

Miguel Á. Asiain

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FIDELITY IN PIARIST VOCATIONS. A LIFE IN PROGRESS

44

Calasantian Editions
Madrid - Rome 2010

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Colección Cuadernos
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The Author: Miguel Á. Asiain



@ Publicaciones ICCE
Instituto Calasanz de Ciencias de la Educación
José Picón, 7 - 28028 Madrid
www.icceciberaula.es

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PREFACE

The book that you now have in your hands, *Fidelity in Piarist Vocations. A Life in Progress*, begins a short series of texts on different topics which we shall publish annually during the current 2009-2015 six-year period. The idea for these publications originates with the General Congregation, which wishes to give the Pious Schools a contribution to Piarist formation by concentrating on the principal challenges for religious life today through a thoughtful and illuminating reflection based upon our Constitutions and those of St. Joseph Calasanz.

These are the six questions which we have chosen to deal with:

- a) *Fidelity in Piarist Vocations. A Life in Progress.*
- b) *Prayer, which Strengthens and Unites Us.*
- c) *Jesus Christ is our Center.*
- d) *Passion for the Mission.*
- e) *The Meaning of Our Life.*
- f) *Renewing Our Order.*

Without doubt, each of these represents a central aspect of our Piarist life. We could certainly have suggested other topics, but have decided upon these, because we have limited ourselves to only six, one for each of the six-year mandate given to us by the Order.

For the first of these books, we have asked Fr. Miguel Angel Asiain to work on one of the most important subjects in our lives. How can we increase our vocational fidelity, knowing that like every Christian experience this is at the same time a gift and a duty? What does it mean to us when we speak of understanding life as a process, an ongoing life, in progress, which is a path on which we are always called to live authentically but in circumstances and periods which may be different? What do our Constitutions and those of Calasanz have to say to us today about this challenge?

We hope that this book, and all the series, will help us to experience our vocations authentically and bear transparent witness to the different contexts in which we live and work. Our thanks go to Fr Miguel Angel Asaian for having agreed to write this book, as to all those authors whose help shall be requested for others in the series.

Rome, 25th January 2010,
the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul

Pedro Aguado,
Father General

FIDELITY: A CHALLENGE

1. Is it really possible to be faithful?

Is fidelity a reality, a dream or is it a proven failure? It is easy to ask oneself this question when we look at the statistics issued by the Holy See. According to the Osservatore Romano, the Vatican newspaper, in 2006 the number of Catholic religious fell by 10% compared with the previous year. According to information published in Zenit, on comparing 2000 with 2007, the number of priests who are religious fell by 2.73%, making only a fraction more than 135,000 priests in 2007.

If we look closely at these statistics, the report shows how this decrease is not only to be found in Europe and Oceania, but also in the American continent, where the 45,000 religious priests of the year 2000 had become 42,000 by 2007. As far as professed religious who are not ordained priests are concerned, the report mentions a fall from 55,057 in 2000 to 54,956 in 2007.

When we consider religious, we see that in eight years there has been a fall of 800,000 in the whole world to 750,000. Nearly 42% of these live in Europe and 60% of these in France, Spain and Italy.

Faced with numbers like these and aware of the life which exists behind them, aware of their problems, pain, suffering and personal dramas, when we meet these people and get close to them, we ask whether fidelity is possible. And we ask this not only for these people but also about our own private lives. If others have left religious life, what can happen in our lives, my own life? If others have not succeeded in realizing that ideal life which once led them to commit themselves with joy and hope, then what is going to happen to us, to me?

2. Not everything has the same meaning

One thing is true: not all statistics point to the same thing. The same sources which gave us the above-mentioned figures also tell us that the number of diocesan priests in the world has risen by 2.5%, from 265,781 in 2000 to 272,431 in 2007. This rise in the worldwide number of diocesan priests shows that there has been a different evolution compared with that of religious priests, whose number has fallen.

When we turn to seminaries, we find all kinds of facts, depending upon the place under consideration. Thus, while the publication "The Church in Spain: Statistics" states that in 2001 there were 1797

seminarians in Spain and in 2006 only 1461, other sources emphasize an increase in the numbers of seminarians in Nigeria, the Dominican Republic, India, the Philippines and also an increase in some Eastern European countries, like Poland.

3. The past does not come back

Nevertheless, it is clear that as far as the number of vocations is concerned, there will be no return to previous numbers. It is true that we do not know the ways of the Lord. If we look back, even though times were different from ours, towards the end of the 18th century there were about 300,000 religious, whereas by the middle of the following century there were only 80,000. The Church underwent a period of crisis for various reasons: the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, the liberal and the industrial revolutions. Something similar to this happened during the Protestant Reform, and in that case not only did people leave religious orders, but some orders completely disappeared.

These days we only need to look at the number of people entering religious life in certain areas and the increase in the age of the members of some Orders and Congregations, to be able to state that we are undergoing another period of crisis and that, as in the past, this is an important crisis which will not allow us to have the same numbers in the future as we have had in times gone by.

4. But why are so many leaving?

There are many reasons and causes, and we shall consider only some of them:

- a) It is possible that there was not the proper process of discernment for those vocations which were accepted. People enter religious life for different reasons and later on, on their journey forward, they realize that those reasons were not the right ones. Thus they discover that they are in the wrong place for them and they abandon religious life. This is why vocational discernment is so important before allowing people to enter, as is all the guidance that must be provided during formation years.
- b) There are also people who, when they get to a certain point in their lives, no longer feel satisfied. This seldom occurs at the beginning of their lives as priests or when they profess their first vows, but towards the middle of their lives. Sometimes they do not know the reason themselves, but they are aware that it would be better if they found another place where they feel more at home and which is in harmony with their beliefs, and therefore they leave religious life.
- c) Then there are those who have not developed in religious life. They entered with an ideal before them, which they nourished for many years, but which they have not been able to achieve. And now they are tired. Moreover, they have also come up against the harsh realities of their lives, which are very different from those which they imagined

when they entered as novices and continued to cherish for many years. They have not reached their ideal and consequently they have not achieved that happiness which they thought they should have done by means of that ideal. On the contrary, they have found a difficult real-life situation which teaches them who they really are and they cannot accept this. Thus, they choose the exit door.

- d) Others have developed in a way in which they do not feel at home in an Institution which signifies little for them. Perhaps they have worked very hard for it and have been deeply committed in the mission given to them by the Church, but something has happened. Maybe they found themselves with a Provincial with whom there was little mutual understanding, a superior with whom they openly fought, or they believe that they are insufficiently appreciated or are fed up with the life of their community. In one way or another, they feel bad and in the end they leave the institute and choose another path for their lives.
- e) Then there are those who might really have been able to live the religious life fully and with true dedication, but who, when they get to a certain stage, find that all that was previously living has become weak and lost its meaning, and the lives they once nobly left behind them have returned to a place in their hearts. They miss all that which they once offered to the Lord and they hanker for a life unlived. Not poverty, nor celibacy or

obedience, mean the same as they once did for them. On the contrary, it is the opposite of these that attracts them. And since their hearts are not rooted in Jesus Christ, the only solution for them is to take their leave of religious life. This is the reason why they abandon it.

- f) Others have reached a stage in which they are no longer able to recognize the will of God in the decisions of their superiors. They have been brought up to assimilate, to accept that which comes from outside, as interpreted by their superiors, as the will of God. But when they begin to feel a life growing within them and moving outwards to the world, they feel the need to express their autonomy and are unable to reconcile that with obedience. They think that they must above all be faithful to themselves with an authenticity which they have never before experienced and in order to do so the only thing they find to do is to break with the life they are living. They are unable to reconcile themselves with authority and obedience.
- g) Finally, there are some religious who have never really had fundamental experience of God's love. They have worked but not loved. They have dedicated themselves to their tasks but have never felt loved in return. They have never used informal modes to speak to God, who is not seen as a person, a father to trust at all times, into whose hands one puts one's own life. Nor do they consider Jesus, who has been spoken of frequently,

to be a real friend. They have not known what it is to feel guided by the Holy Spirit, to whose wishes we surrender ourselves. Their spiritual life has been superficial. Those people who have missed the fundamental experience of the love of God cannot stay like that for ever. When a heart is not captured by God it is occupied by other things. So they go away, and they leave the fount of life to go to other places which will never slake their thirst.

5. And if one of them does not leave?

There are other categories of people who do not leave but whose loyalty is open to question, because you do not only break with fidelity by ceasing to be a religious (sometimes the contrary may be true), and you may stay within an order and yet be unfaithful in various ways.

- a) Skeptics. Many exist and there are a lot in religious life. There are those who look down their noses at others who are enthusiastic about life, or the Lord or their work, and who say, "Wait and see, sooner or later you'll get over it". They are unable to appreciate what other people have. They are skeptics. They remain in religious life but we might well ask them where their loyalty lies.
- b) Others are looking for a "hole", a place which offers them safety because they have seen that the ground under their feet has begun to move. They are not as efficient as they once were; people no longer turn to them, but to younger and

cleverer people. They realize they cannot control their lives and feel an insecurity which is new to them. Consequently they enter that “hiding-hole” of what is familiar to them and steer clear of anything adventurous. They are those who always seem “secure”. But faith is adventure, is ability to risk, to put oneself into the hands of God without knowing what might happen one day or the next. Are such people faithful?

- c) There are those who have fallen as their hopes have been frustrated. But what kind of hope was theirs, if they fell, so easily frustrated when their expectations were unfulfilled? Hope is tied to love. One cannot hope if one does not love. And this is always linked to faith. It is not strange that those who are frustrated in their hopes live without faith. And are people who are like this in any way faithful? Fidelity must be an essential element in the personality of a believer.
- d) Even in religious life we may come across people who no longer expect anything. They are exhausted, but not because of work, their efforts or for having consecrated their lives to God, but rather because of disillusion and disenchantment. At their age, how can they expect that God will change their lives? Being that sort of person, how can they live a fuller life or love more generously? None of this can happen. They go on living in the past, feeding on nostalgia, on that which no longer exists. How can things be different from

what they are? They no longer expect anything from God, who has become a person who is far from them and perhaps only someone with whom one just has to maintain good relations. How far they are from the love of God!

6. Not all sorts of fidelity are the same

To show this we shall refer to some kinds:

- The faithfulness of a husband in love, who constantly sacrifices himself by working hard to give his family what they need to live, but who does not sacrifice love to work. He loves his wife with all his heart and offers her his life, body and soul.
- The sometimes incomprehensible faithfulness of a wife who, even when she understands the weaknesses of her husband, does not betray him and continues to forgive him and to love him, to see whether love can overcome the bad behavior of her partner.
- The faithfulness of a friend who is able not to break a friendship, even if this friendship is often misunderstood, and who will accept anything his friend does without criticizing him.
- That faithfulness between two people who love each other and who keep those strong personal bonds which have nothing to do with sex, but only with sincere friendship.
- Faithfulness to an institution, which stays firm above and beyond any difficulties and delusions experienced.

- Faithfulness to God and fidelity to his love, which does not depend upon any personal advantage and which remains constant in suffering and misunderstandings or during those dark moments which are accepted peacefully and with faith in Providence and its sacred will.

7. Faithfulness does not speak with only one voice

That of the loving husband is not the same as that of the person who is faithful to an Institution; that of the faithful and forgiving wife is not the same as that of the friends we love.

This is why, when one decides to face this subject, one must look straight ahead, without hiding anything and one does not feel completely faithful, because one clearly sees the ambiguities in one's own life, the reasons why the centre of the heart is not completely dedicated to love, why dedication to others may be influenced by self-interest, why a feeling of a lack of inner freedom may be linked to a form of slavery to which one is still attached.

We may feel closer to that Peter who, in only one night, was able to behave in two diametrically opposite ways: when he told the Lord that he was ready to give his life for him, and then, shortly afterwards, denied him completely and stated that he did not know him, when perhaps he should have done what he had earlier promised.

Fundamental fidelity is always that which we have for God and it is this faithfulness which must

prevail over any others. It might happen that in order to remain faithful to God, a person has to leave an institution. A clear example of this is Mother Theresa of Calcutta. She was a religious who was dedicated to the education of well-off young girls, but at one point in her life God enlightened her and showed her that she had a different vocation and God called her to another kind of service. It happened in a simple way: she was waiting to go to do her spiritual exercises and had the same vision she had had on other occasions – she saw an old person dying in the street. But then God sent her the light to understand what she had not perceived before. God called her to serve Him in another way. Then she had to struggle against her Institute and the hierarchy, for they did not want to let her go. Faithfulness to God had to come before everything else.

There are two opposite kinds of fidelity, to which one often tends to succumb, even though they are both experienced as the will of the Lord: on the one hand, faithfulness in keeping one's promises, the commandments, obeying the rules and fulfilling the duties one has taken on; on the other, coherent and undivided love. Both of these are ways in which fidelity may be experienced, and both look to the object of that fidelity, which is the Lord and the corresponding life plan (a plan which derives from fidelity).

Is there any way in which we can live like this? I believe there is, and we shall see.

8. Fidelity is possible

In spite of all we have said, if some people have begun to doubt whether it is possible to be faithful or not it must be clear that it is possible, we can be faithful, mankind can be faithful, and most people are faithful in their religious lives, always bearing in mind those weaknesses which are typical of humanity, but conscious that in the fullness of fidelity there is usually something which one desires to possess but does not have. Fidelity is possible for many reasons:

- a) Because a person is able to commit himself. Commitment is obligatory, for it is one's word given. Throughout life an individual behaves and acts in this context and accepts duties which then create rights and may then take upon himself many duties on the strength of his own word. In many cultures, a handshake creates bonds which are so strong they cannot be broken and the word that has been given is kept. Man, who, unlike animals, is a rational being with an intellect, is able to do this. If we were unable to commit ourselves, it would be impossible to keep our word when we take on a task.
- b) Moreover, freedom is not contrary to fidelity. Mankind is made up of free beings and liberty is one of their most precious gifts. But liberty does not consist only in being able to do anything one wants. It may seem difficult to understand, but a Christian must discover that the greatest freedom comes from being faithful. While for

some this becomes a burden or shackles which do not allow them to be themselves, a Christian, on the other hand, experiences it as a great joy of freedom, because his liberty does not come from doing whatever he wants, but in his obedience to his Father in Heaven. That obedience is the fidelity which is experienced every day of his life.

- c) If faithfulness is commitment, one does not commit oneself irresponsibly, but to good work. Irresponsibility is the opposite of fidelity. When one does not keep one's given word, when duties are not taken seriously, when one does as one wishes and not what one has promised to do, then one is no longer faithful. However, this is not the kind of life to which people are easily attracted. It is only for those who have a firm belief that they must experience this commitment as mature adults and not as immature adolescents who only respond to their desires and impulses.
- d) Commitment is ongoing every day. We are unable to foresee the future and are only able to and must live today, in the present. Thus, we must all commit ourselves every day, which is the same as saying we shall be faithful forever. On the one hand we have our desires; on the other we have reality. Desire would like to be able to embrace the future without limits, and this is the reason why we take on duties for our whole lives. In those moments it is love which leads us. One never thinks about what may happen in

the future. If a person who is ready to profess his solemn and perpetual vows started to think about all the possible difficulties which he might find in religious life, or about the hard times that may lie ahead of him, he might well never arrive at that moment of committing himself with his vows and with his “Yes” forever. In Professing (and one might say the same thing about Holy Matrimony) we do not think of this, for it is an act of love in which we say “yes” to fidelity to the person whom we love and into whose hands we give ourselves. Fidelity is possible because it is the response of love to everyday, without thinking about the day after, without that anguish about tomorrow, of which Jesus speaks.

- e) Yes, it is possible to be faithful, but the fidelity must be in the right place. Being faithful forever is not possible on our own. There are so many obstacles in the way of love that one realizes that it is impossible to be faithful on one's own. Faithfulness must be experienced through God. It is God who supports fidelity. If He does not help us, we cannot be faithful forever, because human effort alone is unable to cope with this reality, even if we are speaking of a life of love, for even that may be difficult.
- f) Commitment involves the whole being. The complete person is committed during the act of loving, because fidelity is an act of love. In faithfulness one gives all one is and all of this belongs

to the person to whom we are faithful. Belonging is a hard thing to define, but it is a situation which we all recognize when it happens to us. We know what “belonging to someone” means, because when we experience it, we recognize it and are able to understand how it is different from other experiences. Fidelity means committing ourselves to belonging entirely and everlastingly. This is why we depend upon God for it and it is difficult for us to achieve by mere human effort. Fidelity goes beyond simple duties. Those are external, while faithfulness moves in the inner self.

- g) The history of salvation shows how it is possible to be faithful. It is born from God, who is faithful because he loves. He has always loved and will always love. “Proclaim your love in the morning and your faithfulness at the night” (Psalms. 91, 3). God calls the faithful to act with fidelity (c.f. Psalms. 89). God’s love, which is manifested in an incredible way in his covenant, never takes a step backwards. The Old Testament is full of examples of the faithfulness of God. The response to this fidelity is that of faith, believing in and trusting in Him. Faith is the starting point for the fidelity of man. This dedication to faith is experienced through loving abandonment to God and mankind.
- h) If God gave himself to man, loving him to unimaginable limits so that he gave His life upon the Cross, man’s response should be of the same kind. Thus fidelity has a definitive component.

It may well be successful or not; a task taken on may not be performed for various reasons, but fidelity as a definitive act of commitment has a meaning. God does not guarantee calm, and for this reason there may be problems, as indeed happened to Jesus in his life. But when God gives a vocation, he plants his seed in it and in that seed there is the hope of life.

9. Faithfulness understood as growth

As we have seen, fidelity may be experienced according to one's commitment to the object of fidelity, to God and to the choice of life model which comes from that. This is the most common way to experience it, both as keeping a promise and as coherent and undivided love.

Nevertheless, this is not the only way to live in faithfulness. There is a kind of fidelity which may have as its reference point not the object but the subject. In these cases the key factor is growth and fidelity is experienced in a different way.

Thus the concept of growth and development, about which much is said and written, appears here. We shall apply it to fidelity and it should be applied to life as a whole. We may state that vocational life is growing life.

- a) It is often true that the education we have received places all emphasis upon the student. We think of those who enter as novices or are engaged in their formation. Doctrine and behavior rules

have been considered the fundamental things. We must transmit to the newcomers that which our predecessors or their institutions have in their turn received, or indeed has been set down by the teachings of the Church or theologians. The main task of the teacher was to instruct and that of the pupil to acquire knowledge. But it was not possible to teach the state of the soul needed to acquire this, and thus the result was that generosity became blocked. The question is, why have so many young people who have lived their lives with generosity, started to have a different approach when they ended their formation period, or left religious life altogether? Why do people who have already followed a path, with spiritual exercises, who have listened to the Gospel with open hearts, at the end find they simply need to renew their will to do their duty and little else? Have they forgotten their personal histories? Have they learned nothing from life and so behave as if they were 20 years younger? What use has been everything that has been a personal existential drama for them?

- b) Perhaps the way in which we understand life (not its values but the way we live it) may be wrong. It is here that the concept of growth is important. Vocational fidelity is possible, but always when experienced as a growing or developing life.
- c) Let us concentrate on growth. What has education been like? The best part of traditional

education was that it was focused on desire. This was based upon the ideals upon which the aims of a person were founded. These ideals might have been very elevated ones, and the more elevated they were, the greater was desire for them felt. Remember with what love one wanted to love Jesus, follow the Gospels, live the Beatitudes. But what has happened? Sometimes people deceive themselves as they try to achieve certain ideals without being aware of the reality of their own personal selves, and when this happens, disappointment and discouragement sets in, and sometimes a feeling of having wasted time.

However, growth does not eliminate ideals; it puts them in their right place as we begin to discover that the source of Christian life is not desire but the obedience of faith. Thus, concentrating on the personal point of view brings us to a turning point. The foundations of education are not to be found in that which we receive from outside, from institutions to which we have to adapt ourselves as best we can, but in a growing development through which the candidate is the subject and master of his own history as he takes his own life in hand and tries to find the will of God in his own way.

d) As we apply this to the subject of fidelity, we may state that:

- * this is not a situation fixed once and for all but a path to follow, a process of development in which we learn to experience the will of God;

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- * the fundamental thing is not what one does but what one has in one's heart and in the way real life is experienced;
 - * the decisive factor is not assimilating that which is given from without, but to learn to experience it from within;
 - * it is necessary to learn to understand the moment of one's life being lived without feeling regret for the past or desire for a future period in life which has yet to come;
 - * it is dangerous to jump stages or wish to go faster than is needed in order to follow the path chosen, as this may lead to failure;
 - * what counts is the dynamics of change in a person, in his subjective and inner life;
 - * the criteria of change must not be given by institutions, but should depend upon the inner growth which the Holy Spirit works upon a person.
- e) Leading life as a process of development involves:
- * being aware that subjective values are not given once and for all but as a gradual process of growth, which one learns little by little;
 - * a process does not exist without taking into account the rhythm of inner changes, because there comes a time when your ideals seem diminished and you find yourself naked in your own reality;
 - * being aware of your personal history, realizing that it has a unifying core which is your

history of salvation, in which every part has a meaning and nothing is without significance when seen with the eyes of God;

- * changing the dynamics of conversion;
- * a clear distinction between personal and social identity, which we may express in this way: Am I myself or am I what others expect me to be? Am I living my own life or am I trying to base it upon ideals of holiness?
- * needing to distinguish between ideal and real life, as the key to adulthood.

Questions for personal reflection

- 1) What does fidelity mean to you?
- 2) How have you understood the various stages of your life?
- 3) Where do you live your life and how much do you accept it or feel you are growing? What factors make you realize this?
- 4) What changes would you have to make in your life in order to live it faithfully and as a life which is continuing to develop?

Suggestions for community discernment

- 1) How is it possible to put this into practice in our community?
- 2) What aims do we need for faithfulness to the community?
- 3) Does our community have any aspects which may give rise to disappointment, delusion, separation from the group, individualism?

What would you do in such a case?

- 4) What is the attitude needed in order for us to reach real community discernment? What is lacking?

Suggestions for a day of prayer

- 1) Begin by praying together that you should be in the presence of God.
- 2) Read up on the subject or on a part of it which has been chosen personally.
- 3) Share some parts of your personal reflections or suggestions so that the community may use them for discernment.
- 4) Pray together.
- 5) Concluding prayer.

Biblical texts

- God, the eternal rock which never breaks: c.f. Deut 7, 9; 32, 4; Is. 26, 4; 49, 7.
- God does what he has promised to do: Num 23, 19; Mal 3, 6.
- God's faithfulness to Moses: Ex 34, 6-7; to Abraham: Mic 7, 20; to the People: Deut 7, 9; to David: 1Kings 8, 26.
- His promises are never broken: 2Sam 7, 28.
- Eternal love, in spite of sins: Psalms 98, 3; 118.
- Love of the Father: Ex 4, 22; Deut 8, 5; 14, 1; Is 63, 16; Jer 3, 19; 31, 20.
- Love of a mother: Is 49, 15-16; 66, 13.
- Love of a husband: Hos 2, 16-22; Is 54, 5-8; 62, 4-5; Jer 3, 20; Ez 16, 23.

- God makes history in Christ: Gal 4, 4; Heb 1-2.
- Waiting for the return of the Son: Lu 15.
- His call is forever: Rom 3, 3-4; 11, 29; 2Tim 2,13.
- Christ is the “Yes” to every promise: 2Cor 1, 20; the “Amen”: Rev 3, 14; the “faithful witness”: Rev 1, 5; 3, 14.
- He is the fulfillment of God’s promises to the Patriarchs: Lu 1, 54-55. 72-73; Heb 13, 32-34; Rom 15, 8.
- He is our hope: 1Tim 1, 1.

We live faithfully:

- If we do not yearn for that which we have offered up to God.
- If growth is the dynamics of our lives.
- If we live our inner lives and do not only try to assimilate what comes from outside.
- If we do not try to jump stages in our lives as we search for pure perfection.
- If the main thing in our lives is not what we do but what we have in our hearts.
- If we can change through conversion.
- If every other personal fidelity is subject to our fidelity to God.

FIDELITY AND THE CHALLENGES OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

We are speaking of fidelity, but of faithfulness to which kind of religious life? We confess that consecrated life finds itself up against challenges which must not be underestimated. First of all, this leads us to a diagnosis of these great challenges, with sufficient breadth of vision to allow us to realize that we are not just being fashionable. The current problems are so great that we shall be unable to find valid answers unless we have a deep understanding of those challenges which face consecrated life. From this standpoint we shall be able to ask ourselves the right questions about the future of that religious life.

