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03. Reflections on the Truths of Religion made during a Retreat by someone thinking about a conversion

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REFLECTIONS ON THE TRUTHS OF RELIGION MADE DURING A RETREAT BY SOMEONE THINKING ABOUT A CONVERSION¹

(These are from the notes of a retreat, mentioned in text no. 2 above, made by Claude Poullart des Places, under the direction of a Jesuit in the summer of 1701 when he was 22 years old. He wanted to ensure once again that he was following the plans that God had for him. The notes are in two parts of which this is the first. It corresponds to what St. Ignatius refers to as the 'retreat of conversion'. Below are some extracts.²)

I have been very keen to retire from worldly activity so as to spend eight days in solitude. I was under no obligation to make this sacrifice for the Lord; I was free to let things slip by, as I

¹ A note by Fr. Joseph Lécuyer (Superior General of the Spiritans, 1968-1974): *In this first of our founder's writings that have come down to us, it is not easy to detect the main current of thought of somebody who was still finding his way. But I was struck by the following points:*

1) In the midst of some rather impersonal thoughts on sin, there are some remarkable words on the love of God who constantly pursues the sinner. Claude-François decides that his life will be entirely a response to this love.

2) But despite this strong resolution, he is painfully aware of human frailty, so he will need God's help to become the person he wishes him to be.

3) Linked to this decision to give himself entirely to God, is a resolution to work for the conversion of others, to oppose evil in all its forms and to cut off the new heads of the dragon as they continuously replace those he has already dispatched.

² A critical edition of the writings of Poullart des Places can be found in the work of Fr. Christian de Mare in the series *Memoire Spiritaine, Etudes et Documents no. 4*. Congregation du Saint-Esprit, 30 rue Lhomond, 75005 Paris (1998).

have done so often in the past. Now I want to spend this time working for my conversion and salvation. I have to recognise in this good resolution the grace which enlightened me even in my moments of blindness (...) Fortunately, I seem to be one of those favoured children to whom my Father and Creator so often gives easy and attractive ways of reconciling myself to him.

So now is the time, my soul, to make a generous response. Do not throw away this chance to abandon all your worldly thoughts and feelings and reproach yourself for your ungratefulness and hardness of heart when God speaks to you. Should you not be ashamed to have resisted for so long, to have destroyed, despised and trodden underfoot the precious blood of your Jesus? (...)

You sought me, Lord, but I fled from you. You had given me the gift of reason but I would not use it. I wanted to do without you but you would not allow it. I deserved to be utterly abandoned by you, to cease being helped by you and to be punished instead. Under the weight of your punishment, I would have admitted my faults and recognised the enormity of my crimes. How kind you are, my Saviour! All you want is my conversion, not my death. You always treat me with kindness, as though you needed me. You seem to almost enjoy overcoming a heart as cold as mine. (...)

In acknowledging your power, may I also come to recognise your love. You love me, my Lord, and prove it in a striking way. I know your tenderness is infinite, for not even my innumerable and continuous acts of ingratitude can exhaust it. For a long time now, you have wanted to have a heart-to-heart talk with me, but for just as long, I have been unwilling to listen. You try to convince me that you want to make use of me in your holy work, while I try not to believe you. If your voice sometimes makes an impression on my mind, the world comes along a moment later and sweeps away all the awareness of your grace. For so many

years, you have worked at rebuilding all that my evil passions have destroyed. I could certainly understand if you do not wish to continue this unsuccessful struggle any longer and that you now intend to replace it with justice. (...) I have not come here to defend myself: I have come to let myself be conquered!

Speak to me, Lord, when you like. (...) Speak so that I may now repent of my blindness and renounce with all my heart all those things which made me flee from you. I am ready to search for you, I am ready to follow all your commands. Come into this heart which you have wanted to enter for so long. From now on, I will only listen to you and to those things which will make me love you as I ought. You will find in my heart a place which will be uncontaminated by any other obsession. You will find me surrounded by all those virtues that you have asked me to practise and you can let me know what you want me to do. Nothing in the world will be able to rob you of a servant who, with the courage of a Christian, vows to serve you with blind obedience and total submission. (...)

(The notes continue with his retreat meditations as laid down by the "Exercises". In conclusion, he summarises the new resolutions that have come from these reflections).

Let me be courageous! I promise God that I will do penance for my sins and let him see how much I detest them by the care I take to avoid committing them again. Let nothing in the world ever again separate me from living according to God's will. Let me destroy human respect, self-satisfaction, weakness, self-love and vanity. Let me get rid of all that is evil within me and keep only what is good. Let people say what they will. I will not be bothered whether they approve of me, make fun of me, write me off as a visionary or a hypocrite, or decide that I am a good man. From now on, I will be indifferent to all this. I am searching for my God. He only gave me life so that I could serve him faithfully. I shall soon have to give him an account of the time he has given me on this earth to work out my salvation. The world

will not reward me for the attachment I have had to it. I would be hard pushed to find even one friend who would love me without any self-interest; only God loves me sincerely and wants to treat me well. If I please him, I am exceedingly happy; but if I disappoint him, I am the most wretched person alive. If I live in a state of grace, I lack nothing: if I lose it, I have lost everything.

O my God, keep me faithful to these good resolutions and please give me the grace to persevere to the end. I will have to fight against enemies who will be out to destroy my virtue by tempting me on a thousand different occasions. Lord, defend me against these tempters. And since the most formidable of these is ambition, my ruling passion, I ask you to humble me, crush my pride and silence my desire for glory. May I find mortifications at every turn. May people rebuke me and despise me. I will accept all this, my God, provided you continue to love me and I can always remain dear to you. I will find it hard to stifle this vanity which fills my heart, but what should a person not endure for you, the God who has shed his precious blood on my behalf?

Nothing will be difficult for me if you are willing to help me and if I abandon myself entirely to you. I will distrust myself and put all my hope in your mercy. In my present state I have everything to fear, for I am not where you want me to be. If I want to be saved, I must follow the path that you have destined for me. From now on, this must be the first subject of my reflections. I will be so happy if I do not make the wrong choice. I am going to use all the necessary means to discover your holy will. I am going to make known to my director my likes and dislikes concerning each different state of life, so that I can examine more attentively the one which seems to suit me best. I will omit nothing which I consider necessary to discover your will. Dear Lord, may your grace enlighten me at every step. May I merit this by being attached to whatever pleases you, irrevocably and for all time.