

PRAYING THE ROSARY

Anonymous

UNLIKE REALLY DEVOUT families, mine did not go in for the nightly rosary when I was a child; not, that is, until the great post-war Rosary Crusade, when a wave of piety swept through the parishes and had us all on our knees every evening—until the enthusiasm gradually died away. For me, the rosary was a rather tedious ritual associated with Benediction, when it was usually followed first by the ‘Hail, holy Queen’ and then by a litany. The two-part murmuring of rosary and litany had a hypnotic rhythm. The title of each mystery was announced, but there was little sense that people were actually meditating on a particular gospel event. It was usually said far too fast for anything like meditation. As children we greatly valued a high-speed priest: the congregation, like a well-trained orchestra, adjusted to his tempo and it could be all over and done with in five minutes. To the outsider it would have seemed like pious mumbo-jumbo. And yet, looking back now, I can see that, even at its most mechanical, there was something sacramental about it. The sheer physicality of all that kneeling on hard benches or cold kitchen floors, the feeling of the beads as they slipped through your fingers, the voices rising and falling in repetition, all contributed to a sense of otherness, a feeling at moments of being outside time.

Although I rarely said the rosary privately, except before exams, I treasured the pearly-white rosary I had been given for my First Communion and I always carried it in my pocket or schoolbag—just as I always had a bunch of medals pinned to my vest, so that I rattled when I ran. It was with superstitious dread that, years later, at a time when I felt alienated from the Church and had stopped receiving the sacraments, I came upon the rosary I had inherited after my father’s death broken into small pieces, though I had not handled it in years. This dread, however, took me back to the confessional. So perhaps it was grace, not superstition, after all!

Learning to Drive

Strangely enough, it was learning to drive that brought me to a livelier appreciation of the rosary. I found there was no better way of coping with



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those endless stretches of motorway than by saying the rosary. On a long run, I could get through all fifteen (as they were then) decades, with my finger-tips on the steering-wheel instead of the beads. And because this was a very private, enclosed world, I found myself, like a religious in her cell, able to meditate in a variety of ways. I developed a four-layered method which allowed for almost infinite variation. I would begin with the scriptural element—the gospel narrative—and ponder the theology behind it. Then, in an attempt to enter into the minds and hearts of the people involved, I would try to see the event in its historical and cultural setting (and this soon required some background reading, which led to a greater understanding of the Judaic roots of Christianity). The third layer of meditation took the mystery out into a contemporary setting, where the gospel incident has modern parallels (for example the mystery of the annunciation led into prayer for mothers facing an unexpected pregnancy without support). And finally the meditation would home in on my personal need for grace in such circumstances as the mystery suggested at that time. I believe all this made me more receptive to the great diversity in the gospel story and I felt I received many insights in this way. It was also interesting to find that I could ponder in this slow reflective way while travelling at 70 mph!

The fifteen decades had a curved shape in my imagination: swooping down earthwards in the Joyful Mysteries, staying level during the Sorrowful, then soaring upwards again in the Glorious. The Luminous Mysteries, when

they were introduced, were a valuable addition to the terrestrial element and allowed for a much richer meditation on the humanity of Christ in the incarnation. More recently, I have begun to see a parallel between the rosary and the creed, which begins in eternity with the Creation and ends with the life of the world to come: there are the same movements downwards and upwards, with the incarnation at the centre. Perhaps the word 'creed' suggested 'crib' and 'cradle' to me but I see, in both prayers, eternity as being like a crib cradling the humanity of Christ. It is this intermingling of time and eternity which, I feel, both creed and rosary convey.

The Shadow Side

Now I have discovered another way into the rosary, which I call the shadow side of the mysteries. During a recent stay in hospital, sleepless nights led to frequent rosaries. It was then that I began to think about something that had been on the edge of my mind for some time: that, although we may name them 'joyful', 'luminous' and 'sorrowful', the first fifteen mysteries are more nuanced and complex than that. The Joyful Mysteries are, it seems to me, shot through with anxiety, threat and warnings; the Mysteries of Light move from the excitement of disciples and crowds towards an increasing menace and darkness; while, in the other direction, the Sorrowful Mysteries are laced, if not with joy, at least with an acceptance that deprives evil of its victory. The philosopher Josef Pieper, in his book *Happiness and Contemplation*, writes of a kind of 'consent to the world' as it really is (and implicitly as God wills it) that leads to happiness: 'This consent has little to do with "optimism". It is a consent that may be granted amid tears and the extremes of terror.'¹ Christ's 'fiat' in the first Sorrowful Mystery, the agony in the garden, underlies and supports all the rest by his total consent to the approaching passion.

It was this shadow side to the fifteen mysteries that I found myself exploring during those long nights when neither sleeping tablets nor morphine allowed me to sleep. One night, as I took my rosary to say the Joyful Mysteries, a vivid little scenario came suddenly into my head: I saw Mary as being like a young girl in occupied France, during the early 1940s, suddenly receiving a message on a short-wave radio, telling her of a plan to drop a very important agent, that very night, into this

¹ Joseph Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, translated by Richard and Clare Weston (South Bend: St Augustine, 1998 [1958]), 106.

dangerous and hostile territory. If the agent arrived, she alone would have to receive and look after him. Would she accept the mission? I did not pursue the narrative because that would have been a contrivance but, as a kind of *ligne donné*, it gave a modern take on the dangerous and rather frightening mission that Mary undertook with her 'fiat'. The other four mysteries, too, take on a deeper meaning when their joy is seen in the context of an uncaring or hostile world. This dark side—off-stage as it is—seems nevertheless a corrective to the holy pictures with their sentimental prettiness which have often been the background to the Joyful Mysteries.

I really welcomed the Mysteries of Light when they were introduced. Time and again they take me back to the gospel accounts of Jesus' public life, to build up the detail and draw out new ways of looking at these mysteries. And when I do so—especially in Mark's account—I realise how swiftly the forces of incomprehension, opposition and menace begin to break through the exuberance and joyful hope of the beginning. Even the radiant, out-of-this-world experience of the transfiguration is framed by the disciples' incompetence and lack of faith. And in the fifth mystery of the Last Supper, the luminous Last Discourse is surrounded by the darkness of betrayal.

The Sorrowful Mysteries had always been linked in my mind with the stations of the cross, which were an important part of my childhood. As a very small child (four or five, I think), every evening in Lent I used to go hand in hand with Mr Casey, an old Irishman who lived with us, across the railway track to the cathedral for the stations. I loved the way the congregation was involved, turning bodily from station to station, and singing that mournful verse from the *Stabat Mater*:

Holy Mother, pierce me through
In my heart each wound renew
Of my Saviour crucified.

And, as a child, I found the wholehearted abandonment of the prayer we recited after we had contemplated each Station, 'I love Thee, Jesus, my Love, above all things ...' (so like St Ignatius' reckless offering, 'Take, Lord, and receive ...') both thrilling and moving.

It has been pointed out that, after the tremendous, at times almost frenetic, activity of his public life, once his passion began Jesus was totally passive. Most of the verbs in the gospel account are in the passive voice: he was arrested; he was scourged; he was crowned with thorns; he was

crucified. Nevertheless, the 'fiat' in the garden contradicts any sense of helplessness, because, by willing what the Father wills, he remained an agent in his own victimisation. It is what Teilhard calls 'divinised' passivity, which brings about 'a mysterious reversal of evil into good'.² In the stations, we are reminded how Jesus accepted and carried his cross (a heavy burden, since he fell three times) and, while doing so, paused to speak to the daughters of Jerusalem and also to receive comfort from a compassionate woman. Likewise, in the Sorrowful Mysteries of the rosary, despite their depiction of human brutality, an affirmative bass note can be heard underlying them. It does not diminish one's sense of the suffering of Christ but fills one with awe at his patience, in both meanings of that word. The Sorrowful Mysteries, then, are cathartic in the Aristotelian sense and leave one purified and peaceful in spirit and mind.

At first, when I came to the Glorious Mysteries, I could see no shadow side. Eternity here really seemed to be penetrating and permeating time. But then, I began to pick up and sympathize with the initial doubts, the amazed incredulity, the fears, as well as the joy, surrounding those post-resurrection scenes for the disciples: the sense of bereavement, despite the promise, at the ascension; the dangerous excitement at pentecost. It is only in the last two mysteries that the glory is undiluted—and yet even here we are left, earthbound, like the disciples at the ascension, straining our eyes upwards.

The Mysteries of the Gap

One is always free to invent further mysteries that fit into the recitation of the rosary. The following notes are my attempt to imagine what happened during those terrible hours between Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection. The utter bleakness of the final station, 'Jesus is laid in the tomb', still grabs the heart. In a sense, as a latecomer, I know that all will be well; but in another sense, I do not! During those long hours, it seems to me as if the whole of creation is holding its breath. The disciples, who had been racing forward to what they thought would be a glorious future, are now suspended in a hellish present with only past remorse and no future hope. And what is Mary now pondering? I try to enter into the thoughts and feeling of those left behind.

I was dismayed recently to read about a suggested fifteenth station of the cross—the resurrection. This would be a mistake: that terrible void

² Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin: An Essay on the Interior Life*, translated by Bernard Wall and others (London: Collins, 1964), 92.



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of more than 36 hours is an essential part of the passion story, but it does not seem to get much attention liturgically. In the past, when the churches were open all the time, one could go in and see the emptiness and the gaping tabernacle before going to kneel in the quiet corner where the sacrament was reserved. But now the churches are closed except for the flower team setting up a gorgeous Easter display, which rivals the Christmas crib. We have lost the art of mourning: everything, even death itself, nowadays has to be celebrated.

Yet this period between the death and the resurrection of the Lord can be a rich occasion for solitary prayer. Private meditation on the passion can lead to small devotional acts: for instance, every Good Friday evening, I wash my hair. This may seem a bit eccentric, but in doing so, I am following my mother's practice and her mother's before her ... and goodness only knows how many generations back, certainly to when the family lived in Ireland. (I do not know whether this is an old Irish custom or whether it was unique to my family. I have heard no other reference to it; even the internet draws a blank.) When, as a child, I asked my mother why she did this, she explained how on the first Good Friday, Our Lady's hair would be bloodstained from standing beneath the cross and from holding her dead son in her arms. So after the burial, when she went back to where she was staying, she would need to wash, especially her hair. I like to think that my Good Friday hair-wash began with the pious sympathy of a long ago great-grandmother and she passed it down through a chain

of daughters to me—where, I’m afraid, it will end. Such a homely devotion did not arise from any scholarly knowledge of Jewish purification rites but from the musings of an ordinary woman—almost certainly a mother herself—meditating on the passion and imagining Mary in all the sad details of her situation. It is a very private devotion and I do not see it as sentimental. It is a form of remembering—a folk anamnesis.

I am glad Pope Francis is so appreciative of what he calls ‘genuine forms of popular religiosity’. I do not think he is referring to those big public demonstrations—the fiestas, the huge rallies, the grand public processions—but rather to the everyday, pervasive piety in ordinary lives. Popular piety, he says, ‘enables us to see how the faith, once received, becomes embodied in a culture and is constantly passed on’. It expresses itself rather ‘by way of symbols than by discursive reasoning’ and ‘it entails a personal relationship with God, with Christ, with Mary, with the saints’.³ Such was the basis of my childhood faith and in my latter years I find myself returning to it in a different way. What I used to do automatically, I now perhaps do more consciously. And since we are all postmodern nowadays, perhaps a bit ironically!

In my childhood most houses we visited had images of Jesus and Mary in different manifestations—Our Lady of Lourdes, of Perpetual Succour, the Baby Jesus, the Infant of Prague, the Sacred Heart and, of course, a crucifix in every room. But the visual symbols were just the outward sign of the family’s faith. What was more significant was the way prayer punctuated

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every moment of the day. There were the morning and evening prayers (the first and last conscious acts of the day, usually said kneeling on the cold bedroom floor); the hand dipped in the font near the door to make the sign of the cross as you went out of the house; the grace before and after meals; perhaps the family rosary in the evening; and, for many, daily attendance at Mass. But more significant still was the way that the most ordinary conversations were peppered with mini-prayers—little exclamations such as *God willing!*, *Thanks be to God!*, *Lord have mercy on him!* (or *God be good to her!*, as my father used to say whenever he mentioned his beloved mother). Karl Rahner once said, ‘I believe because I pray’, and certainly the belief of these simple people was rooted in the prayer that marked every moment of their days.⁴

³ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 124.

⁴ Karl Rahner in *Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews, 1965–82*, edited by Hubert Biallowons, Harvey Egan and Paul Imhof (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 212.

I believe this prayer life ‘fostered the relationships’ to which Pope Francis refers, and especially with departed family members. The souls in purgatory seemed very close because we could help them with our prayers. But also the saints, especially patron saints, were familiar presences in our lives. (When I saw the film *Millions* recently I could identify with the little boy because I was very like him at that age.) In addition, what I call the ‘Irish sacramental imagination’ played around gospel events and added back-stories to the incidents. It was something like Ignatius’ ‘composition of place’, except that it seemed to come more spontaneously than the word ‘composition’ suggests. The added stories in the stations of the cross—the three falls, the encounters—must have arisen from such empathetic meditation on ‘how it might have been’.

The Mysteries of Grief

So, in recent years, I have found myself trying to imagine the feelings and behaviour of the various characters in the final stages of the passion story, and most especially of Mary. I could never agree with those pictures of the crucifixion that portray her in a state of collapse—apart, perhaps, from at the heart-breaking moment of Jesus’ death. She was a strong, brave woman and knew exactly how and when to act. The gospel references to her are so few and so slight, and yet we can, in pondering them, learn so much about her—rather as modern scientists can find out so much about a person from a fragment of bone. Mary’s DNA can be found in the gospel fragments.

I found almost immediately that the meditation fell into five sections in my mind and I called them: the descent from the cross; the burial; the return to where they were lodged; the long sabbath; and Mary alone. It is in no way an attempt to fill in historic detail, still less to make fiction or drama. I find I ignore part of the gospel narratives—partly because they are so divergent—but John’s account is perhaps the most helpful. As I have mentioned, these are very Marian mysteries. Luke told us that she ‘pondered’ from the time of Simeon’s fearful warning and from when her young son began to sense his mission. As the beads slip through my fingers, I try to imagine that she is pondering at each stage.

The hours before the death must have been Mary’s Gethsemane, when her entire being cried out, *Does it have to be like this?* I have sometimes wondered whether part of Christ’s agony in the garden was a very human dread that he had got it all wrong—that this is not how it should have been. Such self-doubt, I believe, would fit with his willingness to experience

the entire spectrum of human suffering. And I wonder, too, whether Mary was for a while tormented by the thought that it had all gone wrong. Did Mary, like Jesus, at first pray for the 'chalice' to be taken away? And yet, like his, her will had always been perfectly aligned with the will of God⁵ and so the cry of petition is soon hushed.

For more than thirty years, Mary had kept things in her heart without receiving answers. Now as her Son hangs on the cross, she too is suspended in a state of 'unknowing'—a biblical 'waiting in silence'. But although, in her distress, she may not have been able to give the same 'fiat' that Jesus did to his own approaching suffering, she was perhaps able to say with the psalmist, 'At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me' (Psalm 69: 13). Such trust that there must be a purpose, that this is what Simeon had meant when he had said that Jesus would be a 'sign that will be opposed' (Luke 2: 34), could not alleviate the grief but would preserve her from utter despair.

Jesus Is Taken Down from the Cross

We tend to dwell on the appalling physical sufferings of the crucified Christ when we think of the passion; but for his contemporaries, and especially for his mother and his disciples, the disgrace of such a death must have been even worse than the agony.

With every death, whatever the shock and distress for those involved, the practicalities immediately press in: the death has to be confirmed, the authorities must be notified and funeral arrangements set in motion. With Jesus' death this is even more urgent because it is late in the day and at sunset the sabbath will begin. But I feel that it is at this point that the shame and infamy begin to be lifted: a soldier's spear confirms the death and prompts an astonishing eulogy from a centurion; and two influential new disciples appear on the scene, one of them, Joseph of Arimathea, going boldly to Pilate himself to tell him that the man he had interrogated was dead and to call in a favour.

⁵ This alignment of Mary's will to the will of God (like that of the blessed souls in Dante's *Paradiso*, for whom God's will is their peace) is what I understand by that unfortunately named doctrine, the Immaculate Conception. From the first moment of her existence her entire being was in harmony with what God planned for humanity—that is to say, she was 'full of grace' and so there could be none of the negativity of sin in her. If it is true that Our Lady said to Bernadette 'I am the Immaculate Conception', the strange grammar of that sentence is perhaps her attempt to override the absurd fixation that our more literal-minded theologians have had on the sexual act that began her existence and so invite a grander conception!

He and Nicodemus, who had previously been secret disciples for fear of the Jewish leaders, now risk the derision of onlookers and their reputation with those same religious leaders. They organize the deposition, perhaps commissioning the soldiers who had nailed Jesus to the cross to release him from it. Even in her grief, Mary must have felt gratitude for such courageous witness and for the compassionate efficiency of their actions. But there was possibly something more than comfort and gratitude: a first glimpse of a greater purpose and a growing sense that this was not the end.

Jesus Is Laid in the Tomb

While some of the women went home to prepare the spices before the sabbath began, Mary stayed to see her Son laid in a tomb. It was a reversal of the Bethlehem scene, when the newly born child was wrapped in swaddling clothes and put in an animal's feeding-box; now the newly dead man is wrapped in fine linen and laid in a rich man's tomb. And Nicodemus provided myrrh and aloes sufficient for a king's burial. Such reverence, despite the need for haste! But as the great stone was rolled to the door of the tomb, it must once again have seemed like the end.

The Return Home

The streets would be emptying as they hurried back—just soldiers on patrol, making sure any groups were dispersing. I think I am drawing on some tradition that the Upper Room was in the house of the beloved disciple's family but, at all events, that is where I imagine them returning.⁶ Seeing how destroyed with grief the beloved disciple and Mary Magdalene were, Mary would at this point, I believe, have suppressed her own feelings out of compassion for her son's friends. Seeing the grief of these two, Mary must have known what to expect when she met the others, who had deserted Jesus in their terror. She would have heard of their flight, if not the denial of Simon Peter, and would realise that their sorrow would be all the greater for their remorse. She knew these men so well as she had worn out her shoes travelling with them throughout Galilee and Judaea, providing for their needs along with the other women disciples. Now these men would hardly dare look at her for shame.

⁶ See, for example, D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 72.

The Long Sabbath.

‘On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.’ (Luke 23: 56) It is hard to imagine the disciples resting, but they were devout Jews and the Sabbath has its own timeless rhythm. The ritual observances—the hymns, the readings, the prepared communal meals—would guide them through that long day. But they must have been stunned and beyond questioning or rational thought. I imagine them, as that long sabbath wore on, gradually falling asleep, as once before they did through sorrow. I imagine a different *pietà* from Michelangelo’s, with Mary’s arms around both Peter and Mary Magdalene.

Mary Alone

From the time she left the tomb until late on the following evening, we can imagine Mary ministering to others. Now, at last, as they slept, she could open up to her own thoughts and feelings. St Ignatius was surely right in saying that the first post-resurrection appearance made by Jesus was to his mother. Ignatius was sensitive to the unique relationship there was between this mother and son: ‘the flesh of the mother was the flesh of the son’;⁷ but, as a man, he was perhaps not aware of the powerful bonds there often are between quite ordinary mothers and their children, even into adulthood. There is probably a natural, perhaps biological, explanation for the strange telepathy that at times of crisis can occur between mother and child.⁸ I feel sure that Mary, simply as a human mother, began to get the first awareness of Jesus’ resurrection at the very moment that the grave clothes were laid aside. So, when he actually came to her, it would be a confirmation of what she already knew.

* * *

So, that is where I am at present in my meditations when saying the rosary. I feel sure that there are more approaches yet to come. But there are also many times, when preoccupations or tiredness overwhelm me, and then I let the beads slip through my fingers and simply murmur the familiar words, knowing that this, too, is praying the rosary.

⁷ Diary, 15 February 1544.

⁸ Many mothers have had what, at the time, seems a preternatural sense of sudden heightened awareness when something happens to one of their children—even when the ‘child’ is grown up, has left home and lives far away. It has certainly happened to me, both as a daughter and as a mother. As I commented, it probably has some quite natural explanation but it always fills one with a sense of wonder and gratitude.