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Letter from the Prelate (February 2009)

Uniting our setbacks and sufferings to Christ's self-giving on the Cross is always fruitful, the Prelate reminds us in his letter this month.

02/03/2009

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

Prayer is and always will be the primary weapon to attain the divine gift of Christian unity. We have tried

to employ it especially in recent weeks, during the Christian unity octave, which in this year dedicated to St. Paul takes on special relevance. In Opus Dei, as St. Josemaría recommended, we also pray every day *pro unitate apostolatus*, asking God that those who invoke the name of Jesus, and acknowledge him as Lord, might soon form a single flock with a single shepherd.[1]

Now I want to remind you that, together with prayer, all our apostolic work (including, therefore, the effort to bring about the unity of Christians) has to be accompanied by joyful and generous expiation, which unites us closely to Jesus Christ. Let us not forget that our Lord, on the Cross, redeemed us from our sins and opened the path to identify ourselves with him.

Our Father used to stress that ***mortification is prayer of the***

senses.[2] We have to love Christ on the Cross and share with him our small and great setbacks—in addition to our voluntary personal penance—happy to be able to assist, as St. Paul teaches, in building up the Mystical Body: *Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his Body, that is, the Church.*[3]

In many places, people fail to understand the purifying and co-redemptive value of suffering that is accepted and offered in union with Jesus Christ. St. Josemaría's consideration in one of the stations of *The Way of the Cross* is very timely: ***There is a kind of fear around, a fear of the Cross, of our Lord's Cross. What has happened is that people have begun to regard as crosses all the unpleasant things that crop up in life, and they do not know how to***

take them as God's children should, with supernatural outlook. So much so, that they are even removing the roadside crosses set up by our forefathers.

In the Passion, the Cross ceased to be a symbol of punishment and became instead a sign of victory. The Cross is the emblem of the Redeemer: in quo est salus, vita et resurrectio nostra. *There lies our salvation, our life and our resurrection.*[4]

I invite you to go more deeply into the meaning of these words, especially in the coming weeks, as we prepare to celebrate February 14—a day of thanksgiving in Opus Dei, since it is the anniversary of two foundational events—and also during the last week of this month, when the season of Lent begins. When referring to these foundational moments—the beginning of the apostolic activity of the Work with

women, in 1930, and of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, in 1943—our Father was filled with gratitude to God. St. Josemaría saw a special sign of divine Providence in the fact that these two events in the Work's history came on the same date, although in different years.

On the one hand, he saw there a sign of the essential unity among the different components of the People of God making up the Work. At the same time, St. Josemaría understood with new clarity that Christ on the Cross had to preside over each and every one of the activities of the members of Opus Dei. In August 1931, our Lord had made him understand that he wanted the men and women of God to place the Cross at the summit of all human activities, through their sanctified and sanctifying professional work. This divine desire was ratified on February 14, 1943, when—as our

Father said—***our Lord wished to crown his Work with the Holy Cross.***

The deep theological, spiritual, and apostolic interfusing of the laity and priests, characteristic of Opus Dei from the beginning, received its suitable juridical structure when Pope John Paul II erected it as a personal prelature. Let us thank the Blessed Trinity for the efficacy of this organic cooperation of the priests and laity in the Church's mission *pro mundi vita*,^[5] for the salvation of the world.

With reference to these anniversaries, St. Josemaría once said: ***I thought that Opus Dei would be just for men. It's not that I didn't want women. I have a great love for the Mother of God; I love my own mother and all of yours; I love all my daughters, who are a blessing of God throughout the***

whole world. But until February 14, 1930, I had no idea there would be women in Opus Dei, although I had in my heart a great desire to fulfill God's Will in everything. When I finished celebrating Holy Mass that day, I knew that our Lord wanted the women's branch. Later, on February 14, 1943, he wished to crown his edifice with the Cross: the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross.[6]

