

IV

A SUMMER WHICH FINISHED BADLY

According to Pierre Thomas, after the death of the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, his disciples found “a list wherein he had noted the special favours he had received from God in order to bestir himself to be more zealous in his service”. Unfortunately, this list was very difficult to decipher: “Undoubtedly, I would find many marvels of God’s goodness towards him and many signs of his faithfulness and zeal for his Divine Benefactor. But the great reluctance of Father des Places to let others know about the graces he had received from God induced him undoubtedly to compose his list in such a way that it was almost unintelligible to anybody apart from himself”.¹ Nevertheless, his biographer set about deciphering some of the contents and proceeded to interpret them and add his own comments in a way which was more suitable to a moralist than an historian. But as he shows no great concern for an exact chronology, it would be imprudent to follow him too closely.

So we must approach this section with some caution. It tells us more about the mentality of Thomas than that of Poullart des Places. But it would be useful, first of all, to examine what exactly Thomas wrote, even though it betrays a rather misogynistic outlook on life:

“After he had finished philosophy, his father judged it fitting that he make a trip to Paris. I would not be able to say exactly for what purpose. It is thought that the real motive was to see a high-ranking young lady who had been suggested to him as his future spouse. He was then eighteen or nineteen years old. She was one of the Duchess of Burgundy’s ladies-in-waiting. This is what I found written in a memorandum by one of the students of the community in whom Father des Places had great confidence and to whom he communicated many details of his life.

A young man with such admirable prospects, the only son of a wealthy father whose fortune was constantly on the increase, could not fail to receive frequent offers of marriage. Hence Claude was on his guard against rash decisions; he knew that one often regrets having taken on such a burden and that the marriage proves to be a protracted torment instead of bringing the expected peace and consolation. Consequently, before engaging in that state, he wanted to give it serious thought and seek counsel from God and men. He consulted a great number of married persons and asked them if they were satisfied with their present state of life. At first, they all told him that they were. But he then discreetly pressed them further and asked if they really meant what they said. He begged them to tell him the truth as friends should, and say whether, if they were free, they would still take on those commitments with the same partner. All then confessed that, basing themselves on their present experience, they would not do so. Only one of them steadfastly assured him that if he had to do it over again, he would not hesitate.

Young des Places had a keen mind and he was not blinded by love. He was on his guard against thoughtless commitments. Since his passion was for glory and renown,

¹ Thomas, p. 233

attaching himself to a woman in marriage would be an obstacle rather than a means to achieving his objectives. Girls are all too often preoccupied with frivolous amusements and these held little attraction for him. He did not like the idea of giving in to the whims and fancies that living peacefully with a wife would inevitably involve. He would have been more inclined to fight monsters with Hercules than allow himself to be overpowered by a woman and become her slave, as happened to the same man.

Moreover, he was often conscious of the leaning towards the ecclesiastical state which he had felt from his childhood and God disposed all things according to His designs. It was easy for him to put aside the plans which his parents had in mind for him but which were not at all to his liking.

It seems that Claude led a greater social life after his return to Rennes. It was natural that he should have been granted more freedom to see the world than he had enjoyed up to then and that he should have been given the money required for adopting a dignified appearance.

He rather liked this idea. Consequently, he was not particularly frugal when opportunities arose. But since his parents shied away from prodigality, he had to be somewhat devious to arrange for borrowing and lending sums of money and to hide whatever might have been irregular in his conduct behind an innocent appearance. It is probably to this that Father des Places refers when he speaks of his 'irregular' life, and it may also be these expenditures that I found recorded in the list I mentioned above. However that may be, it is certain that at that time he felt he should make a retreat".¹

A little later, Pierre Thomas will say that Claude Poullart was about 18 when he went to Nantes to study law. In this, he seems to be rather confused, as will become clear from other documents which were unknown to him. On completion of their philosophical studies, the students studying under the Jesuits were invited to make a retreat, during which they would think about their future vocation. At Rennes, Claude and his contemporaries had no need to travel to do this; a retreat house, along the lines of those of Vannes and Quimper, had been opened for this purpose in a property belonging to the Collège Saint-Thomas. In 1697, and since its foundation twenty years previously, the director of this house was Fr. Jean Jégou. His assistant was Fr. Achille Gravé, who was to become the confessor of the Duchess of Bourgone in 1701.²

So it was immediately after his defence of the *Grand Acte* that Claude-François passed a few days under the direction of these two preachers. This is certainly the retreat to which Thomas refers:

"He had begun the retreat not only to strengthen himself in piety but perhaps even more to examine carefully before God the state of life to which he was called. It was probably then that he told his parents of his plan to enter the clerical state and he asked their permission to go and study at the Sorbonne in Paris".³

¹ Thomas., p. 239-241.

