

First Published in St. Bartholomew Bulletin: November 10, 2002

Rosarium Virginis Mariae (The Rosary of the Virgin Mary)

Even though a couple of years have elapsed, with this apostolic letter (pub. 10.16.02) Pope John Paul II wishes to bring to a culmination the Year of Jubilee 2000 with a tribute to Mary. At the same time he celebrates in this manner the 25th year of his pontificate. Finally, he proclaims the year, October 2002 – October 2003, **The Year of the Rosary**. The Holy Father gives three reasons for this recommendation of the Rosary:

1. As a means for Catholic Communities to again become “genuine schools of prayer.”
2. As a means to peace through contemplating the mystery of Christ who “is our peace.”
3. As a means of revitalizing the family, the primary cell of society (and the Church), that today finds itself in mortal combat.

The Holy Father asks us to pray the Rosary to, as it were, sit at the feet of Mary, in the School of Mary; to contemplate “the beauty on the face of Christ” thereby experiencing the depths of his love.

... we look at the Holy Father’s encouragement to prayer, especially with the Rosary. He recalls for us how the Scriptures tell us to pray time and time again. (e.g. “Ask, and it will be given to you; *seek*, and you will find; *knock*, and it will be opened to you.” Mt 7:7). He quotes the Catechism of the Catholic Church when he says, “The prayer of the Church is sustained by the prayer of Mary.” Mary’s power of intercession was abundantly demonstrated at the wedding feast of Cana.

When in the Rosary we plead with Mary, we are asking the Sanctuary of the Holy Spirit to make intercession to the Father who filled her with the Spirit and with the Son born of her womb. Pope John Paul reminds us that just as the Dominicans in ages past used the Rosary to great effect for the purpose of conversion, so today we likewise should have recourse to the Rosary in these difficult times. “The Rosary, “he says, “retains all its power and continues to be a valuable pastoral resource for every good evangelizer.”

Pope John Paul begins Chapter 2 of his apostolic letter by reminding us that the Rosary is a *compendium* of the Gospel. Jesus is its Heart. However, contemplation of the face of Christ requires attentive listening in the Spirit to the voice of the Father. Silence and prayer alone provide that experience. The Rosary in its mysteries is one of those traditional means of prayer directed to the contemplation of Christ’s face while as background support the successive Hail Mary’s form a rhythmic hymn of praise.

The 150 psalms of the Psalter formed the basis for the Rosary with its fifteen “decimated” mysteries. Even so, the Holy Father finds it appropriate “to fill in” as it were by offering an additional five mysteries highlighting Our Lord’s public life: “*While I am in the world, I am the light of the world,*” Hence, the *Mysteries of Light*. In this way the

Pope hopes to invest new interest in the Rosary as a “*true doorway to the depths of the Heart of Christ, ocean of joy and of light, of suffering and glory.*”

In what follows, Pope John Paul now begins to describe the mysteries of the Rosary. As the Holy Father focuses our attention on their content, it becomes immediately evident that the more well grounded we are in the Gospels, the more fruitful will be our meditations.

The Joyful Mysteries are the consequence of THE event of salvation history, the Incarnation, the Word made flesh. “The whole of humanity,” the Pope says, “is embraced by the *fiat* (let it be done) with which Mary readily agrees to the will of God.” And yet amidst the joy of that event we eventually will be led to mediated upon the very “radical nature of the Gospel, in which the closest of human relationship are challenged by the absolute demands of the Kingdom.” The Holy Father tells us that to meditate the Joyful Mysteries is “to enter into the ultimate causes and the deepest meaning of Christian joy”; focusing on the Incarnation while becoming aware of the mystery of Christ’s future saving Passion.

Our Holy Father in his discussion of **The Mysteries of Light** recognizes that except for the wedding feast of Cana. Mary remains in the background of these mysteries. Yet, the Pope points out that her “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5) is fitting acknowledgement of the words and signs of Christ’s public ministry and forms the Marian foundation for all the “*Luminous Mysteries*”.

Jesus, the Light of the World, is thrust to the forefront in a particularly special way in John Paul’s choice of events. ***The Baptism of the Lord*** is uniquely indicative of this as the Spirit descends to invest the Savior with his mission. At ***The Wedding in Cana***, at the instigation of the Lord’s mother, the changing of water into wine opens the disciples’ heart to faith. Then Jesus calls all to repentance and reconciliation in the ***Proclamation of the Kingdom***. On Mount Tabor the glory of the Godhead shines forth from the human face of Christ in a true ***Transfiguration***. In the final Mystery of Light, the Holy Father offers us the miracle of miracles, ***The Institution of the Eucharist***, as the culmination of Jesus’ love for us, as he says, “to the end.”

