

**The Charism of our Society – Historical Perspective**  
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**Introduction**

Livinac wrote *When a Society conserves with care the spirit of its founder and follows faithfully the rules and advice he left, it is blessed by God. God sends it each year numerous pious and intelligent novices full of goodwill. But if a Society loses the spirit of its founder and neglects the observance of its rules, it receives only mediocre candidates. It becomes an embarrassment to the Church and will soon disappear.*

Faithfulness to our origins does not mean the rules should never change. The world around us is constantly evolving. The context within which the Society works is developing. The needs of the apostolate change. African culture, the economy, national politics, even theology are not the same now as they were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In order to remain faithful to the original vision of the Society, our Society has to change, to adapt to the world in which we live. There is a paradox here: if it did not change it would not remain faithful to the vision of the founder. But in changing, growing and developing, there is always a danger of losing something of the original spirit of the first members of the Society. Old established religious orders from time to time have needed reforming and they did so by referring back to their original spirit and the rule of their founders. It is said that only the Carthusians have never been reformed and have always kept their original spirit intact. So it is good to refer back to our roots, to keep in touch with our own God-given charism, to see how and why the Society originally took the shape it did. We may ask how it has changed and are we still faithful to the original vision and vocation of Missionaries of Africa?

It appears to be generally believed that our original rule and spirit came from Cardinal Lavignerie. This is only partly true. The rules of the Dominicans, Franciscans and Jesuits were based on the lifestyle of their respective founders. Saints Benedict, Dominic, Francis and Ignatius developed their own way of life and then attracted imitators to share it. This was not so in the case of the White Fathers. Unlike the founders of most religious orders Lavignerie was never a member of our Society. In 1876 he asked Pope Leo if he might put aside his Archbishop's responsibilities and join his missionaries<sup>1</sup>. The Pope refused, I am sure to the relief of our predecessors. So he remained an outsider. The first members of the Society did not always agree to his proposals and he had to take their wishes into account even in major matters, as we shall see. When the constitutions were first presented to Rome for approval, Lavignerie remarked, *Je n'ai pas fait ce que je voulais et j'ai fait ce que je ne voulais pas.*<sup>2</sup> (I have not done what I wanted, and did what I did not want to do.)

The Constitutions developed and changed during the early years according to the ideas of the first novice master, of the Cardinal, of the original members of the Society. Even then some minor modifications were required by the Holy See. (While granting a decree of praise, Rome required the period of morning meditation to be increased from thirty to forty-five minutes including morning prayers and silence to be obligatory outside recreation and pastoral work.) I will try first to explain the contributions by the early

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<sup>1</sup> December 1876

<sup>2</sup> Livinac *Instructions* Namur 1950 p.196

members to the constitutions from the Society's foundation up to the Chapter of 1900 which Jean-Claude Ceillier calls the Chapter of maturity.<sup>3</sup>

### **The first two novitiates**

The founding of the Society is dated from the opening of the first novitiate. That event took place with four novices on the 18<sup>th</sup> October 1868. Six more joined during the following month. Lavigerie asked the Jesuits to provide the first novice master and had no other advice to offer about a rule except to follow that of the Jesuit novitiate. Apart from spiritual conferences and times of prayer, however, the novices had a heavy programme of manual work morning and evening, to supervise a group of Lavigerie's orphans and to run a dispensary during their recreation. The Jesuit rule included the culpa (in which each week the novices knelt down in a circle and pointed out each other's faults) and also a system of fraternal correction. Fraternal corrections can, of course, very easily become unfraternal and the novices liked neither. Two of the three earliest recruits, Pux and Barbier, refused to take part in the culpa and when Lavigerie heard this on a visit to the novitiate, he immediately sent them packing<sup>4</sup>. We might note the strong line Lavigerie took. For him it was not a question of the culpa. That custom was eliminated from the rule of the novitiate later. It was a question of obedience. One priest-novice did not see the need for a novitiate and left with the two seminarians he had brought. Of the ten novices, six had left by the time the habit was ceremonially taken four months after the start of the novitiate on February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1969.

