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10. A false idea of maturity

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A false idea of maturity

To M. Blanpin¹

This letter of Libermann to Blanpin² is a lesson in psychology and wisdom. Two years earlier, this confrere had jumped from spiritual infancy to adulthood, without passing through any kind of spiritual adolescence! In the process, the childhood virtues had vanished and were replaced by a false idea of the meaning of freedom, which he was convinced he had discovered. In fact, it was nothing more than an independent self-sufficiency which resulted in harshness of judgment and intolerance, causing no small disruption to the community life of the missionaries in Reunion. Libermann suggests a more gospel-like approach.

Notre Dame du Gard, June 18th, 1848

My very dear Confrere,

I wrote you a brief letter from the Seminary of the Holy Spirit but, unfortunately, I was not able to reply to your earlier one. This reply is a little late, but I felt that Mary, our good Mother, would let you know within your heart what I wanted to say to you, until such time as I could write to you.

You still have the same feelings: you no longer want to be like a child, because you are now a man. As I already told you, these ideas are basically sound, but you must watch out for your faults, which could lead you to apply such principles incorrectly. I think you are wrong to be ashamed of your past conduct; it had the merit of being based on simplicity, humility and purity of intention. I believe that your soul was pleasing to God and that he wanted you to be the way you were. I also believe that time has now passed and that your approach to things will inevitably change. What was good five years ago is not necessarily relevant today.

¹ N.D. X, pp. 227-236

² See Index

I told you that this is the normal way that God acts in our souls. To begin with, he is happy to leave us somewhat timid and reserved. This produces a type of docility which is necessary to prepare us for the work he has in mind. After a certain time, we gradually emerge from childhood and become men. But as this transformation is gradual and unhurried, a certain balance is retained between the extremes; the dynamism of the man is joined to the gentleness, simplicity and moderation of the child. In short, the good things of childhood are transformed into manly qualities.

In this way, we become real servants of God. We are strong and we judge things by our intellect, aided by grace, yet this same intellect remains calm, strong yet moderate. Our judgments are not inflexible; we do not cling to our own ideas, our thoughts are not prejudiced and our imagination does not lose control of itself. We are men - masters of ourselves, our thoughts and our imagination. We are still full of life and we retain our childish capacity to be impressed; but our feelings do not uncontrollably assault our imagination and we are no longer dominated by our impressions. All this is because we have arrived at manhood by degrees, while conserving our humility, control over our passions and our openness to the grace of God. We now have some wariness about ourselves and a flexibility of soul in the presence of God.

The human spirit is now set free - free of itself and free of feelings coming from within, which can so easily become tyrannical for our intellect and prevent real light being thrown on the objects of its vision. This freedom of spirit preserves the beautiful simplicity which is one of the greatest attributes of healthy souls. It supposes the presence of gentleness, calmness and moderation of judgment. The soul still maintains its dynamism of action and its fruitful imagination, but it is permeated by the love of Jesus and Mary.

I am not reproaching you for lacking some of these qualities of the mature man. But you are not paying enough attention to the supernatural side of your being, nor to the self-denial that the Lord is asking of you. You must concentrate on those virtues which transform everything that is defective in a grown man. You are too caught up in the flood of your own ideas. This is because the change that took place in you was far too sudden: one moment, you were a child and then suddenly you became a man, without passing through any sort of adolescence, which is of the greatest importance in our human development. As a result of this rapid transformation, your spirit was catapulted much too violently into a new state, so it is not surprising that you tend to exaggerate things. It would be difficult for you to do otherwise. One of the sure signs of this exaggeration can be seen in the shame you felt about your past conduct. So you tried to go in the opposite direction; I am convinced that you jumped much too far and ended up beyond the boundaries prescribed by the Christian spirit.

When you were a child, you relied totally on the judgment of others before acting: when you became a man, you began to rely far too much on your *own* understanding and judgment. Christian humility cautions us to be a little suspicious of our own intellect, but not in the sense that we should always be hesitant, deferring to the ideas of others; this would make us children all over again. It means rather that while using the masculine vigour of our intellect to judge things correctly, we nevertheless retain our earlier calm and suppleness, so as to ward off excessive rigidity in our ideas and to be open to the ideas of others.

(Unfortunately, the paper I am using for this letter is too thin. I do not have the time to begin again, so I will jump straight to a new page, otherwise my writing will be illegible).

As a result of this sudden transformation of your character, you are showing signs of an exaggerated tendency towards

independence. Speaking as a friend, I want to point out that this attitude is placing you in the gravest possible danger; such an approach undermines a basic principle of the Christian religion. We are dealing here with two opposing principles. On the one hand, Christianity bases itself on the submission of intelligence to faith and the submission of the will to love. But on the other side, corrupt human nature pushes us in the direction of the complete independence of our intellect and will. The result is the "*non serviam*" (I will not serve) of the devil: our pride leads us to place the centre of our existence in ourselves and not in God. We replace the proper functioning of our intellect and will with a principle of total independence from everything that is not ourselves. This is the instinct that pride plants in our soul, an evil instinct that can have terrifying consequences.

With the faith principle that I explained above, our intelligence and will lose nothing of their natural liberty: in total freedom, our intellect and will subject themselves to the influence and wishes of God and even, to a certain extent, to human enlightenment. Since this submission come from a completely free decision on our part, we now have perfect freedom and so become perfect men and women.

But if we follow the other route, our so-called "independence" deprives us of our true liberty and leaves us at the mercy of our passions, our faults, and our unbridled imagination. We are then the slaves of a host of different influences, with no means of escape. We are not only slaves to our passions, but to all those things which drive them. In his weakness, "independent" man becomes the play-thing of all creation as well as all his own passions.

Freedom is given to us by our Creator, but independence, in the sense in which I have been using it, is contrary to our nature and destroys all those principles on which our Christian faith is based. The violent tendency towards total

independence of the intellect has led to Protestantism and modern philosophy. It is responsible for the terrible egoism of the last century which leads straight to barbarity, savagery, and the destruction of human society. If everybody on earth insisted on this total independence of the intellect and will (even to the limited degree that you do), society could no longer survive, and in less than fifty years, we would all have descended into a state of total anarchy. Look at what has been happening in France. Everybody wants freedom and that is an excellent thing; but there are a handful of people who are crying out for "independence" and are turning the whole country upside-down. If ever they get into a position of authority, the streets of France will be flowing with blood.

The principle of religion cannot co-exist with the principle of independence as you understand it. Christianity would be totally destroyed. I think your problem is that you have not really understood the difference between freedom and independence. Freedom is calm; independence is turbulent and cannot tolerate any limitation. Christianity came into the world precisely to bring us freedom and, armed with its dogmas and moral teachings it fights to the death anything that opposes it.

In order to destroy this concept of independence, or rather, the attraction with which our fallen nature has infected us, people of faith, guided by the Spirit of God, have established religious community life in the Church. These institutions, some stricter than others, were all approved by the Church, so to criticise them would be to criticise the Church itself, and that basic principle of Christianity which they are simply applying in a more focused way. The firm application of this principle against the type of independence you seem to be supporting in your letter, is totally justified; the members of religious communities have all freely and willingly accepted this principle out of their love of God.

I am well aware, as you are, that in this century the rigorous application of the religious principle against this spirit of independence will create considerable difficulties. Religious Orders which follow this line will come up against insurmountable opposition. If contemporary thinking finds these principles so shocking and provoking, I believe it comes partly from those who have surrendered to this idea of the independence of intellect and will, partly from the confusion which results from not distinguishing sufficiently between the concepts of freedom and independence, and, finally, from the passions that are unleashed by this unqualified love of liberty, which are often directed towards religious orders.

Here are some practical conclusions from all this:

- 1) I believe that you have exaggerated the principle of human freedom – either because of your sudden jump from childhood to manhood that I observed above, or from a certain explosion of your imagination when you first came across these ideas that were completely new to you. This has led you to confuse liberty with the idea of independence, of which I have just explained the nature, source and effects.
- 2) Another result of this sudden jump is that it awakens your self-love, which never really dies. As a result, you become more inclined to judge and condemn people, rather than have feelings of peacefulness and gentleness towards them. This attitude is far from being Christian. The basic Christian feeling is one of love, leading to peace, gentleness and conciliation. If you think about this, you will have a better understanding of what is going on in your soul. At present, your soul is suffering greatly.
- 3) These confused ideas have set you on a path which is dangerous for your soul. Even though you have certain reservations about this spirit of “independence”, you have taken a direction that is devoid of love. You have given a free

rein to that pride which is rooted in the heart of everybody, but which can easily end up as intellectual and moral egoism.

If you are honest with yourself, you will see that you are being very hard on those who do not agree with you. In certain circumstances, this hardness can develop into hatred and intolerance. If you adopt the Christian spirit and the holy Gospels as your starting point, you will find that these phenomena vanish from your soul. Put another way, if you rely on your heart rather than your brain to guide your actions, you will be on much safer ground.

4) To round things off, here are a few points of practical advice:

- a) Beware of any feelings that make you over-excited. Never judge or act when guided by such feelings, - feelings that are bitter, hard and irritated, and thoughts that betray the presence of self-love.
- b) Strengthen the faith, humility and love which is within you. What would be the point of achieving this independence of which you speak at the cost of losing humility and love? You would only be acquiring something that is natural and human. Even supposing it is a perfection of sorts; it will never be more than a human perfection and in the process, you would lose that supernatural faith which is lasting and solid. Without any doubt, when your soul is so preoccupied with this thought of independence, it loses sight of its own supernatural perfection and the practice of those virtues which go with it. So get rid of these thoughts. You need have no fear that you will fall back into a spirit of subjection and a disproportionate reliance on intellect and will that could harm your ministry. Concentrate on acquiring the virtues that are essential for a Christian and a priest.

- c) Make sure that your heart and mind are free. Judge persons and events with calmness, gentleness and love. Do not allow any passionate feelings to rule over you. Submit yourself to the will of God whatever it might be and however difficult you find it. Always act according to Christian and priestly virtues - humility, self-denial etc. Be deferential towards others; if others feel that they should be deferential to you, this would indicate that you are the weakest and they are the ones who are truly free. If you are deferential, it is you who is strongest and genuinely free.
- d) As regards what you say about the Jesuits, I do not think that you can blame their constitutions or the rigorous obedience that they practise, since it has all been approved by the Holy See. If it is true that our century no longer approves of this organization and that their type of obedience does not appeal to the contemporary mind, this is no reason why they should be criticised, because it would take a pontifical intervention to change their constitutions; they cannot do it by themselves. Regarding the other points you make, it is not for us to point the finger at them as a group, even if we object to the behaviour of an individual. Certainly, the majority of them act with the purest of motives. So forget the Jesuits and allow them to act as they see fit, while we do what we feel is right. We must not be intolerant; it is for each one of us to answer before God for the way we act.
- e) M. L. Vavasseur. He has not mentioned very much about you, but what he has said is to your credit and expressed in very affectionate terms. In no way does he appear to want exercise his influence over you in the way you describe. So do not judge him with such severity, showing your repugnance and opposition to

him. Let your relationship be one of gentleness and charity and live in harmony with him. This is important for the peace of your soul, the good of the Black people and the edification of everybody.

Goodbye, my very good friend. You can see how much I love and trust you from the frankness with which I have written

*F. Libermann,
Priest of the Holy Heart of Mary*