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### 04. Libermann describes what is happening in the Congregation

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## Liebermann describes what is happening in the Congregation

*To Frédéric Le Vasseur<sup>1</sup>*

*This letter of 28<sup>th</sup> December 1849, gives an overview of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit to Le Vasseur. It mentions in particular:*

- *the state of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit and the expulsion by the Council of Father Hardy<sup>2</sup> from the Congregation;*
- *the religious development taking place in the colonies and the creation of new dioceses;*
- *the plan to create a corps of ships' chaplains. These would be members of the Congregation and would work on French vessels;*
- *the missionaries who are ready to leave for abroad and those already in Reunion.*

*This list gives some idea of the furious activity of Liebermann at this time: "My health is holding up despite the work of a galley slave! I have never been as busy as during the past two months". We give this letter in full, omitting only the postscript.*

Paris, 28<sup>th</sup> December 1849

My very dear Confrere,

I am writing now to take advantage of the departure of the ship which is bringing your new Governor to Reunion. I have met him twice. I went to him and he also visited me; I find him an excellent person.

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<sup>1</sup> N. D. XI, pp. 319-325

<sup>2</sup> See Index of Names

I am going to give you a summary of the news about ourselves, but it would take too long to go into details. I had much to suffer because of the seminarians last year. My long illness was partly the cause of that. From the beginning of this year, I had even greater misery to endure, but things eventually worked out through a mixture of decisiveness, gentleness and patience.

Father Hardy brought much grief to our community. He interfered with everybody and tried, or at least greatly desired, to destroy our house. I was unable to fathom what was behind his thinking and his plans. But this I do know: that this good man, despite having a sincere and real piety, fell into serious delusions. He was nothing but trouble here, because of the bad spirit which ruled him and the evil plans which he hatched. As a result, he had to be expelled from the Congregation by the Council. It was all done in a regular way and in complete conformity with our Constitutions. Through his scheming and general attitude, he fomented trouble and encouraged insubordination among the seminarians. He did much harm to several of these young men. He spread the idea that we were going to be expelled from the seminary and chased back to Notre Dame du Gard. However, in the long run, the confidence shown me by the Ministry of Religion and the Navy was enough to bring all his efforts to nothing and helped me to restore peace and order once more in the house. On the other hand, Frs. Warnet<sup>1</sup> and Gaultier<sup>2</sup> are united and attached to us as any of you who lived with me at La Neuville. They are full of joy and happy to see the reforms and the good order we have brought into the Seminary. If we had not come here, the

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<sup>1</sup> See Index of Names

<sup>2</sup> See Index of Names

Seminary would surely have ceased to exist in the coming year, perhaps never to open again.

But enough of that sad chapter! Let us look at more consoling things. Since my return to health, I have been busy working with colonial business. I was concerned with two problems in particular. Firstly, I wanted to make sure that the Seminary would receive sixty bursaries and that only priests who had been tried and tested by us for a minimum of one year would be allowed to proceed to the colonies. The second point concerned the creation of colonial dioceses.

As regards the first question, it has been agreed that we will have our sixty bursaries and only this week, the budget of the Seminary was presented to the Chamber of Deputies taking that into account. The Commission has already accepted it and the Chamber of Deputies will certainly do the same. I wrote to the Ministers of Religion and of the Navy, sending them memorandum after memorandum and note upon note. I went to see the Ministers of those two departments and their predecessors, at least those of them who are still working there. The Bishop of Langres<sup>1</sup> used all his influence and helped us greatly. M. de Kerdrel and other Catholic deputies also played their part. Finally, the two Ministers made their requests to the budget Commission, which had already been suitably briefed and it was favourably disposed towards us. They finally agreed that we need sixty students and accepted the Seminary budget. The Chamber of Deputies will now adopt the plan in full.

