

Psalms 51(50)



Take not your Holy Spirit from me



ave mercy on me, God, in your kindness.
In your compassion blot out my offense.
O wash me more and more from my guilt
and cleanse me from my sin.

My offenses truly I know them;
my sin is always before me
Against you, you alone, have I sinned;
what is evil in your sight I have done.

That you may be justified when you give sentence
and be without reproach when you judge,
O see, in guilt I was born,
a sinner was I conceived.

Indeed you love truth in the heart;
then in the secret of my heart teach me wisdom.
O purify me, then I shall be clean;
O wash me, I shall be whiter than snow.

Make me hear rejoicing and gladness,
that the bones you have crushed may thrill.
From my sins turn away your face
and blot out all my guilt.

A pure heart create for me, O God,
put a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
nor deprive me of your holy spirit.

Give me again the joy of your help;
with a spirit of fervor sustain me,
that I may teach transgressors your ways
and sinners may return to you.

O rescue me, God, my helper,
and my tongue shall ring out your goodness.
O Lord, open my lips
and my mouth shall declare your praise.

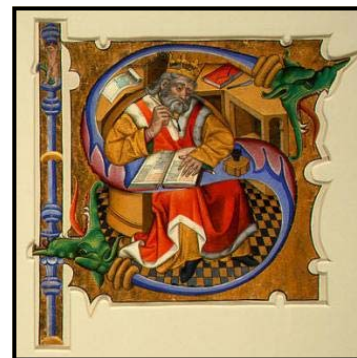
For in sacrifice you take no delight,
burnt offering from me you would refuse,
my sacrifice, a contrite spirit,
a humbled, contrite heart you will not spurn.

In your goodness, show favor
to Zion:
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.
Then you will be pleased with lawful sacrifice,
(burnt offerings wholly consumed),
then you will be offered young bulls on your altar.



1. Every week the Liturgy of Lauds repeats Psalm 50 [51], the famous Miserere. We have already reflected on sections of it on other occasions. Now also, we will reflect in a particular way on a section of this grandiose plea for forgiveness: verses 12-16.

First of all, it is important to note that in the original Hebrew the word "spirit" is repeated three times, invoked of God as a gift and received by the human creature who has repented of his sin: "Renew in me a steadfast spirit.... Do not deprive me of your holy spirit.... Sustain in me a generous spirit" (vv. 12.13.14). One could say, taking recourse to a liturgical term, that it is an "epiclesis", that is, a triple invocation of the Spirit who, as in creation hovered over the waters (cf. Gn 1,2), now penetrates the soul of the faithful, infusing it with new life and raising it from the kingdom of sin to the heaven of grace.



2. The Church Fathers, in the "spirit" invoked by the Psalmist, see the effective presence of the Holy Spirit. Thus, St Ambrose is convinced that it is about the Holy Spirit, who is one "who was active in the prophets, was breathed upon the Apostles and was joined with the Father and the Son in the sacrament of Baptism" (*Lo Spirito Santo* I, 4, 55: SAEMO 16, p. 95; *The Holy Spirit in St Ambrose, Theological and Dogmatic Works*,



CUA Press, reprinted 1977). The same conviction is expressed by other Fathers, such as Didymus the Blind of Alexandria, Egypt, and Basil of Caesarea in their respective treatises on the Holy Spirit (*Didymus the Blind, Lo Spirito Santo*, Rome 1990, p. 59; *Basil of Caesarea, Lo Spirito Santo*, X, 24, Rome 1993).

Again, St Ambrose, observing that the Psalmist speaks of the joy that invades the soul once it has received the generous and powerful Spirit of God, comments: "Joy and delight are fruits of the Spirit and really the sovereign Spirit is the one on whom we are founded. Thus whoever is brought to life by the sovereign Spirit is not subject to slavery, is not enslaved by sin, is not indecisive, does not wander here and there, is not uncertain in his choices, but standing on the rock, he is firm with feet that do not waver" (*Apología del profeta David a Teodosio Augusto*, 15,72 [*Defence of the Prophet David for the Emperor Theodosius*]: SAEMO 5, 129).



3. With this triple mention of the "spirit", after describing in the preceding verses the dark prison of guilt, Psalm 50[51] opens onto the bright realm of grace. It is an important turning point, comparable to a new creation. As in the beginning God breathed his spirit into matter and created the human person (cf. Gn 2,7), so now the same divine Spirit recreates (cf. Ps. 50[51],12), renews, trans-

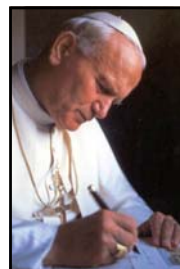
figures and transforms the repentant sinner, embraces him again (cf. v. 13) making him share in the joy of salvation (cf. v. 14). Now the human being, animated by the divine Spirit, sets out on the path of justice and love, as is said in another Psalm: "Teach me to do your will, for you are my God! Let your good spirit guide me on a level path!" (cf. Ps 142[143],10).

4. Having experienced this inner rebirth, the person praying becomes a witness; he promises God to "teach the erring your ways" of good (Ps 50[51], 15), so that, like the Prodigal Son, they may be able to return to the house of the Father. In the same way, St Augustine, after experiencing the dark paths of sin, in his Confessions felt the need to witness to the freedom and the joy of salvation.

Whoever has experienced God's merciful love, becomes a passionate witness of it, especially in dialogue with those who are still caught in the nets of sin. Let us think of the person of Paul, dazzled by Christ on the road to Damascus, who became an untiring missionary of divine grace.

5. For one last time, the person praying looks at his dark past and cries out to God: "Free me from blood guilt, O God, my saving God (cf. NAB version of v. 16). The "blood", to which he refers is variously interpreted in Scripture. Here on the lips of King David, it refers to the killing of Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, the woman who was the object of the king's passion. In a more general sense, the invocation indicates the desire for purification from evil, violence and hatred always present in the human heart with dark and malicious force. Now the lips of the faithful person, purified from sin, sing praise to the Lord.

In fact, the passage of Psalm 50[51] which we have just commented on ends with the promise to proclaim the "justice" of God. The term "justice" in this context, as so often in biblical language, does not actually indicate God's punitive action of evil by God, but rather indicates the sinner's rehabilitation, since God reveals his justice by making sinners just (cf. Rom 3,26). God derives no pleasure from the death of the wicked, but only that he give up his behaviour and live (cf. Ez 18,23)



Blessed John Paul II
4 December 2002
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/2002/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20021204_en.html