

Novitiate Module

Lay Fraternities of Saint Dominic

Province of Saint Joseph

PRAYER -

Dominican Devotion to Our Lady and Her Rosary

By Mr. Joseph Lake, O.P.

Devotion to the Mother of God is central to Catholic worship: “*All generations will call me blessed.*” Hence our devotion to her special prayer, the Rosary. But this devotion has always been a mark of our Dominican Order in a special way: Mary has entrusted her Rosary to St. Dominic and to us, his sons and daughters. Father Dominic once saw Our Lord and his Mother surrounded by religious of every order, but was saddened to see no Dominicans among them. Asking why, he was told that Christ had given the order to His mother. To show him she opened her mantle and sheltered under it Dominic saw the throng of all his Dominican Family.

Shelter and protection and under Our Lady's mantle are indeed part of our very calling as an order of preachers. In the history of the Church in every age we can see that preservation of devotion to Mary, placing ourselves under her protection, is vital to the preaching mission because it defends the Church from error and division. Heresy gains no ground where devotion to Our Lady is present. We see this at the very birth of the Order, when Dominic preached to the Albigensian heretics and had as his first foundation Our Lady of Prouille. Again, during the terrible religious divisions of the Protestant Reformation, the Dominican Pope St. Pius V tells us that it is the Rosary which will save us from heresy. Again in our own times Our Lady calls at Fatima to pray the Rosary to save the world from the oncoming violence and horrific destruction of atheistic totalitarian Nazism and Soviet Communism. And we saw John Paul's passionate call to the defense of life in the face of the contemporary culture of death coupled with his ardent propagation of Our Lady's Rosary, his own “favorite prayer,” to which he calls us with special force. In his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* he tells us that this is precisely the “program” which he sets before the faithful at the dawn of a new millennium: “to contemplate the face of Christ, and to contemplate it with Mary” through the mysteries of the Rosary. “In my Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, I pointed to the Blessed Virgin Mary as our teacher in contemplating Christ's face, and among the mysteries of light I included *the institution of the Eucharist*. Mary can guide us towards this most holy sacrament, because she herself has a profound relationship with it.” He places his twenty-fifth anniversary as Pope “under the aegis of the contemplation of Christ at the school of Mary” because this is “to point out with new force the centrality of the Eucharist.”

1. *A Path of Contemplation*

For most of us prayer begins as petition. We know that our Mother's intercession with her Son can bring us what we ask. By our supplication we express our awareness of our relationship with God. “We are creatures who are not our own beginning, not the masters of adversity, not our own last end.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2621). St. Augustine asks why we should offer our petitions in prayer to One who, after all, knows what we want and what we need far better than we do? Because He wants us to exercise our desire through our prayers, so that we may be able to receive what he is preparing to give us. The limitation is on our capacity to receive, not on what he can give us. The greater our desire, the larger our capacity to receive can become. And we can *pray without ceasing* because we desire unceasingly the life of happiness which is eternal.

Prayer of petition proceeds from such vocal prayer to prayer of meditation and then to contemplation. Meditation is on the life of our Savior; the mysteries of the Rosary. The steady, some might call monotonous, repetition of the prayers in fact becomes the background, a rhythmic accompaniment to our reflection. Meditation is, above all, a quest. We try to meditate, “as in *lectio divina* or the Rosary, on the mysteries of Christ.” (Catechism, 2709).

But then our prayer should go further: to the knowledge of the love of the Lord Jesus, to union with him. This is contemplative prayer, union with Christ, “seeking him ‘whom my soul loves,’ attention fixed on the Lord himself.” The Rosary has served countless saints as a means to reach great heights of contemplative prayer. John Paul II calls us to awareness of this power in the Rosary to serve to raise us up to contemplative prayer. “Simple yet profound it remains a prayer for the Christian who feels drawn by the Spirit of God to ‘set out into the deep’ (*duc in altum!*). The prayer, though clearly Marian in character, is at heart a Christocentric prayer, which has all the depth of the Gospel message in its entirety. Sitting at the school of Mary we are led to contemplate the beauty on the face of Christ and to experience the depths of his love.”

