

Letter from the Prelate (November 2008)

Bishop Echevarría's letter this month is focused on specific ways we can love and serve the Church.

11/06/2008

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

A few days ago the Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops ended. There I was happy to experience, once again, the Church's

unity and universality. I was also moved by the trust shown in the work of Opus Dei by many Fathers from very diverse countries. A large number gave thanks for the apostolic service that the faithful and Cooperators of the Work are carrying out in their dioceses, and others urged me to begin stable apostolic work, as soon as possible, in their countries or regions. I thought often about those dreams of our Father, when he reminded us that people were awaiting us in many places, while he prayed for that future work.

Seeing these manifestations of interest and affection, and faced with so many urgent calls, there came to my mind with more insistence those words: "Jesus, souls! Apostolic souls! They are for you, for your glory." [1] Let us echo each day this cry that our Father wants our hearts to resound with, while he helps us from heaven.

Feeling closely united to the needs of the Church in every continent is, and always will be, something very appropriate for Christians. This deep attitude of heart is especially relevant today, the feast of All Saints. The solemnity that we are celebrating not only invites us to recall the immense multitude of blessed souls; it also brings an invitation to go deeper into the mystery of the Church, of which we who are still pilgrims on earth form part, along with those who are being purified in Purgatory and those who already enjoy God in heaven.

I can never forget the great joy with which St. Josemaría expressed this truth. "In the Church," he wrote, "we Catholics find our faith, our norms of conduct, our prayer, our sense of fraternity. Through it we are united with all our brothers who have already left this life and are being cleansed in Purgatory—the Church

suffering—and with those who already enjoy the beatific vision and love forever the thrice holy God—the Church triumphant. The Church is in our midst and at the same time transcends history. It was born under the mantle of our Lady and continues to praise her on earth and in heaven as its mother."²

One of St. Paul's key teachings was focused precisely on the nature of the Church: he spoke about our Lord's disciples, called together by God the Father and united by the Holy Spirit to form Christ's Mystical Body. Benedict XVI has emphasized this several times in this year dedicated to the Apostle to the Gentiles. In the context of some of his teachings, I invite you to meditate on these truths during the coming weeks. As a fruit of that consideration, I am sure God will increase in each of us love for our Mother the Church and the desire to

serve her as the Church wants to be served, in whatever situation we may we find ourselves.

The Pope encourages us to reflect on the fact that St. Paul's "initial contact with the Person of Jesus happened through the witness of the Christian community of Jerusalem...History shows us that one usually reaches Jesus by passing through the Church."^[3] The Holy Father said that sometimes, as happened with Saul, the first contact with the Church (a reality both spiritual and visible at the same time) might be "a turbulent contact. Having met the new group of believers, he immediately became a fierce persecutor of it. He acknowledged this himself at least three times in as many of his Letters."^[4] Normally there is no need for this to happen, especially if we Christians try to faithfully reflect Jesus in our words and behavior. On the road to Damascus, St. Paul

understood that "in persecuting the Church, he was persecuting Christ. Paul, therefore, was at the same time converted to Christ and to the Church. This leads us to understand," concludes Benedict XVI, "why the Church later became so present in Paul's thoughts, heart and activity."^[5]

Let us meditate once more on the words of the risen Christ. To the question of Saul, *who are you Lord?*, our Lord answers: *I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*^[6] "This exclamation of the Risen Lord, which transformed Saul's life, already contains in summary the entire doctrine on the Church as the Body of Christ. Christ did not withdraw himself into heaven, leaving ranks of followers to carry out 'his cause' on earth. The Church is not an association that desires to promote a specific cause. In her there is no question of a cause. In her it is a

matter of the person of Jesus Christ, who, also as the Risen One, remained 'flesh.' He has 'flesh and bones' (*Lk 24: 39*), as the Risen Christ says, in Luke's Gospel, to the disciples who thought he was a ghost. He has a Body. He is personally present in his Church."⁷

In the light of these considerations, let us go more deeply into the reality that any offense to the Church—to its doctrine, to its sacraments and institutions, to its Pastors, especially to its visible Head, the Roman Pontiff—constitutes an insult directed to Jesus Christ himself. For the Church that we contemplate on earth, despite the weaknesses and mistakes that we who are its members carry with us, is always the *Church of God*, as St. Paul repeated so many times: the People that God the Father has convoked to stand in his presence; the Body of Christ, which Jesus Christ founded at the price of his blood, to

extend his presence in history until the end of time; the Temple of the Holy Spirit, which has been raised as the true dwelling place of God among men. In the words of a Father of the Church, which the Second Vatican Council took up, "the Church has been seen as 'a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.'" "[8]

The Unity and Trinity of God is what determines the ultimate reality and intimate nature of the Church. Therefore "it would be a serious mistake to attempt to separate the charismatic Church, supposedly the sole follower of Christ's spirit, from the juridical or institutional Church, the handiwork of men, subject to historical vicissitudes. There is only one Church. Christ founded only one Church which is visible and invisible. It has a hierarchical and organized body and a fundamental structure by divine law, with an intimate

supernatural life that animates, sustains and vivifies it."^[9] The sublime vision of the Church that St. Paul sets forth in his epistles explains the strength with which he reacts when its unity or universality are threatened. To the Christians at Corinth, who were eager to divide up into opposing factions, he wrote forcefully: *it has been reported to me... that there is quarreling among you, my brethren. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*^[10] Defending the unity of this holy Mother is a dominant passion in the life of the Apostle, while also defending the Church's universality. "From the first moment," the Pope teaches," he understood that this is a reality that did not concern only the Jews or a certain group of men, but

one that had a universal value and concerned everyone, because God is the God of everyone."^[11] And thus, in the face of the danger that the early Christian community might find itself enclosed within the limits of the Synagogue, the so-called Council of Jerusalem declared that all men and women, of whatever race, language and nation, are called to a full incorporation into the Church of Christ,^[12] in which *there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*^[13] From the fact that the Church belongs to Christ stems "our duty to truly live in conformity with Christ. Paul's exhortations concerning the various charisms that give life and structure to the Christian community also derive from this. They can all be traced back to a single source, that is, the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, knowing well that in the Church there is no

one who goes without them, for, as the Apostle wrote, *to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Cor 12: 7).*"[14] Do you put real piety into your petition *pro unitate apostolatus*? How do you pray for all those who are spending their lives for the Church? Do your prayers reach out to the furthest place where people are working for Christ?

How much thanks we should give to God for having wanted the Church to be both one and yet so varied! And how much respect we should show for all the manifestations with which the Holy Spirit has wanted to adorn the Spouse of Christ! "In the Church there is a diversity of ministries, but there is only one aim: the sanctification of men. And in this task all Christians participate in some way, through the character imprinted by the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. We must

all feel responsible for the mission of the Church, which is the mission of Christ."^[15] No one is superfluous in the Church: we are all needed. The important thing is to be in communion with its visible Head, with the Pastors and with the whole People of God, each in accord with the call and grace he or she has received.

Within the framework of St. Paul's ecclesiological teachings, the theological and canonical reality of the Work, which is a small part of the Church, is clearly seen. I would like to reflect on this reality now that we are about to end the special Marian year that I convoked to commemorate the silver anniversary of the date when the Prelature was erected by the Pope. The apostolic work of Opus Dei, of its lay faithful and priests, is necessarily a collaboration in the pastoral efforts

of the particular Churches in which the Prelature lives and acts.

As the Servant of God, Pope John Paul II, reminded us with immense affection when speaking about the "hierarchical nature" of Opus Dei: "The membership of the lay faithful in their own particular Churches and in the Prelature, into which they are incorporated, enables the special mission of the Prelature to converge with the evangelizing efforts of each particular Church, as envisaged by the Second Vatican Council in desiring the figure of personal prelates." [16]

This is one more sign of something that Benedict XVI emphasized recently: "'The Church of God' is not only a collection of various local Churches, but these various local Churches in turn make up the one Church of God. All together they are 'the Church of God,' which precedes

the individual local Churches and is expressed or brought into being in them."^[17] And Opus Dei, at the service of the Church, the Roman Pontiff, and all souls, fulfills that aim as one of the institutions the Roman Pontiff can establish to carry out specific pastoral tasks that "belong *as such* to the universal Church, though their members are also members of the particular Churches where they live and work...It does not erode the unity of the particular Church founded on the Bishop; rather, it helps endow this unity with the interior diversification which is a feature of *communion*."^[18]

In this regard, I am happy to tell you that stable apostolic work has already begun in Indonesia; and that, God willing, the moment for opening the first Center in Bucharest is very close. We are also preparing to begin stable work in Bulgaria and in Korea. To your prayer and that of all who

take part in the Work's activities, I entrust the apostolic expansion to these places and to so many others.

Following in our Father's footsteps, I have gone to pray before the image of the Miraculous Medal in the Rue du Bac, in Paris. There I presented your prayers to our Lady, asking that she help us to carry out the great miracle of converting ordinary life into heroic sanctity. Let us spend these last few days of the Marian year, and all the days of our life, holding tightly to our Lady's hand, fulfilling the indication that she gave to the servants at Cana: *do whatever he tells you.*[19] Let us try to imitate those servants, with the eagerness—in each and every one of us—to respond *usque ad summum*, totally, with our prayer and work.

I can't end without asking you, once more, to unite yourselves to my intentions, especially at Holy Mass.

During these days, pray for your brothers upon whom I will confer the diaconate in Rome on the upcoming 22nd of November, eve of the Solemnity of Christ the King.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father,

+ Javier

Rome, November 1, 2008

1. St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 804.
2. St. Josemaría, Homily "The Supernatural Aim of the Church," in *In Love with the Church*, no. 18.
3. Pope Benedict XVI, *Address at a general audience*, November 22, 2006.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Acts* 9:5.

7. Pope Benedict XVI, *Homily Inaugurating the Pauline Year*, June 28, 2008.

8. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 4; cf. St. Cyprian, *Treatise on the Our Father*, 23.

9. St. Josemaría, Homily "The Supernatural Aim of the Church," in *In Love with the Church*, no. 22.

10. *1 Cor 1:11-13.*

11. Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, October 25, 2006.

12. Cf. *Acts 15:23-29.*

13. *Gal 3:28.*

14. Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, November 22, 2006.

15. St. Josemaría, Homily "Loyalty to the Church," in *In Love with the Church*, no. 15.

16. Pope John Paul II, Speech to participants in a conference on the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, March 17, 2001.

17. Benedict XVI, *Address at a general audience*, October 15, 2008.

18. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Letter *Communionis Notio*, May 28, 1992, no. 16.

19. *Jn 2:5.*