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CLAUDE-FRANÇOIS POUILLART DES PLACES THE SHAPING OF A VOCATION

Christian de Mare, C.S.Sp.

A member of the Province of France, Christian de Mare served for many years as a missionary in Senegal and Congo. He worked subsequently for some 14 years in Spiritan formation, after which he was appointed to the Spiritan Generalate in Rome with responsibility for the Office of History and Anniversaries and for the coordination of preparations for the Spiritan Year (2002-2003). Christian has directed several retreats and workshops in the area of Spiritan spirituality and has edited two important publications in this regard: "Aux Racines de l'Arbre Spiritain, Claude-François Poullart des Places" (*Mémoire Spiritaine* n°4, 30 rue Lhomond, Paris, 1998) and *Anthologie Spiritaine* (Congrégation du St Esprit, Rome, 2008).

(Translation: Vincent O'Toole,
C.S.Sp.)

*...the little group
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On May 27th, 1703, on the feast of Pentecost, a small group of theological students met together in the church of Saint Etienne des Grès in the heart of the Latin Quarter of Paris. Their leader was Claude Poullart des Places, aged 24, who was also a young student of theology. In the side-chapel of Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance, a well-known center of Marian pilgrimage,¹ the little group consecrated themselves to the Holy Spirit, under the protection of Mary Immaculate.

*Messire Claude-François Poullart des Places, in the year one thousand, seven hundred and three, on the feast of Pentecost, while still only an aspirant to the ecclesiastical state, began the establishment of the so-called community and seminary consecrated to the Holy Spirit, under the invocation of the Holy Virgin conceived without sin.*²

This new community of the Holy Spirit was the origin of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit into which the young congregation of Francis Libermann would be absorbed 145 years later, on September 26th, 1848. In 2003, we celebrated the 300th anniversary of the original foundation; we will soon be commemorating the tercentenary of the death of the young founder on October 2nd, 1709.

BRITTANY AND RENNES

Claude-François Poullart des Places was born at Rennes in Brittany on February 26th, 1679, of François Claude Poullart des Places and Jeanne Le Meneust de la Vieuxville, an old Breton family. At that time, Brittany was one of the so-called "Provinces with Provincial Estates." It had been attached to the Crown of France in 1532, some years after the marriage of Anne of Brittany to Charles VIII in 1491. It enjoyed a degree of independence that was somewhat precarious, above all in the reign of the absolute monarch, Louis XIV (1638-1715). Brittany had its own parliament from 1554; situated in a luxurious palace at Rennes since 1665, it had absorbed many of the aristocracy of Brittany. M. des Places was no longer a member since he was unable to produce his letters of nobility, which had gone astray a few years previously; he was greatly mortified by this turn of events and dreamt of the day when he would once again enter the ranks of the nobility.

Under the *Ancien Régime*,³ society was made up of three social orders: the *Third Estate* - dominated by the *bourgeoisie* - the

M. des Places belonged to the upper middle class of business men.

Claude Poullart des Places grew up in this climate of Christian renewal...

nobility (Second Estate), and the clergy (First Estate). The nobility and the clergy had accumulated many privileges, the most notorious being their exemption from paying taxes. At the other end of the social scale, the rural population (85% of the total at the end of the 17th century) and the ordinary people living in towns had no rights or political representation whatsoever. This was also the case with the “lower clergy” in the countryside. The bulk of the population was extremely poor and people were lucky to survive the rigors of the climate and the consequences of a social order built on inequality.

M. des Places belonged to the upper middle class of business men. As part of the landed gentry, an administrator of ecclesiastical goods, and a trader with the help of his wife, he eventually became a high official in the economic affairs of Brittany when the parliament returned to Rennes in 1690, after 15 years of exile in Vannes as a punishment for its spirit of independence. Young Claude was 11 years of age when his father was at the height of his career, nursing the hope that, if his son became a councilor in parliament, the whole family would once again be ranked among the nobility.