The inclusion of ***The Mysteries of Light*** among the mysteries of the Rosary achieves a long anticipated completion in the “*Compedium of the Gospel*”.

The Holy Father tells us that the events meditated upon in the Luminous Mysteries lead naturally to those call the Sorrowful. The **Garden of Obedience (Gethsemane)** re-establishes the undoing of the Garden of Disobedience (Eden). The true cost of discipleship is seen in the **Scourging of Jesus**, his **Crowning with Thorns**, the **Carrying of the Cross**, even to the **Death of the Savior on the Cross**. “With Mary,” the Holy Father says of these mysteries, “we enter into the depths of God’s love for man.” ...And through the ***Ecce Homo***, man is revealed to himself; his meaning, his origin, and his fulfillment.

Meditation on the mysteries of the Rosary, the Pope points out, always has invited us to pass beyond the darkness of the Passion. In the **Resurrection** we find the reason for our Faith. The **Ascension of Christ** and the **Assumption of Mary** re-invigorate hope

in our eternal destiny where **Mary Crowned as Queen of the Universe** reigns in glory at the side of her son.

“**Pentecost**,” he continues, “reveals the face of the Church as a family gathered together with Mary.” Together with her, in the Holy Spirit, we now live the new life of Christ in the very heart of the Church. As a people of salvation we are the pilgrim People of God journeying to their glorious destiny.

The Holy Father approaches the short but very important Trinitarian doxology at the end of each of the ten Hail Mary’s, the “Glory be,” with no little esteem. The glorification of the Holy Trinity, he says, is more than simply a perfunctory closing. It takes on its proper contemplative tone as we raise our minds to heaven and relive once again the experience of Tabor, “it is good for us to be here!”

At length, in pondering the concluding prayer of the Rosary, the Holy Father suggests rather a concluding prayer at the end of each mystery. This prayer would tie the spiritual fruitfulness of that particular mystery in a practical way to every day life. He encourages centers of Rosary devotion, under pastoral guidance, to experiment with such an idea to derive greater nourishment.

No part of the rosary is left unattended. The Holy Father now considers the rosary beads themselves as a means of deepening our contemplation. “The beads,” he says, “converge on the Crucifix.” Life and prayer is centered on Christ and every thing leads through him in the Spirit to the Father. The beads according to Bartolo Longo are a holy chain of love, each bead counting the unnumbered relationships we have with the Lord Jesus.

The opening and closing prayers of the rosary provide a broadening experience in our prayer life. When in closing we pray especially for the Pope we are brought into an ecclesial dimension that extends to all the needs of the Church. To encourage this prayer, the Church has seen fit to generously indulge the practice.

At the end, in many instances those who have made this journey of prayer with Our Lady feel, out of certain exuberance, the need to burst forth with the *Salve Regina* or the *Litany of Loreto*. This is the crowning moment of an incomparable inner journey to Christ with his Mother.

The Holy Father recognizes the fact that many pray the entire Rosary on a daily basis. For many who are ill or elderly, the Rosary is a contemplative companion that fills a sometimes empty and arduous day. With the addition of *the Mysteries of Light*, some now will find it difficult to pray the rosary daily in its entirety. For them the traditional method of assigning the various groups of mysteries to particular days still will find its significant place.

Pope John Paul has suggested a new assignation: Monday and Saturday, *the Joyful Mysteries*; Tuesday and Friday, *the Sorrowful Mysteries*; Wednesday and Sunday, *the Glorious Mysteries*; **Thursday: the Luminous Mysteries** (*Mysteries of Light*). Each day of the week can be flavored by the particular mysteries with special feasts being given consideration for change. What is most important in the mind of the Pope is that the Rosary always be seen as a path of contemplation much like the Sunday liturgical celebration guides us through the significant events of our Lord’s life.

The Rosary is not only a prayer of popular devotion but it possesses as well a theological depth suited to the most sophisticated.

Over the centuries the Church has attributed a particular efficacy to this pray in special times of need. It is at just such a moment of history that the Holy Father now asks us to pray the Rosary for peace in the world and for the cause of the family. It would seem to him that only an intervention from on high will guide the hearts of people through the extremely contentious conflicts of our day.

By its nature the Rosary is THE prayer of peace for its causes us to focus again and again on the Prince of Peace who is “our peace”. In the very mechanism of the Rosary itself there is a resulting peaceful effect on those who pray it. How could one behold the face of Christ in Bethlehem, on the Mt. of the Beatitudes, in the Way of the Cross; or contemplate the continence of the Risen Christ, or for that matter, his Mother crowned in glory, and not yearn for peace?

Prayed ceaselessly, the Rosary is a chain of hope and trust that, in the words of the Pontiff, the difficult “battle” for peace can be won.

In closing this section of RVM on the Mysteries themselves, the Holy Father reminds us, and in so doing prepares us at the same time for the next section, that in the Light of Christ alone is the true image of man seen as he really is and should be.

Pope John proposes that we see the Rosary for what it is, a method to prayer meant to help us to be assimilated into the mystery of Christ. It involves the language of love that somehow finds necessary a certain repetition. “In Christ, God has truly assumed a ‘heart of flesh’,” says this Pope of the Heart. He points to the psychological need in this Divine/human heart for repetitive affirmation in Christ’s own triple question directed to Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Although addressed to Mary, the Hail Mary’s message of love is ultimately directed with her and through her to Jesus.

“To understand the Rosary,” John Paul continues, “one has to enter into the psychological dynamic proper to love.” God in his communication with us normally respects our human nature and its vital rhythms. The Church is attentive as well to these human dimensions in its Sacraments and sacramentals. The Holy Father ultimately returns to what must be well understood, “The Rosary is a method of contemplation. As a method, it serves as a means to an end and cannot become an end in itself.”

Having offered us the Rosary as simply a method of contemplation, the Holy Father now begins to look at its various elements. Through the visual images upon which our imagination focuses we come into contact with the divine. The Sacred Scripture is necessarily an important foundation for our dealing with the mysteries.

So much is this so that his Holiness encourages us to pause after the announcement of each mystery in order to listen to God speak to us through a brief but pertinent passage from the passage to make its impression upon us. This period of silence cannot be over emphasized for it forms the very seedbed of contemplation and is of immense significance in today’s noisy and busy society.

The lifting of the mind and heart to the Father comes almost as a natural consequence of this Scriptural activity. Jesus always leads us to the Father. The Our Father serves as a foundation for the Christ and Mary centered meditation which follows.

The Pope concludes by helping us to understand that this prayer, the Our Father, should lead us in some fashion to an experience of Church.

Pope John Paul now looks at what is a major element of the rosary, the ten Hail Mary's. "The Marian Hail Mary in no way detracts for the very Christ-centeredness of this prayer but increases it," says the Holy Father. In the address of the angels the Father, as it were, repeatedly contemplates his "masterpiece" of creation, the Incarnation of Son in the womb of the Virgin Mary. In this very event Mary's prophecy finds its fulfillment: "Henceforth all generations will call me blessed." (Lk 1:48)

The Pope points out that the hinge that joins the two parts of the Hail Mary together is the name, Jesus. He further suggests that the praiseworthy custom, practice in many regions, of appending a clause referring to the mystery being contemplate is a significant means of proclaiming the faith and focusing our attention. The Pope emphasizes that when we associate the singularly important of Jesus with that of Mary we set our on a path that is meant to help us enter more deeply into the life of Christ.

Theotokos, we are told finally, is that privileged relationship of divine motherhood that makes us want to entrust our lives and especially the moment of death to Mary's maternal intercession.

Announcing the mysteries is an invocation that leads the Holy Father to remind us of the *compositio loci*, the visual and imaginative elements that help us focus our attention and meditation. "It corresponds," he says, "to the inner logic which God himself uses in the Incarnation." In Jesus, God assumes a concrete, human form in a particular time in history.

Although announcing the various mysteries provides the ground of the meditations, the Rosary never replaces evangelical scripture but, in truth, presupposes and promotes it.

The Pope encourages us to read or proclaim at each mystery a pertinent passage from the Sacred Page. It is not so much a matter of recalling information but of allowing God to speak to us through the living word. It is extremely important that at this point for some brief moments we allow our minds to rest in silence. Silence is golden. "Silence," John Paul concludes, "is one of the secrets of contemplation and meditation." Interior silence is sorely needed in today's society and most difficult to achieve.

The Holy Father reminds us all, clergy and laity alike, that the Rosary is the prayer of and for the family and children.

