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THE RELEVANCE OF POUILLART DES PLACES FOR SPIRITAN IDENTITY AND MISSION

“I will proclaim what your goodness has made me hear today.”



Raymond Jung, C.S.Sp.

Raymond Jung, C.S.Sp., is director of the Maison Poullart des Places in Rennes (France), whose mission is to disseminate Spiritan spirituality. He has been formator in various houses of Spiritan formation in the Republic of Central Africa and in Europe. From 1996 to 2012, he was assistant novice director, then director of novices in Ireland, Cameroon, and the European novitiate opened in Chevilly, France, in 2004. As such, he invested much in the study of the founders.

Translated by Roberta Hatcher

In 2002–2003 we celebrated our two founders and 300 years of Spiritan history, then in 2009, the anniversary of the death of Poullart des Places. These celebrations made it clear that the entire Spiritan family recognizes Claude François Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann as its founders and that we owe what we are today to the two of them. Poullart des Places has taken his rightful place in the consciousness of Spiritans.

In fact, these celebrations would not have been possible a hundred years earlier, for Poullart des Places had fallen into obscurity in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was only in 1901, following the suppression of the Congregation by the French government, that a rediscovery began, one that continued throughout the twentieth century.

We now have the *Spiritual Writings* of Poullart des Places available to us in several languages,¹ as well as several biographies, including the work by Joseph Michel, a standard reference that seeks to restore “the true face of our founder.”² Thanks to Fr. Koren³ and the publications of Paul Coulon and others,⁴ we are more familiar with the history of our Congregation. In addition, many initiatives of the Spiritan Provinces have made the figure of the first founder and our Congregation’s history better known.

Yet this activity should not stop there: In his introduction to the re-reading of the *Spiritual Writings* of Poullart des Places, Fr. Lecuyer says: “These books should be in all community libraries. And if they are, they should be read.” A little further he confesses with humility that “he had largely neglected knowledge of the writings and work of Poullart des Places” and “that the same is probably true for many of my Spiritan confreres.”⁵

We are fortunate to have more reliable sources that reduce our distance from the founder. However, a founder is more than a text. He is a person to encounter, a gift to be embraced in order to build our identity and to live the mission in vibrant fidelity, responding in a creative way

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(SRL, 2) to the needs of our time. Our generation and each and every one of us is invited to embrace Poullart des Places, to live his charism and the grace which he was granted.

Are we prepared for this encounter? Though all acknowledge his work, some seem to think he does not have much else to say to us - too removed from us, too rigorous, with an over-the-top piety, *et cetera*. Let's not stop at appearances and prejudices. If the *Spiritual Writings* disappoint us, let his life speak. Let us embrace his witness which remains today a source of inspiration for us. It is important to take it into account in order to face the present, to clarify what we hope for, and to open new horizons. It is in this spirit that I share what, in the life and work of Poullart des Places, continues to call to us, as much in his search for a vocation in the spiritual experience that led him to become founder, as in the launching of a work where his charism is revealed.

Searching for his Vocation through Formative Experiences

From the period of his life when Claude was probing within himself and searching for his life's direction came discoveries and realizations that would prove decisive for his life. At the Jesuit College, Claude received not only quality instruction, but also a pedagogy designed to spark his talents and personality. In the "Company of Mary," he found group support for reflection, prayer and service to others. He was even among the most fervent of the group that gathered around Fr. Bellier, then Vicar of the cathedral. He saw this priest as a model, and in the select group he found strong support for his approach. His relation to Christ became more personal. He learned to listen to his interior voice and felt the stirring of new aspirations, the desire to be a priest. The Gospel, far from "formatting" him as some today fear, on the contrary awakened him to his interiority and his own freedom.

