

You knew Don Alvaro del Portillo very well, the first successor of St. Josemaría Escrivá. What memories do you have of him?

The memories are very numerous. I will limit myself to saying that he was a man of peace—deeply spiritual and deeply human. It was a peace that didn't rest on human reasons, but on placing all his trust in God. I was a witness to how, even in difficult moments, Don Alvaro always kept a perspective of faith and serenity, leading others to be understanding, to dialogue, to overcoming confrontations.

He sought to be fully dedicated to the service of others. When he visited a country, even the most distant, he was concerned about the needs of the local population. And afterwards, with a calm but decisive spirit, he encouraged the faithful of Opus Dei and many others to respond to that need with specific deeds. Thus over time dozens of educational institutions, hospitals and training centers became a reality all over the world.

The "Rimini Meeting" is an initiative in which young people especially take part. What can we do today so that the new generations have a personal encounter with the faith?

Young people have an immense yearning for great ideals. They know what it means to give

oneself for an ideal. The Meeting, which began with a group of young people eager to give Christian witness in society, reflects this concern. I was very impressed by the volunteers: young people (and not so young) who are dedicating their vacations to assisting people here and helping everything run well. It shows how people respond generously when they are offered high goals and challenges. I was also impressed by the joy of so many families present here.

Interview with *Alfa y Omega*, Spain (September 25, 2014)

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When did you first meet Don Alvaro? What impressions remain from that first meeting? After so many years at his side, what is the first thing that comes to mind on recalling him?

My meeting Don Alvaro is inseparable from my meeting St. Josemaría, when I was sixteen. For many years, he was the older brother on whom St. Josemaría could rely very especially, and the rest of us tried to imitate his example. I can assure you that from

the first moment that he was at the head of Opus Dei, his virtues became even more fatherly, and it was very easy to begin to see him as a father to each one of us. In recalling him, there comes to mind his unfailing smile, a sign of his warm welcome, his availability, his service.

I am very aware of God's special grace in allowing me to have lived with two saints, and therefore I ask every day for prayers to respond to that gift, and to transmit it to the faithful of the Prelature and to everyone else.

How did Don Alvaro pray? What was his relationship with God like? What was he like close up, in day to day life?

He learned from St. Josemaría to be a contemplative in the middle of the world, through the ordinary circumstances of each day: in his work, in his tiredness, in his concern for others... His relationship with God was one of great trust, going to him as a Friend and a Father. It wasn't a matter of extraordinary events, or of will-power, but rather the frequent effort to share daily circumstances with the person one loves: some minutes of prayer, meditative reading of the Gospel, a filial greeting to an image of our Lady, a brief visit to the Tabernacle on leaving home....

His deep supernatural outlook resulted in a great serenity that attracted people. Many people, even if they only had a few minutes of conversation with him, attested to the fact that he transmitted a great peace to them. It was the peace of knowing oneself loved by a person whose focus was fixed on what was truly important. Don Alvaro shared in others' sufferings, and rejoiced in their joys, while seeing everything as part of God's fatherly providence.

He too lived close beside St. Josemaría for many years. What was his relationship with the founder of Opus Dei like? What did he say about him? How did he remember him?

As one can read in his writings and see in videos, Don Alvaro always kept St. Josemaría and his teachings present to him. In spite of his outstanding human and intellectual qualities, he freely put himself in second place in order to help St. Josemaría fulfill his mission. And with sincere humility he said that he did not want to be anything more than St. Josemaría's shadow here on earth. He described his mission at the head of Opus Dei as a stage of continuity and fidelity to the foundational charism, striving to transmit to all generations Josemaría's affectionate nearness.

Many people, when speaking about him, remember him as a man of peace. Nevertheless, Don Alvaro lived through the hard years of the Spanish civil war and even suffered religious persecution in his own flesh. How did those years affect him?

