

XVII

A HOUSE OF CHARITY, CRADLE OF A GREAT CONGREGATION

The work of Poullart des Places would never have seen the light of day without the agreement of the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal de Noailles. He was a Doctor of the Faculty of Paris and overseer of the Sorbonne and Navarre universities and he had great reservations about the Fathers of the Company of Jesus; he would certainly have preferred professors of philosophy and theology for the Spiritan students who were not Jesuits and he said this publicly. But he did not insist too much; above all, he was delighted to see that the new foundation, with its total availability to the needs of the poor, was answering some of his most worrying concerns regarding the pastoral apostolate of his diocese. In October 1696, in his *“Instructions for the Tonsure”*, the Cardinal had vigorously and bitterly denounced the cupidity of so many of his clergy, who were making the Church into *“a den of thieves”*:

“What greater insult is there to God than to claim to have taken Him as one’s heritage while searching all the time for personal enrichment? It is shameful for the Church to be served by ministers who give scandal rather than edification; in making themselves despicable, they also bring the whole of their ministry into disrepute. Is there any greater injustice than inflicting clerics on the Church who steal its money for scandalous and profane ends while neglecting the poor to whom this money really belongs?”¹

At the same time, the Cardinal asked King Louis XIV for *Patent Letters* for a small seminary of poor students. He pointed out that it was needed to prepare ministers for the humble works of the Church which at present were *“in the care of clerics, most of whom fell short of what the people expected of them”*.²

He ruled that every candidate for ordination should spend several months in one of the five seminaries he had officially designated in a decision of June 30th, 1696. But he was so satisfied with the training being received by the students of Poullart des Places that they were exempt from any further period of preparation. This gesture proved to be very important because it influenced the attitude of the other Prelates of the Kingdom.³

The new community of the Holy Spirit was linked so closely to the College of Louis-le-Grand that it attracted a similar hatred from the enemies of the Jesuits. It was decided to strangle this new baby at birth! The Cardinal’s feelings about the Jesuits were well known so these people thought they would receive his support, but they were to be disappointed because

¹ Cardinal de Noailles: *“Recueil des mandements, ordonnances, instructions et lettres pastorales”*. Paris, 1718, p. 30.

² This was for the work founded by Fr. de Chanciergues, mentioned earlier. Later, it evolved into the Séminaire Saint-Louis.

³ Arch. C.S.Sp.: Dossier Lebègue, sheet no. 10.

he held Poullart in such high esteem: *"As long as God is being served by this work, I will never destroy it"*.¹

By an edict of December, 1666, Louis XIV had laid down rigorous conditions for the establishment of new communities in his kingdom:

"It is our wish that in future, no new colleges, monasteries, secular or religious communities should be established in any town or place of our kingdom without our express permission through patent letters, duly registered in our parliamentary courts... Any monasteries or communities set up without first receiving our patent letters, duly registered, will be excluded from ever obtaining them."

Taken literally, this decree forbade the founding of any new religious communities. But the King made it clear that this did not apply to seminaries and, from the start, the work for poor scholars fitted perfectly *"the idea of a seminary according to the Council of Trent, the Assemblies of Clergy, provincial councils of France and the royal decrees"*.² But Claude Poullart was in no hurry to adopt officially the title of "seminary"; a decree of the Council of State stressed that the seminaries *"came under the jurisdiction of the Archbishops and Bishops in all things; they were to be governed and administered by secular priests of their choosing."* The Archbishops and Bishops had the right to accept or expel students and to appoint directors, bursars, professors and other officials for the running of the seminary.

At this time, when the Jansenists were making great inroads into the Archdiocese of Paris, Claude Poullart, while recognising the good intentions of this legislation, felt it would be prudent to renounce the status of "seminary" for fear of what it could lead to in the future. Some of the documents that have been preserved show just how prudent he was. In official acts, such as his clerical title, his dimissorial letters and even the contract for the house in rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne, he always used the title *"Ecclesiastic"* to describe himself. In the last months of his life, he used to write, *"A very unworthy priest"* under his signature. Apart from the baptismal register of his nephew, mentioned earlier, he used the title of superior of an institution. In the Rules of the community, he gives no title to the new work; he simply talks of "the house" and "the students", but he never uses the words "Seminary" or "Seminarians". He also deliberately avoided the term "community": at one point in the Rule, he was half way through writing "community" when he scratched it out and simply wrote "house" in its place.³

As a former student of law, he took great care with his vocabulary so as to protect the foundation from the draconian measures of the Edict of 1666, never giving the impression that he was setting up a canonical seminary. This caution proved to be invaluable in the years to come. Of necessity, they talked less of the "House" of the poor students than the "Community of M. Poullart", or even, "The Community of the Holy Spirit". Charles Lebègue, a priest of the parish of Saint-Medard,⁴ left a considerable amount of money to "the

¹ Ibid. sheet no. 11.

² Arch. C.S.Sp., Procès Labaigue, sheet no. 11.

³ Rule no. 125.

⁴ This church is in the rue Mouffetard, close to to the spiritan house in the rue Lhomond.

Community of the Holy Spirit". When he eventually died in 1726, the successors of Claude Poullart were unable to receive the legacy because of the Edict of 1666, so they quickly asked King Louis XV for Patent Letters of "confirmation" (not establishment"). The request stated that *"the said Claude-François Poullart des Places, moved by the spirit of God, had begun, in 1703, an establishment consecrated to the Holy Spirit, under the invocation of the Virgin conceived without sin"*.

The king duly signed the letters, but the heirs of Fr. Lebègue opposed registration by Parliament as follows:

"According to itself, the Community of the Holy Spirit was established in 1703 and therefore, for the last 23 years, it has been incapable of being approved by the Prince under the terms of the Edict of 1666. So the legacy left to this Community cannot be enforced by law".¹

The report to this argument shows clearly the juridical situation of the foundation of Poullart des Places - that it was nothing more than "a work of charity":

"A zealous clergyman feeds and supports some Poor Scholars by his own alms and those of the faithful. Is it being claimed that Patent Letters are necessary before somebody can look after the poor, clothe the naked and give drink to the thirsty and food to the hungry? ... Such actions do not come under the Edict of 1666, which prohibits the setting up of new bodies and communities ... In 1703, it was neither one nor the other. This charitable priest and the poor scholars whom he fed were neither a 'body' nor a 'community'; they possessed no common property ...

"If it is claimed that these poor Scholars along with those who support them merit the title of "the Community of the Holy Spirit" because of the inspiration given to this good priest to look after them, one can reply that it is not by the name that such things should be judged but by the substance".²

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But the house on rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne was, in fact, not just a seminary according to the mind of the Council of Trent but also the initial foundations of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.

After his "great conversion", Poullart des Places had thought seriously about devoting his life to the foreign missions; but it soon became obvious to him that his provisional commitment to the poor students now had to become his life's vocation. After its foundation, his work developed so quickly that by the end of 1704 it had become a flourishing community. To strengthen the administrative side, he had invited Michel Le Barbier and Jacques Garnier to be his associates. He had also chosen Pierre Caris *"to be a member of his community and an associate in the government of the seminarians"*.³

¹ *"Claim by the descendants of Fr. Charles Lebègue against the Superiors and Directors of the so-called 'Community of Students' which today bears the name of 'The Seminary of the Holy Spirit, under the invocation of the Virgin conceived without sin' ". Paris, 1727, sheet no 8.*

² *Idem, sheet no, 7*

³ *"Registre des Associez", pp. 1 and 2.*

So would it be correct to regard these “*associations*” as the beginning of a real congregation? If one studies the oldest documents which have come down to us, this tradition amongst the Spiritans is obviously well founded: that Poullart des Places was not just the founder of a seminary, but also the initiator of a new religious family.

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When talking of meals, the Rule that Claude wrote for the community says the following:

*“Neither praise nor criticism should be directed at what has been prepared for the meal. It is unworthy of a true Christian to think too much about these things or to speak or complain about them. It reveals a lack of mortification in a religious or cleric who falls into this habit”*¹

In the original manuscript preserved in the General Archives of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, the word “religious” has been crossed out. What did Poullart des Places have in mind when he originally wrote the word? In his memoirs, Pierre Thomas said: “*Claude had initially planned to train not priests but religious who would practise rigorous penances if God called them to the cloister*”. But it seems that this was just an early plan, probably prior to the opening of the house in the rue des Cordiers, and certainly before the drawing up of the Rule.

Could it have been an allusion to the missionaries that Claude had promised to his friend Grignon de Montfort? Perhaps, but more likely, it refers to his “associates” of that time and in the years to come. There are two other articles of the Rule which would seem to confirm this hypothesis - those which concern the tailor and the cook (nos. 221 and following):

“The tailor may not work for anyone apart from those living in the house ... He will make the clothes of all the students ... On no pretext whatsoever may he demand any payment from them.”

It was also the tailor’s duty to sweep the rooms, the staircase, the study and the recreation halls. Both he and the cook had to be present for morning prayers, which lasted for 30 minutes, for evening prayers and, unless it was impossible, for the period of spiritual reading. Daily Mass was obligatory and they had to receive the blessed sacrament once a fortnight. Finally, they were encouraged to “*confess to one of the confessors of the house*”, in other words, to a Jesuit from Louis-le-Grand”.

So these celibates, who devoted at least an hour and a half each day to spiritual exercises, sound very much like members of a community. Later on, when the work was officially recognised after the death of Poullart, the tailor was referred to as “*Brother Tailor*”.² But for the moment, it would have been imprudent to speak of Brothers or Religious, or refer to Communities, Rules or Vows.

Since the start of the XVII century, the bishops of France, had not been in favour of the founding of new Congregations. They saw the taking of solemn vows as a limitation placed on their own authority. Even simple vows (which at that time were regarded as private) seem to have been an obstacle for gaining approval. For example, the Rule of the “*Priests of*

¹ Rule no. 73.

² “*Notre Frère Tailleur*”. This title appears in a letter from Brother Pottier, a student in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, dated 24th March, 1750. Arch M-E V. 508.

the Mission" (the Vincentians) only talks of 'simple' vows, but nevertheless, St. Vincent de Paul had great difficulty in obtaining endorsement for his foundation. In 1647, he wrote to his representative in Rome: "*We have had great difficulty in getting our Institute recognised because the Prelates do not want us to be religious*".¹ So to avoid these difficulties with bishops, most of the founders gave up the idea of their members taking vows.

At the same time, the Agents of the King were strongly enforcing the Edict of 1666. This is well illustrated by what happened to a community of medical brothers, founded in Canada by M. Charron, a contemporary of Poullart des Places. On June 30th, 1707, Chancellor Phélypeaux of Pontchartrain wrote to the founder:

"The King is happy to continue giving 1,000 livres to the hospital of Montreal ... His Majesty is satisfied with the way you are running this hospital, but he has instructed me to inform you that in no way does he agree that your co-founders should take vows nor should they be given statutes, habits or the title of 'Brothers'. In other words, His Majesty would disband them rather than allow the setting up of a convent or community. I am asking you to conform with the wishes of His Majesty. Keep me informed as to what you are doing".²

The following year, the Governor of Canada was even more explicit:

"We forbid the said Hospitalers to take vows and we declare invalid those they may take in the future, being contrary to the wishes of His Majesty and the said 'Patent Letters' of the foundation of the General Hospital; they are not allowed to wear habits, black hoods, silk belts or the Rabat. We simply permit them to live in community, according to the above mentioned Patent Letters".

