

THE PSALMS

WITH APPENDIX: AQUINAS' PROLOGUE TO HIS
COMMENTARY ON PSALMS

by:

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INTRODUCTION

Sing the words and tunes of the psalms and hymns when you are together and go on singing and chanting to the Lord in your hearts, so that always and everywhere you are giving thanks to God who is our Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ep. 5:19-20)

Much has been written on Psalms, some works focusing on when the Psalms were composed,¹ others on general principles for interpreting them, others on the meaning of individual Psalms, and so forth. This module will take up the following questions that have direct bearing on the use of the Psalms for prayer:

- What are the Psalms?
- How should we pray the Psalms?
- How are we to understand the Psalms?
- How are we to understand the curses found in certain Psalms?
- Why do the Psalms play a central role in the Liturgy of the Hours?

This module will draw principally from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), the *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours*,² the USCCB's "Introduction to the Psalms," and from writing of saints, especially Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

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1. See United States Council of American Bishops (USCCB), "Psalms - Introduction," <http://www.usccb.org/bible/psalms/>0THE BOOK OF PSALMS: "Seventy-three Psalms are attributed to David, but there is no sure way of dating any Psalm. Some are preexilic (before 587), and others are postexilic (after 539), but not as late as the Maccabean period (ca. 165). The Psalms are the product of many individual collections (e.g., Songs of Ascents, Ps 120–134), which were eventually combined into the present work in which one can detect five 'books,' because of the doxologies which occur at 41:14; 72:18–19; 89:53; 106:48."
 2. *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours* is a Vatican document published by the Congregation for Divine Worship in 1971. Hereafter cited as *GILH*.

WHAT ARE THE PSALMS?



The CCC describes the Psalms in these words:

From the time of David to the coming of the Messiah texts appearing in these sacred books show a deepening in prayer for oneself and in prayer for others.³⁷ Thus the psalms were gradually collected into the five books of the Psalter (or "Praises"), the masterwork of prayer in the Old Testament.

The Psalms both nourished and expressed the prayer of the People of God gathered during the great feasts at Jerusalem and each Sabbath in the synagogues. Their prayer is inseparably personal and communal; it concerns both those who are praying and all men. The Psalms arose from the communities of the Holy Land and the Diaspora, but embrace all creation. Their prayer recalls the saving events of the past, yet extends into the future, even to the end of history; it commemorates the promises God has already kept, and awaits the Messiah who will fulfill them

definitively. Prayed by Christ and fulfilled in him, the Psalms remain essential to the prayer of the Church.³⁸

The Psalter is the book in which The Word of God becomes man's prayer... The words of the Psalmist, sung for God, both express and acclaim the Lord's saving works; the same Spirit inspires both God's work and man's response.¹

THE PSALMS ARE PRAYERS, particularly of praise,² composed in the form of songs.³ Though they were written in the context of the history of the chosen people, these inspired works are suited to people in all times and places. As the *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours* notes:

Though the psalms originated very many centuries ago among an Eastern people, they express accurately the pain and hope, the unhappiness and trust of people of every age and country, and sing above all of faith in God, of revelation, and of redemption.⁴

While certainly the prayers we spontaneously make to God are essential to maintaining our relationship with God, praying the fixed words of the psalms helps us express our deepest desires because the psalms are inspired by God. Thus, the *General Instruction* notes that since these songs are inspired by the Holy Spirit, "the origin of these verses gives them great power to raise the mind to God, to inspire devotion, to evoke gratitude in times of favor, and to bring consolation and courage in times of trial."⁵ While we may at first find that praying the psalms feels artificial, with practice we discover that their words often express what is in our hearts better than our own words could, as well as eliciting appropriate thoughts and desires in us. As the USCCB notes: "It has been rightly said that the Psalms are 'a school of prayer.' They not only provide us with models to follow, but inspire us to voice our own deepest feelings and aspirations."⁶

The Psalms are the prayer of Christ himself.⁷ If we wonder what Christ prayed to the Father in the many hours he spent in prayer, we can be sure that part of what he prayed was the Psalms.

Two of his seven last words on the cross were drawn from the Psalms. There he prayed the beginning of Ps. 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Mk. 15:34) and also a verse from Ps. 31: "Into your hand, I commend my spirit" (Lk. 23:46). Consequently, when we pray the Psalms, we enter into the prayer of Christ. St. Augustine expresses this point eloquently in his exposition of Psalm 85:

God could have granted no greater gift to human beings than to cause his Word, through whom he created all things, to be their head, and to fit them to him as his members. He was thus to be both Son of God and Son of Man, one God with the Father, one human being with us. The consequence is that when we speak to God in prayer we do not separate the Son from God and when the body of the Son prays it does not separate its head from itself. The one sole savior of his body is our Lord Jesus Christ, the son of God, who prays for us, prays in us, and is prayed to by us. He prays for us as our priest, he prays in us as our head, and he is prayed to by us as our God. Accordingly we must recognize our voices in him, and his accents in ourselves.⁸

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM, #2585-87. (Hereafter cited as *CCC*.)

