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### 06. The integration of the Holy Heart of Mary with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit

Christian de Mare CSSp

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# The integration of the Holy Heart of Mary with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit

*To the communities of Mauritius and Bourbon*<sup>1</sup>

*Libermann addresses this letter to the communities of Mauritius and Bourbon (Reunion) and gives details of the "fusion" to put their minds at rest.<sup>2</sup> It is dated December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1848. Another copy, slightly different, was sent at the same time to the communities of Dakar and Gabon. Libermann had been elected Superior General of the combined congregations of the Holy Spirit, while his predecessor, Fr. Monnet, was appointed Vicar Apostolic of Madagascar on October 3<sup>rd</sup>. Meanwhile, on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1848, Fr. Bessieux had been appointed Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas with Fr. Kobès as his Coadjutor (September 22<sup>nd</sup> of the same year).*

December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1848

My dear confreres,

I can now finally give you positive and joyful news concerning recent events.

## 1) News of the Congregation<sup>3</sup>

### a) The union of our Congregation with that of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> N.D. X, pp. 338-345

<sup>2</sup> Amongst the many writing on the "fusion" are the following:

- Michel Legrain : *"Une union de congrégation au XIXe siècle"*, an article in the book by Paul Coulon, entitled *« Libermann, 1802-1852 »*, pp. 695-727.
- Michel Legrain : *« Le Saint Esprit et le Saint Cœur de Marie : préliminaires à une union de congrégation »*. It is in the revue *« Mémoire Spiritaine »*, no. 7, p. 7. The sequels are in no. 8, p. 7 and no.12, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> These headings are not in the original letter; they have been introduced here for the sake of clarity.

I have always had the feeling that the union of our two societies was in the plan of God. They have the same work and move in the same direction. It would be strange if divine Providence had brought two societies into existence for the same work, which could easily have been done by one. The idea had been put to me persuasively in Rome in 1840 by some excellent men, but they were unaware of the reasons behind our decision at that time. It was said, "*You are erecting one altar facing another; the Society of the Holy Spirit is already doing this work, so we have no need of you*". So even though this was not really true at that time, Fr. Le Vavas seur and myself made several approaches to Fr. Fourdinier<sup>1</sup>, the superior of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. We agreed to enter his Society on condition that we could live in community and that we would not work in parishes but devote ourselves to the black people. But the moment of God had evidently not yet arrived. We were still too weak and Fr. Fourdinier did not agree to us living the regular life. So our efforts came to nothing.

When Fr. Fourdinier died, I made some new, indirect approaches, but God's moment had still not arrived. The obstacles were insurmountable. But now, finally, the work of God is ripe and everything is in place for the project to succeed.

If we had remained apart, the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary was in danger of complete failure, or at least the work would have dragged along for many years with no assurance of ultimate success. Now that the union has been completed, the scope of our works has been greatly extended and we have all that is necessary to accomplish our plans. The advantages will be felt immediately in Guinea; we will no

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<sup>1</sup> Fr. Amable-Jacques-Célestin Fourdinier (1788-1845) from the diocese of Arras, the 7<sup>th</sup> superior general of the Society of the Holy Spirit (1832-1845).

longer have to compete with a society which is approved both by Rome and the Government. As a result of this union, we will now have, to a certain extent, sufficient resources to run our novitiate and provide what is necessary for our missionaries when they are sick. With this in mind, and knowing that after the union we can still retain the same spirit that we have always had and our devotion to the Holy Heart of Mary, I was convinced that both Congregations would profit from coming together. This seemed to be the will of God and I believed it would meet with the approval of all the members.

Everything necessary has now been completed. The Propaganda was very much in favour of this union and all our requests to them have been granted. I went personally to Rome in October to expedite this business. Although it was still their holiday time, the officials completed the formalities with great speed. The Secretary of the Propaganda told me that the Cardinals, at their general congregation, were very satisfied with this fusion and broke into spontaneous applause at the end of the session.

However, things could easily have come unstuck! Having worked out all the details of the agreement with the members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, Fr. Loevenbruck<sup>1</sup> was chosen to take the documents to Rome and present them to the Holy See. He is an excellent and trustworthy man, but having arrived in Rome, for some extraordinary reason he did not dare to speak of the conditions that we were submitting, so Propaganda approved the fusion with no conditions attached. That is why I quickly went off to Rome myself and, in fact, none of my propositions met with the slightest difficulty once I was there.

So the conclusions were as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> See index

The Society will be consecrated to the Holy Spirit *under the invocation*<sup>1</sup> of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. We used this phrase on the advice of the Propaganda, so as not to jeopardise the approval of the French government which the Congregation of the Holy Spirit already enjoys. Propaganda assured me that the words "consecration" and "invocation" have the same meaning in the title of the Society: saying that the Society is consecrated to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary is the same as saying "the Society of the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Heart of Mary". Therefore, I had no reservations about agreeing to this formulation so as to avoid any possible problem of recognition by the civil authorities. I had also previously consulted the Bishop of Amiens, the Provincial of the Jesuits, the Superior of Saint-Sulpice and Fr. Desgenettes, and they were in unanimous agreement on this point.

### **b) The Constitutions**

The Constitutions of the Holy Spirit are already approved by the Holy See and they will be adopted by us with a few minor modifications. I will send them to you later, along with the rules of which I will speak below. Meanwhile, just carry on as we always have done, because there will be no changes of any importance to the way we live as missionaries.

