

## **Session 2. Why the Rosary?**

A very warm welcome back to “Discovering More About Mary”. Last week we considered the question “Who is this Woman?”, and we reflected on the centrality of Mary to the history of our salvation, how she is the ‘new Eve’ referred to in that first announcement of the Gospel in Genesis, the *proto-Evangelium*. This week, we want to continue our journey into the mystery of Mary by starting to look at the wonderful and powerful prayer she has given us, the Rosary.

I want to start by considering where the Rosary fits in relation to the prayer of the Church.

The prayer of the whole Church centres, of course, on the Eucharist, the sacrifice of the Mass – the source and summit of Christian life (CCC1324), in which the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus becomes present. And that Eucharistic feast takes place in the context of the continuous daily prayer of the Church, the Divine Office, which is a direct continuation of the Jewish prayer of the scriptures, especially the psalms, that Jesus prayed in the temple; the Divine Office sanctifies the whole day, and fulfils Jesus’ command, to “pray continually” (c.f. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). “Office”, roughly speaking, means ‘work’ – our work of prayer, and God’s work in us as we pray; all lay people are encouraged to say the Office, and ordained people are *required* to say Morning and Evening Prayer.

Then, both within and outside the official Liturgy of the Church, we have private prayer, our own devotion. The Rosary comes into this category<sup>1</sup>. Of course, ‘prayer’ is our relationship with God, so there are as many ways of praying to God as there are people. However, millions of Christians all over the world have a deep devotion to the Rosary, they find it fruitful to structure their prayer using the Rosary. Many great saints through the centuries and holy men and women have recommended it, pope after pope has exhorted us to pray it, and Mary herself has asked us to pray it. To give a measure of how important the Church considers the Rosary, it even has its own feast day, tomorrow, October 7<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, the only

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<sup>1</sup> As Pope Paul VI wrote in *On Devotion to the Blessed Virgin #55*, “The Rosary is an excellent prayer, but the faithful should be serenely free towards it.”

feast in the General Calendar to be named after a specific prayer. Why does the Church regard the Rosary as so important?

Well, before Fr Stephen helps us to answer that question by helping us to unpack the treasures of the Rosary, I want to prepare the ground by saying a few words about prayer in general.

Many of the great saints have written about prayer. One who attracts me is St. Theresa of Avila the great mystic, who described her experiences of prayer in her book *The Interior Castle*. And again, St Francis de Sales who wrote the first guide to prayer for lay people (*An Introduction to the Devout Life*) – which I particularly like because it acknowledges that prayer for lay people takes place in the context of busy lives, and there are many others. It seems to me that, even though there is a huge diversity in these writings, in some ways they all have similar messages. So for tonight I have chosen a twelfth century monk called Guigo – I find his ‘model’ of prayer simple and useful, and perhaps you will to. Guigo, a prior of the Carthusian mother house *La Grande Chartreuse*, envisaged a ‘ladder’ of prayer leading up to heaven, with four main ‘rungs’.

**Rung 1**, *lectio*, or ‘reading’. This is the physical reading of scripture or the reciting of set prayers. When you take down the bible from your bookshelf and start to read prayerfully, then you are praying. When you say “Hail Mary, full of grace” you are putting on your own lips the words from God spoken by a holy angel – how can you use those same lips for boasting or gossip or lies? When you are tired or distraught or sad, and all you can manage is an Our Father, then that is prayer. If you recite divine words with the will to pray, then you pray. I say this because sometimes people think that there is something wrong if they cannot ‘feel’ or fully understand the words. Not so; if you ‘do’ prayer with the intention of praying in your heart, then that is prayer – heaven rejoices. But there is more, which brings us to **Rung 2**, *meditatio*, or meditation.

Guigo was a monk and he said, or rather sung, the Divine Office every day; he must have known well the power of repeatedly immersing yourself in the Word. He understood how it seeps into your being, how sooner or later your heart would ponder the hidden meaning of what you are saying or reading. *Meditatio* is the slow, meditative thinking about what we have read or what we are saying and what it means in our life – pondering it in our heart as Mary did with the events of her life. We are going to do some of that in our break out groups later on. But again there is more.

Guigo also understood that such heart-pondering leads us towards even more direct encounter with the Lord, what he called **Rung 3**, *oratio*, (literally ‘prayer’). We are led to address the Lord directly with praise, sorrowfully acknowledge our sins, pour out our thanks, lay before Him our pain and difficulty, and above all, to listen to Him.

Finally, Guigo talks about **Rung 4**, *contemplatio*, or contemplation. For some, prayer in turn leads us into the quiet stillness of God where our soul finds rest; you could call it a foretaste of heaven. Or as St. Alphonsus Ligouri put it, “... the blessed furnace in which our souls are inflamed by the love of God...” (St. Alphonsus Ligouri, *Necessity and Power of Prayer, The Great Means of Salvation and Perfection*).

This ladder of prayer is just a model – not necessarily a sequential programme starting with Rung 1 and eventually graduating to Rung 4 (many people report having a direct encounter with God, which leads them to more organised prayer – they have started at Rung 4!). But I think it is a useful model for understanding the Rosary. This is because the Rosary covers all these four rungs. People often place emphasis on the ‘mechanical’ recitation of the Rosary; this is a ‘Rung 1’ viewpoint, and, as I said, there is nothing wrong with that. But there is so much more ...

Let’s start with some history.

From the very earliest centuries, Christians used repeated prayers as a way of helping them meditate, and used knots or beads to keep count. For example monastic Desert Fathers in Egypt were likely to have originated the Jesus Prayer (“Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner” – words attributed to St. John Chrysostom who dies in 407, and still in use today), and we also know from the writings of the Church Fathers that the prayer given to us in scripture, the Our Father, was recited in the earliest times.

By tradition the Rosary was given to St. Dominic in the thirteenth century in a vision of Our Lady. He had taken on the arduous task of preaching against the Albigensian heresy, and was not making good progress. By tradition she appeared to him and said this:

*“Wonder not that until now you have had such little fruit from your labours: you have spent them on a barren soil, not yet watered with the dew of divine grace. When God willed to renew the face of the Earth he began by sending sown the fertilising dew of the Angelic Salutation. Preach my Rosary composed of 150 Aves and you will obtain an abundant harvest.”*

Whatever the historical truth of the tradition, blessed Dominic did obtain an abundant harvest, and the tradition no doubt reflects the historical truth of the Dominicans’ devotion to the Rosary, which they still have today. The fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary were certainly passages that St. Dominic could well have used in his preaching against the Albigensian heresy, and the 150 Hail Marys represent the 150 psalms that were recited in the Divine Office we mentioned earlier – so the Rosary was a way of allowing those with less time and literacy to participate in the Divine Office, which perhaps explains its growing popularity over the next few centuries.

However it came to be, it seems that by the fifteenth or sixteenth century the Rosary had the form it has today, and in 1569 Pope Pius V officially approved the devotion and it has remained unchanged ever since.

The term ‘Rosary’ comes from ‘*rosarium*’ which literally means ‘rose garden’. At around the time that the Rosary assumed its current form and grew in popularity, the

term *rosarium* was used to mean collections of beautiful things, not just roses; in particular it was used to refer to collections of beautiful literary things such as an anthology of poems. So it was natural to call the collection of the beautiful mysteries of our faith a *rosarium* or Rosary. but was used at that time to describe a special collection such as an anthology of poems – so the Rosary is a rose garden of the precious Mysteries of our faith).

So now it is time for Fr. Stephen to lead us into that rose garden of beautiful mysteries ...