

V. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

R. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

You've just recited one of the newest prayers in the Catholic Church. It took us hundreds of years to write the hail mary. We didn't finish until about the time Christopher Columbus crossed the ocean. What took so long was the second part. We had to figure out what to say. The first part was easy. It comes from today's Gospel. We've always known about it, and it quickly entered Christian worship.

The Hail Mary is so popular we pray it by itself, as part of the rosary, and when passing a football. Each time we're telling part of the Christmas story. "Hail, Mary," are the words Elizabeth said when Mary entered her home. Her next words, "Blessed are you," are truly extraordinary. According to Luke, the angel Gabriel visited Mary and asked her consent to become the mother of Jesus. The angel convinced Mary by telling her that an elderly relative, Elizabeth, who never had any children, conceived a child six months ago. Like, "If she can do it, Mary, you can do it." When the angel left, Mary dropped everything and went to Elizabeth. Now, there were no telephones, no pony express, no fax, no email. Elizabeth had not told Mary that she was pregnant; Mary had not told Elizabeth about her. These two women meet: one too old to bear a child, and barren all her life; the other a young virgin--neither one of them physically capable of pregnancy, any more than, say, Arnold Schwarzenegger. And neither one of them physically capable of radioing the news to the other. But when Mary entered Elizabeth's house, before she can say, "I'm preggers," the baby inside Elizabeth kicked, and Elizabeth said, "Blessed is the fruit of your womb, and why has the mother of my Lord come to me?" Elizabeth becomes a prophet. Before Mary can speak, Elizabeth recognizes not just that Mary is pregnant, but that she carries Christ.

Whenever we pray this prayer, we imitate Elizabeth. The Spirit of God, which is already within us, kicks us into recognizing Christ in the world.