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Different worries about the Mission and the Congregation in France

To Bishop Bessieux¹

This long letter, which we reproduce in its entirety, took many days to complete - from January 21st to February 2nd, 1850. He deals with many points which are causing him anxiety:

- *Bishops Bessieux and Kobès had written a letter to Libermann, threatening, in rather intemperate language, to invite other Congregations to work in their missions if Libermann could not supply sufficient personnel. They feared that he was giving precedence to the Colonies over the needs of the Two-Guineas. Libermann's initial response² was brief, because he was recovering from a serious sickness; here, he treats the problem at greater length.*
- *Complicated relations with the Archbishop of Paris since the "fusion".*
- *The Castle of Maulévrier, offered to the Congregation.*
- *Libermann's involvement in the erection of bishoprics in the French colonies.*
- *An invitation to join in a government plan for supplying chaplains for French ships.*
- *Missionaries for Senegal, Bourbon and Mauritius.*
- *Possible missions in Whida (present-day Benin)), Asinie and Grand-Bassam (Ivory Coast).*

This important letter shows how Libermann approached the problems facing the Mission and the Congregation.

¹ N.D. XII, pp. 14-19

² N.D. XI, pp. 128-132, (June 13th, 1849): In this Anthology: Chapter V, Text 7.

January 21st, 1850

Dear Bishop Bessieux,

I presume Bishop Kobès forwarded my letter to you both, written from Lande-de-Langé.¹ Please do not get too upset by the contents; the storm has now past and we are once more on good terms. For the love of God, let us strive to maintain good relations amongst our confreres—in each of the Missions, between the different Missions and between the Missions and those in Europe. It is our duty—you, the elect of God, and myself – to work hard always for that unity.

I am no longer worried about inviting another congregation to work with us in Guinea. I know that henceforth, you will work in close collaboration with us and that you will always act in a spirit of gentleness and trust. I will speak more on this subject a little later. My only fear is that there might be a misunderstanding which would arise between the missionaries and the Mother House. I have only noticed a few little sparks coming from Senegambia; this does not necessarily means that there is a disagreement, but it does worry me at times. It is up to you, who have received an abundance of divine grace through your consecration, to pass on to the missionaries confided to your care a spirit of gentleness, love and unity with the rest of the Congregation. I have not detected the same spirit in the missionaries of Senegambia that is to be found in Gabon, Bourbon and Mauritius. I am telling you this in confidence. Be vigilant, because it is a spirit that could be harmful if it is allowed to spread. What I have noticed is a tendency to grumble and to jump to conclusions about us. I have not received news about the missionaries for quite a long time; Bishop Kobès is the only one who writes and his letters

¹ This was a country house of the Le Vasseur family, where Libermann had gone for convalescence after his prolonged illness.

are always very reassuring. I feel that if I had been able to reply to all the letters, they might have written more frequently; but if this spirit of unity and mutual love really existed, they would still have written to me, realising that it was impossible for me to do otherwise.

Throughout 1848, I was completely taken up with revising our Rules so that our union with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit could take place. It was very urgent and I only completed the work just before I had to leave for Rome. After that, I still could not attend to everything because I had to make the necessary corrections, often working until after 11 at night. And then in 1849, the uniting of the two societies was very time-absorbing during the first few months. I subsequently fell seriously ill for 5 months, during which time I was unable to do anything and writing was out of the question. When I finally recovered around mid-October, I was able to get back to work, but there was such a back-log awaiting my attention that I had to concentrate on the most important things. Then five or six more pressing matters arose (more on these later) to which I had to devote a considerable amount of time, finishing only just before Christmas. I have never worked so hard in all my life as I did during those last three months, but God in his goodness gave me sufficient health to see me through. Then I was hit by some other minor ailments for the next ten days which made it impossible for me to write to all our dear missionaries via the eight new ones who have just set sail. So now that I am able, I am trying to catch up on all this correspondence.

Frs. Boulanger, Morel, Tangy, Thiérard, de Régnier, Duret, Bourget and Ramboz have just left for Senegambia, along with Brothers Michel, Julien, Antoine and Charles.¹ There are also four Sisters of the Community of Castres who are heading to

¹ Notes on all these men are to be found in the Index.

