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**A Telling of Beads:
Discovering The Rosary**

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Chapter 1

The Rosary in Legend and History

If I had been asked two dozen years ago for an example of what Christ forbade when he said 'Use not vain repetitions,' I should very likely have referred to the fingering of beads. But now if I wished to name a special sort of private devotion most likely to be of general profit, prayer on the beads is what I should name. Since my previous opinion was based on ignorance and my present opinion is based on experience, I am not ashamed of changing my mind.¹

These sentences written by the Anglican theologian and preacher Austin Farrer, describe his own change of heart about the Rosary. Many other Christians, including myself, could testify to a similar experience; and I have written this booklet in an attempt to share the value of that experience with others.

A rosary is, simply, a string of beads. The main circle consists of fifty beads arranged in five groups of ten (called 'decades'), with each group separated from the next by a single bead, and the circle often closed by a small medallion of some sort. From this hangs a pendant consisting of a single bead, a group of three beads, another single bead, and at the end a cross or crucifix. It is not usually an article of jewellery or decoration, but is a device for counting prayers. In the West it is usually associated with the Roman Catholic Church, and particularly with devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, since the most commonly used prayer that is counted with it is the Hail Mary.

¹Austin Farrer, *Lord, I Believe*, 1958. p. 80

One of the most common and traditional ways of using the Rosary is as follows: Holding the Rosary in your hands, you use each bead in turn to 'count off' the

prayers as you go round the circle. Beginning with the Cross at the end of the pendant, it is usual to say the Apostles' Creed. Then, taking the first single bead of the pendant between the forefinger and thumb of one hand, you pray the Our Father. The group of three beads together is for three Hail Marys, (traditionally associated with prayer for the three virtues of faith, hope and love) followed by Glory be to the Father. The medallion from which the pendant hangs now marks the beginning of the five decades. Each of these begins with the Our Father (said on the single separating bead), consists of ten Hail Marys, and concludes with the Gloria (also on the single bead between decades). It may take fifteen or twenty minutes or more to get all the way round, at which point you may conclude with a prayer called the 'Salve Regina' ('Hail, Holy Queen') or continue for a second time round.

The Rosary may be used simply as a means of counting prayers, but it is also common to focus one's thoughts on a different 'Mystery' for the duration of each decade, so that the prayers are being used as a background for meditation on a theme from the Gospels or the experience of the early Church. There are fifteen of these mysteries divided into three groups:

The Joyful Mysteries

1. The Annunciation of our Lord to the Blessed Virgin Mary
2. The Visitation: Mary visits Elizabeth
3. The Nativity of Jesus
4. The Presentation of Christ in the Temple
5. The Finding of the Boy Jesus in the Temple

The Sorrowful Mysteries

1. The Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane
2. The Scourging of Christ
3. The Crowning with thorns
4. The Carrying of the Cross
5. The Crucifixion

The Glorious Mysteries

1. The Resurrection of Christ
2. The Ascension
3. The Coming of the Holy Spirit
4. The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
5. The Coronation of the Virgin Mary

Praying all fifteen Mysteries one after the other would involve three circuits of the Rosary and take a considerable time; so the usual practice has been to use just one set of Mysteries each day. The Joyful Mysteries are prayed on Mondays and Thursdays, the Sorrowful Mysteries on Tuesdays and Fridays, and the Glorious Mysteries on Wednesdays and Saturdays. If the Rosary is used on a Sunday, the choice will follow the season of the Christian year: in Advent and after Christmas, the Joyful; in Lent the Sorrowful; and from Easter to the beginning of Advent, the Glorious Mysteries.

The Rosary has a history stretching back many centuries. Legend has it that the Rosary was ‘given’ by the Blessed Virgin Mary to St Dominic (1170-1221). Worn out by his unsuccessful efforts to convert the Albigensian heretics, the saint withdrew into the wilderness, where after some days of fasting and prayer, he was visited by the Virgin Mary. She advised him to deal with the heretics not by the thunder of intellectual argument in preaching, but rather, ‘if you would preach successfully, preach my psalter (i.e. the Rosary)’. Thus armed, St Dominic went back to his mission and had far greater success in converting the heretics, by teaching them to use the Rosary.

Unfortunately this pleasing story is only an edifying legend. The earliest lives of St Dominic make no mention of it; and the heretical Albigensians were in fact dealt with not by any kind of preaching at all, but by the more radical (and less Christian) expedient of exterminating them along with their heresy. The only semblance of truth in it is that the Dominican order, which the saint founded, has played a major role in promoting the Rosary - including propagating the legend of its origin.

Yet in spite of the Rosary’s connections with Pre- and Counter-Reformation devotional practices, and with a theology which attaches such importance to invoking the Mother of Jesus, the surprising fact is that there has been considerable recent interest in the Rosary quite outside Roman Catholic circles. This interest, which I shall examine more fully in chapter 2, suggests that the Rosary may after all have a relevance for the present day, and even for Christians who do not share the theology from which it originated.

This is because the *principle* represented by the Rosary is not restricted to the prayers and devotions that have come to be chiefly associated with it, but has a far wider application. The legend of the Rosary's origin, and its more recent history, have obscured the fact that it has a history which antedates its connection with devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The idea of saying a prescribed number of prayers, and therefore needing to keep count as you go along, is known in early Christianity as it is in many other world religions. It appears for example among the third-century Desert Fathers, with the hermit Paul of Thebes, whose practice was to say the Lord's Prayer three hundred times a day, keeping count by moving pebbles one by one from one pile to another. Primitive counting methods like this were later replaced by using a length of string with the prescribed number of knots in it, or pieces of bone or beads threaded on a string. This provided a much more practical and portable means by which believers could keep a tally of the number of prayers they said.

In his book *Company of Voices*, George Guiver describes how the Rosary has its origins in the Christian use of the Psalter in daily prayer. From being the mainstay of monastic worship, the psalms were soon adopted as a major part of the daily office, the public worship of the whole Church. But what was to be done for those who could neither read a psalter, nor learn the psalms by heart? Guiver refers to a medieval set of rules for English recluses which suggest what was commonly done.

Anyone who did not understand Latin should, during the readings of the psalms, do one of the following things: (1) understand each verse to mean 'Lord, have mercy on me'; (2) take a favourite verse from one of the psalms, such as 'Show us, Lord, your favour and grant us your salvation', and repeat it 2606 times (equalling the number of verses in the Psalter!); (3) learn one psalm by heart and say it 150 times; (4) use a psalm breviary ... which gives one verse from each psalm; (5) recite the Lord's Prayer a fixed number of times in place of a corresponding number of psalms. All of these, we should remember, are ways of coping with illiteracy and the non-availability of books.²

Whenever prayers or psalm verses were counted, it is likely that a rosary was used for the purpose; and certainly, for much of Christian history, the prayer which has been principally repeated with the Rosary has been the Lord's Prayer. In fact, rosaries have often been called 'Paternosters', after the first words of the Lord's Prayer in Latin. (And as in Paternoster Row in

²George Guiver, *Company of Voices: Daily prayer and the people of God*, S.P.C.K., 1988, p.107

London, originally the street where the manufacturers of rosaries had their premises.) It was only from about the eleventh century that the element of popular devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary became more prominent, and so the title 'Our Lady's Psalter' entered common usage.

Chapter 2

The Revival of the Rosary

In spite of the fact that the Rosary has sometimes been abused, or treated as an object of superstition, it has proved impossible simply to dismiss it, as some have tried to do, as ‘merely a monotonous and boring relic of past ages when few could read’. Its continued survival and rediscovery by non-Catholics are phenomena which make it worth reconsidering. I want to look now at some recent examples of non-Catholic interest in the Rosary.

Austin Farrer, in his little book about turning the Creed into prayer, *Lord, I Believe*, which I quoted at the beginning of chapter 1, calls the Rosary a ‘heaven-sent aid’ to prayer. After describing his change of heart concerning the Rosary, he goes on to speak of it as a ‘thread’ on which ordinary ‘unspiritual’ people can hang the meditations and devotions which normally get lost in distractions. It is a means of prayer which can be used at any time and place, and the subjects for meditation provided by the fifteen Mysteries are a ‘beaten track’ which we cannot quarrel with, because they go right to the heart of the faith. The words associated with the beads can moreover serve all the purposes of prayer, from praise and adoration, through thanksgiving, to intercession and petition.

The Rosary has many possible uses, but in order to extend its potential and make it more generally acceptable, Farrer suggests some additional Mysteries and alternative prayers. The alternative Mysteries are drawn more from the events of Christ’s ministry as recorded in the Gospels, than from the Birth and Passion narratives. Under the heading Mysteries of Obedience, Farrer suggests: the Baptism of Jesus (Mt.3.13-17); the Temptation (Mt.4.1-11); the Transfiguration (Mt.17.1-8); the Anointing (Mt.26.6-13) and the Last Supper (Mt.26.20-29). Another possibility would be to meditate on the Mysteries of Grace suggested by some of the elemental symbols in John’s Gospel: Wine (Jn.2.1-11); Water (4.5-14); Bread (6.5-35); Light (9.1-38) and Life (11.14-44).

Farrer was also aware of the difficulties some of his readers would have with the words of the Hail Mary, and suggests the following alternative prayers as being particularly appropriate for use with the Sorrowful Mysteries.

Blessed be Jesus Christ, very God and very Man, Blessed be the holy name of Jesus. O Saviour of the world, who by your cross and precious blood have redeemed us, Save us and help us, we humbly beseech you, O Lord.

It is perhaps even more surprising to find the Methodist, Neville Ward, among contemporary enthusiasts for the Rosary, but Ward's book *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy* is rumoured to have contributed to a revival of interest in the Rosary even among British Catholics. It is a collection of meditations on each of the fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary, relating them to modern life and concerns. The reason for this approach was that Ward found it essential to meditate on these great Christian truths not just in his times of prayer, but more extensively, and this led to the writing down and sharing of these reflections.

Neville Ward gives two main reasons why he adopted this unfamiliar form of prayer. First, that we all need variety in our prayer life in order to prevent us from becoming stale, and in an age of increased ecumenical understanding, it is good to draw on the wealth of spiritual experience in other traditions than our own. Secondly, the neglect of the Virgin Mary within Methodism (and not only there!) is such that he wanted to explore the reasons for his mingled fascination and nervousness about the subject, especially in the light of how much the Mother of Jesus means to Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians. He writes

I have found this nervousness dispelled simply by using this form of prayer and trying to enter in to the benefit which so many Christians find in it. It seems to me now that it is a quite inexhaustible source of help in the spiritual life.¹

Like Farrer, Neville Ward alludes to the hesitation which some will feel about using the Hail Mary. Without going into it at great length, he seems to conclude that it is 'part of the package' (my expression!), but apart from this it can be used without fear because of its basis in Scripture and the Creeds. (But see further on this in the next chapter.)

