

# **Magnify Love**

*Unlocking the Heart of Jesus  
in Marriage and Life*

**Nicole Berlucchi**

**En Route Books and Media, LLC**

**Saint Louis, MO**

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*Make the time*

En Route Books and Media, LLC  
5705 Rhodes Avenue  
St. Louis, MO 63109

Contact us at [contactus@enroutebooksandmedia.com](mailto:contactus@enroutebooksandmedia.com)

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*“But whoever keeps His word, the love of God is truly perfected in him. This is the way that we may know that we are in union with Him: whoever claims to abide in Him ought to live [just] as He lived.” 1 John 2:5-6*



## **Author's note**

This book contains my story: my weaknesses, my decisions—both good and bad. The intention of this book is to invite you to recognize that prayer, especially the Rosary, and scripture are so important when discerning God's will in your life. It's not meant to serve as a step by step manual, or a do-as-I-did (because trust me, I did plenty wrong), but instead intended to help you reflect on your own life and how you can apply the mysteries of Jesus' life to your own, as well as seek the intercession of His Mother.

If you find yourself in a physically, emotionally, or psychologically abusive relationship, please seek professional help. This book does not address anything of this nature.

*For Joe, I love walking with you through life.*

*Thank you for your constant support and for your trust in sharing our story with others so that they might have hope and trust in God and all He can do through their lives and marriage.*

*We are blessed.*

*I love you.*

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Venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen once said of the Rosary that it is “the book of the blind, where souls see and there enact the greatest drama of love the world has ever known; it is the book of the simple, which initiates them into mysteries and knowledge more satisfying than the education of other men; it is the book of the aged, whose eyes close upon the shadow of this world, and open on the substance of the next. The power of the Rosary is beyond description.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fulton Sheen, *The World's First Love: Mary, Mother of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), p. 217-218.

## Introduction

“You and Joe have such a great marriage,” said my friend with a tone of admiration, over drinks at a bar.

I wanted to say to her, *you have no idea what our marriage has been.*

I wanted to say, *that’s what you think.*

I wanted to say, *let me tell you a story.*

I wanted to say a lot of things. But instead, I said with a half smile, “It’s taken a lot of hard work,” all while the slideshow of our struggles, and honestly, my resentments I was still holding on to, slid through my mind. My mind seemed to particularly focus on the worst time.

*The day I had had enough and packed my bag.*

*Not the time.*

*Not the place.*

My mind, thankfully, kept the stories from gushing out. There was too much to share about what Joe and I had been through. Honestly, if I had shared my story then, it would have been the wrong time. God still had work to do on me and my heart. Lies to smash. Truths to grow. If I had been paying attention, I would’ve seen He was creating a work in us, in me, once we were faithful to Him, once we didn’t rely on ourselves, once we took the crosses with the resurrections.

*God is so good.*

Do you have a marriage story like mine? A story buried within a worried heart and mind? A story where the ending feels unclear but you are trying to get control of it? A story where you felt unsure of

choices you made? A story where you were desperately trying to be the hero but ended up a casualty instead? A story where your burdens were heavy, where you felt alone? Abandoned? Maybe you still do.

I have been there, in your shoes. I have cried hidden tears in a shower. I have smiled and laughed while hosting parties when my heart was experiencing deep pain. I have longed for two pink lines and have been pregnant wondering if I would stay married. I have weathered death and new life in more ways than I can explain within the pages of this book, but my hope is to tell you enough.

Enough to give you hope. Enough to remind you about how the love of God conquers all. Enough to help you begin to unlock what Jesus can reveal in your life and your marriage when you let Him and His mother teach you eternal lessons. Enough to give you courage to lay down your life and your will for God's plans.

Because His plans are the best plans grown out of the greatest love story ever written.

What God has taught me over the last almost ten years (yes, 10, and really is still teaching me!) is His astounding love and mercy has authority over everything, and if you let Him in, He will make your wounds sources of light in your own life and in the world.

God let carefully constructed parts of me break because I had built a fortress of self-reliance, fear, perfectionism, and pride, which hindered my ability to live freely, joyfully, and in a way that my marriage to Joe and my everyday life could be a visible sign of His love on earth.

I had built a tough, pristinely designed exterior, fake and empty. I was living a life where I thought I could fix everything, save everything and everyone. The savior.

There was one little hiccup in living like that.

I already had a Savior.

And so, He let my carefully constructed facade and protections be crushed.

In His mercy, He and His mother were there to slowly and gently help me understand why that painful crushing was needed and what I (and we) needed in order to rebuild not only a marriage of substance, but also a life fuller than we could have ever designed ourselves.

While my prayers were often for the situation to change or for Joe to change, what ultimately happened, with Mary's intercession, was everything changed.

### **Including me.**

The changes didn't come instantly. They came through decades—a decade of my life and decades of the Rosary, day in and day out.

With each *Our Father* I asked the Father's will to be done, asked Mary to pray for me over and over, and repeatedly offered praise to the Trinity while reflecting on the Joyful, Sorrowful, Glorious and Luminous mysteries of Christ's life, God was transforming my heart to understand there was abundant fruit that came from my yeses, from my suffering, from giving more than I wanted to give, from trusting and faith, from authentic relationship and the sacraments, especially the Sacrament of Marriage.

Mary knew that I was accepting that all the details of my life were from the Lord for His purposes, but I had not given them to Him to be changed from water into wine.

She was key to unlocking the heart of Jesus in my life and in my marriage. She prayed for me to understand her advice in the Gospel: “Do whatever He tells you.”

She prayed for deeper revelation about God’s love for me. She prayed for me to know I was not alone in my suffering. She prayed for a Resurrection and a Pentecost in my life. She prayed for my mission. That is the power of the Rosary—your prayers united with the Mother of God’s prayers. She is praying for you, too.

My hope is that this book will be a tool to reflect on your life through the mysteries of the Rosary, and in doing so, you too will change out the lens of a victim, for a lens of the victorious.

Let your suffering be redeemed. Don’t wade through your life passive to the pain, instead plunge into the depths of His healing grace and allow Mary to intercede for you over and over until the water of your life becomes wine.

She wants us living and loving as redeemed, not as restrained. She will help us navigate the struggles of marriage and motherhood, of professional and personal life, and of the illusion of control and sole responsibility, until we’ve given it all to her Son, Jesus, Lord of it all.

I share my story with the greatest humility, hoping to be of service to our Lord and our Lady. I navigated plenty of my marriage imperfectly, tripping and stumbling my way in darkness until I found my path in the Light. I wrestle like many people with trust, control, insecurity, and desiring to love and be loved.

This is why I pray the Rosary. Because these human weaknesses don't disappear. Because I know my marriage and life will face different challenges in the years ahead. Because I know Satan wages war on marriage and family every day. Because we all need divine intervention and intercession in our lives if we are to magnify love like Jesus'.

My prayer for you is that you, too, will experience and see the supernatural wisdom and grace that flows to us from the mysteries and prayers of the Rosary—transformations both old and new. I also pray that you will appreciate the gift Jesus gave us in Mary, a mother who is constantly tending to our hearts in order to more fully receive Him.

I cannot wait to witness the transformative power of the Rosary in your life. Keep me posted on your journey by visiting my website ([www.nicoleberlucchi.com](http://www.nicoleberlucchi.com)) or Instagram (@berlucchiwriting) and submitting your transformation stories. I would love to connect with you and share your story with others.

Come, Holy Spirit! Let's begin...



# **Part I**

## **Match Made For Heaven**



No, that is not a typo. I know the saying is “match made in heaven,” but I much prefer “match made for heaven.” A husband and wife should be looking out for each other and helping the other get to heaven. I wish I could say it is easy, entering the war with Satan, who would love nothing more than to destroy and distort the beauty of marriage, but the reality is that marriage is hard.

It’s hard because two sinful, broken (but usually well-intentioned) people are entering into a life together. In marriage, you face bumps, hills, and mountains along the way that you never planned on. These create twists and turns in your life’s terrain, which will cause you to lose your balance, fall, try too hard, overcompensate for your weaknesses, and so much more. Let’s just be clear here: you are not in control. Most likely, if you picked up this book, you know exactly Who is in control: God. The beauty of the Sacrament of Marriage is that the covenant is not between two humans, but rather two humans AND God.

So, why then is it hard? Many of us tend to focus on the human aspect of marriage *aka* our spouse and do not focus on how both, together, need to be inviting God into their day-to-day married life. Grace before meals together is great, but grace given to each other in an argument because you remember God is present in your marriage is even better.

I wish someone would’ve told me how marriages need more outpourings of grace. Marriages need more moments of pause and allowing God some space to work on things with and for us. Marriages need more leading with love rather than languishing or laboring through life. Marriages need more prayer and scripture helping

spouses internally reflect so that marriage can externally project God's life and love into our own lives.

