

IX

CLAUDE'S LIFE OF PRAYER

A short time after he came across the work of Fr. Verjus, Claude drew up a detailed rule of life for himself. The four pages that have come down to us concern his spiritual exercises.¹ He prayed for at least one hour each morning and evening and he visited the Blessed Sacrament five or six times during the day. The prayer to the Blessed Trinity that he recited morning and evening shows the clear progress he was making in his spiritual life:

“Most holy and adorable Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whom I adore through your holy grace with all my heart, with all my soul and all my strength, allow me to offer you most humbly my little prayers, for your greater honour and glory, for my sanctification, for the remission of my sins, the conversion of my father, mother, sister, cousin and all my relatives, friends, enemies and benefactors, as well as everybody alive or dead for whom I am bound to pray.

Permit me, Lord, to offer you the holy sacrifice of the Mass for that same intention so that you will grant me faith, humility, chastity, purity of intention, honesty in my judgement, great trust in you and a distrust of myself, constancy in doing good, final perseverance, sorrow for my sins, love of sufferings and the Cross, contempt for the world's opinion, regularity in the observance of my rules, your strength and power against tepidness, against human respect and against all your enemies.

Grant me also the favour, my God, to imprint in my heart by the indelible darts of your grace, the death and passion of my Jesus, his holy life and incarnation. May I thereby always remember them and be affected by them as I should.

Fill my heart and my mind with the greatness of your judgements and your gifts, together with the promises I have made to you by your grace. May I always keep them in mind and may I undergo a thousand deaths rather than be unfaithful to you. May I never forget the moments I have squandered in my life and may I always have a horror for my past sins (even though I should die of sorrow on their account if this were not opposed to your will). And by your grace, may I henceforth make better use of the time that is left to me. I only have one thing to ask you, Lord: that I may be deprived of all earthly and perishable goods and detached from all creatures and from myself and only attached to you. May I always live in your presence.

I beg you most fervently that I may be overwhelmed with opprobrium and sufferings. May I thus make myself worthy to receive your love, the love of the Blessed Virgin and the grace of knowing and fulfilling your will with perfect resignation.

These are the three graces which I implore more than any others. May I be ready to suffer death on the gallows or the rack rather than deliberately commit even one small venial sin. Humble me in any way you wish, for as long as I do not offend you, I want nothing more.

¹ “Fragments of Resolutions for a personal Daily Rule”. Translation in Koren, p. 117.

I ask you for all these graces through the holy sacrifice of the Mass which I hope to hear by your grace and through the prayers that I make to you. But I also ask for them through the precious blood which Jesus Christ has shed for me on the cross. I ask for them through the holy sacrifices which have been offered in the past, by those now being offered and those that will be offered in the future, especially those in which the body of Jesus will be immolated. I also ask for these graces by all the communions that have been and will be received in the past, in the present and in the future until the end of the world, as well as by all the prayers that are made to you each day.

Therefore, allow me to join my intention to that of all those holy people to whom I ask you to be a God of mercy, now and for all eternity, through the precious blood that Jesus has poured out for us. And I ask the Blessed Virgin to offer it to you, together with our hearts, so that it may be efficacious for us. Amen”¹

What an extraordinary journey he had travelled in just a few months! This young man, until recently, had thought of nothing but personal glory, was jealous when he saw others succeed, was full of regret that he lacked the necessary funds to achieve all his ambitions. Now he was begging God to deprive him of all worldly and perishable goods and grant him complete detachment from all creatures and from himself. Just like Michel Le Nobletz, he asked to be despised and covered in opprobrium and suffering.

His morning and evening prayers show that his main devotions were to the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the Eucharist, the Precious Blood and the Passion of Our Lord. His Marian devotion was marked by memories of his infancy: *“I will recite the ‘Sancta Maria’², to place myself under the protection of the Virgin Mary, to whom I was consecrated in my infancy by my parents and in whose honour, they clothed me in a white garment for seven years”³*. Going to God through Mary had become a habit with him; whether he was offering the precious blood of Christ to the Blessed Trinity, or himself to Jesus, he did so through the Virgin Mother.

