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Riches to Rags



Francis Poullart des Places

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Michael J. Troy, CSSp

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Congregation of the Holy Spirit
USA Eastern Province

Riches to Rags

Claude Francis Poullart des Places

Michael J. Troy, CSSp



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Dedication

On the happy occasion of the first fifty years of the Spiritans' arrival in English Canada (1954) and the first steps in the formation of the Trans-Canada Province, this booklet is dedicated to the pioneers of that memorable venture: Frs. Leo Brolly (RIP), Desmond McGoldrick (RIP), Nicholas McCormack (RIP), Patrick Walsh (RIP), Robert Hudson and Gerard McCarthy.

Riches to Rags: Claude Francis Poullart des Places
by Michael J. Troy, CSSp

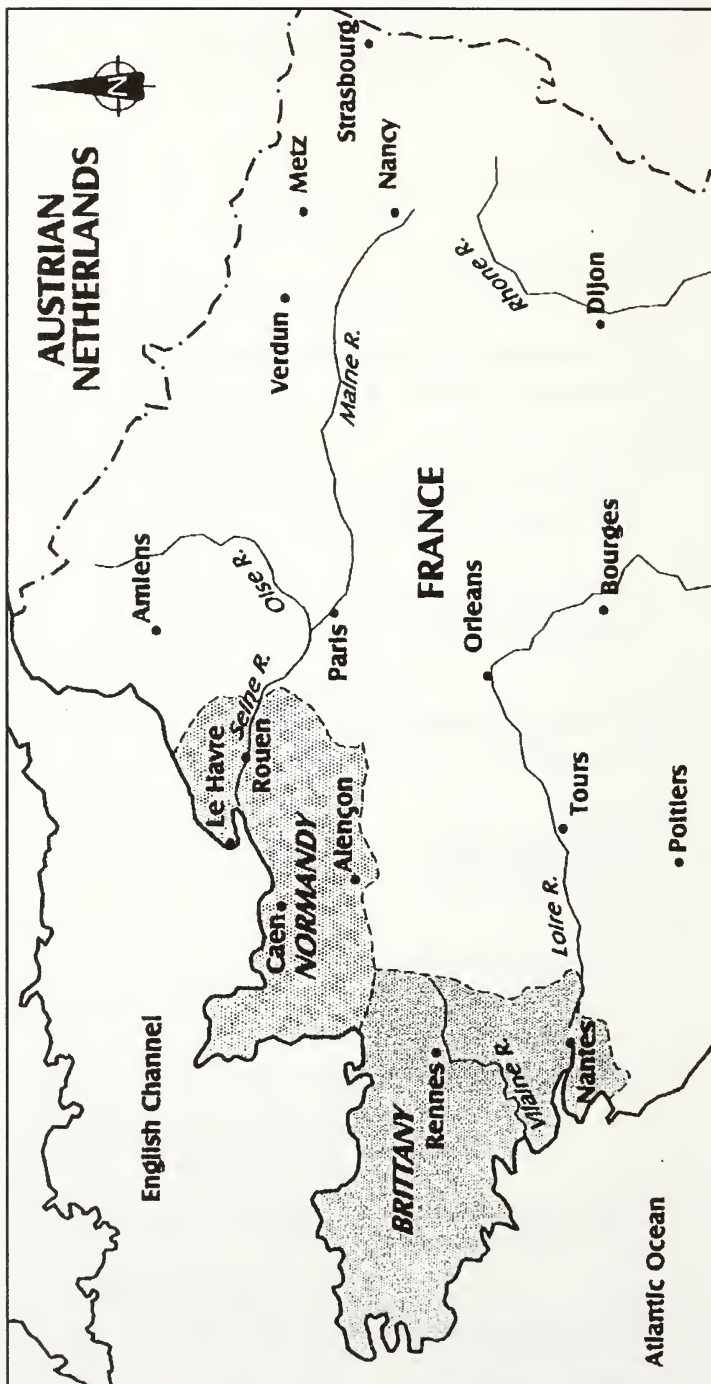
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Northwestern France in the 1700s



INTRODUCTION



A Role Model for Modern Youth

Young people, always in search of stars to follow and role models to imitate, need to hear a little about history's real heroes to offset the rave reviews of the latest pop celebrities, who, all too often, have clay feet in their private lives.

In this connection they may learn something from Claude des Places, a young man like them, who accomplished so much and influenced so many other young people during his short lifetime.

Although this young man belonged to a different century, it is remarkable how similar his experiences on and off campus were to those of any high school or university student today. He, too, had to struggle with growing up and making career decisions that at first were not fully understood or approved by his peers, his professors or even his family.

A Young Man Fully Alive

Claude began high school at the local Jesuit College in Rennes, where, before long, he was recognized as an honour student. But Claude was more than a scholar. He was a great all rounder, as popular with his teachers as he was admired by his peers. Handsome, well-built, with a physique and courage to match, he was well capable of taking good care of himself on any campus. A born actor, year in and year out he was given lead roles in school plays, gigs, and ballet dancing. Outside of school he was an avid hunter, a good horseman (no cars in those days!) and so useful with a sword and gun that he even thought of a career in the armed forces.

Claude may have been a live wire in and out of school, lively and restless like everyone else, but there was a deeper side to his character. He had been given a

wonderful Catholic upbringing at home but like so many boys then and now, he might have been embarrassed if others knew he still believed in God and said his prayers, but not Claude!

Graduating from high school at 16, Claude was considered too young to go on to University, so he was given a 'finishing off year' in the university city of Caen.

Away from home, for the first time, with many opportunities to take it easy, Claude went on to win three of the five prestigious student awards that year — no small achievement in one of the most famous international colleges in France.

The real test for Claude came when he was 19 and spent three years in the Law School of Nantes, where student life at that time was an all time wild, as one chronicler put it: "Instead of being locked in serious discussions with their professors, these law students were more often involved in brawls, fist fights, even armed violence on the streets." Claude, however, kept his head and at 22 graduated with a Licentiate in Law.

With the world at his feet and so many promising careers open to him, he had great difficulty deciding whether it would be a career in the military, law and provincial politics like his dad, the family real-estate business, or the priesthood. His family suggested that he combine his theological studies with another degree at the University of Paris. But Claude decided to concentrate entirely on the spiritual preparation for the priesthood and took non-degree courses at a Jesuit College in Paris.

All during his high school and university studies Claude had been very active in social justice and now in Paris he became involved in helping immigrant chimneysweepers from Savoy and poor seminarians. The hostel he opened for the latter eventually became the famous Holy Spirit Seminary.

A Role Model For Modern Youth

Claude des Places, then, was no ready-made saint but an ordinary school boy and young adult striving by the grace of God and his own best efforts to do the best he could and always be a credit to his family, high school, college, country and Catholic Church.

Even in founding the Holy Spirit Seminary Claude was no old or middle aged rector laying down laws for others, but a young man in his prime — the first to follow the Rules he wrote.

Most unexpectedly in the late summer of 1709, although always healthy and very fit, he fell seriously ill of pleurisy and after a short but painful illness patiently borne, he died peacefully at the age of 30 years and 7 months.

Even in dying, Claude gave a memorable lesson to his youthful associates for his only request was that they bury him not with an expensive tombstone at his head, but in a nameless plot among the poorest of the poor of Paris.

Claude des Places' life 'from riches to rags' is a striking reminder not only of the high price that must be paid if one is to take Christ at His word, give up all

and follow Him, but also of the rich reward not only of 'treasure in heaven' but a promised hundred-fold even on earth.

At the same time, how valuable to any young man hesitating to make a final decision on his vocation to the priesthood and/or a religious profession of religious poverty, chastity and obedience is Claude's leap of faith and joyful perseverance in his decision in contrast to the other young man in the gospel story (Matthew 19: 16-22) who "went away sad because he was unwilling to sell all that he owned and follow Christ."

FOREWORD



From Riches to Rags

This short biography of Claude Francis Poullart des Places makes no claim to be an authoritative biography of the founder of the Holy Spirit Missionary Congregation (the Spiritans), but is an effort to tell a little of the life and times of this great priest so little known even among the members of the Society he founded.

Many excellent biographies in French and English have been published over the years by qualified historians and experts on Claude's spiritual life but most of these, primarily written by Spiritans for Spiritans, have never been too readily available for other people.

To remedy this situation, it is hoped that this small booklet, although for the most part only a 'digest' of already published works, will help the ordinary reader and particularly lay associates and friends of the Spiritans, come to know more about this very important but little known priest whom Cardinal Merry del Val once called "one of the great personalities in the Catholic Church of France in the eighteenth century."

From Riches to Rags

The story of Claude Poullart des Places has little of the usual 'from rags to riches' motif and might rather be called 'from riches to rags.' Claude was born into one of the wealthiest and most influential families in Rennes (the capital city of Brittany), but when he died at the early age of thirty in Paris, he was, at his own request, buried in an unmarked pauper's grave.

The Best and the Worst of Times

While the full story of the final years of the *Old Regime* of pre-Revolution France is outside the scope of this brief account of the life and times of Claude

Poullart des Places, without some knowledge of this ‘best and worst of times’ for the French upper class aristocrats and the Catholic Church in France, there is no understanding of Claude’s good fortune in the family background and educational advantages he enjoyed, or the difficulties he later encountered in attempting to address himself to the immense disparity encountered by young men from working-class families of that period in France during their preparation for the priesthood in contrast to the standard seminary amenities enjoyed by their fellow seminarians from rich merchant or landowner backgrounds.

No Ready-Made Saint

Too often in biographies of saints, in well-meaning emphasis on ‘the grace of God in the making of the saint,’ much of the human interest in the narrative is lost and sanctity is seen as a ready-made God-given affair rather than a life-accomplishment. Claude did not escape this kind of common caricature. His early biographers often neglected the many very human aspects of his character that endeared him to his contemporaries and portrayed him as a very self-centered and scrupulous individual, a holier-than-thou spoil sport, without much practical know-how or common-sense.

One of the reasons for this is the over-importance given by these authors to some very personal retreat notes hastily written by Claude not for publication but for private discussion with his spiritual director and confessor.

Doubtless, from the start, Claude was always a young man with strong religious convictions, but, in no way, was he ever a religious fanatic. On the contrary, the real Claude, was the very opposite — a very out-going, energetic, impetuous, gregarious, much admired individual — a true son of his father and mother, Francis and Jeanne Poullart des Places, two very good Catholics but two very common-sense and practical entrepreneur business people as well.

A Saint in a Hurry

Finally, since Claude accomplished all that he did in such a short lifetime, he had to be a go-getter and a ‘saint in a hurry’ for how else could he have become possibly the youngest founder in the history of the Catholic Church of a major religious society, the world-wide Missionary Congregation of the Holy Spirit, that three hundred years after his death, still is so very much alive in Africa and Asia, Europe and the Americas, Australia and Oceania?

A Forgotten Founder

In contrast with the high profile usually given to founders of religious societies (like St. Grignon de Montfort, one of Claude’s life-long friends and closest collaborators), little recognition appears to have been given to Claude des Places of Rennes even in the Holy Spirit Congregation (the Spiritans) he founded.

This lack of appreciation of one of France’s eighteenth century greats and one whose spiritual life in the words of Fr. Jean Savoie, Postulator for his Cause

for Beatification, was “a constant seeking to give himself to God in fidelity to the Gospel and in complete dedication to the Holy Spirit” can be seen in the contrast between his Congregation’s tardiness in having his virtues recognized by the Church and its haste in seeking similar honours for later members of the Congregation.

For example, although the Cause for Claude’s Beatification was not officially presented to the Church for examination until 275 years after his death, already by that time (1988), two of his later confreres had been beatified, Fr. Jacques Laval of Mauritius in 1979 and Fr. Daniel Brottier of France in 1984.

Even more remarkable is the case of Claude’s eleventh successor as Superior General, Fr. Francis Libermann, whose cause for beatification was introduced 25 years after his death and once the heroicity of his virtues were recognized by the Church in 1910, he was thereafter honoured not just as “Father Francis Libermann”, but as “The Venerable Father” of all Spiritans.

A Long Overdue Recognition

Happily, however, since the recent Tri-Centennial celebration of the foundation and early years of the Holy Spirit Seminary and Society, there has been seen among Spiritans a renewed interest not only in learning more about Claude des Places himself but also about his Cause for Beatification.

This booklet is being published as the Spiritans in Canada (the first overseas mission of the early Spiritans in 1732) celebrate two historic dates — the first fifty years of the Spiritans’ arrival in English Canada in 1954 and the first centenary of their second-coming to French Canada in 1905 after their earlier expulsion from the country by the British authorities as French patriots, undesirable champions of the Acadians and staunch defenders of Canada’s Native Peoples like the Micmac Indians.

As stressed by Superior General Fr. Pierre Schouwer, in his official Convocation Letter for the 2004 General Chapter (complete text in the Appendices), one of the most important topics facing the delegates was “*to assure that the Congregation remains authentically Spiritan amidst all the changes and diversity in origin, culture and life-experiences of its present members, now that most of the younger confreres come from the Southern Hemisphere, whereas in the past it was those from the Northern Hemisphere that set the tone.*”

This, perhaps, was what Fr. Jean Savoie had in mind when he said that any recognition by the Church of the Spiritan Founder at this particular time would be “for the benefit of all” because what greater source of Spiritan solidarity could there be than a shared fidelity to the true spirit of Claude des Places, irrespective of a member’s own country of origin or destination in mission.

This is why, if this short booklet can in any way help to make our Founder, Claude des Places, a little better known and loved, the labour involved in its compilation will be seen as more than richly rewarded.

Acknowledgements

The author is especially indebted to Fr. Sean Farragher CSSp of the Province of Ireland and the late Fr. Henry J. Koren CSSp of the United States East Province to whose outstanding historical research and published works this booklet is so greatly indebted.

He would also like to acknowledge his great indebtedness to Darlene Fitzgerald who typed (and retyped so often!) the manuscript, to Pat Sterr for his excellent map of Northwest France in the 1700s that helps readers locate Claude's hometown (Rennes), native Province (Normandy) and places connected with his studies — Caen, Nantes, and Paris (where also he died) and to Fr. Patrick Fitzpatrick, Provincial Superior of the Trans Canada Province, who, from the outset, encouraged this publication.

*Michael J. Troy, CSSp
Pentecost Sunday, 2004*

CHAPTER 1



Family Background and Early Years

Rennes (1679-1688)

Claude Poullart des Places was born on February 25, 1679, in Rennes, the capital city of Brittany. He was the eldest and only son of François Claude Poullart des Places and Jeanne Le Meneust.

Claude's Father

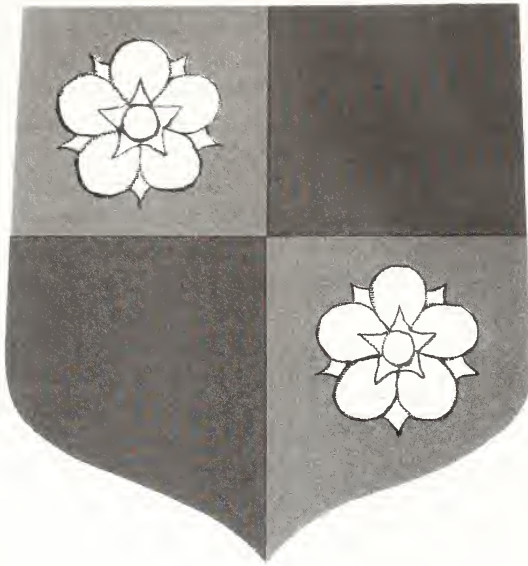
Claude's father was not only one of the wealthiest business men in the city but also enjoyed considerable standing in the community as a lawyer advocate in the *Breton Sovereign Parliament*. He was legitimately proud of his family that could trace its nobility back to the Middle Ages and spoke frequently with pride about its many deeds of valour on the battle fields of France and its outstanding loyalty at all times to the Catholic Universal Church.

His only embarrassment was that despite his frequent but frustrated attempts to remedy the situation, he had failed to regain the Poullart des Places official title to nobility lost in Colbert's 1668 Royal Treasury Reforms. He was unable to produce the requisite title deeds.

Claude's Mother

Claude's mother, Jeanne Le Meneust, also belonged to the aristocracy of Pre-Revolution France. Gilles, her father, had died young and as one contemporary chronicler put it: 'left nothing to his daughter except a good education.'

Jeanne used this good education well and thanks to the kind offices of her friend, Nicolle Lyais (who recommended her to her sister-in-law, the wife of Comte de Marbeuf), obtained the position of governess to the 'First Family of Brittany,' that of Claude Francis Marbeuf, President of its Sovereign Provincial Parliament.



The des Places family Coat of Arms.

In time, Jeanne became so indispensable to the Marbeuf family that when the husband's first wife died, she became the heart of the motherless household, its big family residence in Rennes and its three country castles in Laille, Gide and Servon.

In many ways, it appears that, with her charm, Jeanne very much resembled Maria, the heroine in the *Sound of Music* movie, who endeared herself to the motherless van Trappe family.

In fact, so much did Jeanne become devoted to the Marbeuf family that when the husband married a second time, she delayed her own wedding another twelve months in order to help Marbeuf's new bride learn to cope with her instant family and all its real estate.

Claude's Birth & Baptism

François and Jeanne's wedding, delayed for many years, was a big social affair and, of course, included the Marbeufs as special guests. It is not known whether Marbeuf himself 'gave away' the bride (Jeanne's father being dead) but two years later, when Claude was born on February 25, 1679, the sponsor at his baptism was none other than the President of the Breton Parliament himself.

In fact, one of the Marbeuf's jokes at the post-baptism get-together was how pleased he was that the baby had been baptized *Claude François* (Marbeuf's own first two names) and not *François Claude* (his Dad's)!

Fortunately the Record of this Baptism escaped the Great Fire of Rennes (1720) in which so many other invaluable Civil and Church documents were lost.



**Comte de Marbeuf,
Claude's godfather.**

“Claude Francis, born yesterday, the son of nobleman Claude Francis Poullart, lawyer at the court, and Madame Jeanne Le Meneust, his wife, Lord and Lady des Places, has been baptized in this church by the noble and illustrious Sir Julian Roussigneul, its Rector. He was held over the holy baptismal font by the exalted and puissant Lord, Sir Claude de Marbeuf, Lord of Laille, Gue and other places, member of the King’s Council, President of his Parliament in Brittany, Godfather; and Madame Françoise Truillot, Lady of Ferret, Godmother, who together with several other persons of quality have affixed their signatures this day, February the twenty-seventh, 1679.”

A Model Christian Household

All too frequently during the bloody pogroms of the French Revolution, noble families and rich business people of the Old Regime were demonized as enemies of the People and the Republic — idle, arrogant and ruthless exploiters of the working classes and, as such, well deserving of the guillotine!

However there were many among these upper classes, especially in Brittany, who had a great sense of family *noblesse oblige* that called for heroism even unto death when necessary in the service of their God, King and *la patrie*.

In this regard, Claude was fortunate to have such parents, for Francis and Jeanne were exemplary Christians and citizens, hardworking themselves and magnanimous in their dealings with workers and neighbourhood poor. Their lives taught their son more than their words. In all this, Claude, with one exception that he always regretted, learned his lesson well. He once struck a ‘commoner’ with his sword, when travelling on horseback to Nantes. But of this incident and his own and his father’s reactions, more later!

True Grit of Brittany

If it is true that not to know the soil from which a poet is sprung is to never know his poetry, so, too, not to know Brittany where Claude was born and raised, is never to know the founder of the Spiritans.

For starters in this connection, it is important to remember that Claude and his family were not only citizens of France (with its over-centralized government

in Paris) but fiercely independent people of Brittany, proud of their own culture, language (Celtic) and traditions and ever on guard against any threat (national or foreign) to their staunchly Catholic faith or their political autonomy.

For example, in the Second Year of the New Republic, during the Vendée insurrection against the Central Government, 20,000 Breton men, women, children and priests wandered around Brittany and neighbouring Normandy for three months until their much out-numbered guerrilla army was defeated in the battle of Savenay by the forces of the South. It was then in the infamous Vendean massacre or genocide that followed, that one-third of the population of Brittany (a quarter of a million people) were slaughtered in what Robespierre called 'a river of blood that separated France from its enemies.' It is worthy of note that Napoleon, a young officer at the time, refused to accept a command in this inglorious campaign!

Even today, Brittany continues to treasure its own Celtic language, its own traditional dress and all the splendid pageantry of its age-old Catholic fiestas.

As will be seen, Claude, too, had much of this fighting spirit of Brittany. He might lose a battle or two in the years ahead but the final victory would always be his. No wonder this spirit of *Fidelitas in Arduis* (*Steadfastness in Difficulties*) was to be characteristic of Claude himself long before it became a motto for his Spiritan associates.

Claude's Sister

Francis and Jeanne were wonderful parents but both were nearly forty years old when they married and so Claude, their first born, grew up almost like an only child for he never had a brother and Jeanne Françoise, his sister, was seven years his junior (Claude's other sister, two years his junior, lived only five months).

This difference in age between brother and sister was responsible for one of Claude's most harrowing experiences as a school boy. Practicing at home for one of his lead-roles in a school play, he was being continuously hassled by his mischievous little sister. Although he dearly loved her, to scare her off, he picked up his father's gun and presuming it unloaded (as it normally was) he aimed it at her head ...

One can imagine the scene — a little sister annoying an older brother — a loaded gun — a perfect scenario for a family tragedy! Fortunately, however, the gun-shot passed two inches above Jeanne Françoise's head and between Claude's mother and a cousin named Anne Marie who at the time lived with them.

The gun had been loaded by Claude's father the night before when some rather suspicious intruder noises had been heard outside the house.

