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## On the Development of the Rosary

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# ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ROSARY

by  
Sean Paul Fredsti

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of St. John's University,  
Collegeville, Minnesota, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Theology

School of Theology  
St. John's University  
Collegeville, Minnesota

November, 1998

This paper was written under the direction of

*Michael Kwatera, OSB*

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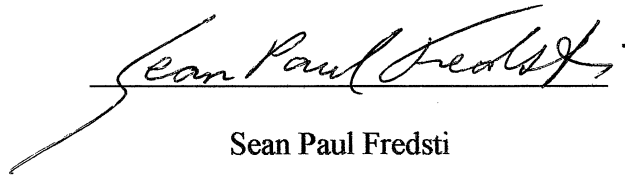
Michael Kwatera, OSB

## ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ROSARY

The rosary is one of the most popular devotions practiced throughout Church history. Its most ardent practitioners down through the ages have been lay people. Because of this the rosary has a rich and varied background which reflects the many cultural nuances gleaned over the centuries.

The paper follows the development of the rosary from its earliest origins and shed light on some of the meanings of the rosary as it is practiced today. The rosary grew out of a desire to live a spiritual life of prayer. In addition, we can see that in the hundreds of years that the rosary has been with us, it has continued to evolved as a devotional practice. Because of its origins, its ardent lay devotees, and its appreciation of Mary's place in redemptive history, it is foreseeable that the rosary as we know it today will continue to develop as our Mariology develops.

*This paper may be duplicated*

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sean Paul Fredsti". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Sean Paul Fredsti

November 1998

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## **ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ROSARY**

The rosary is one of the most popular devotions practiced throughout Church history. Its most ardent practitioners down through the ages have been lay people. Because of this, the rosary has a rich and varied background which reflects the many cultural nuances gleaned over the centuries.

This paper will follow the development of the rosary from its earliest origins and shed light on some of the meanings of the rosary as it is practiced today.

### **Background**

Many religions of the world have traditions of repetitious prayer. Before Christianity, there were already religions around the world using counting aids in prayers. Pebbles or beads put into a dish were common. Also long before Christianity, placing beads on a string and using a string of beads for counting of the repetitious prayers was practiced. In the Christian tradition, the Desert Fathers practiced repetitious prayer. There are stories of these monks using pebbles to keep count.

## **Early Foundations**

For the early Church Fathers private oral recitation of Scripture was seen as a very effective way of protecting the monks against the snares of evil.<sup>1</sup> Whether alone or in communal prayer, oral recitation was frequently practiced. The most recited Biblical texts were those of the psalms. From this practice arose the development of the Divine Office as we have it today. Specific hours of the day were put aside for the recitation of the Office. Some religious communities gathered to recite all 150 psalms in the course a month, a week, or even a day. Because of the regular repetition of these Bible verses, many monks would recite the prayers by rote. There were some monasteries that had members who were not able to read the texts of Scriptures and depended on memorization to observe the Liturgy of the Hours.

Lay people often went to monastic liturgies and desired to join in the prayer life. Visiting lay people often added their own spontaneous canticles of praise from pious folk songs such as the “Hail Holy Queen” and the “Queen of Heaven.” The laity found memorizing all 150 psalms somewhat bothersome due to their busy schedules. Therefore, it was not

uncommon for them to substitute 150 Our Fathers in place of the psalms. There is very little hard evidence of the use of pebbles or counting beads among the laity for this particular practice. However, one can easily imagine the laity also using some counting device to help them in their recitation. While reciting the Our Father, devotees meditated on the mysteries and the themes found in Scripture. Later, this element of meditation would be focused on the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary as we have in the mysteries of the rosary today.

As time went by, liturgical practices came to divide the lay people from the religious more and more. Lay people clung tightly to their desire to enter into a regular prayer life in union with the whole Church. Here, the rosary became an important means for lay people to have a regular prayer life even though it was not a liturgical practice.

The Divine Office took a predominate position in the prayer life of the Church. In addition, the practice of allegorical interpretation had come into wide practice at the beginning of the Middle Ages. It may have been easy for the lay people to see recitation of the rosary as allegorical to the Divine Office itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Burton-Christie, The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early



The place where prayer was said also had special significance. Lay people created rose gardens as special places reserved for prayer. These places were seen as an allegory to the garden of Gethsemani or to the Garden of Eden which was in keeping with the Biblical themes. In these gardens they would recite what we would now call early forms of the rosary.

