

XIV

THE HOUR OF TEMPTATION

During the Christmas holidays of 1704, Claude Poullart des Places made a retreat in the novitiate community of the Jesuits. From his *“Reflections on the Past”* which he wrote afterwards, we learn that he was seriously thinking of giving up the direction of his little community. Since the start of the year, he had been going through a very difficult period in his spiritual life, the sort of trial that one finds in the lives of all the saints as they are prepared for entry into a stage of contemplation.

After his initial conversion, he had thrown himself totally into his journey towards God, while God welcomed him with the tenderness of the Good Shepherd who finds his lost sheep:

*“I received consolations in abundance ... If I took any step towards the Lord, he would immediately carry me on his shoulders for the next few miles”.*¹

Such consolations are certainly graces, but graces which are temporary of their essence, adapted to those who are taking their first steps towards God. Such people are still a long way from perfection and they have to become far more detached from all created things. This apparent abandonment in the depths of the dark night brings great suffering to the person who has become accustomed to *feeling* his fervour. We can see this in the famous lament of St. Bernard when he went through a similar experience:

*“My heart is all dried up. It has hardened as when milk curdles. It is like soil without water. I am so insensitive that I am incapable of shedding any tears of compunction. I find no joy in the singing of psalms, nor in reading, nor in prayer. Meditation is impossible. I have lost all those things that make our exile bearable – the intoxication of the spirit, peace, tranquillity and joy”.*²

Francis Libermann also talked of this state:

*“Throughout this time of great suffering, the soul who perseveres gradually enters into the contemplative path which leads directly to a perfect union”.*³

To clarify further what is happening when somebody goes through these sorts of trials, St. John of the Cross uses the image of a log of wood that is thrown on the fire when it is still green:

“The fire begins by drying out the log; it expels the humidity by making it cry away all its sap. It then gradually turns it black and ugly, letting out a repulsive smell. But slowly, it draws out all the nasty hidden elements from within that are opposed to its action, until at last it catches fire and shines as brilliantly as the fire itself.

¹ Koren: *“The Spiritual Writings of Father Claude François Poullart des Places”*, p. 132.

² Bernard of Clairvaux: *“Sermons on the Canticle of Canticles”*; Sermon LIV.

³ François Libermann; *“Ecrits spirituels”*, p. 228

*... Something similar happens when the soul, still full of imperfections, is thrown into the divine fire of contemplation. This fire, before transforming the soul into itself, purifies all the elements that oppose it. It squeezes out all the dirt that is within; it makes it dark and more ugly than was originally apparent. Before this purification, the soul could not see or even imagine that these things dwelt in it, but now they all have to be brought to light before they can be destroyed and thrown out”.*¹

Claude Poullart was all the more upset by this purifying trial because it took place just as his community was beginning to develop. He was obviously concerned about his own spiritual life and his studies, but added to that was the burden of providing spiritual and material help for the 40 poor students who were relying on him.

Talking from her own experience, Theresa of Avila warned her Carmelites against too much disdain for external involvements:

“It is precisely when your zeal leads you to retreat into yourself that you must show your real love for God, because you will prove your fidelity to him much more when you are involved in external things than when you have withdrawn into seclusion. Believe me, you will grow much more quickly in virtue, even if you occasionally make some mistakes. I presume, of course, that you are acting out of obedience or out of love for others.

*Through such activity, we learn to know ourselves and appreciate the real quality of our virtue. However holy a person considers himself to be by living in solitude, he has no way of measuring if he is patient or humble. It is a bit like a soldier: we can't be sure of his bravery until we see him in action on the battlefield. It is a great blessing to know just how weak we are!”*²

Poullart, on the other hand, made no excuse for his shortcomings because of the crushing burden he was carrying; he rather exaggerated their importance. In his *“Reflections on the past”*, he verges on the borders of scrupulosity:

“It would not have been excessive if I had shed tears of blood to bewail my wretchedness. I had never been what I should have been, but at least I was quite different then from what I am now. If I had lost only half of the grace that had been given me it would not have been quite so bad; but now, I no longer pay attention to God's grace as I should, nor do I think of him in my sleep. I am always distracted, even when I am praying. I am no longer regular in my prayers. I have no fixed time or method for them and frequently cut short the time set aside for prayer and spiritual reading. I have lost the gift of tears by neglecting my prayers. As regards Holy Communion, my desire to receive it has lessened and my thanksgiving is full of distractions.

¹ St. John of the Cross: *“La Nuit Obscure”*, Book I, Chapter IX and Book II Chapter X.

² *“Livre des Fondations”*, Chapter V.

I no longer have the courage to mortify myself continuously. I used to do this to remind me every moment of the day to make up for the sins of my past life. I have ceased to keep watch over my senses. I readily speak of worldly matters, looking and listening to everything and no longer having the desire to speak about God. I have no great concern for the conversion of my brothers and easily give up on them and do not seek the help of God in such things.

