

The Origin of the Rosary

The most holy Virgin in these last times in which we live has given a new efficacy to the recitation of the Rosary to such an extent that there is no problem, no matter how difficult it is, whether temporal or, above all, spiritual, in the personal life of each one of us, of our families, of the families of the world, or of the religious communities, or even of the life of peoples and nations, that cannot be solved by the Rosary. There is no problem, I tell you, no matter how difficult it is, that we cannot resolve by the prayer of the holy Rosary. With the holy Rosary, we will save ourselves; we will sanctify ourselves; we will console our Lord, and obtain the salvation of many souls.¹ –Conversation between Sr. Lucy of Fatima and Fr. Fuentes, Dec. 26, 1957

These statements of Sr. Lucy certainly form the most beautiful apologia that can be made for the Rosary. Certainly, the prayer most effective for touching the heart of God is without a doubt liturgical prayer: the holy Mass and the Divine Office (the breviary recited by priests and monks and nuns). The Rosary has never claimed to replace the liturgy. "But inversely, the liturgy does not eclipse the Rosary, which has its own irreducible character."² Taking up the mysteries of the Lord's life celebrated by the liturgy in the Christmas and Easter cycles, the Rosary considers them in a particular way: "by focusing attention on the place that our Lady holds in each one."²

An Epic: From Marian Salutations to the *Ave Maria*

In history, rarely does a devotion appear suddenly. The divine pedagogy often takes centuries to prepare souls to receive it. The Rosary, one can say, stemmed from the habit of the early Christians of thanking the Virgin Mary for all the benefits she had brought mankind; such are the lines of verse by Sedulius in the fifth century inserted in the liturgy: *Gaudia Matris habens cum virginitatis honore/ Nec primam similem visa est, nee habere sequentem.*⁴ The *Ave Maris Stella* and the *Salve Regina*, among others, sprang from a similar inspiration. All sorts of salutations flourished in the piety of the clergy and the laity, more or less developed according to the inspiration.⁵ This form of piety developed especially during the Middle Ages following the great Marian devotion inspired by St. Bernard.⁶

The contemplation of the Virgin Mary, her privileges, and the favors she bestows on her children was considered a joy exceeding all other joys. It was this joyful piety of the "Hail, Our Lady" that gave the name of the Rosary. In the Middle Ages, the symbol of joy was the rose. To crown one's head with a garland of roses (a chaplet) was a sign of joy. The Virgin Mary was even called "a garden of roses." In medieval Latin, a garden of roses is *rosarium*.⁷

It was felt that at each salutation, the Virgin Mary herself experienced an echo of the joy of the Annunciation. It was not merely a matter of cheering oneself at the thought of our Lady; the purpose was also to rejoice the heart of Mary. The salutations were conceived of as so many spiritual roses

presented to the Virgin Mary by fashioning for her a crown, a chaplet. In return, our Lady would place upon the heads of her children an invincible diadem of roses, of spiritual graces.

How the *Ave Maria* Came About

In this fervor to greet our Lady, it is not surprising that the most popular salutation was taken directly from the Gospel, from the episodes of the Annunciation and the Visitation, which everyone knows: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women" (Lk. 1:28). "Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb" (Lk. 1:42). These two salutations formed the first part of the *Ave Maria*. According to common opinion, they were joined around the 11th century. At the beginning of the 17th century, the second part of the *Ave Maria* was not yet in general usage, and the *Ave* often remained incomplete, comprising only the first part.



The Institution of the Rosary by St. Dominic

In vain would one expect to find in the literature of the 13th and 14th centuries a detailed account of the institution of the Rosary by St. Dominic. That was not the literary genre of the time. These writers were more anxious to edify their readers—which is the most important thing—than to write history. The origins of the Rosary are thus as if covered by a mysterious shadow. Providence wanted it thus, with all due respect to modern rationalists. It is a secret between the Virgin Mary and her servant Dominic. But it would be a great impiety and an astounding lack of common sense and reason to use this shadow to deny to St. Dominic the invention of this prayer as the moderns do: It would be great impiety because the institution of the Rosary by St. Dominic belongs to the most assured tradition, not only of the Dominican Order, but also of the Roman Church. That is the major argument. It would be a lack of good sense and reason, because the documents of the 13th and 14th centuries offer indication of it so numerous and so evident that they suffice to situate the institution of the Rosary in a time neither before nor after St. Dominic. We shall develop these two points about which modern criticism is completely silent.

The Tradition of the Roman Church

First of all, let us cite the Bull *Consueverunt Romani Pontifices* (1569) of St. Pius V. There he very clearly writes that St. Dominic invented and then propagated in the entire holy Roman Church a mode of prayer, called the Rosary or Psalter of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which consists in honoring the Blessed Virgin by the recitation of 150 *Ave Marias*, in conformity with the number of David's psalms, adding to each decade of *Aves* the Lord's Prayer and the meditation of the mysteries of the life of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Bull *Monet Apostolus* (1573), which instituted the solemnity of the holy Rosary, Pope Gregory XIII recalls that St. Dominic in order to deflect God's wrath and obtain the help of the Blessed Virgin, instituted this practice so pious that it is called the Rosary or Mary's Psalter.

In 1724, contradictors having called into question the attribution of the Rosary to St. Dominic, Benedict XIII asked the Congregation for Rites to study the question. The promoter of the faith, Prospero Lambertini, the future Benedict XIV, establishing himself on the firm ground of Roman tradition, annihilated the objections. On March 26, 1726, Benedict XIII made obligatory the lessons of the Roman breviary for the Matins of the Feast of October 7th, teaching that

Mary recommended to St. Dominic the preaching of the Rosary to the people, giving him to understand that this prayer would be an exceptionally efficacious succor against heresies and vices.⁸

Benedict XIV, having learned of objections to the attribution of the Rosary to St. Dominic, declared that the Roman tradition was founded on the most solid bases—*validissimo fundamento*—and he responded to the adversaries:

You ask us if St. Dominic instituted the Rosary. You declare that you are perplexed and full of doubts about this matter. But then what do you make of so many oracles of the Sovereign Pontiffs, of Leo X, of Pius V of Gregory XIII, of Sixtus V, of clement VIII, of Alexander VII, of Innocent XI, of Clement XI, of Innocent XIII, of Benedict XIII, and of still others, all unanimous in attributing to St. Dominic the institution of the Rosary?⁹

The Evidence of 13th and 14th Century Documents

The contemporary documents give evidence of the appearance of a new custom. We have seen in the early Marian salutations the remote origin of the Rosary. Nevertheless, it is easy to demonstrate that the custom of reciting a specific number of *Ave Marias* was not practiced; in a word, it did not constitute an institution before St. Dominic's epoch simply because no document and no

tradition make mention of it. But it is astonishing—and convincing—to observe that from St. Dominic's time, the signs of this devotion, which has been adopted by all, from the cultivated classes to the humble folk, from the cloister to the world, abound in the archives of the time.

The number of 50 and of 150 *Ave Marias*, appears in the archives in a significant way.

The documents are numerous to prove that, in the convents and monasteries of the Dominican Order, from the 13th century, they recited groups of *Ave Marias*, whether 50 or 150 or 1000....Who gave this devotion to the Dominican friars and nuns of the 13th and 14th centuries? Would it not be the founder of the Order, Dominic de Guzman? ¹⁰

Let us cite this beautiful testimony about King St. Louis:

Every evening the king would kneel fifty times, each time rising and then rekneeling, and each time he knelt he would slowly recite an *Ave Maria*. ¹¹

The usage of beads invaded every rank of society at that time also. In Paris, there were no fewer than three companies making this item. ¹² Another interesting and revealing fact concerns Romee de Livia, a direct disciple of St. Dominic. In the ancient chronicles we read that the Blessed Romee, apparently a very lettered clerk because he was successively prior of the convent at Lyons, then provincial of Provence, and finally prior of Bourges, died while squeezing tightly in his hands the knotted cord on which he counted his *Ave Marias*, meditating and instructing the friars in this devotion to the holy Virgin and the Child Jesus. ¹³

This fact shows that, from the beginning, the first preachers proved to be very zealous in spreading the devotion of St. Dominic to the Rosary. The Dominicans, dispersed to the four corners of Christendom, were to have a decisive influence in the expansion of the Rosary and its implantation in every class of society. The Reverend Father Mortier, O. P., eminent historian of the Dominican Order wrote:

The Order founded by St. Dominic developed from its beginning, in an extraordinary way, the practical devotion to the *Ave Maria*. This is incontestable. ¹⁴

But the Rosary was not only a new and beautiful custom honoring our Lady by the repetition of the angelic salutation. From St. Dominic's time, the Rosary appeared as a weapon against the Church's enemies.

