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Letter from the Prelate (March 2015)

Lent is "a time especially propitious for imitating Christ by our generous dedication to the members of his Mystical Body," the Prelate tells us in his letter this month.

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

A number of days have now gone by since the beginning of Lent. Besides considering once again, with gratitude and eagerness to learn, Jesus' forty days of prayer and fasting in the desert, and his victorious struggle against the evil spirit, the Church invites us to prepare ourselves very well to enter deeply into the scenes of our Lord's passion, death and resurrection in the approaching paschal celebration. Therefore she encourages us to spend this liturgical time closely united to the Master, as Saint John Paul II reminded us some years ago.

Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem (Mk 10:33). With these words, our Lord invites the disciples to journey with him on the path that leads from Galilee to the place where his redemptive mission will be accomplished. This journey to Jerusalem, which the Evangelists present as the crowning moment of

Christ's earthly path, is the model for the life of every Christian committed to following the Master on the way of the Cross.

"Christ also invites the men and women of today to 'go up to Jerusalem.' He does so with special force in Lent, which is a favorable time to convert and restore full communion with him by sharing intimately in the mystery of his death and resurrection. For believers, therefore, Lent is the appropriate time for a profound re-examination of life."[1]

We are familiar with the principal practices that the Church recommends during Lent, to show our eagerness for conversion: prayer, penance, and works of charity. I would like us now to especially consider the final one. Pope Francis, in his message for Lent, refers to the "globalization of indifference": an

evil that has become accentuated in our day and age and that is directly opposed to God's way of acting. For our Lord, in his infinite mercy, cares for each and every one of us. He seeks us even when we distance ourselves from him, and never ceases to send us the clarity of his light and the strength of his grace, so that we decide to conduct ourselves at every moment as good children of his. "But often," the Pontiff emphasizes, "when we are healthy and comfortable, we forget about others (something God the Father never does): we are unconcerned with their problems, their sufferings and the injustices they endure..."[2]

To overcome this danger, we have to remember our solidarity with one another. And above all, we need to reflect on the Communion of Saints, which will spur us to serve, to be concerned about, day after day, our sisters and brothers in need of

spiritual or material care. Lent thus becomes a time especially propitious for imitating Christ by our generous dedication to the members of his Mystical Body, reflecting on his self-giving for us.

The strength to act in this way comes from an attentive listening to the word of God and the reception of the sacraments (Confession, the Eucharist), indicated in a specific way in the commandments of the Church, during these days. Let us consider that, on receiving the Body of our Lord in Communion with the required spiritual dispositions, we will become more and more like him; our identification with Jesus will become more perfect until we come to be—as our Father used to say—*ipse Christus*, Christ himself. And we will make very much our own all the needs of others, never allowing a crust of selfishness to form on our hearts, absorbed in our own ego.

"Whoever is of Christ, belongs to one body, and in him we cannot be indifferent to one another."[3] How can we fail to remember St. Paul's forceful words: *If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together?*[4]

My daughters and sons, I would very much like that we apply these considerations to the care of the sick: a work of mercy that Jesus rewards in a special way. Let us also pray every day for those who are suffering persecution because of their religious convictions. No one's needs should be foreign to us! Let us beseech our Lord to assist them with his grace and give them strength. And since charity is ordered, it has to reach first those who are closest (members of our supernatural or human family, friends and neighbors, colleagues at work), all those with whom we share special

ties of fraternity, given our different situations.

The Pope's suggestions are very clear: "Do we experience being part of one body? A body which receives and shares what God wishes to give? A body which acknowledges and cares for its weakest, poorest and most insignificant members? Or do we take refuge in a universal love that would embrace the whole world, while failing to see the Lazarus sitting before our closed doors (cf. *Lk* 16:19-31)?"[5]

I take advantage of this letter to once again thank my daughters and sons and so many other people who care for the sick and the aged, for their generous dedication to this work: how God smiles on them! I am not unaware that this effort may sometimes lead to weariness. But then let us turn our eyes to a very clear reality in the light of faith:

taking care of those who cannot take care of themselves, both in their own homes as well as in other venues, places us right in the merciful Heart of our Lord. Let us strive to dedicate our best service to them, without ever haggling about the personal sacrifice. Frequently I read about how St. Josemaría went joyfully—it was a necessity, also for doing Opus Dei!—to visit the sick, to be with them. From those moments he drew strength to carry out what God was asking of him.

In the Work we have ample experience of these works of mercy: not in vain, I repeat, was Opus Dei born and consolidated among the poor and the sick. Very significant for our path is the fact that on March 19, 1975, just a few months before his going to heaven, forty years ago now, our Father vividly recalled those beginnings during a family get-

together. I invite you to consider once again his words.

