Poullart des Places and the Reform of the Clergy

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Claude Poullart des Places was not an innovator like Saint Benedict, Francis of Assisi, Saint Ignatius or Libermann. He was very much part of a renewal movement of the clergy in the 17th Century. This movement was a response to the appeals of the Council of Trent (1545 – 1563) which took place a century earlier and which drew up a renewal program for the entire Church.

The Church was living through one of the most serious crises of its history and reform was very much needed. The decadence of the clergy and of monastic life was a core issue in this crisis. It was because of this crisis that the Protestant Reformation took place and that the Council of Trent was convoked.

1. Poullart des Places and the reform of the clergy - context and influences.

The reform of the church took place on various levels and two styles can be noted: the first institutional, the second charismatic.

The high point of this reform at the institutional level was the Council of Trent. This Council took place during three distinct periods. The first session was under Paul III and lasted from 1545 to 1549. The second was under Julius III and occurred between 1551 and 1552. The third session finally took place after a long interruption in Pius IV’s papacy between 1562 and 1563. Here a global reform of the entire Church took place both in the doctrinal and disciplinary areas. In this reform special attention needs to be given to the reform of the clergy.

The decree on the reform of the clergy with the long expected establishment of seminaries was probably what made the biggest impact. If the Council of Trent had done nothing more than the setting up of seminaries, it would have done an important service to the Church. These were the so-called concilior seminaries. There were already examples of seminaries. Saints Augustine, Hilary of Arles and many other bishops were accustomed to gathering around them their clerical students and priests in order to train them for priestly ministry and at times build a community with them. Later, each cathedral had a school for the moral and intellectual formation of its ministers. But the multiplication of rural parishes and the ecclesiastical benefices
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had created a new situation. Two recent experiences from Rome itself offered a solution which the Council would embrace – namely the German College established by Saint Ignatius Loyola in 1552 and the English Seminary founded by Cardinal Reginald Polé in 1556. It was with this model in mind that the Pope and his secretary of State, Charles Borromeo, came up with the idea of setting up a Roman seminary which was expected to be ready in 1563 – precisely the year in which the Council concluded. The Council did nothing more than adopt this as a general model. As a reform measure this was the most exciting and appropriate proposal. In Chapter 18 of Session 23 we find the Council’s instruction which directs each diocese to establish a seminary:

“Whereas the age of youth, unless it be rightly trained, is prone to follow after the pleasures of the world; and unless it be formed, from its tender years, unto piety and religion, before habits of vice have taken possession of the whole man, it never will perfectly, and without the greatest, and well-nigh special, help of Almighty God, persevere in ecclesiastical discipline; the holy Synod ordains, that all cathedrals, metropolitan, and other churches greater than these, shall be bound, each according to its means and the extent of the diocese, to maintain, to educate religiously, and to train in ecclesiastical discipline, a certain number of youths of their city and diocese, or, if that number cannot be met with there, of that province, in a college to be chosen by the bishop for this purpose near the said churches, or in some other suitable place. Into this college shall be received such as are at least twelve years old, born in lawful wedlock, and who know how to read and write competently, and whose character and inclination afford a hope that they will always serve in the ecclesiastical ministry. And It wishes that the children of the poor be principally selected; though It does not however exclude those of the more wealthy, provided they be maintained at their own expense, and manifest a desire of serving God and the Church. The bishop, having divided these youths into as many classes as he shall think fit, according to their number, age, and progress in ecclesiastical discipline, shall, when it seems to him expedient, assign some of them to the ministry of the churches, the others he shall keep in the college to be instructed; and shall supply the place of those who have been withdrawn by others, so that this college may be a perpetual seminary of ministers of God.

And that the youths may be the more advantageously trained in the aforesaid ecclesiastical discipline, they shall always at once wear the tonsure and the clerical dress; they shall learn grammar, singing, ecclesiastical computation, and the other liberal arts; they shall be instructed in sacred Scripture; ecclesiastical works; the homilies of the saints; the manner of administering the sacraments, especially those
things which shall seem adapted to enable them to hear confessions; and the forms of the rites and ceremonies. The bishop shall take care that they be present every day at the sacrifice of the mass, and that they confess their sins at least once a month; and receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ as the judgment of their confessor shall direct; and on festivals serve in the cathedral and other churches of the place.

All which, and other things advantageous and needful for this object, all bishops shall ordain—with the advice of two of the senior and most experienced canons chosen by himself - as the Holy Spirit shall suggest; and shall make it their care, by frequent visitations, that the same be always observed. The forward, and incorrigible, and the disseminators of evil morals, they shall punish sharply, even by expulsion if necessary."

