CHAPTER FOUR

FROM THE RESTORATION TO THE ENTRANCE OF THE VENERABLE FRANCIS LIBERMANN, 1802-1848

1. The First Restoration

N. B. 243 ff. One of the Holy Ghost Fathers who had gone into exile during the French Revolution was Father James Bertout (1753-1832), a nephew of Father Duflos, the Superior General. As we have seen in Chapter II, he had accompanied Father de Glicourt on the voyage to Guiana which had ended in shipwreck off the coast of Africa and indirectly brought about the recapture of Senegal by France. Back in Paris, he had been appointed professor of theology first at Paris and then at Meaux. In 1787 he was elected Assistant to the General and in that capacity he had witnessed the horrors of the Revolution. While secretly administering the sacraments in his native diocese of Boulogne, he had suffered betrayal and fled to England just in time to avoid arrest.

cf. p. 29

N. B. 245 In 1802 peace between Church and State was finally declared in France. Eager to resume his duties, Father Bertout returned at once to Paris, where everything had to be started all over again. Close by the Seminary he found his seventy-six-year-old uncle, sick, blind, his mind no longer lucid, and wholly incapable of exercising his function as Superior General. The other members of the Congregation were all scattered and had assumed positions in various dioceses which, because of the scarcity of priests, they could not easily abandon. Moreover, they showed little interest in the restoration of the Congregation. With no money, no house, no students, no personnel, and a Superior General in his dotage, they felt it was hopeless even to think of it. Father Bertout, however, was not the man to give up so easily. Courageously and almost singlehandedly he undertook the task and finally succeeded in spite of almost insuperable odds.

FI. 472 f. The first step was to get permission from the Government for the Restoration. For this purpose a joint memorandum was addressed to Napoleon by the Vincentians, the Foreign Missions of Paris, and Father Bertout for the Spiritans. In reply, Napoleon
issued a decree enjoining these three societies to fuse into one centralized missionary institute. None of the three societies, however, reacted favorably toward this forced union. They fully realized it could not be carried out. Consequently, the affair remained unsettled till 1804 when Pope Pius VII came to Paris to crown Napoleon. On that occasion the Pontiff presented the Emperor with a memorandum containing twelve articles regarding the Church in France. Father Bertout had previously appealed to the Pope and personally saw to it that one of these articles demanded the restoration of his congregation and seminary. The following year, in compliance with the Pope’s wishes, Napoleon legally restored the Congregation and gave back the old Spiritan property of “La Chyperie,” near Orleans. (All the others had been sold.) Strengthened by this initial success, Father Bertout determined to do his utmost to regain possession of the Congregation’s former seminary buildings in Paris, for the remote location of “La Chyperie” made it quite unsuitable for his purposes. While biding his time in this respect, he did not remain idle. He rented a building in the Rue du Cherche-Midi, and opened a college and junior seminary whose student body soon numbered a hundred and thirty, of which twenty-five were seminarians. In 1824 this work was transferred to a building adjoining the old Motherhouse in the Rue Lhomond.

2. New Suppression and Restoration

Soon, however, Napoleon was once more in conflict with the Pope and his troops were marching off to occupy the Eternal City. Realizing where the traditional sympathies of the Holy Ghost Fathers lay, he impulsively decreed the Society’s suppression in 1809. Undeterred by this outburst of imperial ire, Father Bertout simply continued to run his college and seminary, for he knew well that time always has its way with tyrants. Meanwhile he devoted his attention to the sadly neglected state of the Faith in the colonies, and did what he could to remedy it.

After the fall of Napoleon, in 1814, when the restored monarchy immediately demanded a large number of missionaries for these colonies, Father Bertout pointed out that he could not do anything until the Congregation was legally restored and reestablished.

For the same reason this proposed fusion was rejected again in 1806 when Cardinal Joseph Fresch, the Chaplain General of France, urged a similar idea.
in the possession of its former properties. His persistent pressure finally produced the desired result: a royal decree of February 3, 1816 proclaimed the reestablishment of the Congregation and officially charged it with providing clergy for all French colonies; its properties were returned to it, and an annual subsidy of 5,000 francs was granted. Unfortunately, the restitution of the properties was found to be against the Concordat and the documents had to be rescinded. Nothing daunted, Father Bertout reopened his senior seminary in a rented building in 1817 and continued his battle to repossess the former seminary properties.

The struggle seemed hopeless, for the Department of Education had rented the buildings from their new owners. It turned them over to the State Superior Normal School, and this institution had no intention to leave its roomy quarters. Quietly Father Bertout entered into negotiations with the owners and privately arranged to have the property sold to the Congregation. Just to make sure, the contract specified that if such a sale would be vetoed by the Government, the priest himself would buy it in his own name. In either case he would become the Normal School's landlord, and thus be in a position to refuse renewal of the lease in a few years' time. After much haggling, the Government was induced to let the Congregation buy back its former property. In the end it agreed and, surprisingly enough, even paid the bill of sale. By a stroke of luck, the recalcitrant Normal School incurred the displeasure of King Louis XVIII and was temporarily suppressed in 1822. Thus after twenty years of continuous strife, Father Bertout's efforts were finally crowned with success and the Congregation was once more established in its ancient Motherhouse.

3. **Approval by the Holy See**

The Holy See itself was impressed by the energy, perseverance and businesslike way in which Father Bertout had handled all these negotiations, as well as by his zeal for a religious revival in the colonies. When the Propaganda expressed a desire to see the Rules of the Congregation, Father Bertout promptly dispatched a copy, making known at the same time his wish to see them approved by the Holy See. A few years later—Rome always moves slowly in such affairs—formal approval was given to the Rule. The only change that had to be made was the explicit recognition of
the Propaganda's authority with respect to anything pertaining to the missions. By this approval, dated February 7, 1824, the Congregation changed its status from that of a purely diocesan institute to one that was immediately dependent on the Holy See. However, the right to confirm the Superior General still remained in the hands of the Archbishop of Paris. With all other details out of the way, Father Bertout was now able to re-open his junior seminary in the fall of that same year.

4. New Dangers and Trials

The restoration of the Monarchy after the fall of Napoleon was accompanied by a revival of Gallicanism. In 1816 the French Government went so far as to impose the teaching of Gallican principles on the seminaries of France. True to its proud traditions, the Congregation turned a deaf ear to this order. As a result, its relations with the Government became more and more strained, although, as mentioned above, Father Bertout still succeeded in obtaining the restoration of the Seminary and even several grants for maintenance and repairs.

A new danger arose in 1825 when a committee of French Bishops decided that they must have the buildings in the Rue Lhomond for their proposed Institute of Higher Ecclesiastical Studies. Apparently, the intention was to do away with the Holy Ghost Seminary and let each diocese of France supply two priests for the colonial missions. It was only with considerable manoeuvring that Father Bertout succeeded in side-stepping this threat.

Religious persecution flared out more openly again in 1828. The Jesuits saw their colleges closed, and the following year Parliament once more debated the suppression of the Spiritans. Fortunately, the final vote was favorable to the Congregation. Shortly after, the 1830 revolution overthrew the Monarchy of the Bourbons. In the ensuing riots, Father Bertout had to stand by and watch powerlessly while surging mobs invaded his houses and pillaged everything he had built up at the cost of so much labor.

Still worse trials lay ahead for him. The new government of King Philip disliked the Congregation and wanted very much to exclude its priests from the colonies. After first forcing the closure of its junior seminary in 1830, the Ministry cut off all subsidies, leaving Father Bertout no alternative but to send home his senior
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seminarians. Politically speaking, this government action was sheer folly, for, as the former Colonial Minister pointed out to his new successor:

The colonies have been deliberately deprived of the only institution that is able to render less dangerous the now inevitable changes in the situation of the slaves and the rights of the colored people.

With the aid of the Propaganda, Father Bertout reopened his seminary again in 1831, although necessarily on a reduced scale because of lack of funds. Meanwhile however, most of his associates had lost heart and withdrew in despair.

