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Jean-Remi Bessieux (1803-1876) and the Founding of the Catholic Church in Gabon



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INTRODUCTION

THANKS TO ENGLAND'S ECONOMIC AND MARITIME EXPANSION in the nineteenth-century, the extraordinary missionary mobilization that marked the century began with the development of Protestant missions.¹ France had to wait until 1830 to begin restoring an ecclesial fabric shaken by the Revolution, but parishes were then very quickly revitalized and religious Congregations born or reconstituted in a movement that combined domestic and overseas missions. It was the period of Chateaubriand's *Génie du Christianisme* and the Jesuit *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses*, both of which aroused interest in missionary literature. In Lyon, Pauline Jaricot, a young girl from a family of silk workers, inspired by the Anglo-Saxon practice of taking up missionary collections, conceived a similar plan: each member of her association, which would become the *Work of the Propagation of the Faith*, committed to giving a penny a week to help the missions.

At the same time, evolving attitudes towards the slave trade, in wide practice at the time, made it possible to view the trade as increasingly unsustainable; hence its abolition in England in 1838 and France in 1848. The prospect of

1. Jean Comby and Claude Prudhomme, *Deux mille ans d'évangélisation et de diffusion du christianisme* (Paris: Karthala, 2022), 282ff.

returning slaves to their continent of origin led to a turning of the gaze towards Black Africa, then largely still unknown.

In this context, Catholic and Protestant missionaries shared a single conviction: that there was an urgent need to spread the reign of God, the only one capable of giving meaning to human history wherever it may be in the world. The debates that had marked the Reformation in the sixteenth century gave way to a shared conviction: modern upheavals and wars were reviving fears of the end times and therefore the urgency of offering salvation to all peoples. The possibility of giving one's life, and even of martyrdom, once again became a regular feature of the mission.

THE VOCATION OF JEAN-REMI BESSIEUX

Jean-Remi Bessieux was indeed a man of his time. He was born in Vélioux on December 24, 1803 to a family of peasant landowners who were very attached to their faith in this harsh country of Haut Minervois (Hérault). Past confrontations with the Cathars, and the more recent resistance to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy imposed by the Revolution, had made a lasting impression on people's minds. It is in this context that Jean-Remi would see his priestly and missionary vocation mature from childhood.

Ordained a priest in 1829 in Albi, over the next thirteen years Father Bessieux was successively vicar in Pézenas, parish priest in Minerve, then professor at the minor seminary of Saint-Pons.² Fully missionary in his parish functions, with great closeness to the poor, Jean-Remi from the start of his ministry felt drawn to distant missions. He was already preparing for them by frequent fasting and going on long walks from one village to another. Above all, he distinguished himself by his zeal and his many initiatives to develop the Work of the Propagation of the Faith.

In 1841, Jean-Remi took advantage of the holidays to go to Paris to see how to direct his missionary vocation. His steps naturally led him to the parish of Notre-Dame des Victoires, whose parish priest, Father Desgenettes, was well known in the Minervois and throughout France. Father Desgenettes had just founded the Archconfraternity of the Holy Heart of Mary. When he was first appointed priest of Notre Dame des Victoires, it had been deserted since the

2. Gérard Morel, *Jean-Rémi Bessieux et le Gabon* (tome I : 1803-1849; Paris: Karthala, 2007, 27ff ; tome II : 1849-1854; Paris: Karthala, 2019).

Revolution; he saw an influx of the faithful once he consecrated the parish to the Holy Heart of Mary in 1836.³ Father Desgenettes introduced Jean-Remi to Francis Mary Paul Libermann, a convert from Judaism, who was about to found a missionary Congregation dedicated to the evangelization of black people. Jean-Remi Bessieux returned home determined to join this Institute; he would have to wait a year, however, to be authorized to leave his diocese of Montpellier.

