

1979

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### Recommended Citation

Savoie, J. (1979). The Spiritual Personality of Claude Poullart des Places. *Spiritan Papers*, 10 (10). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-papers/vol10/iss10/3>

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## The Spiritual Personality of Claude Poullart des Places

*Conference given, February 26, 1979,  
by Fr. Jean SAVOIE, at the Generalate.*

**Introduction:** Today in the Congregation of the Holy Ghost we are celebrating the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Poullart des Places. We recognize him as our founder and we all remember his «poor students». A fair number of books have been written about him. Still, often we only retain a few memories of him from the Novitiate where we had hopes that he would be the inspiration of our life. True enough, in recent times many confreres send us enthusiastic papers and I/Ds and circular letters about Poullart. We are grateful for them. One might wonder what we can add to all that this evening, but it is hard to refuse to speak at a family feast. With that in mind, I re-read Poullart des Places.

One question occurred to me: are there not really two Poullart des Places: the one we know in the Congregation – Poullart the Founder, man of action, innovator, the one nobly pictured on official plaques; and the Poullart we find in his writings – an anxious person, inclined to be scrupulous, continually taking a second look at his interior problems, more and more self-effacing, walking away on tip-toe until he disappears altogether and leaves nothing solid after him. . . ? Which one is the real Poullart? Father Le Floch seems to have principally met the former one, while Father Thomas (his first biographer and a man who had known Poullart) presents more the latter one. More recent authors (Koren, Michel, Lécuyer, Legrain) base themselves mostly upon his writings.

For myself, I think it might be worth while this evening to bring out, if possible, *the spiritual personality of Cl. Poullart des Places*. I shall first follow the principal stages in his spiritual

itinerary and then draw out some traits which characterize his spiritual personality. This will enable us to pass in review the key moments in his life, but giving special attention not so much to what he did as to why and how he did it.

## I - THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF POUILLART DES PLACES

The earliest account we have of Poullart des Places is the Memorandum of M. Thomas (1687-1751). Thomas entered Poullart's Seminary in 1704 and therefore lived with him for three years as a seminarian. In 1723, he thought of becoming a Montfortian, but remained a Spiritan. His Memorandum is an interior history of Poullart, with a long treatment of every aspect of the spiritual life: prayer, mortification, sacramental life, sense of the apostolate, etc. The author was acquainted with Poullart's letters to his director and with other documents which are lacking to us. He does not hesitate to recount even the *most humiliating moments* of the life of Mr. des Places. (Notice that he always calls him Mr. des Places except at the beginning of the two sections – his life and his spirituality – where he calls him Mr. Poullart des Places. There are certainly some corrections to be made in the Koren edition)<sup>1</sup>.

As I compared M. Thomas' Memorandum and the Writings of Poullart des Places, it seemed to me that one could distinguish three periods of unequal length in the spiritual journey of Mr. des Places:

1) **his conversion to the sacerdotal ministry**, a sort of Road to Damascus. This is the period during which he studied Law (1697-1700);

2) **the light of the Spirit**, which might be compared to the Cenacle and to Pentecost. During this time he studied theology and founded his community (1701-1703);

3) **the suffering of the apostle**, comparable to Jacob's struggle. This was the time when he bore the burdens of responsibility (1704-1709).

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<sup>1</sup> Koren, *The Spiritual Writings of Father Claude Francis Poullart des Places*, edited by Henry J. Koren, CSSP, S.T.D., p. 225.

Without over-simplifying, we can even find a similar progression in his interior life during each of these periods:

a) a time of preparation and of crisis:

- 1697-98 at Nantes: life in the world.
- 1701-02 at Louis-le-Grand: his *Particular Rule*.
- 1704: year of doubt and darkness.

b) a time of reflection and retreat:

- 1700: end of Law studies in Paris or Rennes: *Truths of Religion and Choice of a State in Life*.
- 1702: August: retreat for tonsure.
- 1704: Christmas: retreat on *Reflections upon the past*.

c) a time of decision and commitment:

- 1700: decision to go towards the priesthood; turning from the world.
- 1702-03: great conversion and foundation of the Seminary.
- 1704: decision to ask for Orders and to live in spiritual hiddenness.

It could be schematized as follows:

	Preparation and Crisis	Reflection and Retreats	Decisions and Commitments
Conversion (1697-1700)	Life in the world: Nantes	Retreat on <i>Truths of Religion and Choice of a State in Life</i>	1st Conversion/ decision to become a priest
Fervor (1701-1703)	First year of theology	Retreat for Tonsure, Aug., 1702	2nd Conversion/ foundation of the Seminary
Suffering (1704-1709)	Year of doubt 1704	Retreat: <i>Reflections upon the Past</i>	decision to request Orders and a life of spiritual hiddenness.

