



Reflecting on our Piarist Ministry (Part 2)

Letter to our
brethren
NOV 2023

I continue to share with you all some reflections inspired by the third chapter of our Rules dedicated to our ministry. I do not conceal that my aim is that we read this chapter, which is often unknown and little studied, but which contains an extraordinary richness for the whole of the Pious Schools. As in the previous *Salutatio*, I will refer to some specific points that seem relevant to us.

1-Several paragraphs are devoted to the Calasanctian educator. And it strikes me that the key from which the value of the educator is presented is testimony. The witness of an educator's life is defined as *a quiet, forceful and effective proclamation of the Good News*.

We all know this from our own experience. Students learn many things in our schools, but what they value most is the personal witness of their educators. They remember the Piarists and the educators who helped them with their lives to become better.

I think we are facing a problem that needs to be taken into account in the formation of our educators. We speak of the authenticity of life, of teachers who live what they teach, of people who are always ready to learn. It is good

to highlight aspects that we consider fundamental in shaping the profile of the educator we need in our schools. I dare to suggest four important aspects that we need to work on so that the testimony of our educators is truly pedagogical.

- a) Identified educators: educators who are convinced of what they have to do, who are sure that the direction we want to take our schools is appropriate. Educators who are willing to work in that direction. And of course, authentic and credible witnesses to the lifestyle we aspire to.
- b) Educators who are willing to learn. That is the great challenge we all have. At least that's how I feel and I feel it inside me. I have to do my job in a way that I have not been trained to do. And it is quite possible that this will happen to all of us. We need educators who are not afraid to break new ground. Educators who assume that every day is new and that much of what they have learned in their years of training is already surpassed by their students. But they want to keep learning. This is fundamental. We usually call this dynamic "*lifelong learning*".
- c) Educators working together. Educators seeking together. We want to educate in solidarity, fraternity and the ability to seek together. And we know that the end is in the means like the tree in the seed. Perhaps we are facing one of the greatest challenges for our schools: to create a culture of collaboration, of thinking together for the benefit of the students entrusted to us.
- d) Student-centred educators. This is one of the most important questions in our schools. What is the student to us? I would like to elaborate on this question by referring to a constant that I experience in all my visits to Piarist schools when I have the precious opportunity to speak with students. I often ask them about the aspects of the school that excite them most. Among the answers, there is one that is never missing: in this school, the teachers know us, they know who we are. I assure you that the Piarist character of the

school would have to be questioned if this answer were not given.

I like the way this section on the Calasanctian educator ends in our Rules: with a reference to the virtues we have learned from Calasanz. These are: *simplicity, purity, humility, poverty and charity*¹. The bar is set high.

2-Under the title of "**Catechesis**", the Rules offer us a valuable compendium of what we may call the "**school ministry**". Our aim is "*to bring forth and strengthen Faith*"² and "*offer the evangelical message with the greatest respect and in a progressive way*"³. I mention the aspects that stand out in particular and that it is good that we take them into account.

- a) The sacramental life, especially the Eucharist and penance. We know that there are not many Piarist priests in each school, and this fact naturally worries us. But it should not deter us from renewing our efforts to ensure that the Eucharist is celebrated frequently in our schools for our students and that the opportunity for sacramental confession is always open. I have no hesitation in saying that in schools where this sacramental life is cultivated, the pastoral tone from which they proceed is richer and more positive. And if we need to talk about "*restoring*" this dynamic, we should do so openly.
- b) The preparation and formation of catechists. It is especially requested that the superiors see to it that there are Piarists who specialise in catechesis. A goal once taken care of. Other tasks for restoration.
- c) Special mention is made of the introduction to the prayer, and the Continuing Prayer is expressly quoted, "*according to the conditions of the present time*"⁴. We are dealing here with one of the treasures of the Order, the Continuous Prayer. The General Congregation has

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- 1.- Common Rules of the Pious Schools, ed. 2022, number 117.
- 2.- Common Rules of the Pious Schools, ed. 2022, number 118.
- 3.- Common Rules of the Pious Schools, ed. 2022, number 112.
- 4.- Common Rules of the Pious Schools, ed. 2022, number 121.

decided to give full impetus to this precious Calasanctian heritage by proposing a progressive path based on three options: formation, provision of materials and reflection.⁵

- d) The promotion of groups and movements of children and youth is proposed as a proposal for growth in faith. It is the proposal of the Calasanz Movement, another treasure of the Order. It is interesting to read the fruits that the Rules expect from this project: that children and young people take seriously the commitment to live according to the Gospel and that vocations to serve the Church, including priestly and religious vocations, can arise. The General Congregation promotes the Calasanz Movement from five different complementary projects: Vocation Culture, Accompaniment and Networking, Communication and Dissemination, Educator Training and Shared Resources.⁶
- e) A commitment is made to the formation of the parents of our students for whom “*special pastoral*” care’ is desired⁷. It must be acknowledged that we are generally far from having provided an adequate response to this objective.
- f) The chapter ends with a new reference to the Piarist Christian community, which must take responsibility for the task of evangelisation. The insistence on this theme is very interesting and very revealing in this time of *synodality* to which we are called.

3-The Rules offer us a comprehensive teaching on the **Piarist school and the various platforms on which we can exercise our ministry today**. I emphasise that the text is very rich and worth studying. I would just like to highlight

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5.- General Congregation of the Pious Schools. Roadmap 2022-2028, pages 43-44.

6.- General Congregation of the Pious Schools. Roadmap 2022-2028, page 40.

7.- Common Rules of the Pious Schools, ed. 2022, number 123.

three points that seem to me to be particularly important today.

- a) First of all, the importance and priority of the popular school, especially in the context of the charism of the Founder. All platforms are important for the exercise of our charism and ministry, but the school has priority. This has always been clear to us. The Rules tell us that *we must never abandon this task unless we are forbidden to do so*.⁸
- b) b) The concept of “*full-time school*” appears in various formulations, a formulation we use today to try to explain how we understand our schools: as living spaces where our students grow in an integral way in all their dimensions. It speaks of the relationship between formal and non-formal schools, of education in leisure, of the accompaniment of students, of the explicit proclamation of the Gospel message, of innovation, of ecclesial and social involvement, etc. The Order’s commitment to a “full-time school” promotes that integral education which is the basis of our charism and tradition.
- c) There is an explicit recognition of the Piarist character of other mission platforms that acquire official status with us: boarding schools, homes, churches, parishes, etc. We are on an interesting path and wish that these mission platforms can grow in Piarist identity and thus make their valuable contribution to the richness and plurality of our ministry.

4- I would like to end these two fraternal letters dedicated to our ministry with an explicit quotation from n. 149 of our Rules, which enthusiastically and generously places **the Order at the service of the mission “ad gentes”** and proposes that we place religious and lay people at the service of the peoples most in need of evangelising education. And the reason is clear: our

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8.- Common Rules of the Pious Schools, ed. 2022, number 125.

Order must always be attentive to the calls of the Church and of the poor.

I remember the times when there were discussions about whether our Order was missionary or not. I have always believed that this debate did not make much sense because the term “*mission*”, however it is understood, is central to the Pious Schools. Mission in contexts where the faith is lived and shared and needs to be pastorally cared for; mission in contexts or groups where the faith has been diluted and needs to be refreshed or re-proposed, or mission in contexts where the faith is unknown or clearly in the minority, and then we talk about the traditional concept of “*ad gentes*”.

From the beginning we had this awareness of “*missionary co-responsibility*” and this is how we understand the first sending of Piarists by Calasanz outside Italy and others into Protestant contexts. And this is how we live the foundations made in the middle of the twentieth century in Catholic minority countries such as Japan or Senegal.

The Second Vatican Council’s call for active religious congregations is still strong and relevant. While it is true that it is an old text and that today’s language is different, the issues raised by the Council are of great importance. “*Institutes of the active life, whether they pursue a strictly mission ideal or not, should ask themselves sincerely in the presence of God, whether they would not be able to extend their activity for the expansion of the Kingdom of God among the nations; whether they could possibly leave certain ministries to others so that they themselves could expend their forces for the missions, whether they could possibly undertake activity in the missions, adapting their constitutions if necessary, but according to the spirit of their founder; whether their members are involved as totally as possible in the mission effort; and whether their type of life is a witness to the Gospel accommodated to the character and condition of the people.*”⁹ I believe that our Order has

at least three answers, which it tries to give with strength and enthusiasm.

- a) On the one hand, the efforts to care for and sustain our missions in particularly complex contexts such as Japan. The great work of the Asia-Pacific Province in caring for our mission in Japan deserves the highest praise and recognition. The same goes for the growth of the Order in countries where the Church is in a minority, such as India or Senegal.
- b) On the other hand, it is clear that the Order is open to new “missionary” presences (I use the term in the traditional sense because it helps us to understand it). The Provincial Chapter for Asia-Pacific has been considering opening a mission in Thailand and we are working to welcome young people with vocation from countries such as Myanmar or Laos. We are progressing step by step in our desire to be involved in the proclamation of the Gospel where it is least known, and we are trying to do this according to our charism.
- c) And thirdly, we must not forget that certain traditionally Catholic contexts are no longer Catholic and that the challenge to proclaim the Gospel continues to take on new colours in unexpected places.

I will not fail to say that the school is an excellent platform for evangelisation *ad gentes*, because in it there are all positions on the faith. And we can all give an answer. Being aware of the danger of simplification, I think we can say that all our students take different positions on faith, always depending on the contexts and situations. To give an example:

- » Young believers who are content with their faith and look forward to growing in it, sharing it and living their lives by it.
- » Young people open to the faith, more or less comfortable in pastoral contexts but not liv-

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9.- Second Vatican Council. Decree “Ad gentes” on the missionary activity of the Church, number 40, year 1965,

ing it or attracted to positions or options from the faith.

- » Young people who are negative about the faith, resist it, close themselves off or move away from it of their own free will.
- » Young people who have never lived the faith and do not have it in their life horizon, but consider seeking it depending on the circumstances in which they live.
- » Young people who belong to other religions and live them in different ways.

What can we offer them all? For the first group, we undoubtedly need to offer processes of faith from which they can live and shape their lives as Christians. For the second group, it is very helpful if they receive attractive offers from which they can live important aspects of being Christians, in order to gradually introduce them to the global processes we offer. The third group needs above all to feel that they have a place with us, that they are valued and loved and that they can participate in many Piarist initiatives. For the fourth group, we need to accompany them thoroughly and offer them open paths that can help them to encounter Jesus by involving them in so many proposals that we are pushing forward. Those who profess a different religion can and should grow among us as brothers who should be respected and called to learn that religion is not a barrier that separates people. And for all: suggestions and experiences where they learn together to build the world they dream of. The school is a great platform for missionary evangelisation.

Let us go on. Let us continue to reflect and open new horizons.

Receive a fraternal embrace.

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