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Letter from the Prelate (September 2009)

Bishop Javier Echevarría highlights the feasts of our Lady celebrated this month, and assures us that Mary will obtain the graces we need to confront our daily struggle.

09/04/2009

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

We are beginning another month rich in feasts of our Lady. As always,

these celebrations bring joy to the hearts of those who know ourselves to be her children. For me, this month also contains special memories because it was on September 8th, feast of the Nativity of our Lady, that I asked for admission to Opus Dei. I have always considered this (as everyone has experienced) a special caress from our Mother on her feast day.

On one occasion, when commenting on the call of the Three Kings who made their way to Bethlehem led by a star, our Father assured us: "We have had the same experience. We too noticed a new light shining in our soul and growing increasingly brighter. It was a desire to live a fully Christian life, a keenness to take God seriously. If each one of you were to tell aloud the intimate details of how his vocation made itself felt, the rest of us would conclude immediately that it was all God's doing. Let us give

thanks to God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and to Holy Mary, through whom all blessings from heaven come to us, for this gift which, along with our faith, is the greatest the Lord can bestow on any of his creatures. It is a clear desire to attain the fullness of charity, the conviction that sanctity is not only possible but necessary in the midst of our social and professional tasks."[1]

St. Bernard, that impassioned singer of Mary, expressed it admirably in one of his sermons dedicated to our Lady: "If the sun ceased to illumine the world," he wrote, "how could we have daylight. Take away Mary, star of the sea, a sea that is undoubtedly great and immense, and what would remain but a darkness that would hide everything, a shadow of death and thickest night. From the deepest recesses of our soul, with all the affection of our heart and the desire of our will, let us venerate Mary,

because that is the will of the Lord who wanted us to receive everything through Mary."[2]

Spiritual tradition has called Mary the *all-powerful Suppliant*, because whatever she asks her Son for is infallibly granted to us. Our Lady knows very well what will further the glory of God and our own spiritual well-being, and this is precisely what she beseeches God for us. Let us go to her intercession then with a lot of confidence and tenacity during this month that—as I already mentioned—is adorned with Marian celebrations. From each of these feasts we can draw out—as bees do from all the flowers—the ingredients needed to produce, with God's help, the honey, the spiritual nourishment that, as small children, we all need. Our Mother herself encourages us, with the inspired words that the liturgy places on her lips: *I am the mother of fair love, and of fear, and of*

knowledge, and of holy hope. In me is all grace of the way and of the truth, in me is all hope of life and of virtue. Come over to me, all ye that desire me, and be filled with my fruits. For my spirit is sweet above honey, and my inheritance above honey and the honeycomb.[3]

Faced with so great a treasure, let us ask ourselves if we go frequently to our Mother throughout the day, in our great and small needs. Does that tender invocation, "Mother, my Mother!", come often to our heart and lips, as it did continuously for our Father? Do we call on her with the urgency and abandonment of a child in need of a mother's care?

The first Marian feast this month is the Nativity of our Lady, on September 8. We have often considered the fact that, with Mary's birth, the day of salvation began to dawn on earth, because from her

ortus est sol iustitiae, Christus Deus noster: Christ was born, the Sun of Justice, our God and Saviour.[4] The prophets had foreseen that memorable day, and the Church highlights it by choosing as the first reading of the Mass a passage from Micah about Bethlehem, the city where the Messiah was to be born As the Pope points out: "The Messiah, the oracle says, was to be a descendant of King David, like him a native of Bethlehem but a figure who would exceed human limitations. His 'origin,' it says, are 'from ancient times,' lost in the most remote ages, at the frontier of eternity. His greatness would reach 'to the ends of the earth,' as would also his peace (cf. *Mi* 5:1-4)."[5] And Benedict XVI continues: "The coming of the 'Lord's anointed,' who was to mark the beginning of the people's liberation, was described by the prophet with an enigmatic expression: 'until the time when she who is in travail has

brought forth' (*Mi* 5:3). Thus the Liturgy—which is a privileged school of the faith—teaches us to see in Mary's birth a direct connection with that of the Messiah, Son of David."[6]

