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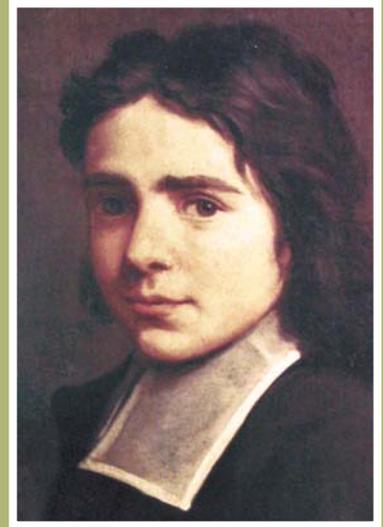
A SHORT LIFE OF CLAUDE POUILLART DES PLACES

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Speak to my heart, O God, I am
ready to obey you.



**Spiritan Life
and Mission**

No. 2



*Founder of
the
Congregation
of the
Holy Spirit*



A SHORT LIFE OF CLAUDE POULLART DES PLACES

Happiness reigned in a home in Rennes on the evening of February 26th 1679. Francois-Claude Poullart des Places, a lawyer in the Breton Parliament, and his wife, Jeanne le Meneust were celebrating the birth of a son – a child whom they had feared would never be born.

The baby was baptised the following day. He was given the names of Claude-François. He owed his first Christian name to his godfather, Count Claude de Marbeuf, and his second to his godmother, Mme. Françoise Ferret de Tymeur, the wife of an influential banker in Rennes and a friend of Mme. de Sevine. It would have been difficult to find a more impressive set of godparents in the town of Rennes.

M. Poullart des Places, the father of baby Claude, had long ago promised himself that he would realise his dearest wish – to have his family line integrated once more in Breton nobility from which it had been removed on the occasion of Colbert's reform in 1668. As a means to achieving this end, he had purchased the office of Inspector of Taxes which meant he had to reside in the Finance Office but which exempted him from paying all taxes. He retained his position of Collector General of the revenues of many abbeys and priories, as well as being the Receiver General of the dues of the Bishopric of Rennes.

Thanks to his prodigious hard work, this enterprising man had become one of the richest businessmen of the town of Rennes. M. Des Places placed all his hopes on this son whom the Lord had just given him. For him he mapped out a very careful and well thought-out education so that one day he would be worthy of being re-integrated into the ranks of the nobility.

But God had another plan for Claude. He would intervene in his life by means of a series of events which would turn out to be so many invitations to Claude to realign himself with what God wanted of him.





AN ACCOMPLISHED YOUNG MAN



Since young Claude was of delicate health, his father entrusted him to a tutor who took charge of his early education. This situation continued until Claude reached the age of eleven in 1690 when he became a fourth-year student in the renowned Jesuit College of Saint-Thomas. In the same year, the des Places family left the neighbourhood around the Parliament and settled in Rue Saint-Sauveur.

2 Claude often used go to pray in the nearby church where Our Lady of Miracles was venerated. It was there that he met another student from the Jesuit College who, like him, was animated by a deep Marian devotion, Louis Grignon de Montfort. Despite the difference in their ages and the social standing of their respective families, a close friendship developed between them. In 1692, Louis Grignon went to Paris to enter the Eudist Seminary. Their friendship would continue later through a very close collaboration.

Without his parents or tutor knowing it, Claude, at that time, founded a pious association with a few co-disciples. They prayed a lot and undertook fairly severe physical mortification. A Jesuit Father at the College, when he heard about this, dissuaded them from continuing their meetings, rightly fearing harmful excesses of devotion.

It was then that his friend, Louis Grignon, put him in contact with M. Bellier, a young priest of the locality, who exerted a very strong influence on him. This priest directed Claude's generosity towards a surer way to holiness – serving the poor and visiting the sick and infirm in the hospital of Saint-Yves.

