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## INTERVIEW WITH RAFAEL CAPÓ

Rafael (37) born in Ponce, belongs to the Viceprovince of New York-Puerto Rico. He recounts that he felt a vocation since he was a child and tells us how he experiences being a Piarist nowadays. Besides his own vocation, he looks after and attends the vocation of many others, being the coordinator of Vocations Ministry of the Americas. Rafael appears to be optimistic and full of hope. He assures us that he is that way because “he is a young man called on by God”. The others say that Rafael likes to create communion and that he always tries to heal wounds, although - someone adds - at times he is very emotional.

*Some call him “Father Superman” because he develops his big body down at the gym. He says that this releases stress and that, sometimes, in the gym, he has to carry on with his Piarist ministry when someone comes up and says to him, “Father, can we talk for a minute?; and right there - Rafael recounts - “covered in sweat, we sit down for a chat. You are a Piarist everywhere, and all places are fit for spreading the Gospel.”*

### ***Tell us about your vocational history.***

My vocational history begins from when I can first remember. As a child, I remember the calling. I studied at Colegio Ponceño, in Puerto Rico, with the Piarists. The example of one of the fathers in Elementary School, one of our Religion teachers for first communion and later on other Piarists, slowly laid down something inside me and this started creating a certain dream. Afterwards, the struggles and internal battles began, and I got carried away by other things. But trying as I was, to escape from what I felt to be a calling; trying to run away and silence that Voice - it kept coming back again and again...

In 1985, when World Youth Day was celebrated in Rome, I was chosen to represent my school. At that time I was studying in High School and living the normal life of a teenager. I was thrilled by the opportunity of going to Rome, to meet so many other young people and I imagined the fun we could have, how much we were going to enjoy ourselves, etc. But during that World Youth Day, the words of John Paul II who repeated to us “Don’t be afraid”, and a special experience at the side of Calasanz, touched my heart. A Piarist from my school invited me to the Piarist Motherhouse of Saint Pantaleo, and I sat alone there in the patio of the general curia. I visited the room of St. Joseph Calasanz, and trembling, I said to God “Give

me proof that you are calling me”. And the proof was the commotion I was feeling in my heart.

The next year I felt I had to face up to the future: where was I going to university or what I was going to do, at the same time feeling deep inside me this feeling of restlessness, this idea of becoming a Piarist. It was a difficult time and I didn't have the courage to speak to anyone. In the middle of all those hesitations, I was taking steps to go study Medicine in the States. But I finally said to myself: “I can't go on like this; I'm going to talk to one of the fathers”, and I turned up all anxious to talk with one of the fathers at my school...it was a Sunday, February 2, 1986, at noon ... I was worried to bring up the subject of vocation in our conversation, until I broke down crying and I opened up my vocational quest to this father. Opening up my heart helped me feel that it was God's will, and that gave me strength to take a final decision. That was surely the happiest day of my life.

### ***What then?***

Well, the process wasn't easy because my father strongly opposed my vocation. It was difficult, but I had to follow my heart. So, running away from home, I joined the seminary. I did my initial formation between Puerto Rico, Mexico and Rome, until 1996, when I was happy to make my solemn profession before the tomb of St. Joseph Calasanz, 11 years after that first visit I had made as a restless young guy facing vocation.

### ***What's the situation with your parents now?***

It's been like a miracle and it all happened precisely when I was in Rome: one week before the Solemn Profession, I received a call from Puerto Rico. You must remember that my father had been firm in his opposition all throughout my years of formation. It was something we didn't talk about. When I went home for vacation, he would disappear.

### ***Hard for you...***

Yes, very. But I tried to take it with serenity and I would tell God: “Lord, you got me into all this; so you better take care of my Dad; do what you want, when you want to”.

### ***So, let's get back to that phone call you received before your solemn vows...***

Yes. My father called me from Puerto Rico and told me, “We're going over there for that thing of yours”. I don't know what happened to him, but it surely was God's grace in action. My father arrived in Rome, he hugged me and, with tears in his eyes, he told me that he wanted to share that moment, because he was proud of me. It was indescribable for me. I remember the moment of my prostration, during the chant of the litanies

of the saints. My father was weeping with emotion and happiness! At the end of the Mass, Father Asiaín came up to me and told me to look at what my father had written in the Visitors' Book in the Chapel of the Calasanctian relics. I went there, read what my father had written... it was a great gift of God. Those words I carry in my heart to this day.

***Since then, all's well with the family?***

Yes. And I think both my parents are now proud to have a son who's a Piarist and they are happy. For my brother and my sister it was kind of weird, but they are also proud of their crazy brother who's a priest. I think the important thing is that they see I'm happy, even during moments of crisis, either small or big.

***What are the most important crisis you were concerned with?***

There are crisis linked to community life: characters and personalities clash, there are different ways of working and understanding religious life. Conflicts and crisis arise from all that. Additionally, there are crisis regarding options: vows, ordination... Facing all these options you ask yourself, "Am I capable?" But above all, seeing the crisis of others along the way.

***What about crisis regarding affectivity and sexuality?***

On the way to maturity, you see yourself growing emotionally and sexually. But giving up married life is not always easy: the human heart is not made of stone and it feels it. After struggling with this, I am convinced that what really is important is not what you have given up but what you have discovered: the gift of celibacy which you have received. It is a calling to give your whole life, and when you sincerely look at the deepest aspects of vocation itself, renunciation isn't so hard, because you have truly discovered, with joy and enthusiasm, that your dedication is to the person of Christ.

***Do you really believe that?***

Yes, of course! I really mean it. It is not some theology found in books, it is real life. Sure, I've had my own moments of crisis: finding yourself in solitude, is not always easy. But that's when I rediscover in my heart, that my life has a deeper meaning because God has called me to this commitment and that's where I find happiness.

***What does being the Coordinator for Vocations Ministry in the Americas involve?***

It involves coordinating the group of brothers who are in charge of vocational pastoral ministry in the different provinces: to motivate, to promote and to put life into the objectives we have set in common, and

also to encourage those who are in charge of the ministries of promotion and formation of vocations.

***What are the fundamental challenges of PV in your province?***

In Puerto Rico we face a culture which - although it is deeply religious and young people are spiritually receptive - is immersed in the outside world which has a strong influence. The world of capitalist, hedonist culture is so strong that it makes it difficult for young people to opt for religious life.

***I imagine that that was also a difficulty for you...***

Of course; that's why I understand it so well and I can see it when I'm with young people. They are receptive to a presentation on vocations; in fact, they can even consider a vocation themselves and begin a process of discernment, but along the way, the world overwhelms them, and in general, their affective wounds and weakness do not help them take a decision such as joining religious life. The world offers so many things to fill up those emotional wounds which many young people have. I see these young guys full of things, but suffering a huge emptiness, a deep solitude. It is difficult; it is a challenge, but there is still hope that a positive answer to a vocation is possible. What is lacking is trust in God, and that trust is a fine thread which can break so easily.

***Where is the New York-Puerto Rico Viceprovince headed?***

We are at a point in time in which there is great hope and joy, in the middle of our own poverty, because we are a small demarcation with many elder fathers. There is hope because of the young men who taken a step forward; we are three native Piarists and we hope to be example for many more to come. On the other hand, regarding our ministry, it is also a source of joy because we experience each day the freshness of the Calasanctian ministry... we all minister in some way to children. It is very uplifting, for example, to see an 80 year old priest who is still headmaster of a small school, and who gets together at break time with the children who run up to greet him. Seeing so many needy children, whether it be in Puerto Rico or New York, tells us about the present state of our ministry and vocation.

***It must be so different working in Puerto Rico and in New York...***

Yes and no. Because in New York we are based in Harlem, in a neighborhood which is half Hispanic and half African-American.

***When you were a child, what things from the Piarist life attracted your attention?***

Above all the daily joy and happiness you saw in the fathers, the enthusiasm they had in class or wherever. You saw they were happy; that's the image that has stayed with me.

***Do you think that impression has changed?***

Through the eyes of a child, everything is rose-colored. As an adult, you discover that not everything is joy and, in this case, to answer your question, I would say that you can look happy on a field-trip with the children, but afterwards, in community life, sometimes it's not the same, because you are tired and you are with your brothers in the community, with the conflicts that arise, because of differences, various ages, different cultures. There are challenges in community life, but that isn't an obstacle to our common witness of joy, which, truly, despite all difficulties, can be a real experience. I think that, when a vocation is authentic, happiness just comes out, because your vocation is also a calling to happiness.

***What does being a Piarist mean to you?***

A person called by God to find Him among the children and young people, to help them discover the meaning of their lives by means of culture and faith: Piety and Letters.

*(by Julio César)*