

Simplicity in Nicholas Roland and in the Congregation of the Sisters of the Child Jesus of Rheims (2/3)

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The actual Constitutions

In the ad experimentum Constitutions of 1967-1969, modified slightly in 1973 and abrogated in 1979 to be replaced by the new Rule of life, the change is radical. The first part is called "*Spirit and finality of the Congregation*". It includes a first article "*Entering into the Father's plan*," and a second article "*Aim of the Congregation*." The Congregation wishes for its part to answer God the Father's appeal to all Christians in revealing to them the mystery of his will in Christ Jesus and signing them with the seal of the Spirit to enable them to live by this will. What, then, is the part played by the Congregation of the Sisters of the Child Jesus in the carrying out of God's plan according to the guidelines given by its founder, Nicholas Roland? The text goes on: "*Vowed to the Child Jesus, the Sisters are especially faithful to let him live in them the mystery of his incarnation and of his infancy*" One may note the very French School tonality of this text. The Sisters of the Child Jesus have therefore as their specific vocation to let Jesus live in them today the mystery of his Incarnation and of his infancy. The text continues: "*In their whole life and action, they will let him reproduce in them his filial attitude of simplicity that will lead them to seek God first: 'Seeking God, walking always in his presence, abandoning oneself to his guidance, going to him with great simplicity without turning back on themselves', and which will then make them keep close to him. Having only God in view and staying close to him, 'they use means as means', with attention and fidelity to the interior movements of grace.*"

In the Spirit of Christ, the only Son, they will cultivate this simplicity which is a gift of God, "*an emanation of the Spirit of his Son, who, throughout his life, had only one aim: the glory of his Father.*"

It is clear that the authors of this text intended from the start to stress the spirit which animates the Congregation. God's plan is to be fulfilled today. The Sisters of the Child Jesus take part in this fulfilment by living the mystery of childhood. And the mystery of childhood itself is accomplished by the virtue of simplicity. This is a moral virtue rooted nevertheless in the theological life, since it is ultimately the profound and direct orientation, straight on, of human life towards God. And this derives from Christ's living it in us now, he who practised it himself in the Spirit. It is therefore communicated to us by the Spirit of Jesus, of which it is an emanation. This latter expression is moreover an explicit quote from Nicholas Roland.

The Rule of life produced by the Chapter of 1979 puts things even clearer, since this document begins by simplicity. The Chapter explicitly intended to take n° 17 of the "*Avis aux personnes régulières*" dealing with simplicity and put it at the head of the Rule of life, considering it thereby as utterly basic to the spirit of Nicholas Roland. One of the points insisted on, in fact, by the Rule of life is the return to the texts of the origins, of which those published here are acknowledged as constitutional. Now the essential of these texts is in fact to be found in "*Little Treatise on the virtues most necessary for the Sisters.*" But in this Little Treatise, there is no question of the virtue of simplicity. It is, on the

other hand, mentioned in n° 17 of the "Advice to persons in religion". If this n° 17 was intentionally taken out and given the place it now holds at the beginning of the Rule of life, it is certainly because simplicity was held as being at the heart of the spirit of the founder, according to the intuition already set in motion in the Constitutions of 1967-68.

We can now rephrase our opening question within the context just clarified: By taking this option, were the Sisters of the Child Jesus being faithful to Nicholas Roland?

It is evidently impossible to go back to the origins, just as it is impossible to be perfectly consistent with the founder. We are faced with a set of texts some of which moreover were not written by him directly while others are testimonies to his life. Through these texts as we read them today, we encounter something of himself, his thought, his intuitions, but he continually escapes us, and we cannot put questions to him.

In a text that begins with this foreword: "*Recommendations given viva voce by the late Mr Roland, our worthy founder, for the Sisters of this community. These are his very own words that were noted down the year of his death*", one may read: "*I wish to make clear that the spirit of this House is a spirit of simplicity and straightforwardness, and of disinterestedness whether towards spiritual or temporal things*" (Lefton, p. 88). These are the opening words of a set of counsels in which, clearly, Nicholas Roland committed his authority: "*I wish to make clear*". He therefore highlighted simplicity, linked to straightforwardness and disinterestedness, in a declaration made a few months before his death, and presenting it as the first of the spiritual attitudes he expected of the Sisters of the Child Jesus. Does that suffice to make it the touchstone of the Congregation? We need to tread this ground warily. In the first place because in this text simplicity, which certainly comes first, is accompanied by other virtues and attitudes. Secondly, because we know that in the "*Little Treatise on the Virtues most necessary for the Sisters*", the founder said nothing about simplicity. Nicholas Roland was well aware of the spiritual tradition in the matter of virtues. He knew that charity is the first and the queen of them, and that humility is considered as the foundation of all the virtues. He says so clearly, in fact, in the Little Treatise concerning humility. It is "*one of the fruits of the Incarnation of the Son of God and one of the virtues he has taught us most by word and example. It is the basis of Christian perfection. Without it the other virtues would have no solidity and the best works would easily become a matter for sin*" (Little treatise, p. 102). Moreover, in the first chapter of the book of "*Usages*", what is put forward is charity when treating of the aims and spirit of the community.

