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### 08. "Reflections on The Past (1704-1705)

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## **“REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST” (1704-1705)<sup>1</sup>**

*(Notes of a retreat of Poullart in his 26<sup>th</sup> year)*

If I had only a little love for God and my salvation, I would have been inconsolable because of the way I have spent this year. Is that the kind of gratitude the Lord has to expect from me? More than three years ago, by an extraordinary act of compassion, he drew me from the world, broke my prisoner's chains, snatched me from Satan's grip, almost in spite of myself, and clothed me once again with the garment of salvation. (...) I received abundant consolations; when I could be alone, my eyes were never dry as I thought about my sins and God's mercy. When I made any effort to do something for the Lord, he immediately carried me on his shoulders for mile after mile. Eventually, I was able to do without the least effort what I had previously considered impossible for a man like me. (...) I could hardly think of anything but God. My greatest regret was that I could not think of him all the time. I only wanted to love him and to be worthy of his love, I gave up even the most legitimate attachments. I looked forward to a time when I would have nothing, living only on handouts when I had given everything away. The only earthly thing I wanted to keep was my good health, so that I could sacrifice it entirely to God in the work of the missions. I would have been so happy if, having told

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<sup>1</sup> *The little community of 'poor scholars', founded at Pentecost, 1703, continued to grow. By the end of 1704, there were 40 members, and Claude found the increased workload and worries difficult to support. So he made another retreat to assess his spiritual crisis and look again at the work he had undertaken which now seemed to be almost beyond his powers.*

everybody of the love of God, I could give the last drop of my blood for him who was always giving me his blessings. (...)

*(Claude goes on to reflect on the enthusiasm he had had during 18 months for a life lived according to the Gospel, talking especially of the Eucharist. He then compares this with the frustration he now feels in coming to terms with his responsibilities as the director of the community).*

Tears of blood would not be too strong a way of bewailing my present wretchedness. It is true that I have never been what I ought to be, yet I have certainly been much better than I am at present. I would be happy if I had only lost half of what I had acquired by grace; but I am now no longer aware of the presence of God; I never think of him when I am trying to sleep and almost never when I am awake. I am always distracted, even during my prayers. (...)

I have little concern about correcting my brothers. I forget to recommend such things to God, as I wander along thoughtlessly and inconsiderately. My words and manners are lacking in gentleness and I am often proud and short with others. I am arrogant and bitter in my speech, lukewarm and tedious in giving correction. I look gloomy, showing I am in bad mood. I am very sensitive as regards my family and reluctant to reveal that my father and mother sell linen and wax. (...) I am afraid that people will find out about it. I do not make it known sufficiently that I had nothing to do with the work of the poor students' house; on the contrary, I am quite happy when people who know me only a little or not at all think I am a rich man who spends his fortune on these young people. (...)

Yet day after day I make firm resolutions to change my life. I am tired of being so irregular yet I finish up following my own ideas and whims without referring, as I used to do, to my director, whom I have substituted, so to speak, with my own fancies.

To sum up, I must confess before God that at the present moment I am someone who is believed to be alive but who is certainly dead, at least when I compare the present with the past. I am no more than a mask of devotion and a shadow of my former self. (...) This is the way that some people, who were once strong in virtue, begin to slide downwards and end up by perishing miserably. Nobody should fear such a fall more than I, having been always so inconsistent in my returning to God and then later on falling into prolonged disorders. (...)

*(Even though he is so troubled by these frustrations, he finds courage again in his experience of God's unfailing love for him).*

Perhaps I should fear that God may abandon me entirely. If this has not happened yet, it is only because of his infinite mercy towards me. He has always shown me such tenderness, unable to reject me definitively, having always preserved me from the ultimate hardness of heart that leads to final impenitence. Instead, he has given me the chance to make this retreat at a time when I was not even thinking of it. He has worked things out in such a way that I can return once more to my obligations with no excuses for avoiding them any further.

But even apart from that, I have every reason to believe that the good Lord will have pity on me once more if I return to him with all my heart. My assurance is based on the way the Lord has led me up until now:

- (i) He has never allowed me to be satisfied with myself; on the contrary, I have always been anxious and sorrowful about my disarray;
- (ii) He has always given me the grace to see that, within myself, I was not in the least what others thought or said I was;
- (iii) He never allowed me to get rid of my scruples. Though these have to some degree contributed to my disturbed

state, they have also made me go to confession more frequently and have given me greater remorse when the occasion to offend God presents itself.

So the way God has led me gives me hope that heaven will no longer be inaccessible to me if I am sincerely sorry for my sins and seek to live once more by the Lord's grace. Full of confidence by God's grace, and ignoring my own inclinations, I am going to see which is the quickest way that will lead me back to the One without whom I cannot live in peace for a single moment. (...)

*(Having finished his retreat, Claude was able to see the way ahead more clearly, but he found it difficult to act on it because of the suffering he was going through).*

These reflections fill me with sorrow. I left the world to seek God, renounce vanity and save my soul. Is it possible that I merely changed my aim in life while remaining at heart exactly the same? What then was the use of undertaking this work?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Note of Joseph Lécuyer: *Reading these burning words of Poullart des Places. I believe that certain fundamental traits of Spiritan spirituality were already emerging:*

- a) *A strong certainty of the love and goodness of God and his infinite mercy;*
- b) *A total conviction of the wickedness and ingratitude of sin, which is the only obstacle standing in the way of the victory of God's love;*
- c) *A strong desire to respond to this love of God with an unreserved gift of one's whole life in his service, particularly "in the work of the missions", and even in martyrdom, which Claude-François hoped to find amongst those to whose salvation he was consecrating himself. More immediately, he confessed that he had a great affection for those who were suffering and a burning desire to help sinners return to God. His biographer stressed that it was from this time that he had a great inclination towards works that were obscure and hidden and works that had been abandoned by others.*
- d) *The importance of mortification, or, better still, what Liebermann would call 'abnegation' and 'renunciation', i.e. a deliberate refusal to follow the ways of this world, its likes and its conventions, and the resolve to follow only Jesus crucified.*

*(These retreat notes, like those of his retreat in 1701, come to an end with a question. His director was able to help him to draw conclusions from this journey in search of the truth. Relying entirely on the love of God, Claude would follow up the work he had started, but sharing the responsibility with others. It was the beginning of a small community of formators, the "Society of the Holy Spirit", dedicated to the large community of "poor scholars" known as the "Seminary of the Holy Spirit")*

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## Charles Besnard (continued)

While Monsieur des Places<sup>1</sup> gave himself entirely to the demands of his embryonic community and exhausted himself by austere mortifications, he suffered an attack of pleurisy that was accompanied by a violent fever and a painful tenesmus, which for four days caused him atrocious sufferings. But not one word of complaint, and still less of impatience, escaped his lips. One could only tell that his pain was growing by the fact that his prayers of resignation became more frequent. His very exhaustion seemed to give him new strength as he repeated continually the prayer of King David: "*How lovely is your dwelling-place, Lord of Hosts! My soul yearns and pines for the courts of the Lord*" Psalm 84: 2-3). As soon as it was known in Paris that he was seriously ill, a great number of people known for their holiness came to see him. (...) He eventually received the last sacraments and then quietly

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e) *The vital importance of prayer, the Eucharist and the sustained thought of God as often as possible. For Claude, we cannot really love God without frequently averting to his presence and his love.*

<sup>1</sup> As a result of sharing his responsibilities, Poullart was able to complete his theological studies. He was ordained sub-deacon on 18<sup>th</sup> December, 1706, deacon on 19<sup>th</sup> March, 1707 and priest 17<sup>th</sup> December, 1707.