

29<sup>th</sup> Sun (A)

22<sup>nd</sup> October 2023

'October, month of the Holy Rosary'

Is 45: the Lord's anointed, Cyrus Ps 95: "give the Lord glory and power"

1Th 1: Good News "not only as words but as power and love and conviction"

Mt 22: 15–21: "give to Caesar . . . and give to God"

I am torn ... The Gospel today points us to a very important teaching, that of how to use our finances. It's a crucial issue, even as students — and then as you look forward to employment and salaries one day — how to weigh in the balance our "*giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.*" The right use of money, not becoming its slave but being a *steward* of that which you are entrusted with, including your financial assets, and *consciously* generous to those in need — this is an issue which every Christian must tackle and try to get right. Our Lord deals with this head-on in the Gospel any number of times: He is always very cautious when it comes to the question of money, and quite ambivalent with regard to riches. How many times does He say things like, "*store up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where no moth consumes it nor thief can come and steal it.*" This Thursday evening we will be screening a film of the life of St Francis, whose break-through point came, as a young man in his 20s,

with the realisation that the luxuries he had come to take for granted in his family home and father's business were not the be-all and end-all, but that he was being called to renounce them and embrace a life of poverty.

But, as I said, I am torn, because despite the seriousness of that topic, I also wish to talk about the *Rosary*, before we run out of Sundays in October, month of the Holy Rosary. In these first weeks of term we have prayed a decade of the Rosary before each Sunday Mass. This may be part-and-parcel of a Catholic prayer life for some of you; and really rather new and unusual for others of you. Almost certainly, most Catholics will have a rosary somewhere, a gift at some point, perhaps from First Holy Communion or Confirmation, or just something that we've always had. But is it getting used, or is it gathering dust somewhere in a drawer? It would be good if this month, at this point in time, at this university chapter in your life, you could take up your rosary again, and come to treasure it, as one of the 'treasures in heaven' that you are amassing, for it truly is one of the *jewels* in the treasury of Catholic prayer.

The Rosary is a *Marian* prayer, of course, and has as

its key component the repeated recitation of the *Hail Mary*. So let's start with thinking about that prayer. We invoke the prayers of the saints, and especially of Our Lady, as they are our brothers and sisters — and Mother! — who have won through already from the trials of this earthly life to the happiness and glory of heaven. They are already with God, and in perfect communion with Him. So, when we pray *to* them, what we are actually doing is praying *with* them; asking them to pray for us. And who better to appeal to than the one who is closest of all humanity to Jesus, His sinless Mother, His only 'blood relation,' Mary of Nazareth? Both the basic prayer, the *Hail Mary*, and the more developed Rosary, have had a gradual history and development, only reaching their present form in about the 16<sup>th</sup> c. But invoking Our Lady in prayer has been present in the Church since the outset: the oldest known prayer to Our Lady, the *Sub tuum Praesidium* exists in parchments dating to the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. If we take a look at the *Hail Mary*, we see that it is in three parts:

1. *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.* These are the words of the Angel Gabriel to Our Lady (Lk 1:28) at the Annunciation.
2. *Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit*

*of thy womb, [Jesus].* These are the words of Elizabeth to Our Lady (Lk 1:42) at the Visitation.

3. *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.* These are words the Church has added to turn it from an invocation into a genuine prayer of petition.

The *Hail Mary*'s earliest versions only exist in those first two parts, the Scriptural texts, ending with the words "Blessed is the fruit of thy womb" (c. 1030AD). Then in the 13<sup>th</sup> c., the word "Jesus" or "Jesus Christ, Amen." were added, and only by the 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> c. were various conclusions being proposed, in different countries of Europe. By the Council of Trent's *Catechism* (1566) and then the *Roman Breviary* of 1568 the *Hail Mary* is quoted in the version we know today. It's worth noting that in the final version, the prayer is essentially an appeal to a saint to intercede with God; a request for her to pray for us: "pray for us, sinners ...". It's not focussed on Mary, but on the Lord Himself.

The Rosary also has a long history, with popular tradition suggesting that it was given in a vision to St Dominic (d. 1221). This isn't likely, since (i) rosary beads were in use for many sorts of prayers prior to St Dominic; and (ii) the 'mysteries' of the rosary were not fixed until

long after St Dominic's day. *Rosary* means a garland of roses, and used in a figurative sense — as also *corona* or *chaplet* — can mean a collection of prayers. It's not only in the Catholic rosary that strings of beads for counting prayers are used; other religions have them too, and they existed in the Christian faith prior to the widespread use of the *Hail Mary*. In fact, the English word *bead* comes from the old English word *gebed* ("to pray"): so the word 'bead' comes into our language via the idea of rosary *beads* as a way of praying. Counting the 150 Hail Marys itself came from the inability of illiterate 'lay brothers' in monasteries to recite the 150 psalms of the Divine Office as the 'choir monks' did. Instead by analogy they were prescribed the recitation of the well-known prayers, originally the *Our Father* only, but later the *Hail Mary* too. Prayer beads — rosaries — were utilized to count the prayers, and this was already true by the 12<sup>th</sup> c., even before St Dominic was active. The connection with St Dominic and the Dominican order comes through the preaching of a particular 15<sup>th</sup>-c. friar. He promoted the rosary widely, founded rosary confraternities, and may have taught that it was given to St Dominic. (The

Dominican religious habit still includes the wearing of a large rosary from the belt, and it's the Dominican friary up in Hampstead that is the London 'shrine of the Holy Rosary'.) Popes from the 16<sup>th</sup> c. promoted the rosary, the earliest being Leo X in his bull *Pastoris Aeterni* of 1520. And after the astonishing victory of Christian fleets at the battle of Lepanto, 7<sup>th</sup> October 1571, the Dominican Pope, Pius V, instituted 7<sup>th</sup> October as the feast of the Most Holy Rosary, which is still its feast today.

The wisdom and beauty of the Rosary is that it knits together a simple recitation of *Hail Marys* etc. with a simultaneous meditation on the mysteries of Our Lord's life, as interwoven with that life of Our Lady (and indeed thus of all humanity). The original 15 decades (hence the '150') were extended by invitation of Pope St John Paul II in 2002 to include the 5 'luminous mysteries,' events in the public life of Our Lord — His Baptism, His Transfiguration, His Last Supper etc. — which were previously missing.

The recitation, which is in itself simple and meditative, is a vehicle for entering into the depths of the relationship between God and ourselves, as exemplified in

Mary. The mantra-like quality allows us to be carried gently along, and to weave into these prayers a sense that we walk with Christ in those saving events of His life, ministry, passion, death, resurrection and glorification, as Mary did. In the Rosary, as it were, Mary *takes us by the hand* and draws us in that path of Christ's saving mysteries. If you're in any doubt that the Rosary is heaven-sent, God-willed, then just think of this: at Lourdes, at Fátima, Our Lady in her appearing herself promoted the Rosary. When Bernadette saw her in Lourdes, Our Lady was holding a Rosary and prayed it in synchrony with her; the shepherd children at Fátima were instructed clearly from the first apparition to pray their Rosary often for their own salvation and that of others, and for the sake of the world. We can't ignore the Rosary without ignoring its *divine* origin.

So, let's set ourselves to learn, use, and devote ourselves to this simple but effective, and God-given / Mary-promoted prayer. The repetition, and indeed the breathing rhythm at which it is typically prayed aloud, achieves a personal (and bodily) peacefulness. From that place of peace, we can be open to imbibing the grace of

Jesus Our Lord, His personal divine gifts in His saving ministry and sacrifice. If you are unsure about the Rosary, then just try it! Find yourself a rosary, take a Rosary card, and start just with one decade (5 mins) of a mystery of your choosing, and with a prayer intention. Know that whenever you pray the Rosary you are praying for your needs along with Our Lady, and with all those saints for whom the Rosary has been their staple and saving grace.

At the start of term, at the LSE CathSoc, we had one of our after-lunch discussion, and one of the group offered a personal testimony about his life of faith, telling us that the *Rosary* had been his salvation: as a school student during Covid he had been in lockdown and not coping well, and feeling not so close to the Lord. But something in him, for no reason he could fathom, urged him to take up his rosary and pray it. In no time, he had recovered faith and peacefulness, a tangible gift from heaven, to go on and to commit Himself again to Christ. Like him, we *can* each of us do the same, and plug ourselves into this powerhouse of grace that has served the Church so well for centuries.

... *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners* ...