

CIRCULAR LETTER No. 109

OF THE

VERY REV. SUPERIOR GENERAL

TO THE

Congregation of the Holy Cross.

NOTRE DAME, IND., March 5th, 1881.

REV. FATHERS AND BELOVED CHILDREN IN JESUS CHRIST:

Mt. St. Mary's teaches us a lesson we should never forget. The misfortune of this time-honored and celebrated Institution is now the subject of public and private attention everywhere. I mean here no censure of any one individual connected with the venerated college; I take simply the declaration now made public of its failure and bankruptcy, as an occasion for some important remarks which I intended presenting to all our religious since nearly twelve months. Emmitsburg is not, unfortunately, the only place from which we have heard of pecuniary embarrassments; but it is the most recent and most painful for us, as it is directly in our line. Such a warning should not be lost, but wisely profited by, to bring reform wherever needed.

Such dreadful announcements, so painful to Religious and so humiliating for Catholics at large, make me feel more keenly than anything else the awful responsibility of my charge. Poor as it is, yet it is a relief to avail myself of this opportunity to confess that what terrifies me most, since twelve years, is the obligation, civil or moral, I have assumed before the public, to shield us against debts. In presence of such a sad reality, no one will find it strange to be recalled to the strict rules of general economy, without which we should not deserve the name of Religious, especially in the administrative circles of the Congregation. Wherever a religious council is itself governed by due respect for its constitutions and superior authority, there is no danger of any serious commital; but if this is set aside, who can foresee the result? Alas! we have made enough and a great deal too much of such ruinous experiments, prolific only in consequences of the worst nature. Weak minds always fancy they have only to erect such and such a building, or to yield to the entreaties of such or such an interested adviser, etc., etc., to see the outlay covered at once and made a source of profit! I leave you to qualify such undertakers.

Not only will they go lightly, ornamenting, enlarging and living beyond their means, but they will scarcely stop at any bounds to secure patronage and fill up their halls. They will reduce their prices and make reductions at that, rather than miss an opportunity to increase their number, upon the principle of that celebrated merchant who sold everything under cost, expecting to find his profits on the quantity. At least, you will say, we make friends and grateful ones. Are you very certain of this? Experience has taught me a different lesson.

Two weeks after our disaster of the 23d of April, 1879, I made a personal appeal to nearly 200 families indebted to Notre Dame, not from reduced terms, but from actual acknowledged accounts standing unpaid, due, many of them, of responsible and able parties, one of them having even a deposit of funds with our Treasurer here; I made said appeal as strong and moving as I could, for I knew it covered an amount of \$75,000. Shall I say how much I received? Why not? we may all turn it to profit. I received twenty-two dollars. Ah! this is the lesson I then learned. We expected to make friends by patiently waiting, as we had by reducing terms and sometimes foregoing all payments; *we failed*; and, what is worse yet, we made of those pretended friends under obligations, *ungrateful beings*, the worst class of people; we have nothing to expect from them, but something to fear. What conclusions shall I draw from such premises? Here they are: viz:

1. I absolutely forbid, for all our Houses, going into expenses beyond the approved Budget.

2. I strongly advise you to postpone all new and unnecessary outlays of money, until you are free from debts. You may all rest assured of one thing, which every one can see in the air and everywhere, viz.: that a *debt-maker* will soon be looked down, with more than general contempt. After such striking and deplorable warnings, no excuse, nothing but downright universal condemnation can be looked for by new endorsers of such a pitiable system. Such will be the verdict of every honest man in the world. But in a Community, I tell you, the time has come already when any member creating a serious debt and leaving it unpaid, shall be disgraced for life. But why not leave them in charge until all is paid? Simply because bold debt-makers are the poorest debt-payers. They deal with the Community funds as if they were their own; or rather the reverse.

3. I must add here, as a result of my forty years' experience that, instead of favoring the method apparently forced on Catholic schools in this country, of filling up our halls at any price, on any terms, and even gratuitously, *I reprove it for our Houses*, of which it is a ruin, and, as a rule, no profit to any one. Having never received endowments of millions, as Harvard University declared last week (of three millions already cashed and as much more expected soon), we must provide, if not for a decent living, at least for the continuance of our establishments; a strict adherence to reasonable terms (they are generally too low) will alone remove all danger of debt-making, and enable our Religious to do justice to their pupils, to themselves and their Congregation, a triple obligation, mostly overlooked, although forming a basis visibly indispensable to the permanency and usefulness of any educational establishment. We are, thank God, in a fair way, to pay up what we owe; but to pay the last dollar, requires a will. I could not die *in peace, if in debt*.

4. Let our watchword be for some time, "saving, saving." Let me ask a question: how long will you be able to aid your Congregation? Next year, possibly next week, you may be disabled, sick, an invalid. Have you laid up enough to support you for the rest of your life? Be not offended at my plain manner of writing to Religious. I speak in the name and in behalf of the best members. Should any one take offence, I could only regret the moderation of my remarks for such. Personally I always dreaded and shrunk from the thought of being some day a *burden* to the Community. What claim can we have, otherwise, to the esteem and friendship of the Congregation? you may say or imagine anything you please, but I assure you, the Community values you as it values me, *at our worth*. Let us all then show we are worth something.

5. I recommend more than ever, the most minute attention to the daily record of receipts and expenses in each House, and the regular sending to proper quarters, of the quarterly accounts, duly signed by the members of local councils. On this point, no indulgence should be expected. I charge the Secretary's conscience with its scrupulous observance. Why keep money for months instead of sending it where it ought to be sent?

Will useless, everlasting travelling ever cease in view of these decisive words: *Qui multum peregrinantur raro sanctificantur*, those who travel much rarely sanctify themselves?

6. Henceforth, it must be clearly understood, that no one has a right to order or cause any expense *not authorized by the Council*. Any violation of this prohibition is a matter of confession. I tremble for some of our Religious whose vow of poverty is registered in heaven, I shiver for myself; but, with God's help, I solemnly promise to see, at any cost, our sacred engagements on holy poverty respected by all. Here I make a most earnest and conscientious appeal to every devoted member of our beloved Congregation, to join me in unanimous efforts to secure everywhere a scrupulous observance of holy poverty. Here is the danger, here is the enemy.

E. SORIN, C. S. C.,
Superior-General.