

Recensioni

John F. COVERDALE, *Saxum: The Life of Alvaro del Portillo*, New York, Scepter, 2014, 237 pp. = JOHN F. COVERDALE, *Saxum: vida de Álvaro del Portillo*, Madrid, Palabra, 2014, 316 pp.

Saxum is the first complete biography of Bishop Alvaro del Portillo written in English. It was published at a propitious time and in print by July, 2014, in anticipation of his beatification in Madrid on September 27, 2014. As the author notes in the Preface, his most important published source for information on the life of Alvaro del Portillo was Javier Medina Bayo's *Un hombre fiel* (Madrid, Rialp, 2012) the best documented extensive biography of Alvaro del Portillo to date. Coverdale may use this book as the main source for his content, but he presents the material in his own very readable and engaging style; and in no way is *Saxum* merely a translation of that book. The author personally knew Don Alvaro del Portillo (Don is a respectful Spanish title for a priest) for he lived in Rome with St. Josemaría and him from 1960-1968 and thus he affectionately makes the personality of Alvaro del Portillo come alive for the reader. *Saxum* – the Latin word means rock – is the nickname that St. Josemaría Escrivá, founder of Opus Dei, bestowed on Alvaro del Portillo just a few years after he met him because he was his loyal, faithful and strongest supporter. Escrivá stated that del Portillo's role in Opus Dei was providential as God had put him at his side to help him with great courage. Del Portillo's only goal of all his life was to serve the Church as the Church wanted to be served.

The book begins relating the unprecedented visit of Pope John Paul II to the wake of Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, and then documents the important events leading up to Alvaro del Portillo joining Opus Dei in the 1930's. It then flashes back to give a chronological biographical history of del Portillo's life.

The chapters are arranged around the main events in his life, organized around time periods and themes.

Coverdale does not 'sugar coat' del Portillo's nor Escrivá's characters stating that although they were indeed holy men with strong characters, they were human. As he states, "they needed human affection and support... and they helped each other mutually...". Del Portillo was constantly at St. Josemaría's side helping him first as a

layman and engineer in the 30s, then as one of the first three priests in the 40s, when he also became his confessor from the day after his ordination until Escrivá's death in 1975. Del Portillo accompanied Escrivá when he moved the central headquarters of Opus Dei to Rome and served as Secretary General of Opus Dei, Procurator, Rector of the Roman College, Head of Opus Dei in Italy, and *custos* – or spiritual advisor – to St. Josemaría. He accompanied St. Josemaría on all of his trips, long and short, in Europe, Mexico and the Americas. Coverdale emphasized the humility of del Portillo who was always “eclipsed, in the background but in a spot where he could see, hear and take care of the founder. He was always attentive to the founder”.

After the death of St. Josemaría in 1975, Msgr. Alvaro del Portillo became his first successor, and for the next 19 years he completed the tasks that St. Josemaría had entrusted to him during his life: completing the editing and publication of several books written by Escrivá [(*Friends of God*, *Furrow*, *Forge*, and *The Way of the Cross*)], as well as annotating St. Josemaría's spiritual diaries, finalizing the erection of Opus Dei as a Personal Prelature, and completing all the extensive documentation necessary for Escrivá's beatification in 1992. Del Portillo's apostolic zeal and love for all moved him to promote Opus Dei's establishment and growth in twenty new countries with many different apostolic works. The current Prelate of Opus Dei, Bishop Echevarría stated that Alvaro del Portillo was “the first and great collaborator of St. Josemaría in the work of governing Opus Dei. He became the prudent executor of the task the Founder entrusted to him and the faithful liaison who related to the other faithful of the Work what he transmitted to him to pass on”.

Coverdale clearly explains the various difficulties and misunderstandings that Opus Dei encountered both during St. Josemaría's life and then during Msgr. Alvaro del Portillo's life as the first successor to the Founder because of a lack of understanding on the part of clergy, religious, and the general public regarding this novel institution which proposed that lay people could strive for sanctity in the middle of the world. The author gives the facts and then he explains how these events were resolved, emphasizing the serenity which del Portillo lived following the example he received from St. Josemaría. These difficulties include those encountered at the beginnings of the organization in Spain which were especially acute in Barcelona; threats in Italy in the 1950s that moved St. Josemaría to consecrate the families of the members of Opus Dei to the Holy Family; criticism in the 60s when the Founder petitioned to change the canonical form of Opus Dei from that of a Secular Institute; and in the 70s a lack of trust by some members of the Curia. Then, after Opus Dei was approved as a Personal Prelature in the 80s, a German media company described the Work as a religious sect and a dangerous secret society; and finally in the 90s at the Beatification of Josemaría del Balaguer, once again calumnies and criticism arose. Bishop Alvaro del Portillo's reaction was to follow the lead of the Founder –to turn to prayer, and ask the members of Opus Dei to be silent, to pray, to smile, and to continue working.

