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### 03. Advice on guiding vocations

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## Advice on guiding vocations

To Fr. Ferret<sup>1</sup>

*This is without doubt the most important letter that Libermann wrote from Lyons. It is addressed to a Sulpician, M. Ferret, a priest and Director of the Senior Seminary at Nantes. He talks about the art of spiritual direction.*

*Fr. Ferret<sup>2</sup> had made a remark, in the presence of M. Le Vavas seur, about M. de la Brunière joining the "Work for the Black People", and Le Vavas seur passed it on to Libermann. Ferret had said, "What a catastrophe you will bring about if you snatch this young man from France and take him with you to evangelise the Negroes".*

*In addition to the advice he gives regarding spiritual direction, particularly the discernment of vocations, this is the first time that Libermann wrote down his own theological and spiritual vision about the Mission to the "Negroes".<sup>3</sup>*

December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1839

In the name of Jesus and Mary!

Dear Father,

No doubt you have heard that I have left Rennes and I can tell you now that it is permanent. I will not go into all the details of this affair at the moment because I have other things to tell you that you will find more interesting and which more directly concern the glory of Our Lord.

On my journey, I met an excellent young priest, totally devoted to the salvation of souls. He has a certain amount of experience from ten years in the ministry and living community

<sup>1</sup> L.S. II, pp. 307-318, and N.D.I, p. 673

<sup>2</sup> See the Index

<sup>3</sup> Paul Coulon has analysed this letter in the revue "Mémoire Spiritaine", no.6, p. 22

life. He is a past confrere of the seminary and a close friend. He told me about a project that the Lord has put into his mind to which he would like to devote himself completely: it is to set up a Society of good and fervent priests who will dedicate themselves to build up and sustain the commitment of priests who are working in the active ministry. (...)

Perhaps you find the idea amusing, but this man is taking it very seriously. He has reflected on your own project of organising meetings and get-togethers for these priests, but he has gone much further into it, suggesting details regarding spiritual exercises and the conduct of their own private lives. I will not go into the details of all he has in mind because I would not be able to explain them as well as he will himself. I believe you could be a great help to him in executing this plan and he is of the same opinion, so I hope you will get in touch with him. May I suggest that if you find elements of which you disapprove in his explanation, that you look at them carefully before God and not come down too hard on him; I feel that the good Lord is behind this work and has given this priest a greater understanding of what is needed than he has to others.

But in this context, I feel I must speak to you about something which will not be easy for me, because I am just a poor man and it is not really my role to tell you how you should set about serving God and directing souls. You have more experience and have received more graces in these matters than I have. But I would be lacking in my duty to God if I did not use this opportunity to express my own thoughts on such matters. I know in advance that I will probably say some unwelcome things, because, unfortunately, my temperament sometimes get the better of me when I talk about things of which I disapprove. I ask your pardon for the love of God, because I have a great respect and love for you, as is only right for a priest of the Lord who is working totally for his greater glory,

while I am doing nothing. So I will speak simply, without paying too much attention to the nicety of my language since you know what is in my heart. If I should say something hard, it is not against you as such but against the things I am talking about. So, after this long preamble, I will get down to business.

Regarding your principles for the direction of vocations, I truly believe, before Jesus Christ, that your way of proceeding is harmful and opposed to the way he wants to treat people. It seems that you regard yourself as the arbiter of vocations, but in no way should such a thing depend on the opinion of the director; his role is simply to obey the will of God as it reveals itself in a soul. I have noticed that you direct vocations with a great deal of reasoning, comparing and examining a host of elements; this seems to me to be a dangerous path to follow, for it is certain that the things of God should never be submitted to an examination by our human intellect. The more we employ reason to get to the truth, the more we are in danger of making a mistake. This does not mean that we should despise rationality completely; we must hold it in some esteem and even resort to it when things are far from clear. But we must never see it as an infallible instrument. I think I can say with certainty that it is not the way a good director should proceed, for we have no reason to believe that the ordinary direction of souls towards perfection should be guided by different principles to those used in the discernment of a vocation.

It is beyond dispute that in the direction of souls, we must be constantly examining the attraction of the grace of God within them, and that a director who neglects this will contribute little towards their sanctification. It is not just a question of recognising the presence of this grace: it also involves discerning its progress, its development, its influence on all the actions of the person involved. Having once recognised that God is at work in a soul, the only role of the director is to guide

the person to follow that grace and remain faithful to it. He does this by encouraging the person as he is and helping him to get rid of all those faults and other obstacles which are preventing the development of the grace received.

But a director must guard against wanting to control the soul: God will do the steering, while the director's task is to ensure that the person concerned does not obstruct this forward progress. He must never attempt to impose his own tastes or attractions on the one being directed, nor influence him by his own way of doing and seeing things. If he were to do this, he would end up by turning souls away from being led by God and would often act in opposition to where the grace of God is leading. I am speaking here of souls who are moving straight along the path of perfection, not those who are cowardly and lukewarm.

For my part, I can see no possible reason why this method has to be changed when dealing with souls who are searching for their vocation. What other method should a director use to understand what God is doing within a person, if not God's own enlightenment which will come directly to that person in prayer or from his constant union with Our Lord? These words of St. Paul are very relevant here: *Just as in human affairs, only the human spirit can judge, so in divine matters, only the Spirit of God can discern.* If we are closely united to the Holy Spirit, he will help us to penetrate the hidden depths of the Divinity when it is important for the salvation of souls.

