

**(Letter from the Prelate: February 2013)**

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

On considering God's immense love for mankind, shown above all in the mystery of the Incarnation, "we are deeply moved." This is how our Father begins his homily *Towards Holiness*,<sup>1</sup> and I think that we too want to react in this way when we recite the Creed. How great is our gratitude when we affirm that the eternal Word of God took flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, through the action of the Holy Spirit, and became man! When reciting these words we bow deeply (and twice each year, we kneel), "for the veil that concealed God is lifted, as it were, and his unfathomable and inaccessible mystery touches us: God becomes the Emmanuel, 'God-with-us.' When we hear the Masses written by the great composers of sacred music," the Holy Father said in a recent audience, "we immediately notice how they pause on this phrase in a special way, as if they were trying to express in the universal language of music what words cannot convey: the great mystery of God who took flesh, who was made man."<sup>2</sup>

In the previous weeks, helped by the liturgy, we followed the steps of Jesus on earth: first in the workshop at Nazareth and later along the roads of Judea and Galilee. Now I suggest, in meditating on this great mystery of God made man, that we pause to consider the various moments of our Lord's earthly life. For Jesus not only had a true human birth in Bethlehem, but he walked among us for more than thirty years, leading a fully human life. St. Josemaría urged us to thank him for having taken on our flesh, assuming it with all its consequences. And he insisted: "God has not clothed himself in human form: he has become incarnate."<sup>3</sup> The Second Vatican Council reminds us that the Son of God "worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin."<sup>4</sup>

When considering our Lord's life, it is very important "to recover our wonder at the mystery, to let ourselves be enveloped by the grandeur of this event: God, the true God, Creator of all, walked our roads as a man, entering human time to communicate his own life to us (cf. *Jn* 1:1-4)."<sup>5</sup> Let us delve more deeply then, with the help of grace, into the consequences of the reality that God has become a perfect man. Jesus gives us an example of how we should behave at every moment—in accord with the dignity he has won for us—as true daughters and sons of God. Throughout the liturgical year, we will call to mind once again, with new meaning, his principal teachings. Let us strive to assimilate them personally, to reproduce them in our daily life: this is the sure way—there is no other—to attain the holiness to which our Lord calls all Christians. He himself said in the Gospel: *I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 294.

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, January 2, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> St. Josemaría, Notes taken from a meditation, December 25, 1972.

<sup>4</sup> Vatican II, Pastoral const. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, January 9, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> *Jn* 14:6.

While still quite young, St. Josemaría taught those who drew close to his pastoral work (and also those he himself sought out to bring them to our Lord, since the apostolate has no room for pauses) the path for following Christ in one's ordinary life. God granted him a special light to discern the salvific content of Christ's life in Nazareth, which, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, "allows everyone to enter into fellowship with Jesus by the most ordinary events of daily life."<sup>7</sup> Benedict XVI stated this expressly in recognizing that our Founder's conduct and writings reflect with special strength a ray of the divine life contained in the Gospel, precisely in teaching that holiness can and should be attained in the normal circumstances of Christian life,<sup>8</sup> made up of hours of work, of dedication to one's family, of professional and social relationships....

God placed in St. Josemaría's heart "the desire to help people of every condition and background to understand that ordinary life can be holy and full of God. Our Lord is calling us to sanctify the ordinary tasks of every day, for the perfection of the Christian is to be found precisely there."<sup>9</sup> And he inspired him to found Opus Dei, *a way of sanctification in daily work and in the fulfillment of the Christian's ordinary duties*.<sup>10</sup> His spirit is a sure guide for those who want to find Christ, to follow him and love him in the midst of earthly realities, in all the crossroads of the world.

The mystery of the Incarnation speaks to us of God's self-giving to all mankind. The divine Word "in taking flesh...wanted to make a gift of himself to men and women, he gave himself for us...he took on our humanity to give his divinity to us. This is the great gift. In our giving too," explains the Holy Father, "it does not matter whether or not a gift is expensive; those who cannot manage to give a little of themselves always give too little. Indeed, at times we even seek to substitute money or material things for our hearts and the commitment to giving ourselves. The mystery of the Incarnation shows that God did not do this: he did not give some *thing* but he gave himself in his Only-Begotten Son."<sup>11</sup> And he expects the same from each one of us.

In the middle of the month we will begin Lent, a time especially suited to reviewing our behavior and seeing whether we are being generous towards God and towards others for God. In the second reading for Ash Wednesday, the Apostle to the Gentiles tells us on God's part: *In an acceptable time I heard you, and on the day of salvation I helped you. Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation*.<sup>12</sup> Later in the same letter he encourages us to serve God at every moment *in much patience; in tribulations, in hardships, in distress...in labors, in sleepless nights, in fastings; in innocence, in knowledge, in long-sufferings; in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in unaffected love*.<sup>13</sup>

"These words of the Apostle," writes St. Josemaría, "should make you happy, for they are, as it were, a ratification of your vocation as ordinary Christians in the middle of the world, sharing with other men—your equals—the enthusiasms, the sorrows and the joys of human life. All this is a way to God. What God asks of you is that you should, always, act as his children and servants.

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<sup>7</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 533.

<sup>8</sup> See Benedict XVI, Apostolic exhort. *Verbum Domini*, September 30, 2010, no. 48.

<sup>9</sup> St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 148.

<sup>10</sup> Prayer to St. Josemaría.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, January 9, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Roman Missal, Ash Wednesday, Second Reading (2 Cor 6:2).

<sup>13</sup> 2 Cor 6:4-6.

