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Claude Poullart des Places: Mission is Born of Love

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MISSION IS BORN OF LOVE



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In the spiritual life, everything is faithfulness to grace! Everything is a response of love and gratitude, filled with rejoicing, to the love of God

“Whoever acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God remains in him and he in God. We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us. God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment, and so one who fears is not yet perfect in love. We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:15-16, 18-19).

A Life of Faith and Love¹

The life of faith is a life illuminated by the love of God revealed in and by Jesus Christ. How can we live this life unless it is marked by the immense joy of being children of God? Indeed, the Father tirelessly and lovingly repeats to our heart these same words he directed to Jesus: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). And we can say to him, moved by the Spirit: “Abba! Father!” (Rom 8:15).

I am deeply convinced that the greatest joy and the greatest fortune that can happen to us is to find ourselves with this look of tenderness and love from God. In Jesus Christ, God looks at us not as just creatures, but as dear children.

In the spiritual life, everything is faithfulness to grace! Everything is a response of love and gratitude, filled with rejoicing, to the love of God. In light of this principle, we can identify some mistakes that can occur in the life of faith.

1. Living a Life of Faith motivated by Fear

Fear of punishment, fear of reaching the end empty-handed, mistrust of God. But this is absurd. The disciple of Jesus is to live out their faith with profound joy, with an attitude of boundless trust in God. With the trust of a poor person’s heart, rooted – not in their own merits – but in the love and mercy of God. In fact, the love of God, manifested in and through Jesus Christ, opens the heart of whoever, by this trust, believes in him and drives out every fear. For that matter, the Lord himself tells us: “(For) those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Rom 8:14-15; cf. 1 John 4:18).

Good! It is precisely in this perspective that Claude Poullart des Places situates us, when he prays:

The chastisements which will follow my crime will not

be the cause of my prudence and wisdom, but it is fear of displeasing You and offending a master who deserves to be so tenderly loved which will keep me, God, faithful to You as I ought to be.²

2. Understanding Spiritual Life as the Fulfillment of a Duty

when our heart encounters the beauty and goodness of the love of Christ, the life of faith comes to be lived as a response of love and gratitude to the gratuitous love of God

We do this or that, we go to Mass or we help our neighbor, because it is commanded, as if the commandments were a capricious imposition of God. This is a very poor and limited comprehension of spiritual life. Effectively, when our heart encounters the beauty and goodness of the love of Christ, the life of faith comes to be lived as a response of love and gratitude to the gratuitous love of God. In this way, our own faith is seen as a precious gift of God. This is how the young Claude Francis understands his relationship with God:

Speak Lord, when you please. All the evil I may have attempted to inflict on you, while doing myself infinite harm, has not prevented you from crying out for me. Hence, Lord, I now repent of my blindness and renounce with all my heart all those things that have caused me to flee from you. I am ready to heed the sacred commands of your divine Providence. Descend into this heart where for so long a time you have desired to enter. That heart will now listen to you alone and will henceforth conceive no other affections than those that will make me love you as I ought. You will find a place in my heart that will not be stained by any passion. And there, surrounded by the virtues which your law commands me to practice, you will be able to make known your holy will to me. Nothing in all the world will be able to rob you of a servant who vows to you with courage, worthy of a Christian, blind obedience and infinite submission.³

Obedience to God is filial and loving obedience, dictated by the trust and gratitude of a heart that recognizes the unfathomable love with which God, for all eternity, loves us.

3. Thinking that We are Doing God a Favor

Thinking that we are doing a favor for God when we believe in him and live in accordance with his will. If we think like this, we demand due reward, and we can even intend to negotiate with God. In reality, if there is favor, it

is on God's part, who always remains faithful in his love, even when we are ungrateful and unfaithful to him. For that matter, if we believe in God we add nothing to his glory and greatness. In fact, he does not need anyone to be who he is. We, all of us, are the ones who have an absolute need of him. So may it be for us a great grace and a great happiness to be able to believe in him. This is exactly what Elizabeth said of the Virgin Mary: "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the LORD would be fulfilled" (Luke 1:45).

In his *Writings*, Claude demonstrates a profound awareness of having been overwhelmed with blessings by God. And he feels moved to respond with love and gratitude to the merciful love of the Lord:

My Savior, I want at all costs to render myself worthy of your love. This from now on is the limit of my desire. My heart, until now, has been full of vanity and ambition. It found nothing in the world that was high or great enough to give it peace. I am no longer astonished that earthly and perishable things were unable to satisfy my heart. It was reserved for God, and now has found something to fill it entirely. It will no longer be occupied with anything except yourself.⁴

The Radicality of Love

The radicality of love is, in fact, the essential radicality of the Christian life

"As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:9-13).

In a world that promotes adrenaline and extreme sports, permit me to speak of the radicality of love. The radicality of love is, in fact, the essential radicality of the Christian life. I can have a faith capable of moving mountains, the generosity to distribute all of my possessions in alms, and the audacity to sacrifice my own life, but if I do not have love, it is of no use to me and I am nothing (cf. 1 Cor 13:1-3).

