

Letter from the Prelate (9 January 2018)

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

1. Following a guideline of the General Congress, over the past months I have frequently made reference to freedom. Now, in accord with the teachings of Saint Josemaria, who throughout his life was a lover of freedom, I want us to recall some aspects of this great gift from God. “I will never tire of repeating, my children,” he once told us, “that one of the clearest characteristics of the spirit of Opus Dei is its love for freedom and for the need to understand others.”¹ As we reread and meditate on his words, let us give heartfelt thanks to God. And let each of us examine how we can give better expression to these words in our own life, with God’s grace. Thus we will also be better prepared to help more souls attain “the glorious liberty of the children of God” (*Rom* 8:21).

An ardent desire for freedom, the demand for it on the part of persons and peoples, is a positive sign of our times. Acknowledging the freedom of each woman and man means acknowledging that they are persons: masters of their own acts and responsible for them, able to direct their own lives. Although freedom does not always lead everyone to develop into their best selves, we can never exaggerate its importance, since if we were not free we would not be able to love.

But unfortunately, in many circles there is great ignorance about what freedom really is. Often an illusory freedom without limits is aspired to, as though it were the ultimate goal of progress. And not infrequently, we are pained to see that this claim goes hand in hand with many forms of oppression and of apparent freedoms that in reality are only chains that enslave. This form of freedom, sooner or later, reveals its emptiness. “Some people think they are free if they can avoid God,” the Pope writes. “They fail to see that they remain existentially orphaned, helpless, homeless. They cease being pilgrims and become drifters.”²

Called to freedom

2. We have been “called to freedom” (*Gal* 5:13). Creation itself is a manifestation of divine freedom. The Genesis accounts give us a glimpse of God’s creative love, his joy in sharing with the world his goodness, his beauty (cf. *Gen* 1:31), and with human beings, his freedom (cf. *Gen* 1:26-29). In calling each of us into existence, God has made us able to choose and to love the good, and to respond with love to his Love. Nevertheless, our limitation as creatures makes it possible for us to separate ourselves from God. “It is a mystery of divine Wisdom that, when creating man *in his image and likeness* (cf. *Gen* 1:26-29), God wanted to run the sublime ‘risk’ of human freedom.”³

In fact, at the dawn of history this risk led to the rejection of God’s Love through the original sin. Thus the strength of human freedom’s attraction to the good was weakened, and the

¹ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 31 May 1954, no. 22.

² Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, no. 170.

³ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 24 October 1965, no. 3.

will was left to a certain degree inclined towards sin. Afterwards, personal sins weaken human freedom even more, and therefore sin always implies, to a greater or lesser degree, a form of slavery (cf. *Rom* 6:17, 20). Nevertheless, “man always remains free.”⁴ Even though “his freedom is always fragile,”⁵ it remains an essential good of each human person and needs to be protected. God is the first to respect and love it, since he “does not want slaves, but children.”⁶

3. “But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (*Rom* 5:20). Grace gives rise to a new and higher freedom for which “Christ has set us free” (*Gal*, 5:1). Our Lord frees us from sin through his words and actions, all of which have redemptive efficacy. Hence “this hymn to freedom is echoed in all the mysteries of our Catholic faith.”⁷ I often remind you that we need to put Christ at the center of our lives. To discover the deepest meaning of freedom, we have to contemplate him. We are amazed to see the freedom of a God who, out of pure love, decides to abase himself by taking on flesh like ours. We see this freedom unfold throughout his steps on earth towards the sacrifice of the Cross. “I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (*Jn* 10:17-18). Human history has never witnessed an act as deeply free as our Lord’s self-giving on the Cross. “He gives himself up to death with the full freedom of Love.”⁸

