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‘Serene and thoughtful, del Portillo showed his love for Christ every day’

As Madrid prepares to beatify bishop who was former head of Opus Dei, Helena Scott looks back at a man who exemplified Christ in everything he did. This article originally appeared in the Catholic Universe, 27 September 2014

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Madrid, Spain, early 1930s: anti-religious feeling is running high, and a group of thugs is lying in wait for some students who have been to teach catechism.

When they appear, the thugs jump on them and start to beat them up. One of them has his ear almost torn off; another, Alvaro del Portillo, is hit on the head with a heavy spanner.

Battered and bleeding profusely, the students manage to wrench themselves away, dodge into a metro station and jump on a train which providentially shuts its doors just in time.

Fast-forward to 2014. This Saturday 27th September, Madrid will be thronged with crowds who have come to see Alvaro del Portillo beatified. He was born and brought up in Madrid, and the city was the setting for further dramatic scenes during the Spanish Civil War.

Like all Catholics in the Republican capital of those days, he was constantly under threat: captured and imprisoned, on his release he went into hiding, until he was finally able to escape to the other side. It was in Madrid, too, that as a university student he met St Josemaria Escriva, who had founded Opus Dei just seven years previously, and promptly threw in his lot with the new foundation, recognising God's call to dedicate his life to holiness and apostolate in the middle of the world.

Del Portillo was ordained a priest by the Bishop of Madrid in 1944. He was elected to take over as head of Opus Dei after the death of its founder, St Josemaria Escriva, in 1975. He was ordained a Bishop by St John Paul II in 1991, and died in Rome, aged 80, in 1994.

Mgr Alvaro del Portillo in the UK

Meeting Alvaro del Portillo for the first time turned most of my ideas about him upside down. At that point, in 1980, I had been in Opus Dei for eight years and Mgr del Portillo had been head of it for five, and during those years, through his writings and messages, I had got to know him, as I thought, fairly well, and to love him sincerely for his dedication, clear-mindedness, and real fatherly concern for everyone in Opus Dei and all its apostolates.

I knew what a support he had been to St Josemaria for the forty years they had spent working together, and how committed he was to practising and spreading the spirit of Opus Dei, within the fullness of the teachings of the Church.

He came to the UK for several weeks in the summer of 1980. What most struck me about him was his gentleness and considerateness. He

was aware of everyone in the room, and although I had never met him face to face before, from the first moment I felt that I knew him personally and he knew me – and loved me. The person I had expected to meet was a VIP, someone very intellectual, certainly holy, and very demanding, expecting of everyone the same high standards as he practised himself.

The person I met was, first and foremost, a priest in love with Jesus Christ, a father in the best sense of the word, and above all, a very humble, simple man – nothing of the VIP about him, in spite of the respect he was shown.

Mgr. Alvaro del Portillo loved his children in Opus Dei and, transparently, saw himself as there to serve us and help us on our way.

In short, when I met him I realised that holiness is love – love of God,

love of other people, translated into the practicalities of affection, thoughtfulness and understanding. He really did inspire me to aim at being “the best I could be”. He also had a ready sense of humour.

Re-evangelisation

Rather than being “demanding” in any severe or burdensome way, Del Portillo showed such confidence in people – in their ability and good will – that they raised their sights and took up the challenge of reaching further. On his 1980 visit here, he spurred us on to open centres of Opus Dei in Scotland: up until then, the centres in Manchester had been as far north as we had got. In subsequent visits here, in 1985 and 1987, he continued to encourage us in the work of evangelisation and re-evangelisation.

I never worked with him directly, but those who did tell the same story:

however intense the work he had to do, he never lost sight of the fact that work is a path to God, and when we work for love of God it opens up a huge field for growing in virtue, and especially, love for our neighbour.

He taught everyone how to find God in the specific job that they were engaged on, and how to fill that job with love.

Del Portillo's life was remarkable for his faithfulness to whatever God asked of him, and that faithfulness was the immediate result of his love.

He got to the heart of the radicalness of Christian living, with a faith that meant deeds, sacrifice, commitment and witness.

During the Spanish Civil War he came very close to dying for the faith, without shrinking. An anti-Catholic prison guard put a pistol to his head, accusing him of being a

priest – which he wasn't yet. It is not known why the guard did not pull the trigger, but Alvaro's calmness may itself have given him pause. This quality of serenity, the result of his awareness of God's presence, remained with him all his life.

Unwavering faithfulness

Alvaro trained and qualified as a civil engineer, and the habits of concentration, attention to detail, and thoroughness which he acquired and developed in the process, were put to good use throughout the rest of his life.

His work with St Josemaria on establishing and developing Opus Dei involved applying for recognition by the Holy See for this innovative organisation. It was a long-drawn-out process which entailed a thorough mastery of canon law, as well as a deep understanding of the role and

charisma of priests and laity within the Church.

Del Portillo, who had moved from Spain to Rome with St Josemaria in 1946, soon became known at the Vatican, and once the preparations for the Second Vatican Council were under way, no time was lost in appointing him as Secretary or Advisor to several of the preparatory working-groups.

His capacity for hard work – he was in practice doing two more-than-full-time jobs – his penetrating intelligence and unwavering faithfulness to the teachings of the Church, meant that he was very highly valued.

Another outstanding thing about Alvaro del Portillo was his gift of friendship. For him, it wasn't enough just to be on good terms with people, or even to treat them with charity: he

made friends, and lifelong friends, wherever he went.

He used his excellent memory to keep people and their concerns in mind, not only to pray for them, but to offer them practical advice and help, often going right out of his way to do so.

I think that it was only after his death, on seeing the outpouring of grief and affection from a huge number of people who were each mourning their personal friend, that the rest of us in Opus Dei realised what a good friend he had been to an extraordinary number of very different people.

Serving the Church

For del Portillo, his mission in Opus Dei, both during the founder's lifetime and after his death, was to serve the Church in total faithfulness to St Josemaria and his spirit, and to

guide everyone else in Opus Dei to do the same. Though the two men were very different in character and temperament, del Portillo dedicated himself to being nothing but a support to St Josemaria, aiming for no personal recognition and deliberately avoiding the limelight. He was in no sense an “*eminence grise*”, but simply applied himself, consciously, to amplifying St Josemaria’s evangelising work and spreading its effectiveness still further.

A bishop who knew Del Portillo well said of him: “I always saw in him a bishop similar to the great saints who ruled the Lord’s flock, totally dedicated, despite his age, to his mission as Shepherd, and quick to follow the guidance of the Holy Father: a real example for bishops the world over.”

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