So it is understandable why Poullart des Places proceeded with such caution; it was not just the scruples of a young lawyer. His congregation would only be finally recognised after prolonged ups and downs. It was on January 22nd, 1731, that Parliament agreed to register the royal Patent Letter, and only on condition that the community be governed according to the statutes and rules drawn up by the superiors and directors, and presented to the Archdiocese for examination and approval.³

To fulfil these civil requirements, a document was produced entitled: "*Regulae et Constitutiones Seminarii et Communitatis Sancti Spiritus sub tutela Beatae Mariae Virginis sine macula conceptae*".⁴ It was approved in its entirety by Archbishop de Vintimille, the successor of Cardinal de Noailles. This 15-page manuscript states unambiguously that the organism recognised by King Louis XV, under the title "*Communauté et Séminaire du Saint-Esprit*", does not refer directly to the 'Work for poor students' but to the Ecclesiastical Institution of diocesan right for the formation of its directors. The document also helps us to

¹ *Lettres de Saint Vincent de Paul, Paris 1882, Volume I, p. 224*. See also the note of M. Faillon on the reluctance of the bishops in the XVII century to confide seminaries to religious, in "*Vie de M. Olier*", Paris 1873, Vol III, pp. 264-275.

² Documents quoted by His Eminence Cardinal Tisserant in an unpublished study on the legacy of Saint Louis Grignon de Montfort, pp. 120-121.

³ Arch. C.S.Sp, Dossier "*Lebègue, document no. 19*."

⁴ A copy of this document can be found in the National Archives of France (M 200) in the handwriting of M. Bouic.

get a better understanding of Poullart's thoughts, because if the "*Regulae*", from one point of view, are no more than a Latin version of the "*Règlements généraux et particuliers*", they are nevertheless a codification of the practices prior to 1709. Its editors certainly did not neglect the lessons learnt from their experiences so far, both as regards the government of the Seminary and the practice of community life.¹ They show clearly their fidelity to the traditions of the founder by adding the following paragraph which talks of the Superior:

"Sine consultorum consensus in usibus receptis nihil immutet, nec sub praetextu majoris etiam boni novos inducat". ("He will change nothing regarding the customs without the approval of his counsellors: even under the pretext of a greater good, he will introduce no innovations").

In a passage which is not an integral part of the Latin Rule, the editors make a solemn request to those who will come after them:

*"Postquam autem Regulas et Statuta nostra exposuimus, fratres et successores nostros obsecramus in Domino, ut pios usus quos plerosque a piissimae memoriae Claudio Francisco Poullart des Places, sacerdote ac institutore nostro accepimus, stodiose retineant ».*² (*"Having drawn up our constitutions, we beg our brothers and successors in the Lord to preserve carefully the pious customs which, for the most part, we have received from Claude-François Poullart des Places, priest, and our founder of sacred memory"*).

All the documents make it clear that, apart from juridical approval, the official recognition introduced no important changes to the life of the Community of the Holy Spirit. The confirmation of the Patent Letters says explicitly that it applies to the establishment of M. Poullart des Places and that the said establishment should continue to be governed in the way it has been up to the present day.³

The first page of the *Register of Assemblies and Deliberations*⁴ tells us that on June 4th, 1732, Frs. Bouic, Caris, Thomas, David and Foisset ...

"... came together both to obtain Patent Letters and for the administration and education of the Poor Scholars confided to their care ... They decided, subsequent to being granted Patent Letters, that they would draw up an act of association between themselves in the form of a civil contract. This would be entered in a register for themselves and for those who would follow".

The 'Registre des Associez', started on March 4th, 1734, was drawn up based on "*an older register*" dating back to the time of Poullart des Places. It states that M. Bouic was elected superior in March, 1710, "*having already exercised this function*" and that M. Caris, "*chosen*" by Fr. des Places himself to be a member of the said Community and Seminary, had exercised the role of first assistant up to that point.

¹ A copy of the approval of the "*Regulae*" by Archbishop de Vintimille can be found in Le Floch, p. 546.

² This text appears in Le Floch, p. 546.

³ Le Floch, pp. 522-525.

⁴ *Régistre des Assemblées et Délibérations*, Archives Nationales (A.N.), M. 200.

After the re-election of M. Bouic, his confreres asked him “to continue to govern them as he had been doing since his authorisation by Cardinal de Noailles, Archbishop of Paris in the month of March, 1710”.¹ So when a new person was received into the Community, he promised to follow not only the *Constitutions* approved by Cardinal de Noailles but also the *Règlements* and the customs laid down, for the most part, by Poullart des Places.

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The closeness of the *Latin Rules* to the *Constitutions* of the Company of Jesus show the degree to which M. Bouic and his confreres were faithful to the spirit of their founder. On important points like obedience and poverty, the close relationship is obvious:

The Text of the Company of Jesus²

Obedientia tum in executione, tum in voluntate, tum in intellectu debet esse in nobis omni ex parte perfecta ...

Obedience and execution, both in will and judgement, must be perfect amongst us ...

In his quae pertinent ad victum, vestitum, cubilique supellectilem, et alia vitae communi necessaria, uniformitas tam superiorum cum inferioribus, quam inferiorum inter se, omnino retinenda ... Vestitus sit honestus ... conveniens professioni paupertatis.

As regards food, clothing, bedroom furniture and other necessities of the common life, uniformity must be totally observed between superiors and inferiors and between inferiors themselves ... Clothing must be decent and in conformity with the profession of poverty.

The Spiritan text³

Seipsos ex toto abnegare student, praecipue per obedientiam, quae ex omni parte perfecta sit, in executione, intellectu et voluntate.

They must strive towards a total self-abnegation, particularly through obedience, which must be perfect in execution, judgement and will.

Ratio victus, vestitus, lecti, cubiculi, pauperibus accomoda sit ... Idem sit omnibus cibus, vestitus quoque uniformis, pauper, simplex ... Superior idem particularia in omnibus fugiat, in cibo, vestitu, etc ...

The food, clothing, bed and furniture must be suitable for poor people ... The food should be the same for everybody and likewise the clothing which will be poor and simple ... The superior will avoid any distinction in food, clothing, etc. for himself.

¹ Minutes of the election of May 29th, 1733. A.N. M. 200.

² *Epitome Instituti Societatis Jesu*, Rome, 1704, pp. 300 and 311.

³ Le Floch, pp. 536 and 541.

The election of the superior for life was also borrowed from the Company of Jesus. The facts and the texts are curiously alike.

In 1558, the day after the election of Fr. Laynez as the first successor of Ignatius Loyola, the Fathers received a message that caused considerable consternation: In the opinion of Pope Paul IV, the powers of the new General should only be valid for a specific time - three years was suggested.¹ The Jesuits were known for their obedience, but they were anxious to preserve their *Constitutions* just as their founder had written them, so they addressed a memorandum to the Sovereign Pontiff: *“Everybody, in perfect unanimity, without any exception, agreed that it would be most fitting for our Society if the General was not changed throughout his lifetime”*.²

In 1727, Cardinal de Noailles opposed the registration of the Patent Letters obtained from the King by the Community of the Holy Spirit. His advisers had pointed out that the authority of the successor of Poullart des Places seemed to be too extensive and that his mandate should be limited to three years.³ But the Cardinal died in 1729 and his successor approved the Rule without hesitation. It read:

“Superior non eligatur ad tempus determinatum, exempli gratia, ad triennium aut sexennium praecise, sed legitime electus, non mutetur, nisi ita postulet Sodalitii bonum; mutatio enim Superioris extra hunc casum, communibus suffragiis, judicatur bono Sodalitii contraria”. (The Superior will not be elected for a specific time, three or six years for example, but once legitimately elected, he will not be changed unless the good of the Community demands it. Apart from this case, it was unanimously decided that a change would not be conducive to the good of the Community.)

So the influence of the Company of Jesus is perfectly clear. On the other hand, despite the absence of vows in the rules of that period, the perfection demanded in the observance of poverty, chastity and obedience could hardly have been greater.

¹ Cf. Cretineau-Joly: *Histoire de la Compagnie de Jésus*, Volume 1, 1844, p. 367.

² *“Decreta Congregationum generalium Societatis Jesu”*, Anvers, 1635, pp. 45-46.

³ *Réponse du Conseil de Monseigneur l’Archevêque au sujet des troisièmes Lettres*. (1727). Arch. C.S.Sp., Procès Lebaigue, document no. 14.