

3. November 2023

There is great sorrow in my heart

Rom 9:1-5

This is the truth and I am speaking in Christ, without pretence, as my conscience testifies for me in the Holy Spirit; there is great sorrow and unremitting agony in my heart: I could pray that I myself might be accursed and cut off from Christ, if this could benefit the brothers who are my own flesh and blood. They are Israelites; it was they who were adopted as children, the glory was theirs and the covenants; to them were given the Law and the worship of God and the promises. To them belong the fathers and out of them, so far as physical descent is concerned, came Christ who is above all, God, blessed for ever. Amen.

What great love for his people speaks from the words of the apostle and at the same time what profound knowledge of what God has entrusted to them! It is precisely the realisation that the people of the Old Covenant were so blessed and chosen by the Lord that makes his grief so great. It is the grief that they have not recognised the one towards whom their whole history with God runs: "*Christ who is above all, God*". We even hear Paul dare to utter such a shuddering phrase: "*I could pray that I myself might be accursed and cut off from Christ, if this could benefit the brothers who are my own flesh and blood.*"

When we hear such statements of the apostle and remember his further reflections on the salvation of Israel, we can ask ourselves whether such a fire of love also burns in us.

What about us Catholics, who have been given much more by God than the people of Israel? Are we aware of the fullness of grace as St Paul was aware of what it means to have encountered the Lord? From that hour he puts his life entirely at the service of Christ! What is this burning?

Can it be anything other than the fire of the Holy Spirit that has united itself with the apostle? This fire awakens in him that desire which filled the Lord: to give His life for all men, to seek the lost sheep (cf. Lk 15:4-7). It is the desire of Jesus who became sin for us (cf. 2 Cor 5:21) in order to save us!

The key for such love to live in us is the most intimate union with the Holy Spirit, the love between the Father and the Son. Didn't Jesus speak of the fire that He came to bring to the earth and that He wished it to blaze? (Lk 12:49)

This fire drove St. Paul and the apostles to carry the message of salvation everywhere, it inflamed the missionaries to go to distant lands, it led the religious to prayer and the path of sanctification, it made the faithful fulfil their God-given task in the world. In this fire, St. Francis of Assisi wanted to convert the Sultan, St. Francis Xavier wanted to conquer India and China for the Lord, this fire drove the Jesuits of that time to reach out to the cruellest indigenous tribes to bring them the Gospel and it burned in all those martyrs who put their fidelity to Christ above their lives.

Has that fire gone out?

No, certainly not completely, but has grown weaker.

Perhaps it can help us if we absorb St Paul's text more deeply, if we accept from God's hand even more gratefully the beauty and dignity of our vocation in Christ in its uniqueness, and thus discover more and more what He entrusts to us. If we were to be more strongly grasped by this, then a greater fire might be kindled in us, and more strongly awaken our desire that other people too might encounter the goodness of God.

If we also recognise in the words of the Apostle to the Gentiles the love of God for His first-born, the people of Israel, who have still not come home, it calls us to pray for the enlightenment and conversion of Israel. For this surely our friend Paul would be very grateful.

We might also be inflamed by a significant word of Pope Pius XII who said, *"It is a chilling mystery that some people's salvation depends on others praying for them and atoning for them."*

Whatever path the Holy Spirit takes to reach us: May He be urged to awaken us from all spiritual sluggishness and make us burn as St Paul did, so that we may gratefully fulfil the mission God has given us - for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.