

The Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
August 13, 2023
Year of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Ark of the New Covenant

“For I could wish that I myself were accursed and separated from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kin according to the flesh.” (Romans 9:3)

In the opening verse of the ninth chapter in Saint Paul’s Letter to the Romans, Paul offers his readers a promise. He affirms that what he will profess is the truth. It is the truth in Christ. One might see a correlation in our own statement to tell the truth, “so help me, God.” Due to his preaching of the Gospel to the people of Gentile origin, a nasty rumor has most likely developed. Many scholars would assume this rumor stated something which describes Saint Paul as no longer expressing or feeling concern for the children of Israel. He does not seem to hold their coming to know and believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah as an important aspect in the ministry of the Church. Saint Paul would write to assure his readers that he did have concern and expressed this concern in other letters authored by him (2 Corinthians 11:31, Galatians 1:20, and Timothy 2:7). Despite his initial assurance, a reader might still question: Has Paul ceased being concerned with the children of Israel and their salvation? To this question, Saint Paul would offer a heartfelt and astounding claim — *“For I could wish that I myself were accursed and separated from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kin according to the flesh.”* (Romans 9:3).

To understand Saint Paul’s statement of verse 3, allow me to offer a similar, more commonly used analogy: “I would give my life for . . .” Paul has such deep feelings for his fellow Israelites, he states that he would give up his life in Christ, choosing to bear the burden of the curses associated with the non-believers (Romans 8:35-36), ***IF*** this would become a means to their salvation. Saint Paul is not alone in expressing feelings of this nature. The great Old Testament figure, Moses, expressed similar feelings in a conversation he had with God following Israel’s worship of the golden calf found in Exodus (32:31-32). And yet I ask you, do we need this statement made by Moses to affirm that which we already know?

A nature documentary on a particular species of animal can show us an instance where a camera captures the moments a mother defends her young from a predator. For example, a video on YouTube showed the tense moments as a mother hen, channeling her inner Mike Tyson and Chuck Norris, fought a cobra who had intended to make a meal of her chicks. A zoologist might attribute this behavior to the instinct of the animal. That may be true, but how does this statement of instinct account for a human mother or father choosing to fight to defend their children? For the human endowed with the freedom of will, their decision to choose to fight accounts for more than just an instinctual behavior. We have a choice and this choice is based upon love and the responsibilities associated with this love. This answer may suffice for parents and children, yet how do we respond to those who, similar to Saint Paul, express the same sentiments for those not related to them?

Let us begin by acknowledging those who, by career choice, are willing to daily place the lives of others above their own. I am thinking of those who are first responders. Despite the recruitment and funding issues in many areas of our nation, we can still express our thankfulness to those responders who choose to serve the needs of our communities. I once heard of a person

who, after seeing a first responder or a few first responders dining, chose to pay for their meal without any acknowledgment. However, does Saint Paul, in this selection, qualify as a first responder? Should he have been treated in like manner?

The expression of love and grief found in the writings of Saint Paul finds its center in the realization of mankind's need for redemption and salvation. His words of love mixed with grief are the words of the heart of a minister. They are the words of a minister who truly loves those with whom they live and work. Similar to Saint Paul, they are spending themselves in the service of God for the salvation of others. They very much want to see everyone living a life centered upon the life of Jesus Christ. They are willing to work long hours with only His Presence as their joy, their hope, their consolation. And, no matter how much they sacrifice of themselves, sadly, they see those who apathetically profess the same faith. One could say, at a minimum, the Jewish people of Saint Paul's time were mostly not receptive to his words. This is the thought he expresses for the grief that he feels. Now, consider the Saint Paul of our time, the minister who sees his family express faith with their lips while not being present in God's house. I am sure that minister, knowing how much God loves these wayward children of his, yearns to have them reunited home with the Father. I am sure that minister would have the same feelings as Saint Paul. I am sure of this, for I am a minister and you are my family.