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Letter from the Prelate (July 2014)

The Prelate suggests that, besides intensifying our prayer, we can also prepare very well for the beatification of Alvaro del Portillo by carrying out works of mercy.

07/02/2014

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

We have recently celebrated the liturgical solemnities of Corpus Christi and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the memorial of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. These feasts show us the path to eternal happiness: entering into the pierced Heart of Jesus, led by our Lady. Then, on the solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul, we have reinforced our union with the Roman Pontiff, with his person and intentions. And we have grown in our eagerness to bring Christ to many people. Thus, once again, we have followed our Father's advice: *omnes cum Petro ad Iesum per Mariam!*

On June 26, it is now a tradition in many places to honor God by celebrating the Holy Sacrifice in honor of St. Josemaría. I pray that, through his intercession, abundant spiritual fruit will be produced in all of these places and throughout the whole world. On the eve of this feast,

June 25, we celebrated the seventieth anniversary of Don Alvaro's ordination as a priest. And in a few days we will commemorate the anniversary of his petition for admission to the Work, on July 7, 1935. These anniversaries move me to reflect on the example of my beloved predecessor, with his attentive and constant concern for the spiritual and material needs of souls.

On the fiftieth anniversary of his response to God's call, he wrote to us, with great simplicity: "The story of my vocation is the story of the trusting and persevering prayer of our Founder, who over the course of four years—without even knowing me, only because one of my aunts had spoken to him about me—prayed that our Lord would grant me this immense grace, the greatest gift, after the faith, that God could have given me. Together with that prayer,

also at our Father's urging, there was the apostolic effort of some of his sons, who invited me to take part in giving catechism classes and to visit the poor of our Lady, before bringing me to the Ferraz Residence and introducing me to our holy Founder. It was all God's doing."[1]

Don Alvaro concisely points out here two conditions for winning from Heaven the gift of following Christ with full dedication to spreading his kingdom. In first place prayer, the principal "weapon" we Christians have for obtaining divine gifts. The second, which is the one I would like to focus on here, is also very necessary: serving others by carrying out works of mercy.

"It was all God's doing," said Don Alvaro. But God also counts on each one's active concern, shown with specific deeds and personal sacrifice, for the spiritual and material needs

of our neighbor. From his earliest youth, Don Alvaro took very seriously some words of the Master, which St. Matthew records for us, about the final judgment. The Lord will invite the just to share in his joy, based on the fact that they have helped the most needy on earth: *For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink . . . 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'*[2]

Jesus was very close to the destitute: to the poor, the sick, those who were alone.... He put himself at their side with a love of predilection, and he wants his disciples to follow the same path. When we open our eyes to so many situations of need today, we discover each day Jesus Christ himself, who united himself in solidarity with each and every man and woman. And if we care for these people, close by or distant, with

mercy, we “touch” with our hands very closely the Most Holy Humanity of our Lord, as Pope Francis assures us: “How can we find Jesus’ wounds today? I cannot see them as Thomas saw them. We find Jesus’ wounds in carrying out works of mercy. These are the wounds of Jesus today.”[3]

We know that the call of Don Alvaro to Opus Dei, on that 7th of July 1935, was prepared by the action of grace in his heart and by his fraternal charity towards everyone, and specifically towards the needy. Starting in 1934, with other friends who already knew Opus Dei, he frequently went to an outlying area of Madrid where he taught catechism and visited the poor and the sick. And I think one can say that his first contact with St. Josemaría was a direct consequence of those activities, enriched by an ingredient of sacrifice. You already know that one day, after having taught

catechism to children from a parish with those friends of his, he was attacked by a group of anti-Catholics, who struck him on the head with a heavy wrench. This caused a severe wound and a very painful infection, which lasted for several months and left in its wake a strong neurological pain that from time to time returned. He never complained about this injury nor harbored the slightest resentment towards those who caused it. Moreover, he very rarely referred in public to this episode in his life.

He never forgot the immense good he received from giving those catechism classes and visiting the sick and destitute, generously dedicating part of his time to them. God was preparing him for his meeting with St. Josemaría, which radically changed his life. Thus it is easier to understand his decision to ask for admission to Opus Dei, after a

brief explanation about the spirit of the Work and after having attended only one meditation in the day of recollection preached by our Father. Since then, on seeing how St. Josemaría asked those who came to the Residence to go to those encounters with the needy, with the sick, Don Alvaro saw even more clearly the importance, not only theoretical but also practical, of the works of mercy. “Contact with poverty, with destitution,” he remarked many years later, “produces an enormous spiritual shock. It makes us see that often we are concerned about foolish things that are simply the result of our own selfishness and pettiness.”[4]

This spirit of service has always been lived in the Work. As St. Josemaría told us: “Opus Dei was born among Madrid’s poor, in the hospitals and most wretched outlying districts. And we continue to care for the poor, for

children and for the sick. It is a tradition that will never be interrupted in the Work, because there will always be poor people (also those suffering from spiritual poverty, who are no less in need of help) and children and the sick. We do so in the catechism we carry out in the most needy parishes, and in the visits to ‘our Lady’s poor.’”[5]

As you well know, our Father spurred forward countless initiatives in favor of the needy, all over the world, and Don Alvaro continued on that same path. When he met with adults or young people, he invited them to grow in their concern for the disadvantaged, by promoting projects to help remedy educational, health, workplace needs, etc., and specifically, in order to bring God to people and help them get closer to him. He also fostered this responsibility among business people, industrialists, bankers and, in

general, among men and women with financial means. He spoke to them about the possibility of starting or supporting such initiatives, which they should consider a duty stemming from the justice and charity that should inform each Christian's actions, and from a sincere love for all mankind, our brothers and sisters.

On his pastoral trips, spurred by an eagerness to improve the material or work conditions of the people in the places he visited, he would not infrequently urge the faithful and cooperators to come up with new ideas in this regard. For example, in 1987, during his stay in the Philippines, on seeing the needs of so many poor people, he suggested to those listening that they promote centers of professional formation and social assistance in Cebu and Manila, which now are a splendid and ever growing reality. At other

times, he would accept the petitions of members of the Church's hierarchy, who knew Don Alvaro's priestly heart. This happened in the Congo, during a pastoral visit to that country in 1989. At the request of the president and the secretary of the bishops' conference, he encouraged several faithful and cooperators of the Work who were already developing a medical dispensary, to consider—with personal responsibility and professionalism—the possibility of transforming it into a hospital center, where, besides the indigenous population, priests and religious, also from other countries, who were working in the country could go for assistance. This project is going forward with great effectiveness and offers specialized assistance in hospital care and ambulatory treatment for thousands of people.

Spurred by an apostolic zeal to spread the practice of the Church's social doctrine, he recommended the setting up of schools that would impart a Christian outlook to business people and managers, as did St. Josemaría. But he wasn't satisfied that these be begun only in developed countries; he insisted that these projects should also be carried out in developing countries, well aware of their importance for the resolution of the problems arising from excessive social inequality.

In one of his pastoral letters, commenting on the parable of the good Samaritan, Don Alvaro discovered new perspectives for uniting justice and charity, so characteristic of Christians who live and sanctify themselves in the middle of the world. "The zeal to care for and remedy as far as possible the material needs of one's neighbor, like the good Samaritan, without

neglecting one's other responsibilities, is a characteristic of the fusion of the priestly soul with the lay mentality.”[6] God asks us, above all, to sanctify our professional work and the ordinary duties of each one's specific state. And in the midst of these occupations, Don Alvaro continued, our Lord “allows you to come into contact with other people's neediness and suffering. A clear sign, then, that you are carrying out your tasks with a priestly soul is that you do not pass by with indifference; and a no less clear sign is that you do not abandon the other duties you have to sanctify.”[7]

For the danger certainly exists of dreaming about helping distant peoples and nations, and forgetting about the needs of those who at our side and who are hoping that we will listen, with patience and affection, to their concerns, that we give them some sound advice, dedicating our

time to them. The moment then comes to act as did the innkeeper in the parable, who took charge of caring for that injured man, taking him into his house. Meditating on that scene, Don Alvaro remarked: “All of you can act as he did, in the exercise of your work, because any professional task offers in a more or less direct way the opportunity to help needy people.”[8] You and I, how concerned are we about the needs of those who lack everything or something very necessary? Do we react with a supernatural spirit when we meet beggars? In seeing so much misery on some continents, how much do you pray for those countries and those people?

In his constant concern for the poor and marginalized, the Roman Pontiff has insisted that he includes here all those in need, both near and far.

“The Gospel is for everyone!

Reaching out to the poor does not

mean we must become champions of poverty or, as it were, ‘spiritual beggars’! No, no this is not what it means! It means we must reach out to the flesh of the suffering Jesus; but the flesh of Jesus is also suffering in those who do not know him through their study, their intelligence, their culture. We must go there! I therefore like using the expression ‘to go out to the peripheries,’ to the peripheries of life. To all of them, from physical and real poverty to intellectual poverty, which is also real. All the peripheries, all the crossroads of life: go there. And sow there the seed of the Gospel with your words and your witness.”[9]

I am filled with joy on receiving news about all the works of mercy that, faithful to the spirit of St. Josemaría, are being carried out in the places where we are working apostolically, both in our work with young people as well as with adults. Treating with

greater affection the sick person who lives at home or in a hospital, helping out with a food-bank, showing concern for the needy in a poor neighborhood or for those who are “ashamed” and hide their poverty, spending time with the aged in a nursing home or with those in prison, who have no one to show concern for them.... All of this, moreover, will help us to prepare in an excellent way for Don Alvaro’s beatification. Recently I asked you to make a special effort to prepare spiritually for that event: the works of mercy also form part of that preparation. Intensify, above all, your *apostolate of confession*: there is no greater work of charity than bringing to God those who are distanced from him by sin.

As I am beseeching our Lord and his Blessed Mother, the beatification of our beloved Don Alvaro should be an invitation to thousands of men and

women, and we in first place, to love Christ and his Church more. Let us pray that it will be a moment of special fraternity, and an opportunity to transmit our friendship and affection also to all those who, during these years of the Work's existence, have shared in some way in its spirit and apostolate. I am sure that Don Alvaro will intercede in a special way for each of these women and men.

As always, I ask you to pray for my intentions. And also now for the fruit of the trip I am hoping to make in the second half of this month, to several countries in Central America.

With all my affection, I bless you,

Your Father,

+ Javier

Pamplona, July 1, 2014

1 Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, *Letter*, July 1, 1985.

[2] *Mt* 25:35, 40.

[3] Pope Francis, Homily, July 3, 2013.

[4] Don Alvaro, Notes taken at a family gathering, March 4, 1988.

[5] St. Josemaría, *Instruction*, December 8, 1941, no. 57.

[6] Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, *Letter*, January 9, 1993, no. 20.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*, no. 21.

[9] Pope Francis, Speech to the Diocesan Assembly of Rome, June 17, 2013.

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