



“Lord, have mercy on me, because I am a sinner”

LETTER TO OUR
BRETHREN
MAY 2021

I dedicate this *Salutatio* to a shared reflection on one of the strongest challenges we have as Christians and as religious: **clericalism**. We are facing one of the ecclesial dynamics most denounced by Pope Francis throughout his pontificate, and I think it is worth reflecting on it from the context of our Pious Schools.

I entitle the letter with the prayer of the Publican, contained in the Gospel of Luke and presented as an alternative to the Pharisee’s prayer. And I do it because I believe that this parable, popularly known as “*the Pharisee and the publican*”¹, is one of the clearest to understand what clericalism means and the serious dangers it entails. As in almost every parable of the Gospel, it is especially important to read whom it is addressed to. This detail is usually underlined at the beginning of the narrative, but sometimes it escapes us. Jesus directs this parable to “*those who presume to be men of good and despise*

others” (Lk 18:9). Indeed, the Pharisee says, “*I thank you, Lord, for I am not like the others*”. And he gives a list of things he does well, his high degree of compliance with the mandates of the law. His self-image is superior, and his attitude to the other is that of contempt because he considers him “a second-level believer.” It is a parable against clericalism.

From my point of view, the root of clericalism is perfectly portrayed in this parable and consists in feeling superior to others “because of his office or his role in the Church”. For this reason, clericalism introduces a rupture dynamic into the ecclesial communion, and leads the clerical state to the risk of self-sufficiency and, hence, to many other scenarios, some of them extremely serious and painful, as we have been able to experience.

I think that the awareness that clericalism is one of the most serious evils we experience in the Church is growing among us, and that it affects us all, also Consecrated Life, and also our Order.

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1.- Lk 18, 9-14

And while it may be surprising, it affects too the lay people who walk within the Pious Schools. However, at the same time that awareness of this risk grows, I doubt that clarity about what it means or about the dynamics that are meant to overcome it is growing. Clericalism is not surpassed “by decree”, but through a long process of “*unlearning what has been learned and learning the new*”. Like all entrenched trends, a long process of transformation is needed. There is a long way to go.

It is very important **not to fall into simplifications**. Clericalism has nothing to do, for example, with the use of the Piarist habit or with the careful and beautiful celebration of the Liturgy. I have met religious in jeans - or with jacket and tie - who were extremely clericalists and Piarists in sweaty cassocks full of marks of heavy work, humble and servant, to whom young people gave a deep joy to approach and feel listened to by them. The clothes we wear should serve what we are called to be: become close, and never become an expression of power or elitism. When this happens, something does not work well with us. Likewise, I know priests who confuse the “close and pedagogical celebration” with the botch, priests who celebrate the Liturgy with a precious - and pedagogical - care for sacramental and ritual language, as well as others who are “examples” of that rigidity that absolutizes the relative, an idolatry similar to that to which it relativizes the absolute. Simplification is not the way; it never has been. Clericalism is something deeper.

Clericalism is both **an attitude and a structure**. It is a mindset that tends to crystallize in a culture. That is why its removal requires serious and deep, systemic and accurate work. The attitude of the one who “believes that as a priest he is above others and, therefore, should not be judged by others” - the second is an immediate consequence of the first - is gradually consolidated into a clerical culture or structure. If the “clerical attitude” can be defined as that of the *one who feels that his ordination or vocation makes him superior*, the crystallization of that mentality in a culture - or organizational culture - could be defined as the “*conscious or unconscious concern to promote the particular interest of the clergy and to protect the*

privileges that have traditionally been granted to those in the clerical state”.²

This “clerical culture” always degenerates into dynamics that do nothing to help the construction of the Church and, in our case, the Christian Piarist community. Problems such as authoritarianism, the absence of co-responsibility, the undervaluation of the role of women in the Church, the excessive dependence of the priest or the superior, etc. appear immediately. Let us be aware of that.

And, without a doubt, clericalism brings with it the most serious of consequences: ***the transgression of boundaries***, which has led to the painful consequences that we all know. The lack of respect for the other, sustained by the idea that we have the right to transgress the limits of that respect, is at the heart of everything related to abuses within the Church. Many scholars relate this dynamic to a certain vision of the priesthood as a representative of a sacred power, of a self-sufficient and closed God instead of the God Father of Jesus Christ. What is already known as “*syndrome of the chosen one*” lets us go more profoundly into this line of reflection. An example of this syndrome is that of King David, with a clear awareness that he had been chosen by God and that he was unable to respect the limits. This led to the abuse of power, conscience and sexuality. Clericalism tends to place people and institutions above limits. That is why Pope Francis insists so much on this issue.

Taking one more step, I would like to approach three simple reflections, thinking of us. I believe that within us there are some **symptoms** of the clericalism virus, just as there are some **clarities of how it is overcome**, as well as **some challenges that we can pose ourselves**. I would like to say something about each of these three aspects.

Some “symptoms”. Over the years I have seen attitudes (personal and institutional) that are “red flags” that have to make us think. I speak

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2.- This is the definition given by the 1983 Conference of Major Superiors of USA in its assembly on “Solidarity and Service” It is almost forty years old, but history - sadly - has proved it.

freely, surely we can all feel included in some of these symptoms, *because “whoever is sinless, may throw the first stone”*.³

- I have seen religious, unfortunately young people, who think that because they are Piarists they do not have the same obligations as the teachers of the school or should not respect and welcome the principal - man or woman - layman of the school, or could afford to miss a meeting of the staff;
- I have seen religious with institutional responsibility say publicly that a religious is always a better director than a layperson;
- I have seen formators permissive with clerical attitudes or dynamics of their juniors or even provocative of them;
- I have seen religious worried with their image, with their prestige or with their desire to hold important positions;
- I have seen formators transmitting a “superior to the subordinate” lifestyle, unable to generate the fraternal dynamics that characterize consecrated life and which dignifies the service of authority;
- I have seen temptations of lack of professionalism, of not preparing enough, of improvising, of not preparing with depth what you will do or say;
- I have seen dynamics of abuse of conscience or power in some situations.

That is all real. And more things we could say or share in meetings where our goal was to discern how to accompany Pope Francis in his desire for a more Samaritan and more servant and community-generating Church.

I am talking about the symptoms of the disease. Not from the countless signs of “Calasancian life” I perceive in the Order, pregnant with humility and service. It will be nice to write another

letter about it. I may be encouraged. I am inspired by the growth among our young people of the aspiration to be “Simply Piarist”. That is the right direction.

Some clarities to overcome it. Reading Pope Francis, I see that the orientations he gives to overcome clericalism can be summed up like this: an absolute priority of mission in the Church; greater proximity of the clergy especially to those on the periphery of society; appropriate inclusion of lay people in decision-making processes in the Church; greater formation for all; greater emphasis on the primacy of the Sacrament of Baptism and the Holy People of God to whose service the clergy are; a greater assessment of the infallibility of the faithful *in credendo* and of the *sensus fidei*; truly trust that the Holy Spirit is well present among the lay faithful.

These contributions that the Pope is making at various times can be synthesized in this clairvoyant statement: “In the people of God, faithful and silent, resides the immune system of the Church”.⁴ For us Piarists, there are some interesting consequences that we are called to think about and which are consequences of these lines proposed by the Pope.

- We are for the Mission. Dedicating our energies to serving, to working, to giving our best for children and young people, to always being with and among them, will help us not to think about ourselves, but about those we serve and for whom we exist. To live always from the first love, struggling not to fall into the temptations that life is proposing to us and in which, without realizing it, we can enter. Clericalism nests in those who think of themselves and consolidates into a self-referential or self-sufficient institution, unable to open its windows to the air that renews it.
- Poverty and work among the poor lighten our hearts from selfish burdens and moves us to be servants. And this happens at a personal, community and institutional level.

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3.- Jn 8, 7

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4.- Pope Francis. Letter to all the People of God in Chile, 2018.

- The dynamics of teamwork, the consolidation of the proper relationship with the Fraternity, the work from the model of “Piarist presence”, the search for new, more co-responsible forms of “government and direction of our mission”, network work, etc. All these dynamics, already present among us, ask to be truly valued and consolidated. They will offer fruits, no doubt.
- To advance in our joint formation, that of all. Not some people who form others, but a training shared by all, because we all need it.
- The great advantage of Consecrated Life is that the key lies in consecration, not in the position - temporary - that a person assumes. It is the great advantage of the Church, in which Baptism is essential, not the service that some assume by vocation or choice. Delving into all that the generation of co-responsibility - organized – means, will help us a lot.
- Understand that the sin of clericalism is two-way. It is not an exclusive problem of the “clergy”; it is also that of the layperson who does not assume their condition and who becomes accustomed to a profile of little co-responsibility. Sometimes lay people are more clerical than religious or priests.

Some challenges we can pose ourselves. I sense some new horizons that open up before us, in the form of positive challenges that will help us take steps in the right direction. Changing a “culture” requires processes, but it also requires decisions.

- To be **“clerics regular non-clerical.”** Calasanz founded us as “Clerics Regular”. There are not many Orders or Congregations that were founded like this. I pass you the names, because it is good for us to be educated in these things: Theatines, Barnabites, Jesuits, Somaschans, Camillians, Caracciolinians, those of the Mother of God and Piarists. I sense that delving into the keys from which Calasanz made his decisions and walking the paths he traveled will help us to be religious and priests away from the temptation to live

our condition as a privilege. Let us not forget that the Clerics Regular are born at a very special moment in the life of the Church, and as an alternative to a priestly model touched by ambition and poor formation. It emerges as a new form of religious life that looks for authenticity. It would be nice to think about programs or action plans in this direction.

- An **Initial Formation** capable of healing this problem. There is no doubt that Initial Formation is decisive in this respect, as in all. Young people in formation are sponges capable of absorbing all that they perceive in their elders, but also, unconsciously, all the contradictions. Working our initial formation in this line challenges us strongly. Just as an example, I would like to recall some criteria that emerged at the last meeting of the formators of the Order, convened in July 2019 in Rome and focused on the issue of combating sexual, conscience and power abuses. In this meeting, things like these were proposed: dynamics from which trainers train on all these issues, the accountability of the trainer in his performance, the team from which formative work is contrasted, the dynamic from which young people gain in co-responsible prominence over their own process, the deepening in an initial formation capable of generating a religious life liberated from clericalism, etc.
- **Synodality** is part of the horizon of renewal of the Church and, consequently, of all religious institutions. Our Order has a long experience in this field, but there is no doubt that there are areas where we can and must renew our efforts. For example, the role of the weekly community meeting (the “theology of the table”); more participated chapter processes; further deepening of all that community discernment means; the generation of co-responsibility between religious and laity, taking advantage of the platforms we have or creating others, etc.
- The **increasingly authentic, balanced, mystical and prophetic experience of our vocation.** These four notes of our vocation, which are proposed in one of the pre-capit-

ular documents that have been prepared in these months, are really “key to a better future” for the Pious Schools. I would like to recall that this proposal was central to the reflections of the Second Vatican Council. The same decree on ecumenism makes this difficult to improve: *“Every renewal of the Church consists essentially of an increase in fidelity to her vocation”*.⁵

Let us never lose sight of Calasanz’s thinking, aware that by our own means we cannot attain that vocational authenticity that we seek. *“In a humble attitude we must expect from Almighty God, who has called us to this very fertile harvest, the necessary means that **make us** worthy cooperators of the truth.”*⁶ We must put the means at our disposal, the result of a certain and demanding discernment, and pray intensely to the Lord of every vocation to help us in this process of *“transformation”* to which we are called.

Get a fraternal hug

*Fr. Pedro Aguado Sch. P.
Father General*

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5.- Second Vatican Council. Decree “Unitatis Redintegratio” n.6

6.- Saint Joseph Calasanz. Constitutions of the Pauline Congregation of the Poor of the Mother of God of the Pious Schools n.3.