The following year struck a last cruel blow at the intrepid old man. Cholera had broken out among the French troops and assumed such proportions that military hospitals were unable to care for all the sick and dying. Moved by their plight, Father Bertout allowed the seminary buildings to be requisitioned as an emergency hospital, after exacting from the Government a precautionary written guarantee that the house would be immediately evacuated after the disease had subsided. But when the danger was over, the ungrateful Government refused to return the seminary to its owners. This was the last straw. After thirty years of intense struggle, dashed hopes, and ceaseless harassments, the eighty year old Superior General found himself almost in the same position as when he had so hopefully started the work of restoration: most of his students had left, his funds were cut off, nearly all his confreres had abandoned him, and the government had seized his buildings once more. The shock was too much. He died before the end of the year 1832. Had he lived in happier times, his achievements undoubtedly would have rivalled the magnificent record of Father Bouic in the eighteenth century. As it is, his indomitable energy, perseverance, and diplomacy in the service of God saved the Congregation from what would otherwise have been inevitable extinction.

Despite the multiple tragedies he had to sustain, Father Bertout succeeded in sending out to the colonies ninety-seven priests in the fifteen years preceding his death. For the sake of comparison, we may give here the figures of the Foreign Mission Seminary of Paris which, like all orders and congregations, had to make a fresh
start after the French Revolution. Between 1804 and 1815 it was able to send only two priests to the Far East. In 1822 the number of its seminarians did not amount to more than seven, and 1831 the total number of its missionaries was only fifty-three. Thus we see that, in comparison to this sister institution, the Spiritans could boast of consoling success even during these years of profound crisis.

5. Father Amable Fourdinier

Fl. 496 ff. N. B. 290 ff. pp. 113 f.

At the death of Father Bertout there were only three Holy Ghost Fathers left in the seminary: his nephew, Father Amable Fourdinier (1788-1845), who had formerly been a professor at the seminary of Boulogne; Father Hardy, a rich young man, somewhat mentally unbalanced and emotionally abnormal, who later had to be expelled for persistently fomenting revolt in the seminary; and Father Carandiou, a recent recruit, who did not persevere. With a special dispensation, however, Father Carandiou was allowed to vote in the election of the new Superior. If this had not been the case, Father Hardy might have aspired to the position, for it was unlikely that Father Fourdinier would have voted for himself. As it is, Father Fourdinier was elected to assume the unenviable task. He had been Father Bertout's assistant since 1817 and was all too well informed about the mighty problems facing him. It required almost heroic courage to accept the burden that was laid on his frail shoulders. Humanly speaking, it would have been so much more attractive to return to his professorship at Boulogne or accept an honorable and less heartbreaking function in the diocese of Paris and let the Congregation die a natural death.

Attacking the most urgent problems immediately, Father Fourdinier succeeded in obtaining several excellent new associates, such as Father Warnet and Father Gaultier who, after their probation, became members of the Congregation. He then resumed negotiations with the Government to have the armed forces evacuate his seminary buildings. Forcefully pointing out the illegality of the whole affair, he succeeded in getting the support of the powerful Ministers of the Navy, the Treasury, and Ecclesiastical Affairs, who finally persuaded their recalcitrant colleague of the Army to surrender the property he was arbitrarily occupying. In 1835 the soldiers left, and the Congregation at last had full use of the whole complex of buildings belonging to it.
Father Francis Becquet, fourth Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost (1763-1788).

Father James M. Duflos, fifth Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost (1788-1805).
Father James M. Bertout, sixth Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost (1805-1832).

Father Amable Fournier, seventh Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost (1832-1845).
There remained one hurdle to be overcome before the Seminary could efficiently fulfill its function. In the past, Government subsidies had provided most of the funds necessary for the training of the colonial clergy. Now the income of the Seminary consisted almost entirely of gifts sent to it by former students working in the colonies. Although substantial when compared to a missionary’s income, these benefactions were far from adequate to maintain a good-sized seminary. The only solution seemed to lie in a renewed battle for subsidies.

