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“SAINT JOHN PAUL II: A GUIDE IN THE ART OF PRAYER”
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My Dear Friends in Christ,

I am very happy to be with you this evening for this “Art of Prayer” Series. I thank Anne Elisabeth Giuliani for her kind invitation to be with you. Following our gathering we will also share in the highest form of prayer in the Church – the celebration of Mass. After all, the Eucharist is the “source and summit” of all life in the Church.

I must admit that the title of this talk, “Saint John Paul II: A Guide in the Art of Prayer” is a little deceptive, because I wish to reflect with you on the Liturgy of the Hours. In his Apostolic Letter to close the Great Jubilee Year, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Saint John Paul II reflected on holiness in the Christian life, stating that the “training in holiness calls for a Christian life distinguished above all in *the art of prayer*” (POPE JOHN PAUL II, APOSTOLIC LETTER *NOVO MILLENIO INEUNTE*, 6 JANUARY 2001, 32).

Noting that prayer can be taken for granted and acknowledging the effects of secularization, Saint John Paul II asserted that there was still a “widespread demand for spirituality, a demand which expresses itself in large part as a renewed need for prayer” (cf. *NMI*, 33). Today, we often hear people say, “Well, I’m spiritual, not religious.”

It is our duty as Christians to show what depths the relationship with Christ, the Savior of the World and Revealer of the Eternal Father, can offer and lead to. Intense prayer, through which we fall in love with Christ, happens by conversing regularly with God, by asking God for help, and in adoration, contemplation, and in active listening in silence. In opening our hearts to the love of God, we also learn from the Divine Master how to open our hearts to our brothers and sisters, how to be with them and to listen to them.

The art of prayer, like any other art, requires training and discipline. In 2001, immediately following the Jubilee Year, Saint John Paul II began a series of reflections on the Psalms, which are used in the Church’s liturgical prayer, specifically in the Liturgy of the Hours. Many consecrated persons, especially monks, and even laity pray the Liturgy of the Hours, consecrating their time and their day to the Lord. We will conclude our reflection this evening, following a period of silence, by praying Evening Prayer.

The Holy Father said, “Education in Prayer should become in some way a key-point of all pastoral planning” (*NMI*, 34).

The psalms certainly provide us with an education in life. The words of the psalms resonate with the emotions we experience each day. In his Wednesday audience of March 28, 2001, Pope John Paul II reflected on the value of the Psalms:

“It would be no less interesting to go over the Psalms and consider the various sentiments of the human heart expressed in them: joy, gratitude, thanksgiving, love, tenderness,

enthusiasm, but also intense suffering, complaint, please for help and for justice, which sometimes lead to anger and imprecation. In the Psalms, the human being fully discovers himself.” (POPE JOHN PAUL II, GENERAL AUDIENCE, 28 MARCH 2001)

In his first encyclical letter, John Paul II identified Christ as the Redeemer of Man, who is the center of the universe and of history (cf. POPE JOHN PAUL II, ENCYCLICAL LETTER *REDEMPTOR HOMINIS* 4 MARCH 1979, 1) and recalled what was already said about Him by the Second Vatican Council, namely that He “in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, *fully reveals man to himself* and brings to light his most high calling” (cf. *REDEMPTOR HOMINIS*, 8).

It should come as no surprise that the Fathers of the Church identified Christ as the key to understanding the Psalms, as John Paul II described:

“The Fathers were firmly convinced that the Psalms speak of Christ. The risen Jesus, in fact, applied the Psalms to Himself when he said to his disciples, ‘Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled’ (Luke 24:44). The Fathers add that in the Psalms, Christ is spoken to or it is even Christ who speaks. In saying this, they were thinking not only of the individual person of Christ, but of the *Christus totius*, the total Christ, composed of Christ the Head and his members.” (POPE JOHN PAUL II, GENERAL AUDIENCE, 28 MARCH 2001)

In this light, Christians attempted to read and understand the Psalms, but little by little, they began to sing the psalms, even in choir. This practice flourished during monastic times, leading some such as St. Romuald to assert that “the Psalms are the only way to experience deep prayer.”

Gradually, this praying and chanting of the psalms in common took the shape of the Church’s Liturgy of the Hours. Pope Benedict XVI saw the chanting of the monks and their ordered way of life, not as an explicit attempt to create a culture, but as a means to seek the face of God. Their goal was the *quaerere Deum*. He commented:

“*Quaerere Deum*: because they were Christians, this was not an expedition into a trackless wilderness, a search leading them into total darkness. God himself had provided signposts, indeed he had marked out a path which was theirs to find and follow. This path was his word, which had been disclosed to men in the books of the sacred Scriptures. Thus, by inner necessity, the search for God demands a culture of the word ... Because in the biblical word God comes toward us and we towards him, we must learn to penetrate the secret of language, to understand it in its construction and in the manner of its expression.” (POPE BENEDICT XVI, “MEETING WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF THE WORLD OF CULTURE, 12 SEPTEMBER 2008)

The monastic culture, which gained prominence especially through the Benedictine Tradition profoundly influenced culture. In communal prayer, one is singing in the presence of the heavenly court and, in theory, in harmony with the angels and saints. Communal prayer, done rightly and in a contemplative way, is a sure remedy against the individualism and, at times, selfishness that characterize contemporary American culture. The chanting of the psalms is not a form of “private creativity”, to use the words of Benedict XVI, but is rather “about vigilantly recognizing with the ‘ears of the heart’ the inner laws of the music of creation.”

The contemplation fostered by the monks in their chanting of the psalms helped establish a “culture of being” rather than “doing”. For they prayed and sang in a way commensurate with the grandeur of the sacred word that had been handed on to them. The modern world tends to value people more for what they do rather than who they are. The contemplative singing of the monks does the opposite: it reminds us of the worthiness of man in his praise of God (and not merely in his productivity) and the majesty of God who is worthy of the praise, not only of man, but even of the angels!

Yet, monasticism and singing the Psalms are not an escape from the world. Pope John Paul II reminds us:

“By praying the Psalms as a community, the Christian mind remembered and understood that it is impossible to turn to the Father who dwells in heaven without an authentic communion of life with one’s brothers and sisters who live on earth. Moreover, by being vitally immersed in the Hebrew tradition of prayer, Christians learned to pray by recounting the *magnalia Dei*, that is, the great marvels worked by God both in the creation of the world and humanity, and in the history of Israel and the Church. ... the Book of Psalms remains the ideal source of Christian prayer and will continue to inspire the Church in the new millennium.” (POPE JOHN PAUL II, GENERAL AUDIENCE, 28 MARCH 2001)

Sometimes, I think when we are at Mass and hear the Responsorial Psalm, we may just sing along, without reflecting on the deep interior meaning of the words and asking God what they mean for our lives or for our relationships with those around us. Am I simply singing or am I seeking the face of God as I sing? If I discover and encounter God in my prayer, what are the implications for my actions and the way I treat others or all of creation?

This evening we have the opportunity both at Mass and as we pray Vespers to meditate on the Psalms, to examine how they resonate with our life experiences, and from our heart to sing the praise of God, the Author of all creation. Let us also utilize the silence, which is itself a gift from God, to hear with the “ears of the heart” God’s sacred word for our life and to pray to God from the heart in thanksgiving for Saint John Paul II, who joins us from his place in heaven, as together we sing the praises of the thrice-holy God.