

## 7. LETTERS TO ANTOINE BELUET, SEMINARIAN

Father Beluet to whom the following letters were addressed when he was still a seminarian, later became arch-priest of Jonzac in the diocese of La Rochelle. His high esteem of Francis Libermann can be seen in the following passages contained in two letters which he wrote about Libermann in 1869 and 1870:

I knew the saintly Father Libermann particularly well. We looked upon him as a saint. He was "a bright burning light." After listening to him, especially when he explained the Gospel for which he had a very particular predilection, we said to one another what was once said by the disciples of Emmaus, "Was not our heart burning within us while he spoke?"

The thing that touched us most and filled us with admiration was his profound humility. He entranced all hearts and we were literally brought to the feet of this man who, at that time, was not even our confrere but a simple domestic who ran errands for the seminary.

I personally, because of the special need of my soul, was most eager to keep close to the "good Mr. Libermann," as we used to call him. Contrary to what the *Imitation* says about those who "walk among men," I always left his company "more, and not less a man." He was particularly helpful to me in some of my difficulties, and even the mere sight of him revived my courage. . . .

When he noticed that I was more deeply depressed than usual, he sent me, while we were in the dining hall, one of those powerful looks which I can-

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not better describe than by recalling the one that Our Lord cast upon Saint Peter and which touched and converted the Apostle.<sup>1</sup>

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*How to love God with all our heart. Personal news.*

*Letter One      Amiens, August 30, 1835      Vol. 1, p. 319*

Dear Friend:

No doubt you will say to yourself that I am forgetting you because I am so slow in writing to you; but you see the reason: I am traveling. I am just returning from Normandy and shall stop at Amiens for a few days to visit our dear Picardians.

*[Love God With All Your Heart]*

Now what shall I tell you except to beg you to love God with your whole soul and all your heart and strength? Outside of that, there is nothing of value either on earth or in heaven. If we thus love God, everything becomes good to us; everything is sweet and delightful to our soul; even the bitterness and the acrimony of our past sins, are turned into sweetness and honey for us. Let us, therefore, heartily rejoice in the presence of God, since He has deigned to draw us to Himself, and to bestow a small portion of His love upon us.

But do you know how to love God with your whole heart, your whole soul and your whole strength? Let me tell you what I think of it; you can do with it what you think is good and proper.

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<sup>1</sup>*Notes et Documents*, vol. 1, pp. 316 f.

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*[Christ's Words Should Be Carefully Meditated Upon]*

I must, however, confess that, like so many others, I had only a very vague notion of it for a long time. And yet Our Lord says that the whole law of the Gospel is contained in these words. It is therefore well worth our while to try to understand them in their strict meaning, and to perceive and practice them to the letter.

Remember that all the maxims of Our Lord should be fathomed and applied to our souls as remedies to our ills. He never spoke in a vague or undetermined way. He surely had enough time to prepare what He had to tell us and to arrange His sentences so that we would understand them, for He foresaw everything from all eternity. He foresaw the least circumstances in which He was to be placed. On the other hand, how could the heavenly Father, who also foresaw and regulated even the slightest movement of the ant from all eternity, remain indifferent to the words of life and love which His well-beloved Son was destined to bring to His dearest children, in order to render them more pleasing to His sight?

That is why I believe we should meditate upon and weigh every word that our Divine Savior has uttered in order to instruct and save us. We should apply it afterwards to ourselves in our inmost soul, and always put it into practice.

*[How to Love God with All Our Heart]*

We must love God with our whole heart, that is, with all our desires and affections. And when do we love God in this way? It is when we have no desire nor affection apart from God; when they are all concentrated in Him alone. We should love nothing upon earth or in heaven but God alone, and all else should be loved only for Him and in Him.

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This appears difficult; but, dear friend, as long as our heart is divided between God and creatures, as long as we still seek enjoyments in ever so slight a degree, it is impossible for us to make any real progress in the most holy love of God. What advantage is there in amusing ourselves with trifles during our short stay upon earth? Will not all things pass away? And even our desires, are they not vain and miserable? Why yield to them? What difference does it make whether I have a moment of satisfaction or a moment of pain? All these things vanish, and on the morrow we no longer think of them. Let us profit by the short time that we have to pass upon earth, in order to learn how to love our Lord Jesus Christ with our whole heart. It will be a little hard in the beginning; but, as soon as we have seriously put our hand to the task, we will be able to do it with the greatest of ease.

