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THE CENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF FATHER SCHWINDENHAMMER

WHY FATHER SCHWINDENHAMMER?

The title of my paper embraces two questions: firstly, why speak of Father Schwindenhammer on the anniversary of Father Libermann's death; secondly, why did Father Libermann choose Father Schwindenhammer rather than Father Le Vavas seur as his successor?

The answer to the first question is brief: the answer to the second is much longer and constitutes the subject-matter proper of this lecture.

* * *

Father Ignatius Schwindenhammer died at Rue Lhomond on March 6, 1881. He was 67 years of age and had governed the Congregation for 29 years. Alone of all Superiors-General to date, M. Bouic and Mgr Le Roy have been in office longer: 53 and 32 years respectively.

As there will be no special celebration of this centenary on March 6, it seemed to me fitting that, at least in the Generalate, it would not pass unnoticed. When all is said and done, Father Schwindenhammer deserves this recognition.

* * *

We all know the circumstances as recalled by Father Le Vavas seur himself in a letter to Mgr Bessieux and to Mgr Kobès concerning **the mind of our beloved Father on the choice of his successor**: *When I saw how seriously ill our beloved Father was, I asked Father Schwindenhammer to come to Paris. I told him of my fears and invited him to think ahead as to what we should do after the death of our beloved Father. He replied that it was quite clear even now that I should be Superior. I told him I*

was not at all of that opinion: having considered the matter before God, I thought I should not accept for four reasons. Having exposed these reasons with admirable humility and child-like sincerity, Father Le Vavas seur passed the word to Father Schwindenhammer. He tried to counter these reasons but in vain, adds Le Vavas seur, for they are all too clearly self-evident.

Three days later, after Father Libermann had received Holy Viaticum and Extreme Unction, finding him rested and being alone in the room with him, I drew near his bed and said: "Dear Father, you know what you mean to me . . . you know . . . that I promised Our Blessed Mother . . . to consider you always as the organ of her Heart for me . . . you will therefore understand the importance I attach to your last thought concerning myself, relative to the Congregation. This I ask as the final and most precious gift of your heart". Father Le Vavas seur goes on: He answered: "that, my dear friend, is a delicate and embarrassing question . . . Just give me a couple of days to think it over". (The Venerable Father, Briault, pp. 424-7).

While Father Libermann, on his sick-bed considers the choice to be made, let us consider some aspects of the lives of the two candidates, in order to understand better the reply he will give. Let us begin with Father Schwindenhammer.

* * *

Libermann, then an acolyte 39 years old, entered the Seminary of Strasbourg on Feb. 24 1841, to prepare for Major Orders. For the first time he met M. Schwindenhammer, who had been enrolled there since 1838. Like Libermann at Saint Sulpice, Schwindenhammer had been moved to found groups of piety at Strasbourg, in order to preserve devotion in some and to arouse it in others (N.D. II, p. 400).

These groups were to be a providential factor in drawing the two seminarians into a close relationship. This, according to Fr Francis-Xavier Libermann is what happened. One day, M. Schwindenhammer *meeting M. Libermann on his path, asked him if he would care to walk with him. "Gladly", replied Libermann. M. Schwindenhammer then enquired what he thought of the spirit prevailing in the Seminary and was very surprised when he said he found it very good . . . Discerning in him a spirit of deep holiness . . . he had expected a totally different answer* (N.D. V, p. 401).

From that time, they were in constant touch with each other, directly in the Seminary, by correspondence later, until the time M. Schwindenhammer entered La Neuville. Libermann became his spiritual counsellor. *I was greatly consoled by your letter*, wrote Libermann, *I see you are daily growing in your desire to live only for our Divine Master* (N.D. XIV, p. 101).

At that time M. Tisserant, always regarded as one of the three Founders of the Work for the Blacks, was Assistant-Director of the Archconfraternity at Notre-Dame des Victoires. Soon however he was to leave for Haiti, and both he and M. Libermann had thought of him as a possible successor there. Thus, M. Libermann wrote to him on May 17 1847: *I have just had an idea. The parish priest of Notre-Dame des Victoires needs someone to help in his Archconfraternity: his assistant-director has left him recently to join our Congregation for the Blacks. If I invited you to take his place, would you be prepared to come... and without delay?* After an exchange of letters between himself, Libermann, Tisserant and Desgenettes, M. Schwindenhammer agreed to come to Paris. He was then weighing the question of his vocation: this perhaps would help him to find the answer. To Libermann one thing was certain: God did not want him to stay in the world: *Concerning your vocation, the best advice I can offer is that you do not stay in the world: I am convinced you are not made for that* (N.D. III, pp. 190-192).

Three choices presented themselves to Mr Schwindenhammer:

- 1) To stay at home and revive the pilgrimage to Notre Dame des Trois Epis, whose buildings were owned largely by his own family;
- 2) To offer himself to the Bishop for the direction of the Seminary, which strongly attracted him;
- 3) To embrace religious life, either as a Jesuit or as a member of Libermann's Congregation.

Libermann advised him on these three possibilities:

Do not seek the solitude of which you already spoke last year: join rather those fervent people who want to serve God and work for the salvation of souls. If you give yourself to this pilgrimage-work you will vegetate there ever afterwards (III, p. 121).

As to your attraction to the direction of Seminaries, you may not tell your Bishop you want this rather than that (N.D. IV, p. 281).

I am afraid the approach you propose to make to Monseigneur would be imprudent. Would it not be considered a sign of ambition, etc. ? (III, p. 191).

There remains the third possibility, religious life: what has to be seen is whether you should join the Society of Jesus or become a missionary with us. That is not urgent at this time. God does not give me light to judge for or against one or the other at the moment. Wait: that can be decided later (III, p. 191).

