

1. LETTERS TO FRANÇOIS LIEVIN

François Liévin was a young deacon, on the threshold of the priesthood, when in 1834 he was struck by a disease which forced him to discontinue his studies at Saint Sulpice Seminary and to return home. Though still young in years, Liévin had made great progress on the road to holiness and was united by the most intimate bonds of spiritual friendship to Francis Libermann. Throughout the three years of the young man's lingering illness until his death in 1837, Libermann continued to guide him from afar and to prepare his soul for the glorious moment of its final union with the God of Love.

1

Reflections on the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin. Model conduct of seminarians on vacation. Patience with one's own imperfection.

Letter One *Issy, September 10, 1834* *Vol. 1, p. 218¹*

Dear Brother :

[*Reflections on the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin*]

The feast that we have just celebrated is very beautiful indeed. As long as we are on earth these glorious days will come and go; but there will come a time—or rather an eternity—when everything will take on another aspect. There our joys and happiness will never end. There we shall con-

¹References are made to the collection, *Notes et documents relatifs à la vie et l'oeuvre du Vénérable François-Marie-Paul Libermann*, Paris, 1927, ff.

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tinually behold the grandeur and the glory of the Blessed Virgin blended with those of her Son. Then shall we clearly and fully see the purity, the holiness, and the charity of Mary, whereas here below we can perceive but a dim glimmer, because our eyes are darkened by our miseries. However, by the little that God shows us in this world, we can surmise what it will be like when we shall have the happiness of clearly seeing the greatness of the glory and the beauty of our Divine Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Let us remain calmly prostrate before Him in union with the Blessed Virgin.

See what great things God has accomplished in Mary from the first moment of her birth. Let us try to draw down upon ourselves a share of the bountiful graces with which she was filled from her infancy to her blessed Assumption. The purity and holiness of the august Virgin from the time of her Nativity was but a pledge and a sign of the eminent sanctity which she was to attain at the end of her life.

If Mary was already so brilliant at her dawn, what shall we say of her when she had reached the height of her splendor? If Mary was already so pure when she came forth from the womb, although still united to the impure blood of sinful Adam, what must she have been when she was united, in such an intimate and extraordinary way, with the Eternal Word, the Author and Perfector of all holiness?

Our souls should therefore be filled with the deepest joy at the thought of the greatness and immensity of God's mercy toward the Blessed Virgin and of His incomprehensible bounty toward our most excellent Mother. He wished her to be born His servant, in order to make her the Queen of Heaven and earth, as well as the Mother of His Son.

Behold, therefore, this dear little child and this poor servant of the eternal Father: Heaven, Earth and Hell tremble before her. God bountifully bestows upon her His choicest favors, He adorns her with His greatest splendors

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and the immense riches of His grace, He invests her with His own grandeur and glory. The angels and saints are dazzled by her effulgence and every creature bows in awe before her.

Pardon me, dear friend, for being carried away by these thoughts! They should not form the subject of a letter in which we can say but little about them; yet I would count myself guilty of disloyalty to the Blessed Virgin if I did not say at least a few words in her honor and for her glory.

You probably have made much nicer and more edifying reflections in your meditation but it matters little what thoughts present themselves to our minds about the grandeur and holiness of our good Mother, provided we love her with our whole heart and try to be faithful in our turn to the graces which God bestows upon us through her prayers and intercession. That should be enough for us and should form the chief object of our desires.

[Model Conduct of Seminarians on Vacation]

I have received several letters from the good seminarians with whom I was associated at the Seminary [of St. Sulpice]. All of them are very fervent and cover me with confusion before God. They are in the world, but not of it. They live and act only for and in God. They strive to watch constantly and peacefully over themselves, so as to allow no desire nor affection that is not entirely of God. On vacation as well as during the year, their aim is to act solely in virtue of God's grace that is in their soul—nothing for themselves, nothing for their own interest, nothing for the sake of their own satisfaction. God is the motive and the end of all their actions and thoughts. My joy is immense when I think of these good seminarians. I am confounded and ashamed before God because He has deigned to reveal to me some of the graces and favors bestowed on those whom He loves, and who are striv-

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ing to serve Him sincerely by giving themselves entirely to Him.

One of those seminarians had probably been told that he ought to seek distraction. Apparently this caused him some embarrassment, for he did not know what that meant and in his simplicity of heart he asked me how to distract himself! I was overjoyed at the sight of such blessed ignorance and it seemed to me that I saw Adam in his original innocence and ignorance of sin.

You may judge from this how closely those seminarians are united to God. . . . They have manifested an extreme desire to be occupied with God from morning to night. They are very much put out when they are obliged to converse with men for any length of time and would surely not do it except at the call of charity and obedience. These, my dear friend, are some models that I hold up to you and they are known to you.

[Patience with One's Own Imperfection]

However, don't be disturbed when you do not feel so powerful a grace in you, for this would be a serious mistake. You know that God is the Sovereign Master of His gifts and graces. Be faithful to what he asks of you. Keep yourself peaceful and calm before Him. Deny yourself in all things and seek yourself in nothing. Take care especially not to aim at relishing things of this world. The more your soul is deprived of enjoyments, whether natural or supernatural, the more it will be capable of perfect union with God. As long as you retain desires and wishes of your own, your union with God will be neither real nor perfect.

Observe principally one thing: it often happens that we renounce every pleasure, joy and natural inclination—at least we imagine that we renounce them—for in the case to which

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I am alluding we do not *really* do so. But when it seems to us that we are not as perfect as we wish to be, our heart grows sad, disturbed, and discouraged. Such an affliction is a real plague on our souls. It stops us short, prevents us from progressing, and most often causes us to fall back and lose virtually all that we had gained. In such a case we must remain at great peace before God, subduing and humbling ourselves before His sovereign grandeur in the depths of our own wretchedness. We must rejoice at everything that He may be pleased to do with us, enduring calmly and lovingly the sadness that springs from our self-love, which is afflicted at seeing itself so small. We should peacefully turn our attention away from the motives and reasons that arouse our displeasure and should raise our souls to God, in whom alone we should feel gratified, and in whom alone we should put all our joys, desires, affections, and all our love.

All good wishes in the most holy charity of Jesus and Mary.

Your humble servant,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN

P. S. May I ask you not to talk to anyone at the Seminary of Paris or to anyone else who might have the opportunity of seeing these good men about the edifying things which I have told you. Profit by them in order to progress in the holy love of God and the renunciation of yourself and of all other creatures. Mr. Recourt sends you his best regards.

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2

The reign of Jesus in our souls. No self-scrutiny. Happiness is found in God alone.

Letter Two Issy, September 11, 1835 Vol. 1, p. 219

Praised be Jesus and Mary!

Dear Brother:

[*The Reign of Jesus in Our Souls*]

May the peace and confidence of our Lord Jesus Christ in His Father be the heritage of your soul!

Always live joyfully in the most perfect contentment of heart. Your heavenly Father loves you and fills you with His graces and favors. Preserve your soul, then, constantly in profound tranquillity as becomes the cherished child of Jesus and Mary.

If your soul feels and sees nothing, it should still remain most peaceful and repose entirely upon the Heart of its Well-Beloved. He looks upon you unceasingly with delighted and loving eyes. He wishes to be your support, strength, hope, light, your only joy, your sole happiness and only love. May this dear Love live and reign as the sovereign Lord of your soul. May it fill you with its all-powerful strength and draw you to Him so that He may be all you desire to possess.

Do you know how this great, admirable, incomprehensible Lord wishes to reign in you? He desires to be amidst the ruins of your wretched self, to be surrounded with sorrows, sufferings, crosses and dishonors. Do not be frightened by this! Your self-love must pass through it all. It must be lost and reduced to nothing by all these means in the presence of that universal and only Love.

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Remain, therefore, in peace, and let Him operate in you. You are blind; let Him who is the source of all light lead you. This may be painful for you. It may grieve and worry you. So much the better, for this is the best of all. You will, at times, be uncertain about your condition before God; so much the better again. You need not know it, and it will prove a powerful means of detaching yourself, and of giving yourself up to Him who must be your All. The more you live in doubt about your state, the more you will be convinced of your entire dependence upon God; and this ought to be the greatest source of joy for you.

My God alone is great; my God alone is beautiful; my God alone is rich, powerful, and all-knowing. And I am poor, wretched in His sight, all covered with wounds and sores. I am blind, lame, deformed, deserving of the greatest contempt and every humiliation. What joy, what love should not fill our hearts at the sight of God's supreme grandeur, and our extreme wretchedness!

