



Irreplaceable?

*Letter to our
brethren*
SEPTEMBER 2023

There are many Gospel texts that help us to reflect on our ministry. Each one of them offers us a different perspective, and this helps us to understand the richness of the mission that we have received as an inheritance. There is no doubt that the central text is the one in which Christ identifies himself with children (Mt 18:5), and it is for this reason that we proclaim it so frequently in our Piarist celebrations. But there are more Gospel texts that can inspire us, in a creative way, in the present moment that we live in the Pious Schools.

As you all know, the General Congregation has proposed four “keys of inspiration” for the whole six-year period, and as such, they should also inspire our ministry. I will try to suggest four small reflections that can help in this exciting task: that our ministry be truly irreplaceable. I recall the four “keys of inspiration”: “**Going Forth**”, “**Synodality**”, “**Integral Sustainability**” and “**Authenticity and Identity**”.

For the first, “**Pious Schools Going Forth**”, I thought of the beautiful narrative contained in the Gospel of John, at the pool of Bethesda (Jn 1:1-9). In that place, there was a “*multitude of sick, lame, blind, paralyzed...*” A multitude.

This is how the evangelist describes the reality into which Jesus enters. They were all waiting for the movement of the water. There was one who had been waiting for thirty-eight years. However, never arrived on time. Someone was needed to give him the “little push” to reach the water. And that someone was Jesus.

I will like to use this text to propose an important key for our Order: to be present where a young person or a child needs a “little push”. That’s all he needs. The Lord says to that man a new and demanding word: *take your stretcher, you can do it; I will accompany you*. And that man overcomes and breaks his “*passive waiting*” and becomes a fighter for his future.

We have so many examples of “little pushes” that we are giving to so many children and young people... we could publish an exciting book (*more than one*) telling stories of lives changed by Piarists who knew how to be where they had to be, in that place of the “*multitude of children and young people in need*”. I believe that this is a key that we must think about our Ministry, so that it is truly irreplaceable: that the Pious Schools reach Bethesda. Let us not forget what Bethesda means: “*House of Mercy, house of grace*”. Let us enter deeply into this challenge of the Pious Schools Going Forth, in the direction of Bethesda.

For the second, “**synodality**”, I thought of the passage of the first Pentecost (Acts 2:1-8). That first Pentecost shows us the way to live other forms of Pentecost, always as a gift received from God. That first Pentecost teaches us what kind of synodality we need, and what kind of synodality will offer us new ways of announcing -ministerially- the message of which we are the bearers.

That first Pentecost, like all of them, happened because that was God’s will. It was a gift. Besides there are things in those disciples that can help us a lot. They were all united, in the same place; they were gathered together, in the name of Jesus; they felt a deep need for the Spirit, because they were living in fear. It is in this context that the Holy Spirit bursts in and provokes the mission. Pentecost provokes mission, proclamation, witness.

The dynamics of synodality in which Pope Francis has embarked the Church, and which has been accepted with full availability by our Order, is the key to the discernment of our mission. For that reason, from the General Congregation, we are gathering the directors of the schools or the juniors of the Order (last June we gathered all the juniors to talk about their formation for a synodal Church). For that reason, in all the Provinces you try to grow in this dynamics of shared work, communitarian discernment, and common search.

This is what the Church expects from us today. I am always impressed when I read number 100 of our Rules. Sometimes we are unaware of those numbers of the Rules that are not “juridical”, but that mark the direction we must follow. This precious text says: “*The reason for our Order’s existence is derived from its office of evangelization entrusted to it by the Church. For this reason, it proceeds with all humanity, experiences the world situation, and endeavors to accomplish its own renovation and transformation through integral promotion of man, as the Gospel requires.*”¹. And today, our Church seeks Communion, Participation and Mission. This is the way. Let us travel it.

For the third “**integral sustainability**”, what comes to mind is what the book of Acts narrates just after Pentecost (Acts 2:9-47). Our Order has defined *integral sustainability* from three keys: *charismatic identity, leadership, and resources*. Only from an adequate combination and care of these three keys will we move forward.

I am especially happy that the first meeting of the Calasanctian Family of Africa focused on the challenge of integral sustainability. If you read the conclusions of their meeting, they give us three formidable clues: “*identity is not a concept, but a life, which should try to be concretized in the priority options of our founders*”; “*the Piarist leadership that our mission needs can only be achieved if it enters fully into our spiritual life and is worked from the initial formation*”; “*the generation of a new identity is not a concept, but a life, which should try to be concretized in the priority options*”

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1.- Common Rules of the Order of the Pious Schools, ed. 2022, number 100.

of our founders”; “the leadership that our mission needs can only be achieved if it enters fully into our spiritual life and is worked from the initial formation”. “The generation of resources is only possible from a growth in co-responsibility”².

It seems to me especially significant that the circumscription of Africa, and in the dynamics of the Calasanctian Family, has “set to work” to grow in sustainability and to do so in an integral way. This is how the Church began, as the book of Acts tells us: the apostles lived and worked from a renewed and unequivocal identity; they assumed a profoundly spiritual leadership and achieved the co-responsibility of the brothers, who offered their resources for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel.

Resources, which are so necessary, sometimes come from unsuspected places. For example, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes was possible because an anonymous young man had a basket with five barley loaves and two fish (Jn 6:9). Resources, however small, are all important. Even the big ones, which are often the fruit of the systematic and organized work of our shared mission networks, are important. For example, we will be able to build a school in Kinshasa (Congo) or finance our mission in Bolivia because the “Itaka-Escolapios” network has raised funds, and not small or symbolic funds, but important ones.

Integral sustainability requires us to look at our reality and the challenges of our mission in a new way. This is why we are facing a “key of inspiration”. I am very happy, for example, that the General Secretariat for Irreplaceable Ministry is designing a Piarist Leadership Course; we need it.

For the fourth of the keys, “**authenticity and identity**”, I have chosen the precious text of the Gospel of the Good Shepherd (John 10). Thinking about our Ministry, and looking for it to be truly irreplaceable, I like to read this text as the gospel of the “Good Educator”. A few years ago (2014), the Order held a Congress on Calasanctian Spirituality, which was coordinated by Fr. Alejandro

Solórzano, of the Province of Nazareth. In that congress there was a presentation by Fr. Fidel Oñoro (Eudist) focused on the type of educator we need. The presentation consisted of a reflection on the parable of the Good Shepherd. Sometimes it is good to “dust off” materials that once helped us but that, at the speed at which we walk, we run the risk of wasting.

I am not going to synthesize Fr. Oñoro (it would be better if you read it), but I will offer you three little lights that can help us understand the type of educator we need for a ministry that is truly irreplaceable: a *reliable shepherd-teacher*, who “enters through the door” and makes himself known to his sheep, who knows them one by one and because of this, because he is seen as someone authentic, is able to lead them to new pastures; a *shepherd-teacher who is able to give tools to his sheep* so that they can go forward in spite of the dangers, and who is with them; a *shepherd-teacher who gives his life for his sheep*, because he has a great dream for them: that there be only one flock with only one shepherd.

What educator do we need? How can we advance in this exciting challenge? What experiences can we share in relation to the formation of our educators? What formative proposals do we make to our young religious so that they become the authentic and identified educators we need?

“**Irreplaceable**” is the word used by Calasanz to try to convince Cardinal Michelangelo Tonti of the importance of the Pious Schools being configured as a religious Order of solemn vows: “*And among the latter is counted the Work of the Poor of the Mother of God of the Pious Schools, with an **irreplaceable ministry** - in the opinion common to all, ecclesiastics and laymen, princes and citizens and perhaps the principal one for the reform of corrupt customs; a ministry which consists in the good education of boys insofar as on it depends all the rest of the good or bad living of the future man.*”³

It has always seemed to me that the word “irre-

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2.- Félicien MOUENDJI. “Meeting of the Calasanctian Family of Africa. Synthesis of the work. Daloa, May 31, 2023.

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3.- St. Joseph Calasanz. Memorial to Cardinal Tonti. Opera Omnia, volume IX, page 302.

placeable” has much to say to all of us today. I believe that we must resolutely confront ourselves with this word and do so from many points of view. I offer one, to begin with. But there are many.

I have heard more than once things like this: that today, if education is taken over by the states, our schools will no longer make sense. I have also heard that, if a Piarist school closes, the students will find another one in which to continue studying, because the governments will take care of it.

Calasanz did not found the Pious Schools from a “substitutive” mentality, but as an integral response to an integral need. Let us not assume what is not in our genes. The educational project of the Piarist School will never cease to be indispensable because it will never - neither before, nor now, nor in the future - be fully assumed by the States. The Piarist School has something more, and must give it as contribution. The Piarist School must believe in its project and offer it without doubt and with conviction, for the good of children and young people. For this reason, the training of educators and the common work of all of us who believe in this educational proposal are fundamental. This is the only way to move forward. There are still many children and adolescents without a school, and many more who need a school. Moreover, it will always be necessary to have a school that evangelizes education, that brings Christ, that bets on the poor, that has the smell of the Kingdom of God. This is not offered by any official curriculum. And this is what Calasanz wanted. This is why he founded the Pious Schools. The word “irreplaceable” means that, if we leave it, no one can do it the same way, nor with the same keys. That is why this word is a profound challenge of Calasanctian fidelity for our impulse of the Piarist Ministry.

It seems to me that it is good to think how the “keys of inspiration” can illuminate the different areas of our life and mission. With this opportunity, I wanted to offer some clue of how these keys can inspire our ministry: the preference for the poor and needy, the synodal dynamics in the discernment and promotion of the ministry, the responsible and sustainable leadership we need

and the adequate formation of educators. All four are, evidently, fundamental at this time for our Order.

I want to end this simple fraternal letter with a quote from Calasanz, which can help us understand what the word “irreplaceable” means to him. Calasanz says: “*If our Work is carried out with due care, there is no doubt that the insistent requests for foundations in numerous states, cities and towns will continue, as has been proven up to the present time*”⁴. The holy Founder placed this phrase no more nor less in his Constitutions. In other words, he is insisting to the Piarists that, if we do well, we will continue to be needed. This is the founder’s word. As clear as water.

Receive a fraternal embrace.

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

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4.- St. Joseph Calasanz. Constitutions of the Pauline Congregation, 175.