

PRAYING THE PSALMS ACCORDING TO BASIL AND CASSIAN

Sept. 26, 2013

When we think about what St. Benedict says about prayer in his Rule, we rightly think first of all on chapters eight through twenty on what he calls the Work of God and the spirit with which it is to be prayed, along with chapter 52, on the oratory of the monastery. It is, however, important to keep in mind that there are many other places in the Rule where he speaks of prayer. For example, in the fourth chapter, on “the tools for good works,” he writes: “Devote yourself often to prayer” and “Every day with tears and sighs confess your past sins to God in prayer,” and “Pray for your enemies out of love for Christ” (4:56, 57, 72). In a later chapter, about monks who refuse to amend after frequent reproofs, he writes that if all other measures don’t seem to help, there is an even better remedy: “Let [the abbot] and all the brothers pray for him so that the Lord, who can do all things, may bring about the health of the sick brother” (RB 28:4). There are still other parts of the Rule that I could mention, but my point is that one of the practices that should most clearly characterize a monk is that he be a man of prayer. But since entire books have been written about prayer and I don’t want to speak at great length, I will this evening touch only on our prayer in common, whether it be called “the Work of God” or “the divine office” or “the liturgy of the hours,” and even within this I will focus on the psalms.

Let me begin by referring to the two authors who, in addition to holy scripture, are the ones whom Benedict recommends the most: St. Basil and John Cassian. Since Basil is the great monastic legislator of Eastern monasticism and wrote in Greek while living in his native Asia Minor, he has perhaps had less influence on prayer in the Western church than Cassian, who wrote his *Conferences* and *Institutes* in Latin while residing in southern Gaul. In fact, it was only when preparing this conference that I learned what Basil teaches in particular about praying the psalms. In his homily on the first psalm, he has this to say:

A psalm gives profound serenity to the soul, dispensing peace, calming the tumultuous waves of thought. For it softens anger in the soul and bridles intemperance. A psalm solidifies friendships, reconciles the separated, conciliates those at enmity. Who, indeed, can consider as an enemy him with whom he has uttered the same prayer to God? So psalmody in choral singing is a bond, as it were, of unity, joining harmoniously the people into a symphony of one choir, producing the greatest of all blessings, charity. A psalm is ... a shield against the fears of the night, a rest from toils of the day, a safeguard for infants, an adornment for vigorous youth, a consolation for the elderly.... It is the

foundation for beginners, the improvement of those advancing, the solid support of the perfect. It is the voice of the Church, brightening feast days; it creates a sorrow which is in accordance with God, for a psalm calls forth a tear even from a heart of stone. A psalm is the occupation of the angels, heavenly life, spiritual incense.¹

That passage might sound too exuberant, too idealized, but if one considers carefully the various points that Basil is there making, one would surely have to agree that there is much substance to what he says. If we really take to heart the words we regularly sing at the various hours of the divine office, then we would certainly be led to rejoice with the whole Church on great feasts even as we would be led to compunction when praying any of the seven penitential psalms. Or again, if we take seriously such lines as the opening verses of psalm 133—“How good and how pleasant it is, when brothers dwell together as one”—then we could not but be helped to want to foster such harmony and to repent of ways in which we have harmed it. And if one keeps in mind that truly saintly men and women have never tired of praying what Dame Maria Boulding once called “the robust earthiness of the psalms,”² then we would have to agree with Basil that the psalms are not only foundational for beginners and a way forward for those advancing in the spiritual life but are also what he calls “the solid support of the perfect.” Even if, humanly speaking, it is not realistic to expect to pay perfect attention throughout the psalmody, let us therefore never tire of seeking more and more to keep our minds in harmony with our voices, as Benedict urges at the end of his nineteenth chapter.

As you would expect, the other great monastic source for Benedict—John Cassian—is in basic accord with Basil’s teaching on the psalms. His tenth conference has some wonderful passages on making the sentiments of the psalms one’s own, as when he writes:

The man who in his moral ascent possesses simple innocence and yet the gift of wisdom ... will make the thoughts of the psalms his own. He will sing them no longer as verses composed by a prophet, but as born of his own prayers. At least he should use them as intended for his own mouth, and know that they were not fulfilled temporarily in the prophet’s age and circumstances, but are being fulfilled in his daily life....

For example, if we have the same attitudes of heart with which the psalmist wrote or sang his psalms, we shall become like the author and be aware of the meaning before

we have thought it out. The force of the words will strike us before we have rationally examined them. And when we use the words, we will remember, by a kind of meditative association, our own circumstances and struggles, the results of our negligence or earnestness, the mercies of God's providence or the temptations of the devil, the subtle and slippery sins of forgetfulness or human frailty or unthinking ignorance. All these feelings we find expressed in the psalms. We see their texts reflected in the clear mirror of our own moral experience. And with that experience to teach us, will not hear the words so much as discern their meaning intuitively. We will not merely recite them like texts committed to memory, but will bring them out from the depths of the heart as an expression of [our own] moral reality.³

This is exactly what St. Benedict means when he writes of having our minds in harmony with our voices when singing the psalms. To the extent that we enter into the spirit of what Basil and Cassian and Benedict are talking about, we will come to the divine office not at all as a chore needing to be accomplished but as a privilege that most people don't even have the time to enjoy. This is why it was entirely appropriate for the Belgian Benedictine Jean Gribomont, who taught for many years at Sant'Anselmo, to sum up St. Basil's teaching about prayer precisely on this note of joy. He wrote that for Basil prayer is "a spontaneous effect of love, manifesting itself by joyous delight, wonder, and constant gratitude, rising above the [concerns of this] world and ordering itself to the will of God."⁴ As we now conclude this day's prayer with Compline, may we have the grace to experience something of that joy, wonder, and gratitude in our own hearts.

1 St. Basil, "Homily on Psalm 1," n. 2, in Matey Havryliv, OSBM, "Prayer in Life and Work of St. Basil." <http://osbmcommission.wordpress.com/list-of-conferences/on-prayer-in-the-teaching-rule-and-life-of-st-basil/> (accessed Sept. 24, 2013).

2 Maria Boulding, "A Tapestry, from the Wrong Side," in *A Touch of God: Eight Monastic Journeys*, ed. Maria Boulding (Still River, MA, 1982), 38.

3 John Cassian, Conf. 10:11, in *Western Asceticism*, ed. and trans. Owen Chadwick (Philadelphia, 1958), 243-44.

4 J. Gribomont, "La preghiera secondo S. Basilio," in *La preghiera* (Rome: 1964), 374.