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Letter from the Prelate (May 2009)

Bishop Javier Echevarría asks us during these weeks to "contemplate our Lady, the Mother of Jesus and our Mother, taken up in body and soul to heaven...in the joy and the glory of the Resurrection."

05/06/2009

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

This month of May falls entirely within Easter time. The joy of Christ's

Resurrection imbues the life of the Church, both on earth and in heaven. It is the *gaudium cum pace*, the joy and peace, that all of us have in our heart.

During these weeks we will contemplate our Lady, the Mother of Jesus and our Mother, taken up in body and soul to heaven. We will see her "in the joy and the glory of the Resurrection. The tears shed at the foot of the Cross have been transformed into a smile which nothing can wipe away, even as her maternal compassion towards us remains unchanged. The intervention of the Virgin Mary in offering succor throughout history testifies to this, and does not cease to call forth, in the people of God, an unshakable confidence in her: the *Memorare* prayer expresses this sentiment very well. Mary loves each of her children, giving particular attention to those who, like her Son

at the hour of his Passion, are prey to suffering; she loves them quite simply because they are her children, according to the will of Christ on the Cross."[1]

Let us meditate on these words of the Pope in order to go more deeply into the reasons for our devotion to our Lady and to give it new luster. The reasons are clear: Mary is the Mother of God and our Mother. Therefore we need to cultivate an ardent and tender Marian devotion, solidly based on the divine Revelation set forth by the Church's Magisterium. Our beloved Don Alvaro recalled this in a letter that he wrote in 1987. Mary's maternal mission, he told us, stems from a specific divine plan: "It is an undeniable fact that wherever the Church has taken root, through the grace of Christ and the tenacious and sacrificing effort of the evangelizers, the Mother of the Church is also present . . . As a result,

gratitude to Mary is born and develops, and the fruitful plant of Marian devotion rises up. Giving clear testimony to this devotion are the churches and shrines that, like the bright trail of a comet, cover the landscape of the countries where the faith has taken root, infusing into the lives of Christians a home dimension that only the Most Holy Virgin can bring about."[2]

What a great truth this is! We Christians form a family, the Holy Church, in which Jesus Christ is the first-born among many brethren,[3] and which has a Mother, Mary Most Holy. Jesus shows us the path we have to travel to reach holiness, full identification with him. And our Lady encourages us along the way, so that we can reach the goal: eternal life with God and with all the angels and saints.

Christian art expresses this graphically when it presents, for the veneration of the faithful, the image of Mary with the Child Jesus in her arms. By her attitude, by her gaze, our Mother seems to be telling us: look at my Son, your elder Brother, and follow his example in everything. Walk where he walked; foster in your heart the same redemptive longings that filled his heart; have compassion on your brothers and sisters as he had compassion on everyone.

In the coming days, many thousands of people will make pilgrimages to a great variety of places where our Lady is venerated, with the desire to encounter Jesus once again, to become more like him, following the invitation of St. Josemaría to his daughters and sons in Opus Dei and to so many other people. The "May pilgrimage" is now a joyful reality all over the world, which we do without

noise, following the footsteps of our Founder in his first pilgrimage, back in 1935. "I respect and love public demonstrations of devotion," he wrote in a homily, but "I must admit I prefer to offer Mary the same affection, the same enthusiasm, in private visits or with very few people—a more intimate sort of thing." [4]

Often this pilgrimage will have as its goal a site close to where we live, perhaps in the same city or nearby. In some cases—for example, for those who are the sick or disabled—it won't even be possible to leave home. But even then one can carry out a May pilgrimage of our Lady. The important thing is not the physical movement from one place to another, but the interior journey of the soul, which spurs us to draw closer to Mary, and therefore closer to Jesus.

