

This is my hope for Joseph Cardinal Höffner as well, as we commemorate the tenth anniversary of his death. May God reward him abundantly for all the good he accomplished for the Church and souls in his long and fruitful life.

Rome (December 15, 1997)

An academic convocation was held at the Pontifical Athenaeum of the Holy Cross on the occasion of the presentation of the Italian translation of the first biographical sketch of Bishop Alvaro del Portillo. Bishop Javier Echevarría gave the following address.

We wished to dedicate this gathering to the memory of Bishop Álvaro del Portillo; to commemorate him in the fullest sense of the word. We want to honor the memory of the founder and first chancellor of the Pontifical Athenaeum of the Holy Cross. But above all, we want to nourish in ourselves the bonds of gratitude and affection by which we feel united to that pastor who loved us with a paternal love and who watched over with such solicitude this institution of learning and those who form part of it.

Non est vir fortis. . .

While they were constructing the central headquarters of the Prelature of Opus Dei, Blessed Josemaría had a statue placed in one of the interior courtyards that depicted a magis-

trate of ancient Rome, dressed in a toga. It is sculptured in the classic style, projecting composure, serenity, conviction. The impression is paradoxical, because that statue lacks a head and hands. A Latin inscription on the pedestal underlines the paradox: *Non est vir fortis pro Deo laborans cui non crescit animus in ipsa rerum difficultate, etiam si aliquando corpus dilanietur.* This text was composed by Blessed Josemaría, during a night of prayer and work, in the early 1950s. It was inspired by a text of St. Bernard. He wanted to express an idea that was born of the same experience: that difficulties which proceed from our personal weakness, as well as external obstacles to apostolic work are never insuperable if one acts with the virtue of fortitude shaped by charity.

Thinking of Bishop del Portillo, that inscription illustrates a characteristic that many admired in him, namely, his serenity in the face of contradictions, the fortitude he showed in fulfilling God's will, his magnanimity—his greatness of heart!—at the moment of carrying out any enterprise for the glory of God and the service of the Church. Truly this inscription provides a sketch of the personality of the first Prelate of Opus Dei: *The strong man who works for God increases in fervor amid difficulties, even if at some point his body lies shattered.*

Fortitude is a virtue indispensable for a Christian. We all have to be strong, if we want to be good sons and daughters of God. St. Thomas Aquinas, with his usual precision, teaches that this virtue has as its

proper acts *aggredi pericula y sustinere mala* (to confront dangers and support adversity for a just cause.)¹ Nevertheless, we should not only think of someone who sacrifices his life as a martyr for the faith; or in the valor of someone who risks his life for his country or to help his companions in danger. This virtue is also shown in many other ways, which usually pass unnoticed. With Blessed Josemaría we can say that “the person with fortitude is one who perseveres in doing what his conscience tells him he ought to do. He does not measure the value of a task exclusively by the benefit he receives from it, but rather by the service he renders to others. The strong man will at times suffer, but he stands firm; he may be driven to tears, but he will brush them aside. When difficulties come thick and fast, he does not bend before them.”²

In one of the first audiences of his pontificate, continuing the catechesis that his predecessor had begun, Pope John Paul II illustrated fortitude with present-day examples: the mother of a large family, capable of resisting the pressures of those who would try to induce her to eliminate the new life forming in her womb; or the professional who renounces a brilliant career when the price that he has to pay is to set aside his ethical and religious principles. The Pope said, “There are many, very many manifestations of fortitude, sometimes even heroic, that are not written about in the

newspapers, or that they speak very little about. They are known only to the human conscience . . . and to God!”³

Bishop del Portillo is undoubtedly numbered among those who lived fortitude heroically. It was enough to be close to him to realize immediately the human and supernatural strength with which he was able to confront pain, physical or moral, and the strength with which he carried out his daily duties. His constant smile, the goodness with which he dealt with all of those who approached him, and the meekness of his voice hid the reality of a solid and well-defined character, which the action of grace and his long association with Blessed Josemaría was sharpening and enriching from year to year.

The founder of Opus Dei discovered these qualities of Álvaro del Portillo very early; they became obvious in a special way during the Spanish civil war. It was not by chance that already in 1939 in several letters he was referred to as *saxum*, the rock, alluding to his special firmness of character, and, at least implicitly, to the hope of being able to depend on him some day for the development of Opus Dei. Some of the people who knew him during those years noted especially his courage in the face of danger; his generosity in helping anyone he found in need, even at the cost of sacrifice; and the maturity of a personality that seemed

1. Cf. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiæ*, II-II, q. 123, a. 2.

2. BLESSED JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ, *Friends of God*, no. 77.

3. JOHN PAUL II, *Address*, November 15, 1978.

to be sculpted in the marble of a character incapable of wavering or compromising on matters of principle.

A few examples of his fortitude are collected in the first biographical work on the life of Bishop del Portillo, of which the Italian language edition has been introduced today. Since the day our Lord called him to Opus Dei—when he was just over 21 years of age—Don Álvaro offered an example of how to exercise Christian fortitude in the most common circumstances of everyday life.

This human and supernatural fortitude allowed him to serve the Church with great efficacy, and to help the founder of Opus Dei, more than any one else, in the mission that our Lord had confided to him. I had the immense good fortune of spending many years at the side of these two authentic *giants* of the life of the Church of our time, and I am an eye witness of innumerable episodes with which these statements could be documented.

The brevity of this address will not permit me to adequately describe Bishop Álvaro del Portillo's practice of fortitude. I will, therefore, limit myself to sketching a few aspects of his personality related to this virtue.

Greatness of soul

He was a magnanimous man to whom one could apply the description offered by Blessed Josemaría in

one of his homilies: "Magnanimity means greatness of spirit, a largeness of heart wherein many can find refuge."⁴

In his soul there was a great desire to serve, which showed itself in ambitious projects. He tried to put them into practice realizing the personal sacrifice they would entail, but not giving any importance to that sacrifice. He was magnanimous not only in conceiving and carrying out his own projects, but also when it came to accepting and supporting the proposals of others. He was not intimidated by any effort when the good of the Church, the service of the Pope, or the salvation of souls was at stake. To continue the text of the founder of Opus Dei just cited, magnanimity "gives us the energy to break out of ourselves and be prepared to undertake generous tasks that will be of benefit to all. Small-mindedness has no home in the magnanimous heart, nor has meanness, nor egoistic calculation, nor self-interested trickery. The magnanimous person devotes all his strength, unstintingly, to what is worthwhile. As a result he is capable of giving himself. He is not content with merely giving. He gives *his very self*. He thus comes to understand that the greatest expression of magnanimity consists in giving oneself to God."⁵

Described in this way, magnanimity shows itself to be a virtue that is indispensable for the Christian, the fruit of a life that is theologically mature and which shows a

4. BLESSED JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ, *Friends of God*, no. 80.

5. *Ibid.*

harmonious union of the grace of God and personal effort. This was the case with Don Álvaro. His natural strength had developed in the atmosphere of a large family and was strengthened by a solid Christian education. Later, the example of the founder of Opus Dei and his correspondence to the impulses of the Holy Spirit shaped this consistency, this sureness, this breadth of viewpoint, this firm steadiness that made him a pastor capable of inspiring confidence in those around him.

Let us listen once more to the Angelic Doctor: "Magnanimity leads a man to act with honor in great things, in conformity with the gifts received from God. Thus if he possesses great courage of soul, magnanimity will make him tend toward perfect acts of this virtue. And we can say the same about the use of any other good."⁶ This text confirms the nucleus of Christian doctrine about the virtues. They always converge toward unity. We understand then why it is that in Don Álvaro fortitude was harmonically intertwined with serenity and understanding; how magnanimity harmonized with extreme care in little things; how he was capable of setting high goals in the spiritual life, but at the same time remaining patient and full of encouragement.

His mature theological life was nourished by a constant exercise of faith. Bishop del Portillo carried out tasks that were truly heroic in a quiet, unassuming way. At least it seemed that way. He did not give the impres-

sion that he had to force himself, although we saw him using all his energy and applying all the means, both supernatural and human, within his reach.

One significant example was provided by Don José María Hernández Garnica, one of the first faithful of Opus Dei who joined the Work in 1935 almost at the same time as Don Álvaro and who was ordained with him in 1944. One day, during the 1940s when Don Álvaro was Secretary General of Opus Dei, Don José María asked him whether he didn't feel a little hesitant when speaking with important ecclesiastical people. It was not unusual, in fact, for him to be asked by Blessed Josemaría to explain some aspect of the spirit of Opus Dei to a person who did not understand it perfectly. He realized that it was necessary to do so with affection, with the necessary respect, but also with fortitude. This was not an easy task given the differences of age, of position, and so on. Don Álvaro answered that question with all simplicity: "I think of the miraculous catch of fish and of what St. Peter said: *In nomine tuo, laxabo rete*. I think of what the Father told me, and I remember that scene of the Gospel." By the time of Don Álvaro's death, Don José María had already been gone for more than 20 years; when he wrote the testimony that I am referring to, Don Álvaro was still relatively young. And, nevertheless, Don José María did not hesitate to affirm that "This fortitude was purely the result of his supernatural spirit."

6. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q, 129, a. 3 ad 4.

In what was great, and in what was small

In his penetrating study of magnanimity, St. Thomas observed that “above all, that person is magnanimous whose spirit is oriented toward a great act. And an act can be great in two ways: relatively and absolutely. We can say that something is relatively great even if it is a matter of using something which is small or medium-sized: for example, if optimal use is made of the thing. A thing is absolutely great if the act consists in the optimal use of a great thing.”⁷

Bishop del Portillo was magnanimous in both senses. If we had asked him about this, his response would echo the words he addressed to the faithful of the Prelature in 1991: “Understand deeply that on personal sanctity, yours and mine, many great things depend.”⁸ He gained this conviction thanks to the teachings of Blessed Josemaría: there is nothing that is great or little in itself, important work or work of little importance, because everything becomes great if we carry it out with love and for love. “One of the chief aspects of the spirit of our Father,” wrote his successor in 1975, a few days after the founder’s death, “was precisely that marvelous connection, in such a great heart, in a soul that climbed so high, with love for little things: what one notices only when one’s pupils are dilated by love.”⁹ Don Álvaro *studied*

many years in the *school* of the life and teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá. It was there he learned that “great souls pay much attention to little things.”¹⁰

Precisely because he was moved by faith and by love, Don Álvaro gave himself without stint in all that referred to the service of the Church and the good of souls. In his decisions as Prelate of Opus Dei, his basic criterion was always the effort to emphasize the pastoral indications of the Pope, whether they were directed to the Church as a whole or to one sector or portion of the People of God. I remember, for example, the interest he showed in seeing to it that the meetings that the Holy Father had with Roman university students found the greatest possible response among the students. With what great insistence did he encourage the faithful of the Prelature who lived in Rome to make this intention one of the objectives of their personal apostolate! He showed the same solicitude in connection with the pastoral visits of the Roman Pontiff to various countries. He prayed and asked others to pray for their pastoral fruitfulness. He encouraged the faithful of the Prelature, the cooperators and friends of Opus Dei in each country to act as a leaven among their relatives and acquaintances to assure the Vicar of Christ an attentive and affectionate reception.

He showed the same promptness in accepting the wishes of the Holy

7. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 129, a. 1.

8. BISHOP ÁLVARO DEL PORTILLO, *Letter*, March 1, 1991.

9. BISHOP ÁLVARO DEL PORTILLO, *Letter*, June 29, 1975, no. 14.

10. BLESSED JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ, *The Way*, no. 818.

Father in regard to evangelization in geographical areas that were especially difficult. One can find an example of this magnanimity in the history of the beginnings of apostolic work by the faithful of the Prelature of Opus Dei in the Scandinavian and Baltic countries, in India or Kazakhstan, to give just a few examples. In effect, Bishop del Portillo felt the urgent need to begin apostolic activities of the Prelature in those countries, among others, as a response to the wishes of the Pope and of the local bishops.

In regard to this, it seems only right to mention particularly the collaboration of Don Álvaro, as Prelate of Opus Dei, in the task of the new evangelization of the countries of ancient but moribund Christian tradition, taking up the repeated calls of the Pope. In 1985 he wrote a pastoral letter on this subject. After telling the faithful of the Prelature that the Pope desired that "in our apostolic work we involve ourselves especially with the *countries of old Europe*,"¹¹ he also asked those living in other continents to collaborate in that effort: "Since the spirit of the Work leads us to feel ourselves with the Church in everything, we have to make these desires and preoccupations of the Pope very much our own. . . . My daughters and sons, a new moment has arrived to show with deeds that we are loyal children of the Church, making the best use that we can, *usque ad summum!* (Jn 2:7), of the talents that we have each individually received."¹²

After indicating the supernatural means that had to be employed, he concluded: "Be optimistic, with a supernatural optimism that has its roots in faith, which is nourished by hope, and which gives wings to love. We have to fill every sector of society with a Christian spirit."¹³

A few months later he gathered in Rome his vicars for the nations most directly involved in the program of the *re-evangelization*, to jointly evaluate their different experiences and to develop a long-term pastoral plan.

In 1987 in writing a pastoral letter on the occasion of the Marian Year of the universal Church, he enumerated some of his intentions, the *holy ambitions* he kept in his heart: "While praying the beads of your rosary, ask the Queen of the World to disburse more abundantly the graces of her Son. Commend in a special way the sanctity of the family so lacerated by the plague of divorce, the great crime of abortion, and the diffusion of a hedonistic mentality; commend the purification of customs in all environments, and especially in Christian homes; the conversion of Russia and religious freedom in so many other countries around the world; the union of Catholics and Orthodox in the one Church of Christ under the supreme rule of the Roman Pontiff; the coming to the true faith of our other separated brethren; the conversion of non-Christians."¹⁴ In these words, the daring of the goals proposed is

11. BISHOP ÁLVARO DEL PORTILLO, *Letter*, December 25, 1985, no. 2.

12. *Ibid.*, no. 3.

13. *Ibid.*, no. 10.

14. BISHOP ÁLVARO DEL PORTILLO, *Letter*, May 31, 1987, no. 26.

parallel to the absolute confidence with which he proposed them to himself and to everyone. Some of these intentions have already begun to be fulfilled. It is our task to continue praying and working so that some day in the not too distant future they will all become a joyous reality.

At the service of all

In this brief exposition of the fortitude of Don Álvaro we cannot fail to cite, even though only in a summary way, some of the apostolic projects for which he provided the impulse in various corners of the world.

In the first place we should note the special impulse that he gave, especially in the less developed countries, to civil programs carried out by faithful and cooperators of the Prelature in the area of education at all levels. Universities, schools of professional formation, centers for the promotion of women, primary and secondary schools, structures and programs for the benefit of the rural population, health institutions for the needy, and a long *etcetera*, which includes all sorts of initiatives, found in Don Álvaro a most enthusiastic and decisive promoter. Innumerable people have benefited from this work especially in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Men and women, young people and adults, have been able to acquire the basic elements of an authentically Christian life, and, at the same time, have benefited from a specifically professional formation that has enabled them to improve the economic situation of their families and to work responsibly for the common good and the progress of their country.

Some of these initiatives arose as the immediate result of the pastoral trips of the Prelate of Opus Dei. I remember how moved he was by the poverty of some of the outlying areas of Manila and Cebu. Now, as a result of his words of encouragement, faithful and cooperators of the Prelature have developed health clinics and professional training schools for the poor in those two cities. One could cite similar examples in connection with his trips to Mexico, Colombia, the Republic of the Congo, or the Ivory Coast.

One of the most characteristic aspects of his pastoral zeal was his solicitude for the formation of priests in every diocese. For this purpose he strengthened the ecclesiastical departments of the University of Navarre, and launched the Pontifical Atheneum of the Holy Cross. He asked them to create, in Pamplona and in Rome, the international seminaries "Bidasoa" and "Sedes Sapientiae," dedicated to the formation of seminarians. In these institutions hundreds of seminarians from dozens of dioceses have been assisted in their preparation for the priesthood.

But let us return to our point of departure. Bishop Álvaro del Portillo was a man who profoundly incarnated faith and hope in daily life. This is the one and true explanation of the fruitfulness of his pastoral ministry. The fortitude and magnanimity which we find in him, were the fruit of his passionate love of Christ and the Church. As St. Augustine explains, the love that moves Christians "is not the love of any object, but the love of God; that is to say, of the high-

est Good, the highest Wisdom, and highest Peace."¹⁵ And since the cardinal virtues are nothing other than diverse and convergent aspects of the one love of God, the holy Bishop of Hippo concluded by stating that when we love the highest good with our whole heart, "love is preserved from corruption and impurity, which is proper to temperance; it makes us invincible against all our adversities, which is proper to fortitude; it leads us to renounce every other type of subjection, which is proper to justice; and, finally, it puts us always on guard

to discern the truth of things and not to allow ourselves to be deceived by lies and deception, which is proper to prudence."¹⁶

I think that this is a perfect description of the life and work of the founder and first chancellor of this Atheneum. Let us give thanks to God, from whom all good things come, for exemplary pastors like Don Álvaro del Portillo, who enlighten our path with their example and help us to follow that path and to reach heaven.

Articles and Interviews

Avvenire (September 21, 1997)

"Sanctity in ordinary life" is the title of the interview with the Prelate of Opus Dei published in the newspaper Avvenire on the occasion of the Eucharistic Congress celebrated in Bologna, Italy, during the final days of September.

1. Could you briefly define the "charism" of Opus Dei?

Right from the start, Blessed Josemaría saw Opus Dei as a profoundly secular reality: a divine invitation, directed to ordinary faithful, to seek sanctity *in* and *through* their daily occupations, without

changing their state in life. The context of their life is everyday existence. Baptism has given them a specific role in the economy of salvation, and the vocation to Opus Dei simply confirms this. The Prelature's configuration emphasizes the ecclesial nature proper to this pastoral phenomenon: a personal jurisdictional structure, essentially secular. Insofar as it is part of the common hierarchical organization of the Church, membership does not change in any way the conditions of life of its faithful, either from the civil or from the ecclesiastical point of view.

The message our Lord entrusted to Blessed Josemaría could be summed up as follows: to remind people that all Christians are called by

15. ST. AUGUSTINE, *Of the customs of the Church and of the Customs of the Manicheans*, 1, 15.

16. *Ibid.*, 1:25.