

Duquesne University

Duquesne Scholarship Collection

A Spiritan Anthology

Anthologie Spiritaine

1-1-2011

06. Answering the calls of Mission

Christian de Mare CSSp

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/anthologie-spiritaine-english>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

Repository Citation

de Mare, C. (2011). 06. Answering the calls of Mission. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/anthologie-spiritaine-english/58>

This Chapter III is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthologie Spiritaine at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in A Spiritan Anthology by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

Answering the calls of Mission

To the Community of Reunion¹

In this letter, Libermann has just taken on missionary work in the Two Guineas under the direction of Bishop Barron. The confreres in Reunion were most critical of this extension of their mission field. They wanted to know if the superior of the Congregation had weighed up sufficiently well the risk he was taking in multiplying his commitments. Libermann here replies to their criticisms. He was full of sympathy for the stance they were taking, since they undoubtedly feared that no more reinforcements would come their way. He says they should not demand the assurance of certain success before undertaking a particular work. Is it not Providence which is guiding us, as well as human prudence?

La Neuville, 25th February 1844

My very dear Brothers,

I have been a little slow in replying to your letter because I have many things to say to you. You already know about what has happened in Guinea². Fathers Collin and Blanpin were still here when the news came through. The reasons which I had for accepting that mission were that Santo Domingo was not available, and Reunion, without actually being a liability, could not give us any great security, since our stay there was not supported by the French Government. We had on our hands five missionaries, full of zeal. We could not keep them on hold for ever, and if they were to find, time after time, that their wishes were being frustrated and their hopes dashed, the Congregation would have been confined just to the island of

¹ N.D. VI pp.73-81

² He is talking of the deaths of several missionaries on the first expedition.

Reunion, where our foothold is precarious. If we had rejected Guinea, it would have left them feeling very discouraged. And there was another even stronger reason which influenced my decision: the mission of Guinea is one of the most important in the world. The number of people to be saved there is immense. That would be a sufficient reason in itself, but it is also just what we need to get our Congregation well established. If we were only in Reunion, we would never grow in numbers, and within ten years, we would have disappeared, for nobody would have joined us. It goes without saying that our whole confidence must rest in God, but if He offers us the chance of serving Him in a big way, thus establishing ourselves in everybody's eyes, why should we refuse? Would that not be letting him down?

People did warn me that the diseases of the Tropics would lay us low, but are we to abandon these poor people on the road to perdition? We have undertaken the Work for the Black Peoples, and it is our duty to get down to it for the salvation of those lands. Apart from Reunion and Mauritius, every country with Black People is unhealthy. To accept the Work of the Blacks is to be exposed to tropical diseases. It is up to us to take the proper preventive measures, and up to divine Providence to protect us. In general, I make the same reply to all such objections: if God wants this sort of work to be done, he will have to support it, since it can only be done in unhealthy climates. You could, of course, answer that we ought to wait until our Congregation is firmly established. But we cannot take our time, much as we would like to. The mission is there here and now. We must take it on immediately or lose out to another religious congregation, which would keep it for itself. And then those who would like to serve the Black Peoples would join that other congregation or find an even larger mission. That is not all; to restrict ourselves to Reunion would mean that we would never get firmly established at all. So there is no point in delaying.

Our seven missionaries left last September. At that time we thought that four would go to Senegambia, and three to Cape Palmas, but God decided otherwise. I received a letter from the Minister for the Navy which I had to attend to immediately. They were offering to help us. I have already discussed that matter with Father Le Vasseur and no doubt he mentioned it to you, so I have no need to tell you much about it. The definitive agreement was that the Ministry would give us 1,500 francs for each missionary priest (and for that we had to guarantee three priests for every French station), and 400 francs for each Brother. In addition, they would build a community house in each place, along with a chapel. We would have the right to visit the station doctor and pharmacist. We would receive free passage out, and 600 francs for the trousseau of each missionary. All costs incurred on the journey, including waiting at a port if necessary, would be met by the Government, at a cost of 3 francs per person per day. Moreover, for each new station opened, we would receive 1,000 francs towards the cost of the novitiate (they will not backdate this for now because the missionaries have already arrived in Africa). I asked the Ministry for the Navy to officially appoint our men in Reunion, but they refused. However, I have good reason to hope that you will be protected by them. They did ask one thing which cost me a lot of thought: they wanted the seven missionary priests and the three Brothers to be placed in three trading posts¹. I would have much preferred to see them all in one or, at the most, two places, but I reluctantly agreed to their request. Obviously I could not turn my back on all the advantages they were offering. I hope that divine Providence will send us plenty of recruits, all the more so since Bishop Barron has sent a memorandum to the Association for the Propagation of the Faith² (APF) in which

¹ *These were French trading establishments along the West African coast.*

² *A charitable organisation for the support of missionary activity.*

he describes our work and progress, and it will soon be published in the *Annals*.