Claude Poullart grew to maturity developing deep resources of piety but was also full of energy and able to enjoy life. He was a source of great consolation to his parents. They refused nothing which they thought would advance the



education of their son. He was given lessons in horsemanship, fencing and music. Already Claude was showing signs of the polished manners of the nobleman that – they hoped – he would become one day.

In 1694, at an astonishingly early age, Claude completed his study of the humanities with great success and received many prizes. Since he was thought to be too young to embark on the study of philosophy, his parents sent him to the Jesuit College at Caen to study rhetoric, a discipline for which he seemed to be particularly gifted. Just as at Rennes, he became distinguished both for his academic success and for his piety.



Then he returned to his home town and began his philosophy studies. In 1698, he was selected for the “Grande Acte” – the title given to a public debate in which the most brilliant student would defend – in Latin – a philosophical thesis. This solemn event took place in the Great Hall of the Parliament. All the important people both in the town and in the surrounding area gathered there to be present. Claude Poullart achieved a brilliant success. Everybody was talking about him. Everyone was loud in praise of his knowledge, his brilliance and his eloquence. M. and Mme des Places began to see the realisation of the dream they had cherished ever since their son was born.

It was now time to think about his future. M. Des Places planned to send Claude to Paris in order to make the acquaintance of a maid of honour to the Duchess of Burgundy. However, Claude was not ready yet to start thinking about marriage. He wished to be free to prepare himself for the brilliant future which he desired.

Now that his philosophical studies were complete, Claude became less fervent than he had been. His first biographer notes that he carved out a bit of a career for himself. **“It was only natural for him to avail of the opportunity to see the world which he had not done up to now and to provide himself with the money which would allow him to appear with honour. All this was according to his taste and he did not spare any expense.”**



However, his soul was too upright to continue in this state. Claude had no illusions about himself and penned some very lucid words of self-judgement. **“I sincerely admired people of property. I was a lover of virtue while, however, hardly ever practising it. Human respect and inconstancy were huge obstacles for me. Sometimes I had the devotion of a hermit, pushing the limits of austerity beyond those considered correct for a man of the world. At other times, I was sulky, cowardly and unenthusiastic about fulfilling my duties as a Christian, always afraid when I forgot God and fell into sin.”**

4

Even though his religious convictions would have kept him safe from the traps of a worldly way of life, Claude Poullart felt ill at ease. He felt that he needed to make a retreat. It was then that God’s call became clearer to him. On the completion of the retreat, he informed his parents that he thought he was being called to the priesthood, an inclination which he had experienced since his childhood. He clarified that he wished to pursue his theological studies at the Sorbonne in Paris thus indicating that he wished to pursue a career in the clerical state.

This was a deep disappointment for his father who had thought of nothing else but of making his son a Councillor in the Parliament of Brittany, a position which would in turn mean that his descendants would be re-integrated into the ranks of the nobility.





LAW STUDENT

M. des Places did not really believe that his son had a vocation but did not wish to oppose his plans head-on. Playing for time, he suggested to his son a period of reflection during which he would study Law. In any event, his studies in Law would be a definite advantage to Claude if he were eventually to carve out a career for himself in the Church. He felt that Claude wished to leave the family circle and accordingly arranged for him to study in Nantes. Both parents and son found this decision mutually satisfactory. Claude therefore set off for Nantes. He made it clear that the two years which he was going to spend there would be a time of significant relaxation. He was barely 20 years of age. Left to his own devices, he led a life which, without appearing irregular in the eyes of people of the world, was nevertheless not the kind of life that one would have expected of him. Later, speaking of his past, he discovered how merciful God had shown himself in his regard: **“In order to draw me to himself, God closed his eyes to an enormous crime which was the greatest of my iniquities and which I had just committed at the very time when he was influencing me to change my way of life. On the contrary, he used it to touch me. The greatness of his patience began to pierce me to the heart.”**

5

At the end of the summer of 1700, Claude returned to Rennes with his degree in law. What was he going to do with his life? He himself did not rightly know. He was still thinking of the priesthood but he was also attracted by the world of the Law.

