

Pastoral Letter (June 1, 1999)

In the framework of the third year of preparation for the great jubilee of the year 2000, the Prelate of Opus Dei, Bishop Javier Echevarría, addressed the following pastoral letter to the faithful of the Prelature in June.

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

By inviting us to dedicate these months especially to deepening our friendship with God the Father, the Roman Pontiff points out that "one sign of the mercy of God which is especially necessary today is the sign of *charity*, which opens our eyes to the needs of those who are poor and excluded."¹ Today I would like to comment on some aspects of this teaching, which forms part of the commitment taken on by all Christians to build up the Kingdom of Christ.

The starting point is the solemn declaration made by our Lord in the synagogue at Nazareth, where he declared that he had come into the world *to preach good news to the poor . . . , to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim*

*the acceptable year of the Lord.*² Later on, when he was asked by John the Baptist's disciples if he was the long-awaited Messiah, he answered by listing a number of signs that were clearly messianic in nature, and in particular, the last one: *the poor have the gospel preached to them.*³ The whole of this Gospel account shows in a specific and tangible way how our Lord had pity on anyone who was in need of help: from lack of food or health, to an incomparably graver privation, that of the life of the soul.

The Apostles preached the same message, highlighting the fact that charity with others, especially those most in need, is a clear and practical sign of love for God. The Apostle St James expresses it very clearly: *If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*⁴ Christian faith by its very nature has to be put into practice, and among its works the ones that show mercy to anyone in need are among the most important, as St John writes, *If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth.*⁵

1. John Paul II, Bull *Incarnationis Mysterium*, November 29, 1998, no.12.

2. Luke 4:18-19

3. Luke 7:22

4. Jas 2:15-17

5. 1 John 3:17-18

Spurred on by the example of the Master, we as Christians feel a solidarity with all other men and women, especially those who are least fortunate, and this solidarity of feelings has to be turned into deeds, in accordance with each person's possibilities. "Today more than ever," the Pope writes, "the Church is aware that her social message will gain credibility more immediately from the witness of actions than as a result of its internal logic and consistency."⁶ As Christians, all of us are the Church, and we all have a duty to give witness in this way. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Holy Father has declared that "a commitment to justice and peace in a world like ours, marked by so many conflicts and intolerable social and economic inequalities, is a necessary condition for the preparation and celebration of the Jubilee."⁷

There are many kinds of poverty and discrimination, and those of us who know we are children of God and brothers of everyone have to try and alleviate such things, by working together with other people of good will. The "preferential option for the poor... is never exclusive or discriminatory toward other groups. This option is not limited to material poverty, since it is well known that there are many other forms of poverty, especially in modern society — not only economic, but cultural and spiritual poverty as well."⁸

It is not the Magisterium's job to offer specific solutions to social problems. As in so many other fields, it sets

out some general principles which, in the light of the Gospel, can be converted into criteria for action, and into a positive means for urging on people's consciences to do good. But this logical explanation of basic points, with great respect for freedom, is no excuse for anyone to remain inactive or indifferent in practice. As Blessed Josemaría pointed out, "A man or society that does not react to suffering and injustice and makes no effort to alleviate them is still distant from the love of Christ's heart."⁹

Following on from these words of our beloved Father, we could do a little personal examination of conscience. Do we really feel the pain, every day, of the injustices that so many people are suffering? Do we remember to pray for their needs? Do we cooperate, in whatever way we can, in helping to resolve these problems? Do we try and make other people aware? Don't think that all this is just a sort of utopia or can be limited to merely *wishing one could help*, when faced with the undisputed fact that we have neither wealth, nor power, nor authority, nor influence, and each of us is only a drop in the ocean of mankind. Don't forget that prayer is always effective, and don't lose sight of the fact that a good example always attracts people. So all of us can and should do more each day in these areas.

I would like us to stop and consider now the importance of the personal witness given by any honorable man or woman, especially when

6. John Paul II, Encycl. Letter *Centesimus Annus*, May 1, 1991, no. 57.

7. John Paul II, Apost. Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, November 10, 1994, no. 51.

8. John Paul II, Encycl. Letter *Centesimus Annus*, no. 57.

9. Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 167.

immoral customs are widespread (with evidence of corruption in economic life, decadence in public morality, permissive laws on abortion, divorce, etc.) and when these become a real *situation of sin*, in the sense that they greatly facilitate the spread of evil.

