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4.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST

INTRODUCTION

We have reached the end of the year 1704. Three years have passed since Claude Francis Poullart des Places left the world to begin his studies for the priesthood. Up to Whitsuntide 1703 he lived as a boarder at the College Louis le Grand and followed the courses in theology. On 15th August 1702 he received the tonsure and began to wear clerical dress.

Something of his life of prayer at that time comes to light in the previous document, *Fragments of a Personal Regulation*. But at the same time he also undertook works of charity. According to Father Thomas, 'he had by that time developed a special liking for what was most lowly and most abandoned. From time to time he gathered the little Savoyards and taught them their catechism, whenever he had the opportunity' (*Koren*, p. 268). These little Savoyards were young children who came from the mountains of Savoy every year to Paris and other big cities to ply the trade of chimney sweeps. Separated from their families and without any fixed abode, they were not cared for within the parish framework. They needed someone who would take in hand their religious formation. Others thought of this before Claude so no doubt he joined them in this humble but very necessary apostolate.

In spite of the meagre allowance he received from his father, Claude began to help those who were poorer than himself. Among these he picked out poor scholars who wanted to become priests but could not afford to pay their board and lodging. By May 1702 he was looking after one such scholar. To do this he cut down on his own food, on occasion even depriving himself of necessary sustenance (*Michel*, pp. 99-100). Little by little, as one of his early biographers points out, 'M. des Places felt that God wanted to use him "to people his sanctuary" and form masters and guides for the faithful. To succeed in this he was convinced that the only thing to do was to continue helping the poor scholars to live and keep up with their studies. He did not simply confine

himself to material aid. He planned to bring them together in a room where from time to time he could give them talks and watch over them, in so far as his residence in college allowed. He made known his plan to his Father Confessor who gave his approval. The college rector did even more. He promised to support his work by giving him what remained from the boarders' meals towards the sustenance of the poor scholars' (cf Besnard, *La Vie de Messire Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort*, quoted in *Michel*, pp. 130-131).

The origins of this work for the poor scholars were very humble indeed. As the text which follows shows, it was simply a question of gathering together in one room 'four or five poor scholars and trying to feed them quietly and without any fuss'. The little group grew quickly and it was the students themselves who asked to form a real clerical community. Thus without any previous intention Claude saw himself being drawn by force of circumstances, or rather by divine providence, into the role of founder of a seminary, though the word itself was not yet being used. The final step was taken on Whit Sunday 27th May 1703. He had been directing this work and supporting all the spiritual and material anxieties of it for a year and a half when he wrote the document we are considering. What an amazing situation, something almost inconceivable nowadays! — a cleric not yet in minor orders was, at the age of 24, running what was to all intents and purposes a seminary. Towards the end of 1704 he made another retreat during which he wrote his *Reflections on the Past*.

The manuscript in our possession comprises four foolscap pages written in two columns in Claude Poullart des Places's own hand. It contains a certain number of erasures and corrections but in general remains easy to read. Several words and phrases are underlined but, since they are written in different ink and seem to belong to another hand, we will take no notice of them. The importance of the spiritual crisis described so painfully in these pages cannot be exaggerated; they are deeply moving and worthy of careful study, since they reveal the measure of the spiritual struggle going on in the young founder's soul. Father Michel has included a detailed study of them, pp. 167-173; all we can do is to refer the reader to it.

A. M. D. G. V. q. M.¹
REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST²

If I had a little love for God and my salvation I ought to be inconsolable because of the way I spent this year. Is that the kind of gratitude the Lord has to expect from me? More than three years ago by an extraordinary act of compassion he drew me from the world, broke the chains that held me prisoner, snatched me from Satan's claws, as it were in spite of myself, and clothed me once again with the garment of salvation.³ He worked miracles for me. So as to attract me to himself he closed his eyes to an enormous crime which constituted my crowning iniquity, committed as it was at the very time when he was exerting his greatest pressure to bring about my conversion.⁴ Far from resenting it he used it to touch my heart. His excessive patience began to pierce my very soul. I would not have hesitated any further had I dared hope for that which in his goodness he did for me, but which I

¹ These seven letters are the initials which make up the abbreviation for *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam Virginisque Mariae* (to the greater glory of God and of the Virgin Mary).

² In the manuscript above this title are written the words '3 years after his conversion, in 1705, perhaps in the month of August. Here M. des Places describes the fervour of his spiritual life and compares it to what he calls his state of lukewarmness and even of a fall.'

According to *Michel*, pp. 88 and 161, the true date of this document is the Christmas holidays 1704.

³ The image of putting on a new garment to signify conversion is classical among spiritual writers and is based on quite a few New Testament expressions, cf Rom. 13,12; Gal. 3,27; Ep. 4,24; Col. 3,12, etc.

⁴ Michel feels he has discovered this 'enormous crime.' It concerns a quarrel during which Claude wounded a coach driver from Batz with his sword (cf *Michel*, pp. 46-48). This event probably took place at the beginning of October 1697. At that time Claude was just eighteen and had crowned his philosophical studies at the Jesuit College, Rennes, with a brilliant public defense of his 'Grand Acte', a kind of minor thesis. He had made a retreat and was preparing to go to Nantes to begin his law studies (cf. *Michel*, pp. 36-37 and 42).

had no reason to expect from him. All I need do is to recall it here without putting it down on paper. Only God and my heart ought never to forget this, his most startling act of mercy ever: God, so as to exact an act of gratitude without parallel; my heart, so as to love forever and exclusively such a bounteous benefactor.

This God of goodness did not stop there in the expressions of his kindness towards me. Had I at last consented to return to his house after he himself had fulfilled the conditions which I had dared to impose on his mercy,⁵ everything would have opened up before me. Heaven anticipated my requests. In exchange for a small act of love of God I experienced God's coming back to me in a manner impossible to describe in words. I received abundant consolations. When I was myself meditating on my disorders and on the mercy of my God tears flowed continuously from my eyes. Whenever I made any effort at all to approach the Lord that merciful Master immediately carried me on his shoulders for league after league. Finally I was able to do without the least effort what I had previously considered impossible for a man like me . . .

It is fitting for me to call to mind at this point the moments of fervour I had the good fortune to experience when I first returned to God. What were my thoughts and desires at that time, what was my manner of life and what were my most ordinary occupations? I could, so to speak, think only of God. My greatest regret was that I could not think of him all the time. I wanted to love only him. For love of him I had renounced even the most legitimate attachments.⁶ I wanted to see the day when I would be penniless, living only on alms, after giving everything away. Of temporal possessions I intended to keep my health alone, so that I could sacrifice it

⁵ What conditions is he talking about? Perhaps the answer may be found in the request made to God in the last couple of sentences of the *Choice of a State of Life*: 'Through your holy grace grant that like St Paul I may find an Ananias to show me the path I must follow. I will follow his advice as though it were a divine command' (see above, p. 51).

⁶ He had in fact left his parents and his dearly loved sister; he had abandoned all possibility of a prosperous future together with the ambitious dreams fostered both by himself and by others.

entirely to God in the work of the missions. I would have been only too happy if, after setting the whole world on fire with the love of God, I could have shed the last drop of my blood for him whose blessings were ever before my eyes.⁷ I never tired of speaking about these favours. I found too few people to whom I could talk about them. I found pleasure only in conversations in which God was not forgotten. I became scrupulous about keeping quiet when an opportunity arose to talk about him. I found people who spoke to me about other topics quite unbearable. I spent a considerable amount of time before the Blessed Sacrament. These visits became my most frequent and most pleasant forms of recreation. I prayed for the greater part of the day, even while walking the streets, and I was immediately disturbed when I noticed that for some time I had lost the presence of him whom alone I desired to love. I met few people and came to appreciate solitude. During these moments of solitude I often recalled my past mistakes. I meditated on them at the beginning of my mental prayer. They even became my normal subject of prayer. My moral blindness caused abundant tears to flow. Day by day it appeared to be more and more opaque. That which two or three months before seemed quite an ordinary sin, with no particular malice, now looked infinitely more hideous. The malice itself grew daily before my very eyes, in proportion to the progress I made in my meditation before God. Profoundly ashamed and disgusted at such moments, I could no longer put up with myself, I lived in a spirit of humility. I despised myself and made this clear to those I met by taking pleasure in belittling myself before them. This virtue which, by an amazing effect of grace, I began to practise, after being perhaps the vainest man of the world of my time, drew down on me a great number of God's blessings.

