

"John Paul II and Opus Dei"

October 22nd is now the liturgical feast of Blessed John Paul II. An interview with the Prelate of Opus Dei published in the Italian journal "Studi Cattolici" last April at the time of the beatification.

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What is your most vivid memory of John Paul II?

John Paul II frequently insisted that each man and woman finds their full

perfection in self-giving, in dedicating themselves to God and to others. And he himself gave his life to God and the Church with a constant generosity and self-sacrifice. The difference between the Pope so filled with physical strength who took the helm of the Church in 1978, and John Paul II in his final years, bent beneath the weight of fatigue and illness, is a sign not merely of the passage of time, but also of the full measure of his self-giving.

I once accompanied Bishop Alvaro del Portillo to the pontifical apartment at a rather late hour of the evening. While we were awaiting the Pope's arrival, we heard some steps approaching through a corridor that sounded like someone dragging his feet. It was the Holy Father, very fatigued. Don Alvaro exclaimed: "Holy Father, how tired you are!" The Pope looked at him and, with a firm

and friendly voice, replied: “If I were not tired at this hour of the day, it would be a sign that I hadn’t fulfilled my duty.”

Although impossible to sum up briefly, what has John Paul II left to the Church?

He has left us a marvelous treasure of doctrine and his example of pastoral charity. What I would highlight in his pontificate is the impulse he gave to a new evangelization through ordinary life, through people actively present in all fields of human endeavor, with conduct consistent with their faith.

Perhaps that was why he understood Opus Dei so well, whose spirit is sanctification and apostolate in ordinary life.

I want to make clear that the veneration and gratitude of the faithful of Opus Dei extends to all the

Popes, for the work they have carried out for the benefit of the universal Church and because all of them, from Pius XII until today, have been providential for the development of the apostolates of Opus Dei. With John Paul II we have a special debt of gratitude, because it was during his pontificate that certain events of special importance for the history of the Work took place. These include the establishment of this part of the Church as a personal prelature, the beatification and canonization of St. Josemaria, and the creation of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross.

Certainly the Pope saw in the Work an effective instrument for evangelization through ordinary life. But, at the same time, I would say that he had no special predilection for Opus Dei. John Paul II was truly the Pope of everyone, a Father sensitive to all the charisms that the

Holy Spirit brings forth. I think that, with him, millions of people have felt themselves to be “favorite sons and daughters.” And the faithful of Opus Dei have also felt this, with daily joy and thanksgiving.

Did John Paul II know Opus Dei before becoming Pope?

During the Second Vatican Council he was introduced, in the Council Hall, to Don Alvaro del Portillo. But there were no more contacts until 1971, when the young Cardinal from Krakow, Karol Wojtyla, during a synod of bishops in Rome, attended a conference organized by CRIS, the *Centro Romano d'Incontri Sacerdotali*, with the assistance of some priests of Opus Dei. On that occasion he was asked to give an interview about the priesthood for a publication of CRIS, since people were interested in hearing the voice of a bishop who was suffering under

the Communist tyranny. He wrote down the questions and a few weeks later sent thirty-one hand-written pages, in Polish. At the beginning of each page—the paper was of very poor quality—he had written an aspiration, *Totus Tuus*, and some verses taken from the sequence of the Holy Spirit: *Veni Sancte Spiritus...* *Dulce refrigerium...* *In labore requies...* *O lux beatissima...* *Reple cordis intima...*

In 1974 the CRIS invited him to give one of the conferences in a series entitled *The Ennobling of Man and Christian Wisdom*. The topic dealt with by Cardinal Wojtyla was *Evangelization and the Inner Man*. It was a lecture of great depth, and contained a reference at the end to an expression of Msgr. Escrivá de Balaguer on how to imbue the world with Christ's peace: “*sanctify work, sanctify oneself in work, and sanctify others through work.*” The text was

later published in a book together with other interventions of his.

When he became Pope, John Paul II would sometimes give copies of this book to people who visited him.

Four years later, Cardinal Wojtyla came to Villa Tevere, the central headquarters of Opus Dei, to have lunch with Don Alvaro. It was a very friendly meal. Afterwards, when we went to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, the Cardinal knelt on a wooden kneeler that is conserved there as a relic because it was used by Pius VII and by St. Pius X. And also by St. Josemaria, to whom some relatives of St. Pius X had given the kneeler as a gift. When Don Alvaro mentioned this to him, Cardinal Wojtyla immediately got off the kneeler and knelt on the floor after having kissed the relic. It was a spontaneous gesture of humility which I have never forgotten.

He had great affection for Don Alvaro, especially after his election to the Chair of Peter. Holy people understand each other very well.

Could you tell us any memories of your first meetings with the new Pope?

The first meeting took place unexpectedly on the day following the election, on October 17, 1978. Bishop Andrea Deskur, a Polish bishop who was then President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, and who was a good friend of Don Alvaro, and an even closer friend of Karol Wojtyla since his youth, had been hospitalized at the Gemelli Polyclinic as the result of a stroke suffered a few days before.

The day of the Pope's election, Don Alvaro called him by telephone. He didn't want to give him the good news directly, so as not to provoke

any possibly dangerous emotion. He limited himself to asking him: “Andrea, do you know who has been elected Pope?” Deskur responded: “They couldn’t have made a better choice.” And he added: “Tomorrow I will see him.” Don Alvaro thought the patient must be a bit delirious: how could the newly-elected Pope leave the Vatican?

The next day Don Alvaro went to visit his friend. I went with him. And we were very surprised, on leaving the sick person’s room, to be told that we had to wait in a corner with some other people, because the Pope had just arrived and the exit from the floor had been blocked. It was even a greater surprise when John Paul II came up to Don Alvaro and gave him a big hug. Don Alvaro was filially moved, and on kissing the ring of the new Pontiff, he saw that he held a rosary in his hand.

Those days at the beginning of the new pontificate were very intense. We were able to see the Pope with a frequency we would not have imagined possible. For example, Don Alvaro made a visit to the Shrine of La Mentorella, close to Rome, to entrust the new Pope to our Lady's intercession. And while there, leaning on the hood of the car, he wrote a post card to John Paul II in which he expressed his desire to assist him with his prayer. He placed at his disposal the more than sixty thousand Masses that were offered by the faithful of Opus Dei each day for the intentions of the head of the Work; it was, he said, the greatest support he could give him. A few days later he received a telephone call from the Pope himself. He wanted to thank him for that gesture, and by the tone of his voice one could sense his deep gratitude for the treasure that had been placed in his

hands, a reflection of the Pontiff's great love for the Eucharist.

On October 28, John Paul II received him for the first time in an informal audience. Don Joaquin Alonso and myself were also present, and we could see how the Pope listened with great attention and affection to what Don Alvaro was telling him. I recall that he said confidently, striking the table with an affectionate thump of his fist, that the Church would overcome all her difficulties with the help of our Lady, the first *opus Dei*, the most important work of God. Don Alvaro said that he too fully shared that hope. Also on that occasion, Don Alvaro told him that because of the *Sede Vacante* caused by the unexpected death of John Paul I, he had not been able to receive the letter which the new Pontiff, the previous Patriarch of Venice, had wanted to send for the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of

Opus Dei. Msgr. del Portillo added that he had understood very well that Opus Dei was not, in fact, a secular institute and that he would have to find the proper juridical solution. Referring to that letter, John Paul II said: *“La facciamo!”* We will do it!.

On December 5 of that year, Don Alvaro informed him that he had prepared for him the traditional gift of oranges that Poles usually give as a present on St. Nicholas Day, December 6. The Pope was surprised that he knew about that custom and gave him an appointment for the following day. Together with the oranges we brought him various books of St. Josemaria. The Pope had these books placed in the office where some of his assistants helped in the preparation of his addresses.

These “unprogrammed” meetings seem very characteristic of John Paul

II who, especially at the beginning, surprised everyone with his direct way of relating to people. But were there also official audiences?

Naturally, among other reasons because we wanted to request of the Holy Father—as I have already mentioned—the conclusion of Opus Dei’s canonical path, which Paul VI had also shown himself open to in the first audience that he granted to Don Alvaro del Portillo. And, in fact, the Pope took the steps necessary to reach that goal.

At the same time, I retain an especially pleasant memory of those first months. For the feast of the Epiphany in 1979, the ordination in St. Peter’s Basilica was set to take place of the Pope’s successor in the Archdiocese of Krakow, Archbishop Macharski. The Holy Father wanted to celebrate it at the altar of the Confession, but it was

suggested to him that the altar of the Cathedra might be better, because it would be difficult to fill the Basilica with people and it would be awkward if there were not enough people there. I don't know who suggested to the Pope that he contact Msgr. del Portillo, to ask him to encourage many people to attend the episcopal ordination. During those days we were making a pastoral trip through various European countries. In Switzerland we received word of this from Rome. Seeing this request from the Pope, as he did on other occasions, Don Alvaro made every effort to mobilize the people of the Work, and asked them to do the same with their friends, to fill the Basilica. And in fact it was filled. Don Alvaro himself did not participate in the ceremony, since he wanted those attending to direct their affection entirely to John Paul II and the new archbishop. At the end of the celebration the Pope expressed his

thanks to Opus Dei. It was the first time that a Pope had made a public reference to the Work in St. Peter's Basilica.

There were other occasions on which the Pope counted on the help of the faithful of Opus Dei to mobilize many people.

Above all, in those first moments. Later the Holy Father was able to count on the support of many other faithful children as well.

I recall that John Paul II wanted, right from the start, to celebrate Mass for university students in St. Peter's, as he had been doing in Krakow. We did what we could to help him to inaugurate that tradition. Don Alvaro suggested printing personal invitations that would include, besides information about the Mass, a good number of hours for confessions in the Basilica, and he said he would call dozens of

confessors asking them to help out. This initiative turned out to be a great success.

During one of the lunchtime invitations that we received from the Pope in the pontifical apartment, Don Alvaro spoke about the need to foster confessions, in order to help people re-encounter our Lord, encouraging priests and laity to take part in this apostolate. To illustrate what he was saying, he told some anecdotes about the good results obtained around the world with this method of helping souls. John Paul II, with a smile of agreement, said: “You remind me of those good zealous pastors of my time, who spent their lives in this way to look after souls, whom they loved with all their strength.” At other times, in similar conversations, the Pope said, referring to the faithful of Opus Dei, both laity and priests: “You have the charism of Confession.” I know that

he said the same thing to other people, with reference to the Work, because they mentioned to us.

I imagine that similar situations were repeated on John Paul II's trips throughout the world, wherever there were members of Opus Dei.

In all parts of the world, the faithful of the Prelature, like other Catholics, naturally showed him their affection and support. The Pope knew how to win the hearts of everyone, and all over the world he drew people's affection and enthusiasm.

In the first years of his pontificate, the final work was done for erecting Opus Dei as a personal prelature. Could you tell us something about this?

Both Paul VI and John Paul I had already expressed their intention of concluding the canonical path of the Work, but our Lord called them before they could take up the

question. John Paul II took an interest in it very early on. He put the study in the hands of Cardinal Sebastiano Baggio, Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, and a “paritetic” (mixed) commission was appointed, made up of experts in Canon Law from the Holy See and from Opus Dei. The Pope followed all of its steps attentively, and knew the particulars very well. The technical canonical details are well known. Here I would like to highlight the paternal interest that the Holy Father showed for the process, while at the same time leaving the canonists full freedom to study the questions involved. He was also very paternal —and not simply prudent—in confronting the difficulties caused by the objections of some bishops, which were understandable in dealing with a new canonical figure. He himself oversaw this study, seeing to it that those objections were considered and adequately resolved.

To what extent did John Paul II intervene in the government of Opus Dei? Did he make suggestions?

The most important one, clearly, was erecting Opus Dei as a personal prelature, an act by which he placed this part of the Church, made up of lay people and priests, men and women of all walks of life, under the jurisdiction of a prelate so that—also with its priests—it would serve the universal Church better, in communion with the particular churches. He also suggested apostolic initiatives to the Prelate, since he was very much convinced of the effectiveness of the personal apostolate of each of the faithful of Opus Dei and of those who—persons from all social spheres—take part in the apostolic activities of the Work.

It was at an express request of the Pope that the international seminary *Sedes Sapientiae* was established in

Rome, in order to form priests who could later take on tasks of formation in seminaries all over the world, including those that had just attained their freedom after the period of Soviet domination.

John Paul II began speaking of the new evangelization at least as early as 1981, but it was in 1985 when he gave a strong impetus to this pastoral priority, above all in the countries of Western Europe and North America, where the symptoms of secularism were growing alarmingly. A symbolic date is October 11, 1985, the day on which the Holy Father concluded an Extraordinary Synod of Bishops held in Rome, inviting the Church to a renewed missionary impetus. In a conversation with the Prelate, John Paul II stressed this priority of his. Don Alvaro immediately provided the support that he could, and in a pastoral letter dated December 25 of that same year he urged everyone to

collaborate with all their strength in this task, which was particularly important in the countries of Old Europe, the United States and Canada.

From then on, he redoubled his pastoral efforts in this regard, with frequent trips to European countries. Between 1987 and 1990 he extended this effort to Asia and Oceania, North America and Africa.

The Pope invited Don Alvaro to begin the activities of the Work in the Scandinavian countries. And, of course, in Poland. He pointed out that it was very important to spread among the people of God in Poland the need for personal spiritual direction, and he knew that this was practiced assiduously in Opus Dei.

The Pope continued encouraging Don Alvaro to assist the evangelizing mission with the spirit proper to Opus Dei—as he later did with me—

right to the end of his life. On January 13, 1994, he granted an audience in which the Prelate informed him about the development of the apostolic work of the faithful of Opus Dei and the many initiatives that were being planned. The Pope insisted on the need to continue striving to assist the new evangelization of society. Don Alvaro left those audiences very encouraged, with a renewed awareness of the need to always live—as he had seen in St. Josemaria—in full union with the successor of Peter and the other bishops.

In those audiences, the Pope gave him various suggestions, together with encouragement to continue in the apostolic undertakings that were already being carried out. For example, he recommended that an effort be made to carry out a deep apostolate with intellectuals, encouraging them in their work and

showing them that faith and reason do not travel along separate paths, much less opposed ones. John Paul II thought that intellectuals were key persons for the new evangelization, and he was concerned that they be given special pastoral care. In the same way he considered it a priority to evangelize those who had positions of responsibility in the political and economic spheres, since that is the most effective way to improve the situation of everyone, first of all the most needy. He also encouraged the faithful of the Prelature and many other people who work in business schools, saying: "If those who study these subjects become Christians and are converted, it will be easier to eradicate poverty."

And did Don Alvaro ever give suggestions to the Pope about the Church?

On a few occasions, the Holy Father asked him for his opinion. As early as the end of 1978, when he was weighing the expediency of making a trip to Mexico for the CELAM meeting (it was a rather delicate situation), the Pope mentioned to Don Alvaro, in the presence of other people, that he had heard various opinions on this question. He was clearly asking him for his opinion. With all simplicity, Don Alvaro suggested that he make the trip, for it would be a great good for the Church in Mexico, in Latin America, and in the whole world. Don Alvaro's tone of voice made it clear that whatever decision the Pope decided on in the end would be fine as far as he was concerned. The trip was carried out with the extraordinary results that we all know. Naturally, the Pope must have also consulted with other people and with the offices of the Roman Curia.

After the trip to Mexico he invited us to lunch and joyfully told us many details about his visit. He didn't speak about his own efforts, but about the faith and response shown by the Mexican people for the visit of St. Peter's successor.

Don Alvaro several times suggested to John Paul II that he write a letter or an exhortation on St. Joseph, in order to foster the faithful's devotion and to ask St. Joseph to protect the Church. So he was very happy when the Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptoris Custos* was published on August 15, 1989.

I remember another suggestion related to piety. We had invited a Spanish canon of the Chapter of St. Peter to lunch, Msgr. Pedro Altabella. During lunch the topic came up of the good for souls being done by the practice of permanent exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in some

churches. Don Joaquin Alonso remarked that it would also do great good if that custom could be started in St. Peter's, and Don Alvaro gave his vigorous support to the suggestion. The canon liked the suggestion so much that he said he would make sure it was passed on *in altissimis*, to the highest level. In a short time the Eucharistic worship in the Vatican Basilica that has produced such marvelous fruit began. The year this took place was 1981.

All these recollections reflect a very cordial relationship with the Pope.

John Paul II showed us many signs of paternal affection, too many to recall them all here. But there comes to mind now Don Alvaro's 70th birthday, on March 11, 1984. He received a picture of our Lady of Czestochowa with a hand-written message from the Pope, with an

affectionate greeting. I think that everyone who dealt closely with John Paul II saw that he was a man who “knew how to love.”

Did the Pope visit any center of Opus Dei?

In his plan of pastoral visits to the parishes in Rome, he included the three that were entrusted to Opus Dei and he visited the centers attached to them. Perhaps the most interesting anecdote here is that, when he was still in good health, he went several times to a conference center of the Work in Abruzzo, called Tor d'Aveia. The property is situated on the side of a mountain, with easy access to pleasant excursions and even skiing. Naturally, the Pope needed to relax from time to time, and there he could do so very discreetly. Tor d'Aveia is a little over an hour from Rome by car, and he made the trips without anyone

noticing it. It provided the Pope with a good opportunity to rest. The women of the Work in charge of the center were able to have some get-togethers with him and his secretary, but they never told anyone so that no one would bother the Pope. Don Alvaro himself only went there once to welcome him. John Paul II also went once to another conference center that we use in Ovindoli, not far from there, with a ski slope nearby.

You were often invited to eat in the Pope's residence. What did you speak about on those occasions?

About many different topics, in an informal context: the situation of the Church, the apostolate of the faithful of Opus Dei in various countries, etc.

On one of those occasions he gave Don Alvaro a small edition of the New Testament which he later used during his trips, expressly to

remember the Roman Pontiff. He didn't use it otherwise because the typeface was so small.

Do you have any memories connected with the assassination attempt in 1981?

At that moment we were gathered with the Prelate's Council for the apostolate with women. As soon as we heard the news, he interrupted the meeting and we went to the Gemelli Hospital. Don Alvaro, invited by Msgr. Angelini, was able to join some members of the Curia, while the doctors were operating on the Holy Father.

Don Alvaro immediately asked the whole Work to pray for the Pope. We went to the Gemelli hospital frequently, although we knew we wouldn't be able to visit him. But we wanted to pray for him and to be close to him physically.

For his trip to Mexico, Don Alvaro had given the Pope a cassette with Mexican songs. They were love songs that the people also sang to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Well, on the first day we were allowed to visit the Holy Father in the polyclinic, we found him listening to those songs on a tape player. "They help me to pray," he said. We had no advance notice that we would be able to see him, but the Pope himself had asked that we be shown to his room. Don Alvaro put his hand on the Pope's arm with a filial gesture, and noted that he had a very high fever. The visit was quite short, but one sensed there that the whole Church was praying for Peter, as in Jerusalem, and that Peter was offering everything for Christ's Church.

We haven't said anything about the beatification and canonization of St. Josemaria, both carried out by John Paul II.

The Pope was very happy to elevate the founder of the Work to the altars. As you recall, before the beatification in 1992 misunderstandings arose that resulted in some controversy. These were blows by the devil's tail to impede what was, as John Paul II said soon after the beatification, "a great manifestation of faith." At the end of the ceremony, John Paul II himself expressed his joy at seeing so many thousands of people recollected in prayer, and he told Don Alvaro, who accompanied him as he walked towards the Basilica: "Now I understand why some sectarians didn't want this manifestation of faith to take place." The Pope added that he was very grateful to God for the opportunity to celebrate that ceremony, in which he also beatified Mother Bakhita, a Canossian nun, because it had helped bring to the world's attention the tragic situation of the Church in the Sudan. In short, what has remained

recorded for history is the good being done for the whole Church by devotion to St. Josemaria. And the Pope was very aware of this.

In the canonization, the Pope defined St. Josemaria as “the saint of the ordinary,” very much in harmony with his hope to evangelize society through ordinary life: in the domestic church that each family is, in work, in sports and in social relationships.

John Paul II himself was also the target of some people's criticism. How did the Pope confront this opposition?

He was very supernatural and happy to carry the cross. Moreover, he was very determined and continued walking straight ahead seeking the good of the Church. Don Alvaro once had the opportunity to participate in praying the rosary with the Pope, accompanied by a number of people. On that occasion Mother Teresa of

Calcutta was also there. At the end, the Pope introduced Don Alvaro to Mother Teresa, who thanked him, because priests of the Work had taken good care of her nuns in various parts of the world. Then the Pope said to her, half jokingly and half seriously: "Mother, why is there so much criticism of the Pope and of Opus Dei while everyone says good things about Mother Teresa?" And she responded with great sincerity: "Pray for me, so that I be humble."

John Paul II also went to pray before the mortal remains of Don Alvaro on the day of his death. Can you tell us something about those moments?

On March 11, 1994, his 80th birthday, Don Alvaro received a hand-written message from John Paul II written on a photograph: "To our esteemed and beloved brother Alvaro del Portillo, who with gratitude to God is celebrating his eightieth birthday, in

expression of my warm appreciation for his faithful work in the service of the Church, and imploring abundant heavenly graces for a ministry that will continue for many years to produce abundant fruit, I impart an affectionate and special apostolic blessing, extending it also to all the priests and laity of the Prelature.”

On the evening of March 22, 1994, we had just returned from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and a few hours later, on the morning of the 23rd, God called to himself the Prelate of Opus Dei. I communicated the news to Msgr. Stanislaw Dziwisz, John Paul II’s private secretary, at about six thirty in the morning. Don Stanislaw told me that he would communicate it to the Holy Father, and that they would pray for the eternal rest of the Prelate to God in their Mass. We had a nice surprise when the Prefect of the Pontifical Household, Msgr. Monduzzi, called us at about ten in

the morning, to inform us that the Holy Father wanted to come in the afternoon to pray before Don Alvaro's body. I won't go into the details of this visit, but I do want to emphasize the interest shown by John Paul II. He asked me when and where Don Alvaro had said his last Mass, since he knew he had just returned to Rome on the previous day. When I told him that it was at eleven in the morning in the Cenacle, I was surprised when the Pope quickly calculated the time elapsed between the hour of the Mass and his going to heaven. At the end I thanked him for the visit, which was so unusual, but the Pope interrupted me saying: "It was a duty, it was a duty."

And after your appointment as Prelate in 1994, did you yourself have a similar relationship with John Paul II?

The Pope continued to be equally paternal and affectionate. For example, he telephoned me personally to announce my appointment as Prelate. I visited him on various occasions to inform him about the development of the apostolates of the Work and was able to see his joy. A few months after the appointment, he conferred on me ordination as a bishop. After the year 2000 the Pope was already quite sick, but he continued receiving me in audience with a certain frequency, to hear news of the apostolic activities of the Work all over the world. Three days after the death of the Pope, I went with Don Joaquin Alonso to pray before his mortal remains in St. Peter's Basilica, and to greet Don Stanislaw, who invited us to pray in his private chapel and later encouraged us to go up to the terrace of the apostolic palace. He wanted to show us the immense stream of people who were coming to pay their

final respects to the Pope and all the television transmitters from all over the world installed around St. Peter's Square. Shortly afterwards, he gave me one of John Paul II's cassocks, so that we could keep it as a relic.

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