



A Spirituality of Liberation: The Rosary as a Means of Cultivating Simone Weil's Attention

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Abstract: *This paper explores the interpretation of the Rosary through the philosophical thoughts of Simone Weil, highlighting its potential as a means of cultivating Weil's living philosophy of "attention," and thereby presenting a spirituality of liberation that attempts to present in whole the twofold image of Weil as both a mystic and a radical. Through Weil's theory of attention and her two-step philosophical method, which involves reflection on several personal experiences formed through the Rosary, this paper presents a practical formulation of Weil's moral and religious teaching on attention, especially highlighting the potential for a spirituality of liberation —contributing to the progressive discourse in the philosophy of religion within the Roman Catholic tradition.*

Keywords Simone Weil, attention, the Rosary, Catholic spirituality, a spirituality of liberation.

Introduction

Simone Weil (1909-1943), a French philosopher, mystic, and revolutionary, was born in Paris to an agnostic Jewish family.¹ Raised as a student of philosophy within the critical Marxist tradition, Weil was dubbed the "red virgin" and a "saint" in her college days for her unique ambivalence as both a leftist intellectual and yet also an ascetic, denouncing carnal and material comforts as part of her altruistic character.² Such titles only became more true of Weil over time, especially in light of her remarkable, mystical encounter with the God of Christianity throughout the last years of her life.³

Claiming that her conception of life "has always been Christian,"⁴ Weil found her radical intellectual journey led her to a deep love for the Catholic faith,⁵ yet she rejected baptism due to various disagreements with the Church's teachings, believing her vocation was to be a Christian outside of the Church.⁶ Her conversion didn't occur in negation to her lifelong leftist intellectual thoughts, but rather as a continuation of them—Christ's prophetic call for liberation and radical love had only intensified her upbringing. Despite it being widely believed that she died without receiving baptism, her commitment to

¹ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (London: Routledge, 2021), 52.

² Sophie Burgault, "Beyond the Saint and the Red Virgin: Simone Weil as Feminist Theorist of Care," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 35, no. 2 (2014): 1.

³ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 28-30.

⁴ Weil, 27.

⁵ Weil, 8.

⁶ Weil, 7.

faith, justice, and truth was steadfast, having corresponded with many priests and written many theological thoughts until the end.

Attention, which is a concept central to Weil's lived philosophy consisting of vast metaphysical and ethical tenets, is thus deeply entwined with this spiritual journey of hers. Weil's encounter with Christianity in the context of her leftist principles is deeply fascinating. Her spiritual journey deeply resonated with me, particularly in my personal experience with the Rosary, a prayer that is very dear to me. In reading her texts, I find within the Rosary the "growing" of such attention that she had talked about, as well as a spirituality of liberation. Thus, this research was conducted to see the potential of practicing the Rosary as a means of cultivating attention, as was coined and taught by Simone Weil in her religious and moral philosophy, and by doing so, presenting a spirituality of liberation.

This paper explores the Catholic prayer practice of the Rosary as a means to cultivate attention, which shall be found in the capacity of the Rosary to provide space for personal, spiritual experience. This paper is divided into four sections: first, I introduce the Rosary, my personal context about it, and its potential as a locus of personal spirituality. The second and third sections examine Weil's concept of attention, especially its metaphysical dimension, and the possible ways in which it may be practiced through three "implicit loves." The final section analyzes how the Rosary can be practiced as a means to grow in attention, concluding that it presents a spirituality of liberation.

In this paper, Weil's theory of attention serves as the principal philosophical concept used to interpret the practice of the Rosary. My analysis also utilizes Weil's philosophical method as interpreted by Benjamin P. Davis, which involves two steps: first, to understand reality through proper inquiries and reflections; and, second, to test our understanding through concrete actions.⁷⁷ Inspired by Weil's spiritual journey, which also resonates with mine, I shall reflect on her concept of attention and her two-step method to my personal experience—and many others cited—in praying the Rosary. Weil's aspiration to democratize knowledge and her understanding of reality through inquiries form the basis of my exploration of spaces for personal spiritual experiences in the Rosary. The moral and religious aspects of attention and her own mystical experiences in encountering Catholicism make her thoughts proper to interpret the Rosary. Finally, through reflection on Weil's call to test our reflections through praxis, I see a spirituality of liberation arise. Thus, this paper revolves not only around mere library research of Weil's texts and secondary sources, but also around phenomenological reflections of my own experiences. These layers of methods allow us to move beyond philosophical and religious abstractions, arriving at a concrete commentary on the reality in which we live today.

The novelty of this research lies in the synthesis of Simone Weil's philosophical thoughts with the practice of a specific devotional practice, namely the Rosary; its attempt to do a philosophical reading on the spiritual potentials within the Rosary; and how, by bringing together the Rosary, its spiritual potentials, and theory of attention, I present a spirituality of liberation, attempting to present in whole the twofold

⁷ Benjamin P. Davis, "Simone Weil's Method: Essaying Reality through Inquiry and Action," *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 13, no. 3 (2021): 236.

image of Weil as both a mystic and a revolutionary who preached the prophetic message of religion through the call for social justice and radical love for one's neighbors.

Personal Experiences of Spirituality within the Rosary

The Rosary in Roman Catholicism is a form of popular devotion, which is “an external practice of piety by which the devotion of the faithful finds life and expression.”⁸⁸ These practices of devotion allow the presence and organic development of spirituality among the faithful through an emotional approach to the human conscience or through an exemplary model of faith.

The Rosary is a set of repetitive prayers meant to accompany the contemplation of Christian salvation mysteries within the life of Jesus. The prayers in the Rosary, among many, consist of fifty repetitions of “The Hail Mary”, and as such, the faithful are invited to contemplate the life of Christ as well as honor the Blessed Virgin, as she is a pathway to Christ (*Ad Jesum Per Mariam*). The name “Rosary” itself came from the Latin word *rosarium*, which means “crown of roses”, referring to the popular tradition of crowning the Virgin's statues with garlands of roses. While popular devotions are secondary and optional to liturgies, acting as an extension of the sacraments in the daily life,⁹ the Rosary is recommended and taught as one of the most essential Catholic practices. Catholics worldwide pray the Rosary every day, but especially in May—which is traditionally consecrated as the month of Mary—and October, which is honored as the month of the Holy Rosary.

As a practicing Catholic, the rosary is a devotional practice dearest to my spiritual life. The recitation of the Rosary, both individually and communally, has been an inseparable part of my experience in living the Catholic faith. As someone who became Catholic as an adult, the Rosary became an essential medium for me to grow in the faith. The Rosary consoled me through many difficulties in life.

A bit of personal recount to put my thoughts in context. Born to a non-Christian family, I experienced religious trauma throughout my early years, which caused me to later dissociate myself from the religion that I was born into. One particular issue that has always bothered me with institutions of religion ever since is their misogyny—how they justify the violent patriarchal structures with the scriptures—, and the growing trend within the religious masses to identify with right-wing fundamentalist politics. In my early teenage years, I labeled myself agnostic after many failed attempts to reconcile my ideas with my religious upbringing. For several years, I was pessimistic about religious institutions and distanced myself from any serious thoughts of God. This was until I began learning Catholicism in high school out of my intellectual interest, during which I was initially a huge skeptic, knowing that the Catholic Church is the biggest, organized religious institution led by all-male priests and was notorious for many violent policies it has carried out in the name of religion.

However, one thing “bound” me to Catholicism in the end, and it was my attachment and devotion to the figure of Mary. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is very much venerated in the Catholic Church. The

⁸⁸ Herbert Thurston, “Popular Devotions,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 12 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911).

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* Indonesian ed. (Ende: Ecclesiastical Province of Ende, 1995), no. 1675.

Catholic Church honors her as she is the *Theotokos*—the God-bearer;¹⁰ the ever-virgin;¹¹ the one who was made pure since her conception¹² and thus the highest of creations,¹³ assumed to heaven after death.¹⁴ She is also granted the title Mother of all the faithful,¹⁵ the queen of heaven,¹⁶ the dispenser of heavenly graces,¹⁷ the advocate of sinners.¹⁸

My encounter with Mary in light of the Catholic faith is inseparable from the practice of the Rosary. I began learning about it in my earliest days of going to church, and it immediately pulled and bound me to Catholic spirituality. The meditation on the life of Christ through repetitive recitations of the Hail Mary gave me a sense of trust, safety, and confidence in the Church. By giving myself to such maternal love, I slowly began to be able to learn, believe, and hold on to the teachings of the Church until I was finally christened. Mary became the “bridge” between me, a sinful and unworthy man, and the divine presence. She is not equal to the Trinity and is not divine, certainly, yet at the same time she is “divine”: she is the highest creation in heaven, in direct presence of God. We can entrust ourselves to her intercession, yet at the same time, she is just a human, a mother who can only love and not judge her children. Thus, in the face of a seemingly patriarchal institution, the Rosary granted me a personal spiritual experience of a divine feminine, which gave me the space needed to grow in faith and understanding of the Catholic Church. Through it, I can live out faith in a way that is individually unique for me, an accessible, safe space in which I can experience the protection and confidence of divine love.

The attainment of a personal spiritual experience from the Rosary is not in itself a rare, unique thing. In *Mysteriously Woman: A Feminist View of the Rosary*, Mary Gordon shares the repetition of Hail Marys in the Rosary as a form of mantra that helps her contemplate the role of women in the life of Christ, thus gaining feminist insights from it.¹⁹ In *An Angel in My Pocket: Touch, Sacred Objects, and Spiritual Coping* Linda M. Miller tells the story of a widowed elderly woman named Mattie, who experiences deep grief after the death of her husband. She was exceptionally lonely because the couple did not have a child. Mattie thus copes with the Rosary, and although many times her sorrow won’t let her finish her prayer, she will always have her rosary in her pocket, and she will only need to grasp it in her hand to feel relief and consolation.²⁰ In medical research conducted by Barbara Stöckigt and others, it has been proven that the use of prayer beads and rhythmic repetition within the rosary can initiate an experience of peace and contemplative connection with the

¹⁰ Herbert Thurston, “Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. vol. 15 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912).