He never wanted to speak much about the sufferings that, like so many Spaniards of his generation, he had to endure during that horrible fratricidal struggle. It is true that some episodes of his life during the war are better known, also because of their close connection to St. Josemaría's life, with whom he took refuge for many months in the Honduran Legation. He recalled the affection filled with courage with which St. Josemaría risked his life to provide spiritual care for his father, who died after the hardships he suffered when imprisoned for being a Catholic. Don Alvaro himself was imprisoned unjustly, and was at the point of being martyred a number of times.

But the few times that he spoke about these events, he always placed them in the context of the need to reject any kind of violence and foster forgiveness and fraternal love among all men. He told us that "we have to always forgive."

What was his relationship with Spain like? How did he view the

events in our country: Francoism, the arrival of democracy, the advance of secularism...?

Two years after his priestly ordination, in 1944, Don Alvaro moved to Rome, where he resided until his death in 1994. He became Roman, in the Catholic sense of the word: universal. During his first years there, he also received the task from St. Josemaría of directing the apostolate of the Work in Italy, a country that he got to know very well. Throughout his life he was acquiring what St. Paul called a concern for all the Churches. During his years as prelate of Opus Dei, he urged forward the activities of the Work in many countries, and made trips to them to give encouragement to those who were beginning the apostolic work and to establish a fraternal relationship with the bishops of each place.

But this universal mentality did not make him a person without roots. He never lost his love for Spain nor his characteristic way of being as someone from Madrid. Don Alvaro was born only a few yards from the Puerta de Alcalá, and he was very much a Madrid native; he used local expressions in his conversation, and made use of examples taken from recollections of his time spent in Madrid. Moreover, he had a close relationship with his mother and

brothers and sisters who lived in Spain. He also paid special attention to the apostolic development of what he called the “first-born region of the Work.” He didn’t say this to foster vanity, but to remind those who were carrying out the work of the Prelature in Spain of their responsibility. In addition, as prelate and bishop he maintained a cordial and close communion with the Spanish bishops and the Church in Spain in general: religious institutions, ecclesial movements, etc. He confronted the changes in Spanish society by encouraging the faithful to be united to the bishops, and to freely participate in public affairs, each on his or her own personal responsibility.

Don Alvaro assisted the work of the Second Vatican Council as president of the ante-preparatory Commission for the Laity. How did he understand the role of the laity in the Church? Where did he put the emphasis when talking and meeting with lay people? What did he ask of them?

By his efforts in that ecclesial assembly, Don Alvaro sought to help further the spread of the universal call to sanctity. Thanks to his years of experience living and transmitting the spirit of Opus Dei, received from St. Josemaría, he was able to offer not only the theory, but also the reality of the lives of thousands of lay faithful who, understanding their

baptism as an authentic vocation to exercise the common priesthood in their professional work and ordinary daily circumstances, strove to be consistent to their faith in all their actions.

Don Alvaro not only provided important contributions to theology and canon law, but above all he led thousands of lay people to discover their baptismal vocation and mobilized them to get involved in society, sowing the leaven of the faith through their professional work, friendships, and family relationships. We could say that he continued the mission of St. Josemaría (the saint of the ordinary, as St. John Paul II called him), by making the truth of the Gospel lovable among people on every continent, of all ages and walks of life. As a consequence of his teachings, many of them launched out to put into operation educational and social welfare initiatives. And, above all, thousands of people discovered the human and Christian value of work well-finished out of love for God, in the service of society.

He also formed part of the Commission on the Discipline of the Clergy. What was the priesthood of Don Alvaro like? How did he understand the priesthood in relation to the mission of the laity in the world?

Indeed, he was the secretary of the Commission that produced the Conciliar decree on the

priesthood, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. In that document one can see the mature fruit of the relationship between the ministerial priesthood of clerics and the common priesthood of the lay faithful. I still recall the impact made on some people by his explanation that everyone in the Church, not only the laity, but also the cardinals and bishops, were equally the faithful. On the other hand, Don Alvaro explained that “the priest is not more a Christian than the other faithful, but he is more a priest, and he is such in an essentially distinct way.” This was the thesis that he developed in his book *Faithful and Laity in the Church*, and that is present in the Council’s theological vision.

But also in this area, Don Alvaro was a priest in love with his vocation. He encouraged the priests of the Work to enlarge our hearts in order to understand everyone and to share in their needs, and he gave us advice like this: “celebrating the Eucharistic mystery devoutly will be your best apostolate.” He also insisted that preaching be joyful and doctrinal.

St. Josemaría’s constant concern for the holiness of priests was equally one of the guiding principles of Don Alvaro’s pastoral action, which led to his keeping very much in his heart the other diocesan priests when

he succeeded the founder. In the last year of his life, he had the joy of being able to say that “St. Josemaría dreamed about the marvelous reality that we contemplate today: that a great number of priests, through the faithful fulfillment of their own duties, embody the spirit of *Opus Dei* and are contributing to its spread throughout the whole world.”

Don Alvaro was the successor of St. Josemaría at the head of Opus Dei, and the first Prelate of the Work when it was erected as a personal prelature in 1982. At the time this was a new canonical figure in the Church. How would you sum up the results after all these years? And how did Don Alvaro react personally to the objections that were raised back then by some people?

Don Alvaro always gave priority to continuing the foundational legacy of St. Josemaría. One of his most important tasks was that of bringing to completion—at the request of John Paul I and later John Paul II—the canonical path of *Opus Dei*, within the general law of the Church, so that its canonical form would respond to its ecclesial reality. Also in this regard he was seconding the wishes of St. Josemaría, who had left everything prepared so that the Work could be erected as a personal prelature, a canonical figure contemplated by the Second Vatican Council. With the prudence that

characterized him, he worked without rushing, but also without stopping, and always in consultation with the Holy See, to bring to a happy conclusion this mission in the service of the whole Church. I am a witness of how this holy bishop took up every day St. Josemaría's advice to have recourse first of all to prayer when seeking to carry out a program for the glory of God. For years, Don Alvaro prayed and asked others to pray for this intention, and he liked to point to the immense riches of the prayer, reception of the sacraments and sacrifices of many thousands of people, also among the sick and the needy. It was on these that he relied when the difficulties arose that are often present in this kind of process. And instead of becoming discouraged, when they arose he gave thanks to God, while also insisting that we needed to pray more.

How is Opus Dei carrying out its apostolate at a time when evangelization is needed in the Church, and Pope Francis has put the emphasis on the family?

The immense majority of faithful of the Prelature are lay faithful, ordinary Christians, mothers and fathers of families who try to follow Christ closely in their family, professional and social situation. One of the great teachings of St. Josemaría was reminding people of the value of

marriage as a vocational path to holiness. Today we can all see that society progresses or regresses morally, according to the thermometer of the value that is given to marriage, to fatherhood and motherhood, to family life in general. Therefore those of us who share in the spirit of Opus Dei have received with great joy the news of Pope Francis' decision to celebrate synodal meetings centered on the family. Pope Francis is a pastor who is very close to the faithful, and knows from close up the possibilities and risks facing Christian families today. All Catholics should support him in this intention, with our prayer and our evangelizing zeal.

Many lay people connected to Opus Dei have had their causes of canonization opened. Is it true that a father or mother of a family, a person who holds down a job, a normal everyday student... can become a saint, and a saint raised to the altars?

This has been true throughout the history of Christianity! Especially in the first centuries, there were many men and women saints who were fathers or mothers of a family, adolescents, soldiers, craftsmen, etc. It is true that during a certain period this reality was placed in the background, but it never disappeared from the Church's life. Our Lord, in inspiring St. Josemaría, wanted

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.

Interview Granted to *Giornale del Popolo*, Switzerland (September 27, 2014)

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.