

# The writings of the Founder, testimony to his commitment and his charism

(1867-1892) (PE nr. 1078)



## Introduction

The Missionaries of Africa and the MSOLA Sisters are acquainted with a good number of texts of the Founder, often those that express strong expressions on the mission, on community life, etc. Phrases such as “Be apostles and nothing but apostles” or “be not just united, but one” are often used to illustrate an image, to adorn a classroom/community room or to develop a reflection on our vocation. On the other hand, it is not easy to find more developed texts such as the instructions to the confreres of the first caravans on which he had spent a lot of time drafting or writings concerning the start of some new foundation.

It is even more difficult to realize just how much our founder wrote and to discover all the questions he has had to deal with during his twenty-five years as Bishop and Founder as well as the incredible number of his correspondents. The aim of the following lines is to present the principal aspects of these documentary riches, knowing that it is only by examining his complete writings that the character of Lavigerie is revealed as well as the importance of his activities for the mission and for the Church of his time.

## Where can these documents be found?

The first question that comes to mind is to wonder where one can consult these writings and, because they are so numerous, where can one find what one wants. The answer is on the second floor of the Generalate of the Missionaries of Africa, via Aurelia, Rome where the Society’s archives are located. They can be found under the general title of Fonds Lavigerie and contain a body of documents, letters, personal notes and reports drafted by Lavigerie or his secretaries under his dictation, but always signed by him. The Secretaries always made a copy, which are the ones, now found in the archives. For the most part, it contains a collection of some fifty large files or binders, listed according to the places concerned by the documents or by the organizations and the addressees such as the Holy See, religious congregations, dioceses, bishops, particular people, mission communities, etc. It is a substantial collection but it is difficult to consult. In fact, the way in which the documents are classified is not

always easy to follow plus the fact that the paper is old and fragile and the handwriting is not so easy to make out because, at that time, there were no typewriters not to mention computers.



The archives in Rome

Aware, no doubt, of these difficulties, the first generation of archivists put in a considerable effort that consisted of typing one by one all the documents of the founder now found in the Archives. Each text, letter, conference, instruction, etc. was typewritten three times. One series of documents was classified by chronological order according to the date of their writing. Another series of the same documents was filed according to the addressee and a third series according to their order of registration in the Archives. When one wants to get an overall picture of all the writings of Lavigerie, the first series is the best, because it allows one to discover the works of the founder by following chronologically the evolution of his life. Over the course of the past two years, I have personally examined all the documents in this first series. It represents 98 volumes in commercial paper format, often typewritten on one side only and double-spaced. Altogether, it constitutes about 16,000 to 18,000 pages. Is it possible to put some sort of order in these documents? In this vast collection, the writings concerning the mission and the double foundation of our institutes concern us particularly and they will be presented in more detail in the second part of this article. Let us begin with a rapid presentation of the other categories of texts.

## **I – A great diversity of recipients**

### **Texts linked to the Episcopal ministry of Lavigerie**

A first body of work concerns the writings of Lavigerie in the framework of his double Episcopal ministry, at Algiers from 1867 to 1892, then at Tunis as Apostolic Vicar and then as Archbishop. The Founder was faithful to this Episcopal ministry all during this quarter of a century. His abundant correspondence and the numerous pastoral documents, which he published, bear witness to this. He wrote pastoral letters, injunctions for Lent, letters announcing his visit to parishes, statutes for the foundation of religious confraternities,

organising novenas for such and such an intention etc. Lavigerie also wrote letters to his diocesan priests presenting Papal Encyclicals and one could find in the Archives, a lengthy presentation of the celebrated encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII of 1891. Indeed, there is another pastoral letter on *Magnae Dei Matris*, an encyclical on devotion to the Rosary published some months later. Without speaking here about pastoral visits or audiences or meetings linked to his role as a bishop, because we are only concerned with written documents, one can say that Lavigerie consecrated a lot of time and compassion to this ministry.

### **His relationships with Government authorities**

A second tranche of documents, important because of their volume, deals with the relations of the Founder with the French Government. To understand this question it is necessary to bear in mind the circumstances of the time. Algeria was then a French territory, and whether he liked it or not, Lavigerie, in many respects, depended on the authorities in place, either directly from the government in Paris or more often on the office of the Governor of Algeria. He had to deal with numerous problems of subventions for his social works, permission to open schools or to found new parishes. He often wrote complaining about the anti-clerical campaign directed against him and his activities by some elements of the press in Algeria and even in France. This was carried out with some sort of silent complicity on the part of the authorities. The situation in Tunisia, which became a French Protectorate in 1881, was different, but there again, Lavigerie had to deal with the Protectorate authorities even if the relationships were less tense. Once again, all these efforts have been reflected in a copious correspondence addressed to parliamentarians, government authorities, or sometimes to journalists influential in the political world.

At the national level, Lavigerie was frequently solicited as a mediator in the conflicts, which opposed at the time the French Government and the French Bishops, or even more directly the Holy See. We should remember that in 1880, the government published a law that expelled the Jesuits from all teaching posts and forbade most of the religious congregations involved in teaching from operating in France (and therefore in Algeria). It was a dramatic situation, which gave rise to many approaches on the part of the Founder and consequently an abundant exchange of letters. It is not possible to develop further these social and civil commitments but they involved a remarkable number of letters, reports, written protests that occupy a not inconsiderable place in the main body of his writings.

### **The Holy See and benefactors**

Other large collections of texts can still be indentified in the hundreds of volumes contained in the Fonds Lavigerie. There is abundant correspondence with the Propagation of the Faith, founded some dozens of years previously in Lyon, France. This organisation had helped the Mission in a significant way on the financial level. Lavigerie was an assiduous and loyal correspondent to thank them for their support and to give them news of the varied works of the Society. In the same way, he maintained regular correspondence with the *Œuvre des Écoles d'Orient* of which he was the Director himself at one time and which faithfully supported the Mission with its gifts. We also have to mention his regular correspondence with the Holy See, in particular with the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda of the Faith now known as the Evangelisation of Peoples, and with Cardinal Simeoni, it's Prefect and in whom Lavigerie, a Cardinal since 1882, had great confidence. One must also mention his correspondence with the Holy Father, Pope Leo XIII to whom he reported regularly on his

activities whether they were missionary or otherwise such as during the Anti-Slavery Campaign in 1888 and 1889.



*Letter of Mgr Lavigerie to a Mother Superior*

### **Historical research and friends**

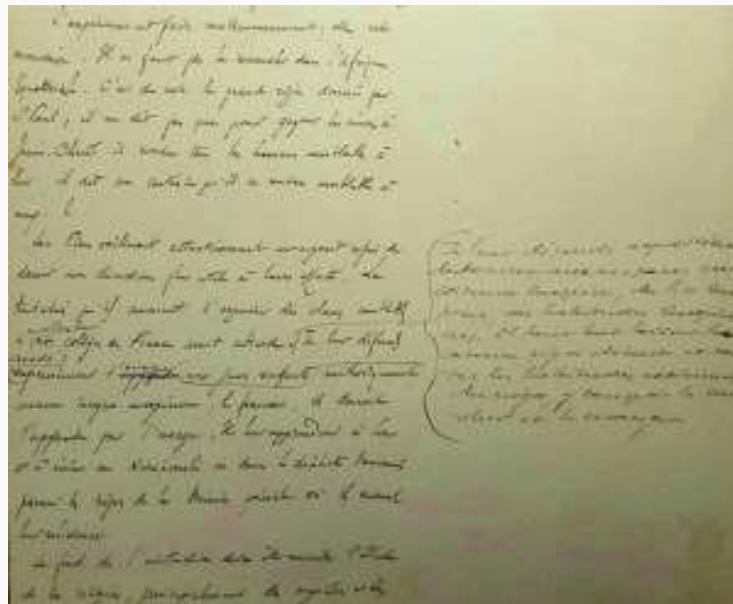
One can also mention the area of historical research carried out by the Founder himself. While he was busy, and often overburdened by his numerous responsibilities and frequent trips to France or Italy, Father Lavigerie still found time and energy to publish works of historical research. They were mainly concerned with the Ancient Christian African Church, the history of Jerusalem, in particular the history of the Basilica of St. Anne, the archaeology and geology of the Sahara, and the history of the Eucharistic Cult in the Ancient African Church.

