

The Spirituality of Father Planque

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Sister Claude-Marie, of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles (OLA), is the person who, in recent times, has done the most in-depth study of the life of Father Planque, through the study of the numerous letters and other texts pertaining to him. As well as her beautiful biography on Father Planque, she has published numerous articles in missionary and spirituality magazines, particularly in "Spiritus". She was very active in making Father Planque, the Founder of OLA, better known among the young, and not so young, Sisters of her Institute. The article below, written in 1997, is a part of the material used by her for this formation. Sister Claude-Marie, who was the main contributor to the book, Augustin Planque, Yesterday and Today, (Lee Press, Cork [English translation], 1985), draws out its main elements.

The word 'personality' may be preferable to the word 'spirituality'. It seems to encompass more fully the qualities of the man, Father Planque, whose entire life was centered on the foreign missions. "Do not leave God out of your heart and life", he said. "Bring him with you everywhere in your work."

We are acquainted with his charism. The well known quotation cited above reminds us of the truth that Father Planque lived only for the Mission and under the eye of God. His charism was that of a Founder who was given the charge of serving the Church through two Institutes (*The Society of African Missions* and *The Congregation of Our Lady of Apostles*) and through the work to which he was dedicated.

Does Fr. Planque have a Spirituality of his own?

Following the extensive work of Fr. Douau on the Founder and the Congregation (OLA) in the 1960s, as well as the publication of two books that tackled the question of his spirituality in 1984 and 1995¹, it comes as a bit of a surprise that the answer to the above question must be a categorical “no.” Such an answer is particularly regrettable because there is the need for the Congregation to welcome, and even research, the extraordinary richness that the Founder bequeathed to it. This is something that the latest edition of the Constitutions² forcibly expresses. Through a proper updating, the Congregation has the duty to give this inheritance an increased vitality that is adapted to evangelization of today.

I. HOW TO SITUATE FATHER PLANQUE?

It must be repeated that Augustine Planque is not a master of spirituality in the normal sense of the expression. His position is modest. He never presented himself –nor did he regard himself— as one of the Masters. On this point there is no disagreement.

He did not leave any documents that clearly describe his spiritual journey. It is not, therefore, from any original text which shows a developed doctrine that we can discern what his experience was.

On what basis, therefore, can we rely?

- He left numerous texts, the best among them being short - with some being very short - that come from his letters. They are

¹ *Augustin Planque, Yesterday and Today*, Lee Press, Cork (English translation) 1984; Claude Marie ESCHALLIER, *The Fortitude and Faith of an Apostle, Augustin Planque (1826-1907) African Missionary Design/Print D&A O’Leary Cork, Ireland* (English translation), 1995.

² *Constitutions, Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles*, 1st ed., Tipografica ‘Leberit’, Rome, 1985.

³ B. CHENU, *L’Urgence Apostolique*, pp. 11-42 and pp. 258-260.

reflections of unequal length, depending on the circumstances in which they were written. This volume of letters, which are extremely varied and often dealing with practical and material matters, is filled with his reflections.

- To discover the spirituality of Fr. Planque requires searching here and there for what might be called “pearls”. These texts show his personal relationship with God, a relationship that is always clear and vigorous, even when they are short. Thus, research is necessary in order to discover the strong points of his spirituality, of his intimate self, and of the advice he often gave in abundance. In a word, through his letters one finds the way that he followed himself, a way that he wanted to pass on to others.
- Augustine Planque’s letters provide an almost daily account of his life, especially from the time he joined Bishop de Marion Brésillac. It is from here, through reviews and re-readings, and through the different stages of his journey that the “Man of God”, which one might say he was so admirably, is found.
- Along with the letters are added the conferences given during the Sisters’ novitiate. Some of them, which clearly come from the fullness of his heart, his faith, and his constant recourse to Scripture, are certainly very valuable. Others, such as his sermons, influenced as they are by the theological thinking of the time, are much less important.

In the last series of texts, made up of sermons and especially conferences, it must be noted that Father often spoke as Novice Master. He stressed the virtues (modesty, moderation, submission to Superiors, etc.), the practice of which he recommended to the young girls. The “missionary dimension,” an encouragement to be zealous in spreading the Gospel, is much stronger and more convincing in the letters that he sent to those at work in the mission territories.