1. Living focused on the Gospels

The need to experience the life of the Gospels truly and deeply means that we must be clear about our vocation and charism. Practically speaking, after

Vatican II, these became a part of drawing up the new Constitutions. It was the most important challenge taken up by our institution. But is that enough? Can the meaning of our charism be understood only through more suitable regulations? Is there not a new danger of experiencing these challenges in an external way, through rules and regulations rather than through the process of conversion?

Living the Gospels in an original way is a challenge which we cannot meet simply by changing and clarifying our foundations on the theoretical level. That would be a massive feat of fortune-telling about how faith works in human life. The aims of the institutions are not enough and the subjective experiences of individual lives are what are needed. This is important because, on principle, we religious give up many forms of human fulfillment. It is in this renunciation that we give added value to the quality of our faith in following Jesus and this means we are admitted to the knowledge of the Cross.

Therefore, on the one hand this challenge is presented as completion of the human element, and simultaneously and on the other hand, in relation to following Jesus, where the fundamental element is naked faith in the understanding of the Cross.

This is where we see our religious life faced with the first challenge: up to what point are we faithful to the Gospels in our consecrated life and how do we express this in the Constitutions?

2. Our God

Another challenge is God, our true God. This is because it is indispensable to find this sense of God again in the utilitarian world in which we live: our world (let us recognize the fact) places value only on that which it can control, and faced with this idea, our God “serves” for nothing at all. With our religious life we confess in faith that our God does not need to justify Himself if not for his own sake, as Love and as being “without-reason”. Consequently this is the greatest affirmation of the meaning of God for man. Thus, consecrated life must recover all that which belongs to God in our world and that which gives value to it: prayer, free giving, love without limits, disinterested commitment, suffering which is borne as a grace, living under the protection of Providence.

In such a way we shall witness to people just who our God is. We neither wish to nor can we control Him; He is far above our efforts to reach Him. In an atheist world, consecrated life is called to rediscover the only God as a safeguard. This is why we have no problems in confessing out faith, but on the contrary, we shine before the world and in history. We clearly see that when God disappears from people’s horizons, they destroy each other.

Are we faithful to God our Lord Jesus Christ, or to the images of other gods which we have made and which we follow?

3. Blessed are the Poor

Why is the subject of poverty always a challenge for religious life? This is especially a question when most religious institutions, especially the female ones, were founded for the service and aid of the poor. This is also true of our own institution. We remember the experience of Calasanz and the foundation of and reason for our Order.

Perhaps when we look at and examine our Works and we become aware of our commitment, we can look at our identity again and can see not what we speak of but what we do, and we may think that it is not all evangelical. Is it true that our Church is a church of power? In general terms, is it true that religious institutions do not serve the poor, as they claim to do, or that they do not do so as they did when they were founded?

At the same time, because a new mentality has grown through revising history, there is a rejection of social paternalism, which forces us to rethink our service to the poor.

Connected with this subject is that of living in poverty. What is poverty for us? Is it an ascetic norm or should it be an existential choice for poverty through the dynamics of conversion of the affections? Do we experience poverty or just speak about it? We only need to examine our lives, our dwellings and other situations to be able to reply to this question. Nonetheless, one must be

faithful to the calling of Jesus, who had no place to rest his head.

We have to go beyond paternalistic attitudes towards the poor. The Church has had a tendency to propose its mission as good works, as charity, rather than as commitment to and struggle for the marginalized in society. Thus the poor no longer accept paternalism, and this is a call to evangelical conversion, a conversion to the authentic mission, which may definitively be summed up as conversion to poverty.

4. God as love and man as a creature

This is the same challenge expressed in a different way. This is the challenge of the relationship between evangelization and justice, or between salvation and human effort. Since we have spoken of the marginalized of society, if we ask them the question, it may be expressed in this way: should we evangelize the poor or liberate them?

The Church and its institutions should ask themselves questions on this subject: that is, on being or not being a sign of human rights, and, in the end, of man himself, without entering into the realm of politics, which only confuses what it wishes to change and solve.

After all we are also speaking of the relation which should be created between Church and Kingdom of God. If the Church is the real sign of

the Kingdom, it is so if it incarnates the will of God for a more just world, more faithful to evangelical values, in which those who are less fortunate are more blessed; you only need to read the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount.

Certainly this challenge of the dispossessed cannot be limited to a social context of human change. Within it there reside the mystery of evil itself and the depths of human suffering. This is why, rather than being a social problem, it is clearly a problem of the definitive condition of man, who, in the last resort, calls upon the mystery of the salvation of the Cross. The problem of poverty cannot be dealt with unless we begin with the revelation of the love of God, together with that of man, which seems incomprehensible in that act with which he takes on the evil, the pain and the sins of all mankind. Thus we meet Jesus, who became poor for us in order to enrich us with his poverty.

We need to be faithful to the poor, to the dynamics of the Kingdom seen as a better world than that which currently exists, for which it is worth fighting and working, faithful to those who suffer evil and injustice, so that we are witnesses to a God who is on their side, even though sometimes that may be difficult to imagine or see.

How should we react to these challenges? Shall we convert them into devotion or shall we apply ourselves to them through our actions?

5. Institution and Charism

This duality is present, not only in consecrated life, but in the very Church itself. This is on the one hand an institution and as such it requires rules, regulations, an authority and mediation between different circumstances encountered. But on the other hand it is the work of the Holy Spirit, which resides within it, suggests what it should do, reminds it of our Lord Jesus Christ and what He did and taught us and who will stay with it until the end of time.

This challenge may be faced from various points of view:

- a) It is necessary that religious life should recover the charismatic sense, which is the essence of its real being. What do we wish religious life to be? Should it be a simple style of life which is taken on for various reasons or rather a sign of prophecy within the Church? Is our mentality more charismatic or more institutional? Which is more attractive: obedience or an authentic life which wishes to follow its own path, confident, having heard the Spirit, but never forgetting discernment and personal adventure?
- b) We must discover an important element in consecrated life: authority, which is there not so much to protect and defend the institution and make sure it functions, rather than to guide the discernment of a community in its search for the will of God. The two elements must not be

considered contrasting, but in religious life the legalistic aspect has often prevailed, and this needs to be surpassed.

- c) If we pause for a moment on an important element of religious life like the community, we get a different result if we understand it as something imposed from above which tells us what to do, or as a community process in which there is participation at all levels.
- d) Even the mission itself is conditioned by the duality of the term: institution. This is because it is not the same thing if one experiences it as a job to be done because one has chosen to do it as one of the commitment to which the Church has called an individual; it is not the same if we fulfill the mission in its institutional aspects as when we experience it as we search for new forms which we may create; this means evangelical discernment and at the same time awareness of the circumstances of the real world around us.

All this requires commitment to being faithful when the heart feels moved by the Holy Spirit, as long as we do not allow ourselves to be entrapped by the insidious calls which passion often makes upon us, or the weaknesses to which we may easily succumb. There are many challenges for religious life. This is the reason why we ask how to focus our fidelity on the kind of religious life, according to the challenges which we are presenting.

6. Secularization

Secularization is the new way in which man chooses to live in our world, in which a social, cultural and historical process has taken place which has led us away from the way we lived until only a short time ago. What is specific about this secularization is that things are no longer understood in the theocentric way which previously dominated man's outlook, but according to an anthropocentric vision of the world in which everything is observed and understood from the point of view of the individual. In this world, man finds his place without the need for a religious explanation, a transcendent one, because he does not feel it is necessary. Thus, he becomes radically critical of religious. This is a post-Christian process which is, in a way, a reaction to that Christianity which desired to baptize all human situations and in which the Church had become the Church of Christianity.

What implications does this challenge create for religious life?

- a) If consecrated life is and must be the sign of the Kingdom, how is that possible these days when so many changes have taken place? There is a difference in this experience in a theocentric world and in a secular one. The ways and means will be completely different. Do we need to maintain the monastic ways which separate us

from the world or should we choose a way of life which is more suited to the world in which we live? Should we or should we not embrace the secular world?

- b) In this secularized world we need to have a different relationship with it. Do we wish our vocation to be considered a simple duty which we do, just as many other people do theirs, or do we try to be manifestations of the immensurable love of God who takes care of His children and thus we conceive our mission as actually making this love visible in the world? How do we, who are committed to the calling of Jesus Christ and who wish to do everything for Him, see ourselves in this world which is one of complete human autonomy, in which nothing is organized with God?
- c) The theocentric world placed great importance upon prayer; if God controls everything, we need to remain in constant contact with Him. This is not the case in secular society. We must rediscover prayer; a prayer which is more suitable for the critical conscience of man and, all in all, for the mystery and nakedness of faith. We are not in a sacred world but in a world where the presence of God is perceived most of all by faith.
- d) Other aspects of this relationship with the world: becoming secularized presupposes more respect for humanity; becoming part of a world with all

it has which is dark and obscure, but at the same time also having the greatest respect for freedom. This is the challenge of being prophets in a world without God, without having complexes about our faith, but witnessing to the Lordship of God in our history. But we shall be able to state this only in so far as we possess a critical consciousness of secularization and yet are similarly able to integrate this secularization.

7. Possible ways of approaching these challenges

- a) The first is an attitude of fear and escape. This is quite normal. What has been said and questions asked produce insecurity and insecurity often leads to looking for rapid answers. However, we have seen that this gives no result and one cannot continue for long in a state of insecurity, so one looks for an escape.

In this situation one often searches for solutions which give a sense of calm because in that way one hopes to stop the pain. In religious life this kind of escape may take one of two paths: the first moves towards a spiritual haven in which a person is afraid of facing reality and therefore all is elevated to the spiritual sphere; these spiritualized states are dangerous because they are none other than fear of facing the real world, from which a person flees to find refuge in one which seems to calm him psychologically. The second kind is

rationalization, in so far as, faced with what is happening, the person rationalizes the fact in a way which may be valid in se, but which hides certain interests which are often unconscious.

- b) This opposite attitude. In a period of transition, futurism and a certain kind of prophesying become fashionable. It is thus that one may think he has the right answer to what is happening in religious life, like those who say it is disappearing because it is a personal and private charism without any future, and that it will give way to other Church movements.

We find ourselves faced with an ambiguous situation, partly because one may ask why it is that movements in the Church have been and gone in the past, while many religious Orders and Congregations have remained. One needs to ask whether we are authentic and permanent or whether religious life remains and other movements disappear not because of their intrinsic value but because it is in the nature of institutions to stay put just because of their routine. In uncertain times institutions tend to become stronger, but not for their own intrinsic value.

- c) Attitudes of discernment. This is the attitude that may loyally ask where religious life is going, and, in the light of the Holy Spirit and all possible mediation, tries to discern this. It is true that when asking such a question one must achieve

a certain detachment so that one's own personal interests do not influence discernment.

8. Lines of action for the Future

We shall cite some of them briefly here, without wishing to be a prophet on such a complex subject, on which we need to throw the kind of light which may be lacking.

- a) Options for the *sequela Christi*, or following Jesus. This is a fundamental aspect of the matter. This is the choice for being radical in a Christian way. We say we are following the Lord, but we need to examine the truth of that claim. Religious life must be the radical sign of the Gospels. Our daily fidelity must be seen in the light of this fact. This is why the mentality of many people must be changed, for many centralized attitudes keep us blocked and stationary.
- b) The identity of our community. In the future we shall have to move forward bearing in mind the style of life rather than the institutional aspect. Rather than obeying the rules, we need another way of looking at living together. This does not mean we do not observe the Constitutions, but they may frequently be interpreted in another way. This is why, instead of stopping at the institutional level, we should let ourselves be guided by the light of the Holy Spirit which breathes upon us and by those who

feel really called to the true *sequela Christi*. Our communities are in need of fewer signs of the sacred so that they can go out amongst mankind.

- c) Contemplation and commitment for man, in intimate unity. We cannot separate these two aspects, cannot comprehend the truth of one without that of the other. Religious life cannot be the authentic following of Jesus if it does not also embrace struggle for the defense of mankind, rights, justice and peace, and if all this does not become true in the very community and the mission that is being fulfilled. This is where the credibility of faith is put to the test. Let us not play around too much with spiritualism but remember that God humanized history.
- d) Commitment to the disinherited. This is opting for the marginalized. This does not mean making a choice of class, but it demonstrates the preference of Jesus for the poorest, the sinners, for those who are cast out by those of their time who thought they were in the right. If religious life is *sequela Christi*, its members must not behave differently to how their Master behaved. Otherwise this would not be a real *sequela*.
- e) The contemplative dimension in life. Although on the one hand the future of religious life becomes more and more a mission amongst mankind, at the same time it must, while in our secularized world, remain more deeply-rooted

in the explicit confession of faith and in a certain intense experience of God. This experience of God must be encouraged without changing it into spiritualism, because we come across God in the very human context in which we move.

- f) Integration of the role of women. This will become more and more important for the future of consecrated life. It is a revolution which will be for the good of religious life.

9. Principles which may influence future lines of conduct

Let us first remember some of the principles, indicated in the previous point, which must influence our future plans.

- a) Firstly, evangelical lucidity. What does this mean? It means that the Gospels are not a regulatory model of life, even if one must fulfill them in order to live in harmony with God or to be “saints”. They are not even an ideal for our needs, for we become ever more demanding as we read them. Rather, they are the spirit which is personalized in an individual and which creates that personal freedom which is the sign of the new covenant.
- b) Lucidity about the model of religious life. What kind of consecrated life do we wish for and are we building? Are we already, without knowing it, creating a particular kind of religious life with our behavior, the way we do things and through

our attitudes? It is important to strengthen and create a charismatic-prophetic aspect in all this. This is what the *sequela Christi* should be. This should be the sign of the Church. This is how it should reveal itself to mankind. Thus, we should not try to follow fashion neither should we surrender to certain values of the world. It is worthy of note that our Founders based the institutions on the irremovable rock of the Gospels and the true following of Jesus Christ.

- c) As Ignatius of Loyola often asked for, spiritual indifference towards all, and at this point, towards the results which we shall accomplish. This means that we have not already decided on certain plans about our point of arrival, unless we mean those which leave freedom for the Holy Spirit to lead religious life where it will. This is not indifference for real life, but this freedom creates a certain distance from our own selfish interests, by opening up to faith, by searching for the will of God, waiting for the breath of the Holy Spirit, without letting ourselves be conditioned by personal desires, which may then be justified evangelically. We must always ask ourselves: what does the Lord want? And to discern this we must live in spiritual indifference, which is not zero point on the scales, for it means putting in the one pan the will of God and in the other our own will.
- d) Making sure we analyze facts, behavior and way of life properly. If we want religious life to follow

in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, we must examine ourselves about this situation truthfully. This means real fidelity to the will of the Lord.

- e) Take care of the education of faith. We must insist on this. Religious life will have no future unless its source is rooted in the Gospels, in the experience of God, and in following Jesus, in fidelity and according to the radical nature of the Gospels, and, even more deeply, of faith and revelation of what has been freely given by the love of Christ the Lord.
- f) Another thing is important: taking the time element into consideration when we ask questions, examine data or opinions. If we ask whether religious life today is better than 30 years ago, what does such a comparison mean? I can give an answer which limits itself to simply external aspects and reply in concrete terms; alternatively I may reply with a depth of meaning in which external factors are unimportant compared to other values. For example, one might say that previously there was a greater sense of prayer (let's suppose this was the case), but nowadays there is a greater experience of God; previously there may have been a greater sense of the community, whereas now there is more interpersonal communication. Thus one has to beware of comparisons which are based upon temporal differences, and it is often difficult to compare the past and the present. In this

context we must also be on our guard against a certain prophesying tendency which may arise when the future is taken into consideration, so that we always keep an open and critical eye upon what may be claimed for the future.

Fidelity is necessary for the today in which we live, as it is for religious life. This must be without compromising ourselves, but by checking that choices for the future are authentic, are lived deeply and to the full, born from the Gospels and the *sequela Christi*.

Questions for personal reflection

- 1) Who is your God? Make a list of His characteristics.
- 2) How do you experience your relationship with God in this secular world?
- 3) Do any of the challenges presented here make you feel afraid? Why?
- 4) Do you love your religious life with all your heart or has it simply become a permanent and routine place?

Suggestions for community discernment

- 1) Does your community project its life towards people outside in a significant way?
- 2) Is your community faithful towards the disinherited? How can you show this?

- 3) How does your community live within the secularized world?
- 4) What are the most important challenges for your community?

Suggestions for a day of prayer

- 1) Place yourselves in the presence of God.
- 2) Examine the principal challenges for a community in our world. What should we do when faced with these? To which future lines of action should we dedicate ourselves?

We are faithful to a new religious life:

- If the most important thing is the Gospels and not following regulations.
- If the God to whom we offer ourselves in religious life is a humanizing God.
- If our authorities promote shared discernment on the will of God.
- If we accept that the Church is not the church of Christianity.
- If we try to be the manifestation of the immensurable love of God who looks after His children.
- If we perceive God in our faith.
- If there is real commitment to the disinherited.
- If we take greater care of our style of life rather than simple matters of behavior.

FIDELITY IN LIVING THE “SEQUELA CHRISTI”

One of the most profound experiences of someone who has been consecrated is that of having been called. Such people do not find themselves in that situation just by an act of their own will. This does not depend upon their efforts alone and it may seem to be a great limit. Through the experience of being called, a person finds that the need for a faithful response grows within him. There is a feeling that it is impossible to live if not in fidelity, but this is also found to be difficult. When God calls you, you have to be faithful. But how is that possible when we are so poor and small? If God does not enter our own lives and give us what we need, we'll never be able to fulfill that chosen career that we desire. Unfaithfulness is frightening, but being faithful is such hard work. Who but the Lord can help us?

1. A reference point

“The *sequela Christi* is the fundamental criterion and norm of our lives” (C 17). This is the reality

which conditions the entire existence of a Piarist. Entry into religious life begins with the novitiate, but the motives of that entry are various and differ from person to person. Some of us will have been called because of the ideal which we found incarnate in somebody we knew; others because of a force within them which burned like a fire and led them to ask to be admitted into the Order; some will have used discernment about the way their lives were going or, indeed, simple contact with the religious of the institution of their choice - the serious relationship they had with these people might have been a factor. There may be various motivations, but behind each and every one of them, supporting that which is experienced as a calling, is to be found the fundamental rule which regulates their lives: following Jesus, the *sequela Christi*.

1. Knowledge of the *sequela* derives from a double experience: firstly the Word: "Our Savior called those whom he wanted to be his disciples to follow Him" (C 15). Mark says much the same thing: "He now went up onto the mountain and summoned those he wanted. So they came to him and he appointed twelve; they were to be his companions and to be sent out to proclaim the message..." (Mk 3, 13-14).

In the text there are three elements to which we must be faithful: the calling, the community and the mission. Firstly, the call: the knowledge that we have been personally called by God is

the founding experience of every vocation. Being called requires a faithful response. Then we can respond or not. The Twelve responded, whereas the rich young man did not. In this case the Lord was unhappy, because, faced with a request from Him a man of freewill should accept the will of God, for, as those who have experienced the calling know, there is no greater freedom than that of obedience. This response of fidelity to this call is built day by day, not once and for all. How is it that when one is unfaithful one ends up feeling dissatisfied and not at peace with oneself?

Secondly, there comes the community. For even though the call is always personal and a vocation is chiefly based upon the “I-You” relationship, the framework in which we live and experience this *sequela* is fraternal and the true story of mankind. A community and history are the foundations upon which the project of the *sequela Christi* becomes concrete. This requires fidelity in living the *sequela* in a community.

The third aspect is the mission. To be an apostle you have to be a disciple and you cannot be an apostle if you have not been a disciple. You are called to proclaim the Kingdom, to proclaim a new world, the world of which God has always dreamed and that the prophets have always promised, and which did not become real until God sent his own Son down to us to make it real.

2. The second element which makes the *sequela* possible is knowing the real story of one's own life. "We too, called with the strength of Baptism to the peak of perfect charity, renounce all for love of Christ" (C16). Following Jesus is not easy. Every Christian is obliged to follow Him, and is a disciple, or should be so, and the Second Vatican Council in its "Lumen Gentium", insisted on this fact (c.f. Chapter V). However, to follow Him we need to know Him well and this requires certain elements.

We must be authentic people. Without authenticity we cannot be responsible; those who are not responsible cannot be faithful, and without fidelity there can be no true *sequela*. People who are authentic are those who become the protagonists of their own lives. They know how to face reality. They do not flee from it but live within that reality and they develop it starting from their own subjective selves. They are always moving ahead and do not tire; they do not cling to the empty comforts of those things which are familiar to them. They wish to be ever faithful to that which God asks of their religious life, while trying to be as similar as possible to Jesus, and, even in the knowledge of how difficult it is they desire to follow in his footsteps.

It is also important not to let ourselves be conditioned by that which disturbs many others: expecting to succeed in everything we do. Constant worrying about succeeding only causes us to make more mistakes. We need to realize that it is

not so important to “always do well” but to do it wholeheartedly. It should be clear that life does not mean building a safe fortress around ourselves, but running the risk of trusting. Thus, if we dedicate our own lives in this way, we can be faithful to the *sequela Christi*. This kind of life allows us to meet Jesus as we go on our lives’ way, and this meeting will be a chance one.

Therefore it is indispensable that we should return to examine our lives and see the past in a new way. In the days of the *sequela Christi*, the most important thing in life seemed to be following orders exactly. Nowadays, it is living the adventure of a faith which takes risks. Then it was important to create security; now we must totally commit our lives because it is only thus that we can really follow Jesus. Previously, fidelity meant obeying the rules; now, on the other hand, it means living one’s life according to one’s own particular itinerary of faith.

Thus one must live faithfully every day and not confuse discipline with life or discipline with fidelity.

2. The beginning of religious life as discernment: Calasanz

Calasanz does not speak directly of the *sequela Christi*. This was not the language of the period in which he lived. However, we can see that the whole of the preparation which he required for

those who wished to enter religious life is that of a kind of discernment whose aim is that which we call *sequela Christi*. We shall see that this path which Calasanz requires is an honest one, because, as an example, it means that if some impediment is discovered, which stops a candidate from entering religious life, “we proceed no further with him, but with calm and comforting words, he should be dismissed as soon as possible” (CC 14).

In the mind of the saint, the path begins with a “long trial” (CC16). This shows the great knowledge which he had of the human heart; in fact he says: “There are some tendencies rooted in the heart which are difficult to diagnose and even more difficult to root out” (CC16). Calasanz knows well what man is like, and this is clear from his letters and is one of the spiritual principles which he gives to his religious: self-knowledge. On this basis one can reach God, because, when we know ourselves as we are, we are able to put ourselves into the hands of God, just as a two-year-old child does with its mother (God as mother). This consciousness which is required of candidates for religious life must be deep, and reached “by one’s own confession but also through the knowledge of the teacher, friends and companions and all those with whom he has lived in one way or another” (CC16).

Later on it is the community which becomes involved as it meets and prays to decide whether the candidate is guided by the Holy Spirit. At this

point, discernment is of major importance and is thus supported by prayer and guided by the Holy Spirit. If the community agrees, the next stage of his path is entered and the candidate is accepted as a guest for a short period of time (c.f. CC17).

What is the aim of this? It is that the candidate gets to know “our institute, and that our Fathers get to know him better in the spirit of the Lord” (CC17). The saint was much concerned about this aspect and his efforts in the matter were great. We know that later on not all of the superiors followed this procedure and thus, in the lifetime of Calasanz himself, he had to put up with many situations which would never have happened, had his instructions, as laid down in the Constitutions, been followed.

All this requires the candidate to be faithful; otherwise he should leave the institute. It is clear that when something costs us something, if we do not experience it faithfully, then in the end it gets abandoned. Fidelity is the path along which a person who asked to join the Institute must tread. In his own mind, the saint never gave up and thus, for the third time he asks that the candidate should be tested with “various examinations” and that if he – faithfully – perseveres “firm in his resolution, he may be allowed to wear our habit” (CC 18).

Thus, religious life within the Institute begins with spiritual exercises “at least one month and

even more, if the Novice Master deems it useful” and the candidate will make a general confession of his whole life (CC20).

