



INTERVIEW WITH GONZALO CARBÓ BOLTA

He was born in Real de Gandía near Valencia, Spain on 8th July 1940. He has two brothers. He studied with the Carmelites in Gandía until eight and afterwards joined the Escolapios,

“I come from a simple family”, Gonzalo recounts, “a Christian family: my father worked in a shoe shop and my mother, apart from working in the home, was an artistic embroiderer...” Gonzalo seems to almost lose himself in childhood nostalgia and then, after a moment of silence replete with memories, he adds, “my parents were dedicated to education and they possessed a great spirituality”.

In 1951 he joined the Escolapios as a postulant. “One week later I had already lost several kilos because I rejected the food. My parents said “Come on home”. But I, with inappropriate childhood clarity, told them, “No, I’m staying”.

He was ordained as a priest on 22nd February, 1964 right in the middle of the Vatican Council II, according to which he wanted and begged to receive and experience the ministry.

Nowadays, Father Gonzalo lives in Valencia in the school house and dedicates all his time to working with children. For 16 years he has shared, lived, worked and helped in the spiritual life of small children, an experience that has grown with time and which captivates all those who draw near to it.

Moreover, he likes music and art very much. He has been spreading the Gospel for 30 years in parish communities who experience baptismal and ecclesial renewal according to the Neocatecumenal Way.

When asked what experience as an Escolapio has most touched his heart, Gonzalo's face lights up and he replies, "The relationship with children, something I had always wanted in the Order, a profound desire which now, thanks to God, takes up practically all my ministerial time.

What would you like to be when you grow up?

When I was 11 years old being an Escolapio was proposed to me. At that time it used to be done in this way. Of course before, when I was 9, I had already been asked what I would like to be when I grew up. My reply was *priest, teacher or doctor*. A father, the then provincial Jesús Gómez, told me, "So become an Escolapio. Then you'll be teacher, priest and a doctor of souls".

That's how I came to announce to my family that I wanted to be an Escolapio. My mother said, "Talk to your father". He was working, and when I told him that I wanted to be an Escolapio, he answered no. But they talked to a priest, Father Antonio Fuster, and when they came back they told me, "you can go when you want".

Do you consider yourself to be a priest of Vatican II?

My generation experienced the Council a great deal. I feel that the Lord has been opening up so many things for me, has been educating me little by little for the ecclesial present and always leaving me open to what is new and always with hope. I have felt the words of Augustine as if they were mine, "*Attende ubi albescit veritas*". I haven't looked for this, He has given me it.

How did the experience of praying with children come about?

Pure Providence. When I finished my provincial studies, I asked to do something with children. I already had experience of Calasanz continuous prayer. He, along with other saints, say that children are capable of prayer and contemplation and that they can do anything with the heart of God. So there I was praying with children. They are particularly prepared for this and from the first day I was captivated by the experience. The "Little Children's Oratory" has been going for 16 years now.

What do they do?

They bring children nearer to Jesus so that, with both of them present, they can establish a dialogue of love between them. Jesus talks to the children and they believe and love, and they can transfer to their lives what they experience in prayer. They also become missionaries for the experience, taking it and communicating it to their parents. We follow a structure. We begin by praying to ourselves or "in secret". Then we pray with the Word: they listen to it, they learn, they apply it to their lives or they sing it. And then they pray together, beseeching or thanking aloud. They are 5 to 12 year old children.

You say that the children draw near to Jesus... I imagine that the children bring you nearer to Jesus too, don't they?

Without a doubt. They have a perception of the Gospel which is very new, assured, original and happy. John Paul II used to talk about "the children's Gospel": they give it to us and bring us closer to Jesus. Fundamentally, we present Jesus of the resurrection, the encounter is with the resurrected Jesus. Theologians argue forever, but children understand perfectly that Jesus *with a new body or a spiritual body* is in the Word, in the Eucharist, in a gesture, in a child, in whatever person in need... We present a "sensitive Christ", who gains admittance through our senses, who can hear, see, touch, "taste", kiss, help, hug...

Tell us an anecdote

Once, while presenting the Passion of Christ to an 5 year old child, when we have finished explaining we ask the same question that Calasanz asked children, "*If Jesus so loved us, what can we do for Jesus on the cross?*" Usually the reply we give would be, "Don't sin, love Jesus...", thinking more of ourselves than Jesus, don't we? Well, one time one group of children said, "Don't you have a saw so we can cut out the nails and take Jesus down from the cross?". "And where are you going to put him?", I asked. "In our hearts!", they replied.

Are the children helped to understand that there are social problems like poverty and immigration?

Yes, of course. Moreover, they are very sensitive to these situations. We try to help them to show solidarity with these situations, from their very concrete

viewpoint as children. For example, after getting Christmas presents, each child thinks of the best present to give to Jesus, and through Him to the needy. A struggle begins in their hearts and with their parents, but in the end the Lord triumphs on the side of Love. These presents are given to other poor children, poor families, children with cancer or AIDS, gypsies, or they are sent to other countries.

How is prayer integrated into everyday life?

If Jesus is present in a poor person, prayer serves to see what that poor person needs. And the reply is to give what I have. If he is in a child, the answer is to embrace him with love and respect. A prayer starts to appear which teaches the experience of life with love of the Gospel, which assumes an input of what you are, what you know and what you have.

You talked about continuous prayer, what significance did it hold for Calasanz?

When Calasanz began his work, due to his own experience and the growing devotion in Rome to the Holy Sacrament, he started to take the children to the Oratory. So, during the school schedule, there was always one little group praying and preparing themselves for the sacraments. Calasanz places this experience - "the pious habit of teaching and praying" - at the heart of his education, from the time his schools began. If there is prayer, education works... We understand that he placed it at the heart of education because the relationship with Jesus in everyday life allows us to overcome the limitations a purely human education could never overcome.

Personally speaking, how has this experience with children changed you?

It's like playing a good role, the role of Mary in the Gospel sitting at the feet of Jesus. All my ministerial life has been illuminated and guided by this experience of prayer with children. It has helped me to love the very core of what is Escolapio - prayer. At the same time it has helped me see the seed of a new pedagogy, because the attitudes which appear in children's prayer have a power to transform: in taking these attitudes into the classroom, it makes that pedagogical experience change too.

When you see a small child, what do you think when you remember that at 10 you decided to become an Escolapio?

I see that many children, at that age or even younger, want the same thing and they say so clearly and naturally. I think that God calls when he wants to. The thing is how to proceed side by side with the family, how to cultivate the seed they have. Nurture and process cannot be left on one side. Calasanz said that our charisma is to work “from”: from childhood until the process is completed. A break in the process or to abandon the cultivation of indications in the child are inconceivable.

Why do breaks in that process of faith and vocational initiation happen?

Life is very different now: many families are not believers, the educational programmes are not always at the service of children but to obey the laws. We also need educators who believe and commit themselves to their Christian vocation... We need to infuse more confidence and credibility into the “*a teneris annis*” of the pedagogue and Saint Calasanz...

Is there a vocational crisis?

There are still vocations. God still calls, enriching his People with charisma and ministries. Certainly there are charismas with more vocations than others. There are new ways, movements that are filled with missionary vocational spirit, roads to renovation leading to fundamentals. We will have to ask ourselves why God doesn't bless us with what we think to be the necessary vocations. I wonder about this in my Province, after quite a few years of significant vocational blessing...

What must be renewed within the Order?

I don't know the entire Order. I think we should beg for the foundational talent and return to it, to feel inside what Calasanz himself felt. This happens when we are meek before God and open to the Church. There is a new Church!. After Vatican II a new Church emerged which begs us monks for a profound “renewal” within the framework of the change, which has become evident over the years, and not only through the first council documents.

Church...?

Where the Holy Spirit gives life, that's where we should be. Close to the new experiences, open to them, affected by them. That's where I think there can be

new productivity. From our Special General Chapter, for some years now, I have believed and stated that Escolapio renewal will come from a closeness to the changes that the Lord is placing before us. And I have seen it!

What does being an Escolapio mean?

I would love to know if I am really an Escolapio. Calasanz says that if someone cannot educate or love poor children, he doesn't have Escolapio vocation or he has lost it. So I go on wondering along this line: am I really an Escolapio? To be one is a blessing and that's what I ask of God.

To me being an Escolapio is to do God's will each day, in the place and mission I am in. God took the call in my childhood to do great work in me and to renew my whole being: I want to feel like a brother to all the human family, but more concretely with all those close to me. And inside the Church being christian to the Christians, which assumes a real expressive communion with them, from a charismatic universal ministry. And moreover, to be an Escolapio is to be in the Church benefitting children. So, to be an Escolapio means being a brother, a Christian, a priest and a monk with specific availability and ministry.

What are the weaknesses you see in the Order?

Human limitations themselves. To be an Escolapio doesn't depend on one's effort and ability, but on the gift from God. And so, "I rejoice in my weaknesses because the power of God appears in them".

Although, to tell the truth, I don't like the terms "weaknesses and strengths". I prefer "to bless and to hope". To bless the gifts that are there, and there are many. And to hope that the Lord carries out the budding reality. Looking at the present Pious School, we should all rejoice at seeing all the many gifts and promises the Lord has sent us. Thinking about my Province, I remember when the previous Father General, Josep Maria Balcells, recounted them aloud a few years ago... What a wonderful service Superiors performed to profess and confirm in us the presence and way of the Spirit!

And the challenges?

We have been born at a time when the church is trying to renew itself. Calasanz discovered that all church renewal, with new clergy, starts out from a good education in childhood. It is something special to our charisma, which we have always maintained within the church: perhaps we should convince ourselves even more about this original idea. Perhaps we should be more open and more

adventurous in some situations, without fear of “extravagances”. To be open to all that is best, as Calasanz wanted. The Escolapio is called to disclose in the Church the moment when Jesus embraces the children.

To announce that Christ is among the children, embracing them, making the story of the child part of himself, helping him to grow.

To bless, which is to embrace him as he is and to join him in his feelings and growth.

The putting on of hands to transmit all life, love and development to those children who can grow in Christ.

Perhaps these are the challenges of the Escolapios...

Each child is an “already but not yet”, as much in his reflection of God as in the human beauty of his identification with Christ.

To bless the “already” and hope for the “not yet”, is a sure source of psychic and spiritual health for children and for us in our relationship with them.

Have you experienced any vocational crisis?

I can't remember any time I questioned my vocation and that is a blessing. I have seen myself placed by the Lord in all sorts of personal and institutional problems. And, by pure grace, I have been always been able to hope. We have limitations and that hurts me: but I have never had a vocational crisis, thank God. My love and my pain is this Pious School, full of beauty which excites me, and also limitations which cause me pain and encourage me. I expect qualitative leaps in it, new upwellings of the Spirit, renewing the body which is already so old and fertile. There are signs and an urgent need for that leap in quality. *In Dei laudem et puerorum utilitatem.*