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Beatification announced for the "rock" of Opus Dei

The successor to the founder of Opus Dei will be beatified next September. Fr Joseph Evans recalls Bishop Alvaro del Portillo's life and legacy.

31/01/2014

In 1943 a young Spanish engineer was given a daunting task. He was sent to Rome aged only 29 and in the midst of the Second World War, charged with getting an audience

with the Holy Father to explain to him in person the recently founded Opus Dei.

As the Italian plane crossed the Mediterranean it found itself caught up in an air and sea combat between Allied and Axis forces. The passengers were terrified but the engineer, Álvaro del Portillo, confident in God and in the task entrusted to him by Opus Dei's founder, St Josemaría Escrivá, remained calm. "I am going to fulfil a mission which God wants and so nothing is going to happen", was how he later described his feelings at the time. Sure enough the plane landed safely.

Arriving on 25th May, by June 4th he was standing before Pius XII outlining to him Opus Dei's message of holiness for all in the midst of the world. Conscious of his youth, the engineer had taken with him and

worn for the occasion the full dress uniform of the Spanish engineers corps, dashinglly elegant with its gold buttons and purple sash. The Swiss Guard officer in charge mistook him for an admiral of the fleet and lined up the troops for review. With great aplomb, the engineer reviewed the guard before going up to his audience with the Holy Father.

The whole episode speaks volumes about del Portillo, who on September 27th will be beatified in Madrid, becoming – after St Josemaría Escrivá – the second member of this organisation, first founded in 1928, to be raised to the altars. It shows his total confidence in God, in the divine origin of Opus Dei and in St Josemaría as God's chosen instrument. This confidence – it is worth adding – was profoundly supernatural and far from mere human pluck, for by nature he was quite a shy man. If the founder of

Opus Dei, *the work of God*, wanted him to meet the Holy Father, then God would find a way, and God did.

From their first meeting in 1935, del Portillo was absolutely convinced of the holiness of Escrivá – he was particularly struck by the saint’s joy – and that his message was truly divine. He would later say: “That priest left a deep impression on me. This was clearly something from God”. It was at a day of recollection preached by St Josemaría on 7th July 1935, only their third encounter, that del Portillo asked to join Opus Dei. As he would later say, that day “the Holy Spirit opened my eyes (...) to awaken a new restlessness in my heart, which led me to begin my *real* life”.

It almost goes without saying that the audience went well. Pope Pius XII was very impressed by the engineer and soon after gave the Work what would be its first ever papal

approval. It is also not surprising that St Josemaría chose del Portillo for the job. Above and beyond his many human qualities, Álvaro stood out for his fidelity to the founder, a fidelity which led the saint to refer to him affectionately as *Saxum*, rock, so firm a support was he for him.

Del Portillo was in fact to be Escrivá's closest collaborator, as layman and later priest, for 40 years until the saint's death in 1975. Not surprisingly he was elected unanimously as his successor at the head of the organisation, a position he occupied until his own death in 1994.

Álvaro enjoyed being St Josemaría's shadow, with a discreet but ever present service to the founder. Watching him in a meeting with Escrivá one could see his keen attention, drinking in the saint's teaching. If one word describes the

soon-to-be Blessed Álvaro, it is fidelity. His time at the head of Opus Dei was likewise totally focussed on keeping the organisation faithful to its founder's charism.

But, quite rightly, and following St Josemaría's spirit, Álvaro's first fidelity was to the Church. Here too he carried out a discreet and behind-the-scenes service, making use of his formidable intelligence and capacity for hard work, and an authentically amiable simplicity which won him many friends. He was deeply involved in the Second Vatican Council and if so many priests have been helped and inspired by the council's document on priesthood, they owe a great deal to del Portillo. When the document's first draft was, to say the least, unsatisfactory, Álvaro – as secretary of the commission – set to work on it. Significant portions of the document in its final form were written directly

by him. It goes without saying that he never ever spoke about this.

Álvaro also had great affection for Great Britain, although his initial relations with our land were not at all auspicious. Though the story is slightly convoluted, it is well worth the telling. As a young man del Portillo went to teach catechism in a poor working-class area of Madrid in a time of great tension and anti-Church hostility in Spain, as the Civil War approached. One day in February 1934 a group of men attacked him and his colleagues, probably with the intention of killing them. They managed to escape but Álvaro got hit on the head with what we would call a monkey-wrench or heavy spanner but what in Spanish is known as a “llave inglesa”, an “*English key*”! His wound caused him severe headaches for years after.

Despite this unfortunate introduction to things English, the blow to the head never affected his heart and del Portillo loved our island greatly, seeing it, as did St Josemaría, as the “crossroads of the world”, with enormous global significance. In his 1980 visit, speaking specifically of London, he said, “here there are people from so many nations who, if they are set on fire with the love of God, can then cause a great blaze throughout the whole earth”. And he insisted that many vocations of commitment to God could come from Britain for other nations.

He accompanied St Josemaría to England on the five visits the saint made here from 1958-1962, and as head of Opus Dei he returned here in 1980, 1985 and 1987. The start of Opus Dei’s activities in Scotland was due directly to him. On his 1980 visit Opus Dei only had centres in England but del Portillo insisted, using the

image of a chick coming from an egg, that the members had to “break the shell” and venture beyond the border. That same year journeys began to Scotland and soon after a centre was established in Glasgow.

The blessed-to-be worked tirelessly to bring about projects which St Josemaría had dreamt of but had not been able to bring to fruition. These included achieving Opus Dei’s definitive juridical status as a Personal Prelature in 1982 and starting a pontifical university in Rome. A new pilgrim centre in Jerusalem, one of his own unfulfilled dreams, is now being constructed and will be called “Saxum” in his honour.

Álvaro also promoted numerous projects for the poor. On his visit to DR Congo in 1989, for example, he encouraged members there to start a hospital offering high-quality care to

rich and poor alike. The Monkole Hospital was opened in 1991. A similar initiative, also inspired by him, is the Niger Foundation Hospital in Enugu, Nigeria.

Anyone who met Bishop Álvaro was immediately struck by his gentle warmth and simplicity. He was much loved and admired in the Roman curia and by bishops throughout the world. He was ordained as bishop himself in 1991. When he died in 1994 Blessed John Paul II took the unprecedented step of going in person to pray by his body in the Opus Dei central house in Northern Rome. When thanked for this, the Holy Father simply answered, “*Si doveva, si doveva*”, “I just had to”.

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