



# Becoming a Piarist

LETTER TO OUR  
BRETHREN  
APRIL 2017

**A** few days ago, on March 25, our Order and the whole of the Pious Schools celebrated a Day of Prayer for the novices of the Order. You all could receive the full list of their names, some testimonies of their experience of the Novitiate, and even a simple prayer that will help us put their lives and their vocation in the hands of the One who called them to this abundant harvest.

Well, I confess that the reading of their experiences, which were sent to me with generosity and transparency by the young men, penetrated deeply in me and helped me to reflect on a question: *what is happening in each one of the young over the twelve months of their Novitiate?* What interior movement, discoveries, what process of consolidation of their vocation, which dynamism of change, what impulse of donation of their own life occur in these months on the inside of each one of the novices? What is what has been going on in every one of the Novitiates of the Order during so many years of the life of the Pious Schools? Why Calasanz said that the Order will easily fall - that's the word used by Calasanz - if the screening and admission of novices to be admitted is not carried out with great discernment and they are not instructed most diligently?<sup>1</sup> Why Calasanz defines the task of the master of novices as the one who *“leads each novice through this*

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1.- CC n. 7

*way to the summit of perfection”?*<sup>2</sup>

All of these questions made me think that it is good to help the Order to become more aware that something extraordinary, out of the ordinary, takes place every year in the Novitiates of the Pious Schools. Every year, a group of youth, eager to wear their life in the Pious Schools, spends a year work hard on themselves and on the authenticity of their vocation, before deciding if they want to devote their life, as religious, to the only Lord. When this decision occurs and the responsible for process gives acceptance, the young professes his vows and gives his life entirely to the project of Calasanz, which he has already assumed as his own.

I would like, with this simple writing, give voice to the interior process of our novices and, ultimately, make two simple points about the future of the Order. What is it what a novice lives in this very special year?

The first thing I want to highlight is something very obvious: each of the young men has his own process, each experience is different. I am going to try to bring me closer to the most common items that are experienced in the Novitiate, but I do not want to stop saying that each one is unique and lives his own process. That is why the novitiate needs, as Pope Francis says, “artisanal” work, in which the one who has the responsibility of accompanying, must know how to approach each one to understand what he is living and so to be able to accompany him correctly on the undertaken way. From here, I want to thank all the Masters of Novices, those who are currently, and those who have been at some point in their lives.

What is the central dynamic that occurs in the process of the Novitiate? I would define it thus: the identification of the young man with the Piarist life project, understood as his total response to the Lord, and that causes in him — with deep joy - the sincere desire to give his life. This process is very strong. Obviously, when a young man decides to make the novitiate, it is because at the bottom of his heart he has taken the decision to become a Piarist. But it is true that some months later he will check that that decision-if it was already taken- was not so full as it is called to be. This experience - this is to walk - causes effort, struggle, searches, sometimes abandonment and, above all, a clear conscience of following a road, that gradually that progressive vocational clarity is coming.

I would like to point out some of the processes that occur in our novices. I think that all of them are very significant in our Piarist life.

Most of the novices highly value the process of **self-knowledge** that they experience during the Novitiate. They take the decision to enter within themselves, allow the formator to help them in this task, and explore what they are. They live transparency, find in the community response to this transparency, and continue forward. Only from there they can “successfully” tackle a so hard and difficult task because it involves a clear sincerity with themselves, with his companion and with God. Valuing this dynamism of self-consciousness, transparency and desire to grow, so that in adulthood we continue doing so, would help us much to be best Piarists.

The novice seeks sincerely his identification with Piarist vocation. We don't talk about “identity” as a concept, but about the process of “identification”. There is no identity without **identification process**. In this process the figure of Calasanz plays an interesting role. Calasanz is

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2.- CC n. 23

a discovery that is essential in the process of configuring the Piarist vocation. I therefore think that when we do not work - in our lives - for further deepening in the one who is the source of our identity, we lose a formidable wealth. I think that the Order must think about this issue when implementing lifelong learning.

The novitiate helps a lot to understand and assume the central keys of Piarist life. I call my attention all the effort dedicated to the novices understand that the secret is in **the balance** with which we live our “basic axes” (the experience of prayer, community life and dedication to the mission) and how difficult is later on to live it in many cases. Where is the secret of the balance? I am convinced that the secret is to look for it honestly. So simple as that.

The truth is that I have been able to share with many novices the reasons why they chose their “religious name”. They are very diverse, and all of them are respectable. But in the vast majority of them, there is some background: the **desire for consecration**. The novice, in his profession, is devoted to Christ. It puts his life in the hands of the Lord. It is devoted to Him, not to his ideas or his tastes or to his processes, but to the only Lord. This experience is honest, sincere and clear in all of them. It is true that it is an experience not consolidated for life, even if strongly configured in his soul. There is a message in all of this for adult life, when many times we forget what essentially we are (consecrated to Christ) and we get lost in other goals, aspirations, or devotions.

If something catches my attention in the novitiates I visit it is the rooted and deep **joy** that the novices are living. Calasanz himself said it already when he writes that “*I am continually in the novitiate, and I’ve never seen novices as happy, healthy and happy as now.*”<sup>33</sup> Joy is a sign of vocational authenticity. Sometimes I wonder what happens in our Piarist life when sadness, disappointment, criticism, skepticism or indifference dominate. This is not what marks the birth of our vocation or the spiritual context from which a young man makes his profession.

No novice has it easy. During a year everything happens in the life of youth: questions, affirmation, feeling of not being progressing sufficiently, nostalgia for what was left behind, feeling that prayer is not always easy or meditation has its secrets, difficulties with the transparency, etc. Sometimes he struggles with loneliness, with the need to be clear about the deep sense of what he lives, with the own tendencies that we know that must be overcome. But the young fights. This is the most important thing. So I think that the **ability to fight** is part of what holds us as authentic Piarists.

I leave to the end the great treasure of the novitiate: the **experience of prayer**. The discoveries that young people make and treasure in relation to their personal relationship with God and their experience of prayer are - so I see it-, wonderful. There is a new world that appears in the life of young people. Before becoming novices they already had a strong experience of prayer (the vocational option without that experience is impossible), but it is very interesting to see how it strengthens, how it is enriched, how it is customized and how it is cared of by each one this experience of “living from God”. It is also interesting to see how complicated it is to keep it in its same quality and how difficult it is often to make of this experience of faith something consolidated that marks my life afterwards. I have to say that the experience of personal prayer is a challenge for the religious of the Order. We have to think why.

Undoubtedly we could cite more dynamics that are characteristic of the life in the Novitiate.

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3.- EP 638

I have quoted the self-knowledge, the identification process, the balanced experience of the various dimensions of the Piarist life, consecration, joy, struggle and prayer. One could quote others, such as the life of study, the learning of community, the value of the mission among children, etc. I am not looking for completeness. Simply I desire to think of the importance of these dynamics in our lives, because they are those that make it possible that a young man make his profession. They must also be those who make possible our faithfulness.

In this line, I want to finish with two small points:

Nothing of what is discovered in the Novitiate, and none of the lived processes, is consolidated. None. In all we can and must move forward, and in everything we can go back. This is the great challenge of formation. They come to my mind - and I am sure that to yours too - specific faces of young people sincerely excited in their first profession who a few years after left our life believing that “they wanted to experience another” or simply weakened in the conviction of their vocation. So we must continue caring for - and living - the same dynamics, adapted to our age and the vital moment. Nothing is finished, everything is on the way.

And my second belief: what I have just said is not only for the Initial Formation process, but for the whole life of the Piarist. During our whole life we need to vibrate – in the way in which each one may do it - with the authenticity of life. Do you have never wondered why all we get moved when we take part in a solemn profession? The answer is clear: because that central experience is my own essential experience.

I think that the Novitiate is a privileged space to understand what it means to “become a Piarist”. The dynamics that we live in it, the discoveries that we make, the struggles that we face, express the task of “inner transformation” which is the essential condition of religious vocation. Thinking about it can help us understand what means that all we lived in the novitiate should continue being lived throughout the life – of course in a different way - if we really want to live with authenticity.

I invite you to pray frequently for the youth who are living their novitiate. I appreciate the authenticity with which they live and walk.

Receive a fraternal embrace.

*Pedro Aguado*  
*Father General*