



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 15 October 2003

Vespers, Prayer of Sunset

Structure of Evening Prayer in the Roman rite

1. We know from numerous testimonies that from the fourth century onwards *Lauds* and *Vespers* had become an established institution in all the great Eastern and Western Churches. This is borne out by St Ambrose: "Just as every day, in going to church or devoting ourselves to prayer at home, we start from God and end in him, so the entire day of our life here below and the course of every single day always starts from him and ends in him" (*De Abraham*, II, 5, 22).

Just as *Lauds* is prayed at daybreak, so *Vespers* is prayed close to sunset, at the hour when, in the temple of Jerusalem, the burnt offering was made with incense. At that hour, after his death on the Cross, Jesus was lying in the tomb, having offered himself to the Father for the salvation of the world.

The various Churches, following their respective traditions, organized the Divine Office in accordance with their own rites. Here, let us consider the Roman rite.

2. The invocation *Deus in adiutorium* in the first verse of Psalm 69 opens the prayer that St Benedict prescribes for every *Hour*. The verse recalls that the grace to praise God as befits him can come only from God. The "Glory be to the Father" follows, because the glorification of the Trinity expresses the essential approach of Christian prayer. Finally, except in Lent, the *Alleluia* is added. This Hebrew word means "*Praise the Lord*" and, for Christians, it has become a joyful manifestation of faith in the protection that God reserves for his people.

The singing of the *Hymn* is vibrant with the reasons for the Church's praise in prayer, evoking with poetic inspiration the mysteries wrought for the salvation of man at the hour of *Vespers* and, in

particular, the sacrificial work of Christ on the Cross.

3. The *Psalmody* of Vespers consists of two Psalms suitable for this hour and of a canticle from the New Testament. The typology of the Psalms for Vespers displays various nuances. There are Psalms that deal with the ritual lighting of the lamp in which "evening", the "lamp" or "light" are explicitly mentioned; Psalms that express trust in God, the stable refuge in the precariousness of human life; Psalms of thanksgiving and praise; Psalms from which flow the eschatological meaning suggested by the end of the day; and others with a sapiential character or penitential tones. We also find Psalms of the *Hallel*, with a reference to the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples. In the Latin Church, elements have been handed down that facilitate the understanding of the Psalms and their Christian interpretation, such as the themes, the psalm prayers and especially the antiphons (cf. *Principles and Norms for the Liturgy of the Hours*, nn. 110-120).

The *brief Reading* at Vespers that is taken from the New Testament has an important place. Its purpose is to propose some sentences from the Bible forcefully and effectively, and impress them on hearts so that they will be expressed in practice (cf. *ibid.*, nn. 45, 156, 172). To make it easier to interiorize what has been heard, the Reading is followed by an appropriate silence and by a *Responsorial* whose function is to "respond" to the message of the Reading with the singing of some verses, fostering their warm acceptance by those taking part in the prayer.

4. The *Gospel Canticle* of the Blessed Virgin Mary is chanted (cf. Lk 1: 46-55) with great honour and introduced by the sign of the Cross. Already attested by the Rule of St Benedict (chapters 12 and 17), the custom of singing *the Benedictus* at Lauds and the *Magnificat* at Vespers "is confirmed by the age-old and popular tradition of the Roman Church" (*Principles and Norms for the Liturgy of the Hours*, n. 50). In fact, these Canticles are exemplary for their expression of the sense of praise and thanksgiving to God for his gift of Redemption.

In the community celebration of the Divine Office, the gesture of incensing the altar, the priest and the people while the Gospel Canticles are being sung, is reminiscent - in light of the Hebrew tradition of offering incense morning and evening on the altar of incense - of the sacrificial character of the "sacrifice of praise" expressed in the *Liturgy of the Hours*. Surrounding Christ in prayer, may we be able to live personally what is said in the Letter to the Hebrews: "Through him, then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (13: 15; cf. Ps 50[49]; 14: 23; Hos 14: 2).

5. After the Canticle, the *Intercessions* addressed to the Father or, sometimes, to Christ, express the supplicant voice of the Church which is mindful of God's solicitude for humanity, the work of his hands. The character of the Intercessions at Evening Prayer is, in fact, a petition for divine help: for people of every class, for the Christian community and for civil society. Lastly comes the remembrance of deceased faithful.

The liturgy of Vespers is crowned in Jesus' prayer, the *Our Father*, which sums up all the praise and all the petitions of God's children, reborn from water and the Spirit. At the end of the day, Christian tradition has connected the forgiveness implored from God in the *Our Father* and the brotherly reconciliation of men with one another: the sun must never go down on anyone's anger (cf. Eph 4: 26).

The prayer of Vespers concludes with a *Prayer* which, in harmony with the crucified Christ, expresses the entrustment of our lives into the hands of the Father, knowing that his blessing will never be lacking.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I offer a warm welcome to the Sisters of St Joseph of Chambéry celebrating their General Chapter. My greeting also goes to the Delegation of Paramount Chiefs from Sierra Leone, and to the members of the Euro-American Urological Association. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland, Scotland, Sweden, Canada and the United States, I cordially invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus.

To special persons, with a closing thought

I hope that you, dear *young people*, *sick people* and *newly-weds*, will imitate the example of St Teresa of Avila, whose Memorial we are celebrating today: strive, like her, to live your Christian vocation authentically.

Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to you all for your good wishes and for the reassurance of your prayers for the [25th Anniversary of my Pontificate](#). I invite Romans and pilgrims to join me here in St Peter's Square, at six o'clock tomorrow evening, to praise the Lord and thank him on this happy occasion.

Appeal for prayer for the people of Bolivia

The news from Bolivia where a serious crisis is causing death and injuries is giving rise to deep concern.

I would like to express my spiritual solidarity to those who are suffering, as I ask everyone to pray that the Lord will inspire the parties involved to give priority to civil dialogue and to seek just solutions, with respect for the law, to the problems that are afflicting the country.

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