The use of the rosary as a devotional and prayerful practice had a solid foundation and a popular following during the Middle Ages. Lay Christians far and wide, knew and practiced this Marian devotion. Theresa of Avila speaks about how she was especially fond of “telling her beads” as a child.<sup>2</sup> Her use of the rosary prayer continued as she entered into the convent.<sup>3</sup> Praying the rosary was a regular devotion for Theresa.<sup>4</sup> She saw the rosary as a special help when it was difficult to pray otherwise.<sup>5</sup> Her experience and practice of the rosary were not uncommon during Theresa’s life time. Often the rosary was rooted and was practiced in the family prior to any formal religious training. Most religious, brothers, priests, or nuns carried the practice of saying the rosary into their religious life from the practice of it in

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*Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 123.

<sup>2</sup> Theresa of Avila. *The Life of Saint Theresa of Avila by Herself*. Trans. J.M. Cohen. London: Penguin Books, 1957. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Theresa of Avila, 36 (the use of the Ave Maria)

<sup>4</sup> Theresa of Avila, 207.

<sup>5</sup> Theresa of Avila, 283.

their own family as children. In this way, the rosary retained its particularly lay attribute of simplicity which facilitated this devotion in a family setting.

## **Marian Roots**

In the early Church, there grew the cult of the martyrs. These men and women who gave their lives in faith and gave the ultimate witness were not only honored, but seen as having a special place in heaven from which they could help those who were still on earth.

In the shadow of these cults grew a recognition of Mary as also having a special place in heaven due to her being the Mother of God. An early example of the exaltation of the Blessed Virgin Mary can be found in the writings of Irenaeus.<sup>6</sup> He writes, ‘The knot of Eve’s disobedience was loosened by the obedience of Mary. For what the Virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the Virgin Mary set free through faith.’<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus saw the Virgin Mary as the “Second Eve.”

During the early controversies about the nature of Jesus, we find Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria proclaiming the perpetual virginity of

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<sup>6</sup> Williston Walker, A History of the Christian Church (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959).

<sup>7</sup> Walker 63-64.

Mary. In the condemnation of Nestorius and the decision of the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, Mary was fully elevated to be first among all created beings in the Christological theories of orthodoxy. For the populace, Mary was quickly seen as the one human who had achieved the highest place in heaven and held the closest position in the “court of God” for she was given the special favor by God of being a virgin and the mother of Jesus. Humankind had found a sympathizer in the heavenly courts. Even though there existed no relics of the Virgin Mary, the proponents of orthodoxy had proclaimed that Mary, more than any martyr, was blessed beyond any other saint in heaven. Mary had become the closest friend of God and humans. Before all, she was and is “Queen of Heaven.” The name of Mary came up time and again in discussions of God’s saving act and the meaning of the ministry of Jesus.

In the second century there arose the heresy of Ebionism. Their Christological understanding had denied the divinity of Christ altogether. They further denied the virgin birth. The proponents of orthodoxy reiterated the divinity of Christ, championed the idea of the virgin birth, and implicitly gave a special value to Mary in the story of salvation.

The story of the fight against Gnosticism also brought up a discussion of Mary’s place in salvation history. Gnosticism was overcome by the

ecclesiastical authorities unwavering reliance on the rule of faith as expressed in liturgy, catechetical teaching, and preaching that the Son of God had really become man.<sup>8</sup> The orthodox saw Jesus Christ as both flesh and spirit, true God and true man, of Mary and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary, by her consent and in her conception of Jesus, had an honored place in salvation history and in theology itself. In discussing the Christological controversies of the time, there was among the orthodox proponents the consistent preaching of the special place that Mary had in salvation history.

In the fight against the Polinarianism in the fourth century the role of Mary in orthodox Christology continued. Mary's Son was pronounced as the Word made flesh. As a result of this controversy, we find Gregory of Nyssa and the Church Council proclaiming Mary as the Theotokos.<sup>9</sup> Many see this as the strongest statement about Mary throughout all of Church history.

