

‘Let me sing to my friend the song of his love for his vineyard.’

Is 5:1

Tuesday, 7th October, will be the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, so it seems fitting to pause and consider what this means.

Since at least the early Middle Ages there has always been a version of the rosary in use by devout Catholics. The prayers and formats were different in different times and places, but it was always used to meditate on the mysteries of our Faith.

In the early thirteenth century, St Dominic, the founder of the Dominicans, was preaching in southern France against the Albigensian heresy which maintained that all material creation was evil. For Christians who believe that the Son of God became Man, and for whom all seven Sacraments involve material things – such as water, oil, bread, and wine – this was a bit of a problem. It was about this time that the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to St Dominic and gave to him the rosary as we now know it today, with fifteen mysteries for us to meditate upon, covering the chief events of Christ’s saving life, death, and resurrection. Just as monks and nuns in their monasteries and convents sang all 150 psalms in choir, so ordinary folk – who had too much work to do to be singing psalms all day – now had their own version of the psalter, namely 150 prayers to pray and meditate upon.

Praying the rosary soon became immensely popular, proving effective at keeping the devil and his temptations at bay, and drawing people closer to Our Lord Jesus Christ through the Immaculate Heart of His Mother.

By the time we get to the sixteenth century, when the whole of Europe was under the threat of invasion from the Ottoman Empire, the rosary was regarded – as St Dominic himself had regarded it – as a spiritual weapon for the defeat of evil and the triumph of good.

Pope St Pius V ordered Christian Europe to turn to the rosary in prayer as the naval forces of Spain, Venice, Genoa, and other smaller states besides, set sail under the command of Philip II of Spain and the captaincy of Marcantonio Colonna from Rome.

On 7th October 1571 the Catholic navies of Europe defeated the Ottoman fleet at the Battle of Lepanto and turned the tide of European and, indeed, world history. The Ottoman Empire was halted in its tracks. In thanksgiving for this preservation of Christendom the Pope established the feast of the Most Holy Rosary.

Now, in the twenty-first century, we are under no less of a threat from invasion than Europe was five hundred years ago, although the threat today takes different forms. In our day, peculiar ideologies shake the foundations of what was once a Christian society and its chief building block, the Catholic family. You know perfectly well how hostile our society can be towards the truth, the goodness, and the beauty of God.

But the rosary remains a powerful instrument in the fight for good and the defeat of evil. But *why* is it so powerful?

The word rosary comes from the Latin meaning a rose garden. Imagine that each time you pray the rosary you are entering into a beautiful garden on a summer's day. The sky is blue; the sunshine is warm; and Our Blessed Lady takes you by the hand to lead you around her garden. Amongst the ever-fruitful vines in this vineyard [which we have heard about in the First Reading, in the Psalm, and in the Gospel today] Our Lady shows us three rose beds. The first is filled with the white roses of innocence: of her own Immaculate Conception, her perpetual Virginity, and her Motherhood; of the birth of her Divine Son, His being made known to the world in the Temple in Jerusalem as an infant and as a child. Then Our Lady shows us a bed of red roses, coloured by the Blood of her Son's Passion, Crucifixion, and Death, before moving on to the third bed of roses where we see a yellow so bright that it dazzles as gold: the golden splendour of the resurrection and ascension; the

golden tongues of fire at Pentecost, and the golden crown of Our Lady's own Queenship in heaven.

But the most striking thing about this rose garden is its tranquility and its preservation from all the harm with which the devil would otherwise poison it. For whatever pain Lucifer was allowed to inflict upon the Son of God as part of Our Lord's atoning work of redemption, Christ's Mother is kept free from any and every assault that Satan might try to inflict upon her. It is as if Our Lord is saying to the devil, Harm me in whatever way you will: I accept it on behalf of a fallen race whom I love and choose to redeem. But you may NEVER harm my Mother!

And so it is that whoever takes shelter in her rose garden will find all the truth, the goodness, and the beauty of God Himself, along with the sweet fragrance of the presence of her Divine Son. For Mary herself is, as the Song of Songs tells us, the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valley. She, and she alone, has never been touched by the stain of sin, and so it is she who prays for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death, and presents us as gifts to her Son, the living fruit in the Vineyard of our God.