

“HAVE MERCY ON ME GOD IN YOUR KINDNESS” RECOVERING A SPIRITUAL TRADITION

“This day, brethren, warns me to think more attentively about the burden I carry.” Few homiletics professors would recommend this as an opening line for a homily celebrating the anniversary of one’s ordination, and yet, this is precisely how St. Augustine began his preaching one day in the year A.D. 425. The good bishop explained the source of his burden. He reminded the people that “you are only going to render an account for yourselves alone, while I shall be giving one both for myself and for you.” There is indeed a weighty duty that accompanies ecclesial ministry and one may rightfully speak of accountability with respect to the actions of the ministers of the Gospel, especially for those called to the episcopacy. The Catholic priesthood has felt a **crushing burden** due to the grievous sins of sexual misconduct by our brothers, and in some cases, the lack of proper ecclesiastical oversight from the episcopacy. To help the Church bear this heavy burden, rediscovering one of her venerable traditions—praying the penitential psalms—could help.

While he lay on his deathbed, Augustine ordered a group of psalms to be placed on sheets of paper on the opposite wall, where he could read them. His biographer, Possidius by name, does not specify the exact number, but says they were “few in number,” perhaps four. But it fell to a sixth century Roman statesman by the name of **Cassiodorus** to provide the first clear evidence of a specific group of seven psalms of a penitential nature. A loyal adviser to the Ostrogothic (and Arian) Emperor Theodoric, Cassiodorus later preserved many documents that became a precious source of history of the Ostrogothic kingdom. Following the fall of the gothic kingdoms, the layman Cassiodorus dedicated his life to God and embarked upon an ambitious commentary on all 150 psalms. He first mentions a group of specifically penitential psalms in his commentary on **Psalms 6**, where he writes, “Be mindful however, that this psalm is the first of [the] penitential.” He then lists the complete set which includes **Psalms 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143**. He explains that “these psalms begin with hardships and end with joys, to ensure that no one despairs of the forgiveness which he realized lay in the prayers themselves.”

In the centuries that followed, various monks and clerics sought to give these psalms a place in the Church’s **public prayer**, and were successful. St. John Fisher preached a series of sermons using these psalms, a retreat of sorts, and had them published. Orlando di Lasso composed a polyphonic version of the seven penitential psalms for private performance in the chapel of Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria (1559). They were published twenty years after his death. His composition was the first to include all seven as a coherent group, and remains a standard work in the repertoire of renaissance polyphony. The Breviary of Pope St. Pius V (1568) included the Penitential Psalms in an appendix, along with a special Office for the Dead, a Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, etc. There they were for centuries, up to the reforms of Vatican II when they were sadly removed.

Contrast this with the conclusion of the 1962 ceremony for the conferral of Minor Orders, those liturgical steps along the way to priesthood. The *Roman Pontificale* reveals a striking similarity to the homily referenced earlier. The closing reads, “Dearly beloved sons, carefully consider the order which you have received today and the burden which has been laid upon your shoulders. Endeavor to live holy lives devoted to religion and to be pleasing to the almighty God...” The bishop continued: “All those who have been promoted to the first tonsure, or the four minor orders, say once the seven penitential psalms with the litany, versicles, and orations.” That must have made an impression upon the seminarians to rely always on God’s strength and never only on their own.

The penitential psalms slowly began to lose their place in the prayer of the Church during the first liturgical reforms of the 20th century. Those reforms removed the remaining obligation for the choral recitation of the penitential psalms; effectively, the penitential psalms became a **private devotion**, though they remained in the back of the Breviary in an appendix. My own research on this topic discovered that in fact, they were **not** intended to be completely removed as a group, but rather that, following Vatican II, they would be placed in a separate prayer book that the priest would carry with him for pastoral visits of the sick and dying, etc. In the rapid aftermath of Vatican II and its many changes, the additional book was never published and so the tradition languished. It is never too late!

In these critical days of the life of the Church as we priests deal with our need and desire to offer penance for the sins of our fellow clergy, we want to do something, being “doers of the Word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). These Psalms can play a role. As our Bishops are currently revising the Liturgy of the Hours (producing better translations of texts, etc.), now is the time to re-insert these seven psalms in a special place. Nowhere may they be found today in a group, much less recommended for prayer on Fridays as in the past. Those seven are scattered within a four-week cycle, but not easily accessible. I pray we may recover this tradition in the Church in some tangible way. A link on our parish website will take you to an article I wrote in 2014, just as our Archdiocese began going through some very trying days. You may also click a link to pray the psalms, put together in a handsome online booklet. I am grateful to Marybeth Gaetano for producing this timely and much needed resource.

- Members of law enforcement and first responders – along with their families and the public – are invited to this special **Blue Mass** honoring their courageous service and asking for God’s protection and blessings as we all work together to build up the common good. Archbishop Hebda will preside at the Mass celebrated on **Saturday, September 29**, at the usual 5:15 p.m. Mass time.
- “Our **State Fair** is a great State Fair.” With a hat tip to Rodgers and Hammerstein, I wholeheartedly agree. This year’s edition shattered several attendance records, surpassing the elusive 2-million mark for the first time in its 159-year history. A total of 2,046,533 fairgoers passed through the gates during the 12-day run. I wonder how many went more than once? (Shhh, I went twice, but each for a half day) Technically, we’re #2– Texas draws 2.25 million visitors, but over 24 days, not 12! Hey, Texas–don’t mess with Minnesota!
- Mark your calendars– the **Cathedral Festival of Lights** will be held on October 4, 2018. We hope to raise needed funding to restore the six windows above the confessionals, so that they shine as bright as the Rose windows. Sponsored by the Cathedral Heritage Foundation and held right here on campus, see page 7 for more information.
- Join priests from the Archdiocese here at the Cathedral next Saturday, September 15, 2018 at 11:00 a.m. for a **Holy Hour of Reparation and Prayers for Healing**. The Penitential Psalms will figure in that prayer in some way. It is the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector