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Commitment to community life is a priority

To Father Marcellin Collin¹

The evening before this letter² was written, that is 20th September, 1851, the last of a series of Council Meetings had been held, to examine how to strengthen the Congregation by the practise of the Rule of Life and community living and how to improve the union between distant communities and the Mother House. So it is not surprising to find in this letter the same approach as in the one written to Father Laval³ a few months before. Both letters stress the necessity of the observance of the Rule and the safeguarding of a genuine community life.

Notre Dame du Gard, 21st September 1851

My very dear Confrere,

In reply to your letter of 16th July, I will begin by saying a few words about the problems we are discussing here at present. Yesterday, 20th September, we held the final meeting of the Council. The whole day was spent on the general state of the Congregation and the steps to be taken to consolidate it. We concentrated on how to maintain in the Congregation the spirit of God and sound discipline.

We have reached period when there is a pressing need to take serious measures to ensure the good of the Congregation

¹ *Marcellin Collin (1818-1904) was born in the diocese of Vannes. He made his consecration on 18th November 1842. He was ordained priest on 5th February, 1843 and left for Reunion on 11th April, 1843. He did missionary work and was then was appointed superior in September, 1849. He returned to France at the end of August, 1852 and became a General Councillor, Director of the Colonial Seminary, Provincial Visitor in the Indian Ocean, First Assistant of the Congregation and superior of various houses. He died in Paris on 21st May, 1904*

² N. D. XIII, pp. 293-297.

³ N. D. XIII, pp. 55-57.

in the future. If we had acted before now, it may have been too soon, but putting it off until later will probably be too late. We have to protect ourselves in the face of an imminent danger which is inherent in all missionary work. Such a danger threatens every community, and every missionary. Because they are so full of eagerness and are filled with an enthusiasm which comes from God, they tend to devote themselves exclusively to the work in hand, thereby neglecting observance of the Rule of Life, obedience to their superiors and the practise of community life. Giving in to such a temptation means that after a few years, the Congregation would be dislocated in all its joints. God only knows what would then become of the work we have been given to do and for which we have already made, and are continuing to make, such great sacrifices.

The missionary, the community superior and the ecclesiastical head of a mission can see only the area for which they are responsible and the good that is waiting to be done there. Consequently, they throw themselves into battle with all their pent-up zeal and become totally immersed in their particular sphere of work and forget that they belong to a body of men who should march in step together. All too easily, they unloosen the ties with which God has bound them together and end up with as many isolated individuals as there are missionaries. The small gains that are made will eventually result in a hundred times more losses.

The missionaries see only the souls to be saved and the work to be done. Since community life seems to be an impediment to all that, they throw it overboard. They think that by concentrating on living holy lives, according to the spirit of the community and the observance of the Rule, they will not achieve as much good or save as many souls as if they were totally free. So they follow their own impatient feelings and give up community life altogether. The result is that there is no

longer any regularity or interior spirit and no obedience to superiors, other than when the person feels like it. Perfect obedience no longer obtains and the unity between communities and the Superior General and Mother House is inevitably destroyed.

People in that situation think that they are inspired by true zeal, but in reality, they are only following the impetuous urges of their own natures. They console themselves for the loss of their interior spirit and community life by thinking of all the good they have done for the people they want to save: they do not consider the harm they are doing to themselves and to others. They bring about a little good but also a lot of harm, because they weaken the bonds uniting the Congregation, destroy any hope for its continuing fervour and deprive it of the great strength that comes from marching together in a well disciplined way.

A dislocated body simply cannot move; it is no good for anything but suffering! What would be the point of having a Congregation reduced to such a state by the imprudent zeal of its members? How many souls would be lost by such short-sightedness, which is willing to mortgage the future for a small, immediate advantage? A missionary who allows himself to be misguided by such an imprudent zeal runs the risk of losing thousands of souls just for the benefit of saving one.

It is our duty, therefore, to consider seriously the vital question of the general discipline of the Congregation. We must carefully examine the ardour that is consuming you missionaries in Reunion. That type of zeal is destroying regularity in Mauritius and is not unknown in Guinea. We in the Mother House are determined to be on our guard against the egocentricity of individual missions, communities and missionaries. People who are interested in nothing but the work in which they are directly involved are sacrificing everything to their own egoism.

I am not necessarily criticising the men on Reunion helpful though that might be; Father François will tell you that I have always greatly appreciated the community there. I know that you have tried to do your best, often in very difficult circumstances, but I want you and your dear confreres to be on your guard against the natural tendency to be found in every missionary and the harm that results from such an attitude, which will only appear in years to come.

Try then to do all in your power to foster the good that already exists among you and make it even better. I believe your present situation is more favourable for the practise of community life than it was in the past. You no longer have to worry about what the civil authorities might say, nor have you anything more to fear as regards opposition from the local clergy. But you must make sure that you come to a good understanding with the bishop, who will surely appreciate that you have to keep to your rules of life.

The circumstances at la Rivière des Pluies and three other missions would seem to be not very favourable. But can you not take steps to ensure that the missionaries in charge of Brûlé, the French Quarter and Chaudron stay outside of community for only two nights a week and that you are all together for the rest of the time, unless something exceptional occurs? Look at the situation carefully in the presence of God. I am only mentioning these things to draw your attention to the current state of affairs and to invite you to consider what practical steps can be taken. Let me know what type of organisation would be more favourable to community life in closer conformity with our Rule. As regards the bishop, be careful not to create a situation where he intervenes, probably without realising it, in the internal organisation and direction of the community.

- I prefer to wait before replying to your questions about Mauritius until your second letter arrives. Then I will know

better what has resulted from your visit there. I will not be writing to our confreres in Mauritius until that letter arrives.

I have no need to go into details about your enquiry concerning Rodrigues; I completely agree with Father Le Vavasseur's decision on the matter. But Father Thévaux should not be sent there without your agreement.

Be careful about Father François and his impetuous zeal:

- a) I don't want him to kill himself with overwork;
- b) I don't want him to overstep the Rule and act independently;
- c) I approve of your prudent decision on the question of his fasting. He may only fast as long as his health is not being compromised.

His letter to me has not yet arrived.

Yours in Jesus and Mary!

F. Libermann, superior