

To Prepare His Ways

Tracing the Life
of

Melchior de Marion Brésillac



Melchior de Marion Brésillac

1813 - 1859

Founder of the Society of African Missions (S.M.A.)

“You shall go before the Lord,

To prepare His ways”.

(Gospel of Luke: Chapter One, Verse 76).



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Introduction

The name Melchior de Marion Brésillac is not familiar to most Christians. Even among many Church historians, he is scarcely mentioned. Yet, in the first half of the 19th century, he courageously spoke out against the received wisdom and missionary practice of the Church in the so-called “foreign missions”. Not only did he speak and write, he also put himself “on the line” by actually living and working for twelve years in South-East India - a place which was regarded as a very difficult mission at that time.

Through meticulous research, hard work and much opposition, Melchior de Marion Brésillac gradually drew the attention of the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples (“Propaganda Fide”) in Rome to study and decide on the issues which he brought to it. With its customary restraint and measured tempo, the Congregation eventually did approve many of his recommendations. The last three years of Melchior de Marion Brésillac’s life were spent in establishing a Missionary Society which would implement his progressive approach to evangelisation. This became known as the “Society of African Missions” (S.M.A.). It was founded in 1856.

The pages which follow are an attempt to familiarize readers with this “Great Servant of Mission”. It is not a Biography in the accepted sense. It is more a study - a “*Memoire*” or (re)reading - of the original words and actions of Melchior as he wrote them down in his Diaries or *Souvenirs*. He began writing these down from the age of eighteen, with the last entries being made one week before his untimely death. We are fortunate to have these “primary sources”. It will also help to explain the use of the chronological method and the use of frequent references in the following pages.

Melchior de Marion Brésillac had always intended to edit his *Souvenirs* before publication. But he never got around to it... What you will read in this presentation is his own very personal view of

the Catholic missionary situation of India in the first half of the 19th century and his “struggle” to found the Society of African Missions. Also revealed are the personality, thinking, motivations, plans, scriptural and theological basis of the spiritual life of a missionary who “neglected no means of advancing the work of God”.

A limited number of authoritative “secondary sources” are also provided in this book. However, it is my hope that readers will make their own assessment of a man who was “a missionary from the bottom of his heart”. In a postscript, I will offer some elements of his legacy as I see them.

The context or “milieu” of France at the beginning at the 19th century obviously had a profound effect on Melchior de Marion Brésillac. The French Revolution (1789) had brought huge societal changes – not just to France but to many European countries and beyond... Indeed, it may be seen as giving birth to many significant ideologies (including nationalism, liberalism, socialism and even communism). In France itself, it brought an end to the Monarchy with the execution of King Louis XVI on 21st January 1793.

It has been well documented that the immediate cause of the French Revolution was the failure of crops and the raising of taxes. There was no bread and the economy was in a shambles. But now, “the land was freed” (1789 - 1791). This had a profound effect on the ancient, Catholic and “Royalist” de Marion Brésillac family, into which the future Missionary and Founder was born in 1813.

The family could be traced back to the 15th century and had many branches. Their wealth was based on the ownership and management of land. From the religious viewpoint, one of Melchior’s ancestors was a Canon in Carcassonne (South of France) when “he left all” to become a Cistercian monk. This was in the 16th century. Later, he became the confessor of Henry III and died while taking care of plague-stricken soldiers in Turin. In the eighteenth century,

another member of the family became a Benedictine religious and writer, while another (Jean Louis) became a priest and professor at the Sorbonne University in Paris. These are just three examples of the strong Catholic tradition of the “faith, piety, and alms-giving” which existed in this family.

Melchior’s grandfather (Jean Louis Benoit de Marion Brésillac) was born in 1743. Through his marriage, he united the two main lineages of the family. It was from this union that Gaston (the father of Melchior) was born in 1773.

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, Gaston and his three young brothers quickly fled from France (1791). Gaston went to Spain but quickly moved on to Denmark and Sweden. He found employment as “a designer of small manuscripts” (*miniaturist*) and thus earned a decent living. However, one of his brothers (Pierre Marie) was captured and executed in Holland. He was aged 18. When circumstances had changed and “The Terror” had subsided somewhat, Gaston returned to their home area in the South-East of France, as did his two remaining brothers. Together, they set about salvaging what remained of their land and other possessions. Only a small fraction of what they had previously owned now remained, but this they recovered.

As Gaston planned to marry, he knew that his share would not be sufficient. However, among the properties which he did recover was a comfortable house, with small annexes and stables, in Castlenaudary near Carcassonne. In order to provide a regular income, he took a job as an “engineer officer” of the *Canal-du-Midi* (an important waterway facilitating commerce between the Atlantic and Mediterranean regions).

Gaston married Josephine Emile Marion de Gaja on 16th June 1812. He was aged 39, while his wife was 28 years old.

Chapter One

Life in Carcassonne

Melchior Marie Joseph de Marion Brésillac was born on 2nd December 1813 in the town of Castlensaudary, near Carcassonne in the south of France. He was the eldest of five children, (three boys and two girls).¹

His mother, Josephine Emilie, has been described as “*a woman of noble heart, discreet, full of Christian faith and love for her husband and children... she had the gift of a rare piety*”.² Melchior’s father, Gaston, was “*upright and God-fearing... a Christian in the full sense of the word... a man of faith... intelligent, educated and well-read [and a] proud and passionate man*”.³

Due to the changed social and financial circumstances caused by the French Revolution, the family never had too much money to spare. For this reason, as well as the condition of primary education and what Gaston believed to be the “*philosophical and ‘Voltairean’ leprosy*” rampant in France at the time, he and Josephine decided to educate the children themselves. According to contemporaries and professional educators, Gaston was “*an excellent teacher, possessing the qualities and necessary expertise for the task*”. He was passionate about humanities and science, and possessed a vast knowledge about events of his time, country and Europe.

Certainly, his eldest son (Melchior) proved to be a good student, eager to learn. The following are just a few testimonies by those who knew Melchior well and spoke about his childhood and adolescence. His youngest sister (Félicie) wrote:

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- 1 Two other girls had died in infancy – *Marie* (1815) and *Victoire* (1818). The bio-data of the rest of the family is as follows: Pierre Gaston de Marion Brésillac (Father) 1773 - 1861; Josephine Emilie de Marion Gaja (Mother) 1784 - 1862. Melchior (1813 - 1859). Jules (1816 - 1835). Henri (1821 - 1876). Bathilde (1824 - 1909). Félicie (1826 - 1875).
 - 2 Bruno Semplicio: *De Marion Brésillac* (1813-1859). SMA Publications: Rome. 2005. page 36. This book is the official biography submitted to the Congregation of Saints in that same year.
 - 3 Ibidem: page 35.

*“In his young days, Melchior was very cheerful. He liked to laugh and tease his two sisters. He played tricks on them, making voices to scare them at night, pulling their braids and, later on, undoing their little hair-bun...Mama would give him a little sermon which he would listen to with humorous contrition but without regret, since he would start teasing them again immediately. He was never angry and he would never sulk. It must be said in his favour that the little damsels themselves were given to tossing and messing up his beautiful blond hair of which he was so proud”.*⁴

Canon Pradies (a local Parish Priest) wrote later on: *“Little Melchior had little taste for children’s games.... He served Mass in the church very gracefully from the age of six, and would climb the bell-tower with the bell-ringer...He sang at the lectern until the age of eighteen...”*⁵

Mlle Blanchet (a family friend) would later on remark: *“He wanted to grasp everything and would constantly ask for explanations of the words and things he did not understand.... Remarkable for his love of work and his application to study, he was not less notable for his wisdom and piety...”*⁶

There is no doubt that Melchior himself was completely devoted to his own father, mother, brothers and sisters. Most of his early life was spent in their company. He had little love of activities outside the home. Indeed, he has been described as a “loner” who liked to walk along the banks of the Canal-du-Midi admiring nature or reading a book... Certainly, one can say that Melchior had a “sheltered” upbringing.

Priestly Vocation

It was no surprise when Melchior announced that he wished to become a priest. It was at this time also, that he began to keep a

4 De Marion Brésillac... page 39.

5 Ibidem: page 40.

6 Ibidem: page 39.

Diary.⁷ He states: “*God granted me the grace, I believe, of inspiring in me the idea of a priestly vocation almost at the same time as he gave me the use of reason*”. Melchior entered the Diocesan Minor Seminary at Carcassonne in 1832, with the blessing of his father. He was then 19 years of age.

Life in this seminary was austere (as it was in all seminaries at that time). There were periods of silence and times for prayer, while there was a “*no-frills*” menu. Religious ceremonies were celebrated with all possible splendour. Melchior soon excelled in Philosophy, Rhetoric,⁸ Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, Latin and Music - receiving several awards. His fellow students honoured him with “*the Wisdom Award*”. This was conferred by the students themselves on the person whom they considered “*the worthiest*” within the group.

Again, Mlle Blanchet writes: “*Everybody liked him (Melchior)... his school-mates because he was always cheerful and in good mood, straightforward and honest...his teachers because he was flexible, ready to work and trustful...The unforgettable Superior, Rev. Canon Arnal (a good judge of people) better than anyone appreciated his great qualities, and wanted to keep him teaching in the Minor Seminary when he ended his studies*”.⁹ The studies were completed in two years. Melchior then formally began his theological studies in 1834.

However, the good Canon got his wish. After a period of discernment, during which he consulted widely, Melchior decided to stay and teach at the Minor Seminary, while privately

7 Marion Brésillac: *Souvenirs de Douze Ans De Mission: Mediaspaul*. Paris. 1987. In his “*Souvenirs*”, Melchior meticulously wrote down everything that happened to him for the rest of his life, and freely expressed his opinions. References in this presentation are taken from an English Edition: *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* Translator Robert Hales S.M.A. Three volumes: SMA Publications. Rome. 1988, 1989 and 1991.

8 According to Aristotle, rhetoric is “*the ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion*”. More simply, it has been described as the art of speaking and writing effectively.

9 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 44.

studying theology. He attended lessons at the Major Seminary of Carcassonne, which was not far away. This arrangement had the approval of all the interested parties. It lasted for two years (1834-1836).

On 13th June 1835, Melchior received the “*Tonsure*”.¹⁰ This was followed a few weeks later (24th July) by the sad news of the death of his brother (Jules) at the age of 19. Jules was a cadet in the navy and died while carrying out his duties in Algiers. Naturally, this affected the whole family.

The following year (on 28th May 1836) Melchior received Minor Orders at the Cathedral in Carcassonne.

It was during his time at the Minor Seminary that something highly significant happened in Melchior’s path to the priesthood: *“Suddenly, spontaneously, without the least suggestion on the part of his spiritual director, he felt within the desire to be a missionary. Only then did he realise that this feeling had been dormant in him since childhood, side by side with the strong desire to be a priest. He consulted his director and many others; they advised him to wait. His Bishop received the proposition “frostily”... His father vigorously refused to give his permission...but as one crumb of hope, a Jesuit advised that if, after his ordination, the desire to be a missionary persisted, then Melchior should make a special retreat to enable him to decide”*.¹¹ Melchior decided to let the matter rest - for the time being.

The experience of Melchior’s entire Minor Seminary period has been summed up as follows:

“His letters and personal notes indicate that the years spent in the Minor Seminary were very happy... it was certainly enriching for the young Melchior to abandon the narrow limits of his house - although they were very dear to him - and to be stimulated by new ideas, in addition to the fact that he was really happy to teach. It is here that,

¹⁰ Tonsure has been associated with a multitude of religions. It is the shaving of hair on top of a monk or priest’s head to indicate that the person is consecrated to God (s). It also symbolizes the rejection of “worldly goods”.

¹¹ Patrick Gantly - Ellen Thorp: *For This Cause*. SMA Publications. Rome. 1992. pages 21 - 22.

*for the first time, Melchior shows his true self; we discover in him one of the qualities that later on would become so obvious: his faith in the essential goodness of human nature, and especially this sympathy for young people, his ability to understand them”.*¹²

Melchior continued his studies, while teaching at the Minor Seminary. During 1836-1837, he was in charge of 6th Grade. On 20th May 1837, he was ordained sub-deacon by Bishop Gualy in the Cathedral. On 3rd May 1838, our sub-deacon delivered a sermon in the Minor Seminary chapel to promote “*The Works for the Propagation of the Faith*”. He spoke about missionary commitment as being “*an obligation of charity towards those who do not know the God of Jesus Christ*” and he alluded to his own interior or spiritual struggle... “*the need of souls must press our heart above all*”...¹³

Melchior was ordained Deacon by his local Bishop in the Cathedral of Carcassonne on 9th June 1838. A neighbour’s child from Castlenaudary (Jean Baptist Gouttes) was ordained priest at the same ceremony. Deacon Melchior moved to the Major Seminary full-time in October 1838. Already well known there, he slotted in easily. The following remarks about him have been recorded by Mlle Blanchet:

*“And there (in the Major Seminary), he distinguished himself by these two qualities that were the basis of his character: a gentle and constant friendliness in his relationship with the directors and pupils, and an immutable fidelity to all the rules of interior discipline, and all the laws of the Church”.*¹⁴

On 22nd December 1838, Melchior de Marion Brésillac was ordained a priest by Bishop Gualy (with three other priests, eight deacons and five sub-deacons). The Bishop stated in the ordination letter concerning Deacon Melchior: “*We have raised our dear teacher, Melchior Marie Joseph de Marion Brésillac...deacon of*

12 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 18.

13 *Ibidem:* page 52.

14 *Ibidem:* page 53.

our diocese, to the holy order of priesthood, judging him suitable and capable, dispensing him from the stipulated intervals of time".¹⁵

On 24th December, Father Melchior formally called on his parish priest who asked him to "*sing matins and take charge of the daily office*". On Christmas Day, the new priest celebrated the three customary Masses - the third being the Solemn Celebration. Melchior presided over Vespers in the afternoon and delivered the homily.

Pastoral Ministry (1838 - 1841)

Following his ordination, Melchior was appointed Assistant priest (curate) of St. Michel, in his home town of Castlensaudary. It was not unusual in those days for a priest to be appointed to his native parish or to where his parents lived. Assistant priests were not paid. They often lived an austere life-style and did not enjoy many leisure activities.

For the next two and a half years, Melchior lived with his family. He carefully prepared his sermons, prepared the children for First Communion and participated in all the other pastoral programmes of his time. He paid particular attention to the sick, especially those in the Castlensaudary hospital, where he encountered patients of every kind and with many different types of disease. As time went on, Melchior showed himself to be a dedicated, caring, prayerful and attentive priest, increasingly appreciated by both parishioners, his colleagues in the priesthood and his Bishop. He treated people "*with finesse and politeness*". A public figure from the town put it as follows: "*This Father de Brésillac is charming... he is inflexible regarding duty and the observances of the rules, but he tells you what he has to say in such a gracious way that instead of feeling offended by it, you are pleased and almost thankful*".¹⁶ To all appearances, Melchior himself was completely happy and at ease... "*And, humanly speaking, he says: 'I was happy, really happy. I was where I was meant*

15 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 52.

16 *Ibidem:* page 62.

to be, at my post of duty - and you deigned, O Lord, to give me many consolations. But, he adds: 'the greatest grace you bestowed on me was not to allow me to lose sight of the missions...All the years I was there, the idea of the mission field seemed only a distant prospect, but the desire to go never left me' ...¹⁷

Soon, this voice calling him to the missions became so loud and persistent that he could not close his ears to it. "As one driven, he [Melchior] went to consult his former Jesuit retreat master, who told him to go to the [Jesuit] Society's novice master at Avignon. Arrived there, Melchior learned that the novice master had gone to Aix. He followed him there, and under his direction, made an eight day retreat. At the end, he was told that he should become a missionary".¹⁸

Melchior did not waste any time. Before leaving the Jesuit Retreat centre, he wrote two letters, one to the Superior of the Paris Foreign Missions,¹⁹ and the other to his Bishop. He received a prompt reply from Paris stating that he would be accepted, provided that he had suitable references and the permission of his Bishop. On the side of the Bishop, there was silence. However, a further letter did elicit a response: he could not release Melchior due to a shortage of priests in the Diocese. One may also infer that Bishop Gualy²⁰ did not wish to "lose" a priest whom he saw as a future leader in the Diocese.

Six months later, Melchior again wrote to his Bishop. This letter (described as a "*cri-de-coeur*") elicited a response from the Bishop. He refused permission. But he did offer Melchior another position as "*priest-in-charge*" of a new house which he was planning to open. The purpose of the house was to give retreats and parish missions.

17 *For this Cause...* page 21.

18 *Ibidem*: Page 22.

19 This Society was well-known in Carcassonne. Several priests had, over the years, joined the group. Two of these had become Bishops in the "*Far East*". In this book, I refer to the Paris Foreign Mission Society as the *M.E.P.*

20 Bishop de Saint-Rome-Gualy was born in the Diocese of Rodez in 1765. Bishop of Carcassonne (1824 - 1847).

"I would have liked the work", Melchior admitted, but not at the expense of his missionary vocation.

Finally, the breakthrough came on 3rd May 1841 when Melchior preached at the Cathedral of Carcassonne on *"The Propagation of the Faith"*. After the ceremony, Melchior (and the Superior of the Major Seminary) went to see the Bishop. He complimented Melchior on his sermon. Father Melchior thanked him for his remarks and immediately asked the Bishop for his blessing. Melchior then said to the Bishop that he took his words as *"real consent"* for him to go *"on the missions"*. Remarkably, Bishop Gualy agreed, there and then!

Afterwards, Melchior reflected that the Bishop could not refuse his decision to become a missionary anymore. *"What did (the Bishop) have to do? Verify the means that I had used, submit them to examination and test my vocation. Having done that, he was not free anymore. In conscience he had to tell me to go"*.²¹ From that moment onwards, the Bishop placed no further obstacle in his way. Melchior wrote immediately to Father Langlois (the *"Mission Superior"* in Paris) saying that he would come in July, after tidying up some matters that needed his attention.

The only remaining significant obstacle was gaining the permission of his parents. Melchior knew that his mother, though heartbroken, would see the hand of God in her son's decision. In his own words: *"She had the gift of a rare piety"*. But he also knew from his father's reaction to the idea some years earlier that his attitude would not have changed. Melchior visited his home. It was a very painful event. His father gave vent to his uncontrolled distress. Melchior understood: *"I was cut to the heart by the outcry of an affectionate father whom I had cruelly wounded... his tears and actions were like stones, battering my very heart"*. He fully realized that his father was still mourning the death of one son in Algiers, and now he seemed to be losing a second one.

21 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 69.

Later on, Melchior asked a neighbouring “senior” Parish Priest to visit and talk with his father. There was no change. The priest then pleaded with Melchior not to ask him to take farewell letters to the house²², but he “*would endure this heavy ordeal*” if necessary. It was now clear to Melchior that he must act quickly. He borrowed some money and went to say good-bye to Bishop Gualy. Melchior mentioned to him that a letter could come from his father, asking for a reversal of his permission to leave the diocese. The Bishop told Melchior to feel at ease, “*especially when, on this matter, you and I are of the same mind*”.

At daybreak on 2nd June 1841, Melchior set out for Paris.

22 Melchior had also written letters to each member of his family, as he realized the pain he was causing... (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac* (pages 40 - 43). Father Taurines, his friend and fellow-curate, duly delivered the letters. In a long letter to Melchior, which he sent to him in Paris as quickly as he could, father Taurines describes how he had spent a long time with the parents – listening, crying, praying and offering words of comfort and encouragement. “*Your father spoke very intimately of his sorrows...while through all her sorrow, she [his mother] is resigned and seems unwilling to complain or talk of her own affliction, saying that your trial is greater than hers...*” [Father Taurines also stated that] “*your brother and sisters are “very sad” [but] they can have read your touching letters only with tenderness*”. He concluded by asking Melchior to write immediately to his father as “*your letter will do him a lot of good.* (*Marion Brésillac: Souvenirs: page 48*). As it turned out, Melchior’s father did not write to the Bishop. After a few weeks of anguished soul-searching, he wrote to his son in Paris: “*I had no idea how determined and strongly convinced you were...Your courage – so clearly upheld from above – has shown me how weak I have been. Go, my dearest son, to where Heaven leads. I recognise the voice which calls you... May it protect you...Be happy. I submit...*” (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac* (page 51). Melchior then adds the comment: “*My excellent father’s submission never wavered. From that day on, we kept up the friendliest correspondence*”. Gaston de Marion Brésillac would continue to help his son with advice, love and practical support throughout his missionary adventure.

Chapter Two

A Missionary... At Last

The Paris Foreign Missions

The Society of Foreign Missions of Paris (M.E.P.) was founded around the year 1660 as an organisation of “*secular*” priests (i.e. priests who are not bound to a religious order). It opened its first Seminary in Paris in 1863 (after protracted difficulties).

The purpose of this Institute is the work of evangelisation in “*foreign lands*”. During the past 360 years, the M.E.P. priests, together with lay members and associates, have contributed towards the evangelisation of many Asian countries (for example, China, Japan, India, Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Burma, Laos, Thailand). This Society continues to participate in spreading the “*Good News*” of Jesus Christ right up to our day.

The basic principles of the *Paris Foreign Missions* (based on Instructions from the *Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith* - which itself was founded in 1622) have been stated in its Statutes and can be summarized as follows:

- *Announcing the Gospel and working for the conversion of “infidels”.*
- *Preparing and promoting to priesthood the new Christians, or their children, who would be judged suitable for this holy state, in order to set up the clergy and the hierarchical order in each country.*
- *Bringing the faith... and not rejecting rites or usages of any people, provided that they are evidently not contrary to religion and morality.*
- *Close collaboration and loyalty to the Holy See.*²³

The newly-arrived recruit (Father Melchior) was delighted when

23 This “*cooperation*” was required due to the dominating influence - and even control - of Christian missions by European colonial governments over previous centuries.

he read these principles, as they were very much in line with his own thinking.

Melchior then describes in detail his “*Preparatory Year*”²⁴ in the Paris Seminary. The following is a summary by a biographer:

*“De Brésillac’s frank account of it (the Seminary) involves little but praise for the priests personally who were in charge, though he found the Superior (Father Langlois) was rough and offhand at first. But much of the work he considered a pure waste of time. The Seminary was too like a school for priests who studied there, and yet not sufficiently disciplined for the younger men. Chinese was taught and other foreign languages... (but) he considered that the study should be of the literary background of the mission field for which each was destined. But apparently no one knew which mission field he was destined for! De Brésillac himself surprisingly says that he himself was indifferent to his destination. He wished only to be off on the job as a missionary.”*²⁵

It must also be noted that Melchior spoke of the great happiness, inner peace and joy he experienced during this time, as well as the many lasting ties of friendships he made with his colleagues. He got on particularly well with Father Jean Luquet²⁶ who had come to the Seminary shortly after himself. He too was a man of “*more than usually independent mind*”. They had shared interests and viewpoints, and did lot of research together. Their paths were to cross later.

Melchior was overjoyed to receive his appointment to India, and began his immediate preparations by making a Retreat. The following are his Retreat resolutions:

1. *“To be a missionary from the depths of my heart*
2. *To neglect no means of advancing the work of God*

24 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac ...* pages 51 - 54; 62 - 80. In reality, the length of time was about nine months.

25 John M. Todd: *African Mission: Burns & Oates*. London. 1962. page 18.

26 Jean François Onésime Luquet was born in the diocese of Langres in 1810. He was ordained priest in 1841 and entered the Paris Foreign Missions shortly afterwards. He departed to the “Indian Missions” in 1843 and died in Rome in 1858 (aged 48).

3. *To seize all opportunities of preaching the word of God*
4. *Finally, and it is here I especially implore your blessing, to use all my means, all my strength, all my study, to foster the formation of a local clergy*".²⁷

As we will see later on, Melchior's missionary experience in India was (as a whole) in line with these resolutions. He also made a "strong speech" at the Farewell Dinner along the same lines... "I made it clear that the two things I desired more than anything else were, first, to see if it were not possible to intensify our efforts to convert the heathen, and next, to work more actively for the formation of a native clergy..." As a Biographer remarked: "The motives were laudable, but it was hardly a tactful way of taking leave of one's Superiors..."²⁸

After the Departure Ceremony, which he describes as "deliciously cruel",²⁹ Melchior left Paris with Father Tribulot (who had also been appointed to India). It was Monday 28th March 1842. Melchior was aged 29.

Their ship (the "Pauline") embarked from a port near Nantes on 12th April 1842. Melchior gives a detailed account of all the joys and sorrows of the voyage, the conditions on board, the mixture of personalities, the splendour of sunrise and sunset, being becalmed, undergoing storms and being lost in fog, as well as the difficulties in celebrating Mass onboard and trying to observe "a spiritual rule of life".³⁰

On 24th July, their ship made landfall at Pondicherry in the State of Tamil Nadu, South-East of India. There was no one to meet the two priests, but "crowds of Indians" led them to "the Mission". The Bishop and "beloved brethren" warmly welcomed them. Then, straightaway, they went to the church to return thanks to God for their safe voyage.

27 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 76.

28 *For this Cause...* page 37.

29 In those days, missionaries went "on the missions" and stayed there "for the rest of their lives".

30 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages: 93 -122.



1.1 Castlenaudary



1.2 Gaston De Brésillac
(father of founder)

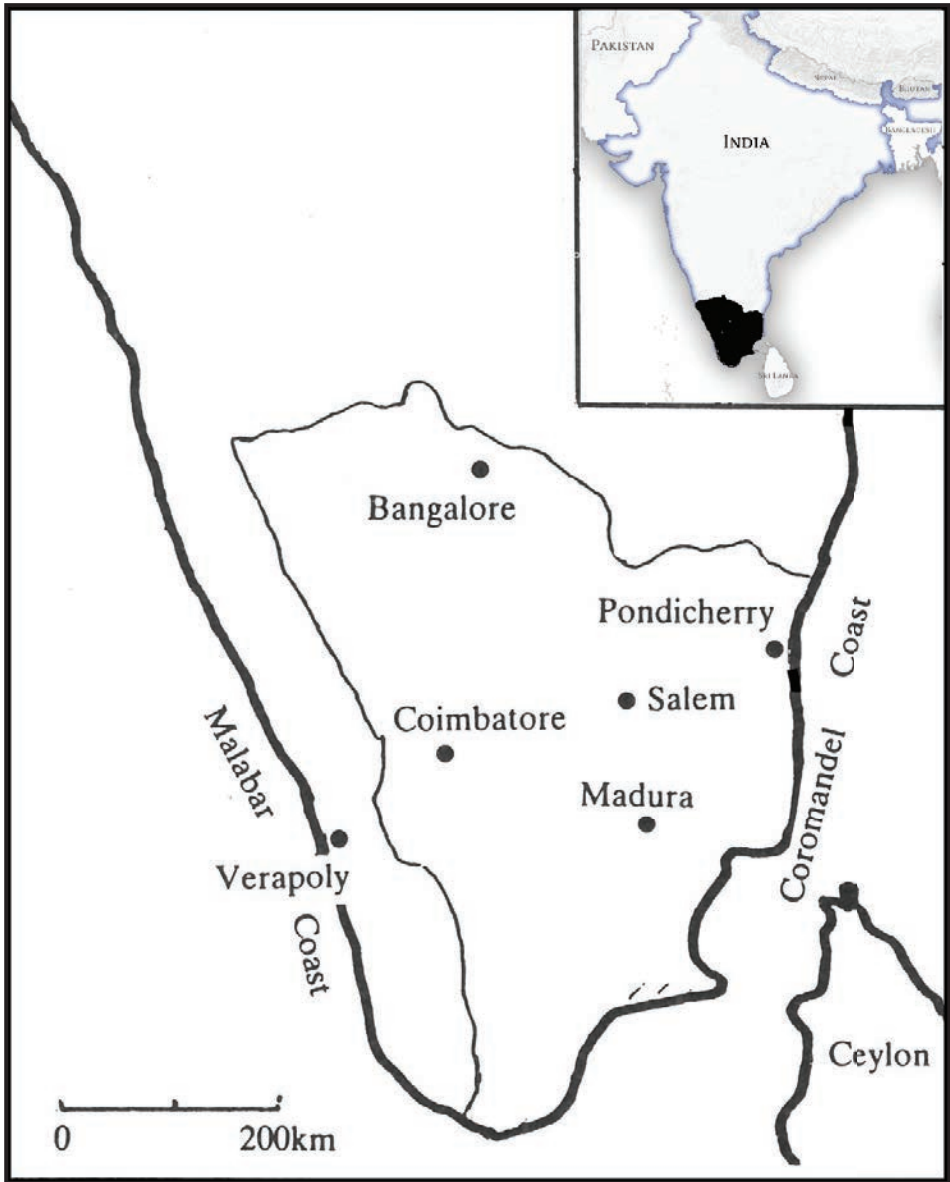


Early Photo of Fr de Brésillac

1.3 Fr Melchior as young priest



1.4 MEP Headquarters



1.5 Vicariate Apostolic of Coromandel Coast (Pondicherry) 1842.

Chapter Three

Mission in India

It was customary that all newly-arrived missionaries would spend a “*period of familiarization or initiation*” in the country before receiving an official appointment. So Melchior and his companion (Father Tribulot) settled into their new environment by living at “*the Mission*” with Bishop Bonnard ³¹ and three other confreres. They began by reading the up-to-date statistics for the Catholic Vicariate of Pondicherry (1840).³²

For several months, both studied the local language (Tamil), the customs of the people and the general milieu where they would live and work. Melchior threw himself wholeheartedly into the task. Living at headquarters was made easy by the kindness of the Bishop and the priests who lived there. Melchior learned a lot, not only by studies, but by observation and by listening to “*his elders*” in their informal discussions. In moving about the city of Pondicherry, he also made many discoveries - all of which he meticulously recorded.

Within a short time, Melchior identified three areas of major concern, which he felt needed his own full attention: a) *The Caste System...* b) *The Local Clergy...* c) *The Malabar Rites.*

The Caste System

The Caste system (based on Hindu philosophy) “*divided mankind into four principal ‘jati’ or castes: Brahmins, Warriors, Merchants and*

31 Bishop Bonnard had the reputation of being “*a true pastor - full of affection and kindness - and for giving particular attention to the human and spiritual well-being of his missionary colleagues - those in the city and those scattered across the large Vicariate*”. Clement Bonnard was born in 1796 in *Saint-Maurice-sur-Dargoire* (Rhône). Ordained a priest in 1821, he went to India in 1824. Appointed Coadjutor to Bishop Hebert (1831), he then became Vicar Apostolic of the Coromandel Coast in 1836. He died in 1861. He has been described as “one of the most remarkable Bishops of the missions in India”.

32 These were: 21 missionaries, 3 Indian priests, 102 Catechists with 164 “helpers”. There were three Convents of Sisters, 2 hospitals, 97 schools, 113 churches and 221 chapels. The number of Catholics is given at 115,000.

Servants, springing respectively from the head, shoulders, thighs and feet of the god Brahma. These castes were subdivided into a host of lesser ones. Inter-marriage between these castes was unthinkable, and for a man to lose his caste was the greatest possible calamity. Far beneath the lowest caste were the multitudes of the outcasts - the pariahs - whose lightest touch, whose near proximity - even to the casting of their shadow or a glance of an eye - brought defilement".³³ It was one thing to read all about Caste and to discuss it with veteran missionaries during his time in Paris. Now, he was to see the reality. What really "stuck in his gullet" was what he saw when he visited the principal church in Pondicherry. He found a fine church building - cruciform in shape with three naves. A Biographer continues: "Running down it, separating one part of the church from another, was a low wall; and for the first time [he] realised that even Christianity, in its most holy places, had not succeeded in bridging the pagan gulf between caste and untouchable. There, for all the world to see, like a monstrous blow in the face, was the dividing wall; and in shocking and shameful emphasis along the top of the wall, available to both sides, yet implacably separating them, were placed the confessionals and baptismal font".³⁴

Melchior was shocked! In his eyes, this was a complete denial of what Christianity stood for: the dignity of each human being as a child of God, deserving respect, love and compassion. But Melchior also knew that as a "newly-arrived" missionary, he must be respectful to his elders... that he must be patient and not behave as a "know-all". He continued to learn and to pray...

The Local Clergy

Assessing the situation of the local clergy was much more straightforward. There were just three ordained Indian diocesan priests in the Vicariate... The Minor Seminary consisted of a few hours weekly instruction of a handful of students, whose motivation

33 *For This Cause...* page 51.

34 *Ibidem.*

was questionable. Father Leroux (the Rector) ³⁵ was well-liked by Melchior and the other priests. He fully realized that the Seminary was “*a shambles*” and that a real effort should be made to train candidates for the priesthood.

Father Leroux had made repeated requests to “the Mission” to reform the institution, but these were met with some opposition and, at best, indifference. Listening to his confreres locally, Melchior also noted that “*nearly all of them had concluded that the establishment of a local clergy was a ‘moral impossibility!’*” Melchior felt that this crucial aspect of missionary work was not only being neglected, but was not being sufficiently insisted upon by the Superiors in Paris.

Again, Melchior decided to bide his time. However, in this instance he was much more hopeful that he could achieve something... and he prayed: “*but what will this hope amount to, O my God, if you do not render it life-giving by your grace?*”

The Malabar Rites

These “Rites” were customs and practices which sprang from - and were bound up with - the Hindu caste system. They were introduced by Roberto de Nobili (1577 - 1656), and permitted by Jesuit missionaries in the 17th century in the South of India. The stated purpose was to “*pave the way*” for conversions, enable the Indians to retain elements of their culture after baptism, and help them to “*not feel estranged*”.

The practice was permitted by Rome, provided that the elements were not against natural or divine law and the fundamental principles of Christianity. Therein lay the seeds for future problems... In Southern India, the missionaries of different “Orders” (and even within “Orders”) adopted different attitudes towards the Indian cultural “*way of life*”.

35 Jean Marie Leroux (from the Diocese of Nantes) was born in Côtes-du-Nord in 1806. He went to the Coramandel Coast (India) in 1840. He moved to Madras in 1857 and died there in 1878.

One result was “*varying usages*” of cultural elements in the context of religion. Such practices were given the generic name of the “*Malabar Rites*”.³⁶

When Melchior arrived in Pondicherry (1842), the controversies of the previous two centuries had muted. Submission (on Oath) to the Decree of Pope Clement XII (1734) and to the tradition established in the Vicariate was required of all newcomers. With this, Melchior obediently complied. Gradually, however, when he saw the practical outcomes in daily life and in the life of the Church, he became uneasy... and began to ponder and to pray... “*As I said, my heart was on the side of the Indians, and it inclined me to give every possible benefit of doubt to their customs... but for now, I resolved purely and simply, to proceed according to what he (the Bishop) might give me, and follow the customs and regulations of the Mission exactly*”.³⁷

Meanwhile, joyous news came in February 1843. Bishop Bonnard informed Melchior that he was to go and serve in the mission district of Salem (a mission in the interior). News also had filtered through that Jean Luquet - his great friend and like-minded confrere, with

36 The “Malabar Catholics” at that time (1842) lived mostly on the West Coast of India. Among them are the *Saint Thomas Christians* (evangelised by the Apostle Thomas), the *Malankara Syrian Catholic Church* and the *Syro-Malabar Catholic Church*. Nowadays, all are autonomous, particular churches in full communion with the Pope and the world-wide Catholic Church. The Syro-Malabar Catholic church (which in recent years has become familiar to us in Ireland) has self-governance under the Code of Canons of the Eastern Church. The name has been used in official Vatican documents since the 19th century.

37 This official “*Coutumier*” gave details on all aspects of life - for the church (buildings, liturgies, administration of sacraments etc.) and for relationships with Indians and governments. Directions were clear as regards the “dress code” (official dress) for missionaries. “*A missionary leaving Pondicherry for the interior shall put off his black soutane and don a white habit, as something more fitting to Indian ideas than the European outfit. His new costume consists of ‘an angi’ (a sort of long gown) with a ‘salvei’ (a big scarf thrown over his shoulders)... A red biretta... Then, ‘papatchi’ (Indian sandals) for horseback - but ‘padakuradu’ (wooden shoes held on by a wooden or ivory big-toe-hold) for house or church. Also a long shoulder-high Malacca cane or staff which is compulsory when walking. A white belt or sash (light yellow would also do and would suit Indian taste quite well). This is the complete outfit for all dealings with Indians. One can wear a white French-style soutane for visits to Europeans in the interior*”. (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 182 - 183).

whom he was in regular correspondence since leaving Paris - had been assigned to India!

Salem

Melchior left Pondicherry early on 28th February 1843. The mode of transport for their luggage was by “bullock cart” - the poor man’s way of travelling. He was accompanied by Father Tribulot (his classmate) who would be with him for the journey... (Tribulot had been appointed to Coimbatore, a mission even further in the interior). A third “experienced” missionary (Father Jacques Roger) completed the caravan.³⁸ He was returning to his “mission station” which was on the way to Salem. The mode of travelling for the missionaries was by horse-back.³⁹

It was customary in this part of India for each missionary to have a “team” of three men - a “disciple”, a cook and a groom for the horse. Melchior was given as “a disciple” a student from the Minor Seminary named Marie Xavery. He was one of the few seminarians “*who showed any signs of a genuine vocation to the priesthood*”. Although of high caste, he seemed to be free of extreme prejudices. He was to prove most valuable to Melchior, as he was fluent in the Tamil language, strong and “*able to walk long distances*”. He would also provide assurance to Melchior in difficult situations. They arrived at their destination on 7th March, one week after leaving Pondicherry. The priest who was in charge of the mission district (Father Fricaud) was away visiting other towns and villages. He was reportedly “*extremely ill - but expected back shortly*”.

Immediately, Melchior was struck by the poverty of the Christians, the extreme shabbiness of the building that served as a church, and the “*decrepit*” state of the presbytery. A few Christians gathered to

38 Jacques Roger was born in the diocese of Bayeau in 1811. He went (as a missionary priest) to the Coramandel Coast in 1839 and died in 1857.

39 Just before leaving Pondicherry, Melchior had purchased “a little horse” for 21 rupees (50 francs) – “including bridle and saddle”! From his performance during the week-long trip, “all came to the conclusion that my little horse was definitely not worth a penny more than what was paid for him”. Melchior had named the horse “*vingt-et-un*” (21).

welcome him and all briefly prayed. The Christians sang the “*Salve Regina - in loud Tamil*” - and, having procured holy water, they happily dispersed. Some left a little food for them - bananas, areca nuts, sugar, bétel-leaves and two loaves of bread.⁴⁰ The leaders stayed on, and Melchior spoke a few words of encouragement to them through his disciple, Marie Xavery.

The young man, however, could see the look of tiredness, sadness, even dispiritedness, on the face and in the demeanour of Melchior, who recalls: “*My disciple tried to comfort me by assuring me that the church was the finest in the District*”! Melchior was to learn a lot in the Mission District of Salem - about missions and about himself.

The next day was busy. It began with the celebration of Mass. Christians had come “*from miles around*”. The Pariahs were separated by “*a little wall*” from the Malabaris (as in Pondicherry). Melchior remarked: “*To see the Indians at Mass only, you would think that they were all Saints*”! From what the elders had told him on the previous night, he was already aware that disputes and quarrels were widespread. The rest of that day was spent on receiving greetings from the Christians and in preparing to “*send off*” Father Tribulot to Coimbatore. Both felt lonely and a bit sad...

On the third day Melchior received many people. He heard confessions, administered “*Extreme Unction*” and tried to give counsel and advice. And it was at this point, that the young missionary learned his first major lesson. He was unable to communicate meaningfully in the local language i.e. Tamil.

After addressing another gathering a few weeks later, he wrote: “*I wanted to say a few words directly. But my eloquence was neither abundant nor touching. How cruel it is to feel your tongue tied like that! It must be that missionaries are still bearing a big part of the punishment meted out to the children of Noah at Babel*”.⁴¹ Melchior

40 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 222. “*There is bread in Salem, since the English have made it the official residence for a Collector or Provincial Head*” [of its government in the area].

41 *Ibidem.*.. page 247.

did add, however, that missionaries would have the “*merit*” of overcoming this added difficulty... But surely this was another big reason for a well-trained local clergy to communicate the joy of the Gospel. These “*sons of the soil*” would be assisted by well-trained Catechists.

Meanwhile, Melchior felt it necessary to speedily contact Father Fricaud ⁴² (his immediate Superior) who was responsible for the Mission District and from whom he expected to learn how “*to manage the Christians*” and deal with other matters. While it was clear that he was unwell, it was not sure when Father Fricaud would return to Salem. The Christians at Salem, however, were sure that his confrere was at Kovilur (a mission station about forty miles from Salem)⁴³.

So, very early on the next day, Melchior set out with his team for Kovilur. Two days later he arrived there after many difficulties, which included the illness from cholera of one of the “*carters*”, his disciple (Marie Xavery) suffering from fever, and an encounter with a member of the British Administration who had queries about his passport. He also mentions that he was feeling unwell himself... “*very ill*” (*fort souffrant*)... from stomach pains.

This was hardly surprising, given the number of days and mode of travel from Pondicherry to Salem, the change and unpredictability of their diet,⁴⁴ the stress, the disappointments and the anxiety. However, all of them improved and returned to “*cheerfulness*” on reaching Kovilur. Melchior looked forward to sitting with Father Fricaud and learning...

However, they found Father Fricaud to be “*really sick*” and anxious to get back to Salem, where he hoped to rest and receive treatment

42 Joseph Fricaud was born in the diocese of Nantes in 1802. As an ordained missionary priest, he was sent to the Coramandel Coast in 1836. He died in 1880.

43 Being in a British controlled area, distances were measured in *miles*. (1 mile equals 1.6 kilometres).

44 During the seven months at Pondicherry (A French Protectorate), Melchior had enjoyed French cuisine and wine (like all the other missionaries there).

from the resident English Doctor⁴⁵. He would also “*keep things going*” there - as “*the Salem visitation had already been done*”. Further, he asked Melchior to go on to Tirupatur (another two days journey) and stay with the Christians there up to Easter. “*He made out my itinerary for a few more villages after that*”, adds Melchior. So, after being together for five days, the “*curate’s*” caravan moved on to Tirupatur.

From this experience, Melchior learned more important lessons. On the physical level, though in the prime of life, he now knew not to take one’s health and well-being for granted, much less abuse it. On the cultural level, he saw that despite a huge amount of good-will, there would always be reticence and even suspicion of “*the stranger*”. Melchior felt this very much. Perhaps, he suffered also from “*culture shock*”... And then, for a person who gave great attention to detail, there was the challenge of coping with the unpredictability of “*mission life*”: the understaffing, under-resourcing, differences of personality and opinions as well as in planning (or lack of it!). All of this, however, helped Melchior towards a better understanding, both of the situation and of himself... to strengthen his resolve... to pray more earnestly... to refocus and to push ahead...

This first “*mission tour*” around the District was to last three months. It began at Tirupatur (as scheduled) where he celebrated Easter with the Christians. It was here that Melchior felt that his “*disciple*” (Marie Xavery) needed a friend and companion nearer his own age. So, after some discernment, he invited the son of a Catechist there to join his staff. All concerned happily agreed. Now, he had two pupils for the seminary! Before leaving Tirupatur, Melchior promised to return to celebrate Pentecost with them.

45 As regards the English doctors, Melchior writes: “*In general, English doctors deserve this testimonial: they behave with humanity - and even generosity... for they give their medicines free... (Besides this) our poverty would not be able to give even a decent present. What could we give, with our 18-20 rupees a month, to a doctor with a monthly salary of 2000 or over?!*” (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 235).

The little group travelled from one community to another. Our missionary celebrated Masses, baptized (mostly children), heard confessions and presided over marriages. There were many sick to be visited and consoled and funerals to be “celebrated”. With the help of Marie Xavery (who was becoming almost indispensable) Melchior mediated in disputes when invited. All of this time, he had a nagging pain in his stomach and bowels. He grew tired easily. He writes “*As you know, internal pains bring on sadness and melancholy... and I had great difficulty in shaking these off*”. Father Jacques Roger (who ministered at the edge of the District) kept in touch with him and sent medicines from time to time. Bishop Bonnard wrote to Melchior encouraging him and urging him to take care of his health. The letter was accompanied by 12 bottles of wine! Even the Procurator in Pondicherry, the oldest member on the mission, added his prescription.⁴⁶

These signs of concern served as a tonic. Melchior no longer felt alone and his health began to improve. This was greatly helped by a visit from Father Roger who at one point of Melchior’s “*pastoral tour*” was just one day’s journey away. Melchior was delighted to welcome him, describing him as “*a man with a clear, incisive mind and a heart of gold, who loved the Indians, not only in conscience but from his heart*”. He was even instructing a few young “*disciples*” whom he hoped would become priests some day or “*at least trained Catechists*”. He brought five of them along with him. With Melchior’s two, they had the nucleus of a Seminary!.⁴⁷

Both men enjoyed the cut and thrust of their discussions and their companionship for the next four days. Melchior poured out all the ideas which were close to heart and basic to his understanding of what a missionary priest is. It was encouraging to hear his

46 “*He urged me to listen to the ‘old staggers’, and advised me to take frequent baths, to dose myself with rhubarb, of which he sent me a packet...to eat highly spiced food and to take up smoking*”.

47 Father Roger and Father Leroux (the Rector of the Minor Seminary) had been consistent advocates for reform of the Seminary at Pondicherry.

confreere's full agreement as to the need for a local clergy, as well as to its theoretical basis. On his side, Father Roger was encouraged by the imminent arrival of Father Luquet to India, who would change things in this regard. Of that, Melchior had no doubt. He knew that Father Luquet's commitment to this was "*one hundred percent*".

Inevitably, the question of caste and how to deal with it featured in their discussions. On this matter, the more experienced Father Roger was more careful in his assessment. While agreeing that the system was completely unjust, the best way to approach the situation from the pastoral point of view was unclear. He felt that if any progress was to be made in South India to further Christianity, it was necessary for missionaries to observe caste customs, even if that meant missionaries living as *pariahs among pariahs!*

Melchior could see the point but wondered how all of that "*fitted in*" to the terms of the "*Oath*" which they had taken. Father Roger's solution was to interpret the oath "*as widely as possible*", but Melchior felt that he could not go as far as his friend in his own actual pastoral practice. Both agreed, however, that this was "*a matter of conscience*" for each person... and that the Holy See should "*review and update*" what was actually being allowed in the oath.

Improved physically and in much better spirits, Melchior continued his pastoral tour. There were moments of happiness when he saw how the people really enjoyed the visit of a priest - the deafening sound of music, the fireworks and the mock gladiator contests. How different from the rather "*cold*" Western form of Christianity that many missionaries were insisting upon, both inside and outside the church buildings. On the other hand, Melchior always felt uncomfortable and a sense of guilt when "*I walked down through the caste Christians and gave communion to the pariahs outside the door*". He knew that it was "*the established practice*" and that if he did otherwise, the result would be a riot and apostasy of all

the caste Christians. He prayed regularly and earnestly to God for forgiveness... In truth, the only place where he could feel at ease was in the all-pariah villages where there was no dividing wall, either spiritual or material...

Melchior had another happy memory in a village named Couvillor. On arrival there, he found many letters - the first he had for months from Pondicherry and France. One of these was from his father, which brought news of family and friends.⁴⁸ There was another world outside the mission District of Salem...

The big news however, was a letter from his friend Father Luquet. He had arrived in Pondicherry. Many had already recognised the brilliance, enthusiasm and "*forcefulness*" of this latest arrival on the Indian mission. Father Tesson (the Superior in Paris)⁴⁹ had written of Luquet's great service to the M.E.P. by publishing the "*History of the Society*" which had been "*favourably received*". Personally, he was very grateful for this. The shrewd Superior, however, foresaw the opposition which Luquet's rather blunt manner "*might annoy or even arouse*" in the senior missionaries. In fact, there were already some "*murmurings*" in Pondicherry...

In a letter to Father Melchior de Marion Brésillac specifically, Father Tesson wrote: "*I implore you to use your influence with Father Luquet to convince him of the absolute necessity of being patient and ready to compromise*"... In the same letter, Father Tesson advised

48 Gaston continued to advise his son (Melchior) on taking normal precautions. "*I beg you - don't be overconfident in your robust temperament and constitution. I won't say 'spare your strength' or 'be cautious' to the point of neglecting your obligations... But I will earnestly advise you not to let your zeal go as far as recklessness. Prudence is something we are commanded to have... not false, worldly prudence, ever on the look-out for its own advantage; but true prudence, the kind that knows what action is benefitting. It doesn't let obstacles block it; nor does it try to burst through them by presumptuous over-confidence. This virtue, which is commanded to us, cannot be attained by reasoning alone. It has to be asked for from the proper Authority...*" (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 197 -198).

49 Jean Tesson was born in the diocese of Bayeau in 1798. He went to the Malabar mission in 1827. He became Director of the Paris Seminary in 1833, and died in 1876. Having special responsibility for the "Indian missions", Father Tesson "*seemed to have a particular influence on Melchior de Marion Brésillac*". A study of their correspondence would appear to substantiate this view.

Melchior himself to be patient... “*I am in complete agreement with your ideas... but I say again and again ‘Patience’*. Your ideas will carry little weight until you have been two or three years on the missions. That time, at least, will be necessary, before you will be able to overcome the prejudice there always is in India against youngsters coming with their ‘new-fangled’ ideas from Europe”.⁵⁰

Melchior took note of this advice from his Superior, transcribing the following prayer for frequent use: “*Give us O Lord, the prudence which our confrere recommends... keep us from discouragement ‘under the Indian sun’*. Do not allow the ‘machine’ to break in our hands, through our inability to make it function...”

The Melchior de Marion Brésillac caravan celebrated the Feast of Pentecost in Kovilur. He had a bit of a mishap on his way back there when he fell off his horse (*vingt-et-un*). This resulted in Melchior being a bit bruised; but he was more hurt by the indignity of it all! The Pentecost ceremonies went off very well. Melchior noticed the joy of the Christians at having a priest with them. They were happy with the actual celebrations (which they carried out “*in their own way*”) and, for this year at least, they would not need to go “*on pilgrimage*” for a major feast.⁵¹

Melchior and his team then returned to Salem, where they remained for over two months, until the end of July 1843.

Shoots of Reform

Bishop Bonnand and his close advisors were well aware of a growing unease among the missionaries. Some of them (particularly the

50 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 287.

51 During the seven months “*Initiation*” period at Pondicherry, Melchior had researched and actually participated in these “religious feasts”, “processions” and “pilgrimages”. Many pages of his *Souvenirs* are filled with vivid descriptions of these events and with own his views. Basically, he recommended immediate efforts at what we now call “inculturation” - a contextualized Christianity which would take into account many of the deep-rooted and enhancing aspects of Indian culture. The practical experience which he had gained “*on the ground*” in the rural areas of the Salem Mission District reinforced his own commitment to this, and to resolving the variation in the interpretation among the missionaries (between severity and laxity) regarding the “*Malabar Rites*”.

younger group) were vociferous as regards the need for reform, while the older ones were either happy to leave things as they were or were openly against any reforms. The Bishop felt that reforming or reorganising the Seminary at Pondicherry would be a good place to start. At least, he thought that all could agree that there was a need to do that! Father Leroux (the Rector) saw it as a “*step in the right direction*”, as did Melchior, but his friend (Father Luquet) viewed it as “*mere temporising*”.⁵²

The project went ahead. The Seminary would become a “*Seminary-College*” where both clerical and lay students would be admitted, the curriculum would be reformed (including making provision for the teaching of French) and a few lay teachers would be employed. It was hoped that everything - including the refurbished buildings - would be ready by the beginning of the following year (1844).

As regards the value of education, Melchior had no doubts. Indeed, he was a lone voice at that time as an advocate for “*universal education*”. During the “*Initiation*” period in Pondicherry, he had spoken and written about it...

52 The two friends were in regular correspondence and discussed many topics. One of these was on the possible reform of M.E.P. and the value of becoming an “*International Society*”. Both of them had come to know and love the M.E.P - but this did not mean being “*blindly uncritical*”. Luquet wrote: “*In the Founders’ successors – past and present – I could see a general outlook so out of tune with the Founding Idea that it was inexplicable. I couldn’t get over it...A single admissions house for young missionaries in Paris was not enough. We must open wide our arms , make ourselves known in nations other than France – go to them, set up there, have a presence there – in order to call them in, to come and take part in the glorious struggles that the Lord is opening up before us*”... In the light of events which took place some fifteen years later, the reply of Melchior is significant... “*It seems to me that it was our Society’s failure - almost from the beginning - to agree among themselves to maintain the true traditions of our Founders. They mistook a historical accident for a fundamental principle. So they soon introduced a regulation that only Frenchmen could become members of the Society. No doubt that was the ‘de facto’ situation at the beginning, since they were depending on the support of the French government. But later on, all the nations of Christendom ought to have been invited to take part in this truly apostolic work. For our formula seems to have been incomparably better than what others had to offer for the missions. There would have been no need, when going international, to renounce any real or moral support from any government... Missionaries of each nation could enjoy the protection of their own government. And we could still maintain a ‘spiritual’ unity between the various national houses - thus preserving our founding principles*”. (Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac... pages 348 - 349).

*“Everything has its dangers. But is not illiteracy always more dangerous than education? One must, of course, beware of imprudently initiating Indians into such a type of European education as would open the door to falsehood and impiety, rather than wisdom and truth...while their caste system would prevent them from adopting, as a counterpoise, whatever is good in European customs... We have very good reason, then, to be careful with regard to our system of education... But we must give education, which in the order of Providence, is a natural preparation for the supernatural conversion of a people as a people”.*⁵³

Linked to Melchior de Marion Brésillac’s vision for the need for universal education was the place of women in Indian society. He had already experienced instances of how women, even of high caste, were being treated, simply because they were women. He wrote: *“Christianity has not yet acquired enough influence in this country to give women their proper rights and dignity - even to Christian women... Of course, we try to impress on husbands and children the basic respect they should have for wives and mothers. But women will not obtain their full social rights until society itself has been steeped in the purifying waters of truth... until public opinion has been really modified by the spirit of the Gospel”.* He cited Europe as an example of how *Christian education* had lifted up and maintained women in *“the proper respect which is due to them”*. However, he added that even in Europe, this is something which must never be taken for granted... *“If Faith ever disappears from the land, then women’s enslavement will recommence...”*⁵⁴

Meanwhile, Father Melchior was kept busy at Salem, taken up with the *“ordinary ministry”* of any Mission station. He also had more time to train and educate his little group of *“disciples”*. More and more, Marie Xavery impressed him... *“I was extremely pleased with him. Every day, I gave him a Latin class... and he had reached the stage of being able to read the Breviary... He had many good qualities ... great piety... intelligent... and what was more remarkable, he had*

53 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 194.

54 *Ibidem:* page 225.

learned to despise all the absurdities of the caste customs. Externally he continued to observe all the restrictions that we ourselves had to observe, in order not to offend the people, but without inward conviction...”.⁵⁵

Melchior had also begun to teach him philosophy. He reported all of this (and more) to the Bishop, and requested that, as Marie Xavery had always refused marriage proposals, he was a worthy candidate for *Tonsure*. As regards the other “*disciples*”, Melchior felt that some “*showed promise*”.

For Melchior, one thing was patently obvious. It has been well summarized as follows: “*With an Indian clergy of the calibre of Marie Xavery, what possibilities there were! They could speak the language (Tamil) perfectly... They would know which of the ancestral customs were really pagan rather than merely social. They would be able to lead the people gradually to break down the barriers of caste. Only these would ever be able to bring about a general movement of the people towards the faith*”.⁵⁶

Another unexpected sign of hope was the receipt of a *Circular* and *Questionnaire* from the Bishop’s office. Bishop Bonnard had sent out a brief one a year earlier which was “*rather light*” in content. Confined mostly to questions about Catechists, it had received a lukewarm response. Now, a more comprehensive one arrived - accompanied by an unexpected announcement. The Bishop, encouraged and perhaps slightly nervous, by what he saw as “*a changing situation*” had decided to call a “*Synod*” in Pondicherry.

The Synod would involve all the priests of the Vicariate, who would meet together to study the situation of the mission and make the necessary decisions. It would take place in mid-January 1844. This would leave adequate time to prepare properly. The *questionnaire* was simply to help the missionaries in their reflection. It touched on the training of catechists, catechumens, the “*conversion of*

55 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 266.

56 *For This Cause...* page 75.

the gentiles”,⁵⁷ (linked closely with the issue of local customs), identifying and developing vocations to the priesthood, the printing of books, feasts of obligation, how to ensure the baptism of dying children, the possibility of working in teams, clerical dress, the Decree of Benedict XIV etc. The missionaries were also asked to compile a list of how they conducted marriage ceremonies with both Christians and “*pagans*”, and to gather information on the “*poutou*” or marks which the Hindu put on their foreheads. It was also made clear that the priests were free to propose other issues which may not have been covered in the actual questionnaire.

Although Melchior’s views on some of these topics were well-known at this stage, he did not rush into print. He felt that, due to his limited experience in the mission, he would let others take “*centre stage*”. Of course, he would attend and participate in the Synod, where he “*would listen and benefit from the examples and discussion of my confreres... and if the opportunity arises, I will only try to insinuate my thoughts about the education of youth and work for the local clergy*”.⁵⁸

In the meantime, he would continue with his second “*pastoral tour*” of Salem Mission District. This would last over four months - until December 1843. He met up with his confrere (Father Fricaud) at Edapaddi who was still in bad health but was always helpful. Melchior preached as best he could, listened to disputes and ministered to individuals and to small groups, as well as to large communities (comprising several villages gathered together in a central church). He continued to admire the “*devotion of the people*” and the “*proverbial gentleness*” of the Indian character. He noted that this latter characteristic extended as far as the animals, which “*they never avoidably hurt, and hardly ever use for food...* [Thus] “*almost all kinds of animals are without shyness, fear or*

57 This was a phrase used – interchangeably - at that time for “*the pagans*”, “*the infidels*” or “*the heathens*”.

58 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 360.

anxiety, in any place where Indians are left to themselves".⁵⁹

"Our" missionary also admired the beauty of creation itself - the Caveri River (one of the biggest in India) and Nayambadi (a town close to it). This town was surrounded by high mountains - a "magnificent setting"! He visited a "small Christian community lost beyond the gorges - [which was known as] "tiger territory". All his team were, not surprisingly, "a bit frightened".

Melchior was very well received by the Christian community in Erode - a small city. The Christians there lived in the "parcherry" - a small quarter assigned to them, as they were all pariahs. And, on this pastoral tour, he met up more frequently with his fellow missionaries. The company and the inevitable discussions helped Melchior a lot, as he never liked being on his own for too long. He also managed to keep up with his correspondence.

At one point, Melchior diverted to Coimbatore to visit his friend and "class-mate", Father Tribulot. They embraced "like brothers". All the other confreres gave him a big welcome. The visit was timed for a great feast in Coimbatore, *The Feast of the Holy Rosary* (4th October at that time). It was a most "uplifting" experience. Melchior also noticed that the mission in general, and the church buildings in particular, seemed to be "more advanced" than in the Salem Mission District. It was here too that Melchior heard the news that Etienne Charbonnaux ⁶⁰ had been nominated as Coadjutor Bishop to Bishop Bonnand. As for Melchior's reaction,

59 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 204- 205.

60 Etienne Louis Charbonnaux was born in the Diocese of Rennes in 1806. He went to the "Indian missions" in 1830, and died in Bangalore in 1873. He was one of "the experienced" group of confreres ("les anciens" - "the elders") and was seen as a "conservative". He was ordained as Coadjutor Bishop of Pondicherry on 29th June 1845 (eighteen months later). The long delay was caused by political interference... The Governor thought that France would be impressed if he opposed or delayed it. He stated that everyone must wait for formal approval from the French government to carry out such a ceremony on French soil. The Bishop-elect could have been consecrated in any of the English part of the Vicariate (in which most of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction lay), but he was equally determined to wait. In his *Souvenirs* (page 470), Melchior wrote: "I am afraid that we are just playing into their hands by letting them establish this precedent".

he would “*wait and see*” how Father Charbonnaux would carry out his new ministry, as he did not know him very well...

On returning to Salem (10th December), Melchior found that Father Fricaud was already there. At last, they were able to spend some time together at the headquarters of the Mission District.

It was also an opportunity for Melchior to reflect on a letter which he had received from the Bishop. It appears that His Lordship had been informed about Melchior’s “*reluctance*” to reply to the questionnaire due to his short time in India and to his “*inexperience*”. The Bishop now “*insisted*” that Melchior should respond to the document as soon as possible... So, Melchior put some of his thoughts in writing for the Synod, hoping that they could help to foster “*dialogue*”.⁶¹

Melchior’s written submission can be summarized as follows:⁶²

1. As regards the “*conversion of gentiles*”, Melchior stated that this was one of the major reasons why he came to India. Now, after direct contact with the Indian situation, he had come to realize that this was closely related to the issue of *local clergy*. In his view, ministry to “*the pagans*” would become more and more effective in proportion to the increase in the numbers of indigenous evangelical workers. Certainly, as an interim measure, it was necessary that some confreres work in the mission posts. But others *could be released* to go and proclaim the Gospel, like Saint Francis Xavier, “*in all simplicity*”.

2. Melchior again repeated his view that missionaries should model

61 This “*reluctance*” was probably due to a session which he had with Bishop Bonnard before leaving Pondicherry. Melchior had for a considerable time been “*pulled by fears and hopes*”. Because of this, he decided to disclose all to his Bishop. He writes: “*I have just been trying to tell our venerable Bishop all I think and feel, about what is closest to my heart. But I didn’t get very far... I soon saw I wasn’t making myself understood ...*” He prays: “*Even if it pleases You to leave my ardent desires ineffective, may your holy will be done in all things anyway... Be that my cross, if you so wish it, O my God, the continuous cause of my pains and sacrifice*”. [*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 197].

62 cf. *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 337 - 388 for the complete text of Melchior’s submission to the Synod.

their lives and activities on that of the Apostles: *“I would like that our eyes are always fixed on the Apostles when exercising our apostolic ministry”*. He pointed out (as an example) that the Apostles had some lay Christians as associates in this missionary work *“so as to foster the people’s receptivity, and facilitate a deeper Christian commitment”*. This would be essential after the missionaries moved on... *“The only thing that can really save and revive our old communities is the conversion of numerous pagans”*.

3. As it was anticipated that the question of *“local clergy”* would be a particular focus of the Synod, Melchior confined his thoughts to finding suitable priestly vocations. *“I would say that in order to find those who are called by God, we should not only look in a corner of the Christian population, but within society as a whole... that is to say, in every caste without exception. Can we set boundaries to the Spirit of God? Should we take those we please, rejecting those who the Lord is calling? Let us not put up regulations and limits against the working of Grace. Let us make priests from all ranks”*. Melchior knew that this contribution would surely open up a much wider debate.

Melchior did not deal specifically with the changes already underway at the Minor Seminary. But he did address some of the practical matters involving education - such as curricula for schools, increasing the number of pupils, having well-prepared texts adapted to the Indian situation, schools for girls... He concluded: *“Truth will take root in the country by offering an open, solid, generous and broad education”*. There was so much more that Father Melchior de Marion Brésillac could have suggested for the Agenda of the Synod. But, that was sufficient for now...

Aware of his own shortcomings, weakness and failures, Melchior continued to pray: *“Lord, give us the grace to follow Your orders whatever they are. And if it is your pleasure to call me to You before I can see my dearest wishes on this earth to come to pass, may Your Will be done. Lord, I know You will raise up other men who, having more virtue than me, will have greater wisdom and zeal. And then, one day,*

it will exist, the completely native Church, or at least mainly native. I do hope for this in Your mercy O my God... Your mercy towards India".⁶³ Melchior continued to pray for the forthcoming Synod, confiding it to Mary (the Mother of God and of the Church) and asking her "to obtain the blessing of Heaven on this meeting, so that we may be enlightened and guided by the Spirit of Wisdom and Understanding".

It was now coming close to Christmas 1843. Father Fricaud asked Melchior to go to Kovilur to conduct the celebrations. As this town was on the way to Pondicherry, his Superior told him to continue on to the Synod in the New Year. All went well with the Christmas celebrations...

On 1st January 1884, Melchior briefly reviewed the previous year. "When I was leaving Paris for India, two things above all claimed my attention... the conversion of pagans and the work for a local clergy. But I did not see things half as clearly then. What was then only a vague idea has today become almost an absolute conviction. But what huge difficulties there are, then undreamt of, especially those difficulties coming from disunity and from the paralysing diversity of views among the apostolic workers. They are all seeking the good, the conversion of the country. Yes, but what disagreement about the right means! What debilitating disunity".⁶⁴

Then, with his team, Melchior began preparations for the departure to Pondicherry. Because the Synod was not due to begin until the middle of January, Melchior planned to travel to Pondicherry via Vellore, rather than take the direct route over the mountains. He proposed to spend some time with his friends Fathers Roger and Chevalier at Vellore. After this, they could all go together to Pondicherry for the Synod.

However, there was a change of plans. This was due to a rather strange letter from the Bishop which instructed him to travel by

63 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 320.

64 *Ibidem: ...* page 358.

the route through the Tiroupatter Mountains. Melchior knew that this route would take at least two days less than by going via Vellore... While it was a beautiful scenic route, Melchior also knew that very few “white” men used the mountain path. It was reported to be “infested” by bandits and had no clear “paths”. Further, accommodation was not guaranteed in the various villages. He was puzzled by this directive, but of course he would do as his Bishop requested.⁶⁵

A second incident occurred... One of his “disciples” left them - “unexpectedly and not on very good terms”. Melchior himself understood from his own experience at the Seminary in Carcassonne, that many things go on in the minds of “the youth” which are not immediately obvious to the older generation. Besides, the young man may also have been under pressure from “outside sources”. Melchior was disappointed; but he was not discouraged. On the other hand, for the confreres who felt that “the Indians” could not become priests, this was another “concrete example” to support their thesis.

It was also disappointing to receive at that time, a letter from Father Barran. He was a “very spiritual person, a good theologian who had put together a course on theology and scripture at the Seminary in Paris, and was one of the Directors of the M.E.P. - but he lacked mission experience... He had never been “on the missions”... [His knowledge of this important reality] “seemed to be confined to maps and geography books”. But more worryingly for Melchior however, was that the letter indicated a lack of unanimity at the highest level

65 “The real reason I learned later on... The Bishop feared that we were likely to be stubborn about native clergy and education...The Bishop ought to have known me better. While I will always retain the right to voice my opinion, I am always ready to yield to orders from a higher authority. I respect authority - even when I consider it to be mistaken - and I would never allow authority to be disrespected in my presence”. He ended this note by stating: “But his Lordship did not know me very well then; and I suppose my choice of language – sometimes not the wisest - gave him some legitimate cause for worry”. (Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac ... page 345).

of the Society on the question of “*local clergy*”.⁶⁶

On the 8th January 1844, Melchior left for Pondicherry. As he assumed that he would be returning immediately after the Synod, he brought the “*absolute minimum for the journey*”. The team accompanying him consisted of two “*disciples*”, the cook, the horse-minder and two “*coolies*” (i.e. unskilled labourers or porters). No one in the caravan knew the route very well. The trip was to prove “*eventful*” and another valuable learning experience for Melchior.

At the end of the first day, the little group could not find lodging in the pagan and Muslim village which they had reached. They were informed that outside the village, there was a “*little mosque*” which apparently accommodated travellers. But it was closed. Melchior continues: “*I sent for the village headman, saying that I was a European (which equals “Englishman”... At the mere sound of “English”, every local authority trembles and obeys) ... The headman arrives and is very eager to do all he can. He sends for the man with the key. Along comes a grave-looking Muslim, with a fine long white beard. He does a big “salaam”, but declares that it is impossible to let him (Melchior) into this sacred place, just recently purified in the preparation for an approaching feast*”.⁶⁷

The old man explained (through Marie Xavery) that if the “*doure*” (“*My Lord*”) were to enter the sacred place, all the purifications laid down by the Law would have to be done all over again; he had

66 Father Barran wrote: “*Now that you are ‘Asiatized’ over there, I hope that it will be for many a long year. Thus you will be able to follow some real progress in your time, and no doubt God will enable you to have some hand in it yourself. But allow me to tell you, dear confrere, that more than once you will have to check your Carcassonne impetuosity. You can’t rush things in Asia. So go easy. Clear the ground, (if necessary). Prune. Cultivate. Help to fruition. Wait for the right season always. Such is the ordinary communal work that the Master is expecting from you*”. The long letter continued with more advice to Melchior and concluded as follows: “*Just wait and see, dear confrere. Long after you are dead, and already a great Saint in heaven, things will be the same in India as regards native churches – almost at the exact point where you find them now. Patience then... And don’t put all your hopes and all your efforts exclusively into that aim (native clergy) - so difficult to attain*”. (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 315 - 317). Melchior replied with his usual courtesy and politeness, though he was irked by the reference to “*Carcassonne impetuosity*”.

67 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac ...* page 364.

neither the time nor the means to do this. Melchior had to accept the situation and though it was one hour after sunset, he decided to go on another ten miles to the next village. The headman, still anxious to please, provided two men to escort them with torches. They arrived in a state of “*extreme fatigue*”.

One result of this experience was that they were able to cover only four miles on the following day! Secondly, Melchior reflected: “*The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’...if only I could love Poverty as well as so many of the Saints did, inspired by these words*”. And thirdly, what was also made abundantly clear was how the power of the secular state, the caste system and stringent religious laws (mixed with local superstitions) kept people in subjection, and even in fear.

For other stages of the journey, Melchior and his group joined convoys which were escorted by armed “*peons*” (guards). This was necessary due to attacks by bandits, particularly in the narrow mountain passes and the desert region. They were informed that “*just recently, two men had died...victims of their ill-judged resistance to the bandits*”. At other times, the Melchior caravan cooked and rested under trees or in villages which offered varying degrees of welcome and accommodation.

There was one experience of this trip, however, which affected Melchior personally and which stayed in his mind. It happened at “*one big village*” where there appeared to be no “*savady*” i.e. accommodation facilities. Melchior sent Marie Xavery to “*spy out the situation*” and see if he could find some place for the group to stay the night. The “*disciple*” returned, accompanied by several *Brahmins*.⁶⁸ They had decided to check things out for themselves. Apparently, this village was “*very*” noble... Many Brahmins lived there.

68 A Brahmin is a member of the highest caste in Hinduism. From this caste are drawn Hindu priests, who are responsible for teaching and maintaining the sacred knowledge and practices of their religion.

The Brahmins quickly reached a conclusion. *“As I was visibly and obviously a European... I could not be allowed into the village. My “disciple” and my people – apart from the horse-minder – could enter and sleep under the outside veranda of some Malabari house. But I myself was far too suspect... Marie-Xavery deployed all his eloquence to prove that I was not like other Europeans... I had no pariah house-servants, never eat beef etc.”*⁶⁹

The Leader thought for a while and then relented. Melchior could use a little cow-stable. This was a mere shed of straw sloping from a wall and held up by three or four poles, and with a floor of big stones and cow-dung.⁷⁰ The European could go to the stable to sleep, but he must not pass through the street of the Brahmins. He must go around by the back alleys.

Melchior candidly admits that *“the basic pride in me - still remaining in my fallen nature - found this behaviour very insulting. But they had no intention at all to humiliate me or wound me. They merely wanted to avoid being downgraded themselves, and maybe being expelled from their caste. But obviously, God did not intend to leave my remaining roots of pride to go unpunished”*.⁷¹ He spent a very restless night. He thought of the Feast of Christmas which they had so recently celebrated... the stable so like where he now was... with an atmosphere filled with love. Instead, Melchior says: *“I went there with reluctance and disgust... So it was only right that You*

69 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac ...* page 366.

70 The cow is a sacred animal for the majority of the Hindu community in India. During festivals and celebrations, the cow is decorated and honoured (“worshipped”). *“In ancient Hindu texts, the cow appears as ‘Kamdhenu’ or the divine cow, which fulfils all desires. Its horns symbolize the gods, its four legs the ancient Hindu scriptures or the ‘Vedas’, and its udder the four objectives of life – including material wealth, desire, righteousness and salvation”* (www.dw.com 17th December 2018).

