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Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, a man 'immersed in God'

Fr Joseph Evans explores the life of holiness of a bishop who was head of Opus Dei for 19 years, and is now about to be beatified. This article first appeared in The Universe (Manchester, UK) on 21 July 2013

21/07/2013

One of the many great things about Blessed John Paul II was his

willingness to disregard protocol when reasons of the heart required it. One such example took place on the late afternoon of 23rd March 1994 when the Polish pontiff left the Vatican to go to a Roman suburb to pray at the corpse of a Spanish bishop who had died that same day. Popes might send telegrams of condolence (and John Paul II had already done just that). It was almost unheard of that they went in person to pray by the deceased's body.

The fact that the Pope did so was a sign of his enormous affection for the man he was going to pray for, and the organisation this person had led until that day. He was Bishop Alvaro del Portillo and he died that morning after 19 years as head of the Opus Dei prelature.

Thus it is so fitting that both men should appear this week on the same declaration announcing Vatican

approval of miraculous cures carried out through their intercession. Whereas the cure for Blessed John Paul will lead to his canonisation, that of Del Portillo opens the way to his beatification.

John Paul II thought very highly of Bishop Alvaro. Indeed, on that same visit he declined to say a responsory prayer for his soul, preferring to pray a Salve, three Glorias and then finally the very brief *requiem aeternam dona ei* prayer. He seemed convinced that the bishop was already in heaven. Thus, it is not surprising that Del Portillo looks likely to be raised to the altars 20 years after his death.

As someone who met Bishop Alvaro on a number of occasions, I certainly am not surprised. He stood out as a man of enormous warmth and kindness, passionately in love with Christ, and with a burning desire to

serve the Church. The word that is constantly applied to him is “fidelity”. For almost 40 years he was the closest collaborator and most faithful spiritual son of St Josemaría Escrivá, founder of Opus Dei. At Escrivá’s death in 1975, he took over as head of the organisation and remained so until his death.

His unique concern was to keep Opus Dei faithful to the spirit God had inspired St Josemaría to see, and he considered himself merely the “shadow” of the founder. Indeed, he would often use the metaphor of the orchestra conductor: he was just the baton, while Escrivá continued to conduct from heaven. Under his lead Opus Dei expanded to numerous new countries and promoted a wide range of initiatives for the poor. He was also very keen to second any initiative promoted by John Paul II. A good example of this was how seriously he took to heart and

encouraged the Pope's 1985 call for the "re-evangelisation" of Europe.

He had a profoundly theological love for the Roman Pontiff whoever he might be, simply because he was the Vicar of Christ, and spoke of his figure with both doctrinal depth and an almost boyish enthusiasm. But he clearly had a particular personal love and affection for Papa Wotylja.

Bishop Alvaro and John Paul II had a lot of fun together. For example, a particular aide of Del Portillo, himself quite close to John Paul and who would usually accompany the Prelate to visit the Pope, was somewhat bald. The Holy Father gave him a blessing on his head, largely in jest, to see if it could make the hair grow. Sure enough the aide's pate remained as hairless as before. Bishop Alvaro would describe this as "the Pope's only failure", a joke

which clearly he had shared with the Pope himself.

In fact, however, Bishop Alvaro was quite a serious man, and certainly a shy one. One reason he chose to study engineering as a young man was to avoid having to speak in public. It is ironic that he spent almost the last 20 years of his life doing just that. But he would do whatever was required to bring souls to Christ and to spread St Josemaría's message of the need to seek sanctity in everyday life and work.

As Prelate of Opus Dei he began the custom of sending a monthly pastoral letter to all the members of the Prelature in which his love of God constantly shone out. In his gentle manner, he would demand nothing less than sanctity. The same spirit came across in his public meetings with groups who gathered to hear him. "We cannot be *part-time*

Christians,” he told a crowd in Houston, Texas. “We have to be *full-time*. We can’t be *weekend* Christians, like those who dedicate half-an-hour to hear Mass on Saturday evening or Sunday, and do nothing more. This precept must be fulfilled, but we are asked a lot more. God – our Creator, Lord and Love – has the right to demand greater self-giving from us”. Truly, as a faithful instrument of the Holy Spirit, he spoke with authority because he practised what he preached.

For all his simplicity, he was very intelligent and played a very significant but discreet part in the Second Vatican Council. He was very much responsible for introducing key ideas on the role of the laity in the Church into the Council documents and the decree on priesthood owed a lot to him. This led to him being greatly loved and respected within the Vatican itself

although he was always very discreet about his activity in the Council and largely kept quiet about it.

Like John Paul II, Del Portillo has proven himself a prodigious miracle-worker after his death as thousands upon thousands of people have sought his intercession. More than 12,000 accounts of favours through his intercession have thus far reached the desk of his cause's Postulator, including various extraordinary cures but also many everyday little favours. His "speciality" seems to be helping married couples to live in harmony, couples to have children and bringing about family reconciliation.

The actual Vatican-approved miracle is the extraordinary recovery of a Chilean baby born with very severe heart and hernia problems and brain damage, culminating in a cardiac arrest of over 30 minutes with

haemorrhaging. Amazingly he came through unscathed. A month later he was discharged and today, 10 years on, he lives a totally normal life. His parents had first prayed for the boy, Jose Ignacio, through the intercession of Bishop Alvaro during what had been a difficult pregnancy. They kept praying to Del Portillo intensely, and getting others to do the same, in the most critical moments of his illness, even when the doctors assumed he was dead. He is now a normal boy who loves music and football. This experience also brought about a deep conversion in his parents.

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a-man-immersed-in-god/](https://opusdei.org/en-uk/article/bishop-alvaro-del-portillo-a-man-immersed-in-god/) (19/01/2026)