

Adapting the Mysteries of the Rosary

And More on Vigil Masses and on Readings

ROME, DEC. 22, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Answered by Legionary of Christ Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy at the Regina Apostolorum university.

Q: What mysteries of the rosary should be said on Sundays of Advent, Christmastime/Epiphany, and Lent? The glorious are scheduled for it, but in the past (before the luminous), we changed the Sunday mysteries to sorrowful in Lent and Advent and joyful in Christmastime. And, of course, when one of the feasts should occur on any day, we changed to that set of mysteries. But now the glorious are said on one day only of the week if Sunday is changed. In the past, it was three days a week and two if Sunday was changed. -- M.C., Cork, Ireland

A: There are two principal official sources regarding this question: the 2001 [Directory](#) for Popular Piety issued by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments, and John Paul II's beautiful apostolic [letter](#) on the rosary published a year later.

The following text from the Directory illustrates the rosary's nature and the faithful's freedom with respect to the distribution of the mysteries:

"197. The Rosary, or Psalter of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is one of the most excellent prayers to the Mother of God. Thus, 'the Roman Pontiffs have repeatedly exhorted the faithful to the frequent recitation of this biblically inspired prayer which is centered on contemplation of the salvific events of Christ's life, and their close association with the his Virgin Mother. The value and efficacy of this prayer have often been attested by saintly Bishops and those advanced in holiness of life.'

"The Rosary is essentially a contemplative prayer, which requires 'tranquility of rhythm or even a mental lingering which encourages the faithful to meditate on the mysteries of the Lord's life.' *Its use is expressly recommended in the formation and spiritual life of clerics and religious.*

"199. With due regard for the nature of the rosary, some suggestions can now be made which could make it more proficuous.

"On certain occasions, the recitation of the Rosary could be made more solemn in tone 'by introducing those Scriptural passages corresponding with the various mysteries, some parts could be sung, roles could be distributed, and by solemnly opening and closing of prayer.'

"200. Those who recite a third of the Rosary sometimes assign the various mysteries to particular days. [Following John Paul II, these are now: joyful (Monday and Saturday), sorrowful (Tuesday and Friday), glorious (Wednesday and Sunday), luminous (Thursday).]

"Where this system is rigidly adhered to, conflict can arise between the content of the mysteries and that of the Liturgy of the day: the recitation of the sorrowful mysteries on Christmas day, should it fall on a Friday. In cases such as this it can be reckoned that 'the liturgical character of a given day takes precedence over the usual assignment of a mystery of the Rosary to a given day; the Rosary is such that, on particular days, it can appropriately substitute meditation on a mystery so as to harmonize this pious practice with the liturgical season.' Hence, the faithful act correctly when, for example, they contemplate the arrival of the three Kings on the Solemnity of the Epiphany, rather than the finding of Jesus in the Temple. Clearly, such substitutions can only take place after much careful thought, adherence to Sacred Scripture and liturgical propriety.

"201. The custom of making an insertion in the recitation of the Hail Mary, which is an ancient one that has not completely disappeared, has often been recommended by the Pastors of the Church since it encourages meditation and the concurrence of mind and lips.

"Insertions of this nature would appear particularly suitable for the repetitive and meditative character of the Rosary. It takes the form of a relative clause following the name of Jesus and refers to the mystery being contemplated. The meditation of the Rosary can be helped by the choice of a short clause of a Scriptural and Liturgical nature, fixed for every decade.

"In recommending the value and beauty of the Rosary to the faithful, care should be taken to avoid discrediting other forms of prayer or of overlooking the existence of a diversity of other Marian chaplets which have also been approved by the Church.' It is also important to avoid inculcating a sense of guilt in those who do not habitually recite the Rosary: 'The Rosary is an excellent prayer, in regard to which, however, the faithful should feel free to recite it, in virtue of its inherent beauty.'"

In his apostolic letter John Paul II also acknowledged the faithful's freedom in adapting the mysteries to the seasons. With respect to Directory No. 201 above, he suggested that the insertion to the Hail Mary is best made after the name 'Jesus' (*Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, No. 33). This brief insertion should be inspired by the mysteries of Christ's life and is especially suitable for community recitation.

