

Golden Rose

- *Sister M. Danielle Peters and Father Johann G. Roten, S.M.*

Q: We hear that popes award the Golden Rose to shrines, churches, and sometimes persons. What can you tell me about the significance and meaning of this gesture?

A: The Golden Rose is a gift which the popes for centuries have conferred as a token of esteem and paternal affection on illustrious churches and shrines as well as on distinguished persons, governments or cities conspicuous for their Catholic endeavor and loyalty to the Holy See.

Symbolism

Traditionally, the Golden Rose is blessed on the fourth Sunday of Lent, Lætare Sunday, also known as Rose Sunday, when rose-colored liturgical vestments replace the penitential purple. The rose color symbolizes hope and joy in the midst of Lent. Morini in his *Dizionario di erudizione storico-ecclesiastica* suggests that the rose color holds the balance between scarlet and purple. The rose, according to Morini, represents charity (fragrance), joy (color), and spiritual substance (taste), and thus stands for the person of Jesus Christ. Durandus of Mende (+ 1296) assimilates the rose with eternal spring after the gloom of winter of this life. Through his Passion and Resurrection, both symbolized in the Golden Rose, Jesus Christ opens the door to eternal spring.

Prior to the pontificate of Sixtus IV (1471-84) the Golden Rose consisted of a simple and single flower made of gold slightly tinted with red. Later, to embellish the ornament while still retaining the religious symbolism, rubies and other precious gems were placed in the heart of the rose or on its petals. Pope Sixtus IV replaced the single rose with a bouquet or bunch of ten or more roses. In the center of the principal rose was a tiny cup with a perforated cover filled with balsam and musk.

Origin

The exact date of the institution of the Golden Rose is unknown. According to some it is prior to Charlemagne (742-814), according to others it had its origin at the end of the twelfth century, but it certainly antedates the year 1050, since Pope Leo IX (1051) speaks of the Golden Rose as of an ancient institution at his time. In a bull addressed to the abbess of Woffenheim (Alsacia) in 1049 the pope grants the monastery exemption from Episcopal jurisdiction provided it donates to the Holy See annually a rose of pure gold (or the equivalent of two ounces of gold). History tells us that Urban II, at the end of the Council of Tours in 1096 awarded Count Foulques d'Anjou with a Golden Rose.

It is said that the exclusive recipient of the Golden Rose was at one time (in the beginning), the prefect of the City of Rome. It was his duty and privilege on *Laetare* Sunday to lead the horse of the pope after Mass to the plaza in front of the Lateran Basilica, and to assist him in alighting from the horse. In recompense for his service the pope would award him the Golden Rose blessed during the liturgical celebration.

A number of crowned dignitaries were subsequently recipients of the Golden Rose: Louis VII in 1163, Raymond Bérenger, the last Count of Provence in 1244, and Don Juan Austria after the victory of Lepanto in 1576--to name only a few.

Presumably, the custom of conferring the rose upon the most deserving prince at the papal court started when the popes moved to Avignon and continued after the papacy moved back to Rome. The prince received the rose from the pope in a solemn ceremony and was accompanied by the College of Cardinals from the papal palace to his residence.

Recipients

From the beginning of the seventeenth century, the rose was sent to queens, princesses, and eminent noblemen. Emperors, kings, and princes were given a sword as a more suitable gift. However, if a deserving Catholic emperor, king or other great prince was present in Rome on *Lætare* Sunday, he would be presented with the rose. Among the deserving ladies we count Marié-Thérèse of Austria (1668), Charlotte of Bavaria (1819), Maria-Teresia of Sardinia (1825), Maria-Pia of Savoya (1842), empress Eugénie (1856), Elisabeth of Austria (1868), and Maria Isabella of Spain (1868)--again, to mention only some of these crowned ladies.

Among the principal churches to which the rose has been presented are St. Peter's Basilica (five roses), the Lateran Basilica (four roses--two to the basilica proper and two to the chapel *Sancta Sanctorum*), Basilica of Mary Major (two roses), *Santa Maria sopra Minerva* (one rose), and *Sant'Antonio dei Portoghesi* (one rose). The Golden Rose was also presented to the Arch-confraternity of the Gonfalone.

In the second half of the twentieth century, awards of the Golden Rose became very rare, and were all conferred upon places, mostly Marian Shrines. Pope Paul VI, for instance, made only five Conferrals of the Golden Rose during his pontificate which, without exception, were given to churches and shrines. The Golden Rose was awarded in the Pontificate of John Paul II only twice, namely to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes (France), and to St. Joseph's Oratory (Canada) in 2004.

Pope Benedict XVI has made nine awards of the Golden Rose so far: among these to the Sanctuary of *Jasna Gora* (Częstochowa, Poland), to the Basilica of *Aparecida* (Brazil), the Mariazell Basilica (Austria), to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., and most recently to Our Lady of Ta'Pinu on Malta.

Golden Rose of Fatima



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