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06. Teaching a young seminarian to develop a strong character

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Teaching a young seminarian to develop a strong character

To Adolphe Godefroy¹

Libermann had taken the young Adolphe Godefroy under his wing. He took a close interest in this junior seminarian who had been placed in his charge. Adolphe had stayed for a short time with Libermann at La Neuville. He is trying to encourage an energetic and brave approach to life in this letter, by advice which is both manly and friendly. As in the letter he wrote to Father Chevalier the previous year, he shows his talents as an educator of adolescents preparing them for their future life. He talks here of Adolphe's idea of becoming a priest².

Amiens, 3rd January 1848

My dear young friend,

I was very happy to read what you say in your letter. I was also impressed by the marks you got in your studies, even though you are not among the first in the class. Be courageous, work with perseverance and your success is assured. Such application will help you in two ways; as well as success in your studies, it will strengthen you against many temptations. You need courage for that, but I am sure that you have plenty.

My good friend, aim at developing your character and increasing your energy and enthusiasm. You are still young,

¹ N. D. X, pp. 5-8; Father Libermann's sense of humour shines through the advice that he gives to this young man.

² N. D. X, pp. 275-276. In a letter to Father Dupont (31 July, 1848), Libermann refers to some difficulties that young Adolphe came up against in the junior seminary of Rouen. Eventually, he became a priest in that diocese, ending up as parish priest in a small parish.

so you have time to work at these things which are so important. You owe it to yourself. A lazy man is always good for nothing. He is just a man of straw, bending with every breeze, who can be broken very easily. Weakness, nonchalance, and timidity make him incapable of undertaking anything worthwhile for the glory of God. It is nothing short of a miracle if he keeps any resolutions made in a moment of generosity; in fact, it is most unlikely that he will ever make any such resolutions. He will even have trouble carrying out his ordinary daily duties. You have been a child until now, so you have had some excuse for being weak; but from now on, it will be your fault if you do not fight against this with all your strength.

I am looking forward to seeing you in the coming holidays and I expect to find you full of strength and energy. So, dear Adolphe, let's get down to it. Stand on your own two feet, march forward, give yourself a shake, make the most of life, take yourself in hand. Now is the time to get down to it, and remember that each moment lost will be an opportunity which will never return. You must now become a real man: not a little girl, but a man who appreciates the efforts made by his teachers on his behalf.

This is what you have to do:

1) **As regards your daily life:** don't pamper yourself, always looking for comfort. Be hard on your body and let it know that you are in charge. Francis Xavier is a good example to follow. When he was younger, he was just like you, but he learnt how to deny himself and become master of his body. Everything else I recommend to you will be based on his example; God blessed his efforts and he will do the same for you.

Be very energetic in everything you undertake. When you are on recreation or go on walks, do the kind of exercise which

tires you out, rather than strolling gently or sitting around lazily. Have no fear of either heat or cold. Don't be tender and indulgent with yourself, as if you were a young woman; a soft and delicate priest would be a shameful, even a monstrous sort of thing. The priesthood and self-indulgence are mutually exclusive; you can have one or the other but not both. A weak priest only leads people to hell. I have declared war to the death on your lethargy because I love you so tenderly. Be full of energy, and do everything with enthusiasm with your school friends and in every other part of your life.

If you are allowed to play games in the seminary, don't pick the easy ones: chose those which are the most physically demanding – like football and gymnastics. In your studies, never be satisfied to remain at your present level. If you find yourself in the bottom half of the class, make every effort to reach the middle rank. If you reach that position, then don't lean back and say "enough is enough"; you have to try your best to get into the top half of the class and even to take the first place. You can do it, believe me! I can just imagine you laughing at what I am saying; cut out the laughter and get moving! Pull yourself together and start working at it right away. I don't want you to turn into a *Sister Softy* or a *Brother Lay-about!*

2) **Regarding regularity:** Be prompt, exact, trustworthy - but always with a smile on your face! As soon as the rising bell sounds, throw off the blankets (you can tidy your room later!) and jump out of bed. Wake up, and don't mooch around like a zombie! At night, don't curl up into a ball and don't make a fuss every time you feel unwell.

3) **Your spiritual life:** Here also, you need energy and enthusiasm. If you are soft and self-indulgent, you will perform your religious exercises casually and with a lack of

commitment. You will never grow in virtue if that is how you carry on. You will meet all kinds of serious temptations and you will be unable to do anything about them. Do your religious exercises regularly and with enthusiasm, not in a half-hearted way, allowing your mind to wander down all sorts of bye ways. Make a good preparation before you receive the sacraments of confession and communion and receive them often. You must be strong if you want to be a priest, otherwise you would be useless to Our Lord. Such a priest would only be a burden to Him and He would vomit him out of his mouth!

So all this is my Christmas present to you – a wonderful present, if you make use of it!

I must leave you now, my dear friend.

May God bless you,

Libermann