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### 04. News from France and advice to the missionaries in West Africa

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## News from France and advice to the missionaries in West Africa

*To the community of Dakar and Gorée<sup>1</sup>*

*In Rome, on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1846, Fr. Blanpin, a member of the Congregation, was cured in the church of Trinitá dei Monti near the Piazza di Spagna. It was witnessed by Bishops Luquet and Pompallier. Libermann gives a lengthy account of the event in this letter to the Dakar community. He also gives news of the acquisition for the Congregation of the old monastery at Notre-Dame-du-Gard (20 kilometres from Amiens), the sale of the house at La Neuville and the temporary move to Faubourg Noyon, near Amiens.*

*The letter also prepares the missionaries for their new situation of having a double authority in the Mission: a Vicar Apostolic and the Superior General. At the same time, he defines his role as Superior General in relation to the confreres working in far-off missions.*

La Neuville,  
December 27th, 1846

My dear Confreres,

It is some time since I sent you some news. I took the resolution to write every 6 weeks and I never let it go beyond 2 months. From now on, I will keep to my words. It is a pleasure for me to be in contact with you. I will not be able to write to all of you every 6 months, but I will write to several and I will always reply to your letters. This time, I was prevented from writing to you because of a heavy cold. The doctor condemned me to complete rest, so I lost a full three weeks. Now I am completely cured again.

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<sup>1</sup> N.D. VIII, pp. 388-399

The good Lord has sent a great blessing to the Congregation through the cure of Fr. Blanpin. As you know, he had lost his voice completely; he had been unable to speak for two years and the situation was getting worse. It was said that he would not recover for five or six years and even then, he would never be able to preach again. It was a great affliction for himself and for all those who know him. I brought him to Rome with me, in the hope that the climate of Italy would do him some good, but the situation worsened and the doctors recommended that he take the waters in the Pyrenees.

I sent him there, but by the end of the season, he was worse than ever. He told me that the doctors advised him to return to Rome for the winter so he asked for permission. I hesitated at first, but I felt I could not deny this to a missionary who had lost his voice in the service of the Lord and the poor black people. I also had the feeling that the Blessed Virgin would cure him for us in Rome, and this feeling was shared by others. Shortly after his arrival, he was in the company of Bishop Luquet and also of Bishop Pompallier from Oceania and another priest who was in contact with Mother Macrine, a polish sister. She had suffered a prolonged martyrdom for the faith during seven years, spending much time in prison. She managed to escape from her Russian guards and eventually arrived in Rome, where she became well known for her sanctity. The bishops were very touched by the plight of Fr. Blanpin and they advised him to seek out Mother Macrine in the hope of being cured. So he went to her and she told him to celebrate seven Masses in honour of the Sorrowing Virgin Mary and another five in honour of the five holy wounds of Our Lord. She also promised to pray for him.

He celebrated these Masses, but there was no improvement. So he returned to Mother Macrine in rather a bad mood but still full of confidence in the Blessed Virgin. It was the morning of October 8<sup>th</sup>. The sister told him to kneel before a statue of

Mary that had recently been blessed by the Pope when he visited this holy religious. She told him to invoke, the names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in as loud a voice as possible; he succeeded in doing this, but with a very faint voice. Mother Macrine prayed again for some time and told another sister who was there that he would be cured and that his voice would be stronger than it was before the sickness hit him. She told him to repeat these holy names every hour and to add an Our Father and a Hail Mary. Fr. Blanpin continued doing this until four in the afternoon. He then returned to Mother Macrine and told her that his voice had improved but it was still very weak. So she made him kneel once more in front of the same statue of Our Lady and she said to him: "*In the name of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, pronounce in a loud voice the name of Jesus*". He did as he was told and found that he was completely cured of his sickness. He recited the *Te Deum* at the top of his voice in front of all the Community. That evening, when he returned to the hotel, he was speaking quite normally.

There was a young artist there whom I had often exhorted to return to God during my stay in Rome, but to no avail. But when he saw that Fr. Blanpin was cured, he was so impressed that he converted, went to confession and communion and left Rome shortly afterwards, determined to mend his ways. A few days later, Fr. Blanpin was presented to the Pope. He gave him permission to celebrate a thanksgiving Mass on the altar that would be erected in the room in front of the statue where he was cured. The Pope also gave him his blessing, saying; "*I am blessing this voice that the Blessed Virgin has restored to you so that it may become apostolic like the voice of Saint John the Baptist, not to preach in the desert but for the salvation of a great number of people*". Fr. Blanpin has not yet returned from Rome, but he should be with us soon. We have all made a thanksgiving novena for the blessing that the Lord has sent us.

Everything is going well here and God continues to bless us. The house at La Neuville is no longer big enough for our needs, so we have bought the house of the Orphans at Faubourg Noyon and have built on another twelve bedrooms as the old building was scarcely habitable. Having bought this house, Providence sent another blessing that will be very beneficial. The Trappists were forced to abandon the Abbey of Gard, because the new railway had cut their property in two and the line ran very close to the monastery buildings. A lay man bought the whole compound and then sold off different sections of the land. The proprietor sold the buildings and the surrounding property.

The buildings consist of a large house 60 metres long, a beautiful church consecrated to St. Peter (40 metres approx.), stables and several other buildings – a farmyard, a brewery, a bakery, washrooms etc. The total area is about 10 acres, including the courtyards and the farmyards. We paid 36,000 francs for the whole property. They had been searching for a buyer for 18 months, which is why we were able to get such a good price. In fact, we wanted to withdraw temporarily from the deal, but because of the imprudence of the person who was acting on our behalf, we found ourselves legally bound to accept the contract. On that very day, three other potential buyers turned up, so six hours later, we would have lost the property all together. It includes everything necessary for a community – enough land to provide vegetables for the two communities, sufficient cider to last the whole year, plenty of fruit and sufficient grass to support five cows for the whole of summer and part of the winter.

Our community of 30 students has already moved in. The house is isolated and healthy. The young men are very happy with it and the rule is being observed perfectly. I go over there once a week. The house where I am will be the novitiate. We already have some novices and are expecting another in a few

days' time. We have sold the house at La Neuville to the Ladies of the Sacred Heart, who will retain the chapel. It was painful for me to sell this house, but the advantages of the house of Gard were very many and we needed the cash to buy it. We sold La Neuville for 20,000 francs more than we paid for Notre Dame du Gard. By next year, we would have been obliged to spend money on extending La Neuville because of the number of students; we were already greatly pressed for room and, as a consequence, it was difficult to observe the rule and in winter, 30 plus people would have found it impossible to take recreation. With the 20,000 francs we were able to pay off the total cost of the house in Faubourg Noyon. If we had kept La Neuville, we would have had to find another 20,000 francs to adapt the house for community living, and that would have been impossible.

I am giving you all these details because I am sure that leaving La Neuville must make you as sad as it makes me. But I am convinced that this is what God wants. We will stay at La Neuville until May and then move to Faubourg Noyon. The building is called the 'House of the Holy Heart of Mary'.

I was hoping to be able to give you the result of my recent visit to Rome, but I have not yet received a reply to my Memorandum. I hope it will not take much longer. I will let you know when I hear something.

That is enough about us - let us now talk about you.

I would give anything to be able to spend a month or so working and suffering with you, to have a better understanding of your problems and difficulties and to be able to give you more informed advice and encouragement. I assure you that my mind and heart are with you very often. Every time I celebrate Mass, I pray fervently for you all. If only I were a better person, you would be showered with graces by now!

But if I do not obtain all that I ask on your behalf, as a group and as individuals, it is not through lack of begging the Lord. So pray that I may become a better person so that I can give more help to you and your work.

I beg you, my dear confreres, to love me as I love you – tenderly and in Our Lord. I am not asking that for the pleasure of being loved; God knows that nothing is further from my mind. But if we love each other in that way, if we are united perfectly in charity, it will be a great help towards your sanctification. It will also help you to be faithful to our rule, to advance in apostolic virtues and the perfection of our community life. It is a great need and a consolation for my self, and for those who will replace me when I have gone, to be able to support and encourage you in your labours and to help you with advice about keeping the rules. So far, I have been unable to do this as much as I would have wished because of all my work and preoccupations and you have probably suffered from my neglect.

You must forgive me; I have suffered as a result infinitely more than you have. I know I can say this without distorting the truth. If it is a need, a duty and a consolation for me to be your supporter and consoler on this earth, it is also the case for yourselves. It is very difficult for you to protect your interior life and find possibilities for recollection. You have so much to do in your ministry, you are surrounded by distractions and your worries are very numerous. On all sides, you are surrounded by difficulties: problems and sufferings coming from the climate and your material needs, from things that are upsetting, from temptations, from your personal relationships. This is particularly the case in these early stages, when order is not yet established, the works not clearly defined, and your experience still limited.

You must be assailed by so many difficulties—misunderstandings and worries, stemming from self-love and

other imperfections; disappointments, discouragement and irritations. If you add to this the many external difficulties, then you are faced with a host of obstacles to your growth in the priestly and apostolic virtues. Perseverance in your good resolutions must be very difficult. So you have a great need for someone who loves you tenderly, who desires your sanctification and who can speak with the authority of Jesus Christ to guide and advise you along this road that a divine and loving Providence has mapped out for you.

You are surrounded by so much work and worries, while we here are living in an atmosphere of silence and calm. But perhaps that puts us in a better position to examine what is necessary for the sanctification of each one of you and the supportive role of your communities. So do not hesitate to ask for help and advice with confidence and love and with an open heart.

Let all of you, together and as individuals, be ready to receive the advice and words of consolation that we send you. My dear confreres, you must guard against a thought which is terribly deceptive and which can deprive you of all joy and support on this earth. The idea is this: *"The people at La Neuville have no idea what life is like out here, so how can they give us any useful advice?"* Rest assured, my dear confreres, that if such thoughts enter your minds, they are coming directly from a poisonous pride, from an inflated confidence in your own ideas, so I beg you never to entertain such ideas. They will lead directly to the destruction of the Congregation and do great damage to the trust which must always exist between superiors and other members of the Community, as well as the good relations between Mother House and missionaries.

We do not have the necessary experience of the interior life of the communities to lay down rules for them or to direct individual confreres; it is at the level of the particular countries



and stations that such things should be sorted out. So there will be as many rules as there are communities and such rules will vary according the judgement of the superiors and senior members who will succeed each other in such communities. If we are performing a human work, we can use human reasoning; but if it is a work of God, he will give us the grace of state that we need to direct the work and the individual confreres involved. Always put your trust in the Lord and guard the precious gifts of humility and perfect obedience in your hearts. Have the same gentle and trusting love for us that we have for you and you will find that these destructive thoughts will never penetrate your minds.

You are probably very surprised that I dwell so long on this point; you cannot see the necessity because your hearts are free from the sort of feelings that I have been describing. I beg you not to think that I have such suspicions in my mind; I am simply trying to forestall these temptations that could easily arise in times of suffering and to warn you that these thoughts are extremely destructive. The devil could easily use such weapons to sow the seeds of disunity and discord amongst us. I put my trust in God and in our good mother, Mary.

The enemy will never succeed in destroying the perfect union that exists between the missionaries and ourselves. It would be the worst wound that he could possibly inflict on my heart. God would not allow such a terrible thing to happen to us. I will do all that I possibly can to alleviate your sufferings and labours that I would dearly like to share with you. If I fail to bring you all the encouragement you need, I beg you not to ascribe it to any lack of good will on my part. My heart fills with emotion every time I think of you and I can say in all humility that our good Master has given me a sincere love for all of you, and for each one in particular.

If you find that some of my advice is disappointing and does not measure up to your needs, do not judge me harshly.

Sometimes, despite my desire to serve you and help you in every way, prudence dictates that I say things that you will not fully understand and that I am not in a position to explain in greater detail. I often have to weigh my words, to remain silent or speak with great reserve on some subjects. But I suffer just as much as you do from these unavoidable restrictions on my openness, so please do not add to my suffering by misjudging my motivation.

If I have to give a decision that is contrary to your own ideas and beliefs, do not condemn me. First of all, you could be mistaken. And do not forget that I have to look at things in their totality, so I may see dangers in things that you find completely innocuous. But my greatest worry is that by condemning my judgement and getting upset about it, you are condemning your own dear friend. I hope that the Lord, in his mercy, will not allow such faults to prevail.

Forgive me for giving you so many recommendations, but for some reason I feel the need to say these things to you to warn you against an evil that could ruin not only the Congregation but also your own mission and the sanctification of your souls. I can sum up my thoughts like this: let there be peace and the unity of perfect charity between us.

Observe the rule as well as you can. You know that neither you nor I have the authority to abolish a rule on our own. Neither can an individual exempt himself from it. The future of our rules in the Missions depends on you. If you keep them now, those who join you later on will also keep them. If you do not keep them, the responsibility for the future will rest on you. Fulfil all the rules, even the least, but above all the rules concerning prayer and monthly and annual retreats. It is not easy to spend a considerable time in prayer when you are preoccupied with so many thoughts during the day. These same thoughts can return during prayer time so that you feel that you could use your time better than this. This is a false

conclusion. The time that we spend struggling with distractions is very pleasing to God and far more useful to the soul than we realise. You will sometimes feel like abandoning the retreats for various reasons. If you have not already had such temptations, they will come sooner or later. The more you are faithful to the rule, the more you will enjoy peace and be pleasing to God. But once you start neglecting it, this peace will be replaced by trouble and agitation. Keep the silence as far as circumstances allow; it will help your recollection and prevent you from wasting time.

Have recourse to God in all your sufferings and disappointments. Humble yourselves before God and submit to his divine will. Remember that patience and a humble trust in God make the missionary invincible, but you need time, courage and a limitless trust in Our Lord. If we lack patience and trust, discouragement comes knocking on the door. As soon as difficulties arrive, we feel we have failed and our courage drains away.

I pray that God will help you to observe all these things in peace and love and that his grace will fill your souls.

I embrace all of you in the love of God and I remain totally at your service.

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