We should not allow ourselves to become pessimistic in the face of such panoramas, because then we would give up completely. Remember that immoral behavior, however widespread it may be, is always the result of free personal choices. It is not something inevitable, so to speak, as if society is bound to go headlong down those wrong paths. The Church teaches that “*social sins* are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many *personal sins*.”¹⁰ Every Christian is obliged to make a positive contribution towards eliminating such situations, in a practical, specific way. This entails everyone making a real effort to be converted, personally, because these situations, which cause scandal in society, are a product not only “of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it,” but also “of those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit certain social evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear, or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world, and also of those who side-step the effort and sacrifice required, producing specious reasons of a higher order.”¹¹

“Holiness is not something communal,” our Founder used to say. “It is the result of each person’s individual effort, together with God’s grace: a group of people could be very holy but if you and I did not struggle to become saints, we would go straight down to hell.”¹² The same thing can be said about social injustice or moral permissiveness. “At the heart of every *situation of sin* are always to be found sinful people. So true is this that even when such a situation can be changed in its structural or institutional aspects by the force of law, or — as unfortunately more often happens — by the law of force, the change in fact proves to be incomplete, of short duration, and ultimately vain and ineffective — not to say counterproductive — if the people directly or indirectly responsible for that situation are not converted.”¹³

To overcome these circumstances, there has to be a positive promotion of honorable behaviour, and this has to start within each individual, who in turn spreads this way of acting among the people round about (relatives, friends, colleagues at work, etc) in a quiet but productive apostolate of friendship and trust; quiet because it is expressed not in futile laments but in meeting the daily demands of our Christian and civic obligations. In short, it entails putting into practice what our Founder recommended so many years ago: “Among those around you, apostolic soul, you are the stone fallen into the lake. With your word and your example you produce a first

10. John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. *Reconciliatio et Pœnitentia*, December 2, 1984, no. 16.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, April 28, 1972.

13. John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. *Reconciliatio et Pœnitentia*, no. 16.

circle... and it another... and another, and another... wider each time. Now do you understand the greatness of your mission?"¹⁴

How important it is, my daughters and sons, to have an upright intention in carrying out your professional and social duties! You can be sure that when you behave in a truly Christian way, and if you try to help many other people to do the same, you are cooperating most effectively towards resolving injustices, because you are revitalising the tissue of society with the lymph of the Gospel and helping to heal those *structures of sin*, which are the result of personal sins, and which tend to mass together in a society that is spiritually ill. Don't think that I am looking at the situation pessimistically; on the contrary, a Christian is called to bring into this world of ours a healthy *gaudium cum pace*, that does not compromise with evil or with spiritual unhealthiness.

As a result of your human and Christian uprightness, many initiatives will begin wherever you live or work, and they will be directly aimed at solving specific social problems, in a noble and brotherly cooperation with other men and women of good will. At this very time I am raising up my heart in thanksgiving to our Lord, because around the Prelature, with the help of so many Cooperators, both Catholic and non-Catholic, abundant examples of such solidarity are flourishing. They are contributing

towards establishing justice and peace on earth, and bringing to tens of thousands of people "the strong and soothing balm of love,"¹⁵ as our Father expressed it.

As well as fulfilling our duties in an upright way, we can help to spread justice and charity by leading a temperate life. In one of his social encyclicals, John Paul II addresses the following words to all Christians without exception: "I wish to ask them . . . to implement—by the way they live as individuals and as families, by the use of their resources . . . —the *measures* inspired by solidarity and love of preference for the poor. This is what is demanded by the present moment and above all by the very dignity of the human person, the indestructible image of God the Creator, which is *identical* in each one of us."¹⁶ So an indispensable means for cooperating in establishing the *kingdom of justice, love and peace*,¹⁷ which Christ came to bring, is to practice in one's personal life the radical nature of the Christian message in all that refers to the use of material goods.

In fact, "the spirit of detachment and evangelical poverty leading to a greater generosity in charity toward all,"¹⁸ is a good indicator of how genuinely concerned Christians are for social justice and charity. On this point too, I would encourage you to do a careful examination of conscience. Do we love spiritual poverty? Are our hearts free, with no ties except those

14. Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, no. 831.

15. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 183.

16. John Paul II, Encycl. Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, December 10, 1987, no. 47.

17. Preface for the Mass of Christ the King.

18. John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. *Christifideles Laici*, December 30, 1988, no. 30.

that unite them to God? Do we give to material resources only the relative importance that they have? Do we seek, above all, the kingdom of God and his justice, and place our trust in divine Providence? Do we create false needs for ourselves? Are we content with what enables us "to live a simple and sober life?"¹⁹ Do we work with joyful hope to obtain more resources for developing the works of apostolate? What are we doing each day to practise the virtue of detachment?

The month of June is rich in feast days that will help us put fresh life into these reflections. The solemnity of Corpus Christi (when we celebrate the real presence of Jesus Christ beneath something as material as the species of bread and wine) should serve, as our Father suggests, "to reflect on the hunger which people suffer: hunger for truth, for justice, for unity and for peace."²⁰ But, our Founder adds, "How difficult it often seems, to eliminate the barriers to human harmony! And yet we Christians are called to bring about that miracle of brotherhood. We must work so that everyone with God's grace can live in a Christian way, *bearing one another's burdens* (*Gal 6:2*), keeping the commandment of love which is the bond of perfection and the essence of the law (cf. *Col 3:14 & Rom 13:10*)."²¹

A week later, the solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus reminds us that our Lord, as perfect Man, is the true Model for everyone. Let us try and

see ourselves in him, and reflect more deeply on the Gospel scenes, so as to learn to practise the human virtues that are indispensable for our apostolic work: straightforwardness, refinement in the way we treat other people, loyalty, firmness, temperance, etc. On that feast day let us ask him (and have recourse also to the Immaculate Heart of our Mother) to "give us a good heart, capable of having compassion for other people's pain. Only with such a heart can we realise that the true balm for the suffering and anguish in this world is love, charity. All other consolations hardly even have a temporary effect and leave behind them bitterness and despair."²²

Finally, June 26, the liturgical feast of Blessed Josemaría, is a good moment to meditate on the fact that our Founder's earthly life was imbued with an unlimited charity for everyone, especially those most in need. How often he used to recall, with deep joy and gratitude to God, the fact that "Opus Dei was born among the poor in Madrid, in the hospitals and in the most squalid slums!"²³ And we have to thank God that as a result, just as our Father wanted, the tradition of looking after the poor has never stopped, "nor will it ever stop, in the Work."²⁴

On the 6th I shall be ordaining a group of your brothers as priests. Pray for them, and closely united to my intentions, ask that the Church may always have priests and lay people who are very supernatural and very human,

19. Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, no. 631.

20. Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 157.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 167.

23. Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, *Instruction*, December 8, 1941, no. 57.

24. *Ibid.*

and capable of carrying out an abundant sowing of charity, love and peace throughout the various strata of society.

When uniting yourselves every day to my intentions, don't forget to continue praying for peace in the world, especially for those countries afflicted by war at the present time.

With a most affectionate blessing from

your Father
✠ Javier

Rome, June 1, 1999

Homilies

Rome March 23, 1999

On the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the death of Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, the Prelate of Opus Dei celebrated Holy Mass in the Basilica of St. Eugene, in Rome. He gave the following homily.

1. After showing us the praise Jesus directs to God the Father for having revealed the mysteries of the Kingdom to the little ones, that is, to simple and humble people, the Holy Spirit invites us in the Gospel to make progress towards the goal every Christian is called to attain: identification with Christ. *All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*¹ The Word became incarnate two thousand years ago to enable us, through the redemp-

tion, to know and love the Father. All of Christ's teaching, his doctrine, the miracles with which he so marvelously confirmed it, his example, had no other objective than to open to humanity the paths leading to communion with the Father: *This is eternal life, that they know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou has sent.*²

Our pilgrimage towards the glory of heaven has been marked by God with signs that encourage us to quicken our pace. The nearness of the year 2000 Jubilee is one of these eloquent signs that God offers us. Within a few months, our Holy Father John Paul II will open the Holy Door in the Basilica of St. Peter; and this solemn opening will be another manifestation of God's inexhaustible condescension towards mankind. But even now, the Pope is inviting us to seek a more vivid personal experience of divine mercy, through trusting recourse to our Father God: "1999, *the third and final year of preparation,*" the Pope has written, "will be aimed at broadening the

1. Mt 11:27.

2. Jn 17:3.