

# Alcuni ricordi

Dott. Ambrogio Piras, Segretario Generale Aggiunto

“Come gli è venuto in mente a Don Álvaro di fondare il Centro Accademico?”. Mimmo Inzerillo, il primo Amministratore del Centro, stralunò gli occhi e rimase alquanto perplesso dalla mia domanda, bofonchiò una qualche risposta pensando probabilmente che non avevo capito nulla. E infatti era proprio così: non avevo ancora capito nulla, quando feci quella domanda, qualche settimana dopo il mio arrivo nella nostra Istituzione. Ho avuto la fortuna di conoscere l’Opus Dei nella mia giovinezza e di poter frequentare fin dal liceo i mezzi di formazione dottrinale, ascetica e spirituale che l’Opera mette a disposizione di chiunque lo voglia, e mi era ben chiaro in mente che l’Opera è stata voluta da Dio per ricordare a tutti, attraverso San Josemaría Escrivá, che in forza del Battesimo la santità è una vocazione universale, che ogni cristiano, ogni persona può incontrare il Signore nella propria vita familiare, professionale, nelle proprie attività ordinarie, e che quindi questa “vocazione”, questa strada di lotta, di impegno per la santità, era eminentemente rivolta ai laici. Ma allora – questo era il mio dubbio – se l’Opera rivolge il proprio apostolato eminentemente ai laici, perché investire persone e risorse in un’istituzione di studi universitari che per loro natura si rivolgono invece principalmente a seminaristi, sacerdoti e religiosi?

Lo ammetto: ero un po’ duro di comprendonio. Poi cominciai a capire, a riflettere, anche conoscendo sempre meglio la figura di San Josemaría Escrivá, mano a mano che venivano pubblicate nuove biografie e nuove opere che lo riguardavano. E la risposta alla mia domanda risiede nel grandissimo amore che San Josemaría aveva per il sacerdozio e per i suoi fratelli nel sacerdozio, amore radicato in quello, sconfitto e profondissimo, che aveva per Gesù. Amore per il sacerdozio e per i sacerdoti che lo portò intorno all’anno 1950, com’è risaputo, a pensare di lasciare l’Opus Dei – per cui aveva dato la vita! –, che aveva intanto ricevuto la prima approvazione pontificia, per avviare una nuova fondazione che si dedicasse esclusivamente ai sacerdoti, per fornire loro aiuto e assistenza spirituale. Poi, una nuova illuminazione divina gli fece comprendere che anche i sacerdoti possono vivere la stessa chiamata alla santità nelle attività ordinarie proprie della loro vocazione sacerdotale, e che

per loro c’era posto nella Società Sacerdotale della Santa Croce, un’associazione di chierici intimamente unita all’Opus Dei. È per questo motivo quindi, per il grande amore al sacerdozio, che Mons. Álvaro del Portillo, suo successore alla guida dell’Opus Dei, mise in atto tutti i mezzi umani e soprannaturali per realizzare il progetto accarezzato da San Josemaría di istituire in Roma un centro di studi ecclesiastici, mettendo quindi a disposizione di tutta la Chiesa il patrimonio di studi teologici, filosofici, canonistici accumulato dal clero della Prelatura dell’Opus Dei.

15 aprile 1986: ricordo benissimo il mio primo giorno di lavoro al Centro Accademico Romano della Santa Croce, come si chiamava allora la nostra Istituzione. Fu il primo giorno per me e per Egidio Lombardi, entrambi addetti alla Segreteria Studenti, alle dipendenze di José María Gorgojo.

La Segreteria era ubicata allora in un locale assai piccolo e buio, al piano terra di via San Girolamo della Carità 64, locale che ora non esiste più. Cominciarono poi le “peregrinazioni” a causa dei primi lavori nell’edificio, e ci trasferimmo inizialmente nel primo ammezzato che si incontra dopo la prima rampa della scala vecchia, poi in un’aula al primo piano, e poi ancora nell’appartamento che si trova al secondo ammezzato (dove per un certo tempo risedette anche una famiglia con funzioni di custodia dell’edificio), in cui adesso ha sede l’Istituto Storico San Josemaría Escrivá.

Disponevamo solo di macchine da scrivere, e quindi bisognava stare particolarmente attenti nel fare, ad esempio, i certificati per gli studenti, i verbali per gli esami e tutti gli altri lavori tipici di una segreteria universitaria.

Per alcuni aspetti il lavoro era quindi disagevole, ma era ampiamente compensato dalla simpatia degli studenti: come non ricordare, ad esempio (anche Egidio ricorderà sicuramente), personaggi come Don Emmanuel Nnajiofor, Marcelo Bustillo, Juan María Gallardo, e tanti altri che abbiamo conosciuto? Alcuni sono anche già in Cielo, come ad esempio il sacerdote Guillermo Vivanco, un colombiano scurissimo di carnagione, Don Tshisambu Mutombo, deceduto nel suo paese, il Congo, e Don Alejandro Laudadio, argentino.

Parlando degli studenti, mi rendo conto che in questi anni è aumentata molto la diversità di prove-

# Some Memories

Mr. Ambrogio Piras, Associate Secretary General

“W hat made Don Alvaro founding the university?” Mimmo Inzerillo, the first Administrator of the Roman Academic Center, rolled his eyes and was somewhat puzzled by my question, as he mumbled a response, probably thinking that I had not understood anything. In fact it was exactly that: I did not understand anything at the time that I asked that question, which was only a few weeks after my arrival at our institution. I had the fortune to know Opus Dei in my youth, and beginning in high school I was able to participate in means of doctrinal, ascetic and spiritual formation, that the Work makes available to anyone who desires it. It was very clear to me that the Work was willed by God to remind everyone, through Saint Josemaría Escrivá, that in Baptism there is a universal call to holiness, through which every Christian and every person can meet the Lord in their family and professional lives and in their ordinary activities. Therefore this “vocation” – this battle path – or commitment to holiness was predominantly directed to the laity. But then – this was my question – if the Work must cater to its primarily lay apostolate, why invest people and resources in an institution of higher education that is directed primarily toward seminarians, priests and religious?

I admit I was a bit slow on the uptake. Then I began to understand, to reflect, as I got to know the figure of Saint Josemaría Escrivá better, as new biographies and works about him were frequently being published. And the answer to my question laid in the great love that Saint Josemaría had for the priesthood and his brother priests, a love rooted in the boundless and profound love he had for Jesus. Around 1950, his love for the priesthood and for priests led him, as is widely known, to consider leaving Opus Dei – to which he had given life – to start a new foundation that was devoted exclusively to priests, in order to provide them with spiritual help and assistance. Then, a divine inspiration made him realize that even priests can live the same call to holiness in the ordinary activities of their priestly vocation, and that there was place for them in the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, an association of clerics intimately united to Opus Dei. It is for this reason, for his great love of the priesthood, that Father Álvaro del Portillo, his successor as Prelate of Opus Dei, directed all available resources, both human and super-

natural, to bring the project to fruition which was cherished by Saint Josemaría.

April 15, 1986: I clearly remember my first day of work at the Roman Academic Center of the Holy Cross, which was what our institution was called back then. It was the first day for both me and Egidio Lombardi, both of us affiliated with the Student Office, working under José María Gorgojo.

The administrative office at that time was a very small and dark room on the ground floor of Via di San Girolamo della Carità, 64 (which does not exist anymore). Then the “pilgrimage” began due to the restoration work on the building. We initially moved to the first mezzanine that you get to after the first flight of the old stairs. Then we moved to a classroom on the first floor, and then again to the apartment on the second mezzanine (where for a certain period of time, a family resided who undertook the custodial functions of the building), and where the Historical Institute of Saint Josemaría Escrivá is now located.

We had only typewriters available then, so we had to be extremely careful in making, for example, certificates for students, the exam records and all of the other secretarial work that is typical to a university.

In some respects the work was very uncomfortable, but it was greatly compensated for by the friendliness of the students: how can we forget, for example (as Egidio will also surely remember) characters like Father Emmanuel Nnajiofor, Marcelo Bustillo, Juan María Gallardo, and many others who we knew? Some are also already in heaven, like Father Guillermo Vivanco, a Colombian, Father Tshisambu Mutombo, who died in his country, the Congo, and Father Alejandro Laudadio from Argentina.

Speaking of students, I realize that in recent years the diversity of geographical origin has greatly increased, in respect also to the political, social, cultural and economic changes of these past two decades. I remember when the first students arrived from Poland, Father Adam Dalach and Father Woiczech Nowacki. It was 1986, difficult years for Poland and for all of Eastern Europe, which was still under the yoke of the Soviet empire. Then came the incredible year of 1989 in which, without violence, that structure of power was swept away by the faith and moral uprightness of those people. Or when in 1991 the first Indians, Fr. Thomas Animoottil and Fr. Abraham Kalarickal, arrived thus opening the



Ambrogio Piras che riceve  
l'allora Gran Cancelliere,  
Monsignor Álvaro del Portillo,  
all'aeroporto

Ambrogio Piras greeting  
then-Chancellor Monsignor  
Álvaro del Portillo at the airport



nienza geografica, e ciò ha rispettato anche i cambiamenti politici, sociali, culturali ed economici di questo ventennio. Ricordo ad esempio quando arrivarono i primi studenti polacchi, Don Adam Dalach e Don Woicjech Nowacki. Era il 1986, anni ancora difficili per la Polonia e per l'intera Europa Orientale, ancora sotto il giogo dell'impero sovietico. Poi doveva arrivare quell'incredibile anno 1989, in cui, senza violenze, quella struttura di potere fu spazzata via, perché non dirlo, dalla fede e dalla dirittura morale di quei popoli. Oppure quando nel 1991 giunsero, apprendo poi la strada a moltissimi altri, i primi indiani, Fr. Thomas Animoottil e Fr. Abraham Kalarikal. E così via, con moltissimi altri paesi: il primo

studente che arrivava era per me sempre una sorpresa e una gioia.

