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DISCOVERING POUILLART DES PLACES

In this year of the THIRD CENTENARY of the birth of our first Founder, POUILLART DES PLACES, we think it may be of interest to publish the following article. It is the story of two Irish confreres on holiday in France, who as a result of an unexpected breakdown of their car, had a providential opportunity to make a pilgrimage to where Claude François was born and lived before coming to Paris. May this voyage of discovery of our two Irish confreres inspire others to walk in their footsteps.

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'The shortest route to Mont St. Michel.' That was the main concern for Brian Gogan and myself Sunday July 23 as we set out after dinner at Piré-sur-Seiche, a house for the retired members of the Congregation in Brittany. "Take the road for Rennes . . ." "Is not there a plaque to Poullart des Places somewhere there?" "Yes, but that church – Saint Germain – is closed Sunday afternoon." So we would have to be content with a tourist snap of the church then. I had picked up at Piré-sur-Seiche a copy of Père Michel's booklet, "A sketch for a biography of Poullart des Places», but did not get an opportunity to read it as we were so busy renewing acquaintance with French confrères we had met years ago at rue Lhomond, etc. So we headed for Mont St. Michel via Rennes, which was some fifteen miles away.

Then it happened. As we drove into Rennes along the Boulevard Jean Janvier not knowing where exactly we wanted to go next, the car groaned as if something serious was amiss. The clutch in fact had gone! We hobbled on to a nearby parking space and tried to grapple with our predicament. Our main concern now was how to get to Le Havre on time to catch the ferry as per appointment. This being Sun-

day afternoon Rennes had all the appearance of a deserted city with every place locked up.

We locked up too and began to reconnoitre. The big building across the street proved to be a Lycée – a huge secondary school. Nothing doing there and it had no interest for us – we thought then. Two hundred yards ahead we saw a beautiful and majestic chateau with an exquisite array of flower beds all open to the public. It all seemed inviting so we strolled in. A notice told us that this, the Chateau St. Georges, housed the social services for the town. One felt instinctively that this could not have been its original destination. Huge letters chiselled in the masonry stretched across over the 19 arcades. They read MAGDELAINE DE LA FAYETTE. Who in the world could she be that her name should be shouted like that? But then we found that one of the social services was being manned for the Sunday afternoon – namely, the fire brigade. We approached the telephonist on duty and explained our predicament. He kindly phoned the nearest A.A. office some fifty miles away. There was no possibility of any repair service till the following day. So we were fairly in the soup.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FOUNDER

We booked in at a hotel with difficulty. As I had Père Michel's booklet we decided to while the time away thumbing through it. It soon became clear that there was much more of des Places interest in Rennes than the plaque erected in 1959 – and that Poullart des Places was a much more interesting personality than we had, as it were, long forgotten. In fact, it would be really interesting to walk around Rennes and try to see if even at this remove it gave some indications of what made him the man he was and do the things he did. Brian purchased a detailed map of Rennes and I retrieved my camera gear and off we started on our pilgrimage. We felt we were no longer tourists heading for one of the great tourist meccas of Europe, Mont St. Michel. Instead, as members of the Spiritan family, we felt a filial curiosity in retracing the footsteps of our Founder.

We may be pardoned for suspecting at this stage that Providence had a hand in the mishap that stranded us just at

the gateway to what might be signposted "Centre des Places". The Lycee across the way now identified itself as being the illegal inheritor of the great Jesuit College of Saint Thomas where Claude spent his most formative years and to which he owed so much. But as we were not a hundred per cent certain of this identification at the start of our round trip, we chose as our first station once more the Chateau Saint Georges. Our guide book informed us that this magnificent chateau was in pre-Revolution times the convent of Benedictine Sisters and that the huge letters chiselled in stone spelt out the name of the prioress who had this palatial convent designed and built to her specifications in 1650! This spoke volumes on religious life in seventeenth century France when the "in commendam", system allowed outside authorities, civil or religious, to appoint their own favourites to the post of abbot or prioress, etc. of religious houses which had become wealthy because of the large properties inherited over the years.

Interesting; but what connection had this detail with our brief introduction to the formative years of Claude Poullart? Claude's father, François Claude, in his capacity as avocat (barrister) du Parlement de Bretagne was deeply involved in the collecting of revenues and tithes for several of these religious houses as well as for the Archbishop's properties, etc. So the des Places' large and ever-increasing fortunes owed an amount to these wealthy religious institutions. They are mentioned here, however, to highlight the fact that it was not with such institutions that the young Claude's associations were formed but with those communities – and there were many such – who catered for the vast population of poor and under-privileged. We mention the Chateau of Saint Georges also because it dominates the entrance to rue Saint Georges where Claude François Poullart des Places was born February 26, 1679.¹

¹ Imagine my surprise on discovering after I had written this article that our very first contact with Rennes – namely the Fire Brigade office at the rear of the Abbey – was just beside the spot where Claude François was baptized on the 27th February 1679. The ancient church of Saint Pierre et Saint Georges which served as a parish church was at the rear of the Abbey and was part of its property. It was demolished after the Revolution.

PRESTIGE STREET

As we crossed the wide boulevard and entered the narrow street of rue Saint Georges it felt as if we left the twentieth century and strayed into another era. Apart from the fact of it being Sunday afternoon in mid-Summer, when we seemed to have Rennes to ourselves, no cars are allowed at any time in this ancient street still paved with cobblestones. Children played with the golden sand strewn on the pavement as if they were at the seaside. The sun, which had by now gone around to the west, was picking out areas here and there lighting up the brilliant colours and artistic façades of houses that were part of the town's precious architectural heritage stretching back over several centuries. The older the buildings the more beautiful they appeared with their strange combination of timber and masonry. Some had obviously been recently restored. The great contrast in styles was explained in our guide book as being due to the great fire which devastated Rennes in 1720 and called for extensive rebuilding. The des Places' first home most likely perished in that conflagration but the family had moved elsewhere long before that date.

The rue Saint George was, in fact, the most prestigious quarter of Rennes in the pre-Revolution era, when it was known as the street of the robes or gowns because of all the titled and professional élite who had a town house in close proximity to the palais du parlement.

The Des Places home (1679-1689) was "near the Saint Georges Gate", that is, the portion of the street nearest the Abbey. The other end of the street opened out on to the large square dominated by the Palais du Parlement (today the Palais de Justice). And indeed this palace of the parliament of Brittany dominated the life of the des Places family in a very special way. The President of that parliament, le Comte Claude de Marbeuf, beside whose 'Hotel' the des Places lived, was the distinguished sponsor at Claude's baptism, and his godmother, Françoise Truillot, was daughter of the Procureur de Parlement, a very wealthy man. That both these sponsors were carefully chosen one can be sure but they should not normally detain us further as baptismal sponsors have only a fleeting connection with the godchild. But both

these sponsors had a close connection with Claude's life. We deal first with his godfather and later indicate that the choice of a godmother may have had a deciding influence on Claude's vocation and the founding of the Congregation.

Des Places senior's christian names were François Claude and naturally the son was named François after him, but the 'Claude' appellation was interpreted as referring to his godfather, Comte Claude de Marbeuf, because of an intimate family association. Claude's mother, Jeanne Le Meneust, who was orphaned at an early age, was recommended to the Comte as a governess to his family, a role she fulfilled with distinction for many years. She even took over complete responsibility for the family when their mother died and, it would appear, even postponed her own marriage to the talented barrister fiancé until such time as the Comte's new wife was satisfied that she could cope on her own with the children. Even after her marriage Jeanne remained in closest contact with the Marbeufs and we find the families frequently acting as sponsors at one another's baptisms and marriages. The Marbeufs could boast of the highest titles of nobility in the various branches of their clan. François Claude des Places signed himself in the marriage register as one who 'neither claims nor disclaims nobility'. He had to forego his claim to noble status a few years previously, when the nobility of Brittany was being reformed, as he could not produce the family titles. He was to enjoy many of the prerogatives of nobility when he secured the office of Juge-Garde des Monnaies (Legal Controller of the Mint) in 1685, but from the day of the birth of his son, des Places senior seems to have been hell-bent on increasing the family fortunes and influence so as to secure for Claude junior a seat in the parlement de Bretagne, by becoming a Conseiller and so restoring to the family its status of nobility. And all seemed set for this ambition to be realised.

COMMEMORATIVE PLAQUE

In 1685 when des Places senior acquired the post of Juge-Garde des Monnaies the family moved from rue Saint Georges to a house which was the property of the Franciscans, just across the street from the palais du parlement in a street then known as rue des Cordeliers – Franciscan Street – but to-

day known as rue Hoche. This short move put them into the parish of Saint Germain and it was in the church of that name, still happily functioning as a parish church, that Claude's sister Jeanne Françoise was baptized. It was there also that Claude acted as sponsor himself for the first time, for the son of one of his father's employees, and his signature on that occasion at the age of nine in the parish register is the first record we have of his writing. And it is in this church, as we mentioned earlier, that the magnificent plaque was erected in 1959 in memory of Claude with mention of his schoolboy friend in Rennes, St. Grignon de Montfort. Brian and I had the privilege of concelebrating Mass next morning at the altar beside this commemorative plaque.

This particular church was chosen for the siting there of the plaque not merely because it dates back to that period but because one of its chapels was dedicated to the Holy Spirit in 1698. This ceremony of dedication and the founding there of a confraternity of the Holy Spirit was part of a re-awakening of devotion to the Holy Spirit throughout Brittany, which may well explain why Claude was a few years later to dedicate his work to the Holy Spirit. It could well be, too, that it was the des Places home in rue Saint Sauveur which was dedicated to the Holy Spirit as "La maison du Saint Esprit", which is among the known addresses in this small street at the time.

The sacristans we met in the Church of Saint Germain that morning were a married couple - refugees from Vietnam. As they recounted their heart-rending tale of long years of endless wars and hardship that has been the story of French Indo-China for a lifetime, I found myself imagining the Irish Wild Geese who had to flee Ireland just as Claude may have been an altar boy here. What I did not advert to at that time was that the first missionary priests who were to set out from the seminary to be founded by Claude, were to go to French Indo-China.

PALAIS DU PARLEMENT DE BRETAGNE

As Brian and I emerged from rue Saint Georges in search of the house occupied by the des Places family from 1685-1690 in rue Cordeliers (rue Hoche to-day) we found ourselves in the large square known as Place du Parlement. It was

from this far corner of the square that we got our first view of the palais du parlement de Bretagne. That noted writer of the more glorious days of Louis XIV, M^{me} de Sévigné, wrote: "The palace of the parliament in Rennes is the most splendid in France." And the 'parlement' itself was rated the most influential of these pre-Revolution parliaments outside Paris. Such an institution in the days of the central monarchy resembled more our Four Courts than a present-day law-making assembly but it was in fact the practical centre of government of the Province since its annexation to France and the marriage of Henry IV to Anne de Bretagne.

According to the thinking of those days the building must suitably represent and symbolise the institution it housed, and *that* the designers of the Palais de Bretagne succeeded in doing from 1618-1655. The palace survived the disastrous fire which devastated Rennes in 1720, and though the building has suffered somewhat from the curtailment of the functions of such provincial institutions it is to-day a really imposing sight inside as well as outside.

It being Sunday we did not expect the building to be opened. We were agreeably surprised to find it open and un-manned; so we had the liberty of the palace to wander round at our ease and admire the architecture, the sculpture and the ceilings – especially in the splendour of the state apartments – and for the first time it really came home to me what des Places senior wanted for his son when he worked all those twenty years extending his legal practice, acquiring several properties, securing posts which gave him prestige, freedom from taxes, and the other trappings of nobility – all with a view to launching his son and heir as a Conseiller of this august institution. What became clear too was the extent of the sacrifice made by young Claude, who was really ambitious to excel, when he decided to renounced all this wealth, splendour and privilege and devote his talents and his life to the service of the poorest of the poor. One came out from that palace with a definite sense of sympathy for des Places senior, no doubt, but with a heightened sense of the sterling nobility of his son who made that considered decision just when life lay open before him. One knew, of course, that Claude was not the only privileged person who made such a generous decision in the France of the 17th century, but one felt that in some way young Claude François Poullart des Places belongs in a real sense to our own affluent age, with a

challenge to the youth of to-day, if only he were presented in a way worthy of his achievement.

HOCHÉ OF THE REVOLUTION

As we went round the side of the Palais de Justice to view the area where the des Places family lived, possibly where No. 3 rue Hoche now stands, we wondered if this Hoche was anything to the gentleman who came over to attempt to free Ireland a hundred years hence, as it were. Our guide book informed us that the street was named after our man of 1798 fame, i.e. General Lazare Hoche. So we had made a double pilgrimage! Hoche was honoured in Rennes for his part in defeating the Royalist supporters in the Vendée battles which followed the Revolution, and though he is remembered as one of the most upright of the military men of the Revolution one could not raise a wholehearted cheer for his cause when one recalled what the Revolution was to do in Paris to the good work started by des Places. But at least none of his followers suffered the fate of the poor Eudist priests who fled to Paris on being expelled from their houses in Brittany during these campaigns conducted by Hoche. They took refuge in their house beside the Holy Ghost Seminary in rue des Postes only to be the victims (nineteen of them) of one of the senseless massacres of the Revolution. What we did not realise then as we looked down rue Houche was that a few hundred yards further down stands Place Saint Jean Eudes. So Rennes remembers her saints as well as her republicans. But the point that we missed was that it was here in Rennes the Eudist priests tried to recover from the ravages of the Revolution with the aid of des Places' most famous successor – Francis Mary Paul Libermann (1836-1839).

Ignorant then of our geography and of future history, as it were, we walked back into Place du Palais and crossed over to the right side of the square. We stood for a moment looking down a splendid stretch of street which reminded one so much of Paris; rue Lafayette leading on to rue Toulouse ending up as rue de la Monnaie. For a moment as I took my tourist snap I wondered if Claude remembered this street as he walked Paris later. My guide book, however, informed

me that this area was almost completely rebuilt after the fire of 1720. What I did not know then was that the final house lived in by the des Places family, their fourth, was located in the last block of this magnificent stretch of street – rue de la Monnaie. Claude's father had by then, 1698, taken up residence in the Hotel de la Monnaie as was his legal right as Juge-Garde des Monnaies. By that time Claude was away at Nantes pursuing his legal studies at the university. The Juge Garde had the legal right from 1685 to take up residence in the Hotel de la Monnaie. Why he moved into the house owned by the Franciscans, adjoining the Friary, is not clear. This spacious Friary was municipal property and was at various periods host to the Parlement de Bretagne. The Etats de Bretagne always held their sessions there. It housed a bank – and at times a prison. But, most amazing in the story of Claude, it was one day to house the School of Law which was transferred from Nantes to Rennes some 30 years after Claude's death. From the age of six to eleven he grew up in the closest proximity to the sons of St. Francis, living, in fact, on their grounds.

We were heading for rue Saint Sauveur to where the des Places moved in 1690 from rue Hoche and where Claude was to spend the most formative years of his life – the years when he was in attendance at the Jesuit College of Saint Thomas. The rue Saint Sauveur takes its name from the church which dominates the entrance to the street from the Place du Palais facing the entrance to rue Saint Georges at the other side of the square. The rue Saint Sauveur is a short street bounded at the other end by the cathedral. Most of the present cathedral was rebuilt after Claude's time, the architects being in fact the Soufflot family who designed the new Sainte Geneviève (the Panthéon) beside where Poullart died, and the chapel of the Holy Ghost Seminary in rue Lhomond. That was in the distant future as yet. Claude, however, must have often watched the two present towers of the cathedral being built as they were completed in 1703. That same year, the year of the foundation of his own society, work began on rebuilding the ancient church of Saint Sauveur, a church which must have had a big influence on his devotion to Our Lady, as it had on the life of Grignon de Montfort whose uncle was the pastor there.

WITH GRIGNON DE MONTFORT

The Basilica of Saint Sauveur, to give it its official title, had been for centuries a shrine of devotion to Our Lady as in one of its chapels is venerated the statue of "Notre Dame des Miracles". According to a pious tradition this statue of Our Lady saved the town by a timely warning of an underground attack on its fortifications by the English during the Hundred Years War – 1356, to be exact. The present basilica, begun in 1703, was severely damaged by the great fire of 1720 but was re-modelled, and the shrine of Our Lady still continues to attract a steady stream of devotees. In fact, as we entered the church that summer's afternoon, we were surprised to see so many people in silent prayer at the shrine, which was aglow with a mass of votive candles. Immediately I was reminded of the incident in the lives of Claude and Grignon where they are reported as setting up in secret a similar shrine of their own to Our Lady.

The De Montfort family like the des Places were not originally from Rennes and, like Mr. des Places, Grignon's father was a member of the legal profession, but unlike him he never succeeded in making a fortune. Grignon moved into Rennes to attend the Jesuit school, his uncle acting as his guardian. Later the whole family followed and eventually settled in rue du Chapitre, a short distance from rue Saint Sauveur, the two streets being connected by a small cross street, rue de la Psallete, one of the most ancient and most beautiful corners of old Rennes which must be almost unchanged since the days when Grignon and Claude lived there as students. They were in fact separated in age, Grignon being 6 years older than Claude. They were further separated by their family fortunes, and even by their very different temperaments, but a friendship grew between them that transcended these differences and lasted not merely till death but continued on, so to speak, in their immediate successors, the members and superiors of the separate societies they founded.

The main cause of the close association between these two young people was their deeply religious outlook on life but more especially their intense devotion to Our Lady. Claude's parents had him specially consecrated at birth to Our Lady in memory of which he was dressed in white till he reached the

age of seven. In later years, on the anniversary of Claude's death, his mother donated her farm towards the upkeep of a home for the poor, her one stipulation being that the chaplain should recite the Rosary three times a week with the inmates.

