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Peace is born in the hearts of men and women

Lenten pastoral letter of Bishop Javier Echevarría to the members and cooperators of Opus Dei.

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At the beginning of Lent, I would like the Holy Father's repeated calls for peace in the world to resound in your hearts. "In this hour of international concern, we all feel the need to go to God *to plead for the*

great gift of peace. As I wrote in the Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* , ‘The grave challenges confronting the world at the start of this new Millennium lead us to think that only an intervention from on high...can give reason to hope for a brighter future’ (no. 40). I invite everyone to take hold of the Rosary and invoke the Most Holy Virgin’s intercession: ‘one cannot recite the Rosary without feeling caught up in a clear commitment to advancing peace’ (*Ibid.* , no. 6)” (John Paul II, Angelus address, February 9, 2003).

These words take on a new urgency in the light of present circumstances. The persevering petition of all men and women of good will, especially those honored with the name of Christ’s disciples, must be raised to heaven with a deep faith in the efficacy of prayer. The Holy Father reaffirmed this a few days ago: “We Christians are especially called to be

guardians of peace in the places where we live and work. We are asked to be alert so that men's consciences do not succumb to the temptation of selfishness, falsehood and violence" (John Paul II, Angelus address, February 23, 2003).

True peace among nations is closely linked to respect for God's law, for his word, for his commandments, precisely because it is the *opus iustitiae* , the fruit of the respect and fidelity to divine law that Sacred Scripture calls "justice" or "righteousness." Therefore "peace will never be achieved once and for all, but must be built up continually. Since, moreover, human nature is weak and wounded by sin, the achievement of peace requires a constant effort to control the passions and unceasing vigilance by lawful authority" (Vatican II, Pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* , no. 78).

In this context, we can understand why peace must come to birth in the hearts of men and women, as the free and voluntary acceptance of God's love. If hatred and envy, rancor and animosity persist in people's hearts, the delicate plant of peace cannot take root there. One must purify one's heart of all attachment to sin, so that in families, in society and in the whole world there may spread the "kingdom of justice, love, and peace" that Christ has brought to the world. We must fight against any trace of resentment or rancor which, by destroying fraternity, breaks our communion with God.

Let us listen once more to St. Josemaría's words: "Peace in heaven. But let's take a look at the earth. Why is there no peace in the world? That's right, there is no peace, only a certain appearance of peace: a balance created by fear and precarious compromises And

there is no peace in many hearts which vainly strive to make up for their intranquility of soul by continuous activity, by seeking a thin satisfaction in things which do not fill them but only leave a bitter aftertaste of sorrow” (St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By* , no. 73).

Never forget the immense importance of each one’s interior struggle, in order to further the cause of peace in the world. And don’t view this as an unrealistic dream. A person who tries, day after day, to be more pleasing to God, who is sorry for his faults and sets for himself small or big steps forward in his spiritual life, who has a true concern to foster the good of those closest to him, who strives to communicate to others the Christian ideals that move him, is a person who is contributing efficaciously to the establishment of peace.

For the upcoming March 5th, Ash Wednesday, John Paul II has asked all men of good will, and especially the sons and daughters of the Church, to dedicate that day “ *to prayer and fasting for the cause of peace , especially in the Middle East*” (John Paul II, Angelus address, February 23, 2003). I remind you of the Pope’s request, to which we want to unite ourselves very generously, with the hope that our united prayer and sacrifice, presented to God through the intercession of our Lady, will once more open wide, as has so frequently happened throughout history, the gates of divine mercy.

“Above all, let us implore God for a conversion of hearts and for prudence in making just decisions, so as to resolve with adequate and peaceful means the disputes which are an obstacle to mankind’s pilgrimage in our days” (*Ibid.*). Only God’s light is able to dissipate the

heated passions, the pride, the personal prejudices, both of races and nations, that are often the cause of the failures to resolve conflicts between human communities peacefully. Prayer is an indispensable means if the dialogue between the representatives of nations is to bear fruit. Let us not cease then to pray every day for this intention. In his request, the Holy Father expresses his hope that, on Ash Wednesday, “in every Marian shrine there be raised to heaven an ardent petition for peace by the recitation of the Holy Rosary. I trust that the Rosary will also be recited in parishes and in families for this great cause on which the good of all men and women depends” (*Ibid.*).

The intention the Pope holds up for us, joined that day to fasting, is very appropriate for the beginning of Lent, a time the Church especially dedicates to prayer, and to works of

charity and penance. Therefore John Paul II specifies: “May this choral prayer be accompanied by fasting, an expression of penance for the hatred and violence that contaminate human relations. Christians share the ancient practice of fasting with so many brothers and sisters of other religions, who by means of this practice strive to free themselves from every taint of pride and to dispose themselves to receive from God the greatest and most necessary gifts, especially that of peace” (*Ibid.*).

Let us be generous, each according to our personal circumstances, in the practice of mortification, which so moves God’s heart. And let us urge many others to do the same, not only on Ash Wednesday but throughout the whole of Lent, putting special care into one’s spirit of penance in eating and drinking, in carrying out one’s work down to the last detail, in

resting and the use of free time, in offering up life's setbacks and difficulties, bearing everything with joy, as St. Josemaría advised us.

“Bring out your spirit of mortification in those nice touches of charity, eager to make the way of sanctity in the midst of the world attractive for everyone. Sometimes a smile can be the best proof of a spirit of penance” (St. Josemaría, *The Forge* , no. 149).

Lent summons us to a greater dedication to others: the works of mercy, in their diverse expressions, are another traditional practice of this liturgical period. In his message for Lent this year, the Pope has chosen as his theme some words from Sacred Scripture: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). We have all had direct experience of this truth. When we follow the interior call to serve others, without expecting anything in

return, we experience a great happiness that we would not exchange for any joy on earth. In contrast, when we resist God's invitation and close ourselves against those around us, we feel unhappy and unsatisfied. If this happens on the level of human relations, how much more so when we respond lovingly to the Love — with a capital letter — of the Holy Trinity, striving to imitate the self-giving of the Son, which God the Father has wanted to bring about for our good.

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