Introduction

Since its appearance in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the rosary of the Virgin Mary has remained such a familiar practice among Catholics in the Latin West that its popularity has not been eclipsed even during periods of seismic social upheaval, cultural change, and institutional reform. Through successive historical epochs—from the late Middle Ages, to early modernity, to the “reflexive” modernity of our own times—the rosary, a ritually repeated sequence of prayers accompanied by meditations on episodes in the lives of Christ and Mary, has varied little in form (round beads strung on cord or wire), structure, or content. This is a remarkable fact when one considers that during these same centuries the official liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church underwent profound changes—most notably in 1474 (publication of the first printed edition of the Missale Romanum, which contained the material said or sung during Mass); in 1570 (publication of the so-called Tridentine Missale Romanum, revised after the Council of Trent); and again in 1970 (publication of the Missale Romanum of Paul VI, as mandated by the Second Vatican Council). Today, significant numbers of people who pray the rosary daily may be found on every continent (with the possible exception of Antarctica). As a popular devotion, moreover, the rosary appeals to a broad spectrum of believers, from traditionalists such as Mother Angelica (founder of the Eternal Word Television Network) to liberal Catholic critics such as Garry Wills. Rosaries may thus be found in the hands of popes, professors, protesters, commuters on their way to work, children receiving the Eucharist (Holy Communion) for the first time, or homeless persons seeking shelter and safety from hostile passersby.

How does one account for the rosary’s ubiquity, durability, and resilience? This question—and a proposed answer—are the subject of The Mystery of the Rosary: Marian Devotion and the Reinvention of Catholicism

Recent scholarship on the rosary focuses primarily on its medieval origins or on the devotional milieu (devotio moderna) that framed its initial
appearance. But positivist histories leave many questions unanswered. History, after all, is less the science of retrieving the past than the exercise of a complex hermeneutic or method of interpretation. Its ultimate quest is not simply to determine “what happened” but to understand how what happened continues to shape human experience. *The Mystery of the Rosary* argues that to understand the rosary’s adaptability and survival across chronological periods, cultures, and continents, one must examine more closely the changes Catholicism itself began to experience after the Reformation—the movement initiated by Martin Luther to reform Catholicism, which led to the eventual development of Protestantism—and the Council of Trent, convened in response to the Reformation to clarify Catholic faith and doctrine in the sixteenth century. These changes resulted, I will maintain, from a series of “reframings” that reshaped how Catholics understood church reform. We will explore these reframings in chapters that will consider the visual representation of sacred subjects, the relation between devotion and the liturgy’s ritual symbols, religious identity, and the rosary itself as devotional prayer with a strongly sacramental subtext. A final chapter will “read” the rosary in light of present-day perceptions of Catholic faith and piety.

This book, then, will not reconsider the medieval origins of the rosary, except for a brief initial overview, but will begin in earnest with the enhanced status and popularity of the rosary among Roman Catholics, particularly after the Christian military victory over Ottoman forces at Lepanto, off western Greece, in 1571. In the aftermath of this perhaps unexpected change of fortune, the Roman Church began to redefine itself not only in relation to Islam but also in relation to the changing landscape of European Christianity. During a crucial quarter century, from roughly 1585 to 1610, early modern Catholicism began to emerge as no longer a church defensively preoccupied by “Counter-Reform” but as a proactive community of renewal ready to reinvent itself.

A moderate version of such reform had already begun during the Council of Trent (1545–63). Yet despite widely accepted assumptions to the contrary, Catholicism after Trent did not become a fossilized, monolithic institution immune to change. True, the early modern church did not suddenly shed its authoritarian structures or its habit of controlling and supervising members while regulating their beliefs and behaviors. Writing about Rome as a “renewed religious capital” in the late sixteenth century, historian Jean Delumeau notes perceptively that the “prestige of a city once more conscious of its potential increased the authority of the
popes in the Catholic world and thus completed the activities of Trent which, against all expectation, had strengthened the position of the Holy See.” This rather unexpected result led an early historian of the Council of Trent, Paolo Sarpi (1552–1623), to note that “the court of Rome, which feared and avoided this council as the most likely instrument to modify the excessive and limitless power it had acquired over the years, so hardened its grasp on the party that remained faithful to it that its authority has never been so powerful and so secure. The moral is to surrender everything into God's hands, and not trust in human prudence.”

