

4. LETTERS TO JEROME SCHWINDENHAMMER

Jerome Schwindenhammer, born on November 25, 1822 at Ingersheim, Alsace, began his ecclesiastical studies at Saint Sulpice, finished them at La Neuville, which he entered in 1844, and made his consecration to the apostolate in 1847. He left for the island of Reunion in the same year, and became superior of that community. He was called back to France at his own request in 1855, and taught at Blackrock College, Dublin, until 1869. He then returned to France, where he worked in the archives of the Holy Ghost Fathers. He died there in 1899.

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The value of temptations. Obedience should not be based on personal esteem but on God. The special grace I have for spiritual direction does not benefit me personally.

Letter One Avignon, June 21, 1846 Vol. 8, p. 176

J. M. J.

Dear Confrere:

[Temptations Teach Us Self-Knowledge]

When I read your description of your temptations, I did not feel sorrow or worry, but on the contrary I experienced joy and consolation in the Lord. I consider it a great grace and source of happiness when you undergo from time to time those painful experiences that are so humiliating for one who wishes to belong to God and has some appreciation of the value of divine grace. Those temptations will make you realize the evils that are latent in your evil nature.

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Having such intimate knowledge, you will have a proper evaluation of yourself and will be led to be faithful to divine grace; you will lean entirely on God's good pleasure and appreciate your great need of His assistance. You will at the same time be grateful for His kindness toward you; you will moderate the emotions that spring from your temperament and will avoid becoming self-centered. During the temptation remain, as it were, motionless before God in an attitude of humility; realize how wretched you are and sacrifice yourself to His love and His good pleasure.

You should never be astonished because you undergo such temptations. Remember that the evil is rooted in your nature, but that, on the other hand, Christ's grace is in the depths of your soul. Despise those disorderly movements; remain in your lowliness before God and fully abandon yourself to Jesus, our divine Liberator; your soul will then resist the wicked promptings of the flesh. It will reject them and attach itself more and more to the grace of our Lord; and grace will constantly increase your strength. . . .

[Obedience Should Not be Based on Personal Esteem]

Do not put your confidence in my words, in my direction of your soul, but seek to obey God alone and to follow His guidance. Never base yourself on what you might think to be good in me. Feel sure that there is nothing good in me, or almost nothing, and that there is in me much that is evil. This, I assure you, is most true. But this should not trouble you as far as obedience is concerned, for you ought to give obedience to God and not to the virtue, the holiness or the talent of any man.

I repeat that there are no serious difficulties in those things, but it would be unfortunate if you obeyed simply because you have a mistaken esteem for your director, for sooner or later you will find out the truth. Truth cannot

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remain hidden, especially since I do not seek to appear different from what I am. If I am a hypocrite it is only in little insignificant circumstances and when I am taken by surprise. Hence great evil could flow from that [mistaken esteem you have for me personally.]

[The Special Grace God Has Given Me is Not for My Personal Benefit]

You can perfectly trust, without any fear, everything pertaining to the spiritual direction which I give you. It is a general principle that one should not be afraid to trust one's director. But there is a special reason: I believe that God has been pleased to grant me a special grace in regard to the truth of salvation and the direction of certain souls. It is just this matter that fools people and makes them take me for what I am not nor ever have been. It is a grace that is purely for the benefit of others, one from which I draw no personal benefit. It is like the case of telegraph operators: they send very important messages over the wires, but draw no profit from them and receive only a small pay for their services in matters they fail to understand.

I am telling you this for yourself only. Others might be scandalized if they heard this, but you will understand now why you do not cause me pain when you tell me about your temptations [against me]. Far from it, dear confrere! Your soul is always precious to me and it is precious in our Lord Jesus Christ.¹

[Entirely yours in Jesus and Mary,

FATHER FRANCIS LIBERMANN]

¹The remainder of this letter is missing.