An historical document shows St. Dominic victoriously employing this prayer in a famous battle against heretics. ¹⁵ It is about the first victory of the Rosary, gained at Muret, near Toulouse, on the 12th of September in 1213 by St. Dominic.

Eight hundred Catholic knights, summoned by Pope Innocent III, found themselves confronted by roughly 34,000 enemy troops (the Cathars were reinforced by troops from Spain led by Peter II of Aragon). Dominic with the clergy and the people entered the church at Muret, and he made them pray one Rosary after the other. Five months after the event, a notary of Languedoc wrote:

*Dominicus afferre
Dum incipit tarn humilis
Dominicus coronas confene
Statim apparet agilis.*¹⁶

The notary observes the humility of Dominic, who does not hesitate to pray the Rosary (a very humble prayer, a prayer of the people); and he remarks his agility at completing the crowns, that is to say, offering them one after the other.¹⁷ The victory of the Catholic knights, led by Simon de Montfort was brilliant and miraculous.¹⁸ The chronicles relate that the enemies of religion fell upon each other as the trees of a forest under the axes of an army of lumberjacks.

If the crusade of which the Battle of Muret was one of the most glorious episodes restored political peace, it was especially the preaching of the Rosary which converted and definitively pacified the region. Here we come to an essential point. Before being a praise to Mary, before being a providential arm for defending Christendom, the Rosary was above all for St. Dominic a method of preaching.

At our Lady's recommendation,²⁰ St. Dominic preached the mysteries of the faith, and at the same time made his audiences pray *Paters* and *Aves*. He acted this way because speech, however brilliant, does not suffice to convert. Only God's grace can break the soul's secret resistances, and this grace can only be obtained by prayer. It is the prayer of the apostle first of all, and St. Dominic would spend his nights in prayer. But, says St. Thomas, "it happens that prayers made for another are not answered... because of an obstacle placed by the one for whom one prays." However, if the sinner himself begins to pray, by praying he removes the obstacle to his conversion. There are, indeed "four conditions the fulfilling of which assure that one obtain what he asks: it is necessary to ask for what is necessary for one's eternal salvation, and do it with piety and perseverance." It is thus the work of an apostle particularly inspired and supernatural to ally his preaching with the prayer of the one being instructed.²³

This method was particularly appropriate for destroying the Cathar heresy. For the Cathars, the physical world is the work of the Evil One, the devil. Therefore God could not have assumed a human body in the womb of a Virgin and died upon a cross to save us. They thus denied the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Redemption, blaspheming against the Blessed Virgin, and they only acknowledged one prayer, the Our Father, to which they had a superstitious attachment. If the absence of Catholic preaching had favored the implantation of Catharism, the popular preaching of the mysteries of the Rosary joined to the praying of the *Pater* and the *Ave* was the radical remedy to this scourge. A multitude of friars crisscrossed the land, joining to their words the example of a life of

poverty. During the 13th century, there were no fewer than 118 convents of religious mendicants (Dominicans, Franciscans, Carmelites, Augustinians, Sachets²⁴ founded in Languedoc. Between 1216 and 1295, one counts 1,100 Dominicans who lived in the region.²⁵

This union of vocal prayer with the meditation of the mysteries of Christ and our Lady influenced pious practice, and so quickly that in 1236, for example, it was already mentioned in the Psalter placed in the hands of the Beguines of Gand.²⁶ Again, nothing similar is found before St. Dominic.

