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## Chapter 2

### ORIGIN OF THE ROSARY

**A** LONG-STANDING tradition puts the origin of the Rosary in the 13th century and ascribes it to St. Dominic, thought to have been inspired by the Virgin Mary. Modern historians speak more guardedly. They see a gradual evolution to its present form.

Concerning the Our Father, some authors think that less literate monks, unable to read or recite the 150 psalms of the choir Office, were expected to say as many Our Fathers instead.

With regard to the Hail Mary, part of it, the words of the Archangel, formed a popular devotion as early as the 11th century. The faithful prayed them in honor of the joys of Mary. St. Peter Damian played a large role in fostering the devotion. A further development occurred toward the end of the 13th century, when people began to pray the words of the Archangel before statues of Mary. They knelt or genuflected and brought flower coronets, especially of roses. These coronets, or "chapeaux," are thought to account for the name chaplet, and the roses for the name Rosary.

Somewhat later, to the joys of Mary were added her sorrows and her glories.

Not until the 14th century did it become common practice to include Our Fathers with the Hail Marys, for reasons which are not clear. About the same time, as mentioned earlier, began the use of the second part of the Hail Mary: "Holy Mary, Mother of God. . . ."

What proved to be the definitive structure of the Rosary, or nearly so, dates from the 15th century, which also saw a remarkable growth in its use. Both developments, in structure and popularization, were principally the work of the Dominican, Alain of Roche. But this great apostle of the Rosary preached as historical certain facts which he knew only through his private revelations. Considering how important it is to treat such revelations with utmost caution, one can be excused for not taking as literal certain miracles which Alain attributes to St. Dominic.

#### Proponents of the Rosary

Still, the fact remains that Alain, a great Breton missionary, was convincing not only to the populace he evangelized but also to his fellow Dominicans. The result was enormous progress for the Rosary. The faithful had indeed honored, first the joys then the sorrows and glories of Mary but with devotion that was more affective than theological.

The Dominican preachers of the gospel were careful not to offend this simple, sincere piety. As disciples of St. Thomas they knew there was a place for sentiment, but in their hands the joys of Mary were brought into line with the mystery of the Incarnation; her sorrows were more clearly pointed toward the mystery of Redemption; her glorification became a symbol and expression of eschatological happiness, the coronation of all the blessed in the fulfilled kingdom.

Thanks to these Dominicans the Rosary, without ceasing to be a perfectly Marian devotion, assumed the character of a theocentric and theological prayer, solidly based on the gospel. By the same stroke, its

spiritual dimensions swelled to infinity. Embodying both the human element and the divine, by God's grace it became a veritable mine which spiritual writers have worked ever since.

Perhaps the best known among such writers is St. Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort. His work, *The Wonderful Secret of the Most Holy Rosary*, is a major contribution to Rosarian literature. For all its wordiness, it has stood the test of time. Cited at large are writers before him. In addition, the author brings his own insights to bear on the richness of the prayers recited and the benefits gained from meditating on the mysteries.

Popes, too, have championed this devotion. In the 19th century, the most notable in this respect was Leo XIII. The eminent Pope devoted no less than ten encyclicals to the subject. If we add his other pronouncements between 1883 and 1901, the number comes to twenty-three. More recent Popes, including the present Pope John Paul II, also have urged devotion to the Rosary.

Despite these high approbations, the Rosary has had its detractors in every age. But then, what doctrinal teaching has not had them? Still, it remained for the years after the Second Vatican Council to bring us some of the most inordinate criticism and attempts to meddle with this proven devotion. In a time of change like ours, perhaps this should not surprise us.

If we have a true understanding of the Rosary, of its biblical and theological foundations and its immense spiritual benefits, we can keep a tranquil mind, detractors notwithstanding.