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RUE NEUVE-SAINT-ETIENNE

On October 17th, 1705, M Claude Poullart des Places rented a large house on the rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne, with right of occupancy after Christmas. Why had he decided to move from the rue des Cordiers which was so close to the Jesuit College? The date of the lease would seem to suggest that with the imminent opening of the new academic year, there would not be enough room for all the poor scholars whom he wanted to help. This would fit in with what Charles Besnard wrote:

*“The all-round progress made by his first disciples inevitably attracted many more excellent students. So he started to look for a larger house to accommodate them”.*¹

But there was more than that behind his decision to move. If the house of the *Gros-Chapelet* was becoming too small for their needs, what was to stop them expanding into one or other part of the *Rose-Blanche*, the large building which was very close? It was the obvious solution, but there were two snags about it.

The first concerned the residents of the *Rose-Blanche*. Since the time of the *Bons-Amis*, the atmosphere in the house could not have changed very much. It was in the interests of the hotel managers to maintain good order so as not to annoy the Jesuits who provided them with their residents, for it was they who retained the right to supervise the material side of the lodging, as well as the behaviour of the students. Nevertheless, *“as lodging houses normally accept a large variety of people, there were inevitably some whose behaviour left much to be desired. This caused the ‘Bons-Amis’ a great deal of suffering, being upright and honourable gentlemen, and they adopted the habit of retiring together after meals to the room of M. Gontier, which was next to the dining hall, so as to avoid listening to the unedifying conversation”*².

These disreputable lodgers in the *Rose-Blanche* must have felt provoked by the over-serious scholars they would meet in the corridors of the building when they returned from their lectures, carrying the leftovers from the dining hall of the Jesuits’ residence. It is not difficult to imagine the taunts and snide remarks they had to endure each day.

Most probably, this is what M. Faulconnier was referring to when he gave his testimony regarding Claude about 20 years later:

“In the early days of the community, he would often speak of the disregard we should have for disparaging remarks made to us; he spoke in such a way, full of the love of God, that he made it easier for us to put up with the many insults we had to endure at that time”.

¹ Charles Besnard; Koren, pp. 285.

² *Mémoire de Bénigne Vacher*, quoted by H. SY according to Arch.M-E, Vol 110, p. 68.

The second obstacle facing the young community came from the University of Paris. They believed that the Jesuit College was depriving them of a large number of potential candidates so they adopted a policy of making it difficult for their philosophy and theology students to be awarded diplomas. The University had the monopoly for such awards and let it be known that they considered students studying with the Jesuits to be unworthy of such official recognition. So those students who were ambitious for their future careers as priests began to realise that it was imprudent to continue to follow the lectures of the Jesuits.

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Therefore, at the end of 1705, the Community of the Holy Spirit moved to the rue Neuve Saint-Etienne. This street had already hosted several celebrities: Descartes lived in this road and Pascal ended his days there. At number 8, Charles Rollin, a friend of Racine and de Boileau, would later compose his famous *Traité des Etudes* and several historical works. In the future, the name of rue Neuve Saint-Etienne would be changed to Rue Rollin to honour the memory of this illustrious inhabitant.¹

Poullart des Places rented the very house where Rollin would live from 1712 to 1741. The property consisted of two buildings and the owner, Claude de Cornoailles, lived in the smaller of the two. The larger one had only two stories but it stretched across the whole length of the property. Its southern windows gave onto the courtyard which separated it from the road; the north looked out over a garden where there were fruit trees and a vineyard. This vineyard was surrounded by large gardens belonging to the Fathers of Christian Doctrine, the English Daughters and the Augustinian Sisters of the Congregation. The lease included wells, a stable, a place to keep coaches and a henhouse. So they had no regrets about moving from the rue des Cordiers; they were only ten minutes walk from the Jesuit College of Louis le Grand yet they were able to enjoy a semi-rural existence. Charles Rollin gave his own charming description of the garden:

"I am beginning to feel and appreciate more than ever the rustic life since I acquired a small garden which transforms the house into a country dwelling. I don't have any never-ending avenues which gradually disappear towards the horizon, but I do have two small paths, one of which gives shade under its arbour while the other is sunny for most of the day, with a promise of abundant fruit in the proper season. There are 5 apricot and 10 peach trees. I don't have any beehives but I have the daily joy of seeing bees visiting my blossoms, gathering the sugar and retiring, without doing me any harm at all. But my joy is not complete because when the temperature drops to freezing, I become very concerned about the fate of my beloved blossom and carnations".²

Claude and his poor scholars had plenty of room in the rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne. They had to add to the furniture they had brought with them from the *Gros-Chapelet*, adapt the house to the needs of a community of young clerics and arrange things in such a way that they could accommodate as many men as possible. Everybody joined in the work and the

¹ Marchis de Rocheguide: *"Promenades dans toutes les rues de Paris"*, 1910, pp 91-92.

² Ferté: p. 35 Charles Rollin had the following words engraved above the door of the room where Claude had previously lived: *"Ante alias dilecta domus, qua ruris et urbis incola, tranquillus meque Deoque fruor"*. (The house loved above all things where, living in both the town and the country, I could enjoy peace both for myself and for God).

inhabitants of Faubourg Saint-Victor were often treated to the sight of seminarians carrying planks and whitewash from the quays of the Seine.¹

The ground floor did not need many alterations. It consisted of a large kitchen, a store for wine and foodstuffs and a room that became the refectory. Two large rooms on the ground floor were furnished with desks and transformed into study halls. In the bedrooms, each student had a bed, a trunk, a wardrobe and a curtain, dividing the room from the person next door. There were a few separate rooms. That of Poullart des Places was on the ground floor of the building of M. de Cornoailles, with its door opening directly onto the courtyard.

