

1979

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### Recommended Citation

Kelly, B. (1979). I. Who Would Have Thought That Things Would Turn Out Like This!. *Spiritan Papers*, 10 (10). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-papers/vol10/iss10/5>

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## **TWO TALKS IN RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION:**

*How do we live our Spiritan spirituality so as to give 'our' special witness in today's world, with reflection on the relevance (or otherwise) of our vocation to the youth of our time?*

- 1. WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT THINGS WOULD TURN OUT LIKE THIS!**
- 2. ONCE UPON A TIME.**

*Talks given by Fr. Bernard A. Kelly, C.S.Sp., at the English Provincial Assembly, 17-20 April 1979, at Upholland Northern Institute.*

## **I - WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT THINGS WOULD TURN OUT LIKE THIS!**

### **Second Thoughts**

In 1700, Claude Poullart des Places made his decision to become a priest. He was 21. Three years later, surrounded by a group of students for the priesthood, he founded the Seminary of the Holy Ghost in Paris. He seemed to have arrived. He had successfully resisted the urging of his ambition to take up a career in law, where his exceptional ability would certainly have won him acclaim. His decision was not in accord with his father's wishes. It had been arrived at slowly and painfully. He finally made up his mind during a retreat under the direction of the Jesuits. He felt confident that he was being called to help the disadvantaged clerical students of Paris. Yet soon after he had gathered them together, he began to have second thoughts. His fervour had

died down, things were not turning out the way he had imagined they would.

*To sum up, I must confess before God that at the present moment I am merely a man who is reputed to be still alive, but who is certainly dead. At least when I compare the present with the past. Alas! I am now only a mask of devotion, as it were, and the shadow of what I once was. . .*

*I shall therefore examine which road is the shorter one, without henceforth being concerned over what is more agreeable to nature, in order to regain Him without whom, whatever I do, I cannot live in peace.*

*I consider first, that the source of my laxness, or to speak more honestly as I should, 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 did not have a sufficiently strong foundation in virtue for such an undertaking. I have not yet acquired enough humility to put myself safely at the head of such a work. . .*

*It is true that I did not undertake that work without the permission of my director. But here my conscience reproaches me, as it has frequently done before. In what fashion did I explain this plan to my director? What twists and turns did I not use? I said, at first, that it was only a matter of taking in four or five poor students and of trying unobtrusively to feed them without making any fuss at all about the undertaking. Perhaps I did not reveal at that time the whole extent of my ambitions and vanity. And I have every reason to fear, and to tremble before God, because when I consulted my director, I did not speak with the candor, simplicity and openness that were in order under the circumstances.*

*These reflections fill me with sorrow. 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>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup>Claude Poullart des Places, extracts from «Reflections on the Past» in *The Spiritual Writings of Father Claude Francis Poullart des Places, Founder of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost*, ed. Henry J. Koren, C.S.Sp. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1959), pp. 143, 145, 147, 149.

When Francis Libermann was 35, he was appointed Novice Master of the Eudist Novitiate at Rennes. He had become a Catholic eleven years previously and entered the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice. With the onset of epilepsy, the door had closed on his ambition to become a priest. The future became so bleak that he was tempted to commit suicide. As he fought to recover his grip on life, he began to work with the scholastics in small groups. He directed their first steps in the seminary, he encouraged them in their prayer life. His success in this led to his nomination as Novice Master. It was his first official position, it held out a hope of finding a place in life. Slowly but steadily this hope ebbed away. Two years later, in 1839, Francis wrote:

*There I was, enclosed in a novitiate with three or four people around me, to whom I brought little or no spiritual benefit. I would find it difficult to explain to you how this came to be, but I can assure you that this was the case. I spoke, I taught, I tried to inspire fervour but my words were dead, without any blessing from God, ineffectual towards any spiritual progress. Because of this, in my first year I was in a state of shock and alarm. I had just come from the Paris Seminary, where the good Lord had blessed everything I did. In my second year I suffered even more. I recovered a little, however, from the despondency of my first year. I regained my courage and was ready to be crushed in this way under God's hand all my life if necessary. Running the novitiate caused me such great suffering, that I would never have believed myself capable of supporting the like. But I can truly say that the greatest (suffering) of all was seeing myself useless in the Church of God.<sup>2</sup>*

Rennes had been a series of shocks for Francis. Things had not turned out as he expected. His sense of unfulfilment had not gone away, it had even grown to become his greatest suffering (*seeing myself useless in the Church of God*). After a period of modest success at the Paris seminary, all of a sudden everything seemed to go wrong at Rennes. None of the old remedies worked. *Who would have thought that things would turn out like this!* was a feeling that arose spontaneously in the

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<sup>2</sup>Francis Libermann, *Lettre à M. Carbon, 15 December 1839*, N.D.I. 674, 675.

heart of Francis as it had done 135 years previously in the heart of Claude.

It is no secret that over the past fifteen years some members of the Congregation have been having second thoughts about what it means to be a Spiritan. During this time, things have not been turning out as they had expected. Some may even feel themselves strangers in the Congregation where they had expected to always feel at home. If you are having second thoughts, if the phrase: *Who would have thought that things would turn out like this!* flashes unbidden across your mind, know that you are in good company. Even if you feel like hanging up your harp and excusing yourself with the plea: *How can I sing a song to the Lord in a strange land?*, I think we can still say that you are in good company.

### Conversion

The second thoughts that come to us as our situation changes are liable to be disturbing, as they were for des Places and Libermann, but this malaise that we feel hides a call to conversion.

Behind *Who would have thought that things would turn out like this!* we are likely to find a disenchantment with the changes that have taken place in the Congregation and in the Church. Disenchantment is accepted as an established pathway to God. At the same time we must allow that it can also lead to apathy or bitterness. The changed situation today often provokes a sense of loss, a feeling of having been wrong and, most demoralising of all, a feeling of having been deceived, of having been in some way cheated. It is hard to talk to someone who feels he has been deceived. If there is to be any hope that this feeling will be a step towards conversion, he must somehow be able to change his statement from *I have been deceived* to *I have deceived myself* and in this way come closer to the perspective of des Places and Libermann. He is not alone. We have deceived ourselves. Not knowingly, but from our present standpoint the old outlook we had was deceptive. Now we have learned from developments that have taken place. We have shed at least some of our illusions. We may, for example, have started out believing that missionary activity was a magnanimous gesture towards a deprived people. Now we see it more as co-operation, between churches, between peoples.

Conversion demands that we are prepared to call ourselves into question, that we are prepared to be interrogated by the state of affairs. I once got talking to a French Spiritan who was in Paris for his 'recyclage' — a year of renewal and theological updating. His impression of the experience was that unless he called himself into question, there would be no renewal. All that would happen would be that he would return to Africa with some additional intellectual baggage. Conversion is at the heart of renewal. It demands that I call myself into question. It was inevitable, but *I have deceived myself*.

A French Jesuit, Fr. Jacques, has described conversion as beginning with God's glance.<sup>3</sup> The first step in conversion always belongs to God. What happens is that *God catches man's eye*.

At a conference on the passion and death of Christ, I remember asking the speaker if there was any sign of Christ's victory over death before the resurrection. He recalled a play by Sartre where a resistance fighter in the France of World War II was captured by the Germans. During his torture, while he was physically broken, there was a look in his eye which didn't waver, a look of loathing that continually accused his captors. The speaker suggested that even during Christ's suffering, his victory was already present in his eyes, in his look which spoke compassion and held a promise of new life.

When God catches man's eye, it is not a pleasant experience. Like Peter we are covered with confusion. A new light shines on our life, we become more clearly aware of who we really are. As our illusions fall away disenchantment sets in. Our previous posturing is seen for what it is. We have to struggle for a new self-acceptance, which is all the more painful as we realise that we are helpless and in need of pardon. As Fr. Jacques puts it: *The grace of conversion is first of all a new light, and this light burns.*<sup>4</sup>

It is important to realise that God takes the initiative in conversion. We may feel that we haven't heard from God in a while. Maybe we haven't been listening to the people we

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<sup>3</sup>Xavier Jacques, S.J., «Convertissez-vous et faites pénitence» in *Christus* July 1963, p. 308.

<sup>4</sup>Jacques, p. 313.

meet. Like the travellers to Emmaus we don't expect God to be available by our side. Somehow we don't expect to meet Him on foot.

