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### 09. The role of Bishops in the Mission of the Congregation

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## The role of Bishops in the Mission of the Congregation

*To the Community of Dakar<sup>1</sup>*

*On May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1848, Fr. Jean-Remi Bessieux,<sup>2</sup> was appointed Bishop of Callipolis and Vicar Apostolic of the Two-Guineas. He was one of only two survivors from the first Spiritan group that went to Guinea and he subsequently worked in Gabon. He was consecrated in Paris on January 14<sup>th</sup>, 1849 and left for Dakar in February. Aloÿs Kobès<sup>3</sup> was a lecturer at Gard and was appointed Bishop of Modon and Coadjutor of Bishop Bessieux on September 22<sup>nd</sup>. Consecrated at Strasbourg on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1848, he became the youngest Bishop in the whole of Christendom. He was one of the Bishops who consecrated Bishop Bessieux.*

*Libermann wrote this letter to the community at Dakar to present the two new Bishops. He gives directions and advice for the good running of the Mission and for smooth relations between the missionaries and the Bishops.*

*Libermann changed the contract he had drawn up with Bishop Truffet: henceforth, the Bishops are also to be Provincial Superiors. So they will now be in charge of the missionary work and also the internal life of the communities.<sup>4</sup> This would lead to many difficulties in the future and it is not clear why Libermann changed his mind.*

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<sup>1</sup> N.D. XI, pp. 21-25

<sup>2</sup> See Index

<sup>3</sup> See Index

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Libermann's letter to Fr. Schwindenhammer of August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1846, which foreshadows some of the material in the Memorandum of 1846. Libermann, helped by Fr. Colin, the Superior and founder of the Marist Fathers, had given much thought to these problems (N.D. VIII, pp. 208-215).

*Perhaps it was to improve relations with the Mother House which had suffered a setback in the opposition of some missionaries to Fr. Schwindenhammer.*

To the community of Dakar.

February, 1849

My dear confreres,

At last I have the consolation of seeing the departure of two Bishops and some other confreres for the "poor mission of Guinea". I hope this will be the end of her suffering. Of course, missionaries will always suffer – otherwise, they would not be missionaries. But henceforth, the Mission will march on towards its goal by the grace of God and the dedication you will all bring to this grace from above. There is no need for me to talk to you of this dedication, because I know that you will use every means that God has given you to work for the salvation of souls and his own glory.

Your two new Bishops are likewise dedicated to God and full of affection for you all, even if they know some of you better than others. They are committed to your spiritual good and to harnessing the enthusiasm and talents that God has shared among you. They are both anxious to build up a well organised Mission that will make great progress amongst the unbelievers and to protect it from any harm that may lie in its path. God will inspire them, enlighten them and lead them safely forward. He will strengthen their hearts so that they progress without hesitation along the path that He has mapped out for them. I am sure they will be faithful to the voice of God who speaks to them and to his light which guides them. I am equally certain that you will give them the cooperation of which they have great need. It is God who is asking this of you and his glory which is at stake. His grace will fill your hearts and will sanctify you, for your own happiness and that of others.

Love with all your heart those whom God has given you to be your guides and who are clothed with the character of his divine Son. Avoid anything that will distress them, never oppose them or criticise what they do, never suspect their motives and do not pass judgement on them. They are amongst you as Jesus was amongst his apostles, so relate to them as the apostles did to Jesus. Never forget that they alone are responsible for the whole mission. They have to answer to God and to the Church for their actions and for those of their missionaries. Be ready to carry out their orders so that they can faithfully execute the mandate they have received from God and his holy Church.

My dear confreres, you will be working with Bishop Kobès. Be careful never to say that you know the Mission better than he does, that your experience is far wider than his. Even if you are correct on a particular point, a missionary who murmurs or, even worse, opposes his Bishop because of such feelings, will certainly be in the wrong in the sight of God. He will also be wrong in his conscience, wrong before his confreres to whom he will be giving such a bad example and wrong because of the good of the Mission which he will be obstructing. However much experience you may have, you can still make mistakes because you are not infallible. How can you oppose the elect of God, clothed with his character, filled with his graces and solely responsible for the work we have been given to do? All of you will have more experience of the way things are in the Missions, but your experience could have led you to false conclusions on several points, either because your principles were wrong, or your knowledge was faulty. These thoughts should be sufficient to make you hesitant to pass judgement, modest in your observations and flexible in your relations with the one whom God has given you for your leader.

What I have said so far are arguments to convince those who live by their reason; but far stronger are those considerations which belong to people of faith – to missionaries and religious people like yourselves. You are so fortunate to have been called by God to sacrifice yourselves for his glory in the mission to which you have been sent. Henceforth, your lives will be completely supernatural, filled with faith and love, so you will have to struggle in your ministry against your old selves, your lives that were once dominated by your intellects. If you follow this way, the love that God has placed in your hearts will grow as he always intended. You will be guided and directed by the will of God and not by your own wills, and this same will of God will be made clear to you through the wishes of your Bishop. So strengthened by this spirit of faith, by priestly virtue, by apostolic charity and the promises that you have made to God in the religious life, you will overcome everything that has led you to resist God's will as manifested through your Bishop. You will become faithful instruments in the hands of God to carry out his plans of mercy for yourselves and the great crowds of people for whom you have offered yourselves up. Also, unity and happiness will reign in your communities, and you will advance together towards a life of virtue.

So be on your guard against:

- Rigidity of opinions and attachment to your own judgements;
- Arrogance in expressing your own ideas, hesitation in carrying out the wishes of the Bishop, seeking ways to avoid their implementation or only partially carrying them out;
- Showing irritation because the Bishop does not act according to your own hopes and ideas; impetuous

and insistent replies, expressing your own ideas in an emotional and unbending way;

- Impatience, interior discontent, ascribing too much importance to your intellect and the inevitable discouragement which follows;
- Too much reliance on your own judgement; over-inflated idea of your talents, intelligence, and experience.

My dear confreres do not imagine that I fear you have these faults, or that I am worried that you might resist or belittle the person whom God has given you. Through him, God himself wants to be among you to direct your difficult work which is so close to His heart.

I have no such fears in your regard; I know your fervour very well and the purity of your intentions. But you are all very dear to me and the mission which has been confided to us is engraved on my heart, so I must not miss any opportunity that God sends to ward off possible harm that might befall yourselves or the Mission. So watch over your feeble nature which will be with you until the end of your lives. Live together in perfect love and in obedience to your superiors, especially your Bishop. Console and encourage him by your exemplary and charitable lives, for that is what God wants you to do.

There is not much more to add to this long letter. I have appointed Bishop Bessieux as Provincial Superior in that part of the Mission that he will retain for himself, and Bishop Kobès as Provincial in the area that will be confided to his care. Until further orders, the Bishop in charge of Senegambia will also be Provincial Superior for the members of the Congregation living in Senegal.

I have given both Bishops the authority to appoint and depose local superiors and bursars of communities, under certain conditions which you will find in the rules that I will send you a little later. These rules will replace our provisional rules; they are mostly the same, with only a few additions which experience has led me to include.

My dear confreres. I greet you all in the love of Jesus Christ and his holy mother, in whom I belong entirely to you all,

*F. Libermann, priest, superior*