

11. September 2023

Completing the suffering of Christ

Col 1:24–2:3

'It makes me happy to be suffering for you now, and in my own body to make up all the hardships that still have to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church, of which I was made a servant with the responsibility towards you that God gave to me, that of completing God's message, the message which was a mystery hidden for generations and centuries and has now been revealed to his holy people. It was God's purpose to reveal to them how rich is the glory of this mystery among the gentiles; it is Christ among you, your hope of glory: this is the Christ we are proclaiming, admonishing and instructing everyone in all wisdom, to make everyone perfect in Christ. And it is for this reason that I labour, striving with his energy which works in me mightily. I want you to know, then, what a struggle I am having on your behalf and on behalf of those in Laodicea, and on behalf of so many others who have never seen me face to face. It is all to bind them together in love and to encourage their resolution until they are rich in the assurance of their complete understanding and have knowledge of the mystery of God in which all the jewels of wisdom and knowledge are hidden.'

Through his testimony, St. Paul draws our attention to an essential aspect. He was able and we too can consciously cooperate so that the salvation that God offers us in His Son Jesus Christ might reach its fullness in the Church, which is His Mystical Body. We know how many sufferings St. Paul had to endure, including the interior sufferings of his apostolic service. These form an elemental part of the mission that God entrusted to this great Apostle. In fact, Jesus did not redeem us only through His preaching, but through His Passion and Death. And this victory that the Lord obtained through His Passion, Death and Resurrection must be actualized and fully realized on Earth. For this to happen, we too can unite all our sufferings to those of the Lord, thus serving the Church.

This is good news, because it means that everything we do and suffer in the Lord can serve for the evangelization of the whole world! Nothing is in vain! Even the smallest act counts; every self-denial; every little sacrifice; every adverse circumstance patiently endured... All this becomes the kindling that makes the fire of evangelization burn!

St. Paul could even rejoice in the suffering he endured for the Church. This joy can only be understood if we become aware of the love that inflamed the Apostle. He knew that, through his sufferings, he sustained his mission, and he was aware of the immense efficacy of this “interior apostolate”. Thus, his proclamation of the Word was deeply rooted in God.

Paul had to endure an arduous struggle. And if he says this, it is not to exalt himself before others or for them to see his merits, but to console the community of Colossae and Laodicea. It was fitting that these Christians should know that the Apostle had also suffered for them, in the following of Him who gave His life for them.

It is also a consolation for us to know that many have suffered so that we may find our way back to the Father's house. To be aware that others have suffered and sacrificed for us becomes even more important when we are confronted again and again with our weaknesses and inadequacies; when we see that we do not achieve what we set out to achieve....

In this context, I would like to tell a little anecdote. Some time ago I visited a Carmelite monastery. An elderly sister, small and discreet, approached me and, with much affection, told me that she, in the hidden, supported my mission with her prayer and sacrifice. To this day I am comforted to know that there is someone who prays, and perhaps also suffers for me. In this way, I can say that an interior and invisible union with this sister has arisen in Christ. This is probably what Paul is referring to when he asks that Christians be “closely united in love”. Every suffering that is consciously accepted increases love in the Church.

And then there is also the concrete proclamation of the Gospel, which is so necessary to instruct people. It is the wonderful message of Christ, in whom “*are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*”. God offers us the fullness of life in Himself! If our heart is filled with this love, our lips will also speak the right words, so that people will come to the fullness of knowledge.