

XXI

THE SPIRITANS AND THE DE MONTFORT FATHERS

During the first fortnight of July, 1713, Louis Grignion de Montfort knocked at the door of the Community of the Holy Spirit. He had not been to Paris since 1704, but he knew that God had blessed the initiative of his friend, Claude Poullart des Places; within a few years, the work for the poor scholars had been transformed into a veritable seminary and was full of a vitality that had survived the premature death of its founder.

So far, Louis had not been able to get his life's ambition off the ground – the foundation of “a poor Company of good priests who would work under the banner of Mary”. During his latest apostolic campaign, he had drawn up the outline of his “Company of Mary”, but as Fr. Besnard says in his biography of Louis¹, “It was not enough to have traced a plan that was so beautiful and filled with the apostolic spirit: it had to be put into practice! But God, who had inspired him with such an idea would also show him the way to make it a reality. The first step was to discuss the project with his old friends, the Directors of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in Paris, with whom he had retained the same close ties as he had had with M. des Places”.²

The mission he had just finished preaching had taken a lot out of him and his friends advised him to take a few weeks off.

“... But he was completely focused on his intended journey to Paris and what he hoped to achieve by it. He immediately set out on foot and arrived safely in the capital. One of his first visits was to the Community of the Holy Spirit.

They were already very numerous and included men from many different regions, well-known for their devotion and learning. When he arrived there, they were on recreation. Having greeted them all, they were surprised when he gave a particularly warm embrace to a young seminarian; he had no idea why he had received such a warm greeting, but he was quite flattered. But the saint explained to them all that he greeted him in a special way because he was the most poorly dressed of the whole community and the uniform of poverty was worthy of reverence wherever it was to be found. They were all very edified by these pious words, and they provided a timely remedy for the initial proud reaction of the young man”³

This incident shows that Louis was already well known to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. The young seminarian would hardly have felt so honoured by the embrace of a poor priest who had just walked 90 miles on foot along a dusty road if he was not regarded as a famous

¹ Charles Besnard: “La vie de Messire Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort, Prêtre Missionnaire Apostolique ». The manuscript is preserved in the archive of the Daughters of Wisdom in Rome.

² Besnard, p. 121.

³ Besnard p. 124.

and saintly missionary. The Directors already knew Montfort, either directly or by reputation: Louis Bouïc and Hédan were from his diocese of Saint-Malo; Pierre Thomas, who entered the rue des Cordiers community in March, 1704, would have heard much talk of him. He also met Pierre Caris, the intimate friend of Poullart des Places.

Louis soon found that he had been abandoned by most of the friends he had previously known in Paris. On the other hand,

“... the Directors of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit were amongst those who remained firmly attached to him; feeling deeply indebted to their late founder who was also a close friend of Louis, they showed the same friendship and esteem that Poullart had had for him throughout his life. Such feelings were seen as part of the inheritance they had received from him ... They saw in Grignon de Montfort what they admired in all those other great men who had been presented to them as models: Fr. Eudes, Fr. Honoré, Fr. Le Nobletz and Poullart des Places himself, their founder and father.

“So it was with this background of friendship and mutual esteem that he explained his plan to set up a Company of missionaries ... He read extracts from the Rule he had prepared for those of their students who would be interested in joining this Company.

The Directors praised his plan and undertook to help him by preparing future priests to support and perpetuate this good work. As a consequence of this declaration, which both sides looked on as a sort of official agreement, he wrote at the head of his Rule:

‘There is a seminary in Paris, that of the Holy Spirit, where young clerics who have a vocation for the Missions of the Company of Mary prepare themselves for their entry by study and the acquisition of virtue.’

*And to drive the point home, he repeated these words again later on in the document”.*¹

¹ Charles Besnard, pp. 127-128. Below are the exact words of the « Règle des Prêtres missionnaires de la Compagnie de Marie » :

« This Company only accepts clerics who have already completed their basic studies in a seminary. So those in minor orders are excluded until they have been ordained to the priesthood. However, there is a seminary in Paris where those who feel drawn to the missions of the Company can acquire the necessary knowledge and virtue.

The second passage to which Besnard refers must be the following:

“The Company has, and can only have, two houses in the Kingdom: the first is in Paris and helps the candidates to acquire the apostolic spirit; the second is outside Paris and serves as a house of repose for those who are sick and for the elderly, who pass their days in prayer and solitude, having spent the best years of their lives in saving souls.”

In the manuscript of the Rule, which is preserved in the Mother House of the Company of Mary, it is clear that these two paragraphs were not later additions. It is most likely that this is the manuscript that was presented to the Directors of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. One can only conclude that by the time it was written, and in virtue of agreement of 1703, Grignon de Montfort had the right to consider “the seminary founded by Poullart des Places as belonging to the Company of Mary”. (cf Eyckeler, “Le Testament d’un saint” pp. 24-39).

If de Montfort did not actually live with the Spiritans in the rue Neuve-Sainte-Etienne, he often went there and his spiritual conferences were much appreciated by the seminarians.¹ But he never forgot the reason why he had come to Paris.

He had his own special way of attracting vocations to the Company. For example, there was a young seminarian from Normandy, who was finishing his second year of philosophy, who had the task of ringing the bell to mark the different events during the day. Most of the seminarians used to end up standing around de Montfort during recreations to listen to his impelling conversation, and this young man, Jacques Le Vallois, always tried to get as close as possible to this man whom he regarded as a saint so as not to miss anything of what he had to say. He said to himself, *“Somebody will write the life of this holy man, like that of Fr. Le Nobletz, which we are reading in the refectory at the moment”*.

One day, this man of God, seeing all the young men around him said, *“Which of you will I chose?”* Then looking into their eyes, one after the other, he took off the time-keeper’s hat and replaced it with his own, saying, *“This is the man. He is good. He belongs to me and I will have him”*.

At first, M. Le Vallois thought he was giving him his hat which was very new, but he soon realised that he was referring to himself. He felt a strong desire to join the Company of de Montfort, but he said nothing at this point because he first had to finish his studies. So he spent the next seven years in the Seminary, preparing for the evangelical ministry. We will see later how he followed up his vocation.²

Other members of the Community, both seminarians and directors, were thinking about devoting themselves to the missions. Fr. Pierre Caris, a Spiritan, was even on the point of joining de Montfort after his departure from Paris. Besnard tells us that

“... although there were not enough Directors for the efficient running of their Seminary, they were ready to make a sacrifice to help M. de Montfort; one of them would accompany him on his missionary journeys for the time being, while the rest were still forming those young men who would join him later.

“Pierre Caris was the keenest to follow the holy man. He wanted not just to prepare missionaries but to be a missionary himself. So he arranged things that the choice fell on him. From that moment, which he looked back on as the happiest day of his life, he could think of nothing else than his preparations to depart for the missions. The day finally arrived and with a white stick in his hand and a breviary under his arm, he went to say goodbye to the superior. But the superior told him that he had not slept all night and although he knew that Caris could do so much good on the missions, he was now convinced that he was even more needed in the Community. He felt he could no longer let him go; in short, he was withdrawing the permission that he had

The most likely explanation is that the Manuscript was more in the form of a suggestion presented to the successors of Poullart des Places by de Montfort than a statement of the actual status. What is clear is that by 1713, the Company of Mary possessed neither the Seminary nor the House of Repose.

¹ This was particularly so in the case of the future Fr. Bouïc, who kept a summary of a talk on “Wisdom” amongst his personal papers.

² Besnard p. 131.

previously given him to leave. It was a terrible blow for Pierre Caris, but he accepted it, and the wonderful service he gave to the seminary in the years to come showed how much he was needed".¹

Fr. Bouïc held Fr. de Montfort in high regard and was reluctant to let him leave without some sort of souvenir of his visit:

"I asked him for a memento of his friendship and he gave me a little crucifix and said, 'This is the most precious thing I have in the whole world and I will give it to you'. It was worn away by the many kisses that de Montfort used to give it.

The founder of the Company of Mary left Paris after two months on his own, but he was happy to have achieved the purpose for which he had come – his agreement with the Fathers of the Holy Spirit to provide him with missionaries.

"He wanted to commemorate this happy and holy association with a suitable statue, He commissioned a painted wooden figure of the Blessed Virgin, about one foot and a half in height. She was dressed in an open fan-like cloak, in the shadow of which were 12 priests, 6 on each side, with their hands joined and their eyes fixed on their good Mother, delighted to have been admitted into her Company".²

No document has survived which gives the details of this "association" agreed upon by Fr. de Montfort and the sons of Poullart des Places. One of its first results came as something of a surprise. In 1716, the year of his death, the author of the *"Rule of the Company of Mary"* signed several legal documents as follows: *"Louis-Marie de Montfort Grignon, missionary priest of the Company of the Holy Spirit"* and in his will, he gave the name of his own institute as *"The Community of the Holy Spirit"*.

Recent historians of the de Montfort religious family have come up with several explanations of this change of title. Fr. Eyckeler sees it as an attempt to facilitate relationships between his Congregation and the Seminary of the Holy Spirit which had promised to send him recruits. J-F Dervaux thinks it was for reasons of prudence ... so as to avoid the impression that the Missionaries were a new religious institute. According to Fr. Le Crom, Montfort used the new name to emphasise the strong links that attached his spiritual family to the Community of Poullart des Places and also as a safeguard for his Company of Missionaries which had no recognised legal existence in France.³ The historical section of the Congregation of Rites in Rome seems to have appreciated the value of a *"certain affiliation"* of the Company of Mary and the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.⁴ The above

¹ Besnard, pp. 131-132.

² Besnard, p. 128.

³ Besnard p. 369 note 5. The Community of the Holy Spirit itself did not have Patent Letters at this point, but Louis XIV *"had the intention of giving it a solid foundation, having honoured it in various ways and having given it his protection, but his death intervened"*. (Letter of Pierre Thomas in the Archives of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit).

⁴ Novo Inquisitio... 1947, p. 314: *"Quandi mori (April 28th 1716) la sua Compagnia... aveva... una certa affiliazione al Seminario dello Spirito Santo, che doveva assicurarne i sogetti"*.

explanations have at least one thing in common: they all underline the importance of the ‘association’ of 1713 to which they refer, at least implicitly.

A letter from Fr. de Montfort to Pierre Caris, which is unfortunately lost, would surely have thrown some light on the nature of this association. In February 1716, “he wrote urgently to Fr. Caris, his friend at the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, of his need for some good priests who would join him in his work... One reason he gave for the urgency was that if he were to die before it was concluded, the donations made to him and his successors would remain null and void”.¹

But whatever kind of union there was between Montfort and the sons of Poullart des Places, without it, the Company of Mary would not have survived.²

Fr. Adrien Vatel was the only Spiritan to share in the work of de Montfort. Early in 1715, he had set out for the West Indies, but the frigate in which he was sailing put in at the port of La Rochelle and there he met the great missionary whom he had known in Paris 20 years earlier. After a talk with the bishop of La Rochelle, he decided to join the missions of Poitou.³ The following October, de Montfort got a second recruit – a young priest called René Mulot – but there were no more before his death on April 28th, 1716.

Three years later, in a letter from the priests of the diocese of Poitiers to Pope Clement XI asking his blessing on the apostolate of Frs. Vatel and Mulot, their society is referred to as “*The Apostolic Missionaries of the Company of the Holy Spirit*”.

Around November 1720, Vatel and Mulot were joined by Jacques Le Valois, the same ‘time-keeper’ on whose head de Montfort had placed his own hat, saying “*He belongs to me and I shall have him*”. The departure of Le Valois for Poitou had been speeded up by “*a supernatural event*” which took place in his bedroom on the eve of Pentecost:

*“Fr. Vatel, immediately after the death of Grignon de Montfort, had written to Paris and sent Fr. Pierre Caris two small sketches of the servant of God ... Jacques Le Valois, who had such vivid memories of this man whose society he had longed to join, asked for one of these sketches. He kept it in his bedroom to strengthen what he saw as his missionary vocation, a feeling that had never left him since those early days”.*⁴

“A cleric of the community, who seemed to be somewhat deranged, had entered the bedroom and seeing the portrait, tore it up into three pieces; one part fell into the courtyard, the second remained in the bedroom and the third, which contained the

¹ Joseph Picot de Clorivière: “*La vie de M. Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, Missionnaire Apostolique, Instituteur des Missionnaires du Saint-Esprit et des Filles de la Sagesse* ». Paris, 1785. p. 485.

² In a letter to the author by the Superior General of the Company of Mary, Fr. Heiligers wrote: “*Our Congregation owes a great deal to the Spiritans. Without them, we would no longer exist*”. (Letter of October 19th, 1959).

³ V. Le Crom, pp. 402-404. Vatel was born in Coutances and was already an acolyte when he entered the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in 1710.

⁴ Besnard, p. 309.

head, was picked up by a young man¹ who wanted to copy it.² A few days later, Jacques Le Valois, returning from a journey, entered the room (which was kept locked in his absence) and to his amazement found the picture restored to its original place with almost no trace of the tears.³

There was also a beautiful scent, as if the room was full of flowers, and it seemed to come from the sketch itself; this was confirmed by Fr. Caris and more than a dozen others living in the seminary. Moreover, the other pictures which had been torn up in the same way were never replaced. This extraordinary event was certified by 13 reliable witnesses, including Fr. Bouïc the superior of the Community of the Holy Spirit in Paris, and Frs. Detehar, Caris, Thomas, Hégy, and Dotassini. Jacques Le Valois himself also testified in writing, but he added that it was not this event that had persuaded him to go to Poitou. As we have seen, that decision was made some time before, but it surely affirmed him in following his plan. He had also consulted Fr. Simon Gourdan, a Canon Regular of Saint Victor, who died in the odour of sanctity in 1729; he had encouraged him to follow his feelings.

Having given away all his money, he put himself entirely into the hands of Providence while he began his apprenticeship to the apostolic life. He arrived in the place of his birth in the diocese of Coutances to say goodbye to his parents and put his domestic affairs in order. Then he went to Poitou where he found Frs. Mulot and Vatel engaged in a missionary project at Nueil-sous-Passavant. He travelled to the grave of Grignon de Montfort at Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre and made a novena that he would recommend his undertaking to the Lord and ask, on his behalf, for an apostolic spirit to work for the salvation of the people. Then he returned to join these two fervent missionaries at the mission they had begun at Niort”.⁴

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In 1720, the Daughters of Wisdom had set themselves up at Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre so as to be near the tomb of their Founder. Two years later, the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit did likewise and the bishop of La Rochelle authorised the blessing of two oratories. Two rooms were chosen for this purpose. The one in the house of the Daughters of Wisdom was blessed by Fr. Mulot, their superior general, and he dedicated it to the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph.

“The honour of blessing the Missionaries’ house was extended to Fr. Pierre Thomas of the Community of the Holy Spirit in Paris. It was he who had pushed the idea since 1713, at which time de Montfort was visiting the Seminary to encourage students to undertake this form of apostolic life. He was not able to carry out the plan during the life of the Servant of God but he grasped the first opportunity to do so. He blessed the

¹ Grandet, *“Le Vie de Messire Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort”*, Nantes, 1724, p. 276

² Besnard, p. 309

³ Grandet, p. 276.

⁴ Grandet, p. 276.

chapel under the dedication of the Holy Spirit which is why, until this day, the house of the Missionaries at La Rochelle is referred to as “The House of the Holy Spirit”.¹

“This good priest was so full of zeal that he immediately undertook to lead two retreats in the chapels, one for men and one for women. He began with the women’s retreat in the chapel of the Daughters of Wisdom and several people from the neighbouring village of Mortagne took part. But he was unable to finish the retreat that he started for men in the Missionaries’ chapel; his superior, Fr. Mulot, asked him to proceed immediately to conduct a retreat at the Bernardière, followed by another at la Madelaine in the diocese of Nantes.² When he was recalled by Fr. Bouïc, the Superior of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in Paris, he was very disappointed that he could not follow up the attraction he felt for the Missions.³ But, like the rest of the Seminary staff, he always kept up a very close relationship with the Missionaries of Saint-Laurent”.⁴

In 1724, a few months after Fr. Thomas returned to Paris, Fr. Joseph Hédan, another director of the Seminary, took his place at Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre.⁵



In the same year, Joseph Grandet published his *“Vie de Messire Louis-Grignion de Montfort”*. This book refers to the desire of the Missionaries of Poitou to give their little congregation the title that their founder had chosen from the beginning: the name *“Company of Mary”* is used a dozen times while that of the *“Company of the Holy Spirit”* only appears twice. In 1728, a Brief granting indulgences was sent by Pope Benedict XIII to the *“Missionaries of the Society normally known as the Company of Mary under the invocation of the Holy Spirit”*.

Between 1727 and 1732, the Daughters of Wisdom made several attempts to obtain patent letters for their religious family. It is most likely that the request presented at the Court asked for the recognition of the two Congregations of Saint-Laurent, because de Montfort himself had said that the superior of the Missionaries should also be the Superior of the Sisters. The fate suffered by these requests to Louis XV is explained by a venomous article that appeared in *“Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques”*:

“The new apostles, that we referred to before under the name of “Mulotins”, recognise no other name today than “The Fathers or Brothers of the Holy Spirit”. M. Mulot is their leader while their founder was a priest from lower Brittany called Grignion, better known as Montfort, who dedicated himself to the missions with an extraordinary fervour. He died 30 years ago ... For some time, he was planning to found two congregations, one of priests under the name of “The Company of Mary” and the other of girls, directed by the priests, who took the grand name of “The

¹ Besnard, p. 330.

² Besnard: *“La Vie de la Soeur Marie-Louise de Jésus »*, Ms. p. 162.

³ Besnard, p. 330.

⁴ Besnard: *“La Vie de la Soeur Marie-Louise de Jésus »*, Ms. P. 162.

⁵ Besnard, p. 339.

Daughters of Wisdom". His disciples received many indulgences from Rome, but in France, they were refused Patent Letters. So they had to abandon their grandiose idea of emulating the "Company of Jesus", but so as not to lose the fruit of their labours, they humbly incorporated themselves into the "Bouïcs" (i.e. Spiritans) of Paris".¹

This outburst from a Jansenist publication is not without some interest. It is true that after 1730, the title of "Company of Mary" had been temporarily abandoned. The author of "A Summary of the life and virtues of Sister Marie-Louise of Jesus, Superior of the Daughters of Wisdom", published in 1768, went so far as to talk of the "Missionaries of the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin".² But it was inexact to define the friendly relations between the Seminary of Paris and the Institute of Saint-Laurent as an 'incorporation'. Perhaps a certain equivocation, more or less deliberate, was encouraged; this "subterfuge"³ would have allowed the "Missionaries of the Holy Spirit" to take advantage of the legal recognition accorded to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.

