# Bead One, Pray Too

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## A Guide to Making and Using Prayer Beads

Kimberly Winston

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For my friend Sandy Olson,
whose life was an inspiration because of her great faith
and the way she put it into practice.
I miss you.

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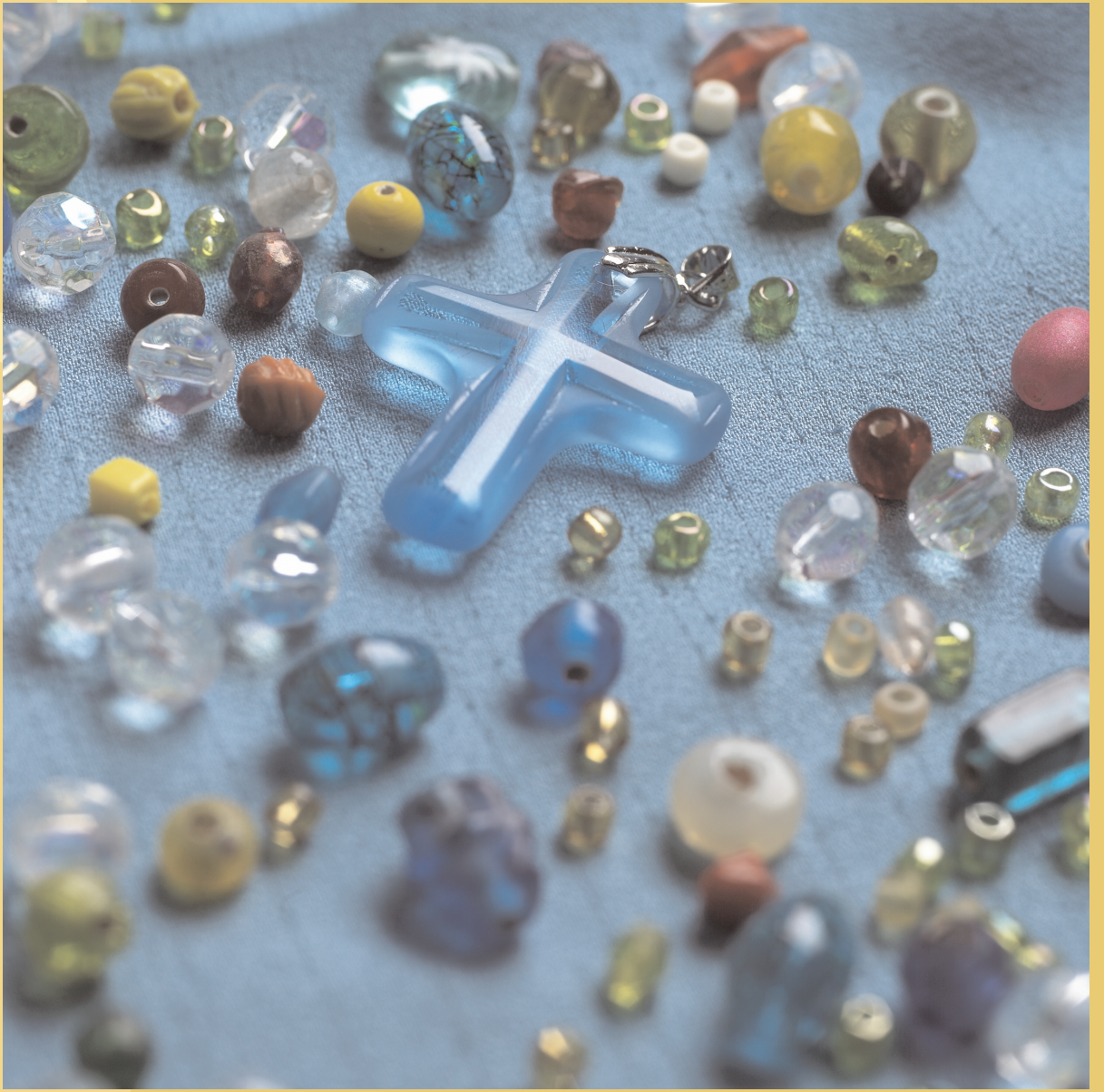

# INTRODUCTION

**When holy and devout religious men**
**Are at their beads, 'tis much to draw them thence,**
**So sweet is zealous contemplation.**

**—William Shakespeare, *Richard III***



When I was a little girl, sometimes after school I used to cross the street from our apartment building and sneak into the cool, dark sanctuary of Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church. I use the word "sneak" because I had the mistaken idea that I shouldn't go into a church that wasn't Protestant, as I was. But I loved Blessed Sacrament, with its statues of serenely gazing saints, its many Marys in blue robes holding chubby babies, the rows upon rows of flickering flames in red glass holders, and the golden glow of the altar candlesticks. There was a great hush about the place that was a welcome respite from the New York City streets outside. But more than anything, I loved the rosaries I saw clasped in the hands of the old Polish and Irish ladies scattered through the pews. In the dim light from the stained glass windows, their small beads winked and twinkled as they clicked through the women's knobby old fingers. The women seemed to whisper to their beads—I couldn't hear what they

said—and kissed them quickly, almost furtively, before slipping them back into their pockets. I didn't know what those beads were or how they were used, but I knew I wanted some. They were pretty and sparkly and there was mystery attached to them, something I knew had to do with the big crucifix at the front of the church. But I wasn't sure what it was and I was too scared to ask a priest and I never thought to ask my own pastor.

I was a Methodist and we didn't have rosaries. We had confirmation Bibles and that was about it. As I grew up and learned more about other religions, I discovered how the Catholic rosary was used and why. I admired those who had the dedication and faith to pray with it daily. But somehow I didn't feel I could take up the tradition of counted prayer. It just didn't seem to *belong* to me.

Then, about two years ago, I wrote a feature story about a growing number of people combining various hobbies with their faith—sewing prayer quilts, knitting prayer shawls, painting icons, stitching skull caps. More than one of the groups I came across in the reporting made something they variously called an Anglican, Episcopal, or Protestant rosary. What, I wanted to know, could that be? Didn't only Catholics have rosaries? A quick search on the Internet showed me I was wrong. There was information about this new rosary on the websites of Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian churches. Most people who use this new rosary credit its creation to an American Episcopal priest who taught others how to use this ancient form of contemplative prayer. Many have formed groups that make rosaries and give them away, while others make them and explore their use in personal and group prayer.

The Anglican or Protestant rosary, these websites say, is a simple thing—thirty-three beads and a cross. Its great beauty lies not in the attractiveness of its beads, but in that *there is no right or wrong way to use it*. Instead of one officially sanctioned set of prayers, like the Catholic rosary, or a couple of traditional ways

of praying with it, like the Hindu mala, this form of rosary can be used to pray *any* prayers you are drawn to—from the prayers of the liturgies and Daily Offices of the church to personal poems of self-expression. You can pray one word on each bead, like a mantra—perhaps the name of God or the word "peace"—or you can recite more complicated expressions of faith from the Scriptures or other literary sources. You can memorize the prayers or read them. You can say them aloud or in your heart. You can pray with your eyes opened or closed. You can pray on your knees or at your job. You can do anything with it.

That is not to say that there are no guidelines for using the Anglican or Protestant rosary. But it is so accommodating to our needs, our goals, our own individual spiritual quests that the many possibilities need some rounding up and explaining.

The same day I learned about this new rosary, I made a quick one. I threaded a needle, strung some beads I had left over from another project in the order I saw described on the websites, tied a knot, and settled down on my bed, my dog at my feet. Unsure about this very un-Protestant–seeming thing, I selected very simple prayers—the Jesus Prayer ("Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me") and the prayer of Julian of Norwich ("All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well"). Then I just started to pray, slipping the hard, round beads through my fingers one at a time, one for each repetition of the prayers.

