

## Chapter 3 Digitally Mediated Rosary

*Reflections from Matthew Pulis*

### **The Rosary**

The Rosary is a Catholic devotional practice which clearly has stood the test of time. Simply put, the Rosary involves five decades of Hail Maries while meditating on five events from Christ's life. Each decade is encapsulated with an 'Our Father' and 'Gloria' at each end. This devotional practice was already well established by the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. Although the Rosary is the Marian prayer par excellence, it involves reflection and meditation on the life of Christ.<sup>1</sup> In essence, it is a 'participation in the life of Mary, whose focus was Christ' as Romano Guardini aptly summarises it.<sup>2</sup>

### **Marian Tradition in Malta**

Marian tradition on the Roman Catholic Island of Malta is ubiquitous. Since St. Paul's shipwreck on our shores as reported in Acts 28, Malta has remained predominantly Christian. World War history has also reinforced this Marian tradition. For example every Assumption day (15<sup>th</sup> August) we commemorate *Operation Pedestal*, a convoy of ships which in 1942 brought much-needed food and goods to besieged Malta. Many to date still see this event as a miraculous Marian deliverance. Out of the 494 Catholic churches on the island, 214 are dedicated to Mary and eleven parishes are dedicated to the Assumption of Mary, one of which is Dingli.

### **The Dingli Parish**

Dingli is considered to be one of the more remote villages in Malta. Although it is a mere five minute drive from urban Rabat, the cultural shift made in that short journey is pronounced. Dingli is very rural, and many of the elderly still tend their own smallholdings. However it has

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<sup>1</sup> H. Thurnston and A. Shipman, 'The Rosary', in *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912).

<sup>2</sup> Catholic Way Publishing, *The Holy Rosary*, E-Book (Catholic Way Publishing, 2013).

also recently seen an increase of young Maltese<sup>3</sup> families buying property, which has brought the average age down to 37.2.<sup>4</sup>

Fr Mark Mallia Pawley, the parish priest, faced two conundrums, an elderly and often lonely generation, and an upcoming generation (40% of the parish) aged under 30. It is in this scenario that Covid19 has hit the village. The parish's main challenge therefore has been how to remain physically close to the elderly in a time of social distancing, who are very limited in their internet usage, while keeping a daily engagement with the younger folk. In this time of disorientation, it made sense to revert to a Marian theme for missionary work and so emerged the idea of streaming the rosary in the public square.

### **Streamed Digital Rosaries**

The parish was split into 8 zones, each covering a hamlet or so, and every Wednesday and Friday, the parish priest and I, together with a small technical team, would go to each hamlet's central point to recite the rosary there. We broadcast the rosary using loudspeakers, and half an hour in advance, we begin inviting people to come out from their windows, doors, roofs or balconies to join us in prayer. Keeping social distance was of the utmost importance, which at times proved difficult, since some elderly would naturally approach us or their neighbours, so we kept having to remind them of the importance of safeguarding each other. The rosary was then streamed live using audio from our Facebook page, where an average of fifty households would join us online to pray this communal prayer. Our main aim was to maintain the devotional practice of reciting of the rosary, a pious prayer often associated with laypeople rather than clergy, as both crucial outreach and pastoral ministry. Moreover, this hybrid digitally-mediated rosary allowed us to pray together with our parish both out on the road and online.

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<sup>3</sup>As per last census, there are only 36 non-Maltese residents

<sup>4</sup>National Statistics Office, '*Census of Population and Housing 2011: Final Report*' (Valletta, 2014).

The bi-weekly recital of the rosary was accompanied by a Monday gathering of five families from the parish, who would join an online video conference call (like Zoom), where they would recite the rosary, whilst also being joined by an average of thirty households on Facebook Live. This event was targeted more towards the younger generation, and so most families involved were of altar boys or children already engaged with the parish. We noticed that the elderly, wanting to see their nephews and nieces reciting the rosary, would ask for assistance to set up Facebook on their smartphones, computers or TVs to join us from around Malta.

All the different digitally-mediated rosaries helped the parish to feel more united in a time of social isolation. As explained, some of the old generation asked other family members to help them get online so as to be close to the parish and be able to pray together. In a sense, it is now the younger generation who are teaching the elderly how to approach prayer, reversing the usual roles involved in building the faith community. Moreover, those who were previously beyond the reach of online efforts, are being included by the clergy visiting their remote hamlets to broadcast the rosary.

### **Theological Inspirations**

The impetus for the parish to opt for a Marian piety goes beyond traditional reasons to embrace more theological ones. The three main theological inspirations were adopted from Pope Francis' prayer for the pandemic first recited when he visited the Salus Romani shrine: the visit itself; the 'sign of hope'; and Mary's command at Cana, 'Do whatever he tells you.'<sup>5</sup>

#### **1. The Visit to the Shrine**

Shrine pilgrimages have been part of the Catholic tradition since the 4th century. The pilgrimage itself is not primarily the destination but more about the journey towards the destination, where one contemplates one's life and faith. Speaking of pilgrims, Pope Francis

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<sup>5</sup> Elise Ann Allen, 'Pope Urges Families to Pray Rosary Together during Month of May', *Crux*, April 2020.

notes that they are the ‘immune system of the church,’<sup>6</sup> and emphasises the need for the priest to be a welcoming priest in attending shrines.

