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Letter from the Prelate (January 2008)

In his monthly letter, Bishop Javier Echevarría reminds us that, while always respecting everyone's freedom, we Christians have to transmit our faith by our example and word.

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

Since December 25th, everything draws our thoughts to the birth of

Christ, Eternal Word of the Father, made flesh and born of the Virgin Mary to save us. In countries with a Christian tradition, popular piety expresses its joy at this marvelous mystery in a great variety of ways. Many men and women of good will, including non-Christians, share with Catholics the ideals of peace, justice and solidarity evoked by this feast, another proof of how Christ's message responds to the deepest aspirations of mankind.

Nevertheless, besides awakening these yearnings (which are quite important, especially in moments like the present, marked by a lack of peace in many countries and hearts), the essential message of Christmas is the event itself that we celebrate. As the Holy Father reminded us a few days before Christmas: "In Bethlehem the Light that illumines our life was manifested to the world; the path that leads to the fullness of our

humanity was revealed to us. If one does not recognize that God became man, what is the sense of celebrating Christmas? The celebration is emptied of meaning. We Christians above all have to reaffirm with deep and heartfelt conviction the truth of Christ's birth, giving witness before all men and women to an unheard of gift whose richness is not only for us, but for everyone" (Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, December 19, 2007).

Christmas once again places before our eyes the urgent need to assist in applying the fruits of Christ's Redemption. The shepherds at Bethlehem give us a good example. After hurrying to the stable, where *they found Mary and Joseph and the Child lying in the manger*, they returned to their usual work filled with joy. They returned changed within, *glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen*, eager

to communicate to their relatives and neighbors the good news. And *all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them* (cf. *Lk 2:16-20*). They spread the news despite being, in all likelihood, somewhat reserved, as is also true today, little given to conversation.

When one experiences a great joy, one feels the need to communicate it to others. Even more so when it is a matter of the supernatural life that Jesus has brought to earth. It is impossible to hide this happiness, since the Christian vocation brings with it, by its very nature, the need to be apostolic. The joy of having been saved by God cannot be contained in a single heart. "St. Augustine says that anyone who gains the conversion of a soul has his own predestined. So think about what it will be like to bring other souls to God's path, to our self-giving. Something marvelous! For the good,

of itself, is diffusive. If I enjoy a good, I will necessarily have an effective desire to see that others come to share in that same happiness" (St. Josemaria, Notes taken in a get-together, December 29, 1959).

However, in many places the false idea has taken hold that one shouldn't speak to others about one's own religious convictions. That is tantamount, they say, to meddling in other people's private conduct, violating their personal privacy. We have to reject any such attitude and always be ready to give a reason for the hope of our Christian vocation (cf. *1 Pet* 3:15), with a sincere desire that the good news of salvation may resound in the ears of our relatives, friends and acquaintances.

We can't be satisfied with just giving witness by our example, because example alone, although indispensable, is not enough. Let us

remember the Lord's reproach to those who failed to warn the people of the dangers of idolatry: *they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber (Is 56:10).*

My daughters and sons, let us remain vigilant so that we never deserve to receive that reproach; we would cease to be the *salt of the earth* and *light of the world (Mt 5:13-14)*. And that should never happen. Do you nourish your apostolic zeal as a supernatural instinct? Are you asking our Lord to put the opportune words on your lips in your daily conversations, also in your professional dealings and when resting? We have to speak to people about the divine condescension shown by the Son of God's coming into the world, and about how our Lord awaits our assistance in spreading his message of love, life and peace.

A few weeks ago, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a *Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization*, which Benedict XVI recommends that all the faithful meditate on (cf. Address at a general audience, December 19, 2007). Among other points, this document reminds us that "to lead a person's intelligence and freedom in honesty to the encounter with Christ and his Gospel is not an inappropriate encroachment, but rather a legitimate endeavor and a service capable of making human relationships more fruitful" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization*, December 3, 2007, no. 5). "The communication of religiously significant events and truths in order that they will be accepted by others is not only in profound harmony with the human phenomena of dialogue, proclamation and education, it also

corresponds to another important anthropological fact: the desire, which is proper to the human person, to have others share in one's own goods" (*Ibid.*, no. 7).

Naturally, in this area as in everything, we not only respect the intimacy and freedom of others, but we defend them, excluding every form of violence. We have a clear memory of the example and the teaching of St. Josemaría here, who told us: "I have always defended the freedom of individual consciences. I do not understand violence; I do not consider it a proper way either to persuade or to win over" (St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 44).

I vividly recall our Father's insistence on the need to speak about our faith. Perhaps he did so more frequently when the idea began to be spread in some sectors that one shouldn't talk to others about the faith, since the

testimony of one's own conduct is sufficient. In the face of this attitude, which could end up paralyzing the Church's missionary efforts, St. Josemaría reacted with apostolic fortitude. He insisted: "my children need to seek the occasion for speaking, for communicating these marvels that our Lord has entrusted to us. It's not enough to 'be present' to work in a Christian way" (St. Josemaría, Notes taken in a get-together, August 25, 1968).

