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18. Be holy as Jesus was holy

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Be holy as Jesus was holy

*To Father Lairé*¹

This letter is regarded as one of the most important that Libermann ever wrote. It was sent to Father Lairé², who as a young deacon had left France with Bishop Bessieux in February 1849. He was ordained priest at Dakar on 7th April 1849 and went to Grand Bassam with his companion Father Duret to start a new mission. Libermann at the time was writing his "Instructions to Missionaries". Here he gives a condensation of the ideas which he was to develop at greater length in the "Instructions". Holiness is the life of the Father in Jesus and the life of Jesus in us. Therefore it comes as no surprise that holiness is the necessary foundation for all apostolic life. Jesus is the one, sent by the Father, who carries on his mission through us.

Here we give the letter to Father Lairé in full: a similar one was sent to the above-mentioned Father Duret. At the beginning of this letter to Father Lairé, there are certain expressions concerning the moral situation of the Black Peoples which are difficult to accept nowadays. However, we must remember that Libermann was a great follower of Saint John the Evangelist, who uses many stark contrasts in his Gospel (darkness and light, flesh and spirit, etc.) to describe the situation of a person who has not yet received salvation from Jesus Christ. We should also remember the great sympathy that Libermann had for the Africans; he frequently denounced "the infamous traffic"³ of the slave trade. On this subject, it is interesting

¹ N. D. XIII, pp. 142-146.

² Charles Mary Lairé (1826-1852) was born in the diocese of Rheims. He was ordained deacon on 17th June 1848, and made his Consecration to the Apostolate on 2nd February 1849. That same month he left with Bishop Bessieux for Africa. He was ordained priest at Dakar on 7th April 1849. He worked in Gorée, then at Grand Bassam (1851). He died as superior of the community at Grand Bassam on 23rd November, 1852.

³ Libermann used this expression in his long "Memorandum" of 1846, in which he clearly denounced those responsible.

to read an article written by Father Joseph Lécuyer entitled, "*Libermann and the curse of Ham*¹".

Paris, 8th May 1851

My very dear Confrere,

In your letter of 7th March, which, like all your letters, gave me great pleasure, you stated that you were ashamed of having waited so long before writing to me. If you have reason for blaming yourself, I also ought to feel a similar compunction because of my own delay in replying. So we can both make good resolutions! We shall change our ways and no longer have reason to blush with embarrassment.

So now you are in Grand Bassam. You will find a rather difficult people there whose conversion, it seems, could take some time. Your most important preaching will be your holy life and the good example that you give, and God will send his grace to these poor people who are preyed on by the devil. The people of Africa do not need and will not be converted by the efforts of clever and capable missionaries: it is the holiness and the sacrifice of their priests that will be the means of their salvation. The blindness and the spirit of Satan are still too much rooted in those peoples and the curse of their father still leaves its mark on them. They can only be saved by your trials, united to the sufferings of Jesus Christ; that alone can expiate these abominable sins. The missionaries must possess a holiness which draws down upon the Africans the all-powerful and merciful merits of Jesus to wash away God's curse from them.

¹ Cf. Paul Coulon et Paule Brasseur : « *Libermann 1802-1852* », Paris, Cerf, 1988, pp. 595-607. (Reference Genesis 9.18-27. See also Galatians 3.13 and Deuteronomy 21.23.) For an English version of Lécuyer's article, see: "*Father Libermann and the curse of Ham*", Spiritan Papers no. 6, pp. 33-47 (1978).

Be holy yourself and encourage your confreres to be holy. On that depends the salvation of these unfortunate people for whom you suffer and sacrifice yourself. Your trials and pains will remain futile if they are not sanctified by your whole way of life. It is not enough simply to offer your sufferings to God, or even to offer your whole life for the salvation of souls; such an offering is useful for yourself and will obtain the forgiveness of your own faults. But if God's mercy depends on your sanctity to bring about your own pardon, and there is not enough holiness in you to make up for your own sins, how will your work and sacrifices be enough to save others?

If we do not have God's holiness in our way of living, if his sanctity does not eliminate, remove or at least keep under control, all our faults and imperfections, how can He possibly hear the prayers which we offer for the people he has asked us to save? How then will our sacrifices bear fruit in our apostolate? These sacrifices would always be tainted by our natural habits, faults and imperfections. As a result, there will be very little left to attract God's mercy down on the people.