On that date was celebrated the feast of the Purification of Mary according to the old calendar. The four survivors included Deguerry and Charmetant, both of whom were prominent in the early formation of the Society. Charmetant was ordained priest the same day. The habit was designed by Finateu to be like the normal dress of Algerian Arabs. It differed from our traditional habit having narrow sleeves adorned with buttons. The rosary was worn but not in so neat a fashion as later. The red chechia had a tassel. However, Lavigerie lined up the novices and cut the tassel off. When they left the ceremony, says Duchêne, *our dear little Arab orphans devoured them with their eyes and it was necessary to give them the innocent satisfaction of letting them kiss the hands and habits of their babas*. At the time, Lavigerie intended February 2<sup>nd</sup> to be the principal feast of the Society. The gospel of the day included Simeon's words about Jesus being *the light of revelation to the gentiles*. It was a festival of light, Mass beginning with a procession of candles, an appropriate symbol for missionaries dispelling the darkness of paganism.

Once the novitiate was under way, Lavigerie told the novice master to compose a rule for the Society. Fr Vincent produced one based on the Jesuit constitutions. It included vows, even two levels of vows. Lavigerie asked novices what they thought of it. They wanted a rule less like that of a religious order and more adapted to a missionary style of life. Specifically, they did not want to take vows nor practice the culpa. Lavigerie in a letter of September 1968<sup>5</sup> had spoken of his Society being composed of secular priests similar to the Paris Foreign Missions. At the time, the Missions Etrangères de Paris was the best known mission organisation in France attracting up to a hundred vocations a year for missions in the Far East. However, it was not a religious institute. Its members belonged to their home dioceses in France and were seconded to a vicar apostolic. They were bound together only by a personal promise to serve the missions. Lavigerie may have been attracted rather by their objectives, namely to adapt to local

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<sup>3</sup> Ceillier *A pilgrimage from Chapter to Chapter* Blue booklet series no.1 p.68

<sup>4</sup> After their departure Barbier became a chaplain to the Sisters at Bone. Pux went to Constantinople to carry out missionary work among the Moslems. There he died after a few years.

<sup>5</sup> Wellens p 23

customs, establish a native clergy, and keep close contacts with Rome. The question of vows was not settled immediately.

Vincent was transferred after a few months and was replaced by another Jesuit, Creusat. At the beginning of the second novitiate in 1869, Lavigerie presented each novice with a set of printed rules containing a hundred and forty-six paragraphs. He still proposed that they took vows. At the time Lavigerie was thinking of following Benedictine traditions. In the early middle ages, after the collapse of the Roman Empire, monasteries and religious were credited with civilising western Europe. Mazé suggests that he intended these ideas only for a proposed Society of agricultural Brothers, but monk-farmers without priests would not spread the gospel. In any case, the novices were not interested in the idea. They thought even the new set of rules was too narrow. Creusat never applied them in the novitiate.

The outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war in July 1870, towards the end of the second novitiate, followed by the revolt of Kabylia in October seemed like a disaster for attracting men or resources to the Society. Lavigerie went through one of his periods of depression and told Charmetant to inform his confrères that they were all free to return home. He returned next day to learn their response. The idea of returning the orphans to their Moslem villages appalled Charmetant<sup>6</sup>. More than a hundred had been baptised. Under his leadership, there was a unanimous refusal of his confrères to dissolve the Society. A very hard year followed with no financial help and heavy agricultural work for the orphans who, with the novices, were turning a vast area of unproductive bush around Maison Carrée into good farmland. Meanwhile Lavigerie was away sorting out the even greater problems of the bankrupt diocese of Constantine after which he went to France. When he returned months later, only eight had remained including Charmetant and Deguerry of the first novitiate. Of the eight three would die in the Society: Soboul at Tabora, Paulmier martyred in the Sahara, and Castex assassinated in Kabylia. Lavigerie thought that for the Society to survive it must be joined to another Society, namely the SMA of Lyon. The Fathers who were sent from Lyon to take over the Arab junior seminary, however, were inexperienced and did not impress Lavigerie. Within a short time he sent them back. In the meantime Charmetant insisted that hardships had strengthened his confrères' vocation and the Society would flourish on its own. So Lavigerie agreed to the start of third novitiate. He sent Charmetant to tour French seminaries for more recruits<sup>7</sup>. *If God blesses your tour, he said, and sends us a good number of seminarians with the requisite qualities, the work will continue.*<sup>8</sup> Livinhac, who knew Charmetant well, says that although he was young he had a dignified and modest appearance, and though his words were simple, he breathed piety, zeal and devotedness. The novitiate of 1871 which opened with four novices, received some fifteen more during the year. Charmetant was always an extraordinarily successful ambassador for the Society even when later dealing with members of the French Chamber of Deputies and leading members of the aristocracy.

