

Do Catholics pray with “vain repetition”?

By Graham Osborne

In Matthew 6:7, Jesus himself says, “in praying do not heap up empty phrases (some Protestant translations read: ‘vain repetitions’ here) as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words.” Some contend that Catholics involve themselves in just this sort of “vain repetition”, particularly when they pray the Rosary, or similar repeated prayers. How should a Catholic respond?

“Vain”, or useless, prayer is the key here. Matthew 6:7 echoes Elijah’s showdown with prophets of Ba’al in 1 Kings 18:26-29. Elijah mocks them because he knows their hours of repeated prayers are useless – “no one answered”– because there was no one *to* answer! This was typical of the pagan worship of the day, even in Jesus’ time. The Gentiles believed that they had to repeat their prayers over and over, both to appease their gods, and for their gods to even hear and answer them at all.

Jesus’ point is that prayer to “gods” who are not gods at all is always vain. But he also has a message for our prayer life too – that the words we address to God must be addressed from the heart, not simply “empty phrases” or thoughtless prayers recited from memory, or to fulfil an obligation.

But repeated prayer, on the other hand, is certainly not bad. Quite the opposite actually! Scripture is packed with such prayers, and many of them said in the direct presence of God himself. Consider Revelation 4:8 “the four living creatures, each of them with six wings ... day and night they *never cease to sing*, “*Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!*” And whenever the living creatures sing these praises, the twenty-four elders around God’s throne in Heaven also “fall down before him ... singing, ‘Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created.’”

The Great Hallel, Psalm 136, recited at every Passover and many other solemn occasions, has a repetitive framework integral to the Psalm itself, and repeats the phrase, “for his steadfast love endures for ever”, some twenty six times!

Similarly, the great fiery furnace prayer of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3:35-65 repeats the phrase, “Bless the Lord... sing praise to him and highly exalt him for ever”, thirty one times! And God not only hears their repetitive prayer and rescues them from the flames, but converts King Nebuchadnezzar in the process!

In Luke 18:3-9, Jesus uses the parable of the persistent widow and unjust judge to teach his disciples that they “ought *always* to pray and not lose heart”. This widow “*kept coming*” to the judge, saying the same thing: “Vindicate me against my adversary” – essentially a repeated prayer. For a while the judge refused; but finally gives in: “she will wear me out by her *continual coming*.” Jesus then confirms that God will certainly answer

those “who cry to him day and night”, repeatedly asking for his help. And unlike the unjust judge, he will do it quickly!

In Mark 14:33-39 Jesus himself repeated his own prayers: “remove this chalice from me; yet not what I will, but what you will ... And again he went away and prayed, **saying the same words.**”

So Scripture clearly teaches that not only is repetitive prayer permitted and encouraged, it is answered! And repeated prayers are exactly what goes on “day and night” in God’s presence!

But let’s take a brief look at the Rosary itself, because some object to its content, as well as its repetition. It consists of the Our Father, the very prayer Jesus asked us to pray in Matthew 6:5-13 above. Next is the Glory Be: a prayer giving praise to the Trinity: “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit ...”

And finally, we have the Hail Mary, a Scriptural prayer that recites the very words of the angel and Elizabeth to Mary in Luke 1:28, 42, 43: “Hail, [Mary] full of grace... the Lord is with you! ... “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” The prayer finishes with a petition of intercession, asking Mary, the Mother of God, to “pray for us sinners”.

Now some find this last part problematic on two counts. First how can Mary be the Mother of the eternal God?

Anyone asking this question does not fully understand this Catholic Doctrine. It states that Mary is the mother of the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. She is not the source of Jesus’ divinity, any more than any mother is the source of the spiritual soul of her child. But as a mother, Mary is mother of a whole person, body and soul, not just of a human nature. If Mary is the mother of the person, Jesus, and if Jesus is God, the divine second person of the Trinity, then Mary can rightly be called the Mother of God. This does not make her divine, it simply makes her a mother.

But perhaps the clearest evidence of this title comes straight from Scripture. “Filled with the holy Spirit”, Elizabeth calls Mary, “the mother of my Lord” (Luke 1:43).

Now some might point out that, “Lord”, is not the same as God. But this reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of how the Jews use the title, “Lord”. The Jews of Jesus’ time, and well before, were hesitant to write or speak God’s revealed name, YHWH [most likely rendered with an “a” and an “e”, Y\_hw\_h, when filling in the intentionally omitted vowels], in part because of the stern warning of Leviticus 24:16, translated in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament of the Jews and the early Christian Church, as: “Whoever names the name of the Lord - by death let him be put to death.” So they would often substitute words like “Adonai/Kyrios” [My Lord in Hebrew and Greek], or elohim, a more universal noun for the word “God”, in its place.

But whatever the case, the context of Luke 1 makes it absolutely clear that Elizabeth is using the word, “Lord”, here to mean God. And over and over in this chapter, Mary, Zechariah, and Elizabeth all use, “Lord”, in this same way. For example, in Luke 1:25 Elizabeth acknowledges, “Thus the Lord has done to me ... to take away my reproach among men” [she is acknowledging that her pregnancy is due to God]. Similarly, in Luke 1:38, Mary would answer God by saying, “Behold, I am the handmaid of *the Lord*”.

And if this is not enough, all the major Protestant Reformers acknowledged this title as well. For example, Martin Luther would write: “In this work whereby she was made the Mother of God...”

A second objection often concerns the intercession of the saints in heaven. The Rosary is ultimately a prayer asking the Blessed Mother to “pray for us sinners”. The idea is that she, as the Queen Mother – the mother of Jesus – will take these prayers directly to her son, just as Bathsheba, the mother of the Davidic King, Solomon, would prefigure in 2 Kings 2:19.

But someone may counter that “there is one mediator between God and men ... Jesus (c.f. 1 Timothy 2:5) Go directly to Jesus, many insist.

But Jesus has the authority to share his mediation with us, just as he gave his seventy disciples power and authority to heal and cast out demons in his name in Luke 10, or forgive sins in John 20:21-23. Similarly, few people would hesitate to ask a friend on earth to pray for them. Why not go directly to Jesus then too? Because the constant understanding of Christianity, is that we can intercede for each other: “the prayer of a righteous man has great power” (James 5:16). So why not go to the saints alive in heaven as well (Luke 20:37-38)?

But some will still object. How can the saints in Heaven hear us? While we may not know exactly how this happens, the fact that earthly prayers can be brought into God’s presence by those in Heaven is clearly seen in Scripture. Revelation 5:8-14 gives us beautiful insight into exactly this process: prayers of the faithful being brought into Jesus’ presence in Heaven: “The twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each ... with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.”

These must be the “saints” on earth, (a Biblical term for those who follow Jesus on earth as well as in Heaven), because those in God’s presence in Heaven would have no need of someone else to bring their prayers before God. And also note that these saints in Heaven don’t actually *answer* the prayers addressed to them, they simply *bring them to God on our behalf*.

But the stunning earthly evidence that this heavenly intercession *does* indeed happen is the hundreds of extensively documented medical miracles that have been gathered by the Church as part of the canonization process of every saint – as confirmation that they truly are in heaven and interceding for us with Jesus (for a more in depth discussion of

intercession and the Communion of the Saints alive in Heaven [c.f. Romans 5:8, Luke 20:37-38 and Hebrews 12:1], see my earlier column on miracles and the canonization of saints.

Ultimately, it is never “vain repetition” to talk with God or to prayerfully quote Sacred Scripture in any form – whether we speak once, or repeatedly, as in Psalm 136 or the Rosary.