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Letter from the Prelate for Jubilee of Mercy

"Let us show our gratitude to our Holy Father with our deeds and prayer for convoking this special jubilee, a true time of grace for the Church and the world."

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

1. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort (2 Cor 1:3), who, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (...) and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:4-6).

These words of St Paul help us to focus, right from the start, on what I would like to transmit to you in this letter. My reason for writing to you is the desire that we may prepare ourselves as well as possible for the Year of Mercy convoked by Pope Francis, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council. It will begin, as you know, on the coming 8 December, and conclude on the

solemnity of Christ the King, on 20 November 2016.

When the Holy Father made public his intention to convoke this extraordinary Holy Year, we felt the Christian joy of knowing it coincided with the final part of the Marian year for the family that we have been observing in the Prelature. We have seen this as another sign of protection from our Lady, whom we invoke as *Regína famílicæ* and *Mater misericórdiæ*.

With our Mother's intercession we have recourse to the goodness of God, who is a sure refuge, always ready to accede to our requests and provide a remedy for our personal needs. From divine mercy we can obtain an increase in charity, understanding, fraternity and concern for souls, since – as members of the Church – we want to contribute to giving a more

authentically human meaning to mankind and its history.^[1] Let us walk day by day with solid hope: Heaven unceasingly offers us the means we need so that we may be filled with peace, certain that the Blessed Trinity is always taking care of all creation. As Pope Francis reminds us, let us ascend from created things to contemplate God's fatherly and loving hand.^[2]

Let us show our gratitude to our Holy Father with our deeds and prayer for convoking this special jubilee, a true time of grace for the Church and the world. We are all filled with joy in welcoming the call of our common Father to draw closer to our Lord, in piety and in the celebration of the Sacraments, above all Penance and the Eucharist, and also in specific manifestations of fraternal charity towards our neighbour. If we are docile to the Holy Spirit, we will become more identified with Jesus

Christ and come to be more like our heavenly Father, whose merciful face is revealed to us in Christ Jesus.

2. *Deus, cui próprium est miseréri semper et párcere: súscipe deprecationem nostram.*^[3] “O God, to whom it belongs always to forgive and to be merciful: receive our prayer,” we say every day. Mercy! It is always necessary to go more deeply, as the Church invites us, into this consoling divine attribute which is a compendium of all God’s attributes. We do so with filial trust. In convoking this extraordinary jubilee, the Roman Pontiff writes that mercy “is the word that reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us (...), the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge

that connects God and man, opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.”^[4] —

Thirty-five years have gone by since St John Paul II published the encyclical *Dives in misericórdia*. There he stressed that it is good to meditate frequently on this wonderful expression of divine Love. “It is called for,” he wrote, “by the varied experiences of the Church and of contemporary man. It is also demanded by the pleas of many human hearts, their sufferings and hopes, their anxieties and expectations.”^[5] —

St John Paul’s words are not only fully applicable today, but become more pressing daily. We are always in need of divine mercy, but in our times we can say that this need has become more urgent. When Pope Francis opens the holy door in the various papal basilicas, and each

Bishop does so in his respective circumscription, “we will entrust the life of the Church, all humanity, and the entire cosmos to the Lordship of Christ, asking him to pour out his mercy upon us like the morning dew, so that everyone may work together to build a brighter future.”^[6] St Josemaría, as a result of his personal experience, urged us expressly, from the beginnings of the Work, to have recourse to this immense love of God, who doesn’t abandon his children, all men and women. Our Founder suggested to us in countless ways that we knock at the doors of the Heart of Jesus.

3. St Josemaría taught us to imbue the paths of the earth with the mercy that Jesus brought to the world. And he made the point that ***our dedication to the service of souls is a manifestation of the Lord’s mercy, not only towards us, but towards the whole of humanity.***^[7]

Guided by St Josemaría's hand, let us step forward together with our Lord so that there may be an overflow, in every Christian and in all people of good will, of that current of merciful love which pours forth continually upon humanity from the pierced Heart of Jesus.

With these sentiments and yearnings I invite you, my daughters and sons, to begin the Year of Mercy with earnest devotion and joy. We will find inspiration in the teachings of Sacred Scripture, whose pages make up a marvellous song to divine mercy. And we will pay special attention to Christ's example, to his life and teachings, striving to model our behaviour intimately on that of the Redeemer and thus follow in the footsteps of St Josemaría, who constantly turned his eyes to the figure of the Good Shepherd giving his entire life for his sheep (cf. *Jn* 10:1-18). St Josemaría suggested to us

and to very many other men and women that we set our sights ever more firmly on the Lord of Heaven and earth.

God's mercy towards mankind

4. Many pages in the Old Testament already make clear God's unfathomable mercy towards his creatures. *The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made (Ps 144 [145]:8-9).* And the prophets never tire of warning: *Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and repents of evil (Joel 2:13).*

At the Last Supper, in accord with Jewish tradition, our Lord prayed the Great Hallel, the great song of praise.

This psalm sets forth the wonders carried out by God in creation and in history, and, at the end of each verse, the following words are repeated as a refrain: *for his mercy is everlasting* (Ps 135 [136]).

