

LETTERS TO BISHOP ALOYSE KOBÈS

28. LETTERS TO BISHOP ALOYSE KOBÈS

Aloyse Kobès (1820-1872) was ordained a priest in 1844 and entered Libermann's novitiate in 1846. Two years later at the age of twenty-eight he became one of the youngest bishops in the world and coadjutor Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas. He died at Dakar, October 11, 1872.

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*Father Libermann writes about his illness and the cholera.  
The Spirit of God does not lead to harsh and impetuous  
action.*

*De la Lande de Lougé, June 13, 1849*

*Letter One*

*Vol. 11, p. 128*

Most Reverend and Dear Bishops:<sup>1</sup>

*[The Cholera Rages, and I Have Been Gravely Ill]*

I write this letter to both of you because I am still too weak to write many letters at one time. My reason for writing this short letter is that I want to set your minds at ease and inform you and our dear confreres about my situation and our two houses.

Let me first tell you that the cholera which raged with extreme violence in Paris has not penetrated into our house. We lost Mr. Musson, who died from typhoid fever. The cholera has reached Amiens, but our house of [Notre Dame du] Gard has been spared. The epidemic is finally on the

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<sup>1</sup>This letter was addressed to both Bishops Kobès and Bessieux.

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wane and I trust that God's goodness will preserve us from that scourge.

As for myself, I have been seriously ill for the last two months and so have not been able to do anything; still less was I able to write. There have been moments when my life was in danger. It all began with a bad fever. I recovered somewhat but then had a relapse; I suffered very severe stomach aches and had liver complaints. Keep in mind that this was taking place at the time when the cholera was at its worst on account of the tropical heat we had in Paris; it was between thirty-five and forty degrees<sup>1</sup> in the shade. It was not very safe for me under those conditions, for any illness developed into cholera and most of the time the lightning kind.

Nevertheless, I did recover a little from that relapse, and convalescence seemed to set in, when after a day or two I was threatened with another relapse, and my stomach became more and more upset. So I was sent away and went to a house in the country that belongs to the parents of Father Levavasseur; I am now receiving the very best of care. I have been here a little over eight days and have not had any fever for six days. My stomach is gradually getting better and I can say that I am cured. But I will not return to Paris until I have completely recovered.

*[Your Rashness and Impetuosity Give Rise to  
Grave Concern]*

I do not intend to give an extensive answer to your letters, for I am still weak. I shall content myself with saying that I am very sorry that those letters have fallen under the eyes of our confreres. The first was addressed to Father Lan-

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<sup>1</sup>In centigrades, which is 95-104 Fahrenheit.

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nurien and the second arrived at the time when my illness was at its worst; it was read by them.

Everything you say, the manner in which you say it, and the excessive hastiness with which you press your pursuits have caused universal consternation. As for myself, I have worried, not in regard to the matter in question—but this we shall discuss some other time—but because you decide a question of so great importance with so much excitement and rashness. You pay no attention to the Community. You scarcely consult it; you threaten to go ahead with your plans if you do not receive an immediate affirmative reply. This is what you say in the letter you wrote before you had reached your mission. The second letter, written from your mission headquarters also contains things that are an occasion of sorrow for the confreres.

I have had the time to reflect seriously upon all those things. I did so at times when I thought I might soon appear before God and I assure you that in such moments when one does not think of any earthly interest I had as much sorrow and worry as I feel presently. For the love of God, make use of a more moderate language, spare the Community, and do not say things that would cause dissension.

I earnestly beg you to stop taking an attitude of indifference in respect to things that concern the Congregation. I feel sure, as far as I am concerned, that that tone and attitude belongs merely to the words and even if they expressed real indifference, I think I can say honestly that this would not diminish my deep and sincere affection for you nor the zeal which I will always entertain for the good of your mission. But the way you express your ideas hurts, it leads to coldness and causes disaffection. Why does the Propaganda entrust missions to religious societies and why does it permit them to present the candidates for the functions of vicar apostolic

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if not because it desires that bishops and Congregation act in concert?

Your blunt and peremptory way of speaking inevitably destroys that union which is so important and even necessary for the success of the mission.

*[The Spirit of God Did Not Dictate Your Letters]*

You say in your last letter that you have the grace of state. It was read to me when my illness was at its worst. I was in a critical condition and said to myself: "Let me see, if I had to appear before God, what judgment would I pronounce on the dispositions that have dictated those letters?" And I felt certain that they had not been written under the influence of grace.

If I did not count upon the sentiments of your hearts, if I did not feel certain that you can depend on mine, I would not speak the way I have done. You are bishops and I am only a poor man, but I know to whom I am speaking and you know me sufficiently to permit me to use such words without fear.

Hence I tell you that you are acting too hastily and there is much harshness and impetuosity in your procedure. The Spirit of God does not operate that way. I feel sure that if you do not take a course that is more gentle, moderate, and wise, you will retard the success of your mission and at times do irreparable harm to it.

These few words should suffice for the present. I beg you to forgive me if I have caused you grief, just as I forgive you very sincerely for grieving me, should you have done so, for it was more worry than grief that I suffered. I place my confidence in God. He will enlighten you and guide you.

I shall speak about the substance of the matter in question in another letter. To put your minds a little at ease let me tell you that we have abandoned the project of sending men

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to the colonies, and the needs of Guinea, which you have described, will more and more confirm that decision. If negotiations about Mauritius end in failure, as is probable, we will then send [you] a few more missionaries than we have promised.

The bad season is at hand. Tell me if, in spite of the fact, it would be well to send missionaries before the fall. . . .

I ask you once more to avoid impatience, inflexibility, hastiness and impetuosity in your administration of the mission. Don't isolate yourselves from the Congregation; don't act without trying to have an understanding with it. If you act according to the ideas expressed in those two letters you may be sure that you will upset everything. . . .

Please write a letter that can serve to sustain and increase charity among all of us. I can assure you that until now, it has not disappeared, but there is anxiety in our minds.

Please give my best regards to all our confreres. I am, Your Excellencies, in Jesus and Mary,

Your most devoted and poor servant,

FATHER FRANCIS LIBERMANN

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*We must endure the imperfections of others with patience and moderation.*<sup>1</sup>

*Letter Two*                      *Paris, July 15, 1851*                      *Vol. 13, p. 224*

Most Reverend and Dear Bishop:

I am very sorry to learn that you have so much to suffer, especially because of the imperfections of a number of mis-

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<sup>1</sup>Administrative parts of the letter to Bishop Kobès have been omitted here.

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sionaries. Don't take too much to heart those troubles, annoyances, and contradictions. They are given for your sanctification. The more you suffer, the more graces you will draw down upon your mission for the present and the future. You are a victim for the salvation of souls, and no sufferings are too great. All are within the designs of God and ought to have advantages for His glory. But, Your Excellency, you, on your own part, should accept them with calm and moderation.

Our Lord Jesus Christ alone had the ability of causing his human nature to experience the utmost pain of which it was capable in order to suffer more. We are poor and weak, and we ought to deaden our sensitivity by abandoning ourselves more fully to God and accepting with great peace and holy calm the imperfections and faults that are found in men and things, together with all the obstacles that stand in the way of the good to be accomplished. Let us then wait with patience, gentleness and moderation for God's own time, being willing victims of His Holy Will. If we feel those pains too keenly—I mean if we yield too much to our sensitivity—we risk mingling our imperfections with the gifts of God that come to us through the channel of suffering. It is not our work we are doing here but His! Let us bear the imperfections and difficulties as He bore them and wait with love, humility, and confidence until He chooses to remove the obstacles. In the meantime let us suffer prayerfully and abandon ourselves to God's mercy. . . .

