

# HD

# HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Volume 36 Issue 4 Summer 2016



## PRAYING OUR EXPERIENCE

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Summer 2016

My brothers and sisters,

I am delighted to share with you our summer 2016 issue dedicated to the theme “praying our experience.”

St. Paul offers us the timeless challenge to “pray constantly” (1 Thess. 5:17). Most of his epistles begin with an extended prayer for the community or individual being addressed; likewise the letters end with prayers of benediction. Throughout his correspondence, St. Paul reminds his fellow believers to make their requests known to God with thanksgiving; all speech or action is to be done in the name of the Lord. Yet, how can we pray without ceasing? Even St. Paul acknowledges that we do not know how to pray as we ought (Romans 8: 26).

Most of us struggle to pray - to find the time, to stay focused and let it flow from the core of our being. We know that prayer and life cannot be discrete things and yet we too easily catch ourselves “saying our prayers” (and rushing back to tasks) instead of praying through our life experiences of joy or sorrow, hope or fear, anger, jealousy, lust or gratitude.

As Henri Nouwen wrote decades ago, “To pray unceasingly is to lead all our thoughts out of their fearful isolation into a fearless conversation with God.” (America, August 5, 1978). Prayer needs to begin with the concrete reality of our lives - but it cannot end there! Prayer looks inward only to look outward with greater gratitude, openness and compassion.

Herein rests the challenge all our authors address: how can we pray our experiences - personal, communal and even global- in such a way that we enter more fully into the mind and heart of Christ? How can formal prayers, the psalms of the Liturgy of the Hours, the prayers of the liturgy, truly resonate with our daily experiences? How can we transform problematic thoughts and desires into a purified expression of love that incorporates body and spirit?

Fr. Jerome Kodell, a retired Benedictine Abbott - no stranger to the psalms as a scholar and one praying them daily in community - reflects on the psalms as an example of how we can “pray our experiences.” Sr. Melanie Svoboda, SND, has written a very energizing piece entitled “Everyday Epiphanies;” she invites us to slow down and let prayer flow through us naturally and spontaneously. In a short piece, a Catholic lawyer, Dan Malone, offers his insights on the importance of how we articulate the very words of our most common prayer, the Lord’s Prayer.

A special treat in this quarter’s issue comes to us from England: Fr. Daniel O’Leary, a regular contributor to the Tablet, offers a pastoral perspective from his own experience of “Praying with a Troubled World.” It has often been said that we should pray with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Fr. O’Leary does just that as he models prayerful contemplation and intercession on behalf of the many people suffering around the world. He shows us how - by contemplation - we can get

“inside” the painful experience of others; we are no longer outsiders glancing with pity but we truly come into communion with them. He suggests that we can even have an appreciation of Earth and all elements of creation as they also “groan in agony” and come to a new spiritual birth. A very poetic, powerful and challenging essay!

Dr. Gillian Ahlgren of Xavier University shares with us valuable insights into the timeless message of St. Teresa of Avila regarding the way contemplative prayer becomes a way of graced living, a space for the Incarnation to continue to unfold within us and among us. If you enjoy her thoughts, you may want to pick up her newly published work, *Enkindling Love: the Legacy of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross*.

The ever delightful Fr. James Martin, SJ of America magazine gave me an interview during which we discussed various applications of our theme, “Praying our experience.” You will appreciate his usual humble, open style of reflecting on life experience; he is a great model for us all. Finally as an addendum, I composed some models of how we might pray through various experiences and come to contemplative adoration, gratitude and peace.

As a concrete example of how facing one’s challenges can become true prayer, we have a powerful first person narrative from Jeff Jay, a therapist who himself worked through addiction via prayer. It is truly a moving story, the capstone of this season’s issue!

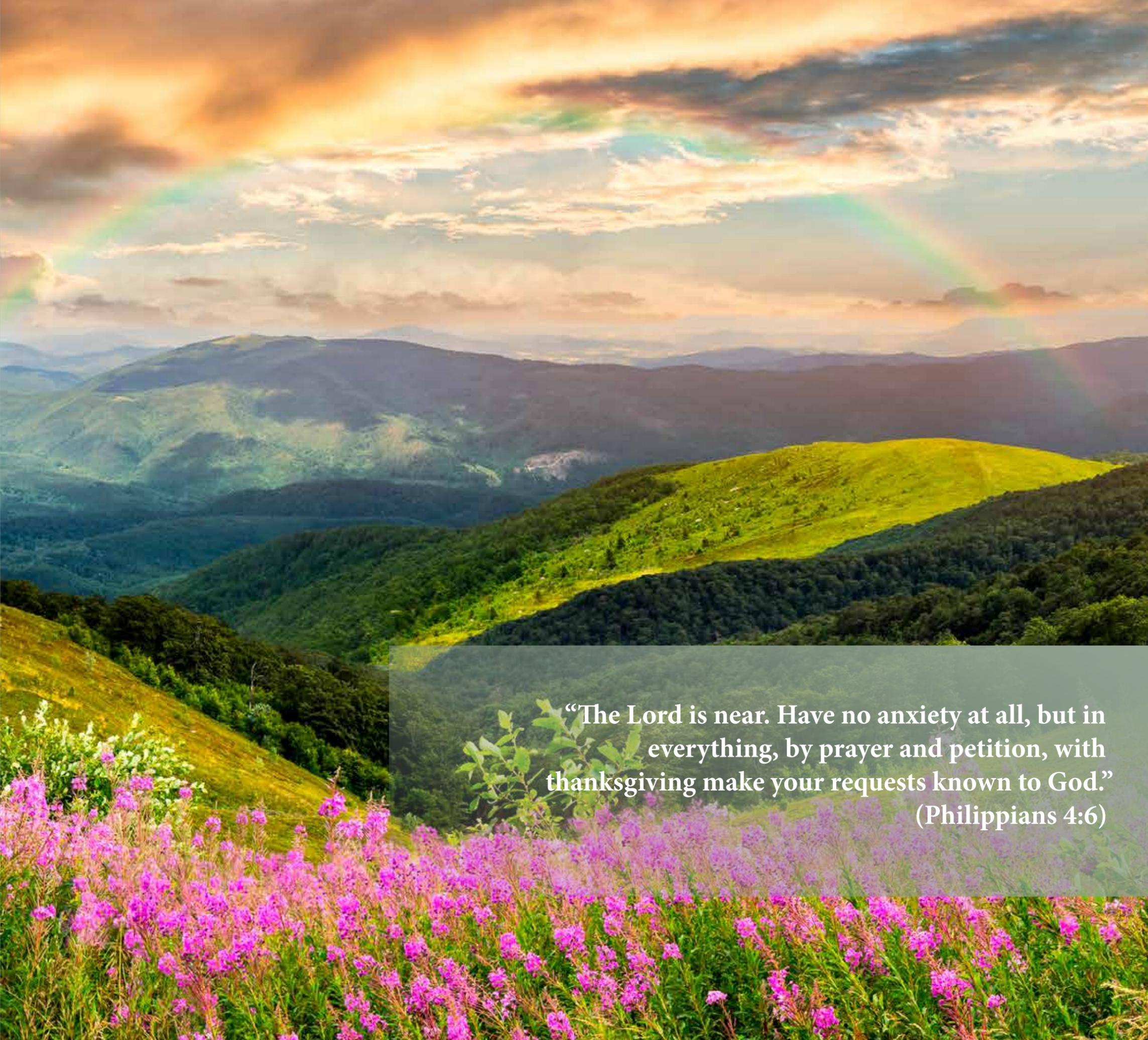
As a special treat - also in keeping with our theme - on our back page you will find a marvelous example of “praying our experience” from the great spiritual author of yesteryear, Fr. Michel Quoist. Many of us developed our spirituality by building on his poetic reflections. The front cover is not explicitly or necessarily a scene of prayer but it seems to present a prayer of jubilation and thanksgiving, praise and wonder as mother and daughter simply enjoy life - and that is certainly prayer!

Happy reading, reflecting and praying!

Your brother in the Lord,

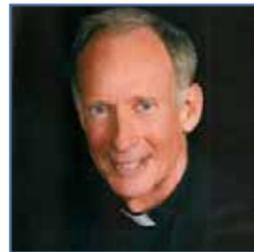
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**“The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving make your requests known to God.”  
(Philippians 4:6)**

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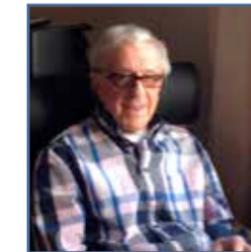
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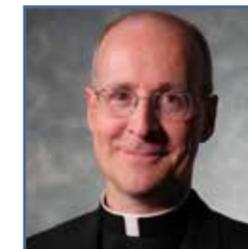
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Immaculata Retreat House  
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**October 5-7, 2016**  
Walking With the Wounded  
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**November 2, 2016**  
All Souls Mass and Luncheon  
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**December 8, 2016**  
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Guest House Scripps Mansion  
Lake Orion, MI

**January 9-12, 2017**  
Alumni Winter Seminar  
DiamondHead Beach Resort  
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**January 19-22, 2017**  
Alumnae Winter Retreat  
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**April 24-27, 2017**  
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## INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS

The editors of Human Development are quite eager to publish articles that translate the latest research in psychology, health, medicine, and spirituality to ministry, formation and practice. Our hope is that Human Development will be known as the most user-friendly ministry publication. This will require making complicated theoretical knowledge, research, and concepts understandable and applicable to the personal and professional lives of our readers.

Since ministry is in a time of significant transition and change, we anticipate that the articles we publish will enlighten and positively influence the daily decisions and practices of those in Church leadership, ministry formation, spiritual direction, and counseling of any kind. There are also a number of previously under-appreciated forces that uniquely influence ministry and ministers: cultural, organizational, and situational factors. We intend to highlight and honor these factors in the pages of Human Development. Accordingly, we ask prospective authors to be mindful of these considerations in their manuscripts. Manuscripts are received with the understanding

that they have not been previously published and are not currently under consideration elsewhere. Feature articles should be limited to 4,500 words (15 double-spaced pages), with no more than six recommended citations and or readings; filler items of between 500 and 1,000 words will be considered. All accepted material is subject to editing. When quoting sacred scripture, the New Revised Standard Version is preferred. All manuscripts are to be prepared according to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th edition).

Letters are welcome and will be published as space permits and at the discretion of the editors. Such communications should not exceed 600 words and are subject to editing.

Authors are responsible for the completeness and accuracy of proper names in both text and Bibliography/suggested readings. Acknowledgments must be given when substantial material is quoted from other publications. Provide author name(s), title of article, title of journal or book, volume number, page(s), month and year, and publisher's permission to use material.

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# PRAYING THE PSALMS

Fr. Jerome Kodell, O.S.B.

## INTRODUCTION: THE PSALMS – OUR WORDS, GOD’S WORD

The psalms are a “school” of prayer. These 150 prayers are songs of praise and thanks, sorrow, lament and petition. The psalms put us in touch with almost every human emotion. We can easily resonate with David in his sense of shame or sorrow or rejoice with gladness at the beauty of creation or the wonder of being miraculously saved. Different though they be in tone, ultimately all the psalms share in a common and deep confidence that God is listening to us as individuals and as a community.

In some ways the psalms are both our words to God and God’s Word back to us. The psalms blend together the human struggle to express our needs and hopes and the response of divine inspiration, imagination, mercy and promise. Praying the psalms actually shapes our prayer and moves us beyond ourselves to a deeper communion with the Lord and a more humble awareness of how we fit within His vast cosmos.

Photo courtesy:  
The monks of Conception Abbey  
chanting the Divine Office

When we pray the psalms, our voices blend together with the Body of Christ, singing the praises of the Heavenly Father in every time and place. The psalms open us up to the wonder and mystery of God's eternal love. Even more, we can sing and pray them with the reassurance that Christ Himself speaks ever anew in us through these same words. Christ is helping us individually and collectively "pray our experience."

### MEETING GOD IN THE PSALMS

The primary exposure to the Book of Psalms for many Catholics is through the Responsorial Psalm at Mass, and if there is a lingering impression, it is probably from the refrains: "The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I should want"; "God is my refuge in the day of distress"; "Sing with joy to God our help."

For those of us who pray daily the Liturgy of the Hours it is different. The psalm verses are regularly rolling through our minds. The danger for us is that given our deep familiarity with the psalms and the distractions of our lives, the verses may not touch us as profoundly as they should. In this issue of Human Development we are considering the theme of "Praying Our Experiences." There are probably no prayers which contain more human experience than the psalms; the psalmists poured themselves out to the Lord in every emotion. They did not think that any feeling was too raw or too insignificant to bring before God, and our tradition has confirmed that insight by making the psalms the official prayers of the Jewish and Christian communities.

But how to connect the experiences of the psalmists with our experiences and bring the healing of God into our own lives? In one way or another, people

have been able to do this for 2500 years. These were the prayers of the prophets, of the people of the exile, of Jesus and the apostles, of the early and later Christians down to today. They are not the typical prayers of any particular generation, but somehow they have staying power for all generations. What are some ways we can get more deeply into them?

### PSALMS AS POETRY

There are many avenues into the psalms as prayer, but I want to concentrate on a single feature of the psalms that was long neglected: their nature as poetry. This seems obvious in their presentation in contemporary Bibles, but for generations the poetic quality of the psalms was seen as incidental to their character in the inspired Bible, and in older editions they were often printed as prose. Today their poetic nature is a fundamental principle in psalm study and use. The meaning of a poem includes an experience beyond the content of the words, and that feature affects how we read, pray and sing the psalms.

Like a traveler packing a suitcase too small for the stack of clothes, the poet wrestles with words, pushing and squeezing to trap an experience of life in a few lines of print. Each word contains its own history, and the poet must balance associations in electric tension so that contact may always produce sparks of recognition and a current of shared life experience. The success of a poem depends on capturing an experience of truth in a way that it may bring to life again that very experience as the words are read by someone else later on.

Hebrew poetry is not the same as English poetry, and some features are always lost in translating from one language to another (such as alliteration or onomatopoeia), but there are elements common

to all poetry and some elements of Hebrew poetry come through the veil of the English language very well.

The psalms are strong in imagery, a feature present in most poetry but not always so pronounced. Most poetry shows rather than defines, and this is certainly true in many of the psalms. Good poetry has the ability to produce awareness of a deeper reality or an understanding of life's deeper meaning by a striking use of the familiar. Poets know there are some realities which cannot be seen head-on, and they use life experiences like a mirror to pick up stray glints of light and flash them through the corners of our eyes. Jesus' use of parables was in this tradition.

### DESCRIBING OUR MYSTERIOUS GOD

We can describe God in prosaic terms as almighty, all-knowing, infinite, protecting us and providing for us. How much more compelling to say with the psalmist, "The Lord is my shepherd." Longing for God can be described in theological terms as "desire for transcendence." In the psalms this feeling has flesh and blood: it is a thirsty deer, an owl among the ruins, a lonely sparrow on a housetop, a parched land desperate for water.

When troubles haunt us, we feel like a sagging wall or a broken down fence, a worn-out tool, a worm, a bird that must flee to the mountains. We are surrounded by people who have deceiving lips and a double heart. Our only friend is darkness.

But God, our deliverer, is robed in light as in a cloak and the winds are his messengers. For him the night shines like the day. The mountains melt like wax when he comes to judge. He turns to me and hears my cry.

A distinctive characteristic of Hebrew poetry is the technique of parallelism, and this is one of the elements that come through in other languages. One line echoes another in a rhythm of regular beats either to repeat with different words or add to an

idea, for example,

"The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, his tongue speaks what is right." (Ps. 37:30)

"And now, kings, give heed, take warning, judges on earth." (Ps 2:10)

"Even if my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me in." (Ps. 27:10)

Or a point may be made by contrasting lines:

"The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he destroys." (Ps. 145:20)

Sometimes a progression of thought may spread to three lines:

"One conceives iniquity, is pregnant with mischief, and gives birth to deception." (Ps. 7:15)

The psalms as poetry invite us not just to a progression of ideas but to an experience: being carried on the waves of rolling parallels as the drama of life unfolds from image to image and thought to thought.

### ENJOYING WHAT WE CANNOT EXPLAIN

One reason the psalms may strike us as obscure and appealing at the same time is our educational history. Classroom education tends to be linear and intellectual. We are trained to look for ideas and arguments. Even exposure to poetry in literature courses often does not open us to experiencing poems but rather to analyzing them for their intellectual content. But we remain fascinated by the poetic and remember times when we have been swept into a poetic experience.

An attention to the poetic nature of the psalms may enliven the way we use them in prayer. This dimension does not detract from any other approach but simply adds another option. In reading for information, the use of imagery and examples may

"The psalmist did not think any feeling was too raw...  
to bring before God"

illuminate the meaning of a text. But they can also get in the way, and we may brush them aside to get to the meat.

In praying the psalms as poetry, instead of brushing aside the images it may help to focus on them, especially the metaphors and similes which portray human feelings and experiences. If we have not been doing this, we may be surprised to notice how many pictures have been flying past us, graphic images we didn't notice before: in a prayer that enemies may "dissolve like a snail that oozes away" (Ps 58:9); in a feeling that "affliction is wearing down my eyes" (31:10); in a promise to "keep a muzzle on my mouth" (39:2). These images are not distractions but the heart of the psalms as poetry. They are conveying the feelings of human beings like ourselves from centuries ago, and we recognize the feelings as very contemporary, though the psalmist may not use terms like anxiety or angst but speak of his heart "melting away within me" (22:15), and describe his emptiness as eating ashes (102:9).

The psalms sometimes go beyond simile and metaphor to personify inanimate creation:

"Let the rivers clap their hands, the mountains shout with them for joy." (98:8)

The Hebrew mentality is more at home than the Greek or Latin with this kind of embodiment or personification, which reaches even to what we consider abstract concepts:

"Justice will march before him, and make a way for his footsteps." (85:14)

Justice is here like a sentinel carrying a banner or blowing a trumpet to announce the coming of the Lord.

### CELEBRATING GOD'S FIDELITY

A particular combination of virtues, sometimes personified, is of special importance. These are the "covenant virtues" of hesed and emeth/emunah,

which are commonly translated "love and truth" and are as close as the Bible comes to portraying what makes the God of revelation different from all other deities. But because these Hebrew words are very rich, hesed is rendered by various synonyms like "mercy," "kindness," "tenderness," and "compassion," while emeth/emunah may be "fidelity," "trustworthiness," "stability," or "faithfulness." Because of these disguises it is difficult to realize how often this combination appears in the psalms and prophets.

"Love and truth will meet; justice and peace will kiss." (85:11)

"Your mercy reaches to heaven, Your fidelity to the clouds." (36:6)

"He has remembered his mercy and faithfulness toward the house of Israel." (98:3)

"A throne shall be set up in mercy, and on it (a judge) shall sit in fidelity. (Is 16:5)

This combination identifies the God of Israel as "loving fidelity" or "faithful love." No other god was ever either loving or faithful towards his worshipers. This also establishes the pattern for our imitation of God in our daily walk, living in loving fidelity and faithful love toward God and toward our brothers and sisters. The shortest psalm is simply an introduction plus one verse proclaiming our God in terms of the covenant virtues:

"His mercy for us is strong;

The faithfulness of the Lord is forever." (117:2)

What I have said about the psalms so far may imply that they are all of a single kind or type of poetry. But the psalms are identified in categories according to literary genre. The largest number of psalms fall into the categories of laments, songs of thanksgiving and hymns of praise, all of which express human emotion. The examples I have given so far are from these psalms.



### PSALMS OF REMEMBRANCE

A small group of historical psalms recall the events of salvation in poetic recitations of the Israelite creed. Among these are especially Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135 and 136. They tend to be longer because of the nature of their content, but they are anything but dry historical accounts. The saving events of history are recalled to arouse fervor and renewed dedication, and imagery abounds here as well:

"He split the sea and led them across, making the waters stand like walls, He led them with a cloud by day, all night with the light of fire, He split rocks in the desert, gave water to drink, abundant as the deeps of the sea, He made streams flow from crags, caused rivers of water to flow down." (Ps. 78:13-16)

Psalm 136 takes the form of a litany with a line-by-line refrain, using the response "For his mercy endures forever:"

"The Lord remembered us in our low estate, for his mercy endures forever; Freed us from our foes, for his mercy endures forever; And gives bread to all flesh; for his mercy endures forever; Praise the

God of heaven, for his mercy endures forever." (Ps. 136:23-26)

We may be moved by the example of this psalm to write our own life litany and thus nudge into memory blessings we have forgotten or taken for granted, and pray our own experiences in imitation of the psalmists:

The Lord gave me life and faith, for his mercy endures forever; He has patched up many wounds in my life, for his mercy endures forever; He has sent me good friends and walks with me, for his mercy endures forever.

### PSALMS OF WISDOM

The wisdom psalms, so called because of their affinity to literature in the wisdom tradition of the Ancient Near East, wrestle with problems of daily living and offer moral admonitions. Biblical books in this tradition include Wisdom, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Sirach. Psalm 37, for example, addresses the age-old question of the suffering of the good and the prosperity of the evil in a series of proverbs, each introduced by a successive letter of the 22-letter Hebrew alphabet.



“Aleph. Do not be provoked by evildoers; do not envy those who do wrong. Like grass they wither quickly; like green plants they wilt away.” (Ps. 37:1-2)

Psalms like this one do not satisfy the modern reader. They foreclose on the mystery of life and try to tidy things up with an unrealistic view of divine retribution. Here the conventional wisdom or personal fantasy overcomes the lessons of experience. The author of Job rebelled against such a solution, and though he did not solve the problem of innocent suffering, he approached the issue with an honesty that has made his book a classic.

The long Psalm 119, which is divided into sections for use in midday Offices in the Liturgy of the Hours, is much more palatable for prayer because it does not presume to solve the mystery of life but is a series of statements reiterating the faith of the psalmist and of invocations for God’s help in the daily journey. Like Psalm 37, it is arranged on the Hebrew alphabet, but has a feature of industry and artistry noticeable only in the original language: twenty-two groups of eight verses, each verse of a particular group introduced by the same letter of the alphabet.

Most of the psalms were used in personal prayer and community worship long before they were collected in the Book of Psalms. The current Book is really five books or collections of psalms brought together in

stages (Psalms 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, 107-150). Even in the early days editorial notes were added to enhance the use of some of the psalms in prayer by giving them a life context in connecting them with events in the life of King David. This technique appears mainly in the first two collections.

Psalm 3, a lament by someone feeling weighed down and persecuted, is entitled “A psalm of David, when he fled from his son Absalom;” Psalm 51, the famous “Miserere” psalm of repentance, is annotated “when Nathan the prophet came to him after he had gone in to Bathsheba;” Psalm 54, a prayer of confidence in God’s help, is annotated “when the Ziphites came and said to Saul, ‘David is hiding among us.’” Critics argue whether or not these titles are historically accurate; what the editorial notes illustrate is that the effort to provide help to enrich the usage of the psalms in prayer by connecting them to familiar life experiences goes back a very long way.

### CONCLUSION

The psalms are poetry, intended to draw us into the author’s heart, mind and soul, to “feel” the poet’s experience of God and make it our own. Rather than becoming too analytical, it is helpful to let the words flow over us – like waves splashing, washing our feet at the seashore.

The psalms reassure us any emotion and every emotion are acceptable to God. They also comfort us because they remind us: we do not pray alone but rather with the people of God of every time and place. Ultimately all human experience is the same: the desire for love, the need to give, the experience of grief and shame, hope and joy. In every time and place, one voice is singing and that voice is Jesus Christ, the Word of God!

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. The psalms present us many diverse emotions and experiences. It can be tempting to look for psalms that resonate with my particular mood or struggle: have I ever done that? It can also be a good challenge to pray with a psalm that does not necessarily connect with where I find myself at the present moment: have I done that as well?
2. Fr. Kodell reminds us to pray the psalms as poetry and not become overly concerned with understanding every reference; “experience” the psalm and do not analyze or interpret it. Have you tried to just let the words and images tumble and cascade over you?
3. The Church invites us to pray the psalms at Mass and in the Divine Office as a means of deepening our communion with Christ and the whole Body of Christ; through the psalms we can enter into the mind and heart of Christ who Himself prayed them. Perhaps you could take one of the psalms listed below, reading and praying them as Christ prayed them during His earthly life and as they form part of the heavenly liturgy at the Supper of the Lamb:
  - Psalm 40 (especially verses 7-11)
  - Psalm 63
  - Psalm 22
  - Psalm 2



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Father Jerome Kodell joined the Benedictine Monastery of Subiaco Abbey, Arkansas in 1957. Ordained a priest in 1965 he went on to obtain an S.T.L. from Collegio Sant’Anselmo and an S.S.L. from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. Besides teaching in Subiaco Academy, he has been involved in the Little Rock Scripture Study Program. For two years he also served at the Santa Familia Monastery in Belize. From 1989 through 2015 he was Abbot of Subiaco Abbey.

His writings include: *The Catholic Bible Study Handbook*, Servant Books, 1985/rev.2001. *The Eucharist in the New Testament*, Glazier, 1988. *Twelve Keys to Prayer*, Liturgical Press, 1999. *Don’t Trust the Abbot*, Liturgical Press, 2009. *Life Lessons from the Monastery*, Word Among Us Press, 2010.

In this article the The New American Bible version of the psalms was used since transition to the revised Grail Psalter for the liturgy is still underway.

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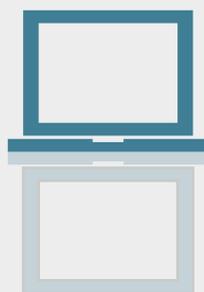
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