Given that the Church gives grants wide leeway to the faithful, our reader has many options if

she desires to pray the glorious mysteries twice in one week. A simple solution would be to switch Tuesday and Sunday and pray the sorrowful mysteries on Sunday and the glorious on Tuesday.

I have misgivings, however, regarding the appropriateness of celebrating the sorrowful mysteries on a Sunday. The Lord's Day always celebrates the Resurrection, even during Lent and Advent. I believe that Sunday's essentially paschal character should be reflected through the glorious mysteries albeit allowing for possible exceptions such as Palm Sunday.

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Follow-up: Christmas Vigil Masses; Options on Readings

A deacon from Toledo, Ohio, had a question related to the topic of Christmas readings (see [Dec. 8](#)). He asked: "Could you clarify why the lectionary omits the last part of the Archangel Gabriel's greeting to the Virgin Mary ('Blessed are you among women')? The Gospel according to Luke is very clear on the subject; as a matter of fact, both at the Annunciation and at the Visitation to her cousin Elizabeth we see that the archangel's last words and Elizabeth's first words of salutation are the same: 'Blessed are you among women.' I have seen different Bibles in Latin, Spanish, Italian and English, and they are identical. Who authorized a translation for a lectionary to be read at Masses which shortchanges our Blessed Mother's unique attribute?"

The reason why the lectionary omits the angel's greeting of "Blessed are you among women" is that, according to most modern scholars, the angel probably never said it.

Let me explain. St. Luke's original text is no longer available. All we have are copies from later centuries, even though some of these copies or fragments of the text get quite close to the time of the apostles. Many of these handwritten copies have slight variations among them, and scriptural scholars must decide which text is closer to the original.

The angel's greeting of "Blessed art thou among women" is one such text. For example, the Jerusalem Bible, one of the most authoritative Catholic Bibles, omits the clause but mentions in the footnotes that some ancient authorities include it.

How do the exegetes decide? They usually follow a set of practical rules such as the text's presence or absence in the oldest manuscripts, the number of its appearances, and if a plausible explanation for its inclusion can be found.

In the case of this clause, a plausible cause of its inclusion was that very early on, the angel's greeting was united to Elizabeth's as a popular prayer, a kind of proto-Hail Mary. This popular usage likely led some copyists, perhaps unconsciously, to add the text to the angel's greeting while copying new versions of the Gospel; and this amended copy was the base of still later copies.

Such a text was the Greek copy used by St. Jerome when he worked on the Vulgate, on which almost all Catholic Bibles were based until relatively recently. The Protestant King James version also used such a text. Thus we have the Latin for Luke 1:28: "et ingressus angelus ad eam dixit haec gratia plena Dominus tecum benedicta tu in mulieribus." And we have the King James text: "And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, *thou that art* highly favoured, the Lord *is* with thee: blessed *art* thou among women."

Modern scholars are now practically agreed on the original Greek text of the New Testament and hence usually omit this part of the angelic greeting. Thus the Catholic New Jerusalem Bible: "He went in and said to her, 'Rejoice, you who enjoy God's favour! The Lord is with you.'" And the Protestant Revised Standard: "And he came to her and said, 'Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!'"

The lectionaries, therefore, are not deliberately shortchanging the text but rather are following established scriptural versions.

Even if the angel did not say to Mary that she was blessed among women, the Holy Spirit said so through St. Elizabeth, and that more than justifies our greeting her every day with the same words.

Finally, in my previous column I reaffirmed my conviction that the Christmas Midnight Mass should be celebrated at midnight or as close to this time as possible. Recently it has been announced that the Holy Father has decided to celebrate it this year at 10 p.m.

While I stand by my reasoning insofar as I interpreted the rubrics, it would appear that the Holy Father, as supreme legislator in the Church, has allowed himself some flexibility.

This initiative might be for personal reasons such as his advanced age and has not been accompanied by any formal change in the norms. All the same, it would still appear that he considers a late-hour celebration as sufficient for the Midnight Mass, especially if the Mass ends after midnight as is almost certain in the case of St. Peter's Basilica.

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Readers may send questions to liturgy@zenit.org. Please put the word "Liturgy" in the subject field. The text should include your initials, your city and your state, province or country. Father McNamara can only answer a small selection of the great number of questions that arrive.

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