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### 08. Advice before undertaking a missionary venture

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## Advice before undertaking a missionary venture<sup>1</sup>

*To Father Briot*

*Father Briot was a young missionary who worked in Santo Domingo (Haiti) from January 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1845 but had to leave on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, due to political unrest on the island. He was waiting at the house of M. Germainville<sup>2</sup> in Bordeaux for the arrival of two other missionaries, Father Arragon and Brother Peter and the three of them would then leave together for Gorée to open a mission in Dakar.*

*This letter is full of wise and practical advice. Libermann concerned himself with the minutest details - wine, pots and pans, and furniture. All this was surprisingly relevant, for preserving one's health. "What good is it if you win a few souls for God, and destroy your body in the process?" In point number five, he says: "When you have to undertake something of importance, weigh it up together in the presence of God". This remains a model for community discernment.*

*Libermann had been in correspondence for more than a year with Mother Javouhey<sup>3</sup> who had experience of Senegal. He took note of her important advice for the greater good of his men. In this letter, we see that Libermann's missionaries had a difference of opinion with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit on the mainland of Senegal,*

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<sup>1</sup> N.D. VII, pp. 191-195

<sup>2</sup> cf. *Memoire Spiritaine* no.6, p.119. "M. Germainville (1806-1881), a man of enterprise, a friend of Libermann" by Georges Henri Thibault

<sup>3</sup> Anne Marie Javouhey (1779-1851), foundress of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny. She worked in Mana in Guyana, and also in Senegal. It was she who in 1825 brought over the first African seminarians to be trained in France. Among them was Father Boilat, who is mentioned at the end of this letter. Cf. *Memoire Spiritaine* no.12, p10, "In the same portion of the vineyard": Father Libermann and Mother Javouhey, by Bernard Ducol.

*concerning their authorisation to preach the Gospel: "I will still write to Rome about it", says Libermann.*

Father Briot,  
Apostolic Missionary,  
c/o Mr. Germainville,  
rue Neuve en Ville,  
Bordeaux

La Neuville, 8<sup>th</sup> June 1845

Dear Confrere,

I asked Father Arragon to leave three days earlier because, as he will explain to you himself, I was afraid that he might miss the ship. So now you are both going to begin a great and important mission. Here are my final instructions to you.

1. Don't depend on your own ability, prudence or activity. You must place all your confidence in God and in Mary.
2. Expect to meet with great difficulties, and to suffer delays before being able to carry out your plans. You will come up against problems, disappointments, contradictions of every type, and pain inflicted by all kinds of persons, things and circumstances. Don't worry or give up. Even when things seem completely hopeless, make sure you never give into discouragement.
3. Be quiet, calm, humble and gentle whatever the situation. Keep the same attitude whether things go well or badly. Always be humble, peaceful and submissive to what the Providence decides. Refer everything back to God, and wait on his divine mercy.
4. Don't look at things in an imaginary way but consider everything calmly and practically. Never be over-elated by success, or depressed by the possibility of failure. Don't build imaginary castles in the air, nor afflict yourselves with unreasonable fears. Work as faithful labourers in the Lord's

vineyard, with neither complacency nor discouragement before, during or after your efforts. Whether you are successful or not, your reward will be great.

5. When you are about to begin something important, consider and discuss the matter together in the presence of God. Begin by removing all prejudice for or against the venture. Don't allow yourselves to be carried away with enthusiasm, nor do anything hastily, but weigh well what you think you ought to do in a spirit of faith but at the same time reason things out. Have confidence in God for whatever you undertake, but do not attempt anything with a presumptive or over-enthusiastic spirit. When you discuss what should be done, your heart must not rule over your head. Don't be scrupulous or worried that you might be failing to follow a good inspiration, when your mind hesitates because you suspect the facts might be different to what you really think.

Always be guided by your faith, basing your conduct solely on the principles of the Gospel. But while your mind is tuned into the things of God, it should also reason things out and act after mature reflection and deliberation. Whenever possible, don't act in matters of importance until you can see things clearly. Try to foresee, more or less, what the result will be before you decide anything. Leave nothing to chance, but once you have taken every precaution, place your trust in God alone.

