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06. Libermann at work as the eleventh Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit

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**Libermann at work
as the eleventh Superior General
of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit
To Father Collin¹**

Father Le Vavas seur arrived at Bordeaux on 27th February, 1850. He had finally returned to France, thus fulfilling the desire of Libermann to have him by his side in the administration of the Congregation. Father Collin² succeeded Father Le Vavas seur as superior in Reunion. He had just received a copy of the Rules of 1849 which Libermann composed after the "fusion". Libermann made sure that the spirit of the provisional Rule of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary was faithfully preserved in the new legislation. He wrote this letter to Father Collin to explain the meaning behind the Rule and to reassure him that nothing had changed as a result of the union between the two Congregations of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Heart of Mary.

This letter is important mainly for the light it throws on the state of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. That Seminary was urgently in need of reform. Here we can see how determined Libermann was to bring about the necessary changes: "There is no way in which we will run a 'factory' for producing priests, so things have got to change."

Paris, 11th March 1850

Dear Father Collin,

Father Le Vavas seur arrived in very good health a few days ago. He is the one who will keep you informed about all that is happening here from now on. As you can imagine, I am

¹ N. D. XII, pp.121-124

² See Index of Names

delighted that he has now joined us and he will tell you himself how happy he is to be back in France. I have already been discussing all kinds of important matters with him. Even though my health is quite good at the moment, I still think it is important for him to stay here. But don't for a moment think that we have any intention of abandoning the mission of Reunion. I can tell you this for I have just read the part of Father Le Vavasasseur's letter dealing with that very point.

I am able to write only a short letter just now because I am very hard pressed with all sorts of problems that need attention.

By now, you will have received the copy of the Rules of 1849 which I sent you. You might have something to say about the title. In the first instance I merely wrote, "*The Rules of the Congregation*" and this title had already been printed. But on reflection, I realised that such a wording could have caused trouble as regards our official recognition by the State. Somebody could have accused us of changing the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and therefore we would be a totally new Congregation without any legal standing. I thought it prudent to use a title which would save us from any quarrel with the Government and I have followed the same principle for the rest of the document. I have not paid much attention to the wording, but I have retained the essentials.

In this document, I have preserved all the rules contained in the "Provisional Rule"¹, even though they were not very important for maintaining commitment in the Congregation.

¹ The Rule of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary, published at Amiens in 1845.

The changes I have made are as follows:

1) **Regarding the layout:** I have tried to use a different way of dividing up the material of the Rule for the sake of clarity and to distinguish between positive law and what are merely counsels for the pursuit of perfection. I also sought to avoid any repetition.

2) **Regarding the style:** I tried to be more concise and exact. You will probably find some other faults but they will be of no great importance. There is a printing error in the last paragraph on page 70. Instead of "*the authorisation of their Superior General*", it should read, "*the authorisation of their Procurator General*¹".

3) **Regarding the Constitutions:** there are no changes here. As before, the Society is still built on the consecration and the promises, while vows are allowed and recommended. There is no alteration regarding community life, poverty, etc. If you see some difficulties in the Constitutions of the Holy Spirit, I can tell you that some of those difficulties have already evaporated. Father Lannurien², who is in Rome for health reasons, has delivered a letter to the Propaganda Fide³ to get approval for the changes in the Constitutions which I thought advisable. The Secretary of the Propaganda told our confrere that the Sacred Congregation will meet and deal with the matter as soon as possible. He foresees no problems with the suggested changes. Both Propaganda Fide and the Nuncio in Paris see the suggested alterations as merely a 'substitution'

¹ Part One, Chapter 7, article III, third paragraph. Cf. N. D. X, p.489.

² See Index of Names

³ Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, Roman dicastery of the Catholic Church for foreign missions.

(that is the term they use), so we will have no trouble getting the necessary authorisation. As regards the rest of the Constitutions, any other changes I have made are of minor importance. I inserted community life, because there was no mention of it in the original.