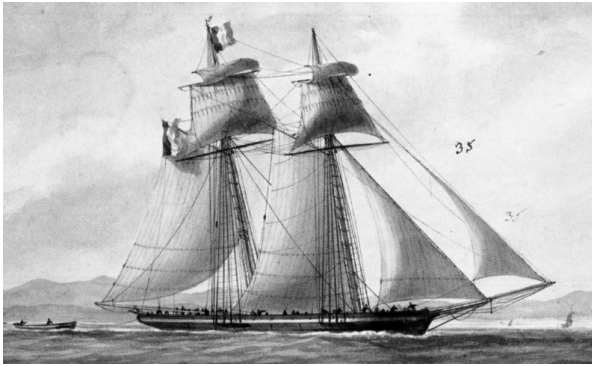
WITH LIBERMANN AND THE CONGREGATION OF THE HOLY HEART OF MARY

The call for the Mission had first come from the Americas and Indian Ocean islands where the emancipation of slaves was approaching. This prospect is what two Creole seminarians had come to discuss with Libermann when they were with him at the Séminaire d'Issy-les-Moulineaux; the first, Frederick Le Vavas-seur, came from Bourbon Island (today Reunion); the second, Eugene Tisserant, was from Haiti. From this meeting came the idea of creating a Society for the Evangelization of Blacks, which Libermann accepted to direct. Libermann was ordained a priest in Amiens and immediately afterwards was able to open a novitiate in La Neuville, near Amiens. Jean Remi Bessieux joined the second novitiate at the start of the school year in September 1842; of the thirteen novices already there he would be the eldest.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH AFRICA

A major movement had emerged in the United States to allow former slaves to return to their land of origin. The United States acquired land for this purpose in what would become Liberia, and beginning in 1834, pastors accompanied freedmen on this return journey. With the encouragement of the Propagation of the Faith, Edward Barron, vicar general of the young diocese of Philadelphia, was sent on this mission, along with an Irish priest and a layman. This small team landed on December 21, 1841. Upon arrival in Monrovia they met some repatriated Catholics and began to visit neighboring villages where they were favorably received and met with requests for missionaries. Barron then left for Rome to seek assistance in order to evangelize the Blacks of Africa. Pope Gregory XVI

3. Since its founding, the Archconfraternity has welcomed more than 1,680,000 members and affiliated more than 21,000 communities worldwide. <https://www.notredamedesvictoires.com/archi-confrerie>



*Sailing boat of 1828 used along the coasts of Africa
(Design: Willaumez)*

decided to create the Apostolic Vicariate of Upper and Lower Guinea and the entire region of Sierra Leone. Edward Barron was ordained bishop with responsibility for this immense territory extending over 8,000 km of coastline, from Senegal to the Orange

River.⁴ Bishop Barron then set out to find missionary personnel; after several fruitless searches, he met Libermann who saw in this meeting a call from Providence for his young Congregation. He decided to send a first team of seven missionaries for this mission to “Guinea”; the group would be joined in Bordeaux by three lay people and a postulant priest. Jean-Remi Bessieux, given his age and experience, was appointed group manager. Despite careful physical preparation and impressive equipment (twenty-four tonnes of supplies!), one could expect that the enthusiasm and inexperience of the participants might give rise to a certain recklessness: some wanted to carry nothing but a cross and sent their watches back to Libermann, replacing them with sand timers.⁵

After delays caused by Africa’s rainy season, the embarkation took place in Bordeaux on September 13, 1843, on the sailing ship *Les deux Clémentines*.⁶ At Libermann’s request, the Ministry of the Navy and the Colonies agreed “to take charge of the travel, accommodation, and even the treatment of the missionaries, but he made it conditional on them settling in French territory.”⁷

The group arrived in Gorée after a month’s crossing but, following a misunderstanding of Libermann’s instructions, Jean-Remi Bessieux insisted that everyone continue to Cap des Palmes, when a community should have stayed in

4. Vicar Apostolic, he later became Titular Bishop of Gallipoli.

5. A. Cabon, CSSp, “La première expédition des missionnaires du Saint-Cœur de Marie en Guinée, 1843–1845,” *Bulletin Général de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit*, Tome 34, n° 475 (March 1930), 539–588, here 556.

6. Mgr. Barron, back in Ireland to seek personnel, was to rejoin the group in Senegal on their stopover at Gorée.

7. Maurice Briault, *La Reprise des missions d’Afrique au dix-neuvième siècle*, Le Vénérable Père F.M.P. Libermann (Paris: J. de Gigord, 1946), 117.