"I went to seek strength in the poorest neighborhoods of Madrid. I spent hours and hours, every day, walking from one place to the other all over Madrid, visiting shamefully poor, miserably poor people who had absolutely nothing; among dirty children with runny noses, but children for all that, and therefore souls pleasing to God . . . I spent many hours in that work. I am only sorry they weren't more. And in the hospitals, and in the houses where sick people were, if those shacks can be called houses. They were people who were forsaken and sick, some with a sickness that was then incurable, tuberculosis

"They were very intense years, in which Opus Dei was growing on the inside almost without our realizing it. But I have wanted to tell you

(some day they will explain this to you in more detail, with documents and papers) that the human strength of the Work has been the sick people in the hospitals of Madrid: the most wretched ones; those who lived in their houses, having lost the last vestige of human hope; the most ignorant in those outlying districts of the city."[6]

My advice to the sick is that they be docile and let themselves be cared for; that they be grateful for the human and Christian affection that Jesus himself dispenses through those looking after them. How many people, including those who lack the treasure of faith, are moved by these manifestations of true Christian and human love, and end up discovering Christ's face in the sick, or in the people who spend themselves for them!

What joy we also draw from the approach of the solemnities of Saint Joseph and the Annunciation of our Lady. These take on significant relevance in this Marian Year dedicated to the family, for they put before our eyes the atmosphere of the home in Nazareth. There was made present God's great mercy towards mankind, the love of the Trinity through the incarnation of the Word in the most pure womb of Mary. There Jesus spent many years, surrounded at every moment by the affection and care of his Mother and Saint Joseph. There the holy Patriarch worked with human and supernatural perfection. These are excellent reasons to entrust to them the holiness of Christian homes and to implore their protection for all the world's families.

In his recent general audiences, the Pope has underlined the very important role of the mother and

father in the heart of the family:
"Mothers," he said on one of these occasions, "are the strongest antidote to the spread of self-centered individualism."[7] The same can be said of fathers, who play an equally fundamental role. Each family needs the presence of a father, although unfortunately "today one has reached the point of saying that our society is a 'society without fathers' . . . Particularly in Western culture, the father figure has become symbolically absent, obscured, removed."[8] This attitude is a very grave error, for both the father and the mother are completely indispensable for the harmonious development of the children in all their facets. Is our prayer for the family, for this vital cell of the Church and civil society, intense, generous? Do we pray that every home may be an extension of the one that sheltered the Son of God in Nazareth? How do we show our

thanks for the generous and cheerful self-giving of so many fathers and mothers? Do we remember to pray for the happiness of the spouses to whom God doesn't grant children, so that they love the will of Heaven, besides giving an example of service to all mankind?

But whether the children God grants are many, few, or none, all Christian homes need to foster the joy of knowing themselves to be a "domestic church." Therefore I offer the following teachings of St. Josemaría, when he says that parents have to receive children "always with joy and gratitude, because they are a gift and blessing from God and a proof of his trust."[9] And he adds: "have no doubt that the reduction in the number of children in Christian families will result in the reduction in the number of vocations to the priesthood, and of souls who want to dedicate their life to the service of

Christ. I have seen not a few couples who, when God gave them only one child, have had the generosity to offer their child to God. But there are not many who do so. In large families it is easier to understand the greatness of a divine vocation, and among their children are some for all states and paths."[10]

Spouses don't always have offspring. When this happens, they shouldn't consider themselves a failure, because they aren't. It is another way—also divine—that our Lord has of blessing married love. "Large families," our Father said, "give me great joy. But when I meet a couple without children, because God has not granted them any, I am also filled with joy. Not only can they sanctify their home just as well, but they also have more time to dedicate themselves to the children of others, and there are now many who do so with a moving self-abnegation. I

have the pride of being able to say that I have never quenched a noble earthly love: on the contrary, I have encouraged it, because it ought to be, each day more so, a divine path."[11] Let us thank God for the joyful fidelity of these spouses.

On the feast of Saint Joseph, all of us will go to the Holy Patriarch, asking that he imbue our whole life with fidelity to God, day after day, as that just man did his, responding to all of God's requests. And before concluding, I want to remind you that March 28 is the ninetieth anniversary of our Father's priestly ordination. Invoke him with reverent and constant petition especially for the Church and the Pope; for priestly and religious vocations; for vocations—also divine—to a total dedication in the midst of the world, in apostolic celibacy or marriage; for the faithfulness of all Christians. Direct your prayers, with faith and trust, to

our Lady and Saint Joseph, so that we learn to be contemplatives in the midst of the world. And continue praying for all my intentions.

It gives me great joy to tell you that, before beginning my retreat, I have gone to pray at Loreto, together with all of you and with our Father. I had the opportunity to accompany him on several occasions and witness how he loved our Mother and placed in her hands the life of his daughters and sons, his own life—the Work!—in order to serve the holy Church more and better.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father

+ Javier

Rome, March 1, 2015

[1] Saint John Paul II, Message for Lent, January 7, 2001.

[2] Pope Francis, Message for Lent 2015, October 4, 2014.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *1 Cor* 12:26.

[5] Pope Francis, Message for Lent 2015, October 4, 2014.

[6] Saint Josemaría, Notes taken in a family gathering, March 19, 1975.

[7] Pope Francis, Address at a general audience, January 7, 2015.

[8] Pope Francis, Address at a general audience, January 28, 2015

[9] Saint Josemaría, *Letter of January 9, 1959*, no. 54.

[10] *Ibid.*, no. 55.

[11] Saint Josemaría, Notes taken in a family gathering, April 10, 1969.

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