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### 14. Solitary life in Rome

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## Solitary life in Rome<sup>1</sup>

*To Dom Sallier*

*By 6th June, 1840, Libermann, who had been in Rome for 5 months, got a letter from the Propagation of the Faith giving a favourable answer to his Memorandum. But there was a condition – he must be ordained a priest first. On 3rd June, Le Vavas seur was ordained sub-deacon in Paris and Bishop Collier, the newly appointed Vicar Apostolic in Mauritius, indicated his readiness to sponsor the ‘Work for the Black People.’*

*On 9th July, Libermann wrote this letter to Dom Sallier<sup>2</sup>, his friend since their Saint-Sulpice days, now in the Carthusian monastery in Turin, to inform him of this progress in the Work. He was looking for advice on the Provisional Rule which he was drawing up and hoped to finish by the end of July. Libermann explained his spiritual strategy to his friend: in the face of many difficulties, he had decided to have nothing to do with human manoeuvring and intrigues, leaving it to God to show what he wanted; he was now totally convinced that he should just continue as he was and wait for the solution to all his problems.*

To Dom Jean Sallier  
at the Charterhouse in Turin

J.M.J.

Rome, 9 July 1840

My dear Father,

I've waited a long time for an excuse to write to you, because in Rome, it is difficult to send letters abroad.

I've been in Rome now since 6 January. I had had a lot of trouble at Rennes at that time and I couldn't wait there for your

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<sup>1</sup> N.D. II, pp. 150-155

<sup>2</sup> See index

letter to arrive. I was fearful that something would crop up that would cause a delay in my departure. What the good men there wanted was for the best and they thought that I could contribute something by staying with them, whereas in reality, there was nothing I could do. So I left with the blessing of Fr. Pinault and I got your letter in Marseilles. Several good people in France felt that I was wrong to leave the Eudists, but for me, their thinking was *secundum hominem*<sup>1</sup>, and in any case, they were not aware of all the facts. What I do know is that all I did was in conformity with the holy will of God.

Since I have been in Rome, I've had to cope with plenty of trouble from people around me, even from some who are very good and are genuinely seeking the glory of God. For about six months, I got no support at all for my proposals. In Paris, Lyons and now in Rome, everyone I spoke to about my plans disapproved of them. Only Fr. Pinault was on my side, but even he didn't appear totally convinced. None of this did any harm to my soul, as might have been feared. Although everyone was against me, I continued on because I could give no credence to their arguments. The majority, especially the most virtuous and learned, had a very poor opinion of me, seeing my plans as the fruit of personal ambition and harbouring suspicions about my motivation. I looked upon this as a grace from God, given to protect me against all things evil. The bad motives ascribed to me were completely without foundation.

I remained in this state until June 6th, with no consolation to give me hope. On the contrary, I had much to suffer from my companion who was with me. Seeing the scorn of others and my own impotence, and now having no conviction himself of the value of my work which he had strongly supported earlier,

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: "according to man"

he continually contradicted me and caused me trouble in many ways. In the end, he left and went to Paris.

In mid-March, I submitted a memorandum to the Secretary of the Propaganda, in which I explained our plan and asked for his reaction. When I returned to hear his opinion, I got an icy reception; he spoke kindly to me, but always along the same lines, namely, that I could make no progress until I was ordained a priest. Only then could I think about the Missions. He had nothing more to say. This was the worst answer he could have given me. If he had given me a flat 'no,' I would have been perfectly happy, because I would have taken his answer as coming from God and would have dropped all my plans. This is what I was looking for - a clear-cut answer. I had gone to him to know the will of God, because I knew that he would consult the Cardinal Prefect. I made no other move, but waited for God to show me his will.

It appears that both the Cardinal and his secretary had doubts about me. Perhaps someone had given a bad report or maybe there was some other reason. But they continued to look for more information and at the beginning of June, the Cardinal told somebody I know that he had had very good results. Finally, on 8th June, I received a very encouraging letter from the Cardinal Prefect. In Paris, Fr. Pinault spoke about the project to the Priests of Holy Spirit and to a missionary bishop: they all seemed very well disposed towards the idea, especially the bishop.

Everything is now in the hands of Our Saviour, as it has always been. The authorities wanted me to make an effort to be ordained, so I approached the Vicars Apostolic of Paris; but instead of giving me Dimissorial Letters, I was sent an "*Exeat*" for the diocese of Rome, even though I had not asked for it. In fact, I had already tacitly refused such a document when I first applied to the Vicariate in Paris. This chain of events led me to think that the good Lord did not want me to be a priest. So I

resigned myself to this and let divine Providence do what was necessary without me.

I resolved never to push this matter further by any roundabout methods. I did not seek any patronage in Rome, but stayed quietly in my room, making no efforts to cultivate influential people. I have seen both the Cardinal and his Secretary on two occasions; when the need arises or circumstances demand it, I will see them again. I have behaved in this way out of fear of wanting too much, of trying to impose my own desires upon my superiors. All I want is to hear the will of God, expressed to me through them.

So this, dear Father, is an up to date account of all that has happened. I really do want you to be part of it and I am very happy to have found this occasion to speak to you.

Now, I want to ask for your advice on the following matter: Fr. Pinault and I are of the opinion that we should write a Provisional Rule from the start, before the departure of any missionaries. This will not be made definitive for a few years so we can see how it works out in practice. I feel that if our missionaries are spread out and become established in two or three different countries, devoting all their time to their work without any rule to guide them, it will become impossible for our society to develop its own common spirit. Different experiences will come from different approaches and ideas. Each area will be different, obedience will be more difficult and leadership will become somewhat arbitrary, as each leader will act as he sees best in his own situation. Added to all this, I myself will probably have to stay in France to run the noviciate and the first members will have little time to prepare themselves before their departure.

On the other hand, the Superior of the Society of the Holy-Spirit and a director at Saint-Sulpice both think differently, saying that as I have no experience of the ministry to be

undertaken, it is impossible for me to draw up a rule at present. I can understand this, but we are not writing a complete and fixed rule, but just setting things in motion to establish a fitting spirit for the whole project. Later on, changes can be made as experience shows what is best.

I began this rule not knowing that others might think differently and I am now about half way through. This is how I set about it. Firstly, the text was divided into sections, chapters and numbers. Each rule has its own number. They have a fairly extensive commentary attached, which will help to explain the overall spirit and show how these rules should be put into practice. It is considerably longer than I thought it would be when I started, but I am not too worried about this because the length is due to the commentary and this will not be part of the final rule.

Please let me know what you think of all this. Pray for us and recommend us to all your community, because I want to be closely linked to your angelic order! I would like to spend some time among you if that is possible. If I can come, can you tell me how long I can stay and what would be the approximate cost? If it is the will of God, I would spend a month to six weeks doing a retreat in your monastery.

Yours, in the love of God.

*F Libermann. Acolyte.*

My address is: c/o M. Patriarche, Vicolo del Pinaco. no 31.

P.S. I forgot to tell you that I haven't yet written to the nun that you spoke about. I was thinking of going to see her to get advice on all my troubles, but God hasn't yet cleared the obstacles in my way. If you still think it is a good idea, I will write to her and ask her opinion, particularly on whether she thinks that God wants me to be ordained a priest.

*F. Libermann*