Be balanced in the way you scrutinise any plans for an undertaking, neither being too slow, nor letting things drag on and on. It is wrong to be reckless, but it is sometimes even worse to remain uncertain and timid when you make a decision. Spend a reasonable amount of time examining what to do, judging the for and against in the presence of God, and acting calmly with the sole desire of pleasing God and bringing about his glory. After thoroughly examining the case, make your decision without fear and act with great confidence in

God. When the matter is not urgent, spend a longer time considering what is to be done, but you don't need to eliminate every difficulty before starting a work. After you have taken proper precautions for its success, always make sure to leave something to Providence.

6. Keep your own counsel, and be reserved without making it too obvious. Never talk about what you intend to do for the glory of God before it is absolutely necessary. Adopt the habit of not telling people everything you know, and have control over your thoughts and speech. Speak only when it is useful to do so. On the other hand, avoid being men of mystery, but rather be simple and open. You should not make secrets out of trifles, but neither be in a hurry to tell people the reasons why you do things.
7. Don't be impatient in your undertakings or you will experience a lot of failure. Give things a chance to mature and don't try to gather fruit before it is ripe, otherwise, it will taste bitter, and all your efforts will come to nothing. A good missionary is as willing to be at rest, if Providence so decides, as he is to get immersed in many labours when faced with an abundant harvest. In everything, at all times and in every circumstance, learn to follow the movements of Providence. Follow God instead of always trying to run ahead of him!
8. Don't plunge imprudently into work with excessive zeal, at the risk of undermining your health. What good is it if you win a few souls for God, and destroy your body in the process? Doubtless, it is an excellent thing to sacrifice your life for the salvation of a single soul, but it is still better to preserve yourself for the good of a hundred.

To fear neither sickness nor death is the attitude of a missionary who is zealous and devoted to God alone; but taking the necessary precautions to preserve one's life, and

thus save a greater number of souls, should be the approach of a missionary who unites perfect prudence with perfect zeal and perfect devotion.

When you are in good health, avoid what will make you sick, but without being excessively preoccupied and fearful. If you fall sick, consider yourselves happy to be suffering for the glory and love of our Lord. Don't become sad or frightened if that happens, but rejoice that you are able to give your lives for the glory of God and the salvation of those to whom you have been sent.

9. Preserve peace and harmony among yourselves. Do nothing without consulting the others and let your unity of hearts be obvious to everybody you meet.

10. Be gentle and peaceful with everybody. Beware of trying to dominate others or to get the better of them. On the contrary, see that the others are always more honoured than yourselves. Be very careful about appearing to encroach upon the responsibilities and work of other priests.

Be restrained about showing your zeal outwardly. Don't give the impression that you are trying to draw attention to yourselves. If others are doing good, let them get on with it and only intervene if they omit or neglect something important. If you are helping in a parish, do the work yourselves but leave all the resulting honour to the priests who are in charge. In all these things, act very naturally and avoid any affectation.

11. Don't be in too much of a hurry to go and preach the Gospel to the poor people on the African mainland<sup>1</sup>. Choose the right time for that, and don't risk your health by

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<sup>1</sup> He is talking of the village of Ndakarou (Dakar), opposite the island of Gorée

landing there too soon. Gather all the information you can so that you can choose the most suitable time, place and circumstances. Don't destroy yourselves by your impatience; you will only be preventing the accomplishment of something really useful.

12. Regarding whether you should go to Saint Louis or stay at Gorée, I have no advice to give. Saint Louis is unhealthy, and Gorée is not, but I don't want to be the one to make the decision. You will know what to do for the best when you visit those places. In any case, it would seem to be sensible to remain at Gorée until the end of the bad weather. At this time of year, it would be too dangerous to go to Saint Louis; but if you feel you should set up there, it would be better to wait until you are invited to do so. I am not in a position to give definitive advise one way or the other; look at the situation as you find it and decide with God's help what to do.
13. As regards provisions, follow the advice of Mère Javouhey but don't bring too much. If M. Ducournaux has already bought the wine, pots and pans and furniture, hang on to them. If not, you must get something.
14. Father Boilat<sup>1</sup> will not refuse to give you the necessary priestly faculties, but I will still write to Rome about it.

May the peace of our Lord and of his Mother be with you.

Yours in the love of the holy Heart of Mary,

*F. Libermann*  
*Priest of the Holy Heart of Mary*

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<sup>1</sup> David Boilat was one of the three first Senegalese priests, trained in France, thanks to Mother Javouhey