

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

The Beads

I still have my first set. Do you? It was given to me as a first communion gift: simple black beads with a plain plastic cross. They're small, child-sized, but I carried them in May processions when I was in grade school. They served to teach me the rudiments of one of our faith's most popular—but often misunderstood—forms of prayer.

Since October is dedicated to the devotion of the rosary, I thought it would be a good time to remind ourselves how meaningful it is, and to appreciate even more the part it plays in our Catholic culture.

Many religions use beads to guide them in prayer, but the origins of the rosary are still somewhat hazy. I did a little “googling,” and found the following, from Fr. William Saunders at the EWTN website:

The use of “prayer beads” and the repeated recitation of prayers to aid in meditation stem from the earliest days of the Church and has roots in pre-Christian times. Evidence exists from the Middle Ages that strings of beads were used to count Our Fathers and Hail Marys. Actually, these strings of beads became known as “Paternosters,” the Latin for “Our Father.”

The structure of the rosary gradually evolved between the 12th and 15th centuries. Eventually, 50 Hail Marys were recited and linked with verses of psalms or other phrases evoking the lives of Jesus and Mary. During this time, this prayer form became known as the rosarium (“rose garden”), actually a common term to designate a collection of similar material, such as an anthology of stories on the same subject or theme. During the 16th century, the structure of the five-decade rosary based on the three sets of mysteries (Glorious, Sorrowful, Joyful) prevailed.

Tradition does hold that St. Dominic (d. 1221) devised the rosary as we know it. Moved by a vision of our Blessed Mother, he preached the use of the rosary in his missionary work among the Albigensians, who had denied the mystery of Christ. Some scholars take exception to St. Dominic's role in forming the rosary. The earliest accounts of his life do not mention it, the Dominican constitutions do not link him with it and contemporaneous portraits do not include it as a symbol to identify the saint.

Elsewhere, I've read that the rosary began as a practice by the laity to imitate the monastic Office (Liturgy of the Hours), by which monks prayed the 150 Psalms. The laity, many of whom could not read, substituted 50 or 150 Ave Marias for the Psalms. Sometimes a cord with counters on it was used.

The rest is history.

The rosary underwent a significant change several years ago, when Pope John Paul II elected to add a fourth set of mysteries: the Luminous Mysteries, or Mysteries of Light. (Not everyone was thrilled, since this disrupted the parallel of the beads with the psalms, but the faithful seem to have accepted the change nonetheless.)

You find rosaries today made of all kinds of material, from cheap plastic to expensive gems. I remember vividly the rosaries worn by nuns: massive black links that announced their approach with clack-clack-clack against black cloth. Occasionally, a search on Ebay will turn up unusual monastic rosaries that have three mysteries and 150 beads. They must weigh a ton.

Wherever it began, or however it started, the rosary remains a powerful source of inspiration and hope. I know in my own life it has brought calm in the midst of many storms. This meditative form of prayer just works.

These days, I pray a set of square, wooden beads that I bought a few years ago at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. But my fingers still remember the first set I used—with deep affection and boundless gratitude. Who knows how many prayers were answered or graces received from using those simple black beads?

But I know this much: they helped ground me in the faith—and guide me to the vocation I live today.

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