6. LETTERS TO ETIENNE CLAIR

Introduction

Etienne Pierre Joseph Clair was born in 1818 at Annonay in the diocese of Viviers. He studied for the priesthood in the Seminary of Lyons, and it was there that Libermann first met him in 1839 on his journey to Rome. Father Clair was a relative of Bishop Mioland of Amiens, the prelate who accepted Libermann for ordination to the priesthood and gave him permission to establish his novitiate at La Neuville, near Amiens.

Father Clair felt an attraction for the religious life and particularly toward Libermann's Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary. Libermann thought much of him at one time and even invited him to join his society and become its novicemaster. When the many obstacles that stood in the way of his religious vocation were removed, Father Clair finally, in 1844, entered the novitiate; a year later he was professed and made his consecration to the apostolate. Unstable, he went in eight years through half a dozen different posts, until in 1853 he left the Congregation. He then sued the Congregation; filled a variety of posts in the diocese of Lyons; was interned in a mental hospital; went to Switzerland; sued his brother, the archbishop of Lyons and the Prefect of the District of Rhone; became an apostate to his catholic faith and his priesthood; and died a pitiful death in Geneva.

Some lines regarding the pernicious fruits of self-love, written to Father Clair, appear to have been prophetic. In his numerous letters to Father Clair, Libermann pointed out the dangers of self-confidence, excessive natural activity and self-esteem. He suggested as a radical remedy a humble docility to God's grace, which is the only way to Christian perfection.
Jesus, the "Soul of your soul." Peace of soul and moderation even in spiritual desires. Sundry counsels.

Letter One Rennes, October, 1839 Vol. 2, p. 197

Dear Mr. Clair:

You gave me great joy in our Lord writing to me and describing in detail the interior condition of your soul, for I assure you that I greatly desire your sanctification in His love. May Jesus and Mary be the foundation of all your hope and the object of all your love. Relish, enjoy, desire nothing except for and in Jesus. Have no heart, soul, body, and existence except for and in Jesus. When will you allow Him to live fully in your soul?

[Jesus, the "Soul of Your Soul"]

I believe that it is our Lord who has inspired your desire, and this gives me very great joy. He will live in you, dear friend; this is my firm hope. Live also in Him. Don't be satisfied with the desire of being always occupied with our Lord Jesus, but have besides a greater and more lively desire to possess Him in your soul and to be possessed by Him. He will then be the life and, as it were, the soul of your soul, so that you have no longer any actions, sentiment, desire, affection, will, or intention of your own, but Jesus Himself will animate you in all your internal and external activities. He will then live in you in "His spirit of holiness, in the fullness of His power." He will re-enact in you all the interior states of His Holy soul, states in which He wants you to have a share.

I tell you all this in a few words, not exactly to point out to you that you do not possess any element of that perfect
LETTERS TO CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS

life of Jesus in souls, but rather in order to prompt you and make you enter into those interior sentiments in the presence of Jesus and Mary and attain the summit of a most holy love.

[Peace of Soul]

The great means to establish Christ’s admirable reign in us are precisely the spirit of constant mental prayer and peace of soul. God’s mercy is granting you a great grace in giving you that twofold attraction. Follow that attraction with gentleness and love in the presence of so much divine goodness.

Recall constantly and establish firmly in your mind and heart the fundamental truth that the greatest and even infallible means to possess the spirit of prayer, is peaceful possession of our soul in our Lord’s presence.

Note well those words, “to possess one’s soul in peace,” they are the words of our divine Master. Your soul must always be cloistered within itself, or rather it should be cloistered in Jesus dwelling in your soul; not imprisoned and shut in as with an iron bolt, but held in sweet repose in Jesus’ arms. Natural eagerness and tension constrict the soul. On the contrary, it expands by such a sweet repose, by peaceful action, by moderation in its interior activity. I don’t think that this practice will be difficult for you, for it is our Lord who is doing this in you and who moves you in all gentleness.

[Moderation of Spiritual Desires]

Avoid harshness and rigidity of mind and will. Don’t rush with excessive eagerness and violence toward objects that attract you, even if they are most holy. When you feel interiorly drawn and experience holy desires, never run ahead of God’s guidance. Don’t seek to preserve interior
sentiments or pious affections beyond the time that our Lord deigns to give them to you.

Keep always in mind that it is neither your function nor within your powers to form and fashion yourself and make an interior man out of yourself. Neither are you able to undertake or choose what is better or more perfect; this belongs to our Lord alone, and He alone can give it to you. The conclusion you should draw from all this is that you ought to avoid natural activity, excitement, anxious longing to achieve what you consider excellent.

When you experience desires that are lively and yet gentle, humble and full of confidence, you may follow them. But don't use violence and anxious effort, and don't rush beyond the limits of those desires. Open your poor heart before the most loveable Jesus. He knows well what is taking place in your soul and what is wanting to you.

Don't act like a child who wants categorically and absolutely to get the things he happens to see. In all such circumstances repose in Jesus, pour out your soul, as it were, before Him like oil. I say "like oil," that is, without noise or violence, but with gentleness and a most peaceful love. Do not fear then to desire and sigh interiorly for Jesus and Mary; but desire them in the way I have described. Remain thus peacefully in Jesus and all will go well.

[Sundry Counsels]

You are permitted to think of yourself, but it should be in God. It is not yourself you ought to consider, but God living in you. Self-consideration which restores peace to the soul and increases interior humility before God is not really a consideration of self but of God.

Don't worry about your shyness or your other faults. Go to God and live in Him in perfect peace of soul. All those faults will then fall away like so many scales.
LETTERS TO CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS

resist them when they come to your notice, and re-establish peace in your soul in God's presence with the desire of living only in and for Him.

Avoid haste both interiorly and exteriorly, and be even more careful in trying to preserve interior tranquility. Be sedate, gentle, peaceful and grave in and before God in all your actions of mind and heart. Avoid tension and violent efforts; avoid the least affectation; do everything with mildness and with the gentleness of our Lord and His Blessed Mother. I am very glad that you intend to submit my letters to your director [at the seminary]. Not only does this not trouble me, but I greatly desire it, for it gives me more assurance that I shall not do you great harm in the things I may say wrongly, especially at the beginning before I get to know you sufficiently well.

Adieu, dear friend. May the peace of Jesus and Mary fill your soul.

Your poor brother and servant in their holy love,

FRANCIS LIBERMAN, ACOLYTE

228

We must not scrutinize God's action in our souls. God's graces should not make us self-complacent. Faithfulness in accepting God's guidance.


Praised be Jesus and Mary

Dear Brother in Our Lord Jesus Christ and in the most beloved Mother of our souls:

Since you desire to be given to Jesus and Mary, I shall not cease to give you to Him, and I don't wish to keep any-
thing for myself that belongs to your soul. This, however, will not prevent me from making always every effort to form our divine Master in you. It will always be my greatest consolation—and one you are not able to fathom—to see Jesus growing in you and attaining to the full stature of a perfect man in you. To reach this goal, you must allow yourself to be led by His divine hand, like a child that knows nothing, that is unable to walk or do anything whatsoever.

[Abstain from Scrutinizing God's Action in Your Soul]

Avoid trying to find out or consider what God is doing in your soul. The eyes of your soul should see nothing but Jesus living in you. But if you want to act purely and in accordance with His most holy desires, you should see this dear and most adorable Lord, as it were, apart from your self, so that your joy, consolation and love are in Jesus dwelling, living and reigning in your soul. I mean you should see Him in this way rather than seeing your soul as possessing that great treasure of your love.

This is very important, dear brother. The more our considerations and our views are detached and abstracted from our self, the purer they will be. The more also they will be free from our self-love and the more pleasing to Him who wants to be the sole and complete good of our souls. I do not mean to say that you are guilty of a fault if sometimes you notice humbly and purely the divine graces that exist in your soul and the various operations of our Lord in you. It might sometimes even be inopportune to reject such views and the sentiments that result from them. To show that we ought not too readily reject them, let me point to the fact that such views can serve to humble us; they can lower us in the presence of our divine Master and leave nothing that can serve as food for our self-complacency; they can also
LETTERS TO CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS

make us enter interiorly into true union of love with our Lord.

Such a recollection and such a union are then free from all self-flattery; they are rather accompanied by self-forgetfulness. For our love should not be one that is, as it were, the product of our soul; it should rather be a yielding or outburst of our soul as it rests in God.

When you are in the latter disposition, you can then abandon yourself to that view and to those sentiments, although your self is involved in them, but make sure that it is always done with self-distrust, and indulge in it as rarely as possible.

The self-consideration in which you are allowed to indulge without fear, when it offers itself to you with relish, love and recollection, is that which reveals your faults, your wretchedness, negligence, infidelity and natural activity, and it should then make you humble yourself before our Lord and the Most Blessed Virgin.

[Do Not Become Proud Because of God’s Love for You]

I am not displeased because the good Lord sometimes lets you experience worry after He has granted you a grace, for, dear brother, you run great dangers at such times. On the occasion of such graces self-love makes us grow in our own estimation, and little by little you might imagine that you are better than others. You might at least run the danger of indulging in self-complacency, seeing that our Lord apparently gives you preference. This is not a way to please Him.

Ask the Blessed Virgin how she acted amidst the immense graces with which she was overwhelmed, and then consider what you ought to make of the few farthings which you have received from our Lord’s hands. Act like a poor man who realizes that he would drop down exhausted and
discouraged if Jesus and Mary did not lend their merciful help.

I have known persons who received very great graces and who at one time gave themselves to God with a most loving and generous heart. I never thought that they would later fall backward; they nevertheless did become lax, and they would have fallen away entirely if our Lord and the Most Holy Virgin had not come to their rescue. I even believe that they will never recover their first perfection, although the latter was only a beginning. I know others who reached the same degree of fervor and who, like the first, caused the admiration of all who knew them, and yet they are now in the most imminent danger. Hence, dear friend, it is not a bad thing that you suffer some troubles and anxieties from time to time. I do not want to give you advice in their regard, but prefer to abandon you to our Lord. He will dispose things according to His divine good pleasure.

[Follow God’s Guidance Whether Pleasant or Painful]

Be faithful, letting yourself be directed by the divine Guide who wishes to care for your poor soul. You see clearly that He brings you back to the right road as soon as you make a blunder and leave His holy direction either to listen to the flesh or to your own opinion, whether in your words or in your actions.

I confess to you that if I dared to mingle in the affairs of our beloved Master regarding the guidance of your soul, I would ask Him to treat you with a little more severity in such circumstances, whereas He always treats you with gentleness and never gives you severe reproof. But, as I say, I would not dare, for all the world, to interfere with the divine work of our Lord in your soul. I see very well that this is to your liking; you prefer to receive sugar instead of gall. Well, dear friend, eat sugar as long as our Lord gives
it to you, but be ready to drink gall and vinegar when, in
His own good time, His divine hand offers it to you.

Don't ask anything at this moment except love and a
desire for your own abasement, self-forgetfulness, the love
of Jesus and Mary, and perfect union of your soul with those
two heavenly souls. Ask that that divine Love of our souls
may possess your soul, but don't try to interfere, desiring
that our Lord would change His conduct in your regard.
It is not for you to be involved in the direction of your own
affairs, but you should allow yourself to be guided according
to the wishes of the good Lord Jesus.

Take care to follow our Lord's instructions most faith-
fully. Cling to the one that concerns that principal attention
to Him, an attention that should be constantly preserved.
Regarding the matter of food and material activities, act with
simplicity according to the interior promptings of our Lord.
Also follow His suggestion in regard to detachment from your
parents, in accordance with your present ideas. I shall
pray for this at Saint Mary Major's, at St. Peter's, Saint
Paul's, at St. John's and in the Catacombs. . . .

Entirely yours in the holy love
of Jesus and Mary,

FRANCIS LIBERMAN, acolyte
Thoughts about the subdiaconate.

Letter Three Rome, July 25, 1840 Vol. 2, 206

Jesus, Mary, Joseph

Dear Confrere:

[Henceforth You Belong to God Alone]

You made a sacrifice when you received the subdiaconate. It is my hope that by it our Lord has finally given you the great grace of purifying and immolating your soul and body completely to Him, for His glory and good pleasure.

Making this vow, you took the first step toward the priesthood and you expressed your intention in the presence of angels and saints. This vow in our Lord’s hands was like a sword which He used to immolate you to the glory of His heavenly Father. From now on there is for you no longer any glory, self-interest, enjoyment or satisfaction on this earth. Our Lord has seized you, bound and pinioned you, and He reserves for Himself the completion of the sacrifice at the time when you will reach the last step, the priesthood. From now on you are no longer your own master nor the master of your affections. They belong to our Lord; He has the right to dispose of them as He pleases; and He will dispose of them for the greater glory of His Father.

[You are Beginning to Become Part of the Sacrifice of Jesus]

By receiving the subdiaconate you died, as it were, and were sacrificed for God’s glory. This happened because of the love and infinite goodness of our Lord toward you. This
LETTERS TO CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS

dead is not only a death to yourself but death also to all creatures. You are beginning to enter into the adorable sacrifice which Jesus offered for the world. It is a sacrifice of death and of extermination of your self, a sacrifice of divine life in your soul and in the souls of all who surround you.

This makes you understand why our Lord gave you those desires for “interior” death and destruction of which you spoke. He wished to prepare you for the things He desired to do in your soul at the blessed moment of your sacrifice. Don’t imagine that from that moment there was already a real interior immolation in you. You had merely the desire, a certain efficacious desire to fulfill it, but it was only a beginning. Now that the great moment has passed and our Lord has embraced you in His most holy love and His most adorable sacrifice, your soul ought to be more vigorous. The immense grace of the sacrifice of our Lord should develop and bring forth fruit in your soul.

I desire with all my heart that our adorable Master will complete your interior sacrifice so that you will remain like a dead victim in the hands of that High Priest who will thus present you to His heavenly Father. You will then have no other task than to remain in that spirit of love which makes Jesus act on and in you, and everything will help you to procure the perfection and consummation of His designs in respect to your soul.

[Let The Spirit of Jesus Flow into All Your Actions]

Do not be astonished, dear friend, that our good Master did not wish to exterminate your self entirely in your interior. Feel certain nevertheless that He has established His grace in you, like a most abundant fountain. You have only to facilitate the flow, not by natural activity, but by allowing that divine source of the wounded Heart of our divine Master,
LETTERS TO ETIENNE CLAIR

which was pierced and sacrificed for us on the Cross, to pour itself out into your soul.

Always keep your soul and its powers well disposed and faithful so that the Spirit of Jesus, who is that inexhaustible source, may flow into all your actions and motions, becoming their principle, a principle of sacrifice and immolation to His divine love.

That death and destruction must extend to your entire interior condition. There should not be left in you any desire, plan, idea of greatness, of distinction, of exaltation and satisfaction, not even in spiritual things; no satisfaction in love and divine grace, not even in that death and sacrifice and in that life of God in you.

[Be in God's Hands Like a Toy in the Hands of a Child]

Your soul should forget itself and fade away; it should stand aside as if it were an indifferent, a worthless object. Do not strive for, speculate about, or desire anything for the purpose of attaining eminence in the supernatural order; but be faithful, giving yourself to our Lord and following Him according to the promptings of His grace. Be in His hands like the toy in the hands of a child. Let Him do with and in you whatever He wishes, and do not ask why or how He does it.

You are nothing. Let Him do with this nothing all He sees fit and proper. Keep this thought of your absolute nothingness before your mind in all circumstances. It should prevent you from attracting the attention of others to your self. Let men judge, examine, praise or blame your conduct; let them love, esteem, hate, despise you, or be indifferent toward you. Your soul, in all circumstances, should remain in lowliness before God, praising, adoring, blessing Him, and trying to be sacrificed to Him in all things and in all circumstances.
LETTERS TO CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS

See God in everything and see Him alone, forgetting yourself more and more. Never desire praise nor have any esteem for yourself. Avoid also self-pity and self-complacency. Never occupy your mind with yourself except for the purpose of abasing, despising, humbling yourself. All your love ought to be in God and for God alone.

It is my hope that the Most Holy Virgin, our well-beloved Mother, has given you a very fine present on the day of your sacred betrothal. Do not try to find out what she has given you; but thank her with all your heart, for you may be sure that on that day she will have granted you some favor, although she saw fit to hide it from you.

Pray our Lord and the Blessed Virgin that their love may be the source, the companion, the guide and the end of all that is taking place in you.

Entirely yours in the most holy and divine love. I beg Jesus and Mary to complete all things in you and consume you, and to do the same for me, your poor servant.

FRANCIS LIBERMAN, acolyte

The dangers of self-love. Holiness is learned from God speaking in your heart and not from books. Let God act as He pleases. Avoid curiosity in spiritual matters.

Letter Four Rome, September, 1840 Vol. 2, p. 209

Praised be Jesus and Mary

Dear Confrere:

I have but little to tell you, for I believe that you are more in need of God’s words than of human words and I am afraid that you might stop at the latter. Please, note
LETTERS TO ETIENNE CLAIR

what I should like to impress upon you: your instruction concerning divine things and your interior life should come from our Lord alone, and it is to Him that all the powers of your soul ought to be directed at all times.

[Beware of Your Self-Love]

It is my wish that you would listen attentively to His adorable voice as directed toward Him in a spirit of constant prayer and make all the activity of your will consist in following Him with love, peace, docility, and confidence. Listen carefully to our Lord, dear brother, and do it with deep humility. The reason why I say this is not that I notice more self-love than usual in you or more than I find in many others; but I want to warn you so that you will be on your guard against your self-love and may not permit it to overcome you after all the favors you have received from our Lord. Pardon me for entertaining such fears and don’t yield to anxiety. I don’t say these things because of what I have discovered in you, but because of what I have witnessed in others who fell into evil ways because of their detestable pride.

Dear brother, walk with love and confidence in the ways of our Lord, but always fear and tremble. So many others have fallen; why would it be impossible for you to fall likewise except through an extraordinary help of God? Have a constant fear of the desire to be somebody, of self-complacency at the sight of God’s gifts to you, and be not afraid of being held in low esteem by others.

[Learn Holiness from God Within You and Not From Men]

I said that the activity of your will ought to consist in following with peace, love and great humility all the suggestions of the divine Master. It is in God that you should
look for instruction even in the [spiritual] things that men and books tell you. Listen with peace and docility to the things you hear from men, but at the same time listen to and meditate on God’s word within you. Keep your soul prostrate before God and surrendered to our Lord while listening to men or reading a book. Receive His divine teaching and inspirations, and the promptings of His most holy love, and follow them faithfully without violent natural efforts.

If men tell you things that are very good in themselves, but our Lord does not see fit to make you relish them, don’t worry. Remain peacefully in His presence and neither despise nor reject those things; but also do not accept them and don’t force your soul. Obey the words of men when our divine Master desires your obedience; but meanwhile keep your eyes constantly turned to the divine Love of your soul, to Him who dwells in you and orders all things in you as your sovereign Lord.

You see therefore that you ought to avoid excess in everything. Don’t despise men but listen to them. Even consult them when this will help you in loving God. Follow their advice when it is proper to do so, but in all these circumstances see, consider, listen to, love, admire and relish only Jesus who lives and speaks in your soul, even when you hear human words spoken by Him through others.

Every time words come from Him He will make you relish them and appreciate them interiorly unless your self-love or some other faults prevent it. I don’t want to decide the practical question you have asked me in this respect, for our Lord does not tell me anything about it. It is well to fear illusions regarding such things, and it is always safest.
LETTERS TO ETIENNE CLAIR

[Let God Act with You as He Pleases. Avoid Curiosity]

Admire the goodness of Jesus who prompts desires and then prevents you from fulfilling them. Be in His Hands like a toy in the hands of a child. If it pleases the divine Master to play this sort of game with you, let Him do it and always approach Him with peace, joy and love.

In regard to [your hints] about your future vocation, I don’t see any reason why I should know about it. It is proper that you avoid curiosity with respect to what you tell me, but it is even more important that I avoid curiosity in asking you questions. Otherwise my words will be useless and you will not hear our Lord in the things I say to you. When our Lord urges you to inform me, do so. I don’t object to it, but before He prompts you I see no need for it . . . .

Adieu, dear brother. Be always and in all things entirely devoted to Jesus and Mary, and live only through their love, in which I am,

Your very poor servant,

Francis Libermann, acolyte

231

How Jesus establishes the reign of His divine will in us.


J. M. J.

Dear Confrere:

[The Reign of the Divine Will]

May the divine will of Jesus be always your will in all things. Be confident, dear friend; our divine Master makes

181
you feel the need of letting His will be the sole master in your soul. He will not be wanting to you in the execution of this design which is so advantageous to your soul.

You are already aware of the authority which that holy and adorable will exercises in you. Rejoice, then, from the bottom of your heart but, at the same time, humble and annihilate yourself because of His adorable goodness. Don’t imagine, however, that Jesus' divine and adorable will is soon to win complete and perfect mastery over you. Time will be needed, struggles, crosses, miseries, much obscurity, renunciations, troubles of all sorts in your interior life, and many external contradictions and humiliations. Hence, my friend, strive energetically for that great perfection of divine love in your soul, but don’t imagine that you have reached the end of your struggles. Since you desire crosses, I shall tell you something about them.

But first a word about the perfect establishment of the divine will in our own. Our will is something that is most intimate in us; submitting and abandoning it entirely to our Lord in order that He may vivify and rule it is most difficult and the acme of divine love. To produce this effect most perfectly, our divine Master ordinarily, and even almost always, digs down to the utmost depths of our soul. He uproots everything that belongs to our own love and our own life in order to substitute for them His own divine life and love.

[God First Establishes the Reign of His Will Through a Powerful Grace of Enlightenment]

To achieve this, He usually employs two kinds of methods. The first of these is direct, and although it very often contains things that are costly to us, it is pleasing and easy, for we are not deprived of divine light. In this case God’s graces draw us, enlighten us in regard to our conduct, and make us
see our imperfections and our faults. We become disgusted with ourselves and we are prompted to cast ourselves recklessly on the bosom of our adorable Lord to be, as it were, wholly absorbed in and by Him.

In this way the action of grace is powerful, produces great things in our souls and attaches us firmly to our Lord. The good it accomplishes is immense. It purifies our souls and detaches them from all that is foreign to grace; it destroys our faults, imperfections, and failings that spring from our flesh and severs the soul’s relations with this source of corruption. Our wretched flesh remains inclined to evil but our will is purified; it no longer follows the same lower tendencies and even abhors the flesh. Nevertheless, this focus of corruption continues to send its evil vapors into the soul, but the soul does its best to dissipate and reject them. It clings to Jesus, submitting and abandoning itself to Him in order that He may live and reign in it by His divine will and by following His inspirations while rejecting what is contrary to them.

This, dear friend, is what causes you to be troubled: you see in yourself what you think is resistance to the divine will. It is a good thing to fear much, but you should never allow yourself to become anxious to the extent of losing your freedom of mind and the peace and steadiness with which you ought to walk in and before our Lord. What you should do is to be on guard, to distrust yourself and to fear because your evil tendencies tend to penetrate into your will, with which they are closely connected. They will be repelled only through the power of the divine will.

If you are unfaithful you deserve to be whipped. And if it were to please our Lord to make you realize that you are and have nothing of yourself, but that He is and wants to be everything in you, He might give you free rein [to follow your own ideas]. It would not take long in that case be-
LETTERS TO CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS

fore you would suffer defeat. Proceed therefore without presumption, without self-love and self-esteem, but with perfect interior humility, in the presence of Him who alone desires to be great in you. Love Him, dear friend: love Him ardently, greatly, generously and perfectly, but humbly. Bow deeply before Him who is all greatness in His little servants; bow deeply before Him in all humility but also with great love.

[Great Darkness Follows this Enlightenment]

The second method which our Lord uses to rule over our wills is indirect. It leads us along a painful and sorrowful road in which our Lord leaves us in great darkness. It then seems that our will has to do everything by its own powers and that the divine All is no longer everything in the soul; and yet this is not so. I need not enter into details regarding this situation, for you are not in this state. It will come at a later date, I hope, for it is only under such conditions that the perfect life and the perfect rule of the divine will are at work in our souls.

The first assault of our Sovereign Master, one in which He is victorious, is that in which He casts out of our soul all that is foreign to Him, even affections that do not come from the flesh. A soul in this spiritual condition has its defects apart from those that spring from its wretched companion, corrupt nature. The divine Master has then to fashion such a soul and its powers, expel from it all that is improper—that is, everything that is not suitable to His indwelling and is contrary to His divine life and absolute reign in the soul. He uses then that second method to accomplish that great perfection of the soul and leads it by that very painful road. Thus, the acme of divine love, the perfect reign of God's will, is attained before the soul has passed through that ordeal.

184
LETTERS TO ETIENNE CLAIR

[Be Prepared for Crosses]

All this goes to show that you will probably meet with crosses and they may not be so far away as you might imagine. Do not readily ask for crosses, but abandon yourself to the guidance of the Master. Follow Him step by step, never wishing to rush ahead of Him or to anticipate things. When we anticipate things we are not always successful, for when crosses come too early, we do not always bear them in the proper way. Hence we should follow the march of our divine Master in all things.

My own affairs seem to proceed rather well, thanks to the goodness of our Lord. The plan of our small enterprise for the benefit of the Negroes seems to get into shape. The bishop will ordain me between now and Christmas; at least this seems probable. If it pleases our Lord, I shall be a subdeacon on the Feast of Holy Trinity, and deacon during the holidays. However, let us wait and see what God’s will is.

Adieu, dear brother. Let us give ourselves completely to the love of Jesus and Mary and live in that love, in which I am

Your poor brother

FRANCIS LIBERMAN, acolyte

232

If you want to join us, be ready to be despised and condemned. Do not come merely out of charity toward me.

Letter Six  La Neuville, September 18, 1841  Vol. 3, p. 37

[Dear Confrere:]¹

Please, keep in mind that we ought to expect much contradiction; and there is already a beginning of opposition,

¹Only a fragment of this letter has been preserved.
I am greatly vilified and moreover, our little undertaking is still scarcely known. On the other hand, all beginnings of this sort invite great contempt, and great obstacles are placed in their way; we should expect every kind of difficulty.

There is one thing I can tell you—namely, that I have no other hope for the success of our enterprise than my trust in our Lord and in His Blessed Mother. This hope is greatly strengthened by the remembrance of everything He has already done for us. But I cannot give you an absolute guarantee regarding the stability of our enterprise. You should be satisfied with confidence in God as I am, and ought to be ready to reap the contempt and mockery of certain persons who do not know us and perhaps also of some who know you. And if it should please our Lord to give free rein to our enemies, you ought to be ready to be humiliated and condemned because you undertook such a risky thing and failed.

I felt a great repugnance in inviting you to come and join us, for I was afraid that you might be prompted to accept because of charity toward me. In such a case your intentions and desires would not have been sufficiently pure. This would have caused me great grief, for it would have been an occasion of scandal for you. I assure you that I prayed to our Lord to keep you from me if a wrong motive were the reason for your joining us.

I see now with great joy that you did not act upon such a sentiment and that you prefer to wait a little—or could it be that this delay was suggested by your director?

Adieu, dear confrere.

In the charity of Jesus
and Mary

Father Francis Libermann
LETTERS TO ETIENNE CLAIR

233

Your vocation does not seem to lie in the secular priesthood. Explain your situation to your spiritual director.

Letter Seven Amiens, July 29, 1842 Vol. 3, p. 193

Jesus, Mary, Joseph

Dear Confrere:

I have waited a long time before replying to you because of my illness; and when my indisposition was over I had many other things to attend to. May your charity not lessen because of my negligence.

[The Secular Priesthood Does Not Seem to be Your Vocation]

I foresaw the difficulties of which you speak, I believe, and it has always been my opinion, that our Lord does not want you in the world. If you remain much longer in it, one of two things will probably happen: either you will become fickle and superficial, a thing to which your temperament inclines you, or you will become tense.

There is no doubt that it would be best for you to withdraw from the world. You should pray to Mary, your good Mother, begging her not to let you languish much longer in the world. It would be wise to reflect upon your attraction. I do not see that you ought to use more prudence than others who have a less strong attraction for the interior and retired life than you, and who would be advised to follow God's attraction without delay, especially when it is also realized that they have no aptitude for ministry in the world. . . .
I sincerely believe that if you followed the inclinations of your nature, you would be able to work in the world in spite of a certain timidity you would experience. But, when I consider the state of your soul and the interior dispositions which God wants you to have, I feel certain that your relations with the world and with external things would not be helpful to your soul nor to the souls of others. You have no aptitude for such things because of your particular spiritual state of soul. . . .

Here then is what I think about your vocation, in a general way: I believe that you ought to leave the world. We still have to find out where God wants you. In this it is your interior taste and attraction that ought to decide, unless divine Providence guides you by some extraordinary means. I believe that we ought not to count upon such extraordinary signs, although they are the best; for special vocations ordinarily are decided only by attraction, a certain taste or desire of the heart [for a particular kind of work]. . . .

Take courage and don’t allow the world to get hold of you. Do not grow weak in the divine love of Jesus. Mary, our well-beloved Mother, will not permit it. On the other hand avoid tenseness and over-eagerness; feel always the freedom of children of God. Construct a temple to our divine Master in the depths of your soul and remain in repose near Him without excessive strain.

[Explain Your Situation to Your Spiritual Director]

I believe that you ought to explain to your director that you feel constant uneasiness and embarrassment, that you run the danger of yielding to tenseness and overeagerness or to laxness and fickleness. You should tell him your tastes and distastes, your interior attractions, your greater aptitude for an order of things that is different from that which exists in the world, the little good and perhaps even
a certain evil you do in the ministry in the world, and the glory you could give to God if you were withdrawn from the world.

If, in spite of that, your director refuses to make a decision, remain peacefully in the arms of Jesus and Mary and wait quietly and lovingly until you are delivered from the world.

I see only one reason of prudence that may stop him from deciding your case, namely your uncle the archbishop. On the other hand, at present I am inclined to think that he will not raise any difficulties.\(^1\)

In regard to your director, I think that you would do well to keep him for a while, because of the critical time during which you have to decide your vocation. Nevertheless, if you see that your stay in the world will harm you, choose another director. You could perhaps propose two or three to him and he could then choose from them the one he wants to be your director.

I leave you in the arms of Mary, and I shall not cease to pray for you. I hope that we shall finally attain our desire, not that you should come here and join us, or should go to some other place, but that Jesus' will may be fulfilled in you by means of the true attraction and taste He will wish to give you along with the facility of following it.

Remain in the peace of Jesus and Mary and grow constantly in their most holy love, in which I am

Your poor servant,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN
Priest of the Holy Heart of Mary

\(^1\)The three preceding paragraphs have been transferred from the preceding passage to this location.
LETTERS TO CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS

234

Gently accept the bishop’s refusal of permission to join us at this time. Avoid both laxity and excessive rigor. Confidently place yourself at the Lord’s disposal.

Letter Eight   La Neuville, November 1, 1842   Vol. 3, p. 328

Praised be Jesus and His Cross

Dear Confrere:

[Humbly Accept the Delay in the Permission to Join Us]

Let us love and adore our good Master for anything He wishes to do with us.

I was not surprised when I learned that the bishop had refused to give you permission to leave his diocese, although I had hoped that the Holy Virgin would hear your prayers and help you, and then all difficulties would have been removed. Well, it seems that God wants you to be crucified a little longer in the world. Submit to His divine will and do it in all gentleness and humility, accepting everything that Jesus may desire. Have patience; the time determined by God’s providence will come and you will find yourself where you are supposed to be . . .

[Avoid Both a Worldly Spirit and Excessive Rigidity]

While you are still living in the world, there are two opposite shoals that you should try to avoid. One is to let yourself be carried away gradually by the worldly spirit and to follow the ways and habits of the world. The second is to become excessively tense and rigorous; you might even become scrupulous, led by the fear of becoming lax.
Keep a free mind and heart and act externally with a certain indifference, being merely on your guard against developing a liking for the things of the world. Be on your guard against vanity and indifferent to the praises of men. Conduct yourself with gentleness, seriousness and reserve, and do this without making a display of it. Be neither timorous nor daring, neither too slow nor hasty. Remain peaceful and calm in your activity, gently preserving a peaceful spirit and attention in all your doings. I mean, remain master over your interior and over your external actions; remain lord over your own mind. Practice equanimity in all circumstances and actions.

Let your conduct be animated by love of God alone, a love that makes you cling gently and peacefully to the divine Master. You will then not allow yourself to be affected and moved by the things of the world, either by favoring or opposing them. Those who live in the world should despise worldliness and be indifferent to its ways rather than hate, fear or abhor the world. The extreme horror or fear which Jesus gives you toward the world seems to me to be one of the most evident proofs that He wants you in a religious community. It is also a grace the good Lord bestows upon you. Desiring to keep you in the world a little longer, He wishes to preserve you unstained by it. It is better to have an excessive horror for it than to have a liking for it.

Attend social dinners as little as possible. Let them be for you what a beating is for a dog: he avoids it the best he can, and when he sees the club raised above him, he drags himself over the floor with evident signs of dislike and fear.

I strongly advise you to practice the virtues of religious: the love of retreat, silence, peacefulness, retirement from the world except when your ministry requires your presence; finally, the practice of poverty in the matter of furniture, although you should not make this too evident to others, for
they might criticize you and trouble you and you might then be led to yield to their criticism.

Be gentle and simple in your dealings with people. Don’t be effusive in your compliments and don’t make a great fuss, but be polite and considerate in a simple and gentle way, with the intention of winning their souls for our Lord.

Read Holy Scripture assiduously. You have a taste for it and it cannot but do you good. Nevertheless, you ought not to use the time necessary for your work on extra reading of Scripture. . . .

[Place Yourself at the Lord’s Disposal]

Just one more word then. Put yourself at the disposal of our Lord; put your confidence in Mary and wait with gentleness, patience, love and humility for the fulfillment of God’s will in your regard. If our Lord wants you to go somewhere else than with us, He will lead you there. In the meantime remain in peace and serve Him faithfully. The accomplishment of God’s designs for you are determined by the circumstances willed by His Providence and the new desires that well up in your heart. . . .

Entirely yours in the holy charity of our good and beloved Mother,

Father Francis Libermann
There is too much of nature itself in your eagerness to become a religious. God wants to purify your attraction. Sundry counsels.

Letter Nine  La Neuville, January 8, 1843  Vol. 4, p. 75

J. M. J.

Dear Confrere:

[Your Own Will is Too Much Involved in Your Desire to Join a Religious Order]

I believe that our Lord bestowed a great grace on you by delaying the execution of your plans to embrace the religious life. It was necessary that your will should be broken a little. Your desires were not sufficiently docile to the divine good pleasure of Jesus. You realized that the divine Master wanted to guide you; you knew what attitude He wanted you to adopt and the perfect love toward Him which He wished you to attain. He also gave you a certain impulse to enable you to reach this goal; but your own will was too much mingled with it, as is usual with persons who are in your condition.

You had an ardent desire to belong entirely to that good Master who was drawing you, and you made violent efforts in this direction. But there were circumstances that blocked the attainment of your goal, or rather, they prevented you from using the means which you yourself considered most suitable to preserve union with the Well-Beloved of your heart, and you fought those obstacles in head-on assaults.

Those obstacles deprived you of the means you thought would directly lead you to the perfection you so much desired, by uniting you perfectly with Him who alone is the light and
LETTERS TO CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS

strength of your soul. You thus conceived great horror for those obstacles, but in this horror were found purely natural elements of a natural craving for perfection. This horror in turn disturbed your mind, at least to a certain extent, for your trouble of mind also sprang in part from a natural love of perfection. That love was and almost always is accompanied by hastiness, by a feverish desire to attain the desired goal, by impatience and the fear of seeing the object of your desires evade your grasp. Hastiness and over-eagerness are the products of nature; on the other hand, grace uncontaminated by nature produces peace and surrender to Jesus and His divine good pleasure, together with great confidence.

Your fear and horror for those obstacles caused a mental strain and rigidity, and you clung desperately to the means which you thought to be necessary for attaining a true union with Jesus. You wanted to adhere to Him in the midst of those obstacles, by means of natural effort and strain; you held in horror and abomination everything that seemed to put an obstacle to your desires.

[God Wants to Purify Your Attraction]

It seems to me that it is this which was at the root of your trouble. I did not dare to explain this to you at an earlier date because I feared that God's own moment had not yet arrived, and I trusted that our Lord would sooner or later enlighten you in this respect. I have preferred to wait rather than to forestall that assistance of our Lord. This, then, is the reason why I believe that He is giving you a great grace when he keeps you a little longer in the world in spite of the great desires He gives you for withdrawing from the world. Wait then most peacefully; that time will come, perhaps even earlier than you think.

The thing for you to do is to labor in the works of the ministry with peace, humility and love. Submit to the divine
LETTERS TO ETIENNE CLAIR

guidance of Jesus. Aim in all simplicity at belonging completely to Him, in your present situation, waiting until He enables you to follow the attraction He inspires.

He wants you where you are at present. He will sustain you in this situation, and when you have drawn from it all the benefit He desires you to have, He will draw you out of it. This benefit consists in wholly abandoning yourself into His Hands, in having a love that is pure and free from all self-centered considerations, in reposing your soul in Jesus alone, in becoming independent of your own interest, even those that are spiritual, in living a life of sacrifice and constant self-offering in His presence.

[Sundry Counsels]

Don’t hurry when saying Mass but also don’t cling rigorously to the length of time you are taking now. Once you are accustomed to the ceremonies, you will habitually use a half-hour for Mass. Perform the ceremonies as it were mechanically unless you have particular sentiments, and keep your soul united to Jesus; remain mentally prostrate before God’s throne, offering yourself while you offer the Sacred Victim.

Work for the poor of your parish, and do not bother the bishop any more for another appointment. Allow our good Master to do what He pleases, and remain flexible in His hands. He gives you attractions and then puts obstacles in their way, because He wishes to break you and make you pliable in His hands; abandon yourself to divine guidance.

 Entirely yours in the holy love of Jesus and Mary,

FATHER FRANCIS LIBERMAN

195
Confidence in God. No systematization of the spiritual life. Despite your faults, God remains the same for you.

Attitude toward the world.

Letter Ten  La Neuville, January 10, 1844  Vol. 6, p. 11

Dear Confrere:

[Confidence in God]

I am glad to see that you are more calm and peaceful than formerly. The good Master will gradually return your soul to a normal condition under the influence of His grace, after those disturbances that were occasioned by a situation opposed to your tastes and attraction.

It has always been my opinion that God called you to labor for the salvation of souls but also that at the beginning you needed work that was calm and peaceful and that required few relations with the world. This kind of work will gradually increase and your interior powers will simultaneously develop in an atmosphere of retreat which is needed for your interior peace. Strain and violent efforts of zeal will never do you any good.

You are right in saying that you should be neither too sensitive nor too fearful. When God's Spirit is in us we ought to possess interior freedom that is sweet and peaceful. We are then aware of our faults and we know what virtues are wanting to us, but we remain in our poverty before our Lord, full of confidence in Him. In this way we gradually learn to live by faith and to purify our views, as is so well expressed by Saint Ignatius.
LETTERS TO ETIENNE CLAIR

[Avoid Systematisation in the Direction of Souls]

In regard to the direction of souls, adopt as a fundamental principle that we should avoid impeding or constricting excessively the ones we direct. Let us not prescribe too many rules to them. We ought not to follow any determined system of spirituality; otherwise we will do harm to souls. If your director had constricted you excessively in his direction, if he had forced you too much to follow certain principles, he might perhaps have done you much more harm.

I consider it a point of capital importance in the matter of direction that we leave great freedom to the action of grace. We should distinguish between true and false attraction, and prevent souls from rejecting true attractions as well as going beyond them.

[Despite Your Faults, Our Lord Remains the Same for You]

When you have regained peace, you will see that you did not really suffer any loss [through faulty direction]. You will indeed be wanting in some virtues, or at least you will not have them in a perfect degree, but in this you will be like the rest of men. The pursuit and cultivation of virtue is the work of a lifetime; you will notice at least that your past state did not leave you any vices and that it was the occasion for very small losses only. Now, if you had been unfaithful by your own fault, you would have lost much. No! dear friend, console yourself! That was a state of trial in which God put you in order to show that you are not worth much, that you are full of sin, vices, and darkness. You have committed faults, as happens to everyone in that condition, but our Lord remains always the same in your regard.
LETTERS TO CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS

[Attitude Toward the World]

It remains a source of joy for me when I see that you preserve a horror for worldliness. I was afraid that during the transition from a state of tenseness and strenuous striving to that of interior freedom, you might fall a prey to worldliness. You will lose that feeling of horror for the world later when you have no longer to fear anything from that quarter, and that feeling will be replaced by an attitude of indifference.

Belong to God alone, dear confrere, but at the same time preserve liberty of mind. Make use of creatures, have relations with them, but as if not using them and not having relations with them. This you will be able to achieve through God's mercy.

Entirely yours in the holy charity of your well-beloved Mother,

FATHER FRANCIS LIBERMANNN

237

In May 1844 Father Clair entered Libermann's novitiate. Soon after his profession he began to long for his parents and Libermann had to point out to him that a priest "must be about his Father's business."

Letter Eleven La Neuville, June 26, 1845 Vol. 7, p. 223

J. M. J.

Dear Confrere:

Your letter arrived while I was on a journey; that is why I have not replied to it before this date. . . .

It is not unnatural for families to ask that their sons or brothers who are priests should live close to them. They act
in this according to nature and in a sense they are not doing anything that is wrong. But the priest is a man who is sacrificed to God, who belongs to God alone. He has no longer "father or mother or any genealogy." It is true happiness for a priest to be away from all that concerns nature. We have in us a grace and a virtue that is entirely heavenly, angelic, divine; and we have at the same time a nature that is earthly, low, sensible, corrupted. As long as we are in the midst of things to which our lower nature is inclined, I mean our evil nature, we become natural men; but to the extent that we associate with the things that belong to the higher order in virtue of grace, through our priesthood, we are divine men.

A sponge fills with water when we place it in contact with water; it loses the water and becomes dry when we expose it to the sun. Again, put salt in something that is humid and the watery element which it contains will become predominant and the salt will become watery; put it in the sun and now heat will predominate and the salt will become hard like a stone.

In regard to your attachment to your parents and your longing for them, you ought to keep always engraved in the depths of your soul the reply of our Lord: "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?"

It has always been my opinion, as it is that of Father Place, that you should prepare your mother for your departure [for the missions]. It belongs to you to do this gradually; you know her; you know the best means and know them better than I. . . .

I leave you with Jesus and Mary and am, in their most holy charity,

Your most devoted,

Francis Libermann
Priest of the Holy Heart of Mary
For a religious, the voice of God speaks through his superiors and not through outsiders.

Letter Twelve September 3, 1845 Vol. 7, p. 284

Dear Confrere:

I shall reply frankly, in accordance with your wishes, to the questions you have addressed to me in your latest letter. As long as you had that incertitude, I had to keep silence; but now that you want to make a decision, I shall state clearly what I think about it.

[For You, as a Religious, Only Your Superior is the Voice of God]

You tell me that [your uncle] the bishop is the voice of Providence for you. I personally think that he is that no longer, for by the very fact that you entered a congregation, he ceased to have that relation with you. Obedience alone is your guide and the bishop has become a stranger to you. True, his counsel, his ideas ought to make your superior examine things, for the bishop is a wise, devout man and he is worthy of respect because of his episcopal character. But it is not up to you personally to take his advice into consideration so as to embarrass your superiors.

As long as you were the master of your own will, you had to conduct yourself by your own reason, and your reason had to seek light from that enlightened man [the bishop] whom divine Providence seemed to have given you for that purpose. But now that you belong to a congregation, you do not have, or at least you should no longer have, a will of your own; the will of your superiors is for you the will
LETTERS TO ETIENNE CLAIR

of God. To think or act otherwise would be to overthrow the principles of religious life.

In your present condition, therefore, your reason no longer needs to follow its own light to guide your conduct and hence needs no longer to find a counselor to guide it. One thing is enough for you: that you act according to obedience and according to the spirit of your rules. In virtue of the same principle you are wrong in asking advice from everyone who happens to come along. You should not ask advice of anyone regarding anything that pertains to your vocation and the spirit proper to it. Once you belong to a congregation, these consultations with strangers are contrary to the rules of obedience and good order; they can even at times do harm to congregations.

Moreover, in regard to you particularly, going for advice to various persons is dangerous, and it will cause you very great perplexity. You are in need of consistency of conduct; obedience will do you good and will enable you to rise above the incertitude to which your nature inclines you.

I feel certain that the bishop would be glad to see you take a definite stand. He himself has said that the reason why he took a hand in your affairs was that you were always so irresolute. Speak positively and clearly, and don't constantly indulge in asking him advice regarding things which you ought no longer to examine or judge, things that concern the internal affairs of the Congregation, such as being employed by your superior for one function or another, or being sent to this place or that.

It is my opinion that you should not write to the bishop that you intend to wait for him at Lyons, since he is expected to go there very soon. When he is there tell him positively that you belong to the Congregation, that you have promised to God to observe the rules of obedience as perfectly as possible, and that, therefore, you ask him to let you live as a good religious, a thing you have not done until now.
LETTERS TO CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS

[If the Bishop Disagrees with Your Superiors, He Should Address Himself to Them and Not to You]

Tell him that if His Excellency has some objection to the decision which your superiors have made in your regard, it is to your superior and not to you that he ought to address himself; that you are firmly resolved not to doubt or examine any more what your superiors will ask you to do; that, beside your duty in virtue of religious obedience, such conduct is necessary in order that you may at long last get rid of your ceaseless perplexities.

Father de Brandt is accompanying the bishop; show him this letter and if you wish ask his advice. All the bishop told you to make you stay [at home] was said by him not in his capacity of bishop or counselor but because he is your cousin. He grieves at the sight of the sorrow which your departure would cause to your mother; this is all! But I am sure that if he had seen that you were firmly resolved, he would not have told you those things.

The bishop is too devout, too wise and too filled with the proper administrative and religious spirit, and too well acquainted with [the requirements of] community life, to give you such advice. If the members of all congregations followed your method, in two weeks all their houses would be in disorder.

The great veneration and gratitude which I owe to the bishop and which I feel in my heart, prevent me from explaining myself to him. I would above all fear to cause him pain. Hence I am unable to act, and yet what is happening to you is a disorder which could have pernicious results if it were known in the Congregation. Only Fathers Schwindenhammer and Thévaux, beside myself, know anything about it.

Here are the things that will enable you to speak positively and clearly to the bishop. I intend to send you to
LETTERS TO ETIENNE CLAIR

Goree at the end of next October. This island, according to what we have been told by all who have returned after having lived there, is a very healthy place. The Commander of the island said to me that it is as healthy as Paris; and a former Governor said that he had never witnessed a high rate of mortality, and everybody else says the same thing. You will not be more than three weeks' voyage from here, and by steamer even less. In the near future we will have to establish a house in the South or in Rome. If you are unable to get accustomed to Goree, we can then place you in a house in the South.

Adieu, dear confrere. Pray to Our Lady of Fourvières that she may give you light and strength to act according to God and not according to the halting ways of your faulty nature. You should return to La Neuville in September at the latest or at the beginning of October.

Entirely yours in the charity of Jesus and Mary,

FRANCIS LIBERMAN, priest of the Holy Heart of Mary

239

God's will for you is clearly expressed through your vows, in particular that of obedience. Father Libermann's replies to the questions raised by his correspondent.

Letter Thirteen Amiens, December 13, 1847 Vol. 9, p. 368

Dear Confrere:

I have failed to reply to your letter of November 15th because of illness. I had been ordered to leave all serious
business aside. That, and not any hesitancy about the answer was the reason for the delay. . . .

I spoke to [your uncle] the bishop yesterday. There is no need for me to report the results of our conservation, for the bishop told me yesterday that he himself would do that at once. However, I want to reply to your question of November 15th.

[For a Religious, Bound by Vows, God's Will is No Longer the Object of a Discussion]

You want to know the will of God and therefore you ask me a number of questions which are all beside the point and should never be asked. You are in the Congregation and have made your vows in it. All those questions are thus no longer a matter for consideration, and to discuss them in your mind will merely make you a plaything of doubts and of the false lights of your imagination and your nature.

You "wish to know the will of God." You accomplish God's will when you fulfill what you have promised Him before the Angels and Saints. I would have replied to you and given you proper advice at the time when those doubts first entered your mind, but you did not ask for advice. Now you tell me categorically that you made a mistake when you embraced the religious life and that you see this clearly; hence you ask me for permission to withdraw.

I should have used my authority and forbidden you to think any more about that question, and I ought to have refused you that permission. This I would have done in the interest of your soul; but my relations with the bishop and my respect for him made it necessary for me to adjust myself to his views and to make no objections. The bishop gave you an affirmative reply through kindness, and I also said yes without a qualm, without afterthought or regret, because I was
doing my duty; and yet I had the intimate conviction that what I was doing would be very harmful for your soul.

I realize that that was not the reply that you wanted. You asked my advice, [you say,] to enable you to decide the matter in accordance with divine Providence, but before receiving my reply you had recourse to the same method that you had used before. Examine all this carefully in God's presence and you will see without difficulty that throughout that time you were misled by an interior illusion.

"Am I in The Right Place?"

Let us now consider your questions one by one. I shall not directly reply to this first question, for it ought not to be asked by a man who is bound [by vows]. Let it suffice to say that you are much more in your place than you would be if you were in the world. If you had remained in it, you would have fallen into great imperfection; you might even have lost both body and soul.

"Did I Leave the Way [God Wanted Me to Take]? What Ought I to Do?"

As to the first point, my answer is No. As to the second, I reply: Nothing, except to renounce yourself, to learn to suffer something in body and soul for the love of God, to abandon yourself to His divine will, to obey blindly the superior whom Providence has given you, without examining his character and his ways, to forget yourself and avoid analyzing constantly your actions, desires, capabilities and your past deeds. Your great fault is that you don't know how to bear any sort of suffering. Die to yourself and don't deliver yourself, tied hands and feet, into the power of the devil. It is possible that a wounded self-love has a share in your temptation.
LETTERS TO CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS

“Ought I Not to Fear That My Character, My Faults, etc. Might Cause Diseification to My Confreres?”

Yes, if you continue in the way you have been going. No, if you learn to overcome yourself, to bear something for the love of God, to live humbly, gently, poorly and charitably in the midst of your confreres. No, if you try to get out of your shell and refuse to remain shut up within yourself, if you practice kindness to all.

You repeat over and over again that you feel drawn to solitude, but I tell you now: beware of that attraction. Nothing is more misleading than an attraction, especially when it does not agree with the life in which divine Providence has placed us. Woe to him who attaches more importance to such attractions than to the ordinary duties of his life, for the devil will become his master unless God restores order in him.

You are too fond of that attraction. I believe that it would have led you to the loss of both body and soul. This is my only reason for talking in such a straightforward way to you. It is my duty to procure the salvation of all the members of the Congregation. I may never base my replies on the advantages or disadvantages that they may have for the Congregation, unless the person concerned does harm to the spiritual welfare of the others.

“Will It be Possible for Me to be a Useful Member of the Congregation?”

This does not concern either you or me. Self-love will make you say, “I want to be a useful member.” Religious humility on the contrary will say: “My God, do with me what You will. I am ready to sacrifice myself to Your glory. Do with me what seems good to You.”
Who are you to try to force our Lord to do something with your help? You say you have that desire. But you don't use the means to obtain the fulfillment of your desires. Moreover, a desire that is not patient and submissive to the will of God does not come from God. It will destroy things instead of building up. Ambitious and anxious desires, desires that excite your imagination so much and lead to those illusions, serve to deliver us forever into the hands of the enemy.

You tell me that your present ministry does not suit you. But is God obliged to cut out a ministry and a life for us that is tailored to all the tastes, caprices, defects and vices of our nature? You are wanting in distrust of your ideas, your tastes, the fancies of your mind and especially your attractions. These, most of the time, are warped by your natural defects, your excessive love of repose and perhaps by self-love; I say by your excessive love of the repose and well-being of your soul.

You ought to learn not to do something for God but to suffer everything, absolutely everything, everything without any exception, for the love of God. As long as you remain attached to your own well-being, as long as you flatter your attraction in the way you have been doing, you will be good for nothing. Once you stop being occupied with yourself and have learned to renounce yourself and to suffer everything for God, I promise you a fruitful ministry for the benefit of souls, but not before that.

You have until now lost every opportunity for doing good solely because of your interior tension. It is about time for you to begin the vigorous practice of renunciation and self-forgetfulness. You still have time. Nothing has been lost except time, and that time will not return; you cannot recapture it, but you can make use of the remembrance of past faults to correct yourself.

207
LETTERS TO CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS

"Don't All Those Annoyances Make You Fear That I Shall Always Remain an Object of Perpetual Worry for You?"

I reply: If you do what I have just told you, my answer is, "No!" If, on the contrary, you always allow yourself to be propelled by your capricious mind, your imagination and your love of rest and well-being, I must answer: "Yes." But does that matter? God suffers me; why shouldn't I be willing to suffer the weaknesses, imperfections and vices of others? It belongs to you to repress those faults; you can do it, you have the obligation to do it, and I trust that you will do your best.

"The Difference Between Myself and Father Boulanger Shows That I Don't Have the Missionary Spirit."

If you haven't the spirit of a missionary, you haven't the spirit of a priest. The difference between you and Father Boulanger comes from the defects I pointed out to you just a moment ago. People consider such defects as being merely originality, eccentricity, manias. In God's eyes they are vices and infidelities. Forget yourself, renounce yourself, know how to suffer for God and stop pursuing the interior well-being of your soul. In that case the difference between you [and Father Boulanger] will disappear with the exception of your and his individual traits of character.

"If I Were in Charge of a Work I Would Acquit Myself of It as Well as Others."

Yes, if you work earnestly to renounce yourself, to suffer and get rid of your inflexibility and narrow-mindedness. No, if you do not do that.

Moreover, this is not a thing that you have to examine. Your job is to abandon yourself with simplicity and humility into the hands of our Lord. It does not belong to you to
determine what should be the conditions of time, place, circumstances and the nature of the work in which He ought to employ you. You should not talk about works and ministry, but make yourself fit to fulfill such functions. Now it is in this that you have been wanting, because you have done nothing to counteract your evil tendencies and defects. You have loved God only to the extent that it didn’t cost you anything and that He gave you satisfactions, to the extent that your love for God gratified your natural cravings. It is not by acting in such a manner that we make ourselves fit for the zealous ministry, which is a work of abnegation and devotedness.

"Grace and Nature Strongly Draw Me to a Retired Life."

This inclination is one that is rooted in your nature rather than in grace, and it is wicked. If you follow it, you will lose your soul. This inclination has caused you to commit many faults. If this inclination were supernatural, it would show itself as a facility for preserving recollectedness. Being rooted in your nature, it causes you to commit great faults, makes you the prey of many illusions. If God had permitted you to follow that inclination, it would have done you great harm in body and soul. Distrust and resist that inclination.

"I Have Reasons for Believing That a Sedentary Ministry Would be More Suitable for Me."

This is your constant and perpetual mistake. You want God to cut out a ministry for you so that it be perfectly adjusted to you. Your imagination pictures such a ministry as a restful time because it is one that suits you. Yes, it will suit all the inclinations of your lower nature and all your defects, instead of destroying those defects and making you fit to be employed by God in any function He might wish to entrust to you.
LETTERS TO CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS

As long as you keep that illusion, you will remain in trouble and anxiety, and you will constantly long for another function, different from the one which you happen to have. Moreover, who can guarantee that by going back to where you came from you will find just the sort of work that suits all your tastes? I tell you positively that this will not happen, and any wise man will tell you the same thing.

"I Want Souls"

But is God obliged to grant you what you ask? You should practice greater submissiveness in that respect. Moreover, if you desire to save souls, make yourself worthy and capable so that you will be a faithful instrument in God’s hands, and secondly learn to wait for the moment which God will choose. Meditate on all those things in God’s presence. Do this calmly and humbly, and our good Master will enlighten and strengthen you, enabling you to walk in the way of peace, humility and obedience. I feel sure that you will then overcome all difficulties and will some day accomplish much good for souls.

Adieu, dear confrere. May the peace of our Lord follow you always.

Entirely yours in Jesus and Mary,

Francis Libermann,
Priest of the Holy Heart of Mary