



# The Holy See

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JOHN PAUL II

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 16 January 2002*

Psalm 41[42], *Liturgy of Lauds for Monday of the second week*

***The thirsting deer longs for streams of living water***

A deer with a parched throat cries out its lament in an arid desert longing for the fresh waters of a flowing stream. Psalm 41[42] that has just been sung opens with this famous image. We can see in it the symbol of the deep spirituality of this composition, a real pearl of faith and poetry. Indeed, according to experts in the Psalter, our psalm is closely linked with the one following, Psalm 42[43], from which it was separated when the psalms were put in order to form the prayer book of the People of God. In fact, in addition to being united by their topic and development, both psalms are dramatically interrupted by the same antiphon: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God" (Ps 41[42],6,12; 42[43],5). This appeal, repeated twice in our psalm and a third time in the one that follows, is an invitation the person praying addresses to himself, with a view to banishing melancholy by trusting in God who will certainly manifest himself again as Saviour.

2. But let us return to the image at the beginning of the Psalm; it would be pleasant to meditate upon it with the musical background of Gregorian chant or with the polyphonic masterpiece of Palestrina, *Sicut cervus*. In fact, the thirsting deer is the symbol of the praying person who tends with his whole being, body and soul, towards the Lord, who seems distant and yet very much needed: "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Ps 41[42],3). In Hebrew a single word, *nefesh*, means both "soul" and "throat". Therefore we can say that the body and soul of the person praying are absorbed by the primary, spontaneous and substantial desire for God (cf. Ps 62[61],2). It is no accident that a long tradition describes prayer as a type of "breathing": it is as primeval,

necessary and basic as life-giving breathing.

Origen, the great Christian author of the third century, explained that the human search for God is a never-ending venture because progress is ever possible and necessary. In one of his homilies on the *Book of Numbers* he writes: "Those who make their journey on the road to seek God's wisdom do not build permanent homes but mobile tents, for they are in constant movement covering new ground, and the further they go, the more the road that lies ahead of them opens up, presenting a horizon lost in immensity" (*Homily XVII, In Numeros [on Numbers] GCS VII, 159-160*).

3. Let us now try to set out the basic design of this supplication. We can think of it as composed of three actions, two of them belong to our psalm, while we find the third in the one that follows, Psalm 42[43], to be considered later. The first scene (cf. Ps 41[42], 2-6) expresses deep longing, kindled by the memory of a past made happy by beautiful liturgical celebrations to which the one praying no longer has access: "These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival" (v. 5).

"The house of God" with its liturgy, is that temple of Jerusalem which the faithful person once frequented; it is also the centre of intimacy with God, "the fountain of living waters" as Jeremiah sings (2,13). Now his tears at the absence of the fountain of life are the only water that glistens in his eyes (Ps 41[42],4). The festive prayer of former times, raised to the Lord during worship in the temple, is now replaced by weeping, lament and supplication.

4. Unfortunately, a sorrowful present is contrasted with the serene and joyful past. The Psalmist now finds himself far from Zion: the horizon all around him is that of Galilee, the northern region of the Holy Land, suggested by the reference to the sources of the Jordan, the summit of Hermon from which this river flows, and another mountain, unknown to us, Mount Mizar (cf. v. 7). Thus we are more or less in the region of the cataracts of the Jordan, the cascades that are the source of this river that flows through the entire Promised Land. However, these waters are not thirst-quenching as are those of Zion. Rather, in the eyes of the Psalmist, they are like the turbulent flood waters that devastate everything. He feels them falling upon him like a raging torrent that wipes out life: "All your waves and billows have gone over me" (v. 8). In the Bible, chaos, evil and divine judgement are portrayed by the deluge that generates destruction and death (Gn 6, 5-8; Ps 68[69], 2-3).

5. The symbolic value of this irruption is defined later on. It stands for the perverse, the adversaries of the person praying, perhaps even the pagans who dwell in this remote region to which the faithful one has been banished. They despise the righteous person and deride him for his faith, asking him ironically: "Where is your God?" (v. 11; cf. v. 14). And to God he raises his anguished question: "Why have you forgotten me?" (v. 10). The "why" addressed to the Lord, who

seems absent on the day of trial, is typical of Biblical supplications.

Can God remain silent in the face of these parched lips that cry out, this tormented soul, this face that is about to be submerged in a sea of mud? Of course not! Hence once again, the person praying is encouraged to hope (cf. vv. 6, 12). The third act, found in the next Psalm 42[43], will be a trusting invocation addressed to God (Ps 42[43], 1, 2a, 3a, 4b) using words of joy and gratitude: "I will go to the altar of God, to God my joy, my delight".

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*To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:*

I welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's audience, especially the many student groups from the United States. My warm greeting also goes to the students of Saint Joseph School in Ringsted, Denmark. I thank the Choir from Jackson for their praise of God in song. Upon all of you and your families I cordially invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

*The Holy Father ended by addressing the Italian faithful:*

I cordially greet the Italian-speaking pilgrims. In particular, I greet the social and business leaders who support *L'Osservatore Romano* and are present here with their families. Dear friends, thank you for the generous readiness with which you work to insure that the Gospel message, the voice of the Successor of Peter and of the Magisterium of the Church, reach the greatest possible number of believers. May God make your collaboration fruitful.

My thoughts turn lastly to the *young*, to the *sick*, and to the *newly-married couples*. May the Feast of the Lord's Baptism that we celebrated last Sunday, reawaken in you, dear *young people*, the thought of your baptism and be an incentive to you to witness joyfully with faith in Christ; for you, dear *sick people*, may it be a comfort in suffering; and may it help you, dear *newly married couples*, to deepen your faith, to witness to it courageously and later to pass it on faithfully to your children. My Blessing to all of you.