

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday March 3 2024
The Third Sunday in Lent

Solemn Evensong
4 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Richard Alton, *Rector, St. Clement's Church, Philadelphia*

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A Homily on The Holy Rosary offered at Evensong
from the 2024 Lenten sermon series: "Lord, teach us to pray" - current and former clergy of Saint Thomas explore patterns of prayer.

In brilliant lectures and essays, the Benedictine liturgical theologian Father Aidan Kavanagh often spoke and wrote about a certain "Mrs. Murphy." While entirely imaginary, Mrs. Murphy the "type" turns up regularly in churches, stalwartly occupying her same pew, often on her knees with her rosary firmly in hand despite plaintive urgings from reformist albeit sophomoric clergy to lay aside such an old-fashioned private devotion in favor of more active participation in the "New Mass" that had so rapidly supplanted the traditional masses that poignantly marked and sanctified the saddest and happiest days of Mrs. Murphy's longish life, just as they had her forebears for generations.

Fr. Kavanagh insisted that ignoring Mrs. Murphy's theological intelligence and spiritual wisdom is always a bad idea. This certainly includes discounting the importance of the Holy Rosary in her daily life. We have much to learn from Mrs. Murphy. While perhaps off-putting, her instinctual anti-clericalism is not meritless. Mrs. Murphy doesn't mean to be impolite, merely realistic. She misses the altar rail, its true, and no amount of cantorial direction has persuaded her to participate in responsorial psalmody. Eschewing the missalette in her pew, Mrs. Murphy soldiers on with her beads until she receives her Lord in Holy Communion standing on her feet whilst kneeling in her heart.

Not all "Mrs. Murphys" are Roman Catholic. Nor need they be female as is quite clear from W. H. Auden's letter to his rector at Saint Marks' in the Bowery concerning whatever scheme for liturgical revision was then in vogue. As a concerned Episcopalian Auden wrote:

Our Church has had the singular good-fortune of having its Prayer-Book composed and its Bible translated at exactly the right time, i.e., late enough for the language to be intelligible to any English-speaking person in this century (any child of six can be told what 'the quick and the dead' means) and early enough, i.e., when people still had an instinctive feeling for the formal and the ceremonious which is essential in liturgical language . . . I implore you by the bowels of Christ to stick to Cranmer and King James. ... One of the great functions of the liturgy is to keep us in touch with the past and the dead.

Nowhere that I know of has Auden's sound advice been more stylishly or consistently heeded than at Saint Thomas Church here on Fifth Avenue, presently in the midst of its 200th year, where things new and old cohabitate swimmingly as Jesus promised they should. After instructing them with no less than seven parables in the 13th chapter of Saint Matthew's Gospel, our Lord checks in with his disciples, asking them "Have ye understood all these things?"

Whether or not they did, (and I very much suspect they did not, not yet at least) they replied "Yea, Lord." Then Jesus said to them, "Therefore every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old."

We encounter this same idea of radical renewal during the Great Vigil of Easter as we pray in hope-laden amazement at the miraculous transformations, the tangible and dramatic results of Christ's Paschal victory over sin and over death. Lent has us headed in that direction.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquillity the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus...

Fittingly this same collect is also offered at ordinations of bishops, priests and deacons who are of little use without a tranquil and humble acceptance of God's loving providence in and around the churches they seek to serve.

In certain drab quarters and tragic seasons of the church, devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary was discouraged, persecuted even, not just by those drear, violent iconoclasts trying to rob Our Lady of England, her dowry, but equally by those no less doctrinaire reformers heeding a false and hollow call to persuade Mrs. Murphy to forgo her manner of praying, the Rosary suddenly becoming unfashionable. As Our Lady's Magnificat is sung here so often and so beautifully, this church understands Mary's unique role in God's plan of salvation. She affirmed it. She enabled it by saying "yes" to the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy word."

While the striking, well-worn bronze statue of Our Lady of Fifth Avenue now enjoys a place of considerable prominence in the Nave so that her many clients, young and old, rich and poor can offer votive candles and pray here every day, there was a time when Mary's appearance in a rather remote corner of the Lady Chapel ruffled feathers. One quite prominent vestryman insisted that the supporting plinth beneath the statue be outfitted with casters to expedite a swift removal upon the departure of the then incumbent rector. Apparently both that rector and Our Lady had other plans as JA's ashes remain securely interred in the footpace of the high altar while Our Lady of Fifth Avenue welcomes all manner of souls to the abiding, eucharistic presence of her Son.