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 499-507.

¹² The doctrine of Immaculate Conception. Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854).

¹³ Pius XII, *Fulgens Corona* (1953).

¹⁴ Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950).

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), no. 47.

¹⁶ Pius XII, *Ad Caeli Reginam* (1954).

¹⁷ Leo XIII, *Supremi Apostolatus Officio* (1883).

¹⁸ See “*Sub Tuum Praesidium*”, the oldest Christian prayer invoking the intercession of Mary, dating back to the third century AD.

¹⁹ Mary Gordon, “Mysteriously Woman: A Feminist View of the Rosary,” *The Furrow* 55, no. 5 (2004): 259-72.

²⁰ Linda Mayorga Miller, “An Angel in My Pocket: Touch, Sacred Objects, and Spiritual Coping,” in *Touch in the Helping Professions: Research, Practice and Ethics*, edited by Martin Rovers et al. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2017), 161–76

divine, which can become a form of emotional support for the faithful in hardships and/or pain.²¹ Far more than what I can write here, the Rosary itself is widely known among the faithful for its efficacy as a means of consolation, even miracles. It is thus a very popular, inclusive, and accessible space of spirituality, and it is undeniable that the faithful everywhere around the world find it as a precious space that allows them to develop their own unique, personal experiences of spirituality.

Thus, as a popular Catholic devotional practice, the Rosary indeed became a space in which many unique, personal spiritual experiences can organically emerge among the faithful. These spaces are made possible through the formation of exceptional affection and particular organic attachment that is unique to how each faithful interprets the Rosary: they can see it as a form of intimacy with the Blessed Mother, with the divine feminine; as a meditation of the life of Christ, as a consolation in times of hardship, or simply as a sacred object for them to hold onto through life. We will next dive into the thoughts of the philosopher central to this paper, Simone Weil, and especially her advice concerning the practice of “attention”, to see how the rosary, in its capacity, may become a form of such cultivation of attention.

Simone Weil's Attention

In her dissertation, *Science and Perception in Descartes*, Weil sought an “intellectual democratization.”²² She criticizes the inclination of modern science to elevate reason and abstraction over ordinary perception and intuition.²³ According to her, such hierarchy has made science a matter only for the elites because the mode of understanding among common, ordinary people is closer to intuition rather than what is recognized as “scientific” knowledge.²⁴ She denounced this “culture of specialists”, the division between manual and intellectual work, between managers and executors, knowers and doers. This, to Weil, is the source of the failure of democracies within capitalism.²⁵

Her reading of Descartes thus reveals a form of common knowledge, that is perception, which she sees as a mode of reasoning equal to science—and even closer to philosophy than scientific studies.²⁶ Thus, ordinary daily work becomes, in itself, a mode of knowledge production, making perceptual experience essential to Weil's epistemology. Weil sees that everyone, even the most ordinary and scientifically uneducated, “already employs the most fundamental and essential principles of science in their ordinary perception and daily work.”²⁷

This primacy of experience becomes the setting for Weil's thoughts on attention. In talking about attention, Weil highlights how attention becomes the foundation of experiencing reality. The problem is that we are inclined to a default mode of perception that hinders us from full attentivity to reality. Weil blames “gravity” (*la pesanteur*), an analog of the force that governs all natural movements of creation. This

²¹ Barbara Stöckigt, et al., “Experiences and Perceived Effects of Rosary Praying: A Qualitative Study,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 60, no. 6 (June 2021): 3886–3906.

²² Lissa McCullough, “Simone Weil's Phenomenology of the Body,” *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (November 2012): 195–218.

²³ Davis, “Simone Weil's Method,” 235.

²⁴ Simone Weil, *Formative Writings: 1929-1941*, ed. D.T. McFarland and W. Van Ness (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 34.

²⁵ Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty* (London: Routledge, 2001), 40.

²⁶ Weil, *Formative Writings*, 53-54.

²⁷ McCullough, “Simone Weil's Phenomenology of the Body,” 197.

gravity is the natural inclination that prevents creations from having the capability of proper attention to reality and receiving “grace” (*la grâce*). Weil wrote, “All of the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception.”²⁸

Weil also saw the problem of “force” (*la force*), the law that controls the movements of the human soul, just like how gravity controls the physical world. Force manifests in the human thirst for power, and while hierarchies are not inherently bad according to Weil, the thirst for power is the problem, for it causes men to see their fellow men as mere means to their interests.²⁹ This force manifests in the mechanism of the state and capitalist-colonial system, conditioning us to live in a world devoid of attention.

