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### 02. Moderation in judgements and decisions

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## ***Moderation in judgements and decisions***

***To Father Le Vavas seur***

### **A Letter of Correction<sup>1</sup>**

*In the "Notes et Documents", this letter is nine pages long. It was written in reply to serious criticisms of Libermann made by Father Le Vavas seur. The latter was once again in the grip of his old demon, namely pure and absolute radicalism. This was of course in addition to his characteristic emotionalism. Le Vavas seur wished to leave the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary and join the Jesuits. The immediate cause was the arrival of Father Plessis<sup>2</sup>, a most disappointing young priest who had been appointed to Reunion by Libermann.*

*Father Tisserant in his Memorandum mentions "The Temptation of Le Vavas seur"<sup>3</sup>. This refers to Le Vavas seur's first serious threat to leave the Congregation. The temptation mentioned in this letter was the second and was perhaps the most serious. We also know of a third temptation - to abandon the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in order to revert to the situation as it was before the "fusion".<sup>4</sup>*

*In this letter we can admire the patience and the pedagogy shown by Libermann in leading Le Vavas seur back to the path of reason. At the same time, he does not compromise on his principles: "I believe that you are doing something which is disagreeable to God, [...] if I were to fall into the same discouragement, I do not know how we would stand before the judgement seat of God". We can also admire*

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<sup>1</sup> N. D. VIII, pp. 28-36

<sup>2</sup> See Index of Names

<sup>3</sup> N. D. III, pp. 6 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Letter of Pentecost 1850, N. D. XII, pp. 198-204: "It would be one of the greatest faults...."

*the personal struggle Libermann had to face under his burden of responsibility.*

*We give the letter here in full despite its length, because it shows Libermann at his best in dealing with people. He sounds like Saint Paul when he gives the long list of responsibilities under which he is labouring, without any self pity: "From the moment God placed me in this work, I have never known a moment of peace or consolation [...]"*

*[Father Cabon wrote the following: this letter is very difficult to read. For the first part, we have followed the text published by Father Schwindenhammer, citing the temptation of Father Le Vavas seur (Circular number 34); otherwise the passage would be incomprehensible. In the second part of the letter, we have accepted the reconstruction done by Father Meillorat in his "Letters to the Members of the Congregation", pp. 273 ff.]*

(For the eyes of Father Le Vavas seur alone)

28<sup>th</sup> January 1846

My dear Confrere,

I feel an urgent need to reply immediately to your letter, in which you describe the circumstances leading to the repatriation of Father Plessis. I agree with your sending him back here. I am to blame for admitting him into our Congregation in the first place; it is for me to suffer any embarrassment that resulted.

But you have hurt me deeply with your words of discouragement and the false impressions you seem to be labouring under. Your letter speaks of deep despondency on your part, as well as very serious worries about the future of our Congregation. I am not reproaching you for having plunged me into even greater sufferings; I see your words as a

sword in the hands of God that he is thrusting into the depths of my soul.

God has laid on my shoulders<sup>1</sup> the burden of this work which entails much sorrow and demands great patience on my part. God has also allowed people who are stronger and worthier than I am to attack me, instead of supporting me in my weakness. May his holy name be blessed! All will be well as long as his poor continues to progress. It is moving forward and, as I see it, will continue to do so more and more. You speak of abandoning the work for which God chose you and put you in charge from the start. Now you are in the depths of depression, as I can see from your words! I believe that you would be doing something most displeasing to God if you were you to allow such thoughts to continue in your mind.

Be very careful, my dear brother: you do not know the plans God has for you and you only see what is directly in front of your eyes. You are not looking at things in God's way at all. Like you, I cannot see clearly what Providence is doing, but I know that you would be guilty of serious infidelity were you to continue in such a frame of mind. If you went ahead and abandoned this work and I did the same, I do not know how we would be able to stand before the judgement seat of God.

Against every excuse you give for your defeatist attitude, I can furnish ten more from my side. I am the one who has to bear the burden of being superior. I have to carry all the worry and responsibility for the work of God in which we are involved. I

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<sup>1</sup> To understand the reasons for Libermann listing the heavy burdens under which he is labouring, it should be remembered that it was Tisserant and Le Vavasour who were the initiators of the Congregation which Libermann now led. Their duty, therefore, was to support, not undermine, the position of Libermann as Superior General.

am continually feeling the most violent shocks, from all the afflictions and trials which divine Providence decides to send to this work, including all the problems concerning the Missions we are already staffing and those which we are going to start. I am the one who has all the worries about the novitiate, the courses of studies to be set up and the different missionary communities. I have to bring some sort of order into our lives, to perfect the Rules, and place the work on a solid foundation. And I must do this more or less alone, with only one confrere to help me maintain regularity of life here at home, to write all the letters, to deal with different people, to accept new candidates and to do a multitude of other things, all of them bringing their own particular worries and concerns.

From the moment God put me in charge of this work, I have never had a minute of peace or consolation, for my soul seems to be incapable of feeling anything like that; on the contrary, it is extremely sensitive to anything which causes sorrow and God in his goodness has not spared me from these things. Just imagine the pain, the heartbreak it must be for me, not having a second during the day to spend on my own salvation. You are aware of the burning and almost continual desire I have to retire from the world and live a life of solitude. I hate being involved in worldly affairs, with an almost insurmountable repugnance, and yet I have to immerse myself in such things. It costs me a great effort to deal with people and I am doing it non stop. From morning till evening, I have to get involved in directing the work and yet I feel extreme revulsion and deadly boredom as a result. I am constantly giving religious conferences, yet the least subject of prayer which I have to give to the students causes me distress for three hours beforehand. It seems that everything in me is against my enjoying the duties in which I am immersed. I feel no attraction for any of it, whether physically or spiritually.

There is not a single fibre of my body, not a single movement in my soul, which does not push me towards a life of solitude.

Nevertheless, I would regard it as a crime to even admit the thought of abandoning these responsibilities. God has bound me and chained me to this crucifying work, which is still so dear to my heart. I am convinced that in order to obey his all powerful will, I have to sacrifice all rest, all consolation, all happiness and, even worse, all spiritual progress of my soul. I weep bitterly for that, but I beg God to pardon my tears and my sorrow and with my whole soul I once again place myself under the will of God, which almost grips me by the throat. I can say truthfully that I have never made the least attempt to free myself from these chains. I would much prefer to be the least in the kingdom of the Father and go there following his holy will and working for the salvation of abandoned souls rather than to be in the front row having abandoned the path marked out for me by God.

You are thinking about deserting the work, because you feel the pain involved. If I were to die before the work is placed on a solid foundation, you would then be free to seek your rest and follow the desires of your heart. But then those people, for whom God inspired in you such great compassion, would perish in their thousands and languish with the demons in hell. Take great care, therefore, dear brother. You do not know how much you still have to suffer for the love of God, nor how much you must still sacrifice yourself for his glory. You want me to let you leave Reunion. If I agreed to that, I would be committing an enormous sin against God and against you. You are bound to God and to the most holy Heart of Mary. Any idea of breaking that link is nothing but an illusion. Many servants of God have lost everything by allowing themselves to be fooled by the false idea of a more perfect state of affairs. If you look at the thing closely, you will see that your imagination and self love lie behind all you are going through.

You are finding it very difficult to be a superior, with all the problems that go with it. I can't imagine how you would have fared if Father Galais' idea of putting you in my place had come about. For every gram of worry and difficulty you now suffer, you would have had fifty kilograms instead! I imagine that in your present frame of mind, you would probably have said that God does not wish the work to continue and that it will never succeed. But I believe that there is no doubt whatsoever that God wants it to continue and that he will guide it to eventual success. The more I look at it, the more I see a serious act of infidelity on your part in letting yourself be tormented by such pain and worry.

It seems that you are dredging up again all the old concerns you had about me in the past; but I can say, with absolute candour, that it doesn't bother me in the least. You must not let yourself be fooled in this way by the vivacity of your imagination. You must take a good hard look at what you did in the past and see that what is happening now is just another temptation from the devil. Unless God in his goodness protects you, you will reap a very bitter harvest.

