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05. Libermann and Le Vavas seur, Co-founders of the Congregation

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Libermann and Le Vavas seur, Co-founders of the Congregation

*To M. Le Vavas seur*¹

Frederic Le Vavas seur, the co-founder of the Congregation and a close friend of Libermann, had undergone a period of deep depression and discouragement in 1845 and it continued for a long time before finally leaving him. Libermann began to write this letter to him on April 27th 1847 and finished it on May 3rd. It shows the deep love and respect that existed between the two men and now that the storm had passed, he wanted to bring Frederic back from La Reunion to work alongside him in Paris. We also learn from this letter that the mission to Australia had failed and that the confreres were being withdrawn. Libermann goes on to speak of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, with whom his own Congregation had been having talks with a view to a possible merger. Since the election of M. Leguay² as Superior General on April 29th 1845, the possible success of this plan was receding, but Libermann continues to follow the matter closely. The whole of this important letter is reproduced below.

Amiens, April 27th, 1847

My very dear Confrere,

I cannot imagine why I did not write to you for such a long time. You must be feeling rather depressed and in need of some encouraging words. For my part, I do not look on what has happened to you as something to grieve over. On the contrary, my heart filled with joy as soon as I heard of the wonderful change that God in his kindness had brought about in your soul.

¹ N.D. IX, pp. 128-135. Cf. N.D. VIII, pp. 28-36 for a letter of Libermann which throws more light on the crisis.

² See Index.

I have often thought that my letter before last, which I wrote after the change, may have caused you some suffering. But on further reflection, I think it was correct, because I said that the terrible storm that had hit you was a strong temptation, so I never felt any resentment against you. In the circumstances, it was a heavy weight for me to bear, but the Lord did not allow me to sink under it.

I feel that this regrettable period has done us both good. We needed this sort of thing and eventually, it will bring glory to God. It has certainly been beneficial for yourself. Even if the only result of the storm had been to give you a distrust of yourself, an awareness of your weakness and some knowledge of your faults, it would still have been a blessing. But I am sure that our good Mother will not stop there. No doubt, she has already given you abundant consolation. You will have more strength to walk along the path that God has prepared for you. By his grace, you will acquire gentleness, constancy in his service, true humility, confidence and abandonment to Jesus and Mary and a patient and sincere love for others. You may also receive many other graces that God has destined for you from all eternity.

The trial was also necessary for me. The mission of Guinea had been going much better than before and we were making good progress in France. But there was a danger that this sudden success would be harmful for me. I was in need of a counterweight to keep my balance, so God sent me one. I must say, in all truthfulness, that the affliction was all the more painful for me because the source came from you. You were the confrere who had always brought me great joy and consolation when I thought about you; I had a stronger attachment to you than to all the others. You were someone with whom I loved to talk and share my worries.

I would have liked to have had you always by my side, to discuss our plans, our troubles and our joys. My hope was that

we would never undertake anything without our mutual understanding and agreement, that we would be one heart and one soul in the love of our Lord and his Blessed Mother. It was at this point that God stepped in: he allowed us to be torn apart like a reed. But he has always remained with us and the time of trial has now come to an end. Our good Mother has prayed on our behalf so God will not abandon us. Henceforth, we shall be united by his grace and love and so we will build our work according to his plans. It will not be our work but his - and that of his Blessed Mother.

We shall be completely united and try to be more faithful to the voice of our Master and build a solid foundation for his work. It is God who has brought us together to carry out his plans and who can separate what God has united? Until now, we were not ready for God to unite us perfectly; our minds were not sufficiently prepared to receive the spirit of God who would enlighten and unite us in perfect harmony.

I have come to realise that in order to be able to speak together of the many things involved in firmly establishing this work of God, we should be in closer contact with each other. We need an atmosphere of peace and recollection, humility, gentleness and the love of Jesus. We have to decide on basic principles, draw practical conclusions from them and apply them to our religious family as it is at present. This is the way we will mould its spirit, set up its administration and ensure its future existence. There is so much to do, and so much that needs to be discussed.

The time has not yet come to decide on a stable and permanent shape for this undertaking, but we have to work towards that for the future. We can only do this if we are together and I have always felt that this is what God wants us to do. Together, we should be guided by His spirit alone in all prudence and wisdom. So please examine this proposition in

his presence. Ask yourself if you would now be able to work for this with me and that we could do these things together. If you agree, then I hope that God in his goodness will bring you to us here in France. We would live in the same place, at least for a short time, or rather for as much time as it takes to complete our task. Like that, with the help of God and the protection of our loving Mother, we will strive to be faithful to his inspirations and prepare this work as He wishes.

Let me know as soon as possible what you think. I have kept one of our best priests here, Fr. Boulanger, who could replace you (*in Reunion*) for as much time as would be necessary. He does not have your experience of the colonies so he would not be able to direct things as well as you are doing. But he is a mature and experienced person, about 40 years old, serious but pleasant, likeable and polite. He is a good preacher and a shrewd assessor of men, experienced in the ministry and an able administrator.