Mr Schwindenhammer was expected in Paris about mid-June, 1842, Mr Desgenettes had written to him to this effect: *Mr Tisserant, my present Assistant-Director is due to leave in the course of July. I myself go to Rome on June 15. In my absence he can introduce you to the work, so that when he leaves you will be able to take over . . .* (III, p. 549/550).

Mr Tisserant also wrote him on May 26: *your friend and my Superior, Mr Libermann, has just forwarded me your welcome letter . . . Mr Libermann already spoke to me about you last September: since then we have had the idea that you might replace me here when the time came . . .*

In the name of the Blessed Virgin, I say you should set out as soon as possible so as to arrive here between June 10-12 . . . (III, p. 549/550).

It is interesting to note that during the time together, Schwindenhammer and his future confrere did not hit it off too well. This can be deduced from a letter of Libermann: *I am not surprised that you could not get on with Mr Tisserant. He is not one to direct or be useful to you . . .* (III, p. 346). This is the first time we find Libermann excusing Mr Schwindenhammer: he would do so often enough in the future.

To the mind of Libermann as well as that of Mr Tisserant, Notre Dame des Victoires was only to be a temporary stop for Mr Schwindenhammer on his way to La Neuville. We find in fact that already in mid-January, 1843, he was a novice under Libermann. He speaks of him: *Mr Schwindenhammer becomes more and more decided and will be a valuable acquisition for our little Work. He is very capable* (VI, p. 7).

Two months later he writes: *He is an excellent subject, a man of decision, very able in the conduct of business matters. He wants to stay here and not go on the mission* (16/3/1844: N.D. VI, p. 115).

Because he was . . . *a man of decision, very able in the conduct of business matters* he was sent to Rome shortly after

his Consecration *to treat of the affairs of Guinea and of Haiti* (N.D. VI, pp. 376 & 498).

Although he was sent by Libermann, himself known and esteemed at Propaganda, he made sure to get a letter of recommendation from the Papal Nuncio in Paris, who introduced him as *un giovane di angelici costumi, e pieno di santo zelo per la conversione degli infedeli*¹ (Archives, Prop. S.R.C. America-Antilles, Vol. VII, 644/5r fol.).

Libermann wrote to M. Ganion in 1844: *I am now on my own. In consequence I must be especially careful, more particularly when I have important decisions to take... I put my trust in God. On one occasion, being more troubled than usual, I complained of this in a letter to Mr Carbon. He encouraged me to continue as I was and to have recourse to the Holy Spirit.*

Now, God has given me a companion, still very young it is true but very sound and capable, endowed especially with a spirit of decision. Already, he has proved of great assistance to me (N.D. VI, p. 192).

Three days later in a letter to Fr Laval he says: *The personnel of the Novitiate consists of myself and Mr Schwindenhammer; he is still young but is full of talent, wisdom and piety. He acts as my First Assistant* (N.D. VI, p. 195).

It is interesting to observe that the first to object to this appointment, when it was proposed, was Fr Le Vavasseur, who wrote to Libermann as follows on July 5, 1844:

Do you intend to make Mr Schwindenhammer your Assistant? It appears to me - Mr Collin himself first suggested this remark - that your assistant should be chosen from amongst those who have worked a certain time on the missions and acquired experience. I see it as difficult to make up for this and so I would consider it unwise to appoint someone who lacked it. If you have kept this dear confrere at your side, it is I presume because there was no one you could withdraw from the missions just now but that you would do so later. I regard it as harmful that with such small resources we should embrace the whole world; but what can be done since as you said you were led in spite of yourself to take on so much at the beginning (N.D. VI, pp. 611/12).

¹ "A young man of angelic manner and full of zeal for the conversion of infidels".

This reflection is both realist and respectful but where was one to find this man with missionary experience? Fr Laval, alone in Mauritius for the last three years? Mr Le Vavasseur himself in Bourbon for two years? Frs Collin or Blanpin also in Bourbon a year and some months?

Fr Le Vavasseur's remark was quite right but Libermann was in absolute need of someone to help him in the administration of the Congregation and chose M. Schwindenhammer as being the most capable. In a letter to Mr Bessieux at the end of October, 1845, he already speaks of *Mr Schwindenhammer, who is Assistant of the Congregation, or more correctly, is my Assistant for the Congregation* (N.D. VII, pp. 344/5).

The quality of the First Assistant was recognised by other members of the Congregation when at La Neuville. This is evident from the well-known document drawn up there by the principal missionaries, in which they prescribed a number of rules that Fr Libermann should follow to preserve his health. It was dated August 6, 1845, and signed: *MM. Tisserant, Schwindenhammer, Lossadat, Acker, Thevaux, and Bouchet*. Fr Tisserant, appointed Prefect-Apostolic of Guinea, who was to die in a shipwreck off the coast of Morocco on December 7 following, was the first to sign. This was only normal as he was one of the three Founders. But a post-script explicitly adds: *The Council instructs the First Assistant to take all the steps necessary to ensure that the missionaries in other houses may be made aware of these deliberations.*

The Superior declares his willingness *to follow the decisions taken by his sons*. The document concludes, in the handwriting of Libermann: *and to obey their orders as if they were those of God. This obedience every Superior owes to his Congregation* (N.D. VII, p. 519).

Libermann speaks of his document in a letter to Mr Bessieux, dated October 28, 1845: *MM. Tisserant and Schwindenhammer called all the confreres together before they set out for the missions and they drew up a regulation for me, by reason of which I must go to bed at ten o'clock at the latest* (N.D. VII, p. 346).

