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12. Regarding relations between missionaries and the colonial authorities

Christian de Mare CSSp

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Regarding relations between missionaries and the colonial authorities

To Father Briot¹

This letter to Father Briot, written on 2nd August 1847, does not give the full story about the detachment of soldiers. Libermann had done so in a letter of 3rd July to Bishop Truffet, hoping that he would be able to find a solution to the problem: "The day on which Fathers Briot and Lossedat wished to bless their chapel, they invited the Commandant of the French forces to attend. He seems to have accepted the idea with much satisfaction, and arranged to come with a detachment of soldiers. He picked a platoon of men he had brought from Senegal, which meant that they were either Muslims or pagans. Both priests therefore refused to allow them to enter the church so much confusion ensued²." This affair gave Libermann the opportunity to explain the principles to be followed when dealing with the European authorities on the Gulf of Guinea.

To Father Briot,
Apostolic Missionary,
Dakar,
West Africa

2nd August 1847

My dear Confreere,

This is not the first letter I have written in reply to yours about the famous episode of the squad of soldiers who turned up for the dedication of your church. I am returning to the matter because your last letter gave the impression that you were feeling very uneasy over the affair.

¹ N. D. IX, pp. 239-244.

² cf. N. D. IX, p. 222: Libermann to Bishop Truffet, 3rd July 1847.

Father Bessieux was very happy to hear that your house and church had been finally built. But it is unfortunate that the occasion of the blessing of the church should have caused a quarrel between you and the French Commandant. I hope that Father Bessieux will be able to restore peace in this matter. He is generally liked by the French authorities and M. Bouet¹ seems to have a very high regard for him. Apparently, the Admiral also has a good opinion of him and M. Brisset had good relations with him in the past. If the latter now appears to be unhappy with him, it is probably because he imagines that Father Bessieux will henceforth be against him and will be dissatisfied and disapproving of his way of acting. I hope that after his return to West Africa, Father Bessieux will win him over with his usual friendly approach. M. Brisset is severe, like all our soldiers and looks at everything from a military point of view. Such an attitude is always difficult for our missionaries, but this sort of problem is to be found everywhere.

On the coast of Africa, running a mission entails having a good rapport with the Commandants of the French military forces. One of the most important virtues for a missionary in such circumstances is the ability to maintain good relations with the civil and military authorities and the captains of ships visiting those shores. But the priests also have to maintain their freedom of action in religious matters.

It would be very unfortunate if the colonial authorities got the impression that you were opposed to the Government. This is the sort of stupid idea that they pick up from the newspapers they read. They join that prejudice to all the others they have gleaned from the anti-religious writings of Voltaire. From these two sources, they will make you into some sort of bogeyman, so they will do their best to oppose and thwart your efforts.

¹ Bouet and Brisson were officers in the French West African colonial administration.

So you must be very prudent in all your dealings with them. Never get involved in political matters, but do your best to help them in any way you can. Treat them with gentleness, charity and consideration. Be simple and polite with them, a simplicity and politeness which come from genuine charity. When you find yourself unable to go along with their wishes - for example, baptising men with more than one wife, or turning a blind eye to the precepts of the Gospel - you have no alternative but to refuse. But always do so with gentleness and love and leave them feeling kindly towards you.

Of course, I don't mean that you should agree with them and then do the opposite. You must be frank and open, but prudent at the same time. Avoid being severe, quarrelsome, discontented, or embarrassed when you reply to them. This only causes trouble and no good can ever come of it. Be careful not to harbour grudges against these men, but always be calm with them and with the same air of serenity and confidence, even when you feel that they have overstepped the mark. Help them to understand that if you are not in agreement with them, it is because you are obliged to follow your conscience. They will appreciate this if you give way on matters of little importance and continue to treat them with trust and openness.

Here are a few rules of prudence concerning your relations with the civil and military authorities:

- 1) As far as possible avoid giving the impression that you do not completely believe in their goodwill towards you. Instead of that, have an attitude of trust and of acting as if you have no doubt about their good intentions. In that way they will often not show the suspicions that they may have about you. Military men are in the habit of acting according to the dominant idea which influences them at a particular moment. Doing as I have suggested will prevent any

irritation from developing, for the majority of these men are fundamentally good.

- 2) Secondly, avoid speaking and acting with authority, or rather, with an air of authority. The arrogance which they usually show in the exercise of their powers, as regards civil and military administration, must not be present in your way of carrying out ecclesiastical duties. Your position involves being firm at times, but always with gentleness and humility. It is natural for soldiers to use their authority with severity, violence and pride; they have no intention of trying to reach evangelical perfection! But the maxims of the Gospel must be the rule of conduct for us, who are priests of Jesus Christ. So we must try to soften their severity by our gentleness, pacify their violence by our moderation, and moderate their pride by our humility.
- 3) Thirdly, take all necessary steps to avoid open conflict. These men are accustomed to never losing face in front of their inferiors and they expect their orders to be obeyed exactly throughout the whole area of their responsibility. That is why once they have advanced, they will never retreat. So if you take steps to thwart them so as to gain the upper hand, they will make you pay dearly for it the next time. They move quickly and are liable to take decisions without much thought as to whether they are right or wrong, since they are far too ready to ignore religious and ecclesiastical concerns. So don't drive them into a position of having to act without forethought. If it happens, despite your precautions, that a commandant acts on a matter which does not concern him, as far as possible don't face up to him straight away and avoid starting a heated discussion. If you can possibly wait a day or two, you may be able to change his mind by putting matters in a more favourable light. But if you attack him immediately, you will only excite his anger and pride and

he will not give in. If the matter is such that it must be discussed without delay, at least avoid all provocative opposition.

- 4) Fourthly, when you cannot avoid direct conflict, because your conscience forces you to take a firm line contrary to the wishes of a French official, (I am not talking of the circumstances I dealt with in the first and second sections of this part of the letter), then you must be very careful, especially if you have a valid point to make. In such circumstances, be wary of a certain air of triumphalism and giving the impression that you have won a victory over him. Be very delicate and don't turn the conversation to anything which may refer to what has happened. Be humble and charitable and never humiliate other people. Sometimes, you may feel that it is your duty to make people realise when they are wrong or have gone too far: that is a very false and a very bad way of proceeding, for all it does is to flatter your self-love and it invariably makes things worse.
- 5) Finally, do not write letters containing formal demands unless it is absolutely unavoidable. When you want to ask a favour of a commandant, it is much better to go in person and gradually lead the conversation round to what you are seeking. Be very circumspect, and make your requests by word of mouth. For example, if you want to hold a solemn dedication of a church, or wish to prevent labourers from having to work on a Sunday, or want to put an end to men and women sharing accommodation in the workers' hostels, go and make a personal visit. Be careful not to give the commandant the idea that you are being narrow minded, because he will be only too ready to put any objections down to intolerance on your part.

Do you remember what I said to you about this rule of prudence when I was discussing Father Tisserant? I told you

that our dear confrere had been very imprudent in making official demands and writing letters to Mister Ardouin.¹ You can't imagine the damage that such letters have caused. Even when you are talking about something which concerns your priestly ministry and about which you wish to inform or advise the commandant, it is often better to go and tell him face to face. If he asks you on the other hand to write down your request, then you will of course agree. He will often want you to do that so as to avoid having to take responsibility himself for whatever happens. So you may need to put your explanation in writing, but it is always better to go and talk about it first.

Now, to get back to your famous "Affair of the Soldiers"; my feelings about the matter are that you could have and should have agreed to the commandant's suggestion without hesitation. However, now that the deed is done, wait for the decision of Bishop Truffet who by now must have been informed of the matter. Since he is in charge of the Mission, it is up to him to decide on specific points regarding discipline.

Basically, your idea was good. It is just possible that your refusing the entry of unbelievers to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass has achieved something worthwhile; I am not in a position to pass judgement here and now. You are in the situation and you know better than I do the people you are dealing with. The only observation I would make at present is that in this difficult problem you had with the commandant, you could have consented to his wishes. I say that because this point of discipline of the early Church is no longer followed on the missions and therefore it has nothing to do with your conscience. But don't worry, because everything will work out.

¹ Mr. Ardouin was Secretary of State for Justice, Education and Religion in the Republic of Haiti.

This is the sort of thing that those who wish to do the will of God are always coming up against, namely crosses and sufferings! Keep going, because God is with you. Don't fret over obstacles which are put in your way by men, for they can only delay and not destroy the work of God. Now you can appreciate how much pain those in charge of projects have to undergo! Be dead to yourself, and act with prudence and moderation if you want to preserve your freedom to serve God.

As for the criticism people are making about you concerning the departure of Father Bessieux, pay no attention to what they are saying. Nobody believes a word of it. [*Here, five lines of the original manuscript have been crossed out*]. I will speak to you about it another time.

Goodbye for now, dear brother, and be courageous!

Yours in Jesus and Mary,

F. Libermann
Priest of the Holy Heart of Mary

P.S.: By the way, I have managed to sell my shares in the "Ernest"¹, the sailing ship I got from you. I got four thousand francs, so it has helped towards paying for our new building here.

¹ Father Briot came from a family of Breton ship owners.