

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

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

I am moved on dating this letter March 1, the first day of the *sede vacante* in the Church following the resignation of Benedict XVI from the Supreme Pontificate. Since he announced this decision, on February 11, some words of the prophet have come frequently to my mind: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways . . . For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*<sup>1</sup>

We are experiencing this once again at the present moment, as though to make it clear, if it were necessary, that the Paraclete is the one guiding the Church. Our Lord needs (he has wanted it that way) human instruments who make him visible before the community of believers. But it is always He, Jesus, the Supreme Pastor, who cares for the pastors and the faithful: he strengthens them in the faith, he defends them from dangers, he illumines them with his light, he provides the nourishment they need so as not to grow faint on their pilgrimage towards their homeland in heaven.

Therefore right away there also came to my heart those words of Jesus, spoken to the apostles and disciples of all times, when the moment was approaching for his bodily departure from this world: *I will not leave you orphans . . . I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever.*<sup>2</sup> Our Lord does not want us to be orphans. When he ascended to the right hand of the Father, the Master conferred on Peter the tiller of his barque. And this chain of conferral continues, because after one pontificate comes another, in accord with Christ's promise to Simon: *And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*<sup>3</sup> Christ's words can never fail. But—along with all Catholics—we have to pray, pray, and pray, as I suggested to your brothers and sisters as soon as I heard this news. God counts on our prayer for the conclave that will assemble within a few days and for the new Roman Pontiff our Lord, in his providence, has prepared.

I transcribe for you what our Father said in moments of *sede vacante*, in 1958: “I would like to speak to you once more about the upcoming election of the Holy Father. You know, my sons, the love that we have for the Pope. After Jesus and Mary, we love the Pope with all the strength of our soul, whoever he may be. Therefore, we already love the Roman Pontiff who is to come. We are determined to serve him with our whole life.

“Pray, and offer to our Lord even your moments of relaxation. We offer even this for the Pope who is to come, just as we have offered the Mass during all these days, just as we have offered...even our breathing.”<sup>4</sup>

As we await filled with hope for the result of the conclave, we thank the Blessed Trinity for the eight years of Benedict XVI's pontificate, during which he has illumined the Church and the

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<sup>1</sup> *Is* 55:8-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Jn* 14:18 and 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Mt* 16:18.

<sup>4</sup> St. Josemaría, Notes from a family gathering, October 26, 1958.

world in a marvelous way through his magisterium. I will not stop to describe the various fields in which he has exercised it. I will only note how he has invited everyone—believers and non-believers, with new strength and great clarity—to rediscover God, Creator and Redeemer of the world, who is Love above all, and to value the human person as created in the image of God, and therefore worthy of all respect. He has emphasized how faith and reason, far from being opposed to one another, can work together to give a greater knowledge of God and a deeper understanding of man. He has shown how it is possible to aspire to divine friendship, stressing the deep meaning of adoring Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, truly present in the Holy Eucharist. He has decisively spurred forward ecumenism, with his eyes set on the longed-for union of Christians. He has indicated the path for a true renewal of the Church, following the guidelines of the Second Vatican Council in faithful continuity with the Church's Tradition and Magisterium throughout the ages.

For these and many other services it isn't possible to mention now, Christians—and all men and women of good will—have acquired a debt of gratitude towards Benedict XVI; it is a debt we can pay back only by praying for him and his intentions, in response to what he has assured us he will do for us. I think that, in these moments, we have realized that we loved him a lot and want to continue doing so: because only with love can we repay the faithful fatherhood with which he has watched over us. Let us take advantage of these circumstances to ask ourselves: Am I trying to make the aspiration *omnes cum Petro ad Iesum per Mariam* a reality every day? How ardently and attentively do I say the prayer of the *Preces* for the Pope?

In accord with the suggestions of the Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei*, let us continue considering the articles of the Creed in this Year of Faith. I invite you to go more deeply into another of the truths that we profess every Sunday. After declaring our faith in the Incarnation, we are led to recall the Passion, Death and Burial of our Lord Jesus: historical events that really occurred at a particular place and time, as certified not only by the Gospels, but by many other sources. At the same time, these true events, by their significance and their effects, surpass mere historical coordinates, since they are salvific events, that is, bearers of the salvation carried out by the Redeemer.

Our Lord's Passion and Death, as well as his Resurrection, foretold in the Old Testament, have a unique supernatural purpose and meaning. It was not any man, but the Son of God made man, the Word incarnate, who offered himself on the Cross for all men and women, in expiation of our sins. And that unique sacrifice of reconciliation becomes present on our altars, in a sacramental way, each time holy Mass is celebrated: how great should be our piety each day when celebrating or taking part in the Holy Sacrifice!

Let us meditate calmly on the Creed. The so-called "Symbol of the Apostles," which we could especially pray during Lent, affirms that our Lord Jesus Christ *suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried, descended into hell, and on the third day arose from the dead.*<sup>5</sup> The same thing, with slight variations, is taught by the symbol of faith that we habitually pray in the Mass, following the formulation of the first ecumenical Councils. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that "Jesus' violent death was not the result of chance in an unfortunate coincidence of circumstances, but is part of the mystery of God's plan, as St. Peter explains to the Jews of Jerusalem in his first sermon on Pentecost: 'This Jesus [was]

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<sup>5</sup> The Roman Missal, the Apostles Creed.

delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God' (*Acts* 2:23)."<sup>6</sup>

