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Rosaries of the World

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Rosaries of the World

October 2002-October 2003

Following the invitation by John Paul II in his encyclical *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (Fall 2002) the Catholic Church celebrates a year dedicated to the rosary (October 2002/2003). The Mary Page participates in these ways in this venture. It published in its New section (What's New) a weekly column on the various articles of the rosary. It also published Rosary Markings, a booklet summarizing important information on the history and practices of this devotion. Our third contribution to the rosary celebration is an exhibit of rosaries.

The rosary's popularity is due in part to its "hands-on" character. The beads gliding between our fingers make it a very physical prayer. Thus, the beads, as we call them, become an important ingredient and support of the rosary devotion.

The physical "rosary" is not a Christian invention. It was, and is, essentially a tallying device, known in Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. It has had the same function in Christianity since antiquity.

Originally, this tallying device served to monitor penitential exercises. Penitents used strings or little cords with knots to count the number of "Our Fathers" to be recited. The name given to this tallying device was *Paternoster* or *Pater*. The Paternoster is older than the physical rosary but co-existed with the latter throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There existed a profession of Paternoster-Makers, specializing in the manufacture of Paternosters and rosaries.

The transfer of the name "rosary" from the prayer form to the physical object took place at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Long before this occurred, the tallying devices, later called "rosary," were either simple cords or closed chains of various lengths, with or without subdivisions, and made of a variety of materials (wood, bone, coral, mother of pearl, pebbles, seeds, pits ...). Around 1500 we find two major types of "rosaries":

- a) Prayer chains with fifty beads or pearls symbolizing the fifty Aves, clustered in five groups of ten, each of these groups separated from the next by a larger bead or pearl;
- b) The so-called tenner, a short string or cord with ten beads and some additional Paternoster beads. Affixed to one end there was a ring to slip the tenner from one finger to the other (5 x 10). The opposite end was decorated with a tassel, medal or special knot.

Special devotions, fashion and local customs brought forth a variety of beads. The short form of the "tenner" was usually reserved for men; it was the typical tallying device for monks as late as the eighteenth century. Women resorted to the longer version and adorned their prayer chain with miniature figurines, images, scented dried fruit and flowers, and also pearls and gems. Among the better known varieties are the ring rosaries, Bridget rosaries (six groups of ten plus three pearls), the psalter rosaries (fifteen groups of ten), rosaries based on the five wounds of Christ with symbols of the wounds hooked into the rosary. Some rosaries were made by goldsmiths (Altötting, Germany, sixteenth century); others with pits from apricots engraved with the portraits of civil rulers. Mass production started early (fifteenth/sixteenth century) and allowed for cheaper rosaries from wood, jet, bone, glass, pewter, lead and iron. The eighteenth century knows of filigree rosaries, the nineteenth century produced chain-stitched rosaries. During these centuries three beads for faith, hope and charity were added, and the Greek cross was replaced by the Latin cross. The Orthodox tradition knows the *komposkoini* (literally a rope with knots). Popular since medieval times, the *komposkoini* is used by monks and nuns for the recitation of the Jesus Prayer. The cord is attached to a cross and has from thirty-three (years of Jesus' earthy existence) to fifty and up to three-hundred (number of genuflections) knots. Mary plays a central intercessory role in the longer formulas of the Jesus Prayer.

This exhibit wants to document one of the many ways in which people have expressed their devotion to Mary with the very beads they use to pray the rosary. The gamut is wide. It encompassed countries, materials, saints and special themes.



Vatican Museum



Clay Beads with String



Stations of the Cross



Handpainted Beads



Jade with Inlaid Stones in Cross



Rosary of the Unborn



Rosaries of Carmel



Blessed Kateri Rosary



Rosary of Angel Head Beads

The following people are donors of Rosaries to the Marian Library/International Marian Research Institute:
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