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09. Apostolic life and the observance of the Rule

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Apostolic life and the observance of the Rule

To Fr. Jacques Laval¹

This letter of Libermann to Jacques Laval is part of a series of four letters that he wrote to missionaries on the island of Mauritius (Thiersé, Lambert, Baud and Laval)². He stresses the importance of fidelity to the Rule and community life in the turbulence of a busy apostolic ministry. Libermann makes it clear that what he has to say is the result of a long conversation with Fr. Le Vavas seur who was a native of Bourbon (La Reunion) and who had worked there from 1842-1849. The irony is that Le Vavas seur himself was not regarded as an exemplary community man by his fellow workers!

Paris, February 24th, 1851

My very dear confrere,

I want to add these few words to my first letter, to speak about a very important matter. I have been prompted to do so as a result of a long conversation I had with Fr. Le Vavas seur.

Our community in Mauritius is one of those which bring me great joy and encouragement. It has received many graces from God and preserves the spirit of the Congregation to my great satisfaction. Every time we think of you we thank Jesus and Mary for the many graces they have sent you.

But according to Fr. Le Vavas seur, who loves you all tenderly in the Lord, the one thing that is lacking is a close observance of the Rule, so this is why I am writing to you. For us, living according to the Rule is of the greatest importance. First of all, if we do not respect it, we are failing God, because it is through the Rule that he expresses his will for us. The spirit

¹ N.D. XIII, pp. 55-57

² See Index

and dedication of the Congregation, as well as the perseverance of its missionaries, depends directly on our fidelity to it. Its neglect would lead eventually and inevitably to laxity in the Community.

You are the first, the founders of our Community in Mauritius, so your influence on those who come after you will be crucial for the future. If you neglect rules now, they will be even more neglected in the future. The same excuses that you are using for non-observance of minor rules will be repeated by your successors to justify their disregard for those which are much more important. So your neglect could turn out to be a sort of 'original sin', imposed on future confreres! All our confreres initially seek to please God in everything and observe the rule in its entirety, but when irregularity creeps in, they start to feel qualms of conscience, even though they cannot put it into words. But this can lead on to a lack of unity and grumbling about the superiors. Even if this has not yet happened amongst you, it is something to guard against for the future. I therefore earnestly ask all the confreres to observe the Rule with love and constancy.

And I ask you, my dear confrere, to do all that you can to help your brothers to keep to the Rule. They can help you to do the same so that together, you can re-establish a spirit of regularity. The result will be most pleasing to the Lord and beneficial for the people to whom you minister. Pay special attention to the following: regularity in rising and going to bed, in observing the time allotted for sleep, personal prayer and particular examen, punctuality for meals and recreation and all those regulations that concern the ordinary routine of the day.

Community meetings must be held regularly. Confreres should not go too far away from each other. One who is isolated from the rest will soon lose the community spirit and will gradually cease to care about his brothers. Perhaps this is not yet the case, but it could happen in the future, especially amongst

those who will come after you. We are not just responsible to God for ourselves: we are also responsible for future evils that may result from our present behaviour.

In extraordinary circumstances, a confrere may remain away from the central station for up to two weeks, but such protracted absences must not be taken as the norm. Therefore, see to it that there is a central place which will be considered the community house and ensure that the missionaries come together there at the times specified by our rules.

The council meetings should be held during those assemblies. They are of supreme importance for the good of your souls and the Mission. The first thing on the agenda will be the observance of the Rule; the second, everything that concerns the good of the Mission. It is a serious error to believe that the care of the people will suffer as a result of these meetings. Anything lost will be more than made up for by the fruits of your coming together in this way. It not only sustains the fervour of the missionaries and their unity but greatly benefits the development of the whole mission. I fully understand that a missionary will find it hard to leave his flock and he will always come up with an apparently good reason for staying where he is. But very few of such reasons have any validity. He must be firm with himself and you, in your turn, should insist on his attending, because it is essential for the general good. See that this is carried out.

Every time a confrere has a reason (which seems to him sufficient, for absenting himself on the appointed day), let him explain himself at the preceding meeting and let the plurality of votes decide. In his explanation, the confrere should not be insistent, nor should he show his disappointment if the request is refused. The members of the council should be free to give their opinion in all simplicity and according to what they feel is right in the sight of God. When it has been impossible to

consider the case at a previous meeting, the confrere should write to you; you will then examine the case before God and make your decision. Read out the request at the next meeting and let the council give its advice with peace, gentleness and charity. Finally, confreres must ask your permission for those things that are listed in the Rule.

This is what I wanted to say to you all, in the love of Jesus and Mary.

Yours in that same love,

F. Libermann

P.S. Please make sure this letter is read to our dear confreres.