

The Rosary

An address from the Master of the Order at Lourdes, in October 1998

fr. Timothy Radcliffe, OP

When I saw that I had been asked to talk about the Rosary, I must confess that I had a moment of panic. I have never read about the Rosary or reflected about it ever in my life. I am sure that most of you have much more profound thoughts about the Rosary than I have. The Rosary is simply something that I have done, without thought, like breathing. Breathing is very important to me. I breathe all the time, but I have never given a talk on it. Saying the Rosary, like breathing, is so simple. So what is there to say?

Simplicity

It may seem a little strange that a prayer as simple as the Rosary should be particularly associated with Dominicans. Dominicans are not often thought of as very simple people. We have a reputation for writing long and complex books on theology. And yet, we fought to keep the Rosary ours. The General Chapter of 1574 urged the brethren to preach the Rosary. It is "nostra sacra haereditas", "our sacred inheritance". There is a long tradition of pictures of Our Lady giving the Rosary to St Dominic. But at one time, other religious orders grew jealous, and started commissioning paintings of Our Lady giving the Rosary to other saints, to St Francis and even to St Ignatius. But we fought back, and, I think in the seventeenth century, persuaded the Pope to ban the competition. Our Lady was only allowed to be shown giving the Rosary to Dominic! But why is this simple prayer so dear to Dominicans?

An address at Lourdes, in October 1998, for the ninetieth anniversary of the Pèlerinage du Rosaire, the annual pilgrimage to Lourdes organized by the Dominicans of France.

The Rosary

Perhaps it is because at the center of our theological tradition is a longing for simplicity. St Thomas Aquinas said that we cannot understand God because God is utterly simple - simple beyond all our conceptions. We study, we wrestle with theological problems, we strain our minds, but the aim is to draw near to the mystery of the One who is totally simple. We have to pass through the complexity so as to arrive at simplicity.

There is a false simplicity, which we must leave behind. It is the simplicity of those who oversimplify, who have too easy answers to everything, who know it all in advance. They are either too lazy or are incapable of thought. And there is the true simplicity, the simplicity of heart, the simplicity of the clear eye. And that we can only arrive at slowly, with God's grace, as we draw near to God's blinding simplicity. The Rosary is indeed simple, very simple. But it has the deep and wise simplicity for which we hunger, and in which we will find peace.

It is said that when St John the Evangelist became an old man, he became utterly simple. He liked to play with a dove, and all that he would say to people, when they came to see him, was «Love one another». You and I would not get away with that! People would not believe us. It is only someone like St John, who wrote the richest and most complex Gospel of all, who can arrive at the true simplicity of wisdom and say no more than just: «Love one another». Just as it is only a St Thomas Aquinas, after he has written his great Summa Theologiae, who can say that all that he had written is «as straw». Yes, the Rosary is very simple. But perhaps it is an invitation to find that deep simplicity of true wisdom. It was said of Lagrange, one of the founders of modern biblical scholarship, that he did three things every day: he read the newspapers, studied the Bible, and prayed the Rosary!

I would also like to suggest that not only is the simplicity of the Rosary good and deep simplicity, but also that it has many characteristics which are truly Dominican.

The angel as a preacher

The Hail Mary begins with the words of the angel Gabriel, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you." Angels are professional preachers. It is their whole being to proclaim the good news. The words of Gabriel are the perfect sermon. It is even short! He proclaims the essence of all preaching, "The Lord is with you". Here we see the heart of our vocation, to say to each other: "Hail Daniel, Hail Eric, the Lord is with you". That is why Humbert of Romans, one of the earliest Masters of the Order, said that we Dominicans are called to live like angels. Though I have to say that, in my experience, most Dominicans are not especially angelic!

