

I. BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

PSALM 4 – ISAGOGE, EXEGESIS AND THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION. PART II

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ABSTRACT. In this research paper, we intend to offer the reader the possibility of becoming more familiar with the main types of biblical commentaries through an exegetic exercise centered round Psalm 4. The choice of the supporting text is not at all random since, even from ancient times, the psalms have benefitted from the attention of an impressive number of scholars and have been the beginning of both dialogue and controversy between religions (Christianity and Judaism) and Christian denominations. Throughout the exegetic analysis, we took into consideration a few rigors of the Critical approach which we correlated with the rabbinic and patristic commentaries in order to accomplish a very ample interpretation. Even if these commentators were not entirely in agreement, rather than bringing to relief their interpretative differences, we tried to underline the common elements existing in the specific manner of interpretation of each exegetic school. Thus, the complexity of this isagogic, exegetic and theological study resides in the fact that it approaches the text of the psalm from a literary, allegorical and spiritual point of view and it can become a hermeneutical paradigm for those who wish to study the Holy Scriptures with scientific and spiritual accuracy.

Keywords: psalm, rabbis, Church Fathers, critical interpretation, king, LORD, Messianic perspective

1 TO THE CHOIRMASTER: WITH STRINGED INSTRUMENTS. A PSALM OF DAVID.
Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have given me
relief when I was in distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!

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- 2 O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame¹? How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? Selah
- 3 But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him.
- 4 Be angry², and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent³. Selah
- 5 Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the LORD.
- 6 There are many who say, "Who will show us some good⁴? Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!"
- 7 You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine⁵ abound.
- 8 In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety⁶ (ESV).

Verse 4

Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. Selah

The reconciliatory advices continue on a paternal tone⁷ in this verse as well. The psalmist suggests to those that rebelled to reconsider their attitude and implicitly to evaluate their acts through their conscience⁸. But before doing

¹ The expression עַד־מַה כְּבוֹדִי לְקַלְמָה (*‘ad-me^h kəbōdī liq̄līmā^h*) – *how long shall my honor be turned into shame* was translated into Greek with ἕως πότε βαρυκάρδιοι – *how long will your hearts be unmerciful*. Cf. Peter Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, in *WBC 19* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 81.

² The Septuagint translates this verb with ὀργίζω – *to get angry*, replacing the action with the feeling that it is based on.

³ The meaning that the Greek text offers to the last part of this verse is this: “on your beds repent of those things spoken into your hearts”.

⁴ M. Dahood translates the term טוב (*tōb*) – *good* with *rain* also because this was the utmost good in Israel. This is why he thinks that this psalm includes the controversy between a faithful servant of God and the Israelites who chose to sacrifice to the idols in order to obtain rain. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms*, in *AB 19A* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 25.

⁵ The translators of the Septuagint have also added oil besides wheat and wine (cf. Dt 28:15; Hos 2:10.24), but the insertion is not necessary. Cf. George Phillips, *The Psalms in Hebrew; with a critical, exegetical and philological commentary I* (London: J. W. Parker, 1846), 34.

⁶ The Septuagint translates the last part of the verb as follows: “because you alone, O Lord, settled me in hope”.

⁷ Ernst Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms I* (Bellingham: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2010), 66.

⁸ Rabbi Solomon Freehof, *The Book of Psalms: A commentary* (Cincinnati: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1938), 18. “Those who refer this psalm to Absalom’s rebellion against his father, suppose that David says to these rebels and their supporters: I forgive you your first moment of anger against me, but stop being against me; draw back into your soul at night time and repent for your wandering”, Gherasim Timuș, *Note și meditațiuni asupra psalmilor I* (București: Tipografia “Gutenberg” Joseph Göble, 1896), 49; cf. Iuliu Olariu, *Explicarea Psalmilor din Orologiu* (Caransebeș, 1899), 148.

this, David asks them to sin no more, ending their rebellion forever, not because they fear their king, but because they fear God⁹. The subtlety with which the author of the psalm refers to God again, in fact, the one against which the *sons of men* fight indirectly, does not result from the text at a first sight. The allusion to the divine power and justice can be found only in the complex implications that the verb רָגַז (*rāgāz*) – *to flinch, to panic, to tremble, to agitate* has. Thus, this manifestation that comprises man’s entire being is usually generated by three feelings: anger, fear or pain. In this context, the rabbis and most of the exegetes¹⁰ state that the anxiety to which the psalmist refers is generated by fear, firstly because it would be improper to believe that he urged his enemies to anger when in fact he was trying to calm them down, and then because up until now no reference is made to a particular pain or sufferance¹¹. Their opinion is also influenced by the fact that the feeling of fear of God is often associated within the psalms with that of trembling (cf. Ps 2:11)¹². And the fact that this verb is used within the parallel texts of the psalms (18:8; 77:17; 77:19; 99:1) only when they refer to God confirms even more the idea previously mentioned through which we state that the psalmist refers here to God not to himself.

The Greek translation of the verb *ragaz* with ὀργίζω – *to get angry, to infuriate* modified significantly the interpretation perspectives proposed by the Hebrew text. In this new approach, the psalmist does not refer to God, before whom all people must tremble, but warns his opponents, in a moralizing manner, on the bad effects that can result from their uncontrolled anger. Starting with Saint Apostle Paul who takes *ad litteram* the first part of the verse in one of his

⁹ Mayer Gruber, *Rashi’s Commentary on Psalms* (Boston: Leiben, 2004), 186. Cf. Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms. A commentary*, trans. Herbert Hartwell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 121.