Then one comes to the more personal letters with some of his friends, bishops generally, such as Mgr. Bouret, Bishop of Rodez in France, and his old classmate from the seminary or Bishop Foulon who succeeded him in the Diocese of Nancy or his letters with Canon Gatheron, the retired Vicar-General of Algiers. He enjoyed a real fraternal friendship with them. These indications are sufficient to show the great variety of letters and written documents that one can find in the Fonds Lavigerie archive without even touching the documents more directed towards the Mission and the missionaries, which we are going to do now.

### **II – The writings on the Mission and to the missionaries.**

Those who work on Lavigerie as a founder of Missionary Institutes are sometimes surprised not to find at the heart of his writings some developed treatise on missionary spirituality or even spirituality in general. In fact, Lavigerie never wrote on the subject as such. Yet one could say that, in all of his writings on the Mission or when addressing himself to missionaries, he reveals a soul totally given to the Mission and as a Spiritual Master profoundly moved by the desire to share this strong faith. If one does not find long texts devoted exclusively to this spiritual message, one discovers, on the other hand, long passages of reflections and spiritual advice, which are at the core of the documents that deal at the same time with the practical aspects of the life of the institutes and projects concerning them. It was the charism of the founder, to evoke together the great demands and spiritual joys of the

missionary vocation and the concrete commitment in such and such a project, with all the practical instructions he thought it necessary to detail.



*Annotations from the hand of Mgr Lavigerie*

## **The Instructions**

The first big series of texts to mention are those commonly called The Instructions. On setting up some new foundations, Mgr. Lavigerie thought it necessary to give the departing missionaries detailed instructions, recalling the major points for their apostolate and the practical orders that he wanted to emphasise. In this category, we need to mention, firstly, the three great texts of instructions drafted for the first caravans leaving for Equatorial Africa, which were written successively in 1878, 1879, and 1880. Each letter was a complement to the previous one. However, for Lavigerie the three documents were inseparable, all three containing a veritable apostolic and community spirituality all rich in pastoral instructions. In these letters, he develops his thoughts on missionary prayer, on the exigencies of renouncing oneself, on the community of three confreres but also on the organisation of visiting outstations, on the catechumenate and on the strict obligation of learning the language.

Corresponding instructions were also drawn up for the missionaries leaving for Jerusalem, for the opening of the Interreligious College of Tunis, for the opening of a formation community on the island of Malta or again, in 1877, for the Missionary Sisters when they founded a community at Ouadhias in Kabylia.

## **Letters to Missionaries**

The Founder's correspondence with missionaries is an important source of information regarding his thinking on the Mission. The first two letters date from 1874. They are historic in a certain sense. The first informs the missionaries of the preliminary approval of the Society by the Holy See, the second published a few weeks later inform the missionaries of the decisions of the 2nd General Chapter of the Society. He wrote hundreds of other letters. They were mostly written to superiors of communities or to those who had specific responsibilities. In the beginning of the Society, he wrote most often to those in charge of posts in Kabylia and the Sahara. He commented on their news, reminding them of the demands of the apostolate such as their closeness to people, the study of the language, community prayer, schools to be built, the prohibition to confer Baptism without his express

permission, etc. From 1878 onwards, we see letters written to the confreres of Equatorial Africa with the aim of encouraging them, giving them advice on starting a new foundation, how to organise the catechumenate. He reminded them, sometimes rather severely, of the requirement of living in a community of three, demanding that they be more faithful to keeping a mission diary to record daily events. He also reminded them of their duty to study the customs and the way of life of the people and to record what they observed. The small anthology of texts in the History Series n°16 gives a general idea of the contents of these two large categories of documents.