Bishop Barron did us no favours. He made our poor missionaries wait in France for six months or more, which meant that they arrived in Africa at the least favourable time of the year. It is true that there were only three or so weeks left of the unhealthy season, but it was enough for all our missionaries to fall sick, especially the four who were supposed to go to Senegambia. Still, divine Providence had foreseen all that. I will describe to you exactly what happened. All left on the same ship which was supposed to land four of them at Gorée, where they were to stay until Bishop Barron arrived. This was before the agreement I signed with the Ministry for the Navy, which took place only a month after their departure. They arrived at Gorée at the height of the unhealthy season. If the four had stayed there, it would have been just as bad for them. Father Bouchet¹ and Father Laval² immediately contracted fever, but recovered eight days later. What saved the others was a misunderstanding which made them believe, against all appearances to the contrary, that I wanted them to leave for Garroway³ to await the Bishop there. So they did not get off the ship at Gorée, but stayed on board the whole of the fifteen days it was at that island. Then they

¹ He is talking here of Francis Bouchet and not of Maurice Bouchet who died soon after his arrival in Australia on 24th January, 1846. As for Mary Peter Bouchet, he died in Gabon on 23rd March 1856. The first two mentioned belonged to the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary, while the third died as a Spiritan after the Fusion of 1848.

² He is speaking of Paul Laval, not Jacques Laval, the Apostle of Mauritius. He was an associate member of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary, and died at Assinie (Ivory Coast) on 13th July, 1844.

³ Garroway is on the Liberian coast, about thirty kilometres north west of Cape Palmas.

had at least another fortnight at sea ahead of them before arriving at Garroway. I think they must have arrived there at the start of the healthy season, but I still have no word from them. The Guinea mission is immense, and we will never have enough people for the needs of that place. However we have to do what we can, so as to stop the area turning Protestant¹, for the Methodists are doing their utmost to take over those countries. We must try to gain these places from them wherever we go.

We must totally reject the idea that we should go first of all to where success is assured and only later consider the difficult areas. If Saint Paul had thought like that, he would never have achieved so much for the glory of God. We must act as we see fit for the spread of the Church and the confusion of heresy. We must be generous and not over-fearful for the future of our little congregation. Of course, we should be prudent and not let our imagination run away with us, but we will never confine ourselves to works of certain success. If we are not completely devoted to the service of Jesus Christ and his Church and ready for every sacrifice, there would be no point in coming together in the first place.

Now I will tell you what has been happening in Haiti (Santo Domingo). When I saw that we had no alternative but to send our seven missionaries to Guinea, I asked Cardinal Franski to free us from our commitment to Santo Domingo and allow us to take Father Laval out of Mauritius. He replied that he was very keen that we should look after Santo Domingo. He wrote this a second and third time, asking me to send reinforcements to Father Tisserant in Haiti as soon as possible. His third letter showed us how much he appreciated our efforts so far and asked me again to find help for that

¹ *As can be seen, the era of ecumenism was still far in the future. But no-one can deny the missionary zeal and faith of our writer.*

desolate country. His reason was that the Protestants are making every effort to take over the land. In fact, the President (General Hérard) is well disposed towards us. He has a high opinion of Father Tisserant and is constantly asking him to send good priests to Haiti. The Municipality of Port au Prince is also asking for good priests as soon as possible. So I felt I had to send some more help; I could not just stand by while thirteen hundred thousand people are about to be lost to the Protestants, thanks to the crimes and negligence of the priests who are already there.

You who are understandably fighting your own corner will probably repeat that we are abandoning what is certain for what is doubtful. But I believe that it would be letting down our Lord and his Church if we abandon that country. So, my dear brothers, you can see that, in spite of myself, I seem to be taking on more and more things for which we do not have the personnel. But God will help us.

