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Letter from the Prelate (July 2009)

Bishop Javier Echevarría asks us to give thanks to God for the gift of the priesthood, since "the priesthood is the love of Jesus' Heart."

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

With the feast of St. Josemaría still so recent, my heart and mind turn to our Father, and I want to have recourse to his intercession with

continued frequency and with greater intensity. In reflecting on his priestly example, on his very generous response to what our Lord showed him on October 2, 1928, we discover once more the immense effectiveness of a holy priest. How often he told us that priests are never saved alone: they are always accompanied by a cohort of souls! Therefore we need to pray untiringly for the holiness of Christ's ministers so that, by giving themselves fully to their ministry and being faithful to their vocation, they will open the path to heaven for a great multitude of souls.

These reflections come insistently to mind during these first weeks of the Year for Priests, inaugurated by the Pope on June 19th, solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The Roman Pontiff in his homily said that "while it is true that Jesus' invitation to *abide in my love* (Jn 15: 9) is

addressed to every baptized person ... this invitation resounds more powerfully for us who are priests, particularly this evening at the solemn inauguration of the Year for Priests, which I wanted to be celebrated on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the death of the Holy Curé of Ars."[1]

St. John Mary Vianney is the patron and model for sacred ministers because of his immense love for God and his ardent zeal for the salvation of souls. I witnessed our Father's affection when he once went to Ars to venerate him, and to commend to him the holiness of priests and the relations of Opus Dei with the diocesan bishops. Let us all ask him for the same thing during the coming months.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* includes an expression by the Holy Curé of Ars that Benedict XVI

recently cited: *The priesthood is the love of Jesus' Heart.*[2] What a great truth is contained in these words! The Pope exclaimed: "How is it possible not to remember with emotion that the gift of our priestly ministry flowed directly from this Heart? How can we forget that we priests were consecrated to serve humbly and authoritatively the common priesthood of the faithful? Ours is an indispensable mission, for the Church and for the world, which demands full fidelity to Christ and an unceasing union with him." [3]

The call to be a priest is a special gift by God to humanity, to enable the fruits of the Redemption to reach souls in all epochs and places. Our Father always stressed its enormous value. The expression, *Josemaría, priest*, took on a special resonance in his words and writings. "The priesthood is the greatest reality in the world," he said. "One only needs

to consider the miracle of bringing Jesus to earth every day. Our Heavenly Mother—how much we have to love her: greater than her, only God!—brought our Lord to earth only once: *fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum!* (Lk 1:38)."[4]

At the same time, it is clear that our Founder—also because of Opus Dei's specific mission—had an immense esteem for the Christian vocation of the lay faithful. It was not in vain that our Lord chose him to open up in the world the pathway of the Work, *a way of sanctification in daily work and in the fulfillment of the Christian's ordinary duties.*[5] As far back as the 1930's, when the universal call to holiness and apostolate was hardly mentioned (it was completely unknown), St. Josemaría showed those who drew close to his priestly work the dignity of the Christian vocation. He helped them to discover the spiritual riches

contained in Baptism—among others, that all Christians, both men and women, share in the one priesthood of Christ, that all have a *priestly soul*; and therefore that they, just like priests, have to aspire to holiness with all their strength, and foster in their hearts zeal for the salvation of souls.

This was his constant refrain, always with the new tones of a soul in love, right to the end of his life. On the very day of his passage to heaven, when meeting with his daughters, he told them once again: "you have a priestly soul, as I always remind you when I come here. Your brothers who are laymen also have a priestly soul. With this priestly soul of yours, you can and should help us. And with God's grace, and the ministerial priesthood that we priests of the Work have, we will carry out an effective work." [6]

In his writings and in his meetings with faithful from all over the world, St. Josemaría explained this teaching with specific examples that spurred people to put their common priesthood into practice. For example, when answering a question about this topic in 1970, he said: "We all share in Christ's priesthood. And I'm not saying anything new, because St. Peter wrote the same thing (cf. *1 Pet 2:9*). You all have a royal priesthood. I, in addition, since I am a priest, have the ministerial priesthood. And that royal priesthood makes us into a holy people, a chosen people, a people of God. Do you see?"

"If you are part of the people of God and of the holy people he has chosen, you have to be a defender of the rights of God and of the rights of the human being. You will do good to everyone; when you are working in something you don't especially like,

you will do it for love, for love of Jesus Christ, because it is his will. And you will also do it thinking of all mankind. Here you have some consequences of the royal priesthood St. Peter speaks about."[7]

The Second Vatican Council, when clarifying the relationship between the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood of the faithful, stated: "Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ. The ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, teaches and rules the priestly people; acting in the person of Christ, he makes present the Eucharistic sacrifice, and offers it to God in the name of all the people. But the faithful, in virtue of

their royal priesthood, join in the offering of the Eucharist. They likewise exercise that priesthood in receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity."[8]

What is proper and specific to priests is to serve the faithful with their ministry, making possible and facilitating the exercise of the common priesthood received in Baptism. Hence the need for those of us who are Christ's ministers to correspond with all our strength to the immense gift we have received.

The work of the priest is indispensable for the call to holiness and apostolate to deeply permeate the life of the lay faithful and not remain as mere words. He alone is the teacher who proclaims the Word of God with sacred authority. Only the priest can administer God's

forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance and guide souls as a good shepherd along paths leading to eternal life. Only the priest has received the power of consecrating the Body and Blood of Christ at Holy Mass, taking Christ's place, so that all the faithful can make personal and direct contact with the Paschal Mystery and receive Holy Communion, indispensable for nourishing souls along their supernatural pathway.

These are good reasons for praying for the faithful ministry of priests. There is a saying that priests have the people they deserve, and the faithful also have the priests they deserve. So we have to raise up our prayer every day, in a true communion of saints, for priests and for the people. We have to beseech our Lord, with our daily struggle for personal holiness, for what the faithful in Latin America ask God for:

Lord, give us holy priests. This prayer is always very timely, since it's clear that we all benefit from imploring heaven for the holiness of the clergy. This daily responsibility affects each and every one of us. Are we praying for this every day? Do we invite others to unite themselves to our prayer?

How much love St. Josemaría put into this duty! To spur on those listening to him, his words were strong and filled with urgency, always moved by his faith in the communion of saints. "I don't know any bad priests," he would say. "I know there are some who are weak, lazy, perhaps cowards. But bad, no!"[9] And on another occasion: "Couldn't it be because you are not helping them enough? Are you praying for priests? Do you do what the good sons of Noah did? . . . Have a little compassion, charity. Don't slander. Pardon, forgive, pray."[10]

My daughters and sons, let us raise our prayers to heaven—filled with trust and optimism—for the Church, for the sanctity of priests and the people of God. Let us pray that, in all nations, the number of persons who seek Christ, who draw close to Christ, who fall in love with Christ may increase. That exhortation of our Lord is always timely: *The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.*

[11] Our Father stressed this repeatedly. In a meditation preached in 1964 he said: "my children, when we think of the hunger for truth that there is in the world; of the nobility of so many hearts that lack light; of my weakness and yours, and that of so many of us who have reason to be dazzled by Christ's light; when we feel the need to sow the Good News of Christ, so that there can be that harvest of life, that rich harvest, we remember (it's something we've

often meditated on) Christ's walking in hunger along the roads of Palestine. . . .

"At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck ears of grain and to eat (Mt 12:1). They too, like us now, were thinking about the need to spread the Good News, as they walked through a wheat field, rubbing the rich ears of grain in their hands and eating it hungrily.

*"Messis quidem multa. The harvest, the multitude of men and women alive then and who were to come later, was great. Messis quidem multa, operarii autem pauci (Mt 9:37). The harvest is great, but the laborers are few. Isn't that what I so often tell you, in a thousand different ways? ... We have to go to our Lord: *rogate ergo Dominum messis ut mittat operarios in messem suam (Mt 9:38),**

beseech the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into his harvest." [12]

My daughters and sons, *caritas Christi urget nos*, [13] the love of Jesus Christ is urging us on. As it did St. Josemaría, this phrase of St. Paul has to stir our heart. God Almighty, Giver of all graces, loves each of us deeply. Let us respond to such a great grace with a love that grows day by day, convinced that God's call is always new—the best we could receive! We have to respond with sincerity and constancy, with the hunger to make a reality in our life the words of Scripture: *ecce ego, quia vocasti me*, [14] here I am, for you called me. Being Christians, being children of God, and knowing these graces and truths, entails the demand to be generous without limits. We have to encourage everyone to experience what our Father wrote in *The Way*: "come with us in search of Love." [15]

On the other hand, God needs many holy priests, so that there can be many fathers and mothers of families, young people and those who are older, people of all walks of life, who take seriously the vocation to holiness and apostolate they received in Baptism. As the Pope said: "‘Pray the Lord of the harvest’ also means that we cannot simply ‘produce vocations; they must come from God. This is not like other professions, we cannot simply recruit people by using the right kind of publicity or the correct type of strategy. The call which comes from the heart of God must always find its way into the heart of man.

"And yet, precisely so that it may reach into hearts, our cooperation is needed. To pray the Lord of the harvest means above all to ask him for this, to stir his Heart and say: Please do this! Rouse laborers! Enkindle in them enthusiasm and joy

for the Gospel! Make them understand that this is a treasure greater than any other, and that whoever has discovered it, must hand it on!"[16]

I so often saw our Father consumed by zeal for souls. Everything he did seemed little to him, and he strove to do more, so as not to take anything from God's glory and the service of souls. Do we act in this way? Do we love God with a new love each day? Do we teach others by our conduct to love God?

During this month I will go to Germany, Puerto Rico and Mexico. Accompany me in my prayer before Our Lady of Guadalupe, closely united to my intentions, as we all did with our holy Founder when he traveled to Mexico in 1970.

On the upcoming 7th we will remember Don Alvaro's "here I am," words that he renewed each day. Let

us go to his intercession so he will gain for us an unbreakable fidelity.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father

+Javier

Pamplona, July 1, 2009

Notes:

1. Benedict XVI, Homily on the opening of the Year for Priests, June 19, 2009.

2. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1589.

3. Benedict XVI, Homily on the opening of the Year for Priests, June 19, 2009.

4. St. Josemaría, *Letter*, August 8, 1956, no. 17.

5. Prayer to St. Josemaría.

6. St. Josemaría, Notes taken in a get-together, June 26, 1975.
7. St. Josemaría, Notes taken in a get-together, May 21, 1970.
8. Vatican II, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 10.
9. St. Josemaría, Notes taken in a meditation November 19, 1972.
10. St. Josemaría, Notes taken in a get-together, October 29, 1972.
11. *Mt* 9:37-38.
12. St. Josemaría, Notes taken in a meditation, March 26, 1964.
13. *2 Cor* 5:14.
14. *1 Sam* 3:6.
15. St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 790.
16. Benedict XVI, Address in Freising (Bavaria), September 14, 2006.

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