



# The Holy See

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## *GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II*

*Wednesday 5 February 2003*

*Psalm 116[117]*

***Prayer is ray of light in self-sufficient world***

1. Continuing our meditation on the texts of the *Liturgy of Lauds*, we consider again a Psalm already presented, the shortest of all the Psalms. It is Psalm 116[117] which we have just heard, a short hymn or an aspiration that becomes a universal praise of the Lord. It proclaims what is expressed in two fundamental words: *covenant love and faithfulness* (cf. v. 2).

With these terms the Psalmist describes synthetically the Covenant between God and Israel, stressing the deep, loyal and trusting relationship between the Lord and his people. We hear the echo of the words that God himself spoke on Mount Sinai when he appeared to Moses: "The Lord, the Lord, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34,6).

2. Despite its brevity and conciseness, Psalm 116[117] captures the essence of prayer, which consists in coming together and entering into lively personal conversation with God. In such an event, the mystery of the Divinity is revealed as faithfulness and love.

The Psalmist adds a special aspect of prayer: the experience of prayer should be radiated in the world and become a witness for those who do not share our faith. Indeed, it begins by expanding the horizon to embrace "all peoples" and "all nations" (cf. Ps 116[117],1), so that before the beauty and joy of faith, they too may be overcome by the desire to know, meet and praise God.

3. In a technological world menaced by an eclipse of the sacred, in a society that delights in a certain self-sufficiency, the witness of the person at prayer is like a ray of light in the darkness. Initially, it can only awaken curiosity; then it can induce the thoughtful person to wonder about the

meaning of prayer, and, finally, it can give rise to the growing desire to have the experience. For this reason, prayer is never an isolated event, but tends to expand until it involves the whole world.

4. Let us now accompany Psalm 116[117] with the words of a great Father of the Eastern Church, St Ephrem the Syrian, who lived in the fourth century. In one of his *Hymns on Faith*, the 14th, he expresses his desire to praise God without ceasing, involving "all who understand the (divine) truth".

This is his witness:

"How can my harp, O Lord, cease to praise you?  
How could I teach my tongue infidelity?"

Your love has given confidence to my embarrassment, but my will is still ungrateful" (strophe 9).  
"It is right that man should recognize your divinity, it is right for heavenly beings to praise your humanity; the heavenly beings were astonished to see how much you emptied yourself, and those on earth to see how you were exalted" (strophe 10: *L'Arpa dello Spirito [The Harp of the Spirit]*, Rome 1999, pp. 26-28).

5. In another hymn (*Hymns on Nisibis*, 50), St Ephrem confirms his task of unceasing praise and finds the reason for it in God's love and compassion for us, just as our Psalm suggests.

"In you, Lord, may my mouth make praise come from silence. May our mouths not be lacking in praise, may our lips not be lacking in confessing; may your praise vibrate in us!" (strophe 2).

"Since it is on the Lord that the root of our faith is grafted, although he is far-removed, yet he is near in the fusion of love. May the roots of our love be fastened to him, may the full measure of his compassion be poured out upon us" (strophe 6: *ibid.*, pp. 77.80).

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*To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors*

I offer a cordial greeting to the pilgrims from Saint Mary the Virgin Parish in Arlington, Texas. Upon you and your families, and upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, I cordially invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

*To young people, the sick and newly-weds*

I would now like to address my thoughts to you, dear *young people, sick people* and *newly-weds*.

Today we are celebrating the *liturgical memorial of St Agatha*. *May the courage of this virgin*

*martyr help you, young people*, to open your hearts to the heroism of holiness. May it sustain you, *sick people*, to offer the precious gift of prayer and suffering for the Church. And may it give you, *newly-weds*, the strength to instil Christian values in your family.