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Letter from the Prelate (December 2015)

Bishop Javier Echevarria this month focuses on the meaning of Advent, "joyful and impatient weeks of preparation for Christmas."

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Pamplona, 1st December 2015

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

We have begun Advent, these happy and impatient weeks of preparation for Christmas. Once again there come to my mind some words St Josemaría said, in the final months of his earthly journey, about this great Christian feast. Contemplating God's redeeming plans, which had already been revealed in Bethlehem and Nazareth, he stirred us up to consider how ***God teaches us to abandon ourselves completely. Look at the atmosphere where Christ is born. Everything about it insists to us on unconditional self-surrender (...).***

Just recalling those scenes would be sufficient to fill us with shame, and with holy and effective resolutions. We need to drink in this new way of reasoning, which

God inaugurated when he came down to earth. In Bethlehem, nobody keeps anything for themselves. You don't hear anyone there talking about "my good name", "my time", "my ideas", "my tastes", or "my money". There, everything is placed at the service of the magnificent game God is playing with mankind: the Redemption. Surrendering our pride, let's tell our Lord with all the love of a child: ego servus tuus, ego servus tuus et filius ancillæ tuæ(Ps115:16): I am your servant, the child of your handmaid Mary: teach me how to serve you.[1]

God's infinite love for mankind is again highlighted in the Year of Mercy that the Pope will inaugurate on 8th December, the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. Let us quicken our pace these last few days so that the opening of the Holy Door, the symbol of God's indulgence, will

find us well prepared to receive God's many gifts in our hearts. Let's imitate the devotion and sense of need with which St Josemaría, from his early youth, took refuge in God's love and closeness to his creatures.

Christ's Incarnation and birth shine a great light on the destiny of mankind, summoned to the closest union with God. The institution of the family, in the heart of which our Lord chose to be born, shows us a clear reflexion of the intimate communion of the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity, in the unity of the One True God. St Paul says that it is from God the Father that *every family in heaven and on earth is named*.[2] The Blessed Trinity is the sublime Model of the unity that should reign among men, including in every home. To encourage us and make it easier for us to foster this unity, God chose to open up to us, through the Holy Family in Bethlehem, a specific path

to travel along every day. Don't you find God's tenderness towards his children amazing? He could have revealed himself in a thousand different ways, but he chose the one that shows the tenderness of his Heart most clearly. As the Book of Proverbs says, before creation began, divine Wisdom *was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men.*[3]

The light of Jesus' birth brings with it the strength to dispel the darkness of this world of ours, which is battling in so many ways to get away from God. This light reminds us of the splendour announced by the prophet, which nothing and nobody can darken: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.*[4] This light continues to radiate now in all its goodness, even amidst the

unhappy events occurring in many parts of the world, which we have recently mourned over. It shines on us with the same clear radiance that lit up the night at Bethlehem two thousand years ago. The liturgy of Christmas Night brings it before our eyes in a special way each year, giving us peace and serenity even at the times that may seem darkest. **The presence of the Lord in the midst of his people, preached Pope Francis, cancels the sorrow of defeat and the misery of slavery, and ushers in joy and happiness.**

We too, in this blessed night, have come to the house of God. We have passed through the darkness which envelops the earth, guided by the flame of faith which illuminates our steps, and enlivened by the hope of finding the “great light”. By opening our hearts, we also can contemplate the miracle of that child-sun who,

arising from on high, illuminates the horizon.[5]

My daughters and sons: Christmas, the true feast of happiness, is a pressing invitation to adore God and thank him for his kindness. The thousands of us who are nourished by the spirit of the Work would like, as our Father said in a meditation preached at Christmas, ***to represent all mankind. We are sure that (...) everywhere in the world, including where the Church is being persecuted, there will be sisters and brothers of yours who feel like representatives of all mankind, and who are saying to our Lord, "We know that you have been born today. We come to adore you in the name of everyone: veníte, adorémus, because these words are the Holy Church's response to the shouts of the angels that were heard in the world, breaking the silence of centuries.***[6]

Benedict XVI said ten years ago that on this feast-day, both the liturgy and popular piety resort to symbols that make the meaning of Christmas clearer to us. The lights and decorations evoke the desire for good that dwells in the depths of the human heart: “the light of good that triumphs over evil, the light of love that overcomes hatred, the light of life that defeats death.”[7] And so, “as we look at the streets and squares of the cities decorated with dazzling lights, these lights refer us to another light, invisible to the eyes but not to the heart. While we admire them, while we light the candles in churches or the illuminations of the crib and the Christmas tree in our homes, may our souls be open to the true spiritual light brought to all people of good will. The God-with-us, born in Bethlehem of the Virgin Mary, is the Star of our lives!”[8]

Let us make an effort to ensure that the external Christmas decorations in our homes and many other places are not merely *like fireworks*,[9] but are something that enables us to welcome Jesus more generously. By our behaviour let us help many people to realise what Christmas means, so that we all act like good children of God.

We contemplate our Blessed Lady, with St Joseph, looking after Jesus who has just been born in the poor stable that was their lodging in Bethlehem. The custom of putting up a Crib is a wonderful reminder that the Divine Word has come to dwell among us.[10] “The crib is an expression of our expectation that God is coming close to us, that Jesus comes close to us, but it is also an expression of thanksgiving for the One who decided to share in our human condition, in poverty and simplicity.”[11]

We can't allow this custom to fall into disuse in Christian homes. Let's start by putting one up – at least the main figures – in our own homes, with sincere devotion; and recommending our friends and acquaintances to do the same. Many of us remember our excitement in setting up the Crib when we were small, helped perhaps by our parents and older siblings. Our Founder also enjoyed remembering those times; his childhood was many years in the past when he wrote: ***Christmas devotion. – I don't smile when I see you making cardboard mountains around the crib and placing simple clay figures near the manger. – You have never seemed more a man to me than now, when you seem to be a child.***[12]

In the stable at Bethlehem heaven and earth come together, because that is where the Creator of the world, the Redeemer of all mankind,

was born. From that spot there shines out a radiance for all times, including our own, which is so badly in need of this orientation from God. As we prepare *to celebrate our Lord's coming once again, and as we consider that he is always delighting in the sons of men, let's be filled with hope: Deus prope est, our Lord constantly draws near us, he is at our side all the time.* [13]

I will finish with some words of the Roman Pontiff, inviting us to trust in God with supernatural optimism. Speaking of Christmas, he suggests some questions to us: **How do we welcome the tenderness of God? Do I allow myself to be taken up by God, to be embraced by him, or do I prevent him from drawing close? (...) What is most important is not seeking him, but rather allowing him to seek me, find me and caress me with tenderness. The question**

put to us simply by the Infant's presence is: do I allow God to love me?[14]

As you can well understand, I don't want to end this letter without thanking you again for the prayers with which you accompanied me during my stay in Navarre University Hospital. I felt very much supported by each and every one of you.

Continue to be united to my intentions, which can be summed up as praying for the Church and the Pope, for every single one of you, and for the whole world to obtain the tranquillity and order that Christ, the *Prince of Peace*,[15] has come to bring to earth.

A very affectionate blessing from
your Father

+ Javier

[1] St Josemaría, *Letter* 14 February 1974, no. 2.

[2] *Eph* 3:15.

[3] *Prov* 8:30-31.

[4] *Is* 9:1.

[5] Pope Francis, Homily, 24 December 2014.

[6] St Josemaría, notes from a meditation, 25 December 1968.

[7] Benedict XVI, General audience, 21 December 2005.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] St Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 247.

[10] Cf. *Jn* 1:14.

[11] Benedict XVI, General audience, 22 December 2010.

[12] St Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 557.

[13] St Josemaría, Christmas card,
December 1968.

[14] Pope Francis, Homily, 24
December 2014.

[15] *Is* 9:5.

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