

5. LETTERS TO FATHER JACQUES LAVAL

Jacques Désiré Laval was born, September 18, 1803, at Croth, in the diocese of Evreux. He studied medicine and practiced as a physician until 1835 when, following an accident and his conversion to a more Christian life, he entered the Seminary of St. Sulpice. After a brief pastorate in a small village, he joined Libermann's congregation and sailed for the island of Mauritius in June of 1841. He labored there most zealously, instructing and baptizing 60,000 former slaves. He died in 1864. The cause of his beatification was introduced in 1918.¹

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We are greatly favored by the Blessed Virgin. Everyone envies you for being able to work for God.

Letter One La Neuville, July 28, 1842 Vol. 3, p. 231

J. M. J.

Dear Confrere:

Your letter addressed to Father Galais brought us great consolation; it was such a long time since we had heard from you! To learn of the few things which it has pleased Our Lord to accomplish through you was a source of great encouragement to us. It is remarkable that you were able to achieve even those small results during the five months that elapsed since your arrival in Mauritius. I am convinced that our good Master has given you great blessings during that time.

¹Cf. Koren, *The Spiritans*, pp. 135 ff.

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[We Are Greatly Favored by the Blessed Virgin]

Now let me give you news about ourselves. Our confrere, Father Le Vasseur has probably given you an account of the way the Holy Heart of our good Mother has deigned to bless us; no day passes without some manifestation of her favors.

I was ordained to the priesthood at Amiens in the month of September of last year. We are established in a country house near the city. We were first three in number; now we are six, of whom I hope three will soon leave to labor for God's glory. We expect five others in the near future, among them Father Tisserant, de Regnier, and Blanpin. They will also prepare themselves for their departure by spending some time in our poor little novitiate.

Mary, our good Mother, loves and protects us. We have the happiness of having the Most Blessed Sacrament in our humble chapel. We live in great peace and close union of mind, as children of Mary's Holy Heart. We quietly follow the exercises prescribed by our rule. I believe that Our Lord is with us. What a happiness!

The rule of our little congregation is finished. I explain it every evening since the beginning of the year. Everyone likes it and this gives me great joy, for it promises peace and union for the future. The first of our missionaries to join you will bring a copy with him.

The Good Lord has wished me to be the head of this small congregation, for there is no one else who can remain in France for that purpose. I have made Father Le Vasseur Superior of the Islands of Reunion and Mauritius; obey him in the sweet love of the holy and lovable Heart of Mary. . . .

[How Happy You Are to be Able to Work for God]

As to yourself, dear confrere, may you find consolation in the visits of Father Le Vasseur who will come to see you

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from time to time until you will have confreres with you all the time.

I recommend that you take care not to ruin your health. In this matter follow the advice of Father Le Vavas seur. Always be united to all of us, inactive as we are. All our confreres of the novitiate and the seminary envy your lot; they would like to labor as you do for the salvation of the neglected souls entrusted to you. They will have this happiness later on, by the grace of God. I am the only one who will be condemned to remain useless in this country, where I do nothing but drag myself slowly to the grave, and I shall appear at the feet of the Judge with empty hands while you, dear confrere, will come there "*portantes manipulos suos*" ("bearing the harvest sheaves in your hands"). This is only right "*Erunt novissimi primi et primi novissimi*" ("the last shall be first and the first last"). I hope, nevertheless, that I shall obtain mercy, although without having done anything. In her maternal goodness the Holy Heart of Mary will not abandon me in that hour. . . .

May the peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ fill your soul and may His divine love grow constantly in you. Work—sacrifice yourself—continually for His glory, but don't forget your own sanctification. The more Jesus is lord over your soul, the more you will glorify Him in others.

Entirely yours in the Holy Heart of Mary,

FATHER FRANCIS LIBERMANN

Libermann encourages Father Laval to persevere despite his isolation and, advises him to spread devotion to the Holy Heart of Mary in order to succeed in his difficult task.

Letter Two La Neuville, December 23, 1842 Vol. 3, p. 355

Dear Confrere :

I sent you recently a copy of our rule. Read it with attention and recollection and try to observe it as much as possible in the state of isolation in which you are through the will of God. I am most anxious to send you men, but the bishop tells me that the Government does not want French missionaries. So have patience a little longer ; Our Lord will hear our prayers and will perhaps have pity on the poor island of Mauritius.

Don't abandon that miserable and neglected country so soon. Continue to do your best and let us wait for God's own good time. If, at a later date, we realize that it is absolutely impossible to provide for that poor country, and there is an opportunity to go to Madagascar, we shall always be able to choose the latter course. . . . So wait and work zealously at your difficult task. It is possible that Our Lord wants you where you are to do some good in that unhappy country. Your time there is not lost.

I am sending you two letters of enrollment into the Archconfraternity of the Most Blessed Virgin, that is, of the most Holy Heart of Mary. Establish that confraternity and you will see that God's grace will be diffused in souls. Almost everywhere where it has been established there have occurred miracles of conversion and whole countries have changed their way of life. I feel certain that when

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the Archconfraternity is established, great changes will take place in the country. . . .

The novitiate is doing well, thanks be to God. All the novices are very well disposed.

Adieu, dear confrere. May the peace of Our Lord and the Most Holy Virgin be with you.

Entirely yours in the holy love of the most Immaculate Heart of our good Mother,

FATHER FRANCIS LIBERMANN

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Father Libermann complains about the missionary's silence. He pities him because of his isolation.

Letter Three La Neuville, May 22, 1844 Vol. 6, p. 193

Dear Confrere:

What a long time since I received any news from you! This has caused me pain . . . I have written several letters which undoubtedly never reached you. Perhaps you also have written. As I recall, I have had only a single letter from you. Please write more frequently. It is important to keep up relations between the various communities; so it is important that you write sometimes to Bourbon; it is still more important to remain in correspondence with the Mother House. So I tell you frankly that your silence, which no doubt has its justification, is not in accordance with our rule or with the will of God. . .

Father Le Vavasseur and his fervent little community give us news in great detail. Their work produces great and consoling results. . .

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I wanted to send you to the promising mission [of Madagascar], but the Cardinal Prefect of the Propaganda refused and told me that you should remain in Mauritius until its interests are taken care of. Console yourself, dear confrere; you have a great and beautiful mission, although it may not appear so or as fruitful as Madagascar promises to be.

God's will should be the only motive of our desires and our actions. As long as we conform to that divine will, the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ will be with us; if we follow our own wishes, that grace will leave us or be greatly diminished, and then what shall we be able to accomplish? So be comforted and rejoice at everything God's goodness is doing and will do through you. Nevertheless, I grieve much because I see you living in isolation. . . I've spoken about it to Bishop Collier [and we are planning to send you Irish or Belgian priests]. . .

You see, then, dear friend, that I am doing everything in my power for the good of your soul, for your consolation and the success of the work which God's providence has entrusted to you. However, I also expect you, through holy obedience, to keep me informed concerning the situation of your mission, about what you have done, are doing now, and about your difficulties. See what the rule says about that. . . It may cost you some time, but it is not time lost. It is important that the rule be observed and it is important also that I be informed about what is happening in Mauritius, so that I can direct the missionaries who are to be sent there and give them the necessary advice. . .

Adieu. Your most affectionate and devoted confrere in Jesus and Mary. . .

FATHER FRANCIS LIBERMANN,
missionary of the Holy Heart of Mary

Lack of regularity leads to laxity. It is your duty to give the example and to enforce the rule. Ministry and community life.

Letter Four Paris, February 24, 1851 Vol. 13, p. 55

Dear Confrere:

I add this little word to my first letter to speak to you about a very important point. I am writing this after a long conversation with Father Le Vavas seur.

Our community of Mauritius is one of those that give me the greatest joy and consolation. It has received very great graces from God and preserves the spirit of the Congregation according to all my wishes. Hence we here cannot think of all of you without great satisfaction and a profound gratitude toward Jesus and Mary.

[Non-Observance of the Rule Will Destroy Community Life]

There is, however, one thing that is still lacking according to the observations of Father Le Vavas seur, who loves you very tenderly in Our Lord, and that is regularity. This then is the subject of my letter.

Fidelity to the rules is one of the most important points for us. First, when we are unfaithful to the rules, we are failing God who expressed His divine will by the rules of our Congregation. Moreover, the preservation of the spirit and fervor of the Congregation, as well as the perseverance of the missionaries, depends on fidelity to the rule. You can be certain that the non-observance of the rule will eventually bring about the laxity of the community.

You are the first—the founder—of that community. You will always exercise great influence on those who will come

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after you. If the rules are not observed at present, they will be observed even less at a later date, and all the reasons which seem to justify your non-observance of the less important rules will prompt those who come after you to justify failure to observe the rules that are most important. Hence if you don't make every effort to observe the rule perfectly, you are committing a sort of "original sin."

Since all our confreres eagerly seek to please God in all things and ardently desire to observe the rule, irregularity causes them qualms of conscience and they sometimes feel spiritually ill-at-ease although they may not be able to describe this properly. From such qualms and discomfort another evil might result, namely a tendency to disunity—and sometimes grumblings against the superiors. Even if this has not yet occurred, it doesn't mean that we don't have to fear for the future. I therefore ask all of them most earnestly to try to observe the rule with love, constancy, eagerness, and exactitude.

Dear confrere, do all that you can to help your good and beloved confreres, in the observance of the rule. Let them in their turn help you in this so that, with united effort, you may be able to re-establish regularity. This will be most precious in the eyes of God and most profitable to souls.

The points that call for special attention and solicitude are the following: the question of rising and going to bed, the time devoted to sleep, mental prayer, the particular examen; the time for meals, recreations—all points which concern the ordinary routine of the day.

[*Ministry and Community Life*]

Again, try to be exact in the matter of meeting regularly. Don't travel too far away from one another. A missionary who lives in isolation from others will lose the community spirit and will gradually lose interest in his confreres. If this

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is not to be feared right now, it may happen gradually at a later date and especially to those who will succeed you. We must not think only of the present; we are responsible before God for the future evils which we can and should prevent.

In extraordinary cases a missionary may remain up to two weeks away from the central station, but such protracted absences should not be the rule. See to it, therefore, that there is a central place which will be considered the community house and have the missionaries return there at the times specified by our rules. During those reunions, see to it that the council meetings are held. There is nothing more precious for the good of souls and that of the mission than those councils. Their first object should be the examination of the observance of the rules, the second, the good of your mission. Here one renews one's forces.

It is a mistake to imagine that [the care of] souls will suffer from these reunions, for in the event that they occasion a loss, it would be compensated for by the fruits of the meetings. For they not only sustain the fervor of the missionaries, but also give rise to direct benefits for the development of the mission and for the unity of action.

I realize that the missionary will find it hard to leave his flock and he will always have an apparently good reason for not leaving it. But few—very few—of those reasons are valid. We should, as it were, seize our heart with both hands to tear ourselves away from our work, and you for your part should hold firmly to that rule, for the general welfare demands it; it is a necessity. Propose that order and see that it is observed.

Every time a confrere has a reason that seems to him sufficient for not coming on appointed days, let him explain his case during the preceding meeting and let the plurality of votes decide. In his explanation, the confrere should not be insistent, nor should he show disappointment when his re-

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quest is refused. The members of the council must feel free and pronounce on the case in all the simplicity of their conscience, and according to what they think is right in the presence of God.

When it has been impossible to consider the case at a previous meeting, have the confreres write to you and then examine the question before God and make a decision. Read the request at the following meeting and let the council give its advice with peace, gentleness, and charity.

Finally, in general, let the confreres ask of you the permissions which, according to the rules, have to be asked. This then is what was dictated for you all by my sentiment of profound affection for you.

Entirely yours in the charity of Jesus and Mary,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN

P. S. I ask you to direct the attention of our confreres to read this letter.