I asked for two changes to their Constitutions:

- As regards poverty: we will continue to practise it as we have done until now.
- Regarding the Second Order: Fr. Leguay had admitted a Second Order into the Society of the Holy Spirit which,

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<sup>1</sup> The original draft, in Libermann's hand, was first written with the word "consecration"; but the same word is then corrected three times.

in my opinion, would simply complicate matters. Also, the Sacred Congregation in Rome had only agreed to this step half-heartedly because they also feared it would create problems. So the second order is now suspended and will soon be abolished by decree. There should be no problem because hardly anybody has joined the Second Order.

### **c) The Rules**

I have been given full power to draw up rules for the application of the Constitutions as regards organisation, administration and interior discipline for the spiritual progress of the Society. The Cardinal was happy with this proposition. Once we have practised these rules for a few years, we have only to submit them to the Propaganda and they will be approved. The bulk of the work on them is already done; I simply have to add the finishing touches.

As you know, for a long time now I have been preparing to correct the provisional rules of the Holy Heart of Mary, as authorised by that same rule, so this is nothing new. As we now stand in the Congregation, I have been given wide powers to adapt these rules. The Society of the Holy Spirit has never had any organisation or regulations for communities on the missions; this means that its former members will not be put out by these rules because nothing contrary ever existed. So you can see, my dear confreres, that you will lose nothing of those things which maintained the fervour, regularity and spirit of our Congregation.

### **d) The situation in Paris**

Fr. Monnet, the superior of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, has been appointed Vicar Apostolic of Madagascar and will

probably set out for there during the month of February. For the moment, he is staying with his family. I remain the superior of the Congregation.

I have now moved to Paris with Frs. Lannurien, Briot and François. Each year, I will keep one member with me until the house is running smoothly. Frs. Warnet, Gaultier and Hardy of the Community of the Holy Spirit have stayed with us; all of these men are extremely well disposed towards us. It would be good if you could write us a letter of encouragement to the confreres.

Our theology students have come with us to Paris, so as to strengthen the spirit of the house, which already has some excellent men. The Novitiate and Philosophy students remain at Gard, with Frs. Schwindenhammer, Boulanger, Le Vasseur and Clair.<sup>1</sup>

This whole episode, which is so important for us, has now been completed. I am sure that God will bless us because this is what he wants us to do. But I would very much like to have your opinions. I wrote to you several times but I was unable to wait any longer for your replies; I had to act in the interests of the Congregation, the works that God had confided to it and all of you who make up the membership. I went ahead, knowing that you would approve because of your confidence in me.

## 2) Regarding Guinea

Fr. Bessieux has been appointed Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas, with Fr. Kobès as his Auxiliary. This decision was published while I was in Rome. I would have liked Fr. Bessieux to come back here so that we could discuss the new situation with him, but that was not possible. Bishop Kobès

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<sup>1</sup> See Index

has just been consecrated at Strasbourg, and he will leave shortly to co-consecrate Mgr. Bessieux. The latter will retain the title of Callipolis while Mgr Kobès will be bishop of Modon or Méthone. Mgr Kobès is a man of considerable renown and sound judgement. Without doubt, he is the most outstanding member of the Congregation and in proposing him for bishop of Guinea, I was making a big sacrifice; it would have been most useful to have him in the Mother House. I am hoping that he will set sail soon, accompanied by a few priests. So finally, this poor Mission, dear to our hearts, will be strengthened and will have every reason to rejoice. I pray that it will never have to suffer again as it has up until now.

In this house in Paris we have over 50 theological students, of whom 20 belong to our Congregation and have transferred from Gard. Amongst the others, it seems that a certain number will also be asking to enter. The Novitiate and Philosophy have remained at Gard, with 11 and 12 students respectively. The Congregation itself now has 43 members: 35 from the former Society of the Holy Heart of Mary and the rest from the former Society of the Holy Spirit.

Devotedly yours in the love of the Hearts of Jesus and Mary,

*F. Libermann, priest, superior*

*(The following are the concluding lines of the version of this letter which was addressed to Dakar and Bourbon.)*

Your poor mission has been left a long time without a leader; I am hoping that now everything will work well, in accordance with the merciful plans that God has for the poor people of Guinea. The appointment was made while I was in Rome (I left on November 1<sup>st</sup>). Bishop Kobès is now consecrated and he will leave as soon as possible.



From every point of view, Bishop Kobès is one of the most remarkable members of our Congregation. It would have been difficult to make a better choice. Those of you who already know him will be aware of his many qualities and his spiritual progress has undoubtedly added considerably to these qualities and to his strength of mind. In suggesting him for this responsible post, the Mother House has made a big sacrifice in favour of Guinea, but this Mission is so dear to our hearts that we would have done anything for its future.

We have more than 50 theologians in this house, including 21 who belong to the Congregation and were formerly at Gard. A number of others will be asking to enter. At Gard, there are 11 in the Novitiate and 13 in Philosophy. There are about 15 Brothers at Gard and 3 in this house. In all, the Congregation numbers 43 members – 34 from the Holy Heart of Mary and the others from the Holy Spirit.

I have no time to give you more details at present; Mme Bertie has just informed me of her imminent departure.

May the peace of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, be with you all! Be united with each other by the same love that unites me to you.

*F. Libermann, superior*