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A TRUE DISCIPLE OF FATHER LIBERMANN: BISHOP FRANCIS XAVIER VOGT (1870-1943)

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Spiritans are familiar with the saga of the conversion of the Cameroons – the throngs crowding the small churches inside and outside, the stream of pagans asking to be converted. One of the great artisans of this Pentecostal activity was Bishop Francis Xavier Vogt.

THE MISSIONARY DREAM

Xavier Vogt's mother died when he was three; this early loss lent an air of austerity to his soul, deprived of a mother's tenderness too soon. From the time he could talk he told anyone who would listen that he wanted to be a missionary. It was decided to send him to the Jesuits. After some hesitation, and after meeting a Spiritan on vacation, he entered Holy Ghost College at Beauvais, where one of his companions was Joseph Shanahan, his future confrere in the Spiritan missionary life and in the episcopate.

His was the lot of being an Alsatian. Born in 1870 at Marlenheim, he did his primary schooling in German. Beauvais made him repeat two years and a half, which only brought him to the middle of secondary studies at 17. Although old for his class, he became a good student. Two years later, he went to Castelnaudary, where he sat for his final exams at the age of 23, and failed. He was more sure than ever that he would be sent to the missions!

As a philosophy student of 25 he was most anxious to become a priest. To gain time, he proposed to his superiors to do two years of theology in one, by an astute addition to

the hours of study, gained by cutting back on manual labour, on vacations and on feastday recreation. This he did, and he was now ready. Moreover, his father was embarrassed that he was taking so long to be ordained! 'That Vogt lad must be dull, he is so old being ordained', the people will say. 'Yes, I hope I am wrong, but I must have proof'. When he saw God's will, he accepted it wholeheartedly. Finally Xavier made it to the priesthood, and then made his consecration to the apostolate at the age of 30.

He was sent to teach at Epinal, but that finished a year later; it was not expedient to maintain as teacher in a French school a subject who was not of French nationality. He became bursar. But his father in Alsace was harassed by the formalities of the German authorities over his son expatriated in Epinal. Xavier returned to Alsace. At this time he wrote, 'I have asked time and time again, and I shall continue to ask, to go to the missions'. He felt Africa very near, but the way there led in fact through Knechtsteden in Germany. The year 1902 saw him there as bursar, science-teacher, master of novices of the Brothers and assistant provincial to Fr Acker. He pestered Mgr Le Roy, the superior general: 'Send me as a poor little missionary to some difficult mission, and keep the honours for those who can and should have them'. He did not know that his name was being suggested as bishop for a new jurisdiction of German East Africa, at Bagamoyo.

When he got wind of this new danger, he attempted a diversionary move with Mgr Le Roy. 'One must pity the Congregation, if it is reduced to taking someone like me for such a position! Dare I say it? I do not know who would be the bigger laughing-stock, Your Grace or poor me!' The Norman Le Roy could not resist a smart answer. 'You have been asking loud and clear to be sent to Africa; now that we are sending you – not without some pomp – you are not satisfied!' The day of his episcopal consecration arrived, 14 October 1906, at the hands of Cardinal Fischer of Cologne, in the presence of many dignitaries. Fr Delsor, his parish priest of Marlenheim, Member of Parliament of the Reichstag and later senator in the palace of Luxembourg, gave the sermon for the occasion. His aged father followed the proceedings from home; he was sent a telegram of congratulations. A week later the new bishop was in Berlin to visit the government and have an audience with the Kaiser. He appreciated the marks of respect he received, but he felt that the pectoral cross sym-

bolized another and harder cross. Pope Pius X said to him: 'May God be with you in your work and suffering; may he be your consolation'.

BISHOP AND MISSIONARY IN BAGAMOYO

Bagamoyo was the beginning of an episcopate that was to last 36 years; at that moment he was 36 years old himself. The missions opened his eyes. He wrote expansively to his parish priest at Marlenheim. He admired the faith of the simple people and lepers. 'One of them has just died in an atmosphere of true holiness. I hope I can die some day like this poor despised leper'. In order to learn the language quicker, he undertook to teach catechism. He looked after his missionaries and wrote a directory for their use, in which he says:

'The missionary must be a man of all tasks, of all initiative, but under his superiors' direction. He must be doctor and theologian, man of learning if necessary - especially for studying the African languages'. Certain pages of the directory are strikingly relevant:

The missionary will try to give solid instruction to his Christians, since knowledge of the catechism is the very basis of evangelization of the races entrusted to us; liturgical chant, ceremonies - everything likely to edify and uplift these simple souls. Reaching out to them, looking for them, taking care of their physical needs in order to reach their souls, receiving them with patience and goodness, peacefully settling their problems, founding schools for their children and clinics for their sick, the missionary will resemble the divine Master for whom he labours and of whom the Scripture says, 'he went about doing good'.

We might say at first glance, 'Nothing extraordinary in all that'. But he had to reckon with all sorts of difficulties, the harassment of authorities, lack of personnel and resources.

I visited the whole vicariate - often on foot - and examined several areas with an eye to setting up catechists. It is a thankless job we have undertak-

en, but I felt impelled in face of the progress of Islam and the Protestant missions. I trust that God will provide the needed personnel and resources.

He had no time for restless people or those worried about their health. He was robust himself. *'If you want to be a missionary you must be one once for all and this seems to exclude preoccupation about health; you must be ready to give all, and that at once'*. He expected much of his men. He handed over a whole station to a Brother alone, hoping for relief later on; he left himself without a procurator, to whom he entrusted a mission while he provisionally took it on himself to look after the accounts and the baggage. He got to know the whole area confided to him. *'I will have to take a week's rest here, my feet are sore from all the walking'*. In turn he would pay the price of sickness. *'Six months of fever and six months of journeying'* he summed up the year 1911.

Of necessity he had to deal with the German authorities of the time. Sometimes he had to take the side of people who were excessively penalized. He even went to the governor on occasion and won his case. Humble and magnanimous, he gracefully maintained a broad expansive outlook on the work to be done, even when the means were not adequate to his desires. That would be true in the Cameroons as it was now in Bagamoyo. He had the keen eye of a good administrator. Some missions were quite prosperous. Their coffee plantations, herds of cattle and general unity were the envy of all. Some rejoiced in big numbers of converts, many schools. This compensated for the indifferent results in half-Moslem areas. Those who sowed had often to share their labour painfully by leaving to others the satisfactions of the harvest!

Xavier Vogt came to his full stature towards the end of his stay in Bagamoyo. After the war, it was clear that his vicariate had fared quite well. Not everything was destroyed, personnel remained and there was no general scattering of catechists and teachers. But the mission suffered many material losses. Bishop Vogt had lent out money. Many of the planters were ruined or turned a deaf ear to calls for repayment; some were brought to justice, but often in vain. Worse still, the English authorities declared that debts contracted with Germans did not have to be repaid, and they looked on the mission as German. Vogt's imperturbable tenacity, rightly demanding his due, wore them out. He was a German sub-

ject, after all; it was high time he gave up his position. Humiliated, dismissed and calumniated, he showed at that moment he had the makings of a saint. In 1921 he thought it better to leave. He was ripe for the Cameroons, where he would spend himself to the last.

BISHOP OF THE CAMEROONS

Priority of the Spiritual Life.

When Bishop Vogt disembarked at Douala on 2 October 1922, he did not know what to expect, what the needs were, what his own strong points were, what difficulties lay ahead. One thing certain – he had built his life around it – was the absolute priority of God in all he undertook, all he would have to live. 'Soli Deo' was his episcopal motto. Between 14 October 1922 and 8 January 1942 he addressed 104 circular letters to his missionaries. He was also their religious superior, he who at one time had been novice master of the Brothers. The importance of the circulars does not lie in the practical details – in which they abound – but in the extent of the spiritual demands they make on his Spiritan confreres, Fathers and Brothers. To the Brothers – we recall that he had been involved in their formation – he recommended good understanding with the Fathers and obedience to those who were in charge of communities or superiors of missions. To work in dependence on a Father younger than oneself when one is already mature and experienced is difficult.

It calls for much virtue and religious spirit to act in dependence on the Fathers even when the Father does not understand much about what he is asking or even when he leaves much to be desired.

He even says to the coadjutor Brothers:

Obedience makes everything you do meritorious. Nothing pleases God more than obedience. By the sacrifice of your will, by the sacrifice of your tiredness and your prayers, you draw down the graces of conversion on souls.