In the love of Jesus and Mary,

Your most respectful and affectionate servant,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN, *Superior*

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*Suffer all things with love. Don't become too anxious about difficulties. Our own sins are the obstacles which prevent God's grace from saving the souls entrusted to us. Trust in God.*

*Letter Three      Paris, October 5, 1851      Vol. 13, p. 300*

Most Reverend and Dear Bishop :

I learned with deep regret that you have been without getting a letter from me since the month of October of last year. I cannot explain it unless the "devil of Guinea" is playing tricks with us. I've written and did not leave any of your letters unanswered. . . .

The more we go forward, the more we ought to realize that our beloved mission of Guinea is a work of patience in every respect. I foresaw this from the very beginning. But I did not then imagine the vast amount of pains, sacrifices, and patience that the Lord was going to demand from us. Nothing, however, ought to surprise us; nothing should disconcert us; still less should anything lead us to discouragement.

*[Suffer All Things with Love]*

It is quite natural that the devil is making efforts to defend his kingdom where he has reigned supreme since the beginning of the world. It is quite natural that he makes use of every means at his disposal to block the zealous work of the missionaries, to thwart their designs and, above all, to lead them to do things imperfectly. Let us defeat his machinations and his malice, by gentle and humble patience, by keeping our souls in peace, and by abandoning ourselves

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wholly to Our Lord, together with all our sufferings, difficulties, and troubles.

We belong to Jesus; the work we have undertaken—the work in which we desire to spend our lives—belongs to Him. Let us give Him absolute mastery over ourselves and over all His works. If He wishes to proceed more slowly than we had planned, let us accept it and follow Him step by step, never trying to run ahead of Him. If He thinks it proper to allow the devil to strike us, to kill, to torment us in every possible manner, we should not worry, but abandon ourselves to Him in peace, humility, and confidence. So let us suffer all things with love.

In regard to troubles and difficulties, I think that all missionaries who possess the spirit of God, will bear them with a more or less calm mind. We ought to be able to reach a point when we no longer harbor perturbation, irritating sentiments, and the like. We can't help feeling pain, but such a pain should leave our souls in peace; it should not leave any deep impression behind it.

*[Don't Become Too Anxious About Difficulties]*

The most difficult point concerns the obstacles we encounter in the progress of the mission. And here, Your Excellency, I am addressing myself to you rather than the missionaries.

It is upon you that the progress of the mission depends; your solicitude extends to everything and this is a very heavy burden. When you meet and are stopped short by insurmountable difficulties, you might be too deeply impressed by them and become excessively anxious about them. Well, Your Excellency, it is in this way that you would risk bringing imperfections to your soul. What can you do against insurmountable difficulties? Nothing but remain prostrate [before God] in all humility, mildness, love, and surrender to Him. You ought to look upon those obstacles as belonging to God's designs.



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Here I have particularly in view the difficulty in which you find yourself on account of the lack of [suitable] superiors. Such a difficulty is heart-rending for one who judges things partly in the light of faith but also partly with purely human reason and the impetuosity of his natural ardor.

It would be wonderful if we could establish missions in countries where they would be almost certain of success. It would be most prudent, most important to profit by favorable circumstances—circumstances that might not be present at a later date. But you are not able to profit by such circumstances. There are other circumstances that block your way and which you are unable to surmount. What then ought you to do? I believe that it is most in accord with the Spirit of Our Lord and with truth that we, you as well as I, ought to humble ourselves before God and attribute the evils to our own infidelities. We should try to adore God's designs, wait peacefully and humbly for the time He has chosen in His mercy, and try to correct our faults and imperfections, hoping thereby to draw down His blessings.

### *[Our Own Sins Prevent God's Grace From Acting]*

Don't imagine that I am saying this for you alone. I am constantly repeating this to myself. Others think that I am faithful to God, but I feel they are greatly mistaken. I am profoundly convinced that the evil comes from me, at least in great part; that if God tries us, it is because I am not sufficiently faithful, or rather because I am too unfaithful.

I beg you to reflect and consider; examine yourself in God's presence. You too must have a share in the obstacle that blocks the effusion of God's mercy. O my God! Is it true that souls are lost because we are wretched? For the love of God, Your Excellency, let us not look for the source of evil where it is not to be found. It is not anywhere else

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but in our sins for which God's adorable and inscrutable justice exacts penalty, and this penalty falls on the poor souls which it is our duty to save. All other considerations are harmful, for they lead us away from the Spirit of God and most of the time they are filled with falsehood.

You and I, who, each in his own way, are charged with that work, are the great culprits. Do we not ardently desire to save the souls that are entrusted to us? Don't all our actions, thoughts, sentiments and aspirations direct themselves to that mission as to the goal of all our efforts? I can fearlessly declare that all I have done or thought until now had no other aim than the good of that mission which God gave us, a mission that is so important but also so very difficult.

Why then is it that so much effort, so many desires and sighs, meet with such great obstacles? We can not find any other cause than our sins. Let us try then, Your Excellency, to renew ourselves in the perfection of holiness, such as God requires of us. Living by and in the Spirit of God, let us take the necessary measures to bring about that spiritual renewal of our dear confreres. They also no doubt have their share in the source of that evil. Pray God that I may be faithful to the resolutions which are inspired by the way His Providence deals with us. Be assured that, on my part, I will not cease to pray for you.

What strikes me most when I contemplate God's dealings with you, is how he seems to have taken care to remove almost all the confreres who would have been suitable as superiors of communities. Of the eleven missionaries who have died, there were at least eight who would now be Superiors and would have exercised that function properly.

This action of God's is not evident only in Guinea. A new evil has befallen us in Cayenne. Of the three missionaries whom I sent there, only one, Father Thoulouse, had the

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calm, the capability, and the experience that was necessary for the exercise of superiorship. I did not dare to send him to Guinea because I thought that the climate would be too severe for a man of his temperament and because I needed a superior in Cayenne. I hoped that the climate there, which is even better than that of the West Indies, would have been suitable for his temperament. But when he arrived, he was suffering severely from constipation. He did not tell anyone about it and failed to take proper remedies. This in turn caused a pernicious fever and that dear confrere was taken away from us in a matter of days.

So God's goodness everywhere shows us that we must work in His vineyard like poor day-laborers. Let us do nothing else than the work which Our Master wants us to do, the work that we are able to perform, and do it with peace, confidence, perseverance, and humility. If we see that much more ought to be done than we are actually accomplishing, we should keep our minds in peace and humility until it pleases the Lord to give us laborers in greater numbers and men who are more capable than we are. Let us consider all that happens to us as a punishment and learn to serve the Divine Master with greater fidelity, so that we may obtain mercy for the souls that suffer on account of our sins.

### [*Trust in God*]

Having corrected our faults and rectified all that in us is agreeable to God, let us labor as saints labor, in the Spirit of God, in a spirit of abnegation, humility and peace, acting always at the same time with wisdom and prudence. But when we have taken all the wise measures which God's goodness suggests, let us trust in Him alone and not in our own plans or lights, and not even in those we imagine to have received from God, lest, trusting in those plans and lights, we

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substitute ourselves for God and our own action for His blessing, and lest we turn the light of God into the tenebrous light of our own nature.

Having thus taken the measures dictated by the holiness of God's life in our souls, we may wait in peace, and rest on God alone, attributing failure solely to our own sins. We should not allow our emotions to make us downhearted or discouraged; we must not allow our passions to lead us to excessive external or internal activity which always draws us away from the life of the sanctity of God abiding in our souls, and plunges us, without our noticing it fully, into the manifold faults that spring from our wicked nature, our pride, and our self-love.

All that I am telling you is very general because it is useless to enter into details regarding myself, and it is more than useless as far as you are concerned, all the more so in view of the distance that separates us. It would be rather difficult to be very specific.