The Hand that Rocked the Cradle

Claude's father, Francis, as far as his frequent absences from home on business and government affairs permitted, took a great interest in his son's education and spared no expense to ensure that Claude got the best that money could buy.

As a result of her husband's frequent absences it was left to Jeanne, Claude's stay-at-home mother, to take care of him in his earlier years. What a great fortune for him; for who could have been more qualified or willing than this wonderful lady who had given so much of herself to care for other people's children (the Marbeufs)?

No wonder, then, these happy, carefree early years at home, *chez lui*, were to be the all important foundation to Claude's future goodness and piety, for while Jeanne might leave a lot of his early training to others, it was she herself who looked after the spiritual side of it.

Not only did she have Claude baptized the day after he was born but had him that same day consecrated to the Blessed Virgin and in Mary's honour dressed him in white for all big Church feast days up to his seventh birthday and his First Communion.

With such a mother's love and guidance, Claude, as the records show, early manifested a great love for prayer and the things of God, even decorating little altars with his own small cash allowance in honour of Mary, the Mother of God.

Early Childhood Schooling

As there were no early childhood kindergartens in those days, only rich parents could afford to get home tutoring for their children. So even though Jeanne was very protective of her son, she never neglected his general education but hired the best of tutors for his reading, writing, music and dancing lessons.

His music teacher, for example, was none other than the organist at the Cathedral, Joseph Monet, and Claude's still extant signature in the Parish Registry of Baptisms, when he was sponsor for Claude Floh (son of one of his father's employees), shows that, even as a young boy, Claude could already write with a very strong hand.

These happy, carefree home-school years of Claude's early life passed all too quickly for his parents but, as one chronicler put it: "Even though they were not the sort of parents to easily hand over the education of their son and heir to any stranger," they were sensible enough to know that Claude by the age of eight or ten would now benefit from a wider education than was possible in home-schooling, no matter how excellent the tutors.

Soon a new phase in Claude's life was about to begin and although the new school was only a short walk or family-carriage drive from his home, it was a prelude for Claude to many and bigger separations and adventures to come.

However as Milton once so well put it: "Childhood shows the man as morning shows the day" and Claude, even as a small boy at his new school would soon show something of that get-up-and-go spirit of *Paratus ad Omnia* (*Ready for Anything*) that later would so characterize himself and his Spiritan associates.

CHAPTER 2



High School Days

Rennes and Caen (1688-1695)

When Claude was eight years old (some suggest nearly ten), as there were no *Public Schools* at the time operated by the French Government or the Catholic Church (St. John Baptist de La Salle opened his first school in 1679, the year Claude was born), his parents enrolled him as a day student at St. Thomas College, a nearby private school operated by the Society of Jesus.

The Jesuit Courses of Studies

St. Thomas College in Rennes was typical of the network of Jesuit All-Boys Schools of the period. Its curriculum of studies began with First Grade or Elementary, included all Secondary or High School Grades and ended with Post-Secondary Third Level Courses.

Apart from the regular subjects (Latin, Greek, French and Mathematics), the Jesuits offered a balanced formation that included physical fitness (*Mens sana in corpore sano*), religious and moral training and various skills and accomplishments then expected of *young gentlemen* — excellent good manners and proficiency in public speaking, dancing and singing, swordsmanship, horsemanship and even in personal use of firearms.

This all-inclusive and elitist school system, so valued in the *Ancien Régime*, envied outside of France (e.g. England) and hated during the French Revolution, is credited (or blamed) for its immense influence good or bad on the social, political, religious and even literary history of 18th century France. Many of its alumni were the leading conservative, liberal and even revolutionary thinkers of the period — individuals as different from one another as Voltaire and St. Grignon de Montfort, Descartes and Bossuet, Bourdaloue and St. John

Eudes. It was this love/hate attitude to Jesuit Schools that, in part, led to the suppression of the Society in 1723, its expulsion from France in 1765, and the guillotine for many of its members as enemies of the people in the bloody pogroms of the French Revolution.

The New Student

Claude probably started in Grade One of this Jesuit *Ratio Studiorum* but thanks to the good foundation he had received from his tutors at home, it was not long before his new teachers began to recognize his above average promise as a student, his keen interest in extra-curricular activities especially rhetoric (public speaking) and the performing arts (drama), but above all his remarkable influence for good among fellow students.

Head of His Class

As far as studies were concerned, Claude from the beginning took everything in his stride and graduated so young that even his teachers suggested that rather than go on immediately to post-secondary study of Philosophy, he should repeat his final year away from home as a boarder at the Jesuit College in Caen in the neighbouring Province of Normandy.

It is ironical that the only surviving documents about Claude's achievements during these early years at St. Thomas College are two Programs of the College Concerts in which he starred — the first as a lead actor in a play during his third year (1692) and the second as a ballet dancer in his final year (1694).



St. Thomas College, in Rennes, where Claude was educated.

First Steps in His Father's Business

From his earliest years, even Claude's parents were amazed at the very special graces God had given their son. Like many another little boy, Claude had loved to imitate the priest at mass and decorate little altars for the Blessed Virgin. But now it was different for, never one to hide his faith in God 'under a bushel'; soon Claude was trying to share his love for God and his devotion to the Blessed Virgin with other boys, organizing them into little prayer groups.

Two Kindred Souls

In this he was greatly encouraged and supported by a fellow student, six years his senior, Grignon de Montfort, the future St. Louis Marie de Montfort and his life-long friend and associate in good works. Together, as the boys walked to and from school they may have dreamed of great deeds for the glory of God but little thought both would become founders of Religious Societies that flourish, even today, some three hundred years after their deaths.

A First Test in Obedience

Two members of the College staff who had profound influence on Claude as a boy, were Fr. Gilbert Petit and Fr. Pierre Descartes (nephew of the great philosopher).

Fr. Gilbert Petit was a young Jesuit priest on his first appointment before being sent as a missionary to French-Indo China.

Fr. Descartes was the Director of Our Lady's Sodality at the College. He was the first to really test Claude's willingness to do what he was told. Apparently Fr. Descartes considered Claude and his friends were going too fast and too far with their piety, prayer and possibly self denial. He ordered Claude to disband the whole group.

To the surprise of all and the disappointment of a few, Claude, although a very strong willed, determined young Breton with a mind of his own, immediately did so.

The incident was a great test in humility, for although Claude was in a hurry to get on with his Father's business, like Jesus at the age of twelve, he, too, submitted to the voice of authority and was prepared to wait 'because his time had not yet come.'

Leaving Home for the First Time

Claude was only twelve when he completed with distinction all his high-school courses at St. Thomas College and so his parents were caught in a dilemma — keep him at home and have him go on immediately to post-secondary studies at his old school or, as some of his teachers suggested, slow down this scholar in a hurry and have him repeat his Final High School Year away from home in a boarding school — the Jesuit International College in Caen, capital of the neighbouring Province of Normandy.

It is more than likely that it was Fr. Jean Pierre Longuemore, Claude's drama teacher and a friend of the family, himself being transferred at this time to the College in Caen, who came up with this brilliant idea.

For Claude's father, Fr. Jean emphasized that the year would be a wonderful learning experience for Claude as Caen, the "Athens of France" because its many cultural centres, was also one of the busiest seaports in France and exposure to this ever-increasing import-export trade of France might become a great asset to Claude if ever he made business and not law his chosen career.

Jeanne, like any good mother, was only worried about her twelve-year-old boy being all alone in this big bad international seaport. Fr. Jean quickly allayed her fears saying he himself would keep an eye on Claude who, anyway, would be living not in a big college residence but in a small well-supervised and privately owned hostel.

So while Claude's parents agonized whether they were doing the best for their boy, Claude himself was probably all excited and impatient to get started on this adventure — his first time away from home!

The Enrichment Year at Caen

To a twelve-year-old of less self-assurance the challenge might have been too much. But not for Claude. On and off stage he was never afraid. In fact, the bigger the challenge, the greater always was his effort and courage. So by the end of the year, it is not surprising that he came away with three of the five top academic awards — no small achievement as Caen College, at that time, had an enrollment of 2000 students from every part of France and as well as from other countries like England and Ireland.

As one Chronicler so well put it: Claude in Caen "*won the increasing approval of his parents and acquaintances by running away with all the honour awards offered by the college, a place where brilliant minds were the order of the day.*"

Thus, Claude came through this first big test with flying colours and thanks to his sound home-upbringing, his own good work habits and perhaps also to the careful eye of his friendly guardian, Claude did not, like so many of his fellow students, young men like himself enjoying their first new-found freedom in a big city, waste his parents' money or miss this wonderful opportunity to grow up.

As he stood on Caen's harbour walls watching the big ships come and go, he may have dreamed not so much of France's imports and exports as of missionaries sailing to places beyond the horizon that had never heard of Jesus Christ or His Blessed Mother!

But be that as it may, it definitely was not all work and no play for Claude in Caen. For example, since Fr. Longuemore, his mentor, at this time was receiving *National Press* rave-reviews for his theatrical productions, it is reasonable to presume that Claude, one of Fr. Jean's favourite principals in his high school plays in Rennes, would have had some part in these stage productions in Caen.

Final Years at St. Thomas College

The year in Caen passed all too quickly and by the Autumn of 1691 Claude was back again in Rennes, living at home and starting his post-secondary studies in his old *Alma Mater*. Three years later, to no one's surprise, he once again took first place in all the final examinations.

As a result he was chosen from among hundreds of his peers to represent the Graduation Class not in giving a Valedictorian Speech as is done nowadays in high schools and colleges, but in defending a highly controversial philosophical subject against the counter arguments of invited members.

Weeks before the date of the debate, the subject was posted on billboards around the town. As a result of this publicity, the social importance of the event was much greater than any given to high school or even university graduations today.

The Great Debate

On the Big Day, a Red Letter Day surely in the lives of Claude and his parents, everything was planned with the customary pomp and circumstance. Members of Parliament and City Corporations joined bishops and clergy and even took part in heckling the youthful defender of the published thesis.

Apparently, however, Claude (in flawless Latin) was more than a match for the opposition, for as Henry Koren describes it, his performance that day was brilliant:

“Dedicating his defense to the King’s son, Louis de Bourbon, the nineteen year old boy thrilled and charmed his audience by the clarity and simplicity of his replies, the breadth and depth of his knowledge, the glow of his youth and the grace of his eloquence. With little or no help from his professor, he deftly disposed of his opponents by a shattering display of logic. Then, as the thunderous applause died down around him, this stage of Claude’s career came to a brilliant and memorable end.

Exceptionally intelligent, charming in manner, handsome, richly endowed with material goods, unusually popular, Claude had the world at his feet. Now it was time for him, his parents thought, to enter society, relax from the drudgery of seven years’ intensive study and become an “accomplished gentleman.” In a city which feverishly tried to emulate the social amenities of Paris, invitation followed invitation: a party here, a banquet there, the chase, the concert, the ball, the theater — every host and hostess clamored for his company.”

An Instant Celebrity

Almost overnight Claude became a local celebrity, the ‘New Boy on the Block’ and a whole new world was opening up for this young man, who up to

this time had been scarcely known outside his family and a small circle of friends and fellow-students.

But, even more unbelievable still, Claude went on to become a celebrity across the country, when a three-page article in the National *Le Mereure Gazette* (November Edition 1698 pp. 184-6) covered the brilliant Rennes defense of his thesis on August 25th, 1698.

Although this highly entertaining article in the Personal and Social Columns of the National Magazine is the sole contemporary public reference to Claude, only a brief extract of it can be published here:

We have received this report from Rennes in Brittany for the fourteenth of this month that Mr. Poullart des Places, junior, defended a very good thesis there which he dedicated to le Comte de Toulouse, Governor of the Province. There was a very distinguished assembly, including members of Parliament and a large number from among the nobility as well.

So many people came forward then to challenge this thesis that it would have taken eight full days for the defendant to reply to all their objections. But one can safely say in praise of this young philosopher that even if he was keenly attacked, his defence was more brilliant still. His solutions appeared so ingenious and delivered with such grace and ease that he aroused the admiration of all who heard him...
(*Le Mereure Gallant*, November 1698: pp 184-186).

A Trip of a Life-Time

In the middle of all this excitement of his coming of age as it were, came a further unbelievable surprise — an invitation from Paris to come and visit the Royal Palace of Versailles.

The reason for the invitation is not clear but obviously the fact that Claude had dedicated his graduation thesis to Louis de Bourbon, the son of Louis XIV (and sent a copy to the Honorée) may have had something to do with it.

For one of lesser balance than Claude, the glitter and glamour of Versailles under Louis XIV might have been the end to any dreams of great things for God and his fellow-man. However, while Claude enjoyed the exciting coach-ride (very dangerous at that time) and his first glimpse of *gaie Paris*, there is no evidence to suggest that he was in any way overawed by the life style of Versailles or the flattery of the mighty and powerful who, according to some authorities, even suggested an early engagement for Claude to some high-ranking young lady in the Court of the Duchess of Burgundy.

Claude may have been mildly attracted to a career ‘in the king’s service’ but an early marriage, for sure, was never then or at any other time, in his own or in his parents’ plans. As his first biographer so well put it: “*Even his father wanted something better for his son, of whom he was immensely proud, than spending his life in antechambers, courtyards and staircases.*”

First Farewell to Paris

Apparently, then, Claude did not overstay in Paris and while he enjoyed the visit, was soon glad to be back in Rennes among more familiar faces and places. One may assume that while he was impressed by the splendor of Versailles, as a Breton, he would have been somewhat irked by the Paris Central Government's apparent little regard for Brittany's demand for more provincial autonomy and respect for its traditional language and culture.

As well, Claude could hardly but have been shocked a little at the stark contrast between the opulence of the Royal Palace and dreadful poverty of other parts of the city. What his first impressions were are not known, but one day he would return and throw in his lot not with well-housed rich but with the homeless poor of the city.

Return to Rennes

However long or short Claude's first visit to Paris, back in his own hometown, things had never been better than now for him and his family.

His father's business was expanding beyond all expectations and only recently Francis had been appointed to a highly responsible office in the financial affairs of the Breton Government (*Juge Garde des Monnaies*).

Now that her two children were a little older, Jeanne, Claude's mother, had started a thriving side-line business of her own, trading in fashionable Breton fabrics (then as now world-wide famous for their quality).

And last but not least, the family had bought a new house and moved into one of the wealthiest and most exclusive neighbourhoods of Rennes.

A Time of Winnowing

No wonder then this was a real testing time for a young man of Claude's high spirits. Keeping up with his school pals, like himself free from the restraints of school and the pressure of examinations and enjoying to the full their new found freedom, was not easy.

Later in life, looking back on this time even in stark self examination retreat notes, Claude could never accuse himself of loose living or immorality but he did admit having financial difficulties keeping up with the Jones despite a generous allowance from his parents. Although his early biographers suggested his companions tried to 'convert' Claude to their ways of thinking, it is clear Claude, even at this time of his life, always did his own thing and his friends respected him for that. For example, Claude even as a young man, never drank wine, something very exceptional for a Breton and a Frenchman!

A Brush With Death

It was probably around this time on one of the gang's 'wild' escapades hunting in the country with firearms that one of his companions, at close range, shot Claude in the stomach and nearly killed him. Fortunately for all concerned, the

wound though severe, was not life-threatening. Claude recovered but never forgot his indebtedness for his escape from an early death to the protection of the Blessed Virgin to whom he had been consecrated as a child.

How long this fun period of coming of age lasted is not known, but one thing is certain: Claude knew that it could not go on for ever — one foot in the 'fast lane' of his friends, another going along with his parents' ambitions for him and last but not least his own gut-feeling that God was really asking more of him than just the life of an ordinary good Christian in the world.

Bridge Over Troubled Waters

No wonder then that in this time of indecision, Claude opted for a quiet retreat to work it all out.

Already as a school boy Claude had enjoyed the Annual Retreats customary at Jesuit High Schools (and for years afterwards common in Spiritan Colleges world-wide), in which, for three days, everything closed down (no sports, no classes, no study) and the school boys, usually so noisy and boisterous at times of recreation, would be seen walking around the beautiful college grounds, in monkish silence, praying, doing some spiritual reading or simply opening up their hearts to God who was giving 'joy to their youth' and maybe asking big things of the few in their future.

The Big Decision

Although it is impossible, for want of records, to know much about the details of this particular retreat (as distinguished from a later one of which his retreat reflections are still extant), one thing is certain, as all his biographers have noted: it ended with a momentous decision to let his parents know his intention of one day becoming a priest.

The announcement was to change not only his outlook on life but his close relations with his friends and family. His father's reaction, as can be imagined, was predictable for he had been taking it for granted that Claude would, as a lawyer or a business man or both, follow in his own footsteps and maybe one day restore the family claim to nobility.

His mother, Jeanne, only thinking of her son's happiness, would be worried about the loneliness of life for him as a priest.

However, both were staunch Breton Catholics with great faith, and so, while not outright in their opposition to his decision, they advised him to take more time. Secretly in their hearts, they may have hoped their only son would change his mind.

The disbelief of his closest friends was only matched by their silent respect and admiration for his initial decision to follow the road less travelled by young men, then as now, a life of celibate service of God and the people of God.

Like every Spiritan after him (or any young man first breaking the news to his family that he would like to be a priest), Claude had no clear idea of the



Portrait by the famous painter Jouvenet of nineteen-year-old Claude des Places, Student of the Year, Graduation Day, St. Thomas University College, Rennes, August 25, 1698.

future. Too many accounts of his life-story reduce the exciting adventure of his and every Spiritan's vocation into a dull sequence of seemingly pre-ordained events and foregone conclusions. As will be seen, it was to be the very opposite.

A Portrait of a Young Man

Far more realistic is it to look closely at a portrait of Claude commissioned at this time than imagine him as anything but a ready-made priest or founder of a new religious society!

This portrait of Claude is still preserved in the Munich Museum (not because of Claude's importance) but that of the painter — Jean Jouvenet — whose interior decorations of the Versailles Palace and the Parliament of Rennes made him famous.

The portrait shows Claude as a typical young aristocrat of the *Old Regime*, a graduate of a Jesuit College — young, handsome, self assured, immaculately dressed and coiffed, even a little arrogant, — in a word, a regular French-edition of the English Thomas Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*.

The portrait, far from depicting Claude as a future priest, shows him (probably his father's idea?) as a young man with a brilliant future as a lawyer holding in his hands the traditional prize awarded the Philosophy Student of the Year in a Jesuit College, a leather bound volume of the great Roman orator, Cicero.

Undoubtedly, Claude was a young man of great promise and gifted with a remarkable command of language. The question at this time, however, was whether Claude would use these talents for a career in public life or dedicate them to the Kingdom of God, for as he himself so well put it: "*In my heart I know ... that I have no special dislike for the world any more than I have for the religious and priestly life.*" Only time would tell what his decision would be!

CHAPTER 3



University Studies in Law

Nantes (1695-1701)

Up to the time Claude shared with his family his desire to become a priest, Francis and Jeanne had looked upon their son as a little boy to be told what to do and not to do. But now, having married late in life and already in their late fifties, they began to realize that he was a young man with a mind of his own and ready to place his entire future at the service of God — a decision that would put an end to all their own plans for him.

A Young Man's Choice

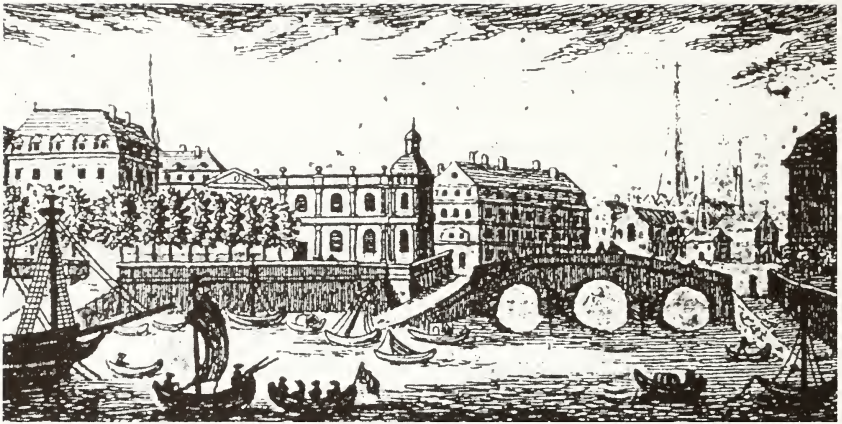
However, no matter how much his parents may have thought him too young and immature to make such a life-decision, they knew him better than oppose him outright or worse still, not take him seriously like the parents of Giovanni di Bernadone, the founder of the Franciscans, whose father went as far as to publicly disown his son.

Fortunately for Claude, his father, although a hard-headed business-man like St. Francis of Assisi's father, was more tactful.

As once before when Claude had finished high school at such an early age, his dad, who, at the time thought his son too young to start the study of Philosophy, consulted Claude's teachers and followed Fr. de Longuemere's suggestion that Claude could benefit from a repeat final year of high school in Caen, so now, once more, he turned to the Jesuit Fathers for advice.

The Nantes Solution

Since Claude, always, apparently, in a hurry and ahead of schedule, was for the moment too young to enter a diocesan seminary or a religious novitiate (Pre-novitiate or pre-seminary residences being non-existent in those pre-Vatican II days!), his Jesuit mentors suggested that he spend three years at the



View of Nantes.

University of Nantes, where he would have the widest possible selection of major and minor options — courses in Law, Theology, Arts and even Medicine.

Even Claude himself could see the wisdom of this interim decision since he had not yet fully made up his mind whether to become a priest or to remain a good Catholic layman. A degree in law would be useful in either career.

As far as Claude's father was concerned, the Nantes solution was doubly attractive. First, a Licentiate in Law from the University of Nantes would be an open-sesame to political advancement if his son ever decided to become a parliamentary lawyer. And secondly, since Nantes, a busy international seaport, also controlled a considerable amount of the national trade (being situated on the Loire River that was navigable inland for more than 200 miles), what better place for his son to make contact with the right people in France's rapidly expanding export and import trade with its colonies, if ever he decided to take over the management of the now more than twenty thriving *des Places* business enterprises?

On the Road to Nantes

In late September 1698, then, one can imagine the mixed feelings of Jeanne and Francis as they saw Claude off, not in a carriage this time (as when he left for Caen and Paris), but on horse-back fully armed and a sword in his scabbard. Their boy was on his way to university and all was right with his world and their's ... when suddenly disaster struck!

Claude and his companion had scarcely left Rennes when on the highway to Nantes an unfortunate incident occurred that might have ended, or at least jeopardized, his whole future as a parliamentary lawyer or his ordination to the priesthood. He got into some sort of altercation, physical or verbal, with Pierre Le Huedez, a coachman from Batz (a small village near Rennes). Considering his rank little respected by this commoner's actions or remarks, Claude lost his temper, drew his sword and struck him twice, injuring the man on his arm and

body. Pierre was unarmed and sued Claude for common assault. What a terrible start for an aspiring lawyer or a future priest! What a stupid mistake or what a very human interest story!

Claude's father hushed up the incident but its memory would haunt Claude for the rest of his life — uncovering, as it did, the Achilles heel or weak spot of his character or as he put it later: *'his upper-class superiority complex, his cowardice in the face of danger and his inability to take even a simple jeer or insult.'*

The Nature of the Altercation

One can only surmise the reason for this physical attack on a local (young or old) man, but one can be sure that it must have been something serious for Claude to lose control of himself. Perhaps, it was a remark from someone who knew the des Places family had no real title to nobility and taunted that Claude, although riding a high horse was no better than his *'ould-lad'* always acting the gentleman; or one of the upstart *nouveau riche* made wealthy only by exploiting underpaid *sans culottes* working class people ... Claude, at any such insult to himself or his father, would have seen red!

However this may have been or whatever Claude's regrets afterwards, for now it was simply a case of legal proceedings against him for common assault. Here, fortunately for Claude, his father came to the rescue and used his influence to have the charge not only withdrawn but entirely struck from the Criminal Records.

The Cover-Up

Fr. Pierre Thomas, unearthed the details of this episode so embarrassing for Claude and so humiliating for his father, and described the cover-up:

"The morning of October 8th 1697 Mr. Poullart des Places presented himself accompanied by two notaries of the Crown at the inn L'Hostellerie du puits Mauger which still stands in the rue de Nantes. The three men entered the room occupied by Pierre Le Huedez, a coachman from Batz, a small townland in the diocese of Nantes. Le Huedez had just brought a charge before the Criminal Court of Rennes 'against two private individuals, one of whom, dressed in brown doublet and mounted on a black horse, had stabbed him with a sword through the arm and had inflicted a flesh wound on his body'.

He agreed to cede to Mr. des Places all rights 'to pursue the extension of the aforesaid charge, and never to revoke this ceding of his rights on whatever pretext possible'. In exchange for this surrogation, des Places would pay the coachman sixty pounds and engage himself to pay for the medical expenses already incurred in connection with this criminal charge. As soon as the contract was signed he repaired to the judge to withdraw the charge made by Le Huedez and so left not the slightest trace on the criminal records of the courts."

A Settlement Out of Court

Often in accounts of Claude's life, well-merited credit is given to his mother for her wonderful influence in his childhood but little or none is ever given to Claude's father for his strong presence and guiding hand throughout his son's career.

Francis des Places was a man for all seasons — a wonderful husband and great father and grandfather! One of the most eligible bachelors in Rennes as a young man, he waited for years for his girl-friend, Jeanne, to end the saga of her long self-sacrificing devotedness as a hired governess to the Marbeuf family and when Claude, a young 'spoiled brat' nearly killed his sister, Francis blamed himself for leaving his gun loaded. When Claude nearly got himself killed by one of his teenager pals, Francis, grateful only that his son was alive, paid the doctor's bill. And now, when Claude, full of pride as he rode out of Rennes on 'a black horse' (owned or hired by his Dad), hit the dust, as it were, like Paul on the road to Damascus, it was his father, like another Ananias, who picked him up, cleared his name and continued to believe in a boy who had so badly let the family down in this ugly brawl. In modern times, it would have been like the embarrassing experience of many a prominent businessman or politician faced with bad publicity because of a daughter or a son's unacceptable conduct or clash with the law.

Nantes Law School in the 1690s

One can imagine how the ride to Nantes that should have been a cherished memory for Claude must have become a nightmare to him as he began his studies at the University. Hearing only long distance or second-hand accounts of how the case against him was going, it must have been difficult for him to settle down to work, thinking of how he had let his mother down and exasperated his father not so much with the legal expenses of the case, but with the damage he was doing to the family good name.

In his later reminiscences, Claude considered this whole period as one of the darkest in his life for in addition to this 'disgrace' at home, his high ideals and noble aspirations were being severely tested by his peers, the 'lawless' students of the university.

As one contemporary put it:

"Instead of being locked in discussions with their professors in the halls of learning, these law-students of Nantes were engaged in brawls, fist-fights and even sword fights on the streets and on the outskirts of the city", so much so that, even allowing for exaggeration about these law students' unruly conduct and neglect of studies, it is a matter of history that just thirty years after Claude's graduation in 1735, the Law School itself had to be taken out of Nantes by a Royal Decree and transferred to Rennes.

This is why, while Claude apparently kept his head in Nantes, it was good to remember he was not dealing now with his old high school teenage pals of Rennes, but with a much older and more sophisticated crowd of twenty-year-olds from every corner of France and as Fr. Pierre Thomas put it:

“Claude’s eagerness to make friends and establish advantageous relations caused him to become more and more involved in worldly affairs. He found resistance hard and, in his inexperience, sometimes failed to see the risks he ran.”

In all this wild life on and off the university campus, it is easy to forget and not give credit to Claude that, even according to his own records, he never, at this time, did anything seriously wrong and kept up his daily prayers and regular attendance at Mass. At the same time, in doing this, he was greatly indebted not only to his parents who had him board with relatives and not on the college campus, but also to his good friends in the Society of Jesus in Nantes who kept a close eye on all their past students, but especially, we can be sure, on a young man with such promising makings of a good Jesuit like Claude Poullart des Places!

Typically, Claude, above all, credited the grace of God that he did not fail at this crucial time in his life for as he himself put it:

“How often did I not find God’s grace surrounding me and setting up, as it were, a wall that saved me a thousand times from my no-good tendencies and weakness towards misconduct.”

A Licentiate in Law

Although Claude, apparently, had little difficulty with his studies, little or nothing is known about his academic achievements during his three years at the Law School of Nantes. Part of the reason for this may have been that many of the Law School Records were lost when the Law School was moved from Nantes to Rennes but the most probable reason was that his early biographers were concerned not so much about his continued success as a student (which they took for granted) as with the difficulties he was encountering in persevering in his vocation to the priesthood on the wild-life Nantes Law School campus.

Welcome Home Party

Claude’s parents, as soon as they heard his successful results in the final examinations, began, immediately, to plan a big testimonial reception for him — a repeat, they hoped, of the one that followed his brilliant debut at the time of his high school graduation speech.

Even a portrait by some famous painter was probably planned for their son — this time not dressed like another *Little Blue Boy* but the 23-year-old *Newest and Youngest Lawyer in Town*, in the full regalia of his profession and in his hands, this time not the speeches of Cicero, the great Roman advocate, but the official certificate of his Law Degree.

The Big Reception

Invitations had gone out and RSVP's from special guests returned and all was in readiness for the great event. The fondest dreams and highest hopes of Francis and Jeanne had been more than realized. Their boy was coming home a fully qualified lawyer with a great future ahead of him. Forgotten entirely was the disgraceful brawl three years before on the road to Nantes — his only *faux pas!*

The highlight of the evening came when Jeanne dressed Claude in the parliamentary counselor's gown she had purchased (or maybe even made in her own haute-couture establishment, for at that time she was one of the top-class fashion-designers in town). What a moment for all the family to cherish for ever!

Claude was not the one to embarrass his mother in public or cheat his father of this moment of glory but when the guests had left and the family were alone by themselves, Claude looked at himself in a life-size mirror and suddenly, to the stunned surprise of his parents and little sister (now in high-school), he stripped off the magistrate's gown and, in a broken voice, told them he would never put it on again.

Fr. Charles Besnard, one of Claude's students, who must have heard the story from Claude himself, graphically describes the scene...

"When (Claude) looked at himself dressed in the gown of Themis (the Greek Goddess of Justice), he apparently decided that he was not the man he saw in the mirror for it was not as easy to possess the qualities of a judge as it was to vest in the robes of the office. However that may be, God illuminated him with a penetrating light which made it clear to him that he was not called to this state of life and openly he declared that he would never don it again."

One can readily understand the shock to all the family at this seemingly outrageous behaviour and ingratitude. The situation was particularly embarrassing for his father. How could he now explain to his colleagues why his son, a qualified lawyer, was not going to practice. Worse still, probably, how could he explain to his friends, his colleagues in the Breton Parliament, his son's refusal to have anything to do with them, although Francis, without Claude's knowledge, may have already been using his influence (and maybe his money) to have the young lawyer immediately accepted into that closed-circle political club!

Fr. Pierre Thomas goes on to try and explain Claude's "unacceptable behaviour":

"It is easy to realize how he (des Places senior) and his whole family were mortified when all their plans were shattered by the repugnance their son had just shown for the legal profession. This was all the more grievous for them because all the necessary preparations for the event had been made. And all the people on whom his admittance depended had been approached. Though they suffered, his father and mother were too religious to grumble. They did, of course, complain to their

son and even sought for an explanation because they were unable to understand what had caused him to have this repugnance. But perhaps he did not know the reason himself.”

The Man in the Glass

Early biographers, who give great importance to Claude's reflections in a later retreat, too often fail to give sufficient attention to this remarkable, self-critical and emotional experience of *The Man in the Glass* which was a glimpse of Claude's role in the history of the Church and the special charism of his future religious family.

On a clear day, as is often said, one can see forever into the past, the present and the future and as Claude looked at himself that night in the mirror, it became luminously clear to him that he was no man to sit in self-righteous judgement on others. A man who got off the hook of justice only by his father's money would never be fit to judge between rich and poor, the influential and the weak. And so, like another young man, Giovanni di Bernadone and future St. Francis of Assisi, he stripped off the rich garments of Dives and opted for the rags of Lazarus. His mission and that of his followers (the Spiritans) would never be to sit in judgment on an unjust society but, as good Samaritans and 'rag-pickers' of the Church, to don the apron of humble service and serve the needs of the poor and heal the wounds of society.

This is what Fr. Pierre Thomas, Claude's first biographer, hinted when he wrote:

“God had His own designs which He did not yet reveal. He destined this only son who was so tenderly loved by them to a state that was much higher than the one his parents contemplated. He wanted to attach him entirely to His own service. He desired to make him a model of the most heroic virtues, the father and head of a priestly family which was later to render great service to the Church, and to give him a numerous progeny, one capable of multiplying itself, and one that would last, perhaps, till the end of time.

It is thus that God is accustomed to procure for us a great good, even when He opposes those of our schemes that do not appear unreasonable to us. Monsieur and Madame des Places were devout enough to guard against placing themselves in opposition to God's plans if He had made them known. However, prudence demanded that they put their son's aversion to the test to see if it were not just a passing whim. They still kept hoping he would listen to reason.”

CHAPTER 4



Choosing a Path Less Travelled

Rennes (1701)

It is not known how long after the fateful night that began so well and ended in such disarray when Claude took off the barrister's robe and declared he would never wear it again, that he followed up on that dramatic declaration and made an eight-day retreat to finalize his decision about his future plans.

While one may speculate on how much, during this interval, Claude got involved in his father's business enterprises, one thing is certain: he knew in his heart of hearts that he could not go on for ever vacillating and procrastinating about his ultimate intentions.

Treasured Retreat Notes

Fortunately some notes taken by Claude during an all-important retreat around this time are still extant, although only preserved in the handwriting of his first biographer, Fr. Pierre Thomas.

That these notes exist at all is very exceptional as most des Places family papers were lost in the Great Rennes Fire of 1720 and most of the early Spiritan documents were destroyed in 1792 during a mob-invasion of the Holy Spirit Seminary, or in 1830 when the Seminary itself was confiscated. These retreat notes have survived, perhaps because during his lifetime they were of special sentimental value to Claude and afterward were treasured by the early Spiritans as priceless. While other founders left copious writings to enable their followers to follow 'the story of their souls' Claude des Places had left practically nothing except 'retreat notes' like these as key to his mind, heart and spiritual life.

However, all this is no justification for exaggerating the importance of these notes or failing to see that they must never be taken out of their context as some hastily written reflections during a private retreat.



1720 fire in Rennes.

To do so is to end with a caricature of the Spiritan Founder as an exceedingly indecisive individual who could never make up his mind, rather than an eminently well-balanced and qualified young lawyer, with the world at his feet, objectively reviewing the pros and cons of his case, like a good devil's advocate, before asking his Spiritual Director's guidance in this all important decision.

Outline of the Retreat

This retreat made by Claude in Rennes in the summer of 1701, follows the traditional guidelines of all Jesuit-directed retreats, the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

The First Part consists in the *Retreatant's Examination of Conscience* in the light of the eternal truths and man's ultimate destiny. The Second Part covers the *Retreatant's Election* or decision about his or her future.

Claude's *Retreat Notes* faithfully follow these Ignatian Guidelines and so were edited by his early biographers in two parts (1) *Reflections on the Truths of Religion* (34 pages) and (2) *Choice of a State in Life* (19 pages).

Reflections on the Truths of Religion

The reflections in Part 1 of the Retreat Notes are of such a general nature (with only one or two references to himself) that they are only included because of an editorial note on the margin of their first page that says they were 'introductory notes of a Retreat made by Monsieur des Places in which he examines his vocation.'

The retreat was not a 'second-conversion' or a radical turn-about in Claude's life but rather a candid soul-searching review to see whether, like Abraham, he had sufficient faith and courage to take God at his word and leave the familiar and comfortable world he knew for a strange destiny, still hidden from him, in which he would take off the proud mantle of privilege and put on the apron of humble service to the poor and marginalized masses of humanity. Although his parents' good example showed him what good people could do within the system, it did not blind him to the fact that there were many problems in the existing structures of Pre-Revolution France and Church that needed more radical reform.

Choice of a State in Life

Part 2 of the Retreat Notes, then, is of far more relevance to this biographical study for in them Claude gets down to the real nitty-gritty question — the choice he must make among the various careers open to him in the light of his strengths and weaknesses, his likes and dislikes.

This part of Claude's reflections has often been compared with St. Augustine's Confessions 'of too late have I loved thee.' Claude, like Augustine, spends more time lauding the mercy of God than deploring his own misdemeanors and faults of character.

This is why biographers like Fr. Sean Farragher have so aptly compared Claude's soliloquy to that of Francis Thompson in his great poem *The Hound of Heaven*, as the poet flees God 'down the arches of the years and the labyrinths of his mind,' only in the end to hear God saying, 'All I took from you, I did but take, not for your harm, but that you might find it in My arms.'

Self-Portrait of a Young Man

Claude begins this part of his reflections with a Hamlet-like soliloquy about the burning question of 'to be' or 'not to be,' with a less than flattering self-portrait of himself!

"I shall begin by examining my temperament and calling to mind my emotions, good and bad, for fear of forgetting the first and allowing myself to be deceived by the second.

I enjoy excellent health, though I appear very delicate. I have a good stomach and am able to digest any kind of food easily. Nothing makes me ill. As strong and vigorous as anyone else, hardened to fatigue and work, I am nevertheless inclined to be lazy and easy-going; applying myself only when spurred on by ambition. By nature I am mild and docile, extremely obliging, almost incapable of saying No to anyone, and in this alone, am I constant.

By temperament I am slightly sanguine and very melancholic. What is more, though rather indifferent to wealth I am passionately fond of glory and of anything that can raise a person above his fellows

by his own achievements. The success of others fills me with jealousy and despair, though I never allow this ugly vice to reveal itself nor do I do anything to satisfy it. I am discreet where secrets are concerned, rather diplomatic in all my conduct, enterprising in my designs but secretive in their execution.

I seek independence yet I am the slave of splendor. I am afraid of death and this makes me a coward, though I cannot tolerate insult. Too fond of flattering others, I am in private ruthless with myself when I have committed a faux pas in public. I am sober with regards to the pleasures of food and drink and rather reserved with regards to those of the flesh.

I sincerely admire truly good people and I love virtue but rarely practice it myself because of human respect and lack of perseverance — sometimes as devout as a hermit, pushing austerity beyond the limits becoming a person of the world; at another times soft, cowardly and lax in my Christian practice; always frightened when I forget God and fall into sin. I am scrupulous to a fault and that almost as much in times of laxity as during times of fervor.

I recognize well enough what is good and what is evil. God's graces are always there so as to help me to discover my blindness. I like to give alms and am naturally sympathetic to the ills of others. I hate slanderers. I am respectful in Church without being a hypocrite. This is what I am and in this description I see the portrait of my real self."

A Wide Variety of Options

Then follows a review of the various secular careers and religious vocations open to him in the light of his education and training.

First he reviews the various careers open to him should he (like his parents) decide to be a good Christian layman in the world of human affairs — a lawyer, a business-man, a government civil servant, or even a member of the armed forces (one of the traditions of the des Places family!).

This is followed by an examination of the various options open to him should he decide to be a priest — the diocesan clergy, an active religious congregation or a cloistered contemplative order like the Carthusians.

While none of the careers in secular world was completely to his liking, Claude's main problem in a choice of a religious vocation was that he was too full of foolish pride and vanity, too much a man of the world full of here and now ambitions to have much hope, except by the grace of God, of persevering in the life of prayer and self-sacrifice demanded in any kind of religious vocation.

This is why, in the end, in spite of or because of all these strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, he opts to allow his spiritual director have the last word in the final decision.

A Touch of Class

No wonder these retreat notes were and are so prized by Spiritans because they, better than any portrait by Jouvenet, reveal their founder as a very lovable and human individual.

How regrettable then that sometimes these priceless reflections are taken out of context and a wrong picture is drawn of Claude as a social misfit, afraid of responsibility and unable to make up his own mind about himself.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Here was a healthy young man, talented and well-educated, a young lawyer humbly seeking God's enlightenment as to whether, he, unlike the rich and righteous young man of the Gospel, had what it takes to give up all he possessed and follow Christ.

He asks for no signs from above but simply is prepared, if the doubts continued, to consult with a wise and prudent director and abide by his decision. This is why Claude ends his soliloquy with this magnificent *Que sera, sera* (Whatever will be, will be) — his great *Amen* — that would change his own life and the lives of so many others down the centuries.

(God) "Grant that, in whatever state of life I choose, I may have no other desire than to please You. And since, in my present state of mind it is impossible for me to make a decision and yet I know that You want more of me than such indecision, I will bare my soul to Your representative without any ifs or buts.

So through Your Holy Grace may I find another Ananias to show me (like Paul of Tarsis, the great apostle of the gentiles, Editor's note) the path that I must take. I will follow his advice as though it were your command. Do not permit me, my God, to make a mistake for all my hope is in You."

How different the picture would have been had Claude listed only his strengths — his wealthy background, his excellent education, his wonderful work habits and brilliant achievements to date! However, that kind of bragging was not his style. To him all such boasting would have been seen as sheer nonsense since he knew, only too well, his manifold weaknesses and failings. Yet despite all this, he was resolved to come as he was, in answer to God's call. If he stayed close to his Master, God, in some as yet unknown way, would make some use of him for His own good purposes.

Claude unlike Lot's wife, never looked back on his decision to leave all and follow Christ because for Claude, his word was his bond!

CHAPTER 5



Theological Studies

Paris (1701-1703)

The Greeks of old used to erect a monument of stones on the spot where the tide of battle turned in their favour. They called it a “trophy” (*trophé*), the turning point that had made all the difference in the final outcome of the engagement. In the story of Claude des Places that turning point in his life was, undoubtedly, the final decision about his vocation he made during an eight-day retreat in Rennes in the summer of 1701. From that time on, there would be no turning back in the total dedication of himself to the service of God.

This defining moment, however, should not be seen as a kind of ‘second-conversion’ — a radical turning from vice to virtue; for at no time, even in his severest self-judgments, could Claude, as St. Augustine in his *Confessions*, accuse himself of any serious misconduct in his earlier years. Rather Claude’s *volte face* might be more correctly seen as a *return* to his boyhood ideals — the renouncement now of all personal ambitions (no matter how legitimate) and the dedication of all the energy and enthusiasm, up-to-now given to secular studies and self-promotion (however honourable), to the glory of God and the sanctification of souls.

The Defining Decision

Previously, Claude, to please his parents, had tried to combine university degrees (like that of law at Nantes) with preparation for the priesthood. But this time there would be no such compromise. To the disappointment of his parents and the surprise of his friends, he decided to concentrate on his preparation for the priesthood by taking non-credit courses in theology at the Jesuit College of Louis le Grand rather than attend the Sorbonne (the University of Paris) where

he could have combined these studies with a degree in theology, the open sesame in those days to high office in the ranks of the diocesan clergy and religious communities.

Collège Louis le Grand (CLG)

While the full story of the rivalry (and enmity) between the Sorbonne and the Jesuit College of Louis le Grand is outside the purpose of this booklet, without some knowledge of this background, there is no understanding of the importance of Claude's decision to take his final theological studies at CLG.

