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02. Libermann describes the new appeals made to the Congregation

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Libermann describes the new appeals made to the Congregation

To Father Le Vavas seur¹

This long letter, (twelve pages in the "Notes et Documents") was written by Libermann to Le Vavas seur to consult him about the future of the Congregation. He gives a full description of projected works in Europe, Tunisia and possible foundations in Southern Africa. He asks Father Le Vavas seur to visit those areas near the Cape of Good Hope and assess the situation. We give this letter in full since it speaks of a critical period in the history of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary.

Faubourg Noyon, 56, Amiens

14th October 1847

My very dear Confrere,

I have intended to write to you for a long time, but I couldn't find an opportunity to do so because I was so busy. Almost a fortnight ago, a Jesuit priest was ready to leave for Reunion and offered to carry this letter with him. I was on holiday at Notre Dame du Gard and on returning to Paris, I waited for him to come but unfortunately, he had already left. I hope in future to be more punctual and regular in my correspondence with you. I am busier than ever, but at least we have now managed to get hold of a newspaper listing the departure times of ships.

I am more grateful than ever to the good Lord for giving you his peace. I feel great relief on two fronts: I was so sorry to see you suffering so much under this temptation and I was so anxious for us to recover that close union we had for carrying

¹ N. D. IX, pp. 282-294.

out the work of God together. I would be overjoyed if God would allow you to be with me so that I would not have to carry the whole burden of administration alone, with all the responsibility that that entails. I know that God will never abandon me and that Mary will always come to my aid, but it would be such an encouragement to have you here with me because you are my second self. Don't be surprised at the confidence I feel after all the troubles we have been through in our relationship. I am convinced that God will give me even more hope, because he has a plan for uniting us in the intimacy of the love of the most holy Heart of Mary.

Please don't think that I undervalue all the other confreres; they are good and holy men, with much talent. But they are young and need experience. Neither did God invite them to take part in the foundation of our work, as He did for you and I. So we must wait for God's moment and keep praying in the meantime.

Father Boulanger, whom I wrote about in a previous letter, is not able to take charge of the community in Reunion. I have felt this for some time and after studying the matter in depth, I have decided that he is not the right man. So we just have to wait a little longer.

It is possible that Father Thévaux¹ might be suitable when he finally arrives. Perhaps with some training he would develop, but I have my doubts. His judgement is quite good but he has a volcanic temperament. He seemed alright when he was here with us and I hope he has learned a thing or two after rubbing shoulders with different people and suffering greatly in Australia. At the moment, I am not very sure where he is. It is possible that the extreme anguish he has undergone and his

¹ See Index of Names

quarrel with the bishop may have made him bitter and even more unstable. You will be able to judge for yourself when he arrives in Reunion and you could train him into the work, if that is what God wishes.

I am afraid my letter of 3rd December was written in a moment of weakness and with a certain amount of depression¹ because of what you wrote to me. I sent another towards the middle of January. It now appears that both letters left on the same boat. Pay no attention to the first one and think no more about it. Do not be concerned at any irritation I expressed about you. What is done, is done! The more pain I felt, the more joy and consolation I now experience at your returning to the path of reason. So you have paid back over and above what you cost me. You owe me nothing. It is I who am in debt now to you and I hope to be able to pay you back with the great love which Jesus has given me for you.

Let me tell you a little about our poor confreres in Australia. I am very upset at what has happened; they are in the most abject poverty and if it continues like this, they will surely be unable to survive. I have written many letters and they have received none of them. They have not even received your letter from last June. What will become of them? Bishop Brady² ended up by giving Father Thévaux a certain amount of money to get rid of them, but our confrere felt he could not leave without my permission. Obviously, in such dreadful circumstances and since he was not receiving any news from me, he could easily have presumed my permission.

I think God has permitted this mistake so as to prove the worth of these dear confreres through extreme suffering. Things had

¹ N.D. VIII, pp. 28-36.

² See Index of Names

come to such a pass that Father Thévaux was suspended from performing his priestly duties. I have no idea what right Bishop Brady had to do that. I find it hard to believe that Father Thévaux did anything to incur such an ecclesiastical penalty. I am going to write to Rome to get that censure lifted. For your part, if Frs. Thévaux and Thiersé¹ have not yet arrived at Reunion, try to send a letter to them by means of some trader from Mauritius. Get them out of that terrible situation as quickly as possible. Let me know as soon as they meet up with you.

I will now give you some news to explain what I wrote in my letter to the community of Reunion. You mentioned something about the land of the Kaffirs²; it was already brought to my attention in Rome last year. I believe that we are able to undertake a new Mission without any difficulty, despite the immense size of Guinea. Our community is on the right road, it is getting better known and our resources make it possible to consider new fields of work. I think it probable that the number of novices and students will increase, but we have as many as we can deal with at the moment. I believe that we should accept another Mission.

Now I want to talk with you about something which must remain a secret between us. I have not mentioned this to any of our confreres as yet but I would like your advice. Please examine the matter seriously in the presence of God. It concerns a Mission, which, as I see it, could counterbalance that of Kaffir land. A fortnight ago, Bishop Luquet³ spent a day

¹ See Index of Names

² The words "Kaffir" and "Hottentot" are racist and insulting in our own day, but at the time of Libermann, they were the names used by the colonialists to designate the inhabitants of southern and south-western Africa.

³ See Index of Names

with us. He knows my views on Kaffir land as I had spoken about it with him in Rome. He tried to make me accept it and wrote to me about it even since my return to Paris. He is bringing this new Mission to our attention because of the number of young people joining us and the good spirit in our Congregation.

But he is talking, at the same time, of us undertaking a Mission in Tunisia. There are a great number of blacks in that country. The Bey has given them all their freedom this year and plans to improve the lot of the Muslim population. He is friendly towards France, and even admires all that is happening here (he spent some time in Paris last year). The Tunisian Mission has a certain importance. There is a French missionary called Father Bourgade who is doing wonderful work there. There is talk of naming this good man Vicar Apostolic and after him; it is from our ranks that the bishop would be chosen. The difficulty is that there are also Capuchin priests in the area. Bishop Luquet thinks that the country could be divided into two vicariates, one for the Capuchins and the other for Father Bourgade and us. Perhaps we could invite Fr. Bourgade to become a Spiritan Associate and get him to sign the same agreement that I concluded with Bishop Truffet¹, so that the Mission would be properly regulated. Bishop Luquet promises to gather more details about the project and that, of course, would be essential before we undertake anything. From now on, I am resolved never to accept any work without having gathered all the facts necessary to enable us to know the real state of affairs.

Bishop Luquet is a man in whom we can have every confidence, just as if he was one of us. So be on your guard against anything that is said or written about him.

¹ N. D. IX, pp. 90-95.

Unfortunately, his discussions with the Jesuits on the question of indigenous clergy and ecclesiastical provinces have become somewhat embittered. Bishop Luquet is not without fault, because with the best of intentions and the most sincere desire to treat the question with gentleness and charity, he has caused much tension and shock; he has attacked the Jesuits with the energy of character of which you know him to be capable. I must give him credit for trying his best to appease his adversaries and to act with gentleness. But I know he has not always succeeded and that he is strongly critical of that excellent and holy body of men. He tends to exaggerate the wrongs that they have done to him. I am sure that the Jesuits feel the same hostility towards him (without rancour) and somewhat exaggerate the ill will that he is meant to have shown them.

The question which has caused this antagonism is very tortuous and painful, but important nevertheless. Bishop Luquet is a fierce champion of his ideas, but is full of good faith. Bishop Luquet is an intimate and affectionate friend of mine; he has excellent intentions, but tends to act a little too harshly, although he leads a saintly life in Rome. Because he has been engaged in so much skirmishing, you might think that his temperament would have become embittered and severe. Well, the contrary is true. He is very calm, moderate and prudent, but I wish he did not feel such antagonism towards the Jesuits. Please pray for that intention.