## 1 - First Step: Call to the Priesthood

In the interest of brevity, we shall not deal with Poullart's extreme youth. M. Thomas gives some details about it. We take as starting-point of his itinerary the year 1697 when he

finished philosophy and passed his public examination. Poullart was 18 years old. He had received a fine education, was a good speaker, a fine horseman and hunter. He had almost killed his little sister while playing some childish game and had been seriously hurt himself. He had made a few trips to Nantes and Caen. He was enthusiastic about life and glory. His father sent him to Paris to meet a certain maid-of-honor of the Duchess of Burgundy as a possible bride. The way M. Thomas describes the negotiations in view of a marriage is worth reading if only to see how incredible they were while probably being typical of the young Poullart's state of mind at the time.<sup>2</sup>

When he got back to Rennes *to see the world and to be seen to take a place of honor in it*, he felt the first shaking of his interior self-assurance. *It is certain that he felt the need to make a retreat*, M. Thomas tells us. He was feeling disgusted with the world and anxious to serve God, — in a word, *converted*. This was the line that grace was to take with Poullart des Places throughout his life, this was to be his spiritual journey. For the moment, the idea was conceived, but its realization was still far off: *The young Des Places persevered for only 40 days*. The life of the world and his ambitions took the upper hand again. Life had to go on. He had thought about an ecclesiastical vocation and had not rejected it. Meanwhile, his father sent him to study Law, — this would serve as a preparation for either law-practice or the priesthood.

Poullart appears to us at this time as the typical young university student: free, worldly, occasionally recollecting himself. *This was the period of M. Des Places' life which was to cause him the greatest humiliation*, says M. Thomas with the intention not only of being properly true to history but also of showing *the strength of grace in overcoming the inclinations of nature*.

Poullart des Places had plenty of leisure for living the same life as his contemporaries. He probably finished his Law courses and received the Licentiate at the Sorbonne in 1700. He had boarded with the Jesuits, and fitted in well, even brilliantly.

It was the custom for students in Jesuit houses to make a retreat at the end of their studies. This second retreat was to

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<sup>2</sup>Koren, *Writings*, p. 239.

bring about Claude Poullart's first real conversion and his decision to give up a worldly career and prepare himself for the priesthood. We have his 1700 retreat notes in *Reflections upon the Truths of Religion and Choice of a State in Life*.

In terms of his spiritual itinerary, we can call this moment Poullart's Road to Damascus. He was finishing his studies armed with his diplomas like Paul seated on his horse, his head held high, out to seek the glory and honor which his noble family tradition confused with the service of God; but he came out of the retreat asking: *Lord, what do you want me to do?* The Lord sent him to his spiritual director as to Ananias to make the scales fall from his eyes. Now he directs himself towards the sacerdotal ministry; now he is converted from a worldly career to the service of God and men without yet knowing what he will have to do and to suffer.

In Poullart's spiritual journey, the purgative way will have to continue for some time longer until fervor can take over in the light of the Spirit.

## 2 - Second Step: The Light of the Spirit

When he had succeeded in winning over his parents to his new life-project, Poullart began to study theology. He returned to Louis-le-Grand, not only as a resident, but as a student of theology. His conversion, therefore, was serious: he was no longer looking for the diplomas he could have obtained at the Sorbonne, even in the ecclesiastical state.

That first year of theology 1701-02 was spent with 450 fellow-students of Louis-le-Grand. We know the particular rule he adopted for himself, or at least his prayer program: it is to be found in the «Fragments of resolutions for a particular rule».

It is worth reading at least the short prayer to the Holy Trinity *for obtaining God's blessing* which he said on his knees every time he entered or left his room.<sup>3</sup>

The total of his daily prayers adds up to a fairly long period of time: at least an hour morning and night, along with five daily visits to the Blessed Sacrament. There can be no doubt that Poullart was growing in fervor.

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<sup>3</sup>Koren, *Writings*, p. 123.

During that school year Poullart gave most of his attention to theology. Still, he found time to give periodic assistance to some Savoyard immigrants. In May, he helped some of his fellow-students who could not pay their board at Louis-le-Grand. We know that he did this to honor Christ in His poorest members and to make up for his own offenses against God.

He prepared himself for tonsure which was to be received at the end of the year with the title of a seminarian of Rennes. He seems not to have wanted to return to Brittany in the summer of 1702. At the beginning of August he made his retreat before tonsure during which some new grace seems to have led him to progress in the spiritual life. When he received the habit along with tonsure, he entered upon an 18-month period of fervor which he will describe for us later in his *Reflections upon the Past*. This was the passage of Poullart into the illuminative way. Affective prayer, continual fervent union with God, and the desire to undertake to do something for God, — all these are traits by which the spiritual authors identify this classic stage in the journey: it is Poullart's second or *great* conversion.

It was in this state of fervor that Poullart began his second year of theology 1702-03. He still lived at the College, but he took his meals at a later hour with a group of poor students whom he was helping. The group grew in numbers. Poullart asked God in prayer what He was asking of him in terms of this ever more absorbing service. He sought counsel from the Jesuit Fathers and from the Archbishopric of Paris. He found a house near the College and, on Pentecost 1703, he went to live there with 12 poor students, marking the occasion by a ceremony at the Church of St. Etienne des Grés. *It was in that silent and obscure sanctuary. . . that the first 12 members came on Pentecost to kneel down together under the leadership of him whom they looked upon as their best friend and already venerated as their father*<sup>4</sup>. We know that for some time to come Poullart was to be bathed in the Pentecost light of the Spirit, but the time of trial and darkness was not far off.

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<sup>4</sup>Henri Le Floch, *Cl̄aude-François Poullart des Places*, quoted by Joseph Michel.

### 3 - The Third Step: Suffering of the Apostle

Poullart's trials came from within himself. Probably towards the end of 1703, during his third year of theology, he found himself stripped of all interior consolation in prayer and assailed by doubt. He speaks of it himself, that whole year of 1704, as really the darkest year of his life. At the close of the year 1704 he made a retreat during which he wrote his *Reflections upon the Past*. This text alone tells us all about Poullart, his interior journey, his spiritual life, — he lets himself go in it with simplicity and realism. Some have perhaps found too many pious exaggerations in it. On the contrary, I find it very concrete and very revealing, while still being classic in the line of spiritual itineraries.

