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Letter from the Prelate (December 2007)

God comes to save us. With that hope, Bishop Echevarría suggests we prepare our hearts during Advent so that Jesus will be pleased to dwell there.

12/04/2007

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

We have begun a Marian year in the Work to thank the Blessed Trinity, through our Lady, for the Prelature

of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei that was erected twenty-five years ago. I have suggested a few specific acts of piety to you for these months. But what truly matters is that each of us grows daily in our zeal for sanctity and apostolate, through intense and ardent recourse to our heavenly Mother.

Don Alvaro also led us along Marian paths back in 1978, for the golden anniversary of the founding of Opus Dei. How logical (and how necessary!) it is to go especially to our Lady on such important anniversaries. Here too we are following in our Father's footsteps. I vividly recall his joy when Pope Pius XII, in 1954, proclaimed a Marian Year for the universal Church, to celebrate the centenary of the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception.

St. Josemaría reminded us then that Opus Dei "was born and has developed under our Lady's mantle. That is why we have so many Marian customs embedded in the daily life of the daughters and sons of God in this Work of God." And he added: "Imagine how great my joy was on seeing this year 1954 consecrated to the Blessed Virgin Mary by the Roman Pontiff" (St. Josemar'a, January 9, 1954).

I would like these words to resound in your ears, since he was speaking to all of us. Besides, it is so easy to recognize our Lady's help in every step in our life! Let us consider this protection calmly in the fruitful silence of prayer, and we will discover with even greater clarity the constant action of our heavenly Mother, even in the apparently smallest events of our life.

Our Lady has been the one who, through her Son's power, has so often defended us from the snares of the enemy of souls; she has helped us to overcome temptations, and to surmount the obstacles that arise on our path towards God. It has been our Lady—because God has so disposed it—who has obtained for us new lights and graces that have taken root in our hearts, despite the personal littleness of each one of us.

These first days of the Marian year coincide with the Novena to the Immaculate Conception, a custom that has crystallized in the Church as a preparation for the great solemnity of December 8th. As St. Josemaría taught us, each of us should live this custom in the way that he or she considers most appropriate—putting, of course, greater effort into assiduous conversation with our Lady, with great refinement in our prayer, mortification, and

professional work, and trying to get our relatives, friends and acquaintances, the more the better, to draw closer to Jesus through our Mother. "To Jesus we always go, and to him we always 'return,' through Mary" (St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 495).

The time of Advent that we have also just begun has to spur us to walk close beside our Lady and St. Joseph in the weeks separating us from Christmas. Each year, when these days come along, the liturgy addresses us with urgent invitations, which become more insistent the closer we get to December 25th. These days are very propitious for meditating on the words with which, right from the dawn of history, God has tried to fill men's hearts with encouragement.

Already in the first chapters of Genesis, right after telling us about

original sin, Sacred Scripture fills us with hope. Addressing the Tempter who, under the guise of a serpent, has seduced our first parents, God says: *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between her seed and your seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel* (Gen 3:15). It is the promise of the redemption carried out by Christ, descended from the woman. And we can also make out here, as though among shadows, the figure of a marvelous Woman—the Mother of the Redeemer—over whom the infernal serpent will have no dominion. Mary, closely united to her Son, will gain with Him full victory over the enemy of souls. By virtue of Christ's merits she was preserved from original sin, with which we are all born, from the first moment of her conception. Her life will always be immaculate, completely holy in body and soul: the *All-Holy*, as

Christians of the Eastern tradition call her.

After that first prediction, the voices of the ancient prophets are again heard with all their vigor during the liturgy of the Advent season, forming a splendid symphony. Above all in the final week, with the Birth of Jesus now imminent, the Church is unable to restrain its enthusiasm and breaks out into exclamations filled with wonder: *Wisdom of our God Most High, teach us to walk in the paths of knowledge!*, we pray in the liturgy of December 17, the first of the great ferial days leading up to Christmas. *Flower of Jesse's stem, save us without delay!* And further on, insistently: *Key of David, opening the gates of God's eternal Kingdom: free the prisoners of darkness! Come and save mankind, whom you formed from the dust of the earth!* (cf. Roman Missal, Gospel acclamations on the weekdays from December 17 to 24).

