

SUPREMI APOSTOLATUS OFFICIO ENCYCLICAL OF POPE LEO XIII

Leo XIII

Communion of the Apostolic See.

Venerable Brethren, Health and the Apostolic Benediction.

The supreme Apostolic office which we discharge and the exceedingly difficult condition of these times, daily warn and almost compel Us to watch carefully over the integrity of the Church, the more that the calamities from which she suffers are greater. While, therefore, we endeavour in every way to preserve the rights of the Church and to obviate or repel present or contingent dangers, We constantly seek for help from Heaven - the sole means of effecting anything - that our labours and our care may obtain their wished for object. We deem that there could be no surer and more efficacious means to this end than by religion and piety to obtain the favour of the great Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, the guardian of our peace and the minister to us of heavenly grace, who is placed on the highest summit of power and glory in Heaven, in order that she may bestow the help of her patronage on men who through so many labours and dangers are striving to reach that eternal city. Now that the anniversary, therefore, of manifold and exceedingly great favours obtained by a Christian people through the devotion of the Rosary is at hand, We desire that that same devotion should be offered by the whole Catholic world with the greatest earnestness to the Blessed Virgin, that by her intercession her Divine Son may be appeased and softened in the evils which afflict us. And therefore We determined, Venerable Brethren, to despatch to you these letters in order that, informed of Our designs, your authority and zeal might excite the piety of your people to conform themselves to them.

2. It has always been the habit of Catholics in danger and in troublous times to fly for refuge to Mary, and to seek for peace in her maternal goodness; showing that the Catholic Church has always, and with justice, put all her hope and trust in the Mother of God. And truly the Immaculate Virgin, chosen to be the Mother of God and thereby associated with Him in the work of man's salvation, has a favour and power with her Son greater than any human or angelic creature has ever obtained, or ever can gain. And, as it is her greatest pleasure to grant her help and comfort to those who seek her, it cannot be doubted that she would deign, and even be anxious, to receive the aspirations of the universal Church.

3. This devotion, so great and so confident, to the august Queen of Heaven, has never shone forth with such brilliancy as when the militant Church of God has seemed to be endangered by the violence of heresy spread abroad, or by an intolerable moral corruption, or by the attacks of powerful enemies. Ancient and modern history and the more sacred annals of the Church bear witness to public and private supplications addressed to the Mother of God, to the help she has granted in return, and to the peace and tranquillity which she had obtained from God. Hence her illustrious titles of helper, consoler, mighty in war, victorious, and peace-giver. And amongst these is specially to be commemorated that familiar title derived from the Rosary by which the signal benefits she has gained for the whole of Christendom have been solemnly perpetuated. There is none among you, venerable brethren, who will not remember how great trouble and grief God's Holy Church suffered from the Albigensian heretics, who sprung from the sect of the later Manicheans, and who filled the South of France and other portions of the Latin world with their pernicious errors, and carrying everywhere the terror of their arms, strove far and wide to rule by massacre and ruin. Our merciful God, as you know, raised up against these most direful enemies a most holy man, the illustrious parent and founder of the Dominican Order. Great in the integrity of his doctrine, in his example of virtue, and by his apostolic labours, he proceeded undauntedly to attack the enemies of the Catholic Church, not by force of arms; but trusting wholly to that devotion which he was the first to institute under the name of the Holy Rosary, which was disseminated through the length and breadth of the earth by him and his pupils. Guided, in fact, by divine inspiration and grace, he foresaw that this devotion, like a most powerful warlike weapon, would be the means of putting the enemy to flight, and of confounding their audacity and mad impiety. Such was indeed its result. Thanks to this new method of prayer-when adopted and properly carried out as

instituted by the Holy Father St. Dominic-piety, faith, and union began to return, and the projects and devices of the heretics to fall to pieces. Many wanderers also returned to the way of salvation, and the wrath of the impious was restrained by the arms of those Catholics who had determined to repel their violence.

