

# MYSTERIES IN MY HANDS



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*Young People, Life, and the Rosary*

*Maureen P. Provencher*

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## **Contributing Authors:**

Andrew Adams  
Matthew Adams  
Robin Adams  
Katie Barnett  
Hannah (Corey) Beaver  
John P. Campbell  
Justine Noel Coyne  
Ashton D. Cozzo  
Virginia Deaton  
Carolyn Della Pietra  
Liza Desranleau  
Cristina Marie Garcia del Busto  
Christopher Gosselin  
Katelyn Gurley  
Carla Anne Hernandez  
Margaret Jumonville  
Amanda Konrad  
Faye LaRochelle  
Joan LaRochelle  
Kathleen Massey  
Carolyn Phippen  
Emily Ryan  
Elysha Schickel

I dedicate this book to the memory of my grandmother, my Mémère, Marie-Jeanne Custeau McAuliffe, a woman of great strength, faith, and witness. Thank you, Mé, for having given me a glimpse of holiness through the suffering and joy of such an ordinary life as your own.





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## PREFACE

My earliest memories of the rosary are those attached to my maternal grandmother. When I am quiet, I can still hear the whispers of such familiar words, powerful words of heartfelt prayer that became the background music of my childhood: *“Je vous salue Marie, pleine de grace, le Seigneur est avec vous . . .”* These were the words Mémère prayed every day of her life, three times a day, in joyful succession and in accompaniment to her daily routine. She usually prayed the first rosary of the day while folding laundry, the second during the evening hours, long after dinner, and the third at bedtime—the last, most important task of her day. Whenever I spent an overnight with her, these were the words that lulled me to sleep. They were words of comfort and peace, and they are, now, the words that continue to connect me with my grandmother, as her human life has ended. For her, not only was the rosary her prayer, it was the rhythm of her life.

I used to think, “Why pray to Mary when one can ‘go direct’ to Jesus,” but I remembered my grandmother’s relationship with Mary and devotion to her. I figured there must be something to a relationship with Mary because it was of such importance and great value to Mémère. Because I trusted her wholeheartedly, I decided to follow her lead. Eventually I made an attempt at beginning such a relationship, not knowing quite how to approach the mother of God! However, with time and patience, I have come to connect with this woman in a very real way, through her youthfulness and her wisdom and as a mother—so eager to share her joy, her Jesus, with me.

To Mary, a mere teenager, was revealed a long-awaited promise: the coming of the Messiah to whom she would give birth—a young woman to give flesh to the divine! It has always amazed me how God has revealed so much to the young and has depended so greatly on them throughout all salvation history. If God called the young then, I have no doubt that God is calling the young now, in our present age.

Mary can show us how best to trust and surrender to a God who calls us into relationship, to say “Yes!” with all that we are—with all our wonderfulness and all our sinfulness.

For me Mary has more relevance than ever before. It is she who, through this ancient of prayers, the rosary, leads us to a more intimate friendship with her son, the one we so desperately long to reach out for and find in our prayer. She accomplishes this through an invitation to journey with her through the mysteries of the rosary—her own memories of her son’s life. It is this life in which we are led to witness and participate; a life that is all so intricately intertwined with her own, and likewise with ours if we desire it. It is Mary who witnesses to us, through her life, how to live as a disciple of the Lord.

As we journey together through the beginnings of the rosary and all the elements of this ageless prayer, my desire for you is to come to know Mary as real, not as one who is distant and intangible but as one who is teacher and mother of us all. I pray that I may be like my grandmother in passing on the faith and in leading you to a deeper understanding and experience of the rosary and a relationship with Jesus and his mother, our mother.

Let us pray for the intercession of Mary, through this most sacred and ordinary of prayers, to unite us to the one rhythm of all our lives, the fruit of her womb, Jesus.



## CHAPTER 1

# *Introduction to the Rosary*

### **What Is the Rosary?**

The rosary is a method, an instrument, of prayer. It was given to us by God through the Church to help us to pray. (M. Basil Pennington, *Praying by Hand*, page 33)

For many of us, when we first consider the rosary, our attention is automatically drawn to the repetitious hum of Hail Marys. For some it is an inviting, peaceful rhythm; but if you're anything like I was in my teens, I found it boring and monotonous, and I didn't understand why we needed to pray to Mary when we could go directly to Jesus.

Fortunately, in my pursuit to understand this prayer better, I've come to appreciate and even long for the repetitious rhythm. I know that is quite a change. My hope is that as we delve into this prayer together, you, too, will come to have a better understanding of the rosary—all its prayers, its methods, its rhythm, and the blessings that flow from it. What I've come to learn is that the rosary is so much more than what we may perceive it to be when we first look at it. So without further delay, let's begin with the rosary's origins and see why this prayer continues to be so popular. There's got to be a good reason for it!

### **Where Does It Come From?**

There really isn't one point of origin for the rosary. Instead, this prayer has evolved over many centuries into what it is today. The rosary

became an important part of our tradition for many reasons. We'll take a look at some of the influences that helped this prayer grow in popularity.

## **Saint Dominic**

The story of the rosary begins with a missionary priest named Dominic, who later was named a saint. Dominic founded an order of preachers known as the Dominicans. The Dominicans are responsible for spreading the prayer of the rosary throughout the world. They adopted many of the elements of monastic life; however, rather than focusing on manual labor, their ministry was preaching the word of God. Today many parishes invite Dominican preachers to lead parish mission retreats and such.

Around the year 1221, it is believed that the Blessed Virgin appeared to Dominic in a dream, giving him the rosary as a powerful tool to convert the Albigenses in the region of Toulouse, France. The Albigenses followed the teachings of the Cathari, a people who did not believe that Jesus was a real man born of a real woman. They believed only in his divinity. Dominic was having a tough time trying to convert the Albigenses, and it seemed like a hopeless cause. That's when Mary stepped in. Dominic spent three days fasting and in prayer, the only thing left for him to do. Mary appeared to him and told him that an intellectual approach would not work in trying to convert the Albigenses, but that a practical approach would. She presented this early form of the rosary to the people as a remedy for sickness, because many of the people suffered from severe illnesses. It caught on, and as the people prayed Mary's prayer and heard of Dominic's apparition of the Virgin, more and more were converted to Catholicism.

## **Monastic Roots**

The rosary is rooted in the liturgical prayer of the Church. In the medieval period, the desire was to give the laity (members of the Church who are not ordained) a form of common prayer. The monks focused on the Psalter (reciting the 150 psalms of the Old Testament). Because common folk could not read or afford a psalter, they recited

the Lord's Prayer 150 times throughout the day. This became known as the "poor man's breviary." Eventually the laity were given beads, specifically to help them count their prayers.

As time went on, the monks adapted the angel Gabriel's greeting in Luke 1:28 to, "Hail, Mary, full of grace," adding this refrain to complete their prayer. Devotion to Mary grew rapidly, and some of the laity of the time replaced the Lord's Prayer with the Hail Mary, praying 150 of them on their beads.

## The Hail Mary

Elizabeth's greeting to Mary at the Visitation (see Luke 1:42) was added to the monks' adaptation of the angel Gabriel's greeting, and the recitation of these two greetings became a great prayer of praise to God, in praise of Christ—the very purpose of both greetings. It wasn't until the thirteenth century that the name *Jesus* was added to complete it. By the fifteenth century, the 150 Hail Marys were organized into sets of ten, called decades, and included the Lord's Prayer at the beginning of each set.

