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THE FOUNDATION OF THE SEMINARY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Unfortunately, the section concerning the foundation of the community of Claude Poullart des Places is missing from the manuscript of Pierre Thomas as it has come down to us. But these pages were known to Fr. Charles Besnard and were used in his biography of Saint Grignion de Montfort:¹

“The close relationship that developed at Rennes between M. des Places and M. Grignion continued to grow over the years and the similar road that their lives and ideas were following showed that Providence had destined them to work together for the salvation of souls. They shared their ideas very closely, but so far, neither had been able to discern the concrete means to be taken.

It seems that one of them had been born with a dominant attraction towards the apostolic life, while the other felt drawn towards a life of stability and solitude. But both were totally devoted to the greater glory of God and they were constantly asking Him to show them exactly what He wanted them to do. These prayers were soon to be answered.”

Since the end of 1693, Louis Grignion had never returned to Rennes. He was ordained priest in 1700 and moved to Nantes to join the Community of Saint Clement, set up and directed by Fr. Lévêque, the founder of the *Brothers of Abstinence*. He arrived there in mid-October, a few weeks too late to have been able to meet Claude Poullart. By the following year, Louis was in Poitiers as chaplain to the General Hospital.

The two friends probably kept in touch by letter, but they were able to meet again when Louis Grignion spent most of the summer of 1702 in Paris and this gave them plenty of time to continue to share their ideas. Louis already had a fairly clear idea of what he wanted to do. Only a few weeks after he left Saint-Sulpice, he wrote to Fr. Leschassier, his spiritual director: *“In view of the present needs of the Church, I have been asking God to help me form a small, poor group of good priests who will work under the standard and protection of the Blessed Virgin”*. His director was not too encouraging, but Louis continued to dream of his *‘Company of Mary’*.

As for Claude, he was already looking after a few poor clerics, but God had not yet shown exactly what He wanted him to do. Twice a day, he asked for the grace to know and carry out the holy will of God:

¹ Charles Besnard was a Spiritan-trained priest who joined St. Louis Grignion de Montfort’s missionaries by virtue of the agreement made between the two congregations. He became the third Superior General of the de Montfort Fathers. The original of this manuscript is preserved in the archives of the Daughters of Wisdom, the congregation of sisters founded by Grignion. The manuscript has never been published but it has been a source from which many subsequent biographers have drawn information. The references given here will be to the original manuscript of Besnard, entitled *“La vie de M. Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort, prêtre missionnaire apostolique”*.

“M. des Places had the feeling that God wanted him to find priests for his sanctuary who would be teachers and guides for His people. He also understood that in order to succeed, there was nothing better he could do than continue to help the poor scholars to survive and pursue their studies. But he was not just concerned for their material welfare; he decided to bring them together in a room where he would go from time to time to instruct them and watch over them, as far as his life in the college would allow.

“He told his confessor about this plan and received his approval. The principal of the college went even further: he promised to help Claude with this excellent work by giving a part of what was left over from the dining room of the seminary to help the poor clerics”.¹

Long before his retreat of conversion, Claude knew that God wanted to use him *“for the holiest and most religious works”*. From the start of his second year in theology, he was begging God to let him know more exactly what he had to do, and he began to see his way forward with greater clarity. He was destined to be either a missionary or a martyr; his vocation would be to form future priests and he would respond to this call by continuing to help the poor scholars both materially and spiritually. His immediate plan was *“to bring together four or five poor clerical students whom he would try to look after, without making too much fuss about it”*.²

Fr. Mégret had been the Principal (today, we would call him the bursar) of the Collège Louis le Grand for the last 18 years. The enemies of the Jesuits claimed that he could not understand Latin; but they must have recognised his wonderful efficiency in running the material side of the college and the seminary where the students lived. They were not able to hide their admiration, nor their jealousy and they concluded that he was doing more “harm” to the University than his confreres who were so endowed with knowledge and educational skills! Confident that Fr. Mégret would continue to support him, Claude was able to plan the development of his work more clearly without being reckless.

In 1703, Grignon de Montfort made another visit to Paris in late April. Charles Besnard gives an account of the meeting:

“At that time, M. de Montfort was also thinking about another project which was close to his generous heart. The idea was to look for priests who would share his vision and bring them together to form an apostolic group. He liked to think of himself as a servant of God who would join with these men in their missionary work. Although he still did not know the time, the place and the way in which all this could be brought about, he felt certain that this was what God wanted him to do.

He decided to turn to Claude Poullart des Places to make these plans a reality. He went to see him and suggested that he join him as one of the founders of this project. Claude replied with his usual candour:

¹ Besnard p. 103.

² Koren: p. 149.