Now we come to the question of the appointment to the colonies of only those priests who have spent a year training

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<sup>1</sup> See Bishop Parisis in the Index of Names.

with us. I wrote a very sad letter to Propaganda Fide<sup>1</sup>. In it, I asked them to make sure that the Prefects Apostolic would not accept any priest who was not in possession of a letter stating that he was an official apostolic missionary. I asked them to appoint me as the sole person able to issue such a document, which would only be given to a priest who had spent at least one probationary year in the Seminary. I have just received the necessary letters addressed to all the Prefects Apostolic, forbidding them to accept any other type of priest into their dioceses, and another for me personally, granting the authority that I had requested. So we should have no more worries on that score.

On the question of bishops for the colonies, following on the efforts of the Bishop of Langres and I, both the Minister for Religion and the Minister for the Navy have completely agreed to our requests. The Minister for the Navy set up a special Commission, in which the Bishop of Langres and I took part. The said bishop chaired the meeting and the whole matter was resolved to our complete satisfaction. There will be three bishops, one each for Martinique, Guadeloupe and Reunion. These bishops will have similar powers to those in France and will be treated in exactly the same way.

You can see from all this how cooperative all the members of that Commission were. I am full of admiration for them and I particularly appreciate the kind interest of M. Mestro, who also sat as a member of the same Commission. He was always the first to support the proposals we made and to reject those which could, in one way or another, weaken the authority of the new bishops. However, I still have some worries about the final draft of the document which the Ministry for Religion will present to the Chamber of Deputies for their approval. I fear

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<sup>1</sup> Now the Roman Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples

that the bureaucrats might introduce certain awkward clauses, tending to lessen the bishops' authority. The decisions taken by the Commission will be written up by the Ministry for Religion, which will then present the matter for ratification. I am hoping that nothing adverse will be proposed without the agreement of the Bishop of Langres before the project is adopted by the Chamber of Deputies. I think it will be sufficient to forewarn the two Ministries so as to prevent anything being introduced which could cause difficulties.

All the details which I have given you about these appointments discussed by the Commission must remain a secret between the two of us. However, you can tell those who may be interested that the nomination of the bishops to the colonies is certain to happen and that they will have the same position in the eyes of the Government as any bishop in France.

We discussed another question in this Commission, namely, having chaplains on board the most important vessels belonging to the Government. We decided that the naval chaplains would be organised by the different religious Congregations. Together with the aide-de-camp of the Minister for the Navy, who is a fervent Catholic, I was asked to draw up a list of general rules to be followed, or rather to make a plan of the general regulations to be considered for the use of the chaplains. Then those regulations would be proposed to the Commission of the Chamber of Deputies. In their next sitting, the Deputies would consider the detailed rules to be followed, in the light of the general regulations already enacted. The actual details were fixed during our last discussion. The special, detailed regulations are based totally on the general principles which the aide de camp and I put forward and therefore we have nothing to fear. Nobody but the gentlemen in the Navy Office can be involved in drawing up these rules,

because they alone know the details required. But they are perfectly well disposed towards us and moreover, the above mentioned aide de camp will also be working with them. The regulations will be good and favourable to us. Also, the Commission will examine them and if they find mistakes, there will be no trouble in modifying or removing them. Everybody wants things to be so arranged that the chaplains can do much good while, at the same time, preserving their priestly vocation.

The present Navy chaplains will be kept on. The Ministry of the Navy has decided to ask us for thirty chaplains. To help us in this, we will be given a building at Brest and later, another at Rochefort or Cherbourg. Some of the chaplains will stay in their residence in whatever port they are working. They will look after the local maritime hospital (I am, of course, speaking of priestly ministry), visit the penal colonies and be involved with the sea-going population. The chaplains will make only one voyage at a time. On their return to port, they will be replaced by those who stayed behind in the chaplains' residence while they were on board ship. The returnees will stay there to recuperate before going on their next voyage, all the while working continually for the glory of God. They will take care of their own spiritual life and practice the priestly virtues while preparing to go to sea again.

I do not have to find the thirty chaplains immediately; in fact, this would be quite impossible. Also, I will make sure that nobody with a definite vocation to the missions is employed as a naval chaplain. So I am now going to make a journey through France, which I intended to do anyway because of the sudden increase in bursaries for the colonial Seminary. I will tell everybody about our three-fold vocation. I hope that God in his goodness will send us worthy priests for the colonies. We will also tell the people about our new missions outside the

French colonies and we are sure to get a greater number of vocations for that as well. Finally, I hope that the work of the chaplains will also attract people.

