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### 05. Reaction to the "Guinea Disaster"

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## Reaction to the "Guinea Disaster"

*To Father Le Vavas seur, Missionary of the Holy Heart of Mary,  
Saint Denis, Reunion<sup>1</sup>*

*Around the middle of 1844, Father Libermann received the news of the disaster which had overtaken the first group of Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary to go to the Gulf of Guinea. He was deeply moved by the deaths of his courageous confreres. He actually believed that they had all died. Here he informs his co-founder, Frederick Le Vavas seur,<sup>2</sup> of the tragedy, and gives his views on this terrible event. There was question of a new mission to Madagascar. but he is adamant that he will only send missionaries there if the conditions prove to be favourable.*

Paris, 16<sup>th</sup> October 1844

My very dear confrere,

I have received your memoranda, and also one from Father Blanpin concerning his mission of Colimaçon at M. de Villèle's place. I cannot give you an answer at this moment in time. I will do it in the next few days, and perhaps you will receive

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<sup>1</sup> N.D. VI pp.374-377

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Le Vavas seur (1811-1882), born in Reunion. Came to France in 1829. Failed his examinations at the Paris Polytechnic. Returned to Reunion in 1835. Became a seminarian at Issy in 1836, and was ordained priest on 18<sup>th</sup> November 1841. Entered the Novitiate at La Neuville on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1841. Made his consecration to the apostolate on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1842, and left on 16<sup>th</sup> February. He was a missionary in Reunion from June 1842 until September 1849. He returned to France in 1850. Became a General Councillor on 13<sup>th</sup> June 1850. He was then novice-master, and superior of several houses of formation. He became assistant provincial in France in 1856, and First Assistant to the Superior General on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1869. He was then provincial in France, and vicar-general in March 1881. He was elected Superior General in August 1881, and died in Paris on 16<sup>th</sup> January 1882.

both this letter and that reply at the same time. I will do my utmost to write to you a second time this very week. Your work gives me great consolation, and much encouragement.

We have much need of consolation at present, for we have just heard of a great tragedy in Guinea. The blows which Our Lord has rained on us are so great, that I can only see in them an extraordinary act of his divine Providence. We had every reason to hope for great things in such a vast and abandoned mission. With the news I was getting from all sides, I believed that we would be able to save that country with little or no losses. God has decided otherwise. He has put us to the test in the greatest possible way. May his holy Name be blessed!

On 6<sup>th</sup> August, I received a letter from Bishop Barron<sup>1</sup> informing me of further losses, namely, of the deaths of Father Audebert<sup>2</sup> and of Father Bouchet<sup>3</sup>. The Bishop has written that he will find a safer place for those who remain. But I think it is likely that they are also dead by now. I am absolutely convinced that I have followed the will of God in this affair. I would not have been doing what God wanted if I had not accepted this mission.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Barron was born in Ireland in 1801. He was ordained priest in 1829. Went to the diocese of Philadelphia in the United States of America. He volunteered for the mission of Liberia, and was made Prefect Apostolic and then Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas in 1842. He resigned in 1844 and returned to the United States where he died on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1854.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Louis Emile Audebert, born 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1813 at Noyon, in the diocese of Beauvais. He entered La Neuville on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1842, and made his consecration to the apostolate on 21<sup>st</sup> November. Left for Guinea on 13<sup>th</sup> September 1843, and died at Grand Bassam on 6<sup>th</sup> July 1844.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Bouchet, born at Cruseilles, in the diocese of Annecy. Entered the novitiate on 28<sup>th</sup> January 1842 and was ordained on 21<sup>st</sup> November. Left for Guinea on 13<sup>th</sup> September 1843, and died at sea on 28<sup>th</sup> May 1844.

I was not able to obtain detailed information on the area in advance, because nobody had any until now. But I am still convinced that we have done the right thing and my soul is full of confidence and perfectly at peace before God. Nevertheless, my heart has been pierced with seven sorrows like that of our Mother Mary. We must help to save that vast, abandoned country. I also believe that God intended to give our seven missionaries to Guinea, not as apostles, but as intercessors before his throne of mercy. I detect something extraordinary here.

