

Maronite Monks of Adoration

Most Holy Trinity Monastery
✦ Petersham MA 01366-9725

At the conclusion of the *Great Jubilee Year of 2000*, Pope John Paul II offered us this exhortation: “We now need to profit from the grace received, by putting it into practice in resolutions and guidelines for action. . . .” We must “start afresh from Christ,” he said.

Now we find ourselves near the close of the *Year of the Rosary*. Our Holy Father’s exhortation can be fairly restated as we approach the end of this special year: “We now need to profit from the grace received by putting it into practice in resolutions and guidelines for action We must “start afresh” [with the Rosary]. When the *Year of the Rosary* concludes this month, that ought not mean for anyone, “Now I’m done with focusing on the Rosary.” No! John Paul’s intention for all of us is that this garland of prayer must take on a **new life** within the whole Church. We must march forth as warriors—Rosary in hand—into this increasingly Godless society, which is marching forth at us in an attempt to blanket human societies in darkness. This must be our attitude at the close of the *Year of the Rosary*: “We are just **beginning** to pray the Rosary of the Virgin Mary!”

For this reason, every few months we will add another installment to this first installment of “Starting Afresh with the Rosary.” And we are starting small, we are beginning at the beginning, with secondary points, it is true, but which, nonetheless, will serve their purpose:

Starting Afresh with the Rosary

October
2003

The Small Beginning

A. Terms

(the) “Beads”/(pair of) “Beads.”

In the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer and other contemporaries of his, this term is found describing the Rosary. It comes from the Middle English word *bede*, meaning “prayer.” So saying “ye bedes” originally meant saying “the prayers”, in this case, the prayers of the Rosary, as it existed in Chaucer’s time (14th c.)

“**Chaplet.**” In earlier forms of the Rosary, it simply referred to 50 continuous Hail Marys. In modern times, the word “chaplet” refers to what we would call “5 decades of the Rosary” as we know it today. “Chaplet” comes to us from the Latin *cappa*, via the French *chapelet*, and refers to a garland or wreath worn on the head.

“**Crown.**” In the 1100s, when both the Hail Mary and the Rosary existed in their earlier forms, the faithful would at times approach a statue of the Virgin, genuflect or bow, and greet her with the early form of the *Ave*, placing a wreath of flowers, often roses, on the head of the statue. The faithful loved to repeat these greetings of the Angelic Salutation and genuflections numerous times. The term derives from the Latin word, *corona*, meaning crown. We see a relation, then, between “crown” and “chaplet.”

“**Psalter.**” Whereas the term “chaplet” refers to 50 repetitions of the Hail Mary, a “Psalter” refers to 150 repetitions of this prayer. The “Psalter” or biblical book of Psalms contains 150 psalms. The psalms were the prayer of monks, especially, so a “Psalter of (150) *Aves*” allowed the devout faithful to “be like those professionals of God,” the monks. People would say “chaplets” of 50, groups of 100 or “psalters” of 150 Hail Marys as a devotion—by the early 1100s.

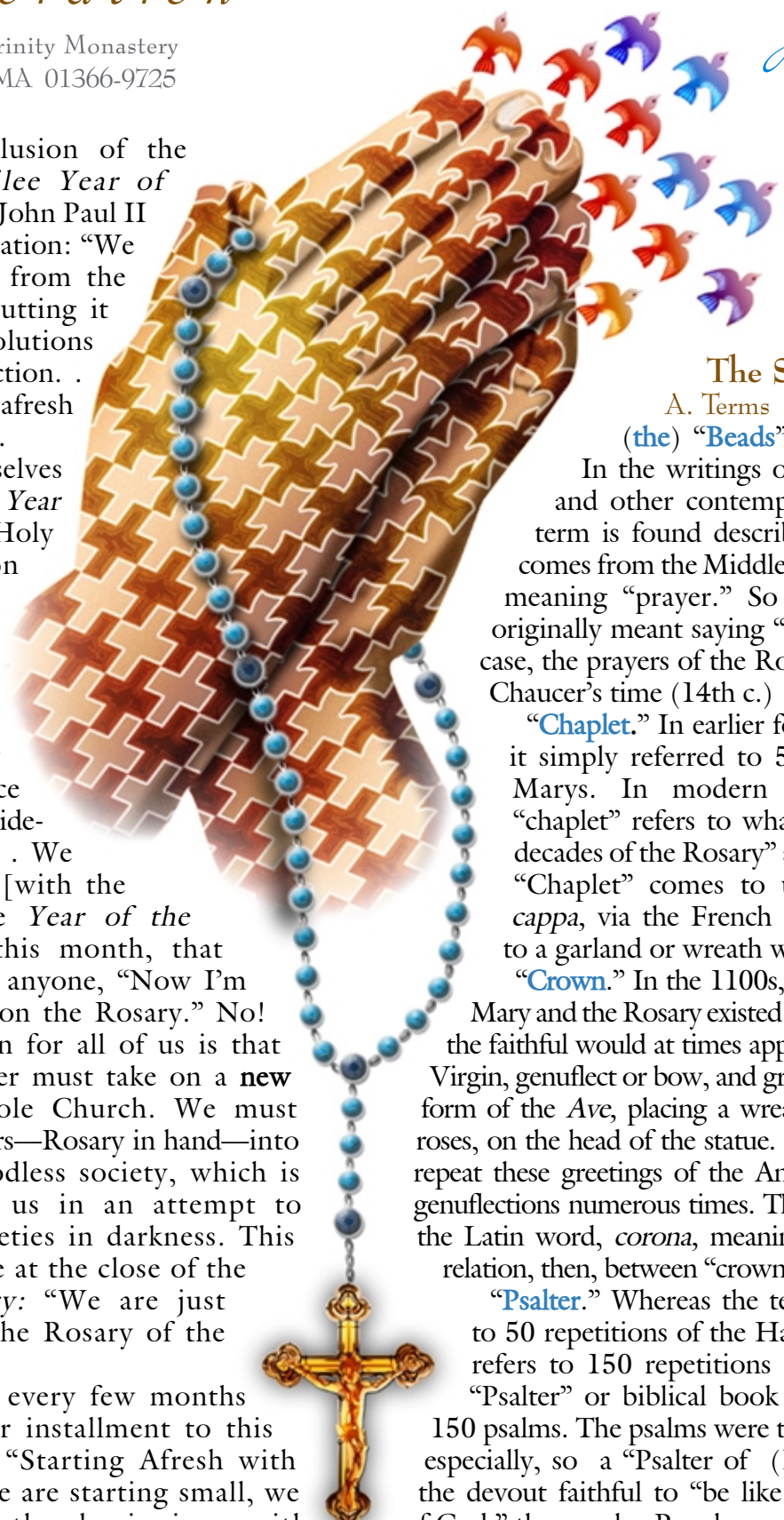


Illustration:
Maronite Monks

“**Rosary**.” This word comes from the Latin term, *Rosarium*, meaning rose garden. It could also signify a garland or bouquet of roses. There is obviously a connection between this term and “crown” described above.

In the recent past, “Rosary” meant the entire 15 decades of the pious exercise, while “chaplet” referred to meditation over 5 decades only. But as we all know, “Rosary” is almost always now used of the prayer of 5 decades.

The word “rosary” is often applied loosely by people of the western world for any string of prayer beads. Yet, these other types of prayer cords have their own names with their own significance, be it in Buddhist, Muslim, or Orthodox Christian traditions. For our purposes then, “Rosary” means exclusively the Marian Rosary of western Catholic tradition and custom.

B. Summary History

I. The Rosary, as we know and pray it today, took form but gradually.

As we said above, prayer—counters are nothing new to human spiritual and ascetical practice, and were not surprisingly developed by early Christians, especially by the desert—dwelling ascetics about the Holy Land: knotted cords . . . little piles of pebbles As monasticism spread into Europe, there gradually developed the practice of providing for illiterate monks to pray the Our Father 50 to 150 times. The monks who could read prayed the 150 Psalms together as their mainstay of prayer. This system allowed the unlettered monks to fulfill a like obligation in prayer. Obviously, counting on the fingers would be quite awkward on a daily basis. Thus, the prayer—counters made their praying easier.