### **The third novitiate**

In October 1871 the third novitiate with seven novices began under Fr Creusat S.J. During the retreat Lavigerie told novices that he had been pained that the first missionaries had not accepted the rules drawn

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<sup>6</sup> Livinhac said of him: *Dieu s'est servi de lui pour empêcher l'oeuvre de sombrer entièrement* Instructions p.197

<sup>7</sup> In 1871 Charmetant visited the following twenty-two seminaries: Mende, Rodez, Toulouse, Tarbe, Luson, Nantes, Rennes, Le Mans, Sées, Bayeux, Coutances, Quimper, Vannes, Angers, Poitiers, Metz, Nancy, St Dié, Langres, Besancon, Viviers, Lyon.

<sup>8</sup> Livinhac *Instructions* p.210-11

up by Vincent and approved by himself. The new rules were shorter and no longer had a monastic character. The culpa was abolished. There was no mention of vows. (Fr Wellens thought that the idea of vows was due to the temporary influence of Fr Vincent.<sup>9</sup>) The same year a scholasticate under a Jesuit superior opened with four students.

Creusat did not survive much longer than Vincent as novice master. After a few weeks of the third novitiate, he was replaced by another Jesuit, Terrasse. Terrasse was a man sent by God, wrote Baunard, the first biographer of the Cardinal. Livinhac said of him that he understood the spirit of the founder and inculcated it into the novices. Instead of long conferences on the apostolic virtues, he taught the novices to be generous in the practice of charity. He did not try to impose Jesuit rules but gave the novices a truly missionary formation. While sharing their life, he modified some of the harsher requirements of the Cardinal. Lavigerie wanted the novices to live the poor life of the Arabs. One newcomer described on arrival being shown to his cell which contained a straw mat as a bed, a bare wooden table, a wicker chair and a little copper crucifix. *This is much better than you will have on the missions*, he was told.<sup>10</sup> The first novices had to sit on the floor for meals being served with only a plate of couscous and a mug of water. Terrasse found that some aspects of the novitiate were more than his European novices could support. He softened those which were too severe. A warm hearted personality, Terrasse was like a ray of sunshine after a cold spell. One of his novices later wrote *we novices were like big children who needed affection and encouragement. It had been so long since we had received a good word.* The novices called him *la bonne maman Terrasse* who would always find a solution to their difficulties and would plead for them before Lavigerie. He had such a gentle and convincing way of saying, *Oh Monseigneur, ces pauvres enfants, ces pauvres enfants*, “these poor children, these poor children” that the Cardinal had to give way. During four years he trained the kernel of the new Society, Lavigerie tried in vain to persuade Terrasse to join the Society hoping to make him Superior General but he refused to leave the Jesuits and after the first Chapter he quietly, even furtively, withdrew. Charbonnier was appointed novice master and the rule of the Novitiate was to remain substantially the same until the time of the Second Vatican Council.

On 1<sup>st</sup> October 1872, four years after the opening of the first novitiate, the oath was taken by twelve missionaries.<sup>11</sup> The Society was becoming known and the two visits of Charmetant to French seminaries had quite remarkable results. In January 1873 Charmetant’s second tour brought in a group which, among others, included Livinhac, Bridoux, Toulotte, (all three became bishops), Delattre the famous archaeologist of Carthage, and Jamet the founder of the house in Zanzibar.<sup>12</sup>

I have given some details of the early unsettled years to show how the continued existence of the Society came from the stubborn perseverance of its members. It explains why a domineering character like

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<sup>9</sup> Wellens p37

<sup>10</sup> By the time of Fr Betz c.1930, a few items had been added: a jug of water, a basin for washing on a smaller table and a chamber pot. One of his novices reported also that in the refectory they read the Founder’s letters to equatorial Africa and the letters of General Laperrine, the friend of Charles de Foucauld, on the pacification of the tribesmen in the Sahara. Apart from the chapel, he said, the novices might have been training for the French foreign legion. *Memoirs* Charles-Henry Vincent. (MG B3-10)

<sup>11</sup> Seven died in the Society: Palmier and Bouchard were assassinated in the Sahara while trying to reach West Africa; Soboul was in the second caravan to East Africa and died a few weeks after reaching Tabora; Feuillet had poor health and died after returning to France for treatment; Castex was murdered in Kabylia; Fretz died at Maison Carrée and Pascal in the first caravan passing through Ugo. When Deguerry left the Society in 1890 he was the only one of the ten still surviving in the Society.

<sup>12</sup> See blue booklet on Fr Jamet by Ivan Page.

Lavigerie had to take into account the opinions and wishes of the early members who, on two occasions, were determined that the Society should continue, even when Lavigerie had given up hope.