To return to the question of Kaffir land. Although I feel we should try our best to find out how things are in Tunisia, I believe it would also be useful to have a clear idea of Kaffir land. This is what I know about that country so far. The lands of the Kaffirs and the Hottentots are actually under the jurisdiction of the Vicar Apostolic of the Cape of Good Hope. The Kaffirs offer more possibility of moral improvement

because of their intelligence, character and so on. (You know the Kaffirs better than I do). Morally speaking, they have better potential than the Hottentots, who appear to be more backward.

Both these peoples are in great need of our help. It appears that the Vicar Apostolic is ready to cede his authority over both of them. Kaffir land is presently at war with the British, but that is a problem which could soon pass. It has been infiltrated by the Moravian Brethren, a type of Protestant sect. They have brought in education and, in that way, have spread their errors. On the one hand this could be a drawback, but on the other, it makes the involvement of the Catholic Faith all the more pressing.

These difficulties do not apply to the Hottentots. They are far too backward for the British to bother about taking control of them or for the Moravian Brethren to get involved. It appears that after the Aborigines of Australia, the Hottentots are the most under-developed people in the world. What I want to find out is if the Hottentots are as numerous as the Kaffirs. I suspect they are not. Do they offer any hope that we will succeed in establishing Christianity among them? I have no doubt on that score, but it will be extremely hard. What do you think is the full extent of the problems involved and what means could be used to overcome them? These questions must all be answered satisfactorily before we can make a choice between the two ethnic groups. We must make a choice because we could not take both Missions on at the same time. So it is very important that we gather as much information as possible before choosing either of these two apostolates.

Here are the principle points we need to clarify:

- 1) An exact idea of the state of these peoples, of their countries and climates;
- 2) What are the difficulties? Are they inherent to the populations or do they stem from their circumstances or geographical location? Or have they been caused by the British?
- 3) Under what conditions could we accept responsibility for these places? Would the authorities insist on a British bishop? This would be my fear because of all the recent problems we have experienced with them; the British are very prejudiced against the French and there are so many differences of character between us. Could we have a bishop from among ourselves? Would the British Government not oppose such a move?

If you can visit the Cape of Good Hope easily and if your absence would not cause serious problems for our dear Black People in Reunion, I would willingly accept your offer to go and get first hand information. You could send me the results of your investigations and your reflections on the whole subject before leaving the Cape of Good Hope to return to Reunion. If you do make this voyage, you can give the Bishop of Cape Town the enclosed letter, addressed to him, by way of credentials. If, on the other hand, you find that you cannot leave Reunion, please let me know as soon as possible so that I can look for another way of getting the information I need.

I would now like to raise another question. I told you in previous letters that I had decided to accept ministry in Europe, above all in certain important seaports. Here are my reasons and I would like you to tell me what you think of them. In our European work, we would concentrate on the poorest

classes in this country who are in the greatest need of our help. I am thinking of sailors, soldiers, working men in general and those who are even worse off: convicts, prisoners, and beggars. It goes without saying that these would be most excellent and useful works.

But for the moment, I want to concentrate on reasons above and beyond the amount of good which there is to be done; I am thinking especially of how they would help to consolidate and strengthen our Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary. None of these works are opposed to the ends or the spirit of our Rule. It is true that at the beginning, we had not thought of such works, but that does not prove that God does not want it. It was impossible for us to think about them at the time; God was directing us to the work for the Black People. However, we did feel the need of broadening our approach to some extent and so the Rule speaks in general of poor and abandoned souls.

The only part of the Rule which is expressly opposed to this idea is article one, chapter three, in the first part of the Rule. There, "foreign missions" are declared to be the only works of the Congregation and it is expressly forbidden to keep missionaries in Europe under the pretext of doing good here at home. However, I think that this article need not be seen as a barrier to us opening some houses in Europe, in the sense in which I am speaking, for the following reasons:

- 1) This article was composed with the aim of consolidating the difficult work of the Missions which the Congregation was to make its very own project. I am still of the same mind: missionary work must always be the special interest of the Congregation and any other occupation can only be accessory and undertaken with the motive of consolidating, supporting and procuring

the greatest possible benefit for the work of the missions. When the Rule was written, our thoughts were to guard against abuses which might be introduced with the passage of time, to the detriment of the Missions.