¹⁰ In the rabbis’ opinion the text of this verse conveys the following message: “If you do not fear me, fear God and do not rebel,” – Rabbi David Kimhi, *The longer commentary of R. David Kimhi on the first Book of Psalms*, trans. R. G. Finch (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), 29 or “Tremble and fear so that you sin no more,” – Rabbi Samson Hirsch, *The Psalms. Translation and commentary* (New York: Samson Raphael Hirsch Publications Society, 1960-66), 22. According to Rabbi Akha, *be angry, and do not sin* means “Make your Tempter tremble with fear, and he will be unable to make you sin.” And in others Rabbis opinion, those words means “Make your Tempter tremble with frustration, and he will be unable to make you sin, thus you will not fall into grip sin.” *Midrasch Tehillim*, trans. August Wünsche (Trier: Sigmund Mayer, 1892), 46.

¹¹ Albert Barnes, *Notes, critical, explanatory, and practical, on the book of Psalms I* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1868-69), 36.

¹² Hirsch, *The Psalms*, 22. In John Goldingay opinion “trembling is an appropriate response of awed submission to Yhwh rather than having recourse to other resources”. *Psalm 1-41* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 121.

epistles (Eph 4:26)¹³, this moralizing interpretation proposed by the translators of the Septuagint was accepted and developed richly by the Fathers of the Church. Without setting aside the positive part of anger¹⁴, the Holy Fathers consider that the king asks the rebels not to fulfil their furious intention in reprehensible acts. They may get angry with him, but they must not sin by rebelling. “So, David also says here: even if you become angry unwillingly, which is not a complete sin, do not add your acts to this, in order not to fulfill the sin. For God forgives smaller things to the weaker, meaning anger, to stop what is bigger, meaning killing and all the acts that are generated by uncontrolled fury”¹⁵.

¹³ See Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An introduction and commentary*, in *TOTC 15* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 72. The Apostle apparently attenuates the stigmatization of this passion severely condemned by Christ (Mt 5:22-24), because he too offers a saving value to the action of removal of the anger: “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. [...] Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” (Eph 4:26-27.31-32 – ESV). See Robert Davidson, *The vitality of worship: A commentary on the book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids/Edinburgh: Eerdmans/Handsel Press, 1998), 23 and Mays, *Psalms*, 55. Saint Chrysostom says that here Paul compels us to reconcile, saying: “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry. [...] He was afraid that during the night, the furious remaining alone might increase his anger. During the day he meets with a lot of people, who can dissipate his anger and turn his thoughts; but at night, when man is alone and sits and speaks to himself, the waves of anger increase and the fury gets bigger. That is why the apostle anticipates this; he wants to deliver him to the night reconciled, so that the devil no longer has the occasion, because of the solitude, to heat the furnace of anger and make it bigger. Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilii la Matei*, in *PSB 23*, trans. Dumitru Fecioru (București: IBMO, 1994), 213-4.

¹⁴ Before its debasement through sin, anger was the first function of aggressiveness that had the purpose to generate opposition to all evil. When he says *stand in awe, and sin not* “he does not interdict anger because it is useful. Nor does he cut the anger, for it is useful against injustice and ignorance. But he cuts the wrongful anger, the irrational anger. [...] For anger was not given to us for us to sin, but to stop with it those who sin, not to become passion or illness, but cure for the passions”. St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. Robert C. Hill (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1988), 62. “When this power of the soul is used against demons and sins, it has the form of a virtuous wise and holy anger, the one that the psalmist is talking about”. Sf. Nichita Stithatul, *Cele 300 de capete*, in *Filocalia 6*, trans. Dumitru Stăniloae (București: IBMO, 1977), 216.

¹⁵ Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, “Tălcuirea psalmilor I (1-8),” trans. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Mitropolia Olteniei* 4 (1989): 48. When he refers to this text, Saint John Cassian urges us to anger, but not against our neighbor, but against passions. “Kindle your anger against your passions and against your evil thoughts and do not sin by acting what they put into your minds. [...] When evil thought come into your heart, cast them away with anger and after having done that, as if you were on a bed of the peace of the soul, repent”. Sf. Ioan Casian, *Despre cele opt gânduri ale răutății*, in *Filocalia 1*, trans. Dumitru Stăniloae (Sibiu: Institutul de arte grafice “Dacia Traiană” S. A., 1947), 110. Cf. St. Augustin, *Expositions on the Psalms*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 8*, trans. Philip Schaff (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 9. Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms I*, trans. P. G. Walsh (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1990), 76.

The psalmist's words in the first part of the verse are meant to convey both a warning and reconciliatory advice. With this attitude, the king tries once more to change the evil thoughts of those who plot vain intrigues¹⁶. And in order for his attempt of ending the conflict to reach a positive result, he advises the rebels to meditate in the tranquility of the night¹⁷, deep inside their hearts¹⁸, on the events that happened and decide wisely. David's recommendation is admirable¹⁹ because for a person that needs to make an important decision, the night is the mother of counsel, and the heart, the spiritual center of man, is the highest court. In other words, the psalmist urges his opponents to calm their anger, to control their actions and not to spread lies with empty words²⁰.

Besides this dimension, the Septuagint suggests through the translation of the verb דָּמַם (*dāmam*) – *to be silent* with *κατανύσσομαι* – *to repent, to feel a painful sting* also a penitential perspective. The second meaning of the verb, which in fact is the literal translation of the term, is obviously open to the theme of the *piercing of the heart* largely developed in the Christian ascetical literature²¹. "After dinner – says Saint John Chrysostom – when you prepare to go to sleep, to go to bed, and there is a lot of peace and quiet, since nobody is around and when there is a deep peace that nothing can disturb, rise within your heart the tribunal of conscience and call yourself to account for the evil things you wished for during the day, the intrigues you plotted, the sorrows you produced to your neighbor, the rotten desires you accepted. Bring all these in the center in the time of that tranquility and stop your conscience from all evil thoughts, destroy them and ask for justice, tear the sinner mind. For this is what *commune* means spoken instead of pierce, sting with a needle what you say in your hearts during the day"²².

¹⁶ David asks them to accept the fact that they are mistaken after they've searched their consciences sincerely. Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on Psalms 1-81*, trans. Robert Hill (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 47.

¹⁷ "Since night time is free from external worries and brings peace to our thoughts, he was correct in this verse in bidding us pass in review what was said or done during the day and in obliging us to heal our wounds with the remedy of repentance". Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms. Psalms 1-72*, in *Fathers of the Church* 101, trans. Robert C. Hill (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 65. Cf. Eftimie Zigabenu and Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirile Sfinților Părinți I*, trans. Ștefan Voronca (Galați: Egumenița, 2006), 84.

¹⁸ In one's bed, the heart is no longer influenced by the troubles of this world and can judge clearly. Kimhi, *The longer commentary*, 29.

¹⁹ Barnes, *Notes on Psalms*, 36. Cf. Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical commentary on The Psalms I*, trans. Fancis Bolton, (Edimburg: T. & T. Clakk, 1871), 114.

²⁰ Craigie, *Psalms*, 81. In Derek Kidner opinion, the psalmist invite his enemy to think. Kidner, *Psalms*, 72.

²¹ Cf. *Septuaginta. Psalmii, Odele, Proverbele, Ecclziastul, Cântarea Cântărilor* 4/I, ed. Cristian Bădiliță et al. (București: Polirom, 2006), 48.

²² St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 64. Cf. Diodore of Tarsus, *Commentary on Psalms 1-51*, trans. Robert C. Hill (Boston: Liden, 2005), 15 and Goldingay, *Psalm*, 122.

Verse 5

Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the LORD.

The final urges that the psalmist addresses to those who followed his son in rebellion are in fact an invitation to obey God. When he asks them to offer the sacrifices of righteousness and to put their trust in the Lord²³, David does nothing else but end the conflict that they started against him and against the Lord of his righteousness and he determines his opponents to assume the mistakes they did while rebelling. The sacrifice that those people had to offer for their forgiveness could not be offered with hypocrisy, as they have done when they gathered around Absalom at the altar in Hebron (cf. 2 Sm 15:7-12)²⁴, but required a pure heart and piety according to the stipulations of the Law²⁵. According to the opinions expressed by the rabbis and the Holy Fathers, the text does not stop to a literal approach, but implies an obvious spiritual dimension. In the view of these interpreters those who are invited to offer this type of sacrifice must change their way of living in agreement with the principles of the divine justice, so that their behavior should be considered and accepted as a sacrifice pleasing to God²⁶. This perspective that transcends the sacrificial ritual determined the Holy Fathers to state that the text prefigures the unbloody sacrifices required by the Lord of the New Covenant. "When he says "offer sacrifices of righteousness", he does not present the shadowed part of the Law, rather the one in Christ and in the Gospel. For the Old Law teaches to offer bloody sacrifices, but in them man could not become complete in conscience. They were offered for the prefiguration of the good scent of the true offerings and were meant to last until the time of the improvement"²⁷.

²³ James Mays, *Psalms. Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 55.

²⁴ Kimhi, *The longer commentary*, 29. Cf. Alexander Kirkpatrick, *The book of Psalms* (Cambridge: University Press, 1905), 19 and Olariu, *Explicarea Psalmilor*, 147.

²⁵ In Arthur Weiser opinion the sacrifices of righteousness are the true manifestation of repentance. Weiser, *The Psalms*, 121. Cf. Davidson, *The vitality of worship*, 23; Phillips, *The Psalms*, 34 and Delitzsch, *Biblical commentary*, 114.

²⁶ "Do the acts of the righteous and it will be considered as an offering of sacrifices". Mayer Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms*, 186. Cf. Freehof, *The book of Psalms*, 18; Hirsch, *The Psalms*, 22.

²⁷ Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, "Tâlcuirea psalmilor," 48: "What does this mean to *offer sacrifices of righteousness* – Saint John asks himself? Return to justice, do justice: this is a greater gift offered to God, this is the accepted sacrifice, this is the pleasant offering, and not to sacrifice bulls and sheep, but to act righteously". St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 65. The bishop of Cyrus states that with these words the cult of the Old Law is cancelled as a superfluous thing and a new type of sacrifice is instituted, because "the possession of righteousness is more acceptable to God than every sacrifice of a hundred or thousand beasts". Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 65. Cf. St. Augustin, *Exposition on the Psalms*, 9 and Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, 77.

The return from the paths of emptiness to a righteous life also implies naturally a change in the manner of relating to God. If initially these *sons of men* put their trust in their powers and their overwhelming number, now they have to entrust themselves to the Lord and put their trust in Him exclusively²⁸. This final advice through which David wishes to seal the return of the rebels has the purpose to consolidate their relationship with God and implicitly with the king whom He obviously supported in his exile²⁹. After all, putting one's trust in God reflects the renunciation to pride and the achievement of a broken spirit which, according to the psalmist (cf. Ps 51:19) is the most obvious sign of a sacrifice of righteousness³⁰.

Verse 6

There are many who say, "Who will show us some good? Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!"

Some exegetes consider that the direct reference of the psalmist to his opponents (defined by the expression *sons of men* – v. 3) stops along with the advices in the previous verse³¹. In this respect, the term רַבִּיִּם (*rabbîm*) – *many* in the beginning of this verse, points to a different category of persons who are lacking a certain good and presenting a distrustful attitude towards the divine providence³². These people were part of either the group that accompanied David in exile and now doubted their victory³³ or of the group that could not decide

²⁸ Kimhi, *The longer commentary*, 29. Rabbi Samson notices those who are blessed with many gifts not to put their trust in the material goods, but to put their trust in God Who gave all those things because this is the only way they will be able to enjoy them; Hirsch, *The Psalms*, 22.

²⁹ "David presents his own things as example. And he tries to teach that those who sacrifice to the Holy God the fruits of righteousness their trust in Him does not remain fruitless. For, he says, as soon as I offered the sacrifice of righteousness and I put my trust in Him, I defeated my enemies, although I cried for the fallen young man [Absalom]". Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, "Tâlcuirea psalmilor," 48.

³⁰ Diodore of Tarsus, *Commentary of Psalms*, 15. "Besides righteousness, we are also asked to have this virtue, to trust in Him, not to trust in any of the earthly things, and standing far from all this to fix our mind to God". St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 66.

³¹ Rabbi Benjamin Segal, "Psalm 4 – Of Words and Personality," accessed 8 May 2013, <http://psalms.schechter.edu/2010/03/psalm-four-and-still-need-for.html>.

³² Davidson, *The vitality of worship*, 24. "It is not the few, the sincere, the tried and the wise who say this, but the great indiscriminating multitude grasp on the confusion of these thoughts. What does it mean what he says? *Who will shew us any good?* There are some who either reject God's providence, or they love pleasures, laziness, riches, glory and power, who ask us such things: Where are the goods of the Lord?" St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 67. Cf. St. Augustin, *Expositions on the Psalms*, 10; Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, "Tâlcuirea psalmilor," 49 and Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 66.

³³ Delitzsch, *Biblical commentary*, 116; Cf. Robert Bratcher and William Reyerburn, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Psalms* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 46; Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 68.

yet whose part to take in the conflict, the king's or the rebels'³⁴. Taking into account the fact that either of these categories could suit this context, we cannot say anything decisively on this matter. However, we mention the fact that David builds his arguments starting from the idea that those who are in front of him are skeptical regarding the positive solution to their dilemma and that the good they dream of is not of a spiritual nature³⁵, their relationship with God being a rather distant one³⁶.

After the psalmist presented his urges to morality and tried to establish a righteous thinking in the hearts and minds of those who wondered in lies and deceit, now he struggles to offer an answer to those who denied the palpability of the Lord's providence. To offer credit to his endeavor, from the very beginning the king appeals directly to Aaron's blessing³⁷, a prayer well known to all the Israelites, and asks God to shine His face on the people, so that with this He pours continuously over everybody peace and prosperity³⁸. In other words, when he asks the Lord to show His face, David asks Him to offer to those who doubted the reality of the providence, a real proof of His presence. In the thinking of the Old Testament, the face or the image (פָּנֵי – *pāneʿ*) of a person were perceived as

³⁴ Barnes, *Notes on Psalms*, 37. Cf. Kirkpatrick, *The book of Psalms*, 19.

³⁵ Hirsch, *The Psalms*, 23. "The psalmist says at the beginning that the legion limits the good to the apparent things and thinks that only those things are good which man can experience with his senses. [...] But the one who aims for virtue, despises this judgment of good, because it is slavish. This is the way a person sees good into the light and this is how the divine joy occurs. Speak about such a light that shines from the face of the Lord, a light whose nature our mind fails to understand. [...] Considering the face of the Lord with certain features, it seems to me that the Prophet referred only to virtues through these features". Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *La titlurile Psalmilor*, in *PSB* 30, trans. Teodor Bodogae (București: IBMO, 1998), 142. Dydimus identifies good with Christ. Dydimus the Blind, "Fragments on the Psalms," in *PG* 39, 1168 – Craig Blaising et al., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Old Testament (Psalms 1-50) VII*, (New York: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 35.

³⁶ Rashi considers that David urges those who plot against him to repent for their sins and to put their trust in God, Who can offer them much more blessing and wealth, than what they could achieve with the money offered by Saul for his capture. Obviously, the rabbi starts from the premise that the psalm was written during one of the persecutions ordered by Saul. Mayer Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms*, 186.

³⁷ "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." (Nm 6:24-26 – ESV). Cf. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 123.

³⁸ Craigie, *Psalms*, 82; cf. Charles Briggs and Emilie Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms I* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1906-07), 32. In the Book of Psalms, God is often asked to turn His face on the people to show His mercy (Ps 25:16-17; 86:15-16; 119:58, 132). Hence, the showing of the face includes a favourable disposition for a person, and its concealment proves a state of adversity, hate or contempt. In the case in which the Lord turns His face, the prayers and the cry for mercy remain unanswered or the salvation is late in coming (Ps. 31:23-24; 55:1-2). Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament V*, trans. David. E. Green (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 24.

a means of manifestation of all the feelings and attitudes, so that it was considered that the entire personality was concentrated on his face³⁹. Both in the case of men and in the case of the Lord, this concept signaled the presence of the respective person. Thus, the expression *the face of the Lord* was the most common way through which an author indicated the integral presence of the divinity⁴⁰.

If we take into account the polysemy of the verb נָשָׂא (*nāsāʾ*) – *to lift* which refers also to the lifting of a mark or a flag⁴¹, we understand that the psalmist did not want to offer to the *many* only a sign of the divine providence, but a control point to indicate the good path⁴². Thus the light of the face was not only the sign of the Lord's real presence, but also a mark to testify⁴³. Translating the imperative of this verb with a form of passive aorist (ἐσημειώθη – *was made a sign*), the text of the Septuagint lets us understand that the testimony of the Lord's presence can be seen on the faces of those who partake to His glory. Saint John Chrysostom states that this fact is obvious from the words of the psalmist who mentions that the light of God's face is not shown, it does not shine, but can be seen on man's face: "He did not say that it appeared, nor that it shone, but that it was *made a sign* proving that as something that is marked on the forehead is obvious to everyone and cannot be hidden, nor is it possible that one can fail to recognize a face full of light and that spreads streaks, the same way is your providence, o Lord. For as the light made as sign, meaning that it is impregnated on the face and it is obvious to everyone, the same way is the providence of your love for the mankind"⁴⁴. Using the same type of interpretation the Western Fathers compare this sign of the divine light on the man's face with the impression of

³⁹ Allen Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 373.

⁴⁰ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on Psalms*, 49. *Panim* is the term which the authors of the Old Testament use most often to underline the presence of a person. David Freedman et al., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary II* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 744.

⁴¹ "What are the flags good for in the army? To gather the soldiers, when they are scattered, and to hold them in unity when they are together. They are also used to show the way to the enemy. [...] The sons of men, you know the will of your princes, manifested through symbols put in front of your eyes and you are not paying attention at all to the light of the Lord, Who leads you, who commands you. The Israelites in the desert were led by a column of fire, image of the light that God put into our hearts and spirits". Timuş, *Note asupra psalmilor*, 52; cf. Olariu, *Explicarea Psalmilor*, 149.

⁴² Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms*, 186; cf. Hirsch, *The Psalms*, 23; Phillips, *The Psalms*, 34 and Delitzsch, *Biblical commentary*, 116.

⁴³ Cassiodorus considers that the sign offered by the Lord as testimony is the Cross of His Son. Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, 77; cf. J. M. Neale, *A commentary on the Psalms: from primitive and mediaeval writers and from the various office-books and hymns of the Roman, Mozarabic, Ambrosian, Gallican, Greek, Coptic, Armenian, and Syrian rites I* (London/ New York: J. Masters/Pott and Amery, 1869), 113.

⁴⁴ St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 70.

Caesar's face on a coin⁴⁵, and Origen offers a biblical example that confirms the psalmist's intention: after Moses' discussions with the lord, his face was shining so brightly, that he had to cover it with a veil. "Furthermore – underlines the Alexandrine exegete – it is obvious from the words of Psalm 67⁴⁶ that the face of the Lord, of which we talk about and which enlightens the mind of the one who is able to receive its streaks, is the cause of our understanding..."⁴⁷.

Verse 7

You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound.

The immeasurable gladness mentioned by the psalmist in the beginning of this verse confirms the fact that God already poured the brightness of His countenance into the heart overwhelmed with sufferance of the king who never ceased putting his trust in the divine help. The presence of the Lord dissipated from the king's heart all sorrow and offered him a joy superior to that which his opponents might feel when they look at the abundance of their earthly fruits: the corn, new wine and oil⁴⁸. The Hebrew version of this text accepts two translations: one of the underlines, as we have already mentioned, the superiority of the king's state of gladness in comparison with the happiest moment that his opponent might have, and the other observes the psalmist's generosity who finds the necessary spiritual strength to rejoice in the abundance of fruits that his opponents have⁴⁹. Rabbi Benjamin considers that these variants of the text do not exclude one another, because there is the possibility that the author wished to keep both nuances that emphasize two attitudes that

⁴⁵ Developing this comparison, Saint Augustin states that if Caesar has the right to ask for the things that have his face on them, then God may do the same with the soul of man. St. Augustin, *Expositions on the Psalms*, 10. Relating the concept of face and the action of sealing to Christ, Saint Cyril states: "The Son in the hidden face of God, and the Spirit sent from Him to us is light. Because we were sealed through Him, when we were first created". Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, "Tâlcuirea psalmilor," 49.

⁴⁶ "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, Selah ² that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations." (v. 1-2).

⁴⁷ Origen, "Selection from the Psalms," in *PG* 12, 1165 – Blaising et al., *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 35.

⁴⁸ Cf. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 123.

⁴⁹ Davidson, *The vitality of worship*, 23. In Midrash the congregation of Israel saw in this abundance their future prosperity: "The congregation of Israel says, because the nations of the earth have kept only seven laws, You have enriched them with the good things of this world as a reward, how many more good things will You lavish in the world to come upon us who are charged with keeping of six hundred and thirteen laws. Therefore, we rejoice when we behold the prosperity of the nations of the earth." *Midrasch Tehillim*, 47-8.

alternated⁵⁰. Thus David first manifested his kindness for his opponents showing that he does not wish them ill⁵¹, and then he showed them that he does not envy them because the gifts he had already receive from the Lord are far better. Substituting to the psalmist, Rashi observes: “Anyway, I don’t envy them, says David, because You put gladness into my heart in the time that their corn and their wine increased, because I am sure that if the Lord does so many things for those who upset Him, all the more so, in the time that will come, which is the day of harvest, He will do to those who fulfill His will”⁵².

The Fathers emphasize here the manner in which a spiritual person such as David does not settle only for the gladness generated by the abundance of fruits, but aims at the spiritual gladness. His happiness is in his heart where, according to Jesus Christ’s words, the Heavenly Kingdom exists, and not in the eyes that take pleasure in the material goods, because those who remain only at this sensory level will never be able to see the good, even if it stands right in front of them⁵³. Also, the spiritual man sees in this abundance not only the providence of the Lord, Who makes the earth give its fruits all in their due time⁵⁴, but also their spiritual meaning⁵⁵. If the corn and the wine are the fruits through which God maintains the physical life of man, they can become through His work, the gifts that will nurture man’s soul: the Holy Eucharist⁵⁶.

Verse 8

In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety

The peaceful sleep and without any torments that the psalmist is about to experience even when he is still in danger is the most obvious sign that the

⁵⁰ Segal, “Psalm 4.”

⁵¹ Kimhi, *The longer commentary*, 30.

⁵² Gruber, *Rashi’s Commentary on Psalms*, 186. Cf. Freehof, *The book of Psalms*, 18.

⁵³ St. Augustin, *Expositions on the Psalms*, 10. Cf. Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 65-6.

⁵⁴ When he speaks about the corn and wine and oil and their abundance, in the same time he speaks about rain, climate of the seasons, fertility of the earth, its fruitage, the course of the sun, the revolutions of the moon, the regular movement of the stars, the sequence of summer and winter, of autumn and spring, the knowledge of agriculture, the use of the tools and many other connected handicrafts. For if all these do not co-operate it is impossible for these fruits to grow to maturity. Hence, when he says corn, wine and oil, the prophet offers to the wise man a means to rise from part to the thinking of the whole, opening an ocean of God’s providence shown in visible things”. St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 72.

⁵⁵ Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, 79.

⁵⁶ Eftimie Zigabenu and Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea*, 87. Cf. Neale, *A commentary on the Psalms*, 114.

Lord has protected and enlarged him from his tribulations⁵⁷. The spiritual peace which he enjoys now fortifies even more his trust that no one will be able to harm him as long as he has the divine support⁵⁸. Thus, the complete trust in the Lord determines David to state that the moment he lies down in his bed, he will fall asleep without any worries⁵⁹. This reality is also marked by the adverb יָחַדָּוַי (yahdāw) – *together*, whose secondary meaning implies the idea of simultaneity⁶⁰ or fast fulfillment of an action. Taking into account the context in which this term is used, the exegetes considered that it is preferable to choose the second meaning of the word (*soon, shortly after*), because it offers coherence to the text⁶¹. In the situation in which the main sense of the adverb were used for this text, the understanding of the fragment would be rather difficult, because instead of expressing clearly that the psalmist completes both actions (lying in bed and falling asleep)⁶² the text becomes needlessly complicated. Hence, some of the rabbis associated this term with the expression *in peace* and stated that the psalmist conditions his peaceful sleep with the reconciliation with the rebelled Israelites⁶³, and the Fathers saw in the adverb *together*, either a reference to the unitary structure of man (body and soul)⁶⁴, or to the unity in David's thinking. Thus, for Saint John Chrysostom, the words *I will both lay me down in peace* mean: "collected, not split into thousands of worries,

⁵⁷ Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms* (Collegewille: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 13-4. The Fathers consider that here David refers firstly to his peaceful end (because he would not be killed), and then to the death of all those who believe in God and trust Him to receive recompense for their efforts. "According to Saint Cyril [of Jerusalem], I will receive the same and together with the saints the death similar to sleep, in peace, if I don't have the sin which is adversity to God. And thus, ending my life, God will take me to dwell into the good hopes, meaning that I will have a certain and unmovable hope". Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, "Tâlcuirea psalmilor," 50. Cf. St. Augustin, *Expositions on the Psalms*, 11; Cassiodorus, *Explanation on the Psalms*, 79 and Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 66.

⁵⁸ "The one who has such peace not only is he not afraid of barbarians or enemies, but he is not afraid of the devil himself". St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 75.

⁵⁹ Freehof, *The Book of Psalms*, 18.

⁶⁰ Kidner, *Psalms*, 73.

⁶¹ Weiser, *The Psalms*, 121. Cf. Barnes, *Notes on Psalms*, 39; Briggs and Briggs, *The book of Psalms*, 37; Olariu, *Explicarea Psalmilor*, 150 and Hirsch, *The Psalms*, 24.

⁶² "I will sleep for days in peace and without any torments, after I cast away all the fears that upset me, and not only will I just fall asleep, but I will also pall with sleep, meaning that I will do both of these". Eftimie Zigabenu and Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea*, 87.

⁶³ Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms*, 187. Cf. Cf. Goldingay, *Psalm*, 124 and Kimhi, *The longer commentary*, 30.

⁶⁴ "And *together* refers to the body and soul, meaning: "I will sleep in peace with my body and soul, for the body through death will be free from the visible enemies, and the soul will be free from the invisible enemies...". Eftimie Zigabenu and Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea*, 87.

without thinking of this or that, nor astray in the world through inquietudes, but thinking of me and what is useful for me or for man in general”⁶⁵.

In the second part of the verse, the psalmist states that the peace he feels inside his soul is owed exclusively to God Who makes him feel safe anywhere and anytime, even while sleeping when every man is vulnerable. This impenetrable protection that only God can offer, determines the king to look with a lot of detachment at the useless attempts and agitation of his opponents who will never succeed against the One who protects him.

THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION

1. Lord have mercy – premise for the Prayer of the Heart.

Evaluating the historical context and the reasons that determined the psalmist to ask for mercy from the Lord, we come to the conclusion that the expression: *Lord have mercy* (v. 2) is either the only solution, or the most common way through which he hopes to achieve deliverance. In other words, this expression indicates a personal prayer spoken with high intensity, through which heavenly mercy and support are asked for in order to obtain deliverance from a pressing state that enfolds the entire being, or from a permanent menace that places the soul into the close proximity of death⁶⁶. Thus, some of the contemporary exegetes⁶⁷ consider that through the cry: *have mercy*, the psalmist does nothing else that draw the attention as fast as he can on his helplessness and underline the need for divine protection.

