Claude Poullart des Places: How a Young Man Became a Founder

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Claude Poullart Des Places
How a young man became a founder

Amongst the many foundations of major religious Congregations in the 17th and 18th centuries, the birth of the Spiritans was rather inconspicuous. They were not conceived as a great new project in the making; their founder and his first collaborators were ordinary students of theology. They had no great backing, no lofty spirituality, no ambitious work in view. They were just a group of students in Paris who wanted to offer their services to the most pressing needs of the Church. They wanted to train poor priests to serve the poor.

On May 27th, 1703, twelve students of the Jesuit College of Louis-le-Grand in Paris pledged themselves to the service of the Holy Spirit and of Mary conceived without sin in a side chapel of Saint Etienne des Grès, a church close to where they were studying. They had been meeting together for several months, with the encouragement of their Jesuit professors. Their primary aim was to help each other materially and spiritually in their studies and to help the poor and the sick in their area.

So it was nothing like, for example, the historic meeting of the first seven companions of Ignatius Loyola in 1534, in a chapel at Montmartre. They were people who were already fairly well known in several countries of Europe. They had a plan for apostolic activity on a global scale, which took off almost immediately as the Company of Jesus.

Sharing amongst students

The twelve students of the rue St. Etienne at Pentecost, 1703, had a much more modest ambition, but they were equally determined to follow the plans that God had in store for them. In this group, ClaudeFrançois Poullart des Places played a pivotal role. The first initiative came from him – to share with other students the money that was given to him by his well-to-do family. This plan of mutual support, which was their initial idea, would gradually expand into something more ambitious.

From the start of this project, Poullart was in search of his own spiritual personality. As it had been during his initial studies in Brittany, he wanted to be open to the will of God, he wanted to help others who were seeking a similar path. He examined all these things in the light of the method of discernment taught to him by his Jesuit teachers. He regularly wrote down the fruit of his reflections, giving us an insight into his intentions, hesitations and actions.
One day in 1702, he met a ‘poor student’ named Jean-Baptiste Faulconnier who did not even have enough to live on. It was the first link in a chain which would continue to grow. Claude shared his own resources – his allowances, his money for meals and everything else he had. The Jesuits allowed him to give the leftovers from the college meals to his students. He rented a room in the vicinity and Jean-Baptiste was soon joined by another student in similar circumstances, and then another…

“From then on, he used what he managed to save, as well as a part of what he really needed for himself, to provide a few poor students with the necessities to continue their studies; eventually, each day he would give half of his rations to one of them who lived at the gate of the College. This is how he began his work – with an enthusiasm which is still bearing fruit today”

A supportive community for poor students

The way in which Poullart went about his help is significant. From the start of his seminary studies in Paris, he housed the students he was helping in lodging close to the seminary, while he himself remained at Louis-le-Grand. It is clear that it was not just a question of material aid: he took responsibility for their studies and their journey to the priesthood as well as their financial needs. In fact it was a community that he had established, including board and lodging, studies, prayer in common and classes at the seminary.

Claude-François moved from the College of Louis-le-Grand at the start of Lent, 1703, as it was becoming increasingly difficult to take proper care of these poor students. He moved in with them, accepting all the difficulties that this entailed – great disparity of education and background, crowded bedrooms, lack of privacy etc. And the numbers continued to grow. He had to find more lodgings and resources, seeking help from his peers and becoming indebted to them. It turned into a real pilgrimage of poverty, far more costly to him than the self-imposed penances of his earlier days.

By May, there were about a dozen students with him. It was then that they decided to place themselves, as a group, under the protection of Mary conceived without sin. This happened on May 27th, before the statue of Our Lady of Rescue (Notre-Dame de Bonne Délivrance) in the church of St Etienne des Grès. They now became a community with a rule of life.

“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.”

“M. Desplaces began by renting a room in the rue des Cordiers, near the College, where he placed the poor students that he had previously been helping and whose good qualities he had already ascertained. The progress made by these first scholars was so remarkable that it soon attracted other excellent subjects, so he set about renting a larger premises. In no time, he had set up a community of clerics to whom he gave very wise rules, examined and approved by others of great experience. He himself was the first to practise what he recommended to others. He did not limit himself to simply giving them instructions: he also arranged retreats given by acknowledged experts in this field. He used every opportunity to provide them with spiritual talks, especially by those amongst his friends who were good communicators.”