In this time of pandemic, we are observing another reversal of roles. It is us priests who are the pilgrims to the shrines of our hamlets. It is we who are walking towards the sacred space where the rosary will be recited and joined by the villagers from their doorsteps. In this pilgrimage, we are reminding people that their households are sacred spaces, and it is the *domus ecclesiae* which is being highlighted over the baroque-adorned brick and mortar church - incarnational missiology in practice. Our pilgrimage invites those living with family to reflect on their identity as a Christians called to pray together at home, and move away from an ill understood sacramental ecclesiology which sees prayer as an individual effort rather than a communal one. The danger of individuality presents the lay person as a consumer of the sacraments, whereas our Christian faith advocates a theology of the gift of the free meal as explored by Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘In liturgy we are not consumers, but celebrants.’<sup>7</sup> Likewise, in the liturgy celebrated in the *domus ecclesiae*, often mediated through the digital, those who partake truly become the celebrant and invite the Holy Spirit to transform their house not merely into a home, but a church.

## 2. ‘Sign of Hope’

In one of the most important documents issued by the Catholic Church during the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Church adorns Mary, the figure and model of the Church, as ‘a sign of certain hope and comfort to the pilgrim people of God.’<sup>8</sup> In a period of disorientation, reverting back to the sure sign of hope is inevitable for a Catholic. And this is not the first time during a pandemic that Catholics have approached Mary for her mediation. In the Black Plague, Christians developed the second part of the Hail Mary to seek Mary’s help and protection from the disease. Fulton Sheen explains that this addition suggests a ‘spontaneous

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<sup>6</sup> Elise Allen, ‘Pope Urges Families to Pray Rosary Together during Month of May’, *Crux*, April 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘We Are Celebrants, Not Consumers’, *La Croix* (Nottingham, May 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Second Vatican Council, ‘*Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*’, (Vatican: Vatican Press, 1964), para. 68.

outcry of people in a great calamity.<sup>9</sup> This is explained by the ‘now’ and ‘at the hour of our death’ clauses, as both moments were almost synonymous to 14<sup>th</sup> century Christians.

In his prayers for the pandemic, Pope Francis suggests that we pray the intercession of Mary to comfort those who are distraught and ‘be close to those who are concerned for their loved ones who are sick and who, in order to prevent the spread of the disease, cannot be close to them.’<sup>10</sup> It is this closeness which inspired us to set up our physical/digital recital of the rosary. Given the hundreds of elderly people, maybe feeling forgotten and disconnected from the digital world, as priests we wanted to become in ourselves a Marian embodiment of the sign of hope. Mary’s *spoude* (haste and ‘eagerness and diligence’)<sup>11</sup> on her journey to accompany Elisabeth (Luke 1.39-40) became our inspiration to visit the elderly and get as close as we possibly could without endangering their health. One criticism might be that just by being there and reciting the rosary we were not offering much help to the loneliness-stricken generation, but what assistance could pregnant Mary offer to Elisabeth, save that of hope-filled accompaniment? In a similar manner we wanted our visits to be symbols of the dawning tomorrow.

### **3. ‘Do whatever he tells you’**

During May, Catholic tradition suggests attending more closely to the school of Mary and contemplating Christ’s life through her eyes through the rosary. These words are more relevant than ever during the pandemic. In his gospel, the powerful last words of Mary recorded by John are ‘Do whatever he tells you’ (2.5) a challenge of Mary to all Christians across the centuries. Also in John, the last words of Christ, ‘Follow me’ (21.23) echo down the years as an invitation to trust in Christ and commit one another into God’s merciful hands.

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<sup>9</sup> Fulton Sheen, *The World’s First Love*, 2nd ed. (Ignatius, 2009), 164

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis. ‘Prayer of the Holy Father to Mary for the Month of May’. Vatican Press, 25 April 2020. [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/prayers/documents/papa-francesco\\_pregchiere\\_20200425\\_preghiera-mariana-maggio.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/prayers/documents/papa-francesco_pregchiere_20200425_preghiera-mariana-maggio.html).

<sup>11</sup> Thayer and Smith, *The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon* (Bible Study Tools, 1999), op. *spoude*

In a parish which is stricken by a high sense of loneliness, the mere echo of their parish priest's voice reciting the rosary is a balm to their solitude and thus, exercise the ministry of consolation.

Considering the Catholic high understanding of the priesthood which sees the priest as the physical face of Christ the Priest, for many laypersons, especially the elderly, this translates somewhat to re-presenting Christ's physical presence in the parish.

Our presence wasn't interpreted only as the leader of a community present amongst his people, but somewhat that Christ as the Shepherd of His flock was present. In a time where people feel disoriented, Christ's shepherd-like figure becomes evermore urgent.

### **Digital and Physical Rosaries**

When we were exploring how we could best address the pastoral needs of our parish, we began by offering specific events depending on the age and needs. On a weekly basis, we held web-conferences with the altar boys, streamed interactive homilies for the young ones, communal liturgies of the hours via web-conferencing and Sunday Masses as well as digital catechesis. However, while half of the parish's population was being addressed through such social media opportunities, the elderly were not. Although the parish priest had telephoned all the older parishioners, in our Mediterranean culture the physical is paramount, and so we were inspired to broadcast the Facebook rosaries physically in each hamlet.

Two final points which helped us discern the way forward are relevant for those of every denomination to reflect on.

1. We opted for a specific devotional practice often associated with the laity. As most priests, us included, were busy streaming Masses, we were concerned about the risk of faith becoming even more clericalised, where the priests 'say' Mass and the laity join in a 'spiritual communion' whilst 'hearing' the Mass. Thus we opted to use a tradition rooted in popular piety, easily understood by all, and one which was already a familiar practice in the local, Catholic tradition pre-Covid19.

2. The choice of broadcasting digital prayer in a physical way helped combat the heightened effects of loneliness created by Covid19. Given our priority to safeguard the elderly, it was impossible to visit them in their homes, but by bringing this event to their doorsteps, they felt remembered by their parish priest as well as by Christ. Moreover, we were also addressing

the younger generation through online streaming, so while physically we were surrounded by elderly people, digitally we were joined by younger families. This reinforced the reality that we pray together as one community, though each with our own needs and hopes.