

Beads AND THE Bible

*Entering the
Mysteries of Prayer*

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INTRODUCTION

The Nature of Prayer

What happens when we engage in prayer? What really takes place when we resolve to banish our everyday distractions and seek to encounter our God in prayer? What are the challenges and opportunities involved in this exercise of communion with our God? What follows is not a detailed response to such questions. Rather, it is an attempt to underline some of the dimensions and aspects of prayer.

In our society the media constantly bombards us on all sides, not only with daily events, but also with their presumed meanings or interpretations. Genuine prayer compels us to react to this barrage of news. It forces us to ask about God's viewpoint on reality. Prayer challenges us to dare to uncover how God would assess the news and how God wishes us to respond. Our liturgical prayer of the faithful is at least one way in which we organize our answer.

Abraham Heschel, the distinguished Jewish scholar, adroitly explains the difference between language and prayer. He unequivocally states that while the purpose of language is to inform, the purpose of prayer is to partake. To a certain degree, prayer is the call to withdraw for a

while from the cacophony of daily life and to search for both time and space to commune with this God. In such time and space, we are to reassess our priorities in the light of this God's will and plan for us. Prayer gives us the opportunity to rub up against this God and attempt to see things from a wholly other perspective.

Prayer enables us to be genuinely human. It removes us from the centripetal force of egoism and energizes us with the centrifugal power of union with God. One may go so far as to say that a life without prayer is not a genuinely human life. We can only react to our ordinary life with its multiple contacts by including contact with the One whose relationship gives value and worth to all our other relationships. To pray is to admit that we are all too human, that we are beings residing in a fragile world who need the One who provides order and purpose for us and our cosmos.

Prayer is a many-splendored reality. We pray in times of normalcy (orientation) when we suffer no great shocks and can easily break out into praise of our God's ongoing goodness and relentless providence. We pray in times of despair and disaster (disorientation) when our whole world comes crashing down. We experience the death of a loved one, the vulnerability of the human body, and the vicissitudes of human relationships. We pray in times of new life and amazement (reorientation) when we encounter a God of surprises, a God who puts a new song in our hearts when Good Friday afternoon gives way to Easter Sunday morning.

Prayer is a communal exercise because it is grounded in

covenant, i.e., a relationship in which God, the community, and the individual are integral partners. At prayer we make the problems and concerns of others our own problems and concerns. The cry of our sisters and brothers—"Why have you forsaken me?"—must trigger our response. In prayer, both the pain and the joy of countless others become our pain and joy. As Saint Paul expresses it, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26). Prayer is never an ego trip.

Our model of prayer is Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. At his baptism, when choosing the Twelve, during Peter's confession, his own transfiguration, the moment prior to giving the Our Father, through his agony in the garden, and while suffering on the cross, Jesus is at prayer. More than the other evangelists, Luke is ever intent to emphasize the absolute necessity of prayer for his gentile-Christian audience that knows nothing of the prayer of petition. The Jesus of Luke's Gospel feels compelled to undertake long seasons of prayer as he plots his ministry. It is hardly surprising that this gospel opens with the prayer of devout Jews in the Temple and closes with the prayer of the disciples in the same place following Jesus' ascension.

The Meaning of Mystery

Whenever we hear the word "mystery," we think almost instinctively of something that is beyond our ken, something that is esoteric and utterly impenetrable. However,

the biblical background, while it does not eliminate the element of something secret or hidden, suggests a much more positive understanding. In that setting we are ushered into the presence of God, who communicates to us (often through a prophet or spokesperson) some aspect of the plan of salvation.

In the prophetic literature, God is depicted as being surrounded by a heavenly council that makes decisions and recommendations. Prophets are seen as either members of such a council or as eavesdropping on the final decisions of the council. In the Book of Amos, for example, God undertakes nothing without first revealing the heavenly plan to his servants, the prophets (3:7). In his attack on the false prophets, Jeremiah poses this question: “For who has stood in the council of the Lord so as to see and to hear his word?” (23:18). If such false prophets had really stood in the divine council and proclaimed God’s message to the people, they would have brought such people back from their evil ways (Jeremiah 23:22).

Later Jewish literature shows a development in such communications as God reveals a variety of matters to humans, frequently in highly symbolic language. In the Book of Daniel, “mystery” is the revelation that King Nebuchadnezzar received in a dream about the large statue and one that Daniel must uncover. “Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision...” (2:19). In a later episode Nebuchadnezzar experiences another terrifying dream and, when his own experts prove unsuccessful in interpreting it, turns to Daniel: “I know that you are endowed with a

holy, divine spirit and that no mystery is too difficult for you. Hear the dream that I saw; tell me its interpretation” (4:9).

Such usage provides the background for grasping the notion of “mystery” in the New Testament. As used in Paul and elsewhere, mystery is basically a new revelation about God’s plan of salvation. What was hidden in God for such long periods of time is now revealed. In First Corinthians, God’s mystery is fundamentally Jesus Christ crucified. The plan that God conceived and that lay hidden in him from the start is now realized in Jesus Christ. Paul views himself as a steward who shares this mystery with his communities. The author of Colossians understands the mystery of Christ to be nothing less than the divine plan for humankind’s salvation that, having been kept secret in the past, is now revealed to Christians. At the same time, in employing the term “mystery,” Paul is fully aware that it is never grasped by merely ordinary means of communication, but only by faith. Hence a dimension of obscurity remains in the human participation in God’s disclosure.

Such an understanding of mystery provides no little help as we discuss the mysteries of the rosary. While we gain insight into the meaning of the biblical texts and discover God’s plan in a variety of events, we still experience a state of awe, a feeling of being overwhelmed at not being able to see with perfect clarity. As Pope Paul VI puts it, a mystery is a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God. While we encounter the divine presence, we realize all too well that we cannot penetrate the totality reality. Perhaps such

an experience is not unlike human love. As love for another grows, we feel we are incapable of expressing that love in simple propositions. We conclude that we must make room for mystery.