- 2) The latter part of the article wished to prevent missionaries who could do good abroad from being kept back in Europe. Again there was the question of taking measures to prevent abuses, so that the spirit of the Rule would remain undiluted.

I am proposing that the thrust of the work which we will do in Europe will be towards the salvation of the working class - of sailors, soldiers, convicts and prisoners - if God gives us the opportunity and the means. We will begin by opening houses in the principal ports which serve our Missions, such as Bordeaux, Marseilles, Toulon, Brest, Nantes and Lorient.

Please don't get alarmed, my dear Brother, at this plan, which at first sight might appear to be retrograde. We don't have to start everything all at once. We can choose what is most convenient for the moment and follow where divine Providence seems to be indicating that we should start. It will, of course, always be an absolute rule that whenever a cleric offers himself at the novitiate with the formal intention of working in the Missions, he will never be employed in Europe in these kinds of houses.

If, we wish, we could compose another rule which I offer for your scrutiny. In the Mother House, there would be a Council composed of a proportional number of representatives taken from the Apostolic Vicariates or provinces in the Missions. The houses in Europe would have one or several representatives, according as this work becomes larger and more important. In

the general affairs of the Congregation, this Council would offer its insights to the Superior General and, if it is judged to be opportune, his absolute power on certain points could be transferred to the said Council¹. Into this category could fall the keeping in Europe of subjects who are destined for the Missions; that could only come about with the approval of the General Council.

All this of course is just the beginnings of an idea and It has to be thoroughly examined before taking any further steps. The houses of Europe will only be staffed by missionaries who cannot support the African climate and by those who offer themselves to the Congregation without any special desire for the foreign Missions, or who even have a particular wish to work here at home. We will never or hardly ever accept someone who insists on being kept in Europe. But in fact, such a person will be kept back here if that is his preference. I think that if God wants us to do this European work, then the type of people we need for it will arrive, because such a work is necessary in France at the present moment. There are a lot of zealous priests and lay people actively engaged in this, but no work has been established with that strictly in mind. The old religious Orders do not get involved, because at the time of their foundation, those Societies did not do such a work, for there was hardly any need for it. The Jesuit Fathers could, of course, engage in this work, but their status in the eyes of the French Government and the great mass of the population here makes that impossible. Since the need exists and is keenly felt, then good priestly souls have to busy themselves with it. Of course, if the vocations do not present themselves, if resources are not forthcoming, then my idea will collapse by itself and obviously, we will be unable to proceed any further.

¹ And give to the Council the powers taken from the Superior General. (This seems to be what Libermann is proposing).

In that case we will confine ourselves to what is strictly and absolutely necessary or we will remain bound to our missionary work. I will pursue this new idea step by step, following the movement of divine Providence, very gently and without any intervention on my part.

So how will the Congregation benefit from all this? Why should we bother undertaking this new work and cause complications for our administration?

1) It is perfectly normal that the Congregation should seek the glory of God wherever and however it can, as long as it does not damage its principal work. This new type of apostolate is very appropriate and even useful for us.

2) We need to have one or two houses in the south of France, so that we can cater for the missionaries who are unable to support the African climate and those whose health has been broken out there. I think that such a situation will arise more often, especially when we have spread out in Guinea to a greater extent. When missionaries pass a certain number of years in the tropics, they can no longer adapt to the cold and damp of northern France. When they have spent some time back in Europe, they will regain a part of their lost strength and be able to work once more for the glory of God.