Since these documents tell us about these achievements, as well as his spiritual advancement, how can one not recognize that Augustine Planque showed by his life and in his letters the elements of a real spirituality?

- he found a way of approaching God
- he also found a way of describing this
- he passed on his own experiences to the members of the two Institutes

Did he not, then, established a school? It seems that his own spiritual choices constituted the message he passed on to his own: a message that was clear and vigorous enough to become a charter for life. Some Spiritual Masters of today do not hesitate to affirm that, in its simplicity, and, perhaps, because of it, this charter is truly adapted to the present world, especially to the world of the youth.

It must be stressed that he was less preoccupied with teaching than with counseling. His writings, rather than being something to be studied, were pointers of the way to follow especially in the most difficult or dangerous of circumstances; the heart must be full of his thoughts and examples.

When studying Fr. Planque, three periods of his life should receive special attention:

- His youth and formative years in the North. His letters do not tell us about this time but we know something about it thanks to the documents collected by Fr. Douau.
- His responsibility as Director of the Seminary where the first SMA missionaries were received, and as Founder of their first Missions.
- The period of the Sisters' foundation and the continuation of their formation through his letters to Africa.

II. THE SPIRITUALITY OF FATHER PLANQUE: ORIGINALITY & SPECIFICITY

It is true that Fr. Planque's spirituality is essentially apostolic and missionary because it coincides with the way to God that Christ taught to His apostles. The apostolic personality of Fr. Planque can be defined as:

- One who prays facing the Father, wanting to obey his will.
- An Apostle, a missionary, encountering people and living in their midst, charged by God to bring the Word to them and to help make the Kingdom grow.

But the Apostle is also a Prophet, for a Prophet is a bearer of the Word; he is God's mouthpiece, the one who interprets the story for the people even at the cost of his life.³ Here one finds a striking resemblance to some characteristics of Fr. Planque: an Apostle, one who prays. It is in this that we find the originality of Fr. Planque because he chose the way to God, living, like the Twelve, the spirituality of the Cenacle and of Pentecost in recollection with Mary, Mother of the Lord, so as to be sent by the Spirit "out into the deep".

In order to have the true spiritual image of Augustine Planque, the following must be added:

- strength of character
- honesty and sincerity
- evangelical simplicity which bears the mark of a temperament, at once humble and forceful

1. ONE WHO PRAYS

Rooted in Faith

Augustine received the gift of faith in his childhood. During his adolescence and seminary years he practiced it assiduously. For him, his faith was as natural as his breath. And in this faith he prayed with unquestioning conviction. It was the foundation and principle of

³ B. CHENU, *L'Urgence Apostolique*, pp. 11-42 and pp. 258-260.

his spiritual life and it depended, for support, on the unshakable rock of God's truth and fidelity. For him, faith was the deposit of revealed truths and it justified work. In the order of the things of God, nothing could be done without it.

Faith, for Planque, did not remain a theological matter only. To have faith was not only to have a sound knowledge that came from books. Faith was life. This is what is meant when speaking of practical faith: faith lived every day. Such was the faith of the Apostles and martyrs, much admired by Father Planque due to their fidelity and trust. They were ceaselessly up against persons and events; they were thwarted by numerous obstacles and forced to surrender their lives. Augustine, too, had experience of critical situations. He experienced God's absence in circumstances when he seemed to be alone in his struggle with others. But it was in these circumstances that he knew how to react.

Because he lived by faith, Augustine tried to discover God's will in signs that he felt called to follow. His faith gave way to trust but this did not mean that his sufferings came to an end and all became easy for him. In fact, his confidence had something desperate about it and was like a distress call for help. Yet he remained sure of being heard by God who was always present to him. For Planque, nothing was ever lost or irreparable. He accepted trials in spite of a lack of resources and his own feebleness. Even if, at times, he hesitated on the brink of an abyss, it is clear that he never had any doubts. His attitude was one of abandonment; one might even say of an active abandonment. While continuing to count on God, he never gave up but behaved philosophically and with good humour.

In Planque's spirituality, faith was expressed in concrete action. Only such an active faith could fulfill his missionary desire. His was a visible faith that lived for this work and by this faith many heroic acts were performed. In this he received comfort and support from the example of the Apostles and Saints. And, like Abraham, his faith compelled him to leave his country, never to return.

If we are useless servants; if we do not share what we have received from God; if we are lukewarm witnesses; if our life does not

provide any sort of witness; if we are swayed by every wind of opinion; if we are prepared to follow whims rather than paths of truth; then in all of this our faith is sterile⁴ and our responsibility is great. In contrast, by witnessing with his faith and through his words the true Apostle helps others to approach God and to learn from Him what Love and Truth are.

Faith and trust in God calls for faith in the human person. In spite of attitudes of severity and rigidity that were sometimes adopted by Planque, he held to a firm belief in those who are God's children in pursuit of salvation. He needed to trust in those around him; he respected them; and he expected the best from them, never allowing himself to become discouraged. He believed that people could and would change and that situations would improve.

His had an extremely active faith that was always stimulated by events and sustained by prayer.

Intimacy with the Lord

It appears that it was always Fr. Planque's habit to place himself in God's presence. We know the prayers that provided him with spiritual nourishments:

- The Our Father: "meditated on with the heart", and not simply recited.
- The Way of the Cross: his contemplation of Christ on Calvary taught him the meaning of suffering, lovingly accepted, and of the submission of the Son to the will of the Father. These two ideas influenced his thinking. His understanding of them was in keeping with the strict teaching that was then in vogue. But above all, however, was his profound experience of them in the main events of his own life.
- Eucharistic Prayer and communion: these were the crowning points of his devotion to Christ, particularly during his priesthood.

⁴ It is in this regard that Fr. Planque employs the expression: we become "murderers" of faith.

- He never ceased to marvel at Him Who Saves because He Loves.
- Prayer to the Holy Spirit: from whom he asked counsel and strength.
- The Rosary and what must be called his “devotions”, his intimate relationship with Mary: his was a son’s confidence in her. He admired in her the strong, courageous woman that she was and had no doubt that she was with the Apostles and the first Christian communities.

He, too, like Mary, was deeply attached to the Church. His periods of fervent prayer led him to accept with conviction and attachment its rites, tradition and scriptural teaching.

Union with God

Finding God in times of liturgical prayer was only one aspect of Planque’s prayer life. The other aspect, which occupied a large part of his life, was ‘prayer of the heart’ or continual prayer. It was through this particular feature of his spirituality that, early on and at least upon his arrival in Lyons, he was drawn to Christ’s way of approaching the Father. His was a continuous and confident chatting with the Father in prayer, and a following of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to leave all and to go out into the great unknown to announce Christ’s Gospel. Everything in Planque’s experience seems to have naturally drawn him to this form of prayer, including his temperament and formation, as well as his long association with the Apostles, whom he so greatly admired. These men, who were always available to him, did not look back after they made a gift of themselves. They were his Patrons. He was at ease with their life of faith and also with their forthright simplicity and sincerity. It was in their company that he came to understand the meaning of the Cenacle and of Pentecost, both of which so influenced his own spirituality.

But the Cenacle, that place of retreat where one stays in recollection with the Lord so as “not to be led astray by distractions”, was not fenced in. It was a port of call on the way towards God and

every Cenacle ended in a Pentecost. When the Spirit comes and when the door is opened, it is then that apostolic work begins. Then it is time to be sent by the Spirit and to leave for the mission field.

Whoever says the word, Mission, also says the word, Prayer

Future meetings with God would neither be “in the corner of a room” nor in a chapel but, rather, in the world. Fr. Planque wrote: “*Walk in mindfulness of God’s presence*”; “Never let Him out of your sight”; “*It is for Me that you seek souls; I am in your heart and you shall be there in solitude with Me.*” He meant that union with God must be continuous. One must know how to combine prayer with action. Even in the midst of activity one remains with Christ as did Martha who conversed with him while performing her duties, who was impatient with Mary’s idleness, and who was distressed over the death of Lazarus.

This is the moment to recall the words of Madeleine Delbrel: “One must go to prayer as in the market place when one is hungry and the day will be difficult.” This is how Fr. Planque acted during empty periods of waiting and distress.

It is our apostolic responsibility that increases our need for God. We are too weak to see and act on our own. With him we are able to work for him and to hear what He wants us to do: “*Go, tell your brothers and sisters...*” If the habit of meeting God in your work is missing in your life, then there will be a wide gap between prayer and action.

To conclude this account of Fr. Planque’s manner of prayer, the following must be added: as well as being prayerful, he was also consecrated. He never took vows but by his priesthood and the oath that bound him to the Society of African Missions, he gave himself over to the cause of God. His prayer and his consecration supported one another.

His consecration established a definite link between God and himself. There was a relationship that was always experienced in

freedom of mind and heart, in a freedom of the children of God to whom God offers love and life. This allowed him to take responsibility for his choices.

2. AN APOSTLE

It is necessary to look at the world where he was going to labor for the coming of the Kingdom.

How did this Apostle/Prophet, Augustine Planque, carry out his Mission? To come to know him better and to follow his career, one must distinguish between two aspects:

- “Dispositions” or habits which fashion the mind and heart, preparing them for the work ahead.
- “Means” which promote creativity and the courage to keep on struggling until the objective is achieved.

The Dispositions

Fr. Planque often called dispositions, virtues. When he recommended them, it signified that he, himself, possessed them:

- A very strong sense of Mission must be given first place. This is not, properly speaking, a virtue but it is a very determining orientation of his entire personality. Is this original? Definitely not. But Fr. Planque was one of the great workers or promoters of the Gospel through the task that he was given, in the importance that he attached to missionary activity and by the work that he accomplished during his life.
- The Mission was his one objective. He was convinced of the need for it, for its universality, and for the indispensable role of an Apostle. It was the Mission that made him a messenger, and although he does not explicitly say so, his close relationship with the Church was that of one who was sent. It was in her and for her that he received the charge from God to bring the Gospel to Africa. It was the Mission that made him a witness who announced Christ by his word and his life.

- The desire for a life devoted to mission should include those qualities that are essential for the one who adopts it. Fr. Planque recommended:
 - the availability and the gift of oneself which places the Apostle at the service of the Master:
 - generosity and disinterestedness;
 - joyful and loyal service.

These dispositions, lived in prayer, faith and consecration, create zeal, a word which means eagerness and enthusiasm. This is the fundamental attitude that encompasses all others.

As noted above, these were his virtues. He was as disinterested - always forgetful of himself - as much as was possible. He wanted to do God's will which he saw at work in all the episodes of his life. These were more often difficult - even tragic - than they were pleasant. But his aim, more than anything, was to become a humble and lowly servant for he trusted in God who used him to sow the Word. Thus, he was without ambition, happy to serve, and full of hope.

The Means

Fr. Planque's originality came, in part, from his understanding of the future and the future of the Kingdom. This was to such an extent that one can speak of his prophetic insights. He searched for the means that were best adapted to his endeavors:

- **Formation:** during the years in which he put his gifts as formator and "accompanist" into the missionary enterprise;
- **Presence among people** (Fr. Planque wanted his directives in this matter to be obeyed);
 - **Proximity:** "you must go to the people; not wait for them to come to you";
 - **Esteem:** for the values and cultures of different peoples;
 - **Goodwill:** respect and sensitivity;
 - **Humility:** not an attitude of superiority or domination.

- **Apostolic activity or “works”** (an expression often used). These must be for the benefit of the people. They were seen in health care, particularly for children, as well as in the overcoming of ignorance and in the preparation of women to seek their rightful place in the home and in society. As a result, dispensaries, hospitals, maternities and schools were built. However, the paramount duty in all of this was to provide the means of learning to “know and love God”. This was shown through catechesis and education that included instruction on Gospel values and the sacraments, thus helping to form a ‘people of God’ in embryo.

Preparing for the Future

Ever since Christ, all spirituality has concentrated on the future, on expansion. The hope, faith and courage that always characterized and animated Augustine Planque were creative and directed towards the growth of the Church, mainly in Africa. Among the means recommended by Fr. Planque were: the formation of a local church with its own priests and religious; the training of responsible lay people; the creation of rural centers and agricultural schools by which to provide suitable jobs for young people, etc.

With so many well thought out insights and projects that looked to the future, Fr. Planque is placed among those missionary Founders who led the way. There is no question of claiming a place for him that he did not seek, but it is good to tell of the gifts that he was able to use in service to the Church.

3. SPIRITUAL NOTES

His spiritual notes reveal the originality of Fr. Planque’s spirituality because they express his deepest thoughts and his stance before God, himself and those around him.

Firstly, there is **simplicity**, practiced with a broad apostolic spirit. This implies truthfulness and a deep attachment to Christ and

His Gospel, as seen in the simplicity and honesty of the Apostles. Fr. Planque preferred to stay in the shadows rather than to bask in the limelight. An enemy of arrogance and all self-seeking, he took seriously the task imposed on him. But he never took himself seriously, never looking for responsibility and, still less, honours.⁵

The fraternal, international life: Fr. Planque wanted the two Institutes to be real families, a body whose unity the Mission would ensure. It was this apostolic spirit, as well as the activities undertaken, that served to unite the members.

A strong will and energetic nature: Fr. Planque attached great importance to human values without which, he thought, there could be no spiritual growth. As a result, he wanted each member to grow in honesty, sincerity, courage and right judgment.

Before concluding this document, the two following notes must be taken into account:

Father Planque and the Jesuits

It is certain that Fr. Planque borrowed much from Ignatian spirituality. Two reasons may be given for his choice of the Jesuits, Masters at once of the interior life and the apostolate:

- He borrowed what seemed to him to be best suited to missionary and apostolic life. He, therefore, drew inspiration from the rule, as he said himself, in order to prepare one for the Consecrated Life. He was particularly impressed by:
 - life in union with God, leading to action (contemplative and active);
 - zeal for service of God and His glory;
 - obedience and submission to authority, in particular to Superiors and, still more, to the Church;
 - the humility of a servant and trust in the Heavenly Father;
 - self-control as necessary for facing up to diverse life situations.

⁵ In the two books about Planque mentioned above, there are many examples of his simplicity.

It is noticeable, however, that several of these borrowed ideas correspond closely to Fr. Planque's own spiritual tastes and the manner in which he, himself, sought a life of intimacy with God. By the humility he showed in admitting his ignorance of how to draw up a rule of religious life, Fr. Planque found in the spirituality of the sons of St. Ignatius a kind of security and justification for giving the necessary orientations himself. He felt at ease and was sure of going in the right direction by putting his confidence in the Jesuit Rule that which was "*not complicated and lends itself perfectly to mission life*".

"Sanctification"

"*Work at your personal sanctification*" is a recommendation that often appeared in Fr. Planque's letters. However, this expression is little used now.

"To become holy" is the Christian's response to Christ's invitation. Earlier, it was Abraham's response to the invitation given him by God. This counsel of Fr. Planque's expresses, it seems, a desire of today. It may be that of everyone who wants to live close to God: a desire for spiritual growth. 'Aspiring to holiness' expresses very well the effort of one who desires to walk in the presence of Jesus, in his wake as it were, and so sets out on the journey.⁶

⁶ When Fr. Planque's 19th century vocabulary is updated we shall realize that his spirituality is still sound.

III. THE CHARISM OF FR. PLANQUE

It has been stated elsewhere that, “an Institute is fortunate in being able to read with faith the life of its Founder and there discern how his mind worked.” We are fortunate in that we have sufficient facts to enable us to understand Fr. Planque’s mental processes.

Gift of Strength and Discernment

To understand Fr. Planque’s charism, i.e. the special gifts he received from God to build the Society of African Missions, found the OLA Sisters and, with these two Institutes, to offer service to Africa, it is necessary to consider two things simultaneously:

1. To follow him during his first thirty years, examining his milieu, education, studies and formation within his family and in the seminary, spiritual evolution, and his awakening to the needs of the Mission.
2. To reflect on the event that can be called a turning point: his departure for Lyons. From the human point of view this was an extraordinary and almost incomprehensible occurrence. He set out for the unknown and unforeseeable and faced risks and adventure. A pioneering work awaited him for which, even if he had the necessary capabilities, he lacked the needed experience. It can be said, however, that “the Spirit rested upon him”, in that part which was hidden from himself, blocked from his awareness, but in which the Spirit was in control.

Upon the death of Brésillac, Fr. Planque received a gift of strength and discernment that enabled him to continue the work undertaken by his predecessor. This gift made him an Apostle dedicated to the growth of the SMA and to the evangelization of Africa. Similarly, when he founded the Sisters, Fr. Planque seemed to have acted under the influence of the Spirit who gave him the intelligence and the courage to bring the task to completion.

What is the Place of Fr. Planque among Founders

Is it necessary to categorize him at all? All categorizing seems artificial when one speaks of the Spirit. It is clear that Augustine Planque did not have the audience or the influence of St. Ignatius of Loyola, nor did he have the novel insight into the Gospel as possessed by St. Francis of Assisi. But he was given a grace of his own which offered him new life and maturity. It prepared him for the appointed moment when, in spite of himself, he became a Founder. Evidently he received from the Spirit the clarity, courage and enthusiasm that go with this “founding charism”.

We can call him a mediator because he was open to the Spirit as well as being very generous and strong willed. He allowed this upsurge of grace, which is the charism of evangelization, to invade the world once again through the sending of Priests and Sisters to the peoples of Africa.

The sad and difficult life of Fr. Planque after 1859, which was sustained by an exemplary fidelity, recalls us forcibly to the essentials, i.e. to personal charisms. The dramatic change that the SMA went through revealed his true worth: his human and spiritual strength. But this was not all. If Fr. Planque asserted himself as quickly as we are given to understand, it can only be because he received the gift of the Spirit. His charism was his total dependence on God who gave him the strength needed for the mighty undertaking of evangelizing the people of Africa.

The man, once prone to discouragement in the eyes of Bishop de Brésillac, was, from now on, able to assert himself with fortitude and daring. The following is an extract from his letter to Bishop Kobès following the deaths of Bishop Brésillac and his confreres: *“With God’s help we hope to walk in the way marked out for us....This beloved Father saw into the future and planned things so that he could be done without and so that the work, which he saw as a created thing with its own identity and life, could continue”*.⁷

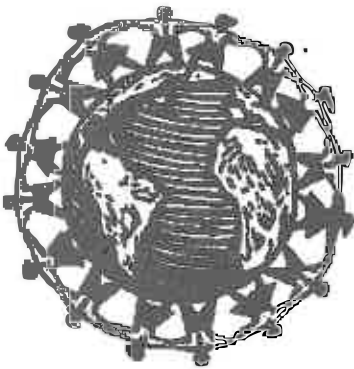
⁷ Planque’s letter to Mgr. Kobès, 17.9.1859.

With the same determination, Fr. Planque wrote to the Congregation of Propaganda: *"I hope that we will have a departure for the mission in November"*.⁸ From that point on this humble man spoke to all in a resolute voice using the first person, thus being unafraid to put himself forward. He proposed going to Rome, not to ask permission to continue the work, but to settle urgent problems. The fact is that he could not back down without betraying his ideals. *"It seems to me that the duty of continuing the work was strictly laid upon me"*,⁹ he wrote to Cardinal Barnabò. Here there is certainly loyalty to the Founder but also an awareness of a task given "from above".

Fr. Planque informed the Church of his decision to continue in the Founder's footsteps and asked for its help. He felt that it was his responsibility to see to the expansion and development of God's Church and of the newly founded Society dedicated to the spread of God's Kingdom in Africa. The founding of the Sisters in 1876 came as a second, but hardly less necessary, stage for the development of the Mission. It is obvious to me that, in 1859, Fr. Planque had an intense experience of Pentecost and through that outpouring of the Spirit he was given a plenitude of gifts from the Lord.

Because of his devotion to the Apostles, he was able to read in their experiences his own life story, finding the same contrasts between poor human means and the vastness of the Mission. But above all it was the same breath of the Spirit that made up for human deficiencies and let the glory of God shine through human weakness.

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⁸ Planque's letter to Propaganda, 26.8.1859.

⁹ Planque's letter to Cardinal Barnabò, 27.9.1859.