



“I know the plans I have for you, and they are plans of hope”

*Letter to our
brethren*
MARCH 2024

I title this fraternal letter with the central announcement that the prophet Jeremiah makes to his people in Babylonian exile. The prophet proclaims that God has plans for his people, and they are plans for peace, bearers of hope. Through Jeremiah, God proclaims hope to a people in exile who are full of suffering.

I have decided to write this letter because I believe that hope is perhaps the proclamation that our world, our societies, our Church, our children and young people need most. And it is good to realise that we ourselves, the Piarists, also need to proclaim hope to one another. Although it is published in March, this letter was written during Advent, a time of anxious expectation of the One who will come to dwell with us forever.

When we look at our world, it is easy to give in to the temptation of hopelessness. We see wars, unjustified violence even against children, migration movements that are misunderstood and treated unkindly. We also see inhumane laws, the pursuit of power and wealth and unjust inequality. We see the decay of our common home without the authorities caring too much. When we see our children and young people, we feel the challenge of nurturing their joy, their dreams and their longing for a better world, which is often interrupted by a crisis of meaning, a crisis of the future or even a crisis of faith. The list of human challenges we experience that warrant a sense of discouragement would be endless. This is also a human feeling. And we must respect it and welcome it as a call to our vocation.

However, I believe that our world needs *a prophecy of hope* more than ever. The prophet, as we know, has a mission that consists of two inseparable dimensions: *revealing the present and proposing the future*. And both from God's perspective. This is the mission of the prophet Jeremiah, which is wonderfully expressed in the message he sends in the name of God to the exiles in Babylon.

How would these people receive such a message of hope? Perhaps they were not lacking in a certain scepticism caused by the reality they were experiencing. How can we proclaim hope to our young people, our families, our children, our brothers, our Church and our societies? What contribution to hope can and should we, as children of Calasanz, make in this world in which we live? I believe that this is an important reflection that we need to deepen. I would like to do this from three points of view: that of **faith**, that of **education** and that of our **daily lives**.

For the person of faith, for a religious Order, dark situations should not hide hope. Hope is a theological virtue; it comes from God. It is not the same as optimism, which is simply a state of mind. We are talking about hope here. There are many examples that help us to understand how hope exists and grows even in difficult situations. It has always made me very thoughtful that St John of the Cross wrote his *Spiritual Canticle* in the darkness of prison or that St Teresa of Jesus wrote her book "The Dwellings or the Inner Castle" during persecution. The content of some of St Paul's letters, which were written in prison and during persecutions and difficulties, is impressive. I could not help thinking that during the crisis of the Pious Schools, Calasanz was calling on the Piarists to remain united and joyful, to trust in God and to work for the children.

People of faith do not simply wait for better times. No. Today is the day. Today is the time to work for a new world. I have always liked this definition of faith in the Holy Spirit: *believing in the fruitfulness of the present*. It is the present in which the Holy Spirit works. That is our faith. Martin Luther King, one of the strongest prophets of hope, bearer of the dream of a new world, is credited with

this very important sentence: "*If I knew the world would end tomorrow, I would plant a tree today.*" The present in which we live is the place of hope; and in this present we are called by faith to seek and set signs of life and hope. This is our mission.

Hope is the daughter of faith. And people with faith, if it is authentic, are bearers of hope. I am certain that a world that is crumbling can only be sustained by groups of faith, by people who trust in God and see themselves as bearers of the promise. These people make a strong appearance in the midst of our world and generate a reaction of life. In a Rome torn apart by social injustice, disease and poverty, a man of faith brought forth a response of hope: the Pious Schools.

I come to the second point of my letter: an education in hope. Education always looks to the future. Always. We try to prepare our students for a world that does not yet exist, but which they must nevertheless create and build. How can we do that? I am not going to write an educational treatise on hope. I am just going to list what we know, how we can do it, what we know works, and what we must not forget. These are some of the pedagogical dynamics that are embedded in our tradition and in our schools, and I believe that they need to be systematically strengthened. I will briefly mention some of them:

- a) An education of faith that helps our young people to look beyond themselves and their sometimes small world, that helps them to discover and experience that God trusts them, that God counts on them and that they are worthy of faith. Faith opens horizons and brings them to fullness. It awakens courage and patience, as in Calasanz.
- b) An education in the spirit of fraternity, in what has been called "global citizenship", which opens the horizons of another world to our students, a world that they can change. An education that enables them to experience and understand the value of solidarity, commitment and fraternity. An education that is touched by the experience of the other, of the other.

- c) An educational process in which they feel listened to, accompanied and healed in their wounds and disappointments, in which the Piarist educators are truly committed to them and their future. A process that raises questions and encourages answers.
- d) A vocational education in which we can offer students horizons for a broader life that are not limited to social or curricular schemes. An education that encourages growth, options and life projects and nourishes these projects from an awareness of humanity.
- e) A holistic education that aims for each student to grow in all its dimensions, including faith in life and in another world. We know that the world can be changed, but only through education. Let us renew our commitment to it and let us move forward. Let us promote all the dynamics that this type of education can provoke, from schools in full time and from various other educational platforms, all of them Calasanctian.

I come to a third and final aspect to which I would like to refer in this simple reflection on hope. **Are we Piarists people of hope, bearers of hope, generators of hope?** When we look at the Order and reflect on Piarist life and the Piarist mission in the world, do we feel joy, do we feel hope? I would like to contribute to answering this question by presenting to you some signs of life and hope that I see in the Pious Schools, and that it is good to name and thank them.

- a. The daily commitment to our schools, under all circumstances. It has never been easy to maintain schools, nor is it now. But if there is one thing we see clearly when we look at the Order, it is the tremendous work being done everywhere to keep schools open and full of students. Think of all the challenges we face: adverse social and political circumstances, restrictive laws, lack of support from the government, difficulties due to the decline in the birth rate and therefore the number of students, and so on. But this is not new in our history; we have a lot of experience in fighting for our schools. We have to keep going.
- b. And together with the schools, and often by them, the enormous effort of missionary creativity that we undertake to create diverse and pluralistic educational platforms that serve very different realities. I like to quote what I have seen: schools in flooded neighbourhoods, in tents or under a deciduous tree; the Calasanz Movement on the four continents; diverse and rich pastoral projects; resistance and education in countries with dictatorships; boarding schools that provide *a school for all*; schools with 90% Muslims or Shintoists; educational projects for second-chance education; homes for young people in care; homes for street children; sports schools; schools converted to provide holistic education for immigrants in the afternoon; reception centres; integration projects for newly arrived immigrants; summer camps; mentoring and accompaniment; homework schools; family schools; teacher training centres; tireless research in educational innovation; training of volunteers and tutors; chairs of pedagogical reflection; publications; participation in the reconstruction of the Global Compact on Education; training in children's rights; peace schools; libraries; continual prayer; training for interfaith dialogue; work with young people in prisons; work with drug addicts; programmes to protect children from abuse; the mere presence in a barracks district; consolidated schools that seek to put forward new proposals, always based on the key to comprehensive and quality education... and many more things that are sincere and honest responses to Calasanz's project. Let us continue to answer...
- c. The testimony of our elders, the bearers of hope. The elders who continue to encourage and hope, and not only remember past times, are a sign of profound hope for the young religious who are trying to live their Piarist life authentically. The faithfulness of the Piarists who are sent to countries that are particularly difficult for the mission and who continue to do so because they know that God will bless them in due course. I am thinking of Japan, for example. The joyful and positive faithfulness of the older people is one of the great-

est needs of the young people. And they are deeply grateful.

- d. The numerous vocation responses from young people who want to follow the path of Calasanz and who are growing up in our formation houses with an increasingly universal and “going forth” vision. It is true that the reality varies greatly depending on the circumstances on the continents, but the Order continues to have vocations and these are good and numerous.
- e. The endeavour of the Piarist Fraternities to consolidate, grow and live in Calasanctian fidelity, as well as their deep desire to share the Piarist mission with different options and structures, the Itaka-Escolapios being perhaps the most developed.
- f. The new foundations and presences that are being promoted in different ways and forms in all the demarcations, including foundations in new countries where we simply want to serve as we have always done.
- g. The daily life of our communities, which endeavour to live with simplicity and authenticity the lifestyle that we have adopted through our profession. Daily life is always a crucible of life and hope.
- h. It has not escaped my attention that I sometimes visit communities and presences where the Piarists are not seen with hope. One of the reasons for this lack of hope is sometimes the lack of vocations. In other cases, it is disagreement about options or orientations. Disagreement is one thing, hopelessness is another. If it is missing, then it is faith that is missing. Only through faith is hope strengthened. We should never forget that.

I recently met a Piarist devoted to formation, in a rather large juniorate. He told me that he was as hopeful as he was concerned. I understood this statement, which Calasanz himself would probably agree with, very well. Hope is not naive, but realistic. Can we live a deeply realistic hope? It sounds like an oxymoron, but it is not: realism

and hope are not opposing dynamics. Quite the opposite. Hope sets us on the path to changing reality, and reality requires us to illuminate it with projects and horizons of renewal. We are people of hope when we work day after day to do things well and give new and renewed answers, in the certainty that it is God’s will to work for the good and happiness of people.

I would like to conclude this letter by inviting you to pray that we may always be people of hope. Prayer always stands between reality and what we hope for. To pray is to hope, because it means trusting in the One who can do everything. Teach us, Lord, to hope in your goodness and the fullness of your promises and to trust that *we will find you when we seek you with all our heart!*

Receive a brotherly embrace.

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

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1.- Jer 29:13