

## FORWARD

On the feast of Pentecost, 1703, a tonsured cleric, Claude Poullart des Places, brought together a dozen young students who were studying for the priesthood, known at the time as “poor scholars”. This was in Paris, in a place between the Sorbonne University and the College of Louis-le-Grand. Six years later, he died aged 30, only one year and nine months after his own ordination. But in this short time he had given his own response to the decree of the Council of Trent regarding seminaries and had set up the nucleus of a religious family which today with 5,000 members is ranked amongst the larger congregations in the Church.

This was an amazing event. All those who founded new spiritual families when they were still young were well past 30 and practically all lived to at least 50:

### The age of some young Founders of religious Societies

	Age at foundation	Age at death
Poullart des Places	24	30
M. Olier	34	49
Saint Alphonsus Liguori	36	90
Saint Philip Neri	40	80
Saint Jean Eudes	41	79
Saint Ignatius Loyola	43	65
Saint Vincent de Paul	48	84

This story is, above all, the story of a soul. In no way was Claude Poullart a ready-made saint. He felt the call of the Lord from his earliest years but he took no notice because he was so obsessed by personal ambition. But when he reached the age of 22, he realised that he had lost the struggle and gave himself unreservedly to God. The surviving documents allow us to follow him through the different stages of his spiritual progress, which has been described as “a model of the most heroic virtues”. Unlike the biography of most young saints, the story of Poullart des Places is also that of an apostolic initiative that proved to be extraordinarily fruitful. At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the extreme poverty of the ‘poor scholars’ was the main cause of the mediocrity of a large proportion of the clergy. By attacking this poverty head on, this young seminarian was able to implement the vision of the Council of Trent: “a free seminary for the poorest”.

Thanks to him and his unshakable trust in Providence, these students were able to benefit from an extended and solid theological training. He also instilled into them a love of poverty, “the cardinal virtue of the priesthood”. The “Spiritans”, as they came to be known, renounced the attraction of lucrative benefices and became the apostles of the poor and most abandoned.

From the early days, some of these students were drawn to the foreign missions, to the extent that by 1750, four of the six bishops of the *Society of Foreign Mission* were Spiritans. Before the end of the same century, Rome had asked the Congregation of the Holy Spirit to take over responsibility for the Apostolic Prefectures of Saint Pierre and Miquelon, French Guyana and Saint Louis in Senegal. By this dedication to the most abandoned people of the black races, they were unknowingly preparing for that moment, chosen by Providence, when the members of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary, founded by François Libermann to work for the black people, would amalgamate with the Spiritans. Libermann subsequently became the 10<sup>th</sup> successor of Poullart des Places and died in 1852.

The influence of the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit was also felt by other religious families. His close friend, Saint Louis Grignion de Montfort, was inspired by him to found the Company of Mary which, until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, was known as the Missionary Priests of the Holy Spirit. The Daughters of the Holy Spirit were founded by René Allenou de la Ville-Angevin, a disciple of Poullart des Places. He wrote a rule for the sisters which was *“based on the one which was followed in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit”*.

So this is an introduction to the work and influence of the youngest founder of a religious order. He was also given the shortest time in which to organise and consolidate what he had started. In this and many other ways, the story of Claude Poullart des Places is unique in the history of the Church. It presents us with an enigma to which the reader may possibly find the key while reading through these pages.

Joseph Michel c.s.sp.

## PRINCIPAL ABBREVIATIONS

A.N.	Archives Nationale, Paris.
Arch. c.s.sp.	Archives of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. (Chevilly - Larue, France).
Asc. et desc.	“Ascendance et descendance de François-Claude Poullart des Places et de Jeanne Le Meneust ». (Ronéot, Arch. c.s.sp.)
Besnard.	« <i>La vie de Messire Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, Prêtre Missionnaire Apostolique</i> » by Charles Besnard s.m.m. (A manuscript in the archives of the Daughters of Wisdom, Rome. An English translation of relevant extracts can be found in the book by Henry Koren listed below, p. 277).
Jean-Baptiste Blain	“ <i>Lettre de Monsieur l’abbé Blain, docteur en Sorbonne, Chanoine de la Cathédrale de Rouen, à Monsieur Grandet, auteur de la première vie du Père Grignon de Montfort</i> ». This letter contains a résumé of the life of Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort. (Archives of the Company of Mary, Rome).
Koren	“ <i>The Spiritual Writings of Fr. Claude-François Poullart des Places</i> ”, edited by Fr. Henry Koren c.s.sp., Duquesne University , Pittsburgh, Pa., 1959. (Contains both the original French and an English translation).
Le Floch	“ <i>Claude-François Poullart des Places, fondateur du Séminaire et de la Congrégation du Saint Esprit</i> ”. Paris, 1906
N.D.	« <i>Notes et Documents relatifs à la Vie et à l’Oeuvre du Vénérable François Marie-Paul Libermann</i> ». Paris, 1929-1957.
Ren.	Archives of Ille-et-Vilaine.
Thomas	Pierre Thomas c.s.sp: « <i>Mémoire sur la Vie de M. Claude-François Poullart des Places</i> ». English Translation in Koren’s book listed above (p. 225).