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01. Community life is absolutely essential for such a long and difficult work

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Community life is absolutely essential for such a long and difficult work

To Frederick Le Vasseur

Frederick Le Vasseur, who was from Reunion, was a seminarian in Saint Sulpice. He was very upset by the sad condition of the Black People in his native island, who were either slaves or recently emancipated. Many people were discussing the total abolition of slavery which would soon take place and some felt there should be a period of moral preparation for it. Le Vasseur had managed to interest some of his seminarian friends in the problem. Fr. Gallais¹ asked Frederick to compose a memorandum on that subject.² On the advice of the Sulpician Fr. Pinault, Le Vasseur consulted Libermann at the end of February 1839 about his plan for founding an association, which would be a "branch of the Eudists" and would bear the name, "The Missionaries of the Holy Cross".

Libermann replied on 8th March 1839³ in order to encourage him and also perhaps to help him develop a more precise focus on the project. He wrote, "I completely agree with Fr. Pinault's⁴ advice regarding the necessity of living within a religious congregation if the project is ever to be realised." We reproduce this important letter in its entirety, which Fr. Tisserant put into his Memorandum of 1842.

¹ Jean-Baptiste Lucien Gallais (1802 - 1854) was a priest of the diocese of Rennes. He taught dogmatic theology and law at Saint Sulpice. He was superior of the seminary at Issy in 1854, dying on 17th January of that year.

² N.D.II, pp.63-67: Memorandum from Le Vasseur to Fr. Gallais.

³ N.D. I, pp.638-641

⁴ Alexis Martin Pinault (1793-1870) of the diocese of Paris. He studied in Saint Sulpice in 1824, was ordained priest in 1827; was at "la Solitude" (during the spiritual year which every Sulpician spent at Issy) in 1829. Became a professor at Issy and died on 12th March 1870.

Rennes, 8 March 1839

Praised be Jesus and Mary!

My very dear Confreere,

*Viriliter age et confortetur cor tuum.*¹ I hope that our Lord will bring to its fulfilment the project he has prompted you to undertake for his greater glory. Pursue that object with confidence and out of love for our Lord. He has merciful designs for the salvation of those poor souls who have been neglected up until now. I advise you therefore to undertake this great work and apply your most earnest endeavours to it. Do not trust in yourself nor in your own devices and schemes. Do not try to persuade anyone, but let the Master of the house act in His own way. It is his privilege to choose the labourers whom He wishes to send there. Your great task for the present consists in humbling yourself very much in his sight, otherwise, you could be a great obstacle to what he plans for those poor souls that are so dear to him.

However, you should have great confidence and love for our Lord, and act energetically. Do not be discouraged by the difficulties you are bound to meet or the criticisms and false judgements that will be made about you, your conduct and anything that you do. People will consider you to be weak-minded, imprudent and proud. They will say all kinds of things about you, not only in your own country of Reunion but even here in Paris. Respectable people will disapprove of you, accuse you, and brand your plan as the foolish dream of a hot-headed young man. They will say that you are trying to do the impossible. This is what you can expect, even from those who are very wise and who have the best of intentions.

When such people see difficulties, which to worldly-minded men seem insurmountable, they declare that the thing is

¹ Translation: "Act manfully and may your heart be strengthened."

impossible. But, my dear friend, all this ought not to discourage you nor should it make you think of putting off the matter even for a second. When even the most devout and wisest of men oppose your plan, persevere in it in the sight of God. These people do not feel any interior prompting from our Lord for such a worthwhile enterprise, and imagine that the difficulties involved will render the work impossible to accomplish. This is why you ought always to remain united with our Lord in a spirit of great humility and love. Let him act in you instead of you acting yourself. Follow his inspirations and the desires he gives you with all gentleness, peace, love and the deepest humility of heart.

Be patient, gentle, humble and calm in God's presence, especially when you find yourself beset with problems, and have the same attitude towards all who cause you those difficulties and troubles.

I have spoken to the Superior of the Eudists about your project¹. He was very happy to hear about it and will be glad to meet you. He said he would be very pleased if the Congregation of Jesus and Mary undertook this great work which is so agreeable to God. Such an arrangement would be to your advantage and even to the project. It would seem to me that such a work should be undertaken by a religious congregation. If the task were to be done by isolated individuals, the spirit of independence would soon show itself and the work would have no stability, lacking any principle of unity. And there are many other reasons besides. In addition, it is essential for you to make yourself ready for such an important ministry by spending a few years in personal preparation, free from any other occupation.

¹ The apostolic project of Fr. Le Vasseur for helping the Black Peoples

For all these reasons, I agree with Father Pinault, that those who undertake such a work should live as members of a religious congregation. If the good Lord directs your steps towards our Congregation (the Eudists), I would be very happy and it would be a great benefit to this poor Order which is presently almost useless in France. It would at least allow it to do something for the glory of God further afield. In addition, we have good rules and constitutions, and nothing will need to be changed for the realisation of your project as they lend themselves perfectly to it. Our spirit is apostolic, and everything in our rules and constitutions is meant to form missionaries after the mind of our Lord. That is what they are all about.

I advise you not to worry for the moment about the details of the rules and constitutions that you will adopt. It is enough for the present that you have a general idea of the project. If at a later date you decide to join us, then we shall work out the details as God inspires us. If He leads you elsewhere, then you can make similar arrangements yourself. But it would not be advisable for you to concern yourself about the minutiae of the work at the moment, since the time for that has not yet arrived. For the moment, simply aim at preparing yourself for such a great ministry. Do all that with interior calm, peace and humility of soul, and by leading a life of love and holiness. Try to make yourself more and more pleasing to our Lord and more able to serve as a faithful instrument in his hands.

I do not understand why Father Gallais thinks we should not be discussing these things, but for that reason, I will not go into the matter any further for the present. I realise that we ought not to be hasty when dealing with a work of God and that we must allow him to act rather than taking the initiative ourselves. Nevertheless, there is nothing wrong in discussing these things unless a reason for not doing so comes to our

notice. In certain circumstances, it would even be very necessary to talk about the matter. But as I have said, Father Gallais probably has reasons best known to himself, reasons which as yet I cannot fathom. If you put Father Pinault in touch with Father Gallais, the two of them together could no doubt agree on what should be done. If I was not afraid of spoiling things, I would have written about the affair to our very dear friend, Father de la Brunière. Nevertheless, I still think we should leave the initiative with our good Lord. But I will discuss the matter with Father Pinault and Father Gallais.

Do not worry about choosing a patron saint for your work, or about the name you should give it. Simply leave everything in the hands of Jesus and Mary. I too would feel inclined to include the cross, because that will be you lot.

Goodbye, dear friend. May Jesus be your refuge, hope and love.

Yours in the love of Jesus and Mary,

F. Libermann, acolyte.