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What Is the Rosary?

The rosary, like anything that has spanned centuries, has had a richly complex evolution. It has borrowed from many traditions and has been influenced by many people. It has been prayed in a variety of ways and continues to spawn variations and inspire supplements. But the traditional rosary is a simple thing, a devotional tool that teaches through prayerful meditation the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The *Catechism* calls the rosary the “epitome of the whole Gospel.” It is a scriptural meditation; eighteen of the twenty mysteries, or meditations, are drawn directly from the New Testament. The person praying the rosary repeats several common Catholic prayers and uses the beads to help him or her keep track of both the meditation and the prayer. The rosary works on multiple levels: it is a physical object; it involves the intellect and the imagination in meditation; and its purpose is developing spiritual insight and, ultimately, connection with God.

The mysteries of the contemporary rosary focus on Christ’s early life, public life, passion, death, and resurrection. However, because most of the rosary prayers are Hail Marys and because two of the mysteries are dedicated to Marian events, the

2 What Is the Rosary?

rosary sometimes appears to be focused on Mary rather than on Christ. Thus people sometimes ask if Catholics are worshipping Mary and want to know what it means to pray to Mary. *Why would people ask Mary to pray for them?* they wonder. This question will be addressed in detail in chapter 3. For now, I would just like to point out that the focus of the rosary is on Christ. This will become clearer as we take a more concentrated look at the evolution of the rosary as a devotional tool.

We must keep in mind three major histories when considering the development of the rosary: the prayers themselves and their origins; the actual physical rosary (beads, chain, and crucifix); and the addition of the mysteries. All three elements developed in combination with each other to finally make up the rosary we know today.

“The rosary provides me with so many opportunities to connect with God. There’s the physical part, moving the beads through the fingers; the vocal prayer; and then the mental, meditative reflecting on the scene. The rosary fulfills St. Paul’s command that we ‘pray without ceasing.’”

Carl, systems analyst

The Prayers of the Rosary

The prayers of the rosary are the Apostles’ Creed, the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the doxology. They make up a

conversation with God that essentially follows the pattern of how we greet and respond and communicate with one another.

Imagine being approached by someone who has been standing off in the distance, someone you have been hoping and waiting for. You first note whether the person is male or female; as he or she draws closer you begin to identify other characteristics—eyes, hair, the way the person walks or dresses. Perhaps you recognize the hair, the eyes, and the smile of your mother. As she approaches and greets you, you recognize her voice and observe her gait, which has slowed as she's gotten older. When the two of you embrace, an even more complete experience of her—brown eyes, white hair, gentle, affectionate embrace—fills your senses: “This is my mother who loves me, and I'm happy we are together.” You then have a conversation with her about those things that you have in common. You direct your speech and comportment in a way that is appropriate for your mother, for your relationship with her and the history you share together.

This is the experience of the rosary. Prayer is coming to know someone. It creates a common language for communication.

Apostles' Creed

The rosary begins with the recitation of the Apostles' Creed on the crucifix.

I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended into hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty; from there he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

Derived from the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed is a declaration of the basic tenets of the faith. It reflects and prepares us for the coming meditations. It serves a communal purpose by establishing a common language of faith for all those who may be praying the rosary. It also serves a personal faith-fortifying purpose by allowing us to declare our faith vocally and by reminding us of the signal characteristics of our triune God.

Our Father

The Our Father, or the Lord's Prayer, follows the creed. It is recited on the first bead and introduces each decade, or group of ten Hail Marys.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our

trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.

Given to us from the lips of Christ himself, the Our Father is the most important prayer in the entire devotion. Because it is taken directly from Scripture, the Our Father has a simple history, but its meaning is certainly rich. Space does not allow for a lengthy study of the prayer, but a brief overview will help place it in the proper context. You may find it helpful to consult some of the many commentaries and devotional books that discuss the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name: We begin by identifying the one being addressed: our Father. We recognize other characteristics of his nature: he is of a divine, or heavenly, nature. Thus he is worthy of praise—his name is holy, honored, and uniquely his. With these basic characteristics in mind, we have become aware of the one to whom we are speaking, and we will conduct ourselves accordingly.

The Our Father remains significant for many reasons. Christ taught us to address God in the most personal way imaginable, as *Abba*—a word close to “Papa” or “Dad.” This emphasizes the intimacy of Christ's relationship to God, and by teaching his disciples to pray in this manner, Christ was inviting us to enjoy the same intimacy. The Our Father, then, is a constant reminder of our childlike dependence on God and of the profound level of intimacy into which he invites us. But addressing God as Father was also problematic and would

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“Kelly’s writing provides a very personable and accessible but very rich path into this devotion. [A]n enjoyable and employable book.”

—Susan HooKong-Taylor, director, Deep Water Sound

the rosary has been a central element in the prayer lives of millions of Catholics the world over, including that of Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II. In *The Rosary*, author Liz Kelly explains the practical as well as the spiritual benefits that this often misunderstood prayer can have for modern life. This book includes surprising and moving testimonies by people whose lives have been touched, healed, and forever changed by this simple but powerful prayer.

In 2002, Pope John Paul II added the five new Luminous Mysteries to the rosary. He also called upon Catholics to begin praying the rosary with greater frequency. Liz Kelly reveals how and why this ancient devotional tool can enhance our own prayer lives and deepen our ongoing relationship with God.



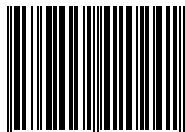
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