Here is Koren's summary to accompany the text:

*— These delights of the soul on Tabor are then followed by its Calvary: the spiritual night mentioned by Saint John of the Cross. Claude began to experience it a year and one half after his 'conversion': loss of God's presence, aridity of prayer, general boredom with the spiritual life. At the same time he had a keen awareness of his faults of pride, vanity, and ambition. He was terrified by a sense of being responsible for his 'laxity', by the thought that a man like him had dared to undertake the foundation and direction of a seminary. Through it all, however, there remains a note of trust and hope that God will not abandon him, no matter how much he has deserved it. 'Heaven will not always be like an iron vault' and the good Lord will have pity with his poor little servant.<sup>5</sup>*

To give some idea of this spiritual darkness, Poullart des Places has passed through, we can recall St. Paul's *sting of the flesh* given to him so that he would not be able to boast. Poullart's description is very clear:

*— . . . the source of . . . my falling off and disorder, is the fact that I left solitude too soon. I have poured myself out, as it were, on external things, undertaking this work for poor students and striving to keep it going.*

*— I know, of course, that if I faithfully used all God's graces, I could really be on my guard and remain steadfast in the midst of my occupations. I can judge that this is true by recalling the beginnings when I had not yet completely lost my fervor.*

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<sup>5</sup>Koren, *Writings*, p. 131.

— *And yet, it was hard for me to remain steadfast and keep from being thrown off balance.*

— *What has happened makes me believe that I made a mistake.*

— *... (on this occasion) the devil transformed himself into an angel of light.*<sup>6</sup>

The final sentence of these *Reflections* reveals for us the real depth of this crisis on Poullart's journey: *I left the world in order to seek God, renounce vanity and save my soul. Is it possible that I merely changed the object of my ambition and that I preserved that ambition all the while in my heart? If so, of what use was it to undertake that work?*<sup>7</sup> Of course, Poullart keeps his confidence in God, — he even writes: *I know that heaven will not always be an iron vault*, but, after this crisis, Poullart will never be entirely the same again. He has entered into the suffering of the apostle, into the unitive way. He has had his struggle with the angel. Like Jacob, just before entering the Promised land, he is all alone, having sent his family on ahead and struggled during the night, not against sin, but against what was best in himself, his work, even his vocation; — in a word, against God. Like Jacob, Poullart came out of the struggle *beaten* and *blessed*: — *beaten* by God, converted, poor in heart, with the decision to become a priest but in a hidden role; and *blessed* by God, ready to proceed to his ordination, having found the balance between prayer and the active life. Poullart is a true son of the Jesuits: *non mihi, Domine, non mihi, sed nomini tuo da gloriam. A.M.D.G.*

## II - THE SPIRITUAL PERSONALITY OF POUILLART DES PLACES

When we read M. Thomas' Memorandum, as when we read Poullart's writings, we are struck by the repetition of certain themes. There are several ideas which regularly appear and which are always of a spiritual nature. Of course, we are dealing with writings which most often are retreat notes. M. Thomas devotes more than half of his Memorandum (14 out of 24 pages) to a description of these elements of

<sup>6</sup> Koren, *Writings*, p. 147.

<sup>7</sup> Koren, *Writings*, p. 149.

M. Des Places' spiritual life. This insistence does not come about by chance; it is because Poullart des Places is above all a spiritual man.

We shall try to highlight some notable traits of his spiritual personality, but first let us follow M. Thomas' presentation of M. de Places' spirituality.

**A. M. Thomas lists eight elements** which can be reduced to **three principal ones: Union with God, contempt for the world, service of the poor.**

**1. Union with God.** *God gave himself to him, flooded him with penetrating light which not even the cleverest teachers can impart to their pupils.*<sup>8</sup> He bitterly deplores. . . *having begun so late to love only God who alone deserves to be loved. . .*<sup>9</sup> His prayer in its various forms was a continual expression of this union with God. This prayer was trinitarian above all: *Most holy and adorable Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost whom I adore with all my heart, with all my soul and all my strength, allow me to offer You most humbly my small prayers for your greater honor and glory. . .*<sup>10</sup>

**The three subjects of his meditation** are pointed out to us: the merciful goodness of **the Father** who has pardoned him, the passion and abasement of Our Lord **Jesus crucified**; the Eucharist as a **gift of love** calling for the giving of ourselves without reserve.<sup>11</sup>

His sacramental life is strongly centered upon the Eucharist. He seems to enjoy an understanding of it and an intensity of communion involving his whole personality which are out of the ordinary: He was drawn to this Sacrament of Love where *«he could enjoy at his ease his union with the beloved Master. Here he could show Him his miseries and become enriched by His treasures, here he could show the Divine Physician his wounds and be cured, ask pardon for his past ingratitude and unfaithfulness, weep in His presence, offer Him his possessions, his honor, his reputation, his life. He could offer himself entirely as a victim ready to be immolated. . .»*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Koren, *Writings*, p. 253.

<sup>9</sup>Koren, *Writings*, p. 255.

<sup>10</sup>Koren, *Writings*, p. 259.

<sup>11</sup>Koren, *Writings*, p. 257.

<sup>12</sup>Koren, *Writings*, p. 265.

