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Letter from the Prelate (November 2009)

"Throughout the Year of the Priesthood, besides praying for the holiness of all priests, we have to pray for the holiness of the entire Christian people," who share in Christ's "royal priesthood," the Prelate tells us in his letter this month.

11/03/2009

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

As we begin the month of November in the Year of the Priesthood, I would like to remind you that it is framed by two liturgical feasts that highlight the priestly character of the People of God: the Solemnity of All Saints and that of Christ the King. The first, which we celebrate today, shows us Christ's priesthood in his members, in Christians. The second, on the 22nd, makes clear that our Head, Jesus Christ, is *a priest forever and King of the universe*,[1] who through his glorious coming at the end of time will take possession of his Kingdom and present it to God the Father.[2]

The two solemnities invite us to reflect on the dignity of the Christian vocation. St. Peter, in his first letter, tells those who have been baptized: *you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness*

into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.[3] The Prince of the Apostles tells us that God, in making us his children through the grace of the Holy Spirit, has inserted us in the new People of God, the Church, to which we belong not by fleshly descent, but by incorporation in Jesus Christ. In virtue of such a gratuitous and unmerited election (made sharers in Christ's priesthood!), we are invited to announce God's marvels by our example, by our words and deeds.

Let us be amazed at the goodness of God the Father and give him thanks. He was not content to send his Son into the world to save us, but wanted the Redemption to reach all mankind, right to the end of time. He makes this a reality through the Church, which is the Body of Christ

and the salvific presence of our Lord in space and in time. As St. Augustine said: "Just as we call all [the baptized] Christians, in virtue of the one chrism, so we also call all of them priests, because they are members of the one Priest." [4] Our Father meditated a lot on this immense gift and urged all of us to have the same sentiments as Christ Jesus. [5] Therefore we should each ask ourselves: how diligently am I striving to assimilate this rich truth?

The universal call to sanctity and apostolate stems, as from its root, from the baptismal character. The common priesthood precedes the ministerial priesthood, and the latter is at the service of the former.

Without the regeneration of baptism we could not have sacred ministers, for this sacrament opens the door to all the others. And without the ministerial priesthood, through which the Church proclaims Christ's

teaching to men and women, incorporates them into his life through the sacraments—especially the Eucharist—and leads them to heaven, we would not be able to make progress on the path of holiness. "Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ." [6]

The holy Curé of Ars vividly expressed the need for the priestly ministry. Benedict XVI, in his letter on the Year of the Priesthood, included some of the saint's expressions: "Without the priest," he stressed, "the passion and death of our Lord would be of no avail. It is the priest who continues the work of redemption on earth ... What use

would be a house filled with gold, were there no one to open its door? The priest holds the key to the treasures of heaven: it is he who opens the door: he is the steward of the good Lord; the administrator of his goods ... The priest is not a priest for himself, he is a priest for you." [7] Do we pray each day, with authentic faith, that holy priests not be lacking? Are we beseeching the Lord of the harvest, as a requirement of our condition as Christians, that he send workers into his field, in sufficient number to meet the great needs of the whole world?

But let us return to today's liturgy, which highlights the priestly character of the People of God. The Apocalypse presents us with an awe-inspiring vision: *a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb,*

clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!"[8] This immense multitude of men and women who prostrate themselves in adoration before the Blessed Trinity, in union with the angels, are the saints: some known, the majority unknown. One sees there the People of God in its final stage, which "includes the saints of the Old Testament, starting with the righteous Abel and the faithful Patriarch, Abraham, those of the New Testament, the numerous early Christian martyrs and the blessed and saints of later centuries, to the witnesses of Christ in this epoch of ours. They are all brought together by the common desire to incarnate the Gospel in their lives under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, the life-giving force of the People of God." [9]

Both the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood exist to sanctify mankind. The sacred ministers, configured with Christ the Head of the Church, do so by preaching the word of God, administering the sacraments and being pastors who guide the faithful towards eternal life, as visible instruments of the Eternal High Priest. But the lay faithful as well, in virtue of their royal priesthood, share in their own way in the triple office of Christ the Priest. St. Josemaría explained that "all Christians, without exception, have been made priests of our lives, 'to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (*1 Pet 2:5*). Everything we do can be an expression of our obedience to God's will and so perpetuate the mission of the God-man." [10]

