

Duquesne University

Duquesne Scholarship Collection

A Spiritan Anthology

Anthologie Spiritaine

1-1-2011

03. Bishops and Missionary Congregations

Christian de Mare CSSp

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/anthologie-spiritaine-english>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

Repository Citation

de Mare, C. (2011). 03. Bishops and Missionary Congregations. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/anthologie-spiritaine-english/100>

This Chapter VI is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthologie Spiritaine at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in A Spiritan Anthology by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

Bishops and Missionary Congregations

*To Ignace Schwindenhammer*¹

1846 was the year when Libermann put the final touches to his "Memorandum on the Black Missions in general and that of Guinea in particular".² He finally presented it to the Propaganda on August 15, 1846. Throughout his stay in Rome, he had been making constant changes to the text in the light of his meetings with different people. He kept his closest collaborators informed about these changes, especially his right-hand man, Ignace Schwindenhammer.³ He wrote at least three times to him during his stay; the final 8-page letter, which stretched across several days, is reproduced below.

Rome, August 4th, 1846

My very dear Confrere,

In your letter of July 20th, you raise a very important point. Your thinking on the subject is full of wisdom and your fears are well-founded "*ex communitate contingitibus*".⁴ But I am convinced that we should continue along the same lines, without any hesitation. I shall explain why.

- 1) First of all, I feel it is useless to take precautions in this matter. A peaceful atmosphere in the missions depends entirely on the good will of the ecclesiastical Superiors and the moderation and prudence of the administrative and legal decisions taken by the superiors of the Congregations. You can rest assured that however great the observance of the rule and the love of his Congregation

¹ N.D. VIII, pp. 208-215

² Cf. Paul Coulon: "*Libermann, 1802-1852*", Cerf. 1988, pp. 434-455. Cf. also "*Mémoire Spiritaine*", no. 3, p. 19: "*Un mémoire secret de Libermann à la Propagande en 1846*".

³ See Index

⁴ "...in the light of what is happening at present".

by a missionary Bishop, as soon as he is put in charge of a Mission, he will want to assert his authority.

There are so many examples of this. A Vincentian priest, noted for his regularity, piety and many talents, refused to take on the leadership of several missionary dioceses for fear that he could then no longer belong to his Society. He finally accepted on condition that he would continue to be a member of the Vincentians. But soon afterwards, despite his continuing piety and fervour, he withdrew from his Society so that he could fulfil his duties completely independent of his religious family.

It is in the very nature of things that once a man is put in charge of a Mission, he will gradually detach himself from the rule he once observed. God said that a person will eventually have to separate himself from his father and mother so as to devote himself fully to his wife. It is something so natural that contrary examples would be extremely rare. Fr. Colin, the Superior of the Marists who has been with me for the last fortnight, told me several times that he prefers to have outsiders as bishops in his missions because they feel obliged to show more consideration to the Superior of the Congregation. I managed to talk him out of this policy. The Vincentians, the Picpus Fathers and the Marists all have bishops drawn from their own ranks who were trained by their own societies, and they all have very large Missions. The Jesuits have some large Missions which are not headed by their own members. Only the "Missions Etrangères" have very few compared with other societies, and this is because of their particular form of organisation.

- 2) Turning to two subjects in particular, if we can only have one bishop, my intention would be to retain M. Boulanger¹

¹ See index

to help us. If we can have two, I would still keep him – at least that was my thought when the letter was written. Let us return to the question. As regards M. Truffet,¹ even if we kept him at home for ten years, he would never be a perfect community man. What we must build on is his good will and excellent qualities – his great devotion, humility, gentleness and spirit of reconciliation. For M. Truffet to give of his best, he needs a certain independence, either within or outside a community. He will always appreciate devotion and regularity and would understand the need of this for his confreres. He would retain this ideal much better if he were not a superior or member of a community. If he were a Bishop, his style and approach to things would be seen to advantage and would not annoy others. But the contrary would be true if we put him in a community. Being a bishop, he would remain attached to the community and would observe at least some of the rules, which would be sufficient for the others to admire him.

