

8. LETTERS TO BISHOP ETIENNE TRUFFET

Etienne Truffet was born at Rumilly, in the diocese of Chambéry, October 29, 1812. Ordained at Chambéry in 1835, he was appointed professor at the College of Pont-de-Beauvoisin (1836-46). He entered Libermann's novitiate in 1846. Appointed Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas, December, 1846, he was consecrated Bishop at Our Lady of Victories in Paris in 1847. Leaving from Bordeaux, he arrived at Dakar on May 7, 1847, and died six months later on November 23.¹

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Harmony of bishop and clergy is essential. A bishop is eminently priest and victim. State of Libermann's health.

Letter One Amiens, June 7, 1847 Vol. 9, p. 163

Your Excellency:

I have for a long time wanted to write to you. My failure to do so was due to my ill health, for this spring my "beloved" migraine gave me a bad time. At long last things are improving . . .

I have doubts about only one of our confreres [whom I considered sending to you], namely, Father Boulanger. I'm afraid of sending him for fear he might be a source of annoyance. That is why I've decided to keep him here a little longer. I beg you to tell me exactly what you think about him. You already sufficiently expressed your opinion in that regard, but since you are now in the mission field,

¹Concerning Bishop Truffet's brief and tragic stay in Africa, see Koren, *The Spiritans*, pp. 89ff. Administrative parts of the letters to Bishop Truffet have been omitted.

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you may perhaps think that you can make good use of him without being too much embarrassed by him.

Here is what I'm afraid of: Father Boulanger, sooner or later, will quite naturally become the superior of a community, and yet it is of the utmost importance that superiors of communities should be full of esteem, affection and respect for you [the bishop] and should live in perfect union and harmony with you. Father Boulanger esteems and respects you, but I'm afraid his character and ideas might not be sufficiently in harmony with yours to establish a permanent bond of union and affection between you. Now it is most important that perfect subordination should exist.

Father Boulanger is certainly a virtuous man. He would make efforts to be submissive and would act according to your views in everything, yet he would at times have bad moments in which he would be carried away [by his temperament] . . .

I just received a letter from Father Gravière which fills me with joy and consolation. The dispositions expressed in this letter are admirable and they are certainly prompted by divine grace.

Father Gravière apparently feels great and sincere joy because he has been relieved of the dignity of Prefect Apostolic. He is keenly aware of his unworthiness—he really seems to mean it—and he is also sorry for his past mistakes. His letter breathes humility and docility. He manifests a great esteem and deep veneration for your person and expresses this in terms which leave nothing to be desired. You can imagine how great my satisfaction and joy are. It is a double, a triple joy: Here was a soul that gave me worry and now it is free from danger, at least for the time being; my fears for disunity are dissolved; and—what I appreciate just as much—it is comforting for you that you'll have so much less trouble. Your position in regard to that

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confreere will become good and normal. I assure you that your pain was as my own to me. But this pain has now been taken away.

I feel certain that this favor has been granted as an answer to your prayers. What is there that God's mercy can refuse to the heart of a bishop? How I'd like to have a few hours with you to pour out my heart and rejoice with you! This wish often wells up in my heart and will continue to return. But I shall be obliged to content myself with a union of heart in the charity of Jesus Christ, and will have to submit to the good pleasures of God.

[A Bishop is Eminently a Priest and Victim]

Your Excellency is one of my dearest friends. I beg you, therefore, always reveal to me your troubles and anxieties so that I may share in them and thus you don't have to suffer them alone. I don't ask for a share in your joys and consolations. Our life in this world should not and never will be one of joy and comfort. You will notice that, for you and me, joys will be almost non-existent, and when they come they will always be mingled with affliction. This is now and always will be our sort of happiness: to suffer for the love of Jesus and to have no other consolation to sustain us than His sole good pleasure. You have more right to that happiness than I. You share in a supreme degree in Christ's priesthood and therefore ought always to share in the perfection of His sacrifice. In you, as in Jesus, there must be a mixture of priesthood and victimhood. The one cannot exist without the other.

I feel certain that God's will shall perfect Christ's supreme priesthood in you by constantly immolating you. What happened to Jesus will probably happen to you also, namely, that the collaborators in your priesthood will add to your troubles and your sacrifices. Act toward them as Jesus acted toward

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His associates on earth. Suffer their weaknesses, console them in their sorrows and discouragement; encourage them, support them in their weakness, pardon their faults. It is not from them that you should expect support and consolation. You have in yourself the sovereign priestly power. Jesus sustains you. He has clothed you with His greatness and His power, in order that you might be able to sustain those whom He has given you as your assistants. I should like to say more on this subject but cannot do so at this moment.

