

25. LETTER TO FATHER JEROME GRAVIÈRE

Jerome Gravière (1814-1886) entered Libermann's novitiate in 1845 and became Prefect Apostolic of the Two Guineas in 1846. Three years later he returned to France. He died there February 19, 1886.

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Attitude toward complaints about superiors. Regularity: the superior is not above the rule. Government of the community. Gentleness in dealing with difficult characters.

Paris, October 22, 1851 Vol. 13, p. 331

Dear Confrere :

The letter which I enclose is addressed to you but contains counsels and observations that are designed for the whole community. I wrote it in such a way that it can be shown to Father Vaugeois. The present letter is addressed to you personally and it contains advice and observations that concern you, either for your own self or for your function as Superior of the Community. I shall speak frankly and simply but you may feel sure that what I shall say comes from an affectionate heart and that there is no element of rancor or displeasure in it. I greatly desire that we be united in mind and that the direction of the communities be like that of my own community. This is why I feel the need of speaking quite openly to you without any reservations.

1. [*Attitude Toward Complaints About Superiors*]

You are convinced that I tend to take the side of subordinates against their superiors.

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This is totally false and it would be absurd for me to act in that manner. It is not at all true that I acted in that way in regard to [our priests in] Guinea. All the facts you mentioned to me some time ago in no way prove your contention, for some are inexact and others do not apply to the questions we are concerned with. Now here is my line of conduct in such a situation :

First of all, I do not decide against a superior nor have I ever decided against a superior even if he happened to be wrong. But neither do I side with them when they are wrong; that is, I don't support their error in regard to the particular principle that is involved in the case, especially when there is a question of the rule. In this case, I try to give an interpretation of the action or the word which provoked the displeasure of the inferior, saving the principle or the rule, and I do my best to explain the conduct of the superior. Sometimes I give no explanation and content myself with saying that the superior must have had reasons in those circumstances for doing or speaking the way he did. And I always recall at the same time the rules which faith dictates to us in regard to obedience.

Secondly, I am cautious with respect to confreres who are imperfect, stubborn, or sorely tempted. I speak with moderation, gentleness, and discretion. It is probably for this reason that you have become vexed. Your character is still somewhat inflexible; you are still peremptory and cling to your own ideas. As a consequence of this, you find that my words do not always coincide with your ideas or wishes, and you even misinterpret what I said in my reply to the complaints of the confreres. I shall return to this point in a moment.

If this is my conduct when the superior is wrong, I have all the more reason for acting in that way when the wrong is all on the side of the inferior.

You add to that first complaint that I listen too much to those who are dissatisfied—at least you have said this to me

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in the past. But it is my bounden duty to listen to those who have complaints. If I refused to listen to them, I would close my heart to all who are ill at ease, their state would become worse, and I would put myself in a position where I could no longer help them.

For the love of God, reject all those ideas and do not occupy your mind with them anymore. They are temptations and you should consider them as such and deal with them accordingly. Try to realize that these ideas arise in you because you are still too sensitive, too inflexible, and too opinionated. You have fought for a long time against those defects, but you have not yet sufficiently overcome them.

Let me tell you now what I ordinarily say in such cases: I declare that we are never right against our superior. Even when we are right we are wrong. Try to enter into that spirit; be intimately united with me in heart, spirit and direction. Help me to direct the community which you have to administer, so that I also may be able to assist you effectively.

Above all, take care not to utter the least complaint before your subjects, or to show the least displeasure, even when I happen to be completely wrong. You would be failing against God, you would do harm to your confreres, and destroy your own authority. Can you expect your subjects to avoid grumbling when they hear you doing it? Moreover, the authority of a superior general will always be more respected and his direction will be more esteemed than that of a lesser superior. So the criticism which the latter utters in regard to the superior general will sooner or later always produce a bad effect, especially on the confreres who are steadfast. I tell you all this, not because I received complaints against you but because it is natural to make known to others the displeasure one feels. For this reason I con-

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sider it useful to warn you, being persuaded that my advice will be well-received.

2. *Regularity: [the Superior is Not Above the Rule]*

I am fully convinced that you are devoted to our rule, and your confreres give testimony to that devotion. Nevertheless I have to tell you that I have received complaints in this matter—"complaints" is too strong, for they were merely observations. Now, I have judged them according to what they were worth, realizing that they might be due to the exceptional position of your community, a situation which must have brought about the occasional non-observance of the rules. Moreover, Father Schwindenhammer's visit has given me new evidence of your devotedness to the rules.

