



Youth, faith and vocational discernment

LETTER TO OUR
BRETHREN
SEPT / OCT 2018

We are at the gates of the Synod convened by Pope Francis on youth, faith and vocation discernment. This is an ecclesial event that is being deeply lived in the midst of the Pious Schools. But it is also, without a doubt, a “chance of the Spirit,” a Kairos (καιρός), an “opportune time” of those that one must know to seize, being attentive, because “the voice of God is voice of the Spirit, that comes and goes, touches the heart and passes, and you do not know where it comes from or when it blows. It matters, then, to be always alert so that it does not come suddenly and goes away without fruit.”¹

The Demarcation and Circumscription phases of the Piarist Synod of Youth were already completed and the Coordinating Commission is already dedicating itself to the task of working all the contributions and ideas received and the various experiences lived. We will be able to offer them – as a Piarist contribution – to the Synodal assembly.

I think this is the right time to share with all of you one of the central objectives that the General Congregation raised when it convened the Piarist Synod of Youth: to open a new stage in the relationship of the Order with young people, changing the dynamics that we must change so that the Piarists are able not

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1.- Saint Joseph CALASANZ. EP 0131 (letter to Narni, November 22,1622).

only to listen to the young, to accompany them and to walk with them, but, with them, to listen to the Spirit. This is one of our aspirations as a team that accompanies the way of the Order: to change our relationship with the youth, making it closer, open, committed, accompanying, evangelical, welcoming, demanding, convening and propositive. We want young people to change us, and just as poor children transformed Calasanz into a Piarist, we want young people to help us be the witnesses, fathers and teachers they need and expect.

On this I want to speak to you in this letter. I have thought of doing it using an evangelical text that I find suggestive: the encounter of Jesus with Zacchaeus². I want to inspire myself in this text to reflect what it means to “change our relationship with young people”. Here we go.

Jesus was going through the city when a man named Zacchaeus tried to see him. We don't know if Jesus wanted to stay in Jericho. We know he was passing through the city, heading for somewhere. But Zacchaeus showed up and Jesus changed his plans. He stayed in Jericho, because Zacchaeus wanted to see him and meet him. I like to think of this fact as a “spirituality of interruption.” When the Piarists we engage with the young, when we are with them, when we attend and respond to their questions and expectations, when we accept the precious challenge of “being with them,” always the same: we have to leave our plans to respond to their needs. The Piarist who does not know to “let himself be interrupted” by the youth, who does not know to leave aside his plans to open to what they need, cannot be for them witness of anything. And this has to do with many things, starting even by the schedules, but following the opening of our communities or by allowing to be questioned by them, breaking with an inaccessible way of life that “protects” us from their challenges. Let's go into that “spirituality of interruption,” deeply Calasanzian.

He was trying to see who Jesus was, but it wasn't easy, because of the crowd. Zacchaeus

‘ desire to find Jesus is difficult because of the multitude. Who could that crowd be today? Can we even be such? Perhaps we should think about what is in us, in our way of life, in the way we carry on our mission, which prevents the young man from finding Jesus, discovering him through us. How do we live? How do they see us? Doesn't it happen on too many occasions that young people see what we do, but not the reason why we do it? What young people need from us, what they want to know, what they crave, is whether we have a relationship with the living God and how that relationship impacts our lives, our choices, our decisions. What they need is testimony. And that's always been the case.

Many times I think our main challenge is that we look at Calasanz and try to imitate the work that he did, but without having the union with God he had. The strength of the testimony of Calasanz, which made his life fruitful to the point of making him able to embrace the charism bestowed by God was, without a doubt, the oneness of his life, Christ-centered and generously delivered to children and young people. This is our challenge. Let's come into it, and the young will answer; I'm convinced of that.

