

**Henri-Dominique Lacordaire:
Letter to Charles Forbes René
Comte de Montalembert
10 November 1852¹**

Correspondence Resumed after a Four-Year Interruption²

**Flavigny
10 November 1852**

My dear friend,

Although you had not sent me your recent document, I have just finished reading it, thanks to the inspiration of the poor pastor in the village, who, I am not sure why, managed to get it to me. I hasten to offer you my congratulations. Yours is a work of verve, of talent, of courage, and I felt I was meeting you again just as I had known you 20 years ago. More than others, you were obligated to protest against the most cowardly, the most shameful, and the most insolent apostasy that ever was, since your actions and your alliances might have made one doubt your perseverance in the principles of your youth. I can see clearly how you have tried to be consistent; but you also have kept this deep within yourself, something I am able to see, but the public could not grasp your interior life except through the bold outlines of your external

conduct, and there are certain brilliant words, things revealing of your way of thinking, which completely overturn its ideas about men. I heard not long ago someone citing with deep sadness these words attributed to you: "Liberty was used like a desperate weapon in a battle at night." As for me, I have gone along with the general perception about you, ever since, under the pretext of illness, you refused to be present at the special ceremony for O'Connell [Daniel O'Connell], which had been planned by you yourself, and where you stubbornly closed your door on his own son. I was thus persuaded that your position had changed, and, when several weeks later, the Revolution of 1848 broke out, I could do nothing at that point but separate myself completely from you and from *L'Univers*, not from love of the Republic in and of itself, a love which had always been restrained in spirit, but from the love of the generous principles which constantly governed my public life. No one asked you to accept democracy or the republican form of government; nothing in your upbringing required it, or rendered it likely or even possible. But you were asked to maintain in an upright and firm manner, in your actions and in your words, your position of being a liberal Catholic. This seemed generally not to be the case, and I confess to you my impression has not changed in the last four years. It was for me one of the greatest sorrows, all the more because I saw you closely bound to men for whom violence

and treachery, in addition to intrigue, brought with it each day an audacity pushed to the extreme of persecuting all who disagreed with them. This miserable faction thought it had the right to claim you, and even today, when you have separated yourself with a vigor as desperate as the situation required, it dares to say to you publicly that you belong to it, in your past, your present, and your future, trying hard to associate you with its dishonor with indissoluble bonds. Nothing will come of it, I hope, I believe, you have just shaken off this odious solidarity and in the process you have saved your good name for the future. But time, prudence, and perseverance will be needed to erase the impressions [about you], which are more commonly held than you might think. No one knows the real truth about himself; the public is an abyss where the most trained eye cannot clearly discern its features. You must make a clean break and never again hide your face behind a veil to your friends and your enemies. Even in this excellent book you have just published, there are words capable of leading people into error.

You confuse always democracy with demagoguery, the revolution with the revolutionary spirit. It is important to distinguish these things. The Church has never condemned democracy; Aristotle and Saint Thomas, just to take these two examples, placed democracy in the ranks of humanity's three great

forms of government, and they said that demagoguery is the corruption of democracy, just as tyranny is the corruption of the monarchy. Aristotle even added these words, among the most profound words I know: “If I had to choose between demagoguery and tyranny, demagoguery is still preferable, because it makes a lot of noise, and does relatively little harm, whereas tyranny does a lot of harm, and makes relatively little noise.” Aristotle when he wrote these words was comparing the history of Athens with that of Babylon.

As for revolution, it can be legitimate; all the doctors of the Middle Ages knew this to be true. But the revolution can be corrupted by the revolutionary spirit, which is to say by a continual desire for change, and a hatred for authority which renders order impossible.

[In your book], I also noticed a page that was too severe on Le Piémont.

Except for these remarks, I would give my blood to have written your book, although I did not have the need, as you do, to write it. It was an undiluted joy to rediscover you exactly the same as when I embraced you twenty-two years ago. You have chosen to associate with many other people rather than with me; you have searched for power in a multitude of alliances that are all more or less ephemeral, and in the end all this is [now] ruptured in a public

separation, where you receive nothing but insults from your allies. May God grant you, at your age, surrounded by so many honorable memories, and blessed with such a great talent, a reward for your efforts, a bearing which is both calm and constant, which has been characteristic of all great men in history, and which is the most beautiful aspect of immortality, because it gives to man something of the serenity and immutability of the divine!

I want to renew, with a joy that for a long time was not as great as it is now, the expression of my sincere and cordial affection.

Fr. Henri-Dominique Lacordaire
Provincial of the Order of Preachers

P.S. I thank you for the complimentary way in which you spoke of me in several places in your book.

Endnotes

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²Approximately 20 years before the letter below was written, Charles Forbes René Comte de Montalembert (1810–70) and Father Lacordaire had been important contributors to *L’Avenir*, a journal established in 1830 to champion the causes of religious and academic liberty, and freedom of the press. During the 1840s, however, Lacordaire became convinced that Montalembert had begun to compromise his convictions as a Catholic Liberal, and their correspondence came to a halt for four years (1848–52). That correspondence was renewed with the letter translated here, in which Lacordaire congratulates Montalembert for severing ties with a publication called *L’Univers*. Montalembert had become openly critical of the publication’s acceptance of the curtailment of basic political and civic liberties by the government of Louis-Napoleon. In the following letter, Lacordaire is responding to Montalembert’s just-published pamphlet, *Les Intérêts Catholiques du XIX^e Siècle*.