Another essential concept she coined was “affliction” (*le malheur*), which she identified during her experience of working as a manual laborer in Paris’ factories for 24 weeks throughout 1934-1935.³⁰ Weil described affliction as a malady of the soul, an internalized helplessness. It is inseparable yet distinguished from the typical form of physical suffering; affliction is prolonged and more enduring, it “takes possession of the soul and marks it with the mark of slavery ... it is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death.”³¹ Affliction is a dehumanization caused by the force which, in Marxist terms, reified relations between fellow men into mere commodities.³²

In her early days, Weil, as noted by de Beauvoir, called for “the revolution that would feed all the people on earth.”³³ Yet she later realized an overlooked necessity for a spiritual revolution. The uprooting of human dignity and life by affliction calls for, in Weil’s terms, “rootedness” (*l’enracinement*), which is “the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.”³⁴ This root is to be found through “real, active, and natural participation in the life of their community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future ... it is natural, automatically brought about [by the contexts in which an individual exists].”³⁵ In this understanding, attention, as Weil has taught, is a form of practice that is imperative for one to be rooted; it is a prerequisite to address affliction within each other, and thus grow in love and recognition of duty towards our neighbor.³⁶

Attention is not an exact moral rule or specific practice—it is mainly a stance. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone defines it as a mode of orientation in life that must be cultivated in order to attain a certain capacity of discernment towards oneself, others, and reality.³⁷ It is quite enigmatic, really—Weil wrote that attention

²⁸ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

²⁹ Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 111.

³⁰ Davis, “Simone Weil’s Method,” 242-244.

³¹ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 71-72.

³² Weil, *Waiting for God*, 78.

³³ Tony Lynch, “Simone Weil,” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ISSN 2161-0002, <https://iep.utm.edu/weil/> (accessed February 8, 2024).

³⁴ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind* (London: Routledge, 2002), 40.

³⁵ Weil.

³⁶ A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Benjamin P. Davis, “Simone Weil,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2024 ed., <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/simone-weil/> (accessed 2024).

³⁷ Rozelle-Stone and Davis.

is not moved by the strength of will, but rather a void desire without object, yet she also wrote that it requires the most effort of all,³⁸ and yet again at the same time, it should be a negative effort.³⁹

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached: empty and ready to be penetrated by the object, it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of ... Our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it.⁴⁰

In French, the word *l'attention* is easier to understand in its similarity with the word *attente* (to wait). Attention is a state of receptive waiting. The problem with active searching, to Weil, is that we often end up filling up the void too quickly with false idols such as self-projections, attachment to the collective, or even attachment to one's ego.⁴¹ Hence, our attention needs to be completely null and free of attachments. Through this, an individual may receive reality in its fullness.

Also essential to the understanding of attention is the religious dimension of it, conveyed by Weil's metaphysics. The effacement of one's ego in attention is a form of imitation of Christ in His kenosis.⁴² She calls this "decreation". There is a God, according to Weil, which could be interpreted as the Christian God per her own beliefs, or simply "The Good" if we were to put it in the context of her Platonic tradition of thought. Weil wrote in *Draft for a Statement of Human Obligation*:

There is a reality outside the world, that is to say, outside space and time, outside man's mental universe, outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties ... That reality is the unique source of all the good that can exist in this world: that is to say, all beauty, all truth, all justice, all legitimacy, all order, and all human behavior that is mindful of obligations.⁴³

This God, who in the beginning is the only existence that is wholly pure, good, boundless, and eternal, "decreated" Himself to make space for creations that are limited, mortal, and neither wholly pure nor good.⁴⁴

Thus, in the place of which God is not, within creation exists a contingency of forces she calls the "web of determinations" that is contrary to God.⁴⁵ This is the "necessity" that rules all the movements of the created world: time, space, the force of the material world, and the very same gravity that "pulls down" creation from receiving the supernatural grace of God. Grace is the antidote to gravity. Grace directs, harmonizes, and balances the human capacity with the reality of God. In emptying ourselves through attention, we give consent for God to fill the void in our souls.⁴⁶ The void within attention serves as a purification, the anticipation of a divine reality that we cannot reach from the necessity of this created

³⁸ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 66.

³⁹ Weil, 65.

⁴⁰ Weil, 66-67.

⁴¹ Rozelle-Stone and Davis, "Simone Weil."

⁴² The self-emptying of Christ; the stripping of His divinity in His incarnation as a Man.

⁴³ Simone Weil, *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (New York: Penguin, 2005).

⁴⁴ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 96.

⁴⁵ Lissa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil: An Introduction* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

⁴⁶ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 85.

world.⁴⁷ This is decreation, in which a creation passed into the uncreated.⁴⁸ As God has decreased and even emptied Himself to make room for creation, so should we do to ourselves to receive His grace. Weil wrote, “Inasmuch that we are nothing, God loves Himself through us,”⁴⁹ and it is through this love alone that a creature may cross the void of nothingness into the ultimate good of God.⁵⁰

The Practice of Attention

Although not explicitly, Weil implied a few practices in which we can exercise our capacity for attention in an essay titled *Forms of the Implicit Love of God*.⁵¹ “Implicit,” because, according to Weil, it is impossible for us to directly know and love God from “here below”, let alone to invite Him to be present in our souls. However, it is possible to love Him implicitly through three loves: love of our neighbor, love of the order of the world, and love of religious practices. These, to Weil, although being “veiled”, can reach a powerful level of perfection and strength.⁵²

