

✠ What is the Rosary? ✠

By Pope John Paul II

The Rosary of the Virgin Mary, which gradually took form in the second millennium under the guidance of the Spirit of God, still remains, at the dawn of this third millennium, a prayer of great significance, destined to bring forth a harvest of holiness. It blends easily into the spiritual journey of the Christian life, which, after two thousand years, has lost none of the freshness of its beginnings and feels drawn by the Spirit of God to "set out into the deep" (duc in altum!) in order once more to proclaim, and even cry out, before the world that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, "the way, and the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). "the goal of human history and the point on which the desires of history and civilization turn".

In the society of its elements, it has all the depth of the Gospel message in its entirety, of which it can be said to be a compendium. With the Rosary, the Christian people sits at the school of Mary and is led to contemplate the beauty on the face of Christ and to experience the depths of his love. Through the Rosary the faithful receive abundant grace, as though from the very hands of the Mother of the Redeemer.

The Rosary belongs among the finest and most praiseworthy traditions of Christian contemplation. Developed in the West, it is a typically mediative prayer, corresponding in some way to the "prayer of the heart" or "Jesus prayer" which took root in the soil of the Christian East.

Prayer for peace and for the family

A number of historical circumstances also make a revival of the Rosary quite timely. First of all, the need to implore from God the *gift of peace*.

A similar need for commitment and prayer arises in relation to another critical contemporary issue: *the family*, the primary cell of society, increasingly menaced by forces of disintegration on both the ideological and practical planes.

The Rosary, a contemplative prayer

The Rosary, precisely because it starts with Mary's own experience, is an *exquisitely contemplative prayer*. Without this contemplative dimension, it would lose its meaning, as Pope Paul VI clearly pointed out: "Without contemplation, the Rosary is a body without a soul.

Mary's contemplation is above all *a remembering*. We need to understand this word in the biblical sense of remembrance (*zakhar*) as a making present of the works brought about by God in the history of salvation. The Bible is an account of saving events culminating in Christ himself. These events not only belong to "yesterday"; *they are also part of the "today" of salvation*.

Christian spirituality is distinguished by the disciple's commitment to become conformed ever more fully to his Master (*cf. Rom 8:29; Phil 3:10,12*).

In the spiritual journey of the Rosary, based on the constant contemplation – in Mary's company – of the face of Christ, this demanding ideal of being conformed to him is pursued through an association which could be described in terms of friendship.

In this process of being conformed to Christ in the Rosary, we entrust ourselves in a special way to the maternal care of the Blessed Virgin.

The Rosary mystically transports us to Mary's side as she is busy watching over the human growth of Christ in the home of Nazareth. This enables her to train us and to mold us with the same care, until Christ is "fully formed" in us (*cf. Gal 4:19*).

The Rosary, "a Compendium of the Gospel"

The Rosary is one of the traditional paths of Christian prayer directed to the contemplation of Christ's face. Pope Paul VI described it in these words: "as a Gospel prayer, centred on the mystery of the redemptive Incarnation, the Rosary is a prayer with a clearly Christological orientation."

Of the many mysteries of Christ's life, only a few are indicated by the Rosary in the form that has become generally established with the seal of the Church's approval. The selection was determined by the origin of the prayer, which was based on the number 150, the number of the Psalms in the Psalter.

I believe, however, that to bring out fully the Christological depth of the Rosary it would be suitable to make an addition to the traditional pattern which, while left to the freedom of individuals and communities, could broaden it to include *the mysteries of Christ's public ministry between his Baptism and his Passion*.

Consequently, for the Rosary to become more fully a "compendium of the Gospel", it is fitting to add, following the reflection on the Incarnation and the hidden life of Christ (*the Mysteries of joy*) and before focusing on the sufferings of his Passion (*the mysteries of Sorrow*) and the triumph of his Resurrection (*the Mysteries of Glory*), a meditation on certain particularly significant moments in his public ministry (*the Mysteries of light*).