4. The efficacy and power of this devotion was also wondrously exhibited in the sixteenth century, when the vast forces of the Turks threatened to impose on nearly the whole of Europe the yoke of superstition and barbarism. At that time the Supreme Pontiff, St. Pius V., after rousing the sentiment of a common defence among all the Christian princes, strove, above all, with the greatest zeal, to obtain for Christendom the favour of the most powerful Mother of God. So noble an example offered to heaven and earth in those times rallied around him all the minds and hearts of the age. And thus Christ's faithful warriors, prepared to sacrifice their life and blood for the salvation of their faith and their country, proceeded undauntedly to meet their foe near the Gulf of Corinth, while those who were unable to take part formed a pious band of supplicants, who called on Mary, and unitedly saluted her again and again in the words of the Rosary, imploring her to grant the victory to their companions engaged in battle. Our Sovereign Lady did grant her aid; for in the naval battle by the Echinades Islands, the Christian fleet gained a magnificent victory, with no great loss to itself, in which the enemy were routed with great slaughter. And it was to preserve the memory of this great boon thus granted, that the same Most Holy Pontiff desired that a feast in honour of Our Lady of Victories should celebrate the anniversary of so memorable a struggle, the feast which Gregory XIII. dedicated under the title of "The Holy Rosary." Similarly, important successes were in the last century gained over the Turks at Temeswar, in Pannonia, and at Corfu; and in both cases these engagements coincided with feasts of the Blessed Virgin and with the conclusion of public devotions of the Rosary. And this led our predecessor, Clement XL, in his gratitude, to decree that the Blessed Mother of God should every year be especially honoured in her Rosary by the whole Church.

5. Since, therefore, it is clearly evident that this form of prayer is particularly pleasing to the Blessed Virgin, and that it is especially suitable as a means of defence for the Church and all Christians, it is in no way wonderful that several others of Our Predecessors have made it their aim to favour and increase its spread by their high recommendations. Thus Urban IV, testified that "every day the Rosary obtained fresh boon for Christianity." Sixtus IV declared that this method of prayer "redounded to the honour of God and the Blessed Virgin, and was well suited to obviate impending dangers;" Leo X that "it was instituted to oppose pernicious heresiarchs and heresies;" while Julius III called it "the glory of the Church." So also St. Pius V., that "with the spread of this devotion the meditations of the faithful have begun to be more inflamed, their prayers more fervent, and they have suddenly become different men; the darkness of heresy has been dissipated, and the light of Catholic faith has broken forth again." Lastly Gregory XIII in his turn pronounced that "the Rosary had been instituted by St. Dominic to appease the anger of God and to implore the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary."

6. Moved by these thoughts and by the examples of Our Predecessors, We have deemed it most opportune for similar reasons to institute solemn prayers and to endeavour by adopting those addressed to the Blessed Virgin in the recital of the Rosary to obtain from her son Jesus Christ a similar aid against present dangers. You have before your eyes, Venerable Brethren, the trials to which the Church is daily exposed; Christian piety, public morality, nay, even faith itself, the supreme good and beginning of all the other virtues, all are daily menaced with the greatest perils.

7. Nor are you only spectators of the difficulty of the situation, but your charity, like Ours, is keenly wounded; for it is one of the most painful and grievous sights to see so many souls, redeemed by the blood of Christ, snatched from salvation by the whirlwind of an age of error, precipitated into the abyss of eternal death. Our need of divine help is as great today as when the great Dominic introduced the use of the Rosary of Mary as a balm for the wounds of his contemporaries.

8. That great saint indeed, divinely enlightened, perceived that no remedy would be more adapted to the evils of his time than that men should return to Christ, who "is the way, the truth, and the life," by frequent meditation on the salvation obtained for Us by Him, and should seek the intercession with God of that Virgin, to whom it is given to destroy all heresies. He therefore so composed the Rosary as to recall the mysteries of our salvation in succession, and the subject of meditation is mingled and, as it were, interlaced with the Angelic salutation and with the prayer addressed to God, the

Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. We, who seek a remedy for similar evils, do not doubt therefore that the prayer introduced by that most blessed man with so much advantage to the Catholic world, will have the greatest effect in removing the calamities of our times also. Not only do We earnestly exhort all Christians to give themselves to the recital of the pious devotion of the Rosary publicly, or privately in their own house and family, and that unceasingly, but we also desire that the whole of the month of October in this year should be consecrated to the Holy Queen of the Rosary. We decree and order that in the whole Catholic world, during this year, the devotion of the Rosary shall be solemnly celebrated by special and splendid services. From the first day of next October, therefore, until the second day of the November following, in every parish and, if the ecclesiastical authority deem it opportune and of use, in every chapel dedicated to the Blessed Virgin - let five decades of the Rosary be recited with the addition of the Litany of Loreto. We desire that the people should frequent these pious exercises; and We will that either Mass shall be said at the altar, or that the Blessed Sacrament shall be exposed to the adoration of the faithful, Benediction being afterwards given with the Sacred Host to the pious congregation. We highly approve of the confraternities of the Holy Rosary of the Blessed Virgin going in procession, following ancient custom, through the town, as a public demonstration of their devotion. And in those places where this is not possible, let it be replaced by more assiduous visits to the churches, and let the fervour of piety display itself by a still greater diligence in the exercise of the Christian virtues.

9. In favour of those who shall do as We have above laid down, We are pleased to open the heavenly treasure-house of the Church that they may find therein at once encouragements and rewards for their piety. We therefore grant to all those who, in the prescribed space of time, shall have taken part in the public recital of the Rosary and the Litanies, and shall have prayed for Our intention, seven years and seven times forty days of indulgence, obtainable each time. We will that those also shall share in these favours who are hindered by a lawful cause from joining in these public prayers of which We have spoken, provided that they shall have practiced those devotions in private and shall have prayed to God for Our intention. We remit all punishment and penalties for sins committed, in the form of a Pontifical indulgence, to all who, in the prescribed time, either publicly in the churches or privately at home (when hindered from the former by lawful cause) shall have at least twice practiced these pious exercises; and who shall have, after due confession, approached the holy table. We further grant a plenary indulgence to those who, either on the feast of the Blessed Virgin of the Rosary or within its octave, after having similarly purified their souls by a salutary confession, shall have approached the table of Christ and prayed in some church according to Our intention to God and the Blessed Virgin for the necessities of the Church.

10. And you, Venerable Brethren, - the more you have at heart the honour of Mary, and the welfare of human society, the more diligently apply yourselves to nourish the piety of the people towards the great Virgin, and to increase their confidence in her. We believe it to be part of the designs of Providence that, in these times of trial for the Church, the ancient devotion to the august Virgin should live and flourish amid the greatest part of the Christian world. May now the Christian nations, excited by Our exhortations, and inflamed by your appeals, seek the protection of Mary with an ardour growing greater day by day; let them cling more and more to the practice of the Rosary, to that devotion which our ancestors were in the habit of practicing, not only as an ever-ready remedy for their misfortunes, but as a whole badge of Christian piety. The heavenly Patroness of the human race will receive with joy these prayers and supplications, and will easily obtain that the good shall grow in virtue, and that the erring should return to salvation and repent; and that God who is the avenger of crime, moved to mercy and pity may deliver Christendom and civil society from all dangers, and restore to them peace so much desired.

11. Encouraged by this hope, We beseech God Himself, with the most earnest desire of Our heart, through her in whom he has placed the fulness of all good, to grant you. Venerable Brethren, every gift of heavenly blessing. As an augury and pledge of which, We lovingly impart to you, to your clergy, and to the people entrusted to your care, the Apostolic Benediction.

Given in Rome, at St. Peter's, the 1st of September, 1883, in the sixth year of Our Pontificate.

LEO XIII

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