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01. Pierre Thomas - the first witness

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Pierre Thomas – the first witness

Pierre Thomas was one of the first disciples of Claude-François Poullart des Places. He entered the community of the Holy Spirit on March 27th, 1704 and received all his formation there: he became a “Priest of the Holy Spirit” in 1712. So in all, he was living with Claude for more than 5 years. His testimony, above all in the first part, says much about the personality and the tastes of his friend. He outlines the spiritual journey which led to his conversion, including the decisive steps of his retreats in 1701 and 1702¹.

Memorandum on the life of Father Claude-François Poullart des Places

Claude François Poulart² des Places was born in the parish of St Peter (Rennes), close to the Abbey and was baptised there. Sir Claude de Marbeuf, President of the Parliament of Brittany, was his godfather and Madame Françoise Truillet, Dame de Ferret, was his godmother. The baby was given the names of “Claude François” after his father. His parents had implored God to bless their marriage with a son and their prayers were answered. They offered their new-born child to the Lord who had given him to them and, in honour of the Blessed Virgin, they dressed him in white for a period of seven years.

¹ Henry Koren: *“The Spiritual Writings of Father Claude-François Poullart des Places. Memoir of Thomas”* (pp. 225-275). Pittsburgh, Duquesne University, 1959. This book contains copies of both the French originals and an English translation of all the documents.

² His name “Poullart” is sometimes written “Poullard” or “Poulart”, as here. Likewise, “des Places” occasionally appears as “Desplaces”.

His great pleasure was to imitate the ceremonies which he had seen performed in church. Sometimes his parents' patience was tried by it, but if he stopped it for a while out of obedience to them, he was soon back at his favourite way of playing a little later. (...) ¹ He gathered together some friends and, without saying anything to his parents or his teacher, he set up a religious group. They had their rules for prayer, silence, and mortification and the latter sometimes even included taking the discipline.(...)

The conduct of young Claude was even more amazing when it is born in mind that he had a lively and restless temperament which pointed him in quite different directions. (...) A Jesuit Father who directed Claude found out about the group and ordered them to disband; he told him that self-love might have a greater share in this venture than the love of God, or at least it might eventually get mixed up in it. Moreover, it was to be feared that their fervour – which perhaps had already gone a bit too far – might lead them into indiscretions. The boy obeyed his director, but this act of obedience was an even more demanding mortification for him than all the others.

He subsequently had to fight strenuous battles to resist the temptation to seek pleasure. His temperament gave him a penchant for it and many invitations and the example of his friends increased the inclination; but his love of duty and the vigilance of a father and mother, who always took a great interest in his education, did not allow him to give free rein to it.

(...) After he finished his lower grades at the Academy of Rennes, his father, on the advice of his director, decided to have him spend another year studying public speaking in the Jesuit College at Caen. This same director, who had shown a

¹ Three dots between brackets (...) indicate that some details in the original text, with little historical interest, have been omitted.

special interest in Claude's education, was himself going to be teaching there. (...) It was there that Claude developed a great facility of self-expression and skill in public speaking which would help him later to present cogent reasons why people should lead a virtuous life.

(...) After his return to Rennes, he started studying philosophy. This is usually a critical period in the life of young people, when they are not as strictly supervised as when they were in the junior classes. (...) However, he studied hard with great success so that by the end of his course, he was able to defend a thesis which was dedicated to the Count of Toulouse. No expense was spared for the event. The Presidents and Councillors of Parliament were present for the ceremony, along with all the important people of the city and the surrounding area.

Having finished his philosophy, his father decided he should visit Paris, but I cannot say for sure what the purpose was. It seems likely that the principle reason was for him to meet a high-ranking young lady who was being suggested as his future wife. He was then eighteen or nineteen years old. She was a lady-in-waiting to the Duchess of Burgundy. I found this information in a memorandum that was given to me by one of the students of the community in whom Father des Places had great confidence and to whom he communicated many details of his life.

(...) Claude, who was very balanced and who would not be blinded by love, had no intention of committing himself so soon. Since his passion was for fame and glory, attaching himself to a woman in marriage would be rather an obstacle than a means to achieving his objective. (...) Moreover, the attraction he had felt for the priesthood since he was young kept coming back; God was working things out according to his plans. It was not difficult for Claude to lay aside the plans which his parents had for him but which involved elements

which he did not find attractive.

It seems that when he returned, Claude took a greater part in the social life of Rennes. It was normal that he should be given more freedom to see the world than he had enjoyed up to then and to be given the money required for making a good impression. This was much to his taste. But since his parents were not over generous with his allowance, he had to use his wits to arrange for borrowing and lending sums of money and to hide whatever might have been irregular in his conduct.

(...) A retreat is something very useful for getting right with God and restoring a good conscience. The time had come for Claude to make his choice of a state of life; marriage had already been suggested to him but he had not sufficiently analysed the situation for his liking. It was for these reasons that he started a retreat. God spoke to his heart and he reacted faithfully to the graces that God usually gives in abundance at such times. He became disgusted with the world and was eager to serve God - in other words, he went through a conversion. (...) But it is not enough to make good resolutions and courageously put them into practice; one also has to persevere and be constant to the end. (...) Young Claude persevered for only forty days.

(...) It seems that it was at this time that he told his parents of his plan to become a priest and asked their permission to go and study at the Sorbonne in Paris. Monsieur and Madame des Places were too religious to oppose their son's vocation, but thought it wise to see if he was really serious about it. (...) So they argued that to be well trained and to become a good priest, it was not at all necessary for him to study in Paris or to be a doctor of the Sorbonne. (...) This was not the reply Claude was looking for; it meant that he would have to study theology at Rennes and that was not at all to his liking. His idea of the life of a priest was not particularly exalted and he had been looking forward to the increased freedom from his

parents which would be impossible if he remained close to them.

Eventually, it was agreed that he should go to Nantes to study law and this choice was in perfect accord with the designs of both the parents and their son. In this way he would also have a chance to let his vocation mature. The study of law was required of all who wanted to become Councillors in the Parliament and it was also useful for those who desired to enter the clerical state. But apart from everything else, Claude wanted more freedom...

(...) He should have recalled the great truths he had meditated on during his retreat. He should have sought the advice of wise persons, practised spiritual reading, and tried to be on his own from time to time. He should have been more sparing in giving himself to the world, instead of plunging into it as he actually did. (...) This is one of the secret ways that Providence uses to arrive at its goals: we become dissatisfied with a state of life without knowing why, but it is a step in the execution of God's plans. We get worried and troubled and finally the time comes when it is evident that we were wrong. God manages to draw much good from what to us appeared only a cause of displeasure.