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A Testimony on Don Alvaro

Bishop Anthony Muheria (Kitui, Kenya) participated in the Study Conference in the Centennial of Msgr. Álvaro del Portillo, Vir fidelis multum laudabitur, Rome from March 12th to 14th, 2014. Here is his presentation.

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Don Alvaro's sincere and tangible love for the Church

Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, simply Don Alvaro, was truly a mentor and a father to all his children in Opus Dei. While loving all, it also was obvious the opportunities he sought to address priests, and more specially his priest sons, who he knew play such an important role in the spiritual formation of all the faithful of the Prelature. At the core of his message to all priests, after underlining the need for personal struggle for Holiness, he always spoke softly yet forcefully on the need for loyalty and Love for the Church.

In the over six years I was blessed to live fairly close to Don Alvaro, while undertaking my studies in the University of the Holy Cross and formation at the Roman College of the Holy Cross, I was one of many who learnt from his example and life, the true meaning of “Love for the Church”.

It wasn't merely an intellectual issue, nor an abstract concern for the Church. Soon after the beatification of St Josemaría, someone commented to him in those family get togethers, that it was amazing how God had used the Holy Father John Paul II to bring about many blessings for the Work. He was referring to the erection of Opus Dei as a Personal Prelature, the Ordination of the Prelate, Don Alvaro as a bishop, and the celebration of the beatification of St Josemaría presided by the Holy Father. It then seemed only natural, the person suggested, that we should have a great affection for the Holy Father John Paul II. Don Alvaro's reaction was immediate, going to lengths to explain that our love for the Holy Father must be theological and not merely sentiments.

It must be a consequential love that knows to sacrifice ourselves for him, to seek to know him and his writings,

a love that leads us to pray incessantly for his person and intentions, to bring joys to him... whoever he may be. Yet he also added, no doubt we do feel especially grateful towards Pope John Paul II who has been Gods instrument for these blessings. It was customary for him to encourage those living in Rome, to go to the Sunday angelus messages, to listen to the Pope and show him our love.

During the UNIV encounters of the university student in Rome, I personally recall the encouragement to make presentations in the show – without any inhibitions- in the various pop songs we sang, to make the Holy Father have a good time, as he watched the young people enjoying. That meant dancing, and even wearing some fancy clothes.

A moment of joy and laughter for the Holy Father was a practical way of

Love for the Church. He would also urge us to give the Holy Father good news of apostolate and so lighten his burden.

Following the spirit of St Josemaría, he never ceased to remind all in Opus Dei of the duty we have to Love the Church. In the Beatification ceremony of St Josemaría in May 1992, he reiterated and reminded all during the mass of thanksgiving, of nurturing the desire to “Serve the Church as the Church wishes to be served”, using the words of Our beloved founder. This he lived and instilled in us forcefully in the many encounters we had with him.

Love for the Church meant not only love of the Magisterium, and orthodoxy, but

moreover, making constant efforts to deepen our doctrinal and theological

understanding. In encounters with priests he always insisted that we must find time every day, for some theological and doctrinal study. Something he lived himself, and I confess, difficult to live within the demanding schedule of the apostolate.

Love for the Church also meant an exquisite attention, as a person in love, to the

liturgical celebrations. Don Alvaro always paid a lot of attention to the preparation of liturgical ceremonies, up to the little details. Needless to say how obedient he was to the master of ceremonies. Now, as a bishop, I know how hard that can be. Following our Founders spirit, he insisted on rehearsals before even the simplest ceremonies. At times he would come to acquaint himself with the place and give suggestions of improvements. In one occasion as a

deacon, just before the solemn benediction I was serving in, I told him how nervous I was. His answer was simply, “do it thinking only of God presence” (Hazlo cara a Dios) and don’t worry. It wasn’t efficiency he was urging me to, but piety and love for God, in loving the Church’s liturgy.

His love for the Church also showed in the tender affection and reverence towards the Bishops of the Church. Most eloquent is the evidence of the many postcards he sent to ecclesiastics during his last trip in Holy Land, at the eve of his life, many of which arrived after his death. His affection was genuine, first at the human level, but moved more by reverence towards the bishops. He never visited a town in his trips without seeking to meet and listen to the bishop of the diocese who in later years was often younger

then himself, promising him prayers, which he actually did.

During my stay in Cavabianca, the See of the Roman college of the Holy Cross, on several occasions, he asked us the students, to host and entertain Cardinals and bishops who may have been far from their homes on great feast-days or may have been a bit tired. I remember more vividly the shows we prepared for Cardinal Cassidy on a Easter time and Cardinal Bernadine Gantin on the anniversary of his ordination, just as examples. Other bishops were also invited for dinner and a lively getogether telling them of various apostolic anecdotes and humorous interesting stories...

Finally, for this brief relation, his Love for the Church showed in the urgency to make Christ's message reach all over, even to the remotest corners. He loved to hear anecdotes

of apostolic nature, always responding with a meaningful “thanks be to God” and encouraging words to do even more! Following invitations from the Holy Father and also from various bishops, the apostolic work of Opus Dei started in the most unexpected places, judging humanly. I myself recall the time he told us the apostolic work would be starting in Kazakhstan, a country of so few Catholics. It seemed to beat human reason, until we learnt that it was on suggestion of the Holy Father.

That was the love of Don Alvaro for the Church, and still is. We who are somehow his heirs, as heirs and spiritual children of St Josemaría, seek to propagate it through ages, and certainly Don Alvaro will assist us through his intercession to be even more faithful in this.

S.E.R. Mons. Anthony Muheria

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