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## Claude Poullart Des Places and his Novel Approach

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## CLAUDE POUILLART DES PLACES AND HIS NOVEL APPROACH

### INTRODUCTION

I begin this reflection on Claude-François Poullart des Places having just visited *Rue Lhomond*, *Les Catacombes*, and *Saint-Étienne-du-Mont* after taking a few of my university students to several Spiritan schools and health centers in Northern Tanzania. For my students, the most pressing question was, “what is the connection between the person in the catacombs and this school in Tanzania?” As an oft described, and self-avowed, ‘devotee of Claude’, I see the parallel and connection, but I realize that much of my thoughts can be described as conjecture. It truly is impossible to determine if Claude François Poullart des Places envisioned a worldwide missionary order spanning the far regions of the globe. For a myriad of reasons, our source materials on Poullart des Places are rather limited. Because of this we must look into his actions and consider them in the broad context of France, Catholicism, and priestly formation in his time. When we do that, I believe we can best appreciate the founding of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in relation to present day Spiritans and the novel nature of des Places’ work. This is echoed in Pope Francis’ recent audience with the Spiritans, where he says God worked through des Places to “start something new in him, and through him in others as well.”

### FRENCH CATHOLICISM IN THE 1700’S

For me, it is impossible to look at the works of the Spiritans around the globe today and not see Claude Poullart des Places in the very fiber of that work. Even those with a passing knowledge of des Places, or his work, can share an anecdote about working in community or serving the poor. Those were, indeed, central to the life of des Places and cannot be disputed. What you don’t often hear is the rich context of his life. For a full understanding of why des Places was so truly unique, and revolutionary, one needs to understand the world des Places felt called to serve and why his specific response to meet the needs of the poor was the first of its kind.

France in the 1700’s was a society marked by great social, economic, and political upheaval. The needs of society were diverse and complex, ranging from economic inequality to political reform, and many needs stemming from religious conflict and lack

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of healthcare. These needs would shape the course of French history in the decades to come, and would, of course, eventually lead to the French Revolution in that century. The overwhelming majority of the population in France was Catholic.<sup>1</sup> According to most historical records, around 95% of the population identified as Catholic during this period.

During this time period, there were several Catholic religious orders in France, each with its own unique focus and mission. Some of the more prominent orders in France included the Benedictines, the Carmelites, the Dominicans, the Franciscans, the Jesuits, and the Ursulines. The Benedictines were a monastic order that focused on prayer, work, and hospitality. The Carmelites were a contemplative order that emphasized prayer and meditation. The Dominicans were known for their commitment to the study of theology and philosophy, and many of their members would then become prominent scholars and thinkers. The Franciscans were known for their simplicity and style of living. The Jesuits were known for their devotion to the ideals of their founder. The Ursulines were a teaching order that focused on the education of young women.<sup>2</sup> During the 1700s in France, these Catholic orders played important roles in the religious and cultural life of the country, and its people.<sup>3</sup> They operated schools, hospitals, and other institutions, and their members played important roles in society as scholars, artists, and thinkers.

### **A GIFTED NOBLEMAN OF GREAT FAITH**

When one thinks about des Places, one must consider the fact that he would have been aware of the landscape of the French Catholic Church of his time. It stands to reason there were points of contact with the influential Catholic orders of the day. Fr. Joseph Michel's text on des Places clearly shows that the family was well connected in Catholic France, beginning with the selection of Claude's godparents and his Catholic education in Rennes.<sup>4</sup> The matriarch of the family,

1. Betros, G. "The French Revolution and the Catholic Church". *History Today*. December 12, 2010. <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/french-revolution-and-catholic-church>.
2. Hayden, J. M., & Greenshields, M. R. "The Clergy of Early Seventeenth-Century France: Self-Perception and Society's Perception" in *French Historical Studies*, 18,1, 1993. 145–172.
3. "France: Religion and Politics until the French Revolution," in *Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs*, 2014.
4. Michel, J., *Claude-François Poullart des Places: Founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, 1679-1709*. 2012.

