



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

"Listen willingly to holy reading, and devote yourself often to prayer" (HR 4:55-56). "The time that remains after Vigils should be spent in meditation by those brothers who still need to memorise some part of the psalter or readings" (HR 8:3). "If anyone is so negligent and lazy as to be unwilling or unable to meditate or read, he is to be given work so that he may not be idle" (HR 48:23). "After this he is to stay in the novitiate, where the novices should meditate, eat and sleep" (HR 58:5). "The first and principal duty of monks, and it is a duty proper to them, is the contemplation of things divine, and constant union with God in prayer. They must apply themselves to this unremittingly.... The brethren are to have a special devotion to the Virgin Mother of God, the example and protectress of monastic life, including by way of the Rosary"

Constitutions of the Subiaco Congregation OSB, approved by the Holy See in 1988, nn. 77 & 79.

"The Rosary is a prayer so easy and yet so rich that it truly deserves to be rediscovered by the Christian community. Let us do so, especially this year. I count on you, consecrated men and women, called in a particular way to contemplate the face of Christ at the school of Mary. I look to all of you, brothers and sisters of every state of life, to you, Christian families, to you, the sick and elderly, and to you, young people: confidently take up the Rosary once again. May this appeal of mine not go unheard!"

Pope John Paul II (16 October 2002).

Monastic Voices

"Abba Antony said: 'The camel, as a ruminant, conserves what he has eaten, and brings it up again to chew over at leisure. In your prayer you should be like the camel, rather than the horse, who very quickly loses what he has eaten. That is to say, keep carefully in your heart the words of Holy Scripture you have been reciting, and slowly go over them at your leisure: for only in this way will they have their full effect in us.'"From the Coptic Sayings of the Desert Fathers (4th century)"The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us'. He dwells in our hearts through faith, He dwells in our memory and thoughts, He penetrates even to our imagination. For what could a man conceive of God unless he first made an image of Him in his heart? He was above our understanding, unapproachable; He was completely invisible and beyond our intellect; but now He wished to be comprehended, to be seen, to be pondered. But how? you may ask. I answer: lying in a manger, resting on a Virgin's bosom, preaching on the Mount, spending the night in prayer; or hanging on the cross, the pallor of death on his face; or like one 'free among the dead', overruling the powers of Hell; or rising again on the third day, showing the Apostles the print of the nails, the sign of victory, and finally ascending from their sight into Heaven. Is there anything here that cannot be reflected on, truthfully, lovingly, reverently? If I reflect on any of these things, I reflect on God, and in all of them I find my God. I call it wisdom to meditate on these things."From the Sermons of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, (1090-1153). cf Divine Office reading for 7 October.

"Those who do not know the Blessed Virgin, those who do not truly love the Mother of Jesus, run the risk of not profitably understanding the mysteries of Christ's Humanity. Christ is the Son of man as well as the Son of God; these two characters are essential to Him. If He is the Son of God by an eternal ineffable generation, He became Son of man by being born of Mary in time. Let us then contemplate this Virgin at the side of her Son. In return she will obtain for us the power of entering more deeply into the comprehension of these mysteries to which she is so closely united.

It is an excellent practice to recite the Rosary devoutly every day. Through it we contemplate Christ in His mysteries, so as to unite ourselves to Him; we congratulate Mary on having been so closely associated in these mysteries, and we return thanks to the Holy Trinity for all her privileges. Then, if each day we have often said to her: 'Mother of God, pray for us... now and at the hour of our death', we may be sure that, when the moment comes at which 'now' and the 'hour of death' will be one and the same, the Blessed Virgin will not forsake us."

From the spiritual conferences of Blessed Abbot Columba Marmion OSB (1858-1923)

Dear Oblates and friends,

I have often thought of devoting one of these letters to the subject of the Rosary. The holy Father's Apostolic Letter Rosarium Virginis Mariae, dated 16 October 2002, gives me all the prompting I need to do so now. In it he proclaims a special Year of the holy Rosary, coinciding with the twenty fifth year of his Pontificate. He offers us a typically rich and heartfelt meditation, to help us rediscover this, his own favourite form of prayer, whereby "at the school of Mary we contemplate the beauty on the face of Christ and experience the depths of His love".

