

4. LETTERS TO MR. BOULANGER, SEMINARIAN

The following four letters were addressed to a seminar-ian whose identity is not certain. On the basis of internal evidence, *Notes et Documents*, Vol. 1, p. 200, identifies him as a Mr. Boulanger, of the Seminary of St. Sulpice.

99

How to accept the death of a beloved relative. Advice about vacation time. Works of zeal and charity.

Letter One *Issy, July 20, 1835* *Vol. 1, p. 206*

Praised be Jesus and Mary

Dear Confrere :

[*How to Accept the Death of Your Beloved Mother*]

I received news of your hurried departure and of the accident that caused it. What can I say to console you? God willed it; this is all the consolation and joy of a Christian. We should no longer have any life upon this earth; since Our Lord Jesus Christ has ascended to heaven, our whole treasure is there. Our heart should be entirely there because it is always where our treasure is; and if our heart is completely in heaven, what have we in common with earth?

Let us live like the angels and saints in heaven; they never weep nor sigh over anybody. Their spirit is inaccessible to sorrow and separation, because they have only one attachment—God, and God is never wanting to them. If we do likewise, if we attach ourselves to God alone, to the exclusion of all created beings, our soul will always enjoy the most profound peace; whereas, if we place all our desires and affections in the things of earth, we shall sooner or later, be overcome with affliction and sadness; for either we are obliged to abandon them or they abandon us.

SPIRITUAL LETTERS OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN

Do not think, dear confrere, that I wish to blame you for the grief that you must naturally feel at the death of your mother, or even for the tears that you have shed, as I have been told. I do not at all believe that there is any evil in this, as long as those tears and this sorrow are within God's order and do not proceed from passion, that is, from too great and too natural an affection, or from desolation, despair or similar motives.

It will be easy for you to determine if they are within God's order, since, if so, far from rendering us disconsolate and troubled, they raise us up to God and leave us in perfect peace, with a soul entirely free. They do not prevent us from quietly attending to our meditation and our other pious exercises, nor do they disturb our imagination to such a degree as to render us incapable of any other thought. It is true, the remembrance of it comes back to us quite often and presents itself to the soul under various aspects. It fills us with sorrow, and sometimes causes profound anxiety; but all this takes place peacefully—at least it does not deprive us altogether of peace—and with perfect submission to the holy will of God.

Such an affliction, if accepted in the right spirit, will make us advance rapidly in the holy love of God. It is just the same with such a visitation as every other cross that we receive from the hand of God; we must accept it with humility, bear it with joy and great love, relishing the sorrow that comes to us, as a glutton enjoys the dainty morsel that he has received from the king's table.

[Vacation Rules for the Interior Life]

You wish me, dear friend, to say a few words about the manner in which you should conduct yourself during vacation. Beggar as I am, what good can I tell you? I will not, however, grieve you by my silence. Ask me whatever you wish, and I will answer you as well as I can.

LETTERS TO MR. BOULANGER, SEMINARIAN

There are certain rules that you ought to observe for your interior life, and others that apply to your exterior conduct.

As for your interior, you should be a perfect Christian and should love God with all the strength of your soul and as much during vacation as during the year. You must be just as self-denying, as united to our Divine Savior, as recollected, as faithful to grace and as much an interior man, as at any other time.

There is not a moment in our life when all our desires, all our affections, our whole will and all the powers of our soul should not be entirely and solely consecrated and given up to God alone. We should belong *entirely* to God, in *all* things, in *all* places, and at *all* times. If, in the course of our life, we have yielded to a single natural desire, only for the twinkling of an eye, we can say that we were unfaithful for the space of a twinkling of an eye.

[*First Rule: Live for God Alone*]

Strive, therefore, dear confrere, to observe especially three points during the holidays. First, take the firm resolution of living for God alone; consequently, do not seek yourself in anything, do not let yourself be carried away by a desire for pleasure and satisfaction. There is no enjoyment for us upon earth. God alone is our love and our all. Outside of Him we have nothing and must have nothing.

Be careful not to misunderstand these words. I do not mean to say that you must put aside all the things that are necessary and useful to distract the mind, such as walks and other recreations of a like nature. I only mean that at the very bottom of your heart you should take no pleasure in earthly enjoyment, that you should not even take part in them interiorly, that you should not even seek those that are spiritual. Be satisfied to give yourself entirely to God, with-

SPIRITUAL LETTERS OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN

out any thought of self, and to make yourself pleasing to Him in all things.

*[Second Rule: Keep Your Soul in
Peace Before God]*

The second thing you ought to do is, to preserve your soul in peace before God. Always remain united to our Divine Savior, so that you may never do anything except for His sake. All the movements of your soul should have their origin in that source of love which He has placed in you, and which He will increase from day to day. If you should commit a fault, do not let your heart become a prey to trouble; it should be pure and holy in the sight of God, but it should never worry. As soon as anxiety enters your heart, you may be sure that it does not rest in the purity and sanctity of God; because wherever God is, there also is peace.

Should it happen that annoyance and uneasiness attempt to gain the mastery over you—and I believe that this will often be the case during the time that you are obliged to spend in the world—do not distress yourself about it. As long as it is a mere temptation, instead of doing you any harm, it will serve only to establish you in true peace, and will attach you more and more to God, by convincing you more thoroughly of the extreme wretchedness of this world, and of the vanity of everything that is not God. Endeavor, then, to bear with humility, and in the presence of God, the pain that arises from this annoyance and trouble that would enter into your soul.

*[Third Rule: Be on Guard
Against Natural Affections]*

The third thing is to watch quietly over your interior, so that no natural affection may steal in, and that, not even for

LETTERS TO MR. BOULANGER, SEMINARIAN

a single moment, you may cease to be intimately united to God, who dwells within you. This does not require, on your part, any tenseness of mind or positive effort of the heart. As I have often told you and has been expressly agreed between us, such sense-dominated efforts are not to be employed, for they are never capable of obtaining for us the grace of God's presence within us. Let God Himself effect this choicest of His graces. The only thing we have to do, is to remain quiet and to be prepared for everything that He may be pleased to do with us and in us, never seeking our own advantage, but only His holy love.

You know very well that, notwithstanding all that we may do toward attaining the love of God, we are so wretched that we constantly cater to our self-love. We should try, at least, to do all in our power to find only God and His holy love, or to approach Him as closely as possible. This rule will not prevent you from taking your recreations and holiday relaxations. I need not dwell any further upon this subject ; you know what I mean.

[Vacation Rules for External Conduct]

In regard to your exterior conduct, act with prudence, that is, carry on quietly, do all things *for* God, *in* God and *through* God, I mean in union with Jesus Christ our Divine Savior. We should distrust ourselves greatly and always be convinced that we are capable of doing only foolish things, but, withal, we ought not to lose our peace, for that would be pride.

Let us keep a certain reserve in our conduct, that is, let us act with moderation, without haste, and without abandoning ourselves to the vivacity of our mind and imagination. It is sufficient if we remain quietly and peacefully in the presence of God, without going outside of ourselves, so as to hear His voice, which finds an echo in our hearts, and to

SPIRITUAL LETTERS OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN

follow docilely and calmly the impulse of His grace, doing what we believe to be His greater glory, and avoiding all haste as well as excessive activity. It would be good, and even necessary for you to lay down a certain exterior rule for your spiritual exercises.

As to the choice of another confessor, I would advise you to proceed with prudence and circumspection, so as not to run any risk of being obliged to leave him afterwards. One should not change one's director as easily as one changes one's coat. You ought to consult God, then try to make a good choice and do not leave him any more; this is very important.

[Works of Zeal and Charity]

With regard to zeal for the salvation of your neighbor, especially of your relatives, I think it would be advisable for you to attract them by all possible means. Here is what I think on the subject. You should pray much; it is God who is to act and not ourselves. We should always distrust ourselves as well as our words, for the latter are, at best, but wind. Take care not to go too fast or to force things. When we see that the grace of God is at work, we may continue with mildness and great gentleness. But when we meet with resistance, we should cease for awhile, and then come back at another time, but always with the greatest gentleness and humility of heart. You know that our Lord Jesus Christ has said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the land." Let us endeavor to possess the whole earth by our tender charity and gentleness, so as to draw everyone to God and to establish His love in the hearts of all men.

Take care not to lose your peace and your interior spirit, in the midst of your works of charity. I think you would do a great deal of good, if you could induce the person whom you mention, to make half an hour's meditation; but do not

LETTERS TO MR. BOULANGER, SEMINARIAN

force anything; let God do as He pleases. Moreover, be gentle, modest, humble, and charitable toward everybody, especially toward the clergy and your former confreres; but all this must be without anxiety, without worry, without haste, without affectation, with peace and moderation.

May our divine Savior always be the sovereign and only Master of your heart; and then His peace and holy love will fill you and preserve you pure, holy and without stain in the sight of His Father. You will be an object of tender affection and delight for the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and for His most Holy Mother. The angels and saints will rejoice in the sight of God; they will adore Him and thank Him with love for having condescended to draw unto Himself a creature so poor and wretched as you are. Never forget these two things: the grandeur and beauty of God, and your own baseness, your unsightliness and pride.

May the most holy peace of Our Lord fill your soul.

Your brother and poor servant,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN, ACOLYTE

100

How to profit by Holy Communion. The practice of "Jesus living in us." Pastimes, examen of conscience and Spiritual conversation. The external practice of religion and charity. Scapular devotion.

Letter Two

Issy, August 9, 1835

Vol. 1, p. 206

Praised be Jesus and Mary

Dear Confrere:

May the peace and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ fill your soul and preserve it in perfect purity and holiness in the sight of God. Let us always rejoice in our Divine Savior

SPIRITUAL LETTERS OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN

because he made us the chosen children of His heavenly Father. Let us also endeavor to correspond properly to His graces and favors, by the holiness of our life and a love free from every earthly affection, to the exclusion of every afterthought of self-love as well as every desire of satisfying ourselves and of enjoying even the least thing outside of him.

May His most holy Name be blessed; may His holy love alone reign fully in our soul. Let us, above all things, walk in His presence, in the most profound humiliation of our soul, sincerely acknowledging the height, the breadth, the depth of our misery, our poverty, our abjection and our wickedness, as well as the greatness of His mercy toward us, who are so ungrateful to Him.

You ask me several things, which, with the grace of God, I shall answer to the best of my ability, so that you may serve Him with the whole strength of your soul and live henceforth for Him alone.

[How to Profit from Holy Communion]

You ask me, what method you should follow in order to profit well from Holy Communion. I don't need to speak about it at great length, for we conversed about it during the week of the Feast of the Most Holy Sacrament, as you no doubt remember very well.

It seems to me that the very nature of the Sacrament suggests to us the manner of preparing ourselves for it and of drawing real fruit from it. What object did our Divine Savior have in view when He instituted the Holy Eucharist? I believe it was to unite us with Himself in the most intimate manner, to make us share in His union with His Father, and to make us live His own life, through the plenitude of His Spirit, with whom He enters into us.

And do you know what kind of a life our Lord Jesus wishes to lead in us? It is a life of separation from all crea-

LETTERS TO MR. BOULANGER, SEMINARIAN

tures and of total surrender into the hands of His heavenly Father. He does not seek to be honored, loved and esteemed by creatures; He does not pursue the pleasures and enjoyments of the earth; He turns aside from them. He does not live for the sake of being quiet and content upon earth; He never seeks to gratify Himself, nor to do anything for His own satisfaction. On the contrary, He wishes to lead in us a pure and holy life, wholly abandoned to His heavenly Father.

It is His will that we seek nothing, desire, love and will nothing but His heavenly Father. We may, therefore, be assured that every movement of our soul that does not tend directly toward God, is not from Jesus living in us; consequently, such a movement is [spiritually] dead or insignificant.

If we wish to prepare for Holy Communion, we must be disposed to live only the life of our Divine Savior. We should, therefore, purify our souls from every earthly affection, and rid ourselves of every natural movement and desire. In other words, we should strive to follow in our actions, to the utmost of our ability, solely the impulse of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us, so that, as our profound misery will permit, the Holy Spirit may be the prime mover of all our actions, especially our interior¹ actions.

I don't know whether I explain myself well or badly, but it seems to me that what I am saying is the truth. Don't let your imagination run wild and give you a wrong interpretation of this complete affair.

[*The Practice of "Jesus Living in Us"*]

The following, it seems to me, is the practice of that admirable life of Our Lord Jesus Christ in us, concerning which so many admirable and delightful things could be

¹The text reads *exterior*, which seems to be a slip of the pen.

SPIRITUAL LETTERS OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN

said, if I were not too poor a man to speak about them; this is why I prefer to remain silent. All we can do in order to lead that life, which is all the glory of the angels in heaven, can be summarized as follows:

1. We should detach ourselves from every desire and every earthly affection that is not in God. This must be understood in the full rigor of the term.

