



“The sovereign Lord is my strength; He gives me gazelle legs and makes me walk through the heights”

LETTER TO OUR
BRETHREN
APR 2021

I write this fraternal letter in the midst of the experience of pandemic by COVID-19, which has so affected the life and mission of the Pious Schools in the midst of this suffering humanity. I do this because quite a few Piarists write to me asking about the situation of our Order, the experience we are living as Piarists. This request has helped me to try to summarize some of the dynamics I can see throughout the Pious Schools as a whole, and to offer it to you as a contribution to your growth in the sense of belonging to the Piarist family.

We are still in the middle of the pandemic, and it will take us a while to get out of it, no doubt. Therefore, it is difficult to assess the consequences the COVID-19 has on the whole Order. We may have to wait a little while to get a more complete view of what we call the “pandemic impact” on the Pious Schools. However, we can get closer to a first analysis.

I wanted to title this letter with the verse 19 of the canticle of Habakkuk (Hab 3:2-

4. 13a. 15-19) with which we so often pray in the Liturgy of the Hours and which so much helps to live this time of difficulty in which we are walking. I remind you of their last verses, because they illuminate our experience of faith:

“Though the fig tree should not blossom
and the vines have no fruit,
although the olive tree forgets its olives
and the fields don’t give crops,
although the sheep in the fold run out
and there are no herd left in the stable,
I will exult in the Lord,
I will glory in God, my Savior.
The sovereign Lord is my strength;
He gives me gazelle legs
and makes me walk through the heights.”

Of course, the first thing that comes to mind and heart is remembrance and prayer for **our deceased**. We have lost some brothers in these months (Catalonia, Bethany, California, Hungary, Emmaus). Numerous religious - of all ages - have become infected and overtook it, with greater or lesser harm to their

health. Practically, all the Provinces we have had the experience of the disease and, consequently, of the quarantines and care of the sick and of all. Many religious have written their reflections in “quarantine times”, which are undoubtedly valuable testimonies of faith and vocation. I have a simple example, from a junior who had the detail of sharing his sickness process. I transcribe only two illustrative paragraphs of this young Piarist’s experience.

“I felt fear, and in this fear I saw little, poor glances. “Getting Infected ruins my plans”, “this will pass fast”, “why must be me and right now?” It seemed that I was looking to the ground, in pain I asked God for explanations. I became a victim, not understanding that, in the midst of fear, God is loving me, and true love corrects, educates, and guides me. Life is a gift from God, not an impossible trial to which God submits us. I was no longer the one with the question to God, but God who asked me “Where are you? Where is your heart? Isn’t your heart with me?”

I then read a phrase from Teilhard de Chardin: “The greatest danger that today’s humanity can fear is not a catastrophe that comes from outside, not even the plague; the most terrible of calamities is the loss of the pleasure of living.” I have discovered that the real danger that looms over life is not the threat of death, but the possibility of living meaninglessly, living without tending to a greater fullness than life and health”. After reading this phrase, I discovered that my fear was not of the virus, but of the lack of meaning of my life. Not all of it, but these aspects of self-reliance that I’ve been building.”

We can extend our solidarity to educators, family, friends etc. The pandemic is indeed being total. And it has affected **the “psychological and spiritual health”** of the Piarists. We have had some religious in psychological treatment for stress, in spiritual crisis, in fear of mission, in social rebellion, in “naivety and simplification of reality”, etc. We have been through many different situations, although most religious have lived - and live - this pandemic with serenity and openness.

The pandemic has affected **the mission**. And in

several ways. From the “positive” side, we can highlight the creativity from which in many demarcations the situation has been answered, and not only in places that have means. It is true that much progress has been made in online classes, for example, and in all kinds of meetings and collective work that are not face-to-face or with partial presence, and we are responding well. But we have many places where it has been very difficult to teach, and it has been done by radio, or by WhatsApp, for example. And some places where we simply haven’t been able to teach for a few months, and the children have lost schooling, because the pandemic has affected the poorest more, as always. This pandemic has reminded us crudely of Calasanz’s conviction: the right to education, integral and quality, and for all, remains a challenge. We have to make it clear that *“the more poverty, the better the response and the higher the quality.”* This is the way to go.

The work of the Piarists and all the educators is not being easy, but **the dedication is formidable**. We will never forget all the effort made to keep our educational service online, which needs presence and closeness as something substantial to what we do and offer. I remember a junior’s testimony in his first year as a teacher. He told me that after four months of online classes, a student asked him if he knew “how tall she was” and that the only right answer that occurred to him was “I can’t wait to know you and to meet you.” It was hard to continue class, because of the emotion everyone felt.

More has been noticed in **pastoral care**, both in the parish and in the extra-academic (e.g. the Calasanz Movement). We have lost activities - which will have to be recovered - pastoral groups have been reduced, in some cases they have simply failed to function. So are the Eucharists, catechesis, etc. There is a “pastoral crisis” caused by the pandemic, which we must think of in a renewed way.

The difficulty has been particularly strong on some **non-formal education platforms**, where children and young people have simply stopped attending, almost always because families thought it is safer to minimize “meeting oppor-

tunities.” Many programs have been maintained, but not without difficulty. I think we are writing a gold page of the history of the Order.

