34. "Vain repetitions" and the rosary

Often heard: "Jesus said not to use vain repetitions (Matt 6:7). The rosary repeats the same prayer fifty times."
Also heard: "Jesus prayed the same words three times in Gethsemane. Was that vain repetition?"

Prayer from the heart, not rote repetition

HELD BY Baptist

Rote, repeated prayers like the rosary are the "vain repetitions" Jesus forbade; prayer should be spontaneous and from the heart.

VERSES CITED

Matt 6:7–8; Isa 29:13.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Reformation-era criticism of the rosary and of counting prayers; now a standard evangelical objection.

Repeated prayer is not vain repetition

HELD BY Catholic | Orthodox Jesus Prayer, not rosary

Jesus condemned empty babbling (*battalogeō*), the pagan idea that more words force God's hand, not repetition itself. He gave a set prayer in the next verses, prayed the same words three times in Gethsemane, and the four living creatures in heaven repeat "Holy, holy, holy" day and night. The rosary is meditation on Gospel events using prayers drawn largely from Scripture (Luke 1:28, 42).

VERSES CITED

Matt 6:9–13; 26:39–44; Luke 18:1–8, 13; Ps 136 (a refrain repeated 26 times); Rev 4:8; Luke 1:28, 42.

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

The Desert Fathers repeated short prayers constantly; John Cassian (*Conferences* 10.10, c. 420) teaches repeating Ps 70:1. Prayer beads for counting Our Fathers appear around the 11th–12th centuries. The rosary is traditionally linked to St. Dominic (13th century) and took its familiar form in the 15th century; John Paul II added the Luminous Mysteries (2002).

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 2613, 2666–2668, 2673–2679, 2708.

Set prayers lawful; prayer addressed to God alone

HELD BY Lutheran | Reformed | Anglican classical | Methodist

Christ forbade babbling, as if many words could sway God, not long, frequent or set prayer: He Himself gave the Lord's Prayer, which may be prayed as well as used as a pattern, and set forms such as the Creed, collects and the Litany may rightly be used. What is rejected is prayer recited as a work without faith or understanding, and prayer addressed to Mary or the saints rather than to God through Christ, the one Mediator; for both reasons the rosary is set aside while set prayer to God is kept.

VERSES CITED

Matt 6:7-13; Luke 11:2-4; 1 Cor 14:15; 1 Tim 2:5.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

The Reformers kept the Lord's Prayer and set forms while removing rosaries and prayers to the saints: Luther's catechisms (1529) give daily set prayers, the Augsburg Confession (1530) lists the use of rosaries among "childish and needless works," the Book of Common Prayer (1549, 1662) made common set prayer the rule of English worship, and Wesley sent American Methodists a revision of it, The Sunday Service (1784).

CONFESSIONS AND DOCUMENTS

Augsburg Confession XX.3, XXI; Large Catechism III.22-23, 33; Small Catechism, Daily Prayers; Calvin, Institutes 3.20.6, 3.20.29; Westminster Larger Catechism Q 186-187; Thirty-Nine Articles XXII; Book of Common Prayer (1662), The Litany; Wesley, The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America (1784); Methodist Articles of Religion XIV.

Across the traditions

How each major tradition understands repeated and set prayer, and the rosary, from its own documents.

Catholic

Catholics hold that Jesus condemned empty babbling, not repetition, and that the rosary is meditation on the events of Christ's life using prayers drawn largely from Scripture. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Matt 6:7–13; CCC 2666–2668, 2673–2679, 2708.

Orthodox

The Orthodox treat short repeated prayer as a path to prayer of the heart. The Jesus Prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner," echoes the publican's plea and is repeated through the day, often counted on a knotted prayer rope (chotki or komboskini). Philaret's Catechism calls the Lord's Prayer the pattern of all prayers and teaches prayer of mind and heart. Daily prayer follows set prayer books and the services of the Church.

Sources: Longer Catechism of St. Philaret, Q 392–393, 397; Orthodox Church in America, *The Orthodox Faith*, vol. IV, Spirituality, "The Jesus Prayer"; Luke 18:13.

Lutheran

Lutherans keep set prayer. Luther's Small Catechism tells households to say the Creed and the Lord's Prayer morning and evening with short set prayers, and the Large Catechism calls the Lord's Prayer the noblest prayer on earth, since God himself arranged its words. What the Reformers rejected was prayer said as a work without faith: the Augsburg Confession lists rosaries among "childish and needless works," and the Apology rejects invented miracle stories about rosaries.

Sources: Small Catechism, Daily Prayers (Morning and Evening Prayer); Large Catechism III.22–23, 33; Augsburg Confession XX.3; Apology XXI.37.

Reformed

Calvin taught that Christ forbade not long or frequent prayer but "garrulous loquacity," spinning out time with the same frivolous prayers as if words could sway God, and he faulted perfunctory recitation from a set form. The Westminster Larger Catechism holds that the Lord's Prayer is a pattern for other prayers and may also be prayed itself, with understanding and faith. Because prayer is to be offered to God alone through Christ's sole intercession, prayers addressed to Mary, and so the rosary, are excluded.

Sources: Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.6, 3.20.25–27, 3.20.29, 3.20.49; Westminster Larger Catechism Q 186–187.

Anglican

Anglicans pray chiefly in set forms: the Book of Common Prayer (1662) gives daily Morning and Evening Prayer, collects, and the Litany,

Methodist

Methodism joins set and free prayer. Wesley published *A Collection of Forms of Prayer for Every Day in the Week*, and for American

appointed for Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays, with repeated responses such as "Good Lord, deliver us." Article XXII rejects the invocation of saints, so classical Anglicanism has no rosary. Anglo-Catholics differ: the Society of Mary, formed in 1931, keeps Marian devotion, and its wards pray the rosary.

Sources: Book of Common Prayer (1662), The Litany (opening rubric and responses); Thirty-Nine Articles, Article XXII; Society of Mary, ward of St Mark's Church, Philadelphia (Episcopal Church).

Methodists prepared *The Sunday Service* (1784), a liturgy "little differing from that of the Church of England," directing that the Litany be read on Wednesdays and Fridays, with extempore prayer on other days. Methodists use the Lord's Prayer and set liturgies, but with Article XIV rejecting the invocation of saints they do not use the rosary.

Sources: Wesley, letter "To Our Brethren in America" (Bristol, 10 September 1784); Wesley, *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America* (1784); Methodist Articles of Religion, Article XIV.

Baptist

Baptists and evangelicals regard rote, repeated prayers like the rosary as the "vain repetitions" Jesus forbade and prefer spontaneous prayer from the heart; many object above all that most of its words are addressed to Mary. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Matt 6:7–8; Isa 29:13.

Where it gets contested: Those who set the rosary aside (Lutherans, Reformed, most Anglicans, Methodists and Baptists) grant that repetition itself is not forbidden and object instead to the content: most of the words are addressed to Mary. Catholics answer that the first, scriptural half of each Hail Mary ends by naming "the fruit of thy womb, Jesus," and that the mysteries are events of Christ's life; the dispute therefore folds into the question of asking the saints' prayers (Chapter 32).

How the Rosary is prayed

Opening: the Sign of the Cross, the Apostles' Creed, an Our Father, three Hail Marys and a Glory Be. Each of five decades: announce a mystery, an Our Father, ten Hail Marys and a Glory Be (often followed by the Fatima prayer). Closing: the Hail, Holy Queen. The mysteries are traditionally prayed by day: Joyful (Monday, Saturday), Sorrowful (Tuesday, Friday), Glorious (Wednesday, Sunday) and Luminous (Thursday). The debate over repeated prayer is set out above.

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