### **The early Chapters**

By 1874 there were forty-three Fathers and nine Brothers in the Society and Lavigerie decided to convoke the first Chapter. Lavigerie's health was giving him concern and he wanted to ensure the Society's future. All superiors and Fathers in Algiers took part – seventeen in all and Lavigerie presided. In a touching allocution to the capitulants he declared that up to now he had carried the Society in his arms like children but now its members should now stand on their own feet although he would always remain their superior as founder and Apostolic Delegate. For the first time a council was chosen: Deguerry, Charbonnier and Livinhac were elected by the capitulants. Deguerry and Charbonnier received an equal number of votes but as the former was older and one of the first novices, Lavigerie chose him as Superior General. He would have only limited power being under the close supervision of the founder during his lifetime. The capitulants' choice of Charmetant as procurator was refused by Lavigerie as he planned to send him to North America for fund-raising. The most far reaching decision was to change the status of the Brothers. Previously called *catechist-Brothers*, they would now be called simply Brothers and instead of three vows would take the same oath as the Fathers. Other items on the agenda concerned theological studies and various pastoral matters such as the care of the orphans and the Arab junior seminary. A decision that was never put into practice was to transfer the headquarters of the Society from Maison Carrée in Algiers to Paris whereas the novitiate and scholasticate would always remain in North Africa. The day after the Chapter Lavigerie handed over the ownership of the property and all the goods bought by him for the Society since its foundation. He also presented the General Council with 51,000 francs and declared the Society debt free. However, he gave a warning that its income was not sufficient to support its regular expenditure.

There were no fewer than eight more Chapters in the lifetime of the Cardinal.<sup>13</sup> During the earlier ones, most of the Fathers were still stationed in Algeria. Several Chapters took no very significant decisions. The Chapter of 1880 lasted only one day. That of 1883 was convoked only to choose members of the General Council. Other Chapters dealt with the distribution of personnel, the organisation of work, adaptations of the rule to the apostolate, and the shortage of financial resources. All the time the Society was growing steadily in numbers and the range of work. At the time of the Chapter of 1877 there were ten houses apart from Maison Carrée, two orphanages, the village of St Cyprien composed of orphans who were grown up and married, an Arab junior seminary, three missions in Kabylia and parishes in the towns of Laghouat, Géryville and Biskra. Missionaries had replaced the Jesuits in the staffs of the novitiate and scholasticate. The report of the same Chapter pointed out that *It has to be recognised that the extension of the Society had taken place only within the boundaries of Algeria whereas we may not forget that the heart of Africa is the real aim of our apostolate.*<sup>14</sup> This situation was soon to change. More personnel were available (there were seventy-seven Fathers and eight Brothers). Under pressure from Lavigerie the Council accepted the church of St Anne's in Jerusalem, the first community arriving there in October 1878. Almost every member of the Society, however, volunteered to take part in the first caravan for East Africa which left Marseilles in the same year. Eight years later as well as a succession of caravans to East Africa to staff missions in Nyanza, Tanganyika, Zanzibar and the Upper Congo, more foundations had been made in

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<sup>13</sup> In 1875, 1876, 1877, 1880, 1883, 1885, 1886, 1889-90.

<sup>14</sup> Ceillier *op. cit.* p.21

North Africa and Europe. There was a community caring for the basilica of Our Lady of Africa in Algiers, a second Christian village in Algeria (Ste Monique), three more posts in Kabylia, the college of St Charles at Carthage and new foundations in Malta and In Europe at Lille, Paris, St Laurent d'Olt, and Woluwe St Lambert in Belgium. In November 1892 when, in the words of Livinhac, *the Cardinal rendered his great soul to God*, there were several hundred Fathers and Brothers.<sup>15</sup>

### Lavigerie - founder

Overseeing and directing the Society was Lavigerie. The founder reserved to himself *avec un soin jaloux la direction supérieure de l'Institut (with a jealous care the overseeing direction of the Institute)*.<sup>16</sup> Deguerry had, at least for some years, to write a weekly letter to the Cardinal.<sup>17</sup> Convoking the first Chapter for the election of its first council he wrote, *As long as I live, I shall remain the principal superior of the Society and those of your confrères who will take the charge of Vicar will be under my authority*. He considered the Fathers too young and inexperienced to act on their own. He normally presided at the Chapters himself and no deliberation of the Chapter would be valid without his consent. While the Chapters might elect members of the General Council, he himself chose the Superior General, in effect his vicar. By 1883 the rules of the Society said that the Chapter should choose the Superior General but Lavigerie petitioned Rome to follow the previous practice of the Chapter selecting five councillors and he himself choosing the Superior General from among them. Leo XII conceded to his request but for one time only. Opening the next Chapter in 1886 Lavigerie declared that it would probably be the last in his lifetime. Although only sixty-one years of age, his health was poor and he had already blessed his funeral vault in the basilica at Carthage. There were thirty capitulants, only four of them elected, the rest were superiors of posts. He announced that he was giving up his rights to veto the decisions both of the Chapter and of the General Council. All the same, he made it clear that he wanted the Chapter to choose Deguerry as Superior General.

