

## chapter three

# BEYOND WORDS

Without [contemplation] the Rosary is a body without a soul, and its recitation is in danger of becoming a mechanical repetition of formulas and of going counter to the warning of Christ: “And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words” (Mt. 6:7).

—POPE PAUL VI, *Marialis Cultus*, 47



Why does the Church encourage a form of prayer that is so repetitive and that can therefore appear meaningless?

A vital thing I’ve learned during my Catholic years is that in formal prayer, the form contributes to the substance, rather than subtracting from it. Let’s take a look at the Mass, for example.

I remember going to Mass with a friend long before I became a Catholic. One of my objections at the time was that the liturgy seemed cold and mechanical. From the outside looking in, I could see only automatons mechanically reciting prayers and droning responses. “How can this possibly have any purpose,” I wondered, “when it’s not from the heart? It’s meaningless, isn’t it?”

Granted, a sea of voices simultaneously reciting the same prayers can sound mechanical, but my assumption was both naïve and presumptuous. I couldn’t possibly have known what

was happening in the hearts and minds of all those present at the Masses I attended. This was confirmed for me when, after becoming a Catholic, my own voice “droned” while my heart was bursting with passion for God.

While responses during the Mass come “automatically” and are prescribed, that does not render them meaningless for us. The prayers of the Mass provide a structure that frees us to experience worship more fully, precisely because we can rely on the stability of the form. Rather than wondering what to do next, we have the basics down. We know when to stand, when to kneel, when to respond. As C.S. Lewis noted in *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*, an ever-changing liturgy can distract from its purpose: “Try as one may to exclude it, the question ‘What on earth is he up to now?’ will intrude. It lays one’s devotion waste.”<sup>1</sup>

The rosary’s prescribed form gives the prayer a shape that frees our mind for the meditations that are meant to accompany it. There is a beginning, a middle and an end. That form allows us to focus. It is the springboard from which the mental prayer takes off.

### VAIN REPETITION?

Let’s look at the warning in Scripture: “And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words” (Matthew 6:7). Are we “heaping up empty phrases” when we pray the rosary?

“Vain” repetition is meaningless repetition, done for its own sake. If I believe that my salvation will depend on an accounting of my prayer quantity, then I may indeed be tempted to heap up a mountain of empty phrases. But as notable as those efforts would be for a world record, they would also, without a doubt, be in vain. God is not in the business of keeping such accounts.

Why then do we repeat the prayers of the rosary so many times?

As we just said, the rosary's form contributes to its substance. The repetition is the frame, or the foundation, upon which the structure of meditation is built. The repetition isn't meaningless but serves a vital purpose. It's the backbone of the prayer, the skeletal support for its real heart and soul.

It's also important to note that Jesus did not say that we must avoid *all* repetition. He said that we are to avoid "empty" repetition. Practically speaking, it would be impossible to avoid all repetition in prayer. We can pray the same prayer countless times in a day, a week, a month or a year, and the prayer does not lose its power with each utterance. Rather, every instance of sincere prayer is an expression of confidence in and love for God.

When Jesus gave us the Lord's Prayer, he did not expect us to say it once and be done with it. And in Revelation the "great multitude in heaven" repeat *Hallelujahs* to the Lord in praise and worship (see Revelation 19:1–6). Is this repetition in vain? Or is it an intense expression of worship, worthy praise of the Lamb of God?

Recently a friend related this story to me. His friend's son was in intensive care after being hit by a drunk driver. This mother would kneel before the Lord and pray, "Please, God, help him. Please, God, please, God, please, God, help him."

One day the mother realized that her prayers were, in one sense, nothing more than "repetition." Yet her intense plea rose up from deep within her soul. In her fear and desperation, she didn't know how else to pray.

I'm certain that in her heart and mind she held various pictures of her son: injured, helpless, frightened and in need, then perhaps healing and smiling and finally fully healed by God. Her mother's heart was assuredly "meditating" on these images as her voice repeated, "Please, God, help him."

Was her repetition empty? Hardly. It was a cry sent from the pit of despair to the throne of heaven, borne of surrender and trust. Her repetitious pleas were the foundation that supported the images of hope held in her heart.

