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13. The Mission and the Colonial Authorities

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The Mission and the Colonial Authorities

To Father Le Berre, Apostolic Missionary, Gabon¹

Father Pierre-Marie Le Berre² had just arrived in Gabon, a fledgling missionary. Here, Father Libermann gives him advice for his missionary work insisting that he have a good relationship with the French garrison in Fort Aumale (Libreville). He must also respect everybody's freedom of conscience, be tolerant, and be peaceful in his dealings with people.

9th August 1847

My dear Confrere,

I see from your letters that what is bothering you most for the moment is the amount of time you have to spend getting supplies for the mission, but that will not last much longer. When starting a work, you have to concentrate on what is not particularly spiritual, but once you have things organised, you will not need to be so taken up with the material side of life. Keep at it, even though you have not managed to do very much else so far. You have cleared the ground; soon you will begin to sow the seed and then God, in his goodness, will let you see the fruits of your labour. Be patient and it will all happen sooner than you think.

While you are busy learning the language, try not to lose your spirit of recollection. Keep your soul in peace, be perfectly

¹ N.D. IX, pp. 247-250.

² Pierre-Marie Le Berre (1819-1891) was born in the diocese of Vannes. Ordained in 1844, he made his Consecration and left for Guinea in 1846. In 1859, he became Bishop Bessieux's Vicar General. He was ordained Bishop of Archis and Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas on 7th September 1877. He died at Our Lady of Gabon on 16th July 1891.

united with your confreres, and don't turn in on yourself. Remain on good terms with those around you and be very natural with these poor Frenchmen who are without any religion¹. Be kind to them and bear them no grudges. If they do you a bad turn, forgive them. If they are harsh with you, reply with gentleness and goodness. If they blame, despise, or otherwise disrespect you, do not put on an air of being embarrassed by it all. Be careful about such feelings towards these people, who think and judge differently from yourself. They may even think badly of you, and despise you. But being upset by it all creates a certain severity of outlook, and a timidity which makes us sullen and very formal in our dealings with them. Such a reaction will have a bad effect and drive them further away than ever from our holy religion.

In general, you should act kindly towards everybody, whatever their opinion of religion or of yourself. We must respect each person's freedom to think and act as they like. If we could force consciences to be pure, wills to be good, and minds to believe the eternal truths, then obviously we would be obliged to do so; love of our neighbour would demand it. But no man on earth is capable of forcing another, whether in his conscience, or his will, or his intelligence. God doesn't wish to, so why should we? He leaves people free to ignore him or to act against him, so we have no right to force people or to get irritated with them; rather, we must be friendly, free and open with them. We will talk with them about the things which please them and try to win their friendship by always being kind.

Father Bessieux will return to Gabon next Autumn, leaving France at the end of September or October. I hope everybody will be pleased to see him again. I am going to try and give him some reinforcements and then you will be able to carry

¹ Namely, the colonial agents of the French Government

out your plans at Konnikuet or elsewhere. We have now received his dictionary. I will ask the Ministry for the Navy to print the grammar, dictionary, catechism and the Life of our Lord, Jesus Christ, which Father Bessieux has translated into Pongwe. I hope the Minister will agree, because It will be a great help to you.

Fathers Blanpin and Jérôme¹ have left for Reunion and Fathers Thévaux and Thiersé have returned from New Holland². We have definitely abandoned that mission, so that means there are now three missionaries in Mauritius, and five in Réunion. Both those missions are going well, particularly Mauritius, considering how few people we have working there. You can judge from the numbers of children attending catechism class - around four hundred boys, and five hundred girls. Five or six hundred are preparing to make their First Communion.

We have started a small foundation at Bordeaux; we will concentrate our work there on labourers, sailors, and the poorer classes. It is important for us to have houses in some of the principal ports in the south of France. If it happens that some of you have to leave Guinea for health reasons, we need a place for you in a temperate climate. Picardy, where we are already established, is too cold and damp for that purpose. We have started at Bordeaux because M. Germainville³ offered us his house, a certain amount of financial backing and a work that is already under way. I have

¹ There is an index at the end of the book concerning the people mentioned in Libermann's letters.

² The attempted mission in Australia turned out to be a disaster.

³ M. Germanville, or Germain Ville, was a merchant in Bordeaux with whom Libermann had important dealings. He had done a lot to help the missionaries who were leaving for Africa from that port. Cf. Annex to N. D. XIII, pp. 279 seq.

sent Fathers Boulanger and Clair there, together with Brother Thomas. Father Boulanger is only there temporarily, since he is destined eventually for Guinea.

Obviously this letter is not just for yourself, so I would ask you to share its contents with Fathers Briot and Lossadat.

Yours in Jesus and Mary,

F. Libermann

P.S. Father Bessieux is overjoyed at the news you sent me. He cannot write to you immediately because he is very busy at the moment with the books in Pongwe.