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Stories about Saint John Paul II

For the feast of Saint John Paul II on October 22, we offer an interview with the Prelate of Opus Dei published in a recent Ignatius Press book with stories about the Polish Pope from those who knew him well.

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Below is an excerpt from *Stories about Saint John Paul II, Told by his Close Friends and Co-workers*, published by Ignatius Press.

SANCTIFYING EVERYDAY LIFE

On October 6, 2002, Saint Peter's Square began to fill up at the first rays of dawn. When John Paul II made his entrance, there were more than four hundred thousand people in front of the basilica and down along the via della Conciliazione. That crowd had come to Rome to pay homage to the Spanish priest who, in 1928, had founded Opus Dei: a new entity in the Catholic Church, aimed at promoting holiness and the lay apostolate through the "sanctification of work." Seventy-four years later, on that crowded square and in the adjacent streets, the solemn words of John Paul II resounded: "In honor of the Blessed and Undivided Trinity . . . we declare and define Blessed Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer to be a Saint, and We inscribe his name in the catalogue of the Saints, ordaining that, throughout the universal Church, he

be devoutly honored among the Saints.”

The canonization of Escrivá was an extremely important moment for the Work (Opus Dei), because it put an end to a period of its history that was marked by some misunderstandings and calumnies, which were also reflected in a novel by Dan Brown

But John Paul II regarded Opus Dei and its founder with great confidence and affection.

Not everyone knows that the ties between Karol Wojtyła and this ecclesial reality were constant and intense and that they began long before the election of the Archbishop of Kraków to the Papal See.

Here to tell us about these relationships is Bishop Javier Echevarría, the current prelate of the Work, who had the privilege of being

very close to John Paul II during his whole pontificate.

Your Excellency, could you tell us when the relationship between Karol Wojtyła and Opus Dei began?

During the Second Vatican Council, Father Alvaro del Portillo [who from 1974 to 1995 would be the first successor of Josemaría Escrivá as head of Opus Dei—Ed.] was introduced to Archbishop Wojtyła.

After that, there were no other contacts until 1971, when the young cardinal of Kraków, during a synod of bishops in Rome, participated in a conference hosted by Cardinal Höffner and organized by CRIS [Centro romano d'incontri sacerdotali, Roman Seminar Center for Priests] and promoted by several priests of the Work. On that occasion, they asked him for an interview on the priesthood for a CRIS publication, because it would be interesting to

hear the voice of a bishop who was working under Communist tyranny. He jotted down the questions and, after a few weeks, sent thirty-one handwritten pages in Polish.

Another time, in 1974, CRIS invited him to be a speaker at a series of seminars on “The Exaltation of Man and Christian Wisdom.” The topic addressed by the Archbishop of Kraków was “Evangelization and the Interior Man.” It was a truly profound speech, and ended with an expression which Monsignor Escrivá considered as the way to build up the peace of Christ on earth: “Sanctify your work, sanctify yourself in your work, and sanctify others through your work.”

Four years later, Cardinal Wojtyła paid a visit to Don Alvaro in Villa Tevere, the central headquarters of Opus Dei. It was a very friendly meeting. After dinner we went to the

oratory to visit the Blessed Sacrament. The Cardinal used a wooden *prie-dieu* (kneeler) that we preserve there as a relic, because it was used by Pius VII and later by Saint Pius X. And by Saint Josemaría, of course, to whom the nephews of Pope Sarto had given it as a gift. No sooner did Don Alvaro inform him about these details, than Cardinal Wojtyła immediately got up from the *prie-dieu* to kneel on the floor, but not before kissing the relic. It was a spontaneous gesture of humility that I have not forgotten.

Cardinal Wojtyła was very fond of Don Alvaro, and the relationship between them became stronger after his election to the Chair of Peter. Holy people understand one another immediately and get along well together.

Well, then, when was the first time you met John Paul II as Pope?

It might seem nearly impossible, but the first encounter took place on the day after his election, on October 17, 1978. Bishop Andrzej Maria Deskur (then president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, later a cardinal), who was very close to Don Alvaro and also a friend of Karol Wojtyła since their seminary days, had been admitted to the Gemelli Hospital because of a stroke.

After the election of John Paul II on October 16, Don Alvaro telephoned Bishop Deskur. He was hesitant about mentioning the good news in case it might it might lead to over-excitement and cause alarm.

He limited himself to asking: “Andrea, do you know whom they have elected?” But Bishop Deskur replied energetically: “They could not have made a better choice.” And he added: “If you come tomorrow, you will meet him.”

Don Alvaro thought that the sick man was delirious: how would a Pope who had just been elected be able to leave the Vatican? Nevertheless, on the 17th, Don Alvaro visited his friend. And what a surprise when we were told, just outside the patient's room, that we would have to wait in a corner, with other people, because the Pope had arrived and the exit on that floor was momentarily blocked off. But my surprise was even greater when, as we were leaving the patient's room, John Paul II turned to Don Alvaro and embraced him. Don Alvaro was profoundly moved and, as he filially kissed the pontiff's ring, he noticed that he was holding a rosary in his hand.

That was the first of many, many meetings, because after that I had the opportunity to see the new Pope more frequently than we could ever have imagined.

Do you remember the first “official” audience?

A few days after that very moving encounter in the Gemelli Hospital, on October 28, John Paul II received him for the first time in an informal audience. On that occasion, Don Alvaro mentioned that, due to the vacant see because of the unexpected death of the revered John Paul I, it had not been possible to write the letter that the Holy Father intended to send for the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Opus Dei. And John Paul II responded, “Then I’ll write it!”

Pope Wojtyła was very anxious to give Opus Dei a canonical framework. And in a few years the Work was erected as a “personal prelature.” How did you reach that very important milestone?

Paul VI and John Paul I had already expressed the desire to bring to completion the legal journey of the

Work, but the Lord called them to himself before they could address the question definitively. John Paul II decided to take an interest in it from the beginning. He entrusted the matter to Cardinal Sebastian Baggio, Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, and a joint commission was appointed, made up of canon law experts from the Holy See and from Opus Dei. The Holy Father followed all the steps attentively and kept an eye on the details.

While the technical and canonical aspects are well known, I would like to highlight the paternal concern that the Pope showed during the whole process, without overriding or influencing the canon lawyers, who worked with complete freedom in their research and in addressing every question that arose.

Not all the bishops were in agreement with the creation of this new “entity” in the Church.

That is true, but the Pope proved yet again to be very careful, prudent, and paternal in addressing the difficulties caused by the objections of several bishops, which were absolutely understandable in the context of dealing with a new canonical scenario. He himself took responsibility for these objections and made arrangements for them to be studied and adequately resolved.

We mentioned certain criticisms of Opus Dei, but not even John Paul II was spared such attacks. Did you have a chance to talk with the Pope about them?

The Holy Father knew how to take up his cross, but at the same time he was very determined and kept going forward, seeking the good of the Church. Let me tell you a revealing

anecdote: on one occasion Don Alvaro took part in the recitation of the Rosary with the Pope. John Paul II always prayed with others, and on that occasion Mother Teresa of Calcutta was also present.

Afterwards, the Pope introduced Don Alvaro to her, and she thanked him very warmly for the help offered to her sisters by the priests of the Work in various parts of the world. Then John Paul II asked her, half-seriously and half-facetiously, “Mother, why do they criticize the Pope and Opus Dei, while everyone speaks well of Mother Teresa?” And she replied, with great sincerity: “Pray for me, that I may be humble.”

You emphasized that John Paul II followed Opus Dei closely. Does this mean that he gave you instructions or that he intervened in the government of the Work?

His most important intervention was, obviously, the erection of Opus Dei as a personal prelature, whereby he placed this portion of the Church, made up of laymen and priests, men and women of every class and social condition, under the jurisdiction of a prelate so that—together with its priests—it might better serve the Universal Church, in communion with the local Churches.

Besides that, the Pope suggested several apostolic ideas to the Prelate, since he was quite convinced of the efficacy of the personal apostolate of every member of the Work. For example, with great conviction Pope John Paul II promoted the international seminary *Sedes Sapientiae*, in Rome, with its objective of forming priests who could in time become directors of formation in seminaries in various countries, especially those that had

just acquired freedom after the period of Soviet domination.

For a “new evangelization”

And not just in the East. In 1981, if not before, John Paul was already speaking about a “new evangelization,” and in 1985, during the synod of bishops, he set this pastoral priority in motion, above all in the countries of Eastern Europe and North America, where the symptoms of secularism were growing at an alarming rate. Don Alvaro supported this program, and, as early as December 25 of that same year, he wrote a pastoral letter to the faithful of the Prelature, urging them to cooperate in every way possible with this task, which was especially necessary in the countries of old Europe, in the United States, and in Canada.

In this way my predecessor obeyed the Pope promptly, and he, in turn,

never left us without his support. Indeed, John Paul II continued to encourage Don Alvaro, and also me later on, until the end of his life, to persevere in the mission of evangelizing, while fully respecting the spirit of the Work. Don Alvaro left that audience greatly reassured, with a renewed awareness of the need to do *opus Dei*, the work of God, as he had seen Saint Josemaría do, living in full unity with the Successor of Peter and with all the bishops.

The greatest gifts of John Paul II to Opus Dei were the beatification and the canonization of Josemaría Escrivá.