If you find yourself in a place of uncertainty, let me assure you, God intends marriage to be beautiful. From the beginning, He created the world with a man and woman in partnership, having dominion over all the earth together. He had hoped it would be perfect, but they forgot Him as so many of us do. If you learn early on to invite Him into those challenging moments as well as the joyful moments, you will discover a fullness in your marriage that cannot be established without His Divine Intervention. I wish I had learned that earlier.

God is THE Creator. He knows you and your spouse so well. He knows the decisions you will make. He knows how you will love each other well and hurt one another. He knows the joy you will experience and the sadness. He knows where your wounds will throb and draw you into yourself. He knows where your prayers will ask Him to heal and pull you out of yourself. But most of all, He knows how to work it all for the good of those who love Him.<sup>1</sup>

I firmly believe it's why He gave us the Rosary, a beautiful tapestry of prayers (Our Fathers, Hail Marys and Glory Bes) woven together with scripture. The Rosary highlights **who** you are supposed to live like: Jesus, **whose** Will you are supposed to follow: God's, and **how** you will be strengthened in the seasons of marriage by living like Jesus, obeying the Father's Holy Will, and cooperating with the Holy Spirit.

Whether you are entering into a marriage or are already married, there are certain things you need to be aware of and a certain

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:28.

weapon I recommend having on hand. Let's unpack what I am talking about as we begin this deep dive into who God is calling us to be and how we can more deeply magnify Him and live with Love magnified in life and marriage.

*Lord, help me remember you as central to my life and marriage. I know I can trust you to work all things for the good of those who love you, even those things that might be challenging. May I always seek your Holy Will for me and my spouse so that we might live our lives with Love magnified and someday be with you in heaven. Amen.*



# Chapter 1

## Finding Your Soulmate

*“Hardly had I left them when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him and would not let him go until I had brought him to my mother’s house, to the chamber of her who conceived me.”*

—Song of Songs 3:4

Finding your soulmate has a nice romantic flavor to it. The image tastes of bliss and satisfaction and intimacy on a level beyond the flesh. We often equate it to finding the person we are destined to marry, a person created just for us. The reality: the earthly search for a soulmate lies in an imperfect, sinful human roaming the earth somewhere out there.

How romantic, right? I know, not the image you were going for when thinking about your soulmate.

But it’s true. When we think of a soulmate, we are usually thinking of a person in the flesh and how they fit into our lives and are rarely thinking of their souls. We are thinking of someone perfect for us, and often we don’t really have a definition to describe that perfection. Many people go by the time-old belief that “you will just know” when you find your soulmate.

The truth of the matter is if we were thinking about finding our soul a mate, we would need to be very aware of our sins and our need for growth. We would be looking for a person to help us conquer

those sins and help us to grow. But let's be honest, most people are looking for someone they get along with and enjoy being around.

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not saying choosing a spouse shouldn't include criteria of someone you enjoy being around, but sometimes what seems easy can be the harder path. If you are both seeking easy, how will you grow and encourage each other in your marriage? If you are both seeking to numb out, how will you experience a full marriage? If you are both looking for fun, how will you tackle all the responsibilities that come along with marriage?

Similarly, those of you who went with the same faith and upbringing criteria might feel like patting yourself on the back right now. I certainly looked for things like marrying someone of the same or similar faith. Someone who faithfully goes to Church. Someone with the same values as me. But in the end, even with all those shared good qualities, you have a human picture in mind even if it is faceless at first. You aren't picturing their soul. You are picturing a blissful life with a partner similar to you or who complements you well.

Let me ask you a question: are you perfect? I'm going to assume you have said no, because unfortunately, we were all basically opened to sin thanks to Adam and Eve. Have you ever tried picturing your self-defined soulmate as sinful?

Ew...I know, why would I suggest something like that? Because it's real. The person you married is going to be sinful and so are you. This fact doesn't mean you are doomed to a sinful life, It simply means God designed you to find perfection (aka Him) together. There is only one perfect person in this world: Jesus Christ, who bestowed perfection on His mother, Mary, from conception in order to carry Him and bear Him into this world.

Soulmate comes in one variety. His name is Jesus.

*“Like the deer that yearns for streams of water, so my soul is yearning for you, O God; my soul thirsts for God, the living God.”*

—Psalm 42:2-3

Your and your spouse’s soulmate is actually Jesus. You are both searching for the same soulmate. The reason you make a covenant with God in marriage is because you need that kind of perfection to weather what the world is going to throw at you, what Satan is going to throw at you, and what God will allow to happen to you, so that you find Him and know Him and become complete in Him.

Notice in Song of Songs where the lovely couple goes upon finding each other—“to my mother’s house, to the chamber of her who conceived me.” (3:4) This nod to Mary being a place of safety for a couple is worth paying attention to. When we get married, the husband and wife unite themselves to God in covenant. These two humans are now meant to reflect the inner dwelling of God in their relationship. He is their soulmate, and He draws them to Mary to remain safe.

The chamber He entrusted Himself to is the chamber He also entrusts the married couple to: Mary. She keeps the couple in covenant with the Lord safe as they navigate life transitions, service to others, unexpected visitors, turbulent times, death, life, the coming of the Holy Spirit and more.

I know when I was walking over after Communion with my new husband to pray to Mary and ask her prayers for us, I could not possibly have imagined how she would be protecting us years later, forming our hearts, helping us release things that needed to be left

behind and helping us reach for things that would help us rise to be who Jesus wanted us to be.

She is not only protecting the married couple, but she is also allowing Jesus to be formed within the married couple. She is helping us let Jesus come alive within us, so that we can continue to carry out his work on earth together.

But let me be clear, I have only realized this in hindsight. When I got married, I was not realizing the care and design God put into the sacrament of marriage. I did not understand that the man and woman must be present in this sacrament because it is both the male and female together who can most perfectly reflect who He is, each carrying a part of Him in order to be the closest earthly picture of Him. The union of the man and woman are a mirror image of a God who cannot be contained by earthly gender.

The bride and groom combined reflect beautiful, unique aspects of God that can only be manifested through their physical and spiritual union. We even see it in the design of their physical bodies as it relates to reproduction—the female with her internal reproductive parts and the man with his external reproductive parts. They complement each other and are designed to fit together. Their physical union should be an act of love because it is so powerful that it can create a new life.

This intentional design is reflected in the design of every human. Man, woman and God together create the complete person: body and soul.

While these reproductive parts do not always function perfectly, it does not change what happens in that union of the internal and external in love. This is the covenant lived again and again in sexual union: male, female, God. The power of threes—just as the Father,

Son, and Holy Spirit are one, so husband, wife, and God become one in a new human life. The Holy Spirit is considered the love between the Father and Son. God is the love between husband and wife.

We often want to think of love as something we conjure up. Often, we are thinking of decisions we make because of love, but the love springs from God. This quality is why He is our soulmate, not a sinful person. God = soulmate.

I know this takes a bit of time to wrap your head around, a reorientation that God is your soulmate, and your spouse is a helper on the way to heaven, but it's true. The spouse, they will help you find God, but God is who your heart rests in. St. Augustine tells us: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."<sup>1</sup> There is no human on the planet that can put your heart and soul at rest the way He does. But if God designed you for marriage, it is through life with this human person that you will both have your soulmate.

True love is God-centered before it is human-oriented.

Looking back, I know with every misstep I took, God was shuffling things around so the right people, places, jobs and opportunities to encounter Him were impossible to miss. Man, I was a difficult case of *not-wanting-anyone-else's-help* and even the *person-who-thinks-they-can-fix-everything-alone*. The common theme was "me" and "I"—up to me, I can handle it. This is where saying *God never gives you anything you can't handle* can really lead to some ultra-dysfunction. It should also be said, *but that doesn't mean you have to do it alone. He placed people around you to help you. God will help you. He wants to be your Help*. If He is giving you more than you can

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<sup>1</sup> *Confessions*, St. Augustine.

handle, it's an opportunity to depend on Him. He wants you to depend on Him. (*Philippians 4:13*) He wants us to learn to surrender hard things to Him.

If it hadn't been for my Rosary, I'm not sure I would've gotten to this place of freedom; it was the one consistent prayer in my life. Always on my nightstand, always in my car, always on my fingertips. It truly felt like a lifeline in those hard moments. I didn't really know what was happening when I prayed my Rosary.

I always thought I was praying the hard situations away, but you can't pray something away while gripping tightly to control. Instead, deep inside me, God and Mary were working together to break through my hard heart and help me open my eyes to how I was working against what God was trying to do.

The Rosary has a history much like every human life. It flowed out of a poor man's breviary—150 Our Fathers. I know it doesn't sound very "poor." It flowed into the prayer we have today—decades flowing from the Father in the Our Father to Mary and Jesus in the Hail Mary and concludes with Praise of the Trinity in the Glory Be, all while meditating on the Life of Christ.

When I studied the history of the Rosary, I began to understand its great power: how it's been carefully curated and created for each of us so that we might truly be able to live like Jesus, and how we might learn from Mary, a key part of Jesus' story, what it means to be fully conformed to God's will and in constant relationship with Him. She is an exception: she is the spouse of the Holy Spirit, and it is with God that she was a part of creating the physical Jesus, true God and true Man.

