

1981

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Recommended Citation

(1981). Centenary of Fr. Le Vasseur's Election as Superior General. *Spiritan Papers*, 15 (15). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-papers/vol15/iss15/4>

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**CENTENARY OF FR. LE VAVASSEUR'S
ELECTION AS SUPERIOR GENERAL
(28 August 1981)**

Having heard that several were thinking of him for the office of Superior General, Fr. Le Vavas seur had believed it his duty in conscience to write to the Cardinal Prefect of the S.C. of Propaganda in Rome, setting out as he saw them the reasons why his appointment should be opposed. While expressing admiration for this delicacy of conscience, His Eminence had not judged it opportune to intervene in the Chapter so as not to interfere with the freedom of vote. He had, however, suggested that Fr. Le Vavas seur tell the members of the Assembly himself of the reasons he had given against such an appointment.

These reasons I'now put before you, said Fr. Le Vavas seur, that you may consider them before God.

The first and weightiest is based on the mind of the Venerable Father himself. Were I to be Superior General, it should have been at his death in 1852. All our brethren would have chosen me unanimously as one of the first to promote the Work for the Blacks. I spoke to the Venerable Father to learn from him God's will in the matter. He did not wish at first to express his thought but finally, upon my insisting, said he would give me an answer after three days of prayer and reflection. As you know, his choice fell on our deceased Father; and time has clearly shown that this too was God's choice. That is therefore a sign that I am not called to govern the Congregation.

The second reason is that the Very Rev. Father deceased has not indicated either that I should succeed him. In intimate conversations I often had with him in his last days about the Congregation, he told me once, 'They will elect you', but did not add that I should accept.

The third reason is that I have not the qualities desirable in a Superior General, especially knowledge above the ordinary,

as the Constitutions stipulate: everyone knows that well enough.

The fourth reason is my advanced age (I shall soon be 71) and my state of fatigue: since being Vicar General I have scarcely had a few weeks of good health. Moreover, I could not have managed at all without the help of the Fathers in the Administration, who have supported me with zeal and devotion.

A fifth reason, which follows from the last, is that it will not be possible to have a meeting of the General Chapter again, when I am no longer there – and that will be soon now.

A sixth and final reason: I believe I can do more good if not Superior General than if I was. I helped our deceased Father to the best of my ability: I shall try to do the same for whoever you appoint, setting an example of obedience and submission. In that way I think I can be useful, for obedience and submission are most important in a religious congregation.

Consider well, therefore, said the Very Rev. Father in conclusion, that you may choose the one destined for us by God Himself.

All then withdrew in silence. It could be argued in reply that the circumstances were no longer the same as at the time of the death of our Venerable Father. His age was scarcely an obstacle: was it not common knowledge that his father, though suffering long from violent attacks of stomach pains, had lived to be 86; and that his respected mother carried lightly enough the weight of her 97 years? Moreover, the Fathers who had helped him as Vicar General would still be available to help him now, and others if necessary could be called to do so. Finally, having been the right-hand man of our Venerable Father himself, he more than another could carry on the traditions of the Congregation and guide it and its members in the way that best accorded with God's designs upon it.

* * *

It was the 28th August 1881 and High Mass for the Feast of the Holy Heart of Mary had been celebrated at 8.30 a.m. Mgr Duboin had pontificated . . .

When it ended, about 10 a.m., the capitulants met in the conference hall of the novitiate, where it had been decided to hold the meetings. In the middle of the room, on a suitably decorated table, stood the urn containing the heart and tongue of our Venerable Father: precious relics reminding all that in their discussions they should be inspired by the mind and spirit of Libermann . . .

According to the Constitutions, the first item of the Agenda was the election of the Superior General. From the first ballot, the Very Rev. Frederic Le Vavasseur was elected unanimously with the exception of two votes.

At once all the bells of the house were rung joyfully and all the community – Fathers, Brothers, Scholastics and Novices – hurried to the great hall to hear the proclamation of the election. The hall had previously been decorated by the scholastics. At the back, under a baldachino, stood the bust of the Venerable Father, who seemed thus to preside at the celebration. Smiles of joy on the faces of all present testified to their satisfaction at the result. Not so, however, the Very Rev. Father General: his face was serious beneath an expression of resignation. He mounted the pulpit and, his voice full of emotion, spoke to us the following words:

Here then is your Superior General . . . In spite of my infirmities and my advanced age, the Chapter Fathers have chosen to appoint me to that post, to impose this heavy burden upon me. If it be true to say 'infirmi mundi elegit Deus', it is certainly so in this case. But, since my own objections were ignored, I must resign myself. We have sincerely prayed that the will of God be done: this then is what He wanted and I am greatly consoled by that.

I am comforted by the thought that everyone will try to lighten the burden for me, and I am counting on this. I count especially on the Fathers of the Mother House, who will continue to help me with all the dedication that they have already shown.

I also rely upon our devoted Brothers, who cooperate in the welfare of the Congregation by their prayers and work. Everywhere they render great service. Their ready cooperation is a precious help to the missionaries in the hard labour of the apostolate. I also count upon our beloved scholastics: they are the seed of the Congregation, they are the men of

tomorrow. I know their good dispositions and so I trust in them.

And now, like our Venerable Father and like our Father just deceased, I undertake to devote myself to the best interests of the Congregation until the end.

Several times our Very Rev. Father's words were interrupted by emotion, which was shared by all. Before leaving, he gave us his first blessing "with all his heart", as he said himself.

Immediately after, Rev. Fr. Collin dispatched a telegram to Fr. Brichet in Rome, asking him, on behalf of the Chapter, to have the appointment of the Very Rev. Father confirmed.

"I received this telegram at about 3.30 p.m.", wrote Fr. Brichet, "and went at once to Cardinal Simeoni. His Eminence welcomed me with a smile and said, 'So, you have a Pope'. 'Your Eminence', I replied, 'He whom we all wanted, and for whom we have reverence as for a Father, has been elected almost unanimously' . . ."

In his letter of 8 September to the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda, Fr. Le Vavasseur wrote: *In accordance with Your Eminence's advice, I explained as well as I could to all the capitulants the various reasons which, in my opinion, ought to prevent them from choosing me. In spite of everything I said, they voted for me. I had no other choice than to submit to this expression of God's will to take up my cross with courage. What gives me confidence is the good spirit which, thank God, prevails among almost all the Fathers. Our Venerable Founder, Father Libermann, gave to our Congregation the spirit that should animate it. His successor, the Rev. Father Schwindenhammer, gave it the Constitutions which Your Eminence so graciously deigned to approve. It remains for me only to maintain and to continue what they did so well with the help of God . . .*

*From the General Bulletin of the Congregation,
Vol. XII, N° 143, 1881, pp. 2-4, 6-9, 13-14.*