

# A Brief History of Chaplets

*by Alice Cantrell © 2006*

For centuries men have has recited repeated prayers as a form of penance and / or petition. No one knows exactly when strings of beads were first used to keep count of prayers, but the earliest historical mention of prayer counters were the pebbles and knotted strings employed by the desert hermits in the 4th century. Not long after this time, we have documentation and evidence that various strings of beads were in common use by the faithful to keep track of the prayers they wished to say each day. There was no set format for the prayer beads and the number of beads used depended on the particular devotion of the user.

As part of their daily prayers, the 12th century religious (monks, friars) were required to read all 150 Psalms. As they were joined by less educated (illiterate) brothers, the substitution of 150 Our Fathers (or in Latin, 'Pater Noster') in place of the Psalms was allowed. The practice caught on, and became widely popular among the laity also. A string of 10, 50 or 150 beads was commonly used to keep count of one's prayers and came to known as a "paternoster". It was not until the mid 1500's that we see the rosary in the format we know it today.

The term "chaplet" dates as far back as the mid 12<sup>th</sup> century and referred to a string of beads on which 50 Aves (or Hail Marys) were said. The word "chaplet" is French for little head covering or hat (*un petit chapeau*). It can also mean a crown or circular band of flowers. It was also around this time (the mid 12<sup>th</sup> century) that Aves began to be compared to roses offered to Our Lady. Therefore, a series of Aves would make a crown or chaplet for the Mother of God, and even though they may have started out as a continuous loop or circlet, early prayer beads were very often made in the open string format.

Today there are dozens of different chaplets made and prayed. The modern term "chaplet" usually refers to a string of beads used in various devotions to Our Lord, the Angels, Saints and Mary and includes almost every beaded devotion smaller than the standard 5-decade rosary.