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Transformation of the Rosary

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(CNS/Rueters photo)

My fishing buddy?s a Freemason. Who would have thought that he would transform my experience of the Rosary? One day he handed me a box. Someone had given him a set of Rosary beads with instructions how to use them. He figured that I?d know what to do with them.

I?d been praying the Rosary since my father drew me back to it during his terminal illness some 20 years earlier. But the instructions were new.

I?d heard about how John Paul II introduced five new mysteries, but I was quite content with the traditional fifteen. My buddy?s instruction sheet included the new ones. That?s where the transformation started.

Comfort

I?d taken great comfort from the Rosary. I loved how the daily prayers joined a set of five ?mysteries? of redemption, and the way each one of the three sets of the mysteries matched its given day of the week. I felt that ?new? mysteries would be an irritation but, I looked into them.

Ironically, Rosarium Virginis Mariae (RVM), the Apostolic Letter that introduced them, helped me grasp better the reasons for my comfort at the same time it increased my irritation.

John Paul II re-affirmed the traditional approach I?d been using. In fact, he believes that by keying the sets of mysteries into the days of the week the ?Rosary marks the rhythm of human life.?(RVM, Section 2) It was as I thought. And to me this meant that on Sunday we pray the glorious, on Monday the joyful, on Tuesday the sorrowful, on Wednesday the glorious. The pattern repeats and then ends on Saturday with the glorious mysteries. The week begins and ends in glory. And what is life but joys and sorrows? You bring them to the Rosary, and it comforts you with the message that they are taken up into God?s glory.

Still, there was something missing in my comfort. That?s why I was open to the irritation.

Irritation and Transformation

The five new mysteries broke my comfort by telling me exactly what was missing.
The traditional fifteen mysteries tell us nothing about Jesus? life, his public ministry. The new ones are all about it.

But here?s the real irritation. If the Rosary marks the rhythm of human life, Jesus breaks it!

John Paul introduces them simply enough. ?Consequently, for the Rosary to become more fully a ?compendium of the Gospel?, it is fitting to add . . .a meditation on certain particularly significant moments in his public ministry (the mysteries of light).? (RVM, Section 19)? I think the following can be singled out: (1) his Baptism in the Jordan, (2) his self-manifestation at the wedding of Cana, (3) his proclamation of the Kingdom of God, with his call to conversion, (4) his Transfiguration, and finally, (5), his institution of the Eucharist?(RVM, Section 20). John Paul hoped that his proposal would give the Rosary ?fresh life? and bring out more fully its ?Christological depth.?(RVM, Section 19)

The problem is that when they expose its Christological depth more fully the new mysteries hit the nerve of Jesus. His words and actions explode convention. And worse yet, they come as commands.

The Sermon on the Mount begins conventionally enough but it rises to commands
to turn the other cheek and to love one?s enemy. And things get worse! Take Jesus? claim that he comes to bring division not peace and his command that the dead should bury the dead.

Try as you might to make sense of them, you cannot. And just like his disciples, you miss the point. But what if, like his disciples, you try to do what Mary told the steward to do at Cana, ?Do whatever he tells you!? People followed Jesus not because they understood him, or, even because he comforted them. They followed him because he replaced their shattered assumptions with the power to heal, feed, clothe, and forgive. And he let them share in the joy of being with him.

Here?s where the new mysteries move from irritation to transformation. John Paul proposes we pray them on Thursday. This changes how the week ends. It?s all the same from Sunday to Wednesday, and Friday is still the sorrowful. But the week ends in joy!

The new week mirrors the path of discipleship and clears a way to live out the very tension at the heart of our faith.

The disciples somehow believe they?re with the messiah. Even Peter understood it once. But while they sometimes succeed, they mostly stumble when trying to do the one thing Jesus commands: Follow me. But they don?t stop trying. And Jesus rewards them with the joy of his constant company.

So it is with us. We believe that our life?s sorrows and joys are wrapped in God?s glory. But lest we hear the irritating words of Jesus, lest we try and fail to follow him here and now, we will never know the earthly joy of his company. Adding the new and ?irritating? mysteries to the Rosary can make us more open to hear those words, and even in the sorrow of our failures, to taste that joy.

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