
March 2009



The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
110 W. Madison St., Chicago, IL 60602 ❖ Phone: 312-372-5111
E-mail: FriarsLegion@aol.com ❖ Web Site: www.stpetersloop.org

THE CHURCH'S HYMNAL

Pope Saint Leo the Great lived and died over a millennium and a half ago, yet he still has much to teach us about what Lent is and how to keep a good Lent. The Lenten season is very much one of preparation for Easter, itself the season "specially marked by the mysteries of our redemption," and as such it cries out to us insistently "the need for our religious preparation." Leo sees the forgiveness of sin as the heart of the Easter celebration. This is most clearly true for those who are baptized at the Easter Vigil, who go down into the water of rebirth that frees from sin, but it is also true for "us others who for some time have been counted among God's adopted children." Unlike the catechumens, our Lent is not a preparation for our own baptism, but like them it demands of us an exertion, a struggle, that is yet a matter of life and death.

For baptism is a beginning not an end, and if we are to grow in grace as well as in age then we must work with and within this grace our whole life long. "Certainly it is true," St. Leo says, "that the water of rebirth initially brings about our new life of grace, but for us all it remains necessary to struggle every day against the rust of our earthly nature. Whatever steps forward we make, there is not one of us who is not always bound to do better. All of us must strive hard and so on Easter day no one should remain bound by the vices of his former nature. And so, dearly beloved, what every Christian should always be doing must now be performed more earnestly and more devoutly."

Referring to a tradition already ancient in his day, Leo points to prayer, fasting and almsgiv-

ing as the trio of actions that are the hallmark of a good Lent. Obviously the Christian does not pray, fast and do works of charity only in the forty days of Lent, for these are a necessary part of the Christian life in all seasons throughout the year. But just as obviously there must be a greater seriousness and an added effort in our pursuit of these in the Lenten season. "The rust of our earthly nature" seems never to rest in its working against us, and so the annual Lenten observance is a privileged time for beseeching the Holy Spirit's help in renewing our baptismal grace of adoption as sons and daughters of the living God.

When we redouble our efforts at prayer in the Lenten season, most of us find ourselves moving in two directions at the same time: the public way and the private way, the way of the Church's liturgy and the way of personal prayer. Of course, we make sure that we get to Mass on all the Sundays of Lent, but we also try to use the weekday Masses to our advantage; if weekday Eucharist is not usually a part of our practice, we try to get to church for it a time or two during the week, and if we usually go during the week we try to get there more often. Our parishes offer the Stations of the Cross and perhaps other Lenten devotions, and we participate in those as best we can. Then there is also our life of private prayer, and we try to build that up beyond the normal for the Lenten season. Perhaps we add the reading of Scripture to our daily routine, or the rosary, or extra prayer and meditation times.

In the midst of such efforts to pray "more

earnestly and more devoutly” during the Lenten season we may notice that we are more and more running into the psalms. Many versions of the Way of the Cross make liberal use of quotations from the psalms. The texts of the Mass likewise are loaded with psalm verses. Every Mass has its entrance antiphon, its responsorial after the first Scripture reading, a verse in the Gospel acclamation, and a communion antiphon, and the book of Psalms furnishes a great number of the Scripture verses employed in these texts. Even if the priest or choir passes over them in silence or replaces them with hymns, they are still there, printed in the Missal, Mass book or missalette, and our eyes linger on them, if only for a moment.

The prevalence of the psalms in Christian worship is neither surprising nor new. It is very much a part of our heritage from ancient Israel, for whom the book of Psalms has been from time out of mind the hymn book of God’s chosen people, the prayer book of the nation. Thus, if we wish during Lent to crank up a few notches our life of prayer, we will find ourselves more deeply into the psalms, and we can make this even more powerful not just by noticing and praying these psalm texts in the liturgy, but also by turning to the book of Psalms when we reach for our Bibles during the season. There are one hundred and fifty psalms, some very short (like Ps. 117) and others very long (like Ps. 119), some that we have heard thousands of times (like Ps. 23, “The Lord is my shepherd”) and others that we have probably never heard (like Pss. 58, 83 and 109, cries for vengeance and vindication whose images are loaded with graphic violence).

The theological and psychological range of the book of Psalms is huge. Saint Athanasius, a fourth century Father of the Church, was con-

vinced that in a sense all of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, can be found in Psalms. As he wrote in a long letter to his friend Marcellinus, a letter which is really a treatise on the proper interpretation of the psalms, all the biblical books are inspired by God and all are useful for instruction, “but to those who study it the

Psalter yields especial treasure.” Using the image of an orchard, he says that each book of Scripture “is like a garden which grows one special kind of fruit; by contrast, the Psalter is a garden which, besides its special fruit, grows also some of those of all the rest.”