A third contemporary advocate of the Rosary is Robert Llewelyn, Chaplain of the Julian Shrine in Norwich, and the author of a number of highly

¹Neville Ward, *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy*, Epworth Press, 1971. p.x

regarded books on prayer and contemplation. Llewelyn's approach to the Rosary is to see it as an aid to contemplation rather than just meditation. In his book *Love Bade Me Welcome* he includes a chapter on the Rosary, introducing it with a quotation from Baron Von Hügel's *Letters To His Niece*, to the effect that we should not judge and condemn practices that are strange or even incomprehensible to us, if they are clearly valued by others and profitable to them! The chapter must have struck a chord in many of the book's readers, because a few years later the author brought out another book entirely devoted to the subject. This is *A Doorway to Silence*, subtitled 'The Contemplative Use of the Rosary', and Llewelyn introduces it with these words:

In a recent book I devoted a few pages to the saying of the rosary. A number of people have told me how much this section meant to them, saying that they have since returned to it or begun to use it for the first time. I am thus encouraged to write at greater length, believing that in this practice and in the silence which must inevitably lie behind it, a surge of new spiritual life affecting Church and nation may be generated.²

This book in turn has been followed by a leaflet entitled *A Rosary of Peace*³, which aims to introduce the principle of praying with the Rosary to Anglicans and other Christians who would perhaps value it, but are uneasy about the use with it of such traditionally Catholic prayers as the Hail Mary. The suggestion in this leaflet is very much that the Rosary might be used as 'a bridge between discursive meditation and silent contemplative prayer', possibly with alternative prayers. Those suggested for saying on the beads of each decade are:

Grace, mercy and peace: from God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ. (cf. 1 Tim.1.2; 2 Tim.1.2)

or (as in Farrer's book) the prayer known as the *Salvator Mundi*:

O Saviour of the world, who by your cross and precious blood have redeemed us: save us and help us, we humbly beseech you, O Lord . In view of these recent publications, and this interest in the Rosary in some non-Catholic quarters, what might be the advantages of exploring this kind of praying?

Evangelical or Reformed Christians may well harbour suspicions about the theology associated with the Rosary, but in spite of these suspicions, I believe there are important ways in which we might benefit. Our spirituality has

²Robert Llewelyn, *A Doorway to Silence*, DLT 1986, p.ix

³Obtainable from the Chaplain at the Julian Shrine, c/o All Hallows, Rouen Road, Norwich NR1 1QT

often been too cerebral and ‘wordy’, appealing far more to those who are at home in the world of books than those who ‘can read but don’t’. We have also not always been at ease with our bodies! though the charismatic movement has helped many people to become more liberated from some of our English inhibitions. And we have tended to be unsympathetic towards the beliefs and practices of other Christians, sometimes for no better reasons than unfamiliarity, ignorance or differences of taste.

In all of these weaknesses, the Rosary can help us. It is a way of praying that is not based on bookishness, and is equally accessible to the most learned and the most ignorant, thus making possible a considerable sharing of prayer experience. It can be used at times and in places where the use of books is inconvenient or impossible. (One war-time book about the Rosary enthused about its usefulness for soldiers at the front, or civilians during air-raids!) This may encourage Christians actually to ‘pray constantly’, thus breaking down the tendency to separate our prayer from our daily living. By giving us something to do with our hands while we are praying, the Rosary involves our physical bodies in prayer: something which traditional wisdom knew about, but we are only beginning to rediscover. And the ecumenical dimension (as Neville Ward found out) is that when we draw on the spiritual treasures of other Christian traditions, many ancient fears and hindrances to unity are overcome.

It is also interesting to note that recent Roman Catholic writings about the Rosary have been at pains to stress its scriptural nature. For example, Pope Paul VI quotes one of his predecessors in describing it as a ‘compendium of the entire Gospel’, and adds:

On many occasions [previous Popes] have recommended its frequent recitation, encouraged its diffusion, explained its nature, recognized its suitability for fostering contemplative prayer - prayer of both praise and petition - and recalled its intrinsic effectiveness for promoting Christian life and apostolic commitment.⁴

He also describes it as ‘a Gospel prayer’ with a ‘clearly Christological orientation’.

There have also been a number of small publications which encourage reference to the Bible before beginning meditation on each Mystery, or the use of Scripture verses as part of the repeated prayers. These developments may encourage Christians who have been suspicious of the Rosary to reconsider whether it could be helpful to them.

⁴Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, ‘To Honour Mary’, 1974, p.70ff

Chapter 3

‘Hail Mary’ and Other Words

But why repeat the same form of words over and over in prayer? Why not be content with the informal conversation with God that is spontaneous prayer, or with the prayer of silence? The answer is: because many people find the repetition helpful as an aid to reaching the other forms of prayer. The familiar, ‘given’ set of words is something that they feel more at home with, than with their own efforts to express the things that matter most to them. The set forms express those things so much more succinctly and honestly, and by repetition they grow in depth of meaning, rather than diminishing. They are also a means of holding the attention on God, even when there are many other distractions.

It is not clear whether Jesus had such repetition in mind when he taught his disciples the way of praying which we call the Lord’s Prayer. Certainly his followers have used it not only as a pattern for their prayers, which sums up the whole of the Gospel and all we could need to ask God for, but also as a set form of words which is used by many every time they pray.

There is good scriptural warrant for this, in the Jewish tradition of prayer which nourished Jesus and which we find for example in the Psalms. Not only were the Psalms a form of prayer and hymnody which would be used repeatedly in the worship of the Jewish people; but they also speak of the repetition of prayers and the words of scripture (especially the Law) in the spirituality of Old Testament times. The repetitive nature of Psalm 119, with its long meditation in acrostic form on the Law of the Lord, and some of the other psalms which have a similar acrostic form (e.g. Ps 9-10, 37, 111, 112) or an obviously repetitive structure (e.g. Ps 19) or refrain (Ps 80, 107, 136), are examples of this. The word often translated ‘meditate’ (as in Ps 1.2), could literally be rendered as murmur, or mutter, and is so translated

in the New Jerusalem Bible: 'How blessed is anyone ... who delights in the law of Yahweh and murmurs his law day and night.' So there are biblical examples of a way of meditation and prayer based on constant repetition of scriptures or prayers. It is this way of prayer which the Rosary is particularly intended for, and as we have already seen, its usefulness does not depend on our being able to adopt the prayers which have been traditionally used, such as the Hail Mary. Rather, any suitable prayer can be used with the same sort of benefit. The important thing is that they should be words which you are comfortable with as providing the right medium for this prayer and meditation. Some possible alternatives are described in chapter 2, and it is also possible to use favourite verses or sections from the Psalms.