It is important to make clear that the radicality of love

has nothing to do with fundamentalism. Fundamentalism relates to aggravated attachment to an idea, a doctrine, a belief.

The radicality of love has to do, likewise, with the radicality that we contemplate in Jesus, who “loved them to the end” (John 13:1). And the radicality of Jesus manifests itself above all in the path he undertook after becoming man, assuming the condition of a slave, without laying claim to being treated according to his divine condition, even giving his life on the cross (cf. Phil 2:5-8) and forgiving and asking for forgiveness for those who so cruelly and unjustly betrayed and killed him (Luke 23:34). Jesus Christ lived out the radicality of love and invited his disciples to follow him to the extreme of giving their lives (cf. John 15:13), forgiving and loving their enemies (cf. Matt 5:44).

What led Jesus to follow this path? It is clear in the Gospels - living deeply united with the Father, with the awareness of being the Father's beloved Son

But how does one live out the radicality of love? Or, how can one love like this, in the way of Jesus? What led Jesus to follow this path? It is clear in the Gospels - living deeply united with the Father, with the awareness of being the Father's beloved Son: “After Jesus was baptized, he came up from the water and behold, the heavens were opened [for him], and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove [and] coming upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”” (Matt 3:16-17; cf. Matt 17:5). Only insofar as we live united with Jesus Christ and in the deep consciousness of his look of infinite love will it be possible for us to walk the paths of the radicality of love.

We see this very thing in the life experience of young Claude Poullart des Places. The encounter with the tenderness of God's love aroused in him the desire to respond to the Lord's love with the Paschal offering of his own life.

Of all temporal things, I wished to keep health alone, and I wanted to offer the latter in a complete sacrifice to God in the work of the missions. I would have felt most happy if, after enkindling the fire of God's love in the hearts of all, I could have shed the very last drop of my blood for him whose mercies were almost always present before my mind.⁵

And we see the young founder die at the age of thirty, certainly because exhausted by the labor that the work of the

Seminary demanded of him as well as his concern in helping those afflicted by the epidemic spreading around Paris at the time. Like a grain of wheat thrown to the earth...

It is enjoyable to show how this radicality of love — the authentic radicality of the Christian life — is also present in Francis Libermann, the other founder of the Spiritan family:

My body, my soul, my whole being are for God; and if I knew that there was still a little vein in me which was not for him I would tear it out and trample it underfoot in the mud and dust. The ties of love that link me and bind me to my Lord Jesus are too strong for you to break.⁶

Later, commenting on the Gospel of John, Francis Libermann would say: “It is great joy for a soul to know that it is loved by Jesus. The awareness of this joy becomes the abundant fountainhead of boundless trust”

We can find an identical radicality in the Blessed Daniel Brottier. He wrote in the request that he made to be admitted to the Congregation of the Holy Spirit:

From the age of twelve, I have thought about the life of a missionary, a life of one who wishes to sacrifice and immolate himself for the salvation of souls—at once or drop by drop, what does it matter? However if I were allowed to express a preference, it would be for the former. That is to say, Monsignor, that my head does not care much about remaining attached to my shoulders. I have some good reasons for this. I do not wish to be presumptuous, but if you have a particularly perilous post, where someone must be put at risk, I simply say: Here I am.⁷

The Ruptures that Love Inspires

“As they were proceeding on their journey someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus answered him, “Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head.” And to another he said, “Follow me.” But he replied, “[Lord,] let me go first and bury my father.” But he answered him, “Let the dead bury their dead. But you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:57-60).

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Human life is marked, from beginning to end, by the dynamism of rupture. The process of birth is the first rupture that all of us live. The beginning of our life is marked by a cry of pain, of freedom, and of light. And the end of our life? What does our last breath signify? Is it not a cry sometimes silent — Jesus let out a loud cry, but in that cry proclaimed, God is here! — of rupture and freedom?

In this sense, speaking of rupture means speaking of birth - the passage to a new way and a greater quality of life. What gives meaning to the rupture is the love that leads to life.

When we think about rupture, we feel, almost always, a certain repugnance, as we fixate on the part of pain that it carries. But why must we fixate on the pain? Why must we not think about the greatest degree of freedom and of life that rupture brings? If a mother fixated on the pain, a child would never be born. And yet, it is well worth a child being born!

Whoever wants to avoid rupture at all costs never comes to generate life and never comes to have a fertile life, which is worth being lived.

How did Claude Poullart des Places live out the reality of rupture? The first note that comes to the top is that of a considerable time of hesitation. Since he was a child, the young founder felt the call to the priesthood. His parents, however, fostered another dream. And although they were good Christians, they resorted to various strategies to steer him away from the priestly life.

The rupture with his parents' dream was not easy for Claude. As he himself confesses in his *Writings*, he had a great appreciation for his parents and his sister. The blood ties held him down, they would not let him open his heart to the call of God. He hesitated for several years without achieving the rupture that the call of the Lord required.

