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2.

CHOICE OF A STATE OF LIFE

INTRODUCTION

The first of Poullart des Places's writings ended with the decision to examine his vocation with the help of a spiritual director and, as a consequence, to make known his likes and dislikes concerning each kind of life. The retreatant had already declared that his dominant passion was ambition, vanity and the quest for fame. The second writing is a nineteen-page manuscript in the form of a followup to *Reflections on the Truths of Religion*. These pages were written during the same retreat and only make sense if taken in the same spiritual context. They bear no title. Between them and the *Reflections* there is simply a blank page. The title we have given to this piece of writing, following Henry Koren and Joseph Michel, does not come from Poullart des Places but describes the contents very well. The writing and the disposition of the paragraphs are exactly the same as in the preceding work. Once again the setting is the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius Loyola. During the second week St Ignatius gives a set of guidelines for the choice or rather the 'election' of a state of life. The young Claude Francis follows these closely, although allowing himself a certain flexibility in the considerations he is led to make.

These pages are important because of the psychological and spiritual portrait that the author draws of himself. He does this with a harshness and an accuracy which on occasions amount to cruelty. This is particularly so when he condemns his ambition, his vanity and his love of glory and success. This is all the more striking in that all the rest of his life seems to have been a battle against these faults. He seems to have passionately cultivated self-effacement, scorn and a love for the most menial tasks which no one else wanted to do. The pages which Joseph Michel has dedicated to this work make very interesting reading (cf *Michel*, pp. 57-70).

CHOICE OF A STATE OF LIFE

O MY GOD, guide to the heavenly Jerusalem for those who really trust in you, I have recourse to your divine providence. I abandon myself entirely to you. I give up my own inclinations, appetites and will in order blindly to follow yours. Be good enough to show me what you want me to do so that I may follow here below the way of life you have traced out for me. May I serve you during my pilgrimage in a way which is agreeable to you and may you shower on me all the graces I always need to offer the glory due to your divine majesty!¹

DURING THIS RETREAT I hope, my God, that you will speak to me in the depth of my heart and in your mercy deliver me from the embarrassing anxieties caused by my want of determination. I realise full well that you do not approve of my present way of life but have chosen something better for me. I must take a firm, rational decision to consider seriously my salvation. Happily I am convinced of the need of salvation. While here I have been meditating on this truth as though it were the most important and most necessary in the Christian religion. So far I have been asked a thousand times whether I understand what is my final end and each time, without thinking, I have answered in the same way as I do today after mature consideration. God created me only so that I can love him, serve him and enjoy forever the happiness promised to the just.² That is my whole vocation, the unique goal of all my actions. I am a fool if I act in any other way since I should have no other purpose in life.

No matter what happens in the future I must always remember that any moments that do not help me to lead a

¹ Marginal note: *Notam fac mihi viam in qua ambulem, quia ad te levavi animam meam* (Show the right road, to one who lifts up his soul to you) (Ps. 142,8).

² Cf *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius, first week, principles and foundation.

good life are moments lost and I will have to render an account to God for them.

DEEPLY CONVINCED of this sense of duty I promise you, O my God, never to undertake a single act without previous examination, careful consideration and asking myself whether I am acting solely for your glory. No matter how I may be feeling, I always want to be cautious³ in my thoughts, my words and my actions. Whenever I find your interests at stake, I will try to protect them, but wherever I find only those of the world I will take flight as from the devil himself.⁴ Should I be happy enough, my God, to discover the state of life in which your divine providence wishes me to serve it, you will give me the necessary graces always to keep in mind the work of my salvation and nothing else. I will free myself from all the human considerations which up to now have always influenced me when considering the possible choices of a state of life. I am convinced that I must put aside all indecision, choose only one and never change. However I do not know which one will suit me and I am afraid of making a mistake.

THIS MATTER is much too important for me not to invoke your help. Lord, you are pledged to guide my steps, since I am resolved to follow the path you will trace for me. I renounce all the advantages which could flatter me but which you could not approve. I have thus learnt to be indifferent to all the various states of life. Speak to me, Lord, in the depth of my heart for I am ready to obey.⁵

SINCE I HAVE no preconceived ideas and prejudices I must once again consider my likes and dislikes for each kind of life. In this holy place nothing will distract me. Here I am more in the presence of God than anywhere else. I do not

³ 'Cautious' is taken here in the sense of prudence.

⁴ Marginal note: *Tamquam a facie colubri fugiam* (Flee from sin as from a snake) (Sir. 21,2).

⁵ Marginal note: *Quid me vis facere, Domine? Paratum cor meum* (What do you want me to do, Lord? My heart is ready) (Acts 9,6; Ps. 56,8 and 107,2). The first words are those of St Paul on the road to Damascus, according to the Vulgate.

have to disguise my feelings, since God understands them better than I do. He knows I would be trying to deceive myself if I did not speak sincerely. I want to weigh things according to 'the scales used in the sanctuary'⁶ so that, once I have made my choice, there will be no need to reproach myself any longer. I will know that God wants me to adopt this particular state of life.

I SHALL BEGIN by examining my temperament and calling to mind my emotions, good and bad, for fear of forgetting the first and allowing myself to be deceived by the second. I enjoy excellent health, though I appear very delicate. I have a good stomach and am able to digest any kind of food easily. Nothing makes me ill. As strong and vigorous as anyone else, hardened to fatigue and work, I am nevertheless inclined to be lazy and easy-going, applying myself only when spurred on by ambition. By nature I am mild and docile, extremely obliging, almost incapable of saying No to anyone, and in this alone am I constant. By temperament I am slightly sanguine and very melancholic. What is more, though rather indifferent to wealth I am passionately fond of glory and of anything that can raise a person above his fellows by his own achievements. The success of others fills me with jealousy and despair, though I never allow this ugly vice to reveal itself nor do I do anything to satisfy it. I am discreet where secrets are concerned, rather diplomatic in all my conduct, enterprising in my designs but secretive in their execution. I seek independence yet I am the slave of splendour. I am afraid of death and this makes me a coward, though I cannot tolerate insult. Too fond of flattering others, I am in private ruthless with myself when I have committed a *faux pas* in public. I am sober with regard to the pleasures of food and drink and rather reserved with regard to those of the flesh. I sincerely admire truly good people and I love virtue but rarely practise it myself

⁶ This expression appears quite often in the Bible, e.g., Ex. 30,13,24, etc. It refers to a weight or measure of which the priests kept the standard in the Temple. Preachers often used this expression in a metaphorical sense. It meant weighing things not by earthly standards but by the authentic standards of the Gospel. Bourdaloue concludes a sermon: 'weigh these words not according to worldly maxims but on the scales of the Gospel and according to the Temple standard'.

because of human respect and lack of perseverance — sometimes as devout as a hermit, pushing austerity beyond the limits becoming a person of the world; at other times soft, cowardly and lax in my Christian practice; always frightened when I forget God and fall into sin. I am scrupulous to a fault, and that almost as much in times of laxity as during times of fervour. I recognise well enough what is good and what is evil. God's graces are always there so as to help me to discover my blindness. I like to give alms and am naturally sympathetic to the ills of others. I hate slanderers. I am respectful in church without being a hypocrite. This is what I am and in this description I see the portrait of my real self.

THERE IS both good and bad in the lifelike sketch I have just drawn. I must preserve the good grain and throw the cockle on the fire, otherwise it will soon choke the precious ears which could yield such a good harvest.⁷ If only I had the courage to burn all the weeds mercilessly, I would no longer find it difficult to choose the life I ought to live. Any state of life would suit me and I would have no more aversion for one than for another. Without these imperfections I would be perfect. Their number can be reduced but it is very difficult to make sure that not even one still remains. Therefore I must not make my decision without taking everything into consideration lest, in forgetting my enemies, I fall more easily into their hands.

SINCE THERE ARE only three states of life there can only be three kinds of vocation. A choice has to be made between the religious state known as the cloister, the ecclesiastical state which is that of secular priests, and the third state called the world. In all three a man can save his soul or lose it. The hair shirt and the cassock can cover a wicked and sinful heart just as easily as the lawyer's gown or the cavalryman's braided tunic. Likewise the judge and the swordsman can preserve a pure and virtuous heart just as well as the most austere hermit and the most faithful priest. Both can be rogues or honest men. God accompanies these everywhere. He gives to each the graces he deserves. These can be mer-

⁷ Cf Mt 13,24 ff: the parable of the wheat and cockle.

ited in any state of life provided it is the one willed by God. The secret, then, consists in making the right choice. The surest way of doing this is to keep in mind only the glory of God and the desire to save one's own soul.⁸ My soul, let you and me ask ourselves whether you really keep this motive in view? I will judge your sincerity by the knowledge I have of your inclinations. You must not try to deceive me. You are too involved in this matter. Since you consider all states of life with equal indifference, since you are no more attached to one than to another, I will tell you the one you must choose, if indeed I discover one in which you will seek only your salvation.

FIRST OF ALL I want to put before you religious life. You must tell me the reasons why you do not dislike this state of life. I know you must be inclined towards some particular view of God. I will know more once I learn what order you would like to enter and when I know better the reasons which sometimes draw you towards this way of life. You reply that you will never take the monastic habit except as a Carthusian. I praise your choice of this form of religious life because I believe your only motive for embracing this kind of solitude would be your desire to concentrate on your salvation. Would not laziness, perhaps, play some part in this desire? Might there not be some annoyance at not being sufficiently esteemed by the world, at not belonging to a sufficiently illustrious family or at not possessing the necessary wealth to reach the position you covet? Are you not afraid that some day it will become apparent that you do not have the great mind you were thought to have? Are there not a thousand other subjects of vanity which might encourage you to love solitude? I do not know what to believe about this. Let us suppose for a moment, although this is a situation which cannot really exist, that it is not unsatisfied ambition that makes you consider such a state. Would you then have any reason at all for not liking the solitary life and for rejecting this voca-

⁸ This principle is taken almost word for word from the second week of the *Exercises* where, at the very beginning of counsels for a good choice of life, St Ignatius tells us we should decide for one thing rather than another only according to what each will contribute to the glory of God and our salvation.

tion? You are a melancholic dreamer who in your moments of solitude become fretful although you like to be alone. At such times you stop your mind from thinking of something good because your want of constancy makes you conjure up ever new desires. In their turn these new desires create a thousand fantasies which torment you and deprive you of peace of mind. At present you are so fickle and so attached to your freedom that I doubt whether you are made always to contemplate the same four walls and never to unloosen the chains that bind you. How would you reconcile your solitude with the affection you have for my sister? You love her tenderly and you cannot bear to be separated from her for any length for time. She is not yet settled in life and she is so dear to you that you want to take an interest in her welfare.⁹ My father is an old man who will leave behind a good deal of business concerns which few people other than myself would be able to put in order. You understand the duties I have towards the father and mother who brought me into the world. They will not oppose my vocation once they know it is a holy one. Would it not, however, be a consolation for them to see me living in the world and to be able to count on me? My soul, you will tell me you are undecided as to the different states of life, but I will answer for you and say, you are not as undecided as you think. Religious life does not attract you.

LET US EXAMINE the other two kinds of life. Perhaps you have fewer reasons for disliking them. I know you are much drawn to clerical life. Of the three it is apparently the one you are most likely to embrace. I do not blame you for this bent, provided I am convinced you have the right intention, namely God's glory and the longing to secure your own salvation. It is true that there are signs of this intention, but I notice many other motives. I am convinced you would like me to make this choice so as to convert souls to God, to remain more regular in the practice of virtue, to be in a better position to do good, and to give alms to the poor more generously. Such a scheme is worthy of praise and contains all I

⁹ Françoise (or Jeanne Françoise), Claude's sister, was sixteen at this time (cf *Michel*, p. 67).

would ask of you so as to approve your choice. Yet tell me honestly is that the only reason you have for wanting to see me serve in the Church? Will not vanity itself, your dominant passion, become the real reason for your vocation?¹⁰ You flatter yourself with the thought that my preaching will be greeted with applause and thus glory and honour will be yours. This is where you are most vulnerable for, if I agree to become a priest on condition that I never mount a pulpit, you will never give your consent. What then will be my decision?

IT IS ALL VERY WELL for you to tell me that some degree of presumption enters into your plans, that it is very difficult to keep every trace of it out of your actions, since it is inseparable from yourself and has been with you so long that you have to consider it as belonging to your personality. It is as old as your birth and as alive as you are. Yet for all that I cannot agree with you. You tell me that if I want to wait until I discover a state for which you have an inclination without any trace of ambition I need only bear in mind that I will live forever in the same kind of indecision that I am in at the moment. To this you add that the virtue that I would practise so perfectly in this state would diminish your propensity for vainglory. By getting me to approach the altar more frequently, by abandoning the friends who, I notice, daily foster your passion, by drawing from theology the illuminations of faith and applying them to meditations on the necessity of following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, humble in all things, you claim, I say, that this smoke will be blown away and that, having got rid of this passion, you will no longer have anything in you which will hinder me from becoming a saint and a faithful servant of God.

TO DO YOU JUSTICE, my soul, I believe you really think like this and would try to stifle your vanity. But what is your answer to the obstacles put in your way by your excessive desire to please others, your jealousy and dissimulation, the boldness with which you undertake a lot of things which you

¹⁰ In the original the sense is not quite clear but from the context this translation seems the best.

should not even dream of doing, your flattery, human respect and inconstancy in doing good, your softness, your inclination to lead an easy life, your melancholy, and all the other defects of my mind and temperament? You will find it hard to destroy so many things which are opposed to that holy state and which, in a priest, must be seen as so many abominations. I know you hope that grace will be a great help since you will try to co-operate with it. This is the best of your reasons. The others you suggest are not so good.

YOU PROMISE ME you will renounce your desire always to please others and you will ask the Lord to make you steadfast; that for this reason you will oblige me to enter a seminary where piety reigns, there to drink in a new life, creating in you a gentle habit of virtue; that you will change your easy-going ways and will no longer indulge your passion for pleasing others, except in order to do good. This of course would be a wonderful thing in one who has a meek and kind heart and earnestly embraces a life of virtue. You even want to make your easy-going tendencies a reason why I should make this choice, since for someone in the world such an inclination is easily corrupted, and the occasions for corruption are much more numerous. Moreover you claim that if, unfortunately, I succumbed to solicitations made to me while in the clerical state I might recover more quickly than if the same misfortune befell me while in the world. As regards all the other obstacles, you assure me that my mind, occupied solely with the business of my salvation, would soon give up so many defects. You say that these imperfections should not be strong enough to detain a person already attracted to a given state, in particular when he has a thousand good qualities besides his dominant propensity. You explain that the indifference you experience towards the other sex, the distaste you have for family life, my tender conscience, the jealousy which I shall certainly have to moderate, but which can serve as a good influence on my work, the desire I have always had, since my tender years, to serve the Church, the predilection I have for the poor, the respect I have for holy things, my love of virtue and, over and above all this, a thousand other good reasons prompt me to approve that state and to consent to the choice of a kind of life that seems to fit me very well.

I HAVE TO AGREE, my soul, that you are much more inclined to the ecclesiastical than to the religious state. I notice quite easily that this inclination is much stronger, in spite for your indecision which makes you waver between so many possibilities. If I did not know you I would come to agree with your wishes in no time. However would you yourself agree if I were to say to you just as quickly, 'Come on now, I want to make you happy, let us say goodbye to the world once and for all, let us side with the Church and abandon completely all other institutions'? I realize that to some degree you are attached to the world, that you would ask for a little time to think it over. It is unfortunate that at one moment you want everything, at another nothing at all. You come up with a thousand reasons why you should enter the ecclesiastical state yet, if I was ready to enter immediately, you would still want time to think about it. You still love the world a little and you do not quite know which of the two you should love the more. Both suit you and both please you. I need only talk to you about them one after the other for you to notice that you are attached to each. I still want to know what line you take when thinking about the world. After that I will try to persuade you to make a definite choice.¹¹

AS USUAL I will ask you whether God alone and my salvation are the only motives you put forward for remaining in the world. You promised to answer me honestly and not to tell a lie. You will not dare, then, to tell me with confidence that these are the only reasons you have in mind. I know full well that what little religion you still retain helps you to preserve some desire to serve God and to save your soul. Nevertheless you will not give up your bad habits as I would like you to do. In your plans I always notice something at variance with views founded on Christian faith.

SO AS TO convince yourself more easily you must answer this question: suppose you remain in the world, which career will you choose: the army, the law or banking? — for these are the only three you can take into consideration. Soldiering has no attraction for you because of your delicate con-

¹¹ For all this paragraph consult *Michel*, p. 67.

science, as you put it, and because of the difficulty of saving your soul in such a profession. It is even more difficult as a soldier than in any other career since death is almost always unforeseen and yet, for all that, no one thinks the more about it.

YOU WOULD prefer court life. A position in the king's service would appeal to you because it would give you satisfaction. Your life would always appear to be calm and peaceful. You would live now in one place, now in another. You would find scope for your political acumen, your gift of flattery and dissimulation, your human respect, your mildness and self-satisfaction, in a word for all the little gifts you imagine I have. In truth nothing in the world would suit you better, so long as I do not take religion into consideration and am willing to gratify your passions. It is no good your telling me that you would not yield to your evil inclinations, that you would live there as elsewhere, like a gentleman, even like a good man. I can think of a thousand reasons you could invoke which would be quite eloquent, for this is greatly to your liking. If you were your own master you would not long remain undecided but would quickly opt for this state. To this I will answer by quoting an old proverb, 'Opportunity makes the thief'.¹² You are too easy-going, you do not have the courage to resist persistent pressure. In a word you know I owe allegiance to my beloved parents who could not approve such a plan. Moreover I owe it to them never to do anything that is contrary to their will.

AT THE MOMENT you have to choose between the law and finance. The latter is not to your taste and I agree that it does not suit you. Only the law remains and I am willing to examine what you have in view in such a career. I believe you love justice and would incline towards the defense of the unfortunate, the widow and the orphan, provided right is on their side. You will apply yourself to your task and acquit yourself worthily unless the pleasure you take in it upsets your good resolutions. Because you are religious-minded you will

¹² Marginal note: *Fuge longe. Qui quaerit periculum peribit in illo* (Run far away. Whoever loves danger will perish in it) (Cf Sir. 3,27).

do your duty, yet at the same time since you like to oblige everyone you will want to listen to all kinds of requests. Such a course of action will fit in perfectly with your deep but secret affection for your parents. You will be able to see them frequently and console them after their life of toil. You claim that your diplomacy will serve you well when dealing with people in power, that your gentleness will attract all hearts and that the opportunities of speaking in public will earn you everyone's approbation and esteem. So as to satisfy this ambition which in any state of life will be the passion you have to fight against most, you will go to any lengths to obtain briefs which entail frequent speeches and addresses. Since your vanity will never be satisfied with the simple profession of a lawyer who is mainly concerned with public discourses and printed documents, you will seek a position which of its nature will earn you a respect which you can increase by your talents.

MY SOUL, I do not find in these views of yours the end which I ask of you and which I must reach. Moreover I discover a number of obstacles in your dislike of marriage. This is important because you must not think that I will be willing to remain in the world all my life as a bachelor. Such an attitude would never be allowed. Given your complacency it would also put your eternal salvation in danger. I notice another obstacle, my scrupulous conscience which will never give me any peace. Being in a position to indulge my lesser as well as my greater passions, which is quite natural, I will do things of which I could never approve. Distressed by my weakness I will become more melancholic than I am by temperament, unless I lose the tender remorse I experience whenever I make a mistake. My situation then will be more wretched than ever since I will become obdurate. My soul, you hope that with age I will become more steadfast and that, having a good conscience as well as becoming more rational, I will become less easy-going and less prone to corruption; that, moreover, all this vanity will disappear. Since I am wretched enough because of my natural inconstancy, I could in that profession become less subject to feelings of regret and grief caused by weakness. Finally you might consider that, as the years go by, you may be able to moderate your ambition, to tame your eagerness to advance at any cost and, being fond of almsgiv-

ing, to persuade me to many acts of kindness and thus draw down upon myself the Lord's graces which will deliver me from my passions.

IF ONLY I had the mind to, I could dispute each and every one of these reasons. But what would be the use since, with all your inclinations to a life in the world, you do not tell me whether you prefer that state to all others? Although you told me nothing about your indifference towards marriage, I am still waiting for a reasoned explanation. I know that people get married every day and rightly so. I also know that anyone with a heart as upright, as kind, as good and as sensitive to gratitude as yours, takes no great risk in setting up a household. O my soul, I know from all the thoughts you inspire in me that you have no real dislike for life in the world any more than for the religious and ecclesiastical state. You agree because you believe I will not take you at your word, but if I were to make a definite choice you would not agree because you would regret putting aside the other two possibilities.

MY SOUL, is that not the whole truth? Not to make too fine a distinction between us, must we not admit that it is indeed a misfortune for me to be so irresolute! I must turn to you, my God, if I am to make a decision in accord with your will. I am here to consult your divine wisdom. Destroy within me all those earthly attachments which pursue me wherever I go. Grant that, in whatever state of life I choose, I may entertain only those opinions which please you. Since, then, in my present state of mind it is impossible for me to make a decision and yet I feel you want something more from me than this indecision, I will lay bare my soul to your representative without any reservations.

THROUGH YOUR holy grace grant that like St Paul I may find an Ananias to show me the path I must follow.¹³ I will follow his advice as though it were a divine command. O my God, do not let me make a mistake for I put all my hope in you.

END

¹³ Cf Acts 9,10 ff: the story of St Paul's conversion.