The **economic issue** is still under study. But the impact will be significant, it’s already being important. In countries where schools are concerted, a lot of money has been lost by reducing additional entries. In countries where school is private, pupils have been lost and, consequently, economic capacity has been reduced. We have saved on trips and meetings. All Provinces are studying the situation, as well as the General Congregation, especially since the Provinces that depend on the general contribution feel great insecurity, of course. They already know our priorities: “first to be able to eat and study, and then we will see”, in addition to working thoroughly to obtain our own resources. That is where we are at.

“**Tightening the belt**” has been applied in all cases, also in the life of the General Curia (travel, reduction of activities and meetings to a minimum, postponement of some reforms expected in general houses, publications, etc.). We study that this dynamic can help us review our functioning, also in the post-pandemic era. But we have to discern well about this matter, which is not simple, because the risk is to “*kill or reduce life*”. We must walk with fine discernment on this subject.

Our young people have suffered especially the situation, especially since they have had to be all year round with online classes, which is quite difficult and exhausting. Some have had to change their training itinerary, for immigration reasons. We have had to resolve quite a few Novitiates exceptionally (in Costa Rica, Bolivia, and Indonesia, places where there is no institutional Novitiate and where we had to authorize them). Several juniors follow their training process outside the training house. Various training accompaniment processes are carried out online, with full availability of trainers and young people.

We **have lost numerous candidates** in the early stages of vocational reception and pre-novitiate, especially since families have not allowed their children to join the Initial Formation. This has

been especially strong in Asia, and very significant in the process of our International House of Manila, aimed at welcoming young people from new countries. The pandemic will reduce the number of our young people in the coming years.

A new awareness emerges gradually between us that “**nothing will be the same**” and that we should think things again. There is still a certain mindset that “with the vaccine, everything will be back to the way it was.” And this is not going to be the case, nor do we want it to be, and we must work to find new parameters of life and mission from which to live and for which to educate. As Piarists, we are challenged by the claim that “*we cannot live again as if nothing had happened.*” Challenges such as ecology, the care of the planet, the global citizenship in which to educate our students, the reception of the immigrant, interculturality, etc., appear as opportunities for renewal of life and Piarist responses. We are only beginning to consider all this, overcoming short terming or the mindset that “soon we can continue to live as we did.” The pandemic has not caused change; it has simply accelerated awareness that “we must change”. This issue is on the table of the Pious Schools, and we will have to develop it little by little. Our aspiration cannot be as short-circuiter as “going back to the previous way”. Let us not lose our way: we want a different world, also different from the one before the pandemic.

Another background element challenges us. The pandemic is being an opportunity for certain “**controller**” and “**anti-plurality**” **socio-political mindsets** to take advantage of positions, with legal measures or with promotion of criteria. We should have our eyes open on issues related to educational laws, legislation on important aspects of human life, restrictions on activities that are important to us, the economic priorities of governments, public aid that we can access, etc. The balance between security and freedom is at stake.

We must also think about what we have learned in relation **to pastoral dedication**. We have seen certain dynamics of “steps back” in pastoral agents and mission dynamics. It is true that prudence must be taken care of, but we have also

seen contexts in which the active presence of the religious or the lay Piarist has been greatly reduced, and in which the “temptation to reduce activities” has been very strong, and has sometimes prevailed.

I mention in a special way the celebration of faith, the liturgy. The pandemic has favored online celebrations. We have a risk that the liturgy will be reduced to contemplation, of moving towards a **bodiless liturgy**. We perceive the risk of growing “non-belonging” to a real community and yes to a virtual community. The fight for “recovering and growing the community” must be considered.

I add something that has to do with **our deep, spiritual experience of what is happening**. We must name and discern experiences well. For example, fear generates enclosing and diminishing our dedication and generosity; having a dark image of the future is always against life, because it becomes a “self-fulfilling” vaticinium, a prophecy that fulfills itself, and it is very contrary to what an educator must live and transmit to his students, which is nothing but the desire to live and the courage to dream.

I finish this simple reflection with a small historical reflection. We have four centuries of history, and we have gone through numerous times or moments of difficulty. We have always come forward, convinced that Calasanz’s dream is essential for our children and young people.

I would just like to provide two small references of our history that personally help me to live this process in which we are involved, one about Calasanz’ options and the second about the process of consolidation of the Pious Schools, with one of the foundations of Florence.

First of all, we cannot forget that Calasanz has already fought the plague, and that his Pious Schools were born in *pandemic time*. Already the first General Chapter of the Order, scheduled for April 1631, had to be postponed because the plague did not cease. In the middle of the pandemic, Calasanz created the Pious Schools for the good of children and young people. We must not forget that no virus can stop or weaken our

charism and mission.

As we approach the process of our foundation in Florence, we found that “*because of the plague, which invaded the city, the schools were closed from September 1630 to November 1631. The Piarists offered their services to the sick persons with such generosity that they earned the esteem of the people and fame for their schools. After a visit by the Grand Duke’s delegates to the schools in 1632, a license was obtained of calling as many religious as necessary, instead of the six allowed at first.*”¹

I am glad that we can say that the Pious Schools, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, have founded a house in Guatemala and in East Timor.

Get a fraternal hug.

*Fr Pedro Aguado Sch. P.
Father General*

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1.- DICCIONARIO ENCICLÓPEDICO ESCOLAPIO (DENES), Volume I. “Florencia, Colegio Santa María dei Ricci”)