This certainly requires great fidelity of those who enter religious life. During the novitiate, Calasanz wants the candidate to work diligently on every kind of religious practice for spiritual life (c.f. CC21), but these words of his show his profound spirituality and understanding of mankind: “we want to call the necessary attention of the Novice Master to one point, that he should carefully scrutinize all interior inclinations and the way in which he follows the guidance of the Holy Spirit which teaches the humble to pray with inexpressible sighs, so that he tries hard to make each novice go forward along the same path towards the summit of perfection” (CC 23).

Thus, according to the Founder, entering religious life is a path to follow. A candidate must be faithful to the desire to reach “the fullness of charity” (CC 1), and the formation team must be faithful in order to accept those who have really been called. Let us remember that the fidelity of which we are speaking is a fidelity that must be built. Therefore there may be moments and situations in which a person does not experience it in the way he wishes. But this is not a cause for worry as the important point is to have that desire in the heart and to follow the path towards the goal.

3. The *sequela* as life

What do we expect from the *sequela*? The Constitutions provide various answers: Jesus is searched for as “the only thing needed” (C 16). “We may ignore all except Jesus Christ” (C 18). We wish to “complete, with our flesh, to the benefit of the Church, that which was lacking in the passion of Christ” (C 20). We wish to give our lives (c.f. C 18). We wish to reach the fullness of charity (c.f. C 16).

On the one hand religious life looks at Jesus as a person. He must be the only thing which counts (even if later on we shall see that what counts is expressed in the mission of our brethren). The entire life of a Piarist consists in following the Master, in trying to become a part of Him, in trying to incarnate in ourselves the attitudes and behavior of the Lord, and that is why Calasanz requires: “We shall dedicate ourselves to understanding and imitating the examples of Saint Paul, of Christ crucified and His virtues, and to remembering them frequently during the day” (CC 44).

The *sequela Christi* makes sure that life is concentrated in Him, so that He should be the most important thing, should become our very reason for existing and for passion for the mission to which He has called us. If this becomes the only “thing needed”, this will lead to that which we need in order to examine ourselves about our fidelity. If we choose to ignore all except the crucified

Christ, then we should examine the relationship we have with pain and with providence, with evil and the possibility to overcome it and we should understand whether our lives have evolved, via a real process, towards this goal. If we search to achieve the fullness of charity, we need to be aware that this does not give immediate results, but it requires that we should follow a path in stages, made up of small and constant experiences; it requires steadfast fidelity amongst the difficulties which beset our lives. Following Jesus Christ is nothing else than giving our whole lives to Him and living them openheartedly with a strong dose of loving faithfulness. Fidelity is the way to follow the Master every day.

So that all this may happen, we must beware of the error into which we may fall. We have quoted a series of expressions from the Constitutions on that which we consider necessary to follow Christ. But remember that it is normal for the process of a vocation to have two stages. During the first of these, social identity is emphasized. This is the moment when a person has left his emotional confusion behind him and has sublimated his desires so as to live a necessary, personal identity. Therefore the group arrives to offer him coherent emotional stability and shared values. In religious life, the power of ideology is very strong because the existence of the group depends upon adhering to Jesus Christ. It is necessary to go through this stage

and perhaps to reflect critically on it, in order to reach what is one's own personal identity. The second stage does not depend upon the group. The path towards personal identity begins by understanding that a person exists above and beyond any situation. We are now in the uniqueness of personality.

Only when this stage has been reached, is it possible to experience the elements indicated in the Constitutions in an authentic way. This requires a path which starts with the Profession and which will last all life-long. Thus we shall have understood that the life of the *sequela* is not a life of spiritualism, but is profoundly incarnated in the daily human experience of every person and that it requires a real and true faithfulness to every current process of change which is happening in the field of religious life.

4. Into which environments do we follow Him?

“We follow Him into the environment of a community of consecrated life...” (C16). “We dispose ourselves to becoming cooperators in the divine Truth” (C19). A person's *sequela* is indeed personal, but it is found in the environment of the community. We follow Jesus personally, but also together. Therefore, nobody can isolate himself from the others like a hermit; nobody can do without his brethren, for it is they who have to help the personal paths of the *sequela* of others.

Following Him together certainly requires a very clear heart and this is why we must discern some of the attitudes that we have. Some of these are of a theological kind: who is God in my life? Are my basic choices motivated by Him? Is my personal relationship with an idea, an explanation or an entity? Do we experience our vocations in a legalistic way, as perfectionists or in an ongoing process of trying to be faithful? Do we follow the rules or do we follow the God of love whose footsteps trace the path of life? Do our lives evolve little by little as ongoing lives, or do we arrive at a certain point and think we have reached the end of the way and can look back with satisfaction? Do we constantly return to the ideals of our youth or do we experience the *sequela* as an ongoing process? What are the basic moments when we experience God and in which way do we offer ourselves to Him?

5. What does the *sequela* consist of?

It is the Constitutions which answer this question in various ways but always taking the same line: “This *sequela Christi*... consists in evangelizing children and young people with great charity and patience” (C 17). “...the simplicity of children and of the poor with the poor” (C 19). “...we spend our lives evangelizing children and the poor” (C 18). “...We are given the simplicity of children” (C 19). “...moved by love, we await the

duties of the apostolate and we support the trials of daily life with faith and constancy in our schools and amongst the children” (C 20). “Thanks to Her continued presence (he is speaking of Our Lady), we are able to present the image of her Son, and our pupils will be able to reproduce in themselves something of Him, who was conceived and educated by Her” (C 20). “By means of our apostolate we show what consecrated people are like and their love for all mankind” (C 21).

We must not forget that we are called to follow a specific charism, that of Calasanz, which he discovered from God and to which he offered his heart: “I have found a better world in serving God, in doing good to these children, and I shall never leave it for all the world”. This is the concrete expression of the call of a Piarist to the *sequela*. Through passion for his charism, a Piarist shows his universal love. Calasanz loved and welcomed all, but we know where his duty lay.

Even in this field there may be many snares to avoid and that is why we must live it faithfully. As we have repeated many times, fidelity must be created slowly. The danger is that when we are young and want our fidelity to be a total experience, we become more idealistic than realistic. Keeping up such loyalty every day is tiring and thus we accept compromises. Our faithfulness fails and that youthful love disappears.

We have said there are many snares which await us: for example, saying that we give to the poor even when it is not true or may not be verified; or that lack of simplicity and humility which may find a place in the heart of a Piarist, and which thus betrays one of those virtues so dear to our Founder. All these things allowed Calasanz to know how God may change lives. He experienced this when in 1638 he wrote that he could not find priests who wanted to go into schools or change school life for the world of the poor, and these were revolutions which Calasanz himself introduced into the world as he offered the poor new means to avoid repeating the same model of society they had found.

Thus the Piarist *sequela Christi* is to look at Him as the only thing needed, and this must be manifested in work, in dedication and effort for the marginalized of society, in a religious life which is encouraged by its mission. The dynamic integration of passion for the mission must serve towards religious growth. Nevertheless, according to statistics, it seems that this integration is found in only 30% of cases. Without it, many problems may arise: for example, that a person takes on a life of easily fulfilled desires and does not put his heart into the mission which has been entrusted to him; there may be an unbalanced relationship between duties, neglecting other aspects of religious life, or perhaps a partiality towards one kind of duty, which takes up all efforts and affections and leaves other activities aside. There is also the

problem of fatigue, of depression and inability to concentrate on one job because a person wishes to spread his activity into every field.

Fidelity in our field must be a life which moves slowly but surely as it learns the ways of the mission. If the *sequela* disappears and everything becomes activity, then fidelity to the Lord is lacking. If consecrated life remains but without faithfulness to the mission the gift for which we have been called has failed.

6. The *sequela*, consecration and our brethren

The *sequela* as religious consecration (even lay people have been called to the *sequela Christi*) implies, in our Constitutions, a relationship with our brethren: “... if we adhere more closely to God, we can open ourselves more freely to what our brethren expect” (C 16) “...we shall live His new commandment” (C 18). “...let us share the fate of all mankind with open minds and magnanimous hearts” (C 21).

Besides what has already been said about the *sequela* and the community, we must add another dimension here, that of love and solidarity. If we are unable to love our own brothers, how can we love God? If we are not constantly at the service of our brethren, how can we make ourselves do what the Lord did (c.f. Jn 13)? If we do not obey his commandment (c.f. Jn 13, 34), if we do not show our solidarity to them, how can we say we are following Jesus?

It is true that everything is done in a particular way in community life, which is the crown and thorns of religious life. It is also true that the eschatological rule of vocations is clear in a shared life: it is possible to unite people from different backgrounds, each with his own personal story, without any common links of affection and it is that very community group which is a sign of the humanity dreamed of by God for a messianic period. We say wonderful things about the community, but then our own lives may be different and seldom confirm what we say.

Nevertheless, it is love and solidarity that are the testing points of Christian life and any ethical heroism (c.f. 1 Cor, 13). The love that comes from God is made concrete in real personal relationships. Be careful here: the paradox of religious life is just this, that there, where we experience in all its clarity the cross of our vocation, is the place where we can most profoundly perceive the miracle of God in our lives.

When we open ourselves to the *sequela Christi* and to following the Master, and we see that this has been done according to that New Commandment by which we give ourselves and we love all men, living with fidelity is tiring. Faithfulness to love towards others is an expression of love for Jesus and faithfulness to helping others is a way to give ourselves in our love for Jesus. Vocational fidelity means being faithful to the commandment of love, because of which we imitate and follow the Master.

7. Our Lady and fidelity

“The Virgin Mary... guides us in the *sequela Christi*” (C 23). When we do not know how to follow Christ, we look to Our Lady. When faithfulness to this following seems to disappear, we look to Our Lady. When we do not understand how we should react in the darkness, we look to Our Lady. Fidelity is portrayed in that marvelous way, “You see before you the Lord’s servant, let it happen to me as you have said” (Lk 1, 38). “We have to turn to the help of God and to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, under whose protection our Order was founded” (EP 4, 417). “I always recommend myself to and place myself under the protection of the Most Holy Crucifix and of the Blessed Virgin Mary, His Mother, asking them to protect this religion” (EP 3, 982).

8. The *sequela* and the renewal of vows

“I write to you to say that the ratification of solemn vows or profession which is done simply for love of God, is an action which pleases God much and which adds merit to all other actions which a man may be capable of except martyrdom. Therefore, those who love God as they should, ought to renew an act which pleased God greatly, and also to set a good example to their neighbors” (EP 4024).

In n. 32 of the Constitutions, Calasanz writes about the way in which people should renew their vows: “Everybody, one at a time, every year, on the feast of

the Resurrection of Our Lord and of All Saints, will renew their vows, according to the rite used by the Congregations, after having made a general confession, completed spiritual exercises, as we shall see later, and having taken sacramental Holy Communion”.

Questions for personal reflection

- 1) Who is the Lord for you?
- 2) Is your life centered on Christ crucified, as the Founder asks of us?
- 3) Have you really met the poor and are you faithful to them?
- 4) What importance does the Virgin Mary have in your life today?

Suggestions for community discernment

- 1) Examine your life and see whether it is truly authentic.
- 2) How to you experience suffering? Is it an aberration for you or a path to follow?
- 3) Should you and/or your community get closer to the poor?
- 4) Tell the community about how your personal relationship with Our Lady developed.

Suggestions for a day of prayer

- 1) Prayer to the Holy Spirit.
- 2) Reading of the subject or a part of it.
- 3) Dialogue about a part of the subject.

- 4) Examine together what it was in the poor that the Founder especially loved.

Biblical tests

Phil 2, 5-11; Jn 13, 6; Rom 8, 21; Lk 10, 1; Mk 10, 13-16; Matt 11, 25-29; Matt 5, 13-16; Jn 17, 11-19, Gal 5, 24; 1Pet 4, 13; 1Cor 1-18-25; Col 1, 24; Rom 8, 17; 2Cor 1, 5.

We are faithful to the *sequela Christi*:

- By being authentic and protagonists in our own lives;
- By not hiding in the past but by being able to move forward;
- If faith is experienced as an adventure, rather than as a safe haven;
- If it is not confused with seeking discipline;
- If our search is for our personal rather than social identity;
- If we are prepared to put aside everything for love of the Lord;
- If we live not to observe the commandments but as a gift of love;
- If consecration is constructed little by little in our daily lives;
- If we love our brethren.

FAITHFUL TO GROWING IN A COMMUNITY

The community is the place where following Jesus in consecrated life takes place. We live in a community for the Lord. It seems impossible that men can live together, each with his own personality, his own ideas, his personal plans and his own way of life and in actual fact this would be impossible if the Lord had not given us this very way of life. First and foremost, we must recognize that the community is a gift of God and we must respond to this gift, as we do to all gifts, with fidelity. Being faithful within the community and to the community is not easy. When God calls, He gives the grace for fidelity, but we must ask for it continually, as we do for all other Christian elements.

1. Fraternity, a sacrament of the Kingdom

Fraternity, or brotherhood, is the sacrament of the Kingdom because it is a strong sign. God the Father shows what the Kingdom on Earth should be

like through the community, that is, a community of brethren, and also what it will be like on the other side: a loving meeting of all those who have followed Jesus Christ, who have given themselves to the service of others and for whom Jesus has been the lodestar of their lives. Religious vocation understands God through a community and asks that all men should be brothers and live as such. In brotherhood the universal love of the Father of Jesus is made manifest. Fraternal communion is the way in which the children of God live as brothers, as children of the one God.

This brotherhood should not be created by external laws which govern our way of life and how we behave, but rather by the deep relationships which must exist between those who share the same vocation. We may learn to be and to live like brothers only if we each live and concretely experience the state of being a disciple. Thus, in consecrated life, being a disciple, as we saw in the previous chapter, is fulfilled within the community.

This means being a sacrament of the Kingdom and we can live as a sacrament only through the grace of the Holy Spirit and with fidelity in our hearts. Belonging to a community is a state which is deeply-rooted in the personal invitation which the Lord permanently gives us. This “belonging” is experienced as a continuous process, faithful to Him who has called us. If there is no fidelity, there is no sign. The Constitutions state it as follows:

“United in a community of faith...in some way we become ministers of hope for the future Kingdom and of fraternal communion between men” (C25). “Called by the Word of God to live our lives in communion, in the Eucharistic sacrifice we shall be a sign of unity, as we reproduce within ourselves the death and resurrection of Christ...”(C 27). Faithfulness to and in the community is essential in order to be a sign of the Kingdom.

2. Constituent elements of fraternity

Brotherhood is a gift of Grace – it would not be possible to live together without the cohesive strength of the Holy Spirit – but it is something which at the same time we have to build ourselves. This means that man himself must use his own efforts and be sincerely dedicated to improving life together. When we speak of commitment, effort and work, we thus speak of fidelity. Nobody can stay in a community if he is not faithful to those aspects which hold up the fraternity. Some of these are:

- a) Giving ourselves to God and to our neighbor. Communication with Him from whom we receive the grace of living together, and commitment towards those who live in the same community. They both nourish each other and are intimately connected.
- b) Celebrating the love of God in our everyday lives. We are all a part of the Body of Christ;

all of us share in the Passion of Our Lord. Each and every day, all of us must behave as brothers, whatever may have happened the day before. Celebrating the love of God means recreating love amongst all of us.

- c) Living the story and the Word. We must make the Word part of our inner lives every day, but at the same time, we must use discernment to understand the times and events in which the community finds itself.
- d) Sincere relationships inside the community, which must include sincere reconciliation, conversion and discernment between the members of the community. If this is not our experience of community life, it is not possible to live fraternally.
- e) The various missions of the community. Each one is a separate item which belongs to the whole body of the community; each has received its gifts of grace and charism from the Lord. None must dominate another and if a member of the community wishes to love one more than another, let him do so and serve it as if he were the least important of all.
- f) Serving the poor. A community will be a sign of that universal brotherhood which is the will of God in so far as it is open-hearted and welcoming towards the poor. Otherwise, how can we possibly say that the Lord resides there?

We have mentioned some elements concerning community roots. The Constitutions say: “We accept our brothers willingly, just as they are, and we actively help them to develop their abilities and to grow in charity, encouraging them through community, witnessing of our good example, so that they may live their vocations faithfully” (C 28). In community life we live to serve others, “...community witnessing of our good example so that they may live their vocations faithfully”. In the previous chapter we saw the way, in this community environment, that we follow the Lord in order to do the only thing needed (c.f. C 16). The community is the place for the *sequela* and for serving others, helping them to fulfill their vocations. When a community has such roots as these we can live and grow constantly. If we examine our giving ourselves to God and to others, we realize that this is something we have done and shall do thanks to grace and fidelity. The efforts we make every day when we get up, and, at the end of the day, when we confess to not having entirely succeeded, are the celebration of God in everyday life, that is, faithfulness and weakness. Living the real story and the Word is the greatest example of faithful listening, with half-done work – I mean fidelity and mediocrity – as in all those aspects which require our critical attention. Vocational fidelity is life in progress, but starts from fraternity.

3. Attitudes for living together

The Constitutions are very clear on this point: “Community life requires from us certain qualities

which are needed for living together” (C 29). “The spirit of Christ, which is always present amongst us, lends delicacy and discretion to our charity, which is why we warn with respect, we love each other with real brotherly love and we help each other in charity, in pardoning and in correcting each other” (C 30). “...We actively help them to develop their abilities and to grow in charity...”(C 20). At the heart of the Gospels and of the Constitutions, we may find facts and attitudes which are essential in order to build a community. Construction implies fidelity. One might here apply the parable of Jesus about the man who begins to build but is unable to finish the work because he lacks faith, because he does not have sufficient resources to finish that which he wanted to do. Community life is like this as it requires the materials to build but also need perseverance and loyalty in order to go onwards and not to fall by the wayside.

The Constitutions say: “Community life requires from us certain qualities which are needed for living together” (C 20). This is a prerequisite. It is an essential element in vocational discernment. If the candidate does not have certain characteristics, he must look for them in his personal itinerary. There are other conditions or abilities which will have to be acquired from personality. These are to be found in the Gospels and in the Constitutions.

We must understand the importance of our personal histories because our attitudes are a seed

which must bear good fruit in life. We call this an ongoing process, an ongoing life, which requires of us loving fidelity to Him that called us to live together.

Fidelity is simultaneously a behavior and an attitude. It is behavior in so far as it is the personal way we face community life, as we try to live in it. It is attitude, because there are indeed some people who are unable to live with others, for their individualism makes it impossible for them to live in a community.

A good but risky statement is that “community life... encourages our complete maturity” (C 29). This should be the case and in some cases that is what it is. However, there is always a possibility that some forms of life in a community keep a person at the puerile stage because he is not encouraged to be autonomous in his personal life or to react to the rules in an authentic way, or because the real situation is different from a certain kind of idealism preached within institutions, or because he does not try to obey his own conscience but passively submits to authority. Thus we had better be on our guard about these two aspects.

So that we may live together, the virtues that we find at the heart of the Gospels and in the Constitutions must be made incarnate in a community: sincerity, friendliness and “becoming little” in our relationships with others (c.f. Matt 18, 1-5); avoiding possible sources of scandal or divisiveness (c.f. Matt 18, 6-10); through charity, with simplicity (c.f. Matt, 18, 12-

15); brotherly correction (c.f. Matt 18, 15); not being an enemy of anyone, but offering our pardon totally and freely, as Our Father in Heaven gives His to us (c.f. Matt 18, 21-35).

Besides what has been said above, there are two principal signs: “Our religious community is centered on the Eucharist” (C 28); sharing the bread, i.e. the fatigue, the needs and everything which makes up daily life. If this element is missing, it is not a real community. Those who escape from doing the work of the community are not a part of it, they take advantage of it. “Bread” symbolizes many things: love, service, plans, relationships, decisions, activities and everything which may be shared.

Another sign: “Let us help our brothers to develop their abilities and to grow in charity” (C 28). To do this we have to serve, to sit at the feet of all and to wash them, as the Lord did (c.f. Jn 13). To live like this every day, trying to grow in various ways, always wishing to imitate Jesus, living our lives with fidelity, a project of the *sequela*, giving ourselves to the community, these things are what let us become, in free obedience, an incarnation of the Constitutions in our own lives.

4. The authentic community

Now we shall illustrate the real community and the community relationships of which the Constitutions speak: “Community relationships are

given new life through charity and co-responsibility; for which reason, each of us, forgetting himself, collaborates with his brothers" (C 31). "We build a real community when we are concerned about the conditions in which our brothers live; when we take part in shared activities and in works of piety, in which Christ Himself is present; when we take an active part in the family Councils, in which our spiritual life and our apostolic activity is planned..."(C 32).

What are those concrete examples of fidelity which, in order to experience the real community, our Constitutions ask of us? First of all, concern for others: not being monolithic, independent of each other, indifferent, without knowing about the situation in which others live, without interacting with them when one, for example, finds oneself in the refectory, the Chapel or the TV room. The other person is only a stick beside me. He does not disturb me, there is no love. Without love there can be no community; nor without that fidelity towards the simple individuals whom we meet in the corridors of the community or of life.

Secondly there is living together in prayer, eating together, praying to God together and asking for the same things. When two or three are gathered together in His name, He is amongst us and can give us what we ask for. Being faithful to real life may seem a routine, because it is possible that love sometimes looks like routine, conserving inside itself the weight of having given.

Thirdly, a community becomes real in meetings, whether they are for planning purposes, for revision, to relax, for enjoyment, to share pain and hope, to walk together, for a multitude of reasons.

Fourthly, there are charity and co-responsibility. These provide support for community relationships. Charity expands through love and co-responsibility increases through reciprocal help. Loving completely with love given freely, as Paul says (c.f. 1 Cor 13), is tiring and difficult, but it is the greatest of all charisms. “In the heart of the Church, I shall be love” (Theresa of Lisieux). Being co-responsible with others in that which they need or when they ask for help is not easy, especially if we have the impression that they may be taking advantage of us or when they may disturb our peace and calm.

A life in common is manifested in all this. Moreover, “the spirit of collaboration makes us forget ourselves” (C 31). This is the greatest sacrifice: divesting ourselves of everything in service and in love for others, like the Lord. The *sequela* takes on the form of expropriation as love is freely shown to others.

Being faithful in a community requires enormous effort. Thus fidelity is often crucified and brings its cross to those who wish to live together with a sincere heart. But we should not forget that if we do not wish to carry our personal cross, we cannot follow the Lord. On the contrary,

the *sequela* is one of the most significant realities in life, which attracts others and manifests greater love for God.

5. Communication in life together

Living together without communicating is a farce. A fraternity is built through communication. This has often become one of the most difficult aspects of consecrated life. Even the Constitutions speak in this way: “create conditions which encourage dialogue” (C 29). “Our religious community... finds a solid base in interpersonal relationships” (C 28). “The spirit of Christ, which is ever present amongst us, lends delicacy and discretion to our charity, for which reason we warn with respect, we love with real brotherly love and we support each other in charity, in pardoning and in correcting each other” (C 30).

I believe that we have far to go in this particular direction. That is why insisting on fidelity means doing so at the beginning of communication. Let us look at some elements which will help us to examine how this reality becomes a part of us, in which particular way we must be faithful, and what our lives must be like in order to grow in this brotherly way.

- a) There can be no doubt that every meeting takes place through words. Silence may represent the supreme moment of a true meeting but that is because of concentration, because words are no longer necessary, not because we do not know what to say.

- b) Communication must be reciprocal knowledge, in which words are only a means. We speak of interpersonal communication, which combines what is reciprocal and what is autonomous, so that neither suffocates the other. We do not refer to words which may be used when there is nothing to say, for those belong to simple verbosity. But in this field we have to distinguish between sincerity and authenticity. This presupposes a personal inner life. Sincerity is not always a part because this may be lacking in intimacy. Authenticity is made of freedom and respect.
- c) On the one hand, communication is necessary in shared life and, on the other, nobody should be obliged to communicate if he does not wish to. How can this paradox be resolved? We need to examine the different levels of communication:

Firstly, the outer level is that which is mostly functional and in which a person does not reveal himself; however, there are certain aspects, for example, such as in administration, which may take on symbolic importance and which involve people personally, so that when the subject of money is spoken of, certain fears appear, or other personal attitudes which may provoke strong emotions.

Secondly, when we no longer speak of things but of people, if they do not touch our personal lives but only our work, then this is still an outer level and we are not very involved.

