The Cause for the Beatification of the Servant of God Claude-François Poullart des Places

Jean Savoie C.S.Sp.

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It is quite an exceptional experience for a religious to be able to submit his own founder to the judgment of the Church. I had the joy and responsibility of presenting the cause of our founder, Claude Poullart des Places, before the tribunal in Paris between 1988 and 2005, in the name of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. This challenged me in many ways, especially in regard to the extent of my own knowledge of the person and life of our founder. I had many gaps to fill, but my reward has been great.

What the Church looks for primarily in the case of a beatification is holiness of life. One’s personal fidelity to the interior action of the Holy Spirit, one’s gift of self for others and for the Church, should provide a pathway to holiness that others can follow today. In this sense Claude’s holiness had always been recognized within the Congregation he founded by the members who felt inspired by his life and example.

1. The History of the Cause of Poullart Des Places

As soon as it was decided to propose Claude Poullart for the official recognition of the Church, two questions were immediately raised: what reputation for sanctity did he have within the universal Church, and why had the Congregation waited for 300 years to acknowledge his sanctity and to recommend him to the Church for beatification? Perhaps the most appropriate way to address these questions is to describe the different steps in his Cause.

Poullart des Places in the Spiritan Congregation and in the Church

Claude was greatly admired and respected during his life and in the years that followed his death. Many people testified to this, both in his own seminary and in the religious circles of Paris in his day. Even the virulent attacks against his seminary by the Jansenists did not point the finger at his own person. The “Placistes” were much maligned by the Gallicanists, but never Claude himself. The eulogies at the time of his death were very explicit. One of them concludes with these words: “Thus was the saintly and renowned founder of the Séminaire du Saint Esprit in Paris, Monsieur Des Places.”

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The History of the Cause

The cause of Claude Poullart des Places, the Servant of God, was only introduced in 1988, virtually 280 years after his death – way beyond the regulatory five years. There are several reasons why the request for beatification was not submitted earlier:

• In the decades following his death, the Seminary of the Holy Spirit was living such a degree of spiritual poverty that nobody would have dared to seek such an honor for its founder.

• From 1805 to 1848, the Seminary did not raise the question because it was having so much trouble recovering its possessions after the French Revolution and carrying out its missionary work in the context of the new international situation.

• Between 1848 and 1901, the “fusion” of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit resulted in a great emphasis being put on the personality of Fr. Libermann as a master of spirituality. Little reference was made to Poullart des Places, although he continued to be regarded as the founder of the original Congregation of the Holy Spirit, so it did not seem appropriate to raise the question of his beatification at that time.

• In 1901, in order to avoid the dissolution of the Congregation, the exact text of the 1848 decree of “fusion” was again scrutinized; it became clear that only the Congregation of Poullart de Places, and not that of the Holy Heart of Mary, continued to exist juridically. However, this had no immediate impact on the spirit of the Congregation.

• From 1906, the question was raised explicitly in the Congregation with the publication of the book by Fr. Henri Le Floc’h.3 The reactions to this work, addressed by Le Floc’h in the second edition,4 cast no doubts on the person and holiness of the founder, but concentrate on the significance to be attached to the “fusion” of 1848 and the lack of knowledge amongst Spiritans of the true status of their Congregation. In 1915, there are still many misconceptions about this “fusion”; the resulting polemical atmosphere ruled out the possibility of a peaceful and unified examination of the question of the Cause.
In 1919, the General Chapter recognized Poullart des Places as the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and Libermann as “the second founder and spiritual father.” This was encapsulated by Mgr. Le Roy in his famous saying: “Without one of them we would not have existed, without the other we would no longer be in existence.”

On November 4th, 1959, the General Council of the Congregation asked the Spiritan Procurator in Rome to contact the Congregation of Rites with a view to introducing the Cause of Poullart des Places. Fr. Antoine Soirat began to draw up a dossier on November 9th. However, he wrote to the Superior General that “it would be prudent not to start anything before receiving the authorization of the Congregation of Rites.” Fr. Joseph Michel, in turn, wrote to the Superior General on January 12th, 1960, as follows: “While regretting the delay, any steps taken in the immediate future would run the risk of being premature and even of compromising the long-term prospects for success. It would be better to start by ensuring that our founder becomes better known.”

Several historical and spiritual researches were subsequently undertaken: the books and translations of Frs. Koren, Carignan, Lécuyer, Michel, and the conferences given on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the birth of Claude Poullart (1979).

A memorial to Poullart des Places was erected in the chapel of the Spiritans in rue Lhomond, Paris, facing the tomb of Francis Libermann.

At the 1986 General Chapter there was a motion to ask the General Council to commission competent confères to undertake the necessary study for a better understanding of Claude Poullart des Places and the introduction of his Cause; the motion was adopted by 70 votes out of 81.

In August 1987, a brief enquiry by the Provincial of France concluded that the Congregation was ready to ask for his beatification. All that was known of Poullart des Places was collected and analyzed from the writings of Frs. Michel, Koren, Martin, Metzger, Riaud, Derrien, and Haas, the Superior General.
He had founded a seminary that he directed for six years, but it had no official recognition or stability.

- On November 3rd, 1988, the General Council appointed Fr. Jean Savoie as the Postulator for the Archdiocese of Paris. The request to introduce the Cause of Canonization of Poullart des Places was presented with the necessary documentation to the Archbishop of Paris on December 24th, 1988.

- Cardinal Lustiger signed the Decree for the opening of the canonical investigation on October 1st, 1989. The theological examiners of the works of Poullart des Places produced their report at the beginning of 2003. The Cardinal set up an historical commission on April 9th, 2003; it submitted its report on October 16th. On October 12th, 2004, the canonical tribunal was constituted to examine the Cause of des Places. The public session for the opening of the Cause was held on December 16th, 2004. There were 10 sessions of the tribunal in 2005 and finally the dossier was transferred to Rome on November 16th, 2005. The Roman process has now begun.

2. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CHARISM OF POULLART DES PLACES

It seems to be providential that the foundation of Claude Poullart was able to survive for centuries, when one considers that it did not evolve naturally, either as a seminary or as a Congregation, which were subject in France to the royal decree of 1666. It was more than a century after his death that the work reached its full maturity. Fr. Joseph Michel refers to “the great miracle of the survival of the Congregation.”

The apparent fragility of the work left behind by Claude Poullart

The project should be assessed not by its beginnings but rather by its capacity to survive many changes of times and places. Libermann himself said: “The way of educating young seminarians in our day must be completely different to that followed before the revolution of 1793. Experience shows that the old methods are no longer applicable.”

When he died, there was no great solidity in what Claude Poullart left behind. He had founded a seminary that he directed for six years, but it had no official recognition or stability. There was no structure that could steer it into the future. His team of formators grew smaller in number and had no guaranteed permanence; two
of his four companions were withdrawn in the same year as he
died. Neither was there any financial stability since it was only
seen as a charitable establishment for “poor scholars.” But it did
answer an obvious need in the Church, so the institutional and
financial means were eventually found.

This is a good illustration of the charism of Poullart des Places;
he was so united to God and faithful to the Holy Spirit that
he laid foundations which would give a lasting and important
service to the Church. The strong convictions and dedication
of the superiors who followed him ensured that the seminary
founded by Poullart des Places would survive.

The exceptional influence of the work
It took another 25 years or so before the work acquired official
recognition and a permanent home (1732). For the next 60 years
it functioned normally as a seminary for the poor (1732-1792).
But with the coming of the French Revolution, there were several
years of almost continuous exclusion, when the project remained
alive but largely unproductive (1792-1832). These were followed
by 15 years of increasing apostolic demands from both Rome and
the French State (1832-1848). Consolidation then came in the
form of the foundation of Francis Libermann, the Society of the
Holy Heart of Mary, whose members entered the Congregation
of the Holy Spirit in 1848.

The friendship between Poullart des Places and Grignon
de Montfort led to a close collaboration between the two
Congregations that they founded. Throughout the 18th century,
the Seminary of the Holy Spirit trained two thirds of the members
and three Superiors General of the Company of Mary.

From early on, the students of the Seminary went to missions
abroad, especially to Canada, the Far East, Guyane, and Senegal.
After the Revolution, the Congregation of Poullart des Places
received permission from Napoleon and King Louis XVIII to
function again for the sole purpose of providing priests for the
French colonies.

There were constant references to Poullart des Places and his
apostolic charism throughout the history of the Congregation.
After his death, his enduring reputation attracted people to give
their whole lives to fulfilling his vision.13 His writings are not
very voluminous, but they are highly spiritual and witness to his
constant search for union with God. Taken together, they show
him as the founder of a community of prayer and missionary
apostolic action.
The strength of the charism of Poullart des Places

We can see a considerable evolution from what was started by Claude Poullart to what has become today of the Congregation that claims him for its founder. His charism is not limited to his personal role but extends to what God wished to do with his foundation. A founder’s charism is personal but it radiates into all the action that it inspires.

The Spiritan historian, Fr. Henry Koren, speaks as follows regarding the strength of the charism of the founder:

The strength, however, of Fr. des Places’ foundation did not lie in its organization, but in its charism. All its graduates became known as Spiritans, but they had no other formal religious commitment than their ordination, and their common bond was the way they viewed their priesthood...Being a priest was for them an evangelical availability in obedience to the Spirit for the service of the poor and abandoned in voluntary personal poverty. If this conception of the priesthood did not suffice to make them live a truly religious life, so they must have thought, any additional reaffirmation of their commitment in vows or oaths would be rather useless or hypocritical.

What des Places wanted was real, not merely formal, identification with the poor through a frugal existence, and for him the Gospel option for the poor was fidelity to the Spirit. This was all the more urgent because in his time there was a great shortage of truly committed priests to serve such people. The same kind of shortage exists also today.14

Poullart des Places was, above all, a spiritual person, attentive to spiritual needs. He did not see his seminary as a project to be accomplished but rather as a work to be performed in the service of God. He had no plans to found a religious Congregation.

He was a spiritual person who abandoned himself to the Holy Spirit in the circumstances which life presented. He heard the Spirit call him through the people he met. He imitated Christ his master first of all. He imitated Michel Le Nobletz, the master of spiritual poverty. He imitated Father Gourdan de St. Victor. He imitated Mr. Chanciargues, who out of humility remained a permanent deacon and founded seminaries for the poor — he even copied his rule. Poullart did not spin theories — he lived. He is a witness more than a teacher. He is a spiritual man...
He followed his own vocation and the charism that was given to him to carry out his work. This is the source of his sanctity and effectiveness. He passed on to his followers a spirit of disinterested objectivity and thus prepared them for the unexpected evolution that lay ahead. To begin with, he followed his vocation to become a poor priest in the service of the poor. This led to the setting up of a seminary for the poor. After his death, the needs of the Church in France, of the colonies, and of the black races, directed his foundation to become a Congregation at the service of the Propagation of the Faith. Finally, the objective re-focused more clearly on the evangelization of the “poor” in the world.\textsuperscript{16}

**Conclusion: The spiritual personality of Claude Poullart**

The personality of Poullart des Places is seen, above all, in his search for a spiritual life and his fidelity to the Holy Spirit, to whom he consecrated his life. The different stages of his life were marked by an evolving clarification and concretization of the gift of himself to God. He started a work of great importance to the Church but this was not his priority; his first concern was to find God and to be faithful to his love in whatever was asked of him. The price he paid was high. He left his comfortable background and the refined society that he was used to. He abandoned his ambition to shine in the eyes of others to follow the light of the Holy Spirit in self-effacing service. In the short time allotted to him, he followed this disinterested itinerary of service in imitation of Jesus Christ. Poullart des Places shows us a way to sanctity. He shows it to us as a founding father who only had time to sow the seed. Others watered it and helped it grow, but it was God who produced the harvest. A similar message in today’s Church would surely produce the same fruit.
Footnotes

1 Claude Poullart des Places (1679-1709) is the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Born into a noble family in Brittany, he was educated by the Jesuits and then decided to become a priest in Paris. He founded and directed a community to enable poor students to become priests. He died at the age of 30 and his seminary evolved into the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.


4 The second edition was published in 1915. Cf. also Henri Le Floc’h: *Note pour la nouvelle édition de la vie de Poullart des Places*, Rome, 1915, 35 pp.

5 Acts of the Spiritan General Chapter of 1919.

6 Letter S/1245/59 from the General Council to the Procurator General, Fr. Daniel Murphy.


10 Decision 81/88 of the General Council.


12 *Notes et Documents XII*, p. 525 (Translation: V. O’Toole)

13 We can refer, amongst other examples, to the heroic perseverance of the Superior General, Monsieur Bertout.

14 Henry J. Koren: *Essays on the Spiritan Charism and on Spiritan History*, Spiritus Press, Bethel Park, Pa, pp. 48-49


16 Spiritan Rule of Life, 1987, no. 4: “The evangelisation of the ‘poor’ is our purpose…”