

The Rosary of Pope St. John Paul II

A Compendium of the Gospel



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and Introduced
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Liguori
PUBLICATIONS

A Redemptorist Ministry

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Imprimi Potest:

Richard Thibodeau, CSsR
Provincial, Denver Province
The Redemptorists

Imprimatur:

Most Reverend Joseph F. Naumann
Auxiliary Bishop/Vicar General
Archdiocese of St. Louis

ISBN 978-0-7648-1034-0

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Cover design by Wendy Barnes
Cover images: PhotoDisc; Corbis

To order, call 800-325-9521, or visit Liguori.org.

Printed in the United States of America
29 28 27 26 25 / 7 6 5 4 3

Introduction



The rosary needs little or no introduction to Catholics. It has been an unchanging, stable, and time-honored devotion for centuries. In light of this, many were surprised when Pope St. John Paul II (1920–2005) suggested adding five mysteries that now are an accepted part of the rosary. The addition was not as unprecedented as some initially thought when the pope encouraged it in apostolic letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*—the Rosary of the Virgin Mary—on October 16, 2002. The rosary is actually a developing prayer; many have proposed changes over the years. While its roots go back to the eleventh century, the way we have come to know it dates to the end of the sixteenth century.

At that time, the praying of the rosary was largely credited with stemming the Ottoman Empire's expansion into the Christian West. The pope may have been alluding to this and other events when he, in this letter, says: "At times when Christianity itself seemed under threat, its deliverance was attributed to the power of this prayer, and Our Lady of the Rosary was acclaimed as the one whose intercession brought salvation" (39).

Still, many people wondered at the timing of the pope's proposal. Some Vatican insiders saw it as a logical development from the 2001 beatification of a Maltese priest, George Preca, who developed these mysteries in 1957. The Maltese are devoted to the rosary. On August 15, 1941, the feast of Mary's Assumption into heaven, a ship full of provisions that saved them from starvation entered Grand Harbor. They attribute that entry to their fervid recitation of the rosary.

These were surely attractive ideas for Pope St. John Paul II, a mystic who believed in the power of prayer—and never more so than as the world entered into a millennium menaced by the prospects of war. Therefore, in the same apostolic letter, the pope proclaimed the twelve months from October 2002 to October 2003 to be the Year of the Rosary. He invited us all to rediscover the efficacy of the prayer of the rosary for peace in the world and in families and to rediscover communion with the Virgin Mary through this prayer. The pope put special accent on this aspect of peace, stating: “The Rosary is by its nature a prayer for peace, since it consists in the contemplation of Christ, the Prince of Peace, the one who is ‘our peace’ (Ephesians 2:14)” (40).

As a group, the five rosary prayer themes suggested by the pope are called the Luminous Mysteries. Since the pope wished for the rosary to become more fully “a compen-

dium of the Gospel” that better reflects the many mysteries of the life of Christ, he offered these mysteries as a way to include the events of Christ’s public ministry in the time between his baptism and his passion, where “the mystery of Christ is most evidently a mystery of light” (19).

The five mysteries are:

- (1) Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan;
- (2) his self-manifestation at the wedding of Cana;
- (3) his proclamation of the kingdom of God, with his call to conversion;
- (4) his transfiguration; and
- (5) his institution of the Eucharist as the sacramental expression of the paschal mystery.

The way the pope envisioned this more fully developed compendium of the Gospel, is to add “following reflection on the Incarnation and the hidden life of Christ (the Joyful Mysteries) and before focusing on the suffer-

ings of his Passion (the Sorrowful Mysteries) and the triumph of his Resurrection (the Glorious Mysteries), a meditation on certain particularly significant moments in his public ministry (the Luminous Mysteries)” (19).

The pope asked that the Luminous Mysteries be recited especially on Thursdays. The traditional sets of mysteries of the rosary—Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious—have long been dedicated to specific days of the week. The pope suggested that since “the Glorious Mysteries are said on both Saturday and Sunday, and that Saturday has always had a special Marian flavor, the second weekly meditation on the Joyful Mysteries, mysteries in which Mary’s presence is especially pronounced, could be moved to Saturday. Thursday would then be free for meditating on the [Luminous Mysteries]” (38).

Those who routinely pray the rosary, and perhaps have a particularly cherished way in which they have prayed it for many years,

should take heart from the pope's words that adding these mysteries is "left to the freedom of individuals and communities" (19). To be sure, the pope suggested and encouraged the version he proposed, but no one is doing anything wrong by praying the rosary the way he or she has been used to praying it:

This addition of these new mysteries, without prejudice to any essential aspect of the prayer's traditional format, is meant to give it fresh life and to enkindle renewed interest in the rosary's place within Christian spirituality as a true doorway to the depths of the Heart of Christ, ocean of joy and of light, of suffering and of glory.

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The Rosary of Pope St. John Paul II

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Basic Method

The complete rosary of Pope St. John Paul II consists of twenty decades, divided into four parts, each part containing five decades. The first part consists of five joyful events in the lives of Jesus and Mary, the second part recalls five mysteries of light, the third part remembers five sorrowful events, and the fourth part considers five glorious events.

We begin by making the Sign of the Cross. Then we say the Apostles' Creed, one Our Father, three Hail Marys, and one Glory to the Father on the small chain.

The pope then made the following suggestions:

1. Announce the individual mystery on which to focus your attention, as that directs the imagination and the mind toward a particular episode in the life of Christ (see 29).
2. Read the biblical passage that relates to the mystery just announced: “No other words can ever match the efficacy of the inspired word” (30).
3. Pause and focus on the mystery before moving into vocal prayer: “Listening and meditation are nourished by silence” (31).
4. Pray the Lord’s Prayer, which “makes meditation upon the mystery, even when carried out in solitude, an ecclesial experience” (32).

5. In reciting ten Hail Marys, we “acknowledge the greatest miracle of history” by using words that “express the wonder of heaven and earth” (33).
6. The Glory to the Father gives tongue to the trinitarian goal of all Christian contemplation: “Christ is the way that leads to the Father in the Spirit” (34).
7. To complete every decade, the pope suggested we conclude each mystery with “a prayer for the fruits specific to that particular mystery” (35), as that makes the contemplation of the mysteries express better their full spiritual fruitfulness.

In a beautiful sentence, the pope summed up his reflections on the rosary:

If prayed in this way, the Rosary truly becomes a spiritual itinerary in which Mary acts as Mother, Teacher, and Guide, sustaining the faithful by her powerful intercession.

THE ROSARY OF THE VIRGIN MARY, 37

The Joyful Mysteries

(Mondays and Saturdays)



The Annunciation of Our Lord

But the angel said, “Do not fear, Mary, for God has looked kindly on you. You shall conceive and bear a son and you shall call him Jesus. He will be great and shall rightly be called Son of the Most High.”

LUKE 1:30–32a

Silent reflection on the mystery