

Salutatio March 2010

PIETY and LETTERS

Dear Brethren,

I am writing this letter towards the end of February, when we, in our lives as believers, are preparing to celebrate Easter, those mysteries which have given us a new life. Through the weeks of Lent we shall hear the calls to conversion addressed to us all by the Church and we shall try to invite our pupils and all those to whom we dedicate ourselves, to open their hearts to the call of Jesus of Nazareth. Our Piarist mission, which is rich and manifold, is given *a new and very important force* in these days: a hope that we know how to encourage everyone to take new steps forward so they may grow personally and discover their faith.

The essential elements of our Calasanzian nature has for a long time been summed up in our motto “PIETY and LETTERS”. It is the central point upon which we base the mission to which we have been called and which we try to fulfill in all those places where we may be found and we live. It is about this motto, which we have written on the walls of our houses and schools, on our publications, which is a part of our everyday lives, and is above all written in our hearts and within all those people who share our mission and charism, I repeat, that it is about this motto of ours that I wish to write to you in my fraternal letter.

I want to share with you this firm belief of mine: *we have not yet completely fulfilled this Calasanzian challenge*. We shall never be able to use up all the charismatic and ministerial wealth contained in this statement by Calasanz: “*If from their earliest years, children receive a serious education in piety and letters, without any doubt there will be a strong hope that they will be happy all their lives long*” (Constitutions, n° 5). In every period of history, we discover new ways, in every place we are asked for new answers, in all our works we uncover weaknesses and new challenges to which we have to respond so that our motto of Piety and Letters really is a dynamic force and not just an empty statement; so that it provides us with the strength to move forward and open up new paths. I ask you to think deeply about this happy combination of human knowledge and Christian practice, between faith and culture, piety and letters. It would be well for our teams of educators, for our communities dedicated to formation and for our publications, to place this objective at the centre of our Order and our Mission. It is with my strongest belief possible that I make this proposal to you, sure that this aim of ours will open up new paths for our journey onwards.

“Piety and Letters” presupposes and expresses a certain kind of education, a way to understand the human being and what he or she needs in order to grow in an integrated way, in order to be able to develop all his or her potential. This is what Calasanz desired. This means that we shall have to have a very clear idea of what we are doing: we dedicate our service to children and young people, and we offer them a complete service which will allow them to develop and enable them to keep going forward. We believe in the transforming power that a certain kind of education may have and thus we are looking for *letters* which are given life through *piety* and a kind of *piety* which is incarnate in science and culture, so that they may acquire spirit and a full horizon. However, we are not doing this in theoretical terms or in a vague way, but with growing people, and that is why our starting point is this educational proposal of ours. I give you some brief reflections which may help you to evaluate the importance of this for us all.

1. Let us first think about **spaces dedicated to the creation of humanist and scientific knowledge and theological reflection**. These are fields in which our modern rationality may find the link between letters (science, knowledge, research) and piety (faith, being open to belief, values) difficult to understand. Calasanz decided to add that “and” and he did it with the utmost clarity. We see this in his relationship with the scientists and learned men of his period, in his teaching program, in his

insistence on Christian piety and on an education which starts from faith, because he believed that only by intelligently combining these elements in the upbringing of a pupil are we able to offer a serious and valid education. We Piarists must insist upon the fact that, today more than ever before, modern and manifest rationality can and has to open itself to the dynamics of faith in order to become more complete, more humanistic, with greater solidarity for the weakest amongst us. Moreover, faith must respect scientific knowledge and must shed light upon it, starting from what is proper to itself. If we accept that these aspects of life are in opposition to each other, we undoubtedly diminish our charism and our mission in the world. This is why we wish to reaffirm our belief in the importance of caring for the institutions in which we work, so that we may ever more strongly encourage the creation of knowledge, scientific research and theological reflection. We are called to *raise the level* of our reflections and contributions.