These were made manifest by the eagerness with which I approached the Blessed Sacrament of the altar. Although I had the privilege of receiving holy Communion frequently, it was not as often as I would have liked. I longed for the

⁷ It is necessary here to underline this attraction towards the missions. That he clearly means missions abroad is confirmed by the fact that he envisages the possibility of martyrdom.

sacred bread with such avidity that when I began to eat it I often found it impossible to stem the torrents of tears. It was from partaking of Jesus' body that I drew the detachment which led me to despise the world and its ways. I cared little for its esteem and even tried sometimes to displease it by contravening its conventions.⁸ Jesus Christ crucified was the subject which most frequently occupied my mind and, in spite of the love of my body which still held me in its sway, I began to do violence to myself and undertake some small mortifications.

Although I did not go very far in all this and consoled myself with the hope that I would do infinitely more in the future, at least I was faithful to my exercises and would have considered it a very grave crime to take my meals,⁹ however busy I was, without previously nourishing my mind with that salutary food of which I partake in mental prayer. I had learnt in my prayerful conversations with God to close my ears to all news, never to open my eyes to see things that might merely satisfy my curiosity, not even when walking through the city. I did not bother with the news and I did not look at anything beautiful. I did not want to rob God of a single moment. I wanted to think only of him and, though I was far removed from thinking of him always and often suffered rather long distractions, I never ceased filling my mind with him, sometimes even in my sleep and always at my first waking.

⁸ Claude's first biographer, Father Thomas, reports an incident which displeased those with whom he lived at Louis le Grand. "... He had preserved in his exterior and in his behaviour the carefully polished manners of the world. But in 1702 he appeared to have changed quite a bit from the way people had previously seen him. He kept only the straightforwardness, mildness and gaiety which virtue must possess if it is not to appear sullen. The many students of the college who knew him well suddenly observed that he had dropped his customary splendour and worldly manners. He was now clothed in the habit and had adopted the simplicity of the most ascetical ecclesiastics. He was not at all concerned about what others might say' (Koren, p. 273). With Michel we have changed the date from 1701 to 1702 because on 15th August that year Claude received the tonsure and was now a cleric.

⁹ The original French text has *viande* (meat), used in the general sense of food or meals.

I could add occasional impulses of compassion which I felt towards those who suffer; a fair amount of kindness, after all my past pride, towards those I dealt with; an ardent zeal to urge sinners to return to God — this went so far that, in order to succeed, I would have found nothing too degrading; finally a blind obedience to my director whose orders I respected so much that I would have been incapable of doing the least thing without having previously obtained his permission.¹⁰

I had the happiness to live like this for eighteen months, my happiness overflowing quite naturally when I noticed my beginnings of regularity increase. I say 'beginnings' for I was far from believing that this state of virtue was sufficient and that I was now leading as holy a life as I ought. I had not left the world long enough to stop the bad habits I had contracted from mixing an infinity of imperfections and sins with my small virtues. It is true that God who knew the depths from which he had rescued me and who had been satisfied, at the beginning of my conversion, with the least of my efforts, still knew how to be satisfied with the little that I gave him in the hope that eventually I would give him much more. He did not enter into judgement with his poor little servant¹¹ because he knew my weakness and the depth of the abyss out of which I had just climbed. I was not in a condition where I could be fully satisfied with myself. I took a strict account of myself and realised that I was far from arriving at the destination I should have reached had I responded faithfully to the graces God offered me every day. The anxiety engendered by the recollection of my past infidelities, together with the meditation of my past life lived in disorder and abominations, sometimes caused me such grief that my body itself was affected. I had become very thin and despondent though my health remained as good as ever. If my want of fidelity at that time caused me such deep sorrow, what should I not feel today, when I consider my present wretched state of lukewarmness!

¹⁰ We do not know the name of this director. Perhaps it was Father Simon Gourdan, mentioned by M. Besnard in his description of Claude's death as 'an old friend' (Cf *Le Floch*, pp. 302 ff; and *Michel*, pp. 170 ff).

¹¹ Cf Ps. 142,2: 'Do not put your servant on trial, no one is virtuous by your standards'.

Tears of blood would not have been too strong a means of bewailing my wretchedness. It is true to say that I have never been what I ought to be yet I have at least been much better than I am at present. Happy would I be had I lost only half of what I had acquired by grace. Alas! I am no longer aware of the presence of God. I never think of it when I am asleep and almost never when I awake. I am always distracted even during my prayers.

I have become slipshod in my meditations. I have no fixed method or subject and no set time for it. I often cut short the time assigned to it and to my spiritual reading. All flavour and fervour have disappeared. I have lost the gift of tears both during prayer and at holy Communion.

I am no longer eager to eat the food of angels, no longer recollected afterwards.

No longer do I have the courage, as I used to, to mortify myself constantly in one thing or another, were it just keeping a foot in a less comfortable position. I had adopted these practices so generously, to remind myself at every moment of the day that I should do penance continually for the life lived by a body which I could never punish sufficiently.

I do not keep watch over my senses any more, but speak willingly about indifferent matters, look at everything and listen to everything. No longer have I that holy readiness to speak about God, while I talk easily about other things.

I have little zeal for the correction of my brethren, grow weary as soon as I fail, and forget to recommend such undertakings to God, as I jog along thoughtlessly and inconsiderately.

No longer do I despise the esteem of the world but am eager to be considered a virtuous man. I even make a pretence of doing things which perhaps I would not do and to which formerly, when I sought only the esteem of God, I paid little attention. I even flatter people rather willingly, etc.

I am far from being mild in my words and manners. I am often proud, curt and fastidious; I am arrogant and bitter in my speech, lukewarm and tedious in reprimanding. I look gloomy to show I am in bad humour. I am very sensitive with respect to my family and reluctant to reveal that my father and mother sell linen and wax. I am afraid that people will find out about it.¹² I do not make it known sufficiently that I have no share in the work of the poor students' house. On the contrary I derive some satisfaction from it when people who know me only a little or not at all think I am a rich man who spends his fortune on these young people.

I have become lax in doing my duty to God and to my studies. I work and pray as it were by fits and starts. I rearrange the tasks for definite hours time after time. I am irregular even in regard to the hours of meals, eating now early now late, taking dinner sometimes at 3 o'clock and supper at 9 o'clock. Yet day after day I make firm resolutions to change my life. I am tired of being so irregular yet I finish up following my own ideas and whims without referring, as I used to do, to my director, for whom I have substituted, so to speak, my own fancies.

To sum up, I must confess before God that at the present moment I am someone who is believed to be alive but who is certainly dead, at least when I compare the present with the past. Alas! I am merely a mask of devotion and the shadow of my former self. Blessed am I in my extreme misfortune if I do not fall away more but stop where I am and use the grace God offers me to reflect more seriously than ever on my pitiable state, so as to prevent my falling into greater disorders. It is in this very way that so many people who were eminent in virtue began to slide downwards and ended by perishing miserably. Who ought to fear a similar fall more than I who throughout life have so frequently shown my inconstancy by returning to God and then later on falling into such prolonged disorders?

¹² His parents had become prosperous merchants dealing in cloth, wax and many other commodities (cf *Michel*, pp. 42-46). However the family and Claude's father in particular hankered after the ancient noble title which they had lost in 1668 (*Michel*, pp. 9 and 10).

This sad experience of mine surely gives me a solid reason for distrusting my own strength. Being full of vanity and presumption and so unfaithful to grace, should I not fear that God may abandon me entirely? I owe it to his infinite mercy that this evil has not yet befallen me. Always full of tenderness for me, unable to make up his mind to lose me after preserving me from the hardness of heart that leads to final impenitence through miracles rather than by the ordinary ways of his providence, he has allowed me to make this retreat at a time when I did not think of making one.¹³ Besides he has disposed everything in such a fashion that I can find a way of once more returning to my obligations without having to advance specious pretexts for doing so, as I did when I overburdened myself beyond authorized limits with the responsibility for those poor students whom providence is kindly taking care of. . . . I have to believe also that the good Lord will again have pity on me if I return to him with all my heart. Since I am now in a state of dryness and am hampered in my efforts to discern God's sentiments in my regard how can I fly to him so as to cast myself at the feet of his mercy? Nevertheless the Lord's past conduct towards me gives me hope.

(i) He did not allow me at any time to be satisfied with myself. On the contrary I have always been anxious and sorrowful about my disorders.

(ii) He has always given me the grace to see that interiorly I was not in the least what others thought or said I was.

(iii) He never allowed me to get rid of my scruples. Though these have to some degree contributed to my disturbed state they have also made me go to confession more frequently and have given me greater remorse when the occasion to offend God presented itself. All this conduct on God's part makes me hope that the vault of heaven will not be always like an iron clamp above my head if I sincerely bewail my sins and seek to live once more by the Lord's grace.

Filled with this holy confidence, thanks once more to the grace of God, I am going to examine, without taking into con-

¹³ This little precise detail leads Father Michel to reject the date given by Father Le Floch ('during the retreat in preparation for minor orders') (Cf. *Michel*, pp. 339-340).

sideration what is most agreeable to nature, which is the shortest road to lead me back to the one without whom, whatever I do, I cannot live in peace for a single moment. In the first place I will suppose that the reason for my laxity (or, to speak more honestly, for my falls and my aberrations) is the fact that I abandoned solitude too soon, became involved in outside work, undertook the project for the poor scholars and strove to keep it going. I did not have a sufficiently strong foundation in virtue for such an undertaking. I had not yet acquired enough humility to put myself at the head of such a work. A ten-years' retreat to reflect only on myself, after a life like mine, would not have been too long. I know of course that if I faithfully made use of all God's graces I could really be on my guard and remain steadfast in the midst of my occupations. I can judge this to be true by recalling the beginnings when I had not yet completely lost my fervour. But that was when the whole thing was more obscure and almost buried, as it were, in the most lowly dust.¹⁴ At that time I could, so to speak, control myself, and so I was able to believe somehow that I was not undertaking anything other than the will of God. Nevertheless it was difficult for me to hold up without losing my head. It was an insidious way, made all the more dangerous because it seemed good, of bringing pride back little by little into my heart. The aim was to overcome me and hurl me, by use of the same trap which caused me to fall before, into worse disorders if possible than those into which I had already fallen. Thus I am sure I would not be wrong in thinking that on that occasion the devil transformed himself into an angel of light.¹⁵ I do not quite know what to think. What happened makes me fear that I may have made a mistake.

It is true that I did not undertake the work without the permission of my director.¹⁶ But here again my conscience re-

¹⁴ From 1702 Claude tried his best to come to the aid of several 'poor scholars' (*Michel*, pp. 99-102). However the real foundation of the work for the poor scholars only took place at Pentecost 1703 and even then it was a very modest undertaking.

¹⁵ Cf 2 Cor. 11,14: 'If Satan himself goes disguised as an angel of light'.

¹⁶ In the course of a conversation de had with Grignon de Montfort a

proaches me, as it has frequently done before. How did I present the work to him? What tricks did I not use? At first I said it was only a matter of feeding four or five scholars quietly, without any fuss whatsoever. Perhaps at that time I did not reveal the full extent of my ambitions and vanity. I have therefore every reason to fear and tremble before God, because in all these consultations I did not use the candour, simplicity and openness that I ought to have done. These reflections fill me with sorrow. I left the world to seek God, renounce vanity and save my soul. Is it possible that I merely changed my object in life while remaining at heart exactly the same? What then was the use of undertaking this work?

week or so before the foundation of the house for poor scholars, Claude told him that the 'advice of several enlightened persons' had confirmed him in his project (Cf *Michel*, pp. 132-135, and *Koren*, p. 282).