



«If You Want to Follow the Lord, Prepare Your Soul for Trials»

Letter to our
brethren
DEC 2023

The quotation with which I head this fraternal letter comes from the Book of Sirach (*Si 2:1*) and is one of the sentences I reflect on during the canonical visitation I make to the young adult religious of our Order who are in the first years of their adult Piarist life, after solemn profession. But I think we can apply this biblical wisdom to all stages of our lives, and to all people who sincerely desire to live the Christian vocation authentically. We must assume that the path of vocation on which we embark will have its difficulties and that there will be trials. The Lord, who inspires the vocation, has guaranteed this from the beginning: “... *a hundredfold more, with persecutions, and in the world to come eternal life*¹.”

Our young Piarists experience “trials” of all kinds. Dialogue with them is very stimulating in order to understand them and to understand that we can all go through them. For this reason, I will try to share with you a reflection on the task of “*preparing the soul for the trial*”, thinking of our Piarist religious life, but realising that everything is applicable to any vocation experience. I will

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1.- Mk 10:30

first address the “**trials**” and then the “**preparation of the soul**”, concluding with a simple invitation.

“**I can do all things through him who strengthens me**” (*Phil 4:13*). This is how Paul speaks in his letters when he refers to the various trials he had to go through in his zeal to remain faithful to the calling he had received. In this way, he gives us a precise indication of how we should accept and process the trials we experience. Listening to the feelings of the Piarists with whom I speak, I see three types of evidence, all of which are real and worth working on: external trials caused by the context; internal trials caused by the Order itself or the Church; personal trials caused by one’s own weaknesses, which one does not always deal with or resolve well. Let us say a word about each of these points.

External trials. We often hear that “pastoral care is not easy”, that “education is not taken into account by society”, that “Christian values are questioned by the established social order” or that “government policies tend to hinder our mission”. All of this is undoubtedly real. And much more, including persecutions, bans or expulsions. Our history is full of these trials or difficulties that complicate our lives and our mission.

We cannot “lump them together” or judge them equally. And I will not attempt to make a “distinction between the different kinds of trials” we may experience. What I do want to emphasise, however, is that anyone who thinks that the Piarist life and mission is easy or that it is promoted by society is living on a different planet. It never was, it is not and it never will be. Precisely because our vocation aims to change the world, the world will resist our approaches, and with very different dynamics. We need to know that there will always be a component of struggle, a counter-cultural dimension and a dynamic of resistance in our lives. And we need to know how to think, work, pray and share this.

Internal trials. We should not be afraid of them, nor should we simplify them. Sometimes it is the Church itself that puts us to the test, with unjust

and incomprehensible decisions or with positions that are far from the apostolic fervour we should live. I must say that I have had more than one experience where it was the Church itself that unsettled us. That is why I could well understand Pope Francis’ message to the Union of Superiors General when he told us: “*I thank you for the patience with which you know how to live and to forgive the humiliations that you sometimes suffer as religious*”.

Sometimes we can be the ones who cause pain to our brothers with decisions that are not very insightful, unbrotherly or even unjust. In these years I have seen Piarists who have caused real pain to their own brothers in various positions or ministries and we are still waiting for them to recognise this or apologise. This pain is stronger and more difficult to bear because it is caused by one’s own family. And it can lead to real vocation problems because they violate a very serious dynamic that we all want to live: joyful belonging to the Pious Schools.

And sometimes it is our own institutional weaknesses that put us to the test: Communities that do not care about the vocation of our confreres, discernment processes that do not favour synodal listening or proper discernment, lack of courage to give the answers that children and young people expect of us, and many others. All this becomes a difficulty that we must know how to overcome.

Personal trials that come from ourselves, as human beings. They too exist. Our own inconsistencies, our lack of interest in our own calling, our lack of personal work to overcome challenges, the weak transparency of life and the weaknesses we have as human beings can become trials that are hard to overcome and walls that are hard to get over. This is why biblical wisdom insists that “*woe to the faint hearts and the slack hands that make us walk in double ways!*”

Prepare the soul. This is an extraordinary, suggestive, engaging proposal. It offers us a sure clue for following Jesus as Piarists, as members of the Fraternity, in short, as Christians: prepare the soul

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2.- Sirach 2:11

for the trial. It is good for us to reflect on how this is done, how the soul is prepared to lead a complex and demanding life, as Calasanz has defined it: “Those who are generally called to leave the world and have only the **spirit of beginners** have yet to wean themselves from the comforts of the world and, as experience shows, will always prefer an already recognised order in which, after the novitiate, they can lead **a secure life** and attain the priesthood, to entering a congregation where, instead of these advantages, they will be confronted with other difficulties resulting from a life **mortified** by the obligatory contact with boys, arduous by the constant strain of their profession and **despicable** in the eyes of the flesh, which regards the education of poor children as such³.”

How can we prepare the soul? How can we strengthen our spirit, our ability to fight, to react, to be coherent, in short, to be authentic? I would like to give just three indications, three suggestions that can help us to reflect on this precious and exciting challenge of “preparing the soul for the test”.

First, **by taking care of our spiritual life**. I think we need to accept that one of our risks is real neglect in the “life according to the Spirit.” It is very clear to me that only *those groups and communities that have a deep and sustained experience of God will have a future*. The great incongruity in Religious Life is to believe in God, to renounce other highly positive and healthy aspects of life, and yet not to make God the *center of our lives*. We easily *accommodate* and *bourgeois*. Here we find one of the most pressing problems of Religious Life today. Accommodation is rooted in the lack of meaning, in the forgetting of the *why* and *what of* our vocation.

Firstly, **in the cultivation of our spiritual life**. I think we have to accept that one of our dangers is that we really neglect the “life according to the Spirit”. I realise that only those groups and communities that live a deep and abiding *experience of God will have a future*. The great inconsistency in religious life is to believe in God, to forgo other

extremely positive and healthy aspects of life and yet not make God the *centre of our lives*. We easily become *complacent and bourgeois*. Here we find one of the most pressing problems of religious life today. Conformity is rooted in a lack of purpose, in forgetting the *why* and *wherefore* of our vocation.

Growth in *life according to the Spirit* has to do with everything that has to do with *life*. The key to spiritual life lies in knowing “how to step out of ourselves” by being permeable to reality, to others, to the Other. As St John of the Cross said: “*To seek oneself in God... that is the opposite of love.*” The difficulty of “spiritual life” coincides with the difficulty of “life”. The problem lies deeper than the mere fact of missing from the Lauds or neglecting personal prayer, as important as these omissions may be, which they are. Of course we need to learn to pray, of course we need to pray consistently, read spiritually together and/or personally, etc. But what is really difficult is “knowing how to live in the depths of vocation” and knowing how to live means stepping outside of yourself to build clean, mature relationships. Therein lies the difficulty. Individualism, spiritual lethargy and the gentrification of religious life and other evils that we talk about so much in our documents are just the tip of the iceberg. The hidden part of it (the “iceberg”) would be called the “absence of the person”. Only when we come to terms with this challenge will we spiritually understand the Lord’s proposal: “*We must be born again*”.⁴ And this can only be understood *spiritually*.

Secondly, **I would like to suggest the path of fidelity**. An authentic fidelity that creates identity, that preserves the freshness of our first love, that continues to move us through our vocation, that we live in the realism of the small faithfulness of each day, that is expressed in our humble striving for progress and growth, that makes us humble and aware of our weakness, and that we accept as an undeserved gift. It is a fidelity that is nourished by prayer, by the constant renewal of our vocational commitments and our consecration, by a way of life that is coherent and not conformed, that relies on the support of the community, that is woven into the personal accompaniment that we seek and

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3.- Saint Joseph Calasanz. Memorial to Cardinal Tonti. Opera Omnia, volume IX, pages 305-306.

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4.- Jn 3:3

offer, and that is grateful to God in the Eucharist, an expression of the essential fidelity, the fidelity of Jesus to God, to the community and to the Kingdom. This is the faithfulness that strengthens our souls. Only *a consistent fidelity will make me fruitful*, after the manner of Calasanz, after the manner of the Lord.

At the entrance to Calasanz's room, a plaque reminds us that Calasanz lived in this room for thirty-six years. During this time, he wrote his letters, accompanied his religious, lived his profound experience of faith and prayer, cultivated his vocation with growing and grateful fidelity and refined it so that the Church could offer it as a path of holiness for all her children. This *fidelity, which generates strength*, is what Calasanz proposes in the last autograph letter we have: "*Constantes estote, et videbitis auxilium Dei super vos. Et nunc sumus orantes pro vobis ut non contristemini, sed in tribulatione magis elucescat virtus vestra.*" (Stand firm and you will see God's help above you. And now we pray for you that you will not be grieved, but that your virtue will shine brighter in adversity.)⁵

The way in which Calasanz poses the challenge of fidelity despite the trials is very revealing. Referring to the Gospel passage mentioned above, in which the Lord assures "a hundredfold along with persecutions," Calasanz says, "*God usually gives a hundredfold, especially when, if one is doing well, one has persecutions or afflictions, which, if one endures them with patience at the hand of God, are a hundredfold in the Spirit; and since few know how to practise this teaching, few receive a hundredfold in spiritual goods.*"⁶

My third suggestion is **to live spiritually accompanied, both personally and as a community**. Accompaniment helps us to *properly anchor our vocation*. To do this, many facets must be addressed, many dimensions of the person. If a vocation is not well anchored, it can be reduced to professionalism, role or compliance. It is necessary that we live our lives in accompaniment, because

it is about something very important that we have here, something that you cannot do alone: it is about properly *anchoring* your vocation.

Accompaniment helps us to *integrate*. Integrating means *knowing, emotionally and sincerely accepting* what is going on within me, while at the same time paying attention to the greater *calling* that life keeps bringing me. It has more to do with acceptance and inner reassurance than overcoming or victory, but it helps us in the struggle for authenticity. The process of accompaniment helps us to know how to "*give a name*" to what we are living. That is the essence of maturity. Giving a name to what helps us and what holds us back. Both are part of our lives.

"*Prepare the soul for trials.*" This is a necessary task for all of us, a spiritual task that we must know how to fulfil with as much humility as consistency. Only in this way will we be able to make progress in the great challenge that we have set ourselves since the first steps of our vocation: to be simply Piarists.

Receive a fraternal embrace.

Fr. Pedro Aguado Sch.P.
Father General

5.- Saint Joseph Calasanz. Opera Omnia, volume 8, page 384.

6.- Saint Joseph Calasanz. Opera Omnia, volume 3, page 234-235. This is a letter to a Spanish religious living in Naples who wants to return to his country because of the difficulties he is experiencing.