To this day, cows can wander unmolested through streets choking with traffic. A majority of States still forbid the slaughter of cows. It has also been reported that *“a right-wing Hindu organisation has launched a line in cosmetics - using cow urine and dung”*. (bbc.com/news/world/asia.india 15th October 2015). Melchior simply notes in 1844: *“The excreta of a cow are so pure... that cow-dung is the principal cure (and soap) for all legal defilements. Nobody considers it as dirt; your hands will be perfectly clean on holding it. It is left lying there in the cleanest rooms”*. (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac... page 366*).

71 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac ...* pages 366 - 367.

(Lord) *should leave me to face it alone... and later on that night, when I tried to re-awaken a better attitude, it was too late. Jesus wasn't there anymore. I had to stay there all night, all alone*".⁷²

And so, Melchior's "*Salem experience*" came to an end "*for the time being*" (as he thought). He prayed - and asked others to pray for him... "*I must not give an account to Him for all my faults in this awesome ministry. He knows that I look for nothing but His love. If I made mistakes, I was only trying to work for His glory. This is my consolation and what keeps my soul at peace in spite of the countless shortcomings of my nature*".⁷³

The Melchior de Marion Brésillac caravan arrived in Pondicherry on 13th January 1884.

Nineteen of Melchior's confreres had already arrived. He immediately became aware that Father Luquet had been very much involved, with Bishop Bonnand, in all the preparations which had been underway for some time. In just six months, he had gained the admiration and trust of the Bishop and many of his senior advisors. It was good to see his friend again!

There was a general air of expectation that "*something important*" was about to happen. "*Everyone seems happy and they are certainly well disposed*".

72 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac ...* page 367.

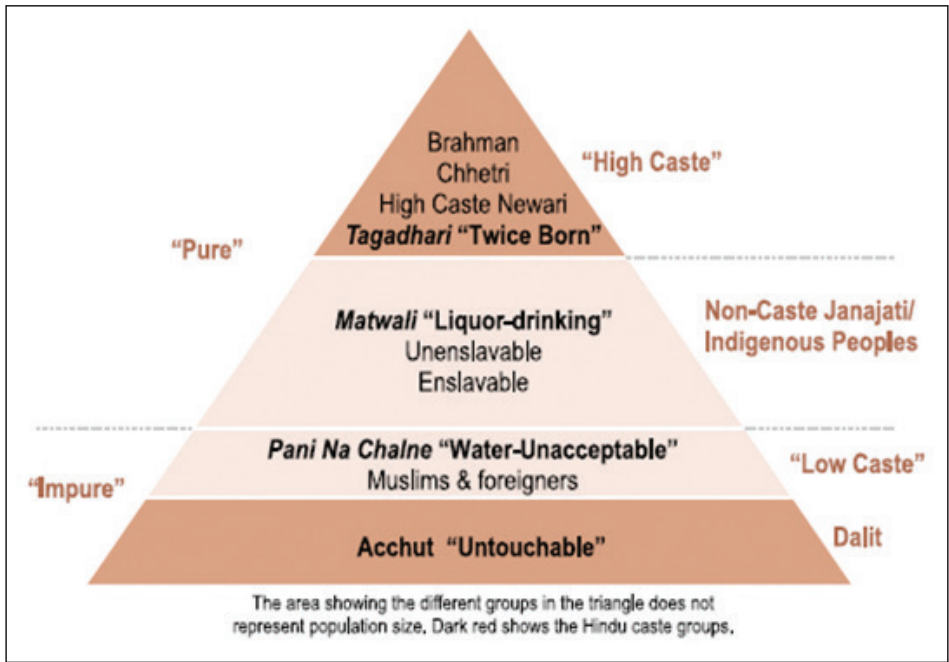
73 *Ibidem*: page 291.



2.1 Pondicherry Cathedral



2.3 Bullock Cart, similar to which De Brésillac travelled on.



2.2 Caste system divisions



2.7 River Cavery Basket



2.4 Rice Fields, South India



2.5 Nilgiri Hills



2.6 River Cavery

Chapter Four

A “New Approach” to Mission in Southern India?

The First Synod of Pondicherry (1844)

Though scheduled to take place on the 15th, the Synod did not formally open until 18th January 1844. The Bishop wished to allow a little more time for some “late-comers” to arrive. However, the two days would not be wasted. They were given over to “*necessary preparations*”. Several sessions were held to formalize procedures, to organize groups for discussions, to discuss voting rights and on the “*authority*” to be given to the findings of the Synod. On this last point, it was agreed that “*they will mainly be directive (but) not binding under mortal sin*”.

The official opening of the Synod took place on 18th January 1844, with a Solemn Mass of the Holy Spirit. A large crowd of the faithful were present. “*All the priests were assembled in the Sanctuary and received Communion from His Lordship.... Prayers from the ‘Pontificale’ were chanted... Recollection was perfect... All seemed deeply aware that, without the help of the Holy Spirit, we can achieve nothing...*”

An Introductory speech was given by Bishop Bonnard at the first session. He thanked all for making such sacrifices to be present... noting that “*nothing but very important reasons could leave so many large Districts without priests for such a long time - or persuaded himself to agree to it!* He urged all to “*make full use of this historic opportunity*”... and noted that “*those who come after us will look at the Acts of the Synod for guidelines... They are all closely concerned and are lifting up their hands in prayer for our success*”. He then urged all of us “*to maintain good order and recollection during the whole period of the Synod*”.

At the end of his speech, Bishop Bonnard outlined the main

themes on the Synod's Agenda: (1) *Formation of the Local Clergy*; (2) *Pastoral Care of Christians*; (3) *Conversion of the Gentiles*. Certainly, this Agenda was broad enough to cover all issues that could arise!

There were 24 of the 25 M.E.P. missionaries present. The three Indian diocesan priests were also in attendance and an *Invitee*: Father *Bertrand* S.J. (the Jesuit Superior). He had requested that he be allowed to follow the proceedings of the Synod. After some hesitation and having consulted his advisors, Bishop Bonnard had agreed.

Father Bertrand was given the right to speak on all the issues, but to vote only on those issues “*that concerned his own mission and to which he made a commitment to getting observed there*”.⁷⁴

It was expected that Fathers Jean Luquet, Melchior de Marion Brésillac and the Coadjutor Bishop-elect Etienne Charbonnaux would play a prominent part in the Synod. While the others did not disappoint, Melchior took little part in the debates at the Plenary sessions, as he had previously decided. However, at the end of each day, he wrote down in detail what had happened and added his own observations ⁷⁵.

During the opening two days, the Synod discussed the topic of “education” (in small groups and at Plenary Session). Despite some chaos (a few talking at the same time and refuting each other - including the Bishop), all three groups were in favour of “*educating*”

74 The Jesuits had been working in Southern India since the time of *Francis Xavier* (1506 -1552). The Society had been suppressed by Pope Clement XIV in 1773 (as has been well documented elsewhere). It was Pope Pius VII who “*undid*” the suppression in 1814 (forty-one years later). From 1834 onwards, Jesuits came again from different parts of the world to work in India “*restoring the old and inaugurating the new*”. The Society returned in 1837 to their old mission at Madurai in South India (just seven years before this Synod began). At this time, they were nominally under the jurisdiction of Bishop Bonnard who was “*Vicar Apostolic of all Southern India*”. The M.E.P and Jesuits disagreed on many policy issues, particularly on the value of catechists *vis-a-vis* local clergy.

75 *Note*: All the quotations concerning the Synod - unless otherwise stated - are taken from the *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* In the English edition, this comes to forty pages (371 - 411). It certainly makes interesting reading.

the youth". Bishop-elect Charbonnaux surprised many by making a very strong intervention in favour, noting that education is a "*mighty means of enlightening the nations*", and that "*now more than ever, we must consider the education of youth to be an essential part of our vocation*". Bishop Bonnard looked "*a bit startled*" at the "*sweeping statement*" of his Coadjutor-elect, as his own objective on this matter was for the Synod to concentrate on "*tidying-up*" the situation at the Minor Seminary-College.

After further discussion on what "*levels of education*" should be made available to Indians, it was agreed that complete instruction, including higher education, should be offered. A vote was taken. The motion was carried by "*a huge majority*". A principle had been agreed. Melchior felt encouraged... and he foresaw that this topic would arise again later on during the Synod before a final vote would be taken.

Bishop Bonnard then moved discussion to the situation of the Seminary-College. Many delegates commended the efforts of Father Leroux and approved of the "*reforms*" which he had been steadfastly carrying out since July 1843 (just six months earlier) and particularly since lay students had been admitted for the first time. All agreed (in the small groups) that further re-organization was required. They made many suggestions for further improvement in the curriculum, including a new study programme in four languages (Latin, Tamil, French and English) and "*some elements*" of history, geography, arithmetic, astronomy and physics. There was also need to enlarge the building.

Melchior felt that they got "*a bit bogged down*" in minutiae and "*boring detail*" concerning supervision, spiritual exercises etc. (elements that only educators and the prevailing circumstances would allow). It was also getting late on this the second day of the Assembly. But one last thing... Some delegates requested that there should be a *Major Seminary* for students studying theology in the future... Was all this a real move towards a "*local clergy*"?

On the following morning, “*several hours went uselessly by*” in discussions about “*whether another missionary should be appointed to the Seminary...and should there also be a Malabari priest...*” One group went so far as to name him: Father Lazare.⁷⁶ Bishop Bonnard became visibly upset by this, as did a few confreres. His Lordship indicated that he was giving the delegates every right to indicate the number and qualifications of staff, but that the actual choice remained his prerogative. The group admitted their mistake and apologised. They amended their proposal to read: “*Two missionaries and one Malabari priest*”.⁷⁷

The afternoon Plenary Session was much more orderly and dignified. “*Everyone could express himself without being interrupted or shouted down*”. The highlights were two important speeches, one by Bishop-elect Charbonnaux and the other by Father Luquet.

The Bishop-elect followed up on what he had previously said about “*education in general*” with a passionate plea to set up an Institution which would have every chance of success. Hence two missionaries (at least) would be required. A Malabari priest would also be needed to supervise the students, as “*foreigners can never know the language sufficiently well to be able to follow the countless expressions, hints and gestures by which the young people interact*”. Others stated that the only way to win the confidence of the parents was to appoint “*an impressive staff*”.

Father Luquet began his speech by quoting complimentary messages from Rome to the M.E.P., including one from Pope Gregory XVI who was then “*gloriously reigning*”. He went on: “*We will continue to deserve such praise if we maintain the original spirit of our Congregation, which is - above all - to form a Native Clergy on the Missions wherever there is a notable number of Christians. And*

76 He had been ordained by Bishop Bonnard in 1837.

77 Melchior remarks: “*His Lordship was (naturally) very reluctant to accept these figures. How could he allow three priests in the Seminary when there were so many communities without a priest?*”

how can we form a worthy clergy without a proper educational base”?

Luquet then proceeded to trace the early years of M.E.P. He noted that the shortage of missionaries was probably a lot worse during those years than it was in their own day. *“But we were still in our first fervour for the wishes of the Holy See... In Siam (for example), we established a College with five missionaries in it, and a Seminary with three other confreres - fulltime”!*

It was now time to take a final vote. However, just before it took place, Bishop-elect Charbonnaux wished to make a clarification. The proposal (as formulated) did not prevent the College priests from *“helping out”* in Pondicherry and its environs, especially when numbers in the College were small or when waiting for new missionaries to arrive. Melchior noted that *“this last-minute intervention diminished the objections of several members”*.

The proposal was passed: **For: 21. Against: 2.**

There was relief and joy on the faces of many confreres... *“Even the Bishop gamely smiled... but we too saw that he desires to take all possible measures in order to advance the Seminary-College”*. His main worry was where to find the personnel for the number of demands being made, not only to fill vacancies throughout the Diocese, but for the increasing number of positions being created by this Synod!

Afterwards, it was decided without taking up a lot of time, that the *College-Seminary* would continue to be located in Pondicherry itself, that the number of boarders could be increased, that buildings may be extended as required and that pagans could be admitted - *but not as boarders*. In general, Melchior was pleased with the results *“which will not be lost, I hope, for the glory of our good Master”*.

Early next day, Bishop Bonnand assembled all the delegates to hear the draft of *“A Joint Letter”* from the Synod to the M.E.P. Directors

in Paris, urging them to send out more men. Everyone supported the draft - and signed it.

The next Plenary Session did not take place until three days later. The theme of the discussions, which was carried out in the small groups, was on “*who*” are to be recruited *first of all to the College*. As it had been decided to admit all boys, it was noted that many young “*pagan*” boys got married very young. So, if the Synod barred them because they were married, many of the “*pagans*” would not benefit educationally. Nevertheless, “*the disadvantages in admitting ‘married’ pagan boys were so great that it lost by a big majority*”.

Next attention turned to who are to be recruited to *the Seminary*. Melchior had a particular interest in this topic.⁷⁸ An indicative vote among the groups agreed that “*Each missionary was urged to seek out young boys who might be showing signs of a vocation. He should take some time with them, testing them as “disciples” before sending them on to the Seminary*”.

Melchior felt that the “*some time*” suggested should be quite short as “*the missionary will be far too busy to keep an eye on him*”. He stated that it would be more beneficial both for the student and the missionary if a type of “*stage*”⁷⁹ was arranged much later on in the formation process. The young man would be more mature, have a better understanding of the Gospel teachings, and be a real help to the missionary with problem cases which inevitably arise in pastoral work.⁸⁰

The question then arose at what age the candidate should receive Tonsure and Minor Orders. This was left to the discretion of the

78 Apart from its importance for the future of the Church, it was one of the three items that he had proposed for the Agenda in the earlier consultation process.

79 “*Stage*” (French) refers to a “*period of training*”. In this context, it would involve a fixed length of time with an experienced person, to enable the young man to gain practical experience and to implement some of the theory which he had already acquired.

80 One can see here the lessons which Melchior had learned through his experience with his own “*disciple*” Marie-Xavery, whom he had once described as “*a model ecclesiastical student*”.

Seminary directors, with the final decision resting with the Bishop.

And now a very important question arose. *“From what castes can a missionary take “disciples” to be later sent on to the Seminary?”* After a prolonged and (for some) an agonising discussion, it was unanimously decided that *“for the moment anyway, only the upper castes (those who, in civil life, can eat together) may be taken. Only these can be admitted into the Seminary or even as College boarders”*.

As regards the *“day-boys”*, it was agreed that *“we can admit everyone except the pariahs and other despised castes, barred from Malabari houses.”*

The missionaries took no pleasure in this decision - but, *“for the moment, it was evidently impossible to act otherwise”*.⁸¹

Up to this point, the three Malabari priests had been excused from participating in these particular discussions *“due to the sensitive nature of the topic”*. It was felt that they could feel embarrassed. However, this did not seem to bother them! What did annoy them was being *“kept outside”* while the most junior missionaries were given precedence before them!

Meantime, other serious issues had arisen. The Pondicherry Christians began to see these long *“Meetings”* as strange. The missionaries must be up to something against Caste and its customs! Otherwise, why maintain all the apparent mystery and secrecy? It seems that some confreres added fuel to their fears by *“thoughtless remarks”* outside the Synod.

Further, from the missions in the interior came the news

81 Melchior wrote: *“Must we not hope and pray that a day will come when we can admit pariahs - even to the priesthood? Isn't it a disgrace that we have to choose the future clergy from only among the upper castes, thus excluding more than three-quarters of the Christian population, which is small enough already in this country! Several confreres expressed their reluctance in going along with this blatant discrimination, and their determination to see it changed at the first available opportunity...”* In regard to the *“half-castes”*, the same confreres observed that *“we could not even consider admitting them (to anything)... but added that “we would try to establish schools for them later, when our resources permitted”*.

that some *Goa*⁸² dissidents were moving around the mission districts, spreading the rumour that “the missionaries” were gone permanently. But they were not to worry... The dissidents assured them that the Archbishop of Goa would send them his own priests!

The immediate effect of all of this was to upset the equilibrium of the confreres and the workings of the Synod itself. Being a bit anxious, the missionaries wanted to “*get things done*” quickly, without giving the necessary time to prayer, thought, analysis and implications of any decisions being taken at this Synod. These decisions would affect the well-being, not only of the Christians, but of their own ministry and *the “future of evangelization”* in that part of the Lord’s vineyard which had been entrusted to them.

Nonetheless, several important decisions were taken in the ensuing few days. After all the previous discussions, it was no surprise when

82 In his *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* Melchior refers to the “*Goan schism*” on thirty-six different occasions. It would take us too far from our immediate topic to deal in detail with this “schism”. However, the following summary may be of help. The roots of the Schism are to be found in the Concordat signed with Portugal, by Pope Leo X, in 1514. The Portugese had come to India and conquered vast areas – not only politically, militarily and in trading – but also in the work of evangelisation. From 1500 onwards, missionaries of different Orders (for example, Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans, Augustinians) had come with them, preaching and building churches. To come to India, they had to get the approval of the Holy See, the King of Portugal and, of course, their own religious Superiors. Missionary work met with great success, especially along the West Coast, in Goa and in Mylapore and Madura (Madurai) in the South-East. However, discipline was loose, caste practices generously adopted or ignored and local clergy ill-prepared for ministry. Portugese power began to fade in 17th century – resulting in a decline in missionaries and in the growth of other colonial powers. “Propaganda Fide” (founded in 1622) began to send missionaries from other countries and to nominate Vicars Apostolic throughout India. The result was suspicion, friction, anger and even violence between the “faithful” of both groups and non-cooperation between “their” clergy. The 1834 Revolution in Portugal and the subsequent severance of Diplomatic relations with the Vatican resulted in the Declaration “*Multa Praeclare*” (Gregory XV 1838). This withdrew ecclesiastical authority from several jurisdictions and assigned them to nearby Vicars Apostolic appointed by the Holy See. This also implied restricting the jurisdiction of the Archdiocese of Goa to *actual* Portugese territory. Hence, “*Multa Praeclare*” was totally rejected by the Goan side who pointed out that, as stated in the original Document (1514), the consent of the King of Portugal was necessary in several matters, including his right (in perpetuity) to nominate Bishops. Resistance and suspicion was at its height during Melchior de Marion Brésillac’s time in India. (cf. Ernest Hull: *Archdiocese of Goa*, in Catholic Encyclopedia: New York. Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved from [NewAdvent:http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06602a/htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06602a/htm). (cf. also: *For this Cause...* pages 118 - 120).

the delegates voted in favour of *village schools*. The missionaries were asked to study the matter further in the context of “*their own*” mission areas, and to get something done!

Melchior continues: “*Then we asked: “Isn’t it time we did something for girls’ education? It’s a big problem.... In India, a lady should not be seen reading, sewing or doing anything other than pound rice, cook, and polish floors with cow-dung”*. However, it was also pointed out that the Christian women were recently becoming “*a bit less allergic to books... A few of our Malabari women can read perfectly...*” Another confrere noted that a Congregation of Religious Sisters was running schools for “*the whites*” within Pondicherry itself. Perhaps they could be invited to “*extend their zeal*” into the mission districts? A final decision was reached. “*It would be better not to risk shocking and displeasing the Christians by publishing too loud that we want to teach their daughters reading, writing and handicrafts. Little by little, we can get them used to the idea... Later on, we will see...*” Melchior was hugely disappointed with the decision.

The agreement reached concerning the *Printing* of religious and educational materials was much more positive. Father Dupuis was already working in this apostolate and had prepared a huge Dictionary in *Tamil-French-English-Latin* which he hoped would be useful, not only to a “*reformed*” Seminary but to the general Indian public. He was encouraged to print it “*later on*”. The urgent need now was for standard text-books and smaller, cheaper Dictionaries. It was also necessary to print a “*Tamil Bible – beginning with the New Testament*”. All of this was essential to assure good Christian formation and quality education. A second missionary would be assigned to help Father Dupuis.⁸³

On the following days (27th - 30th January), the confreres discussed the distribution of personnel in all the mission districts. On this topic, the missionaries had plenty to say, or rather to complain

83 Louis Savinien Dupuis was born in the Diocese of Sens in 1806. He left for the “Indian Missions” in 1831. He died in Pondicherry in 1874.

about. There were not enough of them to look after the Christian communities! Many instances of the pressures in just trying “to keep up” with the demands of pastoral work were cited. Help was urgently needed!

As regards the proposal to release a few missionaries to work “directly” for the conversion of “the heathens”, only a few were in favour. In the light of the previous discussions on distribution of personnel in the Districts, perhaps one can see why. Melchior, however, was very disappointed with the apparent lack of interest and the quality of the discussion. He also felt that not enough time had been given for proper analysis and debate.

A huge number of *Pastoral* issues were then addressed ... *Baptism* (both infant and adult) taking into account certain articles of the *Bull of Benedict XIV* on the issue... *The Ritual... Indulgences... how to celebrate First Communions... sick calls... Baptism and Marriage registers... Stipends... the reduction of liturgical feasts and so on*. After long debates and “vague exhortations”, several aspects were referred to Rome for guidance. It was also very clear to Melchior that “a tiredness” or *strain* had set in among the confreres. This was hardly surprising “after marathons on trivia and sprints over important issues”.

The period from 1st to 6th February (the projected date of the closure of the Synod meetings) was marked by a type of “frenzy”. Melchior lists fourteen issues. Some of these were “extremely serious, on which the whole future of the church in the area could depend.” He states that all of these grave and complicated questions, many of them very practical and special to India, were rushed through “in a few hours” without even going through the accepted practice of being discussed in the small groups.

Melchior lamented that when it came to “pagan customs peculiar to their missions”, the Synod’s authority could have been great. In his view, after the votes on the Seminary and Education, these

matters should have been the principal business of the Synod. *“Unfortunately, the final result was that there were many difficult questions left unresolved, and many huge divergences of opinion among the missionaries”*. Melchior strongly felt that this inconclusive result would have serious repercussions for the Church in the future.⁸⁴

Nonetheless, time was found to have a debate on *“clerical dress”*.⁸⁵ It generated a lot of heat, as well as *“eating into”* the remaining available time. The outcome was again inconclusive: *“Each missionary must try to see what is best for his own District and decide accordingly on his own costume, with the advice and authorisation of the Vicar Apostolic”*.

A detailed report on the financial situation of the Pondicherry Vicariate was provided. It was described by the Procurator as being *“somewhat precarious”*, especially now in the light of all the costly recommendations.

The Centre for *Catechumens* and *Catechists* (which had been projected as being *“extremely important”* and the reason for the first questionnaire) got only a *half-session* on the final evening, instead of a three or a four day discussion. The time was *“limited just to voting for the future existence of a Centre, leaving it up to the Superiors to find the right ways and means for recruiting good Catechists and to decide when to start laying the foundations...”*

All of the unresolved questions were referred to a *Commission* for further study and recommendations. There is no record that such a Commission was ever established. All the priests signed the *“final document”* of the Synod.

Melchior then concludes: *“We finally broke up, in candle-light, having fixed the start of the Retreat for after Evening Prayer to-morrow. May the Lord confirm with His grace whatever good has been started and founded during the Synod... Amen”*.

84 It would also cause major difficulties for Melchior himself.

85 For a brief description of the *“official dress”* for the missionaries, cf. page 22 (above).

One could see why Melchior and his friend Father Luquet (who had waited with such hope for a new and positive direction for the Church) were far from happy with the outcome. A biographer gives the following assessment of the Synod:

*“In later years, turning over the pages of his journal, de Brésillac experienced again the same sadness that had filled his heart, as the Synod drew to a close and it was clear to him that it was going to fail in the very purpose for which it had been convened... It should have ushered in a new period of reform and expansion, brought a new greenness to the fields; but in the end it did not... and despite the triumphs of the first days, the Synod of Pondicherry would be remembered as one of the missed opportunities of his Society and of the Church”.*⁸⁶

A New Missionary Challenge for Melchior de Marion Brésillac?

On the evening of 3rd February (just three days before the end of the Synod sessions), Bishop Bonnand unexpectedly sent for Melchior. The Bishop told Melchior that, after due consultation with his advisors, he was appointing him as Superior of the *Seminary-College*. The Institution was to re-open for the new academic year on 15th February - just two weeks later. Hence, the appointment was to become effective immediately. Melchior records that he was *“astonished and a bit frightened”* at this news. And, as was the case in all decisions which Melchior made, he asked for time to pray and to reflect.

He could see the positives in taking the job... After all, he had been a consistent and a *“vociferous”* advocate for *education* and for a *local clergy*. He was also fully aware of the Synod resolutions on these matters and was genuinely pleased at the progress made. In addition, he had some teaching experience from his time at the Minor Seminary in Carcassonne... But, he still felt very inexperienced in India. He was just one and a half years in the country and had a poor grasp of the Tamil language. The Bishop

86 *For This Cause...* page 80.

listened and agreed to give him a “*little time*”. Melchior used the time to pray, reflect and put into writing his views and reservations. A few days later, he passed on a long letter to Bishop Bonnard.

He began by empathizing with His Lordship on “*the difficulties in trying to reconcile the wishes of the Synod with the needs of the Districts*”. He then goes on: “*As regards my difficulty in taking on the job... in no way is it due to lack of interest in the Seminary-College - that vital work - or any reluctance to help directly in making it produce all the good we can get from it. I say more: it is the very desire I have, of one day being employed in education, that makes me ask your Lordship not to put me in charge - not immediately. That ardent wish of mine, which goes against any natural instinct for pastoral work, stems from my unswerving dedication to the cause of Native Clergy... But the very ardour of my desire to participate in this great work is what makes me pause, lest I start by proving a hindrance rather than a help to it... and lest I render myself thereafter unfit for the job. For I feel a great attraction to it - an attraction which I like to think is a real grace from God... That is why I am strongly opposed to taking charge immediately. The success of such an institution depends very much on the Superior. If he is a Superior in name only, or if he is ‘not up to the mark’, he will soon see the establishment he should be supporting, crumble like a house of cards*”.⁸⁷

Melchior went on to emphasise that any new Superior of the Seminary-College should be “*a real Superior with all the powers and functions of a Superior*”. Melchior was well aware of the control which the “*senior missionaries*” in Pondicherry had over Father Leroux and previous Superiors. He saw the Superior of the Seminary-College as being in charge “*just like any confrere is in charge in his District*”.

Towards the end of the letter, he made a final request for *at least six months* in order to prepare properly before taking up the proposed appointment. He really needed to learn the Tamil language really well in order to communicate, not only with the students, but also

87 cf. *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 404 - 407 for the entire contents of this letter.

with the parents. He would dedicate himself to study and become proficient in Tamil... In fact, he knew an excellent teacher whom he would pay himself.

Melchior also felt that it was important that he return to Salem, in order to deal with some problems which had arisen there and to support Father Fricaud. All had heard about the state of the District from him at the Synod. At the time of writing this letter, Melchior was not even sure that the health of the District Superior would allow him to return to Salem... Surely, it was possible for His Lordship and his Council to come up with some arrangements or permutations that could take all factors into account? Such would allow himself (Melchior) to have a period of preparation there for the Seminary, support Father Fricaud and enable him *“to maintain the authority and influence he needs to continue the good work he has been doing in that part of India”*. Melchior concluded his letter by requesting Bishop Bonnard to present all the considerations which he had outlined to his Councillors, and ended with a prayer: *“Whatever is decided, God grant that I may never be occupied except in accordance with His Holy Will... In the hands of Mary, I place these three sheets of explanation... After frankly saying it all to Your Lordship, there is nothing else for me to do but to leave myself entirely in the hands of Divine Providence which, I trust, will not let me become an obstacle to the great hopes that the future is promising us all”*.⁸⁸

Bishop Bonnard got back very quickly to Melchior... He had not changed his mind... *“He wanted me at the Seminary immediately”*... He also gave many assurances to Melchior that he would have *“full support”* ... and that he would have *“a free hand”* in the running of the Seminary. There was nothing more to be said...

The school year opened on schedule (15th February) with Father Melchior de Marion Brésillac as the new Superior.

88 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 407.

Chapter Five

Life at the Seminary-College

Melchior began his new ministry with energy and in a positive mood. This was further enhanced by the appointment of Father Leroux as his Vice Superior. Experienced and committed to the same ideals as Melchior (as well as being very good friends), Father Leroux did not seem to mind the “demotion” from his previous position as Superior. A third priest, Father Lazare, was appointed as Director of Students. As an Indian with a fluent knowledge of the Tamil language and “*the ways of the Indian youth*”, Father Lazare was also a welcome member of the team. Apart from these priest-colleagues, three Malabari lay teachers were appointed. One would teach Scripture and the other two French. A fourth came in two or three times a week for “*Advanced Tamil*”. As regards students, eighty-nine had applied by the end of the month. This was a huge contrast to just one year earlier. The vast majority of the applicants were “*Day Pupils*”.

As regards the Seminary as such, several “*disciples*” of Melchior’s good friend Father Roger were admitted. Melchior noted that “*they were already fairly advanced in their studies... and they gave real signs of a clerical vocation... unlike some already in residence*”. Marie-Xavery (Melchior’s own “*disciple*”) also joined the new “*community*”. The Seminary students received special classes in Latin and Logic from Melchior himself.

Printing was already underway on a Tamil-Latin and Tamil-French grammar. Lessons were introduced for *all* in the Seminary-College in French, English, Arithmetic, History, Geography, and (when Melchior got equipment) Physics. “*We had to get along with whatever hand-written books we could manage to obtain*”. Melchior introduced “*new systems*” of grading compositions, gave marks for

good conduct as well as “*other little means to arouse the spirit of emulation*”.⁸⁹

These (and other innovations) got the students interested and motivated, and went down well with parents and other observers. They could already see that this “*new-style college*” was intent in giving a solid and well-rounded education to the boys. The clergy also began to realize that this new Superior was committed to implementing all the relevant decisions taken at the recent Synod. Melchior himself was encouraged by the progress and was fully confident about the capabilities of the students.⁹⁰ Soon, Melchior began to reflect on how to take “*even a small step*” to free the seminarians from the shackles of the caste system. “*Although a faithful observer of castes, my intention was to gradually pass over some delicate observances with regard to the seminarians, without going directly against caste... We would be considered as pariahs*”⁹¹ but this would not be the case as far as the ecclesiastical students are concerned. *In this sense, we needed to seize the opportunity - though with a lot of prudence... And maybe I haven't always exercised that virtue, although it was a frequent subject for my meditations*”.⁹² Melchior was well aware that he was being watched closely, as the Christians in particular were afraid that he would take action against caste structures.

The opportunity arose when, during a “*seminary outing*”, the Superior decided to have a meal together with the seminarians.

89 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 415.

90 In a letter to Father Tesson (M.E.P. Director in Paris) which is dated March 1844 and is kept in M.E.P. files in Paris, Melchior wrote: “*No one can say that we can't do anything with the Malabari people... Let them give me what I need, and I commit myself to setting up a Malabar school as brilliant as any distinguished school in France; and from it we will see emerge local priests who will know more than just being able to read the Breviary*” (*De Marion Brésillac...* pages 178 - 179).

91 Missionaries were considered as being “half-pariahs”. Melchior was well aware of this status after his recent experience on the journey from Salem to Pondicherry. But he also knew that “disciples” in the mission districts had no problem in eating while missionaries were present.

92 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 423.

This was forbidden ... someone from a lower caste could not, when eating, even look at another Indian from even the slightest degree higher, much less a pariah. Melchior just quietly said to the students: “*You are my disciples; you are my children... so why can't we eat together?*”? The students remained silent; but their Superior could see that they were pleased and “*even delighted*”. He too was happy... This was “*a bit of progress - a foundation stone*” towards having a “*real*” seminary.

On the other hand, reaction from outside the Seminary was entirely different. The Pondicherry Christians were shocked at the innovation! This could not only affect the seminarians involved but the whole caste concerned! In “*insulting*” one person, one was insulting the whole caste to which he belonged. Further, that individual would have to make “*honourable reparation*” to his caste for the injury done to it.

Melchior and Father Leroux were left “*to sit out*” this crisis. Gradually, the parents and the Christians became less vocal. The students went on with their daily activities. The first “*crisis*” of the new administration subsided. Melchior noted: “*They did not dare make an issue out of this affair... but they must have added another bad mark against my name*”. There were no *immediate* consequences.

During these early months in the Seminary-College, there were times when Melchior became quite discouraged. The Procurator of the Vicariate was not forthcoming with the necessary funds, even for the completion of the building project initiated before he had come as Superior. The “*senior missionaries*” (including Bishop-elect Charbonnaux, who had spoken so eloquently at the Synod) began to express reservations about the Seminary-College project and how it was being administered. Regrettably, what Melchior had written to Bishop Bonnard before his appointment concerning “*outside interference*” was becoming a reality.

However, in all of these “*dark moments*”, Father Luquet was a

constant source of encouragement to Melchior. With a few other mutual friends, he urged Melchior to continue and to persevere. They knew that if Melchior were to give up, the whole project was in danger of being abandoned. Father Leroux (the Vice-Superior) was also a source of strength and support. Melchior reflected ... agonised... prayed...

On the question of *caste* and on his own little effort with the seminarians, his mind went back to Matteo Ricci in China and Robert de Nobili right there in Southern India. They had made some progress in adapting and incorporating some customs to Christianity. He also recalled the various authoritative statements of successive Popes on *caste customs* (which of these could be retained and which were clearly superstitious). And yet, there was no clarity... Further, the recent Synod had done very little to throw light on this burning issue... So, what was he to do?

Melchior knew that the seminarians were intellectually capable. But could they imbibe the character-training necessary for priests who would minister to Indians of different castes and of no caste? This should be possible. Further, if during their Seminary training, the students could be liberated from their caste taboos and customs, then, as priests, they could gradually wean the people away from them. The missionaries had their place in the work of evangelisation, but the long-term future of Christianity in India lay in having their own priests.

And so, Melchior resolved to push ahead and try to have Indian priests in large numbers. He would fight all obstacles "*even at the risk of being broken*". In doing this, he knew that he would have rendered a service to the Church in India. The fruits, however, would become apparent sometime in the future.

Then, Melchior began to draw up plans for the construction of a separate *Major Seminary* which he would submit to the Bishop's office later on.

Tonsure

The next challenge to emerge was that of the Tonsure. As an internal church matter, this should have been easy to resolve. For a long time, Bishop Bonnand had been promising to confer “Tonsure” on Marie-Xavery whose dedication and behaviour had continued to be exemplary. The Superior also considered one of Father Roger’s “*disciples*” to be ready for admission to the clerical state, but the young man did not come forward. He felt that he was not yet ready to make such a commitment.

Melchior was well aware that when an Indian received the Tonsure, he was given a “special status” which, thankfully, had nothing to do with caste. It was a “*Seminary*” or “*Christian*” custom which had been allowed to grow over the years. The tonsured cleric would immediately receive the same honours and “deference” as a priest. For example, Marie-Xavery would no longer be allowed to associate with other students on the same level as before. He would also get a special place in the refectory and would receive “*better*” food. Housework was out of the question and, rather surprisingly, he would no longer “*serve at the altar*” (this was left to “*the students*”). The Superior saw this first conferring of Tonsure as an opportunity to introduce “*a new spirit*” into seminary formation. For Melchior, the established practices associated with the conferring of Tonsure had nothing to do with local customs or caste. It had even less to do with basic Christian virtues, such as reaching out to others or serving with humility. He saw it as an attempt to create a *Christian caste system*! Melchior was fortunate that it was his own “*disciple*” who was the cleric in question. The young man was willing to relinquish all privileges immediately.

Melchior decided that it would be “*more prudent*” to take a gradual approach. Marie-Xavery would be permitted to receive certain marks of honour, but he would be encouraged to forgo others as time went on. The young cleric took this advice.

The whole incident may seem trivial but, for Melchior, it was another “*little step forward*” towards creating the spirit which he considered necessary for any Seminary. Others did not share his view. The Indian priests (including Father Lazare) were very annoyed - as were the lay teachers. The “*older missionaries*” were unimpressed. The Christians saw it as another sign of the attempts “*to destroy their customs and caste system*”. The students themselves saw this innovation as the beginning of the end of the old order - the established system - the only one they knew. They became less open and remained sullen. Melchior could see all this and he knew that it would take very little to cause outright unrest.