In summary, in order to achieve the reform of the clergy, the Council invested especially in the formation of future priests. This formation included a preference for the poor; life in community; theological formation; an evangelical and pious life and a demanding disciplinary structure.

The charismatic level

On the charismatic level the reform was undertaken by a number of saints who played a key role either in this reform process or in the establishment of numerous other religious institutes. The influence of the Council of Trent as well as the challenges offered by the Renaissance, by the discovery of a new culture as well as new worlds, brought to birth a renewal movement at every level of the Church.

We can point to the reform of the Franciscans by Saint Peter of Alcantara (1540), - known as ‘discalced’ or ‘strict observance’ - and the appearance of the Capuchins (1526) also known as ‘Franciscan hermits’. Among the Carmelites the ‘discalced’ and the ‘recollets’ (named thus because they confined themselves to houses of recollection) are other examples. In the contemplative life, an example is the reform of Teresa of Avila who left the Incarnation Convent in Avila to take on the radical life style of the original Carmel founding, the Saint Joseph convent (1563). Another example is Saint John of the Cross, the contemplative of Segóvia (1568). We can also point to Saint Ignatius Loyola (1534) and the Jesuits who took on new areas of evangelization which the new situation had made possible. Another example is the missionary life of Saint Francis Xavier and the new paths of mission in foreign countries. The health apostolate of Saint Camillus de Lellis and his companions is a further illustration.
In creating the Oratory, Saint Phillip Neri (1575) opened a space for the renewal of the clergy. Saint Joseph Calasanctius and his group (1597) focused on the evangelization of youth. Saint John of God (1539), in living with the mentally ill endeavored to integrate them into a process of evangelization. Saint Angela de Merici and the Ursulines, in establishing a form of religious life which was very much integrated into daily activities, opened up a space to female youth. Still another example is Friar Bartholomew of the Martyrs and the evangelization of the rural world. And there are still other examples - we could recall such examples as Saint Francis de Sales (1567) who used both the modern means and technologies of his day to bring the Gospel message to all segments of society as well as Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac who opened up possibilities for evangelization.

2. The establishment of the regular clergy during the 16th century.

Here we will focus solely on clergy reform. What is very new during this time was the appearance of the regular clergy, that is a clergy which sought to renew itself by taking on the core values of religious life. What is happening is a combination of the priestly apostolate and religious life. Better known examples include the Company of Jesus founded by Saint Ignatius (1534), the Camillians founded by Saint Camillus de Lellis and the Order of the Pious Schools founded by Saint Joseph Calasanctius. These regular clergy had a number of common characteristics which served as a prime source of inspiration for Poullart des Places.

All are priests

Contrary to an earlier trend where practically all the founders of religious institutes were laity, now all are priests, or at least they were priests at the point in time when they received approval for their congregation. However most of them drew up their project before they were ordained. They became aware that in order to implement their project, priestly ordination was indispensable. The priesthood here in effect guaranteed a serious formation. The same happened with Poullart des Places. Priesthood is less the result of his personal option than something that was necessary for his project.

The beginning of a new reality: internationality

The Company of Jesus could be taken as an example because its total membership was greater than that of all the other groups combined. It began on August 15, 1534 in the chapel of Saint...
Denis of Montserrat with people of three nationalities: Ignatius de Loyola, Francis Xavier, Diego Lainez, Alphonsus Salermon, Nicholas Bobadilha were all Spaniards; Peter Faber was a Savoyard and Simon Rodrigues was from Portugal. Their aim was to offer themselves to the Pope for work among unbelievers, heretics, schismatics, as well as among the ordinary faithful. A feature which opened all the spaces of evangelization in the new world was a widening of horizons which permitted Poullart des Place’s priests to consider Acadia, Quebec and the French colonies as places of ministry.

An outline constitution

Ignatius and his companions wrote new constitutions; the other institutes settled for adapting the Rule of Saint Augustine and including a number of practical regulations. The constitutions of Saint Ignatius refer constantly to his own personal spiritual journey and to the reflections of the first group in Rome in 1539. Here they sought to harmonize evangelical aspirations and apostolic demands.

The exclusion of unnecessary demands

In terms of organization, the regular clergy did not offer anything new. Their structures were inherited from the mendicant orders. What they did was suppress all the monastic elements. Their life style was apostolic, the direct opposite to a monastic life style. Office in common was dropped as well as the religious habit, penitential practices etc. On the other hand personal prayer, meditation and the contemplation of Christ and the saints became more intensive. They desired to be available for apostolic activity. While this was a model of religious life, it was freed from monastic demands. This also was the option made by Poullart des Places.

