



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 28 April 2004

Psalm 27[26]

Confidence in God in times of tribulation

1. The *Liturgy of Vespers* has divided Psalm 27[26] into two parts, following the text's structure which is similar to a diptych. We have just proclaimed the second part of this hymn of trust that is raised to the Lord on the dark day of the assault of evil. Verses 7 to 14 of the Psalm open with a cry directed to the Lord: "Have mercy [on me] and answer" (v. 7), and then express an anxious search for the Lord with the heart-rending fear of being abandoned by him (cf. vv. 8-9). Lastly, a moving horizon unfolds before our eyes, where family affections themselves fail (cf. v. 10) as "enemies" (v. 11), "adversaries" and "false witnesses" (cf. v. 12) advance.

However, even now, as in the first part of the Psalm, the decisive element is the trust of the person of prayer in the Lord, who saves in time of trial and is a refuge during the storm. Very beautiful, in this respect, is the appeal the Psalmist addresses to himself at the end: "Hope in him, hold firm and take heart. Hope in the Lord!" (v. 14; cf. Ps 42[41]: 6, 12; 43[42]: 5).

In other Psalms too, there was living certainty that one obtains strength and hope from the Lord: "He guards his faithful, but the Lord will repay to the full those who act with pride. Be strong, let your heart take courage, all who hope in the Lord" (Ps 31[30]: 24-25). The prophet Hosea also exhorts Israel in this way: "Remain loyal and do right and always hope in your God" (Hos 12: 7).

2. We will limit ourselves now to highlighting three symbolic elements of great spiritual intensity. The first, a negative one, is the nightmare of enemies (cf. Ps 27[26]: 12), looked upon as wild animals who "eagerly await" their prey and then, in a more direct way, as "false witnesses" who

seem to blow violence from their nostrils, just like wild beasts before their victims.

Therefore, there is an aggressive evil in the world which is led and inspired by Satan, as St Peter reminds us: "Your opponent the devil is prowling like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Pt 5: 8).

3. The second image illustrates clearly the serene trust of the faithful one, despite being abandoned even by his parents. "Though father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me" (Ps 27[26]: 10).

Even in solitude and the loss of the closest ties of affection, the person of prayer is never completely alone since the merciful God is bending over him. Our thought goes to a well-known passage from the prophet Isaiah, who attributes to God sentiments of compassion and tenderness that are more than maternal: "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you" (Is 49: 15).

Let us remind all elderly persons, the sick, those neglected by everyone, to whom no one will ever show tenderness, of these words of the Psalmist and the prophet, so that they may feel the fatherly and motherly hand of the Lord silently and lovingly touch their suffering faces, perhaps furrowed with tears.

4. And so we come to the third and final symbol, repeated more than once in the Psalm: "'Seek his face'. It is your face, O Lord, that I seek; hide not your face [from me]" (vv. 8-9). Therefore, God's face is the point of arrival on the spiritual quest of the person of prayer. At the end an unspoken certainty surfaces: that of being able to "contemplate the Lord's goodness" (cf. v. 13).

In the language of the Psalms, to "seek the face of the Lord" is often synonymous with entering into the temple to celebrate and experience communion with the God of Zion. However, the expression also includes the mystical need of divine intimacy through prayer. In the liturgy, then, and in personal prayer we are given the grace to look upon that face which we could otherwise never see directly during our earthly life (cf. Ex 33: 20). But Christ has revealed the divine face to us in an accessible way and has promised that in the final encounter of eternity, as St John reminds us, "We shall see him as he is" (1 Jn 3: 2). And St Paul adds: "Then we shall see face to face" (1 Cor 13: 12).

5. Commenting on this Psalm, Origen, the great Christian writer of the third century, noted: "If a man seeks the face of the Lord, he will see the glory of the Lord unveiled and, having been made similar to the angels, he will continually behold the face of the Father who is in heaven" (*PG*, 12, 1281). St Augustine, in his commentary on the Psalms, continues in this way the prayer of the Psalmist: "I have not asked from you some sort of prize outside of you, but your face. "Your face, O Lord, I seek'. I shall persevere in this quest; indeed, I do not seek something of little worth, but

your face, O Lord, to love you freely, since I find nothing else of greater worth.... "Do not turn away, angry with your servant', so that in my seeking you, I am taken up with something else. What can be a greater sorrow than this for one who loves and seeks the truth of your face?" (*Expositions on the Psalms*, 26, 1, 8-9, Rome, 1967, pp. 355, 357).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience. I greet in a special way the participants in the Buddhist-Christian Symposium, and also visitors from the Orthodox Church of Finland. I am also pleased to greet the several groups from England, Japan, South Korea, Canada and the United States of America. Upon all of you, I cordially invoke joy and peace in the Risen Lord.

To young people, the sick and the newly-weds

Lastly, my thought goes to the *young people*, the *sick people* and the *newly-weds*. Tomorrow we shall celebrate the feast of St Catherine of Siena, patroness of Italy and of Europe. May the example of this great saint help each of us to persevere in faith, and to give a generous witness to Christ and his Gospel in every situation.