

Blessed Paul VI, Saint Josemaría, and Blessed Alvaro

Archbishop Giovanni Battista Montini, the future Paul VI, and St. Josemaría Escrivá met for the first time in 1946, in Rome. From then on they were always united by their mutual affection. For Pope Paul VI's beatification, we reproduce an article by Cosimo di Fazio that provides some details regarding the relationship of the founder of Opus Dei and Blessed Alvaro del Portillo with this Pontiff.



The close relationship between Josemaría Escrivá and Giovanni Battista Montini has been amply documented in articles already published. Their first meeting took place in Rome, when Montini was the "Sostituto" (the substitute for ordinary affairs) of the Secretariat of State, and continued afterwards when he was elected Pope with the name of Paul VI.

Many of the articles that have been published deal especially with questions related to Opus Dei's canonical path. However, even in the "official" correspondence between Montini and Escrivá, we can detect an especially deep and close relationship between them. This was not just a matter of a mutual esteem, but also of a spiritual communion between two people the Church now sets forth

as an example to all Christians. The saints have always enjoyed a privileged wisdom regarding other people's interior life, with a surprising intuition of another person's holiness. It is enough to remember the words of Blessed Ildefonso Schuster, Cardinal of Milan, about St. Josemaría, and vice versa. The same can be said about his relationship with Giovanni Battista Montini.

During the last audience that Paul VI granted to St. Josemaría, on June 25, 1973, they spoke about Opus Dei's canonical framework and the situation of the Church. The Pope told him several times: "You are a saint!" After the founder's death, Alvaro del Portillo asked the Pope for permission to tell the faithful of Opus Dei about this encounter. On hearing those words of the Pope, Don Alvaro said, the founder in his humility was deeply embarrassed. On his part, St. Josemaría also perceived the holiness of the Pope from Brescia. In 1967, for example, when speaking in Madrid about Pope Paul VI to some members of Opus Dei, he stressed his "longing for peace, his love and concern for the humblest, his desire that no one be lacking anything." Later Alvaro del Portillo alluded (always with Pope Paul VI's permission) to his words in an audience with Don Alvaro in 1976. Paul VI said that the founder of Opus Dei was "one of the people who had received the most charisms in the Church's history and had responded with the greatest generosity to God's gifts."

Giovanni Battista Montini first heard people speaking about the founder of Opus Dei in 1943, when he was *Sostituto* for the Vatican's Secretariat of State. During those years, when World War II was raging, two people of Opus Dei were living in Rome, José Orlandis and Salvador Canals. It was they who informed him about Msgr. Escrivá's spiritual message, giving him a copy of *The Way*, his best known book. On reading it, Montini grasped with great insight its significance, and advised them that the founder should come to Rome.

The news he was receiving about Opus Dei and his reading of *The Way* left a deep impression on him, as we can deduce from a note addressed to Alvaro del Portillo on June 20, 1946. The two had met for the first time just a few days earlier. During that first encounter, Don Alvaro invited the *Sostituto* to lunch and requested an audience with the Pope for St. Josemaría, who was to arrive in Rome a few days later. Montini in his note replied that he wasn't able to leave his work in the Vatican at the present moment and added: "I am very happy about the news you have given me (the arrival of the founder). It would be a great pleasure for me to meet a person of such great merit. Let us arrange a time in the evening, if possible, for that conversation, which I expect will be useful for my soul."

The first meeting of Giovanni Battista Montini with the founder took place a few weeks after this

note was written, on July 8. Montini told Escrivá and Del Portillo that he was very happy to receive news about Opus Dei's apostolic work with university students. Providing spiritual assistance to students was one of Montini's deep pastoral concerns, dating back to the time of his appointment as chaplain for the Federation of Italian Catholic University Students.

This news about Opus Dei's apostolic work was all the more heartening since both he and Pope Pius XII had been saddened by news of the persecution of Catholics in various countries around the world. As their conversation progressed, their mutual trust and esteem became more obvious. Montini even told him that he wanted to address him "as a new brother." St. Josemaría, a good judge of souls, realized that the *Sostituto* was a person with a deep spiritual life. At the end of the audience he asked for his blessing. Montini was so surprised he forgot the protocol of the Curia and said: "But you are the one who should give it to me!"

Their trust-filled relationship can be seen reflected in the letters and reports of St. Josemaría and Blessed Alvaro on matters related to Opus Dei's canonical path. In a note written after their meeting on November 11, 1946, St. Josemaría recorded: "I went to see Montini. When I go to the Vatican and see how much they love us, I bless our Lord a thousand times for all that we have suffered." And he added

that it had been necessary to pass by way of the Cross to reach that resurrection. Montini assured him that he prayed every day for Opus Dei. St. Josemaría often recalled those meetings, right to the end of his life: “The first words of affection and encouragement that I heard in Rome,” he wrote, “were from Bishop Giovanni Battista Montini.”

The appointment of Montini as Archbishop of Milan, in 1954, and his subsequent election as Pope in 1963, decreased the frequency of their meetings, although their friendship and spiritual harmony endured over time.

Blessed Alvaro, a witness to those meetings, said in an interview in 1982: “I was able to note in a very special way Paul VI’s affection for the Father (St. Josemaría) during an audience.” The Pope later told him that he had been reading *The Way* for many years, with great benefit to his soul, and asked him at what age the founder had written it. When Don Alvaro replied that it had been published when he was thirty-seven, but that the core of the book had already appeared in 1934 under the title *Spiritual Considerations*, when the founder was in his early thirties, the Pope turned thoughtful and said: “Then he wrote it in the maturity of youth.”

Seventh St. Josemaría Symposium *New Scenarios of Freedom: Christians in the Twenty-first Century*

On November 21-22, the seventh International St. Josemaría Symposium was held in Jaén, Spain. Over five hundred people from nine countries met to reflect on, in the light of St. Josemaría’s teachings, the creation of “new scenarios of freedom” due to recent social changes.

The inaugural lecture, “Christianity and the values of citizenship,” was given by José Luis Requero, a justice of the Supreme Court. Among the speakers at the conference were Rev. José Luis González Gullón, a theologian and researcher at the Josemaría Escrivá Center of Documentation and Studies at the University of Navarra; the movie director Pablo Moreno; Carmina García Valdés, former director general of the *Fundación Red Madre*; Jack Valero, director of Catholic Voices; the medical doctor for Atlético Madrid, José María Villalón; and Ángel Tallón, a doctor in charge of organizing European initiatives in Africa.

The Vicar General of the Jaén diocese, Rev. Francisco Juan