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A priest and a father

An article by Bishop Javier Echevarría, published in L'Osservatore Romana on the day Bishop Alvaro del Portillo died.

02/28/2004

Early this morning heart failure cut short the life of Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, Prelate of Opus Dei. Shortly before 4:00 a.m. he called me to say he was feeling unwell. While the doctor was attending to him, I gave him the last sacraments, recalling that he had often explicitly expressed

his desire both to me and to other people he met to receive them.

Our eyes are full of tears but from our hearts wells up a sincere act of gratitude: the circumstances accompanying his passing to Heaven bear the mark of a final fatherly caress from God. Only yesterday we came back from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It had been a week of intense recollected prayer, in which he had been able to follow with deeply felt recollection the footsteps of Jesus Christ. During those days he had pastoral meetings with a good number of the faithful there.

He encouraged them to be promoters of peace: peace in society is a consequence of inner peace which in turn springs from correspondence to God's grace, the struggle of each one against the traces of sin which we bear within us.

Yesterday he had celebrated Holy Mass for the last time, in Jerusalem, in the Church of the Cenacle. He had returned to Rome yesterday evening. A group of his children were by his side when he passed from this life to the next. Tears turn into prayer: in prayer, pain and consolation merge into one.

As we pray today, we also ask God for the grace to help us to reap the inheritance which Bishop del Portillo has left us. His life was one long act of fidelity to the spiritual message of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá. That is the root cause of the fruitfulness with which the Lord has blessed the work of this son of his from the moment he joined Opus Dei in 1935, at the age of 21.

Towards the end of March 1939, when the Spanish Civil War was nearing its end, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá wrote to him saying, "How

white is the path, the lengthy path, that you still have to travel. White, and full of fruit, like a field ripe for harvest. Blessed is the fruitfulness of the apostle, more beautiful than all the marvels of this world."

There followed, in rapid succession, the resumption of the ordinary apostolic activities of Opus Dei all over the country, the completion of his engineering degree and the start of his professional career and, most important of all, his close cooperation with the founder in the government of Opus Dei. The two of them lived and worked side by side, day after day for nearly forty years, during which he learned to live in continuous union with God, to pray without ceasing, to devote his life to the care of souls, to love the Cross and to live his priesthood fully, even in the innermost recesses of his heart.

Bishop Alvaro del Portillo was one of the first three members of Opus Dei to be ordained, on 25th June 1944. A few months from now we would have been celebrating the golden jubilee of his priesthood. All the hopes that Blessed Josemaría confided to him in that letter in 1939 have been fulfilled: a marvellous sequence of graces which I feel it my duty to record, for God is faithful to his promises. Every priest, even one tied down by his ministry in the remotest of villages, is a witness to the fruitfulness of the priesthood of Christ; fruit which is nearly always hidden from men's eyes, and cannot be translated into statistics but which lasts unto eternity. These are the fruits of grace, of fidelity to Christian commitment, of peace, of understanding and forgiveness, of generosity and sacrifice, of suffering transfigured into love.

Christ lives on in his Church and he acts through the voice and consecrated hands of his priests. The grace which flows from the sacraments and the uncompromising and faithful proclamation of the Gospel, constantly renew the Gospel miracles. "Even today blind men, who had lost the ability to look up to heaven and contemplate the wonderful works of God, recover their sight. Lame and crippled men, who were bound by their passions and whose hearts had forgotten to love, recover their freedom. Deaf men, who did not want to know God, are given back their hearing. Dumb men, whose tongues were bound because they did not want to acknowledge their defeats, begin to talk. And dead men, in whom sin had destroyed life, come to life again" (Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 131). The faithful priest, as a dispenser of the divine mysteries, hears in the deepest part

of his soul those words of Jesus Christ, "rejoice rather because your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). I am a witness of the marvels which God has done through the ministry of Bishop del Portillo and therefore I am sure that God has welcomed him into his glory.

Re-reading what I have written I see that the words "faithful" and "fidelity" keep recurring. Such repetition may be a sign of poor style, but I prefer not to change it because for me those words sum up perfectly the personality of Alvaro del Portillo. I too shared with him the conviction that Blessed Josemaría Escrivá was an instrument chosen by God for a mission of divine providence for the Church. In the forty-four years I worked with him, I saw him carry that conviction to its logical conclusion. At all times, but more especially after September 15, 1975, when in the first ballot he was

unanimously elected to succeed our founder as the head of Opus Dei, he was determined to be no more than the shadow of the founder. In this faithfulness of his, without any senseless attempt to bring up to date what, like the Gospel, is perennially up to date – it was Blessed Josemaría himself who wrote that in the things of God, *aggiornamento* means above all fidelity – is to be found the cause of the fruitfulness which characterised his life as a priest.

What are the signs of his fruitfulness as a priest? Above all, the service he rendered to the Holy See, carried out with tireless dedication and unswerving loyalty to the Holy Father; his work on various commissions of the Second Vatican Council where he was an active adviser (among other tasks, he was Secretary to the Commission on the Clergy, whose work led to the conciliar decree "Presbyterorum

Ordinis"); his work as consultor to a number of Congregations (for the Doctrine of the Faith, for Saints, Clergy, Religious, etc.), Pontifical Commissions and Councils. His life was a tangible expression of that aspiration of Blessed Josemaría: "to serve the Church as the Church wishes to be served."

Some eighteen years have passed since the day he was elected to succeed our founder. During this time more than eight hundred members of the Prelature have been ordained to the priesthood with the desire of serving the Church with all their heart. Opus Dei has begun its apostolic work in twenty-one new countries: in the Americas -- Bolivia, Honduras, Nicaragua, Trinidad and Tobago and the Dominican Republic; in Europe -- Sweden, Finland, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary; In Africa -- Zaire, Ivory Coast and Cameroon; in Asia -- India,

Taiwan, Macao, Hong Kong and Singapore; in Oceania – New Zealand; not forgetting Jerusalem. Thanks to his pastoral zeal, echoing John Paul II in his call to the whole Church for a new dynamism in evangelisation, the message of Opus Dei, which is the proclamation of the universal call to holiness and the sanctifying value of ordinary work, has been opened to new horizons.

All round the world there have been major social projects, always seeking to foster what constitutes the first and most important responsibility of the Pastors of the Church, the spiritual fruits of salvation. Some of these projects are noteworthy for the way in which they seek to solve the problems facing the society in which they operate, such as universities in countries which are trying to train leaders who will promote just development and the dignity of man, and education and health care

institutes in areas and among populations that are particularly deprived, especially in Latin America and Africa. There have also been events which must be seen as milestones in the history of Opus Dei because they represent the culmination of projects to which Blessed Josemaría himself had contributed with years of prayer and toil, such as the establishment of Opus Dei as a personal prelature. Another such project is the Roman Athenaeum of the Holy Cross [now the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross], fruit of that zeal of the founder which led him to devote his finest energies to the service of the Church through the training and formation of priests of exemplary doctrine and spiritual life.

The spirit which inspired Bishop Alvaro del Portillo in his mission as Prelate of Opus Dei expressed itself in a very special way in the

beatification of the founder. On that unforgettable day we saw more clearly than ever the fruits of that fidelity of his. There we saw a multitude of people giving witness with their impressive prayerfulness to the truth that the identity of the Christian resides in the search for God, in the desire for sanctity and in love for the Holy Father and the Church.

Large numbers of the faithful have been coming these last few hours to the Church of the Prelature to pray before the mortal remains of Bishop Alvaro del Portillo. In their eyes you can see sorrow, affection and gratitude. In line with what he himself taught us over the years, I can affirm that today is not the close of one stage in the life of Opus Dei nor the start of a new one. We are still in the period of continuity and of fidelity to the spirit bequeathed to us by Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, but

now we know we can count on a new intercessor in Heaven.

L'Osservatore Romana // Bishop
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(03/22/2026)