At this juncture, political events came to the rescue. The abolition of slavery in the colonies was in the air and, since the Government anticipated serious trouble, it wanted to prepare the slaves for their emancipation by instructing them in religious and moral principles. Accordingly, a plan was set up to multiply churches and schools which would be staffed by priests, Brothers and Sisters. A special budget was set aside for this purpose and 50,000 francs a year, enough to maintain about sixty seminarians, was allocated to the Congregation. The Government suddenly realized that it had been acting against its own interests in harassing the Spiritans and now humbly wrote to their Superior:

The Seminary of the Holy Ghost is now the only Congregation which, by the very purpose of its institution, is capable of training and supplying the colonies with priests who are thoroughly reliable, not only because of their good studies and purity of conduct, but also because of a special vocation, a zeal that is directed toward the very special situation at hand, and the unity of teaching which they all must follow. Accordingly, it is exclusively to you, Father, that we entrust the education, choice, and general direction of the priests called to work at the laborious and difficult task of morally training the colored in the colonies.

As far as the seminary was concerned, then, the situation had considerably improved since the death of Father Bertout.

6. Attempted Incorporation of the Colonial Clergy into the Congregation

In the colonies entrusted to the Congregation, however, the situation was much different. Ever since the end of the Revolution the Government had been clamoring for priests and more priests,
while at the same time all efforts to train them carefully were continually wrecked by official interference at home. In the colonies themselves Government officials often arbitrarily intervened in the appointments of priests, dismissing those who displeased them and accepting others at their own discretion. Sometimes those going to overseas territories were priests of doubtful character who were in trouble with their bishops and had gone to the colonies on their own initiative. To acquire some respectability, they usurped the title of "Holy Ghost Father," although they were neither members of the Congregation nor trained in its seminary. Soon the colonial clergy was greatly discredited, precisely at a time when all eyes were turned on these colonies to watch the impending abolition of slavery. The Congregation was blamed for everything because it was officially in charge of the colonies. No one seemed to remember that it had no control whatsoever over the priests after they were sent out to these missions.

Father Fourdinier's appeal for real authority over the priests in the colonies fell on deaf ears in Rome. The Propaganda feared that its authority would slowly be taken over by the Archbishop of Paris, who at that time still had the right to confirm the Superior General of the Congregation. To strengthen his position somewhat, Father Fourdinier was made a Prothonotary Apostolic (1839), but at that time this did not even involve a purple robe and a Monsignor's title. In any case, they would have been poor substitutes for real authority. It would have been relatively easy for the Propaganda to strengthen his position without sacrificing or endangering its own authority. If the Superior General had been appointed Prefect Apostolic of all the colonies with the right to delegate his powers to Vice Prefects in each of them, he would have obtained effective control. As a matter of fact, this system was adopted in the second half of the nineteenth century with respect to the Zanguebar and Congo missions entrusted to the Congregation.

The point may be illustrated with the story of Fathers Albertini, Paoli and Marchese. These three Corsican priests had no relation whatsoever to the Spiritans and had been refused permission to go to the colonies. They decided to go anyhow. In passing through the port of Le Havre they presented themselves as Holy Ghost Fathers and shocked everyone by their behavior. When shortly after them two genuine well-behaved Spiritans passed through the same port, no one wanted to believe that they were Holy Ghost Fathers.
In an effort to remedy the situation, Father Fourdinier, in 1836, conceived a plan whereby he would absorb all colonial priests into his Congregation. The Propaganda regarded this utopian project as "very useful" but doubted that it could be put into practice. While allowing him to use persuasion, it definitely warned him not to force anyone to enter against his will. Father Fourdinier’s first efforts at persuasion met with almost no results, but he did not give up hope and continued striving toward his goal for the next few years.

In reality, his plan was not as revolutionary as some people seem to have thought. In fact, it was rooted in a tradition that goes back to pre-revolutionary times for, as early as 1778, members of the Congregation had begun to go to the missions. At the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789, there were at least five members working in Guiana. They had joined the Spiritans with the specific intention of doing missionary work. Extant records do not cover the matter with great clarity, but most likely the whole question of missionary members had been thoroughly discussed in 1778 when the first large territory was confided to the Con-
gregation. In 1807, shortly after the restoration of the society, a plan similar to that of Fourdinier appeared in a memorandum of Father Perrin, the man whom Father Bertout had proposed as Prefect of the French West Indian Islands. Other proposals along the same line were made later by Bertout himself. For various reasons, however, all these plans had been shelved to await more auspicious times. As we will see in Chapter VI, it was only in 1848 under Father Libermann that this particular thread of eighteenth century Spiritan tradition came to full pattern.

