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The Holy Mass, Centre and Root of the Interior Life

Letter from Blessed Alvaro del Portillo sent to members of Opus Dei on 1 April 1986, Easter Tuesday, on the Holy Mass.

17/05/2021

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

Guided by the Church's liturgy in Holy Week, we have once again relived the last days of our Lord's life

on earth: his Passion and Death, and his glorious Resurrection. We have relived the evening of Maundy Thursday, when Jesus Christ, not satisfied with suffering and dying to save us, wanted to institute this wonder of his love, the Holy Eucharist. With the help of our Father, who taught us to go deeply into this Mystery of Love, we have been considering what Jesus felt when, having to return to heaven and at the same time wanting to remain on earth, he brought about this inexpressible mystery. From then on and until the end of time he remains in the Eucharist, for your sake and mine, and out of love for you and me; for in the Holy Eucharist *we are nourished with Christ, the memorial of the Passion of our Lord is carried out, the soul is filled with grace, and we are given a pledge of eternal glory.* [1]

In writing these lines, I propose to dwell on an essential aspect of the Eucharistic Mystery: the unbloody renewal of the Sacrifice of Calvary, which takes place every day on our altars, and will do so, until the end of time, in fulfilment of Christ's command: *Do this in memory of me.* [2] I would like you to apply to your life these words, this divine command – which our Lord gave directly and principally to the Apostles and to their successors in the ministerial priesthood – because all of us, through Baptism and Confirmation, share in one way or another in the priesthood of Christ and all of us have a *priestly soul*.

The Mass. Let us never get used to celebrating or participating in the Holy Sacrifice! A person who has faith recognises in the Sacrifice of the Altar the most extraordinary wonder ever to be worked in this world of ours. To attend Mass – for priests, to

celebrate it – means in effect to detach ourselves from the perishable bonds of time and place, which are proper to our human nature, in order to situate ourselves at the summit of Golgotha, beside the Cross where Jesus is dying for our sins, and share actively in his redemptive Sacrifice. How would we have behaved, if we had received the grace of accompanying Christ in those bitter hours, beside our Blessed Lady, St John and the holy women, knowing that the liberation of the human race, the redemption of our souls and bodies, was being accomplished? Doubtless we would have sought intense, immediate union with our Redeemer, in the adoration, thanksgiving, reparation and petition which Jesus Christ was presenting for us to God the Father during those moments.

Well then, that is how our Mass has to be, every day: meditate well on

this. Because in the Sacrifice of the Altar it is Christ our Lord himself who, having died and risen and ascended into heaven, continues immolating himself to God, now through the priest, and applies to us the infinite merits he won for us on the Cross. "God's love for his creatures is so boundless," wrote St Josemaria, "and our response to it should be so great that time ought to stand still when the Holy Mass is being said." [3] Let us ask the Blessed Trinity to forgive us our past negligence and, having recourse to the intercession of our holy founder and following his example, let us make a resolution to live the Holy Sacrifice as a *work of God*: work which absorbs, delights, is hard and exhausting, because it requires our putting into that divine action our senses and faculties, our whole being.

With words which were later taken up by the Second Vatican Council, St Josemaría also taught us that the Holy Mass has to be "the centre and root of our interior life". And this expression, which has a great theological content, has at the same time practical consequences for one's daily life.

In the first place, the Mass is the *centre*; it should therefore be the point of reference for each one of our thoughts and actions. Nothing that happens in your life should be left out from the Eucharistic sacrifice. In the Mass we find the perfect Model for our self-giving. The living Christ is there, burning with love.

Apparently inactive, he is offering himself constantly to the Father, with the whole of his Mystical Body – with those souls who are his own – adoring and giving thanks, making reparation for our sins and beseeching God for his gifts, in a

perfect and unceasing holocaust. In the Blessed Sacrament, Jesus gives us the permanent and joyful energy to dedicate our entire existence, in the most natural way, to the salvation of souls.

Let us live our journey on earth like this. As St Josemaría wrote, we have to serve God "not only at the altar, but throughout the world – which for us is an altar. All the works of men are done as if on an altar; and each one of you, in that union of contemplative souls that is your day, in some way says 'his Mass', which lasts twenty-four hours, in expectation of the Mass to follow, which will last another twenty-four hours, and so on until the end of our lives."[4]

For the children of God, the *altar* where we constantly practise being priestly souls is our place of work, our home, the place where we live in

friendship side by side with other people. All our activity can and should be centred on the Mass.

Imitate the example of St Josemaría: when anyone confided some sorrow to him or asked him to pray for their intentions, his reply was always the same: that he would remember them in the Holy Sacrifice. That is why at the altar he felt the weight of everyone's needs. As a mediator between men and God, identified with Christ as every priest is when he goes up to the altar, being *ipse Christus*, he exercised great care in his daily celebration of Mass: he prepared himself very well each day, saying the prayers without rushing, savouring them; he lived the *mementos* intensely; he looked lovingly at Jesus who gives himself to us; he adored him with profound piety; he took care of the time of thanksgiving... In short, he made a real effort to make the Holy Mass the centre of his entire life.

That is why, as you may have heard him say, he liked to divide his day into two parts: from the end of Mass until the Angelus was a time for a continuous thanksgiving; he offered to God everything he did during that time in gratitude for having been able to renew the Holy Sacrifice. From twelve o'clock onwards he began preparing for the next Mass, fostering his desires to receive Jesus, repeating spiritual communions, thinking of that colossal miracle in which God, infinitely great, becomes hidden beneath the appearances of a piece of bread, so as to come to us: "to this dunghill of my heart,"[5] he used to add, with profound and sincere humility.

And this has to be our struggle, yours and mine, each day of our lives, if we really want the Holy Mass to be the centre of our interior life. Ask yourself, therefore, how you prepare every day to celebrate or to attend

the Holy Sacrifice; how you look after the Offertory – placing, next to the bread and wine, your work and your tiredness, your sorrows and joys, your hopes and failures – so that Jesus may unite them to his Sacrifice; what effort you make to pray for the Church, for the Pope, and the Bishops, for priests, for your brothers and sisters, for all the faithful living and dead; whether you make the best use of your eucharistic Communion, those minutes when Jesus Christ, the Sun of Justice, is within your breast, revitalising you, transforming you into himself; how your heart goes to the tabernacle during the remaining hours of the day, in order to offer anew to our Lord your work and rest, your laughter and tears, your apostolic desires, your hunger for souls... Examine your conscience and make definite resolutions for each day.

If our whole existence should be one of co-redeeming, do not forget that the Holy Mass is where your life acquires that co-redemptive dimension: it's from there it draws its *strength* and where it is most clearly seen. That is why the Mass is the *root* of the interior life. We have to be very united to that root and this also depends on how we respond. Hence – let me point out to you, paraphrasing St Josemaría's words – our self-giving is worth what our Mass is worth; our life is effective, supernaturally speaking, in proportion to the piety, faith and devotion with which we celebrate or attend the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar, identifying ourselves with Jesus Christ and his eagerness to redeem.

In the Holy Sacrifice, in fact, we recover the strength we have spent in the daily struggle, and we become filled with desires for sanctity and apostolate. Remember what Sacred

Scripture tells us about the prophet Elias. After a long journey, he felt hungry and thirsty. So exhausted was he that his weariness caused him to fall into a deep sleep; but an angel awoke him and offered him a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. After having eaten and drunk, this man of God was so spurred on by the strength of that food that he walked for forty days and forty nights, until he reached the place that God had indicated.[6] So imagine the effectiveness of the eucharistic food on those who receive it with good dispositions! Its effectiveness is much greater, my daughters and sons, much greater! With that spiritual food, with the Body and Blood of Christ, we can travel not just forty days and nights, but our whole life, until we come with rapid and cheerful steps to heaven – where God and our Lady await us – drawing along with us many other souls too.

Yes. In the Holy Mass we find the remedy for our weakness and the energy to enable us to overcome all the difficulties in our apostolic work. Be convinced: in order to plough furrows of love for God in the world, live the Holy Mass well! To carry out the new evangelisation of society which the Church is asking of us, take more care each day of the Mass! For our Lord to send vocations in divine abundance and for them to be well formed, have recourse to the Holy Sacrifice! *Beg* the Lord of the harvest day after day, closely united to the Blessed Virgin, filling your Mass with petitions!

Continue praying for the intentions of my Mass. May you renew your prayer each day, as you approach the altar, very sure that our Lord is preparing marvellous things for us – sooner, more and better than we think – if we do not slacken in this determined effort of faith and deeds.

Allow me to whisper this question in your ear: Are you presenting this petition every day, making it fully alive, when the offering is made of the bread and the wine which will later become the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Alvaro

References to the founder of Opus Dei, who was canonised in 2002, have been changed to "Saint Josemaria".

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[1] Antiphon *O sacrum convivium*

[2] Lk 22:19

[3] *The Forge*, 436

[4] Saint Josemaria, *Meditation St Joseph, our Father and Lord*, 19 March 1968, (in *In Dialogue with the Lord*)

[5] Saint Josemaria, Notes taken at a get-together, 19 March 1973.

[6] Cf 1 Kings 19:3-8

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