It is also on record that Claude's godfather, le Comte Claude de Marbruf, among many charitable activities, had donated funds for a foundation of Masses to propagate devotion to Our Lady of the Rosary. Grignon also, as one would expect from the future author of such a classic as *True Devotion to Our Lady*, had at an early age given external evidence of this special devotion. One form it took was that of making and decorating statues of Our Lady which he sold to pay for his tuition from an art teacher. The shrine of Our Lady in his uncle's church must have helped foster this early devotion in him if it was not its origin, and it may well be that it was at this shrine that he first noticed young Claude – then aged eleven – who lived a few doors away from the church and one of whose favourite pastimes as a child was decorating altars. One can presume they were both altar boys at this nearby church.

The principal incident mentioned by the early biographers associating the two students together was the quasi-secret society of which they were the nucleus and the purpose of which was to honour Our Lady in a very special way by meeting together secretly in a private room, the property of some pious lady in the neighbourhood, where they erected and decorated a shrine in her honour and at their own expense, and where they recited their own special prayers and even performed acts of penance. This may sound a rather unusual if not undesirable mode of behaviour for healthy young people by twentieth-century standards; and indeed that was the judgment of their director in the Jesuit college, who eventually forbade them to continue their association; but it may well have had its inspiration in one of these pious secret societies or 'Bandes' which existed in the Jesuit school in imitation of the senior seminaries of that period in France. One has only to recall those mentioned in the life of Fr. Libermann – in Saint Sulpice.

There were other alternative and more public societies in the Jesuit College and in their parish – notably the Sodality of Our Lady conducted by Fr. Descartes, nephew of the famous philosopher, who singled out Grignon de Montfort as a student of great christian piety and encouraged him to join the

society of young men who gathered together in Fr. Bellier's house near the cathedral to hear his spiritual conferences, join in discussions on religious topics, and above all organise social work among the town's various institutions. As Fr. Bellier was but a few doors away from the des Places at this period, Claude would at least have been in the know of this religious centre from his earliest years. We will return later to Fr. Bellier's work and its influence on Claude in later years.

EARLY EDUCATION

Of Claude's early education very little is known. There were no elementary schools then. St. John Baptist de la Salle opened his first school the year Claude was born but it took years to build up a nationwide network. Incidentally there was a move to link up De La Salle's plans for training schools for teachers with Claude's work for the poor scholars just shortly before the latter's premature death. The des Places family employed a private tutor or preceptor as he is called. Often in those days the person who undertook such jobs was one of the poor clerics who tried to pay for their theology lectures, which they attended as best they could in these days before seminary life was finally made compulsory for candidates for the priesthood. It was to aid such deprived people that Claude was later to found his seminary. Little is known about Claude's preceptor. We can see from Claude's own signature in the Saint Germain parish register that he was well able to write at nine. It is mentioned that his parents took an active interest in his progress and questioned him themselves – even on such matters as the subject of the priest's homily at Mass. Even when Claude attended the Jesuit school his preceptor accompanied him each day to school and made direct contact with his form master in order to be able to supervise his home work. The only other private tuition mentioned has regard to the lessons in singing and music which Claude received from the organist in the cathedral beside where they lived in rue St. Sauveur. The organist was so pleased with his apt pupil that he did him the honour of asking him to act as sponsor at the baptism of his first child.

WITH THE JESUITS

The most formative influence on Claude, apart from his own home that is, was his contact with the Jesuit College, Saint Thomas, and with the retreat house attached to it. He entered the school in 1690 at the age of eleven and almost certainly made his decisive retreat there in 1701 before departing for Paris. So Brian and I set off from rue St. Sauveur, following the route which Claude must have walked – or was he driven in the family coach? – thousands of times – at first in the company of his preceptor, along the beautiful rue de La Psallete, then on to rue Chapitre where the de Montforts lived, a part of the town which has not changed much since; then through what is to-day La Place de la Republique, over the river Villaine, which is to-day partially built over, and to what was then the huge Collège Saint Thomas – catering for over 3,000 students – but where to-day stands the Lycée Émile Zola. The main building has the date 1802 marked on it and we did not ascertain whether any parts of the original school buildings were incorporated into the Lycée built after the Revolution. We were glad to see that the original big chapel of the Jesuit college still stands, functioning to-day as a parish church dedicated to All Saints. The great doors still bear the monogram "S. J." in metal and it would seem that the magnificent church itself remains just as it was when it was so familiar to Claude from school Masses, meetings of the Sodality of Our Lady, and from the many retreats followed while a student and in after years.

The college had a special family association for Claude as his maternal grand-uncle, Fr. Guy Le Menuest, was one of its first rectors; a saintly and scholarly priest who has this distinction that he had as pupil Descartes the philosopher when he taught at La Fleche.

Though relatively little detail is given by Claude's early biographers about his years at Saint Thomas, there should be little difficulty in filling up the broad outlines as the same system was followed throughout all Jesuit schools. Furthermore a detailed history of Saint Thomas College has been written in relatively recent times (1918). That Claude did remarkably well at the academic subjects may not interest us to-day so much as how he fared in the extra-curriculum activities; and

these there were in the days before the pressure of public examinations, and when the airs and graces of a young gallant counted for much. Theatre, ballet and public eloquence were part of the school's normal system. That Claude was actively involved in such activities we hear of by accident, or due to an accident, should we say.

On one occasion Claude was wrapped up in the preparation of a rôle he was to play in the college production. His young sister, to whom he was very much attached, so disturbed his concentration that he reached for a gun that lay around and in mock serious mood threatened to shoot her if she did not keep quiet. All unknown to him his father had loaded the gun to frighten away night prowlers. Claude thoughtlessly pulled the trigger and the bullet passed harmlessly between his sister and his mother. The incident was mentioned by his biographer to call attention to Claude's heightened sense of God's providence in his life. Another such example of this protective providence lifts the veil on another "extra-curricular" activity indulged in by the well-to-do young men of the seventeenth century, namely hunting – with firearms. This time Claude himself was at the receiving end. He was shot at close range by someone accidentally discharging his gun. As Claude fell to the ground the worst was feared but some object he was wearing had deflected the bullet. Another incident to be mentioned later reminds us that swordsmanship was a further necessary accomplishment for a young gallant. There is enough then to make us realise why Fr. Thomas, his first biographer, remarks that spending a considerable time decorating a shrine to Our Lady was all the more remarkable as his temperament was not that way naturally inclined.