Saint John’s gospel recounts a dialogue of our Lord with some persons who had believed in him. Jesus’ words resound with a clear promise: “*Veritas liberabit vos*, the truth will make you free” (*Jn* 8:32). “How great a truth is this,” Saint Josemaria writes, “which opens the way to freedom and gives it meaning throughout our lives. I will sum it up for you, with the joy and certainty which flow from knowing there is a close relationship between God and his creatures. It is the knowledge that we have come from the hands of God, that the Blessed Trinity looks upon us with predilection, that we are children of so wonderful a Father. I ask my Lord to help us decide to take this truth to heart, to dwell upon it day by day; only then will we be acting as free men.”⁹

4. Our divine filiation enables our freedom to expand with all the strength that God has bestowed on it. It is not by emancipating ourselves from the Father’s house that we become free, but rather by embracing the reality that we are sons or daughters. “Anyone who does not realize that he is a child of God is unaware of the deepest truth about himself.”¹⁰ Such a person is unaware of who he is and lives in conflict with himself. How liberating it is, then, to know that God loves us. How liberating is God’s pardon that allows us to return to ourselves and to our true home (cf. *Lk* 15:17-24). And when we pardon others, we also experience this liberation.

Our faith in God’s love for each one of us (cf. *1 Jn* 4:16) leads us to respond with love. We can love because he has loved us first (cf. *1 Jn* 4:10). It fills us with security to know that God’s infinite Love is to be found not only at the origin of our existence but also at every moment in our lives. For God is closer to us than we are to ourselves.¹¹ Realizing that God is waiting for us in each person (cf. *Mt* 25:40), and that he wants to make himself present in their lives also

⁴ Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Spe salvi*, 30 November 2007, no. 24.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 129.

⁷ Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 25.

⁸ Saint Josemaria, *The Way of the Cross*, 10th Station.

⁹ Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Cf. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, III, 6, 11.

through us, leads us to strive to share abundantly with others what we have received. And in our lives, my daughters and sons, we have received and we receive a lot of love. Giving love to God and to others is the most proper act of freedom. Love *fulfills* freedom, it redeems it. Love enables freedom to discover its origin and goal in God's Love. "Freedom finds its true meaning when it is put to the service of the truth which redeems, when it is spent in seeking God's infinite Love which liberates us from all forms of slavery."¹²

Our sense of divine filiation leads, then, to great interior freedom, to deep joy, and to the serene optimism of hope: *spe gaudentes* (Rom 12:12). Realizing we are God's children also leads us to love the world, which came forth good from the hands of our Father God. It leads us to face life with the clear awareness that it is possible to do good, to conquer sin, and to bring the world to God. As Pope Francis said when contemplating our Mother: "From Mary, full of grace, we learn that Christian freedom is more than mere liberation from sin. It is freedom that enables us to see earthly realities in a new, spiritual light. It is the freedom to love God and our brothers and sisters with a pure heart, and to live a life of joyful hope for the coming of Christ's Kingdom."¹³

Freedom of spirit

5. Acting freely, without any sort of coercion, is proper to human dignity and, even more so, to the dignity of the daughters and sons of God. At the same time, we need to "fortify our love for a freedom that is not merely arbitrary, but is rendered truly human by acknowledgment of the good that underlies it": a freedom that is reconciled with God.¹⁴

Therefore I would like to stop and consider the importance of *freedom of spirit*. I am not referring to the ambiguous meaning sometimes given to this phrase, as acting in accord with one's caprices and without restraint by any law. In reality, the freedom of every human person is limited materially by natural duties and acquired commitments (family, professional, civic, etc.). Nevertheless, we can act freely in everything we do, if we do it for love: "*Dilige et quod vis fac*: Love and do what you will."¹⁵ True freedom of spirit is this capacity and habitual attitude to act out of love, especially in the effort to follow what God is asking of us in each circumstance.

"Do you love me?" (Jn 21:17). The Christian life is a free response, imbued with initiative and availability, to our Lord's question. Therefore "it is utterly false to oppose freedom and self-surrender, because self-surrender is a consequence of freedom. Look, when a mother sacrifices herself for love of her children, she has made a choice, and the more she loves the greater will be her freedom. If her love is great, her freedom will bear much fruit. Her children's good derives from her blessed freedom, which presupposes self-surrender, and from her blessed self-surrender, which is precisely freedom."¹⁶

In this context we can understand why encouraging the freedom of each person does not mean a lessening in demands. The freer we are, the more we can love. And love is demanding: "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:7). In turn, growing in love means growing in freedom, being more free. As Saint Thomas Aquinas

¹² Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 27.

¹³ Pope Francis, Homily, 15 August 2014.

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, 29 June 2009, no. 68.

¹⁵ Saint Augustine, *In Epist. Ioan. ad Parthos*, VII, 8.

¹⁶ Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 30.

wrote: “*Quanto aliquis plus habet de caritate, plus habet de libertate.*”¹⁷ The more intense our charity is, the freer we are. We also act with freedom of spirit when we don’t feel like doing something or find it especially difficult, if we do it out of love, that is, not because we like it, but because we want to. “We should all realize that we are God’s children, and strive to fulfill the will of our Father. We should do things as God wants them done, *because we want to*, which is the most supernatural of reasons.”¹⁸

6. Cheerfulness is also a sign of freedom of spirit. “In the human realm,” Saint Josemaria said, “I want to leave you as an inheritance love for freedom and good humor.”¹⁹ These two things can seem quite distinct, but they are actually closely connected, since realizing that we are *free to love* floods our soul with joy, and with it good humor. Our vision of the world deepens beyond the merely natural and we learn to grasp the positive—and, sometimes, amusing—side of things and situations. As Pope Francis said, God “is the author of joy, the Creator of joy. And this joy in the Spirit brings us true Christian freedom. Without joy, we Christians can’t be free, and we become slaves of our sadness.”²⁰

This joy needs to imbue our whole life. God wants us to be happy. In speaking to the Apostles, Jesus is also speaking to us: “that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (*Jn* 15:11). Therefore we can carry out joyfully even duties that we may find unpleasant. As Saint Josemaria tells us, “we shouldn’t think that the only work we can do joyfully is what we find pleasing.”²¹ We can carry out joyfully—and not reluctantly—what we find hard, what doesn’t please us, if we do it for and with love, and therefore freely. When doing his prayer out loud, on 28 April 1963, Saint Josemaria spoke about the lights God had granted him years before in 1931: “You have led me to understand, Lord, that having the Cross means finding happiness, joy. And the reason, as I now see more clearly than ever, is this: having the Cross means being identified with Christ, being Christ, and therefore being a child of God.”²²

7. The whole of the divine law, and everything that is God’s will for each person, is not a law that restricts freedom. Rather it is *lex perfecta libertatis* (cf. *Jas* 1:25), the perfect law of freedom. So too is the Gospel, since all of it is summed up in the law of love—and not only as an exterior rule that requires love, but also as the interior grace that gives us the strength to love. “*Pondus meum amor meus*”: my love is my weight, Saint Augustine said, referring not simply to the obvious fact that at times it is hard for us to love, but to the fact that the love we have in our heart is what leads us on, what carries us to wherever we go.²³ “*Eo feror, quocumque feror*”: wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me.²⁴ Each of us can consider: what is the love that carries me everywhere?

Anyone who lets God’s Love take hold in their heart, personally experiences how true it is “that freedom and self-surrender are not contradictory. They sustain one another. Freedom can only be given up for love; I cannot conceive any other reason for surrendering it. And I am not just playing with words or phrases. When people give themselves freely, at every moment of

¹⁷ Saint Thomas, *In III Sent.*, d. 29, q. un., a. 8, q1a. 3 s.c. 1.

¹⁸ Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 17.

¹⁹ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 31 May 1954, no. 22.

²⁰ Pope Francis, Homily, 31 May 2013.

²¹ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 29 December 1947, no. 106.

²² Saint Josemaria, Notes from a meditation, 28 April 1963.

²³ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, XIII, 9, 10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

their self-surrender, freedom renews their love, and to be renewed in that way is to be always young, generous, capable of high ideals and great sacrifices.”²⁵ Obeying God, therefore, is not only a free act, but also a freeing, liberating act.

“I have food to eat of which you do not know,” Jesus tells his disciples. “My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work” (*Jn* 4:32-34). For Jesus, obeying the Father is what nourishes him, what gives him strength. And so it should be for us. Being Jesus’ disciple, Saint John Paul II said, means “*holding fast to the very person of Jesus*, partaking of his life and his destiny, sharing in his free and loving obedience to the will of the Father.”²⁶

Benedict XVI goes more deeply into this intimate relationship between freedom and self-giving: “It is in his very obedience to the Father that Jesus achieves his own freedom as a conscious decision motivated by love. Who is freer than the One who is the Almighty? He did not, however, live his freedom as an arbitrary power or as domination. He lived it as a service. In this way he ‘filled’ freedom with content, which would otherwise have remained an ‘empty’ possibility of doing or not doing something. Like human life itself, freedom draws its meaning from love . . . Therefore, Christian freedom is quite the opposite of arbitrariness; it consists in following Christ in the gift of self even to the sacrifice of the Cross. It may seem a paradox, but the Lord lived the crowning point of his freedom on the Cross as a summit of love. When they shouted at him on Calvary: ‘If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross!’, he showed his freedom as the Son precisely by remaining on that scaffold, to do the Father’s merciful will to the very end.”²⁷

“Lord, you enticed me, and I was taken in. You were too strong for me, and you prevailed” (*Jer* 20:7). What a breadth of feeling is found in this prayer of the prophet Jeremias. Seeing one’s own vocation as a gift from God (and not as a mere list of obligations), even when we are suffering, is also a sign of freedom of spirit. How liberating it is to know that God loves us as we are, and that he calls us first of all to let ourselves be loved by him.

8. Freedom of spirit also means not binding ourselves to obligations that are not real—being able to set aside and change with flexibility so many small details in life that depend on our free personal initiative. As Don Javier wrote to us twenty years ago: “There are, of course, actions which we are obliged to carry out and others which, in a given instance, we are not specifically obliged to do. However, in both cases we have to seek to fulfill freely and responsibly the supreme commandment of love for God. Thus we are free and obedient at the same time and at every moment.”²⁸

We need to always preserve in the Work the atmosphere of trust and freedom that enables us to make known to the relevant person what is worrying us, and talk about what we don’t understand or what we think should be improved. This atmosphere of trust, in turn, is also nourished by our loyalty and patience in accepting, with serenity and good humor, human limitations, annoying situations, etc. This is the attitude of good sons or daughters who, although they may be convinced they are right, exercise their freedom by seeking to protect goods greater than their own point of view, goods such as unity and family peace, which are priceless. In contrast, “when our ideas separate us from other people, when they weaken our communion, our

²⁵ Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 31.

²⁶ Saint John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, 6 August 1993, no. 19.

²⁷ Benedict XVI, Angelus Address, 1 July 2007.

²⁸ Javier Echevarría, *Pastoral letter*, 14 February 1997, no. 15.

unity with our brothers, it is a sure sign that we are not doing what God wants.”²⁹

9. Although sometimes situations can make us suffer, God frequently uses these to identify us more closely with Jesus. As we read in the Letter to the Hebrews, he “learned obedience through what he suffered” (*Heb* 5:8) and thus brought “eternal salvation to all who obey him” (5:9). Jesus brought us the freedom of the children of God. Accepting the human limitations that we all have, without giving up in our effort to overcome them as far as possible, is also a sign and source of freedom of spirit. Consider in contrast the sad attitude of the elder son in the parable (*Lk* 15:25-30). He complained to his father about so many things that he had been keeping bitterly in his soul, and was unable to join in the family’s joy. His freedom had become small and selfish, incapable of loving, of understanding that “all that is mine is yours” (*Lk* 15:31). He was living at home, but he was not free, because his heart was elsewhere.