No special assignment is required from the authority of the Church to

feel ourselves urged to participate in her salvific mission. "An apostle—that is what a Christian is, when he knows that he has been grafted onto Christ, made one with Christ, in baptism. He has been given the capacity to carry on the battle in Christ's name, through confirmation. He has been called to serve God by his activity in the world, because of the common priesthood of the faithful, which makes him share in some way in the priesthood of Christ. This priesthood—though essentially distinct from the ministerial priesthood—gives him the capacity to take part in the worship of the Church and to help other men in their journey to God, with the witness of his word and his example, through his prayer and work of atonement." [11]

Let us frequently stop to consider what this condition of being a Christian means, because we have to

be bearers of Christ to humanity, and bearers of humanity to Christ.

Throughout the Year of the Priesthood, besides praying for the holiness of all priests, we have to pray for the holiness of the entire Christian people. If there are families who raise their children in the truth of God's love, with the example of their Christian life; if there are men and women who seriously seek Jesus Christ in the circumstances of their ordinary life, there will be many young people who will experience God's call to the ministerial priesthood. During these months we are all offered a new opportunity to become more aware of the universal vocation to sanctity and apostolate, and to follow this call with determination, without half measures or giving sway to our feelings. To what extent do we let ourselves be influenced by tiredness, setbacks, failures? Do we easily lose

our peace and fail to take refuge in God? Do we remember that the Cross is the foundation and crown of the Church?

St. Josemaría received special divine lights to teach us how to build up the kingdom of God through temporal activities. On the very day of his passage from this world, he reminded a group of women, faithful of Opus Dei, that they too—like all Christians—have a priestly soul. Many years earlier he had written: "we must have always and in everything—both priests and laity—a *truly priestly soul and a fully lay mentality*, so that we can understand and exercise in our personal life the freedom we enjoy in the sphere of the Church and in temporal realities, seeing ourselves at the same time as citizens of the city of God (cf. *Eph* 2:19) and of the city of men." [12]

Their *priestly soul* leads the baptized, I insist, to have the same sentiments as Christ, with a hunger to unite ourselves to him each day at Holy Mass and throughout the day. The priestly spirit spurs us to grow in the holy ambition to serve, with a sincere and specific dedication to the spiritual and material well-being of our fellow men and women; it leads us to foster a true zeal for souls, with a vehement desire to be co-redeemers with Christ, united to our Lady and with filial affection for the Roman Pontiff; it disposes us to make reparation for sins, our own and those of all mankind... In short, to love God and our neighbor without ever saying "enough" in the service of the Church and souls. St.

Josemaría summed it up in this way: "With this priestly soul, which I ask God to grant all of you, you have to see to it that in the midst of your daily occupations, your entire life is turned into a continual praise of God:

constant prayer and reparation, petition and sacrifice for all mankind. And all of this in intimate and assiduous union with Christ Jesus, in the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar."[13]

At Holy Mass our works acquire eternal value. During those moments, with vigorous intensity, we become fully aware of our commitment to help Jesus sanctify all human realities, through the offering of our life and all our actions. "*Altare Dei est cor nostrum*,"[14] said St. Gregory the Great; our heart is an altar of God. We have to "serve him not only on the altar, but in the whole world, which is an altar for us. All the works of men are done as though on an altar, and each one of you, in that union of contemplative souls which is your day, in some way says 'his Mass,' which lasts twenty-four hours, in expectation of the Mass to follow, which will last

another twenty-four hours, and so on until the end of our lives." [15]

Moreover, as a manifestation of their participation in Christ's prophetic office, all the faithful have to strive to communicate the divine teachings to others. Certainly, there are many ways to participate in the Church's evangelizing mission. In any case, at the foundation of every apostolic work one always finds Jesus' command to all Christians: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.* [16]

In the same way, the participation in Christ's kingly office encourages Christians to sanctify earthly realities—the laity, specifically, through their effort to order temporal affairs in accord with God's will, [17] acting as a leaven in the world [18] in order to place Christ at the summit of all its activities. "The common priesthood

that we have received at baptism," explained Don Alvaro, following the teachings of St. Josemaría, "is *royal*, kingly (cf. *1 Pet 2:9*), because in offering to God all that we are and have, and in offering all noble human activities carried out in accord with God's will, we extend Christ's reign and reign with him." [19]

As part of the specific mission that God had entrusted to him, St. Josemaría taught that an essential characteristic of the way of making Christ's priesthood present in accord with the spirit of Opus Dei, both on the part of sacred ministers and the lay faithful, is the *lay mentality* proper to their secular condition and their situation in the world.

In this way, priests and laity collaborate in the fulfillment of the one mission of the Church, each in accord with the gifts they have

received, respecting each person's specific situation. The laity exercise their mission in the heart of temporal structures, striving to animate them with Christ's spirit. Priests serve the others by preaching the divine word and administering the sacraments. This helps ensure, as St. Josemaría wrote, "that the clergy don't run roughshod over the laity, nor the laity over the clergy; that the clergy don't seek to interfere in the concerns of the laity, nor lay people in what is proper to the clergy." [20]

On the coming 28th of November we will celebrate another anniversary of Opus Dei's establishment as a personal prelature. Let us give thanks to God and strive to spread the deep theological and spiritual meaning of the organic cooperation between priests and laity in Opus Dei, sharing in the Church's mission. They do so, above all, through their witness of a consistent Christian life,

each one remaining, as St. Paul said, *in the state in which he was called*, [21] being priests or laity *one hundred per cent*. Thus we will serve the Church effectively, as we have always tried to do; with greater reason now that so many people confuse laicism—which tries to expel God from secular structures—with secularity. And we will foster a healthy secular spirit, to which the Roman Pontiff has referred on various occasions.[22]

Within a few days, on November 7th, I will ordain as deacons thirty-two faithful of Opus Dei. Let us ask our Lord that they be good and faithful ministers of his, and let us continue praying for the Roman Pontiff and his intentions, for those who assist him, for priests and deacons, and for candidates for the priesthood all over the world. Let us also recall the day on which our Lady sent our Father the caress of leading him to the

"rose" in Rialp. Let us go to our Blessed Mother, so that she gains for us from God the perfumed "rose" of fidelity. We can also count on the help of all those who have preceded us; during the weeks of this month let us strengthen, with our prayers and suffrages, the unity of the Church triumphant, suffering and militant.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father,

+ Javier

Rome, November 1, 2009

Footnotes:

[1] *Roman Missal*, Solemnity of our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, *Preface*.

[2] Cf. *1 Cor* 15:24.

[3] *1 Pet* 2:9-10.

- [4] St. Augustine, *The City of God*, XX, 10 (CCL 48,720).
- [5] Cf. *Phil* 2:5.
- [6] Vatican II, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 10.
- [7] St. John Marie Vianney; cited by Benedict XVI in his Letter to Priests, June 16, 2009.
- [8] *Rev* 7:9-10.
- [9] Benedict XVI, Homily on the Solemnity of All Saints, November 1, 2006.
- [10] St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 96.
- [11] *Ibid.*, no. 120.
- [12] St. Josemaría, *Letter*, February 2, 1945, no. 1.
- [13] St. Josemaría, *Letter*, March 28, 1955, no. 4.

[14] St. Gregory the Great, *Moralia* 25, 7, 15 (PL 76, 328).

[15] St. Josemaría, Notes taken during a meditation, March 19, 1968.

[16] *Mt* 28:19-20.

[17] Cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 31.

[18] Cf. Vatican II, Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no. 2.

[19] Msgr. Alvaro del Portillo, *Pastoral Letter*, January 9, 1993, no. 11.

[20] St. Josemaría, *Letter*, March 19, 1954, no. 21.

[21] *1 Cor* 7:20.

[22] Cf. Benedict XVI, Addresses of May 18, 2006 and June 11, 2007.

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