

## XIII

### UNDER THE SIGN OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

*“All the students will adore the Holy Spirit, to whom they have been dedicated, in a special way. They will also have a particular devotion to the Blessed Virgin, because they have been offered up to the Holy Spirit under her protection.*

*Their special feast days will be Pentecost and the Immaculate Conception. They will celebrate the first to ask the Spirit to grant them a share in the divine love and the second to be given an angelic purity through the intercession of Our Lady”.*

These are the opening words of the ‘*Règlements*’, drawn up by Poullart des Places for the young students preparing for the priesthood. In this chapter, we will try to find the explanation for this double dedication to both the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

At first sight, one could assume that the consecration to the Holy Spirit could be explained by the date of the official inauguration of the seminary for the Poor Scholars - the feast of Pentecost, 1703. But this explanation would be too simplistic. The project of Poullart had already been going for several months before this date, so there was no reason why he could not have delayed the opening ceremony until the beginning of the academic year, or to another feast day of his choice. The founder must have had a particular reason for choosing Pentecost for the inauguration.

It has been claimed that Grignon de Montfort played an important part in the choice of the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Heart of Mary, but there is no document to support this. Charles Besnard knew nothing of such a contribution, even though he was a student in the seminary of the Holy Spirit and gleaned his information directly from the first disciples of the founder. So we have no alternative than to attribute the choice of patrons entirely to Poullart des Places.

To find the reason behind his choice, we must return once more to Brittany. Missions and retreats were the primary instruments in the religious renewal of the province and they were always conducted under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as a direct result of the influence of Fr. Louis Lallement. This Jesuit was the founder of a school of spirituality that, more than any other, stressed the importance of being always attentive to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He had died in 1635 and never even set foot in Brittany, but it was from this province that his most brilliant disciples traced their origins. He had a great influence on Frs. Rigoleuc and Le Grand from Rouen and Fr. Maunoir<sup>1</sup> from Bourges. Fr. Rigoleuc was the teacher of Fr. Huby, who in his turn, influenced Fr. Champion. These famous preachers of missions and retreats were also writers and spiritual directors. They were the main branches of a spiritual genealogical tree that was to spread its influence over the whole of Brittany.

#### **1) *The Association of Priests of the Holy Spirit in 17<sup>th</sup> century Brittany.***

---

<sup>1</sup> A. Pottier: « *Le P. Louis Lallement et les Grands Spirituels de son temps* ». Vol I, p. 395

Fr. Maunoir and his confreres always involved the local priests in their missionary work. They formed them into a sort of “confederation” and by 1683, it had more than a thousand members. This confederation owed much of its success to Frs. Rigoleuc, Huby and Le Grand.<sup>1</sup> The first two focused primarily on the pastoral and spiritual formation of the priests who came forward to help the missionaries, but for the moment, we must concentrate on the role of Fr. Le Grand (1598-1663).

He spent the last 30 years of his life at Quimper and was regarded as one of the closest followers of the teachings of Lallement. His obituary notice, which was written only a few days after his death, contains some points of great interest to us:

*“ His special devotion was to the incarnation of Jesus Christ and to the Holy Spirit, by subjecting all his interior life to the Spirit’s promptings and seeing Him as the origin of the holiness of priests...He inspired these priests to base their lives on the same conviction, having set up an association for them which was rooted in this belief...He exhorted them to prayer and spiritual exercises...This congregation has done a great deal of good in the three surrounding dioceses over the past 12 years. Through their example and teaching, its members are making a considerable contribution to the improvement of morality and their ministry in the parishes”.<sup>2</sup>*

The fervour of this association of priests was not just a flash in the pan; twenty five years after its foundation, the elderly Bishop of Quimper, Mgr. du Louët, was telling everybody that it had made a significant contribution to the improvement of his diocese. Apparently, the Priests of the Holy Spirit were at the very centre of the confederation of priests associated with the missionary work of the Jesuits. They were put in charge of the diocesan seminary when it was founded in 1678, and their chosen patron was the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

After his death, a booklet written by Fr. Louis Le Grand was published under the title: *“The Institution of the Congregation of Priests dedicated to the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin”*.<sup>4</sup> Here are a few extracts from the booklet which remind us not just of the teachings of Lallement but also of the insights of the founder of the seminary for poor scholars:

*“They will love spiritual poverty as the foundation of the evangelical perfection that they will strive to attain, abhorring not just avarice but the very appearance thereof.”*

*“They must renounce all ambition and any desire to raise themselves higher than others”.*

But the influence of the disciples of Fr. Lallement was not just confined to southern Brittany. There were no frontiers between Quimper, Vannes, Rennes and Nantes. All the Jesuits who played an important part in the missions and retreats were well known at the College of Rennes, where they spent time either as students or teachers. For example, Fr. Rigoleuc left behind him a reputation of both an outstanding scholar and a renowned teacher in the school. It was he who taught the humanities to both Frs. Julien Maunoir and Vincent Huby. As well as in the south, Fr. Maunoir preached in the Breton dioceses of Dol, Rennes, Saint-

<sup>1</sup> H. Brémond: *“Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux”*. Vol. V, pp 112-113.

<sup>2</sup> Pottier: op. cit., Vol III, pp. 390-391

<sup>3</sup> Séjourne: « *Histoire du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu, Julien Maunoir*”. Vol II, p. 43

<sup>4</sup> A. Quimper-Corentin, chez Jean Hardouin, 1667, in-12, p. 218.

Briec and in the neighbouring province of Normandy. On those occasions, the Jesuits of the college at Rennes joined their confreres Rigoleuc, Le Grand, Huby and Champion.<sup>1</sup>

Rennes and Nantes also had their retreat houses. The one in Rennes was founded in 1675 by Fr. Jean Jégou, who came from Quimper and was the rector of the college. He had a great influence. In the year 1687, more than 100 priests took part in a retreat organised especially for the clergy. It is recorded that the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, that was founded at Quimper, spread throughout the whole of Brittany; undoubtedly Fr. Jégou and his missionary confreres had a large hand in this. The guidebook of Fr. Le Grand, re-edited in 1680, must have been widely used by the priests who had followed these retreats.

## **2) The work of Fr. Champion, the “Evangelist of Fr. Lallement”.**

At Nantes, the retreats from 1680 to 1701 were led by Fr. Champion himself. Fr. Maunoir must have presumed that Champion would eventually become his successor; but this was not to be, since the time spent by Champion on the banks of the Loire came to be seen as “*a period of crucial importance in the history of French mysticism*”.<sup>2</sup>

When Champion arrived in Nantes, the future of the school of Lallement was far from secure. The Master had died in 1635 having written nothing; his first disciples simply lived out his teachings by basing their apostolate on what they had learnt from him. They likewise went to their reward without putting the spirituality into writing. Two more generations followed his teachings but they attached no name to it: most of them by then did not even know the name of its creator. It was now in great danger of being corrupted or disappearing altogether.

Fr. Huby, in his seventies, was very concerned about this, so he asked Fr. Champion to take on the role of “*evangelist*” of this school of spirituality.<sup>3</sup> He passed on to him the few papers that Fr. Rigoleuc had left behind – a few short notes that he had taken at Lallement’s conferences at Rouen nearly 50 years previously and some of his own spiritual writings. Fr. Champion was very conscious of the importance of the task that had been confided to him and from then on, he devoted all his spare time to what he called his “*little works*”.

The series started in 1686 with “*The life of Fr. Rigoleuc...and his devotional treatises and spiritual letters*”. This “*little work*”, like most those which followed, ran to 500 pages! It was such a success in Brittany that it was reprinted three times in the first five years.<sup>4</sup>

Champion began with Rigoleuc, not because he did not appreciate Lallement himself but because Rigoleuc was much better known in Brittany. Then, in 1694, he published “*The Life and Teaching of Fr. Lallement*”, and dedicated it to Gilles de Beauveau, the bishop of Nantes. It did not sell as well as his book on Rigoleuc, but Brémond refers to it as “*one of the most important works of modern religious literature*”.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> G. Duratelle de Saint-Sauveur: « *Le Collège de Rennes depuis la fondation jusqu’au départ des Jésuites* ». p. 193

<sup>2</sup> H. Brémond : op. cit. , Vol V, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> A. Pottier: “*Le Père Champion, the Evangelist of Fr. Louis Lallement* », Paris, 1938.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Sommervogel, under the word “Champion”.

<sup>5</sup> Brémond: op. cit. p. 140.

