

The Rosary: a Tool of Silence (Contemplative Prayer)

From Fr. Isaac

Just as Nazareth is a school of silent prayer, Holy Family Parish is a school of contemplative silence. The Rosary is a tool for contemplative prayer. Attend to Pope Saint John Paul II's 2002 Apostolic Letter on the Rosary:

12. *The Rosary, precisely because it starts with Mary's own experience, is an exquisitely contemplative prayer. Without this contemplative dimension, it would lose its meaning, as Pope Paul VI clearly pointed out: "Without contemplation, the Rosary is a body without a soul, and its recitation runs the risk of becoming a mechanical repetition of formulas, in violation of the admonition of Christ: 'In praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard for their many words' (Mt 6:7). By its nature the recitation of the Rosary calls for a quiet rhythm and a lingering pace.*

25. *The Rosary does indeed "mark the rhythm of human life", bringing it into harmony with the "rhythm" of God's own life, in the joyful communion of the Holy Trinity, our life's destiny and deepest longing.*

26. *The repetition is nourished by the desire to be conformed ever more completely to Christ, the true programme of the Christian life.*

5. *The Rosary belongs among the finest and most praiseworthy traditions of Christian contemplation. Developed in the West, it is a typically meditative prayer, corresponding in some way to the "prayer of the heart" or "Jesus prayer" which took root in the soil of the Christian East.*

27. *We should not be surprised that our relationship with Christ makes use of a method...In the East, the most characteristic prayer of Christological meditation, centered on the words "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner" is traditionally linked to the rhythm of breathing; while this practice favours perseverance in the prayer, it also in some way embodies the desire for Christ to become the breath, the soul and the "all" of one's life.*

15. *Christian spirituality is distinguished by the disciple's commitment to become conformed ever more fully to his Master (cf. Rom 8:29; Phil 3:10,12).*

In the spiritual journey of the Rosary, based on the constant contemplation - in Mary's company - of the face of Christ, this demanding ideal of being conformed to him is pursued through an association which could be described in terms of friendship. We are thereby enabled to enter naturally into Christ's life and as it were to share his deepest feelings. In this regard Blessed Bartolo Longo has written: "Just as two friends, frequently in each other's company, tend to develop similar habits, so too, by holding familiar converse with Jesus and the Blessed Virgin, by meditating on the mysteries of the Rosary and by living the same life in Holy Communion, we can become, to the extent of our lowliness, similar to them and can learn from these supreme models a life of humility, poverty, hiddenness, patience and perfection".

The Rosary mystically transports us to Mary's side as she is busy watching over the human growth of Christ in the home of Nazareth. This enables her to train us and to mold us with the same care, until Christ is "fully formed" in us (cf. Gal 4:19).

24. *We might call it Mary's way. It is the way of the example of the Virgin of Nazareth, a woman of faith, of silence, of attentive listening.*

28. *The Rosary is simply a method of contemplation. As a method, it serves as a means to an end and cannot become an end in itself. All the same, as the fruit of centuries of experience, this method should not be undervalued. In its favour one could cite the experience of countless Saints. This is not to say, however, that the method cannot be improved...*

Otherwise there is a risk that the Rosary would not only fail to produce the intended spiritual effects, but even that the beads, with which it is usually said, could come to be regarded as some kind of amulet or magic object, thereby radically distorting their meaning and function.

31. *Listening and meditation are nourished by silence. After the announcement of the mystery and the proclamation of the word, it is fitting to pause and focus one's attention for a suitable period of time on the mystery concerned, before moving into vocal prayer. A discovery of the importance of silence is one of the secrets of practicing contemplation and meditation. One drawback of a society dominated by technology and the mass media is the fact that silence becomes increasingly difficult to achieve. Just as moments of silence are recommended in the Liturgy, so too in the recitation of the Rosary...*

30. *It is not a matter of recalling information but of allowing God to speak.*

29. *The Rosary is no substitute for lectio divina; on the contrary, it presupposes and promotes it.*