The words of the Hail Mary, for those who are unfamiliar with them, are:

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

For many readers, it might be that even the suggestion of a connection with these words would put them off using the Rosary altogether. And yet, not only do we find the Methodist Neville Ward able to use them, but also John de Satgé, writing from an Evangelical perspective in *Mary and the Christian Gospel* (S.P.C.K., 1976). The aim of De Satgé's book is to develop a fresh approach to the Virgin Mary from the Protestant side, and it concludes that a positive relationship with the Mother of Jesus is not only permissible, but even theologically desirable, as something which will greatly enrich Protestant Christianity. In the course of this discussion, De Satgé considers the Hail Mary and comes to the startling conclusion: 'Understood in the way we have expounded, the Hail Mary is a prayer which any evangelical should be happy to use.'¹

Curious about these conclusions, I began to use the Rosary by experimenting not only with alternative prayers, but also with the Hail Mary. This was because I wanted to experience it at its 'hardest', and to try to reach some ecumenical understanding of another Christian tradition which seemed very alien to me. I have found that far from losing anything that is precious in the Evangelical tradition, I have gained a deeper sense of the Incarnation and the real humanity of Jesus.

The first part of the Hail Mary is simply a conflation of two verses from Luke's narrative of the events preceding the birth of Jesus: the angel's greeting to Mary in Luke 1.28 ('Hail, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!'), and Elizabeth's Spirit-inspired words in 1.42 ('Blessed are you among

¹op. cit. p. 139

women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!') Probably these are not the words that people have problems with, though it may seem strange initially to be uttering them as if we were really addressing Mary.

These words remind me that Mary and her response to God were not only essential in the drama of our redemption, (without her there would have been no Jesus of Nazareth), but also that being chosen to be the mother of the Redeemer was itself the most wonderful act of God's grace. God is in debt to no one. Mary's blessedness consists in the Lord's being with her in a unique way, as she bore the incarnate Word in her womb and gave him birth. And yet every Christian is also a Christ-bearer, in the sense that, like Mary, we can receive the Word of God in faith, and Christ can be born in us.

The words remind me too of the humanity of the Mother of Jesus. She is not some exalted or semi-divine being. In fact she is a woman, a member of a sex that has often been oppressed, despised or abused by men: and yet she is the one chosen by God, to be the person by whom his Son enters the created order as its Redeemer. And it is the Son, Jesus Christ himself, who is the centre and focus of this prayer; like any mother, Mary draws our attention not to herself but to her Child.

The second part of the prayer takes us on from the expanded words of the gospel to the Church's additions to those words, addressing Mary first as 'Mother of God'. This title may sound strange to English non-Catholic ears, but it represents an attempt to translate the Greek term *Theotokos*, which means more literally 'God-bearer'. This title was the subject of much controversy in the early Church, but was finally declared orthodox by the Council of Ephesus in 431, which was one of the General or Ecumenical Councils whose authority is recognised by the Church of England. Its usefulness is in safeguarding the glorious truth of the Incarnation: that Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine. The meaning is that Mary is 'she who bare, as to his human nature, him who is God'².

We then recognise that we are sinners, that we are mortal, that we can do nothing without God's help, and we ask Mary to pray for us. This is no doubt the part of the prayer that non-Catholics have most difficulty with. We have the strongest feelings against praying to Mary or any other saint, because we believe that prayer may be offered to God alone. But perhaps the issue appears in a different light if we think of it instead as praying with the saints. They are 'now' (if we can use that word about eternity) ceaselessly active in the worship and praise of God, and asking for their prayers, or involving them in our prayers, may be thought of as a way in which we can 'plug in to' the worship of heaven. This definitely does not

²Quoted in J. Stevenson (ed), *Creeds, Councils and Controversies*, p.279

mean that we are looking for any other mediators between us and God: Jesus is and remains our only Mediator and Advocate. But what it does mean, is sharing our faith and joy with other believers who have already entered into all that God promises, in heaven.

These reflections on the use of the Hail Mary may help some readers to approach it with less suspicion. But when all that has been said, it remains a personal view which not all will share, and it would be wrong for anyone to feel under any pressure to use it in praying the Rosary. I believe the Rosary still has a lot to offer, whatever prayers are used with it; and as I have already said, there are plenty of alternatives to choose from.

Chapter 4

Meditating the Mysteries

‘When the Rosary is said, truth sinks into the subconscious like a slow and steady downpour.’ This testimony to the value of the Rosary, quoted by Robert Llewelyn, is all the more remarkable in coming from a Lutheran minister, Richard Baumann. It points to what for many people is the most valuable aspect of the Rosary, namely, its use as an aid to meditation on the fifteen Mysteries. These, clustering around the birth of Jesus, his Passion and death, and his Resurrection and triumph, cover some of the central events of the Gospels, and so provide material for reflection on some of the greatest doctrines of the Christian faith, concerning the Incarnation, the Atonement and the Christian life and hope.

