

Openness to the Spirit
Claude François Poullart des Places
(1679 – 1709)



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Openness to the Spirit is a defining characteristic of Spiritan life and mission. It has been so since April 12, 1703 when Claude Poullart des Places, with twelve poor scholars dedicated themselves to the Holy Spirit.

Discerning the Spirit's direction for our lives and mission plays a key role in Spiritan decision making. Rather than follow our own plans we open ourselves to God's plan for us. There is evidence of this in the decisions Claude made in his short life of 30 years. I want to present Claude in three dimensions. As artists sometimes paint a landscape in three parts to give depth to the flat canvas, so I wish to portray the "life scape" of Claude Poullart des Places in three parts: background, middle ground and foreground.

The account of Claude's family ancestry, parents, and growing up in Catholic Brittany provides the background. His choice to attend Louis-Le-Grand Seminary in Paris and entry into the world of the poor scholars he met there and chose to help is the middle ground. The foreground of our portrait of this extraordinary young man, without whom we would not have a Duquesne University and we would not be here today, is his decision to go beyond helping to living with and dedicating his whole life to service of the poor scholars.

This sketch of the life of the Spiritan founder may prompt in us a reflection on our openness to the Spirit at important moments in our lives. It may help us discern the background, middle ground and foreground of our own life story.

The Background: Rennes, 1679 – 1697

Ancestors

Ancestry is important. Where we come from, or more accurately, how we hear the story of our origins helps shape our view of the world and the place we take in it. Most life-changing decisions originate in life experience itself. Claude's struggle between being either a priest or a counsellor in the local parliament of Brittany emanates from his family history.

There are three significant ancestral influences at play in the imagination and thinking of young Claude: his father's passion to restore his family's noble status; his mother's saintly devotion to others; and the revival movement at play in the Breton church of the seventeenth century.

François-Claude

Claude's father, François-Claude, was member of a family stripped of its noble status when King Louis XIV conducted a campaign of verification of hereditary titles, which concluded in 1674, only five years before the birth of Claude. Written proofs (marriage contracts, land documents) proving noble rank were required to substantiate the claim of nobility. Failure to provide such documents resulted in a loss of noble status and the privileges attached to it, particularly the exemption from the payment of certain taxes.

The Des Places family could boast many significant ancestors, including a former Archbishop of Rennes. Perhaps François-Claude placed his greatest hopes for the verification of hereditary title on his ancestor, Geoffrey Poullart, who, in the fourteenth century fought for the Blois family (pro French) against the Montfort (pro English) for control of the Duchy of Brittany. Breton folklore remembers the Blois faction as all local gentry and aristocracy performing their proper social duty to protect the people. Whereas the Montfort faction is portrayed as a mélange of foreign mercenaries in the pay of the English and brigands who only torment the poor people.

We can speculate that perhaps Claude François' ambition to restore his family's entitlement to nobility played some part in his choice of a wife. He looked to the prestigious noble family of the Count de Marbeuf and, in particular, Jeanne Le Meneust who the Marbeufs adopted as a young girl following the death of

her impoverished father. She earned her keep by caring for the children. Following a courtship of some nine years, they married in 1677. Two years later, on February 26, she gave birth to a boy and had him baptized the following day. His godfather was none other than Count de Marbeuf, president of the parliament of Brittany.

Jeanne Le Meneust

Jeanne was a devoted Catholic, and, unlike her husband, a noted benefactor to the poor of Rennes. Her cousin, Fr. Pierre Choux de la Maisonneuve, presided at the wedding. She consecrated her new born to the Virgin Mary and dressed him in white in honor of Our Lady until the age of seven. An account of Claude's childhood by his earliest biographer, Fr. Pierre Thomas, suggests that his mother's piety greatly influenced him. Theirs was a small family with Claude's sister born some eighteen months after him with the Count again standing as godfather.

Jeanne also shared her husband's ambition for her new family. She was an industrious woman who worked hard with her husband to build up strong business interests in Rennes. They had in mind that Claude, their only son, would succeed his father as barrister in parliament and, through a second generation of family public service, have the family's noble title restored.

The Church in Brittany



The sixteenth century was a time of religious turmoil in Brittany as in other parts of France. The expulsion of the Huguenots from France in 1598 and the Catholic counter-reformation heralded a new century of religious vitality for the Breton Church. Although he never set foot in Brittany the spiritual doctrine of Jesuit, Fr. Louis Lallement (1588 – 1635), provided the basis for the renewal promoted by the Jesuits and other priests throughout Brittany. An association of priests, called “The Priests of the Holy Spirit”, propagated devotion to the Holy Spirit according to Lallement’s ideas through preaching parish missions and giving retreats.

