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# HOW TO USE THE PSALTER IN THE LITURGY

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IT WAS ONLY from the third century on that the Psalms of the Ancient Testament were definitely adopted to supply texts for nearly the entire official prayer of the Church. Of the touching hymnal compositions of the primitive Church remained in use only the *Gloria in excelsis*, which in the Eastern Churches has its place in the morning Office. We also possess the text of the *Phôs hilaron* (Joyful Light) which was sung in the ancient Office of the *Lucernare*, the predecessor of our Compline, during which the lamps were lighted for the night. One may regret that these hymnic compositions of early Christianity had to make way for the Psalms of the Old Testament. The ancient prayers in hymnal form of the persecution centuries celebrated expressly and in direct language the glory of the God-triune of whom Jesus had brought the revelation. They sang the greatness of Christ the Lord and of the salvation procured by Him. Today, exegetes see a sample of this form of early christian worship in verses 6 to 11 of ch 2 of St Paul's Letter to the Philippians.

Is not this masterful piece of theological poetry incomparably richer in meaning and more inspiring for our worship and our whole spiritual life than so many Psalms which occupy our minds with an irascible Yahwe, quarrelling with His stiffnecked chosen people? Does not this magnificent song of praise, which might well be even older than St Paul's Epistle itself, tell us a good deal more than e.g. that longest of all Psalms : 118? This Psalm which serves traditionally in the monastic Office for all the Little Hours of Sunday and Monday, presents to us in no less than 176 verses always the single theme of attachment to the Law!

## I.—TWO SCHEMES FOR LITURGICAL USE OF THE PSALTER

At the outset, when the Psalms began to replace those beautiful prayer texts inspired by the New Testament, they were distributed according to two schemes. In one, the texts were chosen in agreement with the time of the day, or with a feast, a season, e.g. as especially suited for the liturgical Hour of Lauds or Vespers. The other scheme, monastic in origin and conceived especially in view of night vigils, followed the numerical order of the Psalter. This latter scheme was generally followed in the distribution which St Benedict borrowed from the monks who in his days were in charge of the liturgical services in the Roman basilicas. Practically all monks of the Latin Church, including the Carthusians, have adopted this scheme to the present day . . . or nearly. For with Pope Paul VI, I cannot but regret that, more and more, monks are giving up St Benedict's distribution of the entire Psalter over a week's period. Since the Council, and one may truly say: in spite of the Council, the sense, the value, the usefulness of prayer, even liturgical prayer, are being questioned also among monks. In an alarmingly increasing number of monasteries Offices are being changed and especially shortened in an all but comforting way. One such abbey—Cistercian of the strict observance—celebrated Matins last Christmas with only one Nocturn: 6 Psalms, 4 Lessons, not from Scripture or from the Fathers of the Church, but from Karl Rahner, 4 Responsories and the Te Deum: *voilà tout!* And such examples abound all over the world. It is already well known, that when monks introduce the vernacular in their Office, they almost always end up by sacrificing also Gregorian chant and by gradually losing the contemplative orientation of their calling. They seem to want to practise 'dialogue' with the world, forgetting that their vocation is rather dialoguing in the name of the world *with God*. Dom Jean Leclercq OSB keeps repeating that a certain separation from the world, along with a special concentration on prayer are essential components of any monasticism worthy of its name. Judged by this standard, the situation of the Monastic Order

nowadays can hardly be termed brilliant. Recently a Benedictine abbey in Holland put into practice the general advice given to contemplatives by Father Karl Rahner S.J. That leading theologian reminded monks and nuns, referring to the example of the 'hippies' (!), that it can be an eminent service done to one's own time to act in avowed opposition to its spirit. These Dutch monks some years ago decided to sing the entire Office from Matins to Compline, every day, with its full Gregorian chant. And now, they are the outstanding monastic house in Holland. People from all the Netherlands and even from across the frontiers visit the abbey as a place of pilgrimage, where they can take part in a divine worship 'en style'. And while the 'changing' abbeys are becoming empty, this one is attracting vocations.

## II.—PSALMODY AND THE REVIVAL OF THE MONASTIC SPIRIT

It seems to me that one of the first tasks for those who wish to revive the monastic spirit, should be to improve the monks' prayer by making them familiar with the Psalter. And special care should be devoted to instructing the young in turning, saying and singing Psalms into a real contemplative prayer. After having myself used the Psalter in this way for nearly fifty years, by night and day, and with the most comforting results, I may perhaps be permitted to make a few suggestions on the point in question.

I have alluded heretofore to the considerable difficulty of turning the Psalter into a Christian prayerbook, on account of its reflecting the mentality of the Old Testament. The prayer of a Christian moves in the atmosphere of the Redemption accomplished by God the Son who became the Son of Man, Mediator of our salvation. Like the monks of all monastic history, we should try to solve this difficulty by seeking in the Old Testament texts prophecies and prefigurations of Christ. Above all, of His central mystery of proceeding to the glory of His Resurrection via the apparent failure of His death in shame and torture on the cross.

We should also seek in these psalm-texts prefigurative descriptions

of the Church in its present state, and of the eschatological times. By this I mean : when our final destiny will reveal itself, and this temporal and spatial world of ours will pass on to give way to the conditions of existence of the *homo caelestis*, of man finally resuscitated to celestial life.

The choir psalters of the Cistercians indicate other applications, of a rather moralistic trend.

