

Malines, 11th February 1808

Pupil at Fr De la Marche's boarding school in Montdidier.

My dear Nephew,

I have received your letter and I have done as you wished among my holy daughters.¹ They cherish you in the heart of Jesus Christ and they put your request to Him. I see with pleasure that you are seeking that good friend of your divine Saviour, holy humility. I hope that you will seek it all your life because it is something exceptional in that when you think that you have at last found it, it escapes and leaves us thinking that we have never had it.

So do not be afraid; do not seek to know "am I now humble of heart?" But have an earnest desire to be so, pray fervently to become so and fight endlessly against pride, love of self, vainglory, presumption, self-reliance, pretention and conceit: these are the bitter reprimands and all the pain of the infernal serpent. In fighting against this vice and seeking holy humility we should avoid another trap which is a false humility in constantly accusing ourselves of pride or other faults. The Lord wants us to be as simple as doves, sincere and open, but at the same time as careful as snakes. If we tell others that we are sinful they will not believe it: often it is better that others simply believe us to be sinful.

I believe that the best and most sure humility is that which reveals itself in our minds and hearts when we consider the infinite greatness of our God and the smallness and wretchedness of our selves. When a soul contemplates the immensity of its God it will be overwhelmed and no longer find itself. In considering the omnipotence of God the soul will only find weakness in itself. If it considers its wisdom it will no longer know anything. If it reflects on its holiness it will find in itself nothing good, no real virtue. If it considers its own goodness and charity it will find that it has done nothing as yet for its neighbour. In a word each perfection of the soul's God vitalises a part of the good that it believes it has; the soul becomes convinced that it has no reason for pride and that pride will only be a source of confusion and humiliation. This understanding leads to a faithful rendering to God, as the source of all that is good, what little the soul has achieved with His grace. The soul does not take pride in its own good qualities, nor in its own progress, nor in the graces which God has given to it more than to others; on the contrary it sees in this a source of humility since it regards all this as belonging to God alone. These are gifts not based on merit, but gifts of which the soul will have to give a careful accounting whilst recognising that it has not used them as well as others would. Finally this belief leads the soul to groan when it is praised or shown esteem, since it knows that the merit of the good it does belongs to God alone, and that it is worthy of blame for all it has not done after receiving so many graces. Saint Augustine was indeed right, my dear nephew, in crying our ceaselessly Domine noverim te! noverim me!² because the knowledge of God which leads to self-knowledge brings humility of the heart and of the mind. Our hearts, for love of the truth, seek out humiliation when the mind is convinced that we are only worthy of contempt. Let us then, my dear one, both ask the Good Lord for this double knowledge for the other: I hope to acquire it through your simple prayers and I will carry you in my heart in the hope that He will grant it also to you. The exhortations of Fr Wellens are excellent: we use them here in the refectory from time to time.

¹ The Sisters of Christian Charity: doubtless a prayer request.

² Lord, let me know myself and you.

I hope that you have received your exemption from military service since several others for whom the Archbishop has interceded, as well as the person I mentioned to you, have received it and do not have to submit to the lottery.³

Assure Fr De La Marche of my respects, as well as Fr Quénard whom I seem to remember. My compliments to your brother François: tell him I love him and that I hope he is doing his best to progress in study and in virtue; I pray for him each day.

The Secretary greets you as do my holy daughters.

I have the honour to be with esteem,

My dear nephew,

Your very humble and obedient servant,

— *JG Huleu*

PS I think I have already told you that our cousin Lauwers has been appointed Parish Priest at Humbeen, a league and a half from here.

³ Military conscription was by lottery. If one was listed as an ecclesiastic one was exempt. If one's name was drawn one could pay for a replacement.