

10. LETTERS TO FATHER GRILLARD

Father Grillard, a Sulpician, had an intimate knowledge of Francis Libermann, his fellow-seminarian at St. Sulpice. Writing about the Venerable, he states :

His zeal for souls was very pure. He had God alone in view; in no way did he consider creatures nor allow himself to be led by natural motives. I believe also that he did not lose sight of the presence of God, for he was always recollected and modest and he never showed embarrassment or tenseness. Father Galais, who was then professor of dogmatic theology at St. Sulpice, told us one day that he did not think that there were in the whole of France two souls that had reached a higher state of mental prayer than Mr. Libermann.¹

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How to deal with natural carelessness. Intellectual endeavors and spiritual life. Concentration on a particular virtue. Preparations for spiritual exercises.

Letter One Rennes, October 19, 1837 Vol. 1, p. 395

Praised be Jesus and Mary

Dear Mr. Grillard :

May the peace of Our Lord Jesus be in you and always keep you in His love, and in perfect submission to His divine will, in everything, everywhere and always.

Don't worry nor fret about it. Be of good cheer and quietly pursue the path in which you are now walking; God

¹Notes et documents Vol. 1, p. 187.

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will comfort you. The only thing you have to do is to be faithful and generous in making the sacrifices that He asks of you.

[A Fixed Daily Rule is the Best Remedy Against your Natural Carelessness]

Take the most efficacious means to prevent yourself from falling into your natural carelessness. You need great vigilance and, to bind you down, you must draw up a strict rule in which everything is foreseen. This is easy as long as you are at the seminary. But when you leave it, and especially when you are once launched in the holy ministry, you will run the risk of giving yourself over to a certain inward indifference, and even of attaching yourself to earthly things. I therefore believe that it will be a powerful help to you if you accustom yourself to follow a fixed rule before God, not only now, but also when you are no longer in the seminary.

I did not have to tell you this, for you would have done so anyhow. However, since there is a question of the means, I thought that I should say something about it: hold on to all the important exercises, especially to your meditation; take care of and be faithful in chasing the distractions everytime you notice them. See to it that you make your examen of conscience, etc. All this is too obvious for comment, we have often spoken about that, when I was still with you.

[Intellectual Efforts and Spiritual Life]

I think you ought to keep a constant watch over your mind, both at work, in which it tends to follow its inclination, but even outside of the time of work. Beware of letting it be so occupied that it is carried away and involved to the point of being unable to have a thought of God. You must correct it, not so much in its application to work, as in the

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manner of its application. It so applies itself that it is seized upon, surrounded and penetrated by the created objects which it considers. It does not indeed occupy itself with them as passionately and violently as so many others. It proceeds coldly, but nonetheless becomes deeply involved, and, as it were, bound and gagged by the matters that form the object of its study, so that it loses sight of God during the time devoted to work.

It is true that from time to time your mind harbors a thought of God. This is something, but it is not enough, the more so because this thought is very superficial. You say, for instance, "I must remember God. Well! I remember now." Or, "I must make some ejaculatory prayers. Well! I make them now." All this touches, as it were, only the surface of your mind, whereas it should penetrate to its very essence.

If ejaculatory prayers are to be really good, they must proceed from a soul that tends strongly toward God, and whose every desire goes directly toward Him, just as an arrow parts forcefully with the impulse of the bow, and wings its flight straight toward the target. As long as the bow, when bent, is held in restraint, the arrow remains immovable, though always directed toward the mark; but as soon as the hand which holds back the bow is removed, the arrow speeds away. It must be the same with our soul.

Even while you are busy with your studies, your mind and your heart must be continually disposed to act for the greater pleasure of God.

Do not occupy yourself so much in reading the *Annals* or other things outside of the time of study, but accustom yourself to leave to your mind these moments of repose. Why should it always be occupied and working? Between exercises—I mean when you go from one exercise to another—keep in prayer before God. If you cannot occupy

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yourself without the help of a book, take the *Following of Christ* or the *New Testament*: read a verse and then ponder on it. It is still better if you can do so without a book. Why should you always be wrapped up in books?

[*Apply Yourself to a Particular Virtue*]

I have another advice to give you; it is, to apply yourself to some particular virtue. Propose to yourself one of the most important and most difficult for you; such as the spirit of prayer, humility, or interior mortification. Apply yourself strongly to acquire it, and occupy yourself with it day and night, employing all the means that God will suggest to you. This may be very useful to you, by giving you something serious to exercise your mind upon.

Choose, with the approval of your director, the virtue for which you have the greatest taste. But when you occupy yourself with it especially, you must not neglect the rest. Devote yourself to the practice of universal self-denial. Always be very sober interiorly, without seeking satisfaction in anything. This is a very important point.

[*Treat Your Body as Peasants Treat Their Lazy Donkeys*]

I have a second advice to give you, in order to protect you against the defects of your character. It is a peculiar advice, but one which I consider very important and almost necessary. With its help, you will be morally certain, I think, of persevering in fervor. You are doubtlessly very curious to know what it is, seeing that I comment upon it without coming to the point. Here it is:

You have often seen what peasants do when their donkey does not want to move. They beat him from morning until night, and in this way they get the poor old animal to go along with the load that he has to carry; occasionally he will even run. Well! imitate them. Your body is that

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donkey, and he would rather browse upon thistles than work for the love of his Master's greater glory. Beat him, and he will pursue his journey; sometimes he will even run in the ways of the love of Jesus. He will not always run; you cannot expect it. But you will have the consolation of seeing him always on the way, always alert. I believe before God that exterior mortifications, whatever they be, will ever be useful to you.

Beware of being too tenacious of your own opinions; accustom your mind to be supple and easy in the hands of God.

[The Desire to Belong to God and the Preparation of Spiritual Exercises]

You need not be astonished that your desire to belong to God is neither ardent nor very sensible; this is neither necessary nor possible. Try merely to make them be sustained, continual and practical. If you want to have them reduced to practice, you must expect this from God alone, beg Him for it with perfect sincerity and aim to preserve them always in your heart.

Regarding mental prayer and Holy Communion, prepare yourself the best you can: your mental prayer, by preparing your subject well and keeping your mind as tranquil as possible. If after that you have distractions, remain in your humility and lowliness before God, accepting them as crosses and trying to discard them as soon as you notice them, always bringing back your mind to God.

If you can accustom yourself to occupy your mind less violently during the day, you will have more facility for overcoming your distraction during your meditation, and you might even have no distractions or at least less of them.

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Regarding Holy Communion, prepare yourself for it the evening before, always in the same way, by purifying your mind and heart more and more through the desire of living for God alone. Do not expect to experience strong affections and desires; this is not necessary. Be content with proceeding quietly, and simply see to it that you are well prepared. After that, leave to Our Lord the care of doing what He deems fit for His greater glory.

Maintain yourself always in great humility and lowliness before God, and in a constant desire of living for Him alone. Death, death, death to the "old man" so that the new man may live fully in you.

Best regards in the most holy charity of Jesus and Mary.

FRANCIS LIBERMANN, ACOLYTE

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Counsels concerning mental prayer and the desire to know.

Letter Two Rennes, January 23, 1838 Vol. 1, p. 397

Praised be Jesus and Mary

Dear Confrere:

May the Child Jesus be the absolute master of your soul, of all your affections, all your movements, all your thoughts, and may He make it live of His divine life.

[Habitual Recollection Attunes Us to the Holy Spirit]

I am very glad to hear that you are applying yourself more seriously than ever to interior life and habitual recol-

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lection. It is a grand thing to live continually in the sight of God. He who has attained this point of perfection will soon be master of his soul and of all its movements, and will be able to abandon them into the hands of the great Master, so that he may no longer live but by the life and in the life of the Lord. Without this recollection and this spirit of continual prayer, we act in all things, or in nearly all things, by ourselves, and most often, for ourselves. Even the good and pious actions performed for God are then very imperfect and of very little merit; we are always wrapped up in our own action, and consequently out of tune with the movement of the Holy Spirit. God has, therefore, bestowed a great grace upon you by inspiring you with a desire of this continual prayer, and of applying yourself earnestly to it.

[*Restrain the Impetuosity of Your Mind in Your Mental Prayer*]

Take care not to have your prayer consist merely in the labor and the exercise of your mind. In order that the state of prayer be real, the prayer itself should proceed from an affection of the heart, or from an elevation of the mind, or also from the repose of the soul in God, from the recollected state of our faculties in Him, or from a simple view of the presence of God, before whom we perform all our actions in order to please Him. But we must not make our meditation *through the thinking of our mind*, seeking to attach ourselves here and there to some thoughts that have relation to God. This would not be exactly bad, but it would be very mediocre and of little fruit. Nor should it be a mere play of our mind trying to occupy and enjoy itself in its own way, and to amuse itself with thoughts that appear beautiful and striking, thoughts which the mind considers and reconsiders, in order to understand them thoroughly or simply to keep itself busy with them.

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Try to yield as little as possible to your mind; simplify as much as you can its action in your meditation and recollection. It would be all the better if the mind kept quiet altogether. Still, if it does take part in your mental prayer, it should not be the principal agent; on the contrary, it should be forgotten, because it spoils everything and is your greatest obstacle to recollection.

All the faults you mention proceed from this defect, which is for you a radical one. Your mind is a busybody which examines everything, turns things to suit itself, and wishes to let nothing pass without having had a share in it. It always wants to be busy, and it can never be at rest to let God work in your soul. Your constant endeavor should be to restrain it, to stop and quiet its action—in a word, to keep it bound and in repose before God, in order that the divine Spirit may act in you according to His good pleasure, without any wish on your part to anticipate His action, and without any motion or interference on the part of your own mind. Its meddling would mar everything God wishes to accomplish and would prevent Him from acting.

[Apply Yourself to Study, Not Passionately but with an Interior Spirit]

Your ardent desire for knowledge comes from this defect of your mind, and it will go on increasing from day to day unless you stop it. It is a very great obstacle to your advancement. If you persevere in this desire, you will never be a truly interior man, nor will you ever have the lights of God. This desire is in you in spite of yourself, but you must deaden it and not yield so much to this passion for knowledge and study.

Apply yourself to the necessary sciences, but with an interior spirit. You should never yield to the craze for memorizing texts and beautiful thoughts, for the purpose of

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using them when occasion offers. Never cram your mind, I charge you, with created knowledge, for it would tend to render your mind slothful in applying itself to the lights of grace, which are incomparably greater. When you are obliged to study a subject that pleases you, do not seek enjoyment or delight in it. Keep your mind interiorly in sobriety and reserve.

You did well to determine the time to be devoted to the study of Hebrew; never use any other time for it. If a craving for it should overcome you, take up the Gospel and read there the mildest and divinest words that Our Lord has uttered. You will find wherewith to be confused before Him, for you will find that you have no taste for His word, and that your mind is altogether the slave, as it were, of its natural affections. You will find that your mind prefers natural curiosity to the words of eternal life. God alone! God alone! What else do we need? Jesus, our well-beloved, should suffice us, as the light of our intelligence and the happiness of our soul.

Understand this truth well: the abundance of earthly goods is exceedingly injurious to us, and prevents the acquisition of heavenly wealth. This wealth alone is real. All the rest is nothing. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God." Blessed are they whose mind is poor, whose mind does not delight in, nor ardently long for, created knowledge, which constitute its earthly riches. Blessed is the mind that does not relish, enjoy, or delight in these riches, which are in reality but poverty.

Your mind should be poor, empty, and bare before God. It will then possess God with the superabundance of His light and His graces. When your mind has become purer, you will be more detached also from the pursuit of pious feelings. This purity of mind is essentially necessary to acquire the perfect gift of faith, the virtue of the intellect—a

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virtue that cannot exist perfectly in conjunction with the defect opposed to the purity and abnegation of the mind.

. . .

Best regards in the holy love of the adorable Hearts of Jesus and of Mary,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN, ACOLYTE

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Indifference with respect to his appointment to teach at the seminary. Study and the spiritual Life.

Letter Three Rennes, August 22, 1838 Vol. 1, p. 397

Praised be Jesus and Mary

Dear Brother in Jesus and Mary:

[Simply Accept Your Appointment as Coming from God]

May Our Lord be blessed for all that He is pleased to do with all of us. Why worry and be disturbed? It pleases God to appoint you to teach philosophy, although you lack, as you say, the necessary talents and knowledge. Is He not allowed to do as He likes with those who belong to Him? You did not choose this function, but your superiors and God Himself, whose place they hold, entrusted it to you. You tell me that they don't know you. But this is not your affair. For the present, you have merely to obey with simplicity and modesty, as to God Himself.

If you have any fears of not acquitting yourself properly of this function, cast yourself into the arms of Our Lord, and do not yield to discouragement and agitation. Remain always tranquil and peaceful before God, my friend, and do

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not give rein to your imagination in regard to the future. Think only of the present moment, and try to strengthen more and more your love for Our Lord. Do not waste your time in vain and useless thoughts. In God's own good time He will show you what you must do in each circumstance. You may, however, make a retreat in order to examine yourself before God, as regards your conduct and the means to be employed to preserve your fervor and procure the glory of God in others. Speak to Father Pinault about it; he will be able to give you sound advice in that matter.

Do not allow yourself to be led astray by your self-love. You know beforehand that your complaints and your excuses will not be received by your superiors. It is therefore useless to make them.