Four days before his death Mr Tisserant wrote to Fr Libermann:

I affectionately embrace all my dear confreres, known and unknown, and especially your good Assistant, Mr Schwindenhammer (N.D. VII, p. 466).

He was soon to become an object of hostility. When Australia was accepted, some missionaries saw it as detrimen-

tal to their own mission and blamed Fr Schwindenhammer. Fr Arragon wrote to Fr Libermann:

Beware lest your missionaries, despised and degraded in your eyes and those of your grave counsellors, despise you in return. Quoting these words in his reply of May 8, Libermann went on: *Do not allow yourself to be overcome by anger. As to Mr Schwindenhammer, he is totally innocent of that with which you reproach me with such imprudent vivacity...* Some lines later he adds: *I am very hurt by what you say to me about Mr Schwindenhammer. He sacrifices and spends himself for the Congregation. He is as interested in it as I am myself. Moreover, he is of excellent dispositions, understands our spirit and is a reliable and holy priest. I cannot understand why you are so opposed to him. It was not he who decided to accept Australia; and, even if he had, he would have done a good thing* (N.D. VIII, p. 148).

In the eyes of the irascible Fr Arragon, Mr Schwindenhammer was responsible for all the misfortunes that struck the mission of Guinea: he makes other complaints besides that of Australia: for example, the nomination of Mr Gravière to succeed Fr Tisserant as Prefect-Apostolic. In the same letter Fr Libermann writes: *As to Mr Gravière; you exaggerate, and your violence could be harmful to your relations with him. It was not Mr Schwindenhammer who advised me on this. Excessive embarrassment alone made me make this premature choice: it still worries me but it was necessary, absolutely necessary. You should refrain from trying to control my conduct: you are not sufficiently aware of how things are* (N.D. VII, p. 148).

Fr Libermann was sufficiently well acquainted with Mr Schwindenhammer to know what he was talking about. He had been his companion in Strasbourg, his Master in the Novitiate. He had been in constant correspondence with him: moreover, when the Community of Gard was opened, he had visited there twice a week on walk-days, (N.D. VIII, pp. 344/5).

After the death of Mgr Truffet, the question arose of his successor as Bishop of Guinea. Fr Libermann submitted four names to the Holy See. Third on the list was Fr Schwindenhammer: he came after MM. Bessieux and Kobès and before M. Boulanger. Questioned by Propaganda as to why M. Kobès had been given precedence over M. Schwindenhammer, two years older and much more experienced, Libermann replied:

The third candidate proposed is M. Schwindenhammer. He

has all the fervour and zeal that could be desired in a missionary and the ability necessary to the sacred duties of the office and the general administration of the mission. Nonetheless, I am bound to tell Your Eminence that his present state of health would give rise to concern beneath the burning skies of Africa... (N.D. X, p. 265). The death of Mgr Truffet had been too great a source of grief to Libermann for him to again expose to death one of his most valuable collaborators.

A letter of Libermann to Schwindenhammer of November 19, 1849, says:

I am no longer thinking of sending you Mr Gravière as you fear you would not get on with him (N.D. XI, p. 265). Why this fear?

I think I can surmise the reason from a letter written by M. Libermann to Fr Arragon on February 12, 1847. He writes:

I have no idea what Mr Schwindenhammer said to Mr Gravière but I can assure you of his total dedication to the Congregation. He lacks years and experience, no doubt, but I hope these will come. It is absurd to assert that Mr Schwindenhammer has said he is waiting to take my place and that only then will he make his vows. This is, to say the least, a misunderstanding. In all events, it is wrong to spread such tales among your confreres. That can only sow the seeds of discord everywhere. It is most necessary for the missionaries to be at one with the Mother-House, (N.D. IX, pp. 45/6).

Probably what M. Gravière or M. Arragon was saying had come to be known at Gard! The same Fr Arragon had accused Fr Schwindenhammer of being odd, reserving a special chalice for his own use, for example. Here also Fr Libermann comes to his defence:

As to the chalice, that is a mistake of Br John Baptist. Not knowing where to put the silver-gilt chalice amongst the other things... I put it in the cupboard in Fr Schwindenhammer's room as being drier than the others. M. Schwindenhammer has never said Mass with any chalice other than that of the Community. He has not one of his own and has never received one as a gift or bought one... (12/2/1847: N.D. IX, pp. 45/46).

Clearly there was a campaign against Mr Schwindenhammer in Africa. Others, besides Mr Arragon, accused him of eccentricity, obstinacy in his ideas, etc. etc. While admitting some of his defects, Libermann always defended him.

Mr Schwindenhammer, he writes to Mgr Kobès in May 1850, has completely changed. I spent eight days with him at Easter and was very pleased. Mr Le Vavasseur, of Bourbon, spent

a fortnight there and came back delighted with Mr Schwindenhammer. He is much less obstinate, yields easily and lets others have their way. (N.D. XII, p. 212: 31/5/1850).

The opposition of the missionaries in Guinea to Fr Schwindenhammer continued to grow more acute. If not one of the reasons, it at least was an occasion of constant strain in their relations with the Mother-House. On April 1, 1851, Libermann writes to Mgr Kobès: *I now come to your confidential memorandum. You want to know to what source should be attributed, or rather what I consider the most evident obstacle to this necessary and desirable union.* He goes on to point out the two principal causes and then adds:

The third cause, more correctly occasion, is Fr Schwindenhammer. I shall explain this by reference to what you yourself have to say on this matter, (N.D. XIII, p. 105).

I think Fr Libermann had in mind the ultimatum sent by the missionaries in Guinea demanding that Fr Schwindenhammer give up the direction of the Novitiate. Fr Libermann replies to Mgr Kobès's observations on the matter:

My own view is that Fr Schwindenhammer, taking over the running of the Novitiate from me, was bound to find it difficult, bound also to experience opposition from some Novices. Fr Schwindenhammer's own defects, of which you are aware, compounded those difficulties. Things are now entirely different. Fr Schwindenhammer has now to deal only with a new batch of Novices, none of who were under me. Moreover, he is alone at Gard: that solves all problems and comparisons. Fr Schwindenhammer himself is a changed man, also. You remember how uneasy we all were at the time of your departure. That was the hardest and most critical time for him. An interior change has taken place in him, and little by little all that was displeasing has disappeared. We spoke together about this recently, as a consequence of a report he himself submitted about the whole affair. He clearly saw the cause of the difficulties and attributed them to himself alone. He merely pointed out that his previous faults had been more superficial than profound. There is some truth in that also . . . (N.D. XII, pp. 105/6).

Fr Libermann invokes too the opinion of others:

When M. Le Vasseur came home from Bourbon, I took him over to Gard. He was amazed at M. Schwindenhammer. I then told him something, not all, of what had previously been said about him. I asked him to observe him carefully and to give me his opinion . . . I wished to have M. Le Vasseur's views on the mat-

ter. After 15 days in Gard, he returned to Paris, confirmed in his first opinion and unable to understand how anyone could think unfavourably of M. Schwindenhammer. He has seen him again and again since then and has not altered his view. I am personally convinced he has really changed and I think that only exceptionally will the Congregation ever have a better Novice-Master. I have myself just spent 5 weeks at Gard. I find both Communities in a very healthy state and M. Schwindenhammer enjoying the confidence and esteem of the Novices, M. Chanel excepted. He is a survivor from the past. It is not surprising therefore that he is somewhat disaffected. M. Chanel has moreover a very difficult character and poor judgement: the Council has almost taken the decision not to admit him into the Congregation. (N.D. XIII, pp. 106/7).

M. Schwindenhammer was also accused of favouritism. On this point Fr Libermann wrote to Mgr Kobès on April 24, 1851:

I believe that M. Schwindenhammer, without realising it, did in fact show preference, e.g. for M. Leman, M. Delaplace, etc. Even now he is not conscious of this but will see it upon reflection. Such things often happen to us at the beginning, (N.D. XIII, p. 108).

Another accusation launched against him was his love for the unusual. Once more, in this same letter, Fr Libermann takes up his defence:

Love of the unusual? I don't know how true that is. I have only noticed it in the case of the Sister of Niederbon. Very lively discussion of that took place while you were here... You could judge for yourself. Such things no longer occur...

I am not opposed to the discussion of such topics "occasionally". It is a subject of conversation like any other and can be useful for correcting the ideas of young people on a matter difficult to treat of "ex professo". In this instance it did in fact correct the overstrict views of MM. Bourget and Blanchet, who rejected "a priori" possible divine intervention in the case of Sister Elizabeth or any other... I don't think however that M. Schwindenhammer wished to impose his view-point as to the fact but merely as to its possibility. If that is so, I believe he was right. (N.D. XIII, p. 108).

Another accusation still remains: *Confidential matters communicated to students and the impression of consulting them (even though in a jocular manner when in fact the question under review had been decided already). These have completely ceased. I had already so often insisted on his not talking of such matters on*

recreation that it probably ceased a long time ago: the same is true of other confidences, (N.D. XIII, p. 108).

All these accusations had been presented to Fr Libermann by Mgr Kobès on behalf of the missionaries in Guinea. Having refuted them or at least reduced them to their proper dimensions, Fr Libermann concludes:

I am wholly confident that your authority and the influence of the principal missionaries can put an end to this spirit of gossip and dissension.

As to proposed changes in the Novitiate and House of Studies: this is what I plan. I shall leave M. Schwindenhammer in charge: in spite of the prejudices of many missionaries, I have no choice: there is no one who, even remotely, could carry out these duties as well as he . . . M. Delaplace perhaps or M. Emonet . . . If I can manage to replace M. Collin in 2 years' time, we shall have a sound man with Fr Schwindenhammer, (N.D. XIII, pp. 110/11).

Aware perhaps of Mgr Kobès letter, Fr Lannurien confirms Libermann's attitude in a letter of May 9, 1851:

I am delighted that you wrote to the Superior about the complaints of our confreres in Guinea: there is nothing better than frankness when dealing with people of good-will.

M. Schwindenhammer appears much improved: less tenacious of his own ideas, he does not indulge in the unusual and displays excellent sentiments of good-will. The house at Gard goes well. It might be a help if you were to write to him in person, (Compl. pp. 161/62).

In another letter a month later he adds: *Your suggestion of establishing the Novitiate near the Superior is generally much appreciated: the problem remains of realising it, (Compl. p. 164; 25/6/1851).*

On May 31, 1851, Libermann had written to Fr Schwindenhammer about the proposal to transfer the Novitiate to Paris:

M. Le Vasseur has just read me the letter you wrote to him . . . The principal question of which he spoke to you, he probably treated as though it were for immediate realisation. As we lack the necessary resources, this does not seem possible. We should have to foresee an increased expenditure annually of two or three thousand francs and this we have not got.

I agree in principle that the matter should be resolved to the satisfaction of the confreres in Guinea, even though I am of the opinion that their desire is falsely founded. The reasons that influenced my own views were the two you yourself set forth. It

would be a good thing if the Novices were near me and near the Superiors of the Congregation. I think nevertheless that these advantages can be exaggerated. I accept that fundamentally there is good reason for it now and especially **in the future**: it is good that the Superior be in a position to exercise some supervision over the Novices; and for that they should be within easy access.