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With the passing of time, the Seminary of Poullart des Places became more and more the 'seedbed' which Grignon de Montfort had dreamt of for his Company. By the end of the 18th century, more than two thirds of the *Missionaries of the Holy Spirit* had been formed there. After his aborted departure for the missions, Fr. Pierre Caris made up for his disappointment by spending much time seeking disciples to fulfil the dream of Grignon. He used to encourage young men by telling them his own story:

"He said to one of them, "you are a happy man and I will do everything to help you. I have always wanted to do the same thing, but it was not possible. I made many requests to join the missions and on one occasion I was accepted and was on the point of departing when my sins caught up with me".

He repeated the same thing to another young man who consulted him:

"Carry on, my dear child, leave for Poitou without delay. You will do a lot of good there. Go and take my place ... It is only obedience that has kept me back and is still preventing me from going today".⁴

The memory of de Montfort was also perpetuated by the statue he gave to the community in 1713. In his biography, Besnard speaks of the veneration the community had for the statue, even 50 years later:

"Its age and the number of moves it has undergone have caused the twelve figures to be displaced; but the picture of the Blessed Virgin still has pride of place in a room

¹ July 17th, 1846, p. 116.

² Page 17. Another publication of the same period bore the title: "A Memorandum against the establishment of the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit, under the invocation of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin, and of the Daughters of Wisdom".

³ This expression is to be found in Dervaux, p. 334, which also speaks of "deliberate confusion, prudently adopted". (P. 708).

⁴ Besnard, pp. 132-133.

where the Directors and students go each day and recite the "Ave Maria" and the "Sub Tuum", either after their prayers or when they are going out or returning from a visit to the town".¹

There was also the portrait of de Montfort which had been miraculously repaired and inspired Fr. Le Valois to leave for the mission. In 1774, it was sent to Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre.²

Then there were the frequent visits of the Missionaries to Paris. The best known are those who came to seek Patent Letters at Versailles for the two de Montfort institutes. In 1750, after further fruitless attempts at the Court, Fr. Audubon, the successor of Fr. Mulo, visited the Seminary to seek recruits for his Congregation. Four of them volunteered; three were from the diocese of Amiens and the fourth from Coutances.³ This splendid catch was not the only joy he experienced at the rue des Postes; he was able to greet a young philosophy student in the Seminary called Louis Grignon, a nephew of the great missionary.⁴

Fr. Audubon died in 1755, a short time after another visit to Paris and Versailles. He was succeeded by Fr. Charles Besnard, the biographer of de Montfort and Sister Marie-Louise of Jésus. Born in Rennes in 1717, he was only 20 and a student in minor orders when he read the book of Grandet and decided to consecrate himself to the Missions of Poitou. He completed his clerical studies in his home town and was ordained there in 1741; but before going to Saint-Laurent at the invitation of Fr. Audubon, he did two further years of theology at the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in Paris. Throughout his 33 years as Superior, the fact that he was a 'Spiritan'⁵ and a close friend of his professors in the rue des Postes proved invaluable for the recruitment to his Congregation. When he came to Paris in 1757, he left with three new recruits, including Jean-François Becquet, the nephew of the fourth successor of Claude Poullart des Places.⁶

In 1765, Fr. Charles Besnard made a further unsuccessful visit to Versailles. These Patent Letters, so important for the survival of the two institutes of de Montfort, were finally signed 8 years later. In them, the disciples of Grignon de Montfort were referred to uniquely as *The Missionary Priests of the Holy-Spirit*.⁷ The Directors of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit played a considerable part in this ultimate success: they mobilised the support of their friends and protectors at the Court of Versailles to help the petition.

¹ Besnard, pp. 128-129.

² Cf. Dalin: "Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu, Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, instituteur de la Congrégation des Missionnaires du Saint-Esprit de Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre », Paris, 1839, p. 453.

³ "Chroniques de la Sagesse", First volume, p. 376.

⁴ J. Hervé: "Notes sur la famille du Bienheureux Grignon de Montfort », Rennes, 1927, pp. 64 and 67-68.

⁵ For the whole of the 18th century, the name "Spiritan" was given to all the former students of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. In her *Journal*, Catherine Briand refers to her nephew, Yves-François Duchêne, as either a Missionary priest of the Holy Spirit, a Mulo, or a Spiritan. (cf. the Archives of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit).

⁶ *Chroniques de la Sagesse*, Volume I, p. 376.

⁷ The full text of the Petition to the King for Patent Letters can be found in "Nova Inquisitio", p. 304.

On his final visit to Paris in 1786, Fr. Besnard was accompanied by Fr. Micquignon, another past student of the rue des Postes. It was this 'Spiritan' who was elected to succeed Besnard in 1788. Fr. Becquet wrote to the new superior: *"Much as I regret the passing of your predecessor, I am delighted to hear that you will succeed him"*.¹ So the missionaries of Saint-Laurent had no reason to doubt the continuing support and friendship of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.



Then the Revolution came. In the West of France, the disciples of Grignon de Montfort played a part that Pierre de la Gorce rightly praised:

"To begin with, the Revolution did not displease them because they were ordinary people. But they became terrified as committed Catholics; as soon as they saw the "Civil Constitution", they were bitterly opposed to it ...

"They were unable to preach, but that did not stop them; where the word could no longer be used, there was always the pen. Their house at Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre became their arsenal from where they distributed brochures, pictures and printed cards. The titles showed their purpose: "Sermons of a good priest", "A discussion on the new French Constitution", "A model for persecuted Christians", "The Church and the Civil Constitution".²

An important thing to remember about these men, who were so active in preparing the people for this assault on the Christian faith in Vendée, was that most of them were not from that area at all. Many came from Normandy, Brittany and Picardy, others from Orleans and the Jura. The Superior, Fr. Micquignon, was from the diocese of Amiens and Fr. Régnault, an old and popular missionary, from Boulogne-sur-Mer. Fr. Dauché who was killed at La Rochelle in 1793 was from the small village of Eu in Upper Normandy.³ Fr. Duguet had only arrived at Saint Laurent in 1787. Despite his youth, he quickly became their inspiration and encouraged his fellow-priests in their sufferings. The people looked on him as a great preacher and writer. He produced many pamphlets, including the famous *"Instruction on the intruders in the form of a conversation between a priest and a simple country layman"*.

At the start of the 19th century, another "Spiritan", Fr. Yves-François Duchêne, was elected Superior of the Congregation. He led it from 1810 to 1820. He was the nephew of Mgr. Briand, the bishop of Quebec; he himself had opted for the Missions in Canada, but the presence of the English prevented him from crossing the Atlantic, so he joined the de Montforts in 1785.⁴



When in 1690 the Poullart des Places family moved from rue Saint-François to the rue Saint-Sauveur in Rennes, only God knew that it would result in the friendship of two schoolboys

¹ Letter of July 7th, 1788. (Archives of the Company of Mary.)

² « *Histoire religieuse de la Révolution Française* », Vol II, pp. 349-356.

³ Cf. Dervaux : « *Les Filles de la Sagesse* », vol I, p. 134.

⁴ For Fr. Duchêne, see Dervaux: *"Les Filles de la Sagesse"*. Vol I, and the *Journal* of Catherine Briand, his aunt. He was born at Pordic in 1761 and studied at the Seminary of the Holy Spirit from 1780 to 1785.

that would have dramatic effects for the next 100 years through the close and fruitful collaboration of two congregations.

The words of Charles Besnard, written in 1767, remained true right up to the beginning of the 19th century:

“This friendship never changed as time went by; it was carefully cultivated on both sides by men with the same way of looking at things, the same feelings, the same spirit of poverty, the same enthusiasm and trust in Divine Providence, the same commitment to the glory of God and the salvation of souls”.¹

¹ Besnard, p. 129. In the 19th century, the association between the two institutes produced no practical results, despite the desires expressed from both sides up until 1832. (Cf. Cardinal TISSERANT: *“Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort, the schools of charity and the origins of the Brothers of Saint-Gabriel”*. Luçon, 1960, pp. 265-266.)

XXII

THE SPIRITANS AND THE DAUGHTERS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

We have already met René-Jean Allenou de la Ville-Angevin in this biography of Poullart des Places. He was one of the first of his students. Very quickly, this young Breton distinguished himself in his studies and commitment. Having completed two years of philosophy, he was appointed as a tutor in theology. In 1712, he left the Seminary of the Holy Spirit where he had spent nearly nine years and on February 16th, he was ordained priest by the bishop of Saint-Brieuc. Two years later, his uncle, Fr. Allenou de la Garde, resigned as parish priest of Plérin to make way for his nephew.

At Légué, a small fishing village within the parish, the new parish priest met Marie Balavenne, René Burel and Charlotte Corbel, three young women who ran a small school and taught catechism. They spent much of their time looking after the poor and the sick and organised a monthly meeting of a Franciscan Third Order that had been functioning in Plérin for more than a century. From this small core of devoted people, René-Jean established a congregation consecrated to the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Conception.

