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04. The art of leading a community

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The art of leading a community

To Father Lossedat¹

Father Lossedat² went with Father Tisserant to Santo Domingo (Haiti) in February 1844, but he returned after a year because of the political problems there. He was sent to Guinea in December 1845 and was appointed the new leader of the community of the Holy Heart of Mary. His first impressions of the mission of Guinea and the missionaries working there were not very good. Once again, we see in this letter of Libermann to Father Lossedat an exhortation to be patient and tolerant so as to be able to accept with flexibility the different ways others have of doing things. Here is Libermann at his best in guiding people. For him patience and gentleness are more effective than confrontation.

Father Lossedat,
Apostolic Missionary,
Gorée, on the Coast of Senegambia,
via Le Havre

13 April 1846

My very dear Confrere,

I had already written to you a few days before the arrival of your latest letter of 4th March. So I imagine my letter will make you rather concerned when you receive it, because you did not know that your second letter had not yet arrived and so I was not answering the questions posed in it.

However I know my man and I flatter myself that you also know me. You are aware, my beloved brother, that I am

¹ N. D. VIII, pp. 109-115

² See Index of Names

always very ready to console you in all your sufferings as soon as I possibly can. If only it were possible for me to spend a year with you all in Guinea! But that is not what God has decided; he has no need of me in the Missions. I would have answered your letter even sooner than this, but I was unavoidably absent from the Mother House.

I am glad that you did not send me your "terrible" letter because you have not been long enough on the coast of Africa for all your observations to be correct, especially as regards the way we should be doing things out there. It takes time to get to know the real situation; so I believe you cannot hope to know the policy to follow until you have been there for at least a year or eighteen months. After some more experience, you will find that things will become much easier.

It is difficult for me to find the sort of man you would like to be head of the Mission; I don't have anybody to hand at the moment. However, I think you will come to realise the qualities of Father Gravière and recognise that he is the best man for the job. He is serious, self possessed, thoughtful, and has very good judgement. I think you will find him to be a true friend and I hope that he will appreciate you and be supportive for you.

I can imagine how difficult the Mission is, but perhaps you are tending to exaggerate some of the difficulties because of the sufferings you are undergoing. Let us place our confidence in God and believe that Mary will never abandon us. I am sure that there are even greater difficulties awaiting you which you have not yet dreamed of. Our Lord is with you; with his help, you will pull through. So keep pressing forward, doing the little you are capable of, because it is He who blesses our work. He is very good at making up for our mistakes!

We tend to fix on a perfect idea of how things should be and we expect everything to turn out exactly as we have planned. That is not the way God works. He wants things to be imperfect and weak at the beginning, so we must submit to his will, do the best we can and leave the outcome entirely in his hands. So rest in perfect peace when things are not going as you had imagined. I am sure that often enough, your ideas will turn out to be right and true; but getting upset, feeling hurt, worrying and fretting achieves more harm than good. The way a wise man acts in such a situation is to tone down his own views and follow the general consensus as far as possible. If you see that your confreres think differently from yourself, even when it is obvious that they are aiming only for the second best, it is better not to be too rigid and contradict them. We must leave each person the freedom to follow his own ideas and do good in his own way. That is how we encourage and get the best out of people; we allow everybody to do whatever good they can in their own way. It would be preferable if they had other ideas, but what can we do? They don't have other ideas and that is all there is to it.

If you try to force people to follow your opinion all the time, more often than not less good will be achieved; you will even end up by confusing and discouraging them. You have no idea how important it is to be tolerant. It is impossible for everybody to agree on everything all the time. If we are not tolerant, we will stop any good being done. We will end up in confusion and lose that peace of mind which is so necessary for us. That is how we discourage others and as often as not, end up being discouraged ourselves. But if we allow each person to act in the way he thinks best, according to his character, considerable good will result. Of course people are going to make mistakes and be imprudent, but in time, they will learn from their experience and improve, in line with their own character. It is a very important principle for all action that we

should beware of aiming at an ideal perfection. It is good, of course, to plan how things should be done to ensure a successful outcome and we have to look for the best means for carrying it out; but it is even more important to know how to modify one's approach, how to be flexible and accommodate oneself to the people, things and circumstances that we encounter.

You will never be able to do things exactly as you have planned – that is a pipe dream! If you want to be successful, stand apart for a moment and be ready to listen to others. Otherwise, you only end up shattering yourself in the face of difficulties which arise. I have always admired your sound judgement, but you sometimes cling too much to your own point of view when it comes to the implementation of your plans. You sometimes do not make enough room for the character and temperament of others and you can be intolerant of the way they do things.

This approach can be harmful in three ways:

The first concerns you. Your methods are bringing you much suffering and heartbreak. My dear friend, you know how much I hate to see you in pain and my only concern is to remove the cause. You must learn to put up with the faults of others and be ready to accept a job half done, or even badly done. To achieve peace of mind and be fit to do great and important things for God, you should strive to arrive at a kind of holy indifference to the things you cannot cure. I guarantee that you will bring healing to bad situations if you learn to bear with them when there is no alternative.

The second concerns your neighbour. If you do not walk along the path I have indicated, you will be disturbing your confreres. You will prevent them from achieving all the good

they could on the road on which they are travelling. This will happen especially with weak characters, who are never far from depression. You will discourage them and you are running the risk of making them commit many faults and acts of imprudence as a result.

The third is a mixed bag. By being tolerant and knowing how to accept the others the way they are, you will acquire a certain influence over them. You will not only do the good of which you personally are capable, but you will be a great help to the others in their struggles. But if you cannot keep silent about the least faults which you see in the actions of your confreres, you will soon find that everybody turns against you.

I imagine that I have greater influence over your confreres than you do. That is because I try to be tolerant of their faults which cannot be corrected. I even put up with their irritating habits, some of them extremely offensive, leaving each to follow his own way, while trying to improve the approach of each one in so far as that is possible. Nothing is ever achieved by force, contradiction or resistance: but success is never far away from the man who knows how to bear with people, and to be tolerant, gentle and calm.

I will go even further. Not only do I not aim to make people change their characters and natural way of acting, but I am not even interested in correcting the faults they exhibit in their actions. My aim is to achieve whatever is possible. Then we can enjoy seeing the good taking place which would probably have been lost by acting in a more intrusive way. For example, if you ever tried to make Father Arragon moderate, polite, and attractive in his manners, you would be chasing shadows - you might as well try to stop the sun in its course! But if you deal with him in a friendly manner and let him do things his own way, without doubt you will have the good effect on him which

I have described. But if you give the impression of being hurt or show signs of disapproval or revulsion, you will then get the bad results that I have described.

So leave everybody as they are with all their foibles. God has made them that way, and for the most part they want to do the best they can. You have to encourage them, and each of them will achieve good in proportion to whatever talents they have received from above. Do not seek to find your own consolation in others; rather, try instead to console and encourage them. Be master of your own soul and you will be in command of the whole world. That is the sort of leader you must try to become.

Do not weaken. You are suffering, and you will suffer even more, but your pains will enlarge your soul. I can assure you that I suffer and will suffer as much and probably more than you. I am at least as sensitive to pain as you are, but is that a reason for discouragement? I don't think so. By the grace of God, that will never happen. Do we really need to tell the whole world about our sorrows? Of course not. I never moan about things. Be firm with yourself and you will do great things for God, but if you do not know how to be patient, you will never achieve what God intends for you. You must strive to dominate yourself, to suffer without drawing attention to it, to offer God your pains generously, to be patient with yourself and sacrifice yourself, and to be patient with others in spite of all their faults and failings. You love great and beautiful things and here you have the greatest and loveliest of all. Ask the Lord to give you this treasure.

I will try and arrange the new appointments in a way that will set your mind at rest. Perhaps we could arrange things so that you could explore the coast further and maybe set up another mission, either alone or with Father Gravière. In any case, we will try and do everything for the best. Father Gravière is on

the spot, so he is better placed to judge what is right for you all.

Yours in Jesus and Mary,

*F. Libermann,
Priest of the Holy Heart of Mary*

PS. I hope I have managed to answer all the points I remember seeing in your letter. I am very busy at the moment. We read out your letter in the refectory and I have sent a copy to your father. Please write some letters which can be read out in the refectory and then sent to the Association for the Propagation of the Faith (APF). Of course, I also want you to continue to share your thoughts with me and keep me up to date on developments.