



# The Holy See

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JOHN PAUL II

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 8 August 2001*

*Psalm 32 [33]*

*Hymn of joy and acclamation to God's Providence*

1. Psalm 32 [33], which has 22 verses, the same number as the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, is a hymn of praise to the Lord of the universe and of history. A quiver of joy runs through it from the very first lines: *"Rejoice, in the Lord, you just! Praise from the upright is fitting. Praise the Lord with the lyre, make melody to him with the harp of ten strings! Sing to the Lord a new song, play skilfully on the strings, with loud shouts"* (vv. 1-3). This acclamation (*tern'ah*) is accompanied by music and expresses an interior voice of faith and hope, of joy and trust. The hymn is "new," not only because it renews the certainty of the divine presence within creation and human events, but also because it anticipates the perfect praise that will be intoned on the final day of salvation, when the Kingdom of God will have attained its glorious realization.

St Basil looks longingly toward this final fulfilment in Christ when he explains this passage: "In general, 'new' means something unusual or which has only recently come into existence. If you think of the astounding, unimaginable way of the Incarnation of the Lord, you would have to sing a new and unheard of song. And if you review the regeneration and renewal of all humanity, surrendered of old to sin, and proclaim the mysteries of the Resurrection, then you too would sing a new and unusual canticle" (*Homily on Psalm 32,2; PG 29, 327*). In short, according to St Basil, the Psalmist's invitation: "Sing to God a new song" means for believers in Christ: "Do not honour God according to the ancient custom of the 'letter', but in the newness of the 'spirit'. Indeed, he who does not understand the Law externally but recognizes the 'spirit' in it sings a 'new song' (*ibid.*)

2. In its central part, the hymn is articulated in three parts that form a trilogy of praise. In the first

(cf. vv. 6-9), the creative word of God is celebrated. The wonderful architecture of the universe, like a cosmic temple, did not arise or develop from a struggle among gods, as some cosmogonies of the ancient Near East suggested, but from the basis of effective divine word. Just as the first page of Genesis teaches (cf. *Gn 1*): "God said ... and it was so". In fact the Psalmist repeats: "For he spoke, and it came to be, commanded, and it stood forth" (*Ps 32,9*).

The man of prayer gives special importance to control of the sea waters, since in the Bible they are the sign of chaos and evil. Despite its limits, the world is preserved in being by the Creator who, as mentioned in the Book of Job, commands the sea to halt at the seashore: "Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed" (*Jb 38,11*).

3. The Lord is also the sovereign of human history, as stated in the second part of Psalm 32 [33], in verses 10-15. With vigorous antithesis, the plans of terrestrial powers are opposed to the wonderful design that God is tracing in history. Human programmes, intended as alternatives, introduce injustice, evil and violence, rising up against the divine plan of justice and salvation. And, despite short-lived and apparent successes, they are reduced to mere machinations, destined to dissolution and failure. It is summed up in the biblical Book of Proverbs: "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established" (*Prv 19,21*). Similarly, the Psalmist reminds us that, from heaven, his transcendent dwelling, God follows all humanity's ways, even the foolish and the absurd, and intuits all the secrets of the human heart.

"Wherever you go, whatever you do, whether in darkness, or in the light of day, God's eye sees you," St Basil comments (*Homily on Psalm 32,8 PG 29, 343*). Happy will be the people who, accepting the divine revelation, observes its instructions for life, following its paths through history. In the end, only one thing endures: "The plan of the Lord stands for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations" (*Ps 32,11*).

4. The third and last part of the Psalm (cf. vv. 16-22) takes up again, from two new angles, the topic of the unique lordship of God over human affairs. On one hand, he invites the powerful not to be deluded by the military force of armies and cavalry. Then he invites the faithful, often oppressed, starving and on the brink of death to hope in the Lord who will not let them fall into the abyss of destruction. In this way, the "catechetical" function of the Psalm is also revealed. It is transformed into a call to faith in a God who is not indifferent to the arrogance of the powerful and is close to the weakness of humanity, raising it and sustaining it if it is confident, if it entrusts itself to him, if it raises its prayer and praise to him.

"The humility of those who serve God" - St Basil further explains - "shows that they hope in his mercy. Indeed, anyone who does not trust his own great enterprises or expect to be justified by his own works, sees in God's mercy his only hope for salvation" (*Homily on Psalm 32,10; PG 29,347*).

5. The Psalm ends with an antiphon that has become part of the well-known *Te Deum* hymn:

"May your kindness always be upon us Lord, for we have hoped in you" (v. 22). Divine grace and human hope meet and embrace. Indeed, God's loving faithfulness (according to the meaning of the original Hebrew word used here, *hésed*), envelops, warms and protects us like a mantle, offering serenity and giving our faith and hope a sound foundation.

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I warmly welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from Sweden, Malta, Japan and the United States of America. Upon you and your families I invoke the joy and peace of Jesus Christ our Saviour.