

The Liturgical Year and the Interior Life

The Prayers at the Foot of the Altar

PART II

Historically, Psalm 42 was composed by King David as he fled Jerusalem when Absalom, his son, had usurped his throne. If we read through the psalm as a sacred poetic text, we find David first asking God to judge him. This is not as in a human tribunal, where testimony for and against is weighed in an effort to discern the truth. David knows that when God judges, He exposes the truth as it really is: there is no emotive rhetoric, no specious arguments to muddle the issue, but simply the absolute truth of God's own infinite wisdom laid clear.

Hence David is calling upon God as the One Who alone can look upon him without the clouded judgments of men. David goes on to ask God to recognize his cause: that he is trying to serve God, unlike the rebellious and sinful Absalom and those following him. This is not just any ancient palace coup, but overthrowing the place of one anointed with God's authority to rule. Thus, it is not David's pride speaking when he speaks of himself as distinct from an unholy people, but he asks God to see that he, in doing God's will, suffers at the hand of the wicked and deceitful (in this case his son and his supporters), from whom he implores God to deliver him safely. His hope for this is in God's strength, which is ultimately whence David himself draws his own strength, and yet he asks why he is left in this situation, exiled from his throne as though abandoned or rebuked by God. He asks God to share with him his light and truth, in other words to bestow true wisdom upon him in this hour of tribulation, so that he might accept the ways of God, since it will be this wisdom which will eventually lead him back to his home in Jerusalem, which is both his seat of power, but also, and more importantly, where he can offer sacrifice to God. Note that he speaks of God's altar, not His Temple, which will not be built until the reign of his son Solomon.

Inspired by his trust in God, David proclaims with certainty that he will praise Him once more upon the harp, both by the psalms which he composed and sings to God in his palace, and by his participation in the sung worship of God, which was accompanied by harps. He renounces his initial sadness of soul, and determines to place all his trust in God, his Savior, whose will is always accomplished.

Hence, the psalm was composed at a particular period of history to reflect the interior dispositions of one individual.

Yet, under the motion of the Holy Ghost, who inspired these words to God within David's heart, the text has a wider sense which can be applied to other souls.

Indeed, consider how these same words serve to reflect the sorrows of Christ Himself, prostrate in the Garden of Gethsemane. He too places Himself in the presence of His Father, who alone can look down upon His own Son, the Word made flesh, as He really is, without the preconceptions or blindness of men (an unholy people), so many of whom see him as a miracle worker, or political leader or a provider of wealth and plenty. Whilst Christ kneels in prayer, He is preparing Himself for the wicked and deceitful man, Judas, who is at this time betraying Him. Christ also asks to be delivered from this man and his plot: *Let this chalice pass from Me...*

Even in this hour, God is the strength of His Son: we are told an angel from heaven is sent to strengthen Him. Christ feels the agony of one who goes forth as if abandoned by God: this is what His enemies want, and He will express this pain in His great cry on Calvary: *My God, My God, Why has Thou forsaken Me?* Very soon, He will in fact go forth afflicted by His enemy.

The light and truth of the will of His Father will be what strengthen Christ in His Passion, and these will also lead Him to the Holy Mount (Sion, just like David) and to His tabernacle. This will be on Calvary, where the one true and perfect sacrifice will be offered to the Father. Hence, in bearing His Cross to Calvary, Christ was going to the Altar of God. Upon the Cross, Christ will praise His Father, even using the words of the psalms which David composed and sang to the music of harps, and, although He tells His apostles that, on arrival in the garden, *My soul is sorrowful even unto death*, we now see in Christ only a perfect resolve to fulfill the will of His Father. Even though He will be seized, arrested, tried, judged, scourged, and crucified, He remains calm, with a peace of soul which is an example for us all. †

To be continued.

This article (and the subsequent ones in upcoming newsletters) is part of a series on the Mass which was printed many years ago in past FSSP newsletters and were written by Fr. Paul Carr.

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