

**Letter from Francois Lambert d'Avignon  
Explaining Why He Left the Monastic Life (1523)**

François Lambert d'Avignon, "Histoire du moine racontée par lui-même, traduite du latin" (story of a monk told by he himself, translated from Latin), in Franck Puaux, *Histoire de la Réformation Française* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1859), 1:412-17; taken from Gerdesius, *Historia christianismi renovati*, vol IV; translated into English by Thomas P. Johnston.

"François Lambert, d'Avignon, useless servant of Jesus Christ, to the pious reader, may grace and peace be given to you in Jesus Christ.

"Received hitherto fore into the minor orders [Franciscan or Dominican] who take the title of observing, I during several years, wearing the costume of their order, announced the Word of God in a number of counties. Lately I was forced to remove their habit and their society. It is therefore necessary that I make known the causes and that I give my reasons for my way of acting. If I would not do this, the simple would be scandalized, not understanding that I was able to do so in a Christian fashion. To this end I composed two tracts: in the first, it is this: I expose several of the reasons for my leaving the minor orders; in the second, I make know what are the rules of this order of monks, and how one ought to think of such.

"When you will have read them, not only will you not be, dear reader, scandalized by my actions, but you will be convinced that I acted well. Goodbye, and may the grace of God be with you!

"In the town of Avignon, celebrated city of the Gaul's [Medieval French people-group], having lost my father when I was very young, I felt myself drawn to God by His Spirit. What struck me in particular about this city, was the exterior beauty of the minor orders called observants, and their appearance great holiness. In the simplicity of my childhood, I thought that with these monks their interior responded to their exterior. With them I admired the decency of their clothing, the humility of their physiognomy, their lowered eyes, the softness of the voice, the crossing of their arms, the grace of their gestures. I admired their bare feet, their shaved and covered head, and other similar things. But what I did not recognize among them, was the spirit of a fox and the heart of a wolf hidden under their lambs wool.

"When I heard them in their public assemblies, I felt myself drawn to them and I thought that what they did was pleasing to God. When with lies they told me of life in the convent, the rest of the cloister, and the advantage of education and other similar things, they motivated me. But what they should have revealed to me, this they carefully hid from me.

"Feeling myself drawn to them more and more, I was fifteen years old when I was received into their order at Avignon. I was immensely deceived! But God permitted that I be in order that I might later understand His own wisdom. I do not doubt that it was all by the effect of His providence that I found myself in the midst of them, in order that after having been deceived by their exterior appearance, I exit their convent with a knowledge of the truth, to reveal to others all that there is of rottenness in these whitewashed sepulchers.

"During the year of my initiation, they carefully hid from me all the bad that there was among them, in the fear that I would leave them. This is what they always do with their initiates, because they are assured that if they were to make known what they were, no one would want to be received among them; the initiation completed, they feared nothing, hardly assuring me that it was an unforgivable sin to leave their home.

"My initiation completed, just fifteen years and several days old, I made my vows, barely knowing what I was doing. It did not take long for me to get to know the convent, and how the interior [image] corresponded very little to the exterior [image]. Finding myself deceived during my abeyance [period of waiting], I was sad, afflicted, and languishing; my spirit did not have peace, and my heart was missing the repose that I it had so desired. I moaned to live in the midst of all these godless.

"Called later to the ministry of the Word, I was tormented by those of the minor orders, because I did not preach for their cloister. And while the people eagerly listened to my sermons, these sorry people, deaf as vipers closed their ears and scorned the Word of the Most High; they said that I was a flatterer and corruptor of the Word of God. I was therefore always with them in dissension.

"After several years, I was named an apostolic missionary. In this new job description, besides the difficulties associated with my ministry, the monks were a continual cross for me. The function of apostolic missionary consists of going out, as the apostles, to preach the Gospel to all the world, wherever the opportunity presents itself. While I with infinite difficulty fulfilled my duties, the minor brothers made efforts to destroy with their slander what God was doing through me. While I saw them furious and filled with hatred, I did not want to take all the means that I had in the exercise of my duties; this did not effect them, and they did not cease from persecuting the poor servant of Jesus Christ.

"Often, when tired from my many sermons, I entered into their convent, these wicked men, who should have given me rewards, sold me off to wickedness; their gossip, their mockery was the bread at each of my meals. Because of the weakness of my body I was not able to travel on foot, they hoped in this way to hinder me from attending to my ministry. They permitted nevertheless that my friends gave me donkeys to assist me; but in their cupidity they sold them several days later, or else gave them away according to their own desire.

"Four years ago, I was preaching the Gospel in a town in France; my audience, touched by my sermons and returning to their better sentiments, brought me masques, dices, [playing] cards, and other similar things to burn them; but several of these miserable monks, enemies of the truth, lifted numerous of these objects and notably a mask resembling a lascivious young girl. I therefore accused them of theft. From that time on they conspired against me in order to remove me from the ministry of the Word; they did not neglect anything to this end: they invented lies and false testimonies, but they did not tell them to me. God confounded the designs of these Acitophels, to the end that I did not lose one opportunity to preach.

"One day, a miserable partisan of the antichristian [papal] bulls stood up against me. Sustained by the Spirit of God, I resisted him so well, that he was condemned by the judges of the town. My colleagues blamed me for having acted as I did.

"Bringing myself another day to one of the homes that gives hospitality to brothers of the minor orders, I learned that they were public libertines, usurers [one loaning at exorbitant interest] and players; I warned them in secret of what people were saying and thinking of them; they did not want to listen to me. Irritated, they condemned my advice, as they had not asked for it.

"A certain Cardinal of those we call *à latere* [Latin with unclear meaning] wanted one day that I preach before him. All of this excited the jealousy of my brothers, and especially of two elderly men whose behavior was very poor: one of them was the guardian [must be a title in the monastery]. The day of the preaching having arrived, furious, they went to the palace of the Cardinal and told him that I was sick; it was a lie. The

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fear of these to Babylonian elderly men was that I would not flatter them enough before the Cardinal and his following; when I found out the facts, I reprimanded the guardian who threatened me with imprisonment and torture.

"Becoming the provincial of his order [regional superintendent], this guardian remembered his old wickedness and wrote against my faithful and truthful speeches; fearing because of this to fall into their hands and to see my life broken, I resolved to leave the order and become *chartreux*.<sup>1</sup> I had a great fear of returning into the society of men, for fear of becoming an object of scandal in all the places that I had preached the Gospel of Christ.—I told myself equally, : if I can announce in peace the Word of God, I would then be able to show him what I could through writing. That was again an illusion, for they would not have permitted me to do so.

"Persecuted by the *minorites* [brothers of the minor orders],<sup>2</sup> I was not received among the *chartreux*, although they admitted me with a greeting of peace. Removed from the latter by the intrigues of my older brothers, who saw me with spite, I returned to them and continued my circuit of preaching. It was not long before I was again persecuted.

"I had in my cell [small room] some very-evangelical books of the very illustrious doctor Martin Luther; they took these and placed them under lock and key. Then, without having examined them, the chapter condemned them and threw them in the fire. They should have at least read them before they cried out: they are heretical! They are heretical! This is how they act, condemning that which they do not know. I would say confidentially, God knows that I am not lying, that there was in these books the truest theology of all the books of the monks of all time.

"Pardon me, good reader, to have taken so much time on the folly of these Pharisees.—Again however a few words to speak of the evil that these wicked men have done to me and to those like me who love the truth; wickedness so great that several volumes would not suffice to tell them all.

"Such are the men who proudly call themselves observant, when Jesus Christ, in the seventeenth chapter of Saint Luke [17:10, verse numbers came later], says: "When you have done all the things that are commanded you say, 'We are your useless servants!'" But these men, dear reader, in order that you might know it, despise the Holy Word even in the name that they carry [observants]. They have placed in their rules all the statutes of the other monks, in order to be able to, better than their brothers, call themselves observants,—but none do better than they wrong to the Church.—For how can men, who do not know their own rules or that do not want to understand them, can they sincerely follow them?