For two years he had not spoken of his call to the priesthood. His parents came to the conclusion that he was no longer thinking about it himself. His mother was so out of touch with her son's thinking that she went to the expense of buying a lawyer's gown for him. When she asked him to try it on, he looked at himself for a moment in the mirror. Suddenly the smile disappeared from his face which took on a determined aspect. With a resolute gesture, he took off the gown and said solemnly that he would never put it on again.

A few days later, he informed his parents of the decision which would influence his entire life – he would become a priest. He then asked if he could go to Paris in order to prepare himself for a ministry which he himself thought would be brilliant career.



CONVERSION

Claude Poullart des Places would be a priest – there was no doubt about that – but for the moment, his vision of priesthood was marked by his strong ambition, the search for glory and success. He saw himself as a renowned preacher, gathering around himself a large audience. During a retreat which he did, he described himself as follows, without any irony: **“I am passionate about glory, for everything which can lift one above others by merit, full of jealousy and of despair at the success of others, without however, letting my own unworthy passion be seen.”**

However, Claude would emerge from this retreat radically transformed and re-oriented. A note which he wrote traces his inner struggle: **“You sought me, Lord, and I fled you. You gave me the gift of reason yet I did not want to use it. I wanted to blur my relationship with you but you would not allow it... I have not come here to defend myself, I have come to let myself be conquered. Speak to my heart, O God, I am ready to obey you.”** The help of a spiritual adviser helped him to see what it was that God was calling him to. He would be a priest but with no other ambition but to be a servant of the love and mercy of God.

6





Claude made a deliberate break with any idea of “making a career” for himself. When he arrived in Paris, he did not register at the Sorbonne, the only institution which would permit him to take the degrees which would allow him to obtain lucrative positions and an envied place in the French church. He went instead to study theology at the College Louis-le-Grand which was directed by the Society of Jesus. In this way, his studies would not be crowned with any University degree. Claude would be a poor priest although he did not yet know in what way.

God would tell him by means of the Association des Amis. The AA, or Assembly of Friends, was a pious association similar to those which existed in the majority of Jesuit colleges. It was at the meetings of the association that Claude, now known as M. Des Places, would deepen his devotion to Mary. It was there that he discovered the great wretchedness of the poor whom he considered from then on as the suffering members of Jesus Christ. To help these people emerge from their religious ignorance, what was required was not inquisitive priests or priests greedy for money, but apostles who would be poor and disinterested. He immediately put these convictions into practice. He used to receive from his father a modest sum for his personal needs. He did not hesitate to send the best of his food to the sick and the poor, treating himself as the least and the last of them.

On the following August 15th, he received the tonsure and the ecclesiastical habit. He was happy. He led a life of intense prayer and of devoted service to the sick and the young vagabonds to whom he taught catechism, saying that **“their souls were no less dear to Jesus Christ than those of great nobles and that there was more fruit to be hoped for from them.”** His love for Christ made every burden a light one. To sustain him, God put in his heart an extraordinary fervour which he would experience for eighteen months.



THE AUDACITY OF A YOUNG CLERIC

In the vicinity of Louis-le-Grand, Claude Poullart noticed the deplorable condition of many of the aspirants for the priesthood. At that time, seminaries demanded fees from their students that only clerics from a privileged background could pay. Those who were known as “poor scholars” lived precariously. In order to survive, they used to take on various jobs to the detriment of both their studies and their spiritual formation.

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An event then occurred which enlightened Claude on what God was expecting of him – his meeting with a “poor scholar” who had literally nothing of his own. Claude took him completely under his own protection. This scholar, Jean-Baptiste Faulconnier, was soon joined by another similar “poor scholar” and then by many others. Claude welcomed them all, obtaining enough for them to live on, renting accommodation for them and supervising their formation. He had now discovered his real vocation. He spoke of it to his childhood friend, Louis Grignon de Montfort: **“You know that for some time I have been distributing everything that is at my disposal to help poor scholars to continue their studies. I know many of them who possess admirable dispositions but because of a lack of resources cannot now realise them and are obliged to bury these talents which would be very useful to the Church. I am going to take steps to gather them in the same house. It seems to me that this is what God expects of me.”**

Louis Grignon happened to be in Paris at that time and was making plans of his own to establish a society of priests who would give parish missions. He met

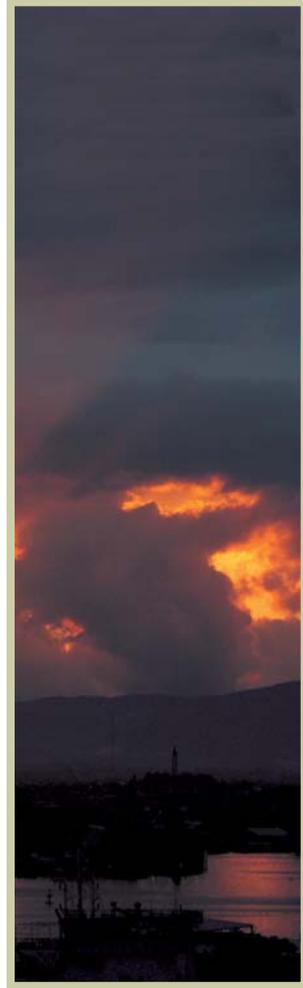


Claude and he asked him to work with him to help these plans reach fulfilment. Claude did not think that he was called to that form of ministry. He suggested to his friend that he would form priests whom Louis could then send out on mission. **“I will prepare missionaries for you and then you can put them to work.”** This association was extremely effective for many years.

At the beginning of 1703, Claude left the College where he was boarding in order to live with his fellow students in a house which he had rented on the Rue des Cordiers. On the following Pentecost Sunday, May 27th 1703, Claude Poullart des Places and his little group of a dozen scholars became a clerical community. In the chapel of Our Lady of Good Deliverance in the church of Saint-Etienne-des-Grès, the group consecrated itself to the Holy Spirit under the protection of the Immaculate Conception.

“Monsieur Claude François Poullart des Places, in the year of one thousand seven hundred and three on the feast of Pentecost, being then only an aspirant to the ecclesiastical state, began the establishment of the aforementioned community and seminary consecrated to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Holy Virgin, conceived without sin.”

The principal characteristic of M. Des Places' foundation was that it only accepted poor candidates. This was formally stated in the rules **“Only subjects who are known to be poor will be accepted in this house. Under no circumstances can people who are in a position to pay for their accommodation elsewhere be admitted here. However, scholars who are not in great**





poverty but who could not support themselves elsewhere may be accepted here. It would be good to require the latter to make some small payment towards the daily expenses of the house so that it would not be found necessary to reduce the number of poor students who, by preference, we must receive." The "poor scholar" was guaranteed lodging, free meals and sometimes even clothing up to the day when he would begin his ministry. Freed from all preoccupation with material things, he would follow the rule of the house whose only aim was to provide him with a solid spiritual and intellectual formation.

These rules, which Claude Poullart re-drafted in 1705, assigned to each scholar his specific role within the community. Claude himself became just one more amongst them without any pretence, sharing their food, practicing the rule, washing the dishes and cleaning the shoes. His only desire in being their superior was that he might serve them better. Outside the house, his students were ready for anything – taking care of the sick in the hospitals, evangelising the poor and even unbelievers. They not only accepted but whole-heartedly embraced and preferred the most humble positions – positions for which it was difficult to find workers.

