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05. A description of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Heart of Mary

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A description of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Heart of Mary¹

This document was composed by Libermann to help Father Le Vavasasseur during his tour of the senior seminaries of France. It enabled him to give an accurate account of the histories of both the Congregations of the Holy Spirit and of the Holy Heart of Mary. It describes their amalgamation, their present state of development and what is required of candidates wish to join this missionary Society. It was written around the feast of Pentecost, 1850. Libermann gives his version of the history of the two societies, seeing them as driven towards their unification in 1848 by the providence of God. It contains the only instance where he describes Poullart des Places as the founder. This document is not to be found in "Notes et Documents", but it is included in the fine work of Father Paul Coulon entitled "Libermann, une pensée et une mystique missionaries".

The Present State of the Congregation

The Congregation of the Holy Spirit was founded on Pentecost Sunday, 1703 by Father Poulart-Desplaces (*sic*) of the diocese of Rennes. It had as its aim the training of priests willing to consecrate themselves for the most difficult tasks. During a considerable period of time, the Congregation survived only thanks to the generosity of charitable people. The venerable founder himself went about begging for help, and he even served the students with his own hands, performing the most menial chores for their sake.

¹ In Paul Coulon and Paule Brasseur, "Libermann 1802-1852", Cerf, Paris, 1988, pp.661-669.

In 1723, the Assembly of the Clergy, in recognition of the important work being done in the dioceses of France by priests trained in the Holy Spirit Seminary, granted to that same establishment an annual subsidy, which was increased by subsequent Assemblies.

In 1776, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit was given the ongoing responsibility of providing twenty missionaries and a Prefect Apostolic for French Guyana.

As a result of the great Revolution of 1792¹, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit shared the same fate as all the other religious establishments in France. The seminary was closed, the priests dispersed, and the house sold by the State.

When peace was finally restored with the Concordat of 1801, Father Bertout, alone and homeless, restarted the work of Fr. Poulart - Desplaces despite the many difficulties.

In 1816, a Royal Edict granted official recognition to the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and declared that this Society alone was to provide priests for all the French Colonies.

However, in spite of the efforts of Father Bertout and his successors, the Congregation could not attract enough recruits to have much effect, nor was it able to bring about the improvements so necessary for carrying out this difficult work. The Seminary lacked directors and had to seek them from outside its own ranks. In addition, it was hampered by the problems caused by slavery, the poor organisation of the colonial clergy and the generally weak state of the Church in post-revolutionary France. Success was hard to come by. The

¹ This is the date of the suppression of the Seminary of the Society of the Holy Spirit by the French Revolution of 1789.

Government accepted responsibility for the upkeep of the Seminary until 1830. However, the French bishops, who were lacking sufficient clergy for their own dioceses, were unwilling to help to provide sufficient priests to serve the needs of the colonies. In 1830, all subsidies to the Seminary were cut off, which now found itself unable to fill the available student places. Because the Congregation had no other source of income, it was forced to accept any priests who offered themselves, without knowing much about them. This was the root cause of all the problems our holy religion has had to suffer in our colonies.

Although in 1840 the Government once more gave the Seminary of the Holy Spirit the allocation granted to it after the Restoration of the Monarchy, the Congregation still could not alter the poor opinion people had of it due to the unhappy situation I have just described.

About this time, some priests who had just left the seminary of Saint Sulpice decided to start a project to help the black peoples. They were profoundly moved by the degradation and squalor in which the poor slaves found themselves. These ex-slaves made up at least two thirds of the population of the French colonies. This group of priests was very conscious of the difficulties involved in such a work and their inability to carry it out by their own unaided efforts, so they decided to seek the help of the Archconfraternity¹ of the Holy Heart of Mary. They were convinced that these good people would help them to overcome every difficulty through the intercession of

¹ This refers to the "Archconfraternity of the Holy Heart of Mary, Refuge of Sinners", founded on the third Sunday of Advent, 1836, by Father Dufriche Desgenettes, parish priest of Our Lady of Victories in Paris. Cf. N. D. I, pp. 641 and following.

the Immaculate Heart of Mary, so full of mercy for sinful and abandoned souls.

To be sure that they were really doing the will of God, they brought their plans to the attention of the Propaganda Fide¹. They received the encouragement they were seeking and decided to press on with their project. They were anxious not to encroach on the works confided to the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, so they offered to join up with that Society, but they insisted on guarantees to assure their perseverance in priestly fervour and the religious life. At the same time, they stated that they would only serve poor and abandoned souls, whose desperate state had moved them to such profound compassion. So they made it a condition for their entry into the Congregation of the Holy Spirit that they would only be used for the salvation of the black peoples and that they would always live in community, following a Rule to help them preserve their priestly fervour and commitment to the apostolate.

However, the moment for union with this Congregation had not yet arrived; God wished their numbers to increase before this could happen. Providence also wanted to involve them in works of greater importance than those with which the Congregation of the Holy Spirit was currently engaged. If they had joined the congregation at that time, the other missions would probably never have been undertaken.

Father Fourdinier, the Spiritan Superior, refused to accept their conditions, so they started the work on their own, forming a separate congregation. In recognition of the graces they had

¹The Roman Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, which organises the Foreign Missions.

received and which they attributed to the prayers of the Archconfraternity, they decided to name their congregation after the Holy Heart of Mary. The new congregation made its first foundation at La Neuville, in the diocese of Amiens, in September, 1841. Father Libermann was chosen as its superior.

The new society was very fragile and they lacked the necessary resources; God alone was their strength and support and they placed all their trust in the Holy Heart of Mary. But despite their confidence in God, the first members still lacked that motivation they would receive when they came face to face with the sorry state of so many abandoned souls. They flinched at the thought of offering themselves for an enterprise which was so lacking in resources and so contrary to what human prudence would suggest. But the grace of God came to their help and they resolved to sacrifice everything rather than abandon the work for which the Lord in his goodness had inspired them.

After only a fortnight by themselves, they found they had every reason to give thanks to the providence of God, who was caring for them in a most unexpected way. The bounty of Providence grew in proportion as their numbers increased. Within two years, they had started work in the islands of Mauritius and Reunion. Both these missions continue to produce abundant fruit for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

Towards the end of the second year, in November 1843, seven missionaries of the new society set out to found the mission of the Two Guineas on the African mainland. But there was a terrible trial awaiting this new beginning and it threatened to destroy all hope for the congregation. The missionaries were inexperienced and did not take the

precautions so necessary for survival in tropical climates; within a few months of their arrival on the African coast, five out of the seven were dead. The Congregation was horrified by this disaster and did not know how it had come about. It was therefore forced to suspend all work in Africa until they could get more encouraging information.

The following year, 1844, five priests of the society were given to Propaganda Fide for the mission of Haiti (Santo Domingo). There were half a million people living there who were well disposed towards the teachings of the Church, but they had been the prey of certain evil priests who had fled from several French dioceses and whose way of life was a permanent scandal to the inhabitants of that sad country. But the moment marked out by the Providence of God had not yet arrived. The Haitian government at that time was anti-Catholic. Their demands, of a schismatic nature, forced the missionaries to leave the country soon after their arrival. The poor inhabitants were left in consternation, since in the short time the missionaries had been there they had come to see them as real priests of Jesus Christ.

Meanwhile, the more detailed information they now received about Guinea made it clear that European missionaries could live on the West African coast without any great danger, as long as they took the necessary precautions for survival in the tropics. The Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary had the consolation of re-opening that Mission towards the middle of 1845, but this new effort was once again to cost them dearly. One of the three first members designated for Guinea, Father Tisserant, had been appointed by Propaganda Fide to head the mission. However, he perished in the shipwreck of the *Papin* on 8th December, 1845 while on his way back to Africa.

At the beginning of January 1847, Rome named Bishop Truffet as the first Vicar Apostolic of Guinea, but before the end of

that same year, the society also lost this holy man; he died as a result of the severe austerities which he practised in his enthusiasm. However, the sacrifice of these seven fervent missionaries and of a great number of other good people eventually brought the blessings of God on this work for the black peoples. In 1848, the Holy See gave the Congregation two bishops for the Two Guineas and Senegambia. Under them, the mission was organised and from then on its future seemed to be assured. As I write, it shows great promise for the future.

The Society of the Holy Heart of Mary had come through all the trials to which the Lord had subjected it and had grown in resources and experience. Now it seemed that the plan of God was for it to join with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, so as to bring together the different aspects of their work and to form one united whole. All of the difficulties preventing the amalgamation of the two Congregations now disappeared. Towards the end of 1848, the union of all the members of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary and of the Society of the Holy Spirit was accomplished. The Congregation retained its ancient title of the Holy Spirit. Its constitutions were seen to be in perfect harmony with the spirit of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary and totally in keeping with the latter's Rule of Life and the organisation of its communities. The entry of the members of the Holy Heart of Mary into the Congregation of the Holy Spirit did not mean any change in their way of life. The constitutions of the Society of the Holy Spirit had been previously approved by the Holy See, as being full of wisdom and of prudence and perfectly apt for training future missionaries. With the fusion of the two Societies, the constitutions were to be better observed than ever. In remembrance of the graces received through the intercession of the Heart of Mary, the invocation of this same Immaculate Heart was attached to the title of the Holy Spirit by a decree of

the sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide. In October 1848, Bishop Monnet, who had been appointed Vicar Apostolic of Madagascar some time before, resigned as superior general and Father Libermann was elected to take his place by the unanimous vote of the members of the two congregations, now united.

I have completed my description of the actual state of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Those who are thinking about joining us will no doubt wish to know about the reason for our existence, our way of life, the conditions for admission into our ranks and the works in which we are engaged.

The Congregation of the Holy Spirit exists in order to devote itself to the salvation of the most abandoned souls. So the members live the apostolic life and take whatever steps are needed to acquire the virtues proper to that state.

To attain the perfection of that apostolic life, to preserve the fervour of the missionaries and for the stability and extension of its work, the Congregation has a fundamental and inflexible rule that its members must always live in community. In pagan countries, where it is often difficult to have large communities, the members must live with at least one other confrere. In colonial territories, the members will refuse to be parish priests or curates, apart from exceptional circumstances. They would only agree to such a situation on a temporary basis, always insisting on the principle of community life¹.

The members of the Congregation are not obliged to take vows. However, those who wish to make a permanent gift of

¹ Rules of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit under the invocation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, 1849, N. D. X, pp. 450-569.

themselves to God are allowed to pronounce such vows individually before their superior. Whether in vows or not, all are held to the same observance of the common life and there must be no difference in the way the members of the Congregation practise it. Obedience and poverty are observed equally by all. Poverty means having nothing that belongs exclusively to oneself; the missionaries will receive everything from the community and cannot dispose of anything without permission. Those who have patrimonial goods can keep them, but only on condition that they do not use those goods or the revenues accruing from them for their own benefit, or give them privately to anyone else, whether totally or in part.

The following conditions are required for clerics wishing to join the Congregation: good health, knowledge and practical judgement sufficient for exercising priestly ministry in the dioceses of France; a sincere desire of devoting oneself to the salvation of souls; a good temperament, so necessary for living in community and a commitment to acquire the apostolic and religious virtues.

Before being admitted into the Congregation, every candidate is obliged to pass through the trial period of the novitiate. Those who have not yet completed their ecclesiastical studies will remain in our special seminary for postulants in order to do so. They will then proceed to the novitiate. Since the Congregation is poor, and needs considerable resources for doing its works, those who apply to enter will normally pay for their stay in the seminary and novitiate. However, those who cannot afford to do so will be admitted free of charge, always presuming that they have the qualities necessary for becoming good missionaries.

The members of the Congregation work in pagan lands and in the evangelisation of the black people in the colonies. They may also be asked to work as professors or directors in the

seminary or novitiate of the Congregation and in the colonial seminary. Finally, they may work in Europe, in some ministry for the poor, in order to help the parochial clergy in works which, despite their dedication, they find difficulty in carrying out.

The works of the Congregation

1. Missions in Lands where the Gospel has not yet been preached

The most important work given to the Congregation by divine Providence is the West African Mission. This is made up of the Two Guineas and Senegambia, including both banks of the Senegal river. It extends along the coast for between five thousand three hundred and five thousand eight hundred kilometres. The interior of these lands is unexplored. It is impossible at the present moment to estimate the populations, but they certainly surpass the numbers given by geographers. This massive area, where the Gospel is unknown, needs fervent missionaries, full of self-denial and ready to sacrifice everything for the glory of God. Although the mission has been properly organised for scarcely a year, it has given good results and offers much hope for the future. The people are very well disposed. Everywhere, the missionaries are joyfully welcomed and everybody is begging them to visit their towns. Because of a shortage of personnel, we cannot satisfy all these requests and so are forced, for the moment, to confine ourselves to the two most important places. We spread the missionaries out in small communities, trying to cover as large an area as possible but without their becoming completely cut off from each other. In the two principal establishments, we have about fifty children receiving elementary education in both Christian and secular subjects. We are trying hard to prepare some of them for higher studies, thus hopefully making possible the training of an indigenous clergy.

We have only thirty-two missionaries in this vast area and a certain number of brothers who look after their material needs. We also invited a community of religious sisters to take part in the work and, as of now, fifteen of them are instructing the young girls and nursing the sick.

2. Missions in the Colonies

Any missionaries of the Congregation sent to the colonies will live in community like all the other members. They will act as auxiliaries to the parish clergy, under the authority of the various ecclesiastical superiors. They will concentrate on helping the black people, without of course neglecting the salvation of the whites, whenever possible. The news we are getting from the colonies speaks of the excellent response of the black peoples, the good which is being done by the members of the Congregation in Reunion and Mauritius and the excellent fruits which are being harvested with comparative ease.

3. Work in Europe

The Congregation believes that it is according to the will of God, that while working abroad for the salvation of abandoned souls, it does not forget the needs of the poor in the land of its birth. However, bearing in mind that God has directed the principal efforts of the Society to foreign missions, the works in Europe will always be of secondary importance. The Rules of the Congregation state that those members who feel a strong inclination to work abroad will only be appointed to duties at home on a very temporary basis.

4. Teaching and Running Seminaries

The Congregation notes with pleasure that among its postulants, there are certain young clerics capable of

becoming seminary professors and directors. The Society wishes to train specialists in the ecclesiastical sciences. Apart from their intellectual aptitudes, the seminary staff are expected to show a solid piety, commitment and a good and friendly character, so that they will have a beneficial influence on the students confided to their care. Finally, they are to practise the regular life and the virtues which will help them to be models in their respective communities.

The foundation of their vocation is zeal for the salvation of souls, which they will practise in ministry outside of the community. Naturally, such exterior work must be controlled to prevent it impinging on their main duties; but it will help the directors to preserve the spirit of their apostolic vocation and acquire the necessary experience for giving good advice to their students for their future ministry. In this way they will be able to impart enthusiasm and the virtues of a true missionary.