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Benedict XVI's Interpretation of the Psalms

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Abstract: This article aims to analyze the way Pope Benedict XVI quotes and interprets biblical psalms. In the introductory section, the author presents statistics and the ways in which Benedict XVI quotes Book of Psalms, and then offers a general, introductory look at psalms and their analysis in papal catechesis. In subsequent sections of the article, the author focuses on the pope's historical-critical exegesis and linguistic analyses of the psalms, followed by the pope's Christological, ecclesiological, Mariological, and actualizing reading of the Psalms. In the concluding section, the author discusses the relationship of the psalms to prayer, the pope's references to the Fathers of the Church and recalls Benedict XVI's most personal statements on the Psalms.

Keywords: Benedict XVI, psalms, hermeneutics of faith, historical-critical exegesis, theological exegesis

The purpose of this article is to analyze Pope Benedict XVI's interpretation of the Psalms. The pope has repeatedly quoted or referred to psalms in his writings and public speeches; several psalms were chosen as the theme for Wednesday catechesis, whether continuing the commentary on the psalms and songs of Lauds and Vespers initiated by John Paul II (2005–2006) or analyzing them during his catechesis on prayer (2011). Despite the fairly large number of publications on Benedict XVI's biblical hermeneutics, the question of interpreting psalms has not been explored in detail.[1] Given also that psalms are part of the Old Testament, the question arises as to how the pope applies Christological interpretation and puts into practice the hermeneutics of faith, the presuppositions of which he has spoken on several occasions.[2]

The introductory section will discuss statistics and citation methods, then Benedict XVI's general view of psalms and will proceed to offer an analysis of the papal catechesis on psalms. The following sections will focus on historical-critical exegesis and linguistic analyses, and a Christological, ecclesiological, actualizing and Mariological reading. Also, attention will be drawn to the relationship of psalms to prayer, the Tradition of the Church (mainly of the patristic period), and Benedict XVI's

1 Of the publications on Benedict XVI's hermeneutics of faith, it is worth mentioning Szram 2007, 263–72; M. Chrostowski 2011, 5–23; Manicardi 2011, 393–416; Muszyński 2011, 1115–26; Szymik 2012, 217; Głuchowski 2012, 3–20; Pietkiewicz 2020, 21–37; Zatwardnicki 2014; Carl 2015; Zatwardnicki 2016, 141–64; Pidel 2023.

2 See especially *VD* 32–41 as well as the forewords in Benedict XVI 2007n, 2011s.

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statements on the Psalms, in which he reveals his most personal attitude to certain passages of the Psalter.[3]

1. Pope's Comments on the Psalms

1.1. Statistics and Formal Issues

Given that almost all papal texts are published in Italian and posted on vatican.va, the statistics presented were based on this language and source. From 20 April 2005 to 1 March 2013, the word "psalm" in the singular ("salmo") appears more than 584 times in 233 papal documents, in the plural ("salmi") it occurs 330 times in 93 documents. The siglum denoting the Book of Psalms ("Sal" and "Ps") occurs 297 times in 225 documents. The word "psalmist" ("salmista") is used 166 times in 91 documents and "psalter" ("salterio") 19 times in 16 documents. In total, a passage from the Book of Psalms was quoted 403 times.

The way that biblical sigla are provided varies. Two hundred sixteen times the numbering is given according to the MT, 101 times according to the Greek-Latin numbering, and 77 times with double numbering. With the passing years of the pontificate, one can notice a tendency to write more often according to Hebrew numbering (in 2006, 15 citations according to the Vulg. against 20 according to the MT; in 2012, 9 according to the Vulg. against 33 according to the MT). It is noteworthy that in all texts addressed to Jewish communities, psalm numbering is always provided according to the TM. The double numbering is written differently: 31/30 or 118/119, 39 (40) or 73 (72). Sometimes the Holy Father himself explains that a particular psalm has two different numbers.[4] In one text he gives two different numberings for the same psalm (Sal 50:14 and 51:19 in Benedict XVI 2011o). Once the Roman numbering (XIII) of the psalm is used, perhaps because the word was spoken on the occasion of a musical concert (Benedict XVI 2011a).

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3 A natural limitation related to the matter explored here is the fact that Benedict XVI is not the author of all the texts that are signed with his name. This is the usual practice of offices, not only the papal office, hence, on the one hand, it is necessary to be aware that these are Benedict XVI's statements, since they have been accepted and published as such; on the other hand, not every text by Benedict XVI is necessarily a text by Joseph Ratzinger. This is why attempts to gain insight into Ratzinger's thinking are always somewhat limited. In addition, the Pope himself, when beginning Wednesday's catecheses, indicated that he was continuing to comment on the psalms and hymns of Vespers; he even speaks of a commentary prepared by John Paul II ("the reflections that he had prepared"). It is therefore not entirely clear to what extent these are texts by John Paul II and to what extent they are already by Benedict XVI. According to Mariusz Szram (Szram 2007, 263), the authorship of these catechesis should be attributed entirely to John Paul II.

4 For example: "Psalms 141 and 142, according to the Jewish numbering" (Benedict XVI 2008d), or: "It is Psalm 23 [22, according to the Greco-Latin numbering]" (Benedict XVI 2011d).

Twice one can note an incorrect notation of the psalm quoted: 8:1 instead of 8:2 (Benedict XVI 2009k) and 32:2 instead of 34:2 (Benedict XVI 2007l). To this one must add about 30 quotations of the commentaries of the Church Fathers on the Psalms (mainly St. Augustine).

