Interview Granted to *Il Tempo*, Rome (April 16, 2014)

by Andrea Atali

The Church is preparing for the canonization of John XXIII and John Paul II, two Popes who showed great esteem for the Work. What memories do you have of them?

About John XXIII, I remember his exceptional goodness, obvious to everyone; and about John Paul II there comes to mind, above all, his deep spirit of prayer. Pope Roncalli knew and esteemed Opus Dei from before he was named Patriarch of Venice. During a private audience he asked St. Josemaría about the possibility of beginning a social work in Casa Bruciato, a working-class section of Rome. And a few years later the Centro ELIS was born, which offers professional training and formation to many young people with limited means.

Regarding John Paul II, besides the paternal affection he always had towards Don Alvaro (and later towards myself, as prelate of Opus Dei), I have one image deeply engraved on my memory. In 2005, when he could no longer participate physically in the Way of the Cross that is celebrated each year in the Coliseum, he followed the ceremony on television, clinging to a wooden cross. He no longer had strength to speak or to walk, but he embraced Christ crucified with his whole soul.

We have just celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, in which Msgr. Alvaro del Portillo played a significant role. Could you speak about those Conciliar sessions and their future consequences?

Although Don Alvaro worked in various Conciliar commissions with great intensity and dedication, he rarely spoke about this work, partly out of humility and also because of the natural reserve that those types of tasks demand. He only referred from time to time and in a general way to some of the projects entrusted to him. He was especially happy to see the mission of the laity in the Church stressed in the Council's teachings, and the clear and unequivocal proclamation of the universal call to holiness that Christ addresses to all the baptized.

Another source of great joy for him were the steps taken during that period to seek unity among Christians. This was one of the great desires he harbored in his heart. He prayed intensely, especially during the octave for Christian unity in the month of January, that our Lord might grant his Church that unity.

You lived close to Don Alvaro for many years. Could you sum up his life in three essential features?

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The founder, in one of his letters, called him *Saxum*, Latin for "rock," a firm point of support. This expression depicts him very well. He was a rock, a solid help for the founder and for everyone, especially since St. Josemaría's death.

Another characteristic feature was his faithfulness. As a priest and as a bishop he left us as a legacy an unforgettable lesson of loyalty to the Church and to Opus Dei. From 1975 (the year when the founder died) until 1982 (when the Work was erected as a personal prelature), he faithfully transmitted St. Josemaría's spirit. And he continued doing so right until his death in 1994.

A third feature that defined him was peace and joy; he transmitted a deep joy, serenity and peace to those around him.

By a happy coincidence, the announcement of Don Alvaro's beatification arrived together with that of the canonization of John Paul II. A current of profound respect and affection existed between the two. Can you tell us something about this?

They were united by a deep friendship, rooted in faith in Jesus Christ and, on Don Alvaro's part, a clear filiation to the common father in the Church. I recall one day, late in the evening, when John Paul II received him in audience. The Pope was very tired after a hard day of work. Don Alvaro noticed this, but the Pope said that if at that hour of the day he wasn't tired, "it would be a sign he hadn't fulfilled his duty that day." The Pope's words moved Don Alvaro deeply and he often made reference to them. I will never forget the day on which Don Alvaro died. John Paul II came here, to the central seat of Opus Dei, to pray before his body lying in the Prelatic Church of Our Lady of Peace.

A year has gone by since the resignation of Benedict XVI and the election of Pope Francis. You are constantly asking people to pray for the Pope. What do you think about Benedict's decision, and what has impressed you about the gestures, apparently revolutionary, of Pope Francis?

Pope Benedict XVI's resignation signified, for the whole world, a deep manifestation of humility and of the sense of service that characterizes a true pastor of souls.

As far as Pope Francis is concerned, I think that some of his gestures appear revolutionary precisely because they are genuine and authentic. When people see him, in person or on television, they immediately recognize a true priest, who is interested in everyone's problems; a priest who listens to you and is always ready to pray. And that is what we are all seeking, what we all want to find in every priest.

