

The Imprecatory Psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours after the Second Vatican Council: Reform, Reception and the Current State of the Debate

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Abstract: Since 1970, the Catholic Church has not used the so-called imprecatory Psalms and verses in the Liturgy of the Hours (in total, 122 verses have been removed). This article aims to analyze the presence of controversial fragments of the Psalms in the liturgy. It consists of four parts. First, it presents the history of the process that began during the Second Vatican Council and led to the decision to remove such fragments from the liturgy. What follows, is an overview of the reception and opinions on the imprecatory Psalms over the past fifty years. The next part of this study collects arguments in favor of removing the questionable texts from the liturgy as well as an argument in favor of keeping them in it. The article concludes with an appendix of all the texts from the Book of Psalms that have been removed from the Liturgy of the Hours. The author is personally in favor of leaving the unwanted verses in the liturgy.

Keywords: Psalms, imprecations, Second Vatican Council, Old Testament

All 150 Psalms had their place in the liturgy of the Catholic Church until the Second Vatican Council. Pope Paul VI's apostolic constitution *Laudis Canticum* "proclaiming prayerful service of God renewed upon the decree of the Second Vatican Council," promulgated on November 1, 1970, explains that "a few of the Psalms and verses that are somewhat harsh in tone have been omitted, especially because of the difficulties anticipated from their use in vernacular celebration."¹ The purpose of the following article is to present the history of the removal of imprecatory verses, analyze the problem under discussion from the perspective of half a century after this decision was made, and present a collection of arguments in favor of and against the presence of the imprecatory Psalms in the liturgy.

¹ See: <https://adoremus.org/2007/12/laudis-canticum/#Anchor-Laudis-49575> (access 24.10.2022). In Latin: https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/la/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-vi_apc_19701101_laudis-canticum.html (access 21.10.2022).

1. The History of the Removal of Imprecatory Verses

The concept and definition of the imprecatory Psalms are not precise in the sense that not every Biblical scholar and not every denomination points to the same collection of entire Psalms or individual verses.² However, the term “imprecatory Psalms” itself has for a long time been established in modern Biblical studies, and its definition is rather clear.³ These are primarily texts in which the Psalmist wishes broadly understood misfortune upon his enemies.

It would be greatly interesting to study the place of the Imprecatory Psalms in the Jewish and Christian liturgies over the past two thousand years. However, the author will limit himself to the turning point which was the Second Vatican Council because that time and place influenced the discussion and ultimate removal of the imprecatory Psalms and verses from the Liturgy of the Hours of the Catholic Church. It is worth at least mentioning that the synagogal liturgy recites these Psalms in a *sotto voce*, as if in an awareness of the fact that it is better to accept these words in silence than to remove them.⁴ The Orthodox Liturgy of the Hours, which is also used in the Eastern Catholic Churches of the Byzantine Rite, recites the entire Psalter every week, dividing it into twenty *kathismata*, each consisting of three parts.⁵ In the Anglican liturgy, Psalm 57 has been completely removed, while, in 1928, the imprecatory verses were placed in parentheses for those who would like to omit them.⁶ Meanwhile, the reformed churches have completely removed twenty-one Psalms from the prayer.⁷

With regards to the Catholic Church, it was not so much the Second Vatican Council itself as the first years following it that had the greatest impact on the decision to remove certain fragments from the liturgy. In a sense, it all started at the Council.⁸

The first voices regarding the presence of the imprecatory Psalms appeared in the council hall on October 21, 1963, during the sessions devoted to the constitution on the liturgy. Cardinals Bacci and Ernesto Ruffini, three bishops, and two other Council fathers wanted to remove the imprecatory Psalms from the new Breviary as those that speak of revenge and those that do not sufficiently represent

² Simango – Krüger, “An Overview,” 598.

³ For example, Chalmers, “The Imprecations” (1903); Barns, “The Psalms” (1908); Steinmetzer, “Babylonische Parallelen” (1912); Ubbelohde, *Fluchpsalmen* (1938); Miller, “Fluchpsalmen” (1943).

⁴ Bianchi, *Pregare i Salmi*, 38.

⁵ Holladay, *The Psalms*, 375–377; Mercenier – Paris, *La Priere*, 195–197; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kathisma> (access 28.07.2018).

⁶ Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 490; Shepherd, “The Place of the Imprecatory Psalms,” 27–47; <http://bible.oremus.org/?version=lp> (access 20.02.2022).

⁷ Paquier, *L'Office divin*; Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 491.

⁸ The main source documents are: Coetus IX, *Rapport general sur l'Office divin* [31 juillet 1966] (Aimé-Georges Martimort), Fondo Braga, Roma, 1–15; Marini, “Elenco degli «Schemata»,” 548–596.

revelation. However, the great majority of the Council fathers opposed this proposal; its opponents included Bishop Guano and the abbots Prous and Reetz. Reetz said: “Ecclesia catholica [...] per saecula totum psalterium ex integro cecinit, et non est cur in saeculo vigesimo ab hac traditione declinet.”⁹

During the voting on the new constitution, only two votes were in favor of accepting Point 91: “iuxta modum: supprimantur psalmi imprecatorii.” An account from October 21, 1963, reveals that they were rejected. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the constitution on the liturgy, which was promulgated on October 4, 1963, makes no mention of the imprecatory Psalms. However, Article 91 of the constitution would be the basis for further debate: “So that it may really be possible in practice to observe the course of the hours proposed in Art. 89, the psalms are no longer to be distributed throughout one week, but through some longer period of time. The work of revising the psalter, already happily begun, is to be finished as soon as possible, and is to take into account the style of Christian Latin, the liturgical use of Psalms, also when sung, and the entire tradition of the Latin Church.”

