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Letter from the Prelate (July 2010)

"Turning work into prayer," the Prelate tells us in his letter, is the heart of Opus Dei's message "This daily effort to conduct ourselves as contemplative women and men, in the most diverse circumstances of life, sets before us a high goal, as is sanctity."

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

Thirty-five years have gone by since June 26th, 1975, when God called our Father to enjoy his presence forever in heaven. As on previous anniversaries, countless people have attended Masses in honor of St Josemaría celebrated all over the world on his liturgical feast day. Everywhere an intense act of thanksgiving has been raised to God for having given to the world and to the Church a shepherd like our holy Founder, who is a model of Christian behavior and a valuable intercessor for all our spiritual and material needs.

The feast we have just celebrated is also an opportunity to consider in depth the message that St. Josemaría, by divine will, spread among men and women. Namely, that with God's grace we can and should attain holiness—the perfection of charity, full union with God—through work that is done faithfully and finished

with care and in the other ordinary circumstances of life.

Let us delve more deeply into the core of this teaching: the need to strive to turn work—any work, manual or intellectual—into true prayer. The Gospel tells us clearly that we *ought always to pray and not lose heart* .[1] And St. Paul, echoing this teaching, adds: *sine intermissione orate* ,[2] pray constantly. This recommendation has the force of a command. But it would be impossible to put it into practice if it were mistakenly interpreted to mean that one must be constantly praying, vocally or mentally—something that's impossible in our present earthly situation. Carrying out our daily tasks—family, professional, social, sporting, etc.—often demands the complete attention of our memory and intellect, and the firm effort of our will, without mentioning the need to get the

necessary hours of sleep. I recall in this context St. Josemaría's great joy when, after having taught for many years that we can turn even our sleep into prayer, he read a passage from St. Jerome that expresses the same thought.[3]

But we have to consider this requirement of the Master in its true depth. He invites us to vivify our entire human existence, in all its dimensions, with the eagerness to transform it into prayer: a prayer that is "continuous, like the beating of our heart,"[4] although often not expressed in words. This is what St. Josemaría taught his daughters and sons, and all those who want to seek sanctity in accord with the spirit of the Work. He insisted: "Opus Dei's weapon is not work, it is prayer. Therefore we turn work into prayer and have a contemplative soul."[5]

Turning work into prayer. This daily effort to conduct ourselves as contemplative women and men, in the most diverse circumstances of life, sets before us a high goal, as is sanctity, which—we are convinced—becomes attainable with the help of grace. “It is necessary to live a spirituality that helps believers to reach sanctity through their work,”[6] said the Pope when speaking about St. Joseph. It is only by placing ordinary work in a close relationship with the desire for holiness that the vast majority of Christians can seriously aspire to the fullness of Christian life.

There come to mind the acts of thanksgiving that burst forth from our Father’s soul when he read the letters of his daughters and sons. He was deeply moved when a farm worker, a member of Opus Dei, told him that he got up very early and prayed to our Lord that our Father

would have gotten a good night's sleep, adding that afterwards while he was opening furrows in the earth with his tractor, he prayed *Memorares* and other prayers. Our Founder greatly enjoyed seeing the reality of a contemplative life in the midst of farm work.

In the apostolic letter, inviting all to holiness, that he wrote at the beginning of the new millennium, the Servant of God John Paul II said: "This ideal of perfection must not be misunderstood as if it involved some kind of extraordinary existence, possible only for a few 'uncommon heroes' of holiness. The ways of holiness are many, according to the vocation of each individual....The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this *high standard of ordinary Christian living*: the whole life of the Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this direction." [7]

Our Father set forth this teaching over and over again, insisting that “contemplation is not something for a privileged few. Some people,” he said graphically, in order to engrave it deeply in his hearers’ memory, “with only an elementary knowledge of religion think that contemplatives spend the whole day in ecstasy. But this shows great naivety. The monks in their monasteries are busy all day with hundreds of jobs: they have to keep the house clean and work hard to earn their living. I often get letters from contemplative religious, both men and women, expressing great affection and enthusiasm for the Work and how much they pray for us. They understand something many people do not, namely, our secular way of life as contemplatives in the middle of the world, in temporal activities. Our cell is the street, that's our enclosure. How can salt be hidden away? We have to make sure nothing is left insipid.

