

CHAPTER 1

THE ROSARY FOR OUR TIMES

As the month of October draws near, a month which we have already dedicated to the Virgin Mary under the title of Our Lady of the Rosary, we earnestly exhort the faithful to carry out this religious exercise this year with the greatest faith, piety and diligence possible. We know that a refuge is at hand in the maternal goodness of the Blessed Virgin, and we are sure that we are not placing our hope in her in vain.

—Pope Leo XIII, *QP*, 2

What Is the Rosary?

The Rosary is many things. It is a powerful story that, when often recited, becomes familiar and inspiring—even thrilling—to many. It is a comfort and a habit, a place to which we return and from which we step out of the world. The Rosary is an object of sacred art, a tactile experience in many media: wood, metal, stone, precious gems, string, and even plastic. But most of all, the Rosary is a prayer; indeed, it is *the* prayer for millions around the world who seek the profound spiritual experience that it promises.

Further, it is a prayer for all Christians—not just Catholics. While throughout this book, I emphasize my experiences and the sources of my understanding about the Rosary, which are primarily Catholic, this book is for all my Christian brothers and sisters, to allow you to take a close look at what this special prayer offers our faith lives.

His Holiness Blessed Pope John Paul II often preached and taught about the Rosary. “The Rosary is my favorite prayer,”

he confessed. “A marvelous prayer!”¹ Like many of the popes, he wrote on the subject for the edification of the faithful. In his 2002 Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (The Rosary of the Virgin Mary) he urged, “Confidently take up the Rosary once again. Rediscover the Rosary in the light of Scripture, in harmony with the liturgy, and in the context of your daily lives” (*RVM*, 43). What a challenge! And from the Pope himself.

The Rosary gives so much more than what it takes in time and effort. In a very real sense, it serves as a catalyst to stir within us God’s grace and peace, or an antenna, so to speak, with which it is easy to pick up the transmission of that grace directly to us, the intended receivers. After all, we have been equipped by our Creator with the ability to receive his Word and every expression of his love for us; ever since humankind was conceived in the mind of God, we have had the physical and spiritual capacity to “hear” him.

Pope John Paul II, his predecessors, and his successor, Pope Benedict XVI, have all recognized the power of receiving God’s grace in our lives and how easy it really is to ask for that holy and healing touch, however unworthy any of us may be in the moment of asking. All the Lord wants from us is that we ask, that we make some kind of affirmative gesture or movement in his direction in response to his never-ending invitation, that we reach out like the ailing woman in the crowd to touch his garment (Mk 5:27). And the Lord is available to us, always and everywhere, along with his mother who stands with him and intercedes with him on our behalf. So little is required of any of us; we need simply turn to him.

This book, then, is an invitation to Christian men, and women as well. It’s not only for Catholics, for the Rosary is not exclusively a Catholic prayer. I invite you to share the peace and joy that I and so many others for hundreds of years have experienced on this powerful journey. Join the worldwide community of prayer that is available to you in your own living room, backyard, or favorite church pew. The Rosary is an invitation

from God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and from the Mother of God, Mary, our Blessed Mother.

Walk with me—with us—on the path of prayer to peace. This is a path that leads directly to God himself, into the heart of the Trinity that is the source of all love and all peace. Isn't that what we are all seeking? Pray with other men of great faith and steadfast purpose; pray along with the women in your lives. We can learn from one another how to pray and why we pray, using the simplest and most beautiful tool the Lord has literally placed in our hands.

Some may hesitate, but can you give me any reason *not* to pray the Rosary? Why say “no” to one of the most precious gifts you will ever receive? Why not give it a try? As John Paul II wrote, it is “marvelous in its simplicity and in its depth” (*RVM*, 2). The suggestions contained in this little book can work as an aid in getting started. I ask only that you spend a little time reading about what has happened to me over the past several years, which I share in these pages as the reality of one man's experience. Also, I offer insights into what became for me a new world—or rather, a new perspective on the world—which I gained from standing still long enough to listen to Jesus, Mary, my pastor, my late mother, my wife, my bishop, and other men who have been placed in my life as God's messengers. They—like you—are the ambassadors of Christ in every minute and every aspect of daily life. My great learning has been saying “yes” to *you* and listening to *you*—and answering the Lord's call to serve *you* on our journey together to him.

