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03. Calming the excesses of impetuous temperaments

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Calming the excesses of impetuous temperaments

To Father Arragon¹

Stanislas Arragon² was a very generous missionary, who nevertheless found it difficult to live in community. He had a very fiery temperament which made him get angry at the slightest provocation. That was why he wrote a very harsh letter to Father Libermann. He was full of resentment against Father Gravière who had been appointed Prefect Apostolic of Guinea. He was also very unsatisfied with the way Libermann was running the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary and how he dealt with the missionary work of the confreres. Father Libermann sent him this letter which contains many reprimands, but his fraternal kindness shines throughout.

8th May 1846

My dear Confrere,

I received your terrible letter of 25th March. If I did not know you well, it would have caused me the greatest annoyance. However, instead, I am going to tell you exactly what I think with all the simplicity at my disposal.

1) If you continue along the road you have started to take, even with the best will in the world, you are going to destroy the Mission. At the very least, you will cancel out all the natural gifts and graces that God has given you. You are going to be a scourge for your confreres. You will only end up by discouraging them and, what is more, you will hamper them in their work. I therefore beg you, for the love of Jesus and Mary,

¹ N. D. VIII, pp. 142-149

² See Index of Names

to calm down and not allow yourself to succumb to this violent side of your nature.

I will deal with everything you mention in your letter step by step. But first of all, you react to things very abrasively and consequently lose your temper far too easily. You can be sure that the spirit of God is not present when that is happening. Ask yourself seriously if this way of judging things is really according to the will of God. Even if I were ninety years old, with fifty years of experience behind me, I would not dare to talk of things in such a critical way as you do. Your way of speaking is full of presumption. But I am convinced that presumption is not at the root of your unfortunate way of expressing yourself. God knows I am ready to listen to everything you have to say on all sorts of things; in fact, it is good that you tell me what you think. I only ask that you speak with calm and moderation. Although I am morally sure that you are not speaking out of presumption, you could end up in that sorry state. In fact I feel you may already have begun to be a bit like that.

2) Your language is too brusque, too harsh, too proud and too bitter. For the love of God, do not put pen to paper when you are upset. Calm down first and then write wisely. Just look at what you have said: you want to call a meeting of all your confreres in order to choose another superior and to refuse the one I am sending you. Read our Rule and show me any place where such an action is permitted. Look at the Rules of every Religious Order in the world and show me one which permits such a reaction. Examine yourself truthfully in the presence of God and ask yourself if you are really acting according to the spirit of our Lord or of the Gospel. Supposing I was the most evil person that existed and I was even worse than you think; even if I had no confidence in any of you, would that give you the right to refuse to obey the will of God

as revealed through obedience? What would then become of the virtues so necessary for community life? If people in all conscience felt they could act like you, what would happen to unity, charity and religious friendship?

3) You accuse me of not having any confidence in you all. You could not be more wrong. If I do not put forward a person's name to be a superior, or a Prefect Apostolic, does that mean I have no confidence in him? I have shown plenty of confidence in Father Bessieux, because I made him superior instead of Father Briot. I have shown a lot of confidence in you, because I appointed you as his first assistant in a situation where the superior will probably be absent for long periods of time. But I have to admit that your latest letter makes me question my judgement. You are feeling great resentment against Father Gravière. If you continue down that road, God only knows what the harvest will be. Give the grace of God a chance to do its work, be faithful, and do not give in to this brutal and violent tendency of your nature. Be as docile as a child, treat Father Gravière with respect and with the affection owed to a superior as a representative of God. Your language when describing him is outrageous. Just suppose he does make some mistakes and that the good of the Mission suffers as a result, what is that to you? It is not you who will have to answer to God for what happens.

So go about things in a calm way and don't be turning everything upside down with your impetuosity. All you speak of has already happened, even before I received your letter, but that does not mean that you have to continue bringing disorder into the group simply because I have not followed your ideas - and therefore do not know what I am doing!

Therefore I order you, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to treat Father Gravière with kindness, charity and the sort of

attitude we should always have towards a superior. Why do you want to discourage him? He was very hesitant to take on the responsibility in the first place. He is serious but he is also just, active and energetic and able to take decisions. I want you to write to me by return of post to put my mind at rest regarding your attitude towards him. Do everything you can to encourage him, to maintain peace and unity between the two of you, and between you and your confreres.

4) As I understand it, you wanted me either to appoint nobody as Prefect Apostolic or to ask Fr. Bessieux to accept the nomination of the Holy See. But you must never set yourself as the judge in such matters. Just like a child under obedience, you must submit to the will of God through the superior he sees fit to give you. If you have any remarks to make on the subject, then make them with modesty, calm and submission to the will of God. I love and sincerely respect Father Bessieux, but I have never considered offering his name to the Holy See as a possible Prefect Apostolic. Rest assured that I have examined the whole affair in the presence of God. You point out that Father Gravière did not spend a long enough time in the novitiate. The reason was that circumstances arose which could not be ignored so I was obliged to by-pass the rule in that instance. I assure you it brought me just as much heartache as yourself and the accusation you are making against me is bringing it all back again, with the self recrimination I feel at having been forced to go to such lengths. I had decided not to send anybody who had not completed the novitiate but I was reluctantly forced to waive the rules in this case.

You are judging things from your limited perspective and you are trying to make rules and criticise even though you have no idea what is involved in running a religious congregation, not having had any experience of it. I do not have to answer to

you for my actions, but you can be sure that I never take decisions without serious reflection. You are acting very wrongly, my dear confrere. If Father Gravière does not know the Rule well enough, then it is up to you, by your good example, to encourage him and remain close to him. Take care not to pass remarks when your mind is so full of pride. Calm down and speak with gentleness and modesty. You can and should keep me informed about his way of acting, especially with regards to the keeping of the Rule. This is your duty, however never do it with a high opinion of your own point of view, because you will only cause me embarrassment. After all, I am not on the spot and therefore in no position to judge the value of your observations.

5) You say that I never pay any attention to your advice. I simply do not know to what advice you are referring. I have always taken great care to act in accordance with your ideas. I have no other way of finding out what is going on out there and that is why I am always pressing you for details. I suppose you may be referring to the Australian venture, but your advice has nothing to do with that. You are convinced, and have repeated it in your letter, that this new Mission will be disastrous for the Mission of Guinea. What more can I say to get that idea out of your head? There is no logical connection between the Australian Mission and the possibility of the ruination of the Guinea Mission. I have told you many times that Guinea will always be our most important Mission and that we shall always take the greatest care of it. Your remarks on that subject have no effect on me. If I were to send you ten missionaries instead of the seven who have been designated, would that be any advantage to you all at this moment in time? Could you really use ten men? Leave me to do my duty in peace; the general administration of the work rests on my shoulders. You have not received the grace of state to reason as you do. You claim that the Mission of Guinea is being run

from France in a way that is diametrically opposed to the ideas of the missionaries. That is entirely false; on the contrary, we have adopted all your ideas and are in perfect agreement with everything you have proposed.

I know you don't want us to accept Australia, but that has nothing to do with the running of the Guinea Mission. You have apparently serious reasons against the Australia venture, but our decisions seem to us to be the correct way forward. Do you really think I am going to follow your advice in a matter which does not concern your Mission and go against my deepest convictions which are shared by all the confreres living here with me at La Neuville? Even if all of us here thought that you were wiser than we are, we would still be bound to disregard your opinions because you do not know all the facts. So do not blind yourself with your violent prejudices. I am committed to Guinea ten times more than you are and I have a much clearer picture of the overall situation than yourself. I also have more experience than you and in no way am I prepared to see the Guinea mission compromised.

6) You accuse me of never writing to you. First of all, the majority of your letters do not seem to require any reply. They contain facts and figures which we found very useful and long may they continue to arrive here. I would like to have replied to all of them but I am under very heavy pressure of work. I have nobody to help me in the administration and I have to give priority to what is most important. Try to see things from the others' point of view. I can only do what is possible, even if it is not as much as I would like. Perhaps when I am able to hand over my task of running the novitiate to somebody else, I will have more time to encourage our missionaries. I always answer when an answer is necessary or useful. Probably my letters do not arrive as quickly as you would like because of

the vagaries of the post, but I have written to you more than eight times.

7) You complain that I have not given you clear instructions about jurisdiction. I told you as much as I could in one of my letters and I assured you that I was working at it. Nothing has been decided as yet and I am going to Rome myself and will get a decision. I have already told you by post not to build anything in Dakar until everything is clarified by Rome, but you have gone ahead and built there. Perhaps you did not receive my letter in time, or maybe I wrote too late, but I could not answer any sooner. I would ask you to cease any construction work until all doubt has been resolved, but remember that such matters are not concluded in a day. We must have patience, which is the most important virtue for a missionary.

8) You say that I am being fooled by the Ministry. That is completely false: I know exactly what I am doing. Your words are that *"once again I am sending missionaries to their deaths, but this time they will not go!"* When you talk like this, you are sinning against a man who loves you more than your father or mother ever did. I would prefer to die myself than lose any of you. You say that they will not go. I know that strictly speaking, they have no obligation to go, but you have committed a fault in saying such things. I also say that they should not go: I have asked Father Gravière to make a thorough examination of every aspect of this business. I have written the same thing to all of you (probably in a letter to Father Briot), telling you not to go to unhealthy places.

My principle in dealing with the Government is as follows: we can progress without them but not against them. If the Government opposes us, there is no future for the Mission. We have to take their susceptibilities into account while, at the

same time, acting in accordance with the directives of our religious authorities.

9) You said a terrible thing in the third point in your letter: *"Take care that your missionaries, whom you and your revered councillors despise and revile, do not treat you in the same way."* My friend, please do not write when you are angry. As regards Fr. Schwindenhammer to whom you refer, he is innocent of every accusation you make against him in your intemperate words. Calm down, I beg you, for you are offending God. When I go to Rome, I will have to give an account of my relations with the Government and I am sure they will approve of my approach. If not, then I will follow whatever orders the Roman Curia gives me.

10) I think it is a good idea for the Brothers to submit their letters to be read before posting, with the exception of those to the Superior General or the Director of their house in Europe.

I am very hurt by what you have said about Father Schwindenhammer because he is sacrificing himself totally for the Congregation. He is completely devoted to it and he has no less interest in it than myself. He has a very good mind and he is a devoted and committed priest. I have no idea why you have suddenly taken such a dislike to him. It was not he who took the decision regarding Australia, but if he had done so, it would have been an excellent choice. Stop worrying about Australia; you are getting all worked up about non-existent problems. Even if I had fifteen missionaries at my disposal, I would not send three more to Guinea. The initial steps must be based on a sure and solid foundation; only then will the real needs become apparent and you will then receive the necessary personnel to meet them.

As for Father Gravière, you are guilty of gross exaggeration and your abrasive attitude will make it impossible for him to relate to you. Father Schwindenhammer had nothing to do with his appointment. I had to act quickly because a decision was urgent. It is not for you decide what I should do because you are not in a position to know all the elements involved. Your duty is to encourage your superiors when they have difficult decisions to make. That is preferable to causing them further pain by criticising their actions which they only manage to carry out with the greatest difficulty.

Be very careful in your relations with the Muslims. Never say a word against Mohammed and do not act impetuously or you may ruin everything. Follow the path that you decided on at the beginning – to win their confidence.

I pray with all my heart that our Lord will grant you peace, moderation, docility and charity. Don't be discouraged for having let your temperament get the better of you. Return to a peaceful frame of mind and God will be with you. I embrace you from the bottom of my heart in the love of Jesus and Mary.

I am at your service,

F. Libermann, priest

PS. I cannot see which case of conscience I have not answered. It seems to me that I have replied to all your questions.