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September 27: Homily of Cardinal Amato

Homily of Cardinal Angelo
Amato during the Mass for the
Beatification of Alvaro del
Portillo

09/27/2014

1. “A shepherd according to the Heart of Christ, a zealous minister of the Church”.^[1] This is the portrait that Pope Francis draws of Blessed Álvaro del Portillo, a good shepherd who, like Jesus, knows and loves his sheep,

brings back to the sheepfold those who have strayed, binds up the wounds of the sick ones, and offers his life for them.[2]

As a youth, the new Blessed was called to follow Christ, going on to become a diligent minister of the Church and to proclaim throughout the world the glorious riches of his saving mystery: “This is the Christ we proclaim, this is the wisdom in which we thoroughly train everyone and instruct everyone, to make them all perfect in Christ. It is for this I struggle wearily on, helped only by his power driving me irresistibly.”[3] And he made this proclamation of Christ the Saviour in absolute faithfulness to the cross and, at the same time, with exemplary, evangelical joy amidst difficulties. For this reason, today the liturgy applies to him St Paul’s words: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete

what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church.”[4]

Serene happiness when undergoing pain and suffering is characteristic of the saints. Moreover, the beatitudes, including the more demanding ones such as being persecuted, are nothing other than a hymn to joy.

2. There are many virtues which Blessed Álvaro practised to a heroic degree, such as faith, hope and charity. He practised these virtuous habits in the light of the beatitudes of meekness, mercy, and purity of heart. The testimonies all coincide in this. Apart from the absolute spiritual and apostolic harmony he had with the holy Founder, he also stood out as being a person of great humanity.

Witnesses state that from his childhood Álvaro was “a very happy and studious boy, who never caused

any problems;” “he was affectionate, straightforward, happy, responsible and kind.”[5]

From his mother, Doña Clementina, he inherited a notable serenity, considerateness, the habit of smiling, understanding, speaking well about others, and reflecting deeply before judging. He was a true gentleman. He was not a talkative person. His engineering training gave him habits of intellectual rigour, conciseness, and precision, enabling him to go straight to the essence of problems and solve them. He inspired respect and admiration in others.

3. His consideration for others went hand-in-hand with exceptional spiritual richness. One of his outstanding graces was the unity between his interior life and his tireless apostolic zeal. The writer Salvador Bernal states that he turned

the humble prose of daily work into poetry.

He was an example of fidelity to the Gospel, the Church, and the Magisterium of the Pope. Every time he went to St Peter's Basilica in Rome, he would recite the Creed before St Peter's tomb, and a Salve Regina before the picture of Our Lady, Mother of the Church.

He always avoided focusing on himself, because he passed on the truth of the Gospel and the fullness of tradition, not his own opinions. His spiritual life was nourished by Eucharistic piety, devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and veneration for the saints. He kept his awareness of God's presence alive by frequent aspirations and vocal prayers. Some of those he used habitually were "Most Sacred and Merciful Heart of Jesus, grant us peace!" and "Most sweet heart of Mary, prepare a safe

journey,” as well as invoking our Lady as “Holy Mary, our Hope, Handmaid of the Lord, Seat of Wisdom.”

4. A decisive moment in his life was his calling to Opus Dei. When he was 21, in 1935, after meeting St Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, who was at that time a young priest of 33, he responded generously to God’s call to holiness and apostolate.

He had a deep sense of filial, affective and effective communion with the Holy Father. He received the Pope’s teaching gratefully and made it known to all the Opus Dei faithful. In the last years of his life he would often kiss the Prelate’s ring given to him by the Pope, as a way of reaffirming his total adherence to the Pope’s wishes. In particular, he backed up the Pope’s requests for prayer and fasting for peace,

Christian unity, and the evangelization of Europe.

He was outstanding for his prudence and rectitude in evaluating events and people; his justice in respecting other people's good name and freedom; his fortitude in facing up to physical or moral difficulties; and his temperance, shown in his sobriety and his interior and exterior mortification. Blessed Álvaro possessed the fragrance of Christ – the *bonus odor Christi* –, [6] which is the aroma of genuine holiness.

5. However, there is one virtue which Bishop Álvaro practised in an especially extraordinary way, considering it as indispensable for holiness and apostolate: the virtue of humility, which is an imitation of and an identification with Christ, who is *gentle and lowly in heart*. [7] He loved Jesus' hidden life, and respected the simple manifestations of popular

piety, such as going up the *Scala Santa* in Rome on one's knees. Once, one of the faithful of the Prelature told him that he had visited that place but had walked up the *Scala Santa* normally, because, as he put it, he considered himself a mature and well-instructed Christian. Blessed Álvaro answered him with a smile that he had gone up the Holy Stairs on his knees, even though the place was somewhat stuffy because of the crowds of people and the poor ventilation.[8] It was a great lesson in simplicity and piety.

Indeed, Bishop del Portillo was “infected”, in the good sense, by the behaviour of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who did not come *to be served, but to serve*. [9] For this reason, he often used to pray and meditate on the Eucharistic hymn *Adoro Te devote, latens deitas – O Godhead hid, devoutly I adore Thee*. Likewise, he used to meditate on the life of Mary,

the humble handmaid of the Lord. He sometimes recalled a phrase from Cervantes' *Exemplary Novels*: "Without humility, there is no virtue worthy of the name." [10] And he would often recite an aspiration that is frequently used by the faithful of the Work: "*Cor contritum et humiliatum, Deus, non despicias* – a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." [11]

For him, as for St Augustine, humility was *the dwelling-place of charity*. [12] He would repeat some advice which the Founder of Opus Dei used to give, quoting St Joseph of Calasanz: "If you want to be holy, be humble; if you want to be holier, be more humble; if you want to be very holy, be very humble." [13] Nor did he forget that a donkey was Jesus' throne during his entry into Jerusalem. Even his fellow-students, as well as stressing his extraordinary intelligence, underline his simplicity, the serene

innocence that came of not considering himself better than others. He thought that his worst enemy was pride. One witness states that he was “humility personified”.

[14]

His humility was not harsh, showy, or ill-tempered, but affectionate and cheerful. His joy was based on his conviction that he himself was worth very little. At the beginning of 1994, the last year of his life on earth, in a meeting with some of his spiritual daughters, he said, “I say this to you, and I say it to myself. We have to struggle all our lives to become humble. We have the marvellous school of humility of our Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and St Joseph. Let’s learn from them. Let’s fight against our own ego, which constantly rears up like a viper, ready to bite. But we are safe as long as we keep close to Jesus, who is the

offspring of Mary, and is the one who will crush the serpent's head.”[15]

For Don Álvaro, humility was “the key that opens the door to enter into the house of holiness”; while pride was the greatest obstacle to seeing and loving God. He said, “humility strips away from us the ridiculous cardboard mask that presumptuous, self-satisfied people wear.”[16]

Humility is the recognition of our limitations, but also of our dignity as God's children. The best praise of his humility was given by a woman in Opus Dei after the Founder's death: “The one who has died is Don Álvaro, because our Father lives on in his successor.”[17]

A cardinal testifies that when he read about humility in the Rule of St Benedict or the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, he felt he was contemplating a very high ideal, but one that was unattainable for

ordinary human beings. But when he met and got to know Blessed Álvaro, he understood that it was possible to practise total humility.

6. What Cardinal Ratzinger said in 2002 with regard to the canonization of the Founder of Opus Dei can also be applied to Blessed Álvaro.

Speaking of heroic virtue, Cardinal Ratzinger, who was at the time Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, said: “Heroic virtue does not mean precisely accomplishing great things unaided, but that in a person’s life there appear things that he did not bring about, because he made himself transparent and available for God to act (...) That is holiness.”[18]

This is the message that Blessed Álvaro del Portillo hands on to us today. He was “a shepherd according to the Heart of Christ, a zealous minister of the Church”. [19] He

invites us to be holy like him, living a holiness that is friendly, merciful, good-natured, meek, and humble.

The Church and the world need the great spectacle of holiness so that its pleasing fragrance can purify the noxious fumes of the many vices which are being praised so arrogantly and insistently.

Now, more than ever, we need an ecology of holiness, to counteract the pollution of immorality and corruption. The saints invite us to bring to the heart of the Church and society the pure air of God's grace, which renews the face of the earth.

May Mary, Help of Christians and Mother of the Saints, help and protect us.

Blessed Álvaro del Portillo, pray for us.

Amen.

[1] Pope Francis, Apostolic Brief for the Beatification of the Venerable Servant of God Bishop Álvaro del Portillo, Prelate of Opus Dei, 27 September 2014.

[2] Cf. *Ezek* 34:11-16; *Jn* 10:11-16.

[3] *Col* 1:28-29.

[4] *Col* 1:24.

[5] *Positio super vita, virtutibus et fama sanctitatis*, 2010, vol. 1, p. 27.

[6] *2 Cor* 2:15.

[7] *Mt* 11:29.

[8] Cf. *Positio super vita, virtutibus et fama sanctitatis*, 2010, vol. 1, p. 662.

[9] *Mt* 20:28; *Mk* 10:45.

[10] Miguel de Cervantes, *Novelas Ejemplares*, “*El coloquio de los*

perros”. Cf. *Positio super vita, virtutibus et fama sanctitatis*, 2010, vol. 1, p. 663.

[11] *Ps. 51[50]:17.*

[12] St Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, 51.

[13] St Josemaría Escrivá, quoted in A. Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. I, p. 491.

[14] *Positio super vita, virtutibus et fama sanctitatis*, 2010, vol. 1, p. 668.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 675.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 705.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 908.

[19] Pope Francis, Apostolic Brief for the Beatification of the Venerable Servant of God Bishop Álvaro del

Portillo, Prelate of Opus Dei, 27
September 2014.

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