That's why all the realities of the world are our seclusion.”[8]

Just as the body needs air to breathe and the circulation of the blood to maintain its life, so the soul needs to remain in contact with God throughout the twenty-four hours of the day. Therefore, authentic piety leads one to refer everything to God: work and rest, joys and sorrows, successes and failures, sleep and wakefulness. As Don Alvaro wrote in 1984, “between temporal occupations and the spiritual life, between work and prayer, there should not be merely an ‘armistice,’ more or less successful; there needs to be a complete union, a fusion without fissure. Work feeds prayer, and prayer permeates work.”[9]

To attain this goal, besides the help of grace, a constant personal effort is required, usually made specific in small details: reciting an aspiration

or a brief vocal prayer while taking advantage of a change or a pause in our work; directing an affectionate glance at an image of the crucifix or of our Lady, which we have discreetly put in our workplace, etc. All of this helps to keep our soul firmly focused on our Lord, a disposition we try to foster daily at Mass and in the periods dedicated expressly to mental prayer. And thus, although at many moments we need to concentrate on our various occupations, with our mind deeply engaged in the task at hand, our soul stays focused on our Lord and maintains a dialogue that is not made up of words, nor even of conscious thoughts, but of movements of the heart, of a desire to carry out everything, even the smallest detail, with Love, offering up whatever we are doing.

When we act in this way, our professional work becomes an arena

where we exercise the most varied human and supernatural virtues: working hard, with order and good use of time, fortitude in finishing our work, care for small details; and so many small signs of concern for others, which are manifestations of a sincere and refined charity.

“Rest assured that it is not difficult to convert work into a prayerful dialogue. As soon as you offer it up and then set to work, God is already listening and giving encouragement. We acquire the style of contemplative souls, in the midst of our daily work! Because we become certain that he is watching us, while he asks us to conquer ourselves anew: a little sacrifice here, a smile there for someone who bothers us, beginning the least pleasant but most urgent job first, carefulness in little details of order, perseverance in the fulfillment of our duty when it would be so easy to abandon it, not leaving

for tomorrow what should be finished today: and all this, to please him, Our Father God! On your desk or in some inconspicuous place that nobody notices, you perhaps place your crucifix to awaken in you a contemplative spirit and to act as a textbook for your mind and soul where you learn the lessons of service.”[10]

With the same strength with which he urged us to convert work into prayer, our Father insisted on the need to never abandon those periods dedicated exclusively to our Lord: frequent Mass and communion, the periods of mental prayer, praying the Rosary and other pious practices with long traditions in the Church. This requires even more care and attention when greater difficulties arise because of a demanding schedule at work, or due to moments of tiredness or dryness that anyone can experience. “Such exercises,”

Don Alvaro reminded us, “should not be seen as interruptions in the time dedicated to work. They are not, as it were, a parenthesis in the course of the day. When we pray, we don’t abandon ‘profane’ activities in order to immerse ourselves in ‘sacred’ activities. On the contrary, prayer is the most intense moment of an attitude that accompanies Christians in all their actions and that creates the deepest bond, because it is the most intimate, between the work carried out earlier and that which one is about to take up immediately afterwards. And in a parallel way, it is precisely from work that one should draw material to nourish the fire of mental and vocal prayer, ever-new impulses for adoration, gratitude, and trusting abandonment in God.”[11]

In a few days I will travel to Ecuador, Peru and Brazil, to be with my daughters and sons and encourage

them in their apostolic work. I ask that, as always, you accompany me on this trip with your prayer, with the offering of your work and with your rest, those of you who are now enjoying a time of vacation. Put care into staying close to God also during these days, recalling what our Father taught us: “I have always seen rest as time set aside from daily tasks, never as days of idleness. Rest means recuperation: to gain strength, form ideals and make plans. In other words it means a change of occupation, so that you can come back later with a new impetus to your daily job.”[12]

This month will also mark the 75th anniversary of the day on which our beloved Don Alvaro told our Lord: here I am! I entrust to his intercession your fidelity and mine, so that it be whole and entire each day, and so that you help me with my intentions.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father,

+ Javier

Pamplona, July 1, 2010

Footnotes:

1. *Lk* 18:1.

2. *1 Thess* 5:17.

3. Cf. St. Jerome, *Treatise on the Psalms*, Commentary on Psalm I (CCL. 78, 5-6),

4. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 8.

5. St. Josemaría, Notes taken in a family gathering, April 23, 1959.

6. Benedict XVI, Homily, March 19, 2006.

7. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, January 6, 2001, no. 31.
8. St. Josemaría, Notes taken in a family gathering, October 30, 1964.
9. Don Alvaro del Portillo, “*Il lavoro si trasformi in orazione*,” an article published in the magazine *Il Sabato*, December 7, 1984 (in *Rendere amabile la verità*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Rome, 1995, p. 649).
10. St. Josemaría, *Friends of God* , no. 67.
11. Don Alvaro del Portillo, *op. cit.* , pp. 650-651.
12. St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 514.

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