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### 11. Works of the Congregation in Europe

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## Works of the Congregation in Europe

*To Dom Sallier<sup>1</sup>*

*Dom Sallier<sup>2</sup>, a Carthusian monk, had remained a close friend of Fr. Libermann since they were together in the Seminary of Issy. Replying to his request to take charge of a pastoral work in France, Libermann spells out for him the ends of the Congregation: works in Europe are not a priority for him ("up until now") but they are not ruled out as long as they are in line with the Rule of the Spiritans.<sup>3</sup>*

May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1851

My very dear Father,

I have made you practise a lot of patience in taking so long to reply. Your letter went astray and I did not know your address. I am very sorry, because the love of Our Lord which united us many years ago kept you in my heart all this time and I now see, with great joy, that you have not forgotten me either. I have need of your help more than ever before, because I am so weak, so poor, and so miserable, yet I should be strong

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<sup>1</sup> N.D. XIII, pp. 170-173

<sup>2</sup> See Index

<sup>3</sup> Libermann had already written to Le Vavas seur on this same subject – N.D. IX, p. 288. (October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1847). *"Our works in Europe will concentrate on the poorest classes, who are in great need in France: people like sailors, soldiers, workers in general, and those who are even worse off – galley slaves, prisoners and beggars. No need to explain to you why these would be excellent works for us. I will just talk about the thinking behind it, apart from the obvious good it would accomplish and the side effect of making us more solidly established in this country. Such works are not opposed to the general aim or the spirit of the Rule. It is true that we did not think about them at the beginning, but that does not prove that God was against it. It was impossible for us to consider it at that time: God was leading us towards the "Work for the Black People", and yet we felt the need to open out further, as can be seen when the Rule talks of poor, abandoned souls in general"*.

and rich in virtue. So please join your prayers to my desires and intentions, in the silence of your desert where you live with God alone; ask him and his holy Mother that I may sanctify myself so as to sanctify others.

The proposition you have put to me is very much in line with the spirit of our Congregation: evangelising the poor is our primary end. But the Missions are the more specific aim we have chosen, above all, those who are poorest and most abandoned. Providence has pointed us in the direction of the black people in Africa and in the colonies. Without any doubt, up until now, these are the poorest and most abandoned of peoples.

We would also like to work for the salvation of souls in France, above all for the poor, while not abandoning those who are not so poor. In France, we would suggest preaching in the rural parishes and, above all, ministering to people of the poor working class, whose needs seem to be the greatest at the moment. To this end, it would be better if we lived in large manufacturing towns, where the greatest number of workers is living and where corruption and irreligion are unfortunately widespread. We could then try to influence them on their own home ground, as these people are generally out of reach of the parochial clergy because they do not go to church.

So the works we would undertake would be extra-parochial. I believe, as I always have done, that those living in Communities must always take care not to encroach on the work of the diocesan clergy, but, as far as possible, to direct the people to their own local parishes. We would receive them in our own churches if that was the will of the Bishop. If the Lord wants us to minister in the vineyard of France, we would be determined to work in perfect compliance with the bishops and the clergy of the country.

I was forgetting your question about enclosed retreats. We receive priests for retreats into our houses; as regards lay people, we have nothing for or against; circumstances will guide us to the right decision.

As regards finance, we only want enough to live on. At present, we are too poor to make any further sacrifice; it takes us all our time to find enough for the running of the novitiate. The Immaculate Heart of Mary will never abandon her children, but we still have to survive. (You could perhaps help us a little by sending us some Mass intentions).

I think there is no point at present in going into the details of starting a house in the countryside. When God's moment arrives and you have a proposal to put to us, that will be time enough. At present, there is no possibility of starting another house because our Missions will take up all our possible personnel for the next three years.

In the meantime, if some priests want to enter our Congregation who would be suitable for working in France, we would accept them and put them to work in this country. It would be neither prudent nor right for them to insist on staying in France as a condition for joining us; we could not accept them on those terms – they must be ready to join us unconditionally. However, if we see that they have the taste, the vocation and the capabilities for working in France, we would be happy to go along with that and we would surely not send them to the missions. To minister in France, they would need a solid piety (or show signs that they would acquire it during the novitiate), great self-denial and total dedication to God, a good character and the necessary ability. We likewise expect all these things from those preparing for the Missions, although their capability could be less, as long as they show sound judgement and no excessive excitability.

If I had more time, I would have given you further news about the Missions. But I must say a few words about Guinea so that you can add this intention to your prayers.

The curse placed on the children of Cham<sup>1</sup> is indeed terrible and the devil still reigns amongst them until today. You have no idea what this struggle entails; we are engaged in hand-to-hand fighting with this fierce enemy of souls. It is a terrible battle, but Jesus is with us and Mary is protecting us, so we will win in the end. The fight began at the end of 1843. Since then, we have sent over 40 missionaries to Guinea: 10 of them have died, in general, the most able; 3 can no longer work, 3 more have had to return to Europe to recover their health, including one of the two Bishops. All the others are experiencing unremitting suffering and privations. But not one of them has given in to discouragement, which shows how strong the help given them by Jesus and Mary is. On the contrary, they would all be inconsolable if they were withdrawn to go elsewhere. Those who have to return because of sickness cannot wait to get back to their work. The coadjutor Brothers have suffered slightly less; we have between 25 and 30; we have lost 3 and 2 others are more or less incapacitated. With one exception, their perseverance is the same as the priests.

There are far more inhabitants on this coast than the experts have said. There are more than 50 million, all of whom are still sitting in darkness. But good things are beginning to happen and our hopes are high.

Dear Father, I want you to enlist in this terrible battle which promises an abundant harvest. Join forces with us, you and

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<sup>1</sup> See the article of Joseph Lécuyer on "*Libermann and the curse of Cham*", Spiritan Papers no. 6, May-August, 1978, p. 33. Also "*Libermann, 1802-1852*" by Paul Coulon, p. 595.

your holy brothers; intercede for so many poor and lost souls and for the missionaries who have to snatch them from the devil and hell. You will be doing something that is so pleasing to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, our good and loving Mother.

Yours in the love of Mary,

*F. Libermann*



*Frédéric Le Vasseur, co-founder of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary with François Libermann and Eugène Tisserant*