3) If we are to preserve the central role in the Congregation, the Mother House must have a strong administrative function. But if we do not have works in Europe, the authority of the Mother House will weaken in comparison to that of the bishops established in the Missions. The Mother House will be nothing more than a seminary at the service of the Missions. In that case we would have to change its organisation, or it will end up in a false and dangerous position. The Mother House is supposed to direct and guide the communities in the Missions.

but if it loses its authority, it will be reduced to almost nothing. This seems very dangerous to me. If we have a work in Europe, it will serve as a counterweight and will give much moral strength to the Superior General, enabling him to maintain his authority vis à vis the Vicars Apostolic. We must conserve the equilibrium between the two authorities, religious and ecclesiastical and in that context, this balance is vitally important.

4) The Mother House should retain a considerable authority over the missionaries so as to preserve the spirit of the Congregation and community life. This authority will naturally be counterbalanced by that of the bishops, so it is imperative that we strengthen it on our side; for if the organisation of the Congregation and of community life is to be properly safeguarded, then the authority of the Mother Community must not be diluted. In general, you will find that few of the Vicars Apostolic are really supportive of community life, or look on it as a priority once they have been nominated to that role. Moreover, if we are not careful, in a short time the nomination of people to be Vicars Apostolic will be in the hands of the Missionaries themselves and, particularly, the already existing Vicars in the same Mission. It is only by preserving its authority that the Mother House will manage to uphold the spirit of the Rules and the bonds which hold the Congregation together.

If the Mother House, i.e. the novitiate and the seminary, were to be the only work in Europe, we would be reduced to six or seven people living here in France. They would include confreres who had been sent back here from abroad, or new recruits found here in France. But if the personnel consisted uniquely of returned missionaries, we would end up with the least capable men and our authority would be mediocre as a result.

For we must remember that according to the rules established by the Holy See for Missions in general, the bishops would not be obliged to let the confreres we were asking for go back to Europe. In addition, those who are most capable of doing good abroad would find it very difficult to return home. If problems arose between the bishops and the Mother House (which is bound to happen), it would be obliged to submit, even when it saw some danger to the spirit of the Rule. The bishops would always have the Mother House at their mercy: they would only have to release mediocre missionaries to completely ruin the influence and authority of the Mother House. If the bishops find themselves in difficulties, they will not hesitate to act in such a way. If this happens, they would be changing the constitution of the Congregation.

I would not see any harm if, from the beginning, the constitution had been built on other foundations than those which exist: but it would be wholly wrong if, after thirty or forty years, we had to make a radical change to the organisation of the Congregation. If we were forced to recruit here, we would always be dependent on a certain number of young men that we would hold on to as soon as they left the novitiate and we would not be able to choose older persons. They would not have the breadth of vision to make good choices, so what influence could the Mother House have over the spirit of the missionaries? If, on the other hand, we have several houses in Europe, we would have a larger pool of people available and there would be a certain number of men who would be wise, serious, learned and experienced. I will not keep on about this any further; I merely wish to indicate how things stand. Pray about it, examine and study the matter deeply before God.

I don't mention the reasons against my plan. I will only say that what I am talking about is extremely serious, so much so that

if we cannot have several houses in Europe, we will have to change the constitution of the Congregation. There have been no such problems up until now; I only want to let you know what I think so that everybody can be prepared. I don't even expect any serious problems while I am still alive. However, I cannot guarantee that they will not appear, because I am unable to see into the future. My main concern is about what will happen after I die.

Now, a word about our financial situation; Our house in the suburbs is costing us one hundred thousand francs. If I had been here when it was bought, we would not have gone ahead with it. But God wants us to have it so I cannot object. We will not necessarily be financially embarrassed as a result. We have contracted a debt of twenty thousand, or perhaps, fifteen thousand francs, so you can see that all is not lost. Our good Mother Mary is with us and she will not see us go short.

The big problem is that we are receiving three thousand francs less per annum and we will have at least sixty-five people to feed and clothe this year. (This figure includes the brothers, the teaching and the domestic staff). So if it is possible for the rest of you and Father Laval to come to our aid, it would be very helpful, because over and above the ordinary expenses for so many people, we have to pay interest on a loan of nine thousand francs and, in a few months time, we will have to find another five or six thousand francs.

Yours in the love of Jesus and Mary,

F. Libermann