Libermann explains why his correspondent's "temptation" to have a high regard for his virtue, has no basis in reality.

Letter Two {Rome} August 3, 1846 Vol. 8, p. 202

J. M. J.

Dear Confreere:

I understand your temptation [against me]; it is rooted in the same interior condition that is the cause of all your other temptations. It is absolutely without foundation, untrue and even impossible. I am anxious to console and sustain you during the severe battles you have to wage against the enemy. This is why I want to tell you something about myself on the condition that you will never divulge it to anyone else.

I already told you what I think of my present condition, and I spoke the truth. I have now merely to add a word about my past, and this will serve to take away the basis of your temptation.

[My Knowledge of Virtues is a Pure Gift of Grace]

I must confess that I have never made a meditation on the virtues, not even on the virtues of Jesus and Mary. I have never been able to draw any conclusions or make resolutions at the end of my mental prayer, concerning the practice of certain virtues in order to guide my conduct or teach others. This I have attributed sometimes to a derangement of my nervous system, but I have also thought sometimes that it was due to a native incapacity. I realize that my mind has acquired a certain vigor, a certain loftiness, and that my judgment has become more broad and more correct.

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But it is certain that it was grace alone that created in me what was not there, strengthened what was weak, and corrected what was defective. This is so true and so evident to me that if I were to become an unbeliever it would be impossible for me to deny the existence and the action of grace in my soul.

[God Has Given This Knowledge to Me for the Benefit of Others]

When I spoke about virtues or perfection it was never as a result of previous meditation; but while I was speaking, truths presented themselves to my mind, fell in order and developed of their own accord. At such moments I felt an impression of light on my mind and of strength in my will, but these impressions vanished as soon as I discontinued my discourse. This makes me believe that God gives me grace for the benefit of others, and I fear for my own salvation. But God, I am sure, will have pity on me. In the long run, then, I have not acquired anything either in regard to knowledge for my mind, strength for my will, or the practice of virtues. God has given me everything. He attracted me without asking my leave and He did so with a violence that I have never noticed in any other soul. At the beginning I was very lax, indifferent, worthless for everything that pertains to the supernatural life. Our Lord gave me the grace to resist my father who desired to tear me away from the Faith. I chose to renounce him rather than to abandon my faith. After this, the good Master came suddenly to tear me away, as it were, from my own self. For the space of about five years He held my faculties absorbed and captive, and throughout that time I never had any thought of "working" to acquire any particular virtue. My whole occupation consisted in being with Him, and this was very easy. Throughout that time I had no clear idea of spiritual things.

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This, I think, will suffice to make you see that your temptation in my regard is groundless. You see that Jesus acts and accomplishes everything in souls. It is metaphysically impossible for anyone to attain to supernatural virtues by natural efforts. One could perhaps succeed in faking those virtues, but it would be impossible to acquire them in reality.

[*Sundry Counsels*]

You may converse with Mr. Plantaz¹ about matters of piety; there is nothing wrong in it but do not give him admonitions unless he asks for them. Never make a deliberate reflection upon him for the sake of sounding his interior life and knowing his dispositions. When he asks you for observations [regarding his conduct] tell him what comes to your mind at that time.

You are right in not desiring anything special. That is what I want. Receive Holy Communion twice a week besides Sundays. Try to forget yourself at all times. Do all things with simplicity, with peaceful confidence in God and in the Blessed Virgin. You will suffer those various temptations as long as you remain alone with your self. You should try to draw profit from them, making use of them to overcome yourself, preventing them from leaving strong impressions on your mind, imagination, sensibility and conduct. Once you will be engaged in an active life, you will have less trouble.

Entirely yours in Jesus and Mary,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN

P. S. Burn this letter three days after receiving it.

¹Philippe Plantaz was one of Father Libermann's most fervent novices. He died at the age of twenty-one.

*Do not judge others or worry about their opinion of you.
Self-forgetfulness.*

Letter Three *{October, 1847}* *Vol. 9, p. 298*

Jesus, Mary, Joseph

Dear Confrere :

I received the letter written by you while you were on the high seas, and it gave me satisfaction to see you calm and peaceful. I hope you have reached your destination [Reunion] and are in possession of the grace and love of our Lord. You have at long last become acquainted with our beloved Negroes ; no doubt you have already been able to visit, console and instruct them. Tell me in your next letter how things are working out in your sacred ministry.

Follow faithfully the advice that Father Le Vavas seur, your Superior, will give you. Open your heart to him also in regard to your interior life. You are too far away from me to receive my direction. You remember in a general way the advice I have given you ; you know in most cases what God wishes you to do. Be calm, moderate, humble, and gentle. You know that you have a natural inclination to self-love. Every time you become mentally tense and rigid, self-love appears at the gate, eager to enter. Self-love will be active without your noticing it ; it will lead you astray and make you see things from a wrong point of view.

*[Do Not Judge Others or Worry About Their
Opinion of You]*

Remain interiorly humble in God's presence. Refrain from judging anyone ; do not be enthusiastic about the good you

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see in others nor become agitated when you think you find evil in them. Remind yourself of the truth that we ought to love our neighbor not on account of his qualities but because of the charity of Jesus Christ that dwells in our souls.

So whether others do good or evil, love them equally. Do not judge them, and never allow yourself to be unfavorably impressed by others. In general, pay no attention to the impression they make upon you which may prompt you to judge them—a thing to which you are too much inclined—and let this be your rule in every circumstance. Distrust first impressions and be on your guard against being guided by them.

Never occupy your mind with what others might be thinking about you. Do not seek to read their interior, to discern their intentions, their ideas, sentiments, impressions. This sort of reflection is very bad and always leads to grave temptations. It stirs up the imagination in all kinds of ways and makes it easy for the enemy to do his work in our souls. Such judgments are based on impressions, and these are developed by our imagination; grace and reason have no share in them.

[*Forget Self*]

Every time you notice that your mind is excited, that it adopts a rigid attitude, becomes self-centered, troubled and agitated, say to yourself. "I am in the grip of a temptation." Aim then at restoring peace to your heart. Quiet the interior movement and remain in a humble attitude in God's presence; be docile to His grace, and abandon yourself to His will.

Aim always at forgetting yourself. The labors of the ministry and your relations with our poor Negroes will make this easier for you. Don't get on the wrong track by making too violent efforts in your fight against nature for the purpose of keeping recollected during your labors. You will find

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it difficult to preserve recollection on the sensitive level, unless the occupations of your sacred ministry naturally lead to recollection. This sometimes happens, but not to everyone.

In general, be content with the interior perfection that God grants you. Be always satisfied with everything, whether you are able to do much or little good at the beginning. Act with perfect simplicity of heart for the love of God, and leave to Him the care of blessing your holy desires to the extent of His wishes. May God's goodness fill your soul at all times with abundant grace and keep you in a state of peace, humility, self-forgetfulness, and complete confidence in His mercy.

Entirely yours in the charity of
the most Holy Heart of Mary,

FATHER FRANCIS LIBERMANN

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Our nature does not change but through God's grace, we can control it. Peace, humility, and self-denial. Living for God alone.

Letter Four Paris, February 20, 1851 Vol. 13, p. 43

Dear Confrere:

I am finally freed, I hope, from the hard captivity that held me bound and pressed on every side and left me no rest nor any instant to write to my dear confreres.¹ This was a source of great grief for me, for I felt certain that my silence was the cause of much sorrow for all of you. But now

¹Father Libermann had spent many months in a successful effort to overcome the difficulties preventing the establishment of the hierarchy in the French Colonies.

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the bishops are ready to leave, and that will be an end to that complex and important affair. I shall now belong to you, and your letters will not remain without an answer.

I have not ceased to pray for your spiritual progress, and it is my hope that the good Master has favored you with ever-increasing graces. I cannot properly recall your needs as you have expressed them in your letters; besides these are too old to suggest the counsels I ought to give you. But I know your soul; I did not leave it even for one moment, but have been united with it at all times in the charity of Jesus our Master.

[*Despite God's Grace, Our Nature Remains
Always the Same*]

God's grace dwells in you, dear confrere, and it constantly inclines you to self-denial and total surrender to Jesus, in which alone you will find *peace, humility, and strength, and life.*

I don't think that any radical change has taken place in your nature. At least the roots of our faults and imperfections remain in our souls, I mean that the tendencies remain. Grace weakens and diminishes them, gives us mastery over them, but our nature will not be changed before our resurrection. At that time the qualities and virtues which God's grace has put in our souls will be communicated to our flesh, and our senses will share in those virtues and qualities.

In the present life, when we have the happiness of belonging to God, our flesh, that is, the sensible part of our nature and our imagination which belongs to it, remains always more or less subject to its evil tendencies. This should not frighten us nor trouble us in the least, but we must be full of confidence in Jesus who lives in our souls. He is able to protect us against the evil that resides in our flesh. Hence, beloved confrere, look with indifference at all the wretched

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things you detect in your flesh, in your senses and imagination. Suffer them with patience, gentleness and peace, as crosses that are laid on you for the glory and the love of God. Be without fears; your soul belongs to God and will always belong to Him. Aim at the four virtues which I mentioned above and which I underlined.

[*Peace*]

Seek to keep a small "retreat" in the depths of your soul and allow no trouble to enter there. Keep this retreat intact when you feel agitation in your imagination. Look upon this agitation as on a cross which you ought to carry peacefully for the love of God. It makes no difference whether your imagination is aroused by judgments you make about men or by the judgments you think others make about you, or by the troubles of your ministry or the sight of your own imperfections, or from any other cause. You must keep your soul in the presence of Jesus and say to Him: "So much the better, O my God! I want to suffer for love of You."

In regard to the thought that occasioned the trouble and aroused the imagination or was aroused by the latter, try to distract yourself, despise those thoughts and imaginations to the best of your ability, and remain peacefully in God's sight.

[*Humility and Abnegation*]

This peace is based on humility and abnegation. Although your confreres have a great esteem for you and love you, as I know from Father Le Vavas seur, you are inclined to think sometimes that the contrary is the case. Well, in such cases, try to realize in the depths of your heart the worthlessness of your being. Always remain at the feet of our Lord as a wretched man, but at the same time entertain sentiments of love and humility.

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Try to be indifferent in regard to men, even toward those who are dear to you, so that you may not care whether they despise or esteem you, love or forget you. But you, on your part, should love them and show them your love and respect because of your love for Jesus, whose poor servant you are. By such a humility we sever the chief root that is the cause of all the troubles we find in ourselves. By means of self-abnegation we become indifferent to joy and pain and in this way protect ourselves against another root—namely, our sensibility, which causes us to feel hurt at every turn. Moreover, we thus acquire the mastery over all our passions and acquire great steadiness; and this severs the last great root, the passionate movement that follows upon the experience of pleasant or unpleasant impressions and stimulates our imagination.

You see then, dear confrere, how great are the resources that divine grace has placed in you to perfect and sanctify you.

[Draw Life from God Alone]

You have a sensitive and impressionable nature; hence you have to expect suffering as a constant companion. Sensibility and impressionability are great gifts of God, but one has always to pay dearly for them by way of the suffering of which they are the occasion. Be glad of it. God will give you strength, constancy and perseverance. Be gentle and moderate in the use of your energy; be peaceful and gentle in your constancy. God is with you. Be united with Him and draw all your life from Him alone. May that divine life be poured into your soul in superabundance.

Entirely yours in Jesus
and Mary,

FATHER FRANCIS LIBERMANN