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### 08. Relations between the Congregation and the Missions

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## Relations between the Congregation and the Missions

*To Fr. Boulanger, in the mission of Our Lady of the Gambia<sup>1</sup>*

*In this letter to Fr. Boulanger, a missionary in Senegambia, Libermann gives guidance on financial administration. He then moves on to a subject which was one of his greatest concerns towards the end of his life: how to preserve the unity of the Congregation when faced with potentially conflicting allegiances in the mission fields.*

November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1850

Dear Fr. Boulanger,

It is a long time since I last wrote to you. I feel the need to do so, even though I have nothing special to say. I have just written a long letter to Bishop Kobès about several matters, so no doubt he will bring you up to date. But there is one question that I raised with him which I will repeat here: it concerns finance. Your bills hit poor Fr. Briot, the bursar, like a hail of bullets! I had just informed him that the Propagation of the Faith<sup>2</sup> is not likely to increase its generosity at the moment. The budget for Guinea this year is the same as last year; they claim that the missionaries are spending too much, as M. Choiselat<sup>3</sup> told me in the nicest possible way. If their appeals this year are good, I hope to receive slightly more from them, but not much. So we will have to economise, but in such a way

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<sup>1</sup> N.D. XII, pp. 462-469

<sup>2</sup> This refers to the "Propagation of the Faith", a society for giving financial aid to missionaries that was based in Lyons, France.

<sup>3</sup> M. Gallien Choiselat, born in Provins in 1784, was the general bursar for the Propagation of the Faith. He died in 1853.

that you in the Mission will not fall sick and our novices here will not die of starvation!

The novitiate will not be able to survive without your cooperation and help in this economising ... Next year will be even worse than this, and if within 2-3 years time we have not found further sources of income, we will have no alternative but to dip into the savings made by the Seminary in Paris for the support of the students there. These savings come largely from the building in the corner of the quadrangle of the Seminary that we have rented out. The total would be no more than 10,000 francs so the novitiate would suffer greatly. At present, we have around 30 students, 10 novices and 12-14 brothers. To them must be added the directors, the Belgian and the workers, so the total personnel works out at around 60 people. The mission of Bourbon has nothing to give us and that of Mauritius has forgotten all about us, even though they have been able to build chapels to the cost of 6,000 francs.

I did not give all these details about finance to Bishop Kobès so as not to upset him, because I have talked to him so much about money recently. But I forgot to tell him one thing that I would ask you to pass on to him. The three Sisters of Castres were not able to travel to Africa with Fr. Arlabosse<sup>1</sup>, so their superior asked me to approach the Minister to arrange their passage. Shortly after Fr. Arlabosse left, I learnt of the discontent of the Propagation of the Faith that I mentioned above and I feared our subsidies would be reduced. Moreover, I felt uneasy that more bills could come to light which would drain the allocation already given us even further, so I could not take the risk of sending the Sisters for the time being. I advised the Superior to postpone their departure, because of the case that was in progress regarding their house in Dakar and our uncertainty as to what the Propagation would give us

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<sup>1</sup> See Index

this year. Please pass this on to Bishop Kobès in my name because I will not be able to write to him again for the next few weeks.

I talked to Bishop Kobès about the steps that should be taken to maintain unity between the communities of Guinea and between them and the Mother House. I am convinced that the African climate has something to do with the suspicion and false ideas about us that some of our dear confreres seem to be entertaining; such touchiness can easily degenerate into general discontent. It is essential that we establish a union and cohesion between the communities in Guinea and ourselves in Paris, otherwise the spirit of God will not dwell amongst us. The missionaries of Guinea must not be, above all, men of Guinea: they must be primarily men of God and the Church. Secondly, their allegiance must be to the Congregation to which God has given them and to which they are lovingly attached. It is through this Congregation and by the will of God that they have been sent to work for the salvation of souls in Guinea. In that country, as anywhere else, they remain members of that religious body to which God has given them. If Guinea becomes their primary allegiance and the Congregation is secondary for them, then this cohesion and unity of hearts of which I am talking becomes impossible. What I have said about Guinea is equally valid for any other mission. If the Congregation is seen as something secondary that can be sacrificed to the interests of the Mission, it will be torn to pieces. Soon there would be as many separate societies as there are missions, having nothing in common but the name and the rule – and even those would not last long.

I am not sure exactly how things stand in Guinea in this regard. My fears are based on certain symptoms that fill me with alarm:

- The erroneous ideas that some confreres have about us, false impressions that they have formed regarding our degree of interest in the mission;
- The speed with which some get annoyed with us and suspect the existence of things which are simply a product of their own imaginations;
- The absence of the regular reports that the superiors are obliged to send me;
- The lack of friendly relations between the confreres in Guinea and those in France, including their one-time directors from when they were in formation;
- The bad reaction (according to Frs. Gravière and Ronarc'h) that my letters to the communities have provoked.