Senegal. The group therefore arrived at Cap des Palmes, where Father Kelly—whom Barron had left behind—welcomed them with open arms, although he couldn't speak French (the group arrived in a predominantly English-speaking and Protestant environment). In their enthusiasm the missionaries neglected to protect their heads from the sun and took up the local diet. On Sunday, the villagers were invited to a solemn procession during which a Bible was opened and Jean-Remi Bessieux gave a homily in Latin on original sin and the goodness of God (with translation into English and retranslation into Grebo, the local language). At first admiring, the listeners soon dispersed under pretext of going to have their meal...

This episode, which recounts the first words addressed to Africa by Jean-Remi Bessieux, may surprise us today but has an important symbolic meaning: the young missionary wanted to give priority to proclaiming the Word of God ("living and effective," Heb 4:12), while ensuring a translation using the means at his disposal. Moreover, the solemn and quasi-liturgical context desired for this proclamation would prove to be a brilliant intuition: in the first missions, the inhabitants showed themselves to be particularly attracted by the beauty of Catholic ceremonies.

A few days later, as they were eagerly beginning to learn Grebo, seven missionaries, including Bessieux, fell seriously ill. Bishop Barron, arriving from Ireland, directed his team, divided into two communities, towards the French posts of Assinie and Grand-Bassam (Ivory Coast) in order to respect the agreements made by Libermann. However, nothing having been planned for their reception, and those places proving to be even more insalubrious, the carnage continued. Bishop Barron then proposed a withdrawal to Senegambia, but the travel ended up decimating the rest of the team. There was also no news from Bessieux and the two lay people who had remained at Cap des Palmes to await a hypothetical departure for Gabon. Believing that no one had survived, Bishop Barron left for Rome to make a report and tender his resignation; he ended his report by expressing his fear that the Mission of Guinea might never one day welcome European missionaries, because "the climate is deadly, and those who come from Europe cannot stay there long enough to learn the language."⁸

8. Cabon, *Bulletin Général*, 587.

OPEN DOOR IN GABON

Bessieux and his two companions, still unaware of the fate of their colleagues, were able to take the corvette *Le Zèbre* on July 26, 1844, arriving in Gabon on September 28. Commander Mauléon, who had shared his table with Jean-Remi for two months, testified to the very strong will of the latter to finally begin, in a state of stability, his African missionary life; he entrusted the small team, which was very weak—Brother Jean Fabé would quickly be repatriated—to the head of the post at Fort d'Aumale. A small room was made available to Bessieux to serve as temporary accommodation and chapel inside the fort. Bessieux would start out as chaplain of this small garrison; it served as a stopover for French warships responsible for apprehending slave ships.

Bessieux had not heard from Fr. Libermann since leaving France, although he had written to Paris nine times. Libermann, for his part, had only received one letter in March 1844 informing him that six missionaries were ill. Then Bishop Barron came to report on the disaster—the death of the missionaries—and newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic quickly spread the news of the tragedy. Libermann gathered the community of La Neuville and in a sad but calm voice informed them of the tragic events; in faith he remained confident in the future of the work and that same day many novices hastened to request being part of its continuation. A service was held for the dead missionaries and, in the certainty of the death of Jean-Remi Bessieux, his name was entered in the necrology of the deceased.⁹

A letter written by Bessieux on March 12, 1845 finally arrived in La Neuville: one can imagine the immense joy with which it filled the whole community! Despite the failure of the first mission to the Two Guineas, Rome decided not to abandon the project and to entrust it directly to the young Society of the Holy Heart of Mary.¹⁰ Bishop Barron's successor was Eugene Tisserant, Apostolic Prefect of Haiti, who had been one of the first three initiators of the small society; because of his experience, he was the natural choice. New ordeal: Tisserant died at sea on December 7, 1845, just after embarking for Africa. He was replaced by another good man, Benoit Truffet, who was appointed Vicar Apostolic of the

9. Abbé M. Granier, *L'Apôtre du Gabon, Mgr Jean-Remi Bessieux* (Montpellier: Librairie Vallat, 1912), 35.

10. Jean Irénée Nkulu-Butombe, "Le Saint-Siège et les origines du vicariat apostolique des Deux-Guinées," in Paul Coulon and Paule Brasseur, *Libermann 1802–1852. Une pensée et une mystique missionnaires* (Paris: Cerf, 1988) 355–381, here 376.

