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Letter from the Prelate (March 2014)

The Prelate focuses on the virtues of fidelity and loyalty, in the context of the centennial of Alvaro del Portillo's birth.

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in pdf](#)

My dear children: may Jesus watch over my daughters and sons for me!

The month of March always has a special connotation, since we

celebrate both the Annunciation of Our Lady and the Solemnity of St. Joseph. These two figures stand out for their faithfulness to God's plans, for carrying out fully what God wished of them, because they knew how to love wholeheartedly.

This year we also commemorate the centennial of Don Alvaro's birth and the twentieth anniversary of his *dies natalis*, his transit to heaven. The supernatural and human virtue of fidelity shone forth like a bright pearl in his life. Later, on the 28th, the anniversary of our Father's priestly ordination also speaks to us of integral loyalty to the divine call: an "untouchable fidelity, firm, virginal, joyful, unquestioned, to faith, purity and the way." [1] It's only logical then that—while making a deep and grateful personal examination—we consider in these weeks how we have responded to the

divine call that each of us has received.

The beginning of Lent, now very close, spurs us to walk with determination along this path. It is a liturgical time that “should suggest to us these basic questions: Am I advancing in my faithfulness to Christ, in my desire for holiness, in a generous apostolate in my daily life, in my ordinary work among my colleagues?” [2] Let us strive to live (also in the other moments of the year as well) a more intense prayer, a more generous mortification, the frequent practice of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, which, as acts informed by faith and charity, are a powerful impulse for our desires to be faithful. It is not a question of feelings but of the ardent zeal of a soul in love, although weariness may come, the weight of our poor ego.

Only a few days remain before the centennial of the birth of our beloved Don Alvaro, on the 11th of March. Since the beginning of the year, we have had this date very much in mind, with our eyes focused on the example of this son of St. Josemaría, who gave himself without holding back, incarnating so admirably the spirit of Opus Dei. The decree by which the Church recognized his virtues states that his life was characterized by an “unquestioned fidelity to God, carrying out his will promptly and generously; fidelity to the Church and the Pope; fidelity to his priesthood, and fidelity to his vocation as a Christian in every moment and circumstance of his life.”[3] And it concludes that Don Alvaro’s life is an “example of charity and fidelity for all Christians.”[4]

The fidelity of the human being is intimately united to that of God, who is *faithful in all his words, and*

gracious in all his deeds.[5] Sacred Scripture, in presenting the history of the patriarchs and the just in the Old Testament, “highlights an essential aspect of their faith. That faith is not only presented as a journey, but also as a process of building, the preparing of a place in which human beings can dwell together with one another . . . With faith comes a new reliability, a new firmness, which God alone can give.”[6]

The example of Don Alvaro is inscribed in that long chain of men and women loyal to God—from Abraham and Moses to the saints of the New Testament—who strove to dedicate their entire life to carrying out the mission they had received. Nothing could separate them even a millimeter from the divine will: external or internal difficulties, sufferings, persecutions, because they found a firm anchor in the most lovable will of God.

“Abraham is asked to entrust himself to this word. Faith understands that something so apparently ephemeral and fleeting as a word, when spoken by the God who is fidelity, becomes absolutely certain and unshakable, guaranteeing the continuity of our journey through history. Faith accepts this word as a solid rock upon which we can build.”[7] And as Benedict XVI said, “faithfulness over time is the name of love.”[8]

Whenever an important anniversary came around, Don Alvaro used to address our Lord with this prayer: “Thank you, forgive me, help me more.” We can imagine him reacting in the same way on the anniversary of his centennial. These words can be for us an excellent prayer for addressing the Blessed Trinity: giving thanks for the benefits received (they are so many, far more than we can imagine!); asking forgiveness for our faults and sins; asking help to

continue serving—more and better—
as good and faithful servants.

Years ago, on another anniversary of this date, Don Alvaro cast a glance back at the time that had gone by. His considerations can help us too to speak with God; especially when, for whatever reason, our mistakes and weaknesses stand out more clearly. These were and are expressions that fill us with hope. “On contemplating the book of my life,” he said, “I think of the pages that have gone by. They have gone, but they have not been thrown into the wastebasket, because they remain before God’s eyes. So many gifts from God! Even before I was born, he prepared for me a pious Christian family, which provided me with a good formation. Then later, so many events that marked my life. Above all the meeting with our Father, which completely changed my life, very rapidly. And then almost forty years

of intimate and constant contact with our Founder.” [9]

Our Lord watches over us too with infinite patience, over years, months, weeks, forgiving us, helping us, encouraging us. Moreover, although many of you did not meet our Father while he was physically with us, you can all get to know him and speak with him thanks to his writings and the trusting conversation he wants to maintain with each of us from heaven. He has left in our hands, with the spirit of Opus Dei, the very specific possibility of being saints, living in depth this path that God offers to many people. With God’s help, with the intercession of Mary Most Holy and of St. Joseph, of St. Josemaría and of so many people who have already followed it to the end... *possumus*, [10] we too can follow this path to the end.

March 19, the solemnity of St. Joseph, also speaks to us of the renewal of our dedication in the service of God and souls. God has called all Christians from eternity to identify ourselves with Christ. And St. Joseph, after Mary Most Holy, is the creature who has best responded to this calling: he is the *faithful and prudent steward, whom the Lord set over his household*.^[11] Therefore, he is patron of the Church and of Opus Dei, and a model for all of Jesus' disciples.

Don Alvaro (I never tire of repeating) was a faithful man: a faithful Christian, priest, bishop. St. Josemaria remarked: "I would like you to imitate him in many things, but above all in loyalty. In the long years of his vocation, there have been many occasions—humanly speaking—for getting angry, for becoming irritated, for being disloyal. But he has always had a

smile and an incomparable fidelity—for supernatural reasons, not because of human virtue. It would be very good for you to imitate him in this.”[12]

His continuous perseverance, completely supernatural, was rooted in the human virtue of loyalty, which he learned in his family home right from his youth and which, later, developed with the passage of the years. How necessary this virtue is! Many people don't realize that, when it is absent, mutual trust is impossible and it becomes practically impossible to live together in society in an ordered, fruitful way. “Let us be, faithful, my daughters and sons. With the supernatural fidelity which is at the same time human loyalty, a virtue proper to mature women and men, who have put aside childish attitudes, and behave with a sense of responsibility, faithful to their commitments.”[13]

“Loyalty! Fidelity! Uprightness! In what is great and in what is small, in little things and big things. Determined to fight even though at times it seems that we don’t want to. If the moment of weakness comes, open your soul wide and let yourselves be led gently: today I will go up two steps, tomorrow four... The next day none, because we find we have no strength left. But we want to want to. We must at least have the desire to have desires. My children, this is already fighting.”[14]

We have to guide, to moderate our heart and feelings, by means of reason enlightened by faith. “Our heart and feelings can help us to be generous with God, but they can’t be the principal reason for our fidelity: that would be sentimentality, a truly dangerous deformation of love. All too many give undue importance to feelings. They rely a great deal on the heart and too little on the intellect. If

they feel like it, if it's attractive, they enthusiastically think themselves capable of anything; but if they don't feel like it, they fall apart. We have to be alert to this danger...Only thus will we recognize, in moments of trial, that infidelity is never a response to reason.”[15]

Don Alvaro followed very closely, first of all, God's call. God had endowed him with outstanding human and supernatural qualities, and he placed all of these at the service of the mission he had received. His response to the Bishop of Madrid shortly after being ordained a priest is well known. Don Leopoldo told him that, with his outstanding civil and academic credentials, Don Alvaro was very much appreciated and respected in ecclesiastical circles, where he could carry out many tasks for our Father. But after his ordination as a priest (the bishop foresaw), he would lose

this high regard on the part of many people. Don Alvaro told him that it didn't matter to him. He had already surrendered everything to God—human prestige, professional plans and possibilities—from the moment he had answered the invitation from heaven to seek sanctity in Opus Dei. He wasn't concerned about the opinion of men, but only with the desire to love God and fulfill his will. He wanted *to hide and disappear*, like St. Josemaría, in order to be a useful instrument in the service of the Church.

His desire to identify himself with the spirit of Opus Dei was graphically expressed when he was designated as the first successor of St. Josemaría. He said that the electors hadn't chosen Alvaro del Portillo, but had re-elected our Founder, who was continuing to direct the Work from heaven. He didn't see in this way of speaking and acting anything special

or out of the ordinary, since he was deeply convinced that God had sought him out to be the “shadow” of our Father on earth; and then, as the channel for communicating a great part of his graces to the faithful of Opus Dei and to so many other men and women throughout the whole world.

Vir fidelis multum laudabitur, [16] the faithful man shall be greatly praised. With good reason we can apply this phrase from Scripture to our beloved Don Alvaro. John Paul II did so in the telegram he sent us on the day of March 23, 1994, on the death of such a good Father and Pastor. While communicating to all the faithful of the Work his great sorrow, he recalled “with gratitude to God the deceased’s life filled with the zeal of a priest and bishop, his constant example of strength and trust in Divine Providence, as well as his fidelity to the See of Peter and his

generous service to the Church as the closest co-worker and well-deserving successor of . . . Josemaría Escrivá.”[17]

Another marvelous anniversary that speaks to us of this Christian virtue, at the end of the month, is that of our Founder’s priestly ordination. On March 28, 1925, our Father sealed in a new, sacramental way, the commitment of fidelity that he had been living since he first felt those “inklings” of a divine calling, when still an adolescent. He kept it ever alive and operative, and at the end of his earthly life he could say: “Don’t ever falter! Right now I tell you . . . that you have a divine vocation, that Christ Jesus has called you from all eternity. Not only has he beckoned you with his finger, but he has kissed you on the forehead. That’s why, for me, your head shines like a star.

“That business of the star is another story..., like those stars that twinkle in the night, high up there in the dark blue sky, like great diamonds of fabulous splendor. That’s how clear your vocation is, yours and mine.”[18]

Let us keep on praying for the Church and for the Pope, especially during the retreat he will be making. I am beginning my own retreat tomorrow in order to take part in the Congress on the centennial of Don Alvaro, organized from the 12th to the 14th at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross. And today I will administer—joyfully, as always—the sacrament of the diaconate to two Associates of the Prelature, in the parish of St. Josemaría. Let us ask our Lord that they be very faithful to this new call they have received, and let us extend our prayer to all the seminarians and priests throughout the whole world.

I don't want to finish without telling you that on the 22nd, when celebrating Holy Mass in the Basilica of St. Eugene, to recall Don Alvaro's transit to heaven, I will be more united, if possible, than ever to all of you, asking our Lord that he make us all completely faithful and that he fill us with his zeal for souls, as the Pope frequently reminds us. As I always tell you, support me in my intentions.

With all my affection, I bless you,

You Father,

+ Javier

Rome, March 1, 2014

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[1] St. Josemaría, *Letter*, March 24, 1931.

- [2] St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 58.
- [3] Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, *Decree on the Virtues of the Servant of God Alvaro del Portillo*.
- [4] *Ibid.*
- [5] *Ps* 145[144]:13.
- [6] Pope Francis, Encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, June 29, 2013, no. 50.
- [7] *Ibid.*, no. 10.
- [8] Benedict XVI, Homily in Fatima, May 12, 2010.
- [9] Don Alvaro, Notes taken during a family gathering, March 11, 1991.
- [10] *Mt* 20:22.
- [11] Roman Missal, Solemnity of St. Joseph, *Entrance Antiphon (Lk 12:42)*.

[12] St. Josemaría, Notes taken in a family gathering, February 19, 1974.

[13] Don Alvaro, *Letter*, February 1, 1987 (*Cartas de familia*, vol. I, no. 287).

[14] St. Josemaría, Notes from a meditation, February of 1972 (*In Dialogue with the Lord*, p. 148).

[15] Don Alvaro, *Letter*, March 19, 1992, no. 31 (*Cartas de familia*, vol. III, no. 321).

[16] *Prov* 28:20.

[17] John Paul II, Telegram to Msgr. Javier Echevarría, March 23, 1994.

[18] St. Josemaría, Notes from a meditation, March 19, 1975.

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