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01. Ecclesiastical authority and the Religious Charism

Christian de Mare CSSp

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Repository Citation

de Mare, C. (2011). 01. Ecclesiastical authority and the Religious Charism. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/anthologie-spiritaine-english/98>

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Ecclesiastical authority and the Religious Charism

To M. Le Vavas seur¹

Writing about the respect that must be shown when explaining the 'Work for the Black People' to Bishop Collier², Libermann expresses his thoughts on the relationship that should exist between Episcopal authority and a religious community. In the Church, authority must always respect the diversity of vocations and of works.

Monsieur Le Vavas seur,
Sub-deacon in the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, Paris

Rome, July 12th, 1840

My very dear Brother,

We must thank and bless Our Lord and his Mother from the bottom of our hearts for all the goodness they have shown and all the encouragement they have given us. If our discussions with Bishop Collier work out well and the Lord blesses our plans, then things should progress satisfactorily. We have reason to hope that the Bishop will take steps in Cambrai to get us a small house; if he has not yet promised it, it is because he is still not sure of success.

What I like very much about the Bishop is that he does not approach things purely from his own interest. Of course, he is concerned about the good of his diocese, but, at the same time, he does not want to harm the work that we are

¹ N.D. II, pp. 85-88

² See Index

proposing. He can see how it would help him, but he does not give the impression that he wants the project to fit in with his own ideas and visions at all costs; he is happy to let us follow the will of God, according to the ideas that Our Lord has given us about the work to be undertaken.

This approach is something I have not met anywhere until now, yet I believe it is very wise and in conformity with God's will. Most people want to change and organise matters according to their own ideas, but very often this opposes or even destroys the plans of God. It also goes against common sense: those who have been planning such projects have a much better idea of what is needed than somebody who is looking in from the outside and is therefore more likely to judge superficially. Moreover, those who have devoted themselves completely to a plan which God has prompted them to undertake can lose some of their enthusiasm when they are forced to abandon half their project and settle for something that differs considerably from His original design.

We all have the same problem; we end up by putting too much of ourselves into the venture. Whenever we judge as men, relying completely on human reason, this is how things will go. We feel we have to change and modify things, for there are no two minds which think alike; each individual has his own point of view. But when we try to look at the problems through the eyes of God, we will reach agreement more readily, because we are all placing our trust in the same God and his designs. We will be ready to yield to others and not be so keen to scrutinise every detail of their plans to see if they are making a mistake. We realise that even if they are lacking experience, they will eventually acquire it by God's grace; and if they are men of good will, they will revise their ideas when they discover that they are wrong.

When I went to see Cardinal Fransoni, he said nothing about making changes; I soon learnt that it is the policy of the

Propaganda not to disturb people but to let them follow their own path. The Cardinal was talking about one country that is very much in need of help, but he suddenly corrected himself in mid sentence, saying, "Excuse me, I was forgetting that your project is aimed solely at the Black people". Everybody else, apart from the Propaganda and Bishop Collier, wanted to change things so that they would reflect their own point of view.

There is no great difficulty about starting the novitiate next year. However, it might be good to delay a little so that I can visit some dioceses and look for suitable priests that the good Lord may be calling to this work. In this way, we could form a complete community from the start and not have to send men out to the missions who had not had the experience of living the Rule in its entirety.

It would be better if we could begin immediately, but that is not possible. So we must delay the opening until the end of winter. It is good not to act too hastily in case we start running ahead of the good Lord; our job is to follow him faithfully, step by step, not to get there before he does. In any case, it would be difficult to decide anything in the next two months. After that, we will have a better idea of how matters are evolving. So let us follow the inspirations that the Lord sends us, in the same way as a ship's course is dictated by the direction from which the wind is blowing.

On the subject of money, I have no particular needs at the moment. But I think it might be wise to keep some in reserve in case God wishes me to make a small tour of some French dioceses as I mentioned above. Other needs could arise as well.

I wrote a letter to M. Bureau a long time ago, but since then, nobody has said anything about him. In your next letter, let me know how he is getting on and if he is persevering with his good intentions.

I am happy to hear of the good morale of all our dear confreres. We must pray constantly to our Lord and the Blessed Virgin that they will all grow in holiness and commitment. May the peace and love of our Lord, Jesus Christ grow and increase in your soul and in the souls of all those dear confreres.

Yours in the love of Jesus and Mary,

F. Libermann

P.S.: Please send me news of M. Maigna¹. Is he alive or dead?

¹ M. Maigna was a seminarian at Issy. At first, he was opposed to Libermann, but later became a fervent disciple. Maigna had said: "If you only knew how I much I detest you!": Libermann replied, "If you only knew how much I love you!". (N.D. I, p. 290)