

17th November 1807

Montdidier, 17th November 1807.

Very dear Father and Mother

If you are in pain for a reason that you want to hide from me, since you don't judge it appropriate to write to me, the news that you received concerning our School might well have increased the pain. Although I am uncertain as to whether I am causing good or pain, it seems to me that it is my duty to write you to appease your concerns about us. But I am going to go a short way back in time to put you in the picture about the business that I have already written to you about. The Emperor (probably ill-informed by the enemies of Religion) suppressed all the houses run by the Fathers of the Faith and therefore dependent on a foreign chief (which they are not); you know, very dear Parents, that our masters are not Fathers of the Faith at all¹. This business was dealt with on the Feast of All Saints in the presence of the whole court, and the Cardinal (one illegible word) whom one believed to have protected these establishments, received the order that as the Head of the French clergy, to tell all these Fathers, presumed to be Fathers of the Faith, that their establishments would be suppressed, and that all those among them who were still in their houses on the 15th of the month would be transported to Guyana. You would be right in feeling that this was a savage blow. Our Fathers received this order with the greatest tranquillity of soul. Fr Le Blanc was in Paris; he came back as quickly as possible to deal with the matter at hand. Indeed, time was short. He withdrew to his room and left here without seeing us and never to see us again. Just like a tender Father, he did not have the strength to make his adieus to his children, the dearest objects to his eyes. The news of the departure of Fr Le Blanc, and his rapid return from Paris without seeing any one of us, made us guess that there was something desperate going on. Fr Sellier left for Amiens and promised to reveal all on his return. In fact, he arrived here a week ago last Saturday. Immediately everybody surrounded him to have his promised news: he made us gather in a room and told us that the government had just given them the order to disband, but that he been to speak to His Eminence the Bishop in order to procure other teachers for us (the Sub-Prefect also wants this with all his heart). At this news everybody broke down in tears, one only heard weeping and sighs; in vain the good Fr Sellier strove to tell to us more to comfort us and was interrupted. However he told us that faith had to overtake nature, and that we had to consider ourselves lucky to be able to endure something for the Good Lord; in short he told us to go to the Chapel to commend ourselves to the Holy Virgin, promising us that in this way we would get the favour of this good Mother. There, with more devotion than ever, we shared our pain with this good Patroness, asking that God's flock should not be dispersed by the ravaging wolf. Two days later we received a letter which allowed our teachers to remain at least for a month, to make the separation less painful, and in the meantime to be replaced by other priests. Indeed, we already have other teachers, and particularly Fr La Marche who is a man of the greatest merit in virtue and in knowledge. What should console you, very dear Parents, is to see that we will be able to continue our studies here. Sadly we no longer have Fr Le Blanc any more and Fr Sellier will soon also leave: now we will see the treasure that we are going to lose! How blind the human mind is; it does not make us treasure anything until it is gone! It is a terrifying thought and one that makes me tremble when I think what will be the torment of damned when they see that it was so easy for them to gain their salvation having Jesus Christ among them on earth that offering them His gifts for their eternal happiness. Here is a copy of the letter that the good Fr Le Blanc wrote to us some days after his departure. I will transcribe it word for word from the original that I have in my hands, and which I will preserve precious; you will see in it, very dear Parents, his tenderness for his pupils and his complete submission to God's will.

J.M.J. 10th November 1807

You know my love for you all, my very dear children, and you will have all guessed the reason why I did not see you before my departure. Thanks be to God, I am resigned to His holy will; I adore Him, I bless Him and submit to Him without complaint; but I didn't have the strength to make my final adieus to you, and I felt this blow so strongly that I was unable even to see you without feeling the most violent tearing of my heart.

¹ Aren't they?

Now, my dear Children, I have the consolation of tell those who will remain at the School that they will have in Mr de la Marche a Father who will fully replace everything that they have lost, and I advise them to give him their trust entirely. I say to all that they should never forget that the earth is only a place of exile, and therefore of misery and pain, but that this exile is only a moment, it is only a dream; in the blink of an eye we will no longer be there. This exile is given to us to prepare us for an eternity of serving God. Let us attach ourselves, therefore, dear children, to God, and to Him alone, especially when we are abandoned by the supports that He has given us but which were not Himself. Remember that you have never been happy, and be sure that you will never be happy, except in serving God. You will have difficulties and obstacles, that is true, but God will give you grace, and will be faithful to all those that do not abandon him.

There is nothing left to me, my very dear children, but to implore you to forgive me all the harm that I have done to you, everything that was an obstacle to God's graces in you: ask God to judge me according to His mercy. In short, do not forget that no one loved you more than me, and that everywhere I go I will carry you in my heart until eternity. Pray therefore for me as I will for you, every day of my life; I embrace you all and stay united with you in Christ our Lord, our only real friend whom no one can remove from us.

(Signed) Fr Le Blanc

He also wrote to me in particular the most edifying letter possible, and in which his humility seems no less than in this one. Ah! who could not admit that one is happy when one serves God? Nothing could happen to Fr Le Blanc that would be more painful to him, even death, as he admitted himself; and however he submits to God's will that he sees in the orders of the Emperor. Nature suffers, but the soul enjoys the greater peace in seeing God's hand that strikes as a Father here below in order to forgive in the other world.

I received the day before yesterday a letter from my dear Uncle Huleu which caused me the greatest joy. Ah! How much we should praise the Good Lord for having given us such an uncle! He does not know anything of what has happened here, and I did not dare to write to him about it, considering the circumstances. Please, very dear Parents, write to him about it, and even if possible send him Fr Le Blanc's letter. I owe him much and I assure you that after you there is no-one who is dearer to me in Our Lord. He takes the greatest interest in my happiness, and wants nothing from me save my advancement in God's will. I will write to him shortly, however, when there is nothing more to fear.

It only remains for me to ask you to write to me as soon as possible, in order for me to understand the reason for your long silence. Do not be afraid, my very dear Parents, to tell me if I am reason for it. I beg you to tell me if I have caused you pain, and, with God's grace, I will repair my mistake. You know the proverb "errare humanum est; errorem agnoscere, angelicum." Please, therefore, satisfy my request as soon as possible.

I pray also my dear brother Jean to think of me, proving that he does so by writing to me from time to time; he must admit that a letter is written easily, and yet it would give me great pleasure. What reason can he have for not doing so?

What I say to my brother Jean I also say to my dear sisters; they would give me a lot of pleasure in telling me that they are applying themselves, but especially that they love the Good Lord, and that they believe the poet who writes: "esteem and respect are just tributes that in the strongest enemies attract virtues".

In short, they should be more grateful for a mistake that someone points out to them than for the compliments that the world pays so much. As Boileau says: "He who seems to applaud you is laughing at you and playing with you;" and again; "love the one who counsels you and not the one who praises you". I finish, very dear Parents, in commending myself to your prayers.

Your devoted son

C Van Crombrughe

PS: Please pay no attention to the mistakes which have crept up in my letter; you would be right in guessing that I didn't write it all at once, and it is very easy to make mistakes that way. Besides, you know well that it is dictated by my feelings for you, and does not have any other source than my heart. I embrace you cordially, as does François. Receive our respects.