As love and supernatural grace are inseparable from attention, it is logical to deduce that these three things are potential fields in which we can sow the seeds of attention so we may reap the supernatural fruit of directly loving God one day. These practices can also be understood, to my understanding, as forms of spiritual exercises that enable us to discern and receive reality in its fullness. Weil wrote, continuing the earlier quotation from *Statement of Human Obligation*:

Those minds whose attention and love are turned towards that reality [of the Good] are the sole intermediary through which good can descend from there and come among men. Although it is beyond the reach of any human faculties, man has the power of turning his attention and love towards it.⁵³

The first love, which is the love of our neighbor, has “already been made obvious by Christ.”⁵⁴ Weil wrote, “The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: ‘What are you going through?’”⁵⁵ In this simple question, we recognize that the suffering individual exists, not just as a label or social category, but as a fellow neighbor that, just as we are, was stamped by affliction.⁵⁶ Through this, attention enables individuals to address affliction, fulfill their duty to their fellow men, and make it an antidote to the force of the world. Engaged attention is also a form of renunciation: “The man accepts to be diminished by concentrating on an expenditure of energy, which will not extend his own power but will only give existence to a being other than himself, who will exist independently of him.” Attention is thus

⁴⁷ Rozelle-Stone and Davis, “Simone Weil.”

⁴⁸ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 32.

⁴⁹ Weil, 34.

⁵⁰ Lissa McCullough, “The Void: Simone Weil’s Naming of Evil,” in *Wrestling with God and with Evil: Philosophical Reflections*, edited by Hendrik M. Vroom (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 1.

⁵¹ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 89-155.

⁵² Weil, 89-90.

⁵³ Weil, *Simone Weil: An Anthology*.

⁵⁴ Weil, *Simone Weil*, 90.

⁵⁵ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 69.

⁵⁶ Weil, 70.

very powerful, for Weil argued it could bring about a grace of renewal and hope to our brethren akin to the sacrament of baptism.⁵⁷

The attention and recognition towards our neighbor opens us to a form of interconnectedness with reality, with the universe, and with God. Through attention, we become an antenna of God, the vessel in which God becomes present for His creations. Additionally, we also present, by turning our attention to the most suffering and destitute among us, a “supernatural justice”, which is the same thing as the love for neighbor.⁵⁸ In this, affliction becomes a form of redemption—Weil did not seek to cure it nor propose a remedy for it—she instead translates her understanding into a form of shared “cross” that we must take, a cross that binds us in love with our neighbor, and by such ultimately leads us in directly loving God.

The second love is the love for the order, and by such, the beauty of the world. This love is a complement to the former because in this love we naturally follow the divine love that created the universe.⁵⁹ It is essentially the same, only directed towards the matters of the physical world instead of persons.⁶⁰ The beauty of the physical world, however, lies not in its attributes, but rather in our relation to it, born out of the sensibility of our body and soul. Our love for it proceeds from God, who resides in our souls, coming out to His presence within creation.⁶¹

The beauty of the world to Weil is the “commonest, easiest, and most natural” way of approaching the divine reality because each person is undeniably attracted to beauty in all of its forms.⁶² In loving the beauty of the world, we should also acknowledge the order of the creation and thus submit ourselves to the creative will of God.⁶³ Love for our neighbor and the beauty of the world orients the person's attention towards his community and where he is in the world, enabling them to become “rooted”.

In the third love—the love for religious practices—Weil sees the relation of man to the divine presence beyond them. The whole virtue of religion, according to Weil, lies in its essence as the recitation of the name of God, which in itself is transformative and salvific to those who practice it with desire.⁶⁴ Religious matters are unique and “special” because they exist here below, tangible, yet “perfectly pure.” This purity is not on account of their worldly attributes—religious institutions may be corrupt, and the faithful may be inattentive, says Weil—yet it is still pure by the right of God, by convention, unconditioned, and perfect. “No stain can sully it.”⁶⁵ Contact with such things that are perfectly pure will then result in the destruction of evil, and here lies the virtue of religious practices.⁶⁶ This is the “waiting” for God: passive, quiet, attentive, and continuous anticipation of God to come down and save us in the midst of our affliction. And so, these three forms of love can be interpreted as potential fields in which we can exercise our souls, orienting them towards the reality above.

⁵⁷ Weil, 97.

⁵⁸ Weil, 91.

⁵⁹ Weil, 107.

⁶⁰ Weil, 108.

⁶¹ Weil, 112.

⁶² Weil, 111.

⁶³ Weil, 124.

⁶⁴ Weil, 127.

⁶⁵ Weil, 131.

⁶⁶ Weil, 130.

The Rosary as a Means to Cultivate Attention

How do we understand the Rosary as a way of cultivating one's attention, although Weil herself has never specifically written about the Rosary? I believe this may be done by inferring several points from both her thoughts and the recount of her spiritual journey, which was marked by her special affinity towards Catholicism. At first, it would be clear enough to quickly understand the practice of the Rosary as one of the aforementioned loves for religious practices, which is among the forms of implicit love of God. The Rosary as a prayer would thus be a potential channel for us to direct our attention to the pure religious matters which cleanse our souls.⁶⁷ However, it is important to note that Weil also has more to say about the practice of prayer. Prayer is, to Weil, the highest form of attention which precedes faith and love; it is "absolutely unmixed attention."⁶⁸ It is pure attention,⁶⁹ "the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable towards God."⁷⁰ The quality of our attention alone determines the quality of our prayer.⁷¹ It is possible that, through such highest attention, a prayer is pure enough to make contact with God.