This kind of rupture is generally difficult for those who have a good experience with family life. Where does the difficulty come from? It seems to me that, in large part, it can be attributed to this: we are known, we are understood, we are loved, we feel safe. So, the difficulty is in risking it. We fear the unknown. We fear above all not being recognized and loved.

The difficulty becomes even greater when we don't

understand this rupture with the “blood ties” well, when we think that it means loving less those who are dear to us. But it is not so when this rupture happens for reasons of faith. It is about, moreover, loving in a different way. In fact, we end up loving more and with greater depth. If we take the ruptures that the Virgin Mary lived, we will find a great light.

I leave here, without further comment, the testimonial of Claude Poullart des Places:

I hope, my God, that in this retreat You will speak to my heart and through your mercy You will disengage me from the embarrassing anxieties in which my indecision has plunged me. I realize full well that You do not approve the life I am now leading, that You have destined me for something better and that I must make a definite and reasonable decision in order to think earnestly of my salvation.⁸

God has created me only that I might love and serve him and finally enjoy the blessedness that is promised to the just. This is my only business. This is the end to which I must direct all my actions. If I do not labor in accord with that end, I am a fool, for there is no other purpose of human life (*ibid.*).

This matter is most important and I cannot afford not to invoke your help. Lord, I invite You to guide my steps, since I am resolved to walk in the way You wish to point out to me. I renounce all of the advantages which might flatter me and which you do not approve... Speak to my heart, O God, my God, I am ready to obey you.⁹

In his analysis to discern what state of life God called him to, Claude Francis, at pondering the state of his religious life, commented to himself:

How would you reconcile living in such a retreat with the attachment you have for your sister? You love her dearly, and are unable to deprive yourself of her presence for any length of time... My father is old and he will leave behind a lot of business affairs which few beside myself will be able to put in order. You know what obligations I have towards my father and my mother, the authors of my life. They will not oppose my vocation when they know it is a holy one,

but would it not be a relief for them to see me in the world and to be able to count on me?¹⁰

This was a rupture that Claude lived with perplexity and suffering. It cost him years of hesitation and escape. But it ended up giving him, at the age of twenty-two, the push that faithfulness to the call of the LORD required. The other rupture, that we will address next, is linked to his natural ambition.

The Logic of Jesus' Passover

“Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me” (John 12:24-26a).

Claude Poullart des Places had to achieve more than just the rupture with his parents' dreams in order to follow Jesus Christ and to be faithful to God's will. In fact, insofar as we correspond to grace, God always leads us farther, because he prompts us and moves us with the power of his infinite love.

The other rupture that Claude Francis lived reached the core of his being, in the depth of his soul: it was the rupture with his “heart of stone” — a heart hardened by self-absorption, more concretely by ambition — in order to be able to receive from God, by the power of the Spirit, a “heart of flesh,” capable of loving without measure, even offering its own life. This is how he speaks of this rupture:

The other rupture that Claude Francis lived reached the core of his being, in the depth of his soul: it was the rupture with his “heart of stone”

Come, my soul, it is time to surrender yourself to so many loving persecutions. I must, as it were, change my nature, divest myself of the old Adam to be clothed with Jesus Christ.¹¹

I shall have enemies to combat... Defend me, O Lord, against those tempters. The most formidable is ambition—my predominant passion. Humble me, crush my pride, confound my vain glory... I accept all of this, my God, provided that You love me always and that I may always be dear to you.¹²

This rupture is so radical, it is hardly done in just one day. In one day, we can make the decision to change our life. But change like this is progressive, at times almost imperceptible. Look at yourself in the process

of transformation as a seed that has been planted. It is something similar to what happens here. The change is progressive, and depends, first of all, on the action of the Spirit, and, then, on our faithfulness to grace (docility to the Spirit).

This is perhaps the rupture that hurts the most. And it hurts, not because God enjoys seeing us suffer — how can a Father, who is infinite Love, enjoy seeing a dear child suffer? — but because of the hardness of our heart. And the more hardened our heart is, the greater the pain will be. Pain that is provoked by our resistance to the action of the Spirit, resistance caused by that which is in us and is the root of sin: pride, ambition, vanity, avarice, hypocrisy, lust...

When we come to terms with entering into the dynamism of this rupture, we start to walk the path of the first bliss, the path of poverty and humility.

For Claude Poullart des Places, directing his steps toward this path involved achieving a third rupture, which decisively marked his life. A rupture that he completed in a short time, though in a progressive way: the rupture with the aristocratic world which until then had moved him. In other words, passage from the world of the rich and powerful to the world of the insignificant and poor.

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He began by withdrawing his attention from his ecclesiastical career, refusing diplomas and opting to pertain to the lower clergy. He abandoned his aristocratic garb, declined benefits, shared with the poor; lastly, he lived with the poor - poor with the poor and serving the poor. Only seven years passed until he gave the total gift of life. But from this seed of love thrown to the earth, in the field of the poor, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit was born.

“Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (John 12:24). It is the logic of the Passover of Jesus. We cannot follow it if we are not determined to enter into this dynamism of life that gives itself, that is given to God as a service of love to one’s brothers and sisters.

The Purification of Faith and Love

“Then he said to the host who invited him, “When you hold a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors, in case they may invite you back and you

have repayment. Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:12-14).

After the conversion retreat and vocational discernment, Claude Poullart des Places lived moments of great spiritual fervor, which we can situate in the context of the prayer of affection of which Francis Libermann speaks: “A state of prayer in which the person, touched by a supernatural and sensitive impression, goes to God and treats with violence what belongs to him or her. It is a prayer of love to God.” It was from this new light which the love of God aroused in his heart that Claude Francis made the crossing to the poor, which led him to found the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.

About three and a half years later, Poullart des Places, during a retreat, which he had in December of 1704, wrote:

It would not have been too much had I shed tears of blood to bewail my wretchedness... At the present moment I am merely a man who is reputed to be still alive, but who is certainly dead... Blessed am I in my extreme misfortune if I do not fall away even more.¹³

Being full of vanity and presumption and also so unfaithful to grace, must I not fear that God may abandon me entirely? If that evil has not yet befallen me, I owe it to his infinite mercy. Always full of tenderness for me, unable to let me get lost, he has first preserved me from the hardness of heart that leads to final impenitence.¹⁴

I must believe that the Good Lord will again have pity on me if I return to him with all of my heart... Filled with this holy confidence through the grace of God, I shall therefore examine which road is the shorter one ... in order to regain him without whom, whatever I do, I cannot live in peace.¹⁵

This impressive testimony makes us understand that the young Founder went through a period of spiritual crisis, coming even to doubt the work which he brought to life - like the desert of spiritual purification about which we already spoke in the first part of this book. In this desert of purification, Claude Poullart des Places had to examine his relationship with God and his motives. Reviewing his spiritual path, Claude Francis realized that, even in the

midst of difficulties, God was applying towards him a loving pedagogy which precisely allowed him to maintain an attitude of vigilance.

In this crucial moment of his spiritual journey, the young Founder could have been brought to succumb to the temptation of pride and discouragement, resulting in the abandonment of the initiative that he had founded, as he himself attests:

The young Founder went through a period of spiritual crisis, coming even to doubt the work which he brought to life

I consider first, that the source of my laxness, or to speak more honestly as I should, of my falling off and disorder, is the fact that I left solitude too soon. I have poured myself out, as it were, on external things, undertaking this work for poor students and striving to keep it going. I did not have a sufficiently strong foundation in virtue for such an undertaking. I had not yet acquired enough humility to put myself safely at the head of such a work.¹⁶

It was an insidious way—all the more dangerous because it appeared good to me—of gradually insinuating pride into my heart. Here then was an entry to a vulnerable spot, and it could have thrown me into the very trap which had already caused me to fall into even more shameful disorders...I would not be wrong in believing that on this occasion the devil transformed himself into an agent of light to seduce me. I hardly know what to think of it. What happened makes me believe that I made a mistake (ibid.).

Claude Francis finds himself facing the risk we can always incur of the illusion of the “apparent good.” The initiative he founded was, in itself, good. But the motives could not be. Jesus himself calls our attention to the danger of this mistake: “[But] take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father. When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you...” (Matt 6:1-2).

In this crucial moment of his spiritual journey, seduced by the infinite mercy with which the Lord had protected him, Claude Francis turned to God, with an attitude of abandonment and trust.

The young Founder learned, not without pain and

perplexity, that, when the human heart is touched by the love of God, it feels compelled to respond with enthusiasm and generosity. But it is necessary to not confuse that initial enthusiasm with holiness. In fact, growth in holiness of life necessarily passes through the purification of faith and love, the purification of motives.

The purification of faith and love is above all an effect of the action of the Holy Spirit. But this purification also calls for collaboration on our part. It implies purification of the image that we have of God. It brings with it purification of the image we make of ourselves as well as that of human beings in general. It still supposes the purification of love which leads our heart to learn to love God for God himself and to love our brothers and sisters with the same love with which God loves us — Jesus' way.

when the human heart is touched by the love of God, it feels compelled to respond with enthusiasm and generosity

The Purification of Motives

“[But] take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father. When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. “When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you” (Matt 6:16).

Jesus Christ directs us to a path of happiness. From love of sympathy to gratuitous love. To walk this path, we need to purify the reasons for our love. Jesus reveals to us a preferential gaze. His gaze of love preferentially falls on the “forgotten” and “unloved”: the paralytic of Bethesda (John 5:1-9). His gaze fixes on the most “insignificant”: the widow who lays down the smallest coin. Jesus points out the value of her offering, which comes from the greatest degree of generosity (Mark 12:41-44). His gaze fixes on the most “unprotected”: the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17). His gaze fixes on the most “sinful”: Zacchaeus, Mary Magdalene...The

parables of the lost sheep and the tax collector who prays in the temple...

