

THE FRANCISCAN CROWN

In 1422 a young novice in Assisi, Friar James, was struggling with his prayer. Before entering the Order he had crowned a statue of Our Lady with fresh flowers each morning. Losing that small daily habit left him so desolate that he thought of leaving. He asked Mary for help and she answered. She taught him a holy flexibility, asking him to weave a crown of prayers instead of blossoms.

His novice master came upon him praying and saw Mary gathering roses from the young friar's lips and placing the finished garland on his head. Together the two friars wove what we now pray as the Franciscan Crown, also known as the Seraphic Rosary. The Crown keeps four joys we already know from the

Rosary. To these it adds the Adoration of the Magi, and then carries the story further than the Rosary's joyful mysteries do, to the Resurrection. It finishes by combining the glorious mysteries of Mary's Assumption and Coronation, which Franciscans have always seen as two movements of the same action.

The transformation of a Rosary into a Crown is an expression of Franciscanism. We have always held that God became small among us because He wanted to be near to us, and not only to mend what had gone wrong. The Crown invites us to sit with that nearness. We watch it begin with

a girl's yes at Nazareth, cross the hills to a cousin's house, lie in straw at Bethlehem, receive magi, go missing for three days, rise from a tomb, and end with a mother crowned on the Seat of Mercy. Seven times we meditate upon the same love wearing our flesh.

This is a devotion made entirely of joy, prayed by an Order that has never pretended life is easy. Praying seven joys in a row does something to a person who has been carrying a hard week.

HOW TO PRAY THE CROWN

Begin with the Sign of the Cross and go straight into the first joy. With Franciscan simplicity we leave aside the prayers that have gathered around the Rosary over the centuries. The Crown is a garland of seven joys, and we start weaving it at once.

If you are holding a Franciscan Crown Rosary, begin at the bead nearest the centerpiece and pray around the loop. After the seventh decade, move to the two beads at the center for the last Hail Marys. If you do not have one, an ordinary rosary will serve. Pray the five decades around, then begin again for the sixth and seventh. Mary asked for a crown of prayers, not a particular string of beads.

Before each joy, read the Scripture passage aloud. Francis wanted his followers to live the Gospel, not merely admire it. We let the Word set the scene, then rest in it while the Hail Marys ebb and flow.

Franciscans who have prayed the Crown for years come to it already carrying our tradition with them, and the old images rise on their own beside the Gospel. For those beginning this devotion, a short image is offered before each passage to help us enter the Gospel as Franciscans do. Use it if it helps and let it go if it does not. The Gospel is the prayer.

For each of the seven joys: read the image, read the passage, pause to picture it, then pray one Our Father and ten Hail Marys.

Do not be anxious about doing this perfectly. The Crown may be set down and taken up again through the day, so long as the seven decades are finished before you sleep. The Crown is an experience to be shared in prayer and not a task to be accomplished, so anyone who finds seven decades too much at once might instead take one joy each day and crown the whole week. Mary taught Friar James a holy flexibility, and she teaches us the same.

FIRST JOY OF MARY: THE ANNUNCIATION

The Gospels do not tell us what she had been praying for, though Franciscans have long pictured her as a girl in the temple asking only to live long enough to serve the mother of the Messiah, whoever that woman might be. Listen now for the answer she was given, and for how much more it asked of her.

LUKE 1:26-38

SECOND JOY OF MARY: THE VISITATION

The Gospels do not tell us what those three months in her cousin's house were like, though Franciscans have long pictured her nursing Elizabeth through the birth and taking the newborn John into her own arms. Listen now for a song sung by a girl who then went and did the work.

LUKE 1:39-56

THIRD JOY OF MARY: THE NATIVITY

The Gospels do not tell us what she wrapped Him in, though Franciscans have long pictured her taking the veil from her own head because there was nothing else in that place to use. Listen now for how little God asked for on the night He came to us.

LUKE 2:1-20

FOURTH JOY OF MARY: THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI

The Gospels do not tell us what became of the gold, though Franciscans have long pictured her giving it away to the poor and keeping none of it for the child or the household. Listen now for what the nations came so far to find, and for a poverty that was not forced upon them but chosen.

MATTHEW 2:1-12

FIFTH JOY OF MARY: THE FINDING IN THE TEMPLE

The Gospels do not tell us how she spent those three days, though Franciscans have long pictured her going up and down Jerusalem asking strangers if they had seen her boy. Listen now for her question when she finds Him, which is the question of any mother.

LUKE 2:41-52

SIXTH JOY OF MARY: THE RESURRECTION

The Gospels do not tell us where Mary was that morning, though Franciscans have long pictured her staying behind to pray while the other women went out to the tomb, and her Son coming to her first, before anyone. Listen now for the moment when the Risen Lord speaks a woman's name and she knows Him.

JOHN 20:11-18

SEVENTH JOY OF MARY: THE ASSUMPTION AND CORONATION

The Gospels do not describe her being taken up or crowned, though Franciscans have long seen her enthroned on the Seat of Mercy, receiving the crown from her Son who first received His flesh from her. Even crowned she points away from herself and toward Him, so hear this last passage the way she would have us hear it, as praise of her Son.

REVELATION 11:19; 12:1-6

THE SEVENTY-TWO HAIL MARYS

Seven decades bring us to seventy Hail Marys. Two more are added at the end, making seventy-two, one for each year of Our Lady's life on earth according to an old tradition of the Order. Having walked with her from Nazareth to her crowning, we give back to her the hidden years the Gospels never tell us about. The Crown then closes with an Our Father and a Hail Mary for the intentions of the Holy Father, and with the Sign of the Cross. Now put the beads down and do for someone what you have just watched her and her Son do.

