



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 14 May 2003

Canticle from the Book of Daniel

We trust in your merciful love!

1. The Canticle that has just been proclaimed is part of the Greek text of the *Book of Daniel*, presented as a fervent and sincere supplication raised to the Lord. It is the voice of Israel, experiencing the harsh trial of exile and of the diaspora among the peoples. Indeed, it is an Israelite, Azariah, who intones the Canticle, set in the Babylonian panorama at the time of the exile of Israel after the destruction of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar.

Azariah, with two other faithful Israelites, is "in the midst of the fire" (Dn 3: 25), like a martyr ready to suffer death in order not to betray his conscience and his faith. He was condemned to death for refusing to worship the imperial image.

2. The persecution is considered in this Canticle as a just punishment with which God purifies his sinful people: "In truth and justice you have brought all this upon us", Azariah confesses, "because of our sins" (v. 28). We are therefore in the presence of a penitential prayer that does not give way to discouragement or fear but to hope.

Of course, the starting point is sorrowful, the despair deep, the trial burdensome, and the divine judgment on the people's sin severe: "At this time there is no prince, or prophet, or leader, no burnt offering, or sacrifice, or oblation, or incense, no place to make an offering before you or to find mercy" (v. 38). The temple of Zion is destroyed and it seems as though the Lord no longer dwells among his people.

3. In the present tragic situation, hope seeks its roots in the past, that is, in the promises made to the fathers. It goes back, therefore, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (cf. v. 35), to whom God assured

blessings and fruitfulness, a land and importance, life and peace. God is faithful and will not be untrue to his promises. Even if justice demands that Israel be punished for its sins, the certainty that mercy and pardon will always have the last word endures. The Prophet Ezekiel previously mentioned these words of the Lord: "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked... and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?... For I have no pleasure in the death of any one" (Ez 18: 23, 32). Now, of course, is the time of humiliation: "For we, O Lord, have become fewer than any nation and are brought low this day in all the world because of our sins" (Dn 3: 37). Yet we do not have an expectation of death, but of new life, after purification.

4. The man praying approaches the Lord, offering him the most precious and acceptable sacrifice: a "contrite heart" and "humbled spirit" (v. 39; cf. Ps 51 [50]: 19). Indeed, it is the centre of existence, the "I" renewed by the trial that it offers to God, so that he might accept it as a sign of conversion and dedication to do good.

By this inner disposition, fear is overcome, confusion and shame are put to flight (cf. Dn 3: 40), and the spirit opens to confidence in a better future, when the promises made to the fathers will be fulfilled.

The last sentence of Azariah's entreaty, as it is proposed by the liturgy, has a strong emotional impact and deep spiritual intensity: "now with all our heart we follow you, we fear you and seek your face..." (v. 41). In these words lingers an echo of another Psalm: "My heart says to you, "Your face, Lord, do I seek"" (Ps 27[26]: 8).

The time has now come when our journey is leaving behind the perverse routes of evil, the crooked paths and devious ways (Prv 2: 15). We are beginning to follow the Lord, moved by the desire to find his face. And his face is not angry but filled with love, as was the merciful father's for his prodigal son (cf. Lk 15: 11-32).

5. Let us conclude our reflection on the *Canticle of Azariah* with the prayer written by St Maximus the Confessor in his *Discorso Ascetico* (37-39), inspired by the text of the Prophet Daniel. "For your name's sake do not abandon us forever, do not break your covenant, nor withdraw your mercy from us (cf. Dn 3: 34-35), through your mercy, O, Our Father in Heaven, through the compassion of your Only-begotten Son and the mercy of your Holy Spirit.... Do not be deaf to our plea, O Lord, and do not abandon us for ever.

"Let us not trust in our own works of justice but in your mercy, through which you preserve our race.... Do not despise our unworthiness, but have pity on us in accordance with your great mercy, and take away our sins through the fullness of your mercy, so that, without condemnation, we may come close to your holy glory and be deemed worthy of the protection of your Only-begotten Son".

St Maximus ends: "Yes, O Lord, Almighty Master, hear our plea, for we recognize none other than

you" (*Umanità e Divinità di Cristo*, Rome 1979, pp. 51-52).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I am pleased to extend special greetings to the participants in the NATO Defense College and to the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, particularly those from England, Wales, Australia, Canada and the United States of America. Upon all of you I invoke the grace and peace of the Risen Saviour.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

Lastly, I address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*, urging them all to deepen the pious practice of the Holy Rosary, especially in this month of May, dedicated to the Mother of God.

I invite you, dear young people, to make the most of this traditional evangelical prayer, which helps us to understand better the central moments of salvation brought about by Christ. I urge you, dear sick people, to turn confidently to Our Lady through this pious practice, entrusting all your needs to her. I hope, dear newly-weds, that you will make the recitation of the Rosary together an intense moment of family life under the maternal gaze of the Virgin Mary.