Meanwhile a little group of future missionaries made an effort to join the Congregation for the very purpose Father Fourdinier and his predecessors had in mind. In 1840 he was approached by a seminarian, Frederick Le Vavasseur, who had been born and raised on the island of Reunion. The young man was introduced to him by Father Warnet, one of the directors of Holy Ghost Seminary. The two had met during Father Warnet’s missionary years in the colonies. Le Vavasseur told him that, together with some other seminarians, they were going to start a new religious congregation dedicated to the christianization of the slaves in the colonies. They would like to associate themselves with the Holy Ghost Fathers to secure canonical and legal recognition. The idea pleased Fourdinier, but when it became clear that he wanted these priests to be wholly assimilated into the colonial clergy, the condition proved entirely unacceptable to them. They desired to live as religious and not as secular priests.

Approached again about the same matter somewhat later, Fourdinier expressed his willingness to entrust to them the complete service of Guiana. This offer too was rejected by their leader, Francis Libermann, because it would have meant limiting the scope of their congregation to one territory and engaging most of its members in ordinary parish work. Libermann desired to work in all the colonies alongside the Holy Ghost Fathers, but to devote his attention to the abandoned slaves and not to parish routine. The announcement of this intention made Father Fourdinier highly suspicious of the newly-projected Congregation. It meant competition, he thought, and all things considered, a dangerous competition. These men would have a number of well-trained and exceptionally fervent priests, who would contrast sharply with many members of the clergy then serving the colonies. Making inquiries about them, he found nothing reassuring. Their leader, Francis
Libermann, was known in ecclesiastical circles as an ambitious Jewish convert, who wanted to trick a bishop into ordaining him and was ruthlessly pursuing dreams of greatness. Sooner or later such a man was bound to try to replace the Holy Ghost Fathers with his own creation. Fourdinier decided to have nothing to do with the newcomers and resolved to oppose them wherever he could. Nonetheless, under governmental pressure and orders from the Propaganda he was forced to admit a few of them into the colonies.

Returning to his plans to incorporate the colonial clergy into the Congregation, he thought that perhaps a relaxation of the rules might produce the desired result. Accordingly, in 1843, he circulated an excerpt of the rule, adding to it a personal note in which he considerably toned down the practice of poverty. For his personal expenses each member was to receive a fixed sum along with the Mass stipends which he would be allowed to retain. Again, however, the response from the colonies was not sufficient to permit execution of the plan. Forced to postpone his project, Father Fourdinier planned to open a novitiate and start the integration by admitting the best of his seminarians into the Congregation. His death in 1845 put an end to all these schemes.

Strict disciplinarian as he was, he had succeeded in giving back to the Seminary something of its former reputation for ecclesiastical learning and sound training of future priests. This gain, however, was offset by his failure to solve the religious crisis in the colonies. He can hardly be blamed for a failure that stemmed ultimately from his lack of authority to solve the problem, but the resultant disorganization considerably weakened the Congregation’s position and soon threatened its very existence.

7. The Reform of Father Leguay

At the death of Fourdinier none of the four Holy Ghost Fathers in Paris felt equal to the formidable task facing them in

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3 An indication of the spirit of its teaching may be seen in the fact that years later Alexander Le Roy, the future Archbishop and Superior General, was at first refused permission to enter the Congregation by his Ecclesiastical Superior, Bishop Bravard of Coutances. This Gallicanistically inclined prelate repeatedly rejected Le Roy’s plea on the ground that Father Gaultier, C.S.Sp., professor of theology at Holy Ghost Seminary, was too staunch a defender of the prerogatives of the Pope. Cf. Henri Goré, C.S.Sp., Msgr. Alexandre Le Roy, Paris, 1952, pp. 32 ff.
the colonies. Father Nicolas Warnet (1795-1863), reluctantly agreed to act as Superior General while efforts were being made to have an outsider come in and assume charge. Negotiations were in progress with Father Alexander Leguay, the vicar general of the Bishop of Perpignan. He was a good friend of the Congregation, but there were already plans for him to succeed his bishop in Perpignan. After four months of deliberation, he generously made the sacrifice of ecclesiastical preferment and came to Paris to direct the Holy Ghost Congregation and Seminary. It was the first and only time in history that an outsider had to be called in to assume the superiorship.

