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LETTER TO THE ROMANS

“Paul's zeal for the people of Israel”

Rom 9:1-5

I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race. They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed for ever. Amen.

These words offer us a profound insight into the heart of the Apostle. He suffers for the people from whom he himself comes. It is a very intense spiritual suffering. Paul himself received the grace of conversion and knows very well what God did for him by opening the door to Christ. We know that he was called as an apostle to the ministry of preaching and that he worked tirelessly to bring the Gospel everywhere, but always first to the Jews. However, when he perceived the obstinacy of his own people, who were increasingly persecuting him and trying to hinder the mission entrusted to him, he turned to the Gentiles.

As he tells us today, Paul feels ‘a unceasing anguish in his heart’. It is a pain that does not easily dissipate, since his brothers according to the flesh are separated from Christ and do not accept the redemption offered to them by the Messiah whom they had long awaited. We can consider Paul's sadness as a ‘holy sadness,’ since, in effect, Israel's greatest loss is not recognising and following the Son of God. The Apostle would be willing to do anything to ensure that Israel received salvation.

When we hear such words, two reflections may arise in us. On the one hand, we may ask ourselves whether we too experience this spiritual pain when we see people not

accepting Christ's grace and even running the risk of condemnation. We may ask ourselves if it hurts us when those who have received a particular vocation do not respond to it or live it for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

On the other hand, we can reflect on the tendencies we observe in the Church today. It is evident that the zeal for all people, including Jews, to encounter Jesus Christ and become members of His Church has been largely lost. The fire of missionary love that still burned in St. Paul, in the other apostles, and in many of their successors must have diminished. If today it is claimed that Jews have their own way of salvation and that all religions are a way to God, then the fervour that would impel us to lead men to the true faith can no longer burn in us.

Thus, an erroneous tendency can lead to a decline in love and cause missionary service to lose sight of the salvation of souls as its primary goal, focusing instead on intramundane problems.

This was not the case with Saint Paul, who continues to show us his zeal for the people of Israel in the following verses:

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; but that Israel who pursued the righteousness which is based on law did not succeed in fulfilling that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it through faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall; and he who believes in him will not be put to shame." (Rom 9:30-33).

And he continues in the next chapter:

'Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit

to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified." (Rom 10:1-4).

In fact, Paul himself had acted out of this zeal lacking knowledge, to the point of persecuting the nascent Church. However, he had an encounter with the Lord and received enlightenment. Therefore, in his case, it is even more understandable that he implores for his brothers according to the flesh that liberating gift of God, which he himself received undeservedly. His conscience is clear, and in the verses that follow, he summarises once again what is essential:

"If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, "every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." (Rom 10:9-13).

Meditation on the day's reading: <https://en.elijamission.net/solemnity-of-the-sacred-heart-of-jesus-the-lord-seeks-his-sheep/>