Pursuant to the *motu proprio Sacram liturgiam*, on January 25, 1964, Pope Paul VI summoned the *Consilium ad exsequendam Constitutionem de sacra liturgia* to implement the constitution on the liturgy, including the compilation of new liturgical texts. Ultimately, fifty-three cardinals and bishops as well as more than two hundred experts and consultants became members of the Council (Consilium).¹⁰ Its first president was Giacomo Cardinal Lercaro, who was succeeded by Benno Cardinal Gut; its secretary was Annibale Bugnini. The entire Council was divided into study groups responsible for the reform of individual books: the Missal, the Breviary, the Pontifical, the Martyrology, and the Ceremonial of Bishops. Because these books and texts consist of several elements, the appropriate number of sub-committees and experts was assigned to each book. Ultimately, thirty-nine study groups were formed.¹¹ The reform of the Breviary was entrusted to a total of nine study groups (*coetus*), eight specialized groups, a ninth coordinating group, and one responsible for the structure of the whole whose relator was Aimé Martimort. A third study group, *De psalmis distribuendis*, whose relator was Joseph Pascher, with Andre Rose as its secretary, and whose members were Angelo Paredi, Balthasar Fischer, Jorge Pinell, Herman Schmidt, and Vincenzo Raffa, was responsible for the arrangement of the Psalms. Work on the Breviary was essentially conducted on three levels: Study Group 3 (*coetus* III), Coordinating Group (*coetus* IX), and the General Assembly of the entire Council.

⁹ “The Catholic Church has prayed the great Psalter in its entirety for centuries; thus, there is no reason why we should abandon this tradition in the twentieth century;” see Raffa, “I salmi ‘imprecatorii;” 663.

¹⁰ A list of all the members of the commission can be found in Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 907–915.

¹¹ Stefański, “Rola consilium,” 298.

The first draft of this liturgical book appeared on April 16, 1964; it does not mention the topic of the removal of any verses. However, during the meetings of the study groups, especially in September 1964, there did appear discussions on whether SC 91 allows for the omission of certain fragments or not. During the vote of September 24, the majority of the third group was in favor of the position that SC 91 does not assume the rejection of certain Psalms (four in favor and two against). Two days later, Group 9 voted, achieving an even more unanimous position (eleven votes in favor of the integrity of the entire Psalter and one against). This topic was discussed on October 1 during the fourth session of the Plenary Council. Bishop Joseph Martin recalled that the Council did not accept the opinion of Cardinal Ruffini regarding the removal of certain Psalms from the Liturgy of the Hours. Ultimately, out of twenty-five fathers, twenty-one voted in favor of preserving all the Psalms. Four were opposed, arguing that the Council did not clearly prohibit the removal of certain Psalms, which was a sign that it allowed the freedom of choice.

During the remaining meetings in the fall of 1964 and throughout 1965, the Council's opinion upheld the traditional position regardless of whether the new Breviary would be divided into four weeks or two. However, publications in the media and discussions on liturgical reform began to increasingly influence its work.

On December 1, 1965, during the fourth session of the Plenary Council, one of the multiple proposals involved moving the imprecatory Psalms from the weekly cycle to another time. Martimort quoted Cardinal Lercaro, the President of the Consilium, who said during an international congress in Assisi that all Psalms should remain, although it would be worth considering dedicating them to another time than the ordinary weekly cycle. One of the archbishops explained that the difficulties related to the Psalter are subjective rather than objective in nature and result from a lack of understanding of the Biblical, patristic, and liturgical sense as well as medieval piety. The contingent removal of the imprecatory Psalms would lead to the removal of other Psalms. Another archbishop pointed out that there is no dogmatized principle according to which individual verses or psalms cannot be removed from the Breviary. Yet another German prelate reported on various complaints about these Psalms, such as that Carmelite nuns from Dachau wrote that they could not pray these Psalms as they think that they direct them against the Nazis. Meanwhile, Bishop Otto Spulbeck of Dresden-Meissen argued that at that time, the situation in Eastern Europe, which was under communist domination, demanded that the appropriate expressions *contra diabolum* should not be abandoned. Ultimately, in response to various voices, it was decided to send a detailed questionnaire to bishops and experts. Most bishops responded in favor of the use of the imprecatory Psalms at a different time in the liturgical year, while the experts supported keeping them in the weekly cycle.¹²

¹² Raffa, "I salmi 'imprecatori,'" 666–667.

Another important element of this process of change was Cardinal Lercaro's letter sent to Martimort on April 5, 1966, in which he writes about the suggestion Pope Paul VI made to him during a March 18 audience. According to it, the imprecatory Psalms should be used during the periods of the year that most correspond to their content. It was uncertain whether this was the pope's private opinion or a more or less binding suggestion.

A little more than three months later, on July 31, 1966, Martimort sent to all the members of Group 9 a forty-one-page analysis. In it, he noted that the Anglican Church omits Ps 58 (however, it does not omit Ps 83), while the verses that can be omitted during recitation are in parentheses. In the reformed churches, meanwhile, twenty-one Psalms are omitted, while eight have been shortened. Finally, the Taizé community initially omitted five Psalms, while in the second stage, four Psalms were abandoned: all those that contained elements related to struggle, historical events and geographical places, or were simply too difficult.¹³ After an analysis from the perspective of history, ecumenism, Christian exegesis, and spirituality, it proposed to follow the Anglican path, which meant granting to those who pray the possibility to omit several imprecatory Psalms and a certain number of similar verses. All these Psalms, however, should remain in the weekly cycle.

Such a proposal was accepted by the group of relators on September 26, 1966, with a strong majority in favor (twenty-three in favor, two against, two after amendments had been made, and two blank ballots) as well as on October 13 during the seventh session of the Plenary Council (twenty-four votes in favor, six against, and three empty ballots¹⁴). A general consensus was reached that a solution emerged that was satisfactory to all; this consensus lasted until 1968.

During the first synod of bishops from September 29 to October 29, the problem of the imprecatory Psalms was also discussed. During the vote on October 27, 122 Council fathers were in favor of keeping them in the ordinary cycle with the possibility of omitting them when the Liturgy of the Hours is prayed together with the people, while forty-nine were opposed.¹⁵

In a letter to Martimort, dated January 31, 1968, the new chairman of the Council, Cardinal Gut, presented the opinion of Pope Paul VI, who during an audience on January 3 seemed to prefer the selection of Psalms that were more appropriate to Christian prayer, assuming the omission of imprecatory and historical texts with the possibility of their use on special occasions.¹⁶

During a meeting of Group 9 on February 28, 1968, all these aspects were discussed once more, and it was decided to send the pope an inquiry asking if he would

¹³ Stefański, "Dystrybucja psalmów," 473.

¹⁴ Raffa, "I salmi 'imprecatori,'" 669.

¹⁵ Perrin, "Imprécations du Psautier," 72.

¹⁶ Raffa, "I salmi 'imprecatori,'" 670.

firmly reject the previous solution and, if not, a version omitting three Psalms and problematic verses in other Psalms was prepared. It was emphasized that if the pope would at some point choose the version removing certain verses, this should be supported by solely psychological and subjective arguments resulting from contemporary sensitivities and not by claiming that these texts were not appropriate for Christian prayer.¹⁷

During the tenth session of the Plenary Council (April 16–30, 1968) at the level of Group 9, both the relators of individual groups and bishops who were present at the session maintained their support for the last compromise solution which had been achieved in the fall of 1966. It was decided to send the questionnaire to the pope, at the same time substantiating reasons in favor of such a response, although the decision was left to his discretion.¹⁸

On May 10, 1968, Martimort presented to the pope not only the position of the *Consilium* along with the results of the voting, in which the majority opposed the removal of any fragments, but also his own opinion, which was an expression of the minority position.¹⁹ This opinion was accepted by the pope during an audience on May 18, 1968, and presented in a letter to Martimort that was relayed by Cardinal Gut on June 7, 1968. On the one hand, Paul VI upheld his earlier position and concurred with the opinion of Martimort and his secretariat: “Se desiderare ut omittantur e cyclo ordinario psalterii psalmi ex integro «imprecatorii» nempe psalmi 57,82 et 108 atque illae partes quae propositae erant ad libitum et ideo inter parentheses includenda.”²⁰

On July 16, 1968, Martimort informed the members of Group 9 of the pope’s position. They were assembled in Ferrara di Monte Baldo (Verona) to edit the *Institutio Generalis de Liturgia Horarum*. Ultimately, this position was presented in the *General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours* (131) on February 2, 1971: “Three Psalms (58, 83, and 109) have been omitted from the psalter cycle because of their curses; in the same way, some verses have been omitted from certain Psalms, as noted at the head of each. The reason for the omission is a certain psychological difficulty, even though the Psalms of imprecation are in fact used as prayer in the New Testament, for example, Rv 6:10, and in no sense to encourage the use of curses.”

¹⁷ Raffa, “I salmi ‘imprecatori,’” 671.

¹⁸ Stefański, “Dystrybucja psalmów,” 477–478.

¹⁹ Twenty-four persons voted in favor of keeping Ps 58, 83, and 109; five were against, while one ballot was blank. Eighteen persons voted in favor of keeping the other verses, while seven opted for their removal, Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 501.

²⁰ Paul VI’s decision may have resulted from the fact that he always opted for a liturgy close to the people, at the same time citing St. Augustine: “It is better that we be reprimanded by grammarians than not understood by people” (*Ennarationes in Psalmos*, Ps 138:20), Perrin, “Imprécations du Psautier,” 80.

In sum, three Psalms were removed in their entirety (58, 83, and 109), while some fragments were removed from nineteen Psalms.²¹ One verse was removed from six Psalms: 5:11; 54:7; 55:16; 110:6; 141:10; 143:12. A verse and a half or two verses were removed from four Psalms: 28:4–5; 31:18–19; 40:15–16; 56:7b–8. Three to five verses were removed from six Psalms: 21:9–13; 63:10–12; 79:6–7, 12; 137:7–9; 139:19–22; 140:10–12. Finally, more than five verses were removed from three Psalms: 35:3a, 4–8, 20–21, 24–26; 59:6–9, 12; 69:23–29.²² In total, 122 verses, or about 5 percent of the Book of Psalms, were removed.²³

All these Psalms remained only in the monastic Liturgy of the Hours; the removed verses were placed in parentheses.²⁴

With respect to lectionaries, other principles guided the selection and arrangement of Psalms as there was no assumption that all should be proclaimed in their entirety during the Eucharist. However, it is worth noting that, with some small exceptions, the Liturgy of the Word also lacks the imprecatory Psalms. Some verses that had been removed from the Liturgy of the Hours remained: Ps 28:4–5; 35:20–21, 24–26, but others were also omitted: not only Ps 139:19–22 but also Ps 139:23–24. The lectionary also lacks, for example, Ps 60:10; 108:10: “Moab is my washbowl.”²⁵

2. Reception and Discussion after the Second Vatican Council

The removal of more than 120 verses from the Divine Office was generally well-received. When almost five thousand copies of the new version were sent to bishops and various Catholic communities around the world on January 17, 1969, the majority of the 873 responses expressed satisfaction with the results.²⁶ If this voting were held today, the majority would perhaps likewise be in favor of not changing what liturgical reform has decided. However, an overview of academic publications on the imprecatory Psalms during the last fifty years after the Council that have been written not only by Catholic Biblical scholars and theologians inclines one to posit the thesis that the further from the Council, the more voices demand the return of the removed Psalms.

In 1981, J. Carl Laney noted that just as Christians do not follow Old Testament diets, likewise the imprecatory Psalms should not be used in the era of the Church

²¹ The text of the removed verses can be found in the appendix preceding the bibliography.

²² Holladay, *The Psalms*, 305.

²³ Perrin, “Imprécations du Psautier,” 68.

²⁴ Lameri, *La liturgia delle Ore*, 36.

²⁵ Holladay, *The Psalms*, 314.

²⁶ Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 504.

of saints, in the era of the New Testament.²⁷ In this way, he refers to C.S. Lewis's well-known opinion preceding the Council that both the translation of these texts and their use are pointless.²⁸

In 1992, Matías Augé, who studied the use of the imprecatory Psalms in monastic communities in antiquity, notices that imprecatory texts were used often, while their understanding was facilitated by allegorical interpretation. The meaning of these Psalms is more than merely historical. They must be used if the reader is to be aware of real difficulties.

In the 1994 monograph *Ein Gott der Rache. Feindpsalmen Verstehen*²⁹ Erich Zenger not only tries to understand the problematic verses; he also puts forth the thesis that they should not be removed. If the literary genre to which they belong is taken into consideration, with a serious approach to the problem of injustice, and if they are treated as a prayer and an act of speech, then they seem more necessary than appropriate. Beginning with his preface, the author makes no attempt to conceal that his aim is an apology for the use of the imprecatory Psalms both in private prayer and in the common liturgy.³⁰

In two more articles published three years later, John Shepherd would argue that the imprecatory Psalms should neither be ashamed of nor avoided but rather should be treated as a still relevant and important part of God's Word.³¹

Also in 1997, Enzo Bianchi published a book devoted to a deeper reading of the Psalms; in it, he explicitly states that these verses have been removed from the liturgy because they have been misunderstood.³² He asks rhetorically: Who gives us the authority to remove a single iota or line from the Word of God, which Christ Himself said shall not be removed? He argued that they remain because emotions of wrath are necessary in a world with so much injustice and to express solidarity with those who suffer.

The same year, Francis Watson wrote that the use of the imprecatory Psalms in the Christian liturgy can in no way be justified.³³

In 2002, Joh Day spoke out in favor of the unwanted verses. He maintained that he was in favor of the thesis that both during the times of the New Testament and in modern times, the use of such prayers against the enemies of God and His people remains relevant.³⁴

27 Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," 43–44.

28 Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 22.

29 The title of the Italian edition more faithfully reflects the author's thesis: *Un Dio di vendetta? Sorprendente attualità dei salmi "imprecatori"* (Milano 2005).

30 Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 6.

31 Shepherd, "The Place of the Imprecatory Psalms," 27–47, 110–126.

32 Bianchi, *Pregare i Salmi*.

33 Watson, *Text and Truth*, 121.

34 Day, "The Imprecatory Psalms," 166–186.

In 2006, Reed Lessing emphasized that the Word of God is a two-edged sword and thus should be used not only as honey for human hearts but also as a sharp weapon that recalls God's harshness towards evil.³⁵

Another approach was taken by Albert Cardinal Vanhoye, who in an interview with Lucas Teixeira published on September 19, 2008, on the website *Zenit. Il mondo visto da Roma* said that it was good that these verses have been removed. According to him, this is "necessary and useful from the perspective of the acceptance of the Word of God, that we can remove things that have been improved by Jesus."³⁶

One year later, Roberto Spataro, who knew Cardinal Vanhoye's opinion, spoke out in defense of the unwanted Psalms, referring to the Church Fathers.³⁷ He quoted Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Jerome, and Chrysostom to arrive at the conclusion that the use of these Psalms during prayer not only can be tolerated; in fact, it can prove quite fruitful. However, the focus should be more on spiritual reading than on the historical-critical method.

In 2011, the author of this paper wrote an article presenting five positive appraisals of the Imprecatory Psalms.³⁸

In 2013, Brent Strawn tried to explain the imprecatory Psalms in reference to gangsta rap (especially using the case of Ice Cube). This sub-genre of rap frequently deals with the topics of violence, drugs, and racism and in a sense "canonizes" words that are vulgar and very strong, but in this type of music, they are not considered unacceptable.³⁹ A similar approach should be adopted with regard to the imprecatory Psalms and greater emphasis should be placed on understanding their unique genre.

That same year, Daniel Nehrbass's dissertation on the therapeutic and preaching virtues of the imprecatory Psalms was published.⁴⁰ In addition to many historical problems and the presentation of a panorama of diverse opinions, Nehrbass aimed to demonstrate the relevance of the unwanted verses and their usefulness even in so-called anger therapy.⁴¹

In 2016, an expanded edition of James Adams' work was published for the first time since 1991.⁴² Adams recalls that the unwanted verses are also Sacred Scripture. He specifies that although one cannot pray for the suffering of one's personal enemies, such prayer is acceptable when referring to God's enemies: sin, evil, and Satan.

³⁵ Lessing, "Broken Teeth," 368–370.

³⁶ <https://it.zenit.org/2008/09/19/la-sacra-scrittura-e-essenziale-per-conoscere-cristo/> (access 21.10.2022).

³⁷ Spataro, "È possibile pregare," 453–471.

³⁸ Węgrzyniak, "Granica miłości," 22–29. See also Węgrzyniak, "Kościół usunął z liturgii trzy tajemnicze psalmy".

³⁹ Strawn, "Sanctified," 403–417.

⁴⁰ Nehrbass, *Praying Curses*.

⁴¹ In a review of Nehrbass's monograph, Abraham Kuruvilla (rev. of Nehrbass, *Praying Curses*, 91–92) accuses him of not resolving most of the problems related to the imprecatory Psalms, despite his ambitious goals.

⁴² Adams, *War Psalms*.

In 2018, Jamie Grant, who was aware of the difficulties resulting from the use of the imprecatory Psalms in the liturgy, opted in favor of their use, emphasizing the proper understanding of these texts as a sub-genre of the Psalms of Lament.

One year later, two authors, Nicoletta Gatti and Daniel Yeboah, wrote about the phenomenon of the use of the imprecatory Psalms in Ghana.⁴³ One effect of the removal of these texts from the liturgy of Christian churches and considering them as un-Christian is that people defect to cults and other groups that pray using these texts. The authors put forth the hypothesis that these texts should be used in the liturgy as a powerful tool that makes it possible to see the world with the eyes of a victim.

In 2020, Charlie Trimm, who compared the texts about Babylon (Ps 137 and Jer 29:7 as well as Jer 50–51), arrived at the conclusion that it is possible to reconcile love for one's enemies with a prayer that God avenges their misdeeds. Ultimately, the aim is that it is God Himself, not man, who reacts to evil.⁴⁴

Considering the works that appeared from the end of the Second Vatican Council until the present, a thesis can be formulated that although there is no unanimous agreement with respect to the use of the imprecatory Psalms in the liturgy, there is a visible tendency to defend these Psalms and pray using them. To these opinions, one can add the experience of people who participated in more than a dozen lectures on Ps 83 that the author of this article gave in Kraków in 2016.⁴⁵ Upon the conclusion of these lectures, they asked in amazement why this Psalm had been removed from the liturgy since there was nothing "bad" in it.

3. Arguments in Favor of Removing Imprecatory Verses from the Liturgy

The arguments that have appeared from the beginning of the discussions on imprecatory verses in the Liturgy of the Hours and that are still used to support their removal from the liturgy are as follows:

- 1) These verses do not represent the fullness of revelation received in Jesus Christ.⁴⁶

⁴³ Gatti – Yeboah, "Cursing Back to Life?" 1–29.

⁴⁴ Trimm, "Praying for the Peace," 13–33.

⁴⁵ Węgrzyński, "Środy Biblijne," <https://wegrzyniak.com/biblista/srody-biblijne>.

⁴⁶ This opinion was expressed in the council auditorium on October 21, 1963; Raffa, "I salmi 'imprecatori,'" 663.

- 2) These verses contain very difficult expressions that are incompatible with modern-day sensibilities.⁴⁷ Thus, the motivation for their removal is purely psychological.⁴⁸
- 3) These verses should not be recited by all but only by those who have a deeper knowledge of Sacred Scripture so that they may use it with the proper understanding and spiritual benefit.⁴⁹ Because liturgical reform encourages all people to actively participate in the liturgy, it is better to remove difficult verses, bearing in mind that not everyone is properly prepared.⁵⁰ The lack of a Biblical sense, patristic and liturgical tradition, and the disappearance of medieval piety make it impossible to properly understand them.⁵¹
- 4) When reciting these verses, people, especially the young, feel a certain spiritual distaste.⁵² Thus, it should be unsurprising that Christians find it difficult to internalize some Psalms during prayer.⁵³
- 5) When reciting these verses, some think ill of people who resemble the Psalmist's enemies.⁵⁴
- 6) Difficulties arise when the Psalms are recited in vernacular languages. Thus, if it is decided to celebrate the liturgy in vernacular languages, it is better to abstain from using these Psalms.⁵⁵
- 7) The Liturgy of the Hours is a form of prayer, and some expressions of anger and hate do not facilitate unity with God and praise of Him, even though they demand great familiarity with Biblical culture. Keeping them in parentheses for optional use would be a sign that the intention is to keep them only formally.⁵⁶ It is better to select texts that are more appropriate to Christian prayer.⁵⁷
- 8) The entire Old Testament is not used in the Liturgy of the Hours; thus, why not select only some Psalms if it is only some fragments of the Old Testament that are selected anyway.⁵⁸

⁴⁷ Such an opinion was presented by, for example, Mortimort during his audience with Paul VI on November 10, 1966; Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 495.

⁴⁸ The opinion of Group IX expressed on February 28, 1968; Raffa, "I salmi 'imprecatori,'" 671; Pascher, "Il nuovo ordinamento," 161–162.

⁴⁹ This opinion was expressed at the Synod of Bishops on October 26, 1967; Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 498.

⁵⁰ See Lameri, *La liturgia delle Ore*, 36.

⁵¹ This opinion was expressed on December 1, 1965; Raffa, "I salmi 'imprecatori,'" 666.

⁵² This opinion was recorded during the ninth session of the Plenary Council (December 10, 1967); Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 499.

⁵³ Lameri, *La liturgia delle Ore*, 38.

⁵⁴ The opinion of Carmelite nuns interned in Dachau; Raffa, "I salmi 'imprecatori,'" 667.

⁵⁵ Paul VI, *Laudes Canticum*; Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 499; Lameri, *La liturgia delle Ore*, 36.

⁵⁶ Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 500.

⁵⁷ Paul VI's opinion from January 3, 1968; Raffa, "I salmi 'imprecatori,'" 671. Likewise, John XXIII was in favor of choosing more beautiful Psalms and those that have greater relevance to Christian revelation; Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 499.

⁵⁸ Martimort's opinion included in a report to Paul VI (May 10, 1968); Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 503.

- 9) The Constitution on the Liturgy did not take a unanimous position on the impossibility of the removal of certain verses.⁵⁹

4. Arguments in Favor of an Integral Reading of the Psalter

- 1) Jesus did not reject any Psalm; on the contrary, He prayed all the Psalms.⁶⁰
- 2) For centuries, the Church has recited the entire Psalter; thus, there is no reason to change this tradition.⁶¹
- 3) The imprecatory Psalms are also inspired by the Holy Spirit. They are also God's Word, a prophetic text that is good and holy. To remove them would be an affront to the Holy Spirit.⁶² The grace of the Holy Spirit supports those who sing them with faith and good will.⁶³
- 4) The removal of these verses does not resolve the problem of Biblical curses.⁶⁴ Sooner or later, believers will be confronted with the proper understanding of these fragments of the Bible that are also God's word.
- 5) The Council fathers did not intend to remove any fragments from the Psalter. Both the discussion in the Council auditorium on October 21, 1963, and all the votes during the Council's work (*Consilium ad exsequendam Constitutionem de sacra liturgia*) at each of its levels as well as the position of the first Synod of Bishops are evidence that the majority was always in favor of keeping all the Psalms in the liturgy.⁶⁵
- 6) The Psalms are not recited in one's own name but *in persona Christi et Ecclesiae*; thus, efforts to feed the soul are necessary.⁶⁶ In the Christian interpretation, praying these Psalms is carrying the cries of the tormented to God. Jesus took upon

⁵⁹ An opinion presented on October 1, 1964, as part of the discussion on the understanding of SC 91; Raffa, "I salmi 'imprecatori,'" 665. A similar opinion was presented on December 1, 1965, when one archbishop asked where is it dogmatized that all the Psalms must be recited in the liturgy; Raffa, "I salmi 'imprecatori,'" 667.

⁶⁰ Bianchi, *Pregare i Salmi*, 32–33.

⁶¹ Such was the argumentation of the abbot Reetz during his speech on October 21, 1963; Raffa, "I salmi 'imprecatori,'" 663.

