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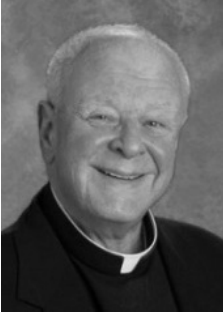
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## The Life of François Poullart des Places as a Paradigm for a Spiritan Boys' School Education



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MY EIGHTY-YEAR-OLD BARBER said to me when he found I taught at Holy Ghost Prep, “Your boys are all a success.” By that, I think, he meant that our graduates, whose hair he continued to cut, were decent people, found jobs and worked hard, took care of their families, and were good citizens. These homely characteristics are nothing to sneeze at and can be counted as a part of the success of the school.

As a high school teacher of more than twenty-five years, I long ago came to realize that teaching is an act of faith. That is, you rarely get to know whether the seeds you have planted have borne any fruit, or that what you hope you have taught actually made a difference in a person’s life. Ever since I have reviewed and reflected more upon the short life of Poullart des Places, I have come to see him as the embodiment of my hopes for our students.

The typical Holy Ghost Prep boy has many of the characteristics of Poullart des Places. He is talented and intellectually gifted, most are athletic, some artistic, their families have high expectations of, and for, them. Our boys are ambitious and competitive in a healthy way. One of our graduates coined the phrase, “Co-petition,” a combination of “competition” and “collaboration.” He said that while they all like “winning,” that is, getting good grades or succeeding athletically or artistically, they more than willingly helped one another to succeed as

well. In other words, the raw material we work with is very much like what we know of Poullart des Places.

I see Poullart des Places's life as unfolding in five stages.

1. He makes friends;
2. He makes mistakes;
3. He comes to really see the poor;
4. He looks in the mirror and chooses his own path;
5. He crosses the street to live with his young scholars. The first three stages we as a school can help form.

### POULLART DES PLACES MAKES FRIENDS

During the course of his schooling with the Jesuits, Poullart des Places had friends and mentors who played a significant role in shaping his character. The most famous of these was St. Louis de Montfort, an older student who became a lifelong friend. Since I have come to Holy Ghost Prep, I have been struck by the fact that our students are generally happy, not at all the norm for a stormy and angst-ridden time. "Cor Unum" and "brotherhood" are the watchwords of our students and the school. They generally make lifelong friends here, keep up with each other after graduation, are in each other's weddings, are there for each other in times of need or significant loss. The prototypical Boomer movie, "The Big Chill," had the line, "I was at my best when I was with you." I think our students experience that grace.

### POULLART DES PLACES MAKES MISTAKES

Poullart des Places famously had three incidents in which he displayed the developmental defects of the adolescent mind—impulsivity, poor judgment, and risk taking. He fired a gun he thought was unloaded at his sister when she annoyed him, nearly hitting his mother. He was almost fatally wounded while hunting with friends—presumably "just fooling around." And for him most seriously in a fit of hauteur and pique, he slashed a coachman who annoyed him or got in his way. His father managed to cover up this crime with a well-placed gift to the coachman. This he considered a major sin that he regretted the rest of his life, in part, I think, because it brought his own arrogance home to him.

Adolescent boys need space to make mistakes. There is a great scene in Lor-

raine Hansbury's epochal *Raisin in the Sun* when Walter Lee, the son, has lost the insurance nest egg which his mother has turned over to him as the "man of the house." The family was counting on this to provide for his sister's education and to give them greater opportunity by buying a home in a new neighborhood. In the plot, a neighborhood association representative has come to bribe the Black family into not moving into the all-white neighborhood. Because Walter Lee was so ashamed, he decided to sell out and take the buyout. After the sister expresses how she despises her brother for his lack of pride, the mother says, "When do you think is the time to love somebody the most? When they done good and made things easy for everybody? [The time to love is when] he's at his lowest and can't believe in himself. . ." The discipline of a Spiritan school should reflect that kind of love where students can make mistakes and mature from them. I've often noted that it is the graduates who "got into trouble" with our disciplinarians, Fr. Brown or Mr. Chapman, who most often return to support the school. There is still a fondness for the school even among those who have been "let go" for academic or disciplinary reasons." I would like to think that is because both of those notoriously tough men managed to convey that love and belief in the student that allowed them to become more a man.

