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POULLART DES PLACES:  
The challenge of his tercentenary

On February 26 this year, we celebrate the tercentenary of the birth of our Founder, Claude POULLART DES PLACES. We shall come together not to commemorate the memory of a distant ancestor vaguely remembered but to renew our life and spirit through him. For, a founder lives on in his Institute to inspire and enliven it.

Life-influence

Claude was only a young seminarian of 24 when he established his Seminary for poor students. Ordained priest at 28, he was dead two years later. His two closest collaborators also died young: one at 25, the other at 30. This Claude never had time to write a Rule nor even to complete the Regulations drawn up for his community. The few notes he left were mostly of a spiritual and personal nature and not intended for publication. Only the Seminary Regulation was in fact published.

We are rightly amazed that in a mere 6 years this young man could so inspire and so infuse his spirit into his foundation that it would come through the most difficult times of the 18th century without losing anything of the depth and vigour of its first fervour. The 1600 priests sent by the Spiritans to "lonely and abandoned outposts" in the years previous to the French Revolution is proof of this. It is also significant that the Spiritans were one of the few Congregations to survive that upheaval. This we attribute primarily to the life-witness of the founder.

More than the written word, Claude communicated to his sons a strength of life, a gift of youthfulness. His own short life is the "book" in which we can read for our encouragement and inspiration. He did not leave us a fully-organised institute but a spirit of vivid awareness of what it means to love the most abandoned. He did not offer us a ready-made Rule but a spirit that challenges us to think afresh in every age and circumstance.

Saints attract us because they are wholly possessed by God: nothing can stand in their way, nothing extinguish the apostolic fire that consumes them. Everyone hears them speak in his own tongue, in his own time: "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia and beyond"... from St. Pierre and Miquelon to Acadia, from the West Indies and Guyana, Paraguay and Pakistan. (Cf. Acts of Ap. I, 9). Their witness is truly Pentecostal.

This presence of the Holy Spirit in our founders offers a challenge to the youth of today and, to ourselves, as together we seek to discern the future. Claude POULLART DES PLACES offers us nothing but his own life for our guidance but that life is everything.

It is encouraging also to know that though he had heard God call from his earliest years, Claude was not a saint from the beginning. He was sufficiently aware of the attractions of the world to turn a deaf ear for a long time. He was already 22 years of age before he could bring himself to submit and give himself entirely to God. Only at the end of a road that had been hard and slow did he see the light.

Everything led Claude at first to a life of ease and pleasure. Good-looking, intelligent, charming, rich and elegant, he was a universal favourite. His distinguished bearing, his brilliant conversation and wide knowledge were much admired. He was invited everywhere: to dinners and receptions, hunting parties and balls, the theatre and the Concert-hall. Claude would have been less than human not to yield to this adulation, these pleasures, as he did most fully.

Quite different were the other influences at work, that led ultimately to his decision to leave all that: some wise spiritual counsellors, a few retreats, reading "which nourished his soul", the love of an understanding family, the friendship of a Grignon de Montfort, of a Father Bellier and of some Jesuits... all these were together determining factors in the development of his vocation.

From this it is clear that Claude was more "modern" than might at first appear. Many young people to-day could recognise their own experience in his. Like him, they are torn between high ideals and earthly temptations; like him, they have their moments of deep fervour and their crises of discouragement. But, along the road of his spiritual adventure he advanced step by step to a final choice that was clear and irrevocable. He had scarcely done so when God swept him up to Himself. May it be our encouragement to remember that from that election of his, all our Spiritan vocation and life was to spring.

"I desired to love Him (God) alone, and out of love of Him I would have renounced the most legitimate attractions of this life. I wanted to be despoiled of everything some day, living only on alms, after giving everything away. Of all temporal goods I wanted to keep health alone and I wanted to offer the latter in a complete sacrifice to God in the work of the missions. I would have felt most happy if I could have shed the last drop of my blood for Him..."

(Quoted by Fr Koren in his edition of The Spiritual Writings of Claude Poullart Des Places, pages 104/15.)

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Empty-handed: a prophetic vision

"There is in every beginning a power
That can never be recaptured:
Like the sun-rise, it has a strength,
A newness and freshness that is unique." (Péguy)

To train the poor to evangelise the poor: this was the vision that seized POULLART DES PLACES and set his heart on fire. It was not just a matter of moral and intellectual preparation of seminarians. His originality lay in his having made the radical Gospel choice, in favour of the most neglected in the Church of his day. The miserable situation of many poor scholars was "one of the deepest wounds in the Church of France" at that time.

Although himself a fledgling cleric, just tonsured, Claude determined to found a seminary so that "the poor might be evangelised". He would accept only poor students who would live exclusively on alms. The theme of his first Retreat to them was: "The Lord sent me to evangelise the poor"... This undertaking was not intended to resolve the problem of seminaries but nonetheless it was to prove a prophetic challenge by reason of its spirit. With other gestures of a similar nature it would restore at least in part the credibility of the French clergy.

A prophet proclaims the ways of God to men by his actions and insights rather than his theories. His life is itself a parable: "the Kingdom of Heaven is like a rich man (Claude POULLART) who gave away all his riches". The message of the prophet goes to the very heart of things, rising up out of current events, the cry of the people, with which the voice of God chooses to mingle itself. (Cf. Ex. 3.7)

The fervour of those first Spiritans was most impressive. Unfortunately, there remain only some "fioretti" of these times but enough to attract and encourage us to recapture their vision and live evangelically with total confidence in God, total commitment to the most abandoned. They challenge us in the depths of our being to restore again, with courage and simplicity, the morning freshness of our beginnings.

All was not clear to Claude from the first. Like the dawn it grew gradually to full glory, step by step, in his own spiritual progress. As he grew more severe with himself his faith grew more lightsome and pointed the way to the poorest and most neglected.

The little chimney-boys of Paris were the first signs given him by God. When he became a tonsured cleric, he suddenly realised that some of his friends were as badly off as these miserable boys who climbed chimneys to earn a living and help their families. Out of the modest income allowed him by his father he decided to help some of these students secretly. At that stage there was no question of opening a house in which they could live. Later he would say: "In the beginning the intention was only to help to feed four or five poor scholars."

They taught him how to be poor and how to live poverty together. Quickly, he realised that he could not live for them unless he lived with them and so he decided to share their life in all things, "washing dishes, shopping, taking his turn to clean the shoes of the students." What he had undertaken as a passing charity had become a permanent commitment, his definitive vocation. The Community was officially established on Pentecost Sunday, 1703, to train poor students for the most difficult works: there were 12 poor scholars present.

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace..." (Is, 52,7).

Soon the little group learnt to put all their trust in God: united in their common poverty, without other resources on which to live and develop than the alms they received, reliance on Providence became the foundation-stone of the new Community. One day, with 80 hungry boys to feed there would not be "an ounce of bread to feed them": they were so heavily in debt that the baker and the butcher cut off supplies until they were paid. On another day, "there was delivered from an unknown source such abundance of food that never before had the community had a better meal."

Out of this experience was born that total availability to God, of which later Libermann would love to speak, and also a preference for those works for which workers were difficult to find. It was a normal consequence of this ideal of spiritual poverty that the tiny band would feel themselves drawn to distant lands, frontier posts, and the missionary priorities of the Church. Already in his "Reflections on the Past", Claude had indicated that the missions were his first love. But, it was only with M. BOUIE and the first Rules that foreign missions would be given explicit mention. The Spiritans would go to wherever there was urgent need or special difficulty.