All this encouraged the Church's official teachings about the special place that Mary had among all the saints. Confident of her special place in the heavenly court, lay people everywhere found solace in asking for her intercession before God. It was easy for lay people to appreciate the special miracle that surrounded Mary in the conception of Jesus. She had conceived

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<sup>8</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1978) 142.

<sup>9</sup> Kelly 299-300.

and given birth to a son. Yet, she remained a virgin. This surely was a miracle beyond any understanding. One could both identify with Mary as a mother and distinguish her from all others because of her special place in salvation history.

Mary was seen as a third party intercessor. Many people praised her place in salvation history with unconstrained acclamations. These traditions grew over time as each generation added to the list. By the fifth century the Marian cult was able to incorporate much of the enthusiasm, devotion, and the fundamental principles of the Christian lay people.

The effects of special devotion to Our Lady were witnessed. For example, during the battle of Lepanto October 7, 1571, many lives were said to have been saved through Mary's intercession.

In 1569, Pope Pius V proclaimed that the meditation of the mysteries was an important part of gaining indulgences in the rosary prayer.<sup>10</sup> Then in 1573, he proclaimed the feast of the Most Holy Rosary, giving this Marian devotion a special liturgical significance.

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<sup>10</sup> Anthony N. Fuerst, This Rosary, Rev. ed. (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1954) 37.

## Key Elements

The first appearance of what would be the modern form of the Hail Mary is found in the Roman breviary of 1568.<sup>11</sup> Most likely it had its origins from the very beginning of the New Testament. The first known prescription of a simple Ave Maria is traced to Odo of Sully, Bishop of Paris in 1198.<sup>12</sup> Over time, there came to be a combination of a series of Ave Marias separated by Pater Nosters. Additional prayers were added or neglected over time. Thus the character of the rosary was in flux during the Middle Ages. There remained, however, the consistent backbone of the rosary that included the Ave Maria, the Pater Noster, and the reflection on spiritual themes.

It is conjectured that around 1414 the Carthusian, Dominic of Prussian (Rutenus), invented the practice of mediating on the life of Jesus while saying the Hail Marys of the Rosary.<sup>13</sup> However, it is also recognized that as early as the 1200's walled "Rose Gardens" were used as places to recite the Hail Marys and readings of the Songs of Songs. During these devotionals, the

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<sup>11</sup> Fuerst 5.

<sup>12</sup> Felix Vernet, *Medieval Spirituality*, trans. Benedictines of Talacre, Catholic Library of Religious Knowledge 13 (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1930) 152.

<sup>13</sup> Fuerst 25.

mysteries of faith were reflected upon and the incarnation was contemplated.<sup>14</sup>

As a whole the rosary is a prayer. It was not merely some way of preoccupying the mind while engaged in some other work. Rather, the rosary itself was seen as the work of devotional prayer. By the year 1589, the incorporation of mental prayer was an integral part of saying the rosary.<sup>15</sup> The early form of the rosary was sometimes called Our Lady's Psalter or praying the beads or sometimes simply the Ave Maria. All of these reflect the fact that the devotees saw the rosary practice as an expression of their belief in the preeminence of Mary by merit of her sanctity.

It was not uncommon for the rosary to be prescribed as a substitute for the Liturgy of the Hours. An example of this is the special circumstances in the case of St. Philip Neri. Because of his old age, Philip Neri was given the privilege of reciting the rosary in lieu of the Divine Office by Pope Gregory XIV.<sup>16</sup> Lay people saw themselves praying just as devoutly as the monks in the monastery when they recited the rosary.

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<sup>14</sup> Anne Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose: The Making of the Rosary in the Middle Ages* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997) 92

<sup>15</sup> John Bucke, "Instructions for the Use of the Beades," 1589, *English Recusant Literature*, Ed. D.M. Rogers, Vol. 77 (Yorkshire: Scolar Press, 1971) 14.

<sup>16</sup> V. J. Matthews, *St. Philip Neri* (1934; Rockford: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1984) 70.

During the Middle Ages there arose many books, especially picture texts, to help the laity in the recitation of the rosary. These texts and pictures were further aids to the meditative process that was integral to the rosary. And just as the early Church Fathers appreciated the oral aspect of prayer, those practicing the rosary understood the benefit of oral recitation of the beads. In addition, it was performed in the vernacular tongue and thus made it more attractive to the common person. To lay people who often found participation in the Divine Office difficult, the rosary was a practical substitute.

