

**Simplicity in Nicholas Roland
and in the Congregation of the Sisters
of the Child Jesus of Rheims (1/3)**

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Founded by Canon Nicholas Roland in 1678, the congregation of the Sisters of the Child Jesus of Rheims today considers the virtue of simplicity as the very essence of the spirit handed on to the Sisters by their founder. The recent Constitutions, as we shall see, confer on simplicity a leading role. The Sisters hold that on this point they are in continuity with the congregation's way of life from the beginning. Yet a quick study of the different Constitutions promulgated throughout the centuries leaves the reader questioning. The first Constitutions were far from stressing simplicity so much. And even if one can notice a progressive evolution in the texts, the fact remains that the Rule of life of 1979 gives simplicity a very different place. One has therefore to ask whether this change, which may be qualified as radical, is really faithful to what the founder himself wanted. The aim of this brief study is to try to answer this question.

**I. The virtue of simplicity and its evolution
in the different normative texts of the Congregation.**

I shall begin by describing the way the virtue of simplicity evolved over the centuries in the normative texts of the congregation. Which are these texts? First of all, the Constitutions. The first date from 1683. They were in force for more than two hundred years and were replaced in 1896. However, a text written in 1861, bearing no approbation, entitled "Guide of the Sisters of the Child Jesus", and drawn up in the style of constitutions, was probably a Rule intended to supplement the text of 1683 until new Constitutions were established. The latter governed the life of the congregation until 1936. This later text became obsolete in 1967-69, when Constitutions were set up "ad experimentum" until the actual Rule of life was drawn up in 1979.

Another type of text has to be borne in mind: the "Usages", an important corpus drawn up at the end of the 17th century. It gathers together many customs in use in the congregation that could not find a place in the Constitutions because of their detailed and meticulous character. But there are good reasons for thinking that this text likewise had as aim to maintain in the Congregation the spirit of the founder. Particular attention needs then to be paid to what it says about simplicity. Finally, Nicholas Roland's own texts will evidently serve as reference throughout this study. (The quotes from his texts are taken from J. Leflon's edition of 1963; quotes from the first Constitutions and the Usages are based on the research diskettes edited by the Abbey of Maredsous in 1966.)

The first Constitutions of 1683.

In the first Constitutions given by the archbishop of Rheims, Mgr Charles-Maurice Le Tellier in 1683, in chapter 4 entitled "of the Virtues necessary for the Sisters", the virtue of poverty takes precedence. It is considered as the foundation of the others because it corresponds to the first vow. It is clear, then, that the intention was to situate the new congregation within the religious life without first distinguishing it by its special spirit derived from the Founder. No doubt the preceding chapters on the members (ch. 1), the spiritual exercises (ch. 2) and the external exercises (ch. 3), express the specificity of the congregation, but through its aims, its practices and its activities. As for the virtues, those come first that are proper to all religious life and which correspond to the three vows. Poverty, in fact, is immediately followed by chastity and obedience.

It is precisely with reference to obedience that the virtue of simplicity begins to show through. The obedience of the religious should be simple, that is, practised "without examining the reasons for the order given them" (CO:T4, 7). Its other qualities are sincerity (obeying from mind and heart) and universality (obeying in everything). After obedience comes humility, for "obedience is preserved only through humility" (CO:T4, 8). Simplicity appears next, in article 7, linked with opening one's heart. It is proposed as "one of the signs that they (the religious) can give of their obedience and humility". It consists essentially in "revealing to their priest Superior and Mother Superior with simplicity and with trust the state of their interior, telling them their troubles and temptations, the graces received and their progress in the spiritual life, their difficulties and their needs whether of soul or body. This practice, so often approved by all the spiritual Fathers is a marvellous help and a felt consolation for those who wish to go to God by the straightest and shortest way. And for that purpose, the Sisters will do well to go to their Superior once a month in order to disclose to her their interior" (CO:T4,9). The place and the nature of simplicity are therefore clearly spelt out. This virtue is closely connected to opening one's heart in trust, which is a means of living in humility and so keep oneself in obedience.

Such view is certainly not foreign to the spirit of Nicholas Roland. He more than once established a close link between simplicity and openness of heart. In his letters on spiritual direction, for instance, he writes: "Speak of what concerns you with simplicity" (L6, p.24), and again, "Disclose the views you have at the time, with simplicity" (L19, p.34). Similarly in the *Avis et Maximes*: "Never look on anyone but with the eye of faith, and act with simplicity and openness of heart..." (AM3,56), "Hold your heart in your hands like a censer of perfume before God, and pour it out like water in simplicity into that of your Superiors" (AM3, p.57). Those texts of his should be placed in the same context where he recommends being simple in one's words: "Avoid all studied words. Maintain Christian simplicity in everything and everywhere" (AM1,4, p.60). This little significant episode is told of him: "One day someone taking direction from him said to him: 'Father, I find myself unable to tell you what troubles me'. It seemed to him so far removed from the simplicity God asks of a soul that he took him to task and told him that he found these studied words unacceptable, and sent him off with this humiliation, so far removed was his simplicity from show and semblance" (MN2, 9, p. 203).

Guiding the Sisters from 1861

A fairly important change can be noticed in the "Guide of the Sisters of the Child Jesus" published in 1861. It is considered in article 6, entitled "Simplicity and Opening one's heart." *The two spiritual attitudes are therefore very much linked together in this text, too. However, simplicity is*

described more broadly and in more theological terms than in the Constitutions of 1683: “Simplicity is a virtue which makes us seek God in self-forgetfulness. Like a small child full of innocence and candour, the simple religious knows neither duplicity nor singularity in her conduct; neither artifice nor roundabout ways; she does not examine what the others are doing, she does not worry about what others think of her, but she seeks God, cherishes his divine presence and has a perfect trust in him. This brings her an unflinching calm and peace in the various events of life.” Opening one’s heart only comes next as a means of acquiring and preserving the virtue of simplicity. This is not a very different angle from that of the Constitutions of 1683. What is new is the ample description of the virtue of simplicity as a relationship with God and the link made with spiritual childhood.

The Constitutions of 1896.

The Constitutions and Rules of 1896, adapted according to the apostolic decree of January 17th 1890 and given by Mgr Langénieux on January 13th 1896 use exactly the same terms. The text is identical in its first part with respect to the virtue of simplicity. But then, where the 1861 text says: “The Sisters, in order to acquire and preserve the precious virtue of simplicity will do well to expose to the priest Superior and the Mother Superior the state of their interior”, the Constitutions of 1896 note opening the heart as one of the occasions when simplicity is exercised: “This simplicity should be particularly shown in the manifestation or rendering account of their conscience that novices usually make to their probation Mistress, and the professed to their Superior”. The difference is fairly subtle, but it the intrinsic character of the link between simplicity and opening one’s heart is a little more blurred in this third text. From being virtually identified with one another in the Constitutions of 1683, they become progressively distinct. Opening the heart becomes a means of acquiring simplicity in the guide of 1861, then in the Constitutions of 1896 opening the heart, while remaining associated in the same article with simplicity, becomes merely an occasion when it is particularly exercised.

On the other hand, the nature of simplicity takes on richness in the way it is expressed. It is the search for God in trust and self-forgetfulness, it goes along with the spirit of childhood, it is the contrary of duplicity, artifice and roundabout ways.

The Constitutions of June 25th 1936, given by Mgr Suhard, repeat exactly the same terms in article 7.

These important modifications with reference to the first Constitutions do not constitute a novelty compared with the thought of Nicholas Roland, on the contrary. In letter 30 occurs the statement: “Abandon yourself to the God’s guidance. Go to him with great simplicity, without turning back on yourself. Don’t ponder over your gains and losses.” Here, simplicity is clearly seen as the right relationship with God. It is well known how much the 17th century (though the expression is already to be found in Ignatius of Loyola) insisted on the importance of going “straight to God”. The one who goes into soul-searching, who lets himself be encumbered by himself in his relationship with God, cannot go straight to him. The following maxim has to be understood in this sense: “Avoid the illusion common to people who are seen as being spiritual, and that is a certain cleverness, a roundabout attitude, equivocation, self-interest, smooth practices; people attached to their inclinations without wanting to constrain themselves in anything and within whom corruption of spirit breeds. Avoid these pitfalls, walk in simplicity, aim at oneness of view towards God” (AM4,42, p. 96).

In the *Usages* it is stressed several times that simplicity is indeed the spirit of the Congregation and that it is opposed to the spirit of the world, which means that it is in agreement with the Spirit of God and therefore allows relations with God. U.O., T29.1. for instance, recommends “being filled with the spirit that has always been impressed on the Sisters since their foundation and which is a spirit of humility and simplicity, entirely removed from and opposed to the spirit of the world”. Likewise, U.O., T63,2-3 advises the sisters to speak with discernment, and it adds: “If this discernment is necessary, frankness is equally so. Hence they will try to show in their words a great simplicity that will make known that the Spirit of God reigns in them, avoiding all concealment and artifice. In this way they will win more souls to God than by fine speeches and studied words.” Simplicity in this text appears therefore as the touchstone of the presence of the Holy Spirit in these religious. Relationship with God is therefore directly involved and at the same time the apostolic benefit that can be drawn from it is stressed. We may note in passing that the *Usages* speak of the spirit of humility and of simplicity as “the spirit that has always been impressed on the Sisters since their foundation”. Humility and simplicity are therefore highlighted with reference to the will of the founder.

The attitude of simplicity has evidently some connection with the spirit of childhood. The child is spontaneously artless and trusting. Nicholas Roland himself paid all the more attention to this because he was founding the Congregation for the service of poor children. He says explicitly in his Advice to people in community: “Always have the intention of pleasing and satisfying God by doing by obedience all that you do. Love this dependence and look upon it as the sole means for reaching perfection with facility. Obey without answering back, without delay, with joy and simplicity, like a little child” (AM1,20, Leflon, p. 70)

In the *Usages* at least one similar observation is made about the relations between the Sisters. They are asked “to bear with one another with cheerfulness and openness in a spirit of simplicity proper to souls consecrated to the childhood of the Son of God. In this way they will draw down his blessings on their house and on their work and will begin even now that happy association they are to continue in eternity” (U.O. T49, 1.1).

From this brief analysis of the texts up to the Constitutions of 1936 we can draw the following conclusions. First of all, there is distinct evolution between the manner of speaking of simplicity in the first Constitutions and what we read in the later ones. We see simplicity less and less identified with opening of the heart (even if the latter remains one of its essential expressions) and becoming more and more a preferential way of being in relationship with God and the others, a witness to the action of the Spirit and a manifestation of the spirit of childhood. This evolution, we saw, agrees with the spirit of Nicholas Roland. It also finds support in the text of the *Usages*.

Whatever the evolution, the guide of 1681, the Constitutions of 1896 and of 1936 keep in fact to the same structure as the Constitutions of 1683, that is, that simplicity takes only a low ranking in the list of virtues, since it is preceded by the virtues linked to the vows: poverty, chastity and obedience, then by other virtues such as humility or again, depending on the case, charity, modesty, love of silence, mortification. Now it is precisely this order that is completely changed by the latest Constitutions.

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