[*State of My Health*]

I would have liked to send you the memorandum I promised to write for you, but since your departure I've had so many infirmities that I have lacked the physical energy necessary for that task. It is my fault to some extent, for I did not take sufficient care of the wretched body which I am dragging around this earth. I did wrong but am currently taking more precautions and following a regime that is more substantial. It grieves me much to have to be different from my confreres in the community. And what do I gain by this? Instead of beer, I get Bordeaux wine with Seltzer water! But things are improving. I am recovering my health, and from now on I will be more faithful, and it is my hope that I shall soon be well enough to do everything I've promised you and all our confreres. . . .

I must end this letter now but I remain with you [in spirit].

With best regards in the most intimate charity of Jesus and Mary,

Your devoted, respectful, and affectionate servant,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN,
priest of the Holy Heart of Mary

The special grace of the episcopacy. God's goodness has removed the occasions of discord among our priests. The blessing of time for recollection in the midst of labor. The spirit of Jesus and your own nature. Libermann's reluctance to speak about the spiritual life to a bishop.

Letter Two Amiens, November 22, 1847 Vol. 9, p. 333

Your Excellency:

[*Special Grace of the Episcopacy*]

I cannot find words to express how great was the consolation you gave me by your latest letter, dated September 1st. I see with unspeakable joy how well you follow God's designs in your regard. You enter fully into all the views which His goodness has given me from the beginning in respect to the salvation of the Negroes. There is this difference, however; you possess the episcopal character and enjoy the lights of the Holy Ghost that it contains, so that you proceed with greater assurance than I in putting those designs into execution. You have a more profound insight into things; you see more clearly and more practically than I would have seen them.

God is with you: He Himself will accomplish your work. I am happy in the realization you will do things better than I could even have conceived them. You have special graces for it, while I have only general graces. I would never have been able to direct very practically the works of the mission, although our views were identical.

Moreover, God has given you as your spouse [a Church] that at present is quite ugly and disfigured. It is your task to make her beautiful. I was not given any special charge

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regarding the care of that spouse. "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him, rejoices exceedingly at the voice of the bridegroom. This my joy, therefore, is made full." . . .

[*God's Goodness Has Removed Discord*]

It should not surprise you that the good Fathers who preceded you did not follow the right road in spite of their excellent good will. They are young and lack experience. They are like most men: they act without definite plans of conduct. Now, when we act thus, we easily leave the right road, especially when we were accustomed to a way that differed from the new way in which we become engaged. I hope that those confreres who preceded you will follow the proper course and will fall in line with the new direction that is given them. You will perhaps more easily succeed in teaching them the right way to behave if you comment and base yourself on Chapter IX of the first part of the Rule. . . .

All the details you give me in your few words regarding the situation among our dear missionaries and the dispositions of their minds, show me that I had good reasons for being anxious at the time when you were appointed to the Vicariate. I must confess that I feared you might have still greater suffering and would find great obstacles on the part of the missionaries themselves. I did not hide my anxiety from you. Nevertheless, I felt certain that you would successfully overcome those difficulties. God has taken a hand in it. He did not want His servants to put too great obstacles in the way of a work which He had inspired. The sudden change in the attitude of Father Gravière is a miracle which we are permitted to attribute to Our Lady.

In the ordinary course of events we could not have expected that things would turn out so well. How good God is to us! And how great is Mary's love for us! This, Your

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Excellency, must be a very great consolation for you and a source of courage in the midst of your pains. . . .

I have named Father Bessieux Provincial Superior or General Visitor. May I ask you to give him your ideas for the good of the community as a whole and for the good of its individual members? He will speak to each member in particular and will thus be able to help them. Father Bessieux is an excellent priest. He is very simple and will obey you with the docility of a child. He has a lively mind and sometimes discusses things or clings to his opinions with seeming stubbornness; but he does it without malice or bitterness and, in spite of everything, he will do as he is told. I don't think he will ever dispute your views. He has so great a spirit of faith in, and so much respect for the episcopal character that he will never dare to say even one word. Moreover, when he argues he does it in a childlike and amusing fashion. Actually, he is animated with an excellent spirit. . . .