To the number of documents we have been commenting on we would like to add one more of astonishing precision in which, in 1221, the name of the Rosary is linked to St. Dominic during his lifetime. In it are indicated the conditions of a perfectly constituted confraternity. This document is a will conserved in the archives of St. James College at Palencia, in Spain. One Antonin Sers makes incumbent the carrying out of his intentions on "the honorable lord Dom Peter Gonzales Tellme, rector of the Nicolates, and first administrator of the confraternity founded in honor of the holy Rosary, with the consent of the Lord Bishop Telle, by the respectable Dominic de Guzman, confraternity," says the testator, "to which I belong." He adds: "I desire that the members be gathered to pray for me, and in compensation, as well as to defray the cost of the candles of the confraternity which they will carry in their hands, that they receive 38 maravedis and 3 measures of wheat."

"What could be clearer?" exclaims Mamachi,²⁶ not only as to the name, but as to the confraternity of the Rosary, and that from the time of St. Dominic, more than two centuries before Alain de la Roche. And this will and testament of Antonin Sers is drawn from authentic archives—*monumenta ex archivis authenticis extracta*; it is clearly dated—*notis chronologicis distincta*; it is offered with the authority of irrecusable *witnesses-et fide dignis testimoniis roborata*, that is to say, on the affirmation of notaries *public-publicanorum scribarum*, of the auditor of the apostolic nunciature and of counselors of the crown. If you cannot defer to such authorities, whom can you believe?²⁸

Among the documents in evidence of the volume published in the *Annales Ordinis Praedicatorum*, the illustrious scholar is careful to publish, with the will of Antonin Sers, all the attestations in favor of this act delivered, at the Dominicans' request, by Dom Francisco Antonino de Angulo, of the Council of His Catholic Majesty, his secretary and first official of the secretariat of the Chamber and of the Royal Patronage.²⁹

How is it possible not to ascribe to St. Dominic the institution of the Rosary when the Sovereign Pontiffs attribute it to him with unbroken unanimity, and when documents abound to prove the appearance of the devotion at the time of the saint and in the order he founded?

As to the manner in which the Rosary was given to this great saint, was it by the ordinary ways of grace, that is, by a simple inspiration? Or was it rather under the form of a heavenly vision of which the saint kept the secret and during which the Virgin Mary would have instructed and consoled her

disciple? The last solution cannot be rejected. It must even have our favor, because it is from a venerable tradition, too favored by the Church and too ingrained in the memory of the faithful to be just a pious legend.

Where did the revelation take place? The citizens of Toulouse place it in the forest of Bouconne, not far from their city, where St. Dominic founded his first convent.³⁰ The Church of Puy says that it was in its cathedral.³¹ Fr. Petitot speaks of a tradition situating the event in the sanctuary of Prouille in Languedoc, at the foot of the village of Fanjeaux, the place where St. Dominic founded the contemplative Dominican nuns, and whence he sent forth his first preaching friars into all of Europe on August 15, 1217.³²

1. Bro. Michael of the Blessed Trinity, *The Whole Truth About Fatima*, vol. 3 (Buffalo, NY: Immaculate Heart Publications, 1990).

2. Fr. Roger Calmel, O. P., "Dignite du Rosaire," *Itinéraires*, April 1962, p. 142.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 142-143.

4. Having both the joy of motherhood and the honor of virginity. No one else has been seen to possess a like privilege, neither before her nor after.

5. Let us note St. Hermann-Joseph (1161-1241), a German Premonstratensian and priest, who wrote in honor of our Lady a long prayer of 80 stanzas which are salutations to the Madonna. He asks her to rejoice for all the gifts she has received and for all that she is. For him, she is "the Rose of love." (Fr. Joseph Andre, *Le chapelain de Notre-Dame*, [Abbaye St-Michel de Frigolet, Tarascon-sur-Rhone, 1955], pp. 128-137.)

6. On this topic of the relation between joy, the rose, and the rosary, see the article "Rosaire," by Fr. Gorce, O. P., in the *Dictionnaire de theologie catholique*.

7. *A qua [Maria] cum monitus esset ut Rosarium populis praedicaret, velut singulare adversus haereses et vitia praesidium.*

8. Cited by Fr. Antonin Danzas, O. P., in his work *Etudes sur les temps primitifs de l'Ordre de Saint-Dominique* (Paris: Oudin Freres, 1877), vol. 4, p. 59.