“By virtue of mercy, all the events of the Old Testament are replete with profound salvific import.”^[8] — This quality is manifested in its fullness in the New Testament, through the redemptive incarnation of the Son of God. Jesus himself, in offering his life in the bloody sacrifice of the Cross, in instituting the Eucharist and the other sacraments, made this supreme act of Love the fundamental sign of divine mercy.

Let us often reread the Gospel passages that show Christ’s compassion and understanding for humanity; from his birth in Bethlehem right up to his holocaust on Calvary. Let us stop to consider

carefully so many examples of his compassionate mercy: when he cured the sick and healed the possessed; when he fed the hungry crowds; when he lavishly distributed the bread of doctrine; when he went out to meet repentant sinners and forgave them; when he chose his disciples; when he rebuked them with a glance or word; when he called his Apostles and sent them out to the whole world; when he gave us his Mother to be our Mother; when he sent us the promised Holy Spirit, etc. In each of his deeds and words, our Lord shows us clearly the merciful face of God the Father.

The same is true throughout the Church's history, after Jesus ascended into Heaven. Amid the lights and shadows that have marked the path of Christians, interventions of divine indulgence have never been lacking. Through the Holy Spirit who dwells in the Church, and with the real

presence of Christ in the Eucharist, along with our Lady's constant intercession, the torrents of mercy constantly being poured out on the world are revealed to us. Let us not cease to thank our heavenly Father for this. Let us open wide the doors of our own heart and try to help other people to let themselves be steeped in divine grace.

A history of God's mercies

5. In his encyclical *Dives in misericórdia*, St John Paul II places mercy at the centre of the Church's life, in the history of mankind. "In the eschatological fulfilment mercy will be revealed as love, while in the temporal phase, in human history, which is at the same time the history of sin and death, love must be revealed above all as mercy and must also be actualized as mercy. Christ's messianic programme, the programme of mercy, becomes the

programme of His people, the programme of the Church. At its very centre there is always the Cross, for it is in the Cross that the revelation of merciful love attains its culmination.”^[9] —

We cannot separate the Cross from the Resurrection, since both reveal divine Love: God’s mercy is made manifest in the whole of the paschal mystery. Blessed Paul VI said that “the whole history of salvation is guided by divine mercy, which goes forth to meet human misery.”^[10] —

Christ took upon himself our sins, *having been offered once to bear the sins of many (Heb 9:28)*. Our Lady accepted with full freedom the self-surrender of the One who, having taken on our human condition in everything except sin (cf. *Heb 4:15*), was able to show true compassion. In her *Magnificat* our Lady proclaimed: *his mercy is on those who fear him*

from generation to generation (Lk 1:50).

6. My daughters and sons: we rejoice in being part of those generations that sing the mercies of God! In his personal life and in that of Opus Dei, St Josemaría constantly discovered God's preferential love. He often said that ***the entire history of the Work is the history of God's mercies.*** ***Neither in this letter,*** he wrote in the 1960s, ***nor in the many documents I might write for you, could I finish telling of the providential care of God's goodness, which has always preceded and accompanied the Work's steps.***^[11] He had no hesitation in saying that ***the history of Opus Dei will have to be written kneeling down.***^[12] With this graphic image, he emphasized that God has always taken the initiative in the founding and development of the Work: St Josemaría's role was simply

to be a faithful instrument of the divine will.

Truly, the life of St Josemaría and that of Opus Dei are closely intertwined, and from 1928 onwards it was impossible to distinguish between them or separate them. ***In the Work, God has done everything***, he exclaimed in a meditation. ***Humanly speaking, what did I have? Only good humour, a great love for Christ and his Church, and a desire to persevere when faced with the impossible. God has dealt with me as I, when a child, dealt with my little lead soldiers: I placed them wherever I wanted, and at times even decapitated them... That's what God has done with me: he has led me along the paths he wished, and allowed people to give me some really hard knocks, because it was good for me.***^[13]___

Each of those circumstances helped our Founder to refine his fidelity and abandonment in God's hands. As Pope Francis has written: "We can know quite well that our lives will be fruitful, without claiming to know how, or where, or when. We may be sure that none of our acts of love will be lost, nor any of our acts of sincere concern for others. No single act of love for God will be lost, no generous effort is meaningless, no painful endurance is wasted."^[14] Thus St Josemaría never lost his peace: ***my children, with contrition comes Love. None of these efforts, no sorrow has made me lose gáudium cum pace, because God has taught me to love, and nullo enim modo sunt onerosi labores amantium(St Augustine, De bono viduitatis, 21, 26); for the one who loves, work is never a heavy burden. Therefore the important thing is to learn to love, because in eo quod amatur, aut non laboratur, aut et labor***

amátur (Ibid.): where there is love, all is happiness. God's greatest mercy has been to lead me like a small child and teach me how to love. When I was barely an adolescent, our Lord sowed in my heart a seed ablaze with love. And today, my daughters and sons, that seed is a leafy tree that gives shade to a legion of souls.^[15]