The most frequently quoted psalms are: 119(x24); 118(x21); 23(x20); 51(x20); 104(x16); 139(x15); 85(x13); 131(x12); Ps 40(x10). In turn, the most frequently quoted verses are: 119:105 ("Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" [x12]); 133:1 ("Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity" [x10]); 104:30 ("when you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth" [x6]). In total, Benedict XVI refers to almost 100 different psalms in his writings and speeches.[5]

As far as publications outside the official Vatican website are concerned, Benedict XVI's books from the time of his pontificate, which he branded with his name and treated as private statements, that have been taken into account in this article are: *Light of the World* (Benedict XVI and Seewald 2010) and *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (Benedict XVI 2007n); *Jesus of Nazareth: Part Two. Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (Benedict XVI 2011s); *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (Benedict XVI 2012n).[6]

In *Light of the World* the reference to the Book of Psalms is found only in the motto (Ps 53:3–5).[7] In *Jesus of Nazareth*, on the other hand, almost 50 different psalms are quoted or mentioned more than 90 times (most often 2; 40; 110; 118). The pope also refers to three psalms not mentioned in the official teaching (15; 55; 97). To this one must add the reference, in a dozen or so places, to the Book of Psalms without indicating a specific work or place.

Summing up the statistical and formal issues, several conclusions can be drawn. The Book of Psalms is a biblical book very frequently quoted by Pope Benedict XVI. The variety of quotations is striking, and although there are psalms or verses used more frequently, the reference to more than 100 different psalms testifies

5 Psalms not quoted by Pope Benedict XVI: Ps 7; 12; 15; 20; 26; 28; 30; 35; 48; 49; 52; 53; 54; 55; 56; 58, 59; 60; 61; 64; 65; 74; 75; 76; 79; 81; 83; 87; 88; 92; 94; 97; 100; 101; 102; 107; 109; 111; 112; 120; 123; 124; 129; 132; 134; 137; 140; 146; 147; 148; 149.

6 Benedict XVI's book *What Is Christianity? The Last Writings* (Benedict XVI 2023) is a record of his thoughts already after he resigned from the papal office in 2013, hence it was not taken into account in the analysis of the material.

7 It is intriguing that, depending on the translation, the motto is not identical. The German original quotes as motto the text from Ps 53, verses 3 and 5b. However, it states that it quotes verses three, four and five. Cf. Benedikt XVI and Seewald 2010, 5. The Italian edition states that it quotes verses one to five. The error, however, is that the publisher actually quotes only verses 2 to 5. Cf. Benedetto XVI and Seewald 2010, 5. The Polish edition quotes only the third verse and states that it quotes verses 3 to 5. Cf. Benedykt XVI and Seewald 2011, 5. The English edition follows the German text exactly. The problem is that it is faithful even where the Germans have made a mistake. They state that they quote Ps 53:3–5 and quote only 53:3,5b. Cf. Benedict XVI and Seewald 2010, 5.

to the treatment of the Psalter as a rich reservoir of thought. A tendency towards increasing use of Hebrew numbering is evident. On the other hand, the current differences in the notation and numbering of sigla are more attributable to editorial work than to Benedict XVI's inconsistency.

1.2. The Pope's General Outlook on the Psalms

While Benedict XVI has spoken on many occasions about psalms in a general or holistic way, it is worth noting the introductory catechesis on the Book of Psalms, delivered on June 22, 2011 during the Wednesday audience in St. Peter's Square in Rome, which can be considered one of the best introductions to the Book of Psalms (Benedict XVI 2011e). Right at the outset, the Pope calls the Book of Psalms "the book of prayer" *par excellence*, "which the Biblical Tradition offers the people of believers so that they become their and our prayer, our way of speaking and of relating to God." He proceeds to point out that the psalms contain an entire range of human emotions and experiences that human beings present to God. Although he mentions different genres of psalms such as hymns, lamentations, individual and collective supplications, songs of thanksgiving, penitential and wisdom psalms, he notes that there are two main types of prayer in the Psalms: petition, which sometimes turns into supplication, and thanksgiving, which sometimes turns into praise. He is also fairly original in showing what the uniqueness of the prayers contained in psalms consists in. Here the pope evokes the figure of parents who, wishing to teach their children to communicate with them, speak to them in the language they wish to use. In the case of psalms, "Since they are a word of God, anyone who prays the Psalms speaks to God using the very words that God has given to us, addresses him with the words that he himself has given us." This unique introduction also does not omit the name of the Hebrew Book of Psalms (*tehillîm*) and David as the traditional author of psalms, which also allows the Pope to move on to the messianic idea, realized in Jesus Christ ("The connection of the Psalms with this outstanding King of Israel is therefore important because he is a messianic figure, an Annointed One of the Lord, in whom, in a certain way, the mystery of Christ is foreshadowed."). Thus, in this short catechesis, the pope has included what will recur continually in his interpretation of psalms: elements that relate to scholarly exegesis, an understanding of the Book of Psalms primarily as a book of prayer, and a Christological, existential, ecclesiological and actualizing reading.

1.3. Benedict XVI's Catechesis on Selected Psalms

After a general look at the Book of Psalms, the psalms that Benedict XVI made the subject of the entire Wednesday catecheses deserve special attention. This is

because while the use of a particular quotation or idea from individual psalms is fragmentary, the interpretation of entire psalms sheds light on Pope Ratzinger's hermeneutics. Initially, the Holy Father continued the catechesis begun by John Paul II, hence the commentaries he delivered are only on the following psalms (according to Hebrew numbering): 111; 112; 113; 116; 121; 122; 123; 124; 125; 126; 127; 130; 131; 132; 135; 136; 137; 138; 139; 144; 145.[8] Also, the pope began catechesis on prayer in 2011, in which he devoted attention to the following psalms: 3; 22; 23; 110; 119; 126; 136.[9] As can be seen from the statistics, Ps 126 and Ps 136 have twice become the subject of the pope's analysis.