The structure of this ‘community’ for poor students

The relationship of Claude to his friends changed somewhat after their joint dedication. Living amongst them and supplying the necessary funding for their food and lodging, they naturally regarded him as their leader. The Jesuit authorities also saw him as the one in charge. Their daily life had to be further organised to prepare them for their future life as priests. They moved into a house on the rue des Cordiers, close to rue Saint Jacques and not far from the Collège Louis-le-Grand.

As the community grew, even more space was needed. On June 6th, 1705, they moved to rue Neuve Saint-Etienne (the present ‘rue Rollin’) where they remained until a short time before Poullart’s death. Then on October 1st, 1709, they moved again to rue Neuve-Ste-Geneviève (rue Tournefort today), in the parish of St. Etienne-du-Mont. It was there they adopted the name of the Séminaire du Saint Esprit and they remained in that location until 1731.

The spiritual life of Poullart des Places after the foundation

In the first months, their community life was lived in an atmosphere of great joy, but the worries and responsibility of looking after these young students soon began to weigh down upon Claude Poullart. He was helped by his fellow students at Louis-le-Grand with the teaching programme but the main burden fell on himself and the precarious situation of the new community began to get him down. It continued to grow and one year after the foundation there were nearly forty students in the house. Poullart was pulled in different directions by the demands of their formation. As the year 1704 progressed, he became increasingly exhausted, both physically and spiritually. He had to...
do something about it. Around Christmas, he decided to do a retreat, where he was guided by a wise Jesuit. Throughout his life, Claude never took any important decision for his future without seeking the guidance of the Jesuits.

He gave his retreat notes the title: “Reflections on the past”. The text follows the structure of a psalm: a) recalling the past blessings of God; b) a consideration of his present sufferings; c) a cry to God and trust in his fidelity.

First of all, he recalls the good times when he was continuously united to God:

“... I could hardly think of anything but God. My greatest regret was that I could not think of him all the time. I only wanted to love him and to be worthy of his love. I gave up even the most legitimate attachments. I looked forward to a time when I would have nothing, living only on handouts, having given away everything I had. The only earthly thing I wanted to keep was my good health, so that I could sacrifice it entirely to God in the work of the missions. I would have been so happy if, after having told everybody of the love of God, I could give the last drop of my blood for him who was always giving me his blessings...”

In the second part, he speaks of the spiritual disorder in which he now finds himself:

“...To sum up, I must confess before God that, at the present moment, I am someone who is thought to be alive but who is certainly dead, at least when I compare the present with the past. I am no more than a mask of devotion and a shadow of my former self... This is the way that some people who used to be strong in virtue begin to slide downwards and end up by perishing miserably. Nobody should fear such a fall more than I, having been, throughout my life, so inconsistent in my returning to God and then later on falling into prolonged disorders.”

This crisis he is going through makes him doubt the legitimacy of his foundation. Was it not motivated by ambition? Was it not presumptuous of him to throw himself into such an undertaking? But he takes heart again when he recalls the unwavering love of God – a love which has followed him since his childhood and that he can still see at work in the midst of his present suffering:

“...But even apart from all that, I have every reason to believe that the good Lord will have pity on me once more if I return to him with all my heart. My assurance is based on the way the Lord has led me up until now:

(i) He has never allowed me 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, within me, I was not in the least what others thought or said that I was;

(iii) He never allowed me to rid myself 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.

So the way God has led me gives me hope that heaven will no longer be inaccessible to me if I am sincerely sorry for my sins and seek to live once more by the Lord’s grace. Therefore, full of confidence, by the grace of God, and ignoring my own inclinations, I am going to look for the shortest path which will lead me back to the One without whom I cannot live in peace for a single moment.”

The originality of the Foundation of Claude Poullart

Claude Poullart directed his efforts towards establishing a house of formation for poor priests, to cater for the needs of the Church which were not being met. So he created a foundation with a new spiritual orientation. It also led to an innovative style of community; its insistence on poverty, extended studies and financial aid to poor students had an influence on other seminaries that were subsequently established:

- **A seminary for the poor.** The rules of the seminary were unequivocal: “We will only accept students whose poverty is clear”, who are incapable of paying for their accommodation elsewhere. The course of studies lasted for 6 to 9 years. It was a continuing struggle to find sufficient money both before and after the death of Poullart, but the students were never charged anything and they were not expected to reimburse the seminary at the conclusion of their studies.

- **The influence of the Jesuits.** Poullart and his disciples followed the Jesuits closely, for studies, spiritual direction, in their opposition to the Jansenists and in the stance they took regarding the on-going question of the Chinese Rites. Like the Jesuits, they maintained a constant fidelity to the Church and the Pope. Even after the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767, the Spiritans did not go to the Sorbonne for their studies but obtained permission to give their own classes – something very exceptional at the time.
- **A course of studies that was regulated and supervised.** Each day, there were 3 obligatory classes plus revision back in the community. There were debates and theses, with supplementary classes in singing, liturgy, preaching and catechetics.

- **A blend of knowledge and virtue.** Poullart des Places used to say that he would have serious doubts about a zealous but ignorant priest, but he would likewise fear for the perseverance in faith and obedience of a learned priest without virtue. Michel de Nobletz had said that piety without doctrine could do considerable harm to the Church.

- **A spirit of poverty.** Detachment was seen as a cardinal virtue for a priest, but Poullart was reduced to real material poverty. He refused some legacies that were left to him. In 1740, the Spiritans turned down a legacy because the descendants of the deceased were suffering real poverty themselves. Spiritual poverty and refusal of any signs of esteem were stressed in the rules and the spirit of the Seminary.

- **A deep-rooted family spirit.** The members of the community showed a great attachment to each other and continued this spirit in their future ministries.

### The last days of Claude Poullart des Places

The final days of Poullart show us a man who had given himself heart and soul to the poor; his heroic dedication to them during the famine of 1709 led directly to his death:

> “While Monsieur des Places gave himself entirely to the demands of his nascent community and exhausted himself by austere mortifications, he suffered an attack of pleurisy that was accompanied by a violent fever and a painful tenesmus which for four days caused him atrocious sufferings. But not one word of complaint, and still less of impatience, escaped his lips. One could only tell that his pain was growing by the fact that his prayers of resignation became more frequent. His very exhaustion seemed to give him new strength as he repeated continually the prayer of King David: ‘Lord of Hosts, how lovely is your dwelling-place! I pine and faint with longing for the courts of the Lord’s temple’ (Ps. 83: 2-3).

As soon as it was known in Paris that he was seriously ill, a great number of people, known for their holiness, came to see him... He eventually received the last sacraments and then quietly expired around five o’clock in the evening, on October 2, 1709, at the age...
of thirty years and seven months. Thus was the holy and famous Monsieur des Places, the founder of the Holy Ghost Seminary in Paris. The friendship that sprung from the shared opinions and similar characters of Poullart and M. de Montfort continued with the successors and the students of these two great men”.  

When celebrating its 300\textsuperscript{th} anniversary in 2003, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit recognized how much it owes to its founder. Because of him, it inherited a habit of listening in all simplicity to the voice of God, of giving itself up to His will, of attending to the material needs of the poor and the spiritual needs of people both near and far. As they seek out their original vision, Spiritans will discover the Gospel-inspired outlook of this rich young man, who became poor so that the poor would have access to the same gifts of God, and that the whole Church would receive the good things that God has prepared for those who accept his love.

The Congregation of the Holy Spirit rejoices in the gifts that were given to Claude-François as a founder and the fruits that the whole Church received through him for its missionary action. His cause for canonization was introduced in Paris in 1988 and is now being examined in Rome.

**Footnotes**

1 A seminarian who was too poor to continue with his preparations for the priesthood.

2 Pierre Thomas wrote in his Mémoire: “His father, who was fairly frugal, only gave him an allowance of 800 livres. It was quite a modest sum for a young man of his age and standing.”


4 The title “community” was not officially adopted until it was formally recognised in 1734. The rule of life was elaborated only gradually.

5 This is an extract from an old Spiritan register that has since disappeared but which was copied into “Gallia Christiana” in 1744.

6 Besnard, op.cit.


8 This text and the preceding one are taken from “Reflections on the past”

9 Besnard, op.cit.