9. Fr. Mortier, O. P., *Histoire abregee de l'Ordre dominicain en France* (Tours: Mame, 1920), vol. 4, p. 8.

10. Danzas, *Etudes*, p. 402.

11. Mentioned by Fr. Danzas, *ibid.*, p.406.

12. Bernard Gui, cited by Fr. Petitot, O. P., *Vie de saint Dominique* (Saint-Maximin: Editions de la Vie Spirituelle, 1925), p.185. This book was republished in 1996 under the title *Dominique Guzman, un saint pour le XXIe siecle*. Bernard Gui, of whom Fr. Petitot speaks, is one of the first and most conscientious Dominican historians. He wrote at the beginning of the 14th century.

13. *Ibid.*, p.8.

14. Fr. Petitot mentions it in his work *Vie de saint Dominique* in chapter 9, p. 187. The fact is equally reported by Fr. Danzas on p.449 in the work cited.

15. Dominic brings roses [to our Lady], he seems so humble when he begins [to pray]; Dominic makes crowns, he seems so agile [at praying].

16. Petitot, *We*, pp. 186-87.

17. The Catholics suffered only 8 deaths, and their enemies, 10,000, among whom was the King of Aragon himself.

18. An excellent book on this subject is unquestionably the work by Dominic Paladilhe, *Simon de Montfort et le drame cathare* (Paris: Librairie Aca-demique Perrin, 1988). Delving into the best sources, the author shows us the true face of Simon de Montfort, one of the fairest examples of Christian knighthood at the Church's service.

19. See Matins for October 7th in the Roman breviary.

20. *Summa Theologica*, III, Q. 83, Art. 7.

21. *Ibid*, II II, Q. 83, Art. 15, *ad 2 in fine*. In article 16, St. Thomas adds: "...God hears the sinner's prayer if it proceed from a good natural desire, not out of justice, because the sinner does not merit to be heard, but out of pure mercy, provided however he fulfill the four conditions given above."

22. It is interesting to note that St. Francis Xavier, the great apostle of Asia, was to use a similar method. His popular catechism lessons were exercises in prayer as much as in doctrine: "I said the *Credo* article by article....! told them that being a Christian is just simply believing firmly, without hesitation, these twelve points... .Then I said the *Pater Noster* and the *Ave Maria*... .We recited twelve *Paters* and twelve *Aves* in honor of the twelve articles of the Faith." (A. Brou, *Saint Francois Xavier* [Paris: Beauchesne, 1912], pp.204-5).

23. Mendicant order founded by a Franciscan c. 1240.

24. These facts are detailed in the work of Fr. Vicaire, O. P., *Les Precheurs et la vie religieuse des pays d'Oc au XIHe siecle* (Toulouse: Privat, 1998), in the chapter entitled *L'action de l' enseignement et de la predication des Mendiants vis-a-vis des cathares*, especially pp.374, 375.

25. Mentioned by Fr. Danzas, O. P., *Etudes*, p.433.

26. Dominican, deceased in 1792. He was the secretary of the Congregation of the Index and Master of the Holy Palace under Pope Pius VI. "The works of Fr. Mamachi suppose a very great erudition" (*Dictionnaire de theologie catholique*, vol. 9, col. 1807).

27. *Annales Ord. Praed.*, I, 324.

28. What we report here has been taken from the book by Fr. Antonin Danzas, O. P., *Etudes sur les temps primitifs de l'ordre de saint Dominique*, vol. 4 *Blessed Jourdain de Saxe*, pp.428-29.

29. This is the account reported by St. Louis-Marie Grignion de Monfort in *Le secret admirable du Tres Saint Rosaire*.

30. Proper of the breviary of Puy, on the day of the Dedication of the cathedral (July 11). Moreover, all the chroniclers and historians of the Velay, especially in the 17th century, mention the passage of St. Dominic and his apparition from the Blessed Virgin about the Rosary.

31. Petitot, *Vie de Saint Dominique*, p. 189. The several traditions relating apparitions of our Lady to St. Dominic in different places in order to give him the Rosary are not contradictory. It is known that the Blessed Virgin appeared numerous times to St. Dominic during his lifetime. Our Lady, who had the habit of speaking to St. Dominic, might well have spoken to him about the Rosary several times, as this devotion was to be of such importance in the Church's history.

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