Once a monk is initiated into this method of using the Psalms, he will easily discover similar or quite other applications. Applying himself to this mental exercise in a spirit of faith, conscious of the fact that he is dealing with words of God, a message of God to humanity and particularly to himself, such a monk will soon notice that the Holy Spirit begins to enlighten him by His Gifts of understanding and savoury knowledge. Divine light will shine on such a sentence or on such an expression at one time, and at another moment on a different one. Then, our mind should occupy itself with that text in perfect freedom, as long as we find nourishment for our piety in it. The choir, in the meantime, goes on chanting or reciting, and it is quite possible to perform such a little meditation while keeping up with the chant. It is the role of the choir to create an atmosphere and an undercurrent of unspecified prayer, which envelopes the participants and carries them on. This undercurrent takes us up again each time our mind returns to full consciousness after having wandered about in distraction. When taking part in the celebration of the Divine Office, we should not attempt to analyse, wanting to understand every word and sentence we are saying or singing. It is not our business then to make the Office a meditative prayer after the method of St Ignatius. Doing so, would excessively fatigue the mind and we would soon lose heart when obtaining no satisfactory results. We should rather try to catch some particular thought now and then, e.g. we might see whether we could discover in a Psalm its main idea, be it trust in God, adoration or praise, thanksgiving, or perhaps fear and anguish. We can then bring ourselves in a similar disposition. At other times, we could think of our fellow men or of nations which are striving in circumstances akin to those the Psalm describes. For it is a monk's vocation to act as the spokesman of the People of

God and to offer continuous intercession for them. While singing or reciting our Psalms, we should perform that task of interceding for the world and the Church *without formulating* the prayer, by a simple movement of the heart (Father Baker's 'aspirations') or by directing our intention in that sense.

The Psalms frequently describe at length the outstanding event of Israel's history: the Exodus from Egypt, where God's People had been so long in bondage. When a monk comes across such a Psalm during his Office, he could think of the Church, the community of the faithful, which is the New Israel. He should remember its long terrestrial pilgrimage throughout history, to the Land of Promise awaiting it at the end of Time. When a Psalm is speaking of David or of the king in general, it could be applied to the Son of David who is Christ, and turned into a prayer for the spread of His Kingdom. For although it is not of this present world, yet it is growing laboriously to maturity in our very midst.

Rather too frequently for our modern mentality, the Psalms are venting violent feelings of hatred and curse against the enemies of Israel, or those of the psalmist himself. Then we can remind ourselves that we are living under the law of charity and brotherly love, and yet be ashamed that in spite of twenty centuries of Christianity, we are still so very, very far from having made charity triumph over egotism and avarice. In spite of all our technical perfection and the enormous output of production, modern man is guiltier than ever of the grinding poverty in existence in far the greater part of our planet. While we pray more than once a day: 'Give us today our daily bread', the culpability of the so-called civilised part of the world increases year after year in offering so little help to the nations suffering from malnutrition. What suggestions for those short wordless elevations of the mind to God during the Office can originate from the imprecatory Psalms! So many people and even monks of our own times do not know what to do with these violent curses in the Psalms, simply because they have never been told that the intention of the Liturgy when prescribing them, was not that we should say them as if they were literally our own prayer, but rather that we should seek in them topics and themes for our personal worship and intercession.

The Psalms and the entire Old Testament for that matter, speak a good deal about the fear of God. Follow the inspiring advice of St John of the Cross who says that wherever the texts has 'fear of God', we should read 'love, charity'. Because as St John the Evangelist reminds us, under the New Law 'love drives out fear when it is perfect love' (I John 4 :18). You will see what luminous discoveries you will make in your Psalms when you apply this transposition advised by the Mystical Doctor of Holy Church.

### III.—TOWARD GRADUAL SIMPLIFICATION

A monk's liturgical life, just as his life of prayer throughout, evolves usually in a sense of simplification. So, in all probability will also be the case with our using the Psalter in the Office. Gradually we will arrive at nourishing our liturgical prayer no longer by a great diversity of thoughts, but usually by recurring to a small number of texts which have proved particularly inspiring for our piety. One might even content oneself with a mere interior attitude of adoration, thanksgiving, supplication, renewed and enlivened from time to time by coming across or remembering some striking text.

St Thomas gives us to understand that when reciting the Office, one may go as far as letting oneself be absorbed entirely by attention to the presence of God, to whom the Liturgy is addressed. The monk may be drawn to this attention by the peaceful rhythm of the chant, and he may even remain rather spellbound by its prayerful sweetness, as St Augustine was frequently, according to his own account of it. I know of a simple soul, profoundly religious, who regularly assisted at Sunday Vespers in a Benedictine monastery. There she used to adore Christ the Messiah, King and Priest, during the first Psalm, *Dixit Dominus* (Ps 109). During the second Psalm, *Confitebor* (Ps 110) this person offered her worship to the Lord enthroned in the assembly of the Saints. At the third Psalm, *Beatus vir* (Ps 111) she honoured St Joseph as being the outstanding Just Man of the Old Testament. And the fourth Psalm, *Laudate pueri* (Ps 112), this contemplative—for she must have

been one though living in the world—praised God for, and with, Our Lady. The themes of this Psalm rightly reminded her of the *Magnificat*.

You will notice how this meditative, and even contemplative, way of taking inspiration from the Psalms when celebrating the Divine Office, can do with even a minimum of understanding of the text. And that, strictly speaking, this method could be followed even by one who sings or recites the Office in Latin, with hardly any understanding of this language. For not paying attention to the words, community singing needs not to be less expressive of the general feelings and the attitude of soul which are underlying the whole liturgical prayer. And for making prayer a vivid reality these underlying feelings *do* matter far more!

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