



ENCYCLICAL LETTER.

Leo XIII on the Rosary of Mary

To the Patriarchs, Princes, Archbishops, Bishops and other Ordinaries in Peace and Communion with the Holy See.

VENERABLE BROTHERS, GREETING AND APOSTOLIC BLESSING!

We always look forward with pleasant expectation and elevated hope to the return of the month of October, which has, by Our exhortation and Order, been dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, and, in which for not a few years now, the devotion of the Rosary has been cultivated not only and earnestly amongst Catholic people. The motive which incited Us to make this exhortation We have made known more than once. For as the unfortunate position of the Church and of States assiduously demands the most instant aid of God, We thought it well that this should be implored through the intercession of His Mother, and that it should be solicited especially by that form of prayer the efficacy of which has always been felt by Christians to be most wholesome. Such was the feeling even at the very origin of the Rosary of Mary, both in the preservation of the holy faith from the wicked attacks of heretics and in the fitting esteem for the virtues which, owing to the age's corrupt example, needed to be sustained and raised, and the same feeling has been experienced publicly and privately in a perennial course of benefits, the memory of which is everywhere immortalised by famous institutions and monuments. We rejoice to relate that our own age, labouring in many ways under dangers incidental to the times, has in like manner derived salutary fruit from the same source; but on looking round, venerable brethren, you see yourselves that there still exist and are partly increasing reasons why zeal in appealing to the Heavenly Queen should by Our exhortation be stimulated amongst your flocks. Add to this that as We fix our thoughts on the intimate character of the Rosary, the clearer its excellence and advantage appear to Us, the higher is raised the desire and hope that Our recommendation may have such an effect that this most sacred devotion, strengthened in the minds of the faithful by a more thorough acquaintance, and flourished by a more extended use, may flourish yet much more abundantly. In promoting this purpose We shall not recall the various considerations respecting the same matter which We set forth in former years; it rather occurs to Us to reflect upon and point out by what an excellent design of Divine Providence it comes to pass that through the aid of the Rosary confidence as to the result of their petitions is pleasantly infused into the minds of those who pray and the maternal compassion of the benign Virgin for men responds to appeals by affording succour with the utmost bounty.

The assistance of Mary which we seek in prayer assuredly depends, as if for its basis, upon the office of procuring Divine grace for us—an office which she continually discharges with God, being most acceptable by her dignity and merits and far surpassing in power all the angels and saints in Heaven. And, probably, in no form of prayer does this office become so manifest as in the Rosary, in which

the part taken by the Virgin in securing men's salvation recurs as if unfolded in an actually present effect, thus supplying an admirable aid to piety, whether in the contemplation of the succeeding sacred mysteries or in the devout repetition of the prayers. In the first place the Joyful Mysteries are before us. For the Eternal Son of God inclines to men and is made Man, Mary however assenting and "being conceived of the Holy Ghost." Then John "is sanctified" in his mother's womb by a special mark and is provided with chosen gifts "to prepare the way of the Lord;" but these things are connected with the salutation of Mary, who by a Divine impulse had gone to see her kins woman. At length takes place the birth of Christ, "the expectation of the nations." He is born of the Virgin, and shepherds and Magi, the



first fruits of the faith, hastening with pious disposition to His birthplace, "find the Child with Mary, His Mother." Then that He might in a public manner offer himself as a victim to God the Father, He desires to be taken to the Temple, and there by the ministry of Mary He "is presented to the Lord." When the Boy is mysteriously lost she seeks Him with anxious solicitude, and finds Him with immense joy. The Sorrowful Mysteries are equally expressive. In the "Garden of Gethsemane," where Jesus fears and is sorrowful unto death, and in the Praetorium, where he is beaten with scourges, punctured with a crown of thorns, and subjected to torments, Mary, indeed, is absent, but these things were long foreseen by her and present to her mind. For when, as a maid, she offered herself up to God for the office of a mother, and when she wholly dedicated herself in the Temple with her Son, even then by each of these circumstances she became a partner with Him in the troublesome work of expiating the sins of the human race; whence it cannot be doubted that she also suffered excessive pain, especially in her mind, at the bitter anguish and torture of her Son. And whilst she was present and looking on was to be carried out that sacrifice for which He had generously prepared Himself as a victim; a fact which at the end and in a more touching way is noticed in the same Mysteries; "Mary, His mother, stood beside the Cross of Jesus," and being moved by immense charity to receive us as children, she willingly off red up her Son to Divine justice, dying at heart with Him and being transfixed with a sword of sorrow. Finally, in the Glorious Mysteries the merciful office of the Virgin is manifested even more fully. In silent joy she tastes of the glory of the Son, triumphant over death; with maternal affection she follows Him as He returns to the Heavenly abode; but whilst worthy of Heaven she is detained on earth as the infant Church's most fitting consoler and teacher, "who penetrated the most profound abyss of Divine wisdom to a greater extent than could be believed" (St. Bernard de XII. Prærogativ. B.M.V. n. 3.). But since the promise of human redemption will not be completely fulfilled until the Holy Spirit of whom Christ gave assurance shall have come, we therefore see her in the

memorable upper room, where, with the Apostles and praying for them with inexpressible groaning, she hastens the advent of the fulness of the same Paraclete, the supreme gift of Christ, a treasure never to fail. And entering into immortal life she is to plead our cause forever, and with increased effect. Accordingly we look up from this valley of tears to the holy city of Jerusalem, crowded with angelic choirs; and we reverence her who is sublime in the glory of the Blessed, and who, crowned by the Son of God with a diadem of stars, sits with Him the Queen and mistress of the universe. All these things, venerable brethren, in which is exhibited "the design of God, the counsel of wisdom, the counsel of piety" (St. Bernard, Serm. in Nativ. B.M.V. n. 6), and in which the merits of the Virgin Mother are conspicuous, must have an agreeable influence on every mind, inspiring the sure hope of exciting the Divine mercy and compassion through the agency of Mary.

The vocal prayer appropriately fitted with the mysteries has the same tendency. First comes, as is right, the Lord's Prayer addressed to Our Heavenly Father; and, after He has been invoked in becoming words of appeal, the voice of the suppliant is turned from the throne of His Majesty to Mary by the law of interceding and propitiating of which we speak, and which is explained by St. Bernard of Sienna in this sentence: "Every grace communicated to the world has a threefold course. For it is imparted on a perfectly regular system (*ordinatissime*) by God to Christ; by Christ to the Virgin; and by the Virgin to us (Serm. VI. in Festiv. in B.M.V. do Annunc. a 1. c. 2). These, stages, as we may call them, though they differ, indeed, in kind from one another, being laid down, we dwell longer, and in a certain sense more pleasingly upon the last, from the design of the Rosary, the Angelic Salutation being continued in decades as if in order that we may ascend the more confidently to the other stages, that is through Christ to God the Father. The same salutation we pour forth to Mary so many times in order that our weak and defective prayer may be sustained by the necessary confidence, beseeching her to pray to God for us and as if in our name. Our voices, in fact, are far more acceptable and powerful with Him if they are recommended by the prayers of the Virgin, whom He Himself urges to intercession with the gentle invitation "Let thy voice sound in My ears for thy voice is sweet" (Cant. II. 14). For this very reason are repeated by us so often the glorious names she possesses for obtaining favours. We salute her who finds favour with God, being singularly "full of grace" from him, so that it might flow in abundance to all persons; her in whom God inheres by the closest possible union; her "blessed amongst women," who "alone took away the curse and brought the blessing" (St. Thomas op. viii. *super salut. angel.* n. 8), the blessed fruit of her womb, in whom "all nations are blest;" finally we invoke her as the "Mother of God," from which lofty dignity, what is there that she does not certainly and earnestly ask "for us sinners," what may we not hope for throughout all our life and at the last agony of our spirit?

It is assuredly impossible that anyone who has devoted himself, with faith and earnestness, to such prayers and mysteries, should not be seized by admiration at the Divine counsels respecting the Virgin for the common salvation of the nations; and with lively confidence he will long to commit himself to her care and protection according to the declaration of St. Bernard: "Remember, O most pious Virgin Mary, that it was never heard of in any age that any one who had recourse to thy protection, implored

thy aid, or sought thy intercession was abandoned."

The power of the Rosary in inspiring those who pray with confidence as to the issue of their appeals is equally effective in moving the heart of the Virgin in compassion for us. It is clear that it must be exceedingly grateful to her to see and hear us whilst we solemnly weave into a crown sincere petitions and beautiful words of praise. For, that in thus praying together we pay and wish God the glory which is His due; that we are anxious that His pleasure and His will should alone be fulfilled; that we extol His goodness and munificence, calling Him Father and, unworthy as we are, begging for very high favours—all this is a source of exquisite joy to Mary, and in our devotion she really "magnifies the Lord." And in truth we address God in a prayer worthy of Him when we recite the Lord's Prayer. Moreover, to the requests we make in this prayer, so just and fitting in themselves and so conformable to Christian faith, hope, and charity, a certain charm most agreeable to the Virgin adds a special weight. For with our voice appears to be united that of the Son Jesus, Who gave us the same formula of prayer in fixed terms and commanded that it should be employed: "Thus, therefore, shall you pray" (Matt. vi. 9). Let us not doubt, then, that she will discharge towards us her office, full of eager love, when with a ready disposition we carry out this injunction by reciting the Rosary; gracefully receiving this chaplet, she will grant us in return a rich reward of favours. The character of the Rosary, in itself well calculated to help us to pray with the proper spirit, affords no small ground for feeling assured of her liberal bounty. Such is man's weakness that when he is engaged in prayer his attention is easily and frequently withdrawn from God, and he is divested from the object he has resolutely set before himself. Now, whoever properly considers the nature of the Rosary will at once see how efficacious it is for keeping the mind alert, for removing torpor, for exciting a salutary sorrow on account of sins that have been committed, and for leading the thoughts to subjects of heaven's contemplation. As is well known the Rosary consists of two parts which are distinct and yet connected together—the meditation on the mysteries and the vocal prayer. This kind of prayer then requires particular attention on the part of those who use it—that is, not only in directing the mind in a certain way towards God, but in contemplating and meditating in such a manner that examples of the higher life are taken to heart, and food found for every species of piety. Indeed, there is nothing greater or more admirable than those same things in which the perfection of the Christian faith appears, and by the light and power of which truth, justice and peace have advanced upon the earth upon a new scale and with most beneficent results. Consonant with this is the mode in which these truths are set before the cultivators of the Rosary; that is to say in a manner adapted to the intelligence even of the unlearned. For the Rosary is arranged not for the consideration of dogmas of faith and questions of doctrine, but rather for putting forward facts to be perceived by the eyes and treasured up in the memory—facts which make all the greater impression on the mind and effect it the more beneficially in as much as they are presented as they occurred, the identity of time, place, and person being preserved. When, before everybody, these considerations are marked and strongly impressed upon the mind from early years, on the mention of each mystery whoever is really inclined to prayer takes them in without any effort whatever, and by a sort of natural movement of the mind and heart he receives abundantly the dew of heavenly grace