

Mysteries of the Holy Rosary
Wednesday night prayer and meditation
By Deacon Jaques

Every week, and sometimes every day, it seems like I find a new reason to be joyful and grateful for being an Anglican, for being an Anglo-Catholic, and for being a part of the community and family that is our Parish of St Mark. This last week, you could say I felt “doubly blessed” because, not only did I get to see us all join together in glorious celebration of what will now have been our one hundredth Easter Sunday in our beloved church, but also because, on that previous Wednesday, our Wednesday night group met for our first prayer and meditation on the mysteries of the holy rosary.

The rosary is not the only example of a string of beads being used as a tool for guidance and focus in the work of every Christian to deepen our life of prayer and devotion to God. There’s never been a time in the church’s history when beads such as the rosary haven’t been used. In the earliest centuries of the church when the first monastic religious communities were arising in the deserts in and around Egypt, the daily prayers of those first Christian monks and nuns consisted of reciting all one hundred and fifty of the Psalms (which, incidentally, you had to prove you had memorized before you were even allowed to take your vows!) It was found that a useful tool for this great task of devotion was a string of one hundred fifty beads or a cord with an hundred fifty knots which a person could hold and count through as they recited the psalms and meditated upon their meaning.

These first prayer beads used by the earliest monastics soon gave rise to the prayer rope still beloved and widely used in Eastern Christianity. The circular rope of one hundred knots was

employed to count and keep track of recitations of the ancient "Jesus Prayer" and the tassel at the end of the rope was said to be for drying to tears that were shed from meditating on the evil one's own sins or on the goodness of almighty God.

In the Middle Ages the precursor to the rosary most Christians know today was the pater noster cord or paternoster beads. This consisted of a straight string of up to one hundred fifty beads with a cross at one end and a tassel at the other. Most Christian laypeople of the time would have been illiterate but all who were baptized would have been required to memorize the Lord's Prayer. In that great age of faith in medieval Europe, the faithful would show their devotion by regularly saying the Lord's Prayer (or *pater noster* in Latin) using the beads to keep track of the number of prayers said. So popular was the paternoster cord that there were entire trade guilds devoted to their manufacture. People from all classes of society were known to carry them hanging from their belts and the wealthy and elite would show their piety and status with paternoster cords made from coral or precious stones or with glass beads sometimes the size of grapes or plums.

The rosary most of us know today is widely attributed to St Dominic, founder of the Dominican order in the twelve hundreds. Tradition and pious legend has it that St Dominic was given the rosary in a vision from the Virgin Mary while praying in the church of Prouille in southern France. That vision is still venerated and celebrated by Roman Catholics as the Apparition of the Lady of the Holy Rosary. From there, thanks to the Dominican "order of preachers" the fifty nine beads of the holy rosary has gone on to become a nearly universal symbol of Christian faith and devotion and a means and conduit of grace and salvation for millions.

In England, after Henry VIII denial of papal supremacy and the

establishment of a distinct Church of England and Anglican Communion, the holy rosary saw something of a "fall from grace" despite the boundless grace it had given to generations of faithful, prayerful English Catholics. Henry, to all outward appearances, remained devoted to most aspects and externals of "the old faith" and likely continued to clutch his beads and say his paternosters right up until his death in 1547. With the accession of his decidedly Protestant son Edward VI, however, the rosary and so many other cherished relics of the ancient faith of blessed Albion were not only discouraged, they were outright banned and seized by royal mandate. There's a government pamphlet from 1547 that proudly trumpets the confiscation and destruction of a shipment of "certaine of the Popes marchandize lately sent ouer into Englande" which included a quantity rosaries Roman Catholic recusants and dissidents had attempted to have smuggled into the country.

It took the Oxford Movement and subsequent Ritualist revival in the eighteen hundreds for Anglicans to again realize that we too are a branch of God's One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church and to rediscover the blessings that can come with serious devotion to and meditations on the holy rosary. Some of the first Anglo-Catholic churches and communities distinguished themselves by holding secret, after-hours rosary prayer groups. Many of the still more Protestant-minded Anglicans of the time still saw the rosary as a tool and conduit for papal oppression and vestige of discarded superstition, but noble and brave pioneers of Anglo-Catholicism such as Edward Pusey, Fr Charles Lowder, and Sister Marian Hughes clung to to it and as a result their faith and that of the communities they served. Anglicans united in prayer and devotion through the holy rosary laid the groundwork and made possible churches just like our beloved Parish of St Mark.

I invite you to join in that tradition and tap into that true wellspring of truly transformative faith by joining us again this Wednesday night after evening prayer for recitation and guided meditation on the mysteries of the rosary. Throughout Lent, our group focused on the sorrowful mysteries, but, this now being that most blessed season of Eastertide, we will be diving into and exploring the glorious mysteries which, most appropriately, begin with the meditation of our Lord's glorious Resurrection. Prayer cards and instruction will be provided. Bring your favorite rosary if you have one and, if you don't, one can be provided.

Also, don't worry. The deacon will still always bring pie.