² P. Delattre, "Les établissements des Jésuites en France», pp. 364-367

³ Thomas., p. 243

This was a great setback for his parents. They had been working hard to increase their fortune. They had acquired the corn market, which was at the junction of the rue de la Cordonnerie (today, the rue de la Monnaie) and the rue Saint-Guillaume. They had bought a block of old houses, courtyards and gardens on the rue Saint-Guillaume which extended right up to the church of Saint-Sauveur. On this land, they had built five three-storey houses, three stables that could hold ten horses and three coach-houses.¹

Jeanne Le Meneust had also become a merchant and shopkeeper in her own right; she was now the head of a large commercial enterprise. Rennes was an important centre of trade for tiles and textile products and tiles from Brittany were very much in demand. They were produced, above all, in the southern part of the diocese of Saint-Brieuc, in the regions of Loudéac, Uzel, Moncontour and Quintin. Jeanne was involved in the wholesale part of the trade. She acquired the tiles from the brokers who were under contract to supply her with "as many white, assorted tiles as they could". She was also involved in the wax business.

So were his parents to abandon all their hopes for Claude, for whom they had striven for twenty years to amass a considerable fortune? Not according to M. Poullart des Places!. But to avoid a total opposition to his son's plans, he told him that to be a good priest, it was not necessary to have done his studies in Paris, nor to be a doctor of the Sorbonne; those who had doctorates did not preach any better than the others!

"This reply did not fit in with Claude's plans. It meant that he would have to study theology at Rennes and that was not what he wanted. His clerical aspirations were not strong enough to preclude a desire for more liberty than proximity to his parents' supervision would inevitably have accorded him. So it was decided that he would go to Nantes to study law, a decision that pleased both Claude and his parents. In this way he would also have the chance to let his vocation mature. The study of law was required of all who wanted to be Councillors in the Parliament; it was likewise very useful for those who desired to enter the clerical state".²

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While waiting to carry out his decision, Claude apparently had time to travel to Paris and Versailles. What was the reason for this? To arrange a marriage between Claude and a lady-in-waiting of the Duchess de Bourgogne? Pierre Thomas seems unsure in his biography. Another hypothesis springs to mind. Is it possible that some important person at court wanted to meet this young man from Rennes who had dedicated his philosophical thesis to a son of Louis XIV? It is quite likely that this dedication had been drawn to the attention of the King himself, during a session of the Council of State, by the Count of Pontchartrain. Before his appointment as head of Finance, this gentleman had been First President of the Parliament of Brittany, so he must have been well acquainted with Claude's father who was the Guardian of the Coinage.

One of the privileges of those concerned with the coinage in Rennes was exemption from being called on to fulfil certain public functions, like churchwarden and receiver and provost of the hospitals. But as M. des Places was not just Guardian of the Coinage but also a merchant, the town of Rennes named him Provost of the hospital of Saint-Yves in April,

¹ Ren. C. 328

² Thomas, p. 243

1694. This post of Provost would entail a great deal of work and responsibility; finally, M. des Places managed to obtain an exemption and so the appointment was cancelled.

But in 1697, the situation became even more complicated. On May 2nd, he was once again named Provost of Saint-Yves, so this time, he appealed directly to the Council of the King. He pleaded that his duties as Guardian of the Coinage were so demanding and dangerous that they needed his full attention. On May 28th, the King and his Council decided *“that the suppliant would be exempt from the function of Provost of the hospital of Saint-Yves as long as he remained Guardian of the Coinage.”*

Meanwhile, the municipality had taken the affair to the Parliament of Brittany and on May 31st, before the news of the decision of the Council of State had reached Rennes, the Parliament confirmed the appointment of des Places as Provost. When eventually the news arrived from Paris, they in their turn presented another petition to the King, explaining the reasons for their choice: *“1) That the Commune was convinced that no exemption could be granted from serving the poor and 2) that M. des Places, apart from his duties as Guardian of the Coinage, was a prosperous business man with interests in tiles, wax, corn, beef and much besides and that he had used his wealth to purchase property in the town to the tune of 50,000 ecus”*. Commenting on his ‘assiduity’ in his financial duties, the Commune reckoned that he devoted far more time to his business interests than to guarding the coinage. But this argument, and several others, were of no avail because the king re-confirmed his first decision on October 8th.

