

4. LETTERS TO FATHER JEAN BESSIEUX

Jean Remi Bessieux (1803-1876) was one of the seven priests Francis Libermann in 1843 sent to Bishop Edward Barron, the Irish-American pioneer who had dared to dream of evangelizing Africa. The first expedition ended in the disastrous death of nearly all its members and the resignation of Bishop Barron. For many months, Father Bessieux and a sick layman were the sole survivors who stayed in Africa. In 1848 he became Bishop Barron's successor as Vicar Apostolic of "The Two Guineas," that is of an area of 5000 miles along Africa's west coast without limits to the interior. He died in Gabon in 1876.¹

29

Libermann assures him that he has not been abandoned. Politeness and charity in dealing with government officials. Flexibility and good relations are important. We will not give up the African Mission.

Letter One La Neuville, May 4, 1845 Vol. 7, p. 159

J. M. J.

Dear Confrere:

[We Have Not Abandoned You]

After a painful uncertainty and long worries about you, I have finally learned that God's goodness has kept you alive and that you are in Gabon. You can imagine how great was my consolation after all those misfortunes. You yourself must suffer greatly because you are alone and without news.

¹For the tragic story of this expedition, see van Kaam, *A Light to the Gentiles*, ch. 17 and Koren, *The Spiritans*, Ch. V, pp. 75 ff.

SPIRITUAL LETTERS OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN

I assume that you have written several times and, since you never or hardly ever received any answer, you think that you've been abandoned. This idea makes you suffer and I suffer with you. I received only two of your letters while I have written several times to you.

I assume that my letters did not reach you. But, dear friend, we are not abandoning you. Let this be your consolation! We are going to send two missionaries to Goree in order to start a foundation on the coast there. Later, if God blesses your work, we hope to accomplish some good in those wretched countries which are so hard to reach.

I sent the Minister a report on the means we intend to use in order to secure happy results, the only means, I believe, that have any chance of success. Our project is considered important, but the authorities were not able to give an immediate reply; they must first finish the projects that now occupy their attention in regard to the whole of the colonies; after that they will make a decision for the execution of our plan.

In the meantime we have been granted a passage for two missionaries and a Brother who will leave for Goree on the fifteenth of this month . . . I send only two for the present. When the government acts favorably on my proposal, I'll send more. We must not proceed hastily in that mission which is so difficult: *qui va piano va lontano*.

[*Be Polite and Charitable in Dealing with
Government Officials*]

In regard to yourself give me news as soon as possible. . . . Tell me about the good you have accomplished, the difficulties you have encountered, the means to overcome them. . . . Tell me what attitude you assume toward the Frenchmen, the government officials. Aren't you perhaps a little too severe, too inclined to cling to your own ideas?

LETTERS TO FATHER JEAN BESSIEUX

Do you fail to observe the norms of politeness with respect to them? Always be gentle and full of kind charity toward all; be polite, full of good-will, and considerate. When you see that they commit very grave sins, are you going to be angry? This would not be right. Imitate our Good Master: He was so gentle toward sinners. Become all things to all men and bear the defects of everyone without being bitter or harsh. You know that this is a general rule which all our missionaries ought to observe and which they do observe thanks to God's mercy.

[Be Flexible and Maintain Good Relations]

Adjust yourself to the customs and habits of all and don't try to make them adopt your tastes and habits. Those who are laboring for the salvation of men must know how to bow and bend to everything. Without this they will either be broken themselves or break others. You know that your character may easily cause you trouble in this matter. Beg God to communicate His charity to you and to enable you to reform your faults so that your character will not be harmful to the poor Negroes because of the antagonism it might arouse in them.

Entertain good relations with the authorities; this is God's will and the good of souls demands it. Cooperate with their plans and assist them, as long as those plans remain within the bounds of justice and truth and are not opposed to the propagation of the faith and good morals. Be on your guard, however, and do not leave the sphere of a minister of the Holy Gospel. The people must not see in you a political agent of the French Government, but the priest of the Most High and a teacher of the truth.

Take an interest in those poor people and teach them how to be happy, not only by means of the faith and piety in which you instruct them, but also by making them share in the benefits of civilization.

SPIRITUAL LETTERS OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN

You know that Bishop Barron has given up the mission of Guinea and that the Holy See has given us charge of it. We shall name a Prefect Apostolic from among our own members toward the month of October; at least that is my hope.

[We Will Not Give Up the African Mission]

I will not abandon Guinea unless extreme necessity forces me to do it. If the French Government helps us in accordance with our request, our success seems assured in the opinion of all who are acquainted with the condition of that country. If no assistance is granted, success will be less great, but there will still be results; if the Government opposes it, we would have to abandon our plan, but such an eventuality seems impossible. Moreover, I did not ask much from the Minister and it would cost him very little if he granted all I have asked for.

I must leave you now. Our Fathers will tell you about what is going on here.

My best regards in the charity of Jesus and Mary.

Entirely yours in their holy charity,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN

priest of the Holy Heart of Mary

LETTERS TO FATHER JEAN BESSIEUX

30

Help is coming. Thanks to the Blessed Virgin, we are doing well. Libermann humorously complains about the way everyone is taking care of him.

Letter Two La Neuville, October 28, 1845 Vol. 7, p. 343

Dear Confrere:

[*Help is Coming*]

Your letters have given us great joy and satisfaction. I hope you have received mine and that it has brought you consolation. Soon you'll be living in community again instead of all alone [for four new missionaries are on their way]. . . .

You learned from my last letter that Bishop Barron left the Mission and that the Holy See has given it to us. We have named an Apostolic Prefect who is not a bishop. Father Tisserant is Prefect Apostolic as well as general Superior of the Mission.

I have considered, in God's presence, that it was my duty to continue to have you as local superior of the house of Gabon. It is a cross which the good Lord wants you to bear; accept it with peace and submission to His will until further notice. However, I give Father Tisserant full power to judge that business and put someone else in your place if he considers it proper and according to God's will that you should be replaced. But obey with simplicity if he decides contrary to your wishes.

As I told you in my last letter, your eight letters did not reach me. Don't worry, your conduct was in no way blameworthy. Console yourself regarding all the disasters that have befallen us; God willed it so; may His Name be blessed! He has accepted the sacrifice of our dear confreres for the salvation of the poor people of Guinea. Let us beg

SPIRITUAL LETTERS OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN

that He may deign to employ us in the same work. It is my hope that the death of our confreres will draw down a flood of graces and blessings on those countries. Let us pray to our dear Savior to employ us in labors in that field and make us produce abundant fruits.

[The Blessed Mother Protects Us Visibly]

Your confreres will tell you how greatly God blesses us here. Our good Mother extends her protection over our house. At present we have twenty who are wearing the cassock; of these, five are priests and one is a deacon who is finishing his studies; the others are students. Four have made application to come to us, one of whom is a priest, one is a deacon, and two are students; of which, I believe, one is a subdeacon. Besides we have six or seven Brothers. And little Adolphe whom you scared so much when you wanted him to sleep in the kitchen—well, he has become a charming boy. He studies Latin and succeeds perfectly well. Then there is also the brother of Father Schwindenhammer, little Eugene, who is an angel of piety. . . .

To tell you how we can support all these men is a puzzle which our good Mother has solved this year and which, I hope, she will solve likewise during the coming year.

We are housed like lords. We have constructed a nice chapel. I was ashamed, and I tell you truthfully that in the beginning I was embarrassed because it was so beautiful and splendid. Poor people like us should have built something more simple. It is true that our brave Mr. Warlop took me by surprise; I had put him in charge of the work and the plans. He is an architect and is enamored with what is beautiful and splendid; he took me in and what is worse, he does not seem to be sorry for it. . . . It has cost plenty of money, but why should we worry? Our good Mother takes care of it.

LETTERS TO FATHER JEAN BESSIEUX

[*Humorous Complaints*]

Our garden yields much: enough potatoes for two meals a day, all our vegetables, and a great part of our fruit. We have three cows, a horse, pigs, chickens, ducks, geese, turkeys, and pigeons. All this is for the benefit of the house. Our food is absolutely the same as it was when you were here; I am the only one who is fed with delicacy; they are fattening me like one of those "boarders" mentioned above, whom I honestly do not want to name so as not to hurt your ears.

We have had to buy all this livestock as well as furniture for the [new rooms] . . . True, this furniture is very plain. . . . But here again, I am the worst of all; everybody uses a plain unpainted chair, but for me they had to buy an arm-chair! Pray for me; you see that I am not advancing in the way of the Good Lord. . . .

I send you a letter from your father. You'd do well to write to him.

This is enough for now. Ten o'clock is sounding and I must go to bed; otherwise I shall be disobedient, for Fathers Tisserant and Schwindenhammer gathered all the confreres before their departure for the missions and made a ruling obliging me to go to bed no later than ten o'clock.

Adieu. May the peace of Our Lord and of our good Mother be with you.

Entirely yours in the charity of the
Holy Heart of Mary,

FATHER LIBERMANN,
priest of the Holy Heart of Mary

Libermann explains why he cannot replace him as superior of the mission.

Letter Three

May 6, 1846

Vol. 8, p. 138

J. M. J.

Dear Confrere :

God be praised! We shall at long last be able to do something for the glory of the divine Master! You have had the consolation of seeing and shaking hands with good Father Briot and your soul has been refreshed by God's love. Father Briot has brought you news about us.