Early modern Catholicism was thus a deeply ambivalent reality, at once humble(d) yet grandiose, eager for renewal yet resistant to change. Despite these ambiguities, the character of Catholic thought and religious practice did shift perceptibly as the Roman Church moved from Counter-Reform to “early baroque,” and from European to “global” community. This shift was nowhere so noticeable as in church art and devotional life. For as I hope to show, a reform of church life is inevitably a reform of its images as these are framed in its icons, its rites, and its written narratives. While post-Tridentine church leaders like Carlo Borromeo and Gabriele Paleotti discussed what was theoretically appropriate in “sacred art,” innovative painters like the Carracci and Caravaggio were re landscaping the Catholic imagination with canvases that both shocked and amazed their viewers. Similarly, while theologians discussed the fine points of dogmas about Christ and his Mother, a visionary writer like Sor María de Jesús (Mary of Ágreda) was able to reimagine the human relationship with God in a novelistic narrative that incorporated the early modern self as subject in the history of salvation.

The Mystery of the Rosary argues, in sum, that the rosary survived and flourished because it was able to absorb the re framings of reform, representation, ritual, religious identity, and devotion that came to characterize early modern Catholicism and that have continued to shape Catholic piety and practice to the present day. For while the core of Jesus’ own message may have been relatively brief and direct—repent, believe, love, serve, make peace, welcome God’s reign among you (see, e.g., Matthew 5)—Christianity has a long, tangled, and sometimes troubled history. One of the attractions of the rosary—as both a devotion and an object of study—is its ability to focus attention on the central meanings and mysteries of Christian faith, as seen and experienced through the lives of a man (Jesus Christ, God’s Word made flesh [John 1.14]) and a woman (Christ’s Mother, Mary). Without getting too sidetracked with peripheral
matters of belief or behavior, the rosary has enabled praying Christians to contemplate the “basics” of human existence as seen from God’s angle.

Take, for example, the so-called joyful mysteries of the rosary, five episodes derived from Luke’s gospel: (1) the angel’s announcement of Jesus’ birth (Luke 1.26–38); (2) Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1.39–45); (3) Jesus’ birth (Luke 2.1–14); (4) Jesus’ presentation in the Jerusalem Temple (Luke 2.22–38); and (5) Jesus’ being lost and found in the Temple (Luke 2.41–52). Embedded within these events are profoundly human—and accessible—motives, conflicts, and emotions. They deal with the raw material of the human drama: a young woman suddenly confronted with an intruder whose improbable “message” leaves her stunned, confused—and pregnant. There follows a panicky trip to a trusted, older relative who, though surely postmenopausal—also becomes pregnant, leaving her aged husband literally speechless. Then we hear of parents in flight, a birth on the run in a stinking, unsanitary shed. After that, the drama continues with an old man’s promise that the kid will run into deep trouble and the mother’s heart will be broken (Simeon’s prophecy, Luke 2.34)—followed by the scary episode of a missing child.

From the perspective of Christian faith, these scenes (“joyful mysteries”) reveal a God passionately in search of humankind, trying by every means—including the edgiest and most unexpected—to get our attention long enough to reveal the divine presence. On a simpler level, they remind us of the grandeur and misery of human life, challenging us to make sense of our personal histories, even if they are littered with interruptions, failures, doubts, and disasters. The rosary gave (and continues giving) many Christians an opportunity to register, review, and (when necessary) revise their relations with God. Understanding the history of this devotion will help us see how, paradoxically, Catholics have maintained traditions of belief and behavior not through single-minded intransigence but by embracing flexibility and change. Here our principal lens for interpreting that history will be reinterpretations of Mary and the rosary in visual art, in ritual words and actions, in personal narratives, and in that expanding interiority and self-awareness that shaped early modern Catholic women and men.