Space was also found for a chapel, an infirmary, a recreation room and a library. The hen house was retained but as the community had neither carriages nor horses, this area was used for a parlour and a reception office. So with a bit of ingenuity, Claude now had enough room for 70 students, with all the basic amenities they required.

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On June 8th, 1705, in the church of Saint-Etienne in Rennes, his sister, Françoise-Jeanne Poullart des Places married Chevalier Henry Le Chat, the Lord of Vernée and a Councillor of the Parliament of Brittany. Her dowry consisted of 100,000 livres in gold and notes and 10,000 in furniture and gold plate.² The marriage gave at least some consolation to Claude's parents; even if their own family name was to disappear, they would at least have grandchildren who would be members of the nobility.

Claude François was not present for the marriage ceremony. On June 6th, the feast day of his Patron, he received the four minor orders³ in Paris. During the holidays in the following year, he spent some time with his parents and eventually asked them to provide him with a title of security for the priesthood, as laid down by the Council of Trent before a candidate could receive the sub-diaconate. This applied to those who were not in possession of an ecclesiastical benefice.

If he had agreed to it, he could already have been in possession of such a benefice. A certain François Lucas de Saint-Macou, a priest and missionary, had formally resigned from three benefices in Claude's favour, which would have given him an income of 1,800 livres. Quite possibly, his father had already paid something for this "gift". Thomas tells us that he was upset by the extent to which Claude had pushed his pursuit of poverty. He had given his daughter a handsome dowry so it was only fitting that he should do something similar for his son.

But Claude-François would not be drawn into such an arrangement. He forbade his own students from dreaming about lucrative positions in the Church and, as always, he backed up his words with example. He had written to M. de Saint-Nacou, saying: *"I do not wish to avail myself of your benefices so I am returning them to you to dispose of them as you wish"*.

¹ Thomas, p. 274.

² The official act of marriage can be found in Le Floch: p. 487.

³ The four Minor Orders following tonsure; doorkeeper, acolyte, lector and exorcist. Prior to the reform of the liturgy by Vatican II, these orders were essential for those proceeding to the priesthood.

The fact that he had shown his father this reply during the visit to Rennes makes it clear that the latter had played some part in this affair.

Claude refused to receive anything from his parents apart from the 60 livres per year that the Bishop of Rennes insisted upon, even for the poorest seminarians. So an arrangement was made that the 60 livres would come from the income of a rich property owned by his father.

Having obtained all that canon law required, Poullart des Places was able to ask the Bishop of Rennes for dimissorial letters to receive the sub-diaconate, and this order was conferred on him in Paris on December 18th, 1706. The following year, he received the diaconate on March 19th. His dimissorial letters for the priesthood were signed on July 15th by Fr. Perrin, the Vicar General of the Bishop of Rennes, Mgr. de Lavardin, which probably indicates that Claude was once again visiting his parents.

Claude's mother, Jeanne Le Meneust, still aided by Anne-Marie Lamisse du Hingueul, was still in good health but his father was declining. For several years now, there had been worries about him.¹ He was still managing his own affairs, but at a reduced rate. On the other hand, he was one of the most active members of the *Congregation of Gentlemen* that had been established at the Jesuit College under the title of *The Purification of the Blessed Virgin*.² Claude-François was anxious to soften the disappointment he had inflicted on his old father by the particular road to the priesthood he was following.

Claude joined the family once more, this time at the chateau de Vernée for the baptism of Henry Le Chat, the first-born son of his sister. The register of the parish of Chamteussé states that the godfather of this child was "*the noble and distinguished deacon Claude-Poullart, superior of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in Paris*".³ Jeanne Le Meneust was now a grandmother for the first time and had gone to help her daughter.



There was a serious set-back at the start of the new academic year. Jean Le Roy, one of the close collaborators of Claude since 1703, now had an excellent reputation in his diocese of Quimper and his ecclesiastical superiors placed great hopes in him for the future. One of the first decisions of the new bishop of Quimper, Mgr. de Ploeuc de Timeur, was to call him back to Brittany in 1707. Fortunately, as well as Le Barbier and Garnier, there were several other past students of the rue des Cordiers who were ready and willing to share in the running of the community. So Poullart des Places was able to take the time to prepare for ordination to the priesthood, which finally took place on December 17th 1707, by Mgr. Henri de Thiard, the bishop of Meaux and the future Cardinal of Bissy.

It seems unlikely that Claude's first blessing as a priest was to his parents, but he surely took great joy in blessing the young clerics whom God had confided to his care and in celebrating Mass in the little chapel of the community. Most probably, he also celebrated in his favourite chapels in Paris: the chapel of the Black Virgin of Paris, the protector of the

¹ Letter of P. Clemeanceau to F-C Poullart des Places, Minut. Le Hongre, January 25th, 1702.

² Archives d'Ille-et-Vilaine, 3 D 14.

³ From the registry of the parish of Chamteussé (M et L).

community, and the crypt of Notre Dame de Saint-Victor, where his friend, Fr. Simon Gourdan, was the chaplain.