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Letter from the Prelate (January 2016)

In his first monthly letter for 2016, the Prelate writes about our Lady's role in the upcoming Year of Mercy.

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

We are filled with rejoicing as we pray the Entrance Antiphon for today's Mass: *Salve, sancta Parens...* Hail, Holy Mother, who gave birth to the King who rules heaven and earth for ever![1] We feel enormous joy as we profess our faith in Mary's divine Motherhood, the root of the other privileges with which the Blessed Trinity adorned our Lady. God created her immaculate and filled her with grace, so that her virginal body too should be predisposed, so to speak, to give birth to the Son of God in the flesh.[2] How marvelous this is! Rightly can we say to God's Mother and ours: ***Greater than you, no one but God!***[3]

We can understand the enthusiasm of the Christians at Ephesus, the city where the Ecumenical Council was held which defined this dogma of faith in the year 431. ***History has handed down to us eye-witness accounts of the joy felt by the***

Christians when they received such clear, precise definitions, which reaffirmed what everyone believed.^[4] St Josemaría recalls this in one of his homilies, quoting St Cyril of Alexandria, who played an important role in the Council. “The entire community of the city of Ephesus, from the first hours of the day until nightfall, waited anxiously for the resolution... When it became known that the author of the blasphemies had been deposed, with one voice they began to glorify God and to acclaim the Synod, for the enemy of the faith had fallen. On leaving the church we went by torchlight to our houses. It was night time and the whole city was joyful and illuminated.”^[5] And our Father remarks, ***I must say that, even at a distance of sixteen centuries, their outburst of piety impresses me deeply.***^[6]

I still remember the time we went to Loreto in 1971. We weren't able to go into the house of the Annunciation, because it was already closed. St Josemaría knelt down and gripped the bars of the gate, saying, ***Mother, my Mother and our Mother!*** And there he poured out his love and that of his sons and daughters of all times. When we arrived at the basilica we had been feeling somewhat car-sick because of the very many bends in the road, but that was no obstacle to his prayer and gratitude to our Mother in Heaven.

“Mother of God!” exclaimed those early Christians of Ephesus too, overjoyed at the proclamation of this truth. And we confess the same today. *Salve, sancta Parens...* Hail, holy Mother of God!... The earliest prayer to Mary that has come down to us is a petition addressed to our Lady by the Christians of Egypt in the

third century, invoking her as Mother of God: “*Sub tuum præsidium confúgimus, sancta Dei Génatrix...*, we fly to your patronage, O holy Mother of God. Despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us from all dangers, O ever glorious and blessed Virgin.”[7] St Josemaría used to say this prayer every day, finding secure refuge in our Lady’s arms.

God grant that this same faith may burn in our hearts, and that a hymn of thanksgiving may rise from our lips: for the Blessed Trinity, in choosing Mary as the Mother of Christ, a Man like us, has brought each one of us under the shelter of her maternal cloak. She is the Mother of God and our Mother.[8]

In the first reading of the Mass, the liturgy gives us the formula which God himself asked Moses to use to bless the people of the Old Covenant:

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord let his face shine on you and be gracious to you. May the Lord uncover his face to you and bring you peace.[9]

In our Lady this blessing was completely fulfilled. The Pope explained it in a homily: **no other creature has ever seen God's face shine upon them as did Mary. She gave a human face to the eternal Word, so that all of us can contemplate him.**[10] These words can provide a frame for the new year for us, just a few weeks after the beginning of the Jubilee. They are an invitation to travel through the coming months under the holy protection of our Lady, *Mater Misericordiae*, Mother of Mercy, as we pray in the Salve. We see the Blessed Virgin as the person who experienced God's mercy most abundantly, because she received the Only-Begotten Son of God in her womb; and as the person who responded to that outpouring of love

most fully: *Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.*[11]

This reply, *ancilla Dómini*, the handmaid of the Lord, shows our Lady's total availability: her humble, docile self-surrender to God's Word, putting herself at the service of the redemption. Her virginal motherhood impelled her to feel the weight of mankind, with uninterrupted constancy, on considering what St Gabriel was telling her on God's behalf: *You will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end.*[12]

The weight of mankind, and the weight of the Church. *Mater*

Ecclésiæ! Mother of the Mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church. In union with Mary's petition, the essential unity of the nascent Church was made visible, with Peter and the other Apostles, as they awaited the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.[13] She, with her motherly mediation, cared and still cares for the Spouse of Christ and each of its members: members of Christ! Let us increase our prayer for this unity, especially for daily unity with the Successor of Peter and the successors of the other Apostles.

