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PRAYING THE ROSARY

The Year of the Rosary, as proclaimed by Pope John Paul II in October 2002, is drawing to a close this month. In his apostolic letter *The Rosary of the Virgin Mary*, the Holy Father sees this devotion as "both meditation and supplication."

To understand the origin of the Rosary, we travel far back in time and also far afield. Knots or beads have been strung together as a way to count repetitious prayers in many places from early ages. Buddhists, Muslims, and Sikhs make use of this method and we find evidence of Christian desert monks in the late second century counting beads or pebbles to keep track of their spiritual invocations.

A variety of rosary forms developed in earlier spiritual practices. Members of the faithful who were illiterate and therefore could not read the 150 Psalms of the Psalter recited instead *the beads*. The word *beda* signifies prayer in Middle English. The so-called Dominican Rosary with ten Hail Marys preceded by the Our Father took a final expression in the 16th century. It was propagated by the successors of St. Dominic through preaching and by establishing confraternities.

Pope John Paul II describes the source of rosary devotion in western Christianity and then likens it to the "Jesus Prayer" or "Prayer of the Heart" that took root in the soil of the Eastern Church. Repetition unites with meditation on the redemptive action of Jesus in our behalf. Any mumbling of a prescribed formula and a rush to reach a certain number is far from the intent of such praying. The simplicity of the method takes us into depths of awareness which can border on contemplation. "By its nature, the recitation of the Rosary calls for a quiet rhythm and a lingering pace," our Holy Father advises.

Communal recitation in a church or home adds the energy of others whose fervor arouses our own. Hearing the words in a variety of voices, young and old, I join a moving chorus of praise and entreaty. There are as many ways of saying the Rosary privately as there are individual pray-ers, and the way I find most fruitful today may not be so in the future.

Many of us remember as children the sight of a beloved parent or other relative quietly murmuring and moving fingers over small beads separated by a large bead with a crucifix at the end of the chain or cord. Some of us were taught at an early age how to join in as the decades advanced. Part of an evening hour for this devotion becomes a regular family practice in many homes.

When human events overwhelm me to the extent that I feel almost unable to pray, the rosary offers me aid. In times of stress, the clasp of my tightened hand on the solid beads is a plea to the Blessed Virgin for help. On happier occasions, joyous emotions and gratitude seek their expression there too. Heart and mind dwell on the Christian mysteries invoked with the recitation. The lives of Mary and Jesus are brought to my attention from the annunciation until their final glorification.

Fifteen mysteries, divided into the Joyous, the Suffering, and the Glorious, now have added to them the Luminous mysteries. What is included are the events of Christ's life between His baptism and passion. "It is during the years of His public ministry that the mystery of Christ is most evidently a mystery of light," the pope's Apostolic Letter on the rosary explains. We find the shining of Christ's saving love in the Baptism in the Jordan, the Wedding at Cana, the Proclamation of the Kingdom of God, the Transfiguration, and the Institution of the Eucharist. The Holy Father urges us, "Rediscover the Rosary in the light of Scripture, in harmony with the liturgy, and in the context of your daily lives."

Earlier words of Pope Paul VI become our own as we ask Mary, our Mother, to intercede for us today when a heavy weight of pain and fear overwhelms many members of the human race. "Look down with maternal clemency, Most Blessed Virgin, upon all your children. Consider the anxiety of bishops who fear that their flocks will be tormented by a terrible storm of evils. Heed the anguish of so many people, fathers and mothers of families who are uncertain about their future and beset by hardships and cares. Soothe the minds of those at war and inspire them with thoughts of peace. Through your intercession, may God, the avenger of injuries, turn to mercy. May He give back to nations the tranquillity they seek and bring them to a lasting age of genuine prosperity" (from the encyclical *Christi Matri*).

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