This is the central core, the reason to foster practice of the Rosary, for “it represents a most effective means of fostering among the faithful that *commitment to the contemplation of the Christian mystery*. Against the background of the words *Ave Maria* the principle events of the life of Jesus Christ pass before the eyes of the soul, as we contemplate the face of the Savior through the eyes of his mother.” It is precisely to enrich this Christ-centeredness of our prayer that the Holy Father has fulfilled it by adding the new Mysteries of Light.

2. *The Dominican Rosary*

The Church assigns responsibility for propagation of the Rosary to the Dominican Order. Pope St. Pius V entrusted the Rosary Apostolate to the Dominicans in 1569. In the nineteenth century Pope Leo XIII says that the “Church has long confided the propagation of the devotion to the Rosary to the Dominicans” and that “this devotion is the rightful property of the Dominican family and to the Friars Preachers is entrusted the commission to teach it to the Catholic world.” And Pius XI in a letter to the Master General: “It may be justly said that the Rosary of Mary is, as it were, the principle and foundation on which the very order of St. Dominic rests for the perfecting of the lives of its members and obtaining the salvation of others.” More recently Paul VI: “Special mention should be made of the sons of St. Dominic, by tradition the guardians and promoters of this very salutary practice.” Leo XIII tells us as well that the Rosary has a special power to bring back those who in modern times lapse from the Church and fall into error, and John Paul II reiterates this for today: “Our Lady of the Rosary continues her work of proclaiming Christ. The history of the Rosary shows how this prayer was used in particular by the Dominicans at a difficult time for the Church due to the spread of heresy.” Today do we not need more than ever to have recourse to the Rosary, with the same faith as those who have gone before us? Our Lady of Fatima tells us that through her intercession, and through faithfulness to the Rosary, even those who fall into the terrible and violent atheistic errors of the twentieth century could be changed, when she promises that through devotion to her Immaculate Heart Russia will finally be converted.

Dominicans traditionally have their own manner of praying the Rosary, using the Angelic Salutation and the verses and responses for the Liturgy of the Hours, appropriately since the Rosary, “Mary’s Psalter,” parallels the Liturgy of the Hours but is always accessible to everyone. The Dominican way of beginning the Rosary:

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. O Lord, open my lips;
R. And my mouth will proclaim Your praise.
V. O God, come to my assistance;
R. O Lord, make haste to help me.
Glory be...