I did not expect that this handful of beads would set me on a path of prayer that would change the way I think about God and my relationship to him. But it did. After a week or so of praying with the beads every day, I began to feel my mind click off in the middle of the recitation. The almost constant chatter that runs through my head—my perennially long list of chores and tasks and worries—began to recede. In its place came a stillness, a place where there is only

me, my beads, and my longing for God. When I end my session with the beads, I come away feeling more serene within the landscape of my life. I don't sweat the small stuff as much as I used to. I don't feel alone, but as if I had just spent time with a good friend, one I will see again the next day when I take up the beads again.

All of this took practice and patience. It didn't miraculously happen in a single session. But it happened, and I never expected it to. Now I have that rosary I longed for as a child. In fact, I have made more rosaries than I can count, keeping many and giving others away. I use them every day, taking them with me everywhere I go, a set for every purse and vehicle I own. I have learned many prayers by heart and have written other, more complicated ones in a journal I keep with my rosary. I yearn for the time each day I will spend with my beads—often on one of my walks or just before bed. They carry me beyond myself and my troubles and preoccupations to a quiet place where I can just sit and *be*. I hope this book will help others see how they, too, can make this spiritual practice their own.

## Some Terminology

Christian prayer beads, the main subject of this book, have many names: the Catholic rosary is also called the Marian or Dominican rosary, and the Anglican rosary is also known as the Episcopal or Protestant rosary. In this book, I will use the term "prayer beads" to refer to the general category of strung beads used to count prayer, and the word "rosary" to refer to strung beads used to count Christian prayer. If I need to distinguish between the different kinds of rosaries, I will add the adjectives "Anglican," "Lutheran," "Protestant," "Orthodox," or "Catholic."

## How to Use This Book

In this book, we'll take a three-part journey. In the first part, I'll introduce the prayer beads of the world's religious traditions and describe what they are made from and how they are used. Then we'll take a closer look at the Catholic rosary and the Anglican or Protestant rosary it gave birth to. We'll delve into the history of these and other forms of Christian prayer beads to place them within the context of the world's religious traditions. We'll look at how these Christian rosaries are used and how they can enrich our individual spiritual practices by drawing us closer to God through counted prayer. In the second part, we will look at the many prayers that can be said on the rosary, taking the words of Jesus, Mary, and other saints and putting them at our fingertips and in our mouths. Lastly, we will learn how to make different prayer beads through simple bead stringing techniques, and we'll explore the symbolism we can give them through the materials we choose. I hope that you will come to fall in love with this great prayer tool as I have.

After reading the first section, you may want to jump to the third section and make your own rosary so you can try the prayers gathered in the second section. Or, you may want to skip making a rosary altogether and jump to chapter eleven and buy one from one of the resources listed there. Catholic rosaries can be found in most religious bookstores and many Episcopal churches and cathedrals with stores have Anglican rosaries available for sale.

And a caution—the purpose of this book is not to encourage anyone to pray the way I do. Your prayer life is your business, not mine. Rather, it is to share this simple prayer tool and the doors to contemplation it can open. My hope is that others will find it as rewarding as I have.

PART ONE



# BEADS OF FAITH

Islamic subhahs and a Hindu mala.

CHAPTER ONE

# A HISTORY OF BEADS AND PRAYER BEADS

**Just as there is one thread**
**And on it are woven breadthwise and lengthwise**
**Hundreds of thousands of beads**
**So is everything woven unto the Lord**

—Grantha Sahib 2352, Nam Dev, Indian poet,
thirteenth-fourteenth century CE

There is something about human beings and a craving for adornment. We have an innate longing for the attention and status beads and jewelry bestow. The oldest known beads, made of teeth and shell, were found in a French cave and date back thirty-eight thousand years to the Neanderthals. But because most early beads were made of organic materials—wood, seeds, clay, and the like—finds like these are rare. Today, beads are made to last—most are mass-produced in factories in Japan and the Czech Republic. But there are still many individual artisans crafting fine handmade beads in glass, clay, ceramic, silver, and other metals.

*It could not have come*
*down to us so far,*

*Through the interstices*
*of things ajar*

*On the long*
*bead chain of*
*repeated birth,*

*To be a bird while we*
*are men on earth.*

Robert Frost

Our instinct for decoration is matched by our instinct for religion. Every culture, no matter how modest or great, no matter how ancient or recent, has some set of religious beliefs. Perhaps it is only natural, then, that beads and religion should have such a long association. Many scholars write that the majority of beads made by our ancestors served some sort of spiritual purpose. Some were worn as a sign of station or class, often signifying the role of priest or shaman, while others served as talismans, protection against the uncertainties and dangers of life. In the Far East, ancient Tibetans made etched *dZi* beads of agate, giving them the patterns and symbols of the Bo religion, an early precursor to Buddhism. These are now known as "Buddha's eyes" and are supposed to have mystical powers to bring good fortune. Another such surviving bead is the "eye bead," a blue and white bead that resembles a staring blue eye believed to protect against evil. Today, it is not uncommon in Turkey and its surrounding countries to find both Muslims and Christians who carry these along with their Islamic prayer beads and Catholic rosaries or Orthodox prayer ropes.

No one is certain when people began counting prayers on beads. Many scholars believe the Hindus of ancient India were the first to engage in the widespread use of prayer beads. The first known use of prayer beads dates to a third-century BCE statue of a Hindu holy man draped with beads hung by devotees. Buddhism, another product of ancient India, probably borrowed prayer beads from Hinduism. As traders and travelers came through the Indian subcontinent, and as Indians ventured beyond their own borders, the practice of counting prayers on strings of beads spread to other parts of the world and soon, to other faiths. Today, counting prayers on beads is one of the most common spiritual practices, performed in places as different and distant as India and Indiana and by people of faiths as varied as Buddhism and Wicca. It is a

practice that links the world's believers in diverse faiths, joining them in a shared longing for the divine, just as the beads themselves are bound together by a single thread or cord.

## Prayer Beads in World Religions

### *Hinduism*

Hinduism is the oldest of the world's religions, taking gradual shape from various local traditions scattered throughout India. In Hinduism, Brahma is the creator of all and has many aspects, including Shiva, the destroyer, and Vishnu, the preserver. Hindu prayer beads, called a *mala*, or "rose" in Sanskrit, have 108 beads, usually made from seeds and worn around the neck. Devotees of Shiva favor malas made from *rudraksha* seeds—Sanskrit for "Shiva's eyes"—while the followers of Vishnu make theirs from the *tulsi* plant, a kind of basil. The number 108 is sacred to Hindus, as it corresponds to the number of Brahma's names. The recitation of these names, called *namajapa*, is a sacred practice. Three other Indian-born religions—Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism—feature the use of 108-beaded malas, evidence of the sharing and blending of religious traditions and the common desire of the devout to count prayers on beads.

### *Buddhism*

Buddhism arose in India about 500 BCE. Like the Hindus, the Buddhists call their prayer beads a *mala*, and it, too, consists of 108 beads. In Buddhism, the number 108 represents the number of sins people can commit and the number of virtues they can aspire to. Many Buddhist temples have 108 steps which the faithful climb to worship. In Zen Buddhism—the Japanese form of the

*He who has learned to pray has learned the greatest secret of a holy and a happy life.*

William Law

faith—108 bells are rung at the new year, marking the number of temptations humans must overcome to achieve nirvana, the ultimate goal of Buddhism.

The Buddhist mala is often made from the wood of the bodhi tree, the type of tree the Buddha was reclining beneath when he achieved enlightenment, an ideal state of total detachment and peace. As the faith spread across Asia, the mala was crafted from other materials, including bone, amber, and semi-precious stones. A Buddhist mala has beads in three sizes. The bulk of the beads—105 of them—are the same size, with one larger bead and two smaller ones at the end. These beads signify the "three jewels" of Buddhism: the Buddha himself, his teachings (*dharma*), and the monastic way founded by the Buddha (*sangha*). A Buddhist uses a mala to count repetitions of the mantra "Om mani padme hum," considered the "true words" of the Buddha and which roughly translate to "The jewel of the heart of the lotus." The person reciting grasps a bead between the thumb and second finger, which represent the body and the spirit. Buddhists believe the repetition of this mantra puts one on the path to enlightenment.

### *Judaism*

Judaism is the only world religion that does not have a tradition of prayer beads. Some scholars say they are forbidden by Jewish law as a pagan practice. But Jews do have a form of counted prayer in the *tallit*, the four-cornered prayer shawl worn by men (and some women, in the more liberal forms of Judaism) for morning prayers, *Shabbat*, or Sabbath, services, and the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The tallit have a border with knotted fringe, known as *tzitzit*. The purpose of the tallit is to hold the tzitzit, which God, in the Torah, instructs the Jewish people to wear so that they might not forget the commandments:

*God wills that men should pray everywhere, but the place of His glory is in the solitudes, where He hides us in the cleft of the rock, and talks with man face to face as a man talks with his friend.*

Samuel Chadwick

> Speak to the Israelites, and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages; let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner. That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge. Thus you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God. (Num 15:38–40, Hebrew-English Bible[1])

Today, there are centuries-old techniques and rules for the tying of the tzitzit. Each tzitzit consists of eight strands of thread. The tallit maker wraps one strand around the others seven, eight, eleven, and thirteen times, with a knot in between each grouping of wraps. These numbers are rich in religious significance. Some say assigning these numbers to their corresponding letters in the Jewish alphabet spells the name of God. Others say adding and multiplying them in a certain way equals the number 613, the number of laws in the Torah. Whatever their meaning, they are an integral part of Jewish spiritual life, as many Jews touch the tzitzit and their knots at designated portions of their prayers.

### *Christianity*

The very word "bead" comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *bede*, which means "prayer." The first mention of Christians and counted prayer is found in the third-century writings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, who carried pebbles in their pockets and dropped them, one by one, as they said their prayers. Eventually, these pebbles were strung on a cord and carried. A Belgian museum claims to have a string of prayer beads that belonged to Saint Gertrude of Nivelles, a seventh-century abbess. In the eleventh century, Lady Godiva of Coventry—she of the legendary naked horseback ride—left a string of prayer beads in her will to a monastery she and her husband founded.

1. New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1917.

*Every great movement of God can be traced to a kneeling figure.*

Dwight L. Moody

Today, the most commonly used form of Christian prayer beads is the Catholic rosary, which we'll look at in detail in chapter two.

In Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the devout use a prayer rope called a *komboskini* in Greek, and a *tchotki* in Russian. Instead of beads, these often have knots, usually thirty-three, fifty, or one hundred, and are made of wool, to represent the flock of Jesus. Eastern Orthodox prayer ropes are usually black, a symbol of one's sins, and instead of a crucifix, they usually have a knotted cross. The Orthodox most frequently recite the Prayer of the Heart, also called the Jesus Prayer, on their prayer ropes: "Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner." The supplicant holds the prayer rope in the left hand, freeing the right to make the sign of the cross. The prayer rope is never worn—that would be a sign of ostentation—and is always carried. No one is certain how the prayer rope developed, though it most likely evolved from the Desert Fathers' and Mothers' pebbles. Legend attributes its creation to Saint Anthony, the father of Orthodox monasticism. It is said that Anthony tied a leather rope with a knot every time he prayed in Latin *Kyrie Eleison* ("Lord have mercy"), but that Satan would come and untie the knots. Anthony then devised a way to tie the knots with seven wraps and crossings of the rope, so that each knot held within it the sign of the cross. The devil, it was said, was unable to bear the sign of the cross and was held at bay. Today, Orthodox prayer ropes are still tied in this intricate fashion.

### *Islam*

Muslims believe the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of their faith, once said, "Verily, there are ninety-nine names of God, one hundred minus one. He who enumerates them would get into Paradise." In the pages of the Qur'an, the holy book Muslims believe was revealed to Muhammad in the seventh century, these names cover virtually every characteristic of God, or Allah, from "Most

Merciful" to "The Avenger," and from "The Giver of Life" to "The Bringer of Death." Muslims believe that to recite these names is to invite Allah's blessings. "O God," Muhammad is believed to have said, "I invoke You with all of Your beautiful names." Many Muslims count all these names on sets of prayer beads called *subhah*, an Arabic word which means "to exalt." Subhahs come in strands of thirty-three, sixty-six, or ninety-nine beads, numbers that make it easy to keep track of the names.

Traditional Islamic prayer beads are round and are bound together with a larger, tubular lead bead and a tassel. Sometimes the tassel has two beads dangling from it as well. They can be made from wood, olive seeds, plastic, ivory, or clay. The tassel is called the *shahed*, or witness.

Muslims use the subhah after each day's five set prayer times, but are also free to use them whenever they want. And there is some flexibility in their prayers. Some Muslims recite *subhan'Allah* ("glory be to God") thirty-three times, *alhamdou'LillAh* ("praise God") thirty-three times and *Allahu Akbar* ("God is the greatest") thirty-three or thirty-four times, the last time upon the tubular bead. Some Muslims might repeat the Islamic call to prayer, which sounds from the world's mosques five times a day, calling the faithful to turn toward Mecca, the Muslim holy city:

> *Allahu akbar*
> God is great
> *La Ilaha ila Allah wa Mohamadun rasul Allah.*
> There is only one God and Mohammad is his prophet.

Muslims also use the subhah during the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca all faithful, able-bodied Muslims must make at least once, using it to recite the names of God as they circle the Ka'ba, the large black sacred cube Muslims believe is the center of the universe.

*Prayer the church's banquet, angel's age,*

*God's breath in man returning to his birth.*

George Herbert

*Our whole being must be in our praying; like John Knox, we must say and feel, "Give me Scotland or I die."*

E. M. Bounds

Not all Muslims use the subhah. Followers of the Wahhabi school of Islam shun them in the belief that the Prophet Mohammad never used them, but counted his prayers with his fingers or with date seeds.

***Baha'i***

The Baha'i faith was founded in the mid-1800s in present-day Iran by a Persian holy man known as Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'ís recite *Alláh-u-Abhá*, a form of God's name, ninety-five times a day. Baha'i prayer beads consist of some factor of ninety-five, usually nineteen of the same kind of bead with an additional five different beads hanging from the circle. They are usually made from wood, stone, or pearls. Some have a tassel and a nine-pointed star, the emblem of the Baha'i faith.

***Neo-Paganism, Earth-Based and Goddess-Based Religions***

No one can say for sure where the practice began, but today many Wiccans, Asatruar (believers in the ancient Norse religion), Druids, and followers of other earth-based and goddess-oriented faiths are making and using prayer beads for their individual and corporate practice. Some scholars of contemporary religions think that some Neo-Pagans (a blanket term for those who follow the many contemporary forms of ancient, pre-Christian faiths) are borrowing Catholic practices many may have been raised with before becoming Neo-Pagans. Other scholars say the fact that Neo-Pagans are codifying and counting prayer is a sign that these new religious movements are maturing. Whatever the reason, anecdotal evidence shows that more Neo-Pagans are using prayer beads, as the number of websites and new books dedicated to pagan prayer beads is on the rise. Some Neo-Pagans adapt a traditional Catholic rosary, removing the cross and replacing it with a more earth-

oriented emblem, such as a fertility goddess, a tree, or a five-pointed star. Some also borrow traditional Catholic rosary prayers, but rewrite them with a focus on the goddess. Tirgereh is a Seattle-based Wiccan I met when I was writing a newspaper story about Neo-Pagans and prayer beads. She has made the Catholic rosary part of her practice since she was a college senior and now writes and shares her own prayers for it with others. One of them, which she calls "The Daily Elemental Rosary Prayer," begins like this:

> The day has begun, the time of resting at end
> as I gather and prepare to go forth
> I take this time to pray and remember:
> it is not alone do I wander
> it is not alone do I search
> it is not alone do I explore
> it is not alone do I live
> For I am surrounded with the love of the Mother
> And I am blessed with the bounty of the Father.

There are almost as many forms of prayer beads as there are religions. How can they help build a richer, fuller prayer life for those who feel called—as I did as a little girl—to learn about and use them? To discover this, we must first look more closely at the Catholic rosary, the main form of Christian prayer beads used today.