The purification of faith and love goes through the purification of the motives of our living and acting. And, here, it is important to know that we can be predominantly motivated by emotions or we can be predominantly motivated by the values of the Kingdom of God.

The image we cultivate and we want others to have of us. Wanting to be the center of attention. Wanting to be well-regarded, to have renown. Wanting to be the first, the best. Wanting to have success, to be seen, to appear as a socially successful person. Wanting to receive praise and applause. Wanting to occupy places of honor. Wanting to be valued, appreciated, wanted, loved... Many times, they unconsciously condition our attitudes and behaviors.

The purification of faith and love goes through the purification of the motives of our living and acting

The concrete examples that Jesus presents us (Matt 6:1-8) — giving alms, praying — are examples of “good works.” When the works are evil, it is easier for us to see that our motives are contrary to the values of the Gospel. But we easily fall for the trap when what we do is, in itself, a “good work,” as was the work that the young Claude Francis undertook. The trap is in this. Praying is good. Giving alms is good. Helping others is good. Whoever practices such actions easily reaps the applause and consideration of others. That others recognize us, in itself, is good. The issue is in doing what we do only, or mainly, to receive applause, recognition, approval, and esteem.

Jesus indicates to us the deep motivation that must be at the root of everything we do or do not do. To act in the presence of God, not wanting to be recognized and appreciated except by him. The praise, the applause, the recognition of men are the reward. But they are a fleeting reward, without the weight of eternity. For that matter, the same people who today applaud, tomorrow condemn. Jesus tells us that the authentic reward is the one that comes to us from God. And it is this that he invites us to seek in all we do.

When Claude Francis undertook the foundation of the Community/Seminary of the Holy Spirit it was well-intentioned. He wanted to please God and serve the poorest. But the dynamism of sin was betraying his generosity, as he himself confesses:

*To act in the presence of
God, not wanting to be
recognized and appreciated
except by him*

I know of course that if I faithfully used all God's graces, I could really be on my guard and remain steadfast in the midst of my occupations... it was true that, I could have persevered and so I was led to think somehow that I was not undertaking anything beyond what was willed by God. And yet it was hard for me to remain steadfast and keep from being thrown off balance.¹⁷

It was an insidious way—all the more dangerous because it appeared good to me—gradually insinuating pride into my heart (ibid.).

I left the world in order to seek God, renounce vanity and save my soul. Is it possible that I merely changed the object of my ambition and that I preserved that ambition all the while in my heart? If so, of what use was it to undertake that work?¹⁸

Facing the spiritual crisis that he was going through, Claude Francis questions himself in order to discern the source of his motives. In fact, stopping, reflecting, praying, and asking some questions can help us to remain vigilant and to purify the motives of our living and acting:

What is it that constitutes the inspirational source of my life? What is, really, the reason for my existence and for my actions? What is it that, in general, leads me to act? The much or the little that I do, why do I do it? When I do something or I don't do something, am I moved by my emotions or by the values of the Kingdom? Do I act according to what pleases me or doesn't please me, or according to the values implied in the evangelical following of Jesus Christ? What is it that determines my choices: pleasing God or doing what pleases me? Serving my brothers and sisters or using them for myself and being served by them?

Being a Man According to God's Heart

“That is not how you learned Christ, assuming that you have heard of him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus, that you should put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth” (Eph 4:20-24).

What is it that determines my choices: pleasing God or doing what pleases me? Serving my brothers and sisters or using them for myself and being served by them?

the first appeal that God guides him to is that of being truly man

In the self-portrait that he makes of himself, after better discerning God's appeal in his life, the young Claude Poullart des Places looks at himself as he is, with his gifts and virtues, his limits and defects: he depicts himself authentically and truthfully both with himself and with God.

The Word of God referenced above refers us to the "truth which exists in Jesus." Indeed, this truth is connected to being man, fully and truly man: a "new self," "created in God's way."

During his crucial conversion and discernment retreat, Claude Francis, touched by the tenderness of God's love and illuminated by his Word, becomes aware that the first appeal that God guides him to is that of being truly man. He understands that God demands a profound change in his life: "It is necessary, so to speak, that I change my nature, that I strip myself of the old Adam to be clothed in Jesus Christ."¹⁹

This radical change that God proposes to him does not in any way deny his being a man. What's more, the change that God wants to see in him, not without his consent and collaboration, is intended to lead him to be truly and fully man: "My God, You want me to be a man, but You want me to be a man after your own heart" (ibid.).

In his passage through Fatima, Paul VI shared this invitation with men of the twentieth century: "Men, thirsty men!" Words as surprising as they are extraordinarily simple and profound.

It is a temptation and a delusion that human beings have dealt with since the beginning of their journey in this world: thinking that God is a threat, a rival that hinders freedom, that he stops them from being fully man. In reality, it is about a tremendous delusion and, even worse, a suicide attempt.