3. *“A Sweet Chain Linking us to God”*

On the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel we see in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* Mary drawing into heaven a man sinking into the abyss, as she throws her rosary to him for him to cling to in his last battle to draw himself up out of evil. Blessed Bartolo Longo calls the Rosary a “chain,” to which John Paul adds the qualifiers “sweet” and “linking us to God.” It is important that we can touch the Rosary, holding it in our hand as a tangible sign of our turning to God. The beads repeat themselves like steps, accompanying us on our journey through life toward our Final Goal. The chain connects us also to those who have gone before us in death, as it also connects us to our fellow Dominicans who are praying it too. It has always held a special place in our petitions for the dead. In the Province of St. Joseph we are asked to say three rosaries each year for our deceased brothers and sisters in the Order, as well as to have Masses said for them on the same day. One of these might well be November 8, the day when we remember our Dominican dead. It accompanies us not just on our journey through life, but in all our circumstances: we can pray it in church, in small groups, at chapter meetings, as we walk, in the car, in bed in the dark of night when perhaps we have trouble sleeping. Fr. Timothy Radcliff says that the prayer is a simple prayer which “brings us close to the mystery of One who is totally simple.” It is a prayer for the home and the community, but also for the road, “A prayer for airports and airplanes, a prayer that I say when I come into land at a new place, and I wonder what I shall find, and what I can offer..A prayer for taking off again..a prayer of pilgrimage around the Order.” It repeats the angelic salutation, whose immediate consequence was Mary's journey, not just to her cousin Elizabeth but with her son eventually to Calvary and to the Resurrection. “This constant reiteration of the words can work a slow but deep transformation of our hearts.” The Catholic television personality, Johnette Benkovic, very movingly describes how it is only the Rosary, and the sorrowful mysteries, which she is able to pray after learning of the tragic death of her young son, a soldier just recently returned unharmed from war in Iraq. She can contemplate through Mary's maternal gaze upon the face of her dying Son as she confronts her own son's death. Fr. Benedict Groeschel, C.F.R., theologian, and television personality asks where it was that he could turn after his automobile accident, when he woke up, literally brought back from death to life? It was to the twenty mysteries of the Rosary. Anna Abrikosov, Mother Catherine of Siena, O.P. was foundress of the Moscow Dominican Sisters. She and nearly all of her Community made a fourth vow of self-sacrifice for the conversion of Russia, and they spent the better part of their lives in the Soviet slave labor camps. They were deprived of Mass, the Eucharist, any access whatever to priests, but they kept their Rosary, out of sight of the guards. As Sister Philomena, O.P., one of their number, writes in her Journal: “They said the Rosary together, and on Saturday evening they chanted vespers. The Sisters' crosses and rosaries had been confiscated at the time of their arrests, but they made their own again quite well, even beautifully, from bread that they colored with pencil.” Some of these rosaries, wonderful testimonies to the constant support of the companionship of the Rosary even in the dark night of the Soviet Gulag, have been preserved to be displayed in the Vatican. Vaclav Havel, first president of the Czech Republic, prayed the Rosary together with a Dominican fellow political prisoner on a knotted piece of string. Writing this I myself sat by my dying aged mother, whose last words were to have been the “Hail Mary” of the Rosary which we prayed as we kept vigil by her bedside.

4. *The History of the Rosary*

When a prayer is repeated a large number of times it only makes sense that there be a way to count the repetitions. A set of beads called the Paternoster, used to count the Our Father, was known throughout the Middle Ages. Orthodox monks use a braided rope for counting the repetitions of the Jesus Prayer, “O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” Moslems, Buddhists and others have similar ways of keeping track as they pray. So when the Hail Mary, the *Ave Maria*, came into general use in the middle of the twelfth century, it was natural to use such a set of beads. The Rosary was the “Marian Psalter,” given that name at least since the thirteenth century: one hundred and fifty repetitions of the angelic salutation to match the one hundred and fifty psalms which are repeated in the Liturgy of the Hours. The Rosary was the prayer of everyone - of the simple illiterates who were the bulk of the population, not just of the clergy and the other small portion among the people who could read and write. We can see this in the origin of the very word “bead” in English: it originally meant “prayer,” and such was the centrality of the rosary to the people's prayers that the word took on the meaning that it has today.

This prayer grew into its present-day form only gradually, as it took form during the second thousand years of the Church's existence. The mysteries upon which we reflect as we pray, an essential feature of the Rosary today, came into use two hundred years or so after the death of Father Dominic in 1221, while the chain of beads for counting the Hail Mary had already been present for one hundred years or so before it. Until recently we were used to saying that the Rosary received its definitive form from the Dominican Pope St. Pius V in 1569. But now, of course, we see that this growth and development still continues strikingly in our own time. The Holy Father, John Paul II, brought it to fulfillment with the new luminous mysteries, so that now the active life of the Lord, contemplated through the eyes of his mother, is a more central part of our contemplation. And the Mysteries now culminate in the mystery of the Institution of the Eucharist because "Mary can guide us toward this most holy sacrament, because she herself has a profound relationship with it."

Section IV, Article 129 of the Constitutions of the Order specifies the place of the Rosary in the Ministry of the Word:

Since the Marian Rosary is a way to contemplate the mysteries of Christ and a school for developing evangelical life, it should be regarded as a form of preaching appropriate for the Order in which the teaching of the faith is conveyed in the light of the Blessed Virgin Mary's participation in the mystery of Christ and of the Church.

Therefore, the brethren should preach the use of the Rosary fervently, which is to be considered a characteristic mark of the Order, and promote its associations so that it may become more vital each day.

