



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday 15 January 2003

Psalm 118 [119]

Begin the day with prayer: let Christ be light of day

1. In our already long journey through the Psalms that the Liturgy of Lauds presents, we come to one strophe - to be precise, the 19th - of the longest prayer of the Psalter, Psalm 118[119]. It is a part of an immense alphabetical hymn. In a play on style, the Psalmist divides his work into 22 strophes corresponding to the sequence of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each strophe has eight verses and the first word of each verse uses a Hebrew word that begins with the same letter of the alphabet.

The stanza we have just heard is a strophe marked by the Hebrew letter *qôf*, that portrays the person at prayer who expresses his intense life of faith and prayer to God (cf. vv. 145-152).

2. The invocation of the Lord is relentless because it is a continuing response to the permanent teaching of the Word of God. On the one hand, in fact, the verbs used in prayer are multiplied: "I cry to you", "I call upon you", "I cry for help", "hear my voice". On the other hand, the Psalmist exalts the word of the Lord that proposes *decrees, teachings, the word, promises, judgment, the law, the precepts and testimonies* of God. Together they form a constellation that is like the polar star of the Psalmist's faith and confidence. Prayer is revealed as a dialogue that begins when it is night before the first gleam of dawn (cf. v. 147), and continues through the day, particularly in the difficult trials of life. In fact, at times the horizon is dark and stormy: "In betrayal my persecutors turn on me, they are far from your law" (v. 150). But the person praying has a steadfast certainty: the closeness of God, with his word and his grace: "But you, O Lord, are close" (v. 151). God does not abandon the just in the hands of persecutors.

3. At this point, having outlined the simple but incisive message of the stanza of Psalm 118[119] -

a suitable message for the beginning of the day - we will turn for our meditation to a great Father of the Church, St Ambrose who, in his *Commentary on Psalm 118[119]*, devotes 44 paragraphs to explaining the stanza we have just heard.

Taking up the ideal invitation to sing praise of God from the early hours of the morning, he reflects in particular on verses 147-148: "I rise before dawn and cry for help.... My eyes greet the night watches". From the Psalmist's declaration, St Ambrose intuits the idea of a constant prayer that embraces all the hours of the day: "Whoever calls upon the Lord must act as if he does not know the existence of any special time to be dedicated to implore the Lord, but always remains in that attitude of supplication. Whether we eat or drink, let us proclaim Christ, pray to Christ, think of Christ, speak of Christ! May Christ be ever in our heart and on our lips!" (*Commentary on the Psalm 118[119],2: SAEMO 10, p. 297*).

Referring to the verses that speak of the specific moment of the morning, and alluding to the expression of the Book of *Wisdom* that prescribes that we are "to give [the Lord] thanks before the sunrise" (16,28), St Ambrose comments: "It would be serious indeed if the rays of the rising sun were to surprise you lying lazily in bed with insolent impudence and if an even brighter light wounded your sleepy eyes, still sunk in torpor. It is a disgrace for us to spend so long a period of time without even the least devotional practice, without offering a spiritual sacrifice during a night with nothing to do" (*ibid.*, op. cit., p. 303).

4. Then St Ambrose, contemplating the rising sun - as he did in another of his famous hymns, "at the crack of dawn", *Aeterne rerum conditor*, included in the *Liturgy of the Hours*, counsels us in this way: "Perhaps, you do not know, O man, that every day you owe to God the first fruits of your heart and voice? The harvest ripens every day; every day the fruit ripens. So run to meet the rising sun.... The sun of justice wishes to be anticipated and does not expect anything else.... If you rise before the sun you will receive Christ as your light. He Himself will be the first light that shines in the secret of your heart. He Himself will be ... who will make the light of dawn shine for you in the hours of the night, if you will meditate on God's Word. While you meditate, the light rises.... Early in the morning hasten to church and in homage take the firstfruits of your devotion. And then, if the affairs of the world call you, nothing will prevent you from saying: "My eyes anticipate the watches of the night to meditate on your promises"; and, with a good conscience, you will betake yourself to your affairs. How beautiful it is to begin the day with hymns and songs, with the beatitudes you read in the Gospel! How promising that the Lord's words should descend on you as a blessing; and that as you sing, you repeat the blessings of the Lord, that you be gripped by the need to practice some virtue, if you also want to perceive within you something that makes you feel worthy of the divine blessing!" (*ibid.*, op. cit., pp. 303.309.311.313).

Let us respond to St Ambrose's call, and every morning open our eyes to daily life, to its joys and worries, calling on God to be close to us and guide us with his words that ensure serenity and grace.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I welcome the pilgrims from St Joseph's Parish in Santa Ana, and the students from St Mary's College in Moraga, California. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience I cordially invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

To young people, the sick and the newly-weds

My thoughts also go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. May the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord which we celebrated last Sunday, be an incentive to you, dear *young people*, to witness joyfully to your faith in Christ; may it be for you, dear *sick people*, a comfort and relief in trial; may it impel you, dear *newly-weds*, to deepen and to witness courageously to your faith, in order to pass it on faithfully to your children.