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Letter from the Prelate (March 2007)

A letter on Lent from Bishop Javier Echevarría to the faithful of the Prelature of Opus Dei.

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We have begun Lent, an *intense* liturgical period, during which the Church invites us to a new conversion. We all need to undertake this change, that is, to constantly redirect the course of our life towards our final end: the possession and enjoyment of God for all eternity.

Nevertheless, we know that while traveling here on earth, we can lose our way, or at least deviate from our course. Therefore we have to make the necessary readjustments with optimism, as a plane or ship does in order to reach its destination.

Our beloved John Paul II said that all human beings, since we are *in statu viatoris*, travelers on the way to our heavenly homeland, also find ourselves *in statu conversionis*, in need of conversion. Therefore he concluded that we need to undertake a *permanent conversion*, which should deeply mark our earthly pilgrimage (Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, November 30, 1980, no. 13). But always, I insist, filled with joy and hope, because God is waiting for us at the end.

Lent encourages us to be more faithful in doing so. It is a period

especially suited to making a more determined effort to change our life, since we can count on a specific grace during this liturgical time. Let us meditate on some words of Saint Josemaría: “We are at the beginning of Lent: a time of penance, purification, and conversion. It is not an easy program, but then Christianity is not an easy way of life. It is not enough just to be in the Church, letting the years roll by. In our life, in the life of Christians, our first conversion—that unique moment which each of us remembers, when we clearly understood everything the Lord was asking of us—is certainly very significant. But the later conversions are even more important, and they are increasingly demanding. To facilitate the work of grace in these conversions, we need to keep our soul young; we have to call upon our Lord, know how to listen to him and, having found out what has gone

wrong, know how to ask his pardon” (*Christ is Passing By*, no. 57).

Our Lord’s passion and death is the greatest act of love, of complete self-giving, that has ever been carried out or will be carried out on earth. The Son of God became man and died to free us from our sins. Therefore, during these weeks, the Holy Father invites us to “direct our gaze more fervently...at Christ Crucified who, dying on Calvary, revealed fully for us the love of God” (*Message for Lent 2007*).

The same recommendation was frequently voiced by Saint Josemaría. How often he encouraged us to take the crucifix in our hands and to place ourselves courageously before our Lord, listening to what he wanted to tell us from the Cross! Let us meditate, for example, on these words of his: “so much do I love Christ on the Cross that every

crucifix is like a loving reproach from my God: 'I suffering, and you... a coward. I loving you, and you forgetting me. I begging you, and you... denying me. I, here, with arms wide open as an Eternal Priest, suffering all that can be suffered for love of you... and you complain at the slightest misunderstanding, over the tiniest humiliation' (*The Way of the Cross*, Eleventh Station, point 2). I saw him kiss our crucified Lord with true love and hunger for reparation.

If, during these days, we place ourselves with complete sincerity before Christ crucified, we will quickly discover specific details in which he wants us to improve. A zeal for sanctity cannot be a matter of empty, ineffective desires; it has to be shown in specific resolutions, in a determined interior struggle.

At times, perhaps we will discover the need to make a radical change in

our conduct, because the paths we are following are not leading us closer to God. Other times (and this will be the most frequent situation), it will involve improving in points that are never small, if we are moved by love.

In any case, let us not forget, as Pope Benedict XVI said: “This conversion of the heart is primarily a free gift from God...For this reason he himself anticipates our desire with his grace and accompanies our efforts for conversion.” And the Pope added, “What does ‘to be converted’ actually mean? It means seeking God, moving with God, docilely following the teachings of his Son, Jesus Christ; to be converted is not a work for self-fulfillment because the human being is not the architect of his own eternal destiny...Conversion consists in freely and lovingly accepting to depend in all things on God, our true Creator, to depend on love. This is

not dependence but freedom” (Address at a general audience, February 21, 2007, Ash Wednesday).

Each of these changes involves both God’s call and our human freedom. God, the fullness of Love, gives himself to us freely in Jesus Christ, and waits for us to open ourselves to his Love. “On the Cross, it is God himself who begs the love of his creature: He is thirsty for the love of every one of us,” the Holy Father wrote (*Message for Lent 2007*), stressing how in Christ nailed to the Cross we find fused the two aspects of *caritas*: love of giving and love of possession.

For “the revelation of God’s *eros* towards man” (his great yearning to be loved by us) “is, in reality, the supreme expression of his *agape*” (his absolute and unconditional self-giving). “In all truth, only the love

that unites the free gift of oneself with the impassioned desire for reciprocity instills a joy which eases the heaviest of burdens” (*Ibid.*).

In these words from his Lenten message, Benedict XVI offers Catholics a light that can help us a lot during these weeks leading up to Easter. Let us strive to take advantage of them. We should ask ourselves how we are corresponding personally, each day, in a specific and efficacious way, to God’s immense, infinite love for each one of us.

The practices proper to this liturgical period—prayer, penance, works of charity—can serve to channel our desire for conversion. Are we preparing for the Easter Triduum with a holy desire to be with Christ, to suffer with Christ, to give ourselves with Christ? He is asking this of us, and he wants us to accompany him in his Passion.

Perhaps we could put more affection into one of the norms of piety (the prayer, Holy Mass, praying the Rosary). Perhaps we could increase the offering of small mortifications, which manifest a spirit of penance: for example, fulfilling with the greatest possible perfection some especially costly aspect of our work; willingly receiving someone who comes to us requesting advice or help; making a greater effort to serve those closest to us; adding the “ingredient” of a small mortification to what we eat and drink, thus helping us to live in the presence of God. Saint Josemaría used to recommend one that is within everyone’s reach: “eating a little more of what we don’t like, and a little less of what we like.” My daughters and sons, do we keep very much in mind that there is no Christianity, no personal Christian life, without the Cross? Does love for the Cross preside over your days?

Since prayer and mortification are two pillars upholding Christian behavior, by channeling the desire for a new conversion along this path we will discover many different ways to improve in our practice of fraternal charity: from rendering a material service to those who need it, to advice given to others that opens up new horizons in the struggle to be good Christians. In this regard, let us not forget the importance of the apostolate of Confession. Let us intensify this effort during Lent so that many people will reach Easter after having had recourse, well prepared, to the sacrament of divine mercy.

I would like to give you one more piece of advice, in accord with what the Holy Father said on Ash Wednesday: let us strive to cultivate “an intense spirit of recollection and reflection” (Address at a general audience, February 21, 2007, Ash

Wednesday). For this is the climate that favors true conversion.

Therefore, let us try to increase our presence of God throughout the day, perhaps making use of aspirations especially adapted to our specific circumstances (the liturgy offers us many possible ones during these days). And let us strive to deepen our daily examination of conscience. Those minutes of reflection, each one alone with God, are an excellent launching point—with the light and strength God will grant us—for a serious change the next day.

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