4) Regarding the Rules: Here we come to the organic part of the document. You will find in the rules some changes and new articles. I have introduced them partly because of the extension which has taken place in our works, partly as a result of experience and partly so as to harmonise the rules with the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.

Once I have obtained authorisation for these improvements to the Constitutions, everything that appears to be defective in the organic part will have disappeared. In actual fact, you will be living in exactly the same way as before.

The former members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and us are living in perfect harmony, with the exception of Father Hardy who has been a constant source of harassment. But there is no need for alarm: he was just the same with all the Superiors of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. He lacks judgement and has an odd way of looking at things.

The situation in the Seminary still leaves much to be desired. I found it in great disorder on my arrival. However, I made only a few changes in my first year here, but in spite of our gentle approach and the fact that we made no serious reforms, there was a cabal amongst the students. But God came to our rescue. The Government refused to pay for the upkeep of half of our students; as a result, we were only able to retain thirty, so I grasped the opportunity and dismissed fifteen of them. That was in the first term of the school year so I did not know the students well enough to make a definitive judgement.

Some of the trouble makers remained and caused a lot of disturbance at the end of the holidays. They were mainly the newly ordained priests who were about to leave for Guyana. They departed, and I hoped that with their going all problems regarding discord and insubordination would disappear. But I was mistaken once again and my long illness was partly to blame: I could not follow the progress of the students for six months and by the end of the year I still did not know enough about them. There was uproar at the beginning of the new year, lasting two or three months and Father Hardy was heavily implicated. I deferred the ordination of the three ringleaders.

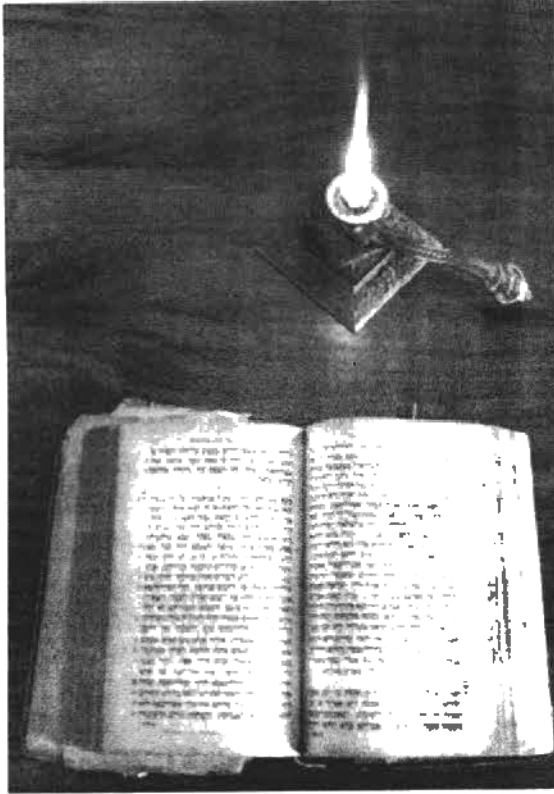
I now realise that the seminary has got out of hand. There is no way in which we will simply run a "factory" for producing priests, so things have got to change. We are now taking steps to restore the seminary to its original purpose - to produce well formed priests for the colonies. Father Le Vavas seur's help will be vital to me in all of this.

What is a poor man like me doing in writing such a long letter?

Please remember to tell Sister Madelaine that I am unable to write to her here and now. I was taken by surprise because the ship for Reunion left four days earlier than expected, on the 25th instead of the 29th. There was no need for you to have gone to all the trouble of sending me the packet which contained the letter of Sister Madeleine; it arrived only four or five days before Father Le Vavas seur at the end of February. I will write very soon to Sister Madeleine because her letter gave me much pleasure.

Yours as ever,

F. Libermann, priest



Libermann frequently read his Bible in Hebrew