



JUAN JOSE SILVESTRE (ED)

THE LITURGICAL YEAR IN THE LIFE OF CHRISTIANS

THE TIME OF GOD'S PRESENCE

The time of God's presence

The liturgical year in the life of Christians

Juan Jose Silvestre (Editor)

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FOREWORD

“History is not a mere succession of centuries, years or days, but the time span of a presence that gives full meaning and opens it to sound hope.”¹ These words of Pope Benedict XVI, which have inspired the title of this book, describe the essence of the liturgical year, which is a “celebration of the mystery of Christ within time.”² In the liturgy, God becomes present among us and carries out our salvation in a mysterious but real way, as real as when Christ was visible on earth. “The liturgical year, devotedly fostered and accompanied by the Church, is not a cold and lifeless representation of the events of the past, or a simple and bare record of a former age. It is rather Christ Himself who is ever living in His Church. Here He continues that journey of immense mercy which He lovingly began in His mortal life, going about doing good, with the design of bringing men to know His mysteries and in a way live by them.”³

This book, which brings together different texts which have been published on the Opus Dei website, invites the reader to live through those mysteries of the liturgical calendar, which revolve around the Paschal Mystery, heart of the life of Christ and of the history of the world. The reader can therefore deepen in the different tonalities which the prayer of the Church acquires as the year progresses; one can discover that the liturgy is, in the words of Pope Francis, “God’s time and space” and that He invites us to “put ourselves there in God’s time, in God’s space, without looking at our watches. The liturgy is precisely entering into the mystery of God; bringing ourselves to the mystery and being present in the mystery.”⁴

Let us contemplate therefore, how the Paschal Mystery, through which Christ has conquered death, enters into our tired days and fills them with life. Let us learn to live joyfully the feasts around the mystery of the Incarnation. Let us deepen in the beginning of our salvation. Let us be open to be surprised by the different profiles of the inexhaustible mystery that God places in front of us through the liturgy, through the

different solemnities and feasts of the Lord. Let us discover anew the maternal presence of Our Lady, whom “the Church holds up and admires the most excellent fruit of the redemption, and joyfully contemplates, as in a faultless image, that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be.”⁵ And, when we remember the saints, let us see “the Paschal Mystery achieved in the saints who have suffered and been glorified with Christ.”⁶

With this book we want to help readers put into practice those well known words of St Josemaría: “We all know that prayer is to talk with God. But someone may ask, ‘What should I talk about?’ What else could you talk about but His interests and the things that fill your day? About the birth of Jesus, his years among us, his hidden life, his preaching, his miracles, his redemptive passion and death, his resurrection. And in the presence of the Triune God, invoking Mary as our mediatrix and beseeching St Joseph, our father and lord, to be our advocate, we will speak of our everyday work, of our family, of our friendships, of our big plans and little shortcomings.”⁷

We hope that this book may contribute to awaken in us the sense of mystery, of transcendence, of the love the Trinity has for us. We hope that these pages may help readers to listen with docility to the Holy Spirit as He speaks to us in our prayer, and may lead us to feel overwhelmed by the possibility of entering a transformative dialogue with the Trinity; a dialogue which helps us to come out of ourselves and to find ourselves transformed in Christ, and sharing his feelings. And when we are one with Him, through the work of the Holy Spirit, that we may be able to enter the presence of the Father of mercies.

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- 1 Benedict XVI, Audience, 12 December 2012.
 - 2 J L Gutierrez-Martin, *Belleza y misterio. La liturgia, vida de la Iglesia*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2006.
 - 3 Pius XII, Enc. *Mediator Dei*, 20 November 1947, 165.
 - 4 Francis, morning meditation in the chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, 10 February 2014.
 - 5 Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 103.
 - 6 Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 104.
 - 7 St Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ is passing by*, 174.

ADVENT

Preparing for the Lord's Coming

“Advent invites us to stop and be silent, to take in the presence of God.”

“Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God, the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming, so that, gathered at his right hand, they may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom.” These words from the Collect for the first Sunday of Advent throw a powerful light on the particular character of this period at the beginning of the liturgical year. Echoing the attitude of the prudent virgins in the Gospel parable, who sensibly took enough oil with them to await the Bridegroom’s arrival,¹ the Church calls upon her children to be vigilant, to stay awake to receive Christ who is passing by, Christ who is coming.

A time of presence

The desire to go out to meet him, to prepare for the Lord’s coming,² makes us consider the Greek term *parousia*, which Latin renders as *adventus*, from which comes our word “Advent.” In fact *adventus* can be translated as presence, arrival, and coming. This word was not invented by the early Christians; in antiquity, it was normally used to designate the first official visit of someone important – the king, the emperor or one of his officials – coming to take possession of a province. It could also be used for the coming of the gods, emerging from obscurity to show themselves in strength, or to be celebrated by their worshippers. Christians adopted the term to express their relationship with Christ: Jesus is the King who has entered this poor “province,” our world, to visit all men and women. He is a King whose invitation to share in the feast of his Advent is extended to all who believe in him, all who are sure of his presence among us.

In using the word *adventus*, Christians were simply stating that God is here: our Lord has not withdrawn from the world, he has not left us alone. Although we cannot see him or touch him, as we can with sense-perceptible things, he really is here, and comes to visit us in many ways: in the reading of Sacred Scripture; in the sacraments, especially Holy Communion; in the liturgical year; in the lives of the saints; in the many happenings, however commonplace, of our daily lives; in the beauty of creation... God loves us; he knows our name; everything about us interests him and he is always present beside us. The certainty of his presence that the Advent liturgy suggests to us discreetly but constantly throughout these weeks, brings before our eyes a new image of the world. “This certainty which the faith gives enables us to look at everything in a new light. And everything, while remaining exactly the same becomes different, because it is an expression of God’s love.”³

Grateful remembrance

Advent invites us to stop and be silent, to take in the presence of God. These are days when we can think again about Saint Josemaría’s words: “we’ve got to be convinced that God is always near us. We live as though he were far away, in the heavens high above, and we forget that he is also continually by our side. He is there like a loving father. He loves each one of us more than all the mothers in the world can love their children; helping us, inspiring us, blessing – and forgiving.”⁴

If we steep ourselves in this reality, if we think about it often during Advent, we shall feel encouraged to talk confidently to him in our prayer and during the day; we will put before him the sufferings that make us sad, the impatience and questions that arise in our hearts. This is the right time to strengthen our conviction that he is always listening to us. “To you I lift up my soul, O my God. In you I have trusted; let me not be put to shame.”⁵

We shall also understand that the unexpected turns a day can take are very personal touches from God, signs of his attentive watchfulness over each of us. Our attention is often drawn to problems and difficulties, and sometimes we scarcely have any energy left to perceive

the many good, beautiful things that come from God. Advent is the time to consider more frequently how he has protected, guided and helped us throughout our life; to praise him for all he has done and continues doing for us.

By being watchful and attentive for loving details from our heavenly Father, our heart will pour out acts of thanksgiving. The grateful memory of the good things God has done for us helps us also in dark times of difficulties, problems, sickness, and suffering. “The joy of evangelising,” wrote the Pope, “always arises from grateful remembrance: it is a grace which we constantly need to implore.”⁶ Advent is a time that invites us to keep, so to speak, an internal diary of the love God has for us. “I imagine,” said Saint Josemaría, “that you, like me, will thank our Lord. I know too that, without falling into false humility, this thankfulness will leave you even more convinced that you have merited nothing of this on your own.”⁷

God is coming

*Dominus veniet!*⁸ God is coming! This short exclamation opens the time of Advent, and is heard in a special way during these four weeks, and throughout the entire liturgical year. God is coming! It is not merely that God came in the past, nor a simple announcement that God will come in the future. It is something actually happening; it is happening now, and it will go on happening as time passes. At every moment, “God is coming”; in each moment of history, our Lord says: *my Father is working still, and I am working.*⁹

Advent invites us to become aware of this truth and act accordingly. *It is full time now for you to wake from sleep. Watch at all times. What I say to you I say to all: watch.*¹⁰ These calls from Sacred Scripture in the readings for the first Sunday of Advent remind us of the constant comings, the *adventus*, of our Lord. Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today. God is not just in heaven, uninterested in us and our history. He really is the God who is coming. Meditating attentively on the texts of the Advent liturgy helps us to prepare so that we do not let his presence pass unnoticed.

For the Fathers of the Church, God’s “coming” – continual, and part of his very being – is concentrated in the two main comings of Christ: his Incarnation, and his glorious coming at the end of history.¹¹ Advent unfolds between these two points. The first days underline the expectation of our Lord’s last coming at the end of time. And as Christmas draws near, the memory of the Bethlehem event, which brought the fullness of time, becomes more vivid. “For these two reasons Advent is markedly a time of pious and joyful expectation.”¹²

The first preface of Advent combines this double theme: “He assumed at his first coming the lowliness of human flesh, and so fulfilled the design you formed long ago, and opened for us the way to eternal salvation, that, when he comes again in glory and majesty and all is at last made manifest, we who watch for that day may inherit the great promise in which now we dare to hope.”¹³

Days of waiting and hope

The fundamental note of Advent, then, is one of waiting; but it is a waiting that our Lord comes to turn into hope. Experience shows us that we go through life waiting and hoping. When we are children we want to grow up; as young men and women we wait in hope for a great love to fulfil us; when we are adults we hope for professional fulfilment, a level of success to shape the rest of our lives; when we grow old our hope is for some well-earned rest. Nevertheless when these desires are fulfilled, and also when they fail, we realise that the thing hoped for was not everything. We need a hope which goes beyond what we can imagine, which will surprise us. And so, although we have great or small hopes which keep us going from day to day, without the greatest hope of all, born of the Love the Holy Spirit has placed in our hearts,¹⁴ everything else is insufficient.

The time of Advent encourages us to ask ourselves: What are we hoping for? What does our hope consist of? Or to go deeper: what meaning does my present life have, my today and now? “If time is not filled by a present endowed with meaning,” said Benedict XVI, “expectation risks becoming unbearable; if one expects something but

at a given moment there is nothing, in other words if the present remains empty, every instant that passes appears extremely long and waiting becomes too heavy a burden because the future remains completely uncertain. On the other hand, when time is endowed with meaning and at every instant we perceive something specific and worthwhile, it is then that the joy of expectation makes the present more precious.”¹⁵

A crib for our God

Our present moment has meaning because the Messiah, expected for centuries, is being born in Bethlehem. Together with Mary and Joseph and with the help of our Guardian Angels we wait for him with renewed excitement. On coming among us Christ offers us the gift of his love and his salvation. For Christians hope is filled with certainty: our Lord is present all through our life, in our work, in our daily cares; he accompanies us all the time, and one day he will dry our tears. One day, not so far away, everything will find fulfilment in God’s kingdom, a kingdom of justice and peace. “The season of Advent ... restores this horizon of hope, a hope which does not disappoint, for it is founded on God’s Word. A hope which does not disappoint, simply because the Lord never disappoints!”¹⁶

Advent is a time of presence and of waiting for what is eternal; and a time of joy, an intimate joy that nothing can take away. *I will see you again*, Jesus promised his disciples, *and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.*¹⁷ The joy of the time of waiting is a deeply Christian attitude that we can see in our blessed Lady: from the moment of the Annunciation “the Virgin Mother longed with love beyond all telling”¹⁸ for the coming of her Son, Christ Jesus. Mary teaches us to wait with a peaceful heart for the coming of our Lord, while we also prepare interiorly for that meeting, joyfully trying “to build a crib for our God in our hearts.”¹⁹

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- 1 Cf. *Mt* 25:1ff.
 - 2 Cf. *I Thess* 5:23.
 - 3 *Christ is Passing By*, no. 144.
 - 4 *The Way*, no. 267.
 - 5 Entrance Antiphon, First Sunday of Advent; cf. *Ps* 24[25]:1-2.
 - 6 Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, no. 13.
 - 7 *Christ is Passing By*, no. 1.
 - 8 *Roman Missal*, Tuesday of weeks 1-3 of Advent, Entrance Antiphon. Cf. *Zech* 14:5.
 - 9 *Jn* 5:17.
 - 10 *Rom* 13:11; *Lk* 21:36; *Mk* 13:37.
 - 11 Cf. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 15:1 (2nd reading of the Office of Readings for the First Sunday of Advent).
 - 12 Roman Calendar, Universal norms for the liturgical year, no. 39.
 - 13 *Roman Missal*, First Preface of Advent.
 - 14 Cf. *Rom* 5:5.
 - 15 Benedict XVI, Homily, Vespers of the First Sunday of Advent, 28 November 2009.
 - 16 Pope Francis, Angelus, 1 December 2013.

17 *Jn 16:22.*

18 *Roman Missal, Second Preface of Advent.*

19 Saint Josemaría, notes from a meditation, 25 December 1973 (AGP, Library, P09, p. 199).

CHRISTMAS

The light of Bethlehem

“Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, is born to illuminate our path on earth. He shows us the Father’s loveable face and gives us the Holy Spirit.”

O Christ, Redeemer of the world, only-begotten Son of the Father, born before all ages in a way that cannot be put into words: *Christe, redemptor omnium, / ex Patre, Patris Unice, / solus ante principium / natus ineffabiliter.*¹ These are the first words the Church pronounces each year at the beginning of Christmas time. The silence of this night leads us towards the eternity of God. In the mystery celebrated during these days, in praying before the crib, in our more intense family life, we want to contemplate the Word who has become a Child. We want to welcome him with “the humble attitude of the Christian soul. Let us not try to reduce the greatness of God to our own poor ideas ... Let us try to understand that this mystery, for all its darkness, is a light to guide men’s lives.”²

A light that leads us to the Father

*God is light;*³ in him there is no darkness. When he intervenes in human history, the clouds disperse. So on Christmas Day we sing: *lux fulgebit hodie super nos, quia natus est nobis Dominus;*⁴ today a light will shine upon us, for the Lord is born for us.

Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, is born to illuminate our path on earth. He shows us the Father’s loveable face and gives us the Holy Spirit. He reveals the mystery of God’s intimate life, for God is not a solitary being: he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In eternity the Father engenders the Son in a most perfect act of Love that makes the Word the Beloved Son: from the *Father of lights*⁵ proceeds the One who is

“Light from Light, true God from true God.”⁶ Although this Light is indescribable, and our eyes are unable to perceive it here on earth, God has not left us in darkness: he enters into people’s lives in a new way, beginning with that of Mary.

“Mary’s virginity manifests God’s absolute initiative in the Incarnation. Jesus has only God as Father.”⁷ The only Son of Mary is the only-begotten Son of the Father: born of the Father before all ages, he is also born on earth of a Virgin Mother. Thus the Church sings: *talis partus decet Deum*,⁸ such an admirable birth was in accord with God’s dignity. This mystery reveals the splendor of God’s glory to those who are humble.⁹ If we draw near to the Child with the simplicity of the shepherds who went with haste to the stable,¹⁰ or the Magi who *fell down and worshipped him*,¹¹ we will be able to recognize the Father’s mercy, and we will learn to converse with him as his children.

The beginning of the path towards Easter

*While they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*¹² It is easy to imagine the joy Mary experienced from the moment of the Annunciation. It was a happiness that would continue to grow day by day as the Son of God was being formed in her womb. Nevertheless, our Lady and St. Joseph were not exempt from grief. The holy night of the Redeemer’s birth is marked by the hardness and coldness of men’s hearts: *He came to his own home, and his own people received him not.*¹³ Thus, while his birth anticipated the glory of the Kingdom, it also anticipated the “hour” in which Jesus would give his life out of love for men: “His arms, as we admire him again in the manger, are those of a child; but they are the same arms that will be extended on the Cross drawing all men to himself.”¹⁴

In the liturgy for the Christmas season, the Church invites us to remember the beginning of God’s passionate love for mankind that culminates in the annual celebration of the Paschal mystery. In fact, in contrast to the yearly commemoration of Passiontide and Easter, the

feast of the Nativity of the Lord did not begin to be celebrated until well into the fourth century, as the calendar came to reflect more clearly the unity of the whole mystery of Christ. Hence, on celebrating Jesus' birth and letting ourselves be touched by the tenderness of the Child, we also understand more clearly the meaning of his coming into the world, as expressed in the Christmas carol that evoked so many memories for St. Josemaría: "*Yo bajé a la tierra para padecer,*" I came down to earth to suffer. Christmas and Easter are united, not only by light, but also by the power of the glorious Cross.

*For while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, thy all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne ... a stern warrior.*¹⁵ These words from the Book of Wisdom referred directly to the old Passover, to the Exodus that set the Israelites free. During Christmas time, the liturgy frequently uses these words to show us, by means of contrasts, the Word who comes down to earth. He whom nothing can contain is enclosed within time; the Master of the world finds no place in his world; the Prince of Peace descends as a *stern warrior* from his royal throne. We can thereby understand that Jesus' birth is the end of the tyranny of sin and the beginning of the liberation of the children of God. Jesus has freed us from sin, thanks to his Paschal Mystery. It is the "hour" that runs through and guides the whole of human history.

Jesus takes on a nature like ours, with all its weaknesses, to free us from sin through his death. This can only be understood from the viewpoint of love, for love seeks union: it seeks to share the same lot as the beloved: "the only way to measure what he does is to say that it cannot be measured; it comes from a madness of love which leads to him to take on our flesh and bear the weight of our sins."¹⁶

Our Lord chose to have a heart of flesh like ours so as to "translate" into human language the madness of God's love for each one of us. And so the Church rejoices on exclaiming: *Puer natus est nobis,*¹⁷ a Child has been born to us. He is the long-awaited Messiah of the people of Israel, but his mission reaches out to all mankind. Jesus is born for everyone; he "has in a certain way united himself with each man."¹⁸ He

is not ashamed to call us his “brothers and sisters,” and wants to join us in praising the Father’s goodness. It is only natural that during the days of Christmas we should live Christian fraternity in a special manner, loving all men and women without useless distinctions based on race, background, or abilities. We need to welcome Jesus’ liberating love that draws us out of the slavery of our bad inclinations, and breaks down the walls dividing us from others, so as to make us “sons in the Son.”¹⁹

A mystery that illuminates the family

“The cycle of feasts surrounding the mystery of the incarnation (Annunciation, Christmas, Epiphany) ... commemorate the beginning of our salvation and communicate to us the first fruits of the Paschal Mystery.”²⁰ These fruits always stem from contact with Jesus, from the relationships created around the Child. And, as with every child who comes into the world, these relationships are, in the first place, family ones. The light from the Child extends, then, in the first place to Mary and Joseph, and from them to all families.

Within Christmas time, the feast of the Holy Family reminds us that Christian families are called to reflect the light of the Home at Nazareth. They are a gift from the heavenly Father, who wishes there to be oases in the world where love has been freed from the slavery of selfishness. The readings for this feast offer us some advice on how to make family life holy: *Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*²¹ We are shown specific ways to make a reality of this great Gospel paradox: only self-renunciation and sacrifice leads to true love.

The Octave of Christmas closes with the Solemnity of Holy Mary, Mother of God. This feast began to be celebrated in Rome, possibly in relation to the dedication of the Church of Holy Mary *ad martyres*, located in the Pantheon. This celebration reminds us that the Son of God is also the Son of the Woman who believed in God’s promises,²² and that he became flesh to redeem us. Thus a few days later we

celebrate the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, the name that brings us consolation in our prayer, since it reminds us that the Child whom we adore is named Jesus because he saves us from our sins.²³

Salvation for all mankind

The final days of the Christmas cycle commemorate the expansive power of God's Light, intent on reuniting all men and women in the great family of God. On the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, the Roman rite originally commemorated also the "manifestation" to the Magi from the East, the first-fruits of the gentiles, and the wedding feast at Cana—the first manifestation of Jesus' glory to his disciples. Although the Roman liturgy now celebrates these "epiphanies" on different days, there still remain some echoes of this tradition, which is conserved in the Eastern liturgies. One of these is an antiphon for the 6th of January: "Today the Bridegroom claims his bride, the Church, since Christ has washed her sins away in Jordan's waters; the Magi hasten with their gifts to the royal wedding; and the wedding guests rejoice, for Christ has changed water into wine, alleluia."²⁴

On the solemnity of Epiphany, the Church invites us to follow the example of the Magi, who persevered in seeking the Truth, did not fear to ask for help when they lost sight of the star, and found their own true grandeur in adoring the newborn Child. Like them, we too want to give him all that is best. For we know that those who are in love need to give gifts, and that the Lord "does not want riches, or the fruits or the beasts of the earth, or of the sea or the air, because they all belong to him. He wants something intimate, which we have to give him freely: 'My son, give me your heart' (*Prov 23:26*)."²⁵

Celebrating our Baptism

The feast of the Baptism of the Lord closes the Christmas season. It invites us to contemplate Jesus as he lowers himself to sanctify the waters, so that in the Sacrament of Baptism we can unite ourselves to his Paschal Mystery: "We, by Baptism, are immersed in that inexhaustible source of life which is the death of Jesus, the greatest act

of love in all of history.”²⁶ So it is only natural, as Pope Francis says, that we should remember with joy the date we received this Sacrament: “To know the date of our Baptism is to know a blessed day. The danger of not knowing it is that we can lose the awareness of what the Lord has done in us, the memory of the gift we have received.”²⁷ Saint Josemaria always remembered the day of his baptism; each 13th January he recalled with gratitude his godparents and the priest who had baptized him.²⁸ On one of his last birthdays here on earth, on leaving the oratory of Our Lady of Peace after celebrating Holy Mass, he paused for a moment before the baptismal font, kissed it, and remarked: “It makes me very happy to kiss it. Here I became a Christian.”

Every three years on the first Sunday after the Baptism of the Lord, the gospel of the wedding feast at Cana is proclaimed. At the beginning of Ordinary Time, we are reminded that the light that shone out in Bethlehem and by the Jordan is not a mere endearing parenthesis, but a transforming force that seeks to reach the whole of society, starting from its nucleus—family relationships. The transformation of water into wine suggests to us that human realities, including our daily work done well, can be transformed into something divine. Our role is to be docile to the action of grace, to identify ourselves with the will of Jesus. He will ask us to fill the vessels *usque ad summum*,²⁹ right to the brim with our efforts, so that our life might acquire supernatural value. In our struggle to sanctify our daily work, we find our Lady anew. Mary, who showed us the Child in Bethlehem, now directs us towards the Master with her sure advice: *Do whatever he tells you!*³⁰

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- 1 Hymn *Christe, Redemptor omnium*, I Vespers of Christmas.
- 2 Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 13.
- 3 *1 Jn* 1:5.
- 4 Roman Missal, Nativity of the Lord, *Ad Missam in aurora*, Entrance Antiphon (cf. *Is* 9:2, 6).
- 5 *Jas* 1:17.
- 6 Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.
- 7 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 503.
- 8 Hymn *Veni, Redemptor gentium*.
- 9 Cf. *Heb* 1:3.
- 10 Cf. *Lk* 2:16.
- 11 *Mt* 2:11.
- 12 *Lk* 2:6-7.
- 13 *Jn* 1:11.
- 14 *Christ is Passing By*, no. 38.
- 15 *Wis* 18:14-15.
- 16 *Christ is Passing By*, no. 144.
- 17 Roman Missal, Nativity of the Lord, *Ad Missam in die*, Entrance Antiphon (cf. *Is* 9:6).
- 18 Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1171.
- 21 *Col* 3:12-13 (2nd reading for the feast of the Holy Family).

22 Cf. *Lk* 1:45.

23 *Mt* 1:21.

24 *Antiphona ad Benedictus, Morning Prayer* for 6 January.

25 *Christ is Passing By*, no. 35.

26 Pope Francis, General audience, 8 January 2014.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Cf. Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 1, p. 10.

29 *Jn* 2:7

30 *Jn* 2:5

LENT

Pathway to Easter

“During Lent the Church again reminds us of the need to renew our heart and our deeds so that we can rediscover the centrality of the Paschal Mystery, a returning to eternal Love.”

“Give us the right dispositions, O Lord we pray, to make these offerings, for with them we celebrate the beginning of this venerable and sacred time.”¹ Right from the first Sunday of Lent the liturgy resolutely marks the character of the forty days that start with Ash Wednesday. Lent is a compendium of our whole life, which is a “constant returning to the house of our Father God.”² It is a pathway to the Paschal Mystery, to the death and resurrection of our Lord, the centre of gravity of history, and of each woman, each man: a returning to eternal Love.

During Lent the Church again reminds us of the need to renew our heart and our deeds so that we can rediscover the centrality of the Paschal Mystery. We once again have to put ourselves in God’s hands to “grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and by worthy conduct pursue their effects.”³

“What a strange capacity man has to forget even the most wonderful things, to become used to mystery. Let us remind ourselves this Lent that Christians cannot be superficial. While being fully involved in our everyday work ... we have to be at the same time totally involved with God, for we are children of God.”⁴ Hence during these days we want to consider in our prayer the need for conversion, to redirect our steps towards our Lord and purify our hearts, making our own the psalmist’s cry: *Cor mundum crea in me, Deus, et spiritum firmum innova in visceribus meis*; “A pure heart create for me, O God; put a steadfast

spirit within me.”⁵ These words are from the psalm *Miserere* that the Church offers us frequently during this liturgical season and that Saint Josemaria so often recited.

Israel’s path through the wilderness

Lent has deep roots in various key episodes in the history of salvation that is also our own history. One of these is the crossing of the desert by the Chosen People. Those forty years for the Israelites were a time of trial and temptation. The Lord God accompanied them all the time, and made them understand that they should rely only on him, softening the hardness of their stony hearts.⁶ It was a time of constant graces. Though the people suffered, it was God himself who comforted and guided them through Moses’ words, and who fed them with manna and quails and gave them water at the rock of Meribah.⁷

How relevant for us are the words, filled with tenderness, with which God led the Israelites to reflect on the meaning of their long journey! *You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know to know what was in your hearts, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.*⁸

The Lord addresses these words today to us as well, who in the desert of our lives certainly experience fatigue and problems every day, but also encounter God’s fatherly care. Sometimes his care reaches us through the disinterested help of family members and friends, and sometimes even from people of good will whom we may not even know. Through his mysterious way of guiding us, God bit by bit leads us into his heart, the true promised land: *Praebe, fili mi, cor tuum mihi...* “My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways.”⁹

Many of the episodes in the exodus of the Israelites foreshadowed future events. Not all of those on that first pilgrimage through the

wilderness entered the Promised Land.¹⁰ That is why the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, quoting Psalm 94, mourns the people's rebellion and at the same time celebrates the coming of a new exodus: *Since therefore it remained to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he sets a certain day, "today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, "Today when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."*¹¹ This "today" was inaugurated by Christ. With his Incarnation, his life and glorification, our Lord leads us to the definitive exodus, in which the promises are totally fulfilled. He makes a place for us in heaven; he achieves *a Sabbath's rest for the people of God; for whosoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labours as God did from his.*¹²

Christ's path through the wilderness

The gospel for the first Sunday in Lent shows us Jesus who, in solidarity with us, allowed himself to be tempted at the end of his forty days spent in the wilderness. His victory over Satan fills us with hope, and makes us realise that with Him we too can win out in the battles of our interior life. Our temptations then no longer upset us, but instead are turned into opportunities to get to know ourselves better and cling more closely to God. We discover that the ideal of a comfortable life is a mirage of true happiness, and we realise, with Saint Josemaria, that "we need, most probably, to change again, to be more loyal and humble, so that we become less selfish and let Christ grow in us, for *He must become more and more, I must become less and less (Jn 3:30).*"¹³

The experience of our personal fragility should not lead to fear, but rather to a humble petition that activates our faith, hope and love: "Take away from me, Lord, whatever takes me away from you" we can say, as St Josemaria often did.¹⁴ When we are with Jesus we find the strength to firmly reject temptation, refusing to dialogue. "Note well how Jesus responds. He does not dialogue with Satan, as Eve had done in the earthly paradise. Jesus ... chooses to take refuge in the Word of God and responds with the power of this Word. Let us remember this: at the moment of temptation, of our temptations, there is no arguing

with Satan. Our defence must always be the Word of God! And this will save us.”¹⁵

The story of the Transfiguration, proclaimed on the second Sunday of Lent, strengthens our conviction that victory is certain in spite of our limitations. We too will share in Jesus’ glory if we unite ourselves to his Cross in our daily life. Therefore we need to nourish our faith, as we see in the Gospel scenes the liturgy presents to us every three years on the last Sundays in Lent. First, we see the Samaritan woman, who overcomes sin to recognise Jesus as the Messiah who quenches, with the living water of the Holy Spirit, her thirst for love.¹⁶ Then the man blind from birth, who recognises Christ as the light of the world who overcomes ignorance, while those who thought they could see remain blind.¹⁷ And Lazarus, whose resurrection reminds us that Jesus has come to bring us new life.¹⁸ By contemplating these scenes as one more person there, with the help of the saints, we will find extra resources for our personal prayer and attain the more intense presence of God that we are seeking during these days.

Our penitential pathway as sons and daughters

The Collect for the third Sunday in Lent presents the penitential meaning of this season: “O God, author of every mercy and of all goodness, who in fasting, prayer and almsgiving have shown us a remedy for sin, look graciously on this confession of our lowliness, that we who are bowed down by our conscience may always be lifted up by your mercy.” With the humility that comes from knowing we are sinners, we ask with the whole Church for the intervention of God’s fatherly mercy: his loving gaze on our lives and his healing forgiveness.

The liturgy urges us to take up personally the process of conversion, by inviting us to make room in our lives for the traditional penitential practices. These practices express a change in our relationship with God (prayer), with others (alms) and with ourselves (fasting).¹⁹ It is the “spirit of penance” Saint Josemaria gave us so many practical examples of: “penance is fulfilling exactly the timetable you have fixed for yourself ... you are practising penitence when you lovingly keep to your

schedule of prayer, despite feeling worn-out, listless or cold. Penance means being very charitable at all times towards those around you ... Penance consists of putting up good-humouredly with the thousand and one little pinpricks of each day ... in eating gladly whatever is served, without being fussy.”²⁰

At the same time we know that merely external actions count for nothing without God’s grace. We cannot be identified with Christ without his help: *quia tibi sine te placere non possumus*, "for without your help we cannot please you."²¹ We try then with his help to carry out these works *in secret*, where only our Father God sees them.²² We try to rectify our intention frequently, so as to seek more diligently his glory and the salvation of all men and women. The apostle John wrote: *he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.*²³ These words invite us to examine our conscience carefully, because it is impossible to separate the two sides of charity. If we know that we are always under God’s gaze, our sense of divine filiation will imbue our interior life and apostolate with a more trusting, childlike contrition, and with sincere self-giving to those around us, among our family, colleagues at work, friends.

Our penitential pathway through the sacraments

In our daily struggle against the disorder of sin, the sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion are also privileged moments. It makes sense that our inner penitence should be perfected by the sacrament of Confession. Much depends on the dispositions of the penitent, although the protagonist is God, who moves us to conversion. Through this sacrament – one of God’s real masterworks²⁴ – we can perceive how he draws good even from our fallen freedom. This is the way Saint Josemaria explained what our role should be: “I advise you all to have, as a special devotion ... that of making many acts of contrition. And an external, practical manifestation of this devotion is to feel a special affection for the Holy Sacrament of Penance,”²⁵ in which “we clothe ourselves with Jesus Christ and his merits.”²⁶

Lent is a splendid moment to cultivate this “special affection” for

Confession, by practising it ourselves in the first place, and then by telling many others about it.

After the absolution the priest gives in the name of God, the Ritual suggests a beautiful final prayer of dismissal of the penitent: “May the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of all the saints, whatever good you do and suffering you endure, heal your sins, help you to grow in holiness, and reward you with eternal life. Go in peace.”²⁷ It is an ancient prayer in which the priest asks God to extend the effects of the sacrament over the whole of the penitent’s life, reminding us of the source of its effectiveness: the merits of the innocent Victim and of all the saints.

As happened with the younger son in the parable, after being embraced by our Father God we are admitted to the banquet.²⁸ What joy it gives us to be really clean when we take part in the Eucharist! “Love our Lord very much. Maintain and foster in your soul a sense of urgency to love him better. Love God precisely now when perhaps a good many of those who hold him in their hands do not love him, but rather ill-treat him and neglect him. Be sure to take good care of our Lord for me in the Holy Mass and throughout the whole day.”²⁹

Through the liturgy, the Church invites us to take up the Lenten journey eagerly. She urges us to receive the sacraments frequently, to meditate earnestly on the Word of God, to practice works of penance – doing so with the cheerfulness that is particularly emphasised on the 4th Sunday of Lent: *Laetare Jerusalem!*³⁰ These practices purify our soul and prepare us to take part intensely in the Holy Week ceremonies, when we will relive the culminating moments of Jesus’ time on earth. “We must bring into our life, to make them our own, the life and death of Christ. We must die through mortification and penance, so that Christ may live in us through Love. And then follow in the footsteps of Christ, with a zeal to co-redeem all mankind.”³¹ Well purified from our sins, and contemplating Jesus giving his life for us, we will rediscover the joy of the salvation God brings: *redde mihi laetitiam salutaris tui*, “restore unto me the joy of thy salvation.”³²

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- 1 Roman Missal, 1st Sunday of Lent, Prayer over the Offerings.
 - 2 Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 64.
 - 3 Roman Missal, 1st Sunday of Lent, Collect.
 - 4 *Christ is Passing By*, 65.
 - 5 *Ps* 50[51]:10.
 - 6 Cf. *Deut* 8:2-5.
 - 7 Cf. *Ex* 15:22-17:7.
 - 8 *Deut* 8:2-3.
 - 9 *Prov* 23:26.
 - 10 Cf. *Num* 14:20 ff.
 - 11 *Heb* 4:6-7; cf. *Ps* 94[95]:7-8.
 - 12 *Heb* 4:9-10.
 - 13 *Christ is Passing By*, 58.
 - 14 Saint Josemaria, notes from a family get-together, 18 October 1972.
 - 15 Pope Francis, Angelus, 9 March 2014.
 - 16 Cf. *Jn* 4:5-42 (3rd Sunday of Lent, Year A).

- 17 Cf. *Jn* 9:1-41 (4th Sunday of Lent, Year A).
- 18 Cf. *Jn* 11: 1-43 (5th Sunday of Lent, Year A).
- 19 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 1434.
- 20 Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, 138.
- 21 Saturday, 4th week of Lent, Collect.
- 22 Cf. *Mt* 6:6.
- 23 *1 Jn* 4:20.
- 24 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1116.
- 25 Saint Josemaría, notes taken from his preaching, 26 April 1970.
- 26 Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, 310.
- 27 The Rite of Penance, no. 104.
- 28 Cf. *Lk* 15: 22-24.
- 29 Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, 438.
- 30 4th Sunday of Lent, Introit (cf. *Is* 66:10).
- 31 Saint Josemaria, *The Way of the Cross*, 14th station.
- 32 *Ps* 50[51]:14.

HOLY WEEK

He loved them to the end

“At the heart of the Liturgical year lies the Paschal Mystery, the Triduum of our Lord’s Crucifixion, Death and Resurrection. The whole history of salvation revolves around these holy days.”

At the heart of the Liturgical year lies the Paschal Mystery, the Triduum of our Lord’s Crucifixion, Death and Resurrection. The whole history of salvation revolves around these holy days, which went unnoticed by most of mankind, and which now the Church celebrates “from the rising of the sun to its setting.”¹ The whole liturgical year, a summary of God’s interaction with men, stems from the “memory” the Church conserves of Jesus’ “hour”: when *having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*²

During these days the Church, in her maternal wisdom, sets us within the decisive moments of our redemption. Provided we don’t resist, we are attracted by the prayerful recollection with which the liturgy of Holy Week leads us into the Passion; the reverence with which we are urged to keep watch beside our Lord; and the outburst of joy in the Easter Vigil. Many of the rites that we observe during these days are rooted in very ancient traditions; their power is attested by the piety of Christians and the faith of the saints for two thousand years.

Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday is, as it were, the door that precedes and prepares us for the Paschal Triduum. “Now that we are at the threshold of Holy Week, and so very close to the moment when the Redemption of the whole human race was accomplished on Calvary, it seems to be an especially appropriate time for you and me to reflect on how our Lord Jesus Christ

saved us, and to contemplate this love of his—this truly inexpressible love—for poor creatures like us, who have been made from the clay of the earth.”³

When the early Christians heard the liturgical proclamation of the Gospel narrative of the Passion and the homily by the bishop, they knew they were not simply present at a mere representation: “for their pious hearts, there was no difference between hearing what had been proclaimed and seeing what had happened.”⁴ In the narratives of the Passion, Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem is, as it were, the official presentation that our Lord makes of himself as the desired and hoped-for Messiah, apart from whom there is no salvation. His is the gesture of the savior King who enters into his own house. Among his own, some failed to receive him, but others did, acclaiming him as the *Blessed One* who comes in the name of the Lord.⁵

Our Lord, always present and active in the Church, renews in the liturgy, year after year, this solemn entrance on “Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord,” as it is called in the Missal. Its very name implies a two-fold element: on the one hand triumphal, and on the other sorrowful. “On this day,” we read in the rubrics, “the Church celebrates Christ’s entrance into Jerusalem to accomplish his Paschal Mystery.”⁶

His arrival is surrounded with acclamations and cries of jubilation, although the crowds do not yet know Jesus’ real destination, and they will be confronted with the scandal of the Cross. We, however, living in the time of the Church, do know where our Lord’s steps are heading: he is entering Jerusalem “to accomplish his Paschal Mystery.” Therefore, we Christians who have acclaimed Jesus as Messiah in the Palm Sunday procession are not surprised to find ourselves taken straight to the sorrowful events of our Lord’s Passion.

The liturgy’s conjunction of lights and shadows in God’s plan holds great meaning for us. Palm Sunday does not simply juxtapose two separate celebrations. The entrance rite of the Mass is the procession itself, which leads directly to the Collect prayer: “Almighty and ever-living God,” we say to the Father, “who caused our Savior to take flesh, and submit to the cross...”⁷ Here everything already speaks to us of

what is going to happen in the coming days.

Holy Thursday

The Paschal Triduum begins with the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper. Holy Thursday comes between Lent, which is ending, and the Triduum, which is beginning. The connecting thread of this day's entire celebration, the light illuminating everything, is Christ's Paschal Mystery: the very heart of the event that is renewed in the sacramental signs.

The sacred action centers on the Supper in which Jesus, before giving himself over to death, entrusted to the Church the testament of his love, the Sacrifice of the eternal covenant.⁸ "While he was instituting the Eucharist as an everlasting memorial of himself and his paschal sacrifice, he symbolically placed this supreme act of revelation in the light of his mercy. Within the very same context of mercy, Jesus entered upon his passion and death, conscious of the great mystery of love that he would consummate on the Cross."⁹

The liturgy leads us in a real and vivid way into this mystery of Jesus' self-giving for our salvation. *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.*¹⁰ Our Lord's *fiat* that is the source of our salvation becomes present in the Church's celebration. Thus the Collect has no hesitation in including us, in the present tense, in the Last Supper: *Sacratissimam, Deus, frequentatibus Cenam...*, the Latin says succinctly, "O God, who have called us to participate in this most sacred Supper..."¹¹

This is "the most sacred day on which our Lord Jesus Christ was handed over for our sake."¹² Jesus' words, *I go away, and I will come to you ... it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you,*¹³ point us towards the mysterious tension between our Lord's absence and presence that presides over the whole Paschal Triduum and, from there, the Church's entire life. Therefore neither Holy Thursday nor the days that follow it are simply days of sadness or mourning: to see the Holy Triduum in

that way would be to go back to the situation of the disciples before the Resurrection.

“This is the source of the joy we feel on Holy Thursday—the realization that the Creator has loved his creatures to such an extent.”¹⁴ To perpetuate in the world the infinite affection concentrated in his Paschal Mystery, in his passage from this world to the Father, Jesus makes a gift to us of his entire being, with his Body and his Blood, in a new memorial: the bread and wine that are turned into “the bread of life” and “our spiritual drink.”¹⁵ Our Lord tells them that, in the future, they are to do what he has just done, in commemoration of him.¹⁶ And thus the Paschal celebration of the Church, the Holy Eucharist, is born.

Two moments in the celebration are very eloquent, if we consider them in their mutual relation: the washing of the feet and the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament. The washing of the feet of the Twelve makes manifest, a few hours before the Crucifixion, the greatest love: laying down one’s life for one’s friends.¹⁷ The liturgy renews this gesture, which so surprised the apostles, in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the possibility of washing the feet of some of the faithful. At the conclusion of the Mass, the procession to reserve the Blessed Sacrament and the adoration of the faithful reveals the Church’s loving response to our Lord’s humble kneeling before the Apostles’ feet. These moments of silent prayer, extended into the night, invite us to remember Christ’s priestly prayer in the Cenacle.¹⁸

Good Friday

The Good Friday liturgy begins with the priests’ prostration, in place of the customary initial kiss. It is a gesture of special veneration for the altar, which is bare, empty of everything, evoking the Crucified Lord at the hour of his Passion. The silence is broken by an ardent prayer in which the celebrant appeals to God’s mercy—*Reminiscere miserationum tuarum, Domine*—and beseeches the Father for the eternal protection that the Son has gained for us by the shedding of his blood, that is, by giving his life for us.¹⁹

An ancient tradition reserves for this day the proclamation of the

Passion according to St. John as the culminating moment of the liturgy of the Word. This Gospel narrative highlights the lofty majesty of Christ, who “gives himself up to death with the full freedom of Love.”²⁰ Our Lord responds courageously to those who come to seize him: *when he said to them ‘I am he,’ they drew back and fell to the ground.*²¹ Later we hear him tell Pilate, “*my kingship is not of this world*”²², and therefore his followers haven’t fought to free him. *Consummatum est,*²³ it is finished: our Lord is faithful to his Father right to the end, and thus he overcomes the world.²⁴

After the proclamation of the Passion and the universal prayer, the liturgy directs our attention to the *Lignum Crucis*, the tree of the Cross: the glorious instrument for mankind’s redemption. The adoration of the holy Cross is a gesture of faith and a proclamation of Jesus’ victory over the devil, sin and death. With him, we Christians have also won, because “*this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith.*”²⁵

The Church envelops the Cross with honor and reverence. The bishop comes up to kiss it without chasuble or ring.²⁶ Then comes the adoration by the faithful, with songs celebrating its victorious strength: “We adore your Cross, O Lord, we praise and glorify your holy Resurrection, because of the wood of a tree, joy has come to the whole world.”²⁷ It is a mysterious blending of death and life in which God wants us to share: “Sometimes we renew the joyous impulse that took our Lord to Jerusalem. Other times, the pain of the agony which ended on Calvary... Or the glory of his triumph over death and sin. But always, the love—joyful, sorrowful, glorious—of the Heart of Jesus Christ!”²⁸

Holy Saturday and the Easter Vigil

An anonymous text from Christian antiquity condenses for us the mystery that the Church commemorates on Holy Saturday: Christ’s descent into hell. “What is it that takes place today? A great silence envelops the earth, a great silence and stillness. The earth trembles and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has come to raise all who have slept ever since the world began.”²⁹ Just as in Genesis we saw God resting after his work of Creation, now our Lord

rests from his redemptive toil. For the paschal feast, which is about to dawn in the world, is “the feast of the new creation.”³⁰ it cost our Lord his life to restore Life to us.

*A little while, and you will see me no more; again a little while, and you will see me,*³¹ our Lord said to the Apostles on the eve of his Passion. While we await his return, let us meditate on his descent into the darkness of death, in which those just men and women of the old Covenant were still submerged. Christ, bearing in his hand the liberating sign of the Cross, put an end to their sleep and led them into the light of the new Kingdom: “Awaken, you who are sleeping, for you did not believe so that you might remain captive in the abysm.”³² From the eighth-century Carolingian monasteries, the commemoration of this great Sabbath spread throughout Europe: the day of awaiting the Resurrection, as the Mother of Jesus did so intensely, which led the Church to make every Saturday into a day of devotion to our Lady. Now, more than ever, Mary is the *stella matutina*,³³ the morning star announcing the arrival of the Lord: the *Lucifer matutinus*,³⁴ the sun arising from on high, *oriens ex alto*.³⁵

In the night of this great Sabbath, the Church gathers in the most solemn of her vigils to celebrate the Resurrection of her Spouse, extending even to the first hours of dawn. This celebration is the fundamental core of the Christian liturgy throughout the whole year. A great variety of symbolic elements express the passage from darkness to light, from death to the new life in the Resurrection of our Lord: the fire, the candle, the water, the incense, the music and the bells...

The light from the candle is a symbol of Christ, the Light of the world, who illumines and inundates everything; the fire is the Holy Spirit, enkindled by Christ in the hearts of the faithful; the water signifies the passage to a new life in Christ, the source of life; the Paschal *alleluia* is the hymn of the pilgrims traveling towards the heavenly Jerusalem; the bread and wine of the Eucharist are a pledge of the eschatological banquet with the Risen One. While we take part in the Easter Vigil, we recognize with the eyes of faith that this holy assembly is the community of the Risen Lord; that this time is a new time, open to the

definitive *today* of the glorious Christ: *haec est dies, quam fecit Dominus*,³⁶ this is the new day our Lord has inaugurated, the day that “never sets.”³⁷

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- 1 *Roman Missal*, Third Eucharistic Prayer.
 - 2 *Jn* 13:1.
 - 3 Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 110.
 - 4 St. Leo the Great, *Sermon on Passion Sunday* 52, 1 (CCL 138, 307).
 - 5 See *Mt* 21:9.
 - 6 *Roman Missal*, Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord, no. 1.
 - 7 *Ibid.*, Collect.
 - 8 See *Roman Missal*, Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper, Holy Thursday, Collect
 - 9 Pope Francis, Bull *Misericordiae vultus*, April 11, 2015, no. 7.
 - 10 *Jn* 10:17-38.
 - 11 *Roman Missal*, Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper, Holy Thursday, Collect.
 - 12 *Ibid.*, special form for *Communicantes*.
 - 13 *Jn* 14:28; *Jn* 16:7.

- 14 Saint Josemaria, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 84.
- 15 *Roman Missal*, Offertory.
- 16 See *I Cor* 11:23-25.
- 17 See *Jn* 15:13.
- 18 See *Jn* 17.
- 19 See *The Roman Missal*, Celebration of the Passion of the Lord, Good Friday, Collect.
- 20 Saint Josemaria, *The Way of the Cross*, Tenth Station.
- 21 *Jn* 18:6.
- 22 *Jn* 18:36.
- 23 *Jn* 19:30.
- 24 See *Jn* 16:33.
- 25 *1 Jn* 5:4.
- 26 See *Ceremonial for Bishops*, nos. 315, 322.
- 27 *Roman Missal*, Celebration of the Passion of the Lord, Good Friday, no. 20.
- 28 *The Way of the Cross*, Fourteenth Station, point 3.
- 29 *Homily on the Great and Holy Sabbath* (PG 43, 439).
- 30 Benedict XVI, *Homily on the Easter Vigil*, April 7, 2012.
- 31 *Jn* 16:16.
- 32 *Homily on the Great and Holy Sabbath* (PG 43, 462).
- 33 The Litany of Loreto (see *Sir* 50:6).
- 34 *Roman Missal*, Easter Vigil, Easter Prayer.

- 35 Liturgy of the Hours, hymn *Benedictus* (*Lk* 1:78).
- 36 *Ps* 117 [118]: 24.
- 37 See *The Roman Missal*, Easter Vigil, Easter Prayer.

EASTER

I have risen and am still with you

“During this time the Church already experiences the joy that our Lord has prepared for us: ‘something that no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived.’”

“Come, you blessed of my Father; receive the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, alleluia.”¹ The Easter season is an anticipation of the happiness Christ has won for us with his victory over death. Our Lord was *put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification*,² so that, by abiding in him, our joy might be complete.³

The Paschal season stands at the summit of the liturgical year because the Christian message is the joyful announcement of the salvation brought about by our Lord’s “passover,” his passage from death to new life. “Easter is a time of joy—a joy not confined to this period of the liturgical year, but to be found really and fully in the Christian’s heart. For Christ is alive. He is not someone who has gone, someone who existed for a time and then passed on, leaving us a wonderful example.”⁴

Although only the few *who were chosen by God as witnesses*⁵ were present at the appearances of the Risen Christ, the liturgy now enables us to re-live these mysteries. As Pope St. Leo the Great preached, “All the things relating to our Redeemer which were previously seen, have now become sacramental rites.”⁶ The Eastern Christians’ custom of exchanging the paschal greeting expresses their awareness of this reality. The greeting “*Christos anestē*, Christ is risen!” is answered with “*Alethōs anestē*, Truly, He is risen!”

The Latin liturgy pours out its joy in the *Exultet* of the Easter Vigil. On Easter Sunday, in the beautiful Introit, it expresses this joy more

succinctly: “I have risen and I am with you still. You have laid your hand upon me. Too wonderful for me, this knowledge.”⁷ We reverently put in our Lord’s mouth, in the form of a burning filial prayer to the Father, the inexpressible experience of his Resurrection at first light on that Sunday morning. Saint Josemaria in his preaching encouraged us to draw close to Christ, to grasp deeply the reality that he is alive today. “I wanted to review with you, briefly, some of the ways in which Christ is alive today—*Jesus Christ, yesterday and today, yes and forever (Heb 13:8)*—because this is the basis of all Christian living.”⁸ Our Lord wants us to talk with him, and talk about him, not as a figure in the past, as someone we remember, but perceiving his “today,” his presence here and now, his living companionship.

The fifty days of Eastertide

Long before Lent and the other liturgical seasons were introduced, the Christian community already celebrated these fifty days of joy. If anyone did not express their jubilation during these days, they were seen as failing to grasp the very heart of the faith, for “with Christ joy is constantly born anew.”⁹ This feast, so extended in time, makes us realise that *the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*¹⁰ During this time the Church already experiences the joy that our Lord has prepared for us: something that *no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived.*¹¹

This awareness of the last things, the anticipation of heaven, has for centuries been reflected in liturgical praxis. The Easter period has no Old Testament readings, since the entire Old Testament was a preparation, a figure of what was to come; but Eastertide celebrates the Kingdom of God already present. During Easter everything has been renewed and everything is fulfilment. Hence during Eastertide, along with the Gospel of Saint John, the liturgy proclaims the light-filled books that are especially suitable for these days: the *Acts of the Apostles* and *Revelation*.

Christian writers of both East and West think of Eastertime as one

unique and prolonged feast-day, and so the Sundays are called Sundays *of* Easter, not Sundays *after* Easter. The whole Easter period is like one great Sunday—the Sunday that made all other Sundays. For the same reason Pentecost Sunday is not considered a separate feast, but rather the conclusion of the great feast of Easter.

In some traditional liturgical hymns for Lent the word “Alleluia” is used in a tone of farewell. In contrast, the Easter liturgy says “Alleluia” with a new sense of rejoicing, as an anticipation of the “new song” the baptised in heaven will sing,¹² who already see themselves as risen with Christ. Therefore during Easter both the Responsorial Psalm and the Antiphons at Mass so often repeat “Alleluia!”—a word derived from imperative of the Hebrew verb *hallal* (praise) and *Yahweh* (the name of God): “Praise God.”

“How happy the alleluia that we shall sing there!” exclaimed Saint Augustine in a homily. “It will be a firm, fearless alleluia, because no enemy shall be present, and no friend lost. There, as here, the divine praises shall resound, but the ones here come from those who are still in difficulties, while the praises resounding in heaven come from those who are secure; here from those who have to die, there from those who will live forever; here from those who hope, there from those who are in possession; here from those who are still on their way, there, from those who have arrived in the fatherland.”¹³ Saint Jerome wrote that during the first centuries in Palestine so habitual had become that cry that people ploughing the fields would sometimes sing out “Alleluia!” And oarsmen ferrying travellers across a river would cry out “Alleluia!” “A deep, serene joy comes over the Church during the weeks of Eastertide. It is the joy our Lord has wanted to leave as an inheritance to all Christians ... a joy full of supernatural content that nobody and nothing can take from us if we do not let them.”¹⁴

The Easter octave

“The first eight days of Easter Time constitute the Octave of Easter and are celebrated as Solemnities of the Lord.”¹⁵ In the early Church, the Bishop of Rome celebrated the “Stations” as a way of introducing

the newly baptised to the triumph of the saints who held special meaning for the Christians in Rome. It was a “geography of the faith,” as it were, in which Christian Rome appeared as a reconstruction of our Lord’s Jerusalem. Seven Roman basilicas were visited: for the Easter vigil the “Station” was held at Saint John Lateran; on Easter Sunday it was at Saint Mary Major; Monday at Saint Peter’s at the Vatican; Tuesday at Saint Paul’s Outside the Walls; Wednesday at Saint Lawrence Outside the Walls; Thursday at the Basilica of the Holy Apostles; Friday at Our Lady of the Martyrs; and Saturday at Saint John Lateran again.

The readings for each day related to the place of celebration. For example on Wednesday the Station was at Saint Lawrence Outside the Walls. The Gospel for that day used to be the passage about a charcoal fire,¹⁶ a clear reference to the popular Roman tradition that the deacon Lawrence suffered martyrdom by being roasted on a grid-iron. The Saturday of the octave was the day on which the newly baptised wore their white baptismal garments for the last time before they put them away, and the first reading was Saint Peter’s exhortation beginning with the words: “*Deponentes igitur omnem malitiam...* Put away all malice and all guile and insincerity...”¹⁷

The Fathers of the Church often refer to Sunday as the “eighth day.” Set within the sevenfold succession of days in a unique and transcendent position, Sunday evokes not only the beginning of time but also its end in the age to come.¹⁸ Thus the early baptisteries, such as that of Saint John Lateran, were octagonal; the catechumens arose from the baptismal pool to begin their new life, open now to the eighth day, the Sunday without end. Every Sunday thus reminds us that our life takes place during the time of the Resurrection.

Ascension and Pentecost

“By his ascension, the Risen Lord draws the gaze of the Apostles—and our gaze—to the heights of Heaven to show us that the end of our journey is the Father.”¹⁹ The time of a new presence of our Lord begins. It seems as if He is more hidden, but in a certain way He is closer to us.

The “time of the liturgy” begins, with the entire liturgy becoming an extended prayer to the Father, through the Son in the Holy Spirit: a prayer with a “broad and peaceful flow.”²⁰

When Jesus disappeared from the Apostles’ sight, perhaps they were speechless at first. “We do not know whether at that precise moment they realised that a magnificent, infinite horizon was opening up before their eyes: the ultimate goal of our earthly pilgrimage. Perhaps they only realised this at Pentecost, in the light of the Holy Spirit.”²¹

“Almighty ever-living God, who willed the paschal mystery to be encompassed as a sign in fifty days...”²² The Church teaches us to recognise this number as filled with meaning in revelation. The number fifty has two important occurrences in the life of Israel: one was the feast of Pentecost, fifty days after the start of the wheat harvest; and the other the Jubilee declared every fifty years, a year dedicated to Yahweh in which each person could recover their property and each could return to their family.²³ In the time of the Church, the “sign” of Paschal time includes the fifty days from our Lord’s resurrection until the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In the language of the liturgy, Lent implies conversion to God with our whole soul, our whole mind, and our whole heart; while Easter means our new life, “co-risen” with Christ. *“Igitur, si consurrexistis Christo, quae sursum sunt quaerite”*; *if, then, you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*²⁴

After these fifty days, “we come to the peak of all blessings and the ‘metropolis,’ the capital of all feasts;”²⁵ for, inseparable from Easter, it is like the “mother of all feasts.” As Tertullian said to the pagans, “Put all your feast-days together, and they will not add up to the fifty days of Pentecost.”²⁶ Pentecost is, then, a conclusive Sunday, Sunday in its fullness. On this Solemnity we experience, in astonishment, how through the liturgy God makes present the gift of the Spirit that happened at the dawn of the Church. At the Ascension, Jesus “was taken up to heaven ... that He might make us sharers in his divinity.”²⁷ And now, at Pentecost, our Lord, seated at the right hand of the Father, gives his divine life to the Church through the outpouring of the

Paraclete, “the fruit of the Cross.”²⁸ Saint Josemaria lived, and encouraged us to do likewise, with a deep awareness of the Spirit’s perpetual presence: “Ask with me for a new Pentecost which will once again set the world alight.”²⁹

We can also understand why Saint Josemaria decided to start some of the means of formation in the Work with the Church’s traditional prayer, found for example in the votive Mass of the Holy Spirit: “*Deus, qui corda fidelium Sancti Spiritus illustratione docuisti, da nobis in eodem Spiritu recta sapere, et de eius semper consolatione gaudere.*” *O God, who has taught the hearts of the faithful by the light of the Holy Spirit, grant that by the same Spirit we may be truly wise, and ever rejoice in his consolation.*³⁰ In these words of the liturgy we implore God the Father that the Holy Spirit may make us capable of appreciating, of “relishing,” the meaning of divine realities; and that we may enjoy the encouraging consolation of the “Great Unknown,” an expression Saint Josemaria often used for the Holy Spirit. For “the world needs the courage, hope, faith and perseverance of Christ’s followers. The world needs the fruits, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as Saint Paul lists them: ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control’ (*Gal 5:22*). The gift of the Holy Spirit has been bestowed upon the Church and upon each one of us, so that we may live lives of genuine faith and active charity, that we may sow the seeds of reconciliation and peace.”³¹

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¹ Introit, Wednesday of Easter week. See *Mt 25:34*.

- 2 *Rom* 4:25.
- 3 Cf. *Jn* 15:9-11.
- 4 Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 102.
- 5 *Acts* 10:41.
- 6 Saint Leo the Great, Sermon 74, 2.
- 7 Introit, Easter Sunday.
- 8 *Christ is Passing By*, 104.
- 9 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 1.
- 10 *Rom* 8:18.
- 11 *1 Cor* 2:9.
- 12 Cf. *Rev* 5:9.
- 13 Saint Augustine, Sermon 256, 3.
- 14 Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, *Pastoral Letter*.
- 15 *Roman Missal*, “Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the General Roman Calendar,” no. 24.
- 16 *Jn* 21:9 This reading is now that of the Friday of Easter week.
- 17 *1 Pet* 2:1.
- 18 Cf. Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, 31 May 1998, no. 26.
- 19 Pope Francis, *Regina Coeli*, 1 June 2014.
- 20 Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 145.
- 21 Benedict XVI, Homily, 28 May 2006.
- 22 *Roman Missal*, Vigil Mass, Pentecost Sunday: Collect.

- 23 Cf. *Lev* 23:15-22; *Num* 28:26-31; *Lev* 25:1-22.
- 24 *Col* 3:1.
- 25 Saint John Chrysostom, Homily II for Pentecost.
- 26 Tertullian, *De Idolatria*, 14.
- 27 *Roman Missal*, Preface of the Ascension.
- 28 *Christ is Passing By*, no. 96.
- 29 *Furrow*, 213.
- 30 *Roman Missal*, Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit: Collect.
- 31 Pope Francis, Homily on Solemnity of Pentecost, 24 May 2015.

ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, the Lord's Day and Day of Joy

“The celebration of Sunday has a festive tone because Christ has conquered sin, and he wants to conquer sin in us.”

Sunday is a special day. It draws us out of the routine of days that can sometimes seem all the same. On Sunday we can do very different things, but what characterizes this day is that it is a gift from our Lord so that we might draw closer to him and, with him, celebrate his Resurrection: the event that brought us a new life. Saint John Paul II invited us to rediscover Sunday as a special time for God. *“Do not be afraid to give your time to Christ! Yes, let us open our time to Christ, that he may cast light upon it and give it direction. He is the One who knows the secret of time and the secret of eternity, and he gives us ‘his day’ as an ever new gift of his love.”*¹

This day can appropriately be called the “the weekly Easter,”² providing a framework for the other six days of the week. Sunday is “the foundation and the kernel of the whole liturgical year.”³ That is why the Roman Pontiffs have insisted that Sunday should be celebrated with diligent care. “We go to Mass every Sunday because that is the day of the resurrection of the Lord. That is why Sunday is so important to us.”⁴

Sanctified by the Eucharist

From the beginning of Christianity Sunday always had special importance. “By a tradition handed down from the apostles which took its origin from the very day of Christ’s resurrection, the Church celebrates the paschal mystery every eighth day; with good reason this, then, bears the name of the Lord’s day or Sunday.”⁵ The Lord speaks to his People in a special way on this day. *I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s*

day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet,⁶ says the seer in the Apocalypse. It is the day on which Christians gather together to break bread,⁷ as we read in Acts in reference to the community at Troas. By celebrating the Eucharist together believers were united to the saving Passion of Christ. They thus fulfilled the command to safeguard this memorial, and passed it on to successive generations of Christians as a most precious treasure. “*Ego enim accepi a Domino, quod et tradidi vobis...*” For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, Saint Paul said to the Corinthians: as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.⁸

The Apology of Saint Justin Martyr to the Roman emperor, in the middle of the second century, reveals the Church’s growing awareness of the breadth of the significance of Sunday. “But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day, when God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Savior on the same day rose from the dead.”⁹ These two marvelous divine works form, as it were, a single reredos with the risen Christ at the center, for he is the source of the renewal of all things. That is why the Church prays in the Easter Vigil: “May the whole world know and see that what was cast down is raised up, what had become old is made new, and all things are restored to integrity through Christ, just as by him they came into being.”¹⁰

The celebration of Sunday has a festive tone because Christ has conquered sin, and he wants to conquer sin in us. He wants to break the bonds that separate us from him, that enclose us in selfishness and isolation. And so we join in the Church’s jubilant exclamation for this day in the Liturgy of the Hours: *Hæc est dies, quam fecit Dominus: exultemus et lætemur in ea.*¹¹ This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad! We experience the joy of knowing that through Baptism we are made members of Christ, who joins us to himself in glorifying the Father, offering him our petitions and our desires to improve.

The joy brought by this encounter with our Lord and Savior is not

individualistic. We always celebrate it in union with the whole Church. At Sunday Mass we strengthen our ties to the other members of our Christian community so that we become *one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.*¹² Hence “the Sunday assembly is the privileged place of unity,”¹³ and especially so for families, who live “one of the most outstanding expressions of their identity and their ‘ministry’ as ‘domestic churches,’ when parents share with their children at the one table of the Word and of the Bread of Life.”¹⁴ What a beautiful picture we have every Sunday when in the parishes and various places of worship we find Christian families gathered together—father, mother, children, even the grandparents—to adore God and grow in faith together!

Becoming richer in God’s word

The festive character of Sunday is reflected in several liturgical elements such as a second reading before the Gospel, the homily, the profession of faith and, except on the Sundays of Advent and Lent, the Gloria. Of course, it is highly recommended to have singing at Sunday Mass, to reflect the Church’s joy in commemorating our Lord’s Resurrection.

The Sunday Liturgy of the Word contains great riches, with the proclamation of the Gospel at the center. During Ordinary Time and throughout the three-year cycle, the Church sets before the faithful an orderly selection of Gospel texts reviewing our Lord’s life. “In order to bring out the unity between the Old and the New Testaments,”¹⁵ the first reading from the Old Testament during Ordinary Time is related to the Gospel so that we might recall the history of our elder brothers and sisters in the faith. The second reading throughout the three years is taken from the letters of Saint Paul and Saint James and helps us understand how the first Christians lived in accord with the new way of life Jesus has brought us.

The Church as a good Mother provides us with abundant spiritual

nourishment from the Word of God. This should prompt each of us to adopt a prayerful attitude during Mass and then to bring it into our life. Pope Francis says: “I think we can all improve a bit in this respect: by becoming better listeners of the Word of God, in order to be less rich in our own words and richer in his words.”¹⁶ To help us assimilate this nourishment, each Sunday the priest gives a homily in which he explains the significance of the readings, especially the Gospel, in light of the paschal mystery: a scene from Christ’s life, his dialogue with those around him, his saving teachings. The homily thus leads us to take part intensely in the Eucharistic Liturgy and to understand that what we celebrate points beyond the Mass and should transform our daily life: our work, study, family...

More than a precept, a necessity

The Holy Mass is a necessity for a Christian. Vatican II teaches: “*Quoties sacrificium crucis, quo ‘Pascha nostrum immolatus est Christus’ in altari celebratur, opus nostrae redemptionis exercetur.*” – “As often as the sacrifice of the cross by which ‘Christ our Pasch is sacrificed’ (1 Cor 5:7) is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried out.”¹⁷ How, then, could we possibly do without it?

The sanctifying value of the Mass is not limited to the time of its celebration. It extends to all our thoughts, words and actions in such a way that “we can consider the Mass as the center and the source of a Christian’s spiritual life.”¹⁸ Saint Josemaria continued: “We may have asked ourselves, at one time or another, how we can correspond to the greatness of God’s love. We may have wanted to see a program for Christian living clearly explained. The answer is easy, and it is within reach of all the faithful: to participate lovingly in the holy Mass, to learn to deepen our personal relationship with God in the sacrifice that summarizes all that Christ asks of us.”¹⁹

“*Sine Dominico non possumus*: we cannot live without the Lord’s Supper,” said the third-century martyrs of Abitina.²⁰ The Church has specified this need in the precept to take part in the Mass every Sunday

and on the other holy days of obligation.²¹ By doing so, we fulfill the commandment in the Decalogue: *Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.*²² Christians fulfill this precept's deepest meaning when we celebrate Sunday, the day of Jesus' Resurrection.

Sunday Rest

Sunday ought to be sanctified in honor of the Lord. We direct our eyes to our Creator and rest from our habitual work, as the Bible teaches us: *In six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.*²³ Even though having one day of the week for rest can be justified for purely human reasons, as good for the person, the family and all society, we must not forget that the divine command goes beyond this. "The divine rest of the seventh day does not allude to an inactive God, but emphasizes the fullness of what has been accomplished. It speaks, as it were, of God's lingering before the 'very good' work (*Gen 1:31*) which his hand has wrought, in order to cast upon it *a gaze full of joyous delight.*"²⁴

In the Old Testament, revelation adds another reason for sanctifying the seventh day: *For remember that you too were once slaves in Egypt, and the Lord, your God, brought you from there with his strong hand and outstretched arm. That is why the Lord, your God, has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.*²⁵ Because the glorious resurrection of Christ is the perfect fulfillment of the Old Testament promises and the culminating moment in the history of salvation which began at the dawn of the human race, the early Christians celebrated the day of the week on which Christ rose as their weekly feast day, sanctified in the Lord's honor.

The miraculous freeing of the Israelites is a figure of what Christ does for his Church through the paschal mystery: he frees us from sin, he helps us overcome our evil inclinations. That is why we can say that Sunday is a special day for living in the freedom of the children of God:

a freedom that leads us to adore the Father and to practice Christian fraternity, beginning with those closest to us.

“Through Sunday rest, daily concerns and tasks can find their proper perspective: the material things about which we worry give way to spiritual values; in a moment of encounter and less pressured exchange, we see the true face of the people with whom we live.”²⁶ It is not a matter of doing nothing or things of little worth. Rather, “the institution of the Lord’s Day helps everyone enjoy adequate rest and leisure to cultivate their familial, cultural, social, and religious lives.”²⁷ It is a day to give to family members the special time and attention that perhaps we sometimes fail to devote to them on the others days of the week.

Finally, Sunday is not a day reserved to oneself, to spend on one’s personal likes and interests. “From the Sunday Mass there flows a tide of charity destined to spread into the whole life of the faithful, beginning by inspiring the very way in which they live the rest of Sunday. If Sunday is a day of joy, Christians should declare by their actual behavior that we cannot be happy ‘on our own.’ They look around to find people who may need their help.”²⁸

Sunday Mass is a force that spurs us to get out of ourselves because the Eucharist is the sacrament of charity, of love for God and neighbor for the sake of God. “On Sunday,” Saint Josemaria said, “it is good to praise the Trinity: glory be to the Father, glory be to the Son, glory be to the Holy Spirit. And I usually add: glory be to Holy Mary; and (a childish thing, but I don’t mind telling you) also to Saint Joseph.”²⁹

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- 1 Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Dies Domini*, 31 May 1998, no. 7.
- 2 Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 6 January 2001, no. 35.
- 3 Vatican II, Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 106.
- 4 Pope Francis, Audience, 5 February 2014.
- 5 *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 106.
- 6 *Rev* 1:10.
- 7 *Acts* 20:7.
- 8 *I Cor* 11:23, 26.
- 9 *Apology*, I, 67, 7.
- 10 Roman Missal, *Easter Vigil*, Prayer after the 7th reading.
- 11 *Psalms* 117 (118), 24.
- 12 *Eph* 4:4-6.
- 13 *Dies Domini*, no. 36.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass, no. 106.
- 16 Pope Francis, Speech, 4 October 2013.
- 17 Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, no. 3.
- 18 Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 87.
- 19 *Christ is Passing By*, no. 88.
- 20 Cf. *Dies Domini*, no. 46.
- 21 Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1247.

- 22 *Ex 20:8-10.*
- 23 *Ex 20:11.*
- 24 *Dies Domini, no. 11.*
- 25 *Deut 5:15.*
- 26 *Dies Domini, no. 67.*
- 27 *Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2184.*
- 28 *Dies Domini, no. 72.*
- 29 Saint Josemaria, notes taken in a family get-together, 29 May 1974.