7. This is how St Josemaría always acted. His devotion to this sure divine refuge that we are contemplating went back to his earliest years. He learned it from his parents in their home; it was strengthened during his preparation for the priesthood in the Seminary of Logroño and in that of San Carlos in Saragossa, which had a representation of the Heart of Jesus inflamed with love and crowned with thorns, an image that deeply moved him. Later, during the Spanish Civil War, it took on new

force for him, as he described in a time of prayer, on the eve of the solemnity of the Sacred Heart:

I want to see myself now, my God, close to the Wound in your side; and I want to call to mind all my children, those who now are living members of this living Body of your Work. I will mention each one by name and consider their qualities, virtues and defects. And then I will beseech you, as I urge them towards you one by one and say, "Enter inside!" I will place them in your Heart. I would like to do so with each one, and with all who will come afterwards and form part of this supernatural family, throughout the centuries until the end of the world. All of us united in the Heart of Christ, all made one through love for Him, and all of us detached from earthly things by the strength of this love and by mortification. We

want to be like the first Christians, making present once again their spirit in the world. Let's begin, then, by making this phrase a reality within the Work:

congregávit nos in unum Christi amor.^[16]—

In the Holy Mass, after the Consecration, St Josemaría used to recite in silence, interiorly, the prayer to merciful Love that he had learned in his youth. The most lovable Heart of Jesus strengthened, at its source, his fatherhood in Opus Dei, which extended to his daughters and sons of all times; and in the Holy Sacrifice his heart was filled with Christ's redemptive longings for all of humanity. These considerations will also help us to be sure and optimistic in the difficult moments that may arise in the history of the world or in our personal life. God is the same as always: all-powerful, all-wise, and merciful. And at every moment he is

able to draw good out of evil and great victories out of defeats, for those who trust in him.

8. In the 1970s, when a grave crisis of faith and discipline was doing great damage to souls, St Josemaría received new lights from Heaven that confirmed him in his unshakeable trust in God's constant help. On 23 August 1971, after he had celebrated Holy Mass, our Lord engraved with fire on his heart some words that, with a slight variation, come from the Epistle to the Hebrews: *adeámus cum fidúcia ad thronum grátiae, ut misericórdiam consequámur* (Heb 4:16). He made this known right away to those of us who were near him at the time. A few weeks later he once again made reference to it in the intimacy of a family get-together with his children in Rome:

I'm going to tell you something that God our Lord wants you to know. We, God's children in Opus Dei, adeámus cum fidúcia, should go with great faith ad thronum glóriæ, to the throne of glory, our Blessed Lady, Mother of God and our Mother, whom we invoke so often as Sedes Sapiéntiæ, ut misericórdiam consequámur, to obtain mercy (...).

Let us go, through the most Sweet Heart of Mary, to the most Sacred and Merciful Heart of Jesus, to ask him, through his mercy, to show forth his power in the Church and fill us with strength to continue along our path, drawing many souls to him.^[17]

This certainty forcefully impelled him to seek in the Word of God the most relevant texts on God's compassion and protection, in order to meditate on them in his personal

prayer. Thus, a year later, he once again made reference to a “discovery” that infused great optimism and confidence in his soul, helping him to overcome the great pain and sorrow in his heart brought about by his love for the Church.

Recently, he said, I have been meditating a lot on some texts in Sacred Scripture that speak about divine mercy. I realize that Scripture scholars give different meanings to this word, and understand by it not only what it signifies in ordinary language – compassion, pity –, but also the loyalty God has towards his creatures.

Isn't this beautiful! God our Lord has such compassion on mankind – because his mercy also means compassion – that his loyalty leads him to be merciful towards each of

us, to look on us with the love of a father and a mother.^[18]

He continued striving to fathom more fully the words of Sacred Scripture that he had already meditated on in his youth: God “delights” in the children of men (cf. *Prov* 8:31). And therefore he went forward with a sure step, in getting *Opus Dei* going. When he found himself without any human resource, this “delight” of God strengthened his assurance that the Work would go forward.

Justice and mercy

9. Among the parables the Master used to explain to his disciples the characteristics of the kingdom of heaven, St Luke (described by one of the great Christian poets as “the recorder of Christ’s meekness”^[19]) gives us three teachings explicitly aimed at highlighting God’s divine

watchfulness over his people: the lost sheep, the missing coin, and the prodigal son. In all three, “Jesus reveals the nature of God as that of a Father who never gives up until he has forgiven the wrong and overcome rejection with compassion and mercy”.^[20]_____

That loving heart is manifest especially in the parable of the father who waits patiently day after day for his ungrateful son to return, so he can forgive him as soon as he arrives. St John Paul II commented on it incisively in his encyclical *Dives in misericórdia*, explaining how this teaching applies to each and every human being. “The parable indirectly touches upon every breach of the covenant of love, every loss of grace, every sin (...) The inheritance that the son had received from his father was a quantity of material goods, but more important than

these goods was *his dignity as a son in his father's house*".^[21]_____

St Josemaría commented on it similarly: ***The mercy God shows us has to lead us back to him always. My sons, it's better not to leave him at all, never to abandon him. But if ever out of human weakness you stray, run straight back again. He always receives us, like the father of the prodigal son, with more intense love.***^[22]_____

Although, as St John Paul II points out, the original text doesn't mention either justice or mercy, "*nevertheless, the relationship between justice and love, that is manifested as mercy, is inscribed with great exactness in the content of the Gospel parable. It becomes more evident that love is transformed into mercy when it is necessary to go beyond the precise norm of justice – precise and often too narrow*".^[23]_____

St Josemaría saw this practical union of justice and love in the behaviour of mothers.^[24] For him God's justice contained ***depths of mercy.***^[25] ***We can't approach God on the basis of rights. What we have to do is to ask him to have mercy on us, as it says in one of the psalms: Miserere mei, Deus, secúndum magnam misericórdiam tuam. Lord, have compassion on me according to your great mercy. We don't appeal to him on the basis of justice.***^[26]

10. Plenty of people see some kind of opposition between justice and mercy. In convoking the jubilee, the Holy Father warned us about this error: "These are not two contradictory realities, but two dimensions of a single reality that unfolds progressively until it culminates in the fullness of love (...).

"Faced with a vision of justice as the mere observance of the law that

judges people simply by dividing them into two groups – the just and sinners – Jesus is bent on revealing the great gift of mercy that searches out sinners and offers them pardon and salvation. One can see why, on the basis of such a liberating vision of mercy as a source of new life, Jesus was rejected by the Pharisees and the other teachers of the law”.^[27]

Having recourse to divine mercy

11. Thanks to a special grace from God, as I mentioned earlier, our Founder gained deep insights into the wonderful flashes of divine clemency contained in Holy Scripture. Commenting, for example, on the miracle of the raising of the son of the widow of Naim, he considered how ***our Lord loved us for holy reasons which perhaps wouldn't have occurred to us. St Luke says: misericórdia motus***

super eam, he was moved by compassion, by mercy for that woman, when he could instead have been moved by more logical reasons: she was poor, she was a widow, and she didn't have any other children.^[28]—

There was a large crowd of people in the funeral procession, and more again accompanying Jesus; but only he enters into that mother's pain and steps forward to meet her. Isn't it admirable, the way the Master allows himself to be overcome by the merciful impulses of his Heart, without waiting for us to tell him our needs? Our Redeemer's divine and human behaviour urges us vigorously to appeal to him at every moment. ***You and I***, St Josemaría says, ***also have to have recourse to God's mercy. Before God we don't have any rights at all. At least, I personally see, with noontday clarity, that I can't say, "Lord, I***

demand that you do this”, even though I know I am his son, and feel it. I go to him with groans of contrition, asking him for mercy,
—^[29] appealing for pity.

In the last years of his life, feeling the need to ask God for pardon with greater confidence and diligence, St Josemaría completed the aspiration he had composed to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in 1952, on consecrating the Work, its apostolates, and the needs of the Church and of mankind to him: **Cor Iesu Sacratíssimum et Miséricors, dona nobis pacem!** From then on, recourse to Heaven’s protection for the world, the Church, and souls, became ever more central in St Josemaría’s life, day and night.

Here we discover the principal fruit we ask God for in the year dedicated to his mercy: that society may return to the path of the commandments, that souls may allow themselves to

be inflamed with the fire of God's love, that everywhere in the Church there may be a resurgence of clear doctrine and genuine piety. I make my own the words of the Holy Father: "How much I desire that the year to come will be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman, bringing the goodness and tenderness of God! May the balm of mercy reach everyone, both believers and those far away, as a sign that the Kingdom of God is already present in our midst!"^[30]

Be merciful as the heavenly Father is merciful

12. The Church constantly seeks to offer God's love to mankind, without excluding anybody. Nevertheless, as Pope Francis observes, "perhaps we have long since forgotten how to show and live the way of mercy. The temptation, on the one hand, to focus

exclusively on justice made us forget that this is only the first, albeit necessary and indispensable step. But the Church needs to go beyond and strive for a higher and more important goal”.^[31]—

It's not enough to ask God for pardon for our own sins and the sins of the world. That prayer, essential though it is, must be accompanied by the concrete practice of mercy towards our neighbour. Because *if any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also (1 Jn 4:20-21).*

The works of mercy, so repeatedly preached and practised in the Church, offer us a fitting way of expressing our good intentions with

concrete deeds. “The works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbour in his spiritual and bodily necessities”,^[32] explains the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. And one of the things the Holy Father asks us to do this year is to practise them assiduously. “Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples.”^[33]

Jesus describes this quite clearly in the Gospel, laying it down as an unequivocal requirement: *As you wish that men would do to you, do so to them. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is*

that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful (Lk 6:31-36).

The corporal works of mercy

13. Catholic teaching sums up the corporal works of mercy as follows: “feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God”.^[34] All of them are expressions of the *mandátum novum* (Jn 13:34), the new commandment of charity given to us by Christ. In keeping with

our Saviour's instruction, the Church has always shown a special love for the poor, the sick, the helpless, the destitute... And she is always conscious of our Lord's words at the Last Judgment: *Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me* (Mt 25:40). And in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus shows us that our charity extends to the whole human race.

