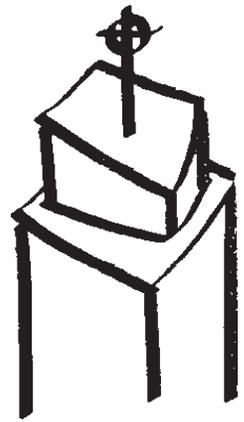


# OUR FAMILY NEWS

For Oblates of St. Bede Abbey, Peru, Illinois

September &  
October, 2014



## THE PSALMS: AN INTRODUCTION OF SORTS

*Dear Oblates, As we are about to begin our yearlong study of the psalms, I offer for your consideration some preliminary personal reflections. Br. Nathaniel*

I was dutifully introducing myself, and no sooner did I utter the words “Benedictine monk” than it seemed as if a light bulb went on above his head, as in a newspaper comic strip. His whole face brightened, and he asked, “Hey, what is it with those psalms?” Such were his exact words, the exact words of a rather inexact question, to be sure, but a question asked in earnest by a rather intelligent (so it became clear) if inarticulate fellow who, like me, was a guest at a cocktail party at which both of us had been expected to appear, like it or not. (Both of us appeared; neither of us liked it.)

It was his recent thirty-eighth birthday that had given him a hint that he was not going to live forever, and for the first time as an adult he had started to take his Catholic faith seriously. He had begun to join the monks of a nearby Benedictine monastery, daily, for both Morning Prayer and Mass, but was too embarrassed to ask one of them what he thought were probably, as he put it, “dumb questions.” Me, however, he found the sort of congenial stranger with whom one can be absolutely honest and forthright because one will probably never cross paths with him or her again.

Before I could even attempt to answer his question, he added, in a statement that said far more than he realized at the time, “Yeah, there’s just no way of getting away from them.”

Not that he wanted to. He had found some of the psalms hauntingly beautiful, some forbiddingly harsh, some simply puzzling. But he sensed that all of them were important, even though he didn’t know precisely why or in what way. He had begun to make some connections—for example, to understand why particular verses of particular psalms were particularly appropriate as responses to particular first readings at Mass. More notably, though, he had acquired a sense of wonder, even excitement, about the psalms, and was filled with questions. He had become an apt pupil in that school of prayer that teaches us Catholics both what to pray (not just pray *for*) and how to pray, and that does so in large part by its extensive use of psalmody, namely, the liturgy. And he was actually eager to do homework, even at a cocktail party.

Now to say that the liturgy is a school of prayer is to say as well that it is a school of belief. What and how the Church has prayed, from its foundation until the present, is the surest indicator of what it has believed and taught from its foundation, continually refined over the centuries, certainly, but incontrovertibly the same as from the start. Contrary, however, to what you might conclude from the immediately preceding statement, it is the former, the Church’s prayer, that has determined the latter, the Church’s belief, rather than the other way around. An axiom first enunciated in the early fifth century, attributed to Pope St. Celestine I, sums up the matter neatly: *Legem credendi statuit lex orandi*, that is, “The rule of prayer establishes the rule of faith.”

What exactly does that mean? When I was still teaching the senior honors course in writing in our academy, I used to tell my students, “You don’t know what you really think until you attempt to express it in speech or writing.” As British novelist E. M. Forster put it, more memorably, “How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?” The Church does not really know what it believes *until* it attempts to express it in prayer. In a very real sense, the Church discovers itself only when it prays.

That the People of God of the New Covenant has uninterruptedly prayed the psalms, the quintessential prayers of the People of God of the Old Covenant, in its worship from the very beginning means that it has ceaselessly

discovered itself anew in these prayers. And because the Church defines itself—can define itself—only in terms of its relationship to its Lord, to him who established that New Covenant, it also means that it has first ceaselessly discovered *him* anew in them. The Body of Christ can define—indeed, know and understand—itsself only in terms of its union with Christ its Head and only insofar as it knows (not just knows *about*) and understands him.

