

Bishop Alvaro del Portillo and the Second Vatican Council

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1. Bishop Del Portillo and the Roman Curia

I lived with don Alvaro for 41 years, until his death on March 23, 1997. I met him in Rome in October 1953, at the central headquarters of Opus Dei, seven years after his arrival from Spain in February 1946. During my studies for a licentiate in canon law at the University of Saint Thomas (then known as the Angelicum), I began to notice the affection and prestige that this 38-year-old priest, procurator general of Opus Dei, enjoyed among the professors at that Pontifical Athenaeum and among more than a few of the prelates in the Roman Curia. He was already well-known as a canonist (especially in questions related to lay spirituality and apostolate), who previously in Spain had studied philosophy and civil engineering and had practiced that profession.

Many of these people knew that don Alvaro was in close and continuous contact with the founder of Opus Dei, St. Josemaría Escrivá, assisting him in the difficult task of attaining an adequate juridical solution in Church law for the specific charism and social reality of this quite new apostolic work. Some of them had read articles by don Alvaro in various ecclesiastical journals, or had heard him speak about the new and surprising reality of a lay vocation to holiness and apostolate, called to a filial dialogue with God and the spread of the Gospel in the midst of professional work and daily life.

In 1955 don Alvaro began working as a consultor in dicasteries of the Holy See, where not only his doctrinal acuity, but also his friendly, humble and cordial character was very much appreciated. I will mention just one example. On April 16, 1960, when speaking with Cardinal Pietro Ciriaci,

1. The author is president emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Legislative and Disciplinary Texts of the Roman Curia. This study is a translation of the Spanish version of the address *Mons. Álvaro del Portillo e il Concilio Vaticano II*, given on March 13, 2014 at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, and later published in: Pablo Gefaell (ed.), *Vir fidelis multum laudabitur*, Edusc, Rome 2014, pp. 83-102.

prefect of the Congregation for the discipline of the clergy and the Christian people, the Cardinal told me of his great esteem for don Alvaro. And he said that that was why, a year earlier, when the first preparatory work began for Vatican II (announced by John XXIII on January 25, 1959), he had appointed him president of a special Study Commission on the Catholic laity set up within that dicastery. I wanted to mention this incident because it was in those years of preparatory work for Vatican II that don Alvaro had the opportunity to get to know many people—bishops and cardinals, theologians and canonists—who later played a decisive role in preparing proposals for conciliar documents referring, among other things, to what would be a central teaching of the Second Vatican Council: the role of the laity and the universal call to holiness and apostolate.

The simple and friendly character of don Alvaro, the depth and also the humility of his thought and the extreme refinement shown in his judgments, explain his great capacity to win the sympathy and friendship of many people: those in the Curia, such as Bishops Domenico Tardini, future Secretary of State, and Giovanni Battista Montini, future Archbishop of Milan and later Pope Paul VI, and also of Cardinals Ciriaci, Marella, Antoniutti and Baggio, along with well-known theologians and canonists who were gradually drawn into the work of the Council. I would like to mention here some of these protagonists of Vatican II who expressed a special interest in getting to know, through don Alvaro, the founder of Opus Dei and his teachings. I recall above all Cardinals Frings, Doepfner, Ottaviani, Koenig and Marty; also Archbishop Pericle Felici, Secretary General of the Council and the future Cardinal President of the Pontifical Commission for the Revision of the Code of Canon Law; Bishop Carlo Colombo, Dean of the School of Theology in Milan, who was a *peritus* at the Council and a theologian close to Paul VI; Msgr. Willy Onclin, Dean of the School of Canon Law at the University of Louvain and *peritus* for four Conciliar commissions; Father Yves Congar, O.P., *peritus* for several commissions and future cardinal; Msgr. Jorge Medina, Conciliar *peritus* and future Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship; Bishop Karol Wojtyła, future Cardinal Archbishop of Krakow and St. John Paul II; Joseph Ratzinger, future Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and Pope Benedict XVI.

With regard to Benedict XVI, our beloved Pope emeritus, permit me a brief recent recollection. I went to visit him a few days ago in the monastery of the Vatican gardens. He already knew about the upcoming beatification of don Alvaro and he said to me: “How wonderful! I had his help for years, when he was consultor in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. What a good example for all of us!”

