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Letter from the Prelate (December 2008)

Our Lord's imminent arrival at Christmas is an opportunity to redouble our effort "to unite the divine and the human in our daily life," the Prelate tells us in his letter this month.

12/05/2008

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

We have come to the end of the Marian Year in the Work, during

which we have given thanks to God, through our Lady's intercession, for the twenty-five years of Opus Dei as a personal prelature. I am sure, through God's goodness, that we have all grown in our affection and devotion to our Mother, which necessarily leads us to a more intimate and personal, a more loving dialogue with her Son, Jesus.

Now we are preparing for the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception: a new opportunity to place even more firmly, in the depths of our soul, the Marian piety that is a characteristic of Catholics and a very important part of the spiritual heritage our Founder left us. We know how St. Josemaría never held himself up as an example of anything. The only Model, he used to tell us, is Jesus Christ. And, nevertheless, he didn't think it out of place to say: "If I want you to imitate me in anything, it's in the love I have

for our Lady." That's how great his filial affection was for our Mother! Let us ask through his intercession that, in these days of preparation for the great feast of December 8, each of us may grow steadily in our Marian piety and apostolic zeal. Let us also encourage others so that, through a more trusting conversation with our Lady, they may enter on the path of interior life, or make progress along that path.

Yesterday was the beginning of Advent, the liturgical time especially appropriate for fostering theological hope. This virtue leads us to aspire with all of our strength to the eternal happiness God has promised to those who fulfill his will. As the Pope wrote one year ago, "we need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who

encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain."[1]

So let us begin this liturgical time by reinforcing our desire to reach heaven. Let us never make the goods here below our end; everything we may achieve here has to help us to traverse the path that leads to heaven. The final end of our life is a single one: possessing and rejoicing in God for all eternity. There we find the definitive goal we must aspire to attain day by day; and therefore we have to put everything—absolutely everything, without keeping anything back—at the service of the kingdom of God.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* sums up the meaning of these weeks in the following words: "When the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present this ancient awaiting of the Messiah,

for by sharing in the long preparation for the Savior's first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his Second Coming."[2]

This is a time for preparing for Christmas, and for fostering hope in the coming of our Redeemer that will take place at the end of time, to judge the living and the dead and to fully establish his kingdom, so that *God may be all in all*. [3]

The first part of Advent, until December 16, is centered on our Lord's final coming. The liturgy at Mass, especially on Sundays, presents us with passages from the Old and New Testaments aimed at preparing us for that encounter. After December 17, the content of the readings changes, to prepare us more immediately for the spiritual coming of Jesus at Christmas time. These two realities are intimately united, and

should guide our prayer during the month of December. How eager are we to be with God, already here on earth? Do we seek his Face in all that we do? Does the certainty that he has come and will come for everyone prevent us from losing our peace?

The consideration of the last things—the final realities that will take place at the end of time, and before that, for each of us, on the day of our death—should not be a source of fear or anxiety. There is nothing further from the Church's intention in setting forth these truths to us. Rather, they are meant to be a call to our sense of personal responsibility, so that we undertake with greater constancy the work of our own sanctification and our apostolic work.

A few weeks ago, taking up the doctrine of St. Paul on the last things, Benedict XVI invited Catholics to meditate on the three great

certainties of our faith related to this theme. The first is "the certainty that Jesus is Risen and is with the Father and thus is with us forever. And no one is stronger than Christ...

Therefore we are secure and free of fear." [4] How can we fear our Father God, who has shown us so many and such evident tokens of love, to the point of sending his Son into the world, to save us? Faith in the risen Christ is the best antidote against any fear. This is what happened when the Gospel was first preached, in a world dominated by a fatalistic fear of destiny, and it has to be renewed again today, in a world in which so many people are full of apprehension about the future, or act irresponsibly as though everything ended here on earth. "*The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?* (Ps 26:1)," St. Josemaría asked himself with words from the Psalmist. And he answered: "No one. If we approach our heavenly Father

in this way, we will have no grounds for fearing anyone or anything."[5] Therefore, "a son of God fears neither life nor death, because his spiritual life is founded on a sense of divine filiation. And he says to himself: God is my Father and he is the Author of all good; he is all Goodness."[6]

Secondly, the Pope continues, going more deeply into the reasons for Christian optimism, "the certainty that Christ is with me, that in Christ the future world has already begun, also gives the certainty of hope. The future is not a darkness in which no one can find their way. It is not like this."[7] For anyone who believes in Christ and lives in Christ, the future is always bright, a sure path, because the risen Christ, the Good Shepherd, has opened for us the path to life eternal and walks with us, protects us and encourages us with the affection of a mother and a father.

Each of us can make our own, with full truth, those inspired words: *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.*[8]

The third certainty that sustains Christians is this:"the Judge who returns both as Judge and Savior has left us the duty to live in this world in accordance with his way of living. He has entrusted his talents to us. Our third conviction, therefore, is responsibility before Christ for the world, for our brethren and at the same time also the certainty of his mercy. Both these things are important."[9]

This sense of responsibility is a response to our Lord's advice: *negotiamini, dum venio*, [10] trade till I come—words that St. Josemaría often meditated on, with the certainty that God is always beside us, and with the responsibility of knowing that he has entrusted his inheritance to us. We have to make good use of our time so that—with God's grace—we come to merit eternal happiness one day. Let us savor these other words from St. Josemaria: "What a shame it would be to have as one's occupation in life that of killing time which is a God-given treasure! No excuse could justify such behavior...How sad not to turn to good account and obtain a real profit from the few or many talents that God has given to each man so that he may dedicate himself to the task of serving other souls and the whole of society!

"When a Christian kills time on this earth, he is putting himself in danger of 'killing Heaven' for himself, that is, if through selfishness, he backs out of things and hides away and doesn't care. A person who loves God not only hands over to the service of Christ, what he has and what he is in life. He gives his very self." [11]

In the light of these invitations we can ask ourselves: Do I feel the responsibility of making the talents entrusted to me bear fruit—personal qualities, jobs that I have, opportunities to do good that come up during the day—in order to firmly establish Christ's kingdom in my own soul and in the environment around me? How do I help others to behave in the same way, by my example and my words? Am I doing whatever is in my power to ensure that civil legislation and society respect God's Law?

The second part of Advent, as I reminded you above, aims to prepare us more immediately for Christmas. During these days, following our Father's advice, we can accompany our Lady and St. Joseph on their journey to Bethlehem. In our times of personal prayer, and throughout the day, let us place ourselves very near them, trying to provide them with some service, making reparation for those who, also now, don't want to accept the Son of God when he comes into this world. This is not merely imagination, but an effective way of stirring up our faith in the mystery of the Incarnation.

Christmas is a marvelous school for us; let us take advantage of the lessons Jesus gives us. As St. Josemaria wrote, when contemplating the naturalness of Christ's birth: "He began by spending nine months in his Mother's womb, like the rest of men, following the

natural course of events. He knew that mankind needed him greatly. He was longing to come into the world to save all souls, but he took his time. He came in due course, just as every other child is born."[12]

We can also learn from Christ's simplicity: "Our Lord comes without any fanfare. No one knows about him. On earth only Mary and Joseph share in the divine adventure. And then the shepherds who received the message from the angels. And later on, the wise men from the East. They were the only witnesses of this transcendental event which unites heaven and earth, God and man."[13]

Determined to imitate the Master, we can unite the divine and the human in our ordinary life. We can do so if we make the effort to put God at the center of our activity, striving to fulfill our duties in order to give him glory, and rectifying any motives that

might hinder this. In the days before Christmas, let us not forget that Mary and Joseph continue calling to souls, as they did at the doors of the houses in Bethlehem. "I am not at all stretching the truth," St. Josemaría assures us, "when I tell you that Jesus is still looking for a resting-place in our heart. We have to ask him to forgive our personal blindness and ingratitude. We must ask him to give us the grace never to close the door of our soul on him again." [14]

In the upcoming weeks, the liturgy echoes Jesus' voice in recommending vigilance: *Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.* [15] As the Pope reminded all Christians: "Jesus, who came among us at Christmas and will return in glory at the end of time, does not tire of visiting us continuously in everyday events. He asks us to be alert to perceive his presence, his advent, and recommends that we

watch and wait for him...Let us prepare ourselves to relive with faith the mystery of the Redeemer's birth, which filled all creation with joy."[16]

Last week I had the opportunity to spend a few days in Pamplona, to accompany your sisters and brothers in the extraordinary circumstances they have gone through. I was able to see, once again, the spirit that our Father infused in everyone, including those who work at the University of Navarra. A few weeks after the attack there, the deeply Christian attitude of the men and women who work there caused me to give thanks to God, because it was so palpably clear that Opus Dei is a sowing of peace and of joy.

I repeat my request for prayers for my intentions: first of all, for the Pope and those who assist him in governing the Church, for the bishops and priests, for all the

members of the People of God. And so that the personal apostolic work of each of us never wavers. With Christ, assisted by our Lady and St. Joseph, let us "become all things to all men."

During this month many anniversaries in the Work's history take place. I can't go into all of them, because it would take too long. But I ask that we may all love even more this "history of the mercies of God," because our Lord has wanted them for each and every one of us. I would like them to be not simply remembrances, but something that we live.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father

+ Javier

Rome, December 1, 2008

1. Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, November 30, 2007, no. 31.
2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 524.
3. *1 Cor* 15:28.
4. Benedict XVI, Address in a general audience, November 12, 2008.
5. St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 95.
6. St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 987.
7. Benedict XVI, Address in a general audience, November 12, 2008.
8. *Ps* 23 [22], 1-4
9. Benedict XVI, Address in a general audience, November 12, 2008.
10. *Lk* 19:13.
11. St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 46.

12. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 18.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, no. 19.

15. *Mt* 24:42.

16. Benedict XVI, Homily on the first Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2007.

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