Although at a first sight the prayer *Lord have mercy* indicates a mainly penitential character⁶⁸, the Fathers underlined the fact that the human being's need of divine mercy is characteristic to his nature, no matter the spiritual state he is in⁶⁹. Hence, Saint John urges us not to be ashamed to ask for God's mercy even

⁶⁵ St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 79.

⁶⁶ Craigie, *Psalms*, 119.

⁶⁷ Bratcher and Reyburn, *The book of Psalms*, 510.

⁶⁸ According to Saint John Chrysostom this cry condenses the entire delivering dimension. The prayer *have mercy* sums up the entire approach that man goes through from the fall into sin to deification: the confession and acknowledgement of the sins, imploring for mercy, forgiveness of the trespasses, deliverance from punishment and obtaining the Kingdom of Heaven. “The one who said: *have mercy!* – underlines the Holy Father – confessed and acknowledged his sins. For those who have sinned ask for mercy. The one who said: *have mercy!*, obtained forgiveness for his sins. For the one who received mercy is no longer punished. The one who said: *have mercy!*, achieved the Kingdom of Heaven. For the one that God shows mercy on is not only saved from punishment but God also makes him worthy of the future goods”. Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilii la Ana. Omilii la Saul și David. Omilii la serafimi*, trans. Dumitru Fecioru (București: IBMO, 2007), 63.

⁶⁹ Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, “Tâlcuirea psalmilor IV (30-40),” trans. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Mitropolia Olteniei* 1-3 (1990): 194-6. For a better understanding we also recommend the reading of the commentaries by father Dumitru Stăniloae to this translation. Cf. Sf. Vasile cel Mare, *Omilii la Psalmi*, in *PSB* 17, trans. Dumitru Fecioru (București: IBMO, 1986), 251 și Eftimie Zigabenu and Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea*, 487.

when we are virtuous, because in our battle with the sin, righteousness and spiritual purity are not enough to obtain the victory⁷⁰. In this respect, King David is given to us as an example for, although he considered himself not guilty for the adversity manifested by his opponents, he asked for mercy from the very first verse of this psalm. Hence, none of the things the psalmist wished for could become real unless God poured His mercy onto him: his cry would have remained unanswered, his trust would have been in vain and the Lord's look upon him with a merciful eye would have been impossible. For these reasons, the words *have mercy* offered the psalmist the trust that the deliverance from the intrigues of his opponents is conditioned only by a certain amount of time, because God cannot remain insensitive towards a persons that asks for His help in such a manner.

The prayer: *Lord have mercy* represents through its theological content and through its frequent use within the Dialogue with the Lord the climax of the oranta expressions of the Old Testament and implicitly the *heart* of the psalmic prayers⁷¹. Through the pronunciation of the divine name within this prayer, the psalmist positions himself into the sphere of communion and accomplishes an act of confession of his faith into the true and living God Who revealed Himself to his parents, and through the request *have mercy*, he opens himself to the direct communication with the grace of the Holy Spirit which is poured abundantly over those who wish to live their life mysteriously into God. The echoes of these sanctifying words were heard again in the Holy Scripture only after several centuries from the lips of the suffering who ask Christ for mercy and deliverance. Their example was followed by the Fathers of the first Christian centuries who, managing to materialize through the continuous repeating of the words *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner* a real manner of living into Christ⁷².

Hence, the words *Lord have mercy* cannot be conceived as a simple formula used for the request of God's mercy, but they rather ought to be considered to be a real ferment which determines and implies a considerable amount of

⁷⁰ Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, "Tâlcuiri la Psalmi. Tâlcuire la Psalmul 4", trans. Alexandru Mihăilă and Sabin Preda, *Studii Teologice* 1 (2008): 162.

⁷¹ The reflections of the Fathers underline the fact that *Lord have mercy* is nothing else than the *pure heart* of the Psalms, and the latter is the fruit of the prayer from the Old Testament. When the prayer *Lord have mercy* is put by the bishop of Cyrus, on Christ's lips, it becomes the Prayer of Jesus, and through Him it also becomes the prayer of the fathers and implicitly the prayer of our hearts. Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 245.

⁷² No matter the forms that it had along the years (*Lord have mercy; Lord Jesus Christ; Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God have mercy on me, the sinner* or *Jesus*) the prayer of the heart has always had as a main element the invocation of the name of the Lord, and as a secondary structure the wish to obtain the divine mercy. Being a synthesis of the two moments of the prayer of the heart (adoration and repentance), the expression *Lord have mercy* which is frequently used within the Book of Psalms may constitute the starting point and the basis from which the entire theology on the Prayer of the Heart or the Prayer of Jesus develops within the Church. Kallistos Ware, *Puterea numelui. Rugăciunea lui Iisus în spiritualitatea ortodoxă*, trans. Gabriela Moldoveanu (București: Christiana, 1992), 26-7.

actions and consequences characteristic for the human-divine communication. Because of this, the practice of the calling of the divine name and mercy with the words *Lord have mercy* was not limited to the psalmic structures⁷³, but was first adopted by several people in the New Testament, and after that by all those who wished to unite intimately with the One whose name they called within the prayer.

