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Letter from the Prelate (16 February 2023) | Fraternity

Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz invites us to reflect on some attitudes and expressions of fraternity.

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

1. With this letter, I wish to invite you to consider with me some implications of those words of our Lord that we have so often meditated upon: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12).

Jesus loved us to the end, to the point of giving his life for each and every one of us. We know this and we want to believe it with a more lively and

operative faith, which we ask of Him, as the apostles did: “Increase our faith” (Lk 17:5). In this way, we will be able to say with Saint John, with full conviction: “We have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us” (1 Jn 4:16).

“God is love” (1 Jn 4:8), and calls us to love: “This is our loftiest vocation, our vocation *par excellence*; and it is also tied to the joy of Christian hope. One who loves has the joy of hope, of reaching the encounter with the great love that is God.”^[1]

Our love for God – supernatural charity – is a response to that divine love for each and every one of us, which our Lord himself sets before us as the model and goal of our love for others. Love for God and love for others are so closely united that, “in any act of fraternity, the head and the heart often cannot distinguish whether it is a matter of service to

God or service to our brothers and sisters, because, in the second case, what we are doing is serving God twice over.”^[2] —

2. Love for others is so decisive in our lives that “we know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love our brothers” (1 Jn 3:14). Charity unfolds in countless ways and reaches the entire world. We can’t view anyone with indifference, because “each one of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”^[3] —

I would like us to reflect on some particularly relevant attitudes and manifestations of fraternity. In a certain sense, they are all summed up in these words of Saint Josemaría: “How very insistent the Apostle Saint John was in preaching the *mandatum novum*, the new commandment that we should love one another! I would

fall on my knees, without putting on any act (but this is what my heart dictates) and ask you, for the love of God, to love one another, to help one another, to lend one another a hand, to know how to forgive one another.”^[4] —

Breadth of understanding

3. The word “understanding,” in the context of personal relationships, could sometimes evoke only one of its aspects: that of not being surprised by others’ defects and faults. But if this were the case, we would not fully grasp the meaning of that point from *The Way*: “Charity does not consist so much in ‘giving’ as in ‘understanding.’”^[5] —

The understanding that is the fruit of charity, of love, is “comprehensive”: it “sees,” first of all, not the defects or faults, but the virtues and good qualities of others. I remember a meditation preached by Don Javier

on 26 August 1999, during a summer course in Olbeira (a conference center in Galicia, Spain). He forcefully and affectionately exhorted us “not to see people through their defects, but through their virtues.” Love makes us see, with joy, what is positive in others. “We need to rejoice in the prosperity of our neighbor as well as in our own.”^[6] This is the complete opposite of seeing others with that dark sin of envy, which is sadness for the good others possess.

Moreover, each person is always worth more than what we are able to see with our usual way of looking at them. In some sense, what we read about in Scripture often happens in our own lives, when the Letter to the Hebrews exhorts us not to neglect hospitality since, thanks to it, “some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb 13:2).

4. The understanding that is born of love also allows us to see others' defects and faults; thus we understand people both with their positive and negative qualities. And we can be sure – love sees this, because it is very wise – that the positive points outweigh the negative ones. In any case, what is negative is not a reason for separation, but for prayer and offering help; if possible, for more affection; and, if needed, for fraternal correction

Our Father insisted in many ways on this manifestation of charity, which is sometimes heroic: “Practice fraternal correction, *ne sit populus Domini sicut oves absque pastore* (Num 27:17), so that this supernatural Family, which is the Work of God, may not look like a group of sheep without a shepherd. I have always taught you, my daughters and sons, that in the Work

each one must be both shepherd and sheep.”^[7]

5. We are all weak, and we cannot be surprised that we misunderstand or react negatively to other people. But we should not accept and justify these reactions; rather, they should be an opportunity to ask our Lord for forgiveness and to beg Him to increase our capacity to love, to give us the greater understanding that is the fruit of love. And thus, without becoming discouraged by our weakness, we will ask God for help, so that in the end we can tell Him, filled with gratitude: “You have enlarged my heart” (Ps 119:32).