Thus, Athanasius points out, the creation, of which we read in Genesis, is spoken of in Pss. 19 and 24. The exodus of Israel from Egypt is the theme of Pss. 87, 105, 106, and 114. Moving on through the main events of Israel’s history, he shows how these appear in the Psalter. Turning to the books of prophecy, he insists on the same point: nearly all the subjects and oracles in the prophets are to be found in the psalms, especially those prophecies that speak of the coming of the Savior, e.g. Pss. 45, 110, and 118. Moreover, the psalms foretell the sufferings of Christ in the flesh he assumed, as in especially Ps. 22, but also in Pss. 88 and 69. The triumph of Christ in the resurrection and

ascension is celebrated in the Psalter in Pss. 24, 47, 9, 110, 50, and 72. Indeed, Athanasius’ preference is always for a Christological reading of the book – if a psalm can be read as referring to Christ or to Christ’s body, the Church, then this is how it ought to be read.

Such a Christological reading, however, does not exhaust the well of meaning contained in the book of Psalms. There is in the Psalter something quite rare, a mirror into your own soul. “Elsewhere in the bible you read only that the Law commands this or that to be done, you lis-



ten to the Prophets to learn about the Savior's coming or you turn to the historical books to learn the doings of the kings and holy men; but in the Psalter, besides all these things, you learn about *yourself*. You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries. Moreover, whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you do not merely hear and then pass on, but learn the way to remedy your ill." Psalms not only teach us the truth of our own heart and provide us with words to express it, they also provide us with a way to pass beyond the difficulties of the present moment and, when we have done so, they give us songs of thanksgiving with which we can express our joy and gratitude to God.

We can find much of this in other books of the bible, Athanasius says, and in those other books we encounter the unmistakable voice of authority, the voice of the teacher. In Psalms, however, we see something we don't often see in other books – ourselves and words fit for our own voices. "...The marvel with the Psalter is that, barring those prophecies about the Savior and some about the Gentiles, the reader takes all its words upon his lips as though they were his own, and each one sings the Psalms as though they had been written for his special benefit, and takes them and recites them, not as though someone else were speaking or another person's feelings being described, but as himself speaking of himself, offering the words to God as his own heart's utterance, just as though he himself had made them up... Whether he has kept the Law or whether he has broken it, it is his own doings that the Psalms describe; every one is bound to find his very self in them and, be he faithful soul or be he sinner, each reads in them descriptions of himself."

Having already told us that the psalms are a vessel wherein is contained the coming of Christ, his life and his paschal mystery, and having also shown us how they are a mirror in which we can see a perfect reflection of ourselves, Athanasius now insists that these two

features work in tandem to bring the soul deeper into the transformative mystery of God's grace. If all we had is the teaching of Christ, we might not know what to do with it, and if all we had was a mirror for our souls, we would not know which way to go. But because the Psalter gives us both, it can be for us a true picture of ourselves and where we are now, and a guide for our journey home to the Father. "Briefly, then, if indeed any more is needed to drive home the point, the whole divine Scripture is the teacher of virtue and true faith, but the Psalter gives a picture of the spiritual life." In the longest section of his treatise, Athanasius shows how no matter what the state or the needs of a person at the present moment, he will find in the psalms words that perfectly express his situation or his plight, and words that will lead him forward. The songs of the Church's hymnal are thus in perfect harmony, blending into a single melody the songs and laments of the pilgrim's heart and the consoling notes of the Spirit's wisdom.

For Athanasius, this is not merely a poetic, musical metaphor but the strongest possible indication that the psalms were written to be sung and ought to be sung. It is not enough just to read them; to really profit the soul they must be rendered with melody and song, and this for two reasons. First, singing demands more of us, takes more out of us, and so is the fuller way of letting the psalms express our love for God. And the second reason is "the unifying effect which chanting the Psalms has upon the singer." Singing requires more concentration than speaking, and from that heightened intensity comes a resolution of the usual disharmonies of mind and body that afflict us, "just as the notes of several flutes are brought by harmony to one effect... When, therefore, the Psalms are chanted, it is not from any mere desire for sweet music but as the outward expression of the inward harmony obtaining in the soul, because such harmonious recitation is in itself the index of a peaceful and well-ordered heart." The implications of this for liturgy are huge and cannot be treated here. Here it is perhaps enough to listen and be led into the Psalter as a part of our Lent.

—*Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.*