14. In Opus Dei, a living part of the Church, we are reminded never to abandon the corporal works of mercy. St Josemaría practised them in the early years of the Work, visiting the sick in the hospitals of Madrid, and looking after down-and-outs, as well as the genteel poor who concealed their poverty under the veil of an apparently normal life. And he taught the people who took part in his apostolate to do the same. He entrusted those activities to our

Lady. That was the beginning in Opus Dei of the visits to “our Lady’s poor”, which still take place wherever the faithful of the Prelature live. On Saturday, our Lady’s day, the young people are invited to give alms which are used to help the needy. When they help the poor, ***our Lady is honoured and they practise charity.***^[35] These visits have a formative role, because they foster the young people’s generosity, and so their love grows.

Our Founder, who always learned from seeing how God cares for his creation, was very upset at the sight of ***the goods of the earth, distributed among a few; the goods of culture, confined to cliques. And, out there, hunger for bread and knowledge; human lives, holy, because they come from God, treated as mere things, as statistics. I understand and share this impatience. It stirs me to look***

at Christ, who is continually inviting us to put his “new commandment” of love into practice (...).

We must learn to recognize Christ when he comes out to meet us in our brothers, the people around us. No human life is ever isolated. It is bound up with other lives. Nobody is a loose line of a poem; we all form part of one divine poem which God writes with the cooperation of our freedom.^[36]

How many young people, both boys and girls, and how many adults too, on discovering and contemplating their neighbour's most pressing needs, have discovered the impoverished Christ in those brothers or sisters and have improved their readiness to serve others! Our Lord, who is infinitely more generous, has inundated their souls with special graces: only he

knows the profound conversions many of them have experienced, the decisions of total self-giving to the service of God and the Church, begotten in those visits to the needy, the elderly, the sick, the imprisoned...

15. With the growth of the Work of God, through the apostolic spontaneity of the faithful and Cooperators of Opus Dei, the activities of material service to others have acquired new dimensions, in accordance with the different circumstances of time and place. There are vocational training schools for people from very diverse backgrounds, in both rural and urban districts; medical dispensaries and hospitals serving the needy in deprived areas; more and more assistance programmes, like NGOs that help in underdeveloped countries, or food banks in First World nations, to mention just a few examples, which in times of financial

crisis like these, enable many men and women to cope with their own material needs and those of their families.

I give thanks to God for the growth of the solidarity programmes run by the faithful and Cooperators of the Prelature. But we can't be content with that. With God's grace, and with the help of many good-hearted people (Catholics and non-Catholics), we should aim to increase their scope even more.

16. Allow me to ask you once again to make every effort to care for the sick: at home, in hospital, and wherever there is an individual suffering in body or soul; and naturally, in the Centres of the Work and the homes of the Associates and Supernumeraries. Christ becomes present to us in a special way in every suffering person.

As well as ensuring that they have proper medical attention, we have to take special care of their spiritual welfare. The priests can do this by ensuring they can receive the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. The laity, by their example and advice, can help the sick, as appropriate, to have a spirit of prayer, which means contemplation, thanksgiving, praise and petition. For instance, they can help them to say the Rosary or practise other Christian devotions, which fill people with joy even in suffering. The sick are very grateful when they discover that by offering God their illness, with the suffering and limitations it involves, in their flesh they *complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church* (Col 1:24), as St Paul wrote, pointing out the salvific value of suffering.^[37]—

When they become gravely ill, we should make every effort to prepare

them to receive the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick as fruitfully as possible. The Church says that this sacrament of mercy has the power to forgive sins; and it can also lead to the improvement of bodily health and even to being cured, if that will benefit the soul.^[38] The Church's long tradition demonstrates that this sacrament confers great peace and serenity on those who receive it with the right dispositions, without waiting until the very last moment of life. What a wonderful catechesis can be carried out with families, who very often (through ignorance or through a misplaced fear of upsetting the patient) fail to summon the priest, or ask him to come only when their loved ones have already lost consciousness!

17. With the passage of time, some of the corporal works of mercy have changed their form of expression or application. That of caring for

travellers is generally expressed nowadays as “to shelter the homeless”. At the present time it includes helping migrants who leave their native land to find work, better living conditions etc. No disciple of the Master can fail to be concerned for these men and women, and sometimes entire families. I’m thinking especially of those Christians persecuted for religious reasons: their exile should make us very aware of the Communion of Saints.

