

Rome, 1 February 2015

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

Step by step we are travelling through these months which are so rich in significant anniversaries (which we could also call “round” anniversaries) of our Work, for which we thank God and which help us to realise that all of us are Church, all of us are Opus Dei.

In a few days’ time it will be 85 years since our Lord gave St Josemaría to understand that Opus Dei was for women as well as men. *I didn’t think that there would be women in Opus Dei*, wrote our Founder in a letter addressed especially to his daughters. *But on that 14th February 1930, our Lord made me feel what a father experiences when he isn’t expecting to have any more children, and then God sends another one. And from then on I think I am obliged to have even more affection for you: I look on you as a mother looks on her youngest child.*<sup>1</sup> And, I may add, every day there arose from his soul a deep sense of gratitude to his daughters.

How much our Father thanked God, I stress, for the divine light that was lit by the presence of women in Opus Dei! As he explained at another point, *the Work, without that express desire of our Lord (...) would have been left really one-handed.*<sup>2</sup>

In his Apostolic Letter about the dignity and mission of women, St John Paul II paused to consider the sublime moment of the Annunciation. “When the time had fully come,” he explains, “*God sent forth his son, born of woman*. With these words of his *Letter to the Galatians* (4:4), the Apostle Paul links together the principal moments which essentially determine the fulfilment of the mystery ‘pre-determined in God’ (cf. *Eph* 1:9). The Son, the Word one in substance with the Father, becomes man, born of a woman, at ‘the fullness of time’. This event leads to the *turning point* of man’s history on earth, understood as salvation history. It is significant that Saint Paul does not call the Mother of Christ by her own name ‘Mary’, but calls her ‘woman’: this coincides with the words of the Proto-evangelium in the *Book of Genesis* (cf. 3:15). She is that ‘woman’ who is present in the central salvific event which marks the ‘fullness of time’: this event is realized in her and through her. (...) Thus the ‘fullness of time’ manifests the extraordinary dignity of the ‘woman’.”<sup>3</sup>

My daughters, these reflections are not just pretty phrases. They are a profound invitation to consider your importance in the Church, and also a stimulus for your faithfulness every day.

St Josemaría was very aware of this. In a letter from 1965, he told us: *in a way, we could say that the function assigned to women by God in the history of Salvation – their specific contribution to co-redemption – is realised to an outstanding degree in the Blessed Virgin Mary*. And he added, addressing his daughters in Opus Dei and Christian women in general: *in Our Lady you have both a model and a help for the elevation of your talents and natural occupations to the plane of grace, turning your specific function in the family and society into a divine instrument of sanctification, into a particular mission within the Church; sharing, to the measure*

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1 St Josemaría, *Letter 29 July 1965*, no. 2.

2 St Josemaría, notes from a family gathering in 1955.

3 St John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 15 August 1988, nos. 3-4.

*of your personal response to grace, in the excellence and pre-eminence with which God adorned his Mother.*<sup>4</sup>

The fact that we are a Christian family, united by supernatural ties, which affects each and every one of us, is highlighted in the Work by the irreplaceable role of my daughters. It was God's express will that in the Opus Dei Prelature women and men should travel in complete separation with regard to the means of formation and the apostolates, but in full spiritual, moral and juridical unity, visibly based on the Prelate, the Father of this spiritual family. Because we form one single home, St Josemaría explained, in Opus Dei there is just one cooking-pot, *from which each person takes according to their need.*<sup>5</sup> Therefore, although this letter is particularly about the role of women in the Church and society, these considerations also apply to men, changing whatever needs changing.

We have all been called to seek the fullness of Christian life in accordance with the circumstances in which God addresses each individual. In apostolic celibacy or matrimony, our response to God always has to be total. In this marian year in the Work, I have invited you to have recourse to the Holy Family of Nazareth, praying especially for all the families in the world. **The family of Nazareth, said the Pope in one of the catecheses that he is dedicating to this topic, urges us to rediscover the vocation and mission of the family, of every family. And what happened in those 30 years in Nazareth can thus happen to us too: in seeking to make love and not hate normal, making mutual help commonplace, not indifference or enmity.**<sup>6</sup>

God wants generosity, which is the source of harmony and peace, to reign in every family, whether natural or supernatural in origin. In this way, recreating the atmosphere of Nazareth day by day in every home, **each time there is a family that keeps this mystery, even if it were on the periphery of the world, the mystery of the Son of God, the mystery of Jesus who comes to save us, the mystery is at work. He comes to save the world. And this is the great mission of the family: to make room for Jesus who is coming, to welcome Jesus in the family, in each member: children, husband, wife, grandparents... Jesus is there. Welcome him there, in order that he grows spiritually in the family.**<sup>7</sup> And likewise in the great family of the Church.

The family based on natural ties has marriage as its foundation, which is a stable and definitive bond between one man and one woman to fulfil God's command in creation.<sup>8</sup> For the baptised, as we well know, marriage is also a sacrament: the channel through which the specific grace of their state, as the image of Christ's union with the Church, reaches the spouses.<sup>9</sup> *That, wrote our Father, is why I always look upon Christian homes with hope and affection, upon all the families which are the fruit of the Sacrament of Matrimony. They are a shining witness of the great divine mystery of Christ's loving union with His Church which St. Paul calls sacramentum magnum, a great sacrament (Eph 5:32). We must strive so that these cells of Christianity may be*

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<sup>4</sup> St Josemaría, *Letter 29 July 1965*, no. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, General audience, 17 December 2014.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Gen* 1:26-28.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Eph* 5:31-32.

born and may develop with a desire for holiness, conscious of the fact that the Sacrament of Initiation – Baptism – confers on all Christians a divine mission that each must fulfil in his own walk of life.<sup>10</sup>

St Josemaría used to give married people advice born of his own experience and his priestly ministry. Once, replying to a question he was asked in Buenos Aires, he exhorted them, *Really love each other! (...) Of course, in front of the children, don't ever quarrel. The children notice everything, and pass judgement straight away. They don't know that St Paul wrote: qui iudicat Dominus est (1 Cor 4:4), our Lord is the one who judges. They set themselves up as lords, even though they are only three or four, and they think: Mummy is bad, or, Daddy is bad; they get in a terrible mess, the poor little things! Don't cause that tragedy in your children's hearts. Wait, have patience; and you can quarrel after the children are in bed. But only a little, realising that you are wrong.*<sup>11</sup>

We can all make this advice our own, and it will help us to safeguard our fraternal dealings with others. *We must pocket our bad temper, our Father said humorously, and, for love of Jesus Christ, smile and make life pleasant for the people around us.*<sup>12</sup> It is not surprising – because we are human beings, not pure spirits – if at some point we react over-hastily or angrily, out of personal pride, which disturbs the harmony between people. But we have the remedy in our hands: apologising, finding some way to show that we are sorry that we have upset anybody. And if ever we think someone has offended us, let us throw any resentment out of our hearts once and for all, with our Lord's help; let us avoid “incubating” any harmful germs that could embitter our relations with others.

Our Lord is very clear about this point, as the Gospel shows. *You have heard that it was said to the men of old, “You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, “You fool!” shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*<sup>13</sup>

The theological virtue of charity, which also includes human affection, will impel us to try to think of others always, and not of ourselves. St Josemaría expressed the ideal of a child of God graphically as follows: *we have to make ourselves a soft carpet for the others to tread on.* And he added immediately, *I am not simply being poetic: it has to be a reality! It's hard, as sanctity is hard; but it's also easy, because, I insist, sanctity is within everyone's reach.*<sup>14</sup>

The anniversary of 14th February 1930 brings before our minds the essential contribution that women are called to offer to family life in their own homes, the places where they work, and the professional and social associations they take part in. You may not realise it, my daughters, but the way you present yourselves in society – your decency and elegance, the polite way you

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<sup>10</sup> St Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 91.

<sup>11</sup> St Josemaría, notes from a family gathering, 23 June 1974.

<sup>12</sup> St Josemaría, notes from a family gathering, 4 June 1974.

<sup>13</sup> *Mt 5: 21-24.*

<sup>14</sup> St Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 562.

treat other people, your smile – as well as the cleanliness and care of your house, admirably help to show others the marvel of seeing oneself as a child of God. Like that you take the *good fragrance of Christ*,<sup>15</sup> which is the hallmark of Christians, everywhere you go.

*See how they love one another!*<sup>16</sup> said the pagans on seeing how affectionately the early Christians treated each other. Now too it has to be noticeable that we love one another, and that we love everyone we come in contact with. Let's stir up our desires to serve, to spend ourselves joyfully for others. In this marian year dedicated to the family, let's take more care of the details in the friendly and positive way we get on with others, in all surroundings, beginning with our own homes. It is very important for each of us to seek to "build up a family" around ourselves. If we talk and listen to Mary and Joseph, we will learn many little ways of improving the good dispositions that our Lord has placed in our souls.

The other anniversary we celebrate on the same date – the founding of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross – also speaks to us of going out of our way, cheerfully, to make life peaceful and enjoyable for other people. In *Opus Dei*, as St Josemaría taught us tirelessly, *we are all equal. There is only one difference in practice: the priests have a still greater obligation than the others to put their hearts on the ground as a soft carpet for the others to walk on (...). They have to be firm, peaceable, loving, and cheerful; special servants – always calmly and joyfully – of God's children in Opus Dei*,<sup>17</sup> and of all souls. They are, in whatever situation or circumstance they find themselves, instruments of unity.

I will pass over other liturgical and family celebrations that fall in this month – the beginning of Lent, the anniversary of the divine locution *Love means deeds, not sweet words*, which our Father heard deep in his soul on 16th February 1932,<sup>18</sup> the anniversary of the *Decretum Laudis* for the Work by the Holy See in 1947... Each of us can draw out personal consequences in our times of prayer. I could tell you many more details of how St Josemaría looked after the home that is *Opus Dei*: I will just give one.

When his daughters first went to Japan to begin the apostolate with women, while they were travelling there by ship, he kept them company all the time with his prayer and thoughts. And as the apostolate began in different countries, his letters to the Vicars show his concern to prepare for the arrival of the women in the Work: take care to open the way, he would write, so that your sisters can begin soon; and like that *Opus Dei* will be complete in that country too.

I do not know the reason why our Father took me, at a time when there was nobody there, to the newly-built area of the Administration, which was the first of the buildings of Villa Tevere. I had the impression he wanted to show us that, if everything is to work properly, what comes first in the Centres, after the Tabernacle, is always his daughters. There was a clear contrast between his concern for the Administration to be perfectly finished off, in comparison with the part of the residence occupied by himself and his sons.

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15 2 *Cor* 2: 15.

16 Tertullian, *Apologetics* 39, 7.

17 St Josemaría, *Letter 8 August 1956*, no. 7.

18 Cf. St Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 933.

As we pray for the Holy Father and his intentions, let's keep in mind the consistory and the appointment of new Cardinals that Pope Francis has announced for this month. In that petition, pray for all the Roman Pontiff's collaborators, in close union with my intentions.

A very affectionate blessing from

your Father

+ Javier