41. *In my Apostolic Letter [Novo Millennio Ineunte](#) I encouraged the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours by the lay faithful in the ordinary life of parish communities and Christian groups; I now wish to do the same for the Rosary. These two paths of Christian contemplation are not mutually exclusive; they complement one another.*

38. *What is really important is that the Rosary should always be seen and experienced as a path of contemplation.*

41. *Individual family members, in turning their eyes towards Jesus, also regain the ability to look one another in the eye, to communicate, to show solidarity, to forgive one another and to see their covenant of love renewed in the Spirit of God. Many of the problems facing contemporary families, especially in economically developed societies, result from their increasing difficulty in communicating. Families seldom manage to come together, and the rare occasions when they do are often taken up with watching television. To return to the recitation of the family Rosary means filling daily life with very different images, images of the mystery of salvation: the image of the Redeemer, the image of his most Blessed Mother. The family that recites the Rosary together reproduces something of the atmosphere of the household of Nazareth: its members place Jesus at the centre, they share his joys and sorrows, they place their needs and their plans in his hands, they draw from him the hope and the strength to go on.*

43. *I look to all of you, brothers and sisters of every state of life, to you, Christian families, to you, the sick and elderly, and to you, young people: confidently take up the Rosary once again. Rediscover the Rosary in the light of Scripture, in harmony with the Liturgy, and in the context of your daily lives.*

Rosarium Virginis Mariae

(John Paul, with the Magisterium before him and after him, encouraged us to pray the Liturgy of the Hours. Here is a good place to start: [singthehours.org](#).)

Listen to this Dominican priest. The Dominicans invented the Rosary with Mary:

So when people ask like how do you do this, because there's the vocal prayer, you know, there's the text that you're working through, then the other Mysteries upon which you meditate--you cannot possibly think of both at once. It's not humanly possible. I don't think that we need to be super concerned about that or super anguished about that. The reason that we meditate on the mysteries of the Life of Christ isn't because it's like "oh isn't Jesus, you know, such a swell fella maybe I should prayerfully consider living like him in the future." No. Everything that he does saves. So we're kind of positioning ourselves before those saving Mysteries alongside the Blessed Virgin Mary, or in communion with the Blessed Virgin Mary,

ultimately so that they can have their effect on us. Because the goal is, through his humanity, his mysteries, his Church, his sacraments, and other things besides, we're actually conformed to him and in being conformed to him we're assimilated to God. We're drawn into the Divine Life by interfacing with the means that our Lord appointed to precisely that end. So when we read the Sacred Scriptures, a good question to ask is like, "what is the Lord teaching here?" But I think that if we say that as if the Lord were just a sage philosopher we're reducing the text like Thomas Jefferson reduced the text. I think we should ask "how is the Lord saving here?" Because the Lord is saving through teaching, through working miracles, through exercising demons, and the rosary is just meant to focus that. I think that you can kind of adopt a posture somewhat passively before the Mysteries, recall them to mind, then just say the prayers without worrying too terribly much, because I think that worry will actually make it harder just to be washed by, bathed in, the Mysteries themselves. YouTube Stop Adding to the Rosary! w/ Fr. Gregory Pine O.P.

And the Catechism:

CCC 2111 Superstition is the deviation of religious feeling and of the practices this feeling imposes. It can even affect the worship we offer the true God, e.g., when one attributes an importance in some way magical to certain practices otherwise lawful or necessary. To attribute the efficacy of prayers or of sacramental signs to their mere external performance, apart from the interior dispositions that they demand, is to fall into superstition.

CCC 2704 Prayer is internalized to the extent that we become aware of him "to whom we speak;" Thus vocal prayer becomes an initial form of contemplative prayer.

CCC 2717 Contemplative prayer is silence, the "symbol of the world to come" or "silent love." Words in this kind of prayer are not speeches; they are like kindling that feeds the fire of love. In this silence, unbearable to the "outer" man, the Father speaks to us his incarnate Word, who suffered, died, and rose; in this silence the Spirit of adoption enables us to share in the prayer of Jesus.

