

## (Letter from the Prelate: December 2016)

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

After the close of the Year of Mercy, which has impacted the whole world, we are beginning Advent and a new liturgical year. The Church encourages us to quicken our pace towards our Lord. This advice is always timely, but now, in preparing for Christmas, it becomes if possible even more urgent.

We all have engraved on our hearts some words that, in the upcoming weeks, should leave their imprint on everything we do: *veni, Domine, et noli tardare*<sup>1</sup>; come Lord, and do not delay. We are invited to turn our eyes to Christ, while recalling his terrestrial birth in Bethlehem and awaiting, also with joy and peace, his glorious coming at the end of time. If we were to fail to make this effort, our daily occupations, the monotonous succession of days almost always the same, could perhaps make our daily path seem tedious and uninteresting, and undermine the expectation of an encounter with the Saviour.

Hence this marvelous cry of the Church: come, Lord Jesus! As Saint Bernard said, between the first and final advent comes an *adventus medius*, an intermediary coming of Christ, which marks the entire course of our existence. “This intermediary coming is, one could say, a path leading from the first to the last: in the first, Christ was our redemption; in the last, he will appear as our life; in this intermediary one he is our rest and our consolation.”<sup>2</sup>

In preparing ourselves for the imminent commemoration of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, these weeks spur us to realize how God draws close to us at each moment; he awaits us in the sacraments, especially Penance and the Eucharist, and equally in prayer, in the works of mercy. “Awaken! Remember that God comes! Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today, now! The one true God, ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,’ is not a God who is there in Heaven, unconcerned about us and our history, but he is the-God-who-comes.”<sup>3</sup>

Each day of this waiting places us very close to Mary and Joseph, also with Simeon and Anna, and all the just of the Old Covenant who longed for the Messiah’s coming. Let us ponder on the yearnings in God’s heart (for *his delight is to be with the children of men*<sup>4</sup>) revealed in salvation history. How are we striving to respond? Let us turn our eyes more frequently to our Lady and the holy Patriarch, meditating on how they awaited, each day with greater eagerness, the birth of the Son of God. We can also reflect on how, during the months preceding this celestial event, their conversations would have revolved around Jesus. Our Father’s words are very timely here: “Joyfully keep Joseph and Mary company... and you will hear the traditions of the House of David. You will hear about Elizabeth and Zachary; you will be moved by Joseph’s pure love, and your heart will pound whenever they mention the Child who will be born in Bethlehem.”<sup>5</sup> I suggest that we try to put more love and affection into praying the Angelus.

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<sup>1</sup> Liturgy of the Hours, Evening Prayer I for First Sunday of Advent.

<sup>2</sup> Saint Bernard, *Discourse 5 on Advent*, 1 (Liturgy of the Hours, Wednesday of the First Week of Advent, second reading).

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily, December 2, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> See Prov 8:31 (Vulg.).

<sup>5</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Holy Rosary*, second joyful mystery.

In today's world, both complex and exciting, the danger exists that the hustle and bustle around us will lead us, almost without noticing it, to lose our focus: to forget that our Lord is very close to us. Jesus gives himself to us completely, and it's only natural that he asks a lot of us. Not understanding this reality means not understanding, not truly grasping the Love of God.

But let us not imagine unusual or extraordinary situations. Our Lord is waiting for us to make a more refined effort in carrying out the ordinary duties proper to a Christian. Therefore I suggest that these weeks (which in so many countries are marked by a *crescendo* of external preparations for Christmas) should lead to a *crescendo* of recollection in your closeness to God and in your generous and cheerful service to others. Amid the rushing around, the shopping (or the financial hardships, perhaps tied to a certain lack of social stability), amid wars or natural catastrophes, we have to remember that God is watching over us. Thus we will find peace of heart. Let us turn our eyes to Christ who is arriving, as the Pope said a few weeks ago, citing a well-known phrase of Saint Augustine: "*I fear that the Lord will pass by without my recognizing him; I fear that the Lord may pass before me in one of these small needy persons, and I will not realize that it is Jesus.*"<sup>6</sup>

In particular, let us take greater care of the small gestures of piety that make our relationship with God warmer and more intimate, and that prepare for the Child Jesus a welcoming inn. For example, making the sign of the cross slowly, knowing we are welcomed by the Trinity and saved by the Cross; recollecting ourselves, with naturalness but with devotion, when saying the blessing or giving thanks at meals for our nourishment; showing by our genuflections before the "perennial Nativity scene of the Tabernacle"<sup>7</sup> the firmness of a real and living faith; accompanying almsgiving with a smile; greeting our Mother with affection in her images, and preparing during these first days of December for the solemnity of her Immaculate Conception... Amid the dryness of certain days, our Lady will place on our path fragrant flowers, filled with the *bonus odor Christi*<sup>8</sup>, the "good aroma of Christ," as happened in the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe to Saint Juan Diego, which we will commemorate on the 12th of this month.

From December 17 on, the wait for Jesus takes on a holy impatience: *He who is to come will come and will not delay, and now there will be no fear within our land, for he is our Saviour.*<sup>9</sup> "When we hear tell of the birth of Christ, let us be silent and let the Child speak. Let us take his words to heart in rapt contemplation of his face. If we take him in our arms and let ourselves be embraced by him, he will bring us unending peace of heart. This Child teaches us what is truly essential in our lives. He was born into the poverty of this world; there was no room in the inn for him and his family. He found shelter and support in a stable and was laid in a manger for animals. And yet, from this nothingness, the light of God's glory shines forth."<sup>10</sup>

When our relationship with God takes on this serene and joyful air so proper to the stable at Bethlehem, there spreads around us, as its ripe fruit, a more intense family atmosphere overflowing with joy, so closely united to these dates. Therefore the Church urges us to better prepare our heart during Advent, and to set aside unimportant matters, distractions that lead us astray, the superficiality of the immediate... Perhaps we have in hand many concerns, and we

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<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, Address to a general audience, October 12, 2016 (see Saint Augustine, Sermon 88, 14, 13).

<sup>7</sup> Saint. Josemaría, (AGP, sec. A, leg. 3, fold. 3), cited in *The Way, Critical-Historical Edition* (Pedro Rodriguez, ed.), Scepter (U.K.) 2009. Commentary on point 998.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Cor 2:15.

<sup>9</sup> Roman Missal, December 19, Entrance Antiphon (see Heb 10:37).

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, Homily, December 24, 2015.

lack peace in our relationship with God. If we strive to maintain our peace and calm with God, we will also offer it to others. The closer family life over the days of Christmas will not be marked by arguments, anger, impatience or frivolity, and we will enjoy relaxing and praying together, nourishing good times together as a family, and ironing out prejudices and small grudges that perhaps our heart may harbor.

Don't be concerned if, despite our good will, we are sometimes attacked by distractions in our practices of piety. But let us struggle to acquire the supernatural and human fortitude needed to reject them. Let us renew perseveringly our eagerness to construct within ourselves a "living crèche" to welcome Jesus, spending time praying before the Nativity scene, although we may sometimes have the impression that our head is in the clouds. Recall then that Saint Josemaría was not discouraged to see himself like this in some of his moments spent before our Lord. In 1931 he wrote down: "I know a donkey of such poor character that, if he had been in Bethlehem next to the ox, instead of humbly adoring the Creator, he would have eaten the hay in the crib."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, I am filled with joy to see that in many countries the Christian custom of setting up a Nativity scene is spreading.

Don't forget to remember during these days people who are alone or in need, and whom we can assist in one way or another, knowing that we ourselves are the first beneficiaries. Try to spread this concern that is so Christian to relatives, friends, neighbors, colleagues. What a deeply Christian gesture, among many others, is the practice of some faithful of the Work who during some nights go to offer something to eat and drink to homeless persons, and also to those who are engaged in watching over the rest of the other citizens.

Before ending these lines, I would like to thank the Holy Father once again for the affection he showed me in the audience on November 7, and the blessing he imparted to the faithful and apostolates of the Prelature. Continue to pray for him and his intentions, with the firm hope that Christ, in the upcoming Christmas, will pour out his gifts abundantly on the Church, the Roman Pontiff, and the whole world.

And let us go with filial trust to our Lady during the days of the novena to the Immaculate Conception. Let us feel the holy pride of being children of such a good Mother, who places us face to face with Jesus, as Saint Josemaría told us. This will also spur us to joyfully increase our closeness to those who are sick. Don't fail to meditate on the fatherly affection and closeness with which our Founder accompanied us already in the first Christmas celebrations in the history of the Work: alone with God, with Mary and Joseph; and with each of his daughters and sons who would come to Opus Dei.

With all my affection, I bless you, and ask you for more prayers, more fidelity.

Your Father,

+ Javier

Rome, December 1, 2016

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<sup>11</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Apuntes íntimos*, no. 181 (March 25, 1931). Cited in J.L. Soria, "Maestro de buen humor," Rialp, 3rd ed., Madrid, 1994, p. 91.