*[The Blessing of Time for Recollection in the Midst
of Labor]*

And now in regard to your own interior life, I feel sure that God is with you. It makes me truly happy to see that His Providence grants you enough time to recollect yourself before God in the middle of the battlefield, so that you can view all things in His light in the calm of contemplation and disengaged from all things. He gives you time and facility for a thorough consideration of your work or rather God's work. You can study the difficulties you have to overcome, the means to be employed, the resources which His mercy puts at your disposal, and the opposition you might find in yourself, in the community, and outside. In the spirit of meditation and prayer you will learn to combine gentleness, patience and apostolic moderation with your natural energy and with the power of the action of God's Spirit in you.

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I don't doubt for a moment that it is by a special design of God's Providence that you are to dwell in the calm of interior life so that you have the opportunity to shape your soul and adjust it to the fulfillment of God's merciful designs. The difficulties are considerable and the burdens heavy. Add to this that your nature is quick, readily breaks out in energetic actions and thus could easily mix its imperfections with the work of the Spirit of Jesus. But Jesus wants His work to remain pure and free from the faults of your nature, whose very energy is in reality a weakness, whose greatness is smallness, and whose beauty is stained when it interferes with the pure and delicate action of the Spirit of Jesus.

[*The Spirit of Jesus and Your Own Nature*]

O blessed priestly soul! You have reached the heights of the gifts and apostolic graces of Jesus. You can understand better than I the beauty, the riches, and the sublimity of Jesus in the intimate sanctuary which He established in you; this sanctuary is the throne of His glory, the treasure of the riches of His graces, the furnace of His divine fire, the center of His lights. It is the throne He chose for Himself. It is from that sanctuary where He dwells that He wants to reign over the souls that live around you, that He wants to diffuse His gifts, His graces, His love, and His consolations. That sanctuary in itself, as you have realized for a long time, is hardly worthy of such a choice. Abandon yourself into the arms of Jesus, rest on the Heart of Mary.

Jesus and His Holy Spirit animate and enlighten you, giving you life and strength. The meanness of your nature will yield before so great a power and will gradually disappear. Never forget what you are of yourself. Be profoundly aware of the fact that Jesus Christ is in you. Compare what it is that Jesus is constantly trying to do in you and what your

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own nature constantly strives for; compare the impressions that come from Jesus and those that spring from your own self; compare the action of Jesus and your own activity. You will then be able to discern what in your actions comes from Jesus and what comes from your own self. You will be sanctified by the Spirit of Jesus; by and in this Spirit you will do the works of Jesus in virtue of His pure and almighty power and according to His mind and His all-holy intentions.

Armed with energy and the power of the Spirit of Jesus dwelling in you, you will be able to preserve in yourself the gentleness, moderation, patience, humility, modesty, and wisdom of Jesus. Jesus will suffer and bear with you, with His mildness, His forbearance, His calm and the patience of a Lamb, whatever others will do against you. You yourself will be a victim of love immolated to Jesus by Mary and a faithful instrument, weak in itself, but almighty by the power of Jesus, for the accomplishment of His merciful designs and the sanctification of souls.

[I Am Ashamed to Speak of the Spiritual Life to a Bishop]

I would have liked to send you the memorandum I promised you before your departure, but while I was then full of good will, I have since totally failed! You asked me then to give you some simple thoughts concerning your interior life. I found this difficult; I felt ashamed of doing such a thing. I wished to do even more by sending you a spiritual treatise on the episcopacy; of this also I have afterwards felt ashamed. And yet, it is not shame that has kept me from doing this for you. What my heart says in your behalf would have been able to overcome the shame which I naturally feel in dealing with questions that are so greatly above me. But what kept me back is the fact that I foresaw constant interruptions and postponements, and this made me feel that what I would write would be valueless. A matter of this sort

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requires calm, recollection, and continuity. I hope, therefore, that you will grant me pardon, and if it pleases God to give me leisure at a later date, I might be able to resume that task.¹ In the meantime, remain satisfied with my good intentions and my most heartfelt affection of charity with which I am and have the honor to be, in Jesus and Mary,

Your devoted servant,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN

priest of the Holy Heart of Mary

P.S. Since what I have said above about Father Bessieux might be misinterpreted against him, I wish to add another word. Father Bessieux is a man of sterling quality who will give you much consolation once you know him well. What I said about his tendency to argue does not imply anything unfavorable. He is a worthy and excellent missionary.

¹Father Libermann's reflections on the episcopacy will be included in the volume containing his *Spiritual Writings*.