The Pineapple Incident

An occasion arose for a celebratory meal. Melchior suggested to Father Leroux that they would join the students as they had done previously. He agreed. After all on that occasion, the objections had not come from the students... Now, they responded enthusiastically and began to prepare and decorate the dining area. They were pleased that their priests would come again to eat with them. There was just one outsider present, a Catechist, who afterwards widely publicised “*the ghastly crime*” which the Superior committed.⁹³

Melchior describes what happened. “*What was the crime? A pineapple... At the end of the meal, they brought a pineapple for Father Leroux and me... The students didn't get any. I thought that it would be nice to give them some too*”. Melchior cut it into slices and put these on to a plate. He then told one of the students to pass the plate round to his companions. Soon, he realized that he had made a big mistake... “*I had taken the pineapple in my hands – my semi-pariah hands. I had divided it with a knife – unclean because it had been used at our table. Then I had put the slices on to a European plate... who knows what hands had been touching it in the past? Clearly, it ought to have been smashed long ago – or at least given away to the pariahs!*” Melchior immediately saw that something

93 cf. *Souvenirs : Marion Brésillac...* pages 433 - 436 for a full account of this incident.

was wrong... In the eyes of all present, the Superior had committed successive “*crimes*”. It mattered little that he had done so without malice, or that he was unaware that his actions might be offensive or against caste.

At once, all the laughter and talking ceased... The students looked sullen and the whole atmosphere grew gloomy. Each of them took a slice of the pineapple - with evident disgust. Melchior immediately noted the change but he continued to cut slices and to pass them round. The older students had by now signalled to all “*not to touch it*”. The result was that only one or two put a slice to his lips. The rest were taking measures to hide or to squash it.

The students could see that their Superior was angry and offended, even though he actually said nothing. On his part, he tried to appear unconcerned and even cheerful. Looking back on the incident later, Melchior wrote: “*In seeing their embarrassment, I ought to have stopped distributing the slices and made a joke about my abysmal ignorance of their complicated caste customs... and then told them to lay aside the offending slice of pineapple... They would have laughed and eaten it anyway*”! But, he remained tight-lipped and, when he was ready and without any rush, the Superior brought the rest of that eventful evening to an end.

The fall-out from this incident was swift and severe. Some of the senior students (who had already been at loggerheads with the new Administration) were happy that now, at last, they had a “*real issue*” to finish off all of these “*innovations*” that were being introduced. Their one concern was to get the news out as quickly as possible. In doing this, they were greatly assisted by the Catechist who had been present at the meal. Melchior noted: “*Very soon, they had turned the mole-hill into an ever-swelling mountain. The most absurd - and contradictory - rumours began to fly around outside. The most frightful plots and designs were attributed to me*”.⁹⁴ The outcome to this incident was significant. It can be summarized as follows:

94 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 435.

- (a) Some students left the Seminary altogether. Others became day pupils.
- (b) The three Indian priests were scandalized. They were now convinced that the ultimate aim of this “*new-type*” Seminary was to “*pariah-lize*” the future clergy. Even Father Lazare, the priest on the Seminary staff whose good qualities Melchior had always recognised, forgot everything when he felt that his caste was being questioned or diminished in any way. He even supported the suspected student ring-leaders.
- (c) Some parents and members of the Christian community were upset and angry. They believed many of the lies and exaggerated stories which were being circulated. The more “*sensible*” ones, however, gradually calmed things down by stating that there was no “*deliberate*” insult. Clearly, they did not want to make an all-out public issue of the incident. Besides, they recognised that the College was going well and the progress in their children’s education was evident for all to see. They did not wish to close down the entire College.

The Superior’s attitude during the crisis period could be described as one of “*quiet determination*”. He went about his daily tasks with his usual thoroughness and equanimity. “*By the grace of God, I managed to keep cool. I never even mentioned the affair, either to the students or to the Christians. When some of the seminarians left, or became day-boys only, I just let them go, without showing either disappointment or satisfaction. Interiorly, indeed, I was glad to see them go, rather than sad. For, when you are trying to start something new, it is a lot better to have new materials to work with. I even edged out a few others myself, especially one student whom I thought the most dangerous of all, but on another issue.*”⁹⁵

95 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 436.

Gradually, peace returned to the house... and to the establishment of a “*new normal*”. Marie-Xavery did “*Trojan*” work in establishing the spirit of cooperation which began to take hold... The Christians came to realize that the Leadership of the institution had the welfare of the students at heart, and were not out to “*attack*” their customs... The Bishop and the confreres in Pondicherry could not but be impressed when they attended the mid-term (oral) examinations... And the authority of the Superior was established, at least among the Christians. Of course, some problems did arise during the rest of the year. The most bizarre of these being an incident of what appeared to be “*poaching*” of students by Father Bertrand S.J. (the Jesuit Superior). Apparently, these students had volunteered to “*go with*” the Jesuits.⁹⁶

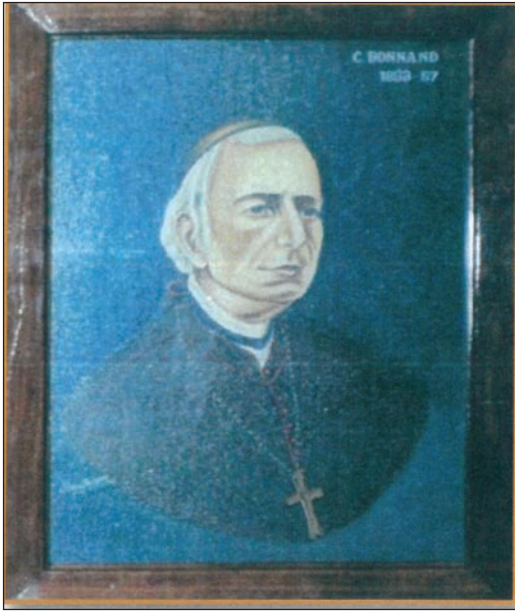
At the end of the school-year, the Superior decided to have a *Prize-giving Day*. Melchior invited all the prominent Indians and Europeans in Pondicherry - including the Governor (in full dress uniform), the President of the Court, the Councillors, the clergy, and of course, the parents and families of the students. He gave a long, detailed and eloquent speech in which he emphasised the abilities of Indian students, the kind of education being offered at the Seminary-College (with its methods and religious foundation) and the obstacles to “*this new work*”. He thanked the audience for their financial support, noting that much more would be required to fulfil all their hopes to ensure the common good of the entire population of Pondicherry and beyond. With the cooperation of all, the dream would come true. “*What dream? To see all the peoples of the Earth, under the sun of Justice and Truth, forming only one great society of friends and of brethren!*”

The students then proudly came forward to receive their awards for their “*assiduous study and good conduct*” throughout the year, and were encouraged “*to persevere in the path of knowledge and of virtue*”.⁹⁷

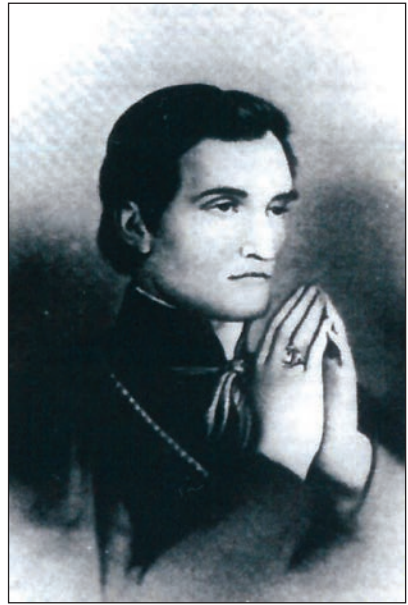
96 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 436 - 439.

97 cf. *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 478 - 490 for the entire speech.

The *Prize-giving Day* made a big impression. Congratulations flowed in to the Superior and his staff from all sides. The Europeans asked Bishop Bonnard to “*take over*” their Royal College in Pondicherry. The Bishops of Calcutta and Madras sent their congratulations, as did some of the M.E.P. Directors. Most of Melchior’s confreres were pleased, especially Fathers Luquet and Leroux. His friend (Father Roger) was “*ecstatic*”, especially as some of his “disciples” had received prizes. The only exception was the Bishop-elect Charbonnaux. He gave no indication of his feelings... However, his previous actions and some of his correspondence had shown a growing hostility towards the entire project. In summing up the year (1844), Melchior asked God for forgiveness for his mistakes, thanked Him for the progress made, as well as for the crosses and joys received... “*All for your glory, O Lord, and for my own salvation*”.



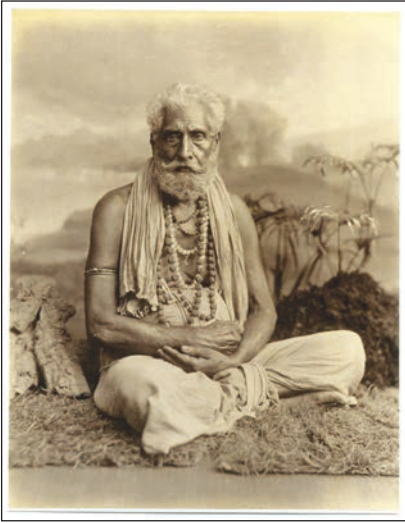
3.1 Bishop Bonnard



3.2 Father Luquet



3.5 A Mission School for boys in India.



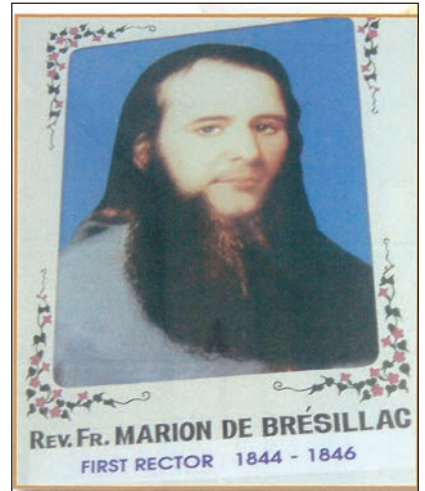
3.4 A Hindu Priest



3.6 Picture of Seminary-College



3.7 Young Indian tonsured



3.8 Fr De Brésillac: in Pondicherry College - Seminary (First Rector)

Chapter Six

Storm Clouds over the Church in South India

While Melchior was engrossed in Seminary affairs during 1844, there were other major occurrences taking place in the Pondicherry Vicariate and beyond. Within weeks of the completion of the Synod, Bishop Bonnard asked Father Luquet to draw up a Report on that event. The Bishop knew that to achieve any long-lasting results, the authorities in Rome would have to give their approval. On this point, Father Luquet and Melchior were in complete agreement with the Bishop.

With his usual skill and zeal, Father Luquet began to draft the Report. During March and half of the month of April, Father Luquet kept the Bishop informed about the structure of his report and of some further submissions which he had received from the confreres. Bishop Bonnard had requested them to send in written submissions “*as soon as possible*” on the issues discussed at the Synod before mid-April.⁹⁸ Father Luquet situated these in the wider context of the Church in South India. The Draft Report was duly completed before an “*Extended Council Meeting*” which the Bishop had scheduled for 18th - 19th April. All the missionaries present in Pondicherry were invited, while those outside that area could still make their concerns known to him or through a confrere who would be at the meeting.

Meanwhile, some “*religious orders*” outside the Vicariate of Pondicherry were becoming anxious about the contents of this proposed Report for Rome. For example, the Jesuits (whose Superior was at the Synod as an “*invitee*”) were worried, not only about *policy* issues but about *jurisdiction*.⁹⁹

On the question of policy differences, Melchior summarizes his

98 Father Luquet was, at this time, resident in Cuddalore. This town is about 25 kilometres from Pondicherry.

99 Melchior refers to the Jesuits in his “*Souvenirs*” over ninety times.

personal position as follows: “*The Jesuits are labouring to hinder the implementation of the Synod among us with a great number of regrettable acts... His Excellency (Bishop Bonnand) is greatly upset... This bothered me also, but since then, it does not surprise me anymore, and I do not quite dare to blame them. Because, after all, opinions about individuals are unimportant when the work is what matters. They have one system and we have another. It is true that I am deeply convinced that ours is the wisest - and that it is certainly closer to the many decrees from the Holy See*”.¹⁰⁰

As regards the question of *jurisdiction*, this was something that had been discussed for over a decade and had been receiving the “*active consideration*” of the Holy See for a long time.¹⁰¹ This was hardly surprising - as it involved arrangements for the entire Catholic Church in Southern India, with all its “*religious orders*” and “*rites*” - as well as taking into account a volatile political situation. There was also the reality of “*political patronage*”- with its negative consequences.¹⁰² These factors (among others) made action by the Holy See urgent.

Another group (besides the Jesuits) who were particularly interested in this question of jurisdiction were “*the Irish*” of Madras. This had become an important city in South India and its “*mission area*” was

100 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 424.

101 Cardinal Fransoni (Prefect of “*Propaganda Fide*”) had written to the Vicars Apostolic of Calcutta, Pondicherry, Madras, Verapoly and Bombay in 1840 - reminding them to send “concrete proposals” for the reorganisation of the Indian Missions. (cf. *De Marion Brésillac...* page 193).

102 In this context, Melchior was referring particularly to *Padorado*. This was an arrangement between the Holy See and the Kingdom of Portugal (later the Republic of Portugal), whereby the Vatican delegated the administration of local churches to the Portugal authorities, in return for some “*theocratic privileges*”. It was confirmed by a *Concordat* - signed by Pope Leo X in 1514. In effect, the Portugese authorities ordered the construction of churches and nominated church leaders - including Bishops. This was a reward for the State’s zeal in propagating the faith. The result was a mixing of religious and political dimensions - with the almost inevitable consequences of secular politics taking over from genuine religious concerns. While this Concordat, which affected India, China, Brazil and Singapore, has been modified over the centuries, the last vestiges were not suppressed until the Second Vatican Council (1965). For example, until this Council, it was the Head of the Portugese State who bestowed the Cardinal’s red biretta on the Patriarch of Lisbon.

right next to the Pondicherry Vicariate. The Bishop since 1841 was John Fennelly.¹⁰³ During his time in Salem, Melchior had noticed on the road from Salem to Coimbatore “*one of the finest churches in the District*”. This had been built for the Irish soldiers by the “*English government*”.¹⁰⁴ He was also well aware that “*the Irish were much better in with the English government than we [French] are - even though the vast majority of our missions are in English territory*”.

It must also be added that Bishop Fennelly knew that there would be further ecclesiastical divisions in South India and he was well aware of the possible implications. Melchior writes: “*Their pretext was that chaplains from their nation were urgently needed in the English garrison towns in the Pondicherry Vicariate... Already the situation was annoying enough: our confreres doing duty as army chaplains could obtain their salaries from the government only through the Vicar Apostolic of Madras, for he is the only Catholic Bishop that the English government will recognise. [And then] to crown it all. The behaviour of the Archbishop of Goa is giving us reason to fear that the schismatics are planning something really bad... This was the final threat that forced Bonnand to take action*”.¹⁰⁵

The “*Extended Council Meeting*” went well, even though some of the missionaries from outside Pondicherry complained that they had not been given enough time to come in person or to even prepare submissions. Father Luquet presented a “*schema*” or an outline of a text which was well received. After debate, amendments were

103 Melchior mentions Bishop Fennelly fourteen times and “*the Irish*” (“*les Irlandais*”) twenty-eight times in his “*Souvenirs*”. Historians have noted that prior to *Catholic Emancipation* in Ireland (1829), priests had to be educated *outside* Ireland due to two centuries of Penal Laws. However, a new interest had been growing in “*foreign missions*” at the end of the 18th century - due to Irish priests working abroad. They went to these “*overseas missions*” as individuals - not in a structured manner. Initially, they concentrated on ministering to the Irish Diaspora. Among Seminaries which sprung to train students for the “*secular*” priesthood - for Ireland and for the “*foreign missions*” - was Saint Patrick’s College, Maynooth (1795). It was there that John Fennelly studied, was ordained a priest and came to India as part of the “*Maynooth Mission to Madras*” in 1839. He was nominated Bishop of Madras in 1841 at the age of 36.

104 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac*... page 322.

105 *Ibidem*: pages 429 - 430.

made and a text was approved. Father Luquet was then given one week to present a final text to the Bishop and his Council for approval. He was also unanimously elected to go to Rome, on behalf of the Vicar Apostolic, to present and explain the *Acta*¹⁰⁶ of the Synod.

The final text was submitted to Bishop Bonnand and his Council on 29th April. Given the accelerated need for clarification on the *question of jurisdiction*, the Bishop and his Council decided to forward a plan which, as Melchior summarizes, was an all-out attempt “*to get the Holy See’s approval for the Synod Acts and a division of the Vicariates without delay... and to resist, charitably but decidedly, the Jesuits’ intrusion which had already taken the best of his Excellency’s jurisdiction, and was working to seize the Kingdom of Thanjavur, while at the same time trying to set foot in Pondicherry itself (not to mention Tranquebar and Karikal) under the pretext of founding schools*”.¹⁰⁷

Father Luquet left Madras by steam-boat on 21st May 1884. Melchior prayed: “*May the angels accompany him and may Mary protect him... And you apostles of India - glorious St Thomas, illustrious Xavier - watch over his undertaking and make it redound to the greater glory of God*”. Not long afterwards, the Jesuits sent a representative to Rome to “*safeguard their own interests*”. Their delegate was Father Bertrand S.J., the Superior of the “Madura Mission”, an area to the south of Pondicherry which included the city of Madurai.

Meanwhile, the Bishop had to grapple with another challenge. This time it came from the city of Pondicherry itself, and from the Christians. The construction of a magnificent church at *Nellitope* (just outside the city) was almost complete. The “*normal*” dividing wall between the central nave and pariah’s side-isle had not yet been put up. The Bishop had decided to use “*railings*” instead of

106 The “*Acta*” (Latin) are the decisions which were formally promulgated at the Synod.

107 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 426.

the wall, thinking that this would look “*less obscene*”. The locals, however, would have none of this. They wanted a “*proper*” wall, just like the Church in Pondicherry itself. So, without consultation, they went ahead and constructed one. On hearing this, Bishop Bonnard had it knocked down immediately.

The Christians were enraged. They vowed never to set foot in a church until “*their wall*” was put back. They began to implement that threat by absenting themselves *en masse* from the church, and by forbidding all others to attend. A group of Christians from Pondicherry itself supported them.¹⁰⁸ Secret meetings were held, more threats issued (including that of Schism) and scurrilous letters written to Rome, which contained a long list of complaints against the “*missionaries*”. The situation became so serious that full-blown rioting was about to take place. Sealed instructions were sent out by caste leaders regarding the time and place for action.

The Bishop decided “*to give in*”. He felt that he had no other option in the face of imminent violence. In an effort to save face, a compromise was reached. The Bishop had to agree to a “*small foundation wall*”, on top of which could be placed “*a grille*”.

On reflecting on some of the implications of this incident, Melchior writes: “*Obviously, the rebels had won. I felt sad about it and fearful what it boded for the future... [But] Having once allowed the original Christians here to keep their various castes, we just have to continue. To try to ‘confuse the castes’ would be a recipe for mass apostasy. At the very least, it would alienate them so badly that they would all keep well away from us... [Further] as many new missionaries are coming out to join us, it is becoming more and more difficult to get them to keep to the “correct” observance of caste rules... some of them find it morally repugnant to keep to the narrow line worked out by their predecessors... others just find it a continual bore and a painful*

108 It must be said that not all of the Pondicherry Christians agreed with those of *Nellitope*. While sympathizing with them, they pointed out that they had been offered “*a grille*” which would fulfil Caste regulations. They also reminded them that their church was being built almost entirely at Mission expense.

constraint”.¹⁰⁹

Nonetheless, Melchior felt that the Bishop should not have conceded “*under threat*”, as this could jeopardise the future. Perhaps greater efforts could have been made to defuse the situation and to sort things out gradually in a calmer atmosphere. By now, Melchior was a strong believer in the “*principle of gradualness*”. He prayed: “*God grant that this ‘peace’ may not do more harm than good*”.

As the eventful year (1844) drew to a close, both sad and good news reached Melchior at the Seminary. Firstly, his “*really good friend*” and class-mate (Father Tribulot) had died in his Coimbatore mission. Though he never enjoyed good health, Father Tribulot had passed away from cholera on 1st November. It seems that there was a cholera epidemic in the area.

As a result, there was not even someone “*to throw holy water on his body*”. In a lengthy tribute, Melchior recalls various aspects of the life and personality of Father Tribulot: “*his continual cooperation with Grace in little things (the making of a great Saint)... the regularity of his life... the scrupulous fidelity to every ‘little devotion’... his obedience to the least order of his Superiors... calmness in the worst of times... always interiorly recollected... always punctual in his duties... seeing every event as Providential*”.¹¹⁰

Though he was above average intelligence, Melchior knew that Father Tribulot could be very stubborn in holding on to his views on important issues. This resulted in regular “differences of opinion” with the Christians on both the theory and practice of Christianity.. He regularly communicated with his Mission Superior on these issues. All of this, however, caused him anxiety and much personal pain, and was a heavy cross for him to carry. But now, he was at peace.... Melchior prayed: “*How inscrutable are Your ways, O Lord. Do not be offended, O my God, at the pain*

109 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 441 - 445. In these pages, there is a full description and reflections on this incident: the so-called “*Nellitope Crisis*”.

110 cf. *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 461 - 464 for the full text of this warm tribute to Father Tribulot.

and sorrow in my heart... Young missionary, are you gone so soon?... so quick to receive the crown of your sacrifices and your many virtues? For I cannot doubt that this dear friend of mine has quickly entered the heavenly Kingdom“.

The good news related to his friend Father Luquet. During his trip to Rome, he had kept Melchior informed, expressing enthusiastically his commitment to “*local clergy*” and to a truly indigenous church. On arrival in Rome (July 1844), he immediately set about working with officials of the *Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples* (“*Propaganda Fide*”). They were immediately impressed by his ability, his grasp of the issues in South India and his clear commitment to the missionary “*Cause*”. On his part, Father Luquet informed Melchior that the opinion of members of the “*Sacred Congregation*” on indigenous clergy was “*most favourable - as it has always been*”. Further, he had “*high hopes*” that the *Acta* of the Pondicherry Synod would soon be approved.

Bishop Bonnard was kept fully informed of the process in Rome and of Father Luquet’s role in it. Others were also... For example, the M.E.P. Superiors in Paris, though initially wary, stated that Father Luquet was “*the right person to deal with the affairs of our missions in Rome*”. They were happy with such a brilliant confrere. They even began to think of him as a future Superior of the Institute. He would be the ideal person to succeed the revered but aging Father Langlois.¹¹¹ Meanwhile Father Luquet continued to work diligently in Rome. He provided a lot of background social, political and theological information concerning the issues involved, as well as quoting decisions taken by various Popes over the years.

The ecclesiastical divisions and the upgrading of Vicariates into Dioceses were proving particularly difficult. The M.E.P. Superiors were completely opposed, as it would diminish their authority “*on the missions*”. Bishop Bonnard was still pushing for “*proper*

111 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 499 - 500.

Dioceses”.. This view was gaining ground among other Vicars Apostolic.... “*Just recently, His Lordship the Vicar Apostolic of Madras (not of our Society) had written to Bishop Bonnard: ‘To increase the number of Vicariates Apostolic would strike a mortal blow at the Schism. To make them into Dioceses would finish it; anybody can see that’...*”¹¹² Obviously, there would need to be some compromise by all the concerned parties on this issue. And then, when all negotiations on the issues were completed, a document would have to be prepared for a future meeting of Cardinals. The key man in doing most of the preparatory work for this document was Father Luquet.

Within a few weeks, Father Luquet drafted a text. He then presented it as a “*Memoire*” to the Secretary of “*Propaganda Fide*”. In accordance with “*usual*” procedure, the Secretary would then prepare an “*Agenda*” for a “*Meeting of Cardinals*” which would follow soon afterwards. The “*Agenda*” usually took the form of “*questions to be addressed*”. It was the prerogative of the Secretary to include some or all of the supporting documentation.¹¹³

And so, the school vacation came to an end. Melchior wrote his customary annual review. There were reasons for regret... “*By nature I have a horror of all contentions and strife. But I also find it impossible to act against my convictions...*” He prayed: “*O my God, when will you give me the grace to put up with psychological hurts, so much harder for nature to take than bodily pain*”.¹¹⁴ But there were also some signs of hope for the future... and for these, Melchior gave heartfelt thanks to God.

112 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 494. The Bishop referred to here was Bishop Fennelly. His colleague Patrick Joseph Carew (Bishop of Calcutta) who had been Coadjutor in Madras (1838) held a similar view.

113 Some months later, Melchior saw the “*Memoire*” and “the questions to be addressed”. There were fourteen questions. (cf. *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 528 - 529).

114 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 491 - 492.

Chapter Seven

A Truly Remarkable Year (1845)

The Superior, the staff and the students began the Academic Year at the Seminary-College in a positive frame of mind. Together, they would build on the “*good work*” of the previous year. Both in the classrooms - and with learning in general - the spirit of cooperation grew.

On the administrative level, however, this was not the case. The attitude of Bishop-elect Charbonnaux had not changed. During the frequent and often lengthy absences of Bishop Bonnard on pastoral “*visitation*”, he made some important decisions. For example, he completely changed the building plan which Melchior had submitted for the new Major Seminary and for the development of the compound under the pretext of “*economising*”. In Melchior’s opinion, “*he completely ruined it*”. Then, the “*Bishop’s Council*” rejected a young seminarian which the Superior and Staff of the Seminary-College had recommended for admission to the clerical state (Tonsure). This Council normally gave the final approval.¹¹⁵

On his return, Bishop Bonnard agreed with a revised plan presented by his Coadjutor and Council as regards the future buildings. However, he delayed a decision on the seminarian, stating that he would take him on his next pastoral trip to get to know the young man a bit better. The trip took place and, overall, the Bishop was confident enough to recommend to his Council to reverse their decision. After all, this was not a question of ordaining him to the priesthood. The Council refused. His Lordship followed their advice and rejected the application for Tonsure.

To put it mildly, the Superior of the Seminary-College was not amused. Melchior could not understand the reasoning behind the

115 This was the recognised procedure at the time.

refusal to approve the application for Tonsure. It was not a request for ordination to the priesthood. He notes: “*That kind of rigidity and severity can achieve nothing but destruction in the Seminary. It is a cold, callous rejection and a destructive insult. Not only has the young man been rejected, the whole Seminary has been rejected. The request was simply to admit the seminarian to the clerical state, not to ordain him to the priesthood. Our work is still only a tender shoot; it has to be treated with gentleness and care. Even in a long-established Seminary, this kind of thing would affect morale. In ours, it could mean disaster to our hopes. From a fully-grown tree, you can saw off a whole branch... from a plant that has just put its head above the ground, you cannot safely pluck a leaf. You are likely to stunt it for life*”.¹¹⁶

On the subject of “*outside interference*”, Melchior wrote a “*very strong*” letter to Bishop-elect Charbonnaux. “*As a missionary of the M.E.P., I do not think that I can be in high spirits when I see the primary aim of our Society in jeopardy or in a second-rate condition... We shall have good native priests if only we take the right means... To remove me from the Seminary would not be a remedy (even though I have submitted my resignation to Bishop Bonnand in protest at a state of affairs which I can never accept). I consider the real reason for all the interference to be incompatible with an honest intention to form a native clergy, a viewpoint regrettably held by many of our confreres in a Society formed for that very purpose*”.¹¹⁷ Melchior concluded his letter by hoping that the Bishop-elect would not be annoyed by “*these few lines*”. He also asked him to accept that he (Melchior) was “*fully devoted to our Work - for life*”.¹¹⁸

Bishop Bonnand met with Melchior and listened attentively to the reasons for his proposed resignation, some of which were echoes of

116 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 493.

117 *Ibidem*: pages 497-498.

118 Melchior did receive a gracious reply from Bishop-Elect Charbonnaux, underlining his sympathy with Melchior for the stress he was undergoing and advising him to take care “*if only for your dear students*”. He did not address the issues of “*interference*” in Seminary matters or about disagreements among the confreres regarding local clergy.

Melchior's letter to him before accepting the post of Superior. He told Melchior that he should not be surprised "*at the contradictions he was encountering in his difficult post....*" Without actually saying it, Bishop Bonnard indicated that there were other very serious issues arising at that particular time. What he *did* say was that he was counting on Melchior and on "*his continued devotedness to the Seminary*". In these circumstances Melchior withdrew his letter of resignation.

Very soon afterwards, these "very serious issues" surfaced. News had reached Pondicherry that Father Luquet had gone completely beyond the mandate which he had received as Bishop Bonnard's delegate (i.e. to present for approval the *Acta* of the Synod, the Bishop's' proposal for the division of the jurisdictions and to get clarification on the oath which all missionaries were required to take as regards the "caste customs").

On the question of jurisdictions, the M.E.P. Superiors were very unhappy. Any moves towards making the present jurisdictions into Dioceses would massively reduce their influence, even though their voting rights were already collectively limited to *one* vote "on mission matters". Further, the Jesuits were now in "all-out opposition" to Father Luquet and his mission confreres in Pondicherry. They had become increasingly critical of our actions, especially those of Father Luquet. At this time, Melchior wrote: "*I was not very surprised... (that) Bishop Bonnard was sadly disillusioned... (particularly on the compromise which Father Luquet had eventually agreed regarding the powers and divisions of jurisdictions - even though he had kept Bishop Bonnard fully informed).*"

Melchior kept his colleague and friend (Father Luquet) updated on the growing criticism and even anger on the side of their fellow-missionaries. But Father Luquet simply thanked him and continued to push ahead... Melchior noted: "*Our dear deputy does not seem to be in the least bit discouraged by all these obstacles. Neither*

*should we. If our work is from God, He will bless our efforts - provided we are faithful... Let us hope that its growth continues and that it will be backed up sufficiently to grow in peace and in good order".*¹¹⁹

Nevertheless, Melchior made his own assessment of the situation at this particular time.¹²⁰ He had mixed feelings. On the question of "local clergy", he was confident that a major step forward would result. As regards the jurisdictions, resolution of this issue seemed to be well advanced. However, on the question of the oath and caste customs, Melchior was less confident. It appeared to him that Father Luquet had gone a long way beyond his mandate as regards caste customs. Melchior was aware that his friend was producing "a book" on caste. It was being printed for distribution, particularly among the "decision-makers" in Rome.¹²¹ His fears on this issue were, regrettably, soon realised.

Another cause for concern and real worry for Melchior was the rumour which emerged in late May 1845. It seems that he, Melchior de Marion Brésillac, was being considered as a "Leader" for one of the proposed new jurisdictions! He just could not believe it... and while it greatly upset him, Melchior dismissed it as one of the many rumours in circulation.¹²²

119 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 466.

120 Mid-March to Mid-May 1845.

121 This turned out to be the "Memoire". It was simply entitled "*claircissements sur le Synode de Pondicherry*" ("Clarifications about the Pondicherry Synod") which was printed by "Propaganda Fide" in May 1845. Father Luquet had written in his letter to Melchior: "*It actually takes in all the most serious questions facing the Apostolate all over the world*". Further, he had stated that he made this point clear "*in a covering letter to the Cardinals*". (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 527).

122 In fact, in a long letter to Melchior on 13th May, Father Luquet had explicitly mentioned it: "*I kiss your hand as a future Bishop...the 'Briefs' are going out today...*" Unfortunately, this letter did not reach Melchior until the end of July. Neither did Melchior receive another letter (dated 12th June) from Father Luquet, in which he urged Melchior "*not to delay too long in getting to work in Coimbatore as it was becoming more and more urgent to take possession of your Coimbatore*". (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 529; 533-534). Father Tesson (M.E.P. Superior) had also written to Melchior: "*... most encouraging news... I will leave it to Bishop Bonnard to tell you... I will just say here that it is beyond all your wildest dreams... Now the Pope and Cardinals are counting on Father Luquet and all of you there to renew the face of India*". This letter was dated 25th June and it arrived a long time after Bishop Bonnard had handed Melchior the official documents on 30th June.

In the light of future events, Melchior's comments on the "*improved mailing system*" to Pondicherry at that time are interesting and significant.¹²³

The Consecration of Bishop-Elect Charbonnaux

The long-awaited Episcopal Ordination of the Bishop-elect Charbonnaux took place "*with great pomp and ceremony*" on 29th June 1845. Melchior gives the following description: "*It would have been a fine celebration even in Europe. For Pondicherry, it was spectacular. Bishop Bonnand (the chief celebrant) was assisted by Bishop Fennelly of Madras, and by a priest. More than twenty confreres were present to honour Bishop Charbonnaux. The Indians crowded into the church, as well as the leading 'white town' citizens, including the Governor. That night, the church was lit up. There was a gun-salute etc. and European 'band' music... Joy was in every heart. And, as a bonus, we had just received news that a decree had been published, ordering freedom for our 'holy religion' in the Chinese Empire...*".¹²⁴

On that evening, during a quiet gathering of the missionaries (after all the formal celebrations), a "heavier postal bag than usual" arrived at the mission. It contained mail from Rome. Bishop Bonnand absented himself temporarily from the gathering. He returned later. Normally, he would share some interesting items of news, but on this occasion he did not. Most of the confreres (including Melchior) retired to their beds "puzzled". Next day, Bishop Bonnand called a meeting of his closest advisors. He also spent much time in discussions with Bishop Fennelly of Madras, right up to two o'clock in the afternoon. "*There was a mysterious air of gloom or of embarrassment around... Grave news from Rome,*

123 Melchior had been loud in his praises of the improvement in Mail delivery which he attributed to "*the invention of the steamship and the inauguration of regular English mail-boats via the Red Sea... Since the beginning of 1845, the post has improved further. Then the mail-boat arrived only once a month, so that at best your letter would be a month old. Now, it is at least twice a month; and telegraphed news takes barely a fortnight to arrive.*" (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...*page 519). Obviously, there were still serious "teething problems" with the service...

124 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 500.

the advisors reported - but nothing more".¹²⁵

Nomination

Melchior was told nothing until eight o'clock on that evening. Bishop Bonnand sent for him and very coldly handed him a letter from the Sacred Congregation ("Propaganda Fide") as well as two Papal "Briefs"¹²⁶. These documents stated that "*Father Melchior de Marion Brésillac is appointed as Bishop of Pruse, with the title of Pro-Vicar Administrator of the future Vicariate Apostolic of Coimbatore.*"¹²⁷ Melchior was stunned and (perhaps for the first time in his life) he was lost for words. However, he could already see that Bishop Bonnand was not in agreement with the division of the jurisdictions. He was greatly perturbed, and even angry, about this issue. As regards Melchior's appointment, he refrained from making any direct comment.

That night in the silence of his own room, Melchior wrote: "*What is going to come of all this? How did I get thrown into this awful situation? It was the last thing I expected. And what am I to do about it? At this time, I simply do not know... Enlighten us O Lord... I think that I can honestly say that I never wanted to be a Bishop... And I am positive that I never did anything to try to get it... Should I refuse?... Should I accept?... Let me know, O my God... May Your Will alone be done*".¹²⁸ On that night, Melchior never closed an eye in sleep. It was to be the first of many such nights.

On the next day (1st July), Bishop Bonnand convened a meeting of all the missionaries in Pondicherry, including those still there

125 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 523.

126 A Papal "Brief" (Latin: *breve*) is a formal document which is signed by the Pope. The contents are expressed in a "more modern form" of language when compared to that used in a "Papal Bull".

127 *Pruse* was a diocese in Asia Minor (Turkey) which had been conquered by the Muslims. In the Catholic tradition, a Bishop is an "overseer" (shepherd) of a community of believers in a specific place (i.e. a diocese). It is also part of that same tradition that for Bishops who are ordained for other reasons (e.g. Diplomatic Service or Assistant-Bishops) that they be given a "territory", even if it is defunct. In the case of Coimbatore, it was clear that "*it would soon become a Diocese, with its own residential Bishop.*"

128 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 524.

after Bishop Charbonnaux's consecration.¹²⁹ Melchior writes: "*The session was most stormy. I will not try to describe all the complaints and accusations made against Father Luquet. The Bishop himself had really turned against him and stated that he would not implement the decisions of the Congregation without a protest. He also told us how angry Bishop Fennelly was... As regards myself, I said very little. Even if I tried to defend Father Luquet, I would only have stirred up new storms. When someone slyly asked me what I was going to do myself, I simply said the truth - I did not know yet...*".¹³⁰ Immediately after the meeting, Bishop Bonnand wrote to "Propaganda Fide" and to the M.E.P. Superiors withdrawing the powers which had been given to Father Luquet. Melchior never saw the letters but he was told that they were "very aggressive".

On 2nd July, Melchior contacted Bishop Bonnand, asking for his advice and guidance at this critical time in his life. Bishop Bonnand agreed. Two "conversations" followed, during which each of them listened to the other with courtesy and kindness. Among other things, it seemed that the Vicars Apostolic had not been consulted regarding the appointments of the new Prelates... Bishop Bonnand's parting advice was that Melchior should not accept before clearing up what was doubtful in the procedure of the nomination. Melchior decided to follow that advice. On 5th July, Melchior wrote to the M.E.P. Superiors and to Father Luquet.

In his letter to Father Luquet, Melchior summarizes his own view on the nomination issue as follows: "*Without absolutely refusing, I do not think that I should just simply accept, unless something happens that could remedy the sort of irregularity in procedure which my confreres, quite rightly, tend to suspect. The closeness between the two of us can easily give the impression that it is the only reason for my*

129 The sequence of the decisions taken in Rome became clearer: presentation of Father Luquet's work to "Propaganda Fide" (early March); meeting of "Propaganda Fide" officials and the approval of new Vicariates (16th March); nomination of Vicars Apostolic (13th May); final Approval of the *Acta* of the Synod (with modifications) on 26th July.

130 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 525.

promotion".¹³¹ The letter to the Superiors was along similar lines. Meanwhile, Melchior went back to giving his full attention to the work of the Seminary-College. He received congratulations on his nomination from Fathers Leroux, Roger, Mousset and Fricaud (his former Superior in Salem), among other friends. His own feelings at this time were mixed. The nomination sometimes made him "tremble", but (overall) he was at peace. However, underlying this, Melchior expressed "*a sense of fear that because of the present hostility of our confreres to Luquet, any delay [by me] could jeopardise the Work he has so well begun... May the Lord dispose all these events to His greater glory*".¹³²

Melchior took on extra classes in the Seminary-College. Nonetheless, he still found time to study some of the decisions which had been communicated to Bishop Bonnard. As regards the division of the jurisdictions, the Decree was detailed and comprehensive. Not only was the Vicariate of Pondicherry divided, but also the Vicariates of Calcutta, Ceylon and Verapoly.

The new jurisdictions in the "old" Vicariate of Pondicherry would now be Pondicherry itself, Mysore, Coimbatore and Trichinopoly. One could see why Bishop Bonnard was upset. Apart from a "loss" of territory, he was always acutely aware of the shortage of missionaries for his own area. This new arrangement would mean the departure of "his" missionaries: Melchior to Coimbatore (creating a vacancy in the "sensitive" Seminary), Father Gailhot as Pro-Vicar (without Episcopal rank) of the new "mission area" of Vizagapattinam¹³³ who would need "*the assistance of two other*

131 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 530.

132 *Ibidem...* page 530.

133 This new "mission area" or territory was being taken from Madras. It was being entrusted to a new group of missionaries from Annecy (France). The *Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales of Annecy* was founded in 1830 by Father Mermier. The congregation was canonically erected in 1838 by Bishop Riley – a successor of the Saint (who had died nearly two hundred years previously). The congregation was not to be simply an "association" of priests but a new religious congregation, bound by simple vows. In 1845, the offer of the Superior General (Father Mermier) for himself and companions to go on the "foreign missions" was accepted by "Propaganda Fide" and approved by the Pope. They were assigned "to India" and "would arrive there during 1845".

experienced confreres” (from Pondicherry). This was something which the Decree explicitly requested. On top of all of this, Bishop Charbonnaux (his Coadjutor) would soon be named as Bishop of Mysore!

The Jesuits, who had spent much time and effort in “lobbying” in Rome, were given the new Vicariate of Trichinopoly (which included Madurai, their Indian base). Father Alexis Canoz S.J.¹³⁴ was appointed its Bishop. Their major complaint was that Coimbatore (which was contiguous) should have been included in “their” new Vicariate. Even in Ceylon, which was much further to the South and with whom Pondicherry had very few dealings, the creation of the new ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Jaffna was being challenged, as well as the nomination of its new “Leader”, Father Bettachini.¹³⁵ Bishop Fennelly of Madras objected to the “loss” of his territory to the new “mission area” of Vizagapattinam. He wrote a very strong letter of protest to “Propaganda Fide”. He also informed the British government of Madras about Rome’s arrangements “*in the hope that the Government would do something to block their implementation...*” and he indicated to Bishop Bonnand that he would have nothing to do with “*those people coming to the area*”. His “ban” also extended to Father Gailhot M.E.P. and his assistants who were to initiate the newcomers. All of them would have to wait for a new, explicit order from Rome.¹³⁶ Melchior was saddened by all of this turmoil. He felt that “*though it was inexcusable... it was not incomprehensible... Our Mission... our jurisdiction... our congregation... our country... our King... our government... What a dismal series of evils have been caused on the missions by such ‘catchwords’ and the all too human ideas and emotions they stir up...*”.¹³⁷ Nonetheless, all had previously agreed that the division of territory was necessary. Melchior felt at this time that, after the initial outbursts, a calm atmosphere would

134 Father Canoz S.J. had come to Madurai in 1839. He became the Superior of the “Jesuit Mission” in 1844. He was aged 39.

135 This priest was an Italian “*Oratorian*” who had come to Ceylon in 1842. He was aged 34.

136 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 568.

137 *Ibidem*: page 569.

allow any “teething problems” to be rectified. He also knew that all the future hopes and plans for these new jurisdictions depended on having a “well-trained and respected” local clergy.

As regards the “native or local clergy”, much progress seemed to have been made in Rome - according to what was being said locally. Melchior, however, again felt that he would need to receive and study the documentation. As regards the “oath” and “caste customs”, many strong and even “wild” assertions were being made... Again, Melchior decided to wait... study... and pray... Three weeks later, towards the end of July, the documentation arrived.

Melchior was particularly happy to receive a copy of Father Luquet’s *Memoire*.¹³⁸ This would help him greatly in reaching conclusions about several issues, including his own process of discernment on the nomination to Coimbatore. His characteristic thorough analysis, reflections, alternative suggestions and even a plan on the issue of “caste customs” are fully recorded.¹³⁹

In our reading of a long letter¹⁴⁰ to Father Luquet (written in August 1845), perhaps we can obtain some clarity as to Melchior’s position on the two basic issues (i.e. local clergy and the oath on caste customs). *“I have read, re-read and meditated upon your long and magnificent ‘Memoire’. You will be awaiting my reaction, my complete thinking on such an important document with all the frankness you know me for. I owe it to you too, because of the sincere friendship I have with you; and I owe it to our Work... Do not think, dear friend that this letter is going to be all praise... do not take it badly... it is a sign of our unbreakable friendship... Yes, dear friend, your ‘Memoire’ is very, very good... It would be absolutely wonderful - if only you had not rushed recklessly into ‘caste’ - a thing which you cannot possibly know in depth and which you have got yourself*

138 This is the “*Eclaircissements sur le Synode de Pondicherry*” (Clarifications about the Pondicherry Synod). Some of the confreres were mistakenly (and perhaps disparagingly) referring to the ‘*Memoire*’ as “Luquet’s Book”.

139 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 526 - 569 (forty-three pages).

140 *Ibidem*: 538 - 539.

thoroughly lost in. How my heart was pierced with pain when I saw the practical implications of what you have written. Your beautiful 'Memoire' could be so dangerous over here! I do not hesitate to say that if it became public (or even leaked out locally) it would be the cause of the total ruination of the Catholic Religion in these countries.¹⁴¹ How totally wrong you are when you go into the practical details of the Mission. How dangerous you became to us all when you touched on that highly explosive issue, the Malabar Rites and the Bull of Benedict XIV.. What a massive blunder to drag in the unfortunate "incidents" at Nellitope and Pondicherry, which ought to have been treated with the scorn and total oblivion they deserve!"¹⁴²

Melchior then asked Father Luquet to make a "disavowal of his position". He should also request the Holy See not to take any action at this time, not to impose any new restrictions, not even to observe the "exact provisions" of the Bull of Benedict XIV. These had, in fact, been already modified by later Decrees and by the legitimate decisions taken by the Vicariate authorities. There should be no change "*until there is a new order... nothing based on your 'Memoire' alone... Make no mistake about it, dear friend, if Rome is going to pile on new obligations on us [missionaries] in the line suggested by your 'Memoire'... we can forget about converting pagans in this country. We will also have to get ready to see a good portion of our Christians going over to Schism or even Protestantism... or even a mass return to paganism... On the other hand, if Rome reverses its policy, we can expect the most wonderful results and still keep Faith secure, and morals unaffected... There is a plan, there is a way forward... to settle the whole caste problem... and I am not the only missionary to think so*".¹⁴³

Melchior goes on to name some highly respected confreres involved in this plan and then poses a rhetorical question: "*Today, will you find a single experienced missionary seriously engaged in caring for the*

141 In effect, Father Luquet had called for "zero tolerance" towards all caste customs.

142 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 540.

143 *Ibidem:* page 541.

Indian Christians and trying to extend Christianity among the people who would be in favour of totally ignoring Indian customs? Not one! [Finally, on this topic, Melchior states] *“If your views on caste are approved and published, then there is no further point in making me a Bishop. And let us also close down our Seminary, before we have to swallow the shame and the grief of seeing it deserted en masse by all the castes (including the lower castes, which you say you are trying to raise up)”*.¹⁴⁴

Following such a trenchant critique, Melchior was very positive - even ecstatic - about his friend's presentation on “local clergy”... He writes: *“Your thesis on Native Clergy is beyond all praise. It sweeps the reader along; it is irresistible... I have felt even tears of joy when following the sweep of your irrefutable argument, your rock-solid principles ... and their equally unassailable conclusions... I just have to admire you....”* But again, there were some indiscretions. For example referring to “two Bishops in India” who were against having local clergy was certainly not a good idea. Some confreres would conclude that he [Luquet] was “hitting at” Bishop Charbonnaux, while the reference to the “bad administration” of Bishop Hebert (Bishop Bonnand's predecessor) – well, this was totally unnecessary! There was no need to exhibit items of the family's “dirty washing” before the Cardinals...

There were many other matters which Melchior touched on in the “next half” of his letter to Father Luquet.¹⁴⁵ He concludes with assurances of friendship and prayers, and by asking his friend again to *“rethink your principles on the subject of caste customs... any reforms would come gradually, gently and naturally - not by smashing and condemning everything to start with...”*.¹⁴⁶ The letter was dispatched in early August.

Meanwhile, the daily round of classes and the routine of the

144 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac.* pages 541 and 543.

145 *Ibidem*... pages 544 - 555.

146 *Ibidem*.

Seminary-College continued without incident. Melchior's colleague (Father Leroux) could see how the Superior was suffering and tried to encourage him... *"The present storm will blow over... better weather will return... Let us pray now... Let us wait it out, and make sure that we can always honestly say: 'Not my will but Yours be done'..."*¹⁴⁷

Melchior was also deeply troubled by "shattering news" from his home in Castlenaudary.¹⁴⁸ *"A blundering friend was writing to me from home to 'congratulate me'... he had heard of my promotion. Then he gave me to understand that my brother (Henri) was dead - very suddenly in some awful accident without regaining consciousness; (but then he added) "Is it true... Do you know anything about it?... Writing to a poor brother about 8,000 miles from home... His melodramatic expressions made me almost certain that something really awful had happened"*¹⁴⁹ One can only imagine Melchior's distress... The anxiety was made worse by the non-arrival of "the usual monthly" letters from his father and other family members. Even a month later, he was still in the dark... *"I cannot even describe the extent to which my heart is grief-stricken and my soul overwhelmed with this affliction... I feel as if my heart is being crushed between two millstones. My chest is constricted and a dull headache never leaves me alone - day or night"*¹⁵⁰

On 29th August, Melchior summed up the mission situation as follows: *"It is now a whole month since we received the "Memoire" and two months since my appointment to Coimbatore became public... Everyone who read Father Luquet's work was deeply pained and disappointed with it. They all feel that way about him... It hurts me to hear (and read) some of the 'intemperate language and the vitriolic bitterness' of a few confreres..."* Obviously, Melchior himself had been included in some of these criticisms. It is significant that he noted:

147 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac.* page 564.

148 Letter dated 7th August 1845 from M. l'abbé Vian.

149 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 582 - 585.

150 *Ibidem.*

“I think that it is necessary, if we are going to be realistic about the difficulties surrounding us, these will have to be taken into account in making decisions. We may need in the future to keep peoples’ attitudes in mind”.¹⁵¹ The opposition would be even further strengthened in Pondicherry when news arrived that Father Luquet had been nominated a Bishop. What is more, he would assume the office of Bishop-Coadjutor of *Pondicherry!*¹⁵²

It was now early September. Melchior decided that it was time to conclude this very difficult period of discernment. News had come that the Superiors in Paris had given their support to Melchior’s nomination. It was now also known that Father Luquet had been consulted by “Propaganda Fide” on who should be Bishop of Coimbatore. He had recommended Melchior. And now there was the huge opposition of the confreres to Father Luquet... and this had now extended *to himself!* Some who had originally congratulated him *“suddenly changed completely”*... He prayed and reflected further...

By the end of the month feelings had reached such a pitch, that Melchior decided to announce his decision on the nomination. *“Faced with ongoing hostility from many of my confreres, I felt that I ought not to accept the episcopate. Indeed how could I expect to achieve anything, especially in a country where the authority of a Vicar Apostolic is so limited? It is only by the friendship and willing cooperation of his co-workers that he can expect to implement anything, even the bare minimum that his conscience commands him to do”*.¹⁵³

Melchior drafted a letter to Bishops Bonnand and Charbonnaux (who was about to leave for his diocese of Mysore). He sent it to

151 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 565-566.

152 A Coadjutor is an Assistant Bishop in a diocese with the right of succession. Though they were unaware of it in Pondicherry at that time, Father Luquet was consecrated as Titular Bishop of Hesebon on Sunday 7th September 1845 in the church of “Santa Maria della Vallicella” (Rome). The ordaining Prelate was Cardinal Fransoni (Prefect of “Propaganda Fide”). He was assisted by the Archbishop Pichi of Heliopolis (Egypt) and Archbishop Brunelli (Secretary General of “Propaganda Fide”).

153 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 571.

them on 25th September.¹⁵⁴

In his letter, Melchior traced the sequence of events and the “deep hurt” which he had undergone since his nomination. He stressed that nearly all of this was due to the negativity of the confreres. However, he stated that he became consoled gradually because he knew in his heart that “*I was innocent of the intentions and ambitions that they obviously suspected in me*”. His conscience was clear as far as he was concerned. As regards Father Luquet, Melchior was sure of “*the complete integrity and holiness of our worthy confrere*”. If he was involved in his nomination, it had nothing to do with friendship or favouritism. In all his work, Father Luquet sought only one thing: “*the good of the missions and the promotion of a native clergy*”.

On his own personal fitness for the episcopacy, Melchior had to consider whether his “unworthiness” did not make it obligatory for him to refuse. But, after some time, he concluded that “*I myself could not be a judge in this matter... nor would be befitting that I should make a parade of sham humility about it*”. As regards the process involved in his nomination, Melchior thought it prudent to allow some time for this to be clarified. If there were flaws, this would give the opportunity for Rome, Paris and perhaps others, to “*rectify the presentation procedure (which) people were saying was not in accordance with the ‘custom’ of our Society*”.

But now, other considerations had also to be taken into account. It would be going against “*the spirit and intention*” of the Council of Trent if he was to delay his decision any longer.¹⁵⁵ It could also impact the implementation of the Holy See’s plans for the reorganisation of the Vicariates, especially Coimbatore. One must also take into account the proposed consecration of Father Luquet.

154 The full text of this letter can be found in *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 572 - 575. All the following quotations are from these pages.

155 This refers to a directive that the consecration of any bishop should take place within three months of his nomination.

How would this affect the church in South India, especially with all the opposition to him? ¹⁵⁶

The M.E.P. Superiors, “Propaganda Fide”, the Cardinals and even the Pope had “*recognised in our confrere his work rate, the force of his arguments and his virtues, and had unanimously agreed (‘unica voce’) to make him a bishop*”.¹⁵⁷ The only dissenting voices were in Pondicherry. The language which was being employed here was “*hurtful and shattering*”. But more importantly, it put both him and Melchior “*under the public accusation of one of the biggest crimes that any priest could commit; and it is an attack on our honour*”. And while Melchior would “*not lose in any way my affection for them (his confreres), the ‘fact’ of the situation was no less real - nor any less grave*”.

Father Melchior then goes on to state: “*Therefore, I have the honour of informing your Lordships that, because of the persistent opposition of my most important confreres (and no other reason) I hereby renounce the dignity of the episcopate which the Sacred Congregation has offered to me. I am writing to the S.C. to inform them. I am also asking them to appoint someone else in my place - some priest who deserves the support and confidence of his confreres more than I do, and who is also not without some zeal for Native Clergy. I have the honour to enclose a copy of that letter*”. Towards the end of this letter to Bishops Bonnand and Charbonnaux, Melchior states that he has “*one other problem which causes me no less pain*”. All of what has been taking place “*has made me make up my mind to ask you to please accept my resignation as Superior of the Seminary. For there too, because of our*

156 Melchior did not know, at the time of writing this letter, that Father Luquet's Episcopal ordination had actually taken place. He states this in a footnote in his *Souvenirs*: page 573.

157 Church Historians have noted the influence of the *Acta* of the Synod of Pondicherry and the work of Father Luquet on various issues: local clergy, catechists, schools and the education of both boys and girls. As an example of this, they state that about four months after the approval of the *Acta*, Pope Gregory XVI issued the Instruction: *Neminem profecto* (23rd November 1845). This was addressed to all Archbishops, Bishops, Vicars Apostolic and other Mission Superiors. It reminded the leaders that “*the prescriptions of the Holy See to set up a local clergy compelled them to establish a formation system which would prepare the clergy to assume the government of the missions*”. (cf. *De Marion Brésillac...* pages 207 - 208).

zeal for a local clergy and our plans for that great objective, we are under great suspicion... some are scared of seeing such a theory being put into practice... all that I want is put it to work - right now”!

Melchior stated that while he was fully aware of their viewpoint, he felt no bitterness or resentment. But the fact remained that there would still be *“a sort of coldness or awkwardness between us, as long as I am in a post that is even slightly elevated. This would have a huge effect on the Seminary; in fact, we have already experienced some of the bad repercussions”*. He then concluded: *“I am not pretentious enough to think that this work has need of ‘me’ in order to be accomplished... But I do know that I have need of peace, and I would not be able to live in a continual state of mutual suspicion... I am not looking for anything – any post whatsoever... so let me just go away to the lowliest corner in either of your jurisdictions. Do not grieve me by refusing this favour”*.

Both Bishops replied (individually) to Melchior on 29th September *“in a friendly manner, it must be said... but they were also quite severe - especially about Father Luquet. They were sorry that I had found myself in a situation because of his friendship. But overall, they led me to understand that, in these circumstances, I was quite right to refuse the episcopate”*.¹⁵⁸

As regards the request to resign from the Seminary, Bishop Bonnard refused to accept it. He stated that the missionaries were not in opposition to *“his way of directing it”*. He should be at peace, as he had the assurance that he was doing God’s Will.

Reactions from the confreres to Melchior’s decision came swiftly. A surprisingly large number spoke to him or wrote to express their regret at his refusal to become a Bishop. These included several who had maintained a “sullen silence” up to this point. Melchior wryly noted: *“I will be treated like a man who has recently died. While he was alive, they did not think much of him. But then, as soon*

158 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 575.

as they hear he is dead... ‘What a great loss’; ‘he was such a good man’ etc”.¹⁵⁹ Bishop Charbonnaux, in a long and warm letter, expressed the view that “*there may have been faults and mistakes on both sides*” and that he (Melchior) “*deserved to be better understood and appreciated*”.¹⁶⁰ He wrote this in reply to another note (“*four or five lines of greeting*”) which Melchior had sent to the Bishop, wishing him all of God’s blessings and happiness in his new position in Mysore. Bishop Bonnand, on his part, wrote in his October Circular to the missionaries: “*You know that Father de Brésillac did not seek nomination, and that he made no move to get there. His honest renunciation is for us new evidence of his deep spirit of faith and strong virtue*”.¹⁶¹

In bringing this entire episode to a conclusion, Melchior offers the following advice: “*If anyone ever reads these pages, remember: exaggerated praise means nothing; no more than exaggerated blame. Moreover, do not forget: I am dead. And even the lowliest will have some good things said about him at his funeral*”.¹⁶²

For the rest of this eventful year (1845), Melchior was relatively at ease. He awaited news from both Rome and Paris which he expected to be the simple acceptance of his resignation. The Seminary-College was going fairly well, apart from the usual tension on the side of “our own” Catholics regarding caste and rites. A few of the students were promoted to the clerical state and “*the best of them were starting Theology*”. Melchior was also happy that he was able by careful guidance “*to have set these young men free from the ‘caste prejudices of their nation*”¹⁶³ A remarkable letter from Bishop Rotard of West Tong-king was also very encouraging. He

159 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 576.

160 *Ibidem*: page 577.

161 *De Marion Brésillac ...* page 206.

162 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 578.

163 *Ibidem*: page 601. Another development was the postponement of Prize-giving Day. This was due to a rearrangement of the Academic Year. The end of the academic year would (in future) be August.

commended Melchior for “*having the same conviction as ourselves about the necessity of a Native Clergy for the consolidation and progress of the missions*”.¹⁶⁴

But arguably, the biggest help to “calming” Melchior was the arrival of a letter from his Father. The November mail-boat was late. The prolonged suspense was painful. Since Father Vian’s letter informing him of Henri’s “tragic death”, Melchior had received no news about his brother Henri. He had waited for some news in hope... in fear... He did not try to alleviate these emotions by sharing them with others.

Before opening the letter, Melchior made the Sign of the Cross and offered up to God whatever it contained. “*The opening lines were fine... Quickly I ran my eyes over the rest... nothing there but words of contentment and good cheer... Glory to God, I cried... ‘it is not true!’ Afterwards, I was able to read it with attention and due order. As usual, it was a long epistle from my father – full of interesting remarks and details – amusing and delightful... not a word in it to sadden the heart... I felt a huge weight lifting from my chest and head*”.¹⁶⁵

Melchior made this heartfelt prayer to God: “*Thanks be to You, O my God... You have been the only one to bear me up... and now You console me! You treat your servants always with kindness... Tu Domine adjuvisti me et consolatus es me*”.

A calmer atmosphere had also descended on Pondicherry. The confreres had begun their preparations for the Christmas festivities and those in “specialized work” got on with their jobs. Bishop Bonnand intensified his work-load but he continued to look preoccupied. Melchior goes on to state: “*Near the end of 1845, I received a very kind and benevolent letter from “Propaganda Fide” which congratulated him on his appointment to Coimbatore. This puzzled Melchior, as he had sent all the documentation connected*

164 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 602.

165 *Ibidem:* page 584.

with his resignation to Rome (via Paris) on 5th July. Perhaps, it was the mailing system again! An interesting enclosure in this communication from “Propaganda Fide” however, was a letter addressed to Father Gailhot, the confrere appointed as head of the Vizapattinam Mission. Melchior immediately passed the letter on to him. It contained “good news”.

The Annecy missionaries had earlier arrived in Pondicherry (as they promised) and were undergoing “a period of initiation”. They were not sure of the date when they would go to “their” territory or what problems were causing the delay. Perhaps, they might even have to return to France! During the period of waiting, “*they tried to make themselves of some use to us. But most of all, they edified us by their good character, their patience and their cheerfulness. One expected them to do well in that part of India assigned to them*”.¹⁶⁶

Father Gailhot informed “his” missionaries at once and began preparations for their departure to Vizapattinam. Melchior congratulated his confrere. Though Father Gailhot was a strong critic of Bishop Luquet, and the fact that “*his temperament and mine never harmonized well*”, Melchior recognised that he was “*an active confrere – enterprising and resourceful – and definitely the right man to start a difficult Mission... Let us pray to God to make him an instrument of salvation and mercy to the people... My prayers and good wishes follow him, and every success of his will bring me joy and gladness*”.¹⁶⁷

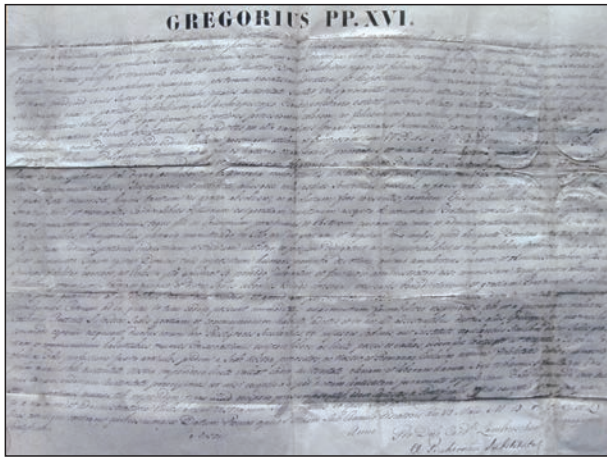
Melchior concluded his reflections on 1845 by recording a tribute to Bishop Fennelly of Madras. While disagreeing with him (and “the Irish”) on missionary policy, Melchior did not doubt their commitment to their particular vision of mission. “*The facts have sometimes forced us to write some painful lines about him*” (i.e. Bishop Fennelly). On the question of the erection of Vizapattinam as a “separate mission”, it was clear from the very day of the

166 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 604 - 605.

167 *Ibidem:* page 609.

announcement, that the Bishop was opposed to it. The reasons he had outlined to “Propaganda Fide”. But now “*as soon as he received the final decision from Rome, he immediately complied. He even showed unexpected generosity and kindness to Father Gailhot by lending him two priests who could be of great help at the start... It is good to be able to recognise this gracious response of Bishop Fennelly... We thank the God of all Light and Source of every good gift!*”¹⁶⁸

168 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 605.



4.3 Papal Documents naming Melchior a Bishop (Nomination Bulls)



4.2 Tomb of Fr. Tribulot

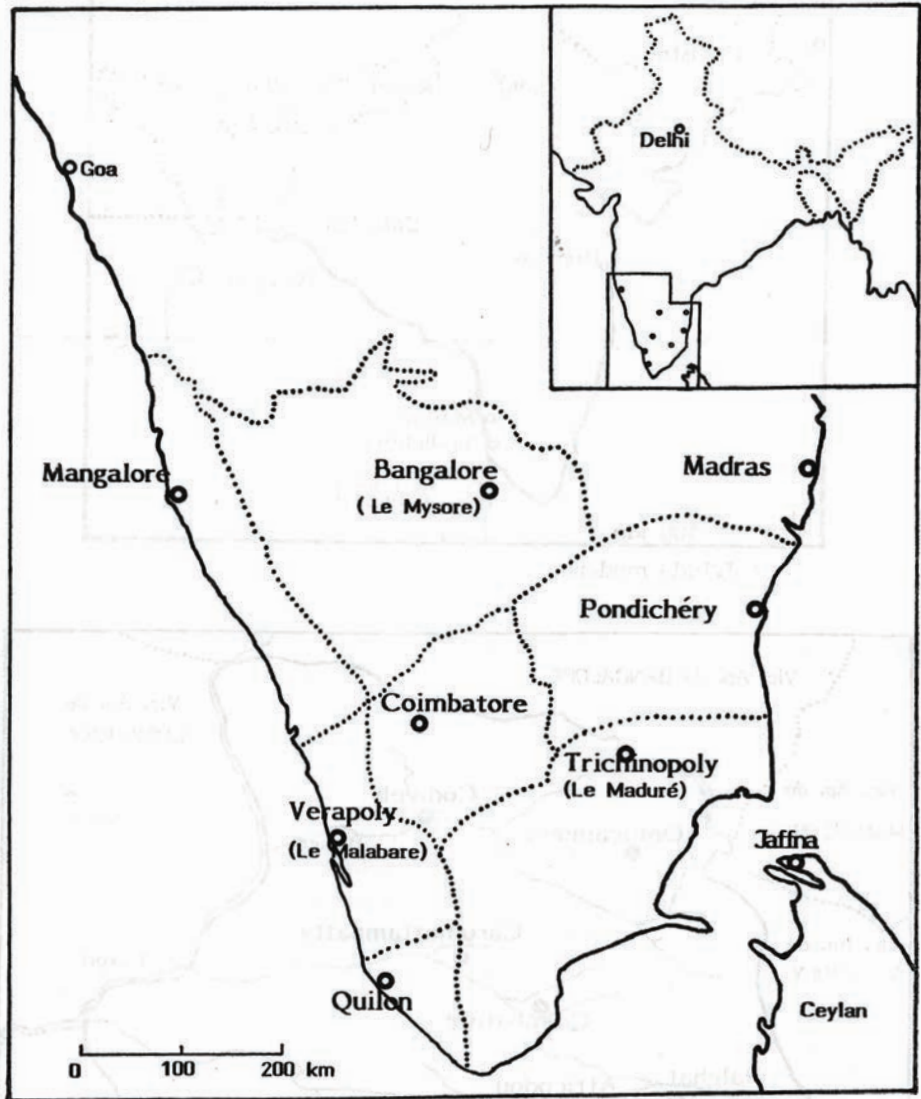


Pope Gregory XVI

4.4 Pope Gregory XVI



4.1 Nellitope Church



4.5 Map of New Divisions of the Vicariate of Pondicherry (1845) and the city of Goa.

Chapter Eight

Decisions

Melchior began the New Year (1846) with a heartfelt prayer: *“Do not stint your mercy, O Lord, which we implore for the ‘poor Indians’ whom you want to save. Make your truth shine out again before all people. And if we [Luquet and himself] are wrong in some points, make us see our error [and] give us the strength to follow up and complete what we have to do... Give us, O my God, the gifts of humility, patience, obedience and charity”*.¹⁶⁹

In February, Melchior indirectly learned that his letter of resignation and the accompanying Papal “Bulls” had not been sent on from Paris to “Propaganda Fide” (as he had specifically asked the M.E.P. Superiors there to do). Melchior was very annoyed... *“I don’t understand a thing... how could the Paris Foreign Missions Superiors stop a letter without the consent of the writer? This delaying tactic could have very bad consequences for Coimbatore... This delay may give the Jesuits time to ‘work a change’ in the Holy See’s allocation of territory... to annex Coimbatore to their [new] mission”*.¹⁷⁰ Melchior was convinced for a long time, that Jesuit policies would not favour the setting up of a local clergy. In the case of the new Vicariate of Coimbatore, it had never even been tried before! Once more, Melchior was thrown into confusion.

A few days later, Melchior discovered that Bishop Bonnand had something to do with “delaying” his letter to “Propaganda Fide”. *“The good man wanted me to become a Bishop – but not necessarily in Coimbatore. Again in this affair as in others, confused thinking was complicating matters”*. It appears that the events and the stress of the past eighteen months had left Bishop Bonnand tired and somewhat disillusioned with the Pondicherry Vicariate. Now, with the erection of new jurisdictions, he felt that this was an opportunity

169 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 607.

170 *Ibidem:* page 618.

for him to carry out his duties in a quieter area where there were only a few confreres assigned at the time (i.e. Coimbatore).

Of course, it would take some time to implement his “plan”.¹⁷¹ The first step would be to get Melchior de Marion Brésillac appointed to Pondicherry as his Coadjutor.¹⁷² Then he would ask “Propaganda Fide” to send one of “his” M.E.P. priests to Coimbatore in much the same role as Father Gailhot had been sent to Vizappatinam with the Annecy missionaries. After “a short time”, Bishop Bonnard could then move to Coimbatore. At that point, Pondicherry - with all its challenges and potential - would be left in the capable hands of his younger, more energetic and “more forceful” confrere (Melchior).

Melchior’s reaction to this “plan” was swift and unequivocal. He was “*absolutely opposed to becoming Coadjutor there. Until all our problems were sorted out, it was vital that Bishop Bonnard should keep all his authority and ‘use’ it*”.¹⁷³ Melchior was convinced that Bishop Bonnard had the ability, temperament, experience and prestige to solve almost all the problems in Pondicherry and beyond.

Meanwhile at the Seminary, a few encouraging things occurred. On 11th March, the French Ambassador to China had visited and “*seemed to be very pleased with our students... and surprised at their intelligence and quick replies... He impressed them with his distinguished bearing and his truly Christian words of advice*”. Privately, he commended Melchior on “*the way we were training the students... and did not hesitate to say that they were the very best he had seen, not excepting our famous Pulo-Pinang College*”.¹⁷⁴

On 19th March, the new buildings at the College-Seminary were

171 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 639 - 664 for full details of Bishop Bonnard’s “plan”.

172 At this stage, it was very clear in Bishop Bonnard’s mind and to almost everybody else (including Bishop Luquet) that he (Bishop Luquet) could never assume the position of Coadjutor in Pondicherry.

173 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 644.

174 *Ibidem*: pages 628 - 629 for a full account of the visit. (*Note*: Pulo-Pinang College is in Malaysia).

inaugurated. Bishop Bonnand blessed the facilities, while the Superior presided over the entire ceremonies. Though differing greatly from the plans that Melchior had originally proposed, “*the new College (such as it is) is a remarkable monument for Pondicherry*”.¹⁷⁵ In his regular monthly Circular to the missionaries, Bishop Bonnand referred to the occasion, and added: “*Father de Brésillac teaches theology to two seminarians who have received the Tonsure, one of whom will also receive Minor Orders. The Seminary Council has decided that the theology course will last four years. Besides theology, Father de Brésillac teaches philosophy and mathematics*”.¹⁷⁶

An Answer from “Propaganda Fide”

The April mail-boat brought the usual amount of letters for all the missionaries. Bishop Bonnand received a letter from Father Langlois (M.E.P. Superior) which he showed to Melchior. It included the following: “*I am sending on a letter to Your Lordship from the Sacred Congregation. They persist in wanting Father de Brésillac to be consecrated bishop. We have just sent Bishop Luquet the ‘Briefs’ appointing Father de Brésillac bishop, asking him (Luquet) to send them back to Pondicherry or to send an authentic copy by the Red Sea...*”. Bishop Bonnand also showed Melchior a letter from “Propaganda Fide”. This stated (in Latin): “*As regards the administration of the missions themselves, we have nothing to add except this: we again confirm through Your Lordship to Father de Brésillac: he should not refuse the responsibility entrusted to him nor [delay] his Episcopal ordination*”.¹⁷⁷

Melchior records his immediate reaction... “*So here we are again thrown into renewed trouble...*” However, on this occasion, Melchior would not allow prolonged discussions... Nothing much had changed, either with the strong opposition from the confreres or with the conclusions of his own previous discernment... “*On that*

175 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 628.

176 *De Marion Brésillac* page 209.

177 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 638 - 639.

day, Father Lehodey, Father Depuis and myself (the only people let into the secret) had a long session with Bishop Bonnard. We got him to agree that if the Sacred Congregation made any other objections to his plan, he would immediately drop it. [On his side] His Lordship asked that I would do nothing, neither to accept Coimbatore nor to formally refuse to be 'a Bishop', until a definitive answer came from Propaganda Fide on his plan". Melchior reluctantly agreed to "stay in this new limbo of indecision, hoping that the end result will be to definitely lift this episcopacy load from me, once and for all".¹⁷⁸

On a personal level, there was just one element that Melchior felt that he needed to reflect on some more and to pray about i.e. Obedience.¹⁷⁹ "It is not just a simple counsel. It is precept founded on the nature of things, on the order of grace and on the example of Jesus Christ. Where can one find, in fact, an institution, a congregation, a society, where members do not submit to obedience? If such exists, it can only be the image of hell. Without obedience, there would be trouble, confusion and disorder... Never permit, O my God, such misfortune to befall us".¹⁸⁰ Elsewhere, he sums up this aspect of the concept of "Obedience" with the phrase: "Obedience is the muscles and sinews of any organization".¹⁸¹

Melchior then "sanctifies" obedience by injecting supernatural motives. He reflects on the *Letter to the Hebrews* which assures us that "while we continue to practice obedience, we are always sure of pleasing God, since He will no longer demand an account of our actions from us but from those who commanded those actions. It is they who must be careful with regard to what they ask us to do. We will have to render an account only for our obedience. We know that God loves obedience - for He has made it more important than sacrifice... The

178 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 640.

