

9. LETTERS TO FATHER ERNEST BRIOT

Ernest Briot de la Mallerie (1813-1870) studied at the Seminary of St. Sulpice and in 1843 entered Libermann's novitiate. After his ordination, he labored in the missions of Haiti and Africa until 1848. On his return to Europe Francis Libermann chose Briot as his confessor. He later became bursar of the Mother House, but unfortunate financial transactions forced him to leave the Congregation and to accept a parish in Switzerland. However, he always preserved a warm affection for the Congregation.

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Because we are nothing, we may count on God. Faults should not frighten us. Don't worry about money.

Letter One La Neuville, August 10, 1843 Vol. 4, p. 303

Dear Friend:

[Because We Are Nothing, We May Count on God]

You must be thinking that I have forgotten you but this is not so! In spite of all your troubles you may feel assurance and be full of confidence in our good Mother who will sustain you. He who can "cause children of Abraham to spring from stones" will know what to do to form a missionary according to the Heart of our Blessed Mother out of the poor man that you are.

If it had been my task to make something of you, I should never have accepted it, even if you were the most accomplished man on earth. We are all wretched men, brought together by the will of the Master, who is our only hope. If we had powerful means at our disposal we would not

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accomplish much good; but now that we are nothing, have nothing, and are good for nothing, we are permitted to conceive great projects, because our hope does not rest on ourselves but on Him who is almighty. Don't worry about your weakness and your poverty; it is when we are miserable that the power of Jesus and His mercy are bound to manifest themselves. Thus the glory [resulting from those projects] will be for Him alone; the axe doesn't pride itself on what is done by him who handles it. You say you are incapable of learning anything. Well, we shall make you study theology in a way that will suit you and I promise that your head will absorb it.

[Do Not Let Your Faults Frighten You]

Your long catalogue of faults doesn't frighten me at all. None of them is a true obstacle to the stream of divine graces which our Good Master destines for the poor, abandoned souls through your service. Cheer up, therefore, and be full of confidence. Don't act like Moses, who, when he saw how unfit he was for his great task, was too insistent in his pleadings with God and yielded to excessive fears.

Remember that only one thing is necessary for [those who want to labor for] poor and neglected souls, and that is to remain dead to the world in the sight of God and allow Him to act according to His good pleasure. Recall the words of St. Paul: God has chosen what was not to destroy that which is: "When I am weak then am I strong," for my confidence in Him is my strength. He will be our strength if He finds us weak; He has to be, for He is infinitely wise. Now when He employs an instrument that of itself is of no use for the work He intends to accomplish, He must give His own strength to it.

Oh, how happy you should be, dear friend, to be obliged to become empty of yourself and to be entirely dependent

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on Him who sends you. Don't be surprised when feelings of pride arise in you; they are not deliberate sentiments; pride always acts against reason. You should despise those sentiments and reject them without anxiety. Try to remain calm in the midst of your troubles; remain humble and poor and at the disposal of the Divine Master, but remain peaceful and gentle, expecting everything from Him and nothing from yourself.

Our Lord has given you great graces. He will give you more. It is your task to consecrate yourself entirely to Him alone, to His service and His glory. Always be quiet and peaceful in His presence; it is God's part to do everything and yours to remain at His disposal in peace, mildness and humility, and to be full of confidence in His mercy and in the incomprehensible kindness of the Most Holy Heart of Mary.

[Don't Worry About Money]

We shall be somewhat in a state of disorder until the 8th of September. Bishop Barron is coming and the departure of the confreres is approaching.

You may send me your trunk in advance . . . Don't worry about the cost of room and board; give what the Good Lord wants you to give. Those who have nothing, pay nothing, and those who have something can pay or not as God wills. Write to me as much as you want and could be useful to you. I hope that in a few days I shall have less work and be able to reply promptly to your letters.

May the peace of the Lord be in your soul.

Entirely yours in the holy charity
of Jesus and Mary,

FATHER FRANCIS LIBERMANN
missionary of the Holy Heart of Mary

Instructions to a departing missionary.

Letter Two *La Neuville, June 8, 1845* *Vol. 7, p. 191*

J. M. J.

Dear Confrere:

I made Father Arragon leave three days earlier because I was afraid he might otherwise miss the boat, as he will explain to you.

So you will both begin the great and important mission!
[Here are my final instructions.]

[*Trust in God and in Mary*]

1. Don't depend on your own powers, your own prudence and your own activity. In God alone and in Mary you must place all your confidence.

2. Be prepared, both of you, to meet great difficulties and to have to suffer delays in the execution of your plans. You will meet troubles, disappointments, contradictions, of every sort, pains inflicted by all kinds of persons, things and circumstances. Don't worry and don't give up. Even when things seem perfectly hopeless, make sure not to yield to discouragement.

[*Be Always Self-Possessed and Submissive to God*]

3. Be quiet and calm, humble and gentle in all circumstances. Preserve the same disposition in both prosperity and adversity; be always humble, peaceful and submissive to all that God wills; refer everything to Him and expect all things from His divine mercy.

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4. Don't look at things the way an excited imagination might suggest but consider them calmly and in a practical way. Don't become too elated by great success or dejected when you foresee the possibility of failure. Work as faithful laborers in the Lord's vineyard, without self-complacency or discouragement before or after your labors. Whether you are successful or not, your reward will always be great.

[Plan and Decide Carefully, Guided by Faith]

5. When you have to undertake something that is important, weigh and discuss the matter in the presence of God. Begin with casting out all prejudices for or against the venture. Don't allow yourselves to be carried away by enthusiasm; never do things hastily; weigh well what you ought to do in a spirit of faith, but at the same time reason things out. Put your confidence in God in all that you undertake; don't attempt things in a spirit of presumption or enthusiasm. When you deliberate about works to be undertaken do not allow yourself to be led by the inclinations of the heart. Don't be scrupulous and fearful that you might fail to follow a good inspiration when your mind hesitates because you suspect something that is contrary to the sentiments that animate you.

Consequently, let your souls be guided by considerations of faith. Base your conduct always on the principles of the Gospel. At the same time, however, while your mind is thus animated, it should also reason things out, and act with mature reflection and deliberation. Whenever possible, don't act in matters of importance until you see things clearly; try at least to foresee more or less what will result before you undertake anything. Leave nothing to chance; foresee as much as you can, but once you have taken all the precautions, put your confidence in God alone.

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Be moderate in examining plans for an undertaking; don't be slow and don't let things drag on. It is a great evil to be foolhardy but it is sometimes worse to remain in uncertainty and timidity in regard to making decisions. Use a suitable length of time to examine a case, weigh the pros and cons in the presence of God and act calmly with the sole desire of pleasing God and fostering His glory. After the case has been well examined, fearlessly make your decision and then put it into execution with great confidence in God. When there is no need for a prompt decision, give the project a long examination. It is not necessary that all the difficulties be eliminated before you undertake a thing. When you have taken proper precautions for its success, always leave something to Providence.

[*Be Prudent in Speaking About Your Plans*]

6. Be secretive and reserved without appearing to be so. Never make known the projects which you undertake for God's glory before it is necessary. Accustom yourself to the practice of not saying everything you happen to know; be masters over your own minds and masters of your tongues. Speak out only when it is useful. On the other hand don't be men of mystery but rather simple and open, and don't make secrets of things that are unimportant trifles.

[*Guard Against Impatience*]

7. Don't be impatient in your undertakings, for if you are you will cause many failures. Give things a chance to mature and don't seek to gather fruits before they are ripe; otherwise you will find them bitter and your labors will not be successful.

A true missionary is as ready to remain at rest when Providence obliges him as he is to engage himself in labors

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when an abundant harvest is calling for him. In all things, at all times, and under all circumstances, learn to follow the movements of Providence; follow God instead of trying to run ahead of Him.

[*Care of Health*]

8. Do not plunge imprudently into the works with excessive zeal at the risk of ruining your health. What good will it be if you win a few souls for God at the expense of your health thus rendering yourselves useless to a greater number? It is, no doubt, an excellent thing to sacrifice one's life for the salvation of a single soul, but to preserve one's life for the salvation of a hundred is better still.

To fear neither sickness or death is the attitude of a missionary who is zealous and devoted to God alone, but to take precautions in order to preserve his life and so save a greater number of souls, is the attitude of a missionary who joins perfect prudence with perfect zeal and perfect devotedness.

When you are in good health, avoid what could make you ill without, however, indulging in excessive attention and fear. When you are ill, consider yourselves happy to be ill for the glory and the love of Our Sovereign Master; don't become sad, downcast or scared, but rejoice that you are able to give your lives for the glory of God and the salvation of the souls to whom He has sent you.

[*Esprit de Corps, Charity, and Moderation of Zeal*]

9. Maintain peace and harmony among yourselves; do nothing without consulting one another. Let your *esprit de corps* be evident to everyone in all circumstances.

10. Be gentle and peaceful with everybody. Take care not to aim at being above others and getting the better of them. On the contrary, see to it that the others are always more

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honored than yourselves. Be on your guard also against appearing to encroach upon the functions and works of other priests.

Be moderate in manifesting zeal before men. Don't assume an air of wishing to draw everything to yourselves. If others are doing good, let them do it and take charge only of what they omit or neglect. When you are working in a parish, take the work for yourselves and leave all the honor and advantages that result from it to the priests of the parish. In all this, act naturally and avoid all affectation.

11. Don't be excessively eager to go and evangelize the poor people of the African mainland; choose the opportune time for it and don't endanger your health by a premature expedition there. Gather proper information about it so that you may choose the time, place and circumstances that are suitable; don't destroy yourselves by your impatience or prevent the accomplishment of anything truly useful. . . .

May the peace of Our Lord and His most Holy Mother be with you.

Entirely yours in the charity of the Most Holy Heart of Mary,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN

priest of the Holy Heart of Mary

Regarding the acceptance of the superiorship. You, holy men, have ruined us.

Letter Three La Neuville, February 8, 1847 Vol. 7, p. 37

Beloved Confrere :

I am very sorry to hear that my letters failed to reach you. I know how much you suffer from this and I assure you that I should gladly reserve for myself the troubles which you and your confreres have to bear. I shall do my best from now on to make sure that my letters arrive. . . .

I must tell you, and it fills me with gratitude towards Our Lord and Our Lady, that, upon my return from the long journey [to Rome], I found the community in perfect condition. Our good Mother is evidently watching over us.

But let's now say a word about you. I drew great consolation from your last two letters. In the first I noticed with much satisfaction how little you desired being superior and I thanked God for it. This is the right manner of living according to God's way: we don't like to accept the burdens placed upon our shoulders but, despite our dislike, we humbly accept them in order to obey God. If, after that, God sees fit to take that charge away from us, let us rejoice and preserve perfect peace of soul.

I am particularly happy to see the tender affection with which you speak of our dear Father Bessieux, who became your superior after he had been your subject. This does not surprise me. You have merely done your duty and I expected you to act in that manner. Yet, I am happy about it, my beloved confrere, and ask God to overwhelm you with His divine favors. The perfect harmony that reigns among you

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and the observance of the rules serve to make my joy complete. I trust that God will reward you with His blessings.

The only thing that worries me is that your health is not very good. I'm afraid of the bad season. I beg all of you to write me from time to time, especially after the winter. . . .

You are all good men, holy men, who look upon money as mere dirt. We are ruined, but don't despair. Mary will help us as she has done in the past. Nevertheless, the mission will have to suffer this year. It hasn't one penny left and surely owes more than two. And yet one has to eat! The Good Lord will provide!

There is still so much I ought to tell you, . . . but at present I am too pressed with work, for I must send quite a number of letters to all our missions.

Adieu then! Be patient, courageous, gentle, and peaceful. Love your confreres of Goree and of Gabon. Forgive the harsh words that have been spoken; pardon with the fulness of the charity of the Divine Master and our good Mother.

Entirely yours in the charity of the
most Holy Heart,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN
priest of the Holy Heart of Mary

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*Practical rules concerning the way a priest should deal with
government officials.*

Letter Four Amiens, August 2, 1847 Vol. 9, p. 293

Dear Confrere:

Father Bessieux is very happy because both your house and your church have been properly completed. It is regret-

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table that a quarrel arose between you and the Commander on the occasion of the erection of that church. I hope that Father Bessieux will be able to restore peace in the matter. He is generally liked by the civil authorities. . . . If Captain Brisset now seems to be displeased with him, it is, in all probability, because he imagines that Father Bessieux will henceforth be against him and will be displeased at and disapprove of his conduct.

I hope that Father Bessieux upon his return will re-establish solid friendship with him and win him back again. Captain Brisset is unyielding—all our military men are—and he does everything in a military manner. Such an approach always contains difficulties for our missionaries, but this sort of difficulty is found everywhere.

[Be Cordial and Prudent in Your Dealings with Officials]

The situation of a mission in Africa makes relations with the military commanders a matter of necessity. I cannot conceive any way of avoiding such relations. The great art required of a missionary who is placed in such circumstances consists in remaining friendly, or at least in maintaining good relations with the civil and military authorities and with the captains of incoming and outgoing ships while, at the same time, preserving freedom for the works of the priestly ministry.

It would be a great evil if all those functionaries were led to believe that you are opposed to the government. They easily get this foolish idea from the bad newspapers which they read. They add this prejudice to all the others they have acquired from reading Voltairian works against religion. From these prejudices they fashion a sort of scarecrow by which they keep us at a distance. They get excited and feel prompted to oppose and resist our efforts.

You must aim at being very prudent in all your conduct. Never interfere in politics and do all you can to oblige every-

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one who lives near you ; treat them with gentleness, charity, and attention. Be simple and polite toward them ; act with a simplicity and a politeness that is born of charity.

When you cannot satisfy their wishes, for example, baptizing those who have several wives or pass lightly over certain precepts of the Gospel and the like—when they request such things—act toward them with gentleness and charity, thus at least pleasing them while not granting what they ask. You cannot do this by saying yes and then doing the contrary in an underhanded fashion. In general, be frank and open, while at the same time exercising prudence. So, avoid harsh replies. Don't argue, don't show that you are displeased or embarrassed. All such attitudes are harmful. They cannot produce good results. At the same time avoid also entertaining inner feelings of displeasure toward them. Remain calm and approach them at all times with an air of serenity and confidence, even after they have done some foolish things against you.

Make them understand and believe that, if you fail to give in to their wishes, it is purely because of your loyalty to your conscience. This you will achieve if you readily grant them unobjectionable requests, and if you always preserve the same air of serenity, confidence and openheartedness in your relations with them.

Here are a few rules of prudence I want to give you in regard to your relations with the civil and military authorities :

[Do Not Show Any Distrust]

1. Avoid as much as possible making them think that you in any way distrust their good dispositions toward you. This, by itself, would suffice to cause them to become ill-disposed. On the contrary, if your behavior manifests confidence, and you act as if you did not have any doubts about

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them, they sometimes will not even dare to show the bad dispositions which they actually harbor. Military men usually act according to their dominant impression. If you act according to the way I have suggested, you will prevent the development of such unfortunate impressions, for we must recognize that those men are fundamentally good.

[Do Not Assume an Authoritarian Attitude]

2. Avoid speaking and acting in an authoritarian manner. By that I mean affecting authority. The haughtiness which shows itself in the way they exercise their powers in their civil and military functions ought not to find its replica in your way of administering church affairs.

Be firm regarding everything that concerns the duties of your state of life, but let your firmness be coupled with gentleness and humility. It is natural for soldiers to use their authority with a show of rigidity, violence, and pride. They have never tried to acquire evangelical perfection. But we are priests of Jesus Christ and for us the maxims of the Gospel must regulate our conduct. We must soften the rigidity of those men by our gentleness, sweeten their violence by our moderation, and reduce their pride by our humility.

[Avoid Conflicts Whenever Possible]

3. Take precautions so that you may avoid conflicts. Those men are accustomed to always having the upper hand over their subordinates; they expect their will to be fully accomplished throughout the territory over which they have been given control. This is why, after they have gone forward, they refuse to withdraw. And if by means beyond their control you manage to get the better of them, they will make you pay dearly for it the next time.

They are, moreover, quick and unabashed in determining their position and do not reflect whether they are right or

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wrong, for they are ignorant of religious and ecclesiastical matters. Hence prudence dictates that we take precautions not to give them an occasion for committing themselves.

If, in spite of your precautions, an officer makes a pronouncement on a matter that lies outside his competence, do your best to let this pass for a time and avoid starting an irritating dispute. By thus allowing some time to pass, you will be able to make him change his view when you enlighten him at another more favorable moment. If you immediately resist him, you will arouse his anger and his self-love, and he will refuse to yield. If you are altogether unable to disregard his first step, avoid at least all embittering opposition.

[*Do Not Humiliate Them*]

4. In cases when it is impossible for you to avoid a conflict, and your conscience obliges you to stand firm against the will of a government official, you begin by observing the first two of the above-mentioned rules. In addition, in case you succeed in making your view prevail, avoid adopting any sort of triumphant air, do not make him feel that you were victorious over him. Be kind and never direct the conversation to anything that touches on that question. Be humble and charitable and do not humiliate others under any pretext whatsoever. We sometimes imagine that it is a good thing to make others realize how wrong they were and how far they went out of bounds. This is a wrong and a very bad method—it flatters our self-love and always produces evil results.

[*Give Preference to Personal Relationships over Official Requests*]

5. Finally, avoid as much as possible the exchange of letters and official requests. Write rarely when you have

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to ask things from commanders. Go and visit them and gradually lead the conversation to the question you are interested in. Lay the groundwork and express your request by word of mouth.

Suppose, for example, that you want [government officials to be present at] a solemn dedication [of a church], or you want to get an order to stop servile work on Sundays, or you want to stop the practice of housing men and women promiscuously. In such cases you pay a personal visit to the commander, so that you can modify your request in view of what he might dislike because he considers it inspired by intolerance.

Do you recall what I said about that rule of prudence in respect to Father Tisserant? Perhaps you remember that I told you how this dear confrere committed a serious fault against prudence when he made official requests and addressed letters to Mr. Ardouin.¹

You cannot conceive what harm is done by such letters. Even regarding a matter that concerns solely your priestly ministry, when you wish to notify the commander about it, it is often better to speak about it rather than write. If you are asked to express your request or your notification in writing, you can always do so afterwards. Such a request for a written statement will often be made because someone's responsibility is involved. We must then act according to the commander's wishes, but it is always a good thing to express our request first orally.

[Your Conflict with Captain Brisset]

In regard to that detachment of [pagan] Negro soldiers [sent by the commander to be present at the dedication of

¹Secretary of State for Justice, Education, and Religion of the Republic of Haiti.

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your church], it is our opinion here that you could and should have accepted it without any hesitation. Since you have refused, the only thing to do now is to wait for the reply of Bishop Truffet. Undoubtedly he has contacted you about the matter. He is in charge of the mission, so it is for him to regulate matters of discipline.

Your idea was fundamentally right; it could be true that excluding pagans from being present at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass would create a good impression. I do not wish to pass judgment on that. You are on the scene and know better than I what sort of people you are dealing with. The only thing I should like to observe is that in your difficulty with respect to the commander, you could have yielded to his wishes, since I believe that the rule of the primitive Church [not to admit pagans] is no longer followed in the missions. Hence your conscience was not involved in that affair.

Nevertheless, don't worry. The affair will be settled. Don't let it discourage you. You see what it means to work for God's glory—there are always crosses and sufferings. Go on, God is with you. Don't be disturbed when you meet obstacles created by men. They can merely retard but not destroy the work of God. You see how arduous the task of governing is. We must be dead to ourselves and must act with prudence and moderation if we wish to enjoy independence in God's service. . . .

Adieu, dear confrere, and don't lose courage.

Entirely yours in Jesus and Mary,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN

priest of the Holy Heart of Mary