

Rome, 1 February 2016

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

Quite soon, when Lent begins, the prophet's cry will ring out once more, telling us on God's behalf: *Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*¹

This invitation to a deep change takes on particular relevance in the Year of Mercy, a special time of grace for all mankind. And what trust and confidence it gives us to know that ***God is always ready to give us his grace, especially at a time like this – grace for a new conversion, grace to rise up to the supernatural level; for greater self-surrender, for advancing in Christian perfection, for burning more ardently.***²

Throughout these months, let us fight to make progress along the path of conversion, which in a way sums up the whole Christian journey. St John Paul II says as much in the Encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*: “Authentic knowledge of the God of mercy, the God of tender love, is a constant and inexhaustible source of conversion, not only as a momentary interior act but also as a permanent attitude, as a state of mind. Those who come to know God in this way, who ‘see’ him in this way,” he added, “can live only in a state of being continually converted to him. They live, therefore, *in statu conversionis*; and it is this state of conversion which marks out the most profound element of the pilgrimage of every man and woman on earth *in statu viatoris*.”³

St Josemaría used to stress that ***each day there is not just one conversion, but many. Every time you correct yourself and, when you realize you have done something wrong – even though it isn't a sin – you try to divinize your life more, you have had a conversion.***⁴

All of us need to correct the direction we are taking, redirect our minds, our hearts and our deeds towards our Lord, turning away from whatever might divert or separate us from him. This is because we all experience the inclination to sin, as St John teaches: *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*⁵

Lent is a special time for prayer, penance, and works of charity, and it should touch our souls deeply. The fact that it is now coming in a year especially dedicated to proclaiming God's mercy stimulates us anew to make a demanding response, out of a desire to behave like better daughters and sons of our heavenly Father who looks at each of us with compassion. Perhaps this is a good moment to stop and strike a very personal balance, to see how we are following the Pope's recommendations for this Holy Year, in union with the whole Church.

¹ Roman Missal, Ash Wednesday, First Reading (*Joel 2:12-13*).

² St Josemaría, notes from a meditation, 2 March 1952.

³ St John Paul II, Enc. *Dives in Misericordia*, 30 November 1980, no. 136.

⁴ St Josemaría, notes from a family conversation, 1 October 1970.

⁵ *I Jn* 1, 8-10.

Among the various Lenten practices I would like to dwell on one of the spiritual works of mercy: praying for the living and the dead. Prayer for the people who are closest to us, and in general for those we meet in the course of the day, is clearly very necessary. In the first place, because that prayer enlarges our hearts, since we are seeking to be more like Jesus, and also because it prevents us from becoming wrapped up in our own affairs – or at least makes it more difficult.

It was really striking to see the effort St Josemaría put into praying for the people he met. It was also noticeable that he prayed constantly for the dead, including whenever he saw a cemetery or a funeral, and that he fostered this attitude day after day.

He left us a marvellous example: when he was talking with someone he would begin the conversation by invoking their guardian angel. If he was out, either on foot or in whatever means of transport, he prayed to our Lord for the people he passed on his way, even though he didn't know them and perhaps would never see them again. Each prayer he made for others was a step forward in the constant conversion he aspired to, in order to be more closely identified with Jesus Christ, feeling in his soul that ***we can never think that we are already totally orientated towards God; we need to keep making successive conversions that bring us closer to holiness.***⁶

This attitude ensures and reinforces our response to the call we have all received to seek holiness seriously. Pope Francis recalls our Lord's encounter with St Matthew. **Passing by the tax collector's booth, Jesus looked intently at Matthew. It was a look full of mercy that forgave the sins of that man, a sinner and a tax collector, whom Jesus chose – against the hesitation of the disciples – to become one of the Twelve.**⁷

The forgiveness of sins always goes together with an invitation to follow Jesus Christ. When we sincerely ask for pardon, or when we go to sacramental Confession, God does not limit himself to absolving our faults, but also pours into us the grace of the Holy Spirit, which consolidates the presence of the Blessed Trinity in the soul. **Each vocation in the Church has its origin in the compassionate gaze of Jesus. Conversion and vocation are two sides of the same coin, and continually remain interconnected throughout the whole of the missionary disciple's life.**⁸

We are coming up to 14th February, the date when our Lord showed St Josemaría that women too could join Opus Dei (in 1930) and then (in 1943) that Numerary priests could be incardinated in it. Later on, in 1950, he saw that other diocesan priests could also belong to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross. Therefore this anniversary is a day of thanksgiving in the lives of the members of Opus Dei, accompanied by the gratitude of all the many women and men who are nourished by the spirit of the Work.

The desire to take Christ's light and life to others arises connaturally with the Christian vocation, and is a permanent source of joy. Benedict XVI said the same: "We cannot keep to ourselves the joy of the faith. We must spread it and pass it on, and thereby also strengthen it

⁶ St Josemaría, notes from a family conversation, 1971.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 11 April 2015, no. 8.

⁸ Pope Francis, Message for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, 29 September 2015.

in our own hearts. If faith is truly the joy of having discovered truth and love, we inevitably feel the desire to transmit it, to communicate it to others.”⁹

St Josemaría’s whole life, and in particular the intense way he gazed at God on the 14th February 1930 and 1943, make us realize the truth of this very directly. His efforts to develop Opus Dei were inseparable from his zeal to spread the Catholic faith.

At the same time, this attitude was also reflected in his joy at the variety of vocations within the one common Christian vocation. Pope Francis recently expressed his desire that **during the course of this *Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, all the baptized may experience the joy of belonging to the Church and rediscover that the Christian vocation, just like every particular vocation, is born from within the People of God, and is a gift of divine mercy. The Church is the house of mercy, and it is the “soil” where vocations take root, mature and bear fruit.**¹⁰

Let us ask this as a grace from the Mother of God and our Mother, the Mother of Fair Love, accompanying the Holy Father spiritually on his forthcoming journey to Mexico, from 12th to 18th February. Let us pray to Our Lady of Guadalupe so that through her intercession many spiritual fruits – many vocations – may spring forth from those days, and also before and after them, in Mexico and throughout the whole world.

Years ago, in preparation for the golden jubilee of the founding of the Work, our beloved Don Alvaro wrote to us: “Ask our Lady to revive people’s desires of fidelity to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Mystical Body, by means of a profound awareness of the supernatural importance of the Christian vocation; a conversion that will lead them to the practice of the sacraments, to an interior life of union with God, to fraternal charity, to a docile obedience to their Shepherds, to have enough fortitude to keep and spread the faith and sound doctrine, rejecting the disloyalty of compromise.”¹¹

Let’s continue Don Alvaro’s plea. Keep praying for my intentions, not forgetting petition for all the sick. Recently, our Lord has been calling many of your sisters and brothers to himself; it is hard, very hard! But we have to submit *ex toto corde*, wholeheartedly, to the most just and most lovable Will of God. The good part of it is that they are going to rejoice finally and permanently in the contemplation of the Blessed Trinity.

A very affectionate blessing from

your Father

✠ Javier

⁹ Benedict XVI, Speech at the inauguration of the convention of the Diocese of Rome, 11 June 2007.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, Message for the World Day of Prayer for Vocations, 29 November 2015.

¹¹ Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, Letter, 9 January 1978, no. 13 (*Family Letters* 2, no. 140).