



**"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"**

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

"We strongly recommend that, if anyone finds our arrangement of the psalms unsatisfactory, he should arrange them in whatever better way he thinks fit, provided always that the psalter with its full hundred and fifty psalms be chanted each week, beginning again each Sunday at Vigils. For monks who in the course of the week sing less than the psalter with the customary canticles betray extreme indolence and lack of devotion in their service. We read, after all, that our holy Fathers strenuously achieved all that in a single day. May we, lukewarm as we are, at least perform it in a whole week." "We should always be mindful of what the Prophet says: Serve the Lord with fear (Ps 2:11) and again: Sing praise wisely (Ps 46/47:8); and: In the presence of the angels I will sing psalms to you (Ps 137/138:1). Let us consider, then, how we ought to behave in the presence of God and His angels, and let us stand to sing the psalms in such a way that mind and voice may be in harmony." (Holy Rule chapters 19:22-25 & 20:3-7)

## Monastic Voices

"The book of psalms is like a garden which contains the fruits of all the other books of scripture, both Old and New Testaments. The crop it grows is their fruit, which it produces as music, while adding other fruits of its own. It seems to me also that the psalms are like a mirror. Anyone who recites them sees himself, and all the movements of his own heart and mind. He is deeply affected, because he encounters there as it were his own words, and his own songs, only given clearer expression than he could ever have managed himself."

*(From the Letter to Marcellinus of St. Athanasius, 295-373, author of the Life of Antony)*

"How I wept at the beauty of your hymns and canticles! How powerfully the sweet sound of your Church's singing moved me! These sounds flowed into my ears, and the truth streamed into my heart: so that my feeling of devotion overflowed, and the tears ran from my eyes, and I was happy in them."

"To show us how to praise Him worthily, God first praised Himself; and since He has deigned to praise Himself, man has discovered how to praise Him."

*(St. Augustine, 354-430: Confessions 9:6; & Homilies on the Psalms: on Psalm 144 § 1)*

"How sweet it is to read the psalms! It is not tiresome, but most delightful. What could I do that would please me more? In the psalms I praise and glorify my Creator; I invoke, honour and entreat Him; in the psalms I thank Him and bless Him; in the psalms I confess my sins and implore mercy; in the psalms I consider the vanity of the world, and I understand the frailty of life, the paltry value of this mortal body, and the danger of being carried far from God. Above all in the psalms I glimpse, in so far as the countless defects of my eyes permit, the infinite power, wisdom, and goodness of God. I find in the psalms such exact prophecies of Jesus Christ that I could believe some of them were composed after, rather than before, His death. I love to sing the psalms by heart so that I can pray them without effort, unhindered by illness or any other obstacle. Does not David deserve

our admiration for giving us such exquisite poetry, such noble philosophy, such tender feeling, as of a man enamoured of heavenly beauty! A love of the psalms is the mark of a true monk. Woe to those who scorn them! We may well doubt whether any spiritual exercise can please someone who is bored by the psalter. So suited is psalmody to monks that in former times when they made their profession they used to be urged to keep the psalms always in their hands or on their lips. For what could be more useful for us, whose desire it is to pray at all times, to meditate frequently, and sometimes even to attain heavenly contemplation? If the main concern of monks is to bemoan their sins, to praise God for His infinite mercy, and with hearts overflowing with love, to cling to Jesus as He hangs naked on the Cross, then no physical or spiritual occupation could offer them greater satisfaction than the recitation of the psalter."

*(Blessed Paul Giustiniani OSB, 1476-1528, founder of the Camaldolese Hermits of Monte Corona)*

"It is the mission of Benedictines to keep the psalms alive in the Church. To do that, it is necessary that we keep them alive also in our hearts."