It is my greatest wish that all my beloved confreres should feel as strongly as I do about the holiness necessary for our missionaries in Africa. Be holy as Jesus was holy; there is no other way to redeem and sanctify souls.

May the spirit of Jesus inspire your actions. May he inspire all your feelings and deaden, or at least moderate, the impetuosity of your mind and all your tendencies to be harsh and unyielding. In short, may he control whatever is passionate and unruly in you. May he guide all your feelings, and direct all your emotions. May he grant you the gentleness and humility of which he has given you such a perfect example. How important are humility and gentleness, and how few people possess those virtues! They are very precious and

are the direct fruits of true and perfect love, demanding as they do a very high degree of interior self denial, docility and submission to God. If we want to obtain them, then all the inflexibility of our wills and all the confidence in ourselves and in our own ideas will have to disappear and be destroyed.

A missionary who has the virtues of humility and gentleness deeply embedded in his soul, who allows them to affect his interior habits and outward actions, is truly made holy by the spirit of God. But the one who lacks those great sanctifying virtues is stunted, so far as Christ's apostolate is concerned. Even if he is as zealous as Saint Paul or Saint Francis Xavier, he is still lacking any solid foundation on which to build. The spirit of Jesus cannot permeate him and most of the time, it is replaced by the missionary's own spirit and sometimes, even by the spirit of darkness.

However, my dear confrere, I don't know why I am spending so much time on these details, because I know that you are working with all your strength to put the commands of our Lord into practice, "*Discite a me*¹....". I have no doubt that his grace is working powerfully in your soul to give you those two holy virtues.

As regards your relations with your confreres, act with gentleness, affection, moderation, simplicity and confidence. Bear their faults with love and patience. Console them in their troubles and, as much as possible, support them in their temptations. Preserve among them peace, gentleness, charity and perfect harmony. Our Lord will live among us if we are truly united in his holy Name; but if we have no cohesion among ourselves, he will not be present and will not give us his blessings.

¹ "*Learn of me because I am meek and humble of heart*" (Mt. 11.29).

Keep the Rule faithfully. It is the only way of preserving fervour and is a sure guarantee against laxity. Without fidelity to the Rule, it is impossible to avoid becoming lukewarm so try your best to ensure that the community in your charge follows the Rule as closely as possible.

I am still trying to find out which confrere in France is not being careful to reply to the letters he receives from you in Guinea. They assure me here that they have answered all the letters they have received from West Africa. All of us would like to receive lots of letters from you and we promise to be very prompt in replying to them. In fact, I have heard the complaint that the dear confreres in West Africa have forgotten all about those at home and don't write to them any more! So please urge the Fathers and Brothers not to neglect the confreres in Europe who love them tenderly and who want to hear from them as often as possible. Ask them to write to one confrere and then another. In that way the holy charity that ought to unite us in Jesus and Mary will be perfect, and God will bless us.

Goodbye for now, my dear confrere.

Yours in Jesus and Mary,

F. Libermann, superior

PS. 1) I regret to inform you that our dear brother, Father Ronarch¹, died a very holy death two months ago on 23rd March.

¹ John Mary Ronac'h was born at Plonéour-Lanvern, in the diocese of Quimper, on 9th December 1815. He entered the novitiate in 1847 and left for Guinea at the end of December. He was in St. Mary of the Gambia in January 1849 and became Vicar General to Bishop Kobès. He went into hospital at Gorée on 7th March 1850.

- 2) Father François has gone to work in Reunion.

- 3) We have sent three confreres to Cayenne. I took the decision with a certain regret, but I had no alternative. I was considering what would be best for the long-term future of Guinea, because unless I sent these men to French Guyana, I would have been obliged, in the next three years, to cut down our numbers in the novitiate by a quarter and perhaps even by as much as a third, counting novices and students together. Now that I have done this, we will be able to maintain our numbers at the present level.

He left for France on 2nd May, and died at Plonéour-Lanvern "in the odour of sanctity" on 23rd March 1851. His tomb is still venerated today.