It is important, for example, for us to struggle to master and mitigate the impatience that could spontaneously arise in the face of real or not so real defects in others (sometimes, the defect may be more in our way of looking). These reactions of

impatience can lead to a lack of understanding, and therefore to a lack of charity. The centuries-old words of Saint Cyprian of Carthage are very forceful: “Charity is the bond that unites brothers, the foundation of peace, the tie that gives firmness to unity. Charity is superior to hope and faith; it surpasses almsgiving and martyrdom, and will remain with us forever in heaven. But rob charity of patience, and it will be undermined.”^[8]

6. Understanding, the fruit of fraternal love, also helps to overcome biases in our relations with one another, which could arise when we notice our differences. In reality, this diversity is often a richness of characters, sensitivities, interests, etc. Our Father told us: “You must also constantly practice a fraternity that rises above all natural sympathy or antipathy, loving one another as true brothers or sisters, with the

dealings and understanding proper to those who form a closely united family.”^[9] —

Along with the effort to love and understand others, it is also important to make it easier for them to love us. I remind you of what I have already written you: “Growing in cordiality, joyfulness, patience, optimism, refinement and in all the virtues that make living with others agreeable is important for helping people to feel welcomed and to be happy.”^[10] — Thus an atmosphere of fraternity is created in which each of us fortifies the others’ affection and, all united, we experience the *hundredfold* that our Lord promised us, as we journey towards eternal life (cf. Mt 19:29).

The treasure of forgiveness

7. Understanding also has a close relationship with the extraordinarily important reality of forgiveness: both

asking for forgiveness and forgiving. In April 1974, our Father told us that “the most divine reality in our life as Christians, as children of God in Opus Dei, is to forgive those who have hurt us.” And then he added, with great simplicity: “I have not needed to learn to forgive, because our Lord has taught me how to love.” Among the many consequences and manifestations of divine filiation, perhaps we would not spontaneously think first of forgiveness.

Nevertheless, we realize that being children of God means *being Christ*, identifying ourselves with Him. And Christ came into this world, the eternal Son became Man, precisely in order to forgive. Therefore we can reflect on the fact that “nothing makes us more like God than being ready to forgive.”^[11] —

How often we pray and meditate on the Our Father! Forgiving others is so decisive that it is a condition for God

to forgive us. How good it is to ask God to teach us to forgive, truly and always. Moreover, let us have the holy audacity to ask Him that, like our Father, we may come to love others so much that we do not need to learn to forgive.^[12] It would be marvelous to want to reach the point of loving so much that we never feel offended.

8. Just as important as understanding and forgiving is learning to ask for forgiveness, even in small daily conflicts. A sincere gesture of asking for forgiveness is often the only way to re-establish harmony in our relationships, even if we think – with more or less reason – that we are the offended party. It was not strict justice, based on theoretical calculations, that led the Son of God to ask his Father for forgiveness on our behalf, but a gratuitous love that thinks only of what it can do for others.

My daughters and sons, let us not think that this is something very beautiful, but beyond our own littleness. Certainly, the goal is very high. But with God's grace we can approach it little by little, if we do not let up in our spiritual efforts, responding to Love with love in an effort that is renewed each day.

Spirit of service

9. The greatest ambition of the children of God in Opus Dei . . . must always be *to serve*.^[13] We understand very well Saint Josemaría's insistence when we read and meditate on our Lord's words: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (Mk 10:45); "I am among you as the one who serves" (Lk 22:27).

The spirit of service is an expression of love, of the affection of seeing the needs of the others as very much our own. How forceful are our Father's

words “I do not mind repeating it many times. Everyone needs affection, and we too need it in the Work. Strive so that, without sentimentality, your affection for your brothers may always increase. Any concern of a child of mine must be – truly! – very much our own. The day we live as strangers or as indifferent to one another, we have killed Opus Dei.”^[14] —

Without wanting to, we could live as strangers or indifferent to one another because we spend too much time in activities that in fact prevent us from getting to know one another, from spending time with one another, from taking a positive interest in others. My daughters and sons, there come to my mind and heart those words that Saint Josemaría used to tell us with all the strength of his soul: “Love one another!”

10. We desire to serve others, knowing that by doing so we are serving Christ: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). Hence it is good for each of us to consider: “Only my readiness to encounter my neighbor and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbor can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me.”^[15] _____

We all have the experience that serving others often involves effort. “Don’t think that it is easy to live a life of service. This good desire must be translated into deeds, *for the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power* (1 Cor 4:20). And we cannot be of constant assistance to others without sacrifice.”^[16] _____ But this effort, done for love, is always a source of joy; a joy which, in contrast, cannot come from selfishness.

