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Letter from the Prelate (December 2015)

Bishop Javier Echevarria this month focuses on the meaning of Advent, "joyful and impatient weeks of preparation for Christmas."

12/01/2015

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My dear children: may Jesus watch over my daughters and sons for me!

We have begun Advent, those joyful and impatient weeks of preparation for Christmas. Once more there come to mind words of St. Josemaría, from the final months of his earthly journey, about this great Christian solemnity. In reflecting on God's redemptive plans, already clearly seen in Bethlehem and Nazareth, he urged us to consider that "God teaches us to abandon ourselves completely. Look where Christ is born. Everything there bespeaks unconditioned self-giving

"Simply calling these scenes to mind should fill us with shame and provoke holy and effective resolutions. We must steep ourselves in this new logic brought down to earth by God. In Bethlehem, no one reserves anything for himself. There we hear nothing of my reputation, my time, my work, my ideas, my preferences, my money. There everything is placed at the service of

God's marvelous adventure with humanity, the Redemption.

Surrendering our pride, let us tell God with all the love of a child: *ego servus tuus, ego servus tuus, et filius ancillae tuae* (Ps 115:16). I am your servant, I am your servant, the child of your handmaid; Mary: teach me to serve you.”[1]

God's infinite love for mankind is once again seen in a special way also in the *Year of Mercy* that the Pope will inaugurate on the upcoming 8th, solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. Let us pick up our pace in these final days before it begins, so that the opening of the Holy Door, a symbol of divine indulgence, will find us well prepared to welcome in our hearts so many gifts of God. Let us imitate the devotion and need with which St. Josemaría, from a very young age, took refuge in God's love and nearness to his creatures.

Christ's incarnation and birth enkindled a great light on mankind's destiny, called to the closest possible union with God. The institution of the family, in whose warmth our Lord chose to be born, shows us a clear reflection of the intimate communion of the three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity, in the unity of the one true God. St. Paul writes that *every family in heaven and on earth is named from God the Father.*^[2] The Blessed Trinity is the sublime Model of the union that should reign among all men, in each home as well. To assist and encourage us to care for that union, God decided to open up for us with the Holy Family in Bethlehem a specific pathway along which we can walk every day. Isn't God's tenderness towards his children wonderful? He could have revealed himself in a thousand different ways, but he chose the one that shows most clearly the tenderness of his Heart. As the book

of Proverbs says, from even before the creation of the world divine Wisdom *was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of men.*^[3]

The light of Jesus' birth brings with it the power to dissipate the darkness of this world of ours, so intent in so many ways to distance itself from God. It recalls to us the bright light announced by the prophet that nothing nor anyone will be able to obscure: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.*^[4]

That light continues shining now with all of its benevolence, even amid the sorrowful events in so many parts of the world, as we have recently lamented. It shines on us with the same bright clarity with which it illumined the night in Bethlehem two thousand years ago.

The liturgy of Christmas Eve makes it especially present every year at Christmas, giving us peace and serenity even in the apparently darkest moments. “The presence of the Lord in the midst of his people,” Pope Francis said in a homily, “cancels the sorrow of defeat and the misery of slavery, and ushers in joy and happiness.

“We too, in this blessed night, have come to the house of God. We have passed through the darkness which envelops the earth, guided by the flame of faith which illuminates our steps, and enlivened by the hope of finding the ‘great light.’ By opening our hearts, we too can contemplate the miracle of that Child-Sun who, arising from on high, illuminates the horizon.”^[5] —

My daughters and sons: Christmas, a true feast of joy, is a special invitation to adore God and thank

him for his benevolence. All of us nourished by the spirit of the Work, who now number many thousands, want—as our Father said in a meditation preached for these feast days—“to represent all humanity. We are certain that . . . in every corner of the world, also in places where the Church is being persecuted, there are sisters and brothers of yours who feel themselves representatives of all mankind, and who are telling our Lord: we know that you have been born today. We have come to adore you in the name of all creatures: *venite, adoremus*; for these words are a response by the Holy Church to that cry of the angels that was heard on earth breaking the silence of centuries.”^[6] —

Pope Benedict XVI pointed out ten years ago that, for this feast, both the liturgy and popular piety employ symbols to help make clearer the meaning of Christmas. The light and

decorations evoke the desire for goodness that dwells in the depths of the human heart: “the light of good that triumphs over evil, the light of love that overcomes hatred, the light of life that defeats death.”^[7] —

Therefore “as we look at the streets and squares of the cities decorated with dazzling lights, let us remember that these lights refer us to another light, invisible to the eyes but not to the heart. While we admire them, while we light the candles in churches or the illuminations of the crib and the Christmas tree in our homes, may our souls be open to the true spiritual light brought to all people of good will. The God-with-us, born in Bethlehem of the Virgin Mary, is the Star of our lives!”^[8] —

Let us strive to ensure that the external decorations for Christmas in homes and many other places are not mere “fireworks that sparkle for an instant,”^[9] — but that they be means

to help us welcome Jesus more generously. By our actions, let us help many people realize the meaning of this Holy Night, so that we may all behave as good children of God.

We contemplate our Lady, with St. Joseph, caring for the recently born Jesus in the poor cave in which they lodged in Bethlehem. The custom of putting up a Nativity scene is a marvelous way to remember that the divine Word has come to dwell among us.^[10] “The crib is an expression of our anticipation that God is coming close to us, that Jesus comes close to us; but it is also an expression of thanksgiving for the One who decided to share in our human condition, in poverty and simplicity.”^[11]

Let us not allow this custom to be neglected in Christian homes. Let us begin by placing it in our own homes

with sincere affection—at least the central figures—and recommend that our friends and acquaintances do likewise. Many of us remember the eagerness with which, as small children, we set up the Nativity scene, helped perhaps by our parents and older brothers and sisters. Our Founder too enjoyed remembering those moments. Many years had gone by since his childhood when he wrote: “Christmas devotion. I don’t smile when I see you making cardboard mountains around the crib and placing simple clay figures near the manger. You have never seemed more a man to me than now, when you seem to be a child.”^[12]

In the cave in Bethlehem heaven and earth meet, because there the Creator of the world was born, the Redeemer of mankind. From that place there shines forth a bright light intended for all times; for ours as well, so in need of this divine

orientation. As we prepare “to celebrate once again our Lord’s coming, and realize that ‘his joy is to be with the children of men,’ let us be filled with hope: *Deus prope est*, our Lord is always drawing close to us, he stays at our side at every moment.”^[13] —

I end with some words of the Roman Pontiff, who invites us to trust in God and to foster supernatural optimism. Speaking of Christmas, he suggests some questions to us: “How do we welcome the tenderness of God? Do I allow myself to be taken up by God, to be embraced by him, or do I prevent him from drawing close? . . . What is most important is not seeking him, but rather allowing him to seek me, find me and caress me with tenderness. The question put to us simply by the Infant’s presence is: do I allow God to love me?”^[14] —

As I'm sure you'll understand, I can't end this letter without once again thanking you for the prayers with which you have accompanied me during my stay in the University of Navarra Hospital. I have felt sustained by each and every one of you. Continue being united to my intentions, which can be summed up in praying for the Church and the Pope, for all of you, for the whole world, so that it may attain the tranquility and order that Christ, *Prince of Peace*,^[15] has come to bring to the world.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father

+ Javier

Pamplona, December 1, 2015

- [1] St. Josemaría, *Letter*, February 14, 1974, no. 2
- [2] See *Eph* 3:15.
- [3] *Prov* 8:30-31.
- [4] *Is* 9:1.
- [5] Pope Francis, Homily, December 24, 2014.
- [6] St. Josemaría, Notes from a meditation, December 25, 1968.
- [7] Benedict XVI, Address in a general audience, December 21, 2005.
- [8] *Ibid.*
- [9] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 247.
- [10] See *Jn* 1:14.
- [11] Benedict XVI, Address in a general audience, December 22, 2010.
- [12] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 557.

[13] St. Josemaría, Greeting card for Christmas, December 1968.

[14] Pope Francis, Homily, December 24, 2014.

[15] *Is* 9:5.

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