A former student of the Seminary, the De Montfort Father, Besnard, would write of them:

"One sees that under the guidance of their immediate superiors and at the first sign of their will... they constitute a kind of military detachment of auxiliary troops, ready to go anywhere there is work to be done for the salvation of souls. They consecrate themselves preferably to missionary activity both foreign and domestic, offering to go and stay in the poorest and most abandoned places for which it is especially difficult to find candidates. Whether it is a question of being exiled into the remote countryside or breaking in the corner of a hospital, teaching in a college, lecturing in a seminary, directing a poor community, travelling to the farthest corners of the Kingdom (of France) or staying there in an austere post, whether it is a question even of crossing the seas and going to the very ends of the earth to gain a soul for Christ — their motto is: Behold we are ready to do Thy will: Ecce ego: mitte me". (Koren: p. 277.)

It could be a page from the Acts of the Apostles! There is a breath of freshness in this availability, this mobility, of our first members, in a time when no one yet talked of "internationality". Availability is the virtue of the poor and of the pilgrim. It is almost a condition of it not to belong to any particular local Church. Paul himself had no permanent resting-place. He went from mission to mission, sometimes for a few weeks, a few months, a year and a half. He planted the Faith, founded
a community and made it responsible for spreading the Church in Corinth, Antioch or elsewhere. Then be moved on and came back again only if they needed him. And yet in spite of this intensive rhythm he knew each one “by his name”; those who were to be in charge, made friends who were ready to lay down their lives for him. (Gf, Rom. 16). The letters of Paul are not at all those of an ‘official visitor’. None has ever succeeded as he did in maintaining equilibrium between human relationships and missionary mobility.

Missionary mobility is much stressed to-day. We have need to recapture the spirit of the Churches of Paul, which is never detrimental to the Church of Peter: rather, the contrary. Our Spiritan origins invite us to take up our staff and continue on our way in the same spirit, with the same generosity that urged them on.

Fountain-Heads of Spirituality

“All students should adore especially the Holy Spirit to whom they are consecrated. They should also have a special devotion to the Virgin Mary, under whose protection they were offered to the Holy Spirit.” (Opening lines of the Regulations of the Spiritan Community.)

If the sons of Poullart Des Places were known as Spiritans, this was not because their first house was dedicated to the Holy Spirit but because the 12 young men who were the first fruits of our great apostolic family were themselves consecrated to the Holy Spirit. Their spirituality would be wholly impregnated with devotion to the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary: this two-fold devotion would impress itself upon their private lives and public apostolate.

A Spiritan is one caught up by the Spirit, the very life-breath of God, blowing where He wills. To consecrate oneself to the Spirit is to accept that gently-whispered invitation which makes our whole being vibrate in harmony with what God wishes. It is the irresistible source of our apostolic availability. “Whence it comes, whither it goes none can tell”. To be a Spiritan is to be open, available to the Spirit, wherever it carries us. Our Congregation will flourish as long as we do not attempt to harness that Wind for our own ends. Perhaps it will direct us to Macedonia when we had planned on Asia Minor: or to the house of Cornelius when we thought we should not frequent it lest holy things be soiled in that contact. This was the Spirit which moved us in the first instance to the poorest works of the dioceses of France, then to the Indians in Acadia, the slaves in Guyana, the blacks of Senegambia and elsewhere...

It is only in the light of the Spirit that we can define what a Spiritan is. It is this special relationship to the Holy Spirit that distinguishes us. In consequence, at a time when the Spirit calls the whole Church to a radical renewal, should we not be the first to listen? More than others, more than ever. He must be be at the heart of our awakening and of our spiritual unity.

“Every family is unique, has its own particular spirit. That is to be found by us in the deep evangelical insight of our Founders as expressed in their lives, the spiritual and missionary adventure they wished to share with their brethren. Sometimes it may happen that we become so identified with the local Church that we forget that, as missionaries, we are bearers of an element of universality in our mission which overflows the limits of the local Church.” – Fr TIMMERMANS.

A Call to Renewal

Rare though they are, the writings of our Founder reveal his spirit. Simple though they be, his confidences are from the heart and reveal his ardent temperament.