So the Christian use of the psalms, communally in the liturgy and personally in private prayer, is an integral part of what is known as sacred Tradition. The very word “tradition,” in whatever context, conjures up notions of something that is old and venerable, and rightly so. But, as should be clear from what has just been said, *sacred* Tradition is of its very nature something that is not only irreversibly old but also irrepressibly new, not static and stale but dynamic and fresh. *Dei Verbum*, Vatican Council II’s *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, goes so far as to speak of its “life-giving presence” in the Church (*Dei Verbum*, 8.).

What can rightly be called the foundational document of Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum* declares that “Tradition transmits in its entirety the word of God which was entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit” (*Dei Verbum* 9.), but also “makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit,” so that “there is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on” (*Dei Verbum*, 8.). “By means of the same Tradition,” the document states, “the holy Scriptures...are more thoroughly understood and constantly actualized in the Church” (*Dei Verbum* 8.).

What *of* that word of God, the sacred Scriptures themselves? Because, again according to *Dei Verbum*, “sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the word of God” (*Dei Verbum* 10.), one may legitimately expect to find in the Scriptures nothing less than divine sanction of—more, divine initiative for—the use of the psalter by us Christians in what we pray and in what we profess. *Dei Verbum* does not hesitate to call the writings of the Old Testament, among other things, “a wonderful treasury of prayers” and states unequivocally that “the books of the Old Testament...shed light on...and explain” the New (*Dei Verbum*, 16.).



As for the use of the psalms in what we pray, could there be any more explicit and forthright an endorsement of the use of the psalms as Christian prayer, any more enthusiastic and forceful an exhortation to Christians to pray the psalms, than either of those two counsels to pray them that are contained in the Pauline letters—in nearly twin passages, no less, that mention the psalms by name?

In the Letter to the Colossians one reads, “Be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col 3:15-17). In the Letter to the Ephesians one finds, “Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing

and playing to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father (Eph 5:18-20).

So striking is the similarity of these passages that, by and large, annotated bibles, bible dictionaries, and biblical commentaries have been content, in their treatment of each passage, simply to call attention to its likeness to the other and to explore and explain the whys and wherefores thereof. It seems to me, however, that far more important than the remarkable consistency of the two passages is their content, that is, what they are consistent *about*. And *that* includes not merely their regard for the psalms but the context in which that regard is meant to be understood.

We tend, I believe, to take these two passages as little more than, well, pleasant pastoral encouragements to early Christian communities to persevere in the faith—pleasant, but certainly not profound. I am by no means a Scripture scholar, but I daresay that one would be hard put to find any other New Testament passage that at once so succinctly yet so completely and clearly sums up the Christian life than either of these.

As Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann once wrote, "All that exists is God's gift to man, and it all exists to make God known to man, to make man's life communion with God." What we have labeled "original sin" was, Schmemmann stated, that man "ceased to see his whole life depending on the whole world as a sacrament of communion with God" and began to see the world as an end in itself. "And Adam," as he poignantly expressed it, "when he left the Garden where life was to have been eucharistic—an offering of the world in thanksgiving to God—Adam led the whole world, as it were, into darkness."

The two Pauline instructions under consideration, then, are also nothing less than synopses of human life as it was meant by God to be from the start and as it has been *restored* by Christ—a life of thanksgiving—and, more than that, as it has been *transformed* by Christ into a previously unimaginable personal communion with him, the very Son of God, and thereby with the Holy Trinity, a share in the divine life itself—the divine response to human ingratitude. "You were once darkness," the Letter to the Ephesians also tells us, "but now you are light in the Lord; live as children of light (Eph 5:8). Is it not remarkable that both of these New Testament directives, summary depictions, as well, of our new life in Christ, give the praying of the Old Testament psalms an exceptionally prominent role in that life—indeed, would have the psalms constantly on our lips? And yet, however remarkable it may be, it should not be all that surprising.

The Gospels themselves, all four of them, intimately associate the praying of the psalms with our new life in Christ, and they do so by putting the psalms on *Christ's* lips in their accounts of that passion and death of his by which that life was gained. The Lord who composed the quintessential prayer of the People of God of the New Covenant, what we, appropriately enough, call the Lord's Prayer—the Our Father—is pointedly presented by the evangelists as praying psalms as he hung dying on the Cross.