Another formative experience was his encounter with the poor. Sent by Fr. Bellier, Claude visited the orphans at the Saint Yves hospice to read them "sacred history" or teach them the catechism. There he discovered boys who did not have a comfortable life like his own, but who were nonetheless friendly, and had like him the desire to live and grow and be happy. He was probably surprised at times by their behavior or their responses, but he felt joy in meeting them. What he experienced there was of impact for the rest of his life. He would later describe himself as "liking very much to give alms and naturally sympathizing with the misery of others . . ."⁶

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Finally, Claude became aware of his weakness. He was nineteen when he left to study law in Nantes. Like the other students, he was torn between attraction to the world and his wish to succeed versus his desire for an authentic spiritual life. He experienced a lack of constancy, sometimes being filled with fervor, at other times "soft, cowardly, and lax in my Christian practice."⁷ A painful experience, but necessary if he is to know himself better and become more mature. Not everything could be reconciled – he could not be responding to this call while at the same time satisfying his ambition. The choice was a difficult one. His parents' desire to re-enter the ranks of the nobility through their only son weighed heavily on his shoulders. Back from Nantes, he went for months without being able to make a decision. A bright future was awaiting him, but at heart he remained divided, incapable of uniting his life around a plan.

The Defining Experience of a Conversion

The resolution came about during a two-week retreat according to the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius which he took in 1701. There he had two key experiences which allowed him to put an end to the indecision. First, he discovered God's merciful love for him despite his many infidelities: "*I seek my God . . . The world will not reward me for my attachment to him. I would only be hard-pressed if I had to find there a true friend who would love me unconditionally. Only God loves me sincerely and is solicitous for my welfare . . .*"⁸ He realized that no love, no promise, can surpass what God offers him; that in comparison, the world's offerings are illusory. He believed this all the more since he also experienced a great joy. Thomas, his first biographer, emphasizes: "*God imparted himself to him, he penetrated him with those powerful lights that even the most skillful masters cannot convey to their disciples . . . He made him experience the sweetness and consolations that one tastes when one is open to giving oneself unreservedly to God.*"⁹ He "tastes" the "sweetness" of giving himself to God. He is no longer afraid. Only God truly loves him and to live in his presence is a source of joy. This retreat, where God overcame him, was lived as a liberation - from the plans of his parents, from his own ambitions, from the illusions and promises of the world. It allowed him to accept himself as he was, to name "his overriding passion"¹⁰ which often lay hidden beneath his actions and decisions: ambition, love of success and glory, vanity.

What he experienced was genuine, for it bore lasting fruit; it marked a turning point in his life. Accessing his true desires unleashed a new power. In a conversation with his spiritual guide, he acknowledged that he was called to be a priest and make decisions that the new direction of his life required. These decisions would no longer be based on his fears, or by going along with what seemed to be the most appealing or comfortable choice, but based on his sole desire to respond to God, to resolutely walk on the path God had prepared for him and to show him gratitude.

Claude thus became the bearer of a personal message. He had a great desire to share the joy he felt: he wanted everyone to taste of the same forgiveness, the same liberation he experienced. "I will make you known to hearts who no longer know you; I will proclaim what your divine goodness has made me hear today. I will use the powerful means of your grace to convert them."¹¹ This passage has often been invoked to represent Poullart des Places's missionary vocation. What is certain is that every person is responsible for the gift he has been given. What Claude "heard" during his retreat, what was revealed to him, determined the path that he followed. For him, the Gospel was that new word which resonated with his story, which spoke to him personally and invited him to respond freely. He became a witness. How could he make such a claim without that personal encounter with Christ? Why go if I have nothing to say? Only those who have "been with him" and who have "seen and heard" were considered Apostles.

"I will make you known to hearts who no longer know you;...

His discoveries from this retreat brought about a certain "manner" of responding. We often use the expression "in the manner of Poullart des Places." What do we mean by it? Aware of having been liberated by his Lord's "extraordinary mercy,"¹² Claude consequently wanted to give himself to this God who alone was worthy of his life's devotion and who

called him into existence by the grace he was granted. Over the course of the journey that followed, he would come up with a response to events as they unfolded, thus living in faithfulness to God's call and to himself.

Like many others he bore witness to the Gospel, but in his own way. Because his ambition had often led him away from God, he would fight it at every turn, and preferred instead "the most obscure works, the most neglected works."¹³ He would follow Christ in his abasement, and in his preference for the poor and the sinners. This logic explains Claude's desire for a humble life of poverty and his concern for those who were destitute, the immigrants of his day, the sick, and students without means. Out of gratitude to his "Liberator," Claude was happy to "be able to comfort him in the person of the poor who are his members."¹⁴ He thus charted an original path that he would propose to the poor students who asked him to assist them in their training for the priesthood.

"My Thoughts and My Desires"

Claude was not a founder when he finished the retreat, but without it he never would have become one. In fact, his spiritual experience guided his entire trajectory and was the source of all his initiatives. During his first year in Paris, the Jesuit seminary environment helped him structure his spiritual life.¹⁵ For apostolic engagement he chose to reach out to the young Savoyards who cleaned the chimneys of Paris. This "obscure, neglected work"¹⁶ suited him, for he was "convinced their souls were no less precious to Jesus Christ than those of the highest nobles, and that there were as many and even more fruits to hope for."¹⁷

In August 1702, he went on a retreat to prepare himself for tonsure. He then entered an eighteen-month period of great spiritual consolation which stayed with him during the months when he started the work for the poor students. It was there that he found the courage to begin the undertaking. He spoke of it in his *Reflections on the Past* in late 1704. "It is fitting that I call to mind here those moments of fervor that I had the joy of experiencing in my first returns to God. What were my thoughts and my desires then, what was my way of life, what were my ordinary activities . . .?"¹⁸ He then describes in a few sentences the "thoughts" and "desires" that were occupying him when he became a founder.

I wanted to see myself one day stripped of everything, living only on alms after having given everything away. Of all temporal goods, I professed to keep only my health, which I hoped to sacrifice entirely to God in the work of the missions. I would have been only too happy if, after having set the whole world on fire with the love of God, I could have shed my last drop of blood for him whose blessings were ever before my eyes.¹⁹

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In his Letter to the Galatians (Gal 1:13-17), Paul describes his vocation as a completely inner revelation of Jesus Christ. God revealed his Son "to him" so that he could proclaim him to the Gentiles. This call gave a new coherence to his life as a whole and made him a free apostle in the service of the Gospel. We could say that "everything sprang from

this event, from this inner knowing of Jesus Christ” (cf. Phil 3, 7-11).²⁰ We can read the life and work of Poullart des Places in the same way. For him, too, his entire life acquires meaning from the encounter with Christ, which he experiences as a call and a conversion. After much hesitation and struggle, he finally accepts the grace granted to him. He is no longer going to focus on himself for the recognition of others, but will live turned towards him to whom he wants to give his life, and towards those to whom he is sent. In this passage the desires that will mark his life and work are already apparent: the choice of material and spiritual poverty, a desire for mission in order to “set the world on fire with the love of God,” and the wish to give his “last drop of blood” on a path of faithfulness to the end.

Fr. Lécuyer already spoke of it: “attraction to a life of poverty, missionary work, total sacrifice in the service of preaching God’s love, all points that we have noted in Poullart des Places, and whose spirit he would instill in the work he founded and which has endured to our day.”²¹

Spiritual experience was where Claude heard the call, where his desire grew, and where his answer was born.

A Missionary Approach

A spiritual experience is confirmed by the fruit it bears. Claude’s deepened the quality of his relations with others. It pushed him towards an encounter with the “poor students” to the point of becoming one of them by placing himself “as with equals.”²² His spiritual fervor gave him the enthusiasm for action, and from his engagement with the poor students came the intuition of the work. There he was unified around his project, a sign of the Spirit acting in him.

Poullart des Places never traveled far, but mission is not measured by distances covered but by the ability to “get outside oneself.” In his initiatives for beginning and consolidating his work, we can recognize an authentic missionary approach that remains a source of inspiration for our mission today.

First, in his way of meeting these students, we find again the “manner of Poullart des Places.” He did not come to them as a rich man,²³ but as someone who asks, who sees all that the other has to give. In this encounter, he perceives his particular calling which is to help them in their preparation for the priesthood. His aim is also revealed: not only to provide them with food and lodging, but to “showcase” and “cultivate” their “admirable dispositions” and their “talents” which, “for lack of help,” remain “buried.”²⁴ He saw what wasn’t visible on the surface, namely their talents and riches that could be developed and put into the service of others. This text clearly shows that from the beginning there was discernment: Claude supported those whom he felt were favorably disposed towards a vocation for the priesthood. He helped them, and they in turn brought their willingness and commitment. A relationship of reciprocity was established in which everyone gave and received.

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The relationship was also based on reciprocal hospitality. Claude offered the students hospitality not only in the house he rented for them, but in his heart. At the start of Lent in 1703, he left his comfortable quarters in the College to move in with them. This time it was they who welcomed him among them, just as in Acts 10:33 Peter and Cornelius received each other, reciprocating hospitality, and together were visited by the Spirit. From being the assisted, the students became brothers. This mutual hospitality is a source of life at the birth of a community that will later become a religious congregation.

The mission was a border-crossing. The house Claude moved into was just across the street, but it was a radical change, an exodus from his own world into that of the students. It was a giant step that went beyond accepted norms, which transgressed existing boundaries in the very hierarchical society of the period. That was his charism. The Gospel was proclaimed.

He made a firm choice for a poor lifestyle by renouncing to live off church assets. Prior to his ordination, he would only accept the sixty livres subsistence income required by his bishop. The little he possessed all went to serve the community he founded. He was thus free from his father, and free from any desire for control over the students he took in. His project was built on confidence in God and his Providence; that is why he chose to live on alms. He shared his students' condition and had no other security than what was available to all of them.

Finally, in 1704, he agreed to share responsibility for the community with others. It was a renunciation, a form of poverty that was a source of life and which gave a future to the community that would no longer be tied to his person.

A Community of the Poor to Evangelize the Poor

Poullart des Places had a strong conviction that was part of his charism: the poor have a right to sound and solid training like everyone else. "Neglected souls" need "educated" priests, because they are just as worthy as those of "high nobles."²⁵ The framework he chose to do this was a community of formation.

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Intended for the poorest, the seminary provided an education in evangelical poverty. Claude knew how to persuade his students that "selflessness is the beginning of perfection for a soul that wants to follow Jesus Christ."²⁶ The objective was to train hardworking, capable and selfless priests²⁷ who would be willing to serve the church's mission and the faithful entrusted to them, priests "for the people."

The mission began with the witness of an evangelical community, where services are shared, where "nothing more is served to the superiors than to the individuals. Everyone must be happy to see themselves as the poor to whom Providence has provided the food they are served in the refectory."²⁸

Even if Claude was the superior with the authority that carried, he acted as one of them, was the first to observe the Rule and did not hesitate to wash the dishes or clean

dirt off the shoes.²⁹ To “proclaim the Gospel to the poor” like his Master, nothing was “too low”³⁰ for him, he made himself the servant of all.

Their evangelical common life took on a prophetic dimension, for it established relations of equality long before the French Revolution (1789), without violence but in the joy that comes from sharing, mutual service, and fraternity.

Moreover this emergent, modest and fragile project constitutes a strong statement in relation to the ills of the church and the world of its time - in the church, a poorly trained clergy concerned with maintaining their advantages, in society, growing inequalities between the different social classes. It is fully in keeping with the reflection and the efforts of the church of Claude’s time; according to J. Michel, it is “the best response to the Council of Trent.”

Conclusion

This brief re-reading of the story of our founding demonstrates that for Poullart des Places the mission is more than the vague dream of a young man, rather part of his calling and the high aspirations that were at the origin of his work.

He did not have a predetermined plan. It was by the guidance of the Spirit that he became founder, and it was to the Spirit of Pentecost that he and his companions consecrated themselves on May 27, 1703, in order to become priests willing to be sent where the church had the greatest need. A humble beginning, but one that launched a history in which the missionary dimension would increasingly assert itself.

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Indeed, after their training at the Holy Spirit Seminary, some priests went back to their dioceses. But many others joined the missions in France with the Montfortans. In 1734, the mission to the “infidels” was written into the Rule of Life, and a short time later some left for Canada and the Far East. Over time, the faraway mission would become the main responsibility of the Congregation, making the Spiritans a religious congregation primarily of missionaries. All this was not by chance, rather the fruit of the missionary spirit that Claude knew how to transmit, the desire to give one’s life to proclaim the Gospel to the poor.

The identity of our congregation does not fit easily into a definition. Rather, it tells its story. It is up to us who are members today “to continue writing this story.”

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Endnotes

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- ⁵ Lécuyer, Joseph, “En Relisant Poullart des Places,” in de Mare, *Aux racines de l'arbre spiritain*, 223-272, here 225, 224.
- ⁶ Poullart des Places, “Choice of a State of Life,” in Koren, *The Spiritual Writings of Father Claude Francis Poullart des Places*, 87 – 113, here 95.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.
- ⁸ Poullart des Places, “Reflections on the Truths of Religion,” in Koren, *Spiritual Writings*, 43-83, here 81, 83.
- ⁹ Thomas, Pierre, “Annexe 1: Le manuscrit de M. Pierre Thomas sur Claude-François Poullart des Places,” in Coulon, Paul, *Claude-François Poullart des Places et les Spiritains*, 160 -184, here 174.
- ¹⁰ Poullart des Places, “Choice of a State of life,” in Koren, *Spiritual Writings*, 101.
- ¹¹ Poullart des Places, “Reflections on the Truths of Religion,” in Koren, *Spiritual Writings*, 63.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 65.
- ¹³ Pierre Thomas, “Annexe 1,” in Coulon, *Claude-François Poullart des Places et les Spiritains*, 160 – 184, here 181.

¹⁴ Ibid., 180.

¹⁵ Theological studies, retreats, admission to the “Assemblée des Amis” (AA).

¹⁶ Koren, Henry J., “Du séminaire du Saint-Esprit aux missions en terre d’Amérique au XVIII^e siècle,” in Coulon, *Claude-François Poullart des Places et les Spiritains*, 267-285, here 268.

¹⁷ Ibid., 268.

¹⁸ Poullart des Places, “Reflections on the Past,” in Koren, *Spiritual Writings*, 127 – 149, here 133.

¹⁹ Ibid., 133, 135.

²⁰ C. Théobald, Christoph, *Vous avez dit vocation?* Paris : Bayard, 2010, 46.

²¹ Lécuyer, Joseph, “Re-Reading Poullart des Places,” *Spiritain Papers*, 4 (1977) 3-17.

²² Pierre, Thomas, “Annexe 1,” in Coulon, *Claude-François Poullart des Places et les Spiritains*, 160-184 here 183.

²³ During that time, he refused an income of 4,000 livres, as seen in the billet II of the letter to the AA of Toulouse, March 20, 1703. See Joseph Michel, *Influence de l’AA sur Claude-François Poullart des Places*. Paris: Beauchesne, 1992 40-41.

²⁴ Besnard, Charles “Annexe IV: Claude-François Poullart des Places et le séminaire du Saint-Esprit dans la Vie de M. Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort de Charles Besnard (Around 1770),” in Coulon, 201–216, here 205.

²⁵ Pierre Thomas, “Annexe 1,” in Coulon, *Claude-François Poullart des Places et les Spiritains*, 160-184, here 181.

²⁶ Michel, Joseph. “Du nouveau sur les sources de la spiritualité de Poullart des Places et sur la genèse de son oeuvre,” in de Mare, *Aux racines de l’arbre spiritain*, 101–123, here 112.

²⁷ Michel, Joseph, “L’ambiance doctrinale d’une fondation,” in Christian de Mare, 134-152, here 145.

²⁸ Poullart Des Places, “Rules for the Community of the Holy Ghost - General and Special Rules # 67,” in Koren, *Spiritual Writings*, 152-221, here 179.

²⁹ Michel, Joseph “Du nouveau sur les sources de la spiritualité de Poullart des Places et sur la genèse de son oeuvre,” in de Mare, *Aux racines de l’arbre spiritain*, 101–123, here 112.

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