The Jesuit College, originally called Collège de Clermont, was opened in 1560 but renamed in 1682 for King Louis XIV on the birth of his son, the future Duke de Bourgogne and Governor of Brittany (and incidentally the honoree of Claude's High School thesis).

Like Jesuit Colleges of the period, CLG covered all three levels of higher education. However because of the excellent reputation of its School of Theology and its faithfulness in following closely the directives of the Council of Trent in the training of candidates for the priesthood, CLG rapidly became a serious rival to its more famous neighbour, the Sorbonne.

Collège de Plein Exercice

This Jesuit College, however, although it was recognized throughout France as a place *'where piety reigned'* and as a *'collège de plein exercice'*, i.e. a college whose students were readily accepted for ordination to the priesthood in any diocese, could not confer Degrees in Theology (a privileged monopoly jealously guarded by the Sorbonne), and so the number of students in its School of Theology had fallen to less than 100 by the time Claude enrolled there. This was all the more remarkable because the College, at that time, had a total student body enrollment of 4000 (including Voltaire in its Junior School).

The majority of the students for the priesthood were junior professed members of the Society of Jesus. The remainder were outsiders allowed by privilege to follow the College courses. Some of these, like Claude, were sons of rich families who could pay for board on the campus. Others were poor students from the countryside, who were allowed (free of charge) to attend classes at the college but had to fend for themselves for food and lodging outside in the city.

Claude, doubtless, also favoured CLG not only because of his long association with the Jesuits in Rennes, Caen and Nantes but also because of his admiration for their scholarship and expertise as spiritual directors.

However, the real reason why, in those troublesome days of political intrigue and theological controversy, he chose CLG was because of its orthodoxy in doctrine and loyalty to the Universal Catholic Church, something he could not have been sure of at the Sorbonne, a hot bed of Gallicanism and Jansenism. In fact, in 1701, the year Claude was debating where to take his studies in theology, the Sorbonne had once again become embroiled in a big national debate on

Jansenism, whose pessimistic outlook on human nature and narrow-minded, joyless doctrines on predestination and asceticism had come under fresh condemnation as heresy by Pope Clement XI.

As well, at that time, Claude, as a Catholic and a Breton, would surely have been fully aware of the Sorbonne's strong support for Gallicanism — that of persistent demand of the French Church and Government for increased independence from Rome and all Papal Authority.

Fr. Michael le Nobletz

Another factor according to some historians that apparently also influenced Claude in his choice of CLG over the Sorbonne was that, this same year (1701), a biography of a Breton priest (who died fifty years before and whose cause for beatification was already introduced in Rome) had just been published.

This saintly priest, whose Breton background and life so closely resembled Claude's, had strongly advocated that all clerical students in their final years in the seminary should concentrate on the spiritual side of their preparation for the priesthood, eschew all university honours and, as far as possible, distance themselves from the rich and privileged aristocracy, if they were to become truly pastors of all the people and not just quasi-private chaplains to the upper classes and even the Royal Court in Versailles.

Another individual who had a defining influence not only on Claude's direction at this time and his and Grignon de Montfort's later work for the Church was l'abbé Julien Bellier, chaplain of St. Yves Hospital in Rennes.

Julien was one of a group of those trying to keep alive at that time the call of Blessed Julien Mallnoit and Michael le Nobletz for organized missions to the then very sadly neglected rural parishes of France.

De Montfort was to answer this call by devoting his whole life to preaching and organizing this missionary work. Claude, on the other hand, did not participate in the preaching, but concentrated on the recruitment and formation of the much needed 'priest missionaries' to ensure the future and continuity of this great work for the poor and most abandoned. As he put it later in writing to de Montfort: "I train them; you put them to work and both of us are happy."

A Changed Man

Claude was never a half-hearted individual. To whatever he did — his studies, public speaking or even performances on stage — he always gave his best try. And so now, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, once his eyes were opened, his enthusiasm for the Kingdom of God and his Father's Business would be boundless!

From the very start of his stay at CLG, then, it appears that, while most of the clerical students dressed in the latest fashions and some 'even carried swords as a badge of their nobility', Claude, who up to this time had been so fastidious in matters of dress and social graces, now gradually began *'to relinquish the airs*

of the world' (Fr. Thomas' expression) and to the amazement of his fellow students, wear hand-me-down clothes, absent himself from their company and socialize with the poorer day-boy students of the college.

Soon the young man who had once complained of meagre financial backing from his father now found himself spending most of his allowance (800 livres) on others rather than on himself. The young aristocrat who first insisted on a private room at CLG College (to better attend to his studies and private devotions) was soon ready to give up that luxury (and expense) to pay some of these poorer students' college fees and the last straw, before Christmas 1702, move out of the College into second-class digs with them.

In fact, it was not long before he was even begging left-overs from the College kitchen to feed these poorer students, as one of them, J. Falconier (later a priest in the diocese of Orleans) recalls:

"I know that about a year before he founded his community he paid for the cost of my board in a private house for some three or four months from where I was able to attend class at the Jesuits. After these three or four months he arranged that I be accommodated at a community belonging to these religious and during all that time he used to send me to two different addresses to bring money to people who would be very embarrassed if it were known that they were also in such need.

As well, I know that before he established his community and while he was still boarding with the Jesuits, he used to collect his own rations or have them brought to his apartments and, I am not sure of this, but I am fairly certain, he then used to give them to others who were in dire want and fend for himself from the scraps left over from the Jesuits' meals..."

Day in the Life

Apart from this laudable outreach in charity to fellow students in need Claude, now serious about his preparation for the priesthood, set himself a very strict schedule of prayers and self discipline.

Rising early, he began and ended each day with one hour of mental prayer. He went to confession regularly, attended Mass daily and not only received Holy Communion three times a week (something very unusual in those Jansenistic days) but admitted *"even this was not as often as I would like to do."*

Practicing what he later would teach others about practical union with God, he prayed before and after all he did, especially his studies. He spent long hours before the Blessed Sacrament.

Self-Denial and Discipline

In addition to this intense life of prayer, Claude, now more than ever before, began, as he put it, *"to do violence to my likes and dislikes and impose small*

mortifications,” so much so that, as one of his early associates put it: “*his mortifications were so severe that his confessor often had to intervene to moderate his excesses.*” Claude, however, was no joyless Jansenist. His increased severity to himself was matched only by his greater gentleness towards others.

The Good Samaritan

The widespread poverty of Paris not only shocked Claude but galvanized him into action. Alone and in organized Mother Teresa-style charity with others, his efforts, at this time, were simply to improve the lot of individuals rather than to change an unjust social system.

This was why, for him, a rich man’s son, his option for the poor was not just confined to a social call to a hospital ward or ‘poor house,’ but included a readiness to don the apron of service, wash ward floors, dress wounds, empty slop-buckets and make beds — anything to ease the sad lot of patients in those days before the advent of properly organized public health-services and more humane modern medical practices.

The Chimney Sweeps of Paris

One of Claude’s favourite charities from his earliest years in CLG was his work for the young men and boys from the hill-country of Savoy (an independent country in S.E. France) who, like himself, were far from home and strangers in a big city.

These young men had come to Paris in search of employment but all too often ended up as unemployed vagrants or poorly paid and poorly housed unskilled labourers. Many of them became chimney-sweeps in Paris, one of the dirtiest and lowest paid jobs in the city.

Despite their hard life, these hillbilly boys from Savoy were proverbial for their *joie de vivre* and their love of song and dance and Claude, who always loved music and dance, must have been very much at home with them.

He could see beneath the soot their bright native intelligence and he did everything he could to give them a chance to better themselves with elementary lessons, whenever they were free from work, in the 4R’s (reading, writing, arithmetic and religion) and as Fr. Pierre Thomas with some irony added:

“He felt sure that their souls were no less dear to Jesus Christ than those of influential noblemen and that he could count as much, or even more, on the fruitfulness of his instructions to them.”

Le Style est l’homme

Claude’s dealing with these young men was typical of his later style in dealing with his own seminarians. As his first chronicler put it: “*One could not but admire the easy and understanding manner in which he drew them to goodness.*”

However, in all this, Claude was no condescending upper class good-doer but a real friend to those young men, equally concerned about their present material needs as about their eternal salvation. He could see that education was

the key to their future. He loved them and they, in their turn, loved him, for Claude, although born to privilege, never lost the common touch. He was a born teacher and even today is an inspiring role model for Spiritans who follow in his footsteps as educators.

Praying and Working Together

However this emphasis on Claude's prayer-life and involvement in works of charity should not be seen as if he was a loner or another Don Quixote. On the contrary, all his time at CLG, he was working very closely with like-minded individuals of two organizations in the College — the *Sodality of Our Lady* and the *Assembly of Friends*.

The Sodality of Our Lady

As was seen in Chapter Two, Claude joined the *Sodality of Our Lady* as a young boy at St. Thomas College in Rennes and it was the Director of this Sodality (Fr. Descartes) who disciplined him and his friend Grignon de Montfort because, in his opinion, they were going overboard in their piety, penances and works of charity. All during his high school years and in college, it may be presumed, Claude continued to be a member in good standing of this student association in honour of Our Blessed Lady.

Assemblée des Amis (AA)

The *Assembly of Friends* (AA) was another very popular student organization in Jesuit colleges but its membership was restricted to those studying for the priesthood and who had been members of the *Sodality of Our Lady* during their high school years.

The purpose of the AA was to train an elite among seminarians as leaders and role-models for their peers not only in holiness but in pastoral work. The AA was founded by Fr. Bagot at the Jesuit College of La Flèche and introduced by him to CLG (then called Clermont College) when in 1640 he was appointed there. The AA flourished for many years at CLG, but as the number of seminarians declined because only the Sorbonne could give degrees in theology, the number of active AA's also declined. So much so that in 1699, two years before Claude came to CLG, there were only four active AA members among the fifty theologians of the College.

Fr. Michael Le Tellier

Fortunately for Claude, the year before he enrolled at CLG, the AA was given a new lease of life by the appointment of Fr. Michael Le Tellier, the Sacred Scripture professor, as its Director.

Fr. Le Tellier was not only a very fine biblical scholar (who held that post at CLG for 25 years) but later became Superior General in the Society of Jesus and personal confessor to King Louis XIV.

Fr. Le Tellier quickly recognized Claude's ability as a leader and knowing his long association with the Society of Jesus and membership in the Sodality of Our Lady immediately had him inducted into the AA. The ceremony of his installation took place on Pentecost Sunday and that feast day as well as the Society's *Manual* or *Rule of Life* given him that day became important parts of the legacy he would later leave to the Spiritans.

Secret Societies in France

Although these *Associations* or *Societies* were only forerunners of present day Catholic organizations like the *Legion of Mary* or the *St. Vincent de Paul Society*, in those pre-Revolutionary days of the *ancien regime* in France, when every close-knit *citoyen* organization was seen as a possible 'terrorist' threat to the existing economic and political *status quo*, they had to be, to a certain degree, 'underground' and 'secret' about their membership and objectives.

And so although the full story of those *citoyen bands* is outside the objective of this booklet, it is important to note that not only was it the genius of the French *citoyens* forming 'clubs' with inflammatory slogans like *Liberté et Fraternité* that finally brought the old Bourbon monarchy down and issued the new *République*, but, it was against this kind of background that Claude, as a lawyer, very wisely avoided calling the little group he was starting on Pentecost Sunday, 1703, a 'society' or giving any publicity to its inauguration.

A Keen Student of Theology

Although Claude's biographers generally pay little attention to Claude's keen interest in theology and biblical studies, the importance he gave to both in the training of his own seminarians indicates how seriously he took these studies, himself, during his years at CLG.

Moral Theology and Civil Law

As a qualified lawyer, Claude, naturally took a particular interest in moral theology and questions of his day relating to Church (Canon) and Civil Law.

This can be seen even in his own writings where he mentions several times his participation in seminar discussions (*Casus Conscientiae*). In this field, it is difficult to imagine that the young boy who once, like a Daniel come to judgment, had defended so vigorously his high-school thesis against all comers, would have lost, at this period of his life, his love for a good argument!

On the contrary, the importance he put on open discussions on all questions of moral conscience will be seen in his insistence that all his students must attend regular home group discussions of their College lectures and his allowing several of his senior seminarians to take law degrees at the Sorbonne.

Brilliant Canon Lawyer

Claude had no opportunity to contribute to the complicated legal relations of his day between Church and State but the manner in which he handled the complicated legal issues involved in getting his 'seminary' off the ground bear witness to his expertise as a counselor-at-law.

On the one hand, to avoid trouble with the civil authorities whose draconian edict of 1666 forbade the opening of any new 'college, monastery, religious society or community' without government authorization, Claude had to avoid any publicity or written record of the first meeting of his associates on Pentecost Sunday, 1703.

In fact it was only 23 years after Claude's death (1709) that his early students (now the directors of the seminary) obtained from Louis XV on May 21, 1706, the long over-due government legal recognition that the Holy Spirit "Society", had been *de facto* founded on Pentecost Sunday, 1703:

"We have been informed that the late Claude Francis Poullart des Places, a priest from the diocese of Rennes, inspired by a special movement from God when he was then thirty years, founded in 1703 in our good city of Paris an establishment dedicated to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Blessed Virgin Conceived without Sin, and that the object of that establishment was to aid and help poor students in their studies and train them in virtue for the useful service of the Church..."

For all these reasons and with full royal power and authority...we confirm the existence of the Society of the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Heart of Mary."

On the other hand, to avoid trouble with Church authorities, Claude could not officially call his new establishment a 'seminary' because, while the opening of a seminary did not require a licence from the Government, it did require authorization from the local bishop. In this delicate matter, in dealing with Cardinal de Nouilles, the Archbishop of Paris, Chancellor of the Sorbonne and no friend of a friend of the Jesuits, Claude had to be extremely cautious, for although the Cardinal greatly admired Claude and his work, he was notorious for his shilly-shallying and vacillation.

Double Jeopardy

In all this, one can see that while Claude recognized the legitimate authority of the Church and State, this did not prevent him from taking a vigorous and courageous stand on his own and his associates' rights, when these were jeopardized by either heavy-handed government regulations or endless Church red-tape.

While people living in free democratic societies today may find Claude's precautions excessive, anyone living under totalitarian communist regimes or

theocratic governments like Iran or Taliban Afghanistan can readily understand the difficulties Claude had to face in the crippling government and Church restrictions in those twilight years of a doomed French monarchical system.

Safeguarding the Future

Not only did Claude successfully avoid the legal Scyllas and Charybdes of his own day, but thanks to his foresight, his society survived not only a 1792 French Government's suppression but a Catholic Church 1848 merger with another religious society, that of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, founded by Francis Libermann.

In 1848, Claude's Society was at its weakest, numerically and in leadership; yet it was the Immaculate Heart Society (the more numerous and vigorous partner in the merger) that legally had to become part of the Holy Spirit Congregation (rather than *vice-versa*), as can be seen in Rome's decision that reads as follows:

"It is your task to bring about the merger of your two congregations in such a way that from now on the Congregation of the Most Holy Heart of Mary ceases to exist and its associates and members are aggregated to the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, thereby becoming its associates and members, sharing the same rights and privileges and being subject to the same disciplinary rules."

Beyond Moral Theology and Canon Law

Claude's brilliance as a student of theology, however, should not be confined to Canon Law and Moral Theology for he also had a very keen interest in biblical studies, liturgy and doctrinal and/or dogmatic theology.

Because Claude was always so busy setting up the Seminary and died so young, he never had an opportunity to formulate all this systematically, but here again one can see how skillfully he attempted to put some kind of order into the confused doctrinal and devotional life of the Church of his day in France.

Biblical Studies and Love of Sacred Scripture

One of the reasons Claude chose CLG for his final preparation for the priesthood was its excellent reputation for Biblical Studies, its excellent library and the fact that many of its professors (like Fr. Martini) were experts not only in the Old and New Testaments but in their knowledge of biblical Greek and Hebrew.

Claude, himself a brilliant Latin scholar who defended his high school thesis in that language, had little difficulty with Latin Vulgate (the official text of the Sacred Scriptures in his day) as can be seen from the fact that all his frequent quotations from both Old and New Testaments were always in Latin (not in French).

In fact it was a text (in Latin) from the Old Testament (Psalm 84) that he kept repeating as he lay dying:

“How I love your palace, Yahweh Saboath. How my soul yearns and pines for Yahweh’s courts. My heart and soul sing for joy to the living God.”

This importance Claude gave to Sacred Scripture in his own spiritual life and that of his seminarians can be seen, for example, in his insistence (Rule 50) that all should spend half an hour of *lectio divina*, the prayerful study of the scripture readings of the next day masses, the evening before all Sundays and major Church feast days.

Devotionalizing Dogma

Claude’s genius always was to get to the heart of any matter and in this case to find what was really fundamental in matters of Catholic faith. Here his first step (thanks to his legal training) was to find out what were the official teachings of the Church rather than to start from the often conflicting opinions of the so-called experts or *periti* theologians of his day. For example, one of the most serious problems Claude saw facing the Church in the France of his day was the inadequate religious instruction of the ordinary faithful due in great part to the inadequate theological training of diocesan clergy especially in rural areas.

In the next chapter, it will be seen that Claude’s primary reason for starting his new seminary was to train such priests, but here, for the moment, the emphasis is only on his own genius, as a theologian, devotionalizing ‘dogmas’ (i.e. Church defined articles of the faith) rather than dogmatizing devotions however popular.

The Blessed Trinity

For this reason, the doctrine of Blessed Trinity, i.e. Christ’s revelation of the inner life of the Supreme God of the universe, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (so different from the Unmoved Mover of the philosophers) was not, for Claude, just an abstract dogmatic definition of the Council of Trent but the key to his whole spiritual life, the woof and the warp of his *weltanschauung* (world view) and one of his most inspiring (though often overlooked) spiritual legacies to his followers.

This all-embracing devotion to the Blessed Trinity found its profoundest expression in his *Prière à la Sainte Trinité* (still extant on his own handwriting and published in full in an *Appendix* to this booklet). It begins with this Trinitarian Invocation:

“Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whom I adore through your holy grace with all my heart, all my soul and all my strength, I beg you to grant me faith, humility, chastity, the grace of not saying, thinking, seeing, hearing or desiring anything except what you want me to do and say.

Grant me all these graces, my God, together with your most holy blessing. May my mind and heart be filled with You alone. May I always walk in Your presence and pray ceaselessly to You as I should.”

The Sanctifying Grace of God

For Claude, then, the Christian life was not so much a struggle for moral rectitude as a growing childlike awareness by faith and an increased sharing by charity in this divine life as adopted children of God by grace (mentioned 8 times in the Trinity Prayer). This is why, without some awareness of Claude’s all-consuming love for the Blessed Trinity, there is no understanding of the extraordinary sacrifices Claude so willingly made for God, or his dedication of his *communauté* to the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit

Flowing from this fountain-head, as Claude saw it, all personal sanctification and works of evangelization (sharing this treasure with others) belong in a very special way to the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Holy Spirit. As Rule 1 of the Community read “*Tous...adorent particulièrement le Saint-Esprit auquel ils ont été spécialement dévoués.*” “All will have a special devotion to the Holy Spirit to whom they have been consecrated in a special way.”

For this reason, while other founders might name their religious families the *Society of Jesus* (St. Ignatius founder of the Jesuits) or the *Company of Mary* (St. Grignon de Montfort, his friend and a founder of three religious societies), Claude would name his own *La Communauté du Saint Esprit* (*Community of the Holy Spirit*), a name, even after 300 years still very much in evidence in official titles like: *Congrégation du Saint Esprit*, *Congregazione dello Spirito Santo*, *Congregation of the Holy Spirit* or simply *Les Spiritans* (*The Spiritans*).

Cor Unum et Anima Una

But the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Holy Spirit, was not only, for Claude, to be the source of personal sanctification and the ‘soul of the apostolate’ but the ‘heart of his followers in their home life’ like that of the early Christian communities so well described in the *Acts of the Apostles* as a close-knit community of *One Heart and One Soul* (*Cor Unum et Anima Una*).

While other ‘founders’ lay great stress on uniformity of life-style and community-living, Claude, saw that (once the highly structured six years of seminary training were over), only a looser bonding would be practical, if his followers, the ‘rag-pickers of the Church’ were to cope with the wide range of requests that would come their way, whenever the Church had difficulty in finding volunteers for the less glorious but no less urgent chores that needed to be done for the salvation of souls.

If this is true today, even when great advances in modern travel and communication facilitate missionaries in keeping in touch with one another and

with centralized authorities (General and Provincial *Maison Mères*), one can imagine how difficult it must have been for the early students of the Seminary, like Francis Poitier, the First Vicar Apostolic of the Sichuan Province in China, who, for thirty years never returned to France, to keep in touch even by letter once a year with the Holy Spirit Seminary in Paris.

In this, as in so many other things Claude's missionary genius can be seen in his belief that the simple but deep fraternal friendship bonding of the AA's, (a Community of Good Friends) would be very essential in keeping together a great missionary family spread all around the world and ready for any task no matter how distant or difficult (*Paratus ad Omnia*).

Loyalty to the Church's Teaching

Last, but not least, of Claude's fundamental principles in his theology (and one of his greatest legacies to his followers) was his loyalty to the official teachings (*Magisterium*) of the Catholic Church.

This was one of the reasons he chose to do his theology at CLG rather than the Sorbonne. This he spelled out for his students in Rule 52 where all "*were expected to be always loyal to the Church's directives in all points of doctrine and always fully submissive to the Church.*"

And what greater tribute could the Church have paid to this principle of *Ut Christiani, Romani sitis*, of Claude's and Spiritans' loyalty to the Church than that the direction of the great Pontifical French Seminary in Rome (where most of the bishops and most influential clerics of France receive their training as seminarians) has been entrusted to the Spiritans since 1852.

Belated Recognition

Hopefully, then, as a result of the recent tri-centennial celebration of the foundation and early years of the Holy Spirit Congregation, there will be, among all Spiritans and their associates, a deepening of their knowledge and appreciation of this rich doctrinal and devotional side of their founder's life and teaching e.g. not only his devotion to the Blessed Trinity and the Holy Spirit but to Jesus in the Holy Eucharist and Mary under the title of her Immaculate Conception (a doctrine so strongly opposed in Claude's day by the Jansenists but no less strongly defended by the Jesuits long before it was defined by Pope Pius IX in 1854).

For these and many other good reasons neither Claude nor his followers ever regretted his decision to take his theological studies and his final preparation for the priesthood at the Jesuit CLG College rather than at the Sorbonne University of Paris!



Father Claude Francis Poullart des Places (1679-1709).



The third residence (page 80).



The catacombs of Paris (page 88).

"Of temporal possessions
I intend to keep
my health alone,
so that I could
sacrifice it entirely
to God in the work
of the missions;
I would have been
only too happy if,
after setting the whole
world on fire
with the love of God,
I could have shed
the last drop
of my blood for Him
whose blessings were
ever before my eyes." (66)



*Je ne souffrirais que de
l'aimer; et pour mériter son amour j'aurais
renoncé aux attachemens même les plus
chers de la vie. Je voudrais recevoir un jour
denier de tout, ne vivant que d'aumônes après
avoir tout donné, je ne prendrais neveu
de tout les biens temporels que la santé
dont je souffrirais faire un sacrifice entier à -
Dieu pour le travail des missions, trop
heureux si après avoir embrassé tout le
monde de l'amour de Dieu, j'aurais pu donner
jusqu'à la dernière goutte de mon sang
pour celui dont les bienfaits m'étoient
présents*

Claude François Poullart

CHAPTER 6



The Long Road to the Priesthood

Paris (1702-1707)

If Claude's early biographers gave little attention to his brilliance as a student of theology, they gave even less to information about his reception of minor and major orders on his way to the priesthood.

The reason for this is obvious because as clergymen writing for clergymen, they took for granted their readers would easily follow Claude's reception *in ordine* of the various minor and major orders.

However, even if this were so, it is strange that they did not give some explanation of the extraordinary long period of five years between Claude's reception of tonsure and minor orders in 1702 and his ordination to the priesthood in 1707 or that it was only as an 'aspirant to the clerical state' and not as a priest that he started a seminary and was later credited as founder of a religious society.

Various Suggestions

One suggestion is that Claude, like his saintly master, Michael le Nobletz, another Breton, had favoured canonically spaced intervals between the reception of these various orders or ministries. However, even that would scarcely have accounted for an interval of five years between his reception of tonsure and his ordination to the priesthood.

Another suggestion is that the long delay was due mostly to Claude's own procrastination and scruples about his worthiness for major orders.

The main reason, however, probably was that Claude was so busy looking after his seminarians' welfare that his own ordination to the priesthood was put on a long finger.

In this, so like his parents was he that procrastination might be seen as a des Places 'family failing.' His parents married late in life because Jeanne, his mother, kept putting off her marriage being so involved with the Marbeuf motherless children and Francis, his father, too busy with parliamentary affairs and opening up new businesses, was also no less slow in settling down.

In a word, Claude, who up to this time had been a leisured gentleman whose personal needs were always catered to by others, now found himself becoming a workaholic in caring for others. That, apparently, was what his friend, the AA secretary, suggested when he reported that Claude's problems at this time all started when he refused a rich benefice from his parents and then, penniless, started a hostel for non-paying students.

Claude himself more or less admitted the same during his retreat for the subdiaconate (June 5, 1705) when he wrote:

"I have over burdened myself beyond authorized limits with the responsibility of these students — and all this not so much for the love of God but in the hope that others may see me as a rich individual spending a fortune on these young people while not shouldering my own share of the chores involved."

Titulus Clericalis

Be this as it may, the first step Claude had to take to become a cleric and have the right (and obligation) to wear the official clerical dress (a cassock or a soutane) was to find himself a *titulus clericalis*, i.e., a guaranteed source of income for life that would, in accordance with the wise regulations of the Council of Trent, prevent him from becoming a financial burden (and a scandal!) to the whole Catholic community — a penniless cleric with no visible means of support.

Two Possible Titles

Claude had two possible sources for such an annuity for life. He could either apply for a reasonably well-paying chaplaincy or some ministry in Paris or ask for this financial backing from his family in Rennes.

As far as the first option was concerned, although Claude, with excellent qualifications and close connections with the Jesuits, could easily have obtained such a chaplaincy in Paris, he wisely foresaw that any such long-term commitment might one day interfere with his responsibility as director of the seminary.

Then, as far as his family was concerned, he knew they would be only too willing to give him this necessary financial backing, even though, to all intents and purposes, he had long ago ceded in favour of his sister Jeanne any title to the family inheritance.

What a surprise, then, for Claude to find that his father, well aware of this Church regulation, had already spontaneously arranged for him in Rome a very generous life-annuity of 1,800 livres. But *hinc lacrimae!*

Hinc Lacrimae

Upset by this arrangement, Claude, although very busy in Paris, made the three-day journey to Rennes to void the annuity.

This he did, with or without his father's knowledge, at a legal actuary office, in the presence of the executor, Francis Lucas de Saint Macau, a long time family friend.

One can imagine the utter disgust of Claude's father when he learned what had taken place, probably behind his back. But worse was to come.

If Francis was angry at Claude's independence in not accepting his generous offer, he was altogether appalled when his son insisted he be given only 60 livres annually, the minimum *titulus clericalis* acceptable in the diocese of Rennes for 'in poverty-line' clerical candidates.

Injured Family Pride

What, thought his father, would the neighbours think of any such shabby arrangement — a pauper's hand-out to his only son for his ordination while his daughter and her husband, an outsider, were being given all the family wealth and property?

As well, what a disgrace for the wealthiest family in Rennes, if it became known that all they could afford for this son's ordination was 60 livres a year — the minimum amount allowed for the poorest of the poor aspirants to the clerical state?

Born Diplomat

How Claude eventually, probably not without his mother's help, got his father to see his point of view in the matter is unknown but one thing is certain: always a born diplomat, Claude in the end succeeded in pointing out to his dad the greater travesty it would be if he, the superior and expected role model for his associates in the seminary, were to accept a dives-rich annuity (1,500 livres a year for his life time) while all the others coming from poor families would have to make do with a lazarus handout of 60 livres!

To Comply with the Regulations

To comply with the legalities of the arrangement, father and son together had to visit one of the lesser des Places family estates — the *Maison des Moltais* and certify that part of the rent of this property would be, henceforth, the Foundation source of the 60 livres payable annually to Claude during his life-time.

The whole affair, though amicably solved in the end, must have been very embarrassing for all concerned and so it is ironical that, as recorded in one of the family documents that escaped the 1720 big fire in Rennes, this annuity-title, after Claude's death in 1709, passed not to Claude's religious family (that probably would have welcomed this little annual windfall from Claude's estate) but to his brother-in-law, Henri le Chat, the rich 'millionaire' husband of his sister Jeanne!

Reception of Tonsure and Minor Orders

Having finalized all these matters of his *titulus clericalis*, Claude returned to Paris and on August 15, 1702, the Feast of Our Lady's Assumption, received tonsure and possibly all the minor orders of the Church — porter, lector, acolyte and exorcist.

The symbolic cutting of his hair by the presiding bishop marked Claude's reception of the title, privileges and obligations of a cleric in good standing in the Catholic Church.

At that time in Church history, these minor orders were mandatory before a candidate could advance to the major orders of the sub-diaconate, diaconate and priesthood.

These regulations remained in force until the 1971-72 Reforms by the Holy See by which the tonsure ceremony was discontinued and replaced by a service of dedication to God and the Church. The minor orders of porter, exorcist and sub-deacon were also discontinued and laymen, as well as candidates for the diaconate and priesthood, could be installed (rather than ordained) as acolytes and lectors. Today, a lay Catholic enters the clerical state with the reception of the diaconate.

Claude, however, had to follow the traditional order of tonsure and the various minor and major orders on his way to the priesthood.

Dimissorial Letters

The next step for Claude, after he had received all the minor orders and before his advance to major orders, was to obtain certification of his completed theological studies and, since CLG was a *collège de plein exercice* (whose students could be accepted by any diocese or religious order for ordination), there was no difficulty in obtaining these papers.

However, in addition, a *dimissorial letter* had to be sent from his diocese of origin (Rennes) to the ordaining bishop (in Paris) vouching for his worthiness and freedom to be ordained.

Claude, as a lawyer, once again, would have been very familiar with this regulation and, as he and his family were known to be strong practicing Catholics in their home town, it is no surprise that these documents issued in Rennes on February 2, 1707, duly arrived in Paris well ahead of his scheduled ordination to the sub-diaconate in December.

Subdiaconate and Diaconate

On December 16, 1706, then, Claude received the first of the major orders — the subdiaconate and on March 19, 1707, the Feast of St. Joseph, the second of the major orders — the diaconate.

Although at that time, there was usually a twelve-month interval between these two ordinations, this regulation was waived in Claude's case possibly because of the long period between his reception of tonsure and his ordination to the subdiaconate.

The reception of the diaconate entitled Claude to be first assistant to the priest-celebrant at Solemn Masses, distribute Holy Communion and, when needed, administer the sacrament of Baptism.

Great Family Reunion

While there is no record of any of Claude's family being present at these ordinations in Paris, it is recorded that after being ordained a deacon, he was present in Vernée, Angers, for the baptism of his nephew, Henry Louis Claude le Chat, his sister's son, born on August 7, 1707.

The occasion was a great reunion of the whole family, as Claude had missed his sister's wedding, the date conflicting with his reception of tonsure and since Jeanne had just lost her first child, a little girl, Louise Françoise, who died on August 23, sixteen days after the birth of her younger brother.

Claude, to the delight of all, arrived safely from Paris. The baptism already delayed over a month (something unusual in those days of frequent early deaths of newborns) to allow for Claude's presence, took place on September 8, the Feast of Our Lady's Nativity. The child was named for his father (Henri), his little sister R.I.P. (Louise), and his uncle (Claude).

Although Claude, a deacon, could have performed the ceremony, he characteristically declined the honour and opted to be his nephew's baptismal sponsor and god-father.

What a great family reunion it must have been when all three generations of the des Places for the first and perhaps last time, were together.

What a wonderful reunion of brother and sister as Claude had failed to get to his sister's wedding because his reception of the tonsure had made it impossible for him to attend. What a proud day, too, for their parents — Francis (now 69 years old) and Jeanne (also in her late sixties), — a golden pond day surely for them to see their two children at last so well settled and happy in their life choices.

Even all the old misunderstandings about Claude's 'choice of a road less traveled' were forgotten as can be seen in the still extant record of his nephew's baptism. There Claude's name is entered as: "*le noble et discret Claude Poullart, diacre, Supérieur du Séminaire du Saint Esprit à Paris*" (the noble and worthy Claude Poullart, deacon, Superior of the Holy Spirit Seminary in Paris).

The grandiose titles of 'noble', 'deacon' and 'Superior of Holy Spirit Seminary in Paris', one can be sure, were certainly not of Claude's choosing but more likely added at the dictation of his dad. His son, Claude, had finally lived up to his highest expectations. Already a lawyer and now a deacon, he would soon be ordained as a priest of the Catholic Church.

As well, in his father's language, his boy was now an important man in Paris, the capital, and had a great future ahead of him as the executive director of a big-name establishment *le Séminaire du Saint Esprit à Paris*. His daughter, Jeanne, was married to a young man of noble lineage and a Councillor in the Brittany

Parliament. Henri, his grandson, was now a 'noble' with all the social status attached to that title, something that for so long had eluded him during his own lifetime.

Little did he know the price the family might have to pay for a title to nobility before the century was out in the coming bloody pogroms of the French Revolution!

Hasty Return to Paris

Having so much to do back in Paris in the next three months, Claude could not stay overlong on this visit to his sister's castle in Vernée and continue to enjoy these happy care-free days with his family. First of all, facing him were all the usual hassles of getting the next academic year organized and new students interviewed. Secondly, some free time had to be found — after all these years of procrastination — for his final retreat for ordination to the priesthood.

Ordination to the Priesthood

Unfortunately, very few details of these months or even Claude's eight-day retreat before his ordination to the priesthood or the ceremony itself have been preserved. In fact, it was only after his death that a portrait of Claude was commissioned showing him dressed in priest's vestments (chasuble, etc.) and holding a chalice and host in his hands, while over his head hovers a dove (the traditional symbol of the Holy Spirit).

The earliest date of this portrait can be gathered from its inscription which reads: *Claude Poullart des Places, founder of the Society of the Holy Spirit*, a title that was only possible after 1734, when the official letters patent of his Society were signed by King Louis XV.

The portrait in oils is modeled on Jouvenet's picture of Claude when he graduated from high school and, although the quality of this later work is much inferior, it still is important as it was the only portrait of Claude (alive) that was known to his early associates.

The Ordination Ceremony and First Masses

The ordination ceremony itself must have been a very modest affair as nothing elaborate would have been possible in the still precarious *status quo* of the new seminary nor would it have been permitted by Claude.

Fortunately, it is known that the Jesuit Fathers invited one of their great friends, Mgr. Henri de Thiard de Bissy, the Bishop of Meux to perform the ceremony. The bishop either made the visit to Paris especially for the ordination or was there on other business.

However, if Bishop de Bissy originally did the ceremony only to oblige the Jesuits, he afterwards came to regard Claude as a very special priest and continued to take a special interest in his work so much so that later he confided to Claude's Society the direction of his two diocesan seminaries, major and minor.



Posthumous portrait of Claude as a priest.

Bishop de Bissy had been Abbot of the St. Germain monastery before succeeding Bossuet (the world-famous orator) as Bishop of Meaux. He later became a Cardinal and, like Claude and the Society of Jesus, was a life-long opponent of the Jansenists and Gallicanists.

The ceremony itself, on December 17, 1707, most likely took place at Collège Louis le-Grand but it is unknown whether Claude was ordained alone or with some of his senior associates like Jacques Garnier who had received his dimissorial letters for ordination on November 6, 1708.

Both the ordination and Claude's First Mass the next day must have been memorable events for his friends and supporters, especially for his own seminarians and the Jesuit priests of the College who had helped him so long and so much in getting the 'seminary' off the ground.

First Masses

More than likely Claude's First Mass after his Ordination was celebrated also at the Jesuit College Chapel (where Claude had so often attended Mass) as the little Spiritan community chapel on rue Rollin would scarcely have been able to cater for all who wished to be present for that very special occasion.

A Community Mass would have been quietly celebrated later in their own Seminary Chapel on rue Rollin and as Fr. Sean Farragher suggests, most likely another sometime later at the Shrine of Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance, where four years before, Claude and his companions had dedicated themselves to the Holy Spirit.

What a pity, then, that most likely, none of Claude's own family were present at any of these masses or the ordination. The cold winter and the long journey from Rennes or Verdée would have made attendance impossible for his now aging parents or his sister with a young child.

CHAPTER 7



Founder of a New Seminary

Paris (1703-1709)

When Claude began his studies for the priesthood at the Jesuit College of Louis le Grand in Paris, in 1701, probably the last thing on his mind would have been the opening of a new seminary much less that of starting a new religious society.

To read the story of his days at CLG, therefore, as any kind of a preconceived plan to do either is to miss all the excitement and drama of a young country boy's adventure in the big city of Paris (then in the height of its imperial glory) and how he, almost in spite of himself, found himself at the age of 24, the leader of a small group of similarly-minded young men (poor as church mice) who wanted to do something special for the glory of God and the less fortunate citizens of France.

For clarity's sake, that complicated adventure (and Claude's leadership in it) is divided here into three phases (I) *The Early Days at Rue des Cordières*, a period of multiple hardships and pioneering improvisations (II) *The Second Chance or Fresh Start at Rue de Neuve (New Street) St. Etienne*, when a larger number of students, better location and improved living conditions made it possible to take the first practical steps in formulating a general *mission statement* and some ground rules for the growing community and (III) *The Third and Final Days at Rue Tournefort before Claude's Death*.

Les Pauperes of Louis Le Grand

As has been seen, Claude had been quite active, as far as his studies allowed, in Jesuit College student organizations and in outreach to poor people outside the college (e.g. the chimney sweep, hill-billy young men from Savoy).

However, soon after coming to CLG he began to notice that there were also poor people inside the College in need of help — namely the poorly dressed day student seminarians, looked down on by their fellow live-in boarders of the college, rich young men like himself, who often dubbed them *les pauperes*.

Beginning by quietly assisting with a little money one or two of these ‘*pauperes*’ (e.g. 16-year-old J. B. Faulconnier), Claude soon realized that their problem was much deeper and widespread than he first thought: Apart from the difficulty of finding affordable lodgings within walking distance of the College, these young seminarians from the country often had to live in deplorable conditions that not only jeopardized their health and their vocations but also made it extremely difficult for them to keep up with their studies.

Unfavourable Reactions of Friends

As long as Claude confined himself to giving financial aid and even hand-outs from the ‘food bank’ he had organized at the College (with the connivance of Fr. Megret, the Jesuit priest in charge of daily meals for the campus staff and students) everyone could applaud and approve, but when it was rumored that Claude was thinking of moving out of the College and living with these ‘*pauperes*’, that was a very different matter.

As far as his professors were concerned, the step to move out of the college was a disaster for Claude’s studies. As for the Jesuit Fathers (his closest friends and mentors in Rennes, Caen and Nantes), it may also have been a big disappointment for many of them secretly hoped that this talented young man, a scholar and a nobleman, might one day join their ranks as a priest. Now they saw him foolishly getting over-involved with outsiders’ problems and in their opinion heading for nothing but trouble.

Most shocked of all by Claude’s decision were his fellow students, especially his colleagues in the AA. In fact, it is their recorded unfavourable reactions that account for most of the bad press reports on Claude’s ‘austerities’ at this time of his life.

In the beginning when Claude and his associates moved into rue des Cordières and things were not too well organized, there was no need for voluntary ‘austerities’ much less a vow of poverty. Not only was there more often than not a food shortage but furniture (beds, chairs, etc.) was also in great demand but short supply.

What wonder then in these cramped conditions on rue des Cordières, if Claude had often to sleep on a chair and get only three hours of sleep while his companions had to lie on the floor? As well, after he had moved out of the College and it wasn’t as easy to collect ‘the hand outs from the rich men’s tables’, the menu for him and his fellow boarders was often only ‘stale bread’, ‘veggies like haricot-beans covered with green mould’, ‘water only, no wine’ — all graphically reported by the AA secretary in the AA minutes.



An early Spiritan symbol depicting the Holy Spirit as a dove over the monogram of Mary.

However, while the AA secretary may have got his facts straight about the shortage of food and the furniture, he certainly did not get them right if he imagined Claude 'spent most of his time in prayer.' Claude was no Carthusian contemplative and the man who later would insist that everyone in the community should spend '8½ hours of study on class days and 6½ hours on Sundays and Feast Days' would scarcely have started 'by praying all day' or allowing others to do the same.

Rue des Cordières was a house of prayer but it was planned not as a Carmelite contemplative monastery but as a house of studies!

The Bridge of No Return

Very quickly then, after he moved out of the College, Claude began to realize he was now on his own and had crossed a bridge of no return.

So even though he prayed about it and confided his doubts to his spiritual director in the AA, Fr. le Tellier, he still had some hesitations as to whether he was doing the right thing or not.

"It is true that I did not undertake the work without the permission of my director. But here again my conscience reproaches me as it has frequently done before. How did I present the work to him? What tricks did I not use? At first I said it was only a matter of feeding four or five scholars quietly, without any fuss whatsoever. Perhaps at the time I did not reveal the full extent of my ambition and vanity."

The First Residence — Rue des Cordières

Once the decision to move out of the College had been made, a suitable hostel within walking distance of the College had to be found and immediately Claude, in his first essay into real estate, showed he had learned a lesson or two from his father, a life-long entrepreneur in the buying and selling of property.



Rue des Cordières (now rue Cujas), Paris, the first location of the Holy Spirit Seminary.

In fact, many were to be surprised, from this time on, how this young man, to all appearances a scholarly academic could be so businesslike in leasing and renovating second-hand buildings.

For starters, then, Claude wisely did not buy but leased one of the two vacant hostels on rue des Cordières owned by the Pechanard family. Called *le Gros Chapelet*, it was the cheaper of the two buildings but a little further from the College than the other, *La Rose-Blanche* (the White Rose).

The lease signed and some necessary repairs made, the little community of five or six seminarians (Claude among them) moved in to their first home in time to celebrate together Christmas 1702.

First Among Equals (Primus Inter Pares)

Claude, it must be remembered, was not much older than any of his companions. He was not a professor at the College but a fellow seminarian. He was not a priest. In fact he was not even a cleric in major orders. He was just one of the 'chartered members', albeit by common acclaim, the playing coach of the team — but by no means one who at this time laid claim to any position of authority.

Such Stuff as Dreams are Made

To the eye of the outsider, life in rue des Cordières in those early days was nothing but misery — a foolhardy project destined to be short lived. But for Claude and his companions it was to be *les beaux jours*, the 'time of their lives' like those enjoyed by Francis di Bernadone, founder of the Franciscans, when he and his first followers took on to repair the little ruined church of the Portiuncula (a gift from the Benedictine nuns). Rue des Cordières may have only been occupied by Claude's first band of followers for three years or less, but there a dream was born that would not only enrich the Church in France during their lifetime but benefit the whole Christian world for many years to come. Knowingly or unknowingly, there was laid the 'rough' foundations of a new religious family open only to *pauperes* and opting only to serve anywhere the Church had difficulty in finding priests.

However, as well, during those days, a young man born with a silver spoon in his mouth was quickly learning to use a wooden one! and he and an ill-assorted group of young dreamers, thrown together by God's providence, were learning to work together and trust in God that tomorrow would look after itself.

Dedication of the Chartered Members to the Holy Spirit

"When the number of students reached almost a dozen, they asked to be consecrated to the clerical life" and so on Pentecost Sunday, May 27, 1703, Claude acceded to their wishes and together they dedicated themselves as a little community to the Holy Spirit through the patronage of the Mother of God under the title of her Immaculate Conception.

The ceremony, modeled on that of the AA, began with the Invocation of the Holy Spirit (*Veni Sancte Spiritus*) and ended with the *Santa Maria* prayer: "Through your Virginity and Immaculate Conception, Most Pure Virgin, cleanse my heart and flesh."

A simple and very private ceremony it had to be because the draconian laws of the French government at the time forbade the formation of any kind of clerical association or society without royal assent (i.e. governmental approval). Nevertheless it was to be the first step in opening a seminary that later would become the nucleus of a future religious society, that was formally legalized only twenty-three years after Claude's death.

The Rendezvous of the Dedication

This historic dedication took place at the nearby parish Church of St. Etienne des Grès in the BVM Chapel of Our Lady of Rescue before the famous statue of the Black Madonna.

Although the full story of this famous church and statue is outside the scope of this booklet, it may be of interest to recall some of the reasons why Claude and his first followers choose this sanctuary for this great '*Spiritual event.*'

A place of pilgrimage for centuries (including among its pilgrims saints like Thomas Aquinas, Dominic and Francis de Sales), it was here the young men of



Statue of Notre Dame de Bonne Délivrance before which Claude and his first associates dedicated themselves to the Holy Spirit.

rue des Cordières used to drop in for short visits to the Blessed Sacrament on their way to and from the College. What wonder, then, if they chose this 'rendezvous' for the "greatest event of their lives."

The Church itself was confiscated during the French Revolution and later demolished. Today the site is occupied by some buildings of Sorbonne University Law School. The famous statue, the Black Madonna, was sold in a public auction for 201 livres. Secreted away for many years in different locations, today it is venerated in a chapel of the Sisters of St. Thomas de Villeneuve at Neuilly, Paris. It was only when the Spiritans, after the abolition of slavery, became so involved in the apostolate of the Black Race and Africa (in particular) that the significance of this dedication at the Shrine of the Black Madonna was fully understood.

The Second Seminary Residence

In a short period of three years (1702-1705), the premises at rue de Cordières became too small to house the ever-increasing number of students applying for entry to this 'Holy Spirit Seminary' as the residence was familiarly called even in those early years.

As one of those early students, Charles Besnard, put it:

"The general progress made in every endeavour by his (Claude's) first associates was too remarkable not to attract other excellent candidates to him. Consequently, he decided to rent a house for them in which they would be less cramped for space."

By all accounts, then, when the number of students outgrew the facilities, Claude, 'like the old woman who lived in the shoe' had to look for a bigger house for a growing family.

This he did on October 17, 1705, when he signed a new lease for a larger building in a more suitable location but still only ten minutes walk from College Louis the Great where he and his boys attended lectures everyday.

Once again, Claude surprised many with his des Places real-estate know-how in the remarkable bargain he got!

One Foot in the Country — and Another in the City

Although Claude's choice of the second location for the Holy Spirit Seminary was, in many ways, the key to much of the progress that followed, his early biographers give little or no attention to this important point.

As far as Claude was concerned, his first experience in rue des Cordières taught him there was little or no possibility of proper prayer, study or community-living in a cramped residence in a noisy, crowded city street. For him, then, no sacrifice was too great to obtain some sort of relative privacy and quiet and so even with his limited financial reserves, he took a giant leap of faith and a big financial gamble.

To understand the magnitude of this risk one has to know something about the new location into which he was moving. It was a real 'oasis of peace', if one is

to believe some of the distinguished residents who preceded or followed Claude on New Street St. Etienne.

The first is none other than the famous French philosopher, René Descartes, who described life there as living ‘*with one foot in the country and the other in the city*’. The second was Charles Rollin, the French humanist (after whom the street later was renamed rue Rollin and No. 8 preserved as a historic site). Rollin moved into No. 8 rue Neuve St. Etienne immediately after Claude and his companions moved their seminary to its third location on rue Tournafort. Rollin once wrote to a friend, Princess Elizabeth of Bohême:

“I have begun to enjoy and love more than ever the sweet joys of rustic life since I have here a small garden which serves as my country residence. I have not of course the long alleys of trees reaching to the horizon; just two small ones, one of which provides a bower that is adequate for my needs and the other which is open to the midday sun allows me to enjoy the sunshine for a good part of the day and promises to provide plenty of fruit in the fall.

A small trellis supports five apricot trees and ten peach trees: that is the sum total of my fruit trees. I have no beehives but I have the pleasure every day of seeing the bees flitting over the blossoms of my trees, preoccupied with their work and enriching themselves with nectar and doing no wrong...”

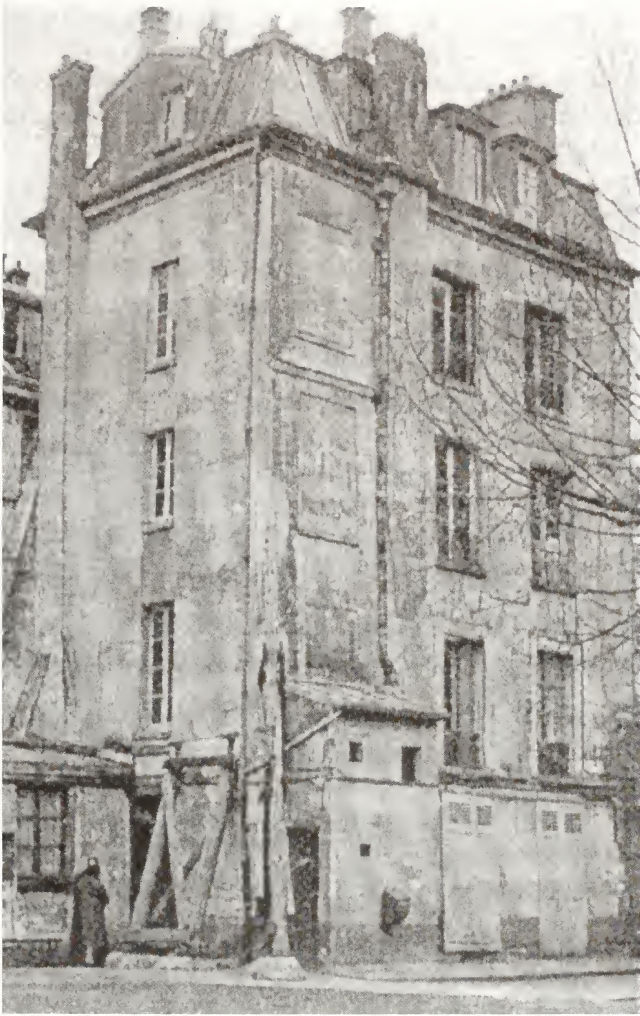
But no greater tribute to Claude’s choice of location for the ‘*Second Spiritan Residence*’ can be paid than the quotation (*in Latin*) that Charles Rollin inscribed in a plaque over the room door on the first floor of the building, where Claude wrote his Rules for the Residence. It reads: “*Most Beloved House, thanks to which I live in the country and in the city and enjoy peace with myself and with God.*”

Terms of the Lease

The lease for the new site, signed on October 18, 1705, was quite a complicated affair. In it Claude took possession of all the house and grounds except the second and third floors of a small turreted Norman Castle-like section at one end of the long two-storey building. This part of the building continued to be occupied by the owner Claude de Cornailles and to ensure his privacy, the ground floor of that part of the building was out of bounds for the students and occupied only by the Director of the Seminary for his office and sleeping quarters. It was a sensible arrangement and worked out reasonably well for both parties.

The Seminary Grounds and Facilities

To understand the background of the *Rules and Regulations* drawn up by Claude after he and the students moved into No. 8 rue Rollin, one must have some idea of the layout of the property itself.



**8 rue Neuve St. Etienne (now rue Rollin), Paris,
the second location of the Holy Spirit Seminary.**

The long two-storied part of the building (occupied by the students) ran the full length of the property along rue Rollin. There was a large landscaped courtyard in front and at the back beautiful gardens belonging to the Fathers of Christian Doctrine and the Sisters of St. Augustine.

The property included a stable, coach house, small poultry farm and a well. These facilities, no longer of use, were quickly converted for other purposes but the well became invaluable as it was so important, before the days of piped water supplies, to have fresh well-water in the middle of the city!

As well, French city bylaws, even in those days, were relatively well advanced. To comply with all the city regulations for the safety of the buildings (eg. against fire) and the security of the tenants (e.g. against theft), each student had to have a private room or at least as Rule 254 put it: “*every student had to have a trunk in his room for his personal property.*”

Moving In

One can imagine the excitement of the seminarians at the news that soon they would be moving to a new house. Eagerly they set about getting the new place ready and moving all their belongings over to their new address. (*No Furniture Moving Company was required for this purpose!*)

Nevertheless, as Fr. Pierre Thomas went on to remark there were some complications: “*While Claude and his students were at rue des Cordières they were hidden away from the public eye but now they were very much in the public gaze and other students were soon amused to see them, some dressed in cassocks, doing all sorts of ‘joe-jobs’ (usually done by servants or lay-brothers in religious orders).*”

Even the Director was often seen carrying planks, lime, etc. through the streets of Paris and apparently “*delighted when someone who knew him met him carrying his load of bundles*” so much so that his students, moved more by his example than his words soon learned “*to conquer their embarrassment, so natural to young people and vied with one another in sweeping the sidewalk on week-days, bringing water from the well in full daylight... and these chores among the less degrading they had to do.*”

Ground Rules for the New Residence

From now on, however, life in the Second Residence would be very different from the old topsy-turvy days at rue des Cordières, for Claude quickly saw that very little could be achieved as far as studies or prayers unless everything had its place and everyone had a responsibility. For this reason, then, sometime early in 1706, he drew up the still extant *Règlements pour la Communauté du Saint Esprit* that as a postscript to the MSS by one of his contemporaries attests: “*All these Rules were drawn up by the late Father des Places and written by his own hand.*”

The many additions and revisions in the MSS show that these first Seminary Regulations were not written in stone but were continually being updated. For example, the entry about ‘the superiors’ and not ‘a superior’ found in Rules 114, 142, 169 only makes sense after Fr. le Barbier, a priest friend of Claude, on loan from Rennes, joined him in the running of the seminary.

In a word, the *Rules for the Holy Spirit Community* should not be seen as regulations for a fully established seminary but one still in the early planning stages.

And last but not least, it is important to emphasize that Claude did not sit down in his office on the first floor of the enormous castle-like building, write up all these Rules out of his own head as an ‘*ipse dixit*’ (*I say so*) set of seminary regulations. Nothing could be farther from the truth. As Fr. Charles Besnard so

well reminded his readers: “*Claude not only learned from the rules of other seminaries, but submitted his own regulations to many men of great experience for examination and approval.*”

One of the seminaries referred to here was Saint Sulpice and foremost among the *periti* consulted must surely have been Claude’s all-season mentors, his friends in the Society of Jesus.

Règlements Pour La Communauté

The contents of the long 66 page manuscript of these *Rules for the Holy Spirit Community* are here divided into four sub-sections so that, hopefully, even in this brief overview, one may get some idea of this all important document, drawn up by Claude with legal brevity but very practical attention to necessary detail: (a) *Defining Devotions of the Community* (Rules 1-2), (b) *General Guidelines for All Members* (Rules 3-131), (c) *Special Duties for Individual Members* (Rules 131-233) and (d) *Additional Miscellaneous Directives* (Rules 234-263)

Defining Devotions of the Community (Rules 1-2)

Knowingly and intentionally, as a lawyer, Claude did not begin with a definition of this ‘foundation’ or a definitive *Mission Statement* of its purpose.

This he did by eschewing the use of such terms as ‘seminary’ or ‘society’ and referring to himself and his associates simply as a *communauté* (a community).

As far as Claude (and his earliest associates) were concerned official recognition or definitions and/or Government or Church titles were the least of their concerns so long as they could get on with their studies for the priesthood and live out the consecration they had made to the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday, 1703.

In other words, the main purpose of the Holy Spirit foundation was to produce well educated and holy priests willing to accept any ministry (no matter how difficult or humble) anywhere the Church needed workers. Everything else was secondary.

General Guidelines for All Members (Rules 3-131)

With this end in view, the following regulations were to apply to all members of the Community including Claude himself.

The academic year would begin with an eight-day retreat preached by the Jesuit Fathers (who would also be the regular spiritual directors and confessors of all members but would have no authority in the policies or day to day affairs of the community).

Great emphasis was laid in the proper recruitment and selection of students who generally must be ‘*pauperes*’ i.e., young men from working class families unable to pay their way.

Entrance examinations would be held twice a year with two judges on the selection committee. To be accepted, all must have the equivalent of 'high school' graduation and pass the Entrance Examination.

Then follows the rules of the seminary concerning the common spiritual exercises — community prayer, daily mass, etc.

As far as religious formation was concerned, the highest standards were expected of all. Claude, never one to ask anyone to do what he didn't do himself, led more by example than legislation.

To outsiders Claude's demands on the young seminarians may seem, perhaps, too demanding and more like those of a regular religious society than of a 'diocesan' seminary but, as he saw it, six years of intense religious training were necessary if raw young men were to develop the kind of habits that would stand them for the rest of their lives as worthy priests, frequently destined to work alone and in very difficult and seemingly hopeless church ministries.

For example, special emphasis was laid on obedience during these years of formation:

“Nothing is more important for the good order of the house than obedience. Moreover, nothing is more highly recommended for it is of great virtue to submit one's will for everything to that of someone else” (Rule 125) but to be of any value, this obedience “must always be prompt and joyful.” (Rule 126)

All were expected to assist daily at Holy Mass (Rules 18 and 36) and strongly recommended to receive Holy Communion at least every two weeks (Rule 37) — something rather unusual in those Jansenistic days. Needless to add, Claude, even before his ordination, gave the example and insisted on proper decorum, e.g. genuflections before the Blessed Sacrament on entry and leaving the Chapel (Rule 89) and kneeling on both knees on the flagstone floor (Rule 88) when receiving Holy Communion.

Listed next are the House Regulations regarding Studies (the second most important *raison d'être* of the seminary). A minimum of 2 years philosophy and 4 years theology was mandated with special emphasis on the study of sacred scripture, liturgy, preaching and catechetics, and in passing, it might be added that it was this reputation as a serious house of studies and not a clerical holiday camp that was then, as well as later, the key to the success and popularity of the Holy Spirit Seminary.

The next long section deals with the community's balanced attention to membership health, hygiene, meals, recreation, etc. Great emphasis is placed on acceptable common courtesy and dress with special emphasis on silence as a condition for serious study as well as prayer and personal privacy.

No wonder Claude has been called a 'spiritual realist'. His formation program gave students a well-balanced daily regime with ample time for prayer, study, free-time, recreation and even sleep (seven hours)!

Special Duties for Individual Members (Rules 131-233)

This very interesting section deals with practical matters in the running of the House, e.g. the special duties of repetition seminar tutors, sacristans, readers at community meals, refectorians (dining hall servers), bursars, store keepers, infirmarians, choir masters and even concierge door keepers or security guards.

The last part of this Section deals with everyone's responsibility for the general cleanliness and tidiness of the house and ends with reference to the special duties of cooks and tailors (the only outsiders and paid members on staff).

As far as all this attention to detail is concerned, perhaps one may see a little of Claude's mother — the wise governess — in her son's insistence that good order, mutual respect and attention to good manners, would ensure a well-run and happy community better than any amount of heavy-handed regulations by those in charge.

Miscellaneous Additional Directives (Rules 234-263)

This last section, called by Claude *Quelques Avertissements (Some Remarks)*, is very like the weekly General and Personal Student Observation Sessions that later became traditional in Spiritan Houses of Formation. It deals mainly with *ad-hoc* clarification or revision of some of his earlier regulations.

Many of these remarks may appear to go beyond what is acceptable nowadays, but they all must be judged in their historical setting to understand their purpose.

For example, in many of them Claude was attempting to bridge the wide divide between the coarse *sans culottes* manners of the working classes and the often ridiculously extravagant etiquette *politesse* of the upper classes (so wonderfully satirized by Molière in his comedy *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*). For example, Rule 238 obliging students to address one another as *Mister (Monsieur or Sir)* may now seem too formal, but in Claude's day, it was a big step in bridging the socially accepted upstairs-downstairs (master-servant) language of the period.

On the other hand in the same Rule 238, to avoid over-familiarity the use of Christian names or *tu (tutoyer)*, customarily reserved for intimate use in one's family or among very close friends, was forbidden. *Vous* (plural) was ruled more acceptable in a house of clerical formation where *cliques* ('gangs') or too close one-to-one friendships so often destroy a healthy genuine community spirit.

Similarly, in trying to find a reasonable balance between what was acceptable and what was foppish in dress even for clerics (Rules 112-4), while wigs and trousers (unless they were velvet) were allowed but not recommended, all outlandish styles or colours in clothes or the use of snuff and perfume were out!

On the other hand, while Claude himself gave up drinking wine when he was a student in St. Thomas College, wine and beer (the ordinary beverages of the day) were to be served everyday at lunch and dinner for those who requested them (Rule 109) but always in moderation and *never at breakfast!*

Tried, Tested and True

While many of the regulations drawn up by Claude cover circumstances of time and place that no longer exist, it is important to emphasize that it was the spirit (if not always the letter) of these des Places *Règlements* that produced hundreds of worthy priests and outstanding missionaries. They still continue today to play a very important part in defining the unique spirit of all Spiritans and their associates whatever their country of origin.

Going His Own Way

At first sight then, it might appear that there was nothing very special about Claude's new seminary, but a closer look shows how original it was and how unique the genius of its 26-year-old founder.

First of all, considering how closely he was associated with the Society of Jesus, one might have expected Claude himself to have joined that wonderful Society or at least have modeled his own on it. But while Claude entrusted the spiritual direction of his early associates exclusively to the Jesuit Fathers, he did



Claude's friend, Grignon de Montfort, now St. Louis-Marie de Montfort.

not allow them or any outsider to have authority over the day-to-day affairs or general policies of the Holy Spirit Seminary.

Secondly, as will be remembered, Claude was born the same year that De La Salle, the founder of the world-famous Brothers of the Christian Schools, opened the first “free school” for children of inner cities and rural areas of France.

Yet, however great Claude’s admiration for De La Salle’s work of free education for the poor and his willingness to help him in chaplaincies (e.g. Fr. Adrienn Votel served as chaplain for the De La Salle novitiate in Paris and Rouen up to 1715), he felt that his own work of educating priests was not quite synonymous with opening schools for the working class children. For this reason, as he made clear later to De La Salle, he would co-operate but not amalgamate with the Brothers of the Christian Schools. This was seen especially when Claude was approached by a young priest friend of De La Salle, Fr. Clement, who had a grandiose dream of a St. Denis Teacher Training Centre in Paris to teach trades to the many neglected young people in the city. Once again Claude promised to help with chaplains if the venture ever got off the ground (but it didn’t) but he made it quite clear that the primary purpose of the Holy Spirit Seminary was the formation of priests and not the running of trade schools.

And finally while as a young boy at St. Thomas College in Rennes, Claude had looked up to his older companion, Grignon de Montfort, despite repeated invitations to join in de Montfort’s work of preaching parish missions in rural France, he refused.

As de Montfort saw it, what an ideal member of the Company of Mary, Claude, a very polished public speaker, would make. Claude, however, although possibly flattered by the compliment and just as anxious as his friend to revitalize the neglected rural Catholic communities of France, still saw that his own special call from God was not to spend his life preaching the gospel himself but to open a seminary to multiply those who would.

When Claude opened his seminary, de Montfort, being a friend of the Director, thought he might have a quasi-monopoly or at least first choice of the young priests from the Holy Spirit Seminary for his own work. Once again, Claude was adamant. While he would support any of his seminarians who wished to join de Montfort, he continued to insist that the *raison d’être* of the Holy Spirit Seminary was much wider than supplying priests for any particular ministry even one as praiseworthy as preaching parish missions throughout France.

This independence of Claude was never more clearly seen than during de Montfort’s last visit to the Holy Spirit Seminary not long before Claude’s death. As remembered by one of the students, Louis Bouic, the subject of de Montfort’s address to the general assembly of Holy Spirit seminarians was *Divine Wisdom*, the first and most important of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit and a subject very dear to the hearts of both Claude and Grignon de Montfort.

De Montfort, always a charismatic speaker, gave a memorable address on the mysterious paradox of how *Divine Wisdom*, which to men so often seems like foolishness, surpasses the *Wisdom of this World* which, in its turn, so often handicaps anyone dedicated to the service of God. According to young Bouic:

“He (Grignon) told us all to kneel down and say a prayer to God and ask Him for that Divine Wisdom of which he had just spoken. He recited this prayer in such ardent terms, with such radiant features and sublime words that it seemed to us as if we were listening to an angel.”

What a great last meeting of these two founders, young men from Rennes, whose accomplishments for the Kingdom of God (even though very different) so greatly surpassed even their wildest boyhood dreams. They would never meet again for Claude died very soon afterwards.

The Defining Charism or Mission

So, while Claude des Places admired the work of other religious societies like the Brothers of the Christian Schools, the Society of Jesus and the Missionary Company of Mary and was ever ready to work side-by-side with them, he still was always careful to maintain the unique spirit and defining identity of his own foundation — *‘The Seminary of the Holy Spirit.’*

As a result, Claude became a legend even in his own day. He was admired and loved especially by those who knew him best — his own (for want of a better word) ‘sons.’ He was their hero and model. A scholar, he taught them to be life-long learners. A prudent and practical man, he taught them the value of common-sense and good judgement. A man of God, he showed them how to pray and answer ‘Yes’ (*Fiat*) to every call from God. He was their hero and inspiration. He was their great ‘formator’ who, himself, personified all that the Holy Ghost Seminary was or ever hoped to be.

No wonder then, that even today, Claude continues to be the role-model and inspiring mentor in how his followers can maintain a balance between working loyally with other groups and yet never losing their own identity or their unique charism as Spiritans.

CHAPTER 8



Tragic Early Death of the Founder

Paris (1709)

Nothing succeeds like success and already in the short span of six years, the Seminary of the Holy Spirit had made remarkable progress.

Begun as a small hostel, opened by an unknown group of seminarians with little or no financial support in a run-down area of the city, it was now a highly respected, well organized and apparently well funded establishment popularly called *The Seminary of the Holy Spirit*.

Claude, himself an unknown young man from the countryside, was now highly respected as its director by his peers, and the directors of the leading seminaries of the city, like St. Sulpice.

Claude's draft of the ground rules for the Seminary had been examined and approved by experts as a kind of classic document for its legal brevity and comprehensiveness, as one might expect from a qualified lawyer. Even as far as finances were concerned, thanks to well organized fund-raising and wise management, the seminary now seemed to be on a fairly sound foundation and all continued to be amazed at how much had been accomplished in such a short time for its students (mostly country boys of working-class family backgrounds).

Claude's own ordination to the priesthood in 1706 followed by that of James Garnier (1708) and Louis Bouic (1709) gave further credibility to the venture.

When on October 1, 1709, then, Claude and his companions moved into their third residence (11 rue Tournafort) everything seemed to be going their way. A bright future lay ahead and the rest of their story seemed likely to be that "they all lived happily ever after." Unfortunately that was not to be the case and, as Shakespeare once put it: "When troubles come, they come not single spies but in battalions..."

Third Holy Spirit Seminary Residence

While the Neuve St. Etienne premises were bigger and better suited to the needs of his students than rue des Cordières, it soon became obvious to Claude that even this second Holy Spirit Seminary building could no longer cope with the ever growing number of applicants.

For this reason, even before the six year lease on the second Holy Spirit Seminary residence expired, Claude was already on the look-out for a bigger and more suitable home for his growing family and was, once again, proving himself to be a true son of his father that old maestro in continuous real estate wheelings and dealings.

When, then, a large property with a four-storey residential building that had once served as a military barracks for the Gardes-Française (a French regiment formed in 1563 for the defence of the royal residences in Paris) went on the real estate market, on August 17, 1709, Claude was quick to sign a lease with its owner, Mr. Cornailles.

The buildings apparently needed a facelift and some major adjustments to meet the requirements of the now highly organized regime of the Holy Spirit community but the price was right! In fact, it was a real bargain if one compares its annual lease fee of 600 livres with the annual fee Claude paid simply for his own board and lodgings at Louis le Grand College — 368 livres!

As well the location of the new four-storey property was excellent — only a seven minute walk from the College — and easily accessible from two main city streets, Tournafort and Mouffetard. Its main entrance, a typically French-styled large coach door, opened on to Tournafort Street.

The change of premises had come none too soon to meet the remarkable growth in the number of Holy Spirit seminarians. From the first four or five who joined Claude at rue des Cordières, Christmas 1702, and the twelve who dedicated themselves and their seminary to the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday, 1703, the number now, in 1709, as they moved into their new residence, was nearly twice the number of the resident theological students (45) at the CLG College, i.e. the junior members in training for the Society of Jesus.

But numbers alone do not tell the whole success story of the Holy Spirit Seminary. For one thing, careful screening of applicants by entrance examinations (Rule 59) and supervision of homework by regular repetition seminars (Rules 131-137) were paying off in impressive examination results.

With a Little Help From His Friends

While, undoubtedly, Claude was the prime mover in all this progress, it would, however, be a serious mistake to credit him with all its success.

On the contrary, now, as always, Claude was not acting alone but a team-player working with other like-minded and similarly motivated individuals.

First and foremost among these must be counted the Jesuit community of Louis the Great College. They not only gave free tuition to Claude's students at

their College but, through the food bank arranged by good Father Megret, the Bursar, were also putting daily bread on the table for Claude's seminarians, young men with hearty appetites!

Since Claude's students were from poor families and full-time students, they could not help much with the financial expenses of the Residence so outside benefactors had to be found to keep the doors open.

Here, once again, Claude, to the surprise of his contemporaries, soon distinguished himself as a fund-raiser (something ever since so much part of the baggage of every Spiritan!).

One of the earliest of these benefactors was Pierre George, a rich Nantes business partner of his father, now retired in Paris, who on May 28, 1707, set up a student bursary worth 46,462 livres.

Another was a parishioner of the new parish, St. Etienne, who came up with a loan of 1000 livres probably to pay the 600 livres down payment for the lease of the new premises.

A third and perhaps the most outstanding benefactor was the pastor of the new parish into which they were moving, a Fr. Charles Lebreque who bequeathed 40,000 livres to the Seminary. His conditions to the bequest unfortunately caused untold trouble for Claude's immediate successors, especially after some of the priest's family challenged the validity of the legacy, a complicated affair outside the scope of this booklet.

But Claude's search for financial backing to his seminary apparently went much higher than fund-raising from individual donors. It is now well known that he brought the whole problem of financing Catholic seminaries for poor students to the attention of King Louis XIV himself, claiming that seminaries for poor students like his own should not have to depend on private charity but should be adequately funded by Church and/or State, in a Catholic country like France!

As Claude saw it, one of the greatest mistakes being made at this time by both Church and State in France was their failure to tap the talents and energies of the 'common people' — 'the working classes', too often seen as little better than bare-footed (*sans culottes*) homeless city-slickers or uncouth 'hewers of wood or drawers of water' in the countryside.

As far as Claude was concerned, given the chance of an education (through public funding, bursaries or scholarships), these '*pauperes*' could very favourably compete with their peers from rich and/or noble families in any career including the priesthood. Failure to do so, as history was to show, was to have disastrous consequences in France both for the Church and *la patrie* before the end of the century!

Various intermediaries have been suggested as to how Claude brought this important subject to the attention of the highest authority of the land, King Louis XIV, but more than likely it was Fr. Le Tellier, at that time the King's personal confessor, who had been Claude's drama teacher and close advisor during his student days in Rennes and Nantes. As Peter Claris was to write to Cardinal

de Fleur (one of the Seminary's great benefactors) years later, "You are fulfilling the designs Louis XIV of glorious memory would himself have implemented the funding of bursaries had he but lived another six months."

This Fr. Le Tellier never ceased to support Claude and his seminary as can be seen when it was thanks to him that, on May 2, 1736, Louis XV intervened in the acrimonious Fr. Lebreque legacy dispute by giving full legal status to the Holy Spirit as a 'society' as far back as 1703.

Early Associate Directors of the Seminary

Before his own ordination in 1707, Claude had to depend on other priests, friends from his home town of Rennes, like Michael le Barbier, who with permission from his bishop came to Paris as a newly ordained priest to help Claude. Michael and Claude had been friends since boyhood but whether Michael was invited by Claude or volunteered to come is not known, but as a young ordained priest (Claude being still in minor orders) Michael was invaluable to the life of the 'Seminary.'

Apart from being available as a priest for daily community mass, Michael rapidly became Claude's right hand man in the running of the Seminary and is probably the 'assistant director' mentioned in Rules 114, 142, and 169.

As well, since Michael had completed all his philosophy and theology studies with the Jesuits in Rennes and was very familiar with the Jesuit programs of studies, he became the first Dean of Studies of the new Seminary and headed up all the students' so-called 'tutorial repetition classes' — daily tutored revision at home of the lectures they had received at the College — which for centuries became the norm for all Spiritan Houses of Studies.

Great Expectations Dashed

By the beginning of 1709, then, the Seminary seemed well on its way to a very promising future. Little did anyone foresee the troubles that would strike before the end of the year.

The first of these problems came with the frequent recall for assignments in their own dioceses of these 'messieurs du Saint Esprit', Claude's invaluable priest associates.

Fr. Jean Le Roy, for example, in July 1707 was called back to his own diocese of Quimper by Bishop de Ploelle, and two years later on June 17, 1709, Fr. Michael le Barbier was recalled by the new Archbishop of Rennes, Mgr. de Lavardin. And sad it is to recall that in this case, although at the time Michael and Claude were young men (in their early thirties) and in excellent health, little did they know how final was this parting, for four months later Claude died on October 2, 1709, and Michael, appointed by his bishop to a small parish with a junior college attached, died the following year on May 22, 1710.

A second shock for Claude and the whole group was the first death in the Seminary, that of a student, René le Sauvage, on May 7, 1709. René must have

been a very promising young man for he was chosen out of all the 1709 CLG Graduation Class to defend the Annual Thesis at the Convocation Exercises. His death, for many of the students and possibly even for Claude himself, may have been their first close experience with death and dying.

Le Grand Hiver 1709

Cold winters are always seasonal in Paris but the winter of 1709 (*le Grand Hiver*) has gone down in history as perhaps the severest ever. On the night of January 5, the temperatures plummeted and the severe cold spell lasted for over two weeks. Then on January 25, a sudden thaw set in with devastating floods. The River Seine, blocked by huge chunks of ice, overflowed its banks.

When the excessive humidity and floods seemed over, the temperatures plummeted a second time. Blizzards with high winds added to the misery of the city poor ill-prepared to cope with this second cold spell. No wonder then that during it 32,800 people died in Paris alone.

But the cold weather of the 1709 winter was not the only problem. The harvest of 1708 had been below average and famine already stalked the land. Cattle, sheep and rabbits (often a mainstay food for the city poor) perished in large numbers. Food prices soared. The price of wheat (15 livres a setier in 1708), in 1709 rose to 67 livres by the end of September.

Everyone was feeling the pinch. Even in big private boarding schools, because of the food rationing, there were bitter complaints from students like Voltaire (François Arouet) who never forgot the 'terrible black bread' he had to eat during that period at CLG College.

Claude and his community were fortunate to have reasonably good living quarters at 11 rue Tournfort, although none of the housing in Paris at that time was sufficiently insulated against such prolonged sub-zero temperatures.

All the religious communities in the city faced food shortages. As Fr. De La Salle wrote: "*Here we eat black bread...the Brothers have two ounces for breakfast and five for lunch...and now we don't have enough money to purchase anything near enough bread for the forty of us here.*" Apparently the baker refused to supply them with any more bread without credit and De La Salle went on to add "While none of us died, all suffered from scurvy!"

Claude and his bursar, with 80 or so young men to feed, must have been at their wits' end particularly as the shortage of food at CLG College itself probably also meant less available for handouts to the Holy Spirit seminarians.

First Serious Illness

Then to add to the Claude's troubles, in the widespread epidemic that raged in the City, he himself fell seriously ill — perhaps for the first time in his life! Although always so healthy and strong, Claude caught pleurisy and instead of taking care of himself and easing up, he kept on working. That in retrospect may have been a mistake but considering all Claude's pressing problems at the

time — the changeover to the new premises, the severe weather, the shortage of food, probably other members of the community ill, and Michael Le Barbier gone, Claude simply had to stay on the job to keep things going.

For this reason, confident that with his usual resilience he could get over this bout, Claude tried to carry on but soon other complications set in and then, with no recovery in sight, he opted to die at home among his own seminarians rather than in some over-crowded city hospital among strangers.

Whatever Claude's thoughts at this time, one fact must be emphasized. Claude's death was from natural causes — pleurisy and complications — not from any personal imprudent austerities.

Here again it is important to recall that just as in the early days at the first residence, when most of Claude's so called 'austerities' were not so much voluntary mortifications, but due to the straightened living circumstances with which he and his companions had to cope, so now in these latter days at the third residence on rue Tournefort, Claude's health problems were not the result of any excessive mortification but of natural causes — a widespread shortage of food and a raging city-wide epidemic caused by the *Grand Hiver* of 1709.

A Director who insisted that the first duty of the apostolate was to be alive and allowed no one in the Seminary to fast without permission (Rule 15) other than on regular Church fast days, would never have foolishly endangered his health especially at this time by indiscretions on his part.

As he himself once put it:

"I enjoy excellent health, though I appear very delicate. I have a good stomach and am able to digest any kind of food easily. Nothing makes me ill. As strong and as vigorous as anyone else, hardened to fatigue and work, I am nevertheless inclined to be lazy and easy-going, applying myself only when spurred on by ambition."

Final Temptations?

Much is often made of Claude's so-called final temptations to despair at this time as if God was asking for a complete sacrifice or holocaust before his death. However, according to Fr. Le Floch, Claude's *Reflections on the Past* in which he mentions spiritual problems like these do not belong to this period of Claude's life but to an earlier time when he made a retreat under the direction of his friend, Fr. Simon Gourdan of St. Victor Abbey. In these notes, Claude contrasts his 'previous fervour' with his 'present lukewarmness' and then keenly aware of his pride, vanity and ambition in starting the Seminary, ends by completely trusting that God would never abandon him, despite his unworthiness:

"To sum up, I must confess before God that at the present moment I am someone who is believed to be alive but who is certainly dead, at least when I compare the present with the past.

Alas! I am merely a mask of devotion and the shadow of my former self. Blessed am I in my extreme misfortune if I do not fall

away more but stop where I am and use the grace God offers me to reflect more seriously than ever on my pitiable state, so as to prevent my falling into greater disorders.

It is in this very way that so many people who were eminent in virtue begin to slide downwards and end by perishing miserably. Who ought to fear a similar fall more than I who throughout life have so frequently shown my inconstancy by returning to God and then later on falling into such prolonged disorder? These reflections fill me with sorrow. I left the world in order to seek God, renounce vanity and save my soul.

Is it possible that I merely changed the object of my ambition and that I persevered in that ambition all the while in my heart? And if so, of what use was it to undertake that work." (Editor's addition 'the opening of the Holy Spirit Seminary')

The News Spread

Before long, as the news spread that Claude was seriously ill with little hope of recovery, not only his own students but the Jesuit Community of Louis the Great College and many old friends across the city became alarmed and hastened to visit him.

As Fr. Charles Besnard put it:

"As soon as it was known in Paris that Claude was seriously ill, a great number of persons distinguished by their piety and rank came to see him: the Directors of St. Sulpice Seminary, of St. Nicholas of Chardonnet and of St. Francis de Sales. The saintly Father Gourdan, to whom he was bound by the strongest ties of friendship, unable to come himself, sent a friend to visit Claude on his behalf."

The names mentioned by Fr. Besnard are, one can be sure, only a few of the many friends, admirers and benefactors who visited Claude during his last illness. That is why it is interesting to note that those mentioned were all well known priests in Paris — e.g. two directors of major seminaries in the city, the rector of the nearby St. Francis des Sales Retirement Home for Priests and the saintly cloistered monk of St. Victor's Abbey, Fr. Simon Gourdan, who greatly admired Claude for his wonderful work with the Seminary, his personal holiness and scholarship.

When the final moment came, Claude who had taught his students how to live, would now show them how to die. As Fr. Charles put it:

"While Father des Places suffered an attack of pleurisy that was accompanied by a violent fever and a painful tenesmus which for four days caused him atrocious sufferings, no word of complaint, much less of impatience escaped his lips. One knew only that his sufferings were intensified because his acts of resignation became more frequent. His very exhaustion seemed to give him new strength to repeat over and over again with King David: "Quam dilecta tabernacula tua, Domine

virtutum, concupiscit et deficit anima mea in atria Domini. How I love your palace, Yahweh Sabaoth! How my soul yearns and pines for your courts!”

Claude devoutly received the last sacraments and then peacefully expired around five o'clock in the evening of October 2, 1709, at the age of thirty years and seven months.

One can easily imagine how his seminarians having done everything they could during his illness to alleviate their Director's sufferings, were either at his bedside or in the chapel, all broken hearted but assisting him with their prayers when the final moment of the last agony came.

Last Portrait

As all hope of recovery waned Claude's friends (probably led by Fr. Michael Tellier, his old mentor at Rennes and Nantes who was now in Paris as Confessor to Louis XIV), invited a professional portrait painter to sketch Claude as he lay on his deathbed.

With so meager factual information about Claude's last days, this portrait is now invaluable as Fr. Sean Farragher so well puts it:

“The realism and sensitivity of this portrait in oils makes up in great measure for the tantalizing lack of other contemporary documents. As we gaze on the emaciated features of this highly gifted generous young man who had already spent himself in the service of the Lord in the person of the least of his brethren, we get a vivid reminder of what it cost him.”

It is quite possible that this portrait was painted by Jean Jouvenet who had already sketched Claude as a young boy, because when the portrait was being professionally cleaned in 1959, the company employed to do so, although they knew nothing about the earlier Jouvenet portrait of Claude, suggested that it must have been painted by Jouvenet who did a similar deathbed portrait of Bourdaloue, the famous Jesuit orator.

Last Deathbed Words

The last words of dying people are always cherished by their families even as Christ's seven last words were by the Evangelists.

In Claude's case it was no different and so his repeated use of King David's Psalm 83 (in Latin not in French) in many ways were seen as epitomizing his whole outlook, on life here and hereafter, on time and eternity.

At that moment Claude had neither fear of death nor human concern for the future of his beloved Holy Spirit Seminary.

True to the spirit of Rule 43 that recommends the *Bona Mors* (Happy Death) monthly practice of receiving Holy Communion as if it were one's *Vaticum* and always saying one's Night Prayers as one's last, Claude in total abandonment, joyously and confidently commended his spirit into the hands of his Maker, when his final moment came.



Claude on his deathbed.

As he himself once put it:

"This is the secret which I have been looking for and to which I must cling. I must keep reminding you, O my soul, lest you ever forget it. Remember your last end and you will never sin (Sir 7, 40). What an excellent piece of advice... I must live well so as to die well... In what condition do I wish to die? In the same condition as the one in which I live. Since I wish to die the death of the just I must live a life which is absolutely holy and entirely Christian... I am going to begin doing what I would want to have done at the hour of my death and after my death, what will remain of all that is earthly, what will the earth

retain of what is mine? A six foot grave, a piece of bad smelling cloth, a coffin made of 4 or 5 pieces of rotten timber...Once I am no longer alive, no one will any more bother with me."

Claude, despite all the evidence that everything was going wrong, did not panic. He had no regrets and no complaints for as always he had faith in God and so he had complete confidence in the holy will of God.

If he worried he hid it, assuring all those dear to him that as God was all-powerful, no man was irreplaceable. And they, as the record was to show, although at this time disconsolate over the death of the one on whom they themselves, so young and inexperienced, depended so much, did not falter, but kept together, trusted God and carried on.

And later, they saw more clearly that Claude, was giving them an inspiring example of why it was better to wear out rather than rust out in the service of God and why the grain of wheat must first die before the harvest can begin.

As the ties of time and earth began to unravel, confidently, with the pilgrim's jubilant processional Hymn 84 on his lips, Claude could look forward to the still more wonderful life in the courts of Yahweh. His work on earth was done, and so, with Jesus' dying words upon the Cross, he could say: "My work is done. Into Your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit."

The Final Obsequies and Burial

The funeral service probably took place at the nearby beautiful parish Church of St. Etienne. One can be sure that Claude's students in typical Spiritan careful attention to Church ceremonials, music and plain chant, must have made sure full honours were done for Claude at the final Requiem Mass.

The burial, however, was an even simpler affair, for at Claude's request his remains were buried in an unmarked grave in the '*pauperes*' section of the St. Etienne cemetery. Many famous men's graves, like those of Racine and Pascal, are still identifiable in that cemetery by elaborate plaques in their honour. But one seeks in vain for Claude's resting place that was at the gable end of the Our Lady's Chapel. There Claude's remains lay among the nameless poor for the next hundred years until, as in all '*pauperes*' interments after a suitable period of time, his bones were removed to make room for other burials and stacked away in other receptacles (or as they were ironically called Charnel Houses).

Early in the 19th century, the city authorities decided to close down these charnel houses and remove all the skeletons to the Catacombs of Paris i.e. deep caverns left after rocks and stones were quarried to build mansions for rich citizens of the city. This is why Claude's remains are now impossible to identify among the millions of skeletons stacked in these catacombs, although each section of the catacombs is marked with the name of the cemetery from which the bones were taken and honoured with classical French quotations from famous authors on the walls.

How They Brought the Sad News to Rennes

One may wonder how soon after Claude's death did his family in Rennes learn the sad news. But their disbelief can be readily understood!

The last time they had seen Claude was at his nephew's baptism when he was so full of the *joie de vivre* and so very happy about how his new Seminary was coming along. What a visit that had been — so much news to catch up on and so many happy memories to recall. Little did any of the family then think they would never see him again!

Never Forgotten

From time to time, news good and bad, must have reached them from the Capital — Claude's ordination to the priesthood and how he and the Seminary were coping with the 1709 terrible winter.

Needless to add, Claude was always in their prayers and as they knew, they were in his, especially at the altar of God now that he was a priest.

However, knowing how healthy Claude always was, they must have been completely unprepared for the dreadful news that: "*Fr. Claude is dead!*" It couldn't be! It was unbelievable.

Nevertheless, as we know from the few family records that survived the big fire of Rennes (1720), Claude's family accepted his death with great courage and faith.

Francis, Claude's dad, at the time himself in declining health, immediately had three masses said for his son in St. Thomas College Chapel (where Claude had so often attended mass). Later, his mother Jeanne, signing her maiden name of Le Meneuet after her husband's death on May 18, 1712, at the age of 71, on October 3, 1718 (the day following the 10th anniversary of Claude's death), handed over the big family estate at Noyal-sur-Vilaine in support of St. Meen Hospital for the Poor, requesting only that the chaplain and patients recite the rosary three times a week in perpetuity for herself and family.

Claude's mother lived for eight years after her husband's death and when she died on August 20, 1720, was buried beside him in the Rennes family plot in the St. Etienne parish graveyard.

Jeanne Françoise, Claude's sister, whom he so dearly loved but nearly killed as a teenager, survived her brother by fifty-one years. She died on July 31, 1760, and was buried in her husband's Le Chat family vault in the parish cemetery of St. Evroult in Angers.

And while it is outside the scope of this short biography, it is interesting to note that in the family history of Claude's sister, researched up to the 20th century, a Jules de St. Philippe des Places wrote to his children: "*Claude François Poullart des Places (is) the greatest of all the des Places, in presence of whom we feel obliged to bow our heads*" and an oral tradition records that, at the request of their saintly ancestor Claude François, the aristocratic self-assertive *de haut en bas* Poullart des Places Coat of Arms was never again used by a family member.

EPILOGUE



Tri-Centennial Reflections

(1703-2003)

The Spiritan year-long 2003 tri-centennial celebration of the founding of the Holy Spirit Congregation by Claude des Places was the first centennial ever celebrated in the Congregation's history.

Pentecost Sunday 1803 was the first centennial of the founding of the Holy Spirit Congregation and although hundreds of ordained priests from the Holy Spirit Seminary were doing wonderful work not only in France but overseas in French colonies in Canada, China, Cambodia, Siam and Vietnam, it was impossible to hold any kind of official celebration in France. Eleven years earlier in the 1792 Revolution, all the Congregation's property in Paris had been confiscated and six years later in the 1798 Revolution all the members scattered into exile in Switzerland, England and Italy.

A more or less similar situation occurred at the time of the second centennial. On Pentecost Sunday 1903, although there were over 1400 Spiritans busily at work in many parts of the world (this time mostly in Africa), no official bi-centennial celebration was possible in Paris because the Congregation at that time was outlawed by the incumbent very anti-clerical National Government.

The Third Centennial

This was why it was with great pride and joy that all 2955 Spiritans worldwide, in countries as distant and different from one another as Brazil and Pakistan, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines, joined in a year-long tri-centennial that ended on Pentecost Sunday 2003.

Needless to add, the most meaningful and biggest celebrations were held in France, the homeland of Claude des Places and Francis Libermann as well as

more than 10,000 French Spiritans who over the last 300 years pioneered most of the missionary works of the Congregation, gave it most of its major superiors and some of the members most outstanding for holiness and missionary zeal, like Blessed Jacques Laval and Blessed Daniel Brottier.

Historic and Fitting Ending to the Tri-Centennial Year

The year came to a fitting end when the Superior General, Fr. Pierre Schouver and all the Spiritans living in or visiting Rome at the time were invited to a private audience with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican on May 26, 2003.

While the Audience began with all the traditional pomp and circumstance of a regular Vatican reception, it ended, as described by Fr. Vincent O'Toole, one of the Spiritans privileged to be present, with a typical warm-hearted informality that speaks volumes not only of the simple humanity, great faith and indomitable courage of one of the greatest popes in the history of the Church but also of a great Missionary Congregation.

We assembled outside the bronze door at the foot of the Scala Regia, 37 in all: 27 from the Generalate and 5 visiting confreres, 3 Spiritans from the French Seminary and 2 from the Spiritan parish of Santa Brigida at Palmarola.

We were saluted by Swiss Guards wherever we went until finally we were led in to the Audience Hall where Pope John Paul II was already sitting in his chair.

The contrast between the rich splendour of what we had just seen and the simplicity of the Pope in appearance and manner impressed everybody. Fr. Pierre Schouver introduced us to him one by one and he greeted us individually.

Then, the Superior General, on behalf of the entire Congregation, read a short address in French to which the Pope listened attentively.

When Fr. Pierre mentioned the beatification of our confrere, Jacques Laval, John Paul said that he remembered it well, as it was his first beatification after becoming Pope.

The Fr. Pierre presented Pope John Paul with a bronze plaque commemorating the Spiritan Year.

We then rose to recite the Regina Coeli as it was close to midday. His attendants urged the Pope to remain seated, but he struggled to his feet and stood there throughout.

Finally, he gave his apostolic blessing, not just for those of us who were privileged to be there, but also, as requested by Pierre Schouver, for Spiritans throughout the world — professed, associates and all our faithful collaborators.

Then, as we prepared to leave, Pope John Paul waved us all goodbye and said: "Bon Courage," to which Fr. Pierre replied on all our behalf: "A vous aussi."

Bon Courage

'Bon Courage' — what a wonderful two-word summation of the 'fidelitas in arduis' spirit — the grit and perseverance in seemingly impossible tasks not only of Pope John Paul himself but of the missionary congregation founded by Claude des Places three hundred years ago.

'Bon Courage' — what a wonderful two-word summation from Pope John Paul of what he spelled out in more detail in his Letter to the Spiritans at the beginning of the tri-centennial celebration.

In that Letter the Pope not only gives thanks to God and praises the 300 year long fidelity of the Spiritans to their "double undertaking" (the spiritual and human welfare of the most abandoned) in pre-French Revolution France and post-Abolition of Slavery Africa, but urges them to continue to live up to this two-fold task by the strength of their words and, above all, by the authenticity of their lives.

Anchors Away

'Bon Courage' — the true hall-mark charism of their founder and proud tradition of the Spiritans — "Readiness for Everything" (Paratus ad Omnia) and "One Heart and One Soul" (Cor Unum et Anima Una) — is nowhere better expressed than in the stirring words and music of the Holy Spirit *Missionary Hymn*:

Go ye afar, Go teach all nations;
Bear witness unto Me,
On earth in every clime;
And I with you shall be,
Until the end of time.

Chorus:

*Lovely appear, over the mountains,
The feet of them that preach,
And bring good news of Peace.*

APPENDIX 1



Prayer to Poullart des Places

It is a joy for us to gather around you on your 300th birthday, an occasion for us to remind ourselves of the history which has made us one and the spirit that animates us.

When you were a young man — sure of yourself and at home in your environment, competent and full of enthusiasm — you had the good sense, before striking out in life, to ask the fundamental question: “Lord, what do you want me to do?” You provide a witness of Gospel priorities for young people today who want their life to be really worthwhile.

As disciple of Christ and his Spirit, you heard the call to humble daily service. Be a guide to those who are looking for the signs of the Spirit and who want to be faithful in the poor-and-servant Church of our time.

You were an apostle who suffered doubts about your work and your life. But you arrived at the confidence necessary to go on living for others even at the risk of being lost yourself. Encourage all apostles who hesitate along the way, and assure them that God lives in the midst of their trials with all his presence and all his love.

In the contemplation of Christ crucified you discovered his solidarity with us and especially with the poor. Help us to find in our religious life the source and inspiration of our mission to mediate Christ and his Church to the world.

You learned to read the gospel as a book of life. There you found the Word which illumined your life, the Word that was greater than your ambition, greater than your heart. You took the step to follow that Word in faith, in trust, in abandonment and in poverty.

Thus you became a guide for whole multitudes by the genuineness of your faith, the ardour of your heart, the commitment of your love. Young men came to you, they read the gospel with you, and together you walked the road of life. You did not draw up a special program, but you gave yourselves unselfishly to all abandoned needs, to every impossible mission. You had so anchored yourselves in God and so rid yourselves of every human ambition, that wherever you went there was nothing that could not be accomplished by God.

So we, your students of today, with filial respect and with the humble pride of disciples in the presence of their guide, say to you: “We shall go on, with God’s grace and with you.”

Prayer by Fr. Jean Savoie for Claude’s 300th birthday

APPENDIX 2



Memorial Plaque in the Holy Spirit Chapel Church of Saint Sauveur, Rennes

Son of a Magistrate in Parliament

CLAUDE-FRANCIS

POULLART DES PLACES

Was born in Rennes in 1679

He was a friend of Grignon de Montfort
and a disciple of Abbé Bellier
A Qualified Lawyer
he refused the honours and took a vow of poverty.

“Reserving only his health, he was
prepared to make a total
sacrifice of himself
for the work of the missions.”

A student of theology in Paris
in 1703, he founded for poor seminarians
the Seminary of the Holy Spirit
He died in 1709

after one year in the priesthood
having laid the foundations of
the Congregation of the Holy Spirit
which was developed by his
first associates, also natives of Rennes,
and today numbers five thousand
missionary Fathers and Brothers

This Memorial was erected
on October 18, 1959
in this Chapel dedicated
since 1698 to the Holy Spirit.

FILS D'VN MAGISTRAT AV PARLEMENT
CLAYDE · FRANCOIS
POVLLART DES PLACES
NAQVIT A RENNES EN 1679

IL FVT L'AMI DE SAINT GRIGNION DE MONFORT
ET LE DISCIPLE DE L'ABBE BELLIER
PROMV AVOCAT

IL REFYSE LES HONNEVRS ET SE YOVE A LA PAVVRETE
"NE PRETENDANT SE RESERVER OVE LA SANTE DONT
IL SOVHAITAIT FAIRE VN SACRIFICE ENTIER
DANS LE TRAVAIL DES MISSIONS"
ETVDIANT EN THEOLOGIE A PARIS

IL FONDE EN 1703, POUR LES SEMINARISTES PAVVRES
LE SEMINAIRE DV SAINT - ESPRIT
IL MEVRT EN 1709

APRES VN AN DE SACERDOCE, AVANT JETE LES BASES DE
LA CONGREGATION DV SAINT - ESPRIT
DEVELOPPEE PAR SES PREMIERS ASSOCIES
ORIGINAIRES DE RENNES, ELLE COMPTE AV JOVR D'IVV
CINO MILLE PERES ET FRERES MISSIONNAIRES

CE MEMORIAL A ETE DRESSE
LE 18 OCTOBRE 1959
DANS CETTE CHAPELLE DEINER AV SAINT - ESPRIT
DEPVIS 1698

Memorial Plaque unveiled in 1959, the 250th anniversary of Claude's death in the Chapel of the Holy Spirit, in the Church of St. Sauveur, Rennes.

APPENDIX 3



Tri-Centennial Letter of Pope John Paul II to Fr. Pierre Schouver — Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit

I take this opportunity of sending you my heartfelt greetings while you prepare the celebrations, which will take place in your religious family in 2003 AD. I am happy to see the spirit in which you want to live these anniversaries by affirming your charisma and your missionary commitments.

On Pentecost Sunday, you will be celebrating the 300th anniversary of your Congregation, founded on May 27th, 1703, by a young deacon aged 24, Claude-François Poullart des Places. It began with a seminary, dedicated to the Holy Spirit and with the Virgin Mary as guide, open to poor students whom your founder wished to work in the most neglected parishes of the Kingdom of France. Very soon, the young Congregation developed a missionary dimension with the sending of the first priest to Quebec, followed shortly by others who went to Senegal, Guyane and the south of present-day Vietnam.

Almost a century and a half later, in 1848, Fr. François Libermann, born of a Jewish family in Alsace and son of a rabbi, converted to the Christian faith at the age of 24 and became the second founder of the Congregation by uniting it to the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary which he had founded in 1841, primarily for missionary work on the continent of Africa.

While thanking God for the work accomplished by your Congregation over the last three centuries, particularly in the evangelization of Africa, the West Indies and South America, I invite you to remain faithful to the dual inheritance you have received from your founders: a concern for the poor and all people socially deprived and neglected and a missionary commitment to announcing the Good News of Christ to all people, especially to those who have not yet received the message of the Gospel. This double undertaking has often led you to start your missionary works by founding a school, so as to instruct the young and give them access to knowledge, but above all, to receive an authentic education which would make each of them aware of their personal dignity, their rights and their duties. Keep listening to the calls of the Spirit in order to help the poor of our day and to let them know the Good News which awaits them, as Jesus himself did. (cf. Lk 4:18)

The current crisis in vocations to the priesthood in some countries affects you in a special way because you have put special emphasis on vocations in your missionary work, setting up junior seminaries in the young Churches for which you were responsible. Announcing the Gospel to the men and women of our time calls for faithful witnesses, inspired by the Spirit of holiness, who will be signs for their brothers and sisters by the strength of their words and, above all, by the authenticity of their lives.

Dear Brothers in Christ, I am not forgetting that the full name of your Congregation is the "Congregation of the Holy Spirit, under the protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary." I ask Mary, the Mother of the Lord and Queen of missionaries, to intercede for the many members of your Congregation, spread throughout the whole world in the service of the Gospel. May the Blessed Virgin always be an example and a spiritual model for you! May her "yes" given to the Lord be the rule of your own lives! To all of you I am happy to impart a special apostolic blessing.

*From the Vatican,
Joannes Paulus II*

APPENDIX 4



Address of the Superior General to Pope John Paul II at the Papal Audience to Commemorate the 300th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Congregation

Monday, 26th May, 2003

Holy Father,

We come to greet you with a profound respect for your position and your person. We are members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit under the protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

We have been celebrating a jubilee year, that we called “The Spiritan Year,” to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the foundation of our Congregation and to renew ourselves in the apostolic intuitions of our founder, Claude François Poullart des Places. There have been fraternal meetings in all five continents where we are working; we have reflected on the apostolic and spiritual inheritance that we received from Poullart des Places and François Libermann, whom we regard as our second founder, as well as Jacques Laval and Daniel Brottier, whom you beatified, and all our predecessors who witnessed to the Gospel throughout the world.

As with most missionary institutes born in Europe, the final years of these three centuries have witnessed great changes; in a sense, they are the fulfillment of our mission. This mission is being carried out increasingly by our Spiritan confreres from Africa and Latin America, and there are now signs of vocations in the Far East where we have recently taken on new commitments. We pray that the Holy Spirit, to whom we were consecrated from the start under the protection of Mary Immaculate, will help us retain the enthusiasm and courage to respond to the missionary call of the contemporary world.

At this time, when our anniversary year is drawing to a close, we would like to express our respect and affection and to receive your blessing for ourselves and all the professed, associates and collaborators of our Congregation. We thank you with all our hearts and assure you of our prayers and our deep communion with you.

*Fr. Pierre Schouver
Superior General*

APPENDIX 5



Reply of Pope John Paul II to Father Pierre Schouver, CSSp The Papal Audience of May 26, 2003

I am happy to greet you today, dear Father Superior General and the members of the General Council of the Holy Spirit, founded on May 27th, 1703. An anniversary is always a time for giving thanks for the road that has been traveled and the gifts received.

Today, the Church is happy to do this with you, thanking God for all the work accomplished by your Congregation over the last three centuries, particularly in the evangelization of Africa, the Caribbean and South America.

Celebrating an anniversary also means rounding a cape and pressing on ahead. I repeat to you what I said to the entire Church: "Duc in altum!" "Cast out into the deep!" Be faithful to the twofold heritage that you have received from your founders: dedication to the poor and the missionary apostolate — the announcing of the Good News of Christ to all peoples.

These two orientations of your lives open up large horizons for you. It means being at one with those whom the world reduces to dependency or pushes to the margins, the poor who make up the vast majority on some continents but who are also to be found in our most developed societies. In this way, you will witness to the closeness of Christ and let them hear the joy of his call.

Do not let yourselves be halted by difficulties, which you have not lacked in the past and which will still be with you in the future, but put your trust in the freedom and strength of the Spirit who accompanies and guides the Church.

It is the Holy Spirit who builds the Church into a family: help our contemporaries discover this through your community and fraternal living, a strong sign of the evangelical life, by holding unity close to your hearts and remaining attached to this devotion to the Holy Spirit which has always been a characteristic of your religious family.

From the start, your founders wanted to place you under the protection of the Virgin Mary and her Immaculate Heart. I confide you once more to her caring intercession, yourselves and all the members of your Congregation dispersed throughout the world in the service of Christ and his Church.

May the trust that Mary had in the Word of God be a light for your own lives. With all my heart, I give you my apostolic blessing.

Joannes Paulus II

APPENDIX 6



Prayer to the Blessed Trinity by Claude des Places

Most Holy and Adorable Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whom I adore through Your grace with all my heart, my soul and strength, allow me to offer You most humbly my small prayers for Your greater honour and glory, my sanctification, the remission of my sins, the eternal salvation of my father, mother, sister, cousin and all my relatives, friends, enemies, benefactors and in general for all, alive or dead, for whom I am bound to pray.

Permit me, my God, to offer You the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass for that same intention and in order that it may please You to grant me faith, humility, chastity, purity of intention, rectitude in my judgements, a great trust in You and great distrust of myself, constancy in doing good, final perseverance, sorrow for my sins, love of suffering and the Cross, contempt for the world's opinion, faithfulness to my little rule, Your strength and power against lukewarmness, human respect, and all Your enemies.

Through Your mercy grant me also, my God, the favour to imprint in my heart by the indelible darts of Your grace the death and passion of my Jesus, His holy life and holy incarnation. May I thereby always remember them and be affected by them as I should.

Fill my heart and mind with the greatness of Your judgements, the greatness of your gifts and the faithfulness with which I must keep the promises I have made to you through your holy grace. May I always remember them, asking you that I may undergo death a thousand times rather than be permitted to be unfaithful to you.

Grant that the moments I have squandered in my past life may be always present to my mind together with a horror for my sins, even though I would die of sorrow on their account if this is not opposed to your Holy Will. And may I henceforth, aided by Your grace, make a better use of the time that is still left to me.

Deprive me, my God, of all earthly and perishable goods by detaching me entirely from all creatures and from myself, so that I may no longer be attached to anything but you alone. And with my mind and heart filled only with You may I live always in your presence.

Teach me, my God, to beg of You most fervently that grace, as well as the grace to endure criticisms and sufferings. In this way, Divine Master, may I

render myself worthy to obtain from Your infinite goodness Your holy love, the love of the Blessed Virgin, and the grace of knowing and fulfilling Your holy will with perfect resignation. May I be ready to suffer death on the gallows or the rack rather than deliberately commit even one small venial sin. I beg You, my God, to humble me in every other way you wish, for, as long as I do not offend you, I shall be content.

I ask all these graces from You, my God and my All, not only through the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, which I hope to hear by Your grace, and through the little prayers I address to You. But I also ask for them through the Precious Blood which my loving Saviour Jesus Christ has deigned to shed on the Cross, through all the holy sacrifices that have been offered to You until now, by those now being offered and those that will be ever offered to You.

I ask these graces from You also, my God, by all the Holy Communions that have been received in the past, those that are being received today and will be received even until the end of the world, by all the holy prayers which have been addressed to You, are being addressed to You today or will ever be addressed to You.

Allow me, my God, to join my intention to that of all those holy persons for whom I ask You to be, as You are for me, a God of mercy now and for all eternity, through the Precious Blood which my Lord Jesus Christ, my dear and only love, deigned to pour out for us. And I ask the Blessed Virgin to offer it to You together with our hearts in order that the power and the merits of this Precious Blood be efficaciously applied to us. Amen.

APPENDIX 7



Claude Poullart des Places — “*Servant of God*”

On October 12th, 2004, Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, the Archbishop of Paris, issued a decree establishing a diocesan tribunal to examine the cause for canonization of our founder, Claude Poullart des Places. As a result, he can now be given the title of “*Servant of God*.” The cause was opened in the Archdiocese of Paris on October 1st, 1989. Favourable reports were subsequently received from experts designated to examine his writings.

Fr. Jean Savoie, C.S.Sp., the Postulator for the cause, is once more asking all confreres to help advance the cause by sending him their own personal testimonies.

The following will be sought from documents and testimonies given:

- The life of the servant of God — what he did, what he wrote, what he founded;
- His heroic virtues:
 - Theological virtues, faith, hope, love of God, love of neighbour;
 - Cardinal virtues, prudence, justice, temperance, perseverance;
 - Charismatic and extraordinary gifts;
 - Reputation for sanctity — during his life, at the moment of death, after his death;
 - Grace; and supernatural occurrences attributed to the Servant of God.

Jean Savoie is hoping that a considerable number of Spiritans will write one or two pages describing what Claude Poullart means for them. He is also anxious to draw up a list of any writings that refer to him:

- Books and articles;
- Conferences, articles, prayers, poems etc. on Poullart des Places;
- Streets, houses, associations that bear his name;
- Graces, favours, “miracles” attributed to the Servant of God

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A role model for modern youth

A handsome son of a rich and influential father, a born aristocrat who struck down with his sword a commoner challenging his rank and privilege, a brilliant student who at 22 qualified as a lawyer... The world was at his feet, but Claude Poullart des Places decided to become a priest.

Shocked by the dreadful conditions of the working classes, this young aristocrat opted for the poor. He taught street children to read and write. He opened a hostel for other seminarians who couldn't afford room and board at the seminary. Little did he guess that his poor living quarters would become the first home of a new international missionary Congregation and that he himself at the age of 24 would become possibly the youngest ever founder of such a Congregation.

Two years after his ordination Claude contracted pleurisy and died at the age of 30. At his own request he was buried in a pauper's grave, with not even a tombstone to mark the spot.

Three hundred years later the inspiration he gave still lives on in the Congregation he founded — the Spiritans — working today in Africa and Asia, Europe and the Americas, Australia and Oceania.