‘Personally, I don’t feel attracted to the missions, but I know what good can be done by them so I want to commit myself seriously to your plan. You know that for some time now I have been trying to help the poor students so that they can continue their studies. I know several excellent young men who, because of poverty, are not able to develop their talents which would be so useful to the Church. I would like to help by gathering them together under one roof and I am convinced that this is what God wants me to do. Several people whose opinion I value have encouraged me to go ahead with this work and one has given me hope that he will be able to help financially.

If, by God’s grace, I succeed in this, you will have your missionaries: I will train them for you and you will put them to work. In this way, both of us will be satisfied!’

“This was the outcome of their conversation and it marked the beginning of the close cooperation and mutual help that has always existed between the Mission of Fr. de Montfort and the Community of Fr. des Places.”¹

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Claude had already found the house to which he refers above. It was at the corner of rue des Poirées and rue des Cordiers, very close to the Collège Louis-le-Grand. The rue des Poirées started almost opposite the main door of the College. After about 40 metres, it made a right angle turn to the left and then joined the rue des Cordiers. It was used for parking by the many carriages which arrived each day at the College with students and visitors. After classes finished, the street soon became an impromptu debating hall for the departing students, often very strident. As the road was quite wide and unfrequented, they were able to continue with their arguments in the middle of the street, which would have been impossible in the adjacent rue Saint Jacques without getting run over by the barrows which hurtled down the road at great speed. It was in a room on the rue des Poirées, only a few yards from the Jesuit house, that Pascal wrote his *“Provinciales”*.

The rue des Cordiers, which since the end of the 19th century has been occupied by the Faculty of Science, went in a straight line between the rue Saint-Jacques, the College of Cluny and the rue de Sorbonne. On the south side of the rue des Cordiers was the famous Dominican convent of Saint-Jacques; this was why the Dominicans came to be known throughout France as the ‘Jacobins’. Amongst the illustrious men who had lived in this convent were Sts. Dominic, Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas.

The house which would be the cradle of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit was mid-way between the Hôtel Saint-Quentin and the Collège Louis-le-Grand, at the corner of the large square where the rue des Cordiers and the rue Saint-Jacques met.

The front of the building, where the old sign of *‘Nom de Jesus’* has been replaced by *‘Le Gros Chapelet’*, gave on to the rue des Cordiers. The *Gros-Chapelet* comprised two basements superimposed on one another, two rooms on the ground floor, four stories with three bedrooms and an attic. The corridor on the ground floor opened onto a small courtyard,

¹ Besnard, pp 103-104.

with a door onto the rue des Poirées. This is why in one legal document, Claude gives the address as 'rue des Poirées' whereas all the others situate it in the rue des Cordiers where the front door was to be found.

The Gros-Chapelet building was owned by Anne and Renée Peschenard, daughters of Nicolas Peschenard, the senior surgeon to the Queen Mother. These women had also inherited a much larger property with its carriage entrance situated on the rue Saint-Jacques, under the sign of "*Rose-Blanche*", almost facing the chapel of the Jesuit College. With its five main buildings, arranged around a courtyard and a well, the *Rose-Blanche* was certainly an imposing structure; the Peschenard family called it the '*Big House*', as opposed to the '*Small House*' which was how they referred to the *Gros-Chapelet*. A corridor under the building at the end of the central courtyard led to the small courtyard of the *Big House*. From there, one door gave onto the *rue des Poirées* and another onto the courtyard of the *Small House*. These details were important for anyone renting the *Gros-Chapelet*.

These two houses of the Peschenard sisters, between the Sorbonne and the Collège Louis-le-Grand, right in the centre of the University area, were given over to housing students. This must always have been in the minds of the architects because, apart from the ground floor, there were more than 50 bedrooms, each with its own chimney. The number of tenants was more than 100. The richest students rented an individual room; some of them even had their own horse and carriage. The poorest had to make do with a bed in a dormitory, as did the students of Louis-le-Grand and all the other hostels.

The Peschenard sisters, who lived at Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, rented out their houses to landlords. These then sublet the available rooms, often following the recommendation of the Jesuits. Since the 16th century, these two houses were, to an extent, dependencies of the College. In 1582, a young student arrived in Paris called François de Sales. The Jesuits "*found him accommodation in the "Rose-Blanche" on the rue Saint-Jacques*". And it was in the same building, around 1650, under the guidance of Fr. Jean Bagot, that François de Montmorency Laval, François Pallu, Henry Boudon, Vincent de Meur and several others set up the little association of "*Bons Amis*" (Good Friends), out of which was to emerge *the Society of the Foreign Missions (MEP)*.

