

Niceta of Remesiana

*On the Benefit of Psalmody*

transl. James McKinnon

Niceta was named bishop of Remesiana (present-day Bela Palanka, Serbia) ca. 370.

I know of some, not only in our region but in the East, who consider the singing of psalms and hymns to be an excess that is barely appropriate to divine religion; they consider it enough if a psalm is spoken in the heart, and frivolous if uttered aloud by the mouth. They appropriate to their view that passage which the Apostle wrote to the Ephesians: "Be filled with the Spirit, speaking in psalms, hymns, and spiritual canticles, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts [Eph 5:18-19]. Look, they say, the apostle makes it clear that a psalm is to be sung in the heart, not prattled like the tunes of an actor, because it is enough for God "who searches the heart" [Rom 8:27] if it is sung there in secret. Nevertheless, if truth be told, just as I do not censure those who "sing in the heart" (for it is always beneficial to meditate upon the things of God), so too do I commend those who honor God with the sound of the voice.

Before I provide the testimony of numerous passages from Scripture, I shall, by reversing the interpretation of that very passage of the apostle that many use against singers, refute their foolishness. The Apostle says in fact: "Be filled with the Spirit as you speak," and I contend that the Spirit has freed our mouths, loosened our tongues, and opened our lips, for it is not possible for men to speak without these organs; and as heat differs from cold, so does silence from speaking. When, moreover, he adds, "speaking in psalms, hymns, and canticles," he would not have mentioned "canticles" if

he had intended the singing to be altogether silent, because no one can sing without making a sound. And when he says "in your hearts," he enjoins you not to sing only with the voice and without the heart, but as he says in another place, "I will sing with the Spirit, I will sing with understanding" [1 Cor 14:15], that is, with both voice and thought.

[Niceta then cites many scriptural passages in support of singing.]

We are pleased by psalms, bedewed by prayers, and fed by the interspersed readings. Indeed, just as the honest guests at a banquet are delighted with a succession of courses, so are our souls nourished by a variety of readings and a display of hymns.

Then let us, dearly beloved, sing psalms with alert senses and awakened minds, as the hymnodist exhorts us: "Since God is King over all the earth, sing psalms with understanding" [Ps 46(47):8], for a psalm is sung not only "in spirit," that is, with the sound of the voice, but also "in mind" [1 Cor 15:15], so that we think of what we sing, rather than allow the mind, caught up in distractions (as often happens), to lose the fruit of its labor. Let the chant, then, be sung in a manner befitting holy religion; let it not display theatrical turgidity, but show a Christian simplicity in its melody, and let it not evoke the stage, but create compunction in the listeners. Our voices ought not to be dissonant, but concordant—not with one dragging out the song, and another cutting it short, while one sings too softly, and another too loudly—and all must seek to blend their voices within the sound of a harmonious chorus, not to project it outward in vulgar display like a cithara. It must all be done as if in the sight of God, not man, and not to please oneself.