**2. Contempt for the world and its esteem.** This trait marks a very precise stage in his spiritual journey. It corresponds with his great conversion in 1702. He who up to then *had preserved... the carefully polished manners of the world... appeared to have changed quite a bit... now clothed in the habit and... simplicity of the most ascetical ecclesiastics.*<sup>13</sup>

*It was from partaking of the Body of Christ that I derived the detachment which made me despise the world and its ways. I cared very little for its esteem and sometimes I even tried to displease it.*<sup>14</sup>

M. Thomas stresses how in Poullart's case this flight from the world went as far as *love of being despised* and mortification. *M. Poullart des Places led a very austere life, one which was to shorten his days... he never believed he had done enough for God and gave himself up to a life of immolation and sacrifice, both for his own sanctification and to draw down heaven's graces and blessings upon his beloved seminarians.*<sup>15</sup>

**3. Service of the poor.** Here we have to make it quite clear that in Poullart's case this service of the poor was not something like what we would today call an apostolic service, nor a humanitarian endeavor. It was a spiritual activity, something done out of love for God. *A heart that was so generous and so sensitive to the love of its God made sure it would not fail to show proper gratitude to Him who held out a saving hand... He found great comfort in being able to console the Lord in the persons of the poor who are members of His Mystical Body.*<sup>16</sup>

*If Claude's heart was so deeply moved by the corporal needs of the members of Jesus Christ, he was still more sensitive to their spiritual needs... Besides, in this he also followed the example of his beloved Master who had come to preach the gospel to the poor. In order to repay God, for he believed he had served Him so badly until then, he was ready to do anything to give Him faithful servants.*<sup>17</sup>

This wholly spiritual motivation for serving the poor is very important if we are to understand Poullart des Places' spiritual

<sup>13</sup>Koren, *Writings*, p. 273.

<sup>14</sup>Koren, *Writings*, p. 265.

<sup>15</sup>Biographies, 1703-1803, Fr. Schwindenhammer; Ed. rue Lhomond, 1908, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup>Koren, *Writings*, p. 267.

<sup>17</sup>Koren, *Writings*, p. 269.

personality. He is not an activist, he is not principally a founder, he is a spiritual man who lives in God and for God.

This is what we must speak about now.

## B. The Dominant Traits of Poullart des Places' Spiritual Personality.

Poullart des Places himself analyzed his own psychological personality<sup>18</sup> and Father Michel has pointed out the clarity with which he did it. But we know that a spiritual personality shows itself more in interior change, in the chief directions it follows than in an analysis of the various factors in it.

### 1) *Spiritual Poverty* (interior renoucement, availability to God)

When we examine the direction Poullart des Places took in his interior journey, we cannot fail to notice a very precise feature which gets stronger and stronger and which defines his spiritual personality better than anything else. It seems as if Poullart des Places' entire life consisted in a struggle against his ambition, his vanity, his passion for glory, in order to become the humble, self-renouncing, spiritual man, totally available to God.

Let us recall some facts from his life:

— When he finished philosophy, on the evening of his public examination, *his passion was for glory and renown*, M. Thomas tells us (p. 239)<sup>18bis</sup>, and to such a point that he did not want to get married and burden himself with a wife. . . He was only 18 years old at the time.

— When he returned to Rennes, he *played a greater role in its social life*. *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 making a dignified appearance. This was much to his taste. Consequently, he was not stingy when opportunities arose.* (Koren, p. 241).

— Even when in 1697 he was thinking of becoming a priest, he wanted to go and study theology at the Sorbonne and not at Rennes: *His clerical aspirations were not pure enough to preclude a desire for more liberty that proximity to parental supervision would inevitably have accorded him.* (Koren, p. 243).

<sup>18</sup>Koren, *Writings*, pp. 93, 95.

<sup>18bis</sup>Koren, *Writings*.

— *He did not foresee that his love of freedom was to become for him a source of the deepest regret and the bitterest remorse.* (Koren, p. 245).

— *Now he felt he... could cut a good figure in the world.* (Koren, p. 247).

This is the young Poullart des Places we find at the age of 18 or 20. This is the starting-point of a spiritual personality where there is not much place for humility, self-denial, interior readiness. Several successive shocks will lead in that direction, however. A first conversion at the end of his Law studies in 1700 made him abandon a law career and choose the clerical state. *What a folly to fill one's heart full of the things of this world — to have one's head full of vain glory. Of all that is earthly what will remain after my death? A grave measuring six feet, a poor worn cloth, and a coffin made of four or five pieces of rotten wood.* (Koren, p. 71).

— *I am a wretch... if I do not earnestly relinquish all earthly things and if I think of anything else than the matter of dying a holy death.* (Koren, p. 71).

He knows that God commands him *not only to flee evil but also to do good*, and that *it is better to keep it in mind than to put it down on paper. Let others say what they please; let them approve of me or make fun of me, treat me as a visionary, a hypocrite or a righteous man! All this henceforth must leave me indifferent. Ego Deum meum quaero.* (Koren, p. 81).

— *Defend me, O Lord, against these tempters. The most formidable is my ambition — my predominant passion. Humble me, crush my pride, confound my vain glory... I am not in the state, Lord, in which You can approve of me. I must choose that which You have destined for me.* (Koren, p. 83).

— *O my God, guide to the heavenly Jerusalem those who truly trust in You, I have recourse to Your Divine Providence. I abandon myself entirely to You, I renounce my inclinations, my appetites, and my own will, in order to follow Your will.* (Koren, p. 89).

— *I detach myself, O my God, from all the worldly views which I held until now in all the states of life I have thought of.* (Koren, p. 91).

It can be seen that, when Poullart des Places examines the various states in life, his chief criterion is whether or not a particular state would make it possible for him to live for God alone rather than satisfy his own natural vanity. **If he becomes a monk at Chartreux, would not sloth have some part in**

*that. . . and might there not be also some chagrin 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? . . . And are there not a thousand other motives of vanity that might prompt you to like that sort of Carthusian solitude?* (Koren, pp. 97, 99).

**As to the ecclesiastical state,** *Is it not principally vainglory, your dominant passion, that impells you to this vocation? You flatter yourself with the thought that I shall be able to preach and receive applause, and hence you will reap glory and honor. This is the side from which you are the most vulnerable, for if I agreed to become a priest on condition that I will never ascend the pulpit, you would certainly not give your consent.* We know that Poullart will change his mind about this, for he will become a priest but will not want to be a preacher like Grignon de Montfort.

— **In the world,** Poullart will not join the army, nor go into finance, but he has a taste for the law and for the Court. He recognizes that in both these situations he would be lost because of his vanity and ambition.

In the prayer with which he ends this inquiry, he follows the same line: *Destroy in me the worldly attachments that cling to me everywhere. Once I have chosen a state, let me no longer have any other thought than to please You.* (Koren, p. 113).

We know that it was on his director's advice that he chose the ecclesiastical state. When it came to deciding where and how to prepare for it, he again took as his criteria flight from personal ambition and **interior self-denial**. He would go to Paris and live with the Jesuits where his directors were, not in some lodgings in the city. He would also study theology with the Jesuits at Louis-le-Grand and not at the Sorbonne. Thus he voluntarily gave up any chance of taking a degree. This choice was diametrically opposed to everything he had pictured to himself up to then with regard to his ecclesiastical career and it speaks volumes about the direction Claude Poullart's spiritual personality was taking.

It is also true, of course, that, in that era of Jansenism, the choice of the Jesuits over the Sorbonne had doctrinal overtones. The same factor will continue later on to influence the sending of Holy Ghost students to the Jesuits in spite of all sorts of pressure.

What Poullart had in mind, however, in beginning his theology was to find a place where spiritual life would be

fostered and to mortify his natural vanity. All subsequent decisions will be made with the same motives at heart.

He was aware of the needs of **the poor in Paris** and gave both material and spiritual help to some Savoyard immigrants. His world was not the world of important and influential people but the world of the poor. This was not because of any leftist ideology but only from a desire to do something for God. He was attentive to his immediate companions and discovered that there were also poor people among his fellow-students: the *poor students*.

He received tonsure at the end of his first year of theology. He did not return home that summer but spent his vacation in Paris. It was during that summer of 1702 that his *great conversion* occurred.

This was the start of the 18 months of fervor which he describes at some length. After the retreat for tonsure in early August 1702, his life became wholly an interior one. He had left the world; now he abandons himself and begins to live the life of the Gospel Beatitudes. *The many students of the college who knew him well suddenly observed that he had dropped his customary splendor and worldly manners. He was now clothed in the habit and had adopted the simplicity of the most ascetical ecclesiastics. He was not at all concerned about what others might say.* (Koren, p. 273).

It was at this time that he read the life of Michel Le Nobletz, a Breton priest and missionary who, according to the de Montfort Father Besnard, *was of no small help to him in learning to despise the world and get above all human respect. he read and re-read this blessed book; he meditated upon it until Michel Le Nobletz became the model he tried to imitate.*<sup>19</sup> Now this Michel Le Nobletz could be called the *doctor of disdain for the world. He tried to attract students to a life of piety and to inspire in them that generous attitude of despising the world which had become the foundation of his own entire spiritual life. He did without things which seemed strictly necessary; he never ate meat or drank wine; the money he saved in this way he sent to his father to be used to provide for the essential needs of the very poorest.* (This text does not refer to Poullart des Places, but to M. Le Nobletz. It is by P. Verjus, pp. 20-21, and is quoted by Michel, p. 101).

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph Michel, *Claude Poullart des Places*, p. 84.

It was also during that summer of 1702 that he organized the help he was giving to some of the students. He had been helping J. B. Faulconnier since May 1702.<sup>20</sup> He met his friend Grignon de Montfort and heard him speak of his desire to find good priests. Poullart realized that he ought to continue to be attentive to the poor students by gathering them together from time to time (cf. Besnard). He was not to be either a missionary or a martyr. His vocation was to form clerics: . . . *four or five students. . . and. . . trying unobtrusively to feed them without making any fuss at all about the undertaking.*<sup>21</sup> We can see how Poullart was avoiding all publicity, anything that would make himself known. He had decided not to be a preacher or a missionary, he who was so gifted with eloquence.

There would be no end to the attempt to illustrate how Poullart made every decision in an attitude of humility and self-effacement; *What a long way he had come in a few months*, says Michel. *This young man who yesterday was still passionately interested in glory, jealous of others to the point of despair, worried because he did not have the means to rise to the heights of his ambition, — now asks of God from the bottom of his heart to be entirely stripped of all perishable earthly goods and to be absolutely detached from all creatures and from himself. . .*<sup>22</sup>

As we have seen, it was this same humility which made him hesitate for two years before asking for Holy Orders. We read of this terrible interior struggle in his *Reflections upon the Past*.

Father Michel describes Poullart for us as he was in his community later on: *In his function as Superior, he always remembered to humble himself before God, recognizing interiorly that he was unworthy of the position and was a greater sinner than any of his students.*<sup>23</sup>

If we were to characterize in a word this fundamental trait of the spiritual personality Poullart des Places was becoming, we would have to speak of **spiritual poverty**. This was both the object of his striving and the impulse of grace. He never uses the term himself; he speaks of humility, of the love of God

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<sup>20</sup>J. Michel, p. 99.

<sup>21</sup>Koren, *Writings*, p. 149.

<sup>22</sup>J. Michel, p. 87.

<sup>23</sup>J. Michel, p. 242.

alone, of dominating his vanity and ambition, of despising glory. But it is spiritual poverty that he is referring to.

— *Spiritual poverty seems to us. . . to be awareness and love of our own abjection, of our nothingness before God, of our uselessness in God's service and in the apostolate, of the fact that all our riches are in God alone. . . to despise and forget about ourselves and everything else, to be attached to God and have confidence in Him alone.*<sup>24</sup>

*A rich young man, anxious for success and glory, Mr. des Places had followed the example of Michel Le Nobletz in discovering that true greatness consists in living the beatitudes. He, in his turn, had become by word and example a preacher of humility and disdain for this world.*<sup>25</sup>

We shall find that, in perfect conformity with this fundamental trait of his spiritual life, there is another one which prolongs it, in a sense; the SERVICE OF THE POOR BEFORE GOD.

## 2) *The Service of the Poor before God.*

There is no doubt that Poullart was the originator of the Holy Ghost Seminary which was to form priests for 250 years. At the same time he started the Congregation of the Holy Ghost which we are today. Still, it seems to me that we would greatly misunderstand Poullart if we regarded him as a founder. Let us look at how he carried out his apostolate.

He began very simply by helping some poor immigrants. Because he lived poor, he had money left over from the funds his father sent him for his keep. Since he was striving to live a life of poverty and retirement he could not keep that money for himself. Since he wanted to imitate Christ in His poverty and to serve Him in His poorest members, he assisted both the Savoyards and the poor students. As he got to know them better, he became aware of their spiritual needs and tried to meet them. Thus he found himself with a group of poor students who counted upon him and who made up his *seminary*.

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<sup>24</sup>P. Rétif, S. J., *Pauvreté Spirituelle et Mission*, pp. 82-83; the author was referring to Libermann.

<sup>25</sup>J. Michel, p. 244.

Poullart des Places was not the head of this group because he had made a study of the needs of the missions, the poverty of the country clergy or any other great need of the Church, and had then drawn up a program and the means to follow it. That's what founders do; — that's what Grignon de Montfort and Father Libermann did.

Poullart des Places simply lived a life of poverty, looked to see whom he could help with the money he had, in what way he could love Jesus Christ in the poor.

The seminary for poor students was started as a service for the poor, a service rendered before God and for God. Perhaps one could say that it was started because Poullart received money from his father and did not spend it on himself.

Thus Poullart found himself at the head of a seminary without having planned it so. Certainly he had thought about it, he accepted it, — but it happened as so many things in life happen: he had not foreseen it. On the contrary, he was trying to avoid anything that would bring him any kind of honor. Being what he was, Poullart could only have become the superior of a seminary through force of circumstances, never through wanting to be a founder.

One question cannot be avoided: what had he intended to found that Pentecost Day, May 27, 1703: a seminary, a charitable work, or the Congregation of the Holy Ghost? We cannot rely upon the titles given to the foundation either in Poullart's time when the Law of 1666 forbade the founding of a congregation or a community, or after Poullart's time when it became necessary to resort to every possible maneuver in order to be able to receive the Lebègue legacy which was willed to *the Community of the Holy Ghost*.

The surest way to find out what Poullart had in mind to inaugurate that May 27, 1703 is to examine his interior progress during those eighteen months of fervor and what he tells us about them.

There were certainly then more than the four or five poor students of the start of the 1702-3 school year. At that early date, Mr. des Places had obtained authorization to help them from his director and from Father Mégret, the Prefect of Resident Students at the Jesuit College. The help he gave them was already a beginning of organization of his daily acts of charity of the previous year. Still a boarder in the College then, he was allowed to take his meals at a later hour with his students in a place near Louis-le-Grand.

*Their number increased rapidly. Having begun with five students, like Claude Bernard's seminary in earlier days, he had a dozen at the end of six months.* (Gallia Christiana).

Because of the force of circumstances, therefore, it was necessary either to progress further or to stop the whole thing. We know about his doubts and how he worked them out from the biographies of Blessed Grignon de Montfort who arrived in Paris at Easter 1703. He did not win over Poullart to his own project, but the two friends prayed together and came to a clearer discernment of God's Will. Poullart would continue his work with poor students: *even though he would not be a preacher himself, 30, 60, or 100 priests formed by him would preach in his stead and, after he would be gone, that preaching would continue on through the years.*<sup>26</sup> Poullart told Grignon: *If God grants me the grace to succeed, you can count upon receiving missionaries. I will prepare them and you will put them to work. In this way we shall both be satisfied.*<sup>27</sup>

Poullart decided to obtain authorization to open a house for seminarians on Rue des Cordiers. Thanks to the recommendations the Jesuit Fathers made to the Archbishop of Paris, this house could legally be either a charitable work or a seminary. Because of the royal ordinance of 1666, however, it could not be either a community or a congregation. The house Poullart rented became available in the month of May<sup>28</sup>. It was to mark the taking possession of it that they had the ceremony on Pentecost Sunday in the Church of Notre Dame des Grés: *On the Feast of Pentecost 1703, Mr. Claude François Poullart des Places, who at the time was only an aspirant to the ecclesiastical state, began the establishment of the said community and seminary consecrated to the Holy Ghost under the invocation of the Blessed Virgin Conceived without Sin. He was ordained a priest later, and he governed the seminary until his death.*

Even though this text from the Spiritan archives is very old, we cannot rely upon it absolutely as giving literal information about what this establishment was; — the word itself could apply to the simple fact that they went into the house together. The text certainly dates from after Poullart's time. Some-

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<sup>26</sup>Kieffer, III, p. 13. (Manuscript in the Archives of the Mother House, Paris).

<sup>27</sup>Besnard 103-104; cf. J. Michel, p. 133.

<sup>28</sup>Kieffer, III, p. 13.

times it is thought to refer to the establishment of *the community* and of the *seminary*<sup>29</sup> sometimes to the establishment of *the community* of the *seminary*<sup>30</sup>.

Father Le Floch seems to go away beyond the available documents when he speaks of the preparatory retreat: its subject was *Misit me evangelizare pauperibus*, its preacher was Poullart des Places, its solemnity. . . etc. Le Floch does not verify the date (May 27, not May 20). He believes he can see in it *the birth certificate of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost*<sup>31</sup>.

But this was certainly not the style of Poullart des Places. When he drew up his rule, he never used the word *seminary*, nor *community*, nor *congregation*. Was this just the carefulness of a good lawyer? Possibly, — even though juridically he could have used the term *seminary*. In his *Reflections upon the Past* in 1704, he uses the word *home*<sup>32</sup> and not *seminary*. I am rather inclined to believe that it all happened this way: on that Pentecost Day some students gathered together under the leadership of Poullart des Places and in dependence upon his material support; in doing this they had the benevolent authorization of the Jesuits; they all continued to go to the College for their courses; the Rule said that the house would be directed by the Reverend Jesuit Fathers (art. 4), but the group of students on Rue des Cordiers would have its own routine, its own life-style of poverty, its own community prayer.

In fact this was the beginning of the Holy Ghost Seminary, but certainly not the beginning of the Congregation. Claude Poullart was very capable in distributing the many tasks involved in running his seminary, but he never indicates any special role for *associates*; even though he had some of them. He always speaks of the Superior, but not of any other animators. Even the *répétiteurs* (in English, *tutors*?) were students. He seems to be the only one in authority. He takes care of all the details of the daily life and formation of the seminarians, but he does not seem to be concerned about the

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<sup>29</sup>J. Michel, p. 139.

<sup>30</sup>Le Floch, p. 284.

<sup>31</sup>Le Floch, p. 285.

<sup>32</sup>Koren, *Writings*, p. 143.

establishment of the work as such. He is in no hurry to advance to Orders, even though it would seem more proper to have a priest as superior.

As early as 1705 there was a priest among the students: Jean Le Roy (de Gourin), who was called back to Brittany in 1707. Even Poullart's own ordination in 1707 probably coincided with that of two of his collaborators — Vincent Le Barbier and Jacques-Hyacinth Garnier — and this event does not seem to have changed the institution notably. The students still went to the Jesuit Fathers. The only change seems to be that now there was Mass in the house on weekdays.

An event which tells us a great deal about Poullart des Places' institution was the death of Father Garnier in 1710. This was a severe blow indeed! Poullart had died suddenly in 1709, and now Garnier died the following year. Le Barbier had been recalled to Brittany. The fact of the matter was that there was nobody in the seminary clearly designated to take charge. They elected Mr. Bouic, even though he had joined them only four months before and was not yet an *associate*. True, he was a deacon. It is clear that they chose him because he seemed the most capable of all the men in the seminary, without limiting themselves to the *associates* (one of whom was the *Priest of the Poor*, Father Caris). This seems to imply that the *associates* did not constitute either a special community or a congregation.

Another bit of insight into Poullart's foundation is provided by the canonical status of the students. The seminarians remained under the authority and jurisdiction of their bishops.

Poullart himself received his dimissorial letters in 1705 from the Bishop of Rennes. Holy Ghost Seminary had no claim on anybody. Le Roy, probably Poullart's first collaborator, was called back to Brittany in 1707, two years after his ordination, just like any other student might have been. Vincent Le Barbier was called back also, even though he too was one of the first collaborators. There was no special community to hold them together in a more stable fashion.

We are quite ready to state that Poullart des Places began a seminary for the poor, wishing to prepare them for work that carried with it neither glory nor worldly advantages. He was assisted by one or other of the better ones from their number. He even admitted a few richer students, on condition that they renounced their goods, with a view to their perhaps continuing the work with him and after him. But it is not

certain that he concerned himself about having around him a community organized in view of insuring the permanence of the work. At least, there is no proof that he did, and, if he did attempt to do so, he certainly did not succeed very well.

It was only in Father Bouic's time that the need for organization made itself felt. It was the vitality of the seminary which founded the Congregation, — once again by force of circumstances and notably the need to identify the institution clearly in view of the Lebègue legacy. It took years to get it all straightened out and to obtain definitive approbation as a congregation in 1734. Even then, it was only because they were required by Parliament that the first Constitutions were written!

