

X

THE COURAGE OF A YOUNG SEMINARIAN

Claude Poullart des Places lived through the extraordinary religious experience that he described in the preceding chapter without really understanding it. In later years, he looked back on it with nostalgia and blamed himself for its disappearance. These words of Libermann¹ will help us understand a little better what was happening during those eighteen months of extraordinary generosity and fervour. He was gifted with *“...the prayer of affection ... This state cannot be acquired by personal efforts; only God can give it, however and whenever He so wishes. It is not a permanent state but a stage on the path to contemplation”*. It is only a stage, but one particularly suited to those who are destined to launch new apostolic initiatives: *“The most difficult things are not an obstacle for those who are in a state of affective prayer. For them, everything is possible and there are no worries about difficulties that may lie ahead. The more intense the prayer, the stronger they feel”*.

The spiritual journeys of many founders of religious orders would illustrate what Libermann was saying. With Poullart des Places, it is perfectly clear: it was while he was in a state of *“affective prayer”* that this young seminarian found the courage to start a seminary of his own. But this seminary would depend entirely on donations! When describing his own character, Claude listed ‘presumption’ as one of his dominant passions, but “courage” and “boldness” were conspicuously absent from the same list. In the unfolding of his project, which we can follow quite closely, there is not the slightest trace of a natural “boldness” or even “presumption”; all we can detect is an overpowering love, the response of a soul who has received so many good things from the Lord.

Regarding this love, Claude is very discreet; having listed the signs of his fervour at some length, he makes no more than a passing reference to it: *“I felt compassion for those who were suffering and an ardent zeal to persuade sinners to return to God.”* But his biographer, Pierre Thomas, was rather more explicit:

“A heart that was so generous and sensitive to the love of God made sure that it would not fail to show proper gratitude to Him who had held out a saving hand, and this feeling found expression on every occasion. He took great comfort from being able to console his Lord in the persons of the poor, who are all members of his mystical body. For them, he stripped himself of all that he could, even necessary things.

His father, who was not over-generous, gave him an allowance of only 800 francs. But he still managed to give a large part of it to the poor. He was particularly kind to poor people who were ashamed of their state and he had a wonderful way of avoiding any kind of embarrassment when giving to them. For this work of charity, he enlisted the help of a young student whose fees he had paid until a Jesuit house gave

¹ « *Ecrits spirituels du Vénérable Libermann: De l'oraison d'affectation* ». pp 149-209

him accommodation. But since he had to use most of the money his father gave him for his own board and lodging, he sent the best food he was given to the poor and sick and only kept the worst for himself.”¹

The “young student” he mentions was Jean-Baptiste Faulconnier. He was just sixteen when Claude started to help him in May, 1702. Later, he was ordained and became a parish priest in the Diocese of Orleans. Jean-Baptiste wrote this about his former benefactor:

“For at least three or four months before he set up his own community, he paid for my board and lodging in a house from where I could attend the classes of the Jesuits... During all this period, he sent me out to different places to bring alms to poor people, especially those who were ashamed of their condition”.²

As regards his own expenses, Claude must have paid out 368 livres, including 36 for the rent of his own room.³ These were the larger sums he had to pay, but there were several more that he could not avoid. For example, *“Most of what his father gave him was swallowed up by his debts to the College, so he cut out all the best parts of his diet and gave the money he saved to the sick and the poor and treated himself as the least amongst them”.*

∞

“If he was so deeply moved by the material needs of the “members of Jesus Christ”, he was even more attentive to their spiritual needs. He would instruct them whenever he had the chance, but he always drew them towards goodness in a gentle and kindly way. From that time onwards, he had a very special love for the most unknown and neglected people. He gathered together a group of young men from Savoy and taught them the catechism. He was convinced that they were just as dear to Jesus as the greatest aristocrats - and more likely to bear fruit!

In all this, he was following the example of his beloved Master, who had come to preach the gospel to the poor. To make up for having served God so badly in the past, he was ready to do anything to find him faithful servants who would follow him”.⁴

∞

Jesus Christ is the only source of all Christian perfection; it is by imitating his life and virtues that people become saints. But because saints are no more than faithful images of Jesus, it is in His footsteps that they lead their own followers. The more the written lives of saints are infused with the Gospels, the more they are sources of sanctity. Fr. P. Verjus illustrates this in his book on Michel Le Nobletz:

“Michel always enjoyed reading the life of Saint Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits, and this had a great effect on his own life story. Like Ignatius, immediately after his conversion, he worked for the greater glory of God and the salvation of men and women, and until the day he died, he looked for ways of sharing the ardent love that

¹ Koren p. 267

² This is taken from a hand-written note that is attached to the manuscript of Pierre Thomas.

³ *“Consultes des Jésuites tenues au Collège Louis-le-Grand (1708).* Manuscript 2130 of the Library of Sainte-Geneviève, pp. 322,323.

⁴ Koren p. 268

was burning in his own soul. He encouraged many students to give themselves generously to God and to look on this world with a certain disdain; this was the foundation on which he had built his own spiritual life. He deliberately went without those things which seemed to be the most necessary, and he rarely ate meat or took wine so as to save some of the allowance that his father sent him for helping the poorest people. In this way, he could also give them the even more valuable help of feeding their souls”¹

This extract is very relevant for us. At the same time as Claude Poullart des Places was setting up his work for the poor students, Père Verjus was also living in Paris. If he had published a second edition of his life of Le Nobletz, he would probably have added a further chapter entitled, *“The life of several people who followed in the footsteps of Michel Le Nobletz”*.

∞

In 1702, through his love for God and in imitation of Michel Le Nobletz, Claude also started to help some poor students, yet he saw his main vocation as work in far off missions. But he soon came to realise that God was calling him to a permanent commitment to the service of these indigent scholars.

Before proceeding any further, we must take a closer look at the little-known world of these poor young men who felt called to the priesthood.

¹ Verjus: « *La Vie de M. le Nobletz* », p. 20-21