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Claude-François Poullart des Places: Founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, 1679-1709

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Joseph Michel c.s.sp.

Claude-François Poullart des Places

Founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit

1679-1709

(Translated from the original French by Vincent O'Toole c.s.sp.)

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Translator’s note

Fifty years have now passed since Fr. Joseph Michel published his life of Claude François Poullart des Places but so far, it has never been translated into English. This means that most anglophones have been deprived of immediate access to the fruits of the immense amount of research undertaken by Joseph Michel in archives large and small throughout France and further afield. This translation is an attempt to fill that gap.

In 1959, Fr Henry Koren, CSSp published the invaluable resource: “The Spiritual Writings of Father Claude Francis Poullart des Places” (Duquesne University Press). In this, the French and English texts of the writings of Claude Poullart are presented on opposite pages for easy comparison. In the present book, Koren’s English translation has been faithfully followed, with the use of a more modern turn of phrase where this seemed to be appropriate.

Vincent O’Toole c.s.sp.

FORWARD

On the feast of Pentecost, 1703, a tonsured cleric, Claude Poullart des Places, brought together a dozen young students who were studying for the priesthood, known at the time as “poor scholars”. This was in Paris, in a place between the Sorbonne University and the College of Louis-le-Grand. Six years later, he died aged 30, only one year and nine months after his own ordination. But in this short time he had given his own response to the decree of the Council of Trent regarding seminaries and had set up the nucleus of a religious family which today with 5,000 members is ranked amongst the larger congregations in the Church.

This was an amazing event. All those who founded new spiritual families when they were still young were well past 30 and practically all lived to at least 50:

The age of some young Founders of religious Societies

	Age at foundation	Age at death
Poullart des Places	24	30
M. Olier	34	49
Saint Alphonsus Liguori	36	90
Saint Philip Neri	40	80
Saint Jean Eudes	41	79
Saint Ignatius Loyola	43	65
Saint Vincent de Paul	48	84

This story is, above all, the story of a soul. In no way was Claude Poullart a ready-made saint. He felt the call of the Lord from his earliest years but he took no notice because he was so obsessed by personal ambition. But when he reached the age of 22, he realised that he had lost the struggle and gave himself unreservedly to God. The surviving documents allow us to follow him through the different stages of his spiritual progress, which has been described as “a model of the most heroic virtues”. Unlike the biography of most young saints, the story of Poullart des Places is also that of an apostolic initiative that proved to be extraordinarily fruitful. At the beginning of the 18th century, the extreme poverty of the ‘poor scholars’ was the main cause of the mediocrity of a large proportion of the clergy. By attacking this poverty head on, this young seminarian was able to implement the vision of the Council of Trent: “a free seminary for the poorest”.

Thanks to him and his unshakable trust in Providence, these students were able to benefit from an extended and solid theological training. He also instilled into them a love of poverty, “the cardinal virtue of the priesthood”. The “Spiritans”, as they came to be known, renounced the attraction of lucrative benefices and became the apostles of the poor and most abandoned.

From the early days, some of these students were drawn to the foreign missions, to the extent that by 1750, four of the six bishops of the *Society of Foreign Mission* were Spiritans. Before the end of the same century, Rome had asked the Congregation of the Holy Spirit to take over responsibility for the Apostolic Prefectures of Saint Pierre and Miquelon, French Guyana and Saint Louis in Senegal. By this dedication to the most abandoned people of the black races, they were unknowingly preparing for that moment, chosen by Providence, when the members of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary, founded by François Libermann to work for the black people, would amalgamate with the Spiritans. Libermann subsequently became the 10th successor of Poullart des Places and died in 1852.

The influence of the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit was also felt by other religious families. His close friend, Saint Louis Grignion de Montfort, was inspired by him to found the Company of Mary which, until the mid-18th century, was known as the Missionary Priests of the Holy Spirit. The Daughters of the Holy Spirit were founded by René Allenou de la Ville-Angevin, a disciple of Poullart des Places. He wrote a rule for the sisters which was *“based on the one which was followed in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit”*.

So this is an introduction to the work and influence of the youngest founder of a religious order. He was also given the shortest time in which to organise and consolidate what he had started. In this and many other ways, the story of Claude Poullart des Places is unique in the history of the Church. It presents us with an enigma to which the reader may possibly find the key while reading through these pages.

Joseph Michel c.s.sp.

PRINCIPAL ABBREVIATIONS

A.N.	Archives Nationale, Paris.
Arch. c.s.sp.	Archives of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. (Chevilly - Larue, France).
Asc. et desc.	“Ascendance et descendance de François-Claude Poullart des Places et de Jeanne Le Meneust ». (Ronéot, Arch. c.s.sp.)
Besnard.	« <i>La vie de Messire Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, Prêtre Missionnaire Apostolique</i> » by Charles Besnard s.m.m. (A manuscript in the archives of the Daughters of Wisdom, Rome. An English translation of relevant extracts can be found in the book by Henry Koren listed below, p. 277).
Jean-Baptiste Blain	“ <i>Lettre de Monsieur l’abbé Blain, docteur en Sorbonne, Chanoine de la Cathédrale de Rouen, à Monsieur Grandet, auteur de la première vie du Père Grignon de Montfort</i> ». This letter contains a résumé of the life of Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort. (Archives of the Company of Mary, Rome).
Koren	“ <i>The Spiritual Writings of Fr. Claude-François Poullart des Places</i> ”, edited by Fr. Henry Koren c.s.sp., Duquesne University , Pittsburgh, Pa., 1959. (Contains both the original French and an English translation).
Le Floch	“ <i>Claude-François Poullart des Places, fondateur du Séminaire et de la Congrégation du Saint Esprit</i> ”. Paris, 1906
N.D.	« <i>Notes et Documents relatifs à la Vie et à l’Oeuvre du Vénérable François Marie-Paul Libermann</i> ». Paris, 1929-1957.
Ren.	Archives of Ille-et-Vilaine.
Thomas	Pierre Thomas c.s.sp: « <i>Mémoire sur la Vie de M. Claude-François Poullart des Places</i> ». English Translation in Koren’s book listed above (p. 225).

THE AUTHOR

Fr. Joseph Michel c.s.sp., was born at Beaucé in Brittany, France, in 1912. His secondary studies were at the diocesan junior seminary of Chateaugiron and then with the Eudist Fathers at Redon. In 1931, he entered the novitiate of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit at Orly, in the outskirts of Paris. After two years of military service, he studied philosophy at Mortain in Normandy followed by four years of theology at Chevilly-Larue, the senior scholasticate of the Spiritans. It was there that he developed his historical interests and published a history of the diocese of Rennes in 1939. Ordained priest in 1939, he taught in the two spiritan establishments of Saint-Ilan and Saint-Michel-en-Priziac before starting university studies at Rennes, culminating, in 1946, with a doctoral theses entitled, "*La Bretagne missionnaire de 1800 à 1940*".

From 1946-1950, he worked in the French Congo, but was then recalled to found and direct the national chaplaincy for overseas students in France (1950-1958). It was at this time that he became actively involved in promoting the decolonisation of French possessions overseas and wrote a series of important articles on the subject, culminating in "*Le devoir de decolonisation*" in 1954. In 1958, the Congregation asked him to use his considerable historical talents to explore the spiritual sources of his own religious family. The result was the publication of this present work on Claude-François Poullart des Places in 1962. This was followed by two books on Blessed Jacques Laval, the spiritan apostle of the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, and a second work on Poullart: "*L'influence de l'Ac, Association secrète de piété, sur Claude-François Poullart des Places*" (1992). He died on June 23rd, 1996.



THE FIRST YEARS

There was great rejoicing in a house in Rennes near the Porte Saint-Georges on the evening of February 26th, 1679. François-Claude Poullart and Jeanne Le Meneust had been married for two years and were approaching their forties. They feared that they would have no children. They had “begged God to bless their marriage with a son”¹ and on that day, the second Sunday of Lent, their prayers were heard. Their joy was unbounded; this son, so eagerly awaited, could help them to fulfil their dreams.



Born in Bréhand-Moncontour², in the diocese of St. Brieuc, François-Claude was the last representative “of a family of considerable nobility, by its alliances and through the episcopacy, by which it had received various honours”.³ History remembers Geoffrey Poullart, killed in the Combat des Trente (1351), a notable event in Breton history. In the second half of the 19th century, Guillaume Poullart had been bishop of Rennes and later of Saint Malo.⁴ But for the last two or three generations, as result of “the misunderstanding between a mother-in-law and her son-in-law”, the condition of the Poullart family was far from brilliant: “nearly all their fortune had been lost or dissipated”.⁵

François-Claude had managed to get a good legal education and was installed as a barrister in the Parliament of Brittany. But in 1668, during a reform of the Breton nobility, he was unable to find the necessary documents and was forced to renounce his claims to the title of “Squire”. From that moment, his great ambition was to produce a son and heir and get reintegrated into the ranks of the nobility. He placed his legal knowledge and general *savoir-faire* at the disposal of Ferret du Tymeur and Michau de Montaran, the two most important bankers in Rennes. He quickly became their trusted servant and friend. A few weeks before his marriage, he received a notable mark of their esteem: with the approval of Jean d’Estrades, the abbot of Saint-Melaine, he was accorded some of the income from this important Benedictine abbey.⁶



Jeanne Le Meneust came from an old family of Saint-Léonard de Fougères. Her father, Gilles Le Meneust de la Vieuxville, died prematurely, leaving her nothing apart from an excellent education.⁷ It was probably her cousin, Nicolle Lyais, the Marquise de Marbeuf, known as the “great friend” of Mme de Sévigné, who had recommended the young orphan to her sister-in-law, Louise-Gabrielle du Louët, the second wife of “the high and mighty” Claude de Marbeuf, the President of the Parliament of Brittany.⁸ Between 1665 and 1675, seven

¹ Thomas p. 228.

² Asc. et desc.

³ Thomas p.248

⁴ Guillotin de Corson: *Pouillé historique de l’archevêché de Rennes*, Vol. I, pp. 72 and 589.

⁵ Thomas p.248.

⁶ Ren. Min. Bretin, 21st March, 1677.

⁷ Asc. et desc.

⁸ Regarding M. de Marbeuf, cf. Sauliner: “*Le Parlement de Bretagne n. 848.*”

children, two girls and five boys, were born into the house of the Marbeufs. One of the girls entered the Visitation Sisters and two of the boys became members of the Knights of Malta. Another was the father of the Comte de Marbeuf, the governor of Corsica and protector of the young Napoleon Bonaparte; he got him into the military school at Brienne and he spent his holidays in his chateau de Callac.¹

Jeanne was a second mother to all these children and the Marbeuf family showed their gratitude to her in various ways. Although they counted many Countesses and Marquises amongst their friends and relations, it was Jeanne who was asked to be the godmother of their second daughter, Jeanne-Claude. After the death of Louise-Gabrielle du Louët in 1674, she took complete charge of the family. To help her in educating the older children, she asked her cousin, Fr. Pierre Cheux de la Maisoneuve, to come to her aid. Even after the re-marriage of the Comte de Marbeuf with the widow Sébastien Le Meneust du Bouédrier, up to the time of her own marriage, Jeanne continued to devote herself to the children who had become so important in her life. This partially explains the unusual length of her engagement to François-Claude. They had been close friends since 1668; in that same year, they were godfather and godmother to a niece and the regular visits of Jeanne to the chateau of Gué explain why the beautiful signature of François-Claude appears frequently in the parish registers of Servon-sur-Vilaine. It was in the church of Servon that they finally married, on May 27th, 1677. The nuptial blessing was given by Pierre Cheux, in the presence of the Comte de Marbeuf and many friends. François-Claude had two lines inserted into the marriage contract which evidently meant a lot to him: *“The said Poullart des Places declares that he will neither renounce nor take the title of Equerry, used by his ancestors, until he has recovered his claims”*.

∞

This was the marriage that was blessed and on February 26th, there was great rejoicing in the household at the birth of a son. François now felt that his line had been assured and that they would once more take their place amongst the nobility. Jeanne was equally happy. She now had her own child who would benefit from her long experience of bringing up other people’s children. She shared her husband’s vision of a very bright future for the family and determined to play her part in making it a reality.

The baby was baptised Claude-François the following day in the parish church of Saint-Pierre-en-Saint Georges. These were the names of his godparents: Count Claude de Marbeuf and Françoise Truillot, the wife of Ferret du Tymeur and a close friend of Mme de Sévigné, who talks about her in her correspondence.² It would be difficult to find grander godparents than that in the city of Rennes! But his parents sought an even higher protection for their son by consecrating the baby to the Virgin Mary and promising to dress him in white until he reached the age of seven.³

∞

So M. Poullart des Places now had a son, but to make his dreams a reality, he had to build up his own personal fortune. He did this over the next twenty years by dint of incredibly hard work in many different areas, but never descending to dishonest means.

¹ Fr. Saulnier: “Notes on the families of the Parliament of Brittany”. (Ms. In the Rennes library).

² *Lettres...* Edit. Des *Grands Écrivains*, Tome VIII, pp 96 & 99.

³ Thomas p. 228.

In 1685, he bought the office of Guardian of the Coinage. This meant that he spent most of his time at the Mint. The post was not particularly lucrative in itself but it had one great advantage: he was now exempt from paying all taxes.

To the revenue he already received from Saint-Melaine, he now added that of the Abbey of Saint Sauveur of Redon, the priories of Sainte-Croix de Châteaugiron, Saint Nicolas de Montfort, Pléchâtel and, above all, the Diocese of Rennes. In virtue of these positions, Poullart des Places collected tithes, rented the farms of the monks to tenant farmers and looked after the upkeep of the buildings. Being already a specialist in the collection of ecclesiastical rents, he now took on the gathering of some civil taxes. As was the practise of the time, he would buy the right to collect indirect taxes in various parts of Brittany, especially those paid on wine, cider and alcohol.

To work on so many fronts at once demanded an economic use of time, a secretariat, trustworthy assistants and, above all, a great deal of experience. But Poullart des Places was no novice so his business prospered. Nearly every year, he acquired the ownership of one or several houses in Rennes and other surrounding towns. He bought up lands which have today become part of the city of Rennes.

In the archives of lawyers in Rennes, one can still follow, week by week, the extraordinary activity of this man in business, in and around the city. There are many surprises amongst them. For example, on June 16th, 1689, there is a lease which contains the signatures of Maître Claude Le Barbier, François-Claude Poullart and Pierre Caris, a tailor. Who could have foreseen that the sons of these men would be intimately associated in the birth of a great spiritual family: Claude-François Poullart would be the founder, Michel-Vincent Le Barbier, son of Maître Claude, one of his first collaborators and Pierre Caris, the son of the tailor, his dearest and most faithful supporter.

While her husband multiplied his business interests, Jeanne Le Meneust was still the teacher she had always been since her early years. On August 20th, when Claude was 18 months old, she presented him with a little sister. Jeanne-Claude was held over the baptismal font by Claude de Marbeuf, the son of the Count, who would become the restorer of the Abbey of Langanet,¹ subsequently the property of the Spiritans. The role played by the Marbeuf family in the baptisms of the children of Jeanne and François is worth noting. It shows that their close friendship with Jeanne Le Meneust continued. For the first seven years of their marriage, M. and Mme. Poullart lived very near to the residence of the Count de Marbeuf, and there are several indications to show that Jeanne continued to look after the orphans of Louise-Gabrielle Louët.

∞

When Claude was six years old, in 1685, the family moved from Porte Saint-Georges to the parish of Saint Germain, very close to the House of Parliament and the convent of the Cordeliers. *“His parents took great care with his religious education from a tender age... As is the case with many great saints, his childhood diversions foresaw the state for which God had destined him and the services which, for the good of the Church, he wanted to obtain from him. He passed the time building chapels and erecting small altars. He used the money he received to buy what he saw as necessary ornamentation for them. His great pleasure*

¹ Cf the certificates of baptism and death in Le Floch, page 486

*was to imitate the ceremonies he had seen performed in church. Sometimes, his parents' patience was tried by it, but if he desisted for a while out of obedience to them, he was soon back at his favourite way of playing a little later".*¹

On July 14th, 1686, "a young nobleman, Claude-François Poullart des Places" was godfather at the baptism of Claude Floh, the son of an employee of M. des Places. For the first time, his signature appears in a parish register. It is a very fine signature, but there is no need to be an expert graphologist to see that the hand of this 'young nobleman' was guided by that of Jean Le Gall, the rector of Saint-Germain.

There was a school in Rennes whose reputation had spread far beyond the boundaries of the province. Because of the number of students (about 3,000) and the quality of its teachers, the Collège Saint Thomas was one of the most renowned of the Jesuit schools in the kingdom. Claude was a very intelligent boy, but as his health seemed to be delicate, his parents avoided trying to make him into a child prodigy. They confided him to a private tutor for his early years. When he reached the age of 11 in 1690, he entered the Jesuit school in the fourth grade. His teacher was Fr. Gilbert Petit,² who continued to accompany the same group of students each year up to the second grade.

¹ Thomas, p. 229.

² Rennes was the first appointment of this young Jesuit. Later, he was sent to the Jesuit missions in the East Indies and finally returned to France to take over the direction of their schools at Moulins and Nevers.

II

THE FRIENDSHIP OF A SAINT AND THE LOVE OF POVERTY

Two important events for the des Places family took place in 1690. They moved from the area of the Palais to rue Saint-Sauveur, and a young cousin of Claude, Anne-Marie Lamisse du Hingueul, was taken permanently into the family home.¹

At the end of the 17th century, the main entrance to the Church of Saint-Sauveur was still situated on the road of the same name, very close to their new house. One of the side-chapels contained the much venerated statue of Our Lady of Miracles. From his earliest days, Claude was very proud of the fact that he had been consecrated to the Mother of God and he was now living in the shadow of her sanctuary. He often went into this chapel to kneel before it and ask for the grace of perfect purity and he received a very special grace from her hands – the friendship of a saint.

By the end of 1690, Saint Louis Grignion de Montfort was a student of rhetoric in the Jesuit college. He had recently moved with his parents to a house in the rue du Chapitre, parallel to the rue Saint-Sauveur. Every day, when going and returning from school, he would drop in to visit the statue of Our Lady of Miracles. Louis and Claude soon got to know each other and walked to school together each day. It was the start of a very close friendship. There was a considerable age difference between the two: Louis Grignion was born at Mont-fort-sur-Meu in January, 1673, so he was 6 years older than Claude. As well as having very different characters, Louis Grignion came from a poor background while Claude, as we have seen, was born into an affluent family, but their shared devotion to Our Lady swept away any obstacles to their friendship.

Such friendships between future saints are not rare in the history of the Church, but their strong relationship, based on their love of the Virgin Mary, was particularly fruitful. Most probably, without the influence of Louis Grignion de Montfort, Poullart des Places would not have become the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and the dream of Louis to found the Company of Mary would never have got off the ground. But we are getting ahead of ourselves...

Claude was probably in the fourth grade when he took a step which, according to his future biographer and disciple, Pierre Thomas, was to be the prelude to the Community which would be his life's work. *“As he grew up, he also progressed in virtue. When he began to go to high school, instead of amusing himself with the usual horse play of young boys, he gathered some friends together and, without saying anything to his parents or teachers, set up a sort of prayer group. On certain days, they met in a room that was put at their disposal by a kind lady who shared their secret. They fixed up a well-furnished oratory and on the major feast days, they lit a huge number of candles that had been bought by the boys. They*

¹ She had been born in the manor of Hinguel in the parish of Gourhel, near Ploërmel.

drew up their rules for prayer, silence and mortification, including the use of the discipline. In other words, they were practising virtues that they had never even heard of!

These initiatives of young Poullart were all the more surprising in that he had a lively and restless temperament that could easily have pointed him in different directions. But, as well as the grace of God, he was already being greatly influenced by the expert guidance he received from his parents and teachers.

These devotions could not remain hidden for long. A Jesuit priest who directed Poullart found out about them and he ordered the group to disband, telling Claude 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, he was afraid that their fervour, which was already going a bit too far, might lead them into indiscretions. Claude obeyed his director, but this act of obedience must have been a more trying mortification for him than all the others he was practising at the time.¹

In *“The Life of M. Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort”* written by Charles Besnard, the third Superior General of the Company of Mary, there is another version of the events recorded above with some notable differences:

“Claude Poullart des Places did his classical studies and philosophy at the College of Rennes. It was there that he struck up a close friendship with Louis de Montfort. They got together to set up a small group of students for the purpose of honouring the Blessed Virgin Mary in a special way. They gathered on certain days in a room that was lent to them by a saintly person. There they erected a kind of oratory to perform their spiritual exercises and they all shared the cost of decorating it. They had their rules for prayer, silence and mortification. The latter sometimes went so far as to include taking the discipline. These meetings continued for some time after Louis had left for Paris, thanks to the zeal of Claude to whom he confided the running of the group and who alone remained their animating spirit and support.²

The manuscript of Thomas dates from around 1730. So it is morally certain that when Besnard drew up the above version of events some 40 years later, he had no other source available than that of Thomas. How can we account for the discrepancies between the two versions?

The explanation could be quite simple. Thomas does not mention the name of Louis Grignon, but the close friendship that had existed between the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and that of the Company of Mary since their adolescence is attested to by very reliable sources. Moreover, the original text does not name any of the companions of Claude Poullart, so why could Louis Grignon not have been the first? When we think of the age difference between the two friends, would it not have been normal for Louis to take the leading role in the foundation and organisation of the group? The intervention of the director of Claude Poullart is not mentioned in the ‘Life of Grignon de Montfort’, which is hardly surprising as it happened after the departure of Louis for a seminary in Paris.

¹ Thomas p. 229

² Besnard P. 101

It is quite understandable if Charles Besnard did not slavishly follow the text of Thomas which he had before his eyes; he hardly committed a crime against the truth if he concentrated rather on the edification of his readers and the glorification of his hero, Louis Grignion.

But it remains unclear. Louis left Rennes at the end of 1693 so the small group could only have been suppressed the following year. This would mean that the group was in existence for three or four years, unbeknown to either Claude's parents or his director. It seems rather unlikely. In his account, Thomas gives clear indications of the short-lived nature of these meetings. At the time when his confessor intervened, Claude was still a child: but when Louis left for Paris, Claude was already studying rhetoric and was referred to as "an accomplished gentleman".¹

∞

One of the results of Claude's friendship with Louis Grignion was getting to know Fr. Bellier.² This young priest lived near the cathedral, close to the house of the des Places family. He was already known for his virtue and dedication. Each week, he gathered a group of students in his house "to talk about the things of God". Not only did he talk of Christian love, but he insisted that they put it into practice: they were sent in groups of two or three to the different "Hospitals" of the town to serve the poor, teach them catechism and read to them during the meals.

These establishments, which were known as "hospitals" at that time, were not just for the sick. At Rennes, the Hospital of Saint-Yves and the General Hospital had many different functions: the sick took up most of the space but there was also a home for the aged, an orphanage and a trade school. Part of the Saint-Yves hospital was dedicated to abandoned children. They were taught until the age of twelve and were then transferred to another section where they were taught a trade. This part of the establishment also took in uneducated boys and girls who, over several months, were prepared for their first communion. They even took in a Moorish footman of Mme de la Mansellière in 1691 to instruct him in the basic elements of religion and prepare him for baptism.³

Most of the administration of these Hospitals was the responsibility of the *Ministry for the Poor*. Normally, it was the godfather of Claude, the Comte de Marbeuf, who presided over the meetings of this department. One day, when he was not able to attend because of sickness, a delegation was sent to his house to thank him "for his generosity, care and devotion to the poor which he has shown over such a long period in the hospitals".⁴

¹ Thomas, ms. 4

² Julien Bellier was baptised at Rennes (in the parish of Toussaint) on June 20th, 1662. All his education took place in Rennes and he was ordained priest in September, 1686. He was praised by all. A register of priests of the diocese of Rennes says that he was "a good priest, virtuous, doing great work in the cathedral". Costil, who lived in Rennes at the start of the 18th century, wrote in the *Annals of the Eudists*: "We are indebted to M. Bellier for his total dedication, especially for his talks to the students and the way he takes part in so many of the good works that are being done in the Province". Ren.:Reg.par. de Toussaint; G. 386. Ann. De la Compagnie de Jésus et de Marie, Tome I, p. 513.

³ Ren.: Volume X Sup., pp 587-588.

⁴ Ren.: Vol. X, p. 587.

Like Louis Grignon, Claude Poullart was a member of the Congregation of Our Lady, founded for their best students by the teachers of the Collège Saint Thomas. The Jesuits, who directed the Augustinian Sisters in charge of Saint-Yves, invited the members of the Congregation of Our Lady to visit the sick and the poor in that hospital.¹ To help them grow in their love for the poor, the Jesuits recommended their young students to read a book called *“Caring for the sick and helping them in all their needs”* by Mathurin Denys, the printer and librarian of the College. It makes disturbing reading:

“ I believe that when a person is facing extreme necessity, the rich have an obligation not just to help and to give him what is needed to save his life, but also to supply what is necessary to preserve his dignity”. (p. 12)

“At the start of this century, St. Francis de Sales and other apostolic people rightly complained of the excessive luxury of the period which was eating up all the donations needed by the poor; but we have even more reason to object to the deplorable excesses of our own time. Over the last fifty years, extravagance has increased to such an extent that we are now sending 15-20 millions more out of the kingdom to buy silk, spices and other superfluous commodities. The rich are spending 50-60 millions more on silver and gold plates and precious stones than their predecessors ever did, a sum that could provide for all the beggars in the kingdom”.

“Just as the amount spent on luxury goods in clothes, carriages, and fine crockery has increased enormously, the level of alms-giving has diminished proportionately. In the parish of Saint-Sulpice in Paris, gifts for the poor were growing by 24 or 25 million livres per year before this craze for luxury set in; today, they do not even reach 4,000!” (p. 65).

The author then adds some examples from Brittany that would make the son of a log merchant pause for thought:

“Every two years, the States of Brittany give the king about 3 million in free gifts, quite apart from the expenses involved in collecting such a sum. It is only taken from the wine and cider that is drunk in the taverns”.

“If the tax on what is drunk produces 1,500,000 livres a year, the price of wine or cider and the profit for the proprietor of the tavern and the farmer who produces it rises by at least the same amount. As a result, three million is spent each year simply in the bars of the province of Brittany”. (p. 69).

Such extracts remind one of Saint Basil and La Bruyère:

“If an epidemic were to hit the horses or dogs of the great lords, these gentlemen would move mountains to find a remedy. But most of them would be willing to abandon thousands of poor people, made in the image of Jesus Christ, to sickness and death without raising a finger to help”. (p. 141).

Thanks to the influence of so many good people – Louis Grignon, Fr. Bellier, M. de Marbeuf, the Jesuits and their writings – the heart of Claude Poullart soon opened to the poor and later, opened to poverty itself. But it seems that the greatest influence of all was his mother,

¹ P. Delattre, S.J.: *“Les établissements des Jésuites en France »*, Vol V, column 362.

Jeanne Le Meneust, and the unfailing example she gave him. Claude's father had the reputation of being very careful with his money; he took a strong line in his business transactions and did not hesitate to throw an insolvent farmer into prison.¹ But his wife was goodness itself. In leafing through parish records, we have found that she was godmother to at least 30 young girls, and most of these were from very poor families. This shows the sort of person she was. After the deaths of her son and husband, she donated the farm of La Bullerye in Noyal-sur Seiche to help the poor of the hospital of Saint-Méen.²

∞

From time to time, Fr. Bellier left Rennes for several weeks. He was part of a volunteer group of priests who, under the direction of M. Leuduger, a scholastic of Saint-Brieuc, continued the mission of Fr. Julien Maunoir in northern Brittany. On his return, he would give his students an account of the miracles of grace that the mission had accomplished.

In reading a life of Louis-Marie de Montfort, it is easy to see that the influence of Fr. Bellier marked him for life. At Poitiers, La Rochelle and in the Salpêtrière in Paris, he gave a great deal of his time to hospitals, and later on he was to found the Daughters of Wisdom to work in such institutions. The rest of his time was given to the missions, for which he set up his other foundation, the Company of Mary.

We will see later that the influence of Fr. Bellier on his young friend, Claude, was of a different kind, but no less effective.

¹ Min. Le Hongre, 20 September, 1692.

² Ren.: E. famille Poullart: Act passed in front of Maître Chevrel, October 3rd, 1718.

III

SUCCESSFUL STUDIES

The adolescence of Claude seems to have been just a continuation of his childhood – pious and studious. *“Nevertheless, he subsequently had to fight long battles to resist the temptation to pleasure. His temperament inclined him in that direction and invitations and the example of his friends increased the inclination; but his love of duty and the supervision of a father and mother who were anxious that he be well educated did not allow him to give free rein to it. He not only had to satisfy his director, but also his parents. On holidays, they asked for an account of the time taken to have a walk and the attention he had given to his studies. On Sundays and holydays, he was expected to give a summary of the sermon. M. and Mme. des Places did not want to rely on any one else regarding the education of a son who was so dear to them and on whom the future of their family rested. They eventually had the consolation of seeing their care rewarded by his academic achievements and by the great promise of his excellent qualities”.*¹

But if Claude retained the lessons of his religious training as he grew up, there was nothing stuffy about him. Through his pleasant manners and courteous behaviour, *“he won the approval and friendship of important people and the respect of his equals”.*²

At Rennes, as in all the Jesuit colleges, theatrical presentations were very popular. There were two each year - one in February and another at the end of August for prize-giving day. There were very many students in the school, so it is all the more remarkable that his teachers frequently called upon Claude to take part in the tragedies and the ballets which went with them. Each member of the audience was given a programme containing the titles of the plays to be performed and the names of the actors. *“In this way, they were all able to enjoy the entertainment on offer. The well-composed ballets, enhanced by music and dancing, must have been quite a spectacle”.*³

Thanks to a collection of these programmes which has survived (unfortunately incomplete), we have detailed information on several roles played by Claude. On August 27th, 1692, he took part in a ballet entitled *“Fortune”*, presented by the students of the third grade; it was part of the tragedy of *“Josaphat, King of Juda”*. On February 17th, 1694, he figured in a ballet called *“Glory”* which was attached to a tragedy about the martyrs Saints Prime et Félicien. This was given by the students of Rhetoric and Claude took the principle role of ‘Glory’.⁴ The programme explains the plot of this ballet: *“The whole population of the world is languishing in a shameful state of slothfulness, so Glory is sent down by order of Jupiter to wake them up. Glory is accompanied by Peace, Mars, Apollo and Religion, to show the people that they can distinguish themselves in peace, war, knowledge and religion”.* In the

¹ Thomas, p. 230.

² Thomas, p. 234

³ G. Durtelle de Saint-Sauveur: *“Le Collège de Rennes(1536-1762), 1918, page 161.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 196

grand finale, Glory dances “surrounded by those who had excelled in these particular accomplishments”.¹

Claude’s parents did everything they could to encourage him in this kind of activity. They arranged for him to have coaching in music and singing by Joseph Manet, the organist of the cathedral. Manet was very impressed by Claude and chose him to be the godfather of his first child.²

Claude was very keen to be successful in all that he did. But one day, his reaction to teasing by his little sister, Françoise, almost ended in disaster. *“He was studying a role for a tragedy in which he was to act and his sister kept distracting him. To get rid of her and to frighten her, as people are wont to do with children, he took up a rifle which was not normally loaded and, thinking it was in its customary condition, he cocked it and pulled the trigger. And it went off! The shot passed between his mother, his sister and his cousin, about two inches from their heads. Everyone was thunderstruck with fear – his father more than anyone, for he knew that the gun had been loaded because some noise had been heard around the house the night before. However, fright was followed by joy and thanksgiving to divine Providence that had watched so carefully over the preservation of the family”.*³



Claude studied rhetoric under Fr. Jean-Pierre de Longuemare. Although only 27, this Jesuit already had the reputation of an outstanding teacher. His expertise in eloquence and drama was noted in the *“Mercurie Gallant”*, where one of its correspondents gave a very flattering account of his conference, given on March 6th, 1694, entitled, *“In praise of the Breton Nation”*. The journalist wrote: *“The praise I have heard for the talk given by Fr. De Longuemare, professor of rhetoric at the Jesuit college of Rennes, demands our attention. This priest delivered his lecture on the vigil of St. Thomas, in the presence of the Duke of Chaulnes, the Governor of the Province, and many other notables. His subject was that Brittany had never been as flourishing as during the present war, where the nation has distinguished itself by its bravery. He attributed all this to the glory of the King in such a delicate manner that everybody felt they had never heard such an eloquent discourse.”*⁴

Claude profited greatly from the lectures of this priest. At the opening of the new school year in 1694, he did not move on to philosophy; Fr. De Longuemare was very impressed with the boy and had asked his father to let him continue to guide Claude in his studies for another year. The priest had been appointed to the college in Caen, so Claude moved to the capital of Normandy to complete a second year of rhetoric. Even though he was now far from his family, he remained as he always had been. The period is well described by Pierre Thomas, who had also studied at Caen:

“Although there are many opportunities for becoming dissolute in a large town that is full of young men from different countries who are their own masters for the first time in their lives, it does not seem that Claude compromised his morals during the year he spent

¹ Ibid., p. 171.

² Baptême de Claude Manet: Reg. de Saint-Sauveur, 11th October, 1694.

³ Thomas, 233.

⁴ *Mercurie Galant*, February 1695, p. 126.

there. His parents had made sure to recommend him strongly to the director and this man felt it his duty to keep a close eye on his pupil. Moreover, the young man had several safeguards on his side. He did not like wine at all and, whether by education or virtue, he was quite indifferent towards the fair sex. His one preoccupation at the time was to distinguish himself and win the increasing approval of his parents and friends by excelling in his studies in a university where brilliant minds were the order of the day. His director took care to keep this competitive spirit alive in the young student. Because his own honour was at stake, he had to watch over his pupil, urge him to work and inspire him with dislike for anything that might distract him from his studies. The authorities had good reason to be satisfied with him. He won three awards of which the one for eloquence was the most prized".¹

At Rennes, a few months before the Duke de Chaulnes handed over the government of Brittany to the Count of Toulouse, Fr. De Longuemare had set out to prove that this province had never been so flourishing. At Caen he also seized upon a similar opportunity; when the Maréchal de Luxembourg died on January 4th, 1695, he made it the subject of a theatrical presentation which was greatly praised by the *Mercurie Galant*. *"Fr. de Longuemare, the professor of rhetoric, used all his literary skill to present a three-act play entitled "The Apotheosis of Laodamas" in memory of the late Maréchal. It was given by torchlight by some of the rhetoric students of this priest, to honour a hero who had done so much for the State; it represented allegorically all that God and men had done at his death to glorify him. In the allegory, the Maréchal is known as Laodamas, which means, 'the conqueror of peoples'.*

There are many things to indicate that Claude Poullart was not just a spectator at this theatrical evening but one of the main reasons for its success.

The religious atmosphere that Claude had known at Rennes was relatively peaceful; the Jansenists had never made much of an impact there. But at Caen, things were very different. They were very numerous and active, looking for any excuse to confront the Jesuits whom they rightly saw as their principal adversaries. Claude arrived in time to hear the last rumbles of a controversy that had broken out in 1693 as a result of a theological thesis presented by a student of Fr. Honoré Carascouët. The central argument of this thesis can be summarised as follows; *"The Christian religion is divine, because it has God for its author and therefore only teaches what is divine. Therefore, it is evidently believable, but this does not mean that it is evidently true, because the truth of the mysteries that it enshrines remains partially obscured and therefore not evident"*. This was excessively subtle, but the thesis reverberated *"above all, amongst the women who prided themselves on being great intellectuals"*.²

Very soon, commentaries, both for and against, began to circulate. Although some of the propositions of Fr. Parascouët were not beyond criticism, the Jansenists determined to take every advantage from the furore unleashed by this thesis and turned it into a frontal attack

¹ Thomas, p. 234.

² "A letter from a theologian to one of his friends", in an anonymous manuscript in the Archives of Calvados, 2D 1139 bis.

on the Jesuits themselves. The tone of this attack is exemplified by an anonymous leaflet that was soon in circulation:

"I was not at all surprised by what was written in these horrible propositions. Once the heart is corrupted, the contagion will rapidly spread to the mind. People who follow a morality as lax and pernicious as that of the Jesuits will inevitably reflect this in their writings.

*"These theses of Caen reminded me of the advice given to his friends and clerical students by the illustrious Alain de Solminihac. When he was dying, this holy bishop of Cahors warned them solemnly to be on their guard against the teaching and conduct of the Jesuits, assuring them that they were the most dangerous enemies of the Church and they should never be engaged as spiritual directors or formators of young clerical students. This wise Prelate, enlightened from heaven, foresaw the deep wounds that these 'venerable' priests were capable of inflicting on the spouse of Jesus Christ!."*¹

Such passionate attacks only served to strengthen the attachment of Claude to his Jesuit teachers and to make him react strongly against the calumnies of this sect. All his life, he remained faithful to the sons of St. Ignatius. When he eventually founded the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, he resisted pressure coming from Cardinal de Noailles and insisted that all direction and teaching for his young students would be given exclusively by the Jesuits.

At the end of the scholastic year, Claude returned to Brittany. He brought with him not only many books that he had been awarded as prizes and which his disciples carefully preserved in his memory right up to the Revolution, but also *"a great facility of expression and a grasp of public speaking which later helped him so much in presenting cogent reasons why people should lead a virtuous life"*.² It also made him very wary of Jansenism and led him into a growing devotion to the Mother of God and her Immaculate Conception.

Back at the Collège Saint-Thomas, the course of philosophy lasted for two years, the first devoted to logic and the second to physics and metaphysics. There were two professors in residence, but both taught the entire programme. Each class had at least 200 students, of whom a large number were destined for the priesthood.³

At the start of the academic year of 1695, Claude Poullart entered the class of Fr. Prévost. He was a specialist in scholastic philosophy, but he was also a *"very holy religious, devoted to the sanctification of his pupils... He had a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin and was keen to share this with those he taught"*.⁴

Claude studied philosophy under the eyes of his father and mother *"and they would not have tolerated undue freedom or waste of time. They knew how to maintain their authority and they redoubled their watchfulness over their son. They fostered that noble spirit of*

¹ *"An account of what happened regarding the thesis that was presented at Caen"*, pp. 6-7

² Thomas, p. 235

³ According to J-B Blain, at the time when Louis Grignon was following the lectures of Fr. Prévost there were around 400 students in the class!

⁴ Blain

*emulation which they had always observed in him and if they granted him a little more liberty, they took great care that he did not abuse it”.*¹

In no way had Claude lost his desire to shine academically as his parents wished, but he also greatly benefited from the classes and exhortations of Fr. Prévost. Shortly before the holidays, each professor of philosophy would organise a large public debate. For the “*Grand Acte*” as it was called, “*The most outstanding student in the class was given the task of defending the doctrine of his teacher. Having made his presentation in Latin, he then entered into debate*”. The event and the subject of debate were advertised throughout the town a month before it was to take place. When the day arrived, the bells were rung to summon the distinguished audience. The debate was conducted in a syllogistic format in Latin.

At the end of his first year of philosophy, Claude was chosen to make this presentation by Fr. Prévost. He dedicated his thesis to a young man only a few months older than himself, His Serene Highness the Count of Toulouse, the son of Louis XIV. Two years earlier, the Count had been appointed Governor of Brittany. “*The financial outlay for this event was extraordinary. The President and Councillors of Parliament, who assisted with due ceremony along with all persons of rank and importance in the city and the neighbourhood, took part in the event*”.² When the defence came to an end, everybody was talking about Claude, his knowledge and his eloquence. The Count de Marbeuf was very proud of his godson and M. and Mme. des Places were more certain than ever that the dreams they had always cherished for their son’s future would soon become a reality.



¹ Thomas, p. 237

² Thomas, p. 239

IV

A SUMMER WHICH FINISHED BADLY

According to Pierre Thomas, after the death of the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, his disciples found *“a list wherein he had noted the special favours he had received from God in order to bestir himself to be more zealous in his service”*. Unfortunately, this list was very difficult to decipher: *“Undoubtedly, I would find many marvels of God’s goodness towards him and many signs of his faithfulness and zeal for his Divine Benefactor. But the great reluctance of Father des Places to let others know about the graces he had received from God induced him undoubtedly to compose his list in such a way that it was almost unintelligible to anybody apart from himself”*.¹ Nevertheless, his biographer set about deciphering some of the contents and proceeded to interpret them and add his own comments in a way which was more suitable to a moralist than an historian. But as he shows no great concern for an exact chronology, it would be imprudent to follow him too closely.

So we must approach this section with some caution. It tells us more about the mentality of Thomas than that of Poullart des Places. But it would be useful, first of all, to examine what exactly Thomas wrote, even though it betrays a rather misogynistic outlook on life:

“After he had finished philosophy, his father judged it fitting that he make a trip to Paris. I would not be able to say exactly for what purpose. It is thought that the real motive was to see a high-ranking young lady who had been suggested to him as his future spouse. He was then eighteen or nineteen years old. She was one of the Duchess of Burgundy’s ladies-in-waiting. This is what I found written in a memorandum 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.

A young man with such admirable prospects, the only son of a wealthy father whose fortune was constantly on the increase, could not fail to receive frequent offers of marriage. Hence Claude was on his guard against rash decisions; he knew that one often regrets having taken on such a burden and that the marriage proves to be a protracted torment instead of bringing the expected peace and consolation. Consequently, before engaging in that state, he wanted to give it serious thought and seek counsel from God and men. He consulted a great number of married persons and asked them if they were satisfied with their present state of life. At first, they all told him that they were. But he then discreetly pressed them further and asked if they really meant what they said. He begged them to tell him the truth as friends should, and say whether, if they were free, they would still take on those commitments with the same partner. All then confessed that, basing themselves on their present experience, they would not do so. Only one of them steadfastly assured him that if he had to do it over again, he would not hesitate.

Young des Places had a keen mind and he was not blinded by love. He was on his guard against thoughtless commitments. Since his passion was for glory and renown,

¹ Thomas, p. 233

attaching himself to a woman in marriage would be an obstacle rather than a means to achieving his objectives. Girls are all too often preoccupied with frivolous amusements and these held little attraction for him. He did not like the idea of giving in to the whims and fancies that living peacefully with a wife would inevitably involve. He would have been more inclined to fight monsters with Hercules than allow himself to be overpowered by a woman and become her slave, as happened to the same man.

Moreover, he was often conscious of the leaning towards the ecclesiastical state which he had felt from his childhood and God disposed all things according to His designs. It was easy for him to put aside the plans which his parents had in mind for him but which were not at all to his liking.

It seems that Claude led a greater social life after his return to Rennes. It was natural that he should have been granted more freedom to see the world than he had enjoyed up to then and that he should have been given the money required for adopting a dignified appearance.

He rather liked this idea. Consequently, he was not particularly frugal when opportunities arose. But since his parents shied away from prodigality, he had to be somewhat devious to arrange for borrowing and lending sums of money and to hide whatever might have been irregular in his conduct behind an innocent appearance. It is probably to this that Father des Places refers when he speaks of his 'irregular' life, and it may also be these expenditures that I found recorded in the list I mentioned above. However that may be, it is certain that at that time he felt he should make a retreat".¹

A little later, Pierre Thomas will say that Claude Poullart was about 18 when he went to Nantes to study law. In this, he seems to be rather confused, as will become clear from other documents which were unknown to him. On completion of their philosophical studies, the students studying under the Jesuits were invited to make a retreat, during which they would think about their future vocation. At Rennes, Claude and his contemporaries had no need to travel to do this; a retreat house, along the lines of those of Vannes and Quimper, had been opened for this purpose in a property belonging to the Collège Saint-Thomas. In 1697, and since its foundation twenty years previously, the director of this house was Fr. Jean Jégou. His assistant was Fr. Achille Gravé, who was to become the confessor of the Duchess of Bourgone in 1701.²

So it was immediately after his defence of the *Grand Acte* that Claude-François passed a few days under the direction of these two preachers. This is certainly the retreat to which Thomas refers:

"He had begun the retreat not only to strengthen himself in piety but perhaps even more to examine carefully before God the state of life to which he was called. It was probably then that he told his parents of his plan to enter the clerical state and he asked their permission to go and study at the Sorbonne in Paris".³

¹ Thomas., p. 239-241.

² P. Delattre, "Les établissements des Jésuites en France», pp. 364-367

³ Thomas., p. 243

This was a great setback for his parents. They had been working hard to increase their fortune. They had acquired the corn market, which was at the junction of the rue de la Cordonnerie (today, the rue de la Monnaie) and the rue Saint-Guillaume. They had bought a block of old houses, courtyards and gardens on the rue Saint-Guillaume which extended right up to the church of Saint-Sauveur. On this land, they had built five three-storey houses, three stables that could hold ten horses and three coach-houses.¹

Jeanne Le Meneust had also become a merchant and shopkeeper in her own right; she was now the head of a large commercial enterprise. Rennes was an important centre of trade for tiles and textile products and tiles from Brittany were very much in demand. They were produced, above all, in the southern part of the diocese of Saint-Brieuc, in the regions of Loudéac, Uzel, Moncontour and Quintin. Jeanne was involved in the wholesale part of the trade. She acquired the tiles from the brokers who were under contract to supply her with "as many white, assorted tiles as they could". She was also involved in the wax business.

So were his parents to abandon all their hopes for Claude, for whom they had striven for twenty years to amass a considerable fortune? Not according to M. Poullart des Places!. But to avoid a total opposition to his son's plans, he told him that to be a good priest, it was not necessary to have done his studies in Paris, nor to be a doctor of the Sorbonne; those who had doctorates did not preach any better than the others!

"This reply did not fit in with Claude's plans. It meant that he would have to study theology at Rennes and that was not what he wanted. His clerical aspirations were not strong enough to preclude a desire for more liberty than proximity to his parents' supervision would inevitably have accorded him. So it was decided that he would go to Nantes to study law, a decision that pleased both Claude and his parents. In this way he would also have the chance to let his vocation mature. The study of law was required of all who wanted to be Councillors in the Parliament; it was likewise very useful for those who desired to enter the clerical state".²

∞

While waiting to carry out his decision, Claude apparently had time to travel to Paris and Versailles. What was the reason for this? To arrange a marriage between Claude and a lady-in-waiting of the Duchess de Bourgogne? Pierre Thomas seems unsure in his biography. Another hypothesis springs to mind. Is it possible that some important person at court wanted to meet this young man from Rennes who had dedicated his philosophical thesis to a son of Louis XIV? It is quite likely that this dedication had been drawn to the attention of the King himself, during a session of the Council of State, by the Count of Pontchartrain. Before his appointment as head of Finance, this gentleman had been First President of the Parliament of Brittany, so he must have been well acquainted with Claude's father who was the Guardian of the Coinage.

One of the privileges of those concerned with the coinage in Rennes was exemption from being called on to fulfil certain public functions, like churchwarden and receiver and provost of the hospitals. But as M. des Places was not just Guardian of the Coinage but also a merchant, the town of Rennes named him Provost of the hospital of Saint-Yves in April,

¹ Ren. C. 328

² Thomas, p. 243

1694. This post of Provost would entail a great deal of work and responsibility; finally, M. des Places managed to obtain an exemption and so the appointment was cancelled.

But in 1697, the situation became even more complicated. On May 2nd, he was once again named Provost of Saint-Yves, so this time, he appealed directly to the Council of the King. He pleaded that his duties as Guardian of the Coinage were so demanding and dangerous that they needed his full attention. On May 28th, the King and his Council decided *“that the suppliant would be exempt from the function of Provost of the hospital of Saint-Yves as long as he remained Guardian of the Coinage.”*

Meanwhile, the municipality had taken the affair to the Parliament of Brittany and on May 31st, before the news of the decision of the Council of State had reached Rennes, the Parliament confirmed the appointment of des Places as Provost. When eventually the news arrived from Paris, they in their turn presented another petition to the King, explaining the reasons for their choice: *“1) That the Commune was convinced that no exemption could be granted from serving the poor and 2) that M. des Places, apart from his duties as Guardian of the Coinage, was a prosperous business man with interests in tiles, wax, corn, beef and much besides and that he had used his wealth to purchase property in the town to the tune of 50,000 ecus”*. Commenting on his ‘assiduity’ in his financial duties, the Commune reckoned that he devoted far more time to his business interests than to guarding the coinage. But this argument, and several others, were of no avail because the king re-confirmed his first decision on October 8th.

Therefore, there is enough evidence to suggest that the journey Claude made to Paris in 1697 was not unconnected with the difficulties encountered by his father.



According to Pierre Thomas, the good resolutions that young Claude had made during his retreat *“lasted no longer than forty days”*. Here at least he is precise! But what happened after forty days? Once again, we must look at all the available evidence.

On the morning of October 9th, 1697, *“M. Poullart des Places (the father of Claude-Poullart) presented himself at the Hostelry of the “Puits Mauger”¹, accompanied by two royal solicitors”*. The three men went to the room occupied by Pierre Le Huédez, a carter from Batz, a small town in the diocese of Nantes. This man had recently arrived to present his complaint in front of the Criminal Judge of Rennes. He claimed that *“two men, one of whom, dressed in a brown jerkin and seated on a black horse, struck him across the arm with his sword and wounded him”*. He agreed to make an out of court settlement with M. des Places and never raise this charge again in the future. For his part, M. des Places *“gave the carter 60 livres and undertook to pay all resulting medical fees until he was completely cured. He would also pay any other costs incurred as a result of this criminal act”*.² As soon as the agreement was signed, the judge was informed that the charge of Le Huédez had been dropped. No trace of the case is to be found in the archives of the Tribunal.

¹ This “hostelry” still exists today, under the same name. It is in the Rue de Nantes.

² Minut. Le Hongre

So who was this person “*dressed in a brown jerkin*” and why was M. des Places so anxious to save the reputation of this man and submit himself to such a humiliating experience? Let us return again to Pierre Thomas. He tells us that Claude-François was about 18 years old when he went to Nantes and he then goes on to say: “*We now come to the most humiliating phase of Claude’s life. God forbid, however, that I should suppress it. The honesty I must practise as an historian would of itself suffice to prevent such a course being taken*”.¹ But there follows nothing more than generalities and pious thoughts on the dangers of leaving young men to their own devices before “*the fiery passions of youth*” have extinguished themselves.

We will get more enlightenment from what Claude himself has to say in some personal notes he wrote under the title of “*Some Reflections on the Past*”:

*“To attract me, God closed his eyes to an enormous crime which brought my iniquities to a climax and which I had committed at the very moment when he pressed me more than ever towards conversion”.*²

Since his retreat and having informed his parents that he now wanted to be a priest, he was faithful to his resolutions and led a fervent life. God was driving him towards a conversion and a total giving of himself.

In a written portrait³ of himself that he drew up soon afterwards, he wrote that he “*feared death but was unable to accept a public insult*”. The day would come when he would accept such verbal assaults to an heroic degree, but he had not yet reached that stage. Is this not a subtle way of saying that at that time, he was still capable of drawing his sword to protect his honour?

In early October 1697 at the age of 18, he had left the family home and set out for Nantes, most probably on horseback and armed with a sword, as one would expect from a student of his rank. This is probably what happened. As he approached the walls of the town he encountered Le Huédez who transported people and goods between Croisic and Rennes. A quarrel broke out between the two and Le Huédez was injured by Claude. It is not clear who started the argument but from the contract signed by his father, it is evident that he feared he might lose the case if it was allowed to proceed.

Most of Claude’s companions would have seen the incident as something of minimal importance and would have reacted the same way themselves. The judges, unless they wanted to vent their anger on his father who had triumphed over the Municipality and the Parliament in the recent confrontation, would probably have looked indulgently on young Claude, known for his goodness and affability. But Claude himself spoke of “*an enormous crime*” that he had committed and it seems to have had a considerable effect on his spiritual life:

“God did miracles for me. To attract me, he closed his eyes to an enormous crime which brought my iniquities to a climax and which I had committed at the very moment when he pressed me more than ever towards conversion. Not only did he not resent it, but he used it to change me. His incredible patience began to pierce my

¹ Thomas, p. 245

² Ecrits, p. 130

³ Koren, p. 93

*heart. I would not have hesitated any longer at that moment to give myself to him if I had known how much He was going to give me. I will not put the details of what had happened on paper. God alone and my heart must never forget the most wonderful effect of his mercy towards me. God must not forget it because he ought to demand of me extraordinary gratitude; and I must remember it so that I will love Him who is so liberal a benefactor”.*¹

¹ Koren, p. 131

V

THE AFFAIR OF THE BARRISTER'S GOWN

In the list that Claude drew up to help him serve God more completely, he mentioned his faults but gave few details. As he did not have the explanatory key to this document, his biographer, Pierre Thomas, knew nothing about the sword wound he had inflicted on Le Huédez. At the beginning of Claude's notes, which refer to his period of legal studies, he would have read about *"The most humiliating part of my life"*, and would probably have applied these words to the whole period he spent in Nantes, rather than to the precise incident regarding Le Huédez. Having spoken of *"The honesty I must practise as a historian"*, Thomas confines himself to rather inconsistent generalities:

"Until now, young Claude had lived under rather close supervision by his parents. In person or through teachers, they gave him all the training needed for his up-bringing, but being unable to follow him to Nantes, they were forced to leave him to his own devices.

His father was widely known and probably had friends in Nantes. It is only 60 miles from Rennes. It is likely that he confided his son to the care of some of them, but friends are rarely watchful enough and do not take note of everything against which a young man should be warned. And, after all, a young man is no longer to be treated like a child. He is supposed to be able to take care of himself in public, especially when he is a law student....."

".....He lived among a great number of young men of good social standing who had also come from the provinces to study law at Nantes. Their intentions were similar to his own. At Rennes, he had had only passing contact with such people but now he had money to spend and felt he could cut a good figure in society. His eagerness to make friends and create useful relationships meant that he became more and more involved in worldly affairs. He found resistance hard and, since he lacked experience, he failed to perceive the dangers that lay in wait for him.

It takes great courage and heroic virtue to remain firm against the onslaughts of the world and the devil. In order to keep to the good resolutions he had made during his retreat, Claude should have risen above this search for esteem amongst dissolute young men. He should have despised their repartee and their banter, but he lacked the courage to do so. He should have recalled the great truths he had considered during the retreat. He should have sought the advice of wise people, practised spiritual reading and looked for chances to be alone. He should have been prudent in giving himself to the world, instead of plunging into it as he actually did".¹

This lack of precision in Thomas's account can hardly be excused by feelings of filial discretion when talking of his hero. In fact what the author is doing is using the occasion to air some of his own ideas. Writing about Claude-François's time in Caen, he said:

¹ Thomas p. 244

"It does not seem that Claude compromised his morals during the year he spent there. Whether by education or by virtue, he was quite indifferent towards the fair sex. His one preoccupation at this time was to distinguish himself It is easy to understand that in order to succeed as well as he did, he could not have wasted his time or spent it in frivolous amusements".¹

These lines are more than a little surprising, considering that Claude at this time was no more than 15 years old!

So to arrive at a balanced view of the spiritual life of Claude Poullart during his three years of legal studies, it is best to pass over the assessment of Pierre Thomas. Claude's *"enormous crime"* was not the beginning of a period of general laxity since God was using this time to *"touch"* the young man and *"pierce his heart"*. Neither was he without support at Nantes. The Jesuits were running a retreat house in the city and Claude knew the director, Fr. de Rollivaud, very well. From 1688 to 1696, he had been the assistant of Fr. Jégou. He could well have been Claude's spiritual director because we know that he did have one at the time. Most probably, he was also attracted by the Carthusians living in the Saint-Clément quarter of the city, because after he left Nantes, he wondered several times whether he should join these sons of Saint Bruno.

So we will better understand his time spent on the banks of the river Loire if we look at the period that follows - a mixture of great fervour and relative laxity.

Claude returned to Rennes in the summer of 1700, armed with a degree in law. He was 21 years old. He now had to decide what he was going to do with his life. He had said nothing more about his vocation to the priesthood over the last three years, so his parents may have got the idea that he had given it no more thought. In any case, they had certainly not abandoned their dream for him and were still taking steps regarding his future. His father *"had every reason to suppose that his son would restore the former renown of the family. This was why he wanted his son to become a councillor in the Parliament of Brittany. Because patents of nobility were required for this function, he definitely intended to press his claim to the family titles".²*

According to Charles Besnard, in his life of Grignon de Montfort, *"His (Claude's) mother had so few worries about her son's inclinations that she had already gone to the expense of making a barrister's gown for him.³ But the moment he tried it on, he felt an immediate distaste for anything to do with law. There was a large mirror in the room and while looking at himself dressed in the gown of Themis⁴, he apparently decided that the important thing*

¹ Thomas p. 244

² Thomas p. 249.

³ The minimum age for becoming a 'Counsellor' was fixed at 25. Like other candidates, Claude Poullart could have sought a dispensation from this regulation, but that was not the problem. Of all the Parliaments in the kingdom, that of Brittany was the most insistent that its members should be of the nobility; the fact that Claude's father was now so deeply involved in commerce would itself eliminate the family from entering Parliament. M. Desplace's ambition was undoubtedly to see his son become a Counsellor, and he was rich enough to follow the example of Ferret du Tymeur who entered the nobility by becoming the secretary of the King. The same man now had two of his sons in Parliament, but in 1700, this possibility did not exist.

⁴ Themis: the Greek goddess of order, law and custom.

was to carefully weigh the scales of justice and not to ascend the tribune to show off his purple, that he should not become the barrister he saw reflected in the mirror and that it was not as easy to acquire the qualities of a judge as it was to simply put on the robe of his office.

However that may be, God enlightened him with a penetrating light, which made it clear that he was not called to this state of life. He took off his gown and openly declared that he would never put it on again. At the same time, he asked his father's permission to go and study at the Sorbonne and become a priest. This announcement fell like a thunderbolt on his father, who had only one son to perpetuate his name and take over his hereditary role of Guardian of the Coinage. He used every means to dissuade him, but when Claude remained steadfast, his family offered no further objection to a vocation that was so evident".¹

If one accepts Besnard's version of events, Claude-François made this gesture, which ruined all the plans of his parents, to indicate that he could not be unfaithful to his vocation which he now knew to be certain. Pierre Thomas is far less affirmative:

"It is easy to see how much he (Claude's father) and his whole family were mortified when all their plans were shattered by the contempt their son had just shown for the legal profession. This was all the more upsetting for them because the preparations for the event had already been made and the people on whom his admittance depended had been approached. But although they suffered, his father and mother were too religious to complain. They simply asked him questions because they were unable to understand why he had reacted in this way. It is possible that he himself was not sure why.

God had his own plans which he had not yet revealed. He destined this only son, who was so tenderly loved by his parents, to a state which was much higher than the one they dreamt of. He wanted to have him entirely for his own service. He wanted to make him a model of the most heroic virtues and the father of a family of priests which would render so great a service to the Church".

This is the way that God draws us into doing a greater good, even by opposing our own plans. M. and Mme des Places were devout enough not to go against God's wishes, but prudence demanded that they test their son's aversion to their plans to see if it was not just a passing whim. They still kept hoping that he would listen to reason".²

Although less dramatic than Besnard's version, the account of Thomas is probably nearer to the truth of what happened. But the deeper motives behind the incident will only become clearer as we examine the writings of Claude-François himself.

¹ Besnard, p. 53.

² Thomas, p. 251

VI

A SENTIMENTAL CHARACTER

After the “affair of the robe”, Claude Poullart remained at Rennes. He got to know enough about his father’s affairs to be able to write: “*My father is getting older and he will leave behind a considerable business which few people, apart from myself, would be able to sort out.*”¹ He had been with his family for nearly a year when he decided to make another retreat, during which he wrote two notebooks. The first, entitled “*Reflections on the Truths of Religion*”², is a summary of the conferences given, but often very personalised. The second bears the title, “*Choice of a State of Life.*”³ The beginning of the first notebook and the whole of the second contain biographical details and clues to his character which are of the greatest interest. Without them, we would know about the works of Poullart but would have little idea about his attractive and very human personality.

In the part of the retreat devoted to ‘*the choice of a state of life*’, Claude-François drew up a sort of balance sheet of his qualities and faults, with a view to making a definitive decision about his future life:

“First of all, I must examine my temperament so as to find out what I am capable of doing. I will look at both the good and the bad aspects of my temperament, lest I forget the former and be surprised by the latter. I enjoy excellent health, although I give the impression of being delicate. I have a good stomach and am able to digest any kind of food easily. Nothing gives me trouble. I am stronger and more vigorous than others and am able to stand fatigue and work very well and yet I am fond of rest and relaxation. I apply myself only because I reason things out or because of ambition. I am, by nature, mild and docile and excessively obliging. I do not know how to refuse and this is the only area in which I show some consistency. I am inclined somewhat towards the sanguine and very much towards the melancholic temperament.

On the other hand, although I am rather indifferent when it comes to wealth, I have a passionate desire for glory and for everything that sets a man above others by his personal achievements. When I see the success of others, I am full of jealousy and despair, although I do not reveal that ugly passion, nor do I ever do or say anything to satisfy that inclination.

I am very discreet in the matter of secrets and I am rather diplomatic in the way I behave. I am enterprising in my plans, but secretive in their execution. I want independence and yet I am a slave to grandeur. I am afraid of death and therefore, I am a coward, but I cannot tolerate a deliberate insult. I am always ready to flatter

¹ Cf. Koren : “*The Spiritual writings of Father Claude Poullart des Places*”, p. 99

² Koren, pp. 42-83

³ Koren pp. 86-113

other people and disgusted with myself when I make a mistake in public. I am moderate in my eating habits and reserved as regards the pleasures of the flesh.

I have a sincere admiration for people who are genuinely good. This means that I love virtue but I do not practise it, for human respect and inconsistency are the great obstacles in my way. At times, I am as devout as a hermit, even practising austerities that are beyond the limits of what is fitting for an ordinary Christian. At other times, I am soft, cowardly and lukewarm in carrying out my Christian duties. I am always terrified when I forget my God and fall into sin. I am extremely scrupulous, almost as much during times of laxity as during periods of fervour. I have a facility to discern what is good and what is evil and I receive many graces from God which help me to be aware of my blindness. I am very happy when giving alms and have an in-built compassion for those who are suffering. I hate detraction and I am respectful in church, without being a hypocrite.

Here, then, is a complete portrait of myself which is a fair assessment of what I am really like".¹

In this self-assessment, Claude is obviously sincere, transparent and objective. He draws up a list of the principal traits of his character, but it is only when he talks of his temperament that he gives an overall judgment: *"I am somewhat inclined towards the sanguine temperament and very much towards the melancholic."* This assessment, where he looks at himself in his entirety, is further illustrated by other data in the *"Choice of a State of Life"*, so it would not be imprudent to move from analysis to synthesis to assess which type of person Claude was according to the categories of modern psychology. After all, some of the leading experts in this field (René Le Senne, Emmanuel Mounier and others) employed this biographical approach in their character analysis of various historical personalities.

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In the study of character, the first objective is to establish the orientation of the three fundamental factors: emotionalism, the tendency to action and the duration of after-effects.²

An emotional person is somebody who is troubled when most people would not be, or an individual who is more violently upset in given circumstances than the majority.

An active person is not necessarily the one who acts the most but the one who, all things being equal, acts with the greatest facility. The **inactive person** acts with difficulty, but is not incapable of intense activity.

The idea of the **duration of after-effects** can be subdivided into *primary* and *secondary*. All the feelings that we experience have a primary or immediate effect on us. But once these feelings have left our consciousness, they continue to exert an influence on our way of thinking and acting by their secondary effects. Psychologists call *"primary"* those individuals

¹ Koren, p. 93+

² The works consulted were: Le Senne: *"Traité de caractérologie"*, Paris, 1946 ;

whose emotions act above all in the immediate, while those who experience after-effects for a much longer period are labelled “secondary”.

According to the possible combinations of these three fundamental factors, we can distinguish various types of character which are clearly different: the passionate, the choleric or exuberantly active, the sentimental, the nervous, the phlegmatic, the sanguine, the apathetic and the amorphous.

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The “sentimental” person of today corresponds to the “melancholic” of the past. In affirming that he was “*melancholic*”, Claude Poullart was not mistaken: everything he reveals to us about his character would lead us today to include him in the category of *Sentimental*.

The sentimental person is also emotional, mildly active and secondary. His emotion, strongly restrained in its first occurrence, does not burst into flames as with the exuberantly active person, for example; he is tense and secret to the extent that he can be taken for a phlegmatic.

Often disappointed by the world, he closes in on himself towards a solitude which he tries to maintain, even though it is painful. He keeps falling back on memories which can play a central part in his life. Solitude, like melancholy, is a wall that he builds between himself and the world. To break free from such a painful conflict he resorts to reflection and analysis.

Self analysis is constantly with him so he is, of all people, the one who knows his weaknesses in depth. No one is more easily dissatisfied with himself. He is often oppressed with scruples and his conduct is sometimes weighed down by excessive self-judgement. He is timid, closed in on himself and sometimes melancholic and gloomy.

Honest and conscientious, with a taste for dignity and a repugnance for aggressive words, respectful of laws, guided by long-term rather than immediate results, he nearly always acts according to what he sees as his duty. Although he is careful with money, his practical sense is very weak. He is happiest in reflection, intimacy and secrecy, but he still needs success in the world. His hope is that by examining his obstacles and their causes, he will be able to draw from his feeble activity as large a return as possible.

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With Claude, activity was not easy or spontaneous; it needed a real effort. He saw himself as somebody who worked hard who was also inclined to laziness. But the success of others made him feel very jealous. This “*unworthy passion*”, sometimes verging on despair, shows that he was intensely emotional. But he managed to keep it hidden; he succeeded in neither doing nor saying anything that would strengthen it. Such self mastery managed to block out all trace of his strongest feelings. His tender feelings towards his parents were very strong but remained secret. In all these traits of character, we can see the emotion of a “sentimental” person which was deep but which remained hidden.

In the “*Choice of a state of life*”, Claude gives ample evidence, in analysing his character, that his self control attained great virtuosity. He knew himself perfectly. The passage in which he examines his inclination towards religious life is a masterpiece that would grace

any anthology on character. He writes it in the form of a conversation between his soul and himself:

"I want you first of all to consider the religious life. I know that some view of God must be present in your inclination, but I shall be more enlightened when I know which religious Order you would like to enter and when I know better the reasons that sometimes incline you towards that state.

You reply that you will never take the habit of a monk unless it is to become a Carthusian. I have nothing but praise for your selection of that type of religious life, for I believe your sole motive for entering into that kind of solitude would be to concentrate on your salvation.

Nevertheless, would not sloth have some part in that inclination and might there not be some disappointment because you are not esteemed enough by the world, because you are not of sufficiently illustrious ancestry or do not possess the necessary wealth to rise where you would so much like to be? Are you not afraid that some day it might be discovered that you have not as great a mind as you thought you had? Are there not a thousand other motives of vanity that might prompt you to like that sort of Carthusian solitude?

I do not know what to believe about this, but suppose it is not unsatisfied ambition that makes you think of that state. Have you no other reasons for rejecting that vocation and making a different choice? You are melancholic, a dreamer, given to depression when you are in solitude, although you like to be alone. You prevent your mind from applying itself in those moments to something that is good. For your inconstancy makes you conceive ever new desires, and these new desires give birth to a thousand chimeras which torment you and destroy your peace of mind. At present, you are flighty, you love freedom so much and it seems doubtful to me that you would be satisfied with always looking at the same walls and being perpetually bound by the same chains".¹

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Keeping personal notebooks like these are very popular with people of a 'sentimental' disposition and the *"Choice of a State of Life"* is the most precious of the biographical documents that we possess. Without this source, Claude's life, which was so brief yet so fruitful, would seem to be nothing but a story of unqualified success, but the many different dimensions of this success would escape us. We would over-emphasise the importance of his being the son of the greatest businessman of Rennes and neglect the role of divine Providence, because Claude's character in no way predisposed him to succeed in the ambitious plans he conceived.

But this was not important, because the real founder of religious families is God himself. Those we refer to as 'Founders' are no more than His instruments; He is more than capable of compensating for their deficiencies. What he asks of them is to accept lovingly the grace of his call and place themselves totally at his disposal.

¹ *"Choice of a State of Life"*. Koren pp. 97 & 99.

VII

“COME AND FOLLOW ME”

After his return to Rennes, Claude led the life of a man of the world but not of a “worldly” person. If he still moved amongst people who encouraged him in his passion for glory, he could not move away from God without being terrified. He managed to be as devoted and austere as a hermit; he had a spiritual director, assisted at Mass more than once a week and often gave alms to the poor.

Since his earliest years, he had always wanted to be a priest. When he tried to ignore the call of God, he was never completely successful; despite his resistance, God’s grace chased after him. When he finally decided to make another retreat, he had already given in to God, so his decision was, in fact, a sign of capitulation. He fully realised this, but far from making him unhappy, it led him to thank his ‘conqueror’, whose only weapons in the struggle had been love, patience and gentleness.

“I have decided to withdraw from the world and spend eight days alone. Nothing forced me to make this small sacrifice for the Lord. I could have wasted my time once more, as I have done all too frequently, but I am now resolved to devote this period of solitude to my conversion and salvation.

In adopting this plan, I was enlightened by grace, despite my blindness. If I had not received that call, would that have excused me from not returning to God? In the past, I have rejected so many graces and refused to open my heart to them. But the Lord has done so much more for me than he had to. I could not demand anything from him, yet he has frequently helped me in danger as if it were his duty! ...

My soul, now is the time to surrender to the one who is chasing you. Do not hesitate to abandon all your earthly feelings. You must reproach yourself and be more attentive and recollected because of your past ingratitude and the hardness of heart you showed to the call of God. You should feel ashamed for having resisted the call of God for so long.

I vividly remember the times when I was about to fall over the precipice and God stretched out his hand and saved me. Very often, his grace was like an iron wall that blocked my path; it halted me in my tracks and directed me elsewhere. I found it hard or impossible to do things that were offensive to God, even when others seemed to have no problem with them...

You sought me, Lord, and I fled from you. You had endowed me with reason, but I refused to make use of it. I wanted to be on bad terms with you, but you refused to allow it. I deserved to be abandoned by you and that you would become tired of being so good to me. I would have recognised my fault through your punishment and felt the enormity of my crimes.

How loveable you are, my Saviour. You do not desire my death; you only want my conversion. You are always very kind to me, almost as if you were in need of me. You seem to be delighted to conquer a heart that is as unresponsive as mine!...

You have wanted to speak to my heart for a long time but I have refused to listen. You tried to persuade me that you wanted to make use of me to carry out your plan, but I refused to believe you ...

It is now clear that you are determined to succeed. You will continue to assault me during this retreat, but it will be much less difficult for you this time. I have not come here to defend myself but to surrender unequivocally”¹.

Claude was already determined to be a priest and was burning with enthusiasm:

“I will show you to those who no longer know you. I understand only too well the confusion of people who have fallen into bad habits, so I will persuade, convince and force them to change their lives, so that you will be praised eternally by those who would otherwise have cursed you.”²

The first part of the retreat was devoted to the final ends of this life. The young retreatants were prepared for making their ‘Choice’ by meditating on the “great truths” of life. But Claude had already made up his mind: *“I have everything to fear from my present state; it is not what you want of me, so for the sake of my own salvation, I must accept your plans in their entirety.”³* But like all the others making the retreat, he was invited to adopt an attitude of personal indifference to his future state and study his vocation according to the method of St. Ignatius. He gave himself totally to this exercise with which he was already familiar:

“Since I have no preconceived ideas or prejudices, I must begin once more to examine the inclination and repugnancy that I have for each possible state of life ... I want to weigh things up in such a way that when I finally come to a decision, I will know that this is what God wants me to do.”⁴

Having examined his own temperament, he set about deciding between monastic life, the secular clergy and life in the “world”. For reasons we have already seen, he had no hesitation in rejecting monastic life. In conversation with his soul, he said: *“You say that you are indifferent to all states of life, but you are not as indifferent as you imagine: monastic life has no attraction for you...”⁵*

He then looked at the option of becoming a secular priest: *“I know you are very much inclined to the ecclesiastical state and it would seem that of the three states of life, this is the one that would appeal to you the most”*. If he decided on this, he could convert souls to God and live a life of virtue more easily. He could rely on the grace of God to reduce those faults which might prevent him from becoming a holy and faithful servant.

After further meticulous examination, the obstacles seemed to melt away and there was every indication that this was the right path for him to follow:

¹ Koren : *“The Spiritual writings of Father Claude Poullart des Places: On the Truths of Religion”*, p. 45

² Koren: *ibid.*, P. 63.

³ Koren: p. 75.

⁴ Koren: p. 93.

⁵ Koren: p. 99.

“The desire I have always had to serve the Church since I was a child, my love for the poor and my respect for sacred things, my attraction to virtue and a thousand other reasons lead me to conclude that this kind of life would fit me well”.¹

Does all this mean that he had finally found the way he should follow? Not quite. He took more time to consider the careers which were available to him in the outside world. With his sentimental character, he seemed to enjoy dissecting the traces of indecision that still remained. Addressing his heart once more, he continued:

“I have to agree that you are more inclined towards the ecclesiastical than the monastic state. I can see that your inclination is much stronger towards that direction, in spite of the indecision that makes you waver between so many choices. If I did not know you so well, I would soon consent to your wishes, but would you agree if I said: ‘I want to satisfy you; let us say goodbye to the world for ever, let us now opt for the Church, let us now completely renounce the other states of life?’

I realise that you still have some attachment to the world and that you would like more time to think it over. But one moment you want everything and in the next you want nothing. You come up with a thousand reasons why I should embrace the ecclesiastical state and the next moment, you still ask for more time to mull it over. You still have some love for the world and this is preventing you from coming to a decision; all these options suit you and all could give you some satisfaction. If I go through the list, you are attracted to each one in turn. I still do not know what are your views when you look at the world. At the end of all this, I will try to force you to make a choice.”²

Claude was not attracted by the military or financial world. A position in the service of the King would perhaps be to his taste but he felt that his character was too accommodating to resist the temptations of the court. Neither would his parents agree to such a plan. Of all the possibilities in the secular world, he devoted most time to considering the legal profession. He found it very attractive but he felt that the hesitations of his conscience could be overcome or, at least, that they would grow less over the years.³



The time for a decision had arrived. In the dialogue with his heart, Claude showed a strong preference for the ecclesiastical state. From the start of the retreat, he recognised that God wanted to use him to accomplish his holy will. He had promised God that he would make him known to those who had drifted away from him. So his conclusion comes as something of a surprise: he decides to follow the advice of his spiritual director.

“I must turn to you, my God, to ensure that I follow your will in this matter. I want to be guided by your wisdom. Destroy the many attachments that I have to worldly things. Once I have made a decision, let my only thought be to please you. Since I cannot reach a decision, I will put the matter to your representative, hiding nothing. Help me to find an ‘Ananias’ who

¹ Koren: p. 104.

² Koren: p. 105.

³ Koren: pp. 109, 111.

will show me the right way, just as you did for St. Paul. I will follow his advice as I follow your commandments. I place all my hope in you.”¹

What can we learn about Claude from this conclusion? Was he the sort of indecisive person who wants everything and nothing? Or was he a hyper-scrupulous individual who, to protect himself against doubts and worries, decided to leave the decision to his spiritual director? It is probably impossible to find an answer to such questions. Perhaps the key to understanding what Claude really felt can be found in the opening prayer of “*A Choice of a State of Life*”:

“O my God, guide to the heavenly Jerusalem of those who put their trust in you, I turn to your Divine Providence. I abandon myself entirely to you, I renounce my own inclinations and appetites so as to follow your will.

Let me know what you want me to do so that by leading the kind of life for which you have destined me, I may faithfully serve you during my pilgrimage on earth in that state of life which is pleasing to you. In this way, you will give me all the graces I need to give you the glory which is your due. ‘Notam fac mihi, Domine, viam in qua ambulem, quia ad te levavi animam meam’ (Make me know, Lord, the way in which I should walk, for I have lifted up my soul to you. Ps 142.8).”²

On the road to Damascus, St. Paul had asked, “*Lord, what do you want me to do?*”. And the Lord replied, “*Go into the town and you will be told what you must do*” and he was put into the care of Ananias. Claude knew exactly what his Ananias would tell him, but he still needed to hear it. He did not want to take the decision to set out on the road to the priesthood by himself: he abandoned himself entirely to Providence and would accept the word of his spiritual director as the word of the Lord.

The exact words of his director have not come down to us but from what happened subsequently, he must have been more clear-cut and decisive than Claude had ever been. Even as a priest, his dominant fault of ambition never completely evaporated; there were plenty of opportunities to gain a reputation as an outstanding speaker. The day after he had delivered his “*Grand Acte*” four years previously, he had asked his parents for permission to study theology at the prestigious Sorbonne University in Paris, from which he would gain a doctorate. He probably saw this as a way to stimulate his work and to get ahead of others on merit. But in fact, by October he was installed at the Collège Louis-le-Grand where he followed the course of theology given by the Jesuits, thus deliberately renouncing any idea of acquiring university diplomas.

Unlike the rich young man in the gospel, Claude Poullart des Places generously accepted the sacrifice that he was asked to make as the price for his personal sanctification. This was the decisive turning point of his life, setting him on the road that would lead to the accomplishment of a great priestly and apostolic work.

¹ Koren: p. 113

² Koren: p. 89.

VIII

THE INFLUENCE OF MICHEL LE NOBLETZ

At the start of the academic year, October 1701, Claude Poullart became one of the 450 students who lived in the College of Louis-le-Grand. He no doubt owed this privilege of being accepted into this prestigious Jesuit college to the recommendation of his own director. He began by making another retreat and choosing a new confessor. For the previous ten years, the spiritual guide of the majority of the religious and theological students had been a venerable octogenarian priest, Fr. Jean Maillard, regarded as one of the outstanding mystical authorities of the Company of Jesus. His influence on Claude was considerable, either personally, through one of his disciples, or by his writings on the spiritual life.

From this point onwards, Claude was known almost exclusively as ‘Monsieur des Places’ (generally written Desplaces). It was a period when he deepened his spiritual life and prepared himself for some important decisions. Pierre Thomas describes it as follows:

“For a long time, he had been considering the idea of giving himself entirely to God. Nevertheless, he had remained more or less the same to the outside observer and retained the polished manners he had always practised. From 1702 onwards, he underwent a considerable change, but he did not lose that transparency, mildness and cheerfulness which virtue must possess if it is not to appear morose. The many students of the college who knew him well noticed that he had dropped his customary splendour and worldly manners. He was now wearing the habit and showed a striking simplicity, with no concern for what others might think of him”.¹

This great change must have come about after August 15th, 1702, because it was on that day that Claude received the tonsure and thus became a cleric. Lay students, even if they were studying theology, did not wear the soutane.

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This new approach to life was the result of a resolution he had made during a retreat at Rennes a few months earlier: *“Let us get rid of all human respect, fear of what others might think, complacency and vanity... Let others say what they please; let them approve of me or make fun of me, treat me as a visionary, a hypocrite or look on me as a holy man. From now on, all this will leave me completely indifferent”.²* Something had happened which had a profound effect on him and perhaps we can find the explanation in the work of Charles Besnard: *“His reading of the life of Fr. Le Nobletz, a missionary priest of great sanctity who worked in Brittany, was a great help to Claude in learning to despise the world and conquer human respect”.³* So we will follow up this clue to try to get a better understanding of his profound conversion.

¹ Thomas, p. 273

² *“On the Truths of Religion”*, p. 81

³ Besnard, p. 281

Michel Le Nobletz died at Conquet in 1652. Fourteen years later, an account of his life, works and miracles was published by Fr. Verjus.¹ Claude would have been anxious to examine this book in the library of the College, because the cause of beatification of this legendary hero of his country, Brittany, had just been introduced in 1701.

There were several surprises in store for him in the opening pages. Like himself, Michel Le Nobletz had shown a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin from when he was very young. Likewise, he had studied with the Jesuits and had been chosen to defend the “*Grand Acte*” in philosophy. And Claude must have been astonished to read that one day, Michel “*was on the point of running a young man through with his sword when he felt his arm restrained by that same ‘Lady’ from whom he had received so many favours in his childhood*”. His biographer continues that “*Michel was more grateful for this grace from heaven than for all the others he had received*”.²

This extraordinary parallel with Claude’s own life went even further: “*M. Le Nobletz was convinced that it was of paramount importance for the spiritual life to break with one’s principle weakness which is the root of all the others; he concluded that in his case, it was the fear of being despised by other people. So he begged the Lord to help him to acquire an increasing disregard for the approval of others by sending him trials that would assault his pride.*”³ Reading these lines, Claude would have remembered what he had written about himself on the last page of his “*Reflections on the Truths of Religion*”:

*“I shall have to combat enemies...Defend me Lord against those tempters. The most formidable is ambition – my predominant passion. Humble me, crush my pride, confound my vainglory. May I find mortifications at every turn and may men rebuke and despise me! I accept all this, Lord, provided you will love me always and that I may always be dear to you.”*⁴

As St. Augustine said, “*The example we feel most drawn to imitate is that of people who are most like us*”. The prayer of Michel Le Nobletz was answered, so that by his life and through his sermons, he became a veritable “doctor” of despising the world. This was a great encouragement for Claude. He had so much in common with his saintly compatriot that he modelled his life on the example of this great man. He read and re-read this book and Nobletz became his guide for life.⁵

¹ “*La vie de M. Le Nobletz, prêtre et missionnaire* » by l’Abbé de Saint André (the pen-name of Fr. Antoine Verjus), (1632-1706), Paris, 1666, in 8 volumes.

² Verjus, p. 13.

³ Verjus, Book 1, Chapter VI.

⁴ “*Reflections on the Truths of Religion*”, p. 81.

⁵ The process of Michel Le Nobletz did not advance greatly after 1701. It was due to Fr. Lejeune of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit that it was re-opened in 1897. On December 14th, 1913, his heroicity of virtues was proclaimed by Saint Pius X.

IX

CLAUDE'S LIFE OF PRAYER

A short time after he came across the work of Fr. Verjus, Claude drew up a detailed rule of life for himself. The four pages that have come down to us concern his spiritual exercises.¹ He prayed for at least one hour each morning and evening and he visited the Blessed Sacrament five or six times during the day. The prayer to the Blessed Trinity that he recited morning and evening shows the clear progress he was making in his spiritual life:

“Most holy and adorable Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whom I adore through your holy grace with all my heart, with all my soul and all my strength, allow me to offer you most humbly my little prayers, for your greater honour and glory, for my sanctification, for the remission of my sins, the conversion of my father, mother, sister, cousin and all my relatives, friends, enemies and benefactors, as well as everybody alive or dead for whom I am bound to pray.

Permit me, Lord, to offer you the holy sacrifice of the Mass for that same intention so that you will grant me faith, humility, chastity, purity of intention, honesty in my judgement, great trust in you and a distrust of myself, constancy in doing good, final perseverance, sorrow for my sins, love of sufferings and the Cross, contempt for the world's opinion, regularity in the observance of my rules, your strength and power against tepidness, against human respect and against all your enemies.

Grant me also the favour, my God, to imprint in my heart by the indelible darts of your grace, the death and passion of my Jesus, his holy life and incarnation. May I thereby always remember them and be affected by them as I should.

Fill my heart and my mind with the greatness of your judgements and your gifts, together with the promises I have made to you by your grace. May I always keep them in mind and may I undergo a thousand deaths rather than be unfaithful to you. May I never forget the moments I have squandered in my life and may I always have a horror for my past sins (even though I should die of sorrow on their account if this were not opposed to your will). And by your grace, may I henceforth make better use of the time that is left to me. I only have one thing to ask you, Lord: that I may be deprived of all earthly and perishable goods and detached from all creatures and from myself and only attached to you. May I always live in your presence.

I beg you most fervently that I may be overwhelmed with opprobrium and sufferings. May I thus make myself worthy to receive your love, the love of the Blessed Virgin and the grace of knowing and fulfilling your will with perfect resignation.

These are the three graces which I implore more than any others. May I be ready to suffer death on the gallows or the rack rather than deliberately commit even one small venial sin. Humble me in any way you wish, for as long as I do not offend you, I want nothing more.

¹ “Fragments of Resolutions for a personal Daily Rule”. Translation in Koren, p. 117.

I ask you for all these graces through the holy sacrifice of the Mass which I hope to hear by your grace and through the prayers that I make to you. But I also ask for them through the precious blood which Jesus Christ has shed for me on the cross. I ask for them through the holy sacrifices which have been offered in the past, by those now being offered and those that will be offered in the future, especially those in which the body of Jesus will be immolated. I also ask for these graces by all the communions that have been and will be received in the past, in the present and in the future until the end of the world, as well as by all the prayers that are made to you each day.

Therefore, allow me to join my intention to that of all those holy people to whom I ask you to be a God of mercy, now and for all eternity, through the precious blood that Jesus has poured out for us. And I ask the Blessed Virgin to offer it to you, together with our hearts, so that it may be efficacious for us. Amen”¹

What an extraordinary journey he had travelled in just a few months! This young man, until recently, had thought of nothing but personal glory, was jealous when he saw others succeed, was full of regret that he lacked the necessary funds to achieve all his ambitions. Now he was begging God to deprive him of all worldly and perishable goods and grant him complete detachment from all creatures and from himself. Just like Michel Le Nobletz, he asked to be despised and covered in opprobrium and suffering.

His morning and evening prayers show that his main devotions were to the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the Eucharist, the Precious Blood and the Passion of Our Lord. His Marian devotion was marked by memories of his infancy: *“I will recite the ‘Sancta Maria’², to place myself under the protection of the Virgin Mary, to whom I was consecrated in my infancy by my parents and in whose honour, they clothed me in a white garment for seven years”³*. Going to God through Mary had become a habit with him; whether he was offering the precious blood of Christ to the Blessed Trinity, or himself to Jesus, he did so through the Virgin Mother.

∞

In a few pages under the title, *“Reflections on the Past”*, written during the Christmas holidays of 1704, Claude Poullart has left us an illuminating sketch of his interior life in the eighteen months that followed his tonsure. God had guided him to a level of prayer that the masters of spirituality consider to be the entrance into contemplation. In a small document on *“Affective prayer”*, Fr. Francis Libermann, the most illustrious successor of Poullart des Places as head of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, has given an excellent description of the most important characteristics of this phase of spiritual life.⁴ When he wrote this treatise, Libermann was completely unaware of the existence of *“Reflections on the Past”*,

¹ *Fragments*, Koren, p. 119

² The ‘Sancta Maria’ was the daily prayer of the members of the ‘Congregations of Our Lady’ which were established in the secondary schools of the Jesuits.

³ Koren, p. 111

⁴ *“Ecrits spirituels du Vénérable Libermann: De l’Oraison d’ Affection”*, pp. 149-209.

yet the similarity between the two writings is quite remarkable. The best commentary we can make on Claude's work is to place extracts from the two works side by side.

Claude introduces his reflections with these words:

"Heaven anticipated my requests. In exchange for a small act of love of God, I received spiritual gifts from him which words cannot adequately describe... My eyes never stopped shedding tears when I was meditating on my sins and the mercy of God. Whenever I took some little steps towards Him, he immediately carried me for many miles on his shoulders. Eventually, I was able to do effortlessly what I previously thought to be impossible for a man like me.

It is good that I recall those moments of fervour that I experienced when I first returned to God. What were my thoughts and desires at that time? What was my way of life and my ordinary occupations? It was impossible for me to think of anything other than God and it was my greatest regret that I did not always think about him.

Text of Poullart des Places¹

"I desired to love him alone, and out of love for him, I would have renounced the most legitimate attachments of this life. I wanted, some day, to be deprived of everything, living only on alms having given everything else away. The only thing I wanted to keep was my health, so that I could offer it completely to God in the work of the missions. I would have been very happy if I could have started the fire of love in people's hearts and then shed the very last drop of my blood for Him whose mercies were all around me".

"I never tired of speaking about these favours. I found very few people to whom I could talk about God's mercy towards me and I found pleasure only in conversations in which God was not forgotten. I felt guilty if I kept silence when I had a chance to speak of him. I found people intolerable if they talked to me about other things".

Text of Libermann

"The most difficult things cost nothing for a person who is really practising the 'Prayer of Affection'. He can undertake anything, is capable of anything and never hesitates, whatever obstacles and sufferings he encounters. The more intense the prayer, the more strength he has (p. 193). The immediate effect of this gift is a love of God which is very violent and ends in a kind of delirium. Those who receive this gift to an advanced degree normally proceed very far along the road of interior life and perfection" (p. 172).

"These people are consumed by a desire to make God loved and served by all those around them, and they strive with all their usual energy, talking and acting to persuade others (p. 197). They cannot tolerate conversations which do not ceaselessly talk about God". (p. 197).

¹ For the French and English originals of these extracts from Poullart des Places, see Koren, p. 131-139.

"I spent a lot of time before the Blessed Sacrament and this became my happiest and most frequent form of recreation. I prayed the greater part of the day, even while walking in the streets, and I was immediately disturbed when I realised that for some time, I had strayed from the presence of him whom alone I wanted to love".

"Such people have a great facility for remaining constantly in the presence of God. It would even be difficult for them not to do so when they have advanced deeply into this kind of prayer. They are always trying to remain there and the presence of God, for them, is full of love and gentleness" (p. 198).

