



To Live Life as a Process

Letter to our
brethren
MARCH 2023

There is no doubt that one of the fundamental documents approved by our 48th General Chapter was the renewed Directory of Ongoing Formation. It is an institutional document which will need time to permeate little by little the life of the Pious Schools and to generate a dynamism of renewal which we could summarize as follows: “to make the Pious Schools a learning community”¹. I believe that this is one of the keys by which the Order must try to approach the great challenge of Ongoing Formation, and which our Directory expresses with a very demanding word which is proper to our vocation: the challenge of “*docibilitas*”, which means “to be in a disposition to learn, to desire to learn”.

It seems to me that this proposal we make to ourselves, “to be ready to learn”, is bold and demanding, and is called to generate a profound dynamism of change and renewal, if we dare to make the most of it. If we understand it well, we can come closer to understanding Ongoing Formation as an integral process of growth and fidelity to vocation that is lived *personally*, shared *communally* and promoted *institutionally*.

These are the three dimensions in which I want to approach the subject in the small space that a *salutatio* allows: something **we live personally**, **share communally**, and **promote institutionally**. So, let us look at it this way. For each

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1.- GENERAL CONGREGATION. Directory of Ongoing Formation n.17. Ephemerides Calasanctianae IV, May 2022, page 1346.

of these three dimensions of Ongoing Formation I will draw on an inspirational text.

For the first, **the personal** one, I have chosen a text from Scripture. Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians: “*May the Father strengthen you with his Spirit so that you may grow in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts and thus live rooted and grounded in love.*”² That is a precious definition of the spiritual process we are called to live. Indeed, I believe that living life as a process is, first and foremost, a spiritual challenge.

To understand life as a process is a challenge at all stages of our journey. Even when we grow older. We often think that when we reach a certain age, our life is already organized and nothing can happen to change us, or to open us to new possibilities. This is not the case. God is always a surprise, and faith in God asks us to always have our souls ready to welcome his calls. Calasanz is a good example.

Our Holy Father discovered his vocation when he was in his fifties, an age when things are – or should be – quite defined. He was already a priest, but he was neither religious, nor had he discovered education, nor had he embarked on the exciting – and surprising – task of founding a religious Order. But the children changed the horizon of his life, and thanks to that, all of us are here and the Church was enriched with a new charism, the charism of Calasanz, and with a new religious Order that absolutely changed the social and religious landscape of the time.

I think that this should help us all to be aware that life is never over, and that God always gives new opportunities. There are events in our lives that, if we look at them with the eyes of faith, are calls that propose new answers. God, our Father, always thinks of us and draws near to our life to change and enrich it. This is Christian faith is all about. I would like to propose three attitudes that can help us to live this dimension of “*personal process of growth*”.

The first comes from a conviction: Jesus’ call to follow him does not happen just once; it is recreated

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2.- Eph 3, 16-17.

and active throughout life. God does not call us to change our vocation, but He does ask us not to freeze it or turn it into something we control. Vocation is a permanent call, and to understand it as if everything were in our hands contradicts its own essence, and contradicts the role of faith and grace. A good spiritual exercise is to dare to read one’s own story – long or short – to make us more aware of the path we are on.

The second is not to assume that we already use the appropriate means to keep ourselves “*alive in our vocation.*” We are educators, and we try to transmit to our young people what an authentic spiritual life is by asking them not to reduce it to certain practices, however good they may be. But we forget that we can run the same risk. Even in a formally religious life we can become accustomed to reducing the experience of God to certain spaces and moments, without living it as that which centers and organizes all life and energies of the personal self. I believe that we are all helped by an existential attitude of openness, a life that accepts what Pope Francis calls “*knowing how to live in imbalance.*”³

The third is inspired by a teaching that I constantly receive from the young Piarists: *listening*. I am impressed by how they listen, how they want to learn, how they remember everything they have heard on a visit, in a personal dialogue, in a retreat. I am surprised how they come to the personal meeting, armed with a notebook and a pen, ready to write down an idea or a suggestion that can help them. I am struck by their spiritual work, which in some places they call “*harvesting*”, in which they learn every day to write and synthesize those reflections or motions that have made them think or pray. This is “*to live attentively to the voice of God, who is the voice of the spirit that comes and goes, touches the heart and passes; You don’t know where it comes from or when it blows, so it is very important to always be vigilant so that it doesn’t come unexpectedly and pass without fruit.*”⁴

I would like to comment on the community **di-**
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3.- FRANCIS. Dialogue with young people in religious and priestly formation in Rome, 24 October 2022, in the Paul VI Hall.

4.- SAINT JOSEPH CALASANZ. Letter 131 of November 22, 1622. Opera Omnia Volume 1, Page 169.

mension of Ongoing Formation with a text inspired by the third chapter of our Constitutions: *“In our community life we encourage each other to live faithfully and in a spirit of conversion of heart the demands of our Baptism and of our religious consecration”, “by the collective witness of our example, so that they may live their vocation faithfully”*⁵ I will try to approach the community as a space for ongoing formation from three different viewpoints.

The first is to accept and understand the double challenge we face in our community life. We have two journeys to make, and both to the center: to give back to the community the core value it should have in terms of vocation, and to work so that the community is articulated around the one center, Christ Jesus the Lord. They are two simultaneous journeys. The first has to do with a call to conversion that we have to make: to overcome certain utilitarian or simplifying temptations of the community, which tend to see it simply as a “way of life” or something “in secondary practice”, to place it in its real place: without a rich and nurtured community experience there is no rich and nurtured Piarist vocation experience. And for this, the second journey is fundamental: to center community life on Christ and on our experience of faith. This is the treasure that we share and that we are called to transmit.

The second is to understand the community as a fraternal space in which each of us can and must help the other to grow in his vocation. It is the role of the community to accompany the process of each of its members. This is not only a “job for the rector”, but for the community. Since it belongs to the community, it is the priority of the rector. But it belongs to everyone. Only in this way will we advance in understanding what the new Directory of Ongoing Formation says: *“the local religious community [...] has as [one of] its main purposes: to lead each and every Religious to full maturity, according to their vocation”*.⁶

Thirdly, I think we have to move forward in understanding the community as a space for forma-

tion. There are many ways we can use to develop this dimension. I give some examples: dedicating meetings to sharing books that we have read; inviting interesting people to reflect with us; reading documents of interest in the community; giving decisive impetus to the synodal process of our Church; sharing God’s Word; offering the homily to the brothers; constantly sharing those ideas or experiences that have enriched us, etc. The idea is clear: in the community we can contribute to our formation, or we can lose this opportunity by trivializing our shared time.

I complete this reflection with the **third dimension** of Ongoing Formation, the **institutional one**. To introduce it, I have chosen a text from our Rules: *“Our consecrated life demands that, with great diligence and vigorous determination, we constantly pursue the maturation of our vocation, we adopt a really evangelical attitude before the changes occurring in modern society, and, with a continuous renewal of our lives, we encourage the children and youth to join our communities and devote themselves to our apostolic activities. To give a full response to these three postulates, we must think seriously about formation, following the directions content in the Directory of Ongoing Formation. This should be the object of a personal and irrevocable purpose that will urge us to keep and renew our Piarist vocation.”*⁷

Our directory insists that Ongoing Formation has an important institutional dimension, directly related to the renovation of the Pious Schools, to the capacity that we must be able to continue giving adequate responses to new situations. The 48th General Chapter invites us to be attentive to the renewal of our “culture of Order”. All institutions have a culture, which refers to the values and practices that give meaning to the work of each of them. These values and convictions are consolidated and transmitted to the new members of the institution, and provoke the necessary institutional coherence. But no group can understand its culture as something immovable and alien to the new situations in which it lives. That is why it is necessary to enter into the reflection on “cultural change”. And this is where Ongoing Formation co-

5.- CONSTITUTIONS OF THE PIOUS SCHOOLS, n. 26b and 28b.

6.- GENERAL CONGREGATION. Directory of Permanent Formation n.23. Ephemerides Calasanctianae IV, May 2022, page 1348

7.- RULES of the Order of the Pious Schools n. 209

mes in.⁸ I highlight three aspects that it is good to take into account for an adequate understanding of the institutional dimension of this “living life as a process” to which we are inviting ourselves.

In the first place, it is essential to understand that the renewal process needs essential key factors: clarifying what are the values in which we believe and which we want to develop, what are the options from which we can carry them forward and what are the ways from which to implement the options. This is the triple task of the team leading a Province or the Order.⁹

Secondly, it is important to name the reductionist visions that we have sometimes had of this exciting process. Perhaps the clearest is to reduce Ongoing Formation to “updating” or to certain “updating” activities. I do not dispute that they are necessary, but we are talking about something more. We have to approach a more integral vision of the personal process, and for this it is very important to listen to the Chapter: “*to understand ongoing formation as an integral process of growth in our vocation, based on an adequate accompaniment of individuals and communities*”.¹⁰

And from here emerges the third commitment, which seems to me to be central and prophetic: accompaniment. Whatever we do to enhance this dynamic in our lives will always be good. And the

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8.- GENERAL CONGREGATION. Directory of Ongoing Formation n.18. Ephemerides Calasancianae IV, May 2022, page 1346.

9.- GENERAL CONGREGATION. Directory of Ongoing Education n.19. Ephemerides Calasancianae IV, May 2022, page 1346.

10.- GENERAL CONGREGATION. “48th General Chapter. Chapter document”. Ed. Calasancias, collection CUADERNOS n. 65, Key of Life n.9, page 75.

first step is to accept, recognize and seek that it is good to be accompanied. We often talk about how we need superiors to accompany, and that is true. But we forget that wanting and seeking to be accompanied is the key to this process. Let us go forward on this path, which is undoubtedly a sure way, bringing life and authenticity.

I conclude by returning to the initial Pauline text. Giving space in life to interior work and growth in vocation will help us to comprehend “*what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God*”.¹¹

Receive a fraternal embrace.

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11.- Ep. 3, 18-19