Appendix 15: Letter from Dreyfus on Devil's Island to the President of the Republic, 8 July 1897

Îles du Salut, 8 July 1897

To the President of the Republic

Mr President,

I permit myself to appeal once more to your great equity, to throw at your feet the expression of my profound despair, the cries of my immense grief.

I will open my heart fully to you, Mr President, certain that you will understand me. I appeal simply for your indulgence as to the form, the possible disjointedness of my thoughts. I have suffered too much, I am too broken, morally and physically, my mind is too crushed to be able to continue making the effort to collect my ideas.

As you know, Mr President, accused and then convicted on the evidence of handwriting for the most abominable crime, the most heinous crime that a man, a soldier, can commit, I wanted to survive to await the explanation of this appalling drama, to see my dear children again, on the day when honour is returned to them.

What I have suffered, Mr President, since the beginning of this sorrowful drama, only my heart knows! I have often called upon death with all my strength, and then I steeled myself again, still hoping in the end to see the light of justice dawn.

I submitted completely, scrupulously, to everything, I defy anybody to reproach me for any incorrect practice. I have never forgotten, I will not forget until my dying breath that a dual interest is at stake in this frightful affair: that of the homeland, mine and that of my children; one is just as sacred as the other.

Most certainly, I have suffered in being unable to alleviate the appalling sorrow of my wife and my family; I have suffered in being unable to devote myself body and soul to the discovery of the truth; but never did the thought occur to me, nor will occur to me, to arrive at this truth by means which might be harmful to the superior interests of the country. I would remain silent about the purity of my thought if I did not have as warrant the loyalty of my actions since the beginning of this sorrowful drama.

I have permitted myself, Mr President, to appeal to your high justice, in order to seek this truth; I have also entreated the Government of my country because I thought that the Government would find it possible to reconcile at once the interests of justice and compassion necessarily inspired by such an appalling and atrocious situation, with the interests of the country.

As for me, Mr President, confronted with the most abominable abuse, when my pain became such that death would have been a kindness, when my reason was collapsing, when everything within me was tearing apart at seeing myself treated like the last miserable wretch on earth, when finally a cry of rebellion escaped from my heart at the thought of my children growing up, their name dishonoured… it was to you, Mr President, it was to my country’s Government that my cry of supreme appeal was addressed, it was in that direction that I always directed my eyes, my tearful glance. I hoped at least, Mr President, that I would be judged on my actions. Since the beginning of this sorrowful drama, I have never deviated from the line of conduct I had mapped out for...
myself, that my conscience inflexibly dictated. I have suffered everything, endured everything, I have been struck pitilessly without ever knowing why… and strengthened by my conscience, I was able to resist.

Ah! yes indeed! I had moments of anger, reactions of impatience. I sometimes let my cankered heart gush forth all its bitterness, consumed by the insults, its most intimate sentiments torn asunder. But I have never forgotten for a single moment that the homeland comes above all human passions.

And yet, Mr President, the situation imposed on me became more atrocious every day; the blows continued to rain down on me without respite, without my understanding why, without my ever having provoked them by my words or actions.

Add to my own sorrow, so atrocious and intense, the torture of infamy, that of the climate, of quasi-solitary confinement, of seeing myself an object of scorn – often not concealed – and of constant suspicion by those who guard me night and day, is that not too much, Mr President… for a human being who has always done his duty in all directions?

And what is appalling for my mind, already suffering from hallucinations, already numb and reeling from the blows which strike it constantly, is to see that an honest man, a loyal Frenchman, whose rectitude of conduct, his invincible desire that no torture will undermine, and whose wish is to die as he lived, is to see himself treated, as I said, every day more harshly, more wretchedly.

My misery cannot be compared with any other; there is not one minute of my life that is not agony. Whatever the conscience, the strength of spirit of a man may be, I am collapsing and the tomb would be a kindness to me.

And so, Mr President, in this profound distress of my whole being, crushed by the tortures, by this situation of infamy which is breaking me, by the suffering which strangles my throat and suffocates me, my mind hallucinating from all the blows which strike me without respite, it is to you, Mr President, it is to the Government of my country that I utter this cry of appeal, certain that it will be heard.

My life, Mr President, I will not describe. Today as yesterday, it belongs to my country. What I ask it simply, as a supreme favour, is to take it quickly, not to leave me to die so slowly in atrocious agony, enduring so many ignominious tortures that I have not deserved, that I do not deserve.

But what I also ask of my country, is to shed complete and full light on this frightful drama; for my honour does not belong to the country, it is the legacy of my children, the property of two families.

And I also entreat, with all the strength of my soul, that consideration be given to the atrocious and intolerable situation, worse than death itself, of my wife and family; and also to think of my children, my dear little children who are growing up, who are pariahs; that every possible effort should be made, everything in a word that is compatible with the interests of the country, to bring an end as soon as possible to the torture of so many human beings.

Confident of your equity, I beg of you, Mr President, to accept the expression of my respectful sentiments.