

CALASANZ AND CHILDREN

St Joseph Calasanz was a Spanish priest born on the 11th of September 1557 in a small village called Peralta de la Sal, in the region of Huesca. He was the last of eight children in an average and pious family. This pious upbringing molded the life of Calasanz till his death. Like other children at his time, he went to elementary and high school, during which his desire to become a priest grew stronger with time. For this reason, after completing his theological studies in Valencia – Spain, he was ordained priest on the 18th December 1583. Being an intelligent and a hard working priest, he acted as secretary to many bishops and also as master of ceremonies in many dioceses in Spain. In addition to all these, he was also in charge of implementing the dictates of the council of Trent after the heat of the Reformation. Being a man of realistic and concrete dreams, he desired to obtain the post of a canon (Parish Priest in a Cathedral). This desire and other commitments like representing his bishop for a meeting with the Pope took him to Rome.

Calasanz arrived Rome on the 27th of February 1592. He sailed to Rome with the hope of returning to Spain very soon. He did not know that it was not a round trip. What he thought was going to be a round trip changed into a definitive one way stay. It is worth noting that it was not the riches, the art or the extravagance of the city of Rome that overpowered him but the misery, poverty and ignorance of its people in the neighborhood that won over his heart and kept him there. While in Rome, St. Joseph Calasanz started a peculiar pilgrimage with his membership in the confraternity of the Twelve Apostles. He began by going into the heart of Rome and there he found plenty of poverty and misery. But it was not just material misery and poverty that he found but also moral misery plus ignorance of the most fundamental and indispensable religious truths. What marveled Calasanz was the fact that in each neighborhood, there was a school being catered for by the city council and there were also people who dedicated themselves to the teaching of catechism to children especially on Sundays. “Why then so many ignorant children?”, St. Joseph Calasanz asked. **He then began to look for someone to carry out his new idea; that of integrating the poor children in schools where they could learn how to read, write, count** and even Christian doctrine and Latin language. Unfortunately for him, he found no one. However, he did not end at that level; he decided to open the first free and popular school in the history of Rome, known as the Institute of the Pious Schools in Santa Dorotea in 1597. The news of a free school and for the poor especially, spread rapidly throughout Rome to the extent that the schools became overcrowded. When his idea was concretized, he vowed saying, “I have found in Rome the best way of serving God through the little ones and I shall not leave it for anything in the world.” From this point forward, Calasanz kept thinking of ways to expand his institute and this was once more achieved on the 06th of March 1617, when his institute was raised to a Congregation with

simple vows by Pope Paul V in a brief titled “Ad ea per quae”. Later on, it was finally raised to the rank of an Order in the Church on the 18th of November 1621 by Pope Gregory XV through the brief “In Supremo Apostolatus” and it was officially called ‘Order of the Poor Clerics Regular of the Mother of God of the Pious Schools’.

Calasanz therefore founded an Order in the Church of God with a different, specific and indispensable mission. **This specific goal (charism) of the Order of the Pious Schools (Piarist Fathers) is the evangelization of children and youth especially the poor through education.** This Spanish saint, Calasanz, in his memorandum to Cardinal Tonti (1621) at the moment of the erection of the Congregation to an Order in the Church, held and believed that the teaching ministry in the Church is truly “the most worthy, most noble, most meritorious, most beneficial, most useful, most necessary, most natural, most reasonable, most worthy of praise and most glorious.” Furthermore, this mission today consists in the good education of the young and the future happy or unhappy life of a man depends on it. Therefore, anything related to the education of children and youth and the problem of their evangelization is to be considered as pertaining to our Institute. More so, we are out to model the consciences of individuals especially children and youth according to the Gospel values. We see to it that the young people achieve psychological maturity, gradual integration into society and critical assimilation of cultural values so that they can directly unite them with the Gospel and thereby attain their personal identity and internal freedom. Our mission as Piarist therefore covers the integral education of children and youth especially the poor ones in order that they can distinguish earthly realities from a Christian perspective.

To continue the work our founder received from the Holy Spirit in the streets of Rome in 1597, we are present in all the continents of the world. In Africa specifically, we have foundations in Senegal, Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, and Mozambique. We are looking forward to open new foundations in many other places in Africa especially where we will encounter these poor, destitute, abandoned and neglected children, so as to continue the work our founder started some 400 years ago.