So much the better if the Brothers are good technicians! But what matters above all is that they be good confreres and good religious, happy in obedience and spreading happiness around them!

Of the priests, who would bear with him the weight of evangelizing the Cameroons, new for them as for him, he asks nothing less than holiness. He liked to quote for them – he who had made a vow of stability in the Congregation, who had been master of novices – Fr Libermann's words to his missionaries, words he would comment on with fervour: '*it is not the talents but the holy life of the missionaries that will convert Africa.*' The vast amount of work is no reason to neglect oneself. We have the right and duty to do our exercises of piety according to the rule.

We rightly demand that people leave us time for our meals. We must also have time for the breviary and our spiritual exercises. The occasion on which charity says to sacrifice our exercises in favour of the ministry must be an exception. Our personal sanctification can only make our apostolic work more fruitful.

His group of missionaries were drawn from various countries to build up an apostolic body of workers in the Cameroons, which had been bereft of missionaries by the war. Vogt counselled union of hearts, 'a union of all of us', even at the cost of some sacrifices. Each person already had his experience, his ways, his views. Missionaries must never forget mental prayer, the price of their fidelity! Spiritual reading must be done, and matter provided for it, if necessary! The missionary who does not work at his own sanctification makes himself unworthy of apostolic grace. Libermann speaks by the mouth of Xavier Vogt! The rule must be adhered to and its prescriptions. Superiors must examine everything and listen to their confreres, but theirs is the decision on lines of action. A common policy is essential even if ideas differ. *Cor unum et anima una* is the motto of our Congregation; let each person try to live it!

Bishop Vogt did not stop at giving advice; before all else he gave example. 'Soli Deo' was his episcopal motto. But his life of prayer had nothing of the spectacular. He was discreet in all things, even prayer. He was devoted to Mary and St Joseph. Fr Simon Mpecke, who accompanied the bishop

in his long journeys in the bush, loved to recount, long after the bishop's death, how many rosaries they prayed together between halts. The bishop travelled a lot on foot and in black soutane! Among the Saints he had his special friends: St Francis Xavier, St Francis de Sales, St Alphonsus Ligouri and the guardian angels of the new converts. He said to the priest-master of ceremonies of the senior seminary, who had forgotten to incense the altar on the feast of St Michael: *'When you want to convert a hardened sinner, you will find nothing more efficacious than prayer to St Michael, the conqueror of Lucifer, and the very guardian angel of your poor sinner. I have always done so and found it worked'*. This interest in the Saints, angels and confraternities may be naive, the ritual blessings and pontifical ceremonies, certain details of devotions he recommends to the Fathers may be misplaced, but what shines through is the piety of the man, lost in God, never without his rosary beads!

Common Life.

As soon as he arrived at Mvolye, near Yaounde, which was to be his home henceforth, Bishop Vogt began to live the common life of his missionaries. It never entered his head to live apart in a bishop's residence, still less in a luxury dwelling. His room was among those of his Fathers, whom he called in all simplicity his 'dear confreres'. He presided at meals and then recreation with the same simplicity, laughing and joking with the rest. He liked chess. No one could discover his preferences in food. On trek in the bush, a handful of rice and two fried eggs were ample – 'fit for a king', he would say. One day at the consecration of a church he was offered champagne. He declined. 'No, keep it for yourselves, for when you are sick'. Back came the superior's answer, 'No one is ever sick here!'. The bishop quaffed the champagne and toasted the occasion with the missionaries.

He wanted to be treated like any of the Fathers. In writing to his confreres he used home-made envelopes and wrote on the backs of calendars. He possessed the humility and self-effacement of a community man. He liked community life and was prompt in advice and encouragement. 'Let him who commands be like him who serves'. But when the occasion demanded, he could use his authority very strongly. The communities of the Cameroons were divided into many small

apostolic groups, overworked and overloaded. Bishop Vogt wanted a correct interplay of apostolic work and communitiy good will. Let the Fathers who live alone in a station come to spend a week per month in the nearest community and take part in its life and work. He recommended young and inexperienced confreres not to consider themselves smarter than others but to listen willingly to the advice and criticisms offered. He elaborates on their duties: not to act independently, to consult their mission head or their neighbour, to keep accounts accurately, to innovate nothing without authorization and especially without consultation.

If superiors have faults they should be told about them, or else the faults should be tolerated, but there must be no gossip behind the superiors' backs about their real or imagined faults. This would be rarely without sin and it injures confreres' reputations. But let superiors know that their faults, or their playing fast and loose with the rule, does not escape the confreres' attention. He wrote: 'We must try to achieve a certain spirit of unity, never to rejoice that a confrere is in trouble, or criticize our confreres before outsiders or - worse still - question our parishioners about our confreres'. Community life always demands some suffering, some sacrifice. Now and then one has do forego a pleasure or give in to others' tastes.

With a little courage and supernatural spirit it boils down to nothing and one even finds peace of heart and happiness in it. As for obedience, it is no longer genuine when we obey only what we think good and reasonable in what the superior or director tells us; be sure that disobedience is never blessed by God. To try to keep one's vows without any suffering, or to direct a mission well, or any work in general, or simply to do good, without suffering, is to deceive oneself. *Qui vult post me venire, abneget semetipsum et tollat crucem suam et sequatur me*'.

Bishop Vogt regularly consulted his Fathers about what was to be kept or modified. The Fathers are invited 'to examine the matters dealt with and note what they consider more or less suitable'. He often asked their advice and gratefully received the observations and ideas they thought fit to

offer him. This was collegiality before the word became current. But this man, so humble, affable and good, was no weakling, he knew how to hold the reins and affirm his authority when necessary. A catechist asked him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or look we for another?' He replied, 'The Pope sent me here to be in charge, there is no question of another coming to take that place'. The young heads of missions had to give monthly reports.

If the monthly letters are well done, this will be an excellent training. I have no pretensions to being a luminary. Look on these relationships from the point of view of faith. God imposed the charge of our missions on me, so he will grant me the graces I need to acquit myself of this charge.

This is the language both of faith and of self-respect.

Love for the African People.

Fr Libermann wrote to his first missionaries in Africa: '*It is not by the liveliness of your zeal that you will win souls; you must add patience, constancy, faithfulness to keep going on in humility and love of God in the midst of trouble, resistance and contradiction*'. Bishop Vogt was good with black people; the missionaries said he had limitless goodness, they even found him too weak. When one of them, harassed by fatigue and cares, came to complain about the hardness of heart of his flock, the good shepherd got annoyed at times. '**You say their heart is hard, their head is hard, that they are impossible. It is not true, you simply do not know how to take them, you are too strict; learn how to forgive**'.

The missionaries came on much that was imperfect in the catechists' outstations. These neophytes had barely emerged from paganism and needed more supervision. '*Still more reason to visit them as a good shepherd and not as a policeman. Harsh wounding ways of speaking never brought back a sinner*'. The missionaries come to Africa because they love the black people. They give their strength, health and life for them. What a pity to spoil such generosity with impatience, anger, slander! What use is it to rail against a chief, a catechist, any black person, as if they were criminals. And so

often one is wrong! Think of our own weaknesses and we will be more patient. We all need God's mercy, perhaps more than our poor people. No preferences must be made between tribes; all must be equally loved. Those least inclined to ministry speak worst of the blacks! We are here to be trail-blazers, to clear paths. It is thankless work, he said, but the blacks will not be corrected by insults and coarse language. Take Fr Laval's humble and continuous dedication as a model, great missionary of the blacks that he was. Jesus would say to his missionaries what he said to St John, who wanted to punish by fire the recalcitrant villages of Samaria, 'You do not know of what spirit you are; I have come to save them, not for their loss'. The bishop added: **'On with the work, dear confreres, we are all one. If we used a fraction of our energy against ourselves, we would soon be holy missionaries and do much good'**.

He prudently recommended that attention be given to administration officials, nurses, clerks, and in general all who exercise or could exercise an influence on others. When the missionary goes to a particular area, he must speak with them. 'One could easily avoid them on the grounds that they are vain and proud people. Actually on the contrary they will be flattered by your attentions, you will bring them to do less harm by taking an interest in them. If they feel neglected, brushed aside, they will only do more harm'. A certain optimism must be risked, based on God's goodness and mercy. The missionary must not insist, 'This is superficial, only the novelty and interest attracts them, they are not serious'. Such ideas undermine zeal and initiative, they are a slight on God's goodness. We must count on him and not on our own activity. God is all, man is nothing!