The Dominicans are intentional about not adding extra prayers to the public rosary:

The point isn't because Dominicans are rushed or they're impious but it's this liturgical sense that you don't want to add things beyond what has been prescribed by the Church lest you overburden the prayers and make people less likely to say it or less likely to enjoy it. Saint Thomas says that prayer should last as long as we can pay attention and it's connected in his mind with delight. So we want to go before the Blessed Virgin Mary, or beside the Blessed Virgin Mary before our Lord Jesus Christ, when praying the rosary, seeking to partake of her Delight in his Mysteries. YouTube Learn How to Pray the Rosary the Dominican Way with Fr. Gregory Pine, O.P.

And St. Jose Maria Escriva: *Have only a few private devotions, but be constant in them.*

With all that being said, here are some ideas to help us pray the public Rosary as communal contemplation, which will help us enter into the communal contemplation of the Father in the Liturgy.

1. **Don't add prayers:** Let's try to pray the public Rosary without extra private devotional prayers during or after the Rosary. After the *Hail Holy Queen*, simply pray Michael's and Kapaun's prayers only.
2. **One voice in pace and volume:** The Liturgy is the sung prayer of Christ to the Father. We pray through, with, and in the one Voice of Christ. We should strive, as much as possible, to pray with one voice, with the same human pace: not too fast, not too slow. With the same volume: soft and confident. Don't talk louder than the person in front of you. Notice the person

behind you. Don't talk faster than the person to your left. Don't talk slower than the person to your right. The Rosary is the contemplative prayer of Mary before Christ. We should strive to pray with the one voice of Mary, with same pace and volume. Don't talk louder than the person in front of you. Notice the person behind you. Don't talk faster than the person to your left. Don't talk slower than the person to your right. Don't be the first to speak. Pray the Rosary and the Mass with Mary's soft and confident voice. Don't project your voice. Listen. Follow Christ in the Body. Stay with the natural rhythm of the whole, which is not too fast, not too slow, but closer to fast than it is to slow.

3. **Almost chant** the prayer at a single note, almost a monotone. Refrain from a sing-songy cadence, an inflection that goes up and down dramatically. Aim for monks chanting more than a military role call.
4. **The rosary leader** should only pray the first part of the prayer. The leader and the body should anticipate each other, meaning there is not much of a pause in between the leader finishing the first part of the prayer and the body beginning the second part almost immediately. The leader should start the next prayer almost immediately, with barely a pause, after the body finishes the second part of the last prayer.
5. **Allow a moment of significant silence** after announcing the mystery before beginning the *Our Father*.
6. **Sit close to each other**, starting in the front pew. The Public Rosary and especially the Liturgy are not private devotions. Through them, The Spirit is making us one body, Christ's Body. Sitting close to each other will make praying with one voice easier with no need to yell. If you don't like sitting next to each other in church, you won't like Heaven.
7. **Listen and attend** to the readings and prayers during Mass without reading the texts from a book. This will develop the necessary contemplative Marian virtues of attention and receptivity. Try reading the readings and Mass-prayers before Mass, then simply receive and pray during Mass. This will require practice, but there might not be anything more important to practice than attention and receptivity.
8. **Again, don't project your voice.** Don't yell, like you're throwing stones at the sky. Almost whisper without whispering, like you're speaking directly into a father's ear.

This will be a journey within our larger journey of continual conversion. Jesus and the Catechism warn us of a superstitious, mindless saying of prayers. Hopefully these reflections and guidelines draw us deeper into the contemplative prayer of Mary and Jesus. How good that we get to journey together.

Mother, teach us how to pray.

Joseph, teach us how to pray.

Jesus, pray through us, with us, in us.

A passage from Thirsting for Prayer by Fr. Jacques Philippe
Repetitive Prayers

One means used to foster continual prayer, especially by religious, is to repeat short phrases, often taken from or inspired by Scripture. This is done either during the time devoted to prayer or outside it, during other activities, to keep God always in mind. According to John Cassian, certain monks in Egypt in the fourth century used to repeat the following invocation ceaselessly: "O God, make haste to my rescue, Lord, come to my aid!" (Ps 70:1).

The beautiful book *The Way of the Pilgrim* spread the knowledge and practice of the "Jesus Prayer" or "prayer of the heart" in the Western world. It tells of a humble Russian peasant who was moved by the exhortation in the Letter to the

Thessalonians “pray without ceasing” (1 Thes 5:17), and wondered how he could put this command into practice. He traveled through Russia in search of a spiritual father who could teach him. A monk initiated him into the tradition of prayer that consists of ceaselessly repeating, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!,” using a simple rosary of knotted woolen thread and coordinating the recital of the prayer with the rhythm of one’s breathing, while looking into one’s heart.

Little by little, the peasant experienced the benefits: his heart was filled with peace and purified, he felt the joy of God’s presence, he received inner enlightenment about God’s love, developed compassion toward everyone, and saw the world and nature with new eyes. This tradition goes back to the Egyptian monasticism of the first centuries and spread throughout Orthodox Christianity; in our days it is also spreading through the Western world.

More familiar to Western Catholics is the devotion of the Rosary, with its constant repetition of the Our Father and Hail Mary.

Today, simple repetition does not always get good press. Ours is a world that, having lost its sense of the most fundamental things in life, is permanently in search of novelty. Now, it is true that repetition can become merely mechanical and routine, but it can also mean that love is being inscribed on the soul for as long as it continues. It is an intrinsic part of life: we are lucky our hearts don’t get tired of constantly beating and our breathing does not get tired of its rhythm!

Rhythm, as I said earlier, plays a fundamental role in human life. It has a calming effect; it allows energy to be used for a considerable length of time without wastage or exhaustion. The rhythm of repetitive prayer enables a desire, an intention, to be expressed externally through the body and at the same time to take root in the heart. It is an acceptance of reality, of the fact of having bodies, and that our human condition is part of the rhythms of nature and life. It is openness to a deep meaning that surpasses us, going beyond the perceptions of the rational mind. It gives us access to a sort of wisdom, an intelligence of life, in a dependence on our Creator to which we consent.

Our prayer is called to become not just one activity among others but the fundamental activity of our lives, the very rhythm of our deepest existence, the breathing of our heart, so to speak. Repetitive prayers help us achieve this, since they are our human effort, our persevering quest, in the hope that God’s grace will grant that for which we ask through our humble, untiring repetition of the same words.

In a talk on the Rosary given at Lourdes in October 1998, Father Timothy Radcliffe, OP, said:

If we love someone, we know that it is not enough to tell them “I love you” just once. We will want to say it again and again, and we may hope that they wish to hear it again and again.

G. K. Chesterton argued that repetition is a characteristic of the vitality of children who like the same stories, with the same words, time and time again, not because they are bored and unimaginative but because they delight in life. Chesterton wrote: “Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, ‘Do it again!’; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead, for grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, ‘Do it again!’ to the sun; and every evening ‘Do it again!’ to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes each daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old and our Father

is younger than we. The repetition in Nature may not be a mere recurrence; it may be a theatrical encore. Heaven may encore the bird who laid an egg” (Orthodoxy, chapter IV).

There is nothing in the least wrong with spending our time of prayer on these repetitive prayers, especially at moments of tiredness, difficulty in mobilizing our intellectual faculties, or else when we feel impelled by the Holy Spirit toward a prayer that in comparison with meditation, is poorer, simpler, brought back to essentials, not relying too much on intellectual discourse or the work of imagination, but favoring the work of the heart. This repetition should be done gently, peacefully, without its becoming forced or requiring an effort (which would be counterproductive). We should be attentive to God’s presence in us, while gently merging body and spirit with the form of prayer used. The rhythm of the repetition can favor our entering into a state of recollection. Being faithful to the humble but sincere search for God expressed in this prayer can give us, little by little, the grace to enter into a state of true contemplation and loving union with God.

The advantage of these repetitive prayers, besides their simplicity, is that they can progressively become a sort of habit (in the good sense of the word); that makes them a valuable resource for praying at many other moments of the day besides the time devoted to prayer properly so called. It may be when we are in the car, walking, during times of insomnia, while engaged in activities or jobs that do not take up the whole of our mind, etc. Now some reflections on the Jesus Prayer and the Rosary.

The Jesus Prayer

At the basis of the Jesus Prayer lies an ancient and very beautiful spirituality of the name of Jesus, which is rooted in Scripture. Jesus himself asks us to pray in his name: “If you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name” (Jn 16:23). The Acts of the Apostles often speak of the power of Jesus’ name and say “there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). From the earliest centuries of the Christian era, a beautiful tradition has developed of invoking the name of Jesus in prayer, whether short prayers like that used by the Russian Pilgrim or reduced to the repetition of the name Jesus alone. Many writings testify to this, such as that of St. Macarius the Egyptian, a sixth-century monk:

When I was a child I used to see women chewing betelnuts to sweeten their saliva and remove any bad odor from their mouths. That is what the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ should be for us: if we chew this blessed Name by pronouncing it constantly, it brings all sweetness to our souls and reveals heavenly things to us, through Him who is the food of joy, the well of salvation, the spring of living waters, the sweetness of all sweetnesses; and all evil thoughts are expelled from the soul by this name, the name of Him who is in the Heavens, Our Lord Jesus Christ, the King of kings, the Lord of all lords, heavenly reward for those who seek him with all their heart.

For the practice of this prayer, consult my book *Time for God*, as well as the more extensive and excellent advice in the book *La prière de Jésus* by a monk of the Eastern Church, published in 1963 by Chevetogne.

The Rosary

The Rosary is very different from the Jesus Prayer, but it can be included in the category of simple repetitive prayers—prayers that, if our hearts are well-disposed, can lead us to deep communion with God and contemplative prayer.

Along with the humble supplication, “Pray for us sinners,” the Hail Mary has a dimension of praise and thanksgiving. The Rosary is also a way of following, with Mary’s help, all the riches of the mysteries of Christ, though we needn’t necessarily apply our powers of reasoning to meditate on each mystery.

It also brings the particular grace of the invocation of Mary, who introduces us into her own prayer, her own recollection, her silence and inner listening, her own communion with God. In a passage about the prayer of simplicity, Father Jean-Claude Sagne says this of the Rosary:

Vocal prayer becomes progressively a school of silence, through plunging into the silence of Mary herself. This is the singular mark of Mary's motherly influence on the lives of the faithful: she draws those who pray it into her silence, to listen to the word of God. . . . The praying of the Rosary is thus an inner preparation for entering, led by the Holy Spirit, into the spiritual place that is the bosom of Mary, as a Tent of Meeting, as a space where God's Word finds itself perfectly understood and listened to, believed, and followed.

The Rosary, like the Jesus Prayer, engages the body, simply but deeply, with the rhythm of repeated words, hands counting out the Rosary beads, peaceful posture, and quiet breathing. It also engages the essential attitudes of heart and will. It offers the mind "minimal" nourishment, food that is very poor, in the simplicity of the formula used. In this way it recalls the mind to its limitations and its essential role, which is to be a capacity for receptiveness, as in the following passage:

The repetition is here the means of gently fixing the mind's attention, so that the heart is free to hear God's Word and keep it. The intelligence is occupied in repeating sober acts and short formulas, known by heart, to make available the deepest attention of the praying person, who is thus established in peace and confidence by the silence of listening. The prayer of simplicity contains a discreet, profound lesson on what the human mind is. It reminds us that the human mind is, first of all, an infinite capacity for receptiveness, but contains absolutely nothing of its own, until it is filled by words and images received from outside itself—from the world, from other people. It is clear from this that priority must always be accorded to listening over speaking, receiving over doing, openness to the gift over the production of a task. This permanent, basic part of the human mind, this part of passivity and dependence, is not only attested to but brought into play by the place of the body in the prayer of simplicity. By that very fact, what is taught and practiced here is also the basic spiritual attitude in Christian prayer: humility of heart in awaiting God's gift. The minimal engagement of the body in the prayer of simplicity, combined with an exercise that offers little gratification to the creative intelligence: all of this helps make this prayer a true school of contemplation for everyone. Contemplation is the prayer that is produced purely by the Holy Spirit in the praying person, and hence the prayer that is received purely as a gift from God.