There is no question, therefore, of imagining that Nicholas Roland, at the end of his life, when he qualified the spirit of the Congregation as being simplicity, straightforwardness and disinterestedness, wanted to take liberties with the classic body of virtues. No more than the Sisters, we can add, who drew up the Constitutions of 1979. It is in no wise a matter of dethroning charity as the keystone to the edifice of virtues, nor of toppling humility as the cornerstone of the same edifice. Simplicity would be rather the special tonality for living the other virtues, the specific character affecting the Sisters' whole life, in the sense that everything should be done with simplicity.

If such is the case, one could then effect the following re-reading. Nicholas Roland, in the last year of his life, bequeathed to the Sisters of the Child Jesus his deep attachment to simplicity (linked to straightforwardness, disinterestedness and other spiritual attitudes) that he had probably already often spoken about; the proof being the lengthy text of number 17 of the "*Avis aux personnes régulières*" and the scattered remarks in his correspondence. It should not be forgotten that a few months from his death he went through a very tough period in Paris during which he tried without success to obtain from the King recognition of his Congregation. He returned to Rheims physically exhausted but spiritually detached from all human success and abandoned into God's hands. He died without having worked out a normative text for the community which did not yet have official existence. The Constitutions of 1683, perhaps drawn up by Saint John Baptist de La Salle, a person directed by and a follower of Nicholas Roland, mentions simplicity but without giving it any particular

importance. On the other hand, the «*Usages*» point out that what has always been sought is to impress on the Sisters the spirit of simplicity (as well as of humility) «*since their foundation*», which certainly seems to indicate a special insistence of the founder. The «*Guide for the Sisters*» of 1861 and the Constitutions of 1896 give simplicity a more theological dimension (as I have stressed, simplicity appears as having priority as a relationship with God, and on the other hand is viewed as an expression of spiritual childhood). These two texts reflect more the thought of Nicholas Roland himself, as has already been said and that the remainder of this study will show again. The Constitutions actually in force have brought to its term a movement set in motion long before.

The likelihood of this possible re-reading of the history of the virtue of simplicity in the Congregation of the Sisters of the Child Jesus of Rheims should become more evident after the study of number 17 of the «*Avis aux personnes régulières*», to which I will now turn.

II - The virtue of simplicity in Nicholas Roland in no. 17 of the «*Avis aux personnes régulières*».

What will be shown essentially in this second part is how Nicholas Roland's thought on simplicity is deeply rooted in biblical tradition, particularly in that of the Wisdom books, that he interprets in a very personal way. It is this rootedness that gives his teaching on simplicity a theological dimension special to him.

1. Simplicity, straightforwardness and disinterestedness

Before entering properly speaking into the study of number 17, some rapid remarks can be made on the link stressed above between simplicity, straightforwardness and disinterestedness. Here I am making use to some extent of the indications of the Dictionnaire de Spiritualité under the article Simplicity (V.15, col. 892-899).

Perfection, integrity and uprightness are the characteristics of Old Testament man, the man who seeks Yahweh, who walks in his presence, as pleases him. We can here bring to mind Psalm 15, 1-2: «*Yahweh, who will dwell in your tent, who will dwell on your holy mountain? He who walks perfectly and acts justly*». We have here two roots, the root *tmm* which indicates integrity and perfection (second meaning), whence is derived the adjective *tamin*, and the root *sdq* which indicates justice. The root *tmm* can be found in association with the root *ysr*, which indicates uprightness, in Psalm 37, 37: «*Look on the one who is perfect, see the upright man*». Now in the Greek version of Aquila, *tamim*, perfect, is sometimes translated by simple, in Greek *haplous*. Translating by simple points out better the attitude of the heart which is at the core of perfection. When Nicholas Roland recommends «*walking always in his presence*» (Leflon, p. 52), and «*going to him with great simplicity, without soul-searching*» (L.30, Leflon, p. 46), he is very much in line with the biblical thought that makes Wisdom say, in Wis 1,1: «*Love justice, you who judge the earth, have straightforward thoughts on the Lord and seek him in simplicity of heart*». Here again, simplicity and uprightness go together. Nicholas Roland himself brings them together in number 17: «*For God is the protector of the simple and of those who are upright of heart*» (Leflon, p. 67). So he is making use of a biblical expression.

Disinterestedness goes hand in hand with simplicity and uprightness. But with the introduction of this new parameter, we are still very much in line with biblical thought. In Mt6, 22-23, the sound eye is in fact an eye that is simple, *haplous*, the mark of the man wholly fixed on God without soul-searching. Simplicity is therefore opposed to doublemindedness, to the bargainer who wishes to have his sights on God and on created things at the same time. Spiritual people of the 17th century would say that he does not go straight to God. The idea of looking involves that of momentum: the man who makes straight for God with generosity is a simple

man, just as is the one who gives to his brothers, as, for instance, in Rom 10,8: «*Let he who gives, give with simplicity*» (cf 2Co 8,2 and 9, 10-13). By being disinterested, the simple man takes nothing away from God (or his brothers), otherwise he becomes doubleminded. Nicholas Roland says just this in a maxim: «*Walk in simplicity, strive for singleness in looking towards God*» (AM, Leflon, p. 96).

The Bible also tells us that it is indeed firstly God who is simple (Jm 1,5). Undivided, he bestows himself in the most perfect simplicity to which man tries to respond by his own simplicity, reflecting the simplicity of God. We shall see further how Nicholas Roland reveals this dimension in his writings.

The theme of simplicity is linked in the Bible to the discernment of spirits. The simple man's way of looking is transparent, his heart is pure; God's light shines in him. As he is fixed on God, he discerns what is of God. In 2Co, 11:2-3, simplicity is opposed to the dividedness of thought and mind which would lead to preaching «*another Jesus*», «*receiving another Spirit*», «*another Gospel*». This aspect is also found in a writing of the 1st century, the Testament of the 12 Patriarchs. Simplicity is presented there in opposition to doublemindedness, which is the work of the evil spirit. This text, moreover, places simplicity at the summit of the virtues, for the simple man is attentive only to the will of God and walks in uprightness of soul. The Shepherd of Hermas takes up the same theme: he opposes simplicity and *dipsychia*, that is the dividedness of the soul that lets itself be torn between the contrary tendencies of the two spirits, and does not leave all the room to the Lord.

It is clear, then, that the way Nicholas Roland speaks to us about simplicity is profoundly influenced by the mentality and texts of the Bible. It happens that in the latter, simplicity is not a moral virtue like the others. It has its origin in God himself, since God is simple, and it is a way of expressing the attitude of a man who is pleasing to God. It is easier then to understand how Nicholas Roland was led put it at the core of the spiritual orientation of the congregation of the Sisters of the Child Jesus.

Understanding simplicity in this biblical fashion is evidently not confined to Nicholas Roland. Some of his predecessors and contemporaries have quite the same view. They inherit moreover in doing so the eastern and western tradition. For the monks of the east, for instance, simplicity is linked with discernment. It is the purity of view which tends towards God without admixture, without doublemindedness. One should have, for instance, the simplicity of the dove and the prudence of the serpent with regard to evil. But it is also the generosity of a spirit that aims straight for God. Thus John Climacus says: «*Simplicity is a deep habit of the soul that excludes artifice and makes it immune to evil-mindedness*» (quoted in DS, V.15, col. 905). The author of the article, V. Deprez, calls it «*the spontaneous reaction of an upright and innocent nature without premeditation, like that of a child*» (idem). The same meaning is found in Guillaume de St Thierry, in the Middle Ages, in the West. «*Simplicity is properly speaking the will fundamentally turned towards God and asking of the Lord only one thing, seeking him with ardour, having no ambition to spread himself by taking on too much in the world*» (idem, col. 909).

Closer to Nicholas Roland we have St Francis de Sales: «*It is a very great and perfect simplicity that fixes deliberately its mind on God alone*» (Lettre 2584, quoted in DS, V.15, col. 914). Simplicity, in the bishop of Geneva's mind, is viewed very broadly. As in the Bible, it is not a virtue among others, but rather a way of living the other virtues: «*Simplicity is nothing but an act of charity pure and simple that has only one aim which is to acquire the love of God, and our soul is simple when we have no other aim in all that we do*» (Talk 12, quoted in DS, col. 914).

There is no need to continue quoting. Those that have just been mentioned, borrowed from many studies already effected show sufficiently that Nicholas Roland's originality does not arise from his insistence on the virtue of simplicity. It has a not inconsiderable place in the spiritual tradition he inherited and from which he took.

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