

PART B: INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

Prayer takes us out of our world into the spiritual world. In prayer we meet God and God touches us. Through prayer we become more like Jesus and more open to God speaking to us. Through prayer we learn to look at events in a new light. Through prayer we get sustenance to face the problems we face. Through prayer we find within ourselves the means to offer help to others. Through prayer we learn that God is with us and so we can face the world with confidence. We are all called to prayer. If we do not pray we are not fully human or fully Christian.

1. The Psalms were the prayer book of the Israelites. God called the Israelites and made them his chosen people. The Psalms were the Israelites' response to God's call and their answer to him. All of Israel's life finds expression in the Psalms. They have arisen as a result of a relationship between God and his people.
2. The Psalms were also the prayer of Jesus. We would expect that he would have known most of them by heart and in the Gospels Jesus quotes more than twenty times from the Psalms.
3. The Psalms are also our prayer. They have now become the prayer of the Church. In the Psalms we talk to God and we join with Israel and Jesus in continuing to praise and worship God. The poetry written by the Psalmist can also be ours. See CCC 2586-2587. Our lives go through ups and downs. The emotions expressed in the Psalms reflect the same ups and downs. Joy, sorrow, expectation and fear, anguish, desperation, triumph, peace: all these emotions have their part in our lives. They are also the material of the Psalms. The Psalms are like a mirror of our lives. All the Scriptures speak to us but the Psalms also speak *for us*.

THE DIVISION OF THE PSALMS IN THIS COURSE

For this course I had to decide what was the best way to teach the Psalms. Since many people following this course are probably reading the Bible for the first time, and also many may be following this course on their own without the benefit of a group, I have decided to divide the 150 Psalms as simply as possible. For the sake of simplicity, I will divide the Psalms into three major categories reflecting our emotions, an idea I take from John F Craghan's book, *Psalms for all Seasons*. Following Craghan, I divide the Psalms as follows:

1. There are times we feel secure and Psalms to pray on those occasions.
2. There are also times when a blow or shock comes and upsets our security, when we despair and are disillusioned. There are suitable Psalms for those occasions.
3. After these dark times we rebuild our lives. We have now become new people, with a new perspective on life. We can pray Thanksgiving Psalms during these times.

There are Psalms that reflect when we feel secure, Psalms that reflect a feeling of despair and Psalms that reflect a recovery from despair. The Psalms speak to our needs and reflect the situations of life that we can find ourselves in. The Psalms deal with human problems and situations. We can use the Psalms to stand before God just as we are, without any pretense, without varnishing our exterior. We do not have to learn from the Psalms a totally new experience but to recognize in the Psalms our own experience lived out directed to God, lived in the presence of God. In the last lesson I mentioned that some parts of the Bible have more

authority for us than others. You will find that certain Psalms fit your condition and our own experience better than others. This is a grace of God. You can use those Psalms more frequently in your prayer and meditations. Let them become “your” Psalms. See CCC 2588. The translation I find most helpful for praying the Psalms is the *Grail* translation.

There are ways to divide the 150 Psalms other than the three categories above. For example, the NJBC 34:8-13 divides the Psalms according to the research of two great Psalm scholars Gunkel and Mowinckel. In a seminary or university, a course on the Psalms would almost certainly follow their division of the Psalms. At the end of this course we will read some Psalms according to their division of the Psalms.

USING THE PSALMS TO PRAY FOR OTHERS

You could say that dividing the Psalms into the three categories as I do is not the full story because that is praying the Psalms only for ourselves. It is a subjective approach to the Psalms. As well as praying for ourselves we should also pray for others. Apart from praying Psalms that reflect the situation we find ourselves in, we can pray Psalms of despair for those who are in despair even if we are not in despair ourselves. Paul said, “If one part is hurt, all parts are hurt with it” (1 Cor 12:26). So we can use the Psalms to pray for others. In other words, we can pray the Psalms for others who are experiencing the sentiments expressed in that particular Psalm. That is the intention with which priests and religious pray the Psalms every day. They pray them for the entire Church, even if the Psalm does not reflect the mood of the person praying. Somewhere in the world there is someone in that situation at the moment and we pray this Psalm for that person. The Liturgy of the Hours, prayed five times a day by priests and religious, rests principally on praying the Psalms and is prayed for the entire church. You have probably seen us praying from books with black leather covers. These books contain those prayers and the book is called the *Breviary*.

