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01. Mary watches over her missionary family

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Mary watches over her missionary family

To Father Desgenettes¹

Father Desgenettes² was parish priest of the church of Our Lady of Victories in Paris. It was the cradle of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary. Libermann wrote this "description of events" that follows at the request of Father Desgenettes. He wanted to let everybody know of the continual graces received through Mary by his Congregation, both as regards its foundation (for example, the astonishing success of Libermann's efforts in Rome) and the first years of its existence. The Congregation is truly the work of Mary's Heart, which is both eminently apostolic and the refuge of sinners.

9th February 1844

Very dear and venerable Father,

As soon as Father de Brandt informed me that you wanted a description of our "Work for the Black Peoples", I got down to writing it. However, I was so often interrupted, that I could not finish it as quickly as I would have liked. I presume you will not publish everything written here in your newsletter. I want to give you plenty of details, so that you can decide for yourself what to include, using the prudence you have received from God. I think it would be better if you talk about your generosity to us, because that is such an important element of my story; but please do not insert the whole letter as such because I would not be able to compose it sufficiently well for that. Moreover, there are some people who are opposed to us and they would only say that I wrote it with a view to boasting about ourselves. So I will tell you my tale, like a child talking to his father, with all simplicity and confidence.

¹ N. D. VI, pp. 37-48

² See Index of Names

It is absolutely certain that our little Work for the Black Peoples owes both its foundation and the progress it has made in the few short years of its existence to the powerful protection of the Most Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary. All the good confreres who started and continue this work with me are convinced of that and our hearts are full of gratitude towards Mary.

From the start, the *Archconfraternity of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Refuge of Sinners*, has interceded for this little work before our good Mother. The principal members who were to begin the work, had not yet been decided upon, the obstacles facing it seemed insurmountable, but the fervent prayers of this holy confraternity obtained what at first sight appeared to be impossible. From its very beginning, our confidence in this difficult undertaking was totally in the goodness of the Heart of our most holy Mother. The problems far outweighed our weakness, and from a rational point of view, we regarded our aims as unattainable. At the same time, we had a very strong feeling that we would succeed. On the one hand I felt very sad and did not dare broadcast the idea of our project, because it seemed to me nothing but folly as far as the eye could see, and every wise person would probably think the same. On the other hand, I felt great trust in the most holy Heart of Mary, which made me sure of success. The few people to whom I did reveal my plans criticised and discouraged me. In spite of all that, I could not stop myself going forward, for the great feeling of confidence I had stopped me from listening to what people were saying to discourage me. But I still wanted to be sure what God wanted, so I decided to use the best possible means to learn the truth.

That is why, at the beginning of 1840, I set out for Rome, where Our Lord gives his enlightenment to those who guide the Church. I arrived without any testimonials or letters of

recommendation of any kind and I looked for no protector to help me carry out my plans, or to seek admission for me into the corridors of power. My only aim was to find the will of God and I was terrified of doing anything which would involve relying on myself. As a result, my friends often criticised me for remaining inactive.

But I had another reason. My plan seemed so contrary to the ordinary rules of prudence that I was convinced, in advance, that all those from whom I would ask official recognition would reject me. I had already met with plenty of difficulties, and I was not looking for new ones. I only had my confidence in Mary to keep me going. I spent two months without making a move, so as to learn how things are done in Rome. I had to devote much time to that, because I knew nobody who could help me to learn how to go about things. Everybody to whom I described my project got angry with me and regarded my idea as pure fantasy. That was partly because I had arrived in Rome without any testimonial or letters of recommendation. At the end of eight weeks, I wrote a memorandum, in which I described the essence of our plan. I presented it to Bishop, now Cardinal, Cadolini, who was then the secretary to Propaganda Fide¹. After that, I returned to my solitude and waited for God's command.

I was not in sacred Orders - my state of health seemed to be an insuperable obstacle to that - and here I was presenting myself as the leader of a work which was pre-eminently for priests. Why should Propaganda Fide bother with my plan, far less agree to it? I lost all hope of ever obtaining a reply to my memorandum, especially when at the end of another two months, I had not still heard a word. But I still took no steps to promote my affair. The usefulness of the work I was proposing

¹ The Roman Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples

spoke strongly in our favour, but what set my mind at rest above all was the confidence I felt in the goodness of the most holy heart of Mary, together with the frequent and fervent prayers of the *Archconfraternity* in Paris.