"I met few people and was in love with solitude, where I often recalled my past failings. They even became a regular subject for my meditations, which caused me to shed many tears. What I had previously regarded as a quite ordinary sin of no particular malice now became something hideous for me; as I advanced in my prayer life, my hatred of these sins grew in proportion. At such times, I was totally ashamed and could hardly tolerate myself, so I remained filled with thoughts of humility".

"Generally speaking, such people experience a great sense of contrition for their sins. These sins are constantly before their eyes and they lead to profound remorse and feelings of humiliation. (p. 198).

The effects of the gift of tears are a great tenderness towards God and a determination to please and serve him.

When we weep for our sins...we could expect to turn in on ourselves; but instead, we fix all our attention on God."(p. 172).

"I despised myself and this became obvious to others, because I sometimes deliberately humiliated myself in their presence. This practice which I adopted, thanks to an extraordinary grace given to the vainest man in the world, resulted in many blessings from the Lord."

"The soul experiences an extraordinary fervour and leads us to act in a way that would make a normal person feel ashamed. This gift can be very intense... and one can act like a mad man in the eyes of the world, like Francis of Assisi at the start of his conversion, and several other saints" (p. 172).

"For example, I became very eager to receive Holy Communion. Even though I had the privilege of going to communion frequently, it was never enough for me, so that on many occasions when I was able to receive the body of Jesus, I burst into a torrent of tears. Through

"Generally, the great devotion of such people is the Blessed Sacrament...Their desire to receive the Sacrament is almost overpowering ... They long for the day when they will be able to welcome Our Lord once more. The effects of holy communion are very many. The presence

communion, I became detached from the world and its ways. I cared nothing for the esteem of others and even tried, on occasion, to deliberately displease them by acting contrary to their expectations."

of the Lord is felt to an extraordinary degree. The soul is smitten with joy and love...and tears fall in abundance..." (p. 173)

"The thought of Jesus crucified dominated my thoughts most of the time, even though I was still obsessed with a love of my corporal body. I began to practise small acts of mortification"

"Sometimes, people gifted in this way practise frightening penances, not always wisely ... Sometimes, they do not understand the things of God." (p. 172)

"Although I did not go very far with all this, and consoled myself with the thought that I would do much more in the future, at least I was faithful to my exercises and I would have considered it a very great crime if I had taken my meals, however busy I was, without having previously nourished my soul with the food I received in mental prayer."

"They have a great desire to carry out the will of God in all things and so they are very punctual and exact in observing the rules when they are in community, as well as their habitual practices in bringing glory to God". (199)

"I had learnt, in these meetings with God, to close my ears to all news and never to open them to see things that might merely satisfy my curiosity, not even when walking through the city. I did not know what was happening, I did not look at anything beautiful, I did not want to rob God of a single moment. I wanted to think of him alone, and although, in fact, I was far removed from thinking always about him and suffered rather long distractions, my mind was always full of him, sometimes even in my sleep and always in my first awakening."

"They have a great horror and disdain for the world". (p. 198)

"I felt compassion for those who were suffering and an ardent zeal to persuade sinners to return to God. This went so far

"Their love for their neighbour is very strong perhaps even too strong. They will do the impossible to help somebody or to

that I was prepared to do anything for them, however degrading. Finally, I practised a blind obedience to my director and respected his orders so greatly that I would not have been able to do the least thing without having previously obtained his permission for it”.

please them” (p. 200)

“A great advantage of this state is their obedience and docility towards their director and, generally, towards their superiors. They do not reason about it; when their director or superior tells them to do something, they carry it out”. (p. 199

“I had the satisfaction of living in this way for eighteen months and I was very happy when I noticed that I was becoming more regular. I say “becoming” because I was far from believing that that state of virtue was sufficient and that I was now leading as holy a life as I ought. I had not been away from the world long enough to be free from the evil habits I had contracted while I lived in it. And these mingled with my small virtues, introducing many imperfections and sins.

“There are some people who stay in this state for a year or eighteen months, but it can be shorter or longer than this”. (p. 163)

It is true that God, who knew the depth from which he had rescued me and who had been satisfied at the beginning of my conversion with the least of my efforts, was pleased with the little I gave him, in the hope that finally, I would give him more. He did not judge his poor servant because he knew the depth of the abyss which I had just left. Certainly, I was not then in a condition where I could have been fully satisfied with myself. I took a strict account of myself and recognised that I was far removed from the state which I would have reached if I had corresponded faithfully with the daily graces God gave me”.

The anxiety brought on by remembering my past infidelities sometimes caused me so much remorse that my body itself was

“Although a person in this state is very happy, he can still experience great interior suffering. This can come from

affected. I became thin and depressed, thinking about his past sins and the although my health remained generally good". anguish can stay with him day and night". (p. 163)

X

THE COURAGE OF A YOUNG SEMINARIAN

Claude Poullart des Places lived through the extraordinary religious experience that he described in the preceding chapter without really understanding it. In later years, he looked back on it with nostalgia and blamed himself for its disappearance. These words of Libermann¹ will help us understand a little better what was happening during those eighteen months of extraordinary generosity and fervour. He was gifted with *“...the prayer of affection ... This state cannot be acquired by personal efforts; only God can give it, however and whenever He so wishes. It is not a permanent state but a stage on the path to contemplation”*. It is only a stage, but one particularly suited to those who are destined to launch new apostolic initiatives: *“The most difficult things are not an obstacle for those who are in a state of affective prayer. For them, everything is possible and there are no worries about difficulties that may lie ahead. The more intense the prayer, the stronger they feel”*.

The spiritual journeys of many founders of religious orders would illustrate what Libermann was saying. With Poullart des Places, it is perfectly clear: it was while he was in a state of *“affective prayer”* that this young seminarian found the courage to start a seminary of his own. But this seminary would depend entirely on donations! When describing his own character, Claude listed ‘presumption’ as one of his dominant passions, but “courage” and “boldness” were conspicuously absent from the same list. In the unfolding of his project, which we can follow quite closely, there is not the slightest trace of a natural “boldness” or even “presumption”; all we can detect is an overpowering love, the response of a soul who has received so many good things from the Lord.

Regarding this love, Claude is very discreet; having listed the signs of his fervour at some length, he makes no more than a passing reference to it: *“I felt compassion for those who were suffering and an ardent zeal to persuade sinners to return to God.”* But his biographer, Pierre Thomas, was rather more explicit:

“A heart that was so generous and sensitive to the love of God made sure that it would not fail to show proper gratitude to Him who had held out a saving hand, and this feeling found expression on every occasion. He took great comfort from being able to console his Lord in the persons of the poor, who are all members of his mystical body. For them, he stripped himself of all that he could, even necessary things.

His father, who was not over-generous, gave him an allowance of only 800 francs. But he still managed to give a large part of it to the poor. He was particularly kind to poor people who were ashamed of their state and he had a wonderful way of avoiding any kind of embarrassment when giving to them. For this work of charity, he enlisted the help of a young student whose fees he had paid until a Jesuit house gave

¹ « *Ecrits spirituels du Vénérable Libermann: De l'oraison d'affectation* ». pp 149-209

him accommodation. But since he had to use most of the money his father gave him for his own board and lodging, he sent the best food he was given to the poor and sick and only kept the worst for himself.”¹

The “young student” he mentions was Jean-Baptiste Faulconnier. He was just sixteen when Claude started to help him in May, 1702. Later, he was ordained and became a parish priest in the Diocese of Orleans. Jean-Baptiste wrote this about his former benefactor:

*“For at least three or four months before he set up his own community, he paid for my board and lodging in a house from where I could attend the classes of the Jesuits... During all this period, he sent me out to different places to bring alms to poor people, especially those who were ashamed of their condition”.*²

As regards his own expenses, Claude must have paid out 368 livres, including 36 for the rent of his own room.³ These were the larger sums he had to pay, but there were several more that he could not avoid. For example, *“Most of what his father gave him was swallowed up by his debts to the College, so he cut out all the best parts of his diet and gave the money he saved to the sick and the poor and treated himself as the least amongst them”.*

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“If he was so deeply moved by the material needs of the “members of Jesus Christ”, he was even more attentive to their spiritual needs. He would instruct them whenever he had the chance, but he always drew them towards goodness in a gentle and kindly way. From that time onwards, he had a very special love for the most unknown and neglected people. He gathered together a group of young men from Savoy and taught them the catechism. He was convinced that they were just as dear to Jesus as the greatest aristocrats - and more likely to bear fruit!

*In all this, he was following the example of his beloved Master, who had come to preach the gospel to the poor. To make up for having served God so badly in the past, he was ready to do anything to find him faithful servants who would follow him”.*⁴

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Jesus Christ is the only source of all Christian perfection; it is by imitating his life and virtues that people become saints. But because saints are no more than faithful images of Jesus, it is in His footsteps that they lead their own followers. The more the written lives of saints are infused with the Gospels, the more they are sources of sanctity. Fr. P. Verjus illustrates this in his book on Michel Le Nobletz:

“Michel always enjoyed reading the life of Saint Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits, and this had a great effect on his own life story. Like Ignatius, immediately after his conversion, he worked for the greater glory of God and the salvation of men and women, and until the day he died, he looked for ways of sharing the ardent love that

¹ Koren p. 267

² This is taken from a hand-written note that is attached to the manuscript of Pierre Thomas.

³ *“Consultes des Jésuites tenues au Collège Louis-le-Grand (1708).* Manuscript 2130 of the Library of Sainte-Geneviève, pp. 322,323.

⁴ Koren p. 268

was burning in his own soul. He encouraged many students to give themselves generously to God and to look on this world with a certain disdain; this was the foundation on which he had built his own spiritual life. He deliberately went without those things which seemed to be the most necessary, and he rarely ate meat or took wine so as to save some of the allowance that his father sent him for helping the poorest people. In this way, he could also give them the even more valuable help of feeding their souls”¹

This extract is very relevant for us. At the same time as Claude Poullart des Places was setting up his work for the poor students, Père Verjus was also living in Paris. If he had published a second edition of his life of Le Nobletz, he would probably have added a further chapter entitled, “*The life of several people who followed in the footsteps of Michel Le Nobletz*”.

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In 1702, through his love for God and in imitation of Michel Le Nobletz, Claude also started to help some poor students, yet he saw his main vocation as work in far off missions. But he soon came to realise that God was calling him to a permanent commitment to the service of these indigent scholars.

Before proceeding any further, we must take a closer look at the little-known world of these poor young men who felt called to the priesthood.

¹ Verjus: « *La Vie de M. le Nobletz* », p. 20-21

XI

THE SAD STATE OF THE “POOR SCHOLARS” -

When they signed the decree on the creation and organisation of seminaries at the Council of Trent, the bishops felt that they had taken an important step towards the reform of the Church. They knew that lasting reform depended on the transformation of the clergy and that this could never be achieved without seminaries. The text stated that preference should be given to poor clerics and that their formation should be free.

But in France, the wishes of the Council came into collision with all kinds of obstacles and it took until the second half of the 17th century before the effects of the decree began to be felt. In Brittany, the first seminary was opened in the diocese of Saint Malo in 1645 and that of Rennes in 1672. And these Major Seminaries, like most of those which already existed in France, were only set up for candidates whose ordinations were imminent. Young clerics entered these seminaries not to pursue their studies, but to prepare for ordination and priestly ministry by a retreat of varying lengths. The bishop of Rennes fixed the duration of his seminary at twelve months: three months before minor orders, and three before each of the major orders.

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Today, there is an obligatory path to be followed by all ecclesiastical students, so it is difficult for us to imagine what it was like for young people aspiring to the priesthood in those days and the particular difficulties encountered by those (a majority) who were classed as “poor scholars”. At Rennes, the students followed the classes of philosophy and theology given by the Jesuits or the Dominicans, but they lived in the town and their life-style hardly differed from that of the lay students. Coming as they did from several neighbouring dioceses, there were far too many of them to have any lengthy personal contact with their professors.

Those who came from rural and working-class backgrounds, as well as many from the lower middle class, often had to interrupt their studies for financial reasons. Some took up posts as teachers, some returned to their villages until such time as the family could find the necessary funding, while others had to abandon their plans altogether because their health had been ruined by their privations.

So it is not surprising that very many of these young men presented themselves for ordination examinations with very limited knowledge and almost no clerical formation to speak of. A unique document¹ has come to light that shows the unfortunate situation of some of these men. Twice a year, in January and August, the candidates had to go to Rennes for examinations. This was not a problem for those who were able to follow the full courses in that city, but the number of students who habitually resided in their own parishes was

¹ “*The Register of examinations for the diocese of Saint Malo*” This starts from 1713.

very considerable. They had to bring along a testimonial from their rectors or professors regarding their studies and behaviour.

The examiners first of all interviewed the deacons, then the sub-deacons, those in minor orders and, finally, the laymen. The students were questioned on the chant, the Catechism of the Council of Trent, Scripture and various areas of philosophy and theology. It was normal for about one third of the candidates to fail their exams. Some of them had to continue with their ordination studies for up to 15 years, but not because of the severity of the examinations; the comments of the examiners in the early pages of the Register of Saint Malo give us a glimpse of the situation that existed at the time:

“Marc Orinel, from Quédillac, 29 years old, sub-deacon since September 1711, presented himself for examination for the fourth time in January, 1714. His testimonials were good but he can hardly sing at all and his explanations of the Catechism of the Council of Trent were very poor. His replies were somewhat better on the topics that he had studied at Rennes for a whole year. But despite his lack of ability, he was accepted because it was said that he was unable to do any better. Admitted.”

This poor man received the diaconate in March 1714, but two years later he was rejected a third time for ordination to the priesthood:

“He came from his own village, where he had studied the Eucharist as a sacrament and sacrifice. He had a good testimonial from his rector, but he still sings badly and his understanding of Trent is minimal. So he was dismissed without having been examined on his treatises, with the warning that he should not appear again unless he could give a perfect explanation of the Catechism of the Council of Trent.”

But eventually, he would have been admitted. This was the case with François Samson, a 39 year old deacon, who had previously received the following assessment:

“He was only examined on the Council of Trent, but he continues to get worse and worse and there is no hope now that he will ever improve. But he had to be accepted or remain forever as a deacon. Admitted.”

Sometimes, these clerics took the same exam six or seven times, and were finally admitted with notes like; *“Admitted reluctantly...in desperation...out of sympathy”!*

Deacons who were rejected for ordination by the examiners could always appeal to the bishop. Quite often, the Register says that someone was admitted through the intervention of a particular bishop on condition that he would go to wherever the same bishop would send him.

While the examiners were able to test the knowledge of the candidates themselves, they had to rely on the testimonies that the young men brought with them when judging their way of life. At nearly every session, they sent away one or other of the candidates without even examining him. When the testimonial letters were contradictory, the decision would be delayed for six months to give time to investigate if they were based on first-hand knowledge or simply on hearsay. But the accusations had to be very grave before somebody was rejected definitively.

Most of those ordained planned their own future. Bishop Desmarets of Saint Malo had ordained 16 men to the priesthood. Four went to Nantes or Rennes for further studies, in the hope that their enhanced qualifications would help them find lucrative benefices. For different reasons, eight of them decided to live with their families or, at least, in their native parishes. Only two or three remained at the disposition of the bishop. As a result, he was obliged to ordain unsuitable subjects to provide for his small parishes and answer the needs for naval chaplains.

These examples from Brittany were fairly typical of the whole of France. So what was the pastoral value of such priests whose formation was so inadequate? The archives of the diocese of Rennes can give us some idea. There we read that of the priests ordained between 1679 and 1689, 56% were assessed as good or excellent priests and 20% as *“mediocre in both knowledge and virtue”*. Of the rest, it was said that they kept bad company, were excessively fond of wine or had doubtful morals.

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Faced with such a situation, some exemplary priests in Rennes diocese decided to do something about it, both for the sake of the “poor clerics” themselves and for those unfortunate people who would be confided to their care. The most fruitful initiative came from two Canons, Claude and Jean-François Ferret, brothers-in-law of Françoise Truillot, the godmother of Claude Poullart. In 1683, they contacted a well-known deacon working in Paris, M. Chanciergues, who had started a community for poor scholars close to Saint Sulpice. They asked him to send them one of his disciples to set up a similar establishment at Rennes. Eventually, he sent them Fr. de Saint-Aubin, who established a junior seminary in Rennes with the support and financial help of the two Canons.

From the start of his ministry, Fr. Bellier took a great interest in the young men who were preparing for the priesthood and this included the majority of those who attended his spiritual conferences. When Fr. Saint-Aubin returned from Paris in 1697, the bishop of Rennes appointed him superior of the junior seminary. The rules of this seminary stated that no student would be accepted without a “certificate of poverty”, signed by his rector. The students followed the courses in philosophy and theology given by the Jesuits, and they also had to go to them for confession. The bishop of Rennes decreed that *“students preparing for the priesthood would not leave the seminary to return to their own parishes...They would be sent to parishes, chosen by the seminary, to gain experience in pastoral work. If any refused to go, they would be suspended because this type of formation is the principal reason for the existence of the seminary”*.¹

If he had not already visited this seminary in the company of the Canons Ferret, Claude Poullart certainly went there many times after the appointment of Fr. Bellier. So he would have seen for himself the spiritual and material needs of the poor clerics.

In 1698, the Eudist Fathers, who were already running the Senior Seminary, took over the direction from Fr. Bellier. But this good priest continued to devote much of his time to these poor students. Up until 1711, he gave accommodation to twenty of them in his own house, which, incidentally, was very close to the Des Places family home.

¹ *“The Decrees of the Bishop of Rennes for the establishment of a second seminary for poor scholars and clerics of the diocese”*. (1709)



In 1701, a brochure appeared entitled: *“A letter to the Archbishops and Bishops of France regarding the best education that can be given to their clerics and the advantages that this would have for the Church”*. This brochure was a sort of preface to a much longer document on the same subject. It was signed by Fr. Jacques Alloth du Doranlo, a former lawyer and now the superior of a small priory in the Lande, in the diocese of Saint-Malo.

Fr. Doranlo had been a missionary for the last twenty years and the document was the fruit of a reflection by a group of missionaries in northern Brittany, which was made up of Fr. Leuduger, some Eudists and Jesuits and Fr. Julien Bellier. In view of the latter’s close relationship with both Fr. Doranlo and the young Poullart des Places, there must have been some contact between the lawyer who had become a priest and the young graduate in law who wished to do likewise. And Claude would certainly have heard the ideas of Doranlo and the rest of his group discussed by Fr. Bellier and he would have read the *Letter to the Archbishops and Bishops of France”*.

Doranlo begins by asserting that the fruits of the group’s missions, however successful they seemed to be at the time, would rapidly disappear soon afterwards. The missionaries did their best to root out sins and plant the seeds of a genuine Christian life, yet the nurturing of this seed was normally totally dependent on the parochial clergy. But *“it is difficult to find any of them who will put themselves out to follow up the work of the missionaries. Perhaps the fact is that they are incapable of carrying out this task. In any case, the result is that the effects of these missions do not normally last very long... So it is hardly surprising that the flock of Jesus Christ is in constant danger of attack when its shepherds are so ignorant; they are nothing but mercenaries who want to avoid all disturbance and who take to their heels as soon as the wolf appears”*.

The answer lies, he continues, in the implementation of the directives of the Council of Trent. Most priests fall short of what they should be, but how, when and where can these men acquire the necessary spiritual, intellectual and moral skills? The classes given in the colleges are not sufficient to instil the priestly spirit if the students do not have close relations with their teachers of philosophy and theology. And the sessions in the seminaries, where the young candidates prepare for ordination, only last a few months and are far too short to rectify the situation.

To be successful, the decree of Trent insisting on free training for poor students must be put into practice. One of the principal causes of the present deplorable state is the huge expenses incurred by the family of a young cleric who simply wishes to be a priest. Quite often, these poor men have more aptitude for this vocation than those who are well off; the gifts of grace come from heaven and have nothing to do with breeding or social position. The Lord gives them to whoever he wants and this is normally the poor and deprived, rather than the affluent.

The expenses are a great drain on a family until the poor student finally arrives at the priesthood. Then, to compensate the family for the generosity they have shown over such a long period of study, the newly-ordained has to look for money to repay them through his priestly ministry. So both the good of the Church and their own consciences suffer as a result.

Doranlo went on to say that the current deplorable situation would continue until the faithful were asked to contribute to the formation of the poor scholars. He had no doubt that there would be a generous response if the suggestion was put to them. For him, the ideal was to set up junior seminaries or communities where the poor students would be welcomed and supported in accordance with the vision of the Council of Trent.

The poor, like the rich, are called to share in the priesthood of Christ, so no effort should be spared to make them worthy of this vocation. They must be helped to acquire the four cardinal virtues of the priesthood: Christian piety, dedication to promoting the glory of God, apostolic work and poverty of spirit. (Fr. Doranlo had written a short treatise on each of these virtues.) In this way, the bishops would have no problem in finding good workers for the different ministries and worthy parish priests and curates. It would also produce good priests for the foreign missions:

“Several of them would be suitable to go to preach the Gospel to those who have not yet heard it. The famine of priests that exists in these huge countries makes us long for some kind of institution that would be able to tackle this problem. We should do something about it when we hear that there are only 72 priests serving the whole of China where there is a need for thousands”.

So Fr. Doranlo envisaged a totally feasible scheme where all the expenses for the education and material support of these poor clerics would be taken in hand. This confidence surely came from the successful example of the junior seminary at Rennes and the clerical hostel of Fr. Bellier, and these two successful undertakings must also have inspired Poullart des Places when he started his own work for the poor scholars in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.

Claude was soon to discover that the condition of the poor clerical students in Paris was every bit as bad as it was in the provinces. This is what the author of a pamphlet said about it in 1699:

“The life of the clerical scholars in Paris is the opposite of what one would expect from those who are called to the priesthood. There are many so-called ‘future priests’ who live a life of ease which leads them to loose living and irreligion. For those who are poor, their life is sometimes more orderly, but hardly ecclesiastical. The poor spend their time looking for something to eat while the better off seek to increase their fortunes. They all want to be priests but they are following a way of life that should exclude them from such a vocation. There are exceptions to what I am saying but this is the overall picture.”

The number of colleges on the Mount Sainte Geneviève in the Latin quarter would have led one to believe that a very large number of poor scholars could have been prepared for the priesthood in them in reasonable conditions. After all, most of them had been founded by bishops who had set up scholarships for candidates from their own dioceses. But the reality was very different. With few exceptions, they were in a sorry state. The Rector of the University, Charles Rollin, made a visitation of them in 1696 and his report shows a sad state of affairs. In a few, discipline was good, if a little too harsh, but the majority were very lax. For example, the Collège d’Autun was a scandal; Rollin sacked the receptionist and his wife, with instructions that henceforth, women should not be admitted to the bedrooms of the students!

In several of the establishments, there was no prayer in common for the students and sometimes, they did not even eat together. To try to improve things, Rollin introduced a fine of one *sou* for every time they missed morning prayer, evening prayer or Mass: on Sundays and feast days, the fine was doubled! These Parisian seminaries were only for those preparing for ordination and throughout the 17th century, it was possible to receive the priesthood without ever having set foot in a seminary.

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During the 17th century, when most of the bursaries fell by the wayside, some new forms of help for poor students appeared. The first foundation, which was called "*The Poor Priest*", was a charity established by Claude Bernard. The first seminarians who received help in 1639 had to sleep on straw that was spread on the floor of the basement. The founder was soon able to finance 33 students, and after moving several times, the seminary set up a hostel in rue Montagne Sainte Geneviève, facing the Collège de Navarre where it remained until the Revolution in 1789.

Around 1650, René Lévêque, a seminarian from Nantes at Saint Sulpice, gathered some students together in a room in the area of Saint Germain. As they were only provided with the strict necessities of life, they were given the name of "*the Brothers of Abstinence*". Once ordained, he left Paris, but the work continued with the help of François de Chanciergues. Born in the diocese of Uzès and studying at the Collège d'Avignon, François was able to observe how the lack of a residential college was most unsuitable for the training of future priests. He moved to Paris and in 1665 and joined the community of *The Brothers of Abstinence*. When he arrived, there were only 6 poor clerics, but ten years later, he had more than 60 under his care, divided into four groups which he called "*The Little Communities of Providence*".

His dream was to set up similar communities in all the dioceses of France, modelled on those he had started in Paris. He produced a booklet entitled: "*Small seminaries where poor clerical students, destined to work in rural parishes, will be freely educated in accordance with the spirit of the Council of Trent*". He set out his objectives and methodology with great clarity:

"Our aim in setting up these little seminaries or communities is to reform the rural clergy; we will provide small and poor parishes with good parish priests and the larger villages with competent chaplains and school teachers. We also intend to prepare missionaries for the Kingdom of France and for foreign countries. These priests will carry out those tasks of the Church which are laborious, poor and neglected..."

"We will only accept good children of peasants and manual workers and they will find the same conditions as if they were still living with their parents. As no charge is made, they will be given a room, a bed and thin soup every day. Every week, fortnight or month, their parents will bring them brown bread, lard, vegetables and other plain food which they would eat if they were at home..."

"In exchange for 15 livres a year (the value of their room, bed and thin soup), they will follow the same spiritual exercises that are practised in a seminary where the students pay 400 livres a year..."

“In Paris, there are four such seminaries for 60 poor students in which they receive the same education as is given in the great seminaries of Saint-Sulpice and Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet. They follow the same curriculum of study and spiritual formation; they learn plain chant, liturgy, catechetics and homiletics. They are instructed about ecclesiastical duties and at the University, they follow courses in philosophy, theology, moral and apologetics...”

“These small communities will produce not just good pastors for country parishes but also directors who will establish small seminaries in all the towns where there are colleges...”

“The communities will be places where the bishops will come to choose subjects for different tasks”

The foreign missions were not forgotten:

“These small communities will prepare zealous missionaries who will instruct the people, root out heresy both inside and outside the Kingdom and preach Jesus Christ to all the nations on earth”.

These dreams of Fr. Chanciergues were eventually fulfilled. After his death in 1691, his work was continued by another priest, Fr. de Lauzi. Thanks to a considerable legacy, the scattered communities were brought together in the rue d’Enfer under the title of the Seminary of Saint Louis. It continued until the Revolution. Outside Paris, 38 similar communities were established by his disciples according to the model of the founder.

In the Senior Seminary of Saint-Sulpice, there were endowments which allowed some poor clerics to study with the more affluent students who were able to pay the fees of 400 livres a year. Philosophers and theologians of modest means could be admitted to the small Seminary, opened in 1684, as the cost was halved by economising on food.

Some of the Sulpicians, like Frs. Bauin and Brenier, were very keen to look after these poor scholars, but their superiors did not approve of their involvement in works which were financially not viable. In 1691, the Superior and his consulters forbade Fr. Bauin to take any further part in the Community of Saint Anne.

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This chapter on the poor scholars has been necessary as an introduction to the initiative of Claude Poullart des Places to place it in its historical context. By the end of the 17th century, contrary to the impression given by most works of Church history, the problem of implementing the decrees of Trent on the formation of the clergy was still far from being resolved, both in Paris and in the countryside. The question of the poor scholars had received little attention; with very few exceptions, all the students entering senior seminaries still had to pay for their board and lodging. Even in the small communities, there were some expenses to be paid and the more generous institutions tended to disappear on the death of their founders, or at least they often lost sight of their initial generosity towards poor clerics and ended up more or less like the colleges of the University.

XII

THE FOUNDATION OF THE SEMINARY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Unfortunately, the section concerning the foundation of the community of Claude Poullart des Places is missing from the manuscript of Pierre Thomas as it has come down to us. But these pages were known to Fr. Charles Besnard and were used in his biography of Saint Grignion de Montfort:¹

“The close relationship that developed at Rennes between M. des Places and M. Grignion continued to grow over the years and the similar road that their lives and ideas were following showed that Providence had destined them to work together for the salvation of souls. They shared their ideas very closely, but so far, neither had been able to discern the concrete means to be taken.

It seems that one of them had been born with a dominant attraction towards the apostolic life, while the other felt drawn towards a life of stability and solitude. But both were totally devoted to the greater glory of God and they were constantly asking Him to show them exactly what He wanted them to do. These prayers were soon to be answered.”

Since the end of 1693, Louis Grignion had never returned to Rennes. He was ordained priest in 1700 and moved to Nantes to join the Community of Saint Clement, set up and directed by Fr. Lévêque, the founder of the *Brothers of Abstinence*. He arrived there in mid-October, a few weeks too late to have been able to meet Claude Poullart. By the following year, Louis was in Poitiers as chaplain to the General Hospital.

The two friends probably kept in touch by letter, but they were able to meet again when Louis Grignion spent most of the summer of 1702 in Paris and this gave them plenty of time to continue to share their ideas. Louis already had a fairly clear idea of what he wanted to do. Only a few weeks after he left Saint-Sulpice, he wrote to Fr. Leschassier, his spiritual director: *“In view of the present needs of the Church, I have been asking God to help me form a small, poor group of good priests who will work under the standard and protection of the Blessed Virgin”*. His director was not too encouraging, but Louis continued to dream of his *‘Company of Mary’*.

As for Claude, he was already looking after a few poor clerics, but God had not yet shown exactly what He wanted him to do. Twice a day, he asked for the grace to know and carry out the holy will of God:

¹ Charles Besnard was a Spiritan-trained priest who joined St. Louis Grignion de Montfort’s missionaries by virtue of the agreement made between the two congregations. He became the third Superior General of the de Montfort Fathers. The original of this manuscript is preserved in the archives of the Daughters of Wisdom, the congregation of sisters founded by Grignion. The manuscript has never been published but it has been a source from which many subsequent biographers have drawn information. The references given here will be to the original manuscript of Besnard, entitled *“La vie de M. Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort, prêtre missionnaire apostolique”*.

“M. des Places had the feeling that God wanted him to find priests for his sanctuary who would be teachers and guides for His people. He also understood that in order to succeed, there was nothing better he could do than continue to help the poor scholars to survive and pursue their studies. But he was not just concerned for their material welfare; he decided to bring them together in a room where he would go from time to time to instruct them and watch over them, as far as his life in the college would allow.

“He told his confessor about this plan and received his approval. The principal of the college went even further: he promised to help Claude with this excellent work by giving a part of what was left over from the dining room of the seminary to help the poor clerics”.¹

Long before his retreat of conversion, Claude knew that God wanted to use him *“for the holiest and most religious works”*. From the start of his second year in theology, he was begging God to let him know more exactly what he had to do, and he began to see his way forward with greater clarity. He was destined to be either a missionary or a martyr; his vocation would be to form future priests and he would respond to this call by continuing to help the poor scholars both materially and spiritually. His immediate plan was *“to bring together four or five poor clerical students whom he would try to look after, without making too much fuss about it”*.²

Fr. Mégret had been the Principal (today, we would call him the bursar) of the Collège Louis le Grand for the last 18 years. The enemies of the Jesuits claimed that he could not understand Latin; but they must have recognised his wonderful efficiency in running the material side of the college and the seminary where the students lived. They were not able to hide their admiration, nor their jealousy and they concluded that he was doing more “harm” to the University than his confreres who were so endowed with knowledge and educational skills! Confident that Fr. Mégret would continue to support him, Claude was able to plan the development of his work more clearly without being reckless.

In 1703, Grignon de Montfort made another visit to Paris in late April. Charles Besnard gives an account of the meeting:

“At that time, M. de Montfort was also thinking about another project which was close to his generous heart. The idea was to look for priests who would share his vision and bring them together to form an apostolic group. He liked to think of himself as a servant of God who would join with these men in their missionary work. Although he still did not know the time, the place and the way in which all this could be brought about, he felt certain that this was what God wanted him to do.

He decided to turn to Claude Poullart des Places to make these plans a reality. He went to see him and suggested that he join him as one of the founders of this project. Claude replied with his usual candour:

¹ Besnard p. 103.

² Koren: p. 149.

'Personally, I don't feel attracted to the missions, but I know what good can be done by them so I want to commit myself seriously to your plan. You know that for some time now I have been trying to help the poor students so that they can continue their studies. I know several excellent young men who, because of poverty, are not able to develop their talents which would be so useful to the Church. I would like to help by gathering them together under one roof and I am convinced that this is what God wants me to do. Several people whose opinion I value have encouraged me to go ahead with this work and one has given me hope that he will be able to help financially.

If, by God's grace, I succeed in this, you will have your missionaries: I will train them for you and you will put them to work. In this way, both of us will be satisfied!'

*"This was the outcome of their conversation and it marked the beginning of the close cooperation and mutual help that has always existed between the Mission of Fr. de Montfort and the Community of Fr. des Places."*¹

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Claude had already found the house to which he refers above. It was at the corner of rue des Poirées and rue des Cordiers, very close to the Collège Louis-le-Grand. The rue des Poirées started almost opposite the main door of the College. After about 40 metres, it made a right angle turn to the left and then joined the rue des Cordiers. It was used for parking by the many carriages which arrived each day at the College with students and visitors. After classes finished, the street soon became an impromptu debating hall for the departing students, often very strident. As the road was quite wide and unfrequented, they were able to continue with their arguments in the middle of the street, which would have been impossible in the adjacent rue Saint Jacques without getting run over by the barrows which hurtled down the road at great speed. It was in a room on the rue des Poirées, only a few yards from the Jesuit house, that Pascal wrote his *"Provinciales"*.

The rue des Cordiers, which since the end of the 19th century has been occupied by the Faculty of Science, went in a straight line between the rue Saint-Jacques, the College of Cluny and the rue de Sorbonne. On the south side of the rue des Cordiers was the famous Dominican convent of Saint-Jacques; this was why the Dominicans came to be known throughout France as the 'Jacobins'. Amongst the illustrious men who had lived in this convent were Sts. Dominic, Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas.

The house which would be the cradle of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit was mid-way between the Hôtel Saint-Quentin and the Collège Louis-le-Grand, at the corner of the large square where the rue des Cordiers and the rue Saint-Jacques met.

The front of the building, where the old sign of *'Nom de Jesus'* has been replaced by *'Le Gros Chapelet'*, gave on to the rue des Cordiers. The *Gros-Chapelet* comprised two basements superimposed on one another, two rooms on the ground floor, four stories with three bedrooms and an attic. The corridor on the ground floor opened onto a small courtyard,

¹ Besnard, pp 103-104.

with a door onto the rue des Poirées. This is why in one legal document, Claude gives the address as 'rue des Poirées' whereas all the others situate it in the rue des Cordiers where the front door was to be found.

The Gros-Chapelet building was owned by Anne and Renée Peschenard, daughters of Nicolas Peschenard, the senior surgeon to the Queen Mother. These women had also inherited a much larger property with its carriage entrance situated on the rue Saint-Jacques, under the sign of "*Rose-Blanche*", almost facing the chapel of the Jesuit College. With its five main buildings, arranged around a courtyard and a well, the *Rose-Blanche* was certainly an imposing structure; the Peschenard family called it the '*Big House*', as opposed to the '*Small House*' which was how they referred to the *Gros-Chapelet*. A corridor under the building at the end of the central courtyard led to the small courtyard of the *Big House*. From there, one door gave onto the *rue des Poirées* and another onto the courtyard of the *Small House*. These details were important for anyone renting the *Gros-Chapelet*.

These two houses of the Peschenard sisters, between the Sorbonne and the Collège Louis-le-Grand, right in the centre of the University area, were given over to housing students. This must always have been in the minds of the architects because, apart from the ground floor, there were more than 50 bedrooms, each with its own chimney. The number of tenants was more than 100. The richest students rented an individual room; some of them even had their own horse and carriage. The poorest had to make do with a bed in a dormitory, as did the students of Louis-le-Grand and all the other hostels.

The Peschenard sisters, who lived at Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, rented out their houses to landlords. These then sublet the available rooms, often following the recommendation of the Jesuits. Since the 16th century, these two houses were, to an extent, dependencies of the College. In 1582, a young student arrived in Paris called François de Sales. The Jesuits "*found him accommodation in the "Rose-Blanche" on the rue Saint-Jacques*". And it was in the same building, around 1650, under the guidance of Fr. Jean Bagot, that François de Montmorency Laval, François Pallu, Henry Boudon, Vincent de Meur and several others set up the little association of "*Bons Amis*" (Good Friends), out of which was to emerge *the Society of the Foreign Missions (MEP)*.

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The landlords of the *Gros-Chapelet* in 1703 were François Guidamour and his wife, Marguerite Valtet. One can presume that on his visits to the young students lodging with them, Claude Poullart must have made their acquaintance and, from time to time, asked them for more rooms for the four or five young men whom he looked after financially. They must have shown sufficient sympathy for him to hope that the house would provide the stability and possibility of expansion which was so important for the work, a project which, for the moment, he kept to himself.

Each day, Claude would visit the students to look after their spiritual and material needs. When he called them together for a meeting, he would invite some others with whom he was in touch to join them. When the leftovers of the Jesuits were more than they needed, they would share the food with these other guests. They were 'external' members of the group, but as soon as the Guidamours had another room vacant, two or three of these externals would move in to join the others.

When they were about twelve in all, it was the students themselves, according to the *Gallia Christiana*¹, who expressed the wish to set up this small group as a clerical community. This was going far beyond the current vision of their benefactor, Claude Poullart des Places, but it was good to see that it was they themselves who wanted to take this initiative. It must have been encouraging for Claude, and reassuring for the Jesuits to see that their support for the initiative of their young theology student was not misplaced.

An old Register, preserved in the General Archives of the Spiritans at Chevilly-Larue, throws more light on these events:

*“On the feast of Pentecost, 1703, M. Claude-François Poullart des Places, while still an aspirant to the priesthood, began the establishment of the so-called Community and Seminary consecrated to the Holy Spirit, under the invocation of the Blessed Virgin conceived without sin”.*²

That year, the Feast of Pentecost, fell on May 27th. On the morning of the day before, the Jesuits assembled their students in the chapel and prepared them for the celebration of this great feast with a solemn exhortation. In the afternoon, as there were no classes that day, Claude and his ‘poor clerics’ got themselves ready for their consecration on the following day:

“The inaugural ceremony took place in the Church of Saint-Etienne-des-Grès, at the feet of the statue of Our Lady of Good Deliverance in a side chapel. This statue was very popular with students at that time....It was in this silent and little known chapel, on the feast of Pentecost, that the first members of the community knelt down together, led by the person whom they loved as their best friend and their father.

“This grace-filled day was preceded by a preparatory retreat, preached by Claude Poullart des Places. The subjects of his talks were humility, self-denial and zeal for souls. He told them that God had drawn them out of dust to make them princes of his people and apostles of his Church; so in accepting such an honour, they must recognise their unworthiness and understand that these words of the Lord apply, above all, to themselves: “He sent me to bring the Good News to the poor”. They were twelve in number and this underlined the apostolic character of their vocation. There was no great external ceremony for this first consecration of themselves to the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Virgin; they were the little flock that Jesus told not to be afraid. These young men pronounced their commitment with all their youthful enthusiasm, undertaking to prepare the ground in the neglected corners of their Father’s field.

The day was brought to an end with a fraternal meal around the table of their simple dwelling. The mustard seed had been planted and the Holy Spirit, by his breath,

¹ *Gallia Christiana* vol. VII, 1744, col 1042. This was a collection of details about the dioceses and personnel of the Church in France which continued to be published from the 16th to the 19th century.

² Arch. C.S.Sp. “*Registre des Associés*”. This Register was only started in 1734, but the details about the foundation were copied from an earlier one.

would transform it into a great tree, capable of taking the fruits of salvation and sanctity to the ends of the world.”¹

While the above account from Henri Le Floch, is partially imaginative, it is probably quite close to what actually happened; there was surely some oral tradition that was passed on by the first disciples of Poullart des Places, explaining the unbroken devotion of the Spiritans to the Black Virgin of Paris.²

In the month of May, Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort was ministering to the sick in the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. Because of their close friendship and the promise Claude had made him a few weeks earlier to prepare his missionaries for their work, it is more than likely that Louis-Marie was also present at the birth of the Community of the Holy Spirit. It is equally likely that some of the Jesuits, whose spiritual and material support were so crucial to the success of Poullart’s initiative, were also present. They were surely praying for these poor students to whom the Jansenists would give the nickname of “*The un-weaned babies of the Jesuits*”!

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The little community grew very rapidly. From 1704, all the rooms of the *Gros-Chapelet* were occupied by the poor students. But a great advantage of the *Small House* was that it belonged to the same owners as the *Large House* next door, so when the first became too small, they could overflow into the adjacent building and a connecting door could be opened. They were also able to find a large room there which could serve as the community common room.

Most of the students in the house were very young. We have already met Jean-Baptiste Faulconnier; he joined the community of his benefactor from Pentecost, 1703. Then there was René Jean Allenou de la Ville-Angevin, a young man of 16 who came from the diocese of Saint-Brieuc; he was later to adapt the rule of the community of Poullart des Places for the Daughters of the Holy Spirit. Pierre Thomas, the future biographer of Claude, entered the community in March 1704 at the age of 17. He came from Saint-Sever du Calvados in the diocese of Coutances. Pierre Caris arrived in October of the same year; he was the bursar for the poor scholars for the next 50 years. Most probably, Joseph Hédan of the diocese of Saint-Malo also entered in 1704; he was eventually one of the first missionaries of Grignon de Montfort’s *Company of Mary*.

From early on, perhaps from the very beginning, Claude had a collaborator called Jean Le Roy. He came from Gourin, a parish close to the Abbey of Langonnet³ and as he was already well advanced in his theological studies, he was ordained priest in 1705.

¹ Henri Le Floch c.s.sp. »*Claude-François Poullart des Places, fondateur du Séminaire et de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit* ». Paris, 1906, p. 280-281.

² Since the early days of the 19th century, the statue of the Black Virgin of Paris had been venerated in the chapel of the Sisters of Saint Thomas of Villeneuve (rue de Sèvres, Paris, until 1907 and at Boulevard d’Argenson in Neuilly until the present time). Fr. Bertout, the 5th successor of Poullart, testified in 1830: “*Before the Revolution, I often saw a statue of the Virgin in the Church of Saint-Etienne-des-Grès whose head, feet and hands were painted black*”.

³ Later to become a house of the Spiritans in the 19th century.

All these students were indeed poor. The families of Thomas, Caris and Hédan were peasants or illiterate labourers. Allenou de la Ville-Angevin belonged to the Breton nobility as his name would indicate, but his parents were crippled by debt and could not support him in his seminary training; the diocese of Saint-Brieuc even gave him a free testimonial because of his poverty (*“propter paupertatem”*).

It would be wrong to conclude from this list of names that most of the students at the *Gros-Chapelet* were Bretons. From the start, Poullart des Places wanted his work to be at the service of the whole Church, not just a particular diocese or province. The only things he looked for when interviewing potential candidates were *“poverty, good behaviour and aptitude for study”*. It is true that there were very many Breton students in Paris at the time. At the Collège Louis-le-Grand, for example, they were by far the largest contingent after the Parisians. The only reason why there were quite a number of Bretons in the rue des Cordiers was because of the Breton origins of the founder. Anne-Marie Lamisse, a cousin of Claude, had recommended Joseph Hédan, the nephew of one of her tenants from Hingueul. Jean Le Roy was surely pointed in the direction of *Rue des Cordiers* by Claude de Marbeuf, the Abbot of Langonnet, who had certain rights over the parish of Gourin.

Towards the end of 1704, Poullart des Places realised that it would be difficult for him to direct the rapidly growing work he had launched without neglecting his own theological studies. He became alarmed when he experienced a period of aridity in his spiritual life that he attributed to the heavy responsibility he was carrying alone. Although he directed the students towards the Jesuits for their confession (as he had done in Rennes), he still felt the need for a priest in the community. Such a priest would have to be chosen with great care, so he turned to a childhood friend, Fr. Michel-Vincent Le Barbier,¹ who thus became the first Spiritan priest. He was the son of Maître Claude de Barbier, one of the legal advisors of the Poullart des Places family. But it was friendship, rather than business, that had brought the two families together. Like Jeanne Le Meneust, the Le Barbier family came from Saint-Leonard de Fougères and the godmother of Pierre, the youngest brother of Michel-Vincent, was none other than *“Demoiselle Jeanne Le Meneust, Dame des Places”*.

In October 1705, Claude received Jacques-Hyacinthe Garnier into the community. Aged 22, he was a sub-deacon, born at Janzé, a little town in the diocese of Rennes. His arrival in Paris was not just an accident: it most probably resulted from the close friendship of two young religious sisters from the Hôtel-Dieu at Fougères. Their community had been founded in 1678 by four Augustinian Sisters from the Hôpital Saint-Yves in Rennes. Madame la Presidente de Marbeuf took responsibility for the journey of these sisters; three of them travelled with her in her carriage while the fourth was accompanied by a young lady of their Company in a sedan chair. This young lady was probably Miss Jeanne Le Meneust, who was happy for the opportunity to revisit the town of her birth.