In singing the Psalms each day the Church is singing of her union with God in Christ. The Psalms unite us in Christ. The sentiments of the Psalmist (author of the Psalm) lead us to God. Pius XII in *Mediator Dei* said that while chanting or reciting the Psalms, “through his Spirit in us Christ entertreats the Father”. Together with the Our Father, the Psalms are in the most perfect sense the “prayer of Christ”.

The very fact that the Rosary was originally referred to as the “Layman’s Psalter” reminds us that before the Middle Ages lay people participated in the Liturgy of the Hours (praying the Breviary) with religious and chanted the Psalms with them. Other devotions arose only when lay people no longer prayed the Psalms. (The Psalter is the Book of the Psalms.)

HOW CAN A CHRISTIAN READ AND PRAY PSALMS WRITTEN BEFORE CHRIST?

This question implies that our way of praying the Psalms is different to the authors of the Psalms since Christ has now come. That is correct. We do not read the Old Testament in the same way as Jews do. We believe in Jesus and that the Old Testament was preparing for Jesus. We see Jesus as the fulfillment of the OT hopes for the Messiah. Therefore when reading and praying the Old Testament, wherever appropriate, we read it as fulfilled in Jesus, anticipating or prophesying Jesus. We read the OT through the lens of the NT. In Luke 24:44 Jesus said *everything written about him in the Psalms was destined to be fulfilled*. Therefore, when appropriate, we read and pray the Psalms or parts of them as referring to Jesus. We call this a Christological interpretation of the Psalms. Psalms are Christologically interpreted in the NT in

two ways:

1. The most important is when Jesus quotes the Psalm applying it to himself.
2. The second is when the writer of the NT book quotes a Psalm verse or alludes to it and says it prophesies or is fulfilled in Jesus or the Church, or it teaches us something about Jesus.

During this course I will help you read the Psalms christologically. It is the Psalms and Isaiah that are quoted most often in this way in the NT, and seen fulfilled in Jesus. Those who pray the Breviary know that this is the way we already pray the Psalms. Over many Psalms in the Breviary there is a quotation from the NT to give us an indication how to pray that Psalm as a Christian. I suggest that those who pray the Breviary pay more attention to those suggestions now that you studying this course.

Praying the Psalms with the Church



Since Vatican II, many people pray using the Breviary every day at home and some Churches celebrate Morning Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours before Mass. If you have not yet prayed using a Breviary, now that you are reading, studying and praying the Psalms in this course, why not join sometimes with a local religious community for the Liturgy of the Hours and pray them with the Church and for the Church? See CCC 1174-1178

PART C: PSALMS TO PRAY WHEN WE FEEL GOOD PSALMS OF PRAISE – HYMNS OF PRAISE

Scripture Reading



In this lesson we begin to read the Psalms. During the course of this lesson I will indicate to you when to read Psalms 8, 104 and 117. Later in this lesson I will recommend you to read other Psalms.

Study

We think we are the center of the world, and so we can become independent of others. Instead of making ourselves the center of our world, the Psalms of Praise make God the center of our world. The Psalms of Praise are communal, meaning that these were Psalms prayed together by the entire congregation in the Temple in Jerusalem or each Sabbath in the synagogue. They are also sometimes called Hymns of Praise. There are Psalms to be used by an individual to praise God but they do not fit into this category of Psalms or Hymns of Praise. We shall read and pray those much later in this course. Remembering the threefold division of Psalms for this course, all of these Psalms or Hymns of Praise are those we pray when we feel secure. They praise God for his qualities:

1. the order he exerts over creation and
2. the way he guides history according to his plan.

Firstly we will read and pray Psalms praising God as Creator. In fact praise is so much the hallmark of the Psalms that it has given the title to the Book of the Psalms in Hebrew. *Tehillim*, the Hebrew name for this book means ‘The Praises’. See CCC2589

PRAISE OF THE CREATOR



Please read Psalm 8.

Psalm 8 - The Dignity of Us Humans

Psalm 8 deals specifically with the creation of humankind. To help us understand a passage in the Bible properly it is a help to see its structure. The structure of the Psalm 8 is as follows. The verse numbers in bold are the US enumeration and the Grail enumeration while those in parentheses are the enumeration in European Bibles:

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| 2ab (1ab) | Call to Praise God |
| 2c-3 (1-2) | God’s Majesty |
| 4-5 (3-4) | Humankind’s Insignificance Compared to the Universe |
| 6-9 (5-8) | God’s Role for Humankind |
| 10 (9) | Repetition of Call to Praise God |

2ab(1ab) Call to Praise God

The Hymns of Praise usually begin by issuing a call to praise God. The Psalmist (author of the Psalm) is filled with wonder as he meditates on God, “how great your name throughout the earth.”

