

LETTER TO FATHER JEAN VAUGEOIS

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Jean Marie Vaugeois entered the novitiate of La Neuville in 1845, and was ordained a priest in 1849. In 1851 he was stationed at Bordeaux. Father Libermann described him as a difficult character who had lost the religious spirit. He left the Congregation in 1854.

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*Self-love is one of your weak points. Your opposition to your superior is unworthy of a child of God. Do not neglect your own soul because of your work. Observance of the rule.*

*Paris, October 25, 1851 Vol. 13, p. 337*

Dear Confrere:

It is only since my return that I became acquainted with your letter to Father Schwindenhammer and with the results of his visitation. Add to this that I was kept busy by the return of our students and other affairs and you will understand why I did not write you before now. I shall, at long last, fulfill my obligation toward you.

It is definitely decided that we shall preserve the community of Bordeaux and shall send more confreres to that house as soon as we are able to do so. This then is merely a matter of time and patience. So it is necessary that your community be put on a firm footing with respect to fervor and regularity. We shall then be able to send you young confreres at the time desired by God's Providence without having to fear that they might fall victim to laxness—a thing that would be dangerous for your community and the Congregation as well as for the confreres themselves.

The community of Bordeaux ought to be a model community at the time when those confreres are sent to you. It cannot be such a community just now because it is incomplete. But it is necessary for you to take whatever means will insure the faithful observance of all the rules that are essential and required for the preservation of the spirit of our Congregation. Keep in mind the graces you received in the novitiate. Be as simple and humble as children; the kingdom of God belongs to no others than these. I seem to have noticed that you have regressed in respect to the practice of virtue. Examine yourself before God and tell me how you stand before Him.

[*Self-Love*]

One thing to which you should pay particular attention is self-love. This has always been one of your weak points. If you are not on your guard, that vice might lead you to become worldly and lose the religious spirit. One of the most dangerous fruits of self-love is confidence in oneself and presumption. Examine yourself on all points during your next day of recollection and also be on guard against a kind of harshness and attachment to your own will. These are faults which I frequently mentioned during the novitiate. They are very dangerous and it is easy to suffer illusions in their regard especially in your present position.

Don't be surprised that I make these recommendations to you. You recall that I know you thoroughly. Well, I know that these are the principal defects of your nature. Don't say, "I am no longer a child and you ought not to make such observations to me." You are a child, and I am glad that I have so much confidence in you that I do not hesitate to say whatever I think may be useful.

You are a child, you ought to be a child "not in years but in want of malice." Now to such a child one can and should

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make these remarks as well as the others which I shall now add. Suppose you had unhappily been emancipated from that holy state of childhood; it would be all the more reason for giving you every advice that is necessary to make you a child again. Hence I shall deal with you as with a child of God and go on [with my admonition].

Seeing you before me as a spiritual child, I feel the need of scolding you, but I must do it in a holy manner and with the charity that flows from our Heavenly Father.

### *[Disobedience is Unworthy of a Child of God]*

You don't have the charitable union with Father Gravière, your superior, that ought to exist in every family of our Heavenly Father, nor have you a spirit of obedience and submission that is worthy of a child of God. Now without such a union of charity and that holy obedience it is impossible to be pleasing to God and impossible to establish a union of charity on a firm foundation. In such a situation it would not be possible for the young confreres whom I intend to send you, at the time designed by God's providence, to continue their formation and even to maintain their spiritual condition.

If my information is not correct, don't become angry with anyone—simply let me know the facts. If, however, I have been correctly informed, accept with love and humility the warning I am giving you and profit by it.

In any case examine your soul regarding the essentials in this admonition. If it is partly undeserved, it contains at least something that is true. Examine all the sources from which [this lack of harmony may spring]. You may feel personal animosity against Father Gravière; you may find faults in him; you may persuade yourself that he does not possess the necessary qualities to direct the community. On

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this last point our Bishops of Guinea do not agree with you, for they desire to have him and have repeatedly and insistently asked for him.

But let us suppose that you're right (although I am convinced that the contrary is true; at least I feel certain that you have exaggerated a great number of his faults), the mere fact that you pronounce judgment on him is already an evil, for Our Lord has told us, "Judge not, condemn not."

If we are told not to judge our equals, *a fortiori* we must refrain from judging our superiors. Moreover what difference does it make whether our superiors are able men or not, perfect or defective? We do not obey man but God, and if the man does wrong, so much the worse for him. He will have to render an account to God for his administration. We have done our duty; we accomplish God's Holy Will; all the rest is irrelevant.

Perhaps you will tell me, "The works will suffer and souls will be lost; I would do more good if I had my own way." But what will it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer harm to his own soul? We shall not be judged because of what we have not been able to do, but we will be condemned for failing to fulfill God's holy will, for our infidelities, for yielding to nature, and neglecting the evangelical perfection which we have promised to God. These, indeed, are hard sayings but believe me, they come from the heart, from the great affection I have for you and from a great desire for your sanctification. Go back to the source [of your disagreement with your superior], delve deeply into your interior, and you will see that the evil is found in you and not in Father Gravière. He may be wrong sometimes, perhaps even seriously so. Nevertheless, even then the evil is not in him but in you. His fault may be an occasion, but he is not the cause of the evil. The evil is in yourself; it is there

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that you must look for it, attack, pursue and exterminate it. I say the evil is within yourself, for we can never claim to be right in our opposition against our superior. Our Lord did not desire to be right against Pilate.

*[Do Not Neglect Your Own Soul Because of Your Work]*

I have begun to hit you pretty hard but, foreseeing that you will listen to me in God's presence, I'll go on with my admonition.

I'm afraid that your ministry has caused you to launch yourself too freely into the world. This activity may have been prompted by zeal but it is also possible that other motives might be mixed up with it. Whatever the principle that may have been at the root, I am afraid that you have neglected your own sanctification and the interior virtues which constitute it, namely, recollection, peace, humility, detachment from self and from your own ideas, detachment from the things the heart longs for, from the satisfactions of nature and self-love. In a word, I believe that, because of that activity, your religious spirit has weakened.

Consider and examine this before God and then tell me about what you find. I know that you are not the only guilty one. I too am guilty, although not as much as you might think. I confess that I have not written you as often as I should have. But this is a thing of the past. I will correct my ways; I will be a new man. Since this is my resolution, you too will become a new man, won't you?

*[Observance of the Rule]*

I now have merely to add a few words regarding regularity and to reply to the letter which you addressed to Father Schwindenhammer concerning the apostolate among soldiers.

There is one thing that may have caused you and the other confreres who passed through Bordeaux to become irregular

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in their conduct, namely, the fact that they have sought advice from outsiders. The priest you interview and consult will almost always side with you and talk along your line of thought. Moreover, he will reason according to his own order of things. Now there are no two religious societies that are perfectly alike. Each is bound to preserve regularity as it exists according to its own rules, otherwise a society would not have its proper spirit. Now suppose that one of us goes to consult a Jesuit, another speaks to a Marist, a third to a Vincentian, a fourth to a Picpus Father. You can see what disorder would result from such a variety of counsels.

It is for reasons of this sort that our rules prescribe that the confessor and director should be chosen within the community. "Of course," you will reply, "I agree with you, but why did you not reply to my letter?" You're right—although I am not as wrong as you imagine. But let us bury the past. I merely give you this advice and ask you to adopt the plan of our rules for your future conduct. I know you well enough to believe that my observations will not be lost on you. . . .

I believe that you are wrong in worrying so much. Proceed with more confidence and simplicity and accomplish the work you are able to fulfill. Suppose that your fears have a perfect foundation and that the good is impeded when you don't have all the power and latitude you have asked us to grant you. This would not be a sufficient reason for trying to give up that duty. First of all, you would then fail in obedience and God could not bless your withdrawal. Secondly, by your refusal, you would prevent the accomplishment of at least a small amount of good. If I gave in and granted you the full powers you asked for, I would create a most serious and dangerous breach in a general rule, for it would be going counter to a principle without which no community is able to function. Hence if I were to grant you full powers, I would go counter to the rule, offending

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against the general principle which governs such cases and as a result I would risk introducing disorder into the community of Bordeaux.

I ask you therefore, to let things run their natural course. At the same time feel assured that Father Gravière will give you the freedom to go your own way in regard to the internal direction of that work of the soldiers. Have a talk with him and you will see.

In respect to dealings with the authorities, this, as a rule, belongs to superiors. They are the ones who transact such affairs or they are undertaken with the understanding of superiors, for such matters are too important to be arranged without their knowledge.

I realize that you have experience with this sort of work and are competent to deal with such affairs, but it is, you see, a question of principle. What is granted and permitted you today, another would do tomorrow, and a third would go farther than both. It is in ways like these that communities run the danger of being ruined. So I beg you, relinquish your own ideas and views as well as your personal fears, and help me put your community in proper order so that later, when God's goodness gives me the means for increasing your number, I may not have to fear for the spiritual welfare of the confreres who would be sent to your community. . . .

I certainly have given you an earful of counsels and perhaps I have caused you pain. But examine those counsels before God in a spirit of recollection, humility and love and you will greatly benefit by them for your own sanctification and the future well-being of your community.

Before all try to become reconciled with Father Gravière and to live in perfect union with him. I am sure that he, on his part, will do all he can to form and preserve that holy union.

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Be ready to forgive certain things; pardon even a great deal if necessary, and suffer one another as Jesus Christ suffers you.

Entirely yours in the charity of  
Jesus and Mary,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN