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Letter of the Prelate (July 2007)

Letter of Bishop Javier Echevarría to the faithful of Opus Dei. This month's letter urges the faithful to consider the ordinary but exemplary life of the first Christians.

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

As in past years, on June 26 the liturgical celebration of the feast of St. Josemaría Escrivá was held in

many places throughout the world. Devotion to our Father is a reality that is growing each day without restrictions of geography, language, race or social status. Millions of people turn to his intercession for their spiritual and material needs, and are inspired by his life and teachings to put into practice the demands of the Gospel.

His example is very timely and will always be so, with God's grace, and will help many men and women to discover the paths that lead to the Blessed Trinity, amid all noble human realities: the family, work, social relationships, etc.

Our Lord wants us, in struggling for sanctity each day in accord with the spirit of Opus Dei, to strive to faithfully follow the paths that St. Josemaría opened by his docility to the divine will. Thus, with the witness of our interior struggle (at

times victorious and other times not, but always beginning again joyfully) and with our words of encouragement, many others will be enheartened to undertake this way of *sanctification in daily work and in the fulfillment of the Christian's ordinary duties*, which is the Work.

Today I want to remind you of some teachings of our Father connected with the first Christians, who received the Gospel message directly from the Apostles or from their immediate co-workers. He used to point to them as an example of how we should live in the midst of the world. Just yesterday we celebrated the liturgical memorial of the first martyrs of Rome, men and women who bore supreme witness to Christ in the Eternal City during the persecution of Nero. Upon introducing their feast in the universal calendar, the Church decided it would be celebrated on

June 30, right after the solemnity of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, as though to stress their close union with the ones who had transmitted to them Christ's holy teaching.

To explain Opus Dei's mission, St. Josemaría often turned to those first sisters and brothers of ours in the faith. *If you want a point of comparison*, he would say, *the easiest way to understand Opus Dei is to consider the life of the early Christians. They lived their Christian vocation seriously, seeking earnestly the holiness to which they had been called by their Baptism. Externally they did nothing to distinguish themselves from their fellow citizens.*

Similarly, he added, the faithful of Opus Dei *are ordinary people. They work like everyone else and live in the midst of the world just as they did before they joined. There is nothing false or artificial about*

their behavior. They live like any other Christian citizen who wants to respond fully to the demands of his faith, because that is what they are.

In mentioning these ideas I am also moved by the desire to second the teachings of the Pope, who in his Wednesday audiences has been speaking for quite some time now about the early Fathers and writers of the Church. His words can help us to imitate the example of those who lived at the dawn of Christianity. In general, the circumstances surrounding their witness to the faith do not seem all that different from our own.

The first point that stands out is the optimism, filled with confidence and conviction (from their faith!), with which they confronted the pagan world. With the light of our Lord's teaching, they were able to discern

the positive elements in the social customs of their times, and to reject what was not in accord with the new vision of life Christ's doctrine had given them.

The Pope points out, for example, that St. Justin (a layman and philosophy teacher in Rome), basing himself on Sacred Scripture, shows first of all the **divine plan of creation and salvation that is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the *Logos*, that is, the eternal Word, eternal Reason, creative Reason.** And he stresses how that ancient Father of the Church held that **every person as a rational being shares in the *Logos*, carrying within himself a "seed," and can perceive glimmers of the truth.** Thus, the same *Logos* who revealed himself as a prophetic figure to the Hebrew people under the old Law also manifested himself partially, in "seeds of truth," in Greek

philosophy. Now, Justin concludes, since Christianity is the historical and personal manifestation of the *Logos* in his totality, it follows that "whatever things were rightly said among all men are the property of us Christians."

In many countries, we who know we are God's children find ourselves submerged in a neo-pagan society, and (let us never doubt it) we have been entrusted with the marvelous mission of redirecting it to God. The apostolic response of each and every one of us has to follow in the footsteps of those who have gone before us. Firmly grounded in Catholic teaching, we have to act without any inferiority complex in the heart of the civil society to which we belong by our own right, and- without arrogance-transform it from within acting as a leaven in the mass, for mankind's temporal and eternal good.