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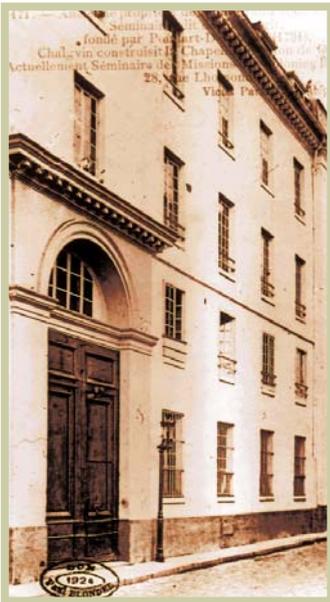
To feed and maintain an entire community was a costly enterprise for the new community. Although severe financial difficulties were caused by the increasing number of boarders, Claude never turned to his family for assistance. Thanks to generous and faithful friends, he succeeded in balancing his meagre budget. The bursar in the Jesuit College helped him by allowing him to avail of what was left over from the 600 meals which were served each day in the Jesuit house. The Jansenists, enemies of the Jesuits, took pleasure in ridiculing the "Placists", as they called Claude and his fellow disciples, dismissing them as the "nurslings of the Jesuits" and were unable to conceal their spite as they saw the increasing success of Claude Poullart's work.



THE BIG TEST

However, Claude found himself overwhelmed by it all. He had barely time to continue his own studies. His relations with his companions suffered as a result. He examined his life in the light of a delicate, almost scrupulous, conscience. It seemed to him that he was unworthy of God's esteem. **"I find that I am no longer sensitive to the presence of God. I never think of it when asleep, hardly ever when awake and I am distracted at my prayer. There is no precision in my meditation, which is without method or fixed subjects and sometimes even without regular times. My words lack gentleness as does my manner of acting – I am proud, dry and disgusted – adopting a haughty tone, using sharp words, giving lengthy and pointed reprimands. Alas, I am no more than a mere mask of devotion and a shadow of what I once was."**

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After having established the pitiable state of his soul, Claude arrived at a practical conclusion – the only way of regaining his former spiritual state would be by placing in more worthy hands the work that he had founded and by returning to solitude to find once again his former fervour.

God had in truth brought him to a deeper awareness of his imperfections in order to lead him to cross another threshold in the faith. Enlightened by the advice of a priest, he came to realise that God's love had never left him. But he had to strip himself of a self-confidence which was no more than illusory and to seek help to make sure that the life of the community continued in the proper way.



Up until this crisis occurred, there were no priests in the house. They all went out to Mass in Saint-Etienne-du-Mont and their spiritual direction was in the hands of a Jesuit Father. Claude Poullart persuaded one of his childhood companions, Michel Le Barbier, who had just been ordained to come and help him in the direction of the community. As the months went by, a team composed of a 22-year-old sub-deacon, M. Garnier and Pierre Caris, the son of a tailor, was formed around Claude. In the meantime, it became necessary to leave the house on Rue des Cordiers which had become too small. They took up residence in a more spacious residence on the Rue Neuve-Saint-Etienne (Rue Rollin today). Claude Poullart now had more time to imprint on his community the spirit which was proper to it and also to prepare himself for the priesthood. He was ordained a priest on 17th December 1707.



THE TERRIBLE WINTER OF 1709

The winter of 1709 was one of the most severe trials of the reign of Louis XIV. For a period of ten days the temperature in Paris dropped to -21 degrees. Then the thermometer rose rapidly leading to the Seine flooding. On February 4th, the cold re-appeared in all its rigour. It is reported that more than 30,000 Parisians died. The cold caused a famine which was further aggravated by the war. The price of food rose sharply. This calamity, which did not spare even the rich, weighed heavily on the 70 scholars of the community which depended entirely on alms for its survival. Its health was severely shaken.

At that very time, Poullart's right hand, Michel le Barbier, was recalled by his Bishop. Claude found himself overwhelmed by the burden of the work. In addition to the fatigue there were the added burdens of the opening of the new academic year and examinations for new candidates.

