



# Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

[Home](#) - [Documentation](#) - [Accounts](#) - [Álvaro del Portillo](#)

## Álvaro del Portillo

*S. Bernal*

**September 15, 1975, soon after St Josemaría died and went to Heaven, [Msgr. Alvaro del Portillo](#) was chosen to succeed him by a general elective congress of Opus Dei.**

On March 23, 1994, Msgr. Javier Echevarría summed up Don Alvaro's work at the head of Opus Dei as follows: "It has been a terrific time, a marvelous adventure, for many reasons. He aimed to witness to the life of a saint, and he took up the challenge, if I can express it like that, and ran with it, with the same pace, style and fortitude as our Founder always showed."

Salvador Bernal, author of the book *Alvaro del Portillo: Bishop Prelate of Opus Dei*, knew Don Alvaro personally. His book describes some of the features of Don Alvaro's spiritual fatherhood.

Not long after being elected to govern Opus Dei, Don Alvaro was asked what the founder had meant to his life. He answered by quoting words attributed to Alexander the Great, who, when accused of loving Aristotle more than his own father (King Philip of Macedon), reportedly replied, "This is true. My parents have, indeed, brought me to earth, but Aristotle's teaching has brought me from earth to heaven."

### **Good son and good father**

In 1984, on Don Alvaro's name day (February 19), Father Flavio Capucci told him that he had looked up "Alvaro" in a well-known etymological dictionary of proper names, and found that it means "he who protects, watches over, and defends everyone." Don Alvaro replied that he himself was inclined to favor a derivation not from German but from Semitic roots, according to which it would mean "the son". "But this can be joined to the interpretation that you have suggested," he said. "Pray for this to be the truth: that I may be a good son and at the same time a good father who watches over the other sons."

Father Capucci probably had those words in mind when he wrote in 1994 that “the profound unity between the founder and his successor, this flowing of paternity from the one to the other (so different in temperament, but so identical in spirit), this continuity of filiation that we have in our spirit – these things bear witness to realities which have no natural explanation.”

No doubt it is thanks to Don Alvaro that Opus Dei, with the grace of God, has kept in all its vigor the spirit of filiation and fraternity of a Christian family (see *The Way*, 955). Those bonds are anchored in the radically original charisma of Opus Dei. They were brought into being by the founder, but they are not dependent on his natural personality, warm as it was.

### **Family with supernatural bonds**

On the first anniversary of his election, Don Alvaro explained this very concisely. Monsignor Escrivá, he said, had two kinds of fatherhood. One was foundational, and hence his alone, since he was the only founder of Opus Dei. But the other kind, the spiritual one, “will always exist in the Work, until the end of time, because we are a family with supernatural bonds.”

Ten years after his election, Don Alvaro expressed his gratitude for the entry of God’s grace in his life and in that of Opus Dei in these words: “The spiritual fatherhood which was incarnated in a unique way in our most beloved founder was passed on to this poor man who is now your Father. Truly, *cor nostrum dilatatum est* – my heart has expanded to love you all, each and every one of you, with the love of a father and of a mother, as our Father asked that his successors would do” (see 2 Cor 6:11).

At the same time, the members of the Work had responded with obvious affection, which made him lift up his heart in thanksgiving also “because Opus Dei continues to be a beautiful family.” Esther Torranzo tells a story about the visit that Don Alvaro made in 1989 to Kibondeni, a women’s Opus Dei centre in Nairobi. Don Alvaro was welcomed with a Masai song – accompanied by sixteen drums! – one verse of which went like this: “I left the house to go and see my father. When he began to speak, I asked him to be silent, because I wanted first to express my joy at seeing him.”

### **All kinds of spontaneous details**

There are countless anecdotes testifying to the paternal, yet never paternalistic, attitude of Don Alvaro. He loved all the members of Opus Dei with the affection of any natural father or mother. And he had an amazingly good memory. Great

problems of the Church or of the Work notwithstanding, he could remember all kinds of details – big and small – of the lives of his children. Through the letters which so many of them wrote directly and spontaneously to him, he kept up with their worries, sorrows, and joys. I was astonished at his ability to retain so much information. Often he asked very specific questions which none of us could answer.

Many times I saw him react in ways typical of a father or mother, for reasons of the heart which the head cannot explain. Usually this had to do with care or concern for sick people. But sometimes it had to do with situations which, objectively speaking, were of no significance. And sometimes he would get carried away by admiration of somebody's virtues or talents. This was never without basis, but it could at times come across to strangers as being somewhat exaggerated. For instance, Ana Echaide, a member of the Academy of the Basque Language, recalls that at a get-together at Torreciudad in 1980, Don Alvaro, thinking of the help she gave in translating the founder's writings into Basque, praised her as "the one who knows more Basque than anyone else in the world."

### **Pain is a caress of God**

On April 19, 1990, at Aralar Hall in Pamplona, Spain, we were awaiting the arrival of Don Alvaro, who was coming by car from Barcelona. Judging from his time of departure, we estimated that he would arrive at about one in the afternoon. But at about that time, when we were ready to welcome him, there was a telephone call notifying us that there would be a long delay. We soon found out why. He had stopped in Saragossa to visit a daughter of his called Camino Sanciñena in the burns unit at Miguel Servet Hospital. She had been in a terrible accident at the end of January and was still in a very serious condition; practically her whole body was covered with burns. She was in an isolation ward – Don Alvaro had to talk to her on a telephone, and she could see him only through a window. But he told her that he had been praying for her ever since he heard, in Rome, about the accident, and that he was counting on her to advance the apostolic work going on all over the world by offering up her suffering. Four years later, when she was studying law at the University of Navarre, she wrote about this conversation in the school newsletter (*Diario de Navarra*, 4/5/94). "There are times," she said, "when it is very hard to keep a positive outlook on life, and one of those is when your whole life has changed because of an accident... The Father told me that even though this is hard to understand, pain is actually a caress from God. He literally said that. And he said it with such conviction that it raised me to his level, the level of faith."

## **Such great affection in the simplest ways**

I myself, of course, was sometimes the direct recipient of his affection. Don Alvaro could show such great affection in the simplest ways. He noticed little things that no one else did. One day, for instance, at the beginning of August 1988, I told everybody at the breakfast table what I intended to be a joke on myself – a proof of how sleepy I had obviously been that morning. When I'd started shaving, the hot water had gotten cut off and I had to lather up with cold water. When I finished, I turned on the hot water faucet to wash my face – I was on automatic pilot and expected the water to still be cold – and had to switch faucets again, because I almost got burned. I said all this thinking I had been confused, and had made a mistake, and that's the way everyone took it. Everyone, that is, except Don Alvaro. Apparently not thinking this was one bit funny, he asked me what time it was that I shaved. I guessed as best I could, and answered that it was at about ten after seven. "It must have been me," he said.

The next day, at breakfast, Don Alvaro wanted to know how the water had been that morning. When he heard that everything was fine, he said, "Then it really was me." He had figured out that I was shaving at the very same time when, just one floor below me in this turn-of-the-century house, he was filling up his bathtub with hot water, as his doctors had recommended. It never ceased to amaze me that from that day forward, he took his morning bath earlier so as not to interfere with my shaving.

## **Make sure they see how happy you are**

Naturally, he had a similar concern for the relatives of all the members of the Work. Sometimes it happens, especially in countries with very few Christians, that members of Opus Dei have non-Catholic parents. Don Alvaro advised these men and women to love their parents very much, to respect them, and to venerate them. In February 1987, in Nagasaki, a woman asked him what she could do for her Buddhist parents. His answer was, "If you have received the gift of the Catholic faith, this has definitely come about by the will of God. But your parents have smoothed the way for you by living true to their own beliefs. Perhaps without realizing it, they made you a religious person – a person capable of receiving the seed of faith. You cannot give your parents lectures. You should love them and treat them with great respect. What you can and should do is pray for them." And then he added, also for the benefit of a medical student who had asked him about the true source of happiness, "Make sure they see how happy you are, how content. Then they will ask themselves, 'Why is our daughter so much happier than she used to be?' They may even ask you. I pray to God that they will. And then you can say, 'It's because I am a Christian.' And backing this up will be the example you give by how hard you work, how dedicated you are, how ready you

always are to be at their service, how much you love them and help them.”

### **For my part, am always with you all**

On the morning of September 15, 1978, in Segovia, my own father unexpectedly died. (...) I received a letter from Don Alvaro, dated September 16. It was a two-page letter in his unique expansive handwriting, with its long and elegant strokes. “... Stay serene,” he wrote. “Help your loved ones to be at peace in the midst of this great sorrow., and don’t fail to offer up the pain of it also for me. Stay very united with the intentions of my Mass. I, for my part, am always with you all – with you, your good mother, and everyone else in your family – with all my heart, and in a very special way at this time.”

He never got used to hearing such news, even when it started coming so frequently because, as he himself put it, “there are so many of us now.” Despite his complete abandonment into the hands of Divine Providence, his heart never grew numb. At the beginning of September 1991, just after the ordination of several new priests in Torreciudad, he spent a few days in Pamplona. On one of those days, upon returning (shortly before suppertime) from visiting some of the women patients, he heard that two Opus Dei women in the United States had died. After praying for them, he said, “After a great joy there always comes a great sorrow. What can we do? These are blows – or rather caresses – from God.”

It was with this deep humanity that Don Alvaro fulfilled his canonical role. Over and above his different legal and pastoral capacities, he was, as indicated in the Statutes of the Prelature, a teacher and father who truly loved everyone in the heart of Christ. He formed and enkindled them with a burning charity, gladly wearing himself out for them. This was the mainspring of his life, the focus of each and every one of his days, the kernel of his work and prayer. From 1975 on, his heart just kept expanding; day by day he felt his affection grow.

Covadonga O’Shea once asked Don Javier Echevarría what had been the greatest lesson he ever learned from Don Alvaro. “Without a shadow of doubt,” he answered, “docility and simplicity. I have never seen a person more ready to serve others than Don Alvaro was. If there was ever a person who knew how to love, and who succeeded in loving, according to the teachings of our founder, it was Don Alvaro del Portillo.”

One did not need to be in the Work to be aware of all this. The writer Vittorio Messori, who had interviewed Don Alvaro just a few months before his death, wrote in the 3/23/94 issue of the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, “He really was a father, as they call him in Opus Dei. You felt like making your confession to

him, instead of asking him questions.”

**Extracts from Don Alvaro del Portillo: *Bishop Prelate of Opus Dei*, by Salvador Bernal, Scepter Publishers, Princeton New Jersey, 1999, Chapter 15.**