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### 07. Charles Besnard (continued)

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## CHARLES BESNARD (continued)

(...) From now on, he used all his savings<sup>1</sup>, as well as part of what he needed for himself, to help a few poor students to continue their studies. He even used to give half his own food to one of them who lived at the door of the College. This was a foretaste of what he would soon be doing on a much larger scale with great enthusiasm and the results are still with us up to the present day. The close friendship which started at Rennes between himself and Louis de Montfort continued to deepen with the passing of time. (...)

Claude felt that God wanted to use him to produce good priests for the churches who would be teachers and guides for the people. He realised that in order to succeed, he could do nothing better than continue helping poor students to survive and carry on with their studies. But his help was not just material: he planned to bring them together in a room where he could go from time to time to give them instructions and look after them, in so far as his commitments in the college allowed. He confided this plan to his confessor and he gave his approval. The superior of the college went even further: he promised to give him part of what was left over from the meals of the boarders to help these poor students.

At the same time, Louis de Montfort was working out another plan that was typical of this kind-hearted man. His idea was to look for like-minded priests to start an apostolic society. (...)

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Thomas wrote in his Memoire. *"His father, who was rather stingy, only gave him a grant of 800 livres. It was a pretty modest sum for someone of his age, but he still managed to give a good part of it to the poor. He gave most to those who were really hard up, and he always talked to them very respectfully so as to save them any embarrassment"*.

He turned to Claude for the execution of these plans. He paid him a visit to explain his project and invited Claude to join in the foundation of this work. Claude replied with his usual sincerity: *'Personally, I am not attracted to the missions, but I am very aware of the good they can do, so I will help you as much as I can. You know that for some time I have been distributing everything at my disposal to help poor students to continue their studies. I came across several who showed great promise but who for lack of the necessary means were unable to continue. They were forced to bury their talents that would have been so useful to the Church if they had been developed. I would like to do something about that by bringing them together under one roof; it seems to me that that is what God wants me to do. I have been encouraged in this by several people whose opinion I value, one of whom has given me reason to hope that he will help with their upkeep. If God gives me the grace to succeed, you can be sure you will get your missionaries. I will train them for you and you will put them to work. In that way we will both be satisfied'*. (...)

Claude began by renting a room in the *Rue des Cordiers*, near the College, and gathered the poor students whom he had already been helping and whose good intentions were known to him. The work progressed so much that it soon attracted some more excellent young men, so he decided to rent a house in which they would be less cramped for space. In a short time, a community of clerics<sup>1</sup> came into being there and Claude drew up an excellent rule that experienced people had previously examined and approved. He himself was the first to practice what he recommended to others. He was not satisfied

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<sup>1</sup> "*Monsieur Claude-François Poullart des Places, on the feast of Pentecost, 1703, while he was still only an aspirant to the clerical state, began the establishment of the so-called 'Community and Seminary consecrated to the Holy Spirit, under the invocation of the Holy Virgin conceived without sin'*". (From an old register of Spiritan archives, copied in "*Gallia Christiana*", 1744.)

with giving them frequent instructions himself: he also arranged retreats to be given to them by very competent preachers. He ensured that they would get spiritual conferences from the best men available, and asked any friends who came to visit him, who were skilled in this area, to talk to the students. (...)