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Letter from the Prelate (December 2009)

As once again the joy of the Christmas season draws near, the Prelate urges us "to help restore the Christian meaning of this feast to society."

12/03/2009

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

Christmas with its marvelous newness is drawing near once again, a feast celebrated almost

everywhere, even in places where Christ is hardly known. For many people it is only an opportunity to give and receive presents, to take a few days rest, or simply to spend more time with their family. But having received the gift of faith, we know the true significance of this celebration: "every Christmas should be for us a new and special meeting with God, when we allow his light and grace to enter deep into our soul." [1]

The Church draws our attention to this repeatedly throughout these weeks of preparation. At the beginning of Advent she invites us: *Let us go with joy to the house of the Lord.* [2] Pope Benedict XVI explains that "the reason why we can go forward joyfully . . . lies in the fact that our salvation is now at hand. The Lord is coming! With this knowledge we set out on the journey of Advent, preparing ourselves to

celebrate with faith the extraordinary event of the Lord's birth. In the coming weeks, day after day the liturgy will offer for our reflection Old Testament texts that recall the lively, constant desire that kept alive in the Jewish people the expectation of the Messiah's coming. Watchful in prayer, let us too seek to prepare our hearts to receive the Lord, who will come to show us his mercy and give us his salvation." [3]

Let us make an effort to follow this advice of the Holy Father, reading attentively the liturgical texts and meditating on them in our personal prayer. And I ask, in addition, that each of us strive, personally, to help restore the Christian meaning of this feast to society. We shouldn't see this goal as utopian. Our Father used to say that "in counting, you begin with one," and then go on from there. Perhaps he was thinking about what he had to do when our Lord put the

Work in his soul, in his hands. And that zeal of his at the beginning grew continually in his unwavering apostolate. Let us make that disposition our own, because we can all help bring about the re-Christianization of this world of ours. Each of us, in his or her surroundings, like a stone dropped in the water, which causes one wave, and then another, and another....[4]

Anticipating our Lord's arrival, who comes to restore justice and peace to the world, the expressions of Holy Scripture are filled with jubilation. *Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring forth for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.*[5]

This coming of our Lord will always be a reality, because he visits this earth especially in the daily celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and he comes to meet us with his Body, with his Blood, with his Soul, and with his Divinity. He comes to us spiritually in many ways throughout the liturgical year: now, with the solemnity of the Christmas season. His presence is so powerful that, although in some places people try to silence it, we see a striking reality: the world "stops" for a time because of the Nativity. The words of the psalm take on all their strength: *Let the heavens rejoice and earth be glad, let the sea and all within it thunder praise, let the land and all it bears rejoice, all the trees of the wood shout for joy. Let them rejoice at the presence of the Lord for he comes.*[6] Twenty centuries ago God's arrival in the world took place silently. Only the angels and a small group of humble people—the shepherds—

shared with our Lady and St. Joseph the joy of the Redeemer's birth. Now too the constant coming of our Lord takes place in silence. But "wherever there is faith, wherever his word is proclaimed and heard, there God gathers people together and gives himself to them in his Body; he makes them his Body. God 'comes.' And in this way our hearts are awakened. The new song of the angels becomes the song of all those who, throughout the centuries, sing ever anew of God's coming as a child, and rejoice deep in their hearts." [7]

Let us try to give full meaning to the external signs of these Christian festive days. Let us strive to restore, I insist, the true significance to the atmosphere of these weeks. It is always possible, for example, to spread the traditional spiritual and devotional customs proper to this celebration: to put up a crib scene at home; to visit the crèches placed in

churches and elsewhere, perhaps along with other family members; to stress the spiritual meaning of the Christmas tree and the gifts customary for this feast, which are meant to remind us that from the tree of the Cross comes everything good..

On the Second Sunday of Advent we are once again asked to foster supernatural joy because of Jesus' imminent birth. The prophet Baruch addresses Jerusalem, a figure of the soul waiting for our Lord, and says:*take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on for ever the beauty of the glory from God. Put on the robe of righteousness from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting.*[8] Our Lord has promised us complete and unending joy if we strive to fulfill his commandments with love, if we return once and again to him

through repentance when we have failed to behave as good children.

"Cheerfulness, and supernatural and human optimism," writes St.

Josemaría, "can go hand in hand with physical tiredness, with sorrow, with tears (because we have a heart), and with difficulties in our interior life or our apostolic work." [9] Do we take advantage of these and other personal circumstances to give a warm welcome to our Lord? Do we go to our Lady and St. Joseph with deep devotion, asking them to help us on our path to Bethlehem?

Even our personal miseries—the sins and faults no one on earth is exempt from—have to spur us to go with greater trust and love to God our Lord, who is constantly offering us his forgiveness, especially in the sacrament of Penance. We should never forget that "Christian optimism is not a sugary optimism; nor is it a mere human confidence that

everything will turn out all right. It is an optimism that sinks its roots in an awareness of our freedom, and in the sure knowledge of the power of grace. It is an optimism that leads us to make demands on ourselves, to struggle to respond at every moment to God's calls." [10] Thus there takes root in our soul a true joy, the joy of being with our Lord. Our Father experienced a deep joy as he awaited Christ's arrival at Christmas.

