

Dear Abby staff:

I read your e-mail on the tradition of the nine days of prayer called Novena. So what can you guys tell me about the Rosary?

Walking On Down Emmaus Road

Dear Walking- On- Down:

Glad you read the novena information. OK, let's look at the Rosary. What would you like to know?

Q. When did the tradition of praying the Rosary begin?

A. Tough one. Hard to say. Pope Pius V officially approved the Rosary as a devotion of the Catholic Church in 1569. It goes back at least to the 12th century, and probably earlier. St. Dominic (1170-1221) was very fond of the Rosary and his followers over the centuries have always encouraged the praying of the Rosary. Some say St. Dominic was actually given the Rosary by the Blessed Mother herself. The Rosary took its present form between the 14th and 15th centuries.

Q. Why did people begin praying the Rosary?

A. In the Dark Ages, monks living in community gathered to pray in monastery chapels several times a day. They rang the monastery bells to summon the monks to prayer. They used the Psalm prayers from the Bible (still do). The Psalms were gathered together in an elaborate, hand-written and hand-decorated ceremonial book called a Psalter. There are 150 psalms in a Psalter. Back then most ordinary people were illiterate. People wanted to pray like the monks but they couldn't read the Psalter. Since there were 150 Psalms, they began the practice of saying 150 "Our Fathers" in place of the Psalms. At least everybody knew that prayer by heart. People who had a particular devotion to Mary might prefer to say 150 "Aves" (Hail) instead. This was not the full "Hail Mary" as we know it, but only the first words of the Angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary. Sometimes they would throw in some lines from the Psalms that they had been committed to memory. It was called "Our Lady's Psalter". People used strings with 150 knots or beads (maybe even rose pedals) to help them keep count. There is something about the sense of touch in prayer. Buddhists and Muslims use prayer beads too!

Q. The Rosary is made up of one hundred and fifty prayers? Yikes.

A. Yes. The full Rosary has 150 Hail Mary's. Sometimes this is now called the "Dominican Rosary". Most people don't know this. See if you can stump your pastor with this one. These prayers are divided into groups of ten Hail Mary's (called "decade" for ten) with the Lord's Prayer beginning each decade. You would have to go around three times if you use the beads now commonly available.

Q. How did the "Hail Mary" prayer come to its present form?

A. It was Pope Pius V (the same one who made the Rosary an official church devotion) who added the second part. This longer form was eventually adopted for the Rosary.

Q. What are these Mysteries of the Rosary?

A. These are events from the life of Christ that one ponders while praying ten Hail Mary's (one decade of the Rosary). They provide material for meditation and keep Christ the central focus of the Rosary. There are fifteen mysteries – Five Joyful, five Sorrowful, and five Glorious. The full Rosary uses all 15 mysteries – 150 Hail Mary's all told. Pope John Paul II added five more – the Luminous Mysteries.

Q. Can you name the Mysteries for me?

A. Sure. As Mother Teresa said: “In praying the Rosary with devotion, we are reliving the life of Christ.”

The Joyful Mysteries (The Early Life of Jesus)

The Annunciation to Mary; The Visitation to Mary; The Nativity of the Lord: The Presentation of the Infant Jesus in the Temple: The Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple

The Sorrowful Mysteries (The Death of Jesus)

The agony of Jesus in the garden; The scourging of Jesus at the pillar; The crowing with thorns; The carrying of the cross; The crucifixion and death of Jesus

The Glorious Mysteries (The Resurrection of Jesus)

The Resurrection of Jesus: The Ascension of the Lord: The descent of the Holy Spirit: The Assumption of Mary; The coronation of Mary as Queen of Heaven

Q. How do I know which ones to say on which days?

A. Mondays and Saturdays: The Joyful Mysteries

Tuesdays and Fridays: The Sorrowful Mysteries

Thursdays: The new Luminous Mysteries (see below)

Wednesdays and Sundays: The Glorious Mysteries

Q. Am I allowed to mediate on other things as well?

A. Of course. Pope John Paul came up the Luminous Mysteries (The Ministry of Jesus): The Baptism of Jesus; The Wedding Feast at Cana; the Proclamation of the Kingdom of God (“The Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the Gospel”); The Transfiguration of Jesus; and The Institution of the Holy Eucharist at the Last Supper. If the Pope can come up with his own Mysteries, why can’t you? While there is good reason to preserve the traditional Mysteries, you might want on occasion to consider some other Scriptural event in the life of Christ – the disciples and Jesus on the way to Emmaus, for example. I sometimes offer a decade of the Rosary for particular friends – or even for certain individuals who might consider me their enemy. Pray for your enemies – it will drive them nuts! (just kidding). Try this: When it comes to the part of the Hail Mary “pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death”, replace the word “sinners” with the name of somebody you know. A friend shared this with me.

Q. What if my mind wanders off while I’m saying all these prayers?

A. Go with it. It’s OK to have distractions. Just let them surface and float away. Don’t fight it. The Rosary is a form of mantra. The repetition of prayers is intended to bring you into a deeper level of awareness in the Divine Presence. It’s not necessary to focus on the words, although if some particular word or phrase catches you – take time to savor. Always pray from the heart. The formal words are not the prayer. If something else enters your mind, maybe God is trying to give you a message. If your mind goes completely blank – that’s even better! This is a higher form of prayer called “contemplation”. Just be still, enjoy, and bask in the Presence of God.

Q. What are those extra beads at the beginning of my Rosary?

A. Start with the Apostles’ Creed – a summary of the great mysteries of the Catholic Faith. Then add an “Our Father” and three “Hail Mary’s”. These are “warm up prayers”, just as you would do warm up before physical exercise.

+Ualghairg, Abbot of Assonet

