

Prayer that Purifies the Heart: How the Rosary Forms our Interior Life

“For a Christian, vocal prayer must spring from the heart, so that while the Rosary is said, the mind can enter into contemplation of each one of the mysteries.”

--St. Josemaria Escriva, Furrow, no. 477

In her poem “Why I Love You, O Mary!”, Saint Therese of Lisieux says that the Blessed Virgin teaches her how to weep and rejoice—what to have sorrow for and what to rejoice over. From the time that we are children, we have the sense that we need to be taught what deserves our tears and our joy. We are told by our parents: Don’t laugh at that; Don’t cry over that; Don’t be angry or sad over one thing or another. It is as though they are saying from a mature perspective: Save the emotions for things more worthy. Save them for when you will really need to laugh and really need to cry.

This is even more true of the Christian soul, which must always have Christ at the center of its joys, sorrows, and hopes. St Augustine says in his Confessions, “The pleasures I find in the world should be a cause for tears, and the sorrows of the world should be a cause of rejoicing.” Yet we often allow ourselves to rejoice and to sorrow over the wrong things. The Lord not infrequently corrects the Apostles themselves on this point: “Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Lk 10:20).

Such corrections would naturally lead the Apostles to ask Jesus follow-up questions on deeper matters: Teach us to pray. After having spent some time in His company, after the initial enthusiasm of having been selected by Him had given way to settled discipleship, they began to realize, Maybe we don’t know what we’re doing—how to pray, how to be good disciples. The Lord was glad to teach them. It is always a sign of progress on the way of prayer when we see that we do not know how to pray as we ought.

Because we too frequently think, feel, and act in fallen ways, the Rosary of our Lady can become the great teacher of our spiritual, emotional, and psychological life. St Josemaria reminds us in Furrow #481 “not to forget the example of the Virgin Mary” at the Annunciation because as “Mary is recollected in prayer... She is using all her senses and her faculties to speak to God.” This is exactly what the Rosary invites us to do: Offering each sense and faculty to God in prayer, our inner

life is purified so that we can learn to see as God sees, love as He loves, and to surrender to Him as Mary did.

As we contemplate the mysteries of Christ with the Blessed Virgin we learn where we should find true joy, illumination, sorrow, and glory. And we find that Christ is at the center of it all: His presence is pure joy; His earthly life is the guide for our own; offenses against Him are bitter; and His glory is our hope.

Meditation on the mysteries of our redemption also helps us to avoid the trap that St Paul speaks of in Philippians: “Many ... live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body...” (cf Phil 3:18-21). A powerful summary of the mysteries of the Rosary and the sinful tendencies that they correct in us.

Because we can be so easily upset or excited over trivial things, we have a constant need to be brought back to the sober and joyful truths contained in the Rosary. Our focus needs to be redirected continually, through the repetition of prayers to our heavenly Father and to our Blessed Mother. Some say that the Rosary is too repetitive. The Rosary is repetitive because it needs to be. All prayer needs to be repetitive. We are repetitive creatures: our actions, our thought patterns, the images that return regularly in our imagination, the words we speak—everything about us is repetitive. Our heartbeat and breathing is repetitive.

The goal is to cultivate the right kind of repetition. St Josemaria justifies saying the same things by the logic of love: “But in the Rosary ... we always say the same things! Always the same? And don’t people in love always say the same things to each other ...?” (Holy Rosary, Preface). Ultimately, we want to overcome the “monotony” of our sins by the refreshing use of holy words and actions: “Blessed be that monotony of Hail Marys which purifies the monotony of your sins!” (Furrow, 475).

A saint of the Russian Orthodox Church, St John of Kronstadt (1829-1908), reflects: “It is not by the variety of prayers that the soul is strengthened, but by their constant repetition—thus they are brought into our heart and into our whole life.

Your heart may change and grow cold, but the same words of the same prayers still have the same power with the Lord, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

St John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter on the Rosary of the Virgin Mary, also explains this very well: “We should not be surprised if our relationship with Christ makes use of a method.” Contemplation with Mary on the mysteries of our redemption “immerses us in the mysteries of the Redeemer’s life, [and] it ensures that what he has done ... is profoundly assimilated and shapes our existence.” What shapes our existence should not be, as St Peter says, “the passions [that once shaped you in your] former ignorance,” but the mysteries of Christ (cf. 1 Pt 1:14).

Since the effects of original sin touch every aspect of our lives (thoughts, imagination, emotions), so we must allow grace to touch us all the more, and continually. Our petitions might very well be not only Lord, teach us to pray, but teach us to think, to feel, to see. This is what the Rosary teaches us—the things we cannot teach ourselves, but must learn from the Lord and His Mother, who are only too eager to teach us.

To contemplate the mysteries of the Rosary is to desire that Christ’s mysteries become ours, that they become our very life. Blessed John Henry Newman says that “This is what it [means to belong to Christ]—to be possessed by His presence as our life, our strength, our merit, our hope, our crown; to become in a wonderful way His members, ... mystically reiterating in each of us all the acts of His earthly life, His birth, consecration, fasting, temptation, conflicts, victories, sufferings, agony, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension;—He being all in all,—we, with as little power in ourselves, as little excellence or merit, as the water in Baptism, or the bread and wine in Holy Communion; yet strong in the Lord and in the power of His might” (Parochial and Plain Sermons, vol. 6, 1).

That is a perfect summary of Christian holiness and how contemplation of the Lord’s mysteries helps to bring it about. Isn’t it often our experience that we feel little power in ourselves, little excellence or merit—and yet we keep going through the joys, the sorrows, the glories of our life? Christ is living within us and reproducing the entire scope of His life in my flesh, my mind, and my heart. We

are learning all of this from our Lady: “Mary lives only in Christ and for Christ!” exclaims John Paul II.

Mary is helping us to participate deeply in the life of Jesus, and so helping us to share with Him His “consecration, fasting, temptation, conflicts, victories, sufferings, agony, passion, death, [and] resurrection.” Because as the great apostle of the Rosary, St Louis de Montfort, says: “Our entire perfection consists in being conformed, united, and consecrated to Jesus Christ.”

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