

**Welcome and Talk – CIB Symposium
6 September 2018 – Sant’Anselmo, Rome**

As you begin these days of reflection on the Benedictine charism of hospitality as found in the words of Chapter 53 of *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, “Let All Guests be welcomed as Christ,” we are pleased to have you among us at Sant’Anselmo. A warm and fraternal welcome to you from the monks living and working at Sant’Anselmo. Our hope is that you will find a kind and gracious welcome among us, especially as we see the person of Christ in each of you. All of you together bring to this gathering a wealth of spiritual knowledge and experience in the welcome of guests, the charism of hospitality, and the discovery of Christ in your midst. In addition to that, you bring a feminine perspective that is greatly appreciated for its special character and distinctive quality of welcome. In early August, when visiting my home community of Conception Abbey, there was the occasion to visit the Benedictine Sisters with whom we have been associated since our foundation from Switzerland in the 1870s. The warm welcome, the renewal of friendships, and the true promise of mutual prayers served as a reminder of the beautiful feminine manner of hospitality in Benedictine communities of women. We are pleased to have you among us. As you may know, some of the Abbot Presidents will be visiting you on Monday morning before their departure for the annual meeting of the Synod of Abbot Presidents which will take place this year at the abbey of Montecassino. Happily, I will accompany you for your audience with Pope Francis on Saturday.

My words to you this morning would be seriously incomplete if there were no reference to the serious crisis which the Church is facing and which Pope Francis has called to our attention. The revelation of the sexual abuse of minors and the cover-up of this information has been a very painful moment for our Church and a shameful and embarrassing display to the whole world. This may be the most serious crisis that the Church has faced in centuries, and it is a moment of serious prayer, reflection and repentance for all of us. At the same time, I share with you my belief that this is God’s way of purifying the whole people of God and the Church. The problem of sexual abuse is larger than what we have seen in our Church; it is worldwide, and if we do not believe that, we are hiding our heads in the sand. It touches educational institutions, the medical professions, and worse, in families. Now we must pray, we must repent of anything that has harmed the Body of Christ, and we must allow God to continue the work of purification, so that the victims of these terrible crimes may come to healing and peace, if that is possible. Our prayer, our concern, our support, and our encouragement must be with the victims who know they are not alone in their pain; we must accompany them with prayer, a listening heart, and hope for the future. Though it may be difficult for us to understand, our prayer for them, our listening to them, and our care for them may well be a quiet, humble, true form of hospitality of the heart, discovering the suffering Christ in them, and bringing about both their healing and our own conversion.

Now let us turn our attention to another point of reference for this symposium, a spiritual reflection that can be a daily entry into the world of hospitality and the welcome of Christ into our lives and into the lives of those we serve. This is something that we do every day, and what we do daily may escape our sense of its importance, its impact, and its assistance to our spiritual growth. Let us consider how the Psalms touch upon our encounter with Christ and our hospitality toward others. That may be a surprising thought, but there is much in the Psalms that teaches us about knowing, experiencing, and finding Christ in the most unsuspected places of our daily lives.

First of all, we ask ourselves, “Who is Jesus Christ whom we encounter in the Gospels?”