In its simplicity and poverty, the Rosary is ultimately a very powerful prayer. Through Mary's gentle, motherly hands, it introduces us into those fundamental attitudes, described earlier, that make our prayer life fruitful: faith, humble hope, and simple, faithful love.

A Passage from *Time for God* by Fr. Jacques Philippe

The "Jesus Prayer"

The Jesus Prayer, or Prayer of the Heart, is the royal way to the life of prayer in the Eastern Christian tradition and especially in Russia. It has become fairly widespread in the West in recent years, and it is good that it has because it can lead many souls to inner prayer.

The Jesus Prayer consists of the repetition of a short formula, such as "Lord Jesus, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" The formula must contain the name of Jesus, the human name of the Word. This way of praying is linked to a very beautiful "spirituality of the Name" rooted in the Bible. It is a very ancient tradition.

Among many others, St. Macarius of Egypt, who lived in the fourth century, witnesses to it. The most ordinary things were for him signs that led him to raise his eyes to the supernatural...

The advantage of this prayer is that it is poor, simple, and based on an attitude of great humility. It can lead to a deep mystical life of union with God.

It can be used almost anywhere and at any time even in the midst of other occupations, and so can lead to continual prayer. Usually it becomes simplified with time, becoming no more than the invocation of the name "Jesus" or something very brief, such as "Jesus, I love you." or "Jesus, mercy," as the Spirit prompts each individual.

Above all—though this is a free gift from God and must never be forced—this prayer "passes down from the mind into the heart." As it grows simpler, it is interiorized so as to become nearly automatic and constant, a kind of perpetual indwelling of the Name of Jesus in one's heart. Bearing this Name within it in love, the heart prays ceaselessly and one makes one's own home there, in the heart, where the name of Jesus dwells—that Name from which flow love and peace. "Your name is perfume poured out" (Song 1:3)

The Jesus Prayer clearly is an excellent kind of mental prayer, but it is a gift not given to everyone, at least not in the form just described. Yet that is no reason not to pray by keeping the name of Jesus in our hearts and minds as much as possible and repeating often and lovingly. This is a way of being united to God, since the name represents—indeed, makes present—the Person.

The danger of the Jesus Prayer would be to try to force things by attempting a mechanical, tiring repetition of it that would end in nervous tension. It should be prayed in moderation, gently and unforced, without trying to prolong it longer than God grants us and leaving it up to him to transform it into something more interior and continual if he so desires. Recall the principle laid down at the start: deep prayer is not the result of technique, it is a grace.

The Rosary

Some people may be surprised to find the traditional rosary treated as a method of mental prayer. But the rosary has made prayer that is contemplative, even continual, possible for many people, perhaps without their even realizing it.

The rosary is also a simple, poor prayer, for poor people—and who is not poor? It has the advantage of being a prayer for all seasons: community prayer, family prayer, prayer of petition (when we want to pray for someone, it is natural to say a decade of the rosary for him). But, at least for those who receive the grace, it can also be prayer of the heart that, very much like the Jesus Prayer, leads into mental prayer. After all, the name of Jesus is at the center of the Hail Mary.

In the rosary it is Mary who leads us into her own prayer, gives us access to the humanity of Jesus and introduces us into the mysteries of her Son. Mary somehow offers us a share in her own mental prayer, surely the deepest ever.

Often, when said slowly and in a spirit of recollection, the rosary can establish our hearts in communion with God. Mary's heart gives us access to Jesus' Heart. Finding it difficult to be recollected and do mental prayer, I have many times had the experience of beginning the rosary and quickly reached inner peace and communion with God. Today, after a period of neglect, the rosary is being rediscovered as a very valuable way of entering into the grace of deep, loving prayer. It is not a matter of fashion or a return to an outworn devotion, but a sign of Mary's maternal presence, so very evident in our times. She wishes to lead the hearts of all her children back to their Father through prayer.