The exact way of using the Rosary in meditation will vary with your individual personality, temperament, or present needs. I have found it most useful to create a mental picture of the event described in the Mystery, and to hold that before my mind’s eye while praying the prayers. Sometimes it is helpful to read the biblical passage describing the event, or to use some of the techniques of Ignatian meditation, which have recently become familiar to a wider public. Another way is to concentrate more on the words of the prayers used, and to pray them in the light of the Mystery. For example, when reflecting on the Agony in the Garden, and Christ’s words, ‘nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done,’ it will be natural to pray the Lord’s Prayer (‘Your will be done’) with that in mind; and the same thought will colour the petitions of whatever prayer we choose for the decade. When using the Rosary like this, our prayer can be either petition for ourselves, or intercession for others.

If you explore the Rosary you will find that it can be used in a large number of different ways. The rest of this chapter suggests a few thoughts to hang on the fifteen Mysteries. If you want more, there are other books you can turn to; or better still would be to follow your own path of meditation, wherever it may lead you.

4.1 The Joyful Mysteries

1. The Annunciation of our Lord to the Blessed Virgin Mary (Luke 1.26-38) Here our salvation begins. After the centuries of waiting and hoping and praying for Messiah to come, the Lord chooses an unknown girl called Mary for the greatest task any human being has ever been entrusted with: to be the mother of the incarnate Son, the doorway by which God enters human flesh for the salvation of the world. In this Mystery we adore God's love and humility, are reminded of the Son's greatness and kingship, and pray to share in the obedient acceptance of the Virgin Mary: 'Let it be to me according to your word'. May we also believe and receive the Word of God, and so be Christ-bearers in our day.

2. The Visitation: Mary visits Elizabeth (Luke 1.39-56) Bishop Jeremy Taylor speaks of 'a collision of joys' at this meeting between the two miraculously-made mothers, and here we share that joy in God's plan of salvation. We can pray that we may recognise the Christ who comes to us in others, that we in turn may bring him to everyone we meet. We can also pray the words of the Magnificat, singing with Mary her joy and praise at the discovery of all that the Lord has chosen to do in her, as she bears a Saviour for the world.

3. The Nativity of Jesus (Luke 2.1-20; Matthew 2.1-12) Here is the Mystery of the divine Word, through whom and for whom all things were made (Col.1.16), now made a part of his own creation; beginning a life in the world in all the weakness and helplessness of any human baby, entirely dependent on a human mother. We may reflect on God's sovereignty over the nations, directing the events of history so that the prophecies concerning Messiah's birth would be fulfilled; on the shepherds and others who longed for the redemption of Israel, and heard the news, and caught a wondering glimpse of what was to be; on the coming of the Gentiles to worship and adore the First-born, foreshadowing the fulfilment of prophecy that all the ends of the earth should see the salvation of our God. And in all this reflection we follow the example of Mary, who 'kept all these things, pondering them in her heart'.

4. The Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Luke 2.22-38) The new-born Son of God and Man is brought to his Father's house. According to the Law of Israel, he has to be 'redeemed' - in reality, it is he who will redeem others - and all his parents can offer is the offering of the poor. Simeon and Anna, who represent the faithful people of God who have longed and prayed for Messiah to come, recognise the Child and proclaim who he is. We may reflect on the words of Simeon's song; on the mingled joy and sorrow that are the cost of our salvation. If we take up our cross to follow Christ, we can expect no less for ourselves. And we may pray for the fulfilment of the

promise that Christ will be a light for all nations.

5. The Finding of the Boy Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2.41-52) Twelve years later Jesus, now on the threshold of manhood, returns to the Temple. The only recorded incident from his childhood shows him growing away from his human parents, into a knowledge of his adult purpose and vocation. In his first encounter with the religious teachers of Israel he listens to them and asks them questions: we may reflect on what there is in our religion that Christ would want to question, possibly with hard questions. If we have stopped questioning, he will want to disturb us and wake us up again. Knowing Christ is not a safe option, but (if we are true disciples) will stretch us to every limit, intellectual and otherwise. Our prayer might be for grace to measure up to that challenge.

4.2 The Sorrowful Mysteries

1. The Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26.36-46; Mark 14.32-42; Luke 22.39-46) In praying the Sorrowful Mysteries I find it most helpful to put myself in the place of the disciples witnessing the suffering of their Friend and Master, but with the extra knowledge that all this he did for us - and for me. Here we not only witness how Christ became sorrowful even to death, but become shatteringly aware of our failure to stay awake and pray with him: which is one cause of his sorrow. Yet there is no condemnation in his rebuke, but only the hurt of love. We are still accepted in spite of failing to do anything to help make his suffering less intense. And in this acceptance is the continuing challenge to pray, and to live, his prayer 'Not my will, but yours, be done.'

2. The Scourging of Christ (Matthew 27.22-26; Mark 15.9-15) William Barclay writes:

The scourging was of the most severe kind. It was not with the *virga*, the rod, but with the *flagellum*, the lash. The lash was a long leather thong, often studded with nails and pieces of bone and sharpened pellets of lead. The prisoner was bound to the pillar in such a way that his back was exposed and he was unable to move, and then the lash was laid on. The victims usually lost consciousness under this scourging; many of them emerged from it raving mad; and not a few died under it.¹

'Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.' (Isaiah 53.5) We are the ones for whom this was inflicted upon him; ours are the hands that wield the lash.

¹ *The Plain Man looks at the Apostles' Creed*, p.99

3. The Crowning with thorns (Mark 15.16-20; Matthew 27.27-31) When we pray ‘Your Kingdom come’, we are praying for a kingdom whose king wears a crown of thorns. That crown was forced upon him in mockery by soldiers who were little different from those we see in a thousand news films: young men no better and no worse than any of us, but frightened, in a strange land, and suddenly given terrifying power over the helpless prisoner before them. Am I prepared to adore this kind of a King? Harder still, am I prepared to serve him and maybe risk the same treatment? Or am I more inclined to join in the mockery, either deliberately, or simply by my apathy?

