



Courtesy of Dr. Rene Breguet

ROSARY ALTAR, DOMINICAN HOUSE OF STUDIES, WASHINGTON, D. C.

## THE MASS, MYSTERY, AND MARY'S ROSARY

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THE FAR END of the long, narrow choir of the Dominican House of Studies, in Washington, D. C., stands an altar dedicated to Our Lady, Queen of the Most Holy Rosary. About this shrine the friars gather each morning to offer, in union with the Eternal High Priest, the Sacrifice of the Mass. To this holy table they return several times a day to chant the hours of the Divine Office, the public prayer by which the Church prepares and renders thanks for the Holy Sacrifice. Whenever they turn toward this altar, whether to answer the *Dominus vobiscum* of the celebrating priest at Mass, or to seek God's help at the beginning of an hour of the Divine Office, they rivet their eyes instinctively upon the tabernacle. But from it, as from a center, they are led to gaze in admiration at the background in which the tabernacle is set and into which it blends. Surrounding this dwelling place of Christ in the Eucharist, reaching up from the altar on which He immolates Himself toward the vaulted ceiling of the chapel is a panel of sharply and exquisitely carved wood figures, which represent the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary (see illustration, opposite). This panel is not a mere decorative effect without a principle of unity. Rather, it is a most appropriate setting for the altar on which the Precious Body and Blood of Our Saviour are offered daily, because it symbolizes the intimate relation and subordination of the mysteries of the Rosary to that center of all Christian life the Sacrifice of the Mass. It tells us that the joys, sorrows, and triumph of Mary and her Son all converge and are mingled in the supreme act of Christian worship, the mystical re-presentation of the immolation of Calvary.

### LITURGY, POWER-HOUSE OF SUPERNATURAL LIFE

To a recently canonized saint, Pope Pius X, we owe the statement of a truth which is an invaluable norm for directing devotion in a time in which the Christian sense of values is being riddled by the constant barrage of secularism. "The liturgy," he said in his *Motu proprio* on church music, "is the *primary* and *indispensable* source of true Christian piety." This is far from mere insinuation. It is a positive pronouncement that principally from the public worship of the

Catholic Church—the Mass, the sacraments, and the Divine Office—stems the life of grace, our participation in the life of God. Moreover, St. Pius goes so far as to maintain that these sources, beyond taking precedence over all others, cannot be by-passed without danger to souls.

The reason for this emphasis upon liturgical worship is not difficult to bring to light. Where else but from the liturgy could "true Christian piety" be derived, since this public worship centers about and finds eminent expression in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Is it not through the Eucharistic Sacrifice that God calls men back to Himself, embraces them, possesses them? Indeed, the center of the liturgy is the re-enactment of Calvary, and Calvary is the hope of mankind.

#### MYSTERIES IN THE LITURGY

When Christ dwelt among men on earth many of His actions were like our own. He walked and talked with His neighbors, ate with them, became weary and laid His head down to rest. Partly with this in mind St. Paul wrote: "We have not a high priest, who cannot have compassion on our infirmities: but one tempted in all things *like as we are . . .*" (Hebr. 4: 15). Indeed, the very actions by which He redeemed us, His painful and bloody Passion and Death were common inasmuch as they caused no immediate and apparent furor outside the environs of the city of Jerusalem. Yet these actions of Jesus Christ, especially the high points in His life, which get most attention from His biographers, the Evangelists, have always had for themselves a special name. They are called "*mysteries*," the mysteries of Christ.

The name, mysteries, is given to these actions because, although all Christ's engagements are outwardly clothed in the drab robe of simplicity and poverty, to the penetrating gaze of faith they yield rich spiritual meanings and are to Christians inexhaustible fountains of grace. Fundamentally this is true since He who acts is God, and the least twitch of God's finger is meaningful to the universe. So a little babe is born in a Bethlehem stable. But "while we see Him with our eyes, through Him we are snatched up by love of things invisible" (Preface of the Christmas Mass). At the other end of Christ's earthly sojourn, the Ascension, we see His body taken away from men's view, only to be reminded that "He is lifted up into heaven in order to make us the gift of a share in God's own life" (Preface of the Mass of the Ascension). The mysteries of Christ, then, are the divine secrets veiled behind Jesus' actions, made known to us, His disciples, in the Gospels and through their custodian, the Church.

These central mysteries in the life of Jesus Christ are significant for all time. Their deeper meanings have been extracted and made spiritually palatable in the liturgy of the Church, Christ's Mystical Body. All of this public worship taken together is like a jewelled ring of espousals which mankind, joined to Christ, presents to God in pledge of fidelity and love. In the center is the chief jewel, a diamond of inestimable worth, the Mass, the Eucharistic Sacrifice. All around are stones less brilliant in themselves, which set off and point to the Eucharist. They are the other sacraments and the Divine Office. Each of these precious jewels, moreover, has many facets, each of which reflects a ray of light, a single mystery of Christ, an action of the Word dwelling among us, once performed physically in Galilee or Judaea, now, from year to year to the end of time, sacramentally re-enacted from the "rising of the sun to the going down thereof."

In the Sacrifice of the Mass the Priest-Victim is the same as that of Calvary. The Eucharistic immolation is ever identical with the bloody offering Our Saviour made of Himself upon the Cross. In this gentle Lamb of God, however, we who share in the Mass may see much more than the *suffering* Christ. With Mary, who stood immovably on Calvary, eyes fixed in agonized attention upon her only Son, we can see the Babe who once cried softly in His manger crib. We can see Christ, the Miracle-Worker and Teacher, the Man who startled all Palestine with His doctrine and His prodigious healings. Finally, because Christ now dies no more, since death no longer has dominion over Him, we can see a Christ who was veiled from the eyes of the sorrowful Virgin, the gloriously reigning Christ, whose impassible flesh is now elevated in the pure white Host of the Altar.

Thus the Mass, which is essentially the mystical re-presentation of a single mystery of Christ, His passion and death, is manifold in its power to show Him to us in all His other mysteries. The Church, to whom Christ gave power over all the sacraments, has woven into this precious fabric images drawn from Sacred Scripture and tradition, from the Old and New Testaments, so that all mysteries of the life of the God-man have become ageless and are constantly repeated. In this way all men may have a share in them. The Divine Office too participates in this power, since it draws from common sources, biblical and ecclesiastical texts, which express the meaning of the mystery at hand.

What does this mean for the Christian who takes part in the Church's gift of her ring of espousals, the liturgy, to her Beloved? Simply this, that as the Eucharist and the Divine Office reflect the various rays of the different mysteries, he receives the grace of union

with the Eucharistic Christ in a particular manner. Sharing in the solemnities of Christ's birthday, for example, brings a *special* grace. And so do all the other mysteries. Through the liturgy, especially in the Eucharist, he can really re-live the life of Christ, from His conception in the womb of the Virgin to the moment of His receiving the everlasting crown of universal kingship.

#### MYSTERIES, BOND BETWEEN LITURGY AND ROSARY

Now, with the primary importance of the liturgy in mind, and knowing also the power it has to make us become contemporaries of Jesus Christ, we come to the question: how does the Rosary fit into the structure of Christian worship and prayer? Is it merely an ornamental appendage or do the Rosary and the liturgy fold into one another and make together an integral whole?

The answer is that they are vitally bound one to the other. Indeed, among all Catholic devotions which are strictly non-liturgical or private, the Rosary has the closest bond and is most easily linked to this preeminent and authentic source of "true Christian piety." To see the truth of this it may be helpful to consider briefly the Collect from the Mass of the Feast of the Most Holy Rosary, celebrated on the first Sunday of October in the Dominican calendar. In this prayer the relation of the Rosary to the mysteries of Christ is set down and explained:

"O God, whose only-begotten Son by His life, death and resurrection hath purchased for us the rewards of eternal life; grant, we beseech Thee, that meditating upon these mysteries in the most holy Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we may both imitate what they contain and obtain what they promise. Through the same Christ, Our Lord."

The first remarkable element in this prayer is that it hinges about "mysteries." The word as used here has exactly the same meaning as when used to designate a mystery commemorated in the liturgy. The mysteries of the most holy Rosary are Christ's mysteries. In the liturgy and in the Rosary, too, we bring to mind all the joys of the Mother and her Son. We take part also in their sorrows, and rejoice in the reward of their exaltation. In a word, the mysteries of the Rosary are identical with those which are found in the "primary and indispensable source of true Christian piety."

The Rosary Sunday collect, moreover, explains exactly what the Rosary is meant to do in regard to the mysteries of Christ. First,

"may we imitate what they contain. . . ." Through the meditative praying of the Rosary a Christian seeks to make more intense his supernatural life, his imitation and conformity to the virtues of Christ, his Model. Second, "may we obtain what they promise. . . ." The supernatural life, nurtured and given vigor through this Marian devotion, is the seed of a life which will never end, life with Christ, through Mary in heaven, where He is the "first-born among many brethren" and she is the Mother and Queen of all.

