



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Song of praise, joy sung by festive chorus and instruments

1. "*Let the faithful exult in glory, let them rise joyfully from their couches*". The order which you have just heard in Psalm 149, points to a dawn which is breaking and finds the faithful ready to chant their morning praise. With a suggestive phrase, their song of praise is defined as "a new song" (v. 1), a solemn and perfect hymn, perfect for the final days, in which the Lord will gather together the just in a renewed world. A festive atmosphere pervades the entire Psalm; it begins with the initial *Alleluia* and then continues with chant, praise, joy, dance, the sound of drums and of harps. The Psalm inspires a prayer of thanksgiving from a heart filled with religious exultation.

2. The protagonists of the Psalm in the original Hebrew text are given two terms that are taken from the spirituality of the Old Testament. Three times they are defined as the *hasidim* (vv. 1, 5, 9), "the pious, the faithful ones", who respond with fidelity and love (*hesed*) to the fatherly love of the Lord.

The second part of the Psalm provokes surprise because it is full of warlike sentiments. It is strange that in the same verse, the Psalm brings together "the praises of God on the lips" and "the two-edged sword in their hands" (v. 6). Upon reflection, we can understand why the Psalm was composed for the use of the "faithful" who were involved in a struggle for liberation; they were fighting to free an oppressed people and to give them the possibility of serving God. During the Maccabean era, in the 2nd century B.C., those fighting for freedom and faith, who underwent a severe repression from the Hellenistic power, were defined as the *hasidim*, the ones faithful to the Word of God and the tradition of the fathers.

3. In the present perspective of our prayer, the warlike symbolism becomes an image of the dedication of the believer who sings the praises of God in the morning and then goes into the ways of the world, in the midst of evil and injustice. Unfortunately powerful forces are arrayed against the Kingdom of God: the Psalmist speaks of "peoples, nations, leaders and nobles". Yet he is confident because he knows that he has at his side the Lord, who is the master of history (v. 2). His victory over evil is certain and so will be the triumph of love. All the *hasidim* participate in the battle, they are the faithful and just who with the power of the Spirit bring to fulfilment the wonderful work that is called the Kingdom of God.

4. St Augustine, starting with the reference of the Psalm to the "choir" and to the "drums and harps", commented: "What does the choir represent?... The choir is a group of singers who sing together. If we sing in a choir, we must sing in harmony. When one sings in a choir, one off-key voice strikes the listener and creates confusion in the choir" (*Enarr. in Ps. 149; CCL 40, 7, 1-4*).

Referring to the instruments mentioned in the Psalm he asks: "Why does the Psalmist take in hand the drum and the harp?". He answers, "Because we praise the Lord not just with the voice, but also with our works. When we take up the drum and the harp, the hands have to be in accord with the voice. The same goes for you. When you sing the Alleluia, you must give bread to the poor, give clothes to the naked, give shelter to the traveler. If you do it, not only does your voice sing, but your hands are in accord with your voice because the works agree with the words" (*ibid.*, 8, 1-4).

5. There is a second term which we use to define those who pray in the Psalm: they are the *anawim*, "the poor and lowly ones" (v. 4). The expression turns up often in the Psalter. It indicates not just the oppressed, the miserable, the persecuted for justice, but also those who, with fidelity to the moral teaching of the Alliance with God, are marginalized by those who prefer to use violence, riches and power. In this light one understands that the category of the "poor" is not just a social category but a spiritual choice. It is what the famous first Beatitude means: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5,3). The prophet Zephaniah spoke to the *anawim* as special persons: "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of wrath of the Lord" (Zep 2,3).

6. The "day of the Lord's wrath" is really the day described in the second part of the Psalm when the "poor" are lined up on the side of God to fight against evil. By themselves they do not have sufficient strength or the arms or the necessary strategies to oppose the onslaught of evil. Yet the Psalmist does not admit hesitation: "The Lord loves his people, he adorns the lowly (*anawim*) with victory" (v. 4). What St Paul says to the Corinthians completes the picture: "God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are" (I Cor 1,28).

With such confidence the "sons of Zion" (v. 2), the *hasidim* and *anawim*, the faithful and the poor,

go on to live their witness in the world and in history. Mary's canticle in the Gospel of Luke, the *Magnificat*, is the echo of the best sentiments of the "sons of Zion": glorious praise of God her Saviour, thanksgiving for the great things done by the Mighty One, the battle against the forces of evil, solidarity with the poor and fidelity to the God of the Covenant (cf Lk 1,46-55).

I warmly welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, and offer a special word of encouragement to the various student groups. I greet the delegation from Macedonia, present in Rome for the Feast of Saints Cyril and Methodius. Upon all of you, particularly the visitors from Sweden, Japan and the United States, I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.

At the end the Holy Father addressed the group of Salesian Bishops and Archbishops who were in attendance:

Addressing the Italian pilgrims, I greet first of all a special group of participants in the audience: the Salesian Archbishops and Bishops, gathered for the first time to reflect on what Don Bosco's charism means for episcopal service.

The perennial force of the educational apostolate of Don Bosco, father and teacher of young people, has inspired the pastoral charity of many Salesian bishops who, beginning with the great missionary, Cardinal Giovanni Cagliero, are committed to evangelization, frequently in places that are on the frontiers of civilization.

Even the dimension of martyrdom has characterized the missionary activity of the sons of Don Bosco, from Bishop Luigi Versiglia, whom I had the joy of canonizing on 1 October of the Jubilee Year, to the three Indian confrères killed recently in Imphal, in Northeast India. Once again I express my sincere participation in the Congregation's grief for its sons who were barbarically killed. I exhort all Salesians to persevere courageously in bearing witness to Christ and to the Gospel. Brothers in the Episcopate, I entrust you and the faithful who belong to your Diocesan communities to the maternal protection of Mary, Helper of Christians and Star of Evangelization. Guided by her, take to every human being the Gospel of her Son, the only Redeemer of humanity. I accompany you with my prayer and sincerely bless you and those who in many parts of the world help you in your ministry.