Rhetoric was the final year of humanities course and as the name implies, the stress was on the cultivation of eloquence or the power of expression oral as well as written. On completing the humanities the student normally passed on into philosophy – a two-year course which was considered normal not merely for aspirants to the priesthood but also for those going on for the various professions. Claude however, having already completed his humanity course at the unusually early age of fifteen, was considered too young to pass on to philosophy. His form master for Rhetoric, Fr. Jean Pierre de Longuemare, himself a noted master of eloquence, took a special interest in Claude whom he marked out as a student of

promise. So when he received his own obedience at the end of the school year to transfer to the Society's college in Caen, Normandy, he suggested to Claude's parents that it would be more profitable for their young son to come to Caen as a boarder and repeat Rhetoric there in new surroundings. The parents agreed and so Claude had his first experience of life away from the family circle where he must have been very much number one, though by no means spoilt.

TO BOARDING SCHOOL

Brian and I passed by Caen two days later when our car was repaired and our homeward journey re-routed, but apart from the fact that, we were in a dreadful hurry to catch the ferry now at Cherbourg, we never even adverted to the fact that Claude spent a year at school there. Little is known about that year. His earliest biographer, Fr. Thomas, treats us to a lengthy paragraph of pious waffle to cover up the lack of concrete detail. Père Le Floch, in one of his grand surveys of the background of the period and personages, reminds us that the Jesuit College at Caen at this period had a quasi-international flavour in its boarders' department and that Irish and Scottish students could be found there. This is easily explained by the proximity of Caen to the Channel coast. This was the time of the Wild Geese, of course. Caen at this period was noted because of the first seminary started there by St. John Eudes.

St. John was himself a student of the Jesuit College at Caen. He died the year after Claude was born, but Claude was to have close contact with the Eudist foundation in Rennes.

Père Michel, Claude's most authoritative biographer, suggests that here for the first but not for the last time Claude may have had first-hand experience of the bitter attacks by the Jansenists on the Jesuit Fathers, as the year 1694-1695 saw one of those outbursts against a member of the Jesuit community in the college at Caen. Claude's own Society was to be for long a target of similar attacks by the Jansenists, mainly because of the very close Jesuit connections, maintained deliberately by des Places and his successors in spite of opposition from the Archbishop of Paris and the Sorbonne.

One thing that is definite about Claude's year at Caen was that he was brilliantly successful at his studies, winning three out of a total of five prizes open to competition by the students of Rhetoric class. These prizes, we are told, were treasured at the Holy Ghost Seminary in Paris for a hundred years until they disappeared, it seems, during the ravages of the Revolution: gone without a trace? Perhaps not altogether without a trace, as we shall see.

LE GRAND ACTE

Claude returned home to Rennes to start his two years philosophy course at Saint Thomas in the company of some two hundred others. This was autumn 1695, Claude being then sixteen years old, and to our way of thinking it seems strange to imagine him being treated to a diet of logic, physics and even metaphysics. But he not merely took it in his stride but emerged as the student chosen for the most coveted award of a big Jesuit College, the student of the year – as it were – who was to represent the school (on trial) at open day in a formal public defence of his professor's teaching – Le Grand Acte, as it was called. This was always a very formal occasion attended by the president and members of the 'parlement' and other public dignitaries. Printed invitations were sent out and posters announcing the details were displayed throughout the town. It was the big day of the school year and a red-letter day in the history of the family involved. Finally it was customary for the student in question to dedicate his thesis to some public figure – having, one presumes, got previous clearance for so doing. Claude dedicated his thesis to His Serene Highness, le Comte de Toulouse and Governor of Brittany – son of Louis XIV. One can imagine that le Comte de Marbeuf, Claude's godfather, was the influence behind this formal dedication. By all accounts, Claude François did the royal Governor justice with a splendid performance which made him the talk of the town, and it would appear the echoes reached the court far away in Versailles.

As I tried to imagine this great day for young Claude and for his family – and having on many occasion waited with my finger on the release button of my camera to record for posterity the presentation of a coveted award to a student – I felt

that Claude was somehow let down in that there was no one there to record his great moment for posterity. But I was mistaken – and that unpardonably so – as I was not reading the recent ‘Spiritan Papers’ with any great degree of concentration, it would appear.

Some weeks later when I had the unexpected opportunity of being back again on the continent, this time in Rome as chaplain to a group of pilgrims, I was invited to the Generalate for an afternoon. As I sat sipping an aperitif while others were excitedly discussing the preparations for the Conclave which was to elect Pope John Paul I, my eyes roved vaguely round my new surroundings. Suddenly I found myself arrested by the portrait of a young man in long hair and semi-clerical dress with one hand gripping an ancient tome. The knowing look in his eye seemed to be saying something, so I asked my neighbour when I could get a word in edgewise, “Who is that young man?” “Oh, that is Poullart des Places”, came the unemotional reply. “But no such portrait was ever painted”, I objected. “Oh, this was discovered recently in Munich – I think, by Père Michel.” If he said someone had discovered a photograph of Brian Boru at the Battle of Clontarf I could scarcely have been more impressed! It made my trip to Rome. And the fact that it was identified by Père Michel stamped it with the imprimatur for me.

It appears that the painter of this portrait, Jean Jouvenet, a leading religious and history painter of the late Louis XIV period who had helped decorate Versailles, was commissioned by the ‘parlement de Bretagne’ to do a similar service for their palais in Rennes. This would have been the responsibility of the President du Parlement, Claude’s godfather, and one supposes also the Procureur or Bursar of the parliament, whose daughter was Claude’s godmother. So what could have been more natural than that advantage would have been taken of this distinguished artist’s presence to have him do a sketch of their brilliant god-child on his big day? A few post-scripts: Is the book Claude is holding in the painting one of the prizes which were preserved for so long in the Holy Ghost Seminary in Paris? How did this portrait get lost and how was it eventually recovered? Père Michel has an intriguing story to publish about that in the near future. Père Michel has also recently discovered an account of Claude’s ‘Grand Acte’ performance, in the ‘Mercure Galant’ for November 1698. Certainly if Brian and I had any idea about Jean Jou-

venet's connection with the subject of our research in Rennes our visit to the palais where his work is displayed would have taken on an added interest.

TO THE LAW SCHOOL

But now that school was over for Claude what next? As one would expect from Jesuit education there was a special retreat to help students prepare for this great decision – a retreat along the lines of St. Ignatius. Claude had now the world at his feet. His problem was that in choosing one career he excluded others and his ambition was to excel through his own merit and achievement. He toyed with several options. He knew what his parents had planned for him but at the back of his mind he felt God was calling him to the priesthood. As yet his ideas of the priesthood were coloured by his recent successes in the field of eloquence. He visualised himself as winning converts to God through the sheer force of his eloquence, to be another Bourdaloue, the great Jesuit orator of the day. (Incidentally, Jouvenet painted a portrait of Bourdaloue and it was to be auctioned in Paris after the suppression of the Jesuits – together with Jouvenet's painting of Claude – and both found their way eventually into the same art collection in Munich.) It was for this reason that Claude now asked his parents to be allowed to go to the Sorbonne in Paris as he planned to be a priest.

The shock for his parents of this decision can well be imagined though as yet they did not take it quite seriously. The father being a good psychologist remarked that he knew many a priest who had been through the Sorbonne and that their sermons were none the better for it! He suggested instead that Claude should attend the University of Nantes, where they had visited family connections the previous summer, and that he should study law there. This was found to be a happy compromise as a licentiate in law would be useful to a future priest as well as fitting in with his parents' plans for his career in the Parlement de Bretagne. So it was to Nantes then, when the university opening time came.

In the meantime it appears Claude made a trip to the Court at Versailles – for what reason it is not clear. His first biographer, Fr. Thomas, suggests there was a proposal of marriage to a titled young lady at the Court – but this has been

ruled out by later and more realistic researchers as being highly improbable. A more plausible reason suggested is that some highly placed personage called for this visit in connection with Claude's dedication of his Grand Acte to Louis XIV's son, the youthful Governor of Brittany. Père Michel suggests the visit may not be unconnected with des Places senior's efforts that year to secure the royal veto against his being saddled with an unwelcome appointment at the behest of the parlement de Bretagne as Prevot of the Hospital Saint Yves in Rennes. Of that incident more later. Whatever the motive for Claude's visit to Court it was brief but long enough to convince him later that 'life at court' was just not on for him, even though it had its attractions.

There is an indication, however, that a slight flair for a more dashing and adventurous type of social life, with some of the airs and antics of the gallant, began to display itself that summer and that he felt too restrained in the straight – jacket of the behaviour imposed on him to date – even to the extent of borrowing money to live it up, as it were. Fr. Thomas once again is vague in his language, but Père Michel in his extensive research into contemporary registers, ecclesiastical and civil, has unearthed one little tit-bit that seems to confirm the ancient biographer's vague hints.

It would appear that as Claude set off for Nantes dressed as a young cavalier and sporting a sword as was his privilege, he was involved in an altercation with a coachman, and feeling that his dignity had been slighted he too hastily drew his sword and wounded the coachman in the arm. This seems to be the only explanation for des Places senior – a dignified member of the legal profession and otherwise a public figure – having to go to a wayside inn still standing to-day on the rue de Nantes, and settle out of court a charge brought by a coachman – named – against a youth – unnamed – but described as wearing "a justaucorps brun" and "mounted on a black horse". (A 'justaucorps brun' is a military type jacket.)

One thing is certain both from Fr. Thomas' biography and from Claude's later notes, that something did happen which hurt Claude in his pride more than it hurt his victim. Once again it was used by divine providence to teach Claude a lesson he would not have easily learned otherwise. We may well have passed by that inn. 'Hostellerie du Puits Mauger', completely unaware of the worry it caused the des Places family!

Time for a commercial break! Brian and I having spent some time in the (former) Jesuit Church of Toussaints admiring the beautiful woodwork of the pulpit area and the splendid altar retable constructed by Brother Turmel (c. 1650), decided to return to our hotel for a rest after the three hours' trek. We were relieved to see that our Morris 1100 was still there displaying its IRL to the passers-by who were now becoming more numerous as the evening came on. Having reached our hotel we threw ourselves on our beds to rest our weary feet and began to comment on what we had learned. In a moment of mental fatigue I accidentally opened my camera and destroyed the film I had so painstakingly shot – 36 shots in all – that evening! This second 'accident' in the one afternoon was almost traumatic for one who believes so much in the value of the record. But in retrospect I now see it as another providential happening as I decided there was nothing for it but to do the whole station over again. Brian eventually agreed to accompany me though by now it was time to worry about our supper and our plans for tomorrow.

AMONG THE POOR

Rested and with a second briefing from Père Michel's 'Esquisse' we set off again to cover the same area but with less delays as the round trip was now etched on memories as well as on the soles of our feet. I am not going to inflict the re-run on the reader here, though in fact it was not at all like a re-run as by now the people had trickled out on to the street and the evening light had transformed some areas making them look even more like the ancient Rennes that we were in search of. We were glad we made this second trip for another reason. It gave us an opportunity to return from rue Saint Sauveur through rue Saint Yves where once stood the famous hospital conducted by the Augustinian Sisters. The only portion of the Hospital Saint Yves which is clearly discernible to-day is its fifteenth century Gothic church. Unfortunately it is in a deplorable state of dilapidation, serving as a warehouse. This hospital catered not merely for the sick but for the aged, the handicapped, orphans and disadvantaged people generally. These young people were taught their religion and instructed in trades, and much of this work was done by voluntary workers, from the Comte de Marbeuf who pre-

sided over the 'Bureau des pauvres', to the students of Saint Thomas College – especially the members of the Sodality of Our Lady. The Jesuits, who were also the directors of the Augustinian Sisters, had a handbook printed for their students on how they could be of best help to the sick and needy in their visits.