I was in a strange situation. My reason told me that there was no possible chance of success, which meant that God was rejecting the work. On the other hand, my heart was full of a certainty that we would not fail. My confidence was such, that at the very moment when all seemed lost, I got down seriously to composing a plan of action, the steps we needed to follow for carrying it out, and the spirit in which we would live it. In other words, I started writing a rule.

In the midst of my efforts, very important in their own way, a strange thing occurred in which I saw the hand of Mary and from which I received great encouragement. Here is what happened. Only Father Tisserant was convinced that we should consecrate our work to the most holy Heart of Mary. Father Le Vavasseur and I did not think that an apostolic enterprise should be consecrated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, even though my whole confidence rested on that most holy Heart. I thought that the Society should be consecrated to some perfect model of all the fundamental virtues of the apostolate. I don't know why I failed to see that we would find all of that in the devotion to the most holy and immaculate Heart of Mary.

So I fixed my attention on another object of devotion – that of the Cross. I had gone to a lot of trouble to try and write down a rule for the new society. But it was impossible to find a single idea because my mind went completely blank. I visited the seven most important churches in Rome, and also decided to include some churches where there was a particular devotion to Our Lady. Without quite knowing why, I found myself

deciding to consecrate our work to the most holy Heart of Mary. I went back home and immediately got down to work. I then saw everything so clearly that with a single glance I had a complete view of everything, its whole complexity down to the last detail. It was an inexpressible joy and consolation for me.

In the course of this work, especially in the explanation of the particular details, certain difficulties arose, and I couldn't see any way out of them. So I went back to some of my churches of Marian devotion, (St. Mary Major, Saint Mary in Trastevere, The Madonna of Childbirth in the church of the Augustinians, and Our Lady of Peace). When I returned home, I only had to pick up the pen and the difficulties would melt away and what was indistinct became as clear as the day.

While I was busy writing the Rule, the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda Fide wrote to France to get information about me. In the meantime, testimonials were sent to me which some priests advised me to present to the Propaganda. My memorandum was examined by the Congregation de Propaganda Fide and at the end of three months, Cardinal Fransoni asked where I was, and learned that I was still in Rome. All that time I had made no attempt at moving matters forward, for I had not even gone to his office. I lived a very retiring life and was content to leave the whole affair in the hands of God and Mary. My reason was that if God wanted this work, then my memorandum was sufficient, since the good people who now had it in their hands desired the glory of God even more than I did. I wanted God to decide everything.

The cardinal wrote me an encouraging letter in the name of the Propaganda Fide. He said, in substance, that the Sacred Congregation, while reserving until later the official recognition of our project, had found it, on a first reading, good and useful for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. The Sacred

Congregation also praised our commitment and his Eminence finished by saying that he prayed that Almighty God would give me health enough to be ordained a priest and so be able to devote myself completely to this holy work. The prayer of such a good person was heard and my health was restored.

Although my health was better, I still had the greatest difficulty in getting ordained; and I was reluctant to take any steps myself to achieve this. In fact, I did nothing because Mary did it for me. I made a pilgrimage to Loreto while still unsure about everything. During this time and without my knowledge, someone spoke on my behalf to one of the most important bishops in France and he offered to ordain me. On my return to Rome, I found a letter containing that news. I therefore went back to France, and the bishop gave me minor orders. Finally, the bishop of Amiens ordained me a priest.

We began our enterprise under the protection and with the blessing of the bishop of Amiens, who was very generous towards us. There were three of us. It was then that the protection of the most immaculate Heart of Mary revealed itself yet again. Some very good and wise people almost destroyed everything by sowing seeds of contention amongst us. It is true that they were full of good intentions as they spoke to one of the principal founders of the work, but I thought everything was lost, unless Mary intervened. Those harmful words, repeated often enough, made such an impression on my confrere, that during the first two months, he did not suspect that it was all a temptation. I was deeply worried and could not find a remedy.

Three days before the feast of the Presentation¹, I had the idea of recommending the affair to the Most Holy Heart of

¹ Feast of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple, 21st November

Mary. I spent those three days in prayer and when the feast day arrived, it was as if a revolution had taken place in the heart of this dear confrere. He came to see me, saying that the Most Holy Virgin had obtained for him a complete change of heart. He then explained to me all that had passed in his soul and made a firm resolution to oppose similar temptations with all his power. As soon as he felt any feelings of disharmony coming on, he immediately had recourse to Mary and once again his prayer was heard. These battles continued until the beginning of February. Towards the end of January he went to Paris to consecrate himself to the Most Holy Heart of Mary at the foot of the altar dedicated to Our Lady of Victories. He wanted to be freed from this evil temptation which had completely turned him against me. He passed the whole night preceding the feast of the Purification¹ in front of the altar of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and was completely healed. He told me, in his letter, that he had obtained the grace of having a totally different opinion of me and since then, the most perfect union has reigned between us.

