

# I knew don Alvaro !!! I knew a saint !!

Testimony given on May 30th in Vancouver (Conference about Bishop Alvaro del Portillo The successor to Saint Josemaria Escriva, founder of Opus Dei)

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I had just turned 19 when I met Bishop Alvaro del Portillo for the first time. It was during a University Congress in Rome during Holy Week. I knew almost nothing of him except that he wanted to have an encounter with us young people from all over

the world. I was not expecting anything exceptional. But when he arrived on the stage, I felt something special in my heart and a very clear thought came to me in that precise moment: I felt as though I were standing before Jesus Christ.

On June 28<sup>th</sup> 2012, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI signed a decree recognizing the "heroic virtues" of Bishop Alvaro del Portillo. That meant that the Pope recognized that Don Alvaro, as we affectionately used to call him, exemplified heroic Christian virtues in his life.

One year later, in July 2013, Pope Francis, acknowledged the miracle attributed to his intercession and this year, on September 27<sup>th</sup>, Don Alvaro will be declared blessed. You can watch on the Opus Dei's website a short video describing the miracle of the recovery of a new born from

Chile after a cardiac arrest lasting longer than half an hour.

It is not every day that we can say we have met a holy person.

I consider myself very blessed not just to have met that holy man, Alvaro del Portillo, but also to have spent time with him. While studying in Rome from 1988 to 1990 I had the chance to see and hear him, but it was especially when I started to collaborate in the central government of Opus Dei in 1990 that I had many occasions to be with him, for work reasons and during informal gatherings, both large and small.

After each encounter with Don Alvaro I would habitually concretize a resolution to be closer to Our Lord. Just seeing how he would speak to someone or give himself generously in the study of a matter, whether of grave or of slight

importance, was enough to instil the desire in me to be a better person.

I will return to my years in Rome with Don Alvaro later, but I want to say that I was also very privileged, as many other people in this room probably were as well, to have heard Don Alvaro during his two pastoral trips to Canada, as Prelate of Opus Dei, in April 1983 and in February 1988 for 4 and 10 days, respectively.

Thousands of people in Canada have had the chance to listen to his fatherly and affectionate words of human and supernatural wisdom, always presented very simply. I still remember how he explained our personal itinerary: "We come from God, we are on earth and we will go back to God." I recall that coming out of a large get-together with Don Alvaro at the University of Montreal on February 28<sup>th</sup> 1988, my father had only this to say: "A holy man." My

dad is a man of few words, but he had captured the essential.

Who was Álvaro del Portillo? Don Alvaro's love for the Church and his desire to serve it unconditionally were constants in his life. He is most well-known for his work in the Second Vatican Council as we have heard from Fr. Soria.

To learn more about the details of his life, I encourage you to invest some time in reading the biography written by Salvador Bernals and, if you can read Spanish, the last one written by Javier Medina.

Briefly, Don Alvaro was born on March 11<sup>th</sup> 1914 and at the age of 21, he discovered his vocation as a Numerary member in Opus Dei. For people who might not be familiar with Opus Dei, Numeraries are those members of the Prelature who have received from God the gift of apostolic celibacy and who are fully

available to look after the specific apostolic activities of Opus Dei.

So from the age of 21, Don Alvaro served God and all souls with generosity, dedication and a joyful spirit. He quickly became a pillar for St Josemaría who, when Alvaro had only been in Opus Dei for four years, started to call him “Saxum”, a latin word meaning rock, alluding to his interior solidity. He was ordained to the priesthood on June 25<sup>th</sup> 1944. After St Josemaria’s death, he was elected as his first successor on September 15<sup>th</sup> 1975. When Pope John Paul II erected Opus Dei as a personal Prelature on November 1982, he appointed him Prelate of Opus Dei, and on January 6<sup>th</sup> 1991 ordained him a bishop.

What did I see in him and why was I convinced that I was in the presence of a Saint each time I had the chance to be close to him?

His peace is probably what touched me the most. His proximity to God radiated from his person in such a way that he emanated peace as a consequence.

One of many examples I can offer is the following. I was asked a couple of times to be his interpreter for French speaking visitors who would come to meet with Don Alvaro for around 15-20 minutes. I was usually given 24 hours' notice and I remember being extremely nervous from the moment of the request until the moment in which I had to welcome Don Alvaro and introduce him to the visitors.

The reason for my nervousness was that I was conscious my French had become somewhat rusty as I had few opportunities to speak it while in Rome. I had difficulty changing register and I was very anxious at the thought of not finding the right words, which indeed happened more than once.

All that disappeared as soon as I was in presence of Don Alvaro. I experienced always the same emotion: a deep and tangible peace as soon as he entered the room.

His presence, his gaze and his voice when he was greeting me would be like a balm of peace which stayed during the whole encounter. I felt he was the one whispering to me, gently and with an affectionate smile, the words I was fumbling for.

This feeling of peace has become for me a sign of his spiritual presence since his departure to heaven. Concretely, some years ago, the daughter of a friend of mine was undergoing a very painful and difficult pregnancy. I told her I would recommend the wellbeing of her daughter and the baby to Don Alvaro's intercession. A couple of times the daughter was rushed to the hospital, herself at risk as well as the

baby. Whenever I received this alarming news, I would instinctively turn to Don Alvaro, asking him for a sign as to whether I could continue hoping for the best and giving that assurance to my friend.

I did not want to communicate false hopes. I remember being worry over the situation, but each time I would pray to him, he would give me that same sentiment of peace that I experienced in his presence. It was as if he was telling me, “I am taking care of the baby and her mom.” Sure enough, the baby was born in perfect health and she is now a beautiful lively little girl of 6. Don Alvaro has become the “Catholic angel” of this Jewish family, using the expression of my friend.

His humility is another virtue that I witnessed frequently. Lately, I read the detailed biography of Javier Medina that I mentioned earlier, and

I was amazed to discover all his accomplishments, his numerous talents, and his extraordinary intellectual gifts that he put to the service of all souls with such naturalness and simplicity.

Humility is not fashionable nowadays — it is frequently mistaken as a sign of weakness. In reality, humility is the virtue of the strong and magnanimous person. In the case of Don Alvaro, his whole being was suffused with humility. He worked with humility; he would always ask for light from the Holy Spirit, aware that God's light is infinitely more powerful than the light of our intelligence. He would constantly give thanks to God for the positive results of an endeavour in which he had intervened directly or indirectly. When people would thank him for something he had done, he would invariably say, "Thanks be to God." He did not appropriate for

himself any merit resulting from his actions, words, or pastoral care.

Perhaps his humility was most manifest in his fidelity to the Founder of Opus Dei and his desire to be only St Josemaría's shadow, first as his collaborator and after as his successor. He had the humility to put all his talents to the service of the Founder, in a hidden but extremely efficacious way. Even though his own personality and temperament were different from St Josemaría's, he understood that his role was to be there, like a pillar, *Saxum*, and to facilitate the Founder in accomplishing the mission God had entrusted him.

As you know, Opus Dei is latin for Work of God and is familiarly called, *the Work*. The specific mission of the Prelature of Opus Dei is to foster the search for holiness and to do apostolate in the middle of the world,

by means of ordinary work and all the other circumstances of daily life.

As the successor of St Josemaría, Don Alvaro gave to all his children in Opus Dei a wonderful example of how to combine a lively spirit of initiative to continue doing Opus Dei along with total fidelity to the message received by God and entrusted to the Founder.

I was also moved by his simplicity and good humour, concretely, on what had to do with his physical limitations during his last years on earth. He was experiencing the natural consequences of age, and he would make us laugh with the fact, for example, that he could hardly see. He was also frequently exhausted by the amount of work he had to do, and he would not hide his fatigue, but would share it with simplicity, never complaining, but at the same time making us aware of

the fact that he felt the growing weight of governing Opus Dei, as its apostolic work continued to develop all over the world.

His affection and love for others were very much in evidence. You would feel loved in his presence, not with a soft sentimentality, but with a strong affection that pushed you to be better, as I mentioned earlier.

His love of God and of others was evident in a variety of ways. It happened more than once that submitting a study for the approval of Don Alvaro, it would come back to us, with no approval, and with some words written in red pen: “This study reflects little love of God.” And he would be right! How could he know that? I think that he had a capacity to detect those failures because he was in God’s presence. One of many ways his love of God would transfer to those of us who worked with him

was how he would make demands on us, concretely in the quality, diligence and depth of our studies. He was quick and firm in correcting any sign of bureaucracy and procrastination, making us aware that it could harm people. When he would perceive that we could do better he would say it bluntly and with fortitude but always with affection.

The following anecdote will touch mothers in particular. One day Don Alvaro was made aware that someone who was suffering an illness for several weeks would eat very little, in fact too little, and as a consequence was becoming weaker and weaker. He was worried. He then suggested asking her what her mom used to cook when she was young. He knew that there is nothing better than the food you were served when you were little. They asked her, but the person could not remember.

A few days after he was so happy, and we know because he repeated time and again, that someone thought of bringing to that sick person a cook book with beautiful pictures, featuring dishes of her home town. This did the trick and she was able to start eating again.

Don Alvaro would not rest easily when he knew someone was ill and was going through a difficult moment. He would ask to be kept informed of that person's progress, so he could pray more concretely.

Now I would like to speak about two physical features, his smile and his gaze.

We sometimes say that the eyes are the window of the soul.

If this is true, and I tend to think that it is, his soul was rich because his gaze led you to a fascinating world of goodness.

One day on the feast of the Ascension of Our Lord, he encouraged us to keep our gaze fixed on Christ using the lyrics of a Spanish love song which goes like this, “He has blue eyes, bluer than turquoise, blue as the sea and as hopeful dreams from looking at the sky,”

Don Alvaro had blue eyes and I am sure he was constantly looking at the sky, the sky being God dwelling in his soul.

So yes, his eyes were a reflection of a deep interior life.

His eyes reflected loyalty, humility, compassion, attention to others and love for all souls.

His gaze was penetrating and fatherly.

It was the gaze of a contemplative, but one with both feet on earth, being totally immersed in the present

moment. It happened regularly that after having been with hundreds of people he would detect something in the face or the expression of someone in the room who had not necessarily been physically near him.

Concretely, I recall that once after a get-together with at least 200 hundred people, he called my office to tell me that he had noticed that so-and-so seemed worried. He asked me to call her and enquire if something was wrong and let her know that he was praying for her. I did what he asked and sure enough, that person had received a phone call some time before the get-together with Don Alvaro and was worried by some news concerning her family. This type of affectionate 'radar' detected many sorrows and pains that were perceived by no one else, even by those much closer to that person. Don Alvaro had a great sensitivity and he

used it to look after the physical and spiritual well-being of the others.

The other feature I would like to touch upon is his smile. There is a lot of literature around smiles, but it is enough here to say that there are different types of smiles, and they can all signify something different (happiness, anxiety, sarcasm, fear, pride, love, satisfaction, laughter, etc.). A smile can communicate what it would take thousands of words to describe.

Don Alvaro had a characteristic smile. The one that you see on the prayer card is HIS smile.

It was a smile that accompanied him, in good times and in difficult times, which makes me think that it was the consequence of his interior happiness and serenity.

The present Prelate of Opus Dei, Don Javier Echeverría, has said that Don

Alvaro's smile has already converted many people.

I would describe his smile as paternal (not to be confused with paternalistic), serene, affectionate and full of goodness.

Before I finish, I'd like to share with you three brief comments about Don Alvaro taken from communications sent some days after his death by some well-known people in the Church.

John Paul II sent a telegram to the Vicar General of Opus Dei, on March 23rd 1994, the day of Don Alvaro's death, which said: "He was an example of fortitude, trust in divine providence and fidelity to the See of Peter."

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, who was then Card. Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, wrote in a letter

dated March 25<sup>th</sup> 1994 to the Vicar General: (quote)“I remember the humility and availability in any circumstance that characterized the work of Msgr. Del Portillo as Consulter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. With his competence and experience, he offered an exceptional contribution, as I was personally able to verify.” (end of quote)

Finally, Sister Teresa Margarita, a Discalced Carmelite, wrote in a letter in 1998: (quote)“I met him on a retreat he gave for young people at the School of the Carmelites of Charity in Vigo in 1945. He impressed me right away with his distinguished demeanor, his recollected spirit and deep humility, and also his simplicity. He was both kind and welcoming, and took care of us with evident goodness.” (end of quote)

I will leave you with some words of the letter of St James. When I read them, I thought of Don Alvaro and how he incarnated the spirit conveyed in those verses. It goes like this:

“The wisdom from above is first of all pure, then peaceful, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without inconstancy and insincerity. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for those who cultivate peace.” (St James, 3, 17-18)

On September 27, the Church will declare solemnly that Don Alvaro has entered in the glory of heaven.

It is now up to each of you to experience his paternal care and assistance in your personal lives. Your devotion to Don Alvaro will be the best testimony that you are in the presence of a holy person who is close to you and who is

interested in each aspect of your life to help you to be holy in your day to day circumstances.

Monique David

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