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Letter from the Prelate (March 2008)

With Holy Week drawing close, the Prelate invites us to redouble our efforts to grow in love for God and neighbor, like runners when they see the finish line.

03/10/2008

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

Two weeks ago, I had the joy of spending forty-eight hours in The Netherlands. As always on these

brief trips (as on other longer ones), I give abundant thanks to God for the tangible reality of the unity of the Work: for the *cor unum et anima una*, [1] one heart and one mind, and yet everyone is different. Our Father, who prayed for this diversity from the beginning, raised many acts of thanksgiving on seeing how it was becoming a reality, and also on seeing that this variety gave rise to a stronger, more joyful unity.

We are drawing close to Holy Week and Easter. Half of Lent has already gone by and we have to speed up our pace. In sporting events, athletes redouble their effort as they get close to the finish line. If they had been conserving their strength, now they pour it out generously, hoping to place well or even win the competition. The thought sometimes goes through my head that time is going more rapidly than our eagerness for sanctity, for

conversion, which shouldn't be the case, since we have to go at God's pace.

Let's do as the athletes do. What are these weeks but a time of training to arrive well purified at the Easter Triduum, which offers us once more the possibility of participating even more intimately in Christ's victory over sin and over death? This well-known sporting metaphor, with its Pauline connotations,[2] has been amply developed by the Fathers of the Church. Look at how it was expressed, for example, by St. Leo the Great. Exhorting Christians to redouble their efforts "to gain the crown of victory in the race in the spiritual stadium,"[3] he gave us a reason for expending greater effort during these weeks: "None of us is so perfect and so holy that we cannot be even more perfect and more holy. Therefore, all together, without difference of dignity or distinction of

merits, let us run with pious eagerness from where we are to where we have not yet arrived." [4]

Last month I urged you to be especially vigilant in your spirit of mortification and penance. Today I want to consider the practice of the works of mercy, both material and spiritual, which Lent also gives great importance to. In his message for Lent this year, the Pope centered his talk on almsgiving, stressing that this act of charity, besides providing assistance to the needy, is also an ascetical practice that helps keep the soul detached from material goods.

[5]

By going to the aid of those in need, fulfilling the conditions indicated by Jesus in the Gospel, [6] we identify ourselves more and more closely with our Lord, who came to earth to free men from their miseries, above all from sin. At the same time, we

offer a service to Jesus, who wanted to identify himself with his smallest brothers and sisters: *I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.*[7]

In the light of these words of our Lord, we see that the works of charity, and specifically almsgiving, transcend the purely material dimension and show themselves to be, above all, a manifestation of the charity with which God loves us: "Every time when, for love of God, we share our goods with our neighbor in need, we discover that the fullness of life comes from love and all is returned to us as a blessing in the form of peace, inner satisfaction and joy." [8]

Let us carry out, then, to the extent of each one's possibilities, this work of charity that is so deeply rooted in the Gospel, to which our Lord himself has united special spiritual fruit. For *love covers a multitude of sins*,^[9] and all of us are very much in need of God's forgiveness.

As is logical, and this is how the Church has always understood it, charity towards our neighbor cannot be limited to the purely material sphere. In reality there are many who are poor, not in financial terms, but in terms of affection, of love—people who find themselves in a sad loneliness or surrounded by the coldness of indifference. From this perspective, the meaning of St. Josemaría's constant teaching becomes clear: "Charity consists not so much in giving as in understanding."^[10] This spiritual maxim has many applications in our daily life and is always very timely.

Even though social progress may one day lead to the most important physical requirements of people being met (food, clothes, a place to live, health care, etc.), it will never be able to provide for all the interior needs—affection, understanding, forgiveness, acceptance—that so many people experience. While the first can be addressed by government programs, the second touch on each one's intimacy, where personal relationships are indispensable. Here we Christians can play a great role in bringing to others the consolation of Christ's charity.

"Love—*caritas*—will always prove necessary, even in the most just society," the Pope wrote in his first encyclical. "There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love.

Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such.

There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be loneliness. There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbor is indispensable. The State which would provide everything, absorbing everything into itself, would ultimately become a mere bureaucracy incapable of guaranteeing the very thing which the suffering person—every person—needs: namely, loving personal concern." [11]

We discover this by attentively reading the Gospels. Certainly Jesus was concerned about the multitudes who had nothing to eat, about the sick who came to him to be cured, about the crowds eager to receive his saving doctrine. [12] But he was equally concerned about individuals: he helps the leper who throws himself at his feet begging for health;

he speaks privately with Nicodemus, who was seeking the truth; he converses at length with the Samaritan woman by the well at Sichar, to convert her; he welcomes the repentant woman in the Pharisee's house, filling her soul with God's forgiveness.[13]

