



THE SOCIETY OF THE MISSIONARIES OF AFRICA AFTER THE DEATH OF THE FOUNDER:

The role of Bishop Livinhac, the first Superior General

A short introduction: Bishop Léon Livinhac

Auguste-Léon Jules Livinhac was born on the 13th July 1846. He came from the parish of Buzeins in the Diocese of Rodez in the south of France. He was an intelligent boy but shy and had somewhat fragile health. He was a brilliant student. He studied at the Diocesan Senior Seminary of Rodez run by the Sulpicians. Despite his reserved character, Livinhac was deeply marked by his training, which led to a deep spiritual life of self-sacrifice, steadfastness and zeal, which he showed throughout his life.

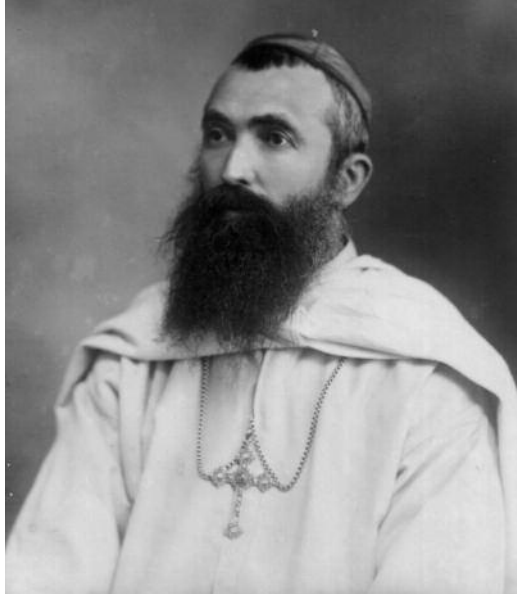
Léon received the tonsure on the 22nd May 1869, the sub-diaconate on the 3rd June 1871 and the diaconate on the 25th May 1872. In that year, Fr. Charmetant of the newly established Institute of the Missionaries of Africa changed young Léon's direction. Cardinal Lavignerie had sent Fr. Charmetant to France to collect funds and to recruit seminarians or priests in France to join the new missionary society. Charmetant emphasised the urgency of the African Mission with its difficulties, sufferings, challenges, and even martyrdom.

Livinhac began the novitiate on the 14th April 1873. He was ordained priest on the 12th October the same year and took his Solemn Oath on the 7th April 1874. He was immediately appointed Professor of Dogmatic Theology and bursar of the White Fathers Scholasticate. He took part in the first General Chapter of the Institute. He was elected Councillor on the 12th October 1874. In December 1874,

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he was sent to Paris as procurator. Five months later, in April 1875, he received a new appointment as Superior of Ouadhias in Kabylia as he had wished. Four months later, Lavigerie put him in charge of training future Missionaries of Africa, which up to then had been in the hands of the Jesuits. On 21st April 1878, he was in charge of the caravan, which set out for Equatorial Africa towards the region of Nyanza. His team arrived in Uganda, the planned destination, on the 17th February 1879. They devoted themselves to teaching catechism, reading and writing, redeeming young slaves, studying the language and healing the sick. Livinhac even translated the catechism into the local language.



Bishop Léon Livinhac Superior General

Livinhac was named Pro-Vicar of the new Pro-Vicariate of Nyanza in September 1880. Already the missionaries were congratulating themselves on the great success of the conversion of the Ugandans despite the indifference, even the hostility, of King Mutesa who had embraced Islam for reasons, which we will not go into here. When the threats got worse, Livinhac thought about making a strategic retreat. The Missionaries withdrew first to Kagueye where he had good local relationships, then to Bukumbi and Tabora. While he was ‘in exile’ the mission continued to expand, Livinhac was named as the first Apostolic Vicar of Nyanza on the 15th June 1883. His Episcopal ordination took place in Carthage on the 14th September 1884.

King Mutesa of the Buganda died on the 14th October 1884 and his son, Mwanga, succeeded him. Even though he was not baptised, Mwanga sympathised with the Christians. On the 3rd November, he invited the missionaries to return to his kingdom. As Livinhac was absent, three other pioneers, Frs. Lourdel and Girault and Bro. Amans took the road back in June 1885. The young bishop did not join them

until the 1st June 1886. At the same time, the young king, who had become a tyrant like his father, executed 13 young Catholics and 13 young Protestants on the 3rd June 1886 by having them burned alive. Spears or machetes were used to kill others. They were the first martyrs for the faith in this part of Africa. The presence of the missionaries and especially the Apostolic Vicar was a source of encouragement to the converts. However, the missionaries were again forced to leave temporarily because of a Muslim revolt. The See of the Bishop was in Bukumbi (Tanzania) from where he visited the missions in Nyanza. At the Chapter of 1889 Livinhac was elected to head the Society although he was not present. In June 1890, he left his Vicariate for the last time to go to Algiers. Becoming Superior General in his own right on the death of Lavigerie, he was to govern the Society for thirty years from 1892 to 1922.

The death of Cardinal Lavigerie: a challenge for the future of the Society

The death of Cardinal Lavigerie on the 26th November 1892 posed many questions about the future of his works, among them the Society of the Missionaries of Algiers, which he had founded in 1868. One commentator commented, “*These works will soon decline and disappear.*”¹ What was certain was that it would not be easy to succeed such an imposing figure. The Cardinal was himself the protector of his Institute when dealing with the political authorities and the Holy See. His life showed him to be a talented and successful man even if there were setbacks and opposition from time to time.

As Archbishop and Founder, he had set up many works under his name. Even after the election of Bishop Livinhac as Superior General, Cardinal Lavigerie reserved to himself, “*everything regarding the external administration of the congregation: appointments, transfers, changing missionaries, expenditure and other areas regarding discipline and external life. Whatever the Council or the Chapter decides, nothing is to be done unless the founder approves it in writing.*”² Thus, the Superior General was only in charge of the internal and everyday direction of the Society but always under the authority of the founder.

After the death of Cardinal Lavigerie, Bishop Livinhac found himself alone with his Council at the head of the Society that, on many occa-

sions, he had tried to avoid being its Superior. In his first circular letter announcing the death of the Founder, he invoked the merits of the Cardinal and expressed the desire for his government to imitate his virtues particularly his love of God and souls and to ensure the unity of the Society by the practice of fraternal charity.³ He invited his confreres to continue in the spirit of the Founder. Nevertheless, the death of Cardinal Lavigerie no doubt opened a new page for the Society as Fr. Hacquard expressed it, “*had for the first time a ‘real Superior General’ and a General Council able to act on its own initiatives.*”⁴

Among the immediate challenges facing Bishop Livinhac, let us mention two. The first was to differentiate the assets and the responsibilities between the Society and the Archdiocese of Algiers and/or Carthage. The Cardinal had placed certain works in his own name. On his death, did they become the responsibility of the Society or the Dioceses? It would be necessary to clarify the question of property exemption, the assets, and the Constitutions of the Society. In fact it would be 1908 before Pius X. finally approved the Constitutions. One can also find reports of heated exchanges between Bishop Livinhac and Archbishop Dusserre, Archbishop of Algiers over some of the legacies of the late Cardinal.

The second challenge was the distrust between the missionaries and the colonial authorities in mission countries. As Superior General, Livinhac had to negotiate with the French, English, German and Belgian governments to facilitate the apostolate in their territories. Some of these points of friction already existed during the time of Cardinal Lavigerie. The most complicated case was that of Uganda. One of the most serious misunderstandings arose from the fact that the English considered the French missionaries to be representatives of the French Government and were working on its behalf. There was also the war between Catholics and Protestants. Catholic missions suffered enormous losses, as the authorities were on the side of the Protestants. Bishop Livinhac, who knew the situation well, intervened with the British Government. In 1895, in order to resolve the conflict and to prove that those Catholic missionaries did not serve any colonial power, Livinhac negotiated the sending of English Catholic Missionaries of the Society of St. Joseph of Cardinal Vaughan (Mill Hill Missionaries) to the Vicariate of the Upper Nile in the east of the country. It was an area, which had a strong Protestant presence. For Livinhac, the most important question was not

to protect the works of his Institute but to assure the future of Catholicism in the country. The intervention of Livinhac with the religious and political authorities in London certainly saved Catholicism in Uganda.

We should remember that the Buganda were a very important mission for the White Fathers. It was the most flourishing mission established by our pioneers in Equatorial Africa at the time. It was the first mission where the converts witnessed to their faith up to the point of martyrdom. The welcome of the Gospel by the Buganda was very impressive because there were no missionaries present between 1882 and 1885 as they were forced to leave because of the persecution of the King. The new converts and the catechumens organised themselves and continued successfully spreading the Gospel. In 1891, it was estimated that there were “*three to four thousand men attending catechism classes in the mission of Rubaga alone.*”⁵⁵ One can see that in the minds of Lavigerie and Livinhac, it was essential that the Catholic missionaries remained.

The General Chapters

The General Chapters of 1889/1890

The 10th General Chapter of the Society took place on the 23rd September 1889. There were two phases. It met first in Carthage on the 23rd September. The Capitulants were tasked with electing a new General Council from whom the Founder would appoint a Vicar-General. It elected Bishop Livinhac and Cardinal Lavigerie named him as Vicar-General. However, as he was not present, the Chapter was suspended in order to await his arrival so that he could be part of the decision making process. On his arrival, the second session began on the 4th November 1890. Cardinal Lavigerie presided, as he was in fact the Superior General. He was in charge as the Constitutions stipulated, “*The Society is placed, and until such time that the Holy See decides otherwise, under the jurisdiction of the Apostolic Delegate of the Sahara who is its first Superior. The Society is governed, under his authority, by a Superior General who is aided by two Assistants, a Secretary General, and a General Procurator. All are appointed by the Chapter and canonically instituted by the Delegate.*”⁵⁶

However, the role of Bishop Livinhac will be somewhat different from that of his predecessors in the sense that the Founder was preparing him to succeed him. Before the votes, Lavigerie had a letter read outlining his views on the special nature of this Chapter. He felt that it would be the last Chapter to be held during his lifetime. He expressed his desire to the participants that they elect Livinhac to succeed him, *“Without doubt this is not an order I give you: the canonical laws do not allow me to do so. It is fatherly advice that you will always remain free not to follow, but which your filial piety and your good spirit will certainly value, as it ought to. I believe I have the duty to put forward as the person best able to take on this charge in your Society, Bishop Livinhac, Bishop of Pacando, Apostolic Vicar of Nyanza. Indeed, this venerable prelate has a remarkable degree of piety, wisdom, knowledge and superior intelligence. His Episcopal rank gives him further privileges and a very special grace to govern a Society such as yours.”*⁷

Lavigerie also proposed the names of those he thought would constitute a balanced Council. He promised to give more authority to Bishop Livinhac, and to undertake the necessary steps with the Holy See so that he might be relieved of the responsibility for his Vicariate. All the Capitulants, except one, followed the advice of the Cardinal.

The General Chapter of 1894

This was the first Chapter held after the death of the founder and the first without his direct influence. It was held from the 25th April to the 10th May 1894. This made it the longest Chapter of the Society until then. One explanation is perhaps that the participants, not being under the direct influence of Cardinal Lavigerie, needed more time. It was the first Chapter presided over by Bishop Livinhac as Superior General in his own right. According to the decisions of the Chapter of 1886, the mandate of the Superior General was six years. Livinhac, elected in 1889, had brought forward the holding of this Chapter, which was due to take place in 1895. He explained the reason in his letter of April 1893 for convoking an Extraordinary Chapter *“as due to the huge void arising from the death of our venerated Father and Founder, His Eminence Cardinal Lavigerie. This makes it necessary to convoke an Extraordinary Chapter which will be able, if it sees fit to reconstitute itself into an Ordinary Chapter and proceed to the election of members*

of the Council.” In fact, before the Chapter began, he had already taken the step of approaching the Holy See so that the Chapter could become an ordinary one and proceed with the election of a new council. He also asked that he be declared ineligible because of his rank of Bishop, which he judged to be a drawback for a Superior General. His first request was granted but not the second. He was elected Superior General after the first round of voting.

