

The Rosary in History
Pauline Jaricot - A Woman of Vision

By Fr. Henry Peel O.P.

"The sea is made up of small drops." These are the words of a prosperous silk-merchant's daughter, Pauline Jaricot, who founded the Society for the Propagation of the Faith and the Association of the Living Rosary.

Wholly dedicated to God

Pauline, born at Lyons in 1799 (ten years after the start of the French Revolution), was an extraordinary woman. When she was about seventeen she gave up the social round of an attractive and wealthy young lady for a life wholly dedicated to God.

She organised a group of servant girls into a Union of Prayer in Reparation to the Sacred Heart. She was eighteen when she sold her jewels and gave the proceeds to the poor.

She said of herself: "I decided in favour of complete renunciation." She chose to live this life of complete renunciation as a single woman since she did not feel called to enter a convent.

The match to light the fire

Two years later Pauline concluded that one of the great needs of the Church was to involve laypeople in the work of the missions by their spiritual and material support. She devised a very simple plan to supply this need: little groups of ten could be formed with each person agreeing to contribute a penny a week for the missions. Her friends would help her to form these groups. The first were among the factory girls of Lyons.

The plan succeeded and the movement grew into what is now the world-wide Society for the Propagation of the Faith. It was taken over by people with far more influence than Pauline Jaricot had and they formed the first Council of the Society. Pauline was content to have been "the first match to light the fire", as she described herself.

"The old religion is dead"

The nucleus of the small group was also the foundation upon which Pauline built the Association of the Living Rosary. The Revolutionary upheavals beginning in 1789 had alienated great numbers from the Catholic Church.

An astute observer at the time wrote: "The old religion is completely dead. It is already dropping away into the dust and most French people do not want to hear any more about the corpse. They hold their handkerchiefs to their noses when the Church is mentioned." A Prime Minister of France said to a churchman in 1831: "The time is coming when you will be supported by only a handful of old people."

The Living Rosary

Pauline Jaricot was twenty seven when, in 1826, she formed the first group of fifteen which was to grow into "The Association of the Living Rosary".

She realised that it would be very hard to get people to pray the Rosary when they had never learned to pray, or had forgotten how to do so. But they could easily be taught to say a decade, and to meditate on one of the Mysteries.

In a group of 15 where each member says one decade each day - the whole group daily says the entire fifteen decades of the Rosary. This was the basis on which the Association of the Living Rosary was built. While separately each member said one decade only the combined group of fifteen formed a Living Rosary. Then by a regular exchange of mysteries each member would say the fifteen mysteries over a period of time. In this fashion they would also absorb the basic realities of the Christian Faith.

The Living Rosary was a program of evangelisation as well as a method of prayer.

A death in poverty

One person was placed in charge of each group to arrange the regular exchange of the mysteries and keep the group at the required number of fifteen. Within a few years the Association had grown so large that the approval of the Holy See was sought for and granted, by Pope Gregory XVI, in 1832. In 1877 "The Association of the Living Rosary" was placed under the guidance of the Dominicans who reorganised it in conjunction with the Rosary Confraternity.

Pauline Jaricot died in poverty on January the 9th, 1862, a victim of a major financial injustice. Her reputation in ruins because of false gossip she was rejected and abandoned. At the time of her death the Association which she had founded had spread throughout the world, and numbered 2,250,000 in France alone. It had been started to help people who did not know how to pray, and who had little knowledge of their Faith. It had also been a completely lay initiative at a time when such initiatives were not encouraged. For those who have lost contact with the Church and with prayer the Living Rosary may be a way to return. It could also be, as it was in the past, a method of introducing children to Our Lady's Rosary.

Pauline finds ways to serve Our Lord

As a child Pauline wanted to convert the heathen, "to nurse the sick and teach the children their catechism" But she soon came to see that France itself was her mission. Anxious about the break-up of family life, the suffering caused by large-scale industry and the pervasive effects of the media, her first step to counteract these evils was the re-introduction of the habit of saying the Rosary.

"I had been puzzling how to get the frivolous French mind to adopt the Rosary - a form of prayer and meditation that was looked upon as out of fashion and relegated to the ignorant. There seemed no hope that these languid souls who had lost all sense of sin, and any wish to remedy it, would adopt a method of doing so which was so unattractive to those who do not know its sweetness".

It was in response to this situation that Pauline, always intensely practical, developed The Association of the Living Rosary.

Pauline Jaricot's cure in 1835 was the great miracle of Mugnano which led to the declaration of St. Philomena's Sainthood in 1837 by Pope Gregory XVI. The same Pope also declared St. Philomena the patroness of the Living Rosary.

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