What you learn and experience through praying the Rosary won't be exactly the same as what I have needed to learn and experience, but I promise you that God created it for you to pray, to conform you to Christ, and to learn from our heavenly mother Mary. He curated these prayers with me and my life in mind, and with you and your life in mind. He transformed me with this sometimes-overlooked common devotion of the Catholic Church. He can do the same for you: working great things in you when you take what He has curated and created and weave it into your everyday life.

When I prayed the Rosary, I thought I knew what I was praying for, but God does what is best for us. I was praying, and He was working. He knows what we need better than we know. He designed the Rosary to help us cooperate better with Him in doing His will and becoming who He created us to be.

I have personally experienced this in my life and in my marriage, and I continue praying this prayer everyday knowing His work is not done until He calls me home.

***Dear Lord, Open our hearts and minds to how we should pursue you as a soulmate in our lives and in our marriage. Help us think about how carefully you created each of us and continue to curate our lives to bring us to perfection so that we might be united to you at last. Amen.***

### **Open Your Heart**

- When you picture Jesus as your soulmate, how does that make you feel?

- When you think about your spouse or future spouse as the person designed to bring you closer to God, do you imagine lofty things as well as the hard things that might come with that or only one or the other?
- What helps you be focused on the life of Jesus throughout each day?
- Have you considered the Rosary as a tool designed to help you remain in the life of Christ from day to day? How does this impact your desire to pray the Rosary?

## Chapter 2

### From Wedding to War

I know! What a terrible way to lead off a book about marriage, but there's a question that needs asking: Are you ready for war?

No, I am not talking about battling it out with your spouse. I am talking about uniting with your spouse to battle the evil in this world. I am talking about battling demons who feed your mind lies so that you and your spouse remain united rather than divided. I am talking about knowing when to surrender to God and knowing how to fight what you are up against. I am talking about listening to the King and laying down your life to be conformed to His.

During those blissful days following an engagement, most couples are so focused on a wedding. Think of how many thousands of dollars go into the first day of your wedded life. Maybe even tens of thousands of dollars! Yet when people think about investing in something like couples therapy or couples retreats, the cost feels so high: *It's so expensive! We can figure it out.*

Clearly, we are generally an over-confident people, unaware of our woundedness, pride, and misplaced expectations. If anyone had told me when I was engaged, "make sure you set aside some money for therapy," I am pretty sure I would've had a nice eye-roll for them.

Joe and I did take seriously practicing our faith, praying, and surrounding ourselves with good friends, some of whom were priests: important weapons in the war on marriage. However, these weapons could not defeat anything without Joe and my cooperation. And the truth is when you are trying to show the world you have a

perfect marriage, you get really good at telling yourself that same lie even when things are breaking down a bit.

As a result, your suppressed feelings begin to manifest themselves through passive aggressive behavior, cutting off communication, seeking solace in drinking or shopping or something else, or fleeing the house to spend time on some hobby where you don't feel inadequate or on the defensive.

Satan knows this and loves that we do this. He loves that newly weds don't want anyone to know they are struggling. He loves when you are too prideful to ask for help or seek counseling right when problems surface. He loves when you struggle to communicate and desire to have the upper hand in a disagreement. He loves when you shut down and shut each other out. He loves that when your marriage is under stress, you get mad at God and start asking questions like: *do you really expect me to live like this?*

It all festers then.... the doubts, the lies, the tension, the distractions, until one day you feel so distant from your spouse, you aren't sure you love them anymore. You say things like: *we've grown apart. I don't know who you are anymore. I'm tired. I can't live like this.*

I feel like I am being too discouraging, but that is not my intention. My intention is to put you on high alert. If you are married, Satan is after you and your marriage. Marriage is designed to be a visible sign of God's love on earth, and Satan will do anything to distort that if you let him. He wants people to see mistrust when they see a marriage. He wants them to see anger and fighting. He wants them to see unhappiness. He wants them to see anything but love. He wants them to see marriage and say: *I want nothing to do with that.*

What people embarking on a marriage journey do not realize is how ill-equipped most of us are when entering marriage. Trust me...you've lived in the world too long. You've been fed images of perfect couples, homes, careers, kids, and more. You've lived through childhood parented by wounded parents who in turn wounded us. These things have an effect on your life and how you live in your marriage if you let them. I speak from experience.

I had found the guy that checked all the boxes: from personable and kind to Catholic to good looking and more. We were ready to conquer the world until suddenly we realized there were a lot of demons that needed conquering, too.

I had let my marriage get to a breaking point that I never thought I would face, let alone, have to navigate through. That's the thing, you never really picture yourself there when you are getting married. You picture the good parts—the health and good times, not the sickness and bad times. Even if you were to let the more difficult picture cross your mind, it would be eclipsed by your saintly disposition of being able to conquer whatever problems you have together. (At least that's how it was for me; I was sure I could handle it.)

But sometimes in marriage, you will find yourself apart. There are a million reasons for this distance in a relationship. I wish I could say you will never experience it, but most likely you will. It's Satan's way, increasing the distance. If you are united in Christ through the Sacrament of Marriage, it is Satan's goal to divide us from Christ and each other.

For my husband and me, the dysfunction started fairly early. We were operating more like parent and child in the day-to-day aspects of life. I set the unspoken rules, and he pushed the boundaries of

newly married life's unspoken "rules." From there, we found ourselves under scrutiny by family and friends questioning if we were happy. To which, I defiantly kicked back: *you don't know what you are talking about.*

My thoughts were somewhere along the lines of: *I was not going to fail at this; I will keep this together, and God, when are you going to give Joe a wake up call.* Joe, on the other hand, was feeling like I wouldn't talk to him about anything, that I wanted to do everything I was doing, and that I just spent most days mad and cleaning the house.

I was under the illusion I wasn't part of the issue. When we deflect instead of self-reflect, we should be on high alert because we have changed the goal to shaming each other rather than understanding each other's hearts. This tension was layered on by a number of life struggles from starting a family and buying a house to career changes. With each of these, the *you don't care-s* and the *you don't understand-s* and the *you are overreacting-s* and the *you are no fun-s* snowballed, until I felt buried in an avalanche. Literally, unsure of which way was up in my marriage and where to go from here.

Requests for counseling were met with resistance until one day, I found myself at a crossroads—*should I stay or could I go?* So many couples end up here, feeling hopeless (as the devil wants), unsure if it's possible, or even worth, continuing, and wondering how to right the ship. When you have lost your way, every person needs to pause and get with God about why they are in this marriage: to meet the world's standards of marriage and look impressive from the outside or to meet God in each other, a constant sacrificing for the benefit of one another, and get to heaven.

I thank God every day for His faithfulness and for the gift of Rosary that was placed in my life at a young age, so that when all seemed lost, those meditations guided my actions in supernatural ways. Things Jesus and Mary had been trying to teach me for years I could put into practice in my marriage: humility, charity, prudence, trust in God and so much more.

It's no surprise that many saints have called the Rosary a weapon against the devil. Over and over again:

*“The Rosary is a fortress against evil. It is a sign to Satan that you belong to Our Lady.”*

—St. Dominic

*“Love the Madonna and pray the Rosary, for her Rosary is the weapon against the evils of the world today.”*

—St. Padre Pio

*“The Rosary is a remedy for all our evils and the root of all our blessings.”*

—Pope St. Leo XIII

*“May [the Rosary] become the sword of each knight of the Immaculata, just as the Miraculous Medal is the bullet that strikes down evil!”*

—St. Maximilian Kolbe

The power of the Rosary is scripture combined with prayer which is the ultimate tool for discernment. The Rosary is like a sieve into which we can put all that we are facing: job decisions, financial success, marital conflict, marital bliss, physical suffering, good health, mental suffering. Through it, we can begin to strain out the number of other sources feeding our minds so that God's voice is clear, or at least clearer than when we allow anxiety, fear, anger, or other emotions and insecurities take over.

If I told you I was sending a highly anxious, insecure, angry soldier into battle with no weapons, you would think I was crazy, right? Well, the same is true in this life. A spiritual war is being waged over the salvation of souls. Mary has told us the final battle will be over marriage and the family.<sup>1</sup> Are you going to go into marriage and family life without any weapons?

I hope you are saying—of course, not, show me the weapons! The Eucharist cannot be matched; receiving and adoring Jesus first and foremost is a force whose power is so mind-blowing we cannot possibly perceive it. However, given that, most people reserve that power for Sundays. Scripture and prayer are the weapons for your day-to-day, hour-to-hour, minute-to-minute protection of your marriage and your family. The Rosary marries these two weapons so perfectly (see what I did there?), centered completely around the life

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Fatima visionary Sr. Lucia to Cardinal Carlo Caffarra: (in 1983 or 1984): "Father, a time will come when the decisive battle between the kingdom of Christ and Satan will be over marriage and the family. And those who will work for the good of the family will experience persecution and tribulation. But do not be afraid, because Our Lady has already crushed his head."

of Christ, praying the *Our Father* and *Glory Be* and asking, or begging, for His mother's prayers in the *Hail Mary*.

Jesus grew in Mary's womb. He involved her in a very intentional way from the start of His humanity to the start of His Church. It's all in scripture. She is there for a reason—at the Incarnation, Birth, First Miracle, Crucifixion, and Pentecost as well as other times scattered throughout. She is not there for Him, but for us. Jesus shows us that at His most pivotal moments He chose to have her in His story so that we might realize what she could be worth in our story with Him. With her prayers, she supports His work in us.

Just like she was His frontline of protection, fleeing from Herod to Egypt. She can be our frontline of protection for our marriage and families. She will be protecting His life in our life. The Rosary is a sure fire way of including her in the battle.

***Lord, You have designed marriage to be a reflection of Your love on this earth. Help us to ready ourselves and to root ourselves in Your life and Your love through scripture and prayer so that the enemy is always defeated. May we have recourse to Your mother who wishes nothing more than for us to be united to You. Amen.***

### **Open Your Heart**

- Have you ever thought of entering marriage as entering a spiritual war? How does this make you feel about getting married or marriage?

- Knowing a spiritual war is being waged against marriage and the family, how are you prepared for battle? How could you better prepare?
- Have you considered engaging Jesus' mother, Mary, to help you face challenges in married or family life? Why or why not?
- How have you witnessed the Rosary as a means of protection for your marriage or family?

## Chapter 3

### Discernment Doesn't End With I Do

Once you've found your spouse, spent a blissful Mass or ceremony committing yourself to marriage, followed by a celebratory event like a reception and possibly a honeymoon, real life comes hard and fast. There is a real thing called post-wedding blues, and I am not even referring to that. I am talking about everything else. The build up to a wedding tends to feel big, exciting, and then life afterwards is quiet.

An engagement is different from a marriage. During an engagement, you are still just one person being one person. Your focus is the wedding: *I am engaged, and I will be engaged until I get married at my wedding.* Seems pretty straightforward, right?

Then comes marriage. Your focus is.... what? A house? Kids? Let me help you... At this stage, your focus is heaven. If you think a house or kids is the goal, then you will struggle, much like I did when things don't go as smoothly as you envisioned for your marriage. God guarantees us nothing but grace in marriage. Let me repeat that—the sacrament of marriage is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace. (Thank you, second grade religion class at St. Joe's.)

Grace is what we are guaranteed. And why do we need grace? Well, clearly to help us in the spiritual warfare against marriage. Additionally, you need grace because as two lives now joined as one, you will begin to see a lot of your human flaws come to light.

If you are married, you know this. We are flawed people, and two flawed people do not create a whole. What they do create is the opportunity to help each other grow and advance in a way that is oriented toward heaven. After marriage, the two become one, bound by God. He fills in the gaps as long as the two are working as one, rooted in Him.

Marriage is a place where you will be invited again and again to listen, love, and live for God and others. The “But what about me and what I want” will come up again and again. It’s our nature—that fruit on the tree—doesn’t it look good? Don’t you want to try it?<sup>1</sup> We start to doubt the goodness of God and look for ways to take control ourselves.

The problem is that this method is usually looking for immediate satisfaction: I got my way. It leads with a shove rather than love. You have to love your spouse enough to hear their opinion, weigh it against yours, and work through the solution together. A relationship should never be one-sided, every decision being made solely by one party.

In the early years of marriage, without serious intention, this important courtesy for your spouse can be overlooked simply because you are used to making your decisions on your own. However, if you are practiced in consulting with God on decisions, otherwise known as discernment, you will find you have a much easier transition to consulting your spouse as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3.

*“If one deprives this love of the depth of self-giving, of the thoroughness of personal commitment, then whatever is left will be its complete denial and contradiction. Ultimately, at the end of this path lies what is called prostitution.”*<sup>2</sup>

—St. John Paul II (Karol Wojtyla)

Let's say that another way. Take away God from the fullness of self-surrender...and what remains is Satan. Yes, Satan will gladly invite himself into your marriage. Satan wants you to approach every decision, every disagreement, everything without God, without love. It is the fast track to fighting, resentment, envy, and all kinds of sins that can rear their ugly heads if permitted.

“Genuine love must be powerless in a certain sense before the one loved.”<sup>3</sup>

Satan is about power. If your marriage becomes a place of “who has the upper hand” in the latest argument, you are going to find yourself lonely, growing apart and lost. I fell into this early in marriage because I perceived myself as the person doing all the right things, and Joe wasn't quite measuring up to all I did.

The problem here is I was positioning myself over Joe. I wasn't seeking God's will. I was trying to perform and shove it in my husband's face. My heart was growing hard, and I could not see that I

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<sup>2</sup> Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. by Grzegorz Ignatik (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2013), 111.

<sup>3</sup> Fr. Donald Haggerty, *Spiritual Insights Into an Essential Encounter with God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), p. 82.

was doing anything but inviting Joe to join me in the responsibilities of our marriage. I was, rather, shaming him.

We know from Jesus's example what choosing to make yourself powerless for the greater good can mean. It can mean death, but it also means resurrection. Jesus was always about the Father's will. He never did anything without the Father.

We need to believe and do the same in our marriages. But how?

For me, I can look back now and say the Rosary helped me learn. The Rosary reached beyond the selfish cries of "it's not fair" to be able to think clearly in really hard situations, to surrender to God the many burdens I had been carrying, and to let Him work as only He could work.

The Rosary is constant with its insights into how we are called to live. These lessons combined with prayers allow God to divinely open our hearts to His will. He knows better than we do. When you find yourself reaching a dead end, call on Him. Call on His mother. Pick up the Rosary. Invite the Holy Spirit to help you take the best action in love.

### **The Catechism of the Catholic Church 971 states**

*"All generations will call me blessed":* "The Church's devotion to the Blessed Virgin is intrinsic to Christian worship." The Church rightly honors the Blessed Virgin with special devotion. From the most ancient times the Blessed Virgin has been honored with the title of 'Mother of God,' to whose protection the faithful fly in all their dangers and needs...This very special devotion...differs essentially from the adoration

which is given to the incarnate Word and equally to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and greatly fosters this adoration.” The liturgical feasts dedicated to the Mother of God and Marian prayer, such as the Rosary, an “epitome of the whole Gospel,” express this devotion to the Virgin Mary.<sup>4</sup>

Whether you know it or not, Mary is helping you in your dangers and your needs because it is God’s will. She is with us to magnify God, to draw attention to His will for our lives. When we approach life full of self-reliance, control, pride, or trying to earn love, it is a huge danger to our souls and to our marriages and to many of the relationships in our lives.

When you allow the devil to sow all kinds of brokenness and discord, the more isolated you will become, and the more isolated you become, the more you will feel the need to flex your “in-control-and-on-top-of-everything” muscle, working harder if the love isn’t coming as expected. I know from experience; I had myself convinced I could “do it all” in those early years of marriage. I didn’t need Joe to help. I could rely on myself, and he would have to be grateful to me. Not exactly a great plan for marriage.

But Mary...my heavenly mother, was there constantly asking God’s mercy for me, praying for my eyes to be opened, as I was praying for my husband to be changed, praying for my marriage to be changed. I was doing all this under the context of the Rosary which the Catechism says is an “epitome of the whole Gospel”!<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church.

<sup>5</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Fr. Jacques Philippe writes, “If at bottom our dream of perfection is to be able to manage without God, we are no longer on the path of the Gospel.”<sup>6</sup> So, there I was, a heart full of pride, but continuing to pray this devotion that I had no idea was slowly softening my heart and bringing things to a head. I was veering off the path of the Gospel, but Mary and the Rosary wouldn’t let me go far.

You see, Mary trusts God fully. She trusts He can work all things for good, and as my mother she knew that He was going to have to shake my world in order to wake me up from the illusion that I could be in a marriage without my husband’s help, without God’s help.

I did not realize at the time what I was praying for. I thought I was praying for Joe to change. I was praying for my idea of what the perfect solution would look like. This unrealistic expectation that I knew best was offset by the prayers of the Rosary. The Creed, Our Father, Hail Mary, the Glory Be, the Hail Holy Queen were exactly the prayers I needed to cling to God’s promises, surrender my will, recognize my dignity, and praise God. This devotion would help me recognize my poverty and my need for the intercession of Mary and God’s saving grace.

I could never have dreamed up the path where God would lead us. If you told me at this stage of our story that I would be living in Tennessee with four kids, having left my development career behind, I would think you were delusional. Yet, here I am. (More on these teasers later.)

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Philippe, *The Way of Trust and Love: A Retreat Guided by St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (Strongsville, OH: Scepter Publishing, 2012), p. 40.

*Lord, help me to recognize that there are seeds you are planting in my life right now that will bloom into something beyond my greatest imaginings. Help me to listen to Your call and discern Your will so that I cooperate with your perfect designs. Amen.*

### **Open Your Heart**

- When you think of leading with love in your marriage and your life, what does that look like? Does it look different when you are mad?
- How did you feel when I replaced St. John Paul II's quote with God and Satan terminology? How does this make you more alert in your behavior with others?
- Do you believe devotion to Mary can deepen your adoration of the Trinity? Why or why not?
- Have you struggled with the vice of control? How might God be calling you to rely more deeply on Him and trust in His plans for your life?



## Chapter 4

### Every Season Has a Reason

The Rosary is Mary’s way of fostering Jesus’ life coming alive in ours. Originally, St. Dominic was told to preach the Gospels and in between moments of preaching to pray the Marian psalter which was 150 Hail Marys, a little different from the Rosary in its current form today. We have added some prayers since then. I imagine that the moment we begin the Hail Marys after reading scripture related to the mysteries of Christ, Mary is praying for us to say: “May it done to me according to thy word<sup>1</sup>” like she once did.

She knows God designed the Rosary to bring out the best in us, to call us to the Authentic Life, His Life. He chose the mysteries and its prayers. As I began to correlate the experiences in my life with the mysteries of Christ’s life, I could see how good God was to me in the highs and lows, even in the sorrow there was beauty in the pain. I could see Mary’s influence, where her intercession was helping me open my heart bit by bit to what God designed for me.

Because the Rosary meditates upon the Living Word,<sup>2</sup> I realized that God would speak to me in new ways each time I prayed the Rosary—the fruits of meditating on these mysteries are never ending. God intended for me to use this prayer to learn from scripture what a full life contains—moments of joy, moments of sorrow, moments

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:38.

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 4:12.

of glory, and moments of enlightenment and mission—to find Him at every point in my life and to ultimately conform my life to His.

The funny thing is I must've been a really special case because Mary was ever present in my life from birth to today. From being born on the Feast of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal to being baptized on the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. It seemed I was predestined for a life where the Blessed Mother was going to need to be on the frontline for me.

From losing a brother at a young age to taking on more responsibility than a child should to rebellion and up to today, Mary has walked with me. The Marian ties and themes that occurred in my life, especially my youth without much effort on my part are too numerous to name. Jesus knew I would be an easy mark for Satan if I didn't have Mary whisking me off to whatever safe place God told her to take me to.

My first date (a blind date) with my husband was in October, the month of the Rosary. The timing was just another nod to me needing all the help I could get. And, no, that is not a knock on Joe; it is simply the truth. We were two people with very similar upbringings that resulted in very different baggage we would bring into our marriage—baggage that would not bode well in the early seasons of marriage.

Yet, the Rosary was always there. A daily part of my prayers, forming me as I entered those early years, showing me how to walk forward even through pain, and bringing me to glory and mission in ways I could have never imagined.

Sometimes, I could recognize the seasons for what they were in the moment, joyful, sorrowful, glorious, light, but some of the seasons took time to understand. If you are in one of those seasons where you are desperate for control, I have been there. And I can assure you and say with the greatest confidence our Lord and our Lady are there with you now.

Today, I can look back and see how these seasons were collectively forming me and, in some ways, letting me die, in order to grow again. I can see the easy and the hard moments; I can see the barren and the fruitful. I can see the real and the fake. God makes sure every season has a reason and that is echoed in both the liturgical seasons throughout the year as well as in the Rosary.

The Joyful Mysteries align with the waiting of Advent and Christmas season—Mary pregnant with Jesus, His birth, and the early years of Jesus' life. We dip shortly into Ordinary Time where we get the first Luminous Mystery of Jesus' Baptism. We start to see the early growth of Jesus' ministry on earth, his creating the circle of the apostles. But wait, then we move into Lent, the Sorrowful Mysteries. We experience the desert, times of fasting, of need; we read about Jesus' suffering and death.

Next comes the triumph of Easter, the Glorious Mysteries, the Resurrection, the descent of the Holy Spirit. In these times, we understand suffering through a different lens. We receive courage; we see our heavenly mother crowned as Queen. This rolls us back into Ordinary Time, the time of growth, the Luminous Mysteries: the enlightenment of key components of Jesus' public ministry and how it impacted the world. I really wish they would change Ordinary Time to Extraordinary Time, but I guess every season is extraordinary.

These liturgical seasons and mysteries of the Rosary do not exist by accident and are not cycled through over and over without reason. They are an echo of our lives and life all around us. They are teaching us—things are always changing, the changes are happening for a reason, the reasons shape the future, and the future is in God’s hands. We must trust what He is doing in every season, because even if we might miss it at the moment, He has a reason. He loves you, and He wants you to experience the fullness of His love in every season.

***Lord, thank you for the variety of seasons you have placed around us to experience Your goodness and beauty. Help us recognize that every season of our personal lives is designed to draw us closer to you. May we always look for you in every season of our life. Amen.***

### **Open Your Heart**

- Think about key seasons of your life. Where can you identify the joyful, sorrowful, glorious, and luminous cycles throughout your life?
- How significant is it that the Rosary’s mysteries are an echo of the liturgical year? Where else in our lives do we see echoes of these cycles?
- Think about the significance of praying the cycle of mysteries in a given week throughout a given liturgical season. Do you see how even in our Lent, Advent, Easter, and Ordinary seasons we might experience joy, suffering, glory, and light or enlightenment?

## Chapter 5

### Expect Victory

Mary was important to me most, if not all, of my life. God had impressed that on my heart. I really can't explain the bond I had with her. The Holy Spirit would not let that fade from my soul. She was there all through my elementary school experience. She was there at the Marianist Center as I started developing my own personal relationship with Jesus. Apparitions had always fascinated me, and thanks to a work trip to Mexico City, I was able to visit the tilma in Guadalupe, a very moving moment for me.

I wasn't sure what to expect when I went to the shrine. There are these moving walkways, maybe four of them, where you have to ride back and forth so that a crowd cannot gather and simply stand in front of the image all day. I rode those walkways back and forth; I was unsure of how many times I passed the image, but I was moved to tears. God and Mary were so present to me in that place. I could feel her words to Juan Diego in my depths.

***“Am I not here, I, who am your mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not the source of your joy? Are you not in the hollow of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms? Do you need anything more?”***

***—Our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego***

Mary has always been there for me: a model, covering me with her mantle, clutching me to her heart, the Mother of mothers.

Jesus is the mold, and Mary is the model of how to allow yourself to fit the mold of Jesus. She is the person we can look at to be perfectly formed to Jesus. Pope John Paul II wrote in his Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*: “The contemplation of Christ has an incomparable model in Mary...No one has ever devoted himself to the contemplation of the face of Christ as faithfully as Mary...Thereafter Mary’s gaze, ever filled with adoration and wonder would never leave Him.”<sup>1</sup> She can show us the virtues needed to live like Him.

She can show us the courage to withstand the sorrows that come, the openness to experience the joy, the humility to experience the glory and the quietness to experience the light. When we pray the Hail Mary as a part of the Rosary, we are asking for her prayers. When Jesus hears her prayer, I assure you He is hearing something like. “They have no wine.”<sup>2</sup> And then she is saying to us: “Do whatever He tells you.”<sup>3</sup> The power of the Rosary! She is telling Him what she sees we need. We might not even know our needs, but she goes to Him and draws His attention to our need and her desire to help us. She always leaves it in His hands.

Still not a believer that the Rosary directs us to the Divine Will? Enter St. Dominic...

In 1208, St. Dominic found himself in the throes of opposition to the Church from a heretical group called the Albigensians who

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<sup>1</sup> *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, 10

<sup>2</sup> John 2:3

<sup>3</sup> John 2:5

vehemently opposed the idea that God had become man in order to redeem us.<sup>4</sup> St. Dominic was preaching against the Albigensians but not making progress. He was desperate: fasting, praying, and making penitential acts until Our Lady answered. She appeared to him and told him to **preach** her Psalter. St. Dominic intertwined the Gospel with the Marian Psalter (150 Hail Marys).

Dominic's preaching became—"here is the mold for your life: Jesus, going through the Gospels," but while he went through Jesus' life, he prayed the Hail Mary. He called upon her to be present, greeting her, as he preached these Gospels, almost like he was calling upon Mary to give birth to Jesus once again, but this time in the hearts of heretics. This powerful combination led to the conversion of hearts. The added grace of prayer opened hearts to what they had previously been unable to receive. St. Dominic became a prolific preacher, proclaiming mysteries of the life of Christ intertwined with 150 Hail Marys. A spiritual weapon is born!

The transition of the name Rosary from Psalter is not entirely clear, but generally the agreed idea from its origins is that in saying the Ave Maria, a person was offering a rose to Mary, hence the Marian Psalter became a bouquet of roses or a Rosary for the Blessed Virgin Mary. This name transition happened during the lifetime of St. Dominic but was solidified in the year 1422.<sup>5</sup>

One of the items I bought in Guadalupe was a Rosary that smelled like roses and inside the cross was a little viewfinder through

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<sup>4</sup> Fr. Donald Calloway, MIC, *26 Champions of the Rosary: The Essential Guide to the Greatest Heroes of the Rosary* (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press, 2017), p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.41.

which could be seen the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. It was a reminder of how united she was to Jesus' cross and how she was constantly placing herself in His hands. She always presented these little nuggets to form me and to show me it is ok to allow yourself to be molded. She was saying: *Don't be the unpliable material that won't fit in the mold. Look at me, Nicole; see what He can do!*

While I was paying attention and truly moved during my visit to Guadalupe, I still did not fully understand where I was stuck and unyielding to God. It would take crosses, joy, and glory in my life before I could begin to understand, but it's important to recognize the early work being done by Jesus and Mary even when you don't realize you need it.

St. Jane de Chantal reminds us Jesus and Mary will not abandon us: "Have confidence, dear, and journey on as peaceably as possible, under the protection of the Son of God our Lord and of His holy Mother. You may be sure that they will never abandon you even though you are frail and your progress is not as great and steady as you would like it to be, nor as your ambition would require. They see only your good will, which will bring forth fruit in due time and place."<sup>6</sup>

Mary is a mother, and if you are a mother you know that you work tirelessly for your children. She labors tirelessly for Jesus and as a result for us. She will teach you the strength of trust, how to thread humility into all you do, and the glory that comes from God. Once you taste what He offers, you will find yourself open to true

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<sup>6</sup> Francis de Sales, *Jane de Chantal: Letter of Spiritual Direction to Madame du Tertre*, trans. by Peronne Marie Thibert (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 223.

discernment and letting God lead you instead of trying to find the way yourself.

You might be thinking that this is all good and fine, but how do you know it was the Rosary that was the “difference maker”? The Rosary has an immense history of victory over evil; there are many examples where a heresy is on the cusp of rising up and the Rosary has been a key component in its defeat. This was a heresy in a way—me full of fear, getting ready to approach my marriage in an upside down way.

It's not hard to know that Mary would do the same for a marriage that she would do for any world or Church conflict that would mess with God's good designs.

The Rosary is a powerful defense when you take two very inexperienced people and place them together to do battle with secular culture, with a world that tells you it's easier to leave than to grow together, and with the devil who desires nothing more than to see the living example of God's love on earth diminished to an outdated practice. St. John Chrysostom tells us, “The love of husband and wife is the force that welds society together.”<sup>7</sup>

We have heard from Fatima that the final battle will be about marriage and the family. In a radio interview, Cardinal Carlo Caffarra quoted Sister Lucia's words from a letter she wrote: “The final battle between the Lord and the kingdom of Satan will be about marriage and family... nevertheless, Our Lady has already crushed his

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<sup>7</sup> St John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, trans. by Catherine P. Roth and David Anderson (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986).

head.”<sup>8</sup> There is no greater service we can do to our marriages than to be faithful to praying the Rosary. We will be uniting our lives to Christ’s life and be aided by the prayers of His mother. How can the devil not flee when we pray the Rosary?

Two Marian feasts that are providentially interchangeable: Our Lady of Victory and Our Lady of the Rosary resulted from a victory over Muslims looking to conquer Rome and a call by the Pope to pray the Rosary. Could these two words be interchangeable as well: Rosary and victory? This linking together of the Rosary and victory, especially as it relates to heretics, makes me wonder what the faithful believe about the Rosary. If this is what we are seeing time and time again, victory with praying the Rosary, why aren’t we collectively, as the universal Church, praying the Rosary more intentionally?

St. Maximilian Kolbe reminds us: “The humble prayer to the Immaculata, the Holy Rosary, together with heartfelt prayers, will indicate when and how to act, because in these moments, it is she who directs, in those moments it is she who erases any difficulty. Who would want to refrain from such a sweet effort?”<sup>9</sup>

St. Pope John Paul II definitely felt praying the Rosary was a priority and drew much attention to the newly added Luminous mysteries and the recommendation to fervently pray the Rosary when he declared October 7, 2002-October 7, 2003, the year of the Rosary. It is also worth noting that this declaration and these mysteries came one year after 9/11/2001 when terrorists attacked the U.S. World Trade Center and Pentagon, and ISIS was gaining traction in the

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<sup>8</sup> Radio interview with Cardinal Caffarra following Mass at the tomb of St. Padre Pio, February 16, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> KW 1117.

Middle East, violently attacking Christians and anyone else who opposed them.

St. Pope John Paul II felt mysteries of Christ's public life would breathe new life into the Rosary devotion. Mysteries, bridging the gap from Christ's childhood to Christ's passion, echoing our liturgical calendar as well. Where the Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious mysteries really draw out those significant liturgical seasons of Advent, Lent and Easter, the Luminous mysteries remind us of Ordinary Time when we are focused on Christ's public ministry, a time he used to prepare and equip his apostles and disciples for when they would need to go out into the world and proclaim the Good News. These mysteries feel a bit like that, a flashlight for the darkness surrounding us. I feel that's why they came last. After experiencing the joy, sorrow and resurrection of Jesus, we are ready to carry out the light of Christ into the world.

Even today, some 20 plus years later, we continue to see violence towards Christians in the Middle East and other parts of the world as well as a spreading opposition and hostility towards Christian values and beliefs. In society, we are seeing a variety of heresies against the Catholic Church, some new and some old. We need the Rosary. I need the Rosary. You need the Rosary. The world needs us to pray the Rosary. God has shown us time and time again its power to defeat the most aggressive of enemies. I definitely want that kind of protection in my personal life. I am grateful for it.

Padre Pio assures of the victory: “Love our Lady, make others love her. Always say your Rosary and say it well. Satan wants to destroy this prayer, but in this he will never succeed. It is the prayer of her who triumphs over everything and everyone.”<sup>10</sup>

***Lord, You are the Victor! You conquer all. Help me use the devotion of the Rosary to harness Your infinite power alongside the intercession of Your Mother, so that I might achieve the ultimate victory, heaven itself. Let me long for nothing more than being united with You in heaven. Amen.***

### **Open Your Heart**

- When you pray the Rosary, are you praying for the victory of the Church, for Christ’s victory? In what ways have the stories of victories over heretics changed how you think about the devotion of the Rosary?
- Have you ever connected the Luminous mysteries following the great darkness of terrorism in the United States and other places in the world? Knowing this connection, consider God’s design in inspiring St. John Paul II to add these mysteries as part of the Rosary devotion.
- Where are you feeling called to pray for a victory? Possibly a personal victory over pride, self-reliance, self-protection,

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<sup>10</sup> *From the Voice of Padre Pio*, Most Rev. Paola Carta, Bishop Emeritus of Foggia, July 1997, Friary of Our Lady of Grace, 71013 San Giovanni Rotondo, (FG), Italy.

despair? Possibly victory for a family member over addiction, self-harm, abuse? Possibly a public victory over racism and discrimination, disunity in the Church, an end to abortion? Where is God calling you to get intentional with this devotion?

- Where has scripture, prayer and/or the Rosary worked a victory as a line of offense or defense in your life?



## **Part II**

### **Total Confidence**



## The Joyful Mysteries

In the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary, we find ourselves in the early years of Christ's life. The childhood years of life are considered the most formative years. We might even consider that God calls these Joyful (even though several are also considered Sorrows of Mary) because he relishes our own formation. In imitating these mysteries, we might consider the more formative places in our faith journey, and the joy those instances brought to God.

I will still never forget the point at the end of his masterpiece, *Orthodoxy*, G.K. Chesterton mentions how we see Jesus experience a range of human emotion, but the one that isn't written out in the Bible is Jesus laughing. Chesterton suggests that in the moments Jesus goes off to pray with the Father that he likes to think it was in those moments that Jesus did experience mirth. I love that image. Picturing Jesus chuckling over creation and the humans he had been with that day, delighting in them.

It made me think of how God must have tenderly chuckled over those early years of me stumbling and tripping my way through early career and early marriage. I love that I can picture even in my missteps that God was delighting in me. That is the beauty of the journey. God places things and situations in our lives, and He makes sure they will develop into something that will form us into who He created us to be, even tragic circumstances that He wouldn't want for us, even the bad decisions we make.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:28.

In my early marriage, it was all about making our marriage look good to everyone else since I thought Joe really wasn't ready to be married, an assumption that came after our "I dos" and one I never chose to discuss with him for fear it was really true. You will see a strong contrast in how I handled those early years of my married life and how Mary handled those early years of her vocation, becoming a wife to St. Joseph and the Mother of God.

In my early career, it was all about "*act like you know what you are doing even though you are filled with self-doubt and fear of making a mistake.*" I lacked confidence but was hard at work making sure I looked confident. I threw myself into my work because it was a place I had a decent amount of control. My inner-perfectionist fed me the lie that to be more perfect, I had to work more.

Oh, what I wished I learned earlier, but thankfully God was always working to bring me to a place where I wasn't just dressing the part of devoted, devout Catholic wife, but instead was actually totally confident in God and where He placed me and what He was working in my life.

If you are in that place where I once was, trying to make everyone believe all is perfect and fine when inside you are scared, lonely, and lost, these mysteries will show you how to lean into Him in all the things—in the big news, in the needs of others, in the unexpected situations, and all the unplanned that comes with life.

***Lord, as we reflect on your Incarnation, Birth and early years, help us remember that we are all called to be childlike in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Help us live with childlike joy until we enter the Kingdom of Glory. Amen.***

## Chapter 6

### Made Just For You

#### The First Joyful Mystery: The Annunciation

My husband, Joe, and I had an interesting start. Our first date was arranged, a blind date! I had just ended a four-and-a-half-year, on-and-off again relationship and was looking to leave that far behind me.

A friend of my mom's, Kathleen, had asked me to sit in on recording some meditation CDs with her. During the course of these recordings, she told me she had this great guy who had been a friend of her sons. I, perhaps, impulsively, gave her my phone number to share. Anything to ensure that I left no open door to my previous relationship.

Why is this seemingly normal "set-up" so unique? The reason was two deaths occurred in order for that moment to happen as it did. My younger brother, JP, died in 1985 at the age of 2 when I was six years old. 14 years later, in 1999, Kathleen's son, Aaron, Joe's good friend, would be murdered. Joe was just short of his 22nd birthday. Two losses years apart.

Then, at a conference on losing children, my mom would hear Kathleen share her story and speak about navigating grief. Because Kathleen was local to Philadelphia, a friendship ensued and led to my mom letting me know that Kathleen needed some help, and since I was living nearby Kathleen in the city, could I spare a few hours to help with some meditation CDs she was producing?

Because I said yes, in 2003, Kathleen would ask for my number at “her son, Aaron’s, prompting” and tell me about a great guy she knew I would hit it off with. Joe would call me three weeks later, and we had our first date, a blind date.

We started spending a lot of time together after our first date—nearly every day post-work unless I was traveling. If you heard his best man tell it, Joe said he was going to marry me after that first date. I know...swoon! The funny part is my prayer at the time had been something to the effect of “help me close this door on my previous dysfunctional relationship.”

But God had other plans. Bigger plans. Most people we knew agreed that we felt arranged by something bigger than Kathleen.

I wish I could say this was intentional trust, that I was examining all our relationship through the lens of prayer; instead, it was my youth. *Let life happen*. I had prayed to move on, and this guy must be the answered prayer, I thought. It felt like an Annunciation of sorts. I couldn’t ignore all the alignment we had in our lives.

Our whole first date had been a repetition of “You, too?” and “Wow, me, too!” All I could see was “easy” in the future with Joe. We had fun together. We liked the same music. We went to the same Church. We liked to go out to eat, go dancing, and go out for drinks.

Blessed Solanus Casey once counseled: “Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be a miracle. Every day you shall

wonder at yourself, at the richness of life that has come to you by the grace of God.”<sup>1</sup>

But we weren't thinking that far ahead, nor were we praying for our future. We were taking the easy as it came and taking for granted how easy and carefree those years of dating were. God was good because we felt good, not because we were in awe of how he was working in our lives, not because we were discerning is this the relationship God is asking me to bind with Him.

I didn't examine the relationship with the lens of prayerful discernment. I let my good feelings drive the decisions. I felt God would give me bad feelings if it wasn't meant to be. I never thought to ask God, why was this guy introduced to my life at this time or how can this be that the Lord would give me such an incredible relationship after a really hard one. Where Joe and I seemed to be headed was less a question of discernment and more an expectation of the natural progression of things.

I wasn't intentionally saying yes to God's will as Joe and I got more serious; I can look back and say that the progress in our relationship was more a function of our own wills. Joe was the kind of guy I had pictured getting married to. I was the kind of girl he could marry (and bring home to his parents). We didn't ask: *why this guy or why this girl or why us together, Lord? What are your plans here, Lord?*

Mary was different when the Angel Gabriel greeted her with great respect. She teaches us something about when a new revelation comes from God whether a vocation or a relationship, no matter

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by a witness in the cause of canonization and referenced on [solanuscasy.org](http://solanuscasy.org) cause for canonization website.

how special it might be, no matter how easy it might seem to accept, that it is worth asking God some questions, and it is worth being intentional about your yes, about treating something as a gift from God and giving it that kind of serious attention and discernment that it deserves.

The Annunciation presents Mary being “troubled at what was said” in the Archangel Gabriel’s greeting of her and pondering what it might mean. She receives this greeting “favored one,” “full of grace,” “The Lord is with you” with humility.<sup>2</sup>

She is wondering what sort of greeting this might be. She hears *the Lord is with you* and is maybe thinking “but why is He with me or how is He with me or why do you feel you need to tell me the Lord is with me.” She is not pondering how the greeting is an affirmation to her but is trying to peel back and see the deeper meaning of the affirmation spoken to her and what it means to her life.

*“All our perfection consists precisely in the practical applications of this principle: Lord, what do you want me to do?”<sup>3</sup>*

—St. Francis de Sales

I wish I had been peeling back those layers in my relationship with Joe and also in my career. I had gotten to a place in my life where I was letting ease, affirmations by others, and good opportunities steer me this way or that without asking God, *what does this mean for my life? What are you inviting me to, Lord?* I was letting life

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:28.

<sup>3</sup> St. Francis de Sales, *Spiritual Treatises* XXI, O. VI, pp. 383-384.

happen to me because it felt easy. It also felt responsible. I continued taking jobs with more responsibility, moving up in the world, working more hours, making more money.

St. Ignatius of Loyola underscores the value of bringing God into our life decisions and talking with Him about His will for our lives: *“Few souls understand what God would accomplish if they were to abandon themselves unreservedly to Him and if they were to allow His grace to mold them accordingly.”*<sup>4</sup>

It took time learning that Mary at the Annunciation was teaching prayerful discernment is important when responding to God’s invitations in our life with abandon. This intentional discernment allowed her to abandon herself to God. She received her commission from God through Archangel Gabriel. She considered it carefully, his words, their meaning, how it might not make sense to human minds (conceiving without being with a man).

After her questions, she received clarification on what it all means from God through St. Gabriel. After this clear answer from God, she said yes to His will. Now when I say a clear answer, I do not mean she fully understood every detail, but instead understood that this is His will for her life and that He invited her to an unmatched fullness of life if she did His will. She understood that God would accomplish wonders if she submitted to His will because she knew the promises about the Messiah from the Old Testament prophets.

She did not say yes because it was the easy thing to do. She said yes because she knew it was what she was meant to do. Being the

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<sup>4</sup> St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola*.

Mother of the Messiah was who she was designed to be. Her Immaculate Conception was an intentional design of God so that she could fulfill this role. She knew that through prayer and conversation with God through the Archangel Gabriel. The Annunciation might appear like an easy discernment task—of course you would say yes to an Angel telling you what you were needed for, but this was no small favor God was asking. It was a huge task, a heavy task, in many ways a hidden task, and Mary in her humility said yes. I am so glad she did.

With her yes, her fiat, the power of the Holy Spirit overshadowed her to form Jesus in her womb, but also to strengthen her in her vocation. While I had not been inviting the Holy Spirit into my life and decision in a very deep way, I was still deferring my relationship with Joe to a movement of God's hand. I wish I had been discerning where God was calling me on a regular basis in my young adult years and am very grateful to God for grace received in Sacraments during that time.

It's amazing how God can work through what little we have to give. My bare minimum effort of getting to Sunday Mass, going to Confession occasionally, and a retreat here and there kept me open to God's Spirit. I also had my Rosary which always reminded me that there were invitations from God, and it was up to me to be listening and responding.

In my 20s, discernment simply wasn't part of my language. I understood that I needed to say yes to God, but I didn't have a thoughtful method on how to achieve figuring out God's will and saying yes. Instead, I relied on what felt good to me—when I did not have fear, hurdles, anxiety, etc., it must be God's will.

However, St. Francis de Sales reminds us, “You will find no vocation, no state in life, where there are no bitter experiences, no annoyances, no hard times. Everyone, except those fully resigned to the will of God, would like to change places with someone else... whoever does not resign himself completely to the will of God will turn here and turn there, but he will never find peace.”<sup>5</sup>

When I had a good feeling, I more or less asked for His blessing over the decision I was making. If I had a bad feeling, I asked for Him to open doors for a change in my life because I wanted one, which is very different from discernment. This is not seeking God’s will. It’s seeking the easy road which can be a trap to seek your own will.

I was saying, “Here is what I want, God, give me a little support here.” I wasn’t leaving room for Him to show me anything. I wasn’t really looking for the answers for who He designed me to be or the path He intended for me, and therefore, did not have peace.

However, as I recited the daily rosary and my desire for a deeper relationship with Jesus grew, I began to think more deeply about each mystery. It began to stir in me questions and thoughts, helping me realize there was more to life than I had been cultivating.

Through many, many rosaries and much time on scripture, God would bring me around to realize He designed me for something unique that only I can do. I realized I was more likely to achieve fulfilling my uniquely designed role in conversation with Him, in listening to Him in scripture and in prayer and in receiving the sacraments. The Holy Spirit strengthened my vocation through the sacraments and both of which strengthened God’s life within me. When

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<sup>5</sup> Letters 233 O. XII p. 348-349.

I was ready to say yes to regularly and fully participating in the sacraments, I was saying yes to God, telling Him that He had my attention now.

When we imitate Mary in the Annunciation, we are saying yes to letting the Holy Spirit come upon us, letting God overshadow us, because we know He can do greater things when He is with us. Our yes to the sacraments unleashes us to be more open to discern God's will for our lives so that we might live it out not only within our Church but also in the world. My life has been different since my decisions became more about "God, will this choice help me become who You created me to be?" "What does this offer mean, God?" "Help me understand what you are trying to teach me with this choice, this trial, this no, this year..."

He wants to co-create with you just like He co-created with Mary. You will not be the mother of Jesus, but living God's will for your life will bring Jesus into this world in a way that no one else can.

***Come, Holy Spirit, help us cultivate the fruit of this mystery: humility. Lord, help us live our lives with greater humility submitting to Your Holy Will like Mary did. Amen.***

### **Open Your Heart**

- When you are faced with a big decision or life change, how do you approach it?

- Are you familiar with discernment? If yes, how has it been effective in your life path? If not, how could you incorporate this into your prayer life?
- Have you thought about the power of the sacraments in helping you make decisions? How can you be more proactive in receiving the sacraments so as to invite the Holy Spirit into your days even when you aren't facing a major decision but are simply trying to live in accordance with God's will?
- How does being called a co-creator with God change the way you look at your life? Do you believe your yes can change the world like Mary's? Why or why not?



# Chapter 7

## First Impressions

### The Second Joyful Mystery: The Visitation

I think generally amongst women, the Visitation is a relatable thing, especially when it comes to expectant or new moms. Many churches, especially moms' or women's groups, run meal trains, knitting groups and other such ministries to show love and support to new or expectant moms. If someone is on bedrest, you better believe fellow moms will be pitching in with meals and rides and whatever else needs coordinating. However, my Joyful Mystery of Visitation is a new spin on the Visitation...when I met Joe's parents.

I flew to Michigan with Joe to meet his parents and six sisters and one brother. It was daunting to say the least. I knew Joe's dad was well-known in the Catholic world, so I was already feeling intimidated by that and then six sisters felt like, well... a lot. Knowing girls aren't always the easiest to warm up, I wasn't sure what to expect during my visit.

I put on my best meet-the-in-laws game face and sat smiling, answering all of their questions in the best possible way I could answer. They affirmed the unlikely story of our meeting, how it all felt designed by God, and seemed to like me well-enough. I listened attentively and complimented the smells coming from the kitchen in preparation for dinner.

"What's for dinner?" Joe asked his mom casually.

“Chicken breast, salad, and potatoes,” his mom responded smiling.

“Is it chicken on the bone? Nicole doesn’t eat chicken on the bone.” Joe replied, warning his mom. I could feel myself dying inside, wanting to disappear instantly, wishing I had never mentioned this preference to him.

“Oh, no, really? Yes, it is on the bone. We can figure it out.” His mom said assuredly, and, I was pretty sure, bewildered over why I wouldn’t eat a chicken breast with a bone in it.

I wanted to crawl into the closest closet and hide. “It’s not a big deal. I am fine eating chicken with a bone in it.” Looking at Joe *like why did you just say that to your mother. Do you want her to hate me immediately?* Everything had been going so well.

(My aversion to chicken on the bone was related to a job down the shore where I spent a lot of time pulling chicken from the bone to make pulled chicken sandwiches. It was not a do-or-die line I drew, but generally I steered away from it. Here, I was now trying to talk my way out of looking like a weirdo.)

Of course, even though I had gone through an explanation and assured Joe’s mom that I would be fine eating a chicken breast on a bone, when I sat down for dinner, I found my chicken breast had considerably been cut from the bone, so I did not have to see it.

Have you ever had a moment where a weird little quirk of yours becomes a focal point somehow? If not, I can only tell you it’s mortifying—especially when it’s your boyfriend’s parents whom you are meeting for the first time.

For the remainder of the trip, I was on my best behavior, complimentary, smiling, agreeable, whatever it took to leave the right

impression. I wouldn't say I wasn't trying to be myself, but I was definitely trying to be the best, most polished version of myself. St. Thérèse understood my struggle when she prayed: "Dear Lord, you know my weakness. Each morning, I resolve to be humble, and in the evening I recognize that I often have been guilty of pride."<sup>1</sup>

A lot of my twenties were like this. Putting on the face, personality, and demeanor that I felt the other person was expecting. I considered them before I considered how I felt. If I felt my boss doubting my performance or capability, I stepped up for more work, worked longer hours, and said yes to anything that was asked. If I felt friends were feeling slighted by me, I would give a gift, send a card, or figure out some kind gesture. When I felt Joe was annoyed, I cooked dinner or took care of something he needed help with, anything to avoid being disappointing or having a conflict.

I did it all out of fear. Fear of being fired or overlooked, fear of being rejected or left out.

And when you meet your boyfriend's parents, fear is real. Fear they won't like you. Fear they will see things about you that they don't like and tell their son—*like how weird it is you don't eat chicken on the bone*. Fear you just don't measure up for their son.

Of course, my experience of Visitation was in strong contrast to Mary's. Mary didn't go to Elizabeth looking for affirmation or to put on some front of what the Mother of God should look like. She didn't go because she was worried Elizabeth might get mad at her because she didn't visit her. She did go in charity because she loves her. She didn't think about whether Elizabeth would accept or reject

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<sup>1</sup> Thérèse de Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Therese* XXIX VIII.

her. She was going to see her pregnant cousin to make sure she was doing well.

Ah, how different my visit would have been if I would have been less focused on what Joe's parents thought of me and more focused on knowing them and simply spending time with them! Maybe even learning more about Joe and who he was. My visit would have been much more relaxing.

Mary's charity resulted in Elizabeth affirming who Mary is—*blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb*. Mary didn't shy away from the compliment. She wasn't afraid that Elizabeth knowing this might treat her differently. She didn't say, no, Elizabeth, please don't make a big deal about it. Instead, Mary stood firm in who she is and launches into the Magnificat: My soul magnifies the Lord...never has a woman spoken with more assuredness, but at the same time, humility, acknowledging God in everything.

I took to praying the Magnificat from the Bible, and the first time I did, I was struck by how the section begins with "And Mary said:..." The Holy Spirit prompted the thought: This could read: "And Nicole said:..." I spoke those words as if they were my words. It was powerful. I invite you to open your Bible to Luke 1:46-55 and speak the Magnificat, not picturing Mary praising the Lord, but let it be your song of praise to the Lord. Proclaim your identity in Him. Let those words penetrate your heart.

If I had learned to root myself in this anthem of praise in my twenties, instead of living my life trying to project what I thought people wanted and reacting to situations out of fear, my life would've been much more God-driven and much less world-driven.

All that said, the trip to visit my now in-laws was a success and they liked me, but when you operate from a place of fear and put on a mask for people, you can never be really sure of if they liked you or if you were really good at creating some form of you that fit their mold of what you think they want.

Mary teaches us in the Visitation to remember from Whom our identity flows and in doing so how much more our identity will be confirmed by others. Through the Visitation, Mary teaches what it means to be rooted in our identity from God, and what a difference it made when an act of service is not rooted in our own need for affirmation but instead out of love for another.

When we stop trying to put on an act, trying to please people, we can love and be present. Compliments begin to feel like true confirmation of our identity from God and not empty. When you root yourself in your God-given identity instead of a world-given identity, praising God for your unique gifts and calling comes more naturally when people praise you.

Life became less about me proving myself and more about me becoming grounded in God.

The more I am rooted in these practices of Mary's from the Visitation, the less I fall into the trap of wearing social masks, doing more than what God intends for me to be doing or doing the will of others. This shift results in becoming more intentional about bringing Jesus to others, living according to God's will for my life, and living in a way that always gives Him praise.

***Come, Holy Spirit, help us cultivate the fruit of this mystery: charity. Lord, help us live our lives with greater charity loving others as You and Your Mother would. Amen.***

### **Open Your Heart**

- When do you wear persona masks and why do you think you do this? If you approach those same situations from a place of love, rather than fear of judgment, how would it change your need for a mask?
- Is it easy to receive compliments from others? Why or why not?
- Have you ever used the gift of compliments as an opportunity to praise God for your gifts whether in public or in private?
- Where have you seen a difference in your own life when you are living for God's opinion or plan versus living for others' opinions or plans? Where do you feel challenged by this?
- Develop your own Magnificat and pray your own prayer of praise to God for His goodness and unceasing mercy and love in your life.