Just about this time, we had another grace from the Immaculate Heart of Mary. That was the mission of Haiti, which was one of those which had come to our attention and which was the first we had proposed to ourselves as fulfilling the reason for our existence together. Just as the Most Holy Heart of Mary had brought us together, Mary wished to make us understand that we could expect everything from her intercession. To prove it, our two large missions, Haiti and Guinea, were given to us at the church of Our Lady of Victories in Paris. You know what happened better than I do, for it was through you that the holy Mother of God gave us these two missions.

¹ Now known as the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, 2nd February

However, once again the situation in Haiti became difficult and we were in a crisis concerning our work here at home. We had, at that moment, five missionaries ready to leave and nowhere to send them. I made the journey to Paris to place our work in the care of the Most Holy Heart of Mary and at the same time to find out exactly how the land lay. I found things to be such that there was no hope whatever of finding a mission for our men before eighteen months or two years had passed.

I can still remember that when I was coming down the steps of Our Lady of Victories, I said to you, "*Father, we are in an embarrassing situation.*" "*Why do you say that?*", you replied. I said, "*We have nowhere to go.*" You said, "*How is that? Are you in financial difficulties?*" I replied, "*Not at all. The Holy Virgin would never let us run short of funds. But we don't know where to go. Every door is closed to us.*" You tried to console me, but there was no need of that. In spite of the distressful state of affairs, I actually felt no fear. I cannot explain why I was so certain for I had no reason to be optimistic, except that my mind was continually turned towards the Holy Heart of Mary and I felt a calm and an assurance based on I know not what. I well remember saying to you, seated beside your fire, that I was absolutely sure that we would soon have a mission, that I was extremely calm and that I had no explanation for my tranquillity, except that the Heart of Mary was preparing a mission for us and that this good Mother was expecting me to wait calmly for a solution to our problem. I left Paris that same day.

The very next day, Bishop Barron, Vicar Apostolic of Guinea, came to pay homage to Mary at the altar of her Most Immaculate Heart at Our Lady of Victories. He spoke to you about his vast Vicariate in Africa and of his great need for priests. A strange thing happened, which I cannot explain from

a natural point of view: it never crossed your mind to mention our foundation to him! The evening before, you had been so sympathetic to us in our embarrassing situation; but when you were offered such a wonderful opportunity to help your children, the children of the Most Holy Heart of Mary, you did not even think of us! In my opinion, there can be only one possible explanation: Mary wished to show us that we would receive everything through her Immaculate Heart. After you and the Vicar Apostolic of Guinea had talked, you went to the altar of the Most Immaculate Heart. Suddenly, you had some kind of inspiration which told you that the mission of Guinea would be ours. You spoke to Bishop Barron¹ about it, and the very next morning after my arrival in Amiens, I had to make my way back to Paris again to conclude the negotiations which Mary had already begun on our behalf.

That was only one of the special graces which the admirable Heart of Mary gave us. But I feel no need to go into great detail to describe all the good things that she has showered on us. We only have to remember the very small resources that were available to us at the beginning to appreciate how she worked on our behalf for the first ten years of our existence. Everything was against us and we had no support anywhere. I was at the head of the organisation, but it seemed that I would never be able to manage a work like this as there was no chance of my ever being ordained a priest. My companions were young and totally without experience. I went to Rome and met ecclesiastical Superiors with no letter of introduction, no testimonials, and no support whatsoever. I only had a plan to offer. Everything else was poor, weak, powerless, without any resources, and devoid of all human means. I could only expect rebuffs, especially when confronted by men of wisdom. But there also it was the Holy Spirit who arranged everything.

¹ See Index of Names

and in that, I find my great joy and consolation. The Holy Spirit guided the head of the Church and those who helped him. Through them, the Holy Spirit encouraged us, as well as getting us a type of written approbation and this encouragement was repeated time and again through the letters which the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda Fide sent us. How did all this come about? Was it thanks to our merits, our talents, our qualities, or our efforts? In no way! I did nothing. I left everything to Mary, placing all my confidence in her incomparable goodness.

After receiving this approval and being ordained priest, I went on to establish our small Society in the diocese of Amiens. There were three of us without any resources. But within two years, we owned a house and garden for our novitiate, and had all that was needed to maintain fifteen missionaries. At present we have twelve missionaries abroad, a thirteenth on the point of departure for the missions and four Brothers. In the novitiate house we have seven clerics and three Brothers. We also have the little African whose story you know. He was sent to us by Mary, since it was during a pilgrimage which one of our priests made to Our Lady of Deliverance that he met him and brought him back here¹. An even greater number of candidates have announced their imminent arrival, even though we have not taken the least steps to attract anybody.

I prefer to keep silent until God makes his plans known to us. It is a rule that I have laid down for myself in the conduct of affairs: always to wait for the moment of Providence. I am absolutely sure that with the help of the prayers of the

¹ Libermann is talking here of young Thiokoro, a Bambara refugee living in France, so as to be safe from an uncle who had usurped his right of succession to the chieftom. Libermann spoke at length about him to his brother Samson in a long letter. Cf. N. D. IV, pp.216-218.

Immaculate Heart of Mary, this way of acting will always bring success in its wake.

Now I must say something about the state of our missions. We have not existed long enough for me to be able to show any great results. We have four missions: Mauritius, Reunion, Haiti and Guinea. It is far too much for a missionary society as young as ours, but in spite of ourselves, that is where we are. I asked to be relieved of the responsibility for two of those missions, but the Holy See did not agree to my request.

1) We have seven missionary priests and one brother in Guinea. We had to open three missions there, one at Garroway, one at Assinie and the third in Gabon. You know of the agreement the Ministry for the Navy made with us: fifteen hundred francs for each missionary priest, four hundred francs for each brother, a house, a chapel with all that is necessary for carrying out worship and many other advantages. And we have the protection of the Government.

2) In Reunion, we have three missionary priests. They have been there for about a year, and are doing so much good that they are overwhelmed with work. I am afraid that their health will suffer as a result. They are asking for more priests and I do not have any available.

3) Then there is Mauritius. We are only able to have one missionary there because the British Government does not want any more French priests on the island. I asked Cardinal Franson's permission to send Father Laval¹ somewhere else. He said he would discuss it with the Vicar Apostolic of Mauritius, because he frequently comes to Rome. I am sure that the

¹ See Index of Names

cardinal will ask me to leave Father Laval there, because he is doing so much good that the Bishop of Mauritius will do all in his power to keep him there.

- 4) Finally, we have Father Tisserant on Santo Domingo (Haiti). We are going to send him another priest and a brother whose job it will be to run a school. The future of the Catholic Faith on the island is in grave danger. The Protestants are trying to sow their errors everywhere. Methodist ministers are doing their best to take over the island and the conduct of some bad catholic priests means that confused people are joining the Methodists and that will do us a lot of harm. However, the civil authorities are on the side of the Catholic Church and are asking Father Tisserant to provide good priests. General Hérard and the town council of Port au Prince have both made the same request to Father Tisserant. The Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda Fide has written to me saying that we must send as many priests as possible there and continue to be responsible for that Mission. It is giving us a lot of headaches, but there is much reason for hope, especially considering the readiness of people to return to the Catholic Church.

(The remainder of this document is in Libermann's own hand)

My very good and dear Father,

I have delayed sending you this account because Father de Brandt told me you would publish it only in your fifth bulletin. And I had another reason: I was not happy with what I had written. So I ask you, dear Father, not to insert it as it stands, in your newsletter. I prefer you to lift out whatever you think is useful and say it in your own way, as long as you make it clear that I am only describing what the Most Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary has done for us. That would be much better

since we have enemies who would be very happy to accuse us of merely seeking publicity. But if you think this memorandum is not up to standard, or is insufficient, let me know and I will make another attempt.

I would love to be able to spend an hour or two with you because I have so many things to discuss. It is difficult to do that by letter. Later on, I will be happy to talk about Haiti at greater length. Since the last letter I sent you, I have received another from Cardinal Frasoni, asking me again to help Father Tisserant. I am going to send him one priest and one brother who will be a teacher in a school, without stressing the fact that he is a religious brother. I am also sending a priest who does not belong to our Congregation.

I will soon be able to give you the news I got from Reunion. It is very interesting. What hurts me, however, is that our priests there did not say a word about setting up the Archconfraternity of the Immaculate Heart of Mary as I expected them to do. I will ask them why they have not done so in my next letter.

I am as always your very grateful, affectionate and respectful child and servant in the love of the Most Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary.

*F. Libermann,
Missionary priest of the Most Holy Heart of Mary*