Two Guineas in December 1846 and ordained on January 25, 1847. He arrived in Dakar on May 8, 1847.

Jean-Remi Bessieux and Brother Grégoire finally received a letter from Libermann dated September 1845 (this time arriving very quickly in mid-October¹¹): it was the first Bessieux had received since his departure from France in September 1843. His joy was all the greater since Jean-Remi Bessieux had wondered if the cause of the mail silence wasn't disgrace due to his errors during the Guinea expedition. He had written to Libermann on March 12, 1845: "Please, write to me: I thirst for your news. I have been alone for over a year."¹² Father Libermann, reassured about the climate of Gabon, informed Bessieux that he was sending off MM. Briot (named Superior) and Arragon, along with Brother Pierre Mercy, to join him.¹³ Jean-Remi promptly wrote to Father Briot to explain the situation of the Gabon mission, where he tried to apply Libermann's missionary approach: he very quickly, without an interpreter, began to study the mpongwe language and (with difficulty) started a small school which also functioned as a workshop where children could discover some foundations of faith and learn how to pray. On the occasion of the death of one of the children, he began to discover local attitudes towards illness and death, as well as the world of fetishism. He was surprised to see Fr. Briot settled in [the French post of] Gorée while in Gabon he was starting to establish a site at a distance from the French post for what was to become the Sainte-Marie Mission, with dwellings that would be gathered around it.

On March 7, 1846, Father Briot came to visit Jean-Remi and returned to Gorée, leaving Brother Théophile to replace Brother Grégoire, who was leaving to begin his novitiate in Gorée. On August 15, 1846, Father Briot arrived again with Father Le Berre and Brother Pierre.¹⁴

On September 9, 1846 Bessieux wrote to Libermann to state his wish, expressed to the French Admiral, for financial support for the new arrangements of the mission. Jean-Remi was faced with a dilemma: he did not want the proximity of French soldiers to "compromise" his missionary action, while being aware of the need for help; in this regard he is entirely in keeping with the practice of Libermann.

11. We can infer that the arrival of steam was beginning to improve journeys by sea.

12. Morel, *Jean-Rémi Bessieux*, I, 211.

13. Morel, *Jean-Rémi Bessieux*, I, 261.

14. Morel, *Jean-Rémi Bessieux*, I, 304.

On November 3, 1846, Jean-Remi Bessieux, seriously ill, had to leave for France to rest for eight months. He left Father Briot in place, soon to be joined by Father Lossedat. Upon arrival in France (April 9, 1847), he learned of Mgr. Truffet's appointment to Dakar and undoubtedly became acquainted with Libermann's *Memorandum* to the Propaganda. He subsequently expressed his disagreement with the founder's request to Rome to bestow minor orders on catechists and schoolmasters as was formerly the practice in the primitive Church.¹⁵

Jean-Remi took advantage of his few months' rest to complete the writing of a Pongwe grammar, dictionary, and catechism, as well as an introduction in Pongwe to sacred history and the Gospel. He also took the opportunity to go to Castres to meet Mother Marie de Villeneuve, founder of a young missionary society, the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of Castres. Jean-Remi would help her carry out her project with Libermann's agreement. Jean-Remi left for Dakar on December 24, 1847, with two priests and three Brothers, and he had the joy of departing aboard *L'Infatigable* with the first four Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of Castres.¹⁶ Unfortunately, when he arrived in Senegal on January 11, 1848, he learned that Mgr. Truffet had died.

EVENTS MOVE QUICKLY FOR JEAN-REMI BESSIEUX

Benoit Truffet had ideas very close to those of Libermann concerning the organization of the mission and the need to "become Negro with the Negroes."¹⁷ However, as soon he arrived in Senegal, the young bishop, who was at the same time the religious superior and native of Savoy (the region was not yet reunited with France), began to prohibit any contact with Europeans and refused any subsidy from France. He organized his community in Dakar as a novitiate, allowed only local foods and Wolof as the only authorized language: he wanted complete assimilation to Africans. This set the stage for a new catastrophe: after six months everyone fell ill and Bishop Truffet died on November 23, 1847. Rome and La Neuville considered Jean-Remi Bessieux best suited to succeed Bishop Truffet: Rome thus appointed him Apostolic Vicar of the Two Guineas

15. *Notes et Documents relatifs à la vie et à l'œuvre du Vénérable François-Marie-Paul Libermann*. Vol. VIII (13 tomes + Appendices et Compléments ; Paris: Maison Mère, 30, rue Lhomond, 1929–2015), 415–416 [henceforth ND]; Morel, *Jean-Remi Bessieux*, I, 338.

16. Morel, *Jean-Remi Bessieux*, I, 387.

17. ["*se faire nègre avec les nègres*"]. Letter to the Community of Dakar and Gabon. November 19, 1847. ND, ix, 324–331. See also *A Spiritan Anthology* (Rome, 2011), 281–287.

on May 20, 1848, and on September 22 gave him a coadjutor for Senegal in the person of Aloys Kobès, then 28 years old. Bessieux was ordained bishop in Paris on January 14, 1849.¹⁸ Bessieux and Kobès left Toulon together for Senegal on February 17, 1849. Their first task was to reconnect with the local authorities and restore a normal regimen for the missionaries. During the year 1848 spent in Senegal, Bessieux, who had already thrown himself into the experience of language learning and the coexistence of languages in Gabon, established a delicate balance between the different languages used by the mission.¹⁹ During his stay he was in top form and proved to be an excellent administrator.²⁰ Appointed provincial superior for Africa, Mgr. Bessieux was a valuable support to his coadjutor and all his colleagues. Mgr. Kobès, in turn, during the twenty-four years of his episcopate (1820–1872), endeavored to leave to his successors a Christian community that would henceforth count within the heart of a largely Islamic setting: he is seen as the founder of the Church of Senegal.

Meanwhile, in 1848 the merger took place in Paris between the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary founded by Libermann and the Seminary of the Holy Spirit founded in 1703 by Claude Poullart des Places. Henceforth the Congregation of the Holy Spirit would lead the evangelization of the Blacks in both the islands and Africa.

APOSTOLIC TOUR AND FIRST EPISCOPAL STAY IN GABON (1849–1851)

Leaving Senegal in the hands of his coadjutor, Bishop Bessieux set out to visit his immense territory of the Two Guineas. The visitor was very warmly welcomed in Assinie and Bassam where he prayed before the tombs of his confreres. He transmitted to Libermann numerous requests for missionaries; he felt Libermann's society wouldn't be able to cope with all these appeals and thought it might become necessary to turn to other Congregations. Libermann at first

18. Augustine Berger, in Coulon-Brasseur, *Libermann 1802–1852*, 639.

19. The young bull without horns is the Wolof we don't yet see; later it alone will power the great wheel of religious science; the decrepit donkey is Latin, which will move but will hardly power others to move; the horse is a living language, indispensable under present conditions, until the native dialects, once furnished with books adapted to the country's needs, can dispense with the languages of Europe.

20. Morel, *Jean-Remi Bessieux*, I, 400.

tempered Bessieux's enthusiasm but then proposed to do research himself in this direction.²¹

On October 1, 1849, Bishop Bessieux made landfall in Gabon; he wrote shortly afterwards to Bishop Kobès to tell of his disappointment at having found only one confrere who could speak the language. On March 11, 1850 he confided to Libermann: "The Europeans are one of the great crosses of the mission and the great scandal of our poor infidels."²²

New events were occurring in Gabon: in July 1849, 46 slaves from the Congo and Loango were freed by the French frigate, *La Pénélope*. They were put ashore on the "plateau" which was given the name Libreville. The slaves were invited to organize themselves according to the ideology of phalansteries then fashionable in Europe: they elected their mayor and their administration.