I've found that my own informal, spontaneous prayers are not necessarily less repetitious or more profound than formal prayers. How often I repeat the same pleas to God and offer redundant lists of petitions!

The rosary is the same. While it could certainly appear to be vain or empty, properly approached it is a prayer from the heart, a cry from the soul and a way to rejoice in the glory of our salvation. The "fixed form" that frees our mind, that very repetition, is necessary for our focus. It's what allows the cries of anguish or shouts of joy to rise up and find voice. Repetition becomes an anchor that fastens our minds to the prayer and keeps our thoughts from floating far away.

So is it enough just to say my Our Fathers and Hail Marys and be done with it for the day? The short answer is, "No. Sorry. It's better than nothing, but it's not enough." The long answer is that although recitation of the prayers *is* better than nothing, we will gain immeasurably more from the rosary if we incorporate meditation. Yes, the rosary is a prescribed set of prayers, but it is more than the sum of those parts. As we just saw, the prescription is there to help us focus. Once we're focused, the real prayer can begin.

## MEDITATION

Consider for a moment the history we discussed. When the monks prayed the psalms, they entered deeply into Scripture and into the story of our salvation. The book of Psalms is an astounding chronicle of human emotion and experience, of joyful praise

and agonizing despair, of divine intervention and man's response. The psalms are about our relationship with the Lord. When meditation on the psalms was eliminated (for the sake of the illiterate), something vital was lost. It's simply not the same thing to pray the Our Father 150 times as it is to immerse oneself in the richness of the book of Psalms.

That is *not* to say that the Our Father is meaningless when prayed without added meditation. No prayer is ever meaningless. And the Our Father is practically a stand-alone catechism of our faith, rich and profound. Prayers, which are essentially sacramentals (sacred signs, symbols or objects that dispose us to receive grace), are always valuable in and of themselves.

Yet it seems to me that the later addition of meditations to the rosary was a recognition of (and remedy for) what had been lost. Meditation restored the purpose of the prayers, allowing us once again to enter deeply into and meditate on Scripture and salvation history, this time with an added bonus: the intercession of our Blessed Mother.

Meditating on Christ's life through the mysteries of the rosary cannot help but draw us closer to him. Meditation is a quest for deeper understanding (see *CCC*, 2705), and in praying the rosary, we are on a quest to know Jesus more intimately. Admittedly, the quality of our quest will vary, as time and circumstances allow, but we should always remember that the rosary is not a set of prayers to race through every day. Rather, the core of the rosary is meditation.

## CLOSER TO JESUS

Pope John Paul II zeroed in on the Christ-centered nature of the rosary when he observed something very basic about the tool we use to pray it: the beads. He noted that they all *“converge upon the*

*Crucifix.*"<sup>2</sup> In other words, Jesus Christ is at the beginning and the end of the prayer. He is the essence of the meditations. All things point to him, including the simple tool we use to aid us in our contemplation.

There's nothing mysterious about the fact that the mysteries are the key to the rosary. The mysteries, mini-portraits of the life of Jesus, come to us from Scripture. They are what make the prayer Christ-centered. It really is all about him.

Because the rosary is anchored in Christ, it cannot help but draw us closer to him. To pray the rosary is to spend time with Jesus. It is a walk with him through every facet of his life, from his earthly conception to the glory of his Resurrection. The rosary is the life of Christ in microcosm. One who prays the rosary regularly is keeping company with the Lord.

Pope John Paul II, shortly after his election to the papacy, aptly summed it up this way:

Against the background of the words *Ave Maria* the principal events of the life of Jesus Christ pass before the eyes of the soul. They take shape in the complete series of the joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries, and they put us in living communion with Jesus through—we might say—the heart of his Mother. At the same time our heart can embrace in the decades of the Rosary all the events that make up the lives of individuals, families, nations, the Church, and all mankind. Our personal concerns and those of our neighbour, especially those who are closest to us, who are dearest to us. Thus the simple prayer of the Rosary marks the rhythm of human life.<sup>3</sup>