And speaking specifically to the women of the Work, he added: *my daughters, you have a priestly soul. I tell you with St. Peter: vos autem genus electum, regale sacerdotium, gens sancta, populus acquisitionis(1 Pet 2:9). You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.... And besides, you have the privilege that God chose a woman to be his Mother: our Holy Mother Mary, ever-Virgin, who remained at the foot of the Cross,*

with strength, with love. From her you learn to be co-redeemers...With your zeal to adore God, to make reparation, to thank him, to beseech him, you complete what is lacking—as St. Paul says—in Christ’s passion: et adimpleo ea quae desunt passionum Christi in carne mea pro corpore eius, quod est Ecclesia (Col 1:24). And our Lord, who is the Divine Sower (you remember the parable) takes you in his bleeding hands as two handfuls of grain; he presses you and scatters you in the air all over the earth. You are God’s blessing. You are God’s fruitfulness. And with his help, you can do everything.[7]

All Christians have a priestly soul, infused in us by Baptism and Confirmation. God wants it to be active in everyone, just as the human soul informs with its power at every moment the body’s various

members. Let us always keep alive this priestly spirit, which has to be like the beating of our heart: a spiritual impulse that leads to union with Christ crucified and risen, with the desire to make ourselves entirely his instruments for the salvation of souls. What impact does the Holy Sacrifice of the altar have on your day, your work, your fraternity, your apostolate? Does your love for our Lord's Passion grow each day? Do you foster in your soul the need for penance?

My daughters and sons, it was in this month that our Father, with impetuous love, told our Lord while distributing Holy Communion to the nuns in the church of St. Elizabeth: ***I love you more than these do.*** And he heard that forceful divine "reproach": ***Love means deeds, not sweet words***[8]—a call to not let up in the prayer and expiation that was already consuming his soul.

The experience of St. Paul, a man in love with the Cross and filled with zeal for the salvation of the world, has to be reproduced in all the faithful. Benedict XVI has stressed this frequently during this year dedicated to the Apostle. **For St. Paul**, the Pope said in an audience, **the Cross has a fundamental primacy in the history of humanity; it represents the focal point of his theology because to say "the Cross" is to say *salvation as grace* given to every creature. The topic of the Cross of Christ becomes an essential and primary element of the Apostle's preaching.** [9]

St. Paul never stopped teaching the need for the Cross wherever he went, including cities such as Corinth where hedonism was rampant. Let us not fail to imitate this specific example that we all should follow, especially in these times. Without

fearing what others would think, St. Paul announced:*For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.*[10]

Today as always, it is urgent to communicate these truths to souls with words that are clear and, at the same time, optimistic and encouraging, filled with hope. **The Apostle wants to remind not only the Corinthians or the Galatians but also all of us that the Risen One is always the One who has been crucified. The "stumbling block" and "folly" of the Cross lie in the very fact that where there seems to be nothing but failure, sorrow and defeat, there is the full power of**

God's boundless love. For the Cross is an expression of love and love is the true power that is revealed precisely in this seeming weakness.[11]

Love for Christ is what underlies Saul's extraordinary power to spread the Christian message throughout the whole world. **Paul is presented by many as a pugnacious man who was well able to wield the sword of his words. Indeed, there was no lack of disputes on his journey as an Apostle. He did not seek a superficial harmony...The truth was too great for him to be willing to sacrifice it with a view to external success. For him, the truth that he experienced in his encounter with the Risen One was well worth the fight, persecution and suffering. But what most deeply motivated him was being loved by Jesus Christ and the desire to communicate this love to**

others. Paul was a man capable of loving and all of his actions and suffering can only be explained on the basis of this core sentiment.

[12]

We find perfectly described in these words the driving force behind the priestly, apostolic soul that we all have to foster. They echo some other words of the Apostle: *caritas Christi urget nos*, [13] the love of Christ urges us on. And also those others: *if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!* [14] The burning zeal to be faithful to Christ's command—the same that all of us Christians have received—impels Paul to journey untiringly to all parts, making Jesus known, without counting the costs and sacrifices that carrying out his mission brings with it.

The same desire urged on the early Christians. ***All of them***, recalled St. Josemaría, at a moment of grave religious persecution, ***by their purity, set out to cleanse the murky and unclean waters of the pagan world...Roman society is astonished to see young men, strong in body and soul, becoming apostles of the new faith. They haven't separated themselves from the world nor are they distinguished from others in any way, only by the vibrant light that burns in their heart. Roman society also begins to see that virgins belonging to patrician and plebeian families choose to crown their innocence with penance. And it begins to perceive the effects of an uninterrupted, persevering apostolate, brimming over with generosity and sacrifice. Amid the noise of the festivals, at the amphitheaters and in the***

enormous banquets, Christ's voice rings out ever more clearly.[15]

Yes, my daughters and sons: only in Christ Jesus do we find the reason for our service to souls, which we want to see grow each day in intensity and zeal. If we are "madly" in love with Him, as St. Paul was, no obstacle or difficulty, whether external or internal, will be able to slow down our apostolate. Let us meditate on some other words of St. Josemaría: ***Where did St. Paul get all his strength from? Omnia possum in eo qui me confortat! (Phil4:13). I can do all things, because God alone gives me this faith, this hope, this charity. I find it very hard to believe in the supernatural effectiveness of an apostolate that is not based, is not solidly centered, on a life of constant conversation with our Lord. Yes, right there in our work; in our own home, or in the street, with all***

the small or big problems that arise daily. Right there, not taken away from those things, but with our hearts fixed on God. Then our words, our actions—our defects!—will give forth the bonus odor Christi(2 Cor2:5), the sweet fragrance of Christ, which others will inevitably notice and say: ‘Here is a Christian.’[16]

Also in this month, on the 19th, is the date on which our beloved Don Álvaro celebrated his Saint’s Day. Let us follow the example of this Servant of God, who harbored so deeply in his heart zeal for the salvation of souls. And let us pray that the *iter* of his Cause of canonization goes forward quickly. Without in any way anticipating the Church’s judgment, we are sure that the recognition of the heroism of his virtues will be another spur for many people to decide to *turn all the circumstances and events of their life into*

opportunities to love and serve the kingdom of Jesus Christ.[17]

On the 21st, I will have the joy of conferring the diaconate on two Associate brothers of yours. I vividly recall St. Josemaría's eagerness to count on this service of his Associate sons. He did not see it made a reality on earth, but his prayer and expiation reached heaven, and you can be sure that you are—we all are—the fruit of his prayer, which continues in heaven, and of the generous and joyful expiation he practiced while he lived with us.

Yesterday the Holy Father Benedict XVI received me in a private audience. I cannot resist adding these lines to this letter, to encourage you once more to be grateful for his great affection and interest, and for his paternal Blessing for all the persons and apostolic works of the

Prelature. Let us pray a lot for him,
for his work and intentions.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father,

+ Javier

Rome, February 1, 2009

1. Cf. *Jn* 10:16.

2. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*,
no. 9.

3. *Col* 1:24.

4. St. Josemaría, *The Way of the Cross*,
Second Station, point 5.

5. *Jn* 6:51.

6. St. Josemaría, notes taken from his
preaching, July 11, 1974.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Cf. St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 933.

9. Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, October 29, 2008.
 10. *1 Cor* 1:18-23.
 11. Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, October 29, 2008.
 12. Benedict XVI, Homily at the inauguration of the Pauline Year, June 28, 2008.
 13. *2 Cor* 5:14.
 14. *1 Cor* 9:16.
 15. St. Josemaría, Notes taken from his preaching, July 26, 1937.
 16. St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 271.
 17. Cf. Prayer for private devotion to the Servant of God Álvaro del Portillo.
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