Today in this Lenten Sunday series on prayer I'm here to urge the Rosary in a place I very much love and cherish, this exemplary parish church where I and so many others were formed as priests, where my wife Barbara was happily engaged and employed, and where our son Francis was confirmed by Bishop Montgomery of blessed memory, and educated at the Choir School.

So, about the Rosary, maybe you're wondering just how it is that something as simple and repetitive as five Our Fathers and fifty Hail Mary's can be so powerful -- all that repetition -- of the Holy Name of Jesus (50+ times) and the Holy Name of his Mother (100+ times). Honestly I don't know "how" it works. I only know "that" it has always done so in the joys and struggles of my own life especially when other forms of prayer were impossible or improbable. Like all effective prayer, saying the Rosary helps us to get over ourselves, a key step in allowing God to be God. In the earliest years I can remember, my maternal grandmother taught me how to say the Rosary. Her instruction wasn't some huge deal, smothered in pious religiosity. It was, rather, a quite plain, matter-of-fact introduction to a practice too simple to forget. Our Father...Hail Mary...Glory be...repeat. Our Father...Hail Mary...Glory be...repeat.

Over time, praying the Holy Rosary is enhanced as we learn to reflect on certain key biblical mysteries, five of them joyful, (the Annunciation, the Visitation, Our Lord's Nativity, his Presentation and his Finding in the Temple) five sorrowful, (Christ's agony in the garden, his scourging and cruel crowning with thorns, his bearing the heavy cross, his Crucifixion) and five glorious (The Resurrection and Ascension, Pentecost, Mary's Assumption and her Coronation as Queen of Heaven, *Regina caeli*). Over time, we learn to see Jesus through Mary's eyes as she gazes upon her infant Lord swaddled in the manger at Bethlehem or in keeping

her most sorrowful station at Golgotha where she weeps beneath his Cross. Over time we learn to run uphill with her on her journey to greet her cousin Elizabeth, far along in a late-in-life pregnancy with John the Baptist, or joined with the Apostles in the Cenacle at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost when Mary first became *Mater Ecclesiae*, Mother of the Church.

This afternoon I can only tell you what I know, that in my most personal struggles, with cancer, depression, addictions, various and sundry anxieties, griefs, losses and disappointments, every time I've felt like I couldn't pray at all, the Rosary sustained me either when the beads were in my hands, or in the hands of some other praying person who loves and cares for me, especially and consistently my "adopted" mother Marilyn Martin and my wife Barbara.

We live in hard, noisy, vulgar, stony-hearted times requiring us to pray fervently not just for ourselves, but especially for others. I'm sure many of you were moved by those striking images of rosaries and other personal items confiscated from immigrants at one of our borders with Mexico and subsequently fished out of trash bags by Tom Kiefer, an artist and part-time janitor who curated and photographed them in a project he called *El Sueño Americano* – The American Dream. Confiscating the rosaries of desperate persons fleeing for their lives and pleading for a modicum of mercy for themselves and their children at the borders of this rich country causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.

In the tactile features of the Holy Rosary, with each bead we touch conjoined to a well-worn prayer, we tangibly yet mysteriously place our hands and fingers within reach of other hands, sweaty, soiled hands and fingers of suffering people everywhere in this blood-drenched, war-torn, brutally selfish world.

Faced with Christ's invitation to examine the wounds in his hands and feet and side, Saint Thomas cried out "My Lord and my God" as well we should whenever we recognize Jesus among the sorrows and sufferings of those most in need of prayer.

In her Holy Rosary Mary is always waiting to help us with this. While she is certainly meek and mild, the church also invokes her as a warrior, "terrible as an army arrayed for battle," a woman "clothed with the sun," the Mother of God, protecting her children while singing God's praises for turning out the mighty from their thrones and raising up the poor, the hungry, the needy, and the lowly, ceaselessly pleading their cause, theirs and ours before the Throne of Grace.

Amen.