

Mirror of the Soul:

Experiencing the Psalms as Contemplative Prayer

ST. ANDREW'S ABBEY: November 24-26, 2023

Fr. Luke Dysinger, O.S.B.

Friday

- 5:30 pm *Vespers*
6:00 Supper in silence with music
6:45 **INTRODUCTORY CONFERENCE**
7:30 *Compline*

Saturday

- 6:00 *Vigils*
7:30 *Lauds*
8:00 Breakfast in silence
9:30 **MORNING CONFERENCE**
12:00 pm *Mass*
1:00 Lunch
3:30 **AFTERNOON CONFERENCE**
5:30 *Vespers of Christ the King*
6:00 Supper
6:45 **EVENING CONFERENCE**
7:30 *Vigils of Christ the King*

Sunday

- 7:30 *Lauds of Christ the King*
8:00 Breakfast in silence
9:30 **CONCLUDING CONFERENCE**
12:00 *Mass of Christ the King*
1:00 Lunch
2:00 Departure

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY and PSALMODY

100

200

300

400

500

600

700

800

900

1000

PSALMODIC REVOLUTION

DESERT FATHERS and MOTHERS

Irenæus
c.130-c.200

Cyprian d.258

Origen
c.185-254

Clement
of Alexandria
c.150-c.215

NICEA
325

Athanasius
c.296-373

Antony of Egypt
?251-356

Evagrius
c.346-399

Cassian c.360-435

Basil c.330-379

Greg.Naz. 329-389

Greg.Ny. c.330-c.395

Dionysius the Aereopagite

Benedict
c.480-c.540

Gregory the Great
540-604

Maximus Confessor
580- 662

John Climacus
570- 649

Bede 673-735

Benedict of Aniane
c.750-820

Scotus Erigena
c.810-c.877

CLUNY

Romuald
950-1027

Simeon the
New Theologian
949-1022

Philo
of Alexandria
c.20 BC-c.50AD

1100

1200

1300

1400

1500

1600

1700

1800

1900

2000

GREGORIAN CHANT

Bernard
1090-1153

Hildegard of Bingen

Bruno
c.1030-1101

Suger
1081 - 1151

Hugh
of St. Victor
1096-1141

Guigo II
1140-1193

Dominic
1170-1221

Francis
1181-1226

Bonaventure
1217-1274

Mechtild
1210-1280

Gertrude
1256-1302

Eckhart
1260-1327

Aquinas
1225-1274

Catherine
of Sienna
1347-1380

Ruysbroeck
1293-1381

Bridget
of Sweden
1303-1373

Julian
of Norwich
1342-1413

Á Kempis
1380-1471

Ignatius of Loyola
1491-1556

PROTESTANT HYMNODY

REFORMATION

Francis de Sales
1567-1622

Teresa
of Avila
1515-1582

John
of the Cross
1542-1591

JANSENISM

Pascal
1623-1662

Jean Pierre
De Caussaude
1675-1751

Br. Lawrence
1611-1691

LITURGICAL MOVEMENT

Columba
Marmion
1858-1923

Thérèse
of Lisieux
1873-1897

Edith Stein
1891-1942

1) *The Night Sky a reminder of:*

Judgment after Death

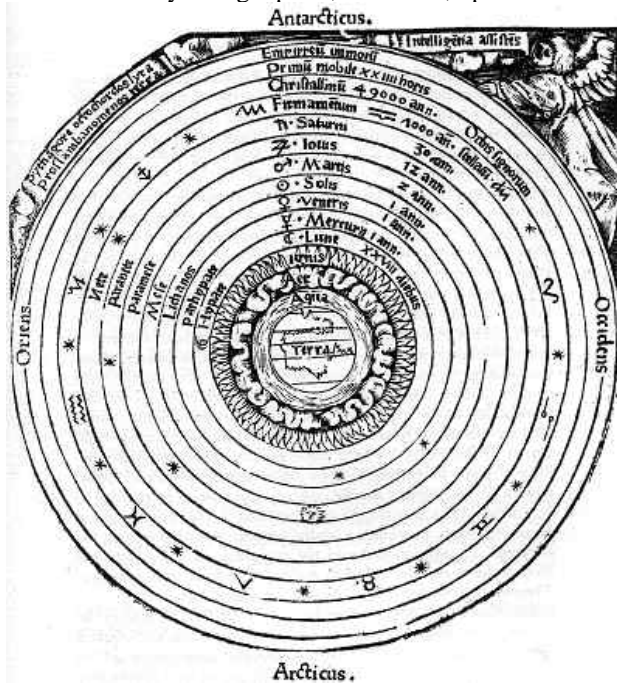
The quest for Virtue

The insignificance of earthly empire and glory

2) *The Music of the Spheres: audible sometimes in earthly song*

"Scipio, imitate your grandfather here ; imitate me, your father; love justice and duty, which are indeed strictly due to parents and kinsmen, but most of all to the fatherland. Such a life is the road to the skies, to that gathering of those who have completed their earthly lives and been relieved of the body, and who live in that place which you now see: which you on earth ... call the Milky Way. When I gazed in every direction from that point, all else appeared wonderfully beautiful.

There were stars which we never see from the earth, and they were all larger than we have ever imagined ... The starry spheres were much larger than the earth ; indeed the earth itself seemed to me so small that I was scornful of our empire, which covers only a single point, as it were, upon its surface.



17. As I gazed still more fixedly at the earth, Africanus said: "How long will your thoughts be fixed upon the lowly earth? Do you not see what lofty regions you have entered? These are the nine circles, or rather spheres, by which the whole is joined.

One of them, the outermost, is that of Heaven; it contains all the rest, and is itself the supreme god, holding and embracing within itself all the other spheres; in it are fixed the eternal revolving courses of the stars. Beneath it are seven other spheres which revolve in the opposite direction to that of heaven.

One of these globes is that light which on earth is called Saturn's. Next comes the star called Jupiter's, which brings fortune and health to mankind. Beneath it is that star, red and terrible to the dwellings of man, which you assign to Mars.

Below it and almost midway of the distance is the Sun, the lord, chief, and ruler of the other lights, the mind and

guiding principle of the universe, of such magnitude that he reveals and fills all things with his light.

[The Sun] is accompanied by his companions as it were - Venus and Mercury in their orbits, and in the lowest sphere revolves the Moon, set on fire by the rays of the Sun. But below the Moon there is nothing except what is mortal and doomed to decay, save only the souls given to the human race by the bounty of the gods, while above the Moon all things are eternal.

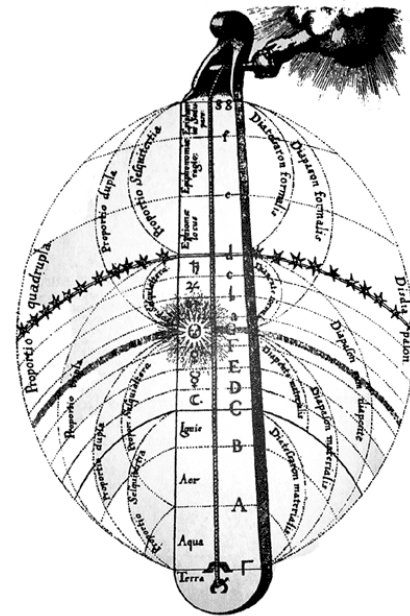
For the ninth and central sphere, which is the earth, is immovable and the lowest of all, and, toward it all ponderable bodies are drawn by their own natural tendency downward

Scipio Hears The Music of the Spheres

18. ... "What is this loud and agreeable sound that fills my ears ? "

"That is produced," he replied, "by the onward rush and motion of the spheres themselves ... the intervals between them, though unequal, are exactly arranged in a fixed proportion: thus, by an agreeable blending of high and low tones, various harmonies are produced.

"Learned men, by imitating this harmony on stringed instruments and in song, have gained for themselves a return to this region



as others have obtained the same reward by devoting their brilliant intellects to divine pursuits during their earthly lives

Men's ears, ever filled with this sound, have become deaf to it; for you have no duller sense than that of hearing. We find a similar phenomenon where the Nile rushes down from those lofty mountains at the place called Catadupa; the people who live near by have lost their sense of hearing on account of the loudness of the sound.

... If you will only look on high and contemplate this eternal home, and resting place, you will no longer attend to the gossip of the vulgar herd or put your trust in human rewards for your exploits. Virtue herself, by her own charms, should lead you on to true glory.

(19) I once heard a wise man expound a theory about our nature. He said that man is a miniature cosmos and contains all the elements of the great cosmos. And the orderly arrangement of the [31] universe, he said, is a diverse and variegated musical harmony which has been tuned in relation to itself and is in accord with itself and is never distracted from this harmony even though a great distinction of essences is observed in the individual parts. For just as when the plectrum skilfully plucks the strings and produces a melody in the variety of the notes, since indeed there would be no melody at all if there were only one note in all the strings, so too the composition of the universe in the diversity of the things which are observed individually in the cosmos plucks itself by means of some structured and unchanging rhythm, producing the harmony of the parts in relation to the whole, and sings this polyphonic tune in everything. It is this tune which the mind hears without the use of our sense of hearing. It listens to the singing of the heavens by transcending and being above the faculties of sense-perception that belong to our flesh. This, it seems to me, is also how the great David was listening when he heard the heavens describing the glory of the God who effects these things in them by observing their systematic and all-wise movement.

(20) For the concord of all creation with itself, which has been composed through opposites, is truly a hymn of the glory of the inaccessible and inexpressible God produced by such a rhythm. For rest and motion are opposites. They have been combined with one another, however, in the nature of existing things, and an impossible blend of opposites can be seen in them, inasmuch as rest is exhibited in motion and perpetual motion in what is not moved. For, on the one hand, all things in heaven are always in motion, either going around together in a fixed orbit, or moving in [p.90] a counter direction in the manner of the planets. On the other hand, however, the sequence in these movements has always been static and continues in this identical condition, never being altered from its present form to something new, but always being just as it is and continuing the same. The conjunction, therefore, of that which is at rest with that which is moved, which occurs continually in an ordered and unalterable concord, is a musical harmony which produces a blended and marvellous hymn of the power which controls the universe.

(21) The great David, it seems to me, having heard this hymn, said in one of the psalms that all the other powers which are in heaven praise God—the light of the stars, the sun and moon, the heavens of the heavens, and the water above the heavens—because he once speaks of water and all the things, one after another, which creation contains. (Ps 148:2-4) For the accord and affinity of all things with one another which is controlled in an orderly⁶ and sequential manner is the primal, archetypal, true music. It is this music which the conductor of the universe skilfully strikes up in the unspoken speech of wisdom through these ever occurring movements. (Cf. Ps. 18: 2-5)

FROM THE RULE OF BENEDICT

CHAPTER 19: THE DISCIPLINE OF CHANTING PSALMS

¹ We believe that the Divine Presence is everywhere, and *the eyes of the Lord in every place look upon the good and the evil.* (Prov 15:3). ² We especially believe this without any doubt when we are assisting at the Work of God.

³ Therefore let us always remember what the prophet says: *Serve the Lord in fear (Ps 2:11), and again,* ⁴ *Chant psalms wisely (Ps 46:8);* ⁵ *and, In the presence of the angels I will chant psalms to you (Ps 137:1).* ⁶ Therefore let us consider how we ought to behave in the presence of the Holy One and His angels, ⁷ and thus stand to chant psalms in such a way that our mind and voice are in concord with each other.

CHAPTER 20, REVERENCE IN PRAYER

¹ If when we wish to request something of powerful men we do not presume to do so except with humility and reverence, ² how much more ought we to offer supplications to the universal Lord and God in all humility and purity of devotion? ³ And we know it is not on account of our wordiness that we are heard, but rather through purity of heart and tears of compunction. ⁴ And therefore prayer ought to be brief and pure, unless it happens to be prolonged by a sentiment inspired by divine grace. ⁵ In community, however, prayer should always be brief; and at the signal given by the superior all should rise together.

XIX DE DISCIPLINA PSALLENDI

¹ Ubique credimus divinam esse praesentiam et oculos Domini in omni loco speculari bonos et malos, ² maxime tamen hoc sine aliqua dubitatione credamus cum ad opus divinum assistimus.

³ Ideo semper memores simus quod ait propheta: *Servite Domino in timore,* ⁴ et iterum: *Psallite sapienter,* ⁵ et: *In conspectu angelorum psallam tibi.* ⁶ Ergo consideremus qualiter oporteat in conspectu divinitatis et angelorum eius esse, ⁷ et sic stemus ad psallendum ut mens nostra concordet voci nostrae.

XX DE REVERENTIA ORATIONIS

¹ Si, cum hominibus potentibus volumus aliqua suggerere, non praesumimus nisi cum humilitate et reverentia, ² quanto magis Domino Deo universorum cum omni humilitate et puritatis devotione supplicandum est. ³ Et non in multiloquio, sed in puritate cordis et compunctione lacrimarum nos exaudiri sciamus. ⁴ Et ideo brevis debet esse et pura oratio, nisi forte ex affectu inspirationis divinae gratiae protendatur. ⁵ In conventu tamen omnino brevietur oratio, et facto signo a priore omnes pariter surgant.

From The *Institutes* and *Conferences* of St. John Cassian

And while all were sitting (as is still customary throughout the land Egypt), having fixed the whole focus of their hearts on the words of the one chanting the psalms, he sang eleven Psalms separated by prayers introduced between them: singing each succeeding verse with equal modulation, he completed the twelfth with the 'alleluia' response, and by suddenly withdrawing from the eyes of all, put an end to both their controversy and their ceremony. (Cassian, *Institutes* II.5,5)

... before they bend their knees they pray for a little while, standing to spend the greater part of the time in supplication. And after this, for the briefest moment, they prostrate themselves on the ground as if adoring the Divine Compassion, and then arise as quickly as possible, standing upright with outstretched hands - just as they had previously prayed (*oraverant*) standing - [now] to linger in [supplicating-] prayers (*preces*). For remaining prostrate on the ground for any length of time renders you open, they say, not only to the assault of [tempting] thoughts, but of sleep. . . But when he who is to 'collect' the prayers rises from the ground they all stand up together: for no one would presume to bend the knee before he bows down, nor to delay when he has risen from the ground . . . (*Inst.* II.7,2-3)

... receiving into himself all the inward states [contained] in the psalms, he will begin to sing them not as if composed by the prophets; but as if spoken by him as his own prayers, drawn forth from deepest compunction of heart: and he will certainly interpret them as directed at himself, understanding that their verses were not only formerly fulfilled by or in the prophet; but that they are fulfilled and acted out daily in him. (*Conferences* X.11.4)

We find all these inward states expressed in the Psalms, so that seeing whatever occurs as in the clearest mirror, we more effectively understand it; and so with our inward states for teachers, we are educated not [merely] by hearing, but through actual examination . . . (Cassian, *Conferences* X.11.6.)

(1) . . . For it can occasionally happen that any verse at all from the psalms may set our prayer ablaze while we are chanting. Or sometimes the musical phrasing by the brother chanting will arouse dull minds to focused supplication. (2) We also know that the enunciation and reverence of the one chanting the psalms can very much increase the fervor of those who stand by [listening]. *Institutes* IX.26.1-2.

And so our mind will attain that incorruptible prayer: . . . which does not consist solely in averting our inner gaze from images, but rather is characterized by the absence of any need for voice or word: for the focus of our minds is set ablaze through some indescribable eagerness of spirit, which our mind, beyond the senses or the effects of matter, then pours forth to God with inexpressible groans and sighs. *Conferences* X.11.6

Cumque sedentibus cunctis, ut est moris nunc usque in Aegypti partibus, et in psallentis uerba omni cordis intentione defixis undecim psalmos orationum interiectione distinctos contiguos uersibus parili pronuntiatione cantasset, duodecimum sub alleluiae responsione consummans ab uniuersorum oculis repente subtractus quaestioni pariter et caerimoniis finem inposuit.

... antequam flectant genua, paulisper orant et stantes in supplicatione maiorem temporis partem expendunt. Itaque post haec puncto breuissimo procidentes humi, uelut adorantes tantum diuinam clementiam, summa uelocitate consurgunt ac rursus erecti expansis manibus eodem modo, quo prius stantes orauerant, suis precibus inmorantur. Humi namque diutius procumbentem non solum cogitationibus aiunt uerum etiam sommo grauius inpuigni. . . Cum autem is, qui orationem collecturus est, e terra surrexerit, omnes pariter eriguntur, ita ut nullus nec antequam inclinetur ille genu flectere nec cum e terra surrexerit remorari praesumat. . .

... omnes quoque psalmorum adfectus in se recipiens ita incipiet decantare, ut eos non tamquam a propheta compositos, sed uelut a se editos quasi orationem propriam profunda cordis compunctione depromat uel certe ad suam personam aestimet eos fuisse directos, eorumque sententias non tunc tantummodo per prophetam aut in propheta fuisse completas, sed in se cotidie geri inperique cognoscat.

Omnes namque hoc adfectus in Psalmis inuenimus expressos, ut ea quae incurrerint uelut in speculo purissimo peruidentes efficacius agnoscamus et ita magistris adfectibus eruditi non ut audita, sed tamquam perspecta palpemus . . .

(1) . . . Nonnumquam etenim psalmi cuiuscumque uersiculus occasionem orationis ignitae decantantibus nobis praebuit. Interdum canora fraternae uocis modulatio ad intentam supplicationem stupentium animos excitauit. (2) Nouimus quoque distinctionem grauitatemque psallentis etiam adstantibus plurimum contulisse feruoris.

Atque ita ad illam orationis incorruptionem mens nostra perueniet . . . quae non solum nullius imaginis occupatur intuitu, sed etiam nulla uocis, nulla uerborum prosecutione distinguitur, ignita uero mentis intentione per ineffabilem cordis excessum inexplebili spiritus alacritate profertur, quamque mens extra omnes sensus ac uisibiles effecta materies gemitibus inenarrabilibus atque suspiriis profundit ad deum.

From the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. (*Apophthegmata Patrum* (Greek syst. col.) 7.1, SC 387, p. 336)

1. Once while living in the desert the holy abba Antony found himself in the state of *acedia*, darkened by [tempting] thoughts. And he said to God: 'Lord, I want to be saved and my [tempting] thoughts do not allow it. What should I do in my affliction? How am I to be saved?

1. Ð aθioj abba='Antwhioj kagezomenoj pote eh t\$=eθhm% eh aθhdi# gegone kailpol I \$=skotw\$ei I ogismwā. Kailej ege proj toh Qeoh: Kurie, qel w swqhñai kailouk ejwsi/me oi(I ogismoil ti/poihs w eh t\$=ql iyei mou; Pwj swqw?

And standing up a short time later he began to go outside, when he saw someone like himself sitting down and working, then standing up from work and praying; then sitting down again to work on the rope [he was making], and again standing up to pray.

But it was an angel of the Lord sent to set Antony straight and confirm him. And he heard the angel saying: 'Do this and you will be saved.' And on hearing this he rejoiced greatly and recovered his courage; and in acting thus he was saved

Kailmikroh dianastaj epiltalecw qewrei=tina o
'Antwhioj wj eputoh kagezomenon kailēgazomenon,
eiḡa ahistamenon apol tou=ērgou kail
proseuxomenon kailpal in kagezomenon kailthh
seirah ērgazomenon, eiḡa pal in eiḡ proseuxhh
ahistamenon.

'Hn delaḡgel oj Kuribu apostal eiḡ proj diotqwsin
kailaḡfal eian 'Antwnibu. Kailhḡkouse tou=
aḡgel ou l egontoj: Outwj poiēi kailswz\$. O del
touto akousaj pol l hh xarah eḡxe kailqarsoj,
kailoutwj poiwn eḡswzeto.

From the *Letter to Marcellinus* by St. Athanasius:

. . . And it seems to me that for the one chanting psalms, these become like a mirror in which he perceives himself and the movements of his own soul; and thus affected he recites them. (*Letter to Marcellinus* 12, PG 27.24)

. . . And the one hearing is struck with compunction as if he himself were speaking, and is moved by the words of the songs as if they were his own. (11, PG 27.21)

. . . for all of Sacred Scripture is a teacher of virtue and the truths of faith; but the Book of the Psalms somehow contains as well the image of the souls' course of life. 14, PG 27.25.

Kailmoi dokei=t%-yal l onti gihesqai toutouj wḡsper
eiḡsoptron, eiḡ tolkatanoēiḡ kailautoh ēh autoiḡ kailtal
thḡ eputou=yuxhḡ kinhmata, kailoutwj aiḡsqomenon
apaggel l ein autouj.

kailo(aḡkouwn delwj autoiḡ l egwn katanuḡsetai,
kailsundiatiqetai toiḡ twḡ %ḡwn rhmasin, wj idiḡn
oḡtwn autou=

pasa meh h(qeib Grafh\didaskal oj eḡstin aḡrethḡ
kailpiḡstewj aḡ hqouj: h(de/ge bibl oj twḡ Yal mwḡ eḡkei
kailthh eikoha pwj thḡ diagwghḡ twḡ yuxwn.

From *De diversis malignis cogitationibus* (on Various Evil Thoughts) by St. Evagrius Ponticus:

17. [Ph 16] The concepts of this present world - these the Lord gave to man, like sheep to a good shepherd: for it is written, *He has placed the world in his heart*; (Eccl. 3:11) yoking to him indignation and desire for [his] support, so that with the first he may drive away the concepts of wolves, while with desire he may lovingly tend the sheep, assailed as he often is by the rain and winds.

[God] also gave him pasture so that he may shepherd the sheep, as well as a verdant place and refreshing water (cf. Ps. 23: 2), [the] Psalter and a harp (*kithara*), a rod and a staff; so that from these sheep he is fed and clothed and gathers provender. For it is written, *Does anyone feed a flock and not drink its milk?* (1 Cor. 9:7).

It is therefore proper for the anchorite to guard this flock at night and by day, so that the concepts are neither caught by wild beasts nor fall into thieves' hands: if this should happen in the wooded valley he must immediately snatch [it] from the mouth of the lion or the bear (cf. 1 Sam.: 7: 35).

It is thus that the thought of a brother is caught by wild beasts - if it pastures what is within us with with hatred: with regard to a woman, if we turn aside to shameful desire; with regard to gold and silver, if we settle down with greed. And the concepts of the holy gifts [of God are caught by wild beasts] if we mentally graze on vainglory: and the same happens in the case of other concepts if they are plundered by the passions.

It is fitting not only to protect this [flock] by day, but also to guard [it] by keeping vigil at night. For it happens that by fantasizing shamefully and wickedly one may lose what is one's own; and this is what was said by holy Jacob: *I did not bring you a sheep caught by wild beasts; from my own [resources] I made good the thefts by day and the thefts by night, and I was burned with heat by day, and with frost by night, and sleep departed from my eyes.* (Gen. 31: 39-40.Sept.)

And if, weary from our toil, a certain *acedia* overtakes us we should climb up a little onto the rock of knowledge and converse with the Psalter, (cf. Ps 48:5) plucking with the virtues the strings of knowledge: let us again tend our sheep as they pasture below Mount Sinai, so that the God of our fathers may also call to us out of the bush (cf. Exod. 3:1-6) and grant us the *logoi* of the signs and the wonders. (cf. Exod. 7:9, 11:9-10)

Psalter is ideal source of Christian prayer

JOHN PAUL II GENERAL AUDIENCE Wednesday 28 March 2001

1. In the Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* I expressed the hope that the Church would become more and more distinguished in the “art of prayer”, learning it ever anew from the lips of the Divine Master (cf. n. 32). This effort must be expressed above all in the liturgy, the source and summit of ecclesial life. Consequently, it is important to devote greater pastoral care to promoting the *Liturgy of the Hours* as a prayer of the whole People of God (cf. *ibid.*, n. 34). If, in fact, priests and religious have a precise mandate to celebrate it, it is also warmly recommended to lay people. This was the aim of my venerable Predecessor Paul VI, a little over 30 years ago, with the Constitution *Laudis canticum* in which he determined the current form of this prayer, hoping that the Psalms and Canticles, the essential structure of the Liturgy of the Hours, would be understood “with new appreciation by the People of God” (AAS 63 [1971], 532).

It is an encouraging fact that many lay people in parishes and ecclesial associations have learned to appreciate it. Nevertheless, it remains a prayer that presupposes an appropriate catechetical and biblical formation, if it is to be fully savoured.

To this end, we begin today a series of catecheses on the Psalms and Canticles found in the morning prayer of Lauds. In this way I would like to encourage and help everyone to pray with the same words that Jesus used, words that for thousands of years have been part of the prayer of Israel and the Church.

2. We could use various approaches to understanding the Psalms. The first would consist in presenting their literary structure, their authors, their formation, the contexts in which they were composed. It would also be fruitful to read them in a way that emphasizes their poetic character, which sometimes reaches the highest levels of lyrical insight and symbolic expression. It would be no less interesting to go over the Psalms and consider the various sentiments of the human heart expressed in them: joy, gratitude, thanksgiving, love, tenderness, enthusiasm, but also intense suffering, complaint, pleas for help and for justice, which sometimes lead to anger and imprecation. In the Psalms, the human being fully discovers himself.

Our reading will aim above all at bringing out the religious meaning of the Psalms, showing how they can be used in the prayer of Christ’s disciples, although they were written many centuries ago for Hebrew believers. In this task we will turn for help to the results of exegesis, but together we will learn from Tradition and will listen above all to the Fathers of the Church.

3. The latter, in fact, were able with deep spiritual penetration to discern and identify the great “key” to understanding the Psalms as Christ himself, in the fullness of his mystery. The Fathers were firmly convinced that the Psalms speak of Christ. The risen Jesus, in fact, applied the Psalms to himself when he said to the disciples: “Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled” (Lk 24: 44). The Fathers add that in the Psalms Christ is spoken to or it is even Christ who speaks. In saying this, they were thinking not only of the individual person of Christ, but of the *Christus totus*, the total Christ, composed of Christ the Head and his members.

Christians were thus able to read the Book of Psalms in the light of the whole mystery of Christ. This same perspective also brings out the ecclesial dimension, which is particularly highlighted when the Psalms are sung chorally. We can understand, then, how the Psalms came to be adopted from the earliest centuries as the prayer of the People of God. If in some historical periods there was a tendency to prefer other prayers, it is to the monks’ great credit that they held the Psalter’s torch aloft in the Church. One of them, St Romuald, founder of Camaldoli, at the dawn of the second Christian millennium, even maintained, as his biographer Bruno of Querfurt says, that the Psalms are the only way to experience truly deep prayer: “*Una via in psalmis*” (*Passio sanctorum Benedicti et Johannis ac sociorum eorundem*: MPH VI, 1893, 427).

4. With this assertion, which seems excessive at first sight, he actually remained anchored to the best tradition of the first Christian centuries, when the Psalter became the book of Church prayer *par excellence*. This was the winning choice in view of the heretical tendencies that continuously threatened the unity of faith and communion. Interesting in this regard is a marvellous letter that St Athanasius wrote to Marcellinus in the first half of the fourth century while the Arian heresy was vehemently attacking belief in the divinity of Christ. To counter the heretics who seduced people with hymns and prayers that gratified their religious sentiments, the great Father of the Church dedicated all his energies to teaching the Psalter handed down by Scripture (cf. *PG* 27, 12ff.). This is how, in addition to the *Our Father*, the Lord's prayer by antonomasia, the practice of praying the Psalms soon became universal among the baptized.

5. By praying the Psalms as a community, the Christian mind remembered and understood that it is impossible to turn to the Father who dwells in heaven without an authentic communion of life with one's brothers and sisters who live on earth. Moreover, by being vitally immersed in the Hebrew tradition of prayer, Christians learned to pray by recounting the *magnalia Dei*, that is, the great marvels worked by God both in the creation of the world and humanity, and in the history of Israel and the Church. This form of prayer drawn from Scripture does not exclude certain freer expressions, which will continue not only to characterize personal prayer, but also to enrich liturgical prayer itself, for example, with hymns and troparia. But the Book of Psalms remains the ideal source of Christian prayer and will continue to inspire the Church in the new millennium.

The Spirit prays through us in the Psalms

JOHN PAUL II GENERAL AUDIENCE Wednesday 4 April 2001

1. Before beginning the commentary on the individual Psalms and Songs of Praise, let us complete today the introductory reflection which we began in the last catechesis. We will do so by starting with one aspect that is prized by our spiritual tradition: in singing the Psalms, the Christian feels a sort of harmony between the Spirit present in the Scriptures and the Spirit who dwells within him through the grace of Baptism. More than praying in his own words, he echoes those "sighs too deep for words" mentioned by St Paul (cf. Rom 8: 26), with which the Lord's Spirit urges believers to join in Jesus' characteristic invocation: "*Abba! Father!*" (Rom 8: 15; Gal 4: 6).

The ancient monks were so sure of this truth that they did not bother to sing the Psalms in their mother tongue. It was enough for them to know that they were in a way "organs" of the Holy Spirit. They were convinced that their faith would enable the verses of the Psalms to release a special "energy" of the Holy Spirit. The same conviction was expressed in their typical use of the Psalms known as "*ejaculatory prayer*" - from the Latin word "*iaculum*", that is "a dart" - to indicate concise phrases from the Psalms which they could "let fly" almost like flaming arrows, for example, against temptations. John Cassian, a writer who lived between the fourth and fifth centuries, recalls that monks discovered the extraordinary efficacy of the short *incipit* of Psalm 69: "God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me," which from that time on became as it were the gate of entry to the *Liturgy of the Hours* (cf. *Conlationes*, 10, 10: *CPL* 512, 298ff.).

2. In addition to the presence of the Holy Spirit, another important dimension is that of the priestly action which Christ carries out in this prayer, associating with himself the Church, his Bride. In this regard, referring to the *Liturgy of the Hours*, the Second Vatican Council teaches: "Jesus Christ, High Priest of the New and Eternal Covenant ... attaches to himself the entire community of mankind and has them join him in singing his divine song of praise. For he continues his priestly work through his Church. The Church, by celebrating the Eucharist and by other means, especially the celebration of the Divine Office, is ceaselessly engaged in praising the Lord and interceding for the salvation of the entire world" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 83).

So then the *Liturgy of the Hours* has the character of a public prayer in which the Church is specifically involved. It is enlightening to rediscover how she gradually came to shape her specific commitment of prayer to coincide with the various phases of day. To do so we must go back to the apostolic community in the days when

there was still a close connection between Christian prayer and the so-called “legal prayers”, that is, those prescribed by Mosaic Law - which were prayed at specific hours of the day in the temple of Jerusalem. From the book of Acts, we know that the Apostles were in the habit of “attending the temple together” (Acts 2: 46), and “going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour” (3: 1). Moreover, we also know that the “legal prayers *par excellence*” were those of the morning and the evening.

3. Jesus’ disciples gradually identified certain Psalms as particularly appropriate for specific moments of the day, week or year, finding in them a deep sense of the Christian mystery. An authoritative witness of this process is St Cyprian, who writes in the first half of the third century: “We must also pray at the beginning of the day that the Resurrection of the Lord may be celebrated by morning prayer. The Holy Spirit once set this forth, when he said in the Psalms: “O my king and my God. For to you will I pray: O Lord, in the morning you shall hear my voice. In the morning I will stand before you, and will see you’ (Ps 5: 3-4).... For since Christ is the true Sun and the true Day, as the sun and the day of the world recede, when we pray and petition that the light come upon us again, we pray for the coming of Christ to provide us with the grace of eternal light” (*De oratione dominica*, 35: *PL* 39: 655).

4. The Christian tradition is not limited to perpetuating Jewish practice but made certain innovations which end by giving a different character to the entire prayer experience lived by Jesus’ disciples. In fact, in addition to reciting the *Our Father* in the morning and evening, the Christians freely chose the Psalms with which to celebrate their daily prayer. Down through history, this process suggested the use of specific Psalms for certain particularly significant moments of faith. Among these, pride of place was held by *the prayer of vigils*, which were a preparation for the Lord’s Day, Sunday, on which the Resurrection was celebrated.

Later, a typically Christian characteristic was the addition at the end of each Psalm and Canticle of the Trinitarian doxology, “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit”. Thus every Psalm and Canticle is illumined by God’s fullness.

5. Christian prayer is born, nourished and develops around the event of faith *par excellence*: Christ’s paschal mystery. Thus Easter, the Lord’s passing from death to life, is commemorated in the morning, in the evening, at sunrise and at sunset. The symbol of Christ, “Light of the world”, can be seen in the lamp light during the prayer of Vespers, which is consequently also called “*lucernarium*”. The *hours of the day*, in turn, recall the events of the Lord’s Passion, and the third hour, the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as well. Lastly, *prayer during the night* has an eschatological character, recalling the watching recommended by Jesus in expectation of his second coming (cf. Mk 13: 35-37).

Giving their prayer this rhythm, Christians responded to the Lord’s command “to pray always” (cf. Lk 18: 1; 21: 36; 1 Thes 5: 17; Eph 6: 18), but without forgetting that their whole life must, in a certain way, become a prayer. In this regard, Origen writes: “One who prays ceaselessly is one who combines prayer with work and work with prayer” (*On Prayer*, XII, 2: *PG* 11, 452C).

The whole panorama constitutes the natural habitat of the recitation of the Psalms. If heard and lived in this way, the *Trinitarian doxology* that crowns every Psalm becomes for the believer in Christ a continual immersion in the waters of the Spirit and in communion with the People of God, in the ocean of life and of peace in which that people was immersed through Baptism, that is, in the mystery of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

FROM *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, Robert Alter, (New York, Basic Books 1985)
Chapter 5 - “Forms of Faith in Psalms”

[1. THE PSALMS ARE INTENDED TO BE SUNG]

OF all the Books of the Bible in which poetry plays a role, Psalms is the one set of texts whose poetic status has been most strongly felt throughout the generations, [...]. This unwavering perception that the psalms were formal poems [...] was no doubt reinforced by the musical indications in the texts themselves. Many of the psalms, that is, are explicitly presented as liturgical songs to be intoned to the accompaniment of the lyre, the ten-stringed instrument, cymbals, drums, and whatever else was once used to fill the temple courts with melody. The name of the book in Western languages, from the Greek psalmos, a song sung to a plucked instrument, stresses this musical character, as does the full Hebrew title, mizmorei tehillim, “songs of praise.”

[2. REPETITION is PART of THE BEAUTY of THE PSALMS]

[That the psalms repeat conventional texts over and over] is perfectly understandable. For a text that is to be chanted by pilgrims in procession on their way up the temple mount, or recited by a supplicant at the altar or by someone recovered from grave illness offering a thanksgiving sacrifice, you don’t want a lot of fancy footwork in the imagery and syntax; you want, in fact, an eloquent rehearsal of traditional materials and even traditional ways of ordering those materials in a certain sequence.

This conventionality of the psalms, [...] is in so many instances to the liturgical function of the poems,

[The psalms are] a collection where in any given genre a dozen or more poems seem to be saying the same thing, often with more or less the same metaphors and sometimes even with some of the same phrasing. What I think we need to be more attuned to as readers is the nuanced individual character—“originality” in fact may not be the relevant concept—of different poems reflecting the same genre and even many of the same formulaic devices.

[3. AS POETRY THE PSALMS CAN EXPRESS DEEPER MEANINGS THAN NARRATIVE TEXTS]

Poetry, working through a system of complex linkages of sound, image, word, rhythm, syntax, theme, idea, is an instrument for conveying densely patterned meanings, and sometimes contradictory meanings, that are not readily conveyable through other kinds of discourse.

Poetry is a way of using language strongly oriented toward the creation of minute, multiple, heterogeneous, and semantically fruitful interconnections in the text. [...]

The psalms are of course poems written out of deep and often passionate faith. [...] the poetic medium made it possible to articulate the emotional freight, the moral consequences, the altered perception of the world that flowed from this monotheistic belief, in compact verbal structures that could in some instances seem simplicity itself.

Psalms [...] often became an instrument for expressing in a collective voice (whether first person plural or singular) a distinctive, sometimes radically new, sense of time, space, history, creation, and the character of individual destiny.

In keeping with this complex expressive purpose, many psalms, on scrutiny, prove to have a finely tensile semantic weave that one would not expect from the seeming conventionality of the language.

LITERARY GENRES *of* THE PSALMS

1. HYMNS [of JOY]

Joyful songs rejoicing in circumstances, praising the goodness and [general] providence of God

- 1 O sing a new song to the Lord,
sing to the Lord all the earth.
 - 2 O sing to the Lord, bless his name. (Psalm 96/95)
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2. PSALMS of [GENERIC] PRAISE

Glorify God and the powerful works that God has done.

- O give thanks to the Lord for he is good;
for his love endures for ever.
 - 2 Who can tell the Lord's mighty deeds?
Who can recount all his praise? (Psalm 106/105)
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3. [PARTICULAR] THANKSGIVING PSALMS

Highlight and celebrate a particular reason for their happiness.

- 2 I will praise you, Lord, you have rescued me
and have not let my enemies rejoice over me.
 - 3 O Lord, I cried to you for help
and you, my God, have healed me. (Psalm 30/29)
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4. [HISTORICAL] "REMEMBRANCE" PSALMS

Recount the past, and point to the works and promises of God.

- 9 You brought a vine out of Egypt;
to plant it you drove out the nations.
 - 10 Before it you cleared the ground;
it took root and spread through the land. (Psalm 80/79)
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5. ROYAL PSALMS

Employ bold regal imagery of thrones, coronations, and processions - usually depict a king or God as king.

- 2 My heart overflows with noble words.
To the king I must speak the song I have made,
my tongue as nimble as the pen of a scribe. (Psalm 45/44)
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6. WISDOM [ETHICAL/MORAL] PSALMS

Wisdom literature: instruction on how to live lives well.

- 1 Lord, who shall be admitted to your tent
and dwell on your holy mountain?
 - 2 He who walks without fault;
he who acts with justice
and speaks the truth from his heart;
 - 3 he who does not slander with his tongue; (Psalm 15/14)
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7. PSALMS OF LAMENT

Cry out to God in the midst of emotional and spiritual turmoil.

- 9 You have taken away my friends
and made me hateful in their sight.
Imprisoned, I cannot escape;
 - 10 my eyes are sunken with grief. (Psalm 88/87)
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8. IMPRECATORY (CURSING) PSALMS

Often closely linked with laments, these cry to God to send judgment on enemies.

- 8 Let the days of his life be few;
let another man take his office.
- 9 Let his children be fatherless orphans
and his wife become a widow. (Psalm 80/79)