You have begged me again not to leave you superior of the mission of Gabon. Poor brother, how much I should like to be able to grant you that favor this very moment! I am keenly aware of your sentiments in this matter. I understand only too well what difficulties and troubles are involved in superiorship to fail to sympathize with your pains, but please, my beloved confrere, be patient for a while. I don't believe that God wants me to discharge you from that function at this time. Great harm might result from it, but I promise that, as soon as I am able, I will release you. Pray that it may please God to send us, or rather to continue to prepare, a man of God who has experience and who could be placed at the head of the mission. I feel certain that this will be possible in two years at the most. So have courage and sacrifice yourself for the love of the Divine Master. He will be your reward. He will help and sustain you in your difficulties.

I am giving you Father Briot as first assistant. He is an excellent confrere, very pious and regular. He will give you all the help that lies in his power. When, at a later date,

LETTERS TO FATHER JEAN BESSIEUX

it pleases God to make it possible, we will replace you and you will be able to consecrate yourself to your beloved Boulous.

It will also be a great help and consolation for you when Father Gravière is named Prefect Apostolic and Provincial Superior of Guinea. . . . You will consult him regarding all important matters, explain your difficulties to him, and act according to his decisions.

In this way, it seems to me, your mind will be at ease. So, courageously make the painful sacrifice which is asked of you by the Good Master. You say you are not capable of exercising the function of superior because you cannot make decisions. But you will have the counsel of your confreres whom you can meet with and consult when you want. Things will be clearer to you after you have received their advice and you will then be able to act boldly. I don't want to say more about that subject. I feel certain that our good Mother will help you and will obtain for you the graces that are necessary for the proper fulfillment of your heavy task.

Father Gravière will write to you from Goree. I urge you to write and explain your difficulties to him. Tell him all you are doing, all that you think ought to be done for the good of the people, and in general give him an account of conditions in Gabon. You can be sure that Father Gravière will come to see you as soon as he is able.

Adieu, dear confrere.

Entirely yours in Jesus and Mary,

FATHER FRANCIS LIBERMANN

Do not pressure your superiors to relieve you of your office. Avoid excessive privations and do not impose mortifications on your confreres. Try to maintain good relations with the government.

Letter Four

September, 1846

Vol. 8, p. 296

Dear Confrere:

It is a long time since I wrote to you, but please don't be angry with me. If I didn't write it was simply because I was unable to do it. I have been overwhelmed with work this past year without having anyone to help me. Next year, I hope to have more time and then I'll see to it that I can adequately discharge a duty that is dear to me. . . .

*[Don't Torment Your Superiors to be Relieved of
Your Office]*

In my last letter I named you Superior of Gabon and of the district attached to it. I know that the appointment must have grieved you, but, my dear confrere, I could not have done otherwise. Moreover, if I had not named you, I would have caused pain to our confreres. Be brave and bear that burden until the time when I can free you from it. I assure you that I will do it as soon as possible.

Moreover, the superiorship with which you are charged concerns only the interior of the community. In regard to the administration of the mission, that is the power to govern and direct the mission, if you are able to obtain someone else from the ecclesiastical superior for the task of governing it, I have no objection. However, at present it is not yet possible. Wait until we have men who are more capable and

LETTERS TO FATHER JEAN BESSIEUX

more mature who can take over that office from you and we shall then take the necessary steps to that effect.

Don't torment your superiors too much. Abandon yourself to God and always be ready to accomplish in all things His holy will at the expense of your rest.

[Avoid Excessive Privations and Don't Prescribe Mortifications]

I have one recommendation to make to you, namely not to "kill" your body. You are in an unhealthy country. You should avoid excessive privations. The confrere who is with you has charge of the necessary care of your bodily welfare. You will obey him in everything that pertains to your health. Read this passage of my letter to him and add to it no commentary of your own.

Take care of your confreres as well and do not prescribe any mortifications to them. It is important to preserve your life and that of the missionaries for the good of the souls whom God desires to save. If, after that, and in spite of the necessary precautions, God's providence sees fit to remove them from this world, may His Divine Will be done! But, as for ourselves, we should act so as to avoid unfortunate accidents that can jeopardize our ability to work for the good of souls.

[Missionaries Should Be Charitable and Kind Even to Government Officials]

Let us be faithful to God in a spirit of humility, mildness, charity, patience and zeal for the salvation of souls. Let us preserve union and peace among our confreres. Let us live by and for God, remaining calm and peaceful, kind, charitable and affable toward everyone, even toward sinners, and let us be full of zeal, affection, attention and care toward

SPIRITUAL LETTERS OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN

the souls we are called to save. Endeavor to live in peace and harmony with government officials. We shall merely impede our own good works if we are at odds with them. Try to calm the minds of the missionaries who might be tempted to show ill-will toward them. It is certain that by winning their confidence or at least by living in good relations with them you will do more good than when you show them distrust. Feel certain that the more you oppose them, the less liberty you will have in your ministry. Tell me what you think about this matter. . . .

Entirely yours in the charity of the most Holy Heart of Mary,

FRANCIS LIBERMANN
priest of the Holy Heart of Mary