

Psalms 51(50)



God's Spirit Purifies



Have 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.

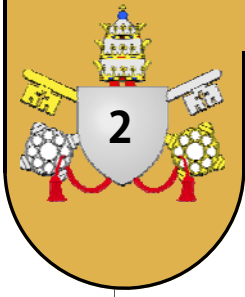
In your goodness, show favor
to Zion:
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.
Then you will be pleased with lawful sacrifice,
(burnt offerings wholly consumed),
then you will be offered young bulls on your altar.



In the preceding catechesis, we quoted a verse of Psalm 51 in which the Psalmist, repentant after his serious sin, implores God's mercy and asks the Lord: "Do not deprive me of your holy spirit" (v. 13). The Psalm is the Miserere, a very well-known psalm which is often repeated in the liturgy, as well as in the devotion and penitential practices of Christian people. It expresses feelings of repentance, trust and humility which easily arise in a "heart contrite and humbled" (Ps 51:19) after sinning. The Psalm merits study and meditation, in the tradition of the Fathers and writers of Christian spirituality; it offers us new dimensions of the concept "divine spirit" in the Old Testament. It helps us to translate doctrine into spiritual and ascetical practice.

Those who followed the references to the prophets made in the preceding catechesis will find it easy to discover the strong kinship of the Miserere with those texts, especially those of Isaiah and Ezekiel. The sense of standing in the sight of God in a sinful condition itself, found in the penitential passage of Isaiah (59:12; cf. Ez 6:9), and the sense of personal responsibility instilled by Ezekiel (18:1-32) are already present in this Psalm. Within the context of the experience of sin and the strongly felt need for conversion, the Psalm asks God for a purification of the heart together with a renewed spirit. The action of God's spirit thus takes on more concrete aspects and a more precise commitment on the level of a person's existential condition.

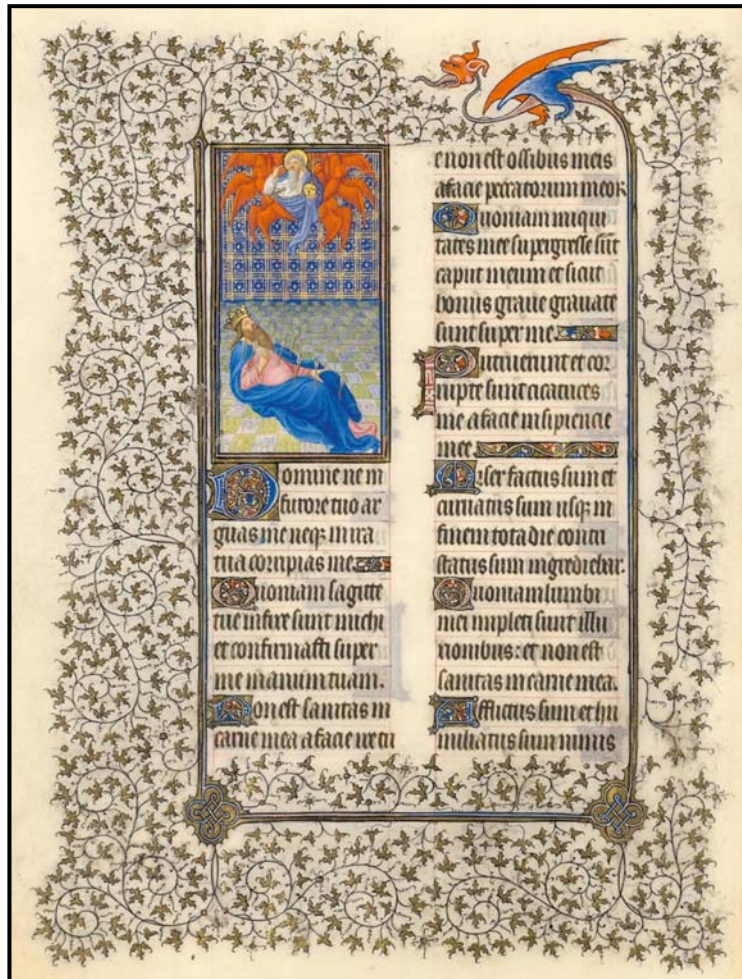
"Have pity on me, O God!" The Psalmist implores divine mercy to win purification from sin: "Wipe out my offense, thoroughly wash me of my guilt, and of my sin cleanse me!" (Ps 51:3-4). "Cleanse me of my sin with hyssop that I may be purified; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow" (v. 9). But he knows that God's pardon cannot be reduced to a simply external withholding of accusation, without there being an interior re-



newal: the human being, all alone, is incapable of that. Therefore he asks: "Create in me, O God, a clean heart, and a steadfast spirit renew within me. Cast me not out from your presence, and your holy spirit take not from me. Give me back the joy of your salvation and a willing spirit sustain in me" (vv. 12-14).

The Psalmist's choice of words is extremely expressive: he asks for a creation, that is, the exercise of God's all-mighty power with the intention of creating a new being. Only God can create (*barĀ*), that is, bring something new into existence (cf. Gen 1:1; Ex 34:10; Is 48:7; 65:17; Jer 31:21-22). Only God can give a pure heart, a heart which is completely transparent in its total desire to conform to God's will. Only God can renew the intimate part of the human being, change the person from within, set aright the basic direction of his conscious life and his religious and moral life. Only God can justify the sinner, according to the vocabulary of theology and dogma itself (cf. DS 1521-1522; 1560), which translates in just that way the prophet's phrase: "to give a new heart" (Ps 51:12).

"A steadfast spirit" (Ps 51:12) is asked for next, or the injection of God's strength into the human spirit, freed from the moral weakness felt in and shown by sin. This strength, this steadfastness, can come only from the active presence of God's spirit, and therefore the Psalmist implores: "Do not deprive me of your holy spirit." It is the only time in the Psalms that this expression is found: "God's holy spirit." In the Hebrew Bible it is used only in the Isaian text which, in meditating on Israel's history, laments to God about the rebellion by which "they grieved his holy spirit" (Is 63:10), and recalls Moses for whom God "put his holy spirit within him" (Is 63:11). The Psalmist is already aware of the intimate presence of God's spirit as a continuing source of holiness, and therefore prays: "Do not deprive me of it!" Thus the juxtaposition of this request with the other one: "Cast me not out from your presence," lets us understand the Psalmist's conviction that the possession of God's Holy Spirit is linked to the divine presence in a person's inner being. To be deprived of that presence would be the real misfortune. If the Holy Spirit remains in him, man stands in a relationship with God that is no longer just "face to face," as before a face to contemplate: no, he possesses in himself a divine strength which inspires his behavior.



After having asked not to be deprived of God's Holy Spirit, the Psalmist asks for the restitution of joy. Earlier he had already prayed for the same thing, when he asked God for his purification, hoping to become "whiter than snow": "Make me feel joy and gladness; the bones you have crushed will exalt for joy" (Ps 51:10). But in the psychological-reflective process in which prayer is born, the Psalmist feels that in order to enjoy this joy fully, it is not enough for all guilt to be wiped away. The creation of a new heart is needed, with a steadfast spirit linked to the presence of God's holy spirit. Only then can he ask: "Give me the joy of your salvation!"



Joy is part of the renewal included in the phrase "creation of a clean heart." It is the result of birth into a new life, as Jesus will explain in the parable of the prodigal son. The father who pardons is the first to rejoice and wants to communicate the joy of his heart to all (cf. Lk 15:20-32).

Along with joy, the Psalmist asks for a "willing spirit," that is, a spirit of courageous commitment. He asks it of him who, according to the Book of Isaiah, had promised salvation for the weak: "On high I dwell in holiness and with the crushed and dejected in spirit, to revive the spirits of the dejected, to revive the hearts of the crushed" (Is 57:15).

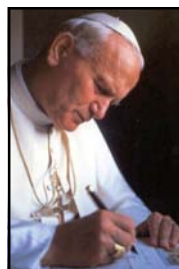
Once this request is made, the Psalmist immediately adds a declaration of his commitment to work with God on behalf of sinners, for their conversion: "I will teach

transgressors your ways, and sinners shall return to you" (Ps 51:15). This is another characteristic element of the interior process of a sincere heart, which has won pardon for its own sins. Such a heart wishes to win the same gift for others, prompting their conversion. It has the intention of working and promises to work toward this goal. This "spirit of commitment" in such a person flows out of the presence of the "holy spirit of God" and is the sign of that presence. In the enthusiasm of conversion and in the fervor of commitment, the Psalmist expresses to God his conviction concerning the effectiveness of his own actions. For him it seems certain that "sinners will return to you." But here as well the awareness of the active presence of an inner power, that of the "holy spirit," is in play.

The deduction enunciated by the Psalmist has a universal value: "My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit; a heart contrite and humbled, O God, you will not spurn" (Ps 51:19). Prophetically he foresees that the day will come when, in a restored Jerusalem, the sacrifices celebrated on the temple altar according to the law's prescriptions will be acceptable (cf. vv. 20-21). The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem will be the sign of divine pardon, as the prophets Isaiah (cf. 60:1 ff.; 62:1 ff.), Jeremiah (cf. 30:15-18) and Ezekiel (cf. 36:33) will also say. But it remains sure that what is of greater worth is that "sacrifice of the spirit" of the person who asks pardon humbly, moved by the divine spirit which, thanks to repentance and prayer, was not taken away from him (cf. Ps 51:13).

As is clear from this succinct presentation of its basic themes, the Psalm Miserere is for us not only a beautiful prayer text and a guide in the asceticism of repentance. It is also a witness to the level of development achieved in the Old Testament regarding the concept of the "divine spirit," as it gradually comes closer to what will be the revelation of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament.

The Psalm is, therefore, a great page in the history of the spirituality of the Old Testament, in pilgrimage, although in shadow, toward the new Jerusalem which will be the Holy Spirit's dwelling place.



Blessed John Paul II
February 28, 1990
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/alpha/data/aud19900228en.html

