

*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee. Blessed are thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.* That prayer has been prayed by every single generation of Catholics from the time of the Annunciation to Mary, the birth of the Church, the growth of Christianity, right up through this moment. This prayer can bring us joy, peace, and comfort. It can strengthen us and guide us. The Hail Mary recognizes the role that Mary plays in the life of the Church and in our lives as disciples. We heard part of that prayer in our Gospel passage just now.

Have you ever really sat down and reflected on that prayer? It really is rather profound. It's actually a penance I often give in the sacrament of reconciliation: to slowly and prayerfully recite the Our Father and the Hail Mary, really reflecting on and understanding what we

*Hail Mary, full of grace* – the words of greeting from the Archangel Gabriel to Mary when he announced that she would be the mother of our Savior. So full of grace, that it overflows throughout the whole world and to all of her children. Grace is that participation in the life of God, and Mary was able to participate so completely and fully, and that grace will never be exhausted or spent. That is partly why we choose to turn to her as our blessed mother.

*The Lord is with you.* God is choosing to dwell with her. After the separation that took place after the original sin, that relationship with God and humanity was broken. Yet, here we see it begin to be restored. That Lord will come and reside with us once more. That he will remain closely united with us, as he did with Mary.

*Blessed are you among women* WE heard these words proclaimed by Elizabeth in our Gospel. It is at the moment of the Visitation, where after Mary learned that Elizabeth was pregnant with John the Baptist, she went in haste to help and serve her cousin. Upon entering the home – blessed are you among women. Mary has a unique role among all of humanity. Everything hinged on her “yes” to God, and the blessing she received was not just for her alone, but would be shared with the entire world.

*And blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus* – the fruit of her womb, the savior of the world, Emmanuel, God-with-us. We are in the final preparations this Advent season to allow Christ to be born. To prepare the manger of our own hearts and our families to receive this new born child, wrapped in swaddling clothes, who would defeat sin and death through grace and love. The name of Jesus was actually added to the Hail Mary in the early fifteenth century by St. Bernadine of Sienna, who greatly fostered devotion to the Holy Name, and it is from there that our Cathedral in Chicago takes its name. So, there’s a fun fact to share with your friends at

Christmas parties this season and impress everybody (not that I expect anybody actually will do that).

*Holy Mary, Mother of God.* Yes, Mary is holy, Mary is set apart. Mary is without sin and so perfectly followed God's will in her entire life, and continues to do so in heaven. Mary is the Mother of God. She is not just the mother of Jesus and his humanity. In the divine person of Jesus Christ, humanity and divinity have come together, without mingling, mixture or confusion. We cannot separate one aspect completely from the other, and since Jesus is God, Mary truly is the mother of God.

*Pray for us sinners* – We are in constant need of prayer, because we are all sinners. We all find those ways, sometimes small, sometimes big, to turn away from God or to follow our own path instead of his. We cannot do this all on our own, nor should we try. Instead we seek the aid and help of others, we ask for their prayers and intercessions on our behalf. We ask Mary, as Queen of Heaven, to intercede for us directly to God, to seek out mercy, grace, and healing, and she does it.

*Now and at the hour of death, Amen.* Every day in every moment we can use prayers. We never reach a spot on this side of eternity where we do not need prayers. Pray for us now, and until we take our last breath, because of the power prayer has in our lives. Amen – the way we end all our prayers. In Greek Amen actually means verily, truly, so may it be. We end each prayer with an Amen because we are saying this is true, this is right, what we just recited and prayed is what we truly hope for.

That's just a short reflection on the prayer that we may recite multiple times throughout each day, especially if we pray a rosary. There is depth and richness and meaning behind every word we recite. And it's amazing to see how this prayer has been a constant companion in the life of the Church from the days of Sacred Scripture up through today. So, the next time you pray a hail Mary, don't just rattle it off or do it in an absent-minded way. Be intentional and be mindful of the powerful words we are reciting.

I just want to end tonight with a brief comment on the Visitation narrative we just heard. The response of all those in this narrative tells us quite a bit. Both Elizabeth's and her son's, even though he was still in utero, their reactions give us a glimpse of how we can respond as well when God enters into our homes. Elizabeth asked Mary: how could it be, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? That is a marvelous question, one which we should all be asking ourselves. How is it possible, that Mary, our Blessed Mother, should come to us? Why does Our Lady choose to approach us?

Mary comes to us for one single purpose: to bring us to her Son. Mary does seek us out; she enters into our homes in order to help us know Christ better. Her role was never to glorify herself, but to always point to Christ. That is the role we as disciples all bear as well, and we look to Mary as a model for how we can do this. Mary desires to take us by the hand and guide us to the heart of her son. The very

next verse after our reading ended today is Mary's Magnificat: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, My spirit rejoices in God my savior." This was how Mary lived. If only we would all do that, if only we all shared the desire to do that. It is not glorifying ourselves, but always and faithfully glorifying our Heavenly Father.