At Expo 67, a giant exposition to celebrate the centenary of Canada, there was a film which involved audience participation in a new way. The story didn't always turn out the same. For example SHE is sitting cosily by the fire in a comfortable house while a storm rages outside. HIS car breaks down and HE arrives soaking wet at the front door and rings the bell. The question is then put to the audience: *Should SHE let HIM in?* Each one votes *yes* or *no* by pressing a button by his seat and the story unfolds in accordance with the majority preference until the next moment of decision arrives and the audience are again asked to choose.

The des Places story and the Libermann story are known. It is good for us to appreciate that they did not move unperturbedly along some predetermined line. There were second thoughts, surprises, unexpected calls to conversion. Our personal story and the Congregation's story are still in the making. How they turn out depends on us. When God catches our eye, he challenges us to conversion. The story, our story, is at a turning point. How it unfolds will depend on which button we press. The buttons by our side read: one *now*, the other *later*. *Later* means: conversion, well of course, but let's see a bit more of the story first, maybe it will turn out alright, maybe it won't be necessary to do anything too drastic, etc.

## A Second Moment

Jacques Loew, in sketching a portrait of the modern apostle, wrote:

*The very first call is rarely difficult to answer. The difficulty comes later when errors, lassitude, failures, weariness have invaded the soul of the apostle. We commence with energy: «Wait and see! The old men have not understood anything! One day though, like Elijah, we find ourselves whispering: 'It is enough for me, Lord. Take away my soul, for I am no better than my fathers' (3 Kgs 19:4). . .*

*For the apostle, like for the prophet, the real response, the real engagement, occur only at the second call. The ordeal of the bitter discovery of our fundamental incapacity, far from being*

*something to avoid, is the real starting point. Before it was just a test ride, wonderful but fragile. God has his ways; he seldom changes them.*<sup>5</sup>

At the beginning of this talk we discovered des Places and Libermann in the grips of second thoughts. Both were surprised by the turn of events. They had generously made their commitment to the Lord but in that earlier day they had little idea of where their commitment was going to lead them. What Fr. Loew calls *the bitter discovery of (their) fundamental incapacity* was to prove to be *the real starting point*. What seemed to be a breakdown proved to be a breakthrough. Two works grew up and subsequently fused to shape the Spiritan tradition.

To live in this tradition, Spiritans should expect to find themselves in landscapes that are not familiar. They will find themselves in situations beyond their control, beyond their strength. Then it is time to turn to God again in a new surrender. *Who would have thought that things would turn out like this!* is a signal for conversion.

Each conversion is the crossing of a threshold. It is a new lease on life. There is the joy of a new beginning, but still no guarantee that things will finally turn out as we expect.

Listen to Libermann a little later on, in 1845:

*You have no idea of the heartaches, worries and anguish that have come from my solicitude for so vast and difficult a task, at the sight of the enormous difficulties of the mission of Guinea, a mission so very dear to my heart. When I reflect that it is a poor mind like mine that must arouse all those peoples, tear them away from the devil and give them to God; that I must remove all obstacles, surmount all difficulties, find efficacious means to manage that enterprise and give it stability, I am at my wits' end. I am astonished to find that I am still alive amidst so much pain and anguish. It must be confessed that Divine Wisdom is making use of a poor lever to lift so enormous a mass!*

*I tell you frankly that if I had foreseen what I now behold, I should have been frightened and would not have dared to*

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<sup>5</sup>Jacques Loew, *As if he had seen the Invisible: a portrait of the apostle today*, Trans. Marie-Odile Fortier Maser (Notre Dame, Indiana: Fides, 1967), pp. 15, 16.



*undertake so great a work and one that is so far beyond my powers.*<sup>6</sup>

When God catches our eye, we must try to return his gaze long enough to see his great tenderness and love. Together with the reproach, there is the promise: *I will be with you. . . always, my grace will be enough for you.* Then we will find the courage to overcome our hesitation and our fear. In the Spiritan story we see God activating resources in men who never suspected they were there. And as we rummage through the Spiritan inheritance, it is not security we find but how to handle insecurity.

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<sup>6</sup>Francis Libermann, *Letter to Mr. and Mrs. Samson Libermann, 1 January 1845* in *The Spiritual Letters of the Venerable Francis Libermann, Vol. 2 Letters to People in the World*, ed. and trans. Walter van de Putte, C.S.Sp. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963), p. 151.