Claude's mother, was known to provide funds for the baptism of the children of local families.<sup>5</sup> For us to understand why Claude's work was so unique we must also understand his upbringing and personality.

Poullart des Places excelled in his studies at the Jesuit College in Rennes. At a young age he felt called to dedicate his life to the service of the Church and began to discern a vocation to the priesthood. He was deeply influenced by spiritual writings which emphasized the importance of a life of prayer, contemplation, and service.

Claude was academically gifted. There is no doubt about that. We also know that Claude was deeply contemplative in his thinking. His writings when he is struggling to determine his vocation show that. In Claude's lifetime the Church faced several challenges. The Enlightenment emphasized reason and scientific inquiry over religious dogma, which would pose a challenge to the Church's authority.<sup>6</sup> Some French Enlightenment thinkers of the time were openly critical of the Church and its teachings, while others sought to reconcile reason and faith in their writings.

All of these factors, compounded by a deep devotion to his family, competed in Claude's mind, and heart, as he figured out his path in life. As a young boy, Claude was known for his academic prowess and adherence to his faith. He was especially drawn to the poor and marginalized, and he would often give away his own possessions to those in need.<sup>7</sup> He was a young man of great faith and vision who felt called to dedicate his life to the service of the Church and the promotion of the Gospel message. He was only seventeen years old when he began to discern his vocation, and he had a deep desire to live a contemplative life while also engaging in active missionary work and education.

## THE NEEDS OF THE POOR

Claude's spirit of compassion and service continued to grow throughout his childhood, adolescence, and adult life. As an adult, he saw firsthand the poverty and suffering of the people of Paris, particularly those who were marginalized and excluded from main-

5. Troy, M. J., CSSp. *Riches to Rags* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Toronto, The Spiritans, 2005.

6. Warner, W. B. "The Enlightenment: A (French) Restoration." *The Eighteenth Century*, 2013. 54 (3), 415–419.

7. Deeson, F. L. *Eternal in their Destiny. A History of the Holy Ghost Fathers*. (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Dublin, Paraclete Press, 1968.

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stream society.<sup>8</sup>

He was particularly troubled by the suffering of those who lived in poverty and had no access to basic necessities such as food, shelter, and medical care. He had a vision of creating a religious community that combined the contemplative life of a monastery with active service to the Church through missionary work and education. He believed that the members of this community would be “apostles of the Holy Spirit” guided by the Holy Spirit in their work of evangelization and service to others. To realize this vision, he gathered together a group of like-minded individuals, poor seminarians, who shared his passion for missionary work and education. They all shared a common desire to serve the Church and bring the message of Christ to those who had not yet heard it. This was the early start of what eventually became the Spiritan Congregation.

Poullart saw the culmination of his personal beliefs about service and community come to fruition with the founding of this group in 1703, which was incredibly unique for several reasons. Foremost, it represented a new model of religious life that emphasized both contemplation and action, combining the best of monastic and missionary traditions. Second, it responded to the needs of the Church at a time when there was a great need for missionary work and education, particularly in the French colonies in Africa and the Americas. Third, it reflected a renewed emphasis on the Holy Spirit in Catholic spirituality, which would have a lasting impact on the Church in France and beyond.

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To this day the Spiritans are known to respond to the greatest needs of the communities they enter. It is important to think of what the needs of the French were at this time. In 1703, France was ruled by King Louis XIV, who was in the 60<sup>th</sup> year of his reign. The French were in the midst of the War of the Spanish Succession. The people were facing economic hardships and famine had taken hold of the country.

France was also just coming out of the period we know as the *Grand Siècle*, or the “Great Century”, which was marked by the emergence of a rich artistic and literary tradition.

The Catholic Church in France in 1703 was a powerful and influential institution, deeply rooted in French society and culture. It was undergoing a period of renewal and reform, as it sought to address the challenges of the times and renew its commitment to the spiritual well-being of the French people.

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8. Koren, H. J., CSSp, *To the Ends of the Earth* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1983.

