

## Noni Calls

*This essay was written as a post to accompany a 54-day novena that I participate in, again and again, along with my [Way of the Rose](#) community.*

Today as I think about how I pray the rosary and my evolving and deepening understanding of Our Lady, I want to introduce you to two wise women from my family, my stepmother, Gaye, and her grandmother who is known to us all as Noni. I knew Noni as a child, but I was very young and she seemed very old and very Italian, so despite her kindness and the twinkle in her eye, I found her somewhat intimidating. She had helped to raise Gaye and her sister when they were children, and my stepmother (a term I use with great affection and respect) talks about her all the time. Even though Noni died a long time ago, my fascination with her has grown over the years.



During the first year of the pandemic, I phoned Gaye in California every day – she was living alone and her loneliness in lockdown was palpable, so our daily calls seemed vital to us both. We talked about everything under the sun, and more – including Noni. Those calls themselves were the answer to my first novena petition, to become closer to my family, and I loved talking to Gaye, a lapsed cradle Catholic, about my rosary experiences and WOTR. In turn, she introduced me to the Mary of Noni’s devotions as she described the flower crowns Noni would make for her to take to school in May and sang me the songs her grandmother had sung to her as a child - I even heard about the religious medals Noni used to wear pinned to her underwear. I began to feel closer to Noni, and often invited her into our circles as one of my beloved dead.

So, now you know who Noni is, let me tell you about *Noni Calls*. When Gaye graduated from school and started working, Noni would ask her to call every day, even if only for a minute, a brief connection, a quick hello. Even though Gaye and I were enjoying lengthy calls every day at the time, she always reminded me that a Noni Call – a brief hello – would be just as appreciated. I’m a grandmother, too, and I understand what she meant. A minute with a child or a grandchild is precious. I don’t need to demand more. When we’re all busy, that minute is wonderfully precious because the time really matters.

And like all mothers, Our Lady appreciates Noni Calls. I babysat for my toddler grandtwins in April and I learned all over again how much energy it takes to be a mother. For that week, I didn’t have the time or the energy – or the inclination – to pray a full rosary. I was fully focused on those youngsters and their three teenaged cousins. I’d pray a stray Hail Mary when I could fit it in during the day, but there was none of the continuity or contemplation that I am accustomed to in my life as a retired woman living overseas in a quiet home with only one other adult. I have never felt closer to Our Lady than I did that week! Thinking back on that time now, I realise those Hail Mary’s were my Noni Calls – brief heart connections with our

Lady birthed out of devotion, not duty, during a time when I was focused on caring for the people I love deeply. I know Our Lady understood and approved.

Back home now, it is easier to pray a full rosary, but I'm newly and keenly aware of the devotion and tenderness, the sweetness, of a Noni Call, and my praying has changed again. Our Lady seems closer now that I'm invoking a flesh and blood Noni and her love for her granddaughter. Just as Gaye didn't want to disappoint Noni or miss a day of talking to her, I am reaching for Our Mother with fresh devotion and an open heart. My Noni Calls to our Lady have infused my prayer life with intimacy and immediacy as I chatter away to her throughout the day, bringing my whole life closer into the garden – and at the same time weaving my ancestors into my daily life, too.

This loose reframe has supported me in placing devotion over perfection. I don't need to gather my prayers into a careful circle or weave a perfect crown for Our Lady – when I make my simple Noni Calls, my heart opens and I think we both smile. The rest of my prayers can follow on from there.