*(Dom Robert Le Gall OSB, Abbot of Kergonan in Brittany: Pluscarden Retreat, November 1995.)*

"We have to learn to pray... This is the secret of a truly vital Christianity, returning continually to the sources and finding in them new life... Our Christian communities must become genuine schools of prayer (cf. HR Prol: 45). No one can rest content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill his whole life... As part of the necessary education in prayer, I myself have decided to dedicate my Wednesday Catecheses to reflection upon the psalms" (Pope John Paul II: Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, January 2001, nn. 32-34).

## **Dear oblates and friends,**

After stating some fundamental principles of monastic life (Prologue and Chapters 1-7), St. Benedict in Chapters 8-20 of his Rule turns to the subject of monastic prayer. We might expect to find here purple passages of exalted and uplifting spirituality. But St. Benedict is notoriously reserved in these matters. What he gives us, instead, is his arrangement for the singing of psalms. He is concerned, certainly, about quality. But his emphasis is chiefly on quantity. For him, an authentic life of prayer will involve a great deal of psalmody.

To modern sensibility, this seems astonishing. In the Church of the sixth century, however, it would have seemed quite natural. Then, much more than now, it was taken for granted that any Christian would pray using the words of scripture, and especially the psalms. No one thought of communal vocal prayer as somehow opposed to personal silent prayer. So monasteries routinely required novices to learn all the psalms by heart, as a condition for their profession. Fifteen centuries later, no monastery in the world would make such a requirement. Nevertheless, the recitation of psalms continues to hold a central place in Benedictine prayer.

Many people visiting monasteries today, perhaps encountering chanted psalmody for the first time in their lives, instinctively feel its power, as St. Augustine did. They realise that this form of prayer, however unfamiliar, possesses extraordinary depth and richness. Yet surely nearly everyone is also aware of a huge cultural gap, which we moderns cannot cross without considerable effort. The language of the psalms is no longer the common currency of everyday speech, even among committed Christians. To pray the psalms well, therefore, or to allow them to pray in us, we have to educate ourselves about them. So I want in this letter to follow the example of the Holy Father. He is offering detailed expositions of individual psalms, week by week. I must content myself here with a few general reflections. I hope my comments might be helpful, above all in encouraging you to use the psalms often. They are a living source from which abundant and refreshing streams of spiritual life can be drawn.

Perhaps no one has understood better than St. Augustine how the psalms provide us with a language for our prayer. He comments on them, verse by verse, in an immensely lengthy set of homilies ("Enarrationes") whose power to nourish and inspire has never been surpassed. His Confessions are a sort of prose poem, addressed not to the reader, but to God: the text is woven throughout with verses from the psalms. Augustine was a literary genius, who was well able to appreciate the intrinsic merit of the psalms as religious poems. They are timeless because they express what is most deeply human: emotions of joy, hope, anguish, rage, love, hatred, repentance, misery, longing, bewilderment, wonder, desperation, exaltation, praise, thanksgiving, religious awe in the presence of God. They speak to God directly, frankly, intimately. Thousands of years after they were first

composed, people of any and every culture can find them a source of comfort, even when all else seems to have failed. Yet there is something about the psalms even more important than this: and it was because he was a theological genius that St. Augustine understood its significance so well. It is that the psalms are not merely the compositions of men. They were written, we believe, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They are part of holy scripture, and therefore we who are Christians regard them as truly the Word of God.

St. Benedict (c.480-c.550?) was deeply influenced by St. Augustine's commentaries on the psalms. He uses material from these directly in his Prologue, when he comments on psalm 33/34, and on psalm 14/15. Another major influence on St. Benedict was John Cassian (360-435), who brought the monastic tradition of the Egyptian desert to the West. In a famous Conference on prayer, Cassian shows how single psalm verses can be repeated constantly in the heart. The verse he recommends particularly is from psalm 69/70:1 "Deus in adiutorium meum intende..." - "O God come to my aid; O Lord, make haste to help me!" Because of this, every service of the Benedictine Office begins with this verse, and the Roman Office follows suit to this day. Cassian speaks of chewing over the verse as a cow chews the cud; sucking it like a sweet, so as slowly to savour its taste. One way we continue to do this is through Gregorian Chant. At Mass, the texts set for the Introit, the responsory before the Gospel and the Communion Antiphon, nearly always taken from the psalms, are drawn out in musical meditation. A very wide variety of psalm verses are used: sometimes quite unlikely ones. The chant is designed to help us pray these words at Mass, not only with our voice and our mind, but also from the depths of our heart.

The psalms are prayed in a different way in the liturgy of the Hours. There is no time to pause over each verse as it comes, as we properly would do in the context of *lectio divina*. We encounter the text instead in the way it was originally intended, as a song to be sung. Although St. Benedict gives few clues about the actual music he used, it is clear that his community habitually sang the psalms. Benedictines still do so. Pluscarden retains the incomparable Latin Chant, sometimes with organ accompaniment. Other monasteries these days often use the vernacular, to a greater or lesser extent. Minster Abbey in Kent is an example of a community which sometimes uses a zither to accompany its English psalmody, with exquisitely beautiful effect. Whatever its form, good monastic chant respects the natural forward movement of the psalm; impelling one along, gently but irresistibly; carrying, lifting the singer or listener, through texts now utterly familiar, to the praise of the glory of God. In this context, we should not be dismayed if we fail to pay attention to the meaning or implications of each word. The words can be thought of as fuel for our prayer, which is essentially in the heart, rather than being the prayer themselves. I think it is good, therefore, even if one has to recite the office alone, to keep the momentum going. If the attention happens to wander, it would be wrong to stop and go back. The office is the prayer of the whole Church - the prayer of Christ. This prayer is bigger than me, and independent of my own moods. My desire is to join my voice to this Chorus of praise. Starting with that firm intention, I can simply let the office carry me.

The psalms have come down to us in both Hebrew and Greek. The Greek translation dates to the third century B.C. It is called the Septuagint, or LXX, because of the legend that 70 scholars simultaneously produced exactly the same translation. This was the version for the most part used by the New Testament writers, and in the writings and liturgy of the early Church. But the original language of the psalms was Hebrew. The oldest surviving Hebrew manuscript, however, dates only from about the tenth century A.D. It differs in many details from the Greek, most notably in numbering. The two versions unfortunately part company at psalm 10. After that the Hebrew is generally one ahead of the Greek. St. Jerome (342-420) translated both; but it was his translation from the Greek that was accepted in the official Latin Bible, the Vulgate. St. Benedict therefore follows the Greek numbering; so do all older Catholic translations; so does the Divine Office book. The Protestant Reformers, however, followed the Hebrew numbering; so do nearly all modern Bibles; so does the new official Latin Bible, the Neo-Vulgate. Verse numbering also provides ample scope for confusion in. Some versions include the strange and sometimes incomprehensible titles of the psalms in their verse scheme, while others omit them.

Probably the main difficulty people have with the psalms today is simply that they are from the Old Testament. Many verses express beautiful and noble sentiments. But mixed in with them are expressions of feeling that sound to us frankly unredeemed. There is the apparently smug, self-righteous attitude we associate with the Pharisee of the Gospel (cf. e.g. Lk 18:11). "Give judgement for me, Lord; I am just and innocent of heart" (Ps 7:9). The vision of life and death also remains firmly within Old Testament horizons. There seems to be no clear expectation of an eternal reward, or faith in any real after-life at all. The blessings asked for from God are material, earthly, and to be enjoyed exclusively in this life. Then there are the ever-present enemies of the psalmist. We are probably uncomfortable with the very idea of having enemies at all. Christians know they should love and pray for anyone who persecutes them (cf. Mt 5:44). The psalmist hates his enemies, whether

personal or national, without the slightest reserve, and he roundly curses them. "Let his children become fatherless orphans, and his wife become a widow. Let his children be wanderers and beggars, driven from the ruins of their home. Let the creditor seize all his goods; let strangers take the fruit of his work. Let none show him any mercy, nor pity his fatherless children" (Ps 108/9:9-12. *Nota bene:* The post-Vatican II Roman Office edits out the curses of the psalms, to make it easier for lay people to participate. Our monastic office retains them all).

We who are Christians cope with difficulties like these by reading and understanding the psalms always in the light of Christ. We can do this in two ways: by reading them either "backwards" or "forwards". That is, with the Fathers of the Church, we read Christ back into the Old Testament text, seeing the psalms simply as Christian prayers. Alternatively, helped by the insights of modern scripture scholarship, we read the psalms according to their original sense, but looking forward, with the Jews, towards their fulfilment in Christ. These two ways are not opposed, but complementary. Both are valid: we need them both.

How, then, are the psalms read "backwards"? St. Augustine has a typically memorable saying which perfectly expresses the Christian approach to the Old Testament. "Novum in Vetere latet; et in Novo Vetus patet" - "The New (Testament) is hidden in the Old, and in the New the sense of the Old is made plain". The principle is supported by the words of Jesus, speaking to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. "Everything written about me in the Law of Moses, in the prophets and in the psalms had to be fulfilled" (Lk 24:44).

On the day of Pentecost, according to the second chapter of Acts, St. Peter wanted to show the crowds in Jerusalem that Christ's death and resurrection had been foreshadowed in scripture. So he quotes texts from the psalms. "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 forever" (Ps 15/16:10-11); and "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit on my right. I will put your foes beneath your feet" (Ps 109/110:1). Peter's point is that these words were not literally fulfilled in King David, but they have acquired a new, more complete meaning when seen in the light of the resurrection. We find this principle very frequently applied throughout the New Testament. The first four chapters of Hebrews, for example, are largely taken up with showing how texts from the psalms should be applied to Christ. Or in a negative way, St Paul cites texts from eight different psalms in Romans chapter 3 to show how Christ is absolutely necessary for our salvation. Jesus Himself in Jn 10:34 defends His right to the title Son of God by referring to Ps 82:6 "I said, you are gods (and sons of the Most High)". Similarly in Mt 22:44 He shows that He is greater than His ancestor David by quoting Ps 109/110:1. This verse, incidentally, with which every Sunday Vespers begins, is quoted six times in the New Testament.

It is not easy to count the number of times the psalms appear in the New Testament. Sometimes they might be only alluded to; or sometimes one verse might be quoted several times. There are anyway at least 55 direct citations: more, even, than from the Prophet Isaiah. So the Fathers of the Church thought of the psalms as the principal source of prophecy in the Old Testament. Assuming that King David had composed them all, they spoke of him simply as "The Prophet", rather as they spoke of St. Paul as "The Apostle" (cf. e.g. HR 16:1; 2:3). Blessed Paul Giustiniani remarks that some psalm texts are so familiar to us as applied to Jesus that we easily think of them as having no other meaning. "The Lord said to me: You are my Son. It is I who have begotten you this day" (Ps 2:7). "They tear holes in my hands and feet, and lay me in the dust of death. They divide my clothing among them, and cast lots for my robe" (Ps 21/22:16,18). "Even my friend, in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has turned against me" (Ps 40/41:10) "You are a priest forever; a priest like Melchizedek of old" (Ps 109/110:5). "The stone which the builders rejected has become the corner stone... Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Ps 117/118:22, 26) ...

The Fathers understood Christ to be present in the psalms in three different ways. First of all, they understood Him as the object of prophecy. He is the Messiah, the anointed King, whose coming the psalmist foretells. He is also supremely the just or righteous Man, and the One who innocently suffers at the hands of the wicked. Secondly, Christ is the One to whom the psalm is addressed: the divine Lord, or the heavenly Bridegroom, now reigning in everlasting glory. Lastly, He is the One who prays the psalm with us and for us. So in his homily on the first psalm St. Augustine comments: "In all the Psalms we can hear the voice of Christ our Redeemer: either singing praise, or sorrowing, or rejoicing in hope, or sighing in distress."

Interpreting the psalms "spiritually", the Fathers found not only Christ, but also themselves. That is, they understood the historical realities referred to in the psalms as images, or symbols, of the Christian life. So the City of Jerusalem, for example, could be interpreted as the baptized soul, or else as the Kingdom of Heaven. The wanderings of Israel in the wilderness could symbolise our own spiritual journey, and our tendency to sin.

Above all, the enemies of the psalmist could be understood as our sins, or as the demons of hell, inciting us to sin. "For it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against the principalities and the ruling forces who are masters of the darkness of this world, the spirits of evil in the heavens" (Eph 6:12). The early monks especially developed this theme with perennially valid insight. As an example, St. Benedict twice uses the shocking curse of psalm 136/7:9 to show how we should dash temptations against Christ (HR Prol 28 & 4:50).

In order to read the psalms "forwards", according to their original literal sense, we need the resources of modern scripture scholarship. This is a fascinating and most rewarding avenue for study, with always something new to teach us, helping us to understand better what we are singing. One of the first things to grasp is the relationship of the psalms with the other books of the Old Testament. The book of psalms has truly been described as a synthesis or summary, in lyrical form, of the whole Old Testament. We find in it echoes from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy; from the History books, from the Wisdom literature and from the Prophets. So just as we cannot understand the New Testament if we are ignorant of the psalms, so we cannot properly understand the psalms if we do not have a good knowledge of the rest of the Old Testament.

The modern scholars helpfully classify the psalms according to type. None of their proposed divisions can be regarded as watertight, and scholars vary considerably among themselves, but standard headings are: hymns; entreaties, thanksgivings (whether of an individual or of the community), songs of Sion, psalms of God's Kingship, wisdom psalms, royal psalms. Some would simply distinguish only two types: psalms of lamentation or of praise ("down" psalms and "up" psalms). An important group of psalms are the "songs of ascents": that is, the gradual or pilgrimage psalms (119/120 - 133/134). Tradition also distinguishes seven penitential psalms: numbers 6, 31/32, 37/38, 50/51, 101/102, 129/130, 142/143. The 150 psalms are also divided into five books. The divisions can be seen by the doxologies at the end of psalms 40/41, 71/72, 88/89, 105/106, and psalm 150.

The psalms cannot be dated with any certainty. They were composed over a period of about 1000 years, from the time of the Judges up to nearly New Testament times: yet the language and conventions remained amazingly stable throughout. It is as if future scholars were unable to decide whether an English poem had been composed by Chaucer or by T.S. Eliot. King David surely composed some. Numbers 17/18 and 104/105 in particular are ascribed to him and repeated in 2 Samuel 22 and 1 Chronicles 16 respectively.

The psalms have many conventions, which it is useful to note. Standard formulae reappear many times, so psalms seem often to be quoting one another. Indeed psalm 13/14 is almost exactly the same as psalm 52/53, and psalm 107/108 is simply a combination of two other psalms. We should be aware, too, of the conventions of the Hebrew language. It prefers very concrete images to abstract terms. So God is a "rock of refuge", and "tower of strength"; to fall into an enemy's power is to fall into his "hand"; to inspire is to "put words into the mouth"; to be proud is to "lift up the horn". Enemies are "lions", "bulls" or "dogs". The hopes and fears of the psalmist are also expressed in conventional terms. Water or the abyss is associated with primeval chaos: to be engulfed in it is a symbol of all that is dreadful; so also is being hemmed in, surrounded, squeezed into a tight place. On the other hand, the wide space, the open, fertile plain is a recurring image of all that is desirable.

