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Reflections on the Truths of Religion

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**REFLECTIONS
ON THE TRUTHS OF RELIGION
MADE DURING A RETREAT
BY A SOUL
WHICH IS CONSIDERING
ITS CONVERSION**

INTRODUCTION

Claude Francis Poullart des Places was twenty-two when he wrote these pages. After a brilliant course of studies at the Jesuit College in Rennes he had gone to Nantes for two years' law studies. Early in 1700 he returned home with a licentiate in law.

For a full twelve months the young graduate in law lived in Rennes familiarizing himself with his father's many activities. Descended from an ancient Breton family, M. des Places, for want of documentary evidence, had been obliged to renounce the title of Esquire which had belonged to his ancestors, when in 1688 Colbert introduced the reform of the Breton nobility. Once appointed judge and keeper of the purse he grew rich thanks to his consistent hard work as farmer general of taxes and even more so as a merchant. Claude Francis' first biographer wrote: 'His father, M. des Places, by his wisdom and hard work had amassed considerable wealth. Appreciating his son's excellent qualities of mind and body, brought to perfection by the upbringing he had given him, he had every reason to believe that this son would restore to his family its former renown. To achieve this he wanted to see him a Counsellor in the Breton Parliament. For this he needed proofs of nobility, and so he maintained that he could substantiate his claim to these titles' (Pierre Thomas, C.S.Sp., in *Koren*, p. 248; newly translated).

These ambitions soon came to nothing. During the year 1701 Claude Francis made a retreat during which he wrote the first two books of notes which follow. They contain reflections written down day by day which are clearly inspired by the meditations put before him by the preacher. Father Le Floch, and Father Koren after him, believe that this retreat took place in Paris at the Jesuit novitiate in the rue du Pot-de-Fer under the direction of Father Sanadon (*Le Floch*, p. 156; *Koren*, pp. 42-43). However there is no proof of this and Father Michel thinks it more likely that it took place in Rennes. Anyhow this detail is of no great importance. What

is certain is that it marks a turning-point in the life of the young graduate in law, for he decided to consecrate his life entirely to the service of God.

The manuscript consists of a quarto notebook of thirty-four pages written with care and without erasures or corrections. From this we can conclude that it is not a first draft but a copy made either by the author himself or by one of his disciples. At the beginning of each paragraph one or two words are written in much bigger letters similar to those of the title on the first page. These words will be printed here in large capitals. On the first page, above the title, can be read the following words written in a different hand: 'Retreat made by Mons. des Places in which he examines his vocation'. Quite frequently in the margin are found brief quotations in Latin, often taken from holy Scripture. No doubt they are Latin formulas quoted by the preacher. They will be pointed out in the footnotes and an English translation will be supplied. Biblical translations are from the Jerusalem Bible.

**REFLECTIONS ON THE TRUTHS
OF RELIGION MADE DURING A RETREAT
BY A SOUL WHICH IS CONSIDERING
ITS CONVERSION**

MY WISH was to retire from worldly activity so as to spend eight days in solitude. I was under no obligation to make this sacrifice for the Lord. I was free to let slip by, as I have so often done before, the moments which I now want to use for my conversion and salvation. I have to recognise in this praiseworthy effort the grace which enlightened me even in my moments of blindness. If I had not been given this holy vocation, would I have the right not to return to God? Have I not already refused so many graces because I would not open the door of my heart? Has not the Lord done far more for me than he even needed to do, since I have no right to demand anything of him? Yet he has often come to my aid as though he were obliged to do so.

ALL ARE right when they wish to be saved, since when they think about their salvation they are thinking about pleasing God and making the precious blood of Christ efficacious in their regard. If we consider the end for which we were created, there is not one among us but is obliged to seek salvation. Nevertheless, when faced with that general necessity, it appears to me that all will not be equally guilty if they renounce heaven. Oh, how many Christians I meet who will be more guilty than others if they do not take advantage of the opportunities that providence offers them so abundantly every day! Fortunately I am one of those beloved children to whom my Father and Creator so frequently offers easy and admirable ways of reconciling myself to him. Unfortunately I will be one of the guilty ones if I do not know how or, to speak more hon-

estly, if I am not willing, to respond to the appeals of a God who himself ought to be deaf to my appeals.¹

ARISE, my soul! Now is the time to yield to such loving pursuit. Can you, even for a moment, hesitate to abandon your worldly ways so as to upbraid yourself with more care and recollection for your ingratitude and hardness of heart before the voice of your God? Should you not be ashamed to have resisted so long, to have destroyed, despised and trodden underfoot the adorable blood of your Jesus?²

OH, THAT I could remember with deep sorrow the moments when, about to fall over the precipice, I found the hand of God ready to stop me, to break my fall, and I kept on con-straining it! How often did I find the grace of God blocking my way like a wall of brass and shattering into a thousand pieces my criminal efforts and my disordered plans. Actions offensive to God which were committed with ease by others became difficult for me. I cannot quite say when I felt they had become almost impossible. Everything became an obstacle for me; times, places and persons ran contrary to my desires. It took me considerable trouble to commit sin. I had to arm myself with patience and courage to vanquish so many enemies who sought only my welfare, and to support so many hardships which of themselves ought to have disheartened me.

YOU SOUGHT ME, Lord, and I fled from you. You had endowed me with reason but I would not use it. I wanted to be at variance with you, but you would not allow it. Did I not deserve to be utterly abandoned by you, to cease being helped by you and to begin receiving chastisement from you? Feeling the weight of your arm while you chastised me I would have admitted my fault and recognised the enormity of my

¹ The sense of the original is a little obscure; however the idea behind the expressions is clear, namely, 'the greater the graces received the greater the obligation to be faithful'.

² Cf Heb. 10,29: 'You may be sure that anyone who tramples on the Son of God, and who treats the blood of the covenant which sanctified him as if it were not holy, and who insults the Spirit of grace, will be condemned to a far severer punishment'.

crimes. How kind you are, O divine Saviour! All you want is my conversion not my death.³ You always treat me with kindness, as though you needed me. You seem to deem it an honour to subdue a heart as cold as mine. Such a conquest appears delightful to you. With one word you could overcome so many millions who would unceasingly sing the praises of their conqueror and compensate you, if I dare say it, for the loss of a wretch like me. Yet you allow them to wage war against you, but you do not want me to follow them in their disorder and impiety.

TO YOU ALONE, O God, it belongs to touch the hearts of people. In acknowledging your power, with what effect do I also acknowledge your love! You love me, divine Saviour, and prove it in a striking way. I know your tenderness is infinite, for not even my innumerable and continuous acts of ingratitude can exhaust it. For a long time you have wanted to have a heart-to-heart talk with me. For just as long I have been unwilling to listen. You try to convince me that you want to make use of me in the most hallowed religious posts, but I try not to believe you. If your voice sometimes makes an impression on my mind, the world comes along a moment later and effaces all the impressions of grace. For how many years have you not tried to restore whatever my evil passions destroy! I can well believe that you do not wish to fight any longer without success and that you have commanded victory to come down on the side of justice. The siege you have mounted against me during this retreat will be glorious though not so difficult as its predecessors. I did not come here to defend myself but only to let myself be won over.

SPEAK, LORD, when you like. All the evil I have been able to inflict on you, while doing myself infinite harm, has not stopped you pursuing me. Lord, that I may now repent of my blindness and renounce with all my heart all those things which forced me to flee from you! Oh, that I may come and look for you, that I may be ready to follow the sacred commands of your divine providence! Come into the heart where

³ Cf Ezek. 33,11: 'I take pleasure, not in the death of a wicked man, but in the turning back of a wicked man who changes his ways to win life'.

for so long you have wanted to enter. It will have ears only for you and entertain no other affections but those which will make me love you as I ought. You will find there an abode which no passion will ever stain. There, surrounded by the virtues your law commands me to practise, you will be able to let me know your holy will. Nothing in all the world will be able to rob you of a servant who with the courage worthy of a Christian vows to serve you with blind obedience and total submission.

IN ORDER to put myself in the dispositions needed to listen to your wise counsels, I will take up again a plan of life which will come as near to Christian perfection as my conduct until now has come to the imperfection that is found in ambition and worldly vanity.⁴ I must, as it were, change my nature, divest myself of the old Adam and clothe myself with Jesus Christ.⁵ Henceforth, divine Saviour, I must either belong entirely to you or myself sign my deed of reprobation.⁶ Lord, you want me to be a man, yes, but a man after your own heart. I know what you are asking of me and I want to grant it to you because you will help me. You will give me strength and anoint me with your wisdom and virtues.

I NEED your help to defend me from the tempter. I am deserting him and he will try to bind me once more with his horrible chains.⁷ This enemy is powerful unless you confront him face to face. O God, it is your concern to fight for me. I entrust myself entirely to you because you always side with those who hope in you. We have nothing to fear when we do our best and you sustain us.

YOU WILL NOT withdraw your arm. O Lord, for fear of helping me as long as I remain faithful to you, but whenever I fall into sin I cease to be faithful. Preserve me, loving Saviour,

⁴ Marginal note: *Christianitas, mors criminum et vita virtutum* (Christianity means death to sin and a life of virtue).

⁵ These are St Paul's own expressions: of Gal. 3,27; Eph. 4,22-24; Col. 3,9-10.

⁶ Marginal note: *Aut in igne, aut in Christo* (To live either in (hell) fire or in Christ).