On June 13th, 1703, Louise Mellet de la Tremblais, the 38th religious of the new community, made her profession; she had been born in 1683, the same year as Jacques-Hyacinthe Garnier. From the local parish registers, we learn that there was a great friendship between the Garnier family and the Mellet de la Tremblais family. The 39th Sister made her profession

¹ Born in Rennes on September 29th, 1679, he was baptised on the same day in the church of Saint-Jean. He was also ordained priest at Rennes, on September 15th, 1704.

in October 1703; she was Renée-Thèrese Le Barbier, the sister of Michel-Vincent.

XIII

UNDER THE SIGN OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

“All the students will adore the Holy Spirit, to whom they have been dedicated, in a special way. They will also have a particular devotion to the Blessed Virgin, because they have been offered up to the Holy Spirit under her protection.

Their special feast days will be Pentecost and the Immaculate Conception. They will celebrate the first to ask the Spirit to grant them a share in the divine love and the second to be given an angelic purity through the intercession of Our Lady”.

These are the opening words of the ‘*Règlements*’, drawn up by Poullart des Places for the young students preparing for the priesthood. In this chapter, we will try to find the explanation for this double dedication to both the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

At first sight, one could assume that the consecration to the Holy Spirit could be explained by the date of the official inauguration of the seminary for the Poor Scholars - the feast of Pentecost, 1703. But this explanation would be too simplistic. The project of Poullart had already been going for several months before this date, so there was no reason why he could not have delayed the opening ceremony until the beginning of the academic year, or to another feast day of his choice. The founder must have had a particular reason for choosing Pentecost for the inauguration.

It has been claimed that Grignon de Montfort played an important part in the choice of the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Heart of Mary, but there is no document to support this. Charles Besnard knew nothing of such a contribution, even though he was a student in the seminary of the Holy Spirit and gleaned his information directly from the first disciples of the founder. So we have no alternative than to attribute the choice of patrons entirely to Poullart des Places.

To find the reason behind his choice, we must return once more to Brittany. Missions and retreats were the primary instruments in the religious renewal of the province and they were always conducted under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as a direct result of the influence of Fr. Louis Lallement. This Jesuit was the founder of a school of spirituality that, more than any other, stressed the importance of being always attentive to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He had died in 1635 and never even set foot in Brittany, but it was from this province that his most brilliant disciples traced their origins. He had a great influence on Frs. Rigoleuc and Le Grand from Rouen and Fr. Maunoir¹ from Bourges. Fr. Rigoleuc was the teacher of Fr. Huby, who in his turn, influenced Fr. Champion. These famous preachers of missions and retreats were also writers and spiritual directors. They were the main branches of a spiritual genealogical tree that was to spread its influence over the whole of Brittany.

1) *The Association of Priests of the Holy Spirit in 17th century Brittany.*

¹ A. Pottier: « *Le P. Louis Lallement et les Grands Spirituels de son temps* ». Vol I, p. 395

Fr. Maunoir and his confreres always involved the local priests in their missionary work. They formed them into a sort of “confederation” and by 1683, it had more than a thousand members. This confederation owed much of its success to Frs. Rigoleuc, Huby and Le Grand.¹ The first two focused primarily on the pastoral and spiritual formation of the priests who came forward to help the missionaries, but for the moment, we must concentrate on the role of Fr. Le Grand (1598-1663).

He spent the last 30 years of his life at Quimper and was regarded as one of the closest followers of the teachings of Lallement. His obituary notice, which was written only a few days after his death, contains some points of great interest to us:

*“ His special devotion was to the incarnation of Jesus Christ and to the Holy Spirit, by subjecting all his interior life to the Spirit’s promptings and seeing Him as the origin of the holiness of priests...He inspired these priests to base their lives on the same conviction, having set up an association for them which was rooted in this belief...He exhorted them to prayer and spiritual exercises...This congregation has done a great deal of good in the three surrounding dioceses over the past 12 years. Through their example and teaching, its members are making a considerable contribution to the improvement of morality and their ministry in the parishes”.*²

The fervour of this association of priests was not just a flash in the pan; twenty five years after its foundation, the elderly Bishop of Quimper, Mgr. du Louët, was telling everybody that it had made a significant contribution to the improvement of his diocese. Apparently, the Priests of the Holy Spirit were at the very centre of the confederation of priests associated with the missionary work of the Jesuits. They were put in charge of the diocesan seminary when it was founded in 1678, and their chosen patron was the Holy Spirit.³

After his death, a booklet written by Fr. Louis Le Grand was published under the title: *“The Institution of the Congregation of Priests dedicated to the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin”*.⁴ Here are a few extracts from the booklet which remind us not just of the teachings of Lallement but also of the insights of the founder of the seminary for poor scholars:

“They will love spiritual poverty as the foundation of the evangelical perfection that they will strive to attain, abhorring not just avarice but the very appearance thereof.”

“They must renounce all ambition and any desire to raise themselves higher than others”.

But the influence of the disciples of Fr. Lallement was not just confined to southern Brittany. There were no frontiers between Quimper, Vannes, Rennes and Nantes. All the Jesuits who played an important part in the missions and retreats were well known at the College of Rennes, where they spent time either as students or teachers. For example, Fr. Rigoleuc left behind him a reputation of both an outstanding scholar and a renowned teacher in the school. It was he who taught the humanities to both Frs. Julien Maunoir and Vincent Huby. As well as in the south, Fr. Maunoir preached in the Breton dioceses of Dol, Rennes, Saint-

¹ H. Brémond: *“Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux”*. Vol. V, pp 112-113.

² Pottier: op. cit., Vol III, pp. 390-391

³ Séjourne: « *Histoire du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu, Julien Maunoir*”. Vol II, p. 43

⁴ A. Quimper-Corentin, chez Jean Hardouin, 1667, in-12, p. 218.

Brieuc and in the neighbouring province of Normandy. On those occasions, the Jesuits of the college at Rennes joined their confreres Rigoleuc, Le Grand, Huby and Champion.¹

Rennes and Nantes also had their retreat houses. The one in Rennes was founded in 1675 by Fr. Jean Jégou, who came from Quimper and was the rector of the college. He had a great influence. In the year 1687, more than 100 priests took part in a retreat organised especially for the clergy. It is recorded that the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, that was founded at Quimper, spread throughout the whole of Brittany; undoubtedly Fr. Jégou and his missionary confreres had a large hand in this. The guidebook of Fr. Le Grand, re-edited in 1680, must have been widely used by the priests who had followed these retreats.

2) The work of Fr. Champion, the “Evangelist of Fr. Lallement”.

At Nantes, the retreats from 1680 to 1701 were led by Fr. Champion himself. Fr. Maunoir must have presumed that Champion would eventually become his successor; but this was not to be, since the time spent by Champion on the banks of the Loire came to be seen as “*a period of crucial importance in the history of French mysticism*”.²

When Champion arrived in Nantes, the future of the school of Lallement was far from secure. The Master had died in 1635 having written nothing; his first disciples simply lived out his teachings by basing their apostolate on what they had learnt from him. They likewise went to their reward without putting the spirituality into writing. Two more generations followed his teachings but they attached no name to it: most of them by then did not even know the name of its creator. It was now in great danger of being corrupted or disappearing altogether.

Fr. Huby, in his seventies, was very concerned about this, so he asked Fr. Champion to take on the role of “*evangelist*” of this school of spirituality.³ He passed on to him the few papers that Fr. Rigoleuc had left behind – a few short notes that he had taken at Lallement’s conferences at Rouen nearly 50 years previously and some of his own spiritual writings. Fr. Champion was very conscious of the importance of the task that had been confided to him and from then on, he devoted all his spare time to what he called his “*little works*”.

The series started in 1686 with “*The life of Fr. Rigoleuc...and his devotional treatises and spiritual letters*”. This “*little work*”, like most those which followed, ran to 500 pages! It was such a success in Brittany that it was reprinted three times in the first five years.⁴

Champion began with Rigoleuc, not because he did not appreciate Lallement himself but because Rigoleuc was much better known in Brittany. Then, in 1694, he published “*The Life and Teaching of Fr. Lallement*”, and dedicated it to Gilles de Beauveau, the bishop of Nantes. It did not sell as well as his book on Rigoleuc, but Brémond refers to it as “*one of the most important works of modern religious literature*”.⁵

¹ G. Duratelle de Saint-Sauveur: « *Le Collège de Rennes depuis la fondation jusqu’au départ des Jésuites* ». p. 193

² H. Brémond : op. cit. , Vol V, p. 6.

³ A. Pottier: “*Le Père Champion, the Evangelist of Fr. Louis Lallement* », Paris, 1938.

⁴ Cf. Sommervogel, under the word “Champion”.

⁵ Brémond: op. cit. p. 140.

For Lallement, the two poles of all spirituality are purity of heart and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but the first is no more than a means towards the second:

“Our aim, having worked for a considerable time on the purity of our heart, is to be so possessed and guided by the Holy Spirit that He alone controls all our powers and senses, as well as our internal and external movements. In this way, we will forget ourselves entirely, by renouncing our own wishes and personal satisfactions. Thus we will no longer live by ourselves but in Jesus Christ, by carefully following the prompting of his Holy Spirit”.¹

The Christological character of *“Doctrine spirituelle”* is obvious, yet the accent is nevertheless placed on the role of the Holy Spirit in the transformation of the soul in Jesus Christ. More than one third of the book is devoted to the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity and there is hardly a page where the Holy Spirit is not mentioned.

Although he continued to live in the retreat house in Nantes, Champion was no longer in charge, so he was able to devote more time to his *“little works”*. He turned his attention to Fr. Jean Surin, another disciple of Lallement. He had died thirty years previously and is best known for having been the exorcist of Jeanne des Anges, an Ursuline sister of Loudun², but he deserved to be better known for his writings. Eventually, he came to be recognised *“as important in the world of spiritual writing as Boileau was in the classical”*.³ Yet at the end of the 17th century, nearly all his works were still only in manuscript form.

But one of them, his *“Catéchisme spirituel”*, was published at Rennes, without his knowledge while he was still alive. It is worth explaining how this came about. In 1644, Mme. Jeanne du Houx aged 30 and the widow of the Count of Forzan, entered Colombier, the monastery of the Visitation recently founded at Rennes. She was a holy woman with many exceptional spiritual gifts. Even in Brittany, there was much talk of the diabolical *“possession”* of the Ursuline Sisters of Loudun and of Jeanne des Anges, their prioress. As elsewhere, opinions were divided regarding this extraordinary phenomenon and the Bishop of Rennes, Mgr. de la Motte-Houdancourt, wanted more clarification. He asked Mme du Houx to visit Loudun and examine Sister Jeanne des Anges. Mme. du Houx gained her complete confidence, to the extent that five years later, she was asked to return to Loudun to help Jeanne prepare for her death.

Meanwhile, there was a considerable correspondence between Colombier and Loudun, and in 1657, one of the first copies of *Catéchisme spirituel* arrived in Rennes in manuscript form, a manuscript that Fr. Surin had no intention of publishing. But Mme du Houx, thinking of the good it would do to souls, quickly took the copy to a printer.⁴

¹ *“Doctrine spirituelle”* in the collection entitled *“Christus, 1959, pp. 176-177*

² The 1634 case of demonic possession in Loudun, France, is arguably the most famous case of multiple or mass possession in history. It involved the Ursuline nuns of Loudun who were allegedly visited and possessed by demons.

³ H. Brémond: op. cit., p. 152.

⁴ The second edition of *‘Catéchisme spirituel’*, also done without authorisation, was prepared by a Breton, Vincent de Meur, one of the founders of the seminary of the Missions Etrangères.

The first volume of Surin's work appeared in 1695, a second in 1697 and a third in 1700. Apparently, he was not too upset when he heard of the publication; he subsequently became the spiritual director of Mme du Houx and of some of the Visitation sisters in the two monasteries in Rennes.

Being led by the Holy Spirit was a thread that ran through the letters of Surin that Mme du Houx received. For example: *"To attract people to God, they have to be led to a great esteem and love for the interior life and to allow themselves to be led always by the Holy Spirit, with no other aim than to please God. If they do not arrive at that point, they will never attain a stable and complete virtue"*.¹

Fr. Champion died peacefully in 1701, having carried out his mission magnificently. It was thanks to him that the teaching of *"The school of the Holy Spirit"* was preserved for future generations.

3) The formation of Claude Poullart des Places at the centre of all these influences

It was during the most prolific period of Champion's work that Claude was going through his formative years at Rennes. It was there that the Jesuits of the college and the retreat centre were pushing his recently published works. The same was true of the Visitation Sisters. All this led to a considerable increase of devotion to the Holy Spirit.

Obviously, for most of the faithful at Rennes (as elsewhere), the Holy Spirit was still the *'Unknown God'*, or at least, they knew nothing more about Him than his name. But the more mature Christians were becoming increasingly aware of the Spirit's important role in the supernatural life. The confraternities of the Holy Spirit had been set up in several parishes in the town, and in 1698, a chapel in the church of Saint-Germain was dedicated to Him.

Claude must have been very aware of the spread of this devotion. In the rue Saint-Sauveur, where he spent his adolescence, one residence was known as *The House of the Holy Spirit*; it is quite possible that this was the very house where Claude lived with his parents.²

Claude's spiritual formation was influenced both by the Jesuits and Fr. Bellier. Julien Bellier had been educated by the Jesuits in their college and retreat house. He was part of the missionary team of Fr. Leuduger which owed much to the Jesuit Fr. Huby.³ In northern Brittany, he was one of the representatives of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, founded by Fr. Le Grand S.J.

Finally, remember that Claude-François was studying law at Nantes. He certainly visited the Jesuit retreat centre in that town and most probably met Fr. Champion. But it is not possible to say which of these different influences led him to choose the Holy Spirit as the principal patron of the seminary he founded in 1703. Perhaps it was simply the whole ambiance in which he grew up that guided him to make such a choice.

¹ *"Lettres spirituels"*, the edition of 1843, pp. 126,137 and 278.

² Baneat: *Le Vieux Rennes*, p. 575.

³ Mgr. A. du Bois de La Villerabel: « *Dom Jean Leuduger* », p. 88.

But why did Poullart add “under the protection of the Immaculate Virgin” to the title of his institution?

Since their foundation, the Jesuits had had a strong devotion to the Immaculate Conception,¹ so it is hardly surprising if this devotion is found in the writings and lives of the followers of the school of Lallement. Here are quotations from some of them:

Lallement:

“What a preparation the Blessed Virgin had for the great dignity of becoming the Mother of God. The Lord exempted her from original sin and from the obligation to contract it. From the very start of her existence, he gave her more graces than all the angels and men put together.”²

Julien Maunoir:

A short time before his death when he was preaching a mission at Lamballe, Blessed Julien Maunoir founded a congregation of laypeople with the title of the Immaculate Conception.³

Fr. Jean Surin:

In one of his letters, Fr. Surin links together the Holy Spirit and Mary conceived without sin:

“On this feast of the Immaculate Conception, the purity of the Queen of Angels must be foremost in our minds. People who are devoted to her must share the same purity. It is a great gift of God for us and he leads us towards it by faith and suffering. The Fire of Divine Love will purify us, just as natural fire purifies everything it touches.”⁴

Fr. Champion:

In both his own spiritual life and in giving direction to others, Fr. Champion brought together the two devotions which were dear to Poullart des Places. He saw the heart of Mary as *“the most perfect palace for the Holy Spirit”*. He had a special veneration for the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady which he did his best to share with everybody.⁵

A belief in the Immaculate Conception was shared by all the sons of St. Ignatius. From the start, the Jesuit colleges set up their own Marian congregations. For example, two had been started at Rennes, one for those studying the humanities, the other for the philosophers. Early in the 17th century, the latter adopted the title of *“Our Lady, Assumed into Heaven”*; by 1750, it had been changed to, *“Mary, conceived without sin”*. But no proof has been found that this change of title had an influence on Poullart des Places.

Before entering the philosophy classes, Poullart had completed a second year of rhetoric at Caen. In that town, one of the Marian congregations in the Jesuit college had the title “...

¹ Cf. V. Delaporte: *“L’Immaculée Conception et la Compagnie de Jésus”*. Paris, 1906.

² *Doctrines spirituelles*, p. 292.

³ Séjourné: op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 200.

⁴ *“Lettres spirituelles”*, Edited 1843, Vol II, pp. 176-177.

⁵ A. Pottier: *“Le Père Champion”*, p. 149.

under the protection of the Conception of the Blessed Virgin".¹ There was nothing extraordinary about that since the Normans had been celebrating the feast of the *Conception of the Virgin Mary* since the 12th century. There is even a tradition that this feast was instituted by William the Conqueror!

At the end of the 17th century, the towns of Caen and Rouen were already celebrating a poetry competition known as "*The Palinods*", in honour of the Immaculate Conception. Before it was burnt down in 1944, the municipal library at Caen still possessed some of the winning poems in honour of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary for the year 1694. Whatever their content and artistic value, these poems must have influenced the young student of rhetoric who, a few years previously, had started a small association of students in honour of the Blessed Virgin in the town of Caen.

¹ Cf. Durtelle de Saint-Sauveur, pp. 167-168.

XIV

THE HOUR OF TEMPTATION

During the Christmas holidays of 1704, Claude Poullart des Places made a retreat in the novitiate community of the Jesuits. From his *“Reflections on the Past”* which he wrote afterwards, we learn that he was seriously thinking of giving up the direction of his little community. Since the start of the year, he had been going through a very difficult period in his spiritual life, the sort of trial that one finds in the lives of all the saints as they are prepared for entry into a stage of contemplation.

After his initial conversion, he had thrown himself totally into his journey towards God, while God welcomed him with the tenderness of the Good Shepherd who finds his lost sheep:

*“I received consolations in abundance ... If I took any step towards the Lord, he would immediately carry me on his shoulders for the next few miles”.*¹

Such consolations are certainly graces, but graces which are temporary of their essence, adapted to those who are taking their first steps towards God. Such people are still a long way from perfection and they have to become far more detached from all created things. This apparent abandonment in the depths of the dark night brings great suffering to the person who has become accustomed to *feeling* his fervour. We can see this in the famous lament of St. Bernard when he went through a similar experience:

*“My heart is all dried up. It has hardened as when milk curdles. It is like soil without water. I am so insensitive that I am incapable of shedding any tears of compunction. I find no joy in the singing of psalms, nor in reading, nor in prayer. Meditation is impossible. I have lost all those things that make our exile bearable – the intoxication of the spirit, peace, tranquillity and joy”.*²

Francis Libermann also talked of this state:

*“Throughout this time of great suffering, the soul who perseveres gradually enters into the contemplative path which leads directly to a perfect union”.*³

To clarify further what is happening when somebody goes through these sorts of trials, St. John of the Cross uses the image of a log of wood that is thrown on the fire when it is still green:

“The fire begins by drying out the log; it expels the humidity by making it cry away all its sap. It then gradually turns it black and ugly, letting out a repulsive smell. But slowly, it draws out all the nasty hidden elements from within that are opposed to its action, until at last it catches fire and shines as brilliantly as the fire itself.

¹ Koren: *“The Spiritual Writings of Father Claude François Poullart des Places”*, p. 132.

² Bernard of Clairvaux: *“Sermons on the Canticle of Canticles”*; Sermon LIV.

³ François Libermann; *“Ecrits spirituels”*, p. 228

*... Something similar happens when the soul, still full of imperfections, is thrown into the divine fire of contemplation. This fire, before transforming the soul into itself, purifies all the elements that oppose it. It squeezes out all the dirt that is within; it makes it dark and more ugly than was originally apparent. Before this purification, the soul could not see or even imagine that these things dwelt in it, but now they all have to be brought to light before they can be destroyed and thrown out”.*¹

Claude Poullart was all the more upset by this purifying trial because it took place just as his community was beginning to develop. He was obviously concerned about his own spiritual life and his studies, but added to that was the burden of providing spiritual and material help for the 40 poor students who were relying on him.

Talking from her own experience, Theresa of Avila warned her Carmelites against too much disdain for external involvements:

“It is precisely when your zeal leads you to retreat into yourself that you must show your real love for God, because you will prove your fidelity to him much more when you are involved in external things than when you have withdrawn into seclusion. Believe me, you will grow much more quickly in virtue, even if you occasionally make some mistakes. I presume, of course, that you are acting out of obedience or out of love for others.

*Through such activity, we learn to know ourselves and appreciate the real quality of our virtue. However holy a person considers himself to be by living in solitude, he has no way of measuring if he is patient or humble. It is a bit like a soldier: we can’t be sure of his bravery until we see him in action on the battlefield. It is a great blessing to know just how weak we are!”*²

Poullart, on the other hand, made no excuse for his shortcomings because of the crushing burden he was carrying; he rather exaggerated their importance. In his *“Reflections on the past”*, he verges on the borders of scrupulosity:

“It would not have been excessive if I had shed tears of blood to bewail my wretchedness. I had never been what I should have been, but at least I was quite different then from what I am now. If I had lost only half of the grace that had been given me it would not have been quite so bad; but now, I no longer pay attention to God’s grace as I should, nor do I think of him in my sleep. I am always distracted, even when I am praying. I am no longer regular in my prayers. I have no fixed time or method for them and frequently cut short the time set aside for prayer and spiritual reading. I have lost the gift of tears by neglecting my prayers. As regards Holy Communion, my desire to receive it has lessened and my thanksgiving is full of distractions.

¹ St. John of the Cross: *“La Nuit Obscure”*, Book I, Chapter IX and Book II Chapter X.

² *“Livre des Fondations”*, Chapter V.

I no longer have the courage to mortify myself continuously. I used to do this to remind me every moment of the day to make up for the sins of my past life. I have ceased to keep watch over my senses. I readily speak of worldly matters, looking and listening to everything and no longer having the desire to speak about God. I have no great concern for the conversion of my brothers and easily give up on them and do not seek the help of God in such things.

I used to be indifferent to what people thought of me, but no longer. And I frequently flatter others. I am not kind and respectful in my words and actions but often proud and aloof. I put on a gloomy face to show that I am in a bad mood. I am sometimes ashamed of my own family and try to hide the fact that they sell linen and wax. I do not make it clear that I have no share in the work of the community for poor students; on the contrary, I am happy when people who hardly know me think that I am a rich man who spends his fortune on the welfare of these scholars.

I lack regularity in my duties towards God and my studies, praying and working only when I feel like it, taking my meals sometimes early, sometimes late, despite my frequent resolutions to change my life. I am tired of being so irregular, but I always end up following my own whims and ideas, without referring any more to my Director. I feel I have left him to follow my own inclinations.

To sum up, I confess before God that I am now as good as dead, at least in comparison to what I used to be. I am just a mask of devotion, a mere shadow of the past. I hope I will not fall even more but be able to use the grace that God gives me to examine more deeply my pitiable state and thus prevent any further decline.

This is the way that many good people have begun to slide down the slippery slope before eventually coming to a miserable end. I must be more in danger of such a fall than most, since throughout my life, I have so frequently returned to God only to fall again into disorder.

But surely this sad experience of my past life will help me to distrust my own strength in future. Being so full of vanity and presumption and neglecting the grace that God has given me, he would be perfectly justified if he were to abandon me altogether. If that fate has not already overtaken me, it is solely because of his infinite mercy.

He was always full of tenderness for me and unwilling to cast me off; he has protected me from that hardness of heart that leads to final impenitence. He has done this through miracles rather than the ordinary way of his providence. He has guided me to make this retreat when I had no idea of making one. And he has worked things out so that I can easily find a way to return to my obligations, without having to think up specious excuses. I had overburdened myself by taking on responsibility for these poor students, who were already being cared for by Divine Providence".¹

¹ "Reflections on the Past". Koren p. 165

After this analysis of the “*pitiful state of my soul*”, Poullart des Places now had to make practical decisions. He never seems to have considered that what he called his “*lack of fervour*” resulted from his excessive involvement in the running of the work for the poor students. The only way he could see of recovering his old fervour was to hand over the direction to others while he returned to solitude. It was indeed his hour of temptation!

“I believe that the good Lord will have pity on me again if I return to him with all my heart. At present, I am spiritually dried up and find it hard to work out what God wants of me. But from the way he has always treated me in the past, I think my hope is well founded. In the first place, he has never allowed me to be self-satisfied: on the contrary, I have always been upset by my chaotic ways. Secondly, he has always helped me to see that I was nothing like as good as others said I was. Finally, he never allowed me to get rid of my scruples and although they have been upsetting, they have made me go to confession more frequently and have put me on my guard when temptations returned. In short, the way God has treated me makes me hope that heaven will not always be like an iron door shut over my head, as long as I am truly sorry for my sins and use his grace to return to him.”

So with this renewed confidence, I will now consider which is the shortest way to find once more the One without whom I cannot live in peace. I feel that this laxity and disorder is the result of my leaving solitude too quickly; I jumped into all this external activity, trying to keep the work going for the poor students. But I did not have a sufficiently solid foundation in virtue for undertaking such a work. After the terrible life I had led, even ten years of preparation would not have been sufficient for somebody like me.

If I had made use of all the graces that God had given me, I would have taken more care and remained steadfast, despite all those worries. This is clear when I look back on the beginnings of the project before I had lost all my fervour. But the whole thing was still very obscure for me. I thought I was not doing anything contrary to God’s will, but it was hard for me to remain committed and retain my balance.

Even though it seemed to be good, pride gradually crept into my heart. This had always been my great weakness and I was now being dragged back to this same snare which had caused my chaotic life in the first place. Possibly, the devil had approached me as an angel of light so as to seduce me. I don’t know what to think now, but I feel that I made a terrible mistake.

I got permission from my director before starting that work, but how honest was I in explaining my plan and what twists and turns did I use to get him on my side? At first, I said I only intended to take in four or five poor students and to try unobtrusively to feed them; but perhaps I did not reveal the whole extent of my ambition and vanity. I tremble before God because I did not speak to my director with the simplicity and openness that the occasion demanded.

These reflections fill me with great sadness. I left the world to seek God, renounce my vanity and save my soul. But perhaps I was simply changing the object of my

ambition so that I could hang on to it. If that was the case, then the whole thing had been a waste of time!”¹

It seems clear that the scrupulous Claude was incapable of making a distinction between his ideas and his intentions. He believed that he alone was responsible for his aridity, his inability to meditate and his loss of the gift of tears. His unfaithfulness had led him into apathy: he was nothing but a mask of devotion and a mere shadow of what he once had been.

But the fact is that even if his imperfections had increased, it was God who was leading him through this *“bitter and terrible night of the senses”*.² St. John of the Cross gave three signs to help people decide whether such aridity indicates the presence of spiritual purification or diminishing fervour:

“The first is when a person cannot find joy or consolation either in the things of God or in the things of this world. This is probably a sign that this aridity and absence of satisfaction is not the result of faults or imperfections recently committed.

The second is when somebody is thinking seriously about God and is worried that he is no longer serving him properly but rather running away from him. This is not the reaction of a person who is falling away through neglect.

The third sign is when one is no longer able to meditate by using imagination, however hard one tries”.³

These three signs are all to be found in Poullart’s case. But he himself was convinced that the primary cause of his back-sliding was taking on the work for the poor scholars rather than spending a longer time in solitude. He tells us that while he was at the stage of affective prayer, he followed a blind obedience to the orders of his director and would not do the slightest thing without his permission. But now, his scrupulous conscience was torturing him. Had he been really sincere with his director? When asking for approval, had he not hidden his real motives of personal ambition? So he decides that he will continue with the work but will hand over the direction to somebody else.

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The arrival of Monsieur le Barbier was surely providential. Some other saints had undergone a similar temptation; the Curé of Ars tried to flee from the confessional and find solitude far away from his parish. In the end, Claude remained faithful to the poor scholars until the day of his death. He confided himself to an excellent guide who correctly diagnosed the nature of his sufferings and thus restored his courage and peace of mind. The *“Reflections on the Past”* fully describes his anguish, but says nothing about how he got over it, nor does it give the name of this guide who showed him the way forward. Father Le Floch thought it must

¹ “Reflections on the Past”. Koren p. 167.

² St. John of the Cross: *“La Nuit Obscure”*, Book 1, Chapter VIII.

³ *Ibid.*, Chapter IX.

have been Simon Gourdan¹ and he was probably correct. According to Fr. Besnard, Claude was a close friend of this extraordinary man for the rest of his short life.²

Fr. Simon Gourdan was almost 60 years old. He was a Parisian and studied in the Jesuit college at Clermont. When still very young, he entered the Abbey of Saint-Victor, founded in the 12th century by Guillaume de Champeaux.³ He was a serious scholar but he deliberately refused to sit for any degrees. As the chaplain of the famous abbey crypt of the Virgin Mary he fought strongly to protect the prerogatives of the Mother of God.

But at that time, the abbey was not particularly fervent and it had come far from the austere way of life for which it had been famous. Simon Gourdan was so disappointed with it that he left to join La Trappe in 1673, just two years after his ordination. Abbot de Rancé was very impressed by his sanctity, but he told him he would bring greater glory to God by returning to Saint-Victor. So he went back to Paris and decided that he would personally follow all the prescriptions of the original rule of the Canons of Saint Augustine. In fact, he went even further, as his biographer describes:

“Gourdan always retained the spirit which had led him to La Trappe and he followed the plan he had adopted in all circumstances: to offer himself to God as a sacrificial victim. From his return until his death, he never drank wine nor ate fish or meat and only occasionally took some eggs. He only went out once into the town and that was under the orders of his superior; an heretical minister was dying and he said that the only person who could make him change his mind was Fr. Gourdan. Even during the worst winters, he was never seen entering the heated room of the community. His own cell had no heating.”⁴

He prayed for 5 to 6 hours each day, slept for only three hours, wore a hair shirt and frequently used the discipline. He was like the Curé of Ars in many other ways. For example, more and more people visited the chapel of Notre-Dame de Saint-Victor; everybody wanted to see this priest celebrating Mass.

“Before long, many graces were being obtained through his prayers. So many came with Mass intentions that another dozen priests had to join Fr. Gourdan to fulfil all the intentions that were requested. Later on, his superiors asked him to put himself at the disposition of all the pilgrims, who came as much to see the chaplain as the Madonna.”⁵

By the start of the 18th century, he had become the most famous director of souls in Paris. But he still managed to find the time to write letters of spiritual direction and several spiritual books.

¹ Fr. Henri Le Floch c.s.sp.: « *Claude-François Poullart des Places, fondateur du Séminaire et de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit* ». Paris, 1906, p. 100.

² Besnard, p. 106.

³ This monastery was situated to the south-east of Place Jussieu in Paris.

⁴ « *Mémoires de Trévoux* », July, 1729, p. 1301.

⁵ F. Bonnard: “*Histoire de l’Abbaye Royale et de l’Ordre des chanoines réguliers de Saint-Victor de Paris*”. Vol. 2, p. 202.

It was most probably after assisting at his Mass and receiving communion from his hand that Poullart des Places opened his soul to Simon Gourdan. He could not have found a better guide. Despite the age gap, a deep spiritual friendship grew up between the two men. Gourdan must have been very impressed that Claude put his life and his work under the protection of the Immaculate Virgin and greatly stressed the virtue of poverty. It was Besnard who talked of their "*close friendship*", but, unfortunately, he did not elaborate any further. Yet what was important for Claude was that, despite his tenderness and depth of affection, Gourdan always loved as a saint and so was ready to treat his friends with great firmness where it was needed.

XV

RUE NEUVE-SAINT-ETIENNE

On October 17th, 1705, M Claude Poullart des Places rented a large house on the rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne, with right of occupancy after Christmas. Why had he decided to move from the rue des Cordiers which was so close to the Jesuit College? The date of the lease would seem to suggest that with the imminent opening of the new academic year, there would not be enough room for all the poor scholars whom he wanted to help. This would fit in with what Charles Besnard wrote:

*“The all-round progress made by his first disciples inevitably attracted many more excellent students. So he started to look for a larger house to accommodate them”.*¹

But there was more than that behind his decision to move. If the house of the *Gros-Chapelet* was becoming too small for their needs, what was to stop them expanding into one or other part of the *Rose-Blanche*, the large building which was very close? It was the obvious solution, but there were two snags about it.

The first concerned the residents of the *Rose-Blanche*. Since the time of the *Bons-Amis*, the atmosphere in the house could not have changed very much. It was in the interests of the hotel managers to maintain good order so as not to annoy the Jesuits who provided them with their residents, for it was they who retained the right to supervise the material side of the lodging, as well as the behaviour of the students. Nevertheless, *“as lodging houses normally accept a large variety of people, there were inevitably some whose behaviour left much to be desired. This caused the ‘Bons-Amis’ a great deal of suffering, being upright and honourable gentlemen, and they adopted the habit of retiring together after meals to the room of M. Gontier, which was next to the dining hall, so as to avoid listening to the unedifying conversation”*².

These disreputable lodgers in the *Rose-Blanche* must have felt provoked by the over-serious scholars they would meet in the corridors of the building when they returned from their lectures, carrying the leftovers from the dining hall of the Jesuits’ residence. It is not difficult to imagine the taunts and snide remarks they had to endure each day.

Most probably, this is what M. Faulconnier was referring to when he gave his testimony regarding Claude about 20 years later:

“In the early days of the community, he would often speak of the disregard we should have for disparaging remarks made to us; he spoke in such a way, full of the love of God, that he made it easier for us to put up with the many insults we had to endure at that time”.

¹ Charles Besnard; Koren, pp. 285.

² *Mémoire de Bénigne Vacher*, quoted by H. SY according to Arch.M-E, Vol 110, p. 68.

The second obstacle facing the young community came from the University of Paris. They believed that the Jesuit College was depriving them of a large number of potential candidates so they adopted a policy of making it difficult for their philosophy and theology students to be awarded diplomas. The University had the monopoly for such awards and let it be known that they considered students studying with the Jesuits to be unworthy of such official recognition. So those students who were ambitious for their future careers as priests began to realise that it was imprudent to continue to follow the lectures of the Jesuits.

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Therefore, at the end of 1705, the Community of the Holy Spirit moved to the rue Neuve Saint-Etienne. This street had already hosted several celebrities: Descartes lived in this road and Pascal ended his days there. At number 8, Charles Rollin, a friend of Racine and de Boileau, would later compose his famous *Traité des Etudes* and several historical works. In the future, the name of rue Neuve Saint-Etienne would be changed to Rue Rollin to honour the memory of this illustrious inhabitant.¹

Poullart des Places rented the very house where Rollin would live from 1712 to 1741. The property consisted of two buildings and the owner, Claude de Cornoailles, lived in the smaller of the two. The larger one had only two stories but it stretched across the whole length of the property. Its southern windows gave onto the courtyard which separated it from the road; the north looked out over a garden where there were fruit trees and a vineyard. This vineyard was surrounded by large gardens belonging to the Fathers of Christian Doctrine, the English Daughters and the Augustinian Sisters of the Congregation. The lease included wells, a stable, a place to keep coaches and a henhouse. So they had no regrets about moving from the rue des Cordiers; they were only ten minutes walk from the Jesuit College of Louis le Grand yet they were able to enjoy a semi-rural existence. Charles Rollin gave his own charming description of the garden:

"I am beginning to feel and appreciate more than ever the rustic life since I acquired a small garden which transforms the house into a country dwelling. I don't have any never-ending avenues which gradually disappear towards the horizon, but I do have two small paths, one of which gives shade under its arbour while the other is sunny for most of the day, with a promise of abundant fruit in the proper season. There are 5 apricot and 10 peach trees. I don't have any beehives but I have the daily joy of seeing bees visiting my blossoms, gathering the sugar and retiring, without doing me any harm at all. But my joy is not complete because when the temperature drops to freezing, I become very concerned about the fate of my beloved blossom and carnations".²

Claude and his poor scholars had plenty of room in the rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne. They had to add to the furniture they had brought with them from the *Gros-Chapelet*, adapt the house to the needs of a community of young clerics and arrange things in such a way that they could accommodate as many men as possible. Everybody joined in the work and the

¹ Marchis de Rocheguide: *"Promenades dans toutes les rues de Paris"*, 1910, pp 91-92.

² Ferté: p. 35 Charles Rollin had the following words engraved above the door of the room where Claude had previously lived: *"Ante alias dilecta domus, qua ruris et urbis incola, tranquillus meque Deoque fruor"*. (The house loved above all things where, living in both the town and the country, I could enjoy peace both for myself and for God).

inhabitants of Faubourg Saint-Victor were often treated to the sight of seminarians carrying planks and whitewash from the quays of the Seine.¹

The ground floor did not need many alterations. It consisted of a large kitchen, a store for wine and foodstuffs and a room that became the refectory. Two large rooms on the ground floor were furnished with desks and transformed into study halls. In the bedrooms, each student had a bed, a trunk, a wardrobe and a curtain, dividing the room from the person next door. There were a few separate rooms. That of Poullart des Places was on the ground floor of the building of M. de Cornoailles, with its door opening directly onto the courtyard.

Space was also found for a chapel, an infirmary, a recreation room and a library. The hen house was retained but as the community had neither carriages nor horses, this area was used for a parlour and a reception office. So with a bit of ingenuity, Claude now had enough room for 70 students, with all the basic amenities they required.

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On June 8th, 1705, in the church of Saint-Etienne in Rennes, his sister, Françoise-Jeanne Poullart des Places married Chevalier Henry Le Chat, the Lord of Vernée and a Councillor of the Parliament of Brittany. Her dowry consisted of 100,000 livres in gold and notes and 10,000 in furniture and gold plate.² The marriage gave at least some consolation to Claude's parents; even if their own family name was to disappear, they would at least have grandchildren who would be members of the nobility.

Claude François was not present for the marriage ceremony. On June 6th, the feast day of his Patron, he received the four minor orders³ in Paris. During the holidays in the following year, he spent some time with his parents and eventually asked them to provide him with a title of security for the priesthood, as laid down by the Council of Trent before a candidate could receive the sub-diaconate. This applied to those who were not in possession of an ecclesiastical benefice.

If he had agreed to it, he could already have been in possession of such a benefice. A certain François Lucas de Saint-Macou, a priest and missionary, had formally resigned from three benefices in Claude's favour, which would have given him an income of 1,800 livres. Quite possibly, his father had already paid something for this "gift". Thomas tells us that he was upset by the extent to which Claude had pushed his pursuit of poverty. He had given his daughter a handsome dowry so it was only fitting that he should do something similar for his son.

But Claude-François would not be drawn into such an arrangement. He forbade his own students from dreaming about lucrative positions in the Church and, as always, he backed up his words with example. He had written to M. de Saint-Nacou, saying: *"I do not wish to avail myself of your benefices so I am returning them to you to dispose of them as you wish"*.

¹ Thomas, p. 274.

² The official act of marriage can be found in Le Floch: p. 487.

³ The four Minor Orders following tonsure; doorkeeper, acolyte, lector and exorcist. Prior to the reform of the liturgy by Vatican II, these orders were essential for those proceeding to the priesthood.

The fact that he had shown his father this reply during the visit to Rennes makes it clear that the latter had played some part in this affair.

Claude refused to receive anything from his parents apart from the 60 livres per year that the Bishop of Rennes insisted upon, even for the poorest seminarians. So an arrangement was made that the 60 livres would come from the income of a rich property owned by his father.

Having obtained all that canon law required, Poullart des Places was able to ask the Bishop of Rennes for dimissorial letters to receive the sub-diaconate, and this order was conferred on him in Paris on December 18th, 1706. The following year, he received the diaconate on March 19th. His dimissorial letters for the priesthood were signed on July 15th by Fr. Perrin, the Vicar General of the Bishop of Rennes, Mgr. de Lavardin, which probably indicates that Claude was once again visiting his parents.

Claude's mother, Jeanne Le Meneust, still aided by Anne-Marie Lamisse du Hingueul, was still in good health but his father was declining. For several years now, there had been worries about him.¹ He was still managing his own affairs, but at a reduced rate. On the other hand, he was one of the most active members of the *Congregation of Gentlemen* that had been established at the Jesuit College under the title of *The Purification of the Blessed Virgin*.² Claude-François was anxious to soften the disappointment he had inflicted on his old father by the particular road to the priesthood he was following.

Claude joined the family once more, this time at the chateau de Vernée for the baptism of Henry Le Chat, the first-born son of his sister. The register of the parish of Chamteussé states that the godfather of this child was "*the noble and distinguished deacon Claude-Poullart, superior of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in Paris*".³ Jeanne Le Meneust was now a grandmother for the first time and had gone to help her daughter.



There was a serious set-back at the start of the new academic year. Jean Le Roy, one of the close collaborators of Claude since 1703, now had an excellent reputation in his diocese of Quimper and his ecclesiastical superiors placed great hopes in him for the future. One of the first decisions of the new bishop of Quimper, Mgr. de Ploeuc de Timeur, was to call him back to Brittany in 1707. Fortunately, as well as Le Barbier and Garnier, there were several other past students of the rue des Cordiers who were ready and willing to share in the running of the community. So Poullart des Places was able to take the time to prepare for ordination to the priesthood, which finally took place on December 17th 1707, by Mgr. Henri de Thiard, the bishop of Meaux and the future Cardinal of Bissy.

It seems unlikely that Claude's first blessing as a priest was to his parents, but he surely took great joy in blessing the young clerics whom God had confided to his care and in celebrating Mass in the little chapel of the community. Most probably, he also celebrated in his favourite chapels in Paris: the chapel of the Black Virgin of Paris, the protector of the

¹ Letter of P. Clemeanceau to F-C Poullart des Places, Minut. Le Hongre, January 25th, 1702.

² Archives d'Ille-et-Vilaine, 3 D 14.

³ From the registry of the parish of Chamteussé (M et L).

community, and the crypt of Notre Dame de Saint-Victor, where his friend, Fr. Simon Gourdan, was the chaplain.

XVI

A RESPONSE TO THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

The foundation of Claude Poullart des Places was not just one of the many communities for poor clerics which grew up at that time; its originality included offering free education to all its students and a length and depth of studies that far surpassed all the others.

1. A free seminary for the poorest.

To gain admission to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, students had to be amongst the poorest of the poor:

“In this house, we shall accept only persons who are known for their poverty ... Nevertheless, it will be permissible to accept a few students who are not in dire poverty as long as they are not sufficiently endowed with goods to pay their way elsewhere. It would be advisable to ask them for a small amount to cover the petty expenses of the house, so that they will not be the cause of a decrease in the number of poorer students who should have preference.”¹

Both before and after his foundation, Claude received no more than 800 livres from his family:

“Although his father was wealthy and very devout, he did not fully approve of the extremes to which his son had gone in practising virtue, so he did not give him more than the usual allowance.”²

Claude’s greatest asset was an unshakable trust in Providence. His work would not have survived or expanded without the gifts of generous people. During the unsettled period at the end of the reign of Louis XIV, a great deal of faith and trust was needed by anybody who was foolish enough to take 70 impoverished seminarians under his wing. M. Leschassier wrote that it was very difficult to make ends meet at that time, especially for communities which were housing poor clerics.

The fact that the disciples of Poullart were following the lectures of the Jesuits put off many would-be benefactors. Fr. Delamarre, the parish priest of Saint-Benoît, had a great love for the poor and lived very poorly himself. In his affluent Parisian parish, he would have had no trouble finding plenty of funding, but he was too attached to the views of Jansenists and Gallicanists to steer such resources in the direction of the “*Placites*”!³ Cardinal de Noailles only gave help to people of the locality and Fr. Dorsanne, the most important of his vicars, had no time for the scholars of Des Places whom he referred to as the “offspring” of the Jesuits.

¹ “*Rules for the Community*”, Koren p. 167.

² Thomas, p. 272.

³ “*Placites*” – a pejorative name applied to the disciples of Claude Poullart des Places.

But the Jesuits were not without friends. Even apart from feast days, their college had plenty of visitors, most of whom parked their carriages in the rue des Poirées. This also helped the scholars who lived in the *Gros-Chapelet*; we know from the “*Règlements*” that the house was open to benefactors who wished to enter “*for charitable reasons and to be edified*”.¹

Claude Poullart would never have been able to increase the number of students he cared for from 12 to 70 without the support of generous friends. But the only such benefactors that we know by name were members of the Gorge d’Antraisgues family.

Pierre Gorge, the Seigneur of d’Antraisgues, was the son of a rich merchant of Rennes. He himself acquired a large fortune through various lucrative posts and he entered the ranks of the nobility by being made a Secretary to the King. In 1685, he married his second wife, Julie d’Etampes, a niece of the Maréchal de Luxembourg. The writer Boileau, who had been his neighbour at Auteuil, was one of his closest friends. He was also very close to the Jesuits. He now lived at the Clos de l’abbaye Sainte-Geneviève and several times a day, he would have seen the poor clerics of the rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne filing past his windows.

