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THE INFLUENCE OF MICHEL LE NOBLETZ

At the start of the academic year, October 1701, Claude Poullart became one of the 450 students who lived in the College of Louis-le-Grand. He no doubt owed this privilege of being accepted into this prestigious Jesuit college to the recommendation of his own director. He began by making another retreat and choosing a new confessor. For the previous ten years, the spiritual guide of the majority of the religious and theological students had been a venerable octogenarian priest, Fr. Jean Maillard, regarded as one of the outstanding mystical authorities of the Company of Jesus. His influence on Claude was considerable, either personally, through one of his disciples, or by his writings on the spiritual life.

From this point onwards, Claude was known almost exclusively as ‘Monsieur des Places’ (generally written Desplaces). It was a period when he deepened his spiritual life and prepared himself for some important decisions. Pierre Thomas describes it as follows:

“For a long time, he had been considering the idea of giving himself entirely to God. Nevertheless, he had remained more or less the same to the outside observer and retained the polished manners he had always practised. From 1702 onwards, he underwent a considerable change, but he did not lose that transparency, mildness and cheerfulness which virtue must possess if it is not to appear morose. The many students of the college who knew him well noticed that he had dropped his customary splendour and worldly manners. He was now wearing the habit and showed a striking simplicity, with no concern for what others might think of him”.¹

This great change must have come about after August 15th, 1702, because it was on that day that Claude received the tonsure and thus became a cleric. Lay students, even if they were studying theology, did not wear the soutane.

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This new approach to life was the result of a resolution he had made during a retreat at Rennes a few months earlier: *“Let us get rid of all human respect, fear of what others might think, complacency and vanity... Let others say what they please; let them approve of me or make fun of me, treat me as a visionary, a hypocrite or look on me as a holy man. From now on, all this will leave me completely indifferent”.²* Something had happened which had a profound effect on him and perhaps we can find the explanation in the work of Charles Besnard: *“His reading of the life of Fr. Le Nobletz, a missionary priest of great sanctity who worked in Brittany, was a great help to Claude in learning to despise the world and conquer human respect”.³* So we will follow up this clue to try to get a better understanding of his profound conversion.

¹ Thomas, p. 273

² *“On the Truths of Religion”*, p. 81

³ Besnard, p. 281

Michel Le Nobletz died at Conquet in 1652. Fourteen years later, an account of his life, works and miracles was published by Fr. Verjus.¹ Claude would have been anxious to examine this book in the library of the College, because the cause of beatification of this legendary hero of his country, Brittany, had just been introduced in 1701.

There were several surprises in store for him in the opening pages. Like himself, Michel Le Nobletz had shown a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin from when he was very young. Likewise, he had studied with the Jesuits and had been chosen to defend the “*Grand Acte*” in philosophy. And Claude must have been astonished to read that one day, Michel “*was on the point of running a young man through with his sword when he felt his arm restrained by that same ‘Lady’ from whom he had received so many favours in his childhood*”. His biographer continues that “*Michel was more grateful for this grace from heaven than for all the others he had received*”.²

This extraordinary parallel with Claude’s own life went even further: “*M. Le Nobletz was convinced that it was of paramount importance for the spiritual life to break with one’s principle weakness which is the root of all the others; he concluded that in his case, it was the fear of being despised by other people. So he begged the Lord to help him to acquire an increasing disregard for the approval of others by sending him trials that would assault his pride.*”³ Reading these lines, Claude would have remembered what he had written about himself on the last page of his “*Reflections on the Truths of Religion*”:

*“I shall have to combat enemies...Defend me Lord against those tempters. The most formidable is ambition – my predominant passion. Humble me, crush my pride, confound my vainglory. May I find mortifications at every turn and may men rebuke and despise me! I accept all this, Lord, provided you will love me always and that I may always be dear to you.”*⁴

As St. Augustine said, “*The example we feel most drawn to imitate is that of people who are most like us*”. The prayer of Michel Le Nobletz was answered, so that by his life and through his sermons, he became a veritable “doctor” of despising the world. This was a great encouragement for Claude. He had so much in common with his saintly compatriot that he modelled his life on the example of this great man. He read and re-read this book and Nobletz became his guide for life.⁵

¹ “*La vie de M. Le Nobletz, prêtre et missionnaire* » by l’Abbé de Saint André (the pen-name of Fr. Antoine Verjus), (1632-1706), Paris, 1666, in 8 volumes.

² Verjus, p. 13.

³ Verjus, Book 1, Chapter VI.

⁴ “*Reflections on the Truths of Religion*”, p. 81.

⁵ The process of Michel Le Nobletz did not advance greatly after 1701. It was due to Fr. Lejeune of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit that it was re-opened in 1897. On December 14th, 1913, his heroicity of virtues was proclaimed by Saint Pius X.