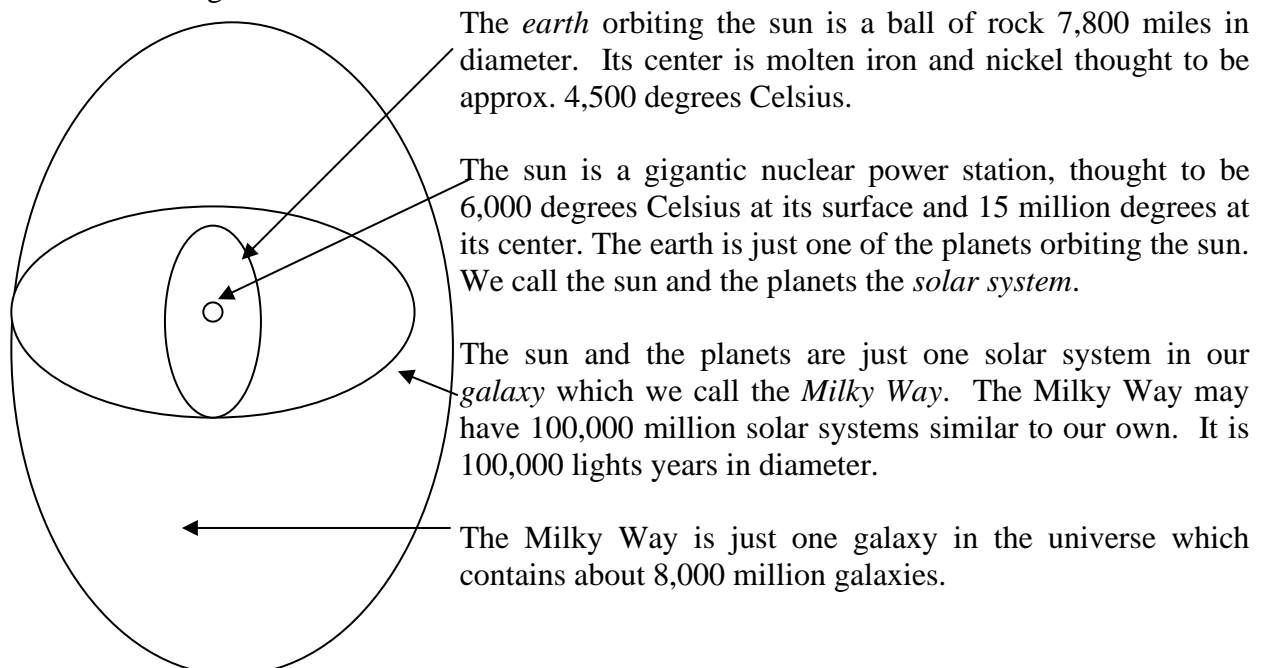
2c-3(1c-2) God's Majesty

Verse 2c(1c) says God's majesty is praised above the heavens; we could think of the angels and saints praising God. Verse 3(2) is difficult to understand properly. God uses the mouth of babies and infants in some way to counteract his enemies. Think, for example, of parents teaching their children to make the sign of the cross. God's enemies, the humanly strong, are those who do not recognize him. Babies symbolize human weakness and humility, but they have strength greater than God's enemies when they take the name of God on their lips. God can use the weak of this world, even a child, to establish his strength and quieten the enemy. The poet feels God's power working in little children. To the eyes of faith, it is in the small and insignificant things that the greatness of God is revealed. (See 1 Cor 1:27,29)

? Compare Psalm 8:3 (8:2) with its quotation in Matt 21:16. What is the difference between the two? Perhaps you are very surprised to discover that the OT is not quoted exactly in the NT. The evangelists writing the Gospels quoted from the Greek OT, the Septuagint, the LXX. I pointed out to you in Lesson 1 Part A, on the seven extra books in Catholic Bibles, that the LXX translation is not the same as the Hebrew.

4-5(3-4) Our Insignificance Compared to the Universe

At last we are given the setting for the Psalm. The Psalmist is out walking by night. It is a cloudless sky and as he sees the moon and stars he begins to reflect on his position and ours in the universe. The spontaneous reaction of a human being upon seeing the night-time universe reflected in the stars and the moon is to become aware of his/her own insignificance. The heavens are the work of God's fingers, and humankind is insignificant compared to the heavens. As he looks up at the night sky he is forced to ask a question. The Hebrew text says 'What is man?' Compared to the vast expanse of the universe we expect the answer, "We are nothing." Looking at the universe in this way and without faith it is inconceivable that humans are important. The poet deliberately creates this sense of despair before he answers his question in the following verses. With our knowledge of the universe now we have even greater reason to think of our insignificance.



6-9(5-8) Our Role in Creation

The answer to the question posed in the previous verse is now given us in vv6-7(5-6). God has a role for us in creation, to be master within the created universe, “gave us power over the works of your hands”, e.g. power to create electricity, to put spaceships and satellites into orbit. (The Hebrew text says ‘gave him power’). We are masters over living creatures within the universe, vv8-9(7-8) both domestic pets and untamed animals. God decreed this at creation, see Gen 1:28b. Therefore humankind is “little less than gods.” The poet describes humankind with royal language like a king/queen, “crowned.” As soon as we recognize our insignificance in the universe, we see the wonderful privilege God has bestowed upon us in the way he has treated us. This moves us to praise God.

10(9) Repetition of Call to Praise

The Psalm concludes as it began; praising God’s name, “How great is your name, O Lord our God, through all the earth!” Praise is the fitting response to reflection on God’s creation, since as CCC 293 tells us, God created to communicate his glory.

Christological Interpretation of Psalm 8

Earlier in this lesson I indicated that Christians read and pray the OT through the lens of the NT and reinterpret some parts of the OT Christologically, about Jesus.

Paul quotes this Psalm and gives “put all things under his feet” in v7a(6a) a new meaning. For him the mastery of humankind expressed in this Psalm is fulfilled in Jesus rising from the dead (1 Cor 15:26; Eph 1:22). Also in the Letter to the Hebrews this Psalm is used to describe Jesus’ victory over death by his resurrection (Heb 2:6-10). So this is a new way for us Christians to pray this Psalm; we can pray this Psalm in thanksgiving that Jesus has won eternal life for us and has conquered death on our behalf. Jesus has put all things, even death, under his feet. Ravasi, an Italian commentator on the Psalms, says it is a prophecy of Jesus’ resurrection, a program for a new humanity and reordered humanity.

In Matt 21:16 Jesus quoted v3(2) in his rebuke to the authorities. In that context they are the foes and rebels and as in the Psalm children mentioned in 21:15 have a truer perception. (See also Luke 10,21) This is not a christological interpretation in that it is not applying the Psalm to Jesus but it is applying part of the Psalm to Jesus’ contemporaries and in that sense I include it here.



Now Please read Psalm 104 (103).

PSALM 104 (103) - PRAISE OF GOD THE CREATOR

Ancient Egyptians worshipped many gods but the Pharaoh Amenhotep IV in the fourteenth century BC started a revolution by worshiping only one god, the sun, which was called Aten. He composed a hymn to Aten. This Psalm has parallels with Gen 1 and the Egyptian hymn to Aten. It is normally understood that the author of this Psalm used the Egyptian hymn in honor of the sun god as his source but structured it in the same way as the account of creation in six days in Genesis 1.

The similarities with Gen 1 are as follows and it helps us to understand a passage of

Scripture when understand its structure:

Verses in Ps 104		Gen 1
1-4	Creation of the heavens and earth	Gen 1:1-5
5-9	Waters pushed back	Gen 1:6-10
10-13	Waters put to beneficial use	(implicit Gen 1:6-10)
14-18	Creation of vegetation	Gen 1:11-12
19-23	Creation of heavenly lights	Gen 1:14-18
24-26	Creation of sea creatures	Gen 1:20-22
27-30	Creation of living creatures	Gen 1:24-31

As you study this Psalm the headings below reflect this structure.

1-2a the Initial Call to Praise.

2b-4 Creation of the heavens and the earth

Creation of the heavens obviously refers to creating the sky, not to creating angels etc. Ancient peoples believed that there was a sea above the earth (probably because of rain) and God's heavenly palace above that. See Gen 1:6-8. Remember our discussion of inspiration in Lesson 1 Part B.

God in heaven
waters above the sky (which produce rain)
sky
earth floating on the waters below and held up by pillars (like an oil-rig)
waters under the earth
the underworld

What a beautiful way to describe wind, God's messenger. The 'flashing fire', lightning, is God's servant.