The Holy Father was very happy to raise the founder of the Work to the glory of the altars. There were again some misunderstandings before the beatification, the thrashing of the devil's tail, but everything was resolved wonderfully. At the

conclusion of the beatification ceremony, John Paul II expressed great joy in witnessing the multitude in recollection and prayer, and, turning to Don Alvaro, who was accompanying him back to Saint Peter's Basilica, he said: "Now I understand why some sectarians did not want this demonstration of faith to take place."

He added that he thanked the Lord for the ceremony in which he had beatified a Canossian nun, Mother Bakhita, which had allowed him to tell the whole world about the tragic situation of the Church in the Sudan. In short, what has remained for the history books is the good that devotion to Saint Josemaría is doing throughout the Church. And the Pope was aware of this.

During the canonization later on, John Paul II described Saint Josemaría as "the saint of ordinary

life,” which is fully in harmony with his idea of evangelizing society through the everyday life of the domestic church, namely every family, in work, in sports, and in social relations.

John Paul II was the kind of person who knew how to listen to everyone. Did he also listen to the suggestions made to him by Opus Dei?

On certain occasions, the Holy Father asked for advice. For example, at the end of 1978, when he inquired whether it was opportune to undertake the journey to Mexico for the meeting of CELAM [the Latin American Episcopal Council]. The region was in a rather unstable situation, and the Pope wanted Don Alvaro's opinion. He turned to him in the presence of others and had already listened to various opinions on the matter. Don Alvaro simply suggested that he make the journey,

because it would be of great good for the Church in Mexico, in Latin America, and throughout the world. Of course, the Holy Father later consulted others also, and the departments of the Roman Curia. But the journey was made, and everyone knows how well it went.

On a number of occasions, Don Alvaro suggested that the Pope might write a letter or an exhortation about Saint Joseph, in order to promote devotion to him among the faithful and to ask him to protect the Church, just as he had protected the Holy Family of Nazareth. I remember his extraordinary joy when, on August 15, 1989, John Paul II published the apostolic exhortation *Redemptoris Custos*.

It is said that members of Opus Dei had something to do with the mosaic of our Lady, Mater Ecclesiae (Mother

of the Church), which is plainly visible from Saint Peter's Square.

Every year several thousand students who attend activities in centers of the Work throughout the world come to celebrate Easter in Rome. In 1980, during an audience, one of them pointed out to John Paul II that Saint Peter's Square was crowned with statues of saints but that there was no image of our Lady.

“Maybe one could be set up, Holy Father,” he suggested. To which the Pope replied: “Very good, very good!”

When he heard about this, Don Alvaro asked the architect Javier Cotelo to consider where an image could be placed, at a strategic point of the square in a way that would attract attention. Javier drew up a plan which centered on a mosaic at one corner of the Apostolic Palace. John Paul II liked the idea so much

that he immediately ordered it to be carried out.

In one of the rooms in your Roman headquarters there is an icon of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa with the Pope's autograph.

It is a token of the paternal affection of John Paul II. For his seventieth birthday on March 11, 1984, this reproduction of Our Lady of Czestochowa was delivered to Don Alvaro with a few handwritten lines by the pontiff, brimming with affection for him. Anyone who often met Pope Wojtyła could see that he “knew how to love.”

Let me tell you something else: three days after the death of John Paul II, Father Stanislaw presented me with one of his white cassocks, which we venerate today as a precious relic.

Your Excellency, you followed the activity of John Paul II very closely.

Now that he is recognized as a saint, how can we sum up the value of his long pontificate?

The activity of John Paul II was so extensive, and he was such an important figure, that it is not possible to come up with a synthesis or summary. His pontificate was unique in a time-frame spanning whole decades of our recent history. He showed once again, with deeds, that the Pope is the “servant of the servants of God,” the tireless defender of the truth, the advocate on behalf of all men, in whose dignity he believed with all his might. He made Christ present in our time and brought mankind to seek in Jesus the answers to the ultimate questions about life.

John Paul II left us a wealth of teaching and a splendid example of pastoral charity. The aspect of his ministry that I would highlight is the

impetus he gave toward a new evangelization through everyday life, through the activities of men and women in all fields of human endeavor, acting in a way that is consistent with their faith.

And what did you personally think when the miracle attributed to Blessed John Paul II was announced?

I thought once again of how Pope Wojtyła spent himself generously and unreservedly in the service of mankind. He brought us closer to God with his prolific Magisterium: through his speeches, his writings, his images, and his many meaningful gestures. Everything about him pointed to Jesus Christ. Because his whole life was based on an intimate communion with the Lord: it was enough to observe him in prayer to understand the fruitfulness of his ministry.

John Paul II was a father who was close to all the faithful, to the Church and specifically, I can say, to this part of the Church that is the Prelature of Opus Dei. I think that, with him, millions of people felt that they were “favorite sons” of the Pope.

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