

It is generally agreed by scholars that a system for counting repetitive prayers began with the Hindus some nine centuries before Christ. In their attempts to live in constant prayer, the early Desert Fathers would often repeat the Lord's Prayer over and over (they would also use the "Kyrie" -- "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner." and the Psalms). Prayer counters such as rocks, sticks or notches in wood were employed to ensure that the proper numbers of prayers were recited.

50 or 150 Our Father's began to be recited by the laity, many of whom could not read, to imitate the monastic Office (Breviary or Liturgy of the Hours), by which monks prayed the 150 Psalms. Sometimes a cord with counters on it was used to keep an accurate count of prayers. The strings of prayer beads were called "Paternosters" (Latin for 'Our Father') because they were principally used to count the number of Our Fathers offered. The old English name found in Chaucer and elsewhere was a "pair of beads", in which the word 'bede' originally meant prayers, and 'bidden' meant petition. As the 'Hail Mary' grew in popularity, it replaced the 150 Our Fathers. 15 Our Fathers remained to break the 150 Hail Mary's into fifteen sets of ten which are called 'decades'. This Our-Father and Hail-Mary-based prayer form became known as "Our Lady's Psalter".

The first clear historical reference to the Rosary, however, is from the life of St. Dominic (+1221), the founder of the Order of Preachers or Dominicans and friend to St. Francis. The Rosary is believed to have come from Our Lady through St. Dominic. The name of the Rosary comes from the word "rose"; she brought it to St. Francis in a vision as a wreath of roses. Tradition has it that the Blessed Mother herself asked for the practice as an antidote for heresy and sin. St. Dominic preached a form of the rosary in France at the time that the Albigensian heresy was devastating the faith there. The devotion then spread throughout Europe in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries.

One of Dominic's future disciples, Alain de Roche (d. 1475), began to establish Rosary Confraternities to promote the praying of the rosary. The form of the rosary we have today is believed to date from his time. Over the next 250 years the devotion spread across Europe, reaching the laity via voluntary confraternities and rosary picture-books. There were numerous competing versions, advocating as few as five Mysteries and as many as 200. The fifteenth century saw the Rosary begin its development into the familiar prayer form we know today. The matter was settled in 1569. In that year St. Pope Pius V, himself a Dominican, issued an apostolic letter establishing the fifteen-Mystery form of the Holy Rosary as the official, Church-authorized version. The Our Father came intact from the Gospel of Matthew. The Hail Mary developed from the scriptural greetings of Gabriel and Elizabeth to Mary in Luke's Gospel, plus a popular exhortation in use by the laity of that period. The Glory Be was used as a common doxology from the earliest of Christian times when praying the psalms. The Salve Regina, a later addition to the Rosary, states all relevant medieval themes about the Blessed Virgin Mary. Its affiliation with the Rosary came about through popular practice although its precise origin within the devotion is not known. The Apostles' Creed and the rosary pendant were also later developments, being added to the Rosary only in the early seventeenth century. In the year 2002, Pope John Paul II published an apostolic letter that added five more Mysteries, making a total of twenty authorized Mysteries – the Joyful, Sorrowful, Luminous and Glorious. Strictly speaking, the only prayers that belong to the essential nature of the Rosary are the fifteen Our Fathers and 150 Hail Mary's coupled with the vocal prayer and meditation on the 20 Gospel Mysteries. John Paul II sets forth the Rosary as a contemplative prayer form comparable to the Jesus Prayer of the East, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me."

Over the centuries the saints and popes have highly recommended the Rosary. Pope Leo XIII wrote 11 encyclicals exclusively about the rosary. Pope Paul VI, echoing the words of Pope Pius XII said, "the Rosary is the compendium of the entire Gospel".

The Rosary is a scripture based and Christ-Centered prayer. The vocal, repetitive use of the ten Hail Mary's is intended to lead us into meditative prayer focusing on the events of Christ's life.