Coverdale, the historian, gives an explanation of the causes and events of the Spanish Civil War that began during Opus Dei's infancy (it was founded in 1928); and an account of the many ways that Msgr. Alvaro del Portillo served the Church before, during, and after Vatican Council II, citing the main commissions in which he was a member. Msgr. Alvaro del Portillo's two books *Faithful and Laity in the Church* (1969), and *On the Priesthood* (1970), are a result of his extensive work and research during this time. The Post-Vatican Council confusion is explained by Coverdale with statistics and an outline of the many serious issues; he notes Escrivá's and del Portillo's reaction of prayer and resource to the Blessed Virgin Mary before this crisis. The continuous health issues that del Portillo suffered from his youth and throughout his life are described noting his cheerful submission to the different medical interventions. Included is documentation of the apostolic expansion of Opus Dei during del Portillo's tenure at the head of the organization, and a succinct but complete outline of his various apostolic visits to countries outside of Europe, including his three longest trips to the countries in the Far East, the Americas, and Africa; and what became his final trip, that to the Holy Land. Coverdale gives an explanation of Opus Dei with a brief but complete outline of its juridical path to become the first Personal Prelature in the Catholic Church. Finally, Coverdale has an extensive summary of the many pages of the different documents required for the Beatification of the founder of Opus Dei, Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, all of which were compiled under the leadership of Msgr. Alvaro del Portillo.

"Friend of Gardeners and Popes" is a special chapter full of anecdotes of Don Alvaro del Portillo's amazingly deep friendships with so many people such as Popes Paul VI, John Paul I and John Paul II and the people he met in his every day life including the gardener and the doorman at the centers where he lived. John Coverdale includes details from the many meetings that del Portillo had with John Paul II over the years which are true treasures that show how closely he collaborated with the Vicar of Christ supporting his many initiatives and helping him realize his apostolic goals. Coverdale's research reveals that there were some forty eight different exchanges between the two of them over the years; from formal audiences, meetings, and informal conversations both in person and on the phone.

Saxum: The Life of Alvaro del Portillo is an inspiring book of a holy and now beatified person, Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, who "accomplished great and heroic things in a quiet way, with great simplicity, through friendship, fidelity, and hard work. He showed us all how an ordinary life should be". The personality of Blessed Alvaro del Portillo "emerges in these pages as a tower of strength, reliability and good humor who faces a host of threats and challenges" in a serene and supernatural way that enthuses the reader in his own quest for sanctity.

The author, John F. Coverdale, is a noted historian, professor of law, and author of several books including *Putting Down Roots* (2009), *Uncommon Faith: The Early Years of Opus Dei* (2002), and *The Political Transformation of Spain*

(1979). One critique of the book would be its lack of footnotes with sources for the many quotes and its lack of a bibliography (although there is a page “Note on Sources”) which makes it a less scholarly book. As the book sold out immediately after publication, perhaps this can be addressed in the second printing.

Madonna M. Murphy

Javier ECHEVARRÍA, *Creo, creemos: textos procedentes de las Cartas pastorales dirigidas a los fieles de la Prelatura del Opus Dei durante el Año de la Fe (2012-2013)*, Madrid, Rialp, 2014, 127 pp.

Con ocasión del Año de la Fe, desde octubre de 2012 a noviembre de 2013, Mons. Javier Echevarría ha dedicado sus cartas pastorales mensuales a comentar los artículos del Credo, para ofrecer una meditación sobre el contenido de la fe. Con la recopilación de estos comentarios, el Prelado del Opus Dei ofrece una pauta para meditar sobre verdades básicas de nuestra fe católica, aplicando estas enseñanzas a las circunstancias de la vida ordinaria.

Como fuente de su pensamiento, acude especialmente al mensaje recibido de san Josemaría Escrivá, fundador del Opus Dei, siempre con devoción y agradecimiento: como quien ha contemplado una vida especial y quiere ser testigo y transmisor de esa vida, que es un espíritu de Dios para toda la Iglesia. También expone con veneración y continuidad el magisterio pontificio. No lo hace como cita de autoridad sin más, sino como algo profundamente meditado y unido a la verdad de que se trata. Son numerosas las referencias al papa Benedicto XVI y al papa Francisco, así como al Credo del Pueblo de Dios de Pablo VI. También se cita con frecuencia el Catecismo de la Iglesia Católica. Otra fuente de sus comentarios es la Liturgia, especialmente de la celebración eucarística.

El estilo es sencillo. No se trata de un texto teológico sino pastoral, siempre como una exhortación a la vida cristiana efectiva, auténtica. «Convenzámonos de que vivir el Credo, integrarlo en toda nuestra existencia, nos hará entender mejor y amar más nuestra estupenda dependencia de Dios, saborear la alegría incomparable de ser y de sabernos hijos suyos» (p. 21). El contenido es profundo y arraigado en la doctrina, no una simple consideración sentimental.

A la vez, el Autor busca la respuesta personal. Por eso suele hacer preguntas incisivas que comprometen al lector, y le suponen en una actitud de oración, de poner la vida personal delante de Dios. Se trata de un vivir o respirar de fe, del empeño en la vida cotidiana del cristiano. Por ejemplo, al reflexionar sobre la muerte y el fin de los tiempos, «consideremos que ese encuentro definitivo del Señor con cada uno va precedido por su actuación constante en cada momento de la vida ordinaria. Todavía recuerdo la viveza con que san Josemaría, para este andar cotidiano, le pedía: *mane*