If I get enough vocations to more or less fill up the thirty places envisaged for the chaplains, it will bring a twofold benefit. Firstly, and most importantly, we will be taking on a very necessary work and will be doing great good. Secondly, it will be a very good source of financial support for our novitiate. We could then take in many more students without any further worries about money and at no cost to the existing mission.

I spoke to you in my last letter about the country house of Maulévrier. The project might fall through; many difficulties have arisen, so we shall probably refuse to accept it. I will call another meeting of the Council to examine the question again.

We have just sent eight missionaries and four brothers to Guinea, along with four sisters. The missionaries are, Fathers Boulanger, Thiéard, Tanguy, Morel, de Régner (no connection with our dead confrere of the same name), Duret, Bourget and Ramboz. The brothers are Michael, Anthony, Charles and Julien. So there will be twenty eight confreres in that mission, not counting the fifteen brothers. Twelve of the Sisters of Castres will also be there. The news from Guinea continues to be good and gives much reason for optimism.

I have just received your letter of 10<sup>th</sup> September. I am very sorry that it did not arrive sooner; I could probably have kept back one missionary and one brother for you. While you are waiting for help, take Father Baud who has left for Mauritius, if your needs are greater than theirs. As soon as I can and insofar as I am able, I will carry out your wishes. But we will have to wait until the new bishop is appointed. It would not be



proper to send more men for your community without consulting him first. In any case, they are not available at the moment. I am also going to try and get a carpenter brother and a tailor brother to help you, but please be patient for a little while longer.

My health is holding up despite my work of a galley slave! I have never been as busy as during the past two months. I have not even had a week off, but when we have finished with all the business described above, I should get a chance for a rest. My current duties are more than enough to keep a poor man like me fully occupied.

That was bad news about Father Pascal. I was hoping that he would enter the Congregation and that he could replace you in Reunion. If he does not enter, how can you leave there? One way or another, I really need you to be here with me, above all now that there is so much development taking place in the work of the Congregation. If I were to fall sick again, there is nobody to replace me, poor man though I be. I know I am not a very good leader, everybody would agree with that. But my age, the progress already made, the development taking place, and my position as superior, mean that things are going well all the same. The others here in France do not have the same advantages and sufficient experience. Moreover, who could replace me? Everybody is deficient in one way or another. You alone seem to be the one destined by God to carry on the work. It would also be good for you to be here in case I die suddenly. Anyhow, there is no need to get alarmed because of my slow recovery. The sickness can flare up again, but it is not life-threatening. We are talking about a possible liver infection, but there is no great danger in that.

If you feel that by leaving, the work in Reunion would go downhill, there is no need to be in any great hurry to return

here, because I am pretty much recovered. I will do my best to send you someone who could take your place. If you think Father Collin is capable of carrying the burden of authority, let me know at once and I will send you some young confreres to replace him.

There is no need to worry about your being chosen to lead the diocese of Saint Denis. We will keep to the principle that the new bishops must be new and totally unknown in the country of appointment, with no previous involvement in the question of the black people. I am presently involved in getting testimonials for the candidates whose names I may put forward as possible bishops, and also information on others which has been requested by the Ministry of Religion. In any event, you can be quite sure that Bishop Poncelet will never return to Reunion.

It is a long time since I last sent you a priest for Reunion, but I will now arrange this with the future bishop, as long as he agrees to accept religious, which I do not doubt. I will discuss with him the matter of bringing our own Congregation up to strength. Meanwhile, I will try to persuade the bishops of the West Indies to take Jesuit Fathers into their new dioceses. I think you will need to stay in Reunion until the arrival of the new bishop, so that he will have a reliable person to tell him the exact state of things on the island.

I must now finish this long epistle. If I get sufficient time, I will write to each of our dear confreres.

Yours in Jesus and Mary

*F. Libermann, superior*