Regarding the first group of psalms, the catechesis of 2005–2006 follows the same structure. First, general information is given (e.g. that Ps 120 belongs to the collection of "Psalms of Ascent"), the literary genre and the *Sitz im Leben* of the psalm in question. Occasionally, the pope indicates how many times a word specific for a particular psalm occurs in it (e.g. *shamar* "to guard, protect" – 7 times in Ps 120), or he undertakes a semantic analysis in order to understand better the meaning or at least the associations that the phrases may evoke (e.g. the heights turn one's thoughts to the worship of pagan idols or standing at the right hand is the position of a defender). Essentially, the pope analyzes the selected psalms verse by verse in an attempt to understand the thought of the psalm in question, and in this his commentary resembles contemporary standard scholarly commentaries on the psalms. After the analysis of a given psalm, there is always a reference to the Church Fathers, or authors from the first millennium of Christianity in general. Sometimes this reference is a quotation from a particular author's commentary on the psalm in question (e.g. Theodoret of Cyrus to Ps 136), and sometimes a quotation of a thought that links the ancient author to a thought present in the psalm (e.g. Ambrose to Ps 123). Reference to the Church Fathers often becomes a way of demonstrating a Christological reading of the psalm (e.g. Cyprian's words to Ps 136:10–26) and a bridge to its actualization, expressed, for example, in sentences such as: "This prayer, then, is a song of hope to turn back to when one is immersed in moments of trial, fear, threats and inner oppression" (to Ps 126; Benedict XVI 2005d); "let us allow this Word of God to awaken us" (to Ps 136:1–9; Benedict XVI 2011f), "let us pray to the Lord that in all of us this desire, this openness to God, will be reawakened." (to Ps 137; Benedict XVI 2005e)

The second set of the pope's commentaries on the psalms, delivered as part of the catechesis on prayer, differs slightly from the first, as best seen in Ps 126 and 136. Before the pope offers an analysis of a particular psalm passage, he quotes it so that the reader does not have to go back to the very beginning to remember what

8 Cf. W. Chrostowski 2006; Jan Paweł II and Benedykt XVI 2007; Benedict XVI 2013; John Paul II and Benedict XVI 2023.

9 The catecheses were delivered from May 4, 2005 to February 8, 2006.

the passage is talking about. Benedict XVI pays slightly more attention to the semantic analysis of the discussed psalm, referring to the original Hebrew (e.g. "'for us', or more precisely 'with us,' in Hebrew '*immanû*'"). As in the previous psalms, he explores literary matters, which is well evident in the analysis of Ps 119, when the pope explains what acrostic structure is:

> In today's Catechesis I would like to reflect on Psalm 119, according to the Hebrew tradition, Psalm 118 according to the Greco-Latin one. It is a very special Psalm, unique of its kind. This is first of all because of its length. Indeed, it is composed of 176 verses divided into 22 stanzas of eight verses each. Moreover, its special feature is that it is an "acrostic in alphabetical order", in other words it is structured in accordance with the Hebrew alphabet that consists of 22 letters. Each stanza begins with a letter of this alphabet and the first letter of the first word of each of the eight verses in the stanza begins with this letter. This is both original and indeed a demanding literary genre in which the author of the Psalm must have had to summon up all his skill. (Benedict XVI 2011f)

As a rule, he does not wait until the end of the analysis to move on to a Christological reading or actualization, but interweaves it directly into the text being commented on. Also, the volume of the papal commentaries on the second set of psalms is generally larger than in the first, although they have the same form of expression as the papal Wednesday catechesis.

2. Historical-Critical Exegesis of the Psalms

One of the distinctive features of Benedict XVI's exegesis is its use of the achievements of the historical-critical method, which is particularly evident in the Wednesday catecheses on psalms. This approach also appears in other statements in which the pope refers to psalms. The pope, speaking of the Babylonian captivity (to the responsorial psalm of Benedict XVI 2007e), points out that Ps 24 was a cultic song used during the temple procession (Benedict XVI 2007j), interprets the author of Ps 41 to be a Levite who longs for the temple in Jerusalem (Benedict XVI 2007g), explains the double character of the metaphor of the vineyard (Benedict XVI 2010k) and the expected messiah who is also depicted in Qumran as a priest or king (Benedict XVI 2010j), uses psalms when looking for the background of the Old Testament temptation of Jesus in the desert (Benedict XVI 2012e), explains that the law as understood in the Bible was not understood as a burden (Benedict XVI 2012b).

Benedict XVI also occasionally reaches out to ancient languages, especially Hebrew. Commenting on Ps 131, he points out that "The original Hebrew text does

not speak of a newborn child but of a child that has been 'weaned'." (Benedict XVI 2005f) When commenting on Ps 132, he explains that "the term 'anointed', in fact, expresses the Jewish term 'Messiah'." (Benedict XVI 2005f) On the other hand, in his explanation of Ps 145, he writes: "In Hebrew we have two typical adjectives to illustrate the Covenant between God and his People: *saadiq* and *hasid*." (Benedict XVI 2006f)

In his homily during the Mass of the Lord's Supper, the pope explains that "thanking and blessing God reached its culmination in the *berakah*, which in Greek is *eulogia* or *eucaristia*: praising God becomes a blessing for those who bless him." (Benedict XVI 2007i) Referring to the recited passage Ps 31:16, he states that although they prayed with the words "In manibus tuis sortes meae", "in the *Vetus latina* the text was: 'In manu tua tempora mea'; the Italian translation says: 'Nelle tue mani sono i miei giorni'; the Greek text speaks of kairoi mou [the English translation is 'my times are in your hands']." (Benedict XVI 2007o) At the same time, he concludes that each of these versions conveys the same truth about man's dependence on God. In turn, commenting on Ps 23, he points out that the word that is translated "will dwell" (v. 6), can also be translated as "return": "The Hebrew verb used here has the meaning of 'to return' but with a small vowel change can be understood as 'to dwell'. Moreover, this is how it is rendered by the ancient versions and by the majority of the modern translations." (Benedict XVI 2011d)

Benedict XVI also explains that the word "amen," used frequently in the liturgy, "derives from *'aman*, which in Hebrew and in Aramaic means 'to make permanent', 'to consolidate' and, consequently, 'to be certain', 'to tell the truth'." (Benedict XVI 2012f)

In *Jesus of Nazareth*, commenting on Peter's use of a quotation from Ps 16 after Pentecost, Benedict XVI points out that linguistic issues have, in a sense, affected the message of faith. This is because Peter quotes Ps 16:10 according to the Greek version ("my flesh will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let your Holy One see corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life") and not according to the Hebrew text ("You do not give me up to Sheol, or let your godly one see the Pit. You show me the path of life"). The pope writes: "If in the early creedal formula from Jerusalem, transmitted by Saint Paul, it is stated that Jesus rose according to the Scriptures, then surely Psalm 16 must have been seen as key scriptural evidence for the early Church. […] What the early Church deduced from the Septuagint version of Ps 16:10 also determined the viewpoint of the entire patristic period." (Benedict XVI 2011s, 256–57)

