



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

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The origins of the Liturgy of Vespers and the symbolism of light

1. Since "every day of our pilgrimage on earth is a gift ever new" of God's love (*Preface for Sundays in Ordinary Time*, VI), the Church has always felt the need to devote the days and hours of human life to divine praise. Thus, for Christians, sunrise and sunset, characteristically religious moments for every people and formerly made sacred in the biblical tradition of offering a burnt sacrifice in the morning and evening (cf. Ex 29: 38-39) and of burning incense (cf. Ex 30: 6-8), have been two special times of prayer since the earliest centuries.

Sunrise and sunset are not anonymous moments in the day. They have unmistakable features: the joyful beauty of dawn and the triumphant splendour of sunset follow the cosmic rhythms that deeply involve human life. Furthermore, the mystery of salvation that is actuated in history has moments linked to various phases of time. So it is that together with the celebration of *Lauds* at daybreak, the celebration of *Vespers* at nightfall gradually became a regular practice in the Church. Both these *Liturgical Hours* have an evocative charge of their own that recalls the two essential aspects of the paschal mystery: "In the evening the Lord is on the Cross, in the morning, he rises to new life.... In the evening I relate the sufferings he bore in dying; in the morning I proclaim the life that dawns from him anew" (St Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms*, [*Esposizioni sui Salmi*] XXVI, Rome, 1971, p. 109).

Precisely because they are associated with the memory of the death and Resurrection of Christ, the two Hours, *Lauds* and *Vespers*, constitute, "by the venerable tradition of the universal Church,... the two hinges on which the daily office turns" (Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 89a).

2. In antiquity, the lighting of the oil lamp after sunset brought a note of joy and communion to the

home. In lighting the lamp at dusk, the Christian community also prayed with gratitude in their hearts for the gift of spiritual light. This was the so-called "*lucernarium*" - that is, the ritual lighting of the lamp whose flame is the symbol of Christ, "the Sun that never sets".

Indeed, Christians also know that at nightfall God brightens the darkness of night with the radiance of his presence and the light of his teachings. In this regard, we should remember the very ancient lamp-lighting hymn, *Fôs Hilarón*, that is part of the Armenian and Ethiopian Byzantine liturgies: "Joyful light of the Holy Glory of the Father, immortal, heavenly, holy, blessed, O Jesus Christ! Now that we have reached the sunset and gazed upon the light of the evening, let us sing praises to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, God. It is right to praise you always and at all times with harmonious voices, O Son of God, you who give life to us: thus, the universe proclaims your glory". The West also composed many hymns celebrating Christ the Light.

Drawing inspiration from the symbolism of light, the prayer of *Vespers* developed as an evening sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving for the gift of physical and spiritual light, and for the other gifts of the Creation and the Redemption. St Cyprian writes: "The sun has set and, with the dying day, once again we need to pray. Indeed, since Christ is the true Sun, let us pray while the sun sets and the day fades in this world, imploring that the light shine on us anew; and let us call for the coming of Christ who will bring us the grace of eternal light" (*De Oratione Dominica*, 35: *PL* 4, 560).

3. The evening is a favourable time for reviewing our day before God in prayer. It is the time "to give thanks for what has been given to us or for what we have been able to do with rectitude" (St Basil, *Regulae Fusiis Tractatae*, Resp. 37, 3: *PG* 3, 1015). It is also the time to ask forgiveness for all the evil we have done, imploring divine mercy to obtain that Christ return with his radiance to our hearts.

Yet the arrival of evening also suggests the "*mysterium noctis*". Twilight is perceived as a time of frequent temptations, of particular weakness and of succumbing to the onslaught of the Evil One. Night, with its hazards, becomes the symbol *par excellence* of all the wickedness from which Christ came to set us free. On the other hand, at every nightfall, prayer allows us to share in the Easter mystery in which "night is clear as day" (*Exultet*). So it is that prayer makes hope flourish, the hope of passing from our ephemeral day into the *dies perennis*, from uncertain lamplight to the *lux perpetua*, from our watchful expectation of dawn, to the encounter with the King of eternal glory.

4. For the ancients even more than for us, the succession of night and day regulated life, generating thought on the great problems of life. Modern progress has partly changed the relationship between human life and cosmic time, but its rapid pace has not completely removed the people of today from the rhythms of the solar cycle.

Consequently, the two fulcra of daily prayer have kept their full value, for they are tied to unchanging phenomena and vivid symbols. The morning and evening are always appropriate times to devote to prayer, both in the company of others and in private. Linked to the important moments of our life and work, the *Hours of Lauds and Vespers* thus prove an effective orientation for our daily journey, guiding it to Christ, "the light of the world" (Jn 8: 12).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I am pleased to offer special greetings today to the deacon candidates from the Pontifical North American College and their family members. May the light of Christ always shine brightly in your lives! Upon all the English-speaking visitors present, especially those from England, Scotland, Ireland, Nigeria, Indonesia, Taiwan, Korea and the United States of America, I invoke the grace and peace of the Lord Jesus.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

I then address an affectionate thought to the *young people*, to the *sick* and to the *newly-weds*.

The Holy Father then mentioned his visit to Pompei the previous day.

I thank Our Lady who gave me the opportunity to pay a visit to the Shrine dedicated to her in Pompei yesterday.