

The Holy Rosary: The Origins

Thinking about history can be strange; it is like looking down a long tunnel, with the only source of light behind you, at the tunnel's mouth. Things close to the mouth are easy to see and we will notice all the differences and changes easily. As we peer farther down the tunnel, farther into the past, we will see less as the light becomes dimmer and things blend together. All we will be able to make out are the big bright items -- there will be lots of little items close by but harder to make out. In the end, it's a matter of perspective -- a personal belief in the traditions passed forward from those centuries.

For those who dislike "tunnel viewing" you can turn to Google. By searching on "Rosary History" (the quotes must be there) we find (on 10/1/2006) 869 pages . . . distilling from these pages can be as bad as "tunnel viewing." In the end, it's a matter of perspective -- a personal belief in the traditions passed forward from those centuries.

So, let us begin.

The Rosary is the tradition-distilled essence of Christian devotion in which vocal and mental prayer unites the whole person in effective and purposeful meditation on the central mysteries of Christian belief. The Rosary thus joins the human race to God through Mary whom God chose from all time for the specific purposes of mother and intercessor.

The traditional story of the rosary is Mary appeared to Dominic de Guzman in the twelfth century. At that time, tradition says she gave him the rosary as a powerful means of converting the Albigensians and other sinners. It is true Dominic was quite devoted to the Blessed Mother, but no one knows for sure if Our Lady herself gave Dominic the rosary. If she did, it is certain that she did not give him a rosary that looks like the one we have today.

In its history the Desert Fathers used prayer ropes to keep track of their saying the Jesus' Prayer (Jesus, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me a sinner). *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (vol. 13, p. 184-189) recounts that in the early centuries of the Church monks would recite the Psalms as part of their rule of life. Since learning the Psalms was necessarily restricted to those who could read, a simpler prayer tradition was needed for the illiterate brothers or in military orders where saying the Psalms would have taken too much time. The Lord's Prayer was adopted for this purpose; the brothers would recite 150 Our Fathers to correspond to the number of Psalms. Those people who didn't know how to read wanted to share in this practice, so praying on a string of 150 beads or knots began as a parallel to praying the psalms. It was a way that the illiterate could remember the Lord and his mother throughout the day. The "Divine Office"; the official prayer of the church; is the recitation of the psalms over a four week period, and is still prayed today.

This first rosary was prayed as we do today; a person would pass their fingers over each bead and say a prayer, usually the "Our Father". The "Hail Mary" as we know it wasn't even around at that time.

When people said the rosary in the twelfth century, Gabriel's Annunciation greeting to Mary, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee" was often said along with the Our Father. Later, Elizabeth's greeting "blessed are you among women ..." was added. "Jesus," following Elisabeth's greeting, was added in the 14th century. It was not until the sixteenth century that the words "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death" were added as well as the "Glory Be" said after 10 Hail Marys. The Salve Regina, a later addition, states all relevant medieval themes about the Blessed Virgin Mary. Its affiliation with the Rosary came about through popular practice although its precise origin within the devotion is not known. During the 16th century a hollow, tubular crucifix was used on rosaries.

In the early 17th Century the Apostles Creed along with the rosary pendant were added to the Rosary. This circular loop of knotted string reminded the people to pray always. The knots gave way to beads of wood, glass, and other semi- and precious metals/stones. The overall configuration and prayer sequence is becoming universally the same.



Various people have added other things to the rosary over the centuries. In the fifteenth century, Henry Egger of Kalkar, a Carthusian monk, divided the rosary into fifteen decades; in 1521 Dominican Alberto da Castello assigned mysteries to each of the decades. These mysteries were events in the life of Jesus as written in the gospels. By meditating on these events even the illiterate could know the stories in the Bible. These decades were the same as ours except for the last two Glorious mysteries. In those two, the Coronation and the Assumption together made up the fourteenth decade and the fifteenth decade was the Last Judgment.

The rosary is one of the most cherished prayers of our Catholic Church. Archbishop Fulton Sheen said, "The rosary is the book of the blind, where souls see and there enact the greatest drama of love the world has ever known. It is the book of the simple, which initiates them into mysteries and knowledge more satisfying than the education of other men. It is the book of the aged, whose eyes close upon the shadow of this world and open on the substance of the next. The power of the rosary is beyond description."

On October 16, 2002, Pope John Paul II, declared that the following year would be the "Year of the Rosary". For the first time in centuries a change was made in the rosary. The Pope added and defined 5 new mysteries that concerned events in the public life of Jesus. These new mysteries were called the "Luminous Mysteries" or "Mysteries of Light" Today's complete rosary is now made up of twenty decades of the Hail Mary, separated by an Our Father and a Glory Be and the Fatima prayer. Evidence again that the rosary is a living prayer that grows with the church. We usually break the rosary into four sets. The four sets are The Joyful Mysteries, The Sorrowful Mysteries, The Glorious Mysteries, and the Luminous Mysteries. One set is prayed on a rosary that has five decades. Each set is prayed on designated days of the week. There are variations however, and in some countries the rosary may even have different mysteries.

Despite all the additions and changes, the important core of the rosary has always remained the same. It is a way for God's people to make holy the day, and to remember the life of Jesus and his mother. May these humble origins always be with us each time we pray the rosary.

If you are interested in exploring the History of the Rosary further and do not want to start at square one, perhaps beginning with <http://www.bookrags.com/wiki/Rosary> will give you a boost. Interested in Latin? Try <http://www.preces-latinae.org/index.htm>.

Pax vobiscum

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Don". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.