

Sydney College of Divinity

Pope John XXIII's Apostolic Letter on the Rosary

AN ASSIGNMENT SUBMITTED TO
MS. ROBYN WRIGLEY CARR
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE CLASS REQUIREMENTS OF
SP458R SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES
AS PART OF AN M.A. PROGRAMME

BROKEN BAY INSTITUTE
(A Member Institute of the Sydney College of Divinity)

BY
ALEXANDER MICHAEL PECK

BRISBANE, QUEENSLAND
SEPTEMBER 19, 2008

SP458R – Assignment #1 – Essay

Pope John XXIII's Apostolic Letter on the Rosary

This reflective paper examines the apostolic letter (dated September 29, 1961) written by H.H. John XXIII to the bishops and faithful of the Catholic world, dealing with the Rosary. Specifically, two questions form the structure of the response. The first is, “What does the writer want the reader to do?”¹ In other words, the aim is to identify what the writer expects of the reader as a result of reading his letter.² Secondly, “What can this reader take away from his engagement with this text?”³ That is, what elements have been encountered that the reader desires to remain with him as helpful, stimulating, encouraging, or challenging?⁴

The Pope's Intentions for His Readers

The first intent of Pope John XXIII's apostolic letter is for readers *to be reminded of Pope Leo XIII's frequent invitations for the Christian world to say the holy Rosary* – “presented to all the Church's children as an exercise in holy and profitable meditation, for the uplifting of their souls and as an intercession for heavenly graces for the whole Church” – and how his successors were faithful to this tradition.⁵

¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 139.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Pope John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), 358.

In relation to the Rosary, he desires readers to know that he intends to follow in the footsteps of the revered shepherds of the flock of Christ whose concern was for the sanctification of souls.⁶

Secondly, the Pope wishes for readers *to think about some basic and practical considerations suggested by the devotion of the holy Rosary*, to guide their meditation and prayer “with the purpose of worldwide supplication for the peace of all men and of all peoples”.⁷ It is in relation to this purpose that he wants to elevate readers’ thinking so that they appreciate the Rosary as a worldwide supplication of individuals comprising the immense community of the redeemed praying for the supreme destiny of fulfilling the eternal purposes of God for all mankind.⁸ Finally, the Pope beautifully sums up this worldwide vision by writing, “in this way the Rosary of Mary assumes the dignity of a great public and universal prayer, to express the ordinary and extraordinary needs of Holy Church, of the nations and of the whole world”.⁹

Furthermore, the Pope desires for readers *to remember that the Rosary entails a prayerful union with God and always has an uplifting effect on the soul*.¹⁰ It involves “the joyful flight of the soul in converse with God in the sublime and tender mysteries of his merciful love for all mankind”.¹¹ His purpose is to reiterate the various elements of the Rosary which will help the reader to value how they are delicately woven together, “full of spiritual

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 358-359.

⁸ Ibid., 360.

⁹ Ibid., 361.

¹⁰ Ibid., 359.

¹¹ Ibid.

warmth and beauty” – namely, the Our Father which gives the Rosary its substance and tone; the angel’s greeting which echoes the joy of heaven and earth; and finally, the Gloria which worships the most holy Trinity.¹²

Fourth, the Pope would like to help readers *to understand the three chords of mystical contemplation, private reflection, and pious intention for every picture*, which give the Rosary its unity and cohesion.¹³ Contemplation of each mystery involves those truths of the faith dealing with the redeeming mission of Jesus – and which draws one into communion of thought and feeling with the life and teaching of Jesus, “who lived on this earth redeeming, teaching, sanctifying”.¹⁴ Reflection has to do with finding applications in each mystery for the conditions and sanctification of one’s own life – under the guidance of the Holy Spirit which “intercedes with sighs too deep for words” for one’s own spiritual needs and for the needs of daily life.¹⁵ Finally, intention concerns intercession for private necessities, persons, or institutions – all of which form part of one’s love towards neighbour.¹⁶

Fifth, the Pope hopes *to instil in the reader an essential historical perspective for the significance of the Rosary*. Historians who have studied the development of political events have recognized the influence exerted by Rosary devotions in protecting nations from threatening calamities, in restoring social order and prosperity, and the achieving spiritual

¹² *Ibid.*, 360.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 359.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 359-360.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 360.

victories.¹⁷ This attests to the value and efficacy of prayer, raised by countless pious individuals as occurs through the Rosary devotion.¹⁸

Finally, in closing his apostolic letter concerning the Rosary, the Pope chooses *to leave with the reader a brief sequence of devout thoughts arranged for each decade of the Rosary*, with reference to the threefold chord stated earlier – mystery, reflection, and intention.¹⁹ Their purpose is to heighten personal piety and to give more fervour to the prayers for the salvation and peace of all men.²⁰

Personal Engagement with the Apostolic Letter

Writing from a non-Catholic background, and therefore unfamiliarity with the Rosary, the Pope's apostolic letter has indeed prompted the following helpful and inspiring appreciation, reflection, and intention in relation to the Rosary. For ease of reading and reference, Table 1 below presents these thoughts under three headings.

¹⁷ Ibid., 361.

¹⁸ Ibid., 362.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Table 1. A Summary of Personally Helpful Thoughts Regarding the Rosary

THE JOYFUL MYSTERIES			
Decade	Mystery	Reflection	Intention
The Annunciation	The Son of God becomes a man in order to rescue and redeem all mankind.	Thank continually the Lord who joined us and made us the adopted sons of his heavenly Father.	Make a sincere effort to acquire humility and purity, and ardent love for the Lord Jesus Christ.
The Visitation	The most sacred maternity possible to imagine on earth has occurred.	Consider how Christian families everywhere are bound together in spirit by the Rosary.	Sustain, increase, and radiate the universal love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.
Birth of Jesus	The Word of God, now made man, first appears in a manger – in poverty and simplicity.	Bow in adoration before the crib and look into the eyes of the Infant, who greets all with a smile.	Commend to Jesus the countless new-born babies – all belong by right to him and are his kin.
Presentation of Jesus	Jesus is offered to the priest – it is the meeting of two Covenants.	Contemplate the many young people offering themselves for lifelong service in Christ's Body.	Express admiration and joy toward the young laity who are giving of themselves in his service.
Temple: Jesus Found	Jesus is found sitting in the midst of doctors – learning and getting wisdom.	Ponder the task of each age – to garner the wisdom of the ages and to hand down good doctrine.	Pray for those called to the service of truth – honouring the truth in research and teaching.

THE SORROWFUL MYSTERIES			
Decade	Mystery	Reflection	Intention
Gethsemane Agony	The Lord's supreme anguish – suffering of soul, bitter loneliness, and broken body.	Accept suffering sent or permitted by God: “Not my will but yours be done” (Lk 22:42).	Share in others' pain – “weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15).
The Scourging	The merciless torture inflicted on the pure and holy body of Jesus.	Bear in mind the need to constantly exercise discipline and to daily mortify the passions.	Beseech the Lord to give purity of morals – as well as strength of character and fidelity at all costs.
Crowning with Thorns	Jesus wears a crown of thorns – woven by cruel men for the head of one who loves them.	Reflect on those who bear the burden of leadership, or are more gifted and so more accountable.	Intercede in prayer before the Father in heaven for leaders and rulers so that their love will prevail.
Carrying the Cross	Jesus carries his Cross up to Calvary – he represents all men. Each one has his cross.	Embrace and bear the Cross – it is one's salvation, life, defence, and heavenly foretaste.	Pray for the strength, consolation, and hope of the vast number of poor suffering souls.
Crucifixion and Death	Through his cruel death on the Cross, Jesus wiped away all our sins by atoning for them.	Think in sadness about those who will never know anything about Christ's blood or refuse it.	Pray earnestly that the precious blood may bring conversion and salvation to all men everywhere.