In her *Spiritual Autobiography*, Weil recounts a piece of her spiritual journey in which she admitted that initially, she had never once prayed in her life, "either out loud or mentally."⁷² This was until she learned the 'Our Father' in Greek for the first time, by which she experienced an "infinite sweetness" that caught her to the point that she couldn't stop saying it throughout her work for several days.⁷³ Since then, she has made a commitment to reciting the prayer with absolute attention. Each time she felt like her attention "wandered or went to sleep" just in the slightest during the recitation, she would restart and repeat it again. This experience of repetitive and attentive Our Father for Weil was extraordinary—she described it as the words of the prayer had snatched her thoughts and taken her into a place of infinity outside of space. On other occasions, she felt like, during such recitations, Christ was present with her in person.⁷⁴ This experience of Weil shows a great potential within repetitive recitation of prayer to spark the contemplative state of attention, an attention that allows us to immerse ourselves in the utterance of "the name of God," a state of anticipation and reception of the divine presence.

Weil also implied another important aspect of prayer during her time spent throughout the Holy Week in 1938 at the Benedictine abbey of Solesmes. She was suffering from "splitting headaches" that caused each sound to hurt her "like a blow." However, in following all of the liturgical services, and through "an extreme effort of concentration," she was "able to rise above this wretched flesh, to leave it suffer by itself, heaped up in a corner, and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words."⁷⁵ Here, we see the potential of prayer, through attention once again, to be a sedative of the soul, allowing us to look above and be brought up by supernatural grace. The said spiritual experiences of Weil revealed the power of attention gained through repetitive prayer and the chanting of the name of God,

⁶⁷ Weil.

⁶⁸ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 117.

⁶⁹ Weil, *Gravity*, 120.

⁷⁰ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 61.

⁷¹ Weil.

⁷² Weil, 31.

⁷³ Weil, 32.

⁷⁴ Weil.

⁷⁵ Weil, 29.

which naturally reminds us of our discussion on the Rosary—a prayer consisting of the repetition of 5 ‘Our Fathers’ and 50 ‘Hail Marys.’ In light of Weil’s personal recounts, we can thus see the strong potential within the Rosary as a means to practice attention.

Additionally, particularly in the case of the Rosary, we can also see the role of the rosary prayer beads as an object to further aid an individual in focusing their attention, especially those who are significantly aided by the sense of physical touch. This is true especially in my own experience: the usage of the prayer beads grew to become not merely a way to count my recitation of prayers, but also as a form of mental grounding that helps me to grow in awareness and meditation. This affectionate touch of the sacred can also be interpreted, in Weil’s thoughts, as a form of love for the divine through the love for the beauty in the physical world, as well as a pure, religious matter that purifies our soul. In this ‘outward’ attributes of the Rosary—that is, its nature as a recitation of repetitive, attentive prayers and its usage of prayer beads—we can already see it as an effective practice to focus our mind into a state of proper attention.

However, I would also like to highlight another potentially powerful aspect of the Rosary for fostering attention: its ‘inward’ attributes, specifically the contents of its contemplation, which centers around the life and passion of Christ. In Weil’s previous recount of her time at the Solesmes, she further added that her experience enabled her “to get a better understanding of the possibility of loving divine love in the midst of affliction,” and that throughout the liturgies “the thought of the Passion of Christ entered into my being once and for all.”⁷⁶ This statement of hers, which juxtaposed the human affliction with the Christian faith in the Passion of Christ, came from her initial recognition of Christianity as a religion of the wretched.

Weil’s earliest encounter with Christianity, as told in her *Spiritual Autobiography*, happened after a year she spent laboring on the floors of various factories in Paris, probably around 1935.⁷⁷ Experiencing firsthand the oppressive conditions of labor, she was “in pieces, soul and body,” due to the contact with the affliction of others that had “killed” her youth and “entered” her flesh and soul. In the factories, she “received forever the mark of a slave.”⁷⁸ It was in this state of mental and physical wretchedness that she was taken by her parents to a holiday in Portugal. There, she entered a little fishing village which was “very wretched too” on the day of its patronal festival. There, under the full moon, she watched the villagers going in procession, touring the ships, carrying candles, and singing “ancient hymns of a heart-rending sadness.” It was in that moment that she understood Christianity as “preeminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it,” and she among them.⁷⁹ This was the beginning of her identification of affliction with the person of Christ, which resonated throughout her thoughts to the end of her life. In *Gravity and Grace*, she wrote of the crucifixion as the meeting point between the Creator and the creator,⁸⁰ the “grand reconciliation” between the two fundamental aspects of the universe—necessity and grace—

⁷⁶ Weil.

⁷⁷ Davis, “Simone Weil’s Method,” 244-245.

⁷⁸ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 28.

⁷⁹ Weil, 29.