An intense academic formation

The school of formation for the monks and the mendicants during their entire life span was the common life. No other formation was offered. It was religious life which formed them. On the contrary, the regular clergy had a number of years given over to specific formation. This formation is given to them, not in convents, but in formation houses, in seminaries, novitiates and scholasticates. These were structures which preceded religious life and they constituted an intensive formation in line with the demands of the Council of Trent. Saint Ignatius opted for a novitiate of two years rather than of one, as demanded by Church law. Following the novitiate, the emphasis was placed on studies. Following studies there came a third year of novitiate.
Saint Ignatius used to say that if the Jesuits were to take this program seriously, they would not need anything more to be good religious. This was also the opinion of Poullart des Places.

**Intense apostolic action**

The regular clergy were formed for intense apostolic activity. But instead of concentrating on one or other activity, they lived a spirituality which served as a foundation for other activities. What united them was a common spirit; this also was exactly the case with Poullart des Places. For this reason the tasks undertaken could be diverse: teaching, education of youth, evangelization, health, missions etc. It could be said that the mission of the Church or of the People of God was what impelled the regular clergy. The task of superiors was especially to coordinate and to orientate the activities. Obedience became one of the chief characteristics – here obedience was seen as strengthening the common project.

What distinguishes the regular clergy was their coming together for intense apostolic action. Community was seen as a spiritual armada where an officer was needed to supervise common problems and common tasks. It was now for the first time that the function of superior or “provost” appears. Earlier, religious life had followed a rural model with the *father-abbot* of Saint Benedict. The mendicant orders understood authority in the context of fraternity: the *minister* or the least of the minors as in the Franciscans or the first of the brothers – the *prior*, as in the Dominicans. But now the authority image becomes that of a chief or superior.

**3. New styles of consecrated life in the 17th and 18th Centuries: common life societies of priests and clerical congregations.**

Another stage in the reform of the clergy was the appearance of common life societies of priests or, to use today’s language, apostolic societies, as well as clerical congregations. During the 16th century two notable trends were evident in religious life: the establishment of the regular clergy and the renewal of the older orders. New congregations continued to spring up using new styles adapted to the needs of the time: in all over 30 such new congregations appeared.

The three chief innovations were common life societies of priests, clerical congregations and lay congregations. In their first phase, the lay congregations such as the Brothers of the Christian Schools of Saint John Baptist de la Salle, and the Monfortians of
Saint Louis Marie Grignion de Monfort, did not participate in the project of clergy renewal because they were exclusively for laity.

**Common life societies of priests**

Already in the 16th century Saint Philip Neri had begun a new kind of association for priests. In 17th century France Cardinal de Bérulle (1575-1625) founded the Oratory in Paris. Several other societies with the renewal of the clergy in mind followed: the Sulpicians (1624), the Vincentians (1625), the Eudists (1663) and at the turn of the century, the Spiritans (1703).

The Spiritans were a group founded by Poullart des Places (1679 – 1709) as a society exclusively for the formation of poor clerical students. After his death, two of his companions, Hyacinth Garnier and Louis Bouic, continued his work organizing the seminary which he had founded. From 1740 onwards they gave up the formation of poor clerics from French dioceses, (these dioceses had now taken on this task) and dedicated themselves to the formation of the colonial clergy and to the evangelization of unbelievers.

Also in the 17th century religious congregations sprung up which brought together priests and laity for the same tasks. Here the priests were always in the majority. Examples include the second phase of the Monfortians, the Passionists of Saint Paul of the Cross, the Redemptorists of Saint Alphonsus de Liguori et al.

**Common characteristics of these foundations**

The purpose of these foundations was evangelization, especially of the masses. For this reason they had an inbuilt condition: the spiritual formation of the priests. Frequently their general purpose was forgotten and the means to achieve the purpose took first place. Little by little the societies of priests became cenacles. While the founders of the earlier groups of regular clergy became priests because of the pressure of circumstances, the opposite happened in the common life societies of priests: Bérulle, Olier, Eudes, Vincent de Paul and Poullart des Places had decided earlier for the priesthood. This decision also influenced them to see the apostolate only from the perspective of a priest.

The societies of priests did not take public vows. Such vows up to this time were considered a distinctive characteristic of religious
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life. Poullart des Places did not take vows. They abandoned the use of the title of ‘order’ and did not consider themselves to be religious – a trend which went against a centuries old tradition. They were societies of apostolic life. On the other hand they had structures quite similar to those of the mendicants and the regular clergy: a rule, a superior, a general assembly, as well as executive and legislative power. They made a promise or an oath to obey the superior, they adopted celibacy and while they maintained the right to own property, they put their earnings in common.

This means that even though they did not make public vows, in practice they lived them as religious did. Their originality was more on the juridical than on the practical level. In fact they were largely similar to the regular clergy. The apostolic life was their chief objective and for this they organized themselves in community.

All of the founders were priests and their recruitment limited itself to candidates for priestly life. Sanctification of the members was a priority because of apostolic work and was seen to be central to the vocation. All of the founders stressed the importance of sanctification as a support for apostolic activity. Sanctification of the members was seen as an intensification of the spiritual life and as an essential condition for the apostolate. The prime objective set for the members was to be holy and zealous priests. For this reason, the spiritual and human bonds in community were of prime importance.

Apart from larger groups, a number of similar smaller communities also flourished and these, without doubt were models from which Claude took ideas. Examples include the seminary of Fr. Bellier (1683), who was Claude’s spiritual director, and Fr. Changiérges’s Small Communities of Providence (1683). It is important to note that despite all of these initiatives, the reform proposed by the Council of Trent took time to arrive in France. Even a hundred years after the Council finished, its documents had not been translated into French.

4. The profile of Poullart des Places as a formator of renewed clergy.

I believe that as this article developed, a profile of Poullart des Places as a formator of priests and of his contribution to the renewal of the clergy, has emerged. In effect Poullart des Places can be placed in the framework of all the movements for the renewal of the clergy. Here I want to underline just a few key points from his work of renewal of the clergy. Poullart des Places’
spirituality has three principal components: docility to the Holy Spirit; community life and service of the poor. It is on these pillars which we need to base our fundamental identity.

Formation is a journey

To be a formator for Poullart de Places was above all to allow oneself to be formed. In fact his entire life was a process of formation. It is important to recall that at the same time as Claude was a formator, he was preparing himself for ordination. His spiritual journey was that of a person who is defining the journey. His own life was the special school of formation for the first Spiritans. He has not left us any other orientations or directives for Spiritan formation.

In the notes of his 1701 retreat about the choice of a state of life, he speaks of a life plan to achieve perfection. This could be pointed to as a Rule of Life but from this document only four pages survive containing points 12 to 15 which he probably elaborated during the first semester at the Saint Louis College. The few written works which he left us, with the exception of the Regulations, all speak of him, of his problems, of his difficulties, of his aspirations and of his dreams. He shows us that a vocation does not begin ready-made. It is necessary to work on adjustments of the initial ‘yes’ so that it can become more solid. Looking at his own vocation, Poullart des Places shows us that if everything is given from the beginning, it still needs to be built step by step. He teaches us to discover unforeseen ways which become opportunities for growth when the time of certainties gives way to doubts and questions; when the time of fervor gives way to the desert and occasionally even to night. The formation process is full of stages, of necessary conversions, in order to renew the convictions coming from prayer, of life in community, in the calls of the Spirit and of the Church to the service of the poor and of the Gospel.

Moving on to devotion and docility to the Holy Spirit

Poullart des Places was born in a setting marked by devotion to the Holy Spirit. The Jesuits who had evangelized his native Brittany had left traces of the Holy Spirit everywhere: preaching, confraternities, novenas and devotions. After his time in school, emphasis on the Holy Spirit continued through his spiritual directors, the Assembly of Friends, readings, apostolic experiences etc. His experience with the Jesuits was what really stamped his spiritual journey.
But the important conversion took place when he moved from devotion to docility. Here, the Holy Spirit was no longer just a devotion but became the center of his life. This was a difficult conversion which he describes in his writings. This was when he experienced the revelation of God’s love for him which enabled him to surmount all obstacles. In his 1701 retreat when he reread his life, he became conscious of this God who sought him out ceaselessly; a God who followed him and did not leave him in peace. At this point all the barriers fell and he lost all his defense strategies. From this moment onwards, his only desire was to give himself to God and to accept God’s love. He gave himself to God with all his defects, all his shadows and all his lights. From then on, docility to the Holy Spirit became the compass which was to guide him. Apostolic availability was an original characteristic of the Spiritans. It was in the context of this availability that he came to know the poor and put himself side by side with them. When Grignion de Monfort requested him to collaborate in the popular missions in the west of France, his future was decided: to help poor students in their priestly formation. “This seems to be what God is asking of me and various enlightened people have confirmed the importance of this project.”

Moving from welcoming the poor to living poverty

Poullart des Places discovered the poor in the company of Fr. Bellier on visits to the Saint Yves hospital in Rennes where the homeless and abandoned took refuge. Later he discovered the chimney sweeps and the poor clerical students wandering on the streets of Paris.

A second step occurred when he became close to one of these students and began to share his funds and accommodation with him: J. B. Faulconnier. In 1702 he started to accommodate a number of students in another house. It was from this moment that the distance which separated him from the poor began to decrease and he moved from benefactor to companion, equal to them. But the real conversion came about when he learned from the poor how to be poor. Then his house became no longer a refuge for the abandoned but developed into a cenacle where poverty was lived as a characteristic of God’s Reign. The poor taught the small community how to discover the poverty of Jesus Christ. Poullart des Places discovered poverty from the poor whom he gathered but also through the successive choices made which at times were difficult because of the radical self emptying, of the letting go of his security and his projects in order to root himself in faith and confidence in God and leave himself open to the Holy Spirit. It is essential to understand this process in order to understand Poullart des Places as a formator.
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Sharing responsibility

In 1704 Claude experienced a deep crisis. Six months after setting up the community he already had forty aspirants and the resulting demands were becoming too much for him: food, accommodation, formation, other problems as well as his own personal preparation for priesthood. He experienced burn-out as well as severe moral depression. It was a time of desert and silence for him. He began to question the work so seriously that he felt crushed by it. As was customary for him he did a retreat which he speaks about in “Reflection from the Past”. He sought out a spiritual director and he recognized that at the center of the problem was the lack of distance between him and his followers. It became clear to him that he would have to surrender exclusive paternity to his work and would need to share responsibility with others. He chose collaborators to help him in the direction of the work and so he became freer and more at peace internally and was able to pursue his studies in preparation for the priesthood. Members of this group included Vincent Le Barbier and Louis Bouic. In this way a group of formators, who would form the nucleus of the Messieurs du Saint Esprit, came into being. This was the first cell of what would become the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. It was also in this way that he began to understand poverty.

The spirit as more important than structure

One of the recurring characteristics of the post Tridentine regular clergy was a model of priesthood which placed more emphasis on the value of religious life than on its structures.

Poullart des Places’ community corresponds exactly with this model. In effect from Poullart des Places we have inherited an emphasis more on spirit than on structure. The community survived without a legal basis for thirty years uncertain whether it was a seminary or a community. In effect it was both. When in 1734 it took on a visible structure, it consisted only of a group of directors as required by civil law. The directors did not make promises or religious vows. They only had a contract in which they simply undertook to observe the statutes. As Koren points out, the vigor of this group came not from its organization but from its charism. What they had in common was their understanding of priesthood. To be a priest meant for them an evangelical openness and obedience to the Holy Spirit for serving the poorest and most abandoned together with voluntary poverty. For them, to live this model of priesthood, all that was needed was to live the religious life in a radical way. What motivated them was not any legal code but rather fidelity to the Holy Spirit.
A quality theological formation

The Council of Trent had set up seminaries for the formation of students for the priesthood. The program demanded for this formation was rigorous. Poullart des Places agreed with such an academic formation of students. Studies included three years of philosophy which included the new sciences such as mathematics and the new physical theory of Newton. Following this came five years of theological studies and finally a master’s degree if considered necessary, requiring two years of canon law and sacred scripture. The pastoral care of the poorest and most abandoned merited this preparation at university level. Even today, formation programs of seminarians are less demanding.

The community as cenacle

Poullart des Places wished to establish in his house the atmosphere of a cenacle. Such an atmosphere was common for the regular clergy. The regulations made every effort in the smallest details to ensure that the community would be a school of fraternity and communion where one heart and one soul would be central in imitation of the church of the Acts of the Apostles. It is no accident that the phrase “one heart and one soul” became the motto of the Spiritans.

If this was to be a fraternal community it also was a prayer community. The consecration to the Holy Spirit, which was basic to the community, was remembered throughout the day by calling on the Spirit before any academic activity. Docility to the Spirit was a founding characteristic.

This was also a community which tenderly loved Mary conceived without sin, under whose protection all members were consecrated to the Holy Spirit. It was a community of Eucharistic and liturgical living which marked the daily lives of the students. It was an apostolic community. From this community emerged a golden generation of Spiritans – the missionaries of North America, at a time when France and England were struggling for control there.

Endnotes

1The translation used here is from http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/trentall.html
2Cenacle; this word evokes a New Testament atmosphere of prayer, hope, the presence of Mary and the coming of the Spirit.