This first reason is strengthened by the second: the incorrect ideas and the prejudices existing amongst the missionaries in Guinea. Whatever other wonders we achieve, we shall not succeed in destroying the mistrust that there exists. They may perhaps take my word for what concerns your own direction and life-style . . . but indiscreet talk, sometimes unintentional and not serious, will lead them to see what is not there. Add to that the imperfections faults of missionaries newly-arrived from the Novitiate and the prejudices are increased. People will always be on the look out for a bad spirit in the person responsible for the Novitiate, even though, in most cases, he is innocent of their suspicions. Thus, if the Novitiate were where I am, these problems would be more easily overcome, (N.D. XIII, pp. 173/4).

M. Schwindenhammer himself favoured the transfer of the Novitiate for another reason: the wishes of the missionaries in Guinea. Libermann rejects his argument:

You say the wish of the missionaries is a major reason for this change: if by that you mean, it would be useful – even important – to remove their prejudice and to maintain unity, yes, I would myself see there a serious reason for the utility and good of the Congregation. If by this you mean that the missionaries have some right to demand this change, no. I am of the contrary opinion. Were such a revolutionary right to exist in the Congregation, it would no longer be possible to exercise authority over it or to assure its unity. Alone, the Superior of the Congregation and his Council have the right of administration and direction in the Society. The Superior should certainly listen to the wishes expressed by the members, examining them before God and estimating whether they are right and opportune. Members should be moderate in their expression of such wishes. In formulating them they should observe the limits set upon them by charity, respect and good manners: they should also submit humbly, peacefully and gently, in obedience to whatever is ultimately decided . . . (N.D. XIII, pp. 173/5).

Mgr Bessieux, then in France, also found M. Schwindenhammer too taken up with outside interests to give his attention to matters within . . . In consequence, the Brothers are not formed, the

Novices not well trained, the Bursar's Office in disorder and all that because his collaborators are *young priests who could not possibly have the experience necessary to help him run the three Communities*, (Letter to M. Schwindenhammer, 10/10/1851: N.D. XIII, pp. 319/20).

The letter from which this excerpt is quoted was addressed to M. Schwindenhammer. M. Libermann wished thereby no doubt to draw his attention to the need of more serious concern for the Novices. He goes on:

Mgr Bessieux . . . nonetheless in all his conversations with me about Gard and Guinea never said anything about you, except on four or five occasions to make the same reflection: M. Schwindenhammer is too preoccupied with the devout persons he directs: in consequence, he has not enough time to devote to the Novitiate: he writes too many letters, (N.D. XIII, pp. 320/321).

Transfer of the Novitiate to Paris

Maulévrier . . . If the gift is eventually made, we shall probably leave Gard . . . the house of studies and the Brothers' novitiate will be established in Paris, near the Seminary and under the immediate direction of the Superior. This is what we all so much desire, M. Schwindenhammer most of all, (Letter of M. Le Vavas seur to Mgr Kobès dated 16/7/1851: N.D. XIII, pp. 230/231).

Mr Le Vavas seur also tries to defend M. Schwindenhammer in the question of the formation of Novices. In this same letter he writes:

The Novices are also put to the test. Lately we spoke of testing Mr Chevalier and wrote to M. Schwindenhammer suggesting he should devise some new ones, so that these candidates should be better formed. But, no test equals a year of ministry in selected works and under the guidance of an experienced man of virtue. Alas, it is always and everywhere difficult to find those with the necessary balance of heart and head. Daily, I realise how rare such men are . . . for our own requirements, those of the Congregation and of the Church, (N.D. XIII, 232/3).

* * *

Enough. Let us now focus our attention on Fr Le Vavas seur, whom Fr Libermann always considered one of the three Founders of the Work for the Blacks, the one first inspired by

God to undertake it. Libermann genuinely wished to have him as his successor and tried hard to prepare him for this responsible office.

Pierre Louis Frederick Le Vasseur was born on the Island of Bourbon (Réunion) on February 25, 1811. His ancestors came originally from Provence and Normandy.

In 1829, he arrived in Paris to study at the Polytechnical School there. In 1836, answering a call of God to the priesthood, he entered the Seminary at Issy. There he made the acquaintance of M. Libermann who became his spiritual counsellor even in the matter of the "Work for the Blacks", which he was first to think of.

Thus, Mr Le Vasseur, with M. Collin and Libermann himself, was a foundation-member of the first Community of the Congregation, the Novitiate at La Neuville. Nevertheless, even from the start, M. Le Vasseur was strongly tempted against our Venerable Father and was undoubtedly a thorn in his side. Let M. Le Vasseur speak for himself:

M. Tisserant is wrong in attributing this temptation to evil counsel . . .

Our weak beginning, the unlikelihood of success, my attitude to the Jesuits whom I wanted to join, would certainly have led one wiser than I to leave our Venerable Father.

Had I taken counsel then I should have been lost . . . the Blessed Virgin saved me from this fate . . .

The real source of my trouble was my own pride and self-assurance. It began with what our Venerable Father told me of the Rule he had written in Rome. He wished that we study it together. From that moment we were in disagreement. There was a Gloss appended to each article of the Rule: having discussed the Rule, we had to discuss this Gloss. I had left the Seminary with a very strict sense of the good I desired, an exaggerated view of perfection and a harshness quite opposed to the contrary virtues, to the dispositions fundamental to the spirit of our beloved Father . . .

I quibbled about every little thing: now about a word that was not good French, now about a badly-constructed phrase; sometimes, an article did not say enough, another time it was too long; this was dangerous, that too mild, etc. etc., (N.D. XIII, pp. 423 et seq.).

Though the whole of this text is interesting it is too long to quote in extenso.

In these crises, our Ven. Father acted on the principle of never giving in to me . . . But, he did this with such humble and gentle

firmness that I myself always felt that he would have liked to agree with me but could not.

One day when I was tempted more than usual and insisted with excess on my point of view, he said as much: "I wish I could give in to you but I cannot. If I did I should have to destroy the whole thing afterwards".

It is certain that at that time the two could not live together:

Our beloved Father thought that by putting a distance between us he might cure my evil dispositions towards him. He was considering this when Mgr Poncelet returned from Rome. He judged it an opportune moment to begin the Mission to Bourbon and thus get me out of the way, committing me to the grace of God and the intercession of Our Blessed Mother alone.

The decision was taken that I should leave for Bourbon without delay... My temptations continued. I felt: if I leave in these dispositions I shall be lost, not merely to the Work but to God... I prayed a lot: little by little one thought alone came to dominate my soul: to consecrate myself to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in the person of our beloved Father. It appeared to me that she wished me to take him as the representative, the organ itself, of her heart in the world... having left La Neuville, I went to Paris to make a Retreat under Fr Tisserant. At the end of it I spent the night... that of Feb. 1-2, 1842... at the feet of Our Lady in Notre-Dame-des-Victoires. There I made the following promises..., (N.D. III, p. 426).

These promises were in effect a consecration of Fr Le Vavas seur to Our Lady. He took Libermann as the representative and intermediary of her Immaculate Heart and promised to obey him.

Fr Le Vavas seur continues: *When I had made these promises, I felt calm restored to my spirit... The next day I wrote to our Ven. Father in these terms: 'I am all yours through Mary... it seems to me I have another heart for you...', (N.D., pp. 428/9).*

Some days later, about Feb. 10, Fr Le Vavas seur set out for Bourbon. The following October Libermann wrote to him as follows:

How distant now seem all your little follies of last year: how often I long to spend some time with you! Write to me often... you are very close to my heart, much more than you think. I shall undertake nothing important without consulting you, if the matter can brook such delay..., (N.D. III, p. 301).

Another three years went by: the old temptation came back. The occasion was the sending of a missionary to Bourbon to help the three already there. On April 8, 1845, Libermann wrote to the Community:

I am sending you two good confreres . . . MM. Lambert and Plessis (N.D. VII, p. 124). The following day he wrote to M. Le Vavas seur alone: *M. Lambert is a good choice, not so M. Plessis. He is a good man, even very good, but that is all. He is pious, willing and docile but has a weak, pusillanimous character . . .* (N.D. VII, pp. 132/3).

Before long M. Le Vavas seur realised how unfortunate Fr Libermann had been in sending them this man, who proved to be a great burden on the Mission of Bourbon. They let him know how annoyed they were: M. Plessis was undesirable. If Fr Libermann continued to admit such people he would soon bring disaster on the Congregation. Le Vavas seur even threatened to leave. M. Plessis was sent back to France.

It is only from Libermann's replies that we know the tone of these letters from Bourbon. *I reply urgently to your letter concerning M. Plessis and his being sent away*, he writes. Then with deep humility he adds: *Should you decide to send him back, I shall respect your decision: as I am guilty of having accepted him, so it is for me to bear the embarrassment. I am nonetheless deeply wounded by the sentiments of discouragement you express and the distressing impressions under which you labour. Your letter indicates great despondency and serious anxiety for the Congregation . . . I do not wish to reproach you for bringing these fresh sorrows upon me. I see you as a sword in the hands of God to pierce my heart. He burdens and crushes me with the weight of this work, a work of sorrow and of patience. He permits also that those stronger and better than I, instead of bearing with my weakness, strike me to the ground. Blessed be His Holy Name, provided this poor undertaking goes ahead! It will in fact make progress more and more as I can well see.*

You talk of giving up this work for the establishment of which God chose you and for which you in the first instance are responsible. You talk like that because you are discouraged, I believe that in voluntarily allowing this thought to take hold of you, you are acting in a way most displeasing to God, (N.D. VIII, pp. 28/9).

Libermann and Le Vavas seur were the two foundation-stones on which God chose to build His Work for the Blacks. (The third Founder, M. Tisserant, was drowned in a

shipwreck on December 7, 1845, just three months earlier). Alone they faced the heavy responsibility, of which both felt the weight. For this reason Fr Libermann continues:

Be on your guard, dear Brother, you do not know God's plans for you: you only see what is immediate, you cannot see what Providence sees, neither do I. I nevertheless discern that if you give in to this thought you will be gravely unfaithful. If I allowed myself to become as discouraged as you, after you had abandoned God's work, I wonder how we would both defend ourselves before the Supreme Judge. And yet for every reason you have, I have 100 others . . ., (N.D. VIII, p. 29).

This is followed by one of the loveliest pages ever written by Our Venerable Father.

Fr Collin was of the same opinion as Fr Le Vasseur. Fr Libermann wrote him also the same day, January 28, 1846: *You break my heart, both of you . . . I only sent M. Plessis to you because I thought M. le Vasseur the best able to bear with him. In that I was genuinely deceived: he himself became very depressed and started to imagine all sorts of things against us here: and you, little man, shared his views. Well, put your mind at rest: . . . things are much better than you seem to think . . .*, (N.D. VIII, pp. 40/41).

Thus, clearly, in the normal way the one to succeed Libermann was le Vasseur. Indeed, at the beginning his name had been put forward for the post eventually filled by our Venerable Father. Libermann himself tells us this in the letter already quoted: *It is a burden for you to be Superior: the difficulties overwhelm you. I don't know how you would have managed had M. Gallais' proposal to put you in my place been carried. Libermann continues: You are thinking of abandoning the Work which you find difficult. Were I to die before it was solidly established, where would you be? You would have your own comfort and realised your own will: but those souls for whom God gave you such compassion might well perish in their thousands . . . You wish me to send you away: were I to do so I should commit a grave fault against God and against you. You are bound to God and to the Holy Heart of Mary: any thought of breaking with that is an illusion* (N.D. VIII, p. 31).

Two months later Fr Libermann returns to the same subject with insistence: . . . *Concerning your vocation, it is my considered opinion that you will have to account to God for the infidelity you allow to infiltrate your thoughts, urging you to set aside what His*

Divine Providence wants of you. Because I myself do not wish to be unfaithful to God, I shall never give my consent to that, (April, 1846: N.D. VIII, pp. 106/7).

The temptation of le Vavasseur was long drawn out. Again at the end of the same year Libermann wrote to him again on the same subject: *I am quite resigned. It has caused me much suffering to do so but I have known greater and I expect there will be other occasions . . . I do not ask you to stay but do not consent to your going. All I ask is: "quod facis, fac citius!"* Realising at once the odious association of this expression, he immediately adds: *Excuse the expression. I assure you I had no ulterior motive in making this objectionable allusion: it just dropped from my pen. I do not wish to rewrite the whole letter in order to remove it.*

He concludes his letter with this brief, incisive phrase: *Make up your mind and let me know,* (N.D. VIII, p. 365).

Finally, le Vavasseur woke up from his nightmare. He recognised the seriousness of the temptation at last. To console him Libermann wrote on April 27, 1847: *Your poor heart must be heavy indeed and in need of some words of comfort. Be assured I have no hard feelings because of what took place. Indeed, I am full of joy and consolation since I heard from you of the change in disposition wrought in you by Divine Providence,* (N.D. IX, pp. 128/9).

Forgetting the past Libermann began planning the future. Six months later he writes to le Vavasseur.

I thank the Master more and more for bringing back peace to you: thus I am well-rewarded for the pain I suffered at seeing you bowed down under such a severe burden of temptation, and because of the desire I always harboured that we should ever remain united in order to realise God's work together. How happy I would be if God allowed you to be with me: then, I would not have to carry all the load alone nor the responsibility associated with it. Though I am certain God will not abandon me and that Mary will always be my helper, still it would greatly console me to have you with me. Do not be surprised at this, in spite of the squalls that have blown up: I think God allowed them that more and more we might be united in the intimate love of the Holy Heart of Mary.

He then went on to speak of his close collaborators, especially Fr Schwindenhammer:

Do not think I am dissatisfied with my confreres: they are good, pious, talented but young and inexperienced. God apparently does not want them to enter into the foundation of the work. They have

not received that grace, as we have . . ., (October 14, 1847: N.D. IX, pp. 282/3).

Already on April 27 he had written: *I am very much aware of what we should do together: to keep silent and calm . . . on all that we are concerned about, in order to firmly establish the work of God.*

For this we need to be together: that we should act together has always appeared to me to be God's plan and that we should be guided only by His Spirit . . . for that we must remain perfectly united.

In the same letter he also said: *Of all my confreres you are the one the thought and memory of whom gives me most joy and consolation, for you are the one to whom I am most strongly attached: with you I can speak freely of what is deepest in me . . .* (N.D. IX, p. 135).

Libermann's idea of having le Vavas seur close to him became almost obsessive: *When I said I need you here I was not thinking of the immediate . . . we do not need you just now but at some future date . . . perhaps in 2 or 3 years or even more. It will depend on how things go in Guinea. My reason for wanting you, for considering it necessary that you come, is that the Rules must be revised and prepared for the approval of the Holy See,* (N.D. X, pp. 82/93).

When Libermann was considering the nomination of Bishops, Mgr Monnet suggested le Vavas seur for the see of St Denis (Bourbon). Libermann wrote to him about this:

Mgr Monnet took steps to present your name but has so little influence that he would not be listened to anyhow . . .

I myself preserved perfect neutrality in the matter. I believe you would do more good by remaining in the service of the Congregation than if you were head of a Colony. You were the one first inspired by God to found our Work: it seems to me He wants you to support it. Given my weak constitution, I think I have not long to live and so we need you. I did not feel I should take any steps to have you appointed Bishop of St Denis: yet I was also afraid that I might be resisting God's interests for those of the Society. I therefore did nothing to oppose Mgr Monnet's nomination. I now have the satisfaction of knowing that God has decided in my favour. Blessed be His Holy Name, (N.D. XI, pp. 132/3).

In the same letter Libermann says: *I went through some bad times during my illness and often felt the need to talk to you. I was, at least I thought I was, in danger. The whole time I could only think of you. What a support it would have been to have you*

near me. I must confess I suffered greatly to see myself at death's door and the Congregation abandoned . . .

. . . I was indeed most anxious about the Congregation. Who knows if my present weak state and this long illness which saps my energy for the past three months was not allowed to lead you to this hour, that His Divine Will for you might be fulfilled? Another thing, were you with me I could leave all the administrative work to you and devote myself entirely to forming the novices and writing letters of direction to the missionaries. But, whatever the Community decides I shall accept . . ., (N.D. XI, p. 134).

In a letter of December 28 1849, he insists with le Vavas seur: *. . . I need your presence here badly, especially now that the works of the Congregation are growing. Were I to fall ill again, there is no one here to replace me . . . True, I don't manage things well but my age, the direction already set, the impetus given and my title of Superior, all mean that things go forward nevertheless, whereas the others lack age and experience in handling affairs. That lack is evident in all without exception. Who then could succeed me? There is something wanting in each one: you alone seem destined by God for this task. It would also be well for you to be present in case I died . . ., (N.D. XI, pp. 324/5).* Early in March le Vavas seur arrived in Paris.

Fr le Vavas seur is spending a few days with me. He is in excellent health, wrote Libermann to Fr Collin on March 11, 1850, as you can surmise, his arrival gives me great joy . . . While well at the moment, I still consider it necessary for M. le Vavas seur to remain with me here, (N.D. XI, p. 121).

Someone passing through from Gorée had said that Father le Vavas seur and some other priests had been expelled from Bourbon for interference in the elections there, (Letter to Mgr Kobès, April 28, 1850: N.D. XIII, p. 168).

In a letter of Libermann to the then Superior of Bourbon, written in 1846, he said: *I am delighted you are so open with M. le Vavas seur. You will find few Communities with a more worthy Superior: his priestly zeal, his charity, humility and spiritual insights are precious. Nor is natural ability lacking. He therefore deserves all the confidence you place in him, (N.D. VI, p. 413).*

Ideal Superior of the Community of Bourbon, could not le Vavas seur also be an ideal Superior for the Congregation as a whole? This undoubtedly was the thinking of Libermann at the time and, had he to choose his successor before May 1850, le Vavas seur rather than Schwindenhammer would have been the choice.

At the time of the actual choice the opinion of the members of the Council was the same: they expected Libermann to indicate le Vavasseur, who was held in high esteem by all. He was a man of great natural and supernatural gifts, had had a valuable missionary experience and enjoyed the support of every one. He was also a man of mature years.

On the other hand, M. Schwindenhammer was too young – only thirty-five –, without missionary experience and unacceptable to a large part of the Congregation especially in Africa.

* * *

After this lengthy parenthesis on the two possible candidates let us now return to the actual day on which Libermann chose his successor.

Two days had passed, says Fr le Vavasseur, I reminded him of his promise. Meantime, Fr Schwindenhammer had arrived and I asked him if I could bring him in. He agreed. When M. Schwindenhammer arrived, he placed one of us on either side of the bed and said: "Now tell me what you think". I had already told him that I thought Mr Schwindenhammer should be Superior but that he maintained it should be I.

Anyhow, we gave our reasons, to which he listened carefully. Then he turned to Mr Schwindenhammer and said: "*I'm afraid you are the one who must sacrifice himself*", (The Venerable Father, by Maurice Briault, p. 427).

* * *

If things were as we have presented them, we may ask why did Libermann prefer Schwindenhammer to le Vavasseur?

If he had had to make a choice before May, 1850, he would surely have chosen the former Superior of Bourbon but something happened in mid-May of that year, of which Libermann took a serious view.

On May 7, 1850, Fr Le Vavasseur left Paris on a propaganda visit to several small seminaries in France: Metz, Nancy, St Denis and Strasbourg. His aim was *to make works of the Congregation known*, (N.D. XII, p. 186; see also SPIRITAN PAPERS, No 5, p. 48).

Undoubtedly, he heard much criticism of the priests trained or sent out by the Seminary of the Holy Ghost, Formerly highly esteemed, the alumni of more recent years had a bad reputation. Some went so far as to suggest to le Vavas seur that the best thing the Congregation could do in its own interest was to close the Seminary of the Holy Ghost.

Le Vavas seur, always ardent, radical and impressionable, accepted this and wrote to Libermann proposing that *the Seminary be dissolved and... the Colonies abandoned* (SPIRITAN PAPERS, No 5, pp. 40/1).

Libermann began to have doubts about Le Vavas seur from that moment. He observed that his temptations were cyclic, recurring every 4 years: 1842, 1846, 1850. Up to that time these temptations had always been overcome – thanks to Libermann's influence over him: but after Libermann's death, on his own, what might happen?

Libermann wrote him a letter on *The Holy Feast of Pentecost, 1850: You suggest we close the Seminary... that would be a grave mistake, one of the greatest wrongs our poor little Congregation could offer God... such a step would be our total undoing for it would indeed merit our abandonment by God...*

My own view is that without seriously opposing God's Will, we cannot abandon either the Seminary or the Colonies... The work of the Congregation is difficult, of course... is that a reason for giving it up?... I think therefore that we should continue to be responsible for this house... while taking all necessary steps to make it holy, (N.D. XII, p. 199; SPIRITAN PAPERS, No 5, pp. 41/42).

Libermann wrote again on July 17, an excellent letter, full of supernatural vigour. Towards the end he says: *Briefly... if you do not come to grips with yourself, you'll never be anything but a good assault soldier, or at best an able officer capable of leading his company in action... God wants more from you than that,* (N.D. XII, p. 321). In Libermann's thinking, God wanted to make le Vavas seur a *General*. At the end of his life Libermann had it in his power to do this. He chose not to: he was afraid.

With all you have said in my presence, having weighed it before God, I find you have drive, much drive: but I do not find in you wisdom, experience or anything else indicative of the Spirit of God... At times, thinking over this, I ask: what would happen the Congregation if Mr le Vavas seur were to be placed at its head as I so ardently wish? If it goes along his way, this poor little Congregation will be in its last agony two months after my own death. This

is a discouraging thought: fortunately, it does not last long, for I say to myself that it is not possible that God would have placed you at my side to demolish what He wished to build up. Had that been so, He would have chosen one less fervent, less zealous for His glory, (N.D. XII, p. 37).

That then seems to have been what Libermann decided in the end: Schwindenhammer would be a safer bet!

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