It is difficult to over-emphasize the importance of Lallement to the Catholic Counter Reformation in Brittany at the beginning of the 17th century. Some commentators compare it with the role played by Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross in the Spanish Counter Reformation at the latter end of the 16th century.

A Fr. Champion, one of the leaders of the association, compiled and published Lallement’s doctrine during the time Claude attended the Jesuit Collège St. Thomas. That was from 1690 to 1697. Fr. Seán Farragher a noted Spiritan scholar in his biography of Claude, entitled, ‘Led by the Spirit’, points out the formative effect Lallement’s teaching on the Holy Spirit had on the

young Claude that is illustrated by texts from Champion such as,

“In order to attract people to God, they have to be led to a great esteem and love for the interior life and to allow themselves to be led always by the Holy Spirit, with no other aim than to please God. If they do not arrive at that point, they will never attain a stable and complete virtue.”¹

Farragher points to Claude’s choice of Pentecost to mark the initiation of his community of scholars in 1703 and the opening words of his rule, “The students will have a great devotion to the Holy Spirit, to whom they are consecrated in a special way.”

Claude’s Jesuit professors also made a deep impression on him, as did a young parish priest, Fr. Julien Bellier, who involved him in his youth group visiting the poor and sick in the local hospital. His relationship with the Jesuits in Rennes would continue in Paris, as would his desire to care for the poor.

Middle Ground: From Rennes to Louis-Le-Grand Seminary 1697–1703



Claude's parents were not a little surprised and disappointed when, in 1697, following a retreat when he finished school he informed them that he wanted to become a priest and so proceed to Paris and study at the Sorbonne, the theological college of

the University of Paris. Taken aback his father pleaded with him to defer this decision and study law in the nearby city of Nantes, 60 miles distant from Rennes. His argument, which Poullart accepted, was that the study of law would be both a good preparation for what he intended Poullart to become, a parliamentarian, and what Poullart wanted to become, a priest.

On return from Nantes in 1700, Claude had a remarkable experience. His mother presented him with a lawyer's gown. He put it on, and what he saw in the mirror ignited in him again the doubts he had about how he would live the rest of his life. He spent the remainder of 1700 and the first half of 1701, at home

endeavoring to interest himself in his father's many businesses.

Finally, he decided to make an eight day Ignatian Retreat to make up his mind. Fortunately, he recorded his reflections in two notebooks entitled, 'Reflections on the Truths of Religion' and, 'Choice of a State of Life'. He considered three possible states of life for himself, that of religious life, the priesthood, or to remain in the world. Weighing up his strengths and weaknesses in a very honest fashion, he could not decide. Religious life would remove him entirely from the world and that would make too great a demand on him. The priesthood would provide an avenue for study and to impress people as well as serve God. The worldly professions of soldier, courtesan and financier held little appeal for him. That of a magistrate – weighing up what was just and unjust did appeal. Speaking to his soul he said, "I believe you would like the law, and that, following your natural bent, you would defend the poor, the widow and the orphans, when right is on their side."

Claude recognized a melancholy at work in him that precluded a decisive choice. He feared this indecision and prayed, "Destroy in me the worldly attachments that cling to me everywhere. Once I have chosen a state, let me no longer have any other thought than to please you." His writing ends with the desire to find one who will guide him towards the right decision. This must have happened as the retreat ended with a firm resolve to be a priest.

Seeing that he had made up his mind, his parents acceded to his decision to be a priest. The road to Paris and study for the priesthood was open to him.

Decisions are often connected, with one decision leading to another. Claude's decision to study for the priesthood at the Jesuit College of Louis-Le-Grand rather than pursue a doctorate at The Sorbonne, the theological college of the University of Paris, laid the ground for his life-changing encounter with poor scholars.

Claude's first months in Louis-Le-Grand confirmed his decision. His strong sense of the presence of God convinced him that he was in the right place. We get a sense of his piety in a few surviving pages from his daily timetable. They detail the following spiritual exercises: Morning Prayer and Night Prayer; a prayer to the Holy Trinity which he composed himself; a prayer to be recited each time he entered and left his room; prayers for his visit to the Blessed Sacrament which he made three times a day.

Claude could apply Lallement's spiritual doctrine to his life experience at that time:

“When a soul has given itself up to the leading of the Holy Spirit, he raises it little by little, and directs it. At the first it knows not whither it is going, but gradually the interior light illuminates it, and enables it to behold all its own actions, and the governance of God therein, so that it has scarcely aught else to do than to let God work in it and by it

whatever he pleases; thus, it makes wonderful progress.”²

This first decision of where to study and live put him in contact with the situation of poor clerical students, who he may otherwise not have met. Louis-Le-Grand had accommodation for 600 students. Claude was fortunate to be one of these with bed and board provided. However, the College also had another 2400 scholars who, although they attended classes free of charge as directed by the Council of Trent, had to find their own accommodation in a very crowded Paris and provide for their own needs. This was particularly difficult for scholars from poor families and without a patron.

