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02. A real spirit of prayer

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A real spirit of prayer

To M. Grillard¹

When this letter was written, François had already been in Rennes for a few months as director of novices for the Eudists. But he kept close ties with the two seminaries of Saint-Sulpice and Issy where he had spent the previous ten years. Writing to M. Grillard,² he shares his convictions about a real spirit of prayer: for scholars like Grillard, it is essential to control the continuous activity of the mind and to strengthen one's presence with the Lord by a simple glance of faith towards him, that is not born of intellectual curiosity but of an openness of heart.

Rennes, January 23rd, 1838

My dear brother,

May the Child Jesus be the sole master of your soul and all its feelings, emotions and thoughts and may he make it live by his divine life. I am so happy to hear that you are putting an increased effort into your spiritual life and working on a habitual state of recollection. It is a great step forward, to live continuously in the presence of God; a person who has reached this stage will soon be master of his soul and all its movements and will then be able to surrender them all into the hands of our great Master, so as to live henceforth by his life and in his life. When we are lacking this recollection and this spirit of continuous prayer, we will always (or nearly always) act by ourselves and, most of the time, for ourselves. Then even good acts, even acts that are done for God, are imperfect and of little merit; we are still following our own agenda and, therefore, acting in strong opposition to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

¹ L.S. I, pp. 404-408

² See the Index

So God is giving you a great gift, when he implants in your soul a desire and a determination for continuous prayer. But be careful that it does not develop into something to be achieved by a purely intellectual exercise.

For this state of prayer to be genuine, it must be attained through love, or by a lifting of the spirit, or by the soul resting in God with our faculties focused on him, or by a simple conviction of the presence of God, before whom we do everything to please him alone. But we must not try to pray through the efforts of our mind, clinging on to a few thoughts which are connected to God. This would not be something bad, but it would be very mediocre and bear little fruit. Neither must it be some sort of intellectual game, bringing satisfaction or entertainment by thoughts that seem beautiful and striking, chewing them over again and again, either to deepen them or simply to be engrossed by them.

Try to reduce the role of your intellect; above all, simplify its involvement in your prayer and recollection as much as you can. The best thing would be if it would keep quiet altogether; but if it does intrude into your prayer, do not let it take on a leading role. On the contrary, it should be ignored because it will only spoil everything and be a great obstacle to your recollection.

All the faults that you have told me about flow from this weakness, which seems to be rather deep-rooted in your case. Your intellect meddles in everything, examines everything, continuously turns things over and allows nothing to pass without interfering in it. It always wants to be busy and is incapable of quietening down so as to allow God into your soul. All your efforts must be aimed at calming its action or, tying it up and letting it sleep peacefully in the presence of the Lord; this will allow the Spirit of God to act as he wishes without your intellect getting in the way and imposing itself, which would spoil everything that God is trying to do in you.

This defect of character is the source of your overriding desire to know things and it will continue to grow and be a great obstacle to your spiritual progress if you do not control it. You will never be a truly recollected person nor will you receive God's enlightenment if you carry on like this. It is no fault of yours that it is there, but you must bring it under control and not allow yourself to be dominated by this passion for study and knowledge. Do not neglect your necessary studies, but retain your recollection. My dear friend, never give in to this obsession for collecting beautiful texts and thoughts so that you can make use of them when a suitable occasion presents itself. Do not stuff your mind with created knowledge; this would make it difficult to concentrate on the enlightenment that comes from grace, which is far superior to any ordinary learning.

When you have to study something which appeals to your intellect, be careful not to be overwhelmed by it; remember it, but with a clear head. You have done well to draw up a timetable for studying Hebrew, but do not allow it to eat into other periods of the day. And if this thought comes to you, take up the Gospels and look at those passages where Jesus speaks lovingly to you and it will make you feel ashamed, because you will find that you now have no taste for such passages and that your poor spirit is stagnating with its earthly preoccupations. You will realise that you now prefer your natural curiosity to the words of eternal life. God alone, my dear friend, God alone! We have no need of anything else; our beloved Jesus is more than capable of bringing light to our minds and joy to our souls.

Understand this well: an abundance of the goods of this earth is extremely harmful and prevents the possession of heavenly goods, the only real goods that exist. The rest are worth nothing. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those whose mind is poor, whose mind

does not wallow in things, or stuff itself with created knowledge. Blessed is the spirit who does not fix its tastes, its joy and amusements on these riches, which are, in fact, real poverty! Your spirit must be poor, empty and naked before God, and then it will possess God and the superabundance of his light and graces.

My greetings in the hearts of Jesus and Mary,

François Libermann