Let us pray for one another, that God may enlighten us and give us the grace we need for our sanctification. See also what has to be done to insure the sanctification of the missionaries. Let us set to work to drive away God's wrath and draw down on us His mercy and benediction by the perfection and holiness of our life and that of all our confreres.<sup>1</sup>

(no signature)

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<sup>1</sup>This letter was not mailed but replaced by the one that follows here.

*Without holiness our work will not succeed. Our priests must learn to combine the religious life with their apostolic works.*<sup>1</sup>

*Letter Four      Paris, November 1, 1851      Vol. 13, p. 351*

Most Reverend and Dear Bishop:

*[Without Holiness Our Work Will Not Succeed]*

It is becoming more and more evident, I think, that our beloved Mission of Guinea is a work of patience, abnegation, gentleness, and abandonment to God. If it was ever necessary for missionaries to be holy, it is even more so for us. If the missionaries of Guinea are not eminent in holiness, they will become the playthings of the devil who shows much desperate eagerness to torment us in a thousand ways. I see more clearly than ever that our life must be one of complete sacrifice. We should attain an attitude of self-abnegation in little things as well as in great ones and remain as it were insensitive to everything that happens to us.

We must be ready to expect every sort of pain, privation, sorrow and difficulty. We must, amidst it all, not lose courage but trust in God, assuming an attitude of peace, humility, and mildness, full of confidence in God's mercy. We must never despair, never pride ourselves on anything, but moderate our joy in success and remain patient in adversity. In all circumstances let us remain calm like men who rely on God alone, who are merely doing God's work without seeking satisfaction for themselves. And so if we

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<sup>1</sup>The parts of this letter which are identical with the preceding one have been omitted here.

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meet with success, we rejoice in God and for His sake because He has accomplished His designs, but our joy is sweet and peaceful. If we fail, if we are arrested in our forward march, [we must patiently wait until God deigns to make our work fruitful.]

I say all this to you not to make observations to you, but in order to pour out my heart to you. You can't imagine the effect produced on me by the consideration of what the enemy is doing to arrest the progress of the word of God and the effusion of His grace and especially the thought of how he tries to inject faults and imperfections in the zeal and generosity of our dear missionaries.

I often reflect in God's presence on what has happened to us since the beginnings of that mission. I see that God wants us to be humble and submissive to His adorable will and entirely abandoned to Him alone. If our missionaries desire to receive God's blessing upon their works, they must earnestly attend to the business of their own sanctification. Only then will God bless us. That is also the reason for our lack of progress. He wants to deaden the ardor of our desires and the too-natural impetuosity of our zeal so that we might not feel elated. He tries us through sorrow, sufferings and trials of every sort that we might remain in our lowliness and attain sanctity through patience, gentleness, and the holy and sanctifying practices of the religious life.

What strikes me most is the fact that God has entrusted that Mission of Guinea to us and instills in us an ardent desire to convert that country and yet, at the same time, stops us in the midst of our efforts! He takes away from us precisely those who seemed most capable to assist your efforts and mine. . . . He has left us with those who are the least gifted. What should we conclude from God's conduct in that respect? He will manifest His designs to us in His own good time. For the present, I believe that His

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goodness wants to humble us; He wants to show us what value we should set on our own efforts and attach to our own persons.

I confess, Your Excellency, that I do not dare to grieve about all those misfortunes and the difficulties that result from them, for I feel certain that all this has taken place according to God's merciful design toward us and that unfortunate people to whom we have been sent as preachers of the Glad Tidings.

One thought that has often recurred and which has sometimes strongly preoccupied me is that if God has desired to treat us so rudely, it is because He wanted to punish us mercifully for our sins. He evidently seems to will that we save this people by means of our own sanctification rather than by our zeal. I mean that it is God's Holy Will that we station ourselves in the midst of those people and lead there a life that is entirely holy, that we take particular care to practice the priestly and religious virtues of humility, obedience, charity, gentleness, simplicity, a life of prayer and abnegation. To this we must apply ourselves with the greatest care and it will in no way impede the exercise of apostolic zeal. On the contrary, from it that zeal will draw strength and perfection. This is the way that was followed by the saintly religious who converted Germany and England. It is the method God wants us to follow and the only one that will attract His blessings upon us.

