

AUGUSTISSIMAE VIRGINIS MARIAE
ENCYCLICAL OF POPE LEO XIII
ON THE CONFRATERNITY OF THE HOLY ROSARY

September 12, 1897

To Our Venerable Brethren, The Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and other Local Ordinaries having Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See.

Venerable Brethren, Health and the Apostolic Blessing.

Whoever considers the height of dignity and glory to which God has raised the Most August Virgin Mary, will easily perceive how important it is, both for public and for private benefit, that devotion to her should be assiduously practised, and daily promoted more and more.

Mary's Place in the Incarnation and Redemption

2. God predestined her from all eternity to be the Mother of the Incarnate Word, and for that reason so highly distinguished her among all His most beautiful works in the triple order of nature, grace and glory, that the Church justly applies to her these words: "I came out of the mouth of the Most High, the first-born before all creatures" (Ecclus. xxiv., 5). And when, in the first ages, the parents of mankind fell into sin, involving their posterity in the same ruin, she was set up as a pledge of the restoration of peace and salvation. The Only-begotten Son of God ever paid to His Most Holy Mother indubitable marks of honour. During His private life on earth He associated her with Himself in each of His first two miracles: the miracle of grace, when, at the salutation of Mary, the infant leaped in the womb of Elizabeth; the miracle of nature, when He turned water into wine at the marriage - feast of Cana. And, at the supreme moment of His public life, when sealing the New Testament in His precious Blood, He committed her to his beloved Apostle in those sweet words, "Behold, thy Mother!" (John xix., 27).

We Must Follow Christ's Example

3. We, therefore, who, though unworthy, hold the place of Vicar of Christ upon earth, shall never cease to promote the glory of so great a Mother, as long as life endures. And since, as old age draws on apace, We feel that life cannot now last much longer, We are constrained to repeat to each and all of our beloved children in Christ those last words of His upon the Cross, left to us as a testament, "Behold, thy Mother!" Greatly rewarded indeed shall We be, if Our exhortations succeed in making even one of the faithful hold nothing dearer than devotion to Mary; so that those words which St. John wrote about himself may be applied to each, "the disciple took her to his own" (Ibid.).

4. As the month of October again approaches, Venerable Brethren, We would not willingly leave you without Our letters this year, also once more urging you with all possible earnestness to strive by the recitation of the Rosary to aid both yourselves individually, and the Church in her

need. This form of prayer appears, under the guidance of Divine Providence, to have been wonderfully developed at the close of the century, for the purpose of stimulating the lagging piety of the faithful. This is witnessed by the splendid churches and much-frequented sanctuaries of the Mother of God. To this Divine Mother we have offered the flowers of the month of May; to her we would have also fruit-bearing October dedicated with especial tenderness of devotion. It is fitting that both parts of the year should be consecrated to her who said: "My flowers are the fruit of honour and riches" (Ecclus. xxiv., 23).

Modern Tendency to Association

5. The natural tendency of man to association has never been stronger, or more earnestly and generally followed, than in our own age. This is not at all to be reprehended, unless when so excellent a natural tendency is perverted to evil purposes, and wicked men, banding together in various forms of societies, conspire "against the Lord and against His Christ" (Ps ii., 2). It is, however, most gratifying to observe that pious associations are becoming more and more popular among Catholics also. They are frequently formed; indeed, all Catholics are so closely drawn together and united by the bonds of charity, as members of one household, that they both may be and are truly styled brethren. But if the charity of Christ be absent, none may glory in the name and fellowship of brethren. So wrote Tertullian long ago in pungent words: "We are your brethren by right of a common mother, nature, yet are ye less than men, because unnatural brothers. How much more justly are they called and esteemed as brethren who acknowledge one and the same Father, God; who have drunk in one and the same spirit of charity; who have been borne from one and the same womb of ignorance into the one light of truth?" (Apolog. c. xxxix.)

Usefulness of Catholic Associations

6. There are many reasons for Catholics joining useful associations of this kind. We include in these clubs, popular savings-banks, recreative classes, associations for the care of youth, sodalities, and many other organizations for excellent purposes. All these, though from their name, constitution, and special ends, apparently of modern invention, are in reality of great antiquity. Traces of societies of this kind are to be found even in the earliest ages of Christianity. In later ages they were legally approved, distinguished by special emblems, enriched with privileges, associated with divine worship in the Churches, or devoted to works of spiritual or corporal mercy, and at different epochs known under different names. Their numbers increased to such an extent, especially in Italy, that no city or town, nay scarcely any parish, was without one or more of them.