## The Mysteries

The mysteries are glimpses into the life of Christ and were originally divided into three sets, or types: the joyful (relating to the events surrounding Jesus's birth), the sorrowful (relating to Jesus's Passion and death), and the glorious (relating to Resurrection, not only for Jesus but for his mother as well). In 2002 Pope John Paul II added a new set of mysteries, which come directly from the Scriptures and are related to Jesus's public ministry, spanning the time between his baptism in the Jordan River and his Transfiguration. This new set, called the luminous mysteries, or mysteries of light, fill the gap between Jesus's childhood and his Passion.

## How We Pray the Rosary

When I was growing up, one of my favorite things to do was to pull out the family pictures and bring back the memories, into the mo-

ment. I have great memories of my brother, Brian, and me pulling open the file cabinet drawers that contained all our pictures through the years and sprawling them out all over our parents' king-sized bed. Those pictures were priceless—some would make us burst into outright belly laughs, and, no matter how hard we would try to fight it, we'd never be able to get past a few others without tear-filled eyes, welled up by the pain still deep within from missing someone whose life affected us. The pictures helped us, then and now, to remember the times of joy in our lives, the times of growth, pain, and triumphant glory.

Jesus's life was no different. Although cameras were far from being invented when Jesus was growing up, the people of his time used storytelling and song to remember, and they had the Scriptures, just as we do today. The "pictures" of the rosary tell us Jesus's story in what we call the mysteries.

## **The Joyful Mysteries**

The first of the four sets, or types, of mysteries is the joyful mysteries. This set of five mysteries focuses on Jesus's life from conception, when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary announcing that she was to be the mother of God, to the age of twelve, when Mary and Joseph had been in Jerusalem for the festival of Passover and discovered, after a full day's travel, that Jesus was not with them. Even Jesus began to show some independence in his adolescence! The joyful mysteries focus on the joy of the Incarnation—God becoming human, becoming one of us.

## **The Luminous Mysteries (The Mysteries of Light)**

The luminous mysteries, or mysteries of light, follow. This set of mysteries was added by Pope John Paul II in October 2002. The reason for the addition is that it completes the circle of Jesus's life, giving us a glimpse of the years between his baptism and his Passion. Those years are referred to as the years of Jesus's public ministry—when the person of Jesus is revealed as the Christ, the anointed one. This set, then, gives us the pictures of Jesus's life from his baptism in the Jordan River (see Matthew 3:16–17), the beginning of his public

ministry, to his Transfiguration on a mountaintop with Peter, John, and James. The luminous mysteries focus on the light that Jesus brings into the world and into the hearts of people.

## **The Sorrowful Mysteries**

The sorrowful mysteries reveal to us the suffering Jesus and Mary endured during his Passion and death. They begin with the agony in the garden, where Jesus prays with the desire and willingness to unite his own will to the will of God the Father, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want” (Mark 14:36). The set concludes with the Crucifixion and death of Jesus. The sorrowful mysteries give us a glimpse into the Passion of Jesus and of his mother, who shared in his suffering.

## **The Glorious Mysteries**

Finally, the glorious mysteries tell us the story of Jesus’s Resurrection through to the crowning of Mary as queen of heaven. As we know, the story does not end with Jesus on the cross or in the tomb; the story ends with a life renewed—Resurrection! These mysteries reveal to us Jesus’s glory, a glory we will all share in one day, yet one in which Mary already shares, as seen in the last two mysteries of this set: her Assumption into heaven and her crowning as queen of heaven.

The glorious mysteries reveal the glory of the Resurrection and of life everlasting through both Jesus and Mary, which has been won for all humankind through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

## **Praying the Rosary**

Praying the rosary is like sitting on the living room couch with Mary and opening up the family album. There is no one way to pray the rosary. We can pray it literally (simply praying the beads), meditatively (reflecting on the mysteries and the word of God in the Scriptures attributed to each mystery), or contemplatively (being, or resting, in



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### **Endnotes Cited in Quotations from *Rosarium Virginis Mariae***

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2. *I Quindici Sabati del Santissimo Rosario*, 27th ed., Pompei, 1916, 27.