The evangelists' primary purpose in doing so was to make clear that what happened at the Crucifixion was a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy {more about the psalms as prophetic in the continuation of this article in the next issue of *Our Family News*}, that what occurred revealed Jesus as the Christ, that is, the Messiah. But the evangelists had other means at their disposal by which to use the psalms to communicate such, and they in fact used these too.

One was allusion, as in all four's inclusion in their narratives of the offering of vinegar to the Crucified, a reference to Ps 69:21, "In my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink" (Mt 27:34 and 48, Mk 15:23 and 36, Lk 23:36, Jn 19:29), and as in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's inclusion of the casting of lots for his garments, a reference to Ps

22:18, “They divide my garments among them, and for my vesture they cast lots” (Mt 27:35, Mk 15:24, Lk 23:34).

Another was direct statement, as in John's treatment of the casting of lots for Christ's garments: “So they [the soldiers] said to one another, ‘Let's not tear it [Jesus's seamless tunic], but cast lots for it to see whose it will be,’ in order that the passage of Scripture might be fulfilled that says: ‘They divided my garments among them, and for my vesture they cast lots.’ This is what the soldiers did” (Jn 19:24). John also uses direct statement in his treatment of the piercing of Christ's side with a lance: “For this happened so that the Scripture passage might be fulfilled: ‘Not a bone of it will be broken (Ps 34:20).’ (Jn 19:36).”

No, the evangelists need not have recorded Jesus's praying of psalms on the Cross in order to demonstrate that what transpired at the Crucifixion was the fulfillment of what had been foretold in the psalms. They clearly *wanted* to present him who established the New Covenant in his blood as praying these prayers of the Old Covenant even as he was establishing the New. Thus Matthew and Mark attest that Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Ps 22:1)” before being offered the vinegar (Mt 27:46, Mk 15:34). Luke attests that Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit (Ps 31:5)” the moment before breathing his last (Lk 23:46). And John in his testimony (Jn 19:28) about Jesus's final moments states: “Aware that everything was now finished, in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled, Jesus said, ‘I thirst (Ps 22:15).’”

It was significant to the evangelists—and they wished that it be significant to us—that the psalms that they recorded Jesus as praying, Psalm 22 and Psalm 31, are keen laments that are transformed, by total trust in God, into songs of thanksgiving, offered in the certainty of rescue, vindication, and final victory. *(to be continued)*



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**Our Family News** is published in the special interest of the oblates of St. Bede Abbey. Please send changes of address and comments to The Editor, Our Family News, St. Bede Abbey, 24 W US Highway 6, Peru, IL 61354.

We welcome your submissions to this publication, either instructive or reflective, whether prose or poetry. They should in some way relate to the **Rule of Benedict**, Benedictine spirituality, and/or the oblate program. The editor reserves the rights to choose material for publication and to edit as necessary.

## SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS

Meetings are held in the abbey church from 1:30 P.M. to 4:30 P.M.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2014

Sunday, November 9--  
Oblates Day  
(See special schedule below)

Sunday, December 7, 2014  
Sunday, January 11, 2015  
Sunday, February 8, 2015  
Sunday, March 8, 2015  
Sunday, April 12, 2015  
Sunday, May 3, 2015



## NOVEMBER 9 OBLATES DAY SCHEDULE

- |             |  |
|-------------|--|
| 10:00 A.M.  | Conventual Mass, within which oblates will renew their oblations |
| 12:00 noon  | Midday Prayer with the monks                                     |
| 12:15 P.M.  | Lunch with the monks in the monastery refectory                  |
| After lunch | Gathering in the abbey church                                    |
| 2:30 P.M.   | Conclusion of meeting  |

### Passage for *Lectio* at the September Meeting

If God bores you, tell Him that he bores you, that you prefer the vilest amusements to His presence, that you only feel at your ease when you are far from Him.

Francois Fenelon

### Passage for *Lectio* at the October Meeting

“Heaven help me,” she prayed, “to be decorative and to do right.”

Ronald Firbank