*Spiritans would work to establish schools and other educational programs to help people gain the skills and knowledge they needed to succeed.*

## TRAINING FOR KNOWLEDGE AND VIRTUE

It is important to keep these events and occurrences in mind as we think about des Places. Many people were struggling with these issues and des Places would offer to those “with ears to hear,” a way to combat these societal issues as agents of social change. This appealed to many people who felt called to serve. He introduced several new elements to his approach to serving the poor and marginalized, which set him apart from his contemporaries and made a significant difference to the lives of those with whom he lived. As we know, his community grew rapidly under his leadership, so much so that the membership outgrew their original home after only three years.<sup>9</sup> After his death, what we know as the Congregation of the Holy Ghost continued to progress, became fully organized, and received the approbation of the civil and ecclesiastical authorities. It sent missionaries to the French colonies, and to India and China.

One of the key innovations of Claude’s approach was his focus on empowering individuals and communities to take charge of their own lives. Rather than simply providing charity and aid, Claude believed in working with people to help them develop the skills and knowledge they needed to improve their own situation. He believed that education was a powerful tool for empowerment, and in that line of service the Spiritans would work to establish schools and other educational programs to help people gain the skills and knowledge they needed to succeed.<sup>10</sup>

Another important aspect of Claude’s approach was his emphasis on the social justice dimensions of his work. He recognized that poverty and inequality were not just individual problems but were rooted in social structures and systems of oppression. We can assume that he worked to address these underlying issues by empowering poor seminarians by joining his society. We see this in the admissions requirements for the early Spiritans, as applicants had to be unable to otherwise afford a seminary education. Poullart des Places was deeply committed to social justice and the promotion of the common good. He believed that the Gospel message called Christians to be agents of change in the world, working to build a more just and equitable society. This was a radical idea at a time when many in the Church saw social justice as a secondary concern

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9. Troy, 69.

10. *A Short Life of Claude Poullart des Places*. Ireland: Office for Spiritan Life.

to personal piety and devotion.

It was this radical departure from his contemporaries that made Claude's work so unique and, quite frankly, flourish to this day. Claude was born into a wealthy family and was able to witness firsthand the stark contrast between his own privileged life and the poverty and suffering of those around him. He recognized that many people were trapped in cycles of poverty and had limited opportunities to improve their situations, and he felt a deep sense of empathy and compassion for their struggles.

*By empowering individuals and communities, addressing systemic injustice, and building strong relationships, Claude was able to make a lasting impact on those around him.*

Claude is also characterized by his deep commitment to personal relationships and community building. He was a charismatic leader who inspired great devotion among the members of his community. He was known for his humility, simplicity, and deep faith. He believed in getting to know the people he was serving on a personal level, and he saw his work as a way of building stronger, more connected communities. The story of Claude originally living across the street from the seminarians is well known. We know that he was struck by the physical distance between himself and those he felt called to serve. This distance was overcome by literally and figuratively crossing the Rue des Cordiers. In this he saw himself simply following the promptings of the Holy Spirit and encouraged others to do the same.

Poullart des Places indeed recognized that poverty and suffering were not just isolated issues but were often rooted in broader social and economic systems. He saw that the poor and marginalized were often excluded from access to education, healthcare, and other necessities, and that their exclusion was often the result of larger societal structures that prioritized the interests of the wealthy and powerful. He believed that caring for the poor was not just a matter of charity but was a key component of social justice. He recognized that poverty and inequality were major sources of social unrest and conflict, and that addressing these issues was necessary for creating a more just and harmonious society.

Overall, it is not hyperbole to say that Claude's unique approach made a significant difference in the lives of the people he served, and it continues to inspire and inform the work of those who follow in his footsteps. By empowering individuals and communities, addressing systemic injustice, and building strong relationships, Claude was able to make a lasting impact on those around him and put events into motion which gives us the Spiritan Congregation today.