The case for Haiti is a strong one and I have always been attracted to it; but this is not the opinion here in Rome. They want the situation to be regularised before the work is taken up again. I have been told that that the moment of Providence for that country has not yet arrived. So it looks as though we will not be involved in Haiti, even though I would have liked to help with its salvation. May God be praised in all things! Keep all this confidential and give the impression that you know nothing about it.

Regarding M. Boulanger, he would benefit to a certain extent by staying in the house a little longer. But the letter and the spirit of the rule would never be so indelibly imprinted on his soul that he would not forget it completely after two years or so as bishop. But it would be enough if

¹ See index

he were to retain an appreciation of the value of the rule and community life as a means of strengthening the fervour of his missionaries. I believe that this would be sufficient because the bishop must not be the superior of the community and the representative of the Superior General¹: a separate superior is necessary. This is a difficult point, but I cannot go into all the details at present. Suffice it to say that Fr. Colin, who felt the same as you at first, came round to my way of thinking. It is a subject that needs a lot of discussion.

All the problems that can arise with a Bishop are the same with a Prefect Apostolic, and perhaps even more difficult in that case. Because the more one's authority is not very great, the more one will be in the shadow of the Superior of the Congregation. And yet in the eyes of Rome, the Superior of a Congregation will always be in the wrong in case of a disagreement with a Prefect Apostolic, just the same as with a Bishop. You would never believe the extent to which the authority of the Superior of a Congregation is whittled down vis-à-vis the ecclesiastical superiors in the Missions. One would never succeed in unseating a Prefect Apostolic, except for reasons of immorality or heresy.

- 4) (Number "3" is missing in the original text). So far, I have given you negative reasons; here is a positive one. Our Mission of Guinea is very difficult as we have already experienced. If it becomes necessary to begin again (i.e. if the mission fails completely), our present good reputation in Rome would take a long time to restore. We would lose the trust of the Propaganda and opportunities to consolidate our Congregation and our Missions. But with the appointment of one or two bishops, the work would be

¹ It was not long before Libermann changed his mind on this point, giving the bishops the authority of a provincial. Cf. N.D. XI, pp. 21-25.

strengthened and the future assured. Moreover, the good of the Mission has an absolute need of the episcopacy; without it, it will hardly advance. And our Congregation needs it to inspire public confidence. Fr. Colin, whom I consulted, is very emphatic on this point.

I have always felt very strongly the need for the episcopacy and since my arrival here, I am even more convinced. It is a subject that worries me greatly. But if, finally, the authorities give me nothing, I will still feel at peace; it is all in God's hands.

- 5) You will probably be astonished to hear that I am asking not just for Vicars Apostolic but also for resident Bishops, as well as the erection of an Archbishopric for Senegambia. My reason is that if we want to establish peace between the Heads of Mission and the Congregation, if we want to protect the spirit of our rule and our communities, then this is the best way to proceed. You must find this paradoxical as there is no apparent connection between the two. But you are not aware of what is happening: everywhere in the Missions, there are conflicts between the Heads of Missions and the Superiors of Communities regarding the temporal administration. If there are any exceptions to this, they are very few.
- 6) They stem from conflicting interests - those of the Head of Mission and those of the missionary group who are working under him. The missionaries try to curtail the powers of the Bishops or Heads of Mission, while the latter want to centralise everything on themselves. With each one pulling in opposite directions, it finishes with both sides being in the wrong and no end to the struggle is to be found. Rome always supports the Head of Mission in a dispute, even when he is in the wrong. Often the Society is not even consulted because for Rome, the first priority is to establish that the Mission is ruled exclusively by the one who has

been appointed by the Holy See. Any objection raised by the missionaries tends to be pushed aside. If an apostolic constitution had been drawn up to regulate this subject, we would know how to proceed, but no such document exists. In any case, it would not be easy to establish such an agreement as both sides would surely raise many objections.

