

XIX

“THERE IS NO GREATER LOVE...”

The winter of 1709 is known to French historians as “le grand hiver” because of its exceptional severity; the like had not been seen before, not just during the long reign of Louis XIV but throughout the history of France. The consequences were tragic for the newly-born family of ‘poor scholars’.¹

To begin with, the winter was quite mild, but on the night of the 5/6th of January, the thermometer plunged and three days later, the Seine was almost completely frozen over. From January 14th to the 19th, the temperature remained around -21 degrees, but from the 25th, the thermometer suddenly climbed rapidly again. Both the Seine and the Marne flooded and deposited huge blocks of ice, more than two metres thick, on the banks of these rivers. The intense cold returned on February 4th, accompanied by heavy snow and violent winds. It remained like that until the beginning of March.

These two periods of extreme cold struck the whole kingdom, leaving a trail of death and desolation. According to the Duchess of Orléans, “*the people died like flies*”. Even the Court at Versailles lost a large number of distinguished persons, including the Princess de Soubise, the Duke de la Trémoille, the Prince de Condé, the Prince de Conti and Père La Chaise, who was confessor to the king. One contemporary witness said that more than 32,000 Parisians died simply because of the cold. Another noted that 24,000 died between January 5th and February 2nd.

The sufferings did not disappear with the passing of winter: the great freeze was followed by a terrible famine. In many provinces, the exceptional conditions killed off cows, sheep, goats, poultry and even wild rabbits. Nearly all the autumn wheat was destroyed and this came in the wake of a very poor harvest in 1708, leaving little seed for re-planting the following year. France was at war at that time and this made the situation even worse; priority had to be given to the feeding of the armies guarding the frontiers; the Dutch and English navies were preventing anything from being imported into France from abroad.

There was panic throughout the Kingdom. Mme de Maintenon wrote to the Princess d’ Ursins on April 8th: “*It is difficult to imagine anything worse than war, but the famine which we are now going through is even more terrifying. The price of wheat rises every day and this years’ harvest is already destroyed. It seems that God wants to reduce us to nothing*”. On March 10th, in the church of Saint-Sulpice, Fr. Massillon described in a homily how death was rapidly spreading throughout the Kingdom:

*“Men, created in the image of God and redeemed by his precious blood, are eating grass like animals and necessity is forcing them to comb the land for food which was not made for mankind; it is leading them to almost certain death”.*²

¹ Cf. A. de Boislisle: « *Le Grand Hiver et la Disette de 1709* ».

² From a Sermon for the 4th Sunday of Lent.

This was not just flowery language: Arthur de Boislisle, the best informed historian on the famine of 1709, spoke of *“walking skeletons, eating nothing but bracken, crushed and mixed with a seventh part of flour, or soup made from mistletoe and nettles, or thistles, slugs and the contents of dustbins”*.

In Paris, there was a great danger that this shortage of food would lead to serious civil disturbances. As soon as the cold weather arrived, the sick and the poor headed for the hospitals in large numbers. At that period, bread was sold in Paris at 15 different public markets. Half the bakers lived in Gonesse, Corbeil, Saint-Germain-en-Laye etc., and it was from these places that they carried their produce to market every day. The Lieutenant General of police, Marc-René d’Argenson, did his best to oversee the regularity of supplies and controlled price-rises to avoid the discontent leading to violence and public disorder. Even though the country was at war, he had 12 companies of French guards and a battalion of Swiss guards at his disposal to ensure that law and order would be maintained amongst the citizens.



Such a calamity, that touched even the richest people, fell very heavily upon Claude-François’ community of 70 poor students who were living almost entirely on charity. The amount of leftovers from the College of Louis-le-Grand diminished alarmingly. François-Marie Arouëa, a young student at Louis-le-Grand, who was to become illustrious under the name of Voltaire, recalled that he ate nothing but greyish-brown bread throughout the whole of 1709.

Death struck the disciples of Poullart des Places, but we only know the name of one of them: René Le Sauvage, one of the defenders of the thesis dedicated to the Archbishop of Besançon. He was buried on May 17th, the vigil of Pentecost.¹

By then, Poullart des Places had known for some three months that he was going to lose the help of Michel Le Barbier, who had been his friend since childhood and had become his right hand man in running the seminary. His father, Maître Claude Le Barbier, had not been happy to see him going to Paris to help in the new seminary. Maître Claude was well known to the Bishop of Rennes. Gilles, one of his eight sons, had been “printer to the bishop” since 1707. When he heard the alarming news coming from Paris about the frozen conditions and the famine, he asked the bishop to give his son an appointment back home in the diocese of Rennes; the bishop was happy to oblige because he appreciated the value of this young priest. So on February 8th, Michel-Vincent Le Barbier was appointed parish priest of Bain-de-Bretagne, where there was a small college attached to the parish. But he decided to stay in Paris with the poor scholars and share their lot until the end of the academic year. He finally left in June and before joining the carriage for Brittany he embraced Poullart des Place for the last time; these two friends would never see each other again.²

The closest market to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit was in the Place Maubert and was one of the largest in the capital. There you could buy bread as well as flour and wheat. The

¹ We know this thanks to the parish priest of Chasné who noted the following in his parochial register: *“M. René Le Sauvage, a tonsured cleric aged 22 years and three months, having died in Paris, was buried there on the vigil of the Feast of Pentecost, May 18th, 1709”*.

² Fr. Le Barbier signed the parish register of Bain for the first time on June 30th, 1709.

police reports concerning this market show how the situation was rapidly worsening. From January 21st, they already talk of great unrest amongst the people because of the rising price of bread. On April 6th, 100 women from la Halle killed a commissioner and seriously threatened d'Argenson himself. For example, the report for May 4th reads:

"Today, there was more bread for sale in the market of Place Maubert than in recent days, but there was also more confusion and disorder. A huge crowd of people had arrived with the result that the market had to close by 10 a.m. But the extra police who had been drafted there were sufficient to maintain order".¹

Prices continued to rise. A portion of wheat that was sold for 15 livres at the end of 1708 cost 30 livres by the following March and 67 by the end of September. The price of bread inevitably followed that of wheat. The police reports show the depth of the suffering of the poor people:

"September 4th: Even if the amount of bread continues to rise as it did today, there is still no guarantee that the market will be able to function. I have never heard such murmuring and cursing. The people are at their wit's end ...

More than twenty bakers did not turn up today and those who did only brought a third of what they normally have for sale..."

"September 7th: The atmosphere in the markets today was one of sadness rather than insurrection. Nothing happened that could have led to sedition; there was only a profound despondency which showed itself in tears rather than words".

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The lease agreed in October 1705 on the house in Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève should have lasted until the end of 1711, but on August 17th, 1709, M. de Cornoailles rented this house to J-B Damont, *"a gentleman of Paris"*. Poullart des Places agreed that the new tenant should take possession on the feast day of Saint-Rémy, in other words, on October 1st. In fact, he had already found a new location for his seminary, less than 200 metres from rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève. It was a large property, situated between rue Mouffetard and rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève (rue Tournefort today) belonging to the *héritiers d'Auboulin*.

Rue Mouffetard has not changed very much since the 17th century; it is still today one of the most picturesque and lively streets in the old part of Paris. But the fronts of the houses have lost their original shop signs – such as *l'Escouvette, la Calebasse, le Soufflet* and *le Fer au moulin; le Chapeau rouge* and *le Chapeau vert; la Fleur de lys* and *le Pomme de pain; les Escus d'Orléans, de Bretagne, d'Ecosse, and de France; le Sauvage d'or; La fontaine de jouvence, le Puits rouge virginal*. The animal kingdom was represented by *le Chat-qui dort, le Regnard bardé, le Coq d'Inde, la Pie, le Pélican, le Mouton d'or, le Pied-de-biche, la Hure de sanglier*. Others recalled the medieval origins of the rue Mouffetard : *Les Pastouriaux, le Heaume, le Chevalier au Cygne*.

At least half the signs of the rue Mouffetard had a religious significance : *le Paradis terrestre, la Samaritaine, le Signe de Croix*. Others were inspired by the patron saints of nearby churches : *Saint Etienne, Saint Médard, Saint Jacques, Saint Nicolas, Sainte Geneviève, Sainte Barbe*. One could also find saints who were venerated throughout France: *Saint*

¹ French National Archives, G7 1654.

Michel, Saint Georges, Saint Louis, Saint Martin etc. The Blessed Virgin was commemorated by *l'Annonciation, la Mère de Dieu, Notre Dame de Liesse, Notre-Dame de Laurette*. The Third Person of the Blessed Trinity was celebrated by *le Saint Esprit* and *le Saint Esprit Couronné*.

The new property for the seminary had the name of "*l'Escu de France*" (the French Shield). The lease and other documents concerning this building were in the custody of Nicolas Aumont, a lawyer at Châtelet, but unfortunately they were burnt during the civil disturbances of 1871. So for further information, we have to consult the maps of Paris of Fr. Delagrive (1728), Roussel (1731) and Turgot (1734), as well as the map and registers of the Abbey of Sainte-Geneviève. Together, they give a fairly accurate description of the house which would be the home of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit for the next 25 years.

The property covered nearly 1,500 square metres (between no. 11 of rue Tournefort and no. 36 of rue Mouffetard). The courtyard facing rue Mouffetard was rented out to a merchant, as well as the small yard where one can still see the remains of an old well. All the rest was rented to Poullart des Places for the sum of 600 livres per annum. The normal entrance to the Seminary was on rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne, almost opposite a bowling alley which went under the name of *La Mort-qui-trompe*. Having gone through the carriage entrance, a passage of about 30 metres led to a courtyard with large buildings on the northern and western sides. An enclosed garden separated the courtyard from a building facing rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève. As in the house of M. de Cornoailles, the noise from the street could not be heard in the area occupied by the seminarians.

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The time had come to think about the new scholastic year. It always began with the examination of fresh candidates, followed by a retreat of eight days. This year, it would also involve moving house before October 1st.

In the notes he had written 10 years previously, Poullart des Places said:

"I enjoy wonderful health although I look rather delicate. I have a good stomach and I am able to digest any kind of food. Nothing gives me trouble. I am stronger and more active than others and I can put up with hard work and fatigue very well".¹

But there had been a considerable deterioration since then. The cold and the famine hit him very hard, not too surprising when we hear that he would deprive himself of food rather than see his students go hungry.

In the last days of September,

"while Poullart des Places was giving himself entirely to the needs of his growing community and exhausted by severe mortifications, he had an attack of pleurisy accompanied by a violent fever and a painful tenesmus which caused him great suffering for four days. But he made no complaint and showed no signs of impatience. The only indication that his sufferings had intensified was the increased frequency of his acts of resignation. His very exhaustion seemed to give him renewed

¹ "*Choice of a state of Life*", Koren p. 241.

strength to repeat frequently the words of the holy King David: "Quam dilecta tabernacula tua, Domine virtutum, concupiscit et deficit anima mea in atria Domini". (How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord God of Hosts! My soul is longing and fainting for the courts of the Lord).¹

The Rule of their Community laid down that sick members should be transported to the Hôpital de la Charité, which was run by the Brothers of St. John of God, but all the hospitals were full to overflowing. For example, the Hôtel-Dieu had 4,000 in-patients, more than three times the normal. The General Hospital was looking after 14,000 poor people and would now only accept the many abandoned children who were left at their door each morning. So Poullart des Places stayed with his community. On October 1st, the day when they had to leave their premises, they carried him to the *Escu-de-France*.

"As soon it was known in Paris that he was seriously ill, a great number of holy and distinguished people came to see him. The Directors of the Seminaries of Saint-Sulpice, Saint Nicholas de Chardonnet and Saint François de Salle all arrived. His great friend, the saintly Father Gourdan, sent someone to visit him on his behalf".²

For many years, Claude had set aside one day each month to prepare himself for death. He would receive Holy Communion as viaticum and perform his prayers and actions as though it was the last day of his life. When night came, he would lay down on his bed as if he was entering his coffin.³ So when death finally came, there were no signs of fear or surprise:

"Having received the last sacraments fully conscious, he died quietly at about 5 p.m. on October 2nd, 1709, at the age of thirty years and seven months".

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In the portrait that was painted immediately after his death, Claude Poullart is wearing a soutane and a large blue rabat as was the custom at that time. He is sitting in an easy chair with a crucifix in his hands. This is the only authentic portrait that we have of Poullart des Places and it is preserved in the meeting room of the General Council of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.

But his disciples would cherish another portrait of him in their hearts. When M. de la Ville-Angevin was founding his own Congregation of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit, he wanted to list the duties of the superior; he looked no further than his friend and teacher, Claude Poullart des Places. He simply transposed his texts to fit the rule of the sisters, thereby preserving a perfect image of the way Poullart governed his own foundation, full of humanity, gentleness and self-denial:

"In carrying out his duties as superior, he always put himself humbly in the presence of God, acknowledging his own unworthiness for such a task, seeing himself as a worse sinner than any of the poor students".

¹ Psalm 83, verse 1. Koren p. 287.

² Besnard. (Koren, p. 287).

³ Cf. Rule no. 43 (Koren p. 173).

“He treated them all with kindness and humanity and looked on himself as the least of all. He carefully examined the character and preferences of each one so as to understand them better.

“When the students did something wrong, he would gently correct them. If they did not accept the reprimand as they should, he would not get angry with them and insist on their compliance, nor did he use strong language; he would prefer to see them commit another small fault rather than treat them in a heavy-handed way”.

“He always turned to the Holy Spirit to enlighten him and treated the students with such kindness and patience that he gained their entire confidence and admiration. He followed the lesson taught by Jesus Christ: ‘Learn from me, gentle and humble of heart”.

“He had a special regard for poverty and holy indifference, preferring to go without something than to see his students in need”.

“Finally, he tried to be a perfect mirror of all the virtues, and avoided anything that his scholars could not or should not do”.¹

In the deposition that he gave after the death of Poullart des Places, M. Faulconnier recalled an event of which he was probably the only witness. He showed how he reacted on one occasion to an unforeseen situation, where many other directors would have been disconcerted:

“One day, a young man, who had thought about becoming a Carthusian for several years, suddenly left the Jesuit College early one morning, carrying his books back to the Seminary which he would take with him to the Charterhouse. He ran into M. des Places who asked him why he had left his lectures so early. The student told him of his plans and Poullart consulted the Lord on the spot. The he said: ‘My friend, God is not calling you to this life’. But the young man was insistent, pointing out that he had been examining this plan and the purity of his intentions for a long time. M. de Places replied: ‘If you still feel like this in a few day’s time, I will willingly give my consent’. With that, he sent him back to the College for the rest of the lectures. Some time later, this young man admitted that he no longer felt an attraction to the Carthusian way of life”.

This ability to make wise decisions on the spot also comes out clearly in the reminiscences of M. de la Ville-Angevin. Poullart des Places was not just somebody of an extraordinary gentleness, with the habit of consulting the Holy Spirit when faced with difficult decisions; it is clear that God had compensated for his lack of experience with an exceptional gift of discernment.

Although he was a rich young man, son of an ambitious father and keen to be successful, Claude Poullart des Places came to realise (like Michel Le Nobletz) that true greatness is to be found in living out the Beatitudes. In his words and actions, he was a great apostle of humility and disdained the joys of this world. One of his disciples and future biographer, Pierre Thomas, shows how impressed they were by his teaching and example:

¹ Based on the Rule of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit, pp. 62 and 77.

“To provide for the needs of the students he had brought together, he was prepared to do things which would humiliate him in the eyes of those who knew him best from the past. It was a common sight to see him in the streets of Paris with some of those students, most of whom were poorly clad. He talked to them as equals, and when they were carrying pieces of furniture and utensils for the community, he always lent a hand, irrespective of what people might think.

They often needed to buy small pieces of furniture and tools for the community and M. des Places went to look for them himself in different parts of the city, as if he were the least of the lay brothers in some monastery. But it was even worse for him, because such lay brothers would normally have more money to spend than he had. They would also buy in larger quantities. Claude, on the other hand, had very little money at his disposal so it was only at rare intervals that he could go to market. Although his father was a rich and religious man, he was never happy with the extremes to which his son had gone in practising the virtue of poverty, so he was not ready to give him any more than the usual allowance.

Claude could often be seen carrying home the things that he had bought. He did this deliberately, both to save money and to humble himself. He was delighted to meet someone he knew from the past when he was carrying these loads, so as to humiliate himself”.¹

Writing elsewhere about his love of mortification, Pierre Thomas said:

“Since his death, I came across a rough draft of a letter he had addressed to his spiritual director. In it, he spoke of his decision to practise some difficult mortifications. But he considered them as nothing compared to what he needed to do to expiate the sins he had committed in the past. He explained these motives to his director very vividly, hoping to obtain his approval to carry out his plans”.²

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Throughout his time as superior, Claude Poullart des Places was a model of heroic virtues for his students. And his funeral proved to be another striking lesson for them which would continue to bear fruit for a long time to come.