⁸⁰ Weil, 86.

personified in the divine nature of Christ as both divine and human. Weil wrote, “This is the only possibility of perfection for us on earth. That is why the Cross is our only hope.”⁸¹

In light of these thoughts, another potential is shed upon the mysteries of the Rosary. The Rosary as a meditation of the life of Christ has the potential of becoming a practice of attention in which, through the recognition of affliction in the Passion of Christ, we may purify our souls, submit ourselves to the Will of God just as Jesus did in the garden, leave our ‘wretched’ physicalities through decreation as Weil said, and transcend to the participation in God’s love. Through the contemplation of Christ, who had to go through death in order to be resurrected and glorified, so do we have to submit to the necessity of affliction here below in order to cross the void and be taken up above by grace.

Finally, it is also important to consider that such recognition of affliction in the Rosary does not merely grace on one’s own individual presence alone. The Rosary, as an essentially Christian practice, entails the Great Commandment of Christ: to love God, and to equally love your neighbor as yourself.⁸² Therein lies a natural implication that the Rosary should also orient us to the divine that lies in our neighbor. Weil wrote in regard to attention and the love for others: “We should be impelled towards our neighbor by God, as the arrow is driven towards its target by the archer.”⁸³ In the context of community, this potential is especially true for the Rosary in the popular practice of reciting it together within families, friends, neighborhoods, and the like. In such practice, the cultivation of attention within the Rosary does not only proceed from its nature as a religious practice, but also as a form of neighborly love and rootedness of an individual in their respective culture and communities. Just like the Christian conception of prayer, attention is directed both to the One above and our neighbors here below. More particularly, the meditation on the affliction of Christ should not merely lift us from our own affliction, but also direct us in attention to the most afflicted among us: “The love of our neighbor is the love which comes down from God to man ... God is longing to come down to those in affliction.”⁸⁴ This is the supernatural justice that Weil called to be brought about by attention.

In conclusion, by interpreting the Rosary in the light of Weil’s experiences and ideas, we have revealed the underlying potentials within it as a means to cultivate attention: in its nature as a form of religious practice, in its character of repetitive prayers and recitation of the name of God, in its sensory use of the prayer beads, and in its meditation of the divine affliction within the Passion of Christ—which grace does not merely benefit for one’s own spiritual growth, but also to direct them in concrete action and commitment in loving our neighbour, especially those who are most afflicted. These characters of the rosary allow us to grow in the love for religious practices and to exercise in focus, concentration, self-renunciation, submission to the will of God, love for neighbor, rootedness in one’s community, and social justice commitment for the afflicted, which all entail the growing of Weil’s attention and thus the reception of divine, supernatural grace.

⁸¹ Weil, 80.

⁸² Refer to Matthew 22:35–40, Mark 12:28–34, Luke 10:27a.

⁸³ Weil, *Gravity*, 46.

⁸⁴ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 100.

Presenting a Spirituality of Liberation

In using the term 'the spirituality of liberation', I refer specifically to the liberation theological method of Gustavo Gutierrez, which asserts that theological reflection must proceed from praxis, that is, the experiencing of God through contemplation and action within the concrete material and historical contexts in which one lives. Theology, coming after it, is thus a critical reflection of one's praxis in the light of faith.⁸⁵ In the context of Gutierrez, which remains true for our time today, the human reality is marked by an oppressive capitalist-imperial system that impoverishes the vast majority of the masses, protected by the tyrannical bourgeois governments that rule with iron fists. Hence, theology must respond to this reality, to not offer mere spiritual consolation, but also a spirituality that commits to justice and the bringing about of an authentic liberation for the poor.

In terms of method, I would argue that Weil's method is fascinatingly similar to Gutierrez's, with the only difference being that one deals with philosophical inquiry and the other with theological reflection. Davis had made explicit Weil's method as a way of engaging the world, a formulation of a way of life.⁸⁶ It does not sit content in just understanding reality, but must proceed from it an action.⁸⁷ This is proven through her time working in factories. As Davis wrote, her point was "to act within [the world] with a view toward changing it."⁸⁸

Both methods emphasize the primacy of lived experience in order to reach a proper understanding of reality, as well as the necessity of concrete praxis to proceed from it, although with evident differences in terminology and train of thought. Here alone we can already see how Weil's philosophical method is in itself a form of spirituality of liberation, especially in light of her left-leaning ideas and radical commitments to justice. So, I intend to denote a spirituality that resonates with such spirit, and I see that such spirituality can be found in a very compatible manner with Weil, both in her ideas and philosophical method.

Segundo Galilea (1928-2010), a Chilean Catholic priest, has noted several key themes that characterize a 'liberation spirituality', all of which were evident in our earlier interpretation of the Rosary: first, emphasis on the historical humanity of Jesus and His historical-social contexts; second, the experience of life among the poor and needy, which brings about a concern for and solidarity with justice; and third, charity, expressed in terms of mercy and compassion for our brothers and sisters, particularly the poorest of the poor.⁸⁹

In the context of my personal experience, the Rosary resonated especially deeply in my community life and social commitments. As someone who was previously a skeptic and left-leaning prior to my conversion, the Catholic Church called me in its liberatory aspects and 'preferential option for the poor.' My first encounter with the Rosary came in this context. It was the 13th of October, and the Jakarta Cathedral held a procession for Our Lady of Fatima. There, in my first experience of learning the Rosary, just like Weil, I see where I belong in the Church: an afflicted slave among many, equally in desperate need of the Blessed Virgin's help. I recognize the church as a hospice. Within 5 years of living the Catholic faith now,

⁸⁵ Martin Chen, *Teologi Gustavo Gutierrez* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2002), 33.