[No Lamentations, No False Humility]

In general, we should not manifest outwardly sentiments which lead only to gain esteem, to make people believe that we are better than others. You may say that you are astonished to be chosen since you do not possess the necessary talents. You may tell [your superiors] that you ask nothing better than to leave this post if you are found incapable of fulfilling it; but do not express this with a tone of lamentation. Explain the matter and leave the rest to your superiors. The best course would be for you to say nothing at all and to act in this as in all other matters with modesty and humility. Humble words are, most of the time, nothing but pride.

Be also on your guard against making another mistake, namely, that of nursing a fear for this function. Your charge is no doubt important, very important. But, why seek to trouble your soul? Approach your task with simplicity, dear friend, and be more intent on strengthening your confidence in God than on fostering this false fear and false humility.

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In such circumstances we often become the prey of grave illusions. We seek to arouse in ourselves a sense of fear which, in reality, is purely organic, and we imagine that we are laying the foundations for true humility and interior distrust. We resemble those good women who try hard to weep over the death of their husbands, but who, in reality, are not too sorry that their partner is gone.

I have no special reason, dear friend, to say this as something applying to you at present, but I want to prevent you from making mistakes in the future. It happens that we become self-satisfied because we have succeeded in feeling a certain fear which we ourselves have aroused in our heart, but in final analysis there is no substance to it. Such a fear does not help us in the least to perform more suitably the task which God has confided to us. In the depths of our soul we are not more humble than before. We continue to esteem ourselves better than our confreres.

Regarding what Father Galais told you about sensibility, he seems to be perfectly right. You are a little too anxious to feel things. Walk with greater simplicity and purity before God; preserve interior humility and lowliness, remembering your wretchedness and your inability to serve God properly. Try, gently and honestly, to serve Him well and to please Him in all circumstances. Be as modest in your exterior as you are peaceful in your interior, and remain in peace and in perfect submission to His holy will.

[*Study, But Above All, be Holy*]

In regard to your new position in life, you run the danger of becoming attached to study. Prepare your classes most carefully; try to acquire the necessary knowledge, and even to possess it to perfection; form your students as well as possible, but see to it that all is done according to God and in God. Do not imagine that you are a great man, if

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you acquire this perishable and ignorant knowledge. Be careful, therefore, not to waste your time—and you would be wasting it, were you to give all your mind to the mere acquisition of this knowledge while failing to give your mind and heart to God. Time is precious; it belongs to God alone and it must be employed in loving Him. Engrave deeply in your mind that study is for you a great impediment to perfection. Study is necessary, but it does you harm. It is a necessary evil. Try to apply yourself to it in a pure and holy manner, so that you may be preserved from the dissipation, the coldness, and the indifference which it tends to engender.

Dear friend, if you desire to become a true priest, be such that when men see you, they say: "There goes a saint, a model we can imitate." But it would be a very bad sign if their first thought at meeting you were, "Here is a learned man." In this case Our Lord would have no use for you. There are enough people in the world who ask nothing better than to honor Him with their science, because they happen to be honored by it first. The great science is that which God imparts to His saints. It is this science which truly sanctifies souls.

Learned men are merely able to formulate phrases and express opinions. The saints are sent by Our Lord to make saints, but scholars can merely make others become scholars like themselves; they do not communicate devout sentiments. They discourse eloquently on the virtues, they are admired; their doctrine is taken note of, but no one is moved to change his conduct.

The Pharisees and the Scribes were learned, but their learning did not come from God. Hence in spite of all their knowledge, they were, even in religious matters, blind leaders of the blind, whited sepulchres appearing beautiful only on the outside. Take all this to heart, dear friend; be a

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man of God rather than a man of learning. Seek knowledge, but seek it more in God than in books.

[Teach Your Students to Work in a Spirit of Faith]

Regarding your students, always instil into them a great spirit of piety, and take care to emphasize very strongly that piety is much more important than learning; that, far from being an impediment to learning, it is a great help; that true and solid piety and devotion greatly develops, rectifies and perfects the mind, and greatly increases its capabilities. If you notice any who are slothful, urge them to work through a motive of piety. If you find others too anxious for knowledge, moderate them. Teach all of them to study with a great spirit of piety, through faith rather than through passion. While trying to teach this to others, you will learn it yourself.

Carefully avoid telling your colleagues the reasons behind your conduct, unless they are very fervent and in perfect agreement with you in this matter. For, if they are not of your opinion, they will cause your fervor to diminish. Do not judge or condemn them. Be gentle, modest, peaceful and charitable toward all. But let nothing ever distract you in the least from the service of God, and aim always at the greatest perfection.

