



SONGS
of the
SOUL

PSALMS AND CANTICLES
FOR the
SOUL'S ASCENT

~ AN INTRODUCTION ~

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In a recent conversation with my German friend, we agreed that poetry and music were truly the language of the soul. In the *Psalms* and *Canticles* drawn from scriptural and liturgical sources, we find the oldest and richest expression of the *Prayer of the Heart*.

Here, through faith and doubt, petition and praise, lament and remembrance, our souls cry out to God, and the Spirit responds with compassion and rebuke, tenderness and reproach, ever calling us to love God, our neighbor, our earth, and ourselves.

(The poetic form of these writings is also more easily memorized than is narrative, and—when prayed over many years—embed themselves into the soul's heart, springing forth into consciousness in those moments of *kairos* (God's time) when it is most appropriate for our soul's needs and desires.)

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Breviary of Holy Silence

In the ancient monastic tradition, the Psalms and Canticles were prayed with a breviary over the course of seven daily offices; the more contemporary version usually consists of four offices a day.

Yet praying the Psalms in solitude is very different than praying them in a congregation or a monastic community. In solitude, one does not have the support of other voices, other souls—except, of course, for the presence of the Communion of Saints, who are even now and unto the ages lifting their voices in praise to the Holy Trinity.

The solitude of a vowed anchorite or hermit is also a life dedicated to silence and simplicity. As such, the traditional breviaries and lectionaries may be found cumbersome, and unduly complicated, often impinging upon the deep silence of contemplative prayer.

Through years of study and prayer, I developed a simpler, more contemplative version of the *Daily Office* consisting solely of pared down expressions of Matins and Vespers, interspersed with periods

of silence. I also included critical elements of the traditional late-evening office of Compline (which may more easily be recited by memory while preparing for sleep).

This work is my ***Breviary of Holy Silence*** which may be found on my blog, ***Holy Dwelling***. While this breviary is designed to support the *Prayer of Silence*, and may be prayed without any scriptural additions, it also is designed to support their inclusion.

Songs of the Soul: Psalms and Canticles

For generations, lectionaries of scripture readings have distributed the scriptural readings (to some degree) to reflect the season of the liturgy (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter. . . and less so for “ordinary time”). Yet I have been unable to find any tradition (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican) that does the same with the Psalms. By and large, the Psalms seem nearly always to have been read in numerical order, whether on a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly cycle. A modified thematic distribution may be found in *A Monastic Breviary* used by the Episcopal Order of the Holy Cross and the Order of St. Helena.

However, none of these traditional arrangements of the Psalms seem to demonstrate any thematic consistency with the classic teaching of the early church’s ascetical practices, nor do they reflect what I have experienced in my own spiritual path. Then one day, I came upon a sentence in the *Rule of St. Benedict* (18:25): “If anyone finds this distribution of the psalms unsatisfactory, he should arrange whatever he judges better.”

This arrangement of the Psalms and Canticles is the fruit of an effort to find a way of praying the Psalms that is in accordance with the ascetical path of the ancient Church, and that is also coherent with the life-style of the solitary anchorite or hermit. (It may also be useful for others who pray alone.)

Songs of the Soul is a significantly simplified arrangement, with the cycle of Psalms spread over a four-week cycle. And the key element of their distribution within each week is based upon the *stages* and *themes* of the spiritual path embedded in the ancient Orthodox tradition of ascetical practice.

Such a distribution of the Psalms, along with Canticles distributed in a similar manner, will, it is hoped, support the soul by each week emphasizing the different stages of the mystical journey.

THE SPIRITUAL PATH

Embedded within the long Biblical heritage of both the Jewish and Christian traditions is the foundational concept that we are created in the *Image of God*, and are ultimately called to be transformed into the *Likeness of God*.

As we answer God's call, we enter into a new and deeper relationship with God, with our neighbors, and, most particularly, a new and deeper relationship with our own souls. With faith, discipleship, and the mercy of God, this is a journey which will carry us along the mystical path of transformation into the full *image* and *likeness* of God.

SPIRITUAL STAGES

Just as we discover when we embark upon any physical journey or pilgrimage, this spiritual path leads through differing and distinct stages. While the following categories are my own, they are based upon the work of the patristic writers Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Maximus the Confessor among others. I have also drawn from western Christian spirituality in the mystical teaching by such as John of the Cross and the medieval work *Cloud of Unknowing*.

In order to support this recognized sequence in the spiritual journey, rather than simply reciting the Psalms in numbered sequence, they and the Canticles are arranged (to the degree possible) to reflect the journey of the soul through the stages of *Faithful Living* (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday), *Contemplative Living* (Thursday and Friday), and *Holy Dwelling* (Saturday and Sunday).

FAITHFUL LIVING

Faithful Living comprises the foundational phase of the Soul's life in God. It begins with creation itself, and with the call to God's people to follow, love, and obey him.

Faithful Living concerns our deliverance out of captivity—the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt through the Red Sea, and the Christians' initiation into the Body of Christ through Baptism and Chrismation.

Faithful Living calls us into Covenant with God, into the relationship of obedience, and surrender to God, who in turn,

protects and guides us to the fulfilling His Law, and to becoming His holy people.

Faithful Living above all teaches us to “Love one another.”—to live with compassion for all, even ourselves; to grow in faith, patience, and charity.

Faithful Living continually calls us to repentance and conversion, and to the grateful reception of God’s loving mercy to us, and to all who “fall short of the Glory of God”—which, of course, is all of us.

Faithful Living transforms our vices into virtues, and, through detachment and discrimination, we become more dispassionate—no longer at the mercy of our own passions.