In this book, you will learn about the mission of Real Men Pray the Rosary (RMPTR), the nonprofit ministry my wife and I founded to share the spiritual blessings of praying the Most Holy Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary with all Christians, especially men. Specifically, the mission statement of RMPTR is derived directly from the Apostolic Letter of Blessed John Paul II quoted earlier.

At RMPTR, we aim to “promote the Rosary with conviction, in the light of scripture, in harmony with the liturgy and in the context of our daily lives.” I have reflected and prayed about this extensively, and I am grateful that this ministry or apostolate has gained a tremendous amount of traction with its simple, direct, and powerful message. Our goal is to keep devotion to praying the Rosary alive and well in our time. In a world filled with fast-paced distractions and ubiquitous technology, we endeavor to encourage people to unplug from time to time, sharing in something that doesn’t need electricity or an LCD screen. Just clear the mind for prayer and meditation on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Perhaps even daily, as our Blessed Mother recommended at Fatima and as countless saints have done throughout their own journeys to holiness.

The Rosary has a body and a soul. The body of the Rosary is composed of the prayers. Some of those prayers are prayed in groups of ten, called a “decade.” The Rosary invites us to contemplate twenty important points in the life and teachings of Jesus and his mother, Mary. These points make up the Rosary’s soul and are referred to as Rosary Mysteries. As we pray the Mysteries, we contemplate how the biblical messages apply to our daily lives—and therein lies the Rosary’s transformative power.

The Mysteries of each decade together embody the overall mystery of the Rosary, which is not something forever hidden or unknowable. On the contrary, the mystery of the Rosary is an invitation to discover something that we have not known before, to experience something that may be brand new or foreign to us. The mystery of the Rosary is a door, perhaps yet unopened, through which we are most graciously invited to pass. It may also present itself to us in the form of a familiar gospel story revealed to us in a new and different perspective. All we need do is open the door through prayer: knock, and it shall be opened to us (cf. Mt 7:7).

A couple of years ago, I was interviewed by a newspaper reporter. During the course of the interview, he tried to get me

to agree with the notion that because I was so familiar with the traditional Rosary prayers, somehow those prayers were more tedious and less meaningful to me. He suggested that continually repeating them lulled me into some sort of meditative trance, and thus I didn't appreciate or understand the prayers any longer. On the contrary, I quickly corrected him, their familiarity was comforting and made them even more treasured to me. I feel the same way when hearing a loved one's comforting voice as when reciting those familiar prayers. For example, I told him, a mother's voice is usually one that we've heard thousands of times. That loving, nurturing voice that many of us are blessed to know and treasure does not become mundane simply because we've heard it before. No matter how many times we've heard it, we do not take it for granted.

Later, as I read more about the Rosary throughout history, I learned that one of the most famous popes, Pope Leo XIII, had described the familiarity of those prayers in much the same way over a hundred years ago: "The Rosary also floods the soul of those who recite it devoutly with an ever new sweetness of piety, giving them the impression and emotion as if they were hearing the *very voice of their most merciful Mother* explaining these mysteries to them and conversing with them at length for their salvation" (*MDM*, 17).

That familiarity evolves into an intimate dialogue with our Blessed Mother. Thus, when one is in the midst of deep prayer in the Rosary, Mary becomes spiritually present to meet us and lead us by the hand through each of those important points of meditation known as the Mysteries. When we pray the Rosary, we are permitted to live those Mysteries through her eyes, through her perspective. That is the beauty of the Rosary: to understand and live those twenty salient points in the life and teachings of Jesus and Mary, with Mary's familiar voice narrating the way.

Ad Jesum per Mariam. To Jesus through Mary.

Why the Rosary?

Pope Pius XII and his successors have referred to the Rosary as a “compendium of the Gospels.” Perhaps because of my profession as an attorney, I view the Rosary as an “executive summary.” And as an executive summary, it is a *short, condensed, and time-efficient path* to reflection on our spiritual life. In business, we find many important things presented to us in summary form: headnotes on newly reported cases in law, indexes of leading economic indicators for those who make long-term financial decisions, and abstracts of reports for those who study demographics or statistics.

The Rosary Mysteries provide an efficient entry point into the life of Jesus and Mary. We are called, in praying the Rosary, to focus on the four groups of Rosary Mysteries: Joyful, Sorrowful, Glorious, and—a recent addition—Luminous. These four groups provide an introduction into twenty specific and salient points in the teaching of Jesus.

Praying the Rosary daily allows us to live and experience the heights and the depths of our entire faith in less than a week’s time. Praying the Rosary daily permits us, within a span of seven days, to personally visit the Holy Family as it was carefully nurtured and formed, to live with the Jesus who actually dwelt among us, to re-create and agonize with the sacrifice and strength of the Passion, and finally to celebrate the glory of a divine promise satisfied.

Studying the Bible passages by themselves could accomplish a coverage of the same material. But praying at the “school of Mary,” to the drumbeat and the rhythm of the Hail Mary and the Lord’s Prayer, enables one to see our Lord and experience our Christian faith through Mary’s eyes—or at least with her *prayers for us*—as we meditate faithfully upon those Mysteries.

The Rosary presents our prayer life with an opportunity for structure that fine-tunes and leverages our spiritual energies in a more complete and comprehensive manner. For example,

you could get off the couch and drive to the gym and, with a sense of determination, sit at the leg extension machine and work your quadriceps. While that effort would be good, or at least healthier than lying on the couch, it would be even more productive to sit with a trainer and be led through an organized and time-tested workout designed to strengthen and tone all of the muscle groups.

Such is the Rosary. Individuals who pray the Rosary regularly can call on Mary's intercession as a spiritual trainer to not just lead them in one isolated workout but rather to engage them to contemplate the span of the Christian good news in an organized way. Over time, as we visit the twenty faith points, or "Mysteries," in the teachings of Christianity, those points become engrained within us or, as the popes say, "inculcate" the faith. The Mysteries become a part of our very existence. We can't help but experience the "joy of the Christmas season" every Monday and Saturday when we meditate upon the third Joyful Mystery, the Birth of Jesus. Just like the couch potato who over time works off the years of inactivity through systematic exercise, so also our prayer life grows and gains muscle tone. In our spiritual workout, we also come to look forward to that twenty-decade journey.

The Rosary presents a point of entry into a study of the Christian good news. Praying the Rosary daily over a period of time permits us to integrate gospel lessons into our everyday lives. Each time we reflect on a Mystery, we interpret it in the light of our current place in life. As our life and circumstances change, so too does our interpretation of the Rosary. Most of us need daily nourishment, especially in the faith. And praying the Rosary is a way to nourish that faith.

For example, in the Sorrowful Mysteries, sometimes our focus is on the Lord's sacrifice for us. His physical suffering speaks to our own experiences of pain and discomfort. Understanding that Jesus endured that suffering for *us* out of love can also make us wonder if we have enough love to endure such trials for those

whom *we* love or are called to love. At other times, we see these Mysteries through Mary's eyes and marvel at her supreme trust in the divine plan, which enabled her to watch as her beloved son endured such suffering. Yet there is no biblical reference to our Blessed Mother's complaints. For those of us who are parents, it is difficult to even imagine the anguish Mary endured in silently witnessing her son's suffering and yet fully trusting in God's salvific plan.

My Story: Mom Knows Best

I call this my "Saul conversion story," in which I was struck not by lightning but by a Rosary!

My dear and saintly mom, Alicia Vera Calvillo, always urged me to have a special love for our "Blessed Mother" and tried to teach me to pray the Rosary. But I was convinced the Rosary was for "old ladies and funerals." It was not for men—not for real men.

Then in the summer of 2008, I found myself at the lowest point in my life. My marriage was in tatters. Many of my fundamental beliefs about myself, my wife, and my marriage had been shattered. I felt like a failure. The prospect of my children living in a broken family was almost more than I could handle. I felt a sense of desperation. I felt a sense of hopelessness.

I instinctively knew I needed a spiritual recharge. I knew that I needed God's help for what may lie ahead in my life. I heard about a retreat for men called the ACTS retreat. Although I had heard of the retreat from other friends and acquaintances, it had never been the right time or the right place. Now was finally the right time.

After many exchanged messages, I met one of the retreat organizers at the parking lot of St. Joseph the Worker Church on a Saturday afternoon. I was impressed that he would take time away from his family on a Saturday afternoon to meet me—a total stranger—with very little notice, just to hand me an application to attend that retreat. I'll never forget him. He has become

one of my heroes: Alex Gamboa Jr. (I share his story a bit later on, including how he was the inspiration for the Rosary-in-fist logo for Real Men Pray the Rosary.)

When the time came for me to leave for the retreat, my small children and my wife drove with me to the church. I sat in our minivan in the church parking lot literally trembling, as I wondered whether I could summon the courage to get down from the van. I sat there quietly for what seemed like an eternity. But when I saw my then-eighteen-year-old son Dave and my brother Bobby waiting there for us, I decided that, if they had come to the retreat “send-off” to show their support, I needed to give it a try. If they had not been there, I’m not sure if I would have attended the retreat. Bobby now says that he came to make sure I did go!

Before I left for the retreat, I consulted with various priest friends about the retreat, and they, especially Monsignor Gustavo Barrera, told me to “Let go and let God.” Essentially, they were telling me to trust in God to help me through this challenging time in my life. I have always been a firm believer in the notion that you get out of something what you put into it. My dad has always preached that lesson. If you really want to learn how to do something and do it well, then you really need to try your absolute best. The same went for the retreat. If I was looking for some help from the Almighty, then I needed to let him help me through this retreat, if that was his will.

My wife, Valerie, unbuckled the kids from their car seats as I grabbed my bags. I had purchased a leather journal at our local Barnes & Noble bookstore. If I was going to attend this retreat, I wanted to harvest everything that I could from it. I wanted to crystallize my thoughts and find out exactly what God wanted me to learn. I wanted to distill from the experience a rescue plan for that point in my life. I hoped scribbling in the journal was going to help me do that.

That particular ACTS retreat was held at a Benedictine monastery in the middle of nowhere, in an isolated section along the Texas-Mexico border. You could literally hear coyotes howling

at night within a couple of miles from the monastery. We were told by retreat leaders to watch out for the scorpions and the rattlesnakes. Others half-jokingly told us to watch out for human “coyotes” who might be passing through this remote stretch of rough border hill country.

The first morning of the retreat we woke up before the sun rose and were led in the dark by candlelight to a quaint and intimate prayer garden. Each of the retreatants was then handed a Rosary. Each retreatant was invited to lead one Hail Mary. The team members were to read the Mysteries and to lead the Our Fathers, and so on, until we had completed the Rosary. As we began to pray as one group, I slowly realized the wonder and beauty of what these men were doing before sunrise out here in the middle of nowhere. I began to weep. From deep within my chest, deep within my heart and soul, deep within my hurt, I marveled and wept at the indescribable, visceral joy of the sight of eighty men wanting to connect with God, earnestly asking for help to do good with their lives. I wept at the reality of eighty rough-looking men from all walks of life, humbly and sincerely raising their hearts and minds to God.

As I cried, I thought of my mom. I found myself lost in an ecstatic fog of prayer in which my thoughts, my very soul, were transported across time and space. I felt profoundly guilty for never previously having prayed the Rosary with my mom. I felt ashamed that I labeled this beautiful prayer the domain of “old ladies and funerals.” I felt a prayerful happiness, a warm comforting presence.

As weird as it sounds, in this fog, I felt as though I was praying with everyone who had ever prayed the Rosary. I felt my grandmother Vera praying with me. I felt my mom. I felt the hearts of those eighty men. I felt like I was praying with and to Jesus himself as I stood at the foot of the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, her arms gracefully outstretched, in the center of this tranquil prayer garden.