

The Origin of the Rosary

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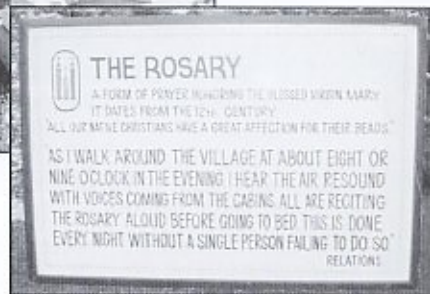
Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic letter of Oct. 16, 2002 (*Rosarium Virginis Mariae*) asks us to make from October 2002 to October 2003, the Year of the Rosary, during which we ought to pray more fervently the Marian devotion that we call "the Rosary."

At the same time he proposes that to the 15 customary "mysteries" of the Rosary we should add another five, "the Mysteries of Light," which direct our attention to the activity of Jesus Christ as He revealed to us the splendor of divine light. These mysteries are: 1) Jesus who was baptized in the Jordan. 2) Jesus who in Cana manifested His divine power. 3) Jesus who announced the Kingdom of God. 4) Jesus who on the Mount Tabor revealed His divine glory. 5) Jesus who in the Eucharist gave Himself to us.

According to the custom of the Church, we divide the mysteries among the days of the week: on Monday and Saturday we say the Joyful mysteries, on Tuesday and Friday the Sorrowful mysteries, on Wednesday and Sunday the Glorious mysteries, and the new mysteries of Light is suggested for Thursday.

The origin of the Rosary is treated in many scholarly and devotional works. We want only to point out a few things about its beginning that we can find in the Psalter, in the Lord's Prayer, in the Hail Mary and in the repetitious prayer-chains. These elements which arose in the 15th century form the Rosary prayer that we are familiar with today.

In the 13th century the Religious orders (Benedictines, Franciscans, Dominicans, etc.) prayed the Psalms in choir, sometimes all the 150 Psalms in one day. Those lay Religious, who could not read, prayed 150 Our Fathers instead of the 150 Psalms.



It is very likely that St. Dominic in a private revelation received the instruction to pray the Hail Mary 150 times instead of the Our Father. From here the praying of the Rosary was associated with the Dominicans. The Hail Mary in those days contained only the first, scriptural part. Pope Urban IV in 1261 added to it the name of "Jesus," which inspired in the 15th century the Carthusians in the Rhine valley to add to every Hail Mary a "mystery" from the life of Jesus, which they could then meditate and contemplate upon.

It was in the cloisters of the Carthusians in the Rhine valley where the Carthusian Adolph of Essen (+1439) originated the idea of a mystery. He was influenced by the *Devotio moderna* of

his age, and by his disciple, Dominic of Prussia who was probably the author of several series of mysteries.

Somewhat later, about 1468-70, the Dominican Alan of Ruspe founded the first "Confraternity of the Rosary" in Douai, which greatly contributed to the spreading of this form of devotion. He might have been the one who divided the 50 Hail Marys into decades and introduced also the Our Father between them.

The second part of the Hail Mary ("Holy Mary, Mother of God...") became part of the prayer only later at the initiative of Pope St. Pius V, who himself was a Dominican. He officially approved the Rosary (1568) and spread this form of Marian devotion.

He also introduced the Feast of "Our Lady of Victory" on Oct. 7, 1572, in memory of the naval victory over the Turkish navy at Lepanto a year before, since the victory was attributed to the praying of the Rosary. The name of the Feast was changed by Pope Gregory XIII to "Our Lady of the Rosary."

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The doxology (“Glory be to the Father...”) and the Apostles’ Creed, as well as the three Hail Marys before the decades, which refer to the three divine virtues, were added after the Council of Trent in the 17th century. The number of mysteries was also reduced to 15 (instead of 150), so that each decade has only one mystery.

In praying the Rosary in a meditative, contemplative way, the Carthusians simply followed the Desert Fathers who recited the Psalms together, then in silence on their knees or prostrated they meditated and contemplated for an extended period of time individually, and finally the abbot or superior collected together the individual prayers with the “Psalm-collect.”

The Carthusians recited the first part of the Hail Mary together, added to the name of Jesus the appropriate mystery, and then they meditated, or rather contemplated upon them individually.

Of course, when nowadays we pray the Rosary continuously, the contemplation about the assigned mystery simply colors the praying of the 10 Hail Marys. It would be commendable, however, if we could spend some time to meditate or contemplate the individual mysteries for a longer period of time.



Our Lady of Fatima Shrine



The Carthusians merely suggested the (50 or 150) mysteries for contemplation. Most likely it was Dominic of Prussia who divided the 50 Hail Marys into decades, added to it the mysteries, and began to call this prayer “Rosary,” i.e., the crown of roses for Mary. The mysteries were called *clausulae*, because they formed a conclusion at that time to the Hail Mary.

We can find several series of these mysteries among the manuscripts of the 15th century Carthusian cloisters. Most of them contain 50 mysteries, but there are some which have 150 mysteries.

