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Letter from the Prelate (March 2012)

This month's letter focuses on "one of the traditional spiritual works of mercy that St. Josemaría taught us to value and that the Holy Father highlights: the practice of fraternal correction."

03/02/2012

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

We have begun Lent, the liturgical season during which we

commemorate Jesus' forty days of prayer and fasting in the desert before beginning his public ministry. The Master began his preaching with a pressing call to conversion: *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel* . [1] So too does the Church exhort us to take advantage of the great graces of this “intense” liturgical time, in order to take a determined step forward in our struggle to draw closer to God.

Although a daily need, the call to conversion resounds in a more urgent way in the weeks we have just begun. On the path that leads to eternal life, we can, almost without noticing it, go a bit astray. Therefore the Church, that wise and good Mother, places before our eyes the need to rectify, making use also of the prayers and readings at Mass, and teaching each of the faithful to convert one day after the next in

specific points. If we sons and daughters of God strive to take advantage of these texts, and bring them to our personal prayer, “in these forty days which lead us to the Feast of the Resurrection, we will be able to find new courage to accept with patience and faith all of the situations of difficulty, of affliction, and of testing, conscious that our Lord will bring forth, out of the darkness, a new day.” [2]

The Lenten liturgy offers us a special grace that prompts us to a change of heart, which necessarily gives rise to good works. Let us read once again these words of our Father:

“Conversion is the task of a moment; sanctification is the work of a lifetime. The divine seed of charity, which God has sown in our souls, wants to grow, to express itself in action, to yield results that continually coincide with what God wants. Therefore, we must be ready

to begin again, to find again—in new situations—the light and the stimulus of our first conversion. And that is why we must prepare with a deep examination of conscience, asking our Lord for his help, so that we'll know him and ourselves better. If we want to be converted again, there's no other way.” [3] How have we done since Ash Wednesday? What have we resolved upon? Are we living each day with the joy of a penitence that is bringing us closer to Christ?

As a motto for his Lenten message this year, the Holy Father cites a paragraph from the Epistle to the Hebrews and invites us to reflect on it: *Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works* . [4] Then he points to the broader context in which these words are found: the need to welcome Christ through the practice of the theological virtues. “It means approaching the Lord ‘sincere in

heart and filled with *faith* ' (v. 22), keeping firm 'in the *hope* we profess' (v. 23) and ever mindful of living a life of ' *love* and good works' (v. 24) together with our brothers and sisters. The author states that to sustain this life shaped by the Gospel it is important to participate in the liturgy and community prayer, mindful of the eschatological goal of full communion in God (v. 25)." [5]

As in previous years, Benedict XVI focuses once again on works of charity, which—together with prayer and fasting—are the typical penitential practices for Lent. On other occasions, I have encouraged you to put special care into the times dedicated to personal prayer, and thus to renew our spirit of penance, putting greater effort into the mortifications that give savor to Christian life, and helping our neighbor in his corporal and spiritual needs. Now, in addition to

exhorting you to live these manifestations of a Christian spirit, I want to center on one of the traditional spiritual works of mercy that St. Josemaría taught us to value and that the Holy Father highlights: the practice of fraternal correction, which Jesus himself recommended to his disciples: *If your brother sins . . . go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother .* [6]

This manifestation of charity is not an isolated teaching. Already in the Old Testament it is stressed a number of times. For example: *reprove a wise man, and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man and he will increase in learning .* [7]

And in another place: *he who heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof goes astray .* [8] In the New Testament, following the Master's preaching, we find a

more specific way to practice this urgent work of refined fraternity, which sustains the others on the path to God. St. Paul stresses that it has to be exercised *in a spirit of gentleness* , [9] seeing in the other person not an enemy but a brother or sister. [10] Sacred Scripture also tells us that *for the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it* . [11] And the apostle James writes: *My brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins* . [12] We should never forget that St. Josemaría, upon arriving at a Center, would first ask if anyone there was sick, and then add: “Are you happy? Is fraternal correction being lived?”

Unfortunately, despite so much insistence on the part of our Lord, making use also of the apostles and many saints, including our Father, this work of spiritual charity is overlooked by many Christians. As the Pope laments: “Here I would like to mention an aspect of the Christian life, which I believe has been quite forgotten: *fraternal correction in view of eternal salvation* . Today, in general, we are very sensitive to the idea of charity and caring about the physical and material well-being of others, but almost completely silent about our spiritual responsibility towards our brothers and sisters. This was not the case in the early Church or in those communities that are truly mature in faith, those which are concerned not only for the physical health of their brothers and sisters, but also for their spiritual health and ultimate destiny.” [13]

Thanks be to God, in this portion of the Church that is the Prelature of Opus Dei (not because we consider ourselves better) this practice, so firmly grounded in the Gospel, is loved and lived. With a special light from God, which led him to go more deeply into certain teachings of Sacred Scripture, our Founder practiced it personally and taught it to others right from the beginning. He said that it is “deeply rooted in the Gospel,” [14] and added that “it is always a proof of supernatural affection and trust,” and “has the savor of early Christianity.” [15]

St. Josemaría so strongly esteemed this evangelical custom, that he did not give up until he succeeded in convincing the Holy See (when it definitively approved the spirit of the Work in 1950) to accept that the Founder as well—and his successors in the government of Opus Dei—could benefit from this means of

sanctification that the Holy Spirit makes use of to improve souls. He told his children, with great simplicity: “When I presented our statutes to the Holy See . . . which speak about fraternal correction for the Father, they always raised a difficulty: ‘How can the person in charge be corrected? Nothing should be said to him!’ I didn’t agree; and I explained to them: How can you allow me, who am a poor man, and those who follow me, who will be better than me, but also just poor men, not to have access to this means of holiness? In practicing this deeply Christian custom, those who make the fraternal correction (even though it costs them effort and they have to overcome themselves) and those who receive it (even though it hurts them and they need to be humble) possess a marvelous means of holiness, which stems from the Gospel. This reasoning convinced them.” [16]

Our Founder left very clear how we should make and receive fraternal correction. He spoke to us about the “norms of prudence and charity” with which one needs to act at every moment, so that it truly be an instrument for one’s own sanctification and that of the other person. In first place, it always has to be a clear expression of supernatural charity and human affection, of concern for one’s own holiness and that of the others. St. Josemaría was crystal clear: “When you have to make a fraternal correction,” he said, “do it with great kindness—with charity!—in what you say and in the way you say it, for at that moment you are God’s instrument.” [17] For as the Pope explains in his message, “Christian admonishment is never motivated by a spirit of accusation or recrimination. It is always moved by love and mercy.” [18]

With this clear principle, in the Work, before making a fraternal correction to anyone, we consult whether it is opportune. Besides making certain of the person's right intention in speaking to that brother or sister, they might suggest to us the way of making it, taking into account the specific circumstances, so that it will be an effective help to the one receiving it. Thus we ensure that this means of serving others is always a clear manifestation of prudence and refinement, of respect for others. I am moved by the thought of the rectitude with which our Father acted in every situation. If anyone complained about someone else or his behavior, he would always ask: Have you spoken to that person? Do so, he would add, and thus you will get him to change, if it's necessary.

Let us remind all Christians that we are called to put this recommendation of our Lord into

practice—without forgetting, as the Holy Father mentions in his message, that few people seem to know what it is nowadays. Unfortunately, people frequently speak badly of others behind their back, without daring to tell them face to face, with supernatural outlook, the faults or defects that they should correct. And thus, the vice of gossip and backbiting does so much damage to family life and society.

Let us strive to rediscover—on everyone’s part—the importance of loyalty, a fundamental human virtue in our interactions with one another, in social and professional life, etc. In this sense, the practice of fraternal correction—with the necessary measures of prudence and charity—is particularly necessary. St. Josemaría, with supernatural realism, said that all of us “are full of defects, which each of us sees, and against which we try to fight; but

there are many other defects that we do not see . . . and some of these are pointed out to us in fraternal correction . . . The others do this because they love us, because ours is the harmony of a Christian family, filled with affection.

“Living in harmony with everyone: and this entails loving, understanding, forgiving. But there are some things that—even though we forgive them—we should not overlook. Those are the things that we should point out in fraternal correction to each one.” [19]

This recommendation rooted in the Gospel is of particular importance when fidelity to God is at stake. Therefore, the Pope writes: “It is important to recover this dimension of Christian charity. We must not remain silent before evil. I am thinking of all those Christians who, out of human regard or purely

personal convenience, adapt to the prevailing mentality, rather than warning their brothers and sisters against ways of thinking and acting that are contrary to the truth and that do not follow the path of goodness.” [20] Certainly, helping others in these points is always difficult. “Receiving one hurts, because it is hard to humble oneself, at least to begin with. But making a fraternal correction is always hard. Everyone knows this.” [21] And, elsewhere, our Father added: “You may find it hard, for it’s easier to be inhibited. It’s easier! But it’s not supernatural. And you will have to render an account to God for such omissions.” [22]

When you receive this letter I will be making my retreat. I ask you to pray for its fruitfulness: that I convert once again to our Lord, in order to better serve the Church, the Work, my daughters and sons, and all souls;

unite yourself, I insist, to my intentions. During these same days a retreat will also be taking place in the Roman Curia, at which the Pope and those who assist him most closely will take part: it is another good moment to redouble our prayers for him and for his intentions, which I so often ask of you. Entrust him to our Lord especially during his pastoral trip to Mexico and Cuba, from March 23 to 29, so that its apostolic fruit may be very abundant.

Although in a very summary fashion, I don't want to fail to remind you of the feasts and family anniversaries during the coming weeks. The 11th is the anniversary of our beloved Don Alvaro's birth, and the 23rd is his *dies natalis*, his departure to his home in heaven. On the 19th we have the solemnity of St. Joseph, patron of the Church and of the Work. Then comes the Annunciation of our Lady, which

this year is celebrated liturgically on March 26th. And on the 28th we will celebrate another anniversary of St. Josemaría's priestly ordination. With the intercession of our Mother, if we live these feasts with a sincere eagerness to improve, the graces of conversion proper to Lent will more easily attain their objective.

I confess to you that I am consumed every day with impatience: I would like to go to every place where you are working. But I remember St. Josemaría's comment: Why stay in Rome?—someone might ask. Because I have a duty to do so, he would say. And I add: how close he was to each and every one!

With these desires for a deep interior renewal and a greater apostolic zeal, I bless you,

Your Father

+ Javier

Rome, March 1, 2012

Footnotes:

[1] Roman Missal, First Sunday of Lent, *Gospel* (B) (*Mk* 1:15).

[2] Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, February 22, 2012.

[3] St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 58.

[4] *Heb* 10:24.

[5] Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent 2012*, November 3, 2011.

[6] *Mt* 18:15.

[7] *Prov* 8:8-9.

[8] *Prov* 10:17.

[9] *Gal* 6:1.

[10] See 2 *Thess* 3:15.

[11] *Heb* 12:11.

[12] *Jas* 5:19.

[13] Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent 2012*, November 3, 2011.

[14] St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 566.

[15] St. Josemaría, November, 1964.

[16] St. Josemaría, Notes from a family gathering, November 21, 1958.

[17] St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 147.

[18] Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent 2012*, November 3, 2011.

[19] St. Josemaría, Notes from a family gathering, December 30, 1962.

[20] Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent 2012*, November 3, 2011.

[21] St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 641.

[22] *Ibid.*, no. 146.

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march-2012/](https://opusdei.org/en-ph/article/letter-from-the-prelate-march-2012/) (04/07/2025)