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Correspondence

1. Letter to Louis XIV [Pl. 1:543–551]

The person, Sire, who takes the liberty of writing you this letter has no interest in this world.¹ She writes it neither out of bitterness, nor out of ambition, nor out of a desire to mix herself up in great affairs. She loves you without being known to you, and she sees God in your person. With all your power you cannot give her the goods she desires, and there are no evils that she would not willingly suffer in order to enable you to know the truths necessary for your salvation. If she speaks to you with vehemence, don't be shocked by it. Truth is free and powerful. You are hardly accustomed to hearing it. Men accustomed to being flattered readily take pure and simple truth for distress, for bitterness, and for excess. It is to betray you not to show it to you in its full extent. God is witness to the fact that the person who speaks to you does so with a heart full of zeal, respect, fidelity, and solicitude for all that concerns your true interest.

You were born, Sire, with an upright and fair heart, but those who raised you gave you for a science of governing only defiance, jealousy, an aversion to virtue, a fear of all spectacular merit, a taste for supple and fawning men, arrogance, and attention to your interests alone.

For nearly thirty years your leading ministers weakened and overturned all the time-honored maxims [544] of state so that your authority might rise to its heights—a project to which they were amenable since your authority was in their hands.² No longer were the state or the rules spoken of. One spoke only of the king and his good pleasure. Your revenues and your expenses have been pushed to the extreme. You have been raised to the heavens in order to have outshone, it was said, the greatness of all your predecessors together, that is to say, in order to have impoverished the whole of France so as to introduce a monstrous and incurable luxury to the court. They sought to raise you on the ruins of all the ranks in the state, as if you could be great by ruining all your subjects, on whom your greatness is founded. It is true that you have been jealous of authority, perhaps

our neighbor. Ask learned and upright men about this: they will tell you that what I say is as clear as day.

This is enough, Sire, to recognize that you have spent your entire life outside the way of truth and justice, and consequently outside that of the Gospel. All the horrible troubles that have distressed the whole of Europe for more than twenty years—all the blood spilled, all the scandals committed, all the provinces ravaged, all the cities and towns burned to ashes—these are the disastrous consequences of this war of 1672, undertaken for your glory and for the confusion of the newspaper editors and medallion-makers of Holland.⁵ Examine, without flattering yourself, and with good men, whether you can protect all that which you possess as a result of the treaties to which you reduced your enemies by so unjustified a war.

It is still the true source of all the ills France suffers. Since this war you have [546] always wanted to establish peace through mastery and to impose conditions, instead of settling them with equity and moderation. This is why the peace cannot last. Shamefully overwhelmed, your enemies have dreamed only of rising up again and reuniting against you. Are you really surprised by this? You have not even stayed within the terms of this peace that you imposed with so much arrogance. In peacetime you waged war and made enormous conquests. You established a Chamber of Reunion in order to be at once both judge and party.⁶ This was to add insult and derision to usurpation and violence. You sought out equivocal terms in the Treaty of Westphalia in order to capture Strasbourg.⁷ None of your ministers ever dared to allege these terms in any negotiation to show that you had had the least pretensions to this city. Such behavior united and animated all of Europe against you. Even those who have not dared openly to declare themselves eagerly desired your weakening and humiliation as the only hope for the freedom and peace of all Christian nations. You, Sire, who could have acquired so much solid and peaceful glory by being the father of your subjects and arbiter of your neighbors, you have been rendered the common enemy of your neighbors, and you have come to be regarded in your kingdom as a hard master.

The strangest effect of these bad counsels is the extent of the league formed against you. The allies would prefer to wage a losing war than to establish peace with you, because they are persuaded by their own experience that this peace would not be a true peace, that you would not abide by it any more than by the others, and that you would use it to overwhelm each of your neighbors individually and easily as soon as their alliances could be broken. Thus the more victorious you are, the more they fear you, and the more they unite in

order to avoid the slavery by which they think themselves threatened. Unable to beat you, they hope at least to exhaust you in the long run. In the end their only remaining hope of security with you lies in putting you in a weakened condition in which you cannot harm them. Put yourself, [547] Sire, in their place for a moment, and see what it means to have preferred your own gain to justice and good faith.

Meanwhile your people, whom you ought to love as your children, and who have been up to now so devoted to you, are dying of hunger.⁸ The cultivation of the land is almost abandoned. The towns and the countryside are being depopulated. All the arts languish and cannot feed the workers. All trade is wiped out. As a result you have destroyed half of the genuine domestic power of your state, in order to make and defend vain foreign conquests. Instead of drawing money out of these poor people, you ought to give them alms, and feed them. All of France is merely a vast hospital, desolate and without supplies. The magistrates are debased and exhausted. The nobility, of whom all property is held provisionally, live only by letters of state. You are pestered by a crowd of men who ask for favors and who murmur. It is you, Sire, who have brought on yourself all this confusion, because the entire kingdom having been ruined, you have everything in your hands, and it is possible to live only by your favor. Thus this great kingdom so flourishing under a king who is depicted to us every day as the delight of the people, and who would in fact now be so if flattering counselors had not poisoned him.

Even the people (it is necessary to say all) who have loved you so much, who had so much confidence in you, are beginning to lose their friendship, confidence, and even respect. Your victories and your conquests no longer bring them joy. They are full of bitterness and despair. Little by little rebellion is breaking out on all sides. They fear that you have no pity for their troubles, that you love only your authority and your glory. If the king, it is said, had a father's heart for his people, would he not rather put aside his glory to give his people bread, and enable them to catch their breath after so many troubles, than to hold on to some places on the frontier that only lead to wars? What response can you give to this, Sire? Public passions that were long unknown now become frequent. Even Paris, so near to you, is not exempt. The magistrates are compelled to tolerate the insolence of rebels and to pay them off under the table [548] in order to appease them; thus are paid those whom it is necessary to punish. You are reduced to the shameful and deplorable extreme of either allowing sedition to go unpunished, enabling it to grow, or of inhumanely slaughtering the people you have rendered so

miserable, in stealing from them, by your taxes for this war, the bread they struggle to win by the sweat of their brows.

But while they lack bread, you yourself lack funds, and you do not want to see the extremes to which you have been reduced. Since you have always been fortunate, you cannot imagine yourself ever ceasing to be so. You are afraid to open your eyes. You are afraid of them not being opened. You are afraid of being compelled to sacrifice some part of your glory. This glory that swells your heart is dearer to you than justice, than your own tranquility, than the preservation of your people constantly dying from diseases caused by famine, than even your eternal salvation, which is incompatible with this idol of glory.

Thus, Sire, the state in which you are. You live as if you are blindfolded to fate. You flatter yourself on daily successes that determine nothing, and you cannot see from a more general viewpoint the broader scope of affairs which is falling into imperceptible decline without any remedy. While you take the field of battle and the cannon of your enemy in rough combat, while you take places by force, you do not imagine that you will fight on a terrain that gives away under your feet, and that you will fall despite your victories.

Everyone sees this and nobody dares to help you see it yourself. You will perhaps see it too late. True courage consists in not flattering one's self, and in taking a firm stance before necessity. You willingly lend an ear, Sire, only to those who flatter you with vain hopes. The men whom you deem the most solid are those who fear you and who avoid you the most. As you are king, you should seek out the truth, press your men to speak it without sugarcoating, and encourage those who are too timid. On the contrary, you seek only not to go deeper. But God will know well in the end to lift [549] the veil that covers your eyes and show you what escapes your sight. For ages he has held his arms raised above you. But he is slow to strike you, because he has pity on a prince who has been all his life haunted by flatterers, and because moreover your enemies are also his own. But he will surely know to separate his just cause from your unjust one, and to humiliate you in order to convert you, because you will only be a Christian through humiliation. You do not love God. You even fear him only with the fear of a slave. It is Hell and not God that you fear. Your religion consists only in superstitions, in petty superficial practices. You are like the Jews of whom God said, "with their lips [they] glorify me, but their heart is far from me."⁹ You are meticulously attentive to trifles, and hardened to terrible evils. You love only your glory and your ease. You refer everything to yourself as if you were the god of the world, and all

the rest had been created only to be sacrificed for you. On the contrary, God has put you on the earth merely for your people. But, alas, you do not understand these truths. How would you know them? You do not know God, you do not love Him, you do not pray to Him from the heart, and you make no effort to know Him.

You have an archbishop who is corrupt, scandalous, incorrigible, false, crafty, insincere, hostile to all virtue, and who makes all good men groan.¹⁰ You put up with him because he thinks only of pleasing you by his flatteries. Prostituting his honor for more than twenty years, he won your confidence. You hand good men over to him, you give him free rein to tyrannize the Church, and not a single virtuous prelate is treated as well as he.

As far as your confessor goes, he is not vicious.¹¹ But he fears solid virtue, and he only loves profane and loose men. He is jealous of his authority, which you have extended beyond all limits. Bishops had always been the king's confessors, and decided all affairs of conscience. You alone in France, Sire, fail to see that he knows nothing, that his mind is coarse and small, and that he combines [550] his artifice with this coarseness of spirit. Even the Jesuits despise him and are outraged at seeing him so vulnerable to the ridiculous ambition of his family. You have made a minister of state out of a religious man. He understands men no better than he understands anything else. He is the dupe of all those who flatter him and make him little presents. He neither doubts nor hesitates on any difficult question. Another man, very upright and very wise, would not dare to decide alone. As for him, he fears only having to deliberate with men who know the rules. He always goes boldly and fearlessly to mislead you. He will always lean toward laxity and to keeping you in ignorance. At least he will only lean toward parties conforming to the rules when he will fear scandalizing you. Thus one blind man leads another, and, as Jesus says, they both fall together into the pit.¹²

Your archbishop and your confessor have thrown you into the difficulties of the business of ecclesiastical appointments, in the bad business of Rome; they have left you to engage by M. de Louvois in those of St. Lazarus, and would have left you to perish in this injustice, if M. de Louvois had outlived you.¹³

It might have been hoped, Sire, that your council would have drawn you away from so wayward a path. But your council has neither power nor vigor for the good. At least Mme de Maintenon and the Duke of Beauvillier ought to have put themselves in the service of your confidence in order to disabuse you.¹⁴ But their weakness and their timidity dishonors them and scandalizes

everyone. France is in peril. What are they waiting for in order to speak to you frankly? That everything be lost? Are they afraid of displeasing you? Then they do not love you, because it is necessary to be ready to upset those one loves rather than flatter them or betray them by one's silence. For what good are they if they do not show you that you must return the lands that are not yours, prefer the love of your people to a false glory, repair the harms that you have done to the Church, and dream of becoming a true Christian, before death overtakes you? I know well that when one speaks with this Christian liberty, one runs the risk of losing the favor of kings. But is your favor dearer to them than [551] your salvation? I also know well that one must pity you, console you, relieve you, speak to you with zeal, gentleness, and respect. But in the end it is necessary to speak the truth. Woe, woe to those who don't speak it, and woe to you if you are not ready to hear it! It is shameful that they had your confidence so fruitlessly for so long. It is up to them to withdraw themselves if you take too much offense, and if you only want to surround yourself with flatterers. You will perhaps ask, Sire, what they should say to you. Here it is: they should make clear to you that it is necessary to humble yourself under the all-powerful hand of God, if you do not wish Him to humble you, that it is necessary to beg for peace and by this shame to atone for all the glory that you have made your idol, that it is necessary to reject the unjust counsels of flattering politicians, and finally that, in order to save the state, it is necessary to return to your enemies as soon as possible the conquests that you in any case cannot hold without injustice. Are you not too happy amid your misfortunes, which God fashions in order to bring to an end the prosperities that have blinded you, and doesn't he compel you to make essential restitutions to your salvation, which you would have never been able to resolve yourself to make in a peaceful and triumphant state? The person who speaks these truths to you, Sire, so far from being opposed to your interests, would give her life in order for you to see what God wants you to see, and she does not stop praying for you.

2. Letter to the Marquis de Louville [CF 10:179–182]

. . . I will tell you—without knowing anything, by any channel—what can happen in your court if you were to fail to limit yourself to your specific function, or fail to mistrust men. It is out of my deep friendship that I speak to you thusly¹⁵ Be patient; resist both your first and even your second thoughts;