Our Lady of the Gambia. At Easter, I will be able to send you more missionaries, slightly fewer than the present group. Please let me know how many you would like to have.

After that long introduction, let us get down to business:

1) The question of having another Congregation in our missions

I have nothing against such a step in principle, but I think it would be better to wait a little; it is a very important matter and I feel it would be premature to make such a decision at this stage.

- a) Although we have now been on the coast for six years, the Mission is only just beginning after many set-backs and difficulties. There was no organisation before your arrival. I believe it would be imprudent to introduce different elements from the start. The foundations need to be solid before inviting members of another society to work with us.
- b) Your knowledge of the country is necessarily incomplete as yet because you are in the very early stages of your involvement there. You cannot know whether such or such a group of people are stable and capable of perseverance, or whether to place a community in this or that place. You run the risk of proceeding in a haphazard way, whereas if you are patient for a while, the way forward will be more secure. You cannot yet be sure if your overall plan is the best for the Mission; what seems right at the moment may have to be changed in the future. Such changes could complicate the placement of new missionaries and the way they approach their apostolate. If you are just dealing with our own Congregation, you can proceed as you wish, but with others, you would have to take many other considerations into account which could turn out to be a greater obstacle than you imagine at the moment.

Although I am such a lazy, lukewarm sort of person, I am sure that even I would be upset to see so many souls being lost while the details of our strategy are being sorted out. And I can see that my suffering would be a lot less than yours, since the special grace you have received as a bishop and the responsibility you have for the salvation of these poor souls makes you all the more determined to help them. Even if I were a better person, I would never have the same commitment as yourself. Nevertheless, the thought of their perdition breaks my heart and I would hate to think that any human consideration or blind love for the Congregation would lead me to contribute to their being lost. So if I express the opinion that we should not be in too much of a hurry, it is precisely because I believe that such haste could greatly endanger these poor souls. In pressing ahead immediately, perhaps a greater number would be saved here and now, but in the long run, ten times more would be lost. Reflect on this seriously in the presence of the Lord before making any decision.

If you do decide to go ahead now, I will not place any obstacle in your way. All I ask is that you inform me in advance so that we can come to an agreement regarding everything that will affect the good of the members of the Congregation. Here, I will just add two other difficulties that I foresee which may persuade you to think again.

- c) A very important factor to consider is finance. I have some doubts if your present resources are even sufficient for your immediate needs, with the arrival of 16 new persons – priests, brothers and sisters, another group that I will be sending you at Easter and further reinforcements in one year's time, including brothers. This year, the Propaganda has cut your allocation and will possibly do the same again next year, with all the political trouble that is going on in France.

If you ask for personnel from another community, you will have to give a fixed sum to each missionary every year, whereas our men will be living with you and sharing your penury. You are convinced that you will have enough resources, but it is difficult to see what you base this judgement on. For me, it is vital that you wait until such income is created. The creation of money would involve an initial investment, considerably greater than you envisage. An estimate is not sufficient in such circumstances: you need to be sure. And it will give rise to another difficulty. If our missionaries have to undergo even the smallest privations, in times of temptation they will start murmuring. But it will be a lot worse if there are even greater privations, especially if they affect their health. This would be bad enough, but if the members of our Congregation want to be put on the same footing as those of other Congregations, you would be obliged to give in to their demands as well. So your desire to have more missionaries at your disposal could end by you having less. It would be a cause of discord and misunderstanding amongst your personnel.

For the moment, I doubt very much if you would be able to finance such a scheme, but you are in a better position to know this than I am. Add up the number of missionaries you have, including those who will be arriving shortly, plus those who will join you at Easter and the end of the year, including the sisters and brothers. Try to work out their expenses, plus the money that needs to be spent on completing what you have started—houses, chapels, furniture etc. You must also put some money aside for unforeseen extraordinary expenses. Add on to all this the cost of bringing another Congregation to the Mission and I am sure you will realise that you simply do not have the means to do so.

- d) Finally, another great difficulty would be to find a Congregation which would want to enter into such a commitment. If it is only a question of supplying a few men, I doubt if it would be worth their while to take on all the difficulties that it would entail. The only ones who could make any serious contribution would be the Jesuits; all the others would only be able to manage a very few missionaries. The possible exception could be the Salesians, but in view of the recent events in Piedmont and Savoy, they would not be able to take on even the smallest corner of Guinea. As regards the Jesuits, I doubt if they would be willing to accept. They already have many missions and they are now preparing to return to Italy (they have already re-possessed their houses in Rome and Naples). They are also re-occupying their educational establishments in France. So I am sure they will now have considerable difficulty in staffing the very many Missions they have already opened, particularly as they re-launch their colleges in France.

Having decided not to send any more missionaries to the West Indies, I told the Provincial of the Jesuits that I would probably be approaching them to set up two communities – one in Martinique, the other in Guadeloupe. But he told me that it would be impossible for them to take this up, so there would be no hope that they would take on a Mission which would entail many more people.

There might possibly be a few other small congregations in France that could be asked, but they would have to be approached with great caution. Those that are more firmly established would refuse because they have all their needs carefully worked out.

If, despite all I have said, you want to go ahead and invite another community, I will be ready to help you from this

end. But I think it would be wise to consult the Propaganda and send them a copy of my observations at the same time. I am sending a copy to Bishop Kobès so that you can come to a decision together. I regard this whole matter as one of primary importance and I fear you could be exposing yourself to inextricable problems.

I will now move on to other business:

2) Problems with the Archbishop of Paris

The former Constitutions of the Fathers of the Holy-Spirit placed that Congregation under the immediate jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Paris, because at that time, the only house of their society was in Paris. In 1847 (before we joined with them in 1848), their Constitutions were corrected and official approval was given. Under those new Constitutions, the Archbishop only retained ordinary jurisdiction and the society now came directly under the Holy See. Immediately after the union was completed, I informed the Archbishop and a great storm broke out. The matter has now been referred to the Propaganda so that an amicable conclusion can be reached.

3) The chateaux of Maulévrier

A noble family of Vendée unfortunately lost their only son in an accident that occurred in the chateaux where they lived. They offered us the house and surrounding grounds for our novitiate, seeing it as a house where prayers could be offered up for all the deceased of their family. The castle is very large and could take up to 80 people. There are beautiful extensive gardens, a farm and a forest. We will take over possession of the house and garden immediately, and later on, the farm and the forest. Altogether, it should bring in a total of around 7,000 francs

revenue. It is very complicated from the legal point of view and there will be some delay in sorting it all out; but we have already taken steps to ensure our possession and the right to the revenue. Our intention is to move the Novitiate and Theologate there during the next holiday. The castle is situated in Maulévrier, a small town in the diocese of Angers where the people seem to be good Christians.

Please pass on this news to our dear confreres. Tell them they are doing great work for the glory of God, and when they get old and can no longer work in Guinea, they will be able to retire to this pleasant spot and live in restful peace after the exhausting labours of their earlier years.

4) The burden of colonial affairs

This new responsibility entails a great deal of work, leaving me hardly any time to breath. These poor colonies have been in a very bad state for a long time. The seminary here in Paris had only 30 students for the colonies, but we are now going to receive a budget for 60 students which, I hope, will be sufficient for present needs. We are also going to have three resident bishops for Martinique, Guadeloupe and Bourbon (Reunion). Two or three months ago, we had almost despaired of somebody for Bourbon, but with the new Minister, things are now going much better. Bishop de Langres has been a great help in this business.

5) Chaplains for the navy

Another heavy burden has now presented itself. The Minister for maritime affairs wants to launch a system of chaplains for the vessels belonging to the State, a project that could do much good. I have been dragged into this affair and it is taking up a great deal of time. Chaplains will be provided for every ship that carries more than 500

people. The idea is that religious bodies will be approached and they will be given houses in the ports from which to operate. Chaplains returning from voyages would stay in these houses and they would be replaced by others on board ship. This would give them the opportunity for some community life. The plan was to offer us a part of this work, because we would not be in a position to do the whole thing ourselves. With the help of other Congregations, we would eventually be able to meet the religious needs of the crews.

I felt I should not refuse outright, in case this was God's way of expressing his will for us. But I could not accept it unless people presented themselves for this special vocation. The missionaries could not be employed in this work—firstly, because it is not their vocation, and secondly, because we do not have enough people for our own needs. So from what I have said on the subject, you can see that there is nothing for you to worry about since the work would not take away a single missionary from our principle works.

