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Letter from the Prelate (March 2015)

Lent is "a time especially propitious for imitating Christ by our generous dedication to the members of his Mystical Body," the Prelate tells us in his letter this month.

03/03/2015

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Rome, 1 March 2015

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

Some days have passed since the beginning of Lent. In addition to reviewing, with gratitude and a desire to learn, Jesus' forty days of fasting and prayer in the desert, and his victorious fight against the evil spirit, the Church proposes that we prepare well to enter into the scenes of Our Lord's Passion, Death and Resurrection in the approaching Easter. For this reason, she invites us to come very close to the Master this liturgical season, as St John Paul II recalled a few years ago:

“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem' (*Mk 10:33*). With these words, the Lord invites the disciples to journey with him on the path that leads from Galilee to the place where he will complete his redemptive mission. This journey to Jerusalem,

which the Evangelists present as the crowning moment of the earthly journey of Jesus, is the model for the Christian who is committed to following the Master on the way of the Cross.

“Christ also invites the men and women of today to 'go up to Jerusalem'. He does so with special force in Lent, which is a favourable time to convert and restore full communion with him by sharing intimately in the mystery of his Death and Resurrection. For believers, therefore, Lent is the appropriate time for a profound re-examination of life.” ^[1]

We know the main practices that the Church recommends during Lent, in order for us to show this desire for conversion: prayer, penance, works of charity. I would like us, at this time, to concentrate especially on the last of these. Pope Francis, in his

message for Lent, refers to the *globalization of indifference*: an evil that has been accentuated in our time and that is directly contrary to God's way of acting. Indeed, the Lord, in his infinite mercy, takes care of each and every one, and he seeks us when we turn away from him; he continues to send the brightness of his light and the power of his grace, so that we may decide to behave always as good children of his. But, the Pope stresses, **when we are healthy and comfortable, we forget about others (something God the Father never does): we are unconcerned with their problems, their sufferings and the injustices they endure...**^[2]—

To overcome this danger, we have to remember that we are in solidarity with each other. And above all, we should reflect on the Communion of Saints, which will encourage us to serve, to concern ourselves – day

after day – with our sisters and our brothers in need of spiritual or material care. In this way, Lent becomes a particularly appropriate time to imitate Christ with generous self-giving to the members of his Mystical Body, thinking how he gives himself to us.

The strength to behave in this way comes from our careful listening to the word of God and receiving the sacraments – Confession, the Eucharist – that are specifically indicated in the commandments of the Church for this time. Consider that, when we receive the Body of Christ in Holy Communion with the necessary dispositions of soul, we will come to look more and more like him, our identification with Jesus will become more perfect, until we become – as our Father used to say – *ipse Christus*, Christ himself. And we will make our own all the needs of the others, without allowing a scab of

selfishness, of focussing on ourselves, to form on our hearts: **whoever is of Christ, belongs to one body, and in him we cannot be indifferent to one another.**^[3] How can we forget St Paul's forthright preaching: *if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.*^[4]

I am keen, very keen, my daughters and sons, that we apply these considerations to our care for the sick: a work of mercy that Jesus Christ rewards in a special way. Let us also pray daily for those who suffer persecution for their religious convictions. Nobody can be a stranger to us! We pray to the Lord to assist them with his grace and grant them strength. And as charity is ordered, it has to come first to those who are nearest to us, members of our supernatural or human families, friends and neighbours, colleagues at work: all those with whom we are

linked by special bonds of fraternity, in the different situations we encounter.

The suggestions I copy down here are very clear: **Do we have the experience of being part of one body? A body which receives and shares what God wishes to give? A body which acknowledges and cares for its weakest, poorest and most insignificant members? Or do we take refuge in a universal love that would embrace the whole world, while failing to see the Lazarus sitting before our closed doors (*Lk 16:19–31*)?**^[5]

I would like to take the opportunity of these lines to thank again my daughters and sons, and many others who care for the sick and elderly people, for their generous dedication to this work: how God smiles on them! I am not unaware that sometimes this task can mean real

tiredness. But then let us turn our eyes to a truth that is very clear in the light of faith: to serve those who cannot fend for themselves, both in the home and elsewhere, takes us straight into the merciful Heart of Christ. Let us take great pains to devote our best services to them, never haggling over the personal sacrifice involved. I often read how St Josemaría went joyfully – it was also a need in order to carry out Opus Dei! – to visit the sick, to be with them. He drew strength from those moments to fulfil what God was asking of him.

In the Work we can count on a wide experience of these works of mercy: not in vain – I repeat – did Opus Dei come to birth and develop among the poor and the sick. It is very significant for our path that on 19th March 1975, a few months before his passage to Heaven – forty years ago now – our Father would vividly

remember those beginnings during a family gathering. I invite you to go over his words again.

I went to seek strength in the poorest neighbourhoods of Madrid. Hours and hours everywhere there, every day, walking from one place to another, among the shamefaced poor and the miserably poor, those who had nothing at all; among children with runny noses, dirty – but children, which means souls pleasing to God (...). And how good it was, what joy! I spent many hours in that work, but now I regret they weren't more. And in the hospitals, and in the houses where the sick lay, if you could call those hovels houses... They were abandoned and sick; some with a disease that was then incurable, tuberculosis (...).

Those were intense years, in which Opus Dei was growing on the inside without realizing it. But I wanted to tell you – some day they will tell you in more detail, with documents and papers – that the human strength of the Work was the sick of the hospitals of Madrid: the most wretched; those abandoned in their homes, with every last human hope gone; the most ignorant people in those terrible slums.^[6]

To the sick, I encourage them to be docile and let themselves be looked after; to be grateful for the human and Christian love that Jesus Christ himself shows them through those taking care of them. How many people, even among those who do not possess the treasure of faith, are moved by these signs of true Christian and human love, and eventually discover the face of Jesus

in the sick or in those who sacrifice themselves for them!

We are also happy at the approaching solemnities of St Joseph and the Annunciation of Our Lady. They take on a special relevance in this Marian year dedicated to the family, for they place before our eyes the atmosphere of the home of Nazareth. There was made present God's great mercy to humanity, the love of the Trinity, through the Incarnation of the Word in the most pure womb of Mary. There Jesus spent long years, surrounded all the time by the love and vigilance of his Mother and St Joseph. There the holy Patriarch worked, with human and supernatural perfection. These are very good reasons to entrust the holiness of Christian homes to them and implore their protection over all the families of the earth.

In his recent catechesis, the Pope has been underlining the important roles of mother and father within the family: **Mothers**, he said in one of these occasions, **are the strongest antidote to the spread of self-centred individualism.**^[7] The same holds true for fathers, who also play an essential role. Each family requires the presence of a father, but unfortunately **today one has reached the point of claiming that our society is a “society without fathers”.** (...) **Particularly in Western culture, the father figure would be symbolically absent, faded, removed.**^[8] This attitude is a very serious mistake, for both father and mother are absolutely essential for the harmonious development of children in all facets. Is our prayer for the family – this vital cell of the Church and civil society – intense and generous? Do we pray that each home may be an extension of the one in Nazareth where the Son of God

dwelt? How do we show our gratitude for the generous and joyful devotion of so many parents? Do we remember to pray for the happiness of married couples to whom God does not give children, that they may love the Will of Heaven, and also give an example of service to all humanity?

In any case, whether the children that God grants are many, few or none, all Christian homes must spread the joy of knowing themselves to be the *domestic church*. For this reason I pick out these teachings of St Josemaría, when he said that we must receive the children ***always with joy and gratitude, because they are a gift and a blessing from God and a proof of his trust.***^[9] He added: ***Do not doubt that the decline in the number of children in Christian families will result in a decrease in the number of priestly vocations***

and of souls who want to spend a lifetime in the service of Jesus Christ. I have seen a number of marriages where, though God has given only one child, they have been generous enough to offer it to God. But there are not many who do that. In large families it is easier to understand the greatness of divine vocation and, among their children, they have some for each state and each path.^[10]

Spouses do not always have offspring. In these cases, they should not think of themselves as failures, because they are not: it is another way – also divine – that the Lord has of blessing conjugal love. *Large families*, our Father stated, *give me much joy. But when I find a marriage without children, because God has not granted them, I am also filled with joy: not only can they sanctify their home just the same, but they also have*

more time to devote to others' children, and there are many who do so with a touching dedication. I am proud to be able to say that I have never smothered a noble earthly love; on the contrary, I have encouraged it, because it must be – each day more – a divine path.^[11] Let us thank God for the joyful faithfulness of these spouses.

On the feast of St Joseph, let us all go to the holy Patriarch, asking him to fill our whole existence, day by day, with loyalty to God, just as this just man did, responding to all God's requests. And before finishing, I wish to recall that 28th March is the ninetieth anniversary of our Father's priestly ordination. Call on him especially with pious and constant prayer for the Church and the Pope; for priestly and religious vocations; for vocations—which are also divine—to a total commitment in the midst of the world, in apostolic celibacy or

marriage; for the loyalty of all Christians. Direct your prayers, with faith and trust, to the Blessed Virgin and St Joseph, so we may know how to walk through the world as contemplatives. And keep on praying for all my intentions.

I am very pleased to tell you that, before beginning my retreat, I went to pray at Loreto, with all of you and with our Father. I was able to accompany him there on several occasions and to see the way he knew how to love our Mother and to leave in her hands the lives of his daughters and sons, and his own – the whole Work! – in order to serve the Holy Church more and better.

A very affectionate blessing from
your Father

X Javier

[1] St John Paul II, Message for Lent, 7 January 2001.

[2] Pope Francis, Message for Lent 2015, 4 October 2014.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] 1 *Cor* 12:26.

[5] Pope Francis, Message for Lent 2015, 4 October 2014.

[6] St Josemaría, notes from a family gathering, 19 March 1975.

[7] Pope Francis, General audience, 7 January 2015.

[8] Pope Francis, General audience, 28 January 2015.

[9] St Josemaría, *Letter 9 January 1959*, no. 54.

[10] *Ibid.*, no. 55.

[11] St Josemaría, notes from a family gathering, 10 April 1969.

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