



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 5 November 2003

Psalm 141[140]

"Prayer in danger"

1. In previous catecheses, we gave an overall look at the structure and value of the *Liturgy of Vespers*, the great ecclesiastical prayer of the evening. We now journey into its interior. It will be like making a pilgrimage to that "holy land" made up of the *Psalms* and *Canticles*. One by one we will reflect on each of those poetic prayers, which God has sealed with his inspiration. They are invocations which the Lord himself desires should be addressed to him, for he loves to listen to them, hearing in them the heartbeat of his beloved children.

Let us begin with Psalm 141[140], which opens Sunday Vespers of the first of the four weeks when, following the Second Vatican Council, the evening prayer of the Church was adopted.

2. "Let my prayer come like incense before you; the lifting up of my hands, like the evening sacrifice". Verse two of this Psalm can be considered as the distinctive sign of the entire hymn and as the apparent justification of the fact that it has been included in the *Liturgy of Vespers*. The idea expressed reflects the spirit of prophetic theology that intimately unites worship with life, prayer with existence.

The same prayer made with a pure and sincere heart becomes a sacrifice offered to God. The entire being of the person who prays becomes a sacrificial act, a prelude to what St Paul would suggest when he invited Christians to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God: this is the spiritual sacrifice acceptable to him (cf. Rom 12: 1).

Hands raised in prayer are a bridge to communication with God, as is the smoke that rises as sweet odour from the victim during the sacrificial rite of the evening.

3. The Psalm continues in a tone of supplication, transmitted to us by a text which in the original Hebrew is unclear and presents certain interpretative difficulties (especially in vv. 4-7).

The general sense may, however, be identified and transformed into meditation and prayer. Above all else, the person praying calls upon the Lord that He not permit his lips (cf. v. 3) and the motions of his heart to be attracted and enticed by evil, thus inclining him to commit "wicked deeds" (cf. v. 4). In fact, a person's words and actions express his or her moral choice. Evil exercises such an attraction that it easily provokes even the faithful to taste "the delights" that sinners can offer, sitting down at their table; that is, taking part in their perverse actions.

The Psalm even acquires the character of an examination of conscience, which is followed by the commitment to always choose the ways of God.

4. At this point, however, the person praying starts by bursting out with a passionate declaration that he will not associate with the evildoer; he will not be a guest of the sinner, nor let the fragrant oil that is reserved for privileged guests (cf. Ps 23[22]: 5) bear witness to his connivance with the evildoer (cf. Ps 141[140]: 5). To express his downright disassociation from the wicked with greater vehemence, the Psalmist then declares an indignant condemnation in his regard, in vivid images of vehement judgment.

It is one of the typical imprecations of the Psalter (cf. Ps 58[57] and 109[108]), whose purpose is to affirm, in a realistic and even picturesque way, hostility towards evil, the choice of good and the certainty that God intervenes in history with his judgment of severe condemnation of injustice (cf. vv. 6-7).

5. The Psalm closes with a final invocation of trust (cf. vv. 8-9): it is a hymn of faith, thankfulness and joy in the certainty that the faithful one will not be engulfed by the hatred that the perverse reserve for him and will not fall into the trap they set for him, after having noted his firm choice to do what is right. In this way, the righteous person is able to surmount every deceit unscathed, as it is said in another Psalm: "We were rescued like a bird from the fowler's snare; broken was the snare, and we were freed" (Ps 124[123]: 7).

Let us end our reading of Psalm 141[140] by returning to the first image: that of evening prayer as a sacrifice pleasing to God. John Cassian, a great spiritual master and native of the East, who lived between the fourth and fifth centuries and spent the last part of his life in Southern Gaul, re-read these words in a Christological vein: "Indeed, in them, one perceives an allusion made to the evening sacrifice in a more spiritual way, brought to fulfilment by the Lord and Saviour during his Last Supper and consigned to the Apostles when he sanctioned the beginning of the Church's holy mysteries. Or (might one perceive an allusion) to that same sacrifice that he offered of himself the following day in the evening, with the raising of his own hands: a sacrifice prolonged until the end of time for the salvation of the whole world" (cf. *Le Istituzioni Cenobitiche* [The Cenobitic

Institutions], Abbey of Praglia, Padua 1989, p. 92).

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

To the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*: may you always feel the presence of Christ alive, to follow him with joy on the way of holiness.

To the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims

I extend a special greeting to the group from the Pontifical Irish College accompanied by Cardinal Connell and other Irish Bishops. I welcome all the English-speaking visitors here today including groups from England, Scotland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and the United States. Upon all of you I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

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