



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Psalm 32[31]

Happy those who are forgiven!

1. "Happy is the man whose offence is forgiven, whose sin is remitted"! This beatitude that opens Psalm 32[31], just read, allows us to understand immediately why it was welcomed by Christian tradition into the series of the seven penitential Psalms. Following the introductory twofold beatitude (cf. vv. 1-2), we do not discover a generic reflection on sin and forgiveness, but the personal witness of one who has converted.

The composition of the Psalm is rather complex: after the personal witness (cf. vv. 3-5), two verses follow, speaking of distress, prayer and deliverance (cf. vv. 6-7); then follows a divine promise of counsel (cf. v. 8) and an exhortation (cf. v. 9). In closing, there is an antithetical "proverb" (cf. v. 10) and an invitation to rejoice in the Lord (cf. v. 11).

2. Now, let us review some of the elements of this composition. Above all, the person praying describes his very distressful state of conscience by keeping it "secret" (cf. v. 3): having committed grave offences, he did not have the courage to confess his sins to God. It was a terrible interior torment, described with very strong images. His bones waste away, as if consumed by a parching fever; thirst saps his energy and he finds himself fading, his groan constant. The sinner felt God's hand weighing upon him, aware as he was that God is not indifferent to the evil committed by his creature, since he is the guardian of justice and truth.

3. Unable to hold out any longer, the sinner made the decision to confess his sin with a courageous declaration that seems a prelude to that of the prodigal son in Jesus' parable (cf. Lk

15: 18). Indeed, he said with a sincere heart: "I will confess my offence to the Lord". The words are few but born from conscience: God replies immediately to them with generous forgiveness (cf. v. 5).

The prophet Jeremiah made this appeal to God: "Return, faithless Israel, says the Lord. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the Lord. I will not be angry for ever. Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the Lord your God" (Jer 3: 12-13).

In this way, a horizon of security, trust and peace unfolds before "every believer" who is repentant and forgiven, regardless of the trials of life (cf. Ps 32[31]: 6-7). The time of distress could come again, but the high tide of fear will not prevail because the Lord leads his faithful to a place of security: "You are my hiding place, O Lord; you save me from distress. You surround me with cries of deliverance" (v. 7).

4. At this point it is the Lord who speaks in order to promise to guide the now converted sinner. Indeed, it is not sufficient to have been purified; it is necessary to walk on the right path. Therefore, as in the *Book of Isaiah* (cf. Is 30: 21), the Lord promises: "I will instruct you... the way you should go" (Ps 32[31]: 8), and invites docility. The appeal becomes solicitous, "streaked" with a bit of irony using the lively comparison of a mule and horse, symbols of stubbornness (cf. v. 9). Indeed, true wisdom leads to conversion, leaving vice and its dark power of attraction behind. Above all, however, it leads to the enjoyment of that peace which flows from having been freed and forgiven.

In the Letter to the Romans St Paul refers explicitly to the beginning of our Psalm to celebrate Christ's liberating grace (cf. Rom 4: 6-8). We could apply this to the sacrament of Reconciliation.

In light of the Psalm, this sacrament allows one to experience the awareness of sin, often darkened in our day, together with the joy of forgiveness. The binomial "sin-punishment" is replaced by the binomial "sin-forgiveness", because the Lord is a God who "forgives iniquity and transgression and sin" (cf. Ex 34: 7).

5. St Cyril of Jerusalem (fourth century) uses Psalm 32[31] to teach catechumens of the profound renewal of Baptism, a radical purification from all sin (cf. *Procatechesi*, n. 15). Using the words of the Psalmist, he too exalts divine mercy. We end our catechesis with his words: "God is merciful and is not stingy in granting forgiveness.... The mountain of your sins will not rise above the greatness of God's mercy, the depth of your wounds will not overcome the skilfulness of the 'most high' Doctor: on condition that you abandon yourself to him with trust. Make known your evil to the Doctor, and address him with the words of the prophet David: "I will confess to the Lord the sin that is always before me'. In this way, these words will follow: "You have forgiven the ungodliness of my heart" (*Le Catechesi*, Rome, 1993, pp. 52-53).

Finally, I would like to greet the *young people*, *sick people* and *newly-weds*. On the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord, I invite you, dear *young people* here present, especially the large crowd from the Archdiocese of Brindisi-Ostuni and numerous students from the Province of Taranto, always to direct your life heavenwards, putting the "things from above" in first place. I encourage you, dear *sick people*, to trust in Jesus Crucified, certain that if you follow him faithfully on this earth, you will participate in his glory in Paradise. I hope that you, dear *newly-weds*, may always grow in the understanding of Christ and in listening to his word, so that his Spirit constantly renews your love.

To the English-speaking pilgrims

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience. I greet particularly the groups from England, Sweden, New Zealand, Japan, China, Canada and the United States of America. I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all of you I cordially invoke joy and peace in the Risen Christ who calls us to share in his victory over evil.