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The landlords of the *Gros-Chapelet* in 1703 were François Guidamour and his wife, Marguerite Valtet. One can presume that on his visits to the young students lodging with them, Claude Poullart must have made their acquaintance and, from time to time, asked them for more rooms for the four or five young men whom he looked after financially. They must have shown sufficient sympathy for him to hope that the house would provide the stability and possibility of expansion which was so important for the work, a project which, for the moment, he kept to himself.

Each day, Claude would visit the students to look after their spiritual and material needs. When he called them together for a meeting, he would invite some others with whom he was in touch to join them. When the leftovers of the Jesuits were more than they needed, they would share the food with these other guests. They were 'external' members of the group, but as soon as the Guidamours had another room vacant, two or three of these externals would move in to join the others.

When they were about twelve in all, it was the students themselves, according to the *Gallia Christiana*¹, who expressed the wish to set up this small group as a clerical community. This was going far beyond the current vision of their benefactor, Claude Poullart des Places, but it was good to see that it was they themselves who wanted to take this initiative. It must have been encouraging for Claude, and reassuring for the Jesuits to see that their support for the initiative of their young theology student was not misplaced.

An old Register, preserved in the General Archives of the Spiritans at Chevilly-Larue, throws more light on these events:

*“On the feast of Pentecost, 1703, M. Claude-François Poullart des Places, while still an aspirant to the priesthood, began the establishment of the so-called Community and Seminary consecrated to the Holy Spirit, under the invocation of the Blessed Virgin conceived without sin”.*²

That year, the Feast of Pentecost, fell on May 27th. On the morning of the day before, the Jesuits assembled their students in the chapel and prepared them for the celebration of this great feast with a solemn exhortation. In the afternoon, as there were no classes that day, Claude and his ‘poor clerics’ got themselves ready for their consecration on the following day:

“The inaugural ceremony took place in the Church of Saint-Etienne-des-Grès, at the feet of the statue of Our Lady of Good Deliverance in a side chapel. This statue was very popular with students at that time....It was in this silent and little known chapel, on the feast of Pentecost, that the first members of the community knelt down together, led by the person whom they loved as their best friend and their father.

“This grace-filled day was preceded by a preparatory retreat, preached by Claude Poullart des Places. The subjects of his talks were humility, self-denial and zeal for souls. He told them that God had drawn them out of dust to make them princes of his people and apostles of his Church; so in accepting such an honour, they must recognise their unworthiness and understand that these words of the Lord apply, above all, to themselves: “He sent me to bring the Good News to the poor”. They were twelve in number and this underlined the apostolic character of their vocation. There was no great external ceremony for this first consecration of themselves to the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Virgin; they were the little flock that Jesus told not to be afraid. These young men pronounced their commitment with all their youthful enthusiasm, undertaking to prepare the ground in the neglected corners of their Father’s field.

The day was brought to an end with a fraternal meal around the table of their simple dwelling. The mustard seed had been planted and the Holy Spirit, by his breath,

¹ *Gallia Christiana* vol. VII, 1744, col 1042. This was a collection of details about the dioceses and personnel of the Church in France which continued to be published from the 16th to the 19th century.

² Arch. C.S.Sp. “*Registre des Associés*”. This Register was only started in 1734, but the details about the foundation were copied from an earlier one.

would transform it into a great tree, capable of taking the fruits of salvation and sanctity to the ends of the world.”¹

While the above account from Henri Le Floch, is partially imaginative, it is probably quite close to what actually happened; there was surely some oral tradition that was passed on by the first disciples of Poullart des Places, explaining the unbroken devotion of the Spiritans to the Black Virgin of Paris.²

In the month of May, Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort was ministering to the sick in the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. Because of their close friendship and the promise Claude had made him a few weeks earlier to prepare his missionaries for their work, it is more than likely that Louis-Marie was also present at the birth of the Community of the Holy Spirit. It is equally likely that some of the Jesuits, whose spiritual and material support were so crucial to the success of Poullart’s initiative, were also present. They were surely praying for these poor students to whom the Jansenists would give the nickname of “*The un-weaned babies of the Jesuits*”!

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The little community grew very rapidly. From 1704, all the rooms of the *Gros-Chapelet* were occupied by the poor students. But a great advantage of the *Small House* was that it belonged to the same owners as the *Large House* next door, so when the first became too small, they could overflow into the adjacent building and a connecting door could be opened. They were also able to find a large room there which could serve as the community common room.

Most of the students in the house were very young. We have already met Jean-Baptiste Faulconnier; he joined the community of his benefactor from Pentecost, 1703. Then there was René Jean Allenou de la Ville-Angevin, a young man of 16 who came from the diocese of Saint-Brieuc; he was later to adapt the rule of the community of Poullart des Places for the Daughters of the Holy Spirit. Pierre Thomas, the future biographer of Claude, entered the community in March 1704 at the age of 17. He came from Saint-Sever du Calvados in the diocese of Coutances. Pierre Caris arrived in October of the same year; he was the bursar for the poor scholars for the next 50 years. Most probably, Joseph Hédan of the diocese of Saint-Malo also entered in 1704; he was eventually one of the first missionaries of Grignon de Montfort’s *Company of Mary*.

From early on, perhaps from the very beginning, Claude had a collaborator called Jean Le Roy. He came from Gourin, a parish close to the Abbey of Langonnet³ and as he was already well advanced in his theological studies, he was ordained priest in 1705.

¹ Henri Le Floch c.s.sp. »*Claude-François Poullart des Places, fondateur du Séminaire et de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit* ». Paris, 1906, p. 280-281.

² Since the early days of the 19th century, the statue of the Black Virgin of Paris had been venerated in the chapel of the Sisters of Saint Thomas of Villeneuve (rue de Sèvres, Paris, until 1907 and at Boulevard d’Argenson in Neuilly until the present time). Fr. Bertout, the 5th successor of Poullart, testified in 1830: “*Before the Revolution, I often saw a statue of the Virgin in the Church of Saint-Etienne-des-Grès whose head, feet and hands were painted black*”.

³ Later to become a house of the Spiritans in the 19th century.

All these students were indeed poor. The families of Thomas, Caris and Hédan were peasants or illiterate labourers. Allenou de la Ville-Angevin belonged to the Breton nobility as his name would indicate, but his parents were crippled by debt and could not support him in his seminary training; the diocese of Saint-Brieuc even gave him a free testimonial because of his poverty (*“propter paupertatem”*).

It would be wrong to conclude from this list of names that most of the students at the *Gros-Chapelet* were Bretons. From the start, Poullart des Places wanted his work to be at the service of the whole Church, not just a particular diocese or province. The only things he looked for when interviewing potential candidates were *“poverty, good behaviour and aptitude for study”*. It is true that there were very many Breton students in Paris at the time. At the Collège Louis-le-Grand, for example, they were by far the largest contingent after the Parisians. The only reason why there were quite a number of Bretons in the rue des Cordiers was because of the Breton origins of the founder. Anne-Marie Lamisse, a cousin of Claude, had recommended Joseph Hédan, the nephew of one of her tenants from Hingueul. Jean Le Roy was surely pointed in the direction of *Rue des Cordiers* by Claude de Marbeuf, the Abbot of Langonnet, who had certain rights over the parish of Gourin.

Towards the end of 1704, Poullart des Places realised that it would be difficult for him to direct the rapidly growing work he had launched without neglecting his own theological studies. He became alarmed when he experienced a period of aridity in his spiritual life that he attributed to the heavy responsibility he was carrying alone. Although he directed the students towards the Jesuits for their confession (as he had done in Rennes), he still felt the need for a priest in the community. Such a priest would have to be chosen with great care, so he turned to a childhood friend, Fr. Michel-Vincent Le Barbier,¹ who thus became the first Spiritan priest. He was the son of Maître Claude de Barbier, one of the legal advisors of the Poullart des Places family. But it was friendship, rather than business, that had brought the two families together. Like Jeanne Le Meneust, the Le Barbier family came from Saint-Leonard de Fougères and the godmother of Pierre, the youngest brother of Michel-Vincent, was none other than *“Demoiselle Jeanne Le Meneust, Dame des Places”*.

In October 1705, Claude received Jacques-Hyacinthe Garnier into the community. Aged 22, he was a sub-deacon, born at Janzé, a little town in the diocese of Rennes. His arrival in Paris was not just an accident: it most probably resulted from the close friendship of two young religious sisters from the Hôtel-Dieu at Fougères. Their community had been founded in 1678 by four Augustinian Sisters from the Hôpital Saint-Yves in Rennes. Madame la Presidente de Marbeuf took responsibility for the journey of these sisters; three of them travelled with her in her carriage while the fourth was accompanied by a young lady of their Company in a sedan chair. This young lady was probably Miss Jeanne Le Meneust, who was happy for the opportunity to revisit the town of her birth.

On June 13th, 1703, Louise Mellet de la Tremblais, the 38th religious of the new community, made her profession; she had been born in 1683, the same year as Jacques-Hyacinthe Garnier. From the local parish registers, we learn that there was a great friendship between the Garnier family and the Mellet de la Tremblais family. The 39th Sister made her profession

¹ Born in Rennes on September 29th, 1679, he was baptised on the same day in the church of Saint-Jean. He was also ordained priest at Rennes, on September 15th, 1704.

in October 1703; she was Renée-Thèrese Le Barbier, the sister of Michel-Vincent.