Here at La Neuville we have four men who, I hope, will be ready for the missions in November or December. One of them will not yet be ordained, but the cold climate of France is undermining his health. He will probably need to leave while still a sub-deacon and get ordained in Guinea. He has a solid character, and is committed to God. In addition, we have a deacon who has just arrived and who will hopefully stay with us. Another deacon is due to join us on the 15th of this month and perhaps there will be another soon afterwards. Also, as soon as Maurice Bouchet¹ is ordained, I will get him ready to be sent out on the first boat, if at all possible. We have two other seminarians who should be finished their training by the end of next year.

¹ *Maurice Bouchet was born in Savoy in 1821. He went to Haiti but was not a success there. He died in Perth, Australia, just at the beginning of a new missionary venture.*

There are also two Brothers, a young African, and Father Schwindenhammer¹ (Ignace). The latter is going to stay here with us here at La Neuville. His brother (Jérôme)) is a young man of great piety and admirable innocence; he will be useful to us later on as a bursar, overseeing the garden and the house. By the way, he is paying his own way. So, in the house we are nine clerics, seven of whom are for the missions. Then there are two Brothers, the young African and the brother of Father Schwindenhammer; a young doctor who wants to go to Guinea but as an associate of the community. There is the deacon, who is due any day, and three Brothers who have announced their arrival and whom I cannot refuse because they are exemplary people and we have great need of them for Guinea and Santo Domingo. So there should be eighteen in all. The three who left a fortnight ago have lowered our numbers somewhat, but as you can see, they will soon be replaced. Father Bouchet will arrive after Trinity Sunday. I am also expecting the Lord will send us many more for Santo Domingo.

There is hardly any more room in the house and we are already getting in each other's way. Our income is not enough for such a large family - God will provide. This year, we have spent more than 8,000 francs and we have only two thousand left to get us to the end of the year. But it will all work out. We had tremendous expenses this year. We had to pay off M. Gorgeon² at a cost of 500 francs, but it was very urgent. We bought two cows for 500 francs, and hay for the winter - another 200 francs; a donkey and trap (no more luxurious than

¹ *He is speaking here of Ignatius Schwindenhammer, the future successor of Libermann, and elder brother of Jerome.*

² "Mr. Louis Georgeon, a day labourer living at La Neuville lès Amiens" (N. D. II. P. 428). *In the name of the community, he had rented out nearly two hectares of land surrounding the novitiate to the parish priest of Saint Leu lès Amiens.*

your "Tilbury" carriage!¹) for 150 francs. 500 francs salary for a gardener and his wife, for looking after the garden and the cows (and that is without paying for their food); 250 francs to another gardener, plus his food. 500 francs to Mister Cacheleux (for the poor people he looks after), as payment for the theology course he gives to our seminarians; A little more than 200 to M. Redoux for Latin lessons for our little African; 700 to 800 francs for the upkeep of Mr. Bouchet and another seminarian at the Paris seminary. Add to that 500 - 600 francs at least for a post office box. The letters I sent in the last three months came to 137 francs 10 cents, and over and above that the stamps which I had to pay for and which were very considerable. The previous quarter, it all came to more than 200 francs. So do your sums and why we have to put all our trust in God....

(Libermann continues to give the details of his expenses; "the chapel with a dormitory above" (85 feet long), will come to 20,000 francs. Faced with all these costs, he could not offer any help to the community in Reunion: rather, they should be aiding the novitiate of La Neuville!)

I must say a few words about the members of the Congregation and those about to join us. Firstly, in Guinea, there are seven priests: Father de Régnier, the superior of the Province, Fathers Bessieux and Bouchet, superiors of communities, and Fathers Roussel, Audebert, Maurice and Laval (from Rennes). The latter came without any reference to me. He joined us in Paris through Bishop Barron who had accepted him. He only spent a few months in the novitiate. I told him that if he persevered in his vocation for another three months, he could be accepted into the Congregation in Guinea. I put him in the hands of his superior.

¹ A carriage, named after the inventor, a London coach builder; a kind of gig, or two-wheeled vehicle without a top or cover.

(This letter goes on to mention other topics. Regarding the "Brothers" brought out to Guinea, Libermann says that it was a mistake not to have made them do a novitiate. Although they were very necessary for teaching trades and for the schools, he fears that "these good Brothers could give them a hard time". Then he talks of the missionaries in Santo Domingo, consisting of two priests and one Brother and he also mentions Father Laval in Mauritius. He ends by telling the missionaries in Reunion that they should try to spread devotion to Our Lady of Victories.)

When you write to me, try to put the things which are not meant for public consumption into a separate enclosure. Put the general news on another sheet.

(The text in "Notes et Documents" stops here, without any greetings or signature.)

F. Libermann