3. The Theological-Spiritual Dimension of the Interpretation of the Psalms

3.1. A Christological Reading

A distinctive feature of Benedict XVI's hermeneutics is the Christological interpretation of the psalms, which can be illustrated by very numerous examples.[10]

The Son of God in Ps 2 according to the pope is Jesus Christ (Benedict XVI 2005w, 2010f, 2012g; also in Benedict XVI 2007n, 304). The phrase "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage" (Ps 2:8) was fulfilled when Jesus sent his disciples out into the whole world with the missionary command (cf. Matt 28:18–20 – Benedict XVI 2008b). Similarly, the persecuted righteous man in Ps 3 is a figure of Jesus (Benedict XVI 2011g). Together with not a few exegetes, the pope believes that the words of Ps 16:10 ("For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit") refer to the resurrection of Jesus (Benedict XVI 2009c). Those who gaze into the heart of Jesus understand the responsory taken from the same psalm: "You are my inheritance O Lord" (Benedict XVI 2010a). To contemplate the face of God spoken of in Ps 21:7 is to know God through Jesus Christ (Benedict XVI 2013a). Ps 22 is fulfilled by Christ both where the psalmist speaks of abandonment by God and when he announces the proclamation of God's victory to all nations (Benedict XVI 2005ab, 2006m, 2008e, 2011h, 2012h). In the image of the feast that God prepares for the psalmist (Ps 23:6), the pope sees a foreshadowing of the eucharist (Benedict XVI 2010c), and, in the good shepherd – Jesus Christ (Benedict XVI 2011i), who first had to become a lamb himself (Benedict XVI 2012c; also in Benedict XVI 2007n, 285). In Ps 24, the pope links the ascension to the temple with the image of an internal and spiritual ascension with Christ (Benedict XVI 2007j). For him, the words of Jesus on the cross "Into your hand I commit my spirit" are not only a quotation of Ps 31:6, but at the same time a manifestation of the total entrustment of himself to the Father at the moment of abandonment (Benedict XVI 2012p). The theme present in the responsorial psalm (Ps 34 – God liberates his people from the power of evil) finds development in Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi (Benedict XVI 2010i). The pope returns several times to the relecture of Ps 40 with Heb 10:8–9, which relates the words of the psalm to the incarnation of the Son of God (Benedict XVI 2007b, 2008h, 2008a, 2011q, 2012l; also in Benedict XVI 2007n, 149–50; Benedict XVI 2011s, 234–35). "The thunder of cataracts" from Ps 42:8 turn his thought to Christ, the source of life in and through whom God's immense love has been poured out upon mankind (Benedict XVI 2011t). The words of Ps 45: "You are the most handsome of men" (Benedict XVI 2006q, 2008i) also refer to Christ. The idea of ascending to the heights present in Ps 68:19

10 Here and in the following sections, the psalms are quoted and discussed in the canonical order of their occurrence in the Book of Psalms.

becomes a picture of Christ attracting humankind towards God (Benedict XVI 2012o). Ps 72:10–11, which speaks of kings bearing gifts, is a prophetic vision announcing the arrival of the Magi in Bethlehem to worship the newborn Jesus (Benedict XVI 2013b). Ps 80:18 "closely associates the 'Son of Man' with the vine." (Benedict XVI 2007n, 260) The words "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Ps 90:2) are interpreted by the pope in the key of the preexistence of the Son of God (Benedict XVI 2008c). The vineyard described in the psalms and "wine to gladden the human heart" (Ps 104:15), returns the thought to Christ, the true vine (Benedict XVI 2012t). The words of Ps 104:30 which speak of the descent of the Spirit on earth foreshadow what happened when Jesus sent the Holy Spirit (Benedict XVI 2009e). The Melchizedek-like priesthood of Ps 110 is referred to the priesthood of Christ (Benedict XVI 2009g, 2010e). Besides, the whole of Ps 110 is treated as messianic (Benedict XVI 2011j; also in Benedict XVI 2007n, 332–33). According to the pope, the stooping down of God in Ps 113:5 is realized at the birth of Jesus (Benedict XVI 2008g) and the lamp of God's word spoken of in Ps 119:105 is Jesus (Benedict XVI 2009d; cf. *VD* 12). Together with the Evangelists, he believes that Psalm 118, quoted at the time of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, is a messianic announcement (Benedict XVI 2008h, 2010g). Christ is also "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone" (Ps 118:22), the new Passover and the one who experienced what Ps 118 describes (Benedict XVI 2009i, 2011p, 2012q, 2012k, 2012m; 2011s, 7).

The message of Ps 126 becomes clear and understandable in the mystery of Christ and the New Testament (Benedict XVI 2011k). In Ps 131, the anointed one is Christ (Benedict XVI 2005g). He refers the words of Ps 139 to the risen Christ (Benedict XVI 2008n). Explaining Ps 143, he says that the anointed one in the fullest sense of the phrase is Jesus Christ (Benedict XVI 2006g).

From the only vaguely Christological interpretations given above, it is clear that for Benedict XVI, the presence of Christ in the psalms, the messianic announcements or the fulfilment of the Old Testament in Jesus of Nazareth is only natural. The pope himself succinctly puts it in his exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, writing: "By praying the Psalms, the Scripture readings and the readings drawn from the great tradition which are included in the Divine Office, we can come to a deeper experience of the Christ-event and the economy of salvation, which in turn can enrich our understanding and participation in the celebration of the Eucharist." (*SacCar* 45)

3.2. An Ecclesiological Reading

Another important feature of the pope's exegesis is a reading that sees psalms as a picture of the Church. The Church fulfils the promise of Ps 22:28 to proclaim the victory of God to all nations (Benedict XVI 2005x). The same Ps 22 speaks of the cross of Christ from which the Church is born (Benedict XVI 2006n). With the words of Ps 96, the Church praises God together with Israel and reads it "as a prophecy and also as a task" (Benedict XVI 2008g). The words "When you send forth your spirit, they are created" (Ps 104:30) come from the heart of the Church at all times (Benedict XVI 2008l, 2008j). God builds his Church from those who are rejected like the stone from Ps 118 (Benedict XVI 2009i). Jerusalem from Ps 122 is recognized by the pope as the figure of the Church, "sacrament of Christ and of his Kingdom" (Benedict XVI 2007m). The house that cannot be built without the Lord (cf. Ps 127:1) is a foreshadowing of the Church and its builder – Christ (Benedict XVI 2008m).