CONTEMPLATIVE LIVING—Created Order

Contemplation of the Created Order was called by the ancient church “second natural contemplation,” or “contemplation of the book which is read.”

Contemplation of the Created Order initially utilizes our five senses to rejoice in the wonders of God’s works in all creation, from the earth, planets, and stars, to the smallest atom and particle of matter.

Contemplation of the Created Order strengthens as the Soul’s life in God matures and deepens, and we become more deeply aware of the transcendent presence of God in all of creation.

Contemplation of the Created Order continues the process of purification of the *Passions of Desire* (gluttony and fornication) and deepens the purification of the *Passions of the Temper* (avarice, sorrow, anger, accidie, vainglory, and pride). This purification helps the Soul to develop a higher degree of Dispassion, and transformation of the vices into virtues.

Contemplation of the Created Order also brings us to a fuller experience of illumination in the eternal truth of God’s Word as we give praise for all His works of redemption.

CONTEMPLATIVE LIVING—Heavenly Jerusalem

Contemplation of the Heavenly Jerusalem was known in the ancient tradition as “first natural contemplation,” or “contemplation of the intelligibles.” Here, the Soul moves from a

contemplation of the visible creation, perceived by the senses, to the contemplation of the invisible, or unseen—those things which can only be perceived by the intuition.

Contemplation of the Heavenly Jerusalem develops when the Soul comes to an even more mature level. Now we realize that ‘the Kingdom of God is within,’ and we enter more deeply into the silence of our Souls.

Contemplation of the Heavenly Jerusalem continues the (life-long) process of purification, but now there is likely more emphasis on the passions of pride and vainglory, as well as the *Passions of the Mind*, when we are encounter the temptations of false visions, prophecy, and revelations.

Contemplation of the Heavenly Jerusalem brings forth a flowering of the ‘Fruits of the Spirit’, with ever-deepening love, joy, peace, and wisdom.

HOLY DWELLING

Holy Dwelling finds the Soul increasingly dwelling within her heart, and now, even the mind is quiet and ‘naked’.

Holy Dwelling brings the Soul ever nearer to the goal of her journey in God. Now, she experiences an ever deepening illumination and contemplation of all that is, seen and unseen.

Holy Dwelling brings the Soul to contemplation of the Holy Trinity, moving beyond mere words *about* God, to the wordless silence of the heart in pure adoration.

Holy Dwelling is found as the Soul enters the sacred altar of the heart, the Kingdom of Heaven, the place where God alone dwells—when the soul is ‘gathered into holy silence’, and dwells within the ‘Mystery exalted beyond silence’. (*St. Isaac of Ninevah*)

SPIRITUAL THEMES

Within this basic structure of the spiritual stages, each weekday focuses upon a given spiritual theme. These themes provide a further amplification of the ascetical practices and mystical transformation within each stage. Monday emphasizes *Creation and Salvation History*; Tuesday focuses on our *Discipleship and the Transformation of our Passions*; Wednesday is a day of *Purification and Repentance*; Thursday stresses *Illumination and Wisdom*; Friday emphasizes *Sacrifice and the Crucifixion*; Saturday celebrates the

Incarnation; and Sunday is of course the *Day of Resurrection* as well as the promise of *Theosis*, or the restoration of the soul to the full Likeness of God.

WEEKDAY	SPIRITUAL STAGE	THEMES
SUNDAY	Holy Dwelling	Resurrection / Theosis / Worship
MONDAY	Faithful Living	Creation / Salvation History
TUESDAY	Faithful Living	Passions / Discipleship
WEDNESDAY	Faithful Living	Purification / Repentance
THURSDAY	Contemplative Living (Created Order)	Illumination / Wisdom
FRIDAY	Contemplative Living (Heavenly Jerusalem)	Sacrifice / Redemption
SATURDAY	Holy Dwelling	Incarnation / Virtue

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Afterword

Of course, not every psalm fits neatly into my categories, and another soul might determine a very different categorization. I was also constrained by an effort to approximate the number of verses for each office, coming up with an overall average of 44 verses for each of the 56 offices in a four-week cycle.

Although traditional practice is to begin each week with Saturday Vespers, I have chosen to use our more modern calendar by beginning with Sunday. However, it would be simple to adjust this system to the more traditional, simply by moving Saturday Vespers to the beginning of each week.

What about the ‘imprecatory’ verses? Our modern sensibility finds them very objectionable, indeed. Some lectionaries omit them entirely. And yet, does that not simply impose our own sensibilities upon what has for millennia been part of the prayer of faithful people, Jew and Christian alike? As hard as some of these verses are to pray, it seems to me they must be retained. We may not wish to think of ‘dashing little ones’ heads against the rocks’ (Ps. 137), but there are people out there who do just that, and perhaps our prayer can bring them—and our own unruly passions—into the transforming presence of God. It is also worth noting that the ancient tradition was to see some of these verses as directed against

the assault of demonic and evil forces, a reality which must be encountered by any soul who prays for very long.

One other note: Psalm 95 is not included here because it is used every day at the beginning of Matins.

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The translation used for the Psalms and some of the Canticles is that of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*.¹ Other Canticles are drawn primarily from the *Revised Standard Version of the Holy Scriptures*,² with several found in various other sources.³ Occasionally I have made revisions for poetic purposes, and some of the Antiphons for the canticles are my own composition.

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¹ *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation. 1979.) In the public domain.

² *Revised Standard Version of the Holy Scriptures* (National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. 1971). Used by permission.

³ See especially <http://www.oremus.org/liturgy/ccp/14cants.html>;
<http://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/daily2/canticles.aspx>;
<http://gregorianprayer.org/TheDivineOffice.html>