

XI

THE SAD STATE OF THE “POOR SCHOLARS” -

When they signed the decree on the creation and organisation of seminaries at the Council of Trent, the bishops felt that they had taken an important step towards the reform of the Church. They knew that lasting reform depended on the transformation of the clergy and that this could never be achieved without seminaries. The text stated that preference should be given to poor clerics and that their formation should be free.

But in France, the wishes of the Council came into collision with all kinds of obstacles and it took until the second half of the 17th century before the effects of the decree began to be felt. In Brittany, the first seminary was opened in the diocese of Saint Malo in 1645 and that of Rennes in 1672. And these Major Seminaries, like most of those which already existed in France, were only set up for candidates whose ordinations were imminent. Young clerics entered these seminaries not to pursue their studies, but to prepare for ordination and priestly ministry by a retreat of varying lengths. The bishop of Rennes fixed the duration of his seminary at twelve months: three months before minor orders, and three before each of the major orders.

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Today, there is an obligatory path to be followed by all ecclesiastical students, so it is difficult for us to imagine what it was like for young people aspiring to the priesthood in those days and the particular difficulties encountered by those (a majority) who were classed as “poor scholars”. At Rennes, the students followed the classes of philosophy and theology given by the Jesuits or the Dominicans, but they lived in the town and their life-style hardly differed from that of the lay students. Coming as they did from several neighbouring dioceses, there were far too many of them to have any lengthy personal contact with their professors.

Those who came from rural and working-class backgrounds, as well as many from the lower middle class, often had to interrupt their studies for financial reasons. Some took up posts as teachers, some returned to their villages until such time as the family could find the necessary funding, while others had to abandon their plans altogether because their health had been ruined by their privations.

So it is not surprising that very many of these young men presented themselves for ordination examinations with very limited knowledge and almost no clerical formation to speak of. A unique document¹ has come to light that shows the unfortunate situation of some of these men. Twice a year, in January and August, the candidates had to go to Rennes for examinations. This was not a problem for those who were able to follow the full courses in that city, but the number of students who habitually resided in their own parishes was

¹ “*The Register of examinations for the diocese of Saint Malo*” This starts from 1713.

very considerable. They had to bring along a testimonial from their rectors or professors regarding their studies and behaviour.

The examiners first of all interviewed the deacons, then the sub-deacons, those in minor orders and, finally, the laymen. The students were questioned on the chant, the Catechism of the Council of Trent, Scripture and various areas of philosophy and theology. It was normal for about one third of the candidates to fail their exams. Some of them had to continue with their ordination studies for up to 15 years, but not because of the severity of the examinations; the comments of the examiners in the early pages of the Register of Saint Malo give us a glimpse of the situation that existed at the time:

“Marc Orinel, from Quédillac, 29 years old, sub-deacon since September 1711, presented himself for examination for the fourth time in January, 1714. His testimonials were good but he can hardly sing at all and his explanations of the Catechism of the Council of Trent were very poor. His replies were somewhat better on the topics that he had studied at Rennes for a whole year. But despite his lack of ability, he was accepted because it was said that he was unable to do any better. Admitted.”

This poor man received the diaconate in March 1714, but two years later he was rejected a third time for ordination to the priesthood:

“He came from his own village, where he had studied the Eucharist as a sacrament and sacrifice. He had a good testimonial from his rector, but he still sings badly and his understanding of Trent is minimal. So he was dismissed without having been examined on his treatises, with the warning that he should not appear again unless he could give a perfect explanation of the Catechism of the Council of Trent.”

But eventually, he would have been admitted. This was the case with François Samson, a 39 year old deacon, who had previously received the following assessment:

“He was only examined on the Council of Trent, but he continues to get worse and worse and there is no hope now that he will ever improve. But he had to be accepted or remain forever as a deacon. Admitted.”

Sometimes, these clerics took the same exam six or seven times, and were finally admitted with notes like; *“Admitted reluctantly...in desperation...out of sympathy”!*

Deacons who were rejected for ordination by the examiners could always appeal to the bishop. Quite often, the Register says that someone was admitted through the intervention of a particular bishop on condition that he would go to wherever the same bishop would send him.

While the examiners were able to test the knowledge of the candidates themselves, they had to rely on the testimonies that the young men brought with them when judging their way of life. At nearly every session, they sent away one or other of the candidates without even examining him. When the testimonial letters were contradictory, the decision would be delayed for six months to give time to investigate if they were based on first-hand knowledge or simply on hearsay. But the accusations had to be very grave before somebody was rejected definitively.

