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Libermann gives news about their missionary family

To Father Jacques Laval¹

This letter to Father Laval bears no date. Father Cabon inserts it in "Notes et Documents" between two others of the 28th and 30th June, 1847. Jacques Laval was the first missionary sent out by Libermann. He was working marvels among the Black People in his mission of Port Louis, Mauritius, after his arrival there on 14th September 1841. Libermann had been wanting to send him some other confreres for a long time, but the British authorities would not allow the presence of other French priests on the island. But now, he was soon to be joined by the missionaries who had left Australia² after project collapsed.

Libermann gives Laval an overview of the state of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary, especially in Dakar and Gabon. He also informs him about the new situation in Amiens, where there were over sixty confreres, divided between two houses of formation. La Neuville, the former novitiate, had been sold. Libermann was now living in Faubourg Noyon with the novices since 23 April, 1847. He remained there until 19th April, 1848, when the novitiate was transferred to Notre Dame du Gard for financial reasons. At the time of this letter, the theologians were residing at Notre Dame du Gard with Father Ignatius Schwindenhammer as Superior. They would stay there until the "fusion" of 1848, when they transferred to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in Paris.

¹ N. D. IX, pp. 211-218.

² N. D. IX, pp. 324-331

Late June 1847 (?)

My very dear Confrere,

Although I gave you news of the Congregation in my last letter, I am going to repeat it all again, because I believe that my recent letters may not have reached you. This is what I presume because I have received nothing from you for a long time. I hope we will correspond more regularly in future. I am very unfortunate in this matter of letter writing. I don't know what to do to make sure that my letters always reach you. I would ask you to repeat what I have said here to our dear confrere, Father Lambert, and to the other confrere who will be with you by the time this arrives.

Our Mission of Guinea, which had such an unhappy start, has now taken a turn for the better and offers much hope. It is a vast area and the ethnic groups are more numerous than I thought. Since we made our second start there, we have had no misfortunes worth talking about. Father Bessieux is the only one left of the first seven members our Congregation sent there. Last year he was very ill in Gabon and came back to Europe to recover. He is now much better and will return to Africa next autumn.

After our first failure, we took the decision to set up an establishment in a healthy spot at the entry to the coast of Guinea. There we will take in young Africans to instruct and teach, with a view to making priests and catechists of them. A house accordingly has been built at Dakar on the Green Cape, six miles from Gorée. Dakar is very salubrious and our missionaries are getting on fine there. They have a stone house, thirty six metres long and fifteen wide. It is used for acclimatising new arrivals, as a place for missionaries who are sick and as a central school for the Africans. Eight of our

priests are there, with two more looking after the school as well as three brothers.

At the other end of West Africa, fifteen miles from the Equator on the Gabon river, we have three missionaries and one brother. It is almost the healthiest place on the coast. Several minor chiefs have invited our confreres to come and set up a mission. Father Bessieux will return there with two missionaries and one or two brothers. I hope that on his arrival he will be able to start a new mission and penetrate into the interior from there.

Soon our confreres will start to expand their influence and begin the preaching of the holy Gospel. From a spiritual point of view, nothing worthwhile has as yet been achieved in the two years that we have been there. There are reasons for this: the climate forces us to be very careful and there are several other problems of a material nature.

We began at Gorée (with Father Arragon and Father Briot). Those two stayed for a while without being able to do anything, because the Prefects Apostolic of Senegal refused to give them faculties. They made a few short excursions to Dakar, but did no serious work there. Later, I asked Rome to give Father Tisserant the powers of a Prefect Apostolic and that dear confrere left for Senegal with Father Lossodat and Father Warlop. They planned to start a mission at Dakar. As you already know, Father Tisserant perished at sea, but the two others had left by another ship and arrived safely. They began building at Dakar and lived during that time at Gorée, but they were unable to do any ministry because they had no faculties. The death of Father Tisserant delayed the progress of the mission in Guinea, but I then asked Rome to grant the powers of a Prefect Apostolic to Father Gravière. They agreed and he left in May last year (1846) with Father Le Berre.