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St. Josemaría said that Opus Dei wants to serve the Church as the Church wishes to be served. Nevertheless, some people have spoken about an attempt to "curb" the reforms sought by Pope Francis.

Opus Dei does not seek to "curb" anything the Pope wants to promote. And I sincerely think that the idea of "curbing" the Pope, who enjoys the assistance of the Holy Spirit, has never passed through anyone's head in the Prelature. The Holy Father is providing a very deep apostolic push, which is affecting not only the Church but all humanity.

Besides, certain advances are necessary because, no matter how well organized, human structures always run the risk of not responding to their high mission of spreading the Gospel message throughout the whole world.

What seems especially relevant to me is the impetus the Pope is giving to inspire all the faithful to commit themselves to the task of the new evangelization; also his work to revitalize the organisms available for the service of the Church and the faithful, together with his eagerness to make everyone aware of God's mercy.

Somewhat like the "apostolic journeys" of St. Josemaría, you have traveled to South America, the Holy Land and India. And in parallel with the Holy Father, who after World Youth Day in Rio, is preparing to visit Jerusalem and Korea. What is the situation of the Church in those countries? What does it expect of the Work?

In each one of those places I have found very different realities, and at the same time great possibilities of apostolic service to souls. In some places today, although at times it is hard to understand this in Europe, it is not at all easy to be a Christian. There are many Catholics who are persecuted because of their faith, and some encounter great difficulties in evangelizing because of the societies or the governments where they live. Precisely for that reason, their example is especially praiseworthy and an example for all of us.

The challenge confronting every Christian (especially evident in these areas, and also in the West, as Pope Francis has often reminded us) is to bring Christ to everyone, to build bridges of unity, to help resolve so many conflicts, and to spread the true culture of peace the Gospel teaches us.

In which countries will the apostolic work of Opus Dei begin soon?

There are many countries where, despite not having any stable apostolic work, some faithful of Opus Dei are living or traveling to for professional or family reasons. When I have an

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opportunity to speak with them, they always ask me when the apostolic work will begin there. Undoubtedly the thirst for the Gospel is strong all over the world, so we need to ask God to send workers for his harvest. I am thinking of the possibility of beginning in some countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

'John XXIII and John Paul II: Two holy Popes, Two Marian saints,' *El Mercurio*, Chile (April 24, 2014)

The canonization of John XXIII and John Paul II is a great event for the Church and a sign of hope for the world, because where sanctity flourishes the crises in this world don't have the final word.

Sanctity provides a solid foundation on which to build the future. In our faith, and in a special way in the saints, we find an answer to the deepest problems of mankind and society, often the result of being distant from God.

We should give thanks to God on seeing that, during recent decades (when so much has been said about the "crises" in economics, culture, politics, society and religion), the Church has been guided by holy people, by saints. Two of the three Roman Pontiffs from these years (John XXIII and John Paul II) will be canonized this Sunday, and the beatification process for the third recent Pope (Paul VI) is now well advanced.

John XXIII is, above all, the Pope who convoked the Second Vatican Council. As Peter's successor he guided the Church, with a firm and fatherly hand, towards this extraordinary experience of faith and personal and collective renewal. As *Guadium et Spes* emphasized, the Council strove to speak to the hearts of men and women in today's world. Pope Roncalli helped place the vocation to holiness at the very core of Christian life. We can go to his intercession today to beseech God that all men and women may take deeply to heart this truth proclaimed by Vatican II: that sanctity is attainable by all Christians, and is not a goal for a few select people.

For mankind as a whole, John XXIII is also the Pope of peace, since during a very tense historical moment he had no hesitation, following the example of his predecessors, to do everything possible to prevent war, using all of his moral and religious authority to make clear the prerequisites for peace and for the safeguard-

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