

Feast of Queen of the Holy Rosary

October 2, 2005

Preacher: S. Mary Mark, OP

It is with real joy that I welcome each of you here this afternoon in the name of all our sisters. As I look at you I am tempted to be so bold as to use Jesus' word as recorded in John's gospel: "I do not call you servants, but friends" and that is what you have become to us. Let us open our sharing this afternoon with the prayer that you will find on your papers:

Lord God, we praise and thank you
for the marvels you have done for Mary, your handmaid.
We rejoice that you are still in the midst of us
and that through her you give Jesus to the waiting world,
to fill up the empty spaces and renew us in your love.

Almost all religious communities claim Mary as their special patron, and we Dominicans do so under the title of Queen of the Holy Rosary. Each Dominican Congregation or Province has its patron or patroness: The Congregation of St. Catherine of Siena, The Congregation of the Holy Cross, St. Albert's Province, the Province of the Holy Name, but ours is the Congregation of the Queen of Holy Rosary, so she is not only our Order's patroness, but also our Congregational patroness. As you have probably noticed as you drive into work each day our college here in Mission San Jose is the Queen of the Holy Rosary College. If you are among those who work in the college building you have probably noticed the statue grouping of Mary with the Child Jesus handing the Rosary to St. Dominic. And if your work is in the main dining room, you've passed the lovely wood carving of the same scene at the entry there. We, as a congregation, commit ourselves to praying either the rosary or some other Marian devotion every day and at the conclusion of our daily communal prayer we sing or pray the "Salve Regina", the Hail Holy Queen together. As those of you who work in our Care Facility know, we always gather to sing the "Salve Regina" with our dying sisters, and as you, Joe and Nicholas know, we always sing it again as our farewell to our sisters at their burial in God's Acre.

The legend of the rosary begins with Dominic in the early 13th century. At that time the Christian foundation in Europe was being shaken by the Albigensian heresy. These people claimed that the body and all material creation were evil. They refused to drink wine for it was a symbol of life on which they turned their backs. Woman, the life-bearer, was despised and marriage was rejected. Wealth, property, and all the external expressions of religion were played down. It was a strange mixture of puritanical asceticism, of opting out of society, and of dabbling in the occult. And the logical conclusion of all this was to deny the possibility of the Word of God taking flesh in the womb of a woman.

What was needed was a powerful preaching to tell the world once more that God had "emptied himself", being born in the likeness of men, "became obedient unto death"; and that now "Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:6-11) The message formed the core of Dominic's sermons and was the heart of the Rosary preaching. It could be summed up in the words Son, Saviour and Sovereign : Son - the Joyful Mysteries; Saviour - the Sorrowful Mysteries; and Sovereign - the Glorious Mysteries.

So the legend runs that Dominic was having but scant success in his preaching against the Albigenses,

when one day Our Lady herself came to his rescue saying: "When God willed to renew the face of the earth he began by sending down the fertilising dew of the Angelic salutation. Preach my Rosary composed of 150 Aves, and you will obtain abundant harvest." And so it was, indeed.

Only over the centuries did the rosary evolve in structure into the model we know now. And with our late Holy Father Pope John Paul II it underwent further change. The Rosary is not only a beautiful form of prayer, but also a general method of prayer. It should lead in some way to meditating on the whole richness of the scriptures, and even to going beyond meditation to that stillness and peace of resting in the divine presence which we call contemplation.

Gabriel Harty, from whose book we are drawing material here, calls the rosary "The Gospel on its Knees." There is not time or space here to develop that image, but it is rich with the truth of the gift of the rosary.

Through the centuries there can be found numerous depictions of saints with the beads in hand. However, even in the paintings of our most acclaimed Dominican artist, Fra Angelico, Dominic is never depicted with the rosary in his hand. Rather he kneels at the foot of the Cross in deep prayer and meditation. That is appropriate because contemplation, not the beads, is the significant Dominican contribution to the development of the Rosary. There is another legend about Mary dear to the hearts of all Dominicans to be found in "The Lives of the Brethren", the earliest chronicle of the founding and establishment of the Order. The legend speaks of the special care of Mary for the young Order and her protection of it from the powers of the Evil One. It seems that the young friars, exhausted from their journeying (always on foot) and their preaching would be harassed mercilessly by Satan at night in the dormitory as they tried to sleep. Dominic turned to Our Lady begging for protection for his brothers and it is said that he was given a vision of Mary passing through the dormitory blessing each of the friars shielding them from the power of Satan. It was at this point that our traditional practice of singing the "Salve Regina" was initiated. After the last prayer "Hour" of the day, Compline, Dominic would lead the brethren in procession through the church to the altar of Mary where they would sing the beautiful antiphon, "Salve Regina", "Hail, Holy Queen."

There are many other stories of Mary's protection of our Dominican brothers and sisters. Perhaps you have noticed in our chapel the window on the right side of St. Hyacinth carrying a monstrance and a statue of Mary. The story goes that when his convent was threatened by an invading force of Tartars from the North, Hyacinth quickly grasped the Blessed Sacrament to flee when he heard Our Lady ask him to take her image too. "I will lighten the load," she said. And so Hyacinth walked dry-shod across the river carrying the Blessed Sacrament in one hand and the statue of Mary in the other.

St. Albert the Great was said to have a great devotion to Mary because in his early experience with theological studies he was so discouraged that he decided to run away. According to legend he was prevented by Our Lady, who reproached him for not having asked her for the wisdom he needed. When he humbly did so the development of his theological expertise astounded his contemporaries.

We need not turn only to saints for stories of Mary's protection and guidance. I am certain that you yourselves have turned to her and received her help and support on many occasions. One of our contemporary writers, Fr. Fabian Parmisano, a former chaplain here at the Motherhouse, has written "Mary is so essential to Christianity and to prayer. She is the individual, tangible person who continually brings God to us and us to God beyond our fears and in love. Thanks to our Mother and the prayer she teaches us, we see God in the small as well as the great, with a joyous wonder and a happy awe."