

The History of the Holy Rosary

By Saint Louis Marie De Montfort



The holy rosary is composed, principally and in substance, of the prayer of Christ and the angelic salutation, that is, the Our Father and the Hail Mary. It was, without doubt, the first prayer and the principal devotion of the faithful and has been in use all through the centuries. It was in the year 1214 that the Church received the holy rosary in its present form and according to the method we use today. It was given to the Church by St. Dominic, who had received it from the Blessed Virgin as a means of converting the Albigensians and other sinners. Saint Dominic, seeing that the gravity of people's sins was hindering the conversion of the Albigensians, withdrew into a forest near Toulouse, where he prayed continuously for three days and three nights. During this time he did nothing but weep and do harsh penances in order to appease the anger of Almighty God. He used his discipline so much that his body was lacerated and finally he fell into a coma. At this point Our Lady appeared to him accompanied by three angels. She said: "Dear Dominic, do you know which weapon the Blessed Trinity wants to use to reform the world?" He responded: "Oh, my Lady, you know far better than I do because next to your Son Jesus Christ you have always been the chief instrument of our salvation." Then our Lady replied, "I want you to know that, in this kind of warfare, the principal weapon has always been the Angelic Psalter, which is the foundation-stone of the New Testament. Therefore, if you want to reach these hardened souls and win them over to God, preach my Psalter." So he arose, comforted, and burning with zeal for the conversion of the people in that district, he made straight for the cathedral. At once unseen angels rang the bells to gather the people together, and Saint Dominic began to preach.

An appalling storm broke out at the very beginning of his sermon. The earth shook, the sun was darkened and there was so much thunder and lightning that all were very much afraid.

Their fear was even greater when, looking at a picture of Our Lady exposed in a prominent place, they saw her raise her arms to heaven three times to call down the wrath of Almighty God upon them if they

failed to be converted, to amend their lives and to seek the protection of the holy Mother of God. Almighty God wished by means of these supernatural phenomena, to spread the new devotion of the holy rosary and to make it more widely known. At last, at the prayer of Saint Dominic, the storm came to an end. He then continued to preach. So fervently and compellingly did he explain the importance and value of the rosary that almost all the people of Toulouse embraced it and renounced their false beliefs. In a very short time a great improvement was seen in the town; people began leading Christian lives and gave up their former bad habits.

Inspired by the Holy Ghost and instructed by the Blessed Virgin, Saint Dominic preached the rosary for the rest of his life. The holy rosary, which he prayed every day, was his preparation for every sermon. He preached it by his example as well as by his sermons. He preached in cities and in country places, to people of high station and low, before scholars and the uneducated, to Catholics and to heretics.

One day he was to preach at Notre Dame in Paris. It happened to be the feast of St. John the Evangelist. He was in a little chapel behind the high altar prayerfully preparing his sermon by saying the Rosary, as he always did, when Our Lady appeared to him and said: "Dominic, even though what you have planned to say may be very good, I am bringing you a much better sermon." Saint Dominic took in his hands the book Our Lady proffered. He read the sermon carefully and when he had understood it and meditated on it; he gave thanks to her. When the time came, he went up into the pulpit and in spite of the feast day, made no mention of Saint John other than to say that he had been found worthy to be the guardian of the Queen of Heaven. The congregation was made up of theologians and other eminent people who were used to hearing unusual and polished discourses. Saint Dominic told them that it was not his desire to give them a learned discourse, wise in the eyes of the world, but rather that he would speak in the simplicity of the Holy Ghost and with His forcefulness. So he began preaching the holy rosary and explained the Hail Mary word by word as he would to a group of children. He used the very simple illustrations which were in the book given him by Our Lady.

Blessed Alan, according to Carthage, mentioned several other occasions when Our Lord and Our Lady appeared to Saint Dominic to urge him and inspire him to preach the holy rosary more and more in order to wipe out sin and to convert sinners and heretics. In another passage Carthage says, "Blessed Alan said Our Lady revealed to him that, after she had appeared to Saint Dominic, her blessed Son appeared to him and said, Dominic, I rejoice to see that you are not relying on your own wisdom and rather than seek the empty praise of men, you are working with great humility for the salvation of souls. Priests should try to kindle a love of prayer in people's hearts and especially a love of my Angelic Psalter. If only they would all start praying it and would really persevere, Almighty God in His mercy could hardly refuse to give them His grace. So I want you to preach my holy rosary."

