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# **Ten Years of Volunteering in Puente Vallecas under Blessed Álvaro's Patronage**

This social initiative, born around the beatification of Álvaro del Portillo, has involved the help of 3,500 volunteers and served 22,500 meals. But what really matter are the people behind the numbers. Each of them has a story of suffering and hardship.

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In September 2014, the *Asociación Memoria Álvaro del Portillo* (Álvaro del Portillo Memorial Association) took on the organization of events for the beatification of the first successor of St. Josemaría. These events took place in Valdebebas (Madrid) and were attended by over 200,000 people from around the world.

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The Association wanted Blessed Álvaro's example to live on in Madrid, and in agreement with Fr. José Manuel Horcajo, pastor of San Ramón Nonato parish, a volunteer initiative was launched.

The parish was chosen for two reasons: first, because Blessed Álvaro served as a catechist there in 1930, when he was a university student, and second, because the economic crisis in Spain (and the world) had put the inhabitants of the Puente de Vallecas district in a precarious position. A large immigrant population faced poverty and the risk of social exclusion.

## **Beyond the numbers: the people**

Some 3,500 volunteers have made it possible for the Obra Social Álvaro del Portillo (Álvaro del Portillo Social Initiative), over the course of its ten-year history, to collaborate with individuals and associations in providing meals for 22,100 people each year at the facilities provided by San Ramón Nonato parish in Puente de Vallecas.

Since September 2014, this volunteer service has been active in three

areas: social, family, and personal. With the support of the Madrid Food Bank and other organizations, an average of 900 food bags are distributed each month, benefiting 300 families.

Job training and employment support is provided through courses in cooking, elderly care, food handling, and basic English, among others. An average of 80 people attend each course, with a total of 800 participants over the past ten years, supported by 122 volunteers.

Another key focus of the initiative is family support, offering programs for married and unmarried couples, single mothers, and women alone. Alongside the volunteers, several experts assist with family mediation for couples facing difficulties. Over these ten years, more than 3,200 people have received assistance.

Additionally, the initiative aims to support children and young people with educational, family, and financial challenges. Around 300 children have been helped over these years through various tutoring and school support activities, thanks to the efforts of 160 volunteers.

After Spanish nationals, the largest groups of beneficiaries over the past decade have been Peruvians, Ecuadorians, Venezuelans, and Cubans. Donations from individuals and contributions from private entities have raised 140,000 euros to prepare and equip the new soup kitchen, which has been in operation since 2017.

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# **Audiobook “Al cruzar el puente”: testimonies from a Church open to everyone (in Spanish only)**

The author, Fr. José Manuel Horcajo, is a priest in the popular neighborhood of Vallecas in Madrid. In this book, he journeys through the stories of many diverse people, including beggars, drug addicts, Buddhists, bank managers, philosophy professors, teenage mothers, and athletes.

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