Last December, I was in Ho Chi Minh City, visiting the Province of Vietnam. After the day's work was over, my socius and I loved to go and get lost in all the back streets of the city. Part of the fun was to escape the Government spy who was sent to see what we were up to. We spent hours wandering around the maze of tiny streets, filled with life - people gambling, eating, talking, playing billiards. Many of the houses had images of Buddha. And then one evening, we went around the corner into a little square, and there, right in the middle, was an enormous statue of a Dominican with wings. It was St Vincent Ferrer, who is always represented as an angel. He was the great preacher. He was seen as the angel of the Apocalypse, announcing the end of the world. Well, no preacher can get everything right! So Gabriel the archangel is a good model for us Dominicans.

And there is another way in which the Hail Mary is like a sermon. Because a sermon does not just tell us about God. It starts from the Word of God which is addressed to us. Preaching is not just the reporting of facts about God. It gives us God's Word, which breaks the silence between God and us.

The opening words of the prayer are words that are addressed to Mary by the angel: "Hail Mary, full of grace". The beginning of everything is the Word which we hear. St John wrote "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sin." (1 Jn 4:10) In fact in the time of St Dominic the Ave Maria only consisted of these words of the angel and those of Elizabeth. Our prayer was the words given to us. It was only later, after the Council of Trent, that our own words to Mary were added.

So often we think of prayer as the effort that we make to talk to God. Prayer can look like the struggle to reach up to a distant God. Does he even hear us? But this simple prayer reminds us that this is not so. We do not break the silence. When we speak we are responding to a word spoken to us. We are taken into a conversation that has already begun without us. The angel proclaims God's word. And this creates a space in which we can speak in turn: "Holy Mary, Mother of God".

So often our lives are afflicted by silence. There is the silence of heaven, which may at times seem closed to us. There is the silence which may appear to separate us from each other. But the Word of God comes to us in good preaching, and breaks open those barriers. We are liberated into language. We find words come, words for God and words for each other.

Perhaps we can say even more. Meister Eckhart once said that "We do not pray, we are prayed". Our words are the reverberation, the prolongation of the Word spoken to us. Our prayers are God praying, blessing, praising in us. As St Paul wrote, "When we cry "Abba, Father" it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God ... " (Rom 8:14) The greetings of the angel and Elizabeth to Mary are continued in the words that we address to her. The second half of the prayer echoes the first. So the angel spoke "Hail Mary, full of grace", and this becomes, in our mouths, the same greeting, "Holy Mary". Elizabeth says "Blessed is the fruit of your womb", and we say "Mother of God". We are caught up into God's speaking. Our prayer is God speaking within us. We are caught up into the conversation that is the life of the Trinity.

So, I would suggest that this simple prayer of the Hail Mary is like a tiny model sermon. It proclaims the good news. But like all good sermons, it does more than that. It does not simply give us

information. It offers a word from God, a word that echoes in our words, a word that overcomes our silence and gives us a voice.

A prayer for home and a prayer for the journey

There is another way in which this prayer is very Dominican. And that is because it is a prayer for the home, and a prayer for the road. It is a prayer which builds community and also which propels us on our journey. And that is a tension which is very Dominican. We need our communities. We need places in which we are at home, with our brothers and sisters. And yet at the same time we are itinerant preachers, who cannot settle for too long, but must set out to preach. We are contemplative and active. Let me explain how the Hail Mary is marked by this same tension.

Think of the great pictures of the Annunciation. They usually offer us a domestic scene. The angel has come to Mary's home. Mary is there in her room, usually reading. Often there is a spinning wheel in the background, or a brush leaning against the wall. Outside there is a garden. This is where the story begins, at home. And this is appropriate, because the Word of God makes his home with us. He pitches his tent among us.

And in a way, the Rosary is often the prayer of the home and the community. Traditionally it was said by the family and by religious communities each day. From the mid-fifteenth century we see the foundation of Rosary Confraternities who meet to pray together. So the Rosary is deeply associated with community, a prayer that we share with others. I must confess that I have ambiguous memories of family Rosary! We did not say the Rosary at home, but we often stayed with cousins who recited it together every night. But it was often a disaster. No matter how carefully the doors were locked, the dogs always burst in and made their way around the family licking our faces. And so however pious we intended to be, we, usually collapsed in giggles. I came to dread the family Rosary.

But the angel's greeting does not leave Mary at home. The angel comes to disturb her domestic life. I often think of a wonderful Annunciation made by our Dominican brother Petit, who lives and works in Japan. He shows Gabriel as a great messenger, filling the canvas, and Mary is this small, shy, demure Japanese girl, whose life is turned upside down. She is propelled on a journey, which will take her to Elizabeth's home, to Bethlehem, to Egypt, to Jerusalem. It is a journey that will lead to her heart being pierced, and to the foot of the cross. It is a journey that will eventually carry her to heaven and glory.

So the Rosary is also the prayer of those who journey, of pilgrims, like yourselves. I have come to love the Rosary precisely as a prayer for my travels. It is a prayer for airports and airplanes. It is a prayer that I often say as I come into land at a new place, and I wonder what I shall find, and what I can offer. It is a prayer for taking off again, giving thanks for all that I have received from the brothers and the sisters. It is a prayer of pilgrimage around the Order.

I think that the structure of Mary's journey marks the Rosary in two ways. It is there in the words of each Hail Mary. And it is there in the structures of the mysteries of the Rosary.

Hail Mary - The story of the individual

Each Ave Maria suggests the individual journey that each of us must make, from birth to death. It is marked by the biological rhythm of each human life. It mentions the only three moments of our lives which we can know with absolute certainty: that we are born, that we live now, and that we shall die. It starts with the beginning of every human life, a conception in the womb. It situates us now, as we ask now for Mary's prayers. It looks forward to death, our death. It is an amazingly physical prayer. It is marked by the inevitable corporeal drama of every human body, which is born and must die.

And this is surely truly Dominican. For Dominic's preaching began in the south of France, not far from here, against heretics who despised the body, and who thought of all creation as evil. He was confronted with one of those waves of dualistic spirituality which have periodically swept Europe.

Augustine, whose Rule we have, was caught in another such movement, when he was a Manichee as a young man. And even today, much of popular thought is profoundly dualistic. Studies have shown that modern scientists usually think of salvation in terms of the escape from the body.

But the Dominican tradition has always stressed that we are physical, corporeal beings. All that we are comes from God. We receive the sacrament of Jesus' body and blood for our nourishment; we hope for the resurrection of the body.

The journey that each of us must travel is, in the first place, this physical, biological one, which takes us from the womb to the tomb. It is in this biological span of life that we will meet God and find salvation. And this simple prayer helps us on the way.

Conception

The words of the angel promise fertility, fertility for a virgin and for a barren woman. The blessing of God makes us fertile. Each of us, in our individual births, is a fruit of a womb that was blessed.

I believe that the blessing promised by the angel always takes the form of fertility, in every human life. It is the blessing of new beginnings, the grace of freshness. Perhaps we are made in the image and likeness of God because we share God's creativity. We are his partners in creating and recreating the world. The most dramatic and miraculous example of this is childbirth. But even we men, who cannot manage that miracle, we too are blessed by fertility. When we are faced with barrenness, sterility, futility, then God comes with a fertile word. Whenever God draws near to us, it is so that we may be creative, transforming, making new, whether in tilling the soil, planting and sowing, or through art, poetry, painting.



“Blessed is the fruit of your womb”. Perhaps the best way, then, that we can ever preach the miracle of this fertility is through art, through painting and song and poetry. Because these are some small share in that same blessing, that endless fertility of God.

There is a charming story, which was told by Malaroux to Picasso. He said that when Bernadette of Lourdes entered the convent, many people sent her statues of the Virgin. But she never had them in her room, because she said that they did not look like the woman whom she had seen. The bishop sent her albums of famous pictures of the Virgin, by Raphael, Murillo and so on. She looked at Baroque virgins, of which she had seen so many, and Renaissance virgins. But none of them looked right. And then she saw the Virgin of Cambrai, a fourteenth century copy of a very old Byzantine icon, which was not like any picture of Mary that

Bernadette would have seen. And she said, “That’s her!”

Perhaps it is not surprising that the young girl who had seen the Virgin, recognised her again in an icon, the fruit of a holy art, a sacred creativity. Mary shows herself most clearly in the work of one who was made fertile through God's grace, a painter.