2. We should maintain ourselves *interiorly* in great peace before God, by never allowing anxiety and agitation to enter into our soul; by constantly paying a calm and effortless attention to God dwelling in the depths of our soul, with the gentle and peaceful desire of corresponding to all the movements of grace with which He inspires us, and of following Him alone.

As for exterior and purely natural actions, such as eating and walking, we should perform them with simplicity and, as it were, mechanically, that is, without fixing upon them the attention of our soul, which ought to be solely upon God. It was thus that Jesus and Mary assisted at the marriage feast of Cana; they ate, drank, spoke like the others, but all the desires of their hearts were with God alone.

When you try to detach yourself from all natural life, you ought, at the same time, to distrust yourself and to be constantly afraid of being deceived by your imagination. This fear should not cause you any trouble, however, nor impede your action. It will only prevent you from becoming prey to a multitude of imaginary illusions; it will quietly maintain you in your lowliness before God, and it will cause you to act with less impetuosity and with greater calm and peace.

Try, then, to purify your heart as a preparation for Holy Communion. Add to it an ardent desire of becoming

LETTERS TO MR. BOULANGER, SEMINARIAN

more and more united with your Divine Savior, and you will, I hope, reap wonderful fruit from this Sacrament. Your life will be one continuous progress in virtue, and God will finally complete in you the grace of perfect union, as He does in His angels and saints.

When you have received Holy Communion, remain quietly in the state of repose you have mentioned, and leave aside all vocal prayers. They are offered up only for the purpose of elevating our soul to God; and, since you are with Him, what more do you want? A man who sees well does not need spectacles; if he puts them on, they only prevent him from seeing well. However, I don't think there is any harm in interrupting this repose with short aspirations, that is, if you have a taste for them, if they help to sustain you to remain recollected, and if they be not too frequent.

— [Pastimes]

With regard to the pastimes which you call "laziness," I don't see any great harm in them, as long as they do not prevent your heart from belonging entirely to God. But do not become attached to them in any way, and do all this as though without thinking. However, they should not encroach upon your spiritual exercises, or prevent you from going to bed at the prescribed time, or be harmful to your meditation. Otherwise, it would be an indication that your heart is, in some slight degree or other, attached to them.

[Examination of Conscience]

As for your examination of conscience, I think the best thing for you is to place yourself calmly in the presence of God, expecting everything from Him alone. When you feel that your heart is very peaceful and perfectly united to God, gently begin to open the interior eyes of your soul upon yourself, in order to examine in what you have offended

SPIRITUAL LETTERS OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN

your God. I told you to open them gently because I do not think that you should seek to know your faults with too much eagerness or avidity. Do not scrutinize your conduct with an exaggerated care lest something may have escaped your attention.

Above all, do not allow your soul to leave God, in order to run after these faults, but rather remain peacefully in His presence, and let Him discover them for you, And for this purpose, your soul may and ought always remain, like St. John on the heart of our Divine Savior, casting only a simple glance upon itself and its conduct, without leaving God, in whom it reposes.

St. John did not change his position on the heart of Jesus, when he asked the divine Master who it was that would betray Him. He did not seek this knowledge in his own mind or in the conduct of the Apostles; but, by a glance at our Divine Savior, he found out all that he wished to know.

I would rather have this method followed, even at the risk of overlooking some of our faults, than have us looking for them carefully and finding them all. It should be sufficient for us to have a sincere and firm desire of knowing those which we have committed, and of confessing them; our contrition will thus be incomparably more perfect than in the other case. But this is not all: in this way, I think, we discover our faults more easily, and we penetrate more thoroughly into our interior, in order to learn the origin and source of such faults.

[Spiritual Conversation]

It seems to me that you could try to start pious conversations with the person whom you desire to lead to the practice of mental prayer. To proceed prudently, limit yourself at first to a few words only. If you find that he receives

LETTERS TO MR. BOULANGER, SEMINARIAN

them well and is willing to enter into your views, you may go on, but always with peace, gentleness, and without precipitation. I don't think it would be useful to give him the method which is taught here in the seminary; it is too dry and too detailed. . . . It is by conversations that you should initiate him into the secrets of mental prayer. It would perhaps be far better if you tried only to inspire him with a taste for this holy exercise; then, if he feels inclined to practice it, send him to a good confessor for the purpose of receiving the necessary instruction.

In doing this, place your whole confidence in God alone; acknowledge, in His presence, your poverty and incapacity. Look for everything from His great mercy: "The Spirit breathes where He wills."

It is our duty to try to lead souls to God and help them to reach the perfection of the Gospel; but we should beware lest we rely too much on our words and our efforts. If we succeed, let us rejoice before God that He has deigned to draw a soul to Himself; if we do not succeed, let us remain quiet before Him and wait until it pleases Him to hear our prayers. The most holy will of God should be the sole object of our love in everything.

[*Exterior Practices of Religion and Charity*]

Here is what I think about exterior practices of religion and charity. We should seriously endeavor to establish the reign of God in our souls, and to approach God with all the love, tenderness and fervor of our heart. The most efficacious means is certainly the practice of mental prayer and of interior self-denial. We should seriously try to give up the natural desires and affections of our heart, as well as our own will. We should endeavor, just as earnestly, to relinquish all the movements of our self-love and to acquire true Christian humility.

SPIRITUAL LETTERS OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN

This is the great object that we ought to aim at in all our religious practices, either interior or exterior. The former are always the better. External practices are of value only insofar as they perfect our interior life. If we notice, later on, that we have no taste for external works, we need not worry about it.

This kind of exterior works may be compared to Jacob's ladder, which leads to heaven, that is, to God. Once we have reached heaven, we no longer trouble ourselves about the ladder, because we can get along without it. However, pay attention to the following points:

1. Examine in perfect *peace* whether it is through negligence or any other human motive that one abstains from these works. This inquiry should be made in the presence of God, in meditation, and without prejudice against oneself.

2. If one does not find any human motive, such as avarice, the desire to take it easy, human respect or other similar reason, he should remain perfectly calm. My apologies for referring to this examination. In all probability the person on behalf of whom you asked this question will not be guilty on those points. Since, however, you give me no information on this subject, I thought that I should mention it.

[When no human motives are discovered], one should abandon himself entirely to the holy guidance of God, following the views of God and the grace of His Spirit peacefully and lovingly. This divine Spirit always manifests Himself clearly, when He wishes to bestow any gift on His servants, and His voice is so gentle and attractive that one always follows it most willingly. In this matter as in others, one should always ask the advice of his directors.

3. Do not despise exterior works or persons who perform many of them and have a liking for them. These per-

LETTERS TO MR. BOULANGER, SEMINARIAN

sons may be as interior as you are, and reversely, you may be just as pleasing to God and as perfect as they. When it happens afterwards that you yourself feel attracted toward work of this kind, you should undertake it. However, take all due precaution not to lose your interior peace, which is much more important than such a work, and even necessary for its performance. Be very careful in this matter and avoid excessive haste in action.

4. I believe that without even having a decided taste for it, it would be advisable from time to time to do some work, especially of charity, when an opportunity presents itself, and when we feel that we can do so without worrying or without losing interior life, because such things always sustain us and prevent us from becoming a prey to illusions.

[*Scapular Devotions*]

With regard to the scapular, I see no necessity of trying, for instance, to gain all the indulgences attached to it, if we are disinclined to do so, nor of performing the exercises prescribed for members of the Scapular Fraternity. I know a person who never does these things, and would even forget them if he wished to do them. He nevertheless carefully wears the scapular as a badge of the Blessed Virgin, and as an exterior sign of his desire of belonging to his well-beloved Mother.

If the one on whose behalf you mention this question is inclined to do likewise, I don't think that he would be wrong [in wearing the Scapular]. This holds good even if the idea [of wearing it as a badge of the Blessed Virgin] should leave Him indifferent. For I believe that it is good not to neglect a pious practice approved by the Church, observed by the majority of God's faithful servants, and which can only be an act of homage rendered to the Blessed Virgin.

SPIRITUAL LETTERS OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN

We should not, however, attach too much importance to it, nor go so far as to worry if we have not this devotion. There are other similar devotions, and even more important ones, that do not occupy the hearts of great servants of God.

The essential and only point is, as I have already told you, to deny ourselves in everything, to bear the cross and follow our Lord Jesus Christ, that is, to unite ourselves in the most intimate manner with Him. If we do this, or at least try to do it with our whole heart, we shall do not wrong when we are not worrying about the other things.

This, dear friend, is all that I can tell you. If all that I have said is good and true, I have given you a great deal of good advice; if I have said foolish things, as one may and should expect from me, the good Lord will know how to suggest to you how to profit by them for the salvation and perfection of your soul, for He made Balaam's ass say good things.

Best regards in the holy charity of Jesus and Mary.

Your poor confrere and servant,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN, ACOLYTE