



Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. Luke 2:19

The Mysteries of the Rosary

Imagine looking upon the face of Jesus through the eyes of Mary. Imagine pondering the words and deeds of Jesus with Mary's mind. Imagine feeling the joys and sufferings of Jesus with Mary's heart. This is the type of imaginative meditation to which the rosary invites us. The rosary is a reflective prayer that we offer to God in union with Mary.

In Christian tradition, Mary is honored primarily for two reasons: she is the mother of Christ and she is the model of discipleship. The gospel of Luke expresses this double honor. First, the gospel reveres Mary as the bearer of Christ: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Luke 1:42). She is the human instrument through which God would bring the Messiah into the world, the vessel through which divinity would join with humanity in her Son. Second, the gospel honors her as an ideal disciple: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Luke 1:45). She listens to God's word and she trusts that God would bring about the salvation that he promised.

Mary was with Jesus from the moment of his conception. As his mother, she gave him life and shared her human likeness with him. She taught him the Scriptures of Israel and the traditions of their people. With Joseph her husband, she brought Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts of Judaism and taught him to sing the psalms. After narrating the events of

Jesus' childhood, the gospel says, "She treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19, 51).

Mary remained intimately united with Jesus through his adult ministry. John's gospel tells us that she was with Jesus at his first public miracle at Cana (John 2:1–5). She remained with Jesus all the way to his cross as she watched him suffer and die (John 19:25–27). The Acts of the Apostles tells us that she was part of the community of disciples that remained in Jerusalem after Christ's resurrection and ascension and that experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). No one knows Jesus better than Mary, and no one can help us understand the mysteries of his saving life better than Mary.

When praying the rosary, the focus of our attention is Christ and his saving life. Yet, we ask Mary for her prayerful support and guidance, that we may walk in faith as she did. We want to entrust our lives to God like her, praying with her, "Let it be, thy will be done." And so we honor Mary along with Christians down through the ages who have expressed admiration and affection for her through feasts, paintings, music, and devotional practices. When we give honor to Mary, we are praising the great things that God has accomplished in her. God took the fragile human life of Mary of Nazareth and transformed her life with his grace into humanity's exemplar. She is the radiant daughter of the Father, tender mother of the Son, and beloved spouse of the Holy Spirit. Through God's grace she is united most fully with the life of God and she shows us the way to an intimate, interior union with God.

Reflection and discussion

- What are my previous experiences of praying the rosary? Which experiences of prayer do I remember best?

- Why do we meditate on the mysteries of the rosary in union with the prayers of Mary?

An Ancient and Evolving Tradition of Meditation

Nearly every ancient religion of the world has a tradition of using prayer beads as a devotional tool for meditation. Primitive forms of prayer beads were made of fruit seeds, dried berries, pieces of bone, shells, and hardened clay. More affluent devotees used strings of coral, precious stones, pearls, and jewels. The Hindu and Buddhist prayer beads predate Christianity, and there are normally 108 beads on the string. Repeating a mantra on each bead drives away evil and fills the person praying with peace and bliss. The prayer beads of Islam consist of 99 beads, or often 33 beads repeated three times, on which each of the names or attributes of Allah are recited.

The development of the present-day rosary of the Christian tradition has roots in the distant past. The desert monks of the fourth century developed a system for counting prayers using a circular string of knotted wool. The cord could be used for counting any kind of prayer or devotional exercise, but typically the Jesus Prayer: “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” The prayer was chanted slowly as the one praying inhaled and exhaled. By the eleventh century, the custom of praying 150 Our Fathers in place of the 150 psalms chanted in the monasteries was widespread among the laity. It became common practice for lay people to carry a “Paternoster cord” of 50 knots or beads, to be repeated three times. Soon thereafter, as popular devotion to Mary increased, the joys of Mary were recounted by praying antiphons to Mary on a similar cirlet of beads. Most common among these prayers were the greeting of the angel Gabriel, “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee,” and the greeting of Elizabeth, “Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.” In thirteenth century London and Paris, crafting strings of Paternoster and Ave beads became a specialized industry with its own guilds of artisans.

In a parallel development, chains of 150 phrases from the lives of Jesus and Mary, extending from the Annunciation to their glorification in heaven, were commonly prayed in popular devotions. In the fifteenth century, these phrases were joined to the Hail Mary prayers and the devotion began to be called a *rosarium*, a rose garden. So long as the rosary consisted of 150 meditative phrases, it had to be prayed with a book as well as beads. By the sixteenth century, the rosary had been simplified to 15 mysteries and took on the more standardized form that we know today.

Despite the fact that the format of the rosary is fairly consistent today, there are a number of variations that can be used. The greater integration of Scripture with the rosary is accomplished in several ways. Often a related passage from the Bible is read after the announcement of each mystery. The “scriptural rosary,” in which a verse of the Bible is associated with each Hail Mary, is a return to the former practice of joining 150 meditative phrases to the repetitive prayers. When Pope John Paul II toward the end of his life recommended the addition of the Mysteries of Light to the rosary, he was establishing the rosary as an even fuller “compendium of the gospel.”

Reflection and discussion

- Why do so many ancient traditions use prayer beads as a tool for meditation practices? In what way has the rosary enhanced my meditation?

- In what way can the rosary enhance my understanding and appreciation of the Scriptures?

The Rosary as Meditative Prayer

The rosary is essentially a contemplative prayer. Our primary focus when praying it is meditation on the joyful, luminous, sorrowful, and glorious mysteries. Rarely do the repeated prayers become our focus; they fade to the background of our consciousness as they are repeated, mantra-like, over and over again.

Meditating on the mysteries means entering the mysteries with our mind and heart—picturing the scene in our imaginations, getting inside the characters, feeling the moment with our emotions, resting in gratitude for the saving gift of the mystery. The prayer is physical and sensate as our hands finger each bead; it is verbal as we pray each prayer; it is contemplative as we enter deeply into the mystery. It seeks to bind together body and soul, mind and heart.

The rosary must never be a superficial, mechanical exercise. We need to heed the warning that Jesus offered in his Sermon on the Mount: “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words” (Matt 6:7). Jesus is criticizing the pagan practices of reciting endless formulas in a vain attempt to force the gods to answer their petitions by saying the right verbal formulas. Repetitive prayer can become like pagan practice if it becomes an end in itself, a task to be accomplished rather than a means to deeper union with God.

The practice of contemplative prayer in every spiritual tradition teaches that there is a value in repetition. When we repeat certain phrases and even actions, like fingering prayer beads, we create a quiet rhythm within our spirits. The beating of our heart is a repetition as is the rhythm of our breathing. All of life has its rhythms, and the repetition of familiar prayers can bring our interior spirits into harmony with the divine heartbeat and the breathing of the divine Christ.

The undulation of repeated prayer can be calming and introspective. It can soothe like a lullaby and leave the mind and heart free to ascend to God, to express interior feelings and sentiments that are almost impossible to put into words. Like the repetition of “I love you” in the context of heartfelt affection, prayerful words have the power to calm and heal. Based in an intimate and personal relationship with Jesus Christ, repetitious prayer can be an important part of the language of love. The rosary can accompany us in times of joy and deep difficulty. It can be a healing prayer in times of darkness and anxiety, a lifeline in desperate moments, a place of refuge amid interior storms. It offers an opportunity to step back for a moment from the challenges of life, an easy way to come into contact with the presence of God.

We live in an age in which large numbers of people have lost any sense of the divine mysteries. The skepticism and rationalism of our modern world have eliminated from many human hearts any deep experiences of awe and wonder at the unfathomable wonders of God.

Because the rosary is so deeply rooted in God's revelation through the Scriptures, it should invariably lead us to a richer reading and study of the Bible. Meditating on the mysteries of the rosary and reading the Bible as the word of God can both lead us to deeper union with God. Likewise, the rosary should lead us to participate more fruitfully in the liturgy. Though the rosary has less value than the public liturgy of the church, it is an ideal preparation for the liturgy of the word and Eucharist. The rosary's practice of biblical contemplation can teach us how to experience a more interior participation in the public prayers of the liturgy.

As the first and most perfect disciple—the one who heard the word of God and acted upon it like no other person in history—Mary demonstrates both the contemplative and the active dimensions of the Christian life. She listened and pondered God's word and gave it birth in the world throughout her life. In singing her Magnificat, she was a prophet announcing the coming justice of God. She is the mother of all disciples and icon of the church. With her we can stretch our hearts to take in the whole world, especially victims of injustice and violence. By praying with her while meditating on the mysteries of the rosary, we can become active contemplatives and live out more passionately our Christian vocation in the world.

The symbolism of the rosary wonderfully expresses its rich meaning. All the beads of the rosary converge on the crucifix, which represents the source and the goal of our prayers. Our devotion is always offered through Christ and, together with his eternal offering on the cross, is directed to the praise of the Father. The linking of the many beads reminds us that all people are joined together in Christ, as sons and daughters of God. Even when we pray in private, we are joined with all those we love, with those in need for whom we pray, with the family of God throughout the world, and even with the saints and angels of heaven. We are all intertwined in the common bond of Christ. The decades of beads represent the mysteries of our faith by which we are joined to God and one another. As John Henry Newman said, the rosary is a way of “holding in our hands all that we believe.”

Reflection and discussion

- How can praying the rosary lead me to a richer reading and study of the Bible?

- In what way does the rosary lead me to a more active engagement with the world?

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, you are the way, the truth, and the life. Through quiet meditation on the mysteries of the rosary, lead me in my pilgrimage of faith to an ever-deepening holiness. Help me to make space in my life for silence and contemplation, so that I can balance the images of the world with the imagery of salvation. Bring the rhythm of my life into harmony with yours, so that I can experience an ever deeper union with you, my life's destiny and greatest longing. May Mary, my mother and mother of your church, teach me and guide me to unite my life with yours.