I have nevertheless considered it wise to make known to you the observations I have received on that subject. Please, don't try to guess who sent them to me and don't yield to vexation of mind, for we are all inclined to feel that the others are against us.

It was observed that you substituted your own will for the rule and that you acted on the principle that the superior of each community is master over the rule. Believe me when I say that this observation made no impression on me. I don't attribute such ideas to you. But I thought that, because of your difficulties with Father Vaugeois, you might have said things which, although not expressing the ideas attributed to you, might nevertheless have led your confreres to think that you had such ideas. Don't worry about such little troubles, but profit by them to acquire experience.

Watch over your words so that in all circumstances your confreres may see that you base yourself on the rule, and on obedience in the exercise of your functions. Don't let anyone think that you would prefer your own will to what is prescribed by the rule or is willed by the superior general.

Since all authority of a lesser superior comes from that twofold source, it will be respected when it is seen that his government rests in everything on those two foundations. I consider this the most important point for a proper direction of communities and the maintenance of a good spirit among confreres.

[3.] *The Government of the Community*

You are in a difficult position, having under you Father Vaugeois, who has a difficult character, is imperfect, and has lost the religious spirit.¹ We greatly sympathize with your suffering in this respect. Be patient; have courage and confidence. When the day comes when we shall be able to send you help—and we shall try to hasten that moment as much as possible—I trust that God will then give you as much consolation as you now have sorrow. In the meantime try to live as harmoniously as possible with Father Vaugeois.

It is unfortunate that he seeks advice from outsiders. I would have liked to forbid him to go to confession to outsiders but I was afraid of outbursts of anger. Moreover, I am afraid that such a measure would not remedy the evil. If Father Vaugeois were obliged to go to confession to you, it would surely not change his attitude toward you. He wants perfect freedom of action in his work for the soldiers and would like to manage that enterprise according to his own ideas. Not only does he desire this freedom for himself but he would also like to employ Brother Louis according to his own judgment. We should here make a distinction between two situations, as does Father Vaugeois himself. There is first the matter of the interior organization of the work: in this respect it is well for him to have all the latitude in regard to the direction of classes, instruction, religious con-

¹He left the Congregation three years later.

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ferences, and in general concerning the whole interior direction of the work.

However, first of all, it is necessary that the superior knows and makes decisions in regard to all that concerns the discipline and good order of the house and the rules, for example, regarding the hours of the meetings, their duration and things of this kind. Secondly, in principle the superior has the right to intervene in everything that concerns the internal direction of any work with which confreres are charged. In *practice*, however, he should leave them full liberty, unless there are exceptional cases which demand his intervention. In general, a superior should not thwart his confreres in the development of their works of zeal, or hamper their action. And this he would do if he wished to intervene in the internal affairs of a work for which a confrere is responsible. So much for the internal aspects of a work.

In regard to its externals, that is, in regard to the relations with outsiders, such as military authorities, soldiers in the barracks, and benefactors, in principle, any relations with authorities, both civil and ecclesiastical, belong to the superior, and once your little community is properly constituted, it ought to be that way. At present, it will be difficult to control Father Vaugeois in this respect. Nevertheless, we must insist that no arrangements are to be made with outsiders without your approval. I'll write to Father Vaugeois to this effect without, however, saying anything that might permit him to deal directly with the authorities. . . .

[*Gentleness in Dealing With Difficult Characters*]

To sum up: handle Father Vaugeois with gentleness. Take into account his weakness and imperfection; handle him so as not to hurt his pride; avoid, as much as possible, any friction, disputes and even discussions. Avoid making him feel your authority by the way you express yourself to him.

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One must be firmly determined to maintain the rule and good order but the practical application of this firmness should be gentle, moderate, and humble. . . .

In my letter of the 21st I didn't speak about the gifts and stipends which Father Vaugeois frequently receives. Here again *in principle* every gift made to members of the Congregation should not be accepted without the express permission (and in certain cases without the presumed permission) of the superior. And what is received ought to be handed over purely and simply to the latter without any advantage to the one who received the gift. But it will be difficult to make Father Vaugeois observe this rule. I'll therefore content myself with telling him that the rule demands that gifts and stipends be handed over to the superior.

Entirely Yours in Jesus and Mary,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN