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"The Psalter is a tremendous school"

In his 21 October general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechesis on prayer, focusing again on the book of Psalms.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today, we need to change a bit the way the audience is conducted because of the coronavirus. You are separated, with the protection of

masks as well, and I am here, a bit distant and I cannot do what I always do, coming near you, because every time I do that all of you come together and do not maintain distance and there is the danger of contagion for you. I apologize for this, but it is for your safety. Instead of coming near you and shaking your hands and greeting you, we have to greet each other from a distance, but know that I am near you with my heart. I hope that you understand why I am doing this. Also, while the readers were reading the biblical passage, my attention was caught by that baby boy or girl over there who was crying, and I was watching the mamma who was cuddling and nursing the baby and I said: this is what God does with us, like that mamma. With what tenderness she was trying to comfort and nurse the baby. They are beautiful images. And when it happens that a baby cries in Church, listening to that and feeling

that tenderness of a mamma there, like today, and thanks for your witnesses, and there is the tenderness of a mamma which is the symbol of God's tenderness with us. Never silence a crying baby in Church, never, because it is the voice that attracts God's tenderness. Thank you for your witness.

Today we will complete the catechesis on the *prayer of the Psalms*. Above all, we see how there often appears a negative figure in the Psalms, called the "wicked" person, that is, he or she who lives as if God does not exist. This is the person without any transcendent referent, whose arrogance has no limits, who fears no judgment regarding what he or she thinks or does.

For this reason, the Psalter presents prayer as the fundamental reality of life. The reference to the absolute and to the transcendent – which the

spiritual masters call the “holy fear of God” – and which makes us completely human, is the boundary that saves us from ourselves, preventing us from venturing into life in a predatory and voracious manner. Prayer is the salvation of the human being.

There certainly also exists a false prayer, a prayer said only for the admiration of others. The person or those persons who go to Mass only to make it seen that they are Catholics or to show off the latest fashion that they acquired, or to make a good impression in society. They are moving toward false prayer. Jesus strongly admonished against such prayer (see *Mt 6:5-6*; *Lk 9:14*). But when the true spirit of prayer is sincerely received and enters the heart, it then allows us to contemplate reality with God’s very eyes.

When one prays, everything acquires “depth”. This is interesting in prayer, perhaps something subtle begins but in prayer that thing acquires depth, it becomes weighty, as if God takes it in hand and transforms it. The worst service someone can give God, and others as well, is to pray tiredly, by rote. To pray like parrots. No, one prays with the heart. Prayer is the centre of life. If there is prayer, even a brother, a sister, even an enemy becomes important. An old saying from the first Christian monks reads: “Blessed the monk who regards every human being as God, after God” (Evagrius Ponticus, *Trattato sulla preghiera*, n. 122). Those who adore God, love His children. Those who respect God, respect human beings.

And so, prayer is not a sedative to alleviate life’s anxieties; or, in any case, this type of prayer is certainly not Christian. Rather, prayer makes

each of us responsible. We see this clearly in the “Our Father” that Jesus taught His disciples.

To learn how to pray this way, the Psalter is a tremendous school. We saw how the Psalms do not always use refined and gentle language, and how they often bring out the scars of existence. And yet, all these prayers were first used in the Temple of Jerusalem and then in the synagogues; even the most intimate and personal ones. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it this way: “The Psalter’s many forms of prayer take shape both in the liturgy of the Temple and in the human heart” (n. 2588). And thus, personal prayer draws from and is nourished first by the prayer of the people of Israel, then by the prayer of the Church.

Even the Psalms in the first person singular, which confide the most intimate thoughts and problems of

an individual, are a collective patrimony, to the point of being prayed by everyone and for everyone. The prayer of the Christian has this “breath”, this spiritual “tension” holding the temple and the world together. Prayer can begin in the penumbra of a church’s nave, but come to an end on the city streets. And vice versa, it can blossom during the day’s activities and reach its fulfillment in the liturgy. The church doors are not barriers, but permeable “membranes”, willing to allow everyone’s groans in.

The world is always present in the prayer found in the Psalter. The Psalms, for example, voice the divine promise of salvation for the weakest: “Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan I will now arise,’ says the Lord; ‘I will place him in the safety for which he longs” (12:5). Or again, they warn about the danger of worldly riches because...

“Man cannot abide in his pomp, he is like the beasts that perish” (49:20). Or still, they open the horizon to God’s view of history: “The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nought; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations” (33:10-11).

In short, where there is God, the human person must be there as well. Sacred Scripture is categorical: “We love, because he first loved us”. He always goes ahead of us. He always awaits us because He loves us first, He looks at us first, He understands us first. He always awaits us. “If any one says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen”. If you pray many rosaries each day but then gossip about others, and nourish grudges inside, if you hate others, this is truly artificial,

it is not true. “And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also” (1 Jn 4:19-21).

Scripture acknowledges the case of the person who, even though he or she sincerely searches for God, never succeeds in encountering Him; but it also affirms that the tears of the poor can never be repudiated on pain of not encountering God. God does not support the “atheism” of those who repudiate the divine image that is imprinted in every human being.

That everyday atheism: I believe in God but I keep my distance from others and I allow myself to hate others. This is practical atheism. Not to recognize the human person as the image of God is a sacrilege, an abomination, the worst offense that can be directed toward the temple and the altar.

Dear brothers and sisters, the prayers of the Psalms help us not to

fall into the temptation of the “wicked”, that is, of living, and perhaps also of praying, as if God does not exist, and as if the poor do not exist.

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