

WHAT ABOUT THE ROSARY ?

Brother John M. Samaha, S.M.

Origin of the Rosary

The Rosary, the blessed beads that quietly slip between our fingers as we pray over the mysteries of Jesus' redemptive life, has an ancient origin. Most likely it originated in the ancient East, perhaps in India, and not in the medieval West. It was and still is a popular prayer device among the Muslims, who use the Arabic term *masbahat*, which means to give praise. Devout Muslims used the *masbahat* in repeating the attributes of God, just as it was used by the early Christian hermits. Following the Crusades the Rosary found its way to the West. The missionary who worked hardest to spread this devotion was *Abed El-Ahad*, Saint Dominic, and his Dominican companions.

The Rosary became a popular method of prayer and spread quickly in the West during the Middle Ages. For Christians it has always been "the Gospel strung on beads." It is a simple and easy prayer that can be employed for vocal prayer or silent contemplation by individuals, families, and communities.

Papal Encouragement

Since the 16th century the popes have frequently encouraged the faithful of East and West to pray the Rosary. The first was a Dominican pope, Saint Pius V, who wrote a papal letter about the Rosary in 1569 shortly after the Council of Trent, and instituted the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary.

In the late 19th century after the First Vatican Council the illustrious Pope Leo XIII wrote more than ten encyclicals and instructions promoting the use of the Rosary.

To make pastoral applications of the Marian teachings of the Second Vatican Council Pope Paul VI in 1974 authored the apostolic exhortation *Devotion to Mary (Marialis Cultus)*. Paul VI discussed the Rosary at some length as a summary of the Gospel comprised of prayers based on Gospel texts. He urged the faithful to pray the Rosary, and especially recommended the family Rosary in these words:

"We would like now to join our voice to the voices of our predecessors and strongly recommend the prayer of the Rosary in the family...because the Christian

family is a family church...If the family neglected this communal prayer, it would lose its character as a Christian family.”

“In addition to the prayer of the Divine Office (Liturgy of the Hours) ...the Rosary of the Virgin Mary would be the most preferable communal prayer for the Christian family.”

Pope Paul VI concluded his recommendation by saying: “We would like to repeat that the Rosary is an excellent and magnificent prayer....”

Pope John Paul II, enthusiastic devotee of our Blessed Mother, in 2002 issued a pastoral letter entitled *The Rosary of the Virgin Mary*, in which he proclaimed October 2002 until October 2003 the Year of the Rosary, and put forth the Luminous Mysteries based on the public life of Jesus.

Our present Holy Father, Benedict XVI, values the prayer of the Rosary as a means of contemplating Jesus with Mary’s eyes. For him pondering the mysteries of the Rosary calms a “restless spirit, allows the soul to settle into tranquility...and grants a vision of God.” He associates the Rosary with consolation and healing, an inner refuge which enfolds us “in the rhythm of the prayer of the whole Church.” “I do it quite simply,” he said, “just as my parents used to pray.”

The Rosary Today

While some Eastern Christians who erroneously consider the Rosary foreign to Eastern spirituality, quite the opposite is the reality. The Rosary is a prayer for all peoples and for all seasons.

Early on, the Rosary was a common method of prayer in the East among Christians and non-Christians. Even though it came to us through Western missionaries, it was and still is an easy and rich method of prayer to help the faithful fathom the mysteries of God along the journey of salvation. And we do so with a special companion, the Mother of God and our Mother. Praying the Rosary, particularly in the family, is an excellent method of bringing us together in the faith under the protection of her who always and everywhere intercedes for all people. Let us spare no effort to remain close to her.