4. The Carrying of the Cross (John 19.17; Luke 23.26-31; also Mark 8.34-38) The way of the cross is not a way for us to be spectators in; nor for us to weep over others’ suffering, like the women of Jerusalem. We are called to take up our own cross and follow Jesus, whatever this may mean for us. Here we can pray for ourselves and others, that whatever trials we may have to face, we may allow them be transformed into a cross we bear with Jesus out of simple love and discipleship.

5. The Crucifixion (Matthew 27.33-56; Mark 15.22-41; Luke 23.33-49; John 19.18-37) Here we enter into the heart of the mystery of God’s love: a love so great that it bore all the sin of the world on the awful cross of Calvary. We enter into the events of that day as people who love the One who hangs there on the cross, yet who are powerless to help him; and indeed we know that it is for us that he is here. Yet every gracious word from the cross is also for us; from ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’, to ‘It is finished!’ In praying this Mystery we adore the Love that died for us, turn from our sins which brought him to this, pledge ourselves to take up our cross and follow him, and pray for all Christians who are now suffering for the sake of their Crucified Lord.

4.3 The Glorious Mysteries

1. The Resurrection of Christ (Matthew 28.1-11; Mark 16.1-8; Luke 24.1-11; John 20.1-18) Suddenly the disciples’ emotions are turned on their head: where hours before there had been only defeat, despair and hopelessness, now there is an amazement and a joy that nothing can take from them. And so the world too reaches its turning point on Easter morning. Instead of a future of death and annihilation, there is life and hope. Here we reflect on God’s amazing way of bringing victory out of tragedy, life through death. We can look for this pattern being repeated in our lives and our world, and pray for these situations. We can join with Mary Magdalene, and all who saw the Risen Christ, and pray that this may be a daily encounter for us.

2. The Ascension (Luke 24.50-53; Acts 1.1-11) The King we serve is one who, following his death and triumph, is now seated at the right hand of

the Father, the rightful possessor of all authority, in heaven and on earth (Mt.28.18). And now he reigns until he has put all his enemies under his feet (1 Cor.15.25). Here we worship him in his glory, we seek to bring our own lives more fully under his lordship, and we pray for the coming of his Kingdom into every part of our suffering and grieving world.

3. The Coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.1-21; John 14.15-31; 16.4b-15) Here we celebrate the fulfilment of Jesus' promise to his disciples, that he would send them another Comforter to be with them always. We thank God for the reality of this experience, and pray that we may go on being filled with the Spirit, God-within-us. The coming of the Spirit reverses the disintegration of the human race described in the story of the Tower of Babel, and prefigures the full bringing together of all things in Christ (Eph. 1.10). And we can expect to be disturbed in the comfortable or complacent parts of our faith, as we are led further into all truth by the mighty Wind of God.

The last two of the traditional Glorious Mysteries are based not on biblical events, but on Roman Catholic tradition concerning the end of the Blessed Virgin Mary's life. For this reason, many people may feel uncomfortable about using them; but it is quite permissible to change any of the Mysteries that you feel unhappy about! You may prefer the following alternative Mysteries.

4. The Church's Mission, in the Power of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 5.14-21, 6.3-10; Ephesians 3.8-21) As we pray this 'Mystery', we reflect on the amazing truth that God entrusted the message of reconciliation to a tiny band of untrained men and women; and now entrusts it to us in turn. The Gospel is not only for the salvation of the whole human race, but also for the spiritual powers which are part of the universe which needs to be reconciled to God. We hold before God in prayer all those who are actively involved in the Church's mission in any part of the world, and pray too for our own witness and all those we witness to. And we remember Paul's testimony that the power of the Holy Spirit is not only shown in signs and wonders, but even more in our weakness and failure, in which God's power is shown most perfectly (2 Cor. 12.9).

5. The Triumph of God's Kingdom (Revelation 7.9-17, 11.15-19, 19.11-16 - or whatever you favourite passages are!) The final Glorious Mystery is the ultimate destiny of creation. God's Kingdom, for which his faithful people have prayed, worked, suffered and died throughout the generations, will at last come in its fullness. We cannot imagine all that will mean; in the end our imaginations of it are only pictures or shadows. So as we pray for its coming, we pray to be able to sit light to whatever images we use, and respond swiftly to God's leading no matter how strange it may seem. We pray that God may reign fully in our lives, and his Kingdom radiate out

from us to everyone and everything that we touch.

While it is possible to use alternative Mysteries like these, I also find I can make use of the traditional ones, without accepting the truth of the Roman Catholic doctrines about them. For example, in reflecting on these Mysteries, I find in them not accounts of the part Mary played in our salvation, but rather the assurance that her human experience is a picture and promise of what ours will be through the saving work of Christ. Thus:

4. The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary This can stand for the Glorious Mystery of the death of the Christian believer, and our sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life, of which such Bible passages as 1 Corinthians 15.12-58 are a reminder. Every one of us will one day travel that lonely way of death without any human companion: but Jesus will be our companion, who has gone ahead of us to prepare the way, and promises to return and take us to himself. Icons depicting the Dormition (or 'falling asleep') of the Virgin Mary, often show Christ standing at his mother's side holding a small white figure which represents her soul. In the same way, he will receive us when we die. We can use this Mystery to pray that we may be prepared for that day, or to pray for people we know who are dying, or to remember those who have already died, commending them to the Lord's safekeeping.

5. The Coronation of the Virgin Mary In a similar way we can use the Mystery of Mary's heavenly reward as a meditation on the reward that all believers will receive after this life, when they share the life of God in heaven. Suitable Bible passages are Romans 2.6-11 and 1 Corinthians 3.10-15. We can reflect on what 'reward' we might expect from God, and how we might need to change if we desire a better one! But we should use this Mystery not only for self-examination, but also to reflect on the Communion of Saints, the fellowship that exists already between the Church Triumphant, and the Church still struggling here on earth.

