

ARTS & CULTURE

Drawing a Bead on Prayer

'Rosary Stars' Packs Star Power

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Lauren Bauer's first recollection of the Rosary is seared into her memory.

When she was 13, Bauer's father and brother left California aboard a sailboat headed for Costa Rica, a journey that should have taken just weeks. But more than two months passed without word from them.

The family began to panic. Finally, a phone call: Lacking a favorable wind, Bauer's father and brother had drifted far out to sea. But one day a rare gust of westerly wind kicked up and blew them safely to land.

The wind had begun to blow at just the time Bauer's mother prayed a Rosary seeking intercession for her husband and son.

"My mom relayed this story to me in tears," Bauer recalled. "She believed it was a miracle. I was amazed. I knew that the Rosary was a good thing at that point."

Today, Bauer is among nearly two dozen notable athletes, actors, singers and other celebrities trying to convey that same message to Catholics, especially youths.

That's being done through "Rosary Stars: Praying the Gospel," a DVD produced by Hollywood's Family Theater Productions (\$19.95, FamilyTheater.org).

Founded by Holy Cross Father Patrick Peyton in 1947 to promote prayer, morality and family unity, Family Theater has produced more than 700 radio and TV programs that have been broadcast 10,000 times.

Father Peyton did so with top-flight Hollywood writers and actors, including Bing Crosby, Loretta Young, Frank Sinatra and others.

The tradition continues today under Family Theater's director, Father Willy Raymond of the Holy Cross Fathers.

Situated on Sunset Boulevard, Family Theater produces dramas, documentaries, Spanish radio broadcasts, billboards, a film festival, Hollywood prayer sessions and 2007's Rosary Bowl attracting tens of thousands of bead pushers.

Now comes "Rosary Stars," an inspiring three-part DVD that explains and prays the Rosary with celebrity imprimatur. Father Raymond conceived of the project after Pope John Paul II introduced the Luminous Mysteries in 2002.

"That made me start looking around at how we could introduce the Rosary to the next generation of people," said Father Raymond, "because it was pretty clear that among people 35 and under, the Rosary was not very well known and not a very popular prayer in their lives."

That was confirmed by 32 focus groups conducted with young Catholics around the country.

"Almost none of them prayed the Rosary," said Father Raymond, "and a lot of them sheepishly admitted that they don't pray it because no one ever taught them to pray."

Two main themes emerged from the focus groups. First, youth were interested in learning about and learning how to pray the Rosary, especially if presented with rich media; second, youth were more likely to pray the Rosary if celebrities showed the way.

"Especially for young people, it's important to have heroes, people they can look up to who are of their faith as well," said Father Raymond. "People who have accomplished notable feats of either athletics or acting or celebrity and who also are humble enough to recognize that there's somebody more important than them, and that's God. And that they are trying to live a good life in spite of celebrity."

"I think it's just part of human nature that young people like to worship."

The DVD's five-year development process culminated with its debut earlier this year. Stars joining the project — including Milwaukee Brewers' pitcher Jeff Suppan, *Bella* actress Ali Landry and Matt Gallant of "The Planet's Funniest Animals" — ranged from cradle Catholics to converts. All contributed time, talent and travel gratis.

Bauer, a former All-American softball player for Arizona University, prayed the First Sorrowful Mystery: The Agony in the Garden. She joined the project because "this DVD promised to open eyes to the beauty and depth of this prayer for beginners and veterans alike."

J. Omar Castro, veteran of nine feature films alongside stars such as Forest Whitaker, Cuba Gooding Jr. and Nicolas Cage, prayed the First Glorious Mystery: The Resurrection.

"As a young adult ... I left the Catholic Church out of frustration that my prayers were not being answered the way that I thought they should be answered," Castro said. "Once I started to grasp the bigger picture and that it's his plan and not mine, I returned. Praying the Rosary has a way of putting whatever is going on in my life at any given moment in perspective."

Among the converts was relative Catholic newcomer Jake Alba, a Hollywood producer. Alba went through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults program in 2003 prior to getting married.

Not long after, Father Raymond recruited him to produce "Rosary Stars," even though the 35-year-old Alba knew almost nothing about the Rosary.

"I feel lucky that I was chosen because anyone could have done this project years ago," said Alba. "A lot of times I didn't think I was qualified to do it because I was so new to it, but that's what they were looking for, that perspective of the Rosary and how it related to ... a modern youth culture.

"When I first got into it, I thought the Rosary was just for old people. I never thought of making it a part of my life."

Now he prays it almost daily.

The first part of the DVD is a learning segment that incorporates themes from Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*.

Viewers are introduced to each of the Rosary's prayers, and the mysteries are explained.

"It's really important to ... see the Rosary as the 'School of Mary,'" said Father Raymond. "She takes you by the hand and takes you all through the important events of her Son. It's important to keep your focus on the face of Christ during all of these events."

The DVD's second part, a timeline, focuses on the centuries-old history and development of the devotion.

The bulk of the 132-minute DVD, though, is time with the stars. Each one works from Father Peyton's *Rosary Prayer Book*, reading Gospel passages pertaining to the mystery being prayed, offering personal reflection, then praying the decade.

Video of the stars is interspersed with storyboard drawings and beads that pulse with light, all underscored with soft music.

The personal reflections often are intimate and powerful. Immaculée Ilibagiza, author of *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*, tells of the 1994 genocide and how she prayed the Rosary while hiding in a tiny bathroom for 91 days — and how that helped her to forgive the killers of her family.

Patrick and Molly Nuo reflected on the Crucifixion. He's a recording star in Asia and Europe with three hit albums; Molly is a U.S. actress.

"They were very transparent about the difficulties that they've had to struggle with," said Father Raymond. "He even talked about his own addiction to pornography and other things before he got married and was coming back to the Church and praying, and especially praying the Rosary. A lot of people gave moving testimonies."

The production quality is top-notch. That's partly due to the great lengths they went to produce the film. Alba, for instance, flew to Rome to capture many of the images seen throughout the DVD.

"It's a high-end product in this world anyway," said Father Raymond.

Sales have been strong, with a second run of DVDs ordered since its February debut. That despite only word-of-mouth and Internet advertising.

"It's the best product in years that we've put out in terms of the response of people," said Father Raymond. "I think it's a useful way to inspire young people with the power and the wonder of the Rosary as a tool in the spiritual life."

And if you're adrift, it might even blow you back on course.

*Anthony Flott writes from
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