A rich young man follows the poor Christ

Joseph Michel
Claude-Francis Poullart des Places (1679–1709) was born into privilege. He stepped down from that to be with the poor and to serve them.

He was the first and only son of a squire whose great ambition was to become one of Brittany’s nobility, a father who took great care with his son’s education. Claude in turn repaid his father’s ambitions. He got prize after prize at school and was the class valedictorian in his final year.

He wanted to leave Rennes, his hometown, to study theology at the Sorbonne, but was persuaded by his father to study law in Nantes. He went on a retreat in 1701 to discern his real vocation, then lived with his parents without practicing law. He was middle of the road religious, now fervent, now easy-going, but not really at peace within himself. “I’m not where I ought to be,” he wrote. “You have greater designs on me, O Lord. You’re trying to persuade me to aim higher… I’ll make you known to hearts that don’t know you … I’ll proclaim your kindness to sinners … I’ll get them to pray sincerely.”

He felt drawn to the priesthood and also to the poor. He also felt drawn to become a real saint, but recognized that the main obstacle to this was his overriding ambition: “God, keep me humble, lower my pride,” he prayed.

A Jesuit director suggested that instead of studying at the Sorbonne he should go to Louis-le-Grand College. Here he wouldn’t get a doctorate but would acquire a well-grounded theology.
In Paris, a two hour daily round of prayer, frequent confession and communion, the imitation of Christ, a loving Marian devotion, poverty and simplicity of lifestyle, no honours or special awards, and bodily mortifications were his regular means of sanctification. He recommitted himself to Mary: “I promise never to forget you. Assist me in all my activities.”

He visited nearby hospitals, seeing in each patient a suffering member of Christ. He became convinced that the poor needed not handouts from the rich, but real apostles like in the gospels. So from 1702 on, Claude felt particularly drawn to the most obscure and the most abandoned projects. He taught catechism to little boys from Savoy who had found their way to Paris. He also helped them out financially. He distributed food from the college to the sick and the poor and often went without a meal so that they might have something to eat. In particular he became aware of the many poor students in Paris, living in very substandard accommodations.

But all the while, he was thinking of faraway missions — these were his ultimate desire. Gradually however he began to understand that by helping future priests he would be indirectly achieving this goal. He met with four or five poor seminarians from time to time and saw to their welfare as best he could. The principal of the college agreed to give him some of the desserts of the regular students. He made a pact with his good friend Grignion de Montfort: “If God grants me success, you can count on my missionaries. I’ll prepare them and you put them to work.”

So, on Pentecost Sunday 1703 he dedicated his work to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Blessed Virgin conceived without sin.

But from the beginning of 1704, he felt no sense of accomplishment whatsoever. This lasted all year. He experienced an overwhelming sense of inertia in complete contrast to his former enthusiasm. But he stayed with the project: when his community grew to more than fifty he bought a house nearby which could hold seventy. He was ordained in 1707. And he died in 1709.

Jean Savoie CSSp, Spiritan Horizons

A prayer of Claude Poullart des Places

O God, you alone can manage the human heart.  
I acknowledge your power.  
For a long time you have been trying to speak to my heart,  
But for an equally long time I have refused to listen.  
Come to this heart of mine where you have wanted to come for so long — a heart that is finally ready to listen to you.  
O God, you want me to be a man after your own heart.  
Give me strength. Anoint me with your wisdom.  
Enlighten me with your insight.  
I will make you known to hearts that do not know you.  
O God, what do you want me to do?  
My heart is ready.