

**Interview with Rodolfo Robert
Vice-Provincial for Central America and the Dominican Republic**

I was born in San José (Costa Rica) in 1962, to an immigrant family, which was very open and tolerant - a family which didn't take much part in church matters, made up rather of free-thinkers. I am the baby of the bunch and also the only male. My two elder sisters have children and one of them lives in Kenya. We are a family which moves around a lot.

Fr. Rodolfo has a degree in Education and also in Economic History. He fulfils spiritual needs by reading the Gospels and other religious texts and says: "Calasanz changed my life. He sorted out my personal choices and has allowed me to meet some incredible Piarist brothers, who have become my family."

How did you meet up with the Piarists?

Even though I was not a pupil in a Piarist school, I knew about them because a lot of my friends in our neighbourhood were pupils in the Calasanz Institute - you know that in South America the life of your neighbourhood is fundamental - and so I always felt close to them. And of course the Institute has always had a very good reputation.

When did you draw closer to the Piarists?

My vocation was late. I had already finished university and started work. At senior school I had approached the idea of a vocation, but my family was not very convinced about it, so I dropped the subject. But this refusal was in no way traumatic. As a lay member I took part in local church activities from the age of 14 to 26, when I finally joined the Piarists.

What impression did you get of the Piarists from your adolescent friends?

That of a high quality school which was run by priests who were dedicated to education; not much more than that.

Well then, what was it that struck you later?

I was simply struck by the founder himself, St. Joseph Calasanz. And the extraordinary thing is that I got to him through a book.

Do you think that the Piarists need to encourage more people to know about Calasanz?

Yes indeed, but I don't think that we ourselves know him well enough. Although I joined because of Calasanz, I need to say that Piarists in general are not familiar enough with his writings and we continually use the same quotations or anecdotes. Thus doing, we deny ourselves and others the opportunity to refresh ourselves at that spring which never runs dry, because the life we cultivate has deep roots and widespread horizons. We Piarists have to return to Calasanz again and again.

Let's go back to when you were 25 or 26...

I was working on a research project in university archives, teaching in a senior school and I was also running a bar. I had been part of a regular couple for 6 years and we had also given some thought to marriage. When, in that period, I was thinking about whether it was the right decision or not, my old idea of the vocation to the priesthood returned to my mind. The question caused me serious problems, until it became all too clear and I had to tell my fiancée. It was a very difficult moment for us.

When I felt that my way was that of a religious vocation, I began to look for the place in which I could develop it. In the same week, two friends who were priests, one of them, Florenino Idoate, a Jesuit who has since passed away, and Angel Sancasimiro, who is now a bishop, both said: "I don't know if this is right for you, but if it is so, then you should choose something like the Piarists." Having received such similar advice from two people within the same week, I went to the Piarists and met Fr. Angel Martinez, who gave me an enormous book: It turned out to be the Critical Biography of St. Joseph Calasanz, by Fr. Bau, and when I had read it I felt that that man, Calasanz, summed up all I believed in. My life and my story took on meaning through his presence.

So the first thing that seduced me was Calasanz rather than the Piarists. My postulancy was "open" because I was an adult and I had to organise many aspects of my practical life.

What did you do with the bar?

Unburdening myself of material things was not easy. But I sold everything. In the end I was left with one lamp and any last doubts that I might have had about my vocation went with that remaining lamp. When I was left with nothing I asked myself: What if I'm making a mistake, shall I be able to begin all over again? And in answer to that question, I gave the last thing I had been left with, the lamp, away and made up my mind. That is how I entered the prenovitiate, with two small suitcases. All the rest and the best of my life has been given to me by the Pious Schools.

Are you happy to be a Piarist?

Happy....very happy!

What is worthwhile about being a Piarist?

Many things. Because it means being part of a living charism. And, when you look at any level of society, you may find this Piarist charism alive and there, because Christ is there too, and He liberates us without breaking anything or anyone, integrating us all: faith and culture, grace and freedom. If we believe in people, we will have no doubt about the fact that this century has both the need and the fecundity. So then, it should be clear that it is worth being a Piarist.

I believe that God calls us to save us, and believe also that God called me to save me and so that I should help save others.

The "Ministry" was an important subject at the Council of the Superior Majors, wasn't it?

To be a Piarist you need to have faith in and love certain fundamental beliefs; that is to say, you cannot be a Piarist if you do not clearly understand the concept of evangelization through education, or without understanding the presence of God in little children and in young people, or without understanding the processes of social transformation. From this viewpoint, from that of faith, there are many diverse ways that one may be a Piarist, and this is one of the riches of the Order, just as the lives of the people we serve are themselves very different.

I think that it is unfortunately easy to wear a mask as a Piarist. One can do much and also do much good, but if one breaks with one of the fundamental beliefs, perhaps one is not a real Piarist. However we Piarists are blessed with a lot of common sense, thanks be to God.

What did you have to say to your ex-fiancée about all this?

That was difficult. But after some years, in which we both followed our different paths in life, we have become good friends. She has married and it was I who baptised her second child.

When you went to Peralta again, for the Superior Majors' Council, what effect did it have upon you?

Going to Peralta is always an opportunity to revisit the birth of my vocation. Also to come up face to face with the birthplace of the vocation of Calasanz, and to realise how the environment and the first years of one's life are important for all people. And I see that a vocation comes free but that one must then earn it, must walk with Calasanz, do one's pastoral work, deal with difficulties and incomprehension. It is a privilege to go to Peralta and find oneself.

Let's talk about your demarcation, which is different in so far as it is made up of three countries.

Costa Rica, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, which are culturally very different. Our mission is sufficiently clear for there to be unity, if we know how to adapt ourselves to the local cultures, because it is a universal mission. Piarists from three or four countries can live together peacefully - the Spanish are an example here, for Valencia is a promoter of our mission. In this case we simply have different countries but one mission.

I feel that the Demarcation faces multiracial and multiethnic aspects in a positive way, and this is an example we are able to offer the rest of the Pious Schools.

Challenges?

As far as our mission is concerned, the challenge is still that of knowing how to get closer to the poor of this world, without having to rely upon any government, but trusting in our own creativity. We have tried to make our work as accessible to poor people as possible and we are happy about this, as we are happy with our work in non-formal education.

Another subject is that of our pastoral work for vocations, which must be excellent in order to support consecrated life.

The third challenge is that of permanent training within the Demarcation, which centres on the subjects of communal life and our teaching work - indeed anything which helps us make concrete recommendations to improve our lives. A fourth challenge might be our links with the rest of the world's Pious Schools, because we know that we are called to look after one another.

And the dreams of the Vice-Provincial....

That the world's Piarists may create more simple and efficient means of evangelizing; that without abandoning the good that there already is, they may not be afraid of engaging in non-formal education. I should like to see a Pious School where education and the Gospel arrive at many many more. This is what, with the help of our lay people, we are trying to do in our Demarcation.

But this does not mean abandoning traditional schools, does it?

Certainly not. In fact, the organisation of the traditional schools is indispensable for all the rest and all of our pupils ought to know it. What an opportunity would be missed if a Piarist were not to experience our schools. However, it is also a great pity if he does not know what it is like in a non-formal school, which is less regulation-bound and which serves poorer areas of the world.

We need to work. A lot is given to us by Grace, but much comes from work itself, just as in everyday life, when one has to earn one's crust of bread. A lot comes from blessings, but inevitably one must also set the alarm clock early and get up to start the day's tasks. It is wonderful to meet God and Freedom, and that is what our vocation means to me.

(by Julio César Boffano)