

## THE HAIL MARY

### Introduction:

The Hail Mary, “Ave Maria” or “Angelical salutation” is the most familiar of all the prayers used by the Universal Church in honor of our Blessed Lady.

The prayer has three parts. The first, “*Hail (Mary) full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou amongst women*”, embodies the words used by the Angel Gabriel in saluting the Blessed Virgin (Lk 1:28). The second, “*and blessed is the fruit of thy womb (Jesus)*”, is borrowed from the Divinely inspired greeting of St. Elizabeth (Lk 1:42), which attaches itself the more naturally to the first part, because the words “*benedicta tu in mulieribus*” (I, 28) or “*inter mulieres*” (I, 42) are common to both salutations.

Finally, the petition “*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*” is stated by the official Catechism of the Council of Trent to have been framed by the Church itself: “*Most rightly has the Holy Church of God added to this thanksgiving, petition also and the invocation of the most holy Mother of God, thereby implying that we should piously and suppliantly have recourse to her in order that by her intercession she may reconcile God with us sinners and obtain for us the blessing we need both for this present life and for the life which has no end.*”

### The Hail Mary a salutation:

To understand the early developments of this devotion it is important to grasp the fact that those who first used this formula fully recognized that the Ave Maria was merely a form of greeting. It was therefore a long custom to accompany the words with some external gesture of homage, a genuflection, or least an inclination of the head. Of St. Aybert, in the twelfth century, it is recorded that he recited 150 Hail Marys daily, 100 with genuflections and 50 with prostrations. So Thierry tells us of St. Louis of France that “*without counting his other prayers the holy King knelt down every evening fifty times and each time he stood upright then knelt again and repeated slowly an Ave Maria.*” Kneeling at the Ave Maria was enjoined in several of the religious orders. In this way, owing to the fatigue of these repeated prostrations and genuflections, the recitation of a number of Hail Marys was often regarded as a penitential exercise, and it is recorded of certain canonized saints, e.g. the Dominican nun St. Margaret (d. 1292), daughter of the King of Hungary, that on certain days she recited the Ave a thousand times with a thousand prostrations. This concept of the Hail Mary as a form of salutation explains in some measure the practice, which is certainly older than the epoch of St. Dominic, of repeating the greeting as many as 150 times in succession. The idea is akin to that of the “*Holy, Holy, Holy*”, which we are taught to think goes up continually before the throne of the Most High.

### Development of the Hail Mary:

In the time of St. Louis the Ave Maria ended with the words of St. Elizabeth: “*benedictus fructus ventris tui*”; it has since been extended by the introduction both of the Holy Name and of a clause of petition. As regards the addition of the word “*Jesus*,” or, as it usually ran in the fifteenth century, “*Jesus Christus, Amen*”, it is commonly said that this was due to the initiative of Pope Urban IV (1261) and to the confirmation and indulgence of John XXII. A popular German religious manual of the fifteenth century (Der Selen Troist, 1474) even divides the Hail Mary into four portions, and declares that the first part was composed by the Angel Gabriel, the second by St. Elizabeth, the third, consisting only of the Sacred Name Jesus Christus, by the popes, and the last, i.e. the word Amen, by the Church.

### The Hail Mary as a prayer:

It was often made a subject of reproach against the Catholics by the Reformers that the Hail Mary which they so constantly repeated was not properly a prayer. It was a greeting which contained no petition. This objection would seem to have long been felt, and as a consequence it was not uncommon during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries for those who recited their Aves privately to add some clause at the end, after the words "*ventris tui Jesus*". Traces of this practice meet us particularly in the verse paraphrases of the Ave which date from this period. The most famous of these is that attributed, though incorrectly, to Dante, and belonging in any case to the first half of the fourteenth century. In this paraphrase the Hail Mary ends with the following words: "*Oh blessed Virgin, pray to God for us always, that He may pardon us and give us grace, so to live here below that He may reward us with paradise at our death.*"

Comparing the versions of the Ave existing in various languages, e.g. Italian, Spanish, German, Provençal, we find that there is a general tendency to conclude with an appeal for sinners and especially for help at the hour of death. Still a good deal of variety prevailed in these forms of petition. At the close of the fifteenth century there was not any officially approved conclusion, though a form closely resembling our present one was sometimes designated as *the prayer of Pope Alexander VI*, and was engraved separately on bells. But for liturgical purposes the Ave down to the year 1568 ended with "*Jesus, Amen*".

We meet the Ave as we know it now, printed in the breviary of the Camaldolese monks, and in that of the Order de Mercede c. 1514. This, the current form of Ave, probably came from Italy. What is certain is that an Ave Maria identical with our own, except for the omission of the single word *nostrae*, stands printed at the head of the little work of Savonarola's issued in 1495, of which there is a copy in the British Museum. Even earlier than this, in a French edition of the Calendar of Shepherds, which appeared in 1493, a third part is added to the Hail Mary, which is repeated in Pynson's English translation a few years later in the form: "*Holy Mary moder of God praye for us synners. Amen.*" In an illustration which appears in the same book, the pope and the whole Church are depicted kneeling before our Lady and greeting her with this third part of the Ave. The official recognition of the Ave Maria in its complete form, though foreshadowed in the words of the Catechism of the Council of Trent, as quoted at the beginning of this article, was finally given in the Roman Breviary of 1568.

One or two other points connected with the Hail Mary can only be briefly touched upon. It would seem that in the Middle Ages the Ave often became so closely connected with the Pater noster, that it was treated as a sort of insertion, before the words *et ne nos inducas in tentationem* when the Pater noster was said *secreto*. The practice of preachers interrupting their sermons near the beginning to say the Ave Maria seems to have been introduced in the Middle Ages and to be of Franciscan origin.

It may also be noticed that although modern Catholic usage is agreed in favoring the form "*the Lord is with thee*", this is a comparatively recent development. The more general custom a century ago was to say "*our Lord is with thee*"

Finally it may be noticed that in some places, and notably in Ireland, the feeling still survives that the Hail Mary is complete with the word *Jesus*. Indeed the writer is informed that within living memory it was not uncommon for an Irish peasant, when bidden to say Hail Marys for a penance, to ask whether they were required to say the Holy Marys too.

On account of its connection with the Angelus, the Ave Maria was often inscribed on bells. One such bell at Eskill in Denmark, dating from about the year 1200, bears the Ave Maria engraved upon it in runic characters.