In the mysterious words of Micah we can see an allusion to Isaiah's prophecy, which the Gospel applies to Mary: *ecce, virgo concipiet et pariet filium et vocabit nomen eius Emmanuel*. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel.[7] These words would be fulfilled at the moment of the Annunciation, when the divine Word took flesh in the most pure womb of our Lady, by the action of the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel reading presents us with the long passage from St. Matthew of Jesus' genealogy, and concludes with the announcement of our Lord's conception. "It presents the history of

Israel from Abraham onwards as a pilgrimage which, with its ups and downs, its paths and detours, leads us finally to Christ." [8] In this long list of figures from the Old Testament, together with men and women who were faithful to God, there is no lack of others who did not behave in this way. We find there the great Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who responded loyally to the divine demands, and also leaders, kings and common people who were great sinners. Some of them repented, others did not. And the same is true of the women: along with Ruth, beloved by God, others are mentioned who offended him. Benedict XVI emphasizes that "the genealogy with its light and dark figures, its successes and failures, shows us that God can write straight even on the crooked lines of our history. God allows us our freedom, and yet in our failures he can always find new paths for his love. God does

not fail. Hence this genealogy is a guarantee of God's faithfulness; a guarantee that God does not allow us to fall, and an invitation to direct our lives ever anew towards him, to walk ever anew towards Jesus Christ."[9]

This is one of the teachings that St. Josemaría invited us to draw from this passage. "The evangelists couldn't write down everything they knew about Jesus, since they would have needed many volumes to exhaustively record his words and deeds. Nevertheless, among the scenes that they select, there are some that reflect badly on the apostles themselves. But all contain a lesson." [10] And he went on to say: "Let us once again consider Jesus' genealogy. There we find men and women—ancestors of Joseph and Mary—who at times weren't very exemplary. Surely the Mother of God wants us to realize that she, being all pure—Immaculate!—will accept us

with our stains. When we draw close to Mary and Jesus, with a clean conscience, with an upright will, then nothing that has happened in the past matters. We can begin our life anew. Therefore throughout the day we have to frequently rectify our intention."[11]

These considerations, during this Year of the Priesthood, invite us to encourage—also among confessors—a broad apostolate of the need for the Sacrament of Reconciliation and to give thanks for this means of gaining forgiveness for our sins that God has granted to the Church. We should be filled with optimism and serenity, because God does not tire of our weaknesses, although he does not want them. Neither our sins, nor our defects, when we are sorry for them and ask for pardon, going if necessary to the sacrament of Penance, can separate us from him. Our Lord wants to draw us

constantly to his love through his mercy.

I stress once again, with word from St. Josemaría: "I want us always to have this perspective in our struggle. We can never forget that in our interior life we have to fight without becoming discouraged. We can't lose heart when we see the need, not once but many times, to rectify our course in our service to God." [12]

Four days after our Lady's Nativity, on September 12, the feast of the Holy Name of Mary is celebrated. What joy we feel in calling our Mother by her name! We should always keep Mary in our heart and on our lips, but especially when our soul is shaken by the winds of temptations and obstacles, which God may permit in order to foster our humility and awaken our total trust in his omnipotence.

During those moments of trial, perhaps a certain discouragement will come that may even diminish our eagerness to continue fighting. Then we have to look with greater effort, perseveringly, to the *Stella Maris*, to our Lady, Star of the Sea. Let us listen once again to St. Bernard, in a well known passage of his: "If the winds of temptation arise, if you encounter the reefs of tribulation, look to the star, call upon Mary . . . You will not go astray if you follow her, you will not despair if you call out to her, you will not be lost if you think of her. If she takes you by the hand, you will not fall; if she protects you, you will have nothing to fear; you will not become tired if she guides you; you will reach the goal safely if she watches over you. And you will experience for yourself why it was said: *and the Virgin's name was Mary* (Lk 1:27)."[13]

With our Lady's powerful help we will always be victorious, although at times we may experience defeat in the skirmishes of our daily struggle. Mary never tires of watching over us, and when she hears her name on our lips she hurries immediately to protect us. "Mother! Call her, cry out to her. She is listening; she sees you in danger perhaps, and she, your holy Mother Mary, offers you, with her Son's grace, the refuge of her arms, the tenderness of her embrace. And you will find yourself with added strength for the struggle ahead." [14]

The feast of our Lady beside the Cross, on September 15, speaks to us of the value of silent and hidden sacrifice. Let us admire and meditate on her strength in the hour of suffering and sadness. "Jesus is comforted anew by the quiet, loving presence of his Mother. Mary does not shout; she does not run about

frantically. *Stabat*: she is there, standing next to her Son." [15] My daughters and sons, shouldn't this teach us that being courageous in persevering close to the Cross, close to Christ on the Cross, is the condition and guarantee of abundant supernatural fruit? The memory of our Lady's response has to help us to rectify at the hour of physical or moral suffering, even when the temptation to rebel tries to worm its way into our soul. I invite you to renew then our Father's resolution, which helped him to carry out the mission God had entrusted to him: "Is that what you want, Lord?... Then I want it too!" [16]

Besides, how can we fail to recall on that day our beloved Don Alvaro? Let us invoke his intercession on this new anniversary of his naming as our Father's first successor, so that he may obtain for us from God the serenity, the peace of soul, that he

spread around him at all times, but especially in moments of tension or difficulty.

Finally, on September 24 we have the liturgical memorial of Our Lady of Ransom [*Nuestra Señora de la Merced*], an avocation that St. Josemaría had recourse to at moments that were crucial in the Work's history, certain that she would win the graces, the "*mercedes*," that he needed to serve souls better. Let us go to her, under that very maternal title, asking for the supernatural gifts needed now by the Church and by this little portion of the Church that is Opus Dei, and also by each and every one of us. Let us not forget to beseech God stubbornly during this Year for Priests (I stress this deliberately) for priestly vocations, and for the sanctity of all sacred ministers.

In your prayer, reserve a special place for your Associate brothers upon whom I will confer priestly ordination in Torreciudad on September 6. And as I remind you every month, keep very present in your daily prayer the Pope and all those who assist him in governing the Church. Let us pray with greater fervor the petition *Dominus conservet eum, et vivificet eum, et beatum faciat eum in terra*, which we raise up every day to heaven in our Preces.[17] Let us accompany him, in a special way, during the trip he plans to make to the Czech Republic, from the 26th to the 28th of this month.

I was united to all of you in praying before the images of Our Lady of Providence, in Puerto Rico, and of Guadalupe, in Mexico. I also had the opportunity (we all did) to spend time before the triptych in the Cathedral of Cologne where St.

Josemaría celebrated Holy Mass a number of times and gave thanks for the Sacrifice of Calvary, adoring God and grasping firmly the hand of the all-powerful Suppliant, our Mother Holy Mary.

My daughters and sons, in the countries where we are working apostolically an abundant and joyful work of souls awaits us. Therefore I want to communicate to you that on this past August 15, upon renewing the consecration of Opus Dei to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I told our Mother that we want to make our own St. Josemaría's petition in Loreto back in 1951, so that zeal for all of humanity consumes us every day.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father

+ Javier

Pamplona, September 1, 2009

1. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 32.

2. St. Bernard, Homily on the Nativity of our Lady (Sermon "on the aqueduct").

3. *Sir* 24:24-27

4. Roman Missal, Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, *Entrance Antiphon*.

5. Benedict XVI, Homily at the Shrine of Our Lady of Bonaria (Cagliari), September 7, 2008

6. *Ibid*.

7. *Is* 7:14; *Mt* 1:23.

8. Benedict XVI, Homily on the feast of the Nativity of our Lady, September 8, 2007.

9. *Ibid*.

10. St. Josemaría, Notes taken in a meditation, September 8, 1966.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. St. Bernard, *Homily 2 on the Annunciation*, 17.

14. St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 516.

15. St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 288.

16. St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 762.

17. Cf. *Ps* 40 (41): 3.