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Letter from the Prelate (October 2013)

“You cannot have God as your Father, if you don’t have the Church as your mother.” The Prelate reflects on these words of a Church Father and on the importance of the sacrament of Confession.

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

During the past few weeks, spurred by the Pope's invitation, a persevering prayer for peace in the world and in consciences has been raised up to heaven in many places. I have had very present that suggestion of St. Josemaría back in 1952, when he invited us to pray often the aspiration *Cor Iesu Sacratissimum, dona nobis pacem!* Years later he added the words *et Misericors*, in order to implore from the most sacred and merciful Heart of Jesus peace for the whole world: spiritual peace, which comes from possessing God, and also human peace among all nations, rejecting hostilities and violence. John Paul II and Benedict XVI also prayed and asked others to pray for peace in the world.

As the Holy Father said when calling for a world day of fasting and prayer, the clamor for peace in society will be in vain if souls do not strive to

attain and preserve peace with God, which is a consequence of a determined struggle against sin. While we were praying for the cessation of wars, of rancor, of enmity, I once again recalled some words St. Josemaría wrote in the early years of his priestly work: “A secret, an open secret: these world crises are crises of saints.

“God wants a handful of men ‘of his own’ in every human activity. And then... *pax Christi in regno Christi* — the peace of Christ in the kingdom of Christ.” [1]

These reflections, always timely, acquire special relevance on the eve of the founding of the Work. On that 2nd of October in 1928, God in his infinite mercy let our Father see that it was his Will to remind all men and women that they are called to holiness. At the same time, he left in his hands—in his soul and in his

heart—Opus Dei: a path of sanctification in professional work and in the circumstances of ordinary life, giving him the spirit and appropriate apostolic means to attain that end.

Eighty-five years have gone by since then and, by the goodness of heaven, Opus Dei is fulfilling the mission of service to the Church and to souls for which God wanted it: let us always be attentive that we are faithful to this explicit divine commission. “We can well say without any boasting,” our Founder wrote many years ago, “that with the Work of God the divine paths of the earth have been opened up in a vocational way.” [2] Let us raise our hearts in thanksgiving to the Most Blessed Trinity and to our Mother the Blessed Virgin, through whom all of heaven’s graces reach us. And at the same time let us consider: what more could I do to make this message take deeper root

in my own heart and in the hearts of others? Isn't it true that I could pray more, offer more sacrifices, work with greater dedication and rectitude in my professional tasks, seek new opportunities to reach and serve others?

During the last few months, we have reflected on the mystery of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. But the Church is also our Mother: *our Holy Mother the Church*, since the Holy Spirit has engendered us in her bosom to the new life of God's children. The Church, as a good and loving Mother, constantly cares for her children *until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ* . [3]

Nevertheless, and it is a sorrow that weighs on us, some people—including Catholics—speak of the

Church with coldness, and even blame her for the faults and defects shown in the conduct of us, her children. For despite the dignity we have received, we continue to be poor men and women, inclined to sin. Very different was the viewpoint of the Holy Fathers of the Church, or of the millions of holy souls the Church has led to heaven. St. Augustine, for example, exhorted: “Let us love the Lord, our God; let us love his Church. He as Father, she as Mother.” [4] And St. Cyprian, two centuries earlier, stated forcefully: “You cannot have God as your Father, if you don’t have the Church as your mother.” [5]

Recently Pope Francis expressed anew this truth of our faith. “The faith is a gift, it is a gift from God given to us in the Church and through the Church. And the Church gives us the life of faith in Baptism: that is the moment in which she

gives birth to us as children of God.”

