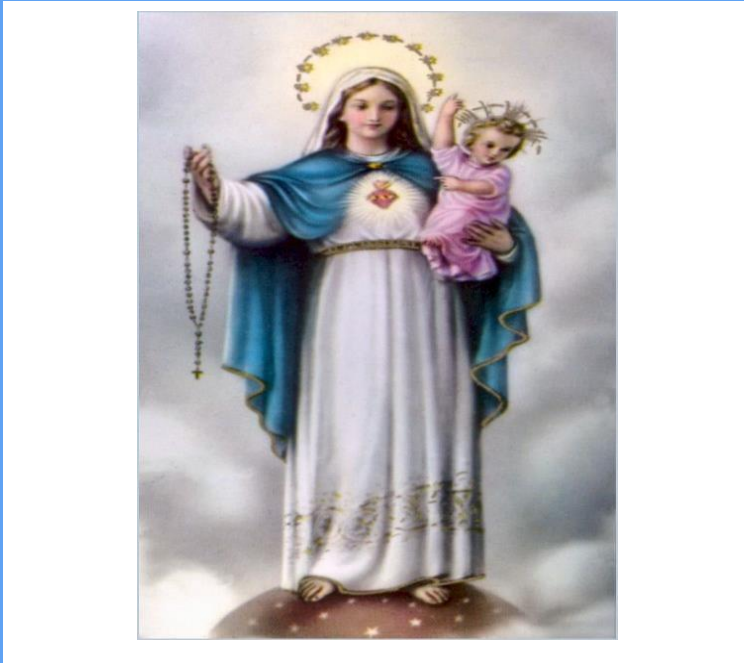


The History of the Rosary

FR. WILLIAM SAUNDERS

Please explain the history and background of the rosary. Is it true that the Blessed Mother gave it to St. Dominic?



The rosary is one of the most cherished prayers of our Catholic Church. Introduced by the Creed, the Our Father, three Hail Marys and the Doxology ("Glory Be"), and concluded with the Salve Regina, the rosary involves the recitation of five decades consisting of the Our Father, 10 Hail Marys and the Doxology. During this recitation, the individual meditates on the saving mysteries of our Lord's life and the faithful witness of our Blessed Mother. Journeying through the Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious mysteries of the rosary, the individual brings to mind our Lord's incarnation, His passion and death and His resurrection from the dead. In so doing, the rosary assists us in growing in a deeper appreciation of these mysteries, in uniting our life more closely to our Lord and in imploring His graced assistance to live the faith. We also ask for the prayers of our Blessed Mother, who leads all believers to her Son.

The origins of the rosary are "sketchy" at best. The use of "prayer beads" and the repeated recitation of prayers to aid in meditation stem from the earliest days of the Church and has roots in pre-Christian times. Evidence exists from the Middle Ages that strings of beads were used to count Our Fathers and Hail Marys. Actually, these strings of beads became known as "Paternosters," the Latin for "Our Father."

The structure of the rosary gradually evolved between the 12th and 15th centuries. Eventually 50 Hail Marys were recited and linked with verses of psalms or other phrases evoking the lives of Jesus and Mary. During this time, this prayer form became known as the rosarium ("rose garden"), actually a common term to designate a collection of similar material, such as an anthology of stories on the same subject or theme. During the 16th century, the structure of the five-decade rosary based on the three sets of mysteries prevailed.

Tradition does hold that St. Dominic (d. 1221) devised the rosary as we know it. Moved by a vision of our Blessed Mother, he preached the use of the rosary in his missionary work among the Albigensians, who had denied the mystery of Christ. Some scholars take exception to St. Dominic's role in forming the rosary. The earliest accounts of

his life do not mention it, the Dominican constitutions do not link him with it and contemporaneous portraits do not include it as a symbol to identify the saint.

In 1922, Dom Louis Cougaud stated, "The various elements which enter into the composition of that Catholic devotion commonly called the rosary are the product of a long and gradual development which began before St. Dominic's time, which continued without his having any share in it, and which only attained its final shape several centuries after his death." However, other scholars would rebut that St. Dominic not so much "invented" the rosary as he preached its use to convert sinners and those who had strayed from the faith. Moreover, at least a dozen popes have mentioned St. Dominic's connection with the rosary, sanctioning his role as at least a "pious belief."

The rosary gained greater popularity in the 1500s, when Moslem Turks were ravaging Eastern Europe. Recall that in 1453, Constantinople had fallen to the Moslems, leaving the Balkans and Hungary open to conquest. With Moslems raiding even the coast of Italy, the control of the Mediterranean was now at stake.

In 1571, Pope Pius V organized a fleet under the command of Don Juan of Austria the half-brother of King Philip 11 of Spain. While preparations were underway, the Holy Father asked all of the faithful to say the rosary and implore our Blessed Mother's prayers, under the title Our Lady of Victory, that our Lord would grant victory to the Christians. Although the Moslem fleet outnumbered that of the Christians in both vessels and sailors, the forces were ready to meet in battle. The Christian flagship flew a blue banner depicting Christ crucified. On October 7, 1571, the Moslems were defeated at the Battle of Lepanto. The following year, Pope St. Pius V established the Feast of the Holy Rosary on October 7, where the faithful would not only remember this victory, but also give thanks to the Lord for all of His benefits and remember the powerful intercession of our Blessed Mother.

The fact that our Church continues to include the Feast of the Holy Rosary on the liturgical calendar testifies to the importance and goodness of this form of prayer. 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."

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."