5-9 Waters pushed back

It was believed the world was like an oil-rig fixed on the ocean. The earth floats on the ocean. We with our modern viewpoint of God having fixed the planet earth in orbit, can also share in the Psalmist's trust in and awe of God. In v7 God by the voice of his thunder has driven away the flood which once covered the mountains. This is the way creation is depicted in Gen 1:9-10, God ordering the chaotic water.

10-13 Waters put to beneficial use

Not only is God the Creator but he also cares for creation by providing springs to nourish life. Water, an enemy before creation according to the viewpoint above in vv7-9, now gives sustenance to God's creatures. Springs supplying water from the ocean beneath the earth are supplemented by rain from above the sky in v13.

14-18 Creation of Vegetation

God is not remote from the world he has created. His providential care is evident, making grass grow for the cattle and plants for ourselves in v14. From those plants we are able to bake bread, v14c. All the details of creation reveal providential care by God for his creation. See CCC 301. Ladies, notice that God has even provided cosmetics, the oil in v15b. Not only

does God provide for us humans, but God also provides for all of creation. Thus in v16 God provides water for the trees. In v17 the trees were God's way of providing for the birds. God has provided mountains unfit for human habitation to be the home for the goats and rabbits in v18. Nature is not pictured as being for our exploitation. Even though since creation we are masters of creation there is no hint of species becoming extinct because of our activities.

19-23 Creation of heavenly lights

The Psalmist marvels at the order he can see in the world. So that we can tell the passing of time God has created the moon. The months in Israel were lunar months and still are, not like our Gregorian calendar. The sun and moon are all part of God's providential care. God in his wisdom reserved the night to the wild beasts of the forest, but the day to us for our work, thus we do not interfere with one another. Notice the beautiful spiritual way in which he views all of creation; the lion roaring is his prayer to God for food. Human work is part of God's plan.

24-26 Sea-Creatures

He exclaims wonder at God creating the creatures of the sea. God has even created the sea-monsters to be his own playthings! Leviathan is the name of a mythological sea serpent or dragon, something similar to the mythological Lough Ness Monster. There is a description of him in Job 40:25-41:26. His defeat is attributed to God in Ps 74:14 and Isa 27:1.

27-30 living Creatures

All creatures depend on God. God is the provider of food for all. Although we gather, it is God who gives it. It all comes from God's hand, v28b. At the end of our lives God withdraws his spirit which gave us life, v29 but gives his life-giving spirit to other creatures so the cycle continues. All life is from God and God is the master of death. You are familiar with v30, translated in a hymn as "Send forth your Spirit, O Lord, and renew the face of the earth."

31-35 Final Praise of God

We have come full circle and return to praising God as we did at the beginning. Another two items showing God's glory are introduced here, earthquakes in v32a and volcanic eruptions in v32b. In v33 he promises to praise God all his life. He hopes this hymn of praise is pleasing to God in v34a. V34b is beautiful. He finds his joy in the Lord. Do you find your joy in the Lord? In v35 he admits that not everyone shares his wonder and awe at God's creation and so he prays that evil will be overcome. Later we will deal with anger and curses in the Psalms so I will pass over it for now.

OBSERVATIONS ON PSALM 104

This Psalm is a statement on ecology, on the connection of all nature and of our connection with creation. All creation praises God. If we don't praise God we are not connected with the rest of creation. When we care for the environment we praise God who wants order in creation. We should see creation as another voice in the chorus of praise of God. This Psalm challenges us to continually discover the beauty in God's creation. This Psalm encourages respect for the environment. It is calling us to return to living as God had planned for creation. The Green Parties would like this Psalm. Even those who do not know God should be able to see God in creation. Paul makes this point in Rom 1:19-20. In Acts 14:17 Paul states to pagans that they should be able to see evidence of God's goodness in creation. See CCC 286.

In the Psalm, humans are mentioned as workers (v 23). There is no impression that work is drudgery or a burden but instead work is to be seen as another way to praise God. If work has become a burden for us, that is not God's intention for us. Can we rectify it? To work well is to praise God. The value of work is that through it we carry on God's act of creating the world. Our work is intended by God to be a means of serving others, of loving others. If it has become only a means of earning money it is downgraded. Through work we achieve fulfillment as humans and it is important for our self-expression and self-assertion.

CHRISTOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF PS 104

Our task is to justifiably see Jesus included in this Psalm. Jesus was created by the Father but has transformed creation so that now "all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld should bend the knee at the name of Jesus." Can you now pray this Psalm in praise of Jesus who transformed creation by becoming part of creation and conquering death?

