

The Rosary Apostolate

Letter from the Master of the Order. May, 1976.

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The important place which the Rosary has in the apostolate and prayer of the Order is well-known. The international symposium of brethren working in this ministry which was held in Rome in May 1976 is a opportunity for us to take a new look at the proper meaning of this evangelical and marian part of our tradition. It is only right for us to underline the success of this meeting of some go of our brethren (plus some sisters), from every corner of the globe: Europe naturally, but also Ecuador, Philippines, Zaire . . . I was impressed by the high quality of the meetings, the obvious joy and the fervour shown in the liturgical celebrations and the recital of the rosary.



Starting from concrete situations, the brethren gave an account of the state of the rosary apostolate in their own areas with an objectivity which lacked neither courage nor at times humour. The diversity of cultural backgrounds, pastoral situations and the ideas of the brethren themselves, was obvious to all. Some of the brethren were anxious rather to keep what has been handed down, while others felt the need to look for new ways of expression. Variety like this is quite normal, and differences of opinion like this healthy and useful, when expressed, as they were, in an atmosphere of mutual trust.

Doctrinal foundation

Marian devotion is sometimes accused of being enthusiastic rather than enlightened, and that is why the brethren, deeply aware of preaching the Gospel when they are preaching the rosary, wanted to compare the way they do this latter with the faith of the Church, especially in what concerns the Mother of Jesus: "True devotion must come from true faith". Consequently the brethren spent a whole day studying the apostolic exhortation *Marialis cultus* of March 1974, which put the rosary in the context of marian devotion renewed in the light of Vatican II, where Mary is seen as part of the mystery of Christ and the Church (*Lumen gentium* Chap. 8).

It has been truly said that, in a few years, we have passed from a rosary which was above all marian to a rosary which is more clearly Christ-centered, based on the incarnation and the paschal mystery, where Mary has her special place as servant of the Lord, model of believers and spiritual mother of the disciples. Let us not be afraid to stress this interpretation which brings out all the doctrinal richness of the rosary, which should be, in a simple but authentic way, an organic presentation of the whole mystery of salvation. After all is it not rather like the plan of the original apostolic preaching ? Can we not see to it the roots of really popular doctrinal preaching ? The rosary can indeed form the framework of true catechesis and, on certain occasions, even the evangelization itself, as can be seen from various examples.

On the other one cannot but be struck by the insistence put by *Marialis cultus* on the mysterious relationship between the Holy Spirit and the virgin of Nazareth in their action on the Church. Brethren engaged in the rosary apostolate have been very much aware of this aspect of the Christian mystery, and of the effects seen everywhere today of renewal in the Spirit. Far from going out of date or useless the rosary is very much at home in this context. Those of our brethren who preach the rosary day in day out are more and more convinced of this, while those who are prejudiced against it surely have no grounds for their prejudice ?

Biblical roots

The renewal of marian piety and of the rosary apostolate is closely linked to renewal of interest in the Bible. Sometimes people try to put these in opposition to each other, but is it not enough to remember for example the marian devotion of someone like Father Lagrange ? Since Vatican II especially we have a better grasp of the deep theology of Mary found in Luke and John, Mary the Mother of Jesus, the Daughter of Sion, the Servant of the Lord, the dwelling-place of the glory of God, the Woman "Mother of all the living".

I am glad to notice that, all over the world, the rosary is being presented as a genuinely evangelical prayer and even as a way of teaching people how to ponder over the scriptures in prayer and faith. This is what the rosary is all about. Obviously all this means that preachers of the rosary must not only have a fervent devotion to Mary but that they must also be steeped in biblical knowledge which they continually keep up to date.

In the world to-day

Like every kind of evangelical preaching the rosary apostolate must be turned towards the world as we know it today, a world which has changed a great deal in habits of thinking and of living. So one of the commissions at the

symposium considered "the rosary and Christian life in the modern world", and another "the rosary and pastoral work". We must examine ourselves honestly about this. Does the rosary as we preach it tend at times to become an alibi, an escape, a way out ? Does it tend to develop a kind of unreal spirituality, far removed from life in the raw, from the hopes, the fears, the struggles of humankind today ? Are we really awake to the desire of people today for more responsibility in fraternal sharing and in spiritual freedom ? Do we know how to encourage Christians to work for real freedom for their brothers ?

These problems and others of the same sort were tackled and one only has to read the report and the conclusions of the symposium to see with what clear-sightedness this was done.

A school of Christian life

Lastly the rosary is very well adapted to teaching the life of faith. It is a school of Christian life and of Christian prayer. Now that we are gradually discovering again, under the heap of learned theories, the merits of popular devotions and popular religion, the rosary is seen once again to be a precious instrument. On the one hand by means of meditation on the "mysteries" of the lives of Jesus and Mary it plunges its roots deep into the mystery of God; on the other, thanks to its simplicity and its method it speaks directly to the hearts of simple and uncomplicated people. So it does really link one to the roots of the faith. And certainly this is the explanation of those moving stories of Christian people deprived of the help of the sacraments, cut off from their spiritual leaders, without bishops, without priests, who hung on to their faith, thanks to the rosary.

The simple and direct character of the rosary makes it a ready framework for a catechesis of the faith for many baptized people who have had scarcely any instruction, and also for non-practicing baptized people; while the remarkable development of rosary "teams" and other up-to-date groups in some countries is a good example of its use in catechesis.

The rosary, which is a school of life open to the simplest of people, far from tying them down to the rudiments of the faith, leads them step by step along the paths of meditation, prayer and contemplation of the Lord. It teaches us to leave words behind when we pray. It is a school for the contemplative life. What is more, if Paul VI in *Marialis cultus* reminds us of the essentials of the rosary as defined by Saint Pius V - and we must always come back to this - he also encourages us to celebrate the rosary rather as one would celebrate the Word of God. Every effort towards research and creativity in this field is to be encouraged. During the symposium examples were given and experiments were carried out.

Conclusion

A tradition recognized in the Church makes us heirs of the mission given to our father Dominic by the Blessed Virgin: "Go and preach my rosary." This is a heritage of which we should be proud and from which we should be the first to benefit in our lives and in our prayer. How many Dominicans could tell us what the recitation and contemplation of the rosary meant from them in the first years of their religious life, how it was a real "school of prayer", perhaps the only one ? Is this still the case in the Order ? Surely our young brethren and those in charge of their formation must dare to follow this way again ?

The rosary is also a heritage of which we must prove ourselves worthy. Our mission as preachers is carried out in all sorts of different ways. From teaching in prestigious universities, and learned exegetical, theological and philosophical research to missions to the people and the most rudimentary catechesis, and passing through the daily breaking of the Word and the continual meditation on the joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries: it is the identical Word of God that we proclaim, the same prophetic mission that we are carrying out.

When our father Saint Dominic saw a group of three people together he would immediately think that there was a congregation to whom he could preach the Gospel. Are we not doing the same whenever we preach the rosary, explain it and lead people to pray it ?