The catechists were another elite group. They have to be told of their faults but must not be rebuked before their Christians and catechumens. Catechists' meetings can often become just a harangue of shouting and rebuking! Check, rebuke and punish, yes, but as a father. Recommendation given in a fatherly tone has often the best effect.

Love and esteem for the Africans led Bishop Vogt to undertake, despite the scepticism of many, the foundation of an African clergy. Never discouraged, he won through; charity, more powerful than racism, sustained him.

PROMOTING AFRICAN VOCATIONS

Priests.

In faithfulness to the instructions of Fr Libermann and of Pope Pius XI, Bishop Vogt made the training of an African clergy a priority. It must be said that Mgr Vierer, his predecessor, already in 1907 had begun a school of catechists at Buea, and from that school issued the first candidates for the priesthood in 1914, but the newborn enterprise died painfully. In 1921 Fr Malessard, the apostolic administrator, gathered four junior seminarians, but he died soon afterwards and the effort died with him. After returning from a trek in Eton country, Bishop Vogt wrote, *'I launch the idea of founding a seminary. Let the schools and the Church say: boys wishing to be priests, come forward!'* Five boys came forward, among them the future Fr Jean Tabi, considered a saint, whose renown is still great today in southern Cameroons. The missionaries felt that the bishop was imprudent, they remained sceptical and non-committal. In the circumstances, was it not acting prematurely? *'No'*, said the bishop, *'for the Pope himself gave me formal instructions to raise up an indigenous clergy as soon as possible'*. Little by little, the opposition melted. He decided to open the junior seminary in September 1923 with boarders lodged at Mvolye (Yaounde). For want of teachers, the vicar apostolic was forced to take charge himself of the direction and teaching of these young Latin scholars. In October 1925 a regular staff was recruited. There were forty students. The senior seminary opened in 1927. The first twelve seminarians took the soutane on 12 March 1928, and on 8 December 1935 the first four priests were ordained in the Cameroons. By the time the bishop died in 1943 he had ordained forty-one Cameroonian priests.

Brothers.

September 1923. *'We will begin a Brothers' postulancy with four candidates'*. Why? *'At Mvolye a Holy Ghost Brother is giving the example of a religious life of dedication and sacrifice; the thought of imitating him has entered the minds of several local young men'*. In 1928 the Congregation

of Brothers of St Joseph numbered six professed members and five novices. By 1932 – twelve years after its foundation – the number of professed rose to twenty-two; forty subjects, novices and postulants, were preparing for religious life. But the Congregation went through a crisis and many left one after another. The remaining Brothers were admitted into the Sacred Heart Brothers, who came to the Cameroons in 1953.

Sisters.

In 1925 three girls of the mission of Minlaba wished to become religious. In 1930 three postulants received the habit, but left afterwards. On 16 January 1933 two Cameroonian Sisters made profession in the Daughters of Mary, and on 16 January 1983 Sister Thérèse celebrated her golden jubilee of profession. Today the Daughters of Mary number 130 professed members and fifteen novices. They run three secondary schools, two technical schools, several dispensaries and a maternity clinic, all of which they look after very competently.

All these initiatives of Bishop Vogt entailed difficulties. His circulars reveal some of them.

Little by little the work goes on. We must get used to the idea of having local priests, Brothers and Sisters in the mission. In theory nobody among us is opposed to having indigenous personnel, but in practice some are perhaps not quite sympathetic enough to this indigenous personnel. The latter will never be Europeans, and to ask of them what one asks of a European is to ask the impossible. Besides, they have qualities that we do not have. I have remarked, both in myself and in many of you, that we are not patient enough – too difficult, too authoritarian.

A youngster who wants to go to the seminary must be followed up, observed to see if he is regular at school and church, to see if he has the talents and good conduct necessary. Where the family atmosphere is not suitable, take him into the mission. All pride and haughtiness must be avoided towards senior seminarians doing apostolic work. They have to be reprimanded, corrected and trained, but as a father does to his children. *'Avoid training clergy who will turn against*

us; the thought that you are training future priests will give you patience and charity'.