Claude Poullart's health, which had never been robust, now left a lot to be desired. The cold and the hunger had a profound effect on him because he preferred to deprive himself than to see any of his students in want.

As September drew to a close, he contracted pleurisy. The hospitals were overcrowded with patients. Claude remained with his own community. On October 1st, he was moved to a new property which had just been acquired on the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève (today Rue Tournefort). It was there that he died peacefully on the evening of October 2nd, after having received the Last Sacraments. He was thirty years of age. His body was buried in the common grave of the little cemetery of Saint-Etienne-du-Mont amongst the poor and in the shadow of the Chapel of the Virgin Mary.

“Such was the holy and renowned M. Desplaces, founder of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit.”

Thus had the Lord brought his plan to completion. He had led Claude Poullart des Places through a life and a death that would be worthy of the Christ of the poor.



AFTER POUILLART

The work of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit would continue after the death of its founder.

M. Jacques Garnier, a young man of 26 years of age, was called to succeed him. Unfortunately, the burdens of office and the deprivations of the winter of 1709 sapped his strength. He died in March 1710.

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Louis Bouic directed the Seminary for more than half a century (1710-1763). He was followed by François Becquet (1763-1788). To them fell the responsibility of maintaining the Founder's spirit and of consolidating his work.



In 1734, the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, without legal approval up to that point, had its rules officially approved, despite the opposition of the University and the Jansenists.

The 1,300 priests who, prior to the Revolution, made up the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, were not linked to it by any vow or contract. Their unity was guaranteed by the spirit which they had received from Claude Poullart des Places. "Spiritans" were to be found in China, in Guyana, among the native peoples in Canada and in the Company of Mary, founded by Louis Grignon de Montfort.

At the time of the French Revolution, the Seminary of the Holy Spirit was



suppressed, its priests dispersed and the house sold. Later re-established, it was once more suppressed by Napoleon. It received legal approval once more in 1816 and took on the responsibility of becoming the sole provider of priests for all the French colonies. Despite his best efforts, M. Berthout, Superior of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, did not succeed in finding priests in sufficient numbers for this difficult ministry.

In 1841, Father Francis Libermann founded the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary. He had plenty of priests full of energy and of desire to go on mission. But he saw that it would be necessary for them to widen the field of their apostolate.

In 1848, at Rome's request, Father Libermann accepted joining the Congregation of the Holy Spirit with his own priests. The two congregations had similar aims – the evangelisation of the poor and missions to the most abandoned souls. The Congregation of the Holy Spirit preserved its title and its rules since these were in perfect harmony with those of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary.

Libermann was elected the eleventh Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.

He infused into it a new inspiration which was a remarkable continuity of the spiritual tradition it had received from Claude Poullart des Places.

The Congregation of the Holy Spirit, a religious and missionary Congregation, continues to develop. In

2006, it numbered around 2,900 members with 470 young people in formation. New Provinces have been established in the countries of the South especially in Africa. It has opened new missions in Bolivia, in Santo Domingo, in the Philippines and in Taiwan. Since the Spirit goes ahead of us leading the way, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit still feels intensely the call to continue to develop, despite many challenges and obstacles





In Ireland, Spiritans are involved in the service of education, of migrants and asylum seekers. They also work in parishes and in ministries of healing and compassion.

M. and Mme. Des Places did not see their lifelong dream become a reality. They died without seeing their descendants receive a title of nobility – but their name has spanned the centuries and has survived in memories and hearts in a way which has surpassed all their hopes.

“O God, who guides all those who trust in you to the heavenly Jerusalem, I come in need of your Divine Providence and I abandon myself completely to it. May you make known to me what you wish me to do so that, in fulfilling here on earth the life to which you have destined me, I may serve you throughout my pilgrimage in a way that would be agreeable to you and where you can give me in abundance the graces I need to give glory for ever to your Divine Majesty.”

Claude Poullart des Places.

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This text is a translation of *La Brève Vie de Claude Poullart des Places*, Coll.

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