This Psalm is used in our liturgy on Pentecost because of the idea of the breath of God as life-giving. It is also the Psalm recommended for Confirmation. The response is v30.

STRUCTURE OF THE HYMNS OF PRAISE

Now that you have read two Hymns of Praise it is time to point out to you their overall structure. Many but not all Hymns of Praise have this structure:

1. Introduction calling to praise God
2. The main part of the Psalm giving the reason for praising God
3. Repetition of the call to praise.

In the Psalms just read, you obviously noticed that they began and ended with a call to praise God and the entire Psalm in between these calls to praise gives us the reason for praising God. The shortest Psalm in the Psalter, Ps 117, also a Hymn of Praise, has the same structure

1. The call to praise is the word 'Alleluia' in v1a. "Alleluia" is a combination of two Hebrew words meaning "Praise God." It is a combination of "*hall*" the Hebrew verb 'to praise' and the first half of '*Yahweh*', one of the words for God in the OT. Thus *hallelu*+*Yahweh* = *HalleluYah*, then shortened to *alleluia*, Praise God. Did you know that is what 'Alleluia' means?
2. The reason for praising God is given us in v2ab, God's love is strong and he is faithful.
3. The repetition of the call to praise occurs in v2c, Praise Yahweh, which occurs in the Hebrew but not in translations! The Psalmist's train of thought has come full circle; his prayer has enabled him to see all things in true light and to establish right relationship with the world and with himself.

There are many variations to the call to praise. It can be "Bless the Lord" Ps 134, "Cry out with joy to the Lord" Ps 100, "Ring out your joy to the Lord" Ps 33. Sometimes it is omitted. Not only is Israel called to praise God, but also in some Psalms foreign nations and the whole earth, the gods or angels and even the world of nature are called upon to praise the Lord.



God is praised as Creator in Psalms 8; 19A (A= first half of the Psalm); 29; 104; 148. These are devoted entirely to praise of the Creator.

Praise of the Creator is also in parts of other Psalms, the following are the US and Grail numbers 33:6-9; 65:7-14; 95:4-5; 135:6-7; 136:6-9; 146:6; 147:4,8-9,16-18.

The following are the same Psalms according to European enumeration 33:6-9; 65:6-13; 95:4-5; 135:6-7; 136:5-8; 146:6; 147:4,8-9,16-18; 148.

Also for another beautiful description of creation you might like to read Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 42:15-43,33 one of the seven extra books in Catholic Old Testaments. Also there is a most beautiful hymn in praise of God in Dan 3:52ff. Praise of the Creator begins in 3:57.

Read these at your leisure and use them yourself to praise God for the beauty of his creation. On a fine day or rainy day also, why not use one of these Psalms to praise God? I will explain later why there are different numbering systems in US/Grail and the European translations.

PRAYER



Psalm 63(62) is a most beautiful Psalm. Read it now and then relax for prayer. The following are only indications as to how you might meditate and use this Psalm for prayer. May the Lord lead you during this prayer in whatever way He wishes. Allow silence between the sentences and paragraphs for your own thoughts to emerge and for God to speak his word to you.

O God, you are my God. You are indeed my God. I have been tempted to worship so many other things or money or career or people but I ask you pardon and say to you now that you alone are my God. When I was giving honor to all of these other things it was because I was longing for you and forgot that it is you I really long for. I got lost in the world, looking for you in the wrong places, tempted by the gifts you have given me and forgetting you the Giver. But I say to you, "You are my God."

O God, it is for you I long. It is indeed true as St Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in You." It is for you and no one else that my soul thirsts. Even my body longs for your love as much as a desert longs for water. When I pray to you in the sanctuary my longing is satisfied.

Your love is better than life. Your love is the most precious gift of all that I have. You love me and this knowledge sustains me. Thank you for loving me despite all my failures. Therefore my lips will speak your praise and I will praise you all my life. Your love fills me with so much happiness and peace and contentment that I feel like I have been fed at a banquet. My mouth shall praise you with joy.

As I lie on my bed at night I think of you and pray to you. Therefore I do not fear the night. I am like a chicken protected under its mother's wings. In the shadow of your wings I rejoice. I cling to you. I do not fear anything because your right hand is holding me fast. You are supporting me, giving me strength to face all of life's problems and difficulties. I draw my strength from you. Your right hand holds me fast.