In a meeting with young people in which we were thinking some questions of the Piarist Synod, a young man told me something like this: “Father, what we need from you is not just to listen to us or to help us with your reflections and advice. What we really need is to see in you that, at any age, you can continue to be enthusiastic about the encounter with Jesus and the vocation that, as young people, you received from him. The rest, we will achieve it by our means; We can do it. “ I still think this boy hit the spot.

So, Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore to see him, for Jesus was going to pass by. That sycamore makes me think a lot. I think of our religious communities, our pastoral processes, our Piarists dynamisms. And I wonder if the religious life is today a sycamore for young people, if we offer them a watchtower from which they can look at things differently, discovering what really has value in the midst of so many superfluous things that others sell them.

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2.- Lk 19: 1-10. For some of the ideas, I am inspired by reflections by Fr. Eunan McDonnell, SDB.

I think we have to work hard to build a community and pastoral climate where young people can share their faith and open up to the dynamics of conversion that it provokes.

I keep circling the sycamore. I dare to ask the same question in another way: The young people who live their faith in a committed and vocational way, are they a sycamore for the Piarists, for the communities and fraternities, for the educators? What are we learning from young people, from their research and proposals?

Jesus said to him: “Zacchaeus, hurry down, I have to stay at your house today.” Jesus looked at Zacchaeus and met him. And Jesus calls him by name. He didn’t know him, but he calls him “Zacchaeus.” The encounter with Jesus provokes in Zacchaeus a new feeling. We are in front of the vocation. And Jesus decides to accompany that vocation, staying at Zacchaeus’ house, to converse with him. That’s accompanying.

We don’t know what Jesus and Zacchaeus talked about, but what we do know is that Jesus became a companion to Zacchaeus’s quests. and accompanied him to find what was at the bottom of his soul. The spiritual and vocational accompaniment seeks, essentially, that young people reconnect with the center of their being, so that they make choices and take decisions from there. “Vocation” is not a goal I follow, but a call I hear. If the young man lives disconnected from his soul, he runs the risk of never finding what he craves for. He may even have the risk of following a noble ideal, but being mistaken in his vocation, because he will live it from outside inside and not from inside to outside. He may even want to imitate heroes, but without listening to his heart, in which God lives, and lives in a lasting way. There is no better fruit that we can expect from our mission with the young people than to help them respond to what God sowed in their hearts.

That’s why we have to learn to be companions. Not just for the fact of being Piarists we know how to accompany. To accompany is to help the young man discover what God is teaching him through the experiences he lives. It’s not about telling them what to do. Do not forget that “spiritual

abuse” is something that can happen, and that we must prevent. There is a proposal from Pope Francis that I really like to interpret it as the best fruit of the spiritual and vocational accompaniment that we can have with the young people: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since “no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord”. The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms”³

Look, Lord, half my assets are given to the poor, and to whom I have defrauded him I will retribute four times more... Today salvation has come to this house.

Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus did not lead to a “change of facade,” but to a true transformation. I am convinced that if we know how to listen with the young people to the Spirit, our change and our conversion will not be superficial, but we’ll open up to a real renovation. Let us not be afraid to call what we need as Piarists in relation to our presence among the young.

When we truly accompany young people in the search for their vocation, they cease to be “a pastoral goal” and become partakers of the mission that God has entrusted to us, because they help us to be what they need. And that is why we can be helped, like Jesus helped Zacchaeus, to reflect on the things that we must let go in order to be able to better transmit what the young people expect.

I leave the reflection here. I leave it open, because I think it should be so. Let’s live this synodal time with hope, trying to be open to the voice of the Spirit. Let’s welcome the contributions of young people. Let’s read with interest the exhortation that Pope Francis will publish after the Synod. And in the light of all this, let’s prepare ourselves

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3.- FRANCIS. Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii gaudium”, n. 3.

to go ahead with the Piarist Synod of the Youth and to open the doors of our 48 ° General Chapter to their contributions and expectations, with their help, to make our Pious Schools, for all, a place of encounter with God and with his kingdom.

Receive a fraternal hug.

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Father General