

Rome, 1 April 2015

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

I am writing to you in the middle of Holy Week. I pray to our Blessed Lady that the marian year we are observing in her honour may stir up our personal desire to get deep inside the scenes of our Lord's Passion, Death and Resurrection in the forthcoming Paschal Triduum.

On 28 March it was ninety years since St Josemaría's ordination to the priesthood; and tomorrow, Maundy Thursday, the liturgy brings vividly before us the institution of the Eucharist and the priesthood, in the Cenacle at Jerusalem. Later on, the Easter Vigil speaks to us of Jesus Christ's victory over sin and death, and, in him, the victory of us who have been incorporated into his Death and Resurrection through baptism.

In the course of the Easter Vigil, the Church administers the sacraments of Christian initiation – Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion. Generally speaking, we received them as children, according to immemorial custom stemming from the Gospel teachings. And on the glorious night of the Easter Vigil, we are invited to renew the commitments which our parents and godparents made in our name, or which perhaps we made ourselves.

Following the line I have marked out for myself for these marian months, I now propose to you to consider the importance of these sacraments for Christian families on their journey. May we overflow with gratitude to the Blessed Trinity every day for these salvific mysteries which enable us to share in God's riches.

We all can and should help in the task of evangelising the family, in whatever way is most suited to our individual circumstances. My thoughts turn to those who work in schools, whether state or private, and are in direct contact with fathers and mothers, with the many young people who come to their classes, and with the teachers who share their responsibility for educational work. I remind you all that your task, one of primary importance, should not be limited to passing on knowledge to help pupils prepare for the future. Concern yourselves – I know you do – with the all-round formation of children and adolescents in the different human, spiritual and religious aspects of Christian education.

The role of fathers and mothers is of primordial importance and, in a way, so is that of the other members of the family: brothers and sisters, grandparents, etc. The parents, or those who take their place, are primarily responsible for their children's education. Speaking of the different family members, the Roman Pontiff said: **You, children and young people, are the fruit of the tree that is the family: you are good fruit when the tree has deep roots (your grandparents) and a strong trunk (your parents). Jesus said that every sound tree bears good fruit but every bad tree bears evil fruit (cf. Mt 7:17). The great human family is like a forest, where sound trees bear solidarity, communion, trust, support, security, happy sobriety, friendship. The presence of large families is a hope for society. And this is why the presence of grandparents is very important: a precious presence both for practical help, and above all for their educational contribution. Grandparents preserve**

**in themselves the values of a people, of a family, and they help parents pass them on to the children.**<sup>1</sup> I stress that married couples to whom God does not grant children can also play an important and enriching role in the Christian formation of other homes.

How much good is done by parents who take this mission seriously! For this to happen, the first thing that is needed is for parents and children to be at home habitually, realising that their house can and must be an “ante-chamber” of Heaven and a school of charity, because the joys and sorrows of one of them are joys and sorrows for the rest of the family.

St Josemaría gave us this very clear teaching, as another fruit of his personal experience. On one occasion, recalling how our Lord had prepared him progressively for the mission of founding the Work, he said, *He caused me to be born into a Catholic family, like most people in my country, with exemplary parents who practised their faith in daily life, giving me great freedom right from my very childhood and yet at the same time carefully watching over me. They tried to give me a Christian education, which was something I acquired from them at home more than at school, even though from the age of three I went to a school run by nuns, and from the age of seven to one run by priests.*<sup>2</sup>

In the Grandparents’ home he learnt to behave in a genuinely Christian way, always in keeping with his age; and he expressed his deep gratitude to God for this at the end of his life, whenever he recalled the big and little events of his childhood years. The advice he offered to fathers and mothers was drawn from his own life and his wide priestly experience.

