

# The Rosary: A Prayer for All Time

The Rosary is a traditional Catholic devotional prayer that honors Mary and helps us to meditate on the life of Christ through prayer as well as meditation.

The Rosary has been a Catholic devotional practice for nearly a thousand years. Of course, during that time the way the Rosary is prayed has gone through a number of changes. Let's take a look at the history of the Rosary as well as some of the ways in which this devotional prayer has changed over time.

Identifying a precise origin to the Rosary is difficult. According to Tradition, the Virgin Mary revealed the Rosary to Saint Dominic (1170–1221), the founder of the Order of Friar Preachers, also called the Dominicans. However, most scholars agree that this version of events falls more in the realm of legend than that of history. Most historians believe the Rosary developed gradually over several centuries, arising out of the laity's desire to imitate the prayer practiced by monks, who prayed each day the 150 psalms contained in the Book of Psalms. According to tradition, the laity, most of whom could not read, substituted 150 Our Fathers in place of the psalms. The Our Father was later replaced with 150 Ave Marias—the angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary, comparable to the first part of the Hail Mary as we know it today—mixed with verses from the Psalms. This devotional practice of combining a prayer addressed to Mary with Psalm verses was known as Our Lady's Psalter.

A string of beads or knotted rope was sometimes used to keep count of the prayers. This too was a practice that began with the monks. Over time rosary beads became a more formalized and common accompaniment to praying the Rosary.

Although most historians agree that Saint Dominic did not introduce the Rosary as a Catholic devotion, few would dispute his contribution, and that of the Dominicans, to the spread and growth in popularity of the devotion. In the years following the founding of their order, the Dominicans traveled throughout parts of Spain and France to defend the Catholic faith against popular heresies, particularly the Albigensian heresy, which, among other things, rejected the doctrine of the Incarnation and the Eucharist. In their travels the Dominicans taught the laity about the Rosary and about Mary's intercession on behalf of those who pray this devotion, thereby making it better known and more widely practiced. Over the centuries the Rosary has continued to be at the heart of the Dominican order.

The Rosary arrived at its present form between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. At that time a Carthusian monk, Dominic of Prussia (1382–1460), grouped the 150 Ave Marias into the fifteen sets of ten, called decades, with each decade preceded by the Lord's Prayer; and he added the mysteries, or events from the life of Christ to be contemplated during the praying of the devotion. However, for many years there were competing versions of the Rosary, with varying numbers of mysteries for one to contemplate during the praying of the devotion.

In 1569 Pope Pius V (1566–1572), a Dominican pope, issued the papal bull, or charter, called *Consueverunt Romani Pontifices*, that officially established the Rosary as a devotion of the Catholic Church. It was at this time that the number of mysteries was set at the fifteen that today compose the Joyful, Glorious, and Sorrowful Mysteries. Pope Pius V also expanded the Ave Maria by adding the second part of the Hail Mary as we know it today, and this form of the prayer was eventually adopted for the Rosary.

For the next four centuries, the Rosary remained unchanged. In 2002, however, Pope John Paul II added another group of mysteries: the Luminous, also called the Mysteries of Light.

Thus today the Rosary includes a total of twenty mysteries, grouped into four sets: the Joyful, Luminous, Sorrowful, and Glorious Mysteries. Although, strictly speaking, twenty decades comprise the Rosary, people usually pray five decades—or one set of mysteries—at a time rather than all twenty decades (or the two hundred Hail Marys) that make up the whole Rosary. Many people pray each set of mysteries on a regular day (or days) of the week, with some variation according to the liturgical season.



## The Rosary as a Path to Union with Christ

The Rosary is a devotion that honors the Virgin Mary. At its center, however, is a focus on Jesus Christ and the events of his life that brought about our salvation. The Rosary is meant to lead us to Christ and into union with God. The Mysteries of the Rosary—the Joyful, Luminous, Glorious, and Sorrowful—invite us to meditate on key occasions in Jesus' life. The Joyful Mysteries recall Jesus' Incarnation; the Glorious Mysteries recall his Resurrection; and the Sorrowful Mysteries recall his suffering and death. The Luminous Mysteries recall major events from Jesus' public ministry, starting with his Baptism.