2. A protagonist at the Second Vatican Council

I would like to turn here to the beginning of the Council, and specifically to don Alvaro's enormous work as secretary of one of the most difficult commissions of Vatican II. On November 4, 1962, he received a letter from Cardinal Pietro Ciriaci, President of the Commission *De disciplina cleri et populi christiani* for the Second Vatican Council, informing him he had been chosen as secretary of this commission. Four days later, on November 8, don Alvaro received his letter of appointment.

To those who were present that day at the headquarters of the General Council of Opus Dei, St. Josemaría Escrivá expressed his joy at the great esteem the Holy See had shown for don Alvaro by this appointment. He also said he had advised him to accept the heavy commitment of work that was being asked of him, out of love for the Church and in filial obedience to the Pope. And he voiced his well-founded hope that don Alvaro would be able to continue carrying out his work as secretary general of Opus Dei, although this would require great effort and sacrifice. This is exactly what happened during the three long years of the great Conciliar assembly.

But besides this double commitment of work, Bishop Del Portillo also had to confront, with the serenity everyone admired in him, a special difficulty in the task entrusted to him by the Holy See. I refer specifically to the obvious gap between the sketchy content of the preparatory schemas entrusted to the Commission "On the discipline of the clergy" (in whose work I too was also invited to collaborate) and the great number of doctrinal and disciplinary questions that began to arise about the identity and ecclesial image of the priesthood, and the demands and specific characteristics of the priest's life and ministry.

Indeed, in the meetings that took place between January 21 and 29 in 1963, the coordinating commission for the work of the Council established that the number of schemas for constitutions and decrees to be presented in the hall by the various Conciliar commissions should be reduced to 17. As a result, the Commission on the Discipline of the Clergy was given the task of preparing a single decree schema, covering only three topics: priestly spirituality, pastoral ministry, and the correct use of ecclesiastical goods. In fact, the coordinating commission itself decided a year later that the previous schema should be drastically reduced to the essential points, and should be presented, not in the form a true decree, but in a few brief "propositions."

Undoubtedly these decisions of the directive organs of the Council were the result of methodological criteria that tended to give priority to the development of topics considered of primary importance, such as a renewed

theological reflection on the Church, the directives for liturgical reform, doctrine on the episcopate and its sacramentality, the apostolate of the laity, and the ecumenical movement. Nevertheless, the 30 members of the *De disciplina cleri* commission (2 cardinals, 15 archbishops and 13 bishops) and the 40 *periti* or “experts” (theologians and canonists from 17 countries) were in agreement that the doctrinal development about the episcopacy and about the laity made it even more imperative to pursue a parallel theological and disciplinary deepening in questions related to the priesthood. (Don Alvaro was very familiar with this concern and made it known with his usual friendly strength.) Otherwise, the very theology of communion that underlay the Council’s work would have remained incomplete, thus disappointing the more than half a million priests who were and are, all over the world, the bishops’ co-workers and the direct pastors of the lay faithful.

Nevertheless, the Commission on the Discipline of the Clergy, in response to the directives they had received, reluctantly prepared (the expression may seem strong, but later it would be shown to be understandable), the brief and therefore necessarily poor and insufficient propositions *De vita et ministerio sacerdotali*, which were debated in the Conciliar assembly on October 13, 14 and 15 of 1964. From the discussion and votes in the Council hall, and the many proposals for changes received, it became clear (as don Alvaro had foreseen and had told me earlier) that the Council fathers wanted the topic of the ministerial priesthood to be dealt with, not in the form of brief propositions, but through a true and proper Conciliar decree of adequate breadth and content.

I recall very well how Bishop Del Portillo, as the commission’s diligent and patient secretary, accepted this desire of the Conciliar assembly not only with a spirit of obedient availability, but also with a lively joy and satisfaction. So much so that he himself suggested to the relator of the schema, the then Archbishop of Rheims Most Rev. François Marty (years later the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris) that he immediately send a letter to the Cardinal moderators of the Council, through the secretary general, Archbishop Pericle Felici, asking for the necessary authorization to redo and develop the schema in the form desired by the assembly, that is, as a true Conciliar decree.

The letter, in Latin (Prot. N. 730/64 of October 20, 1964), received seven days later the expected response from the secretary general of the Council: “I have made your Excellency’s letter known,” said Archbishop Felici, “to the eminent cardinal moderators. In the session on the 22nd, the cardinal moderators, accepting the reasons presented by your Excellency, have expressed their view that the commission should re-work the text of the schema *De vita et ministerio sacerdotali* as your Excellency indicates...”

(Letter of the Secretary General of the Council, Prot. N. LC/758, of October 27, 1964).

Omnia tempus habent (Sir 3:1); everything has its proper time. Finally the moment had arrived when the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, realizing that the desired renewal of the Church and its evangelizing mission depended, to a great extent, on the ministry of priests (see Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, *proemio* and no 1; Decree *Optatam totius*, no. 2), could dedicate to them a document that was sufficiently broad, with all the required doctrinal explanations and pastoral and disciplinary norms, and with specific reference to the cultural and sociological circumstances of the contemporary world.

I recall that don Alvaro immediately convoked, and put to work, the various subcommissions of members and “experts,” and the draft for the new schema was prepared in record time. The plenary commission, always under the direction of Bishop Del Portillo, to whom the president, Cardinal Pietro Ciriaci, with serious health problems, had entrusted this task, examined the various parts of the new schema in the plenary gatherings (one could say that they were truly “interminable” sessions) on October 29, and November 5, 9, and 12, in 1964. The grace of the Holy Spirit, invoked with confidence at the beginning of each work session, enabled the draft for the decree *De ministerio et vita presbyterorum* to be prepared, printed, and distributed to the whole Conciliar assembly eight days later, on November 20, 1964, that is, on the eve of the conclusion of the Council’s third session. The secretary general of the Council was truly and happily surprised, and almost exclaimed: “a miracle.”

This text, later completed in some points with opportune additions, was discussed and approved by the assembly (*in aula*, “in the hall,” as was commonly said) during the fourth and final session of the Council, in October 1965. And it was voted on definitively with the following result: voting were 2394 Conciliar fathers; *placet*: 2390; *non placet*: 4. The Holy Father Paul VI, in a public session of the entire Council, solemnly promulgated the decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis, de Presbyterorum ministerio et vita* on December 7, 1965.

These were days, weeks and months of very intense work, of great moral and psychological tension, fighting against time and stress. But Bishop Del Portillo’s soul and face always reflected great serenity. He seemed to be telling us what was written on the base of a beautiful sun dial that I always liked to compare with don Alvaro: *Horas non numero nisi serenas*. That is, I only register the serene hours, when the weather is calm, with the sun shining, and with peace in the soul.

I am sure that all of you, especially those who had the good fortune of knowing don Alvaro and spending time with him, would like to hear the content of the letter that Cardinal Pietro Ciriaci wrote to him a week later, on December 14, 1965. I will only read a fragment:

“Most reverend and dear don Alvaro:

With the definitive approval on the past December 7, the great work of our commission, thanks be to God, has come to a happy end, guiding the decree, not the least among the Council’s decrees and constitutions, to a safe harbor.” After recalling with joy the “almost unanimous vote on the text,” the president of the commission added: “I know very well how much of this was due to your wise and tenacious work, which, without any lack of respect for the freedom of opinion of the others, was careful to follow a line of fidelity to what have been the major guiding principles of priestly spirituality. When informing the Holy Father I will not fail to mention all of this. Meanwhile I wanted to extend to you, with warm applause, my most sincere gratitude.”

I was not present when don Alvaro read this letter. But since he would always direct any personal praise or gratitude to God, I am sure he must have remarked: Thanks be given to God! *Deo Gratias!*

3. What is the image of the priest in the work of the Council?

Having reached this point, we need to ask: What were the “major guiding principles” that Cardinal Ciriaci mentions in his letter, and that assisted Don Alvaro, the Conciliar commission, and all the Council fathers, in defining the theological identity and apostolic mission of priests? I would say that these principles involved, in first place, the dual commitment of being faithful to tradition and the deep renewal that inspired the whole of the Second Vatican Council.