As a family prayer he says that we must recapture that once enthusiastic acceptance of the Rosary. He reiterates the old adage, "The family that prays together stays together." Pastors of souls are "heartily" urged to encourage their families to once more take up this age-old practice of praying the family rosary. Our times need this daily moment of grace in which the images of the Redeemer and the Blessed Mother are allowed to reproduce for us the household of Nazareth in our lives. Once again, Jesus will take center stage.

The problems with which the youth of today are confronted in this advanced and rapid-fire technological social are quite often overwhelming for them and their parents. John Paul feels strongly that we underestimate the power of the Rosary in the lives of our

children. World Youth Days have shown the remarkable achievements possible when a pastoral approach that is “positive, impassioned and creative” is employed.

The final section of this encyclical is entitled, *The Rosary, a Treasure to be Rediscovered*. The Holy Father then begins to enumerate all who should, not only through voice alone, but out of personal lived experience promote the Rosary. He names us: Bishops, Priests, Deacons, and other agents of ministries, theologians, consecrated men and women, Christian families, the sick and the elderly, and last but not least the young people.

John Paul asks us all to “confidently take up the Rosary.” He is unafraid to plead with us, **“May this appeal of mine not go unheard.”** He spiritually prostrates himself at the feet of the Blessed Virgin in the beautiful shrine built by Bartolo Longo, the Apostle of the Rosary. He takes up Bartolo’s prayer to the Mother of God in full, of which only a bit can be related here, **“You will be our comfort in the hour of death; yours our final kiss as life ebbs away.”**

One final thrust at a condensation of the condensations of Pope John Paul’s apostolic letter. This year through October 2003 is the year of the Rosary. There is a seeming urgency about the Pope’s request to pray the Rosary that these troubled times only accentuate. He asks us to pray for peace and the revitalization of the family. We pray as a family for the family contemplating in common the life of Jesus and Mary in the school of Mary.

Our minds and hearts are to be centered on Jesus. In order to help contemporary Christianity to do this, the Holy Father offers us five new mysteries, the Mysteries of Light. These meditations bridge and fill in the gap which has long existed from the childhood of Jesus to the final moments of his earthly existence, his passion and death on the cross.

John Paul finds no embarrassment in asking, even pleading, with us to begin once again to learn to pray the Rosary. He wishes that all of us, Bishops, Priests, Deacons, theologians, consecrated men and women, the sick and elderly as well as the young, begin to pray it with some fervor. Heaven has responded before to the Rosary’s appeal. It will again, of Mary he says, **“You will be our comfort in the hours of death; yours our final kiss as life ebbs away.”**

I would like to continue in brief segments for the next few weeks to summarize the Holy Father’s Apostolic Letter on the Rosary especially in light of the fact that he has declared this year (October 2002 – 2003) the Year of the Rosary. “Why the Rosary?” you ask. For one, it is a simple means for the family to learn to pray.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls contemplation “a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus” (CCC #2715) The Rosary in its essence is a contemplative prayer. Without contemplating the mysteries, the Rosary is a body without a soul. Mary is the model of Christian contemplation. The Holy Father tells us that “when at last she gave birth to him in Bethlehem, her eyes were able to gaze tenderly on the face of her Son... and that ... Mary lived with her eyes fixed on Christ, treasuring his every word.” In this uniquely Biblical prayer we “remember” with Mary as we gaze upon the face of Jesus.

“To look upon the face of Jesus” in the mysteries of the Rosary means more than a mere learning what he taught but of “learning him.” In the “school of Mary” one is led as the Apostle Paul was wont to say, “to put on the Lord Jesus Christ; ... to put on the mind of Christ.” The Christian’s spiritual life is distinguished by this very thing; the disciple’s commitment to become conformed ever more fully to his Master. In Mary’s company we are introduced into a special, mystical friendship with herself and Jesus. Our Holy Father further suggests that as two friends tend to develop similar habits of life by intimate and close association so too do we hope that we can learn from these supreme models a life of humility poverty, hiddenness, patience and perfection.

Pope John Paul calls Mary “the perfect icon of the motherhood of the Church.” Mother of Christ, she is Mother of the Church and our mother as well. As such she continues to bring to birth children for the mystical Body of her Son through “her intercession, imploring upon them the inexhaustible outpouring of the Spirit.” The pope attests to having experienced this not only in his own personal life but in the life of this pontificate as well. It is well expressed in his motto. *Totus Tuus, All Yours.*