

# **Brief biography of Bishop Alvaro del Portillo (1914-1994)**

06/28/2012

Alvaro del Portillo was born in Madrid on 11 March 1914, the third of eight children of a Mexican mother, Clementina Diez de Sollano, and a Spanish father, Ramón del Portillo y Pardo.

After receiving his secondary education at El Pilar school (Madrid), he entered the School of Civil Engineering, where he completed his

studies in 1941. Subsequently he worked in a number of state water authorities. At the same time he studied Philosophy and Literature, specializing in history, and in 1944 he completed his doctorate on the early exploration of the California coast.

In 1935 he joined Opus Dei, an institution of the Catholic Church that had been founded seven years earlier by St. Josemaría Escrivá. He received formation directly from the founder, with the spirit corresponding to this new path in the Church. He carried out a wide-ranging work of evangelization among his fellow students and colleagues, and from 1939 he undertook numerous apostolic journeys to various cities in Spain.

On 25 June 1944 he was ordained a priest by the Bishop of Madrid, Leopoldo Eijo y Garay, together with José María Hernández Garnica and

José Luis Múzquiz. These were the first three priests of Opus Dei, after the founder.

In 1946 he moved to Rome, a few months prior to St Josemaría moving there, and lived alongside the founder in the years that followed. This proved a crucial period for Opus Dei, which around that time received its first juridical approvals from the Holy See.

For Alvaro del Portillo it was also a decisive period during which he carried out a deep reflection on the role and responsibility of the lay faithful in the Church's mission, through their ordinary work and their social and family relations.

“In a hospital,” he wrote years later by way of illustration, “the Church is not only present through the chaplain: it also acts through the faithful who, as doctors or nurses, strive to provide good professional

service and to show respect and care towards the patients. In a particular locality, the church building will always be an indispensable point of reference, but the only way of reaching those who don't attend it will be through other families.”

Between 1947 and 1950 he spurred forward the apostolic expansion of Opus Dei in Rome, Milan, Naples, Palermo and other Italian cities. He promoted Christian formational activities and provided priestly service to many people. The impact his work had in Italy is reflected today in the numerous streets and squares that have been dedicated to him in various cities.

On 29 June 1948, the founder of Opus Dei erected the Roman College of the Holy Cross in Rome, an international center for formation, of which Alvaro del Portillo was the first rector and in which he taught moral

theology (1948-1953). In that same year, 1948, he obtained a doctorate in Canon Law from the Pontifical University of St Thomas.

During his years in Rome, the various Popes from Pius XII to John Paul II called upon him to carry out numerous tasks as a member of or consultor to 13 bodies within the Holy See.

He played an active role in the Second Vatican Council. John XXIII appointed him as consultor to the Sacred Congregation of the Council (1959-1966). In the stages prior to Vatican II, he was president of the Commission for the Laity. In the course of the Council (1962-65), he was secretary of the Commission on the Discipline of the Clergy and of the Christian People.

After the Council, Paul VI appointed him as consultor to the post-conciliar Commission for Bishops and the

regulation of dioceses (1966). He was also for many years consultor for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The life of Alvaro del Portillo was closely united with that of the founder. He remained always by his side until the very moment of his death, on June 26 1975, helping St Josemaría in his work of evangelisation and pastoral care. He travelled with him to many countries to help set up and give advice on the apostolic works of Opus Dei.

At the time of Alvaro del Portillo's death, an Irish Augustinian, Father John O'Connor, wrote: "on seeing his friendly and unobtrusive presence beside the dynamic figure of Mgr Escriva, there came to my mind the thought of the humility of St. Joseph."

On September 15, 1975, in the General Congress convened after the death of the founder, Don Alvaro del

Portillo was elected to succeed him as head of Opus Dei. On November 28, 1982, when Blessed John Paul II erected Opus Dei as a personal prelature, he appointed Alvaro del Portillo Prelate of the new prelature.

Eight years later, on December 7, 1990, the Pope named him bishop, and on January 6, 1991, he received Episcopal ordination in St. Peter's Basilica.

Over the years he spent as head of Opus Dei, Bishop Alvaro del Portillo promoted the start of activities of the prelature in 20 new countries. In his pastoral visits, which took him to every continent, he spoke to thousands of people about love for the Church and the Pope, and preached persuasively on the Christian message of St. Josemaría about seeking holiness in ordinary life.

As the Prelate of Opus Dei, Mgr Alvaro del Portillo inspired the start of many social and educational initiatives. The *Monkole Hospital* in Kinshasa (Congo), the *Niger Foundation Hospital* in Enugu (Nigeria), the *Center for Industrial Technology and Enterprise (CITE)*, en Cebú, Filipinas) are example of social development projects carried out by members of Opus Dei, with others, under the direct impetus of Bishop del Portillo.

In addition, the *Pontifical University of the Holy Cross* (since 1985) and the *Sedes Sapientiae International Seminary* (from 1990), both in Rome, and the *Bidasoa International Ecclesiastical College* (Pamplona, Spain), have formed for the dioceses thousands of candidates for the priesthood sent by bishops from around the world.

They show the concern of Bishop del Portillo for the role of the priest in today's world, a theme to which he devoted much of his energies, as evidenced during the years of Vatican II.

"The priesthood is not a career," he wrote in 1986, "but a generous, complete self-giving, without calculation or limits, to be sowers of peace and joy in the world, and to open the gates of Heaven to those who benefit from this service and ministry."

Bishop Alvaro del Portillo died in Rome in the early hours of March 23, 1994, just hours after returning from a pilgrimage to Holy Land. On Tuesday, March 22, he had celebrated his last Mass at the Church of the Cenacle in Jerusalem.

Alvaro del Portillo was an author of publications on theological, canonical and pastoral subjects:

*Faithful and Laity in the Church* (1969), *On Priesthood* (1970) and numerous articles, many of them collected posthumously in the volume *Rendere amabile the Verità. Raccolta di scritti di Mons. Álvaro del Portillo*, which was published in 1995 by *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*.

In 1992 the book *Intervista sul Fondatore dell'Opus Dei* was published, a collection of interviews with Italian journalist Cesare Cavalleri about St. Josemaría Escrivá. It has been translated into several languages. The English translation is entitled *Immersed in God*.

Since his death in 1994, thousands of people have testified in writing to the memory of Bishop Alvaro del Portillo: his kindness, the warmth of his smile, his humility, his supernatural courage, and the peace of mind his words inspired in them.

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(01/19/2026)