Our dear confreres were fully aware of the impossibility of surviving in such an unhealthy climate. But they never for a moment thought of leaving the place, because they had been put there by obedience, and also because they saw that the local people were very well disposed. Bishop Barron, who should have made them come out, let them remain and intended to stay with them himself. As soon as I heard about the terrible climate, I told them to leave immediately for the healthier environment of Gorée. I sent two different copies of my letter, but none of them arrived. These confreres were sent out to be sacrificed for the salvation of that land.

My determination to save those huge areas is stronger than ever; I have decided, by the grace of God, never to abandon those poor people, at least as long as that seems to be His will. But I do not think that Providence will ever indicate that I should not continue to be involved with that country. However, do not worry: I shall not send any more of our missionaries to that particular place. I hope the decisions I will now make will mean that there will be no more victims. I trust that the good God is satisfied with the sacrifice we have already made.

Father Tisserant is in France but he has to go to Rome. (I will speak of these matters in my next letter to you). I am sending Father Schwindenhammer with him, to deal with the affairs of Guinea. That is why I am still in Paris. But I repeat, we will not

send any more confreres to Guinea, unless, later on, we put them on Gorée where the climate is much healthier. I will explore every possible avenue, and will not take unnecessary risks. As far as possible, we must take one step at a time and always consider the safety of the men.

A word about Madagascar; Father Dalmond wants to place our missionaries at Nossi Bé. I want you to take care of that mission so please look very carefully at his suggestion. If he offers you a bad situation, have nothing to do with it. He will have to give us a place where we will not have to run the risk of another Guinea. Take every precaution. As soon as you receive this letter, find out about the health situation on the different coasts of Madagascar and on the adjacent islands. Ask Father Dalmond every question you can think of, and do not go into anything blindly. Make him realise that if any more disasters hit us there, it will cause us great harm. Tell him also that if our missionaries are to continue in that place, they will have to receive reinforcements every year. If they die in his charge, he cannot depend on further help in the future. He must treat the question seriously; there is a question here of compromising a young religious society and of doing its mission irreparable harm.

I recommend that you make Fr. Collin the superior of the missionaries I will send you and allocate them to the different houses yourself, rather than returning immediately to Reunion. I hope to send you a missionary for Reunion to join you and the others who are there. Do not send Father Blanpin to Madagascar. I would like you to go there to organise the new mission, but I leave that to your good judgement. I do not have enough knowledge of the place, for it is too far away from here. It is up to you to make the right decisions, in the presence of our Lord.

Father Dalmond has informed me that he will send our missionaries to Nossi Bé, on the side of the island opposite to

where there is a French blockhouse. He says that the island is healthier on that side. That is all very well, but there is one serious inconvenience: if a missionary falls sick, he would not be able to get out of the place, because there are no means of transport. Boats rarely, if ever, call in at that place. You will have to weigh up everything yourself. In addition, I am warning you that there have been difficulties with certain commandants, who will only agree to let the sick missionaries depart when it is too late. You will have to look into all the circumstances and take the necessary precautions.

There must be no question of your trying to get out of being superior of the group. Only what God wants matters. We are miserable creatures who must be sacrificed for his glory. If I took any notice of the pain I am suffering in this most difficult job, I would try to protect myself at every moment and hide away in solitude. But do not worry: there is no danger of that happening! We have to offer up ourselves in our afflictions and work for the glory of God. Just have courage, patience, humility and trust and God will achieve his ends through us, even though we are the most miserable of instruments. There is no need to worry: these losses will do us no harm.

Greetings, my dearest friend, in the charity of Jesus and Mary

*F. Libermann*

*Priest of the Holy Heart of Mary*

P.S. I will simply publish the news of the death of the four missionaries. I will add that we are trying to send the others to a healthier spot, but I will say nothing about our concerns for their fate. I feel that is my duty. Also I think it well not to publish our worries here in France.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Writing to the community of Reunion, 6<sup>th</sup> September 1845, Fr. Libermann said that the unfortunate missionaries had been very imprudent. For example, they had gone out in the sun bare headed. No-one it seems could convince them otherwise. N .D. VII. p.292