Hebrew poetry is based, not so much on rhyme or rhythm, as on parallelism. "Hear this all you peoples ? give heed, all who dwell in the world; men both low and high ? rich and poor alike!" As C.S. Lewis has remarked, this means that, providentially, the psalms can be translated, with minimal loss, into other languages. Not many translations, however, attempt to render the alphabetical structure of the "acrostic" psalms (9/10, 24/25, 33/34, 36/37, 110/111, 111/112, 118/119, 144/145). The translation of Mgr. Ronald Knox is to be recommended as having brilliantly accomplished this. In most of these psalms, each verse begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. But Psalm 118/119 is structured in stanzas. Each stanza has eight verses, all beginning with the same letter. There are 22 stanzas to correspond to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The psalm is a praise of the Law of the Lord. Variety is achieved within the stanzas by using eight different words for the Law. The Grail translation, used in the Divine Office book, has: word, promise, will, commands, law, decrees, precepts, statutes.

It is important to realise that English words are often not exact equivalents of the Hebrew they attempt to translate. The words which characterise the God of the Covenant are particularly significant and rich in meaning. They are outlined in Exodus 34:6, and repeated many times in the psalms. Often they come in pairs: mercy ("Hesed") and truth ("Emeth"); justice ("Sedaqah") and judgement ("Mispat"). "Your love, Lord, reaches to heaven; your truth to the skies. Your justice is like God's mountain; your judgements like the deep" (Ps 35/36:6-7). "Hesed" is probably the most important word in the psalms, and in the Old Testament. The Grail

translates it as "great love"; the NJB "faithful love"; Knox "mercy"; our Latin has "misericordia"; the Greek is *agape*. None of these on its own is adequate. God's "hesed" is the merciful love that induced Him to bring creation into being, and to save His chosen people. In face of Israel's infidelity, it reveals itself as more powerful than betrayal, and stronger than sin. It cannot fail, since it involves God's fidelity to Himself. Psalms 102/103 and 135/136 are beautiful hymns celebrating the divine "hesed". "Emeth" is included in the meaning of "hesed". It is the "truth" of God that is absolutely trustworthy, firm, stable, secure. The opposite of "emeth" is the false vanity of idols. God's "sedeqah", His justice, implies not only moral uprightness but love for the poor; also plenitude and peace. As for His judgement, "mispat", that means above all His intervention on behalf of the down-trodden poor. The "Judges" of the Old Testament were those who rescued the people from bondage to their enemies. One more word to pause over: "rahamim" - "compassion" in the Grail; "miseratio" in our Latin. It is the feminine side of "hesed", which it often parallels. It implies the love a nursing mother has for her infant.

If the God of the psalms is so clearly a God of love, it is not hard to see how we should look for the more perfect and final expression of that in Christ. The Jews rightly loved and praised God for His goodness. How much more cause have we, who have been raised with Christ to share His very life! Now we know that God, Father Son and Holy Spirit is in Himself a communion and mystery of love; so we add the "Gloria Patri" to the end of every psalm, to remind ourselves that we sing it as Christians. In a sense, too, we continue to look forward with the Jews to a fulfilment of the psalms that is yet to come. When their monarchy had ceased to exist, their hopes for a Messiah who would fulfil the promises made to David did not die: rather, they increased. We believe that Jesus Christ was that Messiah; but we also wait in hope for His final triumph, and the completed Kingdom He has promised. So with the psalmist we sing: "He shall endure like the sun and the moon, from age to age. He shall descend like rain on the meadow, like raindrops on the earth. In his days justice shall flourish, and peace till the moon fails. He shall rule from sea to sea, from the Great River to earth's bounds" (Ps 71/72:5-8).

## **Let me end with a little story from the desert fathers.**

"One day an old anchorite spotted a demon trying to persuade another demon to come with him to tempt a monk in his cell. But he heard the second demon refuse. 'There's no point going there', he said. 'I've already tried to tempt that one, but he immediately got up and gave me a dreadful beating with his psalms and his prayers.'"