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Letter from the Prelate (February 2008)

In his February pastoral letter, the Prelate encourages us to approach Lent with optimism and desires for conversion, in order to share in God's joy.

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

We are at the threshold of Lent, a time when the Church, as a good Mother, insistently reminds her

children of the need to convert again to God, rectifying what has to be changed in our life. Certainly, as the Pope reminded us in similar circumstances, "this process of evangelical conversion cannot be restricted to a specific period of the year: it is a daily journey that must embrace the entire span of our existence, every day of our life." [1]

During the liturgical rite on Ash Wednesday, the priest, while imparting the ashes, pronounces some words that constitute an urgent call to self-examination: *Remember, man, you are dust, and to dust you will return*, [2] as one of the possible formulas says. It is a very expressive reminder of our condition as mortal creatures. The moment will come when our Lord will call us into his presence. He will judge our thoughts, words and actions, and give us the recompense—of glory, purification,

or condemnation—that our life has merited.

Consideration of this reality shouldn't frighten us, but rather spur us to sorrow for our failings, to resolutions to improve, and to joy facing the definitive meeting with the Blessed Trinity. As the Holy Father reminds us in his recent encyclical: "From the earliest times, the prospect of the Judgment has influenced Christians in their daily living as a criterion by which to order their present life, as a summons to their conscience, and at the same time as hope in God's justice." [3]

This is what the other possible formula for the rite stresses: *Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.* [4] We are sinners, in need of God's forgiveness. Therefore we are invited to undertake a deep change, to redirect the course of our earthly journey towards our definitive goal:

eternal happiness with God. I would like us, with a sense of optimism, to see in these words a call to improve day by day. If we keep up this battle, the divine Judge will not be for us "a judge—in the harsh sense of the word. He will simply be Jesus,"[5] "our" Jesus: a God who forgives.

Let us meditate, therefore, on St. Josemaría's words: "Isn't it wonderful how God cares for us and is always ready to listen to us—waiting for man to speak? He hears us at all times, but particularly now. Our heart is ready and we have made up our minds to purify ourselves. He hears us and will not disregard the petition of a 'humble and contrite heart' (*Ps 50:19*)."[6] The Holy Church with wise pedagogy places before us, again and again, these fundamental ideas, so that they are well engraved on our minds and we don't forget them. At the beginning of Lent, while the priest is

carrying out the Ash Wednesday ceremony, she invites us to intone a canticle filled with hope: *Come back to the Lord with all your heart; leave the past in ashes, and turn to God with tears and fasting, for he is slow to anger and ready to forgive.*[7]

Each year we remember that the spirit of Lent can be summed up in three traditional practices: prayer, penance, and works of mercy. I have invited you in past years to consider these points during this liturgical time. Now I would like to focus especially on the spirit of penance, which has to spur us—with sorrow and taking refuge in divine mercy—to make reparation for our sins and those of all humanity.

Commenting on the prophet Joel's call to repentance, *come back to me with all your heart*, which the liturgy sets before us at the beginning of Lent,[8] St. Jerome says: "May your

interior penance be shown by your fasting and repentant tears. By fasting now, you will later be filled; by crying now, you will later laugh; by lamenting now, you will then be consoled....Harbor no doubt regarding your forgiveness, for no matter how great your faults may have been, the magnitude of his mercy will certainly remit the abundance of your many sins."[9]

In first place, let us make reparation for our own faults. We have all received the gift of Baptism, which made us children of God and members of Christ's Mystical Body, the Church. Isn't it logical that we should correspond to such great love with our whole soul? Nevertheless, we have to recognize that frequently, owing to our weakness, we fail to fulfill God's will, or, at least, we don't correspond to his Love with the promptness and generosity he has a right to expect from us.

How it hurt our Father to see so many Christians who forget the greatness and dignity of their divine filiation! We can take his words to heart. "Wake up! Listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to you: *Si inimicus meus maldixisset mihi, sustinuissem utique*—if it were my enemy who had insulted me, I could put up with that. But you... *tu vero homo unanimes, dux meus, et notus meus, qui simul mecum dulces capiebas cibos*—you, my friend, my apostle, who sit at my table and take sweet food with me!"[10]

My daughters and sons, without ever losing our peace, let us be forthright in acknowledging our sins and faults. God is our Father and very much our Father, always ready to welcome us in his arms. Let us take good care of the minutes of examination each day—without scruples but with a refined conscience—in order to discover with the light of the Holy Spirit what

has gone well, what has gone badly, what we could have done better. Seeing good things, we should react with sincere gratitude; seeing our faults, we should ask for forgiveness as his children. And let us always end with an act of contrition—with sorrow of love—and with a well-specified resolution, small perhaps, but with a deep eagerness to grow interiorly.

Thus, when we go to the sacrament of Penance, we will be well-prepared and obtain more spiritual benefit. Do we realize that when we do the examination of conscience, which is a deep-rooted Christian tradition, we are opening up our soul to our Lord's eyes? Are we aware that God is ready to grant us his grace so that we love him more?

The Church has recommended and continues to recommend the practice of frequent confession. Without this

means of personal sanctification, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to maintain a high level of Christian life; even more so when the surrounding environment presents so many occasions to stray from God. I never tire, then, of encouraging you to continue carrying out an intense and broad "apostolate of Confession." We can't allow ourselves to be moved by human respect. Let us also nourish in our friends, relatives and colleagues this zeal to help those with whom they are in contact.

Tell everyone—also by the conviction they see in you—that they should take advantage of the abundant graces of Lent to deeply purify their souls and discover or intensify their intimacy with God. They will be filled with peace and greater happiness, for no joy is greater than that of knowing oneself to be a daughter or son of God. Let us suggest that they

go periodically to this "sacrament of joy," as our Father called it.

I have also mentioned the need to ask for forgiveness for the sins of others. This doesn't require that we carry out great deeds. Our Lord has already done so, by dying on the Cross for us. But he wants us to unite ourselves to his redemptive Sacrifice through the small mortifications and penances that life brings with it: the annoyances of an illness, misunderstandings on the part of others, difficulties at work, the failure of a plan we made with great enthusiasm.... In order to accept with good humor vexations of this type, which form part of our personal sanctification, it is good—especially during these weeks—to generously add small mortifications in eating, in drinking, in comfort, in the moments of rest and relaxation, which unite us more closely to Christ's Cross and

prepare us to obtain a lot of fruit from Easter.

Benedict XVI recently reminded everyone of the perennial validity of this way of acting. He wrote in his encyclical on hope: "There used to be a form of devotion—perhaps less practiced today but quite widespread not long ago—that included the idea of 'offering up' the minor daily hardships that continually strike at us like irritating 'jabs,' thereby giving them a meaning." [11] And the Pope, lamenting that many people seem to have forgotten about these signs of love for God, added that pious souls, through the offering of daily vexations, were convinced "that they could insert these little annoyances into Christ's great 'compassion' so that they somehow became part of the treasury of compassion so greatly needed by the human race." [12] And he said: "maybe we should consider whether it might be judicious to

revive this practice ourselves."[13] I pass on this question to you so that each of you consider it, rediscovering the value of the "hidden and silent sacrifice,"[14] and so that you make it resound in the ears of those alongside you.

As I do every month, I ask you to be very united to my intentions. Pray now in a special way for the beginning of stable apostolic work in Romania and in Indonesia. Specific steps are underway to carry this out, God willing, this year. And continue to pray for the Pope and for his intentions, among which the union of all Christians holds an important place, beginning with a deeper and more supernatural union among Catholics.

I also want to ask you to pray every day for those who are sick. Our Lord has granted us abundantly the treasure of being able to care for so

many who are suffering. Just as our Lord sought out those who were suffering to heal and console them, I would like all of us to strive to enrich ourselves with this charity, this authentic affection, by looking after those who require it.

I don't want to make this letter any longer, but I ask that you pray to our beloved Don Álvaro, who celebrated his saint's day on February 19th. Let us ask him to obtain from our Lord a superabundance of fraternal charity so that everyone in the Work—at every moment, and even more so if someone is suffering from an illness—may vividly experience the reality that Opus Dei is a family, a true family, in which we gladly pour ourselves out for the others.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father

+ Javier

Rome, February 1, 2008

1. Benedict XV, Address at a general audience, February 21, 2007.

2. *The Roman Missal*, Ash Wednesday, *Imposition of ashes* (cf. *Gen* 3:19).

3. Benedict XV, Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, November 30, 2007, no. 41.

4. *The Roman Missal*, Ash Wednesday, *Imposition of ashes* (cf. *Mk* 1:15).

5. St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 168.

6. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 57.

7. *The Roman Missal*, Ash Wednesday, *Antiphon at the imposition of ashes* (Cf. *Joel* 2:13).

8. Cf. *The Roman Missal*, Ash Wednesday, *First Reading* (*Joel* 2:12).

9. St. Jerome, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Joel* II, 12–13.

10. St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 244.

11. Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, November 30, 2007, no. 40.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. Cf. St. Josemaría, *The Way*, nos. 185 and 509.

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