I cannot tell you anything [more specific] regarding the way to act toward the students for I don't know exactly what the situation will be. So I restrict myself to giving you general principles. If it pleases God, we shall speak about that some other time.

Entirely yours in the holy love of
Jesus and Mary,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN, ACOLYTE

By forming holy priests, a seminary professor can do far more good than a simple pastor. Avoid the superfluous, especially in books. Simplicity in prayer and relations with others.

Letter Four Rennes, February 16, 1839 Vol. 1, p. 397

Praised be Jesus and Mary

Dear Friend:

I am very sorry for having made you wait so long for a reply to your letter. I am even now very busy, and this obliges me to say only a few words in answer to your questions. Please, forgive me, for once.

[As a Seminary Professor, You are in a Position to Accomplish Much Good]

You are in a position to do an immense amount of good. If you had been placed in a parish, you would merely have saved one soul after another, whereas now that you have the good fortune of forming pious priests, you will save a multitude of them all at once. There is as much difference between you who sanctify and form good priests and one who is merely occupied in sanctifying lay people, as exists between him who fishes with a net and one who fishes with a line. The net takes hundreds of fishes at the same time, the hook takes only one.

You experience great difficulties in your seminary, but try to overcome them. You will not at present succeed in establishing things as they were at Saint Sulpice. There are all sorts of prejudices, and those prejudices are real to a certain point. But if the matter were handled properly, it

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would be possible to arrange things in such a way that the objections offered would cease to exist. However, at present there is no use trying it, for you would not be successful.

All you can do is to try to win the confidence of the students and to do good in your own individual way through the spiritual directions you give to these young men of good will and by your particular endeavors. The good you will do will not be spectacular, but you will nonetheless do something that is truly good and useful.

This is why I believe you should go with the seminarians on recreation as much as possible. Befriend them by manifesting great interest in them, visiting them carefully when they are ill, rendering them little services in other circumstances, but always keeping in mind the purpose of sanctifying them and helping their spiritual progress. You should do this especially with those in whom you see some particular inclination to perfection. Nevertheless, avoid manifesting special attachment and preference, at least in the presence of others.

[Be Sober and Avoid the Superfluous]

Your personal life must be a life of interior humility before God, of confidence and of privations. The good Lord does not demand mortifications from you, but He wants you to practice sobriety and simplicity in all things. Avoid everything superfluous. Avoid in your interior all satisfaction, whatever its nature. Gently moderate your affections for creatures, I mean, the pleasure taken in things that are necessary, for example, study. Raise your heart to God from time to time, in order to humble yourself because of your wretched attachment to amusements in which your mind so easily takes delight. Sobriety and privation in your case must consist in a certain interior abstinence from the relish and the pleasure which you find in earthly things and in the

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use of necessary things. Take care also to practice in your exterior conduct a certain moderation in things that are not absolutely necessary and to retrench what is entirely superfluous.

Be on your guard in your love for books; never own more than those that are necessary. Keep nothing curious or superfluous. Avoid that restless eagerness in regard to books, becoming attached to special covers and the like. Have a fixed time to go to the library and do not remain beyond the time that was determined beforehand. You have to distrust yourself on this point.

[*Simplify Your Mental Prayer and Thanksgiving*]

Especially in mental prayer and at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, present yourself before God in the most profound humility of soul, but also with the greatest confidence. Do not worry about your distractions; be content with preserving in your soul a desire to please Him. When you begin your meditation or your thanksgiving, keep your mind applied to the object with which you are occupied by very simple considerations, letting your soul tend gently toward Our Lord, with the desire of pleasing Him, loving Him, humbling yourself before Him, or with some other pious sentiment or disposition. And make now and then some interior act of love, sacrifice, humiliation or submission. Do all this from the heart. Stop then to consider the object of the act. This is an easy and excellent meditation and an act of thanksgiving which is very pleasing to Our Lord.

Do not manifest any embarrassment or difficulty in your relation with your confreres. Consider yourself as the last in regard to everyone. Don't open your heart to any but those whom you know for a certainty to be in accord with you.

You ought to realize how important it is to prepare your class peacefully. Place your confidence in Our Lord and

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leave success to Jesus and Mary. Overcome this fear and this trouble of having to face your class, through a gentle glance toward Our Lord and occasionally elicit acts like those you make during meditation. . . .

May the holy love of Jesus and Mary fill your soul.

Entirely yours in their holy love,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN, ACOLYTE

P.S. Recommend me to the prayers of your brother-priest and give him my friendly regards. Please tell my little Mr. Vernier that I have not forgotten him, but have often inquired about him. Ask him to pray much to the good Lord for me ; I will also think of him.