“But these ordinary circumstances of life will be a divine way only if we really change ourselves, if we really give ourselves. For St. Paul uses hard words. He promises that the Christian will have a hard life, a life of risk and of constant tension. How we disfigure Christianity if we try to turn it into something nice and comfortable! But neither is it true to think that this deep, serious way of life, which is totally bound up with all the difficulties of human existence, is something full of anguish, oppression or fear.

“The Christian is a realist. His supernatural and human realism helps him appreciate all the aspects of his life: sorrow and joy, his own and other people’s suffering, certainty and doubt, generosity and selfishness. The Christian experiences all this, and he confronts it all, with human integrity and with the strength he receives from God.”<sup>14</sup>

Before continuing, I think we need to pause and consider: Am I preparing to live these weeks in a penitential way? Do I want to share deeply in the holocaust of Jesus? Do I reject all fear of mortification?

It is only when we give this Christian focus to the ups and downs of our life (as I just mentioned, citing our Father), to the frequent suffering and the limits of our state as creatures, that we can understand deeply the reality of the human condition. In order to find meaning in the worries and even anguish we may confront in life—pain, unemployment, sickness, death—we need a sincere faith in God’s infinite love. It is only in the light of the Incarnate Word that everything in our life finds meaning. “With the Incarnation of the Son of God a new creation was brought about that gave the complete answer to the question ‘who is man?’ God’s plan for the human being was fully manifest in Jesus alone.”<sup>15</sup>

This was clearly expressed by the last ecumenical Council: “In reality, it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear. For Adam, the first man, was a type of him who was to come, Christ the Lord. Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling.”<sup>16</sup>

My daughters and sons, I insist once again: let us strive to draw a lot of benefit from the reading of the Gospel; and, to do so, let us meditate deeply on the episodes of our Lord’s life. St. Josemaría always asked us not to read those passages as though they were foreign to us, but to put ourselves into the scenes as “one more person” there: with our weaknesses and our desires to improve, marveling at Christ’s Holy Humanity and relying on his divine strength.

“To follow Christ—that is the secret. We must accompany him so closely that we come to live with him, like the first twelve did; so closely, that we become identified with him. Soon we will be able to say, provided we haven’t put obstacles in the way of grace, that we have put on, have clothed ourselves with our Lord Jesus Christ (see *Rom* 13-14). Our Lord is then reflected in our behavior, as in a mirror. If the mirror is as it ought to be it will capture our Savior’s most lovable face without distorting it or making a caricature of it; and then other people will have an opportunity of admiring him and following him.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 60.

<sup>15</sup> Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, January 9, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Vatican II, Pastoral const. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22.

<sup>17</sup> St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 299.

In the first weeks of ordinary time, and then in Lent, the Church presents us with scenes in which both our Lord's divinity and humanity stand out. Along with the great miracles that show forth his divine nature, we also witness the reality of his human nature: he suffered hunger and thirst, he became physically exhausted by the long journeys from place to place, he was filled with joy on encountering hearts open to grace, and was filled with sorrow when others refused to accept him. Commenting on one of those scenes, for example, St. Josemaría exclaimed: "He was hungry. The Maker of the universe, the Lord of all creation, experiences hunger! Thank you, Lord, for inspiring the sacred author to include this small touch here, a detail that makes me love you more and which encourages me to desire ardently to contemplate your sacred Humanity! *Perfectus Deus, perfectus homo* (Athanasian Creed), perfect God and perfect Man, of flesh and bone, just like you and I."<sup>18</sup>

If we persevere on this path, from Nazareth right to the Cross, the doors of divine life will open to us in all fullness. For by drawing close to Christ as man, we will learn to draw close to Christ as God and, in him and through him, to the Father and the Holy Spirit: to the triune God. Our Founder assured us that, on the path of holiness, a moment comes when the heart feels the need "to distinguish and adore each one of the divine Persons. The soul is, as it were, making a discovery in the supernatural life, like a little child opening his eyes to the world about him. The soul spends time lovingly with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and readily submits to the work of the life-giving Paraclete, who gives himself to us with no merit on our part, bestowing his gifts and the supernatural virtues!"<sup>19</sup>

And St. Josemaría added: "Asceticism? Mysticism? I don't mind what you call it. Whichever it is, asceticism or mysticism, does not matter. Either way, it is a gift of God's mercy. If you try to meditate, our Lord will not deny you his assistance. Faith and deeds of faith are what matter: deeds, because, as you have known from the beginning and as I told you clearly at the time, the Lord demands more from us each day. This is already contemplation and union. This is the way many Christians should live, each one forging ahead along his own spiritual path (there are countless paths) in the midst of the cares of the world, even though he may not even realize what is happening to him."<sup>20</sup>

In the middle of this month, almost coinciding with the beginning of Lent, we have the anniversary of those two interventions by God in the Work's path: February 14th of 1930 and 1943. With the second, it is now seventy years since Heaven drew close to Opus Dei in this way! On that day of thanksgiving we would like our prayer to reach God through the hands of the Most Blessed Virgin, our Mother, whom we venerate especially with the title of *Mater Pulchrae Dilectionis*, Mother of Fairest Love, with which the Church honors her and which our Father liked so much.

A few days later, the 19th, was our beloved Don Alvaro's saint's day. Knowing the Church has recognized that he practiced all the virtues in a heroic way, we go to his intercession, asking God that we too will know how to faithfully follow the path of our Christian vocation, seeking, finding and loving Jesus Christ in the circumstances that make up each of our days. Thanks be to God, the history of the Work also has other anniversaries, to which, I am sure, you will give all the relevance they had when they occurred. As our Father advised, let us never allow them to

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 50

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 306.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 308.

become mere memories, as though they were events in the past, now consigned to history.

With all my affection, I bless you and ask for your prayers

Your Father

+ Javier

Rome, February 1, 2013