Pope Francis has called upon public authorities, and all men of good will, to find specific solutions to this problem. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gáudium* he challenged us: “It is essential to draw near to new forms of poverty and vulnerability, in which we are called to recognize the suffering Christ, even if this appears to bring us no tangible and immediate benefits. I

think of the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly who are increasingly isolated and abandoned, and many others. Migrants present a particular challenge for me, since I am the Pastor of a Church without frontiers, a Church which considers herself mother to all”.^[39] More recently, in preparation for the Year of Mercy, he has intensified this urgent appeal.^[40]

Let us echo the Holy Father’s exhortations and invite relatives, friends and colleagues to put them into practice in accordance with their circumstances and possibilities. As well as praying, we should get them to see how they could be personally involved: perhaps by influencing public opinion on the issue, or providing lodging, a job, a donation or grant, etc. Acting always with a sense of personal responsibility, another good way of supporting this objective is to help

the programmes sponsored by the dioceses and parishes, which the Holy Father has charged directly with this mission. I am aware that many of you, as well as Cooperators and friends, are already involved in projects for the service of migrants. I thank you for it in our Lord's name, because the help we offer these brothers and sisters, we offer to Christ himself.

The spiritual works of mercy

18. St Josemaría confided to us: *I would make so bold as to say that, when social conditions seem to have put an end to wretchedness, poverty and suffering in a given place, that is precisely when there is the greatest need for this incisive Christian charity, which can sense who is in need of consolation amidst the apparently general well-being.*^[41]—

Let us consider the fact that acts of love for our neighbour are not confined to material donations, however necessary such donations may be. The Pope laments that “the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care.”^[42] —

Down through her history the Church has been characterized by concern to practise the spiritual works of mercy, which are always so real and so applicable: “to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead.”^[43] —

How delicate this spiritual charity is! And how indispensable it is in these times, when so many men and women are suffering from loneliness, misunderstanding, persecution, spite and slander; or are mired in doubt, not knowing the path that leads to Heaven! Because ***there***

are widespread social remedies for the scourges of suffering and want, enabling people today to achieve humanitarian results undreamt of in times gone by. But such remedies, being on a different plane, will never do away with the need for practical, human and supernatural tenderness, shown in direct personal contact with our neighbour. Our neighbour is the poor person in a nearby district, the sick person who is suffering alone in a huge hospital, or the other person who may be rich, but who needs time spent in affectionate conversation, Christian friendship to ease their loneliness, and a spiritual refuge that will remedy their doubts and scepticism.^[44]—

Let's remember the event of the beggar-woman to whom St Josemaría was only able to offer his spiritual care and human affection as a priest.

In return, the woman decided to offer her life for the Work. When he met her again later, in hospital, and learned about the offering that this beggar-woman had made to our Lord, he called her the first vocation of his future daughters.

19. Out of the numerous acts of Christian solidarity or fraternity, I am only going to dwell on a few: instructing the ignorant, counselling the doubtful, and forgiving offences. These are proofs of the caring charity we have to show to everyone, and especially to those who are closest to us: our family members, friends and colleagues, acquaintances...

Instructing those who are ignorant of the truths of our faith is a sign of mercy that has fundamental importance. St Josemaría summed it up in a few words: ***our great mission is to spread doctrine***. He often underlined the fact that the

great enemy of God and souls is religious ignorance, and he said that the apostolate of Opus Dei is a **great catechesis**, bringing the Church's saving message within everyone's reach and teaching them to practise it. ***Be convinced of this: your apostolate consists in spreading goodness, light, enthusiasm, generosity, a spirit of sacrifice, constancy in work, deep study, complete self-surrender, being up-to-date, cheerful and complete obedience to the Church, and perfect charity.***^[45] That whole approach demands generous efforts to provide doctrinal, spiritual and apostolic formation to the people we are in contact with. How happy it makes us when the truth of the Gospel lights up our various fields of activity – professional, social and cultural!

In this Year of Mercy let us try to increase our commitment to bring

many souls to the warmth of the Church, the Spouse of Jesus Christ and our Mother. We will manage this, with God's help, if each and every one of us works *personally* to bring more friends, colleagues and acquaintances to the means of formation.

20. There are also many different ways of counselling the doubtful. The first way is by the witness of our own behaviour. That was what Christ did when he lived here on earth, as St Josemaría told us repeatedly. St Josemaría loved to dwell on that example, in the phrase from the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles: *Jesus began to do and to teach (Acts 1:1)*. Following on from the witness of our behaviour there is the opportunity for the right words, clear, affectionate, and never wounding, spoken in the ears of our friends or acquaintances: the ***apostolate of friendship and trust,***

on which St Josemaría laid so much stress.

When what we do matches what we say, how fruitful it is! It will sometimes take the form of fraternal correction, as the Gospel teaches (cf. *Mt 18:15-17*): a work of mercy that is unselfish, courageous and fertile, born of charity and our concern for our friend.

In this regard, Benedict XVI said: “Today, in general, we are very sensitive to the idea of charity and caring about the physical and material well-being of others, but almost completely silent about our spiritual responsibility towards our brothers and sisters. This was not the case in the early Church or in those communities that are truly mature in faith, those which are concerned not only for the physical health of their brothers and sisters, but also for their spiritual health and ultimate

destiny. (...) It is important to recover this dimension of Christian charity.”^[46] And he added, “We must not remain silent before evil. I am thinking of all those Christians who, out of human regard or purely personal convenience, adapt to the prevailing mentality, rather than warning their brothers and sisters against ways of thinking and acting that are contrary to the truth and that do not follow the path of goodness.”^[47]

Let us show our gratitude to St Josemaría for highlighting the effectiveness of this Gospel practice as an excellent, kind, habitual way of helping our neighbour; a way that is born of charity and that must be exercised with real humility and supernatural charity.

