

Duquesne University

## Duquesne Scholarship Collection

---

A Spiritan Anthology

Anthologie Spiritaine

---

1-1-2011

### 11. Supporting a Superior who has a difficult confrere in his community

Christian de Mare CSSp

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/anthologie-spiritaine-english>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

---

#### Repository Citation

de Mare, C. (2011). 11. Supporting a Superior who has a difficult confrere in his community. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/anthologie-spiritaine-english/96>

This Chapter V is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthologie Spiritaine at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in A Spiritan Anthology by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

## **Supporting a Superior who has a Difficult confrere in his community**

*To Father Gravière<sup>1</sup>*

*Father Jerome Gravière was "a serious man, of proven virtue, with a strong mind and a firm and constant character" (N. D. VII, p. 437)<sup>2</sup>. He had previously met with difficulties while running the community of the Holy Heart of Mary in Senegal. Now he was superior of the house in Bordeaux and was faced with other problems caused by certain members of his community. He complained that Libermann was not offering him sufficient support in his difficult task. He replies to his complaints and shares with him his own experience in looking after communities<sup>3</sup>.*

Paris 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1851

My very dear Confrere,

The document which I enclose is addressed to you but contains advice and observations which are meant for the whole community and so I am writing it in such a way that you can show it to Father Vaugeois. This letter I am writing now is for your eyes only and contains advice and observations that concern you, either as regards your own self or concerning your function as Superior of the Community. I shall speak frankly and simply but please realise that what I am saying comes from an affectionate heart and that there is no element of rancour or displeasure involved. I really wish us to be of one mind and hope that the running of our different communities will be a copy of what is happening here in my own

---

<sup>1</sup> N. D. XIII, pp. 331-336

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

<sup>3</sup> Cf. letter to Father Lossedat, 13<sup>th</sup> April 1846, N. D. VIII, pp. 109-115

community. That is why I want to speak quite openly, without holding anything back from you.

1) You seem to think that I tend to take the side of a confrere against his superior. This is totally untrue and furthermore, it would be stupid of me to act in that way. That is not at all the way I treated our priests in Guinea when you were there. All the facts you brought up from some time ago in no way prove that you are correct in what you say now. Some of them are wrong and others do not apply to what we are discussing at this moment. I will tell you exactly how I act in such situations.

- a) In the first place, I do not, nor ever have decided against a superior, even when he was in the wrong. On the other hand, I do not tell the Superior he is right when he is wrong: that is to say, I do not support his error, above all, when it concerns a point of our rule. I will rather examine the act or the words of the superior which led to the objection being made, explaining his conduct to the plaintiff. But sometimes, I give no explanation at all, simply saying that the superior had his reasons for acting in this way and reminding them of the obedience to which we have committed ourselves.
- b) I am very cautious when dealing with confreres who are less than perfect, stubborn, or under a certain strain. I try to speak to them with moderation, gentleness and discretion. That is probably why you are not very happy with me. Your own character is still rather inflexible; you are a bit peremptory and cling to your own ideas. Because of that, you feel that my words do not always conform to your opinions or wishes and you go so far as to misinterpret what I said to the confreres who made complaints about you. I shall return to this point in a moment. If that is how I act when a superior is in the

wrong, all the more reason for me to act like that when it is the confrere who is at fault.

You also add that I listen too readily to people who are dissatisfied. You mentioned this to me in the past. But I have no choice but to listen to those who have complaints. If I refused, I would be closing my heart to all who are unhappy. Their situation would get worse, and I would be putting myself in a position where I could no longer help them. For the love of God, put away all such ideas and pay no more attention to them. Such thoughts are just temptations; you should realise that and act accordingly. I believe these feelings come to you because you are still over sensitive, inflexible and attached to your own ideas. You have struggled for a long time against those weaknesses, but you have not yet won the war.

Let me tell you now what I usually say when dealing with such a case. I state clearly that we are never right when we are against our superior. Even when we are right, we are wrong. Try to have the same attitude. Be closely united with me in heart and mind and in the way you treat your confreres. Help me in my task of guiding the community over which you have been placed, so that I in turn may be better able to assist you.

Above all, take great care never to complain about me in front of your confreres, nor show the least displeasure, even when I happen to be totally wrong. If you did this, you would be failing God, harming your confreres and undermining your own authority. How can you expect your confreres not to grumble when they hear you doing exactly the same thing? Moreover, the authority of a superior general will always be more

respected and his guidance more readily followed than that of a lesser superior. So the criticism uttered by the latter about the superior general will always, sooner or later, have a bad effect on morale and especially do harm to confreres who are trying to be faithful. I am saying all this to you, not because I have received complaints against you, but because it is natural for us to mention any displeasure we feel. For that reason, I consider it useful to warn you and I am sure that you will heed my advice.

2) As regards keeping the Rule, I am fully convinced that you are devoted to it and that your confreres say the same thing about you. Nevertheless, I would like to mention that I have received some complaints in this regard. Perhaps I am using the wrong word, for they were more accurately "observations". I have, of course, judged them for what they are worth, realising that what has happened might be because of the exceptional situation of your community, that probably caused a certain amount of non-observance of the Rule. Moreover, Father Schwindenhammer's visit has given me further proof of your commitment in this matter. But I feel I ought to repeat to you what I have heard. Please do not try to guess who sent these remarks to me and do not get upset by them: it is normal for all of us to feel that some people are against us.

It was mentioned that sometimes you have acted against the rule, on the principle that the superior of a community has the right to do so. This complaint had no effect on me, because I cannot believe that you would think that way. But I wondered if, because of the difficulties you are having with Father Vaugeois, you might have said something which although not reflecting that this is how you feel about the rule, might have led some confreres to think along those lines, especially, if they feel disappointed about some decision you have made in

their regard. Please do not bother yourself about such small problems, but put them all down to experience.

Be careful how you say things, so that your confreres will always see that you are basing everything on the rule and on obedience whenever you exercise authority. Avoid giving the impression that you prefer your own will to what is prescribed in the Rule or to the desires of the superior general. Since all authority of a lesser superior comes from this twofold source, it will be respected when it is clear that his way of running a community is always consistent with those two foundations. I consider this the most important point to remember when guiding a community and trying to maintain a good spirit among the members.

I will now speak about the guidance of your community. I know you are in a difficult position, having to deal with Father Vaugeois<sup>1</sup> who has an awkward character and has lost the religious spirit. I greatly sympathise with you for all you are going through because of him. Be patient and have courage and confidence. When the moment is opportune, we shall be able to send you help - and we will try to make that day come sooner rather than later. I trust that God will then give you much consolation in compensation for what you are suffering now. For the moment, try to live in harmony with him as far as possible.

It is unfortunate that he looks for advice from outsiders. I would have liked to forbid him to go to confession to them, but I was afraid he would lose his temper. Anyway, I do not think that such an action on my part would remedy the situation. If Father Vaugeois was forced to go to confession to you, it would in no way change his attitude towards you. He wants

---

<sup>1</sup> He left the Congregation three years later.

perfect freedom of action in his work for the soldiers, and wants to do everything according to his own ideas. But it is not only himself who is involved. He is trying to use Brother Louis for his own ends.

We need to distinguish between two situations here - the internal and external organisation of the work - because Father Vaugeois is doing just that. As regards the **internal** organisation, it would be well to give him as much latitude as possible regarding taking classes, giving instructions and religious conferences etc. However:

- a) The superior must know everything that is going on, and make the decisions regarding all that concerns the discipline and good order of the house and the rules. For example, he has to agree to the times of meetings, how long they last, and so on.
- b) Secondly, the superior has the right to intervene in everything that concerns the internal direction of any work undertaken by any confrere. In practice, however, he should leave people as free as possible, unless in exceptional cases it is imperative that he gets involved. Generally, a superior should not block confreres in the practice of their works of zeal, or hamper them in any way. He would be doing exactly that if he wanted to interfere in the internal affairs of a work for which a confrere is responsible.

As regards the **external** aspects of a work, for example, relations with outsiders like military authorities, soldiers in their barracks and benefactors, in principle, such relations with civil and ecclesiastical authorities belong to the superior. Once your small community is properly set up, that is how things should be. However, at present, it will be difficult for you to

control Father Vaugeois in this way. Nevertheless I will insist that no arrangements are to be made with outsiders without your approval. I shall write to Father Vaugeois stating this and making clear that he must not deal directly with the authorities himself.

As for Brother Louis, he is to take orders only from you. Not only may he not be employed in the work, except with your permission, but the exact details of his employment are to be regulated by yourself. Otherwise, Brother Louis will be uncontrollable. You will need to take great care that he does not get involved with outsiders. He would be a disaster and will end by acting very imprudently, to the detriment of the whole Community. Father Vaugeois said in his letter to me that Father Schwindenhammer had put the work for the soldiers into his hands. That is not exact: Father Schwindenhammer said to me that he did nothing of the sort. In actual fact, it is not the place of a Visitor, but of the Superior, to take such decisions.

To sum up, I ask you to be gentle in the way you deal with Father Vaugeois. Please remember his weakness and imperfection. Do not say anything that might hurt his pride and avoid, as much as possible, any friction, disputes or even discussions. Do not stand on your authority when you are speaking with him. You must always be very determined to uphold the Rule and good order, but in practice you should be gentle, moderate, and humble. Please read the two chapters of the second part of our Rules, from page 166 to page 184.

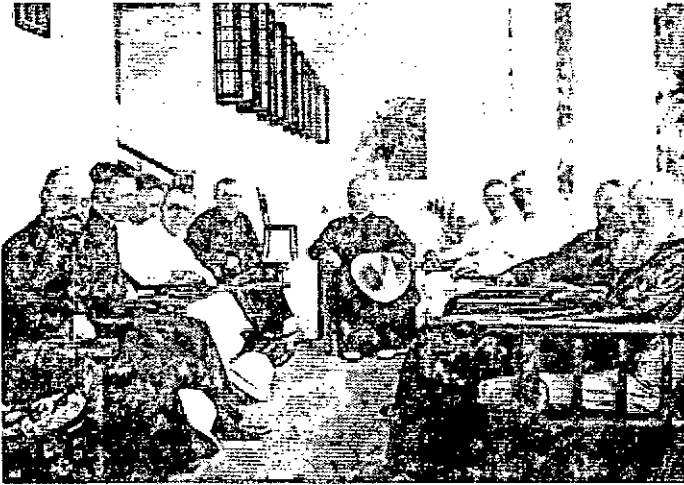
In my letter of the 21<sup>st</sup>, I did not talk about the gifts and stipends which Father Vaugeois frequently receives. Once again, in principle, every gift made to members of the Congregation should be accepted only with the express permission (in certain cases, with the presumed permission) of



the superior. And what is received should be handed over purely and simply to him, with no benefit to the person who received the gift. However, I think it will be difficult to force Father Vaugeois to keep this rule. I will therefore content myself with telling him that the Rule states that all gifts and stipends be handed over to the superior.

Yours in Jesus and Mary,

*Fr. Libermann*



*The Superior General was able to encourage the missionaries at a distance by using "Visitors", who were equivalent to Legates.*