

DOMINICANS AND THE ROSARY

DOMINICAN SPIRITUALITY: VOLUME 4

Many of us are familiar with the Rosary. For centuries, the Rosary (with its accompanying beads which serve as a meditative guide) has provided a contemplative path by which we enter into the mysteries of the gospel. Yet, precisely because the Rosary is so familiar to us, we can be at a loss when others ask us basic questions about this devotion, or when we ourselves, discouraged by the routine of the prayer, fail to experience the rich spiritual fruits of contemplation. What are the origins of the Rosary? How can I pray it more effectively and without distraction? How can the Rosary be the means for developing a contemplative relationship with God? In light of these questions, it can be helpful to consider the connection between the Rosary and St. Dominic (and his followers) in order to see both how the Rosary can lead us to the wellspring of gospel grace and how praying the Rosary can enkindle our love of God and neighbor.



ST. DOMINIC AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE ROSARY

The beginnings of this devotion have been connected to St. Dominic and his followers. According to tradition, St. Dominic was distressed at his lack of success in preaching against the Albigensian heresy, which was popular in southern France during the latter part of the 12th and the beginning of the 13th century. In his desperation, Dominic turned to the Mother of God for assistance. According to legend, she appeared to him and gave him the Rosary as an effective means to join vocal and contemplative prayer with preaching the truth in order to call all to conversion of life.

However long before the time of St. Dominic, there was the custom of counting repeated prayers by the use of a string of beads, knots, or pebbles in a bowl. This form of prayer was common among non-Christian religions, e.g., Muslims and Buddhists, as well as among Christians. As the liturgical life of the Church developed, the 150 psalms comprised the most important part of the official, public prayers prayed by the clergy and the monks in monasteries. Yet, because the majority of Christians had neither the leisure nor ability to pray the Psalter on a daily basis, there was an attempt to create a substitute for the 150 psalms. The *Our Father* and *Hail Mary* began to be used as substitute prayers for the Psalms. Even those who did not have copies of the Scripture or the Breviary could say these prayers in place of chanting the Psalms. The Rosary began to be called the “Psalter of the Laity.” In this way, praying the Rosary provided a path whereby all could travel the road of contemplative prayer and be connected to the liturgical life of the universal Church.

Since the Rosary fosters a unique blend of vocal, mental, and contemplative prayer, it serves as a model for Dominican prayer, and thus the Order of Preachers encourages its devotion with

enthusiasm. For example, the Rosary is both part of the Dominican habit and the daily spiritual life of the friars. The biographers of St. Dominic reveal that he was a man of intense prayer and that his delight for preaching the gospel was rooted in a strong contemplative prayer life. St. Dominic's conversations were always "to God or about God," and it is precisely this intimate relationship that St. Dominic enjoyed with God which fueled the zealous flame of his passion for preaching the gospel. In striving to preach the word of God with faithfulness and perseverance, St. Dominic first sought to be spiritually nourished by the food of the Scriptures and contemplative prayer.

Because the mysteries of the Rosary flow from revelation and lead to contemplation, the Rosary is an effective means for encountering the presence of Christ and preaching about this intimate experience. By further reflecting on the Rosary as a meditation upon the life of Jesus, we will be able to understand the profound spiritual benefits that this perennial prayer has to offer.



THE ROSARY AS A GUIDE ON OUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Since there are many forms and methods of prayer, we might lose sight of prayer's simplicity. Prayer is simply talking to God as we would converse with a friend, a loved one. And just as any conversation has a context or setting, so too, when we pray, we are present to God in a specific way. The particular manner in which we encounter God in praying the Rosary is through its different mysteries. Each mystery of the Rosary is a window which allows us to gaze in upon a unique scene in the life of Jesus from the vantage point of his mother Mary. When we pray the Rosary, we imitate Mary, who pondered the astonishing events of salvation in her heart even as she lived out her vocation as Jesus' mother. The mysteries of the Rosary invite us to explore the richness of God's love for us as revealed in the life of Christ. These mysteries are not puzzles to be solved or

historical events to be committed to memory, but rather they are the inspired stories which have the power to come alive within us as we meditate upon them. For this reason, the mysteries of the Rosary reveal the presence and activity of God in the life of Jesus and Mary by which we are led to discover the ways in which God is present to us in our daily lives. When we prayer the Rosary, the mysteries of salvation come alive in us.

The twenty decades of the rosary follow the path of our human experience. Our lives are a mixture of joy and insight, sorrow and disappointment, achievement and acclaim. The joyful, luminous, sorrowful, and glorious mysteries of the Rosary form a pattern which reflects this rhythm of human experience. The mysteries of the Rosary tell us that God is with us even within the routine of our lives, and when we pray these mysteries we discover that our own human experience is the place where God touches us. Within the normal joys and sorrows of the day, God is present.

In the joyful mysteries, we are invited to reflect on the ways in which God comes alive in our lives. At the heart of these mysteries is the birth of Jesus, the manifestation of the long awaited coming of the Messiah. In the mystery of the Incarnation, God is personally united with our human nature so that we might share in the life of God. But this does not happen all at once. First there is preparation: the Annunciation and Visitation. Mary is chosen to be the mother of Jesus and she

accepts this vocation with all its responsibilities. Next there is the growth in the life of faith: the Presentation and the Finding in the Temple. Jesus matures in every way under the loving guidance of his parents. He is obedient to them and it is through their parental direction that he grows in human virtue.

Thus in the joyful mysteries, we discover that God comes alive in our lives through a process of preparation and growth. This process is the life of faith, and so the joyful mysteries are mysteries of faith. We do not always see how God is working in our lives, and we do not always know or want to carry out what God is calling us to do. Yet in these joyful mysteries, we are given a glimpse of what it means to follow God with the confidence that there is joy in living a life of faith. Our relationship with God is a process of preparation and growth: we are called to seek out and to trust in a God who wants to share his life with us – even when we are unable to fully understand or discern God's presence and activity in our lives.



The luminous mysteries are moments where faith comes alive in concrete, human events. At the center of these mysteries is the proclamation of the Gospel. Jesus' public ministry revolves around preaching the good news of salvation. Accompanying this preaching are the signs that Jesus is the Messiah (his baptism) and miracles (the Wedding feast at Cana). Yet Jesus' preaching is unique. Unlike the prophets of the Old Covenant who point to a future Messiah, Jesus points to himself as the fulfillment of these prophecies. Jesus is himself the Way to the Father and he reveals this divine characteristic to Peter, James, and John in the Transfiguration. And yet, though Jesus is the infinite Word of God, he does not want to be separated from us and for this reason he gives us himself as food in the institution of the Eucharist. Here again we see the process of faith in action: preparation through witness and miracle, the actual preaching of the faith, and finally, a deeper participation in God's own life through the intimate sharing of the Eucharist. Thus the luminous mysteries call us to preach the faith which we have received and to be faithful to the Eucharistic life in which we partake.

The sorrowful mysteries recount the moments of pain, disappointment, and ultimately death that are part of our human experience. In the face of suffering, God does not eliminate our grief, but rather transforms suffering and death into an expression of divine love. In Jesus' agony in the garden, amid his cruel scourging and crowning with thorns, we are horrified to see the ugliness that is the consequence of sin. When we reject Christ in our lives, when we separate ourselves from God's love, we are deeply wounded in mind, body, and spirit. Yet, Jesus does not avoid his cross. He willingly takes it up and carries it in order to show how much he truly loves us. By his death on the cross, Jesus offers himself completely to his Father and in this obediential act of faith, he redeems the world. In order to share in this redemptive act, we are also called to unite all of our daily pains and toils with Jesus' own suffering. The sorrowful mysteries teach us that God is with us in our pain – not always to take it away from us, but to transform it into an act of love. Certainly this is not an easy task: no one ought to love suffering. Yet as we meditate on what Christ suffered for us, we come to understand that when suffering touches those who love, love transforms suffering. God is with us in the midst of suffering.

Finally, the glorious mysteries are mysteries of hope. In the Resurrection, we see that death is not the end, the love with which Jesus offers himself blossoms forth into new life. For those who perseveringly trod shoulder-to-shoulder with Christ through the joys and sorrows, the love and agony of the preceding mysteries now find themselves experiencing new life in Christ. And sharing in this new life does not just happen in a moment of being saved or an experience of grace, but rather is lifelong activity and growth in the life of the Spirit. Through the birth of the Church at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has been given to each one of us in order to share our gifts with others. Our life is not merely our own. We are called to place our gifts at the service of one another in order to help each other love God in a more intimate way. Meditating on the final glorious mysteries enlivens our hope that, just like Mary, we too will share in the glories of heaven and come to true fulfillment and happiness in heaven. The twenty mysteries of the Rosary chart the path of our own human experience. Wherever we are on our spiritual journey, the mysteries of the Rosary touch the personal moments of joy, sorrow, and expectation which form the fabric of our lives. By praying the Rosary, our lives are slowly being transformed into new life with Christ.

CONTEMPLATION AND THE ROSARY

When we pray the Rosary, we are led from meditating on one of these particular mysteries into a place of contemplation. Whereas in meditation we ponder these saving events, in contemplation, we encounter the presence of Jesus. Sometimes in the company of family or friends, we need not even speak to enjoy each others' presence. It is enough simply to be with them. Likewise, with the rhythm of the vocal prayer as a guide, the Rosary leads us to delight in being in God's presence. For God is present to us when we reflect on Jesus' life, and so praying the Rosary make us attentive to living in the presence of Christ. By pondering its mysteries, the Rosary brings us into intimate union with the person of Jesus. We may assume that this kind of contemplation is reserved only for monks or other holy people. Yet by making the Rosary part of our daily life, we can respond to God's universal call to develop an intimate, contemplative relationship with him. And this personal relationship with God is the basis for transforming the world. For this reason, the Rosary is an astonishingly powerful prayer. By the power of the Rosary we can ask God to help us in all of our needs: for conversions of heart, for seeking peace in our troubled times, for bringing unity to families. When we pray the Rosary, we come to encounter the mystery of God's love and we are enflamed with the passion to share it with others.



POINTS TO PONDER

1. Where do you find God's activity in your life?
2. Which mysteries of the Rosary do you relate to right now in your life?
3. How well are you doing in answering God's call to be a contemplative?
4. What might you do to take time for prayer in the midst of the busy-ness of life?
5. Who are the people that help you in your prayer life? Whom do you help?

Michael Hurley, O.P.
August 2005