THE RE-EVANGELIZATION OF BRITTANY

Brittany had been evangelized a very long time before, but by the end of the 16th century it had reverted to a faith that was mingled with Celtic traditional beliefs. Two priests resolved to restore this country to a faith and a practice that were more in line the Gospels. Firstly, there was Michel Le Nobletz (1577-1652), usually known as Don Mikel, who had received a solid priestly formation from the Jesuits at Bordeaux and Agen. He started work in the 1620s and for 30 years he founded missions amongst the rural population of Armorique. A rigorous ascetic, an untiring preacher who lived only for the Gospel, he was greatly loved by the poor because of his evident charity towards them.⁴

For the last 10 years of his apostolic life, he was helped by Julien Maunoir,⁵ a Jesuit, who continued the work of Don Mikel until his own death in 1683. The work of renewal of these two great Breton missionaries, which continued for more than 60 years, eventually included several members of the diocesan clergy, as well as Jesuits and Eudists. It was highly successful. They placed great emphasis on the holiness of priests, on openness of heart to the Holy Spirit, on devotion to Mary, on service to the poor, on the purity of the faith received from the Apostles, on a certain distance to be kept from the influence of the world, and on the vocation of every Christian to seek perfection. Claude Poullart des Places grew up in this climate of Christian renewal and his parents were also much influenced by it.⁶

...many of the lower clergy had neither studied theology nor been trained in their duties.

Since there was such a need of good-living priests who would preach sound doctrine, the first step was to ensure that they were well trained. The situation at the time, above all in the countryside, was lamentable. One of these Breton missionaries, Jacques Alloth Doranleau, describes it graphically in “*A letter to the Archbishops and Bishops of France regarding the best education that they can give to their clerics.*”⁷ He says that many of the lower clergy had neither studied theology nor been trained in their duties. The main reason for this was the great poverty of the rural families. At that time, bishops did not pay for the education of their future priests so vocations could not flourish in situations of such dire poverty. Doranleau saw only one possible solution to this state of affairs which was hampering the success of the interior missions: to establish communities for poor students where they could be prepared for their pastoral and spiritual tasks free of charge.

The convictions of Doranleau were shared by a colleague of the Brittany missions, Fr. Bellier, who set up a small house at Rennes for the education of poor theological students. Bellier persuaded some of the students of St. Thomas College, run by the Jesuits, to help him. Amongst these students were Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort and Claude Poullart des Places, who was five years his junior. He introduced them to the Hospital of Saint Yves, which looked after the destitute, and undoubtedly also to the establishment that he ran for poor students.⁸

THEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL MOVEMENTS IN THE CHURCH OF FRANCE

Amongst these students were Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort and Claude Poullart des Places...

The origins of **Gallicanism** can be traced back to the stormy relationships between the French monarchy and the papacy in the 14th century. The movement insisted on the freedom of the Church in France from papal interference and the superiority of the temporal power of the king in the realm of his own jurisdiction. The kings of France claimed the right to supervise the Church (“*regalism*”), and the appointments of bishops and abbots were done by election. Finally, by the concordat of 1516, the king himself designated the candidates and presented them to the Pope for canonical investiture. It was Bossuet who gave to Gallicanism its established form in the “**Four Articles,**” drawn up in 1682 after a General Assembly of the clergy of France:

The authority of Popes is purely spiritual, so kings cannot be subject to them; the spiritual power of the Popes is limited by the General Councils and, in France, by the customs of the Kingdom and of the Church; the Pope has a ‘principal role’ in questions of faith, but his judgment is only ‘un-reformable’ when it is confirmed by the Church.

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Despite a strong reaction from the Pope in 1693, these articles were compulsorily taught in the faculties and seminaries of France. They produced some fierce theological opposition, especially from the Jesuits (who were also confessors to the kings of France!). Two academic establishments in Paris symbolized the depth of this tension: the Sorbonne and the College of Clermont (also known as Collège Louis-le-Grand) – a house of studies of the Jesuits which was not allowed to award university degrees to its students. The Sorbonne, on the other hand, was the surest path to a glittering career in the higher clergy of the kingdom.

The roots of **Jansenism** are to be found in a problem that theologians had sought unsuccessfully to solve over hundreds of years: How can one reconcile the freedom of God when he gives grace and the freedom of human beings when they respond to it? Is God subject to the freedom of his creatures? One of those who sought an answer was the Bishop of Ypres (in present-day Belgium), Cornelius Jansenius (1585-1638). In his interpretation of the thought of St. Augustine in his book *Augustinus* (1640), Jansen came up with the following formula: Sinful man (as a result of original sin) has completely lost his liberty, so he cannot reach salvation except through a gratuitous gift of God. Therefore, some people are predestined to know the life of God but others are not. This theological position, totally denying all freedom of choice to every human being (and therefore all control over his or her ultimate destiny), gave rise to a very lively debate. It sounded like the teaching of the reformers of the preceding century, so the Jesuits managed to get it condemned by Pope Innocent X in 1653. Because of its echoes of the protestant reformers (above all, the Calvinists), Jansenism inevitably also took on a political importance in an age where the religion of the person in power was automatically seen as the religion of a particular country: “*Cuius regio, eius religio.*”⁹

The controversy became increasingly fierce as the Jansenist position was adopted by the University of Louvain, as well as the Parisian monastery of Port Royal, directed by Antoine Arnauld (1612-1694), and consequences were drawn in regard to the fundamental unworthiness of the Christian in the practice of the faith and the sacraments. Jansenists were ascetical and rigorous in the sphere of morality, and deeply pessimistic in their appraisal of human works; they did not dare to raise their eyes to the Lord and they received communion rarely. Their conviction of human corruption stifled any trusting openness to the mercy of God.

The social scandals, typified by Louis XIV and the private life of Louis XV (1710-1774), gave some justification to the Jansenist austerities of Arnauld, who was joined by Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) in a combined attack on the Jesuits and their humanistic

and optimistic view of human liberty. Neither the condemnation of the Popes ¹⁰ nor the violence of Louis XIV against the Port Royal faction did anything to calm the conflict. Amongst the episcopacy, the clergy, the aristocracy, and the bourgeoisie, many were converted to a Jansenistic view of the misery of human life. Jansenism remained an influence throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

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The Jesuits were in the forefront of the struggle against Gallicanism and Jansenism. They educated a large number of young Christians in a respect for the legitimate authority of the successor of Peter, a trust in the capacity of men and women to receive the grace of God, and an esteem for the cultural activities of the human spirit. Amongst their many students was Claude Poullart des Places, a pupil at their colleges of Rennes and Caen (in Normandy). They also gave him spiritual guidance and education at the Collège de Clermont (Louis-le-Grand), where he completed his theological studies.

THE EXERCISES OF SAINT IGNATIUS

Drawn up in the form of a travel diary by Saint Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556),¹¹ the *Spiritual Exercises* give an account of his own experiences and spiritual journey.¹² They became very well known and practiced and are laid out in the form of a retreat. They gradually lead the retreatant to understand the place that God should have in his/her life, the responses he/she has given to the call of the love of God, and the conversion necessary and the steps to be taken to bring this about. Their impact is strengthened by the fact that they have been personally lived by Ignatius. They are still a very efficacious way of leading somebody to the Gospel or of strengthening those who wish to live their lives by it.

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By 1701, Claude Poullart des Places was in his 23rd year. He had acquired a solid literary education and was a skilled speaker. He had completed two years of legal studies at Nantes as well as a year's practical introduction to business management by his father. The time had now come to put this long preparation to good use and to take decisions about the future. It was foreseen that he would enter the parliament of Brittany as a councilor, a post acquired for him by his father, but when he put on the official robes that his mother had prepared for him, he felt a sudden revulsion for continuing down that route. He needed to come to a decision, so he decided to place himself humbly before God and to follow an accompanied retreat.

At Rennes, as in many towns in France, the Jesuits had a retreat house called *Manresa*, the name of the place in Spain where Ignatius had started his own spiritual journey. Claude went there

and was guided by a Jesuit whom he undoubtedly knew already. The retreat followed the classical path of the *Exercises*: a first part aimed at the conversion of the retreatant, and a second in which a choice was made regarding future commitment, according to the criteria that had emerged from the conversion.

Claude has left us his notes of these two joined retreats, which record the conversations he had with his guide and his own reactions to them.¹³ The title he gives to his first retreat is, “*Reflections on the truths of religion made during a retreat by someone thinking about a conversion.*” It is in a notebook of 34 pages, written with great care in a clear hand. The themes follow carefully the *Exercises* but the reactions of the Claude are personal. The meditations on sin and the terrible punishment of God (including a frightening description of hell) do not make too much impression on him. Claude concentrates above all on the experience of the love of God:

*Claude concentrates
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*You sought me, Lord, and
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You sought me, Lord, and I fled from you. You had endowed me with reason but I would not use it... Did I not deserve to be utterly abandoned by you, to cease being helped by you and to be punished instead?... How kind you are, my Savior! All you want is my conversion, not my death. You always treat me with kindness, as though you needed me. You almost seem to enjoy overcoming a heart as cold as mine.

This rediscovery of the patient love of God leads Claude to a radical conversion, with a desire to love him in return by proclaiming the goodness of the Lord to those who do not know him:

I want to make myself worthy of your love, whatever the cost... I will make you known to people who are ignorant of you... Only God loves me sincerely and is solicitous for my welfare. If I please him, I am exceedingly happy; but if I disappoint him, I am the most wretched person alive. If I live in a state of grace, I lack nothing; if I lose it, I have lost everything.

All that remains is to continue with his reflection until he can find a future which fits in with his conversion. He does that in another notebook of 19 pages which he entitles, “*Choice of a State of Life.*”¹⁴ It is a work of discernment. “*I shall begin by examining my temperament*”; then he examines his “*inclinations and repugnances*” in the context of “*a great indifference for all the states of life.*”

*He was ready to answer
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At the end of this long search, and with the help of his director, Claude decides to become a priest in the service of his diocese of Rennes. It was a huge disappointment for his father and his plans to re-enter the ranks of the nobility. In October 1701, Claude re-entered Collège Louis-le-Grand to prepare himself for the priesthood, under the guidance of the Jesuits, renouncing thereby a distinguished career in the higher clergy.

Claude Poullart des Places was now completely detached from his ambitions for glory and acclaim. He was ready to answer the call that the Lord would give him to dedicate himself to the service of the *poor scholars* who sought a solid formation to serve poor and abandoned Christian communities.

Footnotes

¹ The pilgrimage of Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance had been well known in Paris since the 13th century. St. Dominic, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Albert the Great went there frequently, as did many other well-known personalities. The statue of the Virgin that was venerated there dated from the 14th century; it can be seen today at Neuilly, near Paris, in the Mother House of the Sisters of St. Thomas de Villeneuve.

² Extract from a C.S.Sp. register which has been lost but which was copied in “*Gallia Christiana*” in 1744.

³ The administrative organization in France up to the French Revolution in 1789.

⁴ Cf. F. Renaud, *Michel Le Nobletz et les missions bretonnes*, Paris, 1955.

⁵ Cf. *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, art. « Julien Maunoir ».

⁶ M. Poullart des Places was a member of a spiritual association called *The Assembly of Friends*.

⁷ A document in the French National Archives, quoted by Joseph Michel in his *Claude Poullart des Places*. Cf. *Mémoire Spiritaine*, No. 4, pp. 95-98.

⁸ A good number of students who lacked the money for study offered their services to parish priests in exchange for lessons in theology.

⁹ This was formulated at the Peace of Augsburg (September 25th, 1555) between the Catholic and Lutheran traditions.

¹⁰ Above all, the Bull *Unigenitus Dei Filius* of September 8th, 1713, which condemned 101 Jansenist propositions, drawn from the works of Pasquier Quesnel.

¹¹ The founder of the Company of Jesus (1534).

¹² Two years before his death, Ignatius was asked about the origins of his Exercises. “*He answered that it was not written at one time. Whenever he noticed things in his own soul that could be useful to others, he wrote them down,*” recorded Fr. Luis Gonçalves da Camera in 1554. St. Ignatius was very anxious that his Exercises should receive the approval of the Holy See.

¹³ The original documents, in Claude’s own handwriting, are to be found in the General Archives of the Spiritans in Paris. The critical text, presented by Joseph Lécuyer, C.S.Sp., is published in “Claude-

CHRISTIAN DE MARE,
C.S.SP.

François Poullart des Places," *Mémoire Spiritaine, Etudes et Documents*,
No. 4, Paris, 1998, pp. 275-298.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 299-311.