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## **Saxum - Don Alvaro**

The story of a modern saint,  
'rock' and model to many

2014-09-24

Saxum, the Latin word for rock, is a nick name of sorts given to the prayer “the Memorare” and to a man, Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, who lived his life heroically and was the rock of Opus Dei. On September 27th, 2014, the Venerable Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, the second leader of Opus Dei, will be beatified. A miraculous healing of a newborn Chilean boy, who had suffered major cardiac

arrest a few days after his birth, and was considered by the doctors dead, recovered to live a normal life after his parents started praying through the bishop for a healing.

I first met the Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, Don Alvaro as he is affectionately known, a few weeks after he died. I had just started to live the plan of life in Opus Dei in earnest, when he died suddenly, just 17 hours after he celebrated Mass at the Cenacle. He died of a heart attack just hours after returning from his first trip to the Holy Land. The fact that he was only my father for two weeks did not scare me off from learning to lean on him and rely on him to help me survive day-to-day life.

Just a few weeks after his death, I had the privilege of watching a film of this humble man's visit to the Holy Land. I still have etched in my mind

the wave he gave us at the end of the film, just a short time before his death, as he sat at his desk upon return from his trip. Pope John Paul II had arrived shortly after his passing from this life to the next to pray over his body and, instead of offering the normal prayers one offers at death, prayed the “Glory Be”. That gesture confirmed Don Alvaro’s holiness to me and now that Don Alvaro beatification has been accepted, it has been confirmed to the whole Church.

Alvaro del Portillo was born in Madrid on March 11, 1914, the third of eight children. He studied to be an engineer and achieved doctorates in philosophy, liberal arts and canon law.

On July 7th, 1935, while still an engineering student, Don Alvaro asked for admission to Opus Dei. During the Spanish Civil War, Don

Alvaro was the person who provided the most assistance to the Founder of Opus Dei, St. Josemaria Escriva, over their years together. Opus Dei is dedicated to the spiritual growth of the Catholic laity and assists its members to use their work and their ordinary activities as a way to encounter God.

On June 25th, 1944, Don Alvaro was ordained a priest, one of the first three priests of Opus Dei. In 1946, he moved to Rome, where he carried out various tasks in service to Opus Dei and to the Holy See. In 1963, he was named by Pope John XXIII as a consultant on the Pontifical Commission for the revision of the Code of Canon Law. He was also a Secretary of the Second Vatican Council Commission that drafted the decree “Presbyterorum Ordinis”. Pope John Paul II made Opus Dei a personal prelature in 1982, and he named Don Alvaro its first prelate.

Pope John Paul II ordained Don Alvaro a bishop in 1991.

Don Alvaro died in Rome on March 23rd, 1994, just after returning from a trip to the Holy Land. He had celebrated his last Mass at the Cenacle 17 hours before dying. John Paul II went that afternoon to the Prelatic Church of Opus Dei, dedicated to Our Lady of Peace, where Don Alvaro's body lay. Instead of praying the normal prayers one prays at death, the Pope offered instead the "Glory Be". His body now lies in repose in the crypt of that same church in Rome. I had the privilege of praying there in 2002 at a time I was looking for a miracle.

Bishop Alvaro del Portillo was an example of fidelity in following the spirit of sanctification in work and ordinary life, a spirit he learned directly from St. Josemaria.

Over the years I watched many of my friends rely on this “Rock” as they prayed to him for his intercessions. And I saw amazing things happen.

One couple I know very well, who had been childless, prayed to Don Alvaro for help in adopting a child. Thanks to his intercession, they were able to adopt 4 children, each whose adoptions were confirmed on some important day of Don Alvaro’s life. They had a clear sign that Don Alvaro had interceded for them.

Over the years I have been involved with Opus Dei, I have seen extraordinary favours granted due to the intercession of Alvaro, many in the way of helping out with financial needs. Don Alvaro was the man who helped Opus Dei grow over the early years and was the one who usually went to the bank or donors to look for financial help in those years. His humble manner and true holiness

meant he was usually not refused in his requests for financial help.

And he has continued from heaven to help those in financial need. I watched a group of women, mostly house wives, my good friends, pray to him to help them build a university residence and conference centre for women in the heart of the University of Toronto, said to be an impossible task. I spent a week this past summer in that residence, Kintore College, and I was overwhelmed with the fruits of these women's prayers. Their prayers built a rock solid place for women that will be there for many years to come, a place where Toronto, and probably the whole country, will be transformed by the good works that will happen there.

I had my own prayer to Don Alvaro. I just wanted help in providing for the support of one of my children, who

suffers from a mental illness. I had prayed for help to St. Josemaria, the founder of Opus Dei, to help us get control of this son's illness, and that had been granted. But, when I looked at the prospect of a life of a person on medication for a mental illness, I was worried and troubled by this. I did not want my child to walk around catatonic all day in some flop house.

So I did ask Don Alvaro for a favour. I needed a solution to this problem. Mind you, I was not very dedicated and persistent in bugging him. I prayed the prayer card dedicated to him just 9 days. And a quick response did not come.

But, a few years later, this child did win a large lottery, quite by chance and quite innocently, with his weekly \$2 contribution to a group ticket with his work. This child worked only a few hours a week at a breakfast



diner as a dishwasher. After only a short time in participating in this ticket the 7 workers, mostly all quite poor, won a large sum they all shared. I watched a miracle as my son thought of others first and helped all his family before locking up his money in a trust to help him provide a decent lifestyle for himself over the coming years.

It took me a while to actually realize it was Don Alvaro who had granted my favour. When it all happened, at first I was overwhelmed with the experience that I did not know what had happened, but knew it was a gift from God. But, as I thanked God for this help, I eventually remembered my asking Don Alvaro for his help because of all the extraordinary favours I had witnesses he granted my friend. Now I have learned to daily pray to Don Alvaro and ask him to help my family and friends in all

their special needs and I continue to see favours granted.

We all need to go back to relying on the supernatural help that is just waiting there for us to tap into, instead of journeying along in this valley of tears ourselves, never asking for help. We can get through any situation no matter how terrible, if we would learn to abandon our want to control everything and do it ourselves, and instead ask those who have gone before us to help us. We have been provided many rocks in this life to stand on. Don Alvaro, Saxum, is a big rock we should all learn to lean on.

*Article written by Dianne Wood and published by "Catholic Insight" in the July/August 2014 issue*

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(2025-12-16)