



Perfectae caritatis

Letter to our
brethren
MAY 2023

As you know, this year 2023 marks the 40th anniversary of the adoption of the new Constitutions of the Order (25 August 1983). This was a renewal of the Constitutions written by St Joseph Calasanz in accordance with the guidelines of the Second Vatican Council, the opening of which we have just celebrated on its 60th anniversary (1962).

In the midst of these two events (1962, 1983), the Union of Superiors General, presided over at that time by Fr Pedro Arrupe SJ, carried out an important work of renewal of consecrated life, a dynamic in which all the Congregations were involved. It was an important moment in the history of religious life. As a member of the Union of Superiors General (USG), I have access to interesting documentation on the work of the Superiors General of that time. I am summarising the essentials as a framework for this *salutatio* that I would like to dedicate to you, to invite you to reflect on our consecrated life and the process of renewal to which we are invited.

Fr Arrupe presented a summary of the work of the Superiors General at the USG Assembly in May 1974. He did this in three parts: *difficult points*, *points of hope* and *characteristics of future religious life*. I am sure that our unforgotten Fr Ángel Ruiz participated in this work with enthusiasm and dedication. Father Angel was in his first year as General. The one writing

this *salutatio* was just about to enter the novitiate. It was an exciting time. Just like now.

Among the **difficult points**, these stand out: the rapid changes, the lack of clear prophets, the lack of vocations, the errors in the formation of young people, the excess of experience, the ill-considered response to secularism, the doubts about the priesthood and the pathology of scepticism. In addition, there are others: institutional inflexibility, little appreciation of specific pastoral care, the pursuit of a simple and pleasant community life that weakens apostolic zeal, and the decline of the spirit of prayer.

The following **points** were identified as **hopeful**: Re-encounter with the charism of the Institute, desire for renewal, orientation towards the Gospel, desire for prayer, entry into the world of the poor, sense of humility and consequently renunciation of privileges, desire for better formation, search for better interpersonal relationships, sensitivity to the struggle for justice and desire for ecclesial cooperation.

The **characteristics of the future religious life** seen at that time were the following: Frugality and simplicity of life as opposed to the society of plenty; free service as opposed to the pursuit of profit; reflection and responsibility as opposed to comfort and superficiality in the environment; mature and free obedience as opposed to the mad desire for absolute freedom; universal and preferential love for the weak; the central reference to the Gospel in all aspects of life and decisions.

I am convinced that the content of these three paragraphs, written fifty years ago, is still instructive today, probably because we are still in the midst of the necessary process of renewal of consecrated life proposed by the Council. We are used to working in six- or four-year periods, and sometimes it escapes us that a process of renewal in creative fidelity takes time, a lot of time. But not just any time, but an *attentive* time, a *time of discernment*, a *time used* because it is lived with passion, seriousness and the ability to honestly search for the best answers. We need not just time, but time lived seriously, because the subject we are talking about is serious: the renewal of our lives.

Why do I say this? I want to give an example that illustrates the certain capacity for “*unused time*” that we sometimes have. At our 48th General Chapter, a new Directory for Ongoing Formation was adopted, replacing the one published in 1994 and used for almost 30 years. If we read this Directory carefully, we will notice how many interesting things were addressed in it and which - many of them - went unnoticed and have been reaffirmed in the new document.

In order to try to approach the challenges of renewal to which we are called, I have chosen the text adopted by our 48th General Chapter in the first of its documents and adopted by the Capitulars as the formative core of our six-year process. It is a document entitled “*In the Rhythm of Jesus*”, which is the first of our “*Keys of Life*”. It states: “*Deepening our Piarist spirituality and the growth processes of a consecrated life centred on Christ in order to have an **integral, balanced, mystical and prophetic experience** of our vocation*”.

I believe that the four words chosen by the General Chapter correspond perfectly with the deepest longings of all of us and with the keys of the historical process that the consecrated life is going through and to which I refer in this fraternal letter. I will say something about each of these four words because I believe they guide very well the choices we have to make in all areas of our life and mission, from initial formation onwards.

INTEGRAL. Living one’s vocation integrally means paying attention to each of the dimensions that enrich and define it and embodying them in an appropriate way. We, the Piarists, should be specialists in the *integral*, because we undertake as a ministry the integral education of children and young people according to the Gospel. Integral in the sense of mission means that we seek to educate in all dimensions, times, areas, ages and contexts in which our students grow up. The same applies to our consecrated life.

When we understand the integral well, we make good progress in the identity of our vocation. Can you imagine initial formation without a concrete and truly formative experience of mission or community? We form Piarists, not just students. But

the same is true for adult Piarist life, which we must know how to live with all its challenges. Here we can and must set the “difficult points” or the “points of hope” to which I referred at the beginning of this letter. The integrality, the wholeness of the experience of our vocation is a lifelong task that we must consciously and seriously cultivate and live. This is what we mean when we say that “we must attend to our vocation”.

BALANCED. In my visits to formation houses, I always emphasise the challenge of balancing the three central dimensions to which we are called: concern for the experience of God, community life and dedication to mission. “Balanced” here does not mean something like “prudent” or “calm” No. Balanced means knowing how to properly integrate the three dimensions in each of us.

Not long ago, on the occasion of the Calasanctian Jubilee Year 2017, we used three verbs that helped us to understand a little better what Piarist life and mission is: EDUCATE, PROCLAIM, TRANSFORM. The secret of the Piarist vocation is that these things are not separate. We do not simply *educate* by teaching, we do not simply *proclaim* by catechising, and we do not simply *transform* by working in a social project, for example. We are not simply priests when we celebrate the Eucharist, religious when we live in community, and educators in the classroom. Our lives are not divided into watertight compartments either.

All dimensions of vocation are united, integrated, lived together by the person who accepts this vocation. This is precisely the secret of the Piarist vocation: balance, fullness and the deep relationship with which a person lives the dimensions. Balance and fullness are two inseparable words to understand what our General Chapter means.

This is what we try to live, this is the balance we seek. Not without blemish, not without difficulty. We are human beings. We will never live everything as perfectly as we wish. We can not. But it is wonderful to live with the longing for authenticity. It is wonderful to commit every day to staying true to the dream that captured you at a young age. It is wonderful to try to live each day, each moment, with the desire to serve the cause you believe in in

a passionately balanced way.

MYSTICAL. Another challenging word. Calasanz proposed the “mixed life” for the Piarists, i.e. contemplative and active at the same time. He even went so far as to say that it was more perfect: “*If it has been given to those who have a general or special ministry with only an active or only a contemplative life, why should it be denied to those who have a mixed life with one ministry or the other, a life that is more perfect?*”¹

There are many ways to understand what the word “mystical” means in relation to the Piarists. I will simply focus on Paul and Calasanz. There are many formulations by Paul that make clear his mystical experience. He speaks of it in practically all his letters. For example: “*I have been taken by Christ*”.² Paul was a good example of an active and at the same time contemplative life. Therefore his life was apostolic. The apostolic life must combine both dimensions appropriately.

Calasanz teaches us, with his life, not only what the mystical experience of the Piarist vocation is, but also how important it is to cultivate this dimension, to nurture it daily. The life of Calasanz is a beautiful example of the mystical, which essentially consists in a “*clear experience and awareness of the intimate union of the soul with God*”. Only from this mystical experience can one understand the extent of Calasanz’s life and work: the stripping of himself, his deep life of prayer, his love of poverty, his availability to God’s will out of obedience, his constant calls to listen to the movements of the Spirit, his devotion to the children to the end, and of course his own mystical experiences.

PROPHETIC. I cannot find a more synthetic and clear way of expressing the prophetic dimension of consecrated life than the affirmations of Pope Francis in his message to consecrated men and women on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life. I pick up the whole paragraph because it is very valuable. The Pope said: “*I hope that you ‘wake up the world’ because the note that charac-*

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1.- SAINT JOSEPH CALASANZ. Memorial to Cardinal Tonti. Opera Omnia, volume IX, page 306.
2.- Phil 3, 12.

terises consecrated life is prophecy. Evangelical radicalism is not just for religious: it is required of everyone. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way. That is the priority that is now required of us: To be prophets as Jesus lived on this earth. A religious must never renounce prophecy. The prophet receives from God the ability to observe the history in which he lives and to interpret the events: He is like a watchman who watches in the night and knows when the morning will dawn (cf. Is 21:11-12). He knows God and he knows men and women, his brothers and sisters. He is able to recognise and denounce the evil of sin and injustice, because he is free, he is accountable only to God, he has no other interests than those of God. The prophet is generally on the side of the poor and defenceless because he knows that God Himself is on his side. I therefore hope that you can keep the “utopias” alive, but also create “other places” where the evangelical logic of gift, fraternity, acceptance of diversity and mutual love is lived.”³

It is true that if everything is a prophecy, then nothing is a prophecy. But it is also true that one of the most interesting tasks we have before us is to name some “Piarist prophecies” that we can try to live and proclaim. I would like to give some examples that deeply move the Piarist heart: the prophecy of education for all; the prophecy of “Pious Schools Going Forth”; the prophecy of a school as an engine of social change; the prophecy of a life that seeks and gives meaning; the prophecy of a faith that witnesses to the values that are most needed but not sought; the prophecy of lowering oneself... We are called to awaken the hearts and souls of young people.

I end this simple reflection with a final remark: the **key to this process** of renewal of our Piarist Consecrated Life and consequently the best treasure we can offer to the people and communities who build Pious Schools with us, and to the children and young people who grow in our works and our presences is a Piarist life centred on Christ and able to offer everyone the one complete and definitive word that answers all questions. Our General Chapter put it this way: “*We are in our surround-*

ings the memory of Christ himself”.⁴ So be it.

Receive a fraternal embrace.

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

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3.- FRANCIS. Message to consecrated men and women on the Year of Consecrated Life, 29 November 2013.

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4.- GENERAL CONGREGATION. 48th General Chapter of the Pious Schools. Chapter document. Ediciones Calasancias. Collection CUADERNOS n. 65, page 15.