So let us be optimistic and objective. Although we see deficiencies and errors, there are always many positive attitudes and good realities in the men and women we find alongside us and in the environment around us. In carrying out our apostolate, we have to discover and appreciate these riches, in order to lead those we are dealing with towards the Truth. By stressing these points of common interest, it will be easier to bring souls to God. Our greatest ally for the new evangelization of society-besides the guardian angels of those we are dealing with-is precisely the divine residue that is always found in every human being (although at times they don't realize it), even among those who are furthest from God.

So let us be filled with optimism, and try to spread this outlook to others who perhaps are discouraged in the face of the moral and spiritual

decadence that has arisen in so many places. In our personal conversations with friends and colleagues, as well as in the more or less public interventions that we might be called upon to make, we should rely on **the two "wings" of faith and reason**, as the Pope repeats untiringly, without separating one from the other. Thus we will counteract the relativism around us, a manifestation of a lack of faith and a lack of trust in reason.

Recalling as well our beloved John Paul II, let us put into effect his advice: "Do not be afraid! Open wide the doors to Christ! Open to his saving power the borders of states, the economic and political systems, the broad fields of culture, of civilization, of development. Do not be afraid! Christ knows what is in man's heart. He alone knows it!" We need to make this a reality first of all in ourselves, allowing our Lord to enter our souls and to rule there; and

also in those we are dealing with, accompanying them so that they reach the conviction that Jesus is their best Friend.

Therefore it is essential that we constantly improve our theological formation, that we go deeper-in accord with each one's needs and circumstances-into the topics of public discussion related to the fundamental aspects of revelation.

In explaining the teachings of the Holy Fathers of the Church, the Pope stresses another point of great importance for today's world. He states that the great error of the ancient pagan religions consisted in not adhering to the paths traced out by divine wisdom in the depths of man's soul. **Therefore, the decline of the pagan religion was inevitable: it was a logical consequence of the detachment of religion-reduced to an artificial**

collection of ceremonies, conventions and customs-from the truth of being. The early Fathers and Christian writers, in contrast, made **the choice of the *truth* of being against the myth of *custom*.** Tertullian, the Pope recalls for us, wrote: *Dominus noster Christum veritatem se, non consuetudinem, cognominavit.* Christ our Lord affirmed that he was the Truth, not custom. And Benedict XVI remarked: **it should be noted in this regard that the term *consuetudo*, used here by Tertullian in reference to the pagan religion, can be translated into modern languages with the expressions "cultural fashion," "current fads."**

Today as well, the shipwreck of those who try to do without God is certain. Despite the apparent victory of relativism in some places, this way of thinking and of living will end up collapsing like a house of cards, since

it is not anchored in the truth of God the Creator and in his divine Providence, which directs the paths of history.

We Christians know that we are freer than anyone, because we do not allow ourselves to be dragged about by momentary fads. The Church wants her children to be ***responsible and consistent Catholic citizens, so that the mind and heart of each of us are not dispersed, each going in its own direction, but consistent and firm, doing at every moment what one clearly sees has to be done, without letting oneself be dragged along, through lack of personality and of loyalty to one's conscience, by passing tendencies or fashions:*** so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles (*Eph 4:14*).

At the beginning of this letter I mentioned that devotion to St. Josemaría is continuing to spread throughout the world. A few days ago (and these are not the only quite recent examples) a stone plaque was unveiled in Reggio Calabria commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of our Father's visit to that city, and a street in Fiuggi was named after him. And today, July 1, a parish church in Valencia is being dedicated to St. Josemaría. This is why my letter is dated here, since I have come to this city through the invitation of my dear friend and brother in the episcopate, Archbishop García Gasco, to take part in the liturgical ceremony. Please join me in giving thanks, and let us continue working, each in one's own place, so that this spirit of God may reach new environments and people.

It gives me great joy to tell you that since this past June 26 your brothers who are beginning the stable activity of the Work in Russia have been in Moscow. Let us accompany them closely with our prayer, during these first moments and always; and let us prepare for the future expansion.

Upon seeing all of your letters on the occasion of my birthday, I was filled with embarrassment and joy. I have thanked each and every one of you. As our Father used to say, ***ask Him about it***, if you have any doubts.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father

+ Javier

Valencia, July 1, 2007

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