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"MEMORANDUM OF SOME MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION... AGAINST THE ADMINIS- TRATION OF FR SCHWINDENHAMMER"

The suggestion of Libermann that M. Schwindenhammer should succeed him was taken by all the members of the Congregation as an order. On February 12, those in Paris wrote to the Cardinal-Prefect of Propaganda telling him about these events which touched them most closely: the death of Our Venerable Father and the election of M. Ignatius Schwindenhammer as Vicar-General. They sought definitive approval of their choice of the latter. The letter bore the signatures of all present. (SPIRITAN PAPERS, No 3, p. 19).

They "wished to proceed to a definitive election without waiting for the opinions our confreres on the missions have the right to express" (so reads this document). Alternatively, they asked him to issue a Decree "by reason of his supreme authority, which would make the Vicar General's election as such into a definitive confirmation of him as Superior General". The Holy See did not agree and a whole year would pass before Father Schwindenhammer could be elected Superior General.

In principle, this was an election for life. Nonetheless, "every three years the six members of the General Council should meet – some members having the right to vote – to assess whether or not it was opportune to elect a new Superior General".

It was also agreed that such a request should be submitted to the Holy See for approval on condition that it was requested by four of the six Councillors.

Schwindenhammer having been elected in 1853, such a meeting took place in 1856. It would seem to have been the only one: there is no record of others after this date.

At the end of the 1867 Retreat, Fr Collin asked Fr le Vavas seur if it was not time for the triennial Meeting. Having himself been elected Councillor in September, 1864, he was in a position to do so.

Yes, came the reply, it was time. On Wednesday, August 28 of that year the meeting assembled. Those present under diverse titles were: Fathers le Vavasseur, Gauthier, Léon le Vavasseur, Delaplace, Collin, Blanpin, F. X. Libermann, Gravère, Burg; and Mgr Kobès.

The meeting proper began in the afternoon. It was unanimously agreed that there was no reason to change the Superior General but that "the occasion provided an opportunity of making some remarks to the Very Reverend Father in the interests of the Congregation". In spite of Father le Vavasseur's objections, each member was asked to submit the remarks he thought useful. They then retired to meet again next day, Thursday, August 29.

On the evening of August 28, Fr Schwindenhammer was warned by Fr le Vavasseur and Fr Delaplace of what was afoot. Fr Schwindenhammer sat up most of the night composing a letter explaining to the members of the triennial Meeting why their procedure was illegal. . . .

The following day, this long document was remitted to Fr Gauthier. When he proposed to read it to the assembly, the leading spirits (Frs Collin and François Xavier Libermann, and Mgr Kobès) objected. They maintained this was "against the rule that said the Superior could not intervene in the meeting, since he was the one who was the subject of its deliberations". The letter was not therefore read and the facts concerning the Superior General and his attitudes were discussed. As a result, a memorandum was drawn up and signed by all for presentation to him.

This document is missing. In substance it would appear it resembled one I discovered in the Archives of Propaganda, of which I shall speak later. That fortunately was not destroyed though Fr Schwindenhammer had asked that it should be.

Half-an-hour after the meeting closed, Fr Gauthier presented this document to Fr Schwindenhammer. He refused to accept it: since they had not wished to receive his, he would refuse to accept theirs!

After lunch on August 30, he met two of his Assistants in private: Frs le Vavasseur and Gauthier. He outlined for them his plan of action. He would either resign at once and ask for a Vicar General to be appointed, or he would call a General Chapter and put the question to them. He himself in the meantime would limit his activities to handling current business. . . . He pretended to be won by a third solution proposed:

to try to win back the sheep who had strayed! In the end, that was the line taken.

On Friday, August 30, he called the General Council together to reply to their letter of the previous day. The argument ran: a triennial Meeting has the right to vote only but not to discuss, still less to make remarks. . . Moreover Mgr Kobès alone, an ex officio member, had legitimately been called to attend . . .

He stressed in particular the great harm done to the Congregation by calling his authority in question. Were it to become known, one could imagine what the next triennial Meeting would be like: all the discontented ones would send in complaints to Councillors willing to listen to them . . .

The Council met again on Monday, September 2, with the intention of examining the feelings and dispositions of the members of the Council themselves and to decide on what stance they should adopt.

Frs Gravière, Libermann and Collin declared they were not opposed to the Superior General but they had considered it a duty in conscience to point out weaknesses in his administration. Fr Collin added that he recognised he had been mistaken. Fr Burg said he felt towards the Very Rev. Father General as a son to his father. Fr Gauthier voiced similar sentiments. Fr le Vavasseur said he had done all he could to avoid what had happened but in vain.

Fr Schwindenhammer expressed his joy at their good dispositions. He praised Fr Collin in particular for his generous retraction. He then declared null and void the acts of this triennial Meeting but in view of their present good will, he would take as received, officiously not officially, the document they had presented, in order to see what they reproached him with, so that he might answer them without seeking to justify himself.

He then passed in review the accusations made against him in the document. These were:

1. Too independent in action: not consulting Assistant;
2. Inclined to follow too much his own view of things in his conduct of the affairs of the Congregation;
3. Some regrettable statements in Circulars, which would not have been approved if previously submitted to the Council;
4. Circulars themselves too long and too frequent;
5. Too much time devoted to the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny and to the Apostolic Work;

6. Absence from morning prayer . . . lack of a spirit of poverty, humility and simplicity . . . dresses different to other members ;

7. The instructions at the Annual Retreat are not sufficiently well adapted to the needs of the confreres; hence the desire that a General Chapter be called without delay.

His conclusion from these points is quite clear: the document is not only illegal but has not been sufficiently thought out; well-intentioned perhaps but illusory and excessively ebullient: evidently, it has not been examined in depth. There is no mention in it of good done, no word of praise; only blame and criticism . . .

Another meeting of the Council was held on Sept 3. Fr Schwindenhammer again referred to Frs Collin and Gravière, who had confessed their mistake. There only remained the settling of accounts with Mgr Kobès and Fr F. X. Libermann.

This latter had difficulties with him and was not suitable for his present responsibilities: observations made to him had produced only sterile promises: he would therefore have to accept a change of employment. . . Mgr Kobès was absent: he had contracted a debt and had asked the Congregation to go guarantor: he spent too much money too freely: Fr le Vavas seur would be instructed to write to him.

Once again, the first meeting was null and void: a second was asked for. It took place in M. Gauthier's room and only Councillors were present.

In a post-script to the Minutes of this meeting, it is stated that Fr F. X. Libermann, who was the first to raise these contentious matters "admits his mistake but denies he did an injury to the Very Rev. Father" . . . "although in the end, after a long correspondence and many interventions, he did finally admit this also in a letter dated October 12 . . .".

Father le Vavas seur did in fact write a strongly-worded letter to Mgr Kobès. . . who replied on September 30, refusing to discuss the problem. "Let God be the judge. . . Have me removed if you want to: you will in that have fulfilled the most ardent desire of my heart. . ." ¹.

¹ These notes are excerpts of a very succinct account made by Father Littner from the 96-page document of February 15, 1868, drawn up by Father Barillec. The document may be found in the Archives in Paris, No. B. 34, III.

Libermann wrote a long letter to Mgr Kobès on April 26, 1851, with reference to the various faults attributed by the missionaries in Guinea to Father Schwindenhammer. A note has been added to this by Schwindenhammer:

"Re-reading this passage 15 years later, I try to recall the circumstances which gave rise to this correspondence against me. The faults in question were so very vague and imprecise that I failed to recognise them then. Still less can I recall them to-day. It seems to me that they arose out of my style, my way of acting. . . and from the great difference in virtue and experience between me and our Venerable Father. The position of confidence I held though still very young and – to a degree – the narrow-mindedness and readiness to take offence of many confreres as young and inexperienced as I myself. The Venerable Father often said people were not reasonable about me: they did not really know me and judged by appearances only. In adding this note, it is not my intention to apportion blame nor to minimise my own faults past and present", (N.D. XIII, p. 120).

What Father Schwindenhammer wrote was true at least in part. I believe however his faults were very real and not corrected at the time of this note: this is evident from what we have said so far. It would certainly appear that by adding this note Fr Schwindenhammer was seeking to exonerate himself at the implacable Bar of History. I also ask why the document of the triennial Meeting of 1867 is no longer extant to-day? This question is one to which I think I have found the answer.

On July 25, 1977, I found in the Archives of Propaganda a "Memorandum of some members of the Congregation addressed to the Sacred Congregation against the administration of Fr Schwindenhammer" which began:

"Being witnesses of several fairly serious abuses that have infiltrated the Congregation of the Holy Ghost and the Holy Heart of Mary, some members of this Congregation have considered it their duty to refer to Your Eminence and to the Sacred Congregation over which you preside. They do so because they consider these abuses harmful to the welfare of our Society, of which the present Superior General is Father Schwindenhammer, and an impediment to its development. . ." Some lines later we read:

"Here then are the points which we would draw to the attention of Your Eminence.

1. Irregularities in the admission of subjects to the Novitiate, Profession and Ordination;
2. De facto unlimited authority exercised by Superior General and absence of any serious control over this;
3. End of the Congregation too vast, deviation from the first end: works too numerous and too varied;
4. Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny and the Apostolic Work directed by our Superior General and not without some abuses;
5. Coadjutor-Brothers subjected to a different Rule".

This document, dated August 1, 1868, is a long one: my own type-script of it ran to 18 pages. It is also unsigned, though this does not mean it was anonymous. One wonders if it could not have been enclosed in a letter written to Propaganda by Mgr Kobès on August 9, 1868. It would seem so. This document is the last word we have from the now well-known triennial Meeting of which we have been speaking.

Father Schwindenhammer was aware of the existence of this Memorandum. Two years later he wrote to the Cardinal Prefect: "It was kind of you not to attach any importance to the anonymous document sent you two years ago against my administration". . . He later in the letter asked the Cardinal to have the document destroyed as "not deserving any credence: if kept in the Archives of Propaganda it could give rise to regrettable errors about our Institute in the future. "He hints that he knows who the author is and tries to discredit him. As we have seen, the document was not destroyed: it is still in existence.

* * *

In presenting these facts, I have no desire to belittle the character of Father Schwindenhammer: already amongst our Superiors General he is known as "the badly-liked one". Of course he had his faults: he also had a deep love of the Congregation and governed it with total dedication for 29 years. Finally, our Ven Father esteemed him affectionately and chose him as his successor: for this reason alone, even if there were no other he should command our affection also.

Amadeu Martins