### *[Our Priests Must Learn to Combine Religious Life With Apostolic Work]*

Now it seems to me that some of our confreres have permitted themselves to deviate from that method. Being full of fervor and generosity, they have let themselves be carried away by the idea of zeal, an ideal which led them to pursue external things, to neglect interior exercises and

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the virtues of the religious or evangelical life. Add to this the influence of the climate on their nervous system and their imagination, and we readily see that these men who poured themselves out, as it were, on external things and were not solidly attached to interior virtues, would thus become an easy prey for the devil who desires to turn them away from the perfect life.

One thing that may have led them to that wrong path is their faulty view of their own state of life. Those dear confreres have left their country to be missionaries and they have always preserved the idea that they are, before all, missionaries. As a result of this and without being aware of it, they did not attach sufficient importance to religious life and they cast themselves too much into external pursuits. This is a supposition which I desired to communicate to you. If it is well-founded, it is important to enlighten our confreres and make them see that, though the aim is the mission, the religious life is the indispensable means to attain that aim. They must fix all their attention on this means and be totally occupied in using it to the fullest. If they are holy religious, they will save souls. If they are not, they will accomplish nothing because God's blessing is attached to their holiness and their holiness depends solely on their fidelity to the practices of the religious life.

I assure you that I sometimes feel great pain when I reflect on the constant sufferings of my beloved confreres and the generosity with which they endure them. I say to myself that in this they could find the means of becoming great saints if they were full of the spirit of their Rules and applied themselves with great care to the work of living and practicing the virtues of the interior and religious life. Without such a fidelity to the spirit of our Rules and that zealous practice of an interior and religious life, they lose an immense merit which would constitute an inexhaustible source of graces for



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that wretched country they are sent to evangelize, and they accomplish only half their duty of pleasing God. This causes me great heartache.

I must say, nevertheless, that basically all your missionaries are good men and, if they had the religious and interior spirit, if they faithfully observed their Rule and the requirements of an interior life, their faults would diminish. I think that one of the points to which their attention should be called is the agitation and irritation which is caused by the climate and especially by repeated attacks of fever.

An idea occurs to me and I pass it on to you for what it is worth, leaving you to do with it what you will consider wise and opportune: I think that you might do well to address an instruction to the missionaries to tell them what God expects from their zeal and their fidelity. In that instruction you may appeal to the sorrows and anxiety which I have made known to you, recall the general ideas I have expressed, and cite examples of the apostles to Germany and England I have mentioned. You could then prudently develop and justify these ideas, and apply them to practices, to faults and negligences with which you are acquainted. You would conclude by giving them practical prescriptions for the internal life and for external conduct, offering wise, moderate and firm counsels. In this way you would give them a good start and after that you would merely have to try to maintain what you had prescribed for them. It is especially important to give definite instructions to those who are heads of communities, so that they may help you in preserving obedience to the Rules, the practice of the religious spirit and the rest. . . .

The Good Lord has tried us in Cayenne as well as in Guinea. Of the three missionaries I sent there, it has pleased the Lord to take from us after three months, Father Thoulouse, who was their superior. May the name of God be

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blessed! He is Lord over our men as He is over our works. I am only too happy to have some sorrow that I can offer to Him.

You see once more, Your Excellency, that it pleases God to make us live in wretchedness. He wants us to do His work slowly, laboriously, and with instruments that have no value. When we have a man who is fit to be a superior, he either dies or becomes ill. Should we yield to anxiety on that account? Not at all! We only have to act as I have said above and wait for God's good time in peace and humility of heart.

Your humble servant,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN