



Challenged by Ourselves

*Letter to our
brethren*
APRIL 2024

We all know that we live in a world that challenges us deeply. The Pious Schools are a “sounding board” in which all the challenges of the children and young people of our world reverberate, all the dreams they harbor in their hearts and all the social and ecclesial realities in which they live. This has been the case since our birth. It cannot be otherwise, given that we are dedicated to education, and not just any education, because we understand it in an integral way. We put a lot of effort into discerning the calls that these challenges provoke in us. And we must keep doing it. But sometimes we forget another challenge that is central to us, and that comes from our identity. I want to dedicate this fraternal letter to reflecting on how the Pious Schools can and should feel challenged by the Pious Schools themselves.

A few weeks ago, I attended a good friend’s lecture on education. At one point, the lecturer used a curious photograph. It showed a young man dazzled by the sun, trying to protect himself from the glare with his hand, and he did not realize that he had the right resources to do so: his peaked cap - placed upside down so that it did not protect him - and his sunglasses, unused. That photo inspired me to reflect, because sometimes it gives me the impression that we are like that young man: we have many resources, proper to our identity, to carry out our mission, and we do not take advantage of them in an adequate way. Thinking about this idea, I came to a conclusion: one of the best ways to respond to the challenges we receive from our children and young people is to feel challenged by who we are and what we have. It is about living and working from who we are, with increasing fullness.

What resources do we have, in our own identity, and we do not take advantage of them or live them as we should? What are some of our caps and sunglasses that we sometimes forget to use? I will try to think aloud, with all of you, about this fraternal letter. What are the resources that are part of our identity and that we need to rethink in order to grow and do things better? A little self-criticism can help.

The first is obvious: **we have a clear founder.** Calasanz is a perpetual challenge for us. Having a father like Calasanz is an extraordinary resource, sometimes very unused. His personal process, his vision of Christian life, his way of understanding education, the choices he made, his spirituality (I still meet Piarists who have difficulty explaining Calasanzian spirituality), his criteria of consecrated life, his openness to the Church, his non-conformity, his vision of the future, his freedom from the dominant criteria, its capacity to convene, its global project, its Pious Schools... everything in Calasanz is a challenge. And, sometimes, we train our young people in a superficial way, we read their writings scantly, we partially understand their educational proposal, or we adapt it to the reality in which we live. The Order still needs to *return to Calasanz*. I heard this as a junior, from the lips of Fr. Ángel Ruiz. I feel compelled to say it again. Thank you to all of you who remain passionate about helping us get deeper into the founder. A founder is not “simply” the one who founded, but the one who continues to found, as long as we, his children, have the spirit of a founder, as Calasanz himself proposed¹.

The community. Our choice is community. The Piarist community is an extraordinary resource, which we do not know how to take full advantage of, because sometimes we do not know how to live it in increasing fullness. A community is a space of life, of shared faith, of mission plans, of mutual aid for the exercise of our ministry. A community is a reference point for the school, called to enlighten all those who collaborate co-responsibly in the development of the mission. A community is a laboratory of ideas, a school of educators, a

space of vocational fidelity. To neglect the community and turn it into a place we simply live in is to lose an extraordinary resource. Calasanz always insisted that the proper life of religious would always redound to the benefit of the schools².

Our own story. Feeling challenged by lived history is a healthy and good thing, taking care that it does not lead us to nostalgia, always paralyzing. Throughout these four centuries of existence of our Pious Schools, we have witnessed innumerable contributions made to education, to the Church, to young people. Feeling small on the shoulders of giants helps us to look beyond, because we are taller. Squandering the resources provided by our centuries-old path is typical of a short-sighted and short-sighted institution. We need to go deeper into our “life story,” because that will give us a lot of life.

Just two small, very concrete examples. A few months ago, I read a work by Fr. Burgués on the “founders”. It is impressive how much I was able to learn from reading the efforts made by the Piarists who engendered new presences of the Order. And this is just a small sample of the enormous quantity – and quality – of resources that our own history offers us to feel challenged. I experienced the second example in Poland. A few months ago, I took part in a congress in Warsaw on Fr. Konarski. The feeling I had at that congress was as simple as it was complex: Fr. Konarski was able to do everything he did not only because of his genius, but because he had a Province behind him. And what I said in my brief speech is that the challenge to which Fr. Konarski responded – with his lights and resources – is still valid: an education that is authentically Calasanzian in order to engender a better society. But it does not end there. The next day I attended the anniversary celebration of the school in Warsaw. The students made a play dedicated to the contributions of another Piarist, after whom the school is named. And I had to admit that I did not even know his name. And his contributions to education in Poland were formidable. We have a resource that we must make better use of: we are an institution that contributes. Let

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1.- Saint Joseph CALASANZ. Opera Omnia, volume VI, page 115. Letter to Father Alacchi, July 12, 1638.

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2.- Saint Joseph CALASANZ. Opera Omnia, volume VI, page 361. Letter to Father Berro, September 24, 1639.

us keep that in mind. By the way, I remind you of the name of this Piarist: Fr. Onufry Kopczyński.

I go on listing resources that are part of our identity. **The fourth is our Piarist ministries.** In addition to the pastoral ministry, the Order recognizes three that come from the center of the charism: Christian education, care for the poor for social transformation, and the recently constituted ministry of listening and accompaniment. These are ministries that are entrusted to our young people during their initial formation and to some people, mostly from the Fraternity. We should think about the quality with which we prepare people to receive these ministries, the need we have in our Piarist Christian communities to understand well their nature and importance, the vocational strength they are bearers. Each of them, well understood and well worked, is capable of bringing about profound changes in the way we carry out our mission. And the most important of them all is that these ministries bring us closer to the heart of Calasanz' project. A Piarist ministry, if it is one, has a fundamental virtuality: we never fully live it, and it always asks something more from ourselves, from the community, from the Order and from the Fraternity. It is an engine of change, a value of identity. We need to dig deeper into each of them. I would very much like that, in each house of formation, for example, we would carry out seminars of study and reflection on each of these ministries. I would like some of our juniors to take the step of being more deeply trained in one of them. I would like us to be able to know and share the good experiences that are had in some of our Fraternities, especially the dynamism of these ministries. We need to make better use of our own treasures.

And, speaking of treasures, I enter into the **fifth resource** that challenges us: two enormous **treasures** that we have and that we sometimes do not take advantage of. I am talking about **the Calasanz Movement and Continuous Prayer.** The Calasanz Movement has grown a lot among us in these years, but we cannot get distracted from the essentials. It is a comprehensive educational process in which we offer our children and young people space to discover, share and live their faith, their life, and their vocation to the full-

est. Not just any pastoral activity is the Calasanz Movement. We must delve into what we ourselves have engendered. It is clear that in each context it is incarnated in a different way, but incarnating does not mean diluting or adapting.

Continuous Prayer is slowly making its way among us. It has now overcome the identity crisis it experienced years ago, and it is gradually understanding itself as Calasanz understood it: the soul of the school. I invite everyone to enter the website³ where, little by little, resources and experiences are being exposed that can help us understand and value the treasure we have.

I am going for the sixth resource that is sometimes wasted: the **centrality of the child.** When the Order wanted to define the elements proper to the identity of our ministry, the first of these was this: the child is the center and responding to his or her challenges is ours⁴. This is one of the most significant issues of our Schools, driven by the genius of Calasanz. The center of it all is the child. There is a constant that I experience in all the visits I make to the Piarist educational centers, when I have the precious opportunity to meet with the students. I tend to like to ask about the aspects of school that they are happiest about. 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, if this answer were not given, serious thought would have to be given to the Piarist character of this school.

The "culture of our schools" makes the students known, because they are the center. Everything must be organized so that the student is central to the life of the school, in all its dynamics. This is the vision from which Calasanz builds his popular school and develops it throughout Europe. It is clear that we are facing a key to our identity that becomes a challenge. Let us keep trying to answer.

Obviously, the answer to this challenge has to do with many of the things we do: the type of educa-

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3.- <https://oracioncontinua.com>

4.- GENERAL CONGREGATION of the Pious Schools. "The Calasanzian Identity of Our Ministry." Ed. Calasancias. Madrid 2012, pages 13-14.

tional relationship, the priorities from which we orient the school, our ability to promote new responses to address new situations, the training of our educators, etc. It is good that it is the children who inspire our decisions.

The **seventh resource** I would like to refer to could be defined as follows: **yes to inclusion, yes to preference for the poor**. It is part of our identity to promote educational projects that promote inclusion and that give special attention to the most disadvantaged. I am going to use a word that is very dear to us: Trastevere. When I walk through the neighborhood where Calasanz' project was born, I can't help but think about everything that was experienced there. For us, "Trastevere" is not a district, but a theological place, a place that provokes questions. And the answer to the questions provoked was "St. Dorothea." Knowing the answer helps us figure out the question. The answer "Dorothea" helps us to understand the question that Calasanz asked: we can change reality by betting on the poor and on an inclusive educational proposal that allows those who are "outside the circuit" to become protagonists of their transformation.

The Pious Schools were born in a dynamic of utopia, of profound social change. Calasanz starts from a decisive observation, which places it in none other than its Constitutions: **"In almost all the States the majority of their citizens are poor"**⁵ And he responds to this challenge with a proposal for a school that changes everything. A simple sample button, taken from the regulations of one of the colleges he founded: *"No one in our schools should claim any pre-eminence or privilege over others except for the greatest integrity of morals, for greater diligence and profit in study"*⁶. Our "school in full time"⁷ seeks to energize this commitment to inclusion and a different world.

Certainly, there are many more aspects of our

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5.- Saint Joseph CALASANZ. Constitutions of the Pauline Congregation no. 198. Opera Omnia. Volume VI, page 46

6.- Saint Joseph CALASANZ. Regulations of the College of Campi, 1630. Opera Omnia. Volume VI, page 246

7.- General Secretariat for an Irreplaceable Ministry. "Escuela Pías a plena tiempo y perfil del alumno". Ed. Calasancias. Collection "Cuadernos" number 60.

identity that challenge us, but we cannot address all of them in the space of a letter like this. I invite everyone to continue this reflection, convinced that it can enlighten us greatly. But I do not want to end this letter without a reference to one of the attitudes that can help us most on this path: gratitude *for all that we have received as an inheritance*. But our heritage, because it is Calasanzian, has a secret: it asks to be known, recreated and offered. We have to keep thinking about these keys. Thank you for your patience. Receive a fraternal embrace.

Fr. Pedro Aguado Sch.P.
Father General