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In a few pages under the title, *“Reflections on the Past”*, written during the Christmas holidays of 1704, Claude Poullart has left us an illuminating sketch of his interior life in the eighteen months that followed his tonsure. God had guided him to a level of prayer that the masters of spirituality consider to be the entrance into contemplation. In a small document on *“Affective prayer”*, Fr. Francis Libermann, the most illustrious successor of Poullart des Places as head of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, has given an excellent description of the most important characteristics of this phase of spiritual life.⁴ When he wrote this treatise, Libermann was completely unaware of the existence of *“Reflections on the Past”*,

¹ *Fragments*, Koren, p. 119

² The ‘Sancta Maria’ was the daily prayer of the members of the ‘Congregations of Our Lady’ which were established in the secondary schools of the Jesuits.

³ Koren, p. 111

⁴ *“Ecrits spirituels du Vénérable Libermann: De l’Oraison d’ Affection”*, pp. 149-209.

yet the similarity between the two writings is quite remarkable. The best commentary we can make on Claude's work is to place extracts from the two works side by side.

Claude introduces his reflections with these words:

"Heaven anticipated my requests. In exchange for a small act of love of God, I received spiritual gifts from him which words cannot adequately describe... My eyes never stopped shedding tears when I was meditating on my sins and the mercy of God. Whenever I took some little steps towards Him, he immediately carried me for many miles on his shoulders. Eventually, I was able to do effortlessly what I previously thought to be impossible for a man like me.

It is good that I recall those moments of fervour that I experienced when I first returned to God. What were my thoughts and desires at that time? What was my way of life and my ordinary occupations? It was impossible for me to think of anything other than God and it was my greatest regret that I did not always think about him.

Text of Poullart des Places¹

"I desired to love him alone, and out of love for him, I would have renounced the most legitimate attachments of this life. I wanted, some day, to be deprived of everything, living only on alms having given everything else away. The only thing I wanted to keep was my health, so that I could offer it completely to God in the work of the missions. I would have been very happy if I could have started the fire of love in people's hearts and then shed the very last drop of my blood for Him whose mercies were all around me".

"I never tired of speaking about these favours. I found very few people to whom I could talk about God's mercy towards me and I found pleasure only in conversations in which God was not forgotten. I felt guilty if I kept silence when I had a chance to speak of him. I found people intolerable if they talked to me about other things".

Text of Libermann

"The most difficult things cost nothing for a person who is really practising the 'Prayer of Affection'. He can undertake anything, is capable of anything and never hesitates, whatever obstacles and sufferings he encounters. The more intense the prayer, the more strength he has (p. 193). The immediate effect of this gift is a love of God which is very violent and ends in a kind of delirium. Those who receive this gift to an advanced degree normally proceed very far along the road of interior life and perfection" (p. 172).

"These people are consumed by a desire to make God loved and served by all those around them, and they strive with all their usual energy, talking and acting to persuade others (p. 197). They cannot tolerate conversations which do not ceaselessly talk about God". (p. 197).

¹ For the French and English originals of these extracts from Poullart des Places, see Koren, p. 131-139.

"I spent a lot of time before the Blessed Sacrament and this became my happiest and most frequent form of recreation. I prayed the greater part of the day, even while walking in the streets, and I was immediately disturbed when I realised that for some time, I had strayed from the presence of him whom alone I wanted to love".

"Such people have a great facility for remaining constantly in the presence of God. It would even be difficult for them not to do so when they have advanced deeply into this kind of prayer. They are always trying to remain there and the presence of God, for them, is full of love and gentleness" (p. 198).

"I met few people and was in love with solitude, where I often recalled my past failings. They even became a regular subject for my meditations, which caused me to shed many tears. What I had previously regarded as a quite ordinary sin of no particular malice now became something hideous for me; as I advanced in my prayer life, my hatred of these sins grew in proportion. At such times, I was totally ashamed and could hardly tolerate myself, so I remained filled with thoughts of humility".

"Generally speaking, such people experience a great sense of contrition for their sins. These sins are constantly before their eyes and they lead to profound remorse and feelings of humiliation. (p. 198).

The effects of the gift of tears are a great tenderness towards God and a determination to please and serve him.

When we weep for our sins...we could expect to turn in on ourselves; but instead, we fix all our attention on God."(p. 172).

"I despised myself and this became obvious to others, because I sometimes deliberately humiliated myself in their presence. This practice which I adopted, thanks to an extraordinary grace given to the vainest man in the world, resulted in many blessings from the Lord."

"The soul experiences an extraordinary fervour and leads us to act in a way that would make a normal person feel ashamed. This gift can be very intense... and one can act like a mad man in the eyes of the world, like Francis of Assisi at the start of his conversion, and several other saints" (p. 172).

"For example, I became very eager to receive Holy Communion. Even though I had the privilege of going to communion frequently, it was never enough for me, so that on many occasions when I was able to receive the body of Jesus, I burst into a torrent of tears. Through

"Generally, the great devotion of such people is the Blessed Sacrament...Their desire to receive the Sacrament is almost overpowering ... They long for the day when they will be able to welcome Our Lord once more. The effects of holy communion are very many. The presence

communion, I became detached from the world and its ways. I cared nothing for the esteem of others and even tried, on occasion, to deliberately displease them by acting contrary to their expectations."

of the Lord is felt to an extraordinary degree. The soul is smitten with joy and love...and tears fall in abundance..." (p. 173)

"The thought of Jesus crucified dominated my thoughts most of the time, even though I was still obsessed with a love of my corporal body. I began to practise small acts of mortification"

"Sometimes, people gifted in this way practise frightening penances, not always wisely ... Sometimes, they do not understand the things of God." (p. 172)

"Although I did not go very far with all this, and consoled myself with the thought that I would do much more in the future, at least I was faithful to my exercises and I would have considered it a very great crime if I had taken my meals, however busy I was, without having previously nourished my soul with the food I received in mental prayer."

"They have a great desire to carry out the will of God in all things and so they are very punctual and exact in observing the rules when they are in community, as well as their habitual practices in bringing glory to God". (199)

"I had learnt, in these meetings with God, to close my ears to all news and never to open them to see things that might merely satisfy my curiosity, not even when walking through the city. I did not know what was happening, I did not look at anything beautiful, I did not want to rob God of a single moment. I wanted to think of him alone, and although, in fact, I was far removed from thinking always about him and suffered rather long distractions, my mind was always full of him, sometimes even in my sleep and always in my first awakening."

"They have a great horror and disdain for the world". (p. 198)

"I felt compassion for those who were suffering and an ardent zeal to persuade sinners to return to God. This went so far

"Their love for their neighbour is very strong perhaps even too strong. They will do the impossible to help somebody or to

that I was prepared to do anything for them, however degrading. Finally, I practised a blind obedience to my director and respected his orders so greatly that I would not have been able to do the least thing without having previously obtained his permission for it”.

please them” (p. 200)

“A great advantage of this state is their obedience and docility towards their director and, generally, towards their superiors. They do not reason about it; when their director or superior tells them to do something, they carry it out”. (p. 199)

“I had the satisfaction of living in this way for eighteen months and I was very happy when I noticed that I was becoming more regular. I say “becoming” because I was far from believing that that state of virtue was sufficient and that I was now leading as holy a life as I ought. I had not been away from the world long enough to be free from the evil habits I had contracted while I lived in it. And these mingled with my small virtues, introducing many imperfections and sins.

“There are some people who stay in this state for a year or eighteen months, but it can be shorter or longer than this”. (p. 163)

It is true that God, who knew the depth from which he had rescued me and who had been satisfied at the beginning of my conversion with the least of my efforts, was pleased with the little I gave him, in the hope that finally, I would give him more. He did not judge his poor servant because he knew the depth of the abyss which I had just left. Certainly, I was not then in a condition where I could have been fully satisfied with myself. I took a strict account of myself and recognised that I was far removed from the state which I would have reached if I had corresponded faithfully with the daily graces God gave me”.

The anxiety brought on by remembering my past infidelities sometimes caused me so much remorse that my body itself was

“Although a person in this state is very happy, he can still experience great interior suffering. This can come from

affected. I became thin and depressed, thinking about his past sins and the although my health remained generally good". anguish can stay with him day and night". (p. 163)