How closely my soul should be united to my Lord Jesus from the first moment of my life and throughout all eternity, remaining in complete dependence upon Him, so that He may be in me all light, all greatness, all riches, all happiness and all love, in the presence of His heavenly Father, who, by this very fact, becomes my Father also! O hardness of the human heart! Why do you not melt with love before this dear Lord? It seems to me that this is what St. Paul means when he exclaims, "When I am weak then I am powerful." This, I think, also answers the difficulties of which you spoke in your letter.

Be at peace and do not insult the grace of God, for He is giving you great grace [in your illness]. Self-love can prompt you to wish the contrary. Self-love is blind; it always wants enjoyments. Even when the time is unsuitable, it seeks pleasure, no matter how or what kind. It never takes the will

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of God into account. Let us scoff at this silly love, pay no attention to it. Think only of keeping your soul in peace before God.

Try to purify your heart of every earthly desire. Never allow it to grow enamored of anything whatsoever. We should not wish for enjoyment either on earth or in heaven. This desire for self-gratification should be subject to continual self-denial in us. You should, therefore, never try to satisfy yourself in anything. God alone should constantly be the sole object of your desires, your affections, your intentions and actions—the vital principle and the only aim of all the movements of your soul. If you earnestly strive for this end, you need not worry about the rest.

Let the grace of God be your guide and do not imagine that you are able to lead yourself. Be as a blind and deaf man with respect to God. Let Him conduct and bring you wherever He pleases. Don't go and ask Him, "Lord, why do You make me blind?" It is not for you to know; it is His right to do with you as He pleases, and it is your duty to be overjoyed with everything that He decides.

[No Self-Scrutiny]

I have noticed that you are trying to find out what is lacking in you. You say that it is simplicity of intention, tranquillity of soul, etc., which you need. What advantage do you hope to gain from all such self-inspection? You know what you are expected to do. Well, accomplish it in peace and do not waste time in seeking to discover what may be lacking. If anybody is lost and finds the path that he should take in order to return to the road, will he retrace his steps to see if he has really lost his way, and how it happened? Of course not! He will take the right road that he had left and will not worry any more about the wrong track on which he was before.

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I suppose it is useless for me to add any remarks here about the union which we should have with God. I can speak to you about it some other time. You should be content to walk in God's presence in perfect peace of soul, ignoring yourself and directing your attention to God alone. You should remain tranquil in whatever circumstances or conditions He deigns to place you, without scrutinizing your soul to find out whether it is through any fault of yours or not. This knowledge is absolutely useless to you.

In that respect, you should content yourself with purifying your soul of every attachment save God alone. Pay attention to a rule that I want to give you and I consider of the greatest importance for the spiritual life:

We should occupy ourselves peacefully and lovingly with pleasing God in all the movements of our soul, rather than seeking to know in what we have failed against Him.

If you try to keep your heart very pure and very peaceful before God, your union with Him is assured, although you may not be aware of it. Do not, therefore, try to know whether you are united to Him or not—otherwise your heart will be neither very pure nor very peaceful in His sight. Do all that I have told you and I think that it will suffice for everything—both for your meditation and for Holy Communion.

[Happiness is Found in God Alone]

I remembered what you recommended to me for the feast of Our Lady's Nativity, and I received Holy Communion for the intention of the person you mentioned. Show him in what the true spirit of the Gospel especially consists: in the renunciation of every creature, of self, of all our interior desires, of all our affections, of every satisfaction, of every enjoyment.

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Make him understand that our soul must be entirely despoiled and completely naked before God, possessing nothing, willing nothing, looking for nothing but Him alone. He should be our whole life and the main-spring of all the movements of our soul. Show him, moreover, that we are not necessarily unhappy, even though we desire no satisfaction or enjoyment on earth. The more our soul is stripped of every affection and desire, the more it will be filled with God; and if God, filling the soul, is the only master, it cannot fail to be supremely happy. Besides, experience has proven the truth of this a thousand times over. Nevertheless, our happiness is not to be sought in these dispositions but in God alone. . . .

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

Your humble brother,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN

3

Illness is no excuse for spiritual slackness. Surrender to God's will.