⁷ Marginal note: *Me secutus est errantem, me sequetur paenitentem* (Whether I err or repent he continues to pursue me).

from so dangerous an evil. After being the object of your satisfaction, let me rather die than become the object of your disfavour. Forestall the moment when I would be so unfortunate as to forget you and, since sin displeases you so much, change my weakness into courage. If a weak reed like me has to be exposed to the fury of the winds and strongest tempests then gird me with your mercy and cover my infirmity with the robe of righteousness.⁸

PRESERVE in me a holy abhorrence for what displeases you most. I now understand this better than ever before. I have just learnt how far your wrath can go in the punishment of sin. The example of your justice in punishing the fallen angels frightens me while at the same time it increases my love. I am filled with fear and trembling as I consider the force with which you avenged their crime, whereas I am moved to gratitude when I consider your patience in putting up with all my crimes.

YET, WHAT a difference between such perfect beings and an utterly miserable creature like me! How could these angels, just as much your work as I am but to a degree of excellence far superior, fail to stem your anger and disarm your justice? They only sinned once. Could I possibly count the number of times I have fallen? Their sin was one of weakness; mine were deliberate decisions to offend you. Theirs was only a thought, mine both thoughts and actions. They sinned less than I yet I have been spared more than they. If they had had a single moment to come to their senses, they would have seized the opportunity. How many opportunities the Lord has offered me of which I did not wish to take advantage! Would not my soul be utterly depraved if I did not admire God's tenderness and immediately return to him!⁹

⁸ Cf Is. 61,10: 'He has clothed me in the garments of salvation, he has wrapped me in the cloak of integrity'.

⁹ This comparison between the sin of the angels and the sins of humans may very well be inspired by the *Exercises* of St Ignatius, where in the first week, first exercise, third consideration, we read: 'His justice strikes without pity and yet it is the first sin of the angels and their only sin. What then will become of you who can and ought to say with the prophet, "my iniquities are gone over my head"' (Ps. 36,5)? '(BOW London edn, pp 41-42).

HIS MERCY towards me astonishes me, because of my knowledge of his justice. I know that a sin against him deserves death and eternal punishment. An offence must be measured by the dignity both of the person who commits it and of the one whom it offends. A slap in the face given to a peasant by a nobleman surely deserves some atonement, but if it were given to a nobleman, a lord, a king, say by a peasant, what would it deserve or rather what would it not deserve? There is no comparison between the insult I offer to God and that which the greatest of rogues would offer to the greatest of earthly kings. What then should happen to the creature who by his sin has soaked his hands in the blood of his God. Let this expiation, divine Redeemer, teach me in a wonderful way how frightful sin is, and how much atonement it demands. It could be wiped out only by the merits of your passion. Had I been the only one in the world to have sinned, and that only once, you would have given your life to expiate my offence, which being infinitely evil would demand an infinite ransom.¹⁰

AT LAST, O God, I am convinced of the horror of sin. How happy I am to realize its enormity! How many million thanks ought I to offer you who made me see with eyes which, although open, could not see! But also how unhappy I am not to have sought enlightenment earlier and to have refused so often to allow myself to be convinced of the one thing in the world I needed most to believe! O God, how late I am returning from my wanderings which made me your enemy for so long! You are the Father of mercies who welcomes into Abraham's bosom the lambs who seek their shepherd whom they had lost. You are the vine, I am the branch which you want to graft once more onto the trunk that it may live the same life. My leaves and my fruit shall no longer differ from yours. I shall no longer bear little branches that you do not

¹⁰ Here also Claude is following the thought of St Ignatius. However we must remember that the language he uses reflects the age and society in which he was living with its clearcut distinction between the social classes, and the resulting contempt with which the nobility treated the peasants. This enhances the value of Claude's conversion which led him to dedicate his life entirely to the poor and downtrodden, the most abandoned souls, like the poor chimney sweeps from Savoy and the poor scholars.

recognise provided, Lord, you give me the grace which is the food and nourishment to enable me to bear the flowers that please you.

MY SAVIOUR, at whatever cost I want to make myself worthy of your love. Henceforth that is the limit of my desire. My heart, until now so full of vanity and ambition, found nothing in the world that was high enough to satisfy it. I am no longer astonished that earthly and perishable things were unable to do so. That heart was reserved for God and has now found something to fill it completely. From now on it will be occupied with you alone. Will there be a single moment when it is not raised up to you, when it does not devote all its thoughts to you as so many considerations keeping me always on my guard?

IF BY YOUR holy grace, divine Jesus, I can maintain so great an attentiveness in all my actions I will always preserve an implacable hatred for sin. Being henceforth on my guard against committing even one fault, I will by that means avoid falling into the dangerous abyss of bad habits which we have just heard about and which still frightens me.

I MUST admit that the greatest misfortune that can befall a soul which has unwittingly strayed from holiness is to fall into the habit of a particular vice no matter how small it may be. Such a habit is the height of folly. In no time the sinner, by becoming necessarily the slave of his passion, quite freely sets the seal on his eternal damnation. Lord, I have just promised never to offend you again. You know my intention and you are the one true God who can discover in the intricate folds of the heart what has been hidden there with utmost secrecy.¹¹ My longing to appear before your eyes with the simplicity of the dove and the prudence of the serpent¹² gives me audacity to promise you a fidelity which will never fail.

¹¹ Marginal note: *Scrutans renes et corda, Deus* (You righteous God, assessor of mind and heart) (Ps. 7,9).

¹² Cf Mt 10,16: 'Be cunning as serpents and yet as harmless as doves'.

IN MY PRESENT dispositions I am ready to expose my life a thousand times rather than withdraw the firm promises I now make to you. After the example of David, and with Solomon and St Peter in mind, what can I promise, what guarantees can I give, since the tallest cedars have fallen? I am not presumptuous enough to trust my own courage. I am a man, so I am weak and could forget you at the very moment I believe I am being most watchful with myself. Lord, I detest these sins beforehand and, if I am unfortunate enough to be taken by surprise, may my fall, O God, at the very most be unforeseen and in no way deliberate. May I draw from it grounds for profound humiliation. May this evil lead me to good and not become an attraction which keeps me fixed in depravity. May the first sin not become an enticement compelling me to commit a second.

IF I WERE to fall into this disorder, you would withdraw your graces and I would never be able to rise again.¹³ In no time, divine Saviour, I would forget the promises I now make to live only for you. I would stop loving you because you would no longer be with me. I would no longer feel interior joy or peace of conscience but would love my lack of peace, kiss my chains and, despite their heavy weight, fool myself into thinking them light and agreeable, so as not to give up my crimes and so as to find more pleasure in my disorder.

HENCE the ease with which we sin. I would drink iniquity like water.¹⁴ I would plunge into sin and, through the repetition of my evil acts, it would become an everyday occurrence. Hence the insensibility created by sin. My conscience would no longer feel any remorse. What I would have considered sacrilege a little while before would now be only a small imperfection or a slight fault.¹⁵ Might I not go even further? Might I not consider my crimes as crimes, or even as abominations and monstrosities, yet not be frightened by them, not seek remedies against them, not even bother about them or

¹³ Marginal note: *Ex sola consuetudine peccandi facta est necessitas* (The simple habit of sinning creates a necessity).

¹⁴ Cf Job 15, 16: 'Mankind, that drinks iniquity like water!'

¹⁵ Marginal note: *Omne peccatum consuetudine vilescit* (Habit makes sin look less important).

feel any regret?¹⁶ The consequence — final impenitence, hatred of God, eternal damnation, frightful and everlasting torments. No regret for having offended the Creator, not even the freedom to have such a regret. At most a few words at the hour of death, words which mean to say something but in reality say nothing at all. It is sin that abandons the sinner and not the sinner that abandons sin. Perhaps in times like those I would want to repent but my heart would not let me. My desire would be ineffective. My body no longer strong and vigorous, but ready to return soon to the nothingness from which it came, would gladly renounce its passion, but the will, so accustomed to consent to everything presented to it, would follow its habitual inclination.¹⁷ In my wretchedness I would cry for mercy, yet at the same time my heart would be consenting to affections injurious to God. Would I perhaps have a minute for sorrow? Would I not die as I had lived? Not having thought at all about my salvation during life, I would not think about it at the hour of death. I would be taken by surprise; I would die without any foreboding, without being warned by failing health, sickness or any other symptom of mortality. Sin would be in my heart and I would be preparing to commit another. I would be interrupted and have to pack up and go. All those I had loved so well, my passions, and the devil I had served so well, would not be able to add a quarter of an hour to my life. The prayers people would say for me, the exhortations, the sacraments would not help me at all, but sin would still be alive in me at the moment of death, through God's just punishment.¹⁸

PRESERVE in me, O God, the salutary fear I have of falling into so great a misfortune. Imagine, divine Saviour, offending you deliberately, committing crime blithely, feeling no sorrow for it, having no fear of offending you, awaiting your punishments with tranquillity, irritating you anew every day, every hour, every moment, committing sin in your presence to displease you so much, and in spite of that living as though you

¹⁶ Marginal note: *Ab assuetis non fit passio* (No one suffers from what he is accustomed to).

¹⁷ Marginal note: *Consuetudo ligat* (Habit binds us with chains).

¹⁸ Marginal note: *In peccatis vestris moriemini* (You will die in your sin) (Jn 8,21).

did not exist, as though justice never existed, nor punishment nor hell! O God, I tremble with horror. Keep me always in the path of virtue so that I may always bless your holy name.¹⁹ If your grace were to desert me to that extent what glory would be yours? In truth you would be satisfied with revenge, you would strike me with the darts of your anger and the thunderbolts of your fury. But you are a God of gentleness, the innocent lamb, the good shepherd, who wants to cure the soul and foster its health. Will you not be happier if I am the object of your love and mercy? You will have the pleasure of beholding my faithfulness, my steadfastness, my courage, in serving you as I ought.²⁰

FROM NOW ON, O God, I hold you responsible for my conduct. In your presence I proclaim my intention of resisting the pernicious allurements of sin. This I cannot do without your help, and so I can never ask you often enough. Never allow me to become blind. Enlighten me with the wisdom you gave to Augustine, Paul, Magdalen and so many other saintly people. I will never become accustomed to idols. I will go and destroy them in their most powerful strongholds. Armed with solid arguments and sustained by grace, I will cut off the dragon's heads as soon as they reappear. I will make you known to hearts that no longer know you. Being myself familiar with the disorder of souls who have fallen into a bad habit, I will persuade, convince and force them to change their lives, and so you will be praised forever by mouths which would otherwise have cursed you forever.

I WILL MAKE known to these unhappy people what your divine goodness has made me understand today. I will use the powerful means of your grace to convert them. Without it and without sincere co-operation on their part it will be impossible for them to return to you by personal conversion. It is certain that in losing you forever they will themselves be

¹⁹ Marginal note: *Non mortui laudabunt te, Domine, neque qui descendunt in infernum* (The dead cannot praise Yahweh, they have gone down to silence) (Ps. 115, 17).

²⁰ Marginal note: *Volo vincere inimicos. Clamo ad te* (I want to triumph over my enemies. I cry out to you).

lost forever. You will not give them your grace unless they ask for it and try to merit it.

I WILL THEREFORE invite them to pray sincerely, not to be discouraged, to knock frequently, to pester you and never to stop until they are sure you are listening to them. They will come to know that their obduracy is due to the withdrawal of the graces which you had prepared for them and which they so often refused to use. They will understand your anger by the little attention you pay to their prayers and their first tears. Later on they will understand your mercy provided their sorrow is genuine and lively, and they are determined to renounce their past life.

YOUR RESERVES of grace are inexhaustible, O God. We only have to ask wholeheartedly and do our best, to deserve that you pour over our heads the holy oils which ensure our well-being. Since for your part you have provided all that is necessary when you poured out your grace on the sinner, his consent alone is needed for him to use the means of salvation provided by your mercy. He must do penance, practise austerities, lay the axe to the wood and cut the trunk as well as the branches. Since the root that remains can still produce new dangerous shoots, he must not rest till he has turned over all the ground and pulled up even the smallest roots. It will cost him much trouble, but does he not deserve it and can it ever cost him too much to avoid eternal punishment?

HE SHOULD esteem himself fortunate indeed that you deign to hear his prayers. He remained long enough in his state of sin to experience the evil that follows from his crime. It would not be just for him to enjoy the delightful kindness savoured by those who are faithful to you. He will only enjoy this advantage when he has merited it by his perseverance and his steadfastness in avoiding evil.

AT THAT MOMENT temptations become violent. The devil becomes more wicked and bolder than ever.²¹ He real-

²¹ Marginal note: *Adsumit secum septem spiritus nequiores se* (It then goes off and brings seven other spirits more wicked than itself) (Lk 11,26).

ises he is going to lose one of his followers and does all he can to regain his hold on him. He promotes occasions, watches his cues, follows his prey everywhere, appears more delightful than ever, displays his treasures, shows off his riches, offers his pleasures, his charms, his allurements. In the sight of his deserter he compares the easy sensual life with the austere life of a Christian. He cheats, he lies,²² and never tells the truth at all, but manages to cover his deceit so artfully that it is very difficult not to be taken in.

THAT HEART in particular which has habitually satisfied its passions, which has never managed to nail a single one to the Lord's cross, which in everything has followed its desires and concupiscences to the detriment of God's law, finds it difficult to give up vice and embrace virtue. Such a heart is like a tree that the violence of the wind has bent to one side. When it falls it is always in the direction towards which it leans. Never, or at least very rarely, does it straighten itself and fall in the other direction. Such is the picture of a man who has acquired a taste for sin and made a habit of it. This picture, Lord, strengthens my fear. I want to keep always before my imagination so great a misfortune, the better to know the devil's ways and to avoid any familiarity with him. The punishments which would follow my crime will not be the cause of my prudence and wisdom. No, the fear of displeasing and offending a Master who deserves to be loved so tenderly will hold me, Lord, to the fidelity I owe you.

FROM NOW ON I only want to think about the precautions I should take so as to avoid falling into the miserable sin which leads to the loss of divine grace. I have just been given a reliable means of watching over even my most insignificant acts and of keeping myself ever pleasing in the sight of God. This is the secret which I have been looking for and which I must cling to. I must keep reminding you, O my soul, lest you ever forget it. Remember your last end and you will never sin.²³

²² Cf Jn 8,44: 'He (the devil) is a liar and the father of lies'.

²³ Marginal note: *Memorare novissima tua, et in aeternum non peccabis* (Remember your end and you will never sin) (Sir. 7,40). There are a number of considerations similar to these in the *Imitation of Christ* (Cf Book 1, ch. 23).

WHAT AN EXCELLENT piece of advice! What wonderful words! If I am at all religious-minded and wish to be saved, can I think of death and still fall into sin? Why soil my heart with the things of this world since I have to leave them behind? I cling to the perishable things of earth which in their turn will take hold of me in vain, since both I and they will pass away. I occupy myself entirely with the things of this life which I will soon have to leave behind. I must live so as to die and I must live well so as to die well. Eternal happiness depends on my death, just as my death depends on my life. In what condition do I wish to die? In the same condition as the one in which I live. As one lives so shall he die. It is up to me to take whatever steps I think fit. It depends on me whether I die in a state of grace or not, since it depends on me with the help of God whether I live a holy life or not. How happy I am to be able to choose how I die. Since I wish to die the death of the just I must live a life which is absolutely holy and entirely Christian.²⁴

I AM going to begin doing what I would want to have done at the hour of my death, and at that hour what would I not want to have done? What austerities would I not want to have practised? What virtues would then seem of no avail? What moments would I discover which had not been suitable for thinking about my salvation? How I would blame myself if I had not used the time at my disposal in the practice of good works. Help me, Lord, to serve you faithfully. Engrave deeply in my heart the sentence I will have to undergo, so that I never act except in view of my death, and as though it were for the last time in my life.

I AM just as convinced of the absolute uncertainty of the moment when I shall have to appear before you as I am of the certainty of the fact. You tell us yourself that you will take us by surprise at an hour when we least expect you.²⁵ Woe to me, my God, if you plan my death for a moment when I am only thinking of living. Will I be ready to give that account of

²⁴ Marginal note: *Anima mea morte justorum moriatur* (May I die the death of the just!) (Nb 23,10).

²⁵ Marginal note: *Veniam sicut fur* (I shall come to you like a thief) (Apoc. 3,3).

myself which your justice has weighed on the heavenly scales? Perhaps I will not have put my conscience in order and yet you will not fail to demand an exact account.²⁶

OH, TO BE CONDEMNED to eternal punishments merely for passing diversions, trivialities, or forbidden pleasures of little account! What stupidity it is to fill one's heart with the things of this world and to have one's head bursting with vain-glory. After my death what will remain of all that is earthly, what will the earth retain of what is mine? A six-foot grave, a piece of evil-smelling cloth, a coffin made of four or five pieces of rotten wood. And what will I bequeath to the world? The goods I have accumulated and the corpse which I cared for with such tenderness all my days. These are what I take with me and what I leave behind me when I die.

ALL THE HABITS I have so laboriously acquired, the esteem I have taken such trouble to win, the friendship and trust I have built up through such service, goods, riches, honours — will any of these follow me to the grave or help me to win God's favour? Will my dearest friends, even my nearest relatives, remember me for long and, if they do, what good will I derive from such remembrance?

ONCE I AM no longer alive no one will bother about me any more. Everyone thinks about the living because he has to deal with them, but no one thinks about the dead because they can no longer be of service. What blindness to love things of such little value which cling to us only as long as we can help them.²⁷ Are those who are dead any better off because they only thought of pleasure? Would it not have been better for them had they worked for their salvation? My time will pass like that and it will be correct to indulge in the same reflections about myself as I do about others. If I continue to talk like that, if I do not forsake completely all earthly

²⁶ Marginal note: *Redde rationem villicationis tuae* (Draw me up an account of your stewardship) (Lk 16,2). For the expression, 'weighed on the heavenly scales', see below, *Choice of a State of Life*, note 6.

²⁷ This pessimistic assessment of the attitude of our friends after our death is also found in the *Imitation of Christ*, Book 1, ch. 23, nos. 5 and 8.

attachments, and if I concentrate on anything other than how to die a holy death, then I really am a miserable wretch.

THE BEST WAY of preparing for a holy death is to avoid falling into sin. I hope that the idea kept constantly before my eyes that one day I must die will make me continue to live a virtuous life. If, however, I become so wretched that even so terrifying a thought cannot curb my passions — and it is true that worldly involvement chokes our noblest feelings — ²⁸ I should remind myself it is not simply a matter of dying, but equally of being judged by the living God, who is as vigorous in punishing crime as he is liberal in loving virtue.

TAKE GOOD CARE, my soul, not to forget the vivid pictures of God's vengeance which have been put before you. You ought to continue to tremble until you are sure of your eternal predestination, since you will be judged with such strict justice and will have to give an account of even the smallest thought of your whole life. What torture and despair will be yours if you do not see to it that you do your duty as a Christian. When you leave this life, perhaps at a time when you believe you are as far away from leaving it as ever, you will have to appear before the judgment seat of God's divine majesty. You will stand before your God without being able to hide from his all-seeing eyes. No one will speak up for you, only your own good deeds. Will they be able to plead more eloquently than your misdeeds? Not a single saint will intervene on your behalf. If they were to speak they would be in favour of your condemnation, since you have despised Jesus Christ's blood.²⁹ Your prayers will serve you no purpose. Will you even have the courage to pray? You will be standing before a judge more lovable than love itself and more terrifying than vengeance; however, if you are guilty his love will not

²⁸ Marginal note: *Fascinatio nugacitatis obscurat bona* (The fascination of evil throws good things into the shade) (Wis. 4, 12).

²⁹ Once again we find similar expressions in the *Imitation of Christ*, Book 1, cf. 24, no. 1. Although Claude says that these reflections were put before them by the preacher, it is just possible that the vividness of the pictures he paints may stem from his experience as a young lawyer in the law courts at Rennes.

counterbalance his anger, the blood he shed for you will only make his wrath punish you more severely.

AND WHAT IS this frightful punishment with which our Lord threatens unfaithful Christians? I shudder when I think about it and I cannot even mention it without being horrified. It is hell, the conglomeration of the most bitter effects of burning, the most excruciating sufferings, the most violent and unbearable tortures. It is the combination of all that is most biting in despair, madness, revenge, hatred, jealousy, anger and impatience. It is perpetual exile from paradise, eternal banishment from all consolation and comfort, and the infinite sorrow of never seeing God; in a word, it is hell. How cruel is the punishment, how terrifying the severity of divine justice!

FOR A SINGLE mortal sin to condemn a person full of weakness and levity to burn for all eternity, without remission, without destruction, always whole and entire, always burning and feeling the action of the fire as violently after a million years as on the first day! O my God, what grief, what suffering! Count as many hundreds of millions of years as there are drops of water in the ocean, leaves on the trees, grains of sand on the river banks, blades of grass on the earth and atoms in the air. Add the fact that this is not just a year of eternity, not a month, not a day, not even an hour; it is less than a moment, for there is no time in eternity.

WHAT A HORRIFIC idea! To howl for all eternity! To weep for all eternity! To burn without cease for all eternity, and that in every part of the body at the same time! Never to see the end of one's sufferings, to have as the supreme refinement of this torture the ever-present notion of eternity — something that will never end but will last for ever. It is impossible to talk of days, months, years or limits of time when it will come to an end; it is an infinite, measureless space, in final analysis an eternity, during which the individual will be continually driven mad with anger, without any alleviation, without being able to die, always gnashing his teeth, always tearing himself to pieces in fury and despair, always swearing and blaspheming the name of God, and after ten thousand billions of centuries not relieved in any way, nor any more disposed to be relieved than when it first began.

IN REALITY MY MIND gets lost in such an abyss. I do not know whether I should believe or not because it is beyond my comprehension. Doubtless I would never have believed had not Christ himself revealed it word by word, without ambiguity, without disguise. How can this be, O Lord? Will you never go back on your word? Will you never relax your law? Alas no, you will never change your eternal decrees. In spite of my amazement I am convinced of the existence of hell. It is more correct to affirm the existence of hell than it is to say that I am alive. Yes, my God, you have condemned unrepentant sinners to sufferings which will never end as long as you are God. For their torments to come to an end, you would have to cease to exist. This is no fairy tale but an article of faith. We are not told this to make us afraid nor to make us do good but because you were the first to teach it and nothing is more certain than this punishment. My God, I deserve to become the victim of your wrath and to burn in everlasting fire, if with the certitude I have of these punishments I ever fall deliberately into the slightest sin.

LET ME LEARN from this, my God, how much you detest sin, since you punish it so severely. Sin must be an enormous crime and to commit it one must indeed be wretched. Doubtless its malice must be infinite, since it is an attack on an infinite being. An offence against a king would be treason, whereas against one of his subjects it would only be a slight offence. Since among men it is the rank both of the person offended and of the one who offends which make the insult more or less serious, so the majesty of God who is offended and the lowliness of man who offends should make us realise the enormity of sin. And so, now, as I reflect on the difference between God and the sinner I am no longer astonished that the punishment for such an unworthy deed should be so terrible.

MY GOD, I understand that you are no more unjust when you condemn to eternal fire a wretch who has offended you than I am, for instance, when I kill a fly that has bitten me. You owe us nothing whereas we owe you everything. Thus no penalty is too great for a person who freely wants to displease you and expose himself to the loss of your grace.

WHEN WE HAVE sustained this loss I am not surprised that we die in sin. Can we continue to be good even for a moment without the help of grace? When we possess it how do we use it? In truth there are many Christians who remain watchful lest they lose this treasure but how many are sufficiently careful not to commit sins which diminish the grace within them? Alas, we think it is sufficient to avoid mortal sin, but we do not make much effort to avoid venial sins. This is a form of blindness into which even those who lead an exceptionally regular life fall quite easily. Yet can anyone doubt the sorrow it causes you, when he considers the punishment you exacted for it in ordering David to execute 70,000 men within his kingdom to expiate the vanity he felt over the big number of troops he could enroll in his service? This king's sin was only a small sin of thought and yet you punished it so severely.³⁰

I NEED NO FURTHER proof, O my God, to be convinced how attentive we should be to avoid even the least of those sins which we call small but which, as far as you are concerned, are always enormous. You are too pure and too perfect not to hate imperfection. You will not allow any souls to enter the heavenly Jerusalem who are not wholly purified either in this life or in the next. The pains and torments of purgatory, which would be as severe as those of hell if they lasted as long, should constitute a striking proof that sin, of any kind whatsoever, is the object of your hatred and indignation. Henceforth, O my God, I do not want to countenance any weakness which could diminish the fervour of grace in my soul. Since it would be better for the whole earth and all its inhabitants to fall into nothingness than that a single venial sin be committed, I will always be on my guard with your holy grace lest I fall into so great an evil.

THE SECRET of success in so praiseworthy a desire never to displease you, as it was explained to us today, seems excellent to me, and I long with all my heart never to forget it. Therefore I must remember that I am always in your presence no matter where in the world I may be, that you see me and

³⁰ Cf 2 Sam. 24,1-17 for a full description of David's sin.

that I can never offend you without you being a witness to my disloyalty. Once I have acquired the habit of never forgetting that you are everywhere, in my thoughts, in my words, in my heart as well as in my room, in the street or in any other place, I will always be respectful and submissive. I will never think, speak or act without first consulting you. After making sure that there is nothing evil in my actions I will raise my heart to offer them to you. Thus I will do nothing contrary to your glory or unprofitable for my salvation.

O MY GOD, if I keep all these resolutions I will owe my devout life only to your grace. What form can my gratitude take for such a favour? I possess something very precious which, happily, I can offer you every day. It is with this that I will repay you and I feel sure that you will be pleased with the payment. This is the sacrifice of the Mass which is of infinite merit in the eyes of your divine majesty. For the rest of my life I shall never fail to assist at this sublime mystery in which Jesus Christ himself is presented to us body and soul by the hands of the priest. With what devotion and recollection will I watch the celebration of so great a sacrifice! Perhaps my past sins, though many times forgiven, have taken away from me many graces which you would have given me had I always been faithful. However, I am delighted to know that, because of my Saviour's precious blood, you can never refuse a request. O my God, by offering you this spotless victim I will force you to give me back all the graces I need to become a real saint and to stop breaking your law which simply commands me to avoid evil and do good.

IN A FEW WORDS that is what I have to do and what I have to avoid doing. In detail this commandment comprises many things which it would take too long to write down. I must remember, as I have so often been told, that it is better to keep it in mind rather than put it on paper.

COURAGE, MY SOUL! Promise God that you will do penance for your sins and let him see how much you detest them by the care you take to avoid committing them again. Let nothing in the world ever again separate you from a life of virtue. Let us destroy human respect, self-satisfaction, weakness, self-love and vanity. Let us put aside all that is evil

within us and safeguard only what is good. Let people say what they will. Let me be pleased with those who scoff at me or treat me as a visionary, a hypocrite or an upright man. From now on I must be indifferent to all this. I am searching for my God.³¹ He only gave me life so that I could serve him faithfully. I shall soon have to give him an account of the time he has given me to work out my salvation. The world will not reward me for the attachment I have had for it. If I had to, it would be extremely hard to find a friend who would love me without any self-interest. God alone loves me sincerely and only wants to treat me well. If I can manage to please him I will be exceedingly happy but if I displease him I will be the most wretched person alive. If I live in a state of grace I will be victorious; if I lose it I shall fail utterly.

O MY GOD, keep me faithful to these good resolutions and grant me, please, the grace of final perseverance.³² I will have to fight against enemies who will be out to destroy my virtue by tempting me on a thousand different occasions. At the same time they will seek to ruin me altogether. Lord, defend me against these tempters. Since the most formidable of these is ambition, my ruling passion, humble me, crush my pride and silence my vainglory. May I find mortifications at every turn! May people rebuke me and despise me! I accept all this provided you continue to love me and I always remain dear to you. I will find it hard to suffer and to stifle the vanity that fills my heart, but what should a person not endure for you, the God who has shed his precious blood for me?

NOTHING will be difficult for me if you are willing to help me and I abandon myself entirely to you. I must distrust myself and hope in your mercy. In my present state I have everything to fear. My present state does not meet with your approval. If I wish to be saved I must choose the state you have foreseen for me. This must be the first object of my reflections. I will be only too happy if I do not make the wrong choice. I am going to use the holiest of means to dis-

³¹ Marginal note: *Deum meum quaero* (I am looking for my God).

³² Marginal note: *Qui perseveraverit usque in finem, hic salvus erit* (The man who stands firm to the end will be saved) (Mt 10,22).

cover your sacred will. I am going to make known to my director my likes and dislikes concerning each different kind of life, so that I can examine more attentively the one which seems to suit me. I will leave out nothing which I consider necessary in consulting your providence. Divine Master, may your grace enlighten me at every step. May I merit this by being attached to whatever pleases you, irrevocably and for all time.

END OF THE REFLECTIONS³³

³³ These final words are not in Claude's own hand.