⁶² Raffa, "I salmi 'imprecatori,'" 672.

⁶³ Lameri, *La liturgia delle Ore*, 102.

⁶⁴ "La nostra opinione e che i salmi o i versetti imprecatori vanno lasciati: non possono essere aboliti, perché sono la parola di Dio! Se non li comprendiamo, facciamo come i rabbini che consigliano di leggerli sottovoce, senza proclamarli con canto, ma lasciamoli, affinché la parola di Dio sia intatta" (Bianchi, *Pregare i Salmi*, 39).

⁶⁵ Louis Bouyer even claims that the promoter of the removal of the Psalms was Annibale Bugnini, who successfully pushed for this despite the skepticism of the Council, groundlessly (according to Bouyer's opinion) referring to the pope's will; Bouyer, *Memories*, "Chapter XII: Around a Council."

⁶⁶ The opinion of Martimort from December 1, 1965; Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 486.

Himself all curses (see Gal 3:13); thus, praying using these words means being in solidarity with Christ and other people.⁶⁷

- 7) These Psalms should be read in accordance with their literary genres, not according to the feelings of those who read them.⁶⁸ In their literary genre, the imprecations do not seek vengeance but rather God's intervention to restore justice.⁶⁹ If this restoration of justice involves levying a punishment, like almost every restoration of justice, then one cannot consider it improper to ask God for punishment for His enemies, especially if the dispensing of justice is left to God.⁷⁰ An aim of the literary genre of imprecations in the life of both individual persons and the Church and world is to mention one's enemies at every level and every form of injustice by name.⁷¹
- 8) These Psalms bring great spiritual benefit, including when they are said during prayer, under the condition that one is capable of distinguishing between that whose value is immutable and the variable elements of human language. Although they are not the highest form of prayer, when read considering the Paschal Mystery they take on additional significance and meaning.⁷² And it is indispensable to, as much as possible, "improve [one's] understanding of the liturgy and of the Bible, especially of the Psalms" (SC 90) and realize how to proceed so that they may become one's own prayer.⁷³
- 9) This is appropriate as an expression *contra diabolum* for people who are experiencing oppression. To throw these verses out would be akin to forgetting contemporary enemies, including Satan.⁷⁴ Particularly difficult situations demand reciting the entire Psalter.⁷⁵ To decline to do so would be akin to standing before God and pretending that it would be improper to mention certain things.
- 10) The lack of an objective criterion for the removal of certain verses leads to the danger of subjectivism.⁷⁶ If these fragments are removed today, what can stop removing others in the future?⁷⁷

⁶⁷ Menichelli, *I salmi*, 60; Zenger, "Die Gotteszeugenschaft," 37.

⁶⁸ Sessa, "Sal 137," 132; Althann, "The Psalms," 7; The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Inspiration*, no. 128.

⁶⁹ Menichelli, *I salmi*, 58; The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Inspiration*, no. 128.

⁷⁰ Bianchi, *I Salmi*, 59. The Jews also understood the imprecatory Psalms as a plea for the conversion of sinners (Berakhot 10a); Bianchi, *Pregare i Salmi*, 41.

⁷¹ Sessa, "Sal 137," 132, 170; Anderson, "King David," 270.

⁷² The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People*, no. 48.

⁷³ Lameri, *La liturgia delle Ore*, 102.

⁷⁴ Jacquet, *Les Psaumes*, 142.

⁷⁵ The opinion of Bishop Spulbeck expressed on December 1, 1965; Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 486, Article 13.

⁷⁶ The opinion of Martimort from December 1, 1965; Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 486. The same opinion was expressed by the tenth session of the Plenary Council; Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 487.

⁷⁷ The opinion of one of the members of the group on October 19, 1965; Bugnini, *La riforma liturgica*, 487. The same with Bianchi, *Pregare i Salmi*, 38.

- 11) Their removal attests to the fact that the emphasis has been shifted from the text to the reader.⁷⁸ And man is to be a servant of the Word, not its master.
- 12) The removal of verses was partly due to the incompetence of advisors, often intensified by frequently repeating that these Psalms cannot be sung by the suppliant of the New Testament. If they have been removed, this is perhaps because they have not been properly understood. To use the Psalms for prayer as they are (that is, without properly explaining them) is like giving children stones instead of bread, but not giving them at all would reduce their food rations.⁷⁹ St. John Chrysostom wrote: “In order to understand this Psalm well, we need to use all our intelligence. If one interprets these words as they have been written, they are an obstacle to listeners who do not think about them.”
- 13) Their presence will incline one to appreciate the interpretation of the Bible used by the Church Fathers and not limit oneself to the historical-critical method.⁸⁰ The removal of the Psalms would be justified if the Bible were read only through a historical and critical lens. If, however, one applies the *sensus plenior* according to the principles presented by the Fathers, the richness of such a reading becomes evident.⁸¹ Here, one should appreciate a reading that above all sees Satan in one’s enemies or one that understands these verses not as malediction but rather as prophecy.⁸² This is not so much desiring misfortune as speaking about the consequences of the specific behavior of one’s enemies.
- 14) In the liturgy, one cannot limit oneself to beautiful feelings for people are also filled with wrath and bitterness (see Eph 4:6). There also exists good and holy anger. Even if one does not have it within oneself, one expresses it in the name of those who are suffering at the moment.⁸³ To remove it would be akin to forgetting about those who suffer and solely focusing on oneself.⁸⁴ To pray using these Psalms is to listen to the cries and imprecations of wounded people, transforming them into righteous and pious cries.⁸⁵ If imprecation is an expression of anger at evil, a lack of imprecation can even amount to complicity in evil.⁸⁶

⁷⁸ Braulik, *Lesegesi anticotestamentaria*, 67.

⁷⁹ Bianchi, *Pregare i Salmi*, 37.

⁸⁰ Braulik, *Lesegesi anticotestamentaria*, 75; Augé, “I Salmi imprecatori,” 57.

⁸¹ Spataro, “È possibile pregare,” 471.

⁸² Chrysostomus, *Expositio in Psalmum* 58 (PG 55, 260).

⁸³ Miller, “The Hermeneutics,” 160, 163.

⁸⁴ Bianchi, *Pregare i Salmi*, 37.

⁸⁵ Spataro, “È possibile pregare,” 463.

⁸⁶ Sessa, “Sal 137,” 168. See also The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Inspiration*, no. 128; see http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_polo-ebraico_it.html (access 1.08.2018).

- 15) We should be conscious of the fact that normally reading Scripture, including incomprehensible texts, helps man. According to the Eastern tradition, such a reading “cleanses the heart and soul.”⁸⁷

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the pros and cons of the presence of imprecatory verses in the liturgy, the following conclusions are reached:

- 1) Considering the lack of dogmatic contraindications and considering pastoral issues, the decision to remove certain verses should not be greatly controversial. One may disagree with it, but it should be respected, not attaching too much importance to such a position.
- 2) However, it would be better to leave all the imprecatory verses so the Word of God can also be an intellectual challenge, an incitement to humility, an impulse to experience the mystery, and resignation from a world in which the truth must be pleasant. Removing difficult fragments from the Bible at first glance may seem fruitful and sensible, but in the long term, it risks a perversion of understanding the proper meaning of Divine Revelation, which becomes the truth for one’s salvation as long as one is capable of accepting them in their entirety.

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⁸⁷ Martini, *Il desiderio di Dio*, 15.

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Appendix

A List of Verses from the Book of Psalms Removed from the Liturgy of the Hours⁸⁸

Ps 5:11

¹¹ Declare them guilty, God; make them fall by their own devices. Drive them out for their many sins; for they have rebelled against you.

Ps 21:9–13

⁹ Your hand will find all your enemies; your right hand will find your foes!

¹⁰ At the time of your coming you will make them a fiery furnace. Then the LORD in his anger will consume them, devour them with fire.

¹¹ Even their descendants you will wipe out from the earth, their offspring from the human race.

¹² Though they intend evil against you, devising plots, they will not succeed,

¹³ For you will put them to flight; you will aim at their faces with your bow.

Ps 28:4–5

⁴ Repay them for their deeds, for the evil that they do. For the work of their hands repay them; give them what they deserve.

⁵ Because they do not understand the LORD's works, the work of his hands, He will tear them down, never to rebuild them.

Ps 31:18–19

¹⁸ Do not let me be put to shame, for I have called to you, LORD. Put the wicked to shame; reduce them to silence in Sheol.

¹⁹ Strike dumb their lying lips, which speak arrogantly against the righteous in contempt and scorn.

Ps 35:3a, 4–8, 20–21, 24–26

³ Brandish lance and battle-ax against my pursuers. [...]

⁴ Let those who seek my life be put to shame and disgrace. Let those who plot evil against me be turned back and confounded.

⁵ Make them like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the LORD driving them on.

⁶ Make their way slippery and dark, with the angel of the LORD pursuing them.

⁷ Without cause they set their snare for me; without cause they dug a pit for me.

⁸ Let ruin overtake them unawares; let the snare they have set catch them; let them fall into the pit they have dug. [...]

²⁰ They speak no words of peace, but against the quiet in the land they fashion deceitful speech.

²¹ They open wide their mouths against me. They say, "Aha! Good! Our eyes have seen it!" [...]

⁸⁸ Translations from the *New American Bible* (2010).

THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS IN THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS

²⁴ Defend me because you are just, LORD; my God, do not let them rejoice over me.

²⁵ Do not let them say in their hearts, "Aha! Our soul!" Do not let them say, "We have devoured that one!"

²⁶ Put to shame and confound all who relish my misfortune. Clothe with shame and disgrace those who lord it over me.

Ps 40:15–16

¹⁵ May those who seek to destroy my life be shamed and confounded. Turn back in disgrace those who desire my ruin.

¹⁶ Let those who say to me "Aha!" Be made desolate on account of their shame.

Ps 54:7

⁷ Turn back the evil upon my foes; in your faithfulness, destroy them.

Ps 55:16

¹⁶ Let death take them; let them go down alive to Sheol, for evil is in their homes and bellies.

Ps 56:7b–8

⁷ they watch my every step; they lie in wait for my life.

⁸ They are evil; watch them, God! Cast the nations down in your anger!

Ps 58

¹ For the leader. Do not destroy. A miktam of David.

² Do you indeed pronounce justice, O gods; do you judge fairly you children of Adam?

³ No, you freely engage in crime; your hands dispense violence to the earth.

⁴ The wicked have been corrupt since birth; liars from the womb, they have gone astray.

⁵ Their venom is like the venom of a snake, like that of a serpent stopping its ears,

⁶ So as not to hear the voice of the charmer or the enchanter with cunning spells.

⁷ O God, smash the teeth in their mouths; break the fangs of these lions, LORD!

⁸ Make them vanish like water flowing away; trodden down, let them wither like grass.

⁹ Let them dissolve like a snail that oozes away, like an untimely birth that never sees the sun.

¹⁰ Suddenly, like brambles or thistles, have the whirlwind snatch them away.

¹¹ Then the just shall rejoice to see the vengeance and bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.

¹² Then people will say: "Truly there is a reward for the just; there is a God who is judge on earth!"

Ps 59:6–9, 12–16

⁶ You, LORD God of hosts, are the God of Israel! Awake! Punish all the nations. Have no mercy on these worthless traitors. Selah

⁷ Each evening they return, growling like dogs, prowling the city.

⁸ Their mouths pour out insult; sharp words are on their lips. They say: "Who is there to hear?"

⁹ But you, LORD, laugh at them; you deride all the nations. [...]

WOJCIECH WĘGRZYŃIAK

¹² Slay them, God, lest they deceive my people. Shake them by your power; Lord, our shield, bring them down.

¹³ For the sinful words of their mouths and lips let them be caught in their pride. For the lies they have told under oath

¹⁴ destroy them in anger, destroy till they are no more. Then people will know God rules over Jacob, yes, even to the ends of the earth. Selah

¹⁵ Each evening they return, growling like dogs, prowling the city.

¹⁶ They roam about as scavengers; if they are not filled, they howl.

Ps 63:10–12

¹⁰ But those who seek my life will come to ruin; they shall go down to the depths of the netherworld!

¹¹ Those who would hand over my life to the sword shall become the prey of jackals!

¹² But the king shall rejoice in God; all who swear by the Lord shall exult, but the mouths of liars will be shut!

Ps 69:23–29

²³ May their own table be a snare for them, and their communion offerings a trap.

²⁴ Make their eyes so dim they cannot see; keep their backs ever feeble.

²⁵ Pour out your wrath upon them; let the fury of your anger overtake them.

²⁶ Make their camp desolate, with none to dwell in their tents.

²⁷ For they pursued the one you struck, added to the pain of the one you wounded.

²⁸ Heap punishment upon their punishment; let them gain from you no vindication.

²⁹ May they be blotted from the book of life; not registered among the just!

Ps 79:6–7, 12

⁶ Pour out your wrath on nations that do not recognize you, on kingdoms that do not call on your name,

⁷ For they have devoured Jacob, laid waste his dwelling place. [...]

¹² Turn back sevenfold into the bosom of our neighbors the insult with which they insulted you, Lord.

Ps 83

¹ A song; a psalm of Asaph.

² God, do not be silent; God, do not be deaf or remain unmoved!

³ See how your enemies rage; your foes proudly raise their heads.

⁴ They conspire against your people, plot against those you protect.

⁵ They say, "Come, let us wipe them out as a nation; let Israel's name be remembered no more!"

⁶ They scheme with one mind, they have entered into a covenant against you:

⁷ The tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites, of Moab and the Hagarites,

⁸ Gebal, Ammon, and Amalek, Philistia and the inhabitants of Tyre.

⁹ Assyria, too, in league with them, backs the descendants of Lot. Selah

¹⁰ Deal with them as with Midian; as with Sisera and Jabin at the wadi Kishon,

- ¹¹ Those destroyed at Endor, who became dung for the ground.
¹² Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb, all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna,
¹³ Who made a plan together, “Let us take for ourselves the pastures of God.”
¹⁴ My God, make them like tumbleweed, into chaff flying before the wind.
¹⁵ As a fire raging through a forest, a flame setting mountains ablaze,
¹⁶ Pursue them with your tempest; terrify them with your storm-wind.
¹⁷ Cover their faces with shame, till they seek your name, LORD.
¹⁸ Let them be ashamed and terrified forever; let them perish in disgrace.
¹⁹ Let them know that your name is LORD, you alone are the Most High over all the earth.

Ps 109

- ¹ For the leader. A psalm of David.
² O God, whom I praise, do not be silent, for wicked and treacherous mouths attack me.
They speak against me with lying tongues;
³ with hateful words they surround me, attacking me without cause.
⁴ In return for my love they slander me, even though I prayed for them.
⁵ They repay me evil for good, hatred for my love.
⁶ Appoint an evil one over him, an accuser to stand at his right hand,
⁷ That he may be judged and found guilty, that his plea may be in vain.
⁸ May his days be few; may another take his office.
⁹ May his children be fatherless, his wife, a widow.
¹⁰ May his children wander and beg, driven from their hovels.
¹¹ May the usurer snare all he owns, strangers plunder all he earns.
¹² May no one treat him with mercy or pity his fatherless children.
¹³ May his posterity be destroyed, their name rooted out in the next generation.
¹⁴ May his fathers’ guilt be mentioned to the LORD; his mother’s sin not rooted out.
¹⁵ May their guilt be always before the LORD, till their memory is banished from the earth,
¹⁶ For he did not remember to show mercy, but hounded the wretched poor and brought death to the brokenhearted.
¹⁷ He loved cursing; may it come upon him; he hated blessing; may none come to him.
¹⁸ May cursing clothe him like a robe; may it enter his belly like water, his bones like oil.
¹⁹ May it be near as the clothes he wears, as the belt always around him.
²⁰ May this be the reward for my accusers from the LORD, for those speaking evil against me.
²¹ But you, LORD, are my Lord, deal kindly with me for your name’s sake; in your great mercy rescue me.
²² For I am poor and needy; my heart is pierced within me.
²³ Like a lengthening shadow I am gone, I am shaken off like the locust.
²⁴ My knees totter from fasting; my flesh has wasted away.
²⁵ I have become a mockery to them; when they see me, they shake their heads.
²⁶ Help me, LORD, my God; save me in your mercy.
²⁷ Make them know this is your hand, that you, LORD, have done this.
²⁸ Though they curse, may you bless; arise, shame them, that your servant may rejoice.
²⁹ Clothe my accusers with disgrace; make them wear their shame like a mantle.

WOJCIECH WĘGRZYŃIAK

³⁰ I will give fervent thanks to the LORD; before a crowd I will praise him.

³¹ For he stands at the right hand of the poor to save him from those who pass judgment on him.

Ps 110:6

Who judges nations, heaps up corpses, crushes heads across the wide earth

Ps 137:7–9

⁷ Remember, LORD, against Edom that day at Jerusalem. They said: “Level it, level it down to its foundations!”

⁸ Desolate Daughter Babylon, you shall be destroyed, blessed the one who pays you back what you have done us!

⁹ Blessed the one who seizes your children and smashes them against the rock.

Ps 139:19–22

¹⁹ When you would destroy the wicked, O God, the bloodthirsty depart from me!

²⁰ Your foes who conspire a plot against you are exalted in vain.

²¹ Do I not hate, LORD, those who hate you? Those who rise against you, do I not loathe?

²² With fierce hatred I hate them, enemies I count as my own.

Ps 140:10–12

¹⁰ Those who surround me raise their heads; may the mischief they threaten overwhelm them.

¹¹ Drop burning coals upon them; cast them into the watery pit never more to rise.

¹² Slanderers will not survive on earth; evil will hunt down the man of violence to overthrow him.

Ps 141:10

¹⁰ Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while only I pass over them safely.

Ps 143:12

¹² In your mercy put an end to my foes; all those who are oppressing my soul, for I am your servant.