Finally, a spirit of service is an expression of fraternal love, and “fraternal love can only be gratuitous; it can never be a means of repaying others for what they have done or will do for us.”^[17] —

Sowers of peace and joy

11. One manifestation of the spirit of service, which in some way includes all the others, is that of *sowing peace and joy*. Since we can give this peace and joy only if we have it ourselves, and both are a gift from God, the best way to grow in it is to take refined care of our times of intimacy with God: the sacraments and personal prayer.

Each person's life includes, more or less frequently and with greater or lesser intensity, sorrows and sufferings that can produce feelings of unease and sadness. These sentiments can threaten to overwhelm us, but we can and must

overcome them, recovering our joy through faith in God's love, today and now, for each of us (cf. 1 Jn. 4:16).

We need to ground our joy, not in ourselves, but in our Lord. Thus, no matter what happens, we will find the inner strength needed to forget about ourselves more readily and transmit the joy that comes from God to others. Let us read these words from the book of Nehemiah, as though they were addressed to us: "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh 8:10).

12. With some frequency, the letters you write me contain news of difficult situations you are going through. I would like to be very close to each and every one of you, accompanying you in caring for that sick child, that mother who is very limited by age, or in situations that bring special suffering. I try to carry

all of you in my heart and in my daily Mass.

In these and so many other circumstances, let us remember that God blesses with the Cross and that, as our Father assured us with his abundant experience, “genuine love brings joy in its wake, a joy that has its roots in the shape of the Cross.”^[18] —
Moreover, when fraternity is well lived, we are never alone. Closely united – *cor unum et anima una* – we carry the sweet burden of our Lord’s Cross, interiorly convinced that, in the end, his yoke is easy and his burden light (cf. Mt 11:30). We have often read and meditated on those words of Saint Josemaría, sincerely desiring to make them our own: “To forget about ourselves and give ourselves to the service of souls is so effective that God rewards it with a humility filled with joy.”^[19] —

Family life

13. The great majority of you do not live in a center of the Work.

However, as our Father wrote, “all of us in Opus Dei, my children, form a single home. The reason that we are a single family is not based on the material fact that we live together under the same roof. Like the early Christians, we are *cor unum et anima una* (Acts 4:32), and no one in the Work can ever feel the bitterness of indifference.”^[20]

In order for the great majority in the Work not living in centers (the supernumeraries and associates) to receive and contribute to the warmth of the *home* of Opus Dei, it is necessary for some (the numerary women and men) to build that home materially in the centers, which all the others participate in according to your circumstances. Certainly, the centers are very useful for the means of formation, for hosting apostolic activities, etc., although you know

that all these things take place also when there are no physical centers, especially in places where the apostolic work is still just beginning.

As is natural, sometimes work, health, family duties, and other situations make it advisable or even necessary for some numerary women and men not to reside in the centers, but this does not diminish your responsibility and commitment – different, but real – to building our home.

14. In many families, it is normal for people of different generations (grandparents, parents, children) and temperaments to live together; and many families have persons with chronic illnesses of greater or lesser severity. While it is true that all this can sometimes lead to making unity in the family challenging, it is also true that very often these and other

difficulties can unite families more closely, when there is true love.

My daughters and sons, the Work is a very large family, with people of different ages and personalities, and also sick people. Thanks be to God, the care and affection with which we try to look after the sick in the Work is a magnificent reality.

15. In some centers there may be more difficult situations. If at times you find family life tiring, look sincerely for the cause of this tiredness in order to remedy it.

Consider whether it is due only to a shortage of material means, or to the natural effort that diligently caring for others can entail; or whether it is also due to a cooling down of affection. If the latter is the case, do not be surprised or discouraged. I encourage you to ask God, with simplicity and daring, to enlarge your heart, to help you see Him in

the others, so that you will be filled with joy, as the disciples were when they saw the risen Lord: “The disciples were glad when they saw the Lord” (Jn 20:20).

Moreover, underlying certain character traits are sometimes sufferings that perhaps explain a person’s way of being or acting. God knows each of us in depth, also our suffering, and He looks on all of us with tenderness. Let us learn from our Lord to look at everyone in this way, to understand everyone (I am repeating this deliberately), to put ourselves in the place of the other person. “How many fears and dangers can be allayed by the true love among brothers, which is not mentioned, for then it would seem to be profaned, but which shines in every little detail.”^[21] —

Let us never cease to thank God for the home He has given us, with its

rich diversity of personal temperaments, social situations and cultures. And at the same time, let us feel the responsibility to preserve in it a tone, an atmosphere also characterized by “extreme refinement in mutual dealings.”^[22] —

In the Church and in the world

16. Caring for fraternity is a sign that the Work, as part of the Church, is God’s family. If we strive to love, understand, forgive and serve one another, we will also contribute very directly, through the Communion of Saints, to the unity of all believers and of all humanity. Saint Josemaría said that “the principal apostolate we Christians must carry out in the world, and the best witness we can give of our faith, is to help bring about a climate of genuine charity within the Church. For who indeed could feel attracted to the Gospel if those who say they preach the Good

News do not really love one another, but spend their time attacking one another, spreading slander and quarreling?”^[23] I ask our Lord that we may always be instruments of unity in our own home, in the Work, in the Church and in the whole of society.

Caring for fraternity will also bring light and warmth to our world, which is often in darkness, or suffers from the coldness of indifference. Our homes (those of the associates, those of the supernumeraries, and the centers of the Work) need to be “bright and cheerful.” Open homes, in which many people can participate, even those who perhaps lack the warmth of a home. The witness of a Christian family striving to be united, in which, despite their personal limitations, each person is ready to forgive, love, and serve, will be a point of reference for many people. This is what the home of

Nazareth was, is and always will be. Let us not forget what Saint Josemaría told us: “We belong to that family.”

Fraternity well lived is a very direct apostolate. Many people will see our affection for one another and will be able to exclaim, as they did of the first Christians, “see how they love one another.”^[24] They will be attracted by that Christian love, by that “charity which is a participation in the infinite love which is the Holy Spirit.”^[25]

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17. I will end here, re-reading with you these other words of our Father: “Heart, my children: put your heart into serving one another. When our affection passes through the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Most Sweet Heart of Mary, fraternal charity takes on all its human and divine strength. It makes burdens

bearable, it soothes pains, it ensures a cheerful struggle. It's not something that ties us down: it strengthens the wings of the soul to soar higher. Fraternal charity, which doesn't seek its own interest (cf. 1 Cor 13:5), enables us to fly, to praise God with a spirit of joyful sacrifice.”^[26] —

Your Father blesses you with all his affection,

Rome, 16 February 2023

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^[1] Francis, *Audience*, 15 March 2017.

^[2] Saint Josemaría, *Instruction*, May 1935-September 1950, no. 75.

Hereafter, texts in which the author is not cited are by Saint Josemaría.

[3] Benedict XVI, Homily, 24 April 2005.

[4] *The Forge*, no. 454.

[5] *The Way*, no. 463.

[6] Saint Gregory the Great, *Homiliæ in Evangelia*, 5, 3: PL 76, 1094 B.

[7]⁷ *Letter* 15, no. 169.

[8] Saint Cyprian, *De bono patientiæ*, no. 15: PL 4, 631 C.

[9] *Letter* 30, no. 28.

[10] Pastoral Letter, 1 November 2019, no. 9.

[11] Saint John Chrysostom, *Comment. in Matthaeum*, Homily XIX, no. 7: PG 57, 283.

[12] Cf. *Furrow*, no. 804.

[13] *Letter* 15, no. 38.

^[14] General Archives of the Prelature, Library, P01.

^[15] Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 18.

^[16] *Letter* 8, no. 4.

^[17] Francis, Encyclical *Laudato si'*, no. 228.

^[18] *The Forge*, no. 28.

^[19] *Letter* 2, no. 15.

^[20] *Letter* 11, no. 23.

^[21] *Furrow*, no. 767.

^[22] *Instruction*, 1 April 1934, no. 63.

^[23] *Friends of God*, no. 226.

^[24] Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 39: PL 1, 471.

^[25] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 24, a. 7 c.

^[26] *Letter 14 February 1974, no. 23.*

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