In the latter part of the Middle Ages special societies arose which perpetuated the cult of Mary and the recitation of rosary. Because these societies had no social class discrimination, they were particularly attractive to lay people. When Pope Sixtus IV in 1476 declared that the rosary had special indulgences that were able to help the souls in purgatory, rosary confraternities grew astoundingly. Not only did this declaration give official recognition to this form of prayer, there was also the official proclamation that this prayer was most efficacious.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Anne Winston-Allen, 137.



## **Formulation**

The rosary is not a sheer “multiplication of words” (Matthew 6:7). It is an occasion for prayerful reflection. Just as Jesus repeatedly asked Peter, “Do you love me?” (John 21:15), each utterance of a Hail Mary builds in meaningfulness. Each recitation of the Hail Mary does not spring from lack of trust that God hears our prayer; rather it is taking to heart the call to be persistent in our prayer (Luke 11:8). We are called upon to be never ceasing in our prayer (1 Timothy 5:17). The rosary should be seen as persistence in prayer, not a multiplication of words. The very fact that the rosary has endured over time shows the importance of this Marian devotion.

There have been many official Church documents regarding the Rosary in recent times. Aside from recommending the devotion, Popes have given formulas for the prayer. (see Appendix A for a listing of recent encyclicals on the devotion of the Rosary)

## **Conclusion**

There are few who doubt that the rosary has had a great impact on Christian religious devotion over the ages. The rosary that we have today has always been rooted in the riches of the past. From the simplicity of counting

prayers to the esthetic practice of meditating on Biblical themes, it continuously develops. The rosary grew out of a desire to live a spiritual life of prayer. In addition, we can see that in the hundreds of years that the rosary has been with us, it has continued to evolve as a devotional practice. There have been many official additions to the rosary. Lay people and the clerics have contributed to its development. While the Carthusians, Dominicans, and other orders have aided in the spreading of this devotion, it is the lay people who have so enthusiastically taken it up, brought it into their homes, and taught their children. Because of its origins, its ardent lay devotees, and its appreciation of Mary's place in redemptive history, the rosary as we know it today will continue to develop as our Mariology develops. With faithful practice the rosary reveals its capacity. With its history of continuous development by both lay and religious, the rosary is assured of an essential place in our devotional life and in the future of the Church.

## Appendix A

Some recent encyclicals on the devotion of the Rosary:

ON DEVOTION OF THE ROSARY *SUPREMI APOSTOLATUS OFFICIO* Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII promulgated September 1, 1883

ON THE RECITATION OF THE ROSARY *SUPERIORE ANNO* Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII promulgated on August 30, 1884.

PROCLAIMING AN EXTRAORDINARY JUBILEE *QUOD AUCTORITATE* Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII promulgated on December 22, 1885.

ON THE ROSARY AND PUBLIC LIFE *VI E BEN NOTO* Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII promulgated on September 20, 1887.

ON DEVOTION TO ST. JOSEPH *QUAMQUAM PLURIES* Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII promulgated on August 15, 1889.

COMMENDING DEVOTION TO THE ROSARY *LAETITIAE SANCTAE* Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII promulgated on September 8, 1893.

ON THE ROSARY *IUCUNDA SEMPER EXPECTATIONE* Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII promulgated on September 8, 1894.

ON THE ROSARY *INGRAVESCENTIBUS MALIS* Encyclical of Pope Pius XI promulgated on September 29, 1937.

ON THE ROSARY *GRATA RECORDATIO* Encyclical of Pope John XXIII promulgated on September 26, 1959.

ON THE OCCASION OF THE FIRST OF MAY *MENSE  
MAIO* Encyclical of Pope Paul VI promulgated on April 30,  
1965.

ON PRAYERS TO MARY FOR PEACE *CHRISTI MATRI*  
Encyclical of Pope Paul VI promulgated on September 15, 1966.

APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION FOR THE RIGHT  
ORDERING AND DEVELOPMENT OF DEVOTION TO  
THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY *MARIALIS CULTUS*  
Encyclical of Paul VI promulgated on February 2, 1974

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