

Calasanz and Christmas Nativity scenes

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Published in *Estudios calasancios*. México 2011



A teacher, not Piarist of the Pious Schools

Declared by Pius XII, patron of the popular Christian school, St. Joseph Calasanz contributed significantly to using the nativity scene as a pedagogical resource and educator of the religiosity of childhood. Before Comenius, Calasanz had already applied the intuitive method in his Pious Schools, and the nativity scene proves this.

The initiator of the "nativity scene pedagogy" among the Piarists was Gaspar Dragonetti, who lived 115 years, always retaining great energy and capacity for work. A contemporary describes him this way: "he was healthy and robust, had a sonorous voice, never wore glasses, and always kept all his teeth." He was so popular in Rome, and such was his reputation as a professor of Latin – for whose didactics he composed an original method – that Pope Urban VIII led him to develop before him and high dignitaries of his curia, a class of Latinity, with which he left everyone amazed by translating and commenting on a passage from Virgil.

In 1616, Calasanz founded the Pious Schools in Frascati, a city near Rome. There he sent Fr. Dragonetti, and soon we will have evidence of his hobby – rather a devotion – stimulated and maintained with the complacency and collaboration of Calasanz. From Rome, he wrote to Father Cananea in 1618: "Father Gaspar, for his great desire to leave something in perpetual memory of the Pious Schools of Frascati, has bought here quality figurines to mount a great nativity scene that will move great devotion. It also carries many necessary things to do it perfectly in due time. I would very much like you to put all the diligence into helping you in any way you can with your ingenuity and knowledge of architecture." The following year, when Father Dragonetti moved to Rome, Calasanz wrote to Frascati to take great care (*grandissima cura*) of the figures left there by the old professor.

Calasanz and the "pedagogy of nativity scene"

From the letters that Calasanz writes, it can be deduced that figures were transferred from one school to another. The founder wanted the birth to appear "well devoted" and attract many people to visit him "for the greater glory of God and our greater merit."

The students of the school actively participated in the assembly of the births: "We will manage to build in the church the nativity scene for next Christmas, and we will represent that sacred mystery as best we can. We will have a dialogue and other compositions recited to some of the pupils for the special good of the people who visit it" (1628)

Some comforting letters arrive in Calasanz from Sicily during difficult times for the Pious Schools. A Piarist religious, Brother Salvador Signorini, builds in Cállor a nativity scene with large life-size figures, which attract the attention of the whole city. Carlos M. Rosiani writes to Calasanz referring to such an extraordinary birth, which "has left this city dumbfounded saying with one voice that we (the Piarists) are resurrecting."

The nativity scene tradition has not been interrupted in the Pious School, although it is yet to be investigated. In recent times, I would not wish that some names of Piarists who became famous for

constructing artistic nativity scenes would not fall into oblivion. For many years the whole of Pamplona paraded through the College of the Piarists, to visit the nativity scene with special effects built by Fr. Alejandro Pérez Altuna. The last edition of this Nativity scene was ceded to the Association of "Belenistas" of Pamplona, where it can currently be visited. In Valencia, Frs. José Ramón Ferrís and Vicente Frassetet made the Calasanz School famous. The latter, in addition, for many years mounted, commissioned by the City Council, the outdoor scene that during the Christmas holidays is exhibited in the square of the City of Turia called La Glorieta. Many other Piarists have stood out in this nativity scene art: Faustino Osés, Antoni Peralva, Angel Mitjavila, Luis Gaja, Modest Galofré, Josep Forcada, Eusebi Oller, Angel Torra, Antoni Batlle, Joan Camp, Celestí Miguel. Special mention deserves the births that have been reinstalled where the first two promoted by San José de Calasanz were built. The Church of Saint Pantaleo in Rome, today as in the time of Father Dragonetti, has a nativity scene built in Spain and later transferred to Rome and installed there personally by its author Fr. Jesús Ramo. This Piarist, famous for his scenes in Logroño, culminated his "belenista" career in Madrid, where his award-winning productions for the Calasanz Institute of Education Sciences (ICCE) have earned him the title of Nativity Scene Master, awarded by the Association of "Belenistas" of the Capital of Spain.

In this, as in other aspects, the pedagogy of San José de Calasanz maintains its vitality today.