ORDINARY TIME: FEASTS OF OUR LORD I

The time of God's presence

The first of two articles focusing on the significance and history of four special feasts in the Church: Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, the Annunciation, the Most Blessed Trinity, the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ.

“Just as I have come to you now in the name of the Lord and found you keeping vigil in his name, so the Lord, in whose honor this solemnity is celebrated, will find his Church keeping vigil by the light of the soul when he comes to awaken her.”¹

Keeping vigil, watching, by the light of the soul: these words of St. Augustine, from a sermon for the Easter Vigil, sum up the meaning of the great solemnities and feasts of our Lord that mark the passing of Ordinary Time. In the course of the year, these celebrations unfold before our eyes the mystery of salvation that flows from the Cross and that, from the empty tomb, renews the face of the earth.

“The one and only center of the liturgy and Christian life itself – the Paschal Mystery – acquires in the various solemnities and feasts specific ‘forms,’ with additional meanings and special gifts of grace.”² The feasts of the Transfiguration and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross are found in all the liturgical traditions, while the solemnities of the Most Holy Trinity, the Holy Body and Blood of Christ, the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Christ the King are proper to the Roman Church.

In addition, there are two feasts of our Lord closely linked to Mary's life that are celebrated in Ordinary Time or in Lent: the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, and the solemnity of the Annunciation. By their theological content, both feasts belong in the Christmas Season, but their place in the liturgical calendar is due to the complicated ways their dates were determined.

In this first editorial on the feasts of our Lord that the Church celebrates in Ordinary Time, we bring together some considerations on four of them: the Presentation and Annunciation of the Lord, the Most Holy Trinity and Corpus Christi.

Presentation of the Lord in the Temple

The Mosaic law prescribed that every firstborn male in Israel had to be consecrated to God forty days after birth and redeemed with a sum deposited in the Temple treasury. This was in remembrance of the firstborn sons being preserved from death on the night of the first Passover during the exodus from Egypt. The Gospel according to St. Luke gives us this account of Jesus' presentation in the Temple: *when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord."*³ St. Joseph and our Lady entered the temple, unnoticed among the crowd. The "desired of all nations" came to the house of his Father in his Mother's arms. The liturgy of this feast-day exhorts us, in the Responsorial Psalm, to adore the King of Glory in the heart of his humble family: "*Attolite, portae, capita vestra, et elevamini, portae aeternales, et introibit rex gloriae*": *Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in.*⁴

The Church of Jerusalem began the annual commemoration of this mystery in the 4th century. The feast was celebrated on February 14th, forty days after the Epiphany, because the Jerusalem liturgy had not yet adopted the Roman custom of celebrating Christmas on December 25th. That is why when this became the common custom throughout the whole Christian world, the feast of the Presentation was moved to February 2nd and was soon celebrated throughout the entire East. In Byzantium, the emperor Justinian I introduced it in the 6th century, under the title "*Hypapante*" or "*encounter*," referring to Jesus' encounter with the aged Simeon, who was a figure of the just men of Israel who had patiently awaited the fulfillment of the messianic

prophecies for so many years.

During the 7th century, the celebration also took root in the West. The widespread name of Candlemas comes from the tradition instituted by Pope Sergius I of having a procession with candles. As the elderly Simeon proclaimed, Jesus is the Savior, *prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles.*⁵ In commemorating the arrival and manifestation of the divine light to the world, the Church each year blesses candles, symbol of Jesus' perennial presence and the light of faith that the faithful receive in the sacrament of Baptism. The procession with lighted candles thus becomes an expression of Christian life: a pathway illuminated by the light of Christ.

The annual commemoration of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple is also a Marian celebration and therefore at certain times in the past it was also known as the feast of the Purification of Mary. Even though Mary was preserved by God from original sin, as a Hebrew mother she chose to submit to the *Law of the Lord*, and therefore offered *a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.*⁶ Mary's offering was thus a sign of her prompt obedience to God's commands. "Through this example, foolish child, will you learn to obey the Holy Law of God, regardless of any personal sacrifice?"⁷

The Annunciation of the Lord

On March 25th, the Church celebrates the announcement that the promises of salvation were about to be fulfilled. From the lips of the angel, Mary learnt that she had found grace before God. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, she was to conceive a son who would be called the Son of God. He would save his people and be set on David's throne; and his kingdom would have no end.⁸ This is the feast of the Incarnation. The eternal Son of the Father entered into history; he became man in the womb of Mary, a humble maiden from the people of Israel. From that moment on, "history is not a mere succession of centuries, years or days, but the time span of a presence that gives full meaning and opens it to sound hope."⁹

It is very likely that this feast was already celebrated in Palestine in

the 4th century, since the basilica built in Nazareth in the place traditionally regarded as the house of Mary dates from that time. This Marian connection is reflected in the name that is also given to this commemoration: the *Annunciation of the Virgin Mary*. Very early on, during the 5th century, the feast spread throughout the Christian East, and was later passed on to the West. In the second half of the 7th century, testimonies exist of its being celebrated on March 25th in the Church of Rome under the title of *Annuntiatio Domini*.

The dating of this feast stems from an ancient tradition that placed the creation of the world precisely on the day of the spring equinox (which at the beginning of the Christian era fell on March 25 in the Julian calendar). In keeping with the idea that perfection occurred in complete cycles, the first Christians considered that Christ's Incarnation (the beginning of the new creation), his death on the Cross, and his definitive coming at the end of time, should all occur on the same date. Thus March 25th was a date especially filled with meaning. It also seems that the date for Christmas in the calendar was fixed on December 25th because it was nine months after the Annunciation.

The texts of the Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours for this solemnity contemplate the Word made flesh. Psalm 39 (40) is quoted in the Entrance Antiphon, the Responsorial Psalm and the second reading, as the thread connecting the entire celebration: *I delight to do your will, O my God.*¹⁰ Jesus becomes incarnate in obedience to his Father's will; and his Mother accepts God's will with equal promptness. Mary is troubled, but she raises no objections; she does not doubt the angel's words. Moved by faith, she says "yes" to God's will. "Mary becomes transformed in holiness in the depths of her most pure heart on seeing the humility of God ... The Blessed Virgin's humility is a consequence of that unfathomable depth of grace which comes into operation with the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity in the womb of his ever Immaculate Mother."¹¹

The Most Blessed Trinity

On the first Sunday after Pentecost the Church celebrates the

solemnity of the Most Blessed Trinity. On this day we glorify the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God in three Persons, “so that in the confessing of the true and eternal Godhead you might be adored in what is proper to each Person, their unity in substance, and their equality in majesty.”¹² “You have often heard me say that God is in the center of our soul in grace, and therefore that we all have a ‘direct line’ to God our Lord. But human comparisons pale in the face of this marvelous divine reality. At the other end of this line, waiting for us, is not only the Great Unknown, but the entire Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit ... It’s a shame that we Christians can forget that we are a throne of the Most Holy Trinity. I advise you to acquire the custom of seeking God in the depths of your heart. That is what interior life is.”¹³

Even though this feast was introduced into the Roman calendar in the mid 14th century, its origins date back to Patristic times. Already in the 5th century, St. Leo the Great began presenting the doctrine on the Mystery of the Blessed Trinity in the time of Pentecost. Some of his expressions were later used in the preface of the Mass for the Sunday in the octave of Pentecost. At a somewhat later date, a Mass of the Blessed Trinity was celebrated in the Frankish kingdom and soon became widespread throughout the West, perhaps as a means to teach the Christian people about true faith in God.

Nevertheless, the Roman Church did not establish a special feast in the calendar for the Most Holy Trinity, since the invocations to the triune God and the doxologies already gave this mystery a prominent place in the liturgy. This did not prevent some dioceses and monastic communities from celebrating a liturgical feast in honor of the Blessed Trinity every year, even though no agreement on the date existed. It was Pope John XXII who, in 1334, finally introduced the feast of the Most Holy Trinity into the Roman calendar, on the Sunday after Pentecost. Although the Eastern Churches have not established a specific feast, they dedicate the greater part of the hymns for the Sunday of Pentecost to the contemplation of the Mystery of the Blessed Trinity.

The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

The Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ (*Corpus Christi*) originated in the Middle Ages as a fruit of Eucharistic piety and to reaffirm the Church's teaching after the Eucharistic controversies. This feast was celebrated for the first time in Liege in 1247 at the request of St. Juliana of Mont-Cornillon, a religious who devoted a great part of her life to fostering devotion to the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar. In 1264 Pope Urban IV, moved by the Eucharistic miracle at Bolsena (the monumental Cathedral of Orvieto is shaped like a giant reliquary in witness to this miracle), established the solemnity in honor of the Most Holy Sacrament for the Thursday after the Octave of Pentecost in the universal calendar. The bull instituting this feast contained an appendix with the texts for the Mass and the Office of the day. Tradition tells us that these were composed by St. Thomas Aquinas. The antiphon *O Sacrum Convivium* for Vespers II marvelously sums up the Church's faith, the *mysterium fidei*: "O sacred banquet, in which Christ is received, the memory of his Passion is renewed and there is given to us a pledge of future glory!"¹⁴ As Pope Francis said on this solemnity: "We may ask ourselves: what about me? Where do I want to eat? At which table do I want to be nourished? At the Lord's table? Or do I dream about eating savory foods, but in slavery? Moreover, we may ask ourselves: what do I recall? The Lord who saves me, or the garlic and onions of slavery? Which recollection satiates my soul?"¹⁵

This feast centers on adoring the Most Holy Sacrament and fostering faith in Christ's Real Presence under the Eucharistic species. Hence it is only natural that as far back as the 14th century, the custom arose of accompanying our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament along the city streets on this feast-day. Previously, the Blessed Sacrament had been taken in procession with the palms of Palm Sunday, and had been carried solemnly from the "altar of repose" to the main tabernacle in the church on Easter morning. The Corpus Christi Procession as such was formally adopted in Rome in the 15th century. In recent years, by God's grace, we have witnessed a revival of this devotion, even in places where it had disappeared for centuries. We share the feelings expressed by St. Josemaria on the feast of Corpus Christi in 1971: "while celebrating Mass this morning, I told our Lord in my heart: I want to accompany

you in all the processions throughout the world, in all the Tabernacles where you are honored, and in all the places where you are present and people fail to honor you.”¹⁶

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- 1 Saint Augustine, Sermon 223 D (PL *Supplementum* 2, 717-718).
 - 2 Benedict XVI, Homily, 31 May 2009.
 - 3 *Lk* 2:22.
 - 4 *Psalms* 23 (24): 7.
 - 5 *Lk* 2:32.
 - 6 *Lk* 2:24.
 - 7 *Holy Rosary*, 4th Joyful Mystery.
 - 8 Cf. *Lk* 1:26-33.
 - 9 Benedict XVI, Audience, 12 December 2012.
 - 10 Cf. *Psalms* 39 (40): 8-9.
 - 11 *Friends of God*, no. 96.
 - 12 *Roman Missal*, Preface for the Mass of the Most Holy Trinity.
 - 13 Saint Josemaria, notes from his preaching, 8 December 1972.
 - 14 Antiphon *ad Magnificat*, Vespers II for the Solemnity of the Body and Blood

of Christ.

¹⁵ Pope Francis, Homily, 19 June 2014 (cf. *Num* 11:4-6).

¹⁶ Javier Echevria, *Memoria del Beato Josemaria Escriva*, p. 240.

ORDINARY TIME: FEASTS OF OUR LORD II

Celebrating the inexhaustible mystery of the Lord

The Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Transfiguration, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, and Christ the King are the four feasts of our Lord contained in the second part of this article.

The various solemnities of our Lord offered to us in the liturgy throughout the year give us an opportunity to contemplate the unfathomable mysteries of God from different points of view, and to let their light fill with meaning our Christian life in the world. The liturgical year centers on Easter, which in a way “spreads over three months—first the forty days of Lent, then the fifty days of Eastertide.” This is followed by “three feasts which instead have a ‘synthesizing’ character: the Most Holy Trinity, then Corpus Christi, and lastly, the Sacred Heart of Jesus.”¹ The feasts of the Holy Trinity and Corpus Christi were the topics of a previous article. Here we shall look at the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart, followed by those of the Transfiguration and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, and finishing with that of Christ the King.

Sacred Heart of Jesus

On the Friday following the second Sunday after Pentecost the Church directs our gaze to Christ with his side laid open on the Cross, the expression of God’s infinite love for mankind and the source from which the sacraments flow. Contemplating this scene has fed Christian devotion from the earliest centuries, providing an unending source of peace and security in difficulties. Christian mysticism invites us to open ourselves to the Heart of the Incarnate Word: *that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the*

*breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*²

Popular piety in the late Middle Ages developed a deep, expressive veneration for the Sacred Humanity of Christ suffering on the Cross. Devotion spread to the crown of thorns, the nails, the wounds... and to his open Heart that sums up all that our Saviour suffered for us. These pious devotions left a mark on the Church, and the liturgical celebration of the Sacred Heart was established in the 17th century. On 20 October 1672 a Norman priest, Saint John Eudes, celebrated a Mass of the Sacred Heart for the first time, and in 1673 the news of Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque's visions about this devotion began to spread throughout Europe. Finally Pius IX officially established the feast for the entire Latin Church.

The liturgy of the day is built on two theological pillars: the unsearchable riches of the mystery of Christ's love, and contemplation of his pierced Heart in reparation for sin. This is expressed in the two collects for this feast offered by the Roman Missal: "Grant, we pray, almighty God, that we who glory in the Heart of your beloved Son and recall the wonders of his love for us, may be made worthy to receive an overflowing measure of grace from that fount of heavenly gifts"; and "O God, who in the Heart of your Son, wounded by our sins, bestow on us in mercy the boundless treasures of your love, grant, we pray, that in paying him the homage of our devotion we may also offer worthy reparation."

The consideration of the depths of our Lord's tender yearning for souls is also an invitation to mould our hearts in accord with his, to join our desire for reparation to the desire shown in deeds to bring more souls to him. "We have approached the fire of the love of God. Let us allow that fire to enkindle our lives. Let us feed the desire to spread that divine fire throughout the world, making it known to all the people around us, so that they too can experience the peace of Christ and find happiness there."³

Transfiguration of Our Lord

The Solemnity of the Transfiguration probably arose from the annual commemoration of the dedication of a Basilica of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. In the ninth century the feast spread to the West and later, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it started to be celebrated also in Rome, in the Vatican Basilica. Pope Callistus III incorporated the feast into the Roman Calendar in 1457, in gratitude for the victory of the Christian armies against the Turks in the Battle of Belgrade on 6 August 1456.

In the Christian East the *Transfiguration of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ* is one of the greatest solemnities of the year, together with Easter, Christmas and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. It expresses all the theology of divinization through grace by which human nature, clothed in Christ, is illuminated with the splendour of God's glory. If we are united to Jesus, as the office of readings in the Roman rite tells us, he "will give us a share in his radiance, renew our spiritual nature and transform us into his own likeness, making us for ever sharers in his Godhead."⁴

With Peter, James and John, in this feast we are invited to make Jesus the focus of our attention: *This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.*⁵ We have to listen to him and let his life and teachings make our ordinary lives divine. Saint Josemaria prayed: "Lord, we are ready to heed whatever you want to tell us. Speak to us: we are attentive to your voice. May your words enkindle our will so that we launch out fervently to obey you."⁶

Listening to our Lord with the sincere desire to identify ourselves with him leads us to accept sacrifice. Jesus was transfigured so that *the scandal of the Cross might be removed from the hearts of his disciples,*⁷ to help them bear the dark moments of his Passion. The Cross and glory are closely united. The forty days between the feast of the Transfiguration, 6 August, and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, form in some traditions a second Lent. Hence in the Byzantine tradition this period is observed as a time for fasting and contemplation of the Cross.

Exaltation of the Holy Cross

The feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross originated in the Church in Jerusalem. From the middle of the fourth century it was celebrated on 13 September, the anniversary of the dedication of the basilica erected on Golgotha under Constantine. According to the account written by a fourth-century pilgrim named Egeria, a relic of our Lord's Cross had been found on that date a few years earlier. The "exaltation" or "raising up" of the Cross took place on the second day of the octave of the dedication; on that day, according to a liturgical book of the time, *the venerable Cross is solemnly shown to all the Christian people*. At the present time the most characteristic rite of this feast in the Byzantine liturgy is the priest raising the Cross above all the people's heads, blessing them and turning to the four points of the compass, while the choir intones the *Kyrie Eleison* a hundred times at each point. Afterwards the faithful come forward to venerate the Cross and to receive one of the flowers decorating the place where the Cross has lain. In the Eastern Churches this feast is so important that it is considered an Autumn Easter.

In Rome, from the beginning of the sixth century, 3 May was commemorated in the Vatican Basilica as a parallel feast, the Finding of the Holy Cross. In the middle of the seventh century the Vatican Basilica adopted the Jerusalem custom of venerating a fragment of the relic of the Cross (called the *lignum crucis*) on 14 September. Pope Sergius (687-701) transferred the custom to the Lateran Basilica, giving it extra solemnity, such that by the eighth century the feast had spread all over the Christian West.

In the Roman liturgy the preface of the Mass reminds us that since the tree of Paradise was the place of mankind's fall, God has wanted the Cross to be the new tree that would save us: "*ut unde mors oriebatur, inde vita resurgeret*, so that where death arose, life might again spring forth."⁸ The readings emphasize the lifting up of Christ on the wood of the Cross as an anticipation of his being raised into glory, and as the "magnet" that would draw all creatures: *and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself*.⁹ The Cross is the place of

Jesus' triumph, and from it, he wants us to help spread his reign. "Christ our Lord was crucified; from the height of the Cross he redeemed the world, thereby restoring peace between God and men. Jesus reminds all of us, 'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to myself' (Jn 12:32). If you put me at the center of all earthly activities, he is saying, by fulfilling the duty of each moment in what appears important and what appears unimportant, I will draw everything to myself. My kingdom among you will be a reality!"¹⁰

Saint Josemaria always wore a reliquary round his neck in the form of a cross containing a *lignum crucis*, a fragment of the True Cross. It was a manifestation of his devotion to the Holy Cross in the loving fulfilment of everyday duties. There are hundreds of ways, also small ones, to express this devotion in daily life, such as making the sign of the cross when saying grace before and after meals: "That moment of blessing, however brief, reminds us of our dependence on God for life; it strengthens our feeling of gratitude for the gifts of creation; it acknowledges those who by their labours provide us with these goods; and it reaffirms our solidarity with those in greatest need."¹¹

Christ the King

Christ's lordship over the universe is commemorated in various ways in feasts of the liturgical year, including the Epiphany, Easter, and the Ascension. With the Solemnity of Christ the King, instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 in the context of the growing secularization of the world, the Church wishes to highlight even more clearly Christ's sovereignty over all creation, including human history.

Jesus' reign, as the liturgy of the Mass underlines, is a *regnum veritatis et vitae; regnum sanctitatis et gratiae; regnum iustitiae, amoris et pacis*.¹² Truth, life, holiness, grace, justice, love and peace: these are the values that the human heart most longs for, and we Christians can contribute to bringing them about. We can do so especially through works of mercy done for the most needy, as the gospel for this feast in Year A tells us. *For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and*

*you made me welcome.*¹³

Nevertheless, Jesus himself warned us, *my kingdom is not of this world.*¹⁴ His sovereignty will be seen in its fullness at his second coming in glory, when there will be new heavens and a new earth, and all creatures, *free from the slavery of sin, will serve and never cease to praise him.*¹⁵ Now is the time of expectation, of working for his kingdom, confident that the final victory will be his.

Jesus is the center of history: not only the history of mankind as a whole, but also of each individual person. Even when it seems that everything is lost, it is always possible to appeal to our Lord like the good thief, as the gospel for Year C tells us.¹⁶ What peace comes from the fact that, in spite of our past, with sincere repentance we can always enter the Kingdom of God. “Today we can think about our own story, the path of our life. Each one of us has our history; we each have our mistakes, our sins, our happy moments and our sad ones. On a day such as this we do well to think about our own history, and to look at Jesus, and to say often, but from the heart, in silence, each one of us: ‘Remember me, Lord, now that you are in your kingdom. Jesus, remember me, because I want to be good, I want to be good, but I don’t have the strength, I just can’t. I’m a sinner, a sinner. But remember me, Jesus. You can remember me because you’re in the center, you’re right there, in your kingdom’.”¹⁷

This loving petition is made throughout the liturgical year when we put into practice in our daily lives what we celebrate in the Mass. The Sacred Heart of Jesus, his Transfiguration, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross and the Solemnity of Christ the King do not just give shape to the liturgical year, but actually fill with meaning the days on which they are celebrated.

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- 1 Benedict XVI, Homily on the Solemnity of *Corpus Christi*, 22 May 2008.
- 2 *Eph 3:17-19*.
- 3 Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 170.
- 4 Anastasius of Sinai, Sermon on the Transfiguration of the Lord. Liturgy of the Hours, Office of Readings for 6 August.
- 5 *Mt 17:5*.
- 6 Saint Josemaria, *Holy Rosary*, fourth mystery of light.
- 7 Roman Missal, Preface for the feast of the Transfiguration
- 8 Roman Missal, Preface of the Holy Cross.
- 9 *Jn 12:32*.
- 10 *Christ is Passing By*, no. 183.
- 11 Pope Francis, Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, 24 May 2015, no. 227.
- 12 Roman Missal, Preface for the feast of Christ the King.
- 13 *Mt 25:35*.
- 14 *Jn 18:36*.
- 15 Roman Missal, Mass of Christ the King, Collect.
- 16 Cf. *Lk 23:35-43*.
- 17 Pope Francis, Homily, 24 November 2013.

OUR LADY IN THE LITURGICAL YEAR

“All generations shall call be blessed”

“In celebrating this annual cycle of Christ’s mysteries, holy Church honours with especial love the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, who is joined by an inseparable bond to the saving work of her Son.”

“In celebrating this annual cycle of Christ’s mysteries, holy Church honours with especial love the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, who is joined by an inseparable bond to the saving work of her Son. In her the Church holds up and admires the most excellent fruit of the redemption, and joyfully contemplates, as in a faultless image, that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be.”¹

In brief but incisive words, Vatican Council II presents the meaning of the liturgical veneration of Our Lady. We have a simple yet profound way to understand it: by looking at the best Christian art, arising from the prayer of the Church. If we go to a church in the Byzantine tradition, for example, as soon as we enter the nave our gaze is drawn to the eyes of Christ Pantocrator, Ruler of All, presiding in the dome of the apse. His loving face reminds us that the infinite God has taken on the finite features of the children of men. Below Him is portrayed Mary the all-holy, in imperial colours, escorted by archangels in rich liturgical vestments. And on a third level come apostles and saints, who with us —*communicantes*—offer the *sacrificium laudis*, the sacrifice of praise pleasing to God the Father.²

The first Marian devotion

This image helps us to understand the unique position of Mary in the life and liturgy of the Church. As Saint Josemaria liked to reflect, Mary is before all else the Mother of God, the *Theotokos*. This is “the root of

all the perfections and privileges that adorn her.”³ Therefore the oldest Marian prayer, apart from the angel’s greeting at the Annunciation, daringly calls her *Dei Genetrix*, the woman who gave birth to God.⁴ And also therefore the liturgical veneration of Mary developed especially after the fifth-century Council of Ephesus, when the Church defined the dogma of her divine Maternity.

In other representations, Our Lady appears holding the veil of the Eucharistic chalice or in the attitude of “the virgin praying and offering.” This expresses how Mary’s sharing in the Paschal mystery of Our Lord is the centre and source of her life. The unique way in which Mary, as Mother, is united with Our Lord’s redemptive action is the foundation for all Marian devotion: the Church venerates Our Lady by proclaiming the uniqueness of her role. This is why there are references to the Mother of God in the oldest baptismal professions of faith and in the early Eucharistic prayers. This special presence of Mary also explains why the most natural way of honouring her is to celebrate the mystery of her Son, especially in the Eucharist.

“For me, the first Marian devotion—I like to see it as that—is the Holy Mass ... In the Sacrifice of the Altar, the participation of Our Lady evokes the silent modesty with which she accompanied our Lord as He walked the roads of Palestine. The Holy Mass is an action of the Blessed Trinity: through the will of the Father, and the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, the Son offers himself in redemptive oblation. In this unfathomable mystery we can discern, as through a veil, the most pure face of Mary.”⁵ In celebrating the mystery of Christ, the Church meets Mary and, by contemplating her, discovers how to give expression to the divine mysteries. With her we listen to and meditate on the Word of God, and we echo her voice as she blesses, thanks and praises Our Lord. With her we also take part in her Son’s Passion and the joy of his Resurrection. With her we unceasingly implore the gift of the Holy Spirit.⁶

The beginnings of devotion to the Blessed Virgin

The most recent liturgical reforms of the Roman Liturgy have been

directed towards stressing the centrality of the mystery of Christ and therefore have integrated the commemoration of the Mother of God within the annual cycle of the mysteries of her Son. Apart from two celebrations in which Mary is inseparably united to Christ (the Annunciation, March 25th, and the Presentation of Our Lord, February 2nd), Marian feasts in the present *General Roman Calendar* include three solemnities,⁷ two feasts,⁸ five obligatory memorials,⁹ and six optional memorials.¹⁰ At the same time some liturgical periods such as Advent and Christmas include more references to Mary than before. Finally, the possibility of celebrating a Mass of Our Lady on Saturdays, together with some elements of the Liturgy of the Hours, are the weekly and daily basis of liturgical veneration of Mary. Learning about the origins and development of these devotions can help us to be better children of our Heavenly Mother.

The close connection between Marian devotions and feasts of Our Lord has led to some of these solemnities and feasts being written about in previous editorials. This is the case with the solemnity of Mary the Mother of God, celebrated on the octave of the Nativity, the first day of the year. This was the greatest feast of Our Lady until the arrival of four feasts from the East at the end of the seventh century: the Presentation of Our Lord, the Annunciation, the Dormition (which we now celebrate as the Assumption) and the birth of Mary.

With the influx into the West of Christians from Palestine, Syria and Asia Minor, as a result of the Arab invasions in the seventh century, the Roman liturgy was enriched with the adoption of different liturgical traditions. Among them were four feasts linked to events in Our Lady's life and celebrated in the places where, according to tradition, they had taken place. Churches were built in those places between 300 and 600 AD, and mark a development of Marian devotion. There was, for example, the basilica in the Cedron Valley connected to Mary's Assumption, which in the sixth century became the feast of the Dormition; there was the basilica in Nazareth, built by command of the Empress Helena in memory of the Annunciation; the basilica built over the Pool of Bethesda, which was connected with Our Lady's Immaculate

Conception and birth; and the basilica of Saint Mary the New, built at the beginning of the sixth century near the site of the old Temple of Jerusalem, recalling the Presentation of Mary.

All these feasts introduce us into the shared memories of the great family of the People of God, who know that “history is not subject to blind forces, nor is it the result of chance; rather it is the manifestation of the mercies of God the Father.”¹¹ The Church’s heart, like Mary’s, has deep roots; she remembers her own origin, recalling specific places and faces. The progressive reception in other parts of the world of these commemorations of Our Lady testifies to this divine pedagogy.

From the periphery to Rome and from Rome to the periphery

At the same time, given that the Church is a Mother who takes to her bosom every culture, the veneration of Mary has developed according to the particular human, theological and spiritual tenor of each society. Hence, for example, the Byzantine-Constantinople tradition had a quite sober first phase, but over time generated rich poetic compositions in honour of the *Theotokos*. The hymn *Akathistos* is one of the most loved and widespread: “Rejoice, you through whom the curse will vanish; Rejoice, the Restoration of fallen Adam; Rejoice, the Redemption of the tears of Eve.” For its part, the Ethiopian tradition manifests its deep Marian piety in the Eucharistic prayers and in the institution of the greatest number of Marian feasts known, more than 30 throughout the year.

The Roman rite also has its own history. At the end of the seventh century, Pope Sergius I enriched those four feasts recently arrived from the East by adding an element of Roman popular devotion: liturgical processions through the city. As time passed texts for the Mass and Office of *Sancta Maria in Sabbato* were composed and the custom of dedicating Saturdays to Our Lady spread through Europe. New antiphons were composed for the Liturgy of the Hours. Some of them are now the last prayer that the Church prays at night: the *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, the *Salve Regina*, the *Ave Regina Caelorum* and the *Regina Coeli Laetare*, all composed in the eleventh to thirteenth

centuries. Later, other Marian feasts emerged, for example the Visitation, first promoted by the Franciscans and then extended throughout the Latin Church.

Following the Council of Trent other feasts that until then had only been celebrated in some places were extended to the entire Roman rite. For example Saint Pius V extended to the whole Latin Church the Roman feast of the dedication of Our Lady of the Snows (August 5th). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, various commemorations linked to the Marian piety of different religious orders became by various routes part of the general calendar. These include Our Lady of Mount Carmel (Carmelites), Our Lady of the Rosary (Dominicans), Our Lady of Sorrows (Servites), Our Lady of Ransom, (Mercedarians), etc.

This movement from the periphery to Rome and from Rome to the periphery¹² reflects the Church's maternal care. She encourages whatever creates unity, while being ready "to treat each child differently, with an 'unequal' justice, since each is different from the others."¹³ This respect for local traditions persists in the present liturgical calendar, which recognizes the existence of special Marian devotions, linked to the history and devotion of different members of the People of God. This explains the presence in the Prelature's calendar of the feast of Our Lady of Fair Love, celebrated on February 14th.

The twentieth century was a notable time for Marian devotion, with the incorporation of four new Marian feasts: Our Lady of Lourdes (Saint Pius X in 1907), the Maternity of Our Lady (Pius XI in 1931), the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Pius XII in 1954), and Our Lady Queen of Heaven (Pius XII in 1954). In addition to the memorial of the Holy Name of Mary (September 12th), the most recent edition of the Roman Missal now includes the optional memorials of Our Lady of Fatima (May 13th) and Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12th). The extension to the entire Latin rite of celebrations linked to particular interventions of Our Lady shows the loving vigilance of the Church, who reminds her children of the discreet but firm intervention of Mary. Together with Saint Joseph, Mary journeys with us throughout history.

With our Mother's blessing

Many medieval church doors have an icon typical of the West: the Mother of God holds the Child in her arms, and her gaze and her smile welcome pilgrims as they arrive and bids them goodbye as they leave. This image, situated in a public space opening on to the town, speaks to us of Mary's warm, missionary style, which shapes the life of the Church through the liturgy; it reminds us that Our Lady is waiting for us as we go into a church or oratory to help us draw close to her Son. Knowing that Our Lady is expecting us helps us to be recollected, to prepare well for the different ceremonies or services with the loving care of children: arriving in good time and preparing calmly whatever may be needed (decoration of the altar, candles, book), doing so with the calm and silence that our Mother, "woman of the Eucharist,"¹⁴ showed as she prepared for the "Breaking of Bread" in the first days of the Church.¹⁵

The joy of the All-Beautiful one is found in "producing in the children the spiritual characteristics of the first-born Son."¹⁶ In Our Lady's school "the Church learns to be daily 'the Lord's servant,' to be ready to go out to meet situations of great need, to help the poorest and excluded."¹⁷ Hence, after inviting us to enter to be transformed by Him, our Mother then sends us out to the "beautiful war of peace,"¹⁸ side by side with our brothers and sisters, our fellow men and women.

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¹ Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 103.

² Cf. Roman Canon.

- 3 Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 276.
- 4 Cf. Liturgy of the Hours, *Ad completorium*, Antiphon *Sub tuum praesidium*.
- 5 Saint Josemaria, “La Virgen Maria”, in *Por las sendas de la fe*, Cristiandad 2013, pp. 170-171.
- 6 See *Collectio Missarum de Beata Maria Virgine*, nos. 13 and 17.
- 7 The Mother of God, January 1st; the Assumption, August 15th; the Immaculate Conception, December 8th.
- 8 The Visitation, May 31st and the Birthday, September 8th.
- 9 The Immaculate Heart of Mary, Saturday following the solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus; Our Lady Queen of Heaven, May 31st; Our Lady of Ransom, September 15th; Our Lady of the Rosary, October 7th; Presentation of Our Lady in the Temple, November 21st.
- 10 Our Lady of Lourdes, February 11th; Our Lady of Fatima, May 13th; Our Lady of Mount Carmel, July 16th, Dedication of the Basilica of St Mary Major, August 5th; Holy Name of Mary, September 12th; Our Lady of Guadalupe, December 12th.
- 11 Saint Josemaria, “Las riquezas de la fe,” in *Por las sendas de la fe*, Cristiandad 2013, p. 31.
- 12 Cf. Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 638.
- 13 *Friends of God*, no. 173.
- 14 Saint John Paul II, Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, nos. 53-58.
- 15 Cf. *Acts* 2:42.
- 16 Bl. Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, no. 57.
- 17 Pope Frances, Homily, 5 July 2014.
- 18 Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 76.

THE SAINTS IN THE LITURGICAL YEAR

Like a great symphony

An article on honoring the saints throughout the Church's liturgical year. "The Sacred Liturgy is a privileged place where we can grow in love for these celestial intercessors and feel close to them, as loving companions on our earthly journey."

In Michelangelo's masterpiece, the Last Judgement in the Sistine Chapel, we see Christ in the center seemingly governing the universe with a gesture of his arm. At his side is our Lady, whose eyes look mercifully on her children as they come before the supreme Judge. Surrounding these two figures are a great number of people, saints from the Old and New Testament, martyrs and apostles, who look steadily at the Savior.

This way of representing the Last Judgement enjoys a long tradition in Christian art. In the Middle Ages it was common to find on the facade of churches and cathedrals, and also sometimes inside, the figure of Christ surrounded by saints: men and women, young and old, learned doctors and simple manual workers, kings and popes, monks and soldiers, virgins and married men and women, of all milieus and places, of all races and cultures. This immense multitude was frequently accompanied by angels playing musical instruments, like a great orchestra performing a beautiful symphony directed by the composer and maestro, our Lord Jesus Christ. Benedict XVI compared the saints to a great "ensemble of musical instruments who, despite their individuality, raise up to God one great symphony of intercession, of thanksgiving and praise."¹ Since each is an expert on a different instrument, the result is a richly varied sound that is always new, performed throughout the liturgical year as we celebrate their

memorials. Through the Communion of the Saints the blessed in heaven form a part of our life. We are united to the Church in Heaven “where souls are triumphing with our Lord.”² Our liturgical worship enables us to unite what we believe, live, celebrate and pray into a coherent whole.

Riches of Christian holiness

Throughout history countless men and women have put into practice Jesus’ words: “*Estote ergo vos perfecti, sicut Pater vester caelestis perfectus est*”; *be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*³ The rich charisms of the Holy Spirit, peoples’ different ways of being and the broad spectrum of situations in which Christians live, have made it possible for our Lord’s command to be embodied in many different ways. “Every state of life leads to holiness, always! In your home, on the street, at work, at church, in that moment and in your state of life, the path to sainthood has been opened.”⁴

Saints attract in a wonderful way! The life of a person who has struggled towards identification with Christ is a great “apologia” for the faith. Their powerful light shines in the midst of the world. If sometimes it seems that human history is governed by the kingdom of darkness, possibly this is due to these lights shining less brightly or in fewer number. “These world crises are crises of saints,”⁵ as Saint Josemaria said. The contrast between their light-filled existence and the darkness around them may be great. In fact, many of them suffered misunderstandings or hidden or even open persecution, as happened to the Word Incarnate: *the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light.*⁶ Despite all this, experience shows the great appeal the saints have. In many sectors of society, people admire the witness of a strong and completely coherent Christian life. The lives of the saints show us how being close to our Lord fills the heart with peace and joy, and how we can spread serenity, hope and optimism around us, while being open to the needs of others, especially the least fortunate.

Devotion to the saints

The unfathomable riches of Christian holiness have been continually recalled and meditated upon by the Church in the light of God's Word. The Liturgy lovingly celebrates each year those who have passed through the world, like Jesus, *doing good*,⁷ being bright lamps for their brothers and sisters, helping them to be happy on this earth and in the future life. The dates for their liturgical commemorations normally correspond to the day of their death or *dies natalis*, the day on which they are born to a new life, the life in heaven. On other occasions, the date recalls certain noteworthy moments in their life, especially dates related to the reception of the sacraments.

Saint Josemaria had great devotion to the saints. "What love was Teresa's! What zeal was Xavier's! What a wonderful man was Saint Paul! Ah, Jesus, well I... I love you more than Paul, Xavier and Teresa!"⁸ The Sacred Liturgy is a privileged place where we can grow in love for these celestial intercessors and feel close to them, as loving companions on our earthly journey. The Roman Missal brings together the tradition of faith celebrated down through the ages, with formulas of prayers for the Masses of the martyrs, pastors, doctors of the Church, virgins, and holy men and women who reached the fullness of Christian life in a variety of circumstances and states of life. In the majority of cases, these texts contain some common prayers and others that are proper to the day.

Most families normally celebrate in a special way the anniversaries of the more prominent members of the family, the father or mother, the grandparents... This also happens in the family of God, the Church. In addition to the feasts of our Lady, the general calendar includes the *solemnities* of Saint Joseph (March 19), the Birth of John the Baptist (June 24), Saint Peter and Saint Paul (June 29), and All Saints (November 1). There are also a large number of *feasts* of the saints; besides those of the apostles and evangelists that occur throughout the year, the Church celebrates the feasts of Saint Lawrence (August 10), Saint Stephen the first martyr (December 26), and the Holy Innocents (December 28). Then there are the *memorials*, either free or obligatory. In the Work, besides the feasts of our Lord and our Lady and Saint Joseph, we celebrate with special devotion the feast of the Holy Cross;

those of the holy Archangels and Apostles, patrons of the various apostolic works of the Prelature; those of the other apostles and evangelists; and the feast of the Holy Guardian Angels.⁹

As we read in the book of Revelation, the saints form *a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues.*¹⁰ This multitude includes the saints of the Old Testament, such as the just man Abel and the faithful patriarch Abraham; those of the New Testament; the many martyrs of the early times of Christianity, and the blessed and saints of all time. This is the great family of God's children, formed by those who model their life under the impulse of the eternal sculptor, the Holy Spirit.

Collects of the Roman Missal

A contemporary French writer says that the saints are like “the colors of the spectrum in relation to the light.” Each one expresses with his or her own tones and radiance the light of divine holiness. It is as though the radiance of Christ's Resurrection, in passing through the prism of mankind, opens up a spectrum of colors as varied as it is fascinating. “When the Church keeps the memorials of martyrs and other saints during the annual cycle, she proclaims the Paschal mystery in those ‘who have suffered and have been glorified with Christ. She proposes them to the faithful as examples who draw all men to the Father through Christ, and through their merits she begs for God's favors’ (Vatican II, Const. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 104).”¹¹

In the formulas of Masses for saints in the Roman Missal, the Church expresses her prayer in words that help us to consider the various colors in this spectrum of life. On each of these days, there is at least a collect proper to the saint that the priest recites in the opening rite immediately before the Liturgy of the Word. This brief prayer condenses the character of the celebration.¹² In a few words it reminds us of the aspect of God's holiness that shines forth most brightly in the saint we commemorate that day. Often it begins by recalling some facet of the history of salvation, in particular the Mystery of Christ. And it usually urges the Christian people to seek the intercession of that saint

for some area of their life.

The content of the collects is quite rich and varied. Thus, for example, on the memorial of Saint John Fisher and Saint Thomas More (June 22), we ask to confirm with the witness of our life the faith we profess (what Saint Josemaria would call unity of life); or we ask to have apostolic zeal like that of Saint Francis Xavier (December 3); or to live the mystery of Christ especially by contemplating his Passion as did Saint Catherine of Siena (April 29); or to have our heart enkindled with the fire of the Holy Spirit on the day of Saint Philip Neri (May 26). On other occasions we ask for gifts and graces for the Church: the fruitfulness of the apostolate on the memorial of Saint Charles Luwanga and his martyr companions (June 3); to have shepherds to the measure of Christ's heart, on the feast of Saint Ambrose (December 7); or to trustingly open our hearts to Christ's grace, as Saint John Paul II asked of us (October 22). On the memorial of Saint Juan Diego (December 9) we contemplate our Lady's love for her people, and on that of Saint Agatha (February 5) we are reminded of how pleased God is with the virtue of purity.

These examples, which could be multiplied many times, show us that the prayers we offer on the feasts of the saints are a very rich resource for our personal prayer on that day. They can help us to address our Lord spontaneously with specific phrases during our hours of work and rest that day. Precious gems of unique beauty, some of these prayers have been prayed for many centuries, like jewels inserted into the liturgical celebrations of Christian Tradition. As we pray them, we are praying as so many generations of Christians have prayed. The memorials and feasts of the saints celebrated throughout the year offer us the opportunity to get to know a bit better these powerful intercessors before the Blessed Trinity, and to "make new friends" in heaven.

Stars of God

The saints, "being touched by God's word have, as it were, released an explosion of light, through which God's radiance shines upon our world

and shows us the path. The saints are stars of God, by whom we let ourselves be led to him for whom our whole being longs.”¹³ Just as the star from the East guided the Magi to their personal encounter with Christ, so the saints help us like the North Star in the night sky, to reach the land to which we aspire.

Among the stars that point out the way, the Church has publicly set forth Saint Josemaria and Blessed Alvaro for the devotion of the Christian people. The apostolic zeal and disinterested service to the Church and all souls that so deeply marked the lives of the founder of Opus Dei and his first successor are condensed in the prayers the Church raises up to God on their respective liturgical feastdays. In the first case, the Church implores God the Father that, through the intercession of Saint Josemaria, “we may, through our ordinary work, be formed in the likeness of Jesus your Son and serve the work of redemption with burning love,”¹⁴ and that the celebration of the sacraments may strengthen in us “the spirit of adoption as your children.”¹⁵ In the collect for Blessed Alvaro we ask that by imitating his example “we may humbly dedicate ourselves to the Church’s saving mission.”¹⁶ Don Alvaro was faithful to the Church and loyally followed Saint Josemaria in spreading the message of the universal call to sanctity and apostolate.

We benefit greatly from earnestly seeking the intercession of Saint Josemaria and Blessed Alvaro so that from heaven they might obtain for us fidelity to our vocation in all the circumstances of our life. By reading their lives, as though a great novel, we learn to be saints in ordinary life. As Saint Bernard reminds us in a homily for the feast of All Saints: “The saints have no need of honor from us, nor does our devotion add anything to their glory. If we venerate their memory, it redounds to our advantage, not theirs. I assure you that, when I think of them, I feel my heart enkindled by a tremendous yearning.”¹⁷ Hence we can understand the meaning of the honor given to the saints: “looking at the shining example of the saints awakens in us the great longing to be like them, happy to live near God, in his light, in the great family of God’s friends.”¹⁸ Besides, as we go through the year and contemplate the men and women saints of all times and places, we realize that “they

were, they are, normal: of flesh, like yours. And they conquered.”¹⁹

Celebrating the feastdays of the saints forcefully reminds us of the universal call to holiness. Helped by God’s grace, all men and women can correspond fully to the loving invitation to participate in divine Life, each in our specific circumstances. As Pope Francis said: “Often we are tempted to think that sainthood is reserved only to those who have the opportunity to break away from daily affairs in order to dedicate themselves exclusively to prayer. But it is not so! Some think that sanctity is to close your eyes and to look like a holy icon. No! This is not sanctity! Sanctity is something greater, deeper, which God gives us. Indeed, it is precisely in living with love and offering one’s own Christian witness in everyday affairs that we are called to become saints.”²⁰ Persons of every condition travel the path of Christian perfection. “There are many Christians who are marvelously holy. There are many mothers who are marvelously, wonderfully holy; there are many fathers who are wonderful. They will have marvelous places in heaven. And laborers and farmers. Where one least expects it, there are vibrant souls.”²¹

How encouraging it is to consider that, as the years go by, there will be more and more saints who have lived an ordinary life, and whose lives we will celebrate in the Liturgy so they may spur us to deepen our love for Christ in our ordinary daily tasks!

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¹ Benedict XVI, *Audience*, 25 April 2012.

² Saint Josemaria, Notes taken in a get together, 26 June 1974.

- 3 *Mt 5:48.*
- 4 Francis, *Audience*, 19 November 2014.
- 5 Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 301.
- 6 *Jn 3:19.*
- 7 *Hebr 10:38.*
- 8 *The Way*, no. 874
- 9 Cf. *De Spiritu*, no. 98.
- 10 *Rev 7:9.*
- 11 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1173.
- 12 Cf. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 54.
- 13 Benedict XVI, *Homily*, 6 January 2012.
- 14 *Collect* for the Mass of Saint Josemaria.
- 15 *Postcommunion* of the Mass of Saint Josemaria.
- 16 *Collect* for the Mass of Blessed Alvaro.
- 17 Saint Bernard, *Sermo 2* in *Opera Omnia Cisterc.* 5, 364.
- 18 Benedict XVI, *Homily*, 1 November 2006.
- 19 *The Way*, no. 133.
- 20 Francis, *Audience*, 19 November 2014.
- 21 Saint Josemaria, Notes taken in a get together, 18 May 1970.

SINGING AND MUSIC IN THE LITURGY

The music that comes from God

An article on singing and music in the liturgy. “True liturgical music is prayer; it is liturgy. It does not distract us, nor is it limited to providing us with joyful sensations or aesthetic delight. It helps us to be recollected, to place ourselves in the mystery of God.”

*Cantemus Domino, gloriose enim magnificatus est! I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously.*¹ In a wonderfully consistent way, the liturgy of the Easter Vigil unites this singing with the account of the Israelites passing through the Red Sea. This joyful music rises up spontaneously as we “touch” God’s nearness. For the Chosen People, the miracle of the parted waters becomes an emblem of how close God is to us. The Psalms frequently echo this reality.² Now in the era of the Church, this event speaks to us about Baptism, about the Cross, about heaven... It speaks to us about our life and the Life that God has prepared for us on the other shore. This new Life is “not a mere embellishment of the present one: it surpasses our imagination, for God continually amazes us with his love and with his mercy.”³

Facing “the God of surprises,”⁴ a God who makes all things new,⁵ “words are not needed, because the tongue cannot express itself. The intellect grows calm. One does not reason; one looks! And the soul breaks out once more into song, a new song, because it feels and knows it is under the loving gaze of God, all day long.”⁶ Seeing our God who surprises us with his newness, praise and adoration arise spontaneously—both song and silence. The two are closely related, since they express what mere words could never say. That is why the liturgy reserves them for its most sublime moments. “The Church sings, it has been said, because merely to speak would not satisfy its desire for prayer. You as a

Christian, and a chosen Christian, should learn to sing liturgically.”⁷

A new song

No way out, humanly speaking. That was the situation of the Chosen People, trapped between the Red Sea and the Egyptian army. In front of them was the barrier of the sea; behind them, armed warriors. *The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.’*⁸ So often that is the situation of the Church: under attack from those who want to erase her from the face of the earth, or at least empty her of her supernatural character.

But God is with us as he was with the Israelites. And in the face of what seems humanly impossible, his glory shines forth against the power of Pharaoh and the pharaohs of all ages. In unexpected ways, the sea divides and opens up the way for us and closes again against the enemy. *Thou didst blow with thy wind, the sea covered them; they sank as lead in the mighty waters.*⁹

The sacred text does not tell us the thoughts of the Hebrew people as they passed through the sea on dry land, with walls of water to the right and to the left. Only at the end does the Bible turn to the Israelites and show us their reaction. *The people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses. Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying, ‘I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously.’*¹⁰ They reacted with fear and a renewed faith in God that poured forth in the first “new song”¹¹ the Scripture recounts for us.

We do not know what the music was like. No one was able to record it, nor has it come down to us through oral tradition. But it must have been filled with sincere gratitude and a deep sense of adoration. And it must have been quite moving: any outside witness would have clearly sensed God’s presence in that hymn, as did those who sang it.

After this episode, the Israelites encountered even more difficulties in the desert. First, the bitter waters of Marah that were turned sweet again by the wood, a figure of the Cross.¹² Then the hardships of the

Sinai desert, which the Lord relieved with manna and quails. And later, the water of Massah and Meribah. God always provided help in the midst of the difficulties and the people renewed their song. Their hope was that a moment would come when everything would be a new song.

Christ's coming has brought salvation once and for all. *Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb.*¹³ The new song, which will never end, has already begun. Nevertheless, we still await the moment when it will be full and complete, just as it is presented in the Apocalypse.¹⁴ In a certain sense, the Church has already reached the Promised Land. But she continues her pilgrimage through the desert, which is why the Liturgy speaks about her as "*peregrinans in terra.*"¹⁵ In reality, the term "new," in biblical language, "evokes not so much the exterior novelty of the words, as the ultimate fullness that seals hope. It sings, therefore, of the destination of history where the voice of evil ... will finally be silenced. But this negative aspect is replaced by a more spacious positive dimension, that of the new world, a joyful one about to appear."¹⁶

The music from heaven, on earth

When the Lamb *had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down ... each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints; and they sang a new song.*¹⁷ Sacred Scripture does not fail to mention, in its sober way, the existence of heavenly music. This shouldn't surprise us since "God is not isolation, but glorious and joyful love, spreading outwards and radiant with light."¹⁸ We can easily imagine the music that must have accompanied our Lady when the Blessed Trinity received her into heaven. The hosts of angels awaited their Queen who was about to arrive, body and soul. The music is solemn; it expresses the joy and delicacy of beauty. Our Lady appears in splendor, and the Son, who has brought mankind into the heart of the Trinity, receives his Mother.

The earthly liturgy, even when we are not attentive to all its beauty, owing perhaps to external circumstances or our own situation, is "the

worship of the universal temple which is the Risen Christ, whose arms are outstretched on the Cross to draw everyone into the embrace of God's eternal love. It is the worship of a wide open heaven."¹⁹ Hence the prefaces at Mass always end with an invitation to sing the *Sanctus* together with the angels and the saints. Heaven and earth are united in the *Sanctus*. "We join in the singing of all the centuries, singing that unites heaven and earth, angels and men."²⁰ As Saint Josemaria wrote: "I adore and praise with the angels—it is not difficult, because I know that, as I celebrate the holy Mass, they surround me, adoring the Blessed Trinity."²¹

Certainly, in the narration of the angels' announcement to the shepherds, "Saint Luke does not say that the angels sang. He states quite soberly: the heavenly host praised God and said: 'Glory to God in the highest' (*Lk* 2:13f.). But men have always known that the speech of angels is different from human speech, and that above all on this night of joyful proclamation it was in song that they extolled God's heavenly glory. So this angelic song has been recognized from the earliest days as music proceeding from God, indeed, as an invitation to join in the singing with hearts filled with joy at the fact that we are loved by God."²²

This is the framework for the development of the Liturgy's rich musical creativity, which began with the prayer of Israel: the effort to enter into harmony with God's beauty, in order to catch a glimpse of heaven. "The liturgy is God's time and space, and we must put ourselves there in God's time, in God's space, without looking at our watches. The liturgy is precisely entering into the mystery of God; bringing ourselves to the mystery and being present in the mystery."²³ Saint Josemaria wrote that in the Holy Mass "time ought to stand still."²⁴ In God's presence, a purely instrumental, pragmatic viewpoint is out of place. "The appearing of beauty, of the beautiful, makes us happy without our having to ask what use it can serve. God's glory, from which all beauty derives, causes us to break out in astonishment and joy."²⁵

Within everyone's reach

Our participation in liturgical singing shows our love, the “sense of mystery”²⁶ that leads us to set aside our usual quest for efficiency. Without failing to take into account each one’s professional and family circumstances, we can often bring to the liturgy the “touch” that fosters adoration of God in a special way. Perhaps by doing so we might be going against the pragmatic culture that we also are part of. But by giving the liturgy the time it requires, with the simple splendor of our faith, we help bring the world to God. We make him present amid the hustle and bustle of modern life, which doesn’t know how to make time for God. “Isn’t it strange how many Christians, who take their time and have leisure enough in their social life (they are in no hurry), in following the sleepy rhythm of their professional affairs, in eating and recreation (no hurry here either), find themselves rushed and want to rush the Priest, in their anxiety to shorten the time devoted to the most holy Sacrifice of the Altar?”²⁷ “Faith is love and therefore creates poetry and music.”²⁸ If our faith is alive, we will also be more like those first Christians St. Paul encouraged to sing and celebrate the Lord with their whole heart.²⁹

Liturgical music, then, is not a question of sentimentality or aesthetic taste. It is a question of love, of wanting “to address God with a tender heart,”³⁰ and not “in a dry, official way, with a faith that has no sparkle to it.”³¹ Just as we would miss music at festive times in life, it’s only natural to want to enhance the liturgy in this way. At times, in a daily celebration, a brief pious hymn might suffice: *Adoro te devote*, *Ave Maris Stella*, *Rorate Coeli*, etc. On feast days, depending on the talents of those present, the music will take on greater importance. We can sing some parts of the Mass—the *Gloria*, the *Sanctus*, etc.—and perhaps even have an organ accompaniment.

Throughout the ages, the Church has developed a precious tradition of sacred music. The newness of Christian worship led to seeking new poetic and musical forms that would express prayer raised to unsuspected heights. “Singing psalms befits men, but singing hymns is for the angels and those who lead a life like the angels.”³² And so the Roman Liturgy emphasizes Gregorian chant as being most fitting³³ for prayer during the celebration of the Holy Mass. Thus, for example, the

Roman Missal for the altar contains the music for the *Per ipsum* at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer and for other prayers as well.

In the great repertoire of Christian sacred music we can find hymns that fit all tastes and talents, from simple melodies to complex polyphony. There are also more recent compositions that stem from a particular culture and whose music accords well with the mysteries of God. Both the more traditional pieces and the more modern ones can be found in books for the use of the faithful. Collections of hymns can also be offered that are more suited for a specific time and place.

Those with more musical talent can make an important contribution here. The effort to pour their creativity into making worship more attractive will also lead them to be more generous towards God, because by dedicating their time to the Lord and to others they are offering the sacrifice of Abel.³⁴ In any case, it is well worthwhile putting at least the same effort here that they would put into preparing, for example, a birthday celebration: learning and practicing hymns that are a part of Christian culture, that express an authentic liturgical taste, and that provide a channel for our prayer. For in the liturgy we are with God, and God is pleased by our singing.

The language of adoration

In the liturgy, music is not a mere accompaniment or ornamentation. Nor is it the interpretation of a religious theme that draws attention to itself. In either case, music would run parallel to the celebration, when in reality it should be one and the same thing with it.³⁵ True liturgical music is prayer; it is liturgy. It does not distract us, nor is it limited to providing us with joyful sensations or aesthetic delight. It helps us to be recollected, to place ourselves in the mystery of God. It leads us to adoration, which has silence as one of its privileged languages. As the Pope reminds us: “silence guards the mystery.”³⁶ If the music comes from God, it will not compete with silence. It will lead us to the true silence, that of the heart.

The moments of silence that the liturgy provides for—at the beginning of Mass, in the penitential rite, in the *mementos*, at the

consecration, etc.—are invitations to recollect ourselves in adoration. They prepare us for the moment of communion. “If I am truly to communicate with another person I must know him; I must be able to be in silence close to him, to listen to him and look at him lovingly. True love and true friendship are always nourished by the reciprocity of looks, of intense, eloquent silences full of respect and veneration, so that the encounter may be lived profoundly and personally rather than superficially. And, unfortunately, if this dimension is lacking, sacramental communion itself may become a superficial gesture on our part.”³⁷

Pointing to the intimate heart of the liturgy that will be our heaven, the Pope asks in one of his homilies: “You and I, do we worship the Lord? Do we turn to God only to ask him for things, to thank him, or do we also turn to him to worship him? What does it mean, then, to worship God? It means learning to be with him, it means that we stop to dialogue with him, and it means sensing that his presence is the most true, the most good, the most important thing of all ... worshipping the Lord means that we are convinced before him that he is the only God, the God of our lives, the God of our history.”³⁸

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¹ *Ex* 15:1.

² See Psalm 65 (66); 77 (78); 105 (106); 135 (136).

³ Pope Francis, Angelus, 10 November 2013.

⁴ Pope Francis, Homily in Santa Marta, 20 January 2014.

- 5 See *Rev* 21:5.
- 6 Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 307.
- 7 Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 523.
- 8 *Ex* 15:9.
- 9 *Ex* 15:10.
- 10 *Ex* 14:31-15:1.
- 11 See *Psalms* 32 (33); 39 (40); 95 (96); 97 (98); 143 (144); 149.
- 12 See *Ex* 14:22-25.
- 13 *Rev* 7:10
- 14 *Rev* 5:9-10; 14:3.
- 15 *Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer III.
- 16 Benedict XVI, Audience, 25 January 2006. See *Psalms* 143 (144).
- 17 *Rev* 5:8-9.
- 18 Benedict XVI, Homily, 19 February 2012.
- 19 Benedict XVI, Audience, 3 October 2012.
- 20 Benedict XVI, Homily, 24 December, 2010.
- 21 Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 89.
- 22 Benedict XVI, Homily, 24 December 2010.
- 23 Pope Francis, Homily, 10 February 2014.
- 24 Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 436.
- 25 Benedict XVI, Homily, 24 December 2010.

- 26 Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 17 April 2003, no. 49.
- 27 *The Way*, no. 530.
- 28 Benedict XVI, Audience, 21 May 2008.
- 29 See *Eph* 5:19; *Col* 3:17.
- 30 *Friends of God*, no. 167.
- 31 *The Forge*, no. 930.
- 32 Origen, *Sel. in psalmos*, in Psalm 119 (118): 71.
- 33 See Const. *Sancrosanctum concilium*, no. 116.
- 34 See *Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer I; Cf. *Gen* 4:4.
- 35 See Const. *Sacrosanctum concilium*, no. 112.
- 36 Pope Francis, Homily in Santa Marta, 20 December 2014.
- 37 Benedict XVI, Homily, 7 June 2012.
- 38 Pope Francis, Homily, 14 April 2013.

EPILOGUE

Gathered together in communion: praying with the whole Church

An article on the first Eucharistic Prayer, the “Roman Canon.” “The Roman Canon reminds us that we are at Holy Mass not only with our Lord, but also with people of every place and time.”

“I celebrate Mass together with the whole people of God. I will go still further: I am also together with those who have not yet come close to our Lord, those who are far away and are not yet part of his flock; I have them too in my heart. And I feel that I am surrounded by all the birds that fly across the azure sky, some even looking the sun in the eye ... And by all the animals on earth: the rational ones, we human beings, although we sometimes behave irrationally; and the irrational ones that walk on the surface of the earth or inhabit its hidden depths. That’s how I feel when I am renewing the Holy Sacrifice of the Cross!”¹

We have been considering different moments of the liturgical year, deepening our understanding of all the tones acquired over time by the Church’s prayer. The above words by Saint Josemaria about the Eucharist, “the heart of the world,”² bring before us the true scope of Christian worship. As one of the messianic psalms already announced, the Church’s worship embraces all space—*a mari usque ad mare*, from sea to sea³—and all times—*while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations*.⁴ Everything started from the Cross. There Jesus gathered the whole Church together in his prayer and thus shaped the *communio sanctorum*, the communion of saints, of all places and times. And everything returns to the Cross: *omnes traham ad meipsum, I will draw all to myself*.⁵ In each Eucharistic celebration the whole Church is present, heaven and earth, God and mankind. Therefore, in the Holy Mass, not only political and social barriers are

overcome, but also the barriers between heaven and earth. The Eucharist is *katholikos*, which in Greek means universal, catholic: everything is measured by it because God is there, and with Him all of us, in union with the Holy Father, all the bishops, and all believers of every time and place.

Let us look at some of the features of the Eucharistic Prayer, specifically the Roman Canon.⁶ We will thus perceive the richness of the Church's prayer, which comes from God's richness. If we try to pray at Mass with this universal spirit, with the awareness that we are not alone, our Lord will expand our hearts—*dilatasti cor meum*.⁷ He will enable us to pray with all our brethren in the faith, and make us God's memory, God's balm, God's peace for all mankind.

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus

The Eucharistic Prayer starts with a Preface that always sets before our eyes reasons for thanksgiving. Sometimes we are not capable of appreciating all of them, as something that really affects us. But the Church does know what she is thanking God for, and we can trust her wisdom, even though sometimes our understanding falls short. The end of every Preface reminds us that it is she, the Church of all places and all times, who celebrates the Eucharist, whether with a congregation of thousands “or whether it is only a boy with his mind on other things who is there to serve.”⁸

The Preface culminates with the *Sanctus*, “the unending praise that the Church in heaven, the angels and all the saints, sing to the thrice-holy God.”⁹ We sing in union with the liturgy of Heaven, and we do so not only in our own name, but in the name of all mankind and the whole of creation, which needs our human voices. Through us, mankind becomes the “*leitourgos*” of creation—interpreters and priests of the song that created beings long to sing to God. “We name the heaven and earth, the sea and the sun and moon, the stars and all rational and irrational creatures, visible and invisible, the angels, the virtues, the dominations, the powers, the thrones, the many-faced cherubim (cf. *Ez* 10:21), wanting to say with David, ‘O magnify the Lord with me’ (*Ps*

33[34]:3).”¹⁰

Memento Domine...

This ecclesial prayer, praying together with the whole Church, can also be seen in the intercessions. “*Memento, Domine*—Remember, Lord,” we say; and then we ourselves become “God’s memory” for our family and friends, for those who count on our prayer, and also for all those that perhaps only He remembers. This is something essential in “our Mass,”¹¹ because “if we don’t think about God, everything ends up flat, everything ends up being about ‘me’ and my own comfort. Life, the world, other people, all of these become unreal ... When we no longer remember God, we too become unreal, we too become empty; like the rich man in the Gospel, we no longer have a face!”¹²

The prayer of intercession places us fully within the prayer of Jesus, mankind’s one mediator before the Father. “Since Abraham, intercession—asking on behalf of another—has been characteristic of a heart attuned to God’s mercy. In the age of the Church, Christian intercession participates in Christ’s, as an expression of the communion of saints.”¹³ The first Christian communities shared intensely in this petition that knows no boundaries, as can be seen in the earliest Eucharistic texts. They tried to share the sentiments of the One *who wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth*.¹⁴ If we bring love and affection to the Eucharistic Prayer, God will enlarge our heart and make it grow to the measure of Christ’s.

With this magnanimity we pray in the first place for the whole Church: “Be pleased to grant her peace, to guard, unite and govern her throughout the whole world...” And we start by uniting ourselves with the Holy Father, the bishop of our diocese, and of course with the Father. Thus we pray “tightly gathered together, as a closely united family.”¹⁵

Then our intercession becomes a petition for all the faithful present and all those for whom the sacrifice is being offered. “*Memento, Domine, famulorum famularumque tuaram N. et N. et omnium circumstantium...* Remember, Lord, your servants, N. and N. and all

gathered here, whose faith and devotion are known to you ...” The first Eucharistic Prayer places before our Lord the needs of all those, whether Christians or not, for whom we pray specifically, though it is not necessary to name them aloud. According to the rubrics, the priest joins his hands and prays briefly for those he wants to entrust to God. Saint Josemaria used to spend somewhat longer in this petition: “I make a very long *Memento*. Every day there are different colors, different tones, lights whose intensity varies in focus. But the common denominator of my offering is this: the Church, the Holy Father and the Work ... I remember everyone, absolutely everyone; I cannot exclude anyone. I’m not going to say I won’t include this one because he is my enemy; or that one because he harmed me; or that other because he slandered me, or maligns me, or tells lies... No! I pray for everyone!”¹⁶

Communicantes et memoriam venerantes...

The Roman Canon also reminds us that we are at Holy Mass not only with our Lord, but also with people of every place and time. So we speak not only about the Blessed Trinity and the Incarnate Word, about his death and resurrection, but we also name other important family members, because we know we are in their company as well.

“*Communicantes et memoriam venerantes...* In communion with those whose memory we venerate, especially the glorious ever-Virgin Mary, Mother of our God and Lord Jesus Christ, and blessed Joseph,”¹⁷ followed by the names of twelve apostles, among whom Saint Paul is included,¹⁸ and twelve martyrs from the first four centuries of the Christian era.¹⁹

It is not just an “honours list” like those we may sometimes listen to at official ceremonies, with a certain degree of boredom and hoping it will soon be over. These are members of our family, “the great family of God’s children, the Catholic Church.”²⁰ At Holy Mass we are in communion not only with our brethren “scattered throughout the world,”²¹ but also with our glorified brethren in heaven, and those who are being purified in order to behold the face of God with them. “In celebrating the sacrifice of the Lamb, we are united to the heavenly

'liturgy' and become part of that great multitude which cries out: 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!' (*Rev 7:10*). The Eucharist is truly a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth ... and lighting up our journey."²²

Memento etiam, Domine...

Shortly after the Consecration, at the point where the other Eucharistic Prayers make all their petitions together, the Roman Canon continues them. "Remember also, Lord, your servants who have gone before us with the sign of faith and rest in the sleep of peace." The celebrant pauses for a few moments and prays for the dead, and then continues with some heartfelt words: "Grant them, O Lord, we pray, and all who sleep in Christ, a place of refreshment, light and peace."

The remembrance of our departed brethren focuses our eyes once more on fraternity, on our fellow men and women. The Holy Spirit again enlarges our hearts, for here we can pray not only for the dead closest to us, but also for all the men and women God has called to himself since yesterday. Some of them may have died alone, and God has gone out to meet them, and wiped the tears from their eyes.²³ "In the memento of the dead, what joy it is to pray for everyone! Of course I pray in the first place for my children, my parents and my sisters; for the parents and brothers and sisters of my children; for all those who have approached me or Opus Dei to do us good; I pray for these with gratitude. And for those who have tried to defame us, to lie... with all the more reason! I forgive them with all my heart, Lord, so that you may forgive me. And I also offer for them the same prayers I offer for my parents and my children... And I end up being so happy!"²⁴

De multitudine miserationum tuarum sperantibus

The Canon is drawing to an end, and intercedes once again for those present, the celebrant and the faithful. "*Nobis quoque peccatoribus famulis tuis, de multitudine miserationum tuarum sperantibus...* To us also, your servants, who, though sinners, hope in your abundant mercies, graciously grant some share and fellowship with your holy Apostles and Martyrs..."²⁵ The prayer names Saint John the Baptist

followed by seven men martyrs and seven women martyrs. Like the lists of twelve we found above, seven is a number with a strong Biblical character. Twelve reminds us of God's choice (the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve apostles, etc.), while seven is the symbol of plenitude, of completeness.

We turn our eyes to heaven. The People of God have recourse to their saints at the most transcendental moments of worship, and the Holy Mass is the place where the Church in heaven and the Church on earth know they are most closely united. Benedict XVI encouraged us to give thanks to God "because he has shown us his face in Christ, because he has given us our Lady, he has given us the Saints; he has called us to be one body, one spirit with him."²⁶ As gratitude means appreciation, we can say with Saint Thomas Aquinas: "O thou, the wisest, mightiest, best; Our present food, our future rest; Come, make us each thy chosen guest; Co-heirs of thine, and comrades blest; With saints whose dwelling is with thee."²⁷

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¹ Saint Josemaria, get-together, 22 May 1970, quoted by Javier Echevarria in *Para Servir a la Iglesia*, Madrid: Rialp, 2001, pp. 189-190.

² Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 17 April 2003, no. 59.

³ *Ps* 71(72): 8.

⁴ *Ps* 71(72): 5.

⁵ *Jn* 12:32.

- 6 Unless otherwise indicated the following quotations are from Eucharistic Prayer I, the Roman Canon.
- 7 *Ps 118(119): 30.*
- 8 *Christ is Passing By*, no. 89.
- 9 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1352.
- 10 Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis*, V, 6.
- 11 *Christ is Passing By*, no. 169.
- 12 Pope Francis, homily, 29 September 2013.
- 13 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2635.
- 14 1 *Tim 2:4.*
- 15 Blessed Alvaro, Letter dated 29 June 1975.
- 16 Saint Josemaria, get-togethers on 1 April 1972 and 10 May 1974, quoted by Javier Echevarria, *Vivir la Santa Misa*, Madrid: Rialp 2010, p. 106.
- 17 In 1962 Saint John XXIII decided that his name should be included in the Roman Canon. In the Decree *Paterna Vices*, 1 May 2013, Pope Francis introduced Saint Joseph's name into Eucharistic Prayers II, III and IV.
- 18 Saint Mathias' name comes in the second list, after the Consecration.
- 19 There are five popes, a bishop, a deacon, followed by Saint Chrysogonos (it is not known whether he was a priest or a layman) and four laymen.
- 20 Javier Echevarría, Letter, 9 January 2002.
- 21 Eucharistic Prayer III.
- 22 Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 19.
- 23 See Eucharistic Prayer III.
- 24 Saint Josemaria, get-together 10 May 1974, quoted in Javier Echevarria, *Vivir la Santa Misa*, p. 151.

- 25 Although this prayer, “To us, also, your servants, who, though sinners...,” may originally have referred only to the celebrant and his ministers, it now seems clear, in the light of the other Eucharistic Prayers, that it is a petition for everyone to be united to the heavenly Church.
- 26 Benedict XVI, Speech, 20 February 2009.
- 27 Saint Thomas Aquinas, Hymn *Lauda Sion*.

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