THE GLORIOUS MYSTERIES			
Decade	Mystery	Reflection	Intention
The Resurrection	Death is defeated. Christ conquers, reigns, and rules – the Church's assurance of victory.	See, with eyes of faith, the souls most dear to us, as living and united with the risen Christ.	Let our thoughts turn to the resurrection which awaits our own mortal remains.
The Ascension	Jesus ascended into heaven to return to his Father. Two angels promised his return.	Reflect on the final fulfilment of the promises of Jesus and his preparing a place for us.	Avoid being hampered by things that burden and encumber, but abandon oneself to God's will.
Descent of Holy Spirit	On the day of Pentecost, the apostles received the promised Holy Spirit as Christ's supreme gift.	Know that the Holy Spirit is the Consoler and Giver of life to men – continually poured out.	Understand that the Church's triumphs are not always visible, but always there and rich in surprises.
Assumption of Mary	The ascent of Mary's soul to heaven, the eternal kingdom.	Value our soul's ascent as a source of consolation and faith, in days of grief or pain.	Accept death serenely, knowing that the Lord will be near in our last agony, to take our soul.
Crowning of Mary	God is seen in the splendour of heaven – a scene of joy and glory.	Cherish how the Rosary presents God's eternal plan for our salvation which ends in heaven.	Appreciate that the Rosary brings tempering of afflictions, peace, and the hope of eternal life.

Bibliography

Keating, Thomas. *Foundations for Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Life:*

Open Mind, Open Heart; Invitation to Love; The Mystery of Christ. New York:

Continuum, 2006.

McGrath, Alister E. *Christian Spirituality.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.

McKenna, Megan. *Praying the Rosary: A Complete Guide to the World's Most Popular Form of Prayer.* New York: Doubleday, 2004.

Pope John XXIII. *Journal of a Soul.* London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965.

The NIV Study Bible: News International Version. Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1985.

Appendix 1

Thomas Keating, *Foundations for Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Life: Open Mind, Open Heart; Invitation to Love; The Mystery of Christ* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 356. Keating's work has a one-page appendix entitled "The Rosary". From the text, I created the table below, having found his insights personally helpful.

THE ROSARY				
Mystery	Mystery of divine . . .	Liturgy	Christian Festivals	Christian Virtues
Joyful Mysteries	Light	Advent to Epiphany	Christmas is the feast of divine <i>light</i> ; Epiphany is the fullness of it.	Faith
Sorrowful Mysteries	Life	Lent to the Ascension	Easter is the feast of divine <i>life</i> ; Ascension is the fullness of it.	Hope
Glorious Mysteries	Love	Pentecost to Ordinary Time	Pentecost is the feast of divine <i>love</i> ; the rest of the year is the expression of it.	Love

Appendix 2

In her book entitled *Praying the Rosary: A Complete Guide to the World's Most Popular Form of Prayer* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), Megan McKenna writes that “in accord with the emphasis that the mysteries are about the person of Jesus and the Word of God in the Scriptures, two other glorious mysteries will be included here that continue the revelation about the heart of our faith” (page 222). In place of the Assumption of Mary and the Crowning of Mary, the following two glorious mysteries are described: The Coming of the Son of Man in Glory to Judge the Nations with Justice; and The Trinity. The following table is based on McKenna’s book (pages 243-244 and 255).

THE GLORIOUS MYSTERIES			
Decade	Mystery	Reflection	Intention
Coming of the Son of Man in Glory	Jesus, the Risen One, will come in God’s glory to bring justice to all the earth	Realize that we will be seen for what we are: Either the friends of God or his enemies through our refusal to surrender to Him.	Choose every day of our lives to bend in service to the kingdom of Jesus, the poor man crucified, the stranger, and the least at our door.
The Trinity	Doxology: “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen”.	Consider that being in the presence of the triune God, beyond words, concepts, desires, and images, brings us to awareness and relationships that are truer than any expression of words.	Remember that we worship the Trinity and in God we become human: we become community and we dwell in communion with God, who is Three and who is One. We dwell in that place where they are Three yet One, where they are Love.