

Does the Hail Mary take our focus away from the Lord?



Annunciation baroque relief from chiesa di San Ignazio by Filippo Della Valle, 1649

Dear Father Kerper: As a young child I learned to say the Hail Mary and I know that some Catholics say it all the time. Recently a Protestant friend asked why Catholics say this prayer so much. He said that we should be praying to the Lord, especially by using the Our Father, which comes from the Bible. This makes sense to me. Doesn't the Hail Mary pull us away from the Lord? Why do we make it so important?

Your friend's comment about the Hail Mary expresses a common misunderstanding about this popular Catholic prayer. At first glance, the Hail Mary seems to focus our attention primarily, even exclusively, on the Blessed Mother. However, when we inspect the prayer closely we discover that it really directs us to Christ. Moreover, this prayer's core, like the Our Father, comes directly from Sacred Scripture.

Let's look at its biblical roots. The prayer begins: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." These words come directly from the Bible, specifically Luke 1:28. Commonly called the "angelic salutation," these words came from the lips of Saint Gabriel, the archangel entrusted with announcing to Mary the possibility of becoming the mother of Christ. Considering that God had delegated this task to Saint Gabriel and that Saint Luke's Gospel is the inspired Word of God, it seems quite fitting for us to address Mary with these God-given words.

The prayer continues with a second biblical verse: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." This text – Luke 1:42 – records the words of Saint Elizabeth, the pregnant mother of Saint John the Baptist, when she greeted Mary, who had come to assist her with childbirth. Notice a crucial point: Elizabeth's "prayer" begins by focusing on Mary – "Blessed are you" – but terminates with Jesus – "Blessed is the fruit of your womb." Mary's "blessedness" is rooted in God's mysterious choice of her from "among women" to bear his Son. Mary is not an independent "goddess" who operates alone. Rather the intimate and permanent bond between Mary and Christ makes it impossible to honor one without the other. How then could we ever presume that either Son or Mother would resent honor accorded to the other?

Early Christians quickly recognized the value of praying to Christ in union with his Mother. Hence, they welded together the two verses from the Gospel of Saint Luke, thereby forming the most primitive form of the Hail Mary. This occurred in the sixth century. Some Christian communities soon added a non-biblical text to the two verses: "Because you have conceived Christ, the Redeemer of souls." This line explicitly reinforced the focus on the Lord while also emphasizing Mary's indispensable role as his Mother.

By the 11th century, frequent recitation of the "short" Hail Mary (the two lines from Saint Luke minus the extra line) had become very widespread throughout the Christian world. After all, most Christians were unable to read and this little formula, so easy to memorize, put them in constant touch with God's inspired word. Moreover, it bound them to the common prayer of the masses as well as to Mary as they invoked her by name.

Saint Peter Damian, the great and holy reformer of the

episcopacy and priesthood, took the lead in encouraging frequent recitation of the “short” Hail Mary. By 1200, some bishops required their priests to teach the Hail Mary to everyone under their care. Prior to this time, they taught only the Our Father and Apostles’ Creed.

In 1261, Pope Urban IV mandated the addition of “Jesus” to the words “and blessed is the fruit of thy womb,” thereby strongly accenting the “Cristo-centric” nature of the prayer. Two factors probably delayed this slight change for so long: first, opposition to altering a biblical text; and second, widespread reluctance to pronounce the Holy Name of Jesus aloud and too frequently.

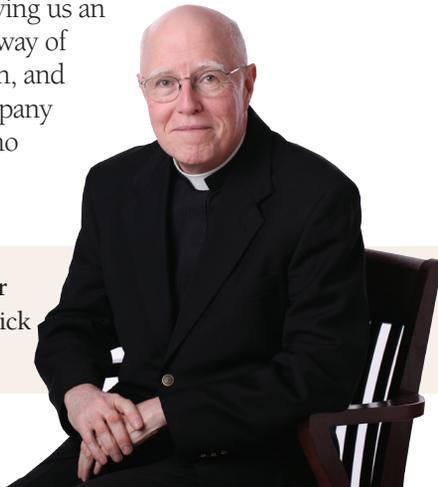
Now, let’s examine the non-biblical part of the Hail Mary. In the second part we pray: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.”

This text is fairly new, first appearing in the 15th century. It comes from a sermon preached by Saint Bernardine of Siena in 1426. Saint Bernardine, a Franciscan who was enormously famous as a preacher, especially in promoting devotion to the Holy Name, probably repeated this little prayer hundreds of times. Thousands of people heard it, liked it very much and began imitating Saint Bernardine by adding it to the private recitation of the “short” Hail Mary. Gradually, this fusion of the “short” prayer with the extra verse became common in many monastic communities, giving the custom the force of monastic endorsement.

This “longer” Hail Mary, as we currently have it, became the only official version when it appeared in the Breviary – the Divine Office prayed by clergy, religious, and some lay people – approved by Pope Saint Pius V in 1568.

Though the Our Father holds the preeminent place among all formal vocal prayers because it originates from the “Lord’s own mouth,” the Hail Mary has great importance for Catholics, indeed for all Christian believers. Like the Our Father, its core – the first half – comes directly from Sacred Scripture. And it carefully balances the Our Father’s more “abstract” image of God as the “unseen Origin” with the image of Jesus, a human being born from the womb of a specific woman named Mary. The rosary, which is so simple yet enormously rich, uses both prayers together, giving us an excellent and integrated way of praying to the Father, Son, and Spirit, always in the company of Mary, never alone. Who could object, or desire anything more?

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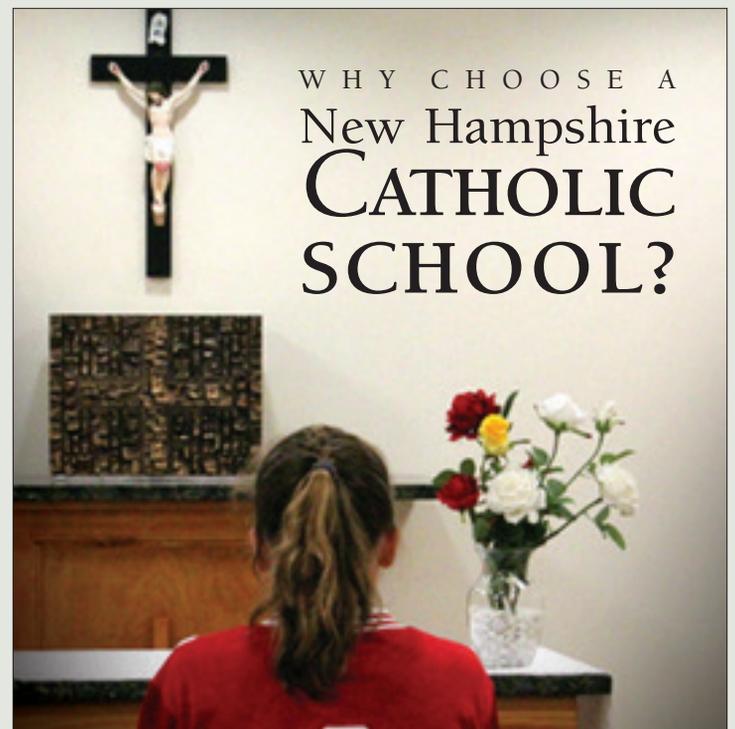


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