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Christian de Mare CSSp

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Missionary advice to Mother Marie Amélie de Villeneuve

Foundress of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception
of Castres (1836)¹

This letter of Libermann was discovered by Fr. Paul Coulon in July 1986, in a book by L. Ayma². It is not to be found in the collection of letters in "Notes et Documents", edited by Father Cabon. It is a letter of considerable interest; its contents and context is very close to the famous letter (which follows after this one) that Libermann sent to the community of Dakar and Gabon on 19th November 1847. It offers an important blueprint for the missionary life.

Amiens, 31st October 1847

Dear Mother Superior,

I have written a letter to the Minister for the Navy, dated 30th October. In it, I said that you intend to send four sisters to the African Coast to devote themselves to educating girls and caring for the sick. I also said that you had asked me to request free passage for your four sisters on a Government ship. I told the Minister that Bishop Truffet³ felt their presence would be a great help for the good of the local people and that

¹The letter can be found in «*Libermann 1802-1852*», by Paul Coulon et Paule Brasseur, Paris, Cerf, 1988, pp. 285-287.

² «*Vie de Soeur Marie de Villeneuve, Fondatrice de l'Institut de l'Immaculée Conception de Castres*», Paris, Ressatré, Librairie-Editeur, 22, rue Saint Sulpice, 1881.

³ Bishop Etienne-Maurice-Benoît Truffet He was appointed Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas before the end of his novitiate in the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary in December, 1846. He died in Dakar on 23rd November 1847, after being bishop for only six and a half months.

Father Bessieux¹ was of the same opinion. I added that Fr. Bessieux (who incidentally, comes from the same part of France as yourself) had already asked you for religious sisters to be appointed to Dakar and Gabon to help the indigenous people of those areas.

You will notice, Mother Superior, that I am keeping a certain distance from the whole affair. I believe that the Minister for the Navy will welcome your sisters getting involved in such a useful work, and that he will grant the four free passages to Africa. If Marshal Soult plays his part, success is assured, but I will have to press him to write in good time.

I do not think it would helpful to send one sister who would devote herself exclusively to domestic affairs; on the contrary, it would be very useful indeed if all our dear sisters were to give the Africans an example by doing their own manual work. Such work is not highly esteemed by the local people, since the Europeans they have seen so far avoid it whenever they can. It is important that we encourage them to respect such work, and the best way to do that is by example. However, the sisters would not be able to do all the heavy work. Bishop Truffet will give them good advice on all these things.

I would like to stress one point in particular - the way they should relate to the poor black people. Those unfortunate men and women are usually despised and badly treated by Europeans. Those who do not actually mistreat them still behave in a manner calculated to lower their self-esteem. We, on the other hand, should always treat them with special kindness so as to restore their self-respect.

¹ Jean- Remi Bessieux was a member of Libermann's first missionary group to Africa in 1843. He was the only priest among them to remain on the Gulf of Guinea. He subsequently worked in Gabon then succeeded Bishop Truffet in 1849, with his residence in Gabon He died there in 1876.

We must relate to them in a simple way, without becoming too familiar. There are two extremes to be avoided: one is a generosity and a gentleness which borders on weakness and over-familiarity; the other is an excessive firmness which can quickly descend into severity and a misuse of authority.

It is always a bad approach (even in Europe), as well as being opposed to the Gospel, if we try to create a distance between ourselves and other people by insisting on manners, conduct, and a particular way of talking and acting. And it is even more detestable if such an attitude is adopted towards the black people, because the effect is to degrade them in the own eyes and suppress their natural characteristics. We should follow the example given by our Lord and his saints. It must be a pure, tender, compassionate and effective love, which is altogether holy and supernatural. In this way, the sisters will win their hearts and all will try to avoid disappointing them. This love should go hand in hand with modesty, calmness and a certain religious seriousness in their everyday lives. On every occasion, even when they are correcting people, the sisters must speak and act in way that shows they are doing this in the best interests of the people concerned. There must be no caustic humour, superiority complex, or loss of self-control. A sister must be full of love and be a model in every way for the African women.

The sisters must expect to be at the beck and call of the poor local people, both in season and out of season. They are very ingenuous and have to be shown patience in all circumstances.

The most important piece of advice I have to offer is as follows: the sisters must realise that on arriving in Africa for the first time, they will have absolutely no idea of how to go about things, nor even how they must behave in order to achieve some good. They should arrive on the African coast feeling like one-year-old children as far as experience is concerned,

and let themselves be guided in everything by Bishop Truffet. As far as they can, they should follow his advice very closely. Coming from Europe, they will tend to live according to the fashion they are used to, but they are entering a country where the customs and habits are radically different. They will be tempted to encourage the people to adopt the tone and manners of Europe, but this would spoil everything. To begin with, the people would pride themselves on their new ways of doing things, but before long, they would be picking up the very worst habits of the Europeans.

The sisters should take an altogether different approach: leave the local people with their customs and habits which have evolved from their natural characteristics and the climate. They must gradually perfect and improve the indigenous men and women through the principles of the faith and Christian virtues and, above all, by their example. If I were to follow my deepest instinct, I would say that we should adopt their customs and habits, rather than try to impose ours on them.

Everybody should work together in the mission; it would be quite wrong for some to follow their own views and inclinations. The sisters should follow the same principles as the missionaries, moving in the same direction, with the same attitudes and methods. To that end, the head of mission must guide and direct everything, because nobody is better qualified to lead than Bishop Truffet. He is a very high-minded man, with a broad and excellent outlook. He knows the mission perfectly as regards its present state and future needs. None of his co-workers can see the whole picture or its details with such clarity. So it is very important that everybody take their lead from him. Your sisters need have no fear of losing the spirit of their Congregation under his direction. He is a bishop of eminent piety and an excellent and experienced spiritual director. Therefore, I encourage the sisters, who are going to devote themselves to the salvation of the Black People, to

follow closely the advice that Bishop Truffet will give them. It will often happen that they do not understand why he is doing things in a particular way, but there is no need to worry; let them be guided by his insights in a spirit of obedience and self-denial.

Europeans find it difficult to practice the kind of self-denial that is so necessary for working in Africa. But it is certain that there must always be abnegation of one's own judgement, will, tastes, ways of relaxing, habits and everything else. The difficulty does not lie in getting used to eating couscous: it is rather in renouncing one's very way of being and of adopting an approach which will help the poor people to whom one is devoted.

The sisters must expect to go down with light and even heavy fevers at times. They are most unpleasant, but what is worse is when such fevers bring on impatience, bad temper and even a change of character. Let them be forewarned and vigilant when this happens.

They should also be wary of any preconceived ideas they might have about the missions. When one is imagining sufferings and pains which are all in the future, they can seem beautiful and only to be expected. But when one is actually suffering and experiencing things as they are, then unless one is extremely unselfish and totally in control, there is the danger of great discouragement.

When the sisters finally arrive in Africa, they must avoid trying to jump into things too quickly. What is needed from the outset is gentleness and equilibrium. Let them never fall into the trap of thinking that things will work out all by themselves; they will certainly meet with plenty of obstacles to the good things they are trying to do. Any worthwhile thing they achieve will only be in the long term. One of the greatest mistakes on the missions is when people want to run before they can even walk and as

a result, the job is only half done. Bishop Truffet has said something very true on this subject: "*Rushing about comes from inexperience and discouragement comes from rushing about.*" We have to be convinced that only God achieves anything of value, and that we are just his instruments. All that an instrument can do is to be available for whatever the worker has in mind and let itself be handled without any resistance. If the instrument goes its own way, apart from the will or action of the worker, the whole job will be spoilt.

I ask Our Lord and his Holy Mother to give your dear sisters the grace of being faithful.

Your humble and devoted servant,

F. Libermann
Priest of the Holy Heart of Mary