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Letter on Lent from the Prelate of Opus Dei

Bishop Javier Echevarría wrote this pastoral letter on the occasion of the beginning of Lent.

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Lent is “a privileged time of interior pilgrimage towards the One who is the fount of mercy. It is a pilgrimage on which He himself accompanies us through the desert of our poverty, sustaining us on our journey towards

the deep joy of Easter” (Pope Benedict XVI, Message for Lent 2006).

Through its insistent invitation to prepare ourselves for the Easter celebrations, the liturgy in the upcoming days urges us to pray with greater intensity and constancy, to be more generous in offering mortifications and in carrying out works of mercy. This last point is the aspect that Pope Benedict XVI wanted to emphasize in his Message, in choosing as his theme the Gospel verse: “When he saw the crowds he had compassion for them” (Mt 9:36). We can and should apply these words of St. Matthew to our daily lives, characterized by constant contact with a wide variety of people: in our family, at work, when resting, in social relationships....

The Holy Father reminds us that we have to strive, in all moments, to look upon others as our Lord looked upon

them and try to help them. We need to see, in those around us, without excluding anyone, souls redeemed by the precious Blood of Jesus Christ (Cf. 1 Cor 6:20). Just as twenty centuries ago, “Christ’s compassionate “look” continues to fall upon individuals and peoples, knowing that the divine plan includes their call to salvation. Jesus knows the perils that put this plan at risk, and He is moved with pity for the crowds. He chooses to defend them from the wolves even at the cost of his own life. Jesus’ gaze embraces individuals and multitudes, and he brings them all before the Father, offering Himself as a sacrifice of expiation” (Pope Benedict XVI, Message for Lent 2006). When dwelling physically among us, the Word incarnate fixed his eyes directly on those who followed him. Now, from the tabernacle and from heaven, he makes use of his disciples, of you and of me, to direct his

merciful look upon every man and woman.

We always have to be thinking about the others, trying to bring them to God. But in the coming weeks, when we are also preparing for the approaching solemnity of St. Joseph, we have to redouble our apostolic zeal. We only need to consider what we see every day, in those closest to us and in the whole world, to discover the urgent need for Christ's charity that exists everywhere.

When confronting the violent episodes that we see in so many nations, we Christians cannot retaliate by committing other offenses or mistreating anyone. To confront the challenge of the problems of human coexistence, whether great or small, the solution consists in loving more, in loving better, in accord with St. Paul's exhortation: "Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is

noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God...No, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom12:17-21).

St. Josemaría, from very early on, summarized this teaching of St. Paul in an incisive phrase, saying that we have to "drown evil in an abundance of good" (Furrow, no. 864). And he specified: "It is not a question of negative campaigns, or of being anti anything. On the contrary, we should live positively, full of optimism, with youthfulness, joy and peace. We should be understanding with everybody, with the followers of Christ and with those who abandon him, or do not know him at all (Ibid.)

This attitude has nothing to do with passivity or defeatism:

“understanding does not mean holding back, or remaining indifferent, but being active” (Ibid.)

As members of civil society, we Christians should defend our rights as citizens, and also the rights of others, with all the licit means at our disposal, without aggressiveness but without ceding or compromising in what affects the common good of individuals or nations. Now, when in many places a militant secularism is being paraded, it is especially important that those who recognize the natural moral law unite in defense of these values, whatever one's personal beliefs.

Thanks be to God, in many places forces that were sleeping are awakening, and many people are leaving behind their individualism to take an active part in the great cultural and social battles of our

time. How are you making use of your personal freedom? Are you taking part in these noble initiatives in accord with your possibilities? Are you trying to mobilize others, telling them that they cannot remain closed up in their shell, but that they have to make a decision to openly defend the rights of God and the inalienable rights of the human person?

This mobilization can be seen as a permanent strategy. At the same time, since it is a matter of fostering deep and lasting changes, personal commitment takes on vital importance here. In the heart of each person decisive battles for the betterment of society are waged, as the Gospel teaches us: "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander" (Mt 15:19). St. Paul sets out a specific program, very much in harmony with the spirit of Lent: "Let love be genuine," he

writes, “hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality” (Rom 12:9-13).

It is a matter, in short, of carrying out a great sowing of charity in human hearts and in social structures. As Pope Benedict XVI pointed out in his first encyclical, “love—caritas—will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such. There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be loneliness. There will always be situations of

material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbor is indispensable” (Deus Caritas Est, no. 28). We all need to feel this specific concern for those who live alongside us, a clear sign of true love for God; because “he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 Jn 4:20).

St. Josemaría taught us that, for this concern to be upright and effective, we need to empty ourselves of our own ego, sincerely taking on as our own the concerns, joys and sufferings of our fellow men and women, and specifically of those closest to us by reason of a common vocation, family ties, profession, etc. Perhaps there will come to your lips the exclamation, “It’s very difficult,” words that we find in Furrow. Recall St. Josemaría’s answer and try to put it into practice: “Listen, if you make an effort, with the grace of God that

is enough. You will put your own interests to one side, you will serve others for God, and you will come to the aid of the Church in the field where the battles are being fought today: in the street, in the factory, in the workshop, in the university, in the office, in your own surroundings, amongst your family and friends” (Furrow, no. 14).

Pope Benedict XVI points out that, at the outset, one’s love is usually conditioned by motives such as one’s own enjoyment, self-fulfillment, or even personal advantage. Therefore it needs to be purified, and one must undertake “a path of ascent, renunciation, purification and healing” (Deus Caritas Est, no. 5). Only thus can the initial imperfect love become the love of a true self-giving, which forgets about itself because it is a reflection of Christ’s love for humanity. “When Jesus speaks in his parables of the

shepherd who goes after the lost sheep, of the woman who looks for the lost coin, of the father who goes to meet and embrace his prodigal son, these are no mere words: they constitute an explanation of his very being and activity. His death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form” (Ibid., no. 12). Saint Josemaría taught us to look at the Crucifix with piety, because “Jesus on the cross, with his heart overflowing with love for men, is such an eloquent commentary on the value of people and things that words only get in the way. Men, their happiness and their life, are so important that the very Son of God gave himself to redeem and cleanse and raise them up” (Christ Is Passing By, no. 165).

As we approach the solemnity of St. Joseph, after having meditated on his sorrows and joys, let us consider the complete loyalty that we have to put into whatever we do. Ask our Father to engrave on each of our souls, the “psychological prejudice” of always thinking about God and the others, for we are never alone. Let us learn from the Holy Patriarch to serve joyfully, loving our Lord’s will and striving to live a refined charity with all souls.

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