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Letter from the Prelate of Opus Dei on the Family

At the start of 2006, Bishop Javier Echevarría wrote a letter to the faithful of Opus Dei and its cooperators. We include here the paragraphs that stress the need to strengthen the institution of the family.

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During this time of Christmas, the Holy Family occupies the center of our thoughts in a special way.

Therefore, it is only natural that, on contemplating the "trinity on earth," there arises in our heart, together with gratitude and adoration, the petition that everywhere the true nature and dignity of the institution of the family be respected and defended, and that especially Christian families be a reflection of the home at Nazareth. As we read in the prayer the liturgy placed on our lips this past December 30, the feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph: *Father, help us to live as the Holy Family, united in respect and love. Bring us to the joy and peace of your eternal home* (Roman Missal, Feast of the Holy Family, Entrance Antiphon).

In his last public statement on this subject, near the end of his life, the Holy Father John Paul II recalled that "by contemplating the mystery of God who becomes man and is welcomed into a human family, we

can fully understand the value and beauty of the family." And the Pope continued: "not only is the family at the heart of Christian life; it is also the foundation of social and civic life, and thus constitutes a central chapter in Christian social teaching" (John Paul II, Address to participants in the Assembly of the Forum of Family Associations, December 18, 2004).

Benedict XVI also stresses the importance of understanding in depth the meaning of marriage and the family in the divine plan, in order to confront those who insist on reducing them to merely human constructions, and therefore susceptible to arbitrary reforms over the course of time. "Marriage and the family," the Pope points out, "are not in fact a chance sociological construction, the product of particular historical and financial situations. On the contrary, the

question of the right relationship between man and woman is rooted in the essential core of the human being, and it is only by starting from here that the answer can be found. In other words, it cannot be separated from the ancient but ever new human question: Who am I? What is a human being? And this question, in turn, cannot be separated from the question about God: Does God exist? Who is God? What is his face truly like?" (Benedict XVI, Address to participants in the Ecclesial Diocesan Convention of Rome, June 6, 2005).

In bringing up these questions, the Pope recalled some fundamental principles of Sacred Scripture, among them that "the human being is created in the image of God, and God himself is love. It is therefore the vocation to love that makes the human person an authentic image of God: man and woman come to

resemble God to the extent that they become loving people" (Ibid). And love, as you well know, is what is most opposed to selfishness.

St. Josemaría stressed that "our faith does not ignore anything on this earth that is beautiful, noble and authentically human. It simply teaches us that the rule of our life should not be the selfish pursuit of pleasure, because only sacrifice and self-denial lead to true love. God truly loves us; and now he invites us to love him and others with the truthfulness and authenticity with which he loves" (St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 24). Only with this conviction, brought day after day to one's personal conduct, to one's own home, to one's workplace, etc., can we effectively refute, with the help of grace, erroneous ideas and help those who hold them to return to God.

One of the immediate consequences of man's original vocation to love is centered on the fact that no one belongs exclusively to himself. We are all closely linked by the bonds of the same origin and end, founded on God. We are all called to take up our personal responsibility for the good of society, each according to the circumstances of his or her own situation. In the case of the family and marriage, it is clear that the laws regulating these institutions--both those of the Church and those of any society that properly seeks the common good--are not just a form imposed from without. Rather they are "an intrinsic requirement of the covenant of conjugal love and of the depths of the human person. Today, the various forms of the erosion of marriage, such as free unions and 'trial marriage,' and even pseudo-marriages between people of the same sex, are instead an expression of anarchic freedom that are

wrongly made to pass as true human liberation. This pseudo-freedom is based on a trivialization of the body, which inevitably entails the trivialization of the person. Its premise is that the human being can do to himself or herself whatever he or she likes: thus, the body becomes a secondary thing that can be manipulated, from the human point of view, and used as one likes. Licentiousness, which passes for the discovery of the body and its value, is actually a dualism that makes the body despicable, placing it, so to speak, outside the person's authentic being and dignity" (Benedict XVI, Address to participants in the Ecclesial Diocesan Convention of Rome, June 6, 2005).

As responsible citizens and Christians, we have to do everything possible to defend and promote the values that can never be renounced in this area so fundamental for the

life of the Church and, let us not forget, of civil society. This is one of the most urgent tasks of the new evangelization. The obligation of spreading true doctrine about marriage and the family is everyone's responsibility. The feasts during these days place this graphically before our eyes and urge us not to fall asleep, and to awaken many others from the bad drowsiness that at times overcomes them.

I don't want to end without a special mention of large families, for whom our Father had such great esteem. His long experience led him to tell us: "I have seen a number of couples who, when our Lord does not give them more than one child, have the generosity to give their child to God. But there are not many who do so. In large families it is easier to understand the greatness of a divine vocation and, among their children,

some are found for all the different states. But I have also seen, and not just a few times, and given thanks to God that others, to whom our Lord has not given a family, even though they are exemplary spouses, know how to accept with joy God's holy will and dedicate more time to exercising charity towards their neighbor" (St. Josemaría, notes taken from his preaching published in *Obras*, October, 1963, pp. 20-21).

Just as our Father, all my affection, like yours, also goes out to married couples to whom God does not grant children. I have often seen our Founder's words fulfilled to the letter: that these families "not only sanctify their own home, but also have more time to dedicate to the children of others, and there are many who do so with a self-sacrifice that is deeply moving (St. Josemaría, notes taken during a get-together, April 10, 1969), carrying out a very

fruitful paternity and maternity. I am consoled by the thought that many faithful have come to the Work as a result of the generous action of these "fathers and mothers."

Recently, Pope Benedict XVI has said that "in the present social context, large families constitute a witness to faith, to courage, and to optimism, because without children there is no future." And he added: "Would that new and adequate social initiatives be promoted to protect and support big families, which constitute a treasure and a hope for the whole country" (Benedict XVI, words at the end of his audience on November 2, 2005). May these words of the Holy Father strongly encourage us to continue making the effort to ensure that everywhere families are helped to fulfill their mission, both supernatural and human, which is indispensable for the future of society.

Let us return to contemplating the mystery of the Nativity, which somehow is repeated every day because Jesus comes daily to our altars and is born and reborn daily in our souls through grace. Let us not cease to go frequently to "Bethlehem ever-present in the tabernacle" (St. Josemaría, January 1939; cited in *The Way*, critical-historical edition prepared by Pedro Rodríguez, Rialp, Madrid, 2004, third edition, p. 1051), to ask Him for light and to learn from Him.

As I pointed out earlier, all of us are involved in this task, first by our generous prayer and, whenever opportune, by our prudent advice. Our Lord, who in Cana of Galilee made use of the docility of the servants to turn water into wine, wants also now to make use of Catholics, of ourselves, to renew his wonders, so that many people will believe in Him (cf. *Jn* 2: 6-11).

+ Javier Echevarría

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