2. See *CCC*, #2589: "The prayer of the psalms is always sustained by praise; that is why the title of this collection as handed down to us is so fitting: 'The Praises.' Collected for the assembly's worship, the Psalter both sounds the call to prayer and sings the response to that call: *Hallelu-Yah!* ('Alleluia'), 'Praise the Lord!'"

What is more pleasing than a psalm? David expresses it well: 'Praise the Lord, for a psalm is good: let there be praise of our God with gladness and grace!' Yes, a psalm is a blessing on the lips of the people, praise of God, the assembly's homage, a general acclamation, a word that speaks for all, the voice of the Church, a confession of faith in song."

3. According to music director, Christopher Candela, O.P., we do not know the melodies that the Jews used when they sang the Psalms. Tradition, however, suggests that the most ancient of the Latin psalm tones, "Tonus Peregrinus," may have been a melody used by the Jews. "Peregrinus" refers to "wandering people," and this tone has a very distinct sound that Jews who attend a very traditional synagogue would recognize.

4. *GILH*, 107. See also *CCC*, #2589: "Certain constant characteristics appear

HOW TO PRAY THE PSALMS

The way we should pray the Psalms follows directly from what the Psalms are. In keeping with the teaching of the CCC, we are to recognize that our prayer “is truly the voice of the Bride herself addressed to her Bridegroom. It is the very prayer which Christ himself together with his Body addresses to the Father.”¹

General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours offers further advice as to how to pray the Psalms:

The psalms are not readings or prose prayers, but poems of praise. They can on occasion be recited as readings, but from their literary genre they are properly called Tehillim (“songs of praise”) in Hebrew and psalmoi (“songs to be sung to the lyre”) in Greek. In fact, all the psalms have a musical quality that determines their correct style of delivery. Thus even when a psalm is recited and not sung or is said silently in private, its musical character should govern its use. A psalm does present a text to the minds of the people, but its aim is to move the heart of those singing it or listening to it and also of those accompanying it “on the lyre and harp.”²

To sing the psalms with understanding, then, is to meditate on them verse by verse, with the heart always ready to respond in the way the Holy Spirit desires. The one who inspired the psalmist will also be present to those who in faith and love are ready to receive his grace. For this reason the singing of psalms, though it demands the reverence owed to God's majesty, should be the expression of a joyful spirit and a loving heart, in keeping with their character as sacred poetry and divine song and above all with the freedom of the children of God.

Staying close to the meaning of the words, the person who prays the psalms looks for the significance of the text for the human life of the believer.³

The *General Instruction* goes on to address a difficulty we might experience in praying the Psalms as part of the Liturgy of Hours, namely, when there is a discrepancy between how we feel and the feeling expressed by a psalm specified for a given hour:

Those who pray the psalms in the liturgy of the hours do so not so much in their own name as in the name of the entire Body of Christ. This consideration does away with the problem of a possible discrepancy between personal feelings and the sentiments a psalm is expressing: for example, when a person feels sad and the psalm is one of joy or when a person feels happy and the psalm is one of mourning. Such a problem is readily solved in private prayer, which allows for the choice of a psalm suited to personal feelings. The divine office, however, is not private; the cycle of psalms is public, in the name of the Church, even for those who may be reciting an hour alone. Those who pray the psalms in the name of the Church nevertheless can always find a reason for joy or sadness, for the saying of the Apostle applies in this case also: "Rejoice with the joyful and weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15). In this way human frailty, wounded by self-love, is healed in proportion to the love that makes the heart match the voice that prays the psalms.⁴

We can, of course, choose to say particular psalms as part of our private prayers. As St. Athanasius notes, there is a psalm that will help meet the soul's every need:

Moreover, whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you do not merely hear and then pass on, but learn the way to remedy your ill. Prohibitions of evil-doing are plentiful in Scripture, but only the Psalter tells you how to obey these orders and abstain from sin. Repentance, for example, is enjoined repeatedly; but to repent means to leave off sinning, and it is the Psalms that show you how to set about repenting and with what words your penitence may be expressed. Again, Saint Paul says, *Tribulation worketh endurance, and endurance experience, and experience hope, and hope maketh not ashamed* [Rom 5:5]; but it is in the Psalms that we find written and described how afflictions should be borne, and what the afflicted ought to say, both at the time and when his troubles cease: the whole process of his testing is set forth in them and we are shown exactly with what words to voice our hope in God. Or take the commandment, *In everything give thanks*. [1 Th. 5:18]. The Psalms not only exhort us to be thankful, they also provide us with fitting words to say. We are told, too, by other writers that all who would live godly in Christ must suffer persecution; [2 Tim. 3:12] and here again the Psalms supply words with which both those who flee persecution and those who suffer under it may suitably address themselves to God, and it does the same for those who have been rescued from it. We are bidden elsewhere in the Bible also to bless the Lord and to acknowledge Him: here in the Psalms we are shown the way to do it, and with what sort of words His majesty may meetly be confessed. In fact, under all the circumstances of life, we shall find that these divine songs suit ourselves and meet our own souls' need at every turn.⁵

1. CCC #1174. The CCC is quoting the Vatican document on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, #84, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.