Now

But the Rosary also invokes another time, not just of birth but also now. “Pray for us sinners now”. Now is the present moment in the pilgrimage of our lives, when we must carry on, survive, on our way to the Kingdom.

It is interesting that this present moment is seen as a time when we sinners need compassion. This is a profoundly Dominican compassion. You remember that Dominic prayed always to God: “Lord, have mercy on your people. What will become of sinners?” Now is a moment when we need compassion, mercy. In the Sistine Chapel, in the fresco of the Last Judgement, there is a man being pulled up from Purgatory by an angel with a Rosary.

Now is the time when we must survive, wondering how long we must wait for the Kingdom. When an American Dominican went back to visit China a few years ago, he found various groups of Dominican laity who survived during years of persecution and isolation. And the only thing that they had kept during all those years was the recitation of the Rosary together. It was the daily bread of survival. And when some of our brethren went to remote areas of Mexico, and met groups of Dominican laity, who had not been in contact with the Order for years, they found the same thing. The one practice that was continued was the Rosary. It is the prayer for survivors in this present time. During Communist times when our brother Dommik Duka was in prison with Vaclav Havel, now the President of the Czech Republic, they said the Rosary together on a knotted piece of string.

Bede Jarrett, the English provincial in the 1930s, sent a member of the Province, called Bertrand Pike, to South Africa, to help in the new mission of the Order. But Bertrand felt overwhelmed and unable to cope. It was more than he could face. He lacked the courage to continue. And Bede wrote to him reminding him of a time in war when he had found his courage in his Rosary.

“Do you remember that dreadful day you had to cross between trenches at Ypres, when your courage failed you, and only after 3 or 4 attempts, did you force yourself to get by, and how you found the carved edges of your Rosary-beads had cut into your finger in your unconscious gripping of them to take a new lease of courage from holding them.”

“Yes, I remember that.”

“But, my dear Bertrand, courage and fear are not opposed. Those only have courage who do what they should do even though they have fear.”

So Bertrand must tightly grip his Rosary to have courage, “now and at the hour of his death”. It is the prayer for all of us who need courage to carry on, to triumph over fear. It gives us the courage of the pilgrim.

The hour of our death

And the final certain moment of our bodily lives is death. «Pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death'. In the face of death, we pray the Rosary. I have just returned from Kinshasa, in the Congo, where many of our sisters have faced death in recent years. The Provincial of the Missionary Sisters of Grenada, Sister Christina, told me about how she and her sisters had had to flee from their home in the north of the Congo during the last war. They had been hidden in the bush by friends. She is a doctor, and when they were fleeing she met a man whose wife she had saved. And he said to her that now it was his turn to save her life. All around them they heard the sound of gun fire. They were told that the rebels had discovered where they were and would come soon to kill them. In the face of this death, they prayed the Rosary. It is a prayer that when we face death, knowing that we will not do so alone, Mary will then pray for us.

I think also of my father. During the Second World War, my mother and the three eldest children remained in London. I was just on the way. My mother insisted on being available in case my father could ever have leave and come home, even though night after night the bombs fell on London. And my father promised that if all of his family would survive the war, then he would pray the Rosary every night. So one of the memories of my childhood is of how every night before dinner, my father would pace up and down the drawing room, praying the Rosary. He gave thanks nightly, that we had survived that threat of death. And one of my last memories of my father was of just before he died, too weak to pray himself any more, we his family, his wife and six children, gathered around his bed and prayed the Rosary for him. It was the first time that he could not do it himself. That he be surrounded by all of us was an answer to that prayer he had said so many thousands of times. “Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.”

T. S. Eliot begins one of his poems “Pray for us now and at the hour of our birth”. And this is right. For we must face these three sure moments in our life: birth, the present, and our death. But what we long for in each moment is always the same, new birth. What we long for now, as sinners, is not the mercy that merely forgets what we have done, but which makes this too a moment of new

birth, of fresh beginning. And faced with death, we again long for the words of the angel to announce a new fertility. For all of our lives are open to God's endless newness, his inexhaustible freshness. The angel comes time and time again, with new Annunciations of good news.

The Mysteries of the Rosary - The story of salvation

So the individual Ave Maria is the prayer of the journey that each of us must make, from birth, through the present now until death. But ultimately our lives do not have meaning in themselves, as private and individual stories. Our lives only have meaning because they are caught up in a larger story, which reaches from the very beginning to the unknown end, from Creation to the Kingdom. And this longer span is given by the mysteries of the Rosary, which tell the story of redemption.

The mysteries of the Rosary have been compared with the Summa Theologiae of St Thomas. They tell, in their own way, of how everything comes from God and everything returns to God. For each mystery of the Rosary is part of a single mystery, the mystery of our redemption in Christ. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth". (Eph 1:9)

So, one might say that each Ave Maria represents an individual life, with its own story from birth to death. But all these Ave Marias are taken up into the mysteries of the Rosary just as our individual lives are taken up into the larger story of redemption. We need both dimensions, a story with two levels. I need to give a form and meaning to my own life, the story of this unique human flesh and blood, with my moments of failure and victory. If there is no place for my unrepeatable story, then I will be merely lost in the history of humanity. For Christ says to me, "Today, you will be with me in paradise". I need the individual AveMaria, my own little drama, in the face of my own little death. My death may not mean much for humanity, but it will be quite important for me.

But it is not enough to remain trapped on that merely personal level. I must find my life taken into the larger drama of God's purpose. Alone my story has no meaning. My individual Ave Maria must find its place in the mysteries of the Rosary. So the Rosary offers that perfect balance we need in the search for the meaning of our lives, both the individual and the communal.

Repetition

I have tried to sketch a few reasons why the Rosary is indeed a deeply Dominican devotion. The Ave Maria bears all the marks of a perfect little sermon. And the whole of the Rosary is marked by the theme of the journey, our own and that of humanity. All this fits well the life of an Order of itinerant preachers. There are other things that I could have stressed, like the biblical basis of the mysteries. It is a prolonged meditation on the Word of God in scripture. But I have said enough!

But I must face a final objection. I have tried to suggest the theological richness of the Rosary. But the fact is that when one prays the Rosary, one rarely thinks about anything. We do not in fact think about the nature of preaching or the human story and its relationship with the story of salvation. Our minds are largely blank. We may even sometimes find ourselves wondering why we are endlessly repeating the same words in this mindless fashion. That is surely not very Dominican! Yet from the very beginning of our tradition, our brethren and nuns have delighted in this repetition. One brother Romeo, who died in 1261, is supposed to have recited a thousand Ave Marias a day!

First of all, many religions are marked by this tradition of the repetition of sacred words. Last Sunday, when I was wondering what to say about the Rosary, I heard a Buddhist service broadcast on the BBC, and it seemed to consist in the endless repetition of holy words, the mantra. It has often been pointed out that the Rosary is quite similar to these Eastern ways of prayer, and that the constant reiteration of these words can work a slow but deep transformation of our hearts. Since this is so widely known I will say no more.

One could also point out that repetition is not necessarily a sign of a lack of imagination. It may be sheer exuberant pleasure that makes us repeat words. 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.' Or our repetition of the Rosary!

Finally, it is true that when we say the Rosary we often may not think about God. We may go for hours without any thoughts at all. We are just there, saying our prayers. But this may be good. When we say the Rosary, we are celebrating that the Lord is indeed with us and we are in his presence. We repeat the words of the angel "The Lord be with you". It is a prayer of God's presence. And if we are with someone then we do not need to think about them. As Simon Tugwell wrote, "I do not think about my friend when he is there beside me; I am far too busy enjoying his presence. It is when he is absent that I will start to think about him. Thinking about God all too easily leads us to treat him as if he were absent. But he is not absent."

So, in the Rosary we do not try to have thoughts about God. Instead we rejoice in the words of the angel addressed to each of us, "The Lord be with you". We endlessly repeat these same words, with the endless vital exuberance of the children of God, who take pleasure in the good news.