Contrasting in point of time the common practice of reciting the Rosary with the re-enactment of the liturgical mysteries in the Mass also manifests the link between one and the other. The liturgy is a majestic, slow-moving yearly cycle. The faithful who actively share in it may spend many weeks in contemplating and applying to their own life in Christ just a single phase of it. Paschaltide, for example, the celebration of the mystery of the Risen and Glorified Christ, stretches over a period of nearly two months. On the other hand Christians customarily pray the Rosary in such a way that several times a week or even daily these same mysteries are held up before the heart's gaze. In this way the young tendrils, which are the offshoots of sharing in the mysteries of Christ in the liturgy, are watered day by day in the soul, and the beautiful mosaic of the Christ-life is retouched, re-vitalized by the finger of Mary's Spouse, the Holy Ghost.

A final link or bond between the Mass and the Rosary is itself a mystery. It is the doctrine of the universal mediation of all grace by the Blessed Mother of God. Certain it is that the liturgy, whose center is the Mass, is the indispensable *source* of true Christian piety. But it is just as certain that the indispensable *channel* of true Christian piety is the Blessed Virgin Mary. No grace can come to any man save through the Mother of Christ. Since, then, in the Mass the Christian finds Christ and unites himself to the Author of grace, and since also the Rosary is the chief among Marian devotions, most pleasing to Mary by her own testimony, the connection, compatibility and cooperative force of the Mass and the Rosary is clear.

#### TRUE PERSPECTIVE OF WORSHIP AND PRAYER

So far we have seen that in the liturgy of the Church men may find Christ, ageless in the repetition of His mysteries and vigorous in the intensification of the supernatural life of which He is Author and Source. We have also perceived that in this common ground of the mysteries of Christ, the liturgy and the Rosary are of a single piece, mutually aiding one another as tools of Christian living. And

so it has become increasingly evident that such tools ought to be used in conjunction one with the other.

First of all, then, we can remark that it is a mistake to consider devotion to the Rosary as an isolated devotion, private in the sense that it is not bound up with all other elements of the Christian life into a higher unity. In practice this means that recitation of the Rosary some time late in the day brings us in spirit to the altar where we shared in the Mass to begin our daily round. Further, it explains why the present Pope, Pius XII, writing on participation in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass by lay-folk, stressed the fact that, although following the liturgical action of the Mass in a missal is, *objectively*, the best method of taking part in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, some souls because of special circumstances may derive rich spiritual profit from devotions which are consonant with the spirit of this august rite, especially *devout meditation on the mysteries of the Rosary*.

That the mysteries of the Rosary impel Christians, with a centripetal force, toward the hub of all supernatural life, the Mass, may also serve to reveal new, but authentic and fruitful sources for meditation. Within the liturgy, especially the proper parts of the Mass, are certain key phrases which penetrate to the marrow of the mysteries and show us what they mean *today*. Already, in passing, we have seen this verified in the Prefaces for Christmas and the Ascension. In this hymn, which introduces the Canon of the Mass, and varies from season to season, we may find many other examples of how the liturgy follows Christ from the preparation of His first dwelling, the womb of the Virgin, to His final and everlasting abode, the Blessed Trinity. This source alone contains truths applicable to nearly all of the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary. The Preface of the Blessed Virgin celebrates the mystery of her own purification, which is one with Her Son's presentation in the temple. It praises her unsullied virginity together with her fruitful Divine Motherhood: "who, without losing the glory of her virginity gave to the world the eternal light, Jesus Christ our Lord." The hymn of the Passion shows how Life had to die to revivify mankind: "who didst place the salvation of mankind upon the tree of the cross, that whence came death, thence life, might come; and he that overcame by the tree, on the tree also might be overcome; through Christ our Lord." Easter's Preface is pledge and proof that the Resurrection is fruitful for every true follower of Christ: "who by dying destroyed our death and by rising again hath restored our life." Other Prefaces are fully as significant and they are but a single vein in the little-worked mine of texts adapted to the mysteries of Christ.

There is no question here of giving the Rosary a place it does not deserve in the Christian scheme of things. Certainly the Mass is the life-giving center of the Christian's existence; we can measure the excellence of all other cult and prayer by its proximity to this Sacrifice. The devotion of the most holy Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary is intimately related to the Eucharist, through the mysteries which they, in common, re-present. This relation to the Mass is admirably summed up in the Rosary altar of the Friars Preachers in our nation's capital. Suspended over the Eucharistic table, this carved panel is an eloquently mute witness of Mary's single desire, that her Divine Son may be loved and exalted "above all principality and power, and virtue, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come (*Eph.* 1:21).