Please don't reply, "*I am ready to do all that you command me to do!*" I want to know *exactly* how you feel about this suggestion; I am not looking for blind obedience in this case. We need a perfect, full, complete union of minds and hearts so that God may use the two of us as if we were one person. There must be no more premature judgements, no more fixed positions; otherwise, I would have to conclude that God's moment has not yet arrived. We would have to wait a little longer, but I am sure that his moment will come, if it has not already arrived.

If we are convinced that this moment has in fact arrived and that you see no objection to Fr. Boulanger replacing you, let me know as soon as possible. He would take the next available ship so that you could be here by the summer of 1848. It would not be good to arrive at the beginning of winter or any other cold period.

It would be good if you could send me a thousand francs, in case the Government is not willing to pay for the passage of Fr. Boulanger. If they do pay, then he could take the money back with him for the Mission of Reunion.

May 3rd

A few days ago, I wrote to the Minister for a passage. If they are cooperative and agree to the appointments of Frs. Jérôme Schwindenhammer, Thévaux and Thiersé, perhaps I will send you Fr. Boulanger immediately so that you will have time to help him settle in before you return here.

We have been thinking of replacing the Mission of Australia by another in Southern Africa ("*La Cafrérie*"). We need a healthy mission where we can send our missionaries who cannot manage the climate of Guinea – otherwise, what could we do with them? There will surely be some like this. I have learnt from Mgr. Bessieux, who has been with us for the last fortnight, that the future of the Mission in Guinea is looking brighter. He indicated some places where mission centres must be set up; but if we start immediately in Southern Africa, our forces would be stretched to the limit. Moreover, I have great reservations about taking on a Mission under the jurisdiction of a bishop who is not a member of our Society; our confreres in Australia suffered greatly in identical circumstances, so I think we should proceed with caution. We would need very precise information and a detailed understanding so as not to repeat what happened there.

Bishop Truffet¹ has left with four missionary priests and two others who will set up a school and catechism classes. Before his departure, I clarified the relations between himself and the missionaries. We drew up and both signed a written agreement on several points. I will send you a copy, and also

¹ See Index.

the Memorandum (with explanations) that I presented to Rome last year. I will give them both to Fr. Blanpin for you, with any more news that arrives in the meantime.

I have recently sent a packet of letters for our missionaries via the Minister. I received your two notes. I would love to have bought you the things that you asked for, but this year has been very bad financially. Everything is so expensive and I am not sure how we will survive. Since last October, we have spent 30,000 francs simply on food, the support of the missionaries, a few clothes, a bit of furniture and necessary repairs to the house. Added to that, our income has gone down by 3,000 francs as a result of buying property and building.

It is some time since I talked to you about the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Things seem to be going a little better in their house, but the future remains uncertain. That Society would not survive if it was no longer responsible for the Colonies. Things are problematical and I have heard doubts being expressed to the Director of the Colonies. Elsewhere, I heard that the Vincentians will be asked to take on this burden of the Colonies. I am not sure whether I should rejoice or lament at hearing such news. On the one hand, it would mean that each Colony would have a Congregation which would work specifically for the black people; moreover, their seminary for the secular clergy would inspire more confidence amongst the good local priests. On the other hand, the Vincentians are more powerful than the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and in conjunction with the Government and with their support, the Holy See would no longer have any control over the clergy. If residential bishops are appointed, this problem would disappear and perhaps this would also be the case if Rome decides on Vicars Apostolic.

The Director of the Colonies has told me that the French ambassador in Rome is actively negotiating an understanding regarding the colonial clergy. The reply I will get from the Minister to my request for the appointment of three of our missionaries to Reunion may indicate the way things are heading. If the reply is negative, it will prove that the affair with the Vincentians is at an advanced stage. If it is hesitant, it would indicate that there is still some doubt. If it is affirmative, it could mean either that the discussions with the Vincentians have fallen through or that they intend to leave us in Reunion and that we would come to some sort of arrangement with the Vincentians. I imagine that with so many other missionary commitments, the Vincentians would not have sufficient personnel to man all the colonies. The Propaganda will want to have a strong authority in the French colonies and it would never allow the Superior General of the Vincentians or any other group to have control over the secular clergy. Rome is a little wary of the French Vincentians; their Superiors are believed to be too Gallican and excessively close to the French government.

I must finish now, my dear confrere. I hope that henceforth, peace will reign in your heart. Abandon yourself to Jesus and Mary, whatever might happen. I will write to our dear confreres via Fr. Blanpin who I think will soon be setting out. I embrace them with all my heart. It would put my mind to rest to have more news about Mauritius.

F. Libermann
Priest of the Holy Heart of Mary