Whenever Bishop Vogt heard confreres expressing fears about having local Brothers and Sisters, he was painfully surprised; he remarked that these sentiments were out of harmony with the directions of Benedict XV and Pius XI. Local seminarians must be treated with deference, charity and patience. He had fears for the future. People wanted them perfect, but had not the necessary patience and charity to give them the slightest formation. To gain oneself the reputation of being severe and difficult, of browbeating people, is to deprive these people beforehand of all trust in us and to sap their authority before the rest of the black people. *'If you treat seminarians and Brothers like that, you will behave likewise with local priests. What incalculable harm will ensue!'*

Defender of Human Rights.

Bishop Vogt did all he could to defend an institution called Sixa, bequeathed to him by the Pallottine Fathers. In practice, this was a sort of novitiate preparatory to marriage. Pagan girls, asked for in marriage by young Christians, prepared here for baptism and for their future tasks as mothers of families. They boarded with the Sisters, hence the name of Sixa. Actually it meant coming to appreciate their dignity as women and children of God, and to see the degrading condition of a wife in polygamy. Sixa became a revolutionary ferment, a school of freedom and on occasion a refuge for women who were sold against their will to some polygamist. The colonial government took umbrage at it, although it usurped the title of defender of customs. There were conflicts and threats of condemnation. The bishop proudly took the side of the Fathers and of Sixa. The missionaries did not come to maintain polygamy, prostitution and the material well being of women-sellers. God sent the missionaries to free women from this slavery. They are accused of being revolutionaries. Doubtless it is true the Catholic Church has wrought a revolution in morals wherever it has been planted, and no human power can prevent that!

The mission, through the voice of its bishop, denounced raids on men and women to bring them to forced labour. Bishop Vogt could speak of what he had seen himself: eight women taken by force at night and brought on leashes by a

policeman to the public work areas. The bishop knew all about the petty annoyances and sometimes condemnations of which the catechists were victims. He told his Fathers to note precisely all the unjust actions they witnessed. Vague imprecise facts are not a basis for accusation, facts alleged must be proven. 'When a Christian or a catechist is condemned, ask for a copy of the sentence; it will cost fifteen francs' True! With its 10,000 catechists, its schools and works, the mission looked, in the eyes of some, like a State within a State. That is why it was interfered with on the subject of land, administrative documents, and the wood needed for building missions. Bishop Vogt imposed the prayer at Mass, 'Against the persecutors of the Church', for three months. If necessary he would go to Geneva to complain. Meanwhile, whenever he was seen putting on his big hat it was known at Yaounde that he had a meeting with the governor, to whom he would speak his mind.

A sectarian spirit is abroad, the spirit of the 'lay laws'. They take it badly that we try to free the women; they harass us over the supply of timber, on the pretext that we do not have a forestry concession; they did not like us objecting to the forced labour for men, women and children, and so on. We are often embarrassing eye-witnesses. One of these people has said, 'If there were no missions, the government would have peace in this country'. About timber, they had the kindness to say, 'You can buy it, like everyone else'. So we are put on a level with the colonials, who only come here to get rich, whereas the missionaries come to devote themselves body and soul to improving the country. And those who speak like that are handsomely paid and would not do a day's work without pay.

Another noble act was the justice he did to the Pallottine Fathers who were before him in the Cameroons. His biographer, Fr Dussercle, says on this point:

We must do justice to the Pallottine Fathers by recognizing, acknowledging the great care they took of the religious instruction of both children and adults, and the excellent formation, both human and apostolic, that they gave the neophytes. The first Christians dreamt only of converting their compatriots. Many of them were baptized in captivity on the

island of Fernando Po, where the remains of the German army had to take refuge.

These soldiers were instructed by the German Fathers interned with them, who spent their free time catechizing and baptizing. Among these former soldiers of the first war, the Holy Ghost Fathers were to find a seedbed of catechists. Indeed, under their influence the Cameroons mission had prospered and remained very much alive. Vogt wrote:

I would like to pay tribute to the great good the Pallottine Fathers did in the Cameroons. We must never speak disparagingly of them. They faced greater difficulties than we, and they crowned their work by the painful sacrifice of the missions they founded and loved so much. It is understandable that in some details our methods are different. But we must not be people of one outlook, always ready to criticize what is done differently. That could be unjust. We have to maintain the good high standards they set. Where they have been changed, I ask that they be restored. New hymns with French melodies must be introduced gradually, but I want the former hymns of the Pallottine Fathers to be maintained, and where they have been put aside let them be restored honourably. Our Christians must not think that our religion is different from that of our predecessors.

