**Father Berthier as the founder**

**February 2020**

Originally, in a foundation, there is which usually called *"charism"* of the founder: It's a given to him through the Holy Spirit who governs the Body of Christ and leads it to completion. Some reserve the term of charisma to truly characteristic foundations, as the great religious orders or recent congregations as the Little Brothers of Father de Foucauld.

Anyway, even if we deny a true charism of the Founder of the Venerable Father Berthier, there is no doubt that he possessed the apostolate charism the charism enough to explain the origin of his work.

They said that the Venerable Father Berthier had a genius for the apostolate. This is no longer to prove. He preached, he exhorted, he composed books, he launched works, always in a pastoral purpose.

With the renewed appeal of Leo XIII in favor of foreign missions, especially the Encyclical *Sancta Dei Civitas* (1880) and the Apostolic Letter *Praeclara gratulationis* (1894), the realization of this project became his passion.

**1. La Salette and the origin of the work.**

Father Berthier’s apostolic activity has known an undeniable turning point. *"The work and missions"* were not offered to him the way he dreamed it. Here is his special grace we may well call his *"apostolic conversion."* But let he speaks: *"When the humble congregation of the Missionaries of La Salette welcomes a few children, in the hope of always keeping them, it only follows the traditions of centuries of faith, the teaching the great Catholic doctors, and imitates what is practiced today with the successful results, in a large number of recent congregation. We even believe that we are entering the Virgin's plans which, at La Salette, has used two children to* ***"pass her messages and tears to all her people."*** (5Annales, August 1876, p.611). What in this text deserves to be strongly emphasized is his proper way of understanding the message of La Salette. According to him, the command of the Virgin **"Eh well, my children, you shall pass it to all my people,**" continued in addressing to the children, to this crowd of "*Maximin and Melanie*" who are waiting at crossroads of life, for someone to come and hire them for the Lord's vineyard. *"Mary, he writes, wanted to establish a house for apostolate on the mountain!* ".

On the mountain of La Salette, the Venerable P. Berthier discovered a new apostolic secret, a way to be an apostle to tenfold power. Throughout his missionary life, he became a tireless apostle of Our Lady of La Salette.

It's easy to understand why he always kept a deep devotion to Our Lady of La Salette: he owed her the direction of his life and his apostolic activity.

There is more. The grace received at La Salette is a grace not only personal, but granted the benefit of the work that he founded in the impulse of that grace. Asking his disciples to remember, this is first a form of thanksgiving for this to be of supernatural origin, the birth of a religious institute in the Church. Evoking the memory of Our Lady of La Salette would have no meaning outside this thanksgiving for the great gift of the Father. On the other hand, remembering its origin, that is, for a foundation, to return to the freshness its source, to dive back into the clarity of the Evangelical spirit from which it sprang, and to see if it preserved its original dynamism.

So, we should not be surprised that the Salettine memory was wanted by the founder as "constitutive" of the memory of his disciples. (see La vie et l’Esprit du P. Berthier, JM De Lombaerde. p. 272)

**2- Work or religious institute?**

To have a clear idea on the idea that the Venerable John Berthier did his foundation we need to read the first Constitutions. Now, in the reading, the question arises: Does Venerable John Berthier wanted to found a religious institute or a work? Indeed, in certain numbers of the first Constitutions, he readily talks about the Institute and the work as two separate things. But it is not uncommon to see him use the word work when he speaks of the Institute as such. Let us take two examples, in the numbers 17 and 18 of the first Constitutions that I do not quote here.

In number **17,** **Institute and work** **are fairly well distinguished,** and Father John Berthier asked members of the Institute to ensure the development of the work. The first is presented as an actor and the second as the recipient, subject to the action of members of the Institute. In number 18, in contrast, **work and institute appear to have the same meaning in expressions,** *"first goal of the work"* and *"main purpose of the Institute."* These are the two phrases that Father John Berthier used to talk about his foundation and that the distinction is not always easy.

But I think this is due to the fact that at first, he wanted to carry out this work within the Institute. But later, his Protector encouraged him to carry out his project independently. The turning point came in 1903 with the petition addressed to Pope Leo XIII, in which John Berthier asks him to recognize the work as *"a regular institute directly under the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda."* Then after the *Decretum Laudis* 1911, officially recognizing the foundation, the term "work" gradually disappears and now we speak of religious institute or religious congregation.

**3- An Institute for late vocations for the missions.**

But from the beginning of the foundation, it seems that the major concerns of the Venerable P. John Berthier were always clear. Two key ideas emerged from the main passages of the first Constitutions: **the multiplication of apostolic vocations and missions:**

*"Foundations, he writes, if they have a purpose other than the schools, and the missions themselves, often absorb and wear out the subjects of an Institute, instead of providing it. It is a fruitful source, it is even many sources that are necessary for congregations who want to spread their branches far away for the glory of God. These sources are students or apostolic schools. It is to feed them that we must first put all their zeal, if we want later to do a great good in missions,... But if the apostolic schools are the hope of the missions, therefore, there is no more effective way to exercise its dedication to the missions themselves or by creating their resources, either by sending them good subjects, or praying for them. "*

The venerable John Berthier, therefore, asked his missionaries to have, above all, the desire to multiply and nurture missionary vocations, and within an apostolic activity. John Berthier spoke little about early trouble, he was content just to say that "the early years were the least happy." For his part, Bishop Van de Ven, then bishop of Bois-le-Duc admited: *"After seeing what the Father Berthier accomplished, I will not say that something is impossible in this world."* The chronology on the next page already gives us some idea of the main problems he had to overcome with courage, intelligence and acknowledgement before arriving at the first fruits.

The deficiencies, poverty, lack of teachers and questioning of the foundation: these are the main problems of the first years. But with the convincing assistance of two fellow La Salette, **Fathers Patarin from 1898 to 1901** and **Pons** **from 1901 to 1905** and fraternal help of the students themselves, the work grew gradually. In addition, it remained serious problem of communication because from the beginning, our Venerable John Berthier insisted that the work be accessible to young people of various nationalities. Note that before his death, the first 25 priests, 15 are German, 6 French, 3 Dutch, and 1 Belgian. This shows us that the vast majority of the Institute was of German origin, while our Founder did not speak their language.

To facilitate communication, he recommended them: *"those who do not strive to help their compatriots to learn the language of the house, are without charity."* This means that direct contact with students was something very difficult because you have to contact an intermediary. One of the first priests, **Father Auguste Stolz** even attributes the many withdrawals from the beginning to this communication problem. He assured:

*"I think he has too easily accepted candidates. It had to overcome many serious difficulties. Among these, one of the most serious was probably that he did not master the German language and that he was obliged to always rely on the judgment of a third party in order to be able to form an opinion on the German students. The German nature and character were also little known to him, so that a deep and personal contact was excluded which would have made possible a mutual explanation and a possible discussion. This, too, may have been one of the reasons that almost all of the students in the first years had to be expelled or that they left on their own. When I entered in the autumn 1896, there were only three left."*

By foresight, the founder also warns his future missionaries against **nationalism,** so keen at the turn of the 1900s, and which can cause irreparable havoc, if one is not careful:

  *"It is the Holy Family, he writes, we owe the cordial charity that reigns in our already numerous youth. There, the new are welcomed with holy joy; each of them in arriving received fraternal embrace of all; some of us are designated to make them aware of the usages and do so with a good heart, so that a newcomer immediately feels as a family. They all live as brothers ... This peace that reigns in the house is all the more admirable since these young people are of quite different living condition and nationality, because the work accepts all people of goodwill ... It was agreed, that no one ever speaks with disfavor of country or family of others, and this rule is respected ... so if one of our young people must move away from house for some serious reasons, he is longing to regain the joy of his religious house. "*

And thanks to the effort of all and every one, this union of hearts which the Venerable John Berthier mentioned, has become a reality which is confirmed by numerous testimonies from the students themselves. The month of August 1908, that is to say, two months before his death, he could therefore say deep joy: *"The work has 26 priests, 13 sub-deacons, 14 other theologians, 27 philosophers, and 87 other young aspirants to the missions. In all 167* ". After his death, the congregation can therefore face the future with a certain serenity.

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