

I. *Life and Career of Père Poulain*

Père Augustin Francois Poulain was born at Cherbourg on December 15, 1836. After four years' studies with two companions in his native town, he was sent to the Jesuit college at Brugelette, where he finished his elementary course and took his humanities and rhetoric, all *mediocri successu*, as the writer of his biographical notice tells us: to be translated, I suppose, as "with middling success," in the Latin sense of *mediocris*. He did very well in philosophy, and at the end of the year obtained his B.-ès-L. After five years at Brugelette he went in 1854 to the École Sainte-Geneviève, where he did a year's science with like success, also gaining the baccalaureate. After a second year of scientific study he was admitted to the École Centrale.* But another way opened before him.

On October 25, 1858, he entered the Jesuit noviciate at Angers. After his two years' probation he made his vows at the École Sainte-Geneviève, and devoted another year to the study of mathematics.

From 1861 to 1870 he was successively supervisor at Metz, theological student at Laval (1867), and then, while continuing his theological studies, professor of mathematics at the École Sainte-Geneviève.

From October 1870 to 1881 he was twice sub-minister, once minister, four years supervisor, three years teacher of mathematics to candidates for the B.-ès-Sc. His third year of probation was made at Laon in 1870-1, and he pronounced his final vows at the École Sainte-Geneviève on February 2, 1877.

From 1881 to 1897 he was sub-director at the Internat of the Catholic Faculties of Angers. In 1897-8 he taught mathematics at the scholasticate in Jersey.

In October 1898 he returned to Paris, to the residence in the rue de Sèvres, and remained there until 1918, fulfilling various offices: sub-director of the artists' guild from 1898 to 1903; then director 1903-7. From 1898 to 1907 he was librarian, and in this office, after the dispersion of 1901, displayed a most praiseworthy and meritorious activity in satisfying the desires of all.

He published, among other works, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, which has been several times reissued.

In August 1918, his strength failing, he retired to the hospital in the rue de Dantzig, where he died a holy death on July 19 of the following year, 1919.

He was naturally of a witty and happy disposition and diffused gladness all around him; the clearness of his mind is manifest in all he wrote.

2. *Writings of Père Poulain*

*It is not very clear from the information in my possession whether he gained his B.-Ès-Sc. in 1855 or 1856, nor whether he spent a year at the Centrale.

On reading this dry résumé of a well-filled religious life, one question at once presents itself to the reader's mind. How could a man so fully occupied in scientific teaching and supervision at the École Saint-Clement at Metz and at the École Sainte-Geneviève in Paris; so taken up by the material cares and discipline of a large house at Angers, in the midst of continually recurring difficulties whose vicissitudes he records with a wit and humour which charmed all without ever involving a breach of charity; devoted as he was, in his capacity of sub-director or director, to his artists, whose often irregular habits and unforeseen adventures caused him much worry and anxiety, and among whom he needed all his presence of mind and ingenuity to give effectual help to these young folk, often wilful and imprudent; how could this man have conceived the idea of compiling a treatise on mysticism, how did he prepare himself for the task and bring it to conclusion? That as a supervisor he could issue a charming little booklet on *The Art of Skating*, that as professor of mathematics he could compose a *Treatise on Geometry** or brilliant talks on the teaching of mathematics,† we can understand. But a work on *The Mysticism of St. John of the Cross*, a large volume on *The Graces of Interior Prayer*! His friends could not get over it. He had so little of "the mystical look"! And then he had done comparatively so little theology! But facts must be faced.

And it was no joke, none of those witty efforts to which he unexpectedly gave vent so appositely and almost without thought. He meant it to be a serious work. Fond of a joke as he was, both for himself and in others, he would allow of no joking on these subjects, which he evidently had very much at heart. In this matter he meant to be taken seriously.

3. *His Studies of and Interest in Mysticism*

He had, in fact, long been interested in these questions. Probably his attention had been drawn to them in the first years of his religious life; it certainly was in his "third year." And everything goes to show that this attention was not a matter of purely speculative curiosity. In spite of his jealous care never to open his soul to profane eyes, it may be guessed that he had himself felt the mystical touch. Once at least he confided in a young religious capable of understanding him that his mystical experience had gone as far as the prayer of quiet, no farther. This confession seems to be confirmed by a number of convergent indications. The author, then, is expressing no mere abstract maxim when he says that, far from

*He used in fun to call this work the "Poor Man's Geometry," for he had devoted all his ingenious and inventive wit to simplifying the theorems so as to bring them within the reach of the meanest intelligence.