Because “Christian admonishment, for its part, is never motivated by a spirit of accusation or recrimination.

It is always moved by love and mercy, and springs from genuine concern for the good of the other. As the Apostle Paul says: ‘If one of you is caught doing something wrong, those of you who are spiritual should set that person right in a spirit of gentleness; and watch yourselves that you are not put to the test in the same way’ (*Gal 6:1*).

“In a world pervaded by individualism, it is essential to rediscover the importance of fraternal correction, so that together we may journey towards holiness.”^[48]

21. Forgiving offences is another marvellous way of practising charity. *Forgive and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be poured into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back* (*Lk 6:37-38*). Let us meditate on the

parable of the man who refused to forgive a fellow-worker a tiny debt, after his master had forgiven him an enormous sum. And what was his master's response? *"You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?"* And in his anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart (Mt 18:32-35).

Forgiving offences is a clear sign that we are children of God and behave as such. ***Far be it from us, therefore, to remember who has offended us or the humiliations we have endured – no matter how unjust, uncivil or unmannerly they may have been – because it would not be right for a son of God to be***

preparing some kind of dossier, from which to read off a list of grievances. We must never forget Christ's example.^[49] St Luke, when actually relating our Lord's Passion, writes that *when they came to the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:33-34).*

Obviously this way of acting may not be easy, but God's grace makes it a viable path, as is proved by the many Christians who, from the earliest history of the Church to the present, have shown not only mercy but sincere love for their persecutors. Similarly, St Josemaría took the upright, permanent decision to forgive always, all the time, and confirmed it with his example and his words.

Not to hate one's enemies, not to return evil for evil, to refrain from vengeance and to forgive ungrudgingly were all considered at that time unusual behaviour, too heroic for normal men. The same thing, let's be honest about it, is true today. Such is the small-mindedness of men. But Christ, who came to save all mankind and who wishes Christians to be associated with him in the work of redemption, wanted to teach his disciples – you and me – to have a great and sincere charity, one which is more noble and more precious: that of loving one another in the same way as Christ loves each one of us. Only then, by imitating the divine pattern he has left us, and notwithstanding our own rough ways, will we be able to open our hearts to all men and love in a higher and totally new way.^[50]___

We will be judged on our works of mercy: “whether we have fed the hungry and given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked, or spent time with the sick and those in prison (cf. *Mt 25:31-45*). Moreover, we will be asked if we have helped others to escape the doubt that causes them to fall into despair and which is often a source of loneliness; if we have helped to overcome the ignorance in which millions of people live, especially children deprived of the necessary means to free them from the bonds of poverty; if we have been close to the lonely and afflicted; if we have forgiven those who have offended us and have rejected all forms of anger and hate that lead to violence; if we have had the kind of patience God shows, who is so patient with us; and if we have commended our brothers and sisters to the Lord in prayer. In each of these ‘little ones’, Christ himself is present. His flesh becomes

visible in the flesh of the tortured, the crushed, the scourged, the malnourished, and the exiled..., to be acknowledged, touched, and cared for by us. Let us not forget the words of Saint John of the Cross: ‘as we prepare to leave this life, we will be judged on the basis of love’.”^[51] —

Apostolate of Confession

22. Another particularly important spiritual work of mercy is to help people recover their friendship with God when it has been lost through sin. How much St Josemaría, and Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, emphasized the importance of the *apostolate of Confession*! I too have often spoken to you on this point, because it is not possible for anyone to advance in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, without careful attention to the state of their soul, without frequent recourse to the sacrament of Penance.

The Pope often talks about this sacrament. In the Bull convoking the Year of Mercy, he notes: “Let us place the Sacrament of Reconciliation at the centre once more in such a way that it will enable people to touch the grandeur of God’s mercy with their own hands. For every penitent, it will be a source of true interior peace.”^[52] —

At the same time, let us meditate on the advice which St Josemaría, following the prompting of his soul, gave to his sons who were priests, and which applies to all priests: ***the ruling passion of the priests of Opus Dei (...) is to spread doctrine and direct souls: to preach and hear confessions. You have to spend yourselves in this task, without fearing to wear yourselves out or suffer setbacks: qui séminant in lácrimis, in exsultatióne metent (Ps 125:5); those who sow with tears will reap with joy. The mission of the laity,***

of my lay daughters and sons, is to give their priest-brothers a lot of work, and therefore joy, by bringing many people to their ministry.^[53]___

23. Confessors themselves are “authentic signs of the Father’s mercy”, writes the Pope. “We do not become good confessors automatically. We become good confessors when, above all, we allow ourselves to be penitents in search of his mercy. Let us never forget that to be confessors means to participate in the very mission of Jesus and to be a concrete sign of the constancy of divine love that pardons and saves.