To revert to the question of Father Plessis, I admit that I made a big mistake in allowing him to be ordained to the subdiaconate and priesthood. As a result, I feel very remorseful and concerned. But it is too late to do anything about it now. I acted as I did through inexperience (?)<sup>1</sup> and due to a lack of confidence in God. I sent Fr. Plessis to you because I thought you would be able to rectify my error. Do not worry about

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the introduction to this letter. The hesitation arises from the difficulty in deciphering the original manuscript. The sections in brackets also indicate that the meaning is not entirely clear.

sending him back to me: you are doing so for the very best of reasons.

Although I am the one who has to take responsibility for this problem, you must not allow what has happened to lead into the devil's trap. Do not be worried about the way I allow candidates to enter our Congregation. The anguish I feel over the case of Father Plessis will ensure that I do not make the same mistake as easily again. I know, however, that we shall probably make a similar error in the future though, hopefully, not as serious as this one. [Nobody, however experienced, is free from the worry of making similar mistakes]. Once I have managed to put everything in order, there will be less cause for concern, but that will take another two years. I think we have less to fear at the moment in that regard. Most of our missionaries will be coming from among our own students. We have thirty of them at present: eight or nine have very solid vocations. We are less sure about three or four others and have more or less decided to part with two of them. The others are good. They will be here for another two or three years, so we shall have a better idea of how they are going to turn out.

You have declared war on me. But I think you are only playing tactics with me (?) so I will do the same. (Now you can see that I have abandoned the sadness that was apparent at the beginning of this letter. I am back to being my old cheerful self once again. It is very important to have complete confidence in God and to abandon oneself into his hands, even if it involves suffering the most violent pain. That is how we become strong with the strength of God himself). Now it is my turn to attack you. I have already given you a hint of what is to come, but I was only doing it to defend myself. Now I am going on the offensive!

I find you to be a very abrasive person. I presume that you are not so violent with others as you are with me, otherwise you would spoil everything you touch and turn the world upside down whenever you encounter some difficulty or other. Please, do not be so uncivil with people. You can make an exception in my case, of course. You cannot imagine how much suffering your attacks cause me, but never for a moment would I dream of doing the same to you!

Try to realise that not everybody shares the same feelings that you have. Be careful about your emotionalism and natural energy. Whenever you are bowled over by something, you are liable to say horribly severe things and in a most thoughtless way. In such moments you are given to wild exaggeration which smothers the action of grace and reason and chases all wisdom away. It makes you extremely impatient, not of course in what concerns you directly, but with the conduct of other people and the administration of affairs. You then fall into discouragement and have no idea how to get rid of it. Your whole world turns upside down and there seems no way out of the depression you feel.

You are of the opinion that I am not wise or prudent: I, on the other hand, consider you to be extremely impatient. You want everybody to be perfect without delay. You pay no attention to the difficulties which have to be met whenever a new work is getting under way.

This brings me to the third observation I want to make: you do not judge things in a practical, realistic way. You look at the old Religious Orders in the Church, and you demand that everybody in our Congregation should live in a perfectly regular way like they do. You are asking the impossible and your severity prevents you from seeing things as they are. We are only in the process of getting established, but you are

already judging and condemning all around you and drawing false conclusions from your false judgements. Then you go on to propose extreme measures instead. You must be patient. We need a reasonable amount of time to establish ourselves, so let us wait until things are a bit more stable and have taken on a definite form. Do not expect perfection from the outset.

How could I possibly have been as rigorous as you demand from the very beginning? The work was too fragile, hardly established and my authority was still too weak. Look at yourself and Father Tisserant, for example: if I had followed the principles you now propose, both of you would have been sent away or at least kept in the novitiate for another two years. (Or, are you forgetting the problems you both had?) So, if I had done that, would I have been acting wisely? Would I not have been imprudent? When a work is just beginning, a host of circumstances arise which do not allow us to interpret general rules in a severe way. In fact, we are already much closer than you think to observing all such principles. But for some little time to come, we shall have to interpret general rules very broadly. If you only realised how necessary discretion is whenever we start to direct the works of God! You have great need of that virtue, because you have allowed yourself to follow your feelings with your eyes shut.

I am not denying that I have made mistakes: in fact, I am sure I will make more in the future. Allowing Father Plessis to enter our Congregation is a case in point. However, I believe that my handling of the work has been wiser and more in accordance with the spirit of Our Lord than if I were to follow your way of thinking. The work is now established and is beginning to grow. Intelligent people who know a thing or two about how communities should be are astonished that our work has taken on such a regular form after a very short time. Remember we are only in existence three or four years. Two

years from now, when we have enough people for the work in Europe, I am sure that our house will have the atmosphere of a long established community. But if I had taken the severe steps you wanted me to take, not a stone would remain upon a stone as far as our work is concerned.

Let us take another look at the people who make up our Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary. I can say, without a moment's hesitation, that all are fervent and solid, with the exception of Father Plessis. One of our members lost his way for a time because he was living alone in Haiti for far too long, but he is now back on the straight and narrow road. I cannot comment on Father Blanpin, because I have still not made up my mind about him.

I repeat, you are putting forward a principle so rigorous that it is absolutely impractical. You want everybody in a community to be so perfect and so full of self renunciation that they can be treated like dolls in a puppet theatre. That would be a beautiful thing, but it has never been, nor ever will be, like that in the Catholic Church. Certainly, the Jesuit Fathers are, to say the least, one of the most fervent religious societies in the Church. However, if they were to be as rigorous as you suggest, they would have to show the door to half of their members. I can go even further and tell you, as a fact, that in the Jesuits, respectable though they may be, hardly a quarter of them have the inclination for self renunciation that you demand as a necessary condition for entry into our society. I don't know many Jesuits, I have to admit. I know a few of them who are very admirable, but I also know a few who are very weak and imperfect. In fact, I could say that they are inferior even to Father Blanpin, from what I have seen of some of them. And according to what you say about him, Father Blanpin would be the least amongst us as regards perfection.

So please do not judge like a juvenile in matters of such importance.

Let me tell you the general criteria I try to follow when considering the admission of candidates into our Congregation. I only allow the entry of those who offer a guarantee, a moral assurance in other words, of their perseverance in the spirit of the priesthood. When I notice defects, I try to correct them, or at least diminish them as far as possible. If the faults are of a type to cause us to have serious doubts for the future stability of the person in religious life, I will send him away. Up until now, with the exception of Father Plessis, I have only admitted people who fulfil these conditions. If a person's faults do not cause us too much worry and make us fear that he will disturb the community, I will admit him. I have no doubt made mistakes and will continue to do so in the future, but even the shrewdest person is not immune from error.

I can prove to you that I am no easier to please than the Jesuits. For example, Father Maurice caused me no end of concern at the time of his admission into our society. He was extremely timid and nervous; I have never met anyone so intensely fearful in my life. He had a strange way of reacting to events and a wild imagination which had led him into many mistakes. But on the other hand, he was extremely pious. I let him join us, not without reservations, and was full of fear at the time. He went to work in our mission in Guinea, but because of his wild imagination and extreme nervousness, he had to come home. I had no idea what to do. Then suddenly, he decided to join the Jesuits and he has now been with them for a good eighteen months. Now the Jesuits know a thing or two about vocations, but they still decided to keep him. Remember that he suffered from serious weaknesses, which made him act in a very irritating way the whole time he was with us. His

faults could not be cured by our novitiate. So you see that we have to interpret your principles less strictly than you would like. We must always judge things in a practical way. I can say that if Father Maurice applied to join us once more, with all the faults he had the first time round, I would unhesitatingly refuse to accept him.

Let me finish by saying that what I really look for in a possible candidate is a community spirit, obedience, simplicity, regularity and the hope that he will be able to live community life to the full.....

(Note of Father Cabon on the original manuscript: "*In the following passages, which are very difficult to read and understand, Libermann talks of the question of relations between Bishop Collier of Mauritius and Father Jacques Laval. Father Libermann was not satisfied with the attitude of the bishop: the latter wanted to keep Father Laval in Mauritius at all costs, but that would be out of the question if the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary were to leave Reunion and not set up another mission in Madagascar in its place. So Father Laval will have to be patient for the time being.*")

You do not know what God is planning for you, so abandon yourself into the hands of Providence. While you are looking for light on the subject, carry on doing the good you have begun and wait for God's moment.

I will answer one of the points you make in the letter I am sending to Father Collin. Please read that letter when it arrives. I am afraid I have said things a little roughly in this letter. Please, do not be hurt. I do assure you that if the words are harsh, there is no corresponding severity in my heart. May the peace of God be with you.

Yours in Jesus and Mary,

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