

REFLECTIONS ON THE ROSARY

Reflections given during Advent 2002 at Terenure College by Christopher O'Donnell, O. Carm.

Advent is a very Marian season; the Pope has recently given the Church a beautiful document on the Rosary and declared a Year of the Rosary.

We all know about the Rosary; we may not know all about it. Just as we can shift a picture or photograph so that it catches the light in a different way, so we can turn around the beads and perhaps see them from a new perspective. The Pope's apostolic letter on the Rosary is called *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* ("The Rosary of the Virgin Mary," issued on 16th October, 2002). He continues a long tradition of popes speaking about the Rosary and encouraging its use. But this apostolic letter is uniquely personal. In it the pope several times comes off his papal throne, as it were, and tells us simply as a Christian that the Rosary is his favourite prayer; that he relies on it in difficulties (#2, 25). He writes, "To pray the Rosary is to hand over our burdens to the merciful hearts of Christ and his Mother" (# 25). He says also: "A prayer so easy and yet so rich deserves to be rediscovered by the Christian community" (# 43). Our short reflections in Advent will be an attempt to open up parts of this long letter, thereby helping us, in the words of the pope, "to re-discover the Rosary."

I said that Advent is a very Marian season. But its centre is not Mary, but the coming of her Son in history at Bethlehem, in our lives through baptism and at the end of time. Likewise the Pope insists that the Rosary is Marian in character, but is at heart a Christocentric prayer. It is about Christ seen through the eyes of Mary. In the words of the Pope: "With the Rosary, the Christian people sits at the school of Mary and is led to contemplate the beauty on the face of Christ and to experience the depths of his love" (# 1).

The Pope makes a few more preliminary points before coming to the core of his letter. He denies that the renewal of the liturgy has made the Rosary outmoded; it is in fact a fine preparation for Mass. Nor is it somehow unecumenical, because it is focussed on Christ. He then points to the Rosary as a prayer for peace, a prayer for the family. But he says: "the most important reason for strongly encouraging the practice of the Rosary is that it represents a most effective means of fostering among the faithful...[a] commitment to the contemplation of the Christian mystery" for "it is more urgent than ever that our Christian communities become 'genuine schools of prayer'" (#5).

I think we should dwell on this for a moment. Let's think of an ordinary day. What do we do from the time we leave the bed, until we return to it at night? There are ordinary things we do: work of various kinds; activities—some pleasant, some unpleasant; we read the papers; see TV; listen to the radio; make phone calls; go to a shop...all kinds of bustle. We

may even stop and think for a while; we may pray. What holds the day together? What gives meaning to a life made up of so many apparently ordinary days after days? A short answer should be “love of God and love of neighbour” (see Matt 22:36-39). Where does failure fit in? Not every day is a good day, or at least some days are not as good as others. Again we get upset about trifles: the things people say to us or about us; things that go wrong; real or imagined slights. We can be upset today about something that we will not remember this time next year, or even this time next month.

What I am coming to is the need for balance in our lives, for a way of keeping things in perspective, for the need ultimately of meaning in our lives. The Pope points to several ways in which the Rosary is a contemplative prayer. If we pray the Rosary, then we are brought up against the great mysteries that give meaning to everything, and which puts all in perspective. Suppose I am hurt because of a phone call, an unpleasant one I received, or a call I expected and did not get. How does that lie in relation to the mysteries of the Rosary? The Rosary brings us into God’s great plan for us. God became a baby, the Son of Mary, to save humanity. He suffered a terrible death for us. He is leading us after him to glory and gives us the Holy Spirit to guide us, the picture of Mary already in glory to be our hope. These mysteries into which we are drawn are so much greater than any daily distress.

If we are being constantly nourished by these truths, if we can let them sink in through the Rosary, then we will have a vision for our own lives and for the world. We will have a greater calm, we will have a contemplative stance. All evil passes, God is drawing us to eternity.

A point, which we will consider later, is that we learn the mysteries of God, the mystery of life itself through the eyes of Mary in the Rosary. We see Jesus through her eyes, and so we can see our own faith mirrored in hers, and our hopes and desires formed by hers.

The Rosary gives us meaning for our lives; it draws us into the divine mystery; it is a source of reflection and of power for our lives. In the Rosary we ponder and tease out the same mysteries that we celebrate on the altar. The pope says that it is an easy prayer. With practice, maybe.