“None of us wields power over this Sacrament,” the Pope goes on; “rather, we are faithful servants of God’s mercy through it. Every confessor must accept the faithful as the father in the parable of the prodigal son: a father who runs out

to meet his son despite the fact that he has squandered away his inheritance. Confessors are called to embrace the repentant son who comes back home and to express the joy of having him back again. Let us never tire of also going out to the other son who stands outside, incapable of rejoicing, in order to explain to him that his judgment is severe and unjust and meaningless in light of the Father's boundless mercy."^[54] —

My daughters and sons, let us beg our Lord to make us into faithful instruments of his mercy: the priests, by dedicating many hours – as many as they can – to forgiving in God's name; and the lay people, by a constant effort to prepare the souls of their friends and acquaintances, through sincere, disinterested charity, to help them draw a lot of fruit from the sacrament of joy and peace.

24. I do not want to write much more. I recommend you to read and meditate deeply on the Bull *Misericórdiaæ vultus*, and draw your own conclusions. It also talks about going on pilgrimage to certain shrines to obtain the gift of the indulgence granted by the Church, and thus abundantly favour tender, filial devotion to our Mother the Blessed Virgin in the coming months. “May the sweetness of her countenance watch over us in this Holy Year, so that all of us may rediscover the joy of God’s tenderness. No one has penetrated the profound mystery of the incarnation like Mary. Her entire life was patterned after the presence of mercy made flesh. The Mother of the Crucified and Risen One has entered the sanctuary of divine mercy because she participated intimately in the mystery of his love.”^[55] —

A very affectionate blessing from

your Father

+ Javier

[1] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Past. Const. *Gaudium et spes*, 40.

[2] Cf. Pope Francis, Enc. *Laudato Si'*, 24 May 2015, 77.

[3] *Preces of the Work, Prayer.*

[4] Pope Francis, Bull *Misericórdiæ vultus*, 11 April 2015, 2.

[5] St John Paul II, Enc. *Dives in misericórdia*, 30 November 1980, 1.

[6] Pope Francis, Bull *Misericórdiæ vultus*, 11 April 2015, 5.

[7] St Josemaría, *Letter 24 March 1930*, 1.

[8] Pope Francis, Bull *Misericórdiæ vultus*, 11 April 2015, 7.

[9] St John Paul II, Enc. *Dives in misericórdia*, 30 November 1980, 8.

[10] Blessed Paul VI, General audience, 14 April 1976.

[11] St Josemaría, *Letter 25 January 1961*, 1.

[12] St Josemaría, Notes from a meditation, 11 April 1952.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 279.

[15] St Josemaría, *Letter 25 January 1961*, 3.

[16] St Josemaría, Notes from a meditation, 4 June 1937; *Growing on the Inside*, p. 101.

[17] St Josemaría, Notes from a get-together, 9 September 1971.

[18] St Josemaría, Notes from a get-together, 14 June 1972.

[19] Cf. Dante Alighieri, *Monarchia*, 1.

[20] Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiæ vultus*, 11 April 2015, 9.

[21] St John Paul II, Enc. *Dives in misericórdia*, 30 November 1980, 5.

[22] St Josemaría, Notes from a get-together, 27 March 1972.

[23] St John Paul II, Enc. *Dives in misericórdia*, 30 November 1980, 5.

[24] Cf. St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 173.

[25] St Josemaría, *The Way*, 309.

[26] St Josemaría, Notes from a get-together, 11 September 1971; Ps 50:2.

[27] Pope Francis, Bull *Misericórdiae vultus*, 11 April 2015, 20.

[28] St Josemaría, Notes from a get-together, 25 September 1971; *Lk* 7:13.

[29] St Josemaría, Notes from a get-together, 9 September 1971.

[30] Pope Francis, Bull *Misericórdiae vultus*, 11 April 2015, 5.

[31] *Ibid.*, 10.

[32] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2447.

[33] Pope Francis, Bull *Misericórdiae vultus*, 11 April 2015, 15.

[34] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2447.

[35] St Josemaría, *Instruction*, 9 January 1935, 196.

[36] St Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 111.

[37] Cf. St John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*, 11 February 1984.

[38] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1520.

[39] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 210.

[40] Cf. Pope Francis, Angelus, 6 September 2015.

[41] St Josemaría, *Letter 24 October 1942*, 44.

[42] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 200.

[43] Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiæ vultus*, 11 April 2015, 15.

[44] St Josemaría, *Letter 24 October 1942*, 44.

[45] St Josemaría, *Furrow*, 927.

[46] Benedict XVI, Message for Lent 2012, 3 November 2011, 1.

[47] *Ibid.*

[48] *Ibid.*

[49] St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 309.

[50] St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 225.

[51] Pope Francis, Bull *Misericórdiae vultus*, 11 April 2015, 15. The quotation from St John of the Cross is from *Words of Light and Love*, 57.

[52] Pope Francis, Bull *Misericórdiae vultus*, 11 April 2015, 17.

[53] St Josemaría, *Letter 8 August 1956*, 35.

[54] Pope Francis, Bull *Misericórdiae vultus*, 11 April 2015, 17.

[55] *Ibid.*, 24.

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