

# The Rosary



A Short History of Its Origins

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Foreword

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Cover photo: *St. Dominic receiving the Rosary from Our Lady*, plaster, The Priory of St. Thomas Aquinas, Providence College, Providence, RI. This is the plaster original for the stone sculpture, St. Vincent Ferrer Church, New York City. (Photo by J.A. Driscoll, OP)

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# FOREWORD

## THE ROSARY PRAYER

Popular piety associates devotion to the rosary with St. Dominic's fervent reliance on our Lady's maternal mediation. Though the "psalter of Our Lady," as the rosary prayer was originally designated, apparently was in use in Northern Europe as early as the 12th century, the Dominican professor and preacher Alan de la Roche (1428-1475) should in all probability be credited for the fact that the rosary came under the suzerainty of the Dominican Order. He did this by encouraging the establishment of Rosary Confraternities, whose purpose was to incite devotion to Our Lady among both religious and lay persons. Since the fifteenth century, but especially after the nineteenth-century renewal of religious life in France, the family of St. Dominic has claimed the rosary as a proper part of its spiritual heritage. Today, the best attestations of this legacy are found in those monasteries where Dominican nuns maintain a regular recitation of the rosary and in confraternities of lay people who are committed to praying the rosary daily.

Our Dominican Blessed Jordan of Saxony used to say that the most beneficial prayer will be the one that moves the heart in the most beneficial way. As an authentic form of Christian prayer, the rosary directs both our minds and hearts to God. But the recitation of the rosary accomplishes these ends in an especially beneficial manner. Like the monastic practice of meditative reading, or the *lectio*, the rosary helps the Christian ponder in faith the mysteries of Christ. The rosary first develops in us the spirit of recollection, and once we are recollected, the rosary disposes us to contemplate the principal mysteries of our salvation. Recollection ensures that our minds remain firmly fixed on the truths of God, whereas pondering in faith the mysteries of our salvation draws divine truth into our hearts.

Distractions create some of the chief barriers to our realizing union with God. The American poet T. S. Eliot has described the modern condition as "distracted from distractions by distractions (Burnt Norton 3.12). And oftentimes we do find ourselves involved in a world of unbridled imaginations and illusory conjectures. Worthless chatter, fictitious daydreams, and other vain fantasies only result in drawing us away from loving God. To tell the truth, their hidden danger lies

in the projection of an unreal world, where, in the creation of our own minds, our disorders progressively supplant the work of divine providence in our lives, encouraging subtle forms of idolatry. Hence the need to purify both memory and desire. Only recollection and fruitful silence—the virtue of seriousness—can provide the remedy for this unhealthy imbalance. As a permanent habit of the heart, recollection disposes us to think about God and to abide in his presence. In this effort, the rosary supplies an incomparable assistance, since those who recite it with devotion enjoy the advantage of meditating on the truth about God, and so escape the danger of distractions by following after the person of Christ.

The rosary is very much a simple prayer, a simple prayer of the heart that helps us to celebrate a memory—to be mindful of the Lord and to fulfill his wish: “Remember me.” Its basic constituents remain the most powerful prayers that God has given the human race to rescue us from our sins: the holy names of Jesus and Mary. “O name of Mary!” exclaims our Franciscan brother Anthony of Padua: “Joy in the heart, honey in the mouth, melody to the ear of her devout clients.” Each time we say “Hail Mary,” the Blessed Virgin points our thoughts towards her Son. Each time we say “Blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus,” we are united with Christ himself, and all that he has accomplished for us by his life, death, and resurrection comes streaming into our souls. What is more, we can share the fruits of our contemplation with others, thereby building up the Body of Christ. Should we wonder that the Dominicans have especially promoted the rosary prayer? Of course not, for it embodies the ancient wisdom retrieved by St. Dominic: first find everything in God, and then share it with others. And this still remains the challenge: today as then. Or, as another father in faith, St. Ambrose, has expressed it, that “we confess in our heart what we profess on our lips.”

Rev. Romanus Cessario, OP

This brief Foreword has been adapted, by Father Cessario, from *Perpetual Angelus. As the Saints Pray the Rosary*, Romanus Cessario, (New York: Alba House, 1995).

## ROSARY

The term usually refers to the so-called Dominican Rosary, a pious exercise composed of both vocal and mental prayer. It consists in the recitation of 15 decades of Hail Marys, each preceded by an Our Father, followed by a Glory be to the Father, and accompanied by a meditation, called a mystery. Its 15 mysteries, focusing attention on the Incarnation, sufferings, and glorification of Christ are a compendium of the life of Jesus and Mary and a summary of the liturgical year. Like the liturgy, the Rosary presents Christian truth comprehensively and graphically, and possesses great power to sanctify those who pray it. A prayer to Jesus and His Mother, it leads through Mary to Jesus, the source of all grace.

The Rosary is begun and terminated in various ways. In the U.S., it commences with the recitation of an Our Father, three Hail Marys, and a Glory Be to the Father, and ends with the recitation of the Hail Holy Queen and the prayer from the Feast of the Rosary. Dominicans start the Rosary with the verses that open Matins of the Divine Office.\* Neither these introductory and concluding prayers nor the Glory Be to the Father following the decades are integral parts of the Rosary. While he recites the vocal prayers, the worshipper does not direct his attention to them but dwells on the mystery assigned to the decade he is reciting. The meditation may be made immediately before or after the decade. It may take a general form or may consider a distinct point of each mystery at successive Hail Marys. The mysteries are divided into three sets of five, namely, the Joyful Mysteries—the Annunciation of Christ’s Incarnation to Mary, her visit to Elizabeth, the birth of Christ, His presentation in the temple, His being found in the temple; the Sorrowful Mysteries—the agony of Christ in the garden, His scourging, His crowning with thorns, the carrying of the cross, the crucifixion and death of Christ; the Glorious Mysteries—the Resurrection of Christ, His Ascension into

\* As it was celebrated in the pre-conciliar period, i.e. “V. O Lord, open my lips. R. And my mouth will declare your praise. V. O God, come to my assistance. R. O Lord, make haste to help me.”

heaven, the sending of the Holy Spirit, the Assumption of Mary into heaven, her coronation as Queen of Heaven. In public recitation of the Rosary, the leader of the prayer announces the mystery before beginning the decade. In German-speaking countries, however, the mystery is referred to in each Ave after the phrase, “thy womb, Jesus.” Thus, at that point throughout the fifth sorrowful mystery, the leader adds, “who was crucified for us.”

## Origin

The origin of the Rosary, especially St. Dominic’s connection with it, has been the subject of much debate. According to pious tradition, Mary appeared to Dominic when he was working among the Albigenses, giving him the rosary and instructing him to preach it. She promised that much success would attend his apostolate, should he do so. This tradition has been current since the end of the 15th century and is traceable to Alan de la Roche. It gained general acceptance owing to the widespread propagation of the Rosary Confraternity and to its insertion into papal bulls granting various indulgences for saying the Rosary.

Those who have favored the tradition have not succeeded in mustering convincing proofs to support it. All their evidence directly linking Dominic to the Rosary, when traced back, ends with Alan de la Roche. Their other arguments refer to the various elements that constitute the Rosary and prove only, as is generally admitted, that parts of the Rosary were practiced as independent devotions before or during the lifetime of Dominic. The most telling proof offered for the tradition is its inclusion by at least a dozen popes in bulls or encyclicals. However, the popes issued those documents to foster devotion, not to teach historical truth. They made no claim to have verified the tradition but cited it as piously believed. It was first mentioned in an indulgence bull granted to the Rosary Confraternity by Alexander VI, July 13, 1495. In preparing such bulls the papal chancery justified the grant of the indulgence by reviewing the reasons alleged by the petitioners. In the early Rosary bulls, the chancery inserted cautionary phrases such as, “it is piously believed” or “it is said,” to indicate that it passed no judgment on the historicity of the material presented by the petitioners. Later chancery clerks failed to insert the cautionary phrases. Thus, papal documents seem to vouch for the veracity of the tradition.

It has also been alleged that the Rosary originated in Dominic’s

style of preaching. Inspired by Mary, he expounded the truths of the faith successively. To bring down grace upon his audience, he invited the listeners to recite the Pater and the Ave between his different expositions. This version of the Rosary's origin is unsupported by the sources. It reduces Dominic's share to the vanishing point and proves only that any great preacher who interlarded his sermons with prayer was the founder of the Rosary.

Militating against the tradition is the long silence about Dominic until the end of the 15th century. In his *Apology*, Alan de la Roche allegedly asserted that Dominic's connection with the Rosary is proved "both from tradition and from the testimony of writers," but justification for this broad claim has not been found. In all the sources where a reference to Dominic and the Rosary might be expected, there is absolute silence: in the acts of his canonization, in his early biographies, in sermons preached on his feast, in medieval art, notably his tomb and the paintings of Fra Angelico, in Dominican chronicles and collections of sermon materials, in the official records of the order, such as the Constitutions, the acts of general and provincial ters, and letters of the masters general.

The most satisfying explanation of the Rosary's origin is that it developed gradually as various Christological and Marian devotions coalesced. The origins are traceable to the tender devotion to Jesus and Mary that arose in the 12th century, and to the desire to give the unlettered faithful closer participation in the liturgy. Thus, the recitation of 150 Paters as a substitute for the psalms became the "poor man's breviary." The Paters were often divided, as were the psalms of David, into sets of "three fifties." Strings of beads, called "paternosters," were used to count these prayers. Marian devotion followed a similar trend. Mary's clients celebrated her joys by saluting her with liturgical antiphons, especially Gabriel's Ave, believing that when they did so she relived the joy of the Annunciation. Hence they multiplied their Hail Marys, especially in "chaplets" of 50 (mystical crowns placed on Mary's brow), groups of 100, or psalters of 150. Because Mary experienced her joy in intimate association with Jesus, the words of Elizabeth, "Blessed art thou among women," were added to the Ave in the early 12th century. During the next century the name of Jesus was added to the Hail Mary.

The development of the Rosary mysteries followed a parallel course. Psalters of Our Lord Jesus Christ or of the Blessed Virgin Mary, applying the psalms to Christ or His Mother, were formed by adding to each psalm a phrase that referred it to Jesus or Mary. In a later stage the psalms were omitted and the phrases evolved into brief

lives of Jesus or Mary extending from the Annunciation to their glorification in heaven. Commemoration of Mary's joys also influenced the formation of the mysteries. At first only the Annunciation joy was recalled, but soon sets of 5, 10, 15, or 20 other joys, often in connection with the liturgical feasts, were fashioned, either by using liturgical antiphons or by composing brief phrases, often rhymed, recounting the joys. This devotion coalesced with the recitation of the Hail Mary. During the recitation of a chaplet of Aves, the Annunciation joy would be considered. During a second or third 50, a second or third joy would be taken up. As devotion to Mary's dolours arose during the 14th century, the second chaplet was dedicated to them. Logically, the third chaplet was set aside for her heavenly joys. Along with this development, chains of 50, 100, or 150 phrases, referring to as many joys, were composed or drawn from the lives of Jesus and Mary that had evolved from the Psalters of Jesus or Mary and were attached to the recitation of the Aves, one phrase to each Ave. The Carthusian \*Dominic of Prussia popularized this practice soon after 1409, when he linked 50 phrases referring to Jesus and Mary to 50 Aves, undivided by Paters. Such a series of 50 points was called a *rosarium* (a rose garden), a common term used to designate a collection of similar material. In preempting this term, Mary's clients applied the rose, the symbol of joy, to

"The Rosary," one of a pair of paintings by Bastiano Mainardi. This panel shows a group of men devotees of the Rosary.



Mary. The name was later transferred to the recitation of 50 Aves; “psalter” was reserved for 150 Aves.

Meanwhile, the method of using the vocal prayers of the Rosary was evolving. First, the psalter of 150 Aves was united with the psalter of 150 Paters, an Ave following each Pater. Early in the 15th century, Henry Kalkar (d.1408), Carthusian visitor on the Lower Rhine, bracketed the Hail Marys into decades by inserting 15 Our Fathers between them. It was a logical next step to separate chaplets of 50 Aves by inserting 5 Paters.

Thus, from the early 15th century, the Rosary was recognizable and its elements had amalgamated: Our Fathers, Hail Marys, and mysteries, though these latter, and the mode of attaching them to the vocal prayers, were still far from standardized.

So long as the Rosary meditations consisted of multiples of 50, the Rosary had to be a “read” prayer; the worshipper had to have a book before him listing the points. The Rosary could not become a universal devotion or a communal prayer until it was simplified. As early as 1480, Rosaries of 50 mysteries were reduced to five, one for each decade. In 1483, a Rosary book written by a Dominican, *Our Dear Lady’s Psalter*, cut down the 150 points to 15, all of which, except the last 2, corresponded to the present mysteries. The Coronation was combined with the Assumption and the Last

The second of the two late 15th-century panels by Mainardi, with a group of women devotees of the Rosary.



Judgment was the 15th mystery. The Dominican Alberto da Castello, in 1521, in his book *The Rosary of the Glorious Virgin Mary*, united the old and the new form of the mysteries (a term he was the first to apply to the meditations). To each Pater he attached a mystery, but kept the old series of 150 in connection with the Hail Marys. These became submysteries for the mystery of the Our Father. During the 16th century, the Rosary of 15 mysteries gradually prevailed.

The vocal prayers of the Rosary were completed during the same century with the addition of the Glory Be to the Father and the second half of the Hail Mary: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, etc." Since the apparitions of Our Lady of Fatima in 1917, the prayer taught by Mary to the children has often been added to each decade: "O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, lead all souls to heaven, especially those in greatest need." The Apostolic Penitentiary declared in 1956 that this addition does not nullify the Rosary indulgences.

A Rosary bull of Pius V, in 1569, and the introduction of the Feast of the Rosary in 1573, helped to standardize the Rosary by presenting it as a combined vocal and mental prayer and regarding the meditations as essential parts of the devotion.

## Spread of the Rosary

Though the Carthusians had made significant contributions to the development of the Rosary, the Dominicans did most to propagate it and render it a general, community prayer. They accomplished this with their Rosary books, preaching, and promotion of the Rosary Confraternity. Other orders soon joined them, and great saints, notably Peter Canisius, Philip Neri, and Louis de Montfort became Rosary advocates. Beginning with Leo XIII, the "Pope of the Rosary," the popes worked to maintain the Rosary as a traditional, popular prayer and to propagate it. The many indulgences that enrich its use, especially the plenary indulgence granted by Pius XI in 1938 for reciting it in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, enhance its appeal to the faithful. Even while extolling the liturgy, Pius XII did not neglect to commend the Rosary and other venerable devotions.

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**Illustration credit:** John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia.

## **Note:**

Father William A. Hinnebusch's study of the rosary was written for the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967). He apparently wrote the article before the 1964 Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, which contains rich and evocative words about Our Lady, and the article was published before Pope Paul VI's 1974 Apostolic Exhortation, *Marialis Cultus*, which devotes a section to the rosary and Pope John Paul II's 1987 Encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater*, which remains the great charter for Marian devotion in the period of the New Evangelization. For a more recent study of the history of the rosary prayer, see André Duval, OP, "Rosaire" in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol 13 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1988): cols. 937-980. Research on the origins of the rosary continues to attract scholars, for example, Anne Winston, "Tracing the Origins of the Rosary: German Vernacular Texts," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 619-636.

Romanus Cessario, OP, 1996

# THE ROSARY

*As said in the Dominican Tradition*

V. Hail Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with thee.

R. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

V. Thou, O Lord, will open my lips.

R. And my mouth will proclaim your praise.

V. Incline unto my aid, O God.

R. O Lord, make haste to help me.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Alleluia. (During Lent—Praised be to thee, O Lord, King of Eternal Glory.)

The Five \_\_\_\_\_ Mysteries,  
the First \_\_\_\_\_ Mystery, the \_\_\_\_\_ .

*At the end of each decade:*

Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

*At the end of the fifth decade:*

Hail Holy Queen...

V. Queen of the Most Holy Rosary, pray for us.

R. That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

V. May the Divine Assistance remain always with us.

R. Amen.

V. May the souls of the faithful departed through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

R. Amen.

Let us pray:

O God, whose only begotten Son by His life, death and resurrection has purchased for us the rewards of eternal life: grant, we beseech Thee, that, meditating on these mysteries of the Most Holy Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we may imitate what they contain and obtain what they promise. Through the same Christ our Lord.

Amen.

# THE MYSTERIES OF THE ROSARY

## **The Joyful Mysteries**

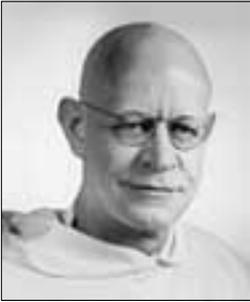
1. The Annunciation.
2. The Visitation.
3. The Birth of Christ.
4. The Presentation of Christ in the Temple.
5. The Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple.

## **The Sorrowful Mysteries**

1. The Agony in the Garden.
2. The Scourging at the Pillar.
3. The Crowning with Thorns.
4. The Carrying of the Cross.
5. The Crucifixion

## **The Glorious Mysteries**

1. The Resurrection.
2. The Ascension.
3. The Descent of the Holy Spirit.
4. The Assumption of Our Lady.
5. The Coronation of Our Lady.



WILLIAM AQUINAS HINNEBUSCH, OP was a scholarly historian, specializing in the history of the Church and the Order.

Born July 10, 1908 in Pittsburgh, PA he was ordained June 13, 1935 by Bishop John M. McNamara, auxiliary of Baltimore, Md. He died January 12, 1981.

He received the doctorate in philosophy from Oxford University before coming to Providence College, where he taught history from 1939-1945. He spent three years doing research at the Historical Institute of the Dominican Order in Rome where he published *The Early English Friars Preachers*, 1951. The rest of his life was spent at the Dominican House of Studies, Washington, DC, where he wrote and taught Church History. He published *The History of the Dominican Order, Vol I & II*, 1966, 1973. In addition to *Dominican Spirituality. Principles and Practice*, 1965, *Renewal in the Spirit of St. Dominic*, 1968, he also published *The Dominicans, A Short History*, 1975. He was a contributor to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the Catholic Youth Encyclopedia and the New Catholic Encyclopedia.

MICHAEL ROMANUS CESSARIO, OP, received the License in Theology (STL) from the Pontifical Faculty of the Dominican House of Studies, Washington D.C. and his Doctorate in Sacred Theology (STD) from the Université de Fribourg. He has taught theology both nationally and internationally. Among the books he has authored are: *Christian Satisfaction in Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.; University Press of America, 1982), *The Godly Image: Christ and Salvation in Catholic Thought from Anselm to Aquinas, Studies in Historical Theology VI* (Petersham/ MA; St. Bede's Publications, 1990), *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame/ London; University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), *Le Virtù, Volume 19 of Manuali di Teologia Cattolica (AMATECA), Sezione sesta; La Persona Umana* (Milan; editoreale Jaca book, 1994), *Perpetual Angelus. As the Saints Pray the Rosary* (New York; Alba House, 1995) He is presently serving as professor of theology at St. John's Seminary School of Theology in Brighton, Massachusetts.