



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Psalm 30[29]

***A hymn of thanksgiving for deliverance from death
and from the experience of trial and crisis***

1. From the heart of the person of prayer, thanksgiving rises to God, profound and sweet after the nightmare of death has been dispelled. This is the sentiment that emerges forcefully from Psalm 30[29], which re-echoes at this moment not only in our ears but certainly also in our hearts.

This hymn of thanksgiving has a remarkable literary finesse; it relies on a series of contrasts that express in symbols the liberation granted by the Lord. Thus, "sinking into the grave" is offset by "raising my soul from the dead" (cf. v. 4); God's "anger of a moment" is replaced by "his favour all through life" (v. 6); the "tears" during the night give way to the "joy" that comes with the dawn (*ibid.*); "mourning" turns into "dancing", the dress of "sackcloth" to that of "gladness" (cf. v. 12).

After the night of death has passed away, the dawn of the new day arises. Christian tradition has thus interpreted this Psalm as an Easter hymn. This is testified to in the opening words that the edition of the liturgical text for *Vespers* has taken from a great fourth-century monastic writer, John Cassian: "Christ gives thanks to the Father for his glorious Resurrection".

2. The person of prayer turns repeatedly to the "Lord", addressing him no less than eight times to declare that he will sing praises to him (cf. vv. 2 and 13), to remind him of how he cried out to him when he was put to the test (cf. vv. 3 and 9) and of God's liberating intervention (cf. vv. 2-4, 8, 12), or to invoke his mercy again (cf. v. 11). In another passage, the person of prayer invites the faithful to sing praises to the Lord and give him thanks (cf. v. 5).

The mood constantly oscillates between the terrible memory of the nightmare experienced and the joy of liberation. Of course, the danger he had left behind him is grave and still causes shuddering; the memory of past suffering is still clear and vivid; the tears in his eyes have only just been wiped away. But now the dawn of a new day has broken; death has given way to prospects of a life that continues.

3. So it is that the Psalm shows us we must never let ourselves be ensnared by the dark confusion of despair, when it seems that everything is already lost. Nor, of course, is there any need to fall into the illusion that we can save ourselves with our own resources. Indeed, the Psalmist is tempted by pride and self-sufficiency: "I said to myself in my good fortune: "Nothing will ever disturb me" (v. 7).

The Fathers of the Church also reflected on this temptation that creeps in at times of prosperity and saw the time of trial as a divine appeal for humility. This is what Fulgentius, Bishop of Ruspe (467-532) said in his *Epistle 3*, addressed to the Religious Proba and in which he comments on the passage of our Psalm: "The Psalmist confessed that he was sometimes proud of being healthy, as though this were one of his virtues, and that in this he discovered the danger of a very grave illness.

In fact, he says: "In my prosperity, "I shall never be moved". And for having said this he was abandoned by the support of divine grace and, disturbed, having precipitated into his infirmity, continued saying: "In your goodness, O Lord, you have placed me on a secure mountain, but when you hid your face, I was disturbed'. Moreover, to show that the help of divine grace, even though he already had it, must nevertheless be invoked humbly and without interruption, he adds: "To you I cry out, Lord, I ask my God for help'. No one asks for help if he does not recognize his need, nor does he think he can keep what he has by trusting only in his own virtue" (Fulgentius of Ruspe, *Le Lettere*, Rome, 1999, p. 113).

4. After confessing his temptation to pride during the time of his prosperity, the Psalmist recalls the trial that followed, saying to the Lord: "You hid your face and I was put to confusion" (v. 8).

The person of prayer then remembers how he prayed to the Lord (cf. vv. 9-11): he cried out, beseeched him for help, begged to be saved from death, justifying his plea by the fact that death brings no profit to God since the dead cannot praise him, nor have they any reason to proclaim their fidelity to God since he has abandoned them.

We find the same argument in Psalm 88[87], in which the one praying, who is close to death, asks God: "Is your love proclaimed in the grave, your fidelity in the tomb?" (v. 12). Likewise, King Hezekiah, who had been gravely ill and then cured, said to God: "For it is not the nether world that gives you thanks, nor death that praises you.... The living, the living give you thanks" (Is 38: 18-19).

In this way, the Old Testament expresses the intense human longing for God's victory over death and cites many cases in which God is victorious: people threatened by dying of starvation in the desert, prisoners who escaped the death penalty, sick people who were healed and sailors at sea saved from shipwreck (cf. Ps 107[106]: 4-32). However, these victories were not definitive. Sooner or later, death always managed to get the upper hand.

Yet the aspiration to victory has always existed in spite of all, and in the end it became a hope of resurrection. The satisfaction of this powerful aspiration was fully assured by the Resurrection of Christ, for which we can never thank God enough.

To special groups

I welcome *the personnel of the NATO Defense College* and I offer prayerful good wishes for their efforts to promote international peace and security. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Finland and the United States of America, I invoke an abundance of joy and peace in the Risen Lord.

I address a special welcome *to the Italian-speaking pilgrims*. In particular I greet the representatives of the Association *Rondine-Cittadella della Pace*, accompanied by several Tuscan Bishops. I renew to them and to all those present the invitation to pray for peace in the world, especially in Iraq and in the Middle East. With the support of the international community may those beloved people walk with determination on the paths of reconciliation, dialogue and cooperation.

I also greet the Superiors General of various religious institutes, the group of lawyers from different parts of the world, the faithful from the Parish of San Nicola di Mira, Forchia, and the flag-wavers of Bisignano. Dear friends, I encourage you in your respective milieus of ecclesial and civil commitments to build a civilization inspired by Christian values.

Lastly I address you, *young people, sick people and newly-weds*. Tomorrow is the memorial of Our Lady of Fatima. Dear friends, I urge you to turn to Our Lady ceaselessly and with confidence, entrusting to her your every need.