Devotion to Mary is the best path to discover the merciful face of our Father God, which shines out in the Incarnate Word. It is very important that we should open our hearts to God's mercy always. This is indispensable at all times, but is perhaps especially called for in our day. **In this era of profound changes, the Church is called to**

offer her particular contribution, rendering visible the signs of the presence and closeness of God. The Jubilee is a favourable time for all of us, because by contemplating Divine Mercy, which overcomes all human limitations and shines in the darkness of sin, we are able to become more certain and effective witnesses.[14]

Moreover, at this time of year people naturally, and frequently, draw up a balance of the year that has gone by and, in the light of their findings, set themselves some goals for the coming year. Raising this to the supernatural level, nothing could be more obvious than to begin the next twelve months with the holy, urgent impulse to renew our desire to identify ourselves with Jesus Christ. The best way is to turn to our Mother: ***We always go to Jesus – and return to him – through Mary.*** [15] She always leads us towards her

Son, as she did the servants at Cana, when she said to them: *Do whatever he tells you.*[16] At the same time, contemplating Jesus' face in the Gospel leads us to exclaim with the spontaneity, admiration and affection of that other woman: *Blessed is the womb that carried you, and the breasts at which you nursed!*
[17]

The new year is also often compared to a book with blank pages, which we must each fill up as the weeks go by. This is what Blessed Alvaro del Portillo said on this day in 1980: "Thank God for his countless gifts and present him with our contrition; make good resolutions and struggle to fulfil them. Continue spreading Opus Dei everywhere!"[18]

I propose this objective to you for the coming year. Don Alvaro suggested "filling up this blank book which opens today, with the freshness and

delicacy of touch that was employed in the Middle Ages to illuminate those beautiful manuscripts, with perfect calligraphy, with no crossings-out. And as there will be blots – because we all have a fallen nature, and are full of wretchedness –, may we not lack the courage to recognize them for what they are, so that we can get rid of them. And how will we expunge them? With our humility, and by going to the Sacrament of Penance.”[19]

Finding a remedy for our faults is a task of love. To do so, we need to make use of a very necessary – indispensable – means, which is the examination of conscience. As St Josemaría wrote of the examinations of conscience, ***if the first man did not practice them, then at any rate the first Christian invented them: probet autem seípsum homo(I Cor11:28), let a man examine himself, the Apostle told the***

faithful of Corinth. And even honest pagan men also examined their spirit. The last chestnut-seller on the banks of the Tiber reckons up the money she has taken at the end of the day, and what the chestnuts cost her, and the time she has spent on selling them (...): the examination has been undertaken by everyone who has had discernment and interest in the things of God or the things of this earth.[20]

I suggest to you too that you do not neglect this daily examination of your soul in the light of God. As St Josemaría said, just a few minutes is enough, before going to bed at night, but with daily constancy. Obviously, there are times – before receiving the Sacrament of Penance, on a day of recollection, on a significant anniversary – when we will need to spend more time on it. Whichever the case, it is always a good idea to

invoke the Holy Spirit, asking him for his light, and to end with an act of sorrow and a specific resolution for the following day. In that way we will correct the direction our behaviour is taking, and we will wipe out with acts of contrition the stains that we may have produced on the book of our life.

During this festive season, and afterwards throughout the whole year, “it is important that we re-enter ourselves and make a sincere examination of our life. Let us permit ourselves to be illuminated by a ray of light that shines from Bethlehem, the light of the One who is ‘the Mightiest’ who made himself lowly, ‘the Strongest’ who made himself weak.”[21]

Let us ask God that many souls will gain the Jubilee indulgence in this Year of Mercy, first going to receive God’s forgiveness in the Sacrament of

Penance. A few weeks ago the Pope again talked about this Sacrament.

Another important sign of the Jubilee, he said, is *confession*.

Approaching the Sacrament by which we reconcile ourselves with God is equal to directly experiencing his mercy.[22]

Don't stop praying for my intentions: the Church, the Pope and his aides, world peace, and all souls. And for this purpose let's have recourse to the intercession of the Mother of God. **May the sweetness of her countenance watch over us in this Holy Year, so that all of us may rediscover the joy of God's tenderness.**[23] May she bring to life in souls, in families and in nations, the seed of merciful love that her Son Jesus is scattering throughout the whole world. Let us also recall that for long periods, St Josemaría maintained his awareness of God's presence during the day by repeating

ever afresh the refrain ***Mother, my Mother!***

A very affectionate blessing, wishing you for 2016 a year that is fruitful in works of love for God and apostolate, from

your Father

+ Javier

Rome, 1 January 2016

[1] Roman Missal, Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, Entrance Antiphon.

[2] Cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St John*, chap. 1, lect. 10.

[3] St Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 496.

[4] St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 275.

[5] St Cyril of Alexandria, *Epistle 24* (PG 77, 138).

[6] St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 275.

[7] Prayer *Sub tuum præsidium*.

[8] St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 275.

[9] Roman Missal, Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, First Reading (*Nm* 6:24-26).

[10] Pope Francis, Homily on the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, 1 January 2015.

[11] *Lk* 1:38.

[12] *Lk* 1:31-33.

[13] Cf. *Acts* 1:14; 2:1-4.

[14] Pope Francis, General audience, 9 December 2015.

[15] St Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 495.

[16] *Jn* 2:5.

[17] *Lk* 11:27.

[18] Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, notes taken in a get-together, 1 January 1980.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] St Josemaría, *Letter 29 September 1957*, no. 71.

[21] Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, 4 December 2011.

[22] Pope Francis, *General audience*, 16 December 2015.

[23] Pope Francis, *Misericordiæ Vultus*, 11 April 2015, no. 24.

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