



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 12 November 2003

Psalm 142[141]

"I cry with my voice to the Lord!"

1. On the evening of 3 October 1226, St Francis of Assisi lay dying: his last prayer was, precisely, the recitation of Psalm 142[141] that we have just heard. St Bonaventure recalls that Francis "burst out with the exclamation of the Psalm: "I cry with my voice to the Lord, with my voice I make supplication to the Lord", and recited it to the very last verse: "The righteous will surround me; for you will deal bountifully with me" (*Legenda Maior*, XIV, 5, in: *Fonti Francescane*, Padua, Assisi, 1980, p. 958).

The Psalm is an intense petition, marked by a series of verbs of entreaty addressed to the Lord. "I cry... to the Lord", "I make supplication to the Lord", "I pour out my complaint before him", "I tell my trouble" (vv. 1-2). The central part of the Psalm is dominated by trust in God who is not indifferent to the suffering of his faithful (cf. vv. 3-7). With this attitude, St. Francis approached his end.

2. God is called upon with [the familiar form of] "you" as a person who provides security: "You are my refuge" (v. 5). "You know my path!", that is, the journey of my life, a route marked by the choice of justice. However, on that path the wicked have set a hidden snare (cf. v. 3); this typical image taken from hunting scenes recurs in the Psalms of petition to indicate the dangers and threats to which the just are subjected.

Facing this nightmare, the Psalmist, as it were, sounds the alarm so that God may see his situation and intervene: "I look to the right and watch" (v. 4). In the Eastern tradition, the person would have on his right his defender or favourable witness in a court or, in the case of war, his

bodyguard. Hence, the believer feels lonely and abandoned: "there is none who takes notice of me"; and he makes an anguished observation: "no refuge remains to me, no man cares for me" (v. 4).

3. A cry then immediately reveals the hope that dwells in the heart of the person of prayer. Henceforth, his only protection, his only effective closeness, is to be found in God: "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living" (v. 5). The "portion" or "destiny" in biblical language is the gift of the promised land, a sign of God's love for his people. The Lord now remains the last and only foundation to depend on, the only possibility of life, the supreme hope.

The Psalmist calls upon him insistently, because he has been "brought very low" (v. 6). He entreats the Lord to intervene to break the chains of his prison of solitude and hostility (cf. v. 7) and to bring him out of the abyss of trial.

4. As in other Psalms of petition, the final prospect is the thanksgiving that will be offered to God when he has answered the prayer: "Bring me out of prison, that I may give thanks to your name!" (*ibid.*). When he has been saved, the faithful one will thank the Lord in the midst of the liturgical assembly (cf. *ibid.*). The righteous will surround him and will see the salvation of their brother as a gift that is also offered to them.

This atmosphere must also pervade Christian celebrations. The suffering of the individual must echo in the hearts of all; likewise, the joy of each one must be vibrant in the whole of the praying community. "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity" (Ps 133[132]: 1), and the Lord Jesus said: "Where two or three are gathered in my name there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18: 20).

5. Christian tradition has applied Psalm 142[141] to the persecuted and suffering Christ. In this perspective, the luminous goal of the Psalm's plea is transfigured into a paschal sign on the basis of the glorious outcome of the life of Christ and of our destiny of resurrection with him. This is also what St Hilary of Poitiers, a famous fourth-century Doctor of the Church, says in his *Treatise on the Psalms*.

He comments on the Latin translation of the last verse of the Psalm, which speaks of a reward for the person of prayer and the expectation of being with the just: "*Me expectant iusti, donec retribuas mihi*". St Hilary explains that "the Apostle teaches us what reward the Father gave to Christ: "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2: 9-11). This is the reward: to the body that has ascended is given the everlasting glory of the Father".

"Then the same Apostle teaches us what the expectation of the just consists in, saying: "Our

commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself' (Phil 3: 20-21). Indeed, the just await his coming so that he will reward them, that is, by changing them to be like his glorious body that is blessed for ever and ever. Amen" (PL 9, 833-837).

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

Lastly, my greeting goes to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*.

May the grace of the Lord encourage you, dear *young people*, in the effort to be craftsmen of justice and reconciliation. May it sustain you, dear *sick people*, so that you do not lose hope at the moment of trial. And may it illumine you, dear *newly weds*, to be generous witnesses of the Gospel of life.

To the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims

I offer special greetings today to the participants in the NATO Defense College: may you ever be strengthened in your commitment to build peace and increase stability in the world. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present, especially those from England, Malawi and the United States of America, I invoke the grace and peace of the Lord Jesus.