On May 27th, 1707, the fourth anniversary of the foundation of the Community of the Holy Spirit, Pierre Gorge ceded to Poullart the interest on a substantial debt owed to him by his nephew. On the same day, his eldest son, Chretien-François, who was a councillor at the Parliament of Paris, transferred a substantial income from different investments to the Superior of the poor scholars. On August 20th of the same year, Poullart purchased a plot of land in the Faubourg Saint-Marcel. He was quick to point out that he was not the real owner, but had simply “*lent his name*” to Pierre d’Antraisgues, his friend and benefactor.

As a last resort, Poullart des Places could always turn to Fr. Simon Gourdan for help. This saintly man frequently urged those he directed to be generous to the poor and he received considerable alms from donors for distribution to the needy. If he had wanted, he could have relieved his young friend, Claude, from all his financial worries, but he loved people as saints should love. His own sister lived in straightened circumstances, but he gave her nothing from his funds: “*One day, he explained that he loved her too much to deprive her of the rewards of evangelical poverty*”.² But everything indicates that, up to his death, he was always ready to come to the help of the poor scholars of the Holy Spirit if all else failed.

2. The influence of the Jesuits

One of the most enduring characteristics of the Community of the Holy Spirit was its dependence on the Jesuits. Without their endorsement, it would never have seen the light of day; without their support, it would soon have disappeared. This dependence was written into the Rule of the Community. The Spiritans went twice a day to the lectures on philosophy or theology at Louis-le-Grand. The Rule laid down that they had to choose a

¹ Koren p. 169: “*Règlement, no. 19: No woman is allowed to set foot in the house on any pretext whatsoever, except for benefactors who wish to enter for reasons of charity and edification*”.

² “*La Vie du Père Simon Gourdan*”, op. cit. p. 52.

Jesuit confessor so it was in their chapel that they received the Sacrament of Penance.¹ The eight-day annual retreat at the start of the academic year had to be preached by a Jesuit, and one of the duties of the cook was to go *“to the Reverend Jesuit Fathers for the leftovers which they are kind enough to give us”*.²

The Jansenists were disgusted with this threefold dependence of the Spiritan students on the Jesuits - intellectual, spiritual and material. They referred to them as the “sucking babes” of the Jesuits, whereas the students themselves were proud to be identified as the sons of the Company of Jesus.

Concern for the poor had always been part of the Jesuit tradition, but the attitude of the University of Paris towards Louis-le-Grand was a further reason why the Jesuits encouraged the initiative of Poullart des Places. Apart from the Spiritans, the number of students attending their theology lectures had been reduced to the Jesuit scholastics and a small number from elsewhere - no more than 100 in all. This was very small compared to the numbers they had had in the past, so the arrival of the Spiritan students was more than welcomed by the Jesuits.

Less than five years after their establishment in the rue des Cordiers, there were as many Spiritan students in the philosophy and theology faculties of the College as there were Jesuits. The enemies of the Jesuits were far from pleased by this increase in numbers at Louis-le-Grand resulting from the Spiritan presence.

The Jansenists showed their disdain when giving their own version of the origins of those they referred to as “Placites”:

“When somebody speaks of a ‘Placite’, he is talking about something worse than a Jesuit, if that were possible! We all know that the Jesuits were terrified when they saw their colleges being abandoned, but now they have found a way to reverse the situation: having brain-washed a certain M. Desplaces, they encouraged him to buy a residence and take in students on condition that they would only attend the lectures of the Jesuits. If one of these students went elsewhere, he would be expelled from their Community, where the members were only allowed to believe or listen to what the Jesuits were teaching”.³

The Sorbonne University realised that the rapid development of the Spiritans was a boost to the prestige of their enemies. This attitude became evident when the disciples of Poullart des Places were trying to get registration for their establishment through *Patent Letters* from King Louis XIV in 1726. As it concerned a community of students, the University was consulted; their advice was to insist that the Spiritans study only in their own schools.⁴ Fortunately, this advice was not followed.

Cardinal de Noailles, the overseer of the Sorbonne, also tried to prise the students of the rue des Cordiers away from the Jesuits. But in 1762, Mgr. de Beaumont, the second

¹ Koren p. 165: *“Rule no. 4: The spiritual direction of the house will be in the hands of the Jesuit Fathers. No one may chose any other confessor...”*

² Koren, p. 215, rule 227.

³ Letter to M. Becquet, p. 36.

⁴ Arch. C.S.Sp., Dossier Le Balgüe.

successor of Cardinal de Noailles, looked again at the arguments of Poullart des Places when he addressed the Parliament which had expelled the Jesuits from their college in the rue Saint-Jacques and which wanted to force the Seminary of the Holy Spirit to send their students to the University for their studies. He said:

“The particular aim of this seminary is to train young clerics to be detached from the goods of this world and prepare them to go wherever their bishops send them; their preference will be to choose the most difficult places and the most abandoned posts, in short, the tasks for which it is most difficult to find workers.

The success and continuation of this excellent work depends, above all, on the directors following a policy that dates back to the beginnings of their institute and, in a sense, is their fundamental rule: that no student will be admitted or retained who aspires to gaining degrees in philosophy or theology. The directors communicate this basic spirit of the Institute to their scholars – to eschew all lucrative and prestigious appointments and to devote themselves to the most obscure and demanding works, such as teaching the Gospel to the rural poor, to the sick in hospital, to soldiers and to the pagans in the New World.

It is obvious that priests destined for such works have no need of degrees, and to force them in that direction would be to destroy the very nature of such an edifying and useful Institute. Self-love, flattered by the honour that goes with academic titles, and ambition, boosted by the privileges that are attached to them, would soon corrupt these young men into forming plans for aggrandisement and wealth, an aim that is diametrically opposed to the primary purpose of their formation.

It is no less evident that they could start thinking along those lines if they were obliged to pursue their theological and philosophical studies at the University. It would attract many subjects to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, armed no doubt with excellent testimonials, whose only ambition would be to decorate themselves with degrees. This would make it difficult for the Seminary to welcome those students whose sole ambition is to prepare for ordination and serve in the hardest and most difficult postings”.¹

Such a plea could not easily be rejected. If the University saw itself as “a nest of eagles”, so many of its ‘eaglets’, garlanded with degrees and flying off to the provinces, would dream of nothing but lucrative benefices which were worthy of their immense knowledge, gliding disdainfully over the humble poor in the rural parishes.

At least this cardinal had got the message!

The University, hoping to curtail the influence of the Jesuits, refused to give even a diploma to the students of Louis-le-Grand, but it seems that Poullart des Places, in sending his students exclusively to Louis-le-Grand was deliberately choosing a formation programme which would not lead to degrees, licentiates or doctorates.

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¹ B.N.Ms. Fond Jolly de Fleury...390, dossier 4,462.

In the Jesuit college, the philosophy course lasted for three years. The first was for Logic, the second Physics and Moral and the third for Metaphysics, Mathematics and a final revision of the whole course. In practice, the third year was followed only by the Jesuit students and a few Spiritans.

“There were two hours of lectures each day, one in the morning, the other in the afternoon. At the end of the lecture, the final quarter of an hour was given over to questions from the students. Lectures in Logic, Metaphysics and Moral were given in Latin. They were almost entirely dictated and the students’ notes were checked over by the professors. Most days, there was also a tutorial conducted by the lecturer; two or three students would give a summary of the recent lectures so as to clarify the contents. At the “disputatio”, theses were expounded by a defendant in syllogistic form and another student would orally attack what had been said. This gave the opportunity to assess the intelligence of the young philosophers. These disputes were aimed at sharpening their minds, giving prompt replies to objections, deepening their understanding of the teaching and assurance in their oral delivery. Politeness and respect were always insisted upon in these debates.

On Saturdays, the tutorials, known as “Sabbatines”, looked back at the theses that had been studied during the week. Each month, there was a gathering entitled the “Menstruale” which all the staff of the college were invited to attend. Once a year, there were public debates, when the most brilliant students would defend the thesis that had been taught during that year; anybody was free to attack them”.¹

Members of the public were invited to these annual intellectual joustings – clergy, members of the Court, legal experts and other educated persons.

Theological studies normally lasted for four years, and all the students attended the same lectures on a rotation system. Two professors taught dogmatic theology, one in the morning, the other in the afternoon and their didactic methods were the same as those teaching philosophy. There was also a chair of Sacred Scripture and a chair of Moral Theology or ‘Cases of Conscience’. The professor of Sacred Scripture was normally also the professor of Hebrew. Unless they showed no aptitude, theology students had to follow a course in Hebrew in the second and third year. But there was no chair of Canon Law because that came under Moral Theology.

3. Encouragement and close supervision of studies

For the Spiritan students, the lectures at Louis-le-Grand were followed up and completed not just by personal study but by a whole series of conferences, tutorials and other aids. According to the Rule of Poullart des Places, there were three tutors living in their Seminary – one for theology, one for philosophy and a third for Scripture. The theology tutor gave at least eleven tutorials a week while the one in charge of philosophy gave six.² But their duties did not stop there:

“The tutor from time to time will visit the Professors of Theology at the College to enquire about his students.

¹ Delattre : *“Les établissements des Jésuites en France »*, col. 1181.

² Rule 51

“He will appoint students to defend theses (in scholastic debates) and also indicate those who will argue against them.

He will be present at the public defence of theses.

Every day, he will devote some time to those who are having difficulties with their studies.

The Rule has some special guidelines for the tutor of Sacred Scripture:

“He will give one tutorial of three quarters of an hour every Sunday and Holy Day. He will begin by explaining or having someone else explain the Scriptures word by word. If the passages are of a controversial nature, he will give the different opinions of the Fathers of the Church and scripture scholars. He will draw a moral lesson, following the most reliable authorities, from the points he has expounded. He will reply to the difficulties raised and will question the students as he thinks fit”.¹

Despite the prominence given to the teaching of dogmatic theology, moral theology was in no way neglected. On the contrary, it was seen as essential for future priests who would be administering the sacrament of Penance, above all because their ministry would take them to many isolated places. Cases of conscience would be given to the senior students for their consideration and would be examined subsequently in a conference.²

The Rule also stressed the importance of the study of plain chant and liturgy, as well as preaching and catechises. The academic progress of the seminarians was frequently examined: *“The students will be examined each year at the end of Lent and July. This will also include an assessment of their conduct. The Superior shall dismiss those who have not given satisfaction and who are showing no signs of possible progress in the future.”³*

Claude Poullart did not hesitate to sanction those who did not reach the required standard, but he made a point of praising and encouraging the better students. No doubt remembering the *Grand Acte* that he had defended at Rennes in his earlier years, he appreciated the value of the end of year *Theses*. He made sure that their poverty did not prevent the more able students from taking part in these exercises; the Rule stated that the Seminary would meet the expenses of those who were put forward and this was observed up to the death of Claude.

4. Following the genuine teaching of the Catholic Church

Having completed their studies in philosophy and theology for six or seven years, students were offered the possibility of spending a further two years of study in the community. As the Rule stated, *“They shall spend two years in the study of moral theology and Canon Law, in which they are permitted to take a degree”.*⁴ As there were no specific courses in Canon Law at Louis-le-Grand, the Spiritans studied it at one of the Colleges of the University.⁵ As a

¹ Rules 51 and 131-137.

² Rule 48.

³ Rule no. 10.

⁴ Rule no. 11.

⁵ Probably, the College at Beauvais.

rule, the Baccalaureate took fifteen months and the Licence three whole years. But students who were over 24 when they applied were not bound by these requirements.

This freedom to graduate in Canon Law that Poullart extended to his students calls for a further precision of his overall plan. In the Memorandum later submitted to Parliament by Mgr. de Beaumont shortly after the suppression of the Jesuits, it was stated that the policy of students of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit renouncing the possibility of qualifications in philosophy and theology was a “custom” that dated back to the foundation of this establishment and so should be regarded “*as a fundamental rule*”. However, there is no such rule in the text of the *Règlements*; it was rather a custom. But as every student applying to enter the Seminary agreed that he would study philosophy and theology at Louis-le-Grand, this was a de facto renunciation of any graduation.

However, when Claude Poullart insisted that his students follow the courses offered by the Jesuits it was not primarily to escape the temptation of degrees. If his own personal choice in 1701 had been to forego a Licence or Doctorate, there was nothing to stop him attending the University, as all students there were free to take degrees or not as they wished. But above all, he opted for the Jesuit College because he wanted to be sure of receiving an orthodox doctrine, untainted by either Jansenism or Gallicanism. He wanted to share with his students what he had considered to be the best for himself,. As the fundamental spirit of his foundation was “*to fly from lucrative and prestigious ecclesiastical appointments*”, the impossibility of receiving any qualifications struck him as an additional advantage, a happy consequence of his original choice.

But Claude Poullart was determined that his students should not be lacking in anything when they presented themselves to their bishops to serve the most abandoned of people, so he had nothing against them attending university courses and accepting a degree once their basic formation was completed. In the Faculty of Law, the expenses were far less than those of Theology. They even offered free places “*to some students whose talents, attitudes and application to studies were well known but who lacked the necessary financial backing to advance*”.¹ Moreover, by virtue of the Concordat of 1516, students could not be accepted for a vacant benefice if they had not studied “*in one of the well-known universities of France*”.

Throughout the 18th century, the reason why the civil and religious authorities insisted on the Spiritans studying at the University was simply to remove them from the harmful influence of the Jesuits. The successors of Poullart had to be practical rather than dogmatic. They simply stressed that although degrees were necessary for the future work of their students, they must never lose sight of the ideals which gave the specific character to their training in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. According to the Sulpician priest Fr. Grandet, it was “*to educate students in the pure doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church*” that Poullart des Places had started his work in the first place.²

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¹ “*Tableau de le ville de Paris*” 1760, quoted by Le Floch, p. 341.

² “*Le Vie de Messire Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort*”, Nantes, 1724, p. 563.

It was impossible for Claude to help all the poor clerics who turned to him, so he looked for those who were most likely to acquire both knowledge and virtue. He used to say that if he had doubts about the blind zeal of a priest who was pious but ignorant, he also feared for the faith and obedience to the Church of a priest who was intelligent but lacking in virtue. When the Spiritan students listened to the readings from the works of Fr. Verjus during meals, they could easily identify where Poullart had first come across these ideas. This letter from Fr. Michel Le Nobletz to a group of students had made a lasting impression on Claude:

“You must lead your lives in such a way that your academic studies are not an obstacle to your growth in virtue... It would be difficult to find a more suitable place than a religious community for focusing on two such different aims, essential for future ministers of God. I feel sorry for the many young men who make great progress in their studies without advancing in those things that would benefit their souls, simply because they do not live in places where the ambiance encourages both intellectual and spiritual growth. But I also feel sorry for those who live in the fear and love of God yet will never fulfil their potential because they lack the necessary knowledge and means to accomplish it.

“Do not attempt spiritual direction or other things which concern the common good until you have acquired these two qualities. How much harm can be done to the soul of an intelligent man if he lacks wisdom and piety; but piety without doctrine and zeal without knowledge will do great harm to the whole Church!

Worldly wisdom, without a sensitive conscience, can lead to pride and a catastrophic fall, while a spirituality which is slow and melancholic and not backed up by knowledge is easy prey to the illusions of the Evil One, who, taking on the guise of an angel of light, can easily trick the ignorant, especially, those who only have trust in themselves. There are some ecclesiastics who are almost incapable of carrying out their ministerial duties because of their lack of knowledge. But there are others who, despite their intellectual prowess, are quite unable to teach other people; this lacuna, along with their attachment to the things of this world, makes them useless, for example, for teaching catechism to young children or giving spiritual guidance to those in their care. They may be learned, but they are also blind and are incapable of resisting those temptations which assail them each day with increasing ferocity and which inevitably lead to complete disaster.”¹

6. The mystique of poverty

In his vision of priestly and apostolic holiness, Claude emphasised one virtue more than all others – that of spiritual poverty. In founding a seminary for poor men who would evangelise the poor, this son of one of the leading business men of Rennes convinced his disciples that *“indifference is the springboard to perfection for one who wishes to follow in the steps of Jesus Christ”*.² For him, poverty is the cardinal virtue for a priest; it frees him from the love of money and honours and makes him totally available to the plans of his superiors, willing to accept the poorest of parishes or to go to the ends of the earth if that is what the Church wishes.

¹ *Gallia Christiana*, Vol. VII, col. 1043, p. 25.

² Allenou de la Ville-Angevin: Règlements ... p. 24.

As we saw earlier, Fr. de Chanciergues, a forerunner of Claude, was thinking of the most abandoned souls when he elaborated his plan to help the poor clerical scholars. He set up his “small communities” with a conviction that only the poor would be willing to work in poor parishes, so their period of training would have to take place in an ambiance of poverty, otherwise they might develop a taste for the good life:

“If these poor students are trained in one of the large seminaries, where they would be much better fed than in their own homes, they could grow accustomed to a life of self-indulgence. They might lose any interest in devoting themselves to poor parishes where their income would be minimal and the good wine, white bread, beef and mutton of the seminary were nothing but a distant memory.”

But if they are trained in the small communities, *“a good meal would consist of onion soup, a piece of lard, plain bread and a jug of water ... and they would be happy with a small parish with an income of two or three hundred livres, because they would be better off there than in their family home”*.

His motivations were undoubtedly good, but the means employed simply forced the poor clerics to practise virtue out of compulsion.

The vision of Poullart des Places went much further and much deeper. He was not content to put a roof over the students’ heads and feed them on onion soup: he made himself totally responsible for these young men throughout the period of their training. He did not share the belief that an adequate menu and relative comfort would stop them devoting their lives to neglected and obscure apostolates. For him, poverty was above all a virtue, even a cardinal virtue for the life and work of a priest.

And in fact, this ideal was accepted by practically all the students who presented themselves at the door of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. Those nursing lofty ambitions would soon abandon an institute from which students would finally emerge with no university qualifications.

The community rule has no chapter on poverty as such, but there are indications throughout of an atmosphere of mortification and detachment. Here, for example, are a few quotations from the section dealing with meals:

“In order to ensure greater uniformity in the house, the superior shall not be served more than the others. Both categories shall gladly regard themselves as poor people to whom Providence offers the food that is presented in the refectory”. (Rule no. 67)

“Each shall be satisfied with whatever is served and shall not seek anything better. God has given us the sense of taste that we might nourish ourselves, not for the sake of flattering our sensuality. One who enjoys the things of the spirit is no longer so demanding and hard to please as regards his body”. (Rule no. 70)

“A person who is even a little mortified, as everyone should be in this house, accepts whatever is placed before him. Everything is good enough for him when he remembers that his God was only given gall and vinegar to drink”. (Rule no. 77)

Poullart des Places knew from experience how a book can transform a person’s life. During his last years, Fr. Jean Maillard, who died at Louis-le-Grand in 1702, had written the life of

Mlle. de Bellère whom he had directed. This holy women, whom God had led along some amazing paths, had practised an heroic devotion to the poor psychiatric cases at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris and, later, to the poor and sick people of Anjou. This biography was not printed until 1732, under the title of *“The triumph of Poverty and humiliations, or The Life of Mademoiselle de Bellère du Tronchay, otherwise known as Sister Louise”*. Poullart des Places had known this book in manuscript form and he made a copy of it to inspire his students with a love of poverty.¹

But no book or exhortation had as great an influence on the students as Claude’s own daily example. Unlike many other directors of small communities, he was not content simply to devote himself to the poor students; in all simplicity, he became one of them, sharing every aspect of their lives and observing the same rule. *“He took his turn in the washing up and cleaned the shoes of the students”*.² He only agreed to be their superior so that he could serve them better.



This comparison may help us to appreciate the scope of the work of Poullart des Places. At the start of the 18th century, there were 70 students studying theology at Saint-Sulpice who paid 400 livres in fees and most of them were only there for 18 months.³ The Seminary of the Holy Spirit looked after the same number of students without any charge and their courses lasted from 8 to 9 years.

Because of their commitment to spiritual poverty, which was their most distinguishing characteristic, the Spiritan priests were *“ready for anything, not just accepting but preferring the most obscure and demanding positions, for which the Church had difficulty in finding workers - like chaplains in hospitals and those involved in the evangelisation of the poor and even of the infidel”*.⁴

So the training the Spiritan students received exceeded that of the other small communities for its thoroughness, despite the fact that they paid no fees at all. Claude had no intention of skimping on the preparation of these future priests so as to produce honest labourers for the Lord’s vineyard as quickly as possible; he wanted to produce apostles fully qualified for the work that lay ahead, however long it took. For him, the souls of the poor were just as valuable as those of the most powerful noblemen.⁵

¹ This copy is preserved in the Mazarine library, the one-time library of Cardinal Mazarin in Paris.

² Thomas: p. 274.

³ Taken from the register of the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice.

⁴ From the Latin Rules.

⁵ Thomas p. 269.

XVII

A HOUSE OF CHARITY, CRADLE OF A GREAT CONGREGATION

The work of Poullart des Places would never have seen the light of day without the agreement of the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal de Noailles. He was a Doctor of the Faculty of Paris and overseer of the Sorbonne and Navarre universities and he had great reservations about the Fathers of the Company of Jesus; he would certainly have preferred professors of philosophy and theology for the Spiritan students who were not Jesuits and he said this publicly. But he did not insist too much; above all, he was delighted to see that the new foundation, with its total availability to the needs of the poor, was answering some of his most worrying concerns regarding the pastoral apostolate of his diocese. In October 1696, in his *“Instructions for the Tonsure”*, the Cardinal had vigorously and bitterly denounced the cupidity of so many of his clergy, who were making the Church into *“a den of thieves”*:

“What greater insult is there to God than to claim to have taken Him as one’s heritage while searching all the time for personal enrichment? It is shameful for the Church to be served by ministers who give scandal rather than edification; in making themselves despicable, they also bring the whole of their ministry into disrepute. Is there any greater injustice than inflicting clerics on the Church who steal its money for scandalous and profane ends while neglecting the poor to whom this money really belongs?”¹

At the same time, the Cardinal asked King Louis XIV for *Patent Letters* for a small seminary of poor students. He pointed out that it was needed to prepare ministers for the humble works of the Church which at present were *“in the care of clerics, most of whom fell short of what the people expected of them”*.²

He ruled that every candidate for ordination should spend several months in one of the five seminaries he had officially designated in a decision of June 30th, 1696. But he was so satisfied with the training being received by the students of Poullart des Places that they were exempt from any further period of preparation. This gesture proved to be very important because it influenced the attitude of the other Prelates of the Kingdom.³

The new community of the Holy Spirit was linked so closely to the College of Louis-le-Grand that it attracted a similar hatred from the enemies of the Jesuits. It was decided to strangle this new baby at birth! The Cardinal’s feelings about the Jesuits were well known so these people thought they would receive his support, but they were to be disappointed because

¹ Cardinal de Noailles: *“Recueil des mandements, ordonnances, instructions et lettres pastorales”*. Paris, 1718, p. 30.

² This was for the work founded by Fr. de Chanciergues, mentioned earlier. Later, it evolved into the Séminaire Saint-Louis.

³ Arch. C.S.Sp.: Dossier Lebègue, sheet no. 10.

he held Poullart in such high esteem: *"As long as God is being served by this work, I will never destroy it"*.¹

By an edict of December, 1666, Louis XIV had laid down rigorous conditions for the establishment of new communities in his kingdom:

"It is our wish that in future, no new colleges, monasteries, secular or religious communities should be established in any town or place of our kingdom without our express permission through patent letters, duly registered in our parliamentary courts... Any monasteries or communities set up without first receiving our patent letters, duly registered, will be excluded from ever obtaining them."

Taken literally, this decree forbade the founding of any new religious communities. But the King made it clear that this did not apply to seminaries and, from the start, the work for poor scholars fitted perfectly *"the idea of a seminary according to the Council of Trent, the Assemblies of Clergy, provincial councils of France and the royal decrees"*.² But Claude Poullart was in no hurry to adopt officially the title of "seminary"; a decree of the Council of State stressed that the seminaries *"came under the jurisdiction of the Archbishops and Bishops in all things; they were to be governed and administered by secular priests of their choosing."* The Archbishops and Bishops had the right to accept or expel students and to appoint directors, bursars, professors and other officials for the running of the seminary.

At this time, when the Jansenists were making great inroads into the Archdiocese of Paris, Claude Poullart, while recognising the good intentions of this legislation, felt it would be prudent to renounce the status of "seminary" for fear of what it could lead to in the future. Some of the documents that have been preserved show just how prudent he was. In official acts, such as his clerical title, his dimissorial letters and even the contract for the house in rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne, he always used the title *"Ecclesiastic"* to describe himself. In the last months of his life, he used to write, *"A very unworthy priest"* under his signature. Apart from the baptismal register of his nephew, mentioned earlier, he used the title of superior of an institution. In the Rules of the community, he gives no title to the new work; he simply talks of "the house" and "the students", but he never uses the words "Seminary" or "Seminarians". He also deliberately avoided the term "community": at one point in the Rule, he was half way through writing "community" when he scratched it out and simply wrote "house" in its place.³

As a former student of law, he took great care with his vocabulary so as to protect the foundation from the draconian measures of the Edict of 1666, never giving the impression that he was setting up a canonical seminary. This caution proved to be invaluable in the years to come. Of necessity, they talked less of the "House" of the poor students than the "Community of M. Poullart", or even, "The Community of the Holy Spirit". Charles Lebègue, a priest of the parish of Saint-Medard,⁴ left a considerable amount of money to "the

¹ Ibid. sheet no. 11.

² Arch. C.S.Sp., Procès Labaigue, sheet no. 11.

³ Rule no. 125.

⁴ This church is in the rue Mouffetard, close to to the spiritan house in the rue Lhomond.

Community of the Holy Spirit". When he eventually died in 1726, the successors of Claude Poullart were unable to receive the legacy because of the Edict of 1666, so they quickly asked King Louis XV for Patent Letters of "confirmation" (not establishment"). The request stated that *"the said Claude-François Poullart des Places, moved by the spirit of God, had begun, in 1703, an establishment consecrated to the Holy Spirit, under the invocation of the Virgin conceived without sin"*.

The king duly signed the letters, but the heirs of Fr. Lebègue opposed registration by Parliament as follows:

"According to itself, the Community of the Holy Spirit was established in 1703 and therefore, for the last 23 years, it has been incapable of being approved by the Prince under the terms of the Edict of 1666. So the legacy left to this Community cannot be enforced by law".¹

The report to this argument shows clearly the juridical situation of the foundation of Poullart des Places - that it was nothing more than "a work of charity":

"A zealous clergyman feeds and supports some Poor Scholars by his own alms and those of the faithful. Is it being claimed that Patent Letters are necessary before somebody can look after the poor, clothe the naked and give drink to the thirsty and food to the hungry? ... Such actions do not come under the Edict of 1666, which prohibits the setting up of new bodies and communities ... In 1703, it was neither one nor the other. This charitable priest and the poor scholars whom he fed were neither a 'body' nor a 'community'; they possessed no common property ...

"If it is claimed that these poor Scholars along with those who support them merit the title of "the Community of the Holy Spirit" because of the inspiration given to this good priest to look after them, one can reply that it is not by the name that such things should be judged but by the substance".²

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But the house on rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne was, in fact, not just a seminary according to the mind of the Council of Trent but also the initial foundations of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.

After his "great conversion", Poullart des Places had thought seriously about devoting his life to the foreign missions; but it soon became obvious to him that his provisional commitment to the poor students now had to become his life's vocation. After its foundation, his work developed so quickly that by the end of 1704 it had become a flourishing community. To strengthen the administrative side, he had invited Michel Le Barbier and Jacques Garnier to be his associates. He had also chosen Pierre Caris *"to be a member of his community and an associate in the government of the seminarians"*.³

¹ *"Claim by the descendants of Fr. Charles Lebègue against the Superiors and Directors of the so-called 'Community of Students' which today bears the name of 'The Seminary of the Holy Spirit, under the invocation of the Virgin conceived without sin' ". Paris, 1727, sheet no 8.*

² Idem, sheet no, 7

³ *"Registre des Associez", pp. 1 and 2.*

So would it be correct to regard these “*associations*” as the beginning of a real congregation? If one studies the oldest documents which have come down to us, this tradition amongst the Spiritans is obviously well founded: that Poullart des Places was not just the founder of a seminary, but also the initiator of a new religious family.

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When talking of meals, the Rule that Claude wrote for the community says the following:

*“Neither praise nor criticism should be directed at what has been prepared for the meal. It is unworthy of a true Christian to think too much about these things or to speak or complain about them. It reveals a lack of mortification in a religious or cleric who falls into this habit”*¹

In the original manuscript preserved in the General Archives of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, the word “religious” has been crossed out. What did Poullart des Places have in mind when he originally wrote the word? In his memoirs, Pierre Thomas said: “*Claude had initially planned to train not priests but religious who would practise rigorous penances if God called them to the cloister*”. But it seems that this was just an early plan, probably prior to the opening of the house in the rue des Cordiers, and certainly before the drawing up of the Rule.

Could it have been an allusion to the missionaries that Claude had promised to his friend Grignon de Montfort? Perhaps, but more likely, it refers to his “associates” of that time and in the years to come. There are two other articles of the Rule which would seem to confirm this hypothesis - those which concern the tailor and the cook (nos. 221 and following):

“The tailor may not work for anyone apart from those living in the house ... He will make the clothes of all the students ... On no pretext whatsoever may he demand any payment from them.”

It was also the tailor’s duty to sweep the rooms, the staircase, the study and the recreation halls. Both he and the cook had to be present for morning prayers, which lasted for 30 minutes, for evening prayers and, unless it was impossible, for the period of spiritual reading. Daily Mass was obligatory and they had to receive the blessed sacrament once a fortnight. Finally, they were encouraged to “*confess to one of the confessors of the house*”, in other words, to a Jesuit from Louis-le-Grand”.

So these celibates, who devoted at least an hour and a half each day to spiritual exercises, sound very much like members of a community. Later on, when the work was officially recognised after the death of Poullart, the tailor was referred to as “*Brother Tailor*”.² But for the moment, it would have been imprudent to speak of Brothers or Religious, or refer to Communities, Rules or Vows.

Since the start of the XVII century, the bishops of France, had not been in favour of the founding of new Congregations. They saw the taking of solemn vows as a limitation placed on their own authority. Even simple vows (which at that time were regarded as private) seem to have been an obstacle for gaining approval. For example, the Rule of the “*Priests of*

¹ Rule no. 73.

² “*Notre Frère Tailleur*”. This title appears in a letter from Brother Pottier, a student in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, dated 24th March, 1750. Arch M-E V. 508.

the Mission" (the Vincentians) only talks of 'simple' vows, but nevertheless, St. Vincent de Paul had great difficulty in obtaining endorsement for his foundation. In 1647, he wrote to his representative in Rome: "*We have had great difficulty in getting our Institute recognised because the Prelates do not want us to be religious*".¹ So to avoid these difficulties with bishops, most of the founders gave up the idea of their members taking vows.

At the same time, the Agents of the King were strongly enforcing the Edict of 1666. This is well illustrated by what happened to a community of medical brothers, founded in Canada by M. Charron, a contemporary of Poullart des Places. On June 30th, 1707, Chancellor Phélypeaux of Pontchartrain wrote to the founder:

"The King is happy to continue giving 1,000 livres to the hospital of Montreal ... His Majesty is satisfied with the way you are running this hospital, but he has instructed me to inform you that in no way does he agree that your co-founders should take vows nor should they be given statutes, habits or the title of 'Brothers'. In other words, His Majesty would disband them rather than allow the setting up of a convent or community. I am asking you to conform with the wishes of His Majesty. Keep me informed as to what you are doing".²

The following year, the Governor of Canada was even more explicit:

"We forbid the said Hospitalers to take vows and we declare invalid those they may take in the future, being contrary to the wishes of His Majesty and the said 'Patent Letters' of the foundation of the General Hospital; they are not allowed to wear habits, black hoods, silk belts or the Rabat. We simply permit them to live in community, according to the above mentioned Patent Letters".

So it is understandable why Poullart des Places proceeded with such caution; it was not just the scruples of a young lawyer. His congregation would only be finally recognised after prolonged ups and downs. It was on January 22nd, 1731, that Parliament agreed to register the royal Patent Letter, and only on condition that the community be governed according to the statutes and rules drawn up by the superiors and directors, and presented to the Archdiocese for examination and approval.³

To fulfil these civil requirements, a document was produced entitled: "*Regulae et Constitutiones Seminarii et Communitatis Sancti Spiritus sub tutela Beatae Mariae Virginis sine macula conceptae*".⁴ It was approved in its entirety by Archbishop de Vintimille, the successor of Cardinal de Noailles. This 15-page manuscript states unambiguously that the organism recognised by King Louis XV, under the title "*Communauté et Séminaire du Saint-Esprit*", does not refer directly to the 'Work for poor students' but to the Ecclesiastical Institution of diocesan right for the formation of its directors. The document also helps us to

¹ *Lettres de Saint Vincent de Paul, Paris 1882, Volume I, p. 224*. See also the note of M. Faillon on the reluctance of the bishops in the XVII century to confide seminaries to religious, in "*Vie de M. Olier*", Paris 1873, Vol III, pp. 264-275.

² Documents quoted by His Eminence Cardinal Tisserant in an unpublished study on the legacy of Saint Louis Grignon de Montfort, pp. 120-121.

³ Arch. C.S.Sp, Dossier "*Lebègue, document no. 19*."

⁴ A copy of this document can be found in the National Archives of France (M 200) in the handwriting of M. Bouic.

get a better understanding of Poullart's thoughts, because if the "*Regulae*", from one point of view, are no more than a Latin version of the "*Règlements généraux et particuliers*", they are nevertheless a codification of the practices prior to 1709. Its editors certainly did not neglect the lessons learnt from their experiences so far, both as regards the government of the Seminary and the practice of community life.¹ They show clearly their fidelity to the traditions of the founder by adding the following paragraph which talks of the Superior:

"Sine consultorum consensus in usibus receptis nihil immutet, nec sub praetextu majoris etiam boni novos inducat". ("He will change nothing regarding the customs without the approval of his counsellors: even under the pretext of a greater good, he will introduce no innovations").

In a passage which is not an integral part of the Latin Rule, the editors make a solemn request to those who will come after them:

*"Postquam autem Regulas et Statuta nostra exposuimus, fratres et successores nostros obsecramus in Domino, ut pios usus quos plerosque a piissimae memoriae Claudio Francisco Poullart des Places, sacerdote ac institutore nostro accepimus, stodiose retineant ».*² (*"Having drawn up our constitutions, we beg our brothers and successors in the Lord to preserve carefully the pious customs which, for the most part, we have received from Claude-François Poullart des Places, priest, and our founder of sacred memory"*).

All the documents make it clear that, apart from juridical approval, the official recognition introduced no important changes to the life of the Community of the Holy Spirit. The confirmation of the Patent Letters says explicitly that it applies to the establishment of M. Poullart des Places and that the said establishment should continue to be governed in the way it has been up to the present day.³

The first page of the *Register of Assemblies and Deliberations*⁴ tells us that on June 4th, 1732, Frs. Bouic, Caris, Thomas, David and Foisset ...

"... came together both to obtain Patent Letters and for the administration and education of the Poor Scholars confided to their care ... They decided, subsequent to being granted Patent Letters, that they would draw up an act of association between themselves in the form of a civil contract. This would be entered in a register for themselves and for those who would follow".

The 'Registre des Associez', started on March 4th, 1734, was drawn up based on "*an older register*" dating back to the time of Poullart des Places. It states that M. Bouic was elected superior in March, 1710, "*having already exercised this function*" and that M. Caris, "*chosen*" by Fr. des Places himself to be a member of the said Community and Seminary, had exercised the role of first assistant up to that point.

¹ A copy of the approval of the "*Regulae*" by Archbishop de Vintimille can be found in Le Floch, p. 546.

² This text appears in Le Floch, p. 546.

³ Le Floch, pp. 522-525.

⁴ *Régistre des Assemblées et Délibérations*, Archives Nationales (A.N.), M. 200.

After the re-election of M. Bouic, his confreres asked him “to continue to govern them as he had been doing since his authorisation by Cardinal de Noailles, Archbishop of Paris in the month of March, 1710”.¹ So when a new person was received into the Community, he promised to follow not only the *Constitutions* approved by Cardinal de Noailles but also the *Règlements* and the customs laid down, for the most part, by Poullart des Places.

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The closeness of the *Latin Rules* to the *Constitutions* of the Company of Jesus show the degree to which M. Bouic and his confreres were faithful to the spirit of their founder. On important points like obedience and poverty, the close relationship is obvious:

The Text of the Company of Jesus²

Obedientia tum in executione, tum in voluntate, tum in intellectu debet esse in nobis omni ex parte perfecta ...

Obedience and execution, both in will and judgement, must be perfect amongst us ...

In his quae pertinent ad victum, vestitum, cubilique supellectilem, et alia vitae communi necessaria, uniformitas tam superiorum cum inferioribus, quam inferiorum inter se, omnino retinenda ... Vestitus sit honestus ... conveniens professioni paupertatis.

As regards food, clothing, bedroom furniture and other necessities of the common life, uniformity must be totally observed between superiors and inferiors and between inferiors themselves ... Clothing must be decent and in conformity with the profession of poverty.

The Spiritan text³

Seipsos ex toto abnegare student, praecipue per obedientiam, quae ex omni parte perfecta sit, in executione, intellectu et voluntate.

They must strive towards a total self-abnegation, particularly through obedience, which must be perfect in execution, judgement and will.

Ratio victus, vestitus, lecti, cubiculi, pauperibus accomoda sit ... Idem sit omnibus cibus, vestitus quoque uniformis, pauper, simplex ... Superior idem particularia in omnibus fugiat, in cibo, vestitu, etc ...

The food, clothing, bed and furniture must be suitable for poor people ... The food should be the same for everybody and likewise the clothing which will be poor and simple ... The superior will avoid any distinction in food, clothing, etc. for himself.

¹ Minutes of the election of May 29th, 1733. A.N. M. 200.

² *Epitome Instituti Societatis Jesu*, Rome, 1704, pp. 300 and 311.

³ Le Floch, pp. 536 and 541.

The election of the superior for life was also borrowed from the Company of Jesus. The facts and the texts are curiously alike.

In 1558, the day after the election of Fr. Laynez as the first successor of Ignatius Loyola, the Fathers received a message that caused considerable consternation: In the opinion of Pope Paul IV, the powers of the new General should only be valid for a specific time - three years was suggested.¹ The Jesuits were known for their obedience, but they were anxious to preserve their *Constitutions* just as their founder had written them, so they addressed a memorandum to the Sovereign Pontiff: *“Everybody, in perfect unanimity, without any exception, agreed that it would be most fitting for our Society if the General was not changed throughout his lifetime”*.²

In 1727, Cardinal de Noailles opposed the registration of the Patent Letters obtained from the King by the Community of the Holy Spirit. His advisers had pointed out that the authority of the successor of Poullart des Places seemed to be too extensive and that his mandate should be limited to three years.³ But the Cardinal died in 1729 and his successor approved the Rule without hesitation. It read:

“Superior non eligatur ad tempus determinatum, exempli gratia, ad triennium aut sexennium praecise, sed legitime electus, non mutetur, nisi ita postulet Sodalitii bonum; mutatio enim Superioris extra hunc casum, communibus suffragiis, judicatur bono Sodalitii contraria”. (The Superior will not be elected for a specific time, three or six years for example, but once legitimately elected, he will not be changed unless the good of the Community demands it. Apart from this case, it was unanimously decided that a change would not be conducive to the good of the Community.)

So the influence of the Company of Jesus is perfectly clear. On the other hand, despite the absence of vows in the rules of that period, the perfection demanded in the observance of poverty, chastity and obedience could hardly have been greater.

¹ Cf. Cretineau-Joly: *Histoire de la Compagnie de Jésus*, Volume 1, 1844, p. 367.

² *“Decreta Congregationum generalium Societatis Jesu”*, Anvers, 1635, pp. 45-46.

³ *Réponse du Conseil de Monseigneur l’Archevêque au sujet des troisièmes Lettres*. (1727). Arch. C.S.Sp., Procès Lebaigue, document no. 14.

XVIII

THE PLANS OF SAINT JEAN-BAPTISTE DE LA SALLE

The upkeep of 70 poor students in Paris, their spiritual formation and their studies did not prevent Poullart des Places from accepting a promising commitment in the year after his ordination.

Jean-Baptiste de la Salle was approaching sixty. In 1679, the year of Claude's birth, he started his first school for poor children at Reims. Five years later, he founded the Institute of the Brothers of Christian Schools (known today as the De La Salle Brothers) which he was now directing from Paris. His disciples, who numbered around a hundred, were running 20 schools in Paris and the larger towns. He also wanted to train teachers for children in small towns and villages and he was looking for a community of priests who would take on the spiritual direction of his Brothers, assure the purity of their doctrinal education and hear the confessions of their students.

This packet of projects was set down in a *"Plan for the reform of schools and the religious education of children"*.¹ The Brothers were the central element of his plan. Since their foundation, they had been in charge of the training of teachers for the rural schools. Unfortunately, the seminary at Reims only lasted five or six years and another attempt in Paris lasted no longer. Jean-Baptiste had been thinking for some time of looking for a community of priests to help him. On November 17th, 1706, the Superior of the community of Saint-Sulpice wrote to one of his confreres: *"It is true that M. de la Salle, the founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, has tried everything to attach his community to Saint-Sulpice, but he did not succeed and we have now dropped the idea"*.² But the failure of Reims and Paris and the refusal of the Sulpicians to collaborate with him did not deter Jean-Baptiste.

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Towards the end of 1707, Fr. Jean-Charles Clément, who wanted to train young boys for different trades, asked Jean-Baptiste de la Salle for two of his Brothers to help him with this undertaking. For the moment, he only had an allowance of 800 livres from his father but he had hopes of others who might support him. De la Salle replied that he could not take on a commitment if it was not in conformity with the aims of his own foundation and he sent Fr. Clément a copy of his *"Plan for the reform of schools"*.³ Clément proposed to add a seminary for teachers in rural schools. In October 1708, thanks to a sum of 6,000 livres given by Fr. de la Salle, he bought a house at Saint-Denis in Paris.

De la Salle also advised him to seek the collaboration of the founder of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. The biographer of de la Salle, Canon Blain, wrote: *"I have no idea why M. de la*

¹ This manuscript is no. 103 in the Archives of the De la Salle Brothers.

² *"Correspondance de M. Leschassier"*, Volume VII, p. 537.

³ Brother Emile Lett : *« Les premiers biographes de saint J-B de la Salle »*, Paris, 1955, p. 43.

Salle advised Fr. Clément to contact Fr. Desplaces (sic) who was running a community for young clerics, leading him to hope that he could provide him with suitable subjects to take care of both the seminary for rural teachers and the children he wanted to educate. Fr. Clément followed the advice and was most impressed by M. Desplaces when he went to visit him. They agreed on a plan for the education of young boys; they sent a memorandum to Cardinal de Noailles and he gave his approval. Since then, these two projects – the seminary for rural teachers and a house for bringing up young boys – were two separate elements in the plans of Fr. Clement”.¹

So the account of Canon Blain shows clearly that it was due to the influence of Poullart des Places that Fr. Clément gave priority to the seminary for rural teachers and set aside the house he had bought for this purpose.

The Memorandum mentioned above was almost certainly the work of de la Salle, but he had good reasons for not claiming the authorship; in February 1706, the Parliament of Paris forbade him to “*establish any community named ‘the seminary of teachers for junior schools’, or anything similar*”.²

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The “*Plan for the reform of schools and the religious education of children*” shows the real nature of the approach being made to Poullart des Places by Fr. Clément and the sharing out of the tasks in the running of the Seminary of Saint-Denis. Clément, who had undertaken to finance the acquisition and running costs, was the founder. The Brothers had complete charge of the professional training of the future teachers. The Spiritans were asked to hear the confessions of the Brothers and students, to be responsible for their spiritual direction and to make sure that they were only taught sound doctrine. The contribution of the Spiritans was clear: this young community would provide the third element of the overall plan for the Christian education of young people.³

The community of rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne was exactly what De La Salle was looking for. He found that they shared two of his favourite devotions: the Holy Spirit⁴ was a central element of his spirituality and his own Marian devotion was characterised by an unshakable trust in the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady.⁵ This man who had renounced his fortune and half the income of his Canonry found a kindred soul in the poverty, detachment and abandonment to Divine Providence of Poullart des Places. He could see the same outlook in

¹ “*Vie de M. Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, instituteur des Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes*”, Canon Blain, Rouen 1733, Volume II, p. 75.

² National Archives, L 515, quoted by Guibert in “*Histoire de saint Jean-Baptiste de la Salle*”, Paris, 1901, p. 414.

³ « *From his plan for the reform of Christian schools, we can get a good idea of the ambitious proposal drawn up by the Founder prior to 1708, covering not just the large towns but also the smaller ones and the villages. The schools in these places would greatly benefit from the teachers emerging from the seminaries; the internal government would be in the hands of the of the Brothers while the external organisation, mainly direction, would be the responsibility of the priests. Even though they belonged to a community outside the Institute, they would be formed in the same spirit as the Brothers*”. Brother Emile Lett, op. cit., pp. 42-43.