My daughters and sons, let us take to heart these pressing calls addressed to us by the Church. Let us make our heart ready, right from the first days of Advent, so that our Lord may find it as clean as possible and be happy to dwell there. We are well aware that none of us is worthy to receive him. But he, overflowing with mercy, takes the initiative. He comes to our assistance and grants us his grace. Each morning he comes to us in the Eucharist. Our careful preparation for this daily meeting is the best way to ready ourselves for his spiritual coming at Christmas. I ask God that you may grasp in all its depth that cry of St. Josemaría: "treat him well for me!" (*The Way*, no. 531), which we see made fully a reality in the behavior of Mary and Joseph.

Let us reflect on the fact, as Benedict XVI points out, that the liturgy does not use "the past tense (God has come) nor the future (God will come)

but the present: 'God comes.' At a closer look, this is a continuous present, that is, an ever-continuous action: it happened, it is happening now and it will happen again. In whichever moment, 'God comes.'

"The verb 'to come' appears here as a theological verb...since it says something about God's very nature. Proclaiming that 'God comes' is equivalent, therefore, to simply announcing God himself, through one of his essential and qualifying features: his being the *God-who-comes*.

"Advent calls believers to become aware of this truth and to act accordingly. It rings out as a salutary appeal in the days, weeks and months that repeat: Awaken! Remember that God comes! Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today, now! The one true God, 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,' is not a

God who is there in Heaven,
unconcerned with us and our history,
but he is the-God-who-comes.

"He is a Father who never stops thinking of us and, with full respect for our freedom, desires to meet us and visit us; he wants to come, to dwell among us, to stay with us. His 'coming' is motivated by the desire to free us from evil and death, from all that prevents our true happiness. God comes to save us" (Benedict XVI, Homily at the First Vespers of the First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2006).

Advent is a call to keep very much in mind the truth that *Dominus prope*, the Lord is near (Liturgy of the Hours, Second Vespers of the First Sunday of Advent: *Phil* 4:5). I am moved every year by this cry of the liturgy, which we could interpret in many ways, adapting these words to the spiritual needs of each of us. Let

us recall this joyful reality even more forcefully when following Christ seems hard and demanding to us, with the conviction that our resistance will disappear if we strive to ensure that this closeness becomes intimacy.

Dominus prope, among other reasons, because he is in the center of our soul in grace: so close that he couldn't be closer. He wants to dwell with us, within us.

We can also keep in mind the words *Dominus prope* as the commemoration draws near of that sublime moment when the All-Powerful One, the Omnipotent, not in need of anything, wanted to show—when the fullness of time arrived—that he takes delight in his creatures, in each one of us: *deliciae meae esse cum filiis hominum* (Prov 8:31), my delight is to be with the children of men.

The words *Dominus prope* also help us to take more urgently the call to apostolate. Let us make a greater effort every day to transmit to our surroundings, without human respect, the truth that God is very close and knocks at the doors of our soul: *Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one!* (Song 5:2), he says to all of us as to the Bride in the Canticle of Canticles. We have to open our heart to him right away, and not let him pass by. We can't let happen to us what happened to the Bride in the Canticle, through being slow to respond: *I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and gone* (Ibid. 5:6).

Let us resolve once again to prepare very well for Christmas. We are in the first week of Advent. How often have we already said: *veni, Domine Iesu* (Rev 22:20), come, Lord Jesus? How many times have we considered that phrase from Scripture, which

during these days we discover with a fuller meaning: *rorate coeli* (Is 45:8), the heavens open and the clouds rain down the Just One. And we might add: may the earth open up to Him! The heavens have opened and are constantly open, because our Lord follows us at every moment. But we have to decide to open up our hearts, to cut furrows in our earth, so that it can be soaked by this divine rain, by grace, which wants to heal us, sanctify us, and make us effective.

The Advent season is a time of hope. Just yesterday, on November 30, the Holy Father released his second encyclical, with the title *Spe Salvi*, we have been saved in hope. Reading and meditating on it during these weeks will help us to grasp more deeply the meaning of Christmas.

In finishing this letter, I ask our Father to teach us to seek Christ with the same solicitude he showed when

taking in his hands the statue of the Child Jesus, a copy of the one that is venerated by the Augustinian sisters of St. Elizabeth in Madrid.

Let us continue to be closely united in prayer and intentions, "putting" our Lady in a special way into our petitions.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father

+ Javier

Rome, December 1, 2007

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