There are numerous ways to answer this question, but we should first consider the Christ who enters into the will of the One he calls *Abba*, that is, through the paschal mystery. Jesus has taken on our human flesh, has sought out the will of God with all his heart, and has found that the path of God's will is the way of self-surrender. We must remember that the Psalms were the prayers that Jesus learned and made a part of his life. The Psalms taught Jesus how to address his Father and also to discover the pains and joys of his people. Thus, the Psalms were "instruction" for him in living his life, finding God's will, and hearing the voice of God's people through their words of lament and joy, suffering and healing, pain and praise, desolation and trust, cursing and thanksgiving. If we can, more and more, enter into the paschal mystery of Christ, our own experiences will have a significant influence on the way in which we interact with our community members, our friends, and the guests who come among us, finding Christ in all of them. This calls for a free and ready willingness to see *ourselves* immersed in the paschal mystery; in other words, our life experiences have true meaning. We don't pass through life from one experience to another without the kind of reflection that enables us to see more clearly what is happening in our life in a way that touches not only our thoughts, but especially our hearts. There is a wonderful text from Mother Jean-Marie Howe, a Trappistine abbess who expresses this quite powerfully. "The journey home is a journey of the heart. Monastic life is a finger pointing within, indicating the path that leads to the deepest center, to the true self: the path of *reditus ad cor*. When we return to the heart, we return to ourselves; we claim the interior landscape of the heart as our own. Monastic life is an essential process of awakening the dormant heart, liberating the life within us, and following its lead." (35) The Psalms open our hearts to the voice of God that has come through human expressions of faith and trust, joy and thanksgiving. She goes on to say, "Monastic life is full of *being*, filled as it is with spiritual realities, because it is filled with the Mystery of Christ." (5) As we know, to be immersed into the Mystery of Christ gives our life a paschal character.

Briefly, let us consider three experiences of Jesus in the Gospels that draw us into his life, and find a significant echo in the Psalms. (As we find these expressions of emotions and feelings in the life of Jesus, we can also find them in our own lives and in the lives of others. That becomes a way for us to encounter the Christ who dwells both in us and in those whom we encounter. The three experiences of Jesus in the Gospels include: 1) Disappointment and frustration; 2) Desolation, anguish, and aggression; and 3) Deep joy and thanksgiving.

1) Disappointment and frustration – There are numerous times in the course of the Gospel narratives where Jesus teaches his disciples some aspect of the meaning of God's kingdom. They come back to him with questions that show they have not understood what he has tried to teach or show them. Jesus tries to open their minds to a new kind of wisdom, and a different way of seeing God's teaching for the well-being of the human race. Yet, they clearly do not grasp the depth and profundity of Jesus' message. The most significant example of this, which appears in both Mk 9:31-32 and Lk 9:45, is when Jesus speaks of his forthcoming passion, death and resurrection, and they fail to understand, with a response that is silent and fearful. The text reads: "[Jesus] was teaching his disciples and telling them, 'The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and three days after his death he will rise.' But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to question him" (Mk 9:31-32). Here, Jesus attempts to tell those people close to him how he sees his own life unfolding in a dramatic way, pointing to death and a mysterious resurrection. The disciples' failure to understand and unwillingness to ask him the meaning of these words must have both disappointed and frustrated him, and maybe even hurt him.

Psalm 31:14 reads, "I have heard the slander of the crowd; terror all around me, as they plot together against me, as they plan to take my life." Then Ps 38:12-13 reads, "Friends and companions stand aloof from my pain; those closest to me stand afar off. Those who plot against my life lay snares; those who seek my ruin speak of harm, planning treachery all day long." Ps 55:13-15a reads, "If an enemy made taunts against me, I could bear it; if my rival had risen against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, as my equal, my friend, whom I knew so well, with whom I enjoyed friendly counsel." These texts from the Psalter echo the experience of Jesus as we heard in the Gospel. Now what is its importance for us?

Who among us has not experienced misunderstanding, frustration in our work or efforts, and disappointment in an outcome we had hoped for? All these experiences draw us into the paschal life of Jesus; but do we see and understand this as something salvific and redemptive in our lives? If we are able to enter into the unfolding plan of God in our lives, and see our experiences of disappointment and frustration as part of life's invitation to be united closely to the person of Christ, this displays important insights for us personally and in our service of others. Our ability to embrace the struggles of life and see their redemptive value enables us to hear in our community member, in a friend, in a guest, and in a stranger the very voice of Christ. How do we welcome Christ in that situation? First and foremost, we listen attentively, without prejudice or judgment. In the act of rapt, conscientious, and courteous listening, we welcome Christ who dwells in that person. And only after we have listened thoughtfully can we ask a question or make a comment, and express our support or encouragement. Yes, our devoted reading, *lectio divina*, of the Psalms teaches and inspires us to welcome Christ within ourselves and within others.

2) Desolation, anguish, and aggression – One needs only to hear the cry of Jesus on the cross to hear his desolation and anguish, repeating from Ps 22:2a, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The grief, loneliness, and anguish of that moment for Jesus remains difficult for us even to put into words, even to this day. Here in these words, the Gospel and the Psalter come together. Here, Jesus used words of despondency and misery to express this moment of his journey back to the Father. For some of us, there have been similar moments when life seems to have been on the brink of disaster, or an unexpected illness, or a deep loss that has taken something precious from us. We have mounted the cross with Christ; but what is so important is to believe that our place aside Christ is redemptive, not only for us but also for others. It is not enough to say that we have suffered; we must come to see how our suffering has meaning, value, hope, worth, and consequence for us and for others. In our world today, there are so many people who come to our monasteries with lives that are broken and splintered, crushed and shattered. Once again, what can we do for them? How can we proclaim the paschal Christ to them? How can we give them hope? Once again, we first must listen attentively, respectfully, and consciously to the story they wish to relate to us. And in many cases, these people do not want us to give them answers because there may or may not be answers to these painful situations. But in some cases, we can tell them that their suffering does have meaning. In other cases, like Mary and the disciples, we can only stand with them at the cross and assure them that they are not alone; they have someone who cares, who is willing to walk this painful path of suffering with them, and who can wait with them in silence as they tell their story. As we have known anguish, we can see the anguished Christ in a community member, a friend, a guest, or someone we do not know who needs only someone to listen to them without passing judgment or having an answer to a situation that cannot find an answer.

Before concluding this second point, there is one other idea to consider in relation to the aggressive and violent language of the Psalter. Hardly a time passes in giving a talk on the Psalms when someone does not ask, “How do you ever pray with the violent language found in the Psalms? Why do we keep that language as part of the Scriptures? How does a Christian recite words that wish harm and violence to another person?” The challenge that faces us with the question is that we, as Catholics, believe that *all* the Scriptures are inspired texts; God speaks to us through them. After much thought and prayer, I have come to the belief that those violent, hostile and destructive words are an important part of our vocabulary of prayer, especially at this moment in the history of our world and our Church. This very day, destructive and hostile things are happening to good people in our world, and the aggressive words of the Psalter remind us of this. We must remember that we do not only pray the Psalms for ourselves, but the Psalms can be an inspiration for us to pray for others; they can also be a healing word for those undergoing oppression, fear, or terror. Only to mention one situation, we can think of the people of Syria who have been exiled, forced to emigrate, and lived in substandard living conditions for over four years now. When we pray the violent words of certain Psalms, we can be the voice of these suffering people before God, when they can hardly find words to wrap around the pain and suffering they are enduring. We must be careful that we not make the words of our prayer and liturgy too antiseptic, too disinfected, or too far removed from the situations of our present world. And it is good that we feel uncomfortable with such expressions of violence and aggression, as we struggle to live out the new commandment of love taught to us both in example and word by Jesus; it shows our Christian sensitivities. Yet, all four Gospels relate the violent act of Jesus in the Temple as he knocks over the tables of the money changers with a whip in hand (Matt 21:12-13/Mk 11:15-19/Lk 19:45-48/Jn 2:14-22). While we may see this action of Jesus as justified anger, still the same, it is anger that had a violent expression. And did he not undergo acts of violent aggression, hatred, and injustice? That can be important for us to keep in mind. Jesus Christ came to know the weaknesses of sinful humanity firsthand. The violent and aggressive words of the Psalms challenge us to pray from a new posture of solidarity with those in our world, and in the Body of Christ, who endure injustice and cruel treatment.

3) Deep joy and thanksgiving – When we think of Jesus praying or teaching us to pray, our thoughts immediately turn to the *Our Father*. But there is a short section in the Gospels where Jesus breaks out into deep joy and thanksgiving for his relationship with the One he called *Abba*. We can pass over that text too quickly and fail to realize that it is one of the ways in which Jesus teaches us to pray. We can learn from his example. We read in Mt 11:25-26, “At that time, Jesus said, ‘I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike. Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will.’” Notice that these words are addressed to God. It is as if Jesus bursts forth with a spontaneous expression of deep joy and gratitude within himself. In this section, Jesus has been having to deal with situations of unbelief, a failure to comprehend the merciful and loving God of the Covenant who offers blessings to those who seek him. The realization of who God is, and what God wishes to give us, brings Jesus to a spontaneous surge of praise, inner joy, and thanksgiving. Likewise in the Gospel according to John, in five verses of Chapter 16, the word “joy” appears five times: “your grief will become joy [...] her joy that a child has been born into the world [...] your hearts will rejoice and no one can take your joy away from you [...] ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete” (vv. 20-24).

The Psalter carries expressions of deep joy. The Hebrew name of the Psalter, *tehillim*, quite literally means “praises.” So even though the largest category of Psalms are Laments, the Psalms,

in Hebrew, are rightly called a “Book of Praises.” We read in Ps 108:2c-5, “I will sing, I will sing your praise. Awake my soul; awake O lyre and harp. I will awake the dawn. I will praise you, LORD, among the peoples; I will sing psalms to you among the nations, for your mercy reaches to the heavens, and your truth to the skies.” In Ps 138:1-3, we read, “I thank you, LORD, with all my heart; you have heard the words of my mouth. In the presence of the angels I praise you. I bow down toward your holy temple. I give thanks to your name for your merciful love and your faithfulness. You have exalted your name over all. On the day I called, you answered me; you increased the strength of my soul.” Psalm 145 begins, “I will extol you, my God and king, and bless your name forever and ever. I will bless you day after day, and praise your name forever and ever.” Again, who of us has not experienced those moments when we have known the presence and power of God working in our midst, felt our hearts ready to burst forth in gratitude, and lifted up our own words of thanks to God for divine blessings. In this, we welcome the “far end” of the paschal mystery in our life, the life of grace that comes from Christ’s resurrection. One could say, “this is an easy word of *welcome* to the Christ we encounter.” But there is something far more profound than this. Rather, we encounter something very sacred, truly holy, and deeply divine that has broken into our lives. Sometimes, it is a joy that is too deep for words, a joy too sacred to be shared with another, or too wonderful to be true. And yet this joy reflects the movement of God in our lives.

It is a special blessing to share in the “welcome of Christ” in the life of another person, to see their tangible joy, to hear their heart speak, and to see the light in their eyes. There are times when a community member, a friend, a guest, or someone we’ve only just met shares with us a deep spirit of joy and gratitude. How important it is to welcome the risen Christ who has “changed their mourning into dancing,” or enabled them to find reconciliation with someone, or given them the chance for a new beginning, or healed a broken relationship. This is a moment of special privilege in our lives as Benedictines when we can “welcome Christ” who truly comes. At times, our place is merely to listen and show joy in our facial expression, or to say, “may God be praised,” to acknowledge the grace of the risen Christ at work in their lives. These are the moments when our silence and fewness of words can mean the most, as we allow the risen Christ to shine forth in the words of whomever speaks to us.

Indeed, my friends, the Psalms which are our daily source of prayer provide us with a variety of ways in which Christ can be welcomed. Today, we have considered only three different aspects of this beautiful mystery. The possibilities of finding human expressions of need, fear, suffering, joy or thanksgiving in these prayers of the Bible are numerous. If we are able to recite them and pray from them in a way that makes them our own, we have a treasure to share with others from the word of God and from our own experiences of passing through the paschal mystery. Each experience becomes a moment to consider more deeply the hand of God which is ever present in our lives, drawing us in that journey of the heart that leads to the communion with God for which we were created, and for which we deeply long.