⁸⁶ Davis, "Simone Weil's Method," 236.

⁸⁷ Davis, 240.

⁸⁸ Davis.

⁸⁹ Galilea Segundo, "The Spirituality of Liberation." *The Way*, 25, no. 3 (1985): 191-93.

I have grown my experience in praying the Rosary significantly through the practice of it as a collective recitation within communities, which reminds me of my presence in the community. Even when I recite it alone, I like to imagine myself in the presence of my closest friends, hearing their voices joining me in calling upon the name of God and the Blessed Virgin. Through these, I see the Rosary as a form of my rootedness in my community, a reminder of my duties to my neighbors.

A similar reading can be found in Mary Gordon's *A Feminist View of the Rosary*, especially in her reading of the sorrowful mysteries of the Rosary. She found that, in the Incarnation of Jesus, His human body became the embodiment of the great love that comes down to suffer together with the whole world. In His flagellation, He is with those who are victims of violence and harassment. In His coronation with thorns, He is present with those who are ridiculed. In His death upon the cross, He is in solidarity with our mortality, who are also mysteriously "left" by God.⁹⁰ In such reading, Gordon directs her attention in the Rosary to those who are victims of discrimination, especially women: those who are mothers, those suffering with mental illness, and those carrying the wounds of trauma.

Thus, we see that as a contemplation into the events of Jesus' life, the Rosary explicitly directs us to the humanity of Jesus and the historical contexts in which He lived. Furthermore, through critical reflections on the various forms of afflictions which He and His family had endured throughout, the Rosary ought to be a call for us to direct our attention to those among us who are afflicted just as Christ, His family, and His disciples were: the ones who do not have a place to stay in the inn, the ones who suffered torture and unjust punishments, the ones who are poor, the ones who are persecuted, the ones who are most marginalised and neglected in our society. Through this may proceed a spiritual concern for the poorest and most in need among us, which ought to finalize in concrete acts of mercy and compassion—a work for liberation. In finality, the interpretation of the Rosary as a means for attention means to present and to push its potential further for a liberatory spirituality, a spirituality that calls for collective rootedness and praxis. It is what naturally should proceed from Weil's philosophical method, religious ideas, and political aspirations—and here lies the greatest potential of such an interpretation of the Rosary.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a bringing about of liberation spirituality through the interpretation of the Rosary as a means to cultivate attention, in light of Simone Weil's thoughts. This was done through several findings. As a starting point, the Rosary, as a popular devotion, was understood as a space in which personal spiritual experiences may be built by the faithful. This is possible through the creation of organic affection and attachment in each individual's interpretation of the practice. Then, we have seen how, through the nature of the Rosary, we see a potential for cultivation of attention as taught by Weil, namely by its nature as a form of religious practice and its potential for one to grow both in the grace of God and the orientation towards their neighbor. Through a thorough additional reading on Weil's spiritual autobiography, we can also see how such an interpretation of the Rosary should culminate in a spirituality

⁹⁰ Gordon, "Mysteriously Woman," 267-269.

of liberation, a spirituality marked by recognition of the most afflicted among us and commitment to the praxis of social justice.

This offer is meant to show a potential within the Rosary to spark a personal spirituality that is able to empower and liberate the faithful in the grassroots, especially those considered to be on the threshold of the Church. Amid this reality of oppressive systems and, a lot of times, neglectful religious institutions, it is essential for the faithful to have an accessible space of spirituality which allows them to be grounded not only in their faith, but also in their community and individual contexts.

This spirituality of liberation also reminds us of the duality of Weil, who, in her own experience, was able to bridge her nature of revolt and her deep love for religious matters that demand obedience. Weil showed us that these seemingly polar opposites of principles do not have to be “reconciled”—all we have to do is to find in them an intermediary, a link within the separation that may lift up our souls. In the person of Weil, we see a locus of liberation spirituality, in which an individual transformation gives birth to the commitment and praxis in bringing about social change. Both the philosophy of Weil and the demand for a spirituality of liberation should be of great importance, especially for the Catholic Church, which should respond to the reality of institutionalized injustice with a concrete manifestation of her preferential option for the poor.

There are several potential areas of research to be further explored from these findings. For instance, it would be interesting to have Weil's religious philosophy in the reading of various other religious traditions beyond her original affinity with Catholicism, especially owing to the fact that she herself was deeply moved by many religious traditions and mythologies. It would also be worthwhile to look at how Weil's thoughts can contribute to further specific contexts within liberation theology. Such discussions may reveal more potential within Weil's philosophy, especially in the progressive discourse within philosophy of religion and/or theology.

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