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1-1-2011

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Repository Citation

de Mare, C. (2011). 19. Holiness rather than enthusiasm. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/anthologie-spiritaine-english/71>

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Holiness rather than enthusiasm

To Bishop Aloÿs Kobès¹

When he wrote this letter, Libermann had no more than three months to live. Within a month, the first signs of his final illness were to appear. He was preoccupied with three ideas, from the foundation of the Work for the Black Peoples, up until his death:

- a) His passion for spreading the Gospel and, after 1843, the year of the "Guinea Disaster", the difficulties which would be encountered whilst preaching the Word in Africa;*
- b) The prime importance of "regularity" in religious community life. He maintained this even before the start of the Work for the Black Peoples and in this letter he uses a telling phrase to get his point across: "Mission is our aim, but religious life is the means sine qua non";*
- c) The absolute necessity for holiness on the part of the missionary. This idea permeates his letters to Le Vavas seur and Tisserant, his co-founders of the Work for the Black Peoples, from as early as 1839. It continues as a recurrent theme throughout his life, right up to his final letters. He expanded the idea in the previously quoted letter to Father Lairé and in this one to Bishop Kobès. He kept repeating this conviction until his dying day.*

Paris, 1st November 1851

Dear Bishop Kobès,²

¹ N. D. XIII, pp. 351-356.

² Aloysius Kobès was born on 17th April 1820 at Fessenheim (68) into a farming family. He passed his studies with distinction in the junior seminary of Saint Louis and then at the major seminary of Strasbourg. He was ordained priest on 21st December, 1844, and entered the novitiate at La Neuville in 1846. He was professor of theology and bursar at La Neuville. Then, following the premature death of Bishop Benedict Truffet, he became coadjutor to Bishop Bessieux and

I was very upset to hear that you have not received any letters from me since October, 1850. I can only assume that it is because of the malice of the demon of Guinea, who wishes to torment us in every way possible and test our patience to the limit. He is evidently trying to destroy the union of love which binds us together.

I have written I don't know how many letters to you and I never failed to reply to any of yours immediately. Since last April alone, I have written three or four times. The only letter of yours that I have still to answer is the one which arrived less than ten days ago. The loss of these letters makes me fear that those I wrote to the confreres in West Africa have similarly gone astray. I carefully replied to all their letters, apart from the latest which arrived at the end of the summer. Please let them know the situation regarding the post, and tell them how distressed I am by these recent machinations of the devil.

The more we proceed, the more it becomes clear that our Mission of Guinea will need a great deal of patience, self-denial, gentleness and abandonment to God. If our confreres in Guinea are not eminently holy, they will become the toys of the devil, who shows such desperate eagerness to torment us in every way possible.

I realise more than ever that our lives must be totally offered up in sacrifice. We must attain such a level of self-denial, in little things as well as in great, that we will be impervious to any set-backs. Every sort of pain, privation, suffering and difficulty will come our way, so we must put all our trust in God, in peace, humility, mildness and great confidence in his mercy. We must never give in to despair, nor take pride in

Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas. He was ordained bishop on 30th November, 1848 as Bishop Bessieux's coadjutor, then became Vicar Apostolic of Senegambia in 1863. He died on 11th October 1872.

ourselves, but control our joy in success and be patient when things go wrong. No matter what happens, let us remain calm like people who rely on God alone, who are merely doing the work of God without seeking any satisfaction for themselves. If we meet with success, we rejoice in and for God, because he has carried out his plans through us. But our joy will be gentle and peaceful for all that. If we fail, if we are thwarted in our attempts to progress, we must be ready to accept that as well.

My intention in making these remarks is not to criticise but rather to unburden my heart to you. You can't imagine how much I suffer when I see all that the enemy is doing to try to impede the progress of the word of God in Africa. He is doing his utmost to prevent the outpouring of God's grace in Guinea by diluting the enthusiasm and generosity of our dear missionaries with their own faults and imperfections.

In God's presence, I often reflect on all that has taken place since the beginnings of our West African Mission. I see now that God wants us to be humble and obedient to his wishes. He wants us to give ourselves to him alone. If our missionaries hope to receive the blessings of God upon their work, they must put all their efforts into their own sanctification. Only then will God bless them. This may also explain our lack of progress to date; God wants us to dampen down our own desires and impetuosity so that we are no longer full of ourselves. He tries us through sorrow, sufferings, and contradictions in order that we might remain in our lowliness and perfect ourselves through patience, gentleness, and the practice of religious life.

God has entrusted the Mission of Guinea to us and has given us a great desire to convert that country; but then he suddenly brings us to an abrupt halt! He takes away from us the very people who seemed the most able to assist us in our work. Amongst those whom God has called to himself in the last nine years who were working in that unfortunate land, there

were eight or nine priests who would have made excellent superiors of communities and perhaps even heads of mission. He has left us with the less capable ones [...] What conclusion should we draw from that? He will make his plan clear in his own good time, but at the moment, I believe He wants to teach us not to rely too much on our own efforts. So we must not get upset about what has happened, because it is all part of the plan of God for these poor people we have been asked to evangelise.

One thought that has often recurred to me is that if God has decided to treat us so harshly, it may be because he wants to punish us, in his mercy, for our sins. He obviously wants us to save the people of West Africa by means of our own holiness, rather than just through our enthusiasm. It is God's will for us to place ourselves in the midst of those people and lead a life that is completely holy. We must practise the priestly and religious virtues of humility, obedience, charity, gentleness, simplicity, prayer and self-denial. This will in no way impair apostolic zeal; on the contrary, it is from that source that our zeal will draw its strength and perfection. Those religious who converted Germany and England had this same approach. This is the method that God wants us to follow and it is the only one that will draw down his blessings.

However, I get the impression that some of our confreres have allowed themselves to deviate from that road. Even though they are so full of fervour and generosity, they have let themselves be carried away by their own idea of total dedication. Their focus is all on external activity, to the neglect of the interior exercises and virtues of the religious and evangelical life. When you add to this the effect that the climate has on their nervous system, concentrating their attention on exterior things, they are in danger of becoming detached from their inner life, and the devil can use this as a

means of turning them away from their search for religious perfection.

One thing that may have led them up the wrong path is a faulty view of their vocation. These poor young men have left their country to be missionaries and have clung on to the idea that they are missionaries before anything else. As a result, they don't attach sufficient importance to religious life and throw themselves excessively into external activity. If I am right, our dear confreres must be brought to realise that though our aim is missionary work, religious life is the means *sine qua non*¹. They must fix their whole attention on that. If they are holy religious, they will save souls: if they are not, they will achieve nothing.

When I think about the sufferings of those poor young men and the generosity which they show in putting up with them, I feel that they could so easily become saints if only they would follow the spirit of their rules and live out the interior virtues of the of religious life. But without such fidelity, they would lose an immense opportunity for merit which could have been an inexhaustible source of grace for that unfortunate land. However, all our missionaries are basically good people and if they acquire the religious and interior spirit, if they faithfully observe their Rule, their faults will diminish. I also think that one of the points to which their attention should be drawn is the agitation and irritation which come about due to the climate and especially from repeated attacks of fever.

An idea has just occurred to me which I pass on for what it is worth. I think it might be useful if you were to give the missionaries some instruction yourself, telling them what God expects in the way of zeal and fidelity. Perhaps you could repeat the general ideas of what I have written. You could

¹ Translation: "The indispensable means".

mention my anxiety and sorrow which I have just described to you and remind them of the examples I gave of the apostles of Germany and England. You could then develop some of my ideas and apply them to their present situation as you see fit, indicating any faults and negligence that you may have noticed on their part. You could end by giving them wise, balanced yet firm advice, with a view to their making good resolutions about their interior lives and external conduct. This would be a good start: after that, you would only have to encourage them to keep on the road you have indicated. It is especially important to give definite instructions to the leaders of communities, so that they in their turn can help you by promoting the keeping of the Rule and practising the religious spirit.

Our good Lord has been sending us trials in Cayenne as well as in Guinea. I sent three missionaries there and one of them, Father Thoulouse¹, the superior of the group, died after only three months in the country. May the name of the Lord be blessed! He is Master over our men as he is over our works, so I am only too pleased to be able to offer up my sorrows to him.

So, dear Bishop, you can see that God is content to let us live through this suffering. He wants us to accomplish his work step by step, slowly and with difficulty, involving much labour on our part and himself making use of the worthless instruments that we are. Look how when we think a man would make a good superior, he either dies or falls ill. Should we yield to anxiety because of that? I don't think so: our task is

¹ Alphonsus Hippolytus Thoulouse was born on 4th July, 1810 at Aubenas, in the diocese of Viviers. He was director of matriculation at the cathedral school of Viviers. He entered the novitiate on 25th January, 1850, was ordained priest, and then made his Consecration on 20th April, 1851, at Notre Dame du Gard. He left for Cayenne, French Guyana, at the end of April, and died there on 16th July.

to carry out what I have described above and wait for God's moments, in peace and humility.

Your humble and poor servant,

F. Libermann