

ÁLVARO DEL PORTILLO'S CENTENNIAL

BUSINESS LEADERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION



ANTONIO ARGANDOÑA

Professor Emeritus of Economics, and Business Ethics, IESE

Thoughts about the Chancellor of the University of Navarra (1975-1994) and his views on business and financial activities. The article below is taken from a talk given by Prof. Argandoña at a Continuous Education session held to mark Álvaro del Portillo's centennial.

PEOPLE MANAGEMENT • ETHICS • SOCIO-ECONOMICS

Álvaro del Portillo, bishop prelate of Opus Dei and chancellor of the University of Navarra (1975-1994), made a profound impression on the university and on many people who work at IESE or have attended programs and activities there. "Never lose sight of the fact that you're involved in a thrilling task destined to influence human history," he said – a fair description of the role of leadership.

We should highlight some of **Álvaro del Portillo's** work in management and governance, as well as the other attributes that one could apply to business leadership – faith in the power of truth; his ability to help people rise above themselves, inspire them and demand their commitment, with diligence and affection; his endeavours to make key social institutions that had lost their sense of mission – the family, school and business – strong again; his optimism; his sense of freedom based on commitment. **Álvaro** lived in difficult times but he never hid be-

hind these difficulties to escape his responsibilities and he encouraged us to always be happy with the times that we are born into: good advice in these times of crisis.

A POSITIVE VIEW OF THE WORLD AND PEOPLE

● This is how he taught us to love the world with a passion, in the words of **Saint Josemaría Escrivá**. He was always open to new ideas and taught us how to distinguish between what is permanent and what is merely transitory. He always had a positive view of the world, of circumstances and people. He promoted the truth but sought dialogue yet without falling into indifference or false ideological neutrality. He recognized that there are no single interpretations or solutions in human affairs. For him, pluralism was both desirable and to be enjoyed.

He always defended religious, cultural, economic, political and educational freedom, as well as freedom of expression, for everyone, but with a responsibility to the truth and to doing good. He did this by encouraging us to focus on the basics: a

life based on faith, a solid Christian life, the sanctification of work as the place where people can realize their vocation in the world, service to everyone, and love.

VIEWS ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

● **Álvaro del Portillo's** words are still relevant and useful in our professional activities as business people and managers involved in socio-economic activities. His diagnosis of society in crisis, principally in the West and in "old Europe," was not based so much on social science as in the religious dimension. What lay behind the crisis was a misguided concept of human beings as people "drugged by the desire for material goods and easy pleasures"¹.

Man had forgotten his truth, which is that he is God's creature, he has lost the basis of his dignity, human rights have been put at risk and reason has given way to sentiment. And an erroneous and incomplete idea of the person brings with it a mistaken idea about society, its institutions and businesses.

Once the root causes of the crisis have been identified, the next step is to solve these fundamental problems. **Álvaro del Portillo** proposed encouraging people to assume responsibility and to act, and to do so with optimism and humility, something that can be applied even in the sphere of business. "We cannot be passive spectators who see evil and think that this attitude is sufficient"².

IDENTIFYING AND MEETING NECESSITIES

● Returning to the transformational role that business can have on society, it's worth recording one of his pastoral letters in which he recalled the parable of the Good Samaritan, a man who, when walking along a road came across another man injured by some thieves, and cared for him where he lay and later took him to an inn to be looked after there.

Álvaro del Portillo said that that man, while going about his daily life, had come upon a person in need, identified his need and, "stopped his journey, changed his plans, given his time and used the means at his disposal"³; and he also took him to an inn. But the following day he had to continue on his route so "producing a couple of dinars, he gave them to the innkeeper and said: look after him and anything more you spend, I will give you when I return"⁴. "He continued on his journey because he had other duties to perform that he couldn't neglect. It isn't an excuse, it isn't evasion, it wouldn't have done any good if he stayed any longer. The same charity that had led him to stop moved him to continue on his journey"⁵.

We also learn in our work as leaders to identify other people's needs and attend to them, without neglecting our own.

But he also had a word for the innkeeper "who passed unnoticed, did most of the work and acted professionally. Contemplating his conduct, understand that you should all behave like him in the course of your work (in this case, as someone working in the hotel business), because any professional task offers an opportunity to help people in need in one way or another"⁶. In other words, he urged us to look beyond the narrow, short-term interests of the business.

EXPERTS IN HUMANITY

● Talking about the work of Christians in our society today, **Álvaro** cited Pope John Paul II: "What are needed are evangelists who are experts in humanity, who have a deep understanding of what lies in the hearts of men today, who can join with them in their pleasures and hopes, their anxieties and sorrows, and at the same time be contemplative and in love with God. For this we need new saints"⁷.

There's no doubt that **Álvaro del Portillo** taught us how to turn our work and our business into a place for human, professional and Christian transformation.

ANY PROFESSIONAL TASK OFFERS AN OPPORTUNITY TO HELP PEOPLE IN NEED ONE WAY OR ANOTHER

1. Pastoral letter, May 31, 1987, no. 14.

2. Pastoral letter, March 1, 1990.

3. Pastoral letter, January 9, 1993, no. 19.

4. Ibid., no. 19, citing Luke X, 35.

5. Ibid., no. 19.

6. Ibid., no. 21.

7. Pastoral letter, December 25, 1985, no. 6. Quoted from Pope John Paul II, Discourse, October 11, 1985, no. 13.