For Lallement, the two poles of all spirituality are purity of heart and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but the first is no more than a means towards the second:

*“Our aim, having worked for a considerable time on the purity of our heart, is to be so possessed and guided by the Holy Spirit that He alone controls all our powers and senses, as well as our internal and external movements. In this way, we will forget ourselves entirely, by renouncing our own wishes and personal satisfactions. Thus we will no longer live by ourselves but in Jesus Christ, by carefully following the prompting of his Holy Spirit”.<sup>1</sup>*

The Christological character of *“Doctrine spirituelle”* is obvious, yet the accent is nevertheless placed on the role of the Holy Spirit in the transformation of the soul in Jesus Christ. More than one third of the book is devoted to the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity and there is hardly a page where the Holy Spirit is not mentioned.

Although he continued to live in the retreat house in Nantes, Champion was no longer in charge, so he was able to devote more time to his *“little works”*. He turned his attention to Fr. Jean Surin, another disciple of Lallement. He had died thirty years previously and is best known for having been the exorcist of Jeanne des Anges, an Ursuline sister of Loudun<sup>2</sup>, but he deserved to be better known for his writings. Eventually, he came to be recognised *“as important in the world of spiritual writing as Boileau was in the classical”*.<sup>3</sup> Yet at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, nearly all his works were still only in manuscript form.

But one of them, his *“Catéchisme spirituel”*, was published at Rennes, without his knowledge while he was still alive. It is worth explaining how this came about. In 1644, Mme. Jeanne du Houx aged 30 and the widow of the Count of Forzan, entered Colombier, the monastery of the Visitation recently founded at Rennes. She was a holy woman with many exceptional spiritual gifts. Even in Brittany, there was much talk of the diabolical *“possession”* of the Ursuline Sisters of Loudun and of Jeanne des Anges, their prioress. As elsewhere, opinions were divided regarding this extraordinary phenomenon and the Bishop of Rennes, Mgr. de la Motte-Houdancourt, wanted more clarification. He asked Mme du Houx to visit Loudun and examine Sister Jeanne des Anges. Mme. du Houx gained her complete confidence, to the extent that five years later, she was asked to return to Loudun to help Jeanne prepare for her death.

Meanwhile, there was a considerable correspondence between Colombier and Loudun, and in 1657, one of the first copies of *Catéchisme spirituel* arrived in Rennes in manuscript form, a manuscript that Fr. Surin had no intention of publishing. But Mme du Houx, thinking of the good it would do to souls, quickly took the copy to a printer.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *“Doctrine spirituelle”* in the collection entitled *“Christus, 1959, pp. 176-177*

<sup>2</sup> The 1634 case of demonic possession in Loudun, France, is arguably the most famous case of multiple or mass possession in history. It involved the Ursuline nuns of Loudun who were allegedly visited and possessed by demons.

<sup>3</sup> H. Brémond: op. cit., p. 152.

<sup>4</sup> The second edition of *‘Catéchisme spirituel’*, also done without authorisation, was prepared by a Breton, Vincent de Meur, one of the founders of the seminary of the Missions Etrangères.

The first volume of Surin's work appeared in 1695, a second in 1697 and a third in 1700. Apparently, he was not too upset when he heard of the publication; he subsequently became the spiritual director of Mme du Houx and of some of the Visitation sisters in the two monasteries in Rennes.

Being led by the Holy Spirit was a thread that ran through the letters of Surin that Mme du Houx received. For example: *"To attract people to God, they have to be led to a great esteem and love for the interior life and to allow themselves to be led always by the Holy Spirit, with no other aim than to please God. If they do not arrive at that point, they will never attain a stable and complete virtue"*.<sup>1</sup>

Fr. Champion died peacefully in 1701, having carried out his mission magnificently. It was thanks to him that the teaching of *"The school of the Holy Spirit"* was preserved for future generations.

### **3) The formation of Claude Poullart des Places at the centre of all these influences**

It was during the most prolific period of Champion's work that Claude was going through his formative years at Rennes. It was there that the Jesuits of the college and the retreat centre were pushing his recently published works. The same was true of the Visitation Sisters. All this led to a considerable increase of devotion to the Holy Spirit.

Obviously, for most of the faithful at Rennes (as elsewhere), the Holy Spirit was still the *'Unknown God'*, or at least, they knew nothing more about Him than his name. But the more mature Christians were becoming increasingly aware of the Spirit's important role in the supernatural life. The confraternities of the Holy Spirit had been set up in several parishes in the town, and in 1698, a chapel in the church of Saint-Germain was dedicated to Him.