His “Reflections on the Past” is the most valuable insight given us of his “interior life”, as it brings to mind the “GOD IS ALL” of Libermann. The background of his early life is made of God’s good pleasure, how to please Him at all costs. For this, God would lead Him into the desert and there speak to his heart (Gf, Os 2,16).

“I spent much time before the Blessed Sacrament. This was my happiest and most frequent recreation. I prayed most of the day and was upset as soon as I noticed I had lost, for a time, the presence of Him whom alone I wanted to love.” (Koren, P. 135.)

Such a spiritual experience ranks high in the list of great riches that is our common patrimony. We can discern in the writings of Claude, “apart from the style which is of his own times, a spirit which does concern us all: his attitude to God and man, which across the centuries makes common cause with our present-day preoccupations. It is to be found throughout our Spiritan history, especially in him who was most profoundly marked by him, Fr Libermann.” (Fr Lecuyer: Spiritan Papers No 3, page 3.)

Above all, we are a “community” that lives by faith in Christ and His universal mission. Our apostolate is based on this conviction. It is over and above all our discussions on The Mission: it should be more powerful than any of our immediate causes for concern. Our methods are called in question? The future of our works are in doubt? These invite us simply to show ourselves more clearly for what we are: witnesses of Christ, witnesses to his Death and Resurrection.

Our future depends on the confidence we have in the fundamental values of our missionary consecration. It depends on our belief in voluntary prayer; a belief sufficient for us to make adequate provision for it in our daily life; sufficient for us to make it the heart of all our apostolic endeavour. It depends also on our awareness that God calls us through the poor and that our prayer requires our commitment to Justice and Peace. It depends, finally, upon our belief in the apostolic creativity of our vows and of our fraternal communion that "the world may believe".
"What was implicit we now make explicit". (Libermann)

It should not be thought that POUILLART DES PLACES founded a Congregation which, by chance as it were, joined up with that of Libermann. The truth is that the charism of Claude and Francis was the same. There is great similarity between the end they proposed in their apostolate and the happenings of their lives.

Both shared and lived the same conviction of the Absoluteness of the Godhead; the power of Mary’s help, the necessity of freedom of spirit and of abandonment in the hands of God.

Where the Absoluteness of God is concerned, many references to it made by Libermann are so well known that it is scarcely necessary to repeat them. Perhaps, those of Claude are less well known:

"My heart... will no longer be occupied with anything except Yourself. Will there be one moment when I shall not lift my heart to You... consecrate to You all my thoughts..." (Koren, P. 57) "I beg You to grant me faith, humility, chastity, the grace of not doing, saying, thinking, seeing, hearing, or desiring anything except what You want me to do and to say." (Koren, 127.

This conviction would in both bring great interior freedom from all that might impede their approach to God, especially pride. Though not yet priests both began something that nobody took seriously. Both were victims of the smiles and taunts of "the wise". Libermann in Rome could have made his own the words of Claude:

"Let others say what they please; let them approve me or make fun of me, treat me as a visionary, a hypocrite or a righteous man! All this henceforth must leave me indifferent!" (Koren, P. 81). Or, "I despaired myself, and others were often to know this, for I sometimes took pleasure in humiliating myself before them." (Koren, P. 135) Or again, "This is Your task, my God, to fight for me. I entrust myself entirely to You, for I know You always side with those who hope in You, and we have nothing to fear when we do our best and You sustain us." (Koren, 52/53)

Both Claude and Francis gave themselves heart and soul to the apostolate of the poor and most abandoned: both trained apostles for the missions: both made the Holy Spirit and the Holy Heart of Mary the living sources of the apostolate of their respective Institutes.

"The union of our two societies has always seemed to me to be in accordance with God's Will. They were both intended for the same end and followed the same line. But, it is not in the plan of Providence to raise up two societies for a particular work, if one suffices." (Notes & Documents, X, p. 33).