



**PONTIFICAL & ROYAL ARCHCONFRATERNITY  
OF OUR LADY OF THE ROSARY  
ANTEQUERA**

SHORT HISTORICAL REVIEW

The worship to the Virgin of the Rosary (Virgen del Rosario) is one of the oldest and most pious manifestations which emerged in Antequera after its adhesion to the Crown of Castile. The origin of this devotion is related to the first Fraternity of Charity whose members looked after the most deprived and ill people in their own facilities since the second half of 15th Century. There are records of that century and the following one which prove that the Marian image of the Virgin of the Rosary was taken out in procession through the Antequera streets each 25th March –Festivity of the Incarnation- and that many religious festivities were devoted to Our Lady of the Rosary, above all from 1571 when thanks to Her intervention the troops commanded by Felipe II defeated the Ottoman Turks in the memorable Battle of Lepanto. This victory of the Catholics helped to spread along the Christian world the worship to the Virgin and the Rosary prayer. It was the very own Pontiff who established from that very same year the 7th October as Her annual festivity. There were uncountable indulgences and privileges granted by the different Popes to the chapels, sanctuaries and fraternities, wherever the Christian territory, whose Titular was the Virgin of Rosary.

The historical manuscripts about the town of Antequera, drafted in the 17th and 18th centuries, transcribe these papal bulls proving how immemorial and useful the fervour for Our Lady was. However, it is not until 1586 when we can prove more rigorously the historical development of this fraternity. In that year, the Order of Saint Domingo de Guzmán founded a convent in our town. Not long afterwards by alleging pontifical rights, the new Dominic temple got the images and the worship devoted both to the Penitent of the Sweet Name –which was until then located in the Franciscan Convent of Jesus- and to Our Lady of the Rosary. The members-brothers, who were installed in the Charity hospice, did nothing to avoid the move. It can be affirmed that they were the same brothers who established the new congregation under the patronage of the Dominic order. In 1587, a little bit before getting installed in the new headquarters, the congregation acquired a new sculpture of the Most Holy Mary of Rosary, a work by Juan Vázquez de Vega, which was better adapted to be dressed and taken in procession as it was bigger than the image worshiped up to then. This new and beautiful Marian image, holding Jesus Child, is the one which we can admire today in the niche of her chapel located in the Basilica of Saint Dominic, in Antequera. This image stands out because its golden polychrome, her beautiful features and peaceful look.

A tragic event links the Virgin of the Rosary with the history of the town. In 1679, the people from Antequera suffered the most awful epidemic of bubonic plague ever recorded until then and whose terrible consequences in human and economic losses will not be repeated again until the pandemic of yellow fever at the beginning of 19th century. The isolation hospital located in the San Bartolomé square to attend to the sick was hardly able to help the hundreds of plagued-infested people who got piled up inside the building due to the lack of doctors and resources. Definitely, the Capuchin order was the most selfless and committed to physically and spiritually help the people who was about to die. The whole town was bricked up to prevent the entry and exit of people and, thus, the entry of food was also stopped. Death, in the form of plague and hunger, walked freely and without stop through the Antequera streets. There were at least thirty common pits dug out of the city walls. It is impossible to calculate exactly how many souls the plague took. Besides these collective burial, the big fires, lighted day and night during many days to purify the environment, consumed clothes and wood objects, furniture, the craftsmen's tools, the churches' pews... devastation was a fact and the people of that time believed that the town had come to its end, to its most absolute extinction.

Although they were reluctant, the Dominic accepted the massive request of the Antequera people to take the image of the Rosary in procession through the streets of the town to ask Her mediation before the



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plague punishment. The expected event took place in the evening of the 20<sup>th</sup> June 1679. According to the accounts, a big storm of rare force burst out before the parade. The temporal calmed down just when the “Queen of the Heavens” was being taken out and She arrived to the hospital where the sick people were. She returned to her temple being accompanied all the way by the prayers of the priests, the municipal authorities and the neighbours. The coincidence of this procession with the purifying rain cleaned the environment fouled by the contagious disease and restored the Antequera people’s health. The Virgin of the Rosary was taken out again in procession on the 28<sup>th</sup> June and besides being accompanied by the devout crowd, there was a white dove flying around her. This sign was interpreted as the definitive redemption of sins and as a miracle of collective health made by the pious celestial mother.

In municipal session held on the 23rd June 1679, the Antequera Council proclaimed the Virgin of the Rosary as the Patron Saint of the town by establishing a perpetual annual festivity (with bullfights and night fireworks) whose first celebration was the 8<sup>th</sup> October 1679.

The collective of scribes and conservators also dedicated a sung mass to be perpetually celebrated on one of the days of her octave. The devotion awakened by the miracle of Mary Holy Saint of the Rosary when the plague catastrophe made Her worthy of receiving many presents from the devotees: jewels, coats and a beautiful silver lamp which crossed the Atlantic from Mexico and which was sent by a person born in Antequera who was living in the far American land.

Among all the votive offerings offered to the Virgin, it stands out the *La epidemia de la peste* painting (Plague epidemic) which is kept in the Epistle niche of Saint Dominic church, in Antequera. Although the original canvas, by an anonymous painter, was painted a little bit after the victory on the plague, probably between 1679 and 1680, the painting we can admire nowadays is a makeover dated in 1732 and paid by a devotee of the Rosary. In the lower part of the canvas we can see several cures practiced to the ills: bleedings, bubo extirpations and cauterizations... It can also be identified in the middle the San Juan de Dios hospital, and the carts carrying the corpses to the extramural pits where the fires to destroy all the infected objects were located. In the upper part we can see the Virgin of the Rosary, in an outbreak of glory, stopping the disease which was striking Antequera in form of arrows.

The fervour for the Virgin of the Rosary continued along the centuries, being more evident in those years when the people from Antequera suffered miseries, above all related to virus infections, such as the yellow fever in 1804. The tumultuous 19<sup>th</sup> century and the confiscations of the church’s wealth put an end to the Order of the Dominic in our town. Without their patronage, the history of the fraternity fades away and the devotion declines without being totally finished. Today, already in 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a group of members of the fraternity is working to recover and increase the faith professed to the Virgin of the Rosary by declaring their admiration for the glorious past of this devotion. Without it, it would not be possible to understand many facts carried out by the Antequera people in the previous years. The objectives of the people involved in the current fraternity are guarding, preserving and increasing the heritage related to Our Lady of the Rosary and her archconfraternity, beside spreading their believe in Her effective intercession.

*Text by Milagros León Vegas*



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The Fraternity is currently undergoing a revival thanks to the conferences about artistic, historical and religious matters through the year, besides the events focused on the Virgin of the Rosary's festivity, on the 7<sup>th</sup> October. As a cultural manifestation, there is an annual exhibition, the last fortnight in September, together with a populous open-air evening party on the third weekend in September. On the first week in October, it is celebrated the annual Triduum in honour of the Virgin which reaches its highest point with a colourful procession in the morning on the first Sunday in October through a traditional tour around a neighbour devoted to its Virgin. She majestically walks under a carved and spectacular silver throne dressed up in one of her 14 coats tailored with antique wedding dresses donated in the past by aristocratic ladies devoted of this Image. The whole set is adorned with two lanterns in Antequera style which have their own throne, inherited from a sumptuous past. The procession is cheered up by the small bells rang by children wearing an original coral colour altar boy costume.

Likewise, it is worth mentioning the impressive set of small jewels composed of pieces of gold, silver and gemstones with a very high material value and incalculable artistic value which are fruit of the populous devotion to this Image in the past. Part of this set of jewels is exhibited in its own display case in the Museum of the Antequera Town.

The image of the Virgin, a work by Juan Vazquez de Vega in 1587, is guarded since 300 years ago in the Basilica of Saint Dominic under an sublime crowning in golden wood. It is surrounded by votive offerings related to her miraculous existence, plus carvings by Andrés de Carvajal and other pieces of precious metals, such as the Altar lamp attributed to José Ruiz.



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