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04. To the Community at Cape Palmas

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To the Community at Cape Palmas¹

When Libermann wrote this letter to the community at Cape Palmas, towards the middle of January 1844, bereavement had already struck them. Father de Regnier² was dead, as was Denis Pindar, the layman whom Bishop Barron had brought with him from the United States of America. Father Roussel³ would die on the 23rd of that same January. Libermann knew nothing of these events, and was writing this letter filled with encouragement to a young missionary community, supposedly in good fettle.

Libermann seems in this letter to be worried about the problem of "Brothers", those young boys who were to be future religious brothers, although Libermann refers to them as "novices". It was Father Bessieux, the leader of the group in Cape Palmas, who had recruited these young men from the foundling hospital of Bordeaux⁴. This fact bothered Libermann no end. He was able to imagine, without any difficulty, the problems which would arise with these youngsters who had not received any religious formation, and who were expected to fit into community life with young priests. Because

¹ This letter was not dated. It was written about the middle of January 1844. It speaks of the arrival of Mr. Warlop (13 December 1843), of Brother Pierre Mersy (14 December) and of Mr. Brunet.

² Marie-Joseph Léopold de Régnier (1807-1843) was born in the diocese of Sées. He made his consecration in 1842. He left for Guinea on 13th September, 1843 and died at Cape Palmas on 30th December 1843.

³ Louis Roussel (1815-1844) was born in the diocese of Amiens. He was ordained priest in 1838, and made his consecration in 1842. He left for Guinea on 13th September, 1843 and died at Cape Palmas on 23 January, 1844.

⁴ Cf. *Memoire spiritaine* no.7, pp. 28-44. "De l'hospice de Bordeaux à la côte d'Afrique, le premier frère missionnaire de Libermann, Grégoire Sey (1824-1857)" by Fr. Gerard Morel.

of that, it is easy to understand Libermann's recommendation that "they should respect the priests as they would Jesus Christ himself."

Libermann expected his missionaries to have good relations with the colonial authorities. The reasons he gives might astonish, and even scandalise us today. He expected his missionaries to appreciate the fact that the colonial authorities were going to favour the Catholic faith rather than the Protestants. Let us never forget that in the nineteenth century, ecumenism was not on the agenda as it is today. Libermann in this respect was a man of his time.

To the Community at Cape Palmas¹

La Neuville, mid-January, 1844

May the Peace of our Lord be with you.

My very dear Brothers,

Be brave and dedicate yourselves to the glory of God and the salvation of so many poor souls. You have and will have much to suffer. Remember however that it is for God that you are suffering and that he well knows how to compensate you a hundred fold, even in this life, for all the sacrifices you are making out of love for him. Each pain offered for the salvation of souls will perhaps save many people. Possibly, that is where the promised hundred fold is to be found. Remember that our Lord suffered continuously, and indescribably, for the salvation of the world. You are disciples of the same Jesus Christ, and must not seek to be treated better than he was. Have no fear of the difficulties you are going to meet. They must never discourage you. You have not gone out in your own name; it is not you who are doing the work, but the One who sent you. You are not alone, and he will always be with you if you remain faithful. So do not be faint-hearted or allow

¹ N.D. VI, pp.3-8

your faith to weaken. An apostle of Jesus Christ cannot be downcast when faced with obstacles. Bear them manfully with peace and patience, and always persevere with any of your projects which are definitely useful for the glory of God and for the salvation of souls. Stop a while in front of obstacles and difficulties which, for the moment, seem to be insoluble, and wait for God's moment with confidence. Be faithful, and that moment will surely arrive.

My very dear Brothers, love one another. What will you ever achieve without peace and unity in your community? Therefore show that the spirit of Jesus Christ is really among you by your perfect union and mutual affection. Bear with each other's faults of character and imperfections. Be for your confreres a source of consolation in the love of Jesus Christ. All your sufferings will seem as nothing, if the love of Jesus unites you. Do not judge or oppose one another. Why should you cause pain to the Heart of Jesus, who wishes to be the bond of unity among you? Allow your confreres to act as seems right and proper to them in the sight of God. For your part, act according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in your souls. Be considerate and show affection to all. Console one another, as you would Jesus Christ himself, who is your Master. Be joyful together in the midst of your works, pains and afflictions, for you are the servants, and the apostles of Jesus Christ. If only you knew how I envy you! I would love to be among you to work and perhaps suffer something for the glory of God. However, I have not been judged worthy of such a great favour of sacrificing all for him, who was himself sacrificed out of love for me. My very dear brothers, since you have been chosen, from among so many others, to receive this great gift, you must live a life worthy of such a wonderful grace. Live by love and charity.

Draw up community rules and be faithful to them. Even if you cannot remain a long time at Garroway¹, make sure you observe them. In doing so, you will feel great peace and calm of soul. Practise obedience with humility and affection, like children of God who follow every wish of their Father. If it costs you somewhat, feel happy to be able to offer that little sacrifice to your God. Be faithful in little things, and you will be the same in great things. Eternal Wisdom has said this. If you are not faithful in little things, you will of course be unfaithful in what is greater.

Although you are most ready to do anything, undertake anything, and make any sacrifice for the glory of our Lord, take care not to expose yourselves too readily to the dangers which are present all around you. Remember that if you make too great a sacrifice of your bodies, you will do harm to a large number of people. But avoid excessive timidity as well and have trust in God. When something has been decided in your community meetings, each one must be ready to place himself in the hands of his superior, no matter the dangers involved. It will be up to Jesus, who thus exposes you, to look after you, if he wishes to avail of your services for even greater things. Do not fear - he will watch over you and protect you. Trust in Mary and you will find great happiness and a powerful protection.

When you are in a community meeting, do not be too tenacious of your own opinions, nor stand up for them too passionately. Follow what the rule of life says about the matter and the outcome will always be beneficial and produce the fruits of salvation for many.

The lay brothers should learn to appreciate the holiness and the greatness of their vocation. May they always feel that they

¹ Garroway was a little seaport on the border between present-day Liberia and the Ivory Coast.

are unworthy of it. Let them live humbly so as not to lose such a tremendous grace through self-love.

The great virtues which every Brother should practise are humility, obedience, docility, modesty and the hidden life. If they are unfaithful, if they do not practice these virtues, they will make themselves unhappy and be the cause of great problems for their superiors. In addition, they would bring disorder into the community and be an obstacle for the ministry of the priests and so cause great harm to the people. They would even put their own salvation in jeopardy. May they never forget the great sacrifice they have made for God's sake, and may they act in a dignified manner, worthy of the great favour that they have received. They must help the priest missionaries by carrying out all the work they are given to do as perfectly as possible and with contentment of heart. They must always be ready for manual labour as well as accompanying the ordained missionaries in their duties. Humility and obedience will make them acceptable to God, whatever their work.

The brothers should respect the priests as if they were Jesus Christ himself. The next missionaries who come out will bring the Rule for the dear Brothers. While waiting for these to arrive, they should learn whatever will be helpful to acquire the religious spirit. They are still novices and cannot be admitted into our Society without having undergone sufficient probation. This is all the more reason why they should make every effort to practice the virtues I have just mentioned, which are, of course, the very virtues which novices should have. Let them place their trust in God, who will grant them the grace of acquiring those holy virtues.

I hope you received the letters which I sent on the subject relations with the Civil Authorities. I assure you, their intentions are proper and correct. I very much recommend you to maintain peace and profound harmony with those in charge of

the French trading posts. Great good will come of it if you do. Whenever possible, you should maintain friendly relations with them. If they practise any injustice or overstep their authority, do not be aggressive in your protestations, rather treat them in as friendly a way as possible. If that does not work, give in on matters of less importance for the sake of good relations, so that you will be in a better position if more important things arise. If you irritate them over what is unimportant, they will obstruct you in more important affairs. Go along with them as far as your conscience allows, and insofar as there is no danger of scandal. They deserve it because they are part of the plan of God. In fact I can state it as a principle: the more we go along with the plans of the Authorities, the more we are carrying out the work of God.

It has already been agreed that the Government will oppose the work of Protestant ministers everywhere, and will promote the Catholic faith. It would be unjust of us not to be grateful for that, and very imprudent not to reply in kind to the good will thus revealed. It is true, of course, that the Authorities are working for political ends and for the good of the country when they adopt such policies, but that is not important. Their intentions are upright and what is correct is being done. In addition, the political interests in this case are so intimately bound up with the interests of God, that it is impossible to separate them.

We have a lot of novices. There are fourteen at meals, and we expect soon to be up to seventeen. I am almost certain that others will arrive at Easter. But there are only a few who will be ready to come out to you this year. We have four priests among the novices, only two of whom can be sent to the missions this year. Perhaps if it is really necessary, I could send you a third who could be ordained priest after his arrival. God in his goodness will decide all that. Of the four priests at present, two will remain here with me. One of them, Father

Schwindenhammer, is slowly making up his mind, and will be an excellent acquisition for our poor little work. He is a very capable person. The other is the nephew of the Bishop of Amiens. The Bishop has been speaking to me about him for a long time, and has agreed that we should make every effort to accommodate him and keep him, if it is agreed on both sides. He has not yet arrived, but will be here within a few months. The others include four theologians who will only finish next year. We also have two philosophers and a delightful Brother, full of modesty, piety and goodwill.

Then there is a young doctor, who came with the intention of becoming a Brother. However, I do not think he has the right attitude. He is very well educated, but he is too familiar with the priests. He will only cause trouble for our Brothers, so I would much prefer to admit him as an associate member. This means we will be making an exception in his case. He will obey the superiors as a Brother, but he will live like a paying guest in the house with the priests. I do not want to lose such a valuable subject for our missions. He has been a doctor for many years, but he is more of a surgeon than a doctor. He can turn his hand to anything, so I believe he will be a great help. He also has an excellent character. I am giving you all these explanation so that you will understand why I am making an exception in admitting him into our religious congregation.

One of our philosophers has come from a regiment of army engineers, He was a sergeant and so he will be a great help to us. The two others are Mr. Seclo, with whom I am very pleased, and the brother of Father Schwindenhammer.

However, we have enormous expenses and we also need to build. At the very least, we must build a wing where the chalet is in the garden and the chapel will take up almost the whole of the ground floor. It is going to cost a lot but I am sure Our Lord will not abandon us. He will not leave us financially embarrassed otherwise we will not be able to make ends meet

this year. The expenses have been greater than ever because we have had to reconstruct the garden.

Francis Libermann