



## Monthly interview

### INTERVIEW WITH FRANCISCO AISA

#### PROFILE

*Francisco “Paco” Aisa was born in Zaragoza 43 years ago and belongs to the Aragon Escolapio province. He recounts that he was an Escolapio student and whilst in contact with them the question arose “Why can’t I be an Escolapio too?”*

I was 16 years old and behind that question was, especially, the testimony of an Escolapio. For me the lifestyle, the way of living was important. I think that in those motives, which later become purified, lifestyle held an important place. I am convinced that at each stage of life there is a particular way to experience things; what is important is to renew the way of following Jesus which circumstances are dictating. In that way and in others, I consider myself still in training.

*“The mid-life crisis” is defined by age, not by one’s experience.*

I realise that my way of experiencing my religious calling is very different now from when I was at another age, another level of ingenuity, another circumstance.

I did my noviciate in Peralta de la Sal, where our founder, Jose Calasanz, was born, Civil studies and Philosophy in Zaragoza, Theology in Salamanca and a Diploma in Theology of Religious Life in Rome.

Francisco worked for years in his province’s schools, and from 1997 to 2003 he was stationed in Rome as general secretary of the Order. In 2003 he was asked to move to the vice-province of Puerto Rico and New York. At present he lives in San Juan, in the parish of El Salvador in Puerto Rico and is the Delegate to the Father General for Training. *Although his parents, brothers and three nephews miss him, they support him and are happy for his new mission in Puerto Rico.*

I feel happy and at ease in Puerto Rico, a small piece of reality where we have everything for growth. For me it has meant being in contact with a very different and challenging

experience: on the one hand, the contact with poverty and on the other, the personal experience of faith of people very different from what I have been accustomed to.

### **What does being the Delegate for the Father General for Training mean?**

This is a figure we have in *Constitutions and Rules*. He is in charge of general training: the initial phase, the pastoral vocational phase and also long-standing training. In each of these three cases there is a secretariat with their respective coordinators. At this moment we are updating the Training Directory and visiting the Order's Training houses.

To update the Directory - which was requested by the last General Chapter for this six-year period - we wished to have a global panorama of how training in our houses is being undertaken. In this sense both aspects of our work are related.

In October we will have the Council of Elder Superiors, and at that moment we will present a report with an analysis of the visits in terms of updating the training directory.

### **Training Directory?**

It's the official document of Escolapio training, published in 1991: we want to update it based on the experience and the magnificent teachers we have.

According to what you have seen....what has been achieved and what challenges have cropped up?

**Achievements:** steps have been taken in the Training Directory within Calasanz training and the way it is organised. At the same time, I notice in the districts a great awareness for having as a point of reference what the Order has established.

The main needs arise from the lack of trainers: we need them to be suitable, to be teachers as much as part of the training teams. Another challenge is connected to the restructuring process we are passing through: when applying it to the training houses, we need to make a map to see how the houses can function at the interdistrict level and, above all, how we can bring together the different training policies in existence.

What do you imagine ideal training should be like?

Well, given to dream, we could dream of trainees experiencing complete devotion to the Gospel, feeling called to live the Calasanz experience in the Church. People who take the option which leads them to a lifestyle in close quarters with the poor, with specific training to experience the ministry in the Church according to the various forms of our talents. All this experienced within the training communities which help, precisely, these decisions to mature based on our Calasanz option and our way in the Church. Communities conceived as a training "whole", where there is a team responsible for training to stimulate the community, and a teacher who has a very specific role, but who at the same time is one more member for growth: the conception of a "training community" has been the exact great challenge which the document on Escolapio training raised.

Difficult!

Yes, but trilling. I believe that on many occasions districts refrain from taking the step of finding a teacher and this is just one step: because the challenge is for our trainees to be in the vocational process of rediscovering the Gospel, to want to experience complete devotion and dedication. And all this inside a community. It is difficult but incredibly trilling, as is personal growth itself.

What difficulties do the trainees encounter?

At times they don't encounter in us the means they need to grow within the Escolapio vocation. I think that this is an institutional problem. Starting from the idea of vocation as a gift from God, our job is to provide the means necessary for this gift to mature. At the same time each trainee is a blessing from God for our work and we have to accept him, embrace him and help him. There are times when this doesn't happen, perhaps because the trainers don't know how to distinguish or because the district doesn't have enough vocational processes to achieve such an arrangement, or even, because of unawareness, we lose our trainees because of trivialities.

Other difficulties are linked to personal growth itself. Trainees can - and do - exist who deceive themselves into thinking they have a vocation. We also have an institutional term to give: discover, in time and together, what act of God is in each pupil and give them the appropriate means.

As for our lifestyle - dedicated as we are to poor children and education - it supposes such concrete steps as that which brings the trainee to choose the poor as an option, and this step is not always taken. Sometimes, the option is for the middle class or for those in power. This isn't part of our vocation, or it happens when circumstances lead us to be those places where an evangelical service can also be rendered. But it is more specifically our talent to be with the poor. In Spain or Italy, poverty is not so noticeable; the American Continent still has a lot of children, many poor, as is the case in Africa and Asia too.

When we become enclosed in First World structures and we don't see the vitality of our Institute, you don't bring to the desired process of maturity a real option for the poor which is an integral part of our organism.

Do you think that, under different circumstances, in some places the essence of being an Escolapio has been lost?

Yes. What happens is that if we talk about to the First World, it doesn't mean that our presence there is absurd, because the challenge to spread the Gospel to secular civilizations such as our own is present. We are in fact the symbol and stimulus of the Kingdom in these situations. What frequently happens is that the means are not always those traditionally set out, perhaps we need to rethink our evangelical presence in the First World. When you land in certain places where poverty accosts you, you can more easily find an answer to your presence there because frequently that's where you have to be. Historically this answer has not always been given: options have been taken to be on the side of the colonizers, with those who most remind us of our *establishment*. I think that for historical faithfulness and fidelity to the Gospel, we need to rethink our presence and find formulas which fuse old and new without forgetting that our place is primarily with the poor.

Do you think that some of the ingenuousness of the noviciate should be regained?

I think that the ingenuousness of the Gospel should be regained, because we often experience it in an overcalculated way, wanting too much to control things and that isn't good. We are not the ones who experience the Gospel, the Gospel evades us because it is a sign and has nothing to do with calculation and certain projects. The Gospel experience is to let oneself be seduced by Jesus who comes to meet you as a

friend, a brother, a priest, a saviour. A God who never lets us down and who never abandons us.

How does an escolapio who has management and administrative tasks to do, avoid losing that God experience by the wayside?

It depends on how you face up to and confront that service. I think God walks among documents, because in administrative work those documents are related to brothers' and people's situations too. You have to find in these situations the meeting point to be faithful to the Gospel and to what the Lord himself is asking of us. When things are confronted in this way, that document or form you have in your hand is a situation of a real person.

Tell us one positive memory of your initial training.

Perhaps the time I changed from junior studies in Zaragoza to studying Theology: that's where we were able to discover the appreciation of some people, to feel the group enriched by what we were experiencing.

How have you felt when a colleague leaves the Order?

Disconcerted to see that often those with the best resources or possibilities are those who leave and you ask yourself, "*maybe I'm the one who should be leaving?*" Especially when you are young, you live that way, later you get to understand that there isn't an explanation for everything and each to their own way, although the question "Why" always remains. I always remember what a person with terminal cancer taught me: he told me why isn't the question but what for.

Apart from being a secretary in Rome, you were always linked to the religious life website. What was that experience like?

*Vidimusdominum* was a great experience; it helped me a lot to understand experiencing religious life in the world. It has put me in contact with very exciting people like Telmo (Meirone) and the team of collaborators there. It was an experience which made me understand the necessity of transmitting our lifestyle, to say what we do, to feel part of a religious life experience which is greater than what we sometimes think. I believe in an experience like *Vidimusdominum* and would love to take part again.

What does being an Escolapio mean?

It means fully experiencing the thrill of following Jesus just as Calasanz wanted for himself and his followers. This, which could sound like a formula of commitment, includes experiencing the Gospel as a long-standing discovery of Jesus. And we do so with determination, as Calasanz wanted: forever keeping the Gospel alive in the Church for children and the poor; living dedicated to the truth that God is a Father who always looks after us...that's why we are "the Mother of God's poor" who, like her, are looking for Jesus. Our vocation is very beautiful, we are called to live a blessing, as I see it.

Do you think there is a vocational crisis?

I wouldn't call it a vocational crisis. I think we have to analyze what is happening and what it means. I don't think the youth of today is lacking the capacity to follow the Gospel, perhaps we are less able to be at their side and make them see all the its riches.

Maybe our work doesn't mention a total commitment to Jesus. Maybe our ministries have become so professional that they have no liberating quality. Maybe.

The Lord goes on calling; we experience that in the Order, where it grows, receiving blessings from God in each boy who approaches us.

Rather than vocational crisis, we have to talk about the crisis in our ability to demonstrate the riches of the Gospel.

When you visit the training houses, what do the trainees complain about?

When you reach a house, the image of being the Delegate for the Father General for Training precedes you. They say they had imagined me as being old and serious and, well, they get me. Somehow there are places where they are expecting a word of confirmation because they don't always feel they are doing the right thing.

The trainees, in general, tell me their experience and make me feel they are a gift from God. I have never set up the visit as an Inquisitor, rather as a brother who wants to get to know and take on board what they are experiencing.