The pope reminds us that the words "O taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps 34:9) were referred to the Eucharist as early as the ancient Church (Benedict XVI 2009f) and "rod and staff" from Ps 23 are also present in the life of the Church and in the life of priests: "The Church too must use the shepherd's rod, the rod with which he protects the faith against those who falsify it, against currents which lead the flock astray." (Benedict XVI 2010c) For the Pope, the ecclesiological reading is a consequence of the Christological reading. *Christus totus* – the Head together with the whole Body – is present in psalms and fulfils them, concludes the pope, probably drawing on St. Augustine (cf. Wołyniec 2016, 53–67).

3.3. A Mariological Reading

While the Christological and ecclesiological reading is more widely known in the history of the interpretation of psalms, what deserves special attention are all the Mariological themes that Benedict XVI finds in psalms.

The words of Ps 40:9: "I delight to do your will, O my God" are interpreted by Benedict XVI several times in relation to both the Son and the Mother: "Before the mystery of these two 'Here I am' statements, the 'Here I am' of the Son and the 'Here I am' of the Mother, each of which is reflected in the other, forming a single *Amen* to God's loving will, we are filled with wonder and thanksgiving, and we bow down in adoration" (Benedict XVI 2006i); "The 'yes' of the Son: 'I have come to do your will', and the 'yes' of Mary: 'Let it be with me according to your word', this double 'yes' becomes a single 'yes', and thus the Word becomes flesh in Mary. In this double 'yes" the obedience of the Son is embodied, and by her own 'yes' Mary gives him that body" (Benedict XVI 2006j); "The Son's obedience was reflected in that of the Mother and thus, through the encounter of these two 'yeses', God was able to take on a human face" (Benedict XVI 2007e); "The will of Mary coincides with

the will of the Son in the Father's unique project of love and, in her, heaven and earth are united, God the Creator is united to his creature. God becomes man, and Mary becomes a 'living house' for the Lord, a temple where the Most High dwells." (Benedict XVI 2012l) He considers the words of Ps 45:13 "the richest of the people … will seek your smile" to be a prophecy spoken about Mary, whose smile Christians have long sought and who was depicted, especially in medieval art, as a smiling Madonna (Benedict XVI 2008f).[11] According to the pope, it is in Mary that the words of Ps 67:7 are fulfilled: "The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us." (Benedict XVI 2005y, 2006l, 2011r) Asking what caused Mary to go to her relative Elizabeth, the pope finds the answer in Ps 119:32: "I run the way of your commandments, for you enlarge my understanding." Well, the Holy Spirit, by whose cause the Son of God became present in Mary's body, enlarged her heart to the size of God's Heart and set her on the path of love (Benedict XVI 2007d). The faithfulness of the psalmist described in Ps 119, which is born out of listening to the Word of God, is called a faithfulness similar to the faithfulness of the Word of Mary, and the happiness of the psalmist from fulfilling the Word of God becomes shared in the life of Mary, who fulfils in a perfect way the image of the believer described by the psalmist (Benedict XVI 2011l). The connection between Ps 119 and the person of Mary is original in that the thought present in the catechesis does not appear on the occasion of a Marian feast or visits to Marian shrines, which in some sense can lead to a Mariological reading. By linking the figure of Mary to Ps 119, the pope shows that, for him, Mary's presence in the psalms is not a matter of chance.

3.4. An Actualizing Reading

As distinctive a feature of the pope's interpretation as the previous ones is the accommodating reading that Benedict XVI employs in almost every statement in which he refers to the psalms. It is difficult to analyze here the almost 200 statements that link the quoted psalms to the current situation of the Church, Christians, people and the world. The analysis here shall essentially be limited only to some selected texts, especially from the beginning of Benedict XVI's pontificate, in order to show the planes on which the pope applies the accommodation of the biblical text.

Fairly frequent, although in a strict sense the least demanding actualization, is the quotation of a passage from a psalm, which becomes, as it were, the motto of a given meeting or a dedication to the addressee. Thus, the words "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity" (Ps 133:1) are the starting point for expressing joy at the meeting with the bishops of South Africa, Botswana, Eswatini,

11 It would be desirable to find the source of the translation of Ps 45:13 used by Benedict XVI: "the richest of the people … will seek your smile", since neither the TM, the LXX nor the Vulgate speak of a smile, but rather in accordance about "face" (פָּנֶיךָ; τὸ πρόσωπον; *vultum*). The papal expression "sorriso", however, is unanimously translated into other languages as "smile" (*smile*, *Lächeln*, *sourire*, *sonrisa*).

Namibia and Lesotho (Benedict XVI 2005a), with the Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I (Benedict XVI 2006d), with the bishops of Ukraine (Benedict XVI 2007a), the bishops of Belarus (Benedict XVI 2009b), with the poor and the community of Sant'Egidio (Benedict XVI 2009j), with the diocese of Rome (Benedict XVI 2010m), with the Missionaries of Saint Charles Borromeo (Benedict XVI 2011c) or with the cardinals on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of their priestly ordination (Benedict XVI 2011b). The verse also makes the pope's argument that racial or ethnic diversity is not an obstacle to people living united as brothers and sisters (117). The function of dedication is also fulfilled by the words of Ps 139:13–14 (on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the birth of Elio Toaff, rabbi of Rome, Benedict XVI 2005z) or Ps 29:11 on the occasion of the visit to the synagogue in Cologne (Benedict XVI 2005ad). The pope's linking of the joy of the choir singing in the Sistine Chapel to the joy of being in the temple from Ps 84 (Benedict XVI 2005b), or referring the procession with candles on Candlemas to the procession described in Ps 24 (Benedict XVI 2006o), should also be included in this category. A similar function is served by the quotation from Ps 119:105, which was the motto of the 21st World Youth Day (Benedict XVI 2006r).

The words about sins hidden from the psalmist (cf. Ps 19:13) become an occasion to speak of the need for fraternal correction (Benedict XVI 2005ac). Speaking of "the darkest valley" of Ps 23, Benedict XVI mentions several examples of difficult life situations to assure that, as in the psalm, God will not abandon his sheep today (Benedict XVI 2005ab). The words of the Psalmist "And of Zion it shall be said, 'This one and that one were born in it'" (Ps 87:5) the pope refers to Rome, of which Catholics can say that they were all born there (Benedict XVI 2005v). Addressing the young, the pope speaks of the fact that they may face many difficulties and adversities in life and will be tempted to say along with the psalmist: "I am severely afflicted" (Ps 119:107a). May they not forget to repeat after the same psalmist, "Give me life, O LORD, according to your word." (Ps 119:107; Benedict XVI 2006s)[12] Ps 127, which praises God for his blessing in children, becomes an occasion to express concern about the demographic decline (Benedict XVI 2005h). The spirit of Ps 135 and the call to praise God is to be given to the pope's listeners (Benedict XVI 2009h). Ps 136 shows the good works of God to be a remedy and a help in experiencing the power of evil (Benedict XVI 2005i). Describing the situation of the Jews in the Babylonian captivity, as described in Ps 137, the Pope goes back in thought to the fate of the Jews of the last century: "It is, as it were, a symbolic foreshadowing of the extermination camps to which the Jewish people – in the century we have just left behind us – were taken in an abominable operation of death that continues to be an indelible disgrace in the history of humanity." (Benedict XVI 2005e) Ps 138 assures the reader that, however strong the trials and

12 On Benedict XVI's legacy to youth, writes, among others, Berry 2024, 175–204. On the Word that can be a light for the young, see especially Berry 2024, 181–82.

forces of evil may be, they will never be separated from God's helping hand (Benedict XVI 2005j). God's concern for man as expressed in Ps 139 (especially the reference to the embryo in v. 16: "Your eyes beheld my unformed substance") becomes a bridge to express the thought that even today, even the weakest are not forgotten by God (Benedict XVI 2005k, 2006c). The words of Ps 145:18: "The LORD is near to all who call on him" become an encouragement that even today, in difficulties, temptations and problems, one should not stop at the theoretical question of where they come from, but respond to them positively, calling on the LORD and taking care to be in living contact with him (Benedict XVI 2006f).

The idea that leads Pope Benedict XVI to actualize psalms and their message seems fairly clear. What the psalmist speaks of was not just his or his people's experience. In psalms, God leaves a word that can become a light in a variety of circumstances and times. What determines the actualization of the psalms is, on the one hand, the belief in the actuality of God's word and, on the other hand, the common or similar idea or experience that connects the psalmist's world with the contemporary world.

4. The Liturgical-Religious Context of Interpretation

4.1. Psalms and Prayer

A fairly regular recurring theme in the pope's references to psalms is the connection between the Psalter and prayer. As early as in the introductory catechesis to the Psalms (Benedict XVI 2011e), Benedict XVI writes that psalms are above all a school of prayer.

When we pray the psalms, Christ is present among us (Benedict XVI 2006g). We pray with the Lord, who is the true subject of the Book of Psalms, included at the same time in the prayer of all ages (Benedict XVI 2006p, 2008m). It is a prayer that unites different religions and denominations: Christians and Jews, Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox (Benedict XVI 2006k, 2006b). The pope encourages the creation of schools of prayer in which, among other things, the Psalms would become a place for encountering God and discerning his will (Benedict XVI 2006e). In the post-synodal exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Benedict XVI asks for the promotion of traditional from of prayer such as the Liturgy of the Hours, so that praying the psalms can lead to a deeper experience of Christ and the economy of salvation (*SacCar* 46). Referring to St. Paul, he argues that one is not able to pray of themselves (cf. Rom 8:26), therefore God has left us a suitable word in the Book of Psalms and the liturgical tradition of the Church (*SacCar*; Benedict XVI 2008m). Priests are reminded that without the Liturgy of the Hours and praying the psalms, one cannot be a good priest; moreover, one will lose the essence of one's mission (Benedict XVI 2007p).

Members of religious orders, priests, deacons and bishops should come before God with hymns and psalms, giving thanks and asking, even if the content of their requests and thanksgiving is not specified (Benedict XVI 2007c). The pope recalls that Jesus' prayer fed on psalms, both when he went to the temple and to a synagogue (Benedict XVI 2008m). Praying the psalms and being faithful to *lectio divina* is also meant to help one accept the witness of St. Paul (Benedict XVI 2009a). During a meeting with cloistered nuns, he says that the Liturgy of the Hours sets the rhythm of the days and makes those who pray it interpreters of the Church-Bride, who unites herself to her Lord in a special way (Benedict XVI 2010h). In the exhortation *Verbum Domini*, he describes the relationship between psalms and prayer as follows:

> The word of God draws each of us into a conversation with the Lord: the God who speaks teaches us how to speak to him. Here we naturally think of the *Book of Psalms*, where God gives us words to speak to him, to place our lives before him, and thus to make life itself a path to God. In the Psalms we find expressed every possible human feeling set masterfully in the sight of God; joy and pain, distress and hope, fear and trepidation: here all find expression. (*VD* 24)

Praying the psalms is also mentioned in the passage on the Liturgy of the Hours: "The Liturgy of the Hours, as the public prayer of the Church, sets forth the Christian ideal of the sanctification of the entire day, marked by the rhythm of hearing the word of God and praying the Psalms; in this way every activity can find its point of reference in the praise offered to God." (*VD* 62)

The words of a psalm sometimes become, for the pope, the words of a specific prayer which he recites, as it were, with his listeners: "Then the Psalm says: 'Arise, God, judge the world' (Ps 81:8). Thus we say to the Lord: 'Arise at this moment, take the world in your hands, protect your Church, protect humanity, protect the earth.'" (Benedict XVI 2010l) Concluding several catechesis on psalms as examples of prayer, the Pope reiterates the invitation to pray the psalms, perhaps even the Liturgy of the Hours, or at least Lauds, Vespers and the Compline before going to bed (Benedict XVI 2011m). Quoting Ps 119, he says that one prays with it on behalf of all people (Benedict XVI 2012s). He points out that adoration of Jesus can take place not only during individual prayer, but also during the common recitation of psalms before Jesus present in the Blessed Sacrament (Benedict XVI 2012d). It is also symptomatic that when the pope, speaking of the responsibility of the successor of St. Peter and his collaborators and the duty to strengthen others in their faith, links this duty to the need to pray and refers immediately to the words of the psalm: "It is those who mirror the light of the Face of God on their face and in their life (cf. Ps 4:7) who can answer the many people who are still asking today: 'Who will enable us to see goodness?'" (Benedict XVI 2013c)

The Holy Father offers an interesting reflection on the silence that grows out of praying the psalms, similar to the silence during the recitation of the rosary. This silence brings the ultimate meaning and, transcending what the words of a psalm says, speaks with them to the heart of man (Benedict XVI 2008k). In addition to silence, gestures and music are also important, involving the entire person, from mind to mouth, from heart to whole body. This way of praying is a feature of Hebrew prayer, especially the prayer of psalms (Benedict XVI 2012i). Besides, music – the Pope points out – and especially songs, can make the recitation of psalms acquire "greater communicative force." (Benedict XVI 2012a)

4.2. The Psalms in the Tradition of the Church

Another characteristic of the reading of psalms proposed by Pope Benedict XVI is the reference to the Fathers of the Church, or tradition in the broadest sense, although mainly referring to the first millennium. The Pope mainly quotes *Expositions on the Psalms* by St. Augustine (to Ps 4:8; 5; 29:9; 44:23; 51:16; 54:9; 60:3; 84:13; 85:1; 85:7; 94:2; 95:7; 98:9(x3); 99:20; 102:5; 103, 109:3; 121:2(x2) 131:1, 7), as well as Basil (*Omelie sui Salmi* 48,8), Gregory of Nyssa (*Sui Salmi 2,11*), Hilary (*Tractatus super Psalmos*, Ps 121:2; 127:1–3), Jerome (*In Psalmum 147*; *Omelia sul salmo 83*, 3; *Breviarum in Psalm*, 66) and Ambrose (*Explanatio Psalmi 40*).

The references to the Fathers of the Church concern especially the Christological reading of psalms. The pope points out that the Church Fathers were fascinated with Ps 45, which they read as an image of Christ's nuptials with the Church (Benedict XVI 2010d) and referred the words of Ps 67:7: "The earth has yielded its increase" to Mary and Jesus (Benedict XVI 2011r). He recalls that Ps 110 in the tradition of the Church was read as a messianic psalm (Benedict XVI 2011n). He quotes Augustine, according to whom Ps 85:12 ("Faithfulness will spring up from the ground") refers to Christ and his birth from Mary (Benedict XVI 2006a)[13] and the "drinking from the streams" in Ps 110 speaks of the incarnation of the Son of God (Benedict XVI 2011j). The Saint of Hippo considers Ps 123 to be sung by members of the Body of Christ who have reached the fullness of happiness (Benedict XVI 2005l), while Ps 124 speaks of the peace of Christ given to the Church as the new Israel (Benedict XVI 2005m). The same Augustine sees the "house of Israel" and the "house of Aaron" of Ps 135 the venerable and ministering members of the Church (Benedict XVI 2005n), and in Ps 137 the Church imprisoned in this world, which should praise Christ in songs (Benedict XVI 2005e). According to Gregory the Great, the Church built on the foundation of Christ is spoken of in Ps 122 (Benedict XVI 2005o). Gregory the Great, together with the already familiar tradition, also understands Ps 139:16 ("Your eyes beheld my

13 Augustine finds it easier to relate this passage to Christ, as he uses the translation "Veritas de terra orta est," making it easier to move on to the One who said "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

unformed substance") as a reference to Christians who are the weakest in the spiritual struggle (Benedict XVI 2005k). The pope also recalls the commentary of Hesychius of Jerusalem, who understood Ps 132:8 ("Rise up, O LORD, and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might") as a reference to the Incarnation of the Son of God (Benedict XVI 2005g). Irenaeus of Lyons understood this psalm in a similar way (Benedict XVI 2005p). Benedict XVI also refers to Clement of Alexandria, who sees the divine help described in Psalm 135 as the help of Jesus (Benedict XVI 2005q).

Benedict XVI does not only mention the Fathers of the Church in his Christological reading of psalms. He recalls the thoughts of Barsanuphius of Gaza, who, with the words of a psalm, encouraged perseverance in difficulties (Benedict XVI 2005r), or explained the fear of God (cf. Ps 111:10) as abstaining from everything God hates (Benedict XVI 2005s). In interpreting the same passage about fear as the beginning of wisdom, he also refers to John Cassian, who sees such fear as imperfect love (Benedict XVI 2005s). He refers to Basil, who understands "the cup of salvation" (Ps 116:13) as enduring suffering in spiritual warfare and resisting sin until death (Benedict XVI 2005t). He recalls the harp with ten strings (Ps 144:9), which Augustine understands as the Ten Commandments of God (Benedict XVI 2006g), and the words about the happy life in Ps 144:15 become an occasion for Augustine to speak of love as the way to eternal life (*SpS* 14).

The pope, quoting the rule of St. Benedict, who stated about the recitation of the Psalms: «Mens concordet voci», writes: "The *vox*, words, precede our mind. This is not usually the case: one has to think first, then one's thought becomes words. But here, the words come first." (Benedict XVI 2006p; also Benedict XVI 2007n, 131) He also shares a beautiful passage from Cassiodorus on the subject of the Psalms (PL 70, 10): „Having rejected and abandoned in Ravenna the demands of a political career marked by the disgusting taste of worldly concerns, having enjoyed the Psalter, a book that came from Heaven, as true honey of the soul, I dived into it avidly, thirsting to examine it without a pause, to steep myself in that salutary sweetness, having had enough of the countless disappointments of active life." (Benedict XVI 2008o)

Sometimes Benedict XVI refers to the Fathers of the Church who, although they do not comment on the psalm in question, convey a certain idea that comes to the pope when reading the psalm in question (thus, for example, on the thoughts of Clement of Alexandria – Benedict XVI 2005u or Basil the Great and an anonymous fourth-century father – Benedict XVI 2006e).

4.3. Personal References to the Psalms

The pope generally does not show any particular emotion or personal reflection in his commentary on psalms but, on several occasions, he expresses what can be called a reading of psalms that is heart-touching for Benedict XVI.

Such a unique reading of psalms for the pope are two commentaries by Augustine. One to the phrase "quaerite faciem eius semper" – "constantly seek his face", of which he states: "ever since my student days his words have lived on in my heart" and to which he returns several times as pope. He quotes Augustine, who argues that it is not just this life, but all eternity, during which one will be discovering this face (*Enarr. in Ps.*, 104:3; CCL 40, 1537). The more one enters into the splendor of God's love, the more beautiful it will be to discover that the search will never end (Benedict XVI 2005aa, 2005c, 2007k). The second passage is related to the ppope's coat of arms. In Munich, the Pope explained that Augustine's commentary on Ps 73:22–23 and especially on the phrase "jumentum factus sum apud te, et ego semper tecum" ("I was like a brute beast toward you. Nevertheless I am continually with you") was crucial for him. Augustine discovered himself in this beast, who was burdened with the yoke of holding bishop's office. He himself had chosen to be a man of study, but God had harnessed him to another role. This new yoke was heavy for him, but it was joyful insofar as it offerred the guarantee of always being close to the animal's owner. The idea of St. Corbinian's bear associated with Munich, which gave Ratzinger courage in accepting his new task, should also be understood in this context (see Seweryniak 2011, 15–74). With a certain sense of humor, the Pope writes that St. Corbinian's bear was set free in Rome, whereas in his case "the Lord" decided otherwise (Benedict XVI 2006h).

In addition, Benedict XVI sometimes interjects the information that a particular passage of the Psalms is simply important to him, such as "Today, in the Office of Readings we recited the words of a Psalm which ring especially true and are very precious to me: 'In manibus tuis sortes meae' (Ps 31[30]: 16)" (Benedict XVI 2007o); "At Vespers today I was particularly moved by the words of the Psalm in which Israel thanks God for the gift of his command that runs swiftly" (Benedict XVI 2008o); "*Ecce quam bonum et quam iucundum habitare fratres in unum* (Ps 133:1). At this moment, I feel I am really experiencing these words of the Psalm" (Benedict XVI 2011b); "And a phrase in the Psalms always moves me when I pray. 'Your hands have made and fashioned me', says the Psalmist (Ps 119[118]:73)." (Benedict XVI 2012j)

The pope also referred to what struck him about the Liturgy of the Hours in the days when there was an earthquake in Italy. To the people affected by the earthquake, the Pope spoke thus:

> We priests, as you know — and also men and women religious and many lay people — pray every day using the "Breviary", which contains the Liturgy of the Hours, the prayer of the Church that punctuates the day. We pray with the Psalms, according to an order which is the same for the whole of the Catholic Church throughout the world. Why am I telling you this? Because in these days, in praying Psalm 46, I came across these words that touched me: "God is our refuge and strength, / an ever-present help in distress. / Therefore we fear not, though the earth be shaken / and mountains plunge into the sea" (Ps 46[45]:2–3). How often have I read these words? Countless times! I have been a priest for 61 years! Yet in moments

> like these they make a strong impression for they touch the living, they give a voice to an experience you are now living through and in which everyone who is praying shares. Yet — you see — it is not because these words of the Psalm draw upon the image of the earthquake that they strike me but above all because of what they say about our interior attitude in the face of an upheaval of nature: an attitude of great assurance, based on the sound, unshakeable rock that is God. We "fear not, though the earth be shaken", the psalmist says, "God is our refuge and our strength", he is "an ever-present help in distress. (Benedict XVI 2012r)

At times, a psalm becomes for Benedict XVI a starting point for personal reflection: "In the Book of Psalms we read: 'Your goodness, Lord, surrounds me like everlasting mountains." And we are surrounded by this visible, divine goodness in the beauty of the mountain. But during all this time I have above all been surrounded by human goodness, by your goodness, which has always accompanied me. For me, you have really been invisible "guardian angels', silent but ever present, ready; and in my memory remains the memory of your presence in these days." (Benedict XVI 2007h)

These examples, although few in number but telling, show that for Benedict XVI psalms are not just the subject of catechesis or theological treatises. They are a living word that also permeates the pope's heart.

Conclusions

The undertaken analysis of Benedict XVI's interpretation of psalms has managed to capture some of his essential hermeneutical rules from his pontificate, which can be summarized in four essential principles:

1) Attention to historical-critical exegesis, which seems to be the basis for further interpretation. Benedict XVI builds his reading of psalms on solid biblical knowledge, frequently referring to philological issues.
2) He treats psalms as a word that is not only a historical record of the experience of the people of God of the Old Testament, but is fulfilled in Christ, the Church, Mary and also in the experience of every believer. In this way, the pope makes it clear that the Book of Psalms contains truths that say much more than the text itself in its literal sense.
3) The consistent search for a bridge between the truth contained in the Book of Psalms and the current experience of contemporary man. In this way the Psalms become a book that contains unchanging ideas that are valid for every time and for every person.
4) Appreciation of the voice of the Church Fathers. The pope thus reminds us that commenting on psalms cannot overlook the broad Tradition of the Church.

Benedict XVI does not provide ready-made formulas for interpreting psalms. However, the hermeneutical principles he follows and proposes seem to be a good combination of science with faith and theology with human experience. It remains to be hoped that Pope Benedict XVI's hermeneutics of faith will find increasing recognition in contemporary biblical studies, or at least in scholarly commentaries on the Psalms, which most often stop at the level of historical-critical exegesis.

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