The parish of Saint-Etienne was one of the oldest in Paris. In the early centuries of its existence, the cemetery surrounding it on three sides had plenty of room and each deceased person had an individual grave. But as the population increased, the church had to be enlarged and so the cemetery was reduced in size. The whole compound was now hemmed in by surrounding buildings.

By the beginning of the 18th century, there were only two sections of the cemetery remaining. The largest, the *Grand Cimetière*, was a few metres away from the front of the church on the square of Sainte-Geneviève; the *Petit Cimetière* was at the far end of the church. Taking both pieces together, there were no more than 200 square metres, yet there were several hundred deaths in the parish each year.

¹ Pierre Thomas, c.s.sp. Koren p. 273.

² Pierre Thomas, c.s.sp. Koren, p. 271.

If they did not own a crypt in the church itself, the richest families were given the privilege of being buried in a private tomb, but the bodies of the poor, who made up the great majority of the parishioners, were put into a common grave. The grave in the *Grand Cimetière* could take up to 300 bodies, but the smaller one (which seems to have been reserved for the poorest clerics) was only large enough for 20.

Some founders of religious societies decided that their disciples should be buried as poor men. The rule written by Fr. Barré for the Sisters of the Christian schools contained this directive. Fr. Bourdoise did not want his priests to be so proud that they would not be buried with the poor. But he asked that a place should be set apart for the burial of the clergy.

At Saint-Etienne-du-Mont, to be buried as a poor man meant to be placed in one of the common graves. Claude Poullart had such a love for the poor that there was no question of seeking out a special place for his burial; so he was placed in the common grave of the *Petit Cimetière*, next to the chapel of the Blessed Virgin. Once this grave was full, it was covered with soil and, a few years later, was dug up to be used again. The bones were put into the mass graves which surrounded the cemetery and remained there until the beginning of the 19th century. It was then that all the mass graves of Paris were suppressed and the contents deposited in the tunnels of the catacombs.¹

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After the death of Claude Poullart des Places, Jacques-Hyacinthe Garnier took over the direction of the seminary. He was just 26 and had been ordained the previous Christmas. It was a heavy burden for this young man who was already weakened by his privations. The famine still continued and the new superior finally died at the beginning of March. The seven most senior seminarians met together to elect his successor. Only one of them, Louis Bouïc, was already a priest and it was he who was elected.² With the help of Pierre Caris and Pierre Thomas, he would direct the Seminary of the Holy Spirit for more than 50 years.

In early June, a letter arrived from Brittany with more sad news for the poor scholars. Fr. Le Barbier, who had reluctantly returned to his diocese when he was recalled by his bishop,

¹ On July 15th, 1710, Henry le Chat and Jeanne Poullart appointed a chaplain for a chapel of Saint-Claude, near their chateau at Vernée.

François-Claude Poullart des Places died on May 18th, 1712.

On October 3rd, 1718, the day after the 9th anniversary of the death of her son, Jeanne Le Meneust, donated the farm of la Bullerie (Noyal-sur-Vilaine) for the support of poor people in the hospital of Saint-Méen. The chaplains were to ensure that the rosary was said in perpetuity by these poor people three times a week, for the repose of the soul of the benefactress and her deceased friends and relations. She died on August 28th, 1720. In the following December a great fire in Rennes destroyed her house, along with the remaining souvenirs of her son. Henry Le Chat wrote that they were able to save only a few of their papers. Those which were destroyed included documents concerning the legacies of M. and Mme Desplaces-Poullart and the genealogy of the Poullart family.

² Cf. *Gallia Christiana*, Volume VII, column 1044. M. Louis Bouïc (or Bouy) was born at Guillac, near Josselin, on August 4th, 1684. Probably due to the influence of his neighbour, M. Hédan, he went to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit after his diaconate (22nd September, 1708) The bishop of Saint-Malo gave him dimissorial letters for the priesthood on August 28th, 1709 and he was ordained on September 21st. In March 1710, M. Joseph Hédan was a deacon, while Pierre Caris, Pierre Thomas and René de la Ville-Angevan were still sub-deacons.

died on March 22nd at the age of 30 years and 8 months. He had been like a big brother to the rest of the Community and left behind him the reputation of a holy and capable man.¹

So within a few months, Claude Poullart des Places and his two closest associates had become victims of the exceptional winter and the subsequent famine, or rather, victims of their total dedication and self-denial; like the good shepherd, they had sacrificed themselves to save the lives of their little flock.

¹ From the Register of the parish of Bain (May 23rd, 1710).