†Especially in his *Causeries pédagogiques*, edited by J. V. Bainvel, 1898.

being proud of the prayer of quiet, he who has attained it should rather only feel humbled, and say: “I have only got so far.”*

It is an evident fact that the little work on *The Mysticism of St. John of the Cross*, first published serially in the *Messenger du Cœur de Jésus*, in 1893, presupposes a long familiarity not only with the writer who is its subject, but with the whole field of mystical questions. As for *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, it bore witness from its first edition in 1901 to a knowledge of mystical authors and a mastery of the subject which were not those of a mere amateur or curious enquirer.†

The author did not cease work on it until his death. In the notes which have kindly been put at my disposal with a view to the present edition, I have found no trace of this work, but only numerous letters addressed to the author either with regard to translations—these have appeared in four or five languages at least—or to ask him questions, discuss some point or other, suggest ideas, etc.

4. *The first Edition of The Graces of Interior Prayer*

The first edition was not issued without difficulty. The wind had not yet set in the direction of works on mysticism. More than one person doubted whether it were prudent to popularise these matters; they feared, not without some apparent reason, that such a book might turn weak heads. Moreover, the author’s theological studies seemed to have been insufficient, and the first edition bore traces of this insufficiency. An eminent professor of theology, Père J.-B. Terrien, without imposing an absolute veto, and recognising the great merit of the work, required corrections before which the author recoiled, not from conceit, but by reason of his attachment to ideas which he considered right and practical—and he was in some degree right. An umpire was appointed who, by limiting the theologian’s requirements to what was purely matter of doctrine (Père Terrien was as good and condescending as could be), made them more acceptable to the author, and by obtaining from the latter the sacrifice of some cherished ideas and the insertion of certain formulas designed to guard against false interpretations or misleading applications, brought about a sufficient agreement. The theologian was glad to be

*“Those who remain stationary would do well to ponder a thought that should engender humility; it is that God has perhaps called them to mount up higher.... Instead of feeling a certain pride because we have arrived at the prayer of quiet, we ought to ask ourselves fearfully why we have not gone beyond it.” III, 12.

†When the book first appeared, Père Poulain had already been in contact with many prayerful souls. In a letter written in 1901, some extracts from which are given in the *RAM* of Jan. 1921, II, 67–8, he wrote to one of his friends: “In thirty years I have come to know 33 persons who seem to have real supernatural graces, and nine who have false visions.” M. Saudreau is mistaken in saying the contrary.

able to pass a book which he valued; the author, while keenly feeling some of the sacrifices, was glad to be able to take wing at the cost of a few feathers.

5. *The Success, Diffusion and Influence of the Book*

The success of the book is well known. In twenty years nine editions have appeared, comprising twenty thousand copies. Several of these new editions show a noteworthy progress. The author was careful to profit by everything: criticisms, the questions which were put to him from all directions, new experiences, contact with a larger number of souls, the growing number of publications and courses of lectures, both on mysticism and on kindred questions (lives of the Saints or pious persons, studies of experimental psychology or pathology, rationalist schemes and explanations or the replies of Christian apologists); he managed to bring all these within his wide and elastic framework, like a collector labelling, classifying and enriching his collection. The book thus grew considerably in size between the first and the ninth editions. There is no doubt that the work played a great part in the popularisation of mystical studies and the ever-quickening interest manifested in them on all hands, not only in France, but throughout the world. I have already mentioned that it has been translated into four or five languages. The author, in his ninth edition, 1914, mentions four translations: English, German, Italian and Spanish. We need not mention the works of all kinds which were inspired or influenced by it, particularly the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, the *American Catholic Encyclopedia*, the *Dictionnaire apologétique*, etc. Specially connected with this influence was the publication of the *Journal intime de Lucie-Christine*, which was placed in his hands as a result of the fame his book had gained him.