This approach is incredibly unique and provides a new model for religious life that emphasizes both contemplation and action. It is not a stretch to say that his vision for the Spiritans was centuries ahead of its time. If we look at the changes he made and his rules for living in community it is as if he anticipated the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, which sought to renew the Church's focus on missionary work and social justice. Additionally, his dedication to education and evangelization helped to spread the Catholic faith and establish a legacy that continues to this day.

### A COMMUNITY OF SCHOLARS

One of Poullart des Places' greatest achievements was his work in the formation of priests. This was a radical departure from the traditional model of seminary education, which focused primarily on academic training and intellectual development. Poullart des Places believed that the formation of priests should also include spiritual and pastoral training, and he designed a seminary program to provide this holistic approach to priestly formation. The seminary was highly successful, and it became a model for priestly formation throughout France and beyond.<sup>11</sup> This approach was significant because it emphasized a holistic formation of priests that would prepare them for the challenges they would face in ministry. Michel best describes Claude's training as one focusing on "knowledge and virtue."<sup>12</sup> In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the model of seminary education that existed in France and other parts of Europe focused primarily on academic training. Seminarians were taught theology, philosophy, and other subjects in a classroom setting, but little attention was given to their spiritual and pastoral formation. The emphasis was on intellectual development rather than on the practical skills that would be necessary for ministry.

Poullart des Places saw this approach as inadequate and believed that priests needed to be trained in a more holistic way. He recognized that priests not only needed to have a deep understanding of theology and philosophy, but they also needed to be spiritually grounded and emotionally prepared for the demands of ministry. In all his work we see that Claude placed a great emphasis on the importance of community life for priests and seminarians. He believed that priests should live together in community to support one another.

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11. Koren, H. J., CSSp, *The Spiritans: A History of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1958. 13-18.

12. Michel, 13.



er, to share their gifts and talents, and to better serve the needs of the church and the world. In his view, community life provided a space for priests to cultivate mutual support, to develop their spiritual lives together, and to learn from one another. He believed that this kind of shared life was essential for the formation of effective, compassionate priests who could serve the needs of their communities with love and dedication.

*A departure from the traditional view that the clergy were the sole bearers of religious authority and that laypeople had a more passive role to play.*

## REFLECTIONS OF AN EDUCATOR

You may have noticed “CSSp” does not follow my name. I am a lay person who has felt incredibly moved by the work of des Places in my life. He recognized the important role that lay people could play in the life of the Church. He encouraged lay people to be active participants in the Church’s mission and to use their gifts and talents for the service of others. He recognized that not everyone was called to become a priest or a religious brother or sister, but that all Christians had a responsibility to live out their faith and contribute to the common good. This emphasis on lay empowerment was ahead of its time and paved the way for a more engaged and active laity in the Church. Without this, people like me would not be working with the Spiritan. Claude believed that we all could make a significant impact in our communities by using our innate skills and talents to serve others. We see this in Fr. Troy’s take on des Places,

As Claude saw it, one of the greatest mistakes being made at that time by both Church and State in France was their failure to tap the talents and energies of the “common people” — “the working classes”, too often seen as little better than bare-footed (*les sans culottes*) homeless city-slickers or uncouth ‘hewers of wood or drawers of water’ in the countryside. As far as Claude was concerned, given the chance of an education (through public funding, bursaries, or scholarships), these “pauperes” could very favorably compete with their peers from rich and/or noble families in any career including the priesthood.<sup>13</sup>

He encouraged lay people to be actively involved in the Church and to work together with priests and religious to help those in need. This was a departure from the traditional view that the clergy were the sole bearers of religious authority and that laypeople had a more passive role to play. Furthermore, Claude recognized the importance of education in empowering lay people to make a difference in the world. He believed that education was a key tool for promoting social justice and enabling people to improve their own lives and the

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13. Troy, 84.

lives of others.

### WHO AM I?

Throughout my life, and career, I often find myself thinking “who am I to continue the work of des Places?” It comes from a place of deep respect and reverence for a man that has offered me guidance on how to live my life. When I have those feelings, I look back to his writings and am reminded that des Places had a deep respect for lay people and saw them as important partners in his mission of serving the poor and marginalized. He believed that by working together, priests, religious, and lay people could make a significant impact in their communities and in the world.