Vorrei ricordare anche altre persone che ho avuto la fortuna di conoscere e che sono già in Cielo, in particolare Mons. Giuseppe Molteni, che fu Segretario Generale dal 1988 al 1993. Ricordo quando lo vidi la prima volta all'Università e lui mi disse: "Sono venuto a dare una mano". Poi per cinque anni fu un vero autentico motore organizzativo finché non fu stroncato da un infarto il 9 agosto 1993. Aveva dato ben più che una mano. Io lo seppi solo verso la fine del mese, perché non fu possibile comunicarmelo prima: ero in villeggiatura all'estero, non avevo lasciato recapito telefonico e ancora non avevo il telefono cel-

Monsignor Álvaro del Portillo  
con Gianni Proietti  
e Ambrogio Piras

Monsignor Álvaro del Portillo  
with Gianni Proietti  
and Ambrogio Piras



path for many others. And so it continued with many other countries: the first student to arrive from a new country was always a surprise and a joy for me.

I would like to recall others who I was fortunate to know, and who are already in heaven, especially Monsignor Giuseppe Molteni, who was Secretary General from 1988 to 1993. I remember when I saw him the first time at the university and he told me: "I came to lend a hand." Then for five years he was a real organizational engine, until he had a heart attack and passed away on August 9, 1993. He had given much more than a hand. I knew of his passing only at the end of the month, because it had not been possible to communicate with me while I was on holiday abroad. I had not left my tele-

phone number, nor did I have a cell phone – they were not very common then – nor email. I would also like to recall Father Raúl Lanzetti, particularly during the meetings of the editorial board of "Annales Theologici", which were held on the attic of Via di San Girolamo; and Father José Luis González Alió, who during a hot summer in Milan – without knowing that we would meet again later at the Academic Center – took Italian lessons for ten days, with little results; Father José Luis will forgive me for saying it, but he was not very good at languages.

I cannot leave out one last memory: on March 22, 1994 I learned that Don Álvaro del Portillo, then the Prelate of Opus Dei and Chancellor of our University,

lulare – erano poco diffusi allora –, né tanto meno disponevo di posta elettronica. Voglio ricordare anche Don Raúl Lanzetti, in particolare durante le riunioni del comitato di redazione di “Annales theologici” che si facevano nell’altana di via San Girolamo; e Don José Luis González Alió, a cui in una lontana e torrida estate milanese – senza sapere che ci saremmo poi rivisti al Centro Accademico – diedi lezioni di italiano per dieci giorni, con scarsi risultati; Don José Luis mi

perdonerà, ma non era molto portato per le lingue.

Non posso dilungarmi. Posso solo dire che in questi anni sono stato testimone di come un’opera apostolica nasce piccola e poi poco alla volta cresce e si sviluppa. Cosa c’è nel futuro della Pontificia Università della Santa Croce? Gli ulteriori sviluppi non si possono prevedere: quello che è certo è che ci sarà sempre il desiderio di servire la Chiesa e tanta grazia di Dio.

would be back that night from a trip to the Holy Land. At that time I lived close to the Ciampino Airport where he landed, I went to greet him with my wife and my eldest daughter, who was then only three months old. Some other families in the area were also there. I noticed that the Father - as the Prelate is familiarly called - was a bit tired, but most of all I noticed his joy in seeing us and the affection with which greeted each one with a kind word. A girl presented him with a bouquet of flowers and he replied saying that he would later offer them to Mary, in the girl's name. Another person present gave him a basket of fresh eggs from his small farm. Don Álvaro was very amused by this unexpected gift and showed that he liked it very much. Then we said goodbye to go home – I seem to remember that it was about 10.00 pm – and I had the good fortune to accompany him to the car and to be the last of the group to see him off.

I was astounded the next morning when arriving at the university I found the rector, Monsignor Lluís Clavell, at the front door surrounded by many students. I asked what the reason was for the gathering, and he told me that during the night Don Álvaro had passed away. I was absolutely incredulous. I replied, "It is impossible, I

saw him last night and he was fine." But I had to accept reality, and shock gave way to sorrow, yet with a sort of certainty of knowing he was in heaven. That same morning I went to the Prelature church of Santa Maria della Pace, where the remains of Don Álvaro were laid. I returned later in the afternoon with my wife. We were near to the remains of Don Álvaro, when someone approached and asked us to exit, thus clearing out the church. We went out into the street and noticed a lot of police ... I immediately thought, someone important is coming, perhaps the President of the Republic, or (in my heart I was hoping that) it was the Holy Father. In fact, on that painful day, it was a true blessing to see John Paul II arrive on Viale Bruno Buozzi. The Pope, who had known Don Álvaro for years, the two connected by friendship, came to pray near him.

I do not want to dwell on this. I can only say that during these years I was a witness to how an apostolic work was born small, and then gradually grew and developed. What is in the future of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross? The future developments cannot be foreseen, but what is certain is that there will always be the presence God's grace and of the desire to serve the Church.