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### **16. We must examine the Mission entrusted to us and persevere with it**

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## **We must examine the Mission entrusted to us and persevere with it**

*To Father Le Vavas seur<sup>1</sup>*

*The Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary, founded by Libermann in 1841, was amalgamated with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit in September, 1848. Father Le Vavas seur had returned from Reunion a little more than three months before this letter was written in 1850. His role was to work alongside Libermann in governing the renewed Congregation of the Holy Spirit. On 7<sup>th</sup> May, at his own request, he left Paris on a recruitment drive to the seminaries of France. During his visits, he was surprised by the amount of criticism he heard of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit<sup>2</sup>. On 16<sup>th</sup> May he wrote a "terrible" letter to Libermann; it was what he referred to his "third great temptation". Libermann replied on Pentecost Sunday with the letter that follows. He makes mention of a "notice" in this letter: this refers to a document written by Libermann for Le Vavas seur to help him in his recruitment drive around the seminaries of France. The full version can be found in Chapter VII, Text 5 of this Anthology.*

Paris, Pentecost Sunday, 1850

My very dear Confrere,

I received your letter of the 16<sup>th</sup> May this morning. I see that you have strong feelings about the state of the Seminary, but the decisions you suggest seem to me to be very extreme.

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<sup>1</sup> N. D. XII, pp. 198-204

<sup>2</sup> The Congregation of the Holy Spirit was founded in 1703. It ran the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, training poor seminarians for difficult situations of ministry. It then found itself providing priests for the French colonies, but it was difficult to obtain sufficiently good and able candidates for the work. Naturally, it had its critics as a result.

Reflect calmly in the presence of God, on what you are proposing and you will see that your advice ignores the plan that God himself has put before us. I agree that you should state your opinion and even state it energetically, but not if that entails deserting the road already traced out for us by the Lord. At the moment, I am convinced that we are where God wants us to be; we are simply following the signs given to us by his divine Providence. Throughout my life, I have never managed to succeed with a plan that I had dreamt up myself; but, as if by some magic, I have always managed to carry out (not without crosses and trials) all that was presented to us providentially. So it would be completely wrong of us to leave the road pointed out by God and to follow our own ideas, however fervent and generous they might appear to be.

I find two things wrong with your advice: First of all, I feel it is a personal idea which does not come from God, but which arises from the impressions you got and the disgust you feel from all that you have been hearing from others about our Seminary. Secondly, your advice is contrary to the normal way God goes about things. Before following your opinion, we would need to have a very sure and certain supernatural inspiration from God.

You are proposing that we close the Seminary of the Holy Spirit here in Paris, return to Notre Dame du Gard<sup>1</sup> and forget about the French colonies. I am convinced that this would be one of the gravest faults and most harmful acts which our poor little Congregation could commit against God. I also believe that such a decision would destroy us altogether, because we would deserve to be abandoned by God. Not only that, but we would be compromising ourselves in the most serious way

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<sup>1</sup> Notre Dame du Gard was the house of studies of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary. It was closed in 1848.

possible in the eyes of others and perhaps even bringing trouble and disorder into our own ranks.

We would be flying in the face of divine Providence if we were to leave our Seminary and abandon the French colonies. God has placed us in our Seminary and has sent us to Reunion and Mauritius; it is not for us to grumble about what He has arranged on our behalf, nor to say that we have already done enough in the way of carrying out His plans.

The work of the Seminary is extremely difficult. We are very poor and weak, but is that a good reason for us to abandon it? If the Bishops no longer want us to run it, then we shall leave, but it would be a crime for us to take that decision on our own. There is no problem there which cannot be solved with the help of God, so let us allow divine Providence to bring things to a successful conclusion. If we are really the men of God we ought to be, we will not be so ready to follow every volatile impression and reject a vital work like this one. It would be much better, to my mind, to let ourselves be crushed by the weight of such a responsibility and lie buried in the rubble, than to abandon the whole idea. This would be like letting God's house burn down and not raising a finger to save it.

You want me to say to the bishops, "Destroy and annihilate the Seminary of the Holy Spirit."! You believe that because the colonies now have their own bishops, we no longer have any responsibility. Neither of these two ideas seems to be in accord with the mind of God, because it would mean the loss of religion in the French colonies and the colonial bishops would find themselves in the most critical situation possible, from which there would be no escape. They would have every reason to condemn us for having done our best to get them nominated bishops only to leave them in an impossible situation. I am totally convinced that if those bishops had no option left but to place their candidates in the French diocesan seminaries, the flow of priests to the colonies would dry up.

Your whole approach strikes me as utopian and impracticable and I would never be tempted to give such advice to the bishops.

In my opinion we have to do two things. We must first of all remain in charge of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit until such time as divine Providence makes it clear that we should leave. Secondly, we must take all possible steps to ensure that our Seminary is a house of holiness. With the help of God, we will succeed in both these aims, even though we are only a bunch of poor people.

You say in your letter that the colonial clergy should be better instructed than those in the French dioceses. I cannot understand why this should be so, but let us leave that question aside for the present. Then you say that we do not have the resources to teach them well and that we are simply not capable of doing it. But do the majority of seminarians in France have better professors than we have? If we are not capable of running the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, neither are we capable of running the Congregation. But we were even less capable when we started!

If we don't mean to rely completely on the help of God, then we might as well retire immediately into the desert and have nothing more to do with the works of God. Who would then undertake the task? The wise and intelligent? The smart set? If we follow your reasoning, no seriously committed person should ever get involved in an important work like this, because such a person would not feel in himself the power and capacity to succeed. Then we would have to fall back on people with a high opinion of themselves, people with their finger on the pulse, in other words, the very people who are incapable of doing things God's way. I am afraid you are not walking along God's path. We may be only a few poor people, but we are sure of success if only we keep faithful to God. We should not think that we are indispensable and so commit the

sin of presumption in undertaking this work of God, but if God decides to use us, then woe betide us if we turn our back on our duty. We must depend completely on him and he will not let us down.

Regarding our involvement in the French colonies, I am of the opinion that the black people need, and will need for many years to come, all the care we can bring to them. I do not think that the blacks are now no longer abandoned simply because they have bishops with money at their disposal. Look at the question calmly and dispassionately and you will surely agree that the black people of Reunion have and will continue to have need of our help for a long time to come. Moreover, it is God who has given us to them. We cannot just abandon them now because they have fewer needs than before. I admit that Guinea is more important for us, but that is no reason for saying that the black people in the existing French colonies have no more need for our work among them.

I am convinced that God wants to impress upon us that we must sacrifice ourselves for the work in the French colonies and that we do everything we can to lead this work in the direction that He wants. If the work has been poorly done so far, it is up to us to remedy the situation and to help the colonial bishops as much as we can to save the souls entrusted to them. It is a question of working out how this can be achieved; that should be our primary concern for the moment. To even consider the idea of abandoning the work is a temptation of the devil, so that we will not be in a position to remedy the bad situation which exists at present. We would be spoiling the map just when the horizon is at last becoming clearer, when the light of God's providence and mercy is beginning to shine on so many thousands of souls.

So let us be convinced that God wants us to do this work and that we should concentrate exclusively on the steps necessary to succeed with God's help. The solution is actually not as

difficult as you imagine: we must help the seminaries in France to understand the actual state of affairs. You will surely not find the same reaction to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in the other places you have not yet visited. If you do find such people, be careful not to add fuel to the flames; you must show that we have reached the moment of God when he wishes to heal the evils of the colonies and of the colonial Seminary and that we need the help of the French seminaries to bring this about.

Explain to the bishops that the Congregation of the Holy Spirit has ceased to exist as it formerly was and assure them that only one of the previous Spiritans remains on as a director (Father Warner will not return here, and Father Hardy is not in any way involved, but is simply a paying guest). Point out that we have less than thirty seminarians and that we intend to send away some others who are unsuitable; we will then be left with about ten. Tell them that in the past year alone, we have dismissed fifteen who lacked the necessary learning and piety and that five of them have been accepted into dioceses in France and Algeria. The bishops will begin to realise that they can send us students without fear because we are taking steps to place the Seminary of the Holy Spirit on a proper footing. Bring to their notice, once again, the extreme need of the colonies and the great good that can be done there. Emphasise the necessity for the French bishops to send us only good candidates. Once they have understood all these matters, they will never abandon us. If you explain that the situation in the colonies mirrors that of our Seminary, with a great number of priests outside France having been dismissed from their posts and that the removal of unworthy persons will continue to be carried out both at home and abroad, I cannot see how they would not be willing to send us suitable men.

According to your letter, I see that you are not happy with the contents of the "notice" I sent you. Tell me exactly what you

think is wrong before giving it out. If you feel it is not good enough, please give detailed reasons for any changes you wish to see in it.

I will write to the Superiors of the seminaries of Nancy and Saint-Dié, to tell them I have learnt from you of their decision not to send any more students to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. I will beg them not to abandon us at the very moment when Providence has placed us here to put it in order. I will point out that if the directors of the French seminaries do not come to our aid, we will revert to the situation that existed previously, especially if they continue to send us only those they would reject themselves. We would be forced to abandon the work for the colonies altogether. However, I will not write the above until I get your reaction. But I will ask the French bishops to send out a circular explaining the actual improvement in the Seminary of the Holy Spirit and that there is a new staff in place.

I enclose your *celebret* which I forgot to send you.

Yours in Jesus and Mary,

*F. Libermann, priest*

PS. Despite all my criticisms of your letter, it has still done me a lot of good. It has given me a new fervour for using every bit of strength at my disposal in the service of God for those poor countries which are in such great distress that even men of God are losing hope. As for me, I am more hopeful than ever, precisely because the situation appears to be so desperate.

Don't forget to look for dependable people who will give us reliable information on the candidates coming to the seminary. As far as possible, that person should be a seminary director<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of Libermann, the word "director" referred not to superiors of seminaries but to a priest working in a senior seminary for the formation and spiritual accompaniment of future priests.

Assure him that we will tell no one about the information he gives, nor even that we have asked him to do us this favour.

I am in a quandary regarding the admission of those who are offering themselves as candidates for the missions. If I admit the first ones to turn up, there would be a risk that we would not have enough places in the novitiate before the end of your recruitment drive. Let me know what you think. We have the same problem regarding admissions to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit; we have need of a greater number there than for the novitiate. If fifty candidates were to appear, we could accept them, depending of course on whether they are good enough. Put it to them that they can only be accepted on three conditions: that they have a proper intention, that they are zealous, and that they are devout.

If you are not happy with the "notice" I sent, we can wait and I will send you another later on.