The Chapter set up four working groups, which looked at revising the constitutions, the obedience to the constitutions, recruitment and apostolic schools (Junior seminaries) and the revenue and assets of the Society. The spiritual life and the apostolate were considered in each of the working groups and were discussed at the time of the Provincial reports. The Chapter improved the text of the Constitutions and Rome approved them for ten years. The Chapter decided to open two seminaries for the White Fathers in France and Belgium. The official name of the Society was agreed, ‘**Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers).**’ The possibility of starting new foundations and the internationalisation of the Society was encouraged and the General Council was charged with promoting this proposition. In December of that year, a caravan of four Fathers was sent to French Sudan (Mali). A dream of the Founder was thus realised as he had tried twice to send missionaries there without success.

The crisis of the 1900s in France and the development of the Society.

In his circular letters of the 1900s, Bishop Livinhac often alluded to the difficult times experienced by the Church in France and the moral and material impact of these problems for the Society. In January 1901, he spoke of a *“terrible storm which threatens the Congregations which have houses in France and who depend on them, at least in part, for their daily bread. A persecution is in preparation which if it breaks out*

will directly or indirectly affect all our Institutions.”⁸ In other letters, he mentioned that this threat was extending to French territories generally. What was he talking about?

On the 1st July 1901, the Government of René Waldeck-Rousseau passed a law that limited the activities of religious congregations suspected of being directed from outside the country, notably the Holy See. Those congregations involved in teaching had to get permission from the Government. The situation got worse in 1902 after Waldeck-Rousseau resigned. A former seminarian, Emile Combes, who was very anti-clerical, became the head of the Government. He “*closed the religious-run schools founded before the law of 1901 and since the law was voted. In March 1903, Combes had the parliament reject the requests for authorisation by 54 male congregations out of 64 and 81 female congregations out of 394.*”⁹ Some missionary institutions such as the Vincentians, the Holy Ghost (Spiritans) and the Paris Foreign Missionaries, which had been recognised at the time of the Second Empire, were exempt from this law. Others “*such as the African Missions and the White Fathers were left awaiting recognition.*”¹⁰

The request for authorisation for the White Fathers was partially granted in December 1902. Livinhac had foreseen the possibility of moving to other European countries, where the White Fathers were already established, if authorisation was not granted. However, he preferred to wait for a final decision. A further request was made in September 1903 and a favourable response was received. Nevertheless, Bishop Livinhac continued to invite the confreres for prayers and to exercise prudence against wasteful expenditure. The Chamber of Deputies passed the Law of Separation of Churches and State in December 1905. It suppressed all state support for religious activities. The State took over control of all movable property and real estate of the Church. Some institutions of the White Fathers were victims of this law especially in Algeria, “*The closing of schools started in 1907 and most of the White Fathers educational work was shut down by 1914.*”¹¹ It is important to note the commentary of Aylward Shorter on the role of Bishop Livinhac during this anti-clerical crisis, “*Livinhac had the delicate task of dealing with the politicians in France and Algiers, of coping with the practical consequences of the new laws, of making contingency plans and preparing his missionaries for a ‘worst case’ scenario. In the event, the Society was left off lightly and anti-clericalism was all but for-*

gotten when war broke out in 1914".¹² The Society had not been weakened by the situation; indeed, it looked for ways and means to go forward independently and unwaveringly.

In the 1900s, the organisation of the Society changed. The Chapter of 1900 ruled on the distinction between Apostolic Vicars and Provincials. The Provincial was the representative of the Superior General vis-a-vis the confreres of a Province, which included a certain number of Apostolic Vicariates. The Apostolic Vicars were the representatives of the Holy See. The Chapter also decided that all formation houses be attached to the Mother House and a permanent Delegate was appointed for this purpose. Today, one talks about the Secretariat for Initial Formation who is charged with the job of ensuring that all candidates receive the same type of training. Another decision taken was that all candidates had to complete their theological studies before they were ordained. It was decided to open a house for missionary promotion and vocation work in Canada. In 1901, the division of the two big provinces of Europe and Sahara-Soudan (French West Africa) was carried out.

