

EASTER 2023

The return of the Hallelujah

ECCLESIA

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The Holy Church, like a diligent mother, makes use of a thousand ways to remind us that we are wounded birds, in need of wide open spaces. She tells us that we are made for God, like the bird for flight. Separated from the One who is at once our origin, our centre, our end, we are like fish on dry land: a few flips, then two or three weaker jerks, and finally immobility on one flank, the sad fluttering of the gills, asphyxiation, and

death.

Man does not know why he lives; he knows even less why he dies. That is why the Church never ceases to remind us, with her canticles, her sacraments, and her liturgy, of the primary truth to which we must always return: we are in exile!

Nothing could be more poignant about the entry into the Septuagesima [1]: the annual cycle of the liturgy is somehow broken; the perfectly circular ring that expresses eternity suffers a shock, a rupture: the disappearance of the hallelujah. Every year, the Church, the educator of men, offers them this sacred mimed drama, through which her children resume the path of exile, with the Israel of the ancient covenant.

For seventy days, representing the seventy years of the Babylonian exile, each year we resume the journey, armed with rituals, songs, symbols, towards the sunless regions, far from the holy city. "On the rivers of Babylon, there we sat weeping at the memory of Zion. From the willows of that land we hung our harps. There those who had deported us, our oppressors, asked us for words of song, songs of joy: "Sing us the songs of Zion!" How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land? "If I forget you, Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill." [Ps. 136 (137): 5].

The departure for exile was an unprecedented event in the history of Israel [...] The Temple burnt down and destroyed, the last kings of Judah taken away captive, their eyes gouged out, chained; it is against this tragic backdrop, laden with strong symbols, that the Church carves out the elements of her prayer and teaching; it is against this backdrop of history that holy Lent, inspired by Jesus Christ's forty days of fasting in the desert, is inserted, as if in overlay.

Then comes Easter night, memorial of this other "O truly blessed night, worthy alone - as the *Exsultet* sings - to know the time and hour when Christ rose from the underworld!". It is during this night of the Easter Vigil that the subdeacon, after the chanting of the Epistle, bowing down deeply, announces the return of the Hallelujah with these words: Reverende Pater, annuntio vobis gaudium magnum quod est: Alleluia! [2] In the past, during the Middle Ages, the liturgies, which were often lengthy, allowed joy to have free rein, with the unexpected intermediary of a child dressed in white, symbolising the Easter Hallelujah; the child roamed freely, from the altar to the faithful, until the end of the Mass, in full view of everyone. Our fathers loved to look, to listen, to perceive; they knew how to make use of the five senses so that nothing was excluded from the offering they made to the Lord.

The liturgy, with divine fingers, will be able to drop what is secondary, keeping only what is universal. The deacon, after the announcement of the *gaudium magnum*, brings the first antiphon of the Hallelujah to the celebrant. He intones it three times on a higher note each time. The melody is short; the proceeding sober but evocative. In the sanctuary and in the nave, the congregation awaits the first notes of that Hallelujah, which had been missing for seventy days. The effect produced is not that of a cymbal crash, but of a sweet, hesitant, perhaps timid birth [3] [...] The crescendo gradually rises; the song hesitates to take flight and the wings of the Hallelujah, to which a little blood has remained attached, open trembling; the notes barely detach themselves in the intervals of *sol la si sol la sol*, before launching themselves up to *do*, with a sweet and ample movement that expresses rest and fullness. Here we touch upon the miracle of Gregorian chant.

What the reappearance of the Hallelujah on Easter night, and the deluge of vocalisations that follow one another throughout Easter time, represents for a monastic community cannot be translated into words.

The Hallelujah is our atmosphere. We come alive again. The palpable sign of our heavenly vocation has reappeared on our lips, in our breath, in our ears, before our eyes. In heaven, says St Augustine, we cry out: *Amen, Hallelujah, Amen* which means: the Lord has fulfilled his promises; *Hallelujah*: praise God. We are not yet in heaven, but through the gratuitousness of love, a part of you, which grows every day, is already transported there: the Hallelujah is for us a lullaby, an epithalamium, an accompaniment, an inner music, a song of the journey. And to say it all, according to an ancient saying, we ourselves are living hallelujahs.

1 Liturgical season comprising three weeks before Lent, which was suppressed during the liturgical reform, and only remains in the old calendar. Starting from the Septuagesima Sunday, the Hallelujah is to be omitted from the liturgy and, in some places, the custom of a 'funeral ceremony' to bury it remains [ed.].

2 Reverend Father, I announce to you a great joy, which is: Hallelujah!

3 **Here** one can listen to the faint and hoarse, but very tuneful, voice of Benedict XVI.