

The Popes and the Rosary

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FROM the thirteenth century down to our own day the successors of St. Peter manifested an ardent desire to see the Rosary devotion extended throughout the universal Church. This desire has expressed itself in some of the most sublime words that have ever come from a source noted for striking utterances. The nature of the constituent parts of the Rosary, its excellence and its efficacy have never been set forth more succinctly and authoritatively than in documents that have emanated from the See of Peter. In these Papal pronouncements we see manifested an ardent and sincere appeal to the Catholic World, encouraging the faithful to a greater devotion and reverence for the mysteries of the life, suffering and glory of Our Lord Jesus Christ and to a more generous love for Mary, the Queen of the Most Holy Rosary. It is also worthy of note that more than forty-two Popes have given proof of an all-consuming zeal in no less than one hundred and ninety documents, all of which radiate with their love for the Marian Psalter.

That some of the pronouncements, among this vast wealth of Papal literature, have been lost, is not at all to be wondered at. When we consider the number of years that have elapsed, during which these documents were scattered all over Europe, we are forced to marvel at the great number that have been preserved. Besides, many of the earlier documents on Rosary devotion were written to a particular locality or to commemorate a passing event. Later generations, seeing no apparent need of preserving these documents, have permitted them to lie exposed to the ravages of time. In many cases, the destruction of these early pronouncements was completed by the Religious Revolution of the sixteenth century. During the reign of terror that accompanied and followed in the wake of the Reformation, many valuable documents were consumed in flames or buried in the ruins of a monastic library.

Among the most prominent of the early proclamations on Rosary devotion, are those of Urban IV, who wore the fisherman's ring from 1261 to 1264, and John XXII, whose pontificate extended from 1316 to 1334. We know that these two Popes confirmed the Rosary devotion from the testimony of later Popes. In the bull of Sixtus V, "Dum Ineffabilia," written on January 30, 1586, this Pope mentions some of his predecessors who had conferred favors on the Rosary devotion. In this list, naming fifteen Popes in all, we see the names of Urban IV, and John XXII. Again, in the bull "Pretiosus," of Benedict XII, promulgated on May 26, 1747, another confirmation of these early documents is had. This Pontiff, in a number of cases refers to the precise bull of an earlier Pope; in others, he merely mentions the Pope's name. Among those mentioned, we see the names of Urban IV and John XXII. Hence, the documents written by these early Popes were considered to be of more than ordinary importance by their successors.

The fact that Urban IV and John XXII are mentioned by later Popes cannot be rated as a gratuitous statement. Anyone conversant with the strict rules of the Papal Chancery must know that at the time the bulls of Sixtus V and Benedict XII were drawn up, the composer of these acts either had the documents of Urban IV and John XXII at hand, or the authentic record of the same. One would be foolhardy to assert that these lists of early Popes were set down at random and confirmed by men illustrious for their learning and prudence.

In Urban IV and John XXII, we have stalwart champions of devotions to the Psalter of Mary during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Pope Leo XIII cites Urban IV as testifying that "the Rosary daily obtained fresh favors for Christendom." In passing, we might call attention to the fact that Urban IV was a contemporary of St. Dominic. While, in John XXII, we behold a Sovereign Pontiff who held the Rosary devotion in the same profound respect during the following century. This Pope, like those before and after him, considered the Rosary an impregnable bulwark against the attacks of heretics.

During the fifteenth century, the names Sixtus IV and Innocent VIII stand foremost as promoters of the Rosary devotion. In two bulls, both of which are extant, Sixtus IV lays stress on the need, the excellence, and the efficacy of this devotion. In the exordium of his bull, "Ea quae ex Fidelium," of

May 12, 1479, he states: "We confirm by the strength of our approbation those things that are ordained to the praise and glory of the Omnipotent God and the Glorious Virgin Mary; and we gladly request the faithful to exercise these works of devotion by granting indulgences that thence, they may be rendered more secure in divine grace." Eminent among these pious devotions is the Rosary which this Pontiff goes on to say "is a Psalter which engenders devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary." His successor, Innocent VIII, likewise issued two bulls on the Rosary. In the bull, "Splendor Paternae Glorise," of February 26, 1491, this Pope encourages the faithful to a greater devotion to the Rosary by exhorting them to pronounce the Name of Jesus at the end of the Hail Mary with great reverence and to carry the beads with them at all times. Before concluding, he states: "We grant to one and all the enrolled brothers and sisters, truly penitent, who carry the Rosary with them now and throughout life, an indulgence of one hundred years and one hundred quarantines; and for those enrolled in this same confraternity (of the Most Holy Rosary, we grant, mercifully in the Lord, an indulgence of five years and five quarantines for pronouncing the Name of Jesus at the end of each Hail Mary."

The next Pope, Alexander VI, whose pontificate extended into the next century, says in his bull, "Illius qui perfecta caritas est," of June 13, 1495: "We lovingly cherish these confraternities and holy places of special grace in which works of charity are performed and we request all the faithful to offer up this fitting prayer and reverence to the Most High God and His Mother, that, thence, they may be aroused to a greater devotion and become more worthy of divine grace; that, thereby, the faithful may store up for themselves a treasure in heaven which is impossible to do, unless the Queen of Heaven, the Star of the Sea, and the Advocate of Sinners be their helper and intercessor before the throne of her divine Son." Then, after lauding the work of the Sons of Saint Dominic for their untiring efforts in spreading this devotion, Alexander VI goes on to say that "this confraternity, ordained by divine help in honor of the Angelic Salutation, extends throughout the whole Dominican Order and includes both the living and the dead; that it was through the merits of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the zealous preaching of this devotion by Saint Dominic that the whole order of the world was preserved."

When, in the sixteenth century, the vast forces of the Musulmen threatened to impose the yoke of slavery and barbarism on Christian Europe, the Sovereign Pontiff, Saint Pius V, aroused the Christian Nations to a common defense; and above all, strove to obtain the favor of the most powerful Mother of God. At this time, the minds and hearts of all Christians rallied around him and prepared to sacrifice their lives, if need be, for the Faith. While the Christian Host went forward to meet the foe, those at home, under Saint Pius' guidance, formed a devout band of suppliants who called on Mary in the words of the Most Holy Rosary, imploring her to give victory to their loved ones. We read in his bull, "Consueverunt," written on September 7, 1569, that "Saint Dominic, under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, devised an easy and exceedingly devout form of prayer to God, accommodated to all,—the Rosary, which is also called the Psalter of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, and this he propagated throughout the realm of the universal Church. With the spread of this devotion, the faithful became more fervent by these meditations and more inflamed by these prayers, that on a sudden, they became different men; the darkness of heresy vanished and the light of Catholic Faith again beamed forth. In these troubled times, greived by heresy, vexed by the depraved morals of men, and afflicted by strife and suffering; nevertheless, full of confidence, we lift up our eyes towards that mount whence all help flows." Surely, Mary heard his prayer and that of the universal Church; for the Christian fleet, by an overwhelming victory, crushed the power of the Turk. This victory is recorded in his next bull, "Salvatoris," of March 5, 1572, in these words: "Mary, the Mother of Mercy, the Lover of Piety and the Consoler of the Human Race, by her intercession before the throne of God, did not cease to pour forth prayers and supplication for the safety of her people; and by virtue of her prayers and petitions, a decisive victory, which must never be forgotten, was gained over the Turks on October 7, 1571."

Acting upon the wish of his predecessor and on account of the great devotion that was again flourishing among the faithful for the Rosary, Pope Gregory XIII instituted the Feast of the Most Holy Rosary. We read his solemn declaration in the words of his encyclical, "Monet Apostolus," of April 1, 1573: "On the seventh day of October which is now the first Sunday in October, we request all the Confraternities of the Rosary throughout the

world to march in procession and to pour forth pious prayers to the Omnipotent God, and at the same time to offer a token of thanks to the Blessed Virgin Mary for her intercession. We, hereby, proclaim a solemn Feast with a Duplex Major Office under the name of the Most Holy Rosary to be celebrated every year on the first Sunday in October."

To guard this devotion even more securely, Benedict XIII issued a proclamation against new devotions that had attempted to usurp the same name. In his bull, "Pretiosus," promulgated on May 26, 1727, he says: "We renew and confirm all that is contained in the pronouncements of Alexander VII and Clement XI (on the founding of new rosaries), and we increase the right to found new rosaries to such an extent that no other rosary devotion may be instituted without the special approbation of the Holy See; that, thereby, the authentic Rosary, so sacred to God and the Blessed Virgin Mary, may not become obsolete."

In the last century, we see the origin and growth of the Living Rosary Society, a distinctive branch of the Rosary devotion. Through the efforts of Marie Pauline Jaricot, small bands of circles were formed, consisting of fifteen members, each of whom was obliged to say a decade of the Rosary each day; and at the same time meditate on a mystery that would be assigned. By this means, the entire Rosary would be said collectively, by the members of each circle every day. This manner of saying the Rosary met with immediate success; and in the brief, "Benedicentes Domino," of January 27, 1832, Pope Gregory XVI gave it the approbation of the Church. This Pontiff "ardently desired to see this practice established everywhere and endure for all time." He also shows what efficacy it has before God, for as he says: "On account of the great concord of those praying, it is made more acceptable to God, who, when besought by common prayer, is moved to bestow mercy and grace."