I used to be indifferent to what people thought of me, but no longer. And I frequently flatter others. I am not kind and respectful in my words and actions but often proud and aloof. I put on a gloomy face to show that I am in a bad mood. I am sometimes ashamed of my own family and try to hide the fact that they sell linen and wax. I do not make it clear that I have no share in the work of the community for poor students; on the contrary, I am happy when people who hardly know me think that I am a rich man who spends his fortune on the welfare of these scholars.

I lack regularity in my duties towards God and my studies, praying and working only when I feel like it, taking my meals sometimes early, sometimes late, despite my frequent resolutions to change my life. I am tired of being so irregular, but I always end up following my own whims and ideas, without referring any more to my Director. I feel I have left him to follow my own inclinations.

To sum up, I confess before God that I am now as good as dead, at least in comparison to what I used to be. I am just a mask of devotion, a mere shadow of the past. I hope I will not fall even more but be able to use the grace that God gives me to examine more deeply my pitiable state and thus prevent any further decline.

This is the way that many good people have begun to slide down the slippery slope before eventually coming to a miserable end. I must be more in danger of such a fall than most, since throughout my life, I have so frequently returned to God only to fall again into disorder.

But surely this sad experience of my past life will help me to distrust my own strength in future. Being so full of vanity and presumption and neglecting the grace that God has given me, he would be perfectly justified if he were to abandon me altogether. If that fate has not already overtaken me, it is solely because of his infinite mercy.

He was always full of tenderness for me and unwilling to cast me off; he has protected me from that hardness of heart that leads to final impenitence. He has done this through miracles rather than the ordinary way of his providence. He has guided me to make this retreat when I had no idea of making one. And he has worked things out so that I can easily find a way to return to my obligations, without having to think up specious excuses. I had overburdened myself by taking on responsibility for these poor students, who were already being cared for by Divine Providence".¹

¹ "Reflections on the Past". Koren p. 165

After this analysis of the “*pitiful state of my soul*”, Poullart des Places now had to make practical decisions. He never seems to have considered that what he called his “*lack of fervour*” resulted from his excessive involvement in the running of the work for the poor students. The only way he could see of recovering his old fervour was to hand over the direction to others while he returned to solitude. It was indeed his hour of temptation!

“I believe that the good Lord will have pity on me again if I return to him with all my heart. At present, I am spiritually dried up and find it hard to work out what God wants of me. But from the way he has always treated me in the past, I think my hope is well founded. In the first place, he has never allowed me to be self-satisfied: on the contrary, I have always been upset by my chaotic ways. Secondly, he has always helped me to see that I was nothing like as good as others said I was. Finally, he never allowed me to get rid of my scruples and although they have been upsetting, they have made me go to confession more frequently and have put me on my guard when temptations returned. In short, the way God has treated me makes me hope that heaven will not always be like an iron door shut over my head, as long as I am truly sorry for my sins and use his grace to return to him.

So with this renewed confidence, I will now consider which is the shortest way to find once more the One without whom I cannot live in peace. I feel that this laxity and disorder is the result of my leaving solitude too quickly; I jumped into all this external activity, trying to keep the work going for the poor students. But I did not have a sufficiently solid foundation in virtue for undertaking such a work. After the terrible life I had led, even ten years of preparation would not have been sufficient for somebody like me.

If I had made use of all the graces that God had given me, I would have taken more care and remained steadfast, despite all those worries. This is clear when I look back on the beginnings of the project before I had lost all my fervour. But the whole thing was still very obscure for me. I thought I was not doing anything contrary to God’s will, but it was hard for me to remain committed and retain my balance.

Even though it seemed to be good, pride gradually crept into my heart. This had always been my great weakness and I was now being dragged back to this same snare which had caused my chaotic life in the first place. Possibly, the devil had approached me as an angel of light so as to seduce me. I don’t know what to think now, but I feel that I made a terrible mistake.

I got permission from my director before starting that work, but how honest was I in explaining my plan and what twists and turns did I use to get him on my side? At first, I said I only intended to take in four or five poor students and to try unobtrusively to feed them; but perhaps I did not reveal the whole extent of my ambition and vanity. I tremble before God because I did not speak to my director with the simplicity and openness that the occasion demanded.

These reflections fill me with great sadness. I left the world to seek God, renounce my vanity and save my soul. But perhaps I was simply changing the object of my

ambition so that I could hang on to it. If that was the case, then the whole thing had been a waste of time!”¹

It seems clear that the scrupulous Claude was incapable of making a distinction between his ideas and his intentions. He believed that he alone was responsible for his aridity, his inability to meditate and his loss of the gift of tears. His unfaithfulness had led him into apathy: he was nothing but a mask of devotion and a mere shadow of what he once had been.

But the fact is that even if his imperfections had increased, it was God who was leading him through this *“bitter and terrible night of the senses”*.² St. John of the Cross gave three signs to help people decide whether such aridity indicates the presence of spiritual purification or diminishing fervour:

“The first is when a person cannot find joy or consolation either in the things of God or in the things of this world. This is probably a sign that this aridity and absence of satisfaction is not the result of faults or imperfections recently committed.