Most of those ordained planned their own future. Bishop Desmarets of Saint Malo had ordained 16 men to the priesthood. Four went to Nantes or Rennes for further studies, in the hope that their enhanced qualifications would help them find lucrative benefices. For different reasons, eight of them decided to live with their families or, at least, in their native parishes. Only two or three remained at the disposition of the bishop. As a result, he was obliged to ordain unsuitable subjects to provide for his small parishes and answer the needs for naval chaplains.

These examples from Brittany were fairly typical of the whole of France. So what was the pastoral value of such priests whose formation was so inadequate? The archives of the diocese of Rennes can give us some idea. There we read that of the priests ordained between 1679 and 1689, 56% were assessed as good or excellent priests and 20% as *“mediocre in both knowledge and virtue”*. Of the rest, it was said that they kept bad company, were excessively fond of wine or had doubtful morals.

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Faced with such a situation, some exemplary priests in Rennes diocese decided to do something about it, both for the sake of the “poor clerics” themselves and for those unfortunate people who would be confided to their care. The most fruitful initiative came from two Canons, Claude and Jean-François Ferret, brothers-in-law of Françoise Truillot, the godmother of Claude Poullart. In 1683, they contacted a well-known deacon working in Paris, M. Chanciergues, who had started a community for poor scholars close to Saint Sulpice. They asked him to send them one of his disciples to set up a similar establishment at Rennes. Eventually, he sent them Fr. de Saint-Aubin, who established a junior seminary in Rennes with the support and financial help of the two Canons.

From the start of his ministry, Fr. Bellier took a great interest in the young men who were preparing for the priesthood and this included the majority of those who attended his spiritual conferences. When Fr. Saint-Aubin returned from Paris in 1697, the bishop of Rennes appointed him superior of the junior seminary. The rules of this seminary stated that no student would be accepted without a “certificate of poverty”, signed by his rector. The students followed the courses in philosophy and theology given by the Jesuits, and they also had to go to them for confession. The bishop of Rennes decreed that *“students preparing for the priesthood would not leave the seminary to return to their own parishes...They would be sent to parishes, chosen by the seminary, to gain experience in pastoral work. If any refused to go, they would be suspended because this type of formation is the principal reason for the existence of the seminary”*.¹

If he had not already visited this seminary in the company of the Canons Ferret, Claude Poullart certainly went there many times after the appointment of Fr. Bellier. So he would have seen for himself the spiritual and material needs of the poor clerics.

In 1698, the Eudist Fathers, who were already running the Senior Seminary, took over the direction from Fr. Bellier. But this good priest continued to devote much of his time to these poor students. Up until 1711, he gave accommodation to twenty of them in his own house, which, incidentally, was very close to the Des Places family home.

¹ *“The Decrees of the Bishop of Rennes for the establishment of a second seminary for poor scholars and clerics of the diocese”*. (1709)



In 1701, a brochure appeared entitled: *“A letter to the Archbishops and Bishops of France regarding the best education that can be given to their clerics and the advantages that this would have for the Church”*. This brochure was a sort of preface to a much longer document on the same subject. It was signed by Fr. Jacques Alloth du Doranlo, a former lawyer and now the superior of a small priory in the Lande, in the diocese of Saint-Malo.

Fr. Doranlo had been a missionary for the last twenty years and the document was the fruit of a reflection by a group of missionaries in northern Brittany, which was made up of Fr. Leuduger, some Eudists and Jesuits and Fr. Julien Bellier. In view of the latter’s close relationship with both Fr. Doranlo and the young Poullart des Places, there must have been some contact between the lawyer who had become a priest and the young graduate in law who wished to do likewise. And Claude would certainly have heard the ideas of Doranlo and the rest of his group discussed by Fr. Bellier and he would have read the *Letter to the Archbishops and Bishops of France”*.

Doranlo begins by asserting that the fruits of the group’s missions, however successful they seemed to be at the time, would rapidly disappear soon afterwards. The missionaries did their best to root out sins and plant the seeds of a genuine Christian life, yet the nurturing of this seed was normally totally dependent on the parochial clergy. But *“it is difficult to find any of them who will put themselves out to follow up the work of the missionaries. Perhaps the fact is that they are incapable of carrying out this task. In any case, the result is that the effects of these missions do not normally last very long... So it is hardly surprising that the flock of Jesus Christ is in constant danger of attack when its shepherds are so ignorant; they are nothing but mercenaries who want to avoid all disturbance and who take to their heels as soon as the wolf appears”*.

