

Praying the Rosary

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The name 'rosary' is given to the small circlet of beads which is so familiar to its devotees as to be taken for granted, although to some people it is a rather strange relic of a bygone age. The very simplicity of most rosaries, crammed into laden pockets, gives them a matter-of-fact image, rather like a keyring or a fountain pen. They are part of the 'luggage' of many Christians, and even those who may have only a muddled idea of the prayer of the rosary still carry their beads, as if the small circlet provides some sort of spiritual insurance.

The word 'bede' originally meant 'prayer', and to 'bid one's bedes' was a literal reference to saying one's prayers. In the sixteenth century the word 'bede' or 'bead' was freed from its religious association but by then the word 'rosary' had come to refer to the circlet of beads with which we are familiar.

But why do we need to count our prayers anyway? It is hard to find any area of human activity which we do not seek to quantify. Some of us seem to be almost obsessed with numbers and seem curiously satisfied with any statement that is backed up by a statistic. Prayer can be the most elusive and frustrating activity as well as the most sublime experience and there is no reason why it, too, should not be subject to our desire for order and regulation. Sometimes we need to count our prayers in order to know how many we have said and where we are in the sequence of the prayer we are saying. Ways of counting prayer were very important to Christians of the eleventh century, many of whom participated in the daily monastic prayer which included the recitation and chanting of the 150 psalms. The abbeys were the centres of learning and few people beyond the walls of monasteries were able to read or write. Those who came in from the villages and fields to join the monks at prayer might have been reduced to being little more than onlookers if someone had not had the bright idea of tying 150 knots in a length of string. With the help of this practical device the lay people were able to recite the Pater Noster (Our Father) in response to each of the 150 Psalms. The origin of our expression 'pitter patter' is said to come from the sound of their whispered prayer.

On their return from Jerusalem and the east, the medieval crusaders brought glowing accounts of prayer beads they had seen in use amongst the Muslims and their reports influenced the development of different types of prayer beads in Europe. The custom of counting prayers on beads had therefore been in existence long before the rosary became popular in the fourteenth century.



In 1041 William of Malmesbury presents us with evidence of the first recorded use of beads for prayer, apart from the counting of Pater Nosters. He describes the beads of Lady Godiva as a circlet of threaded jewels on which she was wont to number her prayers in honour of the Blessed Virgin and which she bequeathed to be hung around the neck of the statue of Mary in the church at Coventry where she lived. In fourteenth-century England prayer beads were given the name 'rosary' for the rose was not only the symbol of Our Lady but of England itself. Devotion to Mary had become part of English culture and England had come to be known as Our Lady's Dowry. Although this title fell into comparative disuse it has never been relinquished and the rose remains the symbol of England.

Until the Reformation in the sixteenth century, roses were woven into chaplets or crowns which would be placed on statues of Mary on her feast days. The connection was strengthened by biblical allusion: 'I am the rose of Sharon' (Song of Songs 2:1) and, 'Like a rose planted on the rivers I have budded forth' (Ecclesiasticus 24:14). Rose gardens became an accepted image of paradise and in monastic gardens 'the paradise' was cultivated by the monks.

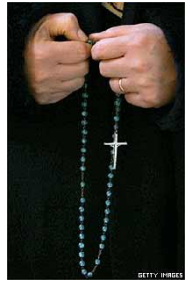
As prayer beads became popular, the rich spent vast sums on threaded jewels, and the courts of Europe positively sparkled with the rosaries of the nobility. Today, we are increasingly aware of the finite nature of the world's resources and are able to treasure natural materials. The quality of wood or of glass can be almost as precious to us as the jewels of a previous age. Modern prayer beads are generally more sober and discreet than in earlier days and echo the knots of string used by medieval Christians we seem to have come full circle and rediscovered that the basic role of prayer beads is to help us to count our prayers. They are of course of secondary importance to the prayer itself.

from "The Rosary - a way into prayer" by Anne Vail. (1997) Canterbury Press. Norwich.

The Prayers

When we pray the Rosary, we start with the Cross, say a prayer, then move on to the first bead and say a prayer, then we move to the second bead and say a prayer, and we continue in this manner until all of the beads have been covered. (It does not matter whether we go from left to right, or from right to left.)

The basic prayer itself is simple: The Rosary consists of a Cross, a medal or knot at the junction of the short string, individual beads and consecutive beads. For the Cross, we pray the "Apostles' Creed"; for the individual beads, the "Our Father" and "Glory be"; and for the consecutive beads, the "Hail Mary." There are also additional prayers, some of which correspond to the medal, such as the "Salve Regina".



The Rosary can be divided into two parts: the Introduction, and five decades. The Introduction consists of the Cross ("Apostles Creed") and the four beads that follow it, which together mean the "Lord's Prayer," three "Hail Mary's" and one "Glory Be." The five decades each consist of one individual bead and ten consecutive beads, that is, of one "Our Father", and ten "Hail Mary's" concluding with a "Glory Be".

The Sign of the Cross

In the name of the +Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

The Apostle's Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into Hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into Heaven, is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of Saints, the forgiveness of Sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen

The Mysteries

Each decade is devoted to a particular event in the life of the Virgin Mary or of Jesus. These are called the Mysteries. Either before or after praying the decade, we should meditate on these Mysteries with a view to reaching a greater love of God.

Since there are five decades in the Rosary, and there is one Mystery corresponding to each decade, there are five corresponding Mysteries for each Rosary we pray. These five Mysteries, however, are not always the same. In fact there are now four sets of Mysteries. They are: (1) the Joyful Mysteries, (2) the Sorrowful Mysteries, and (3) the Glorious Mysteries, and more recently, (4) the Mysteries of Light. Different mysteries best suit different days in the week or times of the year.

The Joyful Mysteries:

1. The Annunciation
2. The Visitation
3. The Birth of our Lord Jesus Christ
4. The Presentation at the Temple
5. The Finding at the Temple

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread: and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Hail Mary

Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

Glory

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.

The Sorrowful Mysteries:

1. The Agony of Christ in the Garden
2. The Scourging at the Pillar
3. The Crowning with Thorns
4. The Carrying of the Cross
5. The Crucifixion and Death of Our Lord

The Glorious Mysteries:

1. The Resurrection of Our Lord
2. The Ascension of Our Lord
3. The Coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles
4. The Assumption of the Virgin Mary
5. The Coronation of the Virgin Mary

The Mysteries of Light:

(instituted by Pope John Paul II)

1. The Baptism in the Jordan
2. The Wedding at Cana
3. The Proclamation of the Kingdom of God
4. The Transfiguration
5. The Institution of the Eucharist