The Rosary Sodality: Its Excellence

7. We do not hesitate to assign a pre-eminent place among these societies to that known as the Society of the Holy Rosary. If we regard its origin, we find it distinguished by its antiquity, for St. Dominic himself is said to have been its founder. If we estimate its privileges, we see it enriched with a vast number of them granted by the munificence of our predecessors. The form of the association, its very soul, is the Rosary of Our Lady, of the excellence of which We have elsewhere spoken at length. Still the virtue and efficacy of the Rosary appear all the greater when

considered as the special office of the Sodality which bears its name. Everyone knows how necessary prayer is for all men; not that God's decrees can be changed, but, as St. Gregory says, "that men by asking may merit to receive what Almighty God hath decreed from eternity to grant them" (Dialog., lib. i., c. 8). And St. Augustine says, "He who knoweth how to pray aright, knoweth how to live aright" (In Ps. cxviii). But prayers acquire their greatest efficacy in obtaining God's assistance when offered publicly, by large numbers, constantly, and unanimously, so as to form as it were a single chorus of supplication; as those words of the Acts of the Apostles clearly declare wherein the disciples of Christ, awaiting the coming of the Holy Ghost, are said to have been "persevering with one mind in prayer" (Acts i., 14). Those who practise this manner of prayer will never fail to obtain certain fruit. Such is certainly the case with members of the Rosary Sodality. Just as by the recitation of the Divine Office, priests offer a public, constant, and most efficacious supplication; so the supplication offered by the members of this Sodality in the recitation of the Rosary, or "Psalter of Our Lady," as it has been styled by some of the Popes, is also in a way public, constant, and universal.

Special Efficacy of Public Prayer

8. Since, as We have said, public prayers are much more excellent and more efficacious than private ones, so ecclesiastical writers have given to the Rosary Sodality the title of "the army of prayer, enrolled by St. Dominic, under the banner of the Mother of God," - of her, whom sacred literature and the history of the Church salute as the conqueror of the Evil One and of all errors. The Rosary unites together all who join the Sodality in a common bond of paternal or military comradeship; so that a mighty host is thereby formed, duly marshalled and arrayed, to repel the assaults of the enemy, both from within and without. Wherefore may the members of this pious society take to themselves the words of St. Cyprian: "Our prayer is public and in common; and when we pray, we pray not for one, but for the whole people, for we, the entire people, are one" (De Orat. Domin.). The history of the Church bears testimony to the power and efficacy of this form of prayer, recording as it does the rout of the Turkish forces at the naval battle of Lepanto, and the victories gained over the same in the last century at Temesvar in Hungary and in the island of Corfu. Our predecessor, Gregory XIII, in order to perpetuate the memory of the first-named victory, established the feast of Our Lady of Victories, which later on Clement XI distinguished by the title of Rosary Sunday and commanded to be celebrated throughout the universal Church.

Difference Between Prayer to God and to the Saints: An Objection Answered

9. From the fact that this warfare of prayer is "enrolled under the name of the Mother of God," fresh efficacy and fresh honour are thereby added to it. Hence the frequent repetition in the Rosary of the "Hail Mary" after each "Our Father." So far from this derogating in any way from the honour due to God, as though it indicated that we placed greater confidence in Mary's patronage than in God's power, it is rather this which especially moves God, and wins His mercy for us. We are taught by the Catholic faith that we may pray not only to God himself, but also to the Blessed in heaven (Conc. Trull. Sess. xxv.), though in different manner; because we ask from God as from the Source of all good, but from the Saints as from intercessors. "Prayer," says St. Thomas, "is offered to a person in two ways-one as though to be granted by himself; another, as

to be obtained through him. In the first way we pray to God alone, because all our prayers ought to be directed to obtaining grace and glory, which God alone gives, according to those words of Psalm lxxxiii., 12, "The Lord will give grace and glory." But in the second way we pray to holy angels and men, not that God may learn our petition through them, but that by their prayers and merits our prayers may be efficacious. Wherefore, it is said in the Apocalypse (viii., 4): "The smoke of the incense of the prayers of the Saints ascended up before God from the hand of the angel" (Summa Theol. 2a tae, q. lxxxiii. a. iv.). Now, of all the blessed in heaven, who can compare with the august Mother of God in obtaining grace? Who seeth more clearly in the Eternal Word what troubles oppress us, what are our needs? Who is allowed more power in moving God? Who can compare with her in maternal affection? We do not pray to the Blessed in the same way as to God; for we ask the Holy Trinity to have mercy on us, but we ask all the Saints to pray for us (Ibid.). Yet our manner of praying to the Blessed Virgin has something in common with our worship of God, so that the Church even addresses to her the words with which we pray to God: "Have mercy on sinners." The members of the Rosary Sodality, therefore, do exceedingly well in weaving together, as in a crown, so many salutations and prayers to Mary. For, so great is her dignity, so great her favour before God, that whosoever in his need will not have recourse to her is trying to fly without wings.