The Rosary and the Scriptures

With two exceptions (the assumption and the coronation of Mary) the mysteries of the rosary are intended to be reflections on specific biblical texts. Thus the Word of God is intended to interact with our efforts at prayer. “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). Our task, therefore, is to allow the Word to enter our entire being, to permeate our whole person in such a way that it can console and challenge us, that it can surprise and reenergize us. The Word of God is not meant to be a dusty collection of obscure texts from the ancient Near East, but a dynamic series of encounters between God and humans. Hearing the Word of God always demands a response, whether that response be praise, adoration, petition, confession, or awe. If we truly hear the Word, we begin to sense its power and its efficacy. “So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).

Borrowing a phrase from Pope Pius XII, Pope Paul VI

in his apostolic exhortation (*Marialis Cultus*, 1974) calls the rosary the compendium of the entire gospel. In 2002, Pope John Paul II enhanced this compendium when he added the luminous mysteries (the mysteries of light) to the recitation of the rosary. In addition to the joyful, sorrowful, and glorious mysteries, we enlarge our focus by reflecting on the following: the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, the wedding feast at Cana, the proclamation of the kingdom, the transfiguration, and the institution of the Eucharist. These luminous mysteries clearly complement the others. At the same time, they draw our attention to other facets of the Good News that offer both challenge and hope. As a result, the rosary as the epitome of the entire gospel is intensified by including events from the public ministry of Jesus. As the gospel focus is enlarged, the opportunities for prayer increase.

Christological Emphasis

While the principal component of the rosary is the Hail Mary, we are not to think that this traditional prayer disregards or minimizes in any way the person and mission of Jesus (Christology). When we consider these twenty mysteries in their totality, they are Christ-oriented and Christ-centered. The Church, therefore, urges us to appreciate the total plan of salvation that attains its zenith in the work and achievement of Jesus. Such an orientation is in keeping with the thrust of the liturgy as a whole. While the feasts of Mary and other saints enjoy a fitting place

in the Church's public worship, according to the Second Vatican Council's constitution on the liturgy, the minds of the faithful are to be focused primarily on the feasts of the Lord in which the unfolding of the plan of salvation is celebrated in the course of the year.

To be sure, Mary, like us, is also redeemed. As a consequence, she is in solidarity with all humans in their need for salvation and cares for all the sisters and brothers of her Son in their journey of faith. In underlining the central place of Jesus in the rosary, the Church also acknowledges that Mary occupies a conspicuous place in the plan of salvation. The Church recognizes that she is a model who encapsulates the desires and hopes of all the faithful. By situating Mary within the larger frame of salvation, we recognize that she is only fully understood and appreciated, not in the splendid isolation of her privileges, but in her response to the Word of God. We call her blessed because she hears that Word and acts upon it.

How to Pray the Rosary With Scripture

This book adopts the following order in approaching the mysteries of the rosary: The Joyful Mysteries (Chapter One), the Luminous Mysteries (Chapter Two), the Sorrowful Mysteries (Chapter Three), and the Glorious Mysteries (Chapter Four). It moves from the Lukan infancy narrative and the public ministry of Jesus through the passion and death to the exaltation of Jesus, concluding with Mary's assumption and coronation. With the exception of the last

two glorious mysteries, this order follows the outline of the biblical texts themselves. As such, the rosary is indeed a compendium of the entire Good News of Jesus.

Each mystery begins with a *focus*. This attempts to orient our thoughts to some particular aspects of the mystery to be considered. It may simply challenge our everyday reactions and attitudes to biblical scenes, for example, the clash of wills in the agony in the garden or our state of amazement at Jesus' cryptic question in the finding in the Temple. To some degree, the focus resembles the practice in certain religious communities of providing points or material for the following morning's meditation. It channels and directs our attention to some salient dimension of the biblical text. To that extent, the focus seeks to grip our attention by underlining certain facets of a given biblical passage.

After the focus, there is a reference to the *biblical text* or *texts* to be read. The reader is encouraged to read the designated passages slowly and prayerfully from a viable modern translation. This recommendation is based on the fact that there is no substitute for knowing what the text actually says. The focus mentioned above should guide the reading of each text.

Following the biblical text reference is a *textual explanation*. This explanation will vary in length depending on the number and density of the passages. It seeks to employ the best of modern biblical scholarship in ferreting out the levels of meaning in the texts. Part of that sound biblical scholarship is the modified two-source theory for the first

three gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as the Synoptic Gospels since they share a common viewpoint, one quite distinct from the Gospel of John. The two sources in question are Mark (the first written gospel) and Q (principally a collection of Jesus' sayings, for example, the Our Father). Matthew and Luke make independent use of Mark and Q. This is a modified two-source theory insofar as Matthew and Luke also employ their own special sources, for example, the Magi in Matthew 2:1–12 and the shepherds in Luke 2:8–20. The modifications of Matthew and Luke provide an invaluable key for uncovering their special interests and emphases. Sound biblical scholarship and a richer experience of prayer, therefore, can go hand in glove.

The last element in the format consists of *reflections*. This represents an effort to disengage from the biblical texts' themes, points, or aspects that may impact our recitation of the rosary and our way of experiencing a particular mystery. The riches of the Bible are inestimable, offering us seemingly endless resources for both prayer and action.

It is not recommended that the reader go through all five mysteries in a chapter. Rather, it may be more rewarding to concentrate on only one mystery at a time. For example, read only the material on the annunciation when reciting the joyful mysteries, leaving the rest of the chapter for other prayer times. The suggested strategy is to divide and conquer.