*He is struggling deeply with what is he supposed to do and finally decides to not resist what he is called to do and says, “Aided by Your grace, grant that I may find an Ananias who will show me the true way.”*

If one were to stop reading my account of the novel nature of Claude’s work a few paragraphs ago they might be misled into thinking that this was an easy path for Claude. On the surface we have a deeply Catholic family who raised a pious son, who then went on to serve the poor. When the story is told in that fashion it is critical to resist the pitfall of glossing over the suffering des Places went through when doing these things. Claude went through a period of immense reflection and suffering as he weighed letting his father down by not carrying on the family work and legacy with pursuing a life of service in the Church. He constantly prayed about his vocation. He wrote in his retreat notes, “All the habits I have so laboriously acquired, all the esteem I shall have won through my labors, the friendship and trust of persons which I shall have won through numerous services, the goods, riches, honors, pleasures — will any of these follow me in the tomb, or will they help me in any way to win God’s favor?”<sup>14</sup> Here he is recognizing that these basic needs are essential for life but ultimately don’t fulfill him. He is struggling deeply with what is he supposed to do and finally decides to not resist what he is called to do and says, “Aided by Your grace, grant that I may find an Ananias who will show me the true way, as was done for Saint Paul. I will follow his counsel as I follow Your commandments. My God do not allow me to make a mistake. I place all my hope in You!”<sup>15</sup>

Claude was quite the orator, and it certainly sounds different but in my own life I echo his sentiment when I think, “God, I know you’re calling me, but I don’t know for what. I will trust

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14. Koren, H. J., CSSp, & Carignan, M., CSSp, *Les Écrits Spirituels de M. Claude-François Poullart des Places* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1959. 71.

15. *Ibid.*, 113.

you.” When I look at the struggle Claude went through in his life it gives me faith that God has put me in the right place, and I too can find my path. For me, what I think about most is how Claude made the conscious choice to do these things. So many are born into Catholic families and don’t take the time to think about their faith. Claude went to the best schools, he was connected with several prominent French Catholic families, and he was very intelligent. We know he took the time to discern his relationship with God. If he didn’t take the time to deeply think about this, he would have been a very good lawyer, who was Catholic. Instead, he walked in the path that God had shown him in a way that gave birth to the Spiritans.

*My personal experience with this is my understanding of what it means to serve students on the margins as they navigate college life.*

### **MY WORK WITH STUDENTS**

My work largely centers around college students. I have a portrait of des Places hanging on the wall behind my desk that is literally, and figuratively, looking over my shoulder as I do my work. It is not lost on me that Claude chose to dedicate his life to serving God at a very young age, whereas most aspiring priests of his time waited until their early twenties to begin their training. Claude’s decision was inspired by his deep sense of compassion for the poor and marginalized, which he had developed from a young age through his charitable work.

As an educator I see a guide in Poullart des Places. His commitment to education and social justice inspires me to see my work as a vocation that serves a greater good, and reminds me to prioritize the needs of marginalized students who may face obstacles to success. His example of combining academic rigor with moral and spiritual formation can also provide a model for educators, as we seek to develop the whole person and promote character education. Ultimately, his vision of creating a community of people who support and learn from one another can encourage educators to collaborate and build supportive networks to strengthen our work and impact.

In all of these ways, Claude François Poullart des Places represented a departure from the traditional approach to priesthood and religious life in his time. His vision for the Church was one that was more engaged with the world, more focused on serving the poor and marginalized, and more collaborative in its approach. This legacy has continued to inspire and shape the work of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and other religious orders that

have been influenced by his example.

My personal experience with this is my understanding of what it means to serve students on the margins as they navigate college life. The life and work of Claude guides my spiritual and professional life. Today, the Spiritans continue to be active in missionary work and social justice initiatives around the world, promoting the values and mission of their founder, Claude François Poullart des Places, inspiring generations of Catholics and others to live lives of faith and service to others.

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