PRAYING
the PSALMS
in CHRIST

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INTRODUCTION

The excellence of Christian prayer lies in this, that it shares in the very love of the only-begotten Son for the Father and in that prayer which the Son put into words in his earthly life and which still continues unceasingly in the name of the whole human race and for its salvation, throughout the universal Church and in all its members. (GILH 7)

With these words from the General Instruction for the Liturgy of the Hours, the Church proclaims the dignity of Christian prayer: it is a share in the prayer of the Incarnate Son of God himself. The Gospels show Christ frequently in prayer. He needed to commune with his heavenly Father to find wisdom and strength for his saving ministry and to entrust himself and his mission to the Father’s guidance. It was his prayer that animated his sacrificial offering of himself to the Father (Heb 5:7). But at an even deeper level, as the eternal Son of God he was always in intimate communion with the Father from whom he proceeded and whom he loved with an infinite love. The love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father is a third and distinct person, the Holy Spirit, who is the bond between the Father and the Son. The prayer of the Son on earth was a human participation in this trinitarian love, and the Church teaches that Christians who are baptized in Christ are drawn into this ineffable prayer of the Son to the Father: they are privileged to participate in it. Even when we cannot put this prayer into words or concepts, the Spirit of Christ is praying in us the prayer of the Son “with unutterable groanings” (Rom 8:26). It is the Christian’s task to allow the Spirit to produce this prayer in us, so that we say with Christ, “Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15–17).
Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours

The principal Christian prayer is the Eucharist, in which we are invited to offer to the Father the very sacrifice of the Son on Calvary. As Christ offers himself to the Father in our midst, we let ourselves be taken up into his offering, giving to the Father both the Sacred Body and Blood of his Son and our own selves incorporated into him. The single, once-for-all sacrifice of the Son on behalf of the whole human race is not repeated but is realized again, made present in our time and place. The offering of the Son to the Father did not cease at his death but endures forever: the Son continually offers to the Father the Body that was slain and is now risen. In the measure in which we can join in this truly cosmic sacrifice we are purified of sin and made holy. The Eucharist perfects our transformation in Christ.

From apostolic times Christians gathered for prayers outside the Eucharist as well. They practiced with new meaning the prayers offered in Judaism at certain times of the day. They prayed in the morning, seeing in the rising sun a symbol of the Lord who rose on Easter morning. They prayed in the evening, recalling the Lord's Supper and his Crucifixion both of which occurred toward the end of the day. Prayers celebrated at regular hours became a kind of sacramental fulfilment of the Lord's injunction to "Pray always" (Luke 18:1; cf. 1 Thess 5:17), and the common vocal prayer was meant to sustain an interior prayer that would continue through the whole of the day.

Liturgy of the Hours and Psalms

Where were the first disciples to find words to formulate the ineffable prayer of the Son to the Father? Christ himself gave the example in praying the psalms of Israel. On the cross he uttered both the psalmist’s cry, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Matt 27:46 = Ps 22:2) and the prayer of trust, "Into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46 = Ps 31:6). He applied passages from the psalms to himself: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the corner stone" (Matt 21:42 = Ps 118:22); "The Lord’s revelation to my master: ‘Sit on my right."
I will put your foes beneath your feet’” (Matt 22:43–45, 26:64 = Ps 110:1);
“My friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has raised his heel
against me” (John 13:18 = Ps 41:10); “Now my soul is troubled” (John
12:27 = Ps 42:7); “They hated me without cause” (John 15:25 = Ps 35:19,
69:5). After his resurrection he showed the apostles how the psalms were
fulfilled in him, particularly in his suffering, death, and rising (cf. Luke
24:44–47).

The apostles and evangelists followed suit in finding Christ in the
psalms. Particularly in the events of his Passion they found the psalms ful-
filled: “They divide my clothing among them; they cast lots for my robe”
(John 19:24 = Ps 22:19); “For food they gave me poison; in my thirst they
gave me vinegar to drink” (Matt 27:34, 48 = Ps 69:22), and so forth. Saint
Peter found a prophecy of his resurrection from the dead in Psalm 15:
“Even my body will rest in safety, for you will not leave my soul among
the dead nor let your beloved know decay. You will show me the path of
life, the fullness of joy in your presence, at your right hand happiness for-
all things under his feet,” was to be applied to Christ (1 Cor 15:26–28,
Eph 1:22–23). Three times the author of Revelation applies to the risen
Christ Psalm 2:9: “With a rod of iron you will break them” (Rev 2:27,
12:5, 19:15). Not only did Christians see Christ in the psalms; in praying
the psalms they explicitly related certain verses to the events of his death
and resurrection (see Acts 4:24–30 with respect to Ps 2:1–2). The psalms
were as much part of early Christian prayer as they were part of the
prayer of Jesus (cf. Mark 14:26, 1 Cor 14:26, Eph 5:19, Col 3:16, Jas 5:13).

By the beginning of the third century psalmody was a regular part
of the daily hours of prayer. Psalms were commented on by bishops and
catechists. Already Tertullian had heard in the psalms the voice of Christ:
“Nearly all the psalms bear the person of Christ, that is, they represent
Christ uttering words to the Father. Notice also the Spirit speaking as a
third person about the Father and the Son.”1 It was Saint Augustine who

1. “[O]mnes paene psalmi Christi personam sustinent: Filium ad Patrem, id
est Christum ad Deum verba facientem repraesentant. Animadverte etiam Spiritum
loquentem ex tertia persona de Patre et Filio” (Adversus Praxeum XI, 5–7 in Salmon,
most consistently propounded the Christian application of the psalms. For him the psalm was the “voice of the whole Christ, head and members,” that is, the prayer of Christ in his Body the Church. His vision is magisterially expressed in the great beginning of the exposition on Psalm 85:

God could have granted no greater gift to human beings than to cause his Word, through whom he created all things, to be their head, and to fit them to him as his members. He was thus to be both Son of God and Son of Man, one God with the Father, one human being with us. The consequence is that when we speak to God in prayer we do not separate the Son from God and when the body of the Son prays it does not separate its head from itself. The one sole savior of his body is our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who prays for us, prays in us, and is prayed to by us. He prays for us as our priest, he prays in us as our head, and he is prayed to by us as our God. Accordingly we must recognize our voices in him, and his accents in ourselves. . . .

He further counsels his listeners, “Say nothing apart from [Christ], as he says nothing apart from you.”

2. And so if the psalm prays, “Out of the depths I call to you, O Lord,” it is Christ in his Passion praying along with Christ in his suffering members throughout the world right now. If it prays, “I will praise you among the nations,” it is the risen Christ praising the Father in the Church spread throughout the world. In the words of Jean Corbon:

Neither the narrow life span of the individual pray-er nor the limited history of Israel, but only the time-transcending subject of the whole Christ could entirely embrace and perfectly assimilate the individual and collective experiences condensed in the psalms, from lamenting de profundis to jubilant Alleluia, and so unite pilgrimage and war, exile and temple, cult-criticism and priestly sacrifice, royal dignity and levitical ministry, sickness and ecstasy, betrayal and brotherly concord that their spiritually-interpreted reality became the expression of a single life that endures from the morning of creation to the last day to reach fulfilment in eternity.

(Fiedrowicz, Psalmus Vox Totius Christi, 425–26; my translation)
The prayer of the Hours consists chiefly of the prayer which Jesus himself used in his mortal condition: the psalms. In this single book of the Old Testament the entire economy of salvation became prayer, and now this love-inspired plan has been fulfilled in Jesus. When the church prays, the liturgy that “fulfills” this love-inspired plan is expressed through these same psalms. In them the Spirit repeats with the Bride the wonderful deeds of her Lord. (*Wellspring of Worship*, 127)

The present commentary will offer suggestions about how the psalms can become the vehicles of Christ’s prayer in his Body the Church.

**Aspects of the Psalms**

In making the psalms his own Christ gave them their definitive meaning. They are the prayers of the man-God who is also the Son of God. He became incarnate, so to speak, in them. For this reason a Christian understanding of the psalms cannot neglect any dimension of these prayers that contributed to their original meaning, since that is the meaning taken up into the prayer of Christ. In any study of the Scriptures it is necessary to begin with the literal meaning of the passage in its historical context. For the Book of Psalms this includes an understanding of the genre or category of each psalm, its internal structure and emotional tensions, imagery, rhythm, and poetic devices such as parallelism and chiasmus, and asyndeton and consonance, by which meaning is enhanced or reinforced. The commentary will occasionally note how these various literary devices enrich the experience of the poetry; clearly only selected examples can be noted.

In the last quarter century research has centered on a previously unrecognized dimension of the Book of Psalms, its interconnectedness. Psalms are seen to have been deliberately placed so as to reflect and complement each other. In particular, greater attention is being paid to the division of the psalms into five “books,” each ending with a doxology. These are Book One, Psalms 3–41; Book Two, Psalms 42–72; Book Three, Psalms 73–89; Book Four, Psalms 90–106; Book Five, Psalms 107–150. Within these units are found smaller collections such as the “Songs of Ascents” (Pss 120–134), collections of psalms attributed to David (first
collection, Pss 3–41; second collection Pss 51–65; third collection Pss 138–145), psalms attributed to the “sons of Korah” (Pss 42–49; 84–85; 87–88), or to Asaph (Pss 50; 73–83), etc. Word links between adjacent or nearby psalms in the various groups encourage the reader to see these psalms in relation to each other. In this way the psalms “comment on” each other. No one psalm stands in isolation, but each is to be seen as a partial aspect of a larger whole. That is to say that the complexity of the relations between God and man can be suggested only by a reading of the whole psalter, just as all the parts of a novel are necessary for the whole. This commentary draws particularly on the work of Erich Zenger and Frank-Lothar Hossfeld\(^3\) to highlight the significance of the positioning of each psalm in relation to the smaller collections of psalms and to the Book of Psalms as a whole. These interconnections will be part of the meaning that is taken up into the Christian praying of the psalm.

Often a verse of the Psalms is illuminated by a passage from another part of the Old Testament. Such parallels are indicated in the commentary, and the reader is encouraged to look up the parallel passages and reflect on the light they throw on the psalm. It may be necessary to read a few verses before the cited passage in order to understand the context, possibly with the help of explanatory footnotes, as in the Jerusalem Bible. Such a leisurely and meditative reflection on the links within the word of God can gradually point us toward the profound mystery beyond all words.

But it is the New Testament parallel passages that give the Christian dimension to the psalms. These passages point to the Christian relevance of the Old Testament prayers, bringing them to a new fullness of meaning. Throughout the Old Testament and in the Psalms in particular, God is portrayed as in love with his people. He created them, made them his own, rescued them from bondage, bound himself to them with a covenant, worked wonders for them; gave them a land, victory over enemies, kings and prophets, a temple in which he would dwell; and continually appealed to them to accept his lordship. Just as continually, his people refused his love, preventing him from being able to give them the fullness of peace he intended for them. The two sides of this God-man rela-

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tionship are the warp and woof of the psalms. God longs for man; man longs for God but feels held back by sin or hostile forces. The impasse was only resolved when God sent his Son: the Incarnate Son of God would be the first human being to respond with wholehearted obedience to the loving will of the Father. Jesus’s vocation was to show God’s love for man in human flesh and to persevere in showing that love even when it was rejected and crucified. Because Jesus clung to the Father’s will even to death, he successfully fulfilled the task of man, and there was no reason that death should keep him in its power (cf. Acts 2:23–24). In raising him from the dead the Father reconciled all humankind to himself, taking away their sin (2 Cor 5:18–19). The risen Christ is our way to the Father (John 14:6, Heb 10:20), the mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5–6). When Christians accept Jesus as their Lord they receive the forgiveness of their sins and stand in the Father’s presence in the risen Son, calling God Father. And when they pray the psalms together on earth it is the saving love of Christ for the Father that they put into words: such is the import of the passage cited at the beginning of this introduction. They offer to the Father the one prayer by which the world was saved, participating in the remaking of the world. At the same time they are introduced into the heart of the dialogue between the Father and the Son in the bosom of the Trinity: they are drawn into the inner life of God.

Thus when a psalm speaks of God’s love (hesed) for his people, the Christian means the love shown in his sending of his Son to die for us. When it speaks of God’s dwelling among his people in the temple, the Christian means the Body of Christ, his Church. When it speaks of liberation from Egypt or defeat of enemies, the Christian means the liberation from sin won by Christ. When the psalm cries out in anguish, the Christian hears the voice of Christ offering his pain to the Father as propitiation for our sins, and he prays in the name of the suffering body of Christ on earth still bearing the cross on its pilgrim journey. In making suggestions about how to pray the psalms from within the Christian mystery, it is hoped that this commentary may stimulate Christians to find their own correspondences between the psalms and the mystery of Christ as presented in the New Testament.

As we continue to pray the psalms in Christ, allowing more and more his Spirit to possess us, we find that the psalms are expressing our
own emotions. They channel our longing, our sorrow, our joy, our gratitude, our love into the full expression of the humanity of Christ. Even our anger becomes transmuted into zeal for the coming of the kingdom. In this way the psalms have an educatory function as was noted by the early monastic writers. For Saint Athanasius the psalms were a “mirror” in which the one praying finds his own self and emotions:

And the one who hears is deeply moved, as though he himself were speaking, and is affected by the words of the songs, as if they were his own songs. . . . Each sings them as if they were written about himself. . . . Then the things spoken are such that he lifts them up to God as if he were acting and speaking them from himself. . . . Each psalm is both spoken and composed by the Spirit so that in these same words . . . the stirrings of our souls might be grasped, and all of them be said as concerning us, and they issue from us as our own words, as a reminder of the emotions in us, and a chastening of our life. (Letter to Marcellinus 11–12)

In the next century John Cassian wrote in a similar vein:

Nourished by continual feeding on the psalms and appropriating all their emotions as his own, he will begin to sing them in such a way that in profound compunction of heart he will produce them not as composed by a prophet but as if uttered by himself as his own prayer, or at least he will consider them to have been directed to his own person and will recognize that their sentiments were not only realized formerly through or in the prophet but are carried out and fulfilled today in himself. (Conference X, 11; my translation)⁴

Athanasius went even further in attributing a kind of “Christ therapy” to the psalms. God composed these prayers as a pattern of the humanity

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⁴ “Quorum iugi pascuo vegetatus omnes quoque psalmorum adfectus in se reciproiens ita incipiet decantare, ut eos non tamquam a prophetra compositos, sed velut a se editos quasi orationem propriam profunda cordis compunctione depromat vel certe ad suam personam aestimet eos fuisset directos, eorumque sententias non tunc tantummodo per prophetam aut in prophetra fuisset conpletas, sed in se cotidie geri inplerique cognoscat.”
of Christ “before his sojourn in our midst, so that just as he provided the model of the earthly and heavenly man in his own person, so also from the Psalms he who wants to do so can learn the emotions and dispositions of the souls, finding in them also the therapy and correction suited for each emotion” (Letter to Marcellinus 13). Through the psalms we can experience our own feelings as the feelings of Christ and vice versa. Our feelings become purified, liberated of anything selfish. “So the psalms have been formed like a sculptor’s tools for the true overseer who, like a craftsman, is carving our souls to the divine likeness” (Gregory of Nyssa, On the Inscriptions II, 137).

Features of the Commentary

The reader will notice at the head of each commentary a single word. These words are meant not as titles or summaries of the psalms, but as indications of something distinct about them. Sometimes the word is an image more developed in one psalm than in any other (e.g., “tree” in Ps 1); other times the word is used in a striking way in the psalm (e.g., “apple” for Ps 17) or as a motif (e.g., “poor” in Ps 9-10); still other times the word alludes to an item found in the psalm (e.g., “sickbed” in Ps 6, “theophany” in Ps 18). These choices are personal and may stimulate the reader to find his or her own “key word” that will designate the uniqueness of a psalm.

The commentary is based on the Hebrew text of the psalms as found in the Biblia Hebraica and follows the current trend in scholarship to respect this Masoretic text without alteration or emendation. The attempt to render the literal sense of the Hebrew may yield awkward English, but it has the advantage of giving the reader the force, and often roughness, of the original poem, even at the cost of elegance. Stylistic variations in word order, as in chiastic expressions, are difficult to reproduce in English, but as they are features of Hebrew poetry the reader has a right to know where they occur. It is hoped that some awareness of these features may deepen a reader’s praying of a psalm even if the official translation of these prayers does not reproduce them. The Grail translation, which is the most widely used version in the Liturgy of the Hours in the English-speaking world, has the merit of general accuracy, singability, and rhythm;
it can easily be prayed even when one is aware that it cannot reproduce all the subtleties of the original Hebrew. The reader might find it helpful to have at hand a copy of the Grail translation as he or she peruses the commentaries on individual psalms.

The Greek translation, the Septuagint (LXX), is occasionally consulted to throw light on a psalm. Most often, however, the commentary takes the form of a literal translation of the Hebrew text, generally in the third person so that the author’s comments can blend with the text. When it was felt necessary to give a literal rendering of passages in the second or first person, the translation is provided within quotation marks. Quotation marks are also used around individual words that have a theological significance or that have important parallels in other verses of the Psalms or other biblical books, these parallels being indicated in parentheses.\(^5\)

A particular feature of the commentary is the effort to translate a Hebrew word with the same English word each time it appears in a psalm. In this way words having a certain theological “weight,” such as ḥesed (covenant love), yš (save), bāḏah (trust), are preserved as are distinctions between synonyms that may have slightly different nuances, as in the rich vocabulary for verbs of rejoicing or nouns for anger or sin. Again the price for literal accuracy will be a loss of elegance, but the reader will have the advantage of knowing which Hebrew concept or poetic device is present in a given verse. At the end of the book is a table of English renderings of selected Hebrew words as translated in this commentary. Certain other translation choices require special comment. The divine name, YHWH, which appears over 680 times in the Book of Psalms, is sometimes rendered “Yahweh,” but generally “The Lord.” The title Šādōn is regularly rendered “Master.” The word nefēš is translated by the traditional “soul,” although it originally meant “throat,” the channel of breath, and is sometimes likely to have this meaning.\(^6\) The important word ḥesed is rendered “covenant love” or simply “love.”

\(^{5}\) For quotations from Scripture other than the Psalms, I rely on the Jerusalem Bible, the RSV, or my own translation.

\(^{6}\) See the helpful discussion by Robert Alter in the introduction to his translation of the Psalms, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 32–33.
An attempt is made in the commentary to read the psalms as a book, in which each psalm makes a new contribution to the work as a whole. This means that themes are slowly developed, later psalms adding nuances to themes introduced in earlier ones. For this reason references to other psalms tend to look backward not forward, that is, to psalms already discussed rather than to psalms appearing later in the book. Like the reading of a novel, the continuous reading of the psalms is a cumulative experience. The first appearance of a theme will be discussed in its place, and later appearances will refer back to the earlier ones for clarification and enrichment. Only upon completing a reading of the Book of Psalms does one gain a grasp of the whole.

Christian and Jewish Reading of the Psalms

The psalms are given to us by Judaism. They are the voice of a humanity befriended by God. If Christians see this humanity as taken up into Jesus, they are paying the utmost tribute to these Jewish prayers. The Church inherits the Hebrew Scriptures as a treasure of divine revelation; it does not reject them but venerates every last iota of them. Christians cannot afford to bypass the Hebrew Scriptures in trying to understand the One who is their fulfilment. While our Jewish brothers and sisters cannot be expected to read the psalms through the lens of Christ, we Christians will not read the psalms divorced from their Jewish roots. It is to be hoped that the Church’s growing awareness of the interlocking of the two Testaments will lead to a greater mutual appreciation between our two faiths. Christians see a “potentiality of meaning” in the Jewish Scriptures that does not abolish the original meaning of those texts for the Jews themselves (Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures, 64).

The Psalms are a vast temple in which God is worshipped. Each individual psalm is like a room in the temple, full of God’s presence but not exhausting it. Praising God in one psalm we hear echoes of songs from other rooms. The psalms in their totality are the “script” for the people of God, themselves a temple wherein God is worshipped, so that in the singing of the psalms the two temples come together. Our task is
to open ourselves to the risen Christ who prays within us, whose Spirit guides our prayer. Because the ongoing psalmody of the Church on earth is a participation in the action by which all men and women are reconciled to God, no other action of the Church, apart from the Eucharist from which it flows, surpasses it in efficacy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 7).

Let us conclude with the great passage on the Liturgy of the Hours from Pius XII’s encyclical *Mediator Dei*, the document that renewed the Church’s understanding of the liturgy as the prayer of Christ (1947). The present book is simply an attempt to draw out the implications of this paragraph for each of the 150 prayers in the Book of Psalms.

The Word of God, when He assumed a human nature, introduced into this land of exile the hymn that in heaven is sung throughout all ages. He unites the whole community of mankind with Himself and associates it with Him in singing this divine canticle of praise. We have to confess humbly that ‘we do not know what prayer to offer, to pray as we ought’; but ‘the Spirit himself intercedes for us, with groans beyond all utterance,’ and Christ Himself beseeches the Father through His Spirit in us. (144)

Let us then study the psalms as the language spoken to the Father by the humanity redeemed in Christ.