In reality, what God wants - and he is so committed to this that Jesus Christ went to the extreme of giving his life for us on the Cross - is for man to have life, a full life: "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

Listening to the voice of God and following in his footsteps do not mean constraining one's own freedom or diminishing one's humanity. On the contrary, it is bursting

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into the infinite horizons of fullness of being and life.

We see this amplitude of horizons in the life of the young Claude Poullart de Places from the moment he opened his heart to the dimension of God's merciful love. He left the closed world of the aristocracy to which his family belonged, which held him captive, to open his eyes to the other world, much vaster, of the Kingdom of God, which calls the small, the poor, the desperate and excluded of this world, who unfortunately still constitute the majority of the human family even today.

This profound life change didn't present itself as easy to young Claude. He knew that the temptation of the comfortable life that his aristocratic lineage offered him, along with the success and glory that those so inclined felt, was not easy to overcome. And it is for that reason that he addresses God and pleads:

My God, You want me to be a man, but You want me to be a man after your own heart. I understand what you are asking of me in one word, and I want to grant it to You, for I know You will help me. Give me strength and anoint me with your wisdom and virtue. I need your help to defend myself against the tempter. I am abandoning him and he will seek to bind me once more in his horrible chains... That enemy is strong when You do not appear near him. This your task, my God, to fight for me. I entrust myself entirely to You, for I know You always side with those who hope in You, and we have nothing to fear when we do our best and You sustain us.²⁰

Worshipping in Spirit and Truth

"All the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They prostrated themselves before the throne, worshiped God, and exclaimed: 'Amen. Blessing and glory, wisdom and thanksgiving, honor, power, and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen'" (Rev 7:11-12).

One often hears that one worships this or that, or some dear being. Worship, however, is due only to God: "The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve" (Deut 6:14, cf. Matt 4:10).

Worship is the attitude of whoever takes off their shoes and remains on their knees before the mystery of God

(cf. Exod 3:2-6). Worship is reverence, recognition of the smallness of the human creature that we are before the infinite majesty of God, who is Creator and Lord. Worship is reverential love of those who know they are loved by God, who is infinite Love! Worship springs up spontaneously in the heart of whoever, by the grace of God, has obtained the true knowledge of themselves — of their condition as a fragile and vulnerable creature — and the true knowledge of God who is Love. The heart understands — not with fear, but with reverence and love — that on your knees is the best way to be before God.

Thus, it is not surprising that Jesus invites us to worship the Father in spirit and in truth: “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24).

Worship in spirit and truth is not restricted to moments of worship and prayer. It is, before anything else, an attitude that pervades the entire life and actions of whoever desires to respond with love and gratitude to the love of God, who first loved us.

Worshipping in spirit and truth is living unfocused on oneself, because one is wholly centered on God, with a gaze fixed on the Lord. Worshipping in spirit and truth is walking in the presence of God and serving the Lord in holiness and justice all the days of our life (cf. Luke 1:75). As a matter of fact, something else that the Lord does not expect of us: “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow before God most high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with myriad streams of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my crime, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:6-8).

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Well, Claude Francis, wanting to respond with love and filial obedience to God, assumes this attitude of worship in his life, as we can verify by the beautiful prayer that he prayed several times a day to the Most Holy Trinity:

Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I

adore You through your holy grace, with all my heart, all my soul and all my strength. I beg You to grant me faith, humility, chastity, the grace of not doing, saying, thinking, seeing, hearing or desiring anything except what You want me to do and say. Grant me those graces, my God, together with your most holy blessing. May my heart and my mind be filled with You alone. May I always walk in your presence and pray ceaselessly, as I should. My Jesus, be for us eternally a Jesus. I place my mind and my heart in your hands through the most Holy Virgin.²¹

The Mission is Born out of Love

“After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:21-22).

Jesus, the Father’s Envoy par excellence, lives out the mission with the anointing of the Holy Spirit (cf. Luke 4:18). But the mission that the Father entrusted to him was not easy at all, as it led him to the extreme of giving his life, on the cross. What was the inner strength that emboldened Jesus Christ? The account of Jesus’ Baptism in the Jordan offers us an answer: The anointing of the Spirit who communicates to him the unflinching certainty of being the “Beloved Son” of the Father. Effectively, it is Love that sustains Jesus in the crucifying hour of his mission.

Well, it was his encounter with the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ that awoke in the heart of Claude Poullart des Places the imperative of the mission. In fact, he understands the mission as a thankful proclamation of the love of God, a joyous announcement of the marvels of his merciful love:

I will make you known to all hearts that no longer know You. Aware myself of the disorder that exists in souls who have fallen into a bad habit, I will persuade, convince, force them to change their lives, and You will be praised eternally by mouths which otherwise would have cursed You eternally.²²

I never tired of speaking about these favors. I found too few people to whom I could recount his mercies towards me. I found pleasure only in conversations in which God was not forgotten. I accused myself for

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having kept silence when I had missed a chance to speak of him.²³

In fact, when someone “tastes that the Lord is good” (1 Pet 2:3), when someone “sees” the salvation of God, one cannot stop saying with St. Paul, “Woe to me if I do not preach it!” (1 Cor 9:16).

At discovering the beauty and goodness of the love of God, Claude Francis feels moved to sacrifice everything, even the most licit things that life in this world offers, in order to correspond to the love of the Lord. He wants to take the Good News of divine love to the ends of the earth, making his own life an offering of love:

It was almost impossible for me to think of anything other than God and it was my greatest regret that I did not always think of him. I desired to love him alone, and out of love for him I would have renounced the most legitimate attachments of this life...Of all temporal things I wanted to keep health alone, and I wanted to offer the latter in a complete sacrifice to God in the work of the missions. I would have felt most happy if, after enkindling the fire of God’s love in the hearts of all men, I could have shed the very last drop of my blood for him whose mercies were almost always present before my mind.²⁴

The mission is born from Love and is the irradiation of Love! This is a conviction that we find in the perspective of the mission that Francis Libermann, the second Founder of the Spiritan Family, offers us.

The mission is the irradiation of the Love of God. The mission is the irradiation of the Spirit. In other words, the mission is born out of the “heart” of the Trinity. It is through the action of the Holy Spirit that Jesus Christ lives out and achieves the mission which the Father entrusted to him; before departing to the Father, he promises to send us the Spirit of Truth (cf. John 14:16, 26; Acts 1:4-8).

The Acts of the Apostles give testimony of the consciousness that the nascent church held in order to live and carry out the mission by the power of the Spirit. In the Apostolic Letter *Redemptoris missio*, Saint John Paul II affirms that the protagonist of the mission is the Holy Spirit. The Venerable Francis Libermann situates us precisely in this perspective when he says:

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He who sows is the Son of God, the Incarnate Word; it is he who merits and imparts the seed of grace in each soul. The one who reaps is different – the Holy Spirit... He is the light and strength of the Apostles, the power of all their words. It is he who touches souls, who draws them, who is the life imparted by the sacraments which bring people into the church and sanctify them. Our Lord attributes to himself the sending of missionaries since he sends the Holy Spirit and merited him. Our Lord merited him and sent him, but the divine Spirit consummates the work and is the true harvester.²⁵

Union with God and the Mission

“Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples” (John 15:4-8).

In chapter 15 of the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us that only insofar as we remain united with him will we be able to bear fruit. Without this intimate and vital union with the Lord, we cannot do anything. No matter how much we tire ourselves in apostolic tasks, we will do nothing for the growth of the Kingdom of God.

Authentic prayer leads the mission. And there is an experience of the mission when there is prayer. As the word itself indicates, mission is a sending. But the sending implies a relationship. The relationship of the sent with he who sends, and of him with the sent. The mission has an origin and objective. Between the origin and the objective, a relationship which gives one meaning and one foundation.

When I speak of the mission, I like to refer myself to Francis Libermann. Now, the perspective that the Venerable Father Libermann has of the mission is, first of all, Christocentric. He understands that the mission of the

church, and in the church our mission, is nothing but the mission of Jesus Christ.

As Jesus Christ was sent by the Father, so we are sent by him. He calls us. He sends us. It is in his name that we live the mission. In fact, the members of the congregation, says the Venerable Francis Libermann, “will become imbued with the idea that the Son of God sends them as his Father sent him,” as they form a community of consecrated people who “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and as sent by him, devote themselves wholly to announce his Holy Gospel, and to establish his reign among the souls that are poorest and most neglected in the church of God.”²⁶

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There is but one mission: the mission that the Father entrusted to Jesus, by the power of the Spirit. Our mission is sharing and communion in the mission of Jesus Christ. But our participation in the mission of the Savior only happens insofar as we live united with him and as we have his life in us.

From this understanding of the mission, which Francis Libermann offers us, emanates a whole dynamic of life and action. The mission is a call that fully commits the life and person of the missionary.

Life is the mission. The mission is life. Inside, at the very heart of this life, is the relationship of the missionary with Christ. What relationship? The relationship that Jesus had with the Father as one sent from the Father; that relationship bears with it that of the missionary with Jesus Christ. This is how Francis Libermann expresses it:

By living in us and communicating the mission he received from his Father, Jesus Christ, in his turn, sends us as he himself was sent, and he wills that those who see us will be able to discern him in us, as once his Father was manifest in him. And this will be brought about by our personal holiness, by the resemblance of our life to his, and our union with him.²⁷

We are, in relation to Jesus who sent us, what Jesus was to his Father.” And what was the relationship of Jesus Christ with the Father? “How is it that the Father sent his Son? Did He not send Him to become sanctified, in order to sanctify others in holiness and in truth?”