The first notice we have regarding the new foundation dates from 1771. It records that after the resignation of Fr. Allenou de la Garde, *“his nephew, Fr. René-Jean Allenou de la Ville-Angevin, continued to look after these young women. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he guided them and drew up a rule of life which was based on the one he himself had followed in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in Paris, where he had done his studies, making the necessary changes to fit in with the different aim of this new religious family”*.¹

The original Rule of the Community of Plérin has been lost, but the Daughters of the Holy Spirit have a copy of it which was made for the sisters who set up a house at Taden in the Diocese of Saint-Malo. The title of this copy is *“Particular and general rules of the house of the Sisters of Charity in the town of Taden ... dedicated and consecrated to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, conceived without sin”*.

The relationship is obvious between the Rules of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit and the Daughters of the Holy Spirit. The Rule of Poullart des Places was extremely succinct, but he had plenty of opportunity to clarify the meaning in the subsequent commentaries he made on it. Fr. de la Ville-Angevin used both the text and the commentaries of his old superior when he wrote his rule for the sisters. Here are the opening paragraphs:

“To be received into this house, the young ladies must be full of charity so as to be able to carry out their duties; they will honour, as perfectly as possible, the three adorable Persons of the Blessed Trinity, but they will have a particular devotion to the Holy Spirit, the love of the Father and the Son, whom they will see as their father in a special way. So their principal feast day will be the day of Pentecost.

¹ *“Abrégé de l’Institut des Filles du Saint-Esprit de la paroisse de Plérin, évêché de Saint-Brieux »*. (A Synopsis of the Institute of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit in the parish of Plérin in the Diocese of Saint-Brieux). This manuscript is to be found in the Mother House of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit.

And as the best way to obtain graces from the Holy Spirit is to elicit the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary, his beloved Spouse, they will also have a particular devotion to her. They will regard her as their patron and advocate with their father, the Holy Spirit; they will use all the titles and qualities that the Church ascribes to her, and they will celebrate the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in a special way”.

Fr. de la Ville-Angevin drew up this rule in the early years of his residence in the parish of Plérin. It was thanks to him that Plérin became a new centre of devotion to the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Conception. In 1718, their dual devotion was underlined by the words of the commitment signed by the original Daughters of the Holy Spirit: *“Signed at the Port of Légué in the house of charity, on the day and the feast of Pentecost and renewed on the day and the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, December the eighth, one thousand seven hundred and eighteen”.*

The following year, the rule was submitted to Mgr. Fréat de Boissieux and all the senior parish priests; it was approved and given the seal of his coat of arms. The Bishop agreed to be their protector and their first superior.

The Rule of these new religious shows how much the young parish priest of Plérin must have been influenced by the years he had spent at the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. If he did not know the seminary rule by heart, he certainly retained a good idea of its contents. Let us take a few examples. Every month, the poor scholars had to prepare themselves for a holy death:

“One day out of every month shall be chosen for serious meditation on death. The day before, everyone will receive Holy Communion as if it were the last day of his life. The meditation for that day will be on death and the particular examination will concentrate on the order that they must put into all their small duties. The reading will be on an appropriate subject. However, regular studies must not be interrupted nor shall the number of spiritual exercises be increased.

*This day will pass as intended if everyone carries out his routine actions as though it is the last time they will ever be performed. They will try to go to bed that night as if they were entering their coffin, with the pious thought that perhaps they will not wake up the following day”.*¹

In the Rule of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit, this same preparation for death is to be found:

“On the Saturday before the first Sunday of each month, they will do one hour of meditation – a half hour in the morning on death and another, before dinner, on the ways in which they have broken the Rule. In addition, in the morning they will read for half an hour on death. The examination of conscience that day will focus on a preparation for death.

They will try to make their confession that day as if it were the last one of their life and they will go to bed that evening with the same thoughts that they would like to have at the time of their death, imagining their bed to be their tomb. The following

¹ “Règlements Généraux et Particuliers” no. 43. (Koren, p. 173).

*day, they will try to take communion with the same feelings that they would like to have when they receive Viaticum at the time of their death”.*¹

There is similar parallelism in the passages about meals:

Rule of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit

“Both the Superior and the students should regard themselves as poor people to whom Providence offers the food that is served in the refectory”

*“All will eat in common but in total silence, paying less attention to feeding the body than nourishing the soul through the public reading that takes place during the meal”.*²

Rule of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit

“The Daughters who enter this community must see themselves as the poor of Jesus Christ. Therefore, they will use the most ordinary food.

*During the meals, they will concentrate on the readings, remembering that it is not sufficient to nourish the body: the soul must also be fed”.*³

It is not possible to quote all the pages in the two Rules which show that they have a common source. Perhaps the most interesting sections for us of the Rule of Fr. de la Ville-Angevin are those that have no direct parallel in the Rule of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit but which clearly echo the exhortations of Poullart des Places. This is the case, for example, with the following quotation regarding the virtues of humility and kindness:

“These two virtues are inseparable and the foundation of all the others; they are so essential for girls who want to enter this foundation that without them, there is no way in which they would be able to look after the sick, teach in schools or fulfil any other ministry.

To grow in these virtues, they must study the example of Jesus himself and absorb the special lesson that he gave us; “Learn of me, for I am gentle and humble of heart”. They must also convince themselves that they deserve nothing, either from God or from men, because of their lack of talent, their sinfulness and their failure to cooperate with the grace of God.

They will suffer with patience and joy all the insults, injuries and calumnies that the world will throw at them and they will tell themselves that it is only right that other creatures should revolt against them, just as they themselves have turned against God by their sins.

¹ “Synopsis ...”, p. 52.

² Nos. 58 and 67

³ Pp. 46-47

They will practise this humility and kindness not just amongst themselves but towards everybody they meet, especially the poor and children, seeing them as far more important than themselves and more worthy to receive the mercy of God”.

In reading this page, we can only think of how often Claude Poullart des Places “urged his poor scholars not just to accept humiliations from others but even to search out such gifts from the Lord”.

Many times during his formation at the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, Fr. de la Ville-Angevin would have been told that a good priest should possess both virtue and knowledge. He insisted on the same for his sisters; they must acquire not just charity but also a competence in caring for the sick.

At Taden, near Dinan, the Count and Countess de la Garaye had transformed some of the buildings on their estate into a hospital. The Count had already acquired some knowledge of chemistry, but to give a better service to the sick, he set about learning pharmacy and surgery. His wife followed his example and showed such skill with the lancet that “surgeons in Paris and England were sending her patients that they dared not treat themselves”.¹

It was to competent teachers like these that Fr. de la Ville-Angevin sent his girls. They included his own cousin, Miss Allenou de Grand-Champs, who felt attracted to religious life but could not decide which group to join.

“Her cousin was informed and he led her to opt for this new foundation. He knew that three young uneducated girls living together would not attract anybody, but that God was very good at making something out of nothing. The Lord would expect her to suffer, but he felt that that is where God wanted her to be and her example would attract others to join.

It needed the courage of somebody like Mademoiselle de Grand Champs to accept this invitation to join such an innovation, where the future was still far from clear; she told him that she was more than happy to help somebody with such inspiring and holy plans. So she entered in 1721, convinced that God was calling her. And she was not mistaken because this virtuous young girl became the pride and joy of the society, as is still the case today.

The concern of the priest of Plérin for the spiritual and material well-being of his daughters led him to search for means for their improvement; he managed to get a place for his cousin in the hospital of la Garaye so that she could study the way to treat poor, sick people. Before long, she was able to produce all sorts of medicine and perform surgical operations which a woman could reasonably be asked to do. Eventually, she returned to Plérin and passed on all she had just learnt to her sisters.

“In 1726, the Count de la Garaye, well known for his generosity, founded a house in Taden for three sisters where they could stay while pursuing their studies at his hospital. All the sisters passed some time there.

The enthusiasm and devotion with which these sisters carried out their duties inspired several of the nobility to start something similar in their own parishes”.

¹ Dervaux: op. cit p. 375

On May 11th, 1741, the day of the Ascension, the parish priest of Plérin headed for La Rochelle, from where he set sail for Canada. But he never forgot his daughters; his official and theological duties in Quebec never prevented him from encouraging them to remember all the instruction he had given them:

“Love and practise poverty as Jesus did; detach yourselves from everything and from yourselves. Never worry if you are lacking something of all the conveniences that you had in the past. Search out privations with a sort of enthusiasm. Be always happy with the little that you receive...”

“...Love the poor, sick people and help them as much as you can. Look after them, because they are the living image of the suffering Jesus Christ...”

The founder died in the odour of sanctity on September 16th, 1753.¹ Today, the Daughters of the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Conception number around 4,000, working in France, North America and Africa. They still base their lives on his wisdom and their Rule remains an echo of the one that was drawn up by Poullart des Places for his poor scholars.²

¹ Abrégé, ms. cit.

² For more information on the subsequent life of Fr. de la Ville-Angevin in Canada, consult Fr. Henry Koren: *“Knaves or Knights? A History of the Spiritan Missionaries in Acadia and North America, 1732-1839”*. Pittsburgh, 1962