

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

**Fr. P.B. Pitaud, P.S.S.**

**2). Number 17 of the «Avis aux personnes régulières»  
and the Wisdom books.**

In what, then lies his originality? It resides, it seems to me, in his sapient interpretation of simplicity, as we shall now see by studying the first part of number 17 of the «*Avis aux personnes régulières*». This study will lead us to the following statement: For Nicholas Roland, simplicity is the Wisdom of the Sisters of the Child Jesus. To prove it, I shall not only compare the text of number 17 with the Wisdom texts, but equally set it alongside a text of Saint Vincent de Paul, on which, in my view, he depends and at the same time goes beyond it.

Saint Vincent de Paul gave several talks in 1659 on simplicity, prudence, gentleness, mortification and humility. The way he speaks of simplicity is most interesting when compared with Nicholas Roland's texts, especially n° 17 of the «*Avis aux personnes régulières*»: «*The simplicity of the dove consists in speaking quite simply, as one thinks, without useless reflections, and in acting artlessly, without disguise or artifice, looking to God alone. Each one accordingly tries to perform all his actions in the same spirit of simplicity, recalling that God is pleased to communicate himself to the simple and to reveal to them his secrets, which he hides from the wise and learned*» (Conférence of March 21st, 1659, Entretiens spirituels, p. 584). He is evidently alluding directly here to the text of Luke 10, where it is said that Jesus rejoiced under the action of the Spirit and said: «*I bless you, Father, for having hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little ones,*» but he also has in mind an Old Testament text, Prov. 3,32. The next part of the talk shows this. «*Simplicity is so agreeable to God! You know that Scripture says that his pleasure is to converse with the simple, with the simple of heart, who act simply and straightforwardly: Cum simplicibus serminacio ejus. Do you wish to find God? He speaks with the simple. O my Saviour! O my brothers who feel the desire to be simple, how happy you are! How happy! Take heart since you have this promise that God's pleasure is to be with simple men*» (p. 587). The expression: «*Cum simplicibus serminacio ejus*» is, in fact, taken from Prov. 3,32. A week later, on March 28th, speaking of gentleness, he declared: «*Next is simplicity, which makes God take his delight with a soul in which it resides. Let us see those among us in whom the mark of this virtue appears most. Is it not true that they are the most lovable, that their candour wins us over, that we find consolation in dealing with them? But who would not have this mark, since Our Lord himself takes pleasure with*

*the simple?»* (p. 601)

These texts are too close to that of Nicholas Roland for us not to propose at least the theory that Nicholas Roland depends here on Saint Vincent de Paul. We may recall that the talks we have quoted from were given by Saint Vincent de Paul in March 1659, and that Nicholas Roland was probably in Paris in 1660. He used to go to Saint Lazare, as we know. The talks must have been circulated, and Nicholas Roland could easily have heard of them.

We must now study in detail number 17 of the «*Avis aux personnes régulières*» so as to find how it is rooted in the Wisdom books.

Simplicity is first presented as «*a virtue as necessary to souls tending to perfection as it is rare and little known. In this century people no longer know what it is to be simple.*»

«*It is a divine virtue since God gives it.*» One thinks at once of Wis 7,25. «*She is a breath of the divine power.*» It cannot therefore be acquired by human effort. But Nicholas Roland adds: «*It is an emanation of the Spirit of his Son*». What does characterise the Son is having «*all his life but one aim: the glory of the Father.*» It is at once apparent that simplicity is a dynamic virtue that reveals in the Son the direction of his whole life towards the glory of the Father. To share in the Spirit is to share this orientation. It is the Spirit of simplicity of the Son and who is no other than the Holy Spirit himself who is given to us. Here Nicholas Roland ties up his reflection on simplicity with the outlook of the French School of spirituality, something Saint Vincent de Paul does not do.

Simplicity «*Is the mistress and guardian of the other virtues, for the soul which possesses simplicity is humble, gentle, obedient, patient, charitable, punctual with regard to its obligations.*» This somewhat untidy enumeration aims at showing that simplicity has in its train all the virtues of which it is the *mistress* (that is that without it one does not have the others, a role attributed to humility in the classic body of virtues) and the *guardian* (that is, helps to keep the others).

Next comes a description of simplicity:

«*It does not know what being self-interested is nor does it have any soul-searching.*» Looking into oneself is one of the forms of pride, according to J.J. Olier. To be self-interested is to draw the profit for oneself. Not to turn inwards on oneself is therefore to go straight to God. One understands why simplicity is always allied to straightforwardness.

«*It is unable to just anyone negatively, seeing everything in a good light.*» It implies, therefore, an attitude to others consisting always judging by the good we find in them, which is not naïvety but goodwill and trust.

«*It is far removed from all curiosity, cleverness and reflection.*» Curiosity here means paying attention to what is useless; cleverness refers to human ability, and reflection to turning back on oneself.

«*It is a unable to look for what is grand and splendid* », that is, it does not seek to shine.

«*It does not get upset whatever happens, since, having only God in view, nothing vexing can happen to her.*» Since the glory of God is sought, whatever happens can be directed to God's glory.

«*It considers as welcome the lowest ways and occupation.*» This expression is most interesting since it evidently refers back to Prov. 9: «*Wisdom has built herself a house, she has set up seven columns, she has set her table. She has sent out her servants to proclaim on the heights of the city: who is simple? Let him come this way!*» The coincidence between the two texts is disconcerting. Wisdom invites the simple. Simplicity, for her part, invites what is worthless

and vile in this world, just as in the Gospel parable, the master of the house invites the poor, the lame, etc... But is not Wisdom folly in the eyes of the world? Already, then, a sort of identification is beginning to be outlined between Wisdom and simplicity which will become more defined in the remainder of the text.

«*What is says and undertakes is sincere and removed from all double-dealing.*» The words of Wisdom are also frank and straightforward. This recalls the text of Prov 8, 8-9: «*All the words of my mouth are just, there is nothing false or crooked in them. All are honest to whoever understands them, upright for whoever possesses knowledge.*» cf also Wis1,1; 1,3,1,5.

«*It has this advantage that God takes pleasure in it and delights to reveal his secrets to it.*» Here the coincidence with the Wisdom books is even greater. Wisdom 8,3 comes to mind: «*Her friendship with God reveals her noble origin, for the master of the universe loves her. She is in fact initiated into the knowledge of God*». Let us not forget that Nicholas Roland says that simplicity has a divine origin. In any case, it is evident that he quotes Scripture since he adds: «*as he has said himself*». One can, of course, think of the text of Proverbs quoted by Saint Vincent de Paul, Prov 3,32: «*Upright men are the friends of God*», but the Vulgate has rendered it. «*Cum simplicibus*», that is to say, «*with the simple is his converse.*» But one should especially recall Prov. 8,30, where creative Wisdom, founded by and born of God, is his delight. «*I was with him the master-builder, his delight day after day, playing always in his presence.*»

Nicholas Roland is here much nearer the biblical text than Saint Vincent de Paul. The difference between their texts is obvious. In his talk on gentleness Saint Vincent de Paul says: «*Follow simplicity which makes God take delight with the soul in which it resides.*» Nicholas Roland says: «*It (simplicity) has this advantage that God is pleased with it and takes pleasure in communicating to it his secrets.*» St Vincent de Paul concentrates on the relationship between God and man, and not on the relationship between God and Wisdom. In the scripture text he quotes, he ultimately is little concerned with Wisdom in itself. What interests him is the simple man that God makes his friend. Nicholas Roland, however, identifies simplicity and Wisdom; he speaks of simplicity and not of the man who is simple.

It stands out, then very clearly that for Nicholas Roland, in this text of number 17, simplicity is not merely a virtue among others. In the sapiential interpretation he gives to it, does he not raise it to the level of the Sisters of the Child Jesus?

This would then justify the insistence of the Congregation on the importance of simplicity in the recent texts of the Constitutions of 1967-69 and of the Rule of life. If simplicity is indeed the form of Wisdom bequeathed by Nicholas

Roland to the Sisters of the Child Jesus, and if Wisdom is truly the art of behaving before God and man, then it is easy to see how simplicity is the specific in the spirit of the Congregation.

This is corroborated by the fact that simplicity is par excellence the virtue of childhood and that the Sisters of the Child Jesus are vowed to the service of poor children. More than once, the link between childhood and simplicity appears in the writings of Nicholas Roland, as I have highlighted before now. «*You must become like a child who has no turning back on himself, nor fear of created things*» (L6, T1). This is quite the characteristic of simplicity. «*Submit always your mind to all that is in order for the glory of God according to the spirit of simplicity and obedience which should reign among us. It is the way to satisfy the Child Jesus, in whose love I am all yours.*» (L9, T1) «*Obey without answering back, without delay, with joy and simplicity, after the fashion of a little child.*» (AM1, T2o,2). In one of the memoirs on his life the following remark is to be found: «*The humility of Mr Roland made him defer to the opinions of others with the simplicity and candour of a child*» (MV2, T2). The book of Usages also includes several observations similar in meaning. The Sisters are recommended to bear with one another «*with mutual affability, with gaiety and frankness, in the spirit of simplicity befitting souls consecrated to the childhood of the Son of God*» (UO, T49, 1,1). And again: «*As the Sisters make profession of living a poor and simple life after the example of the Holy Child Jesus who made himself poor through love of them.*» (UO, T42,1).

And so, since simplicity belongs to childhood and especially to the mystery of the childhood of Jesus, to live out simplicity is for the Sisters of the Child Jesus the way to live this mystery to which they have consecrated themselves and in the service of which give all to the children entrusted to them. This is what is really said in the Constitutions of 1967-1969 and in the Rule of life.

One can now therefore risk making the following theory: It was in Saint Vincent de Paul that Nicholas Roland first found the virtue of simplicity linked to the texts of the Wisdom books, a topic he explored. But he took much further the intuition of the founder of the Vincentians.

## Conclusion

Further analysis of the remainder of number 17 would add nothing significant to the research I have made. It brings out the great originality of Nicholas Roland when he deals with simplicity. It shows he had absorbed biblical culture through meditating texts from the Vulgate. It gives credibility, it seems to me, to the place the Sisters of the Child Jesus of Rheims give to simplicity in their Rule of life. •