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Letter from Bishop Alvaro del Portillo on the erection of Opus Dei as a prelature

Letter from Alvaro del Portillo
to the faithful of Opus Dei on 28
November 1982.

11/23/2006

(...) In September 1975, during my election as successor to our beloved Father, the Elective General Congress unanimously agreed that the

necessary work to obtain the definitive juridical status of the Work should be continued, faithfully following the directives determined forever by our Founder and his precise teachings in this area. (...)

It did not seem opportune to me to take any steps in this regard during the very first years of my mandate. I wanted to avoid and forestall possible erroneous interpretations by people who did not know how much our Father had suffered because of this problem, nor what had always been his spirit, his desires, and his prayer. Nevertheless, in the first audience that Pope Paul VI granted me, on 5 March 1976 (and likewise in the successive one, on 19 June 1978), without requesting anything - I was waiting to present a formal request to the competent department of the Roman Curia - I mentioned the deliberations of the Special General Council of the Work

on this topic. I also added, in the first of those two audiences, that I intended to let some time go by, unless the Holy Father commanded me to do otherwise. Paul VI agreed with my decision, and confirmed that "the question remained open". In the second audience, he reiterated this and encouraged me to present the appropriate request then, following absolutely faithfully our Founder's spirit and taking into account the enrichment brought to the general law of the Church by the conciliar Decrees. With this indication of the Holy Father began the decisive stage in this juridical iter. But two months later, in August, Paul VI died before I could present the desired request.

In September of that same year, 1978, as the fiftieth anniversary of the Work's foundation drew near, in notifying the new successor of Peter that this was a historic date for us, I had to inform Pope John Paul I,

recently elected, about our institutional problem. The Holy Father replied that he would like to see the longed-for juridical solution arrived at speedily.

The sudden, and for that reason more painful, death of Pope John Paul I seemed to be a new delay to our desires. *God knows better!*, I repeated many times, following our Father's example.

Two months later, on 15 November, the present Pope, John Paul II, wrote me a letter in his own hand, to express his cordial participation in our joy and thanksgiving to God for the Golden Jubilee of the foundation of the Work. On handing me the letter, the then Cardinal Secretary of State told me that the Holy Father considered "the solution of the problem of Opus Dei's juridical status as something that cannot be delayed any longer."

I immediately pushed ahead with the work already begun. We made our formal petition to the Holy Father, who, on 3 March 1979, instructed the Sacred Congregation for Bishops to undertake the necessary study, in order to examine the possibility and ways of erecting the Work as a personal Prelature with its own Statutes.

The completion of this study has required more than three and a half years of hard, uninterrupted work on our part and on the part of the Holy See. This was so because, among other things, it was the first time that a personal Prelature was being erected in accordance with the provisions of the Second Vatican Council.

On 28 June 1979 the question was studied by the Plenary Assembly of the Sacred Congregation for Bishops. Subsequently a technical commission

studied all the juridical, pastoral, historical, institutional and procedural aspects of the question in twenty-five working sessions: from 27 February 1980 to 19 February 1981. The fruit of this work, collected in two volumes totalling 600 pages, was examined by a special Commission of Cardinals, nominated by the Holy Father; which gave its opinion on 26 September 1981.

After that, the Holy See sent a note outlining the essential characteristics of the Prelature to the Bishops of all the countries where we have Centres, so as to inform them and allow them to make any observations they might have. Their comments were carefully studied, and answered, by the Sacred Congregation for Bishops.

Later, on 23 August this year, the Holy Father officially announced his decision to establish Opus Dei as a

personal Prelature. This was after his approval on 5 August 1982, feast of Our Lady of the Snows, of a Declaration of the Sacred Congregation for Bishops which explains the fundamental features of the new Prelature. Finally, the Holy Father ordered that the Prelature be erected on 28 November 1982, the first Sunday of Advent. He directed that this pontifical decree be published on the eve of that Sunday, that is to say, on the afternoon of 27 November, which coincided with a date dear to our Father's heart: the feast of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, and the anniversary of the Grandfather's death.

This is how we reached the end of this long path, just as our Founder had desired. *Gratias Deo super inenarrabili dono eius!* (2 Cor 9:15)
Let us give thanks to God for his ineffable gift! (...)

I am sure you'll ask me: "Father, how can we give sufficient importance to this change of juridical form? Will our life now change if the spirit is the same?" (...) First, let me reassure you that there is no change in the spirit, aims, or apostolic methods that we have been living up to now. Nothing has changed, for the simple reason that, as our Father affirmed, "First comes life; then the norm." (...)

By the Will of God, my children, the juridical form is now fitted to our life like a glove to the hand. For years and years our Father prayed, suffered, and worked incessantly to achieve this norm. (...)

In synthesis, our new juridical status can be summed up as follows:

- 1) the Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei is a personal Prelature, of the type of Prelatures "for carrying out special pastoral tasks" which, endowed with their own statutes, are

foreseen in the Documents emanated by the Second Vatican Council and in later pontifical documents applying them. That means that no privilege has been given to the Work, which is something our Father did not want and we do not want either. Neither has a new juridical formula been created exclusively for us, even though Opus Dei is the first institution which the Holy See has erected as a personal Prelature. We have been fitted into a norm of common law which did not exist in 1962 but which is now in force.

2) our situation is not that of a Prelature *nullius dioecesis*, of a territorial character. Nor is it that of an institution the same as the ritual dioceses of the Eastern Churches or any other type of personal diocese. All such juridical forms are based on the principle of complete independence or exemption with regard to the diocesan bishops. This

does not happen in our case, both because our Father never looked for it and also because we have never asked for it, although some people - through ignorance perhaps - have spread this calumny. We forgive those people with all our heart. (...)

The fundamental change reflected in the present Statutes is that, from now on, the faithful of the Prelature – that is to say, my Numerary, Associate and Supernumerary daughters and sons – will continue to dedicate themselves to the apostolic aims of Opus Dei, through a bond of a contractual nature. From the juridical point of view not only does this assure our characteristic secularity perfectly, but it makes it very clear that the lay members of the Work are under the jurisdiction of the Father – of the Prelate – and of the Directors in everything that refers to the fulfilment of the particular ascetical, apostolic and formational

commitments that they have taken on by means of this bond. It is the expression of a demanding vocation which permeates our entire existence. In everything else, the faithful of the Prelature find themselves in the same ecclesiastical and civil situation as any other Christian.

The priests of Opus Dei – who are the only ones who form the clergy or *presbyterium* of the Prelature – are incardinated in the Prelature itself. For this reason, not only in spirit but by juridical condition also, they are fully secular priests in whatever diocese they may be. The Associate and Supernumerary priests of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross do not form part of the *presbyterium* of the Prelature. Moved by our same spirit and a divine vocation, they associate themselves with the Work – just as they do at present: nothing changes – in order to receive the

specific spiritual help that leads them to seek personal holiness in the exercise of their ministry, while at the same time they maintain their canonical dependence on their respective diocesan bishops.

The power of the Father – the Prelate or proper Ordinary of the Opus Dei Prelature – is an ordinary power of governance or jurisdiction. It does not differ substantially in content from that which he enjoyed until now. From a juridical point of view, however, it is conceptually distinct, since the Prelature is a different ecclesiastical entity from the Secular and Religious Institutes, as well as from simple Movements and Associations of the Faithful. (...)

Álvaro del Portillo, *Rendere amabile la verità*. Librería Editrice Vaticana. Roma, 1995, pp. 48-90

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