

The Hail Mary is a popular prayer among Catholics. It is the backbone of the rosary; it is one of the prayers we recommend before going to bed; and it's useful in certain situations involving a football. It has never officially been part of the mass. Before receiving communion we always pray the Our Father, which Jesus taught his disciples. The Lord's Prayer unites us as children of one Father before we act out our unity by coming to communion. The Our Father comes from the bible, but the Hail Mary developed later on. It makes a simple request: "Pray for us sinners." In this prayer we acknowledge that we are sinners, and we ask Mary to intercede for us. We pray, but we also ask her to pray with us and for us. Say the second half of the prayer with me, would you? "Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

"Pray for us sinners." Before the Hail Mary makes this request, it quotes two stories from the bible. One is the annunciation, when the angel Gabriel told Mary she would become the mother of our savior. The angel greeted her with the words, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you." The angel recognizes that the Lord is already present to Mary, and that she is therefore filled with grace. The second story we quote is today's gospel, the visitation between Mary, a pregnant virgin, and Elizabeth, a pregnant senior citizen. Elizabeth would give birth to a son, whom the world knows today as John the Baptist. When Mary arrived for this visitation, Elizabeth greeted her. St. Luke says Elizabeth was "filled with the Holy Spirit" when she spoke to Mary; that expression is used for those who speak as prophets. The angel had told Mary that Elizabeth was pregnant, but there is no record that Elizabeth knew that Mary was pregnant; even so, she puts it all together when she sees Mary. Elizabeth speaks like a prophet to her: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." She recognizes Mary is different from everyone else, that she is pregnant, and that she is carrying someone very special.

These are the lines we quote whenever we start the Hail Mary. They are the words that Gabriel and Elizabeth spoke when they greeted Mary, so we use them to address her as well. Let's say the first half of the prayer: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

In the gospel Elizabeth comments about the particular matter at hand, Mary's visitation. She asks, "How does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" She calls Mary, "the mother of my Lord." So we call her "Holy Mary, mother of God." Elizabeth does not just announce who Mary is; she announces who Jesus is.

Just before we celebrate Christmas this year, we hear the story of the visitation, the good news that Mary is about to give birth to the Son of God. Whenever we pray the Hail Mary, we use the words that once addressed a pregnant woman. We say we are sinners, and we ask Mary to pray for us. Just as she awaited the coming of Jesus from her womb, so we await the coming of Jesus in our lives, to forgive our sins and to bring us hope.