[6] The date on which we were regenerated in the baptismal waters, in the name of and by the power of the Most Holy Trinity, is a very important day in our earthly life. Let us ask ourselves with the Holy Father: “How do I see the Church? As I am grateful to my parents for giving me life, am I grateful to the Church for generating me in the faith through Baptism?” [7] In Opus Dei, thanks to God and to the care of St. Josemaría, we are very aware of this reality, which fills us with gratitude. Because the Work (as Paul VI stressed in a hand-written letter addressed to our Father, on a day like today) was born in our times “as a vigorous expression of the perennial youth of the Church.” [8] In union with our holy Founder, and with so many faithful of the Work who have already reached their heavenly homeland, we cry out: “What joy to be able to say with all the fervor of

my soul: I love my Mother the holy Church!” [9]

Continuing our reflections on the Creed, in continuity with what I have just written, let us focus on the following article of our faith: “We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.” [10] This article is set forth for us at the end of the Creed for a good reason. “The Apostle's Creed associates faith in the forgiveness of sins not only with faith in the Holy Spirit, but also with faith in the Church and in the communion of saints. It was when he gave the Holy Spirit to his apostles that the risen Christ conferred on them his own divine power to forgive sins: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’ (*Jn 20:22-23*).” [11]

The Church safeguards in all fullness the means of sanctification instituted

by Jesus Christ. Our Lord's words and actions during his earthly life were filled with salvific content; so it is not surprising (rather, it seems logical to us) that the crowds came to Jesus seeking to hear and touch him, *for power came forth from him and healed them all* . [12] Those words and actions announced and anticipated the efficacy of the paschal mystery, by which he would definitively conquer the devil, sin and death, and they prepared for what he would transmit to the Church when everything was accomplished. "The mysteries of Christ's life are the foundations of what he would henceforth dispense in the sacraments, through the ministers of his Church, for 'what was visible in our Savior has passed over into his mysteries'." [13]

The sacraments confer the grace that they signify. "What are the sacraments," our Father wrote in

1967, “but the footprints of the incarnation of the divine Word, a clear manifestation of the way that God—no one but He could do it—has chosen and determined to sanctify us and lead us to Heaven, sensible instruments our Lord makes use of to really confer grace on us, according to the signification proper to each one?” [14]

How grateful we should be to our Holy Mother the Church for safeguarding and offering us this treasure with full fidelity to Jesus Christ! And how diligently we need to protect and defend it in all its integrity! We particularly give thanks for Baptism, which introduces us into the marvelous family of God’s children. Receiving it as soon as possible is of capital importance, since this sacrament (or its desire, at least implicit) is necessary to attain salvation: *unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the*

kingdom of God , [15] Jesus told Nicodemus. Certainly, as the teaching of the Church explains, the Holy Spirit can act and does act also outside the visible confines of the Church. But God himself has established that the ordinary way of sharing in Christ's death and resurrection, by which we are saved, is the result of being incorporated into the Church through Baptism; and as a result, "the practice of infant Baptism is an immemorial tradition of the Church." [16] We also read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* : "The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism. The Church and the parents would deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth." [17] And it concludes: "Christian parents will recognize that this practice also accords with their

role as nurturers of the life that God has entrusted to them.” [18]

Baptism not only forgives sins and infuses the first grace, but it is the gateway to the other sacraments and thus makes it possible for Christians to be ever more closely configured with Christ, to the point of being identified with him. In all the baptized, both children and adults, faith, hope and charity need to grow after baptism; and this takes place in the Church, the depositary (as we already said) of the means of salvation. This is how the Pope expressed it in one of his catecheses during the past month. “A mother,” he said, “does not stop at just giving life; with great care she helps her children grow, gives them milk, feeds them, teaches them the way of life, accompanies them always with her care, with her affection, with her love, even when they are grown up. And in this she also knows how to

correct them, to forgive them and understand them. She knows how to be close to them in sickness and in suffering.” [19] The Church acts in the same way with the children she has engendered through Baptism: “She accompanies our development by transmitting to us the Word of God . . . [and] administers the Sacraments. She nourishes us with the Eucharist, she brings us the forgiveness of God through the Sacrament of Penance, she helps us in moments of sickness with the Anointing of the sick. The Church accompanies us throughout our entire life of faith, throughout the whole of our Christian life.” [20]

How great is the mercy of our Father God! Knowing that we are weak and that, despite our good will, we fall again and again into sins and faults, he has entrusted to his Spouse the sacrament of forgiveness “for all sinful members of his Church: above

all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded ecclesial communion.” [21] This sacrament also forgives venial sins and faults, infuses new strength for the interior struggle and can be seen, as the Fathers of the Church said, as “the second plank [of salvation] after the shipwreck which is the loss of grace.” [22]

I recall the great love that St. Josemaría had for the sacrament of Reconciliation (the “sacrament of joy,” he liked to call it), and how he encouraged people to receive it frequently, giving impetus to a constant “apostolate of confession.” Here I will limit myself to reproducing some words of his during a catechetical get-together with many people.

“Confession, confession, confession! God has poured out his mercy on his

creatures. Things don't go well because we don't have recourse to him, to be cleansed, to be purified, to be enkindled. People wash frequently, and play a lot of sports. Wonderful! But how about that other exercise of the soul? And those showers that regenerate us, that cleanse us and purify us and enkindle us? Why don't we go to receive God's grace? Go to the Sacrament of Penance and to Holy Communion. Go, go! But don't receive Communion unless you're sure that your soul is clean." [23]

At another time he insisted: "my children, bring your friends to confession, your relatives, the people that you love. And they shouldn't be afraid. If something has to be cut, they will do so. Tell them it's not enough to go to confession just once, that they have to go many times, with frequency. Just as, when one reaches a certain age, or has an illness, one

doesn't go to the doctor just once, but frequently; and they check your blood pressure and do analyses. Well, the same, the same with the soul. . . .

“God is waiting for many people to take a good bath in the Sacrament of Penance! And he has a great feast ready for them, the wedding feast, the banquet of the Eucharist: the wedding-ring of the covenant, of faithfulness and never-ending friendship. May many people go to confession . . . May there be many who approach the forgiveness of God!” [24]

On the upcoming 6th we will celebrate the anniversary of St. Josemaría's canonization. On that date there resounded with new force, in the Church and in the world, the call to sanctity in ordinary life. This gives us a great opportunity to remind many people of this reality,

inviting them to approach the sacrament of divine mercy. On the 26th we also have the anniversary of the consecration of the Work to the most sacred and merciful Heart of Jesus, carried out by our Father on that date in 1952, and which he wanted us to renew annually on the solemnity of Christ the King.

I will end here. Let us continue being closely united to the intentions of the Pope, praying every day for all that he has in his heart, and also for those who assist him in governing the Church, for peace in consciences and peace in the whole world. Let us be as one heart in our petition, with greater effort each day: we shouldn't let a single day go by without doing so.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father,

Javier

Rome, October 1, 2013

Footnotes:

[1] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 301.

[2] St. Josemaría, *Letter of August 15, 1953*, no. 12.

[3] *Eph* 4:13.

[4] St. Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms*, 88, 2, 14 (PL 37, 1140).

[5] St. Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, 6 (PL 4, 519).

[6] Pope Francis, Address in a general audience, September 11, 2013.

[7] *Ibid*.

[8] Pope Paul VI, Manuscript letter to St. Josemaría, October 1, 1964.

[9] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 518.

[10] The Roman Missal, Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

[11] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 976.

[12] *Lk* 6:19.

[13] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1115. See St. Leo the Great, *Sermon* 74, 2 (PL 54, 398).

[14] St. Josemaría, *Letter of March 19, 1967*, no. 74.

[15] *Jn* 3:5.

[16] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1252.

[17] *Ibid.*, no. 1250. See CIC, can. 867.

[18] *Ibid.*, no. 1251.

[19] Pope Francis, Address at a general audience, September 11, 2013.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1446.

[22] *Ibid.* ., citing the Council of Trent and Tertullian.

[23] St. Josemaría, Notes from a get-together, July 2, 1974.

[24] St. Josemaría, Notes from a get-together, July 6, 1974.

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