The next Chapter was called in 1889. The Cardinal was not present but he wrote to the delegates: *It is not a command that I am giving you – Canon Law does not allow me to do so. It is rather a piece of Fatherly advice which you are free to follow or not but to which your filial piety and your good spirit will wish to attach due importance....I have therefore thought it a duty to indicate to you that the person best equipped to carry out this office in your Society is Bishop Léon Livinhac*. He then named those he wanted to be on the General Council – Deguerry, Viven, Voillard and Dausbourg. The Chapter followed his advice except for choosing Toulotte instead of Dausbourg. Livinhac was in Uganda so further business in the Chapter was suspended until after his return a year later. In the meantime Deguerry as first assistant was his substitute. It was during this period that the unfortunate disagreement between Lavigerie and Deguerry over the division of some funds led to the resignation of Deguerry from the Society. He was the last of the original group of novices and of the first group to take the oath.<sup>18</sup> Mercui wrote thirty years later *young confreres sometimes think themselves authorized to pass disrespectful judgments on those whom unfortunate*

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<sup>15</sup> These numbers are doubtful. Ceillier says there were 470 Fathers and Brothers at the time of the Chapter in 1900, double the number of 1894. See below page 10.

<sup>16</sup> Wellens p117

<sup>17</sup> On Deguerry's difficulties see Duchêne p69 (notes 5-5).

<sup>18</sup> Charmetant had left in 1886 when he learnt his health would prevent him from ever going to a mission. In Paris he became Directeur Général de L'Oeuvre d'Orient .

*circumstances caused to leave the Society. (He listed, among others Deguerry and Charmetant) If they realized how much the Society owes them, they would be a little more careful in passing judgement.*<sup>19</sup>

### **Lavigerie - personality**

The Cardinal inspired great esteem and affection among the early Fathers. He was a regular visitor to the first novitiates, giving conferences which inspired the novices. One of them described him as a tall imposing figure with a long white beard. Though at the time he was hardly forty-five years old he seemed ten years older. His gaze was said to have an extraordinary, overpowering strength. He could certainly be intimidating: Deguerry admitted that he never appeared before the founder without being hesitant and fearful. But a volcanic temperament overshadowed his personal humility which is evident in his correspondence. A novice went to see him fearfully clutching a medal of St Joseph in his hand but was pleasantly surprised to find him kind and sympathetic. Another former novice remembered that he often called on the novitiate *with a charming mildness and goodness which attached us to him profoundly*. Paulmier, later to be assassinated in the Sahara, used to say, *Nous allons voir Papa*. If at times he became depressed and discouraged, he normally displayed enormous energy keeping half a dozen secretaries frantically busy with his massive correspondence. His activity never stopped him rising at the early hour of four in the morning to spend an hour in prayer before Mass. He found time to spend another period of prayer in the evening. He could act impetuously: one day seeing two novices making signs to each other during the silence of their retreat, he dismissed them both. Deguerry prevailed on him to permit one of them to stay but it was only on condition that he spent the rest of the retreat on his knees during meals.<sup>20</sup> In a speech on the centenary of Lavigerie's birth, Fr Voillard gave a number of instances when, after vigorously reproaching a Sister or young Father, he afterwards asked their forgiveness. One Father was so overcome at seeing the Cardinal on his knees in front of him that he wept and ever afterwards regarded him as a saint. Generally, however, Lavigerie was reflective before acting. Arriving at Algiers on a French frigate to take up his new Archdiocese, he was met by thousands of people, Arab and European, who escorted him to his residence. The next few days he spent at the seminary at Kouba, meditating and praying. He was man of great vision – he saw the small and poor diocese of Algiers as a gateway to a continent of 200 million people. He grasped the implications of the opening up of routes for European travel into central Africa by Stanley and others. He proposed in the Secret Memorandum to the Pope to evangelise a great tract reaching across Africa from a narrow coastal strip in the east to a similar distance from the west coast. He spent many hours studying travellers' accounts before giving the most detailed advice in his *Instructions* to the first missionaries to Central Africa. He instructed them on the material conditions and how to safeguard their health demonstrating how desperately keen he was to care for his missionaries and help them to succeed in planting the faith. He was totally dedicated to the Church and the salvation of souls. Aware of the early history of the Church of Saints Cyprian and Augustine, he worked hard to revive the North African Church with partial success. Deeply moved by the missionaries' reports of the destructive effects of slave trading in the Congo, he exerted all his power to bring the situation to the notice of people throughout western Europe. He could make major decisions for the Society without consulting its members, for instance, to accept St Anne's or to commit the Society to missions in Central Africa. Even at the Chapter that followed his death, Toulotte was deputed by the Cardinal to tell the