The second is when somebody is thinking seriously about God and is worried that he is no longer serving him properly but rather running away from him. This is not the reaction of a person who is falling away through neglect.

The third sign is when one is no longer able to meditate by using imagination, however hard one tries”.³

These three signs are all to be found in Poullart’s case. But he himself was convinced that the primary cause of his back-sliding was taking on the work for the poor scholars rather than spending a longer time in solitude. He tells us that while he was at the stage of affective prayer, he followed a blind obedience to the orders of his director and would not do the slightest thing without his permission. But now, his scrupulous conscience was torturing him. Had he been really sincere with his director? When asking for approval, had he not hidden his real motives of personal ambition? So he decides that he will continue with the work but will hand over the direction to somebody else.

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The arrival of Monsieur le Barbier was surely providential. Some other saints had undergone a similar temptation; the Curé of Ars tried to flee from the confessional and find solitude far away from his parish. In the end, Claude remained faithful to the poor scholars until the day of his death. He confided himself to an excellent guide who correctly diagnosed the nature of his sufferings and thus restored his courage and peace of mind. The *“Reflections on the Past”* fully describes his anguish, but says nothing about how he got over it, nor does it give the name of this guide who showed him the way forward. Father Le Floch thought it must

¹ “Reflections on the Past”. Koren p. 167.

² St. John of the Cross: *“La Nuit Obscure”*, Book 1, Chapter VIII.

³ Ibid., Chapter IX.

have been Simon Gourdan¹ and he was probably correct. According to Fr. Besnard, Claude was a close friend of this extraordinary man for the rest of his short life.²

Fr. Simon Gourdan was almost 60 years old. He was a Parisian and studied in the Jesuit college at Clermont. When still very young, he entered the Abbey of Saint-Victor, founded in the 12th century by Guillaume de Champeaux.³ He was a serious scholar but he deliberately refused to sit for any degrees. As the chaplain of the famous abbey crypt of the Virgin Mary he fought strongly to protect the prerogatives of the Mother of God.

But at that time, the abbey was not particularly fervent and it had come far from the austere way of life for which it had been famous. Simon Gourdan was so disappointed with it that he left to join La Trappe in 1673, just two years after his ordination. Abbot de Rancé was very impressed by his sanctity, but he told him he would bring greater glory to God by returning to Saint-Victor. So he went back to Paris and decided that he would personally follow all the prescriptions of the original rule of the Canons of Saint Augustine. In fact, he went even further, as his biographer describes:

“Gourdan always retained the spirit which had led him to La Trappe and he followed the plan he had adopted in all circumstances: to offer himself to God as a sacrificial victim. From his return until his death, he never drank wine nor ate fish or meat and only occasionally took some eggs. He only went out once into the town and that was under the orders of his superior; an heretical minister was dying and he said that the only person who could make him change his mind was Fr. Gourdan. Even during the worst winters, he was never seen entering the heated room of the community. His own cell had no heating.”⁴

He prayed for 5 to 6 hours each day, slept for only three hours, wore a hair shirt and frequently used the discipline. He was like the Curé of Ars in many other ways. For example, more and more people visited the chapel of Notre-Dame de Saint-Victor; everybody wanted to see this priest celebrating Mass.

“Before long, many graces were being obtained through his prayers. So many came with Mass intentions that another dozen priests had to join Fr. Gourdan to fulfil all the intentions that were requested. Later on, his superiors asked him to put himself at the disposition of all the pilgrims, who came as much to see the chaplain as the Madonna.”⁵

By the start of the 18th century, he had become the most famous director of souls in Paris. But he still managed to find the time to write letters of spiritual direction and several spiritual books.

¹ Fr. Henri Le Floch c.s.sp.: « *Claude-François Poullart des Places, fondateur du Séminaire et de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit* ». Paris, 1906, p. 100.

² Besnard, p. 106.

³ This monastery was situated to the south-east of Place Jussieu in Paris.

⁴ « *Mémoires de Trévoux* », July, 1729, p. 1301.

⁵ F. Bonnard: “*Histoire de l’Abbaye Royale et de l’Ordre des chanoines réguliers de Saint-Victor de Paris*”. Vol. 2, p. 202.

It was most probably after assisting at his Mass and receiving communion from his hand that Poullart des Places opened his soul to Simon Gourdan. He could not have found a better guide. Despite the age gap, a deep spiritual friendship grew up between the two men. Gourdan must have been very impressed that Claude put his life and his work under the protection of the Immaculate Virgin and greatly stressed the virtue of poverty. It was Besnard who talked of their "*close friendship*", but, unfortunately, he did not elaborate any further. Yet what was important for Claude was that, despite his tenderness and depth of affection, Gourdan always loved as a saint and so was ready to treat his friends with great firmness where it was needed.