All of these are not proofs, but they are indications or symptoms which are disturbing, and they should urge us on to renewed efforts to establish a better spirit and a greater degree of unity amongst us.

The source of the problem could be some erroneous conclusions that have been drawn from premises which are correct. The argument would go something like this: the aim we have in joining this Congregation is Mission and the Congregation, in fact, has no other end but that. It only exists to look after and sanctify its missionaries. Therefore one can conclude that the Congregation is secondary.

To that I would reply as follows: the essential aim of the Congregation is the apostolate and those who join will be employed by her, according to its aim, intentions and spirit, to work in the missions that have been confided to her by the Holy See. It follows that all should apply themselves with complete dedication wherever they are employed, but within the Congregation and according to its intentions and spirit. Therefore, the Congregation is not and cannot be secondary.

Attachment to the Congregation is of the essence of the commitment. We make our vows *in* the Congregation and not *to* the Mission. Our ties with the Congregation are for ever, whereas our commitment to the Mission is only for as long as we are attached to it. There is no doubt that while our primary attachment is to the Congregation, we should still have a great love and devotion for the particular mission to which we have been sent. But one thing is sure: if we do not establish the principle which I have been describing, then within fifteen years, most of the missionaries will have lost their way and their efforts will not receive God's blessing.

Another false idea is that since the Vicars Apostolic have been appointed by the Holy See, the mission belongs to them and ceases to be a mission of the Congregation. It follows, sometimes without even noticing it, that a missionary sees himself as belonging to the Vicar Apostolic and no longer to the Congregation. So there are two distinct sides: the Vicar Apostolic and the Congregation. The Vicar comes first, the Congregation a distant second. There are very dangerous errors in this way of thinking, not just for the Congregation but also for the Mission. The first error is that the Mission is in no way withdrawn from the Congregation but remains confided to it. The Propaganda never talks to me of "Bishop Bessieux's Mission" but "your Congregation's mission". It was given to the Congregation on the resignation of Bishop Barron. A bishop was granted at my request and the choice of the Vicar Apostolic was left to me and he was drawn from the Congregation.

The Holy See, of course, does not and cannot waive its authority over the Mission. The Propaganda alone gives the powers, directly or indirectly. It alone has the administration and direction of the Mission and it confides these powers to the Vicar Apostolic in matters spiritual and temporal. Thus the Vicar Apostolic has full authority over the missionaries for

everything that concerns their work. But the idea that the Mission belongs to the Vicar Apostolic, not the Congregation, could lead to dangerous conclusions and result in great harm for both the Mission and the Congregation.

It would also be a serious error to divide the Mission and the Congregation into two separate parts. For me, this idea is so pernicious that I would fear the devil would take advantage of it and plant it in the mind of everybody. If the missionaries are all attached to the Head of Mission, they will detach themselves from the Congregation, dividing the apostolic project in two. As I have already said, this will harm both the Mission and the Congregation.

Then, if later some missionaries become dissatisfied with the Vicar Apostolic, this concept of the two parts will divide the missionaries, separate the mission from the Mother House and cause all manner of problems for the Vicar Apostolic. There is no need to elaborate further on this point. Therefore, the missionaries should only think in terms of unity: the unity of the Congregation to which they belong and the unity of the bishops with the Congregation. The Bishops are one with the Congregation to which they belong; they are at the head of the Mission which has been confided to the Congregation. The missionaries' role is not to speculate: it is for them to obey both the Bishop and the Superiors.

It is crucial that the more senior missionaries among you work closely with the bishops to see that the confreres of Guinea rid their minds of this kind of distinction and that their conversation is not critical of the Mother House or any of its members. These rash judgements must disappear. I have heard it said by some that we are not very interested in the Mission, but this, of course, is nonsense. They must be encouraged to love the Mother House and to take an interest in what is happening there. Persuade them to write to their confreres at home and share the news of the Mission with

them. The confreres here will reply and let them know what is happening in France. This sort of loving communication can only produce good results.

I am very anxious about all this. God's blessing will be with us if we are truly united, but not if we are at odds with one another. The future or the ruin of the Congregation hangs on this unity. I hope all the confreres and the Bishops will understand this and work untiringly towards a perfect unanimity.

All goes well here. Fr. Hardy has left us at last. Fr. Gaultier is very happy and the Seminary is fine. There are not many students, but they are committed and observe the rule well. This resulted from sending fifteen of them away and admitting another four, on condition that they will leave with the Bishops of the colonies. Everything is progressing well at Gard.

I have no time to give you any more news. I am soon going to lock myself away in my room to concentrate on writing to our confreres on the Missions. From now on, I should have more time. I will write some letters each month and keep abreast of my correspondence with you all.

Yours in Jesus and Mary,

*F. Libermann, priest*

P.S. I am very anxious to get some news; it is a long time since I heard from Gabon and Senegambia.