All the events recalled in the Mysteries of the Rosary have a scriptural basis, typically in the Gospels. In most cases the scriptural origin of a mystery is a fully articulated event: for example, the Annunciation, the first of the Joyful Mysteries. The exceptions to this are the two Glorious Mysteries related to Mary after her earthly life: the Assumption and the Coronation. Here the events are substantiated by specific New or Old Testament passages or verses, but they are not detailed in the Bible.

The twenty Mysteries of the Rosary are as follows. Note the scriptural reference for each:

### The Joyful Mysteries

- the Annunciation (Luke 1:26–38)
- the visitation (Luke 1:39–45)
- the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:1–14)
- the presentation in the Temple (Luke 2:22–38)
- finding Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41–52)

### The Sorrowful Mysteries

- the agony in the garden (Matthew 26:36–46)
- the scourging at the pillar (John 19:1–5)
- the crowning with thorns (Mark 15:16–18)
- Jesus' carrying the cross (John 19:16–22)
- the Crucifixion (John 19:28–30)

### The Glorious Mysteries

- the Resurrection (Mark 16:1–8)
- the Ascension (Acts 1:6–11)
- the descent of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–4)
- the Assumption (Song of Songs 2:8–14)
- the coronation of Mary as Queen of Heaven (Revelation 12:1–6)

### The Luminous Mysteries

- the Baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:13–17)
- the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–12)
- the proclamation of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14–15)
- the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28–36)
- the Last Supper, the Eucharist (Luke 22:14–20)

The Rosary is closely connected to the Gospels in another way as well. The primary prayers prayed in the Rosary—the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Glory Be, the Apostles' Creed, and the Hail, Holy Queen—are either based in or closely related to the Scriptures. The Lord's Prayer is the prayer that



Jesus himself taught during the Sermon on the Mount. It appears in both the Gospel of Matthew (6:9–13) and the Gospel of Luke (11:2–4). The first part of the Hail Mary contains the words from the angel Gabriel’s announcement of Jesus’ birth as found in Luke’s Gospel (1:28) as well as from Elizabeth’s greeting to Mary (Luke 1:42). The Apostles’ Creed, which starts off the Rosary, summarizes the mysteries of our Catholic faith, most of which are Gospel teachings. Finally, the Glory Be and the Hail, Holy Queen, although not derived directly from the Scriptures, also affirm Church teachings rooted in the Scriptures.

Praying the Rosary not only draws us closer to Mary, whom the Rosary honors, but also brings us closer to Christ as we contemplate his life, suffering, death, and Resurrection.

In the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in the period after Vatican II, the Rosary’s popularity as a devotional practice declined.<sup>1</sup> For some, the prayer was too repetitive and felt mechanical. Further, in the post–World War II years, some had come to see the Rosary as a cure for all the world’s ills. Many came to find this attitude to be overzealous and simplistic, and it subsequently became a source of alienation from the Rosary.

However, over time the Rosary has once again grown in popularity and attracted more Catholics. In part this can be attributed to Pope John Paul II, who often encouraged or led the praying of the Rosary on Marian feast days. In June 1987 the Pope commemorated the opening of the Marian year by praying the Rosary with the faithful from around the world, on five continents, by live telecast. Millions participated in this event at Marian shrines around the world, as well as at home.

The resurgence in the popularity of the Rosary as a devotional practice can also be attributed to its beautiful simplicity as a way to connect with Christ and his Mother in a world that often neglects the nurturing of one’s spiritual life, leaving a hunger for the sacred amidst an abundance of the profane.

The whole history of our salvation is contained in the Mysteries of the Rosary. Thus praying the Rosary is a wonderful way to contemplate the mystery of Christ. It is a way to connect with the message of the Gospels and to recognize Mary’s role in God’s plan for our salvation. It is also an expression of confidence in Mary’s intercession on our behalf as we seek to draw closer to her Son. Those who have embraced this devotion and made it a part of their prayer life have discovered that from the opening Apostles’ Creed to the last Glory Be, the succession of prayers that make up the Rosary lead to a closer union with Christ and to a strengthened confidence that his Mother will guide us as we continue to seek him.

## Endnote

1. Thomas A. Thompson, SM, and Jack Wintz, OFM, “The Rosary: A Gospel Prayer,” at [www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac0589.asp](http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac0589.asp).



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