Therefore, there is enough evidence to suggest that the journey Claude made to Paris in 1697 was not unconnected with the difficulties encountered by his father.



According to Pierre Thomas, the good resolutions that young Claude had made during his retreat *“lasted no longer than forty days”*. Here at least he is precise! But what happened after forty days? Once again, we must look at all the available evidence.

On the morning of October 9th, 1697, *“M. Poullart des Places (the father of Claude-Poullart) presented himself at the Hostelry of the “Puits Mauger”¹, accompanied by two royal solicitors”*. The three men went to the room occupied by Pierre Le Huédez, a carter from Batz, a small town in the diocese of Nantes. This man had recently arrived to present his complaint in front of the Criminal Judge of Rennes. He claimed that *“two men, one of whom, dressed in a brown jerkin and seated on a black horse, struck him across the arm with his sword and wounded him”*. He agreed to make an out of court settlement with M. des Places and never raise this charge again in the future. For his part, M. des Places *“gave the carter 60 livres and undertook to pay all resulting medical fees until he was completely cured. He would also pay any other costs incurred as a result of this criminal act”*.² As soon as the agreement was signed, the judge was informed that the charge of Le Huédez had been dropped. No trace of the case is to be found in the archives of the Tribunal.

¹ This “hostelry” still exists today, under the same name. It is in the Rue de Nantes.

² Minut. Le Hongre

So who was this person “*dressed in a brown jerkin*” and why was M. des Places so anxious to save the reputation of this man and submit himself to such a humiliating experience? Let us return again to Pierre Thomas. He tells us that Claude-François was about 18 years old when he went to Nantes and he then goes on to say: “*We now come to the most humiliating phase of Claude’s life. God forbid, however, that I should suppress it. The honesty I must practise as an historian would of itself suffice to prevent such a course being taken*”.¹ But there follows nothing more than generalities and pious thoughts on the dangers of leaving young men to their own devices before “*the fiery passions of youth*” have extinguished themselves.

We will get more enlightenment from what Claude himself has to say in some personal notes he wrote under the title of “*Some Reflections on the Past*”:

*“To attract me, God closed his eyes to an enormous crime which brought my iniquities to a climax and which I had committed at the very moment when he pressed me more than ever towards conversion”.*²

Since his retreat and having informed his parents that he now wanted to be a priest, he was faithful to his resolutions and led a fervent life. God was driving him towards a conversion and a total giving of himself.

In a written portrait³ of himself that he drew up soon afterwards, he wrote that he “*feared death but was unable to accept a public insult*”. The day would come when he would accept such verbal assaults to an heroic degree, but he had not yet reached that stage. Is this not a subtle way of saying that at that time, he was still capable of drawing his sword to protect his honour?

In early October 1697 at the age of 18, he had left the family home and set out for Nantes, most probably on horseback and armed with a sword, as one would expect from a student of his rank. This is probably what happened. As he approached the walls of the town he encountered Le Huédez who transported people and goods between Croisic and Rennes. A quarrel broke out between the two and Le Huédez was injured by Claude. It is not clear who started the argument but from the contract signed by his father, it is evident that he feared he might lose the case if it was allowed to proceed.

Most of Claude’s companions would have seen the incident as something of minimal importance and would have reacted the same way themselves. The judges, unless they wanted to vent their anger on his father who had triumphed over the Municipality and the Parliament in the recent confrontation, would probably have looked indulgently on young Claude, known for his goodness and affability. But Claude himself spoke of “*an enormous crime*” that he had committed and it seems to have had a considerable effect on his spiritual life:

“God did miracles for me. To attract me, he closed his eyes to an enormous crime which brought my iniquities to a climax and which I had committed at the very moment when he pressed me more than ever towards conversion. Not only did he not resent it, but he used it to change me. His incredible patience began to pierce my

¹ Thomas, p. 245

² Ecrits, p. 130

³ Koren, p. 93

*heart. I would not have hesitated any longer at that moment to give myself to him if I had known how much He was going to give me. I will not put the details of what had happened on paper. God alone and my heart must never forget the most wonderful effect of his mercy towards me. God must not forget it because he ought to demand of me extraordinary gratitude; and I must remember it so that I will love Him who is so liberal a benefactor”.*¹

¹ Koren, p. 131