

THE PRAYER

The power of the Hail Mary explained by the saints

ECCLESIA

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**Ermes
Dovico**



Ave Maria, gratia plena,

*Dominus tecum,
benedicta tu in mulieribus,
et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Iesus.
Sancta Maria, mater Dei,
ora pro nobis peccatoribus,
nunc et in hora mortis nostrae.
Amen*

As is well known, October is the month consecrated to **Our Lady of the Rosary**, whose liturgical memorial the Church celebrates today. We are therefore in a particularly auspicious month to honour our heavenly Mother with the recitation of many Hail Marys. Rain that bathes the parched earth, divine dew, piercing and fiery arrow: there are many metaphors that the saints have used to express the greatness of the *salutatio angelica*. And many are the teachings and devotions they have transmitted to urge us to recite it. After all, what good son or daughter does not rejoice in greeting their mother and making everyone love her? And should this not be all the more true for She who gave us the Saviour of the world and who suffered so much - with Him and in His service - to snatch us from the power of darkness?

The great restorer of the devotion of the Holy Rosary, Blessed Alain de la Roche, expressed some of the wondrous effects produced by devoutly reciting the angelic salutation as follows: "Heaven is in exultation, the earth in admiration whenever I say: *Hail Mary*; I am in horror of the world, the love of God reigns in my heart when I say: *Hail Mary*; my fears vanish, my passions are extinguished when I say: *Hail Mary*; I grow in devotion, I find compunction when I say: *Hail Mary*; my hope is confirmed, my consolation increases when I say: *Hail Mary*; my spirit is gladdened, my sadness disappears when I say: *Hail Mary*". The Breton Dominican himself heard the Blessed Virgin reveal that negligence and even aversion to the Hail Mary are probable signs of eternal damnation; on the contrary, those who are devoted to it have a great pledge of predestination (a concept to be understood only in the Catholic sense, as predestination to grace and glory).

Therefore, St Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort stated that heretics "have a horror of the Hail Mary. They learn, perhaps, the Our Father, but not the Hail Mary", while the faithful naturally love to recite both the one and the other prayer, defined by the French saint as "the most excellent and sublime". Montfort therefore denounced the pretexts that are used to reject the recitation of the angelic greeting. And in order to unveil the illusions of the devil, who trembles before the Woman foretold by God in Genesis (*Gen 3:15*

), he added that "my Hail Mary, my Rosary or my crown is my favourite prayer, it is my sure touchstone to distinguish those who are led by the spirit of God from those who are under the illusion of the evil spirit".

One of the most common excuses for rejecting the Hail Mary is that it, in its complete form, is not found in the Holy Scriptures. The whole of the first part, as is well known, is easily found in chapter 1 of St Luke's Gospel: it consists of the greeting that the archangel Gabriel, sent by the Holy Trinity, addresses to Mary (*Lk 1:28*); and of the double blessing, towards Mary and towards Jesus, that St Elizabeth, "full of the Holy Spirit", exclaims in a loud voice when the Mother of the Lord herself arrives (*Lk 1:40-43*). The second part of the Hail Mary, however, was added by the Church, as the Catechism of St Pius X also recalls. The invocation that it contains (Holy Mary, Mother of God...) is entirely consistent with the content of the Scriptures themselves, and teaching it is certainly part of the mission that God has entrusted to the Church to teach all peoples and guide them, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, "into all truth" (*Jn 16:13*).

However, a curiosity arises: since when has the second part of the Hail Mary been known? Montfort traces its origin to the Council of Ephesus (431), when the Council Fathers condemned the heresy of Nestorius (who opposed the use of the title "*Mother of God*") and solemnly defined the dogma of **Mary's Divine Motherhood**. «The Council decreed that Our Lady should be invoked under that glorious title with the words: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death"» (*The Admirable Secret of the Rosary*, 44). St Louis Marie therefore reports it as certain. In any case, the oldest written attestation known to us, containing the Hail Mary in its complete formulation, is to be found in the prayer booklet used by the Franciscan Antonio da Stroncone (c. 1381-1461) and preserved today in the church of San Damiano, in Assisi.

On the subject of Franciscans, St Anthony already refers to the custom of preachers to recite a Hail Mary at the beginning of their sermon, in order to obtain divine favour. Moreover, the Blessed Virgin herself explained to Blessed Alain: "Just as God chose the angelic greeting to work the Incarnation of his Word and the Redemption of mankind, so those who wish to reform customs and regenerate peoples in Christ Jesus must honour and obey me with the same greeting. I am the way chosen by God to come to men; therefore, after Jesus, to me they must turn for grace and virtues".

To St. Matilda of Hackeborn (†1298), who wondered how she could greet Our Lady in the sweetest possible way, the heavenly Mother revealed that no one could give her a sweeter greeting than the *Hail Mary* that God Himself first addressed to her through His

angel. Saint Mathilde herself prayed to the Virgin to assist her with her presence at the hour of death. Our Lady promised her that she would do so, "but you, to this end, will recite three Hail Marys every day". And she added that the first Hail Mary was to be in thanksgiving to the heavenly Father, for the power He gave her; the second in honour of the Son, for the gift of wisdom; the third in honour of the Holy Spirit, for the abundance of love with which He clothed her. Only God knows how many ordinary believers, popes, and saints - from Alphonsus Maria de Liguori to Gemma Galgani, from the Curé d'Ars to Maximilian Kolbe - have practised this devotion over the centuries. Which reminds us, as with the *Magnificat*, that every praise to Mary reverberates on the Holy Trinity and is the cause of salvation.