

Introduction

I learned the Hail Mary sitting on a mattress on the floor, in the upstairs room of the last apartment I lived in before I got married. I was newly Catholic and I had a special intention. I was convinced the Blessed Mother was the right one to approach.

As I stumbled through the Rosary that first time, without the benefit of the audio aids that would later help me to “get it,” I didn’t get a shock of understanding. The lights didn’t flicker. Nothing exploded in a shower of sparks.

But I kept plugging along, struggling. The Rosary became my companion on commutes, and I discovered a CD that helped me learn the words. I would keep a rosary in my purse, but I learned how to check it off on my fingers when I didn’t have or couldn’t use a rosary. Time passed and that intention was updated with something else. Then I put the Rosary away for a while, only to pick it up again.

Now that I’ve had the Rosary as my companion for years, I notice that when I’m troubled, when I can’t find the words, or when I am fearful, I latch on to the Hail Mary. Does saying it just occupy the part of my mind that needs activity? Possibly. But I think there’s more to it.

A few years ago, I woke in the middle of the night. I was on a trip without my husband, and the baby and toddler were both snoring beauties. Nothing was amiss except that there was an urge so strong it was almost as if someone were *telling* me to pray for my safety.

I don't know how long I lay there, terrified. All I could pray was a litany of Hail Marys. It was the only thing that came out. I had never had an experience where a memorized prayer was a way of praying past the fear completely clouding my mind except in my dreams.

I don't often have nightmares, except when I'm pregnant. Then they are no-holds-barred adventures. During one of my pregnancies, I remember feeling petrified and waking myself up by praying Hail Marys. You might say it's become my blankie prayer.

Just as my children cling to their worn-soft, faded blankies, so I cling to my Blessed Mother's skirt through this prayer. When my heart aches, I cry out a Hail Mary. When I need to be held in my sorrow, it's a Hail Mary that comes out. When I'm worried or troubled, the words I can't find on my own shape up as a Hail Mary.

I wrap my babies in soft blankets, bundling them against hurt, and God has wrapped me in the blankie prayer that I've become as comfortable with as the old quilt from my childhood, the one on my bed. I

hold my children after they fall and put bandages on their scrapes, just as God wraps his arms around me through the love of his mother, which I'm always reminded of when I say a Hail Mary.

I pray it unconsciously, the way my children grab my hand without even knowing it when we're walking side by side. It's a comfort to me, and I'm so blessed to have it. When I don't have words for the desires of my heart, I always have the Hail Mary. When I'm lonely or sad or just at odds with the world, I have the Hail Mary. In the Hail Mary, I find so very many spiritual delights, not the least of which is how it leads me, irrevocably, closer to Mary's Son.

In 2011, Jennifer Fulwiler introduced me to a new way of looking at prayer: one word at a time. She hosted many guest writers at her blog, *Conversion Diary*, and they traveled through the Our Father one word at a time. It was a way of praying I had never considered and one that has stuck with me in the years since.

Of course, I couldn't resist considering my favorite prayer in light of this word-by-word approach. What would it be like to pray the Hail Mary deliberately, carefully weighing the importance and significance of every one of the forty-two words?

The book you hold in your hands represents the answer to that question. I approached a number of my favorite writers and friends, expecting a flurry

of negative responses. What I received, instead, was the grace of seeing people put Mary's yes to work in the most beautiful way, by deliberately walking through the Hail Mary one word at a time.

The experience of praying this, my "blankie prayer," in such a slow and deliberate manner has sown many seeds in my spiritual life. I don't naturally do things slowly. I'm a process gal with an eye toward productivity: there's a lot on my list and the day is burning along. But when I stop and take a breath, praying in this intentional way, I find a different kind of comfort.

It's just as enriching as when I lean into the unconscious softness of it, turning to it without even considering what the words mean. My intellect gets engaged, and suddenly I notice different things. There's a new message for me each time I approach the Hail Mary slowly. A calmness is cultivated that forces me to live in the present moment in a way so few things in my modern life of gadgets and responsibilities require.

Though I'm no master at *lectio divina*, the sacred reading of scripture and praying along with it, I can't help but feel that's the same sort of thing we're doing here, praying the Hail Mary deliberately like this. We're slowing ourselves, focusing on each element.

And since the Hail Mary is based on scripture, that's not such a far-fetched way of approaching this prayer, is it?

Each element is important. Skip a *the* or an *of* and you can change the entire meaning of the sentence. Leave out a verb or a noun, and nothing makes sense.

So here we are. We'll take a journey together through the Hail Mary, word by word. The prayer will expand as we work our way from *Hail* to *Amen*. You may find yourself uncomfortable, inspired, confused, or even overwhelmed. Embrace that experience and let Mary guide you to her Son through it.

