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### 08. Advice on financial administration

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## Advice on financial administration To Bishop Bessieux<sup>1</sup>

*This letter shows the prudence which Father Libermann sought to instil in both bishops of the Two Guineas concerning the proper use of funds. Even though they had overspent their financial allocations, he was still able to speak with fraternal charity to them and make excuses for them in the light of their inexperience. He also makes an important statement about administrative policy: even though they are bishops, the mission belongs to the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. They cannot do just what they like without taking the Congregation into consideration.*

30<sup>th</sup> August 1850

Dear Bishop Bessieux,

It is a long time since we have sent you any news. But first of all, I want to comment on the material affairs of your dear Mission.

Since last year, Bishop Kobès had been asking me to approach the Propagation of the Faith in Paris on his behalf, seeking funds to build the church of Our Lady of the Gambia. He was asking for an extremely large amount of money so I hesitated to carry out his wishes. I was pretty sure I would not be successful and I did not want to antagonise that same Society. So I asked them for ten thousand francs instead of the fifty thousand the bishop wanted. I had come to realise that the Council was not prepared to spend large amounts of money on buildings; there was no way they would agree to give fifty thousand francs for the building of a church, no

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<sup>1</sup> N. D. XII, pp. 348-356

matter important the missionaries reckoned it to be. But Bishop Kobès insisted that I make that request, so I went ahead and presented it exactly as he wished, whether for the building of a church or of a mission compound.

It was a very large sum and when added to your own note asking for funds, it was indeed a substantial amount of money. However, I wanted to avoid causing the two of you and your missionaries any worry, and at the same time to maintain the perfect harmony which exists between us. So I presented the case but I am afraid the result will not please either of you. I learnt indirectly that the central Council of Paris was less than pleased with your requests. They are also very unhappy at the overspending that has taken place in Guinea and they now fear that because of a lack of good administration, the Mission is in a state of collapse! They told me to expect an official letter from the Council expressing these fears, which would also inform me of the wishes of the Council for the missionaries to save as much money as possible. They said they would even ask me to send fewer missionaries to West Africa, since they felt that we had sent too many already.

I am not trying to alarm you; this is a passing storm and there will be no lasting consequences. It is possible they may reduce our allocation this year, but even that is not certain. But there are a few things to which I would like to draw your attention:

- 1) In the first place, you must take greater care in spending money. You have to economise, without, of course, putting the health of the missionaries at risk in any way.
- 2) While continuing to seek the salvation of these poor, abandoned people, you must try to be patient and calm in all your apostolic activity. Continue to be energetic in your work,

but in a spirit of prudent direction and administration. God readily gives such a spirit to those he has chosen to guide his work. He will give to you and Bishop Kobès the wisdom, prudence and moderation so necessary for what he has entrusted to you. You need courage, peace, interior humility and confidence in God alone, but always linked to a healthy Christian distrust of your own opinions and strengths.

3) You need to develop a robust attitude, not so much to fight against external opposition, although that will certainly not be lacking, but to struggle against yourselves in the midst sufferings, contradictions and obstacles, so as not to be worried or overmuch depressed by them. Learn how to bear such troubles with the calm expected from a true man of God.

4) Do everything in your power to maintain peace and unity between you two bishops and between both of you and ourselves. Do all you can to preserve this solidarity and make it even stronger. It is the only possible way of achieving any good and of being able to face the innumerable difficulties which you will continually meet.

5) In all the things I am doing for you at this end, you must allow me a certain latitude. You are well aware that I desire the good of your Mission as much as you do. But if I feel that I should follow a different course to the one you recommend, I obviously have my own very good reasons for doing so. You ought to know by now that I am not stubborn in holding on to my own ideas come what may. So if I act contrary to what you expect, you can presume it is in the best interest of the Mission. Also I know the situation here at home better than you do, so I am able to adapt to circumstances in a way that you may not understand. If Bishop Kobès had not been so insistent on my putting his unreasonable demands to the Propagation of the Faith, and if I had not feared a rift between

myself and the two of you, I would have thought twice about asking for such a large sum of money. Personally I would have asked for forty thousand francs less and would possibly have got more than they actually gave us. I would also have spared both of you considerable embarrassment, because these people now consider you are unrealistic in demanding so much and think that you are not good administrators. If I had followed my own instincts, I would not have raised their concerns for the future of a mission which they now consider to be "lost" – that is the very word they used!

But I repeat that you can set your minds at rest because I guarantee that this storm will cause no permanent harm. Their fears will abate, but try to make things easier for me by being wise and moderate in the way you run the Mission, without of course abandoning your dedication to the salvation of souls. When the wind blows into the sails of a ship, it starts moving forward. But if you leave the boat entirely at the mercy of the wind, it will soon go off course and be in danger of hitting the rocks. It is the wind that pushes the ship forward, but it is the experience and skill of the captain which will ensure that the wind is used to the greatest effect.

I would ask you not to discuss these matters yet with bishop Kobès. I am going to write to him myself at the end of the rainy season, to tell him what I have just said to you. I will not talk to him for the moment for fear of upsetting him and bringing on some sickness.

Now I have to mention another matter which is very important. Bishop Kobès said one day that to help the novitiate, you were ready to donate one thousand francs for every missionary priest we send to you in Guinea. I personally think that things should be done on a more regular basis. That would be better since it would be more consistent with our Rules, which say

that the different communities around the world should help towards the upkeep of the Mother House, in other words, of the novitiate. With a regular annual contribution, we at home would be able to calculate much better the amount we would receive year by year and could more easily measure our resources against our personnel. Finally, the reason which seems the most important to me is that by giving a fixed help every year, the Mission would be united to the whole Congregation and see itself as part of the family. The Mother House would then be able to keep itself going and send new children out to the Missions.

If, on the other hand, you pay a thousand francs for each missionary you receive, you would be treating us like strangers. There is something not quite right about that, because we end up with two spheres of interest facing up to each other. On the one hand, we have a Mission making an agreement with a Congregation in order to get missionaries, and on the other, a Congregation entering into a business deal with a Mission. The latter is an abnormal and inconvenient way of doing things. It is unfortunate, because it is based on mere justice and self interest and not on the charity and unity expected of a family. It comes from an idea of Bishop Kobès, (which I consider wrong) that has been the underlying cause of all the troubles that arose between us soon after we set foot on the coast. I do not know if you also agree with this point of view.

The idea I am criticising consists in the belief that as soon as you were named Vicar Apostolic, the Mission stopped being that of the Congregation and became your own. I regard that opinion as being both dangerous and inexact. I think it is dangerous, because it could give rise to disunity and cause discouragement in the Community. It could also produce a certain coolness among the African missionaries in their

relations with the Mother House and, as a result, cause them to be unfaithful to their Rule of Life. It would all depend on the attitude of the bishops who come after you.

The idea in my opinion is also inexact. I believe that the Holy See confided the Mission to our Congregation and chose men of this Congregation to be bishops who would govern it. Only the bishops have the power, and only they have the responsibility as regards the administration of the mission. That is why the Superior General has no other right than that of giving advice and making observations about things, but he cannot interfere in what concerns either spiritual or temporal rule. So if I am correct, the Mission is yours but it is also ours. But it is neither yours nor ours separately, but belongs to the Supreme Pontiff who has asked the Congregation of the Holy Spirit to work there and for you to administer it. Because of that, the result is perfect union between us in the same work for the glory of God, each playing his own part.

I now return to what I said earlier about the offer made by Bishop Kobès. I felt that the moment was not right for bringing up the question of an increased subsidy towards the rising costs of running our training programme in France, so I simply accepted the offer that he had made. Since we have already sent twelve confreres to the mission, we ought to receive twelve thousand francs (1,000 francs for each one). I wrote to Bishop Kobès suggesting that we retain only 8,000 francs this year, so as not to impose too great a burden on the mission all at once, and that we would take the remaining 4,000 next year. I told him that the Propagation of the Faith had given us 54,000 francs, including the 4,000 francs for Galam.<sup>1</sup> Father

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<sup>1</sup> We are talking here of the Bakel region in the upper reaches of the Senegal river. For more information on the opening of this mission see N. D. Compléments, pp. 315-316.

Briot had already sent him a statement of the amount of money he had received, the expenses incurred and the balance that remains in his account.

But we were stunned when, Bishop Kobès, who seems to be determined to pile on the pain, sent us more demands for goods, which not only used up all the 8,000 francs that we were to keep for the novitiate but also put the mission in debt to us for 3 to 4,000 francs. We were obliged to sell some shares immediately to cover the costs. If that situation were to be repeated in the next two years we would be forced to send away half our novices.

Please look into the matter and give Bishop Kobès some advice, but with gentleness, calm and moderation for fear that it might make him too upset. Bishop Kobès is a man of great potential. He has very good judgement, but because of his lack of experience and maturity, he rushes into things and is unable to manage people and finances very well. He always stands on his authority when he is dealing with us. I fear he has too much confidence in his own ideas. He seems to me to take things on with great enthusiasm but with little reflection as to the likely consequences. He really must learn to act calmly, wisely and according to the mind of God. I beg you, my dear bishop, always act with prudence and moderation. God is with us, so everything will work out well in the end.

As you are anxious to open the Mission of Galam with Father Arlabosse in charge, and as Bishop Kobès seems to be of the same mind, I have been working on this plan and everything is now in order. The Government is giving 15,000 francs for this year, so joined together with the 4,000 francs coming from the Propagation, it should cover the costs of establishing the new mission and allow the missionaries to survive until 1851 with no difficulty. The Government is giving the missions 9,000



francs per year, plus 1,000 for the repairs. Father Arlabosse is leaving for Guinea with Father Blanchet and Father Simonet. There will also be three Brothers: Brother Marie, a carpenter, a Brother shoemaker and Brother Jules, who can turn his hand to anything. That is not the little Brother Jules, who left the Congregation for health reasons.

Propaganda Fide has not judged it opportune to set up the Vicariate of Senegambia just yet and the Prefecture of Saint Louis cannot be reunited with Senegambia for the moment. We must be patient because it will all happen in due course. I am not giving you the details now: I think I already talked about them, but in any case, Bishop Kobès will tell you all about it.

Your letters of May and June made me happy, in spite of all your pains and difficulties. I can see that your soul is filled with peace and confidence; that is a sure sign that the Spirit of God is with you.

You told me that you have given up any idea of getting involved with the culture of the local people. Your reasons seem right and proper, but it is difficult for me to offer any advice on the matter. Always follow God's inspirations and he will bless you. It is possible that what is not to be attempted in one particular place, may meet with success elsewhere. In this case, it may serve you better to have a general rule. See and judge for yourself; God will guide you and he will bless you.

Do not worry about the missionaries in Senegambia. Only two or three of them are causing problems for Bishop Kobès. We always have to expect difficulties from a few individuals; we must correct them and support them for some benefit will come of it in the end. Here at home, we are taking great care to accept only those who have a good and flexible

temperament. But people can change a little when they go on the missions and that makes it difficult for us to know in advance how they will eventually turn out.

I think perhaps you are being a bit severe on the question of fasting and abstinence, but your reasoning on this matter has impressed us. Once again, I say that God is with you so you should act as he inspires you. You will learn by experience. If fasting and abstinence can be kept up, then undoubtedly you do well in introducing it. I approve of your ruling as regards the Community. There is no difficulty about hearing the confessions of confreres during the time of prayer. Our Rules only forbid hearing the confessions of lay people at that time, in case we use it as an excuse to give up prayer altogether. You also ask about recreation: we add an extra fifteen minutes to recreation on Sundays in the novitiate, so we can easily allow the same for the missions.

I am very unhappy at not being able to send Father Gravière back to you. He is not well and it will take a long time before his stomach is better. It would be wrong of me to send him back to Africa in his present state of health. Senegambia is losing a good missionary in Father Ronarc'h. At present, he is at Notre Dame du Gard, but I fear there is no hope for him as he is dying of a chest disease. He may still live for another year or two because only one lung is affected, but it is still very serious.

My own health is fairly good apart from rather frequent attacks, which means I have to be extra careful. Father Le Vasseur from Reunion is with me now; he is going to stay at the Paris Seminary where he will be the Superior. That will give me the chance to spend five or six months each year at Notre Dame du Gard.

The bishops for the colonies have been named, so I am extremely busy getting everything ready for them. I will be freer when it is all over and I will be able to get down to sending letters to my dear confreres in Guinea. Please be patient for another two months. I presume the bishops will have left by then and I will be at liberty once more. It is very important for the glory of God to put the colonies on a sound footing, but it will not happen unless I pay serious attention to the matter. It is worth any trouble and making a little sacrifice of my time is nothing new to me.

At the end of last year we all met at Notre Dame du Gard. We had a council meeting to regulate all sorts of things which lasted a full week, with five hours a day of discussions. Then we made our retreat together, during which I gave a daily talk. We finished with the solemn renewal of our consecration to the apostolate. Our Rules contain no text for such a renewal, so I composed one for the occasion. I am sending you a copy which you can also use. Those of us in vows renewed them in private before the Blessed Sacrament. Only Father Le Vavas seur was allowed to renew his solemnly in the presence of us all.

Please give my warmest regards to our confreres. I embrace them in the love of Jesus Christ. I will write as soon as possible to dear Father Lossedat. At the moment I am too busy dealing with the departure which is to take place today, so I have no time to write just now. I had hoped to do it in the last few days but I have had migraine for three days and could do nothing. Today, thankfully, I am a little better, otherwise I do not know how I could have managed to write this letter to you.

Your devoted servant in the love of Jesus and Mary,

*F. Libermann, superior*