Chapter 5

Contemplation

Some writers on prayer make little distinction between meditation and contemplation, while others write as if meditation were for beginners in the spiritual life, and contemplation a more advanced form of prayer for those who have become more proficient. A more helpful distinction might be this. In meditation, the mind is used to reflect on a passage of Scripture, a Christian truth or image, in a fairly logical and linear way, with the aim of growing in understanding of that truth, making it one's own, and being re-formed in the image of Christ. In contemplation, the mind does not function in this discursive way, but is made to rest in simple attention and one-pointedness. The aim is of course the same, but the work of prayer is being done at a deeper level than the mind, and possibly in a more direct way. This prayer has been described as 'just gazing', or simply being in the presence of God, or in a state of wordless loving. Others have called it the prayer of the heart, in which our love for God is no longer something we primarily think about, but something that affects us at a deeper level.

It may be that the old 'elitist' teaching about contemplation was one of the factors which drove people who were seeking spiritual meaning, to the traditions of the East, because they had been led to believe that the Christian Church had nothing to teach them. But it is now widely accepted that contemplative forms of prayer can be helpful for many more, and more ordinary, Christians, than was previously taught; and people are being encouraged to learn these ways of praying.

The Rosary can be one useful aid to contemplation because it is so well adapted to bringing about the state of stillness and recollection that belongs to this way of prayer. Many contemplative techniques advocate the repetition of a familiar phrase or sentence to keep the mind occupied, or to hold it still; and the Hail Mary or other chosen prayer has this effect. We use the beads for the same reason, only here it is not words but the sense

of touch which is enlisted to focus the prayer of body, mind and spirit on a single point.

Once we are 'in focus' by this means, we direct that single-pointed attention towards God, or rather we may find that our attention is taken up into God. We continue to rest in this stillness and attend to God, while the words of the prayers go on quietly in the background and form a space in which the meeting with God takes place. Another image is that of the safety net, because, being human, we soon find our attention wanders or we become distracted. Then we can fall back into the 'net' of the repeated words and the accompanying touch of the beads, to focus ourselves once more.

The very simplicity of this way of praying may deter some people from trying it. Surely there must be more to it than this! they think. But Anthony De Mello very helpfully points out in *Sadhana* that the distinction sometimes made between vocal prayer and mental prayer - in which the latter is regarded as somehow 'higher' or more advanced - is artificial and also quite recent. The saints of earlier times would not have recognised that there was any way to pray without using words, including set prayers. The repetition with great sincerity and devotion of a few very familiar prayers, was taught by many spiritual guides as the most reliable method of growth in prayer. De Mello quotes an instance from St Teresa of Avila, who was asked by a simple lay sister to teach her the secrets of contemplation.

Teresa asked her how she prayed and found that all she did was recite very devoutly the Our Father and Hail Mary five times in honour of the five wounds of the Saviour. Teresa also discovered that on the basis of these vocal prayers alone, and nothing else, this good lay sister had reached the heights of contemplation and needed no lessons at all in being a contemplative.¹

Although we have so far considered the rosary as an aid to contemplation, it can clearly be used also in intercession or petition. Anthony Bloom describes, in a passage about the Staretz Silouan, how this man of God would intercede for the people in his care². It was when his sense of God's presence with him became stronger and stronger, until it was almost overwhelming, that he then found that in the heart of the divine presence, it was the divine love which was actually holding the people for whom he was interceding. And however much further he was drawn into the depths of God, it was always God's love which held them. This is the answer to anyone who suspects that contemplative prayer, or 'just be-ing' with God, is a kind of self-indulgence which cuts you off from the real world. The reverse is the

¹Anthony De Mello, *Sadhana*, p.113

²Anthony Bloom, *School for Prayer*, Chapter 6

case, as Thomas Merton and many others have said. Contemplation draws you out of yourself, and drives you into involved concern for the world, and truly meaningful prayer for the world and all creatures in it.

How this works with the Rosary is something for each person to explore for themselves, but it might be like this. As you seek to let the prayer of the Rosary draw you deeper into God, you consciously bring the person or other object of your intercession with you. This may only mean using the words of your prayer with them in mind. Or it may mean drawing them into the Mystery if you are using one, so that you see that person in the stable at Bethlehem, kneeling before the new-born Christ child; or standing at the foot of the cross on Calvary, receiving Christ's word of forgiveness; or in the house at Pentecost, with the fire and life of the Spirit descending upon them.

Prayer for ourselves can be done in a similar way, though it is probably a common experience that meditating on the Mysteries has a curious way of putting our own needs and wishes into a very different perspective, so that we are less concerned with what we think we want, and much more interested in discerning and doing what God reveals to us as his will.

Chapter 6

Discovering The Rosary - A Personal View

As a child I had no friends whom I knew to be Roman Catholics, and the first time I remember even hearing of the Rosary was when I read James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. With its terrifying portrayal of the extremes of Roman theology, this did nothing to commend it to me. When I later came to Christian faith, and found myself spiritually at home at the evangelical end of the Church of England, I was only confirmed in my view that like everything else about Rome, the Rosary was not for me.

A broadening of attitude probably began with reading a Catholic story of faith, Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*. This book is real spiritual dynamite: it has even converted evangelicals to Christ, as Richard Lovelace has testified!¹

For me too, there was a sort of conversion to the realisation that Roman Catholics could be Christians too, and with this it aroused a curiosity about the Rosary. I asked a colleague at work, who I knew was a Catholic, about it; and he not only supplied a limited amount of information, but also gave me a rosary so that I could 'try it out'. Although that initial trial was short-lived, it was successful enough to ensure that my interest could revive at the right time.