I am glad you're with us. I pray you'll join us in turning to Jesus through the intercession of his dear and beloved mother.

Hail Mary, full of grace



Fr. Patrick Toner

We all recognize the greeting of Gabriel. The Greek word *chairō* can be translated as “greeting,” or “hail,” or “rejoice.” We commonly use greetings with multiple meanings, such as “Good morning.” It can be a fact or a wish, and often it is meant to be both.

If Gabriel had greeted Mary in Hebrew, it would likely have been *shalom*, or “Peace be with you.” The gospel was written in Greek, so the term *chairō* was used. The translation “Hail” speaks of saluting one of great favor. The Roman greeting “Hail Caesar” easily comes to mind. Certainly Gabriel understood whom he was greeting and the significance of the words that would follow.

In Nazareth, over the grotto of the Annunciation, there is a depiction of Mary and Gabriel overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. They are dancing with great joy. I love to consider what would make an angel dance. Gabriel was in the presence of a rare per-

son, one totally filled with God's grace. His greeting must have been more akin to "Rejoice" than just a simple greeting.

Each time we pray "Hail Mary," we should welcome her into our hearts so that we may meditate on the mysteries with her. To greet her is to acknowledge that she is present to us. May that be a heartfelt and warm welcome, full of joy.

Prayer

How can you welcome Mary into your heart today? As you go throughout your day, pause at least once to pray the Hail Mary. As you're praying it, greet her and greet God through her presence in you.

Fr. Patrick Toner, a priest of forty years in the Diocese of Columbus, Ohio, has served as a pastor, military chaplain, prison chaplain, spiritual director, and editorialist.

Hail *Mary*, full of grace



Deacon Tom Fox

What first came to mind when I thought of writing about the name Mary is related to my Irish heritage. I thought of the patriotic songwriter George M. Cohan, who wrote a song that has these words:

For it is Mary, Mary
Plain as any name can be . . .
And there is something there that sounds so
square
It's a grand old name
Yes—Mary is a grand old name.

I seem to remember my mother—whose name, coincidentally, was Mary—playing that song on our basement piano while Dad played the fiddle.

I discovered the hymn “Mary the Dawn” during my first year as a deacon candidate when we purchased our Liturgy of the Hours books. I had never heard of “Mary the Dawn” before then. In just fourteen lines, I found a sensitive theology for ordinary folks that beautifully and tenderly describes the

Incarnation and the intimacy between Mother and Son. All but lost in history, these words were likely a poem about Mary and the totally unique relationship that exists between the Tabernacle and the God-Son reposed in her.

Mary the Dawn

Mary the dawn, Christ the Perfect Day;
Mary the gate, Christ the Heavenly Way!
Mary the root and Christ the Mystic Vine;
Mary the grape and Christ the Sacred Wine!
Mary the wheat, Christ the Living Bread;
Mary the stem, Christ the Rose blood-red!
Mary the font, Christ the Cleansing Flood;
Mary the cup, Christ the Saving Blood!
Mary the temple, Christ the temple's Lord;
Mary the shrine, Christ the God adored!
Mary the beacon, Christ the Haven's Rest,
Mary the mirror, Christ the Vision Blest.
Mary the mother, Christ the mother's son
By all things blest, while endless ages run.
Amen.

If you are a devotee of Mary, you are aware that there are many titles for our Blessed Mother. There is no person from our Christian scripture and heritage who has been so honored as to the quantity or the scope of the titles as our Mother Mary. I have compiled a nonexhaustive list of these titles for use in meditation, which can be found in the appendix.

Prayer

We often give nicknames to those we love. Choose one of the titles or nicknames of Mary and use it in place of her name when you pray the Hail Mary today. If you need ideas for a title, see the appendix.

Deacon Tom Fox is the cofounder of the Catholic Vitamins podcast.

Hail Mary, *full* of grace



Jaymie Stuart Wolfe

Full. *Full of yourself. Full of baloney. Full of it.* There are instances in which full really means empty. It's so easy to chase our appetites, to fill ourselves with what we think will satisfy our hunger. But that is precisely how we end up empty.

Full of life. Full of hope. A full heart. These are things we cannot acquire ourselves, things we must receive. To be full, we must have *been filled*.

We may look to others as well as to our own ingenuity, but there is only One who can fill us. This is the very human truth that Mary knew and lived. God alone can fill the hungry with good things (Lk 1:53).

We live in a world of image and appearance where what we seem has become more important than what we are. All around us exquisitely crafted empty bottles are being sold as full ones. That's not difficult when no one is willing to take the stopper out and turn the bottle upside down. *Not one drop.* But, afraid we might miss out, a whole lot of us are