So let us see where we are as regards our human reason. *Qui de terra est, de terra loquitur.* If we are earthly men, our thoughts will be earthly and our reasoning will not be according to God's way of seeing things. We will be in danger of making decisions contrary to what God wants, because man will always be from earth and mud. So the more human reason gets involved in divine things, the more it will mix in the things of the earth. So if a director only seeks enlightenment

from God when directing souls, why should other means be employed when it comes to vocations, that is to say, when it is a question of the state of life that somebody should follow? If vocation is something of the highest importance, should we not employ means that are known to be safe and sure? Surely we are not wary of God because we think these things are too important for him! It would be ridiculous to put God to one side and replace Him with our own ideas, reasoning and prejudices!

I believe that the Holy Spirit always breaths the same way in the same person. All his impulses and the way in which he leads an individual more or less resemble each other; therefore the signs of a vocation will follow the same lines as any other. What I mean is that a vocation will show itself in a soul in the same way as any other attraction, so we have to use the same means to identify and know it. And if the attraction of a particular vocation is constant, why should such an attraction be opposed by somebody like me – so full of his own ideas, tastes and prejudices?

I agree that one must be prudent when dealing with the imagination of young people, but one still has to use the same means as in any other case where it concerns a strong attraction. They should be advised not to pay too much attention to it, to concentrate rather on their own sanctification and to remain calm, confiding everything into the hands of God. But there must be absolutely no ban on speaking about their vocation, nor any attempt to make light of what they say or to use harsh words when speaking to them. They can be warned to keep an eye on their imagination, but they must never be told that their ideas are simply imaginary. If you follow this advice, those who do not have a real vocation will slowly forget about their project, because an imaginary attraction, which is not fed and encouraged by something else, will not last. On the other hand, a genuine vocation does not

go away. When it leads to evident forgetfulness of self, a greater proximity to God and spiritual progress, the director should give the person some hope from the start and seek opportunities to talk with him from time to time, as long as care is taken not to encourage his imagination. In short, we must leave God free to act in souls and never hinder the action of his grace but help it to develop, as in all other cases.

But when a director has his own strong ideas and fixed principles according to which he always acts, he will often end up by blocking the action of the Holy Spirit. It is not for us to impose laws or limits on Our Lord. I agree that this is not what is intended by the director: on the contrary, he feels that he is genuinely searching for the will of God. But if he looks carefully, he will realise that he is in fact in opposition, because he will see that he gets upset when a soul whom he trusted abandons these principles or goes against them. His displeasure is a result of these principles being founded on human feelings and fixed ideas which can so easily develop into prejudice.

Moreover, one cannot find principles for the guidance of souls that come from the exterior. Suppose I am convinced that my only concern is the good of the secular clergy. That is excellent; but if I am not careful, I will let myself be taken over by certain human attachments or feelings, as I mentioned earlier. I will oppose everything else; I will have no interest in anything else because of them. This way of proceeding is bad and displeasing to God, so he will not bless my efforts as he would have done otherwise. Because wherever there is intervention, inflexibility or tenacity, we are looking at something human, something bad.

The result would be that I would not make a proper examination of the nature of the attraction to a particular vocation that God has put in a person's soul. If it does not fit in with my plans, I will be hoping to find that it is false. The end

result is that I resist the voice of God, that I hinder the spiritual progress of a soul and, sometimes, that I block the salvation of many people whom God wished to save by the ministry of the one he has chosen. It would be exactly the same if I try to intervene in the vocation of a priest who wants to leave the diocese where I am working; I would be blocking somebody who is capable of doing great good for others.

[Please forgive me dear Father, a poor miserable person, for talking to you like this. I am a worthless individual and useless in the Church; I do not know how to live properly myself and yet I presume to write to you in this way. I feel very ashamed, but I know how good and humble you are and how devoted you are in serving the Lord, so I will continue.]

See how much we tend to ruin the service of God, when we base our direction on simple principles which are often of little value. Our mind is so finite, so miserable, that it is constantly deceiving itself.

What you said to M. Le Vasseur regarding M. de la Brunière has affected me very deeply. He told me that you said, *What a catastrophe you will bring about if you snatch this young man from France and take him with you to evangelise the Negroes.* So anybody who is fervent, generous, of good character must stay in France, and these poor abandoned souls, for whose sake God inspires people with such generous feelings, must be left to rush towards hell in their millions! Must we only send them cast-offs and imbeciles, those who are incapable of doing much good? For me, this is not God's vision; he is much more open and generous than that. He came to save everybody, to sacrifice himself for all, the highest and the lowest. Therefore, his priestly spirit is a spirit of reconciliation and salvation for the whole human race. And those who share in the priesthood of their Master must also be concerned for people worldwide and rejoice when God sends men to save the most abandoned, rather than send only those who are not



much use. It is to think in a purely human way if we base our decisions on the intellectual capacity of the priest. When Our Lord sent the great St. Paul to the despised Gentiles, did anybody dare to insist that this incomparable Apostle should stay in Judea for the good of the chosen people? For there were surely many good reasons to believe that he could accomplish much more amongst his own people than amongst the Gentiles.

I could write much more on this subject, but I fear that I have already said too much. Think over these things in the presence of Our Lord, and pray to him that this poor man who writes to you is doing something good for once, unless of course it is not his will and that these ideas are the fruit of my sins and my bad conduct, past and present.

I have said what I have because this young man will need your assistance and you are in a position to help him find others of the same mind. I am sure he will talk to you about it. Since he talked so strongly to me of those who are an obstacle to God's plans for others because they do not conform to their personal ideas, I thought it best to let you know my thoughts on the subject.

Dear Father, I humbly ask you to forgive my effrontery in speaking this way. Please show me, or continue to show me, the love that you have for me and in which I remain your poor and humble servant.

***François Libermann***