

VII

“COME AND FOLLOW ME”

After his return to Rennes, Claude led the life of a man of the world but not of a “worldly” person. If he still moved amongst people who encouraged him in his passion for glory, he could not move away from God without being terrified. He managed to be as devoted and austere as a hermit; he had a spiritual director, assisted at Mass more than once a week and often gave alms to the poor.

Since his earliest years, he had always wanted to be a priest. When he tried to ignore the call of God, he was never completely successful; despite his resistance, God’s grace chased after him. When he finally decided to make another retreat, he had already given in to God, so his decision was, in fact, a sign of capitulation. He fully realised this, but far from making him unhappy, it led him to thank his ‘conqueror’, whose only weapons in the struggle had been love, patience and gentleness.

“I have decided to withdraw from the world and spend eight days alone. Nothing forced me to make this small sacrifice for the Lord. I could have wasted my time once more, as I have done all too frequently, but I am now resolved to devote this period of solitude to my conversion and salvation.

In adopting this plan, I was enlightened by grace, despite my blindness. If I had not received that call, would that have excused me from not returning to God? In the past, I have rejected so many graces and refused to open my heart to them. But the Lord has done so much more for me than he had to. I could not demand anything from him, yet he has frequently helped me in danger as if it were his duty! ...

My soul, now is the time to surrender to the one who is chasing you. Do not hesitate to abandon all your earthly feelings. You must reproach yourself and be more attentive and recollected because of your past ingratitude and the hardness of heart you showed to the call of God. You should feel ashamed for having resisted the call of God for so long.

I vividly remember the times when I was about to fall over the precipice and God stretched out his hand and saved me. Very often, his grace was like an iron wall that blocked my path; it halted me in my tracks and directed me elsewhere. I found it hard or impossible to do things that were offensive to God, even when others seemed to have no problem with them...

You sought me, Lord, and I fled from you. You had endowed me with reason, but I refused to make use of it. I wanted to be on bad terms with you, but you refused to allow it. I deserved to be abandoned by you and that you would become tired of being so good to me. I would have recognised my fault through your punishment and felt the enormity of my crimes.

How loveable you are, my Saviour. You do not desire my death; you only want my conversion. You are always very kind to me, almost as if you were in need of me. You seem to be delighted to conquer a heart that is as unresponsive as mine!...

You have wanted to speak to my heart for a long time but I have refused to listen. You tried to persuade me that you wanted to make use of me to carry out your plan, but I refused to believe you ...

It is now clear that you are determined to succeed. You will continue to assault me during this retreat, but it will be much less difficult for you this time. I have not come here to defend myself but to surrender unequivocally”¹.

Claude was already determined to be a priest and was burning with enthusiasm:

“I will show you to those who no longer know you. I understand only too well the confusion of people who have fallen into bad habits, so I will persuade, convince and force them to change their lives, so that you will be praised eternally by those who would otherwise have cursed you.”²

The first part of the retreat was devoted to the final ends of this life. The young retreatants were prepared for making their ‘Choice’ by meditating on the “great truths” of life. But Claude had already made up his mind: *“I have everything to fear from my present state; it is not what you want of me, so for the sake of my own salvation, I must accept your plans in their entirety.”³* But like all the others making the retreat, he was invited to adopt an attitude of personal indifference to his future state and study his vocation according to the method of St. Ignatius. He gave himself totally to this exercise with which he was already familiar:

“Since I have no preconceived ideas or prejudices, I must begin once more to examine the inclination and repugnancy that I have for each possible state of life ... I want to weigh things up in such a way that when I finally come to a decision, I will know that this is what God wants me to do.”⁴

Having examined his own temperament, he set about deciding between monastic life, the secular clergy and life in the “world”. For reasons we have already seen, he had no hesitation in rejecting monastic life. In conversation with his soul, he said: *“You say that you are indifferent to all states of life, but you are not as indifferent as you imagine: monastic life has no attraction for you...”⁵*

He then looked at the option of becoming a secular priest: *“I know you are very much inclined to the ecclesiastical state and it would seem that of the three states of life, this is the one that would appeal to you the most”*. If he decided on this, he could convert souls to God and live a life of virtue more easily. He could rely on the grace of God to reduce those faults which might prevent him from becoming a holy and faithful servant.

After further meticulous examination, the obstacles seemed to melt away and there was every indication that this was the right path for him to follow:

¹ Koren : *“The Spiritual writings of Father Claude Poullart des Places: On the Truths of Religion”*, p. 45

² Koren: *ibid.*, P. 63.

³ Koren: p. 75.

⁴ Koren: p. 93.

⁵ Koren: p. 99.

“The desire I have always had to serve the Church since I was a child, my love for the poor and my respect for sacred things, my attraction to virtue and a thousand other reasons lead me to conclude that this kind of life would fit me well”.¹

Does all this mean that he had finally found the way he should follow? Not quite. He took more time to consider the careers which were available to him in the outside world. With his sentimental character, he seemed to enjoy dissecting the traces of indecision that still remained. Addressing his heart once more, he continued:

“I have to agree that you are more inclined towards the ecclesiastical than the monastic state. I can see that your inclination is much stronger towards that direction, in spite of the indecision that makes you waver between so many choices. If I did not know you so well, I would soon consent to your wishes, but would you agree if I said: ‘I want to satisfy you; let us say goodbye to the world for ever, let us now opt for the Church, let us now completely renounce the other states of life?’

I realise that you still have some attachment to the world and that you would like more time to think it over. But one moment you want everything and in the next you want nothing. You come up with a thousand reasons why I should embrace the ecclesiastical state and the next moment, you still ask for more time to mull it over. You still have some love for the world and this is preventing you from coming to a decision; all these options suit you and all could give you some satisfaction. If I go through the list, you are attracted to each one in turn. I still do not know what are your views when you look at the world. At the end of all this, I will try to force you to make a choice.”²

Claude was not attracted by the military or financial world. A position in the service of the King would perhaps be to his taste but he felt that his character was too accommodating to resist the temptations of the court. Neither would his parents agree to such a plan. Of all the possibilities in the secular world, he devoted most time to considering the legal profession. He found it very attractive but he felt that the hesitations of his conscience could be overcome or, at least, that they would grow less over the years.³

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The time for a decision had arrived. In the dialogue with his heart, Claude showed a strong preference for the ecclesiastical state. From the start of the retreat, he recognised that God wanted to use him to accomplish his holy will. He had promised God that he would make him known to those who had drifted away from him. So his conclusion comes as something of a surprise: he decides to follow the advice of his spiritual director.

“I must turn to you, my God, to ensure that I follow your will in this matter. I want to be guided by your wisdom. Destroy the many attachments that I have to worldly things. Once I have made a decision, let my only thought be to please you. Since I cannot reach a decision, I will put the matter to your representative, hiding nothing. Help me to find an ‘Ananias’ who

¹ Koren: p. 104.

² Koren: p. 105.

³ Koren: pp. 109, 111.

will show me the right way, just as you did for St. Paul. I will follow his advice as I follow your commandments. I place all my hope in you.”¹

What can we learn about Claude from this conclusion? Was he the sort of indecisive person who wants everything and nothing? Or was he a hyper-scrupulous individual who, to protect himself against doubts and worries, decided to leave the decision to his spiritual director? It is probably impossible to find an answer to such questions. Perhaps the key to understanding what Claude really felt can be found in the opening prayer of “*A Choice of a State of Life*”:

“O my God, guide to the heavenly Jerusalem of those who put their trust in you, I turn to your Divine Providence. I abandon myself entirely to you, I renounce my own inclinations and appetites so as to follow your will.

Let me know what you want me to do so that by leading the kind of life for which you have destined me, I may faithfully serve you during my pilgrimage on earth in that state of life which is pleasing to you. In this way, you will give me all the graces I need to give you the glory which is your due. ‘Notam fac mihi, Domine, viam in qua ambulem, quia ad te levavi animam meam’ (Make me know, Lord, the way in which I should walk, for I have lifted up my soul to you. Ps 142.8).”²

On the road to Damascus, St. Paul had asked, “*Lord, what do you want me to do?*”. And the Lord replied, “*Go into the town and you will be told what you must do*” and he was put into the care of Ananias. Claude knew exactly what his Ananias would tell him, but he still needed to hear it. He did not want to take the decision to set out on the road to the priesthood by himself: he abandoned himself entirely to Providence and would accept the word of his spiritual director as the word of the Lord.

The exact words of his director have not come down to us but from what happened subsequently, he must have been more clear-cut and decisive than Claude had ever been. Even as a priest, his dominant fault of ambition never completely evaporated; there were plenty of opportunities to gain a reputation as an outstanding speaker. The day after he had delivered his “*Grand Acte*” four years previously, he had asked his parents for permission to study theology at the prestigious Sorbonne University in Paris, from which he would gain a doctorate. He probably saw this as a way to stimulate his work and to get ahead of others on merit. But in fact, by October he was installed at the Collège Louis-le-Grand where he followed the course of theology given by the Jesuits, thus deliberately renouncing any idea of acquiring university diplomas.

Unlike the rich young man in the gospel, Claude Poullart des Places generously accepted the sacrifice that he was asked to make as the price for his personal sanctification. This was the decisive turning point of his life, setting him on the road that would lead to the accomplishment of a great priestly and apostolic work.

¹ Koren: p. 113

² Koren: p. 89.