The television on Thursday night last (12 December, 2002) showed pictures from the Intercontinental Hotel in Geneva as officials from the various football associations awaited the announcement of the destination of the 2008 European football championship. Quite a number of people shown had beads in their hands—not Rosary beads but the typical Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East worry beads. Playing with them can relieve tension and has a calming effect. Beads and prayer cords have been around for a long time and in many cultures. The Rosary beads can have a similar effect. Having them in our hands can calm us. When visiting sick people bringing them Communion or visiting for Confession or the Anointing of the Sick, I have often seen people grab for their beads, even though we will not be saying the Rosary. Taking them is not just for calming, like the football officials, it is somehow making the moment sacred, changing the atmosphere, a beginning of worship.

The calming effect of the Rosary is, however, a major question. In his recent apostolic letter, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, Pope John Paul keeps coming back to the idea that the Rosary is a contemplative prayer. He gives a strong quotation from his predecessor, Paul VI, who wrote, “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’ (Matt 6:7; see *Marialis cultus* 1974, # 47—“To Honour Mary”).” Some of us will be old enough to remember the way each mystery was introduced in the public recitation of the Rosary at Church devotions: “Let us contemplate in this mystery...”

There are many meanings to the word “contemplate.” It can mean just thinking. So we can think about Bethlehem. We can imagine the scene: think of the cold, the angels, remember the smell of straw and animals. We can think about Mary and Joseph and the Baby. There are so many possible thoughts that would occupy more than ten Hail Mary’s worth of time. There is of course no reason why we cannot stay with one mystery and complete the Rosary thinking of only one or a few mysteries.

But there is also a way of considering Bethlehem in which we do not have as many ideas, in which we are quieter. There is a special remembering that is characteristically Christian (# 13). We have our ordinary memories of some event. We can remember it, think about it with pleasure or pain; but it is past. The Christian memory is not so much thinking about what happened, but staying with its power in the present. Past and present are in the now of mystery; they exist in God’s eternal now. They are eternally in the mind and heart of Mary and of her Son. In the liturgy we stand at Calvary; we meet the Easter Jesus; we join in worship with Mary already assumed into heaven.

The Pope tells us that the essential thing is not just learning what Christ taught, but learning him (# 14). And the supreme teacher of Christ is Mary. Indeed the Church has taken the Mass for Our Lady of Mount Carmel and approved it as a votive Mass under the title, “Mary as Teacher of the Spiritual Life.” It is Mary who leads us to the Mountain of God, symbolised by Carmel, but who is of course Christ. She is the one who can teach us about him. The Pope suggests that in the Rosary we look at Christ through the eyes of Mary. We can indeed ask Mary’s help to think fruitfully about her Son. We can recall a prayer ascribed to St. Ignatius Loyola: “Mary show me your Son; Jesus show me your mother.” But thinking will only bring us so far. Books, even sermons, are very limited in what they can do for us. We have to be shown Jesus and Mary. And this comes about in prayerful reflection. Our Christian faith is not only intellectual, but is best expressed in terms of friendship and love. To let this friendship grow, we need to stay with Mary, to see her Son and the mysteries of his life through her eyes. This is more a matter of gazing than of thinking. The Pope speaks of being “enabled to enter naturally into Christ’s life and as it were to share his deepest feelings” (# 15).

So, to return to the beads. They can help to calm us physically and psychologically. But such calming is not meant to encourage our minds to race. The exterior calm is meant to allow us to have an inner tranquillity and peace. In this peace we can stay with Mary as she looks at her Son in all the various events, which the Rosary presents. The Rosary can, as the Pope tells us, be a prayer of supplication and intercession as we pray it for people and events (# 16). But ultimately it is meant to change the way we think and feel and act. It is to transform our minds and hearts to the hearts of Jesus and Mary, to adopt their perspective. In the eternal present of God we gaze at and live with Mary and Jesus in the mysteries of their lives. Putting away our beads is a reluctant return perhaps to the secular world. But maybe there will be an afterglow coming from the mysteries we have contemplated.

In saying the Rosary we all have frequently looked at the beads to see what decade we are on. Indeed we can start off well and find ourselves at the “Hail Holy Queen” without quite knowing how we got there. We have seen something of the rich teaching on the Rosary in the Pope’s recent apostolic letter, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*. It is a compendium of the Gospel, offering meaning for our lives; it is essentially a contemplative prayer that is centred on Jesus rather than on his Mother. But difficulties remain. The Pope offers some aids to the recitation of the Rosary. They are not so much papal teaching, as suggestions from somebody who loves the Rosary and has practiced it over a lifetime. In this he is conscious of the pace of our contemporary lives and of our difficulty in finding the contemplative heart of the Rosary.

He notes that there are many ways of beginning and ending the Rosary, opening prayers like the verse “Lord open our lips” and the Creed at the beginning and the “Hail Holy Queen” or the Litany of Our Lady at the end (# 37). His suggestions belong rather to the core of the Rosary. He has practical suggestions for the beginning and the end of each mystery.

Firstly, he recommends announcing the mystery. This is an obvious help: “The words direct the imagination and the mind towards a particular episode or moment in the life of Christ” (# 29). In so doing he notes that the Rosary is no substitute for other biblical reflection, especially the *lectio divina*, “on the contrary it presupposes and promotes it” (# 29). He suggests moreover that we begin each decade with a phrase from Scripture, or if circumstances allow it, a longer passage (# 30). He says, “No other words can ever match the efficacy of the inspired word. As we listen, we are certain that this is the word of God, spoken for today and spoken ‘for me’” (# 30). It is not a matter of having to root around a bible every time we say the Rosary. We are already familiar with biblical phrases that could accompany the recitation. A few examples, but you could all have your own phrases, whatever might come to mind:

- “Here I am, the servant of the Lord” (Luke 1:38).
- “Elizabeth said, ‘blessed are you because you have believed’” (Luke 1:42.45).
- “The shepherds found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger” (Luke 2:16).
- “They brought him up to Jerusalem” (Luke 2:22).
- “After three days they found him in the temple” (Luke 2:46).

They are just some. We might think of all sorts of other phrases. For instance in the case of the finding in the temple we might focus on the three days loss, the distress of Mary and Joseph, their lack of understanding...

The Pope then suggests that we leave a suitable time for silent reflection before beginning the vocal prayer. He says, "A discovery of the importance of silence is one of the secrets of practising contemplation and meditation" (# 31).

We then move on to the "Our Father." Since we are saying "Our" rather than "My Father," we are not alone, but praying with and in the whole Church. Our meditation, "even when carried out in solitude [is] an ecclesial experience" (# 32). Commenting on the "Hail Mary" he makes several comments, which would be familiar to us (# 33). An important point is his assertion that the point of gravity of this prayer, "which can be overlooked," is the name of Jesus. His Holy Name is the hinge joining the two parts of the "Hail Mary."

Like his predecessor Paul VI, the Pope reminds us that we are to raise up our minds to the Trinity with the "Gloria;" "far from being a perfunctory conclusion, [it] takes on its proper contemplative tone, raising the mind as it were to the heights of heaven" (# 34).

The Pope acknowledges that there are various ways of ending the mystery according to local custom. He suggests another way, which is to have a short prayer based on the mystery (# 35). He anticipates that in the future various formulae could be drawn up. But there is no reason why for instance we could not say after the Annunciation, "Lord give me faith like Mary's." Or after the Visitation, "Help me to praise like Mary." With the Nativity we could say a line from a Christmas carol, or just thank Mary for the gift of Bethlehem, etc. Making up our own prayer after the mystery will help us to draw out its meaning and make it personal.

The part of the apostolic letter, which got most publicity last October, is the Pope's suggestion of having five new decades called, "The Mysteries of Light" (# 21). These are a bridge between the infancy and childhood of Jesus in the joyful mysteries and the Passion in the Sorrowful mysteries. They have the character of manifestation or light. They are:

- The Baptism of Jesus.
- The manifestation of Jesus at the Wedding of Cana.
- Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom and his call to conversion.
- The Transfiguration.
- The Institution of the Eucharist as a sacramental expression of the Paschal Mystery.

Mary was clearly at the second of these mysteries, namely Cana. But her words, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5) should accompany our reflection on all these mysteries.

The days pose a small problem. In the past three into seven was uneven, so we had the glorious mysteries three times, Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. Likewise, four into seven does not go. The Pope suggests that we use the joyful mysteries for Saturday, which is traditionally Our Lady's day, thus freeing up Thursday for the mysteries of light (# 38).

Two last points from the papal address. The Pope gives special emphasis to the Rosary as a prayer for peace, a prayer that allows peace to infill our own hearts (# 6, 40). He also commends it as a prayer for the family, for families (# 41) and for young people (# 42). Anticipating objections the Pope says quite simply, “Why not try it?” He states, however, that we need an approach that is positive, impassioned and creative, especially for young people (# 42). He calls on all members of the Church, in particular sick and elderly people as well as families, religious and 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” (# 43). In his conclusion he uses a memorable phrase: “to contemplate the face of Christ at the school of Mary” (# 43).