

# What is the Rosary?

What is the Rosary, and where does it come from? Answers to some common questions about this Marian prayer. "Dear young people, learn to pray to Mary with the simple and effective prayer of the Rosary; dear sick people, may our Lady be your support in the trial of pain" (Pope Francis, General Audience of May 3, 2017).

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## Summary

1. What is the Rosary?
2. How and when did this devotion begin?
3. How is the Rosary prayed?
4. Why is praying the Rosary a recommended devotion?

"The Rosary is the prayer that always accompanies life, it is also the prayer of the simple and the saints... it is the prayer of my heart" (Pope Francis, introduction to the book *The Rosary, Prayer of the Heart*, Shalom edition).

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## **1. What is the Rosary?**

The Rosary is a traditional Catholic prayer that seeks to honor Mary, the mother of Jesus. It originally consisted of fifteen "mysteries" that recall the joyful, sorrowful and

glorious moments in the life of Jesus and Mary. In 2002, St. John Paul II added another set, the mysteries of light (also called the luminous mysteries), in which we contemplate Jesus' public life.

The strand of beads used to recite this prayer is also called a "rosary."

"All generations will call me blessed," our Lady proclaims in the Magnificat. Indeed, from the earliest times, the Blessed Virgin has been venerated under the title of "Mother of God," under whose protection the supplicant faithful take refuge in all their dangers and needs. Devotion to Mary finds its expression in the liturgical feasts dedicated to the Mother of God and in Marian prayers, such as the Holy Rosary, which in the words of Pope Paul VI is "a synthesis of the whole Gospel." In other words, the Rosary is a prayer that concretizes the special

veneration that the Virgin Mary receives in the Church. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 971)

## **Meditate with St. Josemaría**

- “Take the Holy Rosary, one of the most deeply rooted of Christian devotions. The Church encourages us to contemplate its mysteries. She wants to engrave upon our heart and our imagination, together with Mary's joy and sorrow and glory, the spellbinding example of Our Lord's life, in his thirty years of obscurity, his three years of preaching, his ignominious Passion and his glorious Resurrection.” (*Friends of God*, 299)
- "The Rosary is said not with the lips alone, muttering Hail Mary's one after the other. That is the way over-pious old men and women rattle them off. —

For a Christian, vocal prayer must spring from the heart, so that while the Rosary is said, the mind can enter into contemplation of each one of the mysteries." (*Furrow*, 477)

- "Holy Mary is the Queen of peace, and thus the Church invokes her. So when your soul or your family are troubled, or things go wrong at work, in society or between nations, cry out to her without ceasing. Call to her by this title: *Regina pacis, ora pro nobis* — Queen of peace, pray for us. Have you at least tried it when you have lost your calm?... —You will be surprised at its immediate effect." (*Furrow*, 874)
- "The Holy Rosary: the joys, the sorrows, and the glories of the life of Our Lady weave a crown of praises, repeated ceaselessly by the Angels and the Saints in Heaven — and by those who

love our Mother here on earth.  
—Practise this holy devotion  
every day, and spread it." (*The  
Forge*, 621)

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## **2. How and when did this devotion begin?**

The origin of the Rosary goes back to the origin of the *Hail Mary* in the 9th century, as a prayer to honor Mary, the Mother of God. It is said that the Rosary originated in the Order of St. Benedict and was spread through the Dominicans.

Mary gave her consent in faith at the Annunciation and maintained it without hesitation at the foot of the Cross. Mary's motherhood has since been extended to the brothers and sisters of her Son. The Churches developed their prayer to the Holy Mother of God starting from Mary's

unique cooperation with the working of the Holy Spirit and centered on the person of Christ as manifested in his mysteries. In countless hymns and antiphons expressing this Marian devotion, two movements usually alternate with one another: the first "magnifies" the Lord for the "great things" he did for his lowly servant and through her for all human beings. The second entrusts the supplications and praises of the children of God to the Mother of Jesus, because she is now in the presence of the humanity which, in her, the Son of God espoused.

This twofold movement of prayer to Mary has found a privileged expression in the Hail Mary:

*Hail Mary* [or *Rejoice, Mary*]: the greeting of the angel Gabriel opens this prayer. It is God himself who greets Mary through his angel as intermediary. Our prayer dares to

take up this greeting to Mary with the same gaze God gave to his humble handmaiden and to exult in the delight he finds in her.

*Full of grace, the Lord is with thee:*

These two phrases of the angel's greeting shed light on one another.

Mary is full of grace because the Lord is with her. The grace with which she is filled is the presence of him who is the source of all grace.

"Rejoice . . . O Daughter of Jerusalem . . . the Lord your God is in your midst." Mary, in whom the Lord himself has just made his dwelling, is the daughter of Zion in person, the ark of the covenant, the place where the glory of the Lord dwells. She is "the dwelling of God . . . with men". Full of grace, Mary is wholly given over to him who has come to dwell in her and who she is about to give to the world. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

After the angel's greeting, we make Elizabeth's greeting our own. "Filled with the Holy Spirit," Elizabeth is the first in the long succession of generations who have called Mary "blessed." "Blessed is she who believed...." Mary is "blessed among women" because she believed in the fulfillment of the Lord's word. Abraham, because of his faith, became a blessing for all the nations of the earth. Mary, because of her faith, became the mother of believers, through whom all nations of the earth receive him who is God's own blessing: Jesus, the "fruit of thy womb."

*Holy Mary, Mother of God:* With Elizabeth we marvel, "and why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Because she gives us Jesus, her son, Mary is Mother of God and our mother; we can entrust all our cares and petitions to her: she prays for us as

she prayed for herself: "Let it be done to me according to your word." By entrusting ourselves to her prayer, we abandon ourselves to the will of God together with her: "Thy will be done."

*Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death:* By asking Mary to pray for us, we acknowledge ourselves to be poor sinners and we address ourselves to the "Mother of Mercy," the All-Holy One. We give ourselves over to her now, in the Today of our lives. And our trust in the present moment already extends further, to surrender "the hour of our death" wholly to her care. May she be there as she was at her son's death on the cross. May she welcome us as our mother at the hour of our passing to lead us to her son, Jesus, in paradise. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 2674-2677)

## **Meditate with St. Josemaria**

- "Look: in the eyes of our Mother Mary we never cease to be little, because she opens to us the way to the Kingdom of Heaven, which will only be given to those who become little children. We should never separate ourselves from Our Lady. How should we honour her? By keeping close to her, talking to her, showing her that we love her, pondering in our hearts the scenes of her life on earth and telling her about our struggles, successes and failures. When we do this we discover the meaning of the Marian prayers, which the Church has always used, as if we were saying them for the very first time. What are the Hail Mary and the Angelus if not loving praises of her divine Motherhood? And when we say

the Holy Rosary, which is a wonderful devotion which I will never tire of recommending to Christians everywhere, our minds and hearts go over the mysteries of Mary's admirable life which are, at the same time, the fundamental mysteries of our faith." (*Friends of God*, 290)

### **3. How is the Rosary prayed?**

The Rosary begins with the Sign of the Cross. At the beginning of each decade, one of the five mysteries contemplated that day is announced. On Mondays and Saturdays, the joyful mysteries are contemplated; on Tuesdays and Fridays, the sorrowful mysteries; on Thursdays, the mysteries of light; and on Wednesdays and Sundays, the glorious mysteries. Each mystery is composed of an Our Father, ten Hail Mary's and

a Glory Be. When the five mysteries have been prayed, the Litany of the Virgin, prayers of praise to our Mother, are recited. According to the traditions of different places, to this basic structure of praying the Rosary are added some invocations and prayers that express the richness of popular piety. Here is a guide to pray it.

### **Meditate with St. Josemaría**

- “Immaculate Virgin, I know well that I am only a miserable wretch, and all I do is increase each day the number of my sins... ” You told me the other day that was how you spoke to Our Mother. And I was confident in advising you with assurance to say the Holy Rosary. Blessed be that monotony of Hail

Mary's which purifies the monotony of your sins!" (*Furrow*, 475)

- "You always leave the Rosary for later, and you end up not saying it at all because you are sleepy. — If there is no other time, say it in the street without letting anybody notice it. It will, moreover, help you to have presence of God." (*Furrow*, 478)
- "If we truly got to know Mary our Mother, how quickly the supernatural virtues would grow in us! Let us not be shy about repeating short prayers and aspirations to her throughout the day. There is no need to say them out loud, we can say them in our heart. Christian devotion has gathered together many of these

loving words of praise in the Litany which accompanies the Holy Rosary. But each one of us is free to think up new ones, and address new praises to her, telling her with our heart — with a holy bashfulness that she understands and approves — what we would not dare to say out loud." (*Friends of God*, 293)

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#### **4. Why is praying the Rosary a recommended devotion?**

The Rosary of the Virgin Mary is a prayer recommended by the Magisterium of the Catholic Church; it has within itself the depth of the whole Gospel message, of which it can be said

to be a summary. Moreover, the Virgin Mary herself, when she appeared on earth, encouraged the recitation of this prayer. On May 13, 1917, in her first apparition at Fatima, Mary said: "Pray the Rosary every day for the peace of the world and the end of the war" and in her last apparition at Fatima the Mother of God presented herself as the "Lady of the Rosary."

The Church believes that the Blessed Mother of God continues exercising her maternal office in Heaven, so it is natural for Christians to turn to her to ask her for their needs and entrust their concerns to her.

Numerous Popes have attributed great importance to this prayer: Leo XIII promulgated the encyclical

*Supremi Apostolatus Officio*, a document of great importance, the first of his many statements on this prayer, in which he proposes the Rosary as an effective spiritual weapon against the evils afflicting society. John Paul II wrote a letter on October 16, 2002 called *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, in which he proclaimed a Year of the Rosary and commented on the beauty of this prayer, which helps us "contemplate Christ with Mary."

### **Meditate with St. Josemaría**

- "The holy Rosary is a powerful weapon. Use it with confidence and you will be amazed at the results." (*The Way*, 558)
- "The Rosary is most effective for those who use their intelligence and their

study as a weapon.

Because that apparently monotonous way of beseeching Our Lady as children do their Mother, can destroy every seed of vainglory and pride." (*Furrow*, 474)

- "Finally, I would recommend that, if you haven't already done so, you find out for yourself by personal experience the meaning of Mary's maternal love. It is not enough just to know she is our Mother and to think and to talk about her as such. She is your Mother and you are her son. She loves you as if you were her only child in this world. Treat her accordingly: tell her about everything that happens to you, honour her and love

her. No one will do it for you or as well as you, if you do not do it yourself.

- "I give you my word that, if you set out along this way, you will quickly discover all the love of Christ: and you will find yourself drawn into the ineffable life of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. You will draw strength from it to put the Will of God fully into practice, and you will be filled with desires of serving all men. You will be the Christian you have sometimes dreamed of being: full of works of charity and justice, happy and strong, understanding towards others and demanding on yourself. This, and no other, is the kind of faith we want. Let

us have recourse to our Mother Mary; she will accompany us and help us make firm and constant progress." (*Friends of God*, 293)

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