

## TO BARON D'ECKSTEIN

(Univers of 22 June 1834)

Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, OP

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Metz, 18 June 1834

Sir,

If the article concerning me that you inserted in *France catholique* had contained a simple review of the book I recently published, I don't see that I could do any better than to remain silent. But regarding this book, that you declared yourself unwilling to judge thoroughly, it pleased you to slander my person and the general viewpoint from which you presume I wrote. I am therefore obliged to answer you, and I address myself directly to you because you have made an issue of a person — an issue about which I had hoped to avoid any shadow of personality. Nonetheless, despite its more polemic format, I will always remember your kindness towards me, and I will respect in you what you did not respect in me. Those who will read both of us will perhaps, by this one characteristic, discern where there was passion, and where there was duty.

Above all, you reproach me *for beating my wet-nurse and for applying the discipline* [a whip - Trans.] *to the back of my master*. This choice of words adds to your thought a value that I understand. But when one pronounces libelous words and not the truth, one must be sure of his action. Allow me to tell you, Sir, that you are completely unaware of my relationship with Mr. de La Mennais. In fact, Mr. de La Mennais was neither my father nor my master. Of the ten years that have just passed, there were six during which I set aside the repeated requests made to me in his name to bind myself to him. There was one year in which I served him devotedly; there was another in which I struggled painfully against the need to separate myself from him; the rest was achieved within that separation. Of the four aspects presented by his school — the philosophical, the monarchical, the liberal, and the last one that I do not wish to name — I took part in only one of them, the liberal phase, not in the meaning that I was following Mr. de La Mennais,

but in the sense that he himself was reaching the point where I had been for a long time. Here and there, we were never in agreement: I have written proof of this. When I began to serve him, or rather, to serve his thought and mine, which once were in agreement, I had hoped, it is true, that he would be everything to me; I did call him with the names *father* and *master*, but my nature quickly resisted, even in the midst of the labors at *L'Avenir*, to this abdication of my freedom, and of this, too, I still have written proofs.

Here it is, Sir, my entire history, since you force me to relate it. *My wet-nurse*, in the spiritual order, was the Church; *my father*, was Jesus Christ. I preferred them over men because a Christian does not involve himself save in the loyalty he owes them. When we left for Rome, I had made a solemn promise to listen with the submissiveness of a child the slightest word of the vicar of Jesus Christ. This word made itself heard; I did not hesitate for a moment. I bowed down before it, consistent with myself, faithful to the respect for the apostolic see so praised by the school that I had embraced, and in the end, giving an example all the more beneficial than your light treatment of it. Your banter about *the enlightenment* that I would receive in Rome justifies the simplicity of my behavior, by showing that the Holy See needed to be honored not only in the eyes of faithless men, but also before the many eyes of those who profess to be Catholics.

And so, I left a school that was putting itself aside, that failed in its sacred promises, that abdicated carelessly its submission to an authority which, for twelve years, had been its principal distinction. These reasons are more worthy of respect than those which led to similar partings of the men whom you cite, for example: Aristotle regarding Plato, Fichte regarding Kant. These philosophers abandoned their masters because they believed they had as much knowledge as they had, as many rights as they had to establish a philosophical system. As for me, I abandoned Mr. de La Mennais because I believed that the Church had more knowledge than he has, more rights than he to the submission of minds. I had no intention of establishing a school in place of his, but to attend the universal school. One is never too young for that, Sir; for that, one does not need to be a genius, a philosopher; it is enough to recognize one's weakness, and to have the heart of a child without which one does not enter the kingdom of heaven. One can call to account the philosopher who acts independently without the exaggeration with which his teaching is still covered, according to your way of speaking; as for the man who acts independently at the feet of the Church, if we accuse him of the adornment he wears, he can be proud of it: it is the ancient and immortal garb of truth.

But this book, you say, evidently results in wounding Mr. de La Mennais, to strike him at a time when all the world is throwing stones at him, when simple hatreds find the occasion favorable to vent their rage against a great man.

Not at all, Sir; such is not the evident result of this book. Never does truth, spoken without bitterness, without deference to people, has as its result to strike and to wound. My book was an appeal, not an injury; when kings are unhappy, one can speak the truth to them, while kneeling. Had my book been an assault, it would not have one of the strong against the weak, but the defense of the weak against the strong. You are too clear-sighted, Sir, not to have judged the situation as it really is. Never was Mr. de La Mennais as influential as he is today; he is Achilles within his tent. Sovereign authority of his destinies, between the world which calls, and the Church which ever extends her arms to him, between the age and eternity, object of a sublime combat, every man awaits with anxiety the final cry of his soul; for the longest time, the fate of a simple mortal has not been more glorious. Mr. de La Mennais continues to reign; he is not even at Fontainebleau. As for me, humble soldier of the Church, a child lost in the awareness of that great danger in which I got involved, I lack even the hope that someone will provide me with courage. A new cause is forming around Mr. de La Mennais, distinguished men are getting together to support him; several religious flyers will more or less openly establish themselves as his champions, and I will nonetheless be accused of throwing stones at a crestfallen man. No, Sir; the courage was always to defend the feeble, the oppressed, the victims. But here, the feeble one is truth; the oppressed is the Church which no one thinks about, and on which one seeks to impose the thoughts of a man, lest she appear ungrateful and troublesome; the victims are all those young men, jeopardized by a steadfastness whose extent was impossible to foresee, who carry the burden of a dedication worthy of better compensation; their troubled minds lament before God the clouded mind that abandons them.

I will not pause, Sir, at what you say about my mind: light, frisky, inconsiderate, unsteady, lacking in philosophical comprehension. It would have been more noble of you to engage me in a serious discussion and to let the public decide about my incompetence. But, since you have set yourself up as my judge, I have the advantage of having you judge yourself and we will see shortly whether you have always presented in such a masterly fashion the inventory of my mind.

In the meantime, here, according to you, is the fundamental thought of my book: “A complete rejection of human reason.” Going from there with no other proof save your assertion, and the courage with which you have repeated it in five long columns, in your pity, you sought to teach me a number of things, such as these, for example: “That religion is the food of hearts and of spirits; that reason also wishes to receive Communion and share in the holy table; that Jesus Christ is the consolation in secret adversity; that what is sufficient to develop a Protestant minister, an honest man, after all, is not sufficient for a Catholic priest; that theology is no longer the privilege of a single class of men; that all minds, strong, deep, serious, wish to drink it in, and that I would make theology the exclusive knowledge of seminaries; that the black robe does not provide inspiration, but that it is the Christian genius whose heart beats under the black robe; that, especially as regards this major question, I am completely unequal to the needs of the times; that there is only one truth, and not two, that there is no sufficient cause to disparage the human mind and to make it a humble vassal, that before God and Jesus Christ, reason is never too confused, that in the sacristy it is very much confused; that to say to men today: ‘Believe and do not look; believe because we tell you to, like the infant at the breast, believe like the country woman at her bench, that is what you need, nothing else’ — is that reasonable?; that my entire argument against Mr. de La Mennais is a contest that I introduce into religion against his religion; that the human race today has teeth, that it wants to chew, that it is capable of doing so, that he no longer needs the tongue to swallow spiritual nourishment, etc.”

To this profusion of warnings, to this wonderful multiplication of the same idea, I have one very simple answer to give: it is that the fundamental idea of my book is not the complete renunciation of human reason, but absolutely the opposite. Moreover, I will take pains to show you after you yourself will have taken the time to organize your assertion. Seriously now, have you read me, or was it your plan to leave that to the public and to set me up before it with a grotesque crown of your invention? No, you have not done so and you have indeed read me. But you read me with a very singular spirit which moves me to regret much less the little character that you grant to mine, not to mention the contemptuous language you use against me. Several times, you have called me: that ecclesiastic. Now, here is how *this layman* used to write to *that ecclesiastic*, in 1831.

“Reverend, on Sunday night, I had the honor of sending you an article that I hope you will receive. Today, I address you another concerning the speech relating to foreign

affairs. In everything that *L'Avenir* says, I have found only one stumbling block: universal suffrage. This word always appears to me as being too vague, presenting to many minds sheer rabble-rousing, and requiring many internal evolutions in the social order before one can think of applying it. But this may perhaps be simply unintentional. Please accept, Reverend, the expression of my very sincere dedication and *of my deepest admiration.*”

This 12 August.

Baron d'ECKSTEIN

Thus, dear Sir, in August 1831, nothing in *L'Avenir* was a stumbling block to you except universal suffrage, about which I had never written anything. Thus, in August 1831, you had towards me *deepest admiration*. No doubt, at that time, you had not noticed in my style that *complete inexperience of men and of matters* that you have discovered today. When one wishes to offend a man, Sir, one should be certain of not having praised him, concerning the same matters, with some exaggeration. One ought to be sure also of not being indebted to him. You are indebted to me, Sir, without your realizing it.

I saw you, in the final period of *L'Avenir*, vainly requesting the favor of having some articles included. You did not have one favorable voice in the Council; the memory was still there of certain pages of the *Catholique* newspaper concerning the same system of philosophy that today you do not wish to judge; you were not forgiven. I was the first to offer you support, as soon as I had earned enough credit to do so, and our columns were finally opened to you. Was that following the *inexperience of men and of matters* of which you speak? I do not believe so: I was simply being proper towards you. You have paid me for it with injustice; you have made yourself the spokesman of an emerging party that believes it has an interest in crushing me. But God will uphold me against them and against you; God, Who plumbs loins and hearts, Who knows in what intention I did what I did, Who knows whether it is being unsteady to keep promises solemnly sworn to, Who knows whether I was mistaken in seeing interests of great importance where you only saw *a quarrel of the sacristy*. And yes, as regards that question of sacristy, I wish to set aside the praise that it pleased you to address to me in acknowledgment. You believe that I belong to the *clergy* and not to the *sacristy*. You are mistaken, Sir; I belong to the sacristy: I hold fast to all the names that malice or frivolity successively create against the Church because there is something in the world that I esteem above everything else, the Church; something

that I will defend all my life against everybody, the Church, because one of my duties is to share in her disgrace since I wish to partake in her glory some day. Besides, time will weigh in its scale your conduct and mine; it will decide which one of us, in this matter, was the thoughtless and inconsiderate man.

I have the honor of being, etc.

Father Henri LACORDAIRE

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