

Not in Vain

Repetition and the Rosary

by Eric Stoutz

ISSUE: Is the Rosary a prayer of “vain repetition” (cf. Mt. 6:7)? What type of prayer is the Rosary?

RESPONSE: Any prayer from the heart, repetitive or otherwise, is acceptable to God. How many times should we repeat “I love you” to Our Heavenly Father? The matter then is not simply repetition, but *vain* repetition. As discussed below, the Rosary is not a prayer of “vain repetition” but a meditation moving slowly forward by the familiar words of the Hail Mary and the Lord’s Prayer.

DISCUSSION: Citing the translation from the King James Version of the Bible, as well as other Protestant versions translated during the Reformation, many Christians dismiss the Rosary as “vain repetition.” They refer to Matthew 6:7, which reads: “But when ye pray, use not vain repetition, as the heathens do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking” (KJV).

Catholic translations during the Reformation and modern Protestant translations do not use the same terms as the King James Version. Rather, they use terms such as “babble,” or “empty phrases” (cf. Douay-Rheims, Revised Standard Version, New Revised Standard Version, Revised English Bible). Further, The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (Strong’s), which uses the KJV as its source text, recognizes that the word “vain” in Matthew 6:7 does not exist in the Greek. Also, Strong’s recognizes that the Greek word for “repetition” primarily means “to stutter” or “to prate [chatter] incessantly.” Both of these terms reflect the Catholic and modern Protestant translations. Hence, one might be tempted to answer a charge of “vain repetition” by merely countering that Christ never said those words.

However, dismissing the objection in this way does not allow the passage to be understood according to the *analogy of faith* (cf. Catechism, no. 114). That is, we need to take a closer look at the Bible and show what Christ meant, and that He was not condemning repetitive prayer itself, particularly the repetition of a prayer such as the Rosary.

“As the Heathens Do”

In this passage, Jesus is referring to “vain” or “empty” vocal prayer as practiced by the pagans, “who feared to omit from their prayer the name of one god or the mention of one request.”¹ The key word here is “vain” or “empty,” not repetition. Ancient pagans feared that if they did not invoke the “correct” titles of that day, their fickle gods would not hear them. To them a god was a person with human feelings, appetites, and caprices. By cleverly appealing to these changeable qualities they could influence or even oblige a god to act in their favor. For the pagans, prayer was nothing less than an attempt to manipulate a powerful ruler. In contrast, through the repetition of the Rosary we “manipulate” ourselves to a quiet and focused state. “Needless to say, repetition of such a simple prayer as the Rosary is by no means discouraged provided it does not become mechanical. We use repetition not to secure God’s attention, but to sustain our own.”²

Also, the words of Jesus emphasize that prayer to non-existent gods is necessarily vain and useless. Aside from being violations of the First Commandment, such prayers fall on deaf ears. One example is the repetitive prayer of the worshippers of Baal in 1 Kings 18:26-29. They took the bull given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying “O Baal, answer us!” Later, “they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances . . . they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice.” Surely this was vain repetition and babbling.

Thus Christ warned His faithful to avoid praying as the pagans do. However, He did not warn against repeti-

tion itself. Otherwise, Jesus the God-man inexplicably contradicts Himself in Matthew 6:8-14 when He teaches His disciples to pray the Our Father. His followers would be guilty of repetitious prayer the moment they said this prayer for the second time. Obviously, Christ's emphasis was on "vain" and "empty" repetitious prayer, not simply repetitious prayer. This conclusion is affirmed elsewhere in Scripture. Jesus repeats the same prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane three times (cf. Mt. 26:39, 42, 44); He responded favorably to the repeated prayers of the blind men (cf. Mt. 20:29-33); and the angels in heaven repeat unceasingly, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come" (Rev. 4:8). In Psalm 136, the response, "for His steadfast love endures forever" or, in another translation, "His mercy endures forever," is repeated 26 times.

The context of Matthew 6:7, both historical and textual, is Jesus Christ preaching a radically new relationship with God. He says that the poor in spirit will inherit the kingdom of heaven and that enemies are not to be hated, but loved. What kind of god would make such demands? Certainly not a god like the gods of Gentiles. This God is Our Heavenly Father. We pray to Him in a way radically different from the manner in which Gentiles prayed to their gods. Hence, "do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Mt. 6:7-8).

As Catholics, we do not believe that we will be heard because of our many words, but because we open our hearts to Our Heavenly Father. The Catholic Church affirms that the mere repetition of words doesn't move God as if by magic. That is, of course, a pagan notion. However, to pray repetitively (as in the Psalms, the Our Father, etc.) is clearly a biblical way of praying. That it can be abused or misused is no argument against it as a whole.

Unceasing Praise of Christ

All prayer is a response to God's initiative of love. As God reveals Himself to man, man responds to Him in prayer (cf. Catechism, no. 2567). "Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God" (St. John Damascene, as quoted in the Catechism, no. 2559). According to the Catechism, there are three major expressions of prayer:

The Lord leads all persons by paths and in ways pleasing to him, and each believer responds according to his heart's resolve and the personal expressions of his prayer. However, Christian Tradition has retained three major expressions of prayer: vocal, meditative, and contemplative. They have one basic trait in common: composure of heart. This vigilance in keeping the Word and dwelling in the presence of God makes these three expressions intense times in the life of prayer (no. 2699).

Which of the three expressions—vocal, meditative, or contemplative—is the Rosary? "Vocal prayer, founded on the union of body and soul in human nature, associates the body with the interior prayer of the heart" (Catechism, no. 2722). Because vocal prayer engages the body and soul of man, this form of prayer is essential to the spiritual life. Because it is so thoroughly human, vocal prayer is the form of prayer most readily accessible for groups. Because it expresses the deep desires of the heart, vocal prayer is the foundation of meditation and contemplative prayer. The only prayer explicitly taught by Our Savior, the Our Father, was taught as a vocal prayer.

While vocal prayer is a part of the Rosary, the Rosary as a whole is a meditation on the mysteries of Christ. Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. This mobilization of faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ. Christian prayer tries above all to meditate on the mysteries of Christ, as in *lectio divina* or the Rosary (Catechism, no. 2707).

As the whole life of Mary points us to her Son, the Rosary does the same. The prayers of the Rosary are scriptural and all but two of the 15 mysteries are explicitly taken directly from the Gospels. By meditating on the

mysteries of the Rosary, we ponder the life of Christ as the revelation of God (cf. Catechism, no. 561).

Pope Paul VI, in his apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, goes further in saying that when focusing on Christ, repetition is a form of praise:

As a Gospel prayer, centered on the mystery of the redemptive Incarnation, the Rosary is therefore a prayer with a clearly Christological orientation. Its most characteristic element, in fact, the litany-like succession of Hail Mary's, becomes in itself an unceasing praise of Christ, who is the ultimate object both of the angel's announcement and of the greeting of the mother of John the Baptist: "Blessed is the fruit of your womb" (no. 46).

Steadfast in Prayer

We pray to place ourselves before God and to dispose ourselves to His graces. We are urged to pray regularly and frequently. The power of our prayers does not come from how we feel during prayer, but on the grace of God given through our steadfast discipline (1 Cor. 15:58; cf. Catechism, 2725). A regular recitation of the Rosary helps us develop steadfastness in prayer in ways that spontaneous and extemporaneous prayer cannot.

The Rosary can help us overcome distraction and dryness in prayer. Praying the Rosary does not depend solely on our own inspired creativity. The Rosary provides elements of prayer that we might otherwise lack: a place to begin, a rhythm with its intervals of prayer, and words that we can assent to with our hearts. When we pray the Rosary we settle into a prayer of adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, intercession, and petition.

Thus, regularity and frequency of prayer need not depend on how we feel. At the very least, the Rosary is an exercise in steadfastness. The mere act of reciting the Rosary is a movement toward God. Praying the Rosary honors Mary and glorifies her Son. Far from "vain repetition," the Rosary is a devotion that bears good fruit.

¹ Dom Bernard Orchard, M.A., *et al.*, *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1954), 863.

² *Ibid.*

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