The 1906 Chapter elected Bishop Livinhac as Superior General for life. The Chapter of 1886 had decided that if a Superior General was elected three times in a row with a two-thirds majority, he was elected for life. This election of Bishop Livinhac is explained, according to Jean-Claude Ceillier by the fact that "*Livinhac enjoyed high esteem, if not outright veneration among the missionaries. His wealth of experience, but also his reputation for holiness and his spiritual and human qualities drew everyone's confidence.*"¹³ This Chapter was also marked by the insistence on the unity of the Society over and above the autonomy of each Province, which was advocated by certain participants. For Livinhac, autonomy risked causing a lack of balance between the Provinces. Provinces that were more "popular" would attract much more support from benefactors and sympathisers. Tension could arise, for example, between the missions in North Africa and those in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Sub-Saharan missions attracted many missionaries and benefactors because of the many conversions there. As for North Africa, some thought that missionaries were wasting their time there given the dominance of Islam and the fact that the French Government forbade any form of proselytising. It was felt that donations and personnel ought to be placed at the service of the whole Society and divided proportionately according to needs. The confreres were invited to promote the best

interests of the Society in general rather than limiting themselves to regional preferences

The Chapter also clarified the question of plurality of functions, “the Assembly decided that the Superior General, the Provincial, or Vicar Apostolic cannot under any circumstances be appointed local Superior in the house where he is living and never as bursar of the house.”¹⁴ As for paid work, it was decided that all salaries received from the apostolate should be used for the apostolate in dialogue with the Superior of the Mission. We should also note that the work of the 1906 Chapter concerning the revision of the Constitutions of the Institute led to their definitive approval by the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith by the decree of the 15th February 1908.

The Challenges of the First World War of 1914 to 1918

One of the most difficult periods in the history of the Society during the mandate of Bishop Livinhac was the 1914-1918 war. It occurred at a time when the Society was growing rapidly. Now the Society saw itself deprived of many young members and aspirants because of military service. Germany, Belgium and France had compulsory military service for every young adult. They could be called up as reinforcements for the regular armies of their respective countries as combat soldiers, military chaplains or stretcher-bearers. Religious personnel were not exempt. The Society of Missionaries of Africa was very much affected by these measures.

When war broke out, the vast majority of the young missionaries were at their mission posts in Sub-Saharan Africa. The war severely affected also houses promoting vocations. One estimate is that about 400 Missionaries of Africa were called up during the war of 1914-1918. At the end of the war, the Society had lost 60 dead. Forty-two others left the Society between 1914 and 1922.¹⁵ The war caused the Society a great deal of disruption, especially among the members and aspirants, at a time when missions were rapidly expanding. The Circular Letters of the Superior General showed clearly that the Society suffered economically

as well because of the war. In Europe, grants, gifts and exchange rates were affected. Ordinary everyday food and material items were in short supply. The missionaries were exhorted to be careful of material things without compromising their health.

The war had an impact on the missionaries as well. How could they fulfil their duty as citizens while remaining faithful to their missionary vocation? How could they be a witness to fraternal charity? Eight days after the declaration of war, Bishop Livinhac wrote a circular letter informing the whole Society of the outbreak of war. He ordered special prayers for peace each Friday and Saturday, prayers for those conscripted, for Superiors in the Society. Long journeys to the Mother House were to be suspended because of insecurity. There was to be a scaling down or suspension of expensive enterprises or projects, etc.¹⁶

Livinhac was aware that some confreres were in the opposing camp and he was conscious of the risk of internal divisions so he appealed to the members *“to be united as brothers should be in feelings of heartfelt charity.”*¹⁷ He wrote regularly to all to encourage and to remind them that the work of the Society should continue despite all the difficulties. To the confreres and the aspirants who had been called up, he never ceased reminding them of their status and duty as missionaries by an exemplary life devoted to, among other things, personal sanctification, and the apostolate. He urged them to avoid behaviour that would compromise their character and he expressed his support and paternal affection. He encouraged them to keep in contact with the Society by sending him news regularly and to visit confreres where that was possible. The response of a number of confreres published in the *Petit Echo* show that the exhortations of Bishop Livinhac had a positive impact on them. The letter of Fr. Léon Darot (+ 1958) to him is a good example: *“I received, in Salonika, the exhortations of your Lordship to the confreres and aspirants in uniform. I read them and reread them assiduously and with joy... Given the circumstances in which we find ourselves, the paternal feelings and tender affection, which fill the letter of your Lordship, went straight to the heart. What strike us particularly are the important recommendations regarding holiness and the apostolate especially in respect of the final end which perhaps each day is rapidly approaching.”*¹⁸

Although the number of confreres had diminished, Bishop Livinhac always insisted that the missionaries should always aim for quality. He

wrote, “I will say to you that you should guard against any less than supernatural desire to see your apostolate produce speedy and dazzling results. To also guard against the desire to confer baptism (we can also add other sacraments) on people who are not sufficiently prepared. It is infinitely more desirable to have only a small number but excellent Christians, who by their virtuous life make our holy religion respected and loved and attract those living around them than to have masses of mediocre and bad Christians who give a bad impression and put people off.”¹⁹

Rather than been weakened by the difficult situation caused by the war, the missionaries showed increasing attachment and identification with the Society. The exhortations of the Superior General and regular and detailed information on the state of the Society had certainly contributed to a deep sense of belonging and in consequence a renewed motivation. During the period of the war, Bishop Livinhac wrote 13 letters to all members of the Society and many other letters for particular members such as those who had been conscripted, the novices, and Superiors of missions. One particular aspect of his letters highlighted themes such as Providence, patience, and love of God and of the Society.

After the war

It is important to note that Bishop Livinhac was under no illusions that all would be well after the war. The war situation forced some confreres into opposing camps. Would this not sow hate and mistrust in hearts? Livinhac worried about the existing relationships between the Germans and the others. He had envisaged sending the German confreres to the USA or to Latin America in case the colonial authorities of France, Britain and Belgium would not accept them in their African colonies. He decided to make enquiries. The result revealed that the presence of the German confreres did not pose any cause for concern in the Society nor in the African colonies.

The Society held its 15th General Chapter in April 1920. The Capitulants decided to establish regional senior seminaries to train indigenous clergy. There was a long discussion on the collaboration between European missionaries and local African clergy. The Chapter approved the study of English in the Society. It also decided to set up Provinces in Belgium and the Netherlands. There was a proposal to set

up a special house to help confreres “who lived in unacceptable situations with adults and children, or whose temperament made them too difficult to live within community.”²⁰ In addition, the Chapter also spoke of the care for confreres who were sick or elderly. It commented on excessive hunting, alcohol and tobacco abuse and (too much) socialising. This was the last Chapter under the mandate of Bishop Livinhac who was becoming more and more frail.

The mandate of Bishop Livinhac was marked by a truly memorable event: the Beatification of the Martyrs of Uganda. The cause for their Beatification had begun in 1912. Because of his state of health, he was unable to attend the Beatification ceremony in Rome on the 6th June 1920. On the 21st November, Lavigerie was given the honorary title of Archbishop of Oxyrynque, (a Christian settlement in Egypt in the third century).

Livinhac died on the 11th November 1922 at the age of 76 years. When he took over the Institute on the death of the Founder in 1892, there were 163 priests and 70 brothers; at his death, he left a well-established Society counting 676 priests and 249 brothers. We should remember that the war had caused big number of deaths and departures among the priests, Brothers, Scholastics, and Novices.

The qualities of Bishop Léon Livinhac

On the 25th anniversary of the Episcopal Ordination of Bishop Livinhac in 1909, Fr. Voillard, in the name of the Council, praised the admirable prudence and wisdom by which he ruled the ‘little’ Society. He pointed to the expansion of the Institute despite the difficulties of the time. He would emphasise, later on, that for Bishop Livinhac the growth of the Society “*was the continual and dominant preoccupation and he never stopped, by his persistent, constant and intense activities, from pursuing this aim by his instructions, advice, remarks and exhortations in the Circular Letters he wrote to missionaries.*”²¹... He was the man needed at the time as the Founder had foreseen. At his funeral, Archbishop Leynaud of Algiers said that, “*under his direction, the mis-*

sions in the care of the White Fathers enjoyed an extension and gave results that no one dared hope for.”²²

Livinhac was a shepherd who followed closely all that was taking place in the Society. In 1894, he had asked his missionaries not to hesitate to contact the General Council every time they encountered points they wished to be clarified in the constitutions or other statutes. The unity of the Institute was something close to his heart. To those in formation, he insisted on their sense of belonging, love of confreres and the Society. At the 1906 Chapter, he asked the confreres to write to him personally at least twice a year and that he would try to reply. A number of confreres had regular correspondence with him as spiritual mentor.