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<sup>19</sup> Ceillier *ibid* p.41

<sup>20</sup> Lavigerie believed that the door to enter the Society must be narrow, but large to leave it. He complained that successive directors of the novitiate and scholasticate had not understood this idea. Three months should be enough to see if a novice is apt for the apostolate. One can change hearts but never change heads. *On peut voir changer les coeurs, on ne voit jamais changer les têtes*. Duchêne p.129-30.

capitulants to elect Livinhac as Superior General. However, the General Council did not always follow his wishes. For instance, in order to keep some independence it refused to move to Carthage when Lavigerie took up residence in Tunis. If he exercised authority he was also subject to it and risked the failure of all his enterprises at the toast of Algiers after receiving only a hint from Pope Leo XIII. The magnificent ceremonies in his cathedrals and the banquets he sponsored on occasion contrasted to the poverty of his personal life. While he could be domineering, he could also be very persuasive. In 1886 Deguerry adamantly refused to accept the post of Superior general. Lavigerie's affectionate appeal to him for the good of the Society ended with his promise to resign from his own relationship with the Society if Deguerry persisted in his refusal – a threat he would certainly have carried out.<sup>21</sup> Deguerry could only give way to the appeal. When Livinhac protested that he was not worthy to be bishop, Lavigerie told him he would not return to his beloved Baganda in any other capacity.

### **Our inheritance from Lavigerie**

Each religious institute has its own charisms. Lavigerie wrote: *never lose sight of the character and spirit of your Society. Let other congregations follow their own way.* Lavigerie expected a total dedication to Africa and to nowhere else. The constitutions stated that without the express order of the Holy See, the Society might accept no mission elsewhere. Community life was an essential characteristic. The earliest instructions in 1869 required every future mission post to be staffed by at least three missionaries.<sup>22</sup> According to the constitutions *the existence of the Society should be renounced rather than this capital point.* This phrase is from the Cardinal's own words.<sup>23</sup> It is a rule which has never been questioned. The only interpretation to be made was after missions were founded involving travel on foot to distant outstations. It was then said a Father might be away from his mission on safari for no more than one hundred and twenty nights during the year. The rule of three was not just a question of missionaries living in the same house. They were to give an example of mutual love and charity to their people. Politeness in community was essential. He compared one group of impolite novices to an army of *bachi-bouzouk*.<sup>24</sup> For Superiors Lavigerie left detailed instructions. Their primary duty was to build up community life and care for the spiritual and physical welfare of their confrères and never to shut their eyes to their problems

The early missionaries' way of life was more highly structured than it is today. Each community had a detailed timetable for spiritual exercises, meals, pastoral work, and recreation. The value of this was particularly evident in vicariates where missions were isolated from each other by great distances and may have had no other Father to visit them except for the bishop on his annual confirmation tour. Communications were on foot. Bicycles were first ridden thirty years after the first caravan and motorcycles were few even after sixty years. Today we would consider it monastic to process to the chapel or Church after meals chanting the Miserere psalm in Latin<sup>25</sup> or always wearing the habit, or not allowing lay people into a cloistered part of the house. However, a strong structure preserved morale and a sense of identity as missionaries. In more recent times, it may be asked if television has had a deleterious effect on community life, and, more recently, whether spending time daily interacting with a

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<sup>21</sup> Duchêne pp124-5

<sup>22</sup> Lavigerie *Instructions* p.16

<sup>23</sup> Lavigerie *Instructions* p.43

<sup>24</sup> Instructions p.338

<sup>25</sup> Psalm 51 now said at the beginning of Friday lauds –*Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness...*

virtual community on the internet does not divert energy and attention from the community of real people in which one lives.

