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1-1-2011

03. If we only undertake what is easy, what would become of the Church?

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Repository Citation

de Mare, C. (2011). 03. If we only undertake what is easy, what would become of the Church?. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/anthologie-spiritaine-english/55>

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If we only undertake what is easy, what would become of the Church?

To Eugène Dupont

This letter is the first of a long series which Libermann wrote to Eugène Dupont.¹ He was a tonsured cleric in the seminary of Issy and was thinking about joining the "Work for the Black Peoples". Following the advice of Fr. Pinault,² who was not convinced that he had a vocation, Eugène wrote to Libermann seeking counsel. He felt disillusioned because of the difficulties he was encountering in the seminary, and wondered if it would not be better to leave and join the Eudists at Rennes. We give Libermann's reply in full,³ because it once again helps us to appreciate his qualities as a spiritual director and his personal mystical strategy: we have to learn how to wait for God's moment. This typifies his attitude during his long stay in Rome. We give the letter in its entirety.

Rome 17th August 1840

My very dear brother,

May the peace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ and his most holy Mother fill your soul and be the wellspring of all your actions. I received both your letters last night; they came via London but I am not sure why. I admire the way our Lord is dealing with you. He knows how to use his divine providence

¹ Mary Eugène Dupont was born in 1821 in the diocese of Rouen. He was a seminarian in Saint Sulpice in 1839, and was ordained in 1844. We do not know when he died. There are extant 23 letters which Libermann wrote to him between 1840 and 1848.

² Alexis Martin Pinault (1793-1870) was born in the diocese of Paris. He was a student at Saint Sulpice in 1824, and was ordained in 1827. He spent 1829 in "la Solitude", became a professor at Issy, and died on 12th March 1870.

³ ND.II pp.168-172

to conquer and rule over you in small things - as well as in those to which are the most attached!

You were very anxious for those two letters of yours to reach me and no doubt have been eagerly waiting for a reply. There is, of course, nothing wrong with such ardour and desires, but our Lord thought it better to restrain them. He wants himself alone to be the answer to all your requests. I am sure he has easily found a solution to your difficulties while you have been waiting for the reply of a wretched man like myself.

So give yourself up to our Master and find in him both life and death. Our Lord is not offering you either life or death, as he did to the Israelites in olden days. He wants you to choose both death *and* life - the life which he enjoys in the bosom of his eternal Father in heaven. Such a life is one of love, peace, calmness and rest in God, but it depends completely on our Lord, Jesus, being able to possess your soul in its entirety. You realise, of course, that all this is not accomplished in a day. It demands complete death to yourself, and the most perfect submission of your nature, with all its passions and sentiments, to the dominion of grace. So do not be unduly troubled if you still find in yourself those stirrings of the senses which we call "the passions".

Allow our Lord to act freely within you. You cannot immediately possess the perfect interior life of our Lord in your soul. He has begun by taking over your feelings and passions; that is why all the work of the grace of our Lord in you have affected your inner senses and imagination.

Note well, my dear friend, that whenever the influence of grace made you act in such a lively matter, it was not so much the activity of your feelings and imagination, but more an impression or impulse that was given to them. That activity did not come from your nature: it sprang from a prompting of Our

Lord, which was both its foundation and guide. As long as your human action is inspired by such an impression of grace, and insofar as it is the impulse of grace alone that causes you to act, the activity of the senses is good - even excellent. It only becomes bad when you move ahead further than grace prompts you to go - when you mix in something of your own.

By acting in this way upon your senses, Jesus purifies them and detaches them from the things of earth. He seizes them, takes hold of them, and gradually penetrates into the depths of the soul. In this way, he introduces calmness and peace which endows it with true and perfect love. Or rather, he himself becomes the source and foundation of your peace and perfect love. So place yourself, with gentleness and perfect surrender, into the hands of your Guide. Follow the impressions he gives you, and strive to maintain peace and tranquillity in all your faculties. These dispositions come from your nature and from the life of Jesus at work in us. I am telling you these things so that you will not get the idea that your former state was completely bad, or that whenever the imagination played a role, our Lord was not present. Do not think like that. Thank our Lord for all the goodness he has shown you, with no merit on your part whatsoever.

