

Alvaro is more than a drink

A bottle and a man come to my mind every time I hear the name "Alvaro". The bottle, known to many in Kenya but few out there, is a rich blend between malt beer and fruit produced by EABL. It is non-alcoholic and comes in pineapple and pear crisp flavour.

10/10/2014

The man, known to few in Kenya but many out there, is Alvaro del Portillo,

a prestigious engineer turned priest, then bishop and now saint.

Alvaro del Portillo died in Rome in 1994, just a few hours after having returned from the Holy Land and having said his last Mass at the church of the Cenacle in Jerusalem, where Jesus had his Last Supper. This is how God treats his friends. He will be beatified tomorrow in Madrid, his hometown.

A huge group of Kenyans have travelled to Madrid to attend this ceremony for a man, who according to Pope Francis, "knew how to combine an intense spiritual life grounded on his faithful following of Christ, with a generous apostolic determination that forged him as a pilgrim in the five continents."

Alvaro left his footprints in hundreds of countries around the world. In Kenya he was the decisive voice

behind the growth of Strathmore University.

He saw the realisation of the plans to set it up in Madaraka and constantly encouraged the university authorities to seek the help of the alumni body to find means and ways so that no one would be left out of mainstream education.

He also pushed for the inauguration of Kimlea Training Centre in Limuru, where women from the rural areas are taught basic household skills, catering and business, to improve their livelihoods and get them out of the poverty cycle brought about by the exploitation of permanent casual labour.

Alvaro also pushed for the foundation of the Informal Sector Business Institute, in Eastlands, a fruitful initiative that has turned hundreds of *jua kali* traders into

successful small and medium-size entrepreneurs.

This is what saints do. They are not lone rangers or man-solo, but achieve by inspiring others, through example, with courage and determination, to be good and do good. That's how saints change the world.

Caricature of Saints

Sainthood is a little bit of a mystery. It is one of those gifts God often grants to amazing souls. Saints are the living proof of God's ordinary presence in the world.

There are thousands of saints around us, people with golden hearts, blessed hands, bright eyes and smiling cheeks.

Saints are ordinary people who work well, who are honest, who are quick to get into motion; they would rather

repair what is wrong, and not sit to watch and complain.

Saints work and pray in exemplary ways. They work hard as if God did not listen to them, and pray too, as if they could achieve nothing on their own; a good and faithful husband, wife, father, mother. A good and generous friend is well on his way to sainthood.

Saints are not boring creatures, who only see apparitions, have ruptures or spend their day in a church. They do not have their backs bent due to heavy rosary loads. No, these are not saints, but their caricature.

Saints are made of flesh and bones; they know how to live, love and laugh. They suffer little on their own account, but much for their friends and the world.

Raised to the altars RAISED TO THE ALTARS

Alvaro's sainthood did not come by at a small price. He spent 647 days in confinement and 55 days in jail during the Spanish Civil War. He was beaten up and had a gun pointed right on his temple on several occasions. His father, who was taken to the same jail, died of tuberculosis. He never spoke of his sufferings and much of this was only known after his death.

At a time when many relegated and abandoned Pope Paul VI, Alvaro stood for him and spoke to all about fidelity to their faith. At a time of crisis he said the real crisis affecting the Church was a crisis of saints.

Alvaro is the first graduate engineer to have been raised to the altars, but he will not be the last. Alvaro opens a new avenue in Christian tradition, a direct call to all modern men and women to struggle for greater things than just a pay cheque. There is more

to happiness and to humanity than wealth; a good example to the modern professional Christian.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry says in his masterpiece The Little Prince: “Here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye. The most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or touched, they are felt with the heart.”

Alvaro saw with the heart, and that heart has left a legacy that is still touching many souls across all continents, races and religions. The legacy of a saint is like the legacy of a teacher; we all know when it started, but we will never see when it ends.

Dr Luis Franceschi

First published in the Daily Nation on September 26th, 2014

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