

Salutatio june, 2006

**“*Murus Religionis firmissimus*”
The Order’s impregnable fortress**

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I’ve taken the title of this “*salutatio*” from number 37, Chapter V, of the Constitution of San José de Calasanz (1622), about the poverty of the Piarist, that I quote literally. “The Religious, will love the venerable poverty, mother of the exquisite humility of other virtues, as the strongest defence of our Congregation. They have conserved it in all its integrity and they have strived sometimes to experiment its consequences.” I have translated, thinking that I have interpreted well the Founding Saint “the strongest defence” instead of “the impregnable fortress” of our Order.

I have pondered a lot in choosing the theme for June’s “*Salutatio*”, the end of the scholarly term in several of our districts. Finally, I chose the theme of the poverty of the priarist life project. I pass through, visiting districts all over the Order; information from here, there, and from all over the Order arrives to Rome. Everyone worries for the vitality and effectiveness of their mission. How to boost it? The title could be interpreted as if on the defensive. But this is not so; however, it is so too. Because it is about always creating something new, to look ahead, to carry out deeds, that because they are of a good quality, impulse and bring about vigour, as well as defending us from degradation.

I am not going to enter a generic discussion about the evangelical poverty as such, nor about the Poverty of the religious. We know that the evangelical inspiration and the following of Christ the poor, includes many nuances and features. Each institute tries to bring together something of this, but without covering everything. There are different models of poverty; the Benedictine, the Franciscan, or the Ignacion, there is also the Calasanz model; the style of the poor life of the piarist. This is the lifestyle that we should look towards when we propose to live as a poor evangelical in our following of Christ.

Frequently, concerns appear, during our conversations about this theme, as if we were not so faithful to our poverty. We talk to each other about cases of abuse in the poor life. There are, then, motives to defend the Order from deteriorating. But, In addition, the Order is working on a project of re-structuring, looking towards thrusting its vitality forward. We will not come to anything efficient if we don’t practice the poverty innate to our own model of priarist life. It’s natural, therefore, that the effort to live poorly, as piarists, is a permanent worry among us. I don’t invite you, as such, to theoretically philosophize about what it means to be a poor priarist. It’s better that we drench ourselves in what Chapter seven of the constitution says. Here it is said in black and white, that the indicator of the priarist life is the poor evangelist life.

For those who do not follow the spirit of poverty of our way of life, I invite you to meditate a text of the Revelations, the biblical book that accompanies the Easter Service readings. “Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. “(Revelations 3, 17-18).

This is what I read, paraphrasing the texts “you say; I am fine, as I live, managing money,” but I say to you: buy “ the precious evangelical pearl” (Mt. 13. 46) and you will be rich and better off; wrap yourself with Christ (Gál 3, 27) in order to cover up your nudity; look with the eyes of faith and you will see that your path is not the right one, because you have demonstrated another path in your life different to the one that you have professed. “Why this exhortation? Because I want you to be well, as a piarist. “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten”. (Revelations 3, 19).

To those that follow coherently and not without great generosity, those who give all and resign themselves, I urge you to continue living the poor life as a piarist. It is the right path. With your poor lifestyle you will make the defence of the Order come true and the urge to keep it alive and vigorous. Perhaps it won't be possible to eradicate from life some features that are not consistent with poverty, but he who lives on the straight and narrow must know that the Institution will back him up and say that this is the right path. The connoisseurs of our history agree in saying that when the spirit of poverty has shined in the life of the religious, that the Order has been appreciated by the people, that it has produced abundant fruits in its mission and that it has developed in strength and in number.

Over the past few days, I have been preparing the words that I will have to say at the beginning of this month in the 375 years celebrations of the start of the pious schools in Moravia, currently the Check Republic. There will be commemorative events in Mikulov, the old Nikolsburg of the Epistolary Calasanz, as well as in Strážnice.

We piarists are no longer in Mikulov; the House closed halfway through the last century. Currently, the church has freedom of worship and the school continues to be open as a state school. We returned to Stážnice a few years ago, due to the effort of Father Joseph Maria Balcells. The church has been given back to us, it is magnificent, but the college hasn't been given to us due to the fact that it is now an old age home. The local authorities, however, have shown their acknowledgement and have rescued from the forgotten, the so called “well of Father Casani”, which gave drinking water and watered the ancient orchid. This area has been dedicated as a garden for the citizens. The mayor himself told me proudly, showing me the place that had been cleared and beautified next to the parapet of the well and the plaque that is in memory of Casani. It is now that we have been able to recuperate the spring water and we hope that the water could be “miraculous”, because Casani was declared Blessed. We laughed with joy. But we return to the poverty, that has motivated this digression. Not only the father. György

Sántha (*Epistulae ad S. Iosephum Calasanctium ex Europa Centrali*, Roma 1969) but also G. L. Moncallero (*La fondazione delle Scuole degli Scolopi nell'Europa Centrale al tempo della Controriforma*, Alba 1972) advocate that the success of the Pious schools in this region of Europe, that was dominated then by the recent Lutheran Reform movement, was due above all to the testimony of the poor life and in giving the same as those first priarists had given.

Both authors asked, why were the Piarists so well accepted in these parts? Both in agreement gave this explanation. Contemporary witnesses of the life and work of the piarists praised its “perfect religious life, its admirable humility, the absolute poor evangelist”. The success of their educational and evangelical presence was in the austere life of the religious- the best example- that could be given in towns under the Lutheran influence- is found in the testimony of a XV11 century contemporary. This same witness affirmed keenly. “There is no plant in the empire as fruitful as the Piarist Order.” The evangelical poverty was the great feature of the first piarists who moulded in such a way their personality, so that they were converted into humble educators, who were close to the people.

Humbleness, sure enough, is the essential virtue for those dedicated to serve the poor, whom can not be educated efficiently by those who live in luxury, because they are worried only about their well being and comfortable life. This spirit of a poor evangelist did not only conquer the simple people, but also those that governed. One of them wrote “The piarists are held in high regard and accepted because they do not go through life accumulating wealth; they are satisfied just with food and clothing. This is why they are loved and appreciated by the people and those in charge ask the piarists to educate with such a good example.”

Let's return to the beginning of my talk, making reference to the restructuring process that has started in the Order. Why and for what reason all this? Why? Because we are so far from the margins of our poverty. What for? In order to achieve it. Reconstructing- because we have to start from each person- is a form and way to walk towards the goal. Christ. Why Christ? Christ the poor. Poverty in Calasanz. There is no doubt, therefore, if we go over our behaviour in this sphere; to be owners of money; using it without giving any explanations to any authority or to the community; concealing our income in order not to hand it over to the communal accounts, although we tell ourselves fair reasons (there is no fair reason for a priarist, to not hand the money over to the communal accounts); to possess, in anyway at all, money or objects that can be converted into money (cars, bank accounts, movable and unmovable assets, stocks and shares....), all this is to walk outside of the Pious schools. Nothing is worse for an institution, than to have members who are affiliated, but not as how they should be.

It is a permanent challenge of our faithfulness. We love our Order. So, let's consider ourselves, live stones of this impregnable fortress, which is poverty. Those that have chosen poverty are fortunate, because they are the only ones who have God as their King, or according to the most well known translation, because the kingdom of Heaven belongs to them. (Matthew 5. 3).