People said of the first Christians, with admiration: *See how they love one another!* [14] This praise for our first brothers and sisters in the faith should also be heard today, wherever a disciple of the Master is found. St. Josemaría's advice is very timely: "If you think, looking at yourself now or in so many things you do each day, that you do not deserve such praise; that your heart does not respond as it should to the promptings of God, then consider that the time has come for you to put things right. Listen to St. Paul's invitation, 'Let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of one family with us in the

faith'(Gal 6:10), who make up the Mystical Body of Christ."[15]
Therefore, our Father continued, "The principal apostolate we Christians must carry out in the world, and the best witness we can give of our faith, is to help bring about a climate of genuine charity within the Church. For who indeed could feel attracted to the Gospel if those who say they preach the Good News do not really love one another, but spend their time attacking one another, spreading slander and quarrelling?"[16]

On the upcoming March 15th we will liturgically celebrate the solemnity of St. Joseph, brought forward this year because the 19th is Wednesday in Holy Week. The Patriarch's life, completely dedicated to caring for Jesus and Mary, speaks to us of a love that reaches total forgetfulness of oneself. When renewing our dedication to God on the 19th, with

the marvelous example of this just man, let us meditate deeply on St. John's insistence that the truth of our love for God is shown in our specific deeds of charity towards our neighbor. *By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But if any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and in truth.*

[17]

In his message for Lent, the Pope reminds us of the widow who threw a few coins into the Temple treasury. That poor woman received Jesus' praise for her generosity: she offered all that she had. Recalling that this event took place in the days immediately preceding our Lord's passion and death, the greatest manifestation of God's love, Benedict

XVI suggests: "we can learn to make of our lives a total gift; imitating Him, we are able to make ourselves available, not so much in giving a part of what we possess, but our very selves.

"Cannot the entire Gospel be summarized perhaps in the one commandment of love? The Lenten practice of almsgiving thus becomes a means to deepen our Christian vocation. In gratuitously offering himself, the Christian bears witness that it is love and not material richness that determines the laws of his existence."[18]

I pray that our devout participation in the liturgical rites of the Holy Triduum will lead us, on the one hand, to renew our sorrow for sin, which was the cause of our Lord's surrendering himself to the Passion. And on the other hand, that it will deepen our love and gratitude to

God, spurring us to make an ever greater effort to provide material and spiritual assistance to those God places at our side. How have you resolved to accompany Jesus during these days? Are you determined not to overlook even a single gesture of the Master, to stand vigil over his holy Body when it lies in the tomb, with the refinement of your prayer and your expiation, which are two ways of loving?

In addition to these liturgical feasts, we have other commemorations in the month of March. The 11th is the anniversary of the birth of our beloved Don Alvaro; and the 23rd, of his passage to our home in heaven, fourteen years ago now. During the days just prior to this, he walked in the footsteps of our Lord through the Holy Land, leaving us a marvelous example of piety. Let us ask God to grant us, each and every one of us, a fidelity to the spirit of the Work as

great as that which shone in the life of this most faithful Father and Shepherd of Opus Dei.

I cannot fail to mention that the 19th is the twenty-fifth anniversary of the implementation of the Pontifical Bull erecting Opus Dei as a personal prelature. We need only cast a glance at the past quarter century to discover (and we don't know all of them!) so many reasons for giving thanks to the Blessed Trinity. Let us put our whole heart into caring for the Work, my daughters and sons, frequently repeating that aspiration of St. Josemaría, completed by his first successor: *Cor Mariae Dulcissimum, iter para et servatum!* Most sweet heart of Mary, prepare and preserve a safe path for us! And let us thank the Servant of God John Paul II for having been a docile instrument in our Lord's hands. St. Josemaría brought this intention to his Mass every day, and

we naturally want to unite ourselves to his Eucharistic piety, also taking advantage of the anniversary of his priestly ordination on the 28th of this month.

Today I just finished my retreat. I ask you for the support of your prayers so that I too may undergo a deep conversion this Lent and reach the Easter celebration well purified, enkindled with love for God, for my daughters and sons, and for all souls.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father

+ Javier

Rome, March 1, 2008

1. Acts 4:32 (Vulg.)

2. Cf. *1 Cor* 9:24-27; *Phil* 3:12-14.

3. Leo the Great, *Homily 7 on Lent*.

4. Leo the Great, *Homily 2 on Lent*.
5. Cf. Benedict XVI, Message for Lent 2008, October 30, 2007, no. 1.
6. Cf. *Mt* 6:2-4.
7. *Mt* 25:35-36.
8. Benedict XVI, Message for Lent 2008, October 30, 2007, no. 4.
9. *1 Pet* 4:8.
10. St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 463.
11. Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, December 25, 2005, no. 28.
12. Cf. *Mt* 14:13-21; *Mk* 1:32-34; *Mk* 6:33-34.
13. Cf. *Mt* 8:1-4; *Jn* 3:1-21; *Jn* 4:7-30; *Lk* 7: 36-50.
14. Tertullian, *Apologia*, 39.

15. St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 225.

16. *Ibid.*, no. 226.

17. *1 Jn* 3:16-18.

18. Benedict XVI, Message for Lent 2008, October 30, 2007, no. 5.

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march-2008/](https://opusdei.org/en-in/article/letter-from-the-prelate-march-2008/) (03/31/2025)