The answer lies, he continues, in the implementation of the directives of the Council of Trent. Most priests fall short of what they should be, but how, when and where can these men acquire the necessary spiritual, intellectual and moral skills? The classes given in the colleges are not sufficient to instil the priestly spirit if the students do not have close relations with their teachers of philosophy and theology. And the sessions in the seminaries, where the young candidates prepare for ordination, only last a few months and are far too short to rectify the situation.

To be successful, the decree of Trent insisting on free training for poor students must be put into practice. One of the principal causes of the present deplorable state is the huge expenses incurred by the family of a young cleric who simply wishes to be a priest. Quite often, these poor men have more aptitude for this vocation than those who are well off; the gifts of grace come from heaven and have nothing to do with breeding or social position. The Lord gives them to whoever he wants and this is normally the poor and deprived, rather than the affluent.

The expenses are a great drain on a family until the poor student finally arrives at the priesthood. Then, to compensate the family for the generosity they have shown over such a long period of study, the newly-ordained has to look for money to repay them through his priestly ministry. So both the good of the Church and their own consciences suffer as a result.

Doranlo went on to say that the current deplorable situation would continue until the faithful were asked to contribute to the formation of the poor scholars. He had no doubt that there would be a generous response if the suggestion was put to them. For him, the ideal was to set up junior seminaries or communities where the poor students would be welcomed and supported in accordance with the vision of the Council of Trent.

The poor, like the rich, are called to share in the priesthood of Christ, so no effort should be spared to make them worthy of this vocation. They must be helped to acquire the four cardinal virtues of the priesthood: Christian piety, dedication to promoting the glory of God, apostolic work and poverty of spirit. (Fr. Doranlo had written a short treatise on each of these virtues.) In this way, the bishops would have no problem in finding good workers for the different ministries and worthy parish priests and curates. It would also produce good priests for the foreign missions:

“Several of them would be suitable to go to preach the Gospel to those who have not yet heard it. The famine of priests that exists in these huge countries makes us long for some kind of institution that would be able to tackle this problem. We should do something about it when we hear that there are only 72 priests serving the whole of China where there is a need for thousands”.

So Fr. Doranlo envisaged a totally feasible scheme where all the expenses for the education and material support of these poor clerics would be taken in hand. This confidence surely came from the successful example of the junior seminary at Rennes and the clerical hostel of Fr. Bellier, and these two successful undertakings must also have inspired Poullart des Places when he started his own work for the poor scholars in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.

Claude was soon to discover that the condition of the poor clerical students in Paris was every bit as bad as it was in the provinces. This is what the author of a pamphlet said about it in 1699:

“The life of the clerical scholars in Paris is the opposite of what one would expect from those who are called to the priesthood. There are many so-called ‘future priests’ who live a life of ease which leads them to loose living and irreligion. For those who are poor, their life is sometimes more orderly, but hardly ecclesiastical. The poor spend their time looking for something to eat while the better off seek to increase their fortunes. They all want to be priests but they are following a way of life that should exclude them from such a vocation. There are exceptions to what I am saying but this is the overall picture.”

The number of colleges on the Mount Sainte Geneviève in the Latin quarter would have led one to believe that a very large number of poor scholars could have been prepared for the priesthood in them in reasonable conditions. After all, most of them had been founded by bishops who had set up scholarships for candidates from their own dioceses. But the reality was very different. With few exceptions, they were in a sorry state. The Rector of the University, Charles Rollin, made a visitation of them in 1696 and his report shows a sad state of affairs. In a few, discipline was good, if a little too harsh, but the majority were very lax. For example, the Collège d’Autun was a scandal; Rollin sacked the receptionist and his wife, with instructions that henceforth, women should not be admitted to the bedrooms of the students!

In several of the establishments, there was no prayer in common for the students and sometimes, they did not even eat together. To try to improve things, Rollin introduced a fine of one *sou* for every time they missed morning prayer, evening prayer or Mass: on Sundays and feast days, the fine was doubled! These Parisian seminaries were only for those preparing for ordination and throughout the 17th century, it was possible to receive the priesthood without ever having set foot in a seminary.

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During the 17th century, when most of the bursaries fell by the wayside, some new forms of help for poor students appeared. The first foundation, which was called "*The Poor Priest*", was a charity established by Claude Bernard. The first seminarians who received help in 1639 had to sleep on straw that was spread on the floor of the basement. The founder was soon able to finance 33 students, and after moving several times, the seminary set up a hostel in rue Montagne Sainte Geneviève, facing the Collège de Navarre where it remained until the Revolution in 1789.

Around 1650, René Lévêque, a seminarian from Nantes at Saint Sulpice, gathered some students together in a room in the area of Saint Germain. As they were only provided with the strict necessities of life, they were given the name of "*the Brothers of Abstinence*". Once ordained, he left Paris, but the work continued with the help of François de Chanciergues. Born in the diocese of Uzès and studying at the Collège d'Avignon, François was able to observe how the lack of a residential college was most unsuitable for the training of future priests. He moved to Paris and in 1665 and joined the community of *The Brothers of Abstinence*. When he arrived, there were only 6 poor clerics, but ten years later, he had more than 60 under his care, divided into four groups which he called "*The Little Communities of Providence*".

His dream was to set up similar communities in all the dioceses of France, modelled on those he had started in Paris. He produced a booklet entitled: "*Small seminaries where poor clerical students, destined to work in rural parishes, will be freely educated in accordance with the spirit of the Council of Trent*". He set out his objectives and methodology with great clarity:

"Our aim in setting up these little seminaries or communities is to reform the rural clergy; we will provide small and poor parishes with good parish priests and the larger villages with competent chaplains and school teachers. We also intend to prepare missionaries for the Kingdom of France and for foreign countries. These priests will carry out those tasks of the Church which are laborious, poor and neglected..."

"We will only accept good children of peasants and manual workers and they will find the same conditions as if they were still living with their parents. As no charge is made, they will be given a room, a bed and thin soup every day. Every week, fortnight or month, their parents will bring them brown bread, lard, vegetables and other plain food which they would eat if they were at home..."

"In exchange for 15 livres a year (the value of their room, bed and thin soup), they will follow the same spiritual exercises that are practised in a seminary where the students pay 400 livres a year..."

“In Paris, there are four such seminaries for 60 poor students in which they receive the same education as is given in the great seminaries of Saint-Sulpice and Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet. They follow the same curriculum of study and spiritual formation; they learn plain chant, liturgy, catechetics and homiletics. They are instructed about ecclesiastical duties and at the University, they follow courses in philosophy, theology, moral and apologetics...”

“These small communities will produce not just good pastors for country parishes but also directors who will establish small seminaries in all the towns where there are colleges...”

“The communities will be places where the bishops will come to choose subjects for different tasks”

The foreign missions were not forgotten:

“These small communities will prepare zealous missionaries who will instruct the people, root out heresy both inside and outside the Kingdom and preach Jesus Christ to all the nations on earth”.

These dreams of Fr. Chanciergues were eventually fulfilled. After his death in 1691, his work was continued by another priest, Fr. de Lauzi. Thanks to a considerable legacy, the scattered communities were brought together in the rue d’Enfer under the title of the Seminary of Saint Louis. It continued until the Revolution. Outside Paris, 38 similar communities were established by his disciples according to the model of the founder.

In the Senior Seminary of Saint-Sulpice, there were endowments which allowed some poor clerics to study with the more affluent students who were able to pay the fees of 400 livres a year. Philosophers and theologians of modest means could be admitted to the small Seminary, opened in 1684, as the cost was halved by economising on food.

Some of the Sulpicians, like Frs. Bauin and Brenier, were very keen to look after these poor scholars, but their superiors did not approve of their involvement in works which were financially not viable. In 1691, the Superior and his consulters forbade Fr. Bauin to take any further part in the Community of Saint Anne.

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This chapter on the poor scholars has been necessary as an introduction to the initiative of Claude Poullart des Places to place it in its historical context. By the end of the 17th century, contrary to the impression given by most works of Church history, the problem of implementing the decrees of Trent on the formation of the clergy was still far from being resolved, both in Paris and in the countryside. The question of the poor scholars had received little attention; with very few exceptions, all the students entering senior seminaries still had to pay for their board and lodging. Even in the small communities, there were some expenses to be paid and the more generous institutions tended to disappear on the death of their founders, or at least they often lost sight of their initial generosity towards poor clerics and ended up more or less like the colleges of the University.