REALISTIC IN THE SERVICE OF THE GOSPEL

What strikes one about Bishop Vogt is the plain common sense, the love of practical detail and the concern for things being well and thoroughly done. No doubt his double roots as a bursar in Knechtsteden and as a vinedresser in Marlenheim played an influence. He could not refrain from giving recipes for making beer, for preserving wine, for producing some homegrown medicine. To find out where to keep the tabernacle key, how to draw up an order in a way a bursar would recognize, how to prepare a provisional budget, go to Bishop Vogt's circulars. They tell you how to forestall thieves, how to keep a sacristy or a linen cupboard, how to keep a supply of books. He went further. The missionaries often had to

work with the Sisters and their students or the boarders of Sixa. The good bishop thought too highly of this apostolate and this work of freeing women to allow any kind of ambiguity. His recalls to prudence are many and concrete. He omits nothing: the bad words to avoid, the familiarities to avoid, the methods of dealing with them for what was necessary. He recommended the Fathers to love the work of the bush and visit the outstations. There the indispensable inquiries had to be made since the witnesses were present, the catechism exams must be done there – the smaller number facilitates greater attention. Reports of these visits must be kept meticulously, and catechist leaders must do likewise. **'Carefully, carefully'**, he kept on saying. He provided good opportunity for a thorough preparation for first holy Communion to the children of the mission schools. **'Remember'**, he said to the missionaries, **'when you were children, what care you were given as you prepared for first Communion'**. He invited his missionaries to put to good use the immense fund of good will the catechist represented. **'Put good books into their hands, give them courses and retreats'**. His instructions for ministry in the bush are marvels of appositeness. He obviously knew what he was talking about. He knew all that the Fathers, Sisters and catechists do. His consuming desire was that their labour would not be in vain for want of care or precision. It suffices to look at how he regulates the contact of the Christians in the bush with the central mission, how he advises about dividing out the ministry of Confessions so that no one is neglected despite the great number of penitents.

His feet were on the ground. He paid detailed attention to the catechists, to let them see the importance of their ministry and the value the bishop put on it. He conversed with them, listened to the instructions they gave, took part in their meetings. Some of them became his trusted counsellors. He encouraged that school-books be adapted to the Cameroons, that the Fathers compose them. He examined everything closely, and when he expressed a criticism it was always as a first-hand witness.

IN THE IMAGE OF ST FRANCIS DE SALES

Bishop Vogt has been compared to St Francis de Sales, to whom he had a special devotion. His biographer says he

resembled the Saint in physique, he had the same gentle look, the same style of beard, the same charm. His head inclined a little to the right, his step was measured, and when celebrating Mass he was as devout as the Bishop of Geneva. He shared his gentleness, simplicity and lively concersation. Somewhat shy with strangers, he was all goodness to his Fathers, with whom he remained always friendly, easy and patient. Towards the last years of his life he would visit a mission in a motorcar, accompanied by his coadjutor. His presence, full of goodness and forbearance, created a festive atmosphere. In old age his humility and piety increased; he entered old age to take refuge in God. 'A man of prayer in the midst of his people, whom he loves as a Father and who return his love with interest'. This man of God, so kind and good, kept repeating in his last agony, '**Have mercy on me, a sinner**'. The rosary beads was never out of his hand. His death and funeral were a triumph; two seminarians took it in turn to touch the people's rosaries and medals to his remains. A whole people mourned their father. 'What need to offer Masses for a saint? Rather he will pray for us'.

Near his simple grave in the cemetery of Mvolye, on the famous hill from which the faith spread like wildfire throughout the Camerouns, where the crowds flock to celebrate the feasts and receive the sacraments of the Church, Bishop Vogt's cult continues.

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Michel Kieffer, C.S.Sp., Rome

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(All these are in French except the last).