

## **Letter to a Friend Who Was Considering Whether to Leave the Seminary<sup>1</sup>**



*At the age of twenty-two, Henri Lacordaire wrote this letter to a fellow seminarian who had expressed a desire to stop his studies for the priesthood and live out the rest of his life as a lay person.*



**8 November 1824**

Yes, my friend, you have arrived at a decisive point in your life. It will affect everything, both in the near term and in eternity. You are faced now with a choice between the Church and the world, between a lifelong devotion to God, and other duties that are easier to fulfill. It is the very importance of this choice, the enormity of its consequences, the burden of carrying it out, that make you feel agitated, at a time when you need total clarity and tranquility [to make this decision]. Why do you feel such anxiety? You should examine with calmness and maturity what God is asking of you, and make sure that the aspects [of holy orders] that seem to repel you are not merely a passing trial, rather than a message from Providence calling you elsewhere. Listen, my dear

friend, you have not seen the world, and perhaps its colors have found a way to seduce you. Placed since your infancy in government-run schools, you left the world at an age when you could not have a grasp of the world, and you did not understand the sacrifice you were making when you passed from secondary school to seminary. Now that your faculties of reason have developed further, now that you can understand things in more perspective, you look back with a worried glance at the world you have left, and you dread having lost too much. You are tempted by the charms of freedom, and you are attracted by the ease of life in society. And it does seem that you would be very comfortable wearing a “habit” that does not involve adherence to a strict set of morals, and that would allow you to display the graces of your mild-mannered spirit.

The world’s pleasures do pique the curiosity, and you dream of those spectacles which you have heard so many wonderful things about. Your imagination embellishes what you have heard, because it is in the nature of this enchantress to embellish all that is far away and that one does not know well. But believe in me, and believe in the experience of all men: one cannot find happiness in these things. One becomes quickly disenchanted.

There is but one thing necessary to be happy and to be of value [to others], and that is to do one's duty, and it always costs something to accomplish these things. In the world, there are three kinds of duty to perform: one's duty as a Christian, as a citizen, and as a father to one's children.

As a Christian in the world, you will not be held to continual exercises of piety designed to nourish constantly the clergyman's soul, to prevent him from succumbing under the weight of his ministry, and to keep the spirit of God close to him. But you will nonetheless be held to taxing duties demanded of you by the Gospel, to the religious practices required by the Church. If you are less bothered by the attentiveness required of you, you will be more troubled by the environment you find yourself in: that of a corrupted century. Instead of the clean air that surrounds you now, with living examples that support your soul in the faith and the love of God, you will be breathing in a contagious disease. Ah! Perhaps you do not understand how much strength is needed to be a true Christian in the world, a person worthy to be called faithful! You think this is easy, and you tell yourself that you will be able to enjoy the pleasures that religion permits, and that you will be able to reach the eternal shores by following a less arduous path. These are vain thoughts! Salvation exacts a price no matter where or how one lives. And the innumerable kinds of solitude that the Church

has carved out for Herself in all times are testimony that the struggles in the desert have always, it seems to me, been less harsh than those we witness in this century. In solitude, the only battle you must wage is against yourself. In the world, the universe conspires against you. How many times have the passions triumphed over the most solid faith, uprooted it, after having shaken it to pieces in the heart! It is not prayer, it is not love of the divine Word that is costly to the Christian. It is the victory over one's passions, and nowhere do they launch a more terrible assault than in the place you have come to seek a way out of battle.

As a man living in the secular world, you will not feel less pain and you will not labor less.

You will need to choose an honorable state of life, and the studies required to do this will not be any less difficult than your theological studies.

Theology is one of the most beautiful of the sciences, because it encompasses philosophy, history, the humanities, and religious literature. If you hand yourself over to the legal profession, in order to work at the bar or in the magistracy, you will spend three years learning about and comparing legal texts, and, even then, you will have learned only the basics. The science of law demands an entire life. Medicine will expose you to the amphitheaters and anatomy rooms, under the condition that you sacrifice four years of

your youth to gain the title of physician, and you will spend the rest of your days proving that you deserve that title. Mathematics and the sciences are no less difficult and no more attractive.

Teaching in a government-run institution will offer you more of its monotony. Then there are all the civil administrators, who languish in obscure labor for years on end before they are allowed any leisure, and where even the heftiest pension does not compensate for the boredom of organizational work which nails you to an office desk from nine or ten in the morning until four or five in the evening. I have seen all of this, and I have seen it close up. Whoever knows a little bit about the way society works knows why God out of necessity uttered these terrible words of condemnation: *In the sweat of your face/your shall eat bread/till you return to the ground,/for out of it you were taken*<sup>2</sup>. All is work, all is suffering, here below. Everyone envies his neighbor's state of life or fortune, because we see only the appearances of things, and because we have often helped create our own state of misery. Here on earth, we must earn those moments of happiness that are possible through continual sacrifice.