All of this joy was fully fulfilled in our Lady, as the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception reminds us. On that great feast, the Church puts on our Mother's lips some words from the prophet Isaiah: *I exult for joy in the Lord, my soul rejoices in my God; for he has clothed me in the garment of salvation, and robed me in the cloak of justice, like a bride adorned with her jewels.* [11]

How great should be our joy to see our Lady so close to God, glorified in soul and body, and at the same time so close to us! From heaven, she cares for each one of us; she follows our footsteps and gains from her Son all the graces we need. As the Pope said: "The closer someone is to God, the closer they are to other people. We see this in Mary. The fact that she is totally with God is the reason why she is so close to human beings. For this reason she can be the Mother of every consolation and every help, a Mother whom anyone can dare to address in any kind of need in weakness and in sin, for she has understanding for everything and is for everyone the open power of creative goodness." [12]

The liturgical joy of Advent breaks out with uncontrollable force when the third week arrives, on the Sunday called *Gaudete* because of the words with which the Entrance

Antiphon begins: *Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete.*

Dominus enim prope est.[13] Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice! The Lord is near. He is coming to save us from our sins; this is the root of the rejoicing proper to Christmas. *Shout for joy, daughter of Zion, Israel, shout aloud! Rejoice, exult with all your heart, daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has repealed your sentence; he has driven your enemies away. The Lord, the King of Israel, is in your midst.*[14]

Sometimes, on seeing the suffering and misfortune that afflicts a great portion of humanity, the temptation to sadness, to pessimism, or at least to discouragement, might try to worm its way into our heart. Many situations of violence and injustice exist that need to be remedied; countless people, all over the world, lack the most basic requirements to lead a dignified human life. And

above all: such lack of love in hearts, so much forgetfulness of God, so many selfish desires more or less concealed! None of this, however, should overwhelm a man or woman of faith. On the contrary, it should spur us to redouble our efforts, with the help of grace, to sow charity with greater abundance in human relations. Mary brought the happiness of heaven to the home of Elizabeth. You and I, how are we trying to ensure that others benefit from the nearness of Jesus?

Let us listen to St. Josemaría's advice: "Let us recognize our infirmity but confess the power of God. The Christian life has to be shot through with optimism, joy and the strong conviction that our Lord wishes to make use of us. If we feel part of the Church, if we see ourselves sustained by the rock of Peter and by the action of the Holy Spirit, we will decide to fulfill the little duty of every

moment. We will sow a little each day, and the granaries will overflow." [15]

Let us look to our Lady's example. What relevance to human eyes did a young maiden, almost a child, have in such an unknown place as Nazareth? Nevertheless, God took notice of her and made her the Mother of the incarnate and redeeming Word. Let us once again contemplate her in the scene of the Visitation to St. Elizabeth, as the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Advent sets out for us. The canticle of the *Magnificat*, the fruit of our Lady's habitual conversation with God and nourished by her familiarity with Sacred Scripture, is shown to us as a song of absolute trust in the power of God, and therefore filled with a holy joy.

"Our Mother had meditated deep and long on the words of the holy men

and women of the Old Testament who awaited the Savior, and on the events that they had taken part in. She must have marveled at all the great things that God, in his boundless mercy, had done for his people, who were so often ungrateful. As she considers the tenderness shown time after time by God towards his people, Mary's Immaculate Heart breaks out in loving words, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior, for he has looked graciously upon the lowliness of his handmaid' (*Lk* 1:46-48). The first Christians, children of this good Mother, learned from her; we can and ought to do likewise." [16]

Let us take this lesson of Mary to heart. Our Lord has given the world to Christians as their inheritance, [17] and we are sure that his word will be fulfilled with our collaboration, because he has wanted, in his

goodness, to count on each one of us. Therefore "we have to be optimistic, but our optimism should come from our faith in the power of God who does not lose battles, and not from any human sense of satisfaction, from a foolish and presumptuous complacency." [18]

Let us continue praying for the Pope, for those who assist him in governing the Church, for the bishops and priests. Especially in this Year of the Priesthood, let us ask our Lord to grant the Church many holy ministers. As the Holy Curé of Ars explained to his parishioners, "the priest is the love of the Heart of Jesus. When you see a priest, think of our Lord Jesus Christ." [19]

In the past few days I made a trip to Cordoba, invited by the Apostolic Administrator to speak to the clergy of the diocese in the context of the Year of the Priesthood, and to bless

with him the altarpiece of St. Josemaría that has been placed in the parish of San Nicolas. Our Founder prayed in this church on April 20, 1938, during his first trip to that Andalusian city. I also had an opportunity to meet with many people, men and women, youth and adults, who take part in the apostolic work of Opus Dei. Afterwards I went to Pamplona, and from there I returned to the Eternal City. As always I have made these trips closely united to each one of you and to the trips of our Father, giving thanks to God because the seed that St. Josemaría sowed alone has grown so marvelously, through the power of God's grace.

With all my affection, I bless you,
and wish you a holy and happy
Christmas

Your Father

+ Javier

Rome, December 1, 2009

Footnotes:

1. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 12.
2. Roman Missal, First Sunday of Advent (A), Responsorial Psalm.
3. Benedict XVI, Homily on the First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2007.
4. Cf. St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 831.
5. Roman Missal, First Sunday of Advent (C), First Reading (*Jer* 33:14-15).
6. Roman Missal, Nativity of Our Lord, Midnight Mass, Responsorial Psalm (*Ps* 95[96]:11-13).
7. Benedict XVI, Homily on the Nativity of our Lord, December 25, 2008.

8. Roman Missal, Second Sunday of Advent (C), First Reading (*Bar* 5:1-2).
9. St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 290.
10. St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 659.
11. Roman Missal, Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, Entrance Antiphon (*Is* 61:10).
12. Benedict XVI, Homily on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 2005.
13. Roman Missal. Third Sunday of Advent, Entrance Antiphon (*Phil* 4:4-5).
14. Roman Missal, Third Sunday of Advent (C), First Reading (*Zeph* 3:14-15).
15. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 160.
16. St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 241.

17. Cf. *Ps* 2:8.

18. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 123.

19. The Holy Curé of Ars, cited in Alfred Monnin, *Spirito del Curato d'Ars*, Edizioni Ares 2009, p. 79.

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