Union of Prayer and Work with the Angels

10. We must not omit to mention another excellence of this Sodality. As often as, in reciting the Rosary, we meditate upon the mysteries of our Redemption, so often do we in a manner emulate the sacred duties once committed to the Angelic hosts. The Angels revealed each of these mysteries in its due time; they played a great part in them; they were constantly present at them, with countenances indicative now of joy, now of sorrow, now of triumphant exultation. Gabriel was sent to announce the Incarnation of the Eternal Word to the Virgin. In the cave of Bethlehem, Angels sang the glory of the new-born Saviour. The Angel gave Joseph command to fly with the Child into Egypt. An Angel consoled, with his loving words, Jesus in His bloody sweat in the garden. Angels announced His resurrection, after He had triumphed over death, to the women. Angels carried Him up into Heaven; and foretold His second coming, surrounded by Angelic hosts, unto whom He will associate the souls of the elect, and carry them aloft with Him to the heavenly choirs, "above whom the Holy Mother of God is exalted." To those, therefore, who make use of the pious prayers of the Rosary in this Sodality, may be well applied the words with which St. Paul addressed the new Christians: "You are come to Mount Sion, and to the city of the living God, the Heavenly Jerusalem, and to the company of many thousands of Angels" (Heb. xii., 22). What more divine, what more delightful, than to meditate and pray with the Angels? With what confidence may we not hope that those who on earth have united with the Angels in this ministry will one day enjoy their blessed company in Heaven?

The Popes and the Rosary Sodality

11. For these reasons the Roman Pontiffs have ever given the highest praise to this Sodality of Our Lady. Innocent VIII. calls it "a most devout confraternity" (Splendor Paternae Gloriam, Feb. 26, 1491.) Pius V. declares that by its virtue "Christians began suddenly to be transformed into other men, the darkness of heresy to be dispelled, and the light of Catholic faith to shine forth"

(Consueverunt Romani Pontifices, September 17, 1569). Sixtus V, noting how fruitful for religion this Sodality was, professed himself most devoted to it. Many others, too, enriched it with numerous and very special indulgences, or took it under their particular patronage, enrolling themselves in it and giving it many testimonies of their goodwill.

Concluding Exhortation

12. We also, Venerable Brethren, moved by the example of Our predecessors, earnestly exhort and conjure you, as We have so often done, to devote special care to this sacred warfare, so that by your efforts fresh forces may be daily enrolled on every side. Through you and those of your clergy who have care of souls, let the people know and duly appreciate the efficacy of this Sodality and its usefulness for man's salvation. This We beg all the more earnestly as of late that beautiful devotion to our Blessed Mother, called "the living Rosary," has once more become popular. We have gladly blessed this devotion, and We earnestly desire that you would sedulously and strenuously encourage its growth. We cherish the strongest hope that these prayers and praises, rising incessantly from the lips and hearts of so great a multitude, will be most efficacious. Alternately rising by night and by day, throughout the different countries of the earth, they combine a harmony of vocal prayer with meditation upon the divine mysteries. In ages long past this perennial stream of praise and prayer was foretold in those inspired words with which Ozias in his song addressed Judith: "Blessed art thou, O daughter, by the Lord, the Most High God, above all women upon the earth... because He hath so magnified thy name this day that thy praise shall not depart out of the mouth of man." And all the people of Israel acclaimed him in these words: "So be it, so be it!" (Judith xiii., 23, 24, Z6).

13. Meanwhile, as a pledge of heavenly blessings, and a testimony of Our paternal affection, We lovingly impart to You, in the name of the Lord, Venerable Brethren, and to all the clergy and people committed to your faithful care, the Apostolic Benediction.

Given at St. Peter's, in Rome, on the 12th day of September, 1897, in the 20th year of Our Pontificate.

LEO XIII

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Source: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_1-xiii_enc_12091897_augustissimae-virginis-mariae_en.html: Vatican Translation.

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