Unity could not be taken for granted, it had to be built and consolidated. In his writings, Bishop Livinhac never ceased to remind confreres that divisions between them were a counter-witness to evangelisation. Unity was a value to be lived not only in local communities but also in the whole Society. His language was simple and direct: *“let us love one another as brothers, let us love our Society as a mother, let us observe our Rules, let us be obedient to our Superiors”* but he also liked to add *“but above all, let us love God, with Him we can do anything and without Him we can do nothing.”²³* To those who wished to soften the rule of community life by basing themselves on the practice of other congregations, Livinhac was clear. *“One should not cite the needs of the ministry. One should not say either that in other societies, the missionaries travel alone and live by themselves. Each Society has its Rules and its spirit. Its perfection consists in keeping them faithfully. Let us keep ours as they keep theirs.”²⁴*

While all the time insisting on obedience, Livinhac emphasised that missionaries should be capable of taking initiatives. He invited superiors to be kind but also to be firm in order to maintain order. He himself spoke plainly when it came to reprimanding recalcitrant missionaries.²⁵ At the same time as like all human beings, he had his limits, which he tried to overcome.²⁶ At the beginning of his mandate, he knew moments of discouragement, which sometimes led him to think of suppressing the Society. One day, following a conflict with a certain Belgian Congregation over the borders of missions in the Upper-Congo, he confided to Fr. Burtin, the procurator in Rome, *“If we are expelled from our very best missions in Equatorial Africa, I am resolved to demand the suppression, pure and simple, of our Society. One has the impression*

*that some wish to chase us from all those places where the Society was established at the price of many sacrifices and to relegate us to countries where there is little or no hope of any success. We have spent so much money, sacrificed so many precious lives to create, with the help of God, our missions in Equatorial Africa, which are, I believe, the most prosperous on the continent. Now that we are beginning to reap the fruits of our work, we are looked upon with a malevolent eye. If we are such bad workers, it is better we disperse.”*²⁷ This was the man passionate about the apostolate, but in the end, he opted for dialogue about the situation.

Like the Founder, Livinhac was convinced that the future of the Church in Africa depended on the quality of the Christian formation of the Africans. He insisted on four years of catechumenate and on a solid training for indigenous clergy. For the latter, he could be very demanding: *“That the seminarians may be solidly prepared and tested for a long time and no one should be admitted if there appears to be the slightest doubt.”*²⁸ It was also necessary to avoid the desire to transform them into ‘Europeans with a black skin.’ The intention of Livinhac on the necessity of training an indigenous clergy of high calibre was reinforced by Pope Benedict XV in his Apostolic letter, *Maximum illud*, on the spread of the faith in the world.

Livinhac invited his missionaries to promote self-sufficiency in the local communities by setting up locally planned programmes of works that would assure the future of the missions from the material point of view.²⁹ The missionaries were to put in place activities to train local people in self-reliance by developing schools, trades particularly in agriculture, animal husbandry, and metallurgy. It was a tool of evangelisation that was not limited to Catholics only.

The spirituality of Livinhac was marked by austerity, hardship, obedience and an ardent desire for personal sanctification. It was a spirituality that Lavigerie proposed to his missionaries who had to work in difficult conditions in Equatorial Africa. As was the case for most congregations, the evangelical virtues of poverty, chastity, and obedience were the basis for such spirituality even if they were interpreted in different ways. Ignatian Spirituality, demanded by the Founder remained the practice not only for him but also for the whole Society. The principal lines of his spiritual convictions were printed in a collection at the request of the confreres. Its title was, *“Quelques pensées pouvant servir au règlement particulier d’un missionnaire.”* Livinhac was convinced that, more



Bishop Léon Livinhac in his later years

than anything else, a missionary's life should be anchored in prayer, fraternal charity, community life, obedience and self-sacrifice if the missionary was to carry out his mission. This conviction, which he transmitted to the Society, remains relevant for today's missionaries. While adapting the apostolate to the reality of his times, Livinhac was convinced of the importance of keeping the spirit of the Founder. Perhaps he can help us evaluate ourselves today. Where do we stand?