Life is the mission. The mission is life. Inside, at the very heart of this life, is the relationship of the missionary with Christ

We can indistinctly see this perspective that the Venerable Libermann offers us of the mission in Claude Poullart des Places, as he insists, in the Regulations of the Seminary. Named the “General and Particular Regulations,” it focuses on the importance of the cultivation of a life of holiness and union with God, which goes through prayer and the assiduous reception of the sacraments. I have transcribed, by way of example, some of the prescriptions:

Every morning there will be a little better than a half hour of vocal and mental prayer. The vocal prayers will always be the same and shall not run longer than five to ten minutes so as to leave a little less than half an hour for mental prayer. The subject matter of the mental prayer may be changed every day.²⁸

Before every study period or repetition, all shall ask the Holy Spirit for light so as to work fruitfully . . . Every day the Office of the Holy Spirit will be recited (ibid.).

During the day, all shall raise their heart to God as often as possible (ibid.).

Nothing is more warmly recommended than the most devout assistance at Holy Mass. No one will ever be absent from it unless sickness prevents him. Everyone shall receive the sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist [at least] once a fortnight (ibid., 173).

The clearest example of the importance that Claude Francis gave to union with God by means of prayer is in his own actions, of which we have some indications in the Fragments of a Private Regulation, referring to his personal spiritual life project. For us to perceive the assiduity and intensity of his prayer life, it is enough to consider Article 15°:

I shall never enter my room (when I have no urgent matter to attend to) or leave it, without putting myself on my knees and begging God’s blessings, using expressions like these: Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I adore You through your holy grace, with all my heart, all my soul and all my strength. I beg You to grant me faith, humility, chastity, the grace of not doing, saying, thinking, seeing, hearing or desiring anything except what You want me to do and say. Grant me those graces, my God, together with

your most holy blessing. May my heart and my mind be filled with You alone. May I always walk in your presence and pray ceaselessly, as I should. My Jesus, be for us eternally a Jesus. I place my mind and my heart in your hands through the most Holy Virgin. In the name of my Jesus and Mary.²⁹

May I always walk in your presence and pray ceaselessly, as I should

I beg You to grant me faith, humility, chastity, the grace of not doing, saying, thinking, seeing, hearing or desiring anything except what You want me to do and say. Grant me those graces, my God, together with your most holy blessing. May my heart and my mind be filled with You alone. May I always walk in your presence and pray ceaselessly, as I should. My Jesus, be for us eternally a Jesus. I place my mind and my heart in your hands through the most Holy Virgin. In the name of my Jesus and Mary.

Please excuse this repeated citation, but it shows, more than any other, the place the young Founder gave to his union with Jesus Christ. In the longer version of this prayer, which Claude Francis would pray in the morning and afternoon, he asks for, among other things, the grace to live deeply united to Jesus Christ and intimately imbued with the mysteries of his life in this world:

Through your mercy grant me also, O my God, the favor to imprint in my heart by the indelible darts of your grace the death and passion of my Jesus, his holy life and holy incarnation.³⁰

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Endnotes

- ¹Translated from *Missão espiritana* 21–22 (January 2013) 52–70.
- ²“Reflections on the Truths of Religion,” Koren, *Spiritual Writings*, 67.
- ³*Ibid.*, 49, 51.
- ⁴*Ibid.*, 57.
- ⁵“Reflections on the Past,” Koren, *Spiritual Writings*, 133-134.
- ⁶*Lettres Spirituelles* 1, 10 (1830). Cited from Gilbert, *You Have Laid your Hand on Me*, 21
- ⁷<http://www.clairval.com/lettres/en/2013/12/06/2041213.htm> Abbey of Saint-Joseph de Clairval, France, accessed Feb 13, 2019.
- ⁸“Choice of a State of Life,” Koren, *Spiritual Writings*, 89, 91.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, 93.
- ¹⁰*Ibid.*, 99.
- ¹¹“On the Truths of Religion,” 51.
- ¹²“On the Truths of Religion,” 83.
- ¹³“Reflections on the Past,” 139, 143.
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*, 145.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, 147.
- ¹⁶*Ibid.*, 147.
- ¹⁷*Ibid.*, 147.
- ¹⁸*Ibid.*, 149.
- ¹⁹“On the Truths of Religion,” 51.
- ²⁰*Ibid.*, 52-53.
- ²¹“Personal Daily Rule,” Koren, *Spiritual Writings*, 123.
- ²²“On the Truths of Religion,” 63.
- ²³“Reflections on the Past,” 135.
- ²⁴*Ibid.*, 134-135.
- ²⁵Commentary on the Gospel of John, 1, 134.
- ²⁶Provisional Rule, 37 (Art. 1).
- ²⁷*Instructions for Missionaries* (Center for Spiritan Studies, 2015) 6.
- ²⁸“Rules for the Community,” Koren, *Spiritual Writings*, 171.
- ²⁹“Personal Daily Rule,” Koren, *Spiritual Writings*, 123.
- ³⁰“Memoir of Father Thomas,” Koren, *Spiritual Writings*, 261.