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11. A missionary charter

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Repository Citation

de Mare, C. (2011). 11. A missionary charter. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/anthologie-spiritaine-english/63>

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A missionary charter *To the Community in Africa¹*

This letter is by far the best known of all those written by Libermann: it is a veritable missionary charter. It was composed to back up a plan of Bishop Truffet which he explained to Libermann in a letter of 1st September 1847. In it, he supports his idea of a time of recollection for his missionaries. Libermann calls it a "practical novitiate".

Fr. Paul Coulon has made an in depth analysis of this important letter in his definitive study of Libermann.²

To the Community of Dakar and Gabon

Amiens, 19th November 1847

My dear Confreres,

May the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ overflow in your souls and make you apostles full of virtue and holiness! We should be filled with gratitude and love for our Lord Jesus Christ because of his generosity towards us and the poor, abandoned souls to whom he sends us.

You will soon be welcoming two new priest confreres and three Brothers. They will help you in your work for the salvation of souls, each according to the talents he has received from God. A year from now, I hope to be able to send you even more missionaries, as the preparatory work of founding the Church proceeds. The number of labourers will

¹ N.D. IX pp. 324-332.

² Paul Coulon et Paule Brasseur, « *Libermann 1802-1852* », Cerf, pp.489-546: "Faites-vous nègres avec les nègres".

increase to help clear the ground that has not yet been cultivated and God, in his mercy, will water it with his grace so that it will bear much fruit.

I was very happy to learn of the piety, regularity, peace and love that reigns among you. I see in that a great promise for the future of the mission, a future which depends entirely on you. As I sometimes told you during your novitiate, your sins will be "original" sins while your virtues will bring very special graces to that land.

God founded his work on his all-powerful will and mercy. He breathes life into it through his grace and love, built on a foundation which will last for ever. But he has chosen you to be the first stones to be laid. If they are not properly placed, all the rest will be out of line. You must realise, my dear brothers, that if you have the misfortune to get it wrong, those coming after you will only make it worse. But if you continue as you have started, you will have a powerful influence on your successors. All the fruits of their devoted labour and the salvation and sanctification of the people they minister to, will, in great part, be thanks to you. It will cost you more or less continuous suffering, but on this earth, the servants of God can expect nothing more; it is by the sweat of their brows that they will reach the practice of perfection. But once you have adopted this way of proceeding, you will no longer count the cost. You will have risen above the pains and sufferings of this world and God himself will be your reward.

At the present moment, God in his goodness is offering you the chance to become holy within your community. I see in that a sign of his merciful Providence. If you had been plunged straight into active ministry from the start, you would not have had the time to put all that you learnt during your novitiate into practice. You would not have got to know yourselves sufficiently. Now, you are doing what amounts to a second novitiate, but this time, a novitiate in practice. You are in Africa

and you can see first-hand the dangers and difficulties you are going to meet. With good will and a sincere desire to be true servants of God, you can now seek out the best way to prepare yourselves to fill that role. During your novitiate, you made resolutions in words, sometimes based on imaginary situations: now your resolutions will be based firmly on reality.

Dear confreres, try to make the most of this moment of God. He will give you his insights and his grace will be there to help you. Learn how to be real community men and true apostles. Learn the wisdom of God, so that each of you, according to his capabilities, can complete the great work which He has entrusted to you.

If you want to be good community men, you should look to the sanctification of yourself and of your confreres and brothers. You must be a good example in everything. Learn how to live as men of prayer, who are faithful observers of the rules and filled with their spirit. Try to see Our Lord in the person of your superiors. Obey them exactly and with simplicity in whatever concerns religious life and your own sanctification. Never murmur against them, or pass judgement on their conduct and way of acting, whether in public or in private. Never listen to your own self-love because that is what makes obedience difficult, when we compare ourselves to our superiors. What is merely human must disappear in our obedience and be replaced by faith. Let us be affectionate, gentle and open with our superiors, so as to make their task easier.

Live together in peace, love and unity. Comfort and encourage one another and bear with each other's faults of character. Support your confreres and don't judge them. Love them and be gentle in your treatment of them, even when they irritate you. If you find yourself disagreeing with what your confreres think, give up your own judgement in favour of the general opinion about what should be done. Stubbornly holding on to our own ideas is one of the worst things to find in people who

should be living together in the peace and love of Jesus Christ.

Avoid any kind of severity in your judgements, words, desires, and conduct, because no good can ever come from it. The climate where you are living can have a strong influence on your feelings; you will often be more agitated, bitter, and irritable than you were at home. So do your best to remain gentle, calm and patient and you will advance quickly in the ways of real holiness.

If you want to live as apostolic men, you must practise great self-denial. You have to be convinced of this at all times, because you will not always feel inclined to practise it. Try to keep your souls in a state of peace, even in the middle of great privations and suffering. I am not talking here of bodily suffering, which is relatively easy to support; I am referring to spiritual and moral pain. This can cause great sorrow and discouragement for somebody who is still attached to himself. But those same sufferings can also bring courage and serenity once we are in a state of continuous self-denial, with a perfect attachment to God alone. A strong and truly apostolic person is always calm, gentle, and imperturbable in the midst of pains and contradictions. He is never sad, agitated, brusque, or bitter: such faults belong to weak people who love themselves and who do not know the strength that comes from the cross of Jesus. They follow every passing mood and have no idea how to break free from them.

When such people find that everything is going well according to their own tastes, desires and view of things, they live in a gentle peace, and have the idea that they have reached the heights of apostolic virtue. But it is not in peacetime that the bravery of a soldier of Jesus Christ can be assessed. It proves nothing to be at rest when there is no cloud on the horizon. Peacetime is given us to prepare for battle, because warfare is the normal lot of an apostolic man. When weak souls gain

some success, they are filled with great enthusiasm which often makes them commit mistakes and act imprudently. They think they are strong and powerful and capable of undertaking and suffering anything. This is because they are being swept along by their feelings which give a false impression of success. In these moments of elation, all humility and mistrust of self disappear, and there is no confidence in God. When they find themselves in such a situation, contradictions and obstacles simply irritate them; they feel they can win by a frontal attack, whereas what is needed is a gentle and subtle approach.

But when such people are unsuccessful, or do not succeed quickly enough, they are overtaken by depression and discouragement. They become absorbed in themselves and worry about what mistakes they might have made. They blame those errors for their lack of success and end up in a state of low self-esteem.

On the other hand, somebody who is really dead to himself and open to God, feels a kind of pain when everything is going well. It hurts to see everything turning out according to his tastes. He feels the need to suffer and be contradicted. That is how his life is. When he experiences peace, it is seen as a time for gaining new strength in the ways of God. Such pleasant moments are received with humility and abnegation. He will carry out his duties with perseverance and fidelity and try to consolidate what he has achieved. When storms are raging all around him, when he is faced with failure, he knows how to wait for God's moment. He will be on his guard against discouragement, fighting off sadness and low self-esteem. He will keep his balance and be filled with God and learn how to be patient like Him. He only looks for success as and when God wants it, because he always sees things through the eyes of God. His actions are in accordance with God's plans; it is up to Jesus if his efforts will bear fruit or not.

If you only knew, my dear confreres, the value of patience among the apostolic virtues, you would make every effort to obtain it. If you have learnt how to be patient, you are sure of a success which will be solid and stable. But what is accomplished through violence is altogether different; the tree of the prophet Jonah sprang up one night and died the next. Plants which grow quickly soon wither away, but slow-growing trees gradually become big and strong and then last for centuries. If in your Mission you find that success comes easily and without delay, you should be very worried; but when your work takes time and offers nothing but difficulties, it is a very good sign as long as you go about it patiently. Slowness is not very attractive, but a person who has renounced himself will soon learn how to take advantage of it. If you are patient, you will grow in prudence and the wisdom of God in all your undertakings.

Once again I stress the importance of being united amongst yourselves and especially with your leader. God has given him to you, and to the Mission. He will enlighten him now and always for the work he has asked him to do. So be cooperative with him, share his views and steer clear of following your own. He is better placed to see the overall picture while you have only a partial view. He has the grace of state for guiding you and you have received a corresponding grace to be led by him. He is the architect; you are the builders, but intelligent builders who know how to work in harmony with him. It is only with such a harmony that the grace of God is found and success assured. If you are faithful, my dear confreres, God will be faithful with you.

One final word; Even if they have been there for many years, be wary of what the settlers say about the peoples they have met. Listen to what they say, but don't base our own judgements on their opinions. They look at things from their own point of view and through the prejudices they have built

up so they will only distort your own assessments. Listen to everything but don't get upset by what you hear. Look at the evidence objectively in the spirit of Jesus, setting aside any former impressions or prejudices. Be filled with the love of God and the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. I am sure you will come to very different conclusions about the local people than those that are held by these men. If I had listened to everything that I was told about the black people in the colonies, even opinions coming from otherwise good men, we would never have dared to take on the missions of Reunion and Mauritius. In the event, our confreres are doing great work there and have learned to judge everything in a totally different way to what others said and judged things to be.

Don't judge by first impressions or by what you are used to in Europe. Forget about Europe, its ways of thinking, its customs, its conventions. Be African with the Africans, and you will learn how to judge them as they should be judged. Be a Negro with the Negro, so as to form them into what they can be, not along European lines, but according to their own way of being. Relate to them as if you were their servants and they were your masters, adapting yourselves to their style of doing things. Your sole purpose in all this must be to perfect and sanctify them and to raise them up from their oppressed state to become a people of God. This is what St. Paul meant when he told Christians to be all things to all men so as to win them for Jesus Christ.

This has been a very long letter, my dear confreres, but I never notice the time passing when I am talking with you. You are never out of my thoughts. May your hearts always be with Jesus and Mary and be filled with their love and gentle peace.

F. Libermann

PS. I have not given you any news in this letter: Father Bessieux and his companions will tell you everything when they meet you.