



Monthly interview

Interview with Fr. General

Just a few meters away from Piazza Navona, one of the most beautiful squares in Rome, stands Palazzo Torres, which has been the residence of the Fr. General and his Curia since 1612. That was the year when St. Joseph Calasanz, the founder of the Piarists, bought the old house as a place where he could teach his 'children'. On the second floor of the palazzo, Fr. Jesus Maria Lecea receives us for this interview. In the anti-chamber of his study there is a large table, replete with folders arranged according to subject. The study itself is cozy but simple: there are books about theology and spirituality, a few pictures, a computer and a chair which conveys the impression that he is always receiving or listening to somebody. The view from the windows, giving onto the Vicolo della Cuccagna corner of the street, is striking. Students of the first Pious School crossed this same street. Fr. Jesus Maria Lecea receives us with a smile. His dynamism suggests that he does not have too much time to dedicate to our interview, but this is not what he makes us feel. On the contrary...

HIS ORIGINS AND VOCATION

He was born in Mendavia, a small town of 3,000 inhabitants in the province of Navarra in northern Spain. Fr. Lecea says with pride that: "in those years after the Spanish Civil War, many Priestly and Religious Vocations came from Navarra. I remember that when I came to study in Rome, it was said that in this city, there was not a Religious Community without any vocation from Navarra". He grew up in a rural environment imbued with the religious and missionary spirit of St. Francis Xavier. He lived in his family with his only brother until he was twelve: "There are only the two of us," he says, as if asking forgiveness, and adds: "This is connected with a painful experience connected with the Spanish Civil War. My parents had their first son just a few months before the war and during the war the family was divided, with many consequences. After the war, I was born".

How did you discover your vocation?

It was spontaneous. I was in an environment where the external religious dimension was stressed. That is how we felt at school. Furthermore, my relationship with our parish priest was very close. Within me, I felt a clear desire to channel my efforts to become a missionary and a priest. At that period, a schoolmate, who was also a family friend, had a Piarist relative, and it was thanks to him that I got to know the Order. My school friend and I both joined the order and both of us are still Piarist priests.

What has happened to vocations in Spain?

To tell the truth, there was a confluence of many factors. I think that the large number of vocations after the war was perhaps too great and needed to be normalized. Now, the level is too low. The first factor that comes to mind is the fall in numbers of children born in a family and the changed attitude to religion within the families themselves. Economic factors may also be influential.

Certain families with a large number of children, when they noticed that a child perhaps had a religious inclination, used to send their son to a seminary, thus securing his economic future. In many cases, hoping that their children would receive the kind of education they could otherwise not have afforded at home, a family certainly took advantage of this situation. This was part of the plan of the Religious Congregation and was peacefully accepted.

Do you not think that people have become critical of the Church and that may be one reason why vocations have decreased?

I understand that Church-State relations have changed a lot and I believe that it is a change for the better, because society has improved in those places where Democracy is a solid fact, as is the case in Spain. This has also led to new ways of relating to the Church and religious life, sometimes increasing, sometimes diminishing its importance. Public administrations have lost those leaders who protected ecclesiastical norms. This new situation has tested the depth of our faith, which has become an optional, without external obligation. If, to this, we add an ideological, ethical and moral confrontation with the Church, which has not always been shown in a good light, it is sometimes less easy for new generations to identify with our Church.

Do you think it is relevant that there is a rebirth of new vocations in Asia and Africa?

The number has certainly increased. I don't know whether we may call it a rebirth, but it is certainly interesting. At the present time there are large numbers of new vocations in those areas of the world. But we must wait a few years to study the statistics and to analyze the phenomenon.

Before becoming General Superior, what was the most interesting part of the Piarist Mission for you?

The educational-teaching ministry. For the first 19 years after being ordained as a priest I was in formation houses for the Piarists. In these I taught Fundamental Theology and Anthropology. I have fond memories of my relationship with students and I feel that I learned a lot from them, those younger generations of Religious from different Congregations. At the same time I taught Philosophy at a Piarist School and this experience was very positive, because besides the Religious I was teaching boys and girls at an ordinary school. Another experience was my relationship with the Salamanca Diocese in Spain. I have always loved contact with the local Church and there I had the opportunity to collaborate in the catechism with children, celebrating the Mass for them - pastoral work with children which I found very enriching. This path led me to become a Diocesan Councillor of the *Movimiento junior de Acción Católica* (Catholic Youth Action Movement), with all that goes with it: camps, accompanying them, listening. My best inner feelings come from that time of my life: Since then my path has been serving the structures of my Order, working in the General Curia, and so on.

What work made the most impression upon you?

The work that most affected me was being in charge of the Delegation of Missions that were starting in some parts of Africa and Asia. This gave me the opportunity to be present in those countries, to be in contact with the missionary communities, to encourage the missionary spirit inside the Order, which was a new thing. It was a gratifying experience. The other and more recent period was when, for reasons I cannot go into here, I had to live in Madrid, as I was President of the *Conferencia Española de Religiosos* (CONFER) the Conference of Religious for six years, and at the same time President of the whole European Religious Life. I respect and I thank all the persons I met in this extraordinary service, for it widened my approach to Religious Life in general. It allowed me to get to know many charisms and different visions of life, and these have much enriched me.

How did you become General?

I still cannot understand it. I was working peacefully in Madrid until the general Chapter of our Order, which took place here in Rome in 2003. Naturally I came to the General Chapter like everybody else and I expected to continue my work in CONFER. There was no electoral campaign in the Order to choose the General. We knew that a new one had to be elected and we started to face the dynamics of the election almost without realizing it, because, within a week the election had taken place and from being an ordinary member of the Chapter I was chosen to preside over it. I had not expected this, but since my brothers asked me, I accepted as an act of obedience.

Was it completely unexpected or was your name already being mentioned as a possible candidate?

Of course some rumours reached me, because some of one's companions draw near and make comments. Nevertheless, it was when voting started that I began to tremble, as I realized that some names were voted more than others and that there might be some foundation in the rumours.

How did you feel at the time? Great responsibility? A great challenge?

One analyses one's reactions with time. At that very moment? I cannot say. I have not thought much about my reactions. It was a blow. However, the Chapter kept to a very precise rhythm and I did not have enough time to reflect on it. Of course, something like this makes you change your viewpoint, your perspective. During the last one and a half years, I have had more time to absorb it into my inner being, through day by day service. Certainly I took it seriously and with responsibility, believing that it was a service asked of me by my brothers, for whom I had to do a good job.

The joys of the Fr. General?

When you receive good news of the health of the Order; when the Religious tell you, in their various ways, that they are happy living their Piarist Vocation; that they bear good fruit; that if they retire they take it in a mature way; that if they are suffering they hold on to their faith. The good things in the Order are the people in it, and that makes me happy.

The preoccupation of the Fr. General?

I worry when things go wrong; when people suffer; when they have problems and failures and we do not know what to do. Because it is not a question of apportioning blame; sometimes we, their Superiors, are the people who do not know how to help those of our brothers going through difficult times. I prefer to look at the good and the positive side, because it is that side that helps us to build and thus to overcome weaknesses.

What goals do you have for your six-year mandate?

The General Chapter itself gives some objectives and it is important to respect and follow them. The Order took into consideration five lines of action that I have incorporated into my work as a primary objective. In addition, I should like to hand over an Order that has grown in many ways: personnel, community life, the missions we have undertaken. I should like to stress a little more the vocational impulse: to work and to stress formation, so as to increase the personal qualities of our Religious and to improve our educational service, because our community life is for our mission. I should also like our cultural training to grow so that the Piarist Missionary presence is stronger.

So many things!

It is not difficult to dream, and dreams often come true.

What does it mean to be a Piarist?

It is a different colour of the same thing. I mean as in the Gospel, that allows the diverse charisms

I refer to reading the Gospel, as an inexhaustible fountain of spiritual and missionary riches. The special reading of St. Joseph Calasanz is made concrete in our group of Piarist Fathers. We see ourselves as reflections of Jesus, the Teacher, who blesses children, helping them towards happiness in the future. For Piarists, this is an evangelical mission in imitating Jesus, the teacher of children. It is a real challenge and is done as a consecrated act. That is the reason they become Religious.

What does the Fr. General do when he is not working as General?

I use my free time resting and reading. I like taking part in cultural or recreational activities, but during the last year and a half have had few opportunities for free time. I enjoy reading theological works and about the Religious Life, but novels as well.

The Religious Life Congress has just taken place; what contributions has it made?

For me it was an interesting and useful event. I understand that a Congress is merely an instrument. The problem is what is to be done after the Congress. As it develops one is carried along by so many different things, and this is most enriching. One allows oneself to be carried along and this is consoling. My preoccupation is what happens for my Religious Family after the Congress. This is why I see it as an instrument. Many useful, and other less useful things happened there, or perhaps some of those matters lack clarity at present. Life is not exhausted in a congress. The real problem is to see what elements of the congress may be taken by each one of us for his own Religious Family. I believe that for the Piarists, and in accordance with the symbols of the Samaritan man and woman chosen by the congress, there is a well of living water where we may all really drink: the Gospel and the Piarist charism; an inn, where room may be found for every kind of work and Piarist community. I would like the companions of my own Order to take this material and go on drinking from the living water of this well. At the same time we should see ourselves as the inn of the Samaritan, the other icon used at the 2004 Congress. We must create new inns, new room, for people in need who might approach us, or so that we may reach out to them. I would like the result of the Congress to be that it makes our projects into concrete realities, that its teaching is put into practice in our lives