Specifically, I want to highlight the importance he gave to good example. *From the very start, he said, children are relentless witnesses of their parents’ lives. You don’t realise it, but they judge everything, and sometimes they judge you in a bad light. So what happens at home influences your children for good or for evil. Try to help them with your good example, try not to hide your piety, try to behave uprightly: then they will learn, and they will be the crown of your mature years and your old age. You are like an open book to them.*<sup>3</sup>

It is very important for parents – including fathers, not only mothers – to teach their children their first prayers. *Don’t force them to say long prayers: teach them to say short ones, but every day. When they’re very small, you take their hand and help them make the sign of the Cross, with their own little hand. That’s something they never forget. Your gentleness and your piety, and the piety of your husbands, of our parents, remain deep in the children’s souls.*<sup>4</sup> And on another occasion he added humorously, *Your children shouldn’t go to bed like little puppies. I like to put it that way because it’s very clear and I can make myself understood. Little puppies lie down in a corner, and that’s all. Not so with your children. They have to make the sign of the Cross before going to bed, and say some words to the Blessed Virgin Mary and to God our Lord, even when their soul is not totally clean.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, Speech to the National Association of Large Families in Italy, 28 December 2014.

<sup>2</sup> St Josemaría, notes from a meditation, 14 February 1964.

<sup>3</sup> St Josemaría, notes from a family gathering, 12 November 1972.

<sup>4</sup> St Josemaría, notes from a family gathering, 4 June 1974.

<sup>5</sup> St Josemaría, notes from a family gathering, 18 October 1972.

With holy pride, he admitted that he had never left off saying, morning and night, the vocal prayers he had learnt as a child: *just a few, short, pious ones. And thus the memory of my parents takes me to God and, while making me feel very close to my natural family, it also unites me to the Family in Nazareth – Jesus, Mary and Joseph – and to that family in Heaven, the One God who is Three in Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*<sup>6</sup>

As the daughters and sons grow, they can naturally be taught other prayers: the Our Father, the Hail Mary, grace before meals, the rosary... And when they are old enough, it is very good for them to go to Sunday Mass, even if they do not yet understand much of what is going on. Like that, the seed of Christian living, sown in Baptism, grows in a harmonious, balanced way. And they are prepared for their First Holy Communion, which the Church advises should be preceded by sacramental confession.<sup>7</sup>

Our Father always taught that it was very good to introduce children to the practice of the sacraments as soon as they were old enough. Take note of the advice he gave to one mother: *Take them to confession soon, very soon, as soon as they reach the age of reason. And if you can prepare them yourself, do so; if not, go to a priest you can trust. It's not true that children are traumatised by it! It's not true that it does them harm! It did me a lot of good, and my mother took me to confession when I was six years old.*<sup>8</sup>

On 23 April we will celebrate another anniversary of St Josemaría's First Holy Communion. It is an especially appropriate day for each of us to thank Jesus Christ for the day he first came sacramentally to our Founder's heart, and to our own.

The above considerations can be useful to all of us: fathers and mothers with families, teachers in primary and secondary education, those who help in the Prelature's formational work with adults, and the younger people who, with their friends, help greatly in schoolchildren's clubs and similar activities.

I am very grateful to the monitors or tutors who, with a professional approach, offer this help in close union with families. Bear in mind that, without the parents' cooperation, without their good example within the home, the fruits of your work, often done with so much sacrifice, could easily be lost. And so I will never tire of reminding you to invite the fathers and mothers to come to club activities, and to help with running the schools. Remind them to take their educational duties very seriously, generously offering their time, their material help, and their initiative, in the splendid work of training exemplary citizens and good Christians in the schools and schoolchildren's clubs which are an extension of the home.

In the month that has just ended I visited our Lady at her shrine in Fatima. All of you were very much present in my prayer. Additionally, our Lord granted me the happiness of meeting several groups of my children in Portugal: men and women, young and old, priests and lay-people. Continue to be closely united to my intentions, especially on 20 April, the anniversary of my appointment as Prelate of the Work. And let us increase our prayer for the Pope and his aides.

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<sup>6</sup> St Josemaría, notes from a family gathering, 28 October 1972.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1457.

<sup>8</sup> St Josemaría, notes from a family gathering, 14 July 1974.

Before ending, I would like to stress that we should try to participate very deeply in the liturgical rites of the Sacred Triduum and, afterwards, Easter-time. Encourage your friends, relations and colleagues to obtain a great benefit from these holy days. And let us do all we can to fill the streets and our own homes with acts of thanksgiving, acts of atonement, and spiritual communions, so as to express to our Lord and his Blessed Mother the deepest feelings of our hearts.

A very affectionate blessing from

your Father

✠ Javier