From the eleven Papal documents on the Rosary that bear the signature of Pope Pius XI, we can readily see what a warm place this devotion held in the heart of that great Pontiff. When some of the most momentous events in his pontificate were about to take place, he had recourse to the Rosary. He exhorts the mystical body of Christ, at the time when Gallicanism seemed to be engulfing the Church, in these words of his bull, "Egregius," signed on April 12, 1867: "As Saint Dominic employed this prayer (of the Rosary) like an unconquerable sword to strike

down the detestable errors of the Albigensians, which threatened to engulf the peace and quiet of Christendom, so should the faithful of the present likewise put on this kind of armor, that, under the protection of the Immaculate Mother of God, their daily recitation of her Rosary may the more easily dissipate present errors." The words of Pope Pius continue in the same tone and towards the end, he points out the need of special help from heaven "that the Vatican Council which is soon to be summoned, may overthrow and completely dispell the monstrosity of present day errors and come to a successful ending under the powerful protection of the Immaculate Mother of God."

The Popes of the present century have been just as zealous as their predecessors in fostering this devotion. It has been truly said, that the Rosary devotion has had no stauncher defenders than the Popes of the present century. During the short pontificate of Benedict XV, of happy memory, two documents in which this devotion was praised, were given to the world in the form of exhortations. While, his predecessor, Leo XIII, whose days were also characterised by chronic unrest, scarcely allowed a year of his long pontificate to roll by without solemnly calling the children of the Church to the feet of the Rosary Queen.

On the first of September, 1883, Pope Leo XIII placed his signature to the bull, "Supremi Apostolatus." In this immortal document, we read: "The anniversaries of the very great and manifold favors obtained by Christian Europe through the devotion of the Rosary are now at hand. It is our desire that the whole Christian world should with the greatest earnestness again offer the same devotion to the Blessed Virgin that, by her intercession, her Divine Son may be appeased and the evils which afflict us may be lessened.—Our need of divine help is not less today than when the great Saint Dominic preached the Rosary of Mary." Prompted by this same sincerity, he continues: "We exhort all Christians to give themselves to the daily recitation of this pious devotion either in public or privately in the home and family of each; and we also desire that the whole month of October in the present year be consecrated to the Queen of the Most Holy Rosary." Before concluding, this Pontiff exorts the faithful "to cling more and more to the practice of reciting the Rosary, to which our ancestors had recourse as a glorious pledge and proof of Christian faith and devotion."

Our late beloved Pontiff, Benedict XV, was a great admirer

of Leo XII and learned well, at this master's knee, that the Rosary is one of the most potent means of social regeneration within the reach of the faithful at large. Benedict XV gave us the best indication of his esteem for the Rosary in the two letters which he addressed to the Christian world on the occasion of two Dominican events of more than every-day interest. These were his encyclicals commemorative of the Seven Hundredth Anniversary of the Confirmation of the Order of Preachers and the Seven Hundredth Anniversary of the Death of Saint Dominic. In the second of these encyclicals, dated June 29, 1921, we find an enviable tribute paid to the Dominican Order and to the indefatigable preaching of this devotion by Saint Dominic and his followers. He expressed himself in these words: "How pleased was the Heavenly Queen with her pious servant may be easily gathered from this, that she used his ministry to teach the Most Holy Rosary to the Church, the spouse of her Son, that prayer which being both vocal and mental—in the contemplation especially of the mysteries of religion—while the Lord's Prayer is fifteen times repeated together with as many decades of the Hail Mary—is most adapted to fostering widely piety and every virtue. Rightly then, did Dominic order his followers in preaching to the people, to inculcate frequently this manner of prayer, the utility of which he had experienced. He knew, on the one hand, Mary's influence with her Son to be such that whatever graces He confers on men she has their distribution and apportionment. On the other hand, he knew that she is of a nature so kind and merciful that, seeing it be her custom to succour the miserable of her own accord, it is impossible that she should refuse the petitions of those who pray to her. The Church, which is wont to salute her 'the Mother of Grace and the Mother of Mercy,' has so found her always, but especially in answer to the Rosary."

From these few excerpts, we can see with what sentiments the Popes have expressed themselves when writing on this form of prayer so acceptable to the Blessed Virgin, so suited to the defence of the Church, and so efficacious in bringing down divine blessings. In fact, a close study of these few papal pronouncements will reveal not a little of the Church's history and the role the Rosary played in ecclesiastical annals. How many epoch-making events have been signalized by a "Rosary Encyclical." Truly, can we say in the words of Benedict XV: "the Roman Pontiffs have let no occasion pass of commending the Rosary."