

## II

## THE FRIENDSHIP OF A SAINT AND THE LOVE OF POVERTY

Two important events for the des Places family took place in 1690. They moved from the area of the Palais to rue Saint-Sauveur, and a young cousin of Claude, Anne-Marie Lamisse du Hingueul, was taken permanently into the family home.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the main entrance to the Church of Saint-Sauveur was still situated on the road of the same name, very close to their new house. One of the side-chapels contained the much venerated statue of Our Lady of Miracles. From his earliest days, Claude was very proud of the fact that he had been consecrated to the Mother of God and he was now living in the shadow of her sanctuary. He often went into this chapel to kneel before it and ask for the grace of perfect purity and he received a very special grace from her hands – the friendship of a saint.

By the end of 1690, Saint Louis Grignion de Montfort was a student of rhetoric in the Jesuit college. He had recently moved with his parents to a house in the rue du Chapitre, parallel to the rue Saint-Sauveur. Every day, when going and returning from school, he would drop in to visit the statue of Our Lady of Miracles. Louis and Claude soon got to know each other and walked to school together each day. It was the start of a very close friendship. There was a considerable age difference between the two: Louis Grignion was born at Mont-fort-sur-Meu in January, 1673, so he was 6 years older than Claude. As well as having very different characters, Louis Grignion came from a poor background while Claude, as we have seen, was born into an affluent family, but their shared devotion to Our Lady swept away any obstacles to their friendship.

Such friendships between future saints are not rare in the history of the Church, but their strong relationship, based on their love of the Virgin Mary, was particularly fruitful. Most probably, without the influence of Louis Grignion de Montfort, Poullart des Places would not have become the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and the dream of Louis to found the Company of Mary would never have got off the ground. But we are getting ahead of ourselves...

Claude was probably in the fourth grade when he took a step which, according to his future biographer and disciple, Pierre Thomas, was to be the prelude to the Community which would be his life's work. *“As he grew up, he also progressed in virtue. When he began to go to high school, instead of amusing himself with the usual horse play of young boys, he gathered some friends together and, without saying anything to his parents or teachers, set up a sort of prayer group. On certain days, they met in a room that was put at their disposal by a kind lady who shared their secret. They fixed up a well-furnished oratory and on the major feast days, they lit a huge number of candles that had been bought by the boys. They*

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<sup>1</sup> She had been born in the manor of Hinguel in the parish of Gourhel, near Ploërmel.

*drew up their rules for prayer, silence and mortification, including the use of the discipline. In other words, they were practising virtues that they had never even heard of!*

*These initiatives of young Poullart were all the more surprising in that he had a lively and restless temperament that could easily have pointed him in different directions. But, as well as the grace of God, he was already being greatly influenced by the expert guidance he received from his parents and teachers.*

*These devotions could not remain hidden for long. A Jesuit priest who directed Poullart found out about them and he ordered the group to disband, telling Claude that self-love might have a greater share in this venture than the love of God, or at least it might eventually get mixed up in it. Moreover, he was afraid that their fervour, which was already going a bit too far, might lead them into indiscretions. Claude obeyed his director, but this act of obedience must have been a more trying mortification for him than all the others he was practising at the time.<sup>1</sup>*

In *“The Life of M. Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort”* written by Charles Besnard, the third Superior General of the Company of Mary, there is another version of the events recorded above with some notable differences:

*“Claude Poullart des Places did his classical studies and philosophy at the College of Rennes. It was there that he struck up a close friendship with Louis de Montfort. They got together to set up a small group of students for the purpose of honouring the Blessed Virgin Mary in a special way. They gathered on certain days in a room that was lent to them by a saintly person. There they erected a kind of oratory to perform their spiritual exercises and they all shared the cost of decorating it. They had their rules for prayer, silence and mortification. The latter sometimes went so far as to include taking the discipline. These meetings continued for some time after Louis had left for Paris, thanks to the zeal of Claude to whom he confided the running of the group and who alone remained their animating spirit and support.<sup>2</sup>*

The manuscript of Thomas dates from around 1730. So it is morally certain that when Besnard drew up the above version of events some 40 years later, he had no other source available than that of Thomas. How can we account for the discrepancies between the two versions?