I will never forget the impact of my own first encounter with the holy Rosary. I was in my late teens, and staying at an Anglican religious house on my first ever retreat. In their gift shop I came across a Rosary for sale, with a booklet explaining how to use it. This seemed very daring to me then: for someone brought up in the Anglican tradition, it was alien, even forbidden territory. But I was quite desperate. For years I had felt a hunger for prayer, with a permanent sense of frustration at really not knowing how to pray. I had never not been a Church-goer. I had tried books. There were books full of prayers, which were very nice, but these somehow weren't enough for me: they weren't what I was looking for. There were books about prayer, but I found them dry and boring. I found a book with points for formal meditations, set out in extremely systematic and orderly fashion, but that was quite beyond me. So I bought these beads and the booklet, and started to use them. I was at once completely hooked, and have been ever since. I had found exactly what I had been looking for!

What then seemed to me a stroke of pure genius, what so completely answered my needs, and what I had never before come across, was the idea of constantly repeating the same prayer. It was so devastatingly simple! No need to be always thinking up well phrased speeches to God. No need to rely wholly on the inspiring thoughts of other people. No need either to be at all original. You could just let the simple prayers carry you, on and on: providing as it were fuel, like sticks thrown on a fire, to keep alive the deeper prayer that cannot be captured in words, that is openness to the loving presence of God, and union with Him through Jesus Christ.

It was for me a completely new and life giving discovery that through the Rosary, with its repeated prayers, one can meditate on the central mysteries of our faith: joyful, sorrowful and glorious. This made the doctrines I already knew well come alive for me in a quite new way: not just as information we accept about God, but as vital mysteries we enter into and become part of. I remember also at this time a famous Anglican Bishop was loudly proclaiming his unbelief, especially in the virgin birth of Jesus, His Resurrection from the dead, and His ability to hear or answer our prayer. I felt the urgent need to counter hateful opinions like these. The Rosary offered me the best way possible. Through the Rosary, we confront the doctrines of faith as it were on our knees, in humble contemplation, open to whatever the Holy Spirit wants to teach us about them. It seemed to me then, and I still believe it, that someone remaining faithful to this practice every day could never fall into heresy.

I soon discovered that this way of prayer could be easily adapted to all needs and for all occasions. You could use it as a way of intercession, or thanksgiving, or penance, or simple adoration. You could say it walking along, or lying in bed, or standing in a queue. I liked to have the beads always in my pocket, so that even when I

couldn't be praying decades, I could hold or touch this little reminder of my desire to be with God in prayer. I loved to say the Rosary when full of fervour. Even more so, I found it a lifeline when all was dry as a bone within.

I had set out on a path which led by its own logic to full communion with the Catholic Church, and eventually to the gates of Pluscarden Abbey. I was very happy indeed to discover from my first day here that this community holds the Rosary in high esteem. We do not have a tradition of saying it formally together. Nevertheless, it is a custom of the house for the brethren to recite privately at least five decades daily. From the first, I had been instinctively attracted to the Marian emphasis of the Rosary. I now received in the monastery a solid doctrinal and spiritual formation, which strongly confirmed for me the validity of this. I understood more fully now why Our Lady cannot be regarded as somehow an optional extra in the life of prayer. God did not give us His Son except through her, and Jesus did not die before bequeathing her to us as our Mother. Mary was close to the Lord beyond all others: the one most intimately associated with His life, death and glorification. She was also the woman of silence, who meditated on the mysteries of her Son, pondering them in her heart. So in the ways of prayer she is for us a model, a teacher and an advocate. The closer we can be to her, the closer will she lead us to Jesus.

Can we Benedictine monks and oblates find any support in the Holy Rule for our attachment to the Rosary? I am convinced that we can. It is hardly surprising that the Rule makes no reference to the Rosary. St. Benedict was writing several centuries before its first appearance, and over 1000 years before the familiar form we know today was generally established. But we know that the Rosary represents things St. Benedict held dear. I will try to outline here three ways in which I think it accords perfectly with his spirit.

Firstly, then. The principal expression of prayer in the Rule, and still among modern Benedictines, is the liturgy. We know that St. Benedict observed the liturgical Year, in its essentials exactly as we do today, with its orderly celebration of the various mysteries of Christ, and the feasts of His Mother and the Saints. Well: Pope Paul VI proposed the Rosary as an ideal way for us to assimilate and sustain precisely the prayer of the liturgy, even outside its actual celebration. He insisted that the two forms of prayer are not in any way opposed. On the contrary, they are mutually supportive. On the one hand we should allow the liturgy to guide our Rosary meditations. On the other hand, such meditation on the mysteries being celebrated will help us participate more fully and consciously in the liturgy. This was the whole reason for the liturgical reform of Vatican II. It would also be entirely in accord with the mind of St. Benedict, who urged that "our mind be in harmony with our voice" in Church (HR 19:7), and reminded us that "God regards our purity of heart, and ... not our many words" (HR 20:3).