Jesus himself said: For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father.<sup>7</sup> Thus "the abyss of malice which sin opens wide has been bridged by his infinite charity. God did not abandon men . . . Christ's whole life, from his birth in Bethlehem, was filled with a burning desire to carry out the saving decree of God the Father. Throughout the three years his disciples lived with him, they constantly heard him say that his food was to do the will of him who sent him (cf. *Jn* 4:34). And so it was, right up to the afternoon of the first Good Friday when his sacrifice was completed. *Bowing his head, he gave up his spirit* (*Jn* 19:30). That is how St. John the Apostle describes Christ's death. Jesus dies on the cross beneath the weight of all the faults of men, crushed by the sheer force and wickedness of our sins."<sup>8</sup>

What gratitude should be ours towards our Lord, for the unbounded love he has shown us! He offered the sacrifice of his life freely and for love, not only for humanity as a whole but for each and every one of us, as St. Paul says: *dilexit me et tradidit seipsum pro me*,<sup>9</sup> he loved me and gave himself up to death for me. The same apostle, using a strong expression, points to the immensity of Christ's redemptive love when he says: *For our sake he* [God the Father] *made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*.<sup>10</sup>

As Benedict XVI said in an audience: "How marvelous and at the same time surprising this mystery is! We can never sufficiently meditate on this reality. In spite of being God, Jesus does not want to make his divine prerogative an exclusive possession; he does not want to use his being as God, his glorious dignity and his power, as an instrument of triumph and a sign of remoteness from us. On the contrary, 'he empties himself,' taking on the wretched and weak human condition."<sup>11</sup>

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: "In his plan of salvation, God ordained that his Son should not only 'die for our sins' (*1 Cor* 15:3), but should also 'taste death,' experience the condition of death, the separation of his soul from his body, between the time he expired on the cross and the time he was raised from the dead."<sup>12</sup> Thus is made clear, with even greater evidence, the reality of Jesus' death and the extension of the good news of salvation to the souls in "sheol" or "hell," the name given by Scripture to the state of all the dead, deprived of the vision of God because the Redemption had not yet been carried out. But that "descent" of Christ had unequal effects: "Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him:"<sup>13</sup> yet another sign of God's justice and mercy, which we have to value and be thankful for.

Holy Week is approaching; let us seek to apply to our own lives the scenes the liturgy moves

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<sup>6</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 599.

<sup>7</sup> *Jn* 10:17-18.

<sup>8</sup> St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 95.

<sup>9</sup> *Gal* 2:20.

<sup>10</sup> *2 Cor* 5:21.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, April 8, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 624.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 633.

us to consider. “Let us meditate on our Lord, wounded from head to foot out of love for us,”<sup>14</sup> St. Josemaría invites us. Let us meditate without hurry on the final moments of our Lord’s time on earth. “The tragedy of the passion brings to fulfillment our own life and the whole of human history. We can’t let Holy Week be just a kind of commemoration. It means contemplating the mystery of Jesus Christ as something which continues to work in our souls. The Christian is obliged to be *alter Christus, ipse Christus*: another Christ, Christ himself. Through baptism all of us have been made priests of our lives, *to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet 2:5)*. Everything we do can be an expression of our obedience to God’s will and so perpetuate the mission of the God-man.”<sup>15</sup>

Let us begin preparing ourselves to take part with deep devotion at the liturgy of the Easter Triduum. Each of us can also look for other specific ways to take better advantage of those days. Together with the many public manifestations of religious devotion, such as processions and penitential rites, let us not forget that “there is one pious practice, the ‘Way of the Cross,’ which offers us throughout the year the possibility of impressing the mystery of the Cross ever more deeply on our minds, of accompanying Christ along this path and thus being inwardly conformed to him.”<sup>16</sup>

Let us relive with piety during Lent the *via crucis*, each in the way that one finds most helpful: the important thing is to meditate with love and gratitude on the Passion of our Lord. From the prayer in Gethsemane to his death and burial, the Gospels offer us abundant material for personal prayer. The considerations of the saints and of many spiritual authors can also help us. Let us listen to the suggestion of St. Josemaría: “My Lord and my God, under the loving eyes of our Mother, we are making ready to accompany you along this path of sorrow, which was the price for our redemption.”<sup>17</sup> Let us be daring enough to say: “My Mother, Virgin of sorrows, help me to relive those bitter hours which your Son wished to spend on earth, so that we, who were made from a handful of clay, may finally live *in libertatem gloriae filiorum Dei*, in the freedom and glory of the children of God.”<sup>18</sup>

By doing so we will open our soul more and more widely to receive fruitfully the graces Jesus has brought us with his glorious Resurrection, and we will prepare the pontificate of the next Pope. Let us support with our prayers and sacrifices the task of the cardinals gathered in the conclave to elect the successor of St. Peter, whom we already love with all our soul: this intention could be a key for our presence of God during the time of *sede vacante*.

I want to add, in conclusion, that a few days ago I made a quick trip to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, where besides meeting with the faithful of the Prelature and with other people, I prayed (on two occasions physically and constantly in my heart during the trip) before the image of Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn, which is venerated with such great devotion in that land. I especially entrusted to Mary the present moment of the Church; you too were very present in my prayer. On my return to Rome, I began my retreat in the first week of Lent as I do every year. Also during those days I remembered each and every one of you, praying for your spiritual and material needs, especially those who are sick. Love very much—and watch over—the unity of

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<sup>14</sup> St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 95.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 96.

<sup>16</sup> Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, April 4, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> St. Josemaría, *The Way of the Cross*, Prologue.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

the Work, going to St. Joseph's protection.

In a union of prayers and sacrifices, supported by those of Benedict XVI, with all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father

+Javier

Rome, March 1, 2013