Foreword

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La Colombière is “the ideal Jesuit.” In this way Henri Bremond expressed himself in 1922, in his monumental *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux*. By thus expressing his own judgment, he anticipated that of the Catholic Church, who went on to proclaim La Colombière “blessed” in 1929, then “saint” in 1992, in recognition of both the exceptional character of his virtues and his decisive role in the promotion, during the seventeenth century, of the Devotion to the Heart of Jesus. But by “ideal Jesuit” it must be understood also that La Colombière realized in his person the humanist ideal that the Society of Jesus, expert in eloquence as in spirituality, worked to spread in the colleges of France and Europe in order to form, in accord with the dictum of Cicero, a *vir bonus, dicendi peritus*—a “good man, skilled at speaking.” That La Colombière was a “good man,” not only in the sense of natural morality but in the higher, Christian meaning, no one has ever doubted; that he was “skilled at speaking,” Fr. O’Brien permits us, by this edition, to assess how far this expression falls short of the truth.

Fr. O’Brien, since his doctoral studies at the Sorbonne, where I had the good fortune and the honor to accompany him in his research, is the foremost expert of La Colombière as orator. He indeed dedicated, in 2008, his dissertation in French Literature to the connections between rhetoric and spirituality in La Colombière’s corpus, and especially in three discourses delivered in 1665, 1671, and 1672, in praise of the panegyrist, the age of Augustus, and the French orator, respectively. These Latin discourses show in La Colombière a supreme mastery of rhetorical technique and a virtuosity that verges on the spectacular. The texts that Fr. O’Brien translates in the present work issue from the same author, but they are at the same time altogether different. It is no longer a question of making the powers of eloquence shine for their own sake, in a pedagogical exercise of declamation, but of putting them at the service of God from the pulpit of Truth, in a preaching of which the sole end is the conversion of the listeners.

La Colombière evidently did not forget, when he preached these sermons in 1676, 1677, and 1678, what he had taught his students of rhetoric some years previously, just as Saint Augustine, preaching in his cathedral in Hippo, could not disown his past as professor of rhetoric at Carthage and Milan. And in fact, the texts chosen and presented by Fr. O'Brien are thoroughly those of a master of eloquence, as much on the level of rhetorical invention as on the levels of disposition and elocution. One could go even further and assert that La Colombière, by his psychological lucidity and his sense of the paradoxical and demystifying turn of phrase, proves himself here the equal of the great moralists of the classical age. But he does not seek in his sermons to produce a literary oeuvre—and that may be why it attains such literary merit. He does better than to resist the temptation, denounced by Saint Paul in the work of certain preachers, to “preach himself” (*se prêcher soi-même*) in order to attract the admiration of the crowds: La Colombière preaches Jesus Christ and wants that his own word be nothing but the echo of the Word. Certainly, he resorts to all the rational and emotional means of persuasion, but he knows that these means are useless without that grace capable, with the help of our freedom, to render them effective. While human words echo in our ears, it is in us an invisible master who gives them access to our heart: the true preacher—that is, the Holy Spirit.

Let us not say that the audience of great, worldly people that La Colombière addressed is so different from us, or that his time is so far from ours. We recognize ourselves perfectly in the description he gives of the temptations or desires of his listeners. It suffices to read, by way of example, what he says about the bad habit, which he strikingly calls “a powerlessness that one wants” or “a free necessity,” for if it is easy to engage oneself in such habits it is nearly impossible to quit them. Is this not exactly what we name *addiction*, this practice into which one enters for pleasure and which then carries us away by force? And if the era of La Colombière is distant, Fr. O'Brien, by the meticulousness of his lexical and historical notes—not to mention his invaluable scriptural and theological clarifications—brings within our reach these discourses delivered over three hundred years ago. Time passing changes nothing here: if the true preacher is the Holy Spirit, he continues to act through those who have lent him their voice. The texts of the saints are not a dead letter but a living word. And this is why one could not be too grateful to Fr. O'Brien: by passing on to us these intangible relics of Claude La Colombière, he has opened to us a treasury for today.