

For a more inclusive education

48 General Chapter of the Pious Schools

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In the autumn of 1597, the young priest Joseph Calasanz, together with Fr. Antonio Brandini, decided that the little school of Santa Dorotea should be free and open its doors to the poor children in Rome who could not have access to basic education. The Pious Schools were born with a clear option to offer poor children the opportunity to have a good education.

In the two premises offered by the parish, dozens of children were housed with a small group of volunteers until a year later, in December 1598, when one of the greatest floods of the river Tiber struck, leaving sick orphans and much more poverty. Nevertheless, the stubborn Joseph carried on with his school; how could he now leave the children at the mercy of pillage and begging? He thought the best way to lift them out of misery was for them to learn to earn a living by developing their talents. There was no turning back.

And so all kinds of children came to the Pious Schools, even those who could afford to pay. The teachers of the city were very angry because Calasanz was taking clients away from them; so he had to ask the parish priests for a certificate of poverty in order not to get into a quarrel with them.

Soon Calasanz almost totally abandoned the practice of asking for the certificate of poverty, "because rich and poor have equal need of piety and letters", but he continued to affirm that his Institute was more for the poor than for the rich. He constantly reminded us that the Pious Schools were founded for the poor: As for receiving poor pupils, you do what is holy by admitting those who come, because it is for them that our Institute was founded. And what is done for them is done for Christ, and the same is not said of the rich (EP. 2812).

We cannot hide the fact that the option for the poor is in the genetic code of the Pious Schools, and of course, it is included in the Constitutions written by the Founder: "And since we profess to be truly Poor of the Mother of God, we will not under any circumstances hold poor children in low esteem; but with tenacious patience and affection we will strive to endow them with every

quality, encouraged by that Word of the Lord: as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me" (CC n° 4).

The Pious Schools will maintain their charismatic vitality to the extent that they maintain a decided "option for poor children". The Holy Spirit, who has sustained the Order for more than 400 years, will open new ways for the children to find a place where they can sanctify themselves and be great in heaven, but also to promote and ennoble themselves and their country. (Memorial to Cardinal Tonti n. 14).

Practically all the General Chapters of the post-conciliar period have taken up the desire for the Pious Schools to be more present among the poor and thus to actualize "our religious consecration by a more significant presence in the new Trastevere according to the Calasanctian *praecipies*". This desire has been concretized in a strong and sustainable missionary growth in Africa and Asia where popular education is much needed and valued. In America new missions have been opened in very poor places and efforts have been made to maintain popular schools in spite of funding difficulties. In most schools in Europe, the choice has been made to establish agreements with the State to keep education accessible to all, and many non-formal education initiatives are being promoted for vulnerable groups. The 2009 General Chapter approved a document "Piarist ministry requires a spirit to teach poor children", which reflects on this issue and offers practical guidelines to guide schools in this option.

And following the sustained line of the Order in recent years, the last General Chapter of 2015 approved the line of action: "To significantly boost our dedication to the poorest in all the platforms of the Ministry, since our Institute was born especially for them, attending to new educational needs and frontier realities and advancing in criteria of quality and sustainability of these platforms".

In line with this, in the plan of action for the ministry of the Pious Schools that emerged from the General Chapter of 2021, we approved two initiatives:

- 1) Improve the quality of non-formal and pastoral education programs to effectively reach the poor in all platforms.
- 2) To give visibility to experiences of inclusive education, cooperative work and any other educational experience where each human being is empowered from his or her uniqueness in a positive way.

During the coming months we will share on this website reflections and experiences that have arisen in our educational centres and which are a creative response to the challenges we have as Pious Schools to offer a quality education to the neediest children.