

to awaken among the lay faithful the call to sanctity, which doesn't mean not having defects, but rather fighting to be loyal to God, learning to love God and other men and women, overcoming each day our selfishness. To truly love everyone is not easy, but it is within the reach of each of us if we go to the one who loves us and who gave himself for us: Christ Jesus, the Son of God. Naturally, it gives me joy when a new cause of canonization for a lay faithful of Opus Dei is opened. But what I most ask our Lord for is that those lives may serve as an example and stimulus for many Christians to discover Christ's love, and the happiness of spending one's life with Him and for Him.

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Bishop Echevarría, let's go back to the early years. When, how, where, and why did young Alvaro del Portillo meet Fr. Josemaría Escrivá, while studying engineering?

They met in the spring of 1935, through a common friend, Manuel Pérez Sánchez, who

thought that priest could help his young classmate spiritually. But even before meeting Alvaro, St. Josemaría was already praying for him, since his aunt Carmen del Portillo, who was assisting some works of charity of which St. Josemaría was the chaplain, had spoken very highly—with even a healthy pride—of that nephew of hers, Alvaro, who she said was so good and intelligent.

In 1936, after the Nationalist uprising, Alvaro was in Madrid (a city in the hands of the Republicans) with Fr. Josemaría and some companions. While the future saint managed to pass over to the Nationalist zone the following year, Alvaro remained in Madrid with other companions and spent some dramatic months there, during which he was even imprisoned...

Actually, when Alvaro was in prison, from December 3, 1936 to January 27, 1937, St. Josemaría was still in Madrid. It was one of the times that Alvaro showed a serenity that could only be explained by his faith. This serenity protected him from losing hope when—despite having nothing to do with the military coup, and simply because he was a practicing Catholic—he was imprisoned, with a real possibility of facing execution. His serenity also enabled him to forgive the injustice he had suffered, and to not use that experience as a pretext for resentment or revenge.

Let us continue with the historical and political context. Some people have accused Opus Dei of being an organization that was very useful for Francoism...

Opus Dei was born in 1928 and started growing after 1930, that is to say, before the Nationalist uprising in July 1936. It is important to realize that Opus Dei and a nation's government act on completely different planes. As St. Josemaría wrote: "the only purpose of Opus Dei is spiritual," and therefore "it has not entered nor will it ever enter into the politics of groups or parties, nor will it link itself to any person or ideology." Opus Dei certainly urges its members to be fully responsible citizens, but precisely for this reason it leaves them the broadest possible freedom in their political choices, within the framework of the guidelines of Catholic doctrine.

Some government ministers had links to Opus Dei in the Franco era...

Yes, but it is also true that they were appointed by the government because of their technical knowledge and that they freely accepted those positions. Also keep in mind that all the ministers during the Franco period (116 in 11 different governments) were Catholics; those who belonged to Opus Dei could be counted on the fingers of one

hand. St. Josemaría learned of their appointments through the newspaper and, as he always strove to do, he respected their freedom. If he had not acted in this way, he would not have been able to defend the freedom of other sons of his then and in the future who had different opinions, including opposing ones.

None of that small number of government ministers was ever a member of the Falange. Besides, in Opus Dei, along with some who sympathized with Francoism (in that postwar era in Spain the great majority of Spaniards were sympathizers; we need to view history in its context), there were others with anti-Francoist convictions. And some of these were the object of press campaigns on the part of the Falange party. For example, in 1953, our Founder, who had asked for an audience with Franco, energetically defended someone who had been attacked personally, namely Professor Rafael Calvo Serer, after he wrote an article critical of the government and the regime.

Let's return to Don Alvaro, who in 1944 was already a priest. What was his role during the Second Vatican Council? How did he view the Conciliar assembly?

He was a Conciliar "expert" and the secretary of the commission on the discipline of the

clergy and of the Christian people. Also, beginning in 1959, he worked on various commissions preparing for the upcoming Council. His two books published at the end of the 60s, *Faithful and Laitiy in the Church* and *On the Priesthood*, can be seen as a homage to the Council. Therefore during those years he distanced himself from some of the proposals presented by those who were opposed to both the letter and the spirit of the Council, even if sometimes these were presented, in an abusive way, as practical applications of the Council. He was a man of the Second Vatican Council.

The years that preceded Pope John Paul II's decision to erect the Prelature of Opus Dei in 1982 were difficult for Fr. Josemaría Escrivá and for Opus Dei as a whole. What was the role of Don Alvaro in all of this?

He fully realized that he had inherited, after the death of the founder in 1975, a very delicate task: to bring to conclusion the canonical path of Opus Dei in accord with the founder's wishes, following the path of personal prelatures opened by the Council. He confronted this task with faith and determination, until the final goal was reached. Certainly, difficulties were not lacking, which is understandable given the novelty that this path involved. I would like to add that

both John Paul I and later John Paul II stressed the need to begin the corresponding study.

Is it true that Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Giovanni Benelli were not particularly favorable to the activities of Opus Dei?

As far as Paul VI is concerned, this is absolutely false. With Benelli, there were a few misunderstandings for some years, but later he changed his opinion about the role of Opus Dei in the Church and relations became very cordial. In fact, he was one of the first ecclesiastics who came to pray before the mortal remains of the founder, a few hours after his death.

Often small misunderstandings, which are normal in any area, can be presented to the public in an exaggerated way, because people think that without the picture of two parties in conflict, the public will lose interest in following that matter. This happened with Benelli and also with a few other people, who at certain moments showed themselves less favorable to Opus Dei. For example, in 1981 the Holy See asked thousands of bishops for their opinion about erecting the Prelature of Opus Dei. Well, just fifteen raised objections, something quite understandable, and which the Holy See itself answered.

From the perspective of faith, I must confess that even those small misunderstandings were useful in order to put greater trust in God, to be more humble (St. Josemaría used to remind us that no one is “a ten dollar bill that everyone likes”), and to learn how to explain ourselves better.

What were relations like between Pope John Paul II and the prelate of Opus Dei, Alvaro del Portillo?

Don Alvaro was older than John Paul II, but when he was with the Pope, it was natural for him to see himself as a small child. At the same time, there was a reciprocal esteem between the two, a harmony—including psychological—and a trust such that one could perfectly well speak of friendship, a deep friendship, and not simply esteem or reverence.

How had Opus Dei developed by the time of the death, in 1994, of St. Josemaría’s successor? Did its public image change somewhat?

Between 1975 and 1994, Opus Dei began its apostolic activity in 20 new countries, and developed more fully in many environments in which it was already working. During those 19 years the number of members of the Work grew from 60,000 to 80,000. For those seeking to fol-

low Christ closely, the fact that from time to time they appear in public opinion as a sign of contradiction is not something unusual. But I think that, at least in the Catholic environment, during Don Alvaro’s years the image of Opus Dei (also because of the approval of the personal Prelature) became decidedly more in conformity with its true image. Today the Work is certainly better understood than it was before 1982.

Do you have any especially remarkable personal recollections from your years beside Bishop Alvaro del Portillo? Could you tell us one?

I have many memories, and they are so rich in significance that I wouldn’t want to try to choose one as representative. That would be to somehow betray the memory that I have of him. But I like to recall him, for example, in the Pediatric Department of the University of Navarra Hospital, visiting the children there with cancer. His affection, his concern, his acts of service, his requests to them that they help him with their prayer... Those scenes left a very strong impression on me, as they did on the children and their parents.