This aspect of the life of Rennes soon attracted the interest of Grignon de Montfort as a student, principally through the influence of Fr. Bellier, a very active and pastorally minded young priest who lived beside the Cathedral, a few doors away from the des Place' home. He organised these volunteers, gave them spiritual conferences linking up his work with the Jesuits' sodality. The hospital was just around the corner from de Montfort' house and quite close also to the des Places. It would seem that Claude's mother took an active interest in the care for the poor children especially. She is on record at least thirty times as having acted as sponsor for the children of the poor, and in her later years she turned over the proceeds of a property she owned personally towards the upkeep of a department in such a hospital. So when Claude mentions in his retreat notes that his deep practical sympathy for the poor was one of the determining factors in his efforts to discern the career God wanted for him, he learned this not merely from the spiritual direction at Saint Thomas and his neighbour, Fr. Bellier, from his godfather and indeed from his godmother's people, as we shall see, but above all from his own mother.

Claude's father, however, did not at all feel himself called to this apostolate. At least when he was proposed by the members of the parlement de Bretagne for the post of Prevot de Saint Yves he resisted tooth and nail, even going so far as to seek and secure a royal intervention to restrain parliament from appointing him on the grounds that, in equity if not in justice, he was bound to make this return of service to the community as he, more than any other citizen, had profited from the community through his vast commercial undertakings and his freedom from taxation. When des Places senior so successfully resisted the effort to have him appointed Prevot de Saint Yves, he may have had his own good reasons, but one wonders if this family incident and the comment it caused may not have influenced Claude in later years to reject his father's philosophy and way of life. That he always held both his parents in great esteem and affection he assures us

in his retreat notes, but it is clear from later events that des Places senior had no great sympathy or understanding for what he judged the extreme type of virtue practised by his son when he opted for the life of a virtual pauper, i.e. one living on alms, in Paris. He was also pretty stingy in the amount he allowed Claude by way of money to pay for his studies and board at Paris. The des Places fortunes went not to the work for the poor scholars but to Claude's sister who married into a family of noble rank. So it may well be that it was at the rue Sainte Yves that the seeds of Claude's future vocation were sown. But for the moment Claude is away for most of the time at Nantes where from 1697-1700 he studied Law.

Surprisingly little is known of these three years of Claude's life and one would dearly wish to know how he took to university life and the new freedom it afforded him. Even his industrious biographers of more recent time seem to have come up with very little. Père le Floch, always good for an interesting tour of the horizon, expatiates on the history of this famous university founded in 1461 by a Papal Bull. He goes on to stress the importance of Nantes as a key maritime city and touches on the beauty of the Loire Valley scenery. Brian and I can vouch for that part of his message as we travelled for two days along the area with the intention of staying overnight at Nantes – innocent at the time of any connection between Claude and that town. We did not in fact reach there, luckily – if our car was to break down it would be an extra 120 kilometres on the return journey.

Père Michel for once has little to add. He presumes that Claude would certainly have kept in contact with the Jesuit Fathers who had a retreat house there and some of whom he had known at the retreat house in Rennes. The director of the Jesuit retreat house at Nantes during Poullart's years there was Fr. Champion who has carved out a niche for himself in the history of Catholic Spirituality as it was he who in 1694 published that spiritual classic, *The Spiritual Doctrine of Père Lallement S.J.*

This book was actually an edited version of the notes made from Lallement's conferences by Fr. Jean Rigoleuc S.J., a former pupil and teacher at the school attended by Poullart in Rennes. The main feature of Lallement's teaching was his development of the theme of docility to the Holy Spirit. The confraternities of the Holy Spirit founded at this period in the Jesuit College in Rennes and at the Church of

Saint Germain owe their origin to the resurgence of devotion to the Holy Spirit inspired by Fr. Lallement and his disciples in Brittany, principally Fr. Manoïr who had acted as Master of Novices to Guy Le Meneust S.J., Claude's maternal grand-uncle. And it was this developed doctrine of docility to the Holy Spirit which twice formed the basis of the Spiritan tradition in our Congregation – first through its founder Poullart des Places and once again through Fr. Libermann who openly professed his admiration of Père Lallement's teaching.

Père Michel also presumes that Claude took a special interest in the Carthusian monastery there as later he toyed with the idea of entering the Trappists. It is presumed also that he was in contact with his own relations as both his father and mother's people seem to have hailed from that area. One would have expected some details about contemporary life in the university there, especially the Law faculty, but, seeing that it was transferred to Rennes in 1735 as being the more suitable place beside the legal headquarters in the parliament of Brittany, there may be no living tradition recorded at Nantes. All that is certain is that Claude took out his licentiate in Civil Law there and that it was taken for granted that he was returning to Rennes in triumph to take up his place eventually in that parliament – as a Conseiller. This was so certain that the official robes were ordered, a gala reception was prepared, the guests invited to make his debut. Nobody ever thought of asking Claude himself had he any other plans; and it could be that he had not even asked that question seriously of himself so far – being so immersed in his studies.

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

He seems at first to have passively entered into his parents' plans for him. He donned the robe and went over to a large mirror to see himself. But he realised that the moment of truth had come. Was this the life he was called to by his inner voice? He may not as yet have had any clear vision of his vocation but in a flash he realised that the parlement de Bretagne and what it stood for was not for him. He put aside its symbol, the robe, and to the shock of his parents announced that never was he to wear it again. Dashed were

his father's hopes. His wealth and his ambitions must have turned to ashes in his mouth at that moment.

This scene took place in the new home occupied by the des Places since 1698 – the official residence of the Juge-Garde des Monnaies. Earlier the Juge-Garde had bought up several properties outside Rennes. More recently he had acquired a large area between the rue Saint Sauveur and la rue de la Monnaie and had it converted into stores, coach-houses, etc. to cater for his commercial interests, notably a wholesale trade in linen, cloth and wax, etc. Claude's mother was an active partner in helping organise all this trade. Now Claude, who seems to have spent the whole year 1700-1701 at the family home in Rennes, must have taken some interest in the family business. But one cannot imagine his heart being in it. It is more likely that his interests and sympathies lay rather with a venture that was going on a few doors away. This must be the only explanation why he himself was launched on a similar venture within a few months of his leaving home finally for Paris in Autumn 1701. He also, let us add, kept up his contact with the Jesuit Fathers and it was they who not merely supervised his final and most decisive retreat at Rennes but arranged for his being accepted as a boarder at the Jesuit College Louis le Grand in Paris to follow their theology course although he had expressed no designs on entering the Jesuit Order.

To appreciate the work done in Paris by Poullart des Places in founding his seminary for the preparation of poor clerics for the priesthood, one would need to know something about the state of affairs in the Church at the time that prompted him, while as yet a clerical student himself, to undertake singlehandedly this apostolate. Seminaries as we knew them, until recently at any rate, did not exist till relatively modern times. The Fathers of the Council of Trent saw that the establishment of such training centres for those preparing for the priesthood was a high priority and urged their formation. That was away back in 1560. Very little was done about the matter for some reasons which need not detain us here, with appalling results for clergy and faithful alike. St. Vincent de Paul and others made isolated attempts to cope with these evils by instituting seminaries at least for those nearing ordination and by the conducting of intensive preached 'missions' throughout the country parishes. In Brittany and Normandy these two forms of apostolate,

missions and seminaries, were undertaken by Father Michel le Nobletz and St. John Eudes. Fr. Nobletz spearheaded a great 'missions' movement that was continued by other priests after his death, one group of these known as the Society of the Holy Spirit – some Jesuits and Eudists kept on the good work. Fr. Bellier, mentioned in connection with the Hospital of St. Yves, was actively involved in their preaching of missions whenever he could be spared from his many other commitments in Rennes. It was the re-reading of the life of the founder of this movement, Fr. Michel le Nobletz, that was the real turning point in the life of Claude, according to his biographer Fr. Thomas.

St. John Eudes commenced his first major seminary at Caen in 1643. Years later (1673) the Eudists opened another such seminary in Rennes. These seminaries were for senior students nearing the priesthood. Others felt something should be done at an earlier stage especially for the very poor students who flocked into towns from the country trying to support themselves and pay for their schooling, at risk to their health, physical and moral. Finally two priests, brothers, Claude and Jean François Ferret, decided to start a junior seminary to cater for such destitute students. These two priests' brother Ferret du Tymeur, was married to Françoise Truillot, Claude des Places' godmother.

As Fr. Bellier was deeply involved with these young people in his many pastoral activities over the years he was asked by the bishop to take charge of this juniorate when its director had to leave in 1697. He boarded at times twenty of these poor students (only certified poor were accepted) in his own house a few doors away from the Places' home. In 1698 the Eudists undertook to run this juniorate and to relieve Fr. Bellier of most of the work though he still continued to house several such students. Living in close proximity to these students and to their apostolic minded directors, Claude could not but have been edified and influenced in his final decision to break with his life as a wealthy business man in training. We have no concrete evidence that he helped Fr. Bellier and the Eudists in their work, apart from his retreat notes where he stresses his determination to devote himself to the service of the poor, but it is unthinkable that he should have stood idly by.

The Eudists' Seminary was just at the rear of the Hotel des Monnaies. The fact that he so quickly launched himself

into a similar work in Paris for the little Savoyards is in itself sufficient indication of the way his sympathies lay. One can be morally certain that this work of the junior seminary so close at hand finally gave him the grace of his vocation to devote his life to the service of the poor of Christ.

AMAZING COINCIDENCE

And what an amazing coincidence – in the delicate designs of providence – that it was just down the road a mere few minutes' walk, but almost a century and a half later, i.e. in 1839 – that Francis Mary Paul Libermann, then working with the Eudist novices, decided to embark on his new vocation to work for the most abandoned in the Church of Christ! It is a coincidence I have never seen underlined before, nor would it have struck me had I not visited Rennes this year. And was it while in Rennes that Fr. Libermann made his favourable references to the teaching of Fr. Lallement on the Holy Spirit – the same source from which des Places before him drew inspiration?

One would love to know what did Francis Libermann know of Claude des Places during these three years spent in Rennes when he must have often made the pilgrimage of the various churches and shrines there. Rennes would have been re-living its past in 1839 during Fr. Libermann's stay there as that was the year when Grignon de Montfort was beatified. One can well imagine too the Eudists would have their traditions of life in Rennes before the Revolution. What is certain is that when Father Libermann got to know the spirit and work of des Places' foundation with the intuition of a man of God he saw there was such identity between his work and des Places' that there was no place for such duplication in the Church of Christ. But as we said, that is a century and a half away as yet.

When at last Claude came to terms with himself after a year helping in the family business he decided that the only way to be really sure of what God wanted of him was to go aside into a desert place and rest awhile. So he returned to the retreat house attached to Saint Thomas and did a guided retreat according to the exercises of St. Ignatius. The notes from that retreat which decided his vocation have happily survived. I must confess that I never summoned up the enthu-

siasm to familiarise myself with these notes previously, though they had been published in French and English. But I found them an exciting document now that I had been pawing at the outside trying to plumb the character of this fascinating young man as at last I felt I had come on not merely a portrait from life done by a leading artist but on the revelation of the real man from within done by himself. These notes might not mean a lot to the casual reader who did not know the story of Claude's upbringing and subsequent career. But for members of the Spiritan family they have a significance altogether apart. These writings are being dealt with by Fr. Lecuyer in the recent Spiritan Papers.

When Brian and I had completed our second round of the places sacred to the memory of our Founder we felt we qualified for a special treat – an evening meal in a beautiful little restaurant in an ancient house on the rue du Chapitre entitled: "Au Beaux Vieux Temps" – as it would give us some of the feel of the interior of such a period piece building. Unfortunately too many others had the same idea that evening. The queue being too great we had to content ourselves with a modest snack in less appetizing quarters. The following day, however, after having had the privilege of saying Mass together at Saint Germain – and while still awaiting the all-clear from A.A. – we had the pleasure of dining in an old-time restaurant in one the ancient houses of la rue Saint Georges. We did ourselves well under the mistaken impression that A.A. were to cover our expenses up to the standard of the des Places and Marbeufs of three centuries ago. It was worth having to pay the extra to feel that we were drinking at the source, as it were.

As our car hit the road again along the Avenue Jean Janvier I whipped out my camera to take the final record – a shot of the Chateau Saint Geroges to the one side and the opening into rue Saint Georges on the other as a parting souvenir of one day spent in the footsteps of Claude François Poullart des Places – the ... shall we say it? ... yes, the Unknown Founder!

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