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Letter from the Prelate (March 2009)

"Let us continue being closely united to the Pope and his intentions, for in this way we will be closely united to Christ," Bishop Echevarría urges us in his letter this month.

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

We have begun Lent, a time we need to live with a true hunger for conversion. The Church recommends

that we put special care into our prayer, our spirit of penance and works of charity, in preparation for Easter, with the determination that this not be just one more Lent. So let us try to live these weeks intensely, being demanding on ourselves in corresponding to the abundant graces of the Holy Spirit.

As you well know, the Holy Father interrupts his ordinary activities for a few days during these weeks to dedicate more time to prayer by making his retreat. This custom of the Roman Curia can help us to increase our prayer for the Pope, who in addition celebrates his Saint's Day on March 19. And let us accompany him spiritually during his trip to Cameroon and Angola from the 17th to the 23rd of this month. Thus we will respond to the express petition that he made to all Catholics a few days ago on the feast of the Chair of St. Peter. "This feast,"

he said, "offers me the occasion to ask you to accompany me with your prayers so that I may faithfully carry out this great task that divine Providence has entrusted to me as Successor of the Apostle Peter. For this let us invoke the Virgin Mary, who we celebrated yesterday here in Rome under the beautiful title of Our Lady of Trust. Let us also ask her to help us enter with the proper frame of mind into the season of Lent...May Mary open our hearts to conversion and to docile listening to the word of God."[1]

I have been moved by this petition of our common Father, an echo of the one he addressed to all his sons and daughters when he was elected to the chair of St. Peter, almost four years ago. The solemnity of St. Joseph, patron of the universal Church,[2] is another opportunity to pray more for the Church and the Pope. As John Paul II pointed out,

"the Fathers of the Church, inspired by the Gospels, from the earliest centuries stressed that just as St. Joseph took loving care of Mary and gladly dedicated himself to Jesus Christ's upbringing (cf. St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 23, 1), he likewise watches over and protects Christ's Mystical Body, the Church, of which the Virgin Mary is the exemplar and model." [3]

Let us recall our Lord's promise: *I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.* [4] So let us remain closely united in our petition, closing ranks *as an army in battle array*, [5] in a battle of peace and of joy.

Benedict XVI, when commenting on the Gospel passage I just transcribed, said: "the word the evangelist uses for 'agree' is *synphonesosin*, with a reference to a 'symphony' of hearts.

This is what touches God's heart. Agreement in prayer is important if it is to be welcomed by the Heavenly Father."[6] So let us continue being closely united to the Pope and his intentions, for in this way we will be closely united to Christ and, with him, through the Holy Spirit, our petition will be favorably received by God the Father. Union with the visible Head of the Mystical Body is essential in the Church. In the Acts of the Apostles, when King Herod imprisoned St. Peter with the intention of killing him, *earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church*. [7] The result was the freeing of the apostle by an angel.

St. Paul also offers us a marvelous example of union with the head. In this Pauline year, it is very opportune to recall this, as the Pope pointed out in the solemn liturgy for the two Holy Apostles. Referring to a common image in Christian

iconography that shows the two apostles embracing, he said: "in the New Testament writings we can, so to speak, follow the development of their embrace, this creation of unity in witness and mission. Everything begins when Paul, three years after his conversion, goes to Jerusalem 'to visit Cephas' (*Gal* 1:18). Fourteen years later he went up to Jerusalem again to lay 'before those who were of repute' the Gospel he was preaching...At the end of this encounter, James, Cephas and John shake hands with him, thus confirming the communion that links them in the one Gospel of Jesus Christ (cf. *Gal* 2:9).

"The fact that the co-workers mentioned at the end of the First Letter of Peter—Silvanus and Mark—were likewise close co-workers of St. Paul is a beautiful sign of the growth of this inner embrace, which grew despite the diversity of their

temperaments and tasks. The communion of the one Church is clearly shown by the embrace of the great apostles, by their cooperation."[8]

The two apostles offered the supreme testimony to Christ in Rome through their martyrdom. "St. Paul's desire to go to Rome places emphasis—as we have seen—on the word *catholic*. St. Peter's journey to Rome, as representative of the world's peoples, comes especially under the word *one*: his task was to create the *unity* of the...Church formed by Jews and pagans, the Church of all the peoples. And this is Peter's ongoing mission: to ensure that the Church is never identified with a single nation, with a single culture or with a single state but is always the Church of all; to ensure that she reunites humanity over and above every boundary and, in the midst of the divisions of this

world, makes God's peace present, the reconciling power of his love."[9]

In the last years of his earthly life, St. Josemaría insisted that it was a time to pray and to make reparation; and a time to give thanks, because God's help is never lacking. We have to continue doing likewise, filled with optimism and confidence. For as our Father graphically assured us, "*non est abbreviata manus Domini*, (Is 59:1): the arm of the Lord has not been shortened. God is no less powerful today than he was in other times; his love for mankind is no less true."[10] We Christians have to collaborate by our prayer and expiation, by our work carried out as perfectly as possible, in union with the Sacrifice of the Altar. "If we draw close to God in prayer, we will go forward with a clear gaze that will permit us to perceive the action of the Holy Spirit, even in the face of

events we do not understand or that produce sighs or sorrow."[11]

What a good day March 19th is for Catholics to reaffirm our determination to walk close beside Christ, to renew our self-giving, to live close to him as did St. Joseph during his years in Nazareth!

Meditating on some other words of St. Josemaría, spoken back in 1964 in the context of prayer for the Church and the Roman Pontiff, will help us to celebrate this great feast better: "to defend the Church, to do good to souls, to co-redeem with Christ, to be good children of the Pope, I have no other recipe than this: holiness. You will tell me that it's difficult. Yes. But, at the same time, it's easy; it's within everyone's reach. All the souls redeemed by Christ have, along with the recipe, the medicine: we just have to want it."[12]

Soon after March ends, Holy Week begins: the liturgical commemoration of our Lord's triumph over death, the devil and sin. Let us never lose sight of this reality, especially when external or internal difficulties, which God sometimes permits, affect us more deeply. For "Christ is alive. This is the great truth which fills our faith with meaning. Jesus, who died on the Cross, has risen. He has triumphed over death; he has overcome sorrow, anguish and the power of darkness.

...

"Christ is alive. He is not someone who has gone, someone who existed for a time and then passed on, leaving us a wonderful example and a great memory.

"No, Christ is alive. Jesus is the Emmanuel: God with us. His resurrection shows us that God does not abandon his own. He promised

he would not: *Can a woman forget her baby that is still unweaned, pity no longer the son she bore in her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you (Is 49:14-15).* And he has kept his promise. His delight is still to be with the sons of men. (cf. *Prov 8:31*)."[13]

Let us always go to St. Josemaría's intercession, also on the 28th, the anniversary of his ordination as a priest. Let us ask him to help us share in his supernatural optimism, in his love for the world, so that we will know how to bring everywhere, with the assurance of God's children, the "beautiful battle of love and peace" to which God has convoked us. Let us recall that our Father, whose unconditional love for our Lord and his holy Church brought with it much suffering, used to say that the incomparable joy of divine filiation gave him the firm assurance, day after day, that Christ will

conquer, and that the Christian message will open a path among all men of good will. Let us be filled with confidence, *quia Deus nobiscum est!*, because God is with us.[14] And let us rely on the intercession of our beloved Don Alvaro, who left us for heaven—with his characteristic peace—on March 23, 1994.

Yesterday I returned from a quick trip to Budapest. There, as in so many other places, the spirit of the Work is opening up a path, bringing with it the love for the Church, for the Pope, and for all souls that characterizes it. Let us give a lot of thanks to God! Tonight I begin my retreat: help me, as I try each day to help all of you.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father

+ Javier

Rome, March 1, 2009

1. Benedicts XVI, words at the end of the Angelus, February 22, 2009.
2. Cf. Leo XIII, Encyclical *Quamquam Pluries*, August 15, 1889.
3. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptoris Custos*, August 15, 1989, no. 1.
4. *Mt* 18:19.
5. *Song* 6:4.
6. Benedict XVI, Homily at the Vespers of the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, January 25, 2006.
7. *Acts* 12:5
8. Benedict XVI, Homily on the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul, June 29, 2008.
9. *Ibid.*

10. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 130.
11. St. Josemaría, Homily "Loyalty to the Church," June 4, 1972, *In Love with the Church*, no. 13.
12. St. Josemaría, Notes taken from a meditation, May 28, 1964.
13. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 102.
14. Cf. *Rom* 8:31.

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