When the Second Vatican Council was nearing its end, our Founder urged us to put into practice the important teachings of this great Assembly of the Church. Above all, he invited us to remind people, in public and in private, of the universal call to holiness and apostolate so forcefully proclaimed by the Council. He insisted that we should strive to carry out with everyone—Catholics and non-

Catholics, Christians and non-Christians—a persevering apostolic conversation grounded on truth and charity. Thus he lived right to the end. There come to mind so many memories of how he took advantage of opportunities to serve souls in this way.

During those years one often heard that it was better not to explain the Christian faith to others; some even came to view dialogue as a conversation in which one has to leave aside the truths taught by the Church, as though any opinion referring to God or to revealed truths were equally valid and authentic. In those circumstances, basing himself on the Gospels, St. Josemaría spoke about the many examples of Jesus speaking or preaching to his contemporaries. And he liked to point out that Christians have acted in the same way throughout the centuries, following the example of

the Master. "In preaching the Gospel, the first Twelve had wonderful conversations with those they met and sought out on their apostolic journeys and travels. The Church would not exist today if the Apostles had not carried out a supernatural dialogue with all those souls. For the Christian apostolate comes down to this: *ergo fides ex auditu, auditus autem per verbum Christi* (Rom 10:17); faith comes from hearing, and hearing depends upon the preaching of Christ's word" (St. Josemaría, Letter of October 24, 1965, no. 13).

In his recent encyclical on Christian hope, the Pope incisively develops these teachings. Starting with the idea that zeal for holiness is non-transferable (no one can take our place in our personal correspondence to grace), Benedict XVI explains: "The relationship with Jesus, however, is a relationship with the one who gave himself as a

ransom for all (cf. *1 Tim* 2:6). Being in communion with Jesus Christ draws us into his 'being for all'; it makes it our own way of being. He commits us to live for others" (Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, November 30, 2007, no.

28). This is the root of the need to communicate the good news of salvation to other souls. "Our calling to be children of God, in the midst of the world, requires us not only to seek our own personal holiness, but also to go out into all the ways of the earth, to convert them into roads that will carry souls over all obstacles and lead them to the Lord" (St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 120). We are totally convinced, since it is intrinsic to the calling we have received, that our Lord wants us to increase our personal apostolate of friendship and trust, so characteristic of the faithful who live by divine vocation in the middle of the world, and specifically of those who are nourished by the spirit of Opus Dei.

This month is the seventy-fifth anniversary of the moment when St. Josemaría gave a decisive push to the apostolic work with young people, which he had been carrying out since the founding of Opus Dei. For it was on Saturday, January 21, 1933, when our Father gathered for the first time a small group of young men, to give them a talk on Christian formation.

Our Father began that activity with such great supernatural outlook, eagerness and affection!

Nevertheless, as he so often recalled, only three boys came to that first Circle, despite having spoken to nine or ten people about it. St. Josemaría was not discouraged. Filled with faith, having recourse to the intercession of our Lady and St. Joseph, and entrusting that work once again to the archangel St. Raphael and to the apostle St. John, he gave those first fellows benediction with the Blessed

Sacrament. Let us meditate slowly on his words: "When the class ended, I went to the chapel with the boys. I took hold of our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament in the monstrance. I raised it and blessed those three...and I saw three hundred, three hundred thousand, thirty million, three hundred million...white, black, yellow, of all the colors and combinations that human love can devise. Yet I fell short, because...it has all come true. I fell short, because God has been much more generous" (St. Josemaría, Notes taken in a get-together, February 19, 1975).

On the next day, Sunday, January 22, the first catechism class took place (an indispensable means in our apostolic work with young people and with others as well), attended by some of the young boys our Father was dealing with. They went to a school in the outskirts of Madrid, in

the district of Los Pinos, where a large group of children awaited them. The classes of formation and catechism and the visits to the poor and the sick, which our Founder had been carrying out for some time already, were and always will be a solid foundation for this apostolate, which is, as our Father always used to say, "the apple of our eyes."

As is only natural, the weight and joy of carrying this apostolate forward falls principally on the younger faithful of the Prelature, and on those especially entrusted with this task. My daughters and sons, consider our Lord's confidence, who wants to place in your hands—so that you can mold them as a sculptor molds the clay—the souls of so many young women and men who are sincerely seeking the deep meaning of their lives. Prepare the circles and classes of Christian doctrine very well; ask the Holy Spirit to put into

your words a power that will draw them. And launch out decisively to speak with your friends, starting up an apostolic dialogue that will lead them to Christ, *suaviter et fortiter* (cf. Wis 8:1), with gentleness and strength.

It is very moving to see Benedict XVI's insistence when speaking about the need to invite young people to be generous and to come closer to our Lord, to follow him. Let us echo this in the ears of many people, trusting in the action of the Holy Spirit and in the capacity to dedicate themselves to the service of great ideals that has always characterized young people, although at times it seems to be dormant in their hearts.

Let us go with confidence to St. Raphael and St. John, the patrons of this work, and also to St. Josemaría, who began this apostolate so many years ago now. Keep in mind that

thus you are—we are—preparing for
the future of the Church, the
Christian future of society.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father

+ Javier

Rome, January 1, 2008

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