

On the horizon: the General Chapter within a year (an opportunity not to be missed)

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Father General

The celebration of the 46th General Chapter is imminent. It was called on 11th May this year, the Feast of Pentecost, of the Holy Spirit. The General Chapter is the six-yearly opportunity that the Order gives itself in order to revise its work and decide how to proceed and invigorate its life and mission in the subsequent six years. The General Chapter is our supreme legislative organism, which is the reason why it concerns all of us. I herewith invite you to enjoy preparing for it, and later on to enjoy the Chapter itself, in a spirit of co-responsibility and with the help of both community and personal prayer. The way in which we habitually or skeptically judge the sometimes less-than-efficacious results of a Chapter may lead us to take it lightly, to lose interest or to remain detached ("After all, it's up to them, the members of the Chapter"). With all the cautionary measures we have to adopt - I look upon them as "sailors' warnings" to avoid mistakes and misunderstandings - the General Chapter remains one of those wonderful opportunities in which we may further the work of the Order. Important subjects have to be discussed; various matters need to be looked into and decisions taken: deciding on the people who will have to take on the duties of governing and revitalizing the Order, of caring for our pastoral mission and of acting as guides for our brothers and sisters.

The Chapter will be successful if it is planned properly. When the work of the Chapter is responsible and carried out well, then the Spirit of God is free to act within the Order. After all, the Chapter is a time when we try to discover the present and up-to-date needs of the Spirit within the Order. Above all, the Chapter is an act of obedience. When our brothers meet together and hold fast to the fraternal ties of common work, God is present: *Ubi caritas et amor Deus ibi est!* And that leads us only to the love of Christ: *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor.*

The choice for the central theme of the Chapter is "The Piarist Ministry". Thus we shall deal with a subject which is always dynamically at the heart of our Piarist identity. We were born as the Order for the Christian educational mission (c.f. the memorial of Calasanz to Cardinal Michelangelo Tonti, to ask that the Church should accept his Work as a legal and recognised religious institution). After having listened to the opinions of many Piarists during the Canonical Visitations and during last October's Council of the Superior Majors, the General Congregation does not think it is necessary to write a new document on our ministry to substitute that which we already have: "The Piarist Ministry: Evangelizing by Education in the Calasanz Way", which was published in 1999 on the orders of the General Chapter held two years previously. The subject is vast; it will be more fruitful to deal with concrete matters. This is why seven points or subheadings have been underlined, to enable us to fix the limits for the subjects concerning our ministry which will be dealt with by the Chapter. This is a provisional list of titles: educating the children of the poor; the profile of a Piarist institute; Piarist institutes as pastoral organizations; non-formal education in the Piarist ministry; the religious community and its mission; fulfilling our mission in relation to the growth of

the Order and improvement of the means by which we may evaluate and verify work done and its quality as Piarist work.

Along with this central theme, the Chapter will wish to concentrate on some other subjects, which we have called "ongoing themes". These are things which are already a part of the life and mission of the Order and which need an impulse in order to carry on. They are as follows: the reorganization plan for the Order; pastoral work for vocations; the relationship between the laity and the Order of the Pious Schools; putting into practice the training directorate - "Formation of the Piarist" ("La formazione dello scolopio" - FES - published in 1991) and continuing the directorate on economy. The FES text is ready and at the right moment it will be sent to the Chapters. Its title is "The Formation and Studies of a Piarist" (FEDE).

We trust that with the help of God we shall be able to cope with all this work and do it well, both in the preparatory and Chapter-meeting stages. Obviously, in addition to the various themes under study, the Chapter will deal with normal business. And to this end we need to stress the importance of the elections.

As is indicated in the convocation letter which announces the General Chapter, the place where it will take place will be Peralta de la Sal. The birthplace of our Founder will host the Chapter from 1st to 25th July 2009. I know that this choice has given rise to surprise and some adverse judgment. It is clear that the place and the house in which the Chapter is to be held are a matter of importance, since we are speaking of many days of meetings and work, but I think this is a minor matter, since the building has all the necessary conditions for a place in which a General Chapter is to be held. I believe that the sanctuary house of Peralta certainly has the means and anything more which will need doing will be done. This is not "post factum" since the choice is irrevocable, but I should like to say a few words about the meaning which Peralta de la Sal has or should have for every Piarist. Sometimes it is necessary to motivate and to explain those motivations in a direct manner. I am not speaking about justification, but am simply setting this down, in the knowledge that Peralta is a "special Calasanz site" in which we are to celebrate the General Chapter.

Peralta de la Sal is a small and isolated village; somewhat inconvenient and far from the frantic world in which we live. We might compare it to a desert without sand. The spiritual traditions of the Church, and important periods for conversion, like Lent, draw us to God with a "call to solitude", in order to speak quietly and without interference to Him whom we love. He speaks always of love and conversion. In the General Chapter, the Order needs to have both. I like this passage from Hosea in which the Lord of Israel has an appointment with his beloved spouse in the desert: "I shall lead her into the wilderness: and I will speak to her heart and there she will respond" (Hosea, 2, 14-15). I believe that we, as a Chapter, are invited to listen to the Word that we may translate it into the life and mission of the Order. Noise is distracting and without it our dialogue is always more direct and precise. At the very least, Peralta offers us lodgings without noise, apart from that which we bring with us in our suitcases with the instruments of new technologies, which do not recognise any frontiers in the whole wide world. The traditional welcomes of the Peralta Community and of the Province of Aragon will not allow us to keep our "fasting in the desert". But, if on the material side it will be neither possible nor suitable, on the spiritual side a certain fasting will be a positive sign. The Christian spiritual tradition recommends controlling our appetites so

that we may leave space for the nutrition that the Word gives us, so that we can accept the action of God. A General Chapter is also this.

Thinking about our ministry reveals that it is to us that Christ addresses these words: "you are the salt of the earth ... you are the light of the world" (Matthew, 5, 13-14). This call to the salt of the earth is echoed in the salty earth of Peralta! It may look as if I'm joking, but I am not. If we may paraphrase the early history of the Franciscans and their "Chapter of Mats" (stuoie), ours might be the "Chapter of Salt". Our ministry is the educational salt to instruct and train children and young people. St. Francis, the "poor man", was concerned that the "Porziuncola", that piece of poor and humble land where he was "born to God", might cease to become a model for new houses and convents. The humility and austerity of Peralta today has much to say to Piarists. There, next-door to the house in which he was born, is still the baptismal font of Calasanz. Arriving there in flesh and blood, at the house of Calasanz and at his baptismal font, will be an outward and visible sign of the Order, conforming to the desire of the Church itself, that will be returning to the charismatic sources of religious institutions. It will be a sacramental sign for us, praying God that he will infuse the Holy Spirit in the Pious Schools, which, in far off times He did through its Founder, and that He may grant a new charism to the Order and to the Church.

As has become my habit, my last words are of congratulations for those who, in these days of July and August are celebrating important anniversaries of priestly ordination or solemn profession. Custom and repetition do not diminish my warm appreciation and joy shared with my brothers. Congratulations and good wishes in the Grace of the Lord to these dear Piarists: Fr. Tibor Boriàn for fifty years as an ordained priest and also to Brothers Ruperto Clemente Domínguez and Clemente López. They are all dear to us in the Lord.