"The glorious tomb of Jesus Christ was not yet open to me, and the rock of eternal wisdom under which was kept the loving truth of God, had not yet been rolled... How much I was mistaken!—Whom have they not seduced, these persistent enemies of the observation of the commands of God!—They persecute the one who announces to them the Holy Word and those among their brotherhood who push themselves to rigorously keep the rule. What would I have become among these godless men?

"Having received letters of commissioning from the general or vice-general of the order (I do not remember which), I went from France to Germany.—I seized the first favorable opportunity to remove my pharisaical costume, persuaded that the form and color of the habit are of little importance. I protested to God that I would never have left my order, if, by staying in my convent, I would have been able to freely announce the Gospel; but as that was impossible for me, I had to do what I did. If I had done otherwise, I would have sinned against the precept of the Apostle Paul, "You were purchased with a great price—do not become the slaves of men" (1 Cor 7:23). Thus, those that attached themselves to the foolish constitutions of men do they not make themselves slaves? Me therefore who, seduced, made myself the slave of men, how could I do anything else but to observe the this other precept of Saint Paul, "If you can become free, do it." Separated from the assembly of the wicked, I arrived at the academy of Wittenberg, the first of the universe, and that leaves nothing to be desired as regards evangelical studies. I regret if I may say so of being mute and of not being able to announce with my own voice to the people the Word of God.—But I will wait the command of the Lord: I will place myself under His hand, and I will attempt with all that I can, by my writings, to exhort the world to receive the Gospel

"I tell you only, dear reader, a few of the reasons that constrained me to leave the *minorites*... but it must suffice that I told you only summarily. In a few days, you will receive a commentary concerning the rule of their order, that will help you understand the totality. In the meantime, in order that all the world may know what to wait for as far as my resolutions and convictions, I will say these three things:

"1<sup>st</sup> Hitherto fore seduced and ignorant of what I was doing, I pronounced vows contrary to the Christian profession of faith. Oh well! I renounce to all these inventions of the *minorites* and recognize that the holy Gospel is my rule and should be that of all Christians;

"2<sup>nd</sup> I retract what I have preached that does not conform to Christian truth. I pray all those who have heard me preach or who read my writings to reject all that is contrary to the Holy Books. I have confidence in Him who removed me from a captivity more difficult than that of Egypt, that I will repair with His divine help by my words and by my books my numerous errors;

"3<sup>rd</sup> As no one can come to the knowledge of the truth without being in disagreement with the Pope, I renounce him and all his decrees, and I no longer want to be a part of his reign of apostasy. I desire rather to be excommunicated by him, knowing that his reign is excommunicated and accursed of God...

"In another book, we will speak of these things in greater detail; we will do so for the name of Jesus Christ to whom be honor and glory."

In this way speaks Francois Lambert: his simple words, but full of conviction, reveals in him one of these souls righteous and thirsty to drink from the pure source of Christian truths. Such were almost all the Fathers of Protestantism: for their desire to know God and to be faithful to Him, we recognize them all.

The monk Lambert dates his letter from Wittenberg, where he arrived in 1523. The same year he was married. It was the first French monk to have broken the vow of celibacy, and sought in a chaste and pious woman the help that God in His goodness gave to man.

Lambert attempted to return to France to preach the truths of salvation; but he was not able to. He settled in Marburg, where he became professor of theology and died at the age of 43 years. Let us now continue our story interrupted for a moment.

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<sup>1</sup>Another order, affiliated with the *Chartreux* monastery, probably near Chartres, France.

<sup>2</sup>The reference to the *minorites* is made throughout this essay. It is a plural noun that signifies those of the minor orders, Franciscan (founded in Southern France approximately 1208-1209) and the Dominicans (also founded in Southern France approximately 1225). These orders were Catholic antitheses to the *parfaits* (perfect ones), the name given by the Dominican inquisitors to the Albigenses and Waldenses of that time. Notice the combining of these two groups under two names. The term *minorites* was used by Lambert in the 1520s. We live at a time when some like to distinguish between the Franciscans and Dominicans, as well as between the Waldenses and Albigenses. The first because the Dominicans (of whom was Thomas Aquinas) were the great inquisitors of the *parfaits*. The second, because it has been proven that the Waldenses were *not* heretics.