By situating the ministry of priests and their triple function of teaching, sanctifying, and governing at the heart of the Church’s salvific mission, the decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* views the priesthood from the original and profound point of view of the priest’s participation in the consecration and mission of Christ, Head and Shepherd. Thus a vision of the priesthood arises that is essentially sacramental and deeply dynamic, as Bishop Del Portillo explained with exquisite clarity in 1966:

“Throughout the Conciliar debates on the decree on priests two positions emerged that, considered separately, might appear opposed and even

contradictory. On the one hand, great importance was given to the aspect of evangelization, in announcing Christ's message to all mankind; on the other, stress was given to the worship and adoration of God as the goal to which everything in the priest's ministry and life should tend. An effort of synthesis was required, and the commission put all its efforts into harmonizing these two views, which were not in any way opposed or mutually exclusive. Rather these two facets are absolutely inseparable from one another, and mutually complement and highlight each other. The ministry in favor of men can only be understood as a service given to God, while the glory of God demands that the priest be zealous in striving to bring all mankind to praise Him. . . . A dynamic view of the priestly ministry is thus offered. Announcing the Gospel engenders faith in those who still do not believe so that, by coming to form part of the People of God, they can unite their sacrifices to Christ's sacrifice, forming a single Body with him." ²

In this context, the priest is seen as a member of the People of God, chosen from among other men with a particular divine call (consecration) and sent (mission) to carry out specific functions in the service of the People of God and all humanity. A chosen man, a consecrated man, a man who has been sent. These are undoubtedly, in their unity and inseparability, the three fundamental characteristics of the image of the priest, as don Alvaro highlights in his writings, especially in his book *On the Priesthood (Escritos sobre el sacerdocio)*, which has been translated and published in almost all major modern languages. We will briefly consider these three characteristics of Christ's minister, also because today, fifty years after the Council, they are frequently emphasized by Pope Francis.

1) *A man chosen and called*

Chosen by whom? Chosen by the Christian community, as some want to claim? Chosen perhaps by himself, as if he had an absolute personal right to be a priest? It seems pointless and absurd to ask questions like these. Nevertheless, during the celebration of the Council, and still today, one finds ideological positions, opposed to the Church's magisterium, that are defended with different arguments but that always undermine the true nature of the priesthood. But the Conciliar teaching makes it very clear that the vocation of the priest is absolutely inseparable from his consecration and mission. The one who chooses him is also the one who consecrates and sends him: that is to say, Christ himself, through the apostles and their successors, the bishops.

This divine reality is explained very well in the decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*: "However, the Lord also appointed certain men as ministers, in order that they might be united in one body in which 'all the members do

2. *Palabra* magazine, no. 12-13 (1968), pp. 4-9.

not have the same function' (*Rom* 12:4). These men were to hold in the community of the faithful the sacred power of Order, that of offering sacrifice and forgiving sins, and were to exercise the priestly office publicly on behalf of men in the name of Christ."³

In thus emphasizing the divine institution of the priesthood, the accent was put on the priest's divine vocation. A priest is not a "delegate of the community" before God, nor is he a "functionary" or an "employee" of God for the People. He is a man chosen by God from among men to carry out, in Christ's name, the mystery of salvation. The reality of the priest's divine vocation, as don Alvaro liked to recall, is essential to counter certain "democratic" conceptions, unfortunately present in some ecclesial spheres, and also so that we priests do not ever forget the choice of love that Christ has made of our lives. Pope Francis reminded us: "Called by God—I think it is important to rekindle constantly an awareness of our divine vocation, which we often take for granted in the midst of our many daily responsibilities. As Jesus says, 'You did not choose me, but I chose you' (*Jn* 15:16). This means returning to the source of our calling."⁴ "Becoming a priest is not first of all our own choice, but rather it is our response to a call and to a divine call."⁵

2) *A consecrated man*

Since we have been chosen by God to carry out in an official way, in Christ's name, the priestly function, it is clear that priests are much more than simply holders of a public and sacred office exercised for the benefit of the community of the faithful. The priesthood, writes Bishop Del Portillo, "is, fundamentally and before anything else, a configuration, a sacramental and mysterious transformation of the person of the man-priest into the person of Christ himself, the only Mediator."⁶ I am sure that in all his work as secretary of that commission, he always kept present the teaching on the priesthood of a holy priest who was still alive at that time, Msgr. Escrivá. In a homily in 1960 referring to the Eucharistic Sacrifice, the founder of Opus Dei said: "The Mass is, I insist, an action of God, of the Trinity. It is not a merely human event. The priest who celebrates fulfills the desire of our Lord, lending his body and his voice to the divine action. He acts, not in his own name, but *in persona et in nomine Christi*: in the Person of Christ and in his name."⁷

