The *Rosarium Philosophorum* ("Rosary of the Philosophers")

is best understood as a sequence of alchemical images about transformation. Although it draws on older medieval alchemical themes, the famous set of 20 woodcuts was printed in 1550. The "rosary" means a collection or garden of wisdom, not a Catholic prayer rosary. Jung later read the images psychologically—as a symbolic map of individuation: becoming a more whole person by bringing conscious and unconscious parts of oneself into relationship.

The sequence should not be treated as a rigid staircase. People move back and forth through these experiences, and different interpreters give the images somewhat different meanings. The explanations below use a simple Jungian reading while preserving the main alchemical symbolism.

Plates 1–20 as steps toward individuation

Plate	Traditional image	Easy psychological meaning	A practical step
1	The Mercurial Fountain	You discover that beneath your ordinary personality is a deeper, fluid, unconscious life. Mercury represents something changeable, healing, dangerous, and difficult to control.	Notice recurring dreams, emotions, fantasies, and reactions without immediately explaining them away.
2	The King and Queen	Opposites appear: reason and feeling, independence and relationship, masculine and feminine, spirit and body. The "incest" symbolism means that the opposites are still enclosed within the same psychic family or self.	Identify two opposing sides of yourself that you normally keep separate.

Plate	Traditional image	Easy psychological meaning	A practical step
3	The Naked Truth	The false coverings of the personality begin to fall away. You see yourself and another person more honestly, including shame, desire, weakness, and dependency.	Ask: “What am I pretending not to know about myself?”
4	Immersion in the Bath	Consciousness descends into the unconscious. This can feel restorative, but also frightening, because the ego is no longer fully in control.	Spend time with silence, dreams, journaling, therapy, or active imagination rather than escaping discomfort.
5	The Conjunction	The King and Queen unite. Psychologically, this is the meeting of opposing parts of the personality—not their permanent fusion, but a genuine encounter.	Let thinking and feeling both speak before making an important decision.
6	The Coffin of Putrefying Conception	The old identity dies. The image is not about physical death; it represents the breakdown of a former self-image, relationship pattern, or life direction.	Grieve what is ending instead of rushing to replace it.

Plate	Traditional image	Easy psychological meaning	A practical step
7	Separation or Extraction of the Soul	The elements are separated. You distinguish what belongs to you from what you absorbed from parents, culture, partners, or society.	Sort your own values from inherited expectations: “Is this truly mine?”
8	Ablution, or Washing	The blackened material is cleansed. Painful experiences are not erased; they are made conscious and viewed with less shame and projection.	Name the feeling beneath blame: fear, envy, grief, longing, anger, or helplessness.
9	Rejoining or Sublimation of the Soul	The soul descends again and revives what seemed dead. Meaning, imagination, and emotional life return to the personality.	Reconnect insight with ordinary life through art, friendship, work, nature, or embodied activity.
10	The New Birth: the Rebis	A new whole appears, symbolized by the hermaphroditic Rebis. This means a more balanced personality that can contain opposites. It does not mean becoming flawless.	Practice holding two truths at once—for example, “I love this person” and “this relationship harms me.”

Plate	Traditional image	Easy psychological meaning	A practical step
11	Fermentation	The work begins again at a deeper level. What seemed solved returns in a more conscious form. The winged King and Queen suggest greater awareness, but not final completion.	When an old problem returns, ask what new layer it is revealing rather than assuming you have failed.
12	Illumination	The solar ego descends into the unconscious and loses its certainty. Paradoxically, insight comes through accepting that you do not yet know.	Give up the need to have the correct interpretation immediately.
13	Nourishment and Blackening	The old solar attitude becomes "black as pitch." Consciousness is nourished in darkness; the ego's pride, control, or compulsive striving is digested.	Stay present with uncertainty without turning every insight into a grand theory about yourself.
14	Fixation or Ascent of the Spirit	What is valuable becomes stable. The ego is not destroyed; it becomes less volatile and better able to remain grounded while unconscious forces move through it.	Establish steady habits—sleep, boundaries, honest conversation, creative work—that can hold inner change.

Plate	Traditional image	Easy psychological meaning	A practical step
15	Multiplication	Spiritual or psychological insight is watered into the earth. Transformation begins to spread into behaviour and relationships.	Convert one insight into one observable action.
16	Reviving or Reanimation	The soul descends and raises the "Daughter of Philosophy." A neglected, younger, or more creative part of the personality comes alive.	Ask what part of you has been waiting for permission to develop.
17	Perfection or the Yellowing	The second hermaphrodite appears, surrounded by symbols of nourishment and completion. This is a fuller union of body, soul, spirit, feeling, and thought.	Stop treating inner development as self-improvement alone; let it produce generosity, creativity, and responsibility.
18	The Green Lion Devouring the Sun	The green lion dissolves the sun. Raw life, instinct, emotion, and nature consume the overly polished ego. The old identity is purified rather than simply destroyed.	Let bodily needs, strong feelings, sexuality, anger, and vitality inform consciousness without allowing them to rule it.

Plate	Traditional image	Easy psychological meaning	A practical step
19	Assumption and Coronation	Nature is crowned. What was rejected as inferior—matter, embodiment, the feminine, feeling, ordinary life—is recognized as part of wholeness.	Bring your spiritual or psychological insights back into practical life, work, relationships, and the body.
20	Resurrection	After repeated death and purification, a renewed person rises. Individuation is not escape from humanity but a return with greater freedom, humility, and capacity to live.	Ask: "What does my new understanding require me to do differently now?"

The first ten images are often read as the initial cycle: descent into the unconscious, union of opposites, death of an old identity, separation, cleansing, and rebirth. The later ten continue the process rather than simply celebrating the first rebirth. They show a second descent, another surrender of ego-certainty, stabilization, embodiment, and return. Jung discussed the first part extensively, while later interpreters have emphasized that plates 11–20 complete the series rather than merely append an optional ending.

The final images also retain explicitly Christian and alchemical symbolism. Plate 18 shows the green lion dissolving or devouring the sun; plate 19 presents the crowning of nature through imagery associated with the Virgin and the Trinity; and plate 20 shows resurrection. In a psychological interpretation, these images point to the transformation of consciousness and its return to embodied life—not to becoming superhuman or spiritually superior.

The whole movement in plain language

You could summarize the twenty plates like this:

1. Something deeper is alive in me.
2. I meet the parts of myself that oppose one another.
3. I become more honest about who I am.
4. I enter the unconscious instead of avoiding it.
5. My opposing parts begin to relate.
6. An outdated identity breaks down.
7. I separate my own nature from what I inherited.
8. I process shame, grief, and projection.
9. Meaning and vitality return.
10. I become more capable of holding opposites.
11. The process begins again at a deeper level.
12. I surrender excessive certainty and control.
13. The unconscious transforms my old attitude.
14. A steadier consciousness develops.
15. Insight enters daily life.
16. A neglected creative or soulful part awakens.
17. The personality becomes more integrated.
18. Instinct and embodied life challenge the ego.
19. Ordinary life and the body are valued as sacred material.
20. I return to life changed, but still human.

In Jungian terms, individuation does not mean becoming isolated, perfect, or permanently calm. It means becoming less divided, less governed by unconscious projections, and more able to recognize that the “self” is larger than the conscious ego. The recurring pattern is therefore: encounter, descend, suffer, distinguish, integrate, embody, and return.