

# The Hail Mary



by Cesare Falletti O. Cist

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*by Cesare Falletti O. Cist.*

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## *1. The Hail Mary*



**T**he Hail Mary, after the Our Father, is the best known and best loved prayer of Christians in the West. Saying a Hail Mary is often the simplest way for us to pray together, or to pause for a moment of prayer in the presence of Our Lord. It is a way of pouring out our worries and cares to God, and availing ourselves of the maternal help of Our Lady.

Every Catholic instructed in prayer, knows the words of the Hail Mary from their earliest youth. Yet it is important and useful for us to know the history, content and theology that is expressed in those words.

I believe that the Hail Mary can be considered an important part of our culture, and a true profession of our Christian faith.

The Hail Mary is a very ancient text. The first part is a collage of biblical verses dating from the early centuries of the Church which was in use well before the tenth century. The next two centuries, the eleventh and twelfth, were a period of intense Marian devotion. The monks of that time and in particular the Cistercians dearly loved this early form of the prayer and the importance afforded it in monastic prayer life was second only to the Divine Office. It was in fact a Carthusian who ‘invented’ the rosary, using the Hail Mary as a ‘monologic’<sup>1</sup> prayer: a repetition of one phrase which allows us to contemplate the mysteries of Christ. The Dominicans adopted this prayer and spread and propagated it in the centuries that followed and continue to do so to this day.

The second part of the Hail Mary was composed towards the end of the fourteenth century. Its addition to the first part was ratified by the authority of the Church, in particular by Pope Pius V, in the sixteenth century. Pius was a Dominican Pope who attributed the great victory of Lepanto over the Muslim fleet to the people’s praying of the rosary. The importance of this victory has been greatly played down by modern historiography,

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<sup>1</sup> From the Greek *mono* (one) and *logos* (word).

but it was once considered to be Europe's greatest achievement in the defence of Christendom. The battle was won on the 7th October 1571, the day on which we celebrate the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary.

The first part of the Hail Mary is at the same time a prayer and a *Lectio Divina*; a prayer of praise and of contemplation. The words are exclusively biblical with the exception of the word 'Jesus' which was added later. That addition is however in perfect harmony with the scriptural text since it was the very same angel who said "and you will call him Jesus" (*Lk* 1:31). The Eastern Orthodox say: "You have given birth to the Saviour of our souls" which is equivalent to "the fruit of your womb Jesus" since the name Jesus means 'saviour'.

The tone of the second part of the Hail Mary is more one of supplication, heavily influenced by a late medieval spirituality in which death and sin were ever-present.

Today, we have inherited a very balanced prayer, which in common with many others contains a scriptural introduction and a meditation on that word of God. This meditation exposes our human frailty, and our need to entrust ourselves to God's power through the intercession of the Virgin Mary.

Among the many Marian prayers (the most ancient of which would seem to be the *Sub tuum*<sup>2</sup>) the Hail Mary has prevailed precisely because of its great balance and liturgical and theological exactness. There are no ambiguities in the Hail Mary.

### *Why Pray to Mary?*

First of all it is necessary to correct the mistaken belief that Mary is somehow sweeter and gentler, in a certain sense ‘nicer’ than God. This belief is very much mistaken. No one loves us more than God, no one is more full of goodness or more tender towards us than He is.

There is no mediator between the Father and His children save the Son who has promised that we will become co-heirs with Him. Thanks to His incarnation, His death and resurrection, we can truly become God’s children.

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<sup>2</sup> *Sub tuum praesidium confugimus, Sancta Dei Genetrix. Nostras deprecationes ne despicias in necessitatibus, sed a periculis cunctis libera nos semper, Virgo gloriosa et benedicta. Amen.*

We fly to thy patronage, O holy Mother of God; despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us always from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin. Amen.

Mary cannot help but be a pale reflection of the tenderness of God. That reflection stems from her full and immaculate adherence to the will of God, and the consent she freely gave to her role in the economy of Salvation.

Because of our sins, we are inclined to hide from God. Like Adam we flee from His presence and try to hide from Him, to the point that we run away from heaven itself, from the presence of God, from the gaze of the Father. Praying to the maternal figure of Mary for help in this quest to escape would be useless. She herself would lead us out of our hiding place, back into the open, to meet God face to face, and to trust in Him. She would urge us to recognize that God is the source of all tenderness and come to know Him as both Father and Mother.

### *Is Praying to Mary of Any Use?*

Is Mary simply a shortcut or an easy way to avoid God's anger? Certainly not!

She is the reflection of the greatness of God and at the same time she shows us how desperately we need Him. She bears witness to the fact that it is possible for us mere creatures to communicate with

the Creator. She urges us to abandon ourselves trustingly to God, to place ourselves completely within the plan of divine love, holding nothing back.

The Hail Mary contains and assembles all these aspects and teaches us how and why we should pray to Mary.

We should however, make a small digression to speak of the Communion of Saints. In the Communion of Saints we pray *with* the saints rather than *to* the saints.

We are not alone. We pray in the Church and with the Church. Our prayer is not a lonely cry in the wilderness, but an indispensable note that joins itself to the harmony of the song of the whole Church, of all humanity. We lend a voice to all creatures who praise the Lord.

The Church is a body, given life by the Holy Spirit, made up of living cells, joined one to another. Among these cells are the saints including, we hope and believe, all our dear departed brothers and sisters. It is they who work hardest for our good and who become channels for the power of the Holy Spirit to the entire body.

By God's mysterious design He raised Mary to special heights. Thanks to her unique relationship with Christ, and all the special gifts that accompanied and flowed from her motherhood of God Himself - her being conceived without sin, her assumption into heaven - and thanks to the depth of her theological and cardinal virtues, Mary has a privileged place among the communion of the Saints, and so too in our prayer.

In the Hail Mary, the purity and transparency of Our Lady become manifest; so much so that none of our prayer stays with her but all of it passes on to God. We begin by saying "Mary!", saluting her and coming close to her, and she answers "Jesus!" and leads us to Him. This is the dynamic of the first part of the Hail Mary.

Mary - Jesus: repeating this prayer often we slip into a rhythm that brings us ever closer to Jesus: just like the 'Jesus prayer' which is used so effectively by the Eastern Church.





## II. *The Parts of the Hail Mary*



### *The Greeting*

“Hail!” comes from the Greek word “*Chaire!*” which means “rejoice!” The same word in Hebrew was “*Shalom!*”, a greeting of peace. This is not a greeting that stems from politeness, or a formula to introduce us into Mary’s presence. Rather, it is a desire, a blessing which is directed towards her and comes to rest on all of the Church. It is a gesture that is completely at home in a scriptural context and in line with scriptural tradition. It is not a polite “good day” but an earnest desire, heralding, like the angel did, God’s benevolent intervention.

Mary belonged to a people who lived in strong messianic hope, who depended completely on God’s blessing. Peace, joy and prosperity, even in material terms, flowed from God’s concern for his people. They were signs that this blessing had indeed been given, especially for a people that had long suffered from a lack of peace. God Himself is

peace and joy, He is the one for whom they wait, the Messiah, the Holy Spirit who comes with gifts and fruits.

Saying “*Chaire!*”, “*Shalom!*”, the angel speaks an efficacious word: God is present and makes this promise real, by giving peace.

Thus when we salute Mary we say that:

- What we hope for is within her,
- What we believe in is found in her,
- What we love is God’s beauty which makes Mary beautiful.

As we greet her we enter upon a new world, a divine world. We meet her and she brings us to Jesus.

When we greet her with the same words that God chose when realizing His plan for our salvation, we make an act of faith. We say “I believe” to the new world in which God’s promise becomes reality. We come close to her to contemplate Christ living within her, He who brings us peace. She is the channel of grace, or to use St Bernard’s image, the neck that bears Him who is our head: Christ.

Jesus, who was welcomed by Mary, comes to us, and we, like the three wise men, find Him on His Mother's lap. To reach Him we must tread the same path as Mary, so when we say "*Shalom*, Mary!" we also say "*Shalom*, Jesus!"

When we say "Hail!" it is a greeting of joy and exultation. We know that in Mary we see "a new heaven and a new earth... the Holy City, the new Jerusalem descending from heaven, from God, adorned as a bride for her bridegroom... then there will be no more mourning, nor sadness, nor weeping, nor pain." (*Rv* 21:1-2, 4)

### *Full of Grace*

The Greek word *kexaritomene* contains a wealth of meanings, and is very difficult to render in full in other languages. It means full of grace, favoured by grace, set in grace, shaped in grace, that is, in the love of God which invaded her from her conception and remains with her forever. It means full of a love that is efficacious, divinizing, sanctifying. Thanks to this word used by the angel, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was born. For sin played no part in her story, and found no complicity in her. In Mary sin had nowhere to dwell, there was no

separation, no distance between her and God; she depended completely on her creator. But her dependence did not deprive her of her freedom as a human being, as a person free to choose whom to trust, whom to love and whom to please. Mary knew whom to choose and gave herself completely, without reservation. She gave all and received all.

Her creator lived in her from the first moment of her existence, and He remains with her permanently, and she in Him.

The grace of which the Hail Mary speaks is God who gives Himself as a gift. Mary accepted this gift.

The angel does not use her name but describes what sets Mary apart, the fact that she more than anyone is “full of grace”. It is this that makes her original, unique, and in this title we find everything that is Marian.

But what is grace? Grace is God who gives Himself to us. At the same time grace is the Holy Spirit which is God’s gift through the Son. Grace is also the work of God which transfigures His creatures.

God gives Himself forever to Mary, and Mary is forever receptive to His gift. Mary embodies acceptance of God's grace. This means that in her, every action is a work of God and at the same time every action proceeds from the freely given human 'yes' to God's action.

How do we pray when we say: "Hail, full of grace"? The angel's words turn us to contemplative prayer, because we enter into a world which is not our own. It is the world of God's saving power, of His mercy, His beauty and His holiness. As Mary says in the *Magnificat*: "He looks on His servant in her lowliness", and in turn He looks on the lowliness of all His creatures. What is given to Mary is not without consequences for us, because we in turn will receive the same privileges. Mary is like a channel for grace, she dips into the infinite ocean and reduces it to a stream we can cope with. Her love is so great as to contain the whole of God Mary is so small that when God floods her being, He becomes a man like us.

Contemplative prayer takes us to a place where we simply marvel at the Lord's bountiful goodness, and this leads us to conversion. But how?

## *The Lord is with Thee*

This is a greeting which we find scattered throughout the Bible; it is frequently used and is approximately equivalent to *shalom*. The presence of the Lord was indispensable for His people. If the Lord was with them they could achieve great things, but if He took His hand away from them they were lost. Moses knew that God had to be present among His people before they could leave for the Exodus. Boaz greeted his reapers with the same words: “the Lord be with you” (*Rt* 2:4). Even today the Church preserves these words which are at the same time a greeting, a wish and a blessing. These words serve as the opening dialogue at Mass between the priest and the faithful. However, through the ages, tradition and translation have subtly changed the greeting. In the liturgy we use it almost as a well-wishing formula, expressing a hope that the Lord will be with you. In the Hail Mary however, the greeting is a statement of fact, an announcement, a good news. In fact the angel not only salutes Mary but brings to her the announcement (the annunciation) which had been earnestly awaited for many centuries. The fulfillment of Israel’s hope was at hand; the pillar of cloud, the ark, the gift of prophecy were all signs that presaged and told of this final announcement.

In Mary all the prophecies are fulfilled and all waiting comes to an end. In her, God becomes truly present and she becomes the dwelling place of God, of the Word who became flesh in her womb and who joins each one of us to Himself. In Mary, humanity welcomes the Lord and gives Him its flesh. When we speak of divine motherhood we do not only mean that Mary gave birth to Him who is “God from God”, but also that God dwelt in her for nine months, fed by her blood, forming a human body like ours, and beginning the process of our divinization. As St Irenaeus says: “God became man that we might become God.”

In Mary’s womb, Jesus remains God and man forever. Whenever we take Holy Communion a similar mystery occurs in us. The Word comes and remains in us, transforms us and unites our humanity with His divinity. God comes to dwell in us but it is more accurate to say that we come to dwell in God.

If the Word dwelt for nine months in the flesh of Mary, then we can say that Christ’s flesh remained that of Mary, the very same flesh that now sits eternally at the right hand of the Father, risen and glorified.

We say “The Lord is with thee” and we believe that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (*Jn* 1:14). The womb of Mary represents the whole of humanity; it is the place where humanity welcomes the divine Word. This is why Mary is seen as the perfect image of the Church which is the Body of Christ. She is more perfect than the temple in Jerusalem ever was. Even the Temple was only a pale shadow of the realities that were to come: the fullness of the presence of the Lord with His people.

The presence of Mary in our life *is* the presence of Jesus. St Bernard of Clairveaux says that when we say “Mary” she always answers “Jesus”. She does this precisely because she is never alone: the Lord is always with her.

The prophet Isaiah says that even before we pray, God says: “here I am, here I am.” (*Is* 58:9) Thinking of this we can understand the mystery of the Visitation, the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth, and the deeper mystery that is the meeting between Jesus and John the Baptist. There we see the prophecies meet their fulfillment, we see man meet God. The two women hide within them the mystery of the other great meeting: the

precursor meeting the Messiah, the Voice meeting the Word, the angel meeting the one who sent him, he who prepares the way meeting He who is the Way.

“The Lord is with thee!” When said to Mary this becomes a joyous cry; for if the Lord is with her then He is also with us. She embodies all that we are proud of. Mary, the most beautiful of all women nevertheless remains one of us, made of our same flesh, sharer in our human weakness but united with Him who is God’s strength.

*Blessed art Thou amongst Women  
and Blessed is the Fruit of thy Womb*

These are no longer the words of the angel but the words of Elizabeth. This elderly woman spoke under the influence of the Holy Spirit, so the words she spoke are also words of God spoken to Mary and to us. We can all bear within us the divine Word, through obedient attention to the word of God, through brotherly love and through the sacraments. God in His bounty has given many ways to draw nearer to Him, to dwell in Him and to take Him to our brothers as a “fruit of our womb”.

We speak to Mary using God's own words. The greatness of this prayer lies in the fact that in speaking to Mary we join our words to God's. However, the two blessings in this part of the Hail Mary (directed towards the woman and the fruit of her womb) ascend and descend. The fruit of her womb is Jesus, the son who is equal to God the Father, God from God. Every blessing that we give to God for His marvellous deeds is an act of praise that ascends to God. At the same time a grace comes from God to man which allows us to bless, to adore and love, to live and to be bringers of the peace that comes from God.

God blesses the woman, but she, the woman who represents the Church and all humanity, blesses God.

Giving birth in pain is a consequence of original sin, and still in the Book of Revelation the woman cries out in the pangs of childbirth, for the Church announces and brings the Saviour to the world through toil and persecution. Already in the Old Testament, God's goodness was often manifested through the birth of a child, and the greatest of these signs were given through barren women. But in Mary, God's blessing surpassed the blessings given to all the other women. The Son she bore wiped

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