

LETTER
**ON THE
NEED FOR
FORMATION**

Álvaro del Portillo
1-08-1985



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LETTER ON THE NEED FOR FORMATION

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

In my last letter I talked to you about the divine gift of vocation, which we have to look after with the sensitivity of people in love. Let me continue today with the same theme, drawing out new reflections from this supernatural light which fills our whole life.

While the fiftieth anniversary of my vocation to the Work is still recent, some details have come to my mind of those first moments of my life in the Work. I have told you how, in order to give me the basic formation of the work of St Raphael – which I hadn't received before – our Founder did not hesitate to begin a class for me alone, even though at that time he was close to complete exhaustion, after working extremely hard all year. In order to give spiritual food to a son of his who was newly born to life in the Work, he did not allow himself rest. In this way he was teaching us – and did so throughout his life – that formation is a task of primary importance in order for the vocations, which God is sending us so abundantly, to become firm and reach full maturity.

All of you have to make a determined effort to look after your brothers, especially those who are *quasi modo géniti infántes*,^[1] like children newly born, because they have just asked for the admission into Opus Dei, or are aspiring to ask for it one day not far ahead. My daughters and sons: if we have to be ready to make every personal sacrifice in order to help a soul draw near to the Work, think what we must do for those people who have knocked at the doors of our home, moved by grace and by the most noble and supernatural desire of giving themselves to the service of God in Opus Dei.

But do not think that this is a task exclusively for the Directors and those who have received the job of looking after the first formation. All of us should feel this responsibility, because the Work is Christ's sheepfold – as our Father taught us – in which all of us “as well as being the sheep of that fold, are in some way shepherds of those sheep, good shepherds. For if we were called by the Love of God and have an obligation to correspond, we also have a duty, no less strong, to lead, to contribute to the sanctity and perseverance of our brothers.”^[2]

Being both sheep and shepherd at the same time is one of the characteristic features of our spirit, which we have to guard and transmit in all its integrity. Let us ask the Blessed Virgin for this grace, when we invoke her with the aspiration *Cor Maríae Dulcíssimum, iter serva tutum!* as we renew the consecration of Opus Dei to her most Sweet and Immaculate Heart.

To be a good sheep of this flock of Christ we need to make an effort to receive with docility and gratitude the formation which is made available to us so abundantly in the Work. The seed of vocation will only develop and reach maturity in soil drenched with the rain of humility and sincerity and watered by divine grace. That is why fraternal correction, the *confidence*, the Circles and the rest of the means of formation are indispensable in order to persevere on our way. Try to put more effort each day into assimilating them, my daughters and sons, being as attentive as you can so that the Holy Spirit may do his work without hindrance. Have you thought about this impressive reality: the Sanctifier, who talks to us, inspires us through those means. How well one understands the priority our holy Founder gave to them, convinced as he was that what is said to us – to each one of us – is the word of God for us to make it life of our life.

This is the principal task which corresponds to each one of us in the work of our sanctification: *to allow God to work* in our soul, opening our heart completely in the Confidence, surrendering our own judgement, struggling genuinely and generously, in order to make our own the advice which comes to us through the means of formation, both the personal ones and the collective ones. Examine now, my daughter, my son, what your attitude is – each day, each week, each month, each year – to that formation which, as we know very well, *never ends* because as long as we are living on earth we are *on a journey*, and therefore need to be guided and stimulated. Ask yourself: Do I go to the Circle and the fraternal chat each week with a hunger to identify my spirit with that of the Work? Do I know how to set myself some specific objectives – few – in which I will struggle during those days. Do I ask our Lord to help me fulfil them?

The Work is a good Mother who spends all her energies in ensuring that we her children have the formation we need in order to be loyal to the specific call which God has given us. On your part, my daughters and sons, there has to be the fullest response, also when the time comes to attend those means of formation – the retreat, the workshops, the annual courses – which need more time and dedication, and so require us to put aside our usual occupations for a few days. That is why, when you are thinking about your professional or family plans, consider the fact that – among the rest of your duties – the one of your own formation should occupy pride of place.

Ask yourselves: Do I take into account the demands of formation when planning a time for holidays or rest? Do I know how to renounce my own preferences cheerfully, in order to facilitate the work of those who give me the means of formation? Do I consider my attendance at those means an important part of the commitment of love which I have established, or desire to establish, with the Work? Do I go to each of them “just as keenly as the first time,” even though I have been in the Work for decades? During those days do I try to rejuvenate my dedication, to go to the roots of my vocation, so as to find there the impulse and youthfulness of spirit which allow me to follow Christ with renewed supernatural enthusiasm?

I was reminding you earlier, with words of our Founder that, as well as being *sheep*, we all have to see ourselves as *shepherds* of the others. In this too, and in a very special way, our Father is a model. Look carefully at his wonderful example and learn to give yourselves for the others as a good shepherd “who lays down his life for his sheep:”^[3] thinking not of rights, but of joyful duties; constantly looking

for opportunities to serve your brothers or sisters, genuinely, without being noticed. As I have reminded you on other occasions, the maturity which the Work expects of all of her children is shown in zeal to give one's life for one another. We are praying – every day I present this prayer to the Trinity: don't let me down – that our Lord may keep safe this path of ours, which we have to continue opening up every day with the impact of our footsteps. Let me speak to you a bit bluntly: don't tell me that you love God, the Church, and the Work, if you aren't taking loving care of your path and of the means to follow it.

Meditate on those teachings of our Father: “Don't forget, my son, my daughter, that you are contributing to the formation of your brothers and sisters and of so many souls, all the time: when working and when resting; when people see you looking happy or concerned; when in the middle of the street you pray as a child of God and the peace of your soul shows through on the outside; when people can see that you've been crying, and you smile.”^[4]

And when you feel tired – because all of us are made of flesh and blood – remember our Father's example, the way he so often embodied in his own life the Gospel image of the Good Shepherd, completely forgetting his own weariness and going out in search of a sheep which perhaps had strayed; tenderly taking a newborn lamb into his strong arms; putting himself at the head of the flock and guiding it towards the pastures of eternal life.

Let me not finish without asking you for prayers for my sons, Numeraries and Associates, who will be ordained as priests, in Torreciudad on the 15th of this month. Envelop them with the warmth of your prayer and your affectionate remembrance of them. And continue to be united to my intentions, in which each of you – your happiness, your personal sanctity – occupies a privileged place.

With a most affectionate blessing from

your Father

Alvaro

Rome, 1 August 1985

Blessed Álvaro del Portillo, Letter dated 1-VIII-1985, in *Family Letters*, vol. 1 (AGP, biblioteca, P.17).

^[1] 1 Pet 2:2.

^[2] St. Josemaría, Notes from his preaching, in *Crónica* 1969, pg. 489 (AGP, Biblioteca, P.01).

^[3] Jn 10:11.

^[4] St. Josemaría, *Alone with God*, no. 54 (AGP, Biblioteca, P.10).

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