Thirdly, when we speak of our personal thoughts which are full of emotions and thus reveal our inner selves, then communication really does involve us more deeply. In this case, we each choose the subjects which we wish to speak about and which are sometimes conflicting, sometimes not; questions which may or may not be of practical import are sometimes the subject of theorizing, while others touch the conscience more closely. In community communication, people often keep to an ideological level of discourse, as this, with its elegant forms of speech, allows them to avoid personal questions.

Fourthly, another level is that in which we speak of personal matters, but those which are in the realm of the past. This is an indication of trust, for such matters are not approached lightly. Nevertheless it is limited and does not fully enter the personal sphere.

Fifthly, there is communication of current sentiments. This is rare because the person who opens his heart feels vulnerable, and if he does not see corresponding openness, he clamps up and regrets having been so ingenuous as to speak in the way he has done, thus having revealed his soul.

The sixth and last level is that of the relationship of two people who are in love or are true friends, in which they unconditionally accept each other and open their hearts and minds to each other with serenity.

Certainly, a sincere examination of these points would help us progress – an ongoing life – in this field. We need to risk, to live the adventure of a path which is constantly developing, and we need to be faithful to any opportunities we may be offered to open our personal horizons.

Nevertheless, given the sensitivity of communication, conflicts may also exist. The Constitutions speak of this indirectly when they say: “... create conditions which encourage dialogue and help us to avoid that controversy which can divide the souls of our brethren” (C 29). Let us briefly consider this aspect. First of all, we should bear in mind some conflicts: firstly, our silences, when they clearly show we are either protesting against others or are afraid to say what we think, even when they are silences as a response. Secondly, there are those conflicts which arise when others reject or disdain communication. Rejection may manifest itself in many ways, through words, gestures, gossip, etc. Thirdly, there are those conflicts which arise from an idea that we cannot disagree without breaking a relationship. We need ability to disagree about what each of us thinks without this creating a distance between people. Fourthly, on the contrary, there are those occasions when we agree about the subject under discussion, but the relationship between the people involved is a poor one. The fifth kind of conflict may come from the way in which one person may be dependent upon

the other: he does not think with his own mind, but follows the mind of the person upon whom he depends. And sixthly, sometimes conflict derives from a lack of information. In a community there are always those people who are know-alls and there are others who receive no information. Naturally, this state may be the cause of trouble when certain subjects are discussed.

6. The community and decisions

Who makes up the community? The Constitutions say: "This task of creating and of increasing the community was taken on by everybody at the moment that we decided to take up religious life; but it is especially the duty of those who have been nominated to lead the community, as well as those who officially make up the community of a Province" (C 34). This clearly means all members of the community, but above all the Superior. Information and decision-taking are fundamental to creating a community.

Information must always be clear, complete and divulged in time for it to be received by everybody. If the leaders of a community hold something back, then they perform a disservice to their group. The same is true if they are unable to communicate the matter in question clearly. Another aspect is the decision-making process. At the moment in which a decision has to be made, there are many elements

to be considered: on the one hand, choosing a suitable moment for asking the community its opinion. One thing is the presentation of a proposal; another is the value which one wishes to give it. If at the moment it is presented, it is invested with a certain value, people may be conditioned and those who have most influence may divert the matter to their own ends, leaving aside the opinions of others. On the other hand, there is the best decision and the most democratic one, which is got through consensus, after having examined all the possibilities and after having properly discussed matters. This is the way Ignatius of Loyola chose. It is true that in many cases there may be no choice than that of putting things to the vote, and this is a democratic way, but this method may give rise to divisions within the community, creating groups and causing pain, which could have consequences when the community is divided into winners and losers.

An important sign of progress would be better decision-making skills within communities, as this would be a great help for the Superior, for it would not leave everything up to him, otherwise, can we speak of a community? Neither should he be an obstacle to the liveliness of a community, for this is his duty, and it is in this way that a community is created. This may be summed up as fidelity towards the Superior and towards building the community.

7. Growing in the community

A community must be a place of fidelity and human and religious development for religious. However, there are various ways in which we may understand this growth. For some communities it is the style of a simple life, collective events, a refuge for all, a platform of work and thus a place of self-fulfillment in which we serve. For others, on the other hand, it is interpersonal relationships, which do not enter into conflict with the above-listed points, but which will serve to strengthen the relationship aspect.

Obviously, these two ways in which we may conceive the idea of community imply two ways in which personal growth is understood: the former underlines assimilation of values and content and, consequently, the community is subordinate to such processes of assimilation. Anybody who thinks differently underlines personal progress, the adventure of faith and the importance of authenticity as a value upon life's journey. In the former case, fidelity to the community conforms to its mandate, whereas in the latter, it follows a personal journey, even if this sometimes seems the wrong path to take. In the end it is always fidelity to oneself that leads to encountering the Lord.

But there are some basic attitudes which must be a part of community life. According to the Constitutions, looking after those who enter the Institute, looking after the elderly, concern for

those who find themselves in difficult situations is required: "Let us give particular affection and especial attention to those who are beginning our kind of life and to those who are troubled by personal problems or distressed by illness or old age" (C 33).

Secondly, we must care for the whole of the human family: "Our community, as a part of the entire family of mankind, is always ready to serve it, and takes a willing part, with spiritual fervor, in the joys and hopes, the sadness and fatigues of all mankind, but especially those of that group of people in which it leads its life" (C 38).

Thirdly, there is communion with the Church and with other connected institutions (c.f. C 37).

Fourthly, we should mention the need to move forward, to move from a community which we have described as an environment to one based upon personal relationships.

The fifth point is that we should desire to live with others, in spite of all that this leads to and that which we have seen. And last of all we must state that love for all, and not love in the abstract, is an open-hearted love for our brethren, whether we hold the same opinions or not. And we have thus arrived at the starting point of this chapter, which is our experience that in our faith we often find that the Kingdom of God is here, in growing together as we care for each other, as we pray together and share our suffering. We must be faithful to all this.

Questions for personal reflection

- 1) What does the community mean to you?
How do you live in it?
- 2) Mention three elements which make up a community.
- 3) Do you succeed in developing humanly and spiritually in the community or do you look elsewhere?
- 4) Are you able to follow the path towards deeper and more brotherly communication?

Suggestions for community discernment

- 1) Is your community an important sign of the Kingdom? Why?
- 2) Examine with discernment whether the constituent elements of fraternity are to be found in your community.
- 3) Check whether the specific examples of fidelity required by the Constitutions are to be found in your community.
- 4) Are we able to understand as a group what communication is like in our community?

Suggestions for a day of prayer

- 1) Prayer to the Holy Spirit.
- 2) Reading about the subject or a part of it.
- 3) What do we need to change?
- 4) Give thanks to God.

Biblical texts

Lk 18, 1; 2, 19; Matt 6, 6; Acts 2, 42; Rom 12, 1-2; 1Tim 2, 1; Jn 4, 23-24.

We are faithful to the community:

- If love is the main thing.
- If we know how to forgive with our hearts any mistake made by our brethren.
- If outsiders are surprised at how we live together.
- If we communicate honestly, deeply and kindly.
- If we help the superior in the service of our brethren.
- If every day we take steps forward in our *sequela Christi*.
- If it is a place for human and religious growth.
- If holding different opinions from others does not break the bonds of love.

ARE WE FAITHFUL TO PRAYER?

In a concrete chapter, which concentrates closely on the actions which the followers of Calasanz should take, the Constitutions tell us what Piarist prayer should be like. When considering fidelity to prayer we might wonder to what extent we do those tasks which are asked of us, but this would be a poor kind of faithfulness! We shall try to underline certain aspects of the subject so we shall be able to see the deep meaning and value of prayer, and therefore, the loyalty which it commands.

1. Fidelity and the aim of prayer

1. Article 40 of the Constitutions states: “When we cultivate the spirit of prayer and actual prayer itself, we direct our lives and our apostolate to the Church, with the aim of finding ourselves united to praise God”.

In this sense, the aim of our prayer is similar to that of Jesus. He constantly placed himself in the hands

of the Father, and, while praising Him, He submitted to His will, even when that involved fatigue. That he called God “Abba” is an irrefutable historical fact, and this is the first historical fact, even if we find it towards the end, precisely because the Resurrection reveals that which lies behind the name by which Jesus called God Father. The most important thing is that His relationship with God was special and unique. And it is this historical fact which is revealed after the Resurrection and Pentecost. This is why it is so important to return the Jesus’s experience of God, because this must be our path, too.

On our journey as Christians this is what should happen: we should follow the same path as Jesus in His experience of God. Our lives as praying people should incarnate the path of Christ in history, that Jesus who mediates with and reveals the Father. This means that for us the experience of the Master is of decisive value. In his letter to the Romans, Paul expresses this magnificently, in a classic text on Christian prayer: “All who are guided by the Spirit of God are sons of God; for what you received was not the spirit of slavery to bring you back into fear; you received the Spirit of adoption, enabling you to cry out, ‘Abba, Father!’ The Spirit himself joins with our spirit to bear witness that we are children of God. And if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, provided that we share his suffering, so as to share his glory” (8, 14-17).

Thus we pray to praise the Father, so as to be able to live in love and obedience to his will, and so that this praise may transform our very beings. Only in this way does fidelity exist: if prayer is constant praise, in the knowledge that that this does not exclude other aspects of prayer.

2. In the Constitutions, Calasanz underlined the object of prayer: “In great silence and meditation of the body and of the spirit, on our knees or in another proper position, following the example of Saint Paul, we try to know and to imitate Christ crucified and His virtues and to remember them frequently throughout the day” (CC 44).

The current constitutions use almost the same words: “in the manner of Paul the Apostle, know and imitate Jesus Christ crucified and His mysteries and turn constantly to Him throughout the day” (C 41).

According to Calasanz, prayer should concentrate upon Christ crucified, as was written in the contemporary Constitutions, with the addition of “the mysteries of His life”. The crucified Christ attracted the interest of the Founder: “The real and proper book which all should study is the passion of Christ, which gives wisdom according to the state of each person” (EP 1563).

Here we see that Christian prayer, originating in the Easter mysteries, is, above all, sharing in the mystery of Christ. There is no prayer if it is not in

the Son, because it was He who gave us the Spirit to communicate His experience to the Father to us, his communication with the Father. In other words, all the Gospels, all the works of God, the way in which God communicates about himself through history, may be summed up in the fact that we are able to pray thanks to Jesus.

If this is the case, we must examine our fidelity to prayer when suffering comes to us, as it does in our lives. How faithful are we to Calasanz's wish that we should concentrate on the passion of Christ? What should our fidelity be like so that we can be guided by this through the day?

2. Prayer, the Word and solitude

1. "With regular reading of the Holy Books, we approach an intimate knowledge of God and His will..." (C 42). This implies that the book for our meditations should be the Bible. It contains the Word of God and through that we learn about the history of that salvation which continues in our own lives. The Constitutions do not say that this should be the case, but rather speak of "regular reading". But, during the stress of the working day, we should certainly recognize that the right moment to spend time with the Word is during meditation.

Having said this, there are certain consequences: first of all, saying that Christian prayer is prayer in

the Word, suggests that it is not directly founded upon experience. A characteristic of the Word is that of decentralizing man, and this is a particular kind of anthropology in which man finds himself by leaving himself. For this reason, the direct criterion of Christian prayer is not experience, as if having a lot of experience means a better way to pray. Neither is the kind of experience important: as if the higher the level of experience, the better the prayer. This is not true. Christian prayer always has trans-experimental criteria, and is therefore not supposed to produce a sense of fullness in man. This is manifested in a paradoxical way: joy and suffering, nearness to and distance from God simultaneously; a profound sense of sin and emptiness; a feeling of real liberty and joy. The discernment of Christian prayer is not to be found in either pleasure or experience.

Secondly, the Word has its own method in the process of humanity's finding its way. For example, how can man make his affections concrete in God through prayer? For celibates like us, God is certainly not where our affections find their natural home in the same way that a woman might be, and yet we have given up that kind of affection in order to make God our resting place. This is a paradox which we have to accept and to which we must be faithful.

2. On the subject of prayer and solitude, the Founder spoke importantly: "Furthermore, as far

as possible all should pray to the Lord so that every time it is possible for them to stay in their rooms, they should promise to perform, both outwardly and especially inwardly, an act of humility, of repentance and thanksgiving or of another kind, according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so that the Father, who sees all secrets, may offer his gifts in abundance and raise them to the perfection of true virtue” (CC 48), and nearly the same thing is repeated in our Constitutions (c.f. C 43).

Prayer must be both personal and community. Now we shall deal with personal prayer. Let us see what the Founder expected of his religious:

- a) We must pray even when nobody sees us except Our Father in heaven. Thus our room is a most suitable place. We do not need to go to the chapel to pray; we must pray “in spirit and truth” (Jn 4, 23). God is everywhere and we pray to him from our hearts.
- b) Prayer has its forms, as, like our Founder, Ignatius of Loyola knew. According to Calasanz, we should sometimes pray with external events and others with our inner self. We should pray in the position which the body needs to convey its feelings. These feelings may be humility, contrition, thanksgiving and, Calasanz adds, “other sentiments suggested by the Holy Spirit”. We must therefore pay attention to the Holy Spirit and to what the heart wants to tell us.

- c) Our heavenly Father answers prayers which are made sincerely and according to what the Holy Spirit has told us. Solitude thus seems to be a fundamental element in Christian prayer.

3. Listening and silence

This aspect of prayer is clearly underlined in the Constitutions: “The spirit of prayer is nourished and found in silence and with sobriety of speech; these are virtues which allow us to perceive the voice of that God who makes himself heard where he wishes. Therefore it much behooves us to be vigilant, so that He does not come unawares and pass us by fruitlessly” (C 44).

We recall a celebrated passage of the Founder: “The voice of God is the voice of the Holy Spirit; it touches the heart and disappears; we know not from where it comes, nor when it breathes upon us. Therefore, we must be vigilant, so that when it arrives without warning, it does not pass us by fruitlessly” (EP 131). Thus two elements are essential for prayer: silence and, through this silence, listening.

- a) Silence is important, but not because we wish to idealize it, as has often been done. Our world is full of noises which interfere with prayer. There are many kinds of silence and not all of these help us to pray: there is the silence of those who are empty and do nothing - “he’s absent-minded” and thus the Spirit can do nothing; there is also

external silence while the inner person is full of things and thoughts and his heart is unable to hear the voice of the Spirit; and there is that silence which is the dwelling place of the Spirit, through which an individual is able to hear the voice of the Lord and of his grace. That “speak little”, which is in our Constitutions, must be understood in this sense of the presence of the Lord, where, even in the busy daytime, our hearts remain focused on Him. How is it that great masters of prayer have known how to combine generous dedication to others with intimate union with God?

- b) When faced with the Word, we have to listen to it. What does this mean? That man becomes conscious of himself though the freedom of one who went before him. It means going out of ourselves towards others and also means that man is not made up only of himself, for he goes beyond this, and this is done in Jesus Christ. “Being” means being turned towards God, being in relation to another and listening to him, in listening that is obedience to his will. This means a conversion in attitude, for we are not used to listening when we pray, having transformed prayer into a one-sided discourse which leaves little room for God. Sometimes it is a monologue in which God has to listen to us rather than a loving dialogue between a father and child. Thus, listening is sustaining

the existence of another, in which the personal relationship is one of obedience.

- c) Listening to the Word presupposes a special sense of Truth, because in the word there is the transcendental presence of God who speaks to us. Praying in the way God deserves is something which can be learned only through contact with the living Word. This is why the Constitutions place great importance upon “permanent and familiar contact with the Holy Scriptures”. In human religious life, man tries to approach God in some way or other, and to perceive Him. The Word creates the new heart which is spoken of in Ezekiel 36. So it is the Word itself which dilates the human conscience and opens it up to the infinite spaces of God.
- d) In the Bible there is a coherent method for prayer: when a person learns to pray by listening, the only reply he makes is one of thanks. In this way, even asking is thanking, repentance for sins is praising the marvelous works of the Lord.

When we listen to the Word and wish to pray, by listening to our own conscience, that word is interpreted subjectively and it is difficult to pray. When we learn to listen to the Word as a call from God, then indeed that Word awakens in us a deep feeling of freedom. We must therefore trust in prayer, in the Word, in God, who we can find there and who shows Himself through it.

- e) We must be vigilant in order to perceive the voice of God. We must always listen to God, who comes to us when He wishes. Being vigilant is one of those virtues which should be a part of every Christian, following that advice given in various parables to his disciples and to the crowd by the Lord. We must ask questions of ourselves regarding our fidelity to a constant, careful and silent reading of the Word. Without this kind of fidelity, it is very hard to enter into the knowledge of God, the way He works and his miracles, and to find a way to understand how the history of salvation continues to be repeated in all of us. We cannot listen to God when we are concerned with our own business. We cannot listen if our God is a being who explains everything. We cannot listen if we are unable to see God behind everyday happenings. Fidelity to silence and to listening is necessary for real prayer.

4. Prayer and celebrations

The constitutions contain many references to the various celebrations in which a Piarist religious should take part. We shall concentrate on some of them.

- a) Liturgical celebrations: "With assiduous prayer and working for the presence of God in our daily activities, we prepare ourselves more

efficaciously to celebrate the sacred liturgy, in which work for our salvation and to the glory of God, reaches its highest point" (C 45). To celebrate the liturgy is to celebrate the Church. There are some people who draw a distinction between personal prayer and the prayer of the Church. They say this because, if prayer has a sense, it is that of being something extremely personal, which is unique, not transferable and perhaps even incommunicable. And so in this sense it is the opposite of the Church. But we must go beyond this dialectic, in which the subjective and personal is opposed to the objective and community, and this can only be done when we understand the Church profoundly. Certainly the Church is not a person in any ontological sense, and yet at the same time it is not just a group of individuals. If Our Lady did not exist, with Jesus behind her, then we should indeed have to doubt whether every time that God speaks to us the response would be a perfect, holy and immaculate "Yes", given in love. Nevertheless, when the faithful are united in the name of Jesus, as an Assembly of God, a people of faith, we know that at that moment God finds that perfect and stainless "Yes". In this way our personal assent, and that of all believers, becomes a part of the "yes" of all saints. Thus there is no conflict between personal prayer and that of the Church.

These celebrations should be prepared with daily fidelity to prayer, which is the best way to enter the Body of the Church, which adores, praises and asks God. Personal fidelity helps our common life. A Christian heart opens itself to the dimensions of the Church. We may feel small and poor personally, our faith may be weak and our love may be restricted, but when we celebrate, we enter the Church, which has the faith and love of a Bride.

- b) The Liturgy of the Hours includes Lauds and Vespers. In the morning we sing the compassion of God and in the evening we proclaim his fidelity, which we have experienced during the day. Lauds and Vespers introduce what we call the “Divine Office”. Office means praying to God in the right and official way. This is what we owe to God: the sacred duty of giving that glory to which God has a right. Sometimes our response to the Divine Office tends to diminish it, as if it were a simply a duty to be performed. However, the Office is, as liturgy, the just response of the Church to God and is a response to the immeasurable love which he continually shows us in our lives. We are not faithful to such celebrations simply so that a duty is performed for something which is sacred and which we are ordered to do. Liturgical prayers are useless unless we take upon us the response of the Church and these prayers become personal ones in each of us.

This is why faith in the Church is important. Even if my faith is very great, I am still a sinner and as such I shall, on my own, never be able to contemplate the mystery of God as it has been revealed to us.

What kind of faith do we have for all this? Do we experience prayer as devotion? Here, fidelity is also a path forward and is always linked to the contexts in which we find ourselves.

- c) Amongst all celebrations it is the Eucharist which shines out: “Every day we share in the Lord’s supper, persevering, in the manner of the primitive Church, in the Word of God and the Breaking of the Bread, through which the community is built in brotherhood... a genuine sign of this...” (C 46). How do we celebrate the Eucharist? There are many ways to approach it:

Firstly, the Eucharist is perfect; it is the sacrifice of Christ to God in which I share, I perform and thus I receive faith. This approach makes the sacrament a kind of magic.

Secondly, there is the opposite approach: what counts in the Eucharist is my faith, my vocation. Thus the sacraments are transformed into acts of devotion. The Mystery of what is done is shifted towards personal and subjective religious feeling.

A third approach is when we realize that what matters in the liturgy is what God gives us, that which He has offered as salvation, the communication of Himself, as a revelation of the mystery of Christ. This is a receptive attitude which is nourished by objective fact, indicated by the Church; that which God offers to man.

The fourth approach is when my personal faith, which receives the gift, ties itself to the faith of the Church; that is, when at last I understand that I cannot receive the gift from God, that my heart is unable to share in the mystery of Christ, that my “yes” is unsuitable for the love of God and also that I am unable because although I have received the Spirit my heart is not holy and without stain; then I unite with the Communion of Saints, and I can offer spiritual sacrifices which are acceptable to God.

Fidelity requires living the Eucharist in this fourth way, without acrobatic leaps, but by progressively and permanently abandoning oneself to God.

Calasanz speaks of the Eucharist in a simple way when he advises his religious: “Every day our priests shall celebrate the Sacrifice of the Mass” (CC 56). “Our other working brethren, those consecrated or those in various stages of the sacraments of the Order, every Sunday and once a week and in the first and second class

feast days, shall receive Holy Communion” (CC 57, c.f. CC 61). Furthermore, we only need to read the declarations of many of the religious who lived with him and who saw him celebrate, in order to understand what the living bread of daily life meant to Calasanz, as it helped him to experience all the providence of God.

- d) Another sacrament of these celebrations is as follows: “We are all called to conversion and to renew ourselves continually through repentance, charitable works, the liturgy and in a special way, through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in which we completely reestablish our peace with the Father of compassion, with the whole Church and with our brethren; we shall have frequent recourse to this sacrament, with assiduous fidelity” (C 47). And Calasanz said: “At least once a week, all shall make confession” (CC 58).

If we were to draw up statistics on that “frequent and assiduously”, the number would be rather low. Here are some thoughts:

First of all, this sacrament seems to be experienced in a moralistic way rather than theological. From one point of view this is normal and many people think that therefore it is not very important to take part in it. Morality considers it to be an act; theology an attitude. Morality sees the confession of a sin; theology as diving into the expiatory Blood of Christ.

Secondly, we have made sin banal, by making it the most terrible thing in life. Just take a look again at the Epistle to the Romans. Nobody knows how much a sinner he is, or what his sin means, until he falls to his knees and looks at the Cross. If you don't look from this viewpoint, your sin seems to lose its evil.

Thirdly, reconciliation does not mean that the sin committed is pardoned and therefore I may completely forget about it. It is much more than that. It is the most disturbing manifestation of love which is freely given as an act of mercy without any apparent motive. Sin deserves Hell, when we see that we have killed the Son. But God, in his infinite love, changes our greatest fault into the greatest reason for His love. The death of the Son, which is our greatest sin, becomes, through the love of God, the motive for our salvation. We shall never understand the love of God because it is inexplicable and will always surprise us.

Fourthly, reconciliation is freely given and we do not merit it. We are justified by grace and not by our works. We are astonished when we realize we live in this way. God loves because He loves and there is no other reason than that of his love itself. And it is God who has chosen to love in this way.

The fifth way in which this sacrament is experienced is simply to achieve peace. But

peace comes from the love of God, who forgives because of grace and not only because of the sacrament. Before we were born there were confessionals in churches, a sign that the God's love was there before our own sins.

Therefore we should be faithful to this sacrament because sin can be seen only by the eyes of God. In this way we may achieve peace. If, however, we look at sin through our own eyes, anguish is what comes, with oppression and depression.

5. Prayer and life

Prayer is rooted in life. Prayer is and is performed in life and becomes homage to God. The Constitutions say: "Our whole life shall become a ritual act of devotion if, by accepting in faith all that comes from the hand of the heavenly Father, we always remain one with the mediation of Christ. We shall be able to stay faithful to this plan of life if our consciences are ever vigilant and if, in private and communally, we allow our actions to be examined" (C 48).

Sometimes this prayer-life relationship worries us, because they are two real situations which cannot be divided. A prayer which is not life, which does not become life, is not a prayer. A life without prayer is not in any way suitable for the way of life that has been chosen and to which we have been called. It is true that the link between these two realities differs according to the style of life chosen.

A mother with five children cannot pray in the same way as a nun in a closed order, and the latter will not pray like another religious whose mission is an active one. The heart of prayer will be the same but the manner will be different.

All this sometimes provokes tension. When we feel guilty because we have not been praying, if we seriously examine ourselves we discover that we cannot do better than we do. The same may happen when we feel we are in the arms of God and are faithful to Him in our prayer and yet we feel that our life is not changing. What kind of prayer is this?

In prayer it is not taste which matters, but love. Look not for peace but rather for the will of God. It is not devotion that is important, but faith; do not look at the time spent praying but at the quality of the relationship.

When considering this subject, we need to examine the bases of prayer and of life; some people try to do this alone and that is where they begin to fail. For others, the basis is grace, and this is a beginning for the solution of many failures. There is no contrast between prayer and life, but there may be in the way in which these fundamental realities are experienced, that is, between the obedience of faith and anxiety for things. So, we must be faithful to prayer and to life; to prayer, where we find God, and to life, where we find mankind. But do we not also find God in life and we are with mankind in

prayer? This is also true. We need to be faithful to this double reality and must evaluate how far we are making sure our lives are homage to God in both of these aspects.

6. Difficulties in prayer

This is a subject that is not mentioned in our Constitutions, but it seems pertinent to say some words about it. I shall mention some difficulties without developing the matter and shall limit myself to listing them.

Firstly, there is rationalization, which leads us not to pray. This is an excuse. "For me the Liturgy suffices". Secondly, it may be difficult to concentrate. Ask yourselves: why is it hard to concentrate? It is not the same if it depends on having a nervous character as on being excessively active. Or perhaps it is caused by indifference, as when someone is living outside the light of faith or is going through a bad patch. Please note that obsession for concentration may be a way to distract oneself. I offer a suggestion: we need to learn to pray with distractions. This presupposes exercising our spiritual freedom so we may distinguish between superficial and profound spiritual matters. Thirdly, prayer may bring temptations. What kind? All kinds. If we are tempted, we should ask ourselves what kind of prayer ours should be. In this case, instead of making distractions and temptations

a problem, we should reverse course and change them into a path towards humility. I mention only some of them: aridity, despair, the superficiality of natural optimism, fear of being face to face with God, “sloth”...

We must always stay faithful to prayer and in prayer. Some people begin to pray, soon tire of it and stop. Others think they have more important things to do and don't even begin. Without fidelity in our prayer it is not possible to continue in the *sequela Christi* and to love Him completely.

Questions for personal reflection

- 1) Examine your personal prayer. What do you do? But above all, do you really pray?
- 2) Is praying in solitude a personal habit of yours? Solitude is not loneliness, but is being alone with God.
- 3) Do you use many words in prayer – not pleasant for God, or is it a loving dialogue for you?
- 4) Is yours ecclesial prayer? When you pray, do you feel you belong to the Church?

Suggestions for community discernment

1. In which situations can the community say that it follows Christ crucified?
2. Have you ever taken part in community discernment?

3. Examine with discernment how you experience the various celebrations you perform together: lauds, vespers, the Eucharist...
4. Have you ever celebrated reconciliation together, even if not as a sacrament?

Suggestions for a day of prayer

- 1) Take a biblical text: read it, meditate personally, look for similar images and see what it means for each of you and then share your thoughts with all the others, so as to be able to draw conclusions which will improve the life of the whole community.

Biblical texts

Lk 18, 1; 2, 19; Matt 6, 6; Acts 2, 42; Rom 12, 1-2; 1Tim 2, 1; Jn 4, 23, 24.

We are faithful to prayer:

- If it is focused on Jesus Christ.
- If the passion and resurrection has a special place in it.
- If opening ourselves in a receptive way is our attitude through life.
- If it is not only speaking but also listening.
- If the main thing is God, not our interests, even when these are spiritual.

- If we are not looking for pleasure but for the love of God.
- If we heartfully ask God for his Holy Spirit.
- If we continue with our prayer, even though it may seem arid and when we are discouraged or tempted.
- If we listen to what God is saying.
- If we do not change it into an opportunity to read a book.
- If the Word is often in our hands and in our hearts.
- If we do not abandon it when we feel nothing or it says nothing to us.
- If we respond to the love we receive.
- If we know how to thank, praise and bless God for our lives.
- If we learn to pray as the Lord did.

FAITHFUL IN CHASTITY

Number 16 in the second chapter of the Constitutions says that we shall live the *sequela Christi* “faithful in chastity”. It is of this fidelity that we shall speak here. In following Jesus Christ in consecrated life, celibacy is one of the most characteristic elements when we look at our lives as followers of the Master. The Lord was celibate in his life, and in consecrated life we have been called to model our existence on the ways of our Teacher. But chastity, or rather celibacy, is a path to follow, and the Constitutions mention various aspects of this journey.

1. Chastity is a gift

This is the first statement made by the Constitutions in the relevant chapter: “Our heavenly Father, as a precious gift of his love in the Church, gives us chastity, as a view of the Kingdom of Heaven” (C 53). This means that it is not mankind’s plan, something that he has decided on his own

and intends to do with his own efforts; rather it is a vocation to follow Jesus. A consecrated person has been so attracted by the Spirit of the Lord that he identifies himself with the way of life chosen by the Master. If it were not for the calling and the gift received, it would be impossible to follow Jesus and his way of life in this particular way.

We do not need to ask the reason for this gift; gifts of God are ends in themselves, in the madness of a love which wishes to offer itself in that way. God has desired to call a person to a way of life and has provided the means by which this may be fulfilled. What can we say about love when it has been shown in this way?

This is not to suggest that every kind of chastity is not a gift from God. Even when experienced in different ways, it is still a gift from the Lord. But for now we are speaking of that consecrated chastity of religious life, in which an individual feels tied to the person of Jesus Christ, and so strong is that link that it leads to his belonging to Jesus in a way which far exceeds any other bond which he may have.

This gift requires a response of fidelity: we must be so faithful in accepting it that we can do nothing but open our hands and hearts; faithful in experiencing it with the means to do so written in the Constitutions (as below); faithful in giving thanks for it, because we need to understand that the unheard-of and incomprehensible love of God is the only reason for which we have it.

When we speak of consecrated chastity, we should be careful not to spiritualize it and not to think that it is better than Christian chastity. Those for whom a distinctive sign of religious life is virginity put it in first place, at the highest point of Christian existence, and consider marriage to be an inferior state. Thus virginity is the desired state and is almost necessary in order to fulfill the role of a disciple. Such statements are based upon the Council of Trent, which indicates virginity as a state which is of itself higher than that of matrimony.

However, we need to consider that one state may indeed be superior to another, but that does not mean it is suitable for “me”. And to say “for me” does not only mean at an individual level, but to realize that every kind of Christian life exists only in so far as it is a personal story. The problem of vocations is not a problem of states of being but of personal callings, of personal processes. We should shift the question from the form of existence, from historical states, to the subjective, to ongoing personal processes. In this way we shall change our perception and judgment.

On the other hand, we should take care not to fall into discrediting the body, human love, sexual love and the sexual pleasure that may be found in human life. Those who have chosen religious life because they believe it is greater than marriage or because they have suffered rejection of sexual love have not understood what consecrated life is about. Being called to a vocation does not imply

discrediting the riches which other forms may possess (even matrimony is a vocation) or those things of which other forms of life are made up.

2. Following Christ with individual love

This is a fundamental element in consecrated life but what does it signify or imply in order for us to be able to examine our fidelity?

- a) That our hearts are dedicated to this life and that it must be lived from the innermost heart. Our hearts give their utmost in love and when they really love, they ask for nothing more than to be loved back and wish for nothing else than to fulfill their own desires; we live from the center of life and follow our own impulses wherever they lead us. When we enter religious life, we do not know what will happen to us in the future. We simply allow ourselves to be guided by our love which is centered on Jesus, because we are attracted by Him and led to live that way.
- b) The undivided heart implies belonging. This is why, rather than renouncing certain experiences (even though this is the case), consecrated chastity is to be found in the joy of belonging to someone. In belonging we experience what it is like to be someone. This may be difficult to define, but every individual knows when he or she belongs to someone else and also that more-or-less loving relationships may be possible, without belonging.

Consecrated chastity must be lived and fulfilled in belonging. There is no authentic chastity without belonging, even if those tendencies towards a life which has been given up have been overcome. We may observe all the precepts of the vows of chastity, but if we do not belong to the Lord, what kind of chastity is this?

- c) The undivided heart implies a bond. Belonging is a tie; if you are not bonded, you do not belong, and if this does not happen, the undivided heart is devastated. For this reason, those who live in consecrated chastity do not allow their hearts to be dispersive, or flirt with the affections, or indulge in erotic game-playing. Leaving aside moral blame, which we do not wish to deal with here, this is a matter of spiritual sensitivity, an unconditional relationship with the other; in our case with the Lord himself.
- d) The undivided heart is not something we have simply because we have uttered a vow of chastity. The same happens as with other vows. Normally, profession is not the consecration of something which we immediately live fully, but the beginning of a path forward upon which we must travel. This is important to remember when faced with difficulties which may arise later. An undivided heart must be created progressively, because if consecrated chastity is a gift, it is also a struggle. It is a gift and as such it does not depend upon our efforts, our choices

or our desires; it is a struggle, and God allows difficulties, clashes, obstacles and failures. But being a struggle does not mean that it is not a gift; and vice-versa, being a gift does not mean that it is not also a struggle.

- e) The undivided heart is a bond with God, but that does not mean other ties are not allowed us. There has been much bad teaching in this field, saying that love given to another person is love subtracted from the Lord. How often have we heard this sort of thing taught in religious life! Christianity, and consequently religious life, have not placed proper value on the human side and have been unable to integrate it with the religious experience of faith. Too much Platonism and Augustinism have influenced Christianity in this matter. It is true that an undivided heart has an exclusive alliance with God, but, although it may seem paradoxical, this does not exclude other ties. We must always distinguish the transcendental side from that of categorizing. In the former, we live our relationship with God, which is placed over and above all others; in the latter, there are other relationships which may even be definitive. We need to bear this in mind with discernment, in personal life and in personal guidance.
- f) In the midst of all there are the affections, because there is no chastity when the affections are not taken into account. There are vocations in which

the fundamental element in life is affection for Jesus. He has been everything for these people. He has guided their lives. They have known how to rely upon Him during life's hard times, and it has been Jesus who has settled their troubled hearts and let them confide in Him in absolute faith. In this case we follow a person; the contact is face to face and it is this contact and what follows it which leads to a mission. In others, however, the prevalent feeling is for Jesus as a role-model or symbol. More than Jesus himself, it is what he represents that is important.

Our affections depend upon specific factors and first of all, what influences us is the humanity of Jesus Christ. Let us remember how important this humanity was for Saint Theresa of Avila (or "of Jesus"). Sometimes Jesus is represented as the second person of the Trinity, but in that way we do not always see the humanity of the Master and that is not a way to establish contact with Him. Secondly, there is what Jesus means for his disciples: his importance as a person, which is to say, something like the experience his disciples had of Him face to face, he who was Teacher and Lord at the same time. Jesus, then, has a meaning, a relationship, a tie to an individual; this is everything and it is enough to contain all the relevant images which are found in the Gospels.

- g) The undivided heart implies perfect continence lived in celibacy. "The evangelical suggestion

of chastity... means an obligation to perfect continence lived in celibacy” (C 55).

In the Constitutions, Calasanz placed great emphasis upon his experience of continence: “As long as religious live in their mortal flesh, although, in imitation of the Angels it is wonderful to cultivate chastity in looks, while walking, in speech and in the deportment of the whole body, nevertheless, we know that it is a very bad thing to stain this celestial virtue in any way. Therefore, we shall strenuously avoid impure thoughts, casting them from their very beginnings upon the rocks, and shall avoid obscene discourse and all that which we know recalls the vanity of the world; but we shall pay special attention to the modesty of our eyes, lest death should enter through the window” (CC 112).

The fidelity of an undivided heart is a fundamental reality in order to live consecrated chastity in the *sequela Christi*.

That fidelity should be considered starting from aspects which we shall deal with in the following points.

3. Love for all mankind

When speaking of consecrated chastity, the Constitutions state: “...thus we join ourselves to God more intimately and we embrace all men with singular charity” (C 53). It has always been

claimed that celibacy gives people more freedom and allows them to give themselves to everybody. Some observations are pertinent here:

- a) As has already been said, in celibacy the intimate relationship which is developed with Jesus is of fundamental importance. We follow Him, who is the center of life, of desires and of love. In this sense, we can consider and experience celibacy as a question of affections. The crucial point is that we should not make it become a way of life in order to enable us to be freer for certain functions. In this case, celibacy would become only a functional thing and what should be a question of the heart would only be a simple means to reach certain goals of ours, however important these may seem to us.
- b) Celibacy does not always bring freedom. This way of life may hide forms of selfishness, a lack of dedication in life, the wish to resolve this problem because we are afraid of living it outwardly, the advantage of not having to worry about many problems which ordinary people have.
- c) Other times, what we call “love for mankind” is nothing but protecting our hearts through many activities, because we do not wish to uncover the most important thing in life, and in this way we avoid authentically giving ourselves to man and God; when we are afraid of men, religious life becomes a refuge; if we are afraid

of being face to face with God, life becomes our little hiding-hole where we live well enough.

- d) However, what we have said does not mean that real freedom does not exist for those who, free from worries of a personal kind, freely give themselves to mankind, live for man, give all they can, and especially themselves, in their dedication to the service of others, which imitates that of Jesus with His contemporaries. But just as He nourished that giving through his continual contact and solitary prayer with his Father, they see that giving themselves to man would be worth nothing if it were not sustained and nourished through solitary prayer with Jesus. They find Jesus in mankind, but that meeting must be sustained by the presence of the Master, and in his presence they pray for those men to whom they offer their lives.

What is said above requires fidelity, both to men and to the Lord, and this fidelity is experienced as a path along which we constantly journey. If we are not faithful to men, how can we be faithful to Jesus, who generates dedication and gives Himself to mankind?

4. The path towards the goal of chastity

The Constitutions tell us: “The special gift of perfect chastity can be rediscovered every day, be conquered and kept close, especially by those people who, without counting on their own efforts, keep in

constant contact with God, and they wait in humility for the necessary help He gives" (C 57). Three elements are mentioned: discover, conquer and keep.

- a) First there is "discover". This requires discernment and therefore spiritual guidance. This may come as a desire or be strongly felt as a current which comes from afar, without, until a certain moment, realizing that there is a wish to offer oneself to God, to follow Jesus or to work for the Kingdom. In younger people, this first appears as a desire to imitate someone they know and admire, like an educator or a religious in the same village... I speak about the vocations which we know. Thus, this may firstly be seen as an ideal and it presuppose a person's wish for something he finds attractive and which lets him escape from himself. We need to remember that a vocation itself comes from an impulse of grace and should not be confused with a mere sentiment.

There are people who experience their vocations by dedicating themselves to a cause or a project or through dedication to their neighbor; others experience it as a life of personal love, of belonging. There are many forms of vocational experience. All require discernment, so that an individual may know how he has been called by Jesus and in which way Jesus is his own personal love. But this is not always the case. The question we must ask ourselves is, which

experience of love determines our lives, because we are not speaking only of the moment we enter; moreover, how has that experience of love affected our vocation to follow Jesus? This influence later affects the way we experience consecrated chastity, the undivided heart.

- b) Secondly there is conquest. This is an ambiguous term, because we have stated that it is a gift. But we need to receive the gift as thanks. When we consider a vocation and its sub-strata of the affections, we should consider two aspects of human affections: the symmetric and the asymmetric. The latter is that which implies inequality. Asymmetric experience must develop little by little, as the vocational process develops, and it comes when we are able to hear God as a Father, and to see the experience of love as something which is freely given. Little by little we are reconciled with its finite nature and we learn to rest ourselves in God, realize we are loved, purify our lives and hearts through our trust in God.

A symmetric relationship implies a certain kind of equality; for example, it is the kind we may have with our friends. The gradual acquisition of consecrated chastity becomes a relationship with Jesus. This appears in more autonomous people, for whom, perhaps, the world of meanings is that which comes first, and who may later on find it difficult to be dependent. In this case we must cultivate personal love for Jesus, for the *sequela*,

the form of his person, progress in this life of consecrated chastity as living with and for Jesus, and from there, towards men. Here, there are two poles of a person's affection involved, the finite and freedom, gratuity and works. We need to ask ourselves how this looks to us in our own journey towards our conquest of consecrated life.

- c) Thirdly there is keeping close. We shall look at the means given in the Constitutions, but before that shall mention some of man's beliefs.

Firstly, a clear knowledge that nobody may deny the essential needs of a person with impunity. For example, we cannot be celibate if we are not content with our bodies, with a need to be loved, if we do not take the female world into consideration. We often find ourselves faced with the world of the repressed, even if this may be sublimated. We should be careful of that world which does not accept reality because it is misunderstood or because there has been bad education in this field, or perhaps because of certain fears which may arise in an individual as he feels all those things that are needed for him to be a man.

Secondly, as the path is gradually trodden, a binding experience should appear. This is a trans-psychological experience; which is to say that celibacy is not a question of chastity but of belonging. It is conferred by the Holy Spirit, but is profoundly human. This must not be confused

with a prize. This bond is not a moral one but is an experience of belonging, an alliance. Step by step and little by little as it becomes stronger, chastity is more and more perceived as the love of faith. Thus faith becomes more personal than other needs.

We must consider that when we discover how our vocation for celibacy gradually becomes stronger, the moment arrives in which that love of faith may progress along with the normal necessities of our desires, whatever these are, but this does not matter, since they do not touch the basic elements of ourselves, or touch love in the center of our personalities. It may happen that some people will integrate their human needs in a normal way, whereas God may leave others skin-deep, with strong impressions which may even be frightening. However, we need to realize that this is superficial and that the center is always the undivided heart for the Lord.

5. Spiritual Means

“This union with God, fed by his Word, by prayers and the sacraments, keeps alive in us our inspiration to offer ourselves to God and to mankind in an ever more complete way. Our filial devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and her maternal protection, implored with faith, will increase our strength to diligently follow his example of fidelity” (C 58).

Prayer is the fundamental means by which we may live that consecrated chastity which the Lord wants and of which the Constitutions speak. Who can make us live celibacy authentically? Who can make our lacerated and wounded hearts into undivided hearts centered on love for the Lord? Who can make us renew our lives, which are so deteriorated after the many struggles and losses we have suffered in our lives? The answer is: only God and Jesus, whom we meet in prayer.

Piarist prayer is affectionate. It was not in vain that the Conventual Franciscans, the Carmelites and Fr. Cordeses entered the life of Calasanz. And so must we, as long as we are free to follow Jesus, wherever he may lead us.

Prayer of the affections begins with the presence of God in an act of faith and this starts in the heart. This is not a matter of “believing” with our minds that we are in His presence; rather it is living His presence, which is real, with our hearts, even if this is not shown in any sentiment.

The central moment is the relationship. This may come from having read a passage in the Bible, from an interior look at God, from a heartbeat, from feeling we are led to love, to bless, to praise or to ask God, or even simply to stand before Him, near Him, with Him. Faith enlivened by love is the means and the aim of prayer. This is why we must leave everything else and stay there as soon as this relationship arises.

We should not over-examine everything we do or how we do it, because that is how a relationship breaks down. In prayer, we love and do not necessarily feel at ease; in prayer, it is the Lord who is important, not we; prayer means leaving ourselves to approach Him.

And all ends in the obedience of faith. Those who pray are led to do the will of God, manifested in prayer itself.

The same thing happens with the sacraments, lived by faith: eating the Body of Christ, drinking His Blood, receiving His forgiveness. Food invigorates the soul and makes consecrated chastity stronger and the travails of life are not obstacles for the undivided heart. Forgiveness purifies life day by day and the Blood of the Lamb helps us overcome our difficulties. If the world of the affections (in which there are usually many wounds) is not resolved well, sooner or later, when we choose to give ourselves to celibacy, there will be a crisis. It may happen, but not always, with a healthy person, who, even if his human side is not fully integrated, may through prayer find that God is a substitute for that human side. But this is not usual. We can affirm that if, in his relationship with God, an individual has experienced periods of liberty, and at the same time is not afraid of human relationships, a crisis may come along when he least expects it. In crises of the affections there are obviously moral aspects, but these are not of the greatest importance. Such crises always have a meaning and indicate progress

in the life of an individual. The moral problem must not be set aside, but this personal process has other dynamics, of greater importance, which are often the dynamics of integration.

Thus, faced with a crisis, the question to ask is: what kind is it? Is it idealization? Is it repression? These are sensitive questions which one must ask while we take the process of an individual into consideration, with the experience of the human resources that we shall mention in the following point. All must be lived in fidelity and authenticity.

6. Human mediation

Human mediation is mentioned in the Constitutions: “Sincere fraternal unity in a serene and happy community, which cares for prayer and work, and, with enthusiasm and dedication, lives its consecrated life” (C 59); “practice of human virtues and the appropriate means to safeguard psychological and physical health” (C 59); “a spiritual instinct” (C 59); caring for the means of social communication (c.f. C 60); “sobriety and continual vigilance” (C 61); “daily renewal of this, our option for faith” (C 61); “the desire to get to know Christ better and to direct to Him the only love of our entire life” (C 61).

Let us look at the elements mentioned in the Constitutions; this is not the moment to dwell on the statistics of all these aspects. Rather, it is time to underline faithfulness to that which these aspects

propose. We cannot live this celibacy and have an undivided heart when we allow ourselves to look at or possess magazines which may make chastity difficult, compared to when we do not have them; or, when we spend time looking at inappropriate images through any means of communication (and there are many of them), compared to when we do not spend time doing so. This is obvious and in such cases we must open ourselves to vigilance, loving fidelity, the prayer of the affections, human maturity and spiritual growth.

Communities must be joyful environments, so that their members do not feel a need to look elsewhere. And it is a decisive spiritual instinct which makes us spontaneously perceive what is good and what is not in the field of chastity. Even if it is true that every person is called to honor this vow (like all others) in a specific way; God calls people to live their chastity in different ways, for example, sometimes through human mediation, sometimes not. Living chastely does not only depend upon our own efforts (which we must nevertheless make) but above all upon the call we have received from the Lord to live in a certain way. It is essential that we understand this, and, after having understood it, keep to it faithfully.

Another important point is “sobriety and continual vigilance, maturity in friendship” with people. On this point, the Constitutions of our Holy Father reflect the mentality of his time, even if the heart of the matter (if not the form) is expressed with delicate wisdom (c.f. CC 113 and 115).

These days we understand that interpersonal relationships are very important and we need to state that loving is an important part of life. Celibacy is not castration of the heart. In this relationship with others, we must consider that they are not the means but the mediation given us by God. Making a person become a mediator means objectivizing him; mediation is something which God gives us in our lives so that it may lead to the undivided heart and make Him the only real treasure in our lives. But the path is not easy, there may be obstacles, and we must travel it with real discernment.

All we have said here requires real fidelity. But how can we be faithful to God in a subject which we have made a very thorny one. Why has there been so much fear of the body and of sexual relations in Christianity? And the two of them shall be one body, said God at the beginning. Yes, and in spite of all, fidelity is possible in the field of consecrated chastity, but we need to confide in God. Time does not destroy fidelity, but strengthens it so that it is possible to be faithful “always”. “Forever” is possible. Furthermore, in our vocations, we constantly listen to the voice of the Lord: “Be not afraid, for I am with you”. And we go towards Him, with a loving heart and reconciled; forgiven and astonished at His love; vigilant, but in the sure knowledge that He cares for us; hopeful because we have been given Jesus and in Him, all that we love best.

Questions for personal reflection

- 1) Do you experience your chastity as a gift of the Lord? In which way do you see this?
- 2) How do you consider your body and the sexual side of your life?
- 3) What does having an undivided heart mean to you? How do you live as stated in the Constitutions?
- 4) What is your love for mankind like?

Suggestions for community discernment

- 1) Examine your life in relation to number 112 of the Holy Father's Constitutions.
- 2) Does the community offer itself with all its heart to those for whom it works?
- 3) Is community prayer a place in which the heart is given new life?
- 4) How are the precepts of numbers 59-61 lived in your community?

Suggestions for a day of prayer

- 1) Pray to the Holy Spirit.
- 2) Read the chapter on chastity in our Constitutions.
- 3) Is your community capable of discussing what is said in this chapter in depth?
- 4) Of all the things said in this chapter, what is the most important for your community and for each of you individually?

Biblical texts

Matt 19, 10-12; 1Cor 7, 7; 7, 32-35; Phil 3, 10; 1Cor 9, 22; Matt 25, 1-13; Lk 20, 34; Phil 3, 20-21; Ap 14, 1-5.

You are faithful to chastity:

- If you belong to the Lord.
- If you live bonded to Him.
- If love is the reason for your consecration.
- If every relationship in your life is subject to that of the Lord.
- If your heart is not in your flesh (Saint Paul).
- If you are not afraid of your body, of sexuality and pleasure.
- If any reluctance to what your vow of chastity requires is the result of an experience of love and not of fear or escape.
- If the Lord is everything for you.
- If you truly love mankind and offer yourself, and if that dedication comes from the love of God.

FIDELITY TO DEFENDING THE INSTITUTE

Why should we be faithful to the poverty of our Piarist life? Because Calasanz told us: “Every time we try to experiment, poverty, which is praiseworthy and the mother of precious humility and other virtues, must be loved by religious and must be kept safe in its purity, like a strong wall of Religion and its effects” (CC137). Some of this has been kept in the new Constitutions, which maintain the thought and even the words of the Founder: “This is the poverty that we love as the strongest defense of the Order, and we keep it in all its integrity” (C 75).

For Calasanz, poverty was also, but not only, a vow, which he considered such a profound experience of conversion which God had allowed him to have, that it served to defend his religion. This is one of the last battles he undertook and which he won against certain religious who wanted to reduce this aspect. The Founder was convinced that reducing poverty through new

Constitutions would have been the ruin of the Order, but he prevailed in the discussions and the Order continued on its chosen path.

1. Poverty in religious life

When we think of poverty in religious life we immediately think of the Bible story of the rich young man. His riches impeded him from following Jesus because he was asked for poverty in the *sequela Christi*. The Constitutions state: “We are dedicated to following Christ, who, although he was rich, made himself poor for us so that through his poverty we should become rich...” (C 63). Poverty is a condition for those who follow Christ in consecrated life. Now, basing ourselves on the biblical text of the rich young man (Matt 19, 16-22), we may distinguish five vocational dialectical moments about that poverty to which we must be faithful.

First of all, at the beginning there is a meeting. A vocation is not a plan for perfection and this is the experience of Jesus as the Messiah. It is an experience of faith which involves the experience of Jesus as the One in whom the absolute is manifested.

Next there is dialogue. “Master, what good deed must I do to possess eternal life?” “Keep the commandments... I have kept all these...” So we are dealing with a “plus”. However, the key to this “extra” is neither moral nor legalistic. The “extra” which Jesus asks for comes from the Kingdom and from

the experience of the believer. There is a charismatic call to live the Kingdom through poverty.

Therefore this is a vocational experience which bursts in on us and is not our own choice. The Kingdom introduces a disciple to a new experience. In addition to the commandments, we find the experience of Jesus's "leave everything and follow me". Our Constitutions certainly say the same thing: "...we must place his Kingdom before everything else" (C 63).

The third moment is when it is realized that in order to follow Jesus in poverty we have to have understood what the Kingdom means, independently of any religious rules. What is needed is a choice of faith that allows us to follow Jesus with trust, as the Constitutions say: "...only by trusting in God" (C 63). We cannot live in poverty and be faithful to that choice unless God has called us to follow Him in that way. Only when we are called to live in poverty, can we unconditionally abandon ourselves to God. And thus through poverty we are able to experience the Kingdom.

The fourth moment comes when we understand that all this is impossible for men, but possible for God. Therefore it cannot be a religious desire, a volunteered impulse or perfectionism. It is not with such characteristics that we can live in poverty and follow the Master, for we need grace. We learn that everything is centered on Jesus and all depends

upon faith; from the charismatic experience to which we are called by Jesus; and from the act of faith and the strength of the Holy Spirit, which makes everything possible. We can only follow Jesus in poverty if we too are poor.

We conclude with the question of St. Peter: "To us who have left all..." To you I leave the Kingdom, a hundredfold, all of it, but with persecution. We have "left all for love of the Kingdom" (C 65), say the Constitutions, like Peter, with a promise to "live like Christ poor, which is a manifestation and need for our love for Christ and for the poor" (C 65).

Poverty comes only from the experience of Jesus. There may be many who might choose poverty for other reasons, e.g. for social or practical reasons. For us, it is a vocational experience and the proof that we love God and mankind and it is a necessary ingredient of this love.

There are two aspects of this vocational experience. First of all, the Holy Spirit has had to arouse in us our preference for Christ. And we know that one of these preferences is to live in poverty rather than in riches, to be poor and not rich. The question we must ask ourselves is: do we prefer to be poor or rich? The Kingdom is real in that poverty which was an obstacle to the rich young man. In us, the Spirit produces a great sense of freedom which helps us to prefer poverty. This is a test of whether my *sequela Christi* is real or not.

Secondly, poverty at a vocational level implies that we live this way as a “status”, as a clear desire to be poor. Religious life is often thought of as a state: it has its laws, its rules, its legal and social role and its austerity. All this is not the dynamics of a vocation, in which there must be an explicit desire to embrace poverty. To understand this we need to read the chapters on poverty well. Fidelity, then, is not directed towards the social structures which may permit us many things as long as we respect certain rules; fidelity means the dynamics of vocations and is much more deeply-rooted.

2. Examples

The Constitutions provide us with examples of how to live in poverty: “The Lord Jesus chose, amongst the poor and humble, the Blessed Virgin Mary for His Mother, who stood out amongst all for poverty and humility. And Saint Joseph Calasanz, because he experienced humility and other virtues through venerable poverty, wanted us to be the real Poor of the Mother of God” (C 64).

In Mary poverty is simplicity because she does not consider herself more important than anyone else; it is being helpful, because she is always willing to do the will of God; it is self-denial, because she is interested in others and their needs; it is love towards all, because she is concerned and stays with the disciples when the Lord has gone away. Mary is open

to the will of God without being concerned for her own desires, or, rather, she allows everything when obeying God and gives herself to her neighbor.

Through Calasanz we get to know the extremes of poverty that he lived as “*somma povertà*”. He said: “as far as holy poverty is concerned, which is known and embraced by the few, when we have succeeded in experiencing it, it will be much better for our religion” (EP 1755). There are many deeply spiritual passages in Calasanz’s letters. In the fifth and sixth chapters of the Constitutions, on poverty and clothing, specific information concerning the religious rules for his religious is given. We must bear in mind that these are the reflection of life in another period. We suggest that we should look for true spirituality of poverty more in the letters than in the Constitutions, which show the rules, whereas the letters give us the heart of Calasanz, which beats day by day when faced with the needs of his religious.

3. Manifestations of poverty

- a) “...and as such we bear witness in so far as we voluntarily share...” (C 65): sharing. It is very important to ask ourselves just in what way we experience this sharing. There is a basic level of understanding sharing, i.e. I live a life in common and that is all. But what does life in common mean? Principally it entails observing common practices, living the lives we do dependent

upon a Superior (but not always) and leading austere lives (how austere?). Poverty is strongly influenced by individual feeling and by obedience and this sometimes creates problems in sharing benefits. We need to live and share by giving up personal things and at a community level. It is important to realize that what I produce does not belong to me and to live a life of relations, knowing that the goods we use also belong to others. Instead of individualism, there must be rotation of common goods. At the same time, we must know how to share even outside the community: "...willingly sharing our goods with the needy" (C 65). This is often forgotten in religious life. Certainly we should always consider the ministry to which we dedicate ourselves and also what it requires. Sometimes a quantity of goods is given individually, sometimes within the Institutes.

- b) Then there is looking after things in common: "Our spirit of poverty should show itself through great care for the things we have in common" (C 66). The danger here is to fall into looking at specific cases. Nevertheless, here are some thoughts: how should we live with those things which belong to the community? Can we think of them as ours and do what we wish with them? How should we conduct ourselves with earnings from work? Do we really respect the sense of life in common without looking for something else within the group or which

belongs to others, and do we respect the lives of all, based upon poverty? Do the choices we make reflect a shared life of poverty? What is the quality of life we achieve? As a community, do we try to live with a poverty which does not accumulate things, which shares with the poor and which can give as well as receive? This is a sensitive subject that is normally difficult to talk about: with the ministry that we are called to exercise, can a group only invoke Providence when faced with this subject of poverty?

Many aspects taken into consideration are dealt with in various parts of the chapter. Here are some of them: “we bear witness to it in so far as we willingly share our goods with the needy” (C 65); “Our spirit of poverty should show itself through careful attention to common goods” (C 66); “For responsible exercise of religious poverty... we must all be poor in spirit and in real life” (C 69); “solemnly professed religious lose the ability to acquire and possess. Therefore all material goods which a religious of simple profession may acquire of his own initiative, from his work, pension (including that of the state), benefits, insurance, are incorporated with the goods of the House, the Province and the Order, or, in consideration of the Order, all those goods which come from a religious of solemn profession. Furthermore, all monies, all shares, will be kept in the common fund...” (C 69). We must be faithful to all these

aspects which are indicated in the Constitutions. In the field of poverty it is easy to think that many things are unimportant and to be superficial in the way we live this part of our lives, so that we do not seriously associate living a life of poverty with the *sequela Christi*.

- c) Then there is spirituality in daily life, by which we mean that the spirituality of poverty leads us to experience everything as a gift. This leads to spirituality in everyday life. We do not give things up because they are bad. The spirit of the Kingdom is not so much found in giving up material goods in order to spiritualize, but rather in a belief that making things spiritual consists in being able to experience them as a gift and not as desire for possession, in being rather than having. This means knowing how to enjoy things, to love them and not be negative about them. This is a principle of spiritual life, because God does not want enforced but voluntary sacrifice from us. This leads us to look again at our relationship with things, which is connected to poverty. If an individual gives up something because he considers it bad, what is the point of giving it up? We need to know how to enjoy everything, and also need to know that when we give something up (we are not speaking of sins), we do so because we consider this to be a positive act, because love leads us to perform a gesture of generosity which many people will not understand.

We must examine our own fidelity in daily life and not allow ourselves to do in practice that which we offered to the Lord at our Profession. There is sometimes a great difference between that which is proclaimed in our profession and our everyday lives. Even though we know that life is a process which will never reach fulfillment here, we must beware of those small gestures which lead us away from the experience of poverty.

- d) “With the vow of poverty we give up our right to use material goods and to handle them without the permission of the Superiors” (C 68). We might well call this the spirituality of renunciation. We must take it on ourselves because we follow Jesus and not because of a Platonic and dualistic consideration of material goods. We cannot deny that there is a spirituality of renunciation which is a part of human knowledge and which has been accumulated over time by many people who believe that one’s own identity can be saved only if a man gives up material goods. That is, we must learn to give and to be moderate. This is the “austerity of life” (C 66), spoken of in the Constitutions.

When a religious decides to live in poverty, because he has been called to do so, he does not do this because of that kind of wisdom, but because he has heard the preference of Jesus, and has been given the opportunity to choose poverty instead of riches, just like the Master.

And we need discernment for this experience, for not all are called to express poverty in the same way; it does not depend only upon the different charisms which exist in the Church; within the same charism, God has called people to live a life of poverty in different ways and to different degrees. There are those whose lives require a more radical approach compared to that of others but they should not, for this reason, consider themselves superior to others who observe the Constitutions and live, shall we say, less radically, because it might be that their vows require the opposite. Living a vocational life of poverty means the painful experience of having nothing; otherwise a radical renunciation has no significance. Poverty is born within us, from the love of Jesus who is poor.

In all these aspects, vocational fidelity is necessary. If we are called to experience our vocations by living in poverty we have to follow a definite path in order to follow Jesus. The field is full of many excuses and justifications, because, if we are honest, being poor is no pleasure and sometimes in life it may happen that we take back what we gave to the Lord in our Profession.

4. Defense mechanisms

There are ways of behavior which in some way make it difficult for us to live radically in poverty. One of these is the famous “permit”. It is true that

the Constitutions warn us of this mechanism, but there are some people who place little importance on this element because they think it is infantile for individuals and does not mean much. There are those who make use of it so that they need not worry about their consciences: with a permit I can do what I want. The Constitutions say: "In order to exercise religious poverty responsibly, it is not sufficient to be dependent upon Superiors, but requires all of us to be poor in spirit and in our real lives" (C 69).

A permit is often a way to avoid a real experience of poverty. We must not act because we have a permit, but with a mature conscience, discerning between what is good and what not, what is suitable and what not. A permit is of no use if conscience indicates the opposite, and pacifying the conscience with a permit is the most ridiculous thing when living a life of poverty.

Number 70 of the Constitutions mentions another defense mechanism: "In our Houses and our Works, we must be able to see that poverty to which, taking into account the environment in which we live, we are called to bear witness of a collective kind". What are our Houses like? This is not the place for useless demagoguery. It is true that our ministry requires Works for children, but the Constitutions ask that they shine in poverty, and say: "Thus even an appearance of luxury must be avoided, as undue earnings and accumulation of goods".

The kind of poverty which must appear in our Houses and Works is manifested in a deeper way, in that which is also that of the human condition itself. This means that it is poverty which profoundly allows us to be members of mankind and individually to become full members of humanity; to have the opportunity to accept being finite and to accept ourselves every day for how and what we are. In this sense an obligatory element of a human being may be seen: the finite; and when we speak of being finite, we mean all that it entails, i.e. every human being's existential reduction. Poverty helps that reduction as a kind of wisdom, a path of fulfillment. Being finite means: failing, limits, sickness, pain, tears, distant hearts, losing our dear ones, impotence, old age and many other things. So, all this is a reduction in our lives and poverty helps us to experience it as a path of fulfillment. What seems paradoxical is that in this environment the cross is also a means of fulfillment. Logically, this is the presence of the grace and love of the Lord, whom we wish to follow in poverty and who has allowed us to be able to do so.

5. Poverty and the use of goods

We cannot forget that poverty is charismatic and that there are many charisms in the Church. Piarist poverty will not be the same as that of the brothers of Foucauld, even if for both, poverty means following Jesus. Thus Piarist poverty, like all other kinds, has its own specific aspects.

- a) Poverty is our ministry: “We must use our material goods in a strictly appropriate way for our ministry, and rightly take care that we increase our Works, by employing all those new teaching methods and subsidies whose usage will improve the lives of the poor and the young and also our apostolic work” (C 71).

We might also call it poverty and missionary means. There is no doubt that the first means for our mission is our evangelical mission, and this includes being poor. Our evangelical lives, the ways in which we live the values of the Gospels, the values in which we believe, the commitment we take on, everything that appears amongst Christians, make up the first and fundamental mission. This is the mission of being, which is sometimes not looked after carefully and which must not be forgotten.

But the Church has also entrusted us with a mission of doing, which is an educational commitment for children and young people, especially the needy, and our ministry is a social and historical reality in this field. The Constitutions offer us some advice in the matter: we should use material goods when necessary, and we continually need to acquire new teaching materials for the benefit of our students.

In this field we should remember that sensitive discernment is needed so as not to confuse what is personal and what is academic, and,

furthermore, to realize that the academic world may need personal material in order to achieve the aims of our ministry.

- b) The mission and the poor. Our mission directs us to the poor. Different countries have different situations. We ask ourselves, what kind of poor? I believe that we must follow the evangelical approach, which is not limited to only socio-economic factors, but includes them. Our preference for the poor should not be understood in simply spiritual terms either. Jesus's choice was clear: socially and economically poor, the afflicted, the sick, those marginalized by law, sinners, prostitutes... In the dynamics of preference, none are ever excluded.
- c) Poverty and the struggle for justice and peace. "...and report the unjust conditions of the poor. Similarly we must take an efficacious part in initiatives for justice and peace. Those who work for us shall be treated with humanity and justice" (C 74). One of today's important questions is that the mission cannot only be understood in terms of announcing the Good News of the death and resurrection of Christ or as an experience of faith, but must also be considered, starting from the whole situation of a person. But how far is that possible? Is idealism a chimera, with which we fool ourselves? I do not know where such a subject may lead; I only know that in this field we have to struggle and that in our ministry

there are very many children, who will be the men and women of tomorrow, who also have to be educated in such subjects, so that they may be able to influence the future.

However, we must think about the bases of the struggle for justice and peace, because a mission is not the same thing as paternalism; promoting the poor is not the same as the process of giving them knowledge. Every day we realize that this struggle for justice and peace implies structural changes. How are these possible without political involvement?

- d) Mission and support. The Constitutions ask for various types of help in the field of poverty. Here is a simple list: reciprocal assistance between the Demarcations of the Order: “The Houses and Provinces shall be ready to help those Houses and Provinces who find they are needy...” (C 73). The General Chapter has requested a close study for a new economic arrangement for sharing within the Order. This will be discussed in the Council of the Superior Majors during October 2010.

Help for the Church, because we are the Church, and according to our own abilities: “... and, with a share of their goods which is proportionate to their abilities, they shall contribute to the needs of the Church” (C 73).

Concession of spaces when they are not used by us for the needs of our Works: “When local

needs, and especially those of the poor, ask us, then we shall always make our Houses and our Works available for other services, including scholastic ones” (ibid).

Furthermore, when we read the numbers we cannot sit by and do nothing. The question is: how can we be truly faithful to what the Constitutions require of us? If we are not, then they are about as useful as soggy paper.

6. Poverty, the Easter Mystery and the Cross

In Saint Paul, the Christological mystery may be seen in two ways: on the one hand, obedience: in Philippians we find “he emptied himself...” (2, 7). But on the other hand, in 2 Cor 8, 9, this comes from poverty, in the text which starts this chapter of the Constitutions: “...although he was rich, he became poor for your sake, so that you should become rich through his poverty”. Why does Paul deal with the Mystery of Christ in terms of poverty? Is it that the law of the new life is one of dispossession, that we lose life in order to gain it? This means that we too must learn to experience the cross, failure, the inefficacy of our mission, all from the wisdom of the cross. And thus we come to our final question: where do we mostly fulfill our mission, through work or through suffering? In being or in doing? Through our activities, or through obedience?

Poverty is a path to travel. It is a project through which we mean to follow Christ and, as far as possible, imitate his own experience of poverty in the various aspects which we have looked at. This requires fidelity every day and attentive discernment, lest we deceive ourselves.

Questions for personal reflection

- 1) Do you live a life of poverty because of the *sequela Christi*?
- 2) Do you feel the choices of Jesus are your choices? Would you prefer to be poor or rich?
- 3) Does your poverty mean obeying certain rules or a call from the Lord, which you have heard?
- 4) Examine your life after you have read number 69 of the Constitutions. How do you feel?

Suggestions for community discernment

- 1) Perform discernment of your vocational calling in the light of Matt. 19, 16-22.
- 2) Does your community share its material goods with the needy? If this is not the case, why?
- 3) Could your community live in a way which is closer to poverty?
- 4) Is your community a visible sign of poverty for the outside world?

Suggestions for a day of prayer

- 1) Ask the Lord to enlighten you and dedicate the day to an examination and discernment of this chapter.

Biblical texts

2Cor 8, 9; Matt 6 24-33. Lk 1, 38; 1, 46-49;
2Thess 3, 8-12; Matt 6, 20; 19, 21; 1Jn 3, 17;
Acts 4, 32.

We are faithful to poverty

- If poverty grows from an experience of faith in Jesus.
- If we live in self-denial.
- If we are able to give our time for others.
- If we live as if no property only belongs to us.
- If we take care of common goods.
- If we do not accumulate material goods for which we have no need.
- If we do not create needs which only serve to satisfy our own cravings.
- If we give what we receive, as is indicated in the Constitutions.
- If we live a life of poverty as a blessing and not as something we must put up with.
- If we live with the wisdom of the Cross.

FIDELITY TO THE WILL OF GOD

Obedience was very important for the Founder. In the Constitutions he states: “Because Christ the Lord our Savior says: I have not come to do my will etc. it would be a sign of great folly if anyone in our Congregations expected to do as he wished; but with unanimous consent, all should embrace authentic obedience, which is, according to St. Gregory, the only thing which gives the other virtues to the soul and keeps them there” (CC 99).

When a Christian talks of obedience he always refers to obeying the will of God. This is fundamental for Christian life and also for religious life. Unless we obey the will of God, life moves towards failure. However, the will of God is shown in different ways. In this chapter we shall speak of one of these, which is the vow of obedience. Thus, just as obeying the will of God is important, so is the fundamental dynamics of obedience.

1. Freedom and obedience

When we speak of obedience, the question of freedom immediately arises. Doesn't being obedient conflict with our personal liberty? Is this not one of the most important values for man and can we be obedient and free at the same time? This depends upon the sort of freedom we have.

- a) Freedom as submission. In this case, natural, primordial relationships are guaranteed by authority. There is no possibility of emancipation or individuality. In this case, submission is closely linked to freedom as safety. We prefer to be subjects rather than follow the path of our own personal adventure, which causes insecurity.
- b) Freedom as responsible obedience. This is a step forward. It is freedom because it is moral responsibility. In this case liberty is seen through reference to values, objective criteria and a freedom which guarantees objective good. Obedience means responsibility for a goal. The Church is made up of this objective order. Authority is seen as a means for the common good. There is a danger that superiors may manipulate the one who submits, and this is why a different kind of security is sought: I know that I do the will of God because I obey my superiors.
- c) Freedom as autonomy. This means not always spending time on thinking of our own psychological needs and self-esteem. It means

having a conscience which can lead itself, and a moral conscience which sheds light on itself and is guided by great moral values.

- d) The freedom of love as interpersonal experience. This is not love as dependence, but that love which can interact freely with another person. This is why there is no religious obedience without love.
- e) Freedom as obedience to love. There is no greater freedom than that of obeying because of love. In this case, love may take on the form of submission. On the Mount of Olives, Jesus obeyed by submitting himself to the Father because of love. There is no conflict here between obedience and freedom. The greatest freedom is to obey. Obedience lets us enter the heart of its being and is the greatest freedom man can ever enjoy. Nevertheless, we should recognize that it is not easy to have the courage to live our lives through obedience, because this belongs to a new way of life.

Our obedience will change according to the way in which we experience freedom. The obedience which we put into practice will largely depend upon our concept of freedom. Obviously, this is not mentioned in the Constitutions, but it is the subtext we need in order to live according to our vow of obedience and if we do not wish to fall into merely considering individual cases.

2. Where is the source of obedience?

The Constitutions say: “As we prolong in ourselves the obedience of Christ, we entrust ourselves in faith to Divine Providence, and we offer up our individual will” (C76). The characteristic of obedience is that through its means we can perceive God, his will, his actions and Providence. This is to say that we may interpret the reality of the world in two ways and this helps us to experience obedience with a believing and serene heart, even when we are called to do things that we think may be wrong. It may be my opinion that my superior has asked me to do something on a whim and I am unable to justify this, because if I were to do it I should be making a mistake, although in concrete terms I may be able to understand that command as an action of God. Such is a biblical reading of history. This implies a kind of faith which has come face to face with a particular history; providence which is understood in a story of God and his fidelity. Thus, faith is precisely that ability to peacefully understand the reality of the world, and to see in it a reality which is over and above us.

Vocational fidelity does not mean looking for spiritual reasons, but an adult approach to understanding. This leads us to total fidelity in letting ourselves be guided by God and his Providence, knowing how to interpret what happens in the dual manner indicated above and to obey a superior with an open and honest conscience.

But we should not forget that in this case there is also a donation of our will. This is the moment when we follow Jesus: “By myself I can do nothing; I can judge only as I am told to judge, and my judging is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (Jn 5, 30). “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me, and to complete his work” (Jn 4, 34). In Jesus the mystery of obedience is essentially linked to submission: “...lived under their authority” (Lk 2, 51). “But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being” (Phil 2, 7).

In Jesus there is a paradox, freedom to obey only the Father by a donation of his own will which takes on the form of submission, obedience and subjection. In this way we can make a vow of obedience, i.e. when we have understood that paradox, we can decide on not having our own will and in submitting to that of others in our own lives – the paradox that man’s freedom consists in abandoning himself and not having his own personal projects, so that he can be led by the Holy Spirit.

All this requires fidelity to a perception which is the experience of a new law of the Spirit. This is spiritual because problems are not seen at an organizational level, in terms of how it may be advisable to follow authority in religious groups, but at much deeper levels. Fidelity to discernment is needed, where individual discernment teaches

whether an individual has learned how to focus his own life, his own journey as a member of humanity, including the mystery of the cross. Otherwise we can only talk of social obedience and not of the vow of obedience. This is why no means must be considered absolute, neither that of the superior, nor the community, not any other thing. It is enough if we realize that the road to obedience goes towards God as we shed our own personalities.

It is not easy to be faithful to this kind of reality; it presupposes fidelity to the cross, to having emptied ourselves, to a Biblical interpretation of our personal history and events which have happened in it. If we can do this we shall be well on the way to maturity.

3. What does obedience imply?

The Constitutions say: "Chosen in the name of faith and of love with a decision which is totally free, such obedience absolutely encourages the achievement of that inner freedom which is of the children of God, and it disposes us to offer ourselves in charity and encourages our personalities to really mature" (C 83).

First of all, it is an act of complete liberty. We have already spoken of the relationship between obedience and freedom. Obedience is experienced in the soul itself when we succeed in understanding that its greatest freedom is in obeying God. Thus,

these two aspects are not opposites. But this may be achieved when we live in the dynamics of love. From the human point of view we find this: "My greatest joy is to stay with you and do what pleases you." This is not submission which seeks security, but love, in the form of obedient giving; and this obedience is not unconditioned submission, but an experience of love which comes from a fascination induced by another.

Secondly, obedience is rooted in faith and in love, because it presupposes that an individual, as a believer, has begun to understand, or perceive how, in a useless, inefficient and dark faith, a person may find a meaning, and that only faith takes the whole person.

Thirdly, this leads to inner freedom. Obedience is primarily directed towards God. What happens is that such obedience uses many means. The first of these is the personal conscience itself, which needs to be formed and followed. Amongst these means we may also place obedience to our superiors. This is to say that obedience to God reaches through the charism of the Piarists, and the superior appears here as a means. And it is at this point that we need to place what was said earlier about being able to understand one's own history of salvation and emptying oneself.

Fourthly, to do this we need to be really mature, because we, who have received our vocation within

the Pious Schools, know that this is where we place our obedience to God. We have arrived at the way in which each of us understands his most intimate project for life, and it is clear that we cannot understand obedience to God except in the form of kenosis, emptying of oneself, which is to say that we offer the will of our whole being; that we have no plans, that we are at the disposal of God through the concrete means which God has placed before us for the path chosen: total willingness for whatever God asks of us. This means that freedom is to be found as we place ourselves on the cross, as Jesus did. It requires great maturity, for otherwise it might lead to the destruction of a personality. And yet, nothing arouses and develops obedience as does fulfilling it through these means.

We said above that this is not something which may be achieved simply and does not depend only upon our will; we need to follow a faithful path which leads to our facing our own freedom, in which we feel the will of God and understand that that will does not destroy our personalities but makes us worthy people and helps us to take that necessary step towards a real emptying of ourselves. In this we accept the cross in a biblical reading of the facts of our lives, which are not always transparent and are often ambiguous. Therefore we need a path of fidelity, for otherwise we shall make obedience into just a simple act of submission or we shall lessen its value because we do not understand the sense of it.

4. What are we looking for in obedience?

Number 77 has the answer: “In order to faithfully perform what pleases our Father who is in heaven, all we religious, in communion together, both when we pray and when we deliberate...” The meaning is clear: look for God in our own lives. The Constitutions insist “both when we pray and when we deliberate”. Common dialogue and community meetings must be the means by which we seek the will of God for the group. This means that community meetings must be profound; not only held for practical reasons nor to speak about external matters, but also about the life of the community and religious life. In such a framework, we shall each see how to organize our lives, our attitudes and work.

We get to know the will of God “through the light of the Holy Spirit” (C 77). This requires being sensitive to the Spirit, listening to it, being careful and understanding its breath. It may speak directly to the heart, or in the silence of prayer, or in meditation, when our hearts are open to God.

On other occasions this will is manifested through the desire of the community or through any other sign (*ibidem*). This requires great sensitivity in discernment; otherwise it may not be possible to hear the footstep of God amongst all the events of our lives.

Finally, the Constitutions mention superiors and brothers. In order to deal with this subject we have

to understand that Christian obedience annuls all preconceived models, because the problem is not one of competency, i.e., who we have to obey. In times past the superior held all the power, whereas now the importance of the community has emerged. In any case, this is a problem of organization, not of real obedience. Thus it is necessary to go beyond two models, on the one hand that of the pyramid, with its theological justification that God was at the summit, the subject at the bottom, while in the middle, mediating, was the superior. In the Church of Jesus, mediation does not take place according to the pyramid model. On the contrary, mediation exists so that relationships with God may emerge. On the other hand, we also have to go beyond the equality-democracy model.

We must also take care that we do not make obedience a matter of the sacred. The starting point for obedience is the same freedom for which we have been set free, a freedom which allows man to have a direct relationship with God. An individual must overcome the infantile stages of insecurity and take up human life with freedom. But it is also necessary to go beyond the concept of freedom as free will. In this way we see the other as faith, as listening and we see obedience as unconditional love for the other.

5. The Superior

The Constitutions mention the Superior in many places. What do we ask of our Superiors?

First of all, “His first and essential duty is pastoral care of the brethren...” (C 84). This includes taking care of the religious, especially in times of bodily and spiritual weakness, being close to them in their hard times and “he should make sure that a suitable plan for community life should be drawn up, which always takes into consideration the necessities of the Works and, above all, of people” (C 85). This service of the superior is very important; he must not become a manager, but must remember that in spite of the difficulties he may often find, his basic mission is the loving care of his brethren, so that they grow in the *sequela Christi* without falling by the wayside or taking the wrong path.

Secondly, “he has the last word in making decisions and ordering what has to be done” (C 84). The Constitutions are clear about this, but the superior must be careful when exercising this role. The last word should not conflict with understanding, dialogue, expectations, peace and tranquility for finding other solutions. Even in this matter number 86 is pertinent: “I prefer to use benevolent advice rather than sever command”. However, after all else, he has to respect the Constitutions.

Thirdly, perhaps this is a sensitive and unwanted duty, but the Constitutions ask him to be “aware that he uses his authority amongst men and should use comprehension when correcting their defects” (C 86). These words remind us of Calasanz: “On their part, however, the superiors must remember

to combine authority with prudence and discretion, so that when they believe they are giving orders to men, they use humanity while warning rather than severity in ordering” (CC 111). This attention paid to the subject, to caring for him, to worrying about him, must also be taken into consideration when work is assigned: “apportion work according to the personalities and abilities of each” (C 85). This is an echo of what Calasanz asked when he asked that each person’s “talent” should be taken into consideration. This requires a very personal and constant relationship with each and every one of our brethren: to stay, like the Lord, at their feet; to serve, to respond to their needs, and to worry about their problems.

Fourthly, a mission to seek the will of God together with the religious is not easy. It has to be done with “a docile soul” (C 84); and this seeking the will of God serves to “put it into practice with the brethren” (C 84).

Such service means constant fidelity. Every day the superior has to interpret the help of God and to listen to his brethren with simplicity. His ministry is not just practical work but theological guidance which leads us all to holiness, at the same time that he is following the same path.

6. A brother in a community

What should be the path of every brother or sister in a community? What should they be

faithful to every day in order for them to follow a vocational process in which they too take up the call to obedience?

Firstly, Calasanz wants total obedience to a superior: "Therefore the superior must be respected as a father, whoever he may be, and must be obeyed, totally, immediately, strongly, with due humility, without any excuses or muttering" (CC 100). The new Constitutions underline that obedience is "willing and joyful" (C 81).

To find obedience with these characteristics we have to see Christ in every superior: "And they will do this easily if they try to recognize Christ the Lord in any superior, even if he orders difficult things and those contrary to an individual's sensibility, as the Lord said to the superiors: 'He who listens to you, listens to me and he who disdains you, disdains me'" (CC 101). You will be able to do this if you do not concentrate on the superior as a person: "they should get used to not looking at who the person to obey is, but rather at who the person is for whom and who we obey about everything, who is, of course, Christ the Lord" (CC 103).

Above all they must be totally at the disposal of the superior: "To the voice of the superior, as if it were the voice of Christ, all must be as ready as possible..." (CC 106). For Calasanz, the person who has to obey must leave everything in the hands of his superior, who may do as he will with the individual: "Everyone, in full

obedience, shall leave at the complete disposal of his superior, himself and his possessions, without hiding anything..." (CC 105). Our present Constitutions require: "We submit even our personal charisms to him, so that they may be judged authentic and may be exercised for the benefit of all" (C 81).

Obedience which has all these characteristics requested by the Founder must also be as follows: "It will also be the duty of a good religious not to wait for the superior to firmly order something in writing or vocally, but to see some clear sign of the wish of the superior without an express order, considering that we obey a man because of our great love for God himself, so that things may go on through love and without any problems" (CC 102).

In the opinions of the saint there is a very traditional idea of obedience in religious life: "everyone must firmly believe that, where there is no sin, in following the desires of a superior they can make no mistakes..." (CC 108).

On reading the above, we can see this insistence upon fidelity. Everything leads to a path which is not easy but is a path which we must follow step by step in our lives, for which reason we must continually seek the help of the Lord. Without faithful listening to the voice of God through the mediation of our superiors, there is no obedience. In the Constitutions, the means available for the search for the will of God are not to be found only in our superiors; there are

other ways. We have to be faithful to all of these on our life's journey if we wish to follow Jesus.

7. Conflicts

It is clear that conflict between superiors and those beneath them may arise in the field of obedience. The Constitutions speak of this in number 88: "Whenever a decision of the superior and the conscience of a religious are conflicting, the two parties, whose aim is the common good of the Order and of their brethren, should, with a serene heart, weigh up their respective reasons and, without ignoring prayer and the advice of experts, should seek to learn the will of God. If the problem is not resolved after this and it is necessary to take the matter further, always excepting charity, the religious is required to obey".

This speaks in general terms and provides a general solution. Not all conflicts are the same, and this is why we should distinguish three types.

The first is found when the conflict arises because there has been a strong calling from God: for example, Mother Theresa of Calcutta. She was ready to go to her spiritual exercises, when she heard God calling her to another mission. In this case it is clear that an individual should leave the congregation and obey God's call. What is divine is over and above what is human. I should say that in a case like this there is no conflict and the superiors must allow a person to leave.

Secondly, there may be a conflict at the level of spiritual resources: for example, when a destination may seriously affect a person's vocational identity. A superior may send a religious to a place or a destiny which he feels too weak to face. He may be given encouragement: "Have faith in God". But perhaps he is not mature enough to face conflict, nor has sufficient inner freedom for his faith to suffice. In this case, obedience is put to the test of faith. There are two roads to take: the test of faith which brings maturity or disobedience in order to safeguard something which is more important than the mediation of authority. However, beware of reasoning such as: "I don't feel fulfilled in this role" or anything similar. Great discernment is required in such cases for we may easily deceive ourselves. Therefore, in such a case we must have an inner cleanliness, lest we try to motivate our choice as mentioned above, which may compromise our vocational identity. In our hearts, we frequently know that we are looking for a means of not obeying because we don't like something, or we find it tiring.

Thirdly, there is that conflict between what is efficient and for the common good and my testing myself by emptying myself: for example, I work very well and efficiently in a job and they send me to do a different job. Here is a conflict between controllable efficiency and non-efficient obedience. Our priority must be given to obedience, because

we enter religious life to follow Jesus until death and not to be efficient. This is also because, in the Church, following Jesus has its own great efficacy.

These are signs of evangelical obedience: first, when, with our inner light, we begin to distinguish between desire and obedience; second, when peace is more important than efficacy; third, when we understand life as a path towards inner freedom.

Questions for personal reflection

- 1) What kind of freedom do you experience?
- 2) Is your obedience similar to that of Jesus, in emptying yourself?
- 3) What does it mean to you that that man's authentic obedience is in always obeying God?
- 4) Have you been in conflict with your superiors? How was the problem resolved?

Suggestions for community discernment

- 1) Which facts in your past or present life can you not interpret as God's providence?
- 2) How can you see that inefficacious and useless faith may be the place for a person to fulfill himself?
- 3) Can you examine with discernment some of the more conflicting problems you may have with your superior today?
- 4) What does Superior mean to you? Is it a functional or theological thing?

Suggestions for a day of prayer

- 1) Pray to the Holy Spirit.
- 2) Take the Constitutions of Calasanz and examine them from the numbers indicated above.

Biblical texts

Jn 4, 34; 5, 30.

We are faithful to obedience:

- If its source is freedom, like the obedience of love.
- If it is not just a practical matter.
- If we accept the fact that it means self-denial.
- If the cross that it entails does not destroy a person.
- If it is understood as greater freedom before God.
- If it is experienced as real obedience to God.
- If it becomes a way in which we are able to understand the will of God.
- If it is not experienced as the opposite of personal freedom.
- If it becomes the path of the *sequela Christi*.
- If we live in fidelity and commitment to God.
- If we accept that for love we must empty ourselves until death.

FIDELITY TO THE PIARIST MISSION

If there is one thing that Piarists are happy about, it is the mission to which they have been called. They hold dear that evangelical image of Jesus defending children who wish to come to Him and whom the disciples try to stop. Children have never been and are not irritating for the Master: “Let the little children alone, and do not stop them from coming to me; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of Heaven belongs” (Matt 19, 14). Piarists must be faithful to this mission, of which we shall speak in this chapter.

1. The Piarist mission

The Church received a mandate to evangelize, to preach the Good News to all people. All Christians are obliged to be faithful to the mission received from Jesus, and it is a mission which regards all baptized people. The Pious Schools perform their mission through the ministry which they received from the Church and for which they were founded. The Piarist

mission is an evangelizing mission in the Calasanz way, seen from the Piarist point of view. This is the way in which we help to build the Body of Christ. It is the charism given to us by the Holy Spirit and which the Founder received by the grace of God. In concrete terms, this ministry is fulfilled in the complete education of children and young people, especially the most needy. This is all mentioned in the first number of the chapter of the Constitutions dealing with our ministry in the Church: "The Holy Spirit, which, in view of building the Body of Christ, distributes different gifts to all, has, through the means of our Founder, created the Order of the Pious Schools. Our Order shares, in its own special way, the evangelizing mission which is that of the whole Church, through the complete education of children and young people, especially the poor, as formulated in the fourth specific vow" (C 90).

The aspects which we find here are mentioned throughout the chapter. From the very beginning we must insist upon the importance of the ministry for the Order. We might say that we were born for this ministry, we live for it and we wear ourselves out in it until the time of our death. Passion for the ministry is one of the main things which make a Piarist heart beat. That is why fidelity is essential. Whoever is not faithful to this ministry, in some way ceases to be a Piarist, because the ministry itself is the reason for the existence of the Pious Schools. Piarist life grows in each of us according to the will of God; then, with

our formation, we understand more and begin to fall in love with the ministry we have received and we dedicate some of our spare time to it. When we are ordained priests, we know that we have been ordained for children and young people, especially the needy. When a Piarist is elderly, he prays for them, because, as Calasanz said to Fr. Dragonetti, who was older than 110, he was as happy with praying for children as he was with work for them.

This fidelity must be checked constantly, as we recall one of the strongest sayings of the Founder: “He who does not have the spirit to teach the poor, either has no vocation for our Institute, or the Enemy has stolen it” (EP 1319).

2. Aim of the Piarist Ministry

When a Piarist finds himself before young pupils and he receives them in his classroom, what does he want to do to help them and make of them? First of all, he is concerned to develop the whole formation of the children as individual people and not to manipulate any one aspect. He wants them to be real and authentic people, just as God wants. This means instruction and formation in all aspects of the personality.

Furthermore, he promises to make sure that they look for truth and love. In a world which is not distinguished for these qualities, which is full of lies and full of the search for personal satisfaction, pupils who finish their education in the Pious Schools

should be people who do not identify with such values, but who are able to struggle for a better world, with less inequality, just like Calasanz. They should become people who are able to work together for a more humane world than the one they have found; able to get along with people of other opinions and who may be of another religion; disposed to make a better world which is easier to live in peacefully.

It is true that a follower of Calasanz will work according to faith, trying to make sure that his pupils will have lives which are coherent with that faith. However, this cannot divide them from others who are of a different faith; on the contrary, this must be a test of the sincerity of Christian life, which keeps faith alive while allowing us to work side by side with all people of good will. The Constitutions say: "This educational duty aims at the complete development of man, so that our pupils love and seek the truth, and, as valid builders of the Kingdom of God, take part in making a world which ever more respects the expectations of mankind and, at the same time, whose lives faithfully reflect the faith they profess" (C 92).

Therefore, an important means for Piarists, is education in faith and this is why the catechism is important, which, from the beginning of the Pious Schools was very dear to the Founder, who taught it, with his "children": "Since education for faith is the final objective which we propose with our ministry, the basic means of our apostolate in the heart of the

Christian community, in which we find ourselves living, is – following the example of the Holy Founder and our tradition – the catechism, in so far as it illuminates faith, predisposes pupils for the liturgy and encourages apostolic commitment” (C 96).

A Piarist must constantly force himself to live with this prospect. This means that we must be faithful to practicing the ministry with all the aspects that are listed. Fidelity in the way we live our ministry brings us closer to Christ and to the Pious Schools. The ministry must be our passion and fidelity our strength. We aspire to live in this way and are unhappy when we have to leave it; but we never really leave our ministry, because, with our prayers, through small actions or the example of our lives, we feel we are Piarists for the full span of our existence, accepting from God and offering to Him, all the situations we experience.

3. The apostle

It is important to focus attention upon the Piarist as an apostle and on all this implies; even if the Constitutions do not mention this aspect, we do not wish to forget it.

If we include the inner life of a Piarist as an apostle, we shall see a new form of existence in him, which is that of the apostolic mission. This is the starting point for the Piarist to experience a process of maturity. In general, God calls people for whom the mission may make up their whole existence. Consequently, those

aspects which, from the human point of view we call self-fulfillment, are not central. The ministry which God gives is more important than man. Man loses himself in it and it is not important to follow the path of self-fulfillment. He lives only for the mission to which he has been called. This is not the case in every individual who has a ministry, but it may happen and when it does, it is pure Divine grace.

If this happens to someone, it produces a sort of paradox. On the one hand, he is a person who is full but at the same time solitary, singular, who does not belong to the world but to a world which is special to God and to the Kingdom, to which he was consecrated with all his strength. This may be seen in Piarists who have lived their commitment to the ministry they have loved with all their hearts.

All this involves a risk. We must beware of falling into perfectionism and not expect to be a hero of the apostolate or to try to cut a good figure or succeed in self-fulfillment. We must understand that our ministry is not a job like others in the world. We must remember that the basic needs of mankind, in particular the needs of the heart, continue to seek self-fulfillment. Thus, we must pay attention to idealism, which may only artificially support our real commitment. The paradox has a solution only when human desire for self-fulfillment turns into obedience to the mission.

The same thing happens to an apostle as happened to Saint Paul: we accept our own limits

and weaknesses so that they give us the strength of Christ. God shows his power in weakness. This may confuse an apostle, but it must be understood that this is the action of God.

These elements given to the apostle influence the whole of his ministry in various ways. A Piarist must ask how far he has gone for faith and see whether his life is developing in regard to the situations mentioned. If he is unfaithful to what being an apostle means, his ministry could become a simple job, like any other, but one lacking in the Pauline way in which we offer ourselves to the cause of the Kingdom, which is always within the charism of Calasanz.

4. Achieving the aims of the mission

Starting from the definition of the aims of the Piarist mission, we may ask ourselves what the means to achieve them are. What will a son of Calasanz put his commitment into, knowing that, after all, what he does is grace given by God because of his great love? This is the same as asking ourselves about the elements to which we must be faithful in Piarist life. It is a fidelity which must be lived as a constant progress because something is always missing and we always try to experience it in a better way.

A Piarist lives his ministry and prepares himself for his own Christian, religious and evangelical life. Living in contact with students every day means that it is life which educates rather than the concepts which are

taught. This is a life which is infused with the Gospels; it is a life in which every experience which happens on a good or bad day may be lived as Jesus would have done. All such things are seen by the students and they notice them and remember them in the future, and may have an influence upon them.

Teaching means careful preparation in all fields of knowledge which will then have to be taught. In his Constitutions, the Founder warned: “He will carefully observe how everyone performs his tasks so that he may confirm or remove the person” (CC 190).

This practical sense helped him to draw up rules with wisdom: “And because almost everywhere most of the inhabitants are poor people and can only provide support for their children’s education in letters for a short time, make sure that these children should be provided with a diligent schoolmaster who will teach them writing and arithmetic, so that they may be able to earn themselves a living” (CC 198).

Our present Constitutions, for the same reason, ask us for constant renewal: “Responsible exercise of our ministry obliges us to promise to acquire suitable professional preparation and to keep this updated, so that it corresponds to the real situation in society, which is the object of our concerns. And this is why, according to our most genuine tradition, we may choose the educational method which most conforms to the simplest and most efficient, and the most progressive of all methods” (C 95).

In addition to the above, we have to guarantee the maturity and development of the human and religious skills of Piarists, for the more of these they have, the better will they work for their students. The Founder gives the superiors the task of looking after this matter (c.f. CC 189, 191).

Finally, a certain affinity of spirit and solidarity with the children of the poor is required. How can anybody who lacks such a spirit dedicate a whole life to them? The Piarist ministry does not put up with people, but loves them; otherwise it is better to give up straight away. Every day, we need to verify this love for the needy, our ability to give ourselves and our work to them and our need to see Christ in them, as Calasanz requires of us. Nobody can force himself to offer his life for that which he does not love, even in a voluntary capacity. Only love can make sure that our Piarist ministry is a heartfelt one.

This is all expressed in the Constitutions: “The specific aim of our ministry requires that in addition to our witness of spiritual life, we develop sacred and profane culture and human and religious qualities. Our own state, as consecrated people, and especially, the prestige of our lives lived in chastity and poverty, will serve to give us not only energy and apostolic and educational efficiency, but also an inner harmony and active solidarity with the children of the poor” (C 93).

Living all that we have mentioned creates tension in Piarists, which we must not ignore. Being called

to the ministry implies “being for”. This means that an individual no longer belongs to himself. We might even say that nothing of his belongs to him. He is a part of the mission for the Kingdom of God. His loving care for children derives from God and this mission comes from Him. Thus, from the psychological and emotional point of view, he lives in a special way. He loves, but belongs to no human individual, as we saw in the chapter on fidelity and chastity. It is the Lord who gives a Piarist this grace and strength.

Furthermore, an apostle lives a life which differs greatly from that of other people. Others dedicate their lives to the various jobs they have, whereas an apostle has been introduced to the fire of the Absolute, and thus it is not possible to be a divided self, because everything is linked to the Kingdom. In a word, this is not perfectionism, but it is the dynamics of aggregation and exclusivity which the mission demands. This is a radical reality and so the experience of a Piarist will be that his life is completely taken up in all this. The process is thus: at one moment, love makes a person offer himself but he realizes that something is lacking in his life; then another moment arrives in which love envelopes him so that he has no time for himself. This implies total fidelity to the path which leads to the mission. Here we have to ask the question whether this is really what happens to all of us and how far are we faithful to this in our lives.

5. Means for the Piarist mission

The basic means is school. The Constitutions ask that it should be “popular” which means free for the people, as at the beginning, guided by the Spirit of the Gospels, with a vision of the world which starts from faith and which helps students to develop their skills. Let us see what the Constitutions have to say: “Our school, which was founded chiefly as a school for the poor, is, besides being for developing the gifts of its pupils, in an environment of a school community which is guided by an evangelical spirit of freedom and love for mankind, dedicated to offering a vision of the world, of life and of mankind which is enlightened by the light of faith. In this way, our pupils, inspired by justice and the holiness of the truth, as they model their own lives on those of the “new man”, will be a ferment of salvation for the whole human community” (C 97).

These are all elements which have appeared earlier on in some way or another. In any case, we have to underline the importance of these schools for the people (“popular schools”). If the school is not “popular”, it is not Calasanzian. In number 91, he said: “Our Institute is a charitable institution, which performs the apostolic work of education for no financial gain”.

The Founder was clear that the school was “popular” and he always defended this characteristic, in spite of difficulties on his path. It is a school for

the people, so that they can reach all levels of life which knowledge offers. It is true that since the 17th century, circumstances have changed, but this should not be a trap in which we dilute the amazing power of the schools. This implies creativity and the foresightedness of prophets, who are not criticized and ignored but listened to and followed.

This makes a teacher aware of what living the mission means. The starting point is having experienced a call which becomes a part in human life and is dedicated to the Father. It is a charismatic experience in so far as it consecrates the religious and helps him to dedicate himself to the ministry, which is to the Kingdom. This is why it is an all-enveloping experience and exclusive, and gives a form to a way of life.

This all requires fidelity to the aims of the ministry, to “popular schools”, which may differ from the times of the Founder, but which are for the “people” now, as then. Corrections and different application may be needed, but the ideas of the Saint must not be betrayed. This is why we need prophets who know how to discern how to live today in the way of Calasanz, and it is essential that others should be able to follow them.

This also requires certain human qualities. Firstly, the apostle should be able to have his own world, which is more than giving himself to the ministry, so that he can dedicate himself to the ministry and leave his world elsewhere. Secondly, he should be

able to personalize his work. This means that the task taken on will be experienced as a personal one and not as a tiring job. When we do something personally, we need to have an inner motive, and in order to take it on in that way, faith is necessary, because it is faith which makes it possible.

6. We are not alone

It is very important that an educator should be aware of this. This is not only because he is supported by society (is he? – he certainly needs to be, but we should look at what is happening in the world of education and the way in which educators are treated). Educators are not alone because we must always involve the educational community more (and must check that this is being done). He is not alone because our commitment for cooperation with all the institutions of the Church and with society exists (the problem is not our commitment to cooperation, which we trust is constant, but whether these other institutions wish to cooperate). This is what the Constitutions have to say: “The task of education, although the first people responsible are the family, requires the help of the whole of society, especially local society. Therefore, in our Institutes we must always encourage cooperation with all members of the educational community; indeed, in view of shared educational responsibility, we are disposed towards generous and mutual collaboration with other ecclesiastical and civil institutions” (C 98).

It is not enough to express a wish, for what is needed is active fidelity to this cooperative frame of mind. Numerous reasons may be found for avoiding such collaboration, and often are: because we don't like it; because there are some difficulties; or because it is too much work. In any case, without this cooperation we cannot be efficient, nor go ahead with our schools.

We must be clearly aware that our ministry helps the local church: "With our ministry we shall, in the spirit of Calasanz, meet the needs of the local Church as we offer to collaborate, and this will be coordinated with the diocesan pastoral" (C 100). This is a very important aspect of Piarist life. We need only remember that the Founder remained ever faithful and obedient to the Church in spite of various difficulties, even when this meant the reduction of the Order to that of a Congregation, as was the Institute of the Congregation of Saint Mary in Vallicella in Rome, called that of Saint Philip Neri. For Calasanz, love for the Church came before everything. For Piarists, service to it, dedication to its mission and serving its needs, came above anything else. In order to verify this aspect of our lives, a Piarist must remember what Calasanz wrote: "Make sure that all those who live in the Novitiate House show their gratitude to the holy Church" (EP 3039).

It is also important to remember the commitment to bringing culture that the Calasanzian ministry has, as we must love the peoples amongst whom we live, respecting their customs and the riches of

their own cultures, which we encourage, especially in their unique aspects. Without such respect, we cannot speak of a Calasanzian school: “As far as possible in planning our work, we make sure that it fits in with the legitimate rules and customs of the various nations, with the specific intention of suiting our educational mission to the culture of individual peoples” (C 101).

7. Where do we work?

After discussion aroused in the Pious Schools on this topic, the Constitutions are very clear on this point: “As a response to our vocation, as well as for the catechism and in schools, especially elementary and middle schools, which are fundamental for “popular” education, we may work in any other initiative which aims to educate and encourage young people. In the parishes and missions entrusted to us, according to the spirit of Calasanz, we dedicate special attention to the education of young people” (C 99).

8. Difficulties

We shall indicate some difficulties with which our paradoxical existence presents us. Briefly, this concerns the topic of our “role”, which may be considered from various points of view. Firstly, our role causes strong psychological tension and we have to be on our guard in this matter. It is extremely important to be mentally stable in order to be ourselves, without being conditioned by the roles

we cover; to not have to be perfect for other people; and to be able to show our own weaknesses calmly. We cannot keep up a state of moral tension if we are unable to express ourselves without moralism.

Another difficulty may occur at the level of the affections. We have mentioned this in the chapter devoted to chastity. Fundamentally this is about understanding how to reconcile integration and its human processes with the dynamics of total dedication which is felt in complete solitude. These are two different criteria. The first means being able to experience these levels in a different way: an ability to distinguish between my exclusive belonging to God from the other levels, where I can be myself without this leading to my being dependent upon anybody. The second means being able to live alone: not being or staying on our own, for we are speaking of emotional solitude; the more I give myself to the mission, the more an abyss of loneliness opens.

It is important that we pay especial and heartfelt attention to these aspects. If not, the mission and ministry will lose their riches and become a job which we do with greater or lesser intensity but which will never be that which God asks of us. Therefore, an apostle must always have his eyes fixed upon the Master, must follow Him wholeheartedly, love Him with all his soul and make sure that his life is a gift to God. At the same time we give ourselves totally and in our case and mission, for the benefit of children and young people, especially the most needy.

Questions for personal reflection

- 1) In your opinion, what is the final goal of the Piarist ministry?
- 2) Are you willing to cooperate with all people of good will who are working for a better world?
- 3) Do you try to experience your Piarist mission every day, wherever or however you find yourself?
- 4) Do you really dedicate yourself to your personal formation or have you neglected it.

Suggestions for community discernment

- 1) What form does your love for the wellbeing of children and young people take? Are you impartial? Is your heart really involved in your work?
- 2) Perform community discernment about the difficulties which community members may encounter as they carry out their ministry; each individual, with the help of all the others, should seek a solution.
- 3) Show in which area, and with which children, our commitment to the most needy is fulfilled in a concrete way.
- 4) To what extent are you involved in the mission?

Suggestions for a day of prayer

- 1) Pray to the Holy Spirit.
- 2) Read and comment upon this chapter of the Constitutions and compare and verify what really happens, in order to understand failings and the way in which they may be overcome.
- 3) Pray for the students and especially for the most needy amongst them.

Biblical texts

1Cor 12, 12seq; Rom 14, 2seq.

We are faithful to the ministry:

- If we struggle to achieve a complete education.
- If we collaborate with people of good will who are working for a better world.
- If we can see the strength of God even in poverty and in our limits.
- If life is bearing witness and if witnessing is more important than simple teaching.
- If we are in harmony with the children of the poor.
- If our experience gradually becomes a total life.
- If we succeed in making sure that our schools are more and more “popular” and dedicated to the needy.
- If we sincerely collaborate with the local Church.

FIDELITY TO LIFE IN PROGRESS

Piarist life is a life in continuous progress, with various stages. Piarist religious follow the Lord, but this *sequela* is a path to follow while a person is being formed, is made consecrated and progressively enters upon the road trodden by the Lord. All life is a process. Outwardly this process is marked by the Constitutions; inwardly by means of the Holy Spirit, which guides everyone according to its own plan. At each step, Piarists must be faithful to what is required by the Constitutions, to their own consciences and to the breath of the Spirit which guides their lives. We shall look at the path which must be travelled by those who ask to enter Piarist life.

1. First stage: the desire to be a Piarist

The Lord calls when and how he wishes. The Gospels contain the clearest example, when Jesus calls his disciples. He called those he wanted, according to his own will. In the same way, a

desire to become a Piarist arises in an individual. This may happen in the way in which the water of a river fills up behind a dam and the water overflows everywhere; or the call may be like a flash of lightning in a tempestuous night. It is not important how the call arrives, but it comes at a moment when this person feels a sensation of having been called by God; feels that the hand of the Master has been placed upon his head.

When a call has been heard, the Piarist family's attitude must be to receive the one who has been called with joy; then they will stay with him and dedicate their time to him so that his response may be sincere and generous: "With grateful hearts we welcome into the Piarist Family those who, under the influence of the Holy Spirit and in a desire to share our kind of life and apostolate, ask to join us. It is our duty to confirm them in their decision, above all by showing the joy with which we lead our lives, and to help them to constantly respond to their vocations with sincerity and generosity" (C 104).

At this point, a brief examination of the motives of the call is necessary; which spirit guides it; why this person wants to enter the Pious Schools; what path he has followed up to this point. It is logical that in the middle of the candidate's enthusiasm some doubts may appear, because a call is not always clear and so, the more we get to know the person, the greater may be the fear that this call may be self-deceptive. It is important to verify the

intensity (not sensitivity), the origin and meaning of the call, and whether there is a persistent and heartfelt desire to enter religious life.

2. Second stage: pre-novitiate

We have a candidate who is well disposed. He asks to enter. When someone asked to enter the Order, Calasanz, who understood people well, apart from examining the obstacles to such an entry, required a long trial period. The reasons for this show how well he understood the soul: “Since it is difficult to know and more difficult to uproot passions which are hidden in the human heart, we have decided that it is of the utmost importance that, after a diligent examination of those obstacles, a candidate who asks to enter our Congregation should undergo a long trial period. Indeed, before he is admitted to the common life of the body of the Congregation, he should be well known through his confession and also by his confessor, his teacher, his companions, his friends and those with whom he has in some way lived” (CC 16). Those were his rules and thus he acted, even if sometimes the results were not always the best.

Calasanz also wanted the candidate to be known by the community, so that he could get to know the Institute better: “If later, after common prayer of all the fathers, he should be judged to have been guided by the divine Spirit, he may be allowed to enter as a

guest for some days, as established by the superior, so that in that period he may learn to know the ways of our Institute better and our Fathers may get to know him better in the spirit of the Lord” (CC 17).

The current Constitutions are of the same opinion. It is important that the candidate should get to know a Piarist community at close quarters; that he should see the work which is a part of the ministry; and that he too should be known by the religious who live in the community. The better we know a candidate before he enters, the fewer problems will appear later on, even if this is not always the case. The Constitutions say: “Before entering the Novitiate, and in order to acquire a true conscience of their divine vocation and also indispensable maturity, all our candidates shall, for a suitable time, take part in our community life and our apostolate. In the meantime, the Community will get to know them better and, through careful verification of their abilities will help them to embrace our life with greater decision” (C 108).

At this point it is important to examine the ideals of the candidate. Usually an individual offers his life in a definitive way because he has certain ideals which he wishes to fulfill. However, he could also be dragging certain personal problems from his past life along with him, problems that have not been resolved, and he must understand this. The strength of his ideals might well slow down satisfaction from his original impulse, and if these

things are not closely looked at, they may cause problems in the future. It may also happen that the candidate has low self-esteem, or he may be deeply narcissistic. He could have problems of dependency which may increase in religious life should he not follow the right path. He may be a person with problems of megalomania, who sees religious life as a place where he can shine in those religious values which attract him. He may come from a family with a more or less rigid sense of responsibility. He might have an immature or distorted image of God. He could be turning to religious life so that he can be protected from certain fears about his own life, and this may be at an unconscious level. Thus it is important to perform serious discernment about the candidate and the motivations which led him to Piarist life. The above-mentioned examples may not appear at once, but later in the formation stage, so there must be constant spiritual monitoring and close accompaniment throughout the entire process.

At this stage, great fidelity to the healthy ideals which provided the impulse to enter the Order is necessary, as the Master knows that such ideals are the very beginning of religious life.

3. Third stage: the Novitiate

- a) To begin the Novitiate certain qualities are called for: "good health, a suitable personality

and the right qualities to take up the life of our Institute” (C 109). The Constitutions indicate that it might be important for the candidates to be seen by professionals in order to verify these qualities or to see whether they have any other psychological difficulties which might impede healthy religious life, certainly always safeguarding the inviolable right of every person to defend his own privacy (*ibid*). In the meantime, Calasanz ruled that “if, during this period in which various tests have been made, he perseveres in his desire, after the common prayer of the community, he may be permitted to wear our habit” (CC 18).

In the Pious Schools, the novitiate lasts one year, “in a Canonical House designated by the Father General, with the agreement of his assistants” (C 110).

The Novitiate is the right time for certain experiences which will be had then or in the first years of the Juniorate. Above all, it is easy, with the aid of the above-mentioned help, for the novice to see whether there are any obstacles in his life. For example, believing that God is good but at the same time being afraid of being rejected by God. Or perhaps, when he entered he seemed to be an independent person, but later, at a hidden level, he avoided social relationships and conflict with the authorities. Or maybe, he rejects certain kinds of explanations which are given during his

novitiate and is unable to understand them. All this is normal and is not a cause for worry, but we must look after such cases.

In this stage, and without idealizing this aspect, fidelity to the suggestions of the Spirit is necessary, as it speaks to the heart. This means fidelity to opening oneself to the Master, so that this opening helps to relax but not to delude oneself on the road to be journeyed. It means fidelity to the dynamics of the Novitiate and knowing how to reap a fruitful harvest from all that is taught there.

- b) An indispensable person for the Novitiate is the Fr. Master of Novices. The Constitutions ask for a certain flexibility in order for him to adapt himself to the period in which we live, so that he can interpret the signs of the times and the people and take care of every novice, guiding his development and experiencing, as if they were his own, every situation which gives rise to the candidate's love for the Church and for the Order (c.f. C 107). Calasanz, who also indicates what he expects from the Novice Master, insists on one very important point: "we strongly want to call the necessary attention of the Novice Master to one point, that he should carefully scrutinize all interior inclinations and the way in which he follows the guidance of the Holy Spirit which teaches the humble to pray with inexpressible sighs, so that he tries hard to make each novice

go forward along the same path towards the summit of perfection” (CC 23).

- c) In addition to what the Founder said, the Novice Master must consider an important crisis that may come during the Novitiate, and more than ever now that adults are entering. This is a crisis which belongs to the Novitiate or Juniorate, but if it does not happen now, it will happen when the Piarist is older, and thus will be worse. We are speaking of the conflict between idealism and realism. A candidate enters, motivated by his ideals. He has fed them, because a young person without ideals cannot fly. Slowly he realizes that he is unable to reach what he believed in and finds himself with reality, which he has never faced until now and which he does not believe appertains to him. The shock of this may be very strong indeed, because he sees that there is no correspondence between what he desired and what he can reach. We need to be ready to help him so that he does not go into a period of crisis or depression.
- d) The Novice Master is not alone in his task, but is joined by the formation community with the candidates: “a brotherly community, in which all people mature their own vocations through prayer and work, and they protect them with the necessary discipline” (C 106). It is essential to understand the people who are chosen to make up that community because they may become important reference points for the novices.

They must be committed to formation and be examples of evangelical life; people who inspire trust and to whom the novices may turn in moments of trouble. Finally, they should make up a good team with the Novice Master.

- e) The novices need to be prepared in every sector: for this reason the Superior Major may, on the advice of the Novice Master and in order for them to complete their formation, allow them to “spend one or more periods outside the Novitiate Community, in order to exercise the apostolate” (C 111). Such preparation can be very fulfilling as long as it does not distract from the basic Novitiate. Encountering certain real situations, which are different from those learned about in the Novitiate, may create confusion or crisis, and the Novice Master must be on his guard.

Such training must be completed with something which the Founder desired, even though the Master must apply this to the times in which we live; that is, he must find the deep meaning of that which the Saint wanted, and translate it into a concrete form for today: “they should be exercised in contradicting their own will and their own judgment, and should learn to patiently put up with humiliation and contempt” (CC 22).

The cross may appear in some ways, but in a way which is appropriate for his age and for the time in which the novice is living. In any case, this

must serve him to understand what the *sequela Christi* means here, for it will eventually become a reality in life.

- f) The Constitutions tell us what must be done in the Novitiate: “A novice begins our way of life under the guidance and responsibility of the Novice Master, with the collaboration of the whole Community. Novices learn the fundamental elements of religious life and the main events of the History of Salvation; they shall be instructed in the doctrine and practice of personal and community prayer; and regularly take part in celebrations of the liturgy. By means of evangelical advice they will gradually get used to giving up all those things which do not belong to the Kingdom of God; on the contrary, they will make an effort to be united to God and to increase their own love for their neighbor” (C 12).
- g) When the time to make their vows has arrived: “before Profession, the novice will cede to the administration the use and usufruct of his worldly goods in favor of his own nominee, for the whole period of his simple vows (C 113).

During this period, a novice must be faithful to the gift that the Lord has given to him personally. This choice is not the arbitrary love of God. It is just that God is like this. He loves for love’s sake and chooses because he wants to do so, as His heart decides. This should not create problems for a novice.

When we ask if God loves all in the same way, we learn to understand that He does love all and for that reason chooses some so that all may know this. The novice will experience this choice as love, which is not a threat, but the complete opposite. Thus, he must be faithful to this reality, which will gradually lead him towards the Lord Jesus.

4. Fourth stage: Juniorate

The life of the novice undergoes a change. He takes a step forward and finds he is in the Juniorate and new systems appear, which in spite of necessary continuity, differ from those of the Novitiate. This step is not always an easy one, but he must learn and the Master of Juniors must be there to guide those who are beginning this new stage. When this step is taken, three questions arise. Firstly: what am I doing? Why are there changes in the work and the tasks which fill my life? Secondly: consequently, how can I manage this when I realize the tasks are different and that I have worked with an inner dynamics, which nourished my life and which I do not wish to lose? Thirdly: what attitude should I take in order to do my new work, to commit myself and experience the new situations in which I find myself? And we must be faithful to the responses we give. The Juniorate must not mean losing the best that we carry with us from the Novitiate. This is why we must be faithful to this move from the Novitiate to the Juniorate. It must be a fidelity to

all we have learned in the Novitiate, even if it is possible to experience this in a different way. It must be fidelity to the Holy Spirit, because life must develop in this direction, towards life in the Spirit. It will be fidelity to that which takes up most time during the Juniorate: studying.

The Juniorate consolidates the Novitiate by putting a foot into the real life situation of the future. In this sense there is a fundamental fidelity which is that of prayer. It means honestly experiencing gratitude, because we can see the poverty of our lives and at the same time realize the riches we have received. We can see what we are like as sinners but can also trust God. As time goes by we realize that we know little but that God helps us to enter the true life. Later on we shall abandon ourselves to the mercy of God. Fidelity to all this takes us onto a far-reaching road, along which God will give us more and ever more.

For the kind of study done in the Juniorate, see number 114.

5. Fifth stage: towards Solemn Profession

At least six years of simple vows are required. This period may be lengthened according to the decision of the Superior Major, and “in order for it to be shortened to less than six years, the fixed minimum of three years’ simple profession being taken for granted, a license from the Fr. General, with the agreement of his Assistants, is necessary” (C 115).

In this stage it is important to be very faithful to the process which has previously been experienced: faithful to the simple vows made, verifying how we live so as to understand, from the human point of view, if we shall be able to fulfill them (the full experience is not voluntary but a result only of the grace of God); faithful to God and to the Order.

What the Constitutions say to those who will make their solemn profession is very beautiful: "When the period of the simple profession has finished, the religious sets down in writing his will to live spontaneously with us for the length of his whole life, in the place and role chosen for him by the Superiors, to the glory of God and the benefit of his neighbor. Therefore, after a suitable period of meditation and of prayer, he will make his solemn profession" (C 116).

6. Sixth stage: Solemn Profession

The words of the Profession are in a beautiful text which follows the lines written by Calasanz, with some later and small modifications. We say that we are professing in order to follow Jesus Christ more closely and for this reason we make four vows, which are the three traditional ones of religious Congregations and Orders, and a fourth one which is specially that of the Pious Schools. All this is done freely and with the heart. The vows are made to the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The new Constitutions place this very important

moment under the protection of the Virgin Mary and of our Holy Father Calasanz. Thus this is a moment of total giving of ourselves to God in consecrated life. This is the “forever” which people are so afraid of uttering in our world of today and it is the fidelity which is said to be impossible in that way. A religious, on the other hand, knows that it really is possible to live like that, without any doubt, because he has been called by God and not from his own will. God, who calls, also gives the one who has been called the strength to live for the calling.

From this moment on we must be faithful to our promises and not as a static reality but as a path, a process which will end with our lives.

7. Seventh stage: permanent formation, all life long

The Constitutions say: “All our brethren, having completed the prescribed course of studies, shall, with the help of the Community, make sure that they are constantly updated in their formation, so that they are better able to respond to the needs of their vocations and their ministry. The Superior Majors, together with the brethren, shall make arrangements for every religious to have sufficient time and suitable planning, so as to continue his permanent formation fruitfully” (C 120).

A period of life begins which will continue throughout our existence here. The previous number insisted upon permanent formation. We shall also insist upon three fundamental elements in this stage.

Firstly, life must already be simple *sequela Christi*. This means clearly and maturely knowing that it is not only behavior that is important, but also our point of view. It is not important if a religious prays, but from where he is praying; or, if celibate, what the reason is; or if he is dedicated to his ministry, what expectations he has in committing himself. Little by little, we acquire an ability to realize that things change as signs if they are seen through the eyes of God, as Jesus saw. What may be negative when seen with human eyes may become positive when seen by Him. When we consider our own sin, we can give thanks for that sin of ours, not because we have sinned but because it shows and thus we feel the salvation of God. In this way we can live in peace and reach that depth of understanding in which we know, not only with our minds but also with our hearts that the best thing about freedom is to give it to God.

Furthermore, life will always have one key element: working for the Kingdom. Here it is important to consider certain specific aspects so that we do not deceive ourselves or become depressed. Do not expect too much from the results of work. The Kingdom is often found in weakness and utter failure. This is why we must not live for our own desires, aspirations and ideals, but for those which are incarnate in the will of the Father, whose will is made manifest in many ways. Therefore, we must not seek easy success, for that may hide a trap and not be a sign of the Kingdom. It is also essential

to be vigilant about the motivation of our hearts, because those are the most important things we have, and we have given them to God, to whom they belong. We must be patient about the forces of evil and be ready to be misunderstood.

Another aspect is our emotional relationship with Jesus, which means our whole life. We have to live this relationship because Jesus is the incomparable Gift of the Father. Our relationship with Him must be one of love in obedience, in the sure knowledge that obedience to Him is greatest freedom. We shall understand that this relationship is nourished by the lordship of his love and that thus, all depends upon his will, to which we submit completely. Jesus is all in life: the way, the truth and life, the bread which feeds us, the thirst which quenches ours, the light which illuminates our often darkened way, and the Resurrection in which we believe and one day hope to receive. Without Him we are helpless and to Him we entrust our lives. Therefore, we must be faithful to the Lord and to the way of life which He chose for Himself and to which He has called us through the grace of His love. We shall be faithful to breath of the Holy Spirit which reaches our hearts; faithful unto death.

Questions for personal reflection

- 1) Do you work personally in order to discern a Piarist vocation in any of your students?
- 2) What do you think of our Novitiate? Do you agree with the organization and methods?

- 3) Have ever experienced a crisis of realism which has brought you face to face with the real “you” so that you have abandoned the idealism you had when you entered religious life?
- 4) Go over the way you have prayed since the period of your Novitiate. Do you think this is what the Lord has wanted?

Suggestions for community discernment

- 1) Does your community care for the vocations that may arise in school?
- 2) According to your community or to you, what qualities should those who ask to enter the Novitiate for Piarist life have?
- 3) Examine number 116 of the Constitutions and consider whether you have any difficulties compared with what is written.
- 4) What kind of fidelity characterizes your life for the Lord?

Suggestions for a day of prayer

- 1) Pray together before the Lord.
- 2) Discuss together the topic of vocations and the different stages to follow before entering normal Piarist life. Look at the difficulties which may arise; how to work on these; what the community does; and what it should do. Study cases you know or which are notable.
- 3) Pray for vocations.

Biblical texts

Matt 9, 38; Jn 1, 35-51.

There is fidelity to permanent formation:

- If life becomes a path of constant progress.
- If a candidate is carefully examined before he enters.
- If the Novitiate is a period in which to reflect upon reasons for having joined and upon possible blocks which a candidate may have.
- If, when he arrives, a candidate is helped to deal with crises of realism in life and those are then resolved positively.
- If the formation community to help the Master of Novices is chosen carefully.
- If the Juniorate does not disown the fundamental elements which have been acquired during the Novitiate
- If you have the eyes of God to look at the reality of life.
- If we live as if what is important is not the fruit of the work itself but the heart and soul that is put into our hard work.
- If instead of looking for easy solutions we seek the will of God.
- If we stay faithful to God's love every day.
- If we take care that we read and study to the best of our abilities, to improve our lives as teachers.

