

XVI

A RESPONSE TO THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

The foundation of Claude Poullart des Places was not just one of the many communities for poor clerics which grew up at that time; its originality included offering free education to all its students and a length and depth of studies that far surpassed all the others.

1. A free seminary for the poorest.

To gain admission to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, students had to be amongst the poorest of the poor:

“In this house, we shall accept only persons who are known for their poverty ... Nevertheless, it will be permissible to accept a few students who are not in dire poverty as long as they are not sufficiently endowed with goods to pay their way elsewhere. It would be advisable to ask them for a small amount to cover the petty expenses of the house, so that they will not be the cause of a decrease in the number of poorer students who should have preference.”¹

Both before and after his foundation, Claude received no more than 800 livres from his family:

“Although his father was wealthy and very devout, he did not fully approve of the extremes to which his son had gone in practising virtue, so he did not give him more than the usual allowance.”²

Claude’s greatest asset was an unshakable trust in Providence. His work would not have survived or expanded without the gifts of generous people. During the unsettled period at the end of the reign of Louis XIV, a great deal of faith and trust was needed by anybody who was foolish enough to take 70 impoverished seminarians under his wing. M. Leschassier wrote that it was very difficult to make ends meet at that time, especially for communities which were housing poor clerics.

The fact that the disciples of Poullart were following the lectures of the Jesuits put off many would-be benefactors. Fr. Delamarre, the parish priest of Saint-Benoît, had a great love for the poor and lived very poorly himself. In his affluent Parisian parish, he would have had no trouble finding plenty of funding, but he was too attached to the views of Jansenists and Gallicanists to steer such resources in the direction of the “*Placites*”!³ Cardinal de Noailles only gave help to people of the locality and Fr. Dorsanne, the most important of his vicars, had no time for the scholars of Des Places whom he referred to as the “offspring” of the Jesuits.

¹ “*Rules for the Community*”, Koren p. 167.

² Thomas, p. 272.

³ “*Placites*” – a pejorative name applied to the disciples of Claude Poullart des Places.

But the Jesuits were not without friends. Even apart from feast days, their college had plenty of visitors, most of whom parked their carriages in the rue des Poirées. This also helped the scholars who lived in the *Gros-Chapelet*; we know from the “*Règlements*” that the house was open to benefactors who wished to enter “*for charitable reasons and to be edified*”.¹

Claude Poullart would never have been able to increase the number of students he cared for from 12 to 70 without the support of generous friends. But the only such benefactors that we know by name were members of the Gorge d’Antraisgues family.

Pierre Gorge, the Seigneur of d’Antraisgues, was the son of a rich merchant of Rennes. He himself acquired a large fortune through various lucrative posts and he entered the ranks of the nobility by being made a Secretary to the King. In 1685, he married his second wife, Julie d’Etampes, a niece of the Maréchal de Luxembourg. The writer Boileau, who had been his neighbour at Auteuil, was one of his closest friends. He was also very close to the Jesuits. He now lived at the Clos de l’abbaye Sainte-Geneviève and several times a day, he would have seen the poor clerics of the rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne filing past his windows.

On May 27th, 1707, the fourth anniversary of the foundation of the Community of the Holy Spirit, Pierre Gorge ceded to Poullart the interest on a substantial debt owed to him by his nephew. On the same day, his eldest son, Chretien-François, who was a councillor at the Parliament of Paris, transferred a substantial income from different investments to the Superior of the poor scholars. On August 20th of the same year, Poullart purchased a plot of land in the Faubourg Saint-Marcel. He was quick to point out that he was not the real owner, but had simply “*lent his name*” to Pierre d’Antraisgues, his friend and benefactor.

As a last resort, Poullart des Places could always turn to Fr. Simon Gourdan for help. This saintly man frequently urged those he directed to be generous to the poor and he received considerable alms from donors for distribution to the needy. If he had wanted, he could have relieved his young friend, Claude, from all his financial worries, but he loved people as saints should love. His own sister lived in straightened circumstances, but he gave her nothing from his funds: “*One day, he explained that he loved her too much to deprive her of the rewards of evangelical poverty*”.² But everything indicates that, up to his death, he was always ready to come to the help of the poor scholars of the Holy Spirit if all else failed.

2. The influence of the Jesuits

One of the most enduring characteristics of the Community of the Holy Spirit was its dependence on the Jesuits. Without their endorsement, it would never have seen the light of day; without their support, it would soon have disappeared. This dependence was written into the Rule of the Community. The Spiritans went twice a day to the lectures on philosophy or theology at Louis-le-Grand. The Rule laid down that they had to choose a

¹ Koren p. 169: “*Règlement, no. 19: No woman is allowed to set foot in the house on any pretext whatsoever, except for benefactors who wish to enter for reasons of charity and edification*”.

² “*La Vie du Père Simon Gourdan*”, op. cit. p. 52.

Jesuit confessor so it was in their chapel that they received the Sacrament of Penance.¹ The eight-day annual retreat at the start of the academic year had to be preached by a Jesuit, and one of the duties of the cook was to go *“to the Reverend Jesuit Fathers for the leftovers which they are kind enough to give us”*.²

The Jansenists were disgusted with this threefold dependence of the Spiritan students on the Jesuits - intellectual, spiritual and material. They referred to them as the “sucking babes” of the Jesuits, whereas the students themselves were proud to be identified as the sons of the Company of Jesus.

Concern for the poor had always been part of the Jesuit tradition, but the attitude of the University of Paris towards Louis-le-Grand was a further reason why the Jesuits encouraged the initiative of Poullart des Places. Apart from the Spiritans, the number of students attending their theology lectures had been reduced to the Jesuit scholastics and a small number from elsewhere - no more than 100 in all. This was very small compared to the numbers they had had in the past, so the arrival of the Spiritan students was more than welcomed by the Jesuits.

Less than five years after their establishment in the rue des Cordiers, there were as many Spiritan students in the philosophy and theology faculties of the College as there were Jesuits. The enemies of the Jesuits were far from pleased by this increase in numbers at Louis-le-Grand resulting from the Spiritan presence.

The Jansenists showed their disdain when giving their own version of the origins of those they referred to as “Placites”:

“When somebody speaks of a ‘Placite’, he is talking about something worse than a Jesuit, if that were possible! We all know that the Jesuits were terrified when they saw their colleges being abandoned, but now they have found a way to reverse the situation: having brain-washed a certain M. Desplaces, they encouraged him to buy a residence and take in students on condition that they would only attend the lectures of the Jesuits. If one of these students went elsewhere, he would be expelled from their Community, where the members were only allowed to believe or listen to what the Jesuits were teaching”.³

The Sorbonne University realised that the rapid development of the Spiritans was a boost to the prestige of their enemies. This attitude became evident when the disciples of Poullart des Places were trying to get registration for their establishment through *Patent Letters* from King Louis XIV in 1726. As it concerned a community of students, the University was consulted; their advice was to insist that the Spiritans study only in their own schools.⁴ Fortunately, this advice was not followed.

Cardinal de Noailles, the overseer of the Sorbonne, also tried to prise the students of the rue des Cordiers away from the Jesuits. But in 1762, Mgr. de Beaumont, the second

¹ Koren p. 165: *“Rule no. 4: The spiritual direction of the house will be in the hands of the Jesuit Fathers. No one may chose any other confessor...”*

² Koren, p. 215, rule 227.

³ Letter to M. Becquet, p. 36.

⁴ Arch. C.S.Sp., Dossier Le Balguc.

successor of Cardinal de Noailles, looked again at the arguments of Poullart des Places when he addressed the Parliament which had expelled the Jesuits from their college in the rue Saint-Jacques and which wanted to force the Seminary of the Holy Spirit to send their students to the University for their studies. He said:

“The particular aim of this seminary is to train young clerics to be detached from the goods of this world and prepare them to go wherever their bishops send them; their preference will be to choose the most difficult places and the most abandoned posts, in short, the tasks for which it is most difficult to find workers.

The success and continuation of this excellent work depends, above all, on the directors following a policy that dates back to the beginnings of their institute and, in a sense, is their fundamental rule: that no student will be admitted or retained who aspires to gaining degrees in philosophy or theology. The directors communicate this basic spirit of the Institute to their scholars – to eschew all lucrative and prestigious appointments and to devote themselves to the most obscure and demanding works, such as teaching the Gospel to the rural poor, to the sick in hospital, to soldiers and to the pagans in the New World.

It is obvious that priests destined for such works have no need of degrees, and to force them in that direction would be to destroy the very nature of such an edifying and useful Institute. Self-love, flattered by the honour that goes with academic titles, and ambition, boosted by the privileges that are attached to them, would soon corrupt these young men into forming plans for aggrandisement and wealth, an aim that is diametrically opposed to the primary purpose of their formation.

It is no less evident that they could start thinking along those lines if they were obliged to pursue their theological and philosophical studies at the University. It would attract many subjects to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, armed no doubt with excellent testimonials, whose only ambition would be to decorate themselves with degrees. This would make it difficult for the Seminary to welcome those students whose sole ambition is to prepare for ordination and serve in the hardest and most difficult postings”.¹

Such a plea could not easily be rejected. If the University saw itself as “a nest of eagles”, so many of its ‘eaglets’, garlanded with degrees and flying off to the provinces, would dream of nothing but lucrative benefices which were worthy of their immense knowledge, gliding disdainfully over the humble poor in the rural parishes.

At least this cardinal had got the message!

The University, hoping to curtail the influence of the Jesuits, refused to give even a diploma to the students of Louis-le-Grand, but it seems that Poullart des Places, in sending his students exclusively to Louis-le-Grand was deliberately choosing a formation programme which would not lead to degrees, licentiates or doctorates.

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¹ B.N.Ms. Fond Jolly de Fleury...390, dossier 4,462.

In the Jesuit college, the philosophy course lasted for three years. The first was for Logic, the second Physics and Moral and the third for Metaphysics, Mathematics and a final revision of the whole course. In practice, the third year was followed only by the Jesuit students and a few Spiritans.

“There were two hours of lectures each day, one in the morning, the other in the afternoon. At the end of the lecture, the final quarter of an hour was given over to questions from the students. Lectures in Logic, Metaphysics and Moral were given in Latin. They were almost entirely dictated and the students’ notes were checked over by the professors. Most days, there was also a tutorial conducted by the lecturer; two or three students would give a summary of the recent lectures so as to clarify the contents. At the “disputatio”, theses were expounded by a defendant in syllogistic form and another student would orally attack what had been said. This gave the opportunity to assess the intelligence of the young philosophers. These disputes were aimed at sharpening their minds, giving prompt replies to objections, deepening their understanding of the teaching and assurance in their oral delivery. Politeness and respect were always insisted upon in these debates.

On Saturdays, the tutorials, known as “Sabbatines”, looked back at the theses that had been studied during the week. Each month, there was a gathering entitled the “Menstruale” which all the staff of the college were invited to attend. Once a year, there were public debates, when the most brilliant students would defend the thesis that had been taught during that year; anybody was free to attack them”.¹

Members of the public were invited to these annual intellectual joustings – clergy, members of the Court, legal experts and other educated persons.

Theological studies normally lasted for four years, and all the students attended the same lectures on a rotation system. Two professors taught dogmatic theology, one in the morning, the other in the afternoon and their didactic methods were the same as those teaching philosophy. There was also a chair of Sacred Scripture and a chair of Moral Theology or ‘Cases of Conscience’. The professor of Sacred Scripture was normally also the professor of Hebrew. Unless they showed no aptitude, theology students had to follow a course in Hebrew in the second and third year. But there was no chair of Canon Law because that came under Moral Theology.

3. Encouragement and close supervision of studies

For the Spiritan students, the lectures at Louis-le-Grand were followed up and completed not just by personal study but by a whole series of conferences, tutorials and other aids. According to the Rule of Poullart des Places, there were three tutors living in their Seminary – one for theology, one for philosophy and a third for Scripture. The theology tutor gave at least eleven tutorials a week while the one in charge of philosophy gave six.² But their duties did not stop there:

“The tutor from time to time will visit the Professors of Theology at the College to enquire about his students.

¹ Delattre : *“Les établissements des Jésuites en France »*, col. 1181.

² Rule 51

“He will appoint students to defend theses (in scholastic debates) and also indicate those who will argue against them.

He will be present at the public defence of theses.

Every day, he will devote some time to those who are having difficulties with their studies.

The Rule has some special guidelines for the tutor of Sacred Scripture:

“He will give one tutorial of three quarters of an hour every Sunday and Holy Day. He will begin by explaining or having someone else explain the Scriptures word by word. If the passages are of a controversial nature, he will give the different opinions of the Fathers of the Church and scripture scholars. He will draw a moral lesson, following the most reliable authorities, from the points he has expounded. He will reply to the difficulties raised and will question the students as he thinks fit”.¹

Despite the prominence given to the teaching of dogmatic theology, moral theology was in no way neglected. On the contrary, it was seen as essential for future priests who would be administering the sacrament of Penance, above all because their ministry would take them to many isolated places. Cases of conscience would be given to the senior students for their consideration and would be examined subsequently in a conference.²

The Rule also stressed the importance of the study of plain chant and liturgy, as well as preaching and catechises. The academic progress of the seminarians was frequently examined: *“The students will be examined each year at the end of Lent and July. This will also include an assessment of their conduct. The Superior shall dismiss those who have not given satisfaction and who are showing no signs of possible progress in the future.”³*

Claude Poullart did not hesitate to sanction those who did not reach the required standard, but he made a point of praising and encouraging the better students. No doubt remembering the *Grand Acte* that he had defended at Rennes in his earlier years, he appreciated the value of the end of year *Theses*. He made sure that their poverty did not prevent the more able students from taking part in these exercises; the Rule stated that the Seminary would meet the expenses of those who were put forward and this was observed up to the death of Claude.

4. Following the genuine teaching of the Catholic Church

Having completed their studies in philosophy and theology for six or seven years, students were offered the possibility of spending a further two years of study in the community. As the Rule stated, *“They shall spend two years in the study of moral theology and Canon Law, in which they are permitted to take a degree”.*⁴ As there were no specific courses in Canon Law at Louis-le-Grand, the Spiritans studied it at one of the Colleges of the University.⁵ As a

¹ Rules 51 and 131-137.

² Rule 48.

³ Rule no. 10.

⁴ Rule no. 11.

⁵ Probably, the College at Beauvais.

rule, the Baccalaureate took fifteen months and the Licence three whole years. But students who were over 24 when they applied were not bound by these requirements.

This freedom to graduate in Canon Law that Poullart extended to his students calls for a further precision of his overall plan. In the Memorandum later submitted to Parliament by Mgr. de Beaumont shortly after the suppression of the Jesuits, it was stated that the policy of students of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit renouncing the possibility of qualifications in philosophy and theology was a “custom” that dated back to the foundation of this establishment and so should be regarded “*as a fundamental rule*”. However, there is no such rule in the text of the *Règlements*; it was rather a custom. But as every student applying to enter the Seminary agreed that he would study philosophy and theology at Louis-le-Grand, this was a de facto renunciation of any graduation.

However, when Claude Poullart insisted that his students follow the courses offered by the Jesuits it was not primarily to escape the temptation of degrees. If his own personal choice in 1701 had been to forego a Licence or Doctorate, there was nothing to stop him attending the University, as all students there were free to take degrees or not as they wished. But above all, he opted for the Jesuit College because he wanted to be sure of receiving an orthodox doctrine, untainted by either Jansenism or Gallicanism. He wanted to share with his students what he had considered to be the best for himself,. As the fundamental spirit of his foundation was “*to fly from lucrative and prestigious ecclesiastical appointments*”, the impossibility of receiving any qualifications struck him as an additional advantage, a happy consequence of his original choice.

But Claude Poullart was determined that his students should not be lacking in anything when they presented themselves to their bishops to serve the most abandoned of people, so he had nothing against them attending university courses and accepting a degree once their basic formation was completed. In the Faculty of Law, the expenses were far less than those of Theology. They even offered free places “*to some students whose talents, attitudes and application to studies were well known but who lacked the necessary financial backing to advance*”.¹ Moreover, by virtue of the Concordat of 1516, students could not be accepted for a vacant benefice if they had not studied “*in one of the well-known universities of France*”.

Throughout the 18th century, the reason why the civil and religious authorities insisted on the Spiritans studying at the University was simply to remove them from the harmful influence of the Jesuits. The successors of Poullart had to be practical rather than dogmatic. They simply stressed that although degrees were necessary for the future work of their students, they must never lose sight of the ideals which gave the specific character to their training in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. According to the Sulpician priest Fr. Grandet, it was “*to educate students in the pure doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church*” that Poullart des Places had started his work in the first place.²

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¹ “*Tableau de le ville de Paris*” 1760, quoted by Le Floch, p. 341.

² “*Le Vie de Messire Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort*”, Nantes, 1724, p. 563.

It was impossible for Claude to help all the poor clerics who turned to him, so he looked for those who were most likely to acquire both knowledge and virtue. He used to say that if he had doubts about the blind zeal of a priest who was pious but ignorant, he also feared for the faith and obedience to the Church of a priest who was intelligent but lacking in virtue. When the Spiritan students listened to the readings from the works of Fr. Verjus during meals, they could easily identify where Poullart had first come across these ideas. This letter from Fr. Michel Le Nobletz to a group of students had made a lasting impression on Claude:

“You must lead your lives in such a way that your academic studies are not an obstacle to your growth in virtue... It would be difficult to find a more suitable place than a religious community for focusing on two such different aims, essential for future ministers of God. I feel sorry for the many young men who make great progress in their studies without advancing in those things that would benefit their souls, simply because they do not live in places where the ambiance encourages both intellectual and spiritual growth. But I also feel sorry for those who live in the fear and love of God yet will never fulfil their potential because they lack the necessary knowledge and means to accomplish it.

“Do not attempt spiritual direction or other things which concern the common good until you have acquired these two qualities. How much harm can be done to the soul of an intelligent man if he lacks wisdom and piety; but piety without doctrine and zeal without knowledge will do great harm to the whole Church!

Worldly wisdom, without a sensitive conscience, can lead to pride and a catastrophic fall, while a spirituality which is slow and melancholic and not backed up by knowledge is easy prey to the illusions of the Evil One, who, taking on the guise of an angel of light, can easily trick the ignorant, especially, those who only have trust in themselves. There are some ecclesiastics who are almost incapable of carrying out their ministerial duties because of their lack of knowledge. But there are others who, despite their intellectual prowess, are quite unable to teach other people; this lacuna, along with their attachment to the things of this world, makes them useless, for example, for teaching catechism to young children or giving spiritual guidance to those in their care. They may be learned, but they are also blind and are incapable of resisting those temptations which assail them each day with increasing ferocity and which inevitably lead to complete disaster.”¹

6. The mystique of poverty

In his vision of priestly and apostolic holiness, Claude emphasised one virtue more than all others – that of spiritual poverty. In founding a seminary for poor men who would evangelise the poor, this son of one of the leading business men of Rennes convinced his disciples that *“indifference is the springboard to perfection for one who wishes to follow in the steps of Jesus Christ”*.² For him, poverty is the cardinal virtue for a priest; it frees him from the love of money and honours and makes him totally available to the plans of his superiors, willing to accept the poorest of parishes or to go to the ends of the earth if that is what the Church wishes.

¹ *Gallia Christiana*, Vol. VII, col. 1043, p. 25.

² Allenou de la Ville-Angevin: Règlements ... p. 24.

As we saw earlier, Fr. de Chanciergues, a forerunner of Claude, was thinking of the most abandoned souls when he elaborated his plan to help the poor clerical scholars. He set up his “small communities” with a conviction that only the poor would be willing to work in poor parishes, so their period of training would have to take place in an ambiance of poverty, otherwise they might develop a taste for the good life:

“If these poor students are trained in one of the large seminaries, where they would be much better fed than in their own homes, they could grow accustomed to a life of self-indulgence. They might lose any interest in devoting themselves to poor parishes where their income would be minimal and the good wine, white bread, beef and mutton of the seminary were nothing but a distant memory.”

But if they are trained in the small communities, *“a good meal would consist of onion soup, a piece of lard, plain bread and a jug of water ... and they would be happy with a small parish with an income of two or three hundred livres, because they would be better off there than in their family home”*.

His motivations were undoubtedly good, but the means employed simply forced the poor clerics to practise virtue out of compulsion.

The vision of Poullart des Places went much further and much deeper. He was not content to put a roof over the students’ heads and feed them on onion soup: he made himself totally responsible for these young men throughout the period of their training. He did not share the belief that an adequate menu and relative comfort would stop them devoting their lives to neglected and obscure apostolates. For him, poverty was above all a virtue, even a cardinal virtue for the life and work of a priest.

And in fact, this ideal was accepted by practically all the students who presented themselves at the door of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. Those nursing lofty ambitions would soon abandon an institute from which students would finally emerge with no university qualifications.

The community rule has no chapter on poverty as such, but there are indications throughout of an atmosphere of mortification and detachment. Here, for example, are a few quotations from the section dealing with meals:

“In order to ensure greater uniformity in the house, the superior shall not be served more than the others. Both categories shall gladly regard themselves as poor people to whom Providence offers the food that is presented in the refectory”. (Rule no. 67)

“Each shall be satisfied with whatever is served and shall not seek anything better. God has given us the sense of taste that we might nourish ourselves, not for the sake of flattering our sensuality. One who enjoys the things of the spirit is no longer so demanding and hard to please as regards his body”. (Rule no. 70)

“A person who is even a little mortified, as everyone should be in this house, accepts whatever is placed before him. Everything is good enough for him when he remembers that his God was only given gall and vinegar to drink”. (Rule no. 77)

Poullart des Places knew from experience how a book can transform a person’s life. During his last years, Fr. Jean Maillard, who died at Louis-le-Grand in 1702, had written the life of

Mlle. de Bellère whom he had directed. This holy women, whom God had led along some amazing paths, had practised an heroic devotion to the poor psychiatric cases at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris and, later, to the poor and sick people of Anjou. This biography was not printed until 1732, under the title of *“The triumph of Poverty and humiliations, or The Life of Mademoiselle de Bellère du Tronchay, otherwise known as Sister Louise”*. Poullart des Places had known this book in manuscript form and he made a copy of it to inspire his students with a love of poverty.¹

But no book or exhortation had as great an influence on the students as Claude’s own daily example. Unlike many other directors of small communities, he was not content simply to devote himself to the poor students; in all simplicity, he became one of them, sharing every aspect of their lives and observing the same rule. *“He took his turn in the washing up and cleaned the shoes of the students”*.² He only agreed to be their superior so that he could serve them better.



This comparison may help us to appreciate the scope of the work of Poullart des Places. At the start of the 18th century, there were 70 students studying theology at Saint-Sulpice who paid 400 livres in fees and most of them were only there for 18 months.³ The Seminary of the Holy Spirit looked after the same number of students without any charge and their courses lasted from 8 to 9 years.

Because of their commitment to spiritual poverty, which was their most distinguishing characteristic, the Spiritan priests were *“ready for anything, not just accepting but preferring the most obscure and demanding positions, for which the Church had difficulty in finding workers - like chaplains in hospitals and those involved in the evangelisation of the poor and even of the infidel”*.⁴

So the training the Spiritan students received exceeded that of the other small communities for its thoroughness, despite the fact that they paid no fees at all. Claude had no intention of skimping on the preparation of these future priests so as to produce honest labourers for the Lord’s vineyard as quickly as possible; he wanted to produce apostles fully qualified for the work that lay ahead, however long it took. For him, the souls of the poor were just as valuable as those of the most powerful noblemen.⁵

¹ This copy is preserved in the Mazarine library, the one-time library of Cardinal Mazarin in Paris.

² Thomas: p. 274.

³ Taken from the register of the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice.

⁴ From the Latin Rules.

⁵ Thomas p. 269.