The usual course of events led to the establishment of a colonial administration in Libreville, along with a hospital and eventually a cathedral. Bessieux, meanwhile, always wanted to stay in the area of his first settlement, the Holy Mary mission. In any case, it was necessary to increase the number of missionaries: an opportunity to complain fraternally to Bishop Kobès and to Libermann: "I cannot consent to Senegal absorbing all the priests"²³; he wished that two separate vicariates be made.²⁴

In a letter to Libermann dated May 26, 1850, Bessieux wondered for a moment about the usefulness of teaching "arts and crafts": the missionaries devoted too much time to it, he thought, to the detriment of the direct evangelization of Africans; and, moreover, they risked being confused with Protestants because to the latter, "civilizing means creating needs in order to feed commerce." Seeing the mission's crops, Africans "realize that all we harvest means that much less that we will buy from them." Priority must therefore be given to the mission itself: "Apostolic men have never been sowers of millet and corn."²⁵ Thus, on November 23, 1850, he wrote to Father Lossedat,²⁶ his vicar general, of his intention to open missions with him among the Akélés and the Pahouins (Fang), by learning Bulu.

However, an expedition on the upper Gabon river would ruin Bessieux's

21. *ND*, XII, 14-19.

22. Morel, *Jean-Remi Bessieux*, II, 132.

23. Morel, *Jean-Remi Bessieux*, II, 136.

24. Morel, *Jean-Remi Bessieux*, II, 136-137; *ND*, XII, 593-596.

25. Morel, *Jean-Remi Bessieux*, II, 151-152.

26. Morel, *Jean-Remi Bessieux*, II, 185.

health and he had to leave for France on March 14, 1851. Once recovered, Bessieux traveled to Rome in 1852 to help approve the Rules of the Congregation of the Sisters of Castres; he admits it was a time-consuming process: “For my part, I take a long time and the Congregations take even longer to make their decisions.”²⁷ It was in Rome that he learned of Libermann's death on February 2, 1852. It fell to Jean-Remi Bessieux to send to Rome the votes electing the founder's successor, Father Ignace Schwindenhammer.

Bishop Bessieux returned to Dakar at the end of 1852 and did not arrive in Gabon until 1854, for he had to replace Bishop Kobès who had left for France and Rome; that is how Bessieux would end up taking charge of a certain number of constructions in Senegal. That didn't prevent him from continuing to work on the local languages of Gabon and from giving some advice in his letters to Fr. Lossadat: one must “translate not words but truths” and not be afraid to change certain words “because they say nothing to the hearts or minds of the people,” employing paraphrase if necessary.²⁸ He also dwells to some extent on problems of Latin pronunciation or ceremony: in the absence of suitable books, everyone does what they can!²⁹ Very respectful of the Rule, Bessieux reminded his confreres of the need to remain silent outside of recess; he also closely followed the guidance that the new superior general, Father Ignace Schwindenhammer, was giving to the Congregation: several times he expressed his fear of seeing the reinforcements expected for Africa go instead to new works created in France or even in Europe (the Congregation accepted directorship of the French Seminary in Rome in 1853).

THE FINAL RETURN TO GABON

While continuing to exercise his role as bishop and religious superior, Bessieux became more and more involved in the schools and... the plantations of the mission: this represented an evolution in his thought compared to positions he expressed in 1850. He deemed that working the land himself among his apprentices would serve as testimony and clear him of any reproach of slavery.³⁰ The bishop provides an example of manual work: he wields the ax and the machete

27. Morel, *Jean-Remi Bessieux*, II, 269.

28. Morel, *Jean-Remi Bessieux*, II, 412.

29. Morel, *Jean-Remi Bessieux*, II, 413-414.

30. Paul Coulon, “L'arrivée et l'avancée des Spiritains en Afrique équatoriale,” in *Afrique, à l'ombre des dieux* (Nicolas Rolland, director; Paris: Somogy, 2017), 21-41, here 24.

with ardor, he plants palm oil trees, coconut palms, breadfruit trees, mango trees, avocado trees, orange trees, mandarin trees... with the benevolence of King Denis.³¹ Bishop Bessieux got help from the Spiritan Brothers who came as reinforcements: they showed the inhabitants how to improve the healthiness of their habitat by building permanent huts. Villages thus began to cluster around the Holy Mary mission and its church. The arrival of the Blue Sisters of Castres had made it possible to open a second mission in Saint-Pierre and to take care of the schooling—always more delicate—of girls often promised very early in marriage. Quickly, the apprentices from the mission became workers or auxiliary masters and easily found employment. Later, Savorgnan de Brazza, beginning his explorations, was happy to find interpreters from the missions.