Up until then, Father Bessieux was alone in Gabon, busy learning the language. It took a long time because he had no interpreter. During that period, Father Briot visited Father Bessieux and went back to Gorée to look for more help. He eventually returned with Father Le Berre. Meanwhile, Father Bessieux had mastered the local language (Pongwe). He wrote a grammar, a dictionary, a catechism and a life of Our Lord. As soon as Father Briot and Father Le Berre arrived, Father Bessieux began instructing the local people, but he fell ill and returned to Europe soon after his recovery. During his absence, his confreres learned the language more quickly than he had and are now able to give religious instruction. Father Lossedat joined them again. The people of Gabon are now asking to be instructed and baptised, but our confreres do not wish to act too quickly; they first want to see signs of a genuine conversion.

I forgot to tell you that we actually have a church now in Gabon. The king of a nearby island called Koniquet asked for missionaries. He constructed a beautiful and spacious cabin for them on a hill which they had chosen. Soon they will build a mission there. The language of the island is also Pongwe.

Our missionaries have been in Dakar for the past year and there is a lot happening in the country. Without the opposition from the Islamic marabouts, there would already have been numerous converts. But in general, the people are favourably disposed towards the missionaries and admire them. The king and his chiefs are solidly behind us and the king's nephew, who is next in succession, has been fully instructed in Christianity and is already a Christian in spirit. The only thing which stops him from being baptised is the fear of starting a persecution, but once certain difficulties have been overcome, conversions will be more numerous.

But unfortunately, it has been almost impossible for us to get anything worthwhile done so far; the death of Father Tisserant delayed the hope of much progress in Guinea more than anything else. If from the beginning we had had a bishop to restart the Mission, it would have been much better developed by now. I did not dare request one at that time, but In May, 1846, I went to Rome and asked them for a Vicar Apostolic and they agreed. Father Le Vavas seur must have told you by now all the details which I sent him, so there is no need to repeat them here. Bishop Truffet received his appointment on the day of his profession, the feast of the Epiphany. He left on 15th April with Fathers Chevalier, Bouchet, Dréano and Gallais. In addition, there are two catechists, M. Lamoise and M. Durand, who may one day be ordained priests.

Bishop Truffet arrived on 8th May with his new men, but he found that Father Arragon and Brother Simeon had been captured in the kingdom of Cayor, next to Dakar, where they had gone on a fact-finding expedition. As soon as the king of Dakar learned of their imprisonment, he went to find Bishop Truffet who had arrived only two or three days previously. The king offered him soldiers and to use his influence (which is not very great, I am afraid, for the king of Cayor is much more powerful than the king of Dakar!). But Bishop Truffet told him that God would take good care of his servants and that he would not use force to deal with the situation. The good king Elyman of Dakar admired this attitude. He called a council of his chiefs and marabouts and they decided to write to the king of Cayor to demand the return of the missionaries. It was Soliman, the above mentioned king's nephew, who wrote the letter. Among other things they said that the two Europeans were guests of the king of Dakar; that they had come in peace and therefore the king and his chiefs were demanding their return. He added that if even one handkerchief of theirs did not come back with them, war would be declared for the next thirty

years! These brave words were conveyed to the king of Cayor by three of the important men of Dakar, who returned in triumph eleven days later, bringing the two white men home with them. I am pretty sure that the commander of Gorée had also written at the same time to Cayor to ask for the return of the two Frenchmen and that the wishes of the French commander had more effect than that of the chiefs of Dakar. But they are no less to be admired for all that. The Mission of Guinea is ready for great development and I am sure that in a few years, we will need at least three bishops there to cater for those vast lands.

We are gradually getting well established along the coast. From there, we will be able to get to know the country more and more and once we have a clear idea of the different lands, we will penetrate into the interior where we hope to have the greatest success. On the coast, unfortunately, the corruption practised by the Europeans creates many difficulties for the missionaries and I fear that will always be a big problem for us.

One of the biggest problems is the multiplicity of dialects; you meet a different language every hundred and fifty miles. Please pray constantly for your confreres who will be going into uncharted territory where the Gospel has not yet been preached.

As of now, the Vicariate of Bishop Truffet consists of Senegambia (without the islands of Saint Louis and Gorée), Sierra Leone and the two Guineas (apart from the Portuguese outposts in the Congo): that comes to about three thousand six hundred miles of coastline. Senegambia alone would be enough to form an enormous Vicariate.

Now I will say a little about us here in France. We have plenty of people. There are about ten novices, four of whom are

already priests and a fifth will be ordained in September and five will be made sub-deacons. In the house of studies, which I will describe later, we have twenty-two students, three of whom are in philosophy while the others are all theologians. We have also received several requests from possible recruits for the new academic year and others will probably come later. We only have five professors in the two houses. We are stretched to the limit, for in both places the number of people amounts to almost sixty this year, including the brothers.

I am not sure if you are aware that we no longer have La Neuville. Perhaps my letter with that news never reached you. We sold it in order to get a house nearer town. The novitiate group and I live in Faubourg Noyon 56. The house of studies is at the abbey of Gard, about nine miles from Amiens. We have a very nice church there in good condition; it is about thirty or forty metres long and the religious ceremonies are carried out beautifully in it. The acoustics are excellent and it is called Notre Dame du Gard. The statue below the altar is an imitation of the one at Our Lady of Victories in Paris.

In addition, we have a very big house, sixty metres long and fifteen or eighteen metres wide. We have a double garden which is extremely spacious. There is also the cemetery of the previous owners, the Trappists. The first one we buried in it was a young negro (M. Séclo or Thickoro¹) who died last winter. In addition to the garden, we have two apple orchards, also quite large. There is a big courtyard containing apple trees, a poultry yard and many buildings. The place where we live is isolated and not near any houses. There are villages all

¹ Libermann also spelled the name Thiékoro. He was a Bambara refugee in France, fleeing from an uncle who had usurped his right of succession to the throne. Libermann spoke at length about him to his brother Samson cf. N. D. IV, pp. 216-218. (See also note 5 in Chapter VII text 1).

round us, and the nearest hamlet is ten minutes distance by road. Our young men are full of fervour and are very happy; they follow the regular life in its entirety. We have no complaints to make against these young men. They are pious and studious and during recreation full of fun, open, and perfectly united among themselves. After the September ordinations, we will have one priest, five sub-deacons, four in minor orders, and seven tonsured clerics.

The novitiate is also doing very well and it will be even better once we have got things back to normal after the building work. Hopefully, it will all be finished by the vigil of the Assumption. Silence, regularity, obedience, and the other practices expected in a Novitiate are all well observed.

As you can see everything is going well from a spiritual point of view. Only the finances and my own health leave much to be desired but I think that my health is worse than our bank balance! Because of the present high cost of living and the need to buy a lot of new furniture for the house, we have spent a considerable amount of money. Our good Mother Mary will look after the house. I depend on Providence to prevent us running short of anything.

I will not go into any great detail about what happened in Australia; no doubt you know more about it than I do. We were forced to leave that Mission and I advised Fathers Thévaux¹ and Thiersé² to move to Reunion. I presume that Father Le Vavasseur has sent one of them to you in Mauritius by now because I want there to be at least three of you together. If you want me to send other people and if you have enough

¹ See Index of Names

² See Index of Names

income to support even more, let me know and I will do what I can. Next year, we are going to have a young man from a good family in Mauritius. I don't know if he is from Port Louis or nearby, but his name is M. Berthier. He will study philosophy at Issy. His health is weak but I hope he will manage to continue.

We decided to open several houses for missionaries in the seaports, especially in the south of France. It would take me too long to give you all the reasons behind this. There is a good chance that we will open another establishment like the one in Bordeaux. I am going to send two confreres there, Father Boulanger and Father Clair, together with a Brother.

So, I have given you more or less all the news for now.

Yours in the love of Jesus and Mary,

F. Libermann
Priest of the Holy Heart of Mary

PS. I am concerned about your never writing to me. I don't know if your letters have been lost in transit, but it is a long time since I heard from you. I advise you to read Chapter nine of the Third Part of our Rule of Life.

PPS. Next year, I hope to have a fine young man for you from Savoy. He is strong and is an excellent priest, and he could do good work in Mauritius.