But some solution must be arrived at. I see war on all sides and I would place the main blame on the Communities, but not entirely. The Communities tend to push their own interests and place much emphasis on obedience. The Superior Generals want to preserve their areas of influence and act according to the powers given them by the rules of their Society. This power inevitably comes into conflict with the authority of the Head of Mission in certain areas.

I have made a close examination of the mind of the Holy See on this subject and I find that it disapproves, and has always disapproved, of Congregations acting in this way. So this is not a procedure that we should adopt. In any case, we are, and always will be, too weak to struggle in this way. The Jesuits have suffered from this, and also the Marists, in circumstances where it seemed that the opposite would happen. I do not like to act contrary to the mind of the Holy See. The spirit of God is not in these on-going struggles.

Therefore, I want to try a different approach which could perhaps circumvent these problems. It will not disturb anything and stands a good chance of success. I believe that once we have three or four residential bishops, the rules that we could draw up with them would stand a better chance of being respected. Do not assume that such agreements would be to the detriment of the Community. By then, those with the best intentions would outweigh

those who were less well disposed. They would meet in a synod from time to time and sort out the disorder caused by bad will and other faults of a particular bishop. The synod would give a certain guarantee to the rights of the missionaries and the observance of their rules. (This would not be the case with Vicars Apostolic: they do not constitute an Episcopal body and so they cannot convene a synod). If a good Metropolitan bishop is chosen, a man of peace and good will, he could do much to conciliate the different parties. Perhaps Rome could give him special powers and he could act as a mediator. He would gain more attention than the superior of a Community, so a bishop who acts badly would not always receive a judgement in his favour. If a Bishop was constantly unreasonable, as has happened several times, and relations became impossible, his annoying behaviour would be counterbalanced by the rest of his colleagues in the province. They would eventually be called on to recommend a successor who would follow the majority opinion (Once the Mission is well organised and there are several ecclesiastical superiors of different ranks, the Holy See will consult them rather than the Mother House when it comes to appointing others to their ranks).

I explained my idea to Fr. Colin and we discussed it at length. He finally decided to follow the same path. He cannot present it yet to the Propaganda because the man who would be appointed Metropolitan is the worst in his missions. In any case, it would not depend on him because he already has six Vicars Apostolic. He decided that he would write to them, suggesting that they make the request to the Holy See.

I told you that I would ask for resident Bishops and an Archbishop. But when I saw that there were major difficulties to overcome at present and this would lead to interminable delays, I decided to postpone the request for

some time and simply ask for a Vicar Apostolic, so as to avoid the difficulties experienced by Fr. Colin. If there had been several appointees, this one would have been the Archbishop. So it is essential that the right choice be made. Let me know, with reasons, your opinion of the two confreres in question. What is needed is somebody serious with a good temperament, a bridge-builder who will be able to exert a certain influence over those who will join him later. Let me know what you think; they may ask my opinion before I leave Rome. I am pretty sure that nothing will be decided before Christmas, or even later.

I am coming to the end of my Mass intentions so please put me down for another thirty. I still have sixteen. I am sure that this letter will arrive before I have finished them, so I will continue to say Masses according to your intentions.

They will tell you at Louvencourt that I will be writing to you shortly, but don't wait for such a letter; my letter to them should have left several days ago, but now it will be posted at the same time as this one.

Tell M. Truffet and Percin¹ that I will write to them as soon as possible. I will try to talk again with the Secretary of the Propaganda on the subject of Haiti in the hope that they will take some positive action. They are very busy at the moment, but I would like to get it finished. If I cannot finish this week, I shall try again next week.

Greetings to yourself and all the dear Confreres in Jesus and Mary,

F. Libermann
Priest of the Holy Heart of Mary

¹ See index

P.S. I hope I will be able to tell you of my departure in my next letter. It will not be until after the plenary assembly of the Cardinals. I am keeping very well.