

PADRE ALBERTO HURTADO, S.J. AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Father Alberto Hurtado, S.J. (1901-1952), who soon will be declared a saint, is one of the most noteworthy figures in the history of the Church of Chile. He was both an apostle and a prophet. But he was also a great formator of persons, most especially through spiritual direction. The following pages are intended to explore this facet of his life.

Who he Was

Alberto Hurtado was born at the beginning of the 20th century into an aristocratic but poor Chilean family. He lost his father when he was only four years of age and was forced to live for several years, along with his mother and younger brother, with relatives. He studied in the Colegio San Ignacio in Santiago, graduating in 1917. In 1923 he received a law degree from the Universidad Católica.

The same year he entered the Society of Jesus. He received his formation in Chile, Argentina, Spain, and Belgium. He finished his studies of theology in Louvain and at the same time obtained a doctorate in education. It was there that he was ordained a priest on August 24, 1933.

He returned to his country in 1936, and in only 16 years of priestly ministry, up until his death in 1952, left an indelible mark through his work of evangelization and human promotion. He was a formator of youth; director of the Marian Congregation, professor of religion at the

Colegio San Ignacio and of Pedagogy at the Universidad Católica and in the Seminary of Santiago; a great promoter of the Spiritual Exercises; national adviser of Catholic Action, founder of the Hogar de Cristo, a charitable institution which still today is the most important one of its type in the country; creator of a workers' association; promoter of religious vocations; writer of various books and articles; founder of the journal Mensaje...

In all these efforts he revealed his closeness to Jesus Christ and an immense passion for serving others, especially the poor and marginalized. He was an apostle who proclaimed the love of God and a prophet who denounced the injustices in the world.

He died on August 18, 1952. In his honor, August 18 has been declared by law Solidarity Day. On various occasions the Chilean Parliament has honored him in full session.

He was beatified on October 16, 1994, by Pope John Paul II. In 2004 the decree was signed which recognizes the miraculous character of an extraordinary event which occurred through his intercession, thus paving the way for his upcoming canonization, Sunday, October 23, 2005.

His Experience of Spiritual Direction

When Fr. Alberto Hurtado published his book *Sindicalismo, historia-teoría- práctica* [Labor Unions, History-Theory-Practice] in 1950, he dedicated it to Fr. Fernando Vives, S.J. (1871-1935), saying that he was "the one to whom I owe my priesthood and my social vocation." Fr. Vives was a great apostle, who was an outstanding leader in the Catholic labor movement in the first decades of the 20th century. He was Alberto's spiritual director during some very important moments of his life. As an adolescent the idea of becoming a Jesuit began to grow stronger inside him. He had recently begun to go with a group of friends to a very poor barrio of Santiago to teach catechism and to work in a library. This experience impressed him deeply. Fr. Vives helped him make of this encounter with marginalized people a religious experience.

He also pointed out ways to grow in his relationship with the Lord. Through his correspondence with his best friend, Manuel Larraín, the future bishop of Talca and the founder of CELAM, we can appreciate his

growing religious maturity, in spite of his young age. When he was only 16 years old, he wrote: "If only you would meditate upon the life of Our Lord, you would see the taste you would develop for the things of religion." (s63y04)¹ "You will find that I am right in what I told you, that you will be greatly helped by frequent communion" (s63y02).

In his letters one discovers Alberto eager to find the way that God had chosen for his life. He is sure that a person will find a great tranquility when "one has done everything possible to find the will of God." (s63y02) He recommends to his friend the Ignatian method of excelling in virtue through the examen (s63y04) and the discernment of his vocation through exploring reasons for and against each inclination (s63y02.) It is easy to assume that he had learned all this from Fr. Vives.

We also see the mark of his master in his efforts to develop to the maximum his own talents. An example of this is his academic record at the Colegio San Ignacio. As a child Alberto received few awards for his academic achievement; it is particularly noteworthy that he never ranked first in religion class. Nevertheless, when he became a disciple of Fr. Vives, in his final year of studies (1917), he received an award for his general achievement, honorable mention in all the subjects, and — or the first time in his life — the distinction as the best student in religion.

Fr. Vives had to leave the country shortly after Alberto finished his secondary studies. Alberto suffered greatly, not only because of their personal attachment, but also because he needed his advice. He was upset by his inability to put into action his decision to become a Jesuit. The economic situation of his family was very precarious and he felt responsible for its future security.

He next asked Fr. Damián Symon, SS.CC. (1882-1963), to accompany him in his spiritual journey. While asking the Lord what he wished of him, Alberto dedicated himself seriously to his studies. His dissertation and licentiate received excellent marks, and both concerned legal themes which might improve the situation of the marginalized.

At this time he also began an impressive apostolic activity. Fr. Symon says that he had "an unrestrainable zeal, which needed to be moderated repeatedly so as not to become exaggerated. He could not see a sorrow without wanting to remedy it, nor any need whatsoever without studying how to address it. His life was an act of love for God which constantly

was translated into some act of love for his neighbor. His zeal, almost overflowing, was nothing but his love put into action. He had a heart like a pressure cooker which needed an escape valve.”²

His moments of struggle and of uncertainty continued, until in 1923 he was able to realize his dream of becoming a Jesuit. His first years were not without difficulty. This young lawyer who wanted to realize great undertakings for Christ found himself in a religious life that was very austere and abounding in rules. He began to feel he was not up to the standards he was being held to. In some personal notes he writes: “My life has been a failure.” But with deep hope, he wrote immediately after: “Why am I still alive? The Lord is kneading his apostle with the mud of my miseries” (s12y03).

In Louvain his superior was Fr. John the Baptist Janssens, the future General Superior of the Society. He treated him with affection and knew how to appreciate his gifts. He encouraged him to grow in his familiarity with Jesus Christ and to be attentive to the needs of the world which he was being called to serve.

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In his years of priestly ministry in Chile he accomplished an enormous amount of pastoral activity. He proclaimed Jesus Christ with enthusiasm and creativity. At the same time, he fought for a new social order, fraternal and harmonious, vigorously denouncing anything that opposed it. He helped many to personally meet Christ and to become his companions in mission and life. Aware that such incessant activity could end up separating him from the necessary intimacy with the Lord, and from the source which alone gave meaning to what he was doing, Fr. Hurtado maintained an attitude of total openness towards his religious superiors.

He remained especially close to Fr. Álvaro Lavín, S.J. (1902-1990).³ The detailed reports that Fr. Hurtado sent of his work and interior life are preserved. In these he demonstrates a great openness to letting himself be

led, to change course, to serve God and neighbor in new ways—the authentic availability hoped for by one who is looking for spiritual direction.

This brief review that we have done permits us to affirm without a doubt that the experience that Fr. Alberto Hurtado had of being accompanied by others in the ways of the Lord helped him become in turn a wise spiritual director of others.

Spiritual Accompaniment

When Fr. Alberto Hurtado returns to Chile in 1936 he was a mature man, spiritually and humanly. His life revolves around Jesus Christ. His only desire is to carry out his will and that the world might conform to his loving plan. In his apostolate with young people he speaks of Christ with an enthusiasm and familiarity that is impressive. For this reason many begin to approach him to ask him to help them orient their lives.

What does he propose to them?

I. GOALS THAT A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR OUGHT TO PROPOSE

A) IDENTIFICATION WITH CHRIST. Father invites those who approach him to put the Lord at the center of their lives. They should be always in communion with Him, identifying with Him. One of his favorite texts is this from St. Paul: “Yet it is no longer I, but Christ living in me,” (Gal. 2:20) and he presents it to them as a program for life.

“The overriding desire (of the young) must be *to reproduce the life of the Master; to prolong the Incarnation*; to make the Son of God a Chilean, just as the historical incarnation made him a Jew. This can all be summarized in the great maxim of any spiritual life: To do what Christ would do if he were in my place.”⁴

From this rises the invitation to always look, in every circumstance, for the will of God. He tells them: “One of the great conquests of the Christian life consists in grasping that Christ comes to each one of us individually to let us know his precise will. He stops right in front of me, in front of me alone, and places his divine hands on my head. While we think of ourselves as lost in a crowd of anonymous faithful, while we

imagine that the words or invitations of Christ are going out to the masses of believers, as long as my relations with Christ remain something collective and vague, I have not understood the divine fatherhood, nor my role as a child of God (...) Knowing this special call that God directs to me in particular, must be my life's greatest concern, especially in the most decisive moments, as in the choice of a career."⁵

B) SOLIDARITY OF HEART. Each person must develop an interior attitude of solidarity. With the assurance that no one can serve God without loving others, one must come to see and judge reality with the eyes of Christ. "Once the Catholic has attained this attitude of spirit, all the social reforms that justice requires have been achieved."⁶

Fr. Hurtado feels that whoever accompanies a person spiritually ought to put him in contact with the reality that surrounds him. In this way he can work with the Lord for the sanctification of the world.

"An authentic social education puts the one being educated in intimate contact with the reality of the environment in which they live, with its joys, triumphs, possibilities for action in order to rejoice and to take advantage of them, with its sorrows so that you feel them as your own, with its problems so that you will strain to resolve them, having always in mind the thought of St. Augustine: 'You say that times are bad, but better yourselves and the times will be better: you are the times.'" (HS, p.53)

C) INTERIOR FREEDOM. The one who accompanies a person spiritually ought to help him to be able to love Jesus Christ in a mature, responsible and stable manner. In a word, to achieve autonomy, to have an interior and true appreciation of what is good and right. And this in a conscious, committed, convinced manner.

"The spiritual director has to empower the soul he is directing so he can live without him. For nothing of the world must diminish his power to work, to decide, to resolve. True spiritual direction does not reduce the liberty of the soul, but rather stimulates and strengthens it. The good director knows that God lays out the way for each soul, and not himself. His role consists only in helping the soul to discover it." (PE, pp. 209-210)

II. MEANS

A) *HABITUAL PRACTICES*. A spiritual companion must give the other person tools to help him follow Jesus Christ in a free and effective manner. In the following texts, Fr. Hurtado mentions a few of these tools:

“Learning to pray (...) Prayer is the breath of the religious soul, for this reason the director has not done anything if he has not taught his disciple to pray.

“The first step is to teach *vocal prayer* although this is not the most important; it must be done with the fervor of one who is speaking with God; he should try to bring to it some special intention, for example, for the health of a friend, for peace in the world, etc; not being preoccupied so much with multiplying prayers but rather making them with full awareness and recollection.

“These vocal prayers need to be complemented with *more personal prayer*. This personal prayer consists of a sincere, real, intimate conversation with God, based upon sentiments of gratitude, admiration, respect, joy, hope. The one new to the interior life will make this prayer in all the circumstances of his life: in his travels, in sports, in the theater, in love. This prayer will be nothing more than the supernaturalization of whatever he was doing in the natural form. It must be as frequent as breathing. It can be said, without exaggeration, that the spiritual life of young people depends largely upon taking advantage of these moments.

“Daily meditation, even for a quarter of an hour each morning, is an excellent, indispensable practice for the supernatural feeding of the soul; in it one goes deeper into the great Christian truths and acquires a supernatural sense of life.”

“Spiritual exercises on retreat, for three or four days each year, are the most powerful stimulus for detaching oneself from the visible and joining oneself with spirit of faith to invisible realities.”

“Before going to sleep each night a few brief minutes of examination

whoever accompanies a person spiritually ought to put him in contact with the reality that surrounds him

of conscience; the holy mass and communion as frequently as possible, hopefully daily, constitute the program of a spiritual life..." (PE, pp.214-216)

B) FORMATION. Anyone who accompanies another spiritually should see that he grows in his knowledge of the teachings of the faith. In this way he will find an answer to his deepest worries and arrive at a more mature and full communion with the Lord.

For this purpose, he should give the person a "lively, fresh, interesting exposition, including practical applications, its beautiful and edifying features, and their relation to the vital needs of the human soul." (PE, p. 136) This study should lead to an intimate contact with Christ.

One must also transmit a moral formation, which will give the other person the necessary independence and vigor for facing life's challenges. Beyond emphasizing the struggle against sins, one must show how beautiful it is to live the commandments and the virtues.

C) HUMAN QUALITIES. The means for growing in the life of the spirit cannot ignore those which help to develop human qualities.

"An experienced director *will open up new horizons* for the youth person, introducing him to the many fields that are crying out for study: dogma, morality, church history, sociology, psychology, biography, history, etc., fields which anyone who aspires to be a leader of young people should study in depth." (PE, p. 215)

The person must develop a sense of beauty. "Everything that is beautiful, noble, harmonious, for the mere fact of being so, teaches (...) Harmony is the foundation of a moral order, the harmony that manifests itself in respect for all the essential relations of nature." (HS, p. 92) The cultivation of exterior and interior beauty will move the person to a greater generosity, and to fight against his materialistic surroundings.

"What we have said of contact with beauty should also be said of the cultivation of the human qualities of politeness, education, courtesy, chivalry, respect. Respect for everything: for man and even for things." (HS, p. 92)

"Teachers should not forget that social teaching for the purpose of producing true fruits should be linked with the daily exercise of the virtues which we have recommended. These notions which at first glance seem insignificant: punctuality, closing doors, climbing stairs slowly, not disturbing the sleep of others, turning off the lights, have an importance in life that can never be emphasized enough." (HS, 204)

In brief, the person must be helped to become open to the fullness of reality. "One needs to become open to *life and to all its manifestations in order to sanctify everything* (...) Christian formation is the ordering of this world to the world beyond" (s40y11).

Necessary Attitudes in the Companion

A) *PERSONAL TENDERNESS FOR THE PERSON BEING ACCOMPANIED.* Father Hurtado met these goals because he treated others with enormous and authentic tenderness. He focused on each and every person and tried to help them in their own individual realities. Many are the testimonials of those who felt that the Father treated them as if he only had time for them, although he was committed in thousands of activities.

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He considered this principle fundamental. Referring to the spiritual accompaniment of young people, he wrote the following: "The spiritual director must know the life of the spirit and must know the young person. Spiritual direction is an 'individual affair,' and it is precisely in its 'individual' character that its greatest force resides. Talks, exercises, study groups, are 'general' orientations, the problems of each person are 'individual.'" (PE, p.210)

B) *BE STIMULATING.* Fr. Hurtado gave great importance to taking note of the progress of persons he directed. He felt that under no circumstances should one comment upon the defects and inconsistencies of another in a harsh manner. "Especially when a young person has weaknesses in

which he often relapses, he needs to find an understanding spiritual director, who will not lose patience with him for anything in the world!" (PE, p.238)

This same principle is revealed in the counsel that Fr. Hurtado gives to priests who deal with young people. "Don't forget to encourage the penitent. Never scold mercilessly. If it is a matter of relapses, prevent a possible fall and give him the approach he ought to follow. Let him see the victories he has achieved." (s58y25)

Fr. Hurtado showed these attitudes in his own dealings with those who approached him. The following text is taken from a letter to one of his Jesuit companions. "I believe that a spirit that is too critical can create a climate of malaise around him, a true inferiority complex, impeding action which in the concrete would have been useful, in spite of the deficiencies in it. More and more I see clearly the terrible complex of pessimism, weakness, timidity, and insignificance that weighs upon so many of Ours and which prevents them from reaching the measure of their true stature (...) I am beginning to feel it in my own flesh, and it is perhaps for this reason I have delayed so much in analyzing your letter, this immense difficulty in taking action. Before I could preach extemporaneously. Now I proceed with much fear; you have seen that I have spent the entire summer preparing my talks (...) My brief experience has shown me more and more each day the need for giving encouragement. I believe that one explanation for the fact that so many people approach me in search of encouragement, is the optimism I endeavor to awaken in them (...) On the other hand, I fear that some experts, even with a very exact, although obscure diagnosis... which any of us could give if we look above all at defects, in reality, do nothing more than drive away and discourage the people" (s62y59).

Final Words

Let us conclude with some words of Father Hurtado himself.

"The director must instill in the young person the thought that in every moment he should live according to the will of God, and his mission is to help him to know this will in the diverse circumstances of life. The image of Christ has to be always present in the soul of the young

person, to love him and to inspire him to work at every moment as Christ would have worked if he were in his place (PE, p. 209)

“At the same time that (the spiritual director) is getting to know the young person he must take advantage of his natural virtues, many of them latent deep down in his soul. In a young person of a joyful and boisterous character are often hidden very rich possibilities, more valuable than in those of a timid temperament. If the director succeeds in winning them by grace, it will do miracles in them.” (PE, p. 211)

These statements gather together Padre Alberto Hurtado’s experience and the convictions he held in accompanying persons spiritually. All this was based, in turn, on the experience that he had had of being accompanied by others, especially by Fr. Fernando Vives, along the ways of the Lord.

For more informations about the biography, publications,
and Spirituality of Padre Alberto Hurtado:
Fondación Padre Hurtado: www.padrealbertohurtado.cl
Pontifical Catholic University: www.univ.puc.cl/hurtado
canonization: www.canonizacion.cl (English, French, German, Italian)

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NOTES

1. To identify documents we use the numeration from the archives of Fr. Hurtado.
2. Álvaro Lavín, *El Padre Hurtado, Apóstol de Jesucristo* [Fr. Hurtado, Apostle of Jesus Christ,] Santiago 1977, pp. 22-23.
3. Fr. Lavín was Vice Provincial from January 19, 1947 to September 29, 1952. He later succeeded Fr. Hurtado as chaplain of the Hogar de Cristo, until he was named Rector of the Colegio San Ignacio in 1957. He once again became Provincial of Chile (1960-1963) and chaplain of the Hogar de Cristo. The later years of his life were dedicated

to serving the poor in many ways. He also was entrusted with the cause of the canonization of Fr. Hurtado, about whom he wrote numerous books.

4. *Puntos de educación*, [*Points of Education*], Valparaíso, 1942, p.213. In the future: PE.

5. *Elección de Carrera* [*Choice of a Career*], Buenos Aires, 1943, pp.12-13.

6. *Humanismo Social* [*Social Humanism*], 3rd edition 1992, p.20. In the future: HS.

Translated by Robert E. Hurd, S.J.