

Bishop Alvaro del Portillo and Opus Dei

My friend was painting a stone wall. Nothing artistic. Just plain white. It was the wall surrounding the college in Rome where we were studying. The young men living there were members of Opus Dei doing studies in philosophy, theology and canon law. The head of Opus Dei at that time was Father Alvaro del Portillo. He was the first successor of Saint Josemaria, the founder of Opus Dei.

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My friend painting the wall was close to the entrance gate. He noticed a car drive up to the gate from the parking lot, but didn't pay much attention. Someone was opening the gate, so the car could leave. It was routine. In a few seconds, the car would be gone, and he would continue painting. He was trying to finish the job before sunset. But he didn't want to rush. He was trying to do a good job. It's something he had learned from Saint Josemaria—a lesson that constituted the core of the founder's message about Opus Dei.

Opus Dei is a Latin phrase which means “work of God”. The message is that ordinary men and women living in the middle of the world are called to work for God. While earning a living to support themselves and

their families, they try to live the same way Jesus lived when he worked as a carpenter. They work, and they turn their work into a dialogue with God our Father in heaven.

This is how St Josemaria explained it: “Jesus lived for thirty three years. Thirty of those years were spent in silence and obscurity, submission and work. This is what we are called to imitate: the hidden life of Christ in Nazareth. Here is a mission for ordinary Christians that is heroic—to carry out, in a holy way, all the different kinds of work that people do. Heroism in your work means taking care of the small details and finishing it well.”

My friend, John, continued to paint. He caught a glimpse of someone moving towards him. He turned to see who it was. Before leaving, Father Alvaro del Portillo had asked

the driver to wait. Getting got out of the car, he walked across the grass to the place where John was painting. This was in the year 1979, a few years after the death of St Josemaria. Though Father Alvaro del Portillo had not yet been ordained a bishop, he had been chosen to be the first successor of the founder and was the head of Opus Dei.

Father Alvaro asked John, “Do you want me to show you how to paint?” It seemed a bit odd. The priest was dressed in a black cassock. John was a cheeky chap. He smiled and held out the paint bucket with the brush, soaked in white paint, half expecting Father Alvaro to take it. The priest answered, “No, you keep it. I only wanted to remind you what our founder taught us. Make every stroke of the brush an act of love for God.”

John stood staring at Father Alvaro, absorbing the wisdom of those

simple words. “Make every stroke of the brush...” The priest smiled, then turned and went back to the car. Before John could say anything, the car left and the gates were closed.

John came to tell me about it. In the years that followed, I was hoping Father Alvaro would do something similar for me, but that never happened. Even so, I got to see him often during my years in Rome. I was eventually ordained a priest for the Prelature of Opus Dei. Father Alvaro del Portillo, being the Prelate of the Prelature, was ordained a bishop by Pope John Paul II.