But it is still not sure that they will continue with the plan to make us responsible for a part of this work so I have done nothing to push or impede it. I don't want to be responsible for our taking on such a burden, but if this is what God wants us to do, he will send us the men to carry it out. If it does happen, it will be very useful for our Missions.

6) Regarding Senegal

I had proposed to the Government that Senegal be set up as an Apostolic Vicariate. The Admiralty was in favour but the Ministry of Religion was against, so I am not pursuing it for the moment. I believe it will be possible later on. As it was so difficult to contact you at the time, I wrote to Bishop Kobès on the subject.

I suggested two possible plans:

- The first was to make Senegal a Vicariate and join the inland territory to it as far as the river Gambia. The Vicariate of Guinea would take in the left bank of this same river

- The second suggestion was to divide your Mission into two parts: Senegambia would be one Vicariate and Guinea the other. The Vicariate of Senegambia would stretch as far as Sierra Leone (or another place, the name of which I have forgotten). Guinea would remain with you. With this plan, each of you would have an Auxiliary. Bishop Kobès would send his Auxiliary to Galam. As regards Senegal, we would wait a little until the Government itself proposed that Senegal should be annexed to Senegambia. This would eventually happen, because Senegal could not remain a Prefecture if it is encircled by a country which has two bishops. I have had no reply from Bishop Kobès so far regarding this second question so I will leave this project to one side. Not having succeeded in making Senegal into a Vicariate, I am going to appoint a Prefect for Saint-Louis and Gorée.

- 7) Our missionaries in Bourbon and Mauritius are doing very well and their spirit is excellent. They are observing the Rule and live in peace and harmony. For a period, those in Mauritius were so overworked that they neglected the Rule to an extent; but Fr. Le Vasseur, who is the superior of that province, spent some weeks with them and restored things to normal. Everything is going very well, but our confreres are wearing themselves out. Unfortunately, I can't send them any help because we don't have the money. I am sending you a résumé of what they are doing; Fr. François will tell you more about it.

Please tell our dear confreres on the coast that if God has not seen fit to give them the same success as their brothers working in the islands, their sweat and labours are just as acceptable to the Lord as the work of those in Bourbon and Mauritius—perhaps even more so. Their task is to lay the foundations of a future building; they sow, and the harvest will follow on afterwards. The work of those who sow or lay foundations is not as rewarding. Those who come after them will build the house of God on these foundations and will be able to admire its beauty. They will clear the land and sow the seed: their successors will joyfully reap the harvest. They will plant with much labour and suffering: those who replace them will water the ground and enjoy the fruits of their hard work. So let them be full of courage and perseverance. All their reward will be waiting for them in heaven; their brothers will have some joy and consolation in this life, but it is the same joy that is being kept for the others in the next life. Both groups are working in accordance with our Rule and the spirit of our Congregation; this is my great consolation and something for which we should all be very grateful to God.

- 8) Your letter of October 13th arrived at the end of December. We were very worried that we had heard nothing, so we were delighted to get it. It is now clearer for me where we should go from here:

a) **Whida.** I met a French man recently called Christophe Colomb who spent 13 or 18 months at Whida. He was also in Abomay and he thinks it would be better to start a mission there. Apparently, the King of Dahomey and his people are very attached to the French and they would be delighted to have missionaries living in the capital. M. Colomb believes it would be better to settle at Abomey rather than at the trading post. He reckons that the French living there could be an obstacle to the work of the missionaries, whereas the

king and the chiefs would be happy if they were to start schools and teach the people French. From Abomay, they would be able to enter the kingdom of the Ashantis and they would be well received, but he advised against approaching them from any other direction (I cannot recall the reason he gave for this piece of advice). He is coming back to see me again and I will try to get him to put something in writing so that you will have a clearer idea of what he is saying. This same man, M. Colomb, is very much against the agents of Regis¹. Apparently, he had an argument with them because they were doing everything to stop the local people learning French. He advises that the missionaries be very wary of these agents, but M. Colomb is obviously very angry with them so it would be better for you to weigh up all this advice on the spot.

b) Assinie and Grand-Bassam. I was happy to hear your good news about this area. We will do all we can to send you more men at Easter, providing the amount we get from Propaganda is not too small. So far, we don't know how much they will send. We have already received 10,000 francs and the rest should arrive in March. But I fear the total will hardly reach 30,000 francs; if we add that to the 17,000 francs from the Government, it will give us 47,000 in all. The total personnel of your mission is 54, including the brothers and the sisters. You have 42 children in Gabon and 13 or 17 in Senegambia. So I am worried you would not have enough to manage if I send you extra personnel. However, there is no need to worry because God will take care of the needs of his servants. I am going to write to Bishop Kobès because his reply will reach me

¹ For more information on M. Regis, see the article written in "*Mémoire Spiritaine*", no. 14, p.15: "*M. Victor-Régis, le P. Libermann et le Dahomey (1841-1846)*", by Pierre Trichet.

before yours. I will tell him the same things and if he sees no problem, I will send you the men available at Easter.

I want to share an idea with you that seems good to me, but not having any practical experience of the Mission, I may be mistaken. This is why I only give you advice with hesitation; it is up to you to examine it and decide on its worth.

In view of the great extent of your Mission and the shortage of resources at your disposal, it seems to me that it would be better not to spread the missionaries too thin on the ground but to concentrate on two or three important places and gradually build them up as the missionaries arrive. Meanwhile, financial resources can be improved by the setting up of agricultural centres. This would involve extra financial outlay in the initial stages, which in turn would restrict the number of missionary personnel who could be supported. But once the resources are established, you could then move forward and safely augment the number of missionaries. After a few years, you would be able to support around 100 priests, brothers and sisters. But if you take on too much from the start, without sufficiently calculating your resources, you will not be able to keep up with your financial needs. This would have two unfortunate consequences. First of all, the health and even the lives of the missionaries would be put at risk, working as they are on the dangerous coast of West Africa. It would also lead to discouragement amongst them; you would have to remain at the status quo without any hope of expansion or development, or, even worse, you might be obliged to withdraw everybody to move elsewhere.

Great prudence is needed in the early stages of a Mission or else you can find yourself going down a dead end. If that happens, the only possibility is to withdraw. Remember that your Mission only began effectively one year ago; before that, there was no plan, no organisation, no objective and nobody in

charge. All this was due to the disasters that overtook our confreres. From what you write in your letter, Assinie and Whida would seem to be the important points on which to concentrate. You could then enter the kingdom of Ashanti through Assinie and the kingdom of Dahomey via Whida. If you cannot get into Ashanti country from the Assinie coast, you should be able to do so from Dahomey, according to M. Christophe Colomb.

February 9th

9) It now seems likely that we will be asked to take on a part of the project for naval chaplains. A house would be provided at Brest for as many men as we can manage, from which they would fulfil their duties as chaplains on sea-going ships. But there is no fear that Guinea will suffer as a result. On the contrary, it could eventually increase the number of missionaries that we can produce by swelling our resources for the novitiate and making us better known in France. If we can provide 30 chaplains, as we have been asked, we would receive 30,000 francs a year and we could use it to support the novitiate.

10) Bishop Kobès tells me that we will receive 1,000 francs for every missionary that we send you. That seems a reasonable figure and I would undertake to lower the charge as soon as we are in a position to do so. This is why I will rejoice greatly if the good Lord blesses the chaplaincy plan.

11) Fr. Bousquet came to us, but unfortunately, his health is too precarious, so we decided, regretfully, to leave him in his own diocese. But his visit was not a waste of time because he brought Fr. Mas with him, whom you also know, and he will stay with us. But it is a shame about Fr. Bosquet because he impressed me very much.

12) Fr. Le Vavasseur has arrived from Bourbon and will be with us in a few days. I asked him to come back when I was sick because I did not know how things would turn out.

13) I was interrupted several times while writing this long letter and cannot remember what I said, so please excuse any repetition.

P.S.: I spoke to you about the chaplaincy project, but alas, it seems to have been more or less forgotten. But this will have no effect on the Mission, apart from the money that it could have provided towards running our novitiate. But God will provide.

Please pray for me.

Your poor servant,

F. Libermann, priest