

THE ROSARY - AN OUTLINE

The Rosary is a form of individual or group prayer that can help us meditate on various events (mysteries) the life of Jesus and Mary. With the exception of the “Assumption of Mary” and the “Coronation of Mary” in the Glorious Mysteries, all the events or “mysteries” are found in the Gospels of the New Testament.

Therefore, the recitation of the rosary can help us recall and meditate on certain important events in the Gospels. Thus, they have the “biblical imprint” which is one of the guidelines for legitimate Marian Devotion given to the Church by Pope Paul VI :

Paul VI - guidelines for legitimate Marian Devotions

- 1) Must have biblical imprint
- 2) Must harmonize with liturgy - not replace it with novenas and rosaries.
- 3) Care must be taken not to mislead other Christian brethren about true Catholic doctrine, e.g. Christ is sole mediator.
- 4) Certain devotions depicting Mary as totally submissive person cannot be reconciled with the modern stature of women in society.

HISTORY

The origins of Rosary are somewhat uncertain, but most scholars agree on the following outline:

9th Century -- Irish monks prayed the 150 psalms of the Old Testament. This grouping of Psalms is called a Psalter. These psalms were prayed throughout the days of the week. Priests pray them today in the Breviary. Most lay people in the 9th century could not read and the psalms were too long to memorize, so the monks recommended that lay people pray 150 Our Fathers instead of the Psalms. People use pouches with 150 pebbles, ropes with knots and later strings with pieces of wood to count their prayers.

11th Century -- St. Peter Damien then suggested the “Angelic Salutation” of the Angel Gabriel to Mary found in Luke 1:20 -- “Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee” -- as an alternative to the Our Fathers. So now there were two alternate lay “Psalms”, 150 Our Fathers and/or 150 Angelic Salutations or as they were later called “Hail Marys”.

12th Century -- There is a familiar legend that St. Dominic (1170-1221) received the Rosary directly from the Blessed Mother, but historians have found this difficult to substantiate. However, it is true that St. Dominic and his Dominican Order had a great devotion to the Blessed Mother and have promoted the Rosary over the

centuries.

It was during this time that the greeting of Elizabeth to Mary found in Lk. 1:42,-- “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” -- was added the Angelic Salutation. Thus, the first half of the prayer now known as “the Hail Mary” was formulated from these two passages from Luke - “Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee...blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb”. The name of Jesus after “womb” was a later addition.

13th Century -- There now arose another prayer form that would later give rise to the Mysteries of the Rosary. Based on a view that certain verses in the 150 Psalms could be interpreted as veiled prophecies about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, theologians began to compose “Psalms of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”. These were a series of 150 praises of Jesus, based on their interpretation of the Psalms - one praise for each bead of the Rosary.

Soon Psalms devoted to 150 praises of Mary were also composed, again using certain interpretations of the Psalms. When a Psalm of Mary containing only 50 praises was used, these were called a “rosarium” -- a bouquet or rose garden.

Thus, during the 13th century there existed **four different “lay Psalms”** based on the Psalms: 150 Our Fathers, 150 Angelic Salutations, 150 praises of Jesus and 150 praises of Mary. The consolidation that followed produced the modern rosary. It was also during this century that the name “Jesus” was added after “womb” to the greeting of Elizabeth.

14th Century -- About the middle of the century a Carthusian monk, Henry of Kalkar, combined the Angelic Salutation and the Our Father for the first time. He divided the 150 Angelic Salutation into 15 decades (groups of ten) and put an Our Father between each decade.

15th Century -- Early in this century, (1409), another Carthusian, Dominic the Prussian, linked 50 thoughts about Jesus and Mary to a Rosary of 50 Hail Marys. For the first time a special thought about Jesus and Mary was provided for each bead or Hail Mary. Eventually, these 50 thoughts and Hail Marys were divided into groups of ten, with an Our Father in between.

Later, in 1470, a Dominican Alan of Rupe founded the first Rosary Confraternity. He promoted the 150 Hail Marys with a “special thought” for each bead. He called this the “new” Rosary. Later it was referred to as the “medieval Rosary”. Later the medieval Rosary was replaced with the short Rosary of 5 decades with no Hail Mary thoughts for each bead. The biblical references or mysteries were now recited on the Our Fathers only, as is the general custom today.

16th Century -- In 1569 Pope Pius V officially recommended praying: “150 angelic salutations...with the Lord’s Prayer at each decade...while meditating on the

mysteries which recall the entire life of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The pope also added the second part of the Hail Mary, “holy Mary Mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death”.

In 1572, to celebrate the deliverance from the Turks, Pope Pius V began the custom of celebrating the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary on October 7.

SUMMARY

What has this short history shown us:

1) the Rosary is based squarely on Scripture. The Apostles Creed, added later as an introductory prayer, is a summary of the great mysteries of the faith as attested in Scripture. The Our Father is the prayer which Jesus Himself taught his apostles to pray. The first part of the Hail Mary is based on Luke -- the salutation of the angel to Mary and the salutation of Elizabeth. The mysteries summarize the life of Jesus and Mary. And finally, each decade ends with a prayer of praise to the Holy Trinity.

2) The Rosary is a prayer that leads us to Jesus and into union with God. As the Mother of Jesus, Mary again is a doorway opening us up to her Son.

3) The Rosary is a flexible prayer. The mysteries can be changed to meditate on different aspects of the life of Jesus. In 1973 the U.S. bishops in their pastoral letter wrote this: “Besides the precise Rosary pattern long known to Catholics, we can freely experiment. New sets of mysteries are possible.” Recently new mysteries of the Rosary have been added.

There is also a movement back to the medieval Rosary with a scriptural meditation on each Hail Mary bead. This is often called the Scriptural Rosary and various versions are available at religious bookstores.

One last thing -- while the Rosary is a beloved and powerful prayer it may not be for everyone. We all have different devotions, different ways of praying. In 1974 Pope Paul VI, wrote an address entitled “On Devotion to the Blessed Virgin” in which he said: “We recommend that this very worthy devotion not be propagated in a way that is too one-sided or exclusive. The Rosary is an excellent prayer, but the faithful should be serenely free toward it. Its intrinsic appeal should draw them to calm recitation.” The rosary is a sacramental and should help us meditate on the scriptures and lead us to a fuller participation in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.