### *3. Hence, Poullart is above all a Spiritual Man.*

We had to follow these developments in order to bring out this important aspect of Poullart des Places' spiritual personality. He was not an innovator. He did not even look upon his seminary as a project to be implemented; he lived with it as the daily work he had to do. Above all, he did not propose to found a Congregation. He was a spiritual man who abandoned himself to the Holy Spirit in the circumstances which life presented. He heard the Spirit call him through the people he met. He imitated Christ his Master first of all. He imitated Michel de Nobletz the master of spiritual poverty. He imitated Father Gourdan de St. Victor. He imitated Mr. Chancieurgues who out of humility remained a permanent deacon and founded seminaries for the poor, — he even copied his rule. Poullart did not spin theories, — he lived. He is a witness more than a teacher. **He is a spiritual man who allowed himself to be conquered and led by God little by little.**<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

I was tempted to conclude by making a comparison between Libermann's spiritual personality and that of Poullart des Places, but that would involve a double risk which I prefer

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<sup>33</sup>Fr. Legrain, in his thesis on the «Fusion», notes on page 27 that Father Olier too, by founding a seminary, also founded a congregation.

not to take. All the more so because I came across a conference by Father Le Floch (February 2, 1902) in which that comparison is treated at some length. It is even said there that our Congregation had its Old Testament with Poullart des Places and its New Testament with Libermann. I must say that I find this rather hard to follow. I prefer to limit myself to Poullart des Places and to make a comparison of the portraits we have of him.

a) I see the starting-point of his spiritual evolution in the portrait of the young Poullart with the works of Cicero in his hand (it is in the Munich Pinacotheka and was painted by Jean Jouvenet when he was working at the Parliament in Rennes).

If we remove the rabat (which was added later), we have the Poullart des Places of 1697, even if it was painted in 1695. We see here Saul setting out on the Road to Damascus, — the young man from a good family, *well brought up* (Thomas), brilliant in his studies and cutting a fine figure in the world. The look is direct and confident, the chin is rather self-willed, but still it is a gentle face, kind and even innocent. His hand holds the book firmly but closed, **as if he regarded it as a stepping-stone to other things, as a stage he has successfully passed through.**

To have painted in the soutane and rabat, as if Poullart had remained just as he was, was a serious mistake.

b) The Poullart of Spiritan tradition is better expressed in the photogravure by Dujardin for the souvenir medal of his second centenary in 1903. Here he is a priest holding the host and chalice and with a dove above his head. In the corner there is the inscription: *Mr. Poullart des Places, Founder of the Community and Seminary of the Holy Ghost in 1703.*

I do not think it is very correct, even if it be another work of Jouvenet produced after Poullart's death.

c) Poullart on his death-bed — the crucifix in his hand — seems to me to be the true portrait of him. The face is still young, emaciated but not exaggeratedly so, peaceful. He is recollected as if in prayer, but certainly withdrawn from the world and its vanities. His soutane and rabat are like a shroud; he belongs wholly to God; he is a witness to the workings of grace.

It is this Poullart that I like to keep before my eyes, and it is to him that I address this prayer:

**A filial prayer to Poullart Des Places**  
(on his 300<sup>th</sup> birthday)

It is a joy for us to be gathered together around you on your 300<sup>th</sup> birthday. It is an occasion for us to remind ourselves of the history which has made us one and the spirit which animates us. Certainly, your place in all this is an important one.

We do not give ourselves to much nostalgia for the early days when *everything was simple*. We don't feel bound to reproduce what you did. For a long time now we have not been following your rule in our seminaries. Life has shaken us up and renewed us. But, for all that, we are not very proud of the way we do things nowadays. We are not very sure of ourselves either. We come to you for inspiration and spiritual dynamism.

When you were a young man — sure of yourself and at home in your environment, competent and full of enthusiasm — you had the good sense, before striking out in life, to ask the fundamental question: Lord, what do You want me to do? You provide a witness of Gospel priorities for young people today who want their life to be really worth-while.

As a disciple of Christ and His Spirit, you heard the call to the humble kinds of daily service. Be a guide to those who are looking for the signs of the Spirit and who want to be faithful in the poor-and-servant-Church of our time.

You are an apostle who suffered doubts about your work and your life and arrived at the confidence necessary to go on living for others even at the risk of being lost yourself. You give witness to God's faithfulness to the work undertaken and thereby encourage all apostles who have trembled along the way, and you can assure them that God lives in the midst of trials with all His presence and all His love.

In the contemplation of Christ crucified you discovered His solidarity with men and with the poor. Help us to find in our religious life, lived as the following of Christ poor, chaste and obedient, the source and the inspiration of our missionary life in our communities and our works which mediate Christ and His Church for us.

You learned to read the Gospel as a book of life. You found there the Word which illumined your life because it was

greater than your ambition, greater than your heart, and you took the step — in faith, in confidence, in abandonment and in spiritual poverty. The more you stripped yourself of yourself, the more you were enriched by the very life of God.

Thus you became a guide for a whole multitude by the genuineness of your faith, the ardor of your heart, the commitment of your charity. They came to you, they read the Gospel with you, and you walked on together on the road of life, eyes open to the ecclesial landscape around you. You did not draw up a special program, but you readied yourselves to give yourselves unselfishly to all abandoned needs, to every impossible mission. You had so anchored yourselves in God and so rid yourselves of every human ambition, that wherever you went there was nothing that could not be accomplished by God.

So we your *students* of today, with filial respect and with the humble pride of disciples in the presence of their guide, we say to you:

«WE SHALL GO ON, WITH GOD'S GRACE AND WITH YOU.»