I should not feel satisfied to see you love God above all things, if you loved other things outside of Him. You must love Him *alone*, and love nothing *in addition to* Him, unless it be all *in* Him and *for* Him.

After this you will ask: "How should I spend my vacation?" I answer, "very cheerfully." Take a great deal of recreation and distraction; play, go out walking, amuse yourself. You should, however, do all this with decorum and gravity, without at the same time losing sight of the fact that God should possess your undivided love. We may then indulge in our recreations and pleasures in all simplicity, without feeling in the least embarrassed; for, if we truly love God with all the fullness of our heart, we may freely do all things. You know the words of St. Augustine: "Love, and do what you like."

But enough of this serious talk! So I shall not tell you more of what I had to say, lest I tire and annoy you. I

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should have liked to write in a more pleasant fashion, but what can I do? "No one can give what he does not have."

[*Personal News*]

I cannot give you news about the seminary; I left two days ago before the arrival at Issy of the students from Paris. Before my departure, I handed over to Mr. de Bouchaud a letter which Father Barbier had given me for you; you have probably received it already.

I am at Amiens at present; I was at La Trappe yesterday. What I saw there is capable of taking away all desire of vacation. I do not know how anyone can have the courage to amuse himself and to gratify his whims, after he has seen how these wonderful men immolate and sacrifice themselves for the love of God by such rigorous penance, and that, too, without a moment's respite.

Let us love our God very much, dear friend. Since He does not demand of us as much bodily privations [as of the Trappists,] let us try, I beg you, to make up for it by the complete and universal sacrifice of all the desires and affections of our soul. There is no vacation in the matter of loving God. Let us therefore always love Him, but let us love God only.

God be with you, dear friend, and Mary also. Best regards in the most holy love of Jesus and Mary.

FRANCIS LIBERMANN, ACOLYTE

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*The vanity of all earthly things. Instead of indulging in little devotions, follow Christ's road of self-denial. Libermann's anxiety concerning a worldly-minded seminarian.*

Letter Two      Issy, September 28(?), 1835      Vol. 1, p. 320

Dear Friend:

I shall write to you again before the end of the holidays, so don't imagine that I am forgetting you. No, indeed, I don't forget you in the presence of God; and I beg Him with all my heart to preserve you in all purity of soul, and in the most ardent desire of loving Him with all your heart.

[*The Vanity of All Earthly Things*]

Vacation, like everything created, will soon come to an end. A new year will begin shortly and will end the same way. Only God is permanent and everlasting. Let's take care, then, not to lose our hearts to the miserable vanities of this world.

I hope that God will give us the grace of preparing ourselves, during the remaining days of vacation, to begin the year well, and that in the future He will make us advance far better than we have done until now. Thus, we may hope that, during the whole time that He will leave us upon earth, we shall be occupied only with sanctifying ourselves and serving His greater glory, which is the necessary result of our own sanctification.

What advantage can we expect from all the trifles and vanities which fill and amuse our hearts? When will our soul, with all its desires and affections, belong entirely to God? When shall we acquire that steadfast peace and profound interior spirit, which are the portion of the saints and



a necessary fruit of the love of God that is wholly pure and entirely detached from creatures and self-interest?

I hope, dear friend, that, by the end of next year, we shall possess all these virtues and even greater ones; you know that, in order to attain them, we must walk courageously in the path of evangelical perfection. I am confident that you will begin your year thus, and that you will persevere unto the end.

*[Do Not Substitute Little Devotions for Self-Denial]*

Don't be satisfied with being a saint addicted to little devotional practices, content to say a little prayer to the Blessed Virgin, in which he tells her a number of sweet things! Rather follow the road traced out for us by Christ's words and example, and which the Blessed Virgin and the saints have faithfully followed. We should pray unceasingly in order to obtain this grace, deny ourselves, carry our cross and follow Our Lord.

This means that we must give up our self-love, which makes us wish to be loved, esteemed and respected by everybody. Self-love always fears to lose something in the esteem of men. It makes our heart vain and victim of caprice. It is pained, grows angry and discouraged, as soon as anything happens that is not perfectly suited to its taste or wishes, or when men think or act differently from what is expected of them. Self-love always condemns others; it is distrustful, easily suspects evil, and never judges itself.

