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17. Dealing with obstacles and nervous disorders

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Dealing with obstacles and nervous disorders

To Miss Barbier¹

This letter as we have it is in the handwriting of Fr. Lannurien, the secretary of Libermann and has no signature attached. But on the reverse side, Libermann himself has written "Miss Barbier". This lady was greatly attracted to the religious life but she had come up against many obstacles. Her parents opposed the idea, as did her brother. She also had serious nervous problems. Libermann speaks of his own experience of these kinds of difficulties and indicates how he had dealt with them: by acceptance and uniting them to the sufferings of Jesus.

Long live Jesus and his Cross!

2nd July, Feast of the Visitation, 1845

Dear Miss Barbier,

I have received your letter of June 25th. The good Master is fulfilling and will always fulfil his reassuring words: "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*"

I am very happy to see all the good He is doing to your soul through his cross. He has planted it solemnly in the depths of your heart and it would seem that it has taken root there. So when your beloved parents no longer afflict you, the cross will continue to be your lot, at least for a very long time, for it has taken root in you. The cross is a beautiful tree, a good tree, planted in your soul and it is now producing beautiful flowers; at a later date it will yield some wonderful fruit. "*A good tree can only produce good fruit*" as our Lord said. What kind of good fruit? Those which he bore on Calvary; Jesus himself will be formed in your soul by means of the cross.

¹ N.D. VII, p. 189

This is how he will do it. For a long time now, Jesus has wanted to live in your soul, through the sanctity of his ways and the truth of his virtues. He has been trying to attract you by the sweetness of his grace, the beauty of his light and the balm of his peace. You have followed him as a sheep follows its shepherd and he feeds you with milk and honey. You have seen him, known him and followed him and he has brought joy to your heart. Whatever is not Jesus has become unattractive for you. You have wanted to follow him forever, to withdraw into solitude with him, to choose him for your spouse so that you may rest always upon his heart and live close to him.

You want to be the spouse of Jesus, but this could take some time. It is a great king whom you want to marry. He chose you and attracted you to himself and he placed his love in your soul. It was he who took the initiative. But Jesus asks a dowry, not of silver or gold as some might imagine; the gift he wants is the complete sacrifice of yourself. He bears the cost, he takes charge of executing his designs; he plants his cross in your soul and immolates you to his love. Abandon yourself into his hands. You wanted to belong to Jesus, to be his spouse and be intimately united with him, but your soul still has many imperfections, attachments and unworthy desires. To belong to Jesus, you have to be worthy of him. And how can you make yourself worthy? Only by those sufferings in which your soul has to conquer itself constantly, renounce and humble itself and submit and generously immolate itself. The grace and love of Jesus, which are in the depths of your heart, will make you constant and faithful in the fulfilment of all those things and encourage you to do them even better. The greater your pains, the more deeply your cross is planted in you, the more grace and love will increase and, as a consequence, your soul will progress proportionately in true holiness.

The parish priest wants you to continue to go to Mass. He may be right in this. I don't know your illness well enough to give

you positive advice on that subject. I can only say that, in general, it is best to forget nervous troubles, to ignore and despise them. I was subject to that kind of trouble in my youth in a manner that was quite violent. What caused me most harm was the fear, the anxiety and the precautions I took. Try to shake these things off and distract yourself in such moments. Don't allow yourself to be dominated by that nervous anxiety of the heart, but act energetically against those feelings. In God's presence, make yourself indifferent as to whether such trials come to you or not and then act as if you had never experienced anything of the kind. This is what I did as soon as I began to give myself to the good Lord. I followed this practice in a spirit of faith, with the desire of pleasing God, without thinking that this might help me to recover my health. But in fact, it has had much to do with bringing about my recovery.

If you go to church, you will be able to receive Holy Communion frequently. You could pay some poor woman to help you walk – a poor woman would be happy to get a few pence a week for one or two hours' service like that – and, as for yourself, the good that will come from it is well worth the price.

Since your conversations with your cousin, Miss Lambre, do you so much good, there is no reason why you shouldn't try to see her. If you have a poor woman to take you to church, you'll find it easier to visit your cousin. You could even visit her occasionally instead of going to church, telling her beforehand that you are coming. It might be a good idea to go by coach to Amiens; distractions and changes are beneficial to nervous disorders. It is important for you to make good use of the summer time, because in the autumn, it will be more difficult for you to go out. This is the advice generally given to people who suffer from nervous disorders, but I don't know your type of sickness sufficiently well to give you more definitive advice.

I don't see any point in speaking again to your parents about your attraction to the religious life. It would serve no good purpose, for you will merely give them more grief and expose yourself to new and perhaps stronger opposition. You need rest and consolation; the contradictions and painful behaviour of those with whom you are living will do you harm. Once again, distract yourself as much as possible and don't remain shut up so much. Visit nearby friends, Sister Vasseur for example, or others that you might know.

Since you want to write to me frequently, do it by post and I will reply in the same way. To avoid frightening your parents, don't write too often.

May the peace of our Lord, Jesus Christ be with you and your good family.

Your humble servant in Jesus and Mary,

Fr. Libermann, priest.
Superior of the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary