



Madonna and Child with
Sts Francis and Dominic
and Angels, Giulio Cesare
Procaccini, 1610s, Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New York

Dear Father Kerper: I have always loved the rosary and was taught that it was given to us by the Blessed Mother. While I certainly admire Pope Saint John Paul II, I have never understood why he changed the rosary by adding the “Mysteries of Light.” Why add anything to the Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious Mysteries after centuries of tradition? What else will change? Please help me to understand why this happened.

Let’s begin with some historical background, both near term and more ancient. On Oct. 16, 2002, Pope Saint John Paul II published an apostolic letter entitled *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*,

Why were mysteries added to the traditional rosary?

which means “On the Rosary of the Virgin Mary.” In chapter II, he described the various “mysteries” of the rosary. However, instead of 15 mysteries, the Holy Father suddenly wrote about 20. He called these five additional events the “Mysteries of Light,” also known as the “Luminous Mysteries.” He inserted this new batch between the Joyful and Sorrowful mysteries.

Why – and how – could he upset the traditional rosary?

Pope Saint John Paul II gave two reasons. First, the traditional 15 decades left out everything about Christ’s life from His boyhood to His Passion, jumping from the finding of the boy Jesus in the Temple to the agony in the garden. For people who used the rosary as their principal form of prayer, the standard arrangement deprived them of the opportunity to meditate on the public ministry of the Lord.

Second, the Holy Father wrote that the addition of the Luminous Mysteries was “meant to give [the rosary] fresh life and to enkindle renewed interest in the rosary’s place within Christian spirituality as a true doorway to the depths of the Heart of Christ.” [*Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, 19]

He also noted the great value of the old “method,” namely the standard 15 mysteries, but added, “This is not to say that the method cannot be improved.” He proposed the new mysteries as a genuine enrichment, not as another senseless or annoying novelty.

Now, let’s move to the second question: How could any pope, even a future canonized saint, alter the prayer handed on by the Blessed Mother?

Without doubt, we all believe that the rosary enjoys special status within the Church as an extraordinarily rich and venerable form of prayer. Indeed, many popes have asserted that the rosary is a gift from Mary to us. Pope Saint John Paul II powerfully reinforced this belief in the first line of *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*. He noted that the rosary “gradually took form... under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.” However, this process has always included much human creativity as well. As such, we must admit that the definitive selection of the mysteries was not done by the Blessed Mother alone in a single complete form. Rather, the mysteries emerged from the spiritual wisdom of good and holy people who, over a few centuries, came to agree on the 15 mysteries, now supplemented by the Luminous Mysteries.

We discover this collaborative “Divine/Human” process by looking deeply into Catholic history, specifically the 15th century. Here’s what happened.

For several centuries, ordinary Catholics prayed “Our Lady’s Psalter,” which consisted of 150 Hail Mary prayers.

Each Hail Mary replaced one of the 150 Psalms. This was done because few people had access to the Psalm texts and many could not read.

Recognizing that this “Psalter” was much more than a string of 150 repetitive prayers, people began adding short phrases about the lives of Christ and the Blessed Mother to each Hail Mary, thereby fostering contemplation of Jesus and Mary.

In the early 15th century, a Prussian Carthusian monk named Dominic hit upon a brilliant idea: he divided the Psalter into three “sets” of 50 Hail Mary prayers with 50 corresponding texts about Christ and Mary. He arranged these texts around three specific themes – joy, sorrow, and glory.

A short time later, a Carthusian monk named Henry of Klakar divided the 50 Hail Mary prayers into five groups of 10, thereby creating the “decades” of the rosary linked to a “mystery.” He also inserted the Our Father before each decade.

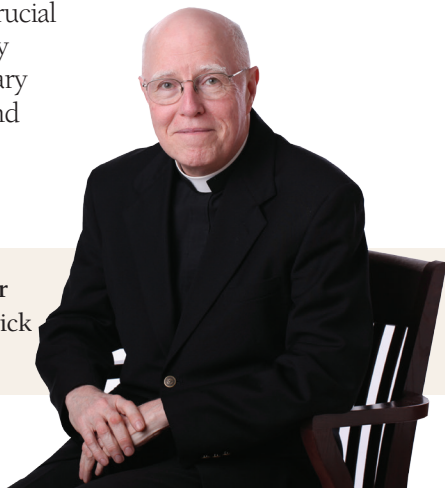
More than 40 years after Dominic’s pioneering innovation, a Dominican friar wrote *On the Dear Lady’s Psalter*. This book replaced the short texts linked to each Hail Mary with complete meditations joined to each complete decade rather than each Hail Mary.

By about 1483, the rosary as we currently have it was almost complete, except for the Glorious Mysteries. In this “set,” the Assumption and Coronation of Mary were combined as the fourth mystery; the fifth mystery was the Second Coming of Christ, which eventually disappeared.

This brief historical overview of the rosary shows us how the rosary is ever ancient and ever new. Its core remains the same: the 150 Hail Mary prayers, which replicate in miniature form the 150 Psalms of David. Yet, each time we pray the rosary, we may possibly encounter something entirely new. This happened to Pope Saint John Paul II. In creating the Luminous Mysteries, he simply shared with the Universal Church his own deeply spiritual insights. Considering his own intense devotion to Mary and her rosary, how could anyone suspect that the Luminous Mysteries are not part of the genuine development of this great prayer?

Moreover Saint Pope John Paul II humbly conceded that he was not mandating that people use the Luminous Mysteries. After all, the rosary is not a formal liturgical prayer. Hence, its form and recitation are not regulated by the Church.

The Holy Father ended his letter on the rosary with this crucial statement: “What is really important is that the rosary should always be seen and experienced as a path of contemplation.” [38] ■



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