### **Other important letters to superiors**

The Founder wrote frequently to those he entrusted with special responsibilities. Naturally, the first group is the successive General Councils. From the first General Chapter in 1874, it became the practice that after every working meeting, if the Founder was absent, the General Council would send him the minutes of the meeting. The decisions taken at the meeting were only validated after his approval. This happened more frequently after 1880, when the Cardinal was staying in Tunis. Thus, there are many letters addressed to the Superior-General, notably Fr. Deguerry or his assistants. The Founder commented on the projects, decisions and reflections of the Council and he did not hesitate to disapprove of the decisions taken by the General Team.

Other confreres, having a variety of responsibilities, also received letters from the Founder at various times. This abundant mail is also very instructive regarding the life of the Society and the thoughts of the Founder. We should note particularly the correspondence with Fr. Burtin, his representative in Rome for many years, Fr. Louail, the indefatigable fund raiser who was called 'Provincial of Europe' by his confreres, Fr. Charmetant, Director of the l'Œuvre des Écoles d'Orient from 1883, or again Fr. Delattre in charge of the archaeological sites at Carthage. Neither should we forget letters sent to Fr. Livinhac, first Superior in Equatorial Africa, to the various superiors of St. Anne in Jerusalem or the father responsible for the procure on the island of Zanzibar. In going through these letters addressed to so many recipients, we discover the astonishing capacity of Lavigerie to follow up on multiple matters but also his permanent care to keep himself informed about the men and the situations in which they lived.

### **Other Documents**

Let us note some other texts, which have a particular character and merit to be mentioned here. These are texts that are more spiritual, or letters linked to dramatic events. I would like to talk here about some letters the founder wrote to the families of confreres who died on mission. In May 1876, after the assassination of three confreres in the Sahara was confirmed, Mgr. Lavigerie wrote a long letter to the families of these confreres. It was a letter full of emotion and affection for the missionaries who had disappeared. It showed a deep empathy with the parents and a spiritual reflection of great depth on the missionary vocation and the sacrifices that might involve. He repeated this sorrowful step a few years later, in 1881, when a second caravan suffered the same fate. In such texts or similar ones, we discover a noble hearted man, stricken, deeply touched, with a profound affection for the missionaries and at the same time, sustained by a deep faith, by the conviction that the sacrifice of these missionaries will bear fruit for the proclamation of the Gospel.

In another list, less dramatic, one can find in the papers of the Founder many detailed drafts for talks for the annual retreat of the missionaries in Algiers. He gave one to two conferences each year if he could where he tackled themes such as the evangelical counsels, the virtue of

wisdom, the fraternal relationships between missionaries, etc. There are very precious texts because they go to the very heart of his own spirituality. The small book in the History Series N° 16 published the notes prepared by the Founder for the retreat of 1876.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, is it possible to invoke the personality, which emerges from these texts? Many approaches have already been proposed to invoke this persona of the Founder and one does not have to claim anything new in this domain. I would simply say that after this long perusal of the documents I would hark back to the theme of the symposium held in Toulouse in October 1992, “Lavigerie, passionné de Dieu, passionné de l’homme.” Passionate, therefore capable of a great love and one remembers his Episcopal motto, Charitas. Lavigerie was passionate about God, human beings, Africa and the Church. In the areas of his commitments, he always looked to the future with a positive outlook regarding the Mission, the role of the Church in the World, for the African continent, for human freedom. Like all passionate people, he sometimes felt overwhelmed because of the rhythm of work he imposed on himself and by his outbursts of temper in the face of obstacles and with those who did not agree with his views.

Thus, Lavigerie was a man of God, a man of great faith, a man of prayer, never ceasing to remember the demands of self-detachment and the uncompromising commitment to the service of the Gospel. He was a fraternal man, for whom many of his closest collaborators often testified to their great admiration and affection despite his over the top reactions from time to time.



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*(This article is a more developed version of a talk given to the confreres at the Generalate in November 2016).*

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