

The Spirit prays through us in the Psalms

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.