⁴ Brother Clément-Marcel : « *La dévotion au Saint-Esprit dans les écrits de Saint Jean-Baptiste de la Salle* », Paris, 1952, p. IX.

⁵ « *L’Institut Lasallien et l’Immaculé Conception de la très Sainte Vierge* » in the « *Bulletin de l’Institut des Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes* », January 1954, p. 3.

the Spiritans that was behind his own foundation of the Brothers. These also were committed to the evangelisation of the poorest people, ready *“not only to accept but to prefer the humblest and most demanding undertakings”*. Finally, he recognised that these young priests, students of the Jesuits at Louis-le-Grand and therefore immunised against the evils of Jansenism, would only teach that *“safe doctrine”* to his Brothers and their disciples that so much concerned him. The determination of the Spiritans to seek only those posts which the Church had difficulty in filling would attract them towards the ministry of the confession of children. As Jean-Baptiste himself said: *“Most priests considered hearing the confessions of the young as beneath them!”*

Jean-Baptiste saw the youth of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit and its founder as a distinct advantage. It would facilitate the adjustments necessary to arrive at a perfect harmony of spirit between the two communities. But he was determined to avoid any precipitous agreement. He was well known for his prudence, as can be seen from his *“Plan for the reform of the Schools”*: *“Before founding this Society of priests, perhaps it would be wise to have a trial period during which it could be moulded. In that way, one could be assured of its utility and relevant measures could be adopted regarding its guidance and support. For how can an establishment for the salvation of souls be strongly built if it does not have firm spiritual foundations?”*.

In fact, there was nothing to fear regarding the spiritual foundations of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, but so far, it only had a few priests. Before coming to a definitive agreement which could not reach its completion until several years later, would it not be better to have a trial arrangement by confiding the Brothers and students of the Seminary of Saint-Denis to the zeal and enthusiasm of the first Spiritans? It was Fr. Clément, the ‘official’ founder of the establishment, who presented himself to rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne, but he was really no more than an intermediary; by agreeing to unite with him, Poullart des Places realised that it was, in fact, the forerunner of a very close collaboration between his disciples and those of de la Salle and that quite soon, he could be invited to extend that collaboration to the whole of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Once the house in Saint-Denis had been bought, Fr. Clément *“was unable to rest until he saw the Brothers moving in”*. They did that at Easter the following year, 1709. A little later, they admitted three young boys who would train to be village teachers. Fr. Clément started looking for twenty scholarships. The establishment would be run by three Brothers, one of whom would be a teacher of plain chant.

But it was not to be; the great freeze-up of 1709 and the ensuing rocketing of food prices made it impossible to keep the students for the time being. They would be re-admitted when things returned to normal.¹

But meanwhile, in early November, 1709, Fr. Clément was appointed to the Abbey of Saint-Calais which had an income of more than 16,000 livres and this event proved to be the downfall of the whole scheme. The abbatial residence was falling into ruins; to pay for the reconstruction, Clément reneged on the debts he had incurred in founding the Seminary of Saint-Denis and acquired a court order against Jean-Baptiste de la Salle which obliged the latter to withdraw his Brothers from the property.

¹ Blain, p. 75. Regarding the Seminary of Saint-Denis, cf. *« Poullart des Places et Saint Jean-Baptiste de la Salle : l’amorce d’une collaboration »*. Yves Poutet, Spiritus, February 1961, pp. 49-67.

Poullart des Place had kept all the agreements he had entered into with Fr. Clément. Canon Blain says nothing whatsoever on this subject in his letter, because his concern was not focused on the short-lived seminary of Saint-Denis but rather on the terrible sufferings that Jean-Baptiste de la Salle underwent as a result of the law suit taken out against him.

The thwarted plan of Jean-Baptiste to confide the spiritual direction of his religious to the disciples of Poullart des Places was not quite finished. Before eventually joining the de Montfort Fathers in 1715, Adrien Vatel, one of the first Spiritan priests, became confessor to the Brothers' novitiate. Nevertheless, the proposed eventual 'twinning' of the two societies never saw the light of day.

It is unfortunate that Blain was so discrete in writing about his onetime fellow-student at Rennes. But without him, we would never have known the degree to which Saint Jean-Baptiste de la Salle admired the founder of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, or of the trust he put in him and his disciples to bring his great educational project to fruition.

XIX

“THERE IS NO GREATER LOVE...”

The winter of 1709 is known to French historians as “le grand hiver” because of its exceptional severity; the like had not been seen before, not just during the long reign of Louis XIV but throughout the history of France. The consequences were tragic for the newly-born family of ‘poor scholars’.¹

To begin with, the winter was quite mild, but on the night of the 5/6th of January, the thermometer plunged and three days later, the Seine was almost completely frozen over. From January 14th to the 19th, the temperature remained around -21 degrees, but from the 25th, the thermometer suddenly climbed rapidly again. Both the Seine and the Marne flooded and deposited huge blocks of ice, more than two metres thick, on the banks of these rivers. The intense cold returned on February 4th, accompanied by heavy snow and violent winds. It remained like that until the beginning of March.

These two periods of extreme cold struck the whole kingdom, leaving a trail of death and desolation. According to the Duchess of Orléans, “*the people died like flies*”. Even the Court at Versailles lost a large number of distinguished persons, including the Princess de Soubise, the Duke de la Trémoille, the Prince de Condé, the Prince de Conti and Père La Chaise, who was confessor to the king. One contemporary witness said that more than 32,000 Parisians died simply because of the cold. Another noted that 24,000 died between January 5th and February 2nd.

The sufferings did not disappear with the passing of winter: the great freeze was followed by a terrible famine. In many provinces, the exceptional conditions killed off cows, sheep, goats, poultry and even wild rabbits. Nearly all the autumn wheat was destroyed and this came in the wake of a very poor harvest in 1708, leaving little seed for re-planting the following year. France was at war at that time and this made the situation even worse; priority had to be given to the feeding of the armies guarding the frontiers; the Dutch and English navies were preventing anything from being imported into France from abroad.

There was panic throughout the Kingdom. Mme de Maintenon wrote to the Princess d’ Ursins on April 8th: “*It is difficult to imagine anything worse than war, but the famine which we are now going through is even more terrifying. The price of wheat rises every day and this years’ harvest is already destroyed. It seems that God wants to reduce us to nothing*”. On March 10th, in the church of Saint-Sulpice, Fr. Massillon described in a homily how death was rapidly spreading throughout the Kingdom:

*“Men, created in the image of God and redeemed by his precious blood, are eating grass like animals and necessity is forcing them to comb the land for food which was not made for mankind; it is leading them to almost certain death”.*²

¹ Cf. A. de Boislisle: « *Le Grand Hiver et la Disette de 1709* ».

² From a Sermon for the 4th Sunday of Lent.

This was not just flowery language: Arthur de Boislisle, the best informed historian on the famine of 1709, spoke of *“walking skeletons, eating nothing but bracken, crushed and mixed with a seventh part of flour, or soup made from mistletoe and nettles, or thistles, slugs and the contents of dustbins”*.

In Paris, there was a great danger that this shortage of food would lead to serious civil disturbances. As soon as the cold weather arrived, the sick and the poor headed for the hospitals in large numbers. At that period, bread was sold in Paris at 15 different public markets. Half the bakers lived in Gonesse, Corbeil, Saint-Germain-en-Laye etc., and it was from these places that they carried their produce to market every day. The Lieutenant General of police, Marc-René d’Argenson, did his best to oversee the regularity of supplies and controlled price-rises to avoid the discontent leading to violence and public disorder. Even though the country was at war, he had 12 companies of French guards and a battalion of Swiss guards at his disposal to ensure that law and order would be maintained amongst the citizens.



Such a calamity, that touched even the richest people, fell very heavily upon Claude-François’ community of 70 poor students who were living almost entirely on charity. The amount of leftovers from the College of Louis-le-Grand diminished alarmingly. François-Marie Arouëa, a young student at Louis-le-Grand, who was to become illustrious under the name of Voltaire, recalled that he ate nothing but greyish-brown bread throughout the whole of 1709.

Death struck the disciples of Poullart des Places, but we only know the name of one of them: René Le Sauvage, one of the defenders of the thesis dedicated to the Archbishop of Besançon. He was buried on May 17th, the vigil of Pentecost.¹

By then, Poullart des Places had known for some three months that he was going to lose the help of Michel Le Barbier, who had been his friend since childhood and had become his right hand man in running the seminary. His father, Maître Claude Le Barbier, had not been happy to see him going to Paris to help in the new seminary. Maître Claude was well known to the Bishop of Rennes. Gilles, one of his eight sons, had been “printer to the bishop” since 1707. When he heard the alarming news coming from Paris about the frozen conditions and the famine, he asked the bishop to give his son an appointment back home in the diocese of Rennes; the bishop was happy to oblige because he appreciated the value of this young priest. So on February 8th, Michel-Vincent Le Barbier was appointed parish priest of Bain-de-Bretagne, where there was a small college attached to the parish. But he decided to stay in Paris with the poor scholars and share their lot until the end of the academic year. He finally left in June and before joining the carriage for Brittany he embraced Poullart des Place for the last time; these two friends would never see each other again.²

The closest market to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit was in the Place Maubert and was one of the largest in the capital. There you could buy bread as well as flour and wheat. The

¹ We know this thanks to the parish priest of Chasné who noted the following in his parochial register: *“M. René Le Sauvage, a tonsured cleric aged 22 years and three months, having died in Paris, was buried there on the vigil of the Feast of Pentecost, May 18th, 1709”*.

² Fr. Le Barbier signed the parish register of Bain for the first time on June 30th, 1709.

police reports concerning this market show how the situation was rapidly worsening. From January 21st, they already talk of great unrest amongst the people because of the rising price of bread. On April 6th, 100 women from la Halle killed a commissioner and seriously threatened d'Argenson himself. For example, the report for May 4th reads:

"Today, there was more bread for sale in the market of Place Maubert than in recent days, but there was also more confusion and disorder. A huge crowd of people had arrived with the result that the market had to close by 10 a.m. But the extra police who had been drafted there were sufficient to maintain order".¹

Prices continued to rise. A portion of wheat that was sold for 15 livres at the end of 1708 cost 30 livres by the following March and 67 by the end of September. The price of bread inevitably followed that of wheat. The police reports show the depth of the suffering of the poor people:

"September 4th: Even if the amount of bread continues to rise as it did today, there is still no guarantee that the market will be able to function. I have never heard such murmuring and cursing. The people are at their wit's end ...

More than twenty bakers did not turn up today and those who did only brought a third of what they normally have for sale..."

"September 7th: The atmosphere in the markets today was one of sadness rather than insurrection. Nothing happened that could have led to sedition; there was only a profound despondency which showed itself in tears rather than words".

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The lease agreed in October 1705 on the house in Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève should have lasted until the end of 1711, but on August 17th, 1709, M. de Cornoailles rented this house to J-B Damont, *"a gentleman of Paris"*. Poullart des Places agreed that the new tenant should take possession on the feast day of Saint-Rémy, in other words, on October 1st. In fact, he had already found a new location for his seminary, less than 200 metres from rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève. It was a large property, situated between rue Mouffetard and rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève (rue Tournefort today) belonging to the *héritiers d'Auboulin*.

Rue Mouffetard has not changed very much since the 17th century; it is still today one of the most picturesque and lively streets in the old part of Paris. But the fronts of the houses have lost their original shop signs – such as *l'Escouvette, la Calebasse, le Soufflet* and *le Fer au moulin; le Chapeau rouge* and *le Chapeau vert; la Fleur de lys* and *le Pomme de pain; les Escus d'Orléans, de Bretagne, d'Ecosse, and de France; le Sauvage d'or; La fontaine de jouvence, le Puits rouge virginal*. The animal kingdom was represented by *le Chat-qui dort, le Regnard bardé, le Coq d'Inde, la Pie, le Pélican, le Mouton d'or, le Pied-de-biche, la Hure de sanglier*. Others recalled the medieval origins of the rue Mouffetard : *Les Pastouriaux, le Heaume, le Chevalier au Cygne*.

At least half the signs of the rue Mouffetard had a religious significance : *le Paradis terrestre, la Samaritaine, le Signe de Croix*. Others were inspired by the patron saints of nearby churches : *Saint Etienne, Saint Médard, Saint Jacques, Saint Nicolas, Sainte Geneviève, Sainte Barbe*. One could also find saints who were venerated throughout France: *Saint*

¹ French National Archives, G7 1654.

Michel, Saint Georges, Saint Louis, Saint Martin etc. The Blessed Virgin was commemorated by *l'Annonciation, la Mère de Dieu, Notre Dame de Liesse, Notre-Dame de Laurette*. The Third Person of the Blessed Trinity was celebrated by *le Saint Esprit* and *le Saint Esprit Couronné*.

The new property for the seminary had the name of "*l'Escu de France*" (the French Shield). The lease and other documents concerning this building were in the custody of Nicolas Aumont, a lawyer at Châtelet, but unfortunately they were burnt during the civil disturbances of 1871. So for further information, we have to consult the maps of Paris of Fr. Delagrive (1728), Roussel (1731) and Turgot (1734), as well as the map and registers of the Abbey of Sainte-Geneviève. Together, they give a fairly accurate description of the house which would be the home of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit for the next 25 years.

The property covered nearly 1,500 square metres (between no. 11 of rue Tournefort and no. 36 of rue Mouffetard). The courtyard facing rue Mouffetard was rented out to a merchant, as well as the small yard where one can still see the remains of an old well. All the rest was rented to Poullart des Places for the sum of 600 livres per annum. The normal entrance to the Seminary was on rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne, almost opposite a bowling alley which went under the name of *La Mort-qui-trompe*. Having gone through the carriage entrance, a passage of about 30 metres led to a courtyard with large buildings on the northern and western sides. An enclosed garden separated the courtyard from a building facing rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève. As in the house of M. de Cornoailles, the noise from the street could not be heard in the area occupied by the seminarians.

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The time had come to think about the new scholastic year. It always began with the examination of fresh candidates, followed by a retreat of eight days. This year, it would also involve moving house before October 1st.

In the notes he had written 10 years previously, Poullart des Places said:

"I enjoy wonderful health although I look rather delicate. I have a good stomach and I am able to digest any kind of food. Nothing gives me trouble. I am stronger and more active than others and I can put up with hard work and fatigue very well".¹

But there had been a considerable deterioration since then. The cold and the famine hit him very hard, not too surprising when we hear that he would deprive himself of food rather than see his students go hungry.

In the last days of September,

"while Poullart des Places was giving himself entirely to the needs of his growing community and exhausted by severe mortifications, he had an attack of pleurisy accompanied by a violent fever and a painful tenesmus which caused him great suffering for four days. But he made no complaint and showed no signs of impatience. The only indication that his sufferings had intensified was the increased frequency of his acts of resignation. His very exhaustion seemed to give him renewed

¹ "*Choice of a state of Life*", Koren p. 241.

strength to repeat frequently the words of the holy King David: "Quam dilecta tabernacula tua, Domine virtutum, concupiscit et deficit anima mea in atria Domini". (How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord God of Hosts! My soul is longing and fainting for the courts of the Lord).¹

The Rule of their Community laid down that sick members should be transported to the Hôpital de la Charité, which was run by the Brothers of St. John of God, but all the hospitals were full to overflowing. For example, the Hôtel-Dieu had 4,000 in-patients, more than three times the normal. The General Hospital was looking after 14,000 poor people and would now only accept the many abandoned children who were left at their door each morning. So Poullart des Places stayed with his community. On October 1st, the day when they had to leave their premises, they carried him to the *Escu-de-France*.

"As soon it was known in Paris that he was seriously ill, a great number of holy and distinguished people came to see him. The Directors of the Seminaries of Saint-Sulpice, Saint Nicholas de Chardonnet and Saint François de Salle all arrived. His great friend, the saintly Father Gourdan, sent someone to visit him on his behalf".²

For many years, Claude had set aside one day each month to prepare himself for death. He would receive Holy Communion as viaticum and perform his prayers and actions as though it was the last day of his life. When night came, he would lay down on his bed as if he was entering his coffin.³ So when death finally came, there were no signs of fear or surprise:

"Having received the last sacraments fully conscious, he died quietly at about 5 p.m. on October 2nd, 1709, at the age of thirty years and seven months".

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In the portrait that was painted immediately after his death, Claude Poullart is wearing a soutane and a large blue rabat as was the custom at that time. He is sitting in an easy chair with a crucifix in his hands. This is the only authentic portrait that we have of Poullart des Places and it is preserved in the meeting room of the General Council of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.

But his disciples would cherish another portrait of him in their hearts. When M. de la Ville-Angevin was founding his own Congregation of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit, he wanted to list the duties of the superior; he looked no further than his friend and teacher, Claude Poullart des Places. He simply transposed his texts to fit the rule of the sisters, thereby preserving a perfect image of the way Poullart governed his own foundation, full of humanity, gentleness and self-denial:

"In carrying out his duties as superior, he always put himself humbly in the presence of God, acknowledging his own unworthiness for such a task, seeing himself as a worse sinner than any of the poor students".

¹ Psalm 83, verse 1. Koren p. 287.

² Besnard. (Koren, p. 287).

³ Cf. Rule no. 43 (Koren p. 173).

“He treated them all with kindness and humanity and looked on himself as the least of all. He carefully examined the character and preferences of each one so as to understand them better.

“When the students did something wrong, he would gently correct them. If they did not accept the reprimand as they should, he would not get angry with them and insist on their compliance, nor did he use strong language; he would prefer to see them commit another small fault rather than treat them in a heavy-handed way”.

“He always turned to the Holy Spirit to enlighten him and treated the students with such kindness and patience that he gained their entire confidence and admiration. He followed the lesson taught by Jesus Christ: ‘Learn from me, gentle and humble of heart’”.

“He had a special regard for poverty and holy indifference, preferring to go without something than to see his students in need”.

“Finally, he tried to be a perfect mirror of all the virtues, and avoided anything that his scholars could not or should not do”.¹

In the deposition that he gave after the death of Poullart des Places, M. Faulconnier recalled an event of which he was probably the only witness. He showed how he reacted on one occasion to an unforeseen situation, where many other directors would have been disconcerted:

“One day, a young man, who had thought about becoming a Carthusian for several years, suddenly left the Jesuit College early one morning, carrying his books back to the Seminary which he would take with him to the Charterhouse. He ran into M. des Places who asked him why he had left his lectures so early. The student told him of his plans and Poullart consulted the Lord on the spot. The he said: ‘My friend, God is not calling you to this life’. But the young man was insistent, pointing out that he had been examining this plan and the purity of his intentions for a long time. M. de Places replied: ‘If you still feel like this in a few day’s time, I will willingly give my consent’. With that, he sent him back to the College for the rest of the lectures. Some time later, this young man admitted that he no longer felt an attraction to the Carthusian way of life”.

This ability to make wise decisions on the spot also comes out clearly in the reminiscences of M. de la Ville-Angevin. Poullart des Places was not just somebody of an extraordinary gentleness, with the habit of consulting the Holy Spirit when faced with difficult decisions; it is clear that God had compensated for his lack of experience with an exceptional gift of discernment.

Although he was a rich young man, son of an ambitious father and keen to be successful, Claude Poullart des Places came to realise (like Michel Le Nobletz) that true greatness is to be found in living out the Beatitudes. In his words and actions, he was a great apostle of humility and disdained the joys of this world. One of his disciples and future biographer, Pierre Thomas, shows how impressed they were by his teaching and example:

¹ Based on the Rule of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit, pp. 62 and 77.

“To provide for the needs of the students he had brought together, he was prepared to do things which would humiliate him in the eyes of those who knew him best from the past. It was a common sight to see him in the streets of Paris with some of those students, most of whom were poorly clad. He talked to them as equals, and when they were carrying pieces of furniture and utensils for the community, he always lent a hand, irrespective of what people might think.

They often needed to buy small pieces of furniture and tools for the community and M. des Places went to look for them himself in different parts of the city, as if he were the least of the lay brothers in some monastery. But it was even worse for him, because such lay brothers would normally have more money to spend than he had. They would also buy in larger quantities. Claude, on the other hand, had very little money at his disposal so it was only at rare intervals that he could go to market. Although his father was a rich and religious man, he was never happy with the extremes to which his son had gone in practising the virtue of poverty, so he was not ready to give him any more than the usual allowance.

Claude could often be seen carrying home the things that he had bought. He did this deliberately, both to save money and to humble himself. He was delighted to meet someone he knew from the past when he was carrying these loads, so as to humiliate himself”.¹

Writing elsewhere about his love of mortification, Pierre Thomas said:

“Since his death, I came across a rough draft of a letter he had addressed to his spiritual director. In it, he spoke of his decision to practise some difficult mortifications. But he considered them as nothing compared to what he needed to do to expiate the sins he had committed in the past. He explained these motives to his director very vividly, hoping to obtain his approval to carry out his plans”.²

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Throughout his time as superior, Claude Poullart des Places was a model of heroic virtues for his students. And his funeral proved to be another striking lesson for them which would continue to bear fruit for a long time to come.

The parish of Saint-Etienne was one of the oldest in Paris. In the early centuries of its existence, the cemetery surrounding it on three sides had plenty of room and each deceased person had an individual grave. But as the population increased, the church had to be enlarged and so the cemetery was reduced in size. The whole compound was now hemmed in by surrounding buildings.

By the beginning of the 18th century, there were only two sections of the cemetery remaining. The largest, the *Grand Cimetière*, was a few metres away from the front of the church on the square of Sainte-Geneviève; the *Petit Cimetière* was at the far end of the church. Taking both pieces together, there were no more than 200 square metres, yet there were several hundred deaths in the parish each year.

¹ Pierre Thomas, c.s.sp. Koren p. 273.

² Pierre Thomas, c.s.sp. Koren, p. 271.

If they did not own a crypt in the church itself, the richest families were given the privilege of being buried in a private tomb, but the bodies of the poor, who made up the great majority of the parishioners, were put into a common grave. The grave in the *Grand Cimetière* could take up to 300 bodies, but the smaller one (which seems to have been reserved for the poorest clerics) was only large enough for 20.

Some founders of religious societies decided that their disciples should be buried as poor men. The rule written by Fr. Barré for the Sisters of the Christian schools contained this directive. Fr. Bourdoise did not want his priests to be so proud that they would not be buried with the poor. But he asked that a place should be set apart for the burial of the clergy.

At Saint-Etienne-du-Mont, to be buried as a poor man meant to be placed in one of the common graves. Claude Poullart had such a love for the poor that there was no question of seeking out a special place for his burial; so he was placed in the common grave of the *Petit Cimetière*, next to the chapel of the Blessed Virgin. Once this grave was full, it was covered with soil and, a few years later, was dug up to be used again. The bones were put into the mass graves which surrounded the cemetery and remained there until the beginning of the 19th century. It was then that all the mass graves of Paris were suppressed and the contents deposited in the tunnels of the catacombs.¹

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After the death of Claude Poullart des Places, Jacques-Hyacinthe Garnier took over the direction of the seminary. He was just 26 and had been ordained the previous Christmas. It was a heavy burden for this young man who was already weakened by his privations. The famine still continued and the new superior finally died at the beginning of March. The seven most senior seminarians met together to elect his successor. Only one of them, Louis Bouïc, was already a priest and it was he who was elected.² With the help of Pierre Caris and Pierre Thomas, he would direct the Seminary of the Holy Spirit for more than 50 years.

In early June, a letter arrived from Brittany with more sad news for the poor scholars. Fr. Le Barbier, who had reluctantly returned to his diocese when he was recalled by his bishop,

¹ On July 15th, 1710, Henry le Chat and Jeanne Poullart appointed a chaplain for a chapel of Saint-Claude, near their chateau at Vernée.

François-Claude Poullart des Places died on May 18th, 1712.

On October 3rd, 1718, the day after the 9th anniversary of the death of her son, Jeanne Le Meneust, donated the farm of la Bullerie (Noyal-sur-Vilaine) for the support of poor people in the hospital of Saint-Méen. The chaplains were to ensure that the rosary was said in perpetuity by these poor people three times a week, for the repose of the soul of the benefactress and her deceased friends and relations. She died on August 28th, 1720. In the following December a great fire in Rennes destroyed her house, along with the remaining souvenirs of her son. Henry Le Chat wrote that they were able to save only a few of their papers. Those which were destroyed included documents concerning the legacies of M. and Mme Desplaces-Poullart and the genealogy of the Poullart family.

² Cf. *Gallia Christiana*, Volume VII, column 1044. M. Louis Bouïc (or Bouy) was born at Guillac, near Josselin, on August 4th, 1684. Probably due to the influence of his neighbour, M. Hédan, he went to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit after his diaconate (22nd September, 1708) The bishop of Saint-Malo gave him dimissorial letters for the priesthood on August 28th, 1709 and he was ordained on September 21st. In March 1710, M. Joseph Hédan was a deacon, while Pierre Caris, Pierre Thomas and René de la Ville-Angevan were still sub-deacons.

died on March 22nd at the age of 30 years and 8 months. He had been like a big brother to the rest of the Community and left behind him the reputation of a holy and capable man.¹

So within a few months, Claude Poullart des Places and his two closest associates had become victims of the exceptional winter and the subsequent famine, or rather, victims of their total dedication and self-denial; like the good shepherd, they had sacrificed themselves to save the lives of their little flock.

¹ From the Register of the parish of Bain (May 23rd, 1710).

XX

TOWARDS A GREAT MISSIONARY CONGREGATION

Logically, with the premature deaths of Poullart des Places and his first collaborators, their work should also have disappeared. It is amazing that it survived such an inauspicious beginning. But in less than six years, this young clerical student had set up a seminary and laid the foundations for a new religious institute. The work of his successors, Louis Bouïc (1710-1763) and François Becquet (1763-1788) was one of conservation rather than innovation; but it was through preserving Poullart's ideal of spiritual poverty and dedication to the most abandoned that they became the first architects of the evolution which would transform the small community of the Holy Spirit into a great missionary Congregation.

In 1702, young Claude was dreaming of being a missionary and martyr. God accepted the generous and total gift of himself, but it was not in preaching the Gospel to pagans in far-off lands that he would lose his life; it was through his dedication to poor, young men who wanted to be priests. And before he died, he started a religious family of priests which, across the centuries, more than fulfilled his missionary dreams.

Adrien Vatel was the only Spiritan we know of who went to an overseas mission before 1730. The College of Louis-le-Grand was the home-base for the Jesuit missions in Canada and the Far East and this must have had a certain influence on the students of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit who were studying there. The same college collected reports from their missions which were eventually published under the title of *"Letters édifiantes et curieuses"* and they triggered a considerable interest. So from the start of the work for poor scholars, the students would have been exposed to an interest in the missionary outreach of the Church; this could well have been the case with Fr. Allenou de la Ville-Angevin who set out for Canada in 1741, at the age of 54.

However, up until 1730, it would have been almost impossible for a priest trained in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit to go to an overseas mission. The religious orders, such as the Jesuits, Franciscans and Capuchins, provided nearly all the missionaries at that time; it was certainly not the custom for secular priests to undertake this ministry. Any who wanted to go to Canada or the Far East would have been obliged to pass through the Seminary of the Foreign Missions (Les Missions Etrangères de Paris). The famous disagreement over the Chinese rites¹, which had begun back in 1635, took on a new lease of life at the beginning of the 18th century, with the Jesuits and the Missions Etrangères on opposite sides of the argument. Fr. Le Gobien and other Jesuit authors resident at Louis-le-Grand played a leading role in the dispute. To make matters even worse, the Jansenists, as usual, supported the opponents of the Jesuits.

¹ The Chinese Rites controversy was a dispute within the Catholic Church from the 1630s to the early 18th century over whether Chinese traditional religious rites could be adapted to the Catholic liturgy. At first, Rome approved such an adaptation, but Pope Clement XI decided against it in 1715 and this greatly reduced Catholic missionary activity in China.

The young students of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit understandably followed the opinions of their Jesuit professors, who were very suspicious of several of the lecturers at the Seminary of the Missions Etrangères in the rue de Bac because of their Jansenistic leanings. But the situation changed when the Council of the Missions Etrangères decided in 1725 that they would no longer accept *“directors, missionaries or any other ecclesiastics who did not sincerely follow the directives of the Holy See regarding Jansenism and the constitution ‘Unigenitus’.*¹

But an agreement still had to be set up between the Seminaire du Saint-Esprit and the Seminaire des Missions Etrangères, and Bishop Dosquet was largely responsible for making this possible. He had been trained at Saint-Sulpice and entered the Missions Etrangères in 1724. Five years later, Mgr. de Mornay, the bishop of Quebec, asked him to be his coadjutor. Canada was greatly lacking in priests, so the new Prelate asked the Seminary of the Holy Spirit to help. Unfortunately, in 1665, there had been an agreement between Mgr de Laval, the first bishop of Quebec, and the Society of the Missions Etrangères; they had decided that *all* secular priests recruited for Canada would have to pass through the rue de Bac. The first Spiritan to do so was François Frison de la Mothe in 1732 and his arrival opened the way to Canada and the Far East for his fellow Spiritans studying in the rue des Postes.²

The following year, Guillaume Rivoal set sail for Asia. Several others followed in quick succession, as can be seen from a letter written by the superior of the Missions Etrangères in 1738 to Cardinal de Fleury:

*“In the past, some Cardinals suspected that a few of our missionaries had not fully accepted the constitution ‘Unigenitus’, but there are none like this nowadays. For several years, we have only admitted students to our Seminary who were formed either in Saint-Sulpice or Saint Esprit, or a few others of whom we were equally convinced of their orthodoxy.”*³

Even more striking is a letter of 1752, written by Fr. Pierre Kerhervé, a Spiritan working in Siam, to Fr. Darragon, another Spiritan who had joined the staff of the seminary of rue de Bac:

*“I was delighted to hear that you are now on the staff of the seminary. I am sure that your presence will greatly enhance the unity and friendship between the seminaries of the Saint Esprit and the Missions Etrangères. Try to go to the Saint Esprit from time to time to solicit others to join you. As you spent many years of your formation in this seminary, they will trust you more than they would another. Those from this seminary who went to the Missions have not disappointed. Not long ago, of the six bishops we had in the missions, four had come from the Saint-Esprit seminary.”*⁴

¹ Archives of the Missions Etrangères, volume 79, p. 3.

² Since January 1st, 1732, the Seminary of the Holy Spirit had been installed in a house in the rue des Postes, the present-day rue Lhomond.

³ Archives of the Missions Etrangères, vol. 20, p. 645.

⁴ Archives of the Missions Etrangères, vol. 885, p. 419 (a letter of June 2nd, 1756).

These four bishops were: Bishop Armand Lefebvre, Vicar Apostolic in Cochin from 1741; Bishop Louis Devaux, Vicar Apostolic of Tonkin from 1746; Bishop Edmond Bennetat, coadjutor to Bishop Lefebvre from 1748; Bishop Jean-Baptiste Maigrot, Vicar Apostolic of Setchoan from 1753.

Later, two other Spiritans were made bishops: Guillaume Piguel who succeeded Bishop Lefebvre and Bishop François Pottier, who became Vicar-Apostolic of Setchoan. Pierre Kerhervé, whose letter to Fr. Darragon was quoted above, was appointed Vicar Apostolic in China, but was forced to decline because of his incipient blindness. We can also add Pierre Blandin to the list: he was the nephew of François Becquet, the Superior of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit; after a period in Tonkin, he was appointed director of the seminary in the rue de Bac.

Other names that appear in the letters of Fr. Darragon addressed to Cardinal de Fleury, would seem to indicate that there were many more Spiritan missionaries in the Far East, but we can only be sure of a dozen.¹

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Unknowingly, Bishop Dosquet was also instrumental in the departure of several Spiritans for the Far East. When he was appointed auxiliary bishop of Quebec in 1733, he asked the help of the directors of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit to provide him with suitable priests for his diocese and was delighted with the results. Before leaving France, he asked Abbé Pierre de la Rue de L'isle Dieu to be his representative in Paris and to recruit priests for Quebec. This proved to be a great help to both Canada and the work started by Poullart des Places.

But Bishop Dosquet was not happy with the necessary link between his seminary and that of the rue de Bac. Almost as soon as he arrived in Quebec, he wrote frankly to the Minister of the Navy:

*“This connection (between the two seminaries) is very annoying because it prevents me approaching other communities directly.... particularly that of the Holy Spirit, which is in a position to provide us with several good subjects”.*²

Knowing the mind of his bishop, where possible the Abbé of L'isle Dieu would seek personnel from the Seminary of the rue des Postes. He now had the role and title of *“General Chaplain of the Colonies of New-France”*, and he continued to exercise this during the episcopacy of Bishop de Pontbriand (1741-1760).

Before 1752, in order to qualify for a free passage on board the ships of the King, as well as expenses incurred for their trousseau and general installation, the Spiritans going to Canada had to spend a few months in the Seminary of the Missions Etrangères, because they were the only ones recognised for such purposes by the Ministry of the Navy. But from 1752 onwards, candidates could also be proposed by the Abbé de L'Isle Dieu. In conjunction with the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, he planned to create a clergy for the colonies who would be independent of all religious societies. The subsequent loss of Canada prevented him from

¹ They have all been listed above, apart from Jacques Corre, Jean-Charles Perrin and Pierre Pansut. But almost certainly, there were others.

² Quoted by Fr. A. David c.s.sp., in *“Les missionnaires du Saint-Esprit à Québec et en Acadie au XVIII siècle »*. 1926. P. 30. .

completing this project: when the British took over the colony in 1763, they refused to allow any French missionary to enter.

Several Spiritans recruited by the Abbé of L'Isle-Dieu taught theology in the Quebec seminary. Even more were missionaries in Acadia; Fr. Pierre Maillard, the apostle of the Micmacs, and Jean-François Le Loutre played an important part in the struggle which ended so tragically for France.¹

The Abbé of L'Isle-Dieu was most impressed by the Seminary of the Holy Spirit which had formed such devoted missionaries and this was to play a decisive part in the future destiny of the work of Poullart des Places. In 1769, the former Vicar General of Quebec wrote to Cardinal Castelli, the Prefect of the Propaganda Fide:

*“During the 38 years that I was Vicar General for all the French missions in the vast diocese of Quebec, I only accepted priests who had been formed in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit; they all exceeded my expectations”.*²

When in 1765 the islands of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, until then part of the diocese of Quebec, were given the status of an Apostolic Prefecture, he recommended to both Rome and Versailles that they be confided to care of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. So it was thanks to him that Fr. Becquet, a successor of Poullart des Places, found himself for the first time directly responsible for a colonial mission.

Ever since the government of Louis XV had decided to replace the religious orders (Jesuits, Dominicans, Carmelites and Capuchins) with secular clergy in the French West Indies and Guyana, the Abbé of L'Isle-Dieu had pointed out to the authorities the advantages of confiding Martinique, Guadeloupe, Saint-Domingue³ and French Guiana to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit:

*“In view of the large number of personnel who would be needed for such a project, the only institute in the whole Kingdom of France which could meet such demands would be the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. Their numerous students are given an excellent formation with a view to taking on works which are the most difficult and abandoned and the least lucrative”.*⁴

For various reasons, this plan was only partially successful. In 1775, Fr. Becquet undertook to supply priests from the Seminary of the Holy Spirit for pastoral and educational works in the colony of Cayenne (French Guiana). To begin with, he placed 20 priests under the authority of the Apostolic Prefect for these works, but the evangelisation of the Galibi Indians, which began a few years before the French Revolution, would need many more.⁵

¹ Cf. Henry Koren: *“A history of the Spiritan Missionaries in Acadia and North America, 1732-1839”*. Pittsburgh, 1962.

² David, op cit. p. 44

³ Present day Dominican Republic.

⁴ The life and ideas of the Abbé de L'Isle-Dieu are given extensive coverage (pp. 51-58) in the work of Fr. David quoted above.

⁵ Letter of Fr. Becquet to M. Micquignon, July 7th, 1788 (Archives of the Company of Mary).



Up until 1778, the members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (as opposed to the students who passed through their seminary) had remained in France, teaching in the seminaries of Paris and Meaux. But in that year, two of them, Dominique Déglicourt and Jacques Bertout, set sail for Cayenne. They left Le Havre on April 24th, but their ship went aground on the sands of Arguin, near Port-Etienne on the West Coast of Africa, where the *Méduse* was also to sink 39 years later. They were taken prisoner by the Moors and sold to the English governor of Saint-Louis-du-Sénégal who put them on a ship bound for England. But they were intercepted en route by a French corsair and so returned to Paris on September 26th, where they gave an account of their adventures to the Minister for the Navy. A month later, they were told to report to Lorient and set out once more for Cayenne. Fr. Bertout was sick, so he was replaced by a priest from Brittany. Their ship was part of a squadron of French vessels and when they got as far as the coast of Mauritania, they were told that the aim of the expedition was not to go to Cayenne but to retake Senegal from the British. After the surrender of Saint-Louis, Déglicourt was appointed Prefect Apostolic for the African Coast and thus, a third mission was officially confided to the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.



For the sons of Poullart des Places, these new responsibilities opened up a whole new world. When he was young, Fr. François Becquet had dreamt of being a missionary in the East Indies¹, but he eventually found a substitute in his dedication to the mission of Cayenne. He sent out many priests and worked hard in preparing all the details of their journeys and their subsequent support. He asked the Daughters of Wisdom to give these missionaries a special place in their prayers and told his sister, a Visitation sister at Saint Denis, to do the same in her community.

Fr. Becquet had a similar concern for the mission of Senegal.² He commissioned François-Joseph Duret, a renowned Parisian sculptor, to make a bas-relief over the main door of the spiritan chapel in the rue Lhomond. Seven metres long, it depicts missionaries preaching the gospel to black people, and a further group of Indians who also seem anxious to join in. He commissioned a painting of missionaries preaching to the pagans; today, it hangs in a chapel of the church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris.



After the French Revolution, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit was restored by Fr. Jacques Bertout. In 1817, Louis XVIII asked the seminary to train future priests for all the French colonies. It would be a very difficult task. There were still plenty of priests in France, but the average age was very high: in 1808, 32,000 out of 33,000 were over 40, and 1,800 had passed 75. So the primary concern of the bishops was, understandably, to rebuild their own diocesan clergy.

Prior to the Revolution, nearly all the missionaries came from religious orders; without exaggerating, one could say that the evangelisation of pagans hardly entered the minds of

¹ Letter from M. Blandin, the nephew of Fr. Becquet. (Archives of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.)

² Letter to M. Micquignon.

the secular clergy. The generation of priests in the second half of the 18th century were unlikely to inspire their successors to worry about the state of the Church in far off countries. These young priests, brought up during the Revolution and the Empire, looked rather for a soft and tranquil life than the adventures and sacrifices of missionary life.¹

In deference to the spirit and traditions inherited from Poullart des Places, Jacques Bertout changed nothing at the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. The studies still extended over six years, which was most unusual at that time. The house in the rue des Postes did all it could to regain the prestige of former years, but many of its most capable students were recalled by their bishops and appointed as lecturers in their seminaries. Nevertheless, between 1817 and 1832, Bertout was able to send 97 missionaries to the American colonies (Guiana, Saint Pierre and Miquelon), to Africa (Senegal) and to the Indian Ocean (the island of Bourbon – present-day Reunion, and Pondichery in India). During the same period, the Seminary of the Missions Etrangères in rue de Bac could only manage 64 priests for their vast missions in the Far East. Guiana



The successor of Jacques Bertout was his nephew, Fr. Amable Fourdinier (1832-1845). Throughout his time as superior, the recruitment of priests for the colonies continued to be very difficult. Even for those few dioceses in France which had sufficient priests for their immediate needs, the prospects were not good. A law of June 16th, 1828 limited the number of students in junior seminaries to 20,000 and this seriously slowed down the recruitment of future priests. This was true of the whole country; in many dioceses, the number of ordinations fell by more than 50 %.

The Seminary of the Holy Spirit was affected by this situation and by its repercussions on the dioceses. Young clerics who wanted to transfer to the Seminary were often prevented from doing so by their bishops. Fr. Fourdinier increased his appeals to the French clergy in the "*Ami de la Religion*", but their applications were either blocked by their bishops or enthusiastically supported if the diocesan authorities were anxious to get rid of them! At the death of Fourdinier, there were 145 priests in the colonies, of whom half had passed through the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.²

Once the superior of the Seminary handed over these young priests to the Apostolic Prefects (none of whom were Spiritans), he no longer had any authority over them. These Prefects were regarded by the Government as ecclesiastical civil servants so neither did they have much authority over their clergy. Nobody gained from this situation - neither the priests, the people confided to their care nor the prestige of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in Paris. The sons of Poullart des Places suffered as much as anybody. Their devoted work in the Seminary was reduced, in the words of Francis Libermann, to "*real and terrible drudgery*".³

¹ Letter from J-M de la Mennais to L'Abbé Bruté de Rémur, 1815 : « *What is the point of talking to young men about the wider world when they are afraid of crossing a stream to bring religious help to the poor peasants who need them on the other side?* »

² Cf. "*Simple observations et renseignements exacts sur le Séminaire du Saint-Esprit et les Missions Coloniales par M. Guiller, Préfet Apostolique de la Guyane française* », Paris, 1845. Cf also J. Janin C.S.Sp. : *Le clergé colonial de 1815 à 1850* », Paris, 1936.

³ Letter of April 27th, 1847: "*Notes et Documents*" Volume IX, p. 134.

The Spiritans drew up a plan to improve the situation of the apostolate in the overseas territories, based on their experiences in Guiana in South America. In 1807, they wrote a report on their activities to the Minister for Cult:

*“The Community of the Holy Spirit, which has been put in charge of the missions in the West Indies, believes that the Superior and his confreres should have the exclusive right to appoint those whom they consider fit for these important responsibilities ... All the priests sent will be members of the Congregation and, therefore, will remain subject to their superior ... Missionaries who return sick or exhausted will all report to the house of the Congregation in France”.*¹

René Bertin from Rennes, who had completed his earlier studies with the Eudists, had entered rue des Postes in 1827. He was very surprised to learn that the Seminary of the Holy Spirit had been founded by “Father des Places, of the diocese of Rennes, with the help of Frs. Le Barbier and Garnier of the same diocese.” He greatly admired the work of his compatriots and decided to try to restore their establishment after its devastation during the French Revolution of 1789 and the disturbances that followed:

*“To strengthen its dedication and fervour, and to avoid being isolated from each other on the missions, I formed an association with two or three like-minded priests, guided by the advice of the venerable Fr. Mollevaut whom I visited quite frequently when he was Superior of the Eudist “Solitude” at Issy. By 1830, there were more than 20 of us and we were ready to incorporate ourselves into the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, which by then had only five or six members. But for the Revolution of 1830², this Congregation would have been certainly re-established by the addition of so many new members”.*³

Evidence of this short-lived project can be found in the Archives of the Spiritans at Chevilly-Larue: under the title of “*The Association of the Holy Heart of Mary*”, there is a list of its members. Unfortunately, the Seminary of the Holy Spirit was scattered once more by the July Revolution of 1830. René Bertin returned to Rennes where, encouraged by Fr. Louis de la Morinière, he joined the Eudist Fathers.

But the realisation of the plan of 1807 mentioned above became something of an obsession for Fr. Fourdinier. He wanted to set up “a real novitiate”, at the end of which, without taking vows, the priests heading for the missions would make a formal dedication of themselves to the Superior of the Congregation.⁴ He received encouragement for this plan from the

¹ Janin, op. cit., p. 253.

² The **French Revolution of 1830**, also known as the **July Revolution**, saw the overthrow of King Charles X of France, the French Bourbon monarch, and the ascent of his cousin Louis-Philippe, the Duc d'Orléans, who himself, after 18 precarious years on the throne, would in turn be overthrown. It marked the shift from one constitutional monarchy, the Bourbon Restoration, to another, the July Monarchy; the transition of power from the House of Bourbon to its cadet branch, the House of Orléans and the substitution of the principle of popular sovereignty for that of hereditary right. Supporters of the Bourbon would be called Legitimists, and supporters of Louis Philippe Orleanists.

³ René Bertin: “*Autobiographie*”, which can be found in Volume III of the “*Fleurs de la Congrégation de Jésus et Marie* (The Eudists)”.

⁴ Janin, p. 255.

Propaganda and the Archbishop of Paris, but that would prove to be insufficient. Fourdinier wrote in a letter in 1842,

*“Far from supporting me, the Apostolic Prefects of Martinique, Guadeloupe and Bourbon openly opposed my plans, so I was forced to postpone them without abandoning them”.*¹

But Fourdinier died at the beginning of 1845 without having accomplished his objectives to restore the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and improve the quality of the clergy that were sent to the colonies.²

His successor, Fr. Le Guay, was a man of action. Once again, he took up the plan to integrate the colonial clergy into the Congregation. He made some concessions on the practice of poverty in the hope of it being accepted more easily by the ecclesiastical authorities; he even set up a type of second order so that the members would be tied to the Mother House by spiritual bonds. He drew up new statutes which were approved by the Propaganda and was optimistic that this time, the plan would succeed. But once again, the efforts to restore the work of Poullart des Places were ruined by yet another revolution and the events of 1848³ which obliged him to hand in his resignation.⁴ Men had done their best, but they had failed; it was now up to Providence to intervene!

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At the time when René Bertin, the founder of the *Association of the Holy Heart of Mary*, was visiting his Eudist friend in the *Solitude*, he must have bumped into a young seminarian in the corridors; he was four years older than René but the onset of epilepsy had excluded him

¹ Janin: p. 256.

² The Congregation of the Holy Spirit had very few members: *“Their great priority was to rebuild the number and quality of the clergy working in the colonies, so they paid little attention to recruiting for their own institution after its restoration. According to their old constitutions, an associate could only be received after completing three years of theology and having spent two years probation in the seminary. But because of the pressing needs of the colonies, they could not keep a student in the seminary for that length of time. They felt they had to send out their best seminarians as quickly as possible to take up their duties. On the other hand, neither Fr. Bertout, who had seen the glory of the old temple, nor Fr. Fourdinier felt they could change the conditions for admission that had been laid down from the early days”.* (Dom Pitra: *“Vie du R.P. Libermann”*, p. 558).

³ The **1848 Revolution** in France was one of a wave of revolutions that year in Europe. In France, the February Revolution ended the Orleans monarchy (1830–1848) and led to the creation of the Second French Republic. The February Revolution was really the belated second phase of the Revolution of 1830. The Revolution of 1830, also called the July Revolution, was the event that had brought Louis-Philippe of Orleans to the throne of France as a constitutional monarch. Following the overthrow of Louis-Philippe in February, the elected government of the Second Republic ruled France. As time passed, this government steered a course that became more conservative. On 23 June 1848, the people of Paris rose in insurrection. There was a bloody but unsuccessful rebellion by the Paris workers against a conservative turn in the Republic's course. On 2 December 1848, Louis Napoleon was elected President of the Second Republic, largely on peasant support. Exactly three years later he suspended the elected assembly and established the Second French Empire, which lasted until 1871.

⁴ Janin, op. cit, pp 258-262.

from ordination to the priesthood. His name was François Libermann, son of an Alsatian rabbi. In 1837, he was living with the Eudists in Rennes; on the recommendation of the same Fr. Mollevaut, he had been appointed novice master of the Eudists. Two years later, despite the pleading of Fr. Louis de la Morinière, he left Brittany for Rome where he sought approval for a “*Work for the Black People*”, a missionary society that he would place under the protection of the Holy Heart of Mary. He was finally ordained priest in 1841 and immediately opened a novitiate at La Neuville-les-Amiens. Very soon, the premises proved to be too small so they moved to the former Cistercian Abbey of Notre-Dame du Gard.¹

Seven years after its foundation, this new Society already numbered 34 priests, 28 Brothers and 40 novices and students; 21 of its priests and 9 of its brothers were working for the evangelisation of black people in Mauritius, Reunion, Gabon and Senegal. These Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary found that the sons of Poullart des Places were already installed in Reunion and Senegal. From the early days of the foundation, Libermann had had the feeling that, one day, it would be joined to that of the Spiritans: *“I have always had the feeling that the union of our two societies was in the plan of God. They have the same work and move in the same direction. It would be strange if divine Providence had brought two societies into existence for the same work, which could easily have been done by one.”*²

On the feast of Pentecost, June 1848, the union was accepted in principle by both sides. The Holy See gave its approval on September 4th, stipulating that the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary would cease to exist and its members would be incorporated into the Society of the Holy Spirit. Finally, on November 23rd, by 10 votes out of 11, Libermann became the 10th successor of Poullart des Places; it was *he* who would restore this congregation.

¹ Both La Neuville and Notre-Dame du Gard are close to Amiens.

² Letter to the communities of Mauritius, Bourbon and Dakar: *Notes et Documents*, Vol. X, p. 339.

In a homily given at Notre Dame des Victoires on November 20th, 1948, Mgr. Chappouliè gave an excellent commentary on these words of Libermann:

“For the Christian who, by the light of God, sees the missionary posterity of Poullart des Places as a natural development of his spirituality, the fusion of 1848 would not come as a surprise. ... Despite their initial reluctance, Libermann was able to convince his companions to accept a rapprochement with the Society of the Holy Spirit because his understanding of priesthood and the apostolate was very close to that of Poullart des Places. With his sensitive vision of the supernatural, he could see that the grafting of his young family onto the old Spiritan trunk would succeed because they both drew their life from an identical sap. They shared the same love of the neglected and abandoned, a desire to be poor and self-sacrificing priests and a total trust in the Heart of Mary. It was true that the Propaganda greatly favoured such a union and common sense seemed to indicate that this was the way to go; but it would be dragging down the things of God to the level of purely human affairs if we did not look for an explanation at a much higher level for the great success of the union and the magnificent work that the Congregation is still doing today”.

XXI

THE SPIRITANS AND THE DE MONTFORT FATHERS

During the first fortnight of July, 1713, Louis Grignion de Montfort knocked at the door of the Community of the Holy Spirit. He had not been to Paris since 1704, but he knew that God had blessed the initiative of his friend, Claude Poullart des Places; within a few years, the work for the poor scholars had been transformed into a veritable seminary and was full of a vitality that had survived the premature death of its founder.

So far, Louis had not been able to get his life's ambition off the ground – the foundation of “a poor Company of good priests who would work under the banner of Mary”. During his latest apostolic campaign, he had drawn up the outline of his “Company of Mary”, but as Fr. Besnard says in his biography of Louis¹, “It was not enough to have traced a plan that was so beautiful and filled with the apostolic spirit: it had to be put into practice! But God, who had inspired him with such an idea would also show him the way to make it a reality. The first step was to discuss the project with his old friends, the Directors of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in Paris, with whom he had retained the same close ties as he had had with M. des Places”.²

The mission he had just finished preaching had taken a lot out of him and his friends advised him to take a few weeks off.

“... But he was completely focused on his intended journey to Paris and what he hoped to achieve by it. He immediately set out on foot and arrived safely in the capital. One of his first visits was to the Community of the Holy Spirit.

They were already very numerous and included men from many different regions, well-known for their devotion and learning. When he arrived there, they were on recreation. Having greeted them all, they were surprised when he gave a particularly warm embrace to a young seminarian; he had no idea why he had received such a warm greeting, but he was quite flattered. But the saint explained to them all that he greeted him in a special way because he was the most poorly dressed of the whole community and the uniform of poverty was worthy of reverence wherever it was to be found. They were all very edified by these pious words, and they provided a timely remedy for the initial proud reaction of the young man”³

This incident shows that Louis was already well known to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. The young seminarian would hardly have felt so honoured by the embrace of a poor priest who had just walked 90 miles on foot along a dusty road if he was not regarded as a famous

¹ Charles Besnard: “La vie de Messire Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort, Prêtre Missionnaire Apostolique ». The manuscript is preserved in the archive of the Daughters of Wisdom in Rome.

² Besnard, p. 121.

³ Besnard p. 124.

and saintly missionary. The Directors already knew Montfort, either directly or by reputation: Louis Bouïc and Hédan were from his diocese of Saint-Malo; Pierre Thomas, who entered the rue des Cordiers community in March, 1704, would have heard much talk of him. He also met Pierre Caris, the intimate friend of Poullart des Places.

Louis soon found that he had been abandoned by most of the friends he had previously known in Paris. On the other hand,

“... the Directors of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit were amongst those who remained firmly attached to him; feeling deeply indebted to their late founder who was also a close friend of Louis, they showed the same friendship and esteem that Poullart had had for him throughout his life. Such feelings were seen as part of the inheritance they had received from him ... They saw in Grignon de Montfort what they admired in all those other great men who had been presented to them as models: Fr. Eudes, Fr. Honoré, Fr. Le Nobletz and Poullart des Places himself, their founder and father.

“So it was with this background of friendship and mutual esteem that he explained his plan to set up a Company of missionaries ... He read extracts from the Rule he had prepared for those of their students who would be interested in joining this Company.

The Directors praised his plan and undertook to help him by preparing future priests to support and perpetuate this good work. As a consequence of this declaration, which both sides looked on as a sort of official agreement, he wrote at the head of his Rule:

‘There is a seminary in Paris, that of the Holy Spirit, where young clerics who have a vocation for the Missions of the Company of Mary prepare themselves for their entry by study and the acquisition of virtue.’

*And to drive the point home, he repeated these words again later on in the document”.*¹

¹ Charles Besnard, pp. 127-128. Below are the exact words of the « Règle des Prêtres missionnaires de la Compagnie de Marie » :

« This Company only accepts clerics who have already completed their basic studies in a seminary. So those in minor orders are excluded until they have been ordained to the priesthood. However, there is a seminary in Paris where those who feel drawn to the missions of the Company can acquire the necessary knowledge and virtue.

The second passage to which Besnard refers must be the following:

“The Company has, and can only have, two houses in the Kingdom: the first is in Paris and helps the candidates to acquire the apostolic spirit; the second is outside Paris and serves as a house of repose for those who are sick and for the elderly, who pass their days in prayer and solitude, having spent the best years of their lives in saving souls.”

In the manuscript of the Rule, which is preserved in the Mother House of the Company of Mary, it is clear that these two paragraphs were not later additions. It is most likely that this is the manuscript that was presented to the Directors of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. One can only conclude that by the time it was written, and in virtue of agreement of 1703, Grignon de Montfort had the right to consider “the seminary founded by Poullart des Places as belonging to the Company of Mary”. (cf Eyckeler, “Le Testament d’un saint” pp. 24-39).

If de Montfort did not actually live with the Spiritans in the rue Neuve-Sainte-Etienne, he often went there and his spiritual conferences were much appreciated by the seminarians.¹ But he never forgot the reason why he had come to Paris.

He had his own special way of attracting vocations to the Company. For example, there was a young seminarian from Normandy, who was finishing his second year of philosophy, who had the task of ringing the bell to mark the different events during the day. Most of the seminarians used to end up standing around de Montfort during recreations to listen to his impelling conversation, and this young man, Jacques Le Vallois, always tried to get as close as possible to this man whom he regarded as a saint so as not to miss anything of what he had to say. He said to himself, *“Somebody will write the life of this holy man, like that of Fr. Le Nobletz, which we are reading in the refectory at the moment”*.

One day, this man of God, seeing all the young men around him said, *“Which of you will I chose?”* Then looking into their eyes, one after the other, he took off the time-keeper’s hat and replaced it with his own, saying, *“This is the man. He is good. He belongs to me and I will have him”*.

At first, M. Le Vallois thought he was giving him his hat which was very new, but he soon realised that he was referring to himself. He felt a strong desire to join the Company of de Montfort, but he said nothing at this point because he first had to finish his studies. So he spent the next seven years in the Seminary, preparing for the evangelical ministry. We will see later how he followed up his vocation.²

Other members of the Community, both seminarians and directors, were thinking about devoting themselves to the missions. Fr. Pierre Caris, a Spiritan, was even on the point of joining de Montfort after his departure from Paris. Besnard tells us that

“... although there were not enough Directors for the efficient running of their Seminary, they were ready to make a sacrifice to help M. de Montfort; one of them would accompany him on his missionary journeys for the time being, while the rest were still forming those young men who would join him later.

“Pierre Caris was the keenest to follow the holy man. He wanted not just to prepare missionaries but to be a missionary himself. So he arranged things that the choice fell on him. From that moment, which he looked back on as the happiest day of his life, he could think of nothing else than his preparations to depart for the missions. The day finally arrived and with a white stick in his hand and a breviary under his arm, he went to say goodbye to the superior. But the superior told him that he had not slept all night and although he knew that Caris could do so much good on the missions, he was now convinced that he was even more needed in the Community. He felt he could no longer let him go; in short, he was withdrawing the permission that he had

The most likely explanation is that the Manuscript was more in the form of a suggestion presented to the successors of Poullart des Places by de Montfort than a statement of the actual status. What is clear is that by 1713, the Company of Mary possessed neither the Seminary nor the House of Repose.

¹ This was particularly so in the case of the future Fr. Bouïc, who kept a summary of a talk on “Wisdom” amongst his personal papers.

² Besnard p. 131.

previously given him to leave. It was a terrible blow for Pierre Caris, but he accepted it, and the wonderful service he gave to the seminary in the years to come showed how much he was needed".¹

Fr. Bouïc held Fr. de Montfort in high regard and was reluctant to let him leave without some sort of souvenir of his visit:

"I asked him for a memento of his friendship and he gave me a little crucifix and said, 'This is the most precious thing I have in the whole world and I will give it to you'. It was worn away by the many kisses that de Montfort used to give it.

The founder of the Company of Mary left Paris after two months on his own, but he was happy to have achieved the purpose for which he had come – his agreement with the Fathers of the Holy Spirit to provide him with missionaries.

"He wanted to commemorate this happy and holy association with a suitable statue, He commissioned a painted wooden figure of the Blessed Virgin, about one foot and a half in height. She was dressed in an open fan-like cloak, in the shadow of which were 12 priests, 6 on each side, with their hands joined and their eyes fixed on their good Mother, delighted to have been admitted into her Company".²

No document has survived which gives the details of this "association" agreed upon by Fr. de Montfort and the sons of Poullart des Places. One of its first results came as something of a surprise. In 1716, the year of his death, the author of the *"Rule of the Company of Mary"* signed several legal documents as follows: *"Louis-Marie de Montfort Grignon, missionary priest of the Company of the Holy Spirit"* and in his will, he gave the name of his own institute as *"The Community of the Holy Spirit"*.

Recent historians of the de Montfort religious family have come up with several explanations of this change of title. Fr. Eyckeler sees it as an attempt to facilitate relationships between his Congregation and the Seminary of the Holy Spirit which had promised to send him recruits. J-F Dervaux thinks it was for reasons of prudence ... so as to avoid the impression that the Missionaries were a new religious institute. According to Fr. Le Crom, Montfort used the new name to emphasise the strong links that attached his spiritual family to the Community of Poullart des Places and also as a safeguard for his Company of Missionaries which had no recognised legal existence in France.³ The historical section of the Congregation of Rites in Rome seems to have appreciated the value of a *"certain affiliation"* of the Company of Mary and the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.⁴ The above

¹ Besnard, pp. 131-132.

² Besnard, p. 128.

³ Besnard p. 369 note 5. The Community of the Holy Spirit itself did not have Patent Letters at this point, but Louis XIV *"had the intention of giving it a solid foundation, having honoured it in various ways and having given it his protection, but his death intervened"*. (Letter of Pierre Thomas in the Archives of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit).

⁴ Novo Inquisitio... 1947, p. 314: *"Quandi mori (April 28th 1716) la sua Compagnia... aveva... una certa affiliazione al Seminario dello Spirito Santo, che doveva assicurarne i sogetti"*.

explanations have at least one thing in common: they all underline the importance of the ‘association’ of 1713 to which they refer, at least implicitly.

A letter from Fr. de Montfort to Pierre Caris, which is unfortunately lost, would surely have thrown some light on the nature of this association. In February 1716, “he wrote urgently to Fr. Caris, his friend at the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, of his need for some good priests who would join him in his work... One reason he gave for the urgency was that if he were to die before it was concluded, the donations made to him and his successors would remain null and void”.¹

But whatever kind of union there was between Montfort and the sons of Poullart des Places, without it, the Company of Mary would not have survived.²

Fr. Adrien Vatel was the only Spiritan to share in the work of de Montfort. Early in 1715, he had set out for the West Indies, but the frigate in which he was sailing put in at the port of La Rochelle and there he met the great missionary whom he had known in Paris 20 years earlier. After a talk with the bishop of La Rochelle, he decided to join the missions of Poitou.³ The following October, de Montfort got a second recruit – a young priest called René Mulot – but there were no more before his death on April 28th, 1716.

Three years later, in a letter from the priests of the diocese of Poitiers to Pope Clement XI asking his blessing on the apostolate of Frs. Vatel and Mulot, their society is referred to as “*The Apostolic Missionaries of the Company of the Holy Spirit*”.

Around November 1720, Vatel and Mulot were joined by Jacques Le Valois, the same ‘time-keeper’ on whose head de Montfort had placed his own hat, saying “*He belongs to me and I shall have him*”. The departure of Le Valois for Poitou had been speeded up by “*a supernatural event*” which took place in his bedroom on the eve of Pentecost:

*“Fr. Vatel, immediately after the death of Grignon de Montfort, had written to Paris and sent Fr. Pierre Caris two small sketches of the servant of God ... Jacques Le Valois, who had such vivid memories of this man whose society he had longed to join, asked for one of these sketches. He kept it in his bedroom to strengthen what he saw as his missionary vocation, a feeling that had never left him since those early days”.*⁴

“A cleric of the community, who seemed to be somewhat deranged, had entered the bedroom and seeing the portrait, tore it up into three pieces; one part fell into the courtyard, the second remained in the bedroom and the third, which contained the

¹ Joseph Picot de Clorivière: “*La vie de M. Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, Missionnaire Apostolique, Instituteur des Missionnaires du Saint-Esprit et des Filles de la Sagesse* ». Paris, 1785. p. 485.

² In a letter to the author by the Superior General of the Company of Mary, Fr. Heiligers wrote: “*Our Congregation owes a great deal to the Spiritans. Without them, we would no longer exist*”. (Letter of October 19th, 1959).

³ V. Le Crom, pp. 402-404. Vatel was born in Coutances and was already an acolyte when he entered the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in 1710.

⁴ Besnard, p. 309.

head, was picked up by a young man¹ who wanted to copy it.² A few days later, Jacques Le Valois, returning from a journey, entered the room (which was kept locked in his absence) and to his amazement found the picture restored to its original place with almost no trace of the tears.³

There was also a beautiful scent, as if the room was full of flowers, and it seemed to come from the sketch itself; this was confirmed by Fr. Caris and more than a dozen others living in the seminary. Moreover, the other pictures which had been torn up in the same way were never replaced. This extraordinary event was certified by 13 reliable witnesses, including Fr. Bouïc the superior of the Community of the Holy Spirit in Paris, and Frs. Detehar, Caris, Thomas, Hégy, and Dotassini. Jacques Le Valois himself also testified in writing, but he added that it was not this event that had persuaded him to go to Poitou. As we have seen, that decision was made some time before, but it surely affirmed him in following his plan. He had also consulted Fr. Simon Gourdan, a Canon Regular of Saint Victor, who died in the odour of sanctity in 1729; he had encouraged him to follow his feelings.

Having given away all his money, he put himself entirely into the hands of Providence while he began his apprenticeship to the apostolic life. He arrived in the place of his birth in the diocese of Coutances to say goodbye to his parents and put his domestic affairs in order. Then he went to Poitou where he found Frs. Mulot and Vatel engaged in a missionary project at Nueil-sous-Passavant. He travelled to the grave of Grignon de Montfort at Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre and made a novena that he would recommend his undertaking to the Lord and ask, on his behalf, for an apostolic spirit to work for the salvation of the people. Then he returned to join these two fervent missionaries at the mission they had begun at Niort”.⁴



In 1720, the Daughters of Wisdom had set themselves up at Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre so as to be near the tomb of their Founder. Two years later, the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit did likewise and the bishop of La Rochelle authorised the blessing of two oratories. Two rooms were chosen for this purpose. The one in the house of the Daughters of Wisdom was blessed by Fr. Mulot, their superior general, and he dedicated it to the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph.

“The honour of blessing the Missionaries’ house was extended to Fr. Pierre Thomas of the Community of the Holy Spirit in Paris. It was he who had pushed the idea since 1713, at which time de Montfort was visiting the Seminary to encourage students to undertake this form of apostolic life. He was not able to carry out the plan during the life of the Servant of God but he grasped the first opportunity to do so. He blessed the

¹ Grandet, *“Le Vie de Messire Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort”*, Nantes, 1724, p. 276

² Besnard, p. 309

³ Grandet, p. 276.

⁴ Grandet, p. 276.

chapel under the dedication of the Holy Spirit which is why, until this day, the house of the Missionaries at La Rochelle is referred to as “The House of the Holy Spirit”.¹

“This good priest was so full of zeal that he immediately undertook to lead two retreats in the chapels, one for men and one for women. He began with the women’s retreat in the chapel of the Daughters of Wisdom and several people from the neighbouring village of Mortagne took part. But he was unable to finish the retreat that he started for men in the Missionaries’ chapel; his superior, Fr. Mulot, asked him to proceed immediately to conduct a retreat at the Bernardière, followed by another at la Madelaine in the diocese of Nantes.² When he was recalled by Fr. Bouïc, the Superior of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in Paris, he was very disappointed that he could not follow up the attraction he felt for the Missions.³ But, like the rest of the Seminary staff, he always kept up a very close relationship with the Missionaries of Saint-Laurent”.⁴

In 1724, a few months after Fr. Thomas returned to Paris, Fr. Joseph Hédan, another director of the Seminary, took his place at Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre.⁵



In the same year, Joseph Grandet published his “*Vie de Messire Louis-Grignion de Montfort*”. This book refers to the desire of the Missionaries of Poitou to give their little congregation the title that their founder had chosen from the beginning: the name “*Company of Mary*” is used a dozen times while that of the “*Company of the Holy Spirit*” only appears twice. In 1728, a Brief granting indulgences was sent by Pope Benedict XIII to the “*Missionaries of the Society normally known as the Company of Mary under the invocation of the Holy Spirit*”.

Between 1727 and 1732, the Daughters of Wisdom made several attempts to obtain patent letters for their religious family. It is most likely that the request presented at the Court asked for the recognition of the two Congregations of Saint-Laurent, because de Montfort himself had said that the superior of the Missionaries should also be the Superior of the Sisters. The fate suffered by these requests to Louis XV is explained by a venomous article that appeared in “*Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques*”:

“The new apostles, that we referred to before under the name of “Mulotins”, recognise no other name today than “The Fathers or Brothers of the Holy Spirit”. M. Mulot is their leader while their founder was a priest from lower Brittany called Grignion, better known as Montfort, who dedicated himself to the missions with an extraordinary fervour. He died 30 years ago ... For some time, he was planning to found two congregations, one of priests under the name of “The Company of Mary” and the other of girls, directed by the priests, who took the grand name of “The

¹ Besnard, p. 330.

² Besnard: “*La Vie de la Soeur Marie-Louise de Jésus* », Ms. p. 162.

³ Besnard, p. 330.

⁴ Besnard: “*La Vie de la Soeur Marie-Louise de Jésus* », Ms. P. 162.

⁵ Besnard, p. 339.

Daughters of Wisdom". His disciples received many indulgences from Rome, but in France, they were refused Patent Letters. So they had to abandon their grandiose idea of emulating the "Company of Jesus", but so as not to lose the fruit of their labours, they humbly incorporated themselves into the "Bouïcs" (i.e. Spiritans) of Paris".¹

This outburst from a Jansenist publication is not without some interest. It is true that after 1730, the title of *"Company of Mary"* had been temporarily abandoned. The author of *"A Summary of the life and virtues of Sister Marie-Louise of Jesus, Superior of the Daughters of Wisdom"*, published in 1768, went so far as to talk of the *"Missionaries of the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin"*.² But it was inexact to define the friendly relations between the Seminary of Paris and the Institute of Saint-Laurent as an 'incorporation'. Perhaps a certain equivocation, more or less deliberate, was encouraged; this *"subterfuge"*³ would have allowed the *"Missionaries of the Holy Spirit"* to take advantage of the legal recognition accorded to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.

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With the passing of time, the Seminary of Poullart des Places became more and more the 'seedbed' which Grignon de Montfort had dreamt of for his Company. By the end of the 18th century, more than two thirds of the *Missionaries of the Holy Spirit* had been formed there. After his aborted departure for the missions, Fr. Pierre Caris made up for his disappointment by spending much time seeking disciples to fulfil the dream of Grignon. He used to encourage young men by telling them his own story:

"He said to one of them, "you are a happy man and I will do everything to help you. I have always wanted to do the same thing, but it was not possible. I made many requests to join the missions and on one occasion I was accepted and was on the point of departing when my sins caught up with me".

He repeated the same thing to another young man who consulted him:

"Carry on, my dear child, leave for Poitou without delay. You will do a lot of good there. Go and take my place ... It is only obedience that has kept me back and is still preventing me from going today".⁴

The memory of de Montfort was also perpetuated by the statue he gave to the community in 1713. In his biography, Besnard speaks of the veneration the community had for the statue, even 50 years later:

"Its age and the number of moves it has undergone have caused the twelve figures to be displaced; but the picture of the Blessed Virgin still has pride of place in a room

¹ July 17th, 1846, p. 116.

² Page 17. Another publication of the same period bore the title: *"A Memorandum against the establishment of the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit, under the invocation of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin, and of the Daughters of Wisdom"*.

³ This expression is to be found in Dervaux, p. 334, which also speaks of *"deliberate confusion, prudently adopted"*. (P. 708).

⁴ Besnard, pp. 132-133.

where the Directors and students go each day and recite the “Ave Maria” and the “Sub Tuum”, either after their prayers or when they are going out or returning from a visit to the town”.¹

There was also the portrait of de Montfort which had been miraculously repaired and inspired Fr. Le Valois to leave for the mission. In 1774, it was sent to Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre.²

Then there were the frequent visits of the Missionaries to Paris. The best known are those who came to seek Patent Letters at Versailles for the two de Montfort institutes. In 1750, after further fruitless attempts at the Court, Fr. Audubon, the successor of Fr. Mulo, visited the Seminary to seek recruits for his Congregation. Four of them volunteered; three were from the diocese of Amiens and the fourth from Coutances.³ This splendid catch was not the only joy he experienced at the rue des Postes; he was able to greet a young philosophy student in the Seminary called Louis Grignon, a nephew of the great missionary.⁴

Fr. Audubon died in 1755, a short time after another visit to Paris and Versailles. He was succeeded by Fr. Charles Besnard, the biographer of de Montfort and Sister Marie-Louise of Jésus. Born in Rennes in 1717, he was only 20 and a student in minor orders when he read the book of Grandet and decided to consecrate himself to the Missions of Poitou. He completed his clerical studies in his home town and was ordained there in 1741; but before going to Saint-Laurent at the invitation of Fr. Audubon, he did two further years of theology at the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in Paris. Throughout his 33 years as Superior, the fact that he was a ‘Spiritan’⁵ and a close friend of his professors in the rue des Postes proved invaluable for the recruitment to his Congregation. When he came to Paris in 1757, he left with three new recruits, including Jean-François Becquet, the nephew of the fourth successor of Claude Poullart des Places.⁶

In 1765, Fr. Charles Besnard made a further unsuccessful visit to Versailles. These Patent Letters, so important for the survival of the two institutes of de Montfort, were finally signed 8 years later. In them, the disciples of Grignon de Montfort were referred to uniquely as *The Missionary Priests of the Holy-Spirit*.⁷ The Directors of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit played a considerable part in this ultimate success: they mobilised the support of their friends and protectors at the Court of Versailles to help the petition.

¹ Besnard, pp. 128-129.

² Cf. Dalin: “*Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu, Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, instituteur de la Congrégation des Missionnaires du Saint-Esprit de Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre* », Paris, 1839, p. 453.

³ “*Chroniques de la Sagesse*”, First volume, p. 376.

⁴ J. Hervé: “*Notes sur la famille du Bienheureux Grignon de Montfort* », Rennes, 1927, pp. 64 and 67-68.

⁵ For the whole of the 18th century, the name “Spiritan” was given to all the former students of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. In her *Journal*, Catherine Briand refers to her nephew, Yves-François Duchêne, as either a Missionary priest of the Holy Spirit, a Mulo, or a Spiritan. (cf. the Archives of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit).

⁶ *Chroniques de la Sagesse*, Volume I, p. 376.

⁷ The full text of the Petition to the King for Patent Letters can be found in “*Nova Inquisitio*”, p. 304.

On his final visit to Paris in 1786, Fr. Besnard was accompanied by Fr. Micquignon, another past student of the rue des Postes. It was this 'Spiritan' who was elected to succeed Besnard in 1788. Fr. Becquet wrote to the new superior: *"Much as I regret the passing of your predecessor, I am delighted to hear that you will succeed him"*.¹ So the missionaries of Saint-Laurent had no reason to doubt the continuing support and friendship of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.



Then the Revolution came. In the West of France, the disciples of Grignon de Montfort played a part that Pierre de la Gorce rightly praised:

"To begin with, the Revolution did not displease them because they were ordinary people. But they became terrified as committed Catholics; as soon as they saw the "Civil Constitution", they were bitterly opposed to it ...

"They were unable to preach, but that did not stop them; where the word could no longer be used, there was always the pen. Their house at Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre became their arsenal from where they distributed brochures, pictures and printed cards. The titles showed their purpose: "Sermons of a good priest", "A discussion on the new French Constitution", "A model for persecuted Christians", "The Church and the Civil Constitution".²

An important thing to remember about these men, who were so active in preparing the people for this assault on the Christian faith in Vendée, was that most of them were not from that area at all. Many came from Normandy, Brittany and Picardy, others from Orleans and the Jura. The Superior, Fr. Micquignon, was from the diocese of Amiens and Fr. Régnault, an old and popular missionary, from Boulogne-sur-Mer. Fr. Dauché who was killed at La Rochelle in 1793 was from the small village of Eu in Upper Normandy.³ Fr. Duguet had only arrived at Saint Laurent in 1787. Despite his youth, he quickly became their inspiration and encouraged his fellow-priests in their sufferings. The people looked on him as a great preacher and writer. He produced many pamphlets, including the famous *"Instruction on the intruders in the form of a conversation between a priest and a simple country layman"*.

At the start of the 19th century, another "Spiritan", Fr. Yves-François Duchêne, was elected Superior of the Congregation. He led it from 1810 to 1820. He was the nephew of Mgr. Briand, the bishop of Quebec; he himself had opted for the Missions in Canada, but the presence of the English prevented him from crossing the Atlantic, so he joined the de Montforts in 1785.⁴



When in 1690 the Poullart des Places family moved from rue Saint-François to the rue Saint-Sauveur in Rennes, only God knew that it would result in the friendship of two schoolboys

¹ Letter of July 7th, 1788. (Archives of the Company of Mary.)

² « *Histoire religieuse de la Révolution Française* », Vol II, pp. 349-356.

³ Cf. Dervaux : « *Les Filles de la Sagesse* », vol I, p. 134.

⁴ For Fr. Duchêne, see Dervaux: *"Les Filles de la Sagesse"*. Vol I, and the *Journal* of Catherine Briand, his aunt. He was born at Pordic in 1761 and studied at the Seminary of the Holy Spirit from 1780 to 1785.

that would have dramatic effects for the next 100 years through the close and fruitful collaboration of two congregations.

The words of Charles Besnard, written in 1767, remained true right up to the beginning of the 19th century:

“This friendship never changed as time went by; it was carefully cultivated on both sides by men with the same way of looking at things, the same feelings, the same spirit of poverty, the same enthusiasm and trust in Divine Providence, the same commitment to the glory of God and the salvation of souls”.¹

¹ Besnard, p. 129. In the 19th century, the association between the two institutes produced no practical results, despite the desires expressed from both sides up until 1832. (Cf. Cardinal TISSERANT: *“Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort, the schools of charity and the origins of the Brothers of Saint-Gabriel”*. Luçon, 1960, pp. 265-266.)

XXII

THE SPIRITANS AND THE DAUGHTERS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

We have already met René-Jean Allenou de la Ville-Angevin in this biography of Poullart des Places. He was one of the first of his students. Very quickly, this young Breton distinguished himself in his studies and commitment. Having completed two years of philosophy, he was appointed as a tutor in theology. In 1712, he left the Seminary of the Holy Spirit where he had spent nearly nine years and on February 16th, he was ordained priest by the bishop of Saint-Brieuc. Two years later, his uncle, Fr. Allenou de la Garde, resigned as parish priest of Plérin to make way for his nephew.

At Légué, a small fishing village within the parish, the new parish priest met Marie Balavenne, René Burel and Charlotte Corbel, three young women who ran a small school and taught catechism. They spent much of their time looking after the poor and the sick and organised a monthly meeting of a Franciscan Third Order that had been functioning in Plérin for more than a century. From this small core of devoted people, René-Jean established a congregation consecrated to the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Conception.

The first notice we have regarding the new foundation dates from 1771. It records that after the resignation of Fr. Allenou de la Garde, *“his nephew, Fr. René-Jean Allenou de la Ville-Angevin, continued to look after these young women. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he guided them and drew up a rule of life which was based on the one he himself had followed in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in Paris, where he had done his studies, making the necessary changes to fit in with the different aim of this new religious family”*.¹

The original Rule of the Community of Plérin has been lost, but the Daughters of the Holy Spirit have a copy of it which was made for the sisters who set up a house at Taden in the Diocese of Saint-Malo. The title of this copy is *“Particular and general rules of the house of the Sisters of Charity in the town of Taden ... dedicated and consecrated to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, conceived without sin”*.

The relationship is obvious between the Rules of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit and the Daughters of the Holy Spirit. The Rule of Poullart des Places was extremely succinct, but he had plenty of opportunity to clarify the meaning in the subsequent commentaries he made on it. Fr. de la Ville-Angevin used both the text and the commentaries of his old superior when he wrote his rule for the sisters. Here are the opening paragraphs:

“To be received into this house, the young ladies must be full of charity so as to be able to carry out their duties; they will honour, as perfectly as possible, the three adorable Persons of the Blessed Trinity, but they will have a particular devotion to the Holy Spirit, the love of the Father and the Son, whom they will see as their father in a special way. So their principal feast day will be the day of Pentecost.

¹ *“Abrégé de l’Institut des Filles du Saint-Esprit de la paroisse de Plérin, évêché de Saint-Brieux »*. (A Synopsis of the Institute of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit in the parish of Plérin in the Diocese of Saint-Brieux). This manuscript is to be found in the Mother House of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit.

And as the best way to obtain graces from the Holy Spirit is to elicit the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary, his beloved Spouse, they will also have a particular devotion to her. They will regard her as their patron and advocate with their father, the Holy Spirit; they will use all the titles and qualities that the Church ascribes to her, and they will celebrate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in a special way”.

Fr. de la Ville-Angevin drew up this rule in the early years of his residence in the parish of Plérin. It was thanks to him that Plérin became a new centre of devotion to the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Conception. In 1718, their dual devotion was underlined by the words of the commitment signed by the original Daughters of the Holy Spirit: *“Signed at the Port of Légué in the house of charity, on the day and the feast of Pentecost and renewed on the day and the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, December the eighth, one thousand seven hundred and eighteen”.*

The following year, the rule was submitted to Mgr. Fréat de Boissieux and all the senior parish priests; it was approved and given the seal of his coat of arms. The Bishop agreed to be their protector and their first superior.

The Rule of these new religious shows how much the young parish priest of Plérin must have been influenced by the years he had spent at the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. If he did not know the seminary rule by heart, he certainly retained a good idea of its contents. Let us take a few examples. Every month, the poor scholars had to prepare themselves for a holy death:

“One day out of every month shall be chosen for serious meditation on death. The day before, everyone will receive Holy Communion as if it were the last day of his life. The meditation for that day will be on death and the particular examination will concentrate on the order that they must put into all their small duties. The reading will be on an appropriate subject. However, regular studies must not be interrupted nor shall the number of spiritual exercises be increased.

*This day will pass as intended if everyone carries out his routine actions as though it is the last time they will ever be performed. They will try to go to bed that night as if they were entering their coffin, with the pious thought that perhaps they will not wake up the following day”.*¹

In the Rule of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit, this same preparation for death is to be found:

“On the Saturday before the first Sunday of each month, they will do one hour of meditation – a half hour in the morning on death and another, before dinner, on the ways in which they have broken the Rule. In addition, in the morning they will read for half an hour on death. The examination of conscience that day will focus on a preparation for death.

They will try to make their confession that day as if it were the last one of their life and they will go to bed that evening with the same thoughts that they would like to have at the time of their death, imagining their bed to be their tomb. The following

¹ “Règlements Généraux et Particuliers” no. 43. (Koren, p. 173).

*day, they will try to take communion with the same feelings that they would like to have when they receive Viaticum at the time of their death”.*¹

There is similar parallelism in the passages about meals:

Rule of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit

“Both the Superior and the students should regard themselves as poor people to whom Providence offers the food that is served in the refectory”

*“All will eat in common but in total silence, paying less attention to feeding the body than nourishing the soul through the public reading that takes place during the meal”.*²

Rule of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit

“The Daughters who enter this community must see themselves as the poor of Jesus Christ. Therefore, they will use the most ordinary food.

*During the meals, they will concentrate on the readings, remembering that it is not sufficient to nourish the body: the soul must also be fed”.*³

It is not possible to quote all the pages in the two Rules which show that they have a common source. Perhaps the most interesting sections for us of the Rule of Fr. de la Ville-Angevin are those that have no direct parallel in the Rule of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit but which clearly echo the exhortations of Poullart des Places. This is the case, for example, with the following quotation regarding the virtues of humility and kindness:

“These two virtues are inseparable and the foundation of all the others; they are so essential for girls who want to enter this foundation that without them, there is no way in which they would be able to look after the sick, teach in schools or fulfil any other ministry.

To grow in these virtues, they must study the example of Jesus himself and absorb the special lesson that he gave us; “Learn of me, for I am gentle and humble of heart”. They must also convince themselves that they deserve nothing, either from God or from men, because of their lack of talent, their sinfulness and their failure to cooperate with the grace of God.

They will suffer with patience and joy all the insults, injuries and calumnies that the world will throw at them and they will tell themselves that it is only right that other creatures should revolt against them, just as they themselves have turned against God by their sins.

¹ “Synopsis ...”, p. 52.

² Nos. 58 and 67

³ Pp. 46-47

They will practise this humility and kindness not just amongst themselves but towards everybody they meet, especially the poor and children, seeing them as far more important than themselves and more worthy to receive the mercy of God”.

In reading this page, we can only think of how often Claude Poullart des Places “urged his poor scholars not just to accept humiliations from others but even to search out such gifts from the Lord”.

Many times during his formation at the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, Fr. de la Ville-Angevin would have been told that a good priest should possess both virtue and knowledge. He insisted on the same for his sisters; they must acquire not just charity but also a competence in caring for the sick.

At Taden, near Dinan, the Count and Countess de la Garaye had transformed some of the buildings on their estate into a hospital. The Count had already acquired some knowledge of chemistry, but to give a better service to the sick, he set about learning pharmacy and surgery. His wife followed his example and showed such skill with the lancet that “surgeons in Paris and England were sending her patients that they dared not treat themselves”.¹

It was to competent teachers like these that Fr. de la Ville-Angevin sent his girls. They included his own cousin, Miss Allenou de Grand-Champs, who felt attracted to religious life but could not decide which group to join.

“Her cousin was informed and he led her to opt for this new foundation. He knew that three young uneducated girls living together would not attract anybody, but that God was very good at making something out of nothing. The Lord would expect her to suffer, but he felt that that is where God wanted her to be and her example would attract others to join.

It needed the courage of somebody like Mademoiselle de Grand Champs to accept this invitation to join such an innovation, where the future was still far from clear; she told him that she was more than happy to help somebody with such inspiring and holy plans. So she entered in 1721, convinced that God was calling her. And she was not mistaken because this virtuous young girl became the pride and joy of the society, as is still the case today.

The concern of the priest of Plérin for the spiritual and material well-being of his daughters led him to search for means for their improvement; he managed to get a place for his cousin in the hospital of la Garaye so that she could study the way to treat poor, sick people. Before long, she was able to produce all sorts of medicine and perform surgical operations which a woman could reasonably be asked to do. Eventually, she returned to Plérin and passed on all she had just learnt to her sisters.

“In 1726, the Count de la Garaye, well known for his generosity, founded a house in Taden for three sisters where they could stay while pursuing their studies at his hospital. All the sisters passed some time there.

The enthusiasm and devotion with which these sisters carried out their duties inspired several of the nobility to start something similar in their own parishes”.

¹ Dervaux: op. cit p. 375

On May 11th, 1741, the day of the Ascension, the parish priest of Plérin headed for La Rochelle, from where he set sail for Canada. But he never forgot his daughters; his official and theological duties in Quebec never prevented him from encouraging them to remember all the instruction he had given them:

“Love and practise poverty as Jesus did; detach yourselves from everything and from yourselves. Never worry if you are lacking something of all the conveniences that you had in the past. Search out privations with a sort of enthusiasm. Be always happy with the little that you receive...”

“...Love the poor, sick people and help them as much as you can. Look after them, because they are the living image of the suffering Jesus Christ...”

The founder died in the odour of sanctity on September 16th, 1753.¹ Today, the Daughters of the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Conception number around 4,000, working in France, North America and Africa. They still base their lives on his wisdom and their Rule remains an echo of the one that was drawn up by Poullart des Places for his poor scholars.²

¹ Abrégé, ms. cit.

² For more information on the subsequent life of Fr. de la Ville-Angevin in Canada, consult Fr. Henry Koren: *“Knaves or Knights? A History of the Spiritan Missionaries in Acadia and North America, 1732-1839”*. Pittsburgh, 1962

XXIII

AN APOSTOLIC SPIRITUALITY

If the sons of Poullart des Places are still known today as “*Spiritans*”, it is not because they dedicated their hall of residence in the rue des Cordiers to the Holy Spirit. The consecration made at Pentecost, 1703, was not that of a house but of 12 young clerics who were to be the forerunners of a large family of priests. Consecrated to the Holy Spirit, the Spiritans would adore Him in a special way. At the same time, they would have a deep devotion to the Virgin conceived without sin, because it was under her protection that their founder offered them to the Holy Spirit. So there is a direct link between their cult of the third Person of the Blessed Trinity and their Marian devotion. They were to be the “*Oblates*” of the Holy Spirit but only because they would be presented to Him by the Immaculate Virgin.

This double devotion of the Spiritans runs through the whole of their spirituality. The common prayers chosen by Poullart des Places were obviously those of a community dedicated to the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. The “*Office of the Holy Spirit*”, and the Marian prayers known as “*Litanies, Inviolata, The Little Crown of the Immaculate Conception*” were the principal ones. According to their Rule, the Spiritans would celebrate yearly the feasts of Pentecost and the Immaculate Conception, “*the first to obtain the fire of God’s love from the Holy Spirit and the second to obtain the purity of angels through the intercession of Our Lady – two virtues which will be the foundation of all their devotions*”.¹

The same inspiration can be found in the Rule of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit:

“To be received into this house, the young ladies must be full of charity so as to be able to carry out their duties; they will honour, as perfectly as possible, the three adorable Persons of the Blessed Trinity, but they will have a particular devotion to the Holy Spirit, the love of the Father and the Son, whom they will see as their father in a special way. So their principal feast day will be the day of Pentecost... Purity is the characteristic virtue of both the Daughters of the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin”.

All the other virtues can be built on the same foundation. For example, Fr. de la Ville-Angevin introduces his chapter on poverty with the following words:

“The Daughters who consecrate themselves to God in this house will remember that by taking the Holy Spirit as their Father and the Blessed Virgin as their Mother, they are giving up all desire for possessions...”

On May 27th, 1703, kneeling before the statue of the *Black Virgin of Paris*, Poullart des Places offered all his disciples, both present and to come, to the Holy Spirit. Each year, on the feasts of Pentecost and the Immaculate Conception, the Spiritans would gather round a statue of Our Lady and repeat this offering in a solemn consecration of themselves:

“Holy Mary, my mother and my queen, prostrate at your feet I implore your assistance. Help me, your unworthy servant, to dedicate myself to the Holy Spirit, your divine spouse, in whose honour, despite my fragility, I wish to make a very

¹ Règlements, no 2. Cf. Koren, p. 165.

*important commitment. Listen to me, my loving mother; all powerful Holy Spirit, listen to my mother and through her intercession, enlighten my mind with your brightness and enfold my heart with the fire of your love, so that in this house which is consecrated to you, I might only do what you want and everything that will lead to your glory, my sanctification and the edification of my brothers”.*¹

The texts of two sermons given in the chapel of the rue Lhomond by Fr. Warnet, the 7th Superior General, can be found in the General Archives of the Spiritans at Chevilly-Larue. A few quotations will show the extent to which devotion to the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin formed the bedrock of spiritan spirituality:

“This ceremony (of consecration) is an act by which we give ourselves to the Holy Spirit, under the invocation of Mary conceived without sin, and to Mary herself through the grace and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

This consecration is an essential part of the spirit of our constitutions; the promises that we make are part of the inheritance that our forefathers have left us. They were poor as regards the goods of this world, but the gifts of the Holy Spirit were the treasure that they really valued.

