



Interview with Jesus Elizari Diez

He was born in Iruña (Pamplona). “40 years old, he tells us with some sorrow; and he adds “that is already a feat”. As for his family, he tells us that his parents are relatively young. Seven brothers and sisters in all. For his family, the fact that they have a son or a brother who is a priest has passed through different moments and stages. They have been very happy for a long time and this, Jesus tells us, is the result of a process. Indeed, some of his brothers have lived three years in Bolivia as lay assistants and at the moment, one sister is working in Mexico. Nowadays he lives in Pamplona with six other community companions where he is in charge of vocational pastoral work in the province. Besides, he is the coordinator for vocational pastoral work in the Provinces in Spain.

What does the coordination work consist of?

Sometime ago, each province did what they thought best in all fields and especially with vocational pastoral work. For a few years now we have tried to become more coordinated in order to help each other when faced with the difficulties of the present vocational situation.

By trying to support each other, trying to see which methods, means and contents we can develop. All six coordinators from the six provinces in Spain get together and we streamline our proposals, our experiences...

Are you united?

More or less; each one has their own quirks and ways of working. There are many cultural differences, different Escolapio traditions, ways of understanding Pious Schools, but nowadays all the differences can be overcome. The meeting we had in Rome in 2000, the one we refer to as “the mimosa meeting”, was very important for

this initial kick-off. That meeting made us realise the necessity of working together, it drove us all forward and we can say that that has borne fruit.

What is the vocational situation like in Vasconia?

Vasconia has traditionally been a highly populated missionary province. Vasconia founded Brazil, Chile and Venezuela. It went to Japan and is now in the Philippines. There are many people outside the province, but it has been one of the provinces which has been getting smaller, which has had great crises, difficult times historically. At the present moment we are among the medium-sized provinces. There are 14 people of my age on whom the burden of the province falls. There are also some younger members.

Tell me about your vocational background.

I joined the Escolapios in 1982. I had studied at the college in Iruña (Pamplona) and during that period the idea came to me to become a priest.

Why?

I think that at that time my idea was to change the world, in its social aspects... To be with the poor... For justice. I felt that the Escolapios had a good presence, did interesting work with youngsters, communicated a message about life, an alternative way; and besides they presented the religious side, the Gospel as an alternative in life. They had helped me quite a lot. So I became an Escolapio as a way to state explicitly an intuition, as a kind of adventure. Later, I was in Tolosa for 4 years and it was there that I discovered what being an Escolapio meant and how an Escolapio had to live near people, with some kind of opening up to people's problems. Afterwards, and since then, I have lived in Iruña-Pamplona in different communities.

At the source of your vocation, what was it in the Escolapios that you knew that attracted you?

That kind of idealism, utopia, the idea of changing the world, breaking down unjust structures, creating another type of society... Jesus and the Gospel experienced very seriously. Above all that.

Is that still present?

I think that it is still present in Vasconia with a strong emphasis; not always so clear in the Church in general. Neither is it appealing for young people nowadays who are sensitive to other things...

What other things?

I think they are sensitive to what is linked more to a kind of consistent life, to getting out of this false world we live in, to freedom in the face of society, in the face of consumption, to having deeper relationships. It is also present in social life but not as strongly as before. I think there is a consciousness about injustice in the south, in Third World countries but not with the same strength.

Have you had experience in some of the countries where Vasconia has founded vice-provinces?

Very brief but intense and , that being so, I can say that I know a lot.

Have they marked you in some way?

A great deal. Above all the living testimony of the Escolapios who are there (referring to some countries in America) experiencing difficult situations, sometimes suffering a lot, maintaining the vocation and work which are incredible. That had a great impact on me. I was stunned by the neighbourhoods in Brazil where Escolapios help maintain people's faith and people's lives under difficult conditions. I was stunned by Venezuela where there is a wonderful educational set-up among the poorest. I was really stunned by Bolivia because they are the poorest in the World: people who wouldn't have a future were it not for the education that has been made available by the Andalucian Escolapios for 12 years and by the lay people of Vasconia since 2001. A lot has made an impact on me. There would be so many tales to tell.

Do you feel up to doing this kind of work?

Yes, when it is necessary.

I don't mean availability, I'm referring to the fact that I think this isn't for everyone...

Yes, there may be people who couldn't do it, but in principal I am available.

Besides, why did you say that the source of your vocation was the social question and the poor...

Of course, perhaps at that time I saw the poor in our own land who are also there. The so-called "fourth world".

Are there poor people nowadays in the Basque country?

Yes indeed there are, they have always been there and lately they have been increased by many immigrants. We live in cities which appear to be in the first world, and in many ways they are, but there are pockets of poverty, people who have been very badly treated by life, who our system have impoverished and most recently, many immigrants who live crowded together on the floor in bad conditions, families where one parent is here and the other back home. They work all day in order to send some money back and they never see their children.

Do these poor children have access to your schools?

Luckily, yes. Our colleges are for everyone and include a large percentage of immigrants. In Pamplona the government subsidises practically all education. It's a policy that allows access to our college for those who wish to enter and, luckily our colleges are a real reflection of society.

Do you mean you can work with the poor without going to America...?

You can and should. I think the credibility of the Escolapios and of the Church as a whole pivots on the fact that we can also work with the poor in our cities.

What does that depend on?

It depends on provincial government decisions and also on external factors which bring closer or drive away the poor. It depends a lot on will, on the orientation given in a province, on the options that drive it...

Do you think that the question of an option for the poor is related to the vocational one?

I would like to say yes and I mean yes, but I think that it isn't wholly true. I think that times have changed and that now a correlation of the "the more we bend over backwards for the poor, the more vocations we will have" kind just isn't on. I wish it were. Because I believe that the vocations we need are those who this appeals to.

What does having more vocations depend on?

Above all on being more meaningful to society, to what youth needs. That they can see we have a consistent life, a consistent relationship with poverty. I think that while we live in houses or in a context which are clearly not poor... I think that life style is fundamental and occasionally our lifestyle makes people think that so much effort is not necessary, renouncing so much to experience what we do. When we have to explain our poverty so much, when we have to explain so much that we are happy, when we have to explain so much so many things, there is something wrong. All this would have to be seen clearly when they meet us and that doesn't always happen.

Are you happy?

Very. Yes, I'm happy.

Tell me about your crises...

I have experienced all possible types. For me, an important moment of crisis is when you ask yourself, "Am I making a fool of myself? Is all this worthwhile?" Now, at 40, I have discovered that efficiency isn't everything, that I can't solve the world's problems, but I think and feel that everything makes sense. The crisis comes when you see that the world is turning, that people don't need someone like me...that is when you ask yourself if it is worthwhile. A crisis also arises when you think some projects are not worthwhile. And of course, the emotional crisis which is always present: feeling alone, seeing that your friends are having children and partners, the sexual crisis when everyone tells you it's a "great experience" and you know you have to give that all up. I have had many crises. I think we all have. I feel proud to have gotten over them, to continue on forward, growing in faithfulness and feeling that everything I am and do are worthwhile.

Do you bear all this in mind when you are with the trainees?

Yes, of course. Besides, because our world is a family community we know each other very well: each one knows how the other feels and what they are like. Also, because I think that we have to train based on reality, that it isn't easy being an Escolapio, that it is wonderful to be one, that it makes you happy, but many moments of crisis and doubt have to be overcome...

What does it mean to be an Escolapio?

To discover that it is worthwhile giving your whole life for the kids, to educate from the bottom up because you believe that there is a greater project than the one they are experiencing at that moment, because you believe the kids of whatever race and age are marked by God, and that God calls you through the Calasanz and Escolapio projects to give them life. Giving them life in Europe means giving them time, listening to them, giving them affection, giving them a meaning, showing them their brothers are suffering and that something can be done for them. Giving them life in other places means giving them bread and education. Being an Escolapio means discovering that you are responsible for the kid you have in front of you, who is listening to you, who has a heart ready to be filled, who is anxious to grow, that you have the responsibility for opening doors to the future for him. All this without asking anything in return...

How are you experiencing the possibility of amalgamating the Provinces of Vasconia and Andalucia?

Within the process which we have laid down for the new province, we have just had the first vote and we have had a positive result. Andalucia and Vasconia both have the will to create a new province together. This doesn't mean we have to give up our separate identities; rather it means enriching each other. We are experiencing it as a new project and we are very excited. We are the protagonists for change. I think that, in a couple of years, we will have a new province because we have wanted it that way and not because circumstances have imposed it on us.

What do you have to say about your President, Rodriguez Zapatero?

Look here: a Theology professor said that he would never forgive the Socialists who had robbed us of Utopia and I really believe that. The Socialists won in 1983; they did a grand job socially and politically, then they stole Utopia from us in the sense that the word Socialism conjures up other improvements and more radical changes, bringing justice nearer, bringing the real distribution of wealth nearer, bringing the care of less favoured sectors nearer. Well, that is all still pending.

Nowadays it's the same. Another thing is that inside the Church it should be said that fear has to be taken away, that the Socialists have many advantages and they help us to see society in a different way. The fact that the Church has always been identified with the Right is not something to be proud of either. I think that we shouldn't be afraid of Zapatero, rather we should demand Socialism to be real. I don't think it's been a big step forward or anything either. In Europe, Socialism isn't very real. It seems we assume the economic system is good, and off we go to deal with other things. In Spain, sometimes, it seems that to be a Socialist is to be modern: "hip", to be extravagant and nothing else.

Marriage between homosexuals has been widely commented on...

I think that we as Church people must distinguish what is important. We had a Father General (Angel Ruiz) who, when everyone in the Church was afraid of the Socialists, wrote a letter saying that we Escolapios should rejoice the most about popular social measures. I think that's where we always have to be. And also, talking about homosexuals and other questions, we Escolapios know where the poor are and that's where we want to be.

"If only we wouldn't discriminate against anybody nor harbour so many fears"