



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday 26 February 2003

Psalm 150

Music, hymnody should be worthy of the greatness of the Liturgy

1. Psalm 150, which we have just proclaimed, rings out for the second time in the *Liturgy of Lauds*: a festive hymn, an "alleluia" to the rhythm of music. It sets a spiritual seal on the whole Psalter, the book of praise, of song, of the liturgy of Israel.

The text is marvelously simple and transparent. We should just let ourselves be drawn in by the insistent call to praise the Lord: "Praise the Lord ... praise him ... praise him!". The Psalm opens presenting God in the two fundamental aspects of his mystery. Certainly, he is transcendent, mysterious, beyond our horizon: his royal abode is the heavenly "sanctuary", "his mighty heavens", a fortress that is inaccessible for the human being. Yet he is close to us: he is present in the "holy place" of Zion and acts in history through his "mighty deeds" that reveal and enable one to experience "his surpassing greatness" (cf. vv. 1-2).

2. Thus between heaven and earth a channel of communication is established in which the action of the Lord meets the hymn of praise of the faithful. The liturgy unites the two holy places, the earthly temple and the infinite heavens, God and man, time and eternity.

During the prayer, we accomplish an ascent towards the divine light and together experience a descent of God who adapts himself to our limitations in order to hear and speak to us, meet us and save us. The Psalmist readily urges us to find help for our praise in the prayerful encounter: sound the musical instruments of the orchestra of the temple of Jerusalem, such as the trumpet, harp, lute, drums, flutes and cymbals. Moving in procession was also part of the ritual of Jerusalem (cf. Ps 117[118],27). The same appeal echoes in Psalm 46[47],8): "Sing praise with all your skill!".

3. Hence, it is necessary to discover and to live constantly the beauty of prayer and of the liturgy. We must pray to God with theologically correct formulas and also in a beautiful and dignified way. In this regard, the Christian community must make an examination of conscience so that the beauty of music and hymnody will return once again to the liturgy. They should purify worship from ugliness of style, from distasteful forms of expression, from uninspired musical texts which are not worthy of the great act that is being celebrated.

In this connection in the *Epistle to the Ephesians* we find an important appeal to avoid drunkenness and vulgarity, and to make room for the purity of liturgical hymns: "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father" (5,18-20).

4. The Psalmist ends with an invitation to "every living being" (cf. Ps 150,5), to give praise, literally "every breath", "everything that breathes", a term that in Hebrew means "every being that breathes", especially "every living person" (cf. Dt 20,16; Jos 10,40; 11,11.14). In the divine praise then, first of all, with his heart and voice, the human creature is involved. With him all living beings, all creatures in which there is a breath of life (cf. Gn 7,22) are called in spirit, so that they may raise their hymn of thanksgiving to the Creator for the gift of life.

Following up on this universal invitation, St Francis left us his thoughtful "Canticle of Brother Sun", in which he invites us to praise and bless the Lord for all his creatures, reflections of his beauty and goodness (cf. *Fonti Francescane [Franciscan Sources]*, 263).

5. All the faithful should join in this hymn in a special way, as the *Epistle to the Colossians* suggests: "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col 3,16).

On this subject, in his *Expositions on the Psalms (Enarrationes in Psalmos)*, St Augustine sees the musical instruments as symbolizing the saints who praise God: "You are the trumpet, lute, harp, tambourine, choir, strings, organ, and cymbals of jubilation sounding well, because sounding in harmony. You are all of these. Do not here think of anything vile, anything transitory or anything ridiculous"... "every spirit (who) praises the Lord" is a voice of song to God (cf. *Exposition on the Psalms*, vol. VI, Oxford, 1857, p. 456).

So the highest music is what comes from our hearts. In our liturgies this is the harmony God wants to hear.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I extend special greetings to the Marist Brothers taking part in a renewal programme in Rome, and to the participants in a Workshop for Pilgrimage Coordinators and Shrine Directors. I also thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from England, Ireland, Japan and the United States of America, I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

I now address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Tomorrow is the liturgical memorial of St Gabriel of the Sorrowful Mother, a young Passionist religious.

Dear *young people*, whom I see here in such large numbers today, may you draw from his shining example the courage to be faithful disciples of Christ and to follow him without compromises in the places where you live. I urge you, dear *sick people*, to face every trial with a spirit of faith and Gospel hope. Finally, I hope that you, dear *newly-weds*, will always find in the mystery of the Cross, as St Gabriel did, the divine love that consecrates your union.

I greet the Bishops of Romania, who have come on their *ad limina* visit and are present at the Audience. With joy, I remember the warm greeting they gave me on occasion of my Apostolic Visit to their country four years ago. I assure you and the faithful in your pastoral care of my remembrance in prayer.