The explanation could be quite simple. Thomas does not mention the name of Louis Grignon, but the close friendship that had existed between the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and that of the Company of Mary since their adolescence is attested to by very reliable sources. Moreover, the original text does not name any of the companions of Claude Poullart, so why could Louis Grignon not have been the first? When we think of the age difference between the two friends, would it not have been normal for Louis to take the leading role in the foundation and organisation of the group? The intervention of the director of Claude Poullart is not mentioned in the ‘Life of Grignon de Montfort’, which is hardly surprising as it happened after the departure of Louis for a seminary in Paris.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas p. 229

<sup>2</sup> Besnard P. 101

It is quite understandable if Charles Besnard did not slavishly follow the text of Thomas which he had before his eyes; he hardly committed a crime against the truth if he concentrated rather on the edification of his readers and the glorification of his hero, Louis Grignion.

But it remains unclear. Louis left Rennes at the end of 1693 so the small group could only have been suppressed the following year. This would mean that the group was in existence for three or four years, unbeknown to either Claude's parents or his director. It seems rather unlikely. In his account, Thomas gives clear indications of the short-lived nature of these meetings. At the time when his confessor intervened, Claude was still a child: but when Louis left for Paris, Claude was already studying rhetoric and was referred to as "an accomplished gentleman".<sup>1</sup>

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One of the results of Claude's friendship with Louis Grignion was getting to know Fr. Bellier.<sup>2</sup> This young priest lived near the cathedral, close to the house of the des Places family. He was already known for his virtue and dedication. Each week, he gathered a group of students in his house "to talk about the things of God". Not only did he talk of Christian love, but he insisted that they put it into practice: they were sent in groups of two or three to the different "Hospitals" of the town to serve the poor, teach them catechism and read to them during the meals.

These establishments, which were known as "hospitals" at that time, were not just for the sick. At Rennes, the Hospital of Saint-Yves and the General Hospital had many different functions: the sick took up most of the space but there was also a home for the aged, an orphanage and a trade school. Part of the Saint-Yves hospital was dedicated to abandoned children. They were taught until the age of twelve and were then transferred to another section where they were taught a trade. This part of the establishment also took in uneducated boys and girls who, over several months, were prepared for their first communion. They even took in a Moorish footman of Mme de la Mansellière in 1691 to instruct him in the basic elements of religion and prepare him for baptism.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the administration of these Hospitals was the responsibility of the *Ministry for the Poor*. Normally, it was the godfather of Claude, the Comte de Marbeuf, who presided over the meetings of this department. One day, when he was not able to attend because of sickness, a delegation was sent to his house to thank him "for his generosity, care and devotion to the poor which he has shown over such a long period in the hospitals".<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas, ms. 4

<sup>2</sup> Julien Bellier was baptised at Rennes (in the parish of Toussaint) on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1662. All his education took place in Rennes and he was ordained priest in September, 1686. He was praised by all. A register of priests of the diocese of Rennes says that he was "a good priest, virtuous, doing great work in the cathedral". Costil, who lived in Rennes at the start of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, wrote in the *Annals of the Eudists*: "We are indebted to M. Bellier for his total dedication, especially for his talks to the students and the way he takes part in so many of the good works that are being done in the Province". Ren.:Reg.par. de Toussaint; G. 386. Ann. De la Compagnie de Jésus et de Marie, Tome I, p. 513.

<sup>3</sup> Ren.: Volume X Sup., pp 587-588.

<sup>4</sup> Ren.: Vol. X, p. 587.