*As children of Mary and the Holy Spirit, we shall strive by our example and our words to make them known, loved and served. In this way, we will follow in the footsteps of our fathers, knowing that this is the best way for us to fulfil the wishes of the Holy Spirit; let us try to imitate them and so be the true heirs of their virtues as well as their name. In that way, we can call Mary ‘our Mother’ in a special way; we will be part of her family and the Holy Spirit will look upon us as His children”.*²

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For the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary founded in 1841, Fr. Francis Libermann foresaw a triple consecration:

“First of all, the Congregation is consecrated to the Blessed Trinity; the whole point of its existence is to seek the glory of God in all things.

Secondly, we belong to and are entirely consecrated to Our Lord Jesus Christ. We have been given to him by his Father for the work that he wants us to do. These two consecrations are essential for any apostolate. But what distinguishes us from all the other workers in the Lord’s vineyard is the consecration that we make of our whole Society, of each of its members and of all their works and undertakings to the Holy

¹ *“O Mater et Domine mea, sancta Maria, mater Dei, virgo sancta, dulce peccatorum refugium, efficax pauperum consolatrix; in hac lacrymarum valle, suavis spes mea ego humili ac devoto corde coram te prostrates, ad tuam clementiam recurro, ut tuum adjuves servulum se dedicantem, consecrantem et voventem augustissimo sponso Spiritui Sancto, propter cuius honorem, infirmus licet valde, aliquid prestantissimum hodie polliceri desidero.*

Audi me, Mater benigna; audi matrem benignam, Spiritus omnipotens ut, sub auspiciis tantae matris, digneris lumen tuum menti meae infundere, et ignem tui amoris in corde meo accendere; ut quae in hac domo, Virgine favente, tuo cultui dicata, tibi placita sunt; quaeque vel ad tuum honorem vel ad mei sanctificationem, vel ad fratrum aedificationem spectant, exsequi fideliter possim. Eia ergo. (From “Preces diurnae”, p. 83).

² Arch. C.S.Sp. Extracts from the homilies of Fr. Warnet, given on December 8th, 1837 and May 26th, 1839.

*Heart of Mary, a heart that is eminently apostolic and burning with a desire for the glory of God and the salvation of souls”.*¹

The formula of consecration for the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary can be found in the *Provisional Rule*, drawn up at the very start of his congregation:

“O my mother, the Queen of my soul, come to my help; remember all those souls I must save from eternal misery. If I am left to my own weakness, they will surely perish; but if you take me under your protection, I will be capable of anything!

*So please accept me into the number of those privileged children of your merciful heart. Mother of my God, if you will grant me this great favour, if through my superior you will receive me into the Society of missionaries of your holy Heart, I promise that I will serve your beloved Son there for the rest of my life with the greatest fidelity. I give you my soul so that it may belong to you as a child belongs to its mother. I will love you all my life with a tender and filial love. I will preach your glory everywhere and I will try to engrave your love and that of Jesus into people’s hearts”.*²

But the founder of this new congregation had been providentially prepared to become the successor of Poullart des Places and to embrace his ideas. Libermann had been greatly influenced by the spirituality of Fr. Louis Lallemand, the master of the *School of the Holy Spirit*, and it has been shown how *“all his spiritual doctrine could be called a ‘school’ of docility to the Holy Spirit”*.³ When one of his early collaborators complained that the proposed union with the Congregation of Poullart des Places would inevitably lead to a lessening of their devotion to the Holy Heart of Mary, he wrote to reassure him:

*“You belong to the Holy Heart of Mary and always will do. Our union with the Community of the Holy Spirit can only increase our devotion and love for this Heart which gave birth to our little Society. We have always found our peace and fulfilment in the Heart of Mary, so full of the overflowing generosity of the Holy Spirit and if we have not so far expressed this fullness of the Holy Spirit in the Heart of Mary in words, it was already the essence of our devotion towards her. So we are not changing anything; we are simply putting down on paper what we already believed”.*⁴

Having become the 10th successor of Poullart des Places, Libermann lost no time in updating the Act of Consecration quoted above, written 7 or 8 years previously, to the new circumstances. The first paragraph was not altered in the revised version, but this is what follows:

“Please accept, my Mother, the offering that I make to you of my whole self, and offer me in your turn to the Holy Spirit, your beloved spouse. All I desire is to devote and consecrate myself entirely to the Holy Spirit and to your Immaculate Heart. In the footsteps of Jesus, I want to live and die, dedicate and immolate myself in this Society

¹ N.D. II, pp. 237-238.

² N.D. II, p. 358.

³ Joseph Lecuyer c.s.sp.; *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Volume III, Column 1494.

⁴ N.D. Vol XII, p. 133.

of Missionaries which is totally consecrated to the Holy Spirit and your Immaculate Heart.

Holy Mother of God, if I am granted this special favour and am received into this Society, I will make a firm and irrevocable resolution that this is where I will serve your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, my Lord, for the rest of my life. I give you my soul so that it will belong to you as a child belongs to its mother; I will serve with a tender and filial love and I will preach your glory everywhere.

I open my heart and abandon it to the Divine Spirit; may He fill and possess it and act within it as my sovereign master. Under his guidance, I want to pour his love into those souls who will be confided to my care through the goodness of your well-beloved Son”.¹

∞

We have seen that the religious of Fr. de la Ville-Angevin “took the Holy Spirit as their Father and the Blessed Virgin as their mother”. Later, Fr. Warnet would say of the Spiritans: “It is a family feast which has brought us together; a father in the person of the Holy Spirit and a mother who is the Virgin Mary”.

So the two-fold devotion to the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin, adopted by Poullart des Places, was the expression of a spirituality which is eminently apostolic. Fidelity to the Holy Spirit and the imitation of Mary have the same objective: an ever more perfect formation of Christ within ourselves and our brothers, for the greater glory of the Father.

¹ N.D. X, p. 499.

XXIV

A LASTING IMPRINT

If it is surprising that the work of Poullart des Places survived his premature death, it is even more so that it spread as a result of his sons' fidelity to his ideal of priestly and apostolic life. Love of poverty, concern for abandoned souls, doctrinal purity and loyalty to the Holy See became the heritage that generations of Spiritans would pass on to their successors.

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Having been founded precisely to help poor clerical students, the Seminary of the Holy Spirit continued to live by an exceptional attachment to poverty. François Pottier wrote in 1749:

"Our students continue to live a life of poverty ... We are always in debt. The baker is for ever knocking at the door for the money owed to him for providing bread to the community; six weeks ago, we were faced with having no bread at all".¹

In 1783, one of the Directors of the MEP, referring to his friend Fr. Becquet, said: *"He is always at his wits' end trying to keep the seminary going".²* Throughout the 18th century, the superiors and bursars of the community lived on a financial knife-edge. The fact that they accepted such an impossible state of affairs, humanly speaking, can only be explained by their love of poverty. This shines through the words of Pierre Caris who somehow managed to feed the poor students for more than 40 years:

"I try as much as I can to pay off our debts but I can never clear them completely; times are so difficult and the alms we receive are not very many and not very large. But I don't complain about God's providence. It's better to be poor than rich; I am happy as long as we can provide what is necessary (which others would call 'dying of hunger'!). After all, Jesus, our Master, chose to live and die a poor man".³

Providence came up with some surprising schemes to make sure that Pierre Caris obtained what was necessary:

"One day, a gentleman, who saw him passing by, sent him a message along these lines: 'You go around with an expression on your face which is both happy and sad. Can I be of any help?' Caris replied: 'I am Caris, a poor priest; I have 80 young men to feed but not an ounce of bread to give them'. In no time at all, a bag of gold coins was put into his hands.

Another time when things were very hard, the Lord used an even more surprising, if less agreeable, way of supplying the necessities of life. Caris was walking down the rue Saint-Antoine when the smelly contents of a chamber pot, emptied by a distracted servant from the floor above, landed on his head. The Master of the house

¹ From the correspondence of Mgr. Pottier with his family. (Archives of the Missionnaires Etrangères de Paris (MEP), vol. 508).

² Letter of M. Boiret to M. Blandin, 24th December, 1783. (Arch. MEP vol. 33).

³ A Letter of 1734. (Arch. C.S.Sp.)

was highly embarrassed and full of apologies. He said to him: 'Here are 500 francs for the Spiritans; that's the fine I would have been given if you had reported me to the police!'. The good Lord and the good Fr. Caris managed to raise money for the poor scholars in a surprising variety of ways!'.¹

One day, when both the butcher and the baker refused to give any further credit to the Spiritans, Fr. Caris spent the whole morning in the streets of Paris and finally came back to the house empty-handed. At midday, the community went to the refectory as usual, said the grace before meals and followed it immediately with grace after meals because there was nothing to detain them on the table. They filed out of the refectory and went to visit the Blessed Sacrament in thanksgiving, as was their custom, and while they were there, an abundance of food suddenly turned up from different sources. So the community returned to the dining hall and after an unusually good dinner, they sang the *Te Deum* together. Later that afternoon, enough money arrived to pay off their outstanding debts.²

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Even though they took no vows, the sons of Poullart des Places followed a very strict practice of poverty. In his last will and testament, Fr. Becquet, the Superior General wrote:

"I declare that my personal habit, underwear and old clothes, as well as the furniture, and books that will be in the room where I shall die in the Seminary, will all belong to the Community, according to the custom of the said Seminary".³

Fr. Jacques Lars, who was the bursar or superior of the Seminary of Meaux for 46 years, had "a father's heart" for the poor and abandoned people. In providing for the poor scholars, he followed the example of Poullart des Places: "By using what he had wisely, by saving money where he could and avoiding unnecessary expenses, he was able to provide for a large number of young students; without him, they would have had to terminate their studies for the priesthood". By the time he died in 1782, most of the priests in the diocese of Meaux, who had passed through the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, were indebted to Fr. Lars for being able to continue with their preparation for ministry.⁴

The example given by the directors of the Seminary often made a lasting impression on the students. A missionary in Guiana wrote to Fr. Becquet:

"I only wish that we priests in Guiana were one heart and one soul and not obsessed with what is "mine" and what is "yours". It would be wonderful if we could be like you, the Fathers of the Seminary, living in a community with a bursar who would give us exactly what we needed, and would present an exact expense account at the end of the year to the missionaries".⁵

Both the archives of the Company of Mary and those of the Missions-Etrangères de Paris witness to the spirit of poverty that so many Spiritans took with them from their seminary

¹ G. Goyau: "La Congrégation du Saint-Esprit", Paris, 1937, p. 28.

² Archives C.S.Sp.

³ Archives C.S.Sp.

⁴ "Almanach historique de Meaux", 1783.

⁵ Letter from Fr. Lanoë, November 6th, 1784.

when they were posted to different missions. As a student, and then as a director, Joseph Hédan spent 20 years in the seminary of rue Lhomond. He devoted the rest of his life to the poor in the Hospital of La Rochelle.

“He was extremely mortified; he loved the poor and wanted to be poor himself. When he was close to death, he only had one ecu and six livres to his name and he gave those away to a poor man. He used to say that he was born poor, lived poor and wanted to die poor. At his request, he was buried alongside poor people”.

A missionary, who lived austerely himself, tells us of the heroism with which Mgr. Kerhervé, the Vicar Apostolic of Su-Tchuen, practised poverty:

“We lived together for more than a year and everything he did spoke of poverty. He had one very old soutane and only wore shoes when he was presiding at the altar. He wrote many books for the education of young people and his greatest joy was in teaching catechism to the children, especially those who had been written of as ‘stupid’”.

In the end, he died at sea, on his way to prevent a threatened massacre of some Siamese seminarians:

“As he was leaving, I did everything I could to make him take some of the money we had left, but he gave it to a student and instructed him not to return it to me until he had set sail. He kept absolutely nothing for himself because he wanted to die a poor man”.¹

Bishop Pottier chose these words for his Episcopal coat of arms; *“Ama nesciri et pro nihilo reputari”* (“Love to live unknown and be reckoned as a nobody”).² He was regarded as a model of spiritual poverty, but he loved to joke about it:

“We don’t use our money to live a life of luxury: we live like the people around us – rice, herbs, occasional bits of pork, poultry if we are given some, and rice wine. Our clothes are such that if a poor Chinaman were to wear them, nobody would notice any difference. I have only three shirts to my name and they are all more than two years old. My bed is a mat, laid on a bunch of straw ... The bishop’s house could hardly be called a ‘palace’; there is no gilding, tapestries or mirrors. The walls are made of mud, coated with lime. But this hard life has never made me sick and despite the poverty, I lack nothing. As long as we have the basic necessities, we will always be rich. It is only the first step which is painful. Apart from life and clothing, nothing else really matters”.³

This last sentence reminds us of the text of the Spiritan Rule: *“Habentes alimenta et quibus tegantur, his contenti sint”*. (Rules, Chapter II, 8.).

¹ Letter of Fr. Artaud, July 22nd, 1768. (Archives of the MEP, vol. 744, p. 868-876.

² *Imit.* L. I, ch. 11.

³ *Nouvelles des Missions Orientales*, quoted by *Nouvelles Ecclesiastiques*, 1787, p. 102.

The same love of poverty was typical of the Spiritans who went to work in America. Fr. Allenou de la Ville-Angevin, who had become the Dean of the Chapter of Quebec, lived a very poor life; he gave all the income from his benefice to the Bishop, asking that it should be used for charitable purposes.¹ Fr. Lanoë, a missionary in Guiana, wrote in a letter to the staff of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in Paris:

*“When I had the privilege of being associated with your house, I did not think about appointments, retirement or any other temporal advantage; my only ambition was to cooperate with the plan of God. Jesus Christ, my Master was a lot worse off than I, but I prefer his poverty and the ignominy of his cross to all the riches and honours that this world has to offer.”*²

There are other instances of former students of the Holy Spirit seminary referring back to their common formation in a spirit of poverty when disputes arose amongst them. For example, in 1820, the local government of the town of Saint-Xandre, close to La Rochelle, decided to cut the salaries of the Daughters of Wisdom who had run the local school and looked after the sick for more than a century. Because of this, their superior, Fr. Duchêne, decided to withdraw the sisters to their headquarters in Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre. But the parish priest of Saint-Xandre, Fr. Royer, begged him to change his mind. He wrote:

*“Remember, dear confrere, that the sisters’ establishment at Saint-Xandre is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, of the Daughters of Wisdom. You and I were both trained in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit and whilst there, we acted as doorkeepers, doing the washing up and so on. The founders of the Missions of Saint-Laurent (Grignion de Montfort) and the Seminary of the Holy Spirit (Poullart des Places) were very close friends and both formed their disciples in a spirit of dedication, poverty and charity. Is it possible that a superior of Saint-Laurent, who was also a former student at the Saint-Esprit, would allow the oldest establishment of the Daughters of Wisdom to be dissolved for financial reasons?”*³

To finish this brief account of the enduring Spiritan poverty of the followers of Poullart des Places, let us return to his most faithful disciple - Fr. Pierre Caris. This *“spiritual and temporal father”*⁴ of the poor students came to be known as *“the poor priest”*. When he was 72, he could no longer walk the streets of Paris. Because all those who knew him thought he was a saint, when his death was imminent, his confreres decided to prepare a vault where his body would rest under the community chapel. But when he heard this, Pierre Caris summoned two solicitors to the house. He wanted to follow the example of Poullart des Places and be buried in a common grave with the poor. So he dictated his last will and testament to make sure that his final wishes would be observed by his confreres: *“I want my burial to follow the normal custom of the House”*.⁵

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¹ *Bulletin des recherches historiques*, Quebec, vol. XIV, Sept. 1908, p. 265

² Letter of November 6th, 1784. National Archives.

³ Letter of May 14th, 1720. (Archives of the Daughters of Wisdom). A few months later, Fr. Royer invited Fr. Gabriel Deshayes, the successor of Fr. Duchêne, to share the soup of *“a poor spiritan parish priest”*.

⁴ The words of François Pottier in a letter of 1749.

⁵ Mint. Cent., National Archives: XLVII, 158, December 2nd, 1756.

There is no true apostolic commitment without an attitude of detachment that includes a deep love of poverty. In the last years of the XVII century, a priest of the order of Saint-Sulpice, Fr. Constant, gave this advice to those about to be ordained in the diocese of Autun:

*“A good priest will seek no other riches than God himself ... He must be so free and forgetful of his own advancement that he will be ready to go to the ends of the earth if the Church so wishes. He will be willing to work in the poorest corner of the diocese, to remain a curate all his life or to serve in a penniless parish if the bishop thinks it important for the good of the diocese ... But such priests are very rare! The great majority of clerics who put themselves forward for ordination would rapidly withdraw if they thought they would be given such an appointment ... It would be a wonderful thing if a bishop had 30 such men at his disposal. May it please God to bring us some priests like this”.*¹

God seems to have answered this prayer through a rich young man, Claude-François Poullart des Places, who renounced all riches and honours so as to follow Christ more closely. He inspired his disciples with a love for the most obscure and abandoned works in the Church. The aim of his foundation was,

*“to form poor clerical students in the love of obedience and poverty. They would be ready, in the hands of their Prelates, for anything: work in hospitals, bringing the Gospel to the poor and even the infidels, ready not just to accept but to prefer the most humble and difficult appointments for which the Church has difficulty in finding workers”.*²

This beautiful text, a jewel of the Spiritan heritage, did not remain a dead letter. Sixty years after the death of Poullart des Places, Fr. Charles Besnard was able to write of the past students of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit:

“Carefully trained in the functions of the sacred ministry and all the virtues necessary for a priest, they are well known for their degree of detachment, their dedication and their obedience. They devote themselves to the needs of the Church and their only concern is to be useful and work in its service. They can be found, in the hands of their immediate superiors and the local bishops, like a corps of auxiliary troops, ready to go anywhere and work for the salvation of souls, preferably in missionary work, either at home or abroad. They volunteer for the poorest places and for abandoned projects where nobody else wants to go. If they have to bury themselves in the depths of the country or work in some corner of a hospital, if they are asked to teach

¹ *“Des saints ordres et des obligations qui leur sont essentielles »*, Archives C.S.Sp. Cf. the Revue « Spiritus » no. 10, p. 48.

² Rule 1 of the “Regulae” : *“Sodalitium ... pro fine habet in ecclesiasticae disciplinae zelo et amore virtutum, obedientiae presertim ac paupertatis, pauperes clericos educare, qui sint, in manu praelatorum, parati ad omnia, xenodochiis inservire, pauperibus et etiam infidelibus evangelizare, munia Ecclesiae infima ac laboriosa magis, pro quibus ministri difficile reperiuntur, non modo suscipere, sed etiam toto corde amare ac prae ceteris eligere »*.

Francis Libermann was to add much later: *“We are nothing more than the down and outs of the Church; we take on what others have left behind”*. (ND VII, p. 292).

*in a seminary or secondary school or travel to the extremities of the Kingdom of France, if they are faced with crossing seas and ending up on the other side of the world to seek souls for Christ, their motto remains the same: "We are here to do your will. Here I am – send me! (Isaiah VI, 8)."*¹

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The Spiritans had also become famous for the quality of the theological education they gave to their students. Fr. Dorsanne recognised this, in his own way, by referring to them as *"the Gillotins of the Jesuits"*. The author² of a *"A treatise on devotion to the Holy Spirit"* (1734) said of the Seminary of the rue des Postes: *"There is nowhere in France where ecclesiastical students receive a better training"*. François Pottier, the future bishop of Su-Chen, had already finished philosophy in his home town, Loches, when he presented himself to Fr. Bouïc for entry into the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, but he still had to re-start his studies in Logic. In a letter to his family, he repeated what one of his new directors had told him:

*"Very few young men enter this Seminary without re-starting their philosophy. When you finally leave, you will not have a doctorate from the Sorbonne but you will probably be every bit as capable as those who are awarded such degrees".*³

The Spiritans, following the wishes of Poullart des Places, continued to be educated *"following the principles of Roman and Catholic doctrine"* by Directors who were faithful to their Rules: *"They will avoid all doctrinal novelties; they will not teach opinions which are either too liberal or excessively severe; they will approve what the Church approves, and what the Church condemns, they will condemn".*⁴

In a letter to Cardinal Castelli, the Prefect of the Propaganda, Fr. de l'Isle-Dieu told him that *"This Seminary on the rue des Postes and all those who have studied there since its inception have always been very attached to the Holy See as the centre of unity".*⁵

In the 18th century, when people talked of theological "novelties", they were referring, above all, to Jansenism. The sons of Poullart des Places were always very opposed to this doctrinal tendency. As Pierre Thomas put it, *"Not one of them supported it; on the contrary, they nearly all fought against it either by their words or their writings".*⁶

¹ Charles Besnard: Life of Grignon de Montfort, p. 107.

² A hermit living at the Abbey of Sept-Fonts.

³ L. Guiot: *"La vie et apostolat de Mgr. Pottier"*, Paris, 1892, p. 71.

⁴ *"Ab omni novitate doctrinae discipulos suos arceant, opiniones laxiores pariter et rigidores ne doceant; quod probat Ecclesia, et ipsi probent; quod damnat, damnent"*.

⁵ Letter of June 5th, 1769, published by David: pp. 43-44.

⁶ Letter to a Prelate (1734). Arch. C.S.Sp.

These disputes had dramatic effects for some of the young clerics. Before he became a bishop, Mgr. Armand Lefebvre, the Vicar Apostolic of Cochinchina, gave a startling account of the history of his vocation:

“You can’t imagine how many problems I had before ordination, and several times, I began to lose hope of ever getting there. Some of my relations, who were rich in the eyes of the world rather than in the eyes of God, did all they could to make me commit myself to a group which had horrified me since my early days. I felt I had no option but to move away from Paris. But the Lord had pity on me and led me to the security of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit”¹.

These were not just words of gratitude to the successors of Poullart des Places; they also show the high reputation that his seminary enjoyed.

So despite the lack of university degrees, the Spiritans were well prepared by the length and quality of their studies to become professors of philosophy and theology. A good number of those who went to Canada or the Far East were asked to teach in the seminaries. Even in France, bishops turned confidently to Fr. Bouïc or Fr. Becquet for their staff. To encourage François Pottier to restart his studies in Logic, one director said to him: *“Our students are highly regarded everywhere. Quite often, we are asked for professors of theology and philosophy without any preliminary examination, because the bishops know and esteem the place where these young priests have been trained”².*

When the ‘subjects’ came from their own dioceses, the bishops were able to contact them directly and their invitation to serve on the seminary staff could sound more like an order than a request. In January 1768, Fr. Liscoat, a young priest from the diocese of Quimper, received the following message from his bishop, Mgr. de Cuillé:

“We need you to fill a vacancy in the seminary of Quimper; such is the urgency of this request, that I am sending you 200 livres to cover the expenses of your journey. It is not without hesitation that we are asking this of you because we know very well that the Seminary of the Holy Spirit will find it difficult to replace you, but our need is at least as great as theirs. The Superior of the Seminary will understand that as you are from my diocese, I will have the first call on your services”³.

In 1737, Cardinal de Bissy, the successor of Bossuet in the diocese of Meaux, and Mgr. d’Hallencourt, the bishop of Verdun, both asked the Spiritans to take over the direction of their seminaries to protect the young students from the influence of Jansenist professors. This was another reason why the editors of the *“Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques”* (a Jansenist publication) had such a low opinion of what they called the “Bouïcs” or the “Bouïques”: they described them as *“uncivilised clerics, swept up from the dregs of society and fed and educated by the Jesuits. To show their gratitude, these men had lowered themselves to the most grovelling dependence on the Jesuits”⁴.* The same Jansenist journal also accused the

¹ Letter to M. Collet, January 15th, 1743. (Archives of the MEP, V. 741, p. 481.)

² Guiot, p. 71.

³ Peyron: *“Notice historique sur le Séminaire de Quimper”*. Quimper, 1899, p. 74.

⁴ They used either the words “Bouïc” or “Bouy”, but always pronounced them “Bouy”. This was by way of a joke on the part of the Jansenists. The *“Supplément Jésuitique”* which was started by the Jesuits to oppose the Jansenist slanders in the *“Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques”*, protested against the name “Bouïcs” being applied to

Spiritans of supporting “the most pernicious ideas regarding the infallibility of the Pope”, and made fun of them by calling them “the priests of the Immaculate Conception”, adding that “their lectures and public theses were every bit as bad as those written by the Jesuits”.

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In 1761, one year before the decree suppressing the Jesuits, the Parliament of Paris closed down the theology courses in the Jesuit College of Louis-le-Grand. The directors of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit reacted in the same way as their founder would have done: rather than send their seminarians to the University, they decided to teach them philosophy and theology themselves. Their right to do this was strongly contested. The text of a letter from the Archbishop of Paris to the Procurator General, in defence of the Spiritans, gives the impression that some people would even like to have seen the Seminary itself suppressed:

*“The more I consider the suggestion that the seminarians of the Holy Spirit should follow the lectures of philosophy and theology in the University, the more I can see drawbacks in the plan ... I am very conscious of your zeal for the good of Religion and the State, so I am sure that you must also have a great interest in preserving an establishment that is so advantageous to both”.*¹

This intervention of Mgr. de Beaumont settled the affair and up to the Revolution in 1789, the Spiritan Seminary was the only one in Paris to have its own professors.²

Many Jansenists and Gallicans saw the Revolution as an opportunity to rid the Church in France of those Congregations which were most faithful to the Holy See. In the month of May, 1790, at the same time as the foundations of M. Olier and St. Jean Eudes, the community of Poullart des Places, was singled out by a monk of Marmoutiers for the attention of the lawyer Treilhard, the President of the Ecclesiastical Committee of the National Assembly:

“ Within the Church of France, there are three sorts of pharisaical preachers who have to be entirely eradicated to purify the old leaven and renew it. These preachers are the Sulpicians, the Eudists, and the Bouïcs, a mob who are ignorant, hypocritical, superstitious and fanatical, and their two great weapons are the Formula of

“the priests of the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Conception: Fr. des Places was the first superior of this community which is normally referred to as ‘the Placistes’. Fr. Bouïc was only the third superior and he never gave his name to the community”. (April 12th, 1746).

¹ The quotation can be found in the National Library, in the deposit of Joly de Fleury, 390, file 4462. A letter of June 7th, 1762. Mgr. Dosquet, the former bishop of Quebec, also wrote to the Procurator, Joly de Fleury, on August 21st, 1762: “I have the honour of bringing to your attention that the Superiors and Directors of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit are still upset by the uncertainty that hangs over them. They are ready and will make it their duty to carry out the orders and intentions of the Court that they should send their students to the University”. The only explanation for this intervention must have been the fear that the Seminary itself was in danger of being closed down completely. But on December 22nd of the same year, Fr. Darragon wrote to Bishop Pottier: “The Fathers of the Holy Spirit are giving lectures in their own Seminary and will continue to do so, unless they are obliged to send their seminarians to the University”. (Archives of the Missions Etrangères de Paris, Volume 25.)

² Delarc: “L’Eglise de Paris pendant la Révolutions française», Tome I, p. 373.

Alexander VII and the Constitution (Unigenitus) of Clement XI. These sources of scandal must be eliminated.¹

But the National Assembly could draw no such distinction between good and bad congregations: “A truly free State must not allow any corporation to exist within its borders; therefore “they are all extinguished and suppressed”. In its declarations of suppression on April 26th and August 18th, the Spiritans had the privilege of being named twice: under the name of the ‘*Fathers of the Holy Spirit*’, who were placed after the *Sulpicians* and the *Nicolites*, and again under ‘the *Bouics*’, after the *Mulotins* and the *Priests of the Blessed Sacrament*.²

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When the revolutionary tempest finally abated in France, the congregation of the Holy Spirit did everything it could to remain faithful to its traditions. Despite the protestations of several Apostolic Prefects, neither Bertout nor Fourdinier would agree to shorten the programme of studies for their seminarians. And fidelity to the Holy See reappeared with increased emphasis. Even though he wrote no books or articles, Fr. Mathurin Gaultier, professor of moral theology in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit (1834-1869), became an important figure in the history of theology. More than anyone else, it was he who rid the seminary manuals in France of their narrow rigorist approach which they had inherited from the Jansenists and the Gallicans. He also played an important part in the restoration of Gregorian chant and the Roman liturgy.

Somebody wrote that his room in the rue Lhomond was “*the Roman salon of Paris and, his library the arsenal of those defending the Holy See*”! Fr. Rohrbacher rented a room in the Seminary to work on the definitive text of his monumental work, “*The Universal History of the Catholic Church*”; Fr. Bouix did likewise to write several works on canon law and launch the “*Revue des sciences ecclésiastiques*”; Dom Pitra, the learned Benedictine whom Pius IX made a cardinal, Fr. Migne, the editor of “*Greek and Latin Patrology*” and a series of dictionaries were amongst those who made great use of the many rare books that were collected by the librarian of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. The circle of Fr. Gaultier included many of the most ardent defenders of the prerogatives of the Pope: Dom Guéranger, the founder of the Abbey of Solemes, Mgr. Parisi, the bishop of Langres, Cardinal Gousset, the Archbishop of Reims and Louis Veuillot. Through his many relationships, Fr. Gaultier had a great influence on the religious books that were being published in Paris: in his youth, they were very Gallican, but by the time he died, they were more or less Roman.³

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In 1701, Claude Poullart had sacrificed the wishes of his parents to the demands of his call from God. The dreams of M. and Mme. des Places were not realised in their own lifetime;

¹ Letter of J. de la Martinière, (National Archives, D XIX, 14).

² Delarc: Volume II, pp 82 and 220.

³ “*Fr. Gaultier, General Assistant of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit*”, from a series of articles published in *Le Monde* by Fr. V. Davin, Paris 1869. According to the author, as a reward to the Spiritans for the part they had played in the doctrinal struggle, headed by Fr. Gaultier, they were asked by Pope Pius IX to open the French Seminary in Rome in 1853.

they died without an heir who could continue their descendance and restore their ancient lineage and position in society. But in fact, their name has survived across the centuries on a far wider scale than they could possibly have imagined. Their son, this poor young priest who died at the age of 30, became the father of a great religious family which will do everything possible, in the words of Pierre Thomas, to preserve his devotion to the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Virgin, his fidelity to the See of Peter, his passion for spiritual poverty and his dedication to the most abandoned souls.

_____ FINIS _____

PRINCIPAL SOURCES

I The Writings of Poullart des Places

The Archives of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit at Chevilly-la-Rue, Paris, contain several documents written by Claude Poullart des Places:

1) Reflections on the truths of religion, written by a soul who is thinking of conversion.

A manuscript of 34 pages in quarto, written at Rennes in 1701, probably in the summer. At that time, Claude Poullart was still “a man of the world”.

2) The Choice of a state of life.

A manuscript of 19 pages, following on from the “Reflections” and written during the same retreat.

3) Fragments of resolutions made for a personal rule.

Four pages from a rule drawn up at Louis-le-Grand in 1702. The original manuscript was much longer but only no. 12 and nos. 13-16 have survived.

4) Reflections on the past.

Four pages in-folio set in two columns. A note by an unknown hand, inserted after the title, says that these Reflections were written “in 1705, perhaps in the month of August”. Fr. Le Floch reckons they were written “during the retreat leading up to the reception of minor orders” which he received on June 6th, 1705.

5) General and particular rules

A manuscript of 64 pages, written in quarto. The cardboard cover has a title, written in an unknown hand, which reads; “Rules for the Community of the Holy Spirit”. It also bears the monogram of Poullart des Places.

The first chapters were written at the very start of the Community, the later ones after the transfer to rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne. A few marginal notes have been added, in all but two cases, written in the hand of M. Bouic. On the last page, there is a note written by Fr. Thomas which says: “All these Rules were drawn up by the late Fr. Desplaces, written in his hand and practised by himself and his students”.

All these writings of Poullart des Places are written in his own hand. In general, the handwriting is cursive throughout. Quotations in this present work are taken from the manuscripts but the references given are to Fr. Henry Koren’s 1959 edition of the writings.

II Biographies

1) The Manuscript of Pierre Thomas

Pierre Thomas, who was received into the Community of the Holy Spirit in March, 1704, wrote a biography of Claude Poullart des Places. It is in the form of a manuscript of 24 pages in quarto. The version that has come down to us and is kept in the Spiritan General Archives is very incomplete; it finishes, effectively, in the year 1702. It says very little about the work for ‘poor scholars’ and solely in the passages where he talks of the virtues of his founder. The only exact date that it gives is that of the birth of Claude Poullart. But despite its

lacunae, this is a document of great value to us. It was published by Fr. Henry Koren after Claude Poullart's "*Spiritual Writings*".

2) Charles Besnard: "*La vie de Messire Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, Prêtre Missionnaire Apostolique.*"

In the fifth volume of this manuscript, which is kept in the Archives of the Daughters of Wisdom in Rome, Fr. Charles Besnard, the third successor of Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, gives a summary of the life of Poullart des Places (pp. 101-107) which fills in some of the gaps in the work of Thomas - the affair of the robe, his relations with Louis Grignon, the preparations for his foundation, his sickness and death. A comparison of the two texts shows that Charles Besnard had access to a more complete version of the work of Pierre Thomas than the one that is in the Spiritan General Archives.

3) Joseph Picot de Clorivière: "*Le Vie de M. Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, Missionnaire Apostolique, Instituteur des Missionnaires du Saint-Esprit et des Filles de la Sagesse*". Paris, Rennes and Saint-Malo, 1785.

Overall, this work depends greatly on the manuscript of Charles Besnard. This is particularly true of the pages (312-319) where he gives a résumé of the life of Claude Poullart des Places. But these same pages prove that the author knew the text of Thomas from another source other than that of Besnard. Hence the interest of the precisions that he gives which are not found either in Besnard's work or in the text of Thomas as it has come down to us: "*He consecrated himself ... by a vow to the practice of poverty ...*"

Fr. de Clorivière saw the letter of Jean-Baptiste Blain concerning Grignon de Montfort. The author of this letter, who was older than Poullart des Places, says that he did not really know Louis Grignon apart from in the class of rhetoric because "*he was very reserved and had almost no relations with the other students*". Fr. de Clorivière concludes that Claude Poullart was in philosophy when he knew the young Grignon.

4) Henri Le Floch C.S.Sp. : « *Claude-François Poullart des Places, fondateur du Séminaire et de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit* ». Paris, 1906. XXIII – 570 pages.

This book, which was praised by the French Academy, played a great part in reviving an appreciation of the importance and role of Poullart des Places which had become largely forgotten. The author was well aware of the difficulty of writing an historical study where there was such a paucity of surviving documents from the period under consideration. He warned his readers in the preface: "*This attempted restoration will be faced with the lack of direct sources of information and, quite often, will fall back on conjecture and probabilities by looking at the effect Claude Poullart had on other people and events*". The author was sometimes led into mistakes by the incorrect deductions of Fr. de Clorivière: for example, Fr. Le Floch has Claude Poullart beginning his 6th year of school at the age of seven and rhetoric at the age of 11.

The work devotes much space to the background history of the period and contains some interesting documents on the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1635 Death of Fr. Louis Lallement S.J.
- 1639 Claude Bernard founded the Collège des Trente-Trois
- 1640 ? Birth of Jeanne Le Meneust, the mother of Claude Poullart
- 1641 Birth of François-Claude Poullart, the father of Claude Poullart
- 1650 ? René Lévêque gathered together a few “poor scholars”.
- 1651? Fr. Legrand founded the “*Congrégation des Ecclésiastiques*” at Quimper, dedicated to the Holy Spirit.
- 1663 ? Germain Gillot starts to gather together his “Johannès”
- 1665 ? François de Chanciergues enters the little community founded by Fr. Lévêque.
- 1673 Birth of Louis-Grignon de Montfort.
- 1677 May 22nd: Marriage of F-C Poullart des Places and Jeanne Le Meneust.
- 1678 Jean-Baptiste de la Salle ordained priest at Saint-Sulpice.
- 1679 February 26th : Birth of Claude François Poullart des Places**
September 29th: Birth of Michel-Vincent Le Barbier
- 1683 August 14th: Birth of Jacques-Hyacinthe Garnier
- 1684 August 5th: Birth of Louis Bouïc.
November 9th: Birth of Pierre Caris.
Foundation of a Junior Seminary for poor scholars at Rennes.
- 1687 March 14th: Birth of Pierre Thomas.
May 8th: Birth of René-Jean Allenou de la Ville-Angevin
- 1689 Fr. de la Barmondière founds a community of poor scholars.
Death of Germain Gillot: Thomas Durieux continues his work.
The Grignon family moves to the rue du Chapitre.
- 1690 The Poullart family moves to the rue Saint-Sauveur.
- 1691 Death of Fr. de Chanciergues. His work continues.
October: Claude Poullart enters the third year at school
- 1693 October: Claude Poullart starts rhetoric.
Louis Grignon goes to Paris (to Fr. de la Barmondière).
- 1694 Death of Fr. de la Barmondière. Louis Grignon enters the community of Fr. François Boucher.

- Fr. Champion publishes the *“Doctrine Spirituelle”* of Fr. Lallement.
 October : Claude Poullart enters the College of Caen. Birth of Voltaire.
- 1695 Claude Poullart begins philosophy at Rennes.
- 1696 Death of La Bruyère and Mme. de Sévigné.
- 1697 *Grand Act*, dedicated to the city of Toulouse by Claude Poullart
 October: Departure of Claude Poullart for Nantes. The affair of Le Huédez.
 Fr. Bellier appointed director of the Junior Seminary of Rennes.
- 1698 June. The Poullart family moves to the rue de le Cordonnerie.
 The Eudists take over the running of the junior seminary.
- 1700 June 5th: Louis Grignon de Montfort ordained priest.
 Claude Poullart is awarded a degree in law. The affair of the robe
- 1701 Publication of the pamphlet of Alloth du Doranlo : *“La meilleur éducation à donner aux clercs”*
 Claude Poullart’s retreat at Rennes ; he writes his *“Réflexions sur les vérités de la religion »* and
« Choix d’un état de vie ».
 October : Claude Poullart enters the Collège of Louis-le-Grand.
- 1702 **Claude Poullart receives the tonsure and begins to provide for a few poor scholars.**
- 1703 April: Louis Grignon arrives in Paris
May 27th: Claude Poullart founds the Community of the Holy Spirit.
 Voltaire enters the College of Louis-le-Grand.
- 1704 March 27th: Pierre Thomas enters the Community of the Holy Spirit.
 September 15th: Fr. Le Barbier is ordained at Rennes.
 October 11th: Pierre Caris enters the Community of the Holy Spirit.
 Christmas time: Claude Poullart makes another retreat. Writes: *“Réflexions sur le passé »*.
- 1705 Fr. Le Barbier arrives at the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.
 June 6th: Poullart des Places receives minor orders.
 M. Garnier receives the sub-deaconate at Saint-Malo.
 October 17th: Poullart des Places rents a house in rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne.
 Fr. Garnier enters the *Saint-Esprit*.
 Around Christmas: The Community moves to rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne.
- 1706 Poullart des Places refuses three benefices.
 December 18th: Poullart des Places receives the sub-diaconate.
- 1707 Poullart des Places receives the diaconate.
- 1708 January 20th: Death of François Boucher.

- December 17th: Claude Poullart des Places ordained priest.**
- 1708 July 28th: Theses of René Le Sauvage and Michel Granger.
September 22nd: Louis Bouïc ordained deacon at Saint-Méen.
- 1709 January 14th-24th: Extreme cold hits Paris.
February 4th: extreme cold returns.
February 8th: Fr. Le Barbier appointed rector of Bain.
April: Opening of the seminary of Saint-Denis.
October 1st: The Seminary of the Holy Spirit moves to rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève.
October 2nd: Death of Poullart des Places. His successor is Fr. Garnier.
- 1710 March: Death of Fr. Garnier. Fr. Bouïc elected to succeed him.
- 1712 Death of François-Claude, the Father of Claude Poullart des Places.
- 1713 Louis Grignon de Montfort comes to Paris and makes an alliance with the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.
- 1716 **April 28th: Death of Grignon de Montfort.**
- 1720 August 28th: Death of Jeanne Le Meneust, mother of Claude.
- 1731 **June 4th: The Spiritans buy a house in rue des Postes.**
- 1732 A Spiritan, Fr. Frison de la Mothe, enters the Missions-Etrangères and is sent to Canada.
- 1733 Guillaume Rivoal enters the Missions-Etrangères and is sent to the Far East.
- 1751 Death of Pierre Thomas.
- 1757 June 21st: Death of Fr. Pierre Caris.
- 1763 Death of Fr. Bouïc, Succeeded by Fr. François Becquet.
- 1765 **The Congregation of the Holy Spirit is put in charge of the Prefecture Apostolic of Saint-Pierre et Miquelon.**
- 1775 The Congregation is made responsible for Guiana in South America.
- 1778 Fr. Dominique Déglicourt, of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, is appointed "Prefect Apostolic of the Coasts of Africa".
- 1788 October 22nd: Death of Fr. Becquet. Fr. Jean-Marie Duflos succeeds him.
- 1792 April 28: The French government suppresses all religious congregations.
- 1802 April 12th: the Birth of 'Jacob' Libermann
- 1805 February 28th: Death of Fr. Duflos.
March 23rd: Napoleon re-establishes the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.
Fr. Jacques Bertout takes over the leadership of the Congregation from Fr. Duflos.

- 1809 Napoleon suppresses the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.
- 1815 March: King Louis XVIII re-establishes the Congregation of the Holy Spirit
- 1824 February 7th: The *Rules* are approved by the Propaganda.
- 1826 December 24th: Baptism of François-Marie-Paul Libermann.
- 1832 December 10th: Death of Fr. Bertout. Succeeded by Fr. Amable Fourdinier.
- 1841 September 18th: François Libermann ordained priest. He founds the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary.
- 1845 January 5th: Death of Fr. Fourdinier. Fr. Nicolas Warnet succeeds him until the election of Fr. Alexandre Le Guay on April 28th.
- 1848 February 29th: Fr. Le Guay resigns.
 March 2nd: Fr. Alexandre Monnet is elected the 10th Superior General.
 June 11th (Pentecost): The principle is adopted for a union between the Society of the Holy Spirit and that of the Holy Heart of Mary. A decision was taken by the Propaganda, approved by Pope Pius IX, for *“the Union of the Society of the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit; the Holy Heart of Mary will cease to exist and its Associates and aspirants will be incorporated into the Congregation of the Holy Spirit”*.
 November 3rd: The Propaganda gives permission to the Congregation of the Holy Spirit to add to its title, *“...the Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary”*.
 On the same day, the Propaganda approves the election of Fr. Libermann as Superior General to replace Fr. Monnet; the latter resigned as Superior General to take up the appointment of Vicar Apostolic of Madagascar.
- 1852 **February 2nd: Death of Fr. Libermann.**
- 1855 Publication of *“La Vie du R.P. Libermann, fondateur de la Congrégation du Saint-Cœur de Marie et premier Supérieur Générale de la Congrégation du Saint Esprit et de l’Immaculé Cœur de Marie »*, by Dom Pitra.
- 1878 Publication of *«La Vie du vénérable Père Libermann, fondateur de la Société des Missionnaires du Saint-Cœur de Marie et premier Supérieur Général de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit et du Saint-Cœur de Marie »*, by Fr. Delaplace, C.S.Sp.
- 1901 February 14th; The Council of State in France announced that *“the Association of the Holy Spirit had ceased to exist (in 1848) and that the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary, which took up its name, is not a religious Congregation that is recognised in law”*
 Mgr. Alexandre Le Roy, the 15th Superior General, presented the Council of State with a dossier proving that the Congregation of the Holy Spirit had never ceased to exist. As a result, the Council of State, in its meeting of August 1st, decreed that *“the Association of the Holy Spirit can now be considered as a Congregation that is legally authorised”*.
- 1906 Publication of *“Claude-François Poullart des Places, Founder of the Seminary and the Congregation of the Holy Spirit”* by Fr. Henri Le Floch C.S.Sp.
- 1919 The General Chapter of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit came to the unanimous conclusion that :
 1) *“The Founder of the Congregation is Claude-Francois Poullart des Places and this took place in 1703. The Venerable François-Marie-Paul Libermann is honoured by the*

Congregation as its second Founder and Spiritual Father. Both must receive our filial devotion; without one, we would never have come into being: without the other, we would no longer exist.

- 2) *The Congregation of the Holy Spirit, founded in Paris in 1703 by Claude-François Poullart des Places, is the only one which exists today. The Venerable François-Marie-Paul Libermann was the successor of Mgr. Monnet, the 10th Superior General, and therefore he was the 11th.*

1922 Eugenie Caps, with the help of Mgr. Le Roy, founded the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Spirit.

1954 The Seminary of the Holy Spirit, which received young seminarians from Guadeloupe, Martinique, Mauritius and Reunion, was transferred from Paris to La Croix-Valmer (Var).