



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 14 November 2001

Psalm 118[119] (the verses 145-152)

Praise God for the gift of His Law

1. What the liturgy of Lauds for Saturday of the first week offers us is a single strophe of Ps 118[119], (the verses 145-152), in the monumental prayer of 22 strophes or stanzas, that correspond to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each strophe begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet and the order of the strophes follows that of the alphabet. The one we have proclaimed is the 19th strophe (verses 145-152) corresponding to the letter qoph.

This introductory preface is a great help for understanding the meaning of this hymn in honour of the divine law. It is similar to Eastern music, whose sonorous waves seem never ending, ascending to heaven in a repetition which involves the mind and senses, the spirit and body of the one who prays.

2. In a sequence that goes from "aleph to tav", from the first to the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, we would say from A to Z in our alphabets, the one who prays pours out his thanks for the Law of God, that he adopts as a lamp for his steps in the often dark path of life (cf. v. 105).

It is said that the great philosopher and scientist Blaise Pascal recited this fullest of all the psalms every day, while the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, assassinated by the Nazis in 1945, made it become a living and timely prayer when he wrote: "Undoubtedly, Psalm 118 [119] is tedious on account of its length and monotony, but we must proceed very slowly and patiently word by word, phrase by phrase. Then we will discover that the apparent repetitions in reality are new aspects of one and the same reality: love for the Word of God. Since this love is never ending, so are the

words that profess it. They can accompany us all our life, and in their simplicity they become the prayer of the youth, the mature man and the venerable old man" (*Pray the Psalms with Christ*, English translation of the Italian title, *Pregare i Salmi con Cristo*, Brescia, 1978, 3a edizione, p. 48).

3. The fact of repetition, in addition to helping the memory in the choral chant, is also a good way to foster inner attachment and confident abandonment into the arms of God, who is invoked and loved. Among the repetitions of the Psalm 118 [119], I want to point out an important one. Each of the 176 verses which make up this praise of the *Torah*, of the divine Law and Word, contains at least one of the eight words used to define the *Torah* itself: law, word, witness, judgment, saying, decree, precept, and order. We celebrate divine revelation this way because it is the revelation of the mystery of God and the moral guide of the life of the faithful.

In this way God and man are united in a dialogue composed of words and deeds, teaching and listening, truth and life.

4. Now we come to our strophe (cf. vv. 145-152) that is well suited to the spirit of morning Lauds. In fact the scene at the centre of this set of 8 verses is nocturnal, but open to the new day. After a long night of waiting and of prayerful vigil in the Temple, when the dawn appears on the horizon and the liturgy begins, the believer is certain that the Lord will hear the one who spent the night in prayer, hoping and meditating on the divine Word. Fortified by this awareness and facing the day that unfolds before him, he will no longer fear dangers. He knows that he will not be overcome by his persecutors who besiege him with treachery (cf. v. 150) because the Lord is with him.

5. The strophe expresses an intense prayer: "I call with all my heart, Lord; answer me.... I rise before the dawn and cry for help; I hope in your word ..." (vv.145.147). In the Book of Lamentations, we read this invitation: "Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches; pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord! Lift your hands toward him" (Lam 2,19). St Ambrose repeated: "O man, know you not that every day you should offer God the first fruits of your heart and voice? Make haste at dawn to carry to the Church the first fruits of your devotion" (*Exp. in ps. CXVIII*; PL 15, 1476 A).

At the same time our strophe is also the exaltation of a certainty: we are not alone because God listens and intervenes. The one who prays, says: "Lord, you are near" (v. 151). The other psalms confirm it: "Draw near to me, redeem me, set me free because of my enemies!" (Ps 68,19); "The Lord is near to the broken-hearted, and saves the crushed in spirit" (Ps 33,19).

After the commentary, the Holy Father greeted the pilgrims in French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Russian, Hungarian, Slovakian, Croatian, and Italian. Here is a translation of the Italian greeting to the young, the sick and newly-weds.

Tomorrow [Thursday] we celebrate the feast of the Bishop St Albert the Great, who continually endeavoured to establish peace among the peoples of his time. May his example be an inspiration for you, young people, to be agents of justice and builders of reconciliation. May he be a source of encouragement for the *sick*, to trust in the Lord who never abandons us in the time of trial. For you, newly-weds, may he be a stimulus to find in the Gospel the joy of accepting and generously serving life, the incommensurable gift of God.

He gave this greeting in English:

I extend a warm welcome to all the English-speaking visitors here today, especially the pilgrims from the Philippines and the United States of America. I cordially greet the members of the NATO Defence College, confident that in these troubled times you will see your profession as a noble service of peace and the common good. God bless you all!

Lastly the Holy Father expressed his spiritual closeness to the relatives of the victims of the recent floods in Algeria:

My thought embraces the beloved peoples of Algeria, recently struck by floods which have claimed thousands of victims and left many families homeless.

While I entrust to the goodness of a merciful God all those who are tragically missing, I express my spiritual closeness to their families and to all those in distress on account of this disaster. May our brothers, so sorely tried, not lack our solidarity and the concrete support of the international community.