As a disciple of Libermann, Bessieux always had in mind the project of training a local clergy as soon as possible, but in Gabon. This prospect faced initial skepticism by some; despite significant efforts and the creation of a section of young “latinists,” the first Gabonese priest, Father Raponda-Walker, was not ordained until 1899. He would become known for his research in ethnology.

In 1852 the administration left Fort d'Aumale to settle on the plateau which would become the center of Libreville. The Sisters followed the administration there because of the hospital (then the creation of the Saint-Pierre mission). When France subsequently considered abandoning its base in Gabon in 1871, it is Bessieux who must be credited with a vigorous campaign opposing this project, which ultimately did not go forward.³²

Jean-Remi Bessieux encouraged his confreres to continue making contacts with the tribes of the interior, while ensuring that they respect the wise rules of community life written by Libermann. He again traveled to France in 1858 and was able to make a short visit to his family; on his return he saw the realization of his desire to see his great vicariate divided in two (1863: Senegambia on one side, Gabon on the other). On the other hand, the apostolate in Dahomey was en-

31. King Denis Rapontchombo (circa 1780–1876), the Mpongwe sovereign who became the interlocutor with the French as they arrived in Gabon. On February 9, 1839, he signed a treaty with the ship's lieutenant, Edouard Bouët-Villaumez (1808–1871), authorizing a French settlement in the Kono estuary. While he remained pagan, King Denis remained close to the mission and supported the settlements

32. Refusing to follow the French authorities when they announced their withdrawal from Gabon, Mgr. Bessieux replied: “We are here before a door: from one year to the next, it could open onto an immense continent. We will wait.” See Granier, *L'Apôtre du Gabon*, 104; Otto Gollnhoffer, Bernard Noël, Roger Sillans, “L'historicité des parole attribuées au premier évêque du Gabon à propos du maintien du comptoir entre 1871 et 1873,” *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, Tome LIX, n° 217 (4e trimestre 1972), 611–644, here 612.

trusted to the Society of African Missions in Lyons in 1860. Apart from a short rest period in Paris and Rome in 1869, Bessieux was thus able to devote himself entirely to Gabon and to his mission of Sainte-Marie. He would never consent to a move to the Libreville "plateau." However, it was he who had also founded the mission of the "plateau," as well as those of Cape Esterias further north, and Cape Lopez south of the Equator (the current Port-Gentil).

A TRUE CHURCH FOUNDER

The bishop wanted to die in place, on the site where he had worked, giving witness to an exemplary religious life. "On April 30, 1876, a Sunday, after having again attended Mass, Bishop Bessieux died, surrounded by the veneration of all his friends, especially the Pongoués of Libreville. A few years ago, Prince Félix Adandé, representing the heirs of King Denis, still expressed the wish that Libreville be named Bessieux."³³

Jean-Remi Bessieux, like everyone else, had his limits: he was faulted for the sometimes muddled explanations in his very long letters, for hesitating in certain decisions, for sometimes being "obsessed with sin, death, hell"³⁴—in this he remained a man of his time—and for occasionally being too tenacious and even stubborn, but his faith and his uprightness, as well as the quality of his prayer, largely compensated for these few faults.

In the Preface to the *Life of Mgr. Bessieux* written in 1912 by Abbé Granier, Mgr. Le Roy writes that the tomb of Mgr. Bessieux deserves the same affection and recognition through the centuries as the tombs of the first apostles who evangelized our countries. He added: "Many Christians bore and still bear his name: Remi or Jean-Remi. [...] Many prayed to him as one of the saints in heaven."³⁵ He concluded: "Mgr. Bessieux was a true founder of the church who, by his holiness, his union with God, his firmness with himself, his humility, his candor, all his virtues, recalls what is said of our legendary saints."³⁶

François Nicolas, CSSp
Chevilly-Larue, France

33. Berger, in Coulon-Brasseur, *Libermann 1802–1852*, 641. Today one of Libreville's main thoroughfares is named "Bessieux Boulevard." The kilometeric point zero in Gabon is located at Bessieux intersection. A highly regarded College in the Gabonese capital is named after him.

34. Morel, *Jean-Remi Bessieux*, II, 537.

35. Granier, *L'Apôtre du Gabon*, x.

36. Granier, *L'Apôtre du Gabon*, xiv.

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