The Confraternity of the Holy Rosary only retained its first fervor for a century after it was instituted by Saint Dominic. After this it was like a thing buried and forgotten. Doubtless, too, the wicked scheming and jealousy of the devil were largely responsible for getting people to neglect the holy rosary, and thus block the flow of grace which it had drawn upon the world.

Thus, in 1349 Almighty God punished the whole of Europe with the most terrible plague that had ever been known. Starting in the east, it spread throughout Italy, Germany, France, Poland and Hungary, bringing desolation wherever it went. Out of a hundred men hardly one lived to tell the tale. Big cities, towns, villages and monasteries were almost completely deserted during the three years that the epidemic lasted. This scourge was quickly followed by two others, the heresy of the Flagellants and a

tragic schism in 1376. Later on, when these trials were over, thanks to the mercy of Almighty God, Our Lady told Blessed Alan to revive the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary. Blessed Alan was one of the Dominican Fathers at the monastery at Dinan, in Brittany. He was an eminent theologian and a famous preacher. Our Lady chose him because, since the Confraternity had originally been started in that province, it was fitting that a Dominican from the same province should have the honor of re-establishing it.

Blessed Alan began this great work in 1460, after a special warning from Our Lord. This is how he received that urgent message, as he himself tells it: One day when he was offering Mass, Our Lord, who wished to spur him on to preach the holy rosary, spoke to him in the Sacred Host. "How can you crucify me again so soon?" Jesus said. "What did you say, Lord?" asked Blessed Alan, horrified. "You crucified me once before by your sins," answered Jesus, "and I would willingly be crucified again rather than have my Father offended by the sins you used to commit. You are crucifying me again now because you have all the learning and understanding that you need to preach the Blessed Mother's rosary, and you are not doing it. If you only did that, you could teach many souls the right path and lead them away from sin. But you are not doing it, and so you yourself are guilty of the sins that they commit." This terrible reproach made Blessed Alan solemnly resolve to preach the holy rosary unceasingly. Our Lady also said to him one day to inspire him to preach the holy rosary more and more, "You were a great sinner in your youth, but I obtained the grace of your conversion from my Son. Had such a thing been possible, I would have liked to have gone through all kinds of suffering to save you, because converted sinners are a glory to me. And I would have done that also to make you worthy of preaching my rosary far and wide." Saint Dominic appeared to Blessed Alan as well and told him of the great results of his ministry: he had preached the holy rosary unceasingly. His sermons had borne great fruit and many people had been converted during his missions. He said to Blessed Alan, "See what wonderful results I have had through preaching the holy rosary. You and all who love Our Lady ought to do the same so that, by means of this holy practice of the rosary, you may draw all people to the real science of the virtues." Briefly, then, this is the history of how Saint Dominic established the holy rosary and of how Blessed Alan de la Roche restored it.

From the time Saint Dominic established the devotion to the holy rosary up to the time when Blessed Alan de la Roche re-established it in 1460, it has always been called the 'Psalter of Jesus and Mary'. This is because it has the same number of Hail Marys as there are psalms in the Book of the Psalms of David.

Ever since Blessed Alan de la Roche re-established this devotion, it was given the name of the rosary, which means "crown of roses." That is to say that every time people pray the holy rosary devoutly they place on the head of the Blessed Virgin Mary 153 white roses and sixteen red roses. These roses will never fade or lose their beauty for they are heavenly flowers.

Our Lady has approved and confirmed this name of the rosary. She has revealed that each time one prays a Hail Mary one gives to her a beautiful rose. Each time one completes the holy rosary one makes for her a crown of roses.

So the complete rosary is a large crown of roses and each chaplet of five decades is a little wreath of flowers or a little crown of heavenly roses which we place on the head of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The rose is the queen of flowers and so the holy rosary is the rose of devotions and the most important of them.