Like Louis Grignion, Claude Poullart was a member of the Congregation of Our Lady, founded for their best students by the teachers of the Collège Saint Thomas. The Jesuits, who directed the Augustinian Sisters in charge of Saint-Yves, invited the members of the Congregation of Our Lady to visit the sick and the poor in that hospital.<sup>1</sup> To help them grow in their love for the poor, the Jesuits recommended their young students to read a book called *“Caring for the sick and helping them in all their needs”* by Mathurin Denys, the printer and librarian of the College. It makes disturbing reading:

*“ I believe that when a person is facing extreme necessity, the rich have an obligation not just to help and to give him what is needed to save his life, but also to supply what is necessary to preserve his dignity”. (p. 12)*

*“At the start of this century, St. Francis de Sales and other apostolic people rightly complained of the excessive luxury of the period which was eating up all the donations needed by the poor; but we have even more reason to object to the deplorable excesses of our own time. Over the last fifty years, extravagance has increased to such an extent that we are now sending 15-20 millions more out of the kingdom to buy silk, spices and other superfluous commodities. The rich are spending 50-60 millions more on silver and gold plates and precious stones than their predecessors ever did, a sum that could provide for all the beggars in the kingdom”.*

*“Just as the amount spent on luxury goods in clothes, carriages, and fine crockery has increased enormously, the level of alms-giving has diminished proportionately. In the parish of Saint-Sulpice in Paris, gifts for the poor were growing by 24 or 25 million livres per year before this craze for luxury set in; today, they do not even reach 4,000!” (p. 65).*

The author then adds some examples from Brittany that would make the son of a log merchant pause for thought:

*“Every two years, the States of Brittany give the king about 3 million in free gifts, quite apart from the expenses involved in collecting such a sum. It is only taken from the wine and cider that is drunk in the taverns”.*

*“If the tax on what is drunk produces 1,500,000 livres a year, the price of wine or cider and the profit for the proprietor of the tavern and the farmer who produces it rises by at least the same amount. As a result, three million is spent each year simply in the bars of the province of Brittany”. (p. 69).*

Such extracts remind one of Saint Basil and La Bruyère:

*“If an epidemic were to hit the horses or dogs of the great lords, these gentlemen would move mountains to find a remedy. But most of them would be willing to abandon thousands of poor people, made in the image of Jesus Christ, to sickness and death without raising a finger to help”. (p. 141).*

Thanks to the influence of so many good people – Louis Grignion, Fr. Bellier, M. de Marbeuf, the Jesuits and their writings – the heart of Claude Poullart soon opened to the poor and later, opened to poverty itself. But it seems that the greatest influence of all was his mother,

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<sup>1</sup> P. Delattre, S.J.: *“Les établissements des Jésuites en France »*, Vol V, column 362.

Jeanne Le Meneust, and the unfailing example she gave him. Claude's father had the reputation of being very careful with his money; he took a strong line in his business transactions and did not hesitate to throw an insolvent farmer into prison.<sup>1</sup> But his wife was goodness itself. In leafing through parish records, we have found that she was godmother to at least 30 young girls, and most of these were from very poor families. This shows the sort of person she was. After the deaths of her son and husband, she donated the farm of La Bullerye in Noyal-sur Seiche to help the poor of the hospital of Saint-Méen.<sup>2</sup>

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From time to time, Fr. Bellier left Rennes for several weeks. He was part of a volunteer group of priests who, under the direction of M. Leuduger, a scholastic of Saint-Brieuc, continued the mission of Fr. Julien Maunoir in northern Brittany. On his return, he would give his students an account of the miracles of grace that the mission had accomplished.

In reading a life of Louis-Marie de Montfort, it is easy to see that the influence of Fr. Bellier marked him for life. At Poitiers, La Rochelle and in the Salpêtrière in Paris, he gave a great deal of his time to hospitals, and later on he was to found the Daughters of Wisdom to work in such institutions. The rest of his time was given to the missions, for which he set up his other foundation, the Company of Mary.

We will see later that the influence of Fr. Bellier on his young friend, Claude, was of a different kind, but no less effective.

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<sup>1</sup> Min. Le Hongre, 20 September, 1692.

<sup>2</sup> Ren.: E. famille Poullart: Act passed in front of Maître Chevrel, October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1718.