According to the Catholic Encyclopedia's entry on the Rosary, "No doubt can exist that the immense diffusion of the Rosary and its confraternities in modern times and the vast influence it has exercised for good are mainly due to the labors and the prayers of the sons of St. Dominic..." Many popes attribute the institution of the Rosary to St. Dominic, just as they ascribe the apostolate of the Rosary to his order. However, scholars often say that it was not possible that Our Lady "gave" the Rosary to St. Dominic in a vision, because as we have seen its use clearly evolved over time, beginning before him and still not complete. But what is the essence of the Rosary, if not the combination of repetition of the Hail Mary with reflection on the life of Christ? And we do know that the Marian Psalter already existed before Dominic's time, and that he preached on the life of Christ interspersing his reflections with her Psalter.

5. *Some Dominicans and their Rosary*

Blessed Alain de la Roche was the great promoter of the Rosary among the Early Dominicans. He tells us that in fact the progress of the Order of Preachers, then as now, depends on its zeal in propagating the Rosary. He was first to list the fifteen mysteries, in the manual which he wrote in the fifteenth century establishing the Rosary Confraternities. These Confraternities established under papal sponsorship join countless hundreds of thousands of people in the work of the Order in a worldwide movement of prayer. Those wishing to gain extra benefits from their daily prayer of the Rosary would be well-advised to join, which they can do by enrolling at the Dominican Province of St. Joseph website: www.confraternityoftheholynosary.org . One may also write or email for information or enrollment at the following address: Provincial Promoter of the Rosary, Dominican Province of St. Joseph, Saint Patrick Church, 280 North Grant Avenue, Columbus, Ohio 43215 or email: promoter@rosaryconfraternity.org .

St. Pius V, the great Dominican Pope of the Rosary, led the Church during the perilous times, when it was under mortal threat from the Protestant Reformation and from the Muslim attack on Christendom. He is the Pope of Lepanto, the architect of the victory over the vastly superior Turkish fleet advancing to conquer Europe. He placed the fleet under the protection of the Rosary and called on all Christians to pray it. Each man on board had received the sacraments and all were saying the Rosary. The Pope knew of the miraculous victory before word could have reached him in Rome, and it is he who established the commemoration of the Victory on October 7, later the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, on Rosary Sunday, the first Sunday of October. It honors "Our Lady, Help of Christians," her title which the Pope placed in the Litany of Loreto.

St. Louis de Montfort was a tertiary Dominican priest whose great work was spreading devotion to Our Lady through her Rosary in his works *The Secret of Mary*, *True Devotion to Mary*, and *The Secret of the Rosary*.

John Paul called Bartolo Longo “the Apostle of the Rosary” when he beatified him in 1980, and in 2003 he chose Blessed Bartolo’s great Rosary shrine to Our Lady of Pompeii as the place where he “prostrates himself in spirit as he places in her hands” his Apostolic Letter on the Rosary.

Simon Tugwell makes the point that there are two kinds of saint: some like St. Francis we know from their own writings and words. Others, like St. Dominic - he calls them “coy saints” - leave very few, if any, of their own words. It is by his legacy that we know Fr. Dominic, by what he left of himself in his works. Thus we know the facts of his life, his spirit which inspires us today, from the Lives written later by the brethren and, above all, by the charism of the Dominican Order, the Order of Preachers. In the same way did our Lady not give St. Dominic her Rosary? For it embodies special devotion to her, the work of the Order sheltered and inspired by her. It is the prayer which goes out into the world like the early friars themselves, and is able to accompany us everywhere, in church as we pray it together, but also alone in our cars, on our walks, during free moments at work, strolling with a friend as we pray together. Is this not the heritage each of us has from our founder, and one of our identifying marks as Dominicans?

For Discussion

1. What are vocal prayer, meditative prayer, and contemplative prayer, and how is the Rosary a means toward contemplative prayer?
2. How can we avoid distractions to focus on the mysteries?
3. Did Our Lady give the Rosary to St. Dominic?
4. What is the role of the Rosary in private revelations, especially Fatima?
5. How can we “pray always” and how does the Rosary fit this ideal?
6. When and where do you pray the Rosary?

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