This practice spread to the laity, who would vary the number of Our Fathers prayed. It developed to such an extent that there were entire guilds dedicated solely to making “Paternosters,” i.e. bead strings on which the people would devotedly pray whole series of Our Fathers. London’s “Paternoster Row” stood as a witness to a former gathering—place of such guild—fellows. Lady Godiva of Coventry (1075) left as a bequest, to a favorite statue of Our Lady, her strung jewels, which she used to number her prayers. Moreover, this practice was found throughout Europe.

Something similar happened in the case of the Hail Mary. The salutation, “Hail [Mary], full of grace the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women” became a devotional practice in monastic circles, as an outgrowth of the Liturgy of the Hours, in the latter 1000s; and by the mid—1100s it had become a cherished devotion among the laity, also. This early form of the Hail Mary would be repeated by devotees in

“chaplets” of 50, groups of 100 or “psalters” of 150 times. Later that same century, the words “and blessed is the fruit of thy womb” were frequently added to it. The name of Jesus was added to this form of the Hail Mary, possibly by Pope Urban IV in 1261. Around 1405, the Carthusian Henry Kalkar divided the 150 Hail Mary’s into “decades” by inserting 15 Our Fathers. His fellow Carthusian, Dominic of Prussia, in 1409 collected brief points of meditation to be used for each Hail Mary. These he compiled from *Lives* of Jesus and Mary then in circulation. He also joined to the *Aves*, after the name of Jesus, a short verse linking it to a certain episode in the life of Jesus and Mary. Dominic spread this form of the Rosary widely in the Carthusians and to the laity as well, and it is still used today. He seems to be the originator of meditation in the Rosary. But this meant that now there were 150 episodes to recall when praying the “Psalter of the Virgin Mary!” As a result, in some places the Rosary needed to be a “book-prayer” and could never really become popular unless the number of points lessened. And lessened they were.

In 1470, Dominican father Alan de Rupe began preaching and greatly popularizing the Rosary among the faithful. He devised a very general meditation on the joys, the sorrows and glories of Jesus and Mary. From this time, the Dominican order takes up the task of promoting the Rosary. In 1480, the idea of “one theme to one decade” appeared in a Rosary book by another Dominican priest. In 1483, another Rosary book published by the Dominicans followed suit, establishing 15 themes for the Psalter of 15 decades, all but the last two corresponding to the 15 mysteries we know (*prior to the Luminous Mysteries!*): The 14th was the Assumption-Coronation; the 15th was the Last Judgement. Fr. Alberto da Castello, yet another Dominican priest, was the first to apply the term “mystery” to the meditation—themes of the Holy Rosary. This was in 1521.

In spite of all this apparent ordering process, the number and topics of the “mysteries” to be used, as well as the final form of the Hail Mary remained unfixed until 1569. In this year, Pope St. Pius V (another Dominican!) published the final form of the Holy Rosary in its essentials.

II. The Rosary developed under the guiding grace of God and Mary, the Mother of the Church.

Of the two protagonists in the formation of the Holy Rosary—God and Man—the more significant role belongs to the Holy Spirit, of course. The human players involved, the “who?”s and the “how?”s relating to its entrance into Church history, are of secondary importance, involving no point of Church doctrine.

What is primary is that its gradual appearance is seen as the work of the Holy Spirit; that the Rosary is always proposed by the Church as a prayer possessed of a singular power (beneath the Church's official Liturgy, of course). This is what is primary.

And we cannot doubt that the Holy Spirit, in His loving "labor" of creating this devotion in the Church, was "assisted" by the Holy Virgin His Spouse, and Mother of the Church. At every step of the way during the roughly—450 years of its formation, the Lady of the Rosary was surely present. Reason? Consider these facts: the fruit of these "four-plus" centuries was the Rosary that we know now, what St. Bernadette knew, what Blessed Jacinta and Francisco of Fatima knew. What did Bernadette see?

The Immaculate Conception holding the Rosary, letting its beads slip through her fingers. She joined St. Bernadette in praying the Our Father and the Glory Be. What about Fatima? At every apparition Our Lady spoke of the Rosary. And at the final appearance she herself declared "I am the Lady of the Rosary." Why did she not choose some other title? Doubtlessly, she was most attentive in guiding the formation of her "favorite prayer." The Most Holy Rosary is a gift of the Holy Spirit and the Mother of God to the human race. It seems that it merits some attention