Letter Three Issy, October 22, 1836 Vol. 1, p. 222

Dear Brother:

[Illness is No Excuse for Spiritual Slackness]

May the peace of Our Lord be with you! Don't worry because I have not written since you left. I did not fail to think of you before God and to beg Him to keep you always in His peace and holy love. This is the great and only desire that my heart holds for you. I confess that your illness causes me great uneasiness. You are sick in the midst of the world, that is in a "hostile territory." There is, perhaps, nobody

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to remind you of the important and essential truths which formed the constant topic of our conversations when we were still surrounded by our dear and fervent confreres. What will you be told from morning until night? "This soup is very good"; "You are beginning to get better"; "Spring will see your health entirely restored"; "This medicine has had a good effect"—and a hundred thousand similar "nice" things!

Those around you will even do everything they can to prevent you from doing your spiritual exercises, under the pretext that they would harm you. They will try, by every means in their power, to make you become dissipated, and lose sight of God and the sanctification of your soul. They will try to amuse you with games, news, and all kinds of trifles. Moreover, the mere sight of your parents will be an occasion for becoming slack and a bond which might be capable of binding you once more to earth. The desire to please them will make you do many foolish things. The [constant] visits of the clergy will also tend to make you lax. Take care of yourself, dear friend, and do not allow yourself to be taken by surprise.

Nevertheless, avoid any kind of stiffness, for this would only be another danger. The fear of growing indifferent makes you run the risk of losing that freedom of mind that is so necessary to you. It is for the purpose of encouraging and strengthening you in the path of love of our good Lord Jesus that I write these few words to you.

[Surrender to God's Will]

The first maxim that you ought to put into practice is never to seek yourself in anything. Abandon yourself entirely into the hands of God. Be ready to accept from Him whatever He deigns to send you. You are not your own and possess nothing. All that you have and all that you are belong to Him

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alone. It is He who is the Sovereign Master and the Supreme Dispenser of all; and consequently He can dispose of it at His pleasure. Do not, therefore, seek the satisfaction of relief in anything.

Nevertheless, you must take all things that are necessary or even useful for your comfort, for such is the most holy will of God. Take them without fear, and with all the freedom of a child of God. Take them when they are given you, but do not seek them with impatience. If you are assailed with desires and temptations, do not mind them, but remain in peace.

Don't worry if you get worse and don't rejoice if you get better. Be in God's hands as a dead man, as one reduced to nothing. Let your life and feeling be solely in God and according to God. Remember, you are filled with the spirit of Our Lord Jesus Christ and that this Holy Spirit wishes to be the sole principle and end of all your desires, all affections, and all the movements of your soul.

We ought to be completely dead to ourselves and all things; then our life will be hidden in God with Our Lord, with whom we shall be intimately united in all our spiritual faculties. When our soul is completely emptied of creatures and of self, the Spirit of Our Lord will be its only life. Take courage, my friend. Keep your soul in continual peace before God.

I shall not say more on this subject for fear of tiring you. I should like to know how you are, both in body and soul. Try to write me or at least dictate a short letter, perhaps to a seven-year-old child who would be unable to understand what you say about spiritual matters. My best regards in the charity of Jesus and Mary.

Your humble brother and servant,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN

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4

The approach of death should be a cause of joy, for soon you will be united forever with God.

Letter Four Issy, November 23, 1836 Vol. 1, p. 222

Dear Brother :

[Death Holds No Fear for One Who Loves God]

Since I didn't receive a reply to my last letter, I take your silence as a sign of serious illness, but, at the same time, of perfect surrender to God who dwells so lovingly in your inmost soul. For this reason, the "man of God," however small he may still be in me, gladdens and consoles my spirit. He fills me at this moment with affection and gratitude toward our heavenly Love, who reigns in heaven above the angels, the saints, and especially in the Blessed Virgin, our most sweet Mother.

How my heart yearns to make you share in this Love and this joy! I am always afraid, my brother, that the world might to some extent spoil the great grace which Our Lord has deigned to bestow upon you. Preserve this precious treasure. Do not let the flesh and thoughts of the flesh worry you.

You know very well that what comes from the flesh is flesh, but that all that is born of the spirit of Our Lord is love—love that is wholly pure and heavenly. So don't be afraid of being obliged to depart from this world, a world so full of corruption and horror, where men love everything except our only Love, our all-lovable, all-admirable, and all-adorable Jesus, the Well-Beloved of our hearts, and the only joy of our souls.