2. Let us consider **our formation**, especially that of those young people who are taking their first steps on the path of Piarist life and who are preparing to take on this ministry with care and dedication. Our ministry in the Church needs Piarists who are well-educated in “letters”, in “piety” and in the relationship between the two. That which we traditionally call “civilization studies” is not just an adjunct to our education. We Piarists undergo a formation in letters and piety. We must think deeply about these subjects so that we do not fall into the trap of thinking that our principal formation is only priestly. Rather than theological studies and civilization studies we should be speaking of “*Piarist studies*”, which presuppose a solid philosophical and theological grounding (at least as far as the education of a priest goes), and a good scientific-humanist education (Calasanzian formation, pedagogy, pastoral, catechistic and other important aspects which are typical of our Piarist identity). If only we start from these aspects we shall educate and grow in what is typically ours. It was clear from the beginning for Calasanz: “I am greatly grieved that our clergy show little desire to learn and do not realize that it would be very useful for them to learn and teach pupils letters and spiritual matters together” (January, 1627).
3. Let us consider **our Works, especially our colleges**. What can we do to make them really Calasanzian? We Piarists have a very clear proposal for our schools, based upon a complete education for children and young people; an education which is centered upon the Christian message and which is dedicated to changing society by educating new generations. It is obvious that we have to do all this by respecting the new environments in which we work, which are different and require different answers from us. We need to think of the necessities that this motto of “Piety and Letters” evokes for our colleagues. We must be ever vigilant when faced with certain temptations or superficial ways in which we express our charism in our schools. I cite only some of these temptations:
 - a) schools which are proud of their prowess in “Letters”, but which lack a clear evangelizing project, nor one for social change;
 - b) schools which offer no evangelizing proposals to accompany their pupils, who of course have freedom of choice, in their path of faith until they are members of the Christian community;
 - c) schools which make no effort to build that “charismatic spirit” of the school from which its Piarist life and dynamics may grow;
 - d) schools which do not look after the Piarist formation of their teachers, which would offer them clear opportunities to visibly and verifiably share our mission;
 - e) schools which forget they are centers of education open to sensibilities of different kinds (also in the field of faith), in which the Christian message must be experienced as the seed for a new life, which is calling and which must be open-armed, never excluding or closed.

The documents which our 2009 General Chapter approved, offer us valid and fruitful criteria to evaluate our works and to work harder according to our special educational model. It would be a good idea to study them in our communities and educational institutes.

4. The motto “Piety and Letters” obviously also refers to **the role of Piarist religious in our works**. Undoubtedly this is a subject upon which we shall have to reflect so that we see how we can be a real presence in our works, which are so diverse. Our mission, which was conceived as “*evangelize by educating*”, requires us to fully immerse ourselves in it in order to make it dynamic. I would like to suggest three “distinct topics” for religious:
- a) First and foremost, to be able to present themselves as witnesses and guarantors of our charism, as they are those who live our identity and convey it to others. This can and must be done by all of us whatever “job” or “role” we have. It is not necessarily connected with any role in the structure of the organization, but rather with the way one behaves throughout life.
 - b) Secondly, I believe that the motto, “Piety and Letters”, is an educational and evangelizing proposition which is capable of making many people share it with clarity and a sense of belonging to it. Piarists are called to instill, encourage and consolidate our shared mission, which has the power to call;
 - c) Lastly, I should like to underline the role of Piarist communities and Piarist Christian communities as a reference points of our mission. Being a “reference point” means giving life, calling, welcoming, tending the growth of the mission, fixing clear priorities regarding the Piarist identity of the Work and, especially, making sure that all is planned and evaluated in the Work as a whole, starting from the central point of our identity.
5. “Piety and Letters” is not only the motto of our schools. **It is the motto of all our Works**. Our parishes must strengthen the motto “Piety and Letters”, starting from the characteristics proper to a parish. An infants’ school, a center of informal education, a boarding school, any educational project, if it is Piarist, must ask itself if it is responding to these challenges and it must put them at the centre of the project. During my visits to the Order, I see there are many more opportunities for our charism, in different works and projects. From the chapel, which during weekdays serves as a schoolroom and becomes a church on Sundays, to a group of young people who are growing with a curriculum tailor-made for their own needs in a close, personal, educational relationship with their Piarist teachers, or a parish which promotes the construction of educational centers for children and young people in diverse personal and social conditions. All our works must be strengthened and evaluated in this perspective.

In order to live this motto of “Piety and Letters” to the full, we have to focus on what is central to our vocation with courage and dedication. Without any doubt, there are many aspects of our lives and mission which are not affected by this challenge. I ask you to think about what I have just expressed and make our motto the guiding impulse for our personal growth and for the growth of the Order. We were born for a mission, we carry its sign in our institutional name, we put it into our plans, our lives and our ability to call young people to experience and take up our vocation.

I send you my fraternal greetings. I trust you will have a profound experience of Lenten time, which is, for all, an opportunity to meet the Lord, a meeting which changes us.

Pedro Aguado

Father General