



Interview with Juan Antonio Frías

We met Juanan - that's what they call him - who, with almost always a smile on his face and smoking his black tobacco, is recounting part of his 60 years to us. That's how we found out about his birth in Tolosa, Guipúzcoa; that from the age of 5 he attended the School with Piaristes, the same school where his father had also been a pupil...

While studying there - he recounts - he met, amongst others, José María Larraz, an Piarist who brought with him a new style of pastoral care and who became an example for our interviewee, an example who gradually brought out his priestly calling. At 15 he started his noviciate. He was, as one of his brothers said in jest, the "black sheep of the family", since there had been no tradition of either priests or monks in it; his mother thought he was too young to take a decision of such a nature... "but they left the decision up to me as in all things".

When he was 28 he was sent to Brazil, where he lived for 14 years. Listening to Juanan, you can understand why he feels that Brazil changed his life... In 1988, he returned to Vasconia and, to his surprise, was named Master of Novices.

At present he has been living in Chile for nearly two years.

Why were you given Chile as your destination?

There is a project between Vasconia and the three districts that Vasconia has in America. That project included the founding of a Noviciate in America, and it was decided that the most suitable place for that would be Chile. So now I'm in Chile, as Master of Novices.

Are there also novices from Vasconia in Chile?

No, the Province of Vasconia sends its novices to Madrid. The novices of the three American districts of Vasconia are in Santiago de Chile, but the noviciate is open to vocations from other countries. This year, for example, there are also novices from Bolivia.

What does it mean for you to be Master of Novices? What experiences have you had?

At first it was a surprise; I never thought of myself as a teacher. I started to work in a school and I continued to do so when I went to Brazil: I gave classes to small children, Art, Natural Sciences, Geography (I was a “Four-Wheel Piarist”)... I studied Pedagogy, Educational Orientation...the usual. When I was named Master of Novices, it came as a complete surprise, but in time I took it on as a mission, and now I feel that it is my mission. Through it, I feel very Piarist because of the deeply educational aspect, and very priestly because I can attend people in their deepest, most spiritual aspects. It is a mission which has fulfilled me in my Piarist being, and I have adopted it now as my own; we could almost say that I recognize it as a great calling.

What has Brazil taught you?

So many things... It has given me more vitality; it has allowed me to appreciate emotions, relationships, enjoyment... to have heart (Brazil is a very hearty country),... affections and plurality too. Brazil is special; I am very grateful to this country, because humanly and spiritually it has enriched and changed me. I'm totally and forever grateful for having gone to live and work in America, to have been able to experience other cultures and, above all, a living Church. The Church in Brazil shares life with the poor and among the poor, although perhaps in the last few years it may have lost a little bit of the energy it had.

It must have been difficult to return to work in Spain...

It was very hard; I feel that the return was more difficult than the outward journey. After 14 years I felt like a stranger in my own land. Imagine, I left Spain with Franco in charge and I returned with democracy reigning again. I spent years understanding nothing. Moreover, the mid-life crisis hit me!! I returned when I was 42; I was a little tired and some questions were going round inside my head, about what I could do then, what I was doing there, why everything seemed so strange... That time was one of adventure for me - a spiritual, immensely human and very big adventure.

Going back to the trip, what was your landing in Chile like?

I already knew Chile but now, of course, I was going to Chile to be a Chilean. I found the country very agreeable and different. Perhaps I didn't find so many differences as I had in Brazil, where even the language was different. But Chile is also different, although some similarities with Spain sometimes trick you and you think that it is quite similar; you run the risk of not paying attention to Chilean culture, to its personality, to its way of speaking and being, which are in fact very different.

I feel very welcome, although I ask myself if I really live in Chile, since the Noviciate is very limited within itself, a small bubble, where 5 countries live together, and the Chilean presence there is small.

What is being Master of Novices basically about?