Claude became friends with one of these poor scholars, the 16-year-old Jean-Baptiste Faulconnier. How could he enjoy such privilege while Jean-Baptiste is so deprived? He drew from the modest allowance of 800 Francs his father gave him (approximately \$2960 in today’s money) and provided lodging and food for Jean-Baptiste.

Through this relationship, he came to know others in the same predicament and was resolved to help them as well. As the number increased, he regularly collected leftovers from the College kitchen to feed seven or eight of them in a room provided by the seminary. He would visit them in their over-crowded and rat-infested lodgings. How could they attend to their studies and mature in their spiritual lives in such conditions? More

and more he wanted to share his privilege with these highly motivated and struggling seminarians.

Foreground: Le Gros Chapelet and Rue Neuve St. Etienne 1703–1709



Sainte Étienne des Grès

The poor scholars wanted more from Poullart than just handouts. They wanted him to live with them so that they could become like him. In response, Poullart resolved to leave the comfort of his seminary dwelling and rented accommodation nearby, ‘Le Gros Chapelet’ at rue des Cordiers, and brought together under one roof those he was helping. It was from this initiative that the first Spiritan Community was founded on Pentecost Sunday (May 27) 1703. Claude was convinced that this is what God wanted him to do. We know this from an earlier conversation that year, in late April with his friend Grignon de Montfort who visited him in Paris. Fr. Besnard, de Montfort’s biographer, recounted what Claude said at that meeting.

“You know that for some time now I have been trying to help the poor students so that they can continue their studies. I know

several excellent young men who, because of poverty, are not able to develop their talents, which would be so useful to the Church. I would like to help by gathering them together under one roof and I am convinced that this is what God wants me to do.”³

The personal cost for Claude was considerable. He intentionally cast off his privileged status to share fully in the life of his new community. He wrote in his rule for the community that at meals, “The Superior shall not be served more than the others” [No.67].

But all was not well. The fervor he had experienced in his first years at Louis-Le-Grand had waned. The old melancholy returned. He began to doubt his motives for what he was doing. Was he truly serving God by agreeing to form this community? He was preoccupied with managing its affairs and had little time for prayer and reflection. He longed for some peace and quiet. His own studies were suffering as he prepared for minor orders. Was he in over his head? Can we call this “burn out”?

At Christmas-time, 1704, Claude made a retreat in the nearby Jesuit Novitiate. Fortunately, we have a record of his struggle at that time as he recorded his thoughts, entitled ‘Reflections on the Past’. Looking back on the year, he laments the loss of fervor that he experienced when he was in the seminary. In this time of spiritual dryness, he remembered the blissful days of affective prayer at Louis-le-Grand. His new situation did not allow for regularity in his prayers. He had returned to

the vainglory of his youthful days seeking the esteem of the world. He accused himself of being “only a mask of devotion” and a shadow of what he once was. He left “solitude too quickly” jumping into so much external activity, “trying to keep the work going for the poor students.”

He recognized that making the retreat at a time when he did not think of making one was providential. It was also providential that he reached out to a well-known spiritual director, Fr. Simon Gourdan of the Abbey of Saint Victor who helped restore his courage and peace of mind.

The overriding desire of Claude was to walk in the way the Spirit marked out for him. The retreat ended with a resolution to continue in solidarity with the poor scholars and to expand the work. In 1705 he recruited a family friend from his days in Rennes, the newly ordained Michel-Vincent Le Barbier, and sub deacon Jacques Hyacinth Garnier, to assist him in providing for and managing this community of scholars. Also in 1705, they moved to a larger house on the rue Neuve Saint Etienne, to accommodate the growing community of 70 students.



Four years later, Claude was dead, but what he began continued and grew into the Congregation that we know today as the Spiritans. Guided by the Holy Spirit, Claude made a fundamental option for the poor. That was over three hundred years

ago. That option continues to operate as Spiritans, guided by the Holy Spirit, commit themselves to solidarity with the poor in our place and time.

¹Quoted in Vincent O'Toole's translation (2013) of Joseph Michel's biography of Claude Poullart des Places. 70.

²Farragher, 'Led by the Spirit' (1992) 126.

³Quoted in Vincent O'Toole's translation (2013) of Joseph Michel's biography of Claude Poullart des Places. 60.