Anything in excess ends up tiring or boring us, and this is true of good fortune. Fundamentally there is nothing more pitiable than those who seem to lack nothing. When the good fortune of your parents affords you complete leisure, the continual care to protect that happiness will prevent you from enjoying it.

In summation, you will have obligations as the father of a family, and here I am touching on the sweetest thing God gives us in human life, when the companion God send us combines the qualities necessary for joining our hearts and our children grow in grace before God and before men. Domestic tranquility, the attractions of an interior life in the midst of serious occupations that society requires of us, give us, to be sure, some beautiful days in our lives. But this happiness, which is often brief and fragile, is inevitably exposed to sad twists of fate, and, when one walks to the altar, one is unaware of what marriage is preparing for us, and one finds out when it is too late. These are the duties that must be fulfilled when one wishes to be a good Christian and a good citizen.

But that is not what strikes us first as we look at the world. We only see the world's exterior, the noise, the smoke, a few years in life, because youth passes quickly, with its illusions and hopes, and maturity arrives with its burdens, sorrowful experiences, and its long disillusionment. One looks around and no longer understands

what originally captivated us. What began in pleasure ends in ambition. I am aware that you will not put much credence in my words. You are under its charm, the world is carrying you along. Oh! How beautiful it seems to you. But how your chains weigh you down! Everything you see, everything you hear is propelling you away from this solitude. There is no word, no event, no situation that can push you further in the direction of the idea that has taken possession of you. Certain weaknesses have penetrated to the bottom of your heart. The culmination of all the hours, all the quarter-hours, of all the touchstones of daily life is [your decision] that it is necessary to leave. So, my friend, this is what has led me to the conclusion that your decision is not a mature decision. Oh! I abjure you, do not allow yourself to be blinded by chimeras. Take counsel in silence and peace, and pray that God will enlighten you.

It is true that the ecclesiastical state requires a great spirit of devotion, pure motives, with one's sights set on higher things. One must be prepared to protest ceaselessly against our century through example and through discourse. The priest is a man who is thrown into the middle of the populace to serve as a kind of barrier against corruption. The priest's role is not unlike that of Cato, appearing in the *circus*, gaining the silence and respect of the Romans through his sheer presence. Faith and charity, those are the sources of

sustenance for the priest's soul, *in which dwell all the sentiments that honor the human race*, and which make man worthy of having been made in the image of God. What a sublime mission it is to announce to Gospel to the nations! If, Plato, the honor of Greece, while strolling with his students in the gardens of the Academy, had been introduced to one man who attracted his interest by reading several passages from the Gospel, Plato would have fallen to his knees and adored this man as a God. Oh! The book of life! The Church of Jesus Christ, which has civilized the world and has opened to us the path to eternity. I abandoned the world to find refuge in your bosom. And now the world is taking away one of your children! As for me, I wish never to leave your delightful sanctuaries, which have given me so much more than I left behind.

My friend, I care for you with all my heart, and I think the best way for you to proceed is to decide on a certain amount of time for reflecting on your vocation, while being faithful in all the pious exercises, and applying yourself to your seminary studies. You are wrong to think that these studies will not be useful to you later on, since the *Traité de la Religion* is important for every Christian to know, above all in our century, where the most profound ignorance of these matters is widespread, and where moral life does not accord enough with its principles. You will endeavor to erase all traces of sadness from your heart. Why, my friend, why are you



sad? You are uncertain of your vocation. Well! You need to examine yourself with courage and utter objectivity. In such a situation nothing [in your examination] should be capricious or moody. You must act like a man. Once you have seriously meditated on this, and pray to God who decides all our destinies, you will declare what your wish is in this matter, with your sovereign will. There is nothing more authoritative than one's sovereign will—other than God. Up until that point, you should maintain the most profound silence, and not give over the most important decision of your life to the anticipated judgments of others. If you come to believe that God is no longer calling you to his service, we will then take measures to accord what you owe to your father and to other respectable people with what you owe to yourself. Don't concern yourself with this ahead of time: *Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.*<sup>3</sup> As for the length of time you should take for reflection, I will fix it at 1 December. This is not too long a time when it involves a decision of this magnitude. Grant me this, my dear friend. You will allow me this, won't you? Farewell, time presses, farewell. Think about everything that I have said to you. Carefully weigh my arguments.

Consult your conscience. And, whatever happens, stay my friend forever, on the shores of the Rhône, just as on the shores of the Seine.

May God be with you. I embrace you and cherish you.

**H. Lacordaire**

### ***Endnotes***

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<sup>1</sup>Translation from the French © 2010 cdtansey. All rights reserved. Translated from Théophile Foisset, *Vie du R.P. Lacordaire*, tome I, deuxième édition (Paris: Librairie Jacques Lecoffre, 1873).

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3:19a. English text taken from Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, *The Oxford Annotated Bible*, Revised Standard Version, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 6:34b. May and Metzger, *The Oxford Annotated Bible*, Revised Standard Version.