#### POULLART DES PLACES COMES TO REALLY "SEE" THE POOR

During the course of his education, Poullart des Places was exposed to mentors who genuinely cared for and served the poor. In his interaction with the chimney sweeps and his poor students, he came to see them as persons with intelligence and great potential. He recognized the advantages his position in society had afforded him. He left the narrow world of his own class preconceptions and prejudices.

This gradual transformation took place through what we would call service projects or trips. These trips may begin as "service tourism," small forays undertaken for "credit" with little effect on the person's understanding or compassion. They may later grow into a genuine commitment to service. The transformation for Poullart des Places took place through serious reflection on his experience in a series of directed retreats. The school is working to continue to build that reflection into our service experience. This entails not only an examination of the students' feelings and perceptions of their experience in serving, but also an analysis of the causes of poverty. At this point in our students' lives it is planting a seed which we hope will grow as they mature.

## POULLART DES PLACES LOOKS IN THE MIRROR

Upon returning from his Jesuit-directed retreat after studying law at Nantes, Poullart des Places was presented by his mother with the elaborate costume of a French lawyer. He tried the clothes on, looked in the mirror, and not seeing the self he had become reflected there, took them off, never to wear them again. In that act he took the painful decision to go against his parents' hopes and expectations for his success and the fulfilment of the family's dream of restoration to the noble class. In short order, he also opted out of a life of ecclesial preferment by attending Louis LeGrand rather than the Sorbonne. These are moments of self-actualization, when he becomes a man, his true self.

To return to *Raisin in the Sun*, I think it was the critic, Pauline Kael, who described Sidney Portier's magnificent performance as dancing and skipping on the balls of his feet until he finally planted his feet and stood his ground when he refused the offer of the white association representative. His mother in the play says he became a man, someone who knows what he truly values and knows his own value. That image of coming to rest and planting your feet, I think, is an apt description of the vocational decision which is "selfish" in the best sense of that word. It is an option for the true, and deepest, and most authentic self.

Because this decision takes place later in life, our hope at the high school level is to provide the student with the building blocks of self-examination leading to an interior life, a recognition of his gifts, and confidence in God.

## POULLART DES PLACES CROSSES THE STREET

Perhaps the most definitive incident in des Places's life occurred when he moved out of his comfortable apartment at Louis LeGrand to move in with the small group of poor students he had been supporting. In that one act he gave up his superior position as benefactor to take his place as one with them. He shared their cramped accommodations, did household chores, and joined them in the never-ending task of scrounging for sustenance. In the process he also lost the leisure for prayer which had sustained a spiritual "high" up until that point. After a period of burn-out he regained his spiritual equilibrium after another directed retreat. It was this act of solidarity that led directly to the foundation of the Spiritans. He, unfortunately, died a few years after that and was buried in a pauper's grave.

## FINAL EXPRESSION OF HOPE

I offer these reflections as a way of thinking about our Spiritan ministry at Holy Ghost Prep. Presumably the situation is the same in many of our schools. All of these stages in the life of Poullart des Places took place gradually. He learned to set aside the preconceptions and prejudices of his class. He repudiated worldly definitions of success, and grew in awareness of and compassion for the world's brokenness. It culminated in "crossing the street"—a complete immersion in that brokenness in an attempt to repair it. He discovered that it is only within a community that this mending is possible.

The lay vocation may be described as making the presence of God tangible within the peculiar and particular confines of a person's life. It is the universal call to discipleship, "to be Christ's hands," that exists within the person's abilities, temperament, work, and family. Each life is meant to be a bright and colorful dot in the great pointillist painting of creation. Each dot vibrates together with others to create the whole magnificent picture. My prayer for our students is that each would find his place within that picture. My prayer is that we would, for a few, plant the seeds that would allow them to completely "cross the street" and live lives dedicated fully to the poor of this world. But for all, I pray that they would be a "success" as decent, hard-working people, living ordinary lives of love.

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