*Among the obligations of the apostolic life that of prayer is the most important. While it is the missionary who works, it is God alone who gives the increase.*<sup>26</sup> In his insistence on the importance of prayer, Lavigerie was transmitting his own personal experience. *Prayer and the spirit of prayer are the soul of the novitiate, he wrote, and everything else depends on it.* Community time tables set aside some four hours daily for prayer.<sup>27</sup>

From the beginning the communities were international. In a ceremony before the departure of the ninth caravan on 29<sup>th</sup> June 1890, Cardinal Lavigerie stated clearly, *My ambition is that in speaking of your little Society... one should at least say of it that it is Catholic par excellence....I have declared that I will keep no one among you who does not extend the same love for all the members of the Society whatever nation they belong to.*<sup>28</sup> In 1928-9 Bishop Hinsley, the apostolic visitor of Pius XI, travelled fifty-five thousand kilometres across British territories in East and West Africa. He contrasted the state of missionaries he met in West Africa, narrowly nationalist, living alone, some of whom had gone bush, with *the wisdom of the international White Fathers who lived in threes, and after ten years returned to the Mother House for spiritual, mental and physical renewal.*<sup>29</sup>

The quality which above all Lavigerie wanted to see in members of the Society was obedience. *Among all the virtues which I wish you to possess, the virtue of obedience is the first and even the only indispensable one, because nothing can supply for it and it alone assures all the others....If it should be otherwise, if pride or self-love ever rules among you, it would be better a hundred times that you never existed.* He made his own the words of St Ignatius, *let other religious orders surpass you in fasting, watching, and other corporal austerities, but let perfect obedience distinguish the true and faithful members of the Society.*<sup>30</sup> Lavigerie inculcated in the Society a particular loyalty to the Pope.<sup>31</sup> When Bishop Hinsley had difficulty during his tour to persuade the Bishops and Fathers of some Congregations of the need to prioritise education, he appealed successfully to the White Fathers' well-known attachment to the Pope to accept the papal policy of building schools before Churches.

The particular pastoral methods the recommended by Lavigerie are too well known to you to be detailed at length here. They include learning the local language perfectly, (Lavigerie expected the first Fathers in Kabylia to speak Kabyle after six months), the study of the people's customs, history, and traditions, the adoption of local food and standard of living as far as possible, the importance of adapting the message of the gospel to the local culture, the use of medicine and schools as means of attracting interest in Christianity, the collaboration of local people in spreading the gospel and hence from the beginning training priests, sisters and catechists. (It is often forgotten that some of the earliest members of the society were

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<sup>26</sup> Instructions p.61

<sup>27</sup> Morning prayers and meditation 45 minutes, Mass and a quarter of an hour thanksgiving, PE, spiritual reading, 15 minutes visit to the Blessed Sacrament in the evening, evening prayers, and the Latin breviary with its long psalms and sometimes nine lessons.

<sup>28</sup> Lavigerie *Instructions* pp 384-5 Members of the ninth caravan included Dutch, Belgian, English, French and two African medical catechists.

<sup>29</sup> The reports of Bishop Hinsley (later Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster) are in the Archivio Segreto Vaticano.

<sup>30</sup> *Instructions* p.59

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid* pp.246-7 and 267

Arabs, Kabyles and African.) In the seminaries manual work enabled the students to learn skills of all kinds. At one time the missionaries had an image of being able to turn their hands to anything in the line of building or mechanics. That image has been lost nowadays.

Some, though not all, missionary societies had similar ideals. But the creation of the catechumenate, now widespread in the Church, owes its existence to Lavigerie's study of the early Church history. His requirement that preparation for baptism should include solid instruction over a period of four years differed from the practices of every other missionary institute. Although nowadays, as African Christian communities have been built up, four years is no longer required in most areas, the serious and solid training of catechumens remains a characteristic of our pastoral work.

### **Chapters after the death of the Cardinal**

There were four Chapters between the death of the Cardinal and the outbreak of the First World War: in 1894, 1900, 1906 and 1912. Livinhac ensured that representation was a reflection of the Society as a whole; those elected were more numerous than ex officio members. Moreover they were elected directly by the members of the different provinces in spite of the problems of distance and limited communications. Those working in Africa exceeded in number those from Europe. Livinhac wanted to ensure a real debate. Now the delegates had years of experience in the missions and represented each time a larger number of membership. The first item on the agenda in 1894 was to invite Deguerry to rejoin the Society. He was touched but refused. The capitulants moved on to the elections. Livinhac was selected as Superior General. The Chapter of 1894 reviewed many matters. Junior seminaries (poor diet and the inexperience of staff), money raising, the rule, (rising too early, silence rule obsolete or to be interpreted more broadly) clothing, reading during meals, living conditions. It might surprise the reader that the official name of the Society was still in some doubt and a variety of names were still being used for the Society<sup>32</sup>. At the Chapter of 1894 it was decided to use the title Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers) and no other.

As one Chapter succeeded another, the memory of the Cardinal became fainter. By 1912 some capitulants had not known him personally. In the judgement of Fr Ceillier, there was much more freedom of discussion – the presence of the Cardinal had been oppressive for it was difficult to oppose him. Fr Ceillier calls the 1900 Chapter the Chapter of Maturity. The Society had now developed having four hundred and seventy Fathers and Brothers, double the number of 1894. There were twenty-seven participants and it lasted nine days. Livinhac was re-elected as Superior General for a third term and so was to hold the office for life. (This rule found in the earliest constitutions was later abolished but in fact no Superior General since Livinhac has ever been re-elected even once.) Four assistants were chosen - Voillard, (the successor to Livinhac as Superior General, Mercui (the historian of the Society's early days), Girault (of the 1<sup>st</sup> caravan) and the theologian Michel. The topics discussed ranged over all aspects of daily life and the apostolate. A few matters, for instance the rule of three, were never questioned or discussed.

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<sup>32</sup> The first novice master referred to the Society as the Society of Missionaries of Our Lady of Africa. The Cardinal added the name of the Venerable Geronimo but that name disappeared at the first Chapter and his cause languished when attention turned to the martyrs of Uganda. Livinhac records in his jubilee history that some Fathers would have liked to keep the name Missionaries of Our Lady of Africa but it was not adopted as the Society had no permanent care of the basilica of that name. (Livinhac *Instructions* p 202 Rome 1960)

The Chapter of 1906 carried out a final review of the Constitutions and submitted them to Rome. Pope Pius X approved and signed the relevant documents on 15<sup>th</sup> Feb 1908. The constitutions were to remain substantially the same until the Chapter of 1967. In a circular letter of 25<sup>th</sup> March 1908 Livinhac had the joy to announce that the Holy See had given our Constitutions, and therefore our Society, definitive approval. He went on to write that *however precious the approval of the Holy See might be, it will be of no value without our fidelity to the Constitutions. With this fidelity we will be pleasing to God, will advance in sanctity, and work efficaciously for the salvation of souls. If we relax our observance of the rules, our Society inevitably will fall into ruin.*<sup>33</sup>

### **Appendix 1 The Canonical situation**

The canonical situation of Society at the death of the founder was uncertain. Institutes without vows were an innovation in the Church during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and canon laws concerning them had not yet been developed. The existence of the Society had been approved of by the provincial council of Algiers in 1878.<sup>34</sup> A year later a decree of praise was granted by the Holy See giving it diocesan status. In 1885 the constitutions were approved by Propaganda for a period of five years only. The prerogatives granted to the founder by the Holy See ceased with his death so the SCPF requested Livinhac to submit the Constitutions again for approval. For this reason the Chapter of 1894 was called a year earlier than the term of six years required. After the unanimous election of Livinhac as Superior General and of his councillors, the Chapter occupied itself with the Constitutions. It submitted two texts to Rome, one was of the Constitutions of 1885 with some corrections. The other served as a commentary or directory. A request was made for approval *ad experimentum* for ten years. The SCPF agreed to both texts with some amendments. Final approval came in 1908. During Lavigerie's lifetime the rules had depended on his approval. Now that they had been sanctioned by the Holy See the Constitutions acquired stability and the Society would be governed independently without interference from outside.

### **Appendix 2 Canonical status**

The definition as a *Society of secular clergy living in community* remained in the opening articles of the Constitutions from the earliest editions until the nineteen fifties. The text was unaffected by the revision of canon law and the publication of the Codex Juris Canonici in 1917. However, in normal terminology "secular clergy" means diocesan priests. So in the Constitutions of 1958 the Society was more accurately described as *a clerical institute of pontifical right composed of clerics and brothers living in community*. After the new code was published in 1983 we became a Society of Apostolic Life of Pontifical Rite.



Francis Nolan wf

19<sup>th</sup> February 2014

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid pp 71-2

<sup>34</sup> The Society did not come under the authority of Lavigerie as the Archbishop of Algiers but as Apostolic Delegate of the Sahara and Soudan. The novitiate and scholasticate were originally called the *Seminaire du Sahara et Sudan*. If the name had shown it was for the apostolate in Algeria, the French government might have objected to its existence. But at the time French control of the Sahara was undefined and the Soudan not under its control. Lavigerie p.45