

71. *The groanings of the Spirit*

My dear Steve, I would like to talk about a sentence in your letter: "It disturbs me to hear it said, over and over, that the Holy Spirit prays within us with '*ineffable groanings*.' To me, this expression seems terribly sad!" Am I wrong to suspect that you refrained from adding: "I can't stand people who groan"? Aren't you telling me that in your view, the Holy Spirit should instead inspire us to shout triumphant hosannas?

Do you know the author of the expression that you are incriminating? None other than St. Paul! Now, you'll certainly agree that he was a virile, militant soul, straining toward victory. If he used these words that displease you, it must surely have been because he could think of none better to translate the prayer of the Holy Spirit that he discovered deep within himself. Yes, a continual groaning rose from his strong and impassioned soul.

Let's go back to the context, to the eighth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. It will then be clear to you that this word "groaning" was certainly not chosen at random. It recurs three times in three consecutive paragraphs. It is closely related to "await" (which appears three times) and "hope" (five times).

What, then, is *awaited, hoped for* with *groanings*? Our liberation. Although we aspire with all our being to be united to the Father, who calls us and offers us eternal life in his love and happiness, we are held captive by the earth, by time, and by our bodies. And when our love for our Father grows strong, the hope within us becomes vehement, and our groanings more poignant.

According to St. Paul, it is not only the Christian soul that is haunted by these groanings. It is also nature, the entire created universe: the stars and the earth, the desert and the forest, the crops and the animals. A muffled, continuous groaning, like a vast, unending ocean swell, rises toward God from this world which aspires, without knowing it, to "*share in the glorious freedom of the children of God*" (Rm 8:21).

The Christian knows things that are hidden from the rest of Creation. The groanings of all men (who are often as ignorant as inanimate things of what they hope for) are united, in the Christian's heart, with the groanings of the natural universe. That is, in the heart of a child impatient for reunion with his Father.

We are far removed from groanings that might be the sentimental plaint of a weak soul. It is really a metaphysical surge, a cosmic aspiration rising from the innermost depths of creation. However, this surge would remain fruitless if the Spirit did not join his "*ineffable groanings*" to the groanings of creatures, to turn them into a prayer to which God cannot turn a deaf ear.

These universal groanings are, to use St. Paul's forceful image, the groans of a Creation in the pangs of a mysterious and awesome childbirth: the bringing forth of the Kingdom of God.