How beautiful, in contrast, is the story of Ruth, the Moabite woman, whose freedom and self-giving are rooted in a deep sense of belonging to her family. It is moving to see how this woman responds to the insistence of her mother-in-law, who encourages her to remake her life on her own: “Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried” (*Ruth* 1:16-17).

In contemplating our Lady, we see even more clearly how freedom unfolds in faithful self-giving. “Consider now the sublime moment when the Archangel Gabriel announces to the Virgin Mary the plans of the Most High. Our Mother listens, and asks a question to understand better what the Lord is asking of her. Then she gives her firm reply: *Fiat!* Be it done unto me according to thy word! This is the fruit of the best freedom of all, the freedom of deciding in favor of God.”³⁰

Forming and governing free people

10. In our formation, personal spiritual direction plays an important role. It should always be carried out in an atmosphere of freedom and aim at forming people who feel “as free as the birds.”³¹ As Saint Josemaria writes, referring to those who receive the personal chats of their brothers or sisters, “the authority of the spiritual director is not power. Always instill in souls a great spirit of freedom. Consider what I have so often told you: *because I want to* seems to me the most supernatural reason of all. The role of the spiritual director is to help the soul to want to fulfill, *to really want to fulfill* God’s will. Don’t command, advise.”³² The aim of the advice given in spiritual direction is to second the action of the Holy Spirit in each soul and help each person to approach God and his or her own duties with personal freedom and responsibility. “In creating souls, God does not repeat himself. Each one is the way he or she is, and we have to treat each one according to what God has done, and according to the way that God is leading them.”³³

Along with advice, ordinarily there can also be some affectionate encouragement that helps

²⁹ Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 17.

³⁰ Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 25.

³¹ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 14 September 1951, no. 38.

³² Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 8 August 1956, no. 38.

³³ *Ibid.*

them realize *it is always worthwhile* to strive to be faithful out of love, freely. Spiritual direction can also occasionally contain a clear, but always affectionate and refined, “imperative counsel,” which reminds the person of the obligation to fulfill a duty. The force of this advice, however, does not stem from the advice itself, but from the duty involved. When there is trust, one can and should speak in this way, and the person who receives that indication is grateful for it, because they recognize in it the fortitude and affection of an older brother or sister.

11. The formation that we receive throughout our whole life, without disregarding its necessary demands, tends to a large degree to *open up new horizons*. In contrast, if we limit ourselves to just making demands and being demanded of, we can end up seeing only what we are not managing to do, our defects and limitations. We can forget about the most important thing: God’s love for us.

In this context, let us recall how Saint Josemaria taught us that “in the Work, we are great friends of freedom, including in the interior life. We aren’t tied to particular schemes or methods . . . There is a lot—there should be a lot—of self-determination even in the spiritual life.”³⁴ Therefore sincerity in spiritual direction, which leads us to open up our soul freely in order to receive advice, also leads us to foster personal initiative, to make known freely what we see as possible points for our interior struggle to identify ourselves ever more closely with Christ.

Therefore our formation, while passing on the same spirit to everyone, does not produce uniformity, but rather unity. Making use of a striking image, Saint Josemaria said that in the Work “we can travel along this path in many different ways: staying on the right or on the left, zigzagging from side to side, on foot or by horse. There are thousands of ways to advance along our divine path. Each one’s conscience, in keeping with their particular circumstances, will oblige them to go forward in one or another of these ways. The only thing essential is not to leave the path.”³⁵ The spirit of the Work, like the Gospel, does not impose itself on our way of being, but rather gives it life. It is a seed destined to grow in the earth of each person.

12. In our formation, it is also important to prevent an excessive desire for security or protection from inhibiting the soul and restricting us. “Those who have met Christ cannot shut themselves in their own little world; how sad such a limitation would be! They must open out like a fan in order to reach all souls.”³⁶ How important it is, then, to form ourselves in the need to live without fear of making mistakes, without fear of failing, without fear of an adverse environment. With supernatural outlook we need to be involved—with prudence and determination—in our own social and professional environment.

Love for freedom is also shown, therefore, in spontaneity and initiative in the apostolate, made compatible with one’s specific apostolic assignments. It is important always to be very aware that “our apostolate is, above all, personal apostolate.”³⁷ The same holds true for the encouragement directors give to apostolic activities. “I have never wanted to tie you down. On the contrary, I have tried to ensure that you work with great freedom. In your apostolic action you have to have initiative, within the very broad margins provided by our spirit, in order to find—in each place, in each environment, in each epoch—the activities best suited to the

³⁴ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 29 September 1957, no. 70.

³⁵ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 2 February 1945, no. 19.

³⁶ Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, no. 193.

³⁷ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 2 October 1939, no. 10.

circumstances.”³⁸

13. Another important sign of love for freedom is found in the pastoral government that falls to the Prelate and his Vicars, with the help of their corresponding Councils. Let us meditate once again with gratitude on these words of Saint Josemaria: “As a consequence of this spirit of freedom, formation—and government—in the Work is based on trust. . . . Nothing can be accomplished if government is based on distrust. In contrast, governing and forming souls with respect produces fruit. It develops in souls the true and holy freedom of God’s children and teaches them to administer their own freedom. To form and to govern is to love.”³⁹

Governing with respect for souls is, firstly, to delicately respect the privacy of consciences, without confusing government and spiritual direction. Secondly, this respect leads one to distinguish directives from what are only opportune exhortations, counsels, or suggestions. And thirdly—and not, for that reason, less important—is the need to govern with such great trust in others that one always tries to take into account, to the extent possible, the opinion of the people involved. This attitude of those who govern, their readiness to listen, is a wonderful manifestation of the fact that the Work is a family.

We also have grateful experience of the full freedom there is in Opus Dei in matters open to opinion in economics, politics, theology, etc. “In everything that is not a matter of faith, each member thinks and acts as he or she wishes with complete freedom and personal responsibility. The pluralism which logically and sociologically derives from this fact does not create any problems for the Work. Rather, it is a sign of good spirit.”⁴⁰ This pluralism should be loved and fostered, although someone may find this diversity hard to accept at times. A person who loves freedom manages to see the positive and attractive aspects of what others think and do in these broad areas.

As regards the way government is carried out, Saint Josemaria established and always forcefully reminded us of the need for collegiality, which is another manifestation of the spirit of freedom that imbues our life in Opus Dei. “I have reminded you in a great variety of circumstances, and I will repeat it many times over the course of my life, that I demand in the Work, at all levels, collegial government, so that no one will fall into tyranny. This is a manifestation of prudence, since with collegial government matters are studied more easily, errors are corrected better, and the apostolic works that are already going well are improved more effectively.”⁴¹

Collegiality is not only or principally a method or system for making decisions; it is, above all, a spirit, rooted in the conviction that all of us can and need to receive from others insights, information, etc., that will help us to improve and even to change our opinion. At the same time, this leads to respecting—even more, to fostering in a positive way—the freedom of the others, so that they can make known their own points of view without any difficulty.

Respecting and defending freedom in the apostolate

14. Our apostolate stems from a sincere desire to help others find Christ or grow in intimacy

³⁸ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 24 October 1942, no. 46.

³⁹ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 6 May 1945, no. 39.

⁴⁰ Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 98.

⁴¹ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 24 December 1951, no. 5.

with him. “Our attitude towards souls can be summed up in this phrase from the Apostle, which is almost a shout: *caritas mea cum omnibus vobis in Christo Iesu!* (1 Cor 16:24): my affection for all of you, in Christ Jesus. With charity, you will be sowers of peace and joy in the world, loving and defending the personal freedom of souls, the freedom that Christ respects and won for us (cf. *Gal 4:31*).”⁴²

We love, first of all, the freedom of those we are trying to help come closer to our Lord, in the apostolate of friendship and trust which Saint Josemaria invites us to carry out by our witness and word. “Also in our apostolic activities—better: principally in our apostolic activities—we don’t want there to be even the slightest shadow of coercion. God wants to be served freely, and therefore an apostolate that did not respect the ‘freedom of consciences’ would not be upright.”⁴³

True friendship entails sincere mutual affection, which is the true protection of the reciprocal freedom and intimacy that exists between friends. Apostolate is not something superimposed on friendship, because (as I wrote you), “we don’t ‘do apostolate,’ we are apostles!”⁴⁴ Friendship is itself apostolate; friendship is itself a dialogue in which we give and receive light. In friendship plans are forged as we mutually open up new horizons. In friendship we rejoice in what is good and support one another in what is difficult; we have a good time with one another, since God wants us to be happy.

15. As you know, proselytism, understood in its original meaning, is a positive reality, nothing other than the missionary activity of spreading the Gospel.⁴⁵ That was how Saint Josemaria always understood the term, and not with the negative meaning it has acquired in more recent times. Still, we need to keep in mind that, despite what we would like, at times words take on new connotations different from their original meaning. Therefore consider carefully, in light of the context, the fittingness of employing this term, since at times your hearers could understand something different from what you want to say.

Respecting and defending the freedom of everyone is also made manifest—if possible, even more clearly—when raising with someone the possibility of God’s call to the Work. Here we mean the freedom to seek advice from whomever one wants and, above all, full freedom in discerning one’s own possible vocation and in the ensuing decision. When commenting on a forceful expression in the Gospel, the *compelle intrare* (force them to enter) of the parable (*Lk 14:23*), Saint Josemaria wrote: “A chief characteristic of our spirit is respect for the personal freedom of everyone. Thus the *compelle intrare* that you should employ in your proselytism is not a physical push but an abundance of light, of doctrine. It is the spiritual stimulus of your prayer and work, which bear authentic witness to doctrine. It is all the sacrifices you offer. It is the smile that comes to your lips because you are children of God: the filiation that fills you with a serene happiness (even though setbacks will not be lacking in your life) and that others will see and envy. Add to this your human bearing and charm and here we have the content of the *compelle intrare*.”⁴⁶ How clear it is, then, that the Work grows and should always grow in an atmosphere of freedom, by presenting to others—with determination and simplicity—the dazzling beauty of living close to God.

⁴² Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 16 July 1933, no. 3.

⁴³ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 9 January 1932, no. 66.

⁴⁴ *Pastoral letter*, 14 February 2017, no. 9.

⁴⁵ Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization*, 3 December 2007, no. 12 and note 49.

⁴⁶ Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 24 October 1942, no. 9.

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16. *Veritas liberabit vos* (*Jn* 8:32). All the promises of liberation that have followed one upon another throughout the centuries are true to the extent that they are nourished by the Truth about God and man. And this Truth is a Person: Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life (cf. *Jn* 14:6). “Today also, even after two thousand years, we see Christ as the one who brings man freedom based on truth, frees man from what curtails, diminishes and as it were breaks off this freedom at its root, in man’s soul, his heart and his conscience.”⁴⁷

God has given us freedom forever; it is not a temporary gift, to employ only during our life here on earth. Freedom, like love, “never ends” (*1 Cor* 13:8), but it continues in heaven. Our path to heaven is a path towards the freedom of the glory of the children of God: *in libertatem gloriae filiorum Dei* (*Rom* 8:21). In heaven our freedom not only won’t disappear, but rather will attain its fullness in embracing God’s Love. “In heaven a great Love awaits you, with no betrayals and no deceptions. The fullness of love, the fullness of beauty and greatness and knowledge . . . And it will never cloy: it will satiate, yet still you will want more.”⁴⁸ If we are faithful, by God’s mercy, in heaven we will be fully free, with the fullness of love.

Your Father blesses you with all his affection,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Leonardo".

Rome, 9 January 2018, anniversary of the birth of Saint Josemaria

⁴⁷ Saint John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, 4 March 1979, no. 12.

⁴⁸ Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 995.