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Dear brother, I embrace you most affectionately in this ineffable and incomparable Love. Love this dear and great Love. Sacrifice yourself entirely for it. Don't let the life of the flesh be a matter of concern to you. How, then, should we live animated by the love of our most lovable Jesus? Would it be right for us to wish that He would dwell in you in the company of flesh and blood? No! Such ought not to be. Jesus would live and reign in you, but all alone, *He all alone!* May all else perish, may all else be reduced to nothing before Him! May the "man of flesh" decay and part from you piecemeal!

So much the better if he does. There is no need for him to live; his life is only death. What you need, essentially and solely, is our good and well-beloved Jesus! Live therefore in Him, and *in Him alone!*

[*Soon You Will Be United with the God of Love*]

Expect nothing from the world and think of nothing that belongs to it. Let this wretched earth perish, so that you may at length be free to love Jesus, our only Love, in peace, and live His life alone!

Think of heaven and of the great things that are being prepared for you there. Consider for a moment how great your joy ought to be upon leaving this earth of filth and mire.

A contemplative soul knows much happiness, joy, and love even here on earth. And yet, its knowledge is very small. Its union with God is poor indeed, interrupted as it is at every moment by its imperfections and its infidelities. But in heaven what currents of grace and of life, of glory, of grandeur and of love! Make haste, therefore, leaving not a single thought lag behind on this miserable earth!

Don't worry about the little faults you have committed during your illness! A moment of love, an act of renunciation

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of every creature and of surrender to God will efface everything.

I don't know why I write you at this moment. I think perhaps you might need it because you might yield to discouragement and slackness. At least it might help you resist if temptations come to assail you.

Best regards in the most holy and sweet love of Jesus and Mary.

Your humble brother,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN

5

Remain confident in God and without any anxiety. The happiness of Heaven is near.

Letter Five *Issy, January 22, 1837* *Vol. 1, p. 223*

Dear Brother :

[*Remain Confident in God and Without Anxiety*]

I wish I knew what is happening with you and in you in order to be able to contribute better to your consolation, so that if you are in sorrow, I might strengthen you ; if you are feeble, I might encourage you lest the flesh tends to drag you down.

No matter what your spiritual condition is, I exhort and beseech you by and for the love of Jesus and Mary to keep your soul in great peace and calm before God. He sees your trials, your sufferings, and your labors. He knows all the depths of your misery and weakness and He is always with you to sustain and strengthen you in your combat. He has

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bestowed great graces on you during the course of your life. You may rest assured that He will not abandon you in the present crisis.

Pay close attention to the great principle which was the constant theme of your conversations at St. Sulpice, namely, peace and union with God, based upon complete denial of self and the intimate knowledge and conviction of the exceeding greatness of our misery and weakness. Think back on this great principle constantly.

Don't become discouraged if you find yourself oppressed with all kinds of weaknesses and imperfections. On the contrary, the poorer and smaller you see that you are, the more you ought to place your confidence and trust in God alone. The moment has arrived, dear friend, when you must come to a perfect and complete surrender of yourself to the hands of God.

[The Happiness of Heaven is Near]

You've suffered a long and dangerous illness. At the same time, you've been isolated from all those who love you truly with the holy and great love of Jesus and Mary. You're surrounded only by men, and angels no longer appear near you. Will you allow yourself to become discouraged and yield to sadness? Will you think that you are lost on that account? No, dear brother, our Divine Savior—the God of our love, in whom we are always perfectly united—He is with you! He has made your soul His dwelling-place and He will not depart from it. He Himself wants to make it enter into the blessed repose of His elect and to present it to His Father.

Let your joy therefore be complete, and your love perfect. Do not hope any more for anything on earth or of the earth. May the flesh perish, decay, and mingle with the dust from which it was taken, until it pleases our beloved Lord Jesus, in the incomprehensible mercy of His Father, to glorify it

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by clothing and filling it with His own light and all the splendor of His own glory.

Don't flatter yourself with the idea that you will have pleasure, enjoyment, and a long life on this miserable earth. *God alone! God alone!* And nothing else!

This is what I want so much to impress upon your soul and I hope that these thoughts and sentiments have never been absent from your spirit. If you have had or still have any temptations against them, don't worry. Simply unite yourself to God and establish profound peace and quiet in your soul.

My fondest regards to you, my dearly loved and esteemed brother. Now you are dearer to me and more esteemed than ever before, because you bear in your soul the stigmata of our Divine Savior.

Entirely yours in His most holy love and in that of His beloved Mother,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN