

SEEKING THE
HEART *of*
CHRIST

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Christian Reflections on the Interior Life



SAINT CLAUDE
LA COLOMBIÈRE

Compiled and translated by
BRANDON P. OTTO

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

“One must be a saint in order to make saints.”¹ Therefore, Claude La Colombière—called to the apostolic life by his Jesuit vocation—had to become a saint, and so he did. La Colombière is best known as the spiritual director of St. Marguerite-Marie Alacoque and a promoter of her devotion to the Sacred Heart. But his true goal was simply to be a saint, and for him, “it is impossible to give a higher idea of sanctity than that of a perfect Jesuit.”²

La Colombière was born on February 2, 1641, in Saint-Symphorien-d'Ozon, outside Lyon, to a truly religious family: out of the five children who survived childhood,

¹ Claude La Colombière, *Spiritual Journal*, §113, in Claude La Colombière, *Écrits spirituels*, ed. André Ravier, 2nd ed. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer/Bellarmin, 1982), 149. The two *Spiritual Retreats* and the *Spiritual Journal* were originally published in one volume, with no section numbering; Ravier's edition numbers their sections sequentially.

² Claude La Colombière, *Spiritual Retreat of 1674* §16, in La Colombière, *Écrits spirituels*, 90.

four became religious, and the one son who married was said to be like “a monk remaining in the world.”³ La Colombière entered the Jesuits in 1658 and professed his first vows in 1660; after giving a panegyric to celebrate the canonization of St. Francis de Sales in 1666, he was sent to study theology in Paris, where he was ordained to the priesthood in 1669. After teaching rhetoric for three years, he began his third year of probation in 1674—during which he wrote his first *Spiritual Retreat* and his *Spiritual Journal*—culminating in his solemn vows in 1675. After these vows, he was sent to Paray-le-Monial, where he met St. Marguerite-Marie Alacoque. He declared her revelations of the Sacred Heart to be authentic,⁴ and he became her spiritual director and promoter.

In 1676, La Colombière was sent to London to be the preacher for the Duchess of York, a Catholic. There, he wrote his *Christian Reflections* and *Sermons* and (cautiously) spread the devotion to the Sacred Heart.⁵ However, during the “Papist Terror” of 1678, he was

³ André Ravier, “Introduction générale,” in La Colombière, *Écrits spirituels*, 8. Ravier’s introduction is my main source for La Colombière’s life and spirituality.

⁴ La Colombière even recorded her account of her greatest vision in his *Spiritual Retreat of 1677*, §135 (*Écrits spirituels*, 165–167).

⁵ Neither the ruling Anglicanism of England nor the popular Jansenism among Catholics looked kindly on this devotion (see Ravier, “Introduction générale,” in *Écrits spirituels*, 57).

arrested and exiled from England for the crime of being a Jesuit. His stint in prison exacerbated his already precarious health, and his last years were often spent in medically-required rest in his hometown. During a stay in Paray-le-Monial,⁶ he finally succumbed to a severe hemorrhage, dying on February 15, 1682.

La Colombière's writings—all edited and published posthumously—include four volumes of *Sermons* (with a separate series of *Meditations on the Passion*), the *Christian Reflections*, two *Spiritual Retreats* and a *Spiritual Journal*, and a collection of letters. The *Retreats* and *Journal*—the first of his works to be published—were a major enkindler of devotion to the Sacred Heart.

The *Christian Reflections* are collections of passages on various topics, often serving as first drafts of passages in La Colombière's sermons. Though not written for publication, their tone is often admonitory and exhortatory,⁷ very different from the intimate, self-directed tone of the *Retreats* and the *Journal*. It is in these latter

⁶ Though his superior had been arranging his departure from the town, St. Marguerite-Marie forbid it, telling La Colombière, "He told me that He willed the sacrifice of your life in this land" (qtd. in Ravier, "Introduction générale," 65).

⁷ Ravier describes their tone thus: "They represent . . . his spontaneous reaction, in some instinctive way, to the religious and moral state of the society of his times." "Introduction" to the *Christian Reflections* in *Écrits spirituels*, 270.

works that he shows his own spiritual ideal: that of “destruction” or, more literally, “nullification” of self in order to belong wholly to God. This ideal is perhaps better stated by Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle: man “ought to be disappropriated and nullified, and appropriated to Jesus, subsisting in Jesus, being in Jesus, living in Jesus, working in Jesus, fructifying in Jesus. . . . The life of man is to abase himself and to nullify himself in himself, to refer himself to God, to unite himself to Jesus, to live and to work in Jesus.”⁸

Such “nullification”—emulating the “all-powerful and nullified God”⁹—is the spiritual ideal of La Colombière, who surrendered his own love of solitude in order to follow Jesus in the apostolic, Jesuitical life, and this “sacrifice of my heart”¹⁰ to the Sacred Heart blossomed a fruitful tree: these *Reflections* are a bushel of its fruit.

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⁸ Pierre de Bérulle, *Diverse Little Works of Piety* V, in *Œuvres complètes de De Bérulle*, ed. Jean-Paul Migne (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1856), 914.

⁹ La Colombière, *Spiritual Journal* §110, in *Écrits spirituels*, 147.

¹⁰ La Colombière, *Spiritual Retreat of 1674*, §40, in *Écrits spirituels*, 101. This “sacrifice,” specifically, is a unique vow La Colombière made to follow all the rules of the Jesuits: see *Spiritual Retreat of 1674*, §41, in *Écrits spirituels*, 101–8.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

Like all of La Colombière's writings, the *Christian Reflections* were published posthumously; the first edition was published in 1684, with slightly revised editions in 1687, 1689, and 1697. I have primarily followed the first edition of 1684, but I have occasionally used readings from the other editions (mainly the "final edition" of 1697) when there are obvious errors, though I have rarely noted it.

Of the various editions published in subsequent centuries, I have made use of two. First is a modernized edition of La Colombière's works, first published in 1757; this edition is "put in better French," as the title page says, though it also often rephrases passages and even rearranges the order of the chapters. Still, the interpretations in this edition have sometimes helped me with translating thornier passages. (A more accurate edition in 1900–1902, by Pierre Charrier, I made no use of.) Second is the 1962 edition of La Colombière's "spiritual writings" by André Ravier; though the text is almost

exclusively that of the 1684 edition, Ravier's edition includes a variety of notes and, most importantly, citations for almost all of La Colombière's quotations and allusions. I have used these citations extensively, though sometimes the sources Ravier gives are either misread or simply *mal à propos* to the quotation or allusion. Still, it has been an invaluable source, especially when trying to track down quotations from excessively voluminous authors like Chrysostom and Augustine.

Except for the quotes from Epicurus in the notes to "On Conscience," all quotations in the footnotes are translated by me from the original languages. The most common source is Jean-Paul Migne's pair of enormous patristic compilations, the *Patrologia Latina* and the *Patrologia Græca*; these are cited, respectively, as PL and PG, followed by the volume number, column number, and (in most cases) column section. Thus, PL 196:327C is *Patrologia Latina*, volume 196, column 327, section C.

In translating La Colombière's text, I strove to match his style as closely as possible. All of the capitalizations found in the first edition are matched in my translation; I have only added capitalizations for pronouns referring to God or Jesus. I strove to break up La Colombière's sentences as little as possible, though

I have been liberal in rearranging punctuation to make the sentences (mostly) match English usage. However, the run-on sentence, alongside the fragmentary sentence, was common in writing of that era, and my translation reflects that.

Editions Used

Claude La Colombière. *Reflexions chrétiennes*. Lyon: Anisson, Poseul & Rigaud, 1684.

Claude La Colombière. *Reflexions chretiennes*. Dernière édition. Lyon: Anisson & Posuel, 1697.

Claude La Colombière. *Réflexions chrétiennes sur divers sujets, et Méditations sur la Passion de N.S. Jesus-Christ*. Nouvelle Edition, mise en meilleur françois. Tome Sixieme. Lyon: Jean-Marie Bruyset, 1757.

Bienheureux Claude La Colombière. *Écrits spirituels*. Ed. André Ravier. Deuxième édition revue et augmentée. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer/Bellarmin, 1982.

NOTICE TO THE READER¹¹

After having given the Public the *Sermons*, the *Meditations on the Passion of Jesus Christ* by Père la Colombière, and his *Retreat*, the Reader will, perhaps, know how willingly I present to him a little Collection of some thoughts by the same Author. He had enough care to note down the views that came to him in the spirit, and when they appeared good and solid to him, he would give them all the space that could render them more useful to him. Afterwards, he would put them to work in his *Sermons*, as justness permitted him; for it in no way worried him to employ a good thought, as long as he believed he had found a natural and regular place for it; he was exact to the scruple, when he dealt with disposing and unifying all the parts of a discourse well.

¹¹ This notice was included in the original editions of the *Christian Reflections* but dropped in later editions. Unfortunately, the original editor of La Colombière's works did not include his name, and he remains anonymous.

One will doubtless find some of the Reflections from this Volume in his *Sermons*, but except for a few, they do not have exactly the same form. The Author had a great facility for writing well and for devoting different days to the same subject. Those who will take the pains to read this Collection with attention will draw great advantage from it: it contains a great variety of choice and remarkable things, and although some are more focused than others, they all have a befitting form which prevents one from languishing while reading them, and which, from the start, promises some profit.

ON THE SWEETNESS OF VIRTUE

Through the practice of virtue, the passions are not destroyed, but they are tamed, which is even more useful and more agreeable. A tame Lion, elephants who fight for you, who have respect for the one who has tamed them, and who serve him as a guard and a defense. One is served by pride in despising the world, by wrath in exercising the rigors of penance against himself, with pleasure.

The world says that the yoke of Jesus Christ is unbearable, but Jesus Christ Himself says that it is sweet; the world, that His commands are difficult, but St. John: *Mandata ejus gravia non sunt* [*His commands are not heavy*] (1 Jn 5:3). The world—that is to say, those who do none of it—say so, but those who have tried it say the contrary: how long do we want to be blinded in this way?

The first gift God gives to the soul is His grace, with which one can do everything. The second is His love; now, love renders everything easy and agreeable. The third is an assurance of salvation, which does not permit one to doubt, which is mixed with a fear that ruins nothing. It is a light that makes one touch, that makes one feel the things of faith—a person to whom God gives this light loses, in a moment, esteem for all earthly things, and it is as if he, indeed, loses them all. It comes to him as if to a person who thought he had a million precious stones in his box, and an able jeweler made him see that these are all false jewels, that they are only glass, that they aren't worth ten écus;¹² all at once, this person, who believed himself rich, is reduced to misery, and he feels all the sorrows of poverty. This light makes him see the vanity of all that one loves upon earth, showing him their brevity, inconstancy, and unfortunate results; it makes one see the truth of all that is feared; it deals with fervor, the fear of God, and now, faith itself, which is in danger due to love of earthly things, as we have never seen an atheist or apostate who wasn't sensual, because the love and use of pleasures quenches man's spirit—and how would they

¹² In La Columbière's time, an écu was worth three francs.

not quench the spirit of God? They render the human spirit heavy, stupid, incapable of performing the most noble operations of its faculties and of entering into the knowledge of spiritual things. This is why naturally soft and sensual souls, if they do not do much violence to themselves, are subject to inconstancy.

Every day we see baneful proofs of this truth. What a misfortune that we let so many be carried away by love of earthly things! Let us prevent this misfortune, let us despise the sweetnesss of life, let us make this inclination to sensuality die in our heart, let us despise these passing goods, let us take our esteem and our affections away from them, let us declare ourselves against their amusements in every way, through our speech and through our actions; let us despise them, as much as our state can permit, as much as God inspires us *to do so*. *Sapientia hujus mundi stultitia est apud Deum* [*The wisdom of this world is foolishness before God*] (1 Cor 3:19).

With how much more pleasure does one walk in full day, having the end of the road before his eyes, than in the night, when he knows neither where he is nor where he is going, his faith being feeble and his spirit blind!

I will not count up all the evils from which one is delivered by practicing virtue: a woman permits herself crimes, she is satisfied, but she fears the suspicions of

her husband, the infidelity of a man, confusion. Pleasures consume goods, vengeance draws forth another vengeance, etc. Beyond all that one could say of it, there is something secret, ineffable, which no tongue can express. The good have tamed passions, and being detached from the earth, they are as if armed against the disgraces and adversities that overwhelm others. Finally, try it in the name of God, since this thing is of such great consequence that, whether I deceive you or not, there is nothing but profit; if I deceive you, the worst that could happen to you would be to win heaven with pain, just like with children, when one makes them believe that the pill one gives them is a candied fruit; they swallow it, they are deceived, but they are healed.

Mihi mundus crucifixus est et ego mundo [*The world is crucified to me and I to the world*] (Gal 6:14). One sense of these words is this: I hold the people of the world to be very miserable, and the world regards me, in its turn, as a man to pity.

It is a greatly sorrowful matter to see so few people devoting themselves to the good, but it is strange that one does not distance oneself from it except in order to avoid sadness. One believes that it is impossible to be good and content, although, deep down, it is entirely

the opposite. What deceives them is the exterior modesty of good people and their love of retreat.

All the world seeks joy in such a way that we will never draw the world to the good except in making it hope for *joy*, but how will we do this, seeing that one is warned that there is naught but crosses in the practice of virtue? As one only lets himself be drawn by joy, one does not let himself be led to prefer, to change, anything, except through a greater joy. Suppose that a soul has established its joy in loving God; it cannot fail to be eternal, since it will never discover anything that could cool its love.¹³

Although one knows that one cannot have everything—if you want pleasures, you consume your riches, you lose your reputation, you risk your life—consider this: to whom do more temporal goods remain, to libertines or to those who have embraced the party of virtue?

Saint Thomas says that the joy of the saints is like the flower of that of the blessed and that, as we have in the flower not only the hope of fruit but also a little bud, which is the beginning of the same fruit, so in

¹³ Ravier's edition interprets this sentence as follows: "This joy cannot fail to be eternal, since this soul will never discover anything that could cool its love" (275). The original French simply has the feminine "it," and both "joy" and "soul" are feminine in French.

divine consolations, we have not only the hope of paradise but, in a way, a paradise begun.¹⁴

Saint Chrysostom says that all the world loves joy, that a person does not labor except for this.¹⁵ A merchant exhausts himself in order to rejoice in his gain. A soldier risks his life for the joy that victory will bring him; a proud man seeks glory for the pleasure that he finds in enjoying this glory. Jesus Himself *preposito sibi*

¹⁴ See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Galatians*, Lecture 6, §328, on Gal 5:22: “*You have your fruit in sanctification* (Rom 6:22), that is, in sanctified works, and therefore they are called ‘fruits.’ They are also called ‘flowers’ with respect to future blessedness, since, as the hope for the fruit is received from the flowers, so, from the works of the virtues, one has the hope of eternal life and blessedness. And as, in the flower, there is a kind of beginning of the fruit, so, in the works of the virtues, there is a kind of beginning of the blessedness which there will be when knowledge and charity are perfected.” Here La Colombière calls holy men and women on earth “saints,” while those in heaven, who enjoy the beatific vision, are “the blessed.”

¹⁵ See St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies to the People of Antioch, on the Statues* XVIII.1: “For everyone desires pleasure and rejoicing, and, because of this, everyone does and says and works. And so the merchant sails for this, in order to gather goods; so he gathers goods in order that, having a reserve, he might rejoice; and the soldier soldiers for this, and the farmers farms for this, and each plies his trade for this, and the lovers of power love for this, so that they might enjoy glory, and they want to enjoy glory, so that they might rejoice” (PG 49:181).

gaudio sustinuit crucem [having set joy before Himself, endured the Cross] (Heb 12:2). Saint Augustine approves Virgil's saying, *trahit sua quemque voluptas* [his desire draws each one on].¹⁶ In effect, if one asks each one what he desires, all would respond, says St. Augustine, *velle gaudere* [that he wants to rejoice].¹⁷

No one in the party of good people has ever complained about not being content; in the other *party*, Solomon himself, the most fortunate of all men, recognizes that all is naught but vanity and affliction of spirit (Eccl 1:14).¹⁸

Virtue raises us above men, which is why one owes respect, a sincere respect, to good people, in contrast

¹⁶ Virgil, *Eclogue* II.65, quoted in St. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of St. John* XXVI.4: "Further, if poets are allowed to say 'his desire draws each one on'—not necessity, but desire; not obligation, but delight—how much more are we *allowed* to say that we ought to draw to Christ a man who delights in truth, who delights in beatitude, who delights in justice, who delights in eternal life, which is the whole Christ?" (PL 35:1608).

¹⁷ See St. Augustine, *Confessions* X.XXI.31: "For though, perhaps, one delights in this, one in that, yet all agree that they want to be blessed, inasmuch as they would agree, if they were asked, that they want to rejoice, and they call this joy 'the blessed life'" (PL 32:793).

¹⁸ "Affliction of spirit" is a literal translation of the Vulgate's form of this verse, *universa vanitas et afflictio spiritus*. Most translations instead read "striving after wind," though the Douay-Rheims has "vexation of spirit."

to sinners, to whom one renders *respect* only by force. One respects the former in their absence; the latter are torn apart everywhere that they are not.

The same honors are more honorable for good people, since they are the fruits of their merit; instead, with the others, they serve only to make one notice their vices, and to make one remember their artifices, violences, injustices, and perfidies through which they attained them.

We have a great interest in being on good terms with Him Who distributes all goods, but God does not give prosperity to His friends. He must distinguish when adversities are necessary for them, but when they make so good a use of goods that instead of being attached to the world, they regard nothing but eternity, God covers them with all kinds of disgraces. He favors the wicked, that's true, when He wants to lose them, yet this is not for a long time, for fear of scandalizing the others, and to repair this apparent injustice and to justify His conduct, He permits sudden deaths, *permits* that their children be miserable, that a trial ruin them: a disgrace despoils them of everything, and no one has compassion on them.

Men can do good to us, be it because they esteem us, be it because they love us, be it because they love

themselves, for their own interests. For one does not love, one does not esteem, one does not hope except for the esteem and friendship of good men; vice is not esteemed, and reasonably, for what mediator trusts the vicious? What salutary counsel can one expect from such people who counsel themselves so poorly? What profit comes from their friendship, which is ordinarily more feared than their hatred? Do you base yourself on their credit? It is not trusted. It would be a great recklessness to take as surety the word of a person who can't keep it before God.

Debauches consume the good and hinder one from acquiring it, ruin one's honor and health, distance one from jobs and duties; one wouldn't dare to entrust a considerable affair to a vicious man; when one recognizes a man in disorder, one avoids him: one would say that the very sight of him is contagious. That one could, indeed, accept the promise of a man who has no other rule or other measure than his pleasure! We see that even the vicious want no one but good men, women, domestic servants, workers; one always prefers those of whose probity one is sure, for they fear God.

In vain, one tells men that the goods down here are nothing, exaggerating their vanity, comparing them to eternal ones, and making whole books in order to point

out the difference between them. Job says in vain that all human happiness is only a speck.¹⁹ It is true that they are short, bounded, deceiving, these pleasures, but they are sensible, one sees them, and the others are invisible. One is astonished that reasonable men would not want to take the effort to consider these truths, that, after having recognized their vanity through their own experience, they are still attached to them—but here is a cause for much greater astonishment, which is that everyone professing to only care for temporal interests, sacrificing religion, repose, health, etc. for them, they do not see that one does not find them except in the practice of virtue, or though seeing this, they do not embrace it.

One cannot doubt that God is the author of all goods, even temporal, of which vice, which distances us from God, deprives us. What misery to separate oneself from God for the sake of goods that one cannot receive except from Him, to renounce virtue for reasons which ought to attach us to it, to lose eternity, to run after a happiness that one cannot find except in seeking eternity itself!

¹⁹ Perhaps a reference to the Vulgate of Job 21:13: “They spend their days among goods, and, in a moment, they descend to hell.” The Vulgate’s Latin for “in a moment” is *in puncto*, recalling La Colombière’s phrasing here, that human happiness *n’est qu’une point*.