Fall 2009

What Can We Learn From Poullart des Places in 2009?

Eamonn Mulcahy C.S.Sp.

Follow this and additional works at: https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons

Part of the Catholic Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Wellsprings is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Horizons by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.
It was the first wake up call...

Eamonn Mulcahy, C.S.Sp.

Eamonn is a Spiritan of the British Province who has had extensive experience in giving retreats to priests, religious and lay-people. He enjoys being involved in Adult-Faith Formation programmes. He has had missionary experience in Congo-Brazzaville and Nigeria and is presently working on the Spiritan Formation Team at Nairobi, Kenya, while lecturing full time in Systematic Theology at Tangaza College, which is part of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa.

What can we learn from Poullart des Places in 2009?

Poullart in the Shadows

Like most English speaking Spiritans of a certain age, I have very little recollection of receiving anything substantial about Claude-François Poullart des Places during my years of formation. Only the vaguest memories linger in my mind of reading in 1972 during my Novitiate in Kilshane the early chapters of Henry Koren’s *To the Ends of the Earth* (in those days still entitled *The Spiritans*). Even though later on in the Scholasticate, Fr. Wilf Gandy, an avid Poullart fan, was my Spiritual Director and the archivist of the English Province, Poullart was still left in the shadows and greatly eclipsed by Libermann in our Spiritan formation programmes in Britain. And the same was true on the broader canvas of the whole Congregation. It took the threat by the French Government in 1901 to suppress the Congregation before the majority of confreres were willing to trace our origins back to Poullart. Indeed it was only in 1903 that in the Congregation itself Poullart was officially recognised as the first Founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and not without an uphill struggle by the then Superior General, Mgr. Alexandre Le Roy, a decision that was ratified only much later in the General Chapter of 1919.

Non-French speaking Spiritans have for a long time been at a disadvantage, being greatly deprived of having access to detailed information about Poullart’s life and work. Henri Le Floch’s first edition of his life in June 1905 [originally intended to mark the second centenary of the foundation of the Congregation in 1903] and his more historically accurate second edition of 1915 are virtually unknown in Anglophone circumscriptions. Maybe this substantial first life of Poullart was neglected by English readers because of its tendency to flowery hagiography or by knowledge of the author’s controversial status in the Church; Le Floch was dismissed as Rector of the French Seminary in Rome by the direct order of Pope Pius XI for his support of *Action Française*. But Le Floch’s biography is not without its value. It was the first wake up call to the whole Congregation to acknowledge and appreciate the original impact of our First Founder and bring him out of the shadows.

Joseph Michel’s masterly and indispensable 1962 study of Des Places has sadly never been translated into English. It remains until today the classic and authoritative life of Poullart. Surely
Eamonn Mulcahy, C.S.Sp.

this tercentenary year would be the time to have it translated into
the other official languages of the Congregation! Christian de
Mare’s wonderfully rich resource, Aux Racines de L’Arbre Spiritain
(1998)⁴, with its critical edition of Poullart’s writings, has not
yet appeared in English. We are grateful to have at least two
studies in English about Poullart – one from the hand of Ireland’s
indefatigable Seán Farragher, entitled Led by the Spirit (1992)⁵ and
the other from Trans-Canada’s nonagenarian Michael Troy, with
his highly reader-friendly, Riches to Rags (2005)⁶. Jean Savoie’s
insightful Prier 15 Jours avec Claude-François Poullart Des Places
has recently been published in English.⁷

Poullart unreal?

One of the reasons perhaps why Poullart has failed to impact
confreres is that he often seems unreal to us. Maybe because,
unlike with Libermann, we have no photograph of him and have
to rely on paintings and pictures which either make him out to be
a young effeminate boy or a ghastly sickly other-worldly spectre.
The surviving portraits simply do not do him justice and have the
effect of turning people off Poullart. That’s a pity because several
episodes from his childhood and youth highlight the reality of
his humanity and the fact that he was a tough likeable character,
with a strong temper which got him into all kinds of trouble and
adventures.

Poullart was not a wilting lily. He undoubtedly had
character. He was exceptionally intelligent and bright, articulate
and eloquent, chosen out of 400 students publicly to defend a
philosophical thesis in Latin in the famous «Grande Acte» of 1698
at College St Thomas at Rennes which he executed to perfection.
He was a trained lawyer with a philosophical mind. He charmed
people. He had a great capacity for friendship. He was vivacious
and popular, if a little «cocky». He had a warm personality. No
introvert, he acted out roles in tragedies and ballets in school
theatre and took part passionately in college debates. He was
anything but a «softie» or a «wimp». He was an accomplished
horse rider and swordsman.

We forget that as a teenager, in a temper, he almost shot his
little sister Françoise and his mother with a gun! The bullet just
missed them both by an inch. We forget too that once when he
was out hunting with friends, he himself ended up getting shot
in the stomach by one of his pals! Then there was the infamous
incident on the road to Nantes in 1698, as he was leaving to
begin his law studies in the University, when in a fit of anger the
19 year old Poullart wounded with his sword and could have

...we have no photograph of him...

He was vivacious and popular, if a little «cocky».
killed the coachman Pierre Le Huédez, stabbing him in the arm and inflicting a flesh wound on his body! It took his father’s hush-money to cover up the scandal and buy Le Huédez off who was suing for assault. For years afterwards Claude referred to this as his «crime énorme». Clearly, the real Poullart des Places was so much more alive and so much more human than the pallid portraits make him out to be.

**Poullart the Priest**

October 2nd 2009 marks three hundred years since the death of one of the youngest founders of a religious Institute in the history of the Church. It is perhaps providential that we are celebrating the third centenary of Poullart’s death in the middle of the Year of the Priest begun by Pope Benedict XVI on June 19th 2009 because Poullart was first and foremost a priest. In the beginning all he ever wanted to be was a diocesan priest, originally in Brittany, and then in Paris. Poullart des Places was ordained a priest aged 28 on 17th December 1707 and he was dead less than 21 months later. Only one year and nine months in the priesthood yet we can we learn valuable insights from his practice of priesthood.

All his energy was channelled single-mindedly into the formation of future priests. It was his sole focus. Convinced of the value of the priestly vocation, he was passionately concerned about the quality of priestly formation. To offer a solid human, spiritual and intellectual formation to the young men entrusted to his care was his priority of priorities. This is an integral part of our Spiritan charism and identity and part of the legacy we have inherited from Poullart which we sometimes forget. Look, for example, at the tremendous role Spiritans have played in the formation of thousands of priests whilst directing for the last 156 years the Pontifical French Seminary in Rome (1853-2009) and how many national or diocesan seminaries were originally founded and staffed by the Spiritans in the 20th century? How many indigenous clergy were first launched in Africa by the Spiritans? How many Spiritans around the world are still working in priestly formation at the moment?

**Poullart’s Core Intuition**

Poullart entered the Jesuit College of Louis-le-Grand in October 1701 aged 22, and it changed his life. It must have been sheer chaos at Louis-le-Grand – 3,000 students, 600 boarders, 100 Jesuit teachers. Classes were free and open to all but 2,400 external students had to find places to live and eat, and provide for their own board and lodging. Many students must have
fallen through the cracks. Poullart saw that many of his fellow seminarians were just as badly off as the poor little immigrant chimney sweeps from Savoy that he had been trying to help in his own pastoral work in the Assemblée des Amis.

Seven months later, May 1702, still in his first year of seminary, Poullart begins helping a young sixteen year old lad, Jean-Baptiste Faulconnier, whom he noticed was struggling to stay in the Seminary. He paid attention to a single individual. He began by making a significant difference to just one person's life. It begins with one. It starts small. The micro-scale. Then he gets this poor student to help other poor students. He gets the poor to help the poor. The poor to evangelise the poor. One student becomes a small band of three or four and then develops into a group of twelve. Poullart had no big project, no preconceived plan for founding an Institution or a Congregation. His “work” was not a logical conclusion. He simply listened to the Spirit and responded concretely to the needs of one person.

His basic intuition was that the poor have the right to an excellent education. Poullart became concerned that many gifts and talents would be wasted to the Church because the poorest of the seminarians were blocked, unable to find enough money to pay their rent and get enough food to live on and hence they would be forced to abandon the seminary and their potential would be lost to the Church. He wanted to save authentic vocations from shipwreck due to lack of material resources. This prompted his bold initiative of renting a room for these poor students so that they could continue their theological education. He was moved because he saw they could be useful for the Church. He created a new beginning for them. Then he moved from working for the poor, to living with the poor. He actually left the comfort and security of his lodging at Louis-le-Grand and moved in with these youngsters in an already over-crowded Gros-Chapelet. He started with one poor student – and he ended up looking after seventy by the time of his premature death.

Poullart the Formator

According to Joseph Michel, Poullart supplied the best response to the Council of Trent’s attempt to renew the Catholic Church’s seminary system. Can Poullart’s intuitions still play a helpful role in the formation of priests today in Africa, Latin America, Asia? What can Formators in our Spiritan Scholasticates around the world today learn from his style as a Formator? Though it would be inconceivable today, he founded a seminary whilst still just a seminarian himself aged only twenty-four – a
tonsured cleric in minor orders (just the way that Libermann himself founded his own religious institute though not yet ordained). Essentially, Poullart opened a house of formation for his poor friends called *la maison du Gros Chapelet* at *la rue des Cordiers* before moving on to the bigger premises at *rue Neuve-Saint-Étienne* and later at *rue Neuve Sainte-Geneviève*. The secret of his success lay in his personalism and his relational approach to students. His attention to individuals. His sensitivity to people. His egalitarianism in community. He moved in with them. He was their friend and elder brother. He tutored them. He shared in all their duties. He did the shopping, ran errands, washed the dishes and went begging for them on the streets of Paris.

In our Second Cycle Houses of Theology we are all professed Spiritan religious, yet in some Scholasticates the Fathers don’t eat at the same table as the students, the Fathers don’t do the washing up, the Fathers don’t do manual labour, the Fathers don’t wash their own clothes or do their own ironing. Often there are huge discrepancies in the life styles between Formators and students as regards possessions and privileges, with inevitable tensions arising. But Poullart, the undisputed leader of the community, was a brother among brothers. There was one rule for everyone – no exceptions, no privileges, no clericalism; totally egalitarian. He shared his time, his presence, his intellectual gifts. Sometimes our houses of formation are simply too big. This makes it hard for formators to really know and accompany each student personally and help them discern their vocation. Poullart was totally student-centred. Those of us who are formators in the Congregation could certainly do with taking a page out of Poullart’s book.

**Poullart the Tutor**

Poullart insisted on academic excellence in his Seminary of the Holy Spirit. He was serious about study. He didn’t just take in anyone. In a sense, he was elitist. He may have accepted only the poorest of the poor, - for nobody who could pay his way elsewhere was admitted into his Seminary - but he took only the intelligent poor, those who were bright and smart. He wanted to give the gifted poor the chance of doing good theology. He facilitated a free education for the poor which lasted between six and nine years. He accepted no «careerist seminarians». After morning and afternoon lectures at the Jesuit College of Louis-le-Grand, Poullart’s students came back to Gros-Chapelet or rue Neuve Saint Étienne to have several sessions of so-called «répétition», personal tutorials, conferences and other academic exercises to ensure that each student had fully understood and assimilated the theological lessons of the day. Poullart’s personalised tutorials
were the key to the academic high standards that the first Spiritans were famous for. Poullart had benefitted greatly in his own education from the personal interest of a young Jesuit, Fr. Jean-Pierre de Longuemare who was his regent and tutor. Poullart was determined to commit to his poor students on their academic journey the same personal investment that he himself had been fortunate enough to receive on his.

The students’ progress was regulated by frequent exams and those who gave clear signs of being academically hopeless were sent away. He wanted his students themselves to be future «masters» and «guides», to excel in theology even as they worked in hospitals and prisons and distant missions. To achieve this goal Poullart insisted that all his seminarians attend the lectures of the Jesuits. It is a pity that some Spiritans over the years have acquired anti-Jesuit prejudices. Poullart owed so much to the Jesuits and his project would never have survived without their help and support. He always had a positive regard for the Jesuits and their spirituality. The first Spiritans went to class to the Jesuits, went to confession to the Jesuits, had their annual retreat preached by the Jesuits and were treated each day to the scraps and the left-overs of the Jesuits’ table, thanks to the kindness of the Jesuit bursar!

**Poullart’s Three Conversions**

Just as Barney Kelly has spoken of the «Second Conversion» of Francis Libermann, we can also speak of several «conversions» in the life of Poullart des Places. Significantly, each one of them was occasioned by him going on a retreat. This is surely something else we can learn from Poullart – the seriousness with which he undertook retreats. They were privileged moments of discernment and growth, *kairos* moments in his life. Poullart felt personally the need to make retreats; not because it was part of the yearly routine or the Rule of Life. Retreats were no mere formality for him. Something actually happened to him during his retreats. They were real turning points; they were the occasions of at least three conversions in his young life. Moreover, we can see that all through Poullart’s adult life he was never without a spiritual director. Someone was always there accompanying him on his spiritual journey. Someone he could turn to to help him discern the road ahead. Surely we could learn something from Poullart here? How many of us professed Spiritans can honestly say that at the moment we have a Spiritual Director of our own? And yet the Spiritan Rule of Life encourages each one of us to have a spiritual companion to journey along with us.
In 1698 after his brilliant performance at Le Grande Acte when the whole world was at his feet, and whilst his parents were looking for an eligible young lady for him to marry, Poullart chose to make a personal retreat the result of which was his decision to go and study theology at the Sorbonne to become a priest - one who would be a great preacher and convert the whole of France by his wisdom and eloquence. Though this decision was based on youthful pride, ambition and fantasy, it could be called his «first» conversion. Due to his spiritual immaturity at this time, its effects understandably lasted only forty days and in the end he followed his father’s advice and went to Nantes to study Law instead.

In 1701 a much more mature Poullart made the most decisive retreat of his life, directed by a Jesuit father. In this retreat he experienced God’s unconditional love for him. Finishing the retreat, he decided he would leave Brittany and that he would become a simple priest without a university degree and without any hope of advancement or an ecclesiastical career. He would not go to the prestigious Sorbonne but to the Jesuit College of Louis-le-Grand in Paris which could not confer any degrees. This was the moment of his «second» conversion and aged 22 he abandoned any prospect of a successful career in law or business and became a seminarian to train to be a diocesan priest.

In 1702, in the second year of seminary life, Poullart went on another retreat and his soul searching reached a new depth and intensity. He undertook to re-organise his interior life and composed his *Fragments of a personal regulation*. During this retreat his intuition to help his poor students sharpened and he decided to regroup the lads in one house, whilst throwing off his image of a rich young noble man and actually becoming poor himself.

In 1704, six months after the foundational event of Pentecost 1703, his project is getting out of control. He’s in crisis. Exhausted. He’s alone with 40 students. He no longer had the time to form himself. No longer nurturing himself spiritually. He had neglected his own formation. It is the time of his breakdown; his burn-out. He’s bitten off more than he can chew. He is out of his depth, drowning. What does he do? He decides to go on retreat and examines his life with excruciating honesty and this leads him to his «third conversion». Poullart realises he had abandoned solitude and meditation; that he had not been totally open with his spiritual director. He sees that he cannot cope alone, that he needs others to help him form the young scholars.
So he calls on his childhood friends – Michel-Vincent Le Barbier, just newly ordained a priest, and Jacques-Hyacinthe Garnier. He realises the only way forward is collaborative ministry. Poullart becomes a Team Player. No one man bands anymore. No Lone Ranger. No going it alone. It was really only now, when he moves into team ministry, that the Spiritans were born. Not in 1703 when he first gathered the students together, but in 1704 when he persuaded a small group of his friends to become formators and shoulder the responsibility of forming these young penniless men for the priesthood. Poullart founded a community of formators, a community of educators of priests and that was the real beginning of the Spiritans.

Conclusion

Poullart des Places was a man open to the Spirit. He was attentive to the needs of individuals. He listened to the young people he lived with. It was their idea, not his, to consecrate themselves to the Holy Spirit. He went along with it. First of all leading them in a retreat on the theme of «He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor» (Luke 4). It could have been on any other day of the year. But it was on Pentecost Sunday. And they could have dedicated themselves to Mary or to any aspect of Jesus’ life. But they chose to dedicate themselves to the Holy Spirit. To the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday – our identity was sealed forever! 27th May 1703 at the Church of Saint-Étienne-des-Grès in front of the altar of Our Lady of Rescue, when Poullart and these twelve young students consecrated themselves to the Spirit of God, a new reality was born in the Church which has not ceased to bear fruit.

Poullart left us very few writings. But he left us his life. His life is all we have and his life is everything. It still inspires us today. He made a deep impact on the lives of the people he met. He never grew old. He died young. He was always with young people. His closest collaborators were all young. He empowered the young. He empowered the poor. He got the poor to evangelise the poor. A life of poverty and simplicity in service of the priesthood. He only directed his Seminary for six years. Dead aged 30. Buried in an unmarked grave, a nameless plot – we don’t even know where his body is! But his legacy lives on.

Part of that legacy is surely his passion for excellence in priestly formation. The mottos of our congregation seem to go back to him: «one heart and one soul», «paratus ad omnia», «those works for which the Church has difficulty in finding workers».
Poullart is a deep mine that has not been fully exploited, especially in the Anglophone world. He can still yield rich treasures. The grace of our beginnings must have something to say about our identity and mission today. Especially our eight hundred young confreres in formation in the circumscriptions of the South have the right to a greater exposure to his life and work. We owe it to them.

What would be the best way to celebrate this Tercentenary Year of Poullart des Places 2009-2010? Here are some suggestions for what we can concretely do:

- Get Joseph Michel’s biography translated and published in English
- Actually address Poullart des Places directly in our own personal prayer
- Intensify our efforts to get Poullart beatified
- Decide to go on a serious personal Retreat
- Commit myself to a Spiritual director
- Pay a poor student’s school fees in Africa
- Sponsor a seminarian’s formation in the Southern Hemisphere
- Make a significant difference to one person or one family wherever we are
- Respond to the needs of just one person, right here, right now

There can be no better way to celebrate the third centenary of Poullart des Places’ death.

Endnotes
6 Michael J. Troy, Riches to Rags: Claude Francis Poullart des Places,


8 Joseph Michel, *Claude-François Poullart des Places*, 187-206