Meanwhile, Father Warnet had limited himself to expediting current affairs which could not be delayed. Among the unfinished business he left for his successor was a new suggestion to unite with the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary. The Propaganda had spoken about it in a letter to Father Libermann in 1845 and suggested that he contact Father Warnet. The latter was very much in favor of it, but having accepted his position only to give Father Leguay time to make up his mind, he could not very well change the entire organization by taking such an important step.

Father Leguay (1794-1865), promptly decided to turn his back on Libermann's Congregation. Having lived at Holy Ghost Seminary in Fourdinier's time, he had heard scores of rumors about this “hypocritical schemer” and the trouble he had caused. His predecessor had been far too weak in his resistance, he thought. Now that he was in charge, he would show no mercy. Let the Government and the Propaganda insist as much as they liked, it would be only over his dead body that one of Libermann's men would be admitted to the colonies. Taking care of the neglected Negroes was part of the ordinary duties of pastors and did not require the services of a new congregation.

Energetically he went to work on the most pressing problem—the reorganization and reform of the colonial clergy. Taking up the plans of Father Fourdinier, he laid down the following rules:

1. Henceforth only aspirants to the Congregation would be admitted to the Seminary.
2. A novitiate of two years and a junior seminary were to be opened at once.
3. In the colonies, community life would be maintained as a rule.

4. Ecclesiastical Superiors in the Missions were to be chosen from among the members of the Congregation and were to remain subject to its Superior General.

5. Troublesome priests were to be recalled at once; the others were free to join the Congregation if they wished.

6. Each member might retain his salary and other income for his own expenses, without having to render an account to the Motherhouse, but once a year the surplus was to be put into a general fund.

His invitation to the colonial clergy to join under this easy rule of poverty had some results: about thirty were admitted to the novitiate before the end of 1848, including his own successor, the future Vicar Apostolic of Reunion, Father Alexander Monnet. Moreover, his threat of recalling troublesome priests was not idle: quite a few were forced to return to France.

Bio. 316

Turning his attention to the Seminary, he proceeded to eliminate rigorously anyone whose vocation appeared to him subject to doubt. At the same time he added three new priests to the seminary faculty. In addition, he made recruiting trips through several dioceses and succeeded in gaining several excellent vocations to swell the student body.

Bio. 314 f.

Meanwhile the Government was formulating its own program for religious service in the colonies and reportedly was planning to proceed again without Holy Ghost Seminary. Father Leguay moved in quickly. He argued forcefully on the basis of the Spiritans' past record of service and before long he had won his point. The Government hastened to assure him that they did not intend to eliminate Holy Ghost Seminary from their new plan of colonial administration.

Bio. 318 ff.

In introducing the above-mentioned changes in the rule, Father Leguay had overlooked the fact that he had no power to modify the rules of a pontifically approved Congregation. As a result, the canonical status of all newly-admitted members was irregular. In rectifying this situation, the Propaganda granted the necessary dispensation, but only for one year, thereby indicating that Leguay
N. D. 9 App., 210 f.

Strict canonical procedure was followed, therefore, in 1847 when Father Loewenbruck, who later was to play an important role in bringing about the entrance of Libermann and his Congregation, went to Rome with a new set of changes that had been agreed on by the Council of the Congregation. The salient points of these changes are listed here:

1. The purpose of the Congregation is to educate its members⁴ for the most abandoned works in the Church.

2. The Congregation depends only on the Holy See, but its members are under the jurisdiction of the ordinary of the place where they reside.

3. There are two orders of members; those of the first order who put their annual surplus into a common fund; those of the second order who have only spiritual bonds with the Congregation.

