

The Rosary

Letter from the Master of the Order. September 1985

fr. Damian Byrne, OP

Beat your breasts for the pleasant fields, for the faithful vine, growing up in thorns and briers; until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field."
Isaiah 32: 12-15

The cry of the Prophet may well have come to the lips of Our Holy Father, St. Dominic in Languedoc, as again it comes to many of us in our own times. The land is desolate and needs to be watered from on High.

The Dominican legend of the Rosary - "The barren land"

The order was born into a barren land: dichotomized humanity, with flesh warring against the spirit, with woman downgraded and life itself despised, was unable to accept the reality of the Worst made flesh, dwelling in the midst of us.

There was only one answer, and it was summed up in the simple words: "Hail... the Lord is with you... you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son..." (Luke 1: 28-31).

Whatever critical historians may have to say about the Legend of the Rosary, it bears witness to the charismatic gift entrusted by the Church to the order of Preachers, a gift which we must exercise by reason of profession, by our legislation and by the constant exhortation of the See of Rome.

The Legend, as such, is worth recalling in these days of renewed insistence on our preaching ministry: After much fruitless labour, tradition has it that the Mother of God appeared to Dominic in the forest of Bouconne near Toulouse:

"Wonder not that until now you have had such little fruit from your labours. You have spent them on a barren soil, not yet watered with the dew of divine grace. When God willed to renew the face of the earth he began by sending down the fertilizing dew of the Angelic Salutation. Preach my Rosary composed of one hundred and fifty Aves, and you will obtain an abundant harvest."

True devotion to Mary

It places Mary in her true ecclesial context - waiting herself in the barren land with the broken, the wounded and the little people of God. The heavenly Ave comes first on her, for in truth the Hail Mary is not so much an ascending prayer as a downward divine blessing poured out on all flesh. Mary stands in the desert on behalf of all humanity, so that it may blossom once more like the rose. The word addressed to Mary is addressed to all: "Rejoice, the Lord is with you." Here, we all draw waters from the springs of salvation, as the fertilizing rain of the Ave renews our land.

A school of prayer

There is a healthy plurality about the Prayer of the Rosary, for its long and varied history has produced many approaches: it has its rich Marian tradition, as witnessed at thousands of Marian shrines, in processions and in rituals where Mary is crowned as Queen. It has too, its Christological orientation as a "compendium of the Scriptures;" it is a powerful vocal prayer and it is a many levelled way of contemplative prayer. It can be prayed in a group or alone. In a word, the Rosary is a School of prayer, providing for body, soul and spirit.

One thinks of the vast collection of Rosary spirituality from the renowned Alanus de Rupensis, Michael de Insulis and William Pepin down to modern times and embracing the wealth of Papal teaching and the untold wealth of Dominican libraries such as that of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. One work which deserves special mention is "Le Triple Rosaire" by Père Bernard, the seventeenth Century Dominican of Toulouse. Père Bernard deals with the classic three ages of prayer in tree Rosary:

"The Rosary of meditation, or of serious reflection ... "The Rosary of intimacy, or of looking in love .. "The Rosary of union, of resting in the Lord and listening in the heart ..."

Many who abandoned the Rosary as not in keeping with their spiritual development, would be greatly surprised by original dynamic. Directors of the Rosary would to these well-springs of our Dominican heritage.

A method of preaching

St. Dominic is above all the "Man of the Book." Art may show him without the beads, but never without the Scriptures. The well known fresco of "Christ mocked" in San Marco is a classic illustration. It contains the main elements of Rosary preaching:

1. The Central theme of the Lordship of Jesus, the subject of our contemplation and of our preaching. This is the suffering, yet triumphant Jesus of "now", with power still going out from his glorious wounds to heal his people.
2. Mary, the first and supreme contemplative who is already exquisitely occupied in pondering these things in her heart and at the same time inviting Dominic to keep her company.
3. St. Dominic, standing for ourselves, pondering the word in the Scriptures and preparing to preach it to others. Fra Angelico portrays him exactly as Our Lady requested five hundred years later at Fatima when she said: "Keep me company meditating on these mysteries of the Rosary."

The Gospel of the Votive Mass of the Rosary which we have in the old missal is that of the Sower and the Seed, falling on good and bad ground, ending with the challenge "To you is given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom". It reminds us of our preaching mission and points to the role of the Rosary in our preaching.

In the golden age of the Rosary, it was common practice to open up any detail of the lives of Jesus and Mary to this preaching of the mysteries of the kingdom. Huge volumes were produced on the lines of a modern Lectionary, entitled: "Annualia" and "Festivalia", giving a whole panorama of the Gospel. This would explain the old adage: "Rosarium magis est modus praedicandi quam orandi."

There is scope here for study by future Congresses of the Rosary, such as have taken place in the recent past. Meanwhile it would be well to study the analysis of the Rosary method of preaching set out in Marialis Cultus of Pope Paul VI:

"The Rosary is thus a Gospel prayer, as pastors and scholars like to define it, more today perhaps than in the past."

"It has also been more easily seen how the orderly and gradual unfolding of the Rosary reflects the very way in which the Word of God, mercifully entering into human affairs, brought about the Redemption..." "It has also been observed that the division of the mysteries of the Rosary into three parts not only adheres strictly to the chronological order of the facts but above all reflects the plan of the original proclamation of the faith and sets forth once more the mystery of Christ in the very way in which it is seen by Saint Paul in the celebrated 'hymn' of the Letter to Philippians - kenosis, death and exaltation (2: 6-11)".

An instrument of healing

Early preachers of the Rosary were concerned not merely with preaching a devotional exercise. They were mindful of the Acts of the Apostles: "Grant to your servants to speak your word with boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." (Acts 4: 29, 30).

Among the classic texts of their preaching was the story of the woman with the issue of blood. She touched the Lord and experienced power go out from him. Healing was a very real part of the Rosary apostolate of former times. The Preacher would hold up the beads, and invite his hearers to touch the Lord in faith, as they reverently called on the name of Jesus in each Ave. "The beads", they would say, "are like the tassel of his robe. Reach out and clutch them in faith and you will be made well."

Bernard of Toulouse would encourage the members of the Rosary Confraternity, to do as members of the Milan confraternity: did "anoint themselves with oil from the lamp burning before the Rosary altar, repeating often the names of Jesus and Mary". He goes to the trouble of setting down a form of words to be used by the laity themselves when they anoint the sick members in the course of their visits.

The Spanish apostle of New Granada, St. Louis Bertrand, gives a graphic account of the miracles performed through his own use of the beads which he was accustomed to place around the neck of the sick person. After his return to Valencia he gave a Rosary to a friend and told him to preserve it with reverence, "because in the Indies, this Rosary cured the sick, converted sinners, and I think, also raised the dead to life."

In these days of the new flourishing of the ministry of healing, it would be remiss of us Dominicans to fail in the healing dimension of the Rosary which is an integral part of our tradition.

A fraternity of faith

As early as the year 1486, when Michael de Insulis (Francois de Lille) made his defence of the Rosary Confraternity at the time of public debate in the University of Cologne, the Order of Preachers had espoused the concept of a fellowship in the spirit, as the basis for a solid Rosary devotion. However vague and undocumented the involvement of the Order with the Psalter of Mary itself, its concern for community, for sharing and support has always been part of its Rosary tradition.

Michael de Insulis often used the Vulgate text: "I share with all those who keep your law." (Psalm 118: 63), while Pépin quoted the words of the Prodigal's father: "All that is mine is yours..." Membership of the Rosary Confraternity implied a great deal more than having one's name in a register and promising to say certain prayers. It meant assuming the authority of an elder brother, of knowing how to put the robe of mercy on your brother's or sister's back; how to put the shoes of freedom on their feet and the ring of covenant friendship on their finger. Hencetorth all would be one and walk like a prince in the royal household. Cf "Alanus Redivivus".

Small group apostolate

While we may not be able to rival the great confraternities of the past we do have in these times a veritable explosion of small Rosary Groups all over the world. Strong in faith and bound together by bonds of love and service, these groups display many of the qualities of committed covenant community. In keeping with the terms of Marialis Cultus (Par. 51) they have learnt to integrate into their prayer the four elements mentioned by Pope Paul VI: Scripture, Silence, Song and the Sharing of the fruits of their contemplation. A wealth of meditation literature, and other Scripture-based material has sprung from these groups. They have endeavoured in many instances to build their Rosary around the Eucharist, using the

traditional Jesus-clauses in each Hail Mary, so as to make of their prayer a deep communion with the Lord.

Directors of Confraternities would do well to encourage and help these groups and in turn to learn from them. In many instances it may be feasible, in accordance with the norms of the Apostolic Constitution of Pope Leo XIII to invite the group to become affiliated to the legally constituted Confraternity in the local district.

Addressing the issues of the day

In the context of this small group apostolate, as well as in the preaching which must accompany any true Dominican Rosary apostolate many of the issues of our day can be faced up to.

The wounded ones can come for healing; it is good to know that many of our Dominican colleagues are once again using the Rosary as did St. Louis Bertrand; the spirit of St. Martin who went about with the beads in one hand and bread in the other, is still alive. We hear of women being comforted and strengthened as, like the woman of the Gospel, they find that power goes out from the mysteries of Jesus, in our day as in the days when the Lord walked the earth in the flesh.

It is encouraging to observe that where social and political ideologies may fail, the true devotion of God's own people brings enlightenment and strength. Genuine Rosary fraternity in our day is manifesting itself as another "Upper Room" experience, as men women and little children wait with Mary and the disciples once again for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, with all the gifts and the fruits of that same Spirit.

In conclusion

A Promoter General of the Rosary has been appointed at the Curia, and all Provincial Promoters are asked to keep in touch with him. It is hoped in due course to have Coordinators for the major language groups to assist him and act as facilitators and resource people for the Rosary personnel of their respective groupings.

It would be well if structures for furthering the Rosary could be reviewed in the light of new found experiences of prayer movements in the world today. Is the model of a rosary-office or bureau adequate for new role of the laity, and the growth of covenant communities? We hear of Priests, religious, and laity forming a Prayer-support community for the Rosary with its varied ministry. These ought to be encouraged and facilitated so as to form a genuine Rosary Confraternity in keeping with our times.

Dominican formation must not neglect the rich heritage of the Order in regard to the history and spirituality of the Rosary. It should enable the student to integrate his studies, especially those of Sacred Scripture, mystical theology and preaching with a future Rosary apostolate. Bearing in mind the references to the Rosary in the New Code of Canon Law, we ought to be foremost in implementing these norms.

It may be timely to recall a remarkable letter addressed to a former Master of the Order by Pope Pius XI. On 7th March, 1934, he wrote:

"It may justly be said that the Rosary of Mary is, as it were, the principle and foundation on which the very Order of St. Dominic rests for the perfecting of the lives of its members, and obtaining the salvation of others."