Now I must answer your main question. You can see, from what I have just said that I am not going to treat all the insights which our Lord has given you as simply coming from your imagination. I can detect something really good going on. However I believe that we have to take a bit more time before deciding what God is actually calling you to do. We must wait for next year's retreat, when you will once more spend a period close to God. You can then examine the matter with the help of Father Pinault, if you have not already done so and if he has not come to a final decision before then. I would prefer to see you go over the whole matter during the retreat, so that

you will be ready to accept whatever may be decided then. Because, my very dear friend, I can foresee many considerable temptations from Satan for people in your situation regarding their vocation and many may fall by the wayside. I went through similar temptations before leaving Rennes¹. That is why I want to see you firm and stable and then, hopefully, the Devil will have no chance to make you go back on your decision.

The difficulties you mention are great, and may become increasingly so later. However, I cannot see how any man who has even a small grain of faith can make any serious objections. If we should undertake only what is easy, what would have become of the Church? Saint Peter and Saint John would have kept on fishing the Lake of Galilee, and Saint Paul would never have left Jerusalem.

I can understand a man who hesitates when faced with obstacles if he considers himself important and relies only on his own strength. But when our trust rests solely in our Lord, what is there to fear? We will only stop when we are blocked by a wall. Then we wait with patience and confidence for a breach to appear, and then resume our onward march as if nothing had happened. That is how Saint Paul and the other apostles acted.

So you can see that I am willing to let you join us, with all the tenderness of a father. My only condition is that the question be firmly settled with our Lord. It is he and his most holy Mother who must receive you, not I, for I am nothing. I hope they have already received you in their holy love for you. So I

¹ He is talking about the difficulties he met when he was leading the "bands of piety", small spiritual groups in which he was involved at Issy. These groups had many critics in the seminary.

look on you now and always as my dear brother in that same love.

As regards your prayer life, I cannot say a lot. Your interior life is not yet stable. The state of your soul is bound to have changed somewhat since the last time you wrote. A thing always worth saying in this respect, and which ought to be enough for you at present, is that you should take our Lord for your Master in the great science of prayer, and obediently follow his guidance. You know the famous saying of Saint Anthony: "*If we are really praying well, we should not be conscious that we are praying at all.*" During your prayer you should pay no attention to what is taking place in you. Follow the inclinations our Lord gives you, for that is what is best for you.

Concerning mortifications, do exactly what Father Pinault advises. Mortification, all the same, is a good thing, but what is to be done about it? The good Lord has placed you in a certain situation, and that is that. For your consolation, let me inform you that external mortifications do not form part of the apostolic spirit.

Love for God, zeal for the salvation of souls, the love of crosses and humiliations, are all of the essence of apostolic zeal, but not mortifications. So, when Saint Paul wanted to prove that he was just as much an apostle as the rest of them, he gave a fearful account of all that he had suffered for the love of God, and drew from it an irrefutable argument against his adversaries. But when he said, "*Castigo corpus meum, et in servitutum redigo*"¹, he gave as his reason the fear of losing his own soul while saving others.

¹ "I treat my body severely and keep it in subjection" (1 Cor.9.1-27)

Consider yourself fortunate if it pleases our Lord to preserve in you this spirit of mortification (which, however, I doubt he will do), for such a spirit will nourish in you a love of crosses and humiliations, which contain treasures for the apostolic spirit and numerous other benefits. In any case, it is an excellent thing that our Lord gives you these desires for mortification. Follow them in all simplicity and try to practice them every time you receive such promptings.

Dear brother in Jesus and Mary, I leave you now in the arms of our beloved Father and Mother.

Yours in their holy love,

F. Libermann, acolyte