We must renounce every pleasure and self-gratification; we must refuse to lose our hearts to trifles, but tear them away from every sensible pleasure, from every enjoyment of creatures, in order to apply ourselves to God alone, and enjoy Him only. A man who is thus completely detached, obeys with the greatest perfection; he never judges his superiors; much less does he say that they are not doing well, that they should have acted otherwise. This remark,

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no doubt, makes you smile, for last year I "battled" with you about this topic.

The man who has completely abandoned self and all earthly pleasures and satisfactions, carries his cross with the greatest facility. He is really glad if any trouble or humiliations fall to his share. He wishes to choose neither his sorrows nor his pains; he leaves the choice of them to God alone, to whom he has surrendered all his wishes. He no longer has a will of his own. It is God's will that lives in him, that moves him and makes him act in everything.

As a consequence, he is always happy and contented. If any trial befalls him, he does not say: "That is very annoying! It's vexing that this should have happened this way. I should have preferred that other sorrow, even if it is greater; this one is going to prevent me from doing my duty," and so on.

He who is completely abandoned to God no longer employs such reasonings. Such thoughts do not even enter his mind, for he lives and breathes for one thing only, the most holy will of God. Outside of this he wants nothing, and to it he does not add any desire or reflection. He takes all things as they are, is delighted with them, and always keeps his soul united to God. If we act like him, we shall soon acquire the spirit of prayer; and we shall gradually feel that we are becoming interior men, entirely abandoned, and wholly devoted to God alone, and dead to every created being.

I wish you this self-forgetfulness in God, dear confrere, with all the ardor of my heart, and pray continually that you may obtain it. Add your prayers to mine. Be faithful and courageous, and you will be perfectly successful. Remember that, during this coming year, you should be a model of a perfect seminarian for all newcomers. They will profit very much by it, because of your expansive and exuberant character.



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If you wanted to remain a mediocre Christian, you might cause great laxity in the seminary. But the good Lord will preserve you from that, I am sure.

Seek God simply, frankly, and with your whole soul; and you will succeed with the help of God's grace. He has begun too well not to wish to perfect his work.

*[Anxiety Concerning a Worldly-Minded Seminarian]*

Mr. de Bouchaud has caused me much grief during the present holidays. I am truly sorry to see such a noble soul dragging itself through mire and misery. He could do great things but he yields his heart to dissipation, frivolity and vain desires and affections to earth. God knows how much I love him and how ardently I desire to be useful to him and to be the lowest of his servants, if only he were willing to listen to God's voice and to give himself to Him. But I find no way of contacting him; he is always distrustful toward me. At times he even seems to despise me. But this does not yet repel me.

I will try to show always how greatly I esteem and love him. It is true that I am a little more reserved than I was in the beginning, and I seem somewhat not to pay too great attention to him; but I do this because I noticed that he had misinterpreted the attention which I tried to give him. He might have imagined that I was trying to spy on him, and it seems to me that he has indeed come to such an erroneous conclusion.

I hope, dear friend, that you will not imagine that I am trying to complain about him by saying these things to you. I believe that I can say in all truthfulness that I have not sought Mr. de Bouchaud for myself, but solely with the hope of winning him for God. I say all this in order that you may try, on occasion, to calm him down and to show him that he has taken a bad road in becoming dissipated and

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yielding to all the vanity, the self-love and the desires of his heart. Show him that he was created for *God alone*. He has already lost two years! If he continues along the same road, things will not go well with him.

This thought, dear friend, pierces my heart and causes me the most profound sorrow. This good soul is already completely withered and soiled by pride and all the desires that are born of self-love. If this continues, O my God, what will become of him? I assure you that this truly breaks and crushes my heart. But let the most holy Will be done in all its fullness! We are in God's hands like vessels of clay; He does with them whatever He pleases and who will dare to say, "Why are you doing this?"

I believe that the evil is serious. It is possible, however, that my extreme desire for his salvation and perfection, and my great affection for him are misleading me. Remedy things, if you can. Do not rush things. Proceed with gentleness, kindness and moderation. Nothing is gained by abruptness or precipitation. It is to you alone, dear friend, that I have spoken and explained those things. Let us pray together for that intention. May the good Lord afterwards do whatever he pleases and desires.

*Adieu.* The bell for Particular Examen is just ringing. Best regards in the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary.

Entirely yours in their holy charity,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN, ACOLYTE

*The effects of indulging in earthly pleasures. There is no need to become discouraged.*

*Letter Three      Issy, October 8, 1835      Vol. 1, p. 321*

Dear Friend:

From your letter, I gather that, notwithstanding the dissipation and excitement of the life you are leading, you are wearied and, as it were, borne down by the weight of the holidays. This was to be expected; it is the necessary consequence of dissipation.

*[The Effects of Indulging in Earthly Pleasures]*

What difference between the sentiments in the midst of creature joys and satisfactions—if we are foolish enough to abandon ourselves to them—and the joys God gave you when you sought to purify your soul and to render yourself wholly pleasing to Him! When you repose in God alone, what transports of peace, of joy, of delight and love, you feel within yourself! What sweetness, what delicacy in these enjoyments! They thoroughly penetrate your soul, make you realize the true greatness and fill you with strength and courage.

Earthly delights in no way possess such qualities; they are superficial and fictitious; they trouble you and deprive you of every taste for the love of God. They are a source of dissipation and entice our mind away from the pursuit of true happiness. They are coarse, carnal; they drag us into the mire of sin, and lead us to the gates of hell. They debase our soul and taint it, just as death and corruption destroy every beauty of the body. They make us incapable of undertaking anything for the glory of God. And what is still

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more extraordinary, instead of humbling us because of the profound baseness into which they have plunged us, they make us prouder than ever, if God does not deign to come to our assistance, in order to draw good from the very evil that we have committed.

When these days of delights and bodily satisfactions draw to a close, they leave us profoundly wearied and overwhelmed with sadness. O happy grief! How salutary for the souls which now truly love God, but which once so far forgot Him as to abandon themselves to dissipation of heart, and to inhale the poisoned odor of earthly pleasures! O horrid world, why do you not leave the servants of God in peace? Is it not enough that you seduce so many millions of weakling hearts, which wallow in the filth of sin and shame?

I am deeply grieved to see that you have yielded in some measure to dissipation. I know, dear brother, that there is no very great harm done, and that two months in the seminary will suffice to restore it all; but I see two months of vacation lost for you; and it is that which grieves me so. What, you have had the courage to forget, for whole days at a time, our most beloved and kind Lord Jesus and our dear and lovable Mother! How could you dare to seek natural pleasures and satisfaction of your own heart, and neglect the delights of the love of God?

*[There is No Need to Become Discouraged]*

But pardon me, dear brother! I am heaping reproaches upon you and what you need is consolation! Your soul is rent asunder, and I lacerate it still more by communicating to you a hundred-fold the sorrow which I myself experience. Console yourself; brace up your soul; strengthen your courage. Our God is at all times gentle, loving and lovable. He knows the full depths and extremity of our poverty and misery; and yet, He cherishes us with an ineffable tender-

ness, manifested as soon as our soul returns to Him. Dry your tears, therefore; comfort your soul, well-beloved child of the Blessed Virgin. Your God is not far away. He encircles you with His arms, and He fills you with His graces. If you feel that you are poor, wretched, unworthy to be the servant of so great and so lovable a Master; if you behold with sorrow that you have neglected and forgotten Him, the only love of your heart, humble yourself profoundly before Him and before the Blessed Virgin.

Do not allow your unmindfulness of God to discourage you. All discouragement proceeds from the devil, from self-love, or from both. The devil looks for nothing better than to discourage us. As soon as he has succeeded, he feels confident that he will gain the mastery over our soul in a very short time. On the other hand, our self-love which is very foolish, and very much hurt when it sees how truly miserable we are, is not slow in succumbing to sadness and discouragement.

The grace of God works along contrary lines. Instead of discouraging us, it strenghten us, so that we may triumph over ourselves and over our enemies. It makes us feel very sorry for our faults; but this sorrow is gentle and peaceful. We suffer, but we would be willing to suffer always like this. If we really love God, we seek Him more ardently after having committed a fault; and the greater the fault is the more our love for Him should increase and grow strong in our soul. Our heart is filled with joy when it realizes that we are wretched; because we see that God alone is great that God alone is beautiful, that He alone is lovable, full of all perfection and worthy of all our love.

Take courage, therefore. Be strong and robust in your love for our Lord Jesus Christ. You need not worry, even if you have been somewhat dissipated during vacation, or if you have committed some faults. The love of our good Lord



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Jesus is still in your heart; and He will triumph there through that holy grace which He is preparing to bestow upon you superabundantly. You are sad, but you must say: "So much the better." Cordially and joyously bear with this annoyance and this sadness. Regard them as a punishment due to your sins; remain calm in the presence of God, and suffer patiently and lovingly.

[*Return in Time for the Retreat*]

There is one thing, however, that astonishes me; it is that you think of remaining on vacation till the 23rd or 24th. The opening usually takes place on the 18th of October; this year it is on the 17th. Dear confrere, I beseech you, by the love of Jesus and Mary, don't deprive yourself of the treasures of graces and blessings which you will receive during the retreat. Be firm and resist the world. Why would you close your heart to the tender pleadings of our Divine Savior and the Blessed Virgin? May God prevent you from doing so, dear friend. Do not falter, I beseech you once again by the dear love that reigns in your soul.

Be firm and energetic, as becomes a true servant of Jesus Christ. Show the world that you absolutely wish to be at Issy on the 17th, and do not let yourself be treated as a weakling who can easily be swayed.

Best regards in Jesus and Mary,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN, ACOLYTE



*The spirit of the world. Family news.*

*Letter Four      Illkirch, August 27, 1836      Vol. 1, p. 322*

Dear Friends :

[*The Spirit of the World and its Attractions*]

May God grant you His peace and His love, and may He protect you against the spirit of the world in the midst of which you are now living. Do not love the world nor what is in it. Do not love its manners, its pleasures, its frivolous amusements, its idle and wicked words, its spirit of pride and vanity, its selfishness, its false judgments, its indifference to the service and love of our good Lord Jesus.

This wretched world loves what is evil, goes in quest of idle values and hardly troubles itself about the only object that is worthy of affections and solicitude. Our kind Lord Jesus is at its door in order to enlighten it. He shines His great and wonderful light before it; and yet it does not recognize the light but runs after darkness. You see then how wicked it would be to follow the world and to let ourselves be fascinated by its caresses and its poisoned charms.

I beg your pardon for speaking to you in such a way, but I fear lest you be seduced by its false attractions. I scarcely know upon what I base my apprehensions, but I must confess that I am a little worried. At first you will not love its vices or be induced by anything in the world to share in them. You would only want to enjoy the pleasures that you consider innocent. Yet even these are not always harmless in their consequences; they often taint the soul with a certain laxity and beget an indifference for all things supernatural. They excite your passions and entice you to deliver yourself up to them; they plunge you into discouragement and leave your soul void of God and of His grace.

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If you have once abandoned yourself to these pleasures and to seek association with the world, you will soon acquire a taste for them. The passions which are very strong in you, will blind you, and will prevent you from seeing what God's goodness demands of you in your inmost heart and what great advantage there is in serving God. This once accomplished, your loss would be certain. I hope that such a thing will never happen.

Be courageous, therefore, and fight, dear friend. You may, perhaps have less pleasure and satisfaction for the moment, but you will have infinitely more of it, even in this world, although, so far, Our Lord has not shown all His splendor and His glory in a sensible fashion to your heart.

Be faithful and He will not fail to come to you with all His riches and His beauty. But above all, your sufferings and your sorrows are written in the book of eternal life. A syllable shall not be erased from this book before God has given you joy and happiness, not a hundredfold, but unto infinity.

### [*Family News* ]

My trip [to Alsace ] has been smooth ; I was not even tired when I arrived in Strasbourg. On my arrival in Illkirch I found my brother and his fairly large family in the best of dispositions. He is a fervent Christian, well-instructed in his religion, and has sense enough to see things in the proper perspective. He labors earnestly at his sanctification and wants to be perfectly detached from self. His family is pious and he raises his children in a very Christian fashion. I met also one of my brothers who is not yet a Christian.

*Adieu*, dear friend!

Cordially yours in the most holy charity of Jesus and Mary,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN, ACOLYTE