Claude must have been very aware of the spread of this devotion. In the rue Saint-Sauveur, where he spent his adolescence, one residence was known as *The House of the Holy Spirit*; it is quite possible that this was the very house where Claude lived with his parents.<sup>2</sup>

Claude's spiritual formation was influenced both by the Jesuits and Fr. Bellier. Julien Bellier had been educated by the Jesuits in their college and retreat house. He was part of the missionary team of Fr. Leuduger which owed much to the Jesuit Fr. Huby.<sup>3</sup> In northern Brittany, he was one of the representatives of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, founded by Fr. Le Grand S.J.

Finally, remember that Claude-François was studying law at Nantes. He certainly visited the Jesuit retreat centre in that town and most probably met Fr. Champion. But it is not possible to say which of these different influences led him to choose the Holy Spirit as the principal patron of the seminary he founded in 1703. Perhaps it was simply the whole ambiance in which he grew up that guided him to make such a choice.

---

<sup>1</sup> *"Lettres spirituels"*, the edition of 1843, pp. 126,137 and 278.

<sup>2</sup> Baneat: *Le Vieux Rennes*, p. 575.

<sup>3</sup> Mgr. A. du Bois de La Villerabel: « *Dom Jean Leuduger* », p. 88.

***But why did Poullart add “under the protection of the Immaculate Virgin” to the title of his institution?***

Since their foundation, the Jesuits had had a strong devotion to the Immaculate Conception,<sup>1</sup> so it is hardly surprising if this devotion is found in the writings and lives of the followers of the school of Lallement. Here are quotations from some of them:

Lallement:

*“What a preparation the Blessed Virgin had for the great dignity of becoming the Mother of God. The Lord exempted her from original sin and from the obligation to contract it. From the very start of her existence, he gave her more graces than all the angels and men put together.”<sup>2</sup>*

Julien Maunoir:

A short time before his death when he was preaching a mission at Lamballe, Blessed Julien Maunoir founded a congregation of laypeople with the title of the Immaculate Conception.<sup>3</sup>

Fr. Jean Surin:

In one of his letters, Fr. Surin links together the Holy Spirit and Mary conceived without sin:

*“On this feast of the Immaculate Conception, the purity of the Queen of Angels must be foremost in our minds. People who are devoted to her must share the same purity. It is a great gift of God for us and he leads us towards it by faith and suffering. The Fire of Divine Love will purify us, just as natural fire purifies everything it touches.”<sup>4</sup>*

Fr. Champion:

In both his own spiritual life and in giving direction to others, Fr. Champion brought together the two devotions which were dear to Poullart des Places. He saw the heart of Mary as *“the most perfect palace for the Holy Spirit”*. He had a special veneration for the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady which he did his best to share with everybody.<sup>5</sup>

A belief in the Immaculate Conception was shared by all the sons of St. Ignatius. From the start, the Jesuit colleges set up their own Marian congregations. For example, two had been started at Rennes, one for those studying the humanities, the other for the philosophers. Early in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the latter adopted the title of *“Our Lady, Assumed into Heaven”*; by 1750, it had been changed to, *“Mary, conceived without sin”*. But no proof has been found that this change of title had an influence on Poullart des Places.

Before entering the philosophy classes, Poullart had completed a second year of rhetoric at Caen. In that town, one of the Marian congregations in the Jesuit college had the title “...

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. V. Delaporte: *“L’Immaculée Conception et la Compagnie de Jésus”*. Paris, 1906.

<sup>2</sup> *Doctrines spirituelles*, p. 292.

<sup>3</sup> Séjourné: op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 200.

<sup>4</sup> *“Lettres spirituelles”*, Edited 1843, Vol II, pp. 176-177.

<sup>5</sup> A. Pottier: *“Le Père Champion”*, p. 149.

*under the protection of the Conception of the Blessed Virgin*".<sup>1</sup> There was nothing extraordinary about that since the Normans had been celebrating the feast of the *Conception of the Virgin Mary* since the 12<sup>th</sup> century. There is even a tradition that this feast was instituted by William the Conqueror!

At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the towns of Caen and Rouen were already celebrating a poetry competition known as "*The Palinods*", in honour of the Immaculate Conception. Before it was burnt down in 1944, the municipal library at Caen still possessed some of the winning poems in honour of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary for the year 1694. Whatever their content and artistic value, these poems must have influenced the young student of rhetoric who, a few years previously, had started a small association of students in honour of the Blessed Virgin in the town of Caen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Durtelle de Saint-Sauveur, pp. 167-168.