To attend. To be with and share life with the novices: to dig deep but still being respectful, making proposals and always attending. It is a key basic stage within training. This does not mean, as it appears in some documents, that the Noviciate is "well-rounded", that the result is a perfect candidate. You can't perform miracles in one year and just because of that, our training is extensive; we live in an on-going process of growth.

What does it mean to you to be an Piarist?

A follower of Christ, according to the charisma of Calasanz. It is being one of Jesus' disciples who, in Calasanz style, in a kind of religious life, dedicates himself to the education of basically poor children. Understanding education in a broad concept, not exclusively centred on a systematic school set-up.

And when you talk of the poor, what are you referring to?

Very easy, to those who have nothing, those who can't, those who don't count (to those who don't want them). The poor are a key element for Calasanz: he refers, on the one hand, to a lifestyle that is charismatic, where poverty and humility form part of that spirituality, so dense and centred around a vision of Christ, who gives up everything for the poor along the way. And on the other hand, he refers to a labour, a task and dedication like Jesus' which liberates, which heals the poor, which cures, which raises up, gives life.

What are the differences between the teachers from Vasconia and the Latin Americans?

Their different cultural ideas, very different ways of understanding life and the world; but there are also differences among the Latin Americans. There are differences based on social origins, environment, national identity, nation... In Latin America, for example, it isn't necessary to talk about the poor, because everyone knows what poverty is, either by seeing it or by having experienced it.

Do you think that the question of the poor is important and, as such, a challenge for Vasconia?

I do, and for the whole Pious School and the Church. This does not mean that we have to set aside Europe because these countries have been lucky enough to overcome certain levels of poverty, because poverty exists here too. It is certainly a challenge for us not to remain set in our ways. Poverty leads you to experience spirituality starting from a stripping away, like Calasanz himself: someone who aims at being an adult and ends up being a child, stripped of everything. I think that this Calasanz process can be forgotten in Europe and for that reason we must be attentive to details and to children.

Is this a key to the vocational question in Europe?

Yes, it is a key. In Europe there are other factors to do with this, such as the birth rate which is important: if there are no children, how can there be future callings? The European lifestyle also doesn't tend towards the religious life; "being small and at the service of others" doesn't seem so attractive nowadays, at least as a complete life plan. I also see that in Europe everything is programmed and there is no margin for surprises; this is terrible for the Christian faith, which is always a surprise and never a programme. And what is most important about religious life if not gratitude and surprise, while everything in our society is nearly all plans, control, interests, "mercantilism".

What are the most important vocational crises that you have had?

I have had so many! It has been my lot to have lived all my life as a monk in the midst of a religious life in crisis. There have been important moments of crisis. I am a priest from the post-Council period; I was ordained in 1971. In all this time there have been situations which have affected me a lot, sometimes in the midst of confusion, of periods of discussion, and I believe that we have become very ideological. It has been very hard for me to give up ideologies in order to try and experience faith; this is something that I have recently learnt, at the age of 50...

Let's say that you are typical of the 68 generation.

That's true, more or less, with all that that supposes about Spain and the Basque Country. We used to live with and by many ideals. Ideals of all types: political, social, religious...of the Pious School. Just imagine that all that didn't leave me indifferent deep down; it produced a crisis inside me, and not infrequently I wondered what I was doing in the Pious School... The process of secularization we started also raised questions for me. I think my crises were more ideological than affective, although I have had both...that is, if they can be separated. And now I'm in my 60 year crisis! I say it a little in jest, a little seriously. Because when

you are approaching 60, you also wonder about things, amongst them, what have you done with your life?

And are you happy with what you have done with your life?

Totally. Well, almost (let's leave it at that). I am very happy with my life and with being an Piarist.

Do you think about death?

Yes. Curiously, up to now, I have considered and thought about death as something that was out there. Now, sometimes, I find myself thinking about it as a real possibility - I think that it is to do with that vital moment when you start saying goodbye to your loved ones and you come to realize that you are getting nearer to that possibility. It's life.

(By Julio César Boffano)