179 Melchior gave a formal "Talk" or "Conference" on this topic later to a group of missionaries. (cf. *Marion Brésillac: Retreat to Missionaries: 1849*: SMA Publications Rome. English Translation: John Flynn 1985. pages 169 - 176).

180 *Marion Brésillac: Retreat to Missionaries...* page 170.

181 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 660.

Saints understood this truth... they never departed from this virtue".¹⁸² Then, there is the example of Jesus Himself... "*My food is to do the will of him who sent me*" (John 4: 34)... [and] "*He learned through suffering what obedience was...*" (Hebrews 5: 8)... *Is there anything further necessary to make us esteem this virtue and to make us consider it as indispensable?*".¹⁸³

Having established that "true obedience" is based on following all of God's laws and the precepts of the Church "*which is the only interpreter of His will*", Melchior states that all Christians must do their utmost to observe the evangelical counsels "*as it was not for nothing that Jesus Christ promulgated them in his Gospel*". Then, there are the duties of one's particular "state in life". These too should be implemented to the best of one's ability. For priests and missionaries, their duties are clear... And finally, all Christians are encouraged to do their best to implement any insights which the Holy Spirit may deign to give them. However, these must always be guided by the Church as "*God has established His Church with its teachers, its Bishops and Pastors for the governing of souls*".¹⁸⁴

Melchior then devotes several pages of his reflections on this theme of Obedience to listing those "*whom we must obey*" and "*how we must obey*". He concludes by stating that obedience must be "*our inseparable companion, our faithful guide and the safeguard for the goodness of all our actions...* [Otherwise], *the person who only follows the inspirations of his own heart will see even the most holy of his projects evaporate*".¹⁸⁵

A Decision is Required

Meanwhile, it emerged that the "urgent reason" to solve "the Coimbatore situation" was the pressure coming from the Jesuit Superiors. "*Bishop Luquet, whose influence still held in Rome,*

182 Marion Brésillac: *Retreat to Missionaries...* page 171.

183 Ibidem: page 172.

184 Ibidem: page 173.

185 Ibidem: page 176.

was fighting to block them taking over Coimbatore, while we were squabbling".¹⁸⁶ Any further delay would only advance the position which the Jesuit Fathers espoused. Also, it had become increasingly clear that Bishop Luquet would not be returning to India, at least not in the foreseeable future. In his own words, he stated: "*I will not be returning to India. I would have too much of a credibility problem to be able to 'do' anything*".¹⁸⁷

By the end of April Melchior knew that he must make a decision. He had always desired to be a "simple missionary", his models being the twelve Apostles. They went from place to place, preaching, teaching and ensuring that a local person would continue to minister to the "new" community. The methods of Saint Paul - and his relationship with Timothy and Titus - had always inspired Melchior, while the "love of Christ" urged him on to reach out to as many people as he could during his lifetime.

But now, the Papal "Bulls" were back in Pondicherry (May 1846). He had to make a decision. "*My position was now critical and I did not want to rely on my own decision. So, I asked Bishop Bonnand to convene a meeting of all the missionaries then present in Pondicherry for an Extraordinary Council... [The Bishop agreed]... The participants were: His Lordship, Fathers Dupuis, Lehodey, Mousset, Pouplin, Richon, Leroux, Godet and myself. As soon as we got together, I submitted the following doubt: 'In view of the whole present situation and past events which you all know, can I now, acting in conscience and without harming our missions, proceed to fulfil my own unchanged personal desire to send back the Bulls again and refuse the episcopate*". [Melchior continues] "*I then left the room to allow freer discussion... I do not know what happened in there, but the conclusion was that I could not do so, and that I should accept. They all agreed on this - except for one, who abstained from giving his opinion. His name I do not know...*".¹⁸⁸ Immediately after the

186 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 640.

187 *Ibidem:* page 641.

188 *Ibidem:* page 644.

Meeting, Bishop Bonnand asked Melchior to confirm the decision (i.e. that he would accept to become “a Bishop”). Melchior did so. He also requested Melchior to keep this decision secret ... it should not be officially announced. His Lordship still waited for what he hoped would be a “positive” reply from Rome on his “plan”. The Bishop then set out on one of his pastoral visitations.

However, many people knew that the “Nomination Briefs” had been sent from Rome to Pondicherry for the second time. Several had heard of the Extraordinary Meeting and that Melchior had accepted his nomination on this occasion. “*Even a [suggested] date for my consecration has been leaked!*” Melchior was embarrassed by this “*harmful artificial atmosphere*”, but he had to remain silent and live in a “*difficult, humiliating and contradictory situation... Many conclude that Bishop Bonnand is still against my appointment*”. The public did not know of Bishop’s Bonnand’s “plan”. Only four people knew of this, and these had to honour His Lordship’s directive. “*This ludicrous humiliation might be very good for me, if it did not resemble the same old dismal opposition towards me and Luquet*”. Melchior continued to pray that “*the holy Will of God, and His Will alone, may be accomplished*”.¹⁸⁹

Death of the Pope

The month of June brought the sad news of the death of Pope Gregory XVI. The following is an extract from Melchior’s tribute to the deceased Pontiff: “*History will relate all the virtues of Gregory XVI. Here I only consider his zeal for the missions. Before becoming Pope, he was actively engaged in all the missions as Cardinal Prefect of “Propaganda Fide” (1826 – 1831). When our Indian affairs took Luquet to Rome, the Pope very quickly saw what it was all about; and the Sacred Congregation, under his inspiration, took swift action for a first step [local clergy]... In his last year, he traced out the main lines of a Plan which was meant to let the Faith - at long last take root in the long-established missions of India... [The Pope] had thoroughly read*

189 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 645 - 646.

Luquet's 'Memoire', and his personal wish must have greatly influenced the promotion of Luquet and mine as well... It was regrettable that Gregory XVI did not live longer to finish what he had barely started... But God has His own designs and will have rewarded his zeal and the merits of the guidelines which he had laid down".¹⁹⁰

The Reply to Bishop Bonnard

In early August - while still on pastoral visitation - Bishop Bonnard received a letter from "Propaganda Fide" at last! His Lordship wrote immediately to inform Melchior, who summarizes the letter as follows: "*Seeing the latest reactions from Rome and Paris, he was not going to continue with his 'plan'. He saw that it was being resisted on all sides. Consequently, he asked me to publicly assume the rank of Bishop-Elect, and to start preparations for the consecration. He had agreed to do it (as I had requested). It would take place at Carumattampatty on the 4th October, the Feast of the Holy Rosary, the big day in that area*".¹⁹¹

On 11th August, Melchior wrote to "Propaganda Fide" accepting his nomination and giving the date for his Consecration. The principal Consecrator would be Bishop Bonnard. Melchior expressed his intention to invite other Bishops to participate. He explained to the Sacred Congregation that his own silence and delay were due *only* to circumstances of which they were already aware.¹⁹²

Melchior also informed the M.E.P. Superiors in Paris, with the addition that he intended to invite Bishop Charbonnaux (Mysore) and Archbishop Martini (Carmelite) of Verapoly¹⁹³ to be Co-

190 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 681- 683.

191 Ibidem: page 654. Devotion to Mary was an important part of Melchior's "spirituality". He mentions the Mother of Jesus fifty-two times in his *Souvenirs*.

192 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 213

193 Tiburce Marcello Martini O.C.D. was born in the Diocese of Lucca, Italy 1809. He came to the "Malabar Mission" in 1835. Consecrated Coadjutor of Verapoly in 1839, he was promoted Vicar Apostolic of Verapoly in 1844. One year later, he was given the title of Titular Archbishop of Chyrra. He was recalled to Rome in 1851 and retired some years later. Melchior would meet him again - in different circumstances.

Consecrators. Bishop-Elect Alexis Canoz S.J.¹⁹⁴ (Madura Province/Madurai) would also be invited to attend.

On the same day, Melchior wrote separately to Father Tesson (his most understanding friend among the Paris Superiors) to explain why he had felt morally obliged to take the steps he had taken. *“Yes, I deplored their mistake in appointing me, but I was convinced that, given our position, I could not make a second and maybe more dangerous mistake by refusing. Unfortunately, the matter had to do with me but I could not openly express my conviction. I could only wait in patience, enduring the first storm to see if the weather cleared up afterwards. But it did not; it only calmed down after I sent back my letters”*.¹⁹⁵

As soon as the news became public, all the confreres then in Pondicherry came to congratulate the Bishop-Elect of Coimbatore. The Seminary-College also came in a group, to wish Melchior well and to express their regrets that he was leaving them. The students seemed to be particularly sad, and Melchior felt that the words of the seminarians were *“very real”*. On his part, he states that they were the only people in Pondicherry that he was really sorry to be leaving.¹⁹⁶

Melchior’s Final Prize-giving Day

Meanwhile, in accordance with the revised academic year, the end of the school-year had arrived. At the end of July, Melchior had sent out invitations to *“the great and the good”* in Pondicherry for Prize-giving Day (as he had done over a year and a half previously for the first Prize-giving Day). The actual date of the event is not clear. But, judging from the content of the Superior’s address at the end of the Prize-giving Day, it was before the middle of August. All those who were invited responded *“very graciously”*, and were

194 It appears that the Consecration of Father Alexis Canoz S.J. had been postponed until “the matter of the jurisdictions” would be finally resolved. The death of Pope Gregory XVI added a further delay.

195 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 213.

196 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 654.

impressed with the progress which the students had made...“*Apart from French, Tamil and Latin, the students were examined on History, Geography and Mathematics. The top students worked out some problems in Algebra and Geometry. They talked through some experiments in Physics and concluded with a debate on a point of Metaphysics in Latin!... Copies of the prize-winning essay on logic were also distributed*”.¹⁹⁷ The entire session was presided over by the Governor - in the absence of Bishop Bonnand. The Superior gave a thought-provoking address at the end, emphasising the importance of education and the necessity of support from everyone “*to allow their youth to enjoy its benefits*”. He had no doubt about the abilities of Indian young people “*to go forward in equality with any other nation*”.¹⁹⁸

Melchior took the opportunity to thank his “*excellent and zealous colleagues [for] whatever good had been achieved*”. He expressed gratitude to Bishop Bonnand, the Paris Foreign Missions and the Holy See who “*had given him the mandate to bring Knowledge, as well as the Light of Faith, in the small area given to us to work*”. He concluded as follows: “*Dear Friends, I repeat that the future is yours if you really want to seize it. I leave it there in your hands and in the hands of God. I leave it... that is the word... because I will not be here with you, to work with you to make the future brighter. A higher will has called me away to a different duty. I must obey. God alone knows the cost of that obedience to me. But what consoles me in it all is the assurance that the College will not be any less well run; nothing will be spared in order to make it prosper... Finally, to you dear students who have been the object of my continual care and my purest joy for over three years, I say Adieu!.. But as regards this adieu, accept it in its original meaning: ‘a Dieu’ - to God. It is to God that I am leaving you. To God I commend you... to God I entrust you*”.¹⁹⁹

A provisional date for Melchior’s departure to Coimbatore was set

197 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac.* page 663.

198 *Ibidem:* pages 664 - 665.

199 *Ibidem:* pages 667 - 668.

for 19th September. In the one month which remained, there was much to be done...

Preparations and Forward Planning

Melchior's first thoughts were centred, not surprisingly, on the possibilities which his new position would offer as regards the formation of a "local clergy". Secondly, he would need personnel to minister to the Christians and hopefully, to reach out to "the pagans". These would need financial support, as would other "essential projects" which he had in mind.

Local Clergy

Melchior saw his own appointment as a "wonderful opportunity" to really advance his most cherished cause. He put forward suggestions to Bishop Bonnard and his Council (which he outlines in his *Souvenirs*).²⁰⁰ *"I very much wanted to bring along one or two seminarians with me - the most advanced in their studies and (more importantly) in their spiritual life - to be the nucleus of a new Seminary in Coimbatore, and get it off to a good start as regards customs and principles. Two wanted to come with me, Arulnathan and Packianathan, who had come to understand the real problems and their causes in India..."*²⁰¹

Melchior felt that Bishop Bonnard and his Council would see the benefits which a *Major Seminary* in Coimbatore, entirely distinct from the *Seminary-College* concept and structure. This new Seminary would bring great benefits to all Vicariates in the area (not just to Coimbatore itself). If they (Bishop and Council) became really enthusiastic, *"perhaps they would even release his long term "disciple" (Marie-Xavery) and Gnanapragassam (from Karaikal) as well!"*²⁰²

Melchior was convinced that, within a short time, he would safely

200 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages: 679 - 681 and in pages 686 - 690.

201 *Ibidem*: page 680.

202 *Ibidem*: page 687

guide all four students to the ultimate goal, their ordination as Catholic priests. Indeed, Marie-Xavery could be ordained within a year. *“Later, these young men (some or even all) could go back to Pondicherry. [Meanwhile]... The seminary there would not be a ‘loser’, as it had several model students to continue the good traditions now established”.*²⁰³

Of course, there would be other immediate benefits to Melchior himself and to making progress in the approach towards the caste customs. *“If I had Arulnathan with me, I would immediately make him my secretary (he knows French and Tamil perfectly). My own problems in trying to write Tamil would serve as good a reason for his appointment and would soothe the prejudices of the missionaries... My ‘secretary’ would live near me and eat at my table. The others would eat separately at first, in order not to annoy the local Christians... but gradually they would become convinced that we were not half-pariahs... and that we would observe the normal etiquette in the country, provided that it was not contrary to the Gospel”.*²⁰⁴

The answer to Melchior’s proposal came quickly. It was hugely disappointing. Bishop Bonnard refused to *“take a great leap forward towards our main founding Aim”* as a Society (M.E.P.), by rejecting all of the proposed names. *“He offered one instead who was not without good qualities, but his character was not very solid. He had not acquired enough basic education or virtues to allow me to accept him without misgivings... And now, I really needed one of those whom I had formed myself, with the help of God’s grace... and they refuse me! [He prayed] O God, may your Will be done - not mine! Be thou alone my help and my rescuer”.*²⁰⁵

Personnel and Financial Support

Melchior was aware that several of the missionaries from the “interior” had volunteered to join him in the new Vicariate of

203 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 690.

204 *Ibidem:* page 688.

205 *Ibidem:* pages 680 - 681.

Coimbatore. He was optimistic that a few would be assigned to be his “mission partners”. There were also indications that the M.E.P. Superiors would send some new missionaries to India. However, Melchior would have to wait for such developments for “*a little while longer*”...

On the question of finances, it was well known that Pondicherry Vicariate had “fairly considerable funds”, and that these were well managed by the Procurator. When the new jurisdictions were announced (more than a year previously) Bishop Bonnard had convened a special meeting of his Council. He informed the meeting that “*a certain sum*” had been set aside, to be divided between Mysore and Coimbatore. This would enable them to begin their work. The Bishop wanted his Council to decide precisely on the proportion between them. “*This was at the time when I had refused the episcopate... and when Bishop Charbonnaux was about to leave Pondicherry to go to Mysore permanently. Coimbatore was not represented there at all... I could hardly represent that mission after formally refusing it*”.²⁰⁶ The result was that Mysore was greatly favoured in the division. “Urgent needs” were cited by Bishop Charbonnaux and no one wanted to offend him! Besides, it was unclear when Coimbatore would have a Bishop. Melchior comments: “*This kind of reasoning might be all right for a yearly or recurrent distribution (like the “Propaganda Fide” annual fund). But in this ‘foundation’ allocation, it was all wrong*!”.²⁰⁷

Melchior was obviously very annoyed and hurt. He lists all the advantages the Mysore Vicariate already had: a fine church in Bangalore and good ones in other stations, decent houses for the clergy and at least two “posts” where the missionaries received a salary as chaplains to the Irish soldiers.

In addition to all of this, the expenses for Bishop Charbonnaux’s consecration had been paid by Pondicherry (because he was there as Coadjutor to Bishop Bonnard). “*Whereas at Coimbatore, there*

206 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 693.

207 *Ibidem.*

was nothing like that... This year, I am starting off (like Bishop Charbonnaux last year) with much less money, although I have a lot more expenses to face... In such an imbalance, it seemed at least natural to expect that I would be given a bigger share of this year's subsidy from 'Propaganda Fide', which was sent in a lump sum to Bishop Bonnand for the three of us. But this did not happen. This (they say) was in order not to upset Bishop Charbonnaux".²⁰⁸

In summing up this incident, Melchior notes: *"Personally, my debt of gratitude is not great towards my confreres in the Pondicherry administration... but I bear no resentment to anyone... they have merely failed to do the good that I was daring to expect from their charity".²⁰⁹*

Bishop Bonnand had also written to Melchior that he was *"free to invite anyone he wished"* to the Consecration ceremony in Carumattampatty. *"But I was careful not to take these words at face value. I took good care not to invite anyone except the people 'he' would want to invite himself. If I were really free, I would also have invited several more Bishops - notably Bishop Bettachini of Jaffna... I would also have invited several confreres who are my best friends, instead of Father Gruyon, the young missionary coming with Bishop Bonnand (whom I hardly know at all). Father Roger was eager to come. I only said that I would be delighted to have him. He hurried to ask permission. He was refused".²¹⁰*

Melchior kept the M.E.P. Directors in Paris informed²¹¹ on developments, and reminded them of his need for more missionaries. He added that he could not assign even one for *"the conversion of the pagans"* until the number reached eleven or twelve. (At the time of writing, there were only four in the new Vicariate). Melchior also gave some details with regard to his consecration. Bishop Bonnand would be the Principal Consecrator and both

208 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 693 - 694.

209 *Ibidem*: page 695.

210 *Ibidem*: page 695.

211 Letter: dated 6th September 1846.

Archbishop Martini and Bishop Charbonnaux had agreed to be Co-Consecrators. This was intended to show unity, as well as conformity to Roman practice, particularly to the “schismatics” (Goanese dissidents). The place for the event (now confirmed) was Carumattampatty - the only place in the new Vicariate which had “*a church worthy of the name*”.²¹² It was in a central position and served the Christians of five or six villages.

Melchior concluded his letter by thanking the Directors for the financial grant which had enabled him to buy vestments and a tabernacle, as well as some furniture and utensils for the house in Carumattampatty.

Retreat

From the 8th to 16th September, the Bishop-Elect went to the village of Ariancoupam (near Pondicherry) for a Retreat. He was very tired and his spirit was agitated. However, he made some general “Resolutions” at the end of that week. He intended to expand on them - and to give more precision to them - as his new ministry unfolded. These resolutions may be summarized as follows:²¹³

1. “*To dedicate all my time, all my faculties, all my being - more specifically and efficiently than I have up until now - to the glory of God, to the propagation of the Gospel, to the extension and exaltation of the Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church, in which it is my aim to live, to act and to die. I desire to do nothing, to say nothing, or to write anything except what has this single and only Aim*”.
2. “*To move as quickly and directly as possible towards the objective which the Holy Church had in view when sending foreign bishops - as missionaries - in this country. If ordinary missionaries who are worthy of their vocation merit the title ‘Apostolic’, surely their bishops must conduct their lives in such a way as to share one day in the glory of the apostles themselves! ‘For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the Good News’. Therefore, I will often imagine the Holy Father telling*

212 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 694.

213 *Ibidem:* pages 676 - 679.

me (like Saint Paul told to Titus) ‘the reason I left you behind in Crete was for you to get everything organised there and appoint [priests] in every town, in the way that I told you’. It is my determination to pursue this work with an invincible constancy, not allowing myself to be discouraged or beaten by any obstacles, but trusting in God’s mercy for His people”.²¹⁴

3. “To always use gentleness, in preference to force, in all my dealings with the Indians and with the missionaries... without weakness, however, or without moving away from the energy which the Lord assigns to my state in order to support whatever is Christian and Catholic in principle, according to my convictions developed in God’s presence and in meditating on the Gospel”.²¹⁵

4. “To be aware, always and everywhere, of trusting too much in my own strength or reason, but rather to trust completely in God, submitting the success of my enterprises entirely to divine Providence, under the direction of the Holy See. I will always keep the Holy See informed about anything significant being done in the Indian church, and I am always ready to submit my own views about such to the judgement of the Supreme Pontiff - the Infallible Vicar of Jesus Christ on earth. I will always act on his decisions”.²¹⁶

It was now time to begin the journey to Coimbatore. However, before doing so, Melchior celebrated Mass in the presence of all the students... “Not that I would miss most of them, apart from four or five who were a great consolation and satisfaction to me”... Thoughts and images of his time in the Seminary came crowding into his mind. He recognized “the little bit of progress” which he and his collaborators were able to achieve.

But now, he could see that even these “successes” were being thrown into danger by his departure. How much more could have been done with more unity among the confreres! How much more could

214 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 677.

215 *Ibidem*: page 678.

216 *Ibidem*: page 678. This resolution (principle) would strongly influence the actions of the future Bishop.

still be achieved if Bishop Bonnand and the Pondicherry confreres (particularly) were more advanced in their thinking about native clergy! All of this brought tears to his eyes... *“At one point, just before the Gospel, I thought I would not be able to continue... I could not shake these thoughts off; every phrase of the liturgy brought an allusion which made them stronger. Each time my heart overflowed; tears filled my eyes. I just had to stop and let them flow”*.²¹⁷

Melchior de Marion Brésillac finally left Pondicherry early in the morning of 19th September 1846. Bishop Bonnand travelled with him. But, on this occasion there was a difference. Melchior thought of his great joy when he first discovered the objectives of the M.E.P. and on being appointed to India. Then, there was the excitement of setting out for Salem after the “Initiation period” in Pondicherry, and the adventure of the trip with Father Roger and his friend Father Tribulot (now gone to his eternal reward). This time, there would be no “disciple” (Marie-Xavery had to remain at the Seminary) and there was very little sense of excitement. The mode of travel would also be very different this time, but the physical demands would be much less.²¹⁸

They went by *palanquin*. Among the missionaries, the Bishops alone (out of respect for convention) used it - but always with a reduced “*style and luxury*”.²¹⁹ By day, Melchior found it to be a

217 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 686.

218 cf. *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 691-702 for a full account of this trip, and Melchior's reflections on it.

219 Melchior explains: “*The palanquin itself, as modified by the Europeans, is a small coach-body – about six feet long (inside) and two and a half feet wide. It is three feet high. Two big shafts - high up along its length – allow it to be carried on men's shoulders. It is polished and varnished on the outside, like a carriage. It has two large sliding doors with windows and blinds, and a glass windscreen in front. The interior is neatly decorated and upholstered... It is designed in such a way that the traveller can sit, lounge or lie down completely. You can sleep perfectly, read, eat your supper or spend a night in it if necessary... You can keep the sun out and still let in a breeze all the time. For a short trip, five men can suffice – four carrying and one for relieving... For long journeys, you would need twelve – if you apply to the official palanquin station. Bishop Bonnand and I had eight each – six carrying and two relievers. In spite of the weight of the palanquin (sometimes up to 150 kilos without a passenger) the bearers keep on trotting at full speed, usually for two and a half hours (about ten miles)*”. (cf. *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 699).

comfortable and practical way to travel, while the accommodation provided at night in the various guest-houses was also highly acceptable. All had been organized by an experienced missionary (Father Pacrau) who had travelled this route many times. Melchior had twinges of conscience about being carried along by his fellow human beings in the *palanquin* - “*lying down, swaying along as on a gentle swing, to the monotonous chant of the bearers... [This] makes you feel bad at first... but you soon see how easy it comes to them. After twenty or thirty miles, they show almost no signs of fatigue at the end of the day. You also stop feeling sorry for their ‘humiliation’. For although they are wearing nothing but half a yard of cheap cloth, they consider themselves infinitely superior to the low-grade passenger they are carrying - even if he were clad in gold braid from head to toe. For we are nothing but pariahs to them!* [Melchior adds the comment] *It is far better to spend your life trotting away under a huge palanquin (but in a high-caste skin) than to be carried in one (inside the skin of a pariah)! But having said all that, they are very gentle, obedient and faithful... they walk, stop, run - just as you require. They will easily go on farther - twice as far as planned if necessary.*”²²⁰ So Melchior had plenty of time “*for prayer, meditation, reading, saying the Divine Office and the Rosary*”.²²¹

They went through districts where the failure of the rains had left people on the verge of famine. His heart was filled with compassion on seeing such poverty... some of it due to the economic policy of the Colonial powers.²²² Passing through the Salem District, Melchior recalled many experiences from his sojourn there. He noted that many of the churches were still in a terrible condition... “*Build fast and cheap, live to see your own building crumbling down – that is the architectural history of many Mission churches*”. An exception was “*a new church (for the pariahs) built at Vujapuram.*

220 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 700.

221 *Ibidem:* page 691.

222 *Ibidem:* pages 696 - 697.

This was due to Father Roger's zeal".²²³

After nine days' travelling, they were only nine miles from Carumattampatty. "We camped for the night, and sent an 'express' message: we would be there by eight in the morning... The Holy Rosary Novena had already commenced. The Christians had gathered in great numbers. The next day had barely dawned when crowds of them came hurrying to meet us. All along the route we met them... running to get a blessing... There was a continual din of drums, bangs and whistling rockets..."²²⁴ Later, amid great rejoicing, all went to the Church where Bishop Bonnand chanted a Solemn High Mass.

223 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 702 and page 696.

224 *Ibidem:* pages 702 - 703.

Chapter Nine

Pro-Vicar Apostolic of Coimbatore

The Consecration Ceremony was carried out “*with great pomp and ceremonial joy... Everything went very well. The people seemed happy. There were Christians from every community [in the Vicariate] and afterwards they all presented their ‘santhippu’.*”²²⁵ The consecrating Bishop was Bonnand, assisted by Bishops Charbonnaux (Mysore) and Martini (Verapoly). There were also thirteen priests in attendance. These included the Bishop-elect Alexis Canoz S.J. (Madura/Madurai). Never before had the people seen such a gathering of clergy. They were very impressed...

Soon after the ceremony, the Bishops departed. Father Jarrige²²⁶ (who had been appointed by Bishop Bonnand as “Father-in-Charge” of the new Vicariate the previous January) also left immediately. Melchior felt hurt by this. His confrere could have been a big help if he had stayed, even for a short time. The celebrations by the Christians, however, continued for the rest of the day. Indeed, some did not leave Carumattumpatty until a few days later. In spite of the widespread hardship caused by food shortages, they stayed to ensure that each one of them could greet their Bishop individually. On that memorable night, Melchior prayed: “*O my God, in spite of my unworthiness, mediocrity and sinfulness, here I am a bishop forever! O Mary, pray for me! Come to help me... O Poor people of India! When will God bring that new day of salvation to you? Hasten that day, O my God, for your greater glory. Amen*”.²²⁷

Three days later (7th October), Bishop Melchior called a meeting of the four missionaries who had been assigned to the Vicariate of Coimbatore. These were: Fathers Metral, Pacreau, Barot

225 The “*santhippu*” means “*gift*” and also “*visit*”. One cannot make an official visit without bringing something to give to the host.

226 Francois Jarrige was born in the Diocese of Clermont-Ferrand in 1796. He came to India in 1819. He died in Bangalore in 1889.

227 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 706.

and Laugier.²²⁸ The Minutes of this meeting state that the four missionaries would serve as a Council to the Bishop regarding the ordinary administration for the Vicariate. They would meet from time to time as events unfolded or as circumstances warranted.

Meanwhile, Father Metral would continue in charge of the District of Palgat, with Father Barot as his assistant. (He was just two years in the country and needed to gain more experience and more proficiency in the language). Father Metral would also serve as the Bishop's Vicar, as he was held in high regard by both the Christians and the secular leaders throughout the Vicariate, as well as by all his confreres.

Father Pacreau would be based in Carumattampatty and serve as Procurator of the Vicariate. His work would require frequent absences to deal with land and other business affairs, but as he knew the language and the local customs well, he would also be of great assistance to the Bishop at the Centre.

Father Laugier was in a similar position as Father Barot, having arrived in India in the same year (1844). He would serve as Priest-in-Charge of Carumattumpatty in order to care for the Christians there (and in the surrounding areas). He would also "*look after a few children whom Father Jarrige had gathered together some time before... I was hoping that they could make the nucleus of my future Seminary*".²²⁹

Finally, Bishop Melchior himself would use the remaining time up to Christmas (about six weeks) by making the study of Tamil "*my principal daily occupation*". He would also familiarize himself with the geographical, ecclesial, political and social situation in the

228 Father Pierre Metral-Charvet was born in the Diocese of Chambéry in 1802. He came to India in 1836. Father Jean Louis Pacreau, born in the Diocese of Poitiers in 1801, arrived in India in 1834. Father Jean-Baptiste Isaiah Barot was born in the Diocese of Tulle in 1818, and came to India in 1844. Father Antoine Laugier, born in the Diocese of Digne in 1820, also came to India in 1844.

229 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac... page 710.*

Vicariate. By 16th October, Bishop Melchior had letters ready for both Rome and Paris with some basic information.

Description of the Vicariate

From the geographical viewpoint, the new jurisdiction of Coimbatore “*was about 200 km long from north to south, and about the same from east to west. The area was about 30,000 square kilometres. It was limited to the east by the Caveri River; to the east and south by the Madurai Kingdom; to the west by the Gates Mountains; and to the north by the Kingdom of Mysore and the Caveri river*”.²³⁰ Climatically, there were two regions - the Coimbatore and Wayanad plateaus (which had a monsoon climate) and the Nilgiri Mountains to the north-west (which had a healthier climate). In this latter area was situated the town of Ootamund. Located at an altitude of 2433 meters, it had become a “tourist site” for the British and for wealthy people.

From the ecclesial point of view, there were about 15,000 Christians and an average of 150 conversions each year. The Vicariate had 50 churches or chapels - all in very poor condition. There were 3 sectors: Carumattampatty, Palghat and Ootacamund (or Nilgiris). The number of schools in the entire Vicariate was 7.²³¹ The town of Coimbatore itself had over half the number of Christians in the Vicariate. These were served from Carumattampatty, about sixteen miles away. (A small house was available to the missionaries about three miles from Coimbatore). In addition, there was the problem of the “schismatic priests” (particularly from Goa) who had made many incursions into this entire Vicariate over the years and had been using the village churches.²³² It was no surprise that there

230 *De Marion Brésillac...* pages 224 - 226.

231 In a separate letter to the Superiors in Paris, the new Procurator (Father Pacreau) emphasised that the main church (Carumattampatty) was in “bad condition” and that the roof of the Bishop’s little house leaked badly. He added that there was no money for the proposed seminary. There was not even enough money to pay a teacher for the few children in the little school to which Father Laugier had been assigned.

232 It was only now - after over four years in Southern India - that Melchior came face to face with the “*Goan Schism*”.

was confusion among the Christians, not only with teaching and pastoral practices, but also on such a basic issue as to who owned the church buildings...

Looking at the political situation, the Coimbatore District was part of "British India". The headquarters was in Coimbatore itself which had a population of about 30,000. The principal English authority, known as the "Collector", lived there and had his headquarters there. *"In reality, he is the 'ruler' of a vast expanse of territory... on his goodwill the welfare of the missionaries greatly depends... In the interior especially, the actual power of the Collector is enormous".*²³³

On the social conditions, Father Jarrige (who had come to India in 1819) had put on record before leaving Coimbatore that *"it is the most abandoned mission and the one with the fewest resources"*. Bishop Melchior added: *"People are living miserably because of a lack of rain for several successive years, to the point that several villages have disintegrated, and several Christian communities who would have helped us in the past, now come to us asking for alms"*.²³⁴ Even though the Coimbatore District produced rice, cotton and jute, the policies of the British textile industrialists - and the low wages provided to the Indians - did little to alleviate chronic poverty. The result was nagging hunger, poor health and the occasional outbreaks of disease among the Indian population.

During these few weeks before Christmas, Melchior made good progress as regards the Tamil language and hoped to preach in that language by the following Easter. He also quietly made his way around Carumattampatty and the neighbouring villages, observing and reflecting on the living conditions, the customs being practiced and the facilities available to the people. During the four years since he had arrived in India, he had seen many instances of suffering and poverty... In this area however, it was

233 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 708.

234 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 228.

extreme.

The Bishop was also struck by an obvious “poverty of the spirit”. He attributed this (in part) to the fact that the Gospel had never been consistently preached in this remote area of the former Vicariate of Pondicherry. There had always been a shortage of personnel - and the few assigned there had been occupied with securing land and erecting small churches, as well as surviving... Superstitious customs and practices had been largely ignored. Educational facilities were at a minimum, while the rights of girls were non-existent. Joining all of these factors together, Bishop Melchior felt that he was beginning a mission to “*the most abandoned*”.

Though the challenges were enormous, Bishop Melchior (and his small team) would proclaim, build-up and extend the reign of God’s kingdom. They would ensure that there would be continuity regarding pastoral care of the new Christians by the successors of Titus and Timothy (the local clergy) who would nourish and show Christ’s saving love to their own people. After an appropriate period of time, the missionaries would go on to preach the Gospel and endeavour to establish the kingdom of God in new places. But for now, they must do the basic work.

A core element of the reign of God was facing them... There were all forms of poverty to be urgently addressed and concrete solutions to be provided, if at all possible. Jesus had promised his kingdom to the poor (Luke 4:18-19) and He himself was poor. He had also outlined the criteria on which all Christians would be judged (Matthew 25:31-46). Melchior prayed: “*Let your kingdom come, the reign of your grace in our hearts, O God, and the reign of your Gospel in all places, but especially where you have appointed us to announce it... But first, O Lord, reign completely in us... Be the only master of our souls, correct our errors, break the waywardness of our wills, so that we may know you such as you are and want only what you wish. Let your will be done*”.²³⁵

235 Marion Brésillac: *Retreat to Missionaries*...pages 29 - 30.

Disturbing News about Bishop Luquet

Meanwhile, disturbing news concerning Bishop Luquet had come from Father Tesson (Paris). *“Bishop Luquet’s position is becoming hopeless. The Jesuits have started an all-out operation to get him out of Rome. We have reason to believe that they were behind Cardinal Franson’s letter two months ago, asking us to please let him know which Mission in India would be most suitable for Bishop Luquet... But I am afraid that it is more likely that he is going to leave our Society altogether... I would regard his departure as a great loss to our Society”*.²³⁶ The Superiors in Paris had hoped to appoint Bishop Luquet as their permanent representative in Rome to “look after” the mission interests of the M.E.P. but the Vicars Apostolic of all “their” missions in Asia had become wary of their brilliant but “undiplomatic” confrere. Melchior too was well aware that opposition to Bishop Luquet was still very strong in India. In fact, his friend had begun to publish pamphlets *“which are of no great use or significance in themselves. They are merely imprudent repetitions. Basically he is right... but he should not be saying it himself, as often or so loud. This new defiant stance of his has become a serious obstacle to all that we have been working for... [There is no doubt] he played a huge role in developing and publicizing the missionary principles initiated at the Synod of Pondicherry, but now he is harming himself and weakening his own work”*.²³⁷ Melchior continued to write to his friend, advising, encouraging and occasionally admonishing him.

First Pastoral Tour of the Vicariate

It was now getting close to Christmas. Bishop Melchior felt that it was time to make a formal visitation of the Vicariate, beginning with Ootacamund.²³⁸ This was a District to the north-west of Carumattampatty which had no resident priest. He decided to ask Father Pacreau to accompany him, as he knew the area and the

236 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 712.

237 *Ibidem:* page 738.

238 The province is popularly known as “Ooty”. The town itself is situated about 2,240 metres above sea-level.

language very well. He could also assess the needs and the finances required for any future infrastructure in that District. Besides, Melchior had noticed that Father Pacreau had been working extremely hard and that the break would do him good. The young, lively and energetic confrere (Father Laugier) was delegated to conduct all the Christmas celebrations.

*“At 2.00 a.m. on the 17th December, we set out, Father Pacreau on horseback and myself in a palanquin. We had ten men carrying our luggage, including our mountain clothes and covering, because we had heard that it would be very cold... Each man carried only a small load, because of the steep road ahead. And to reduce the palanquin team, I had promised to walk (or climb) the worst parts myself. Nevertheless, including the ‘disciples’, the cook and the ‘condireicaran’ [the guide, bodyguard and messenger], we were 29 in all. On the first day, we went directly through fields and bushes. This cut 20 miles from our trip; compared to going through Coimbatore and the main road... We did about 30 miles in the heat of the day, through a semi-desert. Nothing interrupted this monotonous part of the journey...”*²³⁹

The rest of the four-day journey was quite different. When they arrived at the bungalow at Mettupalayam (which was situated at the foot of the Western Ghats Mountains) they could feel the very cool breeze. There were only a few Christians resident in the place. The men were hardly ever at home as they did “coolie” work for the English travellers who were on the way to the Nilgiri hills, or were trading in Kerala. The small little community of Christians (mostly pariahs) did not come to see their Bishop on this occasion. This was due perhaps to a breakdown in communications or their late arrival. But, the visitors were informed (and could see for themselves) that the little mud and straw catholic church had recently been burned down. All Melchior could do was to pray, and to admire the bright stars. The next day they continued their journey, beginning at 5.00 a.m.

239 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 720.

As he ascended the steep incline towards Ooty, Melchior marvelled at the beauty of Creation... *“The sounds of multitudinous streams are orchestrated to the varied notes of an infinity of birds, each of dazzling plumage, singing amid wonderfully fresh green branches of magnificent trees... There was not one of those choristers that did not have a beautiful voice. The endless variety of the warbling, the plumage, the verdant foliage - all made it something completely charming and captivating”*. He goes on to contrast this with *“the flat rice fields, the endless sterile and boring plains, or those sudden hillocks [with] nothing on them but rocks and stones, with hardly a scrawny shrub able to grow in their crevices... Here I gazed in wonder at a real Mountain... with the imposing roar of waterfalls crashing down with white foam on the impregnable rocks... the gentle prattling of smaller streams across sloping meadows... limpid rivulets twinkling drop by drop or rippling surreptitiously through thick banks of moss... soaring trees still in the prime of life, and others bowed a little by the weight of centuries bravely survived”*.²⁴⁰

Melchior made the steep climb of seven or eight miles up to the town of Coonoor on foot. If he had wished to continue by palanquin, he would have had to hire a second team at Mettupalayam for this section of the journey. Father Pacreau also walked, in order to save his horse, which *“though handsome and dignified, was elderly and definitely not a mountaineer”*. Both missionaries enjoyed that day's climb. The usually taciturn Father Pacreau came to life by sharing reminiscences and reflexions on the past - as did Melchior. Both of them spoke lovingly of their country of origin and of the beauties of nature there as well as enjoying the magnificent scenes on the road to Ooty. As evening came, they could hear *“the varied evensong of thousands of birds (yellow, blue, green, red and black)... Their concert was sometimes broken into by the raucous wood-cock and the squalling bush-fowl... [Then] there were the big black monkeys who always wanted to block us - jeering and gibbering as we passed... There were also the big wild deer who stood and bayed defiance...*

240 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 724.

Suddenly, I stopped... I could not believe my ears! Was not that the song of the lark, up in the sky? And there she was - soaring and singing, just as wholehearted as in my 'belle France'. The whole sky seemed alive with the sweet trill of her voice...".²⁴¹

Night caught up with them one hour before they reached their rest house at Coonor. By now, the temperature had dropped considerably and the entire team (apart from the missionaries) were shivering, "*benumbed by the sudden change of temperature and by a thick fog which came down immediately after sunset... And when they saw that we actually liked this cold, they could not get over it!*" Fortunately, the experienced Father Pacreau had made sure that enough blankets had been brought to provide some warmth for all the team.

Coonor was one of the sites chosen by the English to be a rest and recreation centre, as well having a type of sanatorium or rest house. At the time of Bishop Melchior's visit, this was only in the planning stage. Roads were being constructed to provide access.²⁴² No doubt, Coonor would become an important centre in the future, but for now, it was sparsely populated and had only a few Christians.

The next morning was fine. The climb continued but, on this occasion, the road rose very gently (as it was designed for carriage traffic). Melchior continued to admire the wonders of nature, "*the yellow immortelle, a violet, marigolds, the daisies, honeysuckle and (surrounding an English bungalow) vivid beds of geraniums and roses of wonderful variety*". However, a thick mist descended around mid-day. As they neared Ooty, the Bishop could see "*the magnificent*

241 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 728 – 729.

242 Melchior adds that the project was "nearing completion" in 1855. He also pays tribute to British engineers: "*For sheer competence in planning and execution, there are few to equal English Engineers who planned this Mountain Road, built it and cut into the rock - using the natural contours to the best possible advantage to produce the cheapest result... a road not too steep for pedestrians or beasts of burden, and yet not too long or winding - a route not requiring too many cuttings or embankments, or over-expensive bridges*". (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 725).

Protestant temple". On arrival, he asked to see the Catholic Church. *"They carefully pointed out a small and miserable shack in the distance, with a cross stuck on top. It was a humble dwelling for the Lord of this place... Nearby, there was as a small cabin, the missionary's rest house... as he spent only a few months there each year."*²⁴³

The Bishop's caravan arrived unannounced. It seems that the letter which gave notice of the visit had not yet arrived. The Christians, however, were genuinely pleased to see their new Bishop, and to have him spending his "first" Christmas with them. The Bishop, on the other hand, was also pleased to be with them, especially as a "schismatic" priest had also come from Goa to conduct Christmas celebrations! This was an occasion to talk with this priest and, if possible, to find a way to resolve the disputes in the area. These had already been outlined to him by Father Pacreau.

The feelings of happiness experienced on the journey were immediately shattered when Melchior was handed a very disturbing letter from Carumattampatty, the place they had left only a few days earlier! It was signed by the most respected Indian in that area. The letter contained a "terrible accusation" against Father Laugier involving young ladies. The bishop was "shocked" and immediately consulted Father Pacreau. They agreed that, at this particular time and place, the priest had to be considered "innocent until proven guilty". However, *"we concluded that in the present doubtful situation, we should not leave Father Laugier in Carumattampatty. We should not expose the Christians to any shock now, nor to the scandal that might follow if the accusation later proved to be true. So I sent a letter by express messenger to Father Laugier. I merely said that, since a schismatic priest had just arrived in Ooty, I wanted to have a full Solemn High Mass [on Christmas Day]... So, I asked him to come up immediately he got this letter, bringing [the special] vestments and to make sure to arrive before the evening of*

243 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 731 - 732.

the 24th December".²⁴⁴ The Bishop then sent a message to Father Barot (the other young priest) at Palghat, telling him to go to Carumattampatty for the Christmas celebrations.

Father Laugier duly arrived at 6.00 p.m. on Christmas Eve. Melchior continues: "*He arrived cheerful and lively as usual. There was no sign of any uneasiness. And I took good care not to give the slightest hint of the real reason for bringing him up here. We celebrated Christmas in as great a style as possible. [But] I was sad all the time... the presence of the schismatic priest providing a plausible explanation for any signs of depression*".²⁴⁵

A few days later, Father Pacreau left for Carumattampatty. Bishop Melchior had spoken with Father Laugier on the day after Christmas, telling him of the accusation made against him. The priest listened with apparent humility and just mumbled a few words in reply. The Bishop gave him a little time to reflect.

Meanwhile, Melchior met Joachim, a rich man of Portuguese extraction, who had once been a devout Catholic and great supporter of the mission. He had even built a chapel beside his own house. But then, he and the missionary at that time had a major quarrel. Joachim took possession of the church which he had built and, from his own resources, called on the Goanese priests to minister to him and to the large number of Christians who followed him. The missionary then built another church (small and miserable in comparison) to serve the remaining flock. Melchior now tried to dialogue with Joachim. Even though the fortunes of Joachim had been diminishing, he was still very bitter against the missionaries. Further, as the area now had a "Propaganda" Bishop (as the "*Padroado* schismatics" called Melchior and the other Bishops appointed directly by Rome), Joachim and many others throughout the entire area were not going to make things easy for them. On this visit, Melchior tried to reconcile with Joachim,

244 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 734.

245 *Ibidem:* page 735.

but with no success. He tried also to get the “schismatic” priest to recognise the authority of the Vicars Apostolic, but all his efforts were in vain.

On New Year’s Day 1847, Melchior wrote his customary review of the previous year.²⁴⁶ Among the topics which he writes and prays about, is his most recent experience with his four “missionary partners”... *“My own position at present is rather serious... and I cannot see how it will turn out - even in the short term. One of my four missionaries is under grave suspicion. Another has just started a blazing row at Carumattampatty by his blatant disobedience (or is it gross insensitivity?). A third has to be constantly humoured by giving ‘extreme’ concessions. All of this has left me in a condition of depression or deep distress... I had set my hopes on our little school at Carumattampatty. Soon I might be able to find a few good students among them to become the nucleus of a seminary there. Now, they are all going to be disbanded and scattered. Who is going to teach them? Father Laugier was the only one who seemed to have some flair for that work. O God come to our aid!... Lord, save us; we perish!”*²⁴⁷

Though the Bishop had intended to stay in Ootacamund until the end of January, circumstances compelled him to cut his visit short and return to Carumattampatty. News had reached him that Father Barot had not come there for the Christmas celebrations as he had requested. He had come *after* Christmas. The people were extremely annoyed with him, and there was a general state of

246 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 736-740.

247 *Ibidem:* pages 739 - 740. It was in this annual review (of 1846) that Bishop Melchior wrote a prayer which, in recent years, has become “popular and relevant” to many missionaries and Christians... *“Lord, the future is in your hands; and I do not know to what shores the prevailing winds are wafting me. Whatever befalls me, Lord, be Thou the one and only motivation of my actions, the single End of all my efforts and undertakings, the one Object of all my desires. Turn us into docile instruments of your Mercy towards less fortunate peoples. To this end, give me understanding and strength, detachment and mortification, humility and zeal; and every virtue which a missionary (Christian) should have. With these we will triumph over the greatest obstacles. Or at least we will have put everything we have into fighting the good fight; and that is really all You ask of us...”* (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 737).

unrest at the mission. And so, Melchior had to leave Ooty in the hands of Father Laugier to carry out the normal pastoral work, to pray and to consider his own personal position.

On arrival in Carumattampatty, the Bishop immediately set about calming the volatile situation which had arisen there. He could understand the feeling of the people that *“their deepest concerns were being ignored or insulted... that foreigners were openly defying the customs or prejudices which they held most dear (rightly or wrongly)... Anyway I quickly won the confidence and affection of the school children...”*²⁴⁸ while the parents and Christians began to realize that the Bishop had taken all their interests to heart. Melchior himself had to find time to teach the children. Father Barot had to return to the very big District of Palghat to assist Father Metral, but also because he had become *“persona non grata”* among the Christians in Carumattampatty.

News from Father Laugier came sooner than Melchior expected. *“He wrote to me himself, saying he could not possibly stay in India. He seems to have given up all idea of trying to control his passions... he even asked me to request the Holy See for a dispensation from the vow of chastity. He wrote to Rome himself... and in the meantime he requested to ‘change places’ with a certain Pondicherry missionary...”*²⁴⁹ Bishop Melchior decided to immediately inform the Superiors in Paris. He also wrote to Bishop Bonnand about Father Laugier’s request, not hiding the facts of the case. He was somewhat surprised when Bishop Bonnand agreed... *“his charity must have led him to hope that he might be able to convert him... And the Bishop was also growing*

248 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 742. In this little school, the number of pupils was limited to ten as there was no accommodation for them. They ate, slept and had classes in one room. The most advanced pupils could barely grasp the contents of a short “Bible History” - while the rest could not even read. The Bishop writes: *“So half my time is spent drilling A.B.C... But to you, O God, I offer up this drudgery, and the pain and humiliation I sometimes feel at it. Please accept my poor offering, for the good of my soul and for the future advancement of the Cause - the sacred Work of Native Clergy”*.

249 *Ibidem:* pages 735 - 736. On his return from Ooty, Father Pacreau had made discreet enquiries (at the Bishop’s request) regarding the accusation against Father Laugier. He had confirmed the truth of the report.

tired of another young priest (not on any moral grounds but for other reasons)... and so, he sent Father Pajeau to take Father Laugier's place".²⁵⁰

Melchior also appealed for help from his Episcopal confreres (Bonnand and Charbonnaux) in what was clearly an emergency situation regarding personnel. *"They sent back total refusals, based on their inability (real or imagined) to help. The pain and disappointment of this has never quite been erased from my heart. It was all the more painful because several ordinary missionaries would gladly have come to my aid if they were allowed"*.²⁵¹ Melchior gives the name of one confrere, Father Chevalier from Bangalore. *"He felt especially attracted to teaching and was keenly interested in Native clergy. I immediately replied [to his letter, stating] "that if (while maintaining all proprieties he could obtain permission to come) I was now offering him the job of creating and directing my new seminary. He responded immediately, saying that he was now more eager than ever to come to Carumattampatty... I enclosed a letter from myself to his Bishop (Charbonnaux) who promptly replied. His tone was very angry. To a painful refusal, a nasty innuendo was subtly attached. I must say that this letter really hurt and irritated me... but where does irritation get you? "*²⁵²

It was now over three months since Melchior's consecration as Bishop. He felt that it was time to make a formal report to the Superiors in Paris. Having outlined the history of the Coimbatore Vicariate (including the divisions among the Christians, the schismatic priests and their push to take control of the area) Melchior

250 By way of concluding this sad episode, Melchior writes: *"After some time in Pondicherry, Father Laugier misbehaved again and was liable for expulsion. He did not wait for that, however... He left on his own accord and got himself lost on some island of the Indian Ocean, where he dropped every notion of being a priest. According to the latest news about him, however, he may have repented and been converted. God grant that this is so"*. (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 736).

251 Ibidem: page 740.

252 Ibidem: page 741. As some missionaries were expected to arrive later that year from Paris, Melchior had offered to replace Father Chevalier by one who would be assigned to Coimbatore.

stated that he needed priests for Coimbatore, Carumattampatty, Ootacamund, Codively, Darabouram and two in Palghat. These would provide pastoral care for the over 120,000 Christians. He also needed one for the seminary and a second one would be required later on. If there were one or two extra available, he could make a start on preaching to the “pagans”.

Bishop Melchior again emphasised that the Seminary was the key to a long-term solution for the pastoral care of the people. He was acutely aware that missionaries should not come to India to be country parish priests (as in France), but in Coimbatore Vicariate at this particular time, there was little choice. Bishop Melchior knew that it could take up to twenty years before a sufficient number of local priests would be available to serve the needs of the Christians... but a start had to be made now.

Through the efforts of Father Pacreau, extra land had been acquired at Carumattampatty. Melchior hoped to begin the construction of a proper seminary. The plan was to build decent accommodation for twenty boarders, with classrooms, dining room and the other necessary facilities. In fact, some basic work had already begun. The “excellent” Father Metral had given 1,500 francs (an amount which he had saved since coming on the missions in 1836). Melchior himself could manage 700 francs, and the 1,000 francs which had been allocated to him by the M.E.P. Superiors for “local clergy”, would be used in constructing the seminary. In a circular to all the Christians, Melchior had also requested some financial support from them, so that they could have their own priests. In this matter of asking the local people to make contributions to the mission, Melchior pointed out to the Superiors that no tradition had been established. The missionaries were content to live on their own allocation from the Society. The result was that the people had become accustomed to paying absolutely nothing. This would not augur well when the time came to support their own Indian priests. Here again, a start would have to be made now.

Bishop Melchior made several other points in this long letter.²⁵³ He had always been considered by some as being a “dreamer” or “theorist”. Others felt that he had little practical or business acumen. But here he showed that he possessed an enlightened and practical strategy to provide a diocesan clergy. Further, these local shepherds would be supported by their own flocks. Initially, however - and for some time - both the Superiors and the missionaries working in Coimbatore would need to cooperate, support and work towards implementing this “plan”.²⁵⁴

But now (beginning of February), there was an outbreak of the dreaded Cholera among the people. *“The cruel epidemic was raging furiously again. The general economic hardship...and the weather were no help. It made frightful inroads. The few missionaries could not be everywhere at the same time... but night and day, they were on their feet... for when it comes to zeal and devotion to duty, not one of my dear confreres was ever found wanting”*.²⁵⁵ Melchior goes on to speak of a village near Carumattampatty (Marianallur) which was very badly hit by the virus. Already, the men had been forced into doing work which was incompatible with their caste (they were weavers). This was a sign that they were really destitute and desperate. He hired a number of them to help in the construction of a wall around the newly-acquired land at Carumattampatty. *“On many mornings, I had to ask ‘where is So-and-so?’ The answer: ‘He died last night of the illness’ (they would never pronounce the dread word for Cholera)... The little village of no more than 500 souls had 3 to 5 deaths each day. The first week not one of those affected survived. And what was really astonishing is that the very next village (Somanur)... did not have a single fatality during the crisis... Happily, the cholera disappeared about the beginning of Lent... [He prayed] O Lord, bless these poor people, so worthy of your Mercy and Compassion”*.²⁵⁶

253 This letter was sent on 22nd January 1847.

254 cf. Patrick Gantly: *Marion Brésillac in India*. SMA Publications, Cork. 1991. pages 132 - 136.

255 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 761 - 762.

256 *Ibidem*: pages 762, 764, 770.

Due to the temporary closing of the school and the extra demands of the cholera outbreak, some correspondence had not been attended to since Christmas. Melchior quotes (at length) some letters from “his” seminarians in Pondicherry... *“Young men who can write like this are indeed capable of becoming good priests, and the style is obviously their own... Remember these letters were thought out and written by young men of 20-22 years. Only a few years before, they were just ‘raw Indians’ and of course, ‘nothing could ever be made of them’. Well, I think that, with a little bit of love and care, you could make a lot out of them – including first-class priests. Moreover, we had only a very small radius to pick from. This shows that young people of that high quality are relatively plentiful. So I regard it as certain that if we only tackled it in a common agreed effort all over India, we would succeed. We would not only have some very good priests, we would have an excellent Indian clergy”*.²⁵⁷

In another letter, there was an interesting suggestion from Bishop Luquet. *“You should write to the Holy Father, informing him of your recent consecration and also suggesting that for the sake of the urgent needs of the Faith in India, he should convene a Meeting of the Vicars Apostolic on the sub-Continent, to discuss certain vital matters. And you should indicate some of the principal points to His Holiness... Under the heading of ‘means to counter the Schism’, you could include ‘the creation of Ecclesiastical provinces’, thus implying residential Bishops and Archbishops... Perhaps Propaganda could get it on the agenda for you - in an indirect way at least”*. In a note which Melchior received a short time later, Father Luquet was even more precise: *“I am now requesting that you suggest a few good ‘tough’ questions for Propaganda to put to the Vicars Apostolic - questions that they cannot get around - in order to bring out the true position of things”*.²⁵⁸ Melchior did write to His Holiness, *“but I don’t know if it ever really came to the Pope’s personal attention. At that time, the Pope was beginning to*

257 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 745 - 749. These letters are interesting and are very enlightening.

258 *Ibidem*: pages 743 - 744.

become swamped with one political crisis after another - to the great detriment of the missions".²⁵⁹ On his part, Melchior would continue to monitor the general state of the missions in India, despite the difficult situation in his own jurisdiction.

The Easter ceremonies were celebrated with great joy at Carumattampatty. Crowds of Christians came from all the Districts. The place was crowded, and the people were happy. "*This year, I also had the consolation of giving a great number of Holy Communions and of preaching to the people in Tamil for the first time. This first year, their good attendance was a great relief to me, because it reassured me about the Schism*".²⁶⁰

Bishop Melchior and Father Metral had also found time to discuss the future of "their" seminary on several occasions. Five years of experience had taught Melchior that changes in approach were needed. The Seminary-College model, while successful in so many ways, did not adequately address the provision of clergy. While both missionaries (Bishop Melchior and Father Metral) were very much in favour of educating *all* Indians, their over-riding interest was to provide a "*well educated and respected local clergy*".

The Bishop had written to "Propaganda Fide" at Easter (5th April 1847) specifically about the "new" Seminary which he was now in a position to inaugurate in the Vicariate of Coimbatore. The Christians of Coimbatore had seen Indian priests from the Malabar Coast or Pondicherry from time to time, but they never had "one of their own". While this could be attributed to an absence of reflection on the subject or simply being satisfied with the "status quo", it was due (more than likely) to the deep-rooted desire of Indians, including Christians, to have their sons married. Celibacy was a concept that was repugnant to the Hindu mentality and the

259 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 744. Melchior does not record the contents of this letter in his *Souvenirs*. A copy of the letter is in the *African Missions Archives* (Rome). A commentator states: "*It is remarkable in its filial style...*"

260 *Ibidem*: page 764.

majority of children were pledged in marriage from an early age. A second difficulty was the mentality of the missionaries (especially on the Coramandel Coast) who thought that, not only were Indians incapable of becoming priests, but that any seminary that might be established “some day in the distant future” in Southern India should follow the European model. To counteract all of this, Bishop Melchior proposed a model which would take into account some measures proposed by the Council of Trent.²⁶¹

1. To organize the seminary in such a way that it would be perfectly clear to all, especially parents, that this was not an “ordinary school” but was one for aspiring priests only.
2. That while a sufficiently broad education would be provided, the seminary would be a house of prayer and study of “ecclesiastical subjects”. The Divine Office and the Liturgy would have a central place each day in the lives of both students and staff.
3. To offset any student coming for “education” only, Tonsure would be given just a few months after entry to those who showed signs of a vocation. This would strengthen the young candidates and expose any “incorrect attitudes” on the part of the parents.

While awaiting a reply from Rome, Melchior appointed Father Metral as superior of the seminary. He began to implement these proposals quietly. The answer from “Propaganda Fide” came quite quickly.²⁶² It gave full approval (“*maxime probata*”) to the three proposals. This provided great assurance for Melchior, as for him, the “*voice of Rome was the voice of Christ*”.

It had also become clear that Coimbatore should be the place for the Bishop to have his official residence, paid for by the mission. This would ensure that if ever there was a crisis, no one could lay

261 cf. Jean Bonfils S.M.A. - Noel Douau S.M.A.: *Marion Brésillac: Mission and Foundation Documents*: Mediaspaul. Paris. 1985. pages 99 - 102. Translator into English: Robert Hales S.M.A. (1985). cf. also: *De Marion Brésillac...* pages 238 - 239.

262 The letter of approval was dated 22nd June 1847.

claim to it. Coimbatore was also the centre of the Vicariate, and the Bishop could be in daily communication by post with all the missionaries (in addition to many other advantages). “*A suitable house, with some land adjoining came up for sale. We bought it for 4,000 rupees*”.²⁶³ Next, Melchior planned to visit the rest of the Vicariate. But two letters arrived which caused him to change his plans.

263 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 766.

Chapter Ten

The Wider Scene

Even though Bishop Melchior was concerned (and sometimes really worried) about the people and the issues affecting the Coimbatore Vicariate, he could not entirely “let go” of the great hopes which he had for India. Bishop Luquet had consistently warned him about “*underhand intrigues...against the implementation of the truth*”.²⁶⁴ It was also becoming increasingly clear that there were signs of disunity between the various jurisdictions, between religious Orders (Societies) and even *within* the religious groups. The Christians too had become restless. The reasons for this state of disarray varied from Bombay to all the “Coramandel jurisdictions” (including Ceylon). Melchior noted: “*What hope now for those [inter-Vicariate] Councils so urgently needed in order to consolidate and implement the Principles which the Holy See had proclaimed anew after the Synod of Pondicherry? How much more likely it was to see them all continue to be mutilated or ignored in practice*”.²⁶⁵

It appeared, however, that the jurisdictions in the Malabar Coast were not “seriously affected” by this widespread malaise. In the first letter, Archbishop Martini of Verapoly (who had been a Co-Consecrator at Melchior’s Episcopal ordination) and the Carmelite Superiors invited Melchior to attend the consecration of Joseph Baccinelli O.D.C.²⁶⁶ He had been appointed as Vicar Apostolic of Quilon (recently carved out of Verapoly). It would take place on Pentecost Sunday. The second letter was from the Jesuits to attend the Episcopal consecration of Alexis Canoz S.J. - scheduled for 29th June (Feast of Saints Peter and Paul).

Melchior was happy to go to Verapoly. He would visit his friend

264 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 837.

265 *Ibidem:* apages 836 - 841.

266 Joseph Baccinelli was born in Rome (1807). He went to India in 1833. He was ordained Vicar Apostolic of Quilon (1847) and was transferred to Verapoly in 1859. He died in 1868.

(Archbishop Martini) and would see for himself the Malabar Coast, with its Saint Thomas and Syro-Malabar Catholics. He hesitated about accepting the other invitation. It was true that relations with the Jesuits were strained “because of our sometimes painful encounters in the past [but] to decline might be interpreted as personal ill-feeling against the Madurai Jesuits”.²⁶⁷ Other considerations were the expense involved (as money was very scarce) and two prolonged absences from “his Vicariate” - so soon after his own consecration. After consultation with Bishop Bonnard, Melchior finally decided to attend both ceremonies.

On the Road to Verapoly

Bishop Melchior set off for Verapoly on 15th May. He stayed overnight in Coimbatore in the new bungalow. “*Though outside the city, the house was very near to it... It had no furniture in it... I hoped to build a church in the garden... In the meantime, I planned an oratory for myself and the missionaries and the few Catholics... [He prayed] “Lord, let it become the centre of a real diocese where you will one day be known, loved and served by a numerous faithful and by many local priests!...If ever I build a church in this place, it will be dedicated to Saint Michael Archangel, protector of the Holy Church”.*²⁶⁸

Passing through the District of Palghat, Melchior visited Father Barot who was temporarily in charge of the area.²⁶⁹ He was at an outstation (Kovilpalayam). There, the Bishop found a community in “a very bad state of disorder”. Always a difficult place, the young priest (Father Barot) had aggravated the situation by getting into countless arguments and making “some reckless mistakes”. The Bishop also noticed that the “churches” in the District were very dilapidated - as was the priest’s house in Palghat itself. This District (the second in importance in the Vicariate) would need

267 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 772.

268 *Ibidem:* pages 773 - 774.

269 Father Metral had to be at Carumattampatty to supervise the seminary and provide pastoral care for the Christians there during the Bishop’s absence.

special attention as soon as he returned from the visit to the Malabar Coast. In the meantime, Melchior invited Father Barot to accompany him. The young priest was showing signs of defiance, and it was clear that he expected to be reprimanded by the Bishop. Instead, Melchior made no comments on the situation or on his ministry... *“As I was only passing through, I refused to deal with any of their disputes...”*²⁷⁰ By taking him on the trip, he hoped that Father Barot would learn how to show respect to the people and how to be more patient with them. The District would have to manage for a few weeks without a resident priest.

On crossing the Ghat Mountains, the Bishop came upon a different climate and terrain. This was a huge contrast to East India (the Coramandel Coast). Here it was approaching Monsoon season (mid-May) while on the other side of the mountains, it would remain dry and arid. There also seemed to be plenty of relatively small (but navigable) rivers. What was more striking, however, was the state of the Church on the Malabar Coast. He compared this with his own experience of the Indian missions which was preoccupied with castes, rites and customs, local clergy, misdemeanours of secular governments, personnel problems and varied interpretations on the role of “a missionary”. *“On this first journey however, I just revelled in all the good and all the beautiful things I saw... I knew there was another side to the medal; but I was not so interested in looking for it just now”*²⁷¹

The first encounter of the Bishop’s entourage was with a local Indian priest of the Syro-Chaldean rite. He warmly welcomed them to the village (Melarcode). With the local community, the

270 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 777 - 779.

271 Ibidem: pages 774 - 801. Melchior had other occasions to visit the Malabar Coast and most of the South of India (including Ceylon). Some seven years later, Bishop Melchior was requested by “Propaganda Fide” to prepare a report on The Malabar Rites, the Mission of the Church in India and on the Society of Foreign Missions (M.E.P.). This clear and well - researched report (which included several propositions for action) may be found in *Marion Brésillac* (Founder of the Society of African Missions) *Mission and Foundation Documents*. Edited by Jean Bonfils and Noel Douau. (Translator: Robert Hales). Mediaspaul. Paris. 1986. pages 28 -78.

priest led the visitors into “a large and well furnished church... What was my astonishment when I heard that this poor “catanar” priest was himself the sole architect and part mason of this fine church! And that the villagers had paid for it all out of their own pockets! I was in another world here! ”.²⁷² The priest invited Bishop Melchior and Father Barot to dine with him. It was clear that he had gone to a lot of expense to provide food for *all* in the caravan of the Bishop but “my Coimbatore followers, though Christians to a man, went off and cooked their own food, in new pots... for the priest and the Melarcode Christians do not observe caste rules”.²⁷³ During this trip, Melchior would see that the “caste rules” and the Decree of Benedict XIV (*Omnium Sollicitudinum*) were either very loosely interpreted or even ignored. This is the one thing that caused him concern. It was something that would (later on) become for him a huge issue - a matter of conscience.

But for now, Bishop Melchior was delighted to see such a number of Christians in the Verapoly Vicariate (200,000), administered by 48 Indian priests of the Latin rite and 388 of the Syro-Chaldean rite. There were also 30,000 Nestorian Christians in the Vicariate. Only the Bishop and two missionaries were European, and they were of the Carmelite Order. The seminarians numbered 48 (Latin rite) and 200 aspirants to priesthood in the Syro-Chaldean rite. Bishop Baccinelli (the new Bishop of Quilon which was formerly part of Verapoly) would begin with 70,000 Catholics, 20,000 Goan schismatics, 11 Indian priests and one European Carmelite missionary. The statistics of the jurisdiction of Mangalore (which had been taken from Verapoly just one year earlier: May 1845) were not available to Melchior at that time.

As Melchior listened and noted the inevitable problems concerning the “poor training” which the priests had received and some “notorious scandals”, he thanked God for the glorious Apostle

272 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 781. “Catanar” is a synonym for Syro-Chaldean in the Malabar region.

273 *Ibidem*.

Thomas who had first made fertile these lands by his preaching and holiness, and which now includes “*his admirable Syrochaldaic Community... [which] has sufficient local income for their own maintenance and that of their priests*”.²⁷⁴ The fact that there were numerous native priests was the key... “*I have said it before, and I will say it again...It is far better for a people to have even a mediocre clergy of its own (with even a few ‘bad’ priests) than to have no local clergy at all*”.²⁷⁵

The state of Christianity in the Malabar Coast had also been greatly helped by the tradition handed down by Saint Thomas and reinforced by the Portuguese governments regarding Caste. This required that every Catechumen (before Baptism) had to renounce Caste. Melchior comments: “*I am not trying to say that a little bit of flexibility and understanding might not have been useful too. The Christians, indeed, are numerous here; but the pagans that are kept away by harshness and rigidity may even be more numerous. Anyway, the fact remains: the Christians here are stronger than the caste-ridden Christians of the interior*”.²⁷⁶

Bishop Melchior arrived in Verapoly on 20th May. All along the route, he had been made very welcome by Christians and priests. Now, he was warmly received by the Bishops and Carmelite priests who had assembled for the Episcopal consecration. The actual ceremony took place on Pentecost Sunday (23rd May). It was performed “*in good order and in some style... the gathering of clergy (more than one hundred) was an impressive sight... but the crowd was not really huge. The reason given was that it was the third or fourth consecration seen in Verapoly in a short time... [and] the rains had come and far-away people did not want to travel*”.²⁷⁷

Melchior stayed on for three more days (partly because of the rains) before returning to Carumattampatty. During these days,

274 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...*page 782.

275 *Ibidem*: page 784.

276 *Ibidem*: pages 784 – 785.

277 *Ibidem*: page 795.

he learned another reason for the “poor” attendance: the attitude of some Carmelites in Kerala towards the Christians and the native priests. Melchior was well accustomed to the criticism and negativity of his own confreres on these issues but he was surprised to find it here. *“Never in my life did I hear such negative talk about the poor Indians and the native clergy... They [the Carmelites] do not take the trouble of starting the reforms which the Indians themselves desire... but all I saw (and all I could see in this brief period) was the good side of things... any disquieting impressions remained vague...”*²⁷⁸

The journey back to Carumattampatty was uneventful, *“without stopping anywhere except to sleep or eat in public bungalows... Making my way through Palghat District, I could not avoid hearing more about some of the problems ... but I decided to do nothing until I had consulted Father Metral... Poor Father Barot has given me so many signs of being confused and recklessly independent that I am really scared about his future performance in this Vicariate... [In fact], my worst fears were soon surpassed. Only a few short days later, I heard of some unbelievable blunders perpetrated by this young and hot-headed missionary. What numerous trials you are sending me, O my God!... But I must thank you for the graces bestowed on me during the trip to Verapoly”*.²⁷⁹

A Great Consolation

Bishop Melchior (in consultation with Father Metral) decided to bring forward the conferring of Tonsure on two young Indians (aged about fourteen) while awaiting the official approval from “Propaganda Fide”. This was necessary because he had to leave almost immediately for the Episcopal ordination of Bishop-Elect Canoz S.J. but also because (more importantly) he wished to show, as soon as possible, that this new “school” was really different, and that he (with Father Metral) were honestly working to give them their own priests.

278 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 797 – 798.

279 *Ibidem:* pages 799 - 801.

*“The likes had never been seen before in the province of Coimbatore. The crowds that attended the ceremony were a sure sign of the people’s interest in this ‘new’ thing - the Seminary. But none of the missionaries appeared, nor any of my confreres from neighbouring Vicariates. I soon heard, from various sources, that they were ‘shocked’ by my ‘haste’, as if Tonsure was a point of no return, as if it did not leave me plenty of years to get to know and form these young clerics without binding them irrevocably in the sub-diaconate! [Also] I could be morally certain that they would very soon be taken away and married off unless I did something to keep them with me!”*²⁸⁰

The Visit to Trichy (Trichinopoly)

On 19th June 1847, Bishop Melchior set out for Trichy for the consecration of Alexis Canoz S.J. On this occasion, he linked up with Father Pacreau who was stationed at Codively at that time. He had been personally invited because of his long-time friendship with some Jesuits and admiration for their “way of life”. In order to cut down on expenses, they decided to travel in less comfort and by taking some risks, such as crossing the Caveri River in a “*parisal*” which had been constructed by Pacreau and his helpers.²⁸¹ Further, as most of the trip would be on water, Father Pacreau gave the following advice: *“Your Lordship would do well to bring along a suitable light chair, to be made fast to the inside of the ‘parisal’, so that you may have some place to sit during the 5-6 day voyage. Without that, any way you sit will soon become very painful. A good parasol is also essential”*.²⁸²

On arrival at Trichy (27th June), Bishop Melchior got a very warm welcome from the Jesuits. Apart from their officials, he was particularly pleased to meet Father Cauneille S.J. from his own

280 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 801 - 803. Later records show that one of these did not persevere. Not long after, Bishop Melchior gave the Tonsure to four more. All of these persevered.

281 This is a light boat consisting of a round bamboo frame covered with hide, and coated with tar in order to render it waterproof. (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 803 - 804).

282 *Ibidem*: page 805. A full description of this difficult, risky and challenging journey may be found in *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 803 - 830.

diocese of origin (Carcassonne) who had only recently come to India. Like himself, Father Cauneille had been a professor at the Minor Seminary there! “*Though I did not know him, we were very soon [talking] like old acquaintances... What a joy it was to hear all the latest news about people and places that will always be dear to me*”.²⁸³ Of course, Melchior was also happy to meet Bishops Bonnand and Martini and some confreres from Pondicherry. In informal exchanges, Melchior learned that the Seminary in Pondicherry was doing well, with its thirty seminarians and his successor as Superior (Father Godelle). In fact, Bishop Bonnand had brought “a few” Indian clerics with him to this ceremony. In short, any apprehensions which Melchior had of not being made welcome were quickly dissipated.

The actual consecration of Alexis Canoz took place on 29th June (1847), the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. Approximately, thirty priests participated in the ceremony. “*It was magnificent, and would seem so anywhere in the world... Rich decorations and a high Altar prepared with majesty and elegance, enhanced the already beautiful church. The people had come in crowds, and everything went off with wonderful orderliness and precision... [Afterwards] gaiety and good cheer reigned supreme and, as soon as darkness fell, the Christians put on a wonderful fireworks display for the new Bishop*”.²⁸⁴

As had happened at his own consecration, the Bishops did not find time to discuss any of the serious problems facing all of them. Some departed immediately after the ceremony. However, Melchior decided to stay on for a little while to visit the area with his new friend Father Cauncille S.J. During these few extra days, Melchior noted and was impressed by the discipline and the “*esprit de corps*” of the Jesuits (in contrast to his own Society). He attributed their strong sense of unity to “*the dynamism of their constitution and their internal organisation*”. But Melchior lamented the fact that they still declined to establish a local, indigenous and secular clergy in

283 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 820.

284 *Ibidem:* pages 824 - 825.

this area which had so many high-caste Christians. True, they had *“two or three purely Indian Jesuit novices... but this was not what the Holy See meant when it had consistently declared that all must actively work for the establishment of Local Clergy. The Principle is clear”*.²⁸⁵

Bishop Melchior was also on the look-out for a cheaper form of transport than the palanquin. As he would be based in Coimbatore City on his return, he would be travelling frequently to Carumattampatty to visit his “beloved” seminary and his faithful collaborator Father Metral. And so, *“At Trichy, I managed to find a battered old cab and an elderly but still vigorous horse. All together, they coast only 150 rupees. I decided to use them now for my return journey to my dear Mission”*.²⁸⁶

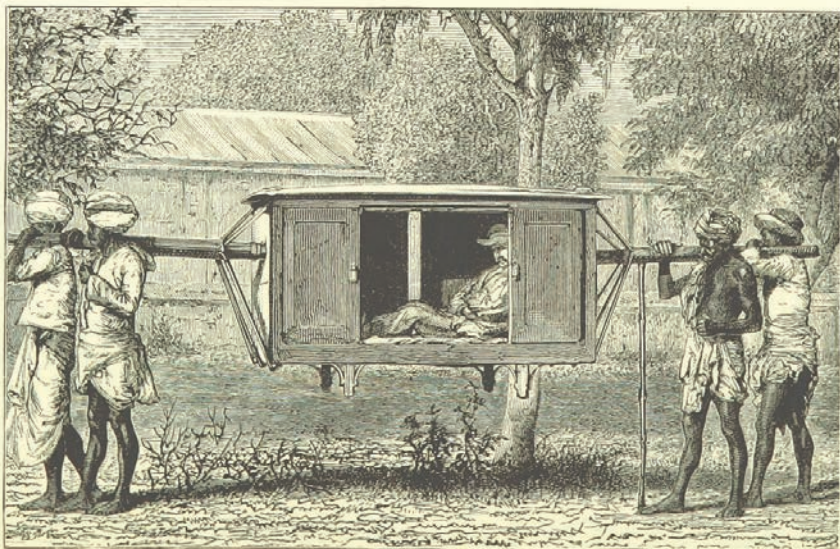
The journey back to Carumattampatty was a tough, monotonous and tiring one. *“A violent scorching wind blew all day and calmed down at night, so we were forced to travel only in the hours of darkness. The roads were by no means suited to my poor old cab, which very nearly smashed a wheel on a rock (more than once). God protected us, however, from such a calamity. May He be blessed forever because of the special protection He has always sent along with me on my journeys”*. Melchior was happy to be back *“to our little chapel, our small cottage and narrow compound...”* Nonetheless, he could not help comparing the dilapidated state of the missions in the Coimbatore Vicariate - as well as the commitment of the Christians - with what he had seen on his visits to the other jurisdictions...

Bishop Melchior strengthened his resolve to do what he could to change the situation, while praying: *“May the Lord hush my inner complaints about being so poor... Wasn't the Lord Jesus poorer still? Give me the grace, O Lord, to turn it all to Your glory - the real genuine poverty which You are bestowing on me now”*.²⁸⁷

285 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 821 - 823.

286 *Ibidem*: page 826.

287 *Ibidem*: pages 829 - 830.

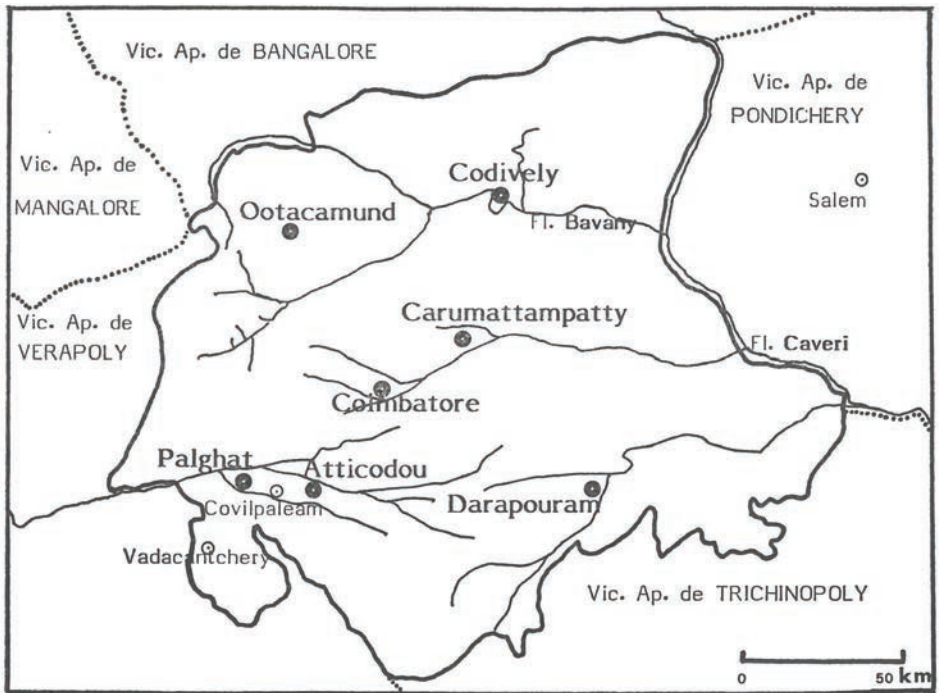


A PALANQUIN.

5.1 A Palanquin



5.2 Nilgiri Hills



5.5 Pro-Vicariate Apostolic of Coimbatore 1845 (Internal divisions established by Bishop de Marion Brésillac)



5.3 Handloom at Carumattampatty



5.4 Spinning at Carumattampatty

Chapter Eleven

Consolidation

Towards the end of July (1847), Melchior moved to Coimbatore - the civil capital of the Province. Situated at 1400 feet above sea-level, it was surrounded by a “horseshoe of hills”, and was healthier than Carumattampatty. The house was modest but adequate. Gradually, Melchior got some basic furniture and developed a section of the garden with flowers and some crops. The garden especially served as an oasis of peace and quiet. Though it was lonely at times, Melchior felt at ease and “at home”. After paying courtesy calls on the officials and other notables in the city, Melchior set about dealing with some of the most urgent issues in the Vicariate.

Since coming to the Vicariate some ten months previously, Melchior had become increasingly concerned about the serious poverty all around him. In the hand-over notes given to him on the day of his Episcopal ordination, Father Jarrige had made explicit reference to the devastating poverty in the area.

Now, especially after his recent trips, Bishop Melchior saw how stark it really was. Apart from the periodic failure of rains (which does cause famine) a major contributing factor was the policies adopted by colonial powers. In the case of the Coimbatore Province, it was the British administration.

Particularly poor at this time were the numerous castes of weavers. *“The raw cotton is now exported to England, to be spun and woven there. Then it is re-imported in machine-made textiles, often better and cheaper than the cloths hand-made in India... all at the expense and ruination of numerous castes of weavers... Who can count the number of famine victims resulting from the single fact of the cotton “revolution”?... One could go on and list a whole series of artificial causes which are daily impoverishing these poor people of India, and*

even diminishing their food resources, all for nothing except for the better enrichment of the 'English'...".²⁸⁸ As an initial step, the Bishop wrote a letter to a prominent wholesaler in the City (Mr. de Colons) asking for a meeting to discuss ways of employing some of the local weavers or offer some practical solutions to the critical humanitarian situation.

Meanwhile, news had come that three new missionaries had been assigned to Coimbatore. These would soon join Father Pajean, the recently arrived replacement for Father Laugier.²⁸⁹ Bishop Melchior felt that, with the imminent increase in missionaries, it was time to draw up a Directory for the missionaries in the Coimbatore Vicariate. Such a document would also be useful to the Paris Superiors when preparing people to come to the area. The text of the Directory consisted of 31 Articles. These stated clearly the motivation, spirit and actions which should motivate each missionary. Melchior recalled the basic goals of the Paris Foreign Missions Society - emphasising that all missionaries must work towards the establishment of a local clergy - even if they were not directly involved in formation work. Further, all missionaries must treat local priests as equals - sacrificing (where necessary) cherished European customs. In dealing with the local people, the missionaries should always be "Good Shepherds", as it is mainly through showing kindness and real love that people will be attracted to the Faith.

In Article 17, we read that the missionaries must always keep in mind their commitment by *Oath* to work for the conversion of "the pagans". As soon as is feasible, they will leave the pastoral care of the Christians to the local clergy. Meanwhile, the missionaries

288 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 696 - 697.

289 (a) *Jean Louis Pajean*: born in the Diocese of Chambéry in 1822. Came to Pondicherry in 1846, and then on to Coimbatore in 1847. (b) *Louis Charles Vanthier*: born in the Diocese of Besançon in 1820. Came to Coimbatore in 1847 and died there in 1848. (c) *Jean Claude Bruyere*: born in the Diocese of Puy in 1819. Came to Coimbatore in 1847 and died there in 1857. (d) *Ernest Christophe Bonjean*: born in the Diocese of Clermond-Ferrand in 1823. He came to Coimbatore in 1847. He died in Ceylon in 1902.

should support each other - by visiting and “developing a fraternal spirit”, receiving the Sacrament of Penance, attending the annual retreat and council meetings - to which all are invited.

The Directory deals at length with the subject of finance and “style of life” of the missionaries.²⁹⁰ Bishop Melchior was well aware that each missionary received a financial allocation (which was then known as “*viatique*” or “*viaticum*” (i.e. “provisions for the journey”) from the M.E.P. for their own personal upkeep. Consequently, many sincerely felt that they could not ask the “poor Indians” to support the work of evangelisation in their midst - while others felt that it wasn’t really worth the effort, or that it could be left to sometime in the distant future.

The Directory makes it clear that the local Christians must learn from the beginning to financially contribute to the maintenance of their own churches and to prepare them to support a future local clergy. Further, this would recognize the dignity of the people, and give the Christians a sense of ownership. Very often, people show little respect for something which is given to them for nothing..²⁹¹

Other articles in this Directory deal with dress for clerics, mode of travel and conduct of religious services. In finalizing the entire text, Bishop Melchior sought and received the valuable insights of

290 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...*pages 831 - 835.

291 Earlier that year (1847), Bishop Melchior had proposed a scheme for the Christians in the District of Carumattampatty. Each Christian community would have its own “*Maniakaran*” (a local, village lay-leader) who would be elected from three candidates proposed to the missionary. This person would have the over-all responsibility for the upkeep and decoration of the church, and would be assisted by two other “*maniakarans*”. Their agreement and presence (as well as that of the priest) was necessary to remove any money from the safe. Annual accounts had to be presented to the Bishop. When on visitation, the Head “*Maniakaran*” would officially welcome the priest and give a report on the state of Christianity in the area. In order to establish this system, the agreement (in writing) was necessary from all the Christians. (cf. *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...*pages 831 - 835). “*The scheme was an experiment which, on the whole, proved satisfactory and gradually spread to other districts of the Vicariate. It was to endure, in modified form, and is still to be found in Carumattampatty and in other parts of the modern diocese of Coimbatore*”. (cf. *For This Cause...* page 133).

Father Metral. He then dispatched it to the Superiors in Paris for their perusal.

The three new missionaries, having arrived in Coimbatore in September (1847), were studying Tamil *“with great ardour and some success. Their piety and their excellent behaviour gave me great joy and high hopes”*.²⁹²

A great consolation to Melchior all during this time was Azaghiri Pillai - an Indian Christian layman. *“He occupied the distinguished post of “sadaramin” (Assistant Judge) in the District...He (and his family) gave very good Christian example...You could have a really interesting and sustained conversation with him. He often came to see me; and in him I could admire the great potential of the Indian people, seeing how education had made him such a truly superior man...”*.²⁹³

He was particularly keen to see a Catholic translation of the Sacred Scriptures into the Tamil language. As this was something which had been discussed at the Pondicherry Synod, Melchior was able to assure him that the work was already underway...*“the execution of the project would be difficult but not impossible”*.

But now, the good Judge was about to be transferred. Melchior regretted this fact - stating that it was definitely a misfortune for the locality, and especially for the Christians. *“He used to protect them from the harassments of the pagans at times... But the pagans too were going to miss him. They knew that justice was the deciding factor in all his decisions - a rare thing among the judges of [this] part of India... Azaghiri Pillai had the reputation of being incorruptible... He never took bribes...”* Tributes were paid to him by all sectors of the population. They were also keen to keep him as “their” Judge.

An indication of this was an approach made to Bishop Melchior by a rich Hindu. *“After a big ‘salaam’, he went on to say: ‘Indeed the news is only too true. He is going... But now he is a man of your*

292 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 863.

293 *Ibidem:* pages 867 - 872 for a full account.

religion. You are the senior Christian guru in the area. So I have come to ask you to pray your God to leave him here with us. For this purpose I am bringing you 50 rupees to address prayers to your God for this intention'... It goes without saying that I declined the rupees and promised the prayers. Unfortunately my prayers were not heard - at least in the obvious way".²⁹⁴

Before Judge Azaghiri Pillai left Coimbatore, he used his influence to raise money for a new seminary building. The response was encouraging. *"In spite of the hard times, the leading Christians gave some money, as well as quantities of cereals etc. They also gave several days of voluntary work. Thus they helped me greatly with the building which I started soon afterwards, and finished a year later... [Melchior reflected] Why can't we take such outstanding men, and make priests of them, and Bishops too. Saint Ambrose was still only a catechumen when he was acclaimed: 'Come! Act no longer as Magistrate but as our Bishop'. Are the real apostolic times gone forever?"*²⁹⁵

Bishop Melchior celebrated the first anniversary of his consecration at Carumattampatty on 4th October. It was more muted than the spectacular event a year previously, but despite the continuing economic hardship, the Christians came from all the districts in the Vicariate. *"The altar was beautifully decorated with long garlands of natural flowers in rather graceful designs... We also 'inaugurated' a fine set of candlesticks, bought with our 'widows-mite' savings, the new Sunday collections... My young seminarians (who had started Plain Chant) got through the Sung Mass fairly well... and I distributed blessed loaves of bread hoping that they would become a progressive substitute for the roasted grains sometimes distributed in the church - more or less as the pagans do (not without some overtones of superstition). I was hoping that a sharing of bread on such big occasions could become a useful symbol of unity and fraternity between our Christians of different castes... May God in his goodness bless these feeble efforts at*

294 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 867.

295 *Ibidem:* page 868.

community”. After the ceremony, Melchior took some time to make a visitation of the Carumattampatty District. He was consoled at the “*encouraging progress*” of both the Christians and the Seminary under the leadership of Father Metral, “*an excellent man whose good example was working wonders [which are] known perfectly only to God but glimpsed also at times by his closest friends, when they are so fortunate as to see a little way into the inner sanctuary where the Saints like to keep their goodness hidden*”.²⁹⁶

Father Gailhot (who had led the Annecy missionaries to “their new mission” at the beginning of 1845) paid a surprise visit to Melchior at Coimbatore. He had left Vizhagapattinam and returned to his former post at Bangalore. It seems that as the missionaries began to find their way, disagreement arose between them and Father Gailhot. This had not come as a surprise to Melchior. Eventually, they reported his confrere to “Propaganda Fide” and, quite quickly, they were given one of their own men as Superior, with Episcopal character. Father Gailhot then immediately left that mission. As he was very tired and in great need of some form of recreation, Bishop Charbonnaux gave him permission to “take a little break”. Having passed through several areas such as Mangalore and Calicut, Father Gailhot decided to travel through Palghat and on to Coimbatore. Melchior was happy to welcome him.²⁹⁷ For a few days, they shared stories and enjoyed each other’s company.

In mid-December (1847), Bishop Melchior was in a position to undertake an official visitation of Palghat. Circumstances had

296 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac*...page 864.

297 In a letter written to Melchior by Father Gailhot’s successor Father Tissot (who had come to India in 1845 as a member of the original team), he stated: “*This move of his really pains me. And it publicizes this rather unedifying misunderstanding far too much... If Father Gailhot had not gone off like that, I had been hoping to sort out everything peacefully... To tell you the truth, My Lord, I think that here has been too much haste about this very delicate and important affair. Nobody here knew what the Sacred Congregation was planning... If we had been consulted, we would not have agreed with it, even though the performance of ‘M. Le provicaire’ [Ghailot] had not always enjoyed our universal approval*”. (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac*... page 840).

prevented him from doing so earlier. He took Father Metral and a few seminarians with him. With Father Metral's experience and by actually seeing their "kith and kin" preparing for priesthood, Melchior looked forward to a fruitful visitation. One month was set aside for the visit.

The Bishop was well aware that the Christians of Palghat District had a reputation for being *"undisciplined, almost unteachable and extremely attached to their customs. They were ready to call on a schismatic priest after the slightest disagreement"*.²⁹⁸ As there was only a short time available before the Christmas celebrations, Melchior decided to go to Covilpalayam, the administrative capital of Palghat District and *"our only possible headquarters... as it had a priest's house (not quite uninhabitable) and a little garden... We have nothing remotely like these in the rest of the District... But most of the Christians live far from here and it is hard for them to come to church here even on Sundays and big Feasts... Things will have to change. The District will necessarily have to be divided... two central missions: one for the City of Palghat and the other at Anthicode (where I am due in a few days time)"*.²⁹⁹ Thus, Christmas 1847 was rather dull and lonely. The team made elaborate preparations but very few Christians attended the ceremony. *"Unfortunately, Father Metral fell ill that evening and Father Barot was called out to a dying Christian some five miles away. All of this upset our little ceremony for this Holy Night... Alas O Lord, how cold my own heart seemed to stay that night... Do not let it be so, O my God"*.³⁰⁰

Even after a few days of the visitation, Melchior could clearly see that Father Barot (one of the original four missionaries in the Vicariate) was unsuitable for what was (admittedly) a difficult mission - due to *"his scattered and recklessly independent temperament. Unbelievable*

298 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 907.

299 *Ibidem*: page 876.

300 *Ibidem*.

blunders had been made by this young and hot-headed missionary".³⁰¹
But for now, Melchior had no one to replace him.

Immediately after Christmas, the Bishop and his team moved methodically from one village to another throughout the District. Melchior lists the Tamil names of these villages, giving detailed accounts of the varied responses from the communities. There were plenty of problems. Most of these were now familiar - poor church buildings, few priests' houses, disputes among the Christians and with "their" priest, a renegade catechist and long-time rebel against the missionaries, superstition and so on. However, all of them had one thing in common: a welcome for the visitors. "*As we went from town to town in the midst of Christian acclamations, the pagans stood at their doorways, watching the colourful scene. The Christians were happy and as proud as Lords, on [what was for them] a great occasion*".³⁰²

Bishop Melchior kept the visitation to the town of Palghat itself until last. They arrived late in the evening. The welcome which he and his team received could be described as "extravagant". "*I think that I have already explained how much the Indians love the exciting sound of gunpowder, rockets and drums. Be it ever so humble, there is no Temple (and no church) that has not got its own gunpowder boxes and rockets to take the place of the bells and carillons of Europe. These are used on every big Feast and important occasion. Gunshots*

301 The story of Father Barot is long and complicated. By way of concluding it, Melchior writes: "*Poor young man! He was not without many good qualities. But he had none of those required to be a missionary. He was a living example of the careless scrutiny then being made in Paris about the suitability of young aspirants. As soon as he had arrived in India, he proceeded to give obvious proofs of his 'non-vocation'. After causing a lot of pain and suffering, he ended up by almost losing his reason. Only then was he sent back to France... [six years later - after being in several jurisdictions]. This is what should have been done years earlier, and it would have been done [by me] if our Rules about sending missionaries home had been a bit more sensible. Before his mental problems became certifiable, he could have been sent away... It was only after I had left India that his insanity declared itself sufficiently blatant and he was expedited to France*". (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 800 -801). For a summary of the entire "Barot case", cf. Patrick Gantly: *Marion Brésillac in India*: Cork. 1991: pages 192 - 196.

302 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 907 - 912.

*and volleys are also very highly appreciated... While I was still two miles out from the city, the compulsory music struck up... joined by a terrifying squadron of drums... rockets blasted, torches flared, Bengal fires shone like constellations. And a stately Elephant - beautifully caparisoned [with majestic decorations] majestically approached - with his huge silver bell swinging and clanking to his portly gait. He made his solemn bow and placed himself at my disposal, as is the custom of all elephants in the presence of a great personage... and so the Elephant led the way”.*³⁰³

Some of the Christians requested the Bishop to wear his full pontifical dress and hold his crozier while going through the main part of the city. But Melchior gracefully declined as he did not want “to ‘over-do’ things in a pagan city under a Protestant government”. The reality was that Palghat had only a small group of Catholic followers. The interesting thing about them, however, was that “some of them were high-caste and (though poor) were very correct and highly respectable. Others were of no caste, being descendants of unions between Portuguese men and Indian women. Though coloured different, they had resounding Portuguese names and they wore European dress. The rest were Pariahs - but they too were determined to be second to ‘no lord and master’ when it came to ‘welcome ceremonies’... There were also some Catholics among the Indian troops (Sepoys) stationed by the English at Palghat; and these always had some money [for important occasions]”.³⁰⁴

Melchior eventually was led to the church building. It was situated “outside the city, in an almost inaccessible yard. A small and ugly building, its brick facade visibly tottering, I asked myself if we could in conscience celebrate the Sacred Mysteries in this hovel and moreover put the lives of the congregation at risk! However, the collapse of the wall did not appear to really imminent. By omitting Mass there, I would have scandalized all the Christians and disappointed many

303 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 913 - 914.

304 *Ibidem:* page 912.

*pagans who seem to have great trust in Saint Sebastian, the Patron of the 'church'. [As the Catechist stated] What do you mean? Saint Sebastian has been holding that wall up for years. Do you think that he would let it fall down now on this special occasion?'*³⁰⁵

On the other hand, there were some aspects which pleased and gave hope to Melchior for the future. Firstly, the seminarians chanted the "Benedictus" as the congregation entered the church - something that impressed all present. Secondly (and more importantly), Melchior was greatly encouraged by the actual congregation... *"The most wonderful thing of all was to see pariahs, topas [half-castes] and Sudras all mixed together indiscriminately inside a church. The topas, of Cochin origin, have always had a big influence in this community. They are 'mestri' (highly skilled carpenters) with a well deserved and widespread reputation. It must have been these who, over the years, had gradually worn down the arrogance of the Tamil caste Christians (who were few and relatively poor). It was to them certainly, that I owed the very magnificent reception I was given in that place"*³⁰⁶ Thirdly, Bishop Melchior was deeply impressed by the high esteem in which Father Metral was held by the people of the District. Time and time again, he listened to their disputes and gently offered solutions. He showed respect to all, the rich and poor, pagan and Christian, the powerful and the lowly. Father Metral was to display this throughout his entire missionary life in India. *"His goodness shows on his face, [though he possesses] none of the special human talents (like eloquence or powerful bearing) or no touch of style or prestige which Europeans (and some missionaries) in India like to show. But then, he is a saint"*³⁰⁷

During the month-long visitation to Palghat District, Bishop Melchior also found time to compile his annual report for 1847. As a copy would be provided for the Superiors in Paris, this report is

305 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 909 - 910.

306 *Ibidem:* page 910.

307 *Ibidem:* page 974.

long and detailed.³⁰⁸ He deals with the history of the Vicariate, the personnel (missionaries), the ongoing problem of the “schismatic” priests, the progress of the necessary infrastructure, the straitened finances and the attempts to get the Christians to financially support their own churches (and hopefully their own priests in the future).

The Bishop reiterates his complete dedication to having a “local clergy” and comments on the “signs of hope” provided by the young candidates at the Seminary in Carumattampatty. As regards sending missionaries to “the pagans”, Melchior states: *“This year, we were able to do nothing... If we could only have eleven or twelve men, at least two or three could make a first vague attempt at evangelisation... We have no idea how to go about serious, sustained action for the idolatrous population. The work has still to be started from scratch in this area”*.³⁰⁹ Finally, Bishop Melchior requested the Superiors to make “general regulations” regarding the “viaticum” or “*viatique*” (the monthly allocation provided to the missionaries) and actually proposed a plan for their consideration. Having mailed the report to Paris, Melchior and his team came back to Carumattampatty on the 20th January 1848.

Melchior’s personal reflections at this point of his life are interesting. *“I have always had two strong inclinations in me (and they seem somewhat contradictory) towards missionary life and towards a quiet, peaceful life at home in my study. To be on my own for most of the day - with a few good books, putting down a few ideas on paper, looking them over a few days later, finding them totally or partially defective, correcting them or tearing the whole thing up - that is the kind of life that comes most natural to me. It would be hard on me, however, if there was going to be no practical use for my ‘literary’ work. And so, I would need to preach now and again, have a moderate amount of pastoral ministry and maybe the smooth, calm supervision of some good Work or other, to balance all the study. Such would be the ‘ideal’*

308 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 917 - 928.

309 *Ibidem*: page 927.

job for me in this world. As for long journeys, disputes and debates, I have always had a horror of them... And as for noise, arguments and 'local politics', I thoroughly dislike all that sort of thing".³¹⁰

Melchior goes on to contrast this with his situation at the end of 1847 and he prays: *"O Lord, you have made me a foreign missionary and have sent me to a place where I face the most controversial issues in any Mission! You know how much I suffer over these... Is that the special Cross chosen by you especially for me? Give me the grace then to carry it bravely ... That is the only motivation (with your grace) which is strong enough to enable me to conquer my natural phobia against travel, hectic movement or conflict".³¹¹*

310 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 929.

311 *Ibidem*: page 930.

Chapter Twelve

Peace Assailed from Near and Far

(February – October 1848)

Within a few weeks (February 1848), Melchior moved back to his headquarters at Coimbatore. He brought with him Father de Gelis, a new missionary who had just come from France.³¹² This confrere immediately impressed by *“his gentle piety and perfect manners... his [obvious] talent and commitment”*. He would be given time to concentrate on learning Tamil and *“to observe this new and strange land into which he had been transplanted. Unlike so many of his contemporaries, he did not know all the answers in advance. He was not ready to make instant judgements on arrival. I sincerely liked him”*.³¹³

On the other hand, Bishop Melchior had become increasingly concerned about Father Pacreau, the most senior missionary in the Vicariate. He recalls: *“He was a great help to me in the beginning. He was in charge of the Carumattampatty outstations and I was in constant touch with him - often by writing. In fact, I never did anything without consulting him. Unfortunately, his rough and unyielding temperament soon came to the fore. I tried everything in order to keep him in good humour; but he would still take everything as a slight. I liked the man for his many good qualities... I made every possible concession to suit him...”*³¹⁴ Father Pacreau had always a great love for the Jesuits. *“He saw everything through Jesuit lenses, and so, he was strongly opposed (in practice) to any native clergy”*.³¹⁵ Melchior was also well aware of his confrere’s past history in Pondicherry. He knew that care was needed in dealing with him. An added factor was Father Pacreau’s physical well-being. During the previous six

312 Laurent de Gelis was born in Toulouse in 1820. He arrived in Coimbatore in late 1847.

313 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 931.

314 *Ibidem*: page 718.

315 *Ibidem*: page 957.

months, he had suffered from recurring fevers.

Bishop Melchior offered him a temporary appointment in Ootacamund, thinking that the much better climate would facilitate a complete recovery in a relatively short period of time. Father Pacreau agreed. *“Then I got a letter from him, clearly saying that he would like to stay up there. Father Metral and I discussed his request and the whole situation. It would be inconvenient to grant his wish. Nevertheless, I decided to confirm his appointment. Normally, I would not have agreed because Ootacamund needs a missionary who knows English (or at least is ready to learn it quickly) - and Father Pacreau would never succeed at his age. He himself saw the need for English and, in his letter, he promised to get down seriously to learning the English language. I knew that he was only fooling himself about that, but I said nothing to discourage him”*.³¹⁶ As it had also become known that many things were not working out well in Ooty, Bishop Melchior decided that he would have to visit as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, some very serious trouble flared up in Athikode District over the Goa Schism. This was the area under the responsibility of Father Barot who was still in Palghat. The Bishop had to send Father Metral immediately to deal with the issue. He then decided to leave the Seminary under the care of Father Pajeau. He would not be there alone, as Father Bonjean was also in Carumattampatty (recovering from a fever). The Bishop felt that both young missionaries would “steer the ship” for what (hopefully) would be a short time. He also requested that one of the seminarians (Arulappan) should join him at Coimbatore (bringing some vestments and other things) and accompany him to Ootacamund.

The two priests at the Seminary agreed. However, Father Bonjean insisted that the young boy should travel alone. It was twenty-six miles to Coimbatore. *“Clerics will have to learn some humility... I have done this often when I was in the seminary in France, [Father*

316 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 964. Melchior records these facts here. It was important in the light of what would happen soon afterwards in the Vicariate.

Bonjean] stated... [Then] a teacher - an excellent man... intervened to state that 'Here in India, a cleric never travels alone... and a coolie (to carry the load which was rather heavy) only costs sixpence'... but it had no effect. [However] the teacher, though of noble caste (for whom it was unheard-of to carry loads) offered to accompany the boy... Father [Bonjean] said that this was matter for himself... So off they went together, walking under the hot sun and sharing the carrying of the load... something that neither were used to. They arrived exhausted. My first greeting to them was 'Where is the coolie?'.³¹⁷

The teacher explained to Melchior what had happened: "This new swamy does not understand our customs yet. He did not mean to insult us. Perhaps that is the custom in Europe"? The Bishop was only too well aware from his own experience how actions such as this could spark a revolt among the Christians and even a schism. "People would jump at the chance to spread such a story by saying: The only reason they want seminarians is in order to insult Caste through them and humiliate all you Christians as well!".³¹⁸

That very evening, Bishop Melchior asked young Arulappan to write to his classmates, telling them that it was all due to a misunderstanding. He requested the teacher to describe his (Melchior's) instinctive reaction as soon as he got back to Carumattampatty. Further, the teacher could explain the mistake (if necessary) to the Christians and ask them to excuse the missionary as he was only a short time in India. Hopefully, all would see that this entire episode did not have the approval of the Bishop. "So, I set out unconcerned now for Ootacamund ... Little did I think then that the reaction was to come - not from the Indians - but from my two confreres".³¹⁹

Bishop Melchior was received politely by Father Pacreau. They discussed several issues connected with Ootacamund, but his host

317 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 958.

318 *Ibidem*: page 959.

319 *Ibidem*.

remained reticent as regards any personal challenges. Perhaps a break in the nearby Vicariate of Mysore (with his confreres there) could be arranged later. But now, “almost as soon as we had arrived [at Ootacamund], a letter arrived for Arulappan from his classmates... It was about the ‘disrespect’ he had shown towards Father Bonjean in his letter to them. The letter was very abusive. The poor boy came to me, with tears in his eyes... ‘For the first time in my life I am accused of being disrespectful to a ‘Swamy’. I certainly have not... That was never my intention at all!... [Melchior then asked] And what did you write? He gave me a summary. [The Bishop tried to assure the boy] ‘Father Bonjean cannot be annoyed by that’... [The distressed boy simply said] “Look at what they wrote back to me”.³²⁰

Melchior read the students’ letter. He was surprised and pained by the contents. It was obvious - from both the content and the style - that the letter had been dictated to the students by Father Bonjean. He had then forced them to sign it. [Melchior noted] “Being still new to the country, he does not see that the students think exactly the opposite. The only thing he has ‘achieved’ is to convince the poor students that it was not a mistake but it was done on purpose... to humiliate all of them... Of course he also lets them see exactly how much regard he has for me and my opinion. In short, he is scandalizing those young boys by showing them that young missionaries - even those so new in the country - can easily ignore and despise the recommendations of their Superiors. Just one or two more actions like this, and our Seminary is finished”.³²¹ But for now, the Bishop calmed down young Arulappan and assured him that they would easily settle the matter when they got back to Carumattampatty.

However, on arrival, “those two Fathers proceeded to go out of their way to show me extreme coolness and bitter resentment... At supper time, I spoke nothing to them about it, merely trying to keep a calm face, in spite of the pain I was feeling. I asked a few questions; but they replied only in monosyllables. Finally, they exploded with a fusillade

320 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 960.

321 *Ibidem.*

of reproaches and unbelievable recriminations. I somehow managed to keep calm... I replied hardly at all to their outrageous remarks".³²² Among the harsh accusations made was that the Bishop was supporting the "Blacks" against his own missionaries. Further, he had "banished" Father Pacreau to Ootacamund.

Melchior immediately wrote to Father Pacreau requesting him to "state the facts". His reply came as a shock. Basically, he supported their accusations and their "unfortunate" attitude. *"Really, it is unbelievable. It is like a nightmare! On every occasion, in every decision, I have been trying to do whatever would best suit this confrere [Pacreau]. In sending him to Ootacamund, I was thinking of the climate, so that he could make a complete recovery from ill-health"*.³²³ Now, there were three confreres on "the attack".

Bishop Melchior instructed Father Metral to return immediately to Carumattumpatty, because to leave Father Bonjean and Father Pajeau in charge would spell the end of the Seminary (which had taken so much effort to establish). The threat made by Father Pajeau was also particularly hurtful... *"Remember Bishop Courvesy. His missionaries forced him to get out. The same could easily happen to you"*.³²⁴

The entire situation regarding the missionary personnel in the Vicariate now became a matter of deep concern for Bishop Melchior. For him personally, the pain and loneliness caused by their lack of support was one thing. A few of the recently-arrived missionaries were also being negatively influenced by their older colleagues. But the danger of their "reckless" actions with the people was much worse. An example of this was Father Barot who *"listened to no advice"* and was continually at loggerheads with the people in the District of Palghat. In that case (and indeed in many others) it was only the wisdom, understanding, patience and experience

322 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* 960 - 961.

323 *Ibidem:* pages 963 - 964.

324 *Ibidem:* page 962. Bishop Courvesy had been made Vicar Apostolic of Malacca in 1841. He resigned in 1844.

of Father Metral that prevented outright revolt and even schism. Melchior would later analyse the reasons for the “attitudes” of the missionaries coming recently from France, but for now he reflected on his own approach and dealings with all the missionaries since he had come to Coimbatore (eighteen months previously).

Beginning with reading his “Four Resolutions” which he made before his Episcopal ordination, Melchior began a “*Particular Examen*” (which was a regular feature of his daily spiritual exercises).³²⁵ This period of reflection on a specific topic could take place over a number of days - or even longer. Later on Bishop Melchior wrote: “*As far as I possibly could, I have tried to please them [the missionaries] - always anticipating the kind of work which I thought would best suit each man. When I had to challenge them, I did it as kindly and as gently as I could. If they came back at me with ‘unruly’ remarks, I usually kept silent. And if their behaviour implied clear disdain for my recommendations, I said and did nothing except when I anticipated negative consequences ‘for the Mission’. Obviously where I foresaw such harm, I acted - but with all possible respect and consideration... On a few occasions, my words may have been a bit severe, but I truly believe that this was rare. Indeed, more often than not, my conscience tells me that I ought to have been much more severe! But I was aware of my weak moral authority.. In any case, I have managed to avoid all resentment towards those who treated me so cruelly. Such is my conscience. What God wants is what will happen. If it pleases Him that I am forced to leave a mission which is so dear to me, I implore Him only one thing - to never permit me, through fear of some humiliation, to act against my conscience. To Him alone be honour and glory. Amen.*”³²⁶

325 “Particular Examination of Conscience” is one feature of “*Ignatian Spirituality*”. