



The Holy See

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GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Psalter is ideal source of Christian prayer

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.

I warmly welcome the priests taking part in the Institute for Continuing Theological Formation at the Pontifical North American College, and I am confident that this special time of study will help you to minister ever more effectively to the people you serve. I also greet the Vicars for Religious from the United States. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.