

The Popes and the Rosary

(From John Charles Putzola - Vatican News)

This May, during the month dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Pope Francis has invited the faithful to renew their love for the Most Holy Rosary, a prayer fully immersed in the Gospel. In this article, Vatican News looks at the dedication of various Popes throughout the centuries to this ancient devotion.

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It is necessary to go back to the 15th century to Pope Sixtus IV to find when the Rosary was officially approved by the Catholic Church. The practice probably originated with the Cistercians in the two previous centuries as an aid for illiterate people. The recitation of prayers and psalms in succession, gradually became a series of 150 Hail Marys. Greeting Mary so many times was compared to offering her a wreath of roses, the “Rosary”.

The Rosary Over Two Centuries

Promoted by the Dominicans in the 15th century, the Rosary took the form of a meditation on the life of Christ, while the Our Father and the Hail Marys were recited. In the 16th century, the Dominican theologian, Antonio Ghislieri, who became Pope St Pius V, structured the Rosary around 15 mysteries. On 7 October 1571, he instituted the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary.

John Paul II in 2002 completed the Rosary with five new mysteries: The Luminous Mysteries were added to the Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious mysteries.

Between 1571 and 2002, the Popes never ceased to encourage the recitation of the Rosary. In September 1893, in the Encyclical *Laetitia sanctae*, Leo XIII stated that he was “convinced that the Rosary, if devoutly used, is bound to benefit not only the individual but society at large”, whose evils he denounced at the dawn of the second Industrial Revolution, which was deepening the imbalance between the social classes.

Prayer in Difficult Times

Pius XI foresaw the wave of National Socialism (Nazism) and Stalinism coming. In 1937, two years before the beginning of the Second World War, in his Encyclical *Ingravescentibus malis*, he observed that if the people of the twentieth century, “with its derisive pride, refuse the Rosary, there is an innumerable multitude of holy men of every age and every condition who have always held it dear”. He addresses the faithful, asking them to recite the Rosary at home so that “the enemies of the divine name (...) may be finally bent and led to penance and return to the straight path, trusting to the care and protection of Mary”.

Pius XI added: “The Holy Rosary, besides, not only serves admirably to overcome the enemies of God and Religion, but is also a stimulus and spur to the practice of evangelic virtues which it injects and cultivates in our souls”.

John XXIII Recites the Rosary for New-Borns

On May 4, 1963, while the Church was engaged in the Second Vatican Council, St John XXIII welcomed the first Italian Living Rosary pilgrimage, during which “Good Pope John” met many sick children. “You are dear to us, like the apple of our eyes,” the Supreme Pontiff said to them. “You are dear to us above all because, with the natural liveliness of your years, you are little children who pray,” he told them. He praised their “commitment to recite at least one decade of the Holy Rosary every day,” adding that a day without prayer is like “a sky without sun, a garden without flowers”.

Already in 1961, an attachment to the Apostolic Letter *Il religioso convegno*, noted that St John, in his daily Rosary, prayed for babies born in the past 24 hours, as he recited the third decade of the Joyful mysteries. He offered the “ten Hail Marys” in order to “recommend to Jesus all children born (...) from all human lineages, who, (...) by night, by day, have come into the world on the whole surface of the earth”.

In the Encyclical *Grata recordatio* of 1959, John XXIII encouraged daily recitation of the Rosary, affirming that the Rosary is an excellent means of meditative prayer, which, he said, “We never fail to recite it each day in its entirety”. He invited the faithful to pray the Rosary for the upcoming Ecumenical Council (Vatican II) and for “the renewed vigour of all the Christian virtues” expected of the Church.

In the wake of the Council, Pope St Paul VI dedicated an Apostolic Exhortation entitled *Marialis cultus* to Marian veneration in which he “intended to encourage the restoration, in a dynamic and more informed manner, of the recitation of the Rosary”. He also emphasized “the importance of a further essential element in the Rosary, in addition to the value of the elements of praise and petition, namely the element of contemplation. Without this the Rosary is a body without a soul, and its recitation is in danger of becoming a mechanical repetition of formulas”. St Paul VI goes on “to recommend strongly the recitation of the family Rosary”.

John Paul II's Favourite Prayer

St. John Paul II, who himself was deeply devoted to the Virgin Mary (*Totus Tuus* was his episcopal motto), encouraged the recitation of the Rosary many times during the 27 years of his pontificate. In 2002 he published an Apostolic Letter dedicated specifically to the Rosary, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*. In it, he described the Rosary as a prayer which “in the sobriety of its elements” concentrates “all the *depth of the Gospel message in its entirety*”, and through which “the faithful receive abundant grace, as though from the very hands of the Mother of the Redeemer”. St John Paul II explains that in his youth he always gave an important place to this prayer, which was his favourite. He had already confessed this in 1978 two weeks after his election. It was in this Letter that he proclaimed the year of the Rosary from October 2002 to October 2003, inviting the faithful to “*contemplate with Mary the face of Christ*”.

At the dawn of the third millennium, the Polish Pope stressed “the urgent need to counter a certain crisis of the Rosary, which in the present historical and theological context can risk being wrongly devalued, and therefore no longer taught to the younger generation”. Concerned then by the critical situation of the family “increasingly menaced by forces of disintegration on both the ideological and practical planes”, he proposed the Rosary as “an effective aid to countering the devastating effects of this crisis typical of our age”.

The New Springtime of the Rosary

Benedict XVI, too, wished to revitalize the recitation of the Rosary: “The Holy Rosary is not a pious practice banished to the past, like prayers of other times thought of with nostalgia,” he said at the end of his [prayer](#) at the Roman Basilica of Saint Mary Major on 3 May 2008. “Instead, the Rosary is experiencing a new Springtime”, he said. “Without a doubt, this is one of the most eloquent signs of love that the young generation nourish for Jesus and his Mother, Mary. In the current world, so dispersive, this prayer helps to put Christ at the centre”.

Three years earlier, in a [Message](#) to young Catholics in the Netherlands, he wrote that “The recitation of the Rosary can help you learn the art of prayer with Mary's simplicity and depth”. During an [Audience](#) in May 2006, Benedict XVI invited the faithful “to intensify the pious practice of the Holy Rosary”. He said to young spouses: “I wish you may make use of the recitation of the Rosary in your family as a moment of spiritual growth under the maternal gaze of the Virgin Mary”. Speaking to the sick, he urged them “to turn with trust to Our Lady through this pious exercise, entrusting to her all of your needs”.

Again, Difficult Times

In October 2018, Pope Francis asked all the faithful to pray the Rosary every day, so that the Virgin Mary may help the Church in a period marked by “the revelation of sexual abuse, power and conscience on the part of clerics, consecrated persons and lay people, causing internal divisions”.

Today Francis renews this [invitation](#) on the eve of the Marian month in 2020, in order to contemplate together “the face of Christ with the heart of Mary”. Praying the Rosary “will make us even more united as a spiritual family and will help us overcome this time of trial”, writes the Holy Father as he assures everyone, and especially “those suffering most greatly”, of his prayer.