I suspect that the Rosary is something which will either fascinate or repel you. I write as someone who has been fascinated, for others who feel something of the same fascination; but if you don't feel it, the simplest thing to say is, don't bother with it. It's only a means, after all, and you will probably find other means to the same end which suit you better.

¹Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of spiritual life*, Paternoster, 1979. p 229

In spite of the fascination I felt, following where it leads has not been without struggle, because of its strangeness to a non-Catholic. I now believe that the struggle is worthwhile, and the gains it brings are worth the effort.

The first difficulty to be overcome, was using the Hail Mary. As I've said, you don't have to use this particular prayer in order to benefit from the method of the Rosary; but when I embarked on the experiment, it was in an 'all or nothing' mood which wanted to try to understand it at its 'hardest'. I have explained in chapter 3 why I think it is possible for other Christians to use this prayer. I can only add, that I have found these words to have a special beauty and meaning, and using them has helped me to find a place in my prayer life for the Blessed Virgin Mary, and a love for her and for the whole communion of saints, which was never there before. I now feel that there was a 'gap' in my Christianity without this, and the Rosary experience has gone some way to filling the gap. It brings the often necessary reminder that ours is not the first generation of Christians. In fact we are only the stragglers and rearguard in a centuries-long march of faith, and far the greatest number of those who have believed have already gone on to the glory of heaven, which Mary (our oldest sister) and all the saints now share, and which we hope finally to share with them.

A further difficulty was just learning to sit still and tolerate the 'boredom' of praying in this way. Late 20th century Christianity is so noisy and hyper-active, that we find it hard to slow down and stop and be quiet. The Rosary can function like a life-line to pull a drowning person out of the mill-race of life, into the still water where you can be brought safely to shore. It is, literally, 'something to hold on to', to keep you sitting still long enough to begin to learn the concentration and quietness of paying attention to God. To do this, it uses the sense of touch as we 'fidget' with the beads, the constantly repeated words which keep the brain just active enough not to wander too fast or far, and the Mysteries which provide a picture or thought to focus our attention more clearly.

The 'boredom' too turns out to be one of the greatest strengths of the Rosary as prayer, when we embrace it as part of contemplation. You might be afraid that the repetition of the same prayers would effectively drain them of all meaning and 'kill' any spiritual value they might have had. In fact I have found the opposite to be the case, especially with the frequent repetition of the Lord's Prayer. It doesn't happen every time, of course, but often, even when I pray the Lord's Prayer at other times, it becomes much deeper and full of meaning, because of what it means when used with the Rosary.

And then there are the fifteen Mysteries, which to me are one of the most beautiful and precious things about the Rosary. They have a wonderful 'givenness' about them. They may not be exactly the events which we would choose to summarise the Gospel, but as we reflect on them we see that they

do encapsulate it, and provide endless scope for meditation and prayer. It would be impossible to exhaust what the Mysteries can teach us about God, his love for the world, his purposes for all mankind (including us) and the ways he has acted to fulfil those purposes. For example, I believe I have come to know the Incarnation more fully, through praying the Rosary. It is a kind of knowing which is quite different from head-knowledge, because it includes the heart and body also. It is a deeper faith-sense of the real humanity of Christ, which makes some of my earlier feelings seem frankly docetic, yet without ever losing the wonder and the mystery that in this fully human Jesus, it is God who became flesh. The Rosary and its Mysteries hold this paradox of faith together, just as they hold together body, heart and mind in the activity of prayer. I am sure that there is much more of this kind of knowing still to be learned. And I think that the Rosary brings out the lessons we need to learn at any time, because it is a means God's Spirit can use to work with our spirit and fulfil his promise of leading us into all truth.

The Rosary has helped me to express great times of joy, and of feeling the ecstasy of longing for union with the Lord, and it has been an anchor in times of depression and disappointment, stopping me from going adrift and being smashed on the rocks. There have been times when it has felt right to use it daily, as one of the main prayer-times of the day. At other times, it can be put aside completely in favour of other ways of prayer; or perhaps just one decade may be used as a way of 'centering-down' at the beginning of a prayer-time.

One way and another it still fascinates and draws me back, to discover more of the depths of God which it can lead me into. I am convinced that it is far too good and helpful a way of prayer to be left to the Roman Catholics, and if this introduction helps anyone else to catch that enthusiasm and to benefit from the Rosary, I shall be very happy.

When all has been said about it, what the Rosary is for is to draw us to Jesus, and to help answer our prayer that we may see him more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly, every day that we are given of this life on earth.

Chapter 7

A Footnote on Rosaries

I have a sentimental notion that the ideal rosary to use is one that is a gift from another Christian who cares about how we pray, and is praying for us. The rosary itself thus becomes a tangible sign of our fellowship in Christ, and a prayer-link between us even when we are not actually praying for one another.

But failing that, if you have read this booklet, and want to try praying with the rosary, how do you come by one? It's not the kind of thing you will find in all local Christian bookshops! You will need to look in the kind of Christian bookshop which also sells 'Church Requisites', such as S.P.C.K. or Mowbrays. Many cathedral gift shops will also sell rosaries.

Prices range from a pound or two upwards. The cheapest ones tend to be plastic, and to come in shocking pinks and whites: I think these are intended for gifts to Roman Catholic children on some occasion like a first Communion.

They often have crucifixes or medallions with pictures of St Bernardette of Lourdes, or other motifs which are not to everyone's taste. It's important to find a rosary that you can live with happily, because symbols and motifs matter, and will get in the way of your prayer if they are not right. Fortunately it is also possible to obtain rosaries with wooden beads, and a plain cross, or one with the Chi-Rho sign, instead of a crucifix. I also prefer the larger beads, so that you can use them easily with your eyes closed. If you look around, you should be able to find one that is attractive and pleasant to use.