



The Holy See

***LETTER OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO FATHER JOSÉ MARIA BALCELLS XURIACH
SUPERIOR GENERAL OF THE PIARIST FATHERS***

*To the Very Reverend Father José Maria Balcells Xuriach
Superior General of the Piarist Fathers*

1. In the fourth centenary of the opening in Rome of “Europe's first free, popular public school” by St Joseph Calasanz, I wish to share in the joy of this institute and of all those who, thanks to the educational and evangelizing ministry of the Piarist Fathers, have received a solid human and Christian formation.

The meeting in the spring of 1597 between Joseph Calasanz and Antonio Brendani, parish priest of St Dorothy parish, was the occasion for your Founder's total conversion to the Gospel, a conversion which led him to give up his legitimate personal aspirations to find in the small school of Trastevere a “better way to serve God by helping these poor children” (Vincenzo Berro, *Annotazioni della Fondazione della Congregazione e Religione delle Scuole Pie [1663]*, vol. 1, p. 73).

From that first educational experience, opportunely transformed and confirmed by Calasanz, the first nucleus of the Pious Schools came into being the following autumn. It was an example of Christian instruction, open to everyone, which was to be the origin of public schools in the modern sense.

As Benedict XV, my venerable Predecessor, recalled on the occasion of the third centenary of the approval of the work of Calasanz, “he (Calasanz), was also the first to invent this way of Christian charity: at a time when children were barely offered even elementary schooling, he took on the task of teaching the children of the poor free of charge, so that they would not be entirely deprived

of instruction because of poverty” (AAS 1917, 9, 105.)

2. Joseph Calasanz, wise interpreter of the signs of the times, considered education, given in a “brief, simple and effective manner” (cf. *Constitutiones* [1622], n. 216), the guarantee of success in the life of students and the leaven of social and ecclesial renewal. Moreover, he saw school as a new way of evangelizing and for this reason he wished religious and preferably priests to take on the task of teaching, committing themselves to offering the child an all-round culture, in which the religious dimension would be considered and lived in a profound manner. Calasanz consequently outlined the figure of the priest, teacher of little ones and of the poor, while at the same time raising to ministerial dignity an office considered by his contemporaries as lowly and of little prestige.

Following in his footsteps, the Piarists, those many “unknown Piarists”, whom Pius XII praised (*Audience*, 22 November 1948), have given witness, down the centuries, of fidelity to Christ in their daily devotion to their educational mission to young people and to the proclamation of the Gospel. They have been and continue to be sowers of hope. Indeed, the teacher himself becomes a seed capable of producing fruit for a better world.

3. Calasanz's gifted intuition opened a fertile furrow in society, which other founders and foundresses have continued and deepened, and so today schools are one of the fields in which the Church can more effectively carry out her evangelizing mission. Therefore, in 1948 my venerable Predecessor Pius XII, rightly proclaimed him the “heavenly patron of all Christian public schools in the world” (Brief *Providentissimus Deus*, in: AAS 1948, 11, pp. 454-455).

Calasanz's contemporaries saw in his work of “evangelization of the poor” (cf. Lk 7:22) a sign of the closeness of the kingdom of heaven and promoted its rapid expansion in many European countries. Today, four centuries later, Calasanz's initiatives are present in about 30 nations of the world. The present commitment to education, considered one of the fundamental duties of a modern State, rather than dispensing with the work of Catholic schools, on the contrary makes it even more urgent. In fact, on the one hand, they make it possible to respond to the right of families to ensure an education founded on the perennial values of the Gospel for their children, and, on the other, to offer the whole of society authentic educational centres in which the quality of the instruction is combined with a sound basic formation. I thus strongly renew the hope that all democratic countries may finally implement effective parity for non-State schools, a parity which at the same time respects the latter's educational programme: such schools in fact offer a service to the public that is appreciated and sought by many families.

The secularized environment in which, unfortunately, the new generations are growing up demands, in fact, that the Christianly-inspired school should continue to be offered to all those who seek in it an excellent place of formation and evangelization. The negative models that are often proposed to the young people of our time require the religious who are involved in the educational

field to continue their mission with “creative fidelity” (cf. *Vita consecrata*, n. 37), in order to fulfil Jesus' commandment: “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15).

In fact, education is a modern areopagus, in which the Church, now more than ever before, is called to carry out her mission of evangelization and cultural charity (cf. *Vita consecrata*, n. 96).

4. Calasanz did not confine himself to developing an ideal “school for everyone”, later acknowledged as one of the fundamental human rights; he wanted his school, run by teachers especially committed to evangelization, to be destined “mainly for poor children” (*Constitutiones* [1622], n. 4, 198). This orientation which appeared particularly innovative in the 16th century, is more timely than ever today. In fact in the marginalized areas of affluent countries and especially in developing countries, many children still receive inadequate schooling or are completely left to their fate, so that the evangelization of the poor continues to be a prophetic sign of the presence of the kingdom of God among men (cf. *Vita consecrata*, nn. 89-90). If Calasanz could see in the face of those Roman children, left to their own devices, the reflection of the face of Christ, it is your turn now, in a world where peoples and persons are appreciated and considered only in proportion to their economic importance, to show the world that little ones and the poor continue to be the favourites of the heart of Christ.

If the Catholic school is a suitable setting for evangelization, today the Calasanz popular public school is often a place of mission. As I recalled in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, religious teachers must feel particularly committed “to be faithful to their founding charism and to their traditions, knowing that the preferential love for the poor finds a special application in the choice of means capable of freeing people from that grave form of poverty which is the lack of cultural and religious training” (n. 97).

5. In your educational works the number of lay people who share the Calasanz ministry with you in different ways and to different degrees is ever increasing. After the example of your founder who, from the beginning, associated priests and laity in his educational apostolate, I urge you to undertake together paths of qualified and fraternal collaboration in the field of the development and transmission of culture, so that the richness of your institute's special charism may continue to produce fruits in the Church and in society (cf. *Vita consecrata*, n. 54). To this end you must intensify your spiritual, theological and cultural formation, so that religious and laity may accomplish the ideal of the Christian educator in their three-fold fidelity “to the spirit of your founder, to the Church and to the cause of the Catholic school” (Paul VI, *Address* of 26 August 1967).

To Mary, the first teacher and disciple of Jesus, under whose protection your founder placed you, calling you “the Poor of the Mother of God” (*Constitutiones*, [1622], n. 4) I entrust you, most Reverend Father, and the whole Piarist Order. May the example of the Virgin encourage you to

follow Christ in everything with the spirit of children, the privileged recipients of the kingdom of God (cf. Lk 18:16-17).

With these wishes, I sincerely impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you all.

From the Vatican, 24 June 1997.

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

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