“You know that so long as Society is careful to maintain the spirit of its Founder, and to faithfully follow the rules and counsels left by him, God's blessing will rest on it, and each year he will send it many pious, intelligent and well-dispose novices. If, in His wisdom, he sends trials, he will give the grace to bear them in a Christian spirit and to come through them with renewed youth and vigour. Let us become more and more imbued with the teaching of our Most Venerable Father, and let us observe our Holy Rules with sacred fidelity, even those that may seem to be of lesser importance.”³⁰

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¹ Louis Burlaton, Monseigneur Léon Livinhac, Archevêque d'Oxyrhynque, Supérieur Général des Missionnaires d'Afrique (Pères Blancs), Fondateur de la Mission de l'Ouganda. Première partie, (typewritten notes) Carthage, 1932, p. 492.

² Louis Burlaton, op. cit. p.491

³ Circular letter 26th November 1892

⁴ Letter of the 27th January 1893, quoted by Jean-Claude Ceillier, History of the Missionaries of Africa, from the beginning of their foundation by Mgr. Lavigerie until his death (1868-1892) Pauline Publications Africa, Nairobi, Kenya

⁵ Letter of Bishop Hirth, 22nd May 1891 quoted by Marinus ROOIJACKERS, "The beginning of the White Fathers' Mission in Southern Uganda and the organisation of the catechumenate 1879-1914," M. Afr. History Series n°9 Stampa Istituto Salesiano Pio XI, Rome, 2008, p. 37.

⁶ Règles de la Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique de 1872, p.5.

⁷ Missionnaires d'Afrique: conclusion des Chapitres généraux, M.Afr Archives 1889-20-2

⁸ Circular Letter of the 6th January 1901

⁹ André ENCREVE et alii, « Le christianisme en Europe des années 1860 à la première guerre mondiale : La France », dans Histoire du Christianisme, Tome 11, (J.-M. MAYEUR et alii, dir.), Paris, Desclée, 1995, p. 527.

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ Aylward Shorter: Cross and Flag in Africa. The 'White Fathers' during the Colonial Scramble (1892-1914) Orbis Books, 2006, Maryknoll, New York p.16.

¹² Aylward Shorter: African Recruits and Missionary Conscripts. The White Fathers and the Great War (1914-1922). Orbis Books, 2007, Maryknoll, New York, p.166.

¹³ Jean-Claude Ceillier: A pilgrimage from Chapter to Chapter, Volume II (1906-1936) M. Afr. History Series n°10 p.21. Stampa Istituto Salesiano Pio XI, Rome, 2008. This rule was suppressed after the death of Bishop Livinhac following the 1926 Chapter

¹⁴ Ibid p.24

¹⁵ Aylward Shorter: African Recruits and Missionary Conscripts op.cit p. 189-208.

¹⁶ Circular Letter of the 5th August 1914

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Letter of the 18th October 1915 quoted in the Petit Echo n° 26, November 1915, p.169

¹⁹ Circular Letter of 2nd February 1918

²⁰ Jean-Claude Ceillier: A pilgrimage from Chapter to Chapter, op. cit. p.61

²¹ Paul Voillard in Instructions de Mgr Livinhac aux Missionnaires d'Afrique (Pères Blancs), Alger, Imprimerie des Pères Blancs, 1938, p. V-VI.

²² See Rapports annuels n°18, 1922-1923.

²³ Circular Letters of the 6th January 1897, 6th January 1902, 6th January 1903

²⁴ Letter of the 19th June 1903

²⁵ We have examples of his reprimands to missionaries, to superiors who infringed the rules, and to those who treated the Blacks severely; or who smuggled items through Customs. It is a "*dishonour on the Society and attracts distrust and is a counter-witness.*" See Circular Letters 6th January 1897, 4th March 1897, 6th February 1898, 1st May 1900, etc.

²⁶ "*His instincts tended towards impatience, even irascibility, but he quickly suppressed all such feelings, especially when interrupted by an unexpected visitor.*" Aylward Shorter: African Recruits and Missionary Conscripts op. cit. p.178

²⁷ Letter of Bishop Livinhac to Fr. Burtin on the 19th November 1894, M. Afr. Archives, Relations avec des Chefs des missions et le Saint-Siege. Fonds Livinhac, Dossier n°6

²⁸ Circular Letter of 2nd February 1918

²⁹ Circular Letter of 19th June 1903

³⁰ Circular Letter of 2nd July 1919. The 50th Anniversary of the foundation of our Society