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Letter from the Prelate (March 2011)

The upcoming weeks of Lent are an important opportunity to undertake "the daily changes that lead us to come closer to God, to share more fully in Christ's life," the Prelate urges us in his letter.

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

“There is nothing so pleasing and desired by God, than that men and

women convert to him with sincere repentance.” [1] These words are always very timely, even more so in the upcoming weeks with Lent about to begin. In the liturgy for Ash Wednesday, with words from St. Paul, the Church earnestly exhorts us not to *neglect the grace of God that you have received. For he says: At the favorable time, I have listened to you, on the day of salvation I came to your help. Well, now is the favorable time; this is the day of salvation .* [2]

In the Christian view of life, “every moment must be favorable and every day must be a day of salvation, but the Church’s Liturgy ,” the Holy Father says, “ speaks of this in a very special way in the season of Lent.” [3] The weeks that we are preparing for are especially apt for drawing once again closer to God, led by his grace. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to make us discover the seriousness of this call, so that these days do not

pass by our soul, as St. Josemaría wrote, “like rain on stones, leaving no trace.” [4] Rather let us beseech him that the waters of his grace may “soak into me, changing me. I will be converted; I will turn again to the Lord and love him as he wants to be loved.” [5]

We shouldn't think here only of the conversion of a sinner, who decides to open himself to grace, passing from spiritual death to Life. It also includes the daily changes that lead us to come closer to God, to share more fully in Christ's life through receiving the sacraments, to foster a spirit of prayer, to place ourselves at the effective service of the spiritual and material good of others. As Benedict XVI said: “Conversion means swimming against the tide, where the ‘tide’ is the superficial lifestyle, inconsistent and deceptive, that often sweeps us along, overwhelms us and makes us slaves

to evil, or at least prisoners of moral mediocrity. With conversion, on the other hand, we are aiming for the high standard of Christian living; we entrust ourselves to the living and personal Gospel which is Jesus Christ.” [6]

In the Church, our Lord has provided us with many paths, many ways to foster successive personal conversions, so necessary for Christian life. Let us recall, in words from St. Josemaría, that these spiritual changes have to be carried out perseveringly, and even many times in the course of a single day. “Beginning again? Yes. Every time you make an act of contrition—and you should make many every day—you begin again, because you offer a new love to God.” [7] Do we frequently remember that God is awaiting us right here and now? Do we stop to consider: Lord, what do

you want from me? Are we eager to draw closer and closer to Christ?

But I would like to turn now to a specific way of strengthening our friendship with the Blessed Trinity: attending a spiritual retreat, which in many places are more frequent during Lent. Although obviously not offered exclusively during these weeks, the liturgy of this time, with its urgent call to a change of life, invites many Christians to take part during these days in an activity of this type. The same can be said of the monthly days of recollection, which occupy an important place among the means of spiritual formation that the Prelature offers to thousands of people throughout the world.

St. Josemaría pointed out that this spiritual practice has been common in the Church right from the first centuries. Whenever someone sought to prepare for a mission, or

simply sensed a greater need to correspond more fully to the touches of grace, he or she strove to draw closer to God. “The early Christians already made retreats. After Christ’s ascension into heaven, we find the Apostles and a large group of faithful gathered in the Cenacle, in the company of our Lady, awaiting the outpouring of the Paraclete that Jesus had promised them. There the Holy Spirit finds them *perseverantes unanimiter in oratione* (Acts 1:14), immersed in prayer.

“Likewise those souls in the times of early Christianity, who without separating themselves from their life alongside others dedicated themselves to God in their homes; and the anchorites who went out into the desert, to dedicate themselves in solitude to speaking with God...and to work! All Christians sincerely concerned about their soul have in

one way or another made a retreat. Because it is a Christian practice.” [8]

From the first years of the Work, our Founder gave great importance to these periods dedicated exclusively to prayer and examination, which are so necessary for keeping one’s interior life enkindled. “What are you and I going to do during these days of retreat?” he asked on one occasion. And he answered: “we are going to draw very close to our Lord, to seek him out, like Peter, and carry on an intimate conversation with him. Notice that I say “conversation”: a dialogue between two people, face to face, without hiding in anonymity. We need personal prayer, intimacy, direct contact with God our Lord.” [9]

At the beginning of his Pontificate, Benedict XVI once again recommended the practice of spiritual retreats, “particularly those that are made in complete silence.”

[10] And in his traditional message for Lent this year, referring to the Gospel on the second Sunday that narrates the Transfiguration of our Lord, he said: “It is the invitation to step aside from the noise of everyday life in order to immerse oneself in God’s presence. He desires to hand down to us, each day, a Word that penetrates the depths of our spirit, where we discern good from evil (cf. *Heb* 4:12), reinforcing our will to follow the Lord.” [11]

In order to draw fruit from these means “of formation and transformation,” as our Father called them, we have to recollect our senses and faculties; otherwise it would be very difficult—not to say impossible—to discover the lights the Paraclete kindles in the soul and listen to his voice, which suggests to us specific points of struggle in order to follow Christ closely and walk at his pace.

Therefore, my daughters and sons, I advise you not to neglect this feature—silence—on your days of recollection and retreats, adapted as needed to the specific circumstances of those taking part in these means of formation. For the situation is different for those who already have a certain familiarity with spiritual matters, than for those who are taking their first steps in the Christian life. Like the faithful and wise steward of whom the Gospel speaks, we have to know how to *give them their portion of food at the proper time* . [12]

Therefore, in looking after the various apostolic activities and the persons who come to them, it is good to organize these days of retreat taking into account, with supernatural outlook, the specific situations of those attending, even though this may require multiplying their number. For the same reason,

as our Founder always insisted, the days of recollection, circles, etc., should never be cancelled, when fewer people attend than initially expected: even when only one person comes.

In short, as we read in *Furrow* , the retreat has to be a time of “recollection in order to know God, to know yourself and thus to make progress. A necessary time for discovering where and how you should change your life. What should I do? What should I avoid?” [13] During these days of retreat, St. Josemaría tells us, “your examination of conscience should be more searching than the usual nightly moment. Otherwise you miss a great chance to put things right.” [14]

The liturgy of Lent provides abundant material for meditation, as the Holy Father emphasized in his message. The scene of Christ’s

temptations in the desert, which we read on the first Sunday, reminds us that our “Christian faith, following the example of Jesus and in union with him, entails struggling *against the ruling forces who are masters of the darkness in this world* (Eph 6:12), in which the devil is at work and never tires—even today—of tempting whoever wishes to draw close to the Lord.” [15] So we have to consider whether we are preparing ourselves for this combat, making trusting use of the supernatural means. St. Josemaría suggested a very supernatural tactic: “carry on the war—the daily battles of your interior life—far from the main walls of your fortress. And the enemy comes to meet you there: in your small mortifications, in your daily prayer, in your orderly work, in your plan of life. And only with difficulty does he come close to the easily-scaled battlements of your castle.

And if he does, he arrives exhausted.” [16]

On the following Sunday we hear the voice of our heavenly Father who, pointing to Christ, tells us: *This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him* . [17] We have to strive more diligently to discover, in our periods of personal prayer, what God is saying to each of us, in order to put it into practice. And we need to consider how we are relying on the grace that comes to us through the sacraments, and also on the advice that we receive in personal spiritual direction.

When the third Sunday of Lent arrives, on March 27, the liturgy presents to us “the question that Jesus puts to the Samaritan woman: *Give me a drink (Jn 4:7)*, which ... expresses God’s passionate love for every man and woman, and seeks to awaken in our hearts the desire for

the gift of *a spring of water within, welling up to eternal life* (Jn 4:14).”

[18] Let us eagerly embrace the call to always be aware that we, his disciples, have to bring his light and grace everywhere: above all, by helping our friends and relatives to reconcile themselves with God through the sacrament of Penance; and also by inviting them to take part in a day of recollection or retreat during these weeks.

We are approaching the solemnity of St. Joseph, patron of the Church and of the Work. Let us prepare ourselves to renew on the 19th our commitment of love with God in the Work, and to pray with confidence to the Holy Patriarch that he obtain from God the grace so that many men and women, of all ages and walks of life, may decide to follow Jesus Christ in Opus Dei.

Also on that day we have a new anniversary of the solemn execution of the Bull *Ut Sit*, by which the beloved John Paul II erected Opus Dei as a personal prelature, thus specifying the organic cooperation of priests and laity in carrying out the inspiration that our Lord put in the soul of St. Josemaría on October 2, 1928. We have an obligation to be very faithful, with the awareness that the Holy Spirit wanted the Second Vatican Council to establish this structure, opening up a channel for pastoral needs in the Church.

The 28th is the anniversary of our Father's priestly ordination. Let us give great thanks to the Blessed Trinity because each of us is truly a child of our Founder's readiness to receive Christ's priesthood. Without his generous and total acceptance of the divine will, there would have been no Opus Dei in the Church. The founding of the Work was the

answer to the question, “why am I becoming a priest?,” which our Father raised during his seminary years in Saragossa, and which was the deepest reason for his determination to begin and continue that path.

Let us go to his intercession, praying that in every country the number of priestly vocations may increase: faithful men, in love with God, who dedicate themselves joyfully to the service of souls, with full fidelity to the Pope and in close union with their respective diocesan bishops. And also that there not be lacking in the Work the priests needed to take care of the apostolic endeavors that our Lord is asking of us. At the same time, let us pray insistently to the Blessed Trinity that all Catholics, both men and women, may nourish the priestly soul that God has placed in each and every one of us.

Continue praying for the Pope and for those who assist him, especially during the first week of Lent, when spiritual exercises are preached in the Roman Curia. We too will take advantage of those days for our annual retreat. I hope with real eagerness that you will accompany me spiritually during those days. I don't mind telling you that every day I beseech our Lord that none of us may waste the torrent of graces that God grants us through these means.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father

+Javier

Rome, March 1, 2011

Footnotes:

[1] St. Maximus the Confessor, *Epistle* 11 (PG 91, 454).

[2] Roman Missal, Ash Wednesday, Second Reading (*2 Cor* 6:1-2).

[3] Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, February 17, 2010. [4] St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 59.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, February 17, 2010.

[7] St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 384.

[8] St. Josemaría, Notes taken at a meditation, February 25, 1963.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Benedict XVI, Address to a group of bishops on an *ad limina* visit, November 26, 2005.

[11] Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent 2011*, November 4, 2010, no. 2.

[12] Lk 12:42.

[13] St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 177.

[14] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 245.

[15] Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent 2011*, November 4, 2010, no. 2. [16] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 307.

[17] *Mt* 17:5.

[18] Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent 2011*, November 4, 2010, no. 2.

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