2. The face of the Lord – a sign of His personal presence

To underline the theological importance of the face of the Lord in the context of the pouring of His mercy, we consider that the systematic presentation of some aspects concerning the significance that the concept of *face* has within the Old Testament thinking is absolutely necessary. Because of the fact that the face of a person expresses best his/her feelings and attitudes, it was only natural that in the case of the Lord, the face was perceived as a means of manifestation of His feelings, as the profound of the nature⁷⁴. Thus the entire person of Yahwe is concentrated on His face, both love and anger, even is the latter is rather expressed by the *turning of His face* or the *absence of the face* of the Lord. In the most explicit fragment for the study of the notion (Ex 33)⁷⁵, where the Lord promises Moses that His face will walk with Israel, actually referring to the personal presence of Yahwe amongst His people. In this respect, Moses' request to see the glory of the Lord expresses his wish to be assured once mores that He is always present directly besides him⁷⁶. On the other hand, this fragment is placed within a context that allows/permits a theological exploitation of the notion, since the face seems to be a substitute of Yahwe Himself Who states clearly His refuse to accompany the people in its wandering through the desert (Ex 33:3-5⁷⁷) and His intention to send an angel to replace Him⁷⁸.

⁷³ The imperative רַחֵם (ḥonnēni) – *have mercy* occurs with this form only in the Book of Psalms, being present 18 times in 13 psalms: 4:2; 6:3; 25:16; 26:11; 27:7; 30:11; 31:10; 41:5.11; 51:3; 56:2; 57:2; 86:3.15; 119:29.58. 132. To this one may add three connected forms: רַחֵם (ḥānēnēni) – *hapax legomenon* from Psalm 9:14, רַחֵם (yḥonnēni) from Ps. 67:2 and 123:2 and רַחֵם (ḥonnēni) from Ps. 123:3.

⁷⁴ Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, 373.

⁷⁵ For a complete analysis of this text we recommend: Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, "Despre viața lui Moise sau despre desăvârșirea prin virtute," in *PSB* 29, trans. Dumitru Stăniloae and Ioan Buga, (București: IBMO, 1982), 88-99.

⁷⁶ John Durham, *Exodus*, in *WBC* 3 (Dallas: Word, Inc., 2002), 458.

⁷⁷ "Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people. When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. For the LORD had said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, 'You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.'" (Ex 33:3-5 – ESV)

⁷⁸ Edmond Jacob, *Théologie de l'Ancient Testament* (Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1955), 62.

The distinction between Yahwe and His face does not correspond completely to the Israelite representations. The fact that God reveals Himself and that man can see Him is a statement with respect to which, for the old Israel, there is no doubt. The name *Penuel*, which confirms the fact that the patriarch Jacob saw the Lord face to face, and the example of Moses who spoke to God face to face shows us the fact that the face was not a problem for the Jewish thinking (Ex 33:11; Nm 12:7-8⁷⁹; 14:14). However early in the history of Israel occurred the statement that no man can see the face of the Lord (Ex 33:20-23; 1 Kgs 19:11-13⁸⁰). To accommodate the idea of the presence of the Lord with the fact that He is invisible and with His unity, *the notions of angel and glory* (which had a material sublayer, one in humanity, the other one in nature) gradually outran the notion of *face* as a form for the presentation of the Lord. However, Edmund Jacob considers that “we must observe that the face never ceased to be considered a divine revelation; the search of Yahwe’s face, in other words His personal presence, condenses both the cult of the Temple⁸¹, and the communion with God through personal prayer (Ps 63:1-3⁸²) and the faithful were confident that this search of the face had as recompense Yahwe’s blessing, which consisted of Him turning His face towards them: The Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you! (Nm 6:25; cf. Ps 80:3⁸³.7.19)”⁸⁴.

CULTIC USE

Psalm 4 is read each Saturday evening within the Vespers as part of the first kathismata (Ps 1-8). Separately, it is read within the service of the Great Compline on Sundays and other important feasts. Verse 3 is used as prokeimenon on every Monday in the Great Lent and it is also read as a stich within the polyeleos from October 14th, December 5th and January 17th and 25th. Verse 6 is used as a koinonikon (communion chant) for the Liturgy on September 14th and we can also find it as a stich for the megalynaria of the polyeleos of the same day. And the words of the verses 6-8 are part of the prayer we say after dinner⁸⁵.

⁷⁹ “Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” (Nm 12:7-8 – ESV)

⁸⁰ “And he said, “Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD.” And behold, the LORD passed by... And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.” (1 Kgs 19:11-13 – ESV)

⁸¹ Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, 373.

⁸² “...in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.” (Ps 63:1-3)

⁸³ “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!” (Ps 80:3).

⁸⁴ Jacob, *Théologie de l’Ancient Testament*, 62. Cf. Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 745.

⁸⁵ See Athanasie Negoită, *Psaltirea în cultul Bisericii ortodoxe* (București: Tipografia Cărților bisericești, 1940), 61, 65, 132 și 141.

UPDATING

Most often, people have the tendency to compel God (based on some previous merits or, what is much worse, under the form of an insidious coercion) to answer immediately to the requests they make in difficult times of their lives. If these requests are not answered, then the Lord is forced to accept, besides the improper attitude, their anger, rebellion, reproaches and even abuse. But the psalmist shows us that the Lord hears our prayer in the very moment we cry for help. If the answer is late in coming or if our request is not solved the way we would wish it, it's not because of an evil intention, but rather because of other realities: sometimes we ask for things that we don't need or are not of any use to us, others we don't deserve to have our requests fulfilled and maybe the time when we consider we should receive help is not the most suitable. In these conditions, if we want God to always answer positively to our requests it is necessary that we take into account the following aspects: our request must not bring sorrows to our neighbors; it must be formulated in agreement with the divine commandments, it must be supported by a virtuous living and it must be followed by perseverance and prayers of gratitude. Besides these it is important to emphasize the fact that God in His omniscience prepares for us in advance the things we are going to ask for at a certain point and that in order to receive them we must believe that in the moment we asked for them we have already received them, as Christ Himself suggested (cf. Mk 11:24).

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