Pope John Paul II emphasized that, in the Marian sites spread all over the world, one can sense a special presence of our Mother. These sites, countless in number, are found in a great variety of forms: from small oratories in homes and niches along the streets, where an image of the Mother of God shines brightly, to the chapels and churches constructed in her honor. Nevertheless, there come to mind certain sites where people sense our Mother's presence in an especially vivid way: the Marian shrines and sanctuaries. "In all these places, the special legacy of the Crucified Lord is made a marvelous reality. There one surrenders and entrusts oneself to Mary; we go there to be with her as with our Mother. We open our heart to her and speak to her about everything; we 'take her into our home,' that is, we bring her into all our problems." [5]

The faithful go there to visit Mary with the desire to find or strengthen "their faith and to nourish it. They seek the sacraments of the Church, particularly reconciliation with God and Eucharistic nourishment. And they set off again strengthened, grateful to our Lady, Mother of God and our Mother." [6]

We all treasure this experience. Who has not experienced a greater closeness to God, after having visited our Lady with the spirit of prayer and penance that our Father taught us. Who has not tangibly felt the effectiveness of recourse to Mary, to revive the faith of a person who needs it, to help them get closer to God, to open up broader horizons for someone who is putting up resistance to God's call to a generous dedication? Jesus wants his grace to reach us through Mary. Therefore "it is not a trifling matter to stop visiting the shrines built for her by her

children's love, nor to pass by her image without greeting her affectionately. It is not a trifling matter to let time go by without singing the loving serenade of the Holy Rosary, a song of faith, the nuptial song of a soul that finds Jesus through Mary." [7] Let us each ask ourselves: How can I improve in my glances at images of our Mother? How can I better savor each Hail Mary, the Hail Holy Queen, the *Regina Caeli*? To whom can I speak about Mary's love and about love for Mary?

These and other Marian devotions can help adorn the month of May. The essential thing is to draw ever closer to Jesus, through the path that his Blessed Mother points out to us. Every encounter with our Lady becomes an invitation to *look at Christ*. As Benedict XVI said at a Marian shrine: "For one who is searching, this summons repeatedly

turns into a spontaneous plea, a plea addressed especially to Mary, who has given us Christ as her Son: 'Show us Jesus!' Let us make this prayer today with our whole heart; let us make this prayer above and beyond the present moment, as we inwardly seek the Face of the Redeemer. 'Show us Jesus!' Mary responds, showing him to us in the first instance as a child. God has made himself small for us." [8]

Let us consider once more some words that St. Josemaría wrote back in the 1930's, words that have helped thousands of people to set out on the paths of contemplation in ordinary life: "if you want to be great, become little...The beginning of the way, at the end of which you will find yourself completely carried away with love for Jesus, is a trusting love for Mary.

"Do you want to love our Lady? — Well, get to know her. How? — By praying her Rosary well."[9]

Attentively considering and praying the mysteries of the Rosary sets before our eyes the key moments in the life of Jesus and of Mary. Thus it becomes easier to walk securely on the path that leads to heaven. We will rectify our course if necessary, and show those accompanying us the sure "short cut" to eternal happiness. As we contemplate those scenes, we come to understand "how through the assent of the humble handmaid of the Lord, mankind begins its return to God and sees in the glory of the all-holy Virgin the goal towards which it is journeying."[10]

We can also put care into other small signs of affection for our Lady. I highlight once again a practice proper to persons in love, which St. Josemaría spread everywhere: greeting affectionately the images of

our Lady that we see every day—on a street or in a square, inside a church, in a room at home.... And we can accompany our glance with an aspiration as a very personal expression of our filial love. Our Father always did this, putting special effort into greeting the images of our Lady where he lived or worked. This was an expression of his filial affection, and reflected what he had deep in his soul: sorrowful glances, or thankful or beseeching ones, depending on the circumstances, but always expressions of true love.

He also used to advise people to carry a picture of our Lady in their wallet or purse (as one carries photographs of loved ones) in order to have her always very present, and direct affectionate compliments to her. He felt great joy at having helped to fill the world with pictures of our Lady. "In Opus Dei," he said,

"we have constantly shown our love for our Lady by placing millions of her images throughout the world, fostering practices of Marian piety on all the continents: in Europe, in Asia, in Africa, in North and South America, in Oceania; bringing young people along this path, freely. Without freedom, no.

"But this is only natural. How could we not love the Mother of God, who is our Mother? Besides, we need her. I need her! Like a small child who, when he is afraid of the dark at night, calls out: Mama! I have to cry out often with my heart, without the sound of words: Mother! Mama, don't abandon me.

"The interior life is like this: naturalness, simplicity. I can't live in any other way. I have to live like a man. And before God, who is eternal, I am a tiny child who is worth nothing."[11] The Liturgy applies

some words from a psalm to our Lady. "The psalmist, seeing from afar this maternal bond which unites the Mother of Christ with the people of faith, prophesies regarding the Virgin Mary that "the richest of the people ... will seek your smile" (*Ps* 44:13). In this way, prompted by the inspired word of Scripture, Christians have always sought the smile of our Lady, this smile which medieval artists were able to represent and show with such marvelous skill. This smile of Mary is for all men and women," says Benedict XVI, "but it is directed quite particularly to those who suffer, so that they can find comfort and solace therein. To seek Mary's smile is not an act of devotional or outmoded sentimentality, but rather the proper expression of the living and profoundly human relationship which binds us to her whom Christ gave us as our Mother." [12]

Let us entrust to our Lady all those who are suffering, in soul or in body: the sick, those who feel lonely or abandoned, those who have been victims of natural calamities, those who are undergoing persecution and violence of any kind... No one should remain outside of our prayer.

Let us pray especially (I remind you of this every month, because it is an ever-present need) for the Pope and his intentions, and now for the fruit of his trip to the Holy Land from the 8th to the 15th of this month. Let us also pray for the faithful of the Prelature who will receive priestly ordination on the 23rd, eve of the Solemnity of the Ascension, which in many countries is celebrated on Sunday the 24th. Let us ask the Holy Spirit, on the upcoming feast of Pentecost, the last day in May, to pour forth his gifts abundantly on the Church and on the world, and to

prepare the hearts of everyone to receive them.

A few days ago I returned from a trip to Japan and Taiwan, where I was able to see once again how the spirit of Opus Dei is taking root in people of all races and cultures. In both countries, besides knowing myself accompanied by all of you, and praying with all of you, I had two very special reasons for joy, among many others. In Nagasaki, I had a chance to visit Oura, the shrine where the martyrs of that country are venerated and the loving memory of those who conserved the faith despite harsh persecution is kept alive. And then in Taipei, I was present for the Exposition and Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament in a church filled with faithful. (We had just gone into a church with a pilgrim image of our Lady and we found ourselves in that Eucharistic act.) In both places, there

forcefully came to mind the thought that we have to bring Jesus, with Mary, to the furthest corner of the globe. Join me in giving thanks to the Most Blessed Trinity, source of all good, and to our Mother, the Blessed Virgin, through whose mediation we receive every grace. And also to St. Josemaría (the 17th is the anniversary of his beatification) for having been a very faithful instrument of God for the carrying out of such an abundant sowing of holiness, doctrine and charity throughout the world.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father,

+ Javier

Rome, May 1, 2009

1. Benedict XVI, *Homily at the Shrine of Lourdes*, September 15, 2008.

2. Don Alvaro, *Letter*, May 31, 1987, no. 8.

3. Cf. *Rom* 8:29.

4. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 139.

5. John Paul II, *Homily at the Shrine of Fatima*, May 13, 1982.

6. John Paul II, *Homily at the Shrine of Aparecida*, July 4, 1980.

7. St. Josemaría, "Our Lady of the Pillar," in *Libro de Aragon*, Saragossa, 1976.

8. Benedict XVI, *Homily at the Shrine of Marizell*, September 8, 2007.

9. St. Josemaría, *Holy Rosary*, Prologue.

10. Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, February 2, 1974, no. 28.

11. St. Josemaría, *Notes taken during a get-together*, April 7, 1974.

12. Benedict XVI, *Homily at the Shrine of Lourdes*, September 15, 2008.

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