N. D. 10, 414

While Father Loewenbruck was in Rome, the February Revolution of 1848 broke out in Paris, the monarchy was abolished, and the Republic was proclaimed. The new Director of the Colonies, Mr. Victor Schoelcher, was violently opposed to slavery and somehow conceived the notion that Father Leguay was equally violent in his support of it. Seeing their chance, some priests who had been forced by Father Leguay to return to France presented themselves as victims of his anti-negro attitude. In short order, Mr. Schoelcher recalled the priests sent out by Father Leguay and restored the others to their former positions. Moreover, he openly threatened to finish off the Spiritans once and for all. Under the circumstances, Father Leguay realized that there was only one way to save the Congregation from this new danger: to resign immediately and have as his successor someone who was more acceptable to the new rulers of France. On March 2, 1848 the Congregation accepted his resignation. Shortly after, Father Leguay withdrew entirely from any association with it.

⁴The original text, with considerably more logic, used the word "clerics". See below p. 123, footnote 12.
In Rome meanwhile, the Propaganda, which was unaware of developments in Paris, had approved his unfortunate revision of the Rule on March 11, 1848. His changes had wrecked the community life of the Congregation by the practical abolition of poverty and burdened it with a second order for which it would be responsible in the public eye but over which it would have no control. In his eagerness to attract the necessary personnel, he had disregarded the existing rules of the Congregation and had liberally dispensed from them as the occasion seemed to demand. Many of the newly admitted priests were more or less members, but exactly to what extent they had bound themselves was difficult to determine. Through the many reform projects, the rule itself had grown quite confused. In the colonies, constant dismissals and appointments of ecclesiastical Superiors and parish priests arising out of the incessant conflicts between the Government and the Church had now reached a climax. It was doubtful whether anything could still be salvaged from the chaos that seemed to reign on all sides.

9. Father Alexander Monnet

The most pressing problem facing the Congregation after Father Leguay’s resignation was Mr. Schoelcher’s threat to annihilate it. There was one man who could effectively neutralize this danger—Father Alexander Monnet (1812-1849). In 1840 Father Monnet had become a missionary in Reunion, where his excellent work among the slaves had made him known as “the Father of the Negroes” and a “second Peter Claver.” In recognition of his merits, the Government had made him a Knight of the Legion of Honor. Returning to France in 1846, he had joined the Congregation. The next year he was sent back to Reunion. Shortly before his boat, the Calcutta, was due to arrive, French newspapers had reached the island reporting a demand of Mr. Schoelcher (then a member of Parliament) that the slaves be freed at once and without compensation to their owners.

The whole island was in turmoil. Many falsely blamed Father Monnet for having had a hand in the plan. Therefore, when the arrival of the Calcutta was signalled to the island, an angry mob of slave-owners gathered on the docks. As soon as the priest descended into the little boat that was to row him ashore, he was greeted with threats and shouts: “Down with Monnet! Drown
him! Kill him!” Somehow he reached the safety of a rectory, but for days angry mobs milled around it, hurling stones and demanding his death. Several times the police charged into the noisy rioters, leaving casualties but not restoring peace. Finally the Governor of the island capitulated to the crowd: he interned the priest in a hospital and sent him back to France on the first available boat. Dissatisfied with the Governor’s cowardly behavior, Paris decided to withdraw him.

Meanwhile Mr. Schoelcher had become Director of the Colonies and Father Monnet was now something of a hero in the eyes of the new Director, for he had faced death and expulsion because of Schoelcher’s plans. With Father Monnet as Superior General, Mr. Schoelcher could hardly execute his threat to suppress the Congregation. As a matter of fact, he expressed his pleasure at the election, though it did not prevent him from acting as a genuine cesaropapist in the matter of ecclesiastical appointments. He forced Father Monnet to accept his own candidates as Prefects Apostolic and to recall the priests who were currently occupying these posts. Moreover, he coldly announced his intention to immediately cut the Seminary’s subsidy by fifty percent.

One of the last acts of Father Monnet was to accept three new priests into the Congregation in August, 1848. It was a provisional admission, for by then the definite and final reorganization of the Holy Ghost Fathers was in an advanced stage of preparation. Fourdinier’s nightmare was on the point of becoming a reality. Father Libermann was about to take over. If only he could have known it, the admission of the convert Jew and his confreres into the Congregation was destined to revitalize the old Society of the Holy Ghost, renovate its antiquated structure, flood it with a fervor it had not experienced for decades, and thus turn it into one of the greatest forces in the whole history of missionary activity.