In light of the deepening in doctrine that other Council documents provided regarding the episcopate and the common priesthood of the faithful,

3. Vatican II, Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 2.

4. Pope Francis, Homily, July 27, 2013.

5. Pope Francis, Words during a gathering with seminarians and novices, July 6, 2013.

6. Alvaro del Portillo, *Escritos sobre el sacerdocio*, Palabra, Madrid 1970, p. 85.

7. St. Josemaría Escrivá, "The Eucharist, Mystery of Faith and Love," in *Christ Is Passing By*, Scepter, NY, 1974, no. 86.

Presbyterorum Ordinis sought to stress the special sacramental consecration of priests, which makes them sharers in the priesthood of Christ, Head of the Church. Thus the document stresses the close tie of the priestly ministry with the fullness of the priesthood and the pastoral mission of the bishops, of whom they are co-workers, while also distinguishing them from the common priesthood of all the baptized. "Having sent the apostles just as he himself had been sent by the Father," we read in section two of the decree, "Christ, through the apostles themselves, made their successors, the bishops, sharers in his consecration and mission. The office of their ministry has been handed down, in a lesser degree indeed, to the priests. Established in the order of the priesthood they can be co-workers of the episcopal order for the proper fulfillment of the apostolic mission entrusted to priests by Christ."

Agere in persona Christi Capitis: through the reception of the sacrament of Holy Orders, the priest is made a sharer in the actions proper to Christ, Head and Shepherd of the Church. The basis of this participation is the power received, while its goal is to make present here and now, through specific actions (*ministerium verbi et sacramentorum*), salvation as the life of the Church and, in the Church, of the world. We see in this formula the "sacramentality" of the specific actions of the ordained minister in respect to the life of the Church.

The priest, while "in the Church, is also placed in the forefront of it."⁸ As St. John Paul II stressed: "By his very nature and sacramental mission, the priest appears in the structure of the Church as a sign of the absolute priority and gratuitousness of the grace given to the Church by the risen Christ. Through the ministerial priesthood the Church becomes aware in faith that her being comes not from herself but from the grace of Christ in the Holy Spirit. The apostles and their successors, inasmuch as they exercise an authority which comes to them from Christ, the Head and Shepherd, are placed—with their ministry—in the forefront of the Church as a visible continuation and sacramental sign of Christ in his own position before the Church and the world, as the enduring and ever new source of salvation."⁹ We priests and bishops are sacramental signs of Christ among men, and the more so the more we can sincerely say with St. Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (*Gal* 2:20). Pope Francis told priests: "This living, this abiding in Christ marks all that we are and all that we do. It is precisely this 'life in Christ' that ensures our apostolate is effective . . . It is not creativity, however pastoral it may be, or meetings or planning that ensure our fruitfulness, even if these are greatly helpful. But what assures our fruitfulness is our being faithful to Jesus, who says insistently: 'Abide in me and I in you' (*Jn* 15:4)."¹⁰

8. Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests*, no. 13.

9. St. John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, March 25, 1992, no. 16.

10. Pope Francis, Homily, July 27, 2013.

3) *A man who is sent*

The priests of the New Covenant “are taken from among men and ordained for men in the things that belong to God.”¹¹ The priest is a man called and consecrated to be sent to all mankind in the service of the Church’s salvific work, as a shepherd and minister of God. Vatican II recalled and reaffirmed the dimension of worship and ritual in the priesthood, in accord with the tradition received from the Council of Trent. But it also sought to strongly emphasize its missionary dimension: not as two distinct aspects, but as two simultaneous facets of the same demand to evangelize.

The decree on which don Alvaro worked so intensely spoke forcefully of the evangelizing presence of priests among men: “[They] live on earth with other men as brothers. The Lord Jesus, the Son of God, a Man sent by the Father to men, dwelt among us and willed to become like his brethren in all things except sin.”¹² The priest should always be present and active, as a minister of Christ, in the lives of other men.

Presbyterorum Ordinis also proclaims with great spiritual energy a teaching that I see as fundamental, in order to counteract the danger of “desacralizing” the image of the priest, or reducing his ministry to social or philanthropic work. And it does so without any distancing of the priest from the world: “Priests of the New Testament, by their vocation and ordination, are in a certain sense set apart in the bosom of the People of God. However, they are not to be separated from the People of God or from any person; but they are to be totally dedicated to the work for which the Lord has chosen them. They cannot be ministers of Christ unless they be witnesses and dispensers of a life other than earthly life. But they cannot be of service to men if they remain strangers to the life and conditions of men. Their ministry itself, by a special title, forbids that they be conformed to this world; yet at the same time it requires that they live in this world among men.”¹³

The presence of the secular priest in the world is always marked by this tension, inherent to the nature of his mission. “Because such a mission,” Bishop Del Portillo wrote in his book on the priesthood, “can only be carried out if the priest—consecrated by the Spirit—can be among men (*pro hominibus constitutus*) and at the same time separated from them (*ex hominibus assumptus*): see *Heb.* 5:1. By living alongside other men, by coming to understand their problems, he will appreciate their values. But at the same time he will also, in the name of something else, give witness to and teach other values, other horizons of the soul, another hope.”¹⁴

11. Vatican II, Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 3.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, *Escritos sobre el sacerdocio*, op. cit., 63-64.

Thus priests will also be able to resolve a problem that at times is exaggerated or misrepresented—today as in the time of the Council—on the sociological plane. I refer to their valid insertion into the social life of the civil community, into the ordinary life of other men and women. In fact, today more than ever, the laity—the intellectual, the laborer, the white collar worker—want to see in the priest a friend, a man who interacts simply and cordially with other people (a man, one might say, within arms reach), who understands and esteems noble human realities. But at the same time, they want to see in him a witness to future realities, to the sacred, to eternal life; in other words, a man capable of perceiving and of teaching, with fraternal concern, the supernatural dimension in their life, its divine destiny, the true answer to their thirst for happiness. In a word, they want to see a man of God.¹⁵ A man able to open his heart to God's tenderness, as Pope Francis said: "The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew."¹⁶

4. The priest "called to holiness"

Permit me a final consideration about a truth we see constantly appearing in don Alvaro's interventions. The three essential features of the image of the priest that we saw above (his divine vocation, sacramental consecration, and evangelizing mission) are fully understood and harmonized only when seen in the light of a deep ascetical demand: personal sanctity, through the specific spirituality of a secular priest. Bishop Del Portillo oversaw the work of the third chapter of the decree on the holiness of priests with great personal commitment and sacrifice, and with a deep love for the priesthood learned directly from St. Josemaría Escrivá.

On more than a few days don Alvaro's work day, and that of his closest co-workers on the commission, ended after midnight. At those late hours, with all the offices of the Holy See's dicasteries closed, they had to meet in one of the residences of the Conciliar Fathers and "experts" (San Tommaso di Villanova, on viale Romania). There they would finish preparing the drafts of the texts for the decree, and also the *responsiones ad modos* (the answers of the commission to the corrections suggested by the Fathers), which had to be presented the morning after the plenary Commission and sent that same day to the Tipografia Vaticana for printing. I remember very

15. See Julián Herranz, "I rapporti sacerdote-laici," in *Studi sulla nuova legislazione della Chiesa*, Rome 1990, pp. 246-247.

16. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhort *Evangelii gaudium*, November 24, 2013, no. 1.

well the great esteem and especially the cordial affection that, despite the relentless rhythm of their work, all of his closest co-workers showed towards Bishop Del Portillo.

The entire work of the Council was aimed at fostering a renewal in the Church, enabling it to carry out a more effective evangelization of the world. So it is no surprise that these pages dedicated to priestly holiness strongly reflect that same commitment and spirit: “This holy council, to fulfill its pastoral desires of an internal renewal of the Church, of the spread of the Gospel in every land and of a dialogue with the world of today, strongly urges all priests that they strive always for that growth in holiness by which they will become consistently better instruments in the service of the whole People of God.”¹⁷ And as the decree also emphasizes, this growth in holiness is to be attained through the exercise of the priest’s proper ministerial functions, which not only require this commitment to strive for perfection, but which foster and further it.¹⁸

By carrying out his proper ministry, following the example of Christ, whose food was to do the will of the Father, the priest attains unity of life (an expression particularly loved by don Alvaro because it appears so often in the teachings of St. Josemaría Escrivá). That is, a priest attains union and harmony between his interior life and the obligations, often quite varied and dispersed, that stem from his proper pastoral mission. One of the most significant elements in the decree’s ascetical teaching is the reference to priests’ unity of life, attained above all by “joining themselves with Christ to acknowledge the will of the Father. For them this means a complete gift of themselves to the flock committed to them.”¹⁹

Moreover, a priest will not be truly able to manifest Christ’s pastoral charity if he is not a man of the Eucharist and of prayer, if he is not an essentially Eucharistic and contemplative soul. As *Presbyterorum Ordinis* says: “This pastoral charity flows out in a very special way from the Eucharistic sacrifice. This stands as the root and center of the whole life of a priest. What takes place on the altar of sacrifice, the priestly heart must make his own. This cannot be done unless priests through prayer continue to penetrate more deeply into the mystery of Christ.”²⁰ With his attractive simplicity, Pope Francis has also spoken about this mystical reality: “We are good priests if we go to Jesus Christ, if we seek the Lord in prayer, even though we are sinners . . . If instead we distance ourselves from Jesus Christ, we have to compensate for this with other worldly attitudes, idolatries, and

17. Vatican II, Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 12

18. See *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.* no. 14.

20. *Ibid.*

we make ourselves devotees of the god Narcissus . . . The priest who adores Jesus Christ, the priest who speaks of Jesus Christ, the priest who seeks Jesus Christ, and allows himself to be sought by Jesus Christ. This is the center of our lives. If we do not have this, we lose everything! And then what shall we give to the people?”²¹

5. Facing the New Evangelization

We have looked at the decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, seeking in its pages the image of the priest that the Second Vatican Council left us and that don Alvaro made known both in his writings and, above all, by the example of his own priestly life and work. Now we can formulate a question that Bishop Del Portillo sometimes asked himself (I well remember some of his conversations) towards the end of his life, almost on the threshold of the third millennium. These doctrinal and disciplinary parameters, this identity of the Catholic priest, how does it fit into the great challenges that the circumstances of today's world present to the Church, and especially to Christ's ministers?

From the Second Vatican Council to today the Church has undergone fifty years of life and suffering, years of theological reflection that was not always balanced and calm, years of pastoral renewal that was not always exempt from difficulties. And nevertheless the teaching found in the decree on the ministry and life of priests is not only still relevant, but it has steadily taken root with a growing vigor. I think the explanation for this is that the Second Vatican Council arose in the Church with a call for renewal and evangelization. And at a distance of half a century, the growing signs of the positive influence of its spiritual and pastoral teachings are easily discernible.

The Conciliar spirit of renewal during these years, under the providential guidance of great popes who have succeeded to the chair of Peter, has imbued liturgical life, canonical norms, catechetical teaching with new life. The Church has truly renewed its teaching, its legislation and its life in accord with Vatican II, and is now in a position to carry out its mission as the times demand. Moreover, it has been committed for years, under the vigorous impulse of St. John Paul II, of Benedict XVI, and now of Pope Francis, to the new evangelization, which “demands priests who are deeply and fully immersed in the mystery of Christ and capable of embodying a new style of pastoral life.”²² A new style that must always entail fidelity to their vocation, consecration and mission, that is to say, to the contents of the decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*.

21. Pope Francis, Morning homilies – House of St. Martha, Homily of January 11, 2014, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, vol. 2, 2014.

22. St. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhort. *Pastores dabo vobis*, March 25, 1992, no. 18.

And the new evangelization, which should show with vigor the centrality of Christ in the cosmos and in history, not only has an ascending dimension—Christ as the fulfillment of all of the yearnings of mankind—but, and above all, a descending mediation: “In Jesus Christ God not only speaks to man but also seeks him out. The Incarnation of the Son of God attests that God goes in search of man.”²³ These are words of St. John Paul II that Pope Francis also likes to repeat.

Christ, the sole Mediator, is present in the priest so that the whole Church, the priestly People of God, can give the Father the spiritual worship that all the baptized are called upon to offer. How could there be an offering acceptable to the Father if what the faithful offer—their work, their joys and difficulties in family and social life, their life itself—were not offered in the Holy Mass, in union with the Body and Blood of his Son, the only propitiatory victim.

Christ, the One and Eternal Priest, is present in the mystery of the priest, to remind everyone that his passion, death, and resurrection are not an event relegated to the past, to Palestine 2000 years ago, but rather always bear salvific value, made continually operative through the miracle of love in the Eucharist, the center and root of the Church’s life.

Christ, by his divinity the only-begotten of the Father and by his humanity the first-born of all creatures, is present in the priest to announce to the world his Word with authority, to educate everyone in the faith, and to form through the sacraments the new humanity, the Mystical Body of our Lord, awaiting in hope his coming at the end of history.

Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, is present in the priest, to teach mankind that the soul’s reconciliation with God cannot ordinarily be a monologue; that man the sinner, in order to be forgiven, needs a man-priest, a minister and sign in the Sacrament of Penance of the radical need that fallen humanity has of a Man-God, the only Just and Justifying One.

In a word, Christ is present in the priest to proclaim and give witness to the world that he is the Prince of peace, the Light of souls, the Love that forgives and reconciles, the Food of eternal life, the Only Truth, the Alfa and Omega of the universe. And therefore that no truly human reality, no human process of perfection and growth, can be conceived of outside the new creation brought about by his incarnation and sacrifice.

23. St. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, November 10, 1994, no. 7.

Here is where all priests find our *raison d'être*, the “credentials for our identity,” which we have to present to mankind with greater courage and clarity the more shameless the pressures of religious agnosticism and moral permissiveness become. St. John Paul II said: “The Church of the new Advent, the Church that is continually preparing for the new coming of the Lord, must be the Church of the Eucharist and of Penance. Only when viewed in this spiritual aspect of her life and activity is she seen to be the Church of the divine mission, the Church *in statu missionis*.”²⁴ This Church, in a permanent state of mission, of evangelization, is the same one that saves and provides mankind with true happiness.

As Pope Francis wrote: “The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience.”²⁵ Facing this reality, Christ’s salvific will (a task that falls to the Church, and in first place to the sacred ministers) is to offer human hearts the joy the world cannot give or take away: “The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness, and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew.”²⁶

6. Bishop Alvaro del Portillo after Vatican II

The promulgation of the decree on the life and ministry of priests practically coincided with the end of the Second Vatican Council and, consequently, of Bishop Del Portillo’s work in the Council. But his influence at the Council was kept alive in the following years and is still present among those of us who work in the University. We can recall here the following solemn statement of Vatican II: “This sacred synod is fully aware that the desired renewal of the whole Church depends to a great extent on the ministry of its priests. It proclaims the extreme importance of priestly training.”²⁷

I think that Pope Paul VI, promulgator of the Council decrees and well-acquainted with Bishop Del Portillo, rejoiced in Heaven on seeing the great care with which don Alvaro took up this desire of the Council, already present in the mind and prayer of St. Josemaría. On January 9, 1985, under the impetus of the then prelate of Opus Dei, Bishop Del Portillo, the *Centro Superior de Estudios Ecclesiásticos* (Center for Advanced Ecclesiastical Studies) was erected, in which we now find ourselves. Since then thousands of priests from all over the world have been formed in this Pontifical Univ-

24. St. John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, March 4, 1979, no. 20.

25. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, November 24, 2013, no. 2.

26. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, November 24, 2013, no. 1.

27. Vatican II, Decree *Optatam Totius*, Preamble.

ersity of the Holy Cross, in close communion with the successor of the Apostle Peter, at the service of the renewed proclamation of the Gospel proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council.

Allow me to conclude with another brief personal memory of Bishop Del Portillo. Our Lord, in his infinite goodness, arranged that this exemplary pastor in the service of the Church and most faithful son of the founder of Opus Dei, was able to celebrate the last Mass of his life in Jerusalem, in the Cenacle, in the same holy place where Jesus had instituted the Eucharist and the Priesthood at the Last Supper. It was March 22 in 1994. A few hours later, on returning to Rome, with his always kindly smile, he surrendered his soul to God in the early morning of the next day, March 23. St. John Paul II who went to pray in front of his body was quite moved when he learned of those very special circumstances of don Alvaro's last Mass and *dies natalis*. Our Lord wanted to crown his life, so often marked by the Cross, with this well merited caress!