A second link between the Rosary and the Holy Rule can be found in the monastic practice of "meditatio". St. Benedict refers to this three times, though he does not mean quite the same thing by it as we do with our word "meditation". It is often translated as "study", but it does not really mean that either. What it refers to is the process, taught throughout the early monastic tradition, of slowly going over a scripture text in order to make it completely one's own; to allow oneself to be changed by it; to ensure that it remains not only in the mind, or the mouth, but takes root in the depths of one's heart. St. Antony's image of a ruminating animal chewing the cud was often echoed by monastic authors when speaking of *lectio divina*. These monks knew that we need to take time to savour the sweetness of the divine word: it would be impossible to draw fully from its abundant goodness in a single rapid reading. Another favoured image was that of a mill wheel, going gently round and round, turning the wheat of scripture into fine flour that can be easily digested. St. Benedict insists on his novices memorising large portions of scripture by heart precisely for the sake of this "meditatio". A favourite text of John Cassian (365-435), who brought the wisdom of the Egyptian desert to the West, was the first verse of Psalm 69: "O God come to my aid: O Lord make haste to help me". Cassian taught that this verse could be repeated limitlessly, on all occasions: not as an end in itself, but as a means to help us arrive at the pure prayer of contemplation. Abba Macarius on the other hand recommended simply the Name of Jesus, endlessly repeated. This tradition would find expression in the form of the Rosary favoured by the Eastern Orthodox today, based as it is on repetition of the "Jesus" prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner". In our Rosary, which is a "Mary" prayer, we continue to use scriptural texts, and to focus our minds slowly and attentively on scriptural themes. With St. Benedict we understand that some such daily exercise is essential, if our formal prayers and observances are to do their work, and not become merely exterior routines.

The third observation I want to make about St. Benedict here is that he was a faithful son of the holy Roman Church. Ever since his time, the ideal of "thinking with the Church" has been a strong element in Benedictine

spirituality. In particular, Benedictines have traditionally been foremost in offering their loyalty and ready obedience to the Roman Pontiffs. So St. Benedict would certainly have approved of our desire to respond to the recent Papal appeal. And in fact Pope John Paul II merely adds his voice again today to a long list of his predecessors, who have all promoted the Rosary, and enriched its recitation with blessings and indulgences.

Perhaps you have already read the holy Father's Apostolic letter. If not, I hope you will consider doing so. You will know anyway that, even in his old age, he has sprung a surprise on us all by adding five new mysteries to the traditional sequence. He calls them the "Luminous Mysteries", or "Mysteries of Light". I think they are an extremely good idea. In letting us reflect on Jesus' public ministry, they bridge the gap which otherwise exists between the "finding in the Temple" and the "agony in the Garden". They are: "the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan"; "His first miracle at Cana in Galilee"; "His proclamation of the Kingdom, and call to conversion"; "His Transfiguration", and "His institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper". Adjusting the standard sequence of days set aside for the various mysteries, the Pope suggests we now say these luminous mysteries on a Thursday.

I have often taken comfort in the remark of G.K. Chesterton, that if a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly. I'm afraid I often say the Rosary very badly, with many distractions and woefully inadequate concentration. But it is a Benedictine thing to want to do things well, especially things pertaining to the worship of God. The Pope's letter is offered to help us to say the Rosary very well indeed. He wants us truly to mean every word we say, and to enter deeply into each mystery we consider. So he offers short commentaries on each of the prayers, on the mysteries, and on the beads themselves. He speaks to us not just in virtue of his office, but with all the authority of a true contemplative, who knows about prayer from experience, and is consumed with love for Jesus Christ. In particular, the Pope asks us to pray the Rosary in the cause of peace. Allow me, then, to recommend it also to Benedictine oblates of Pluscarden. With the Pope, I think especially of families, and of the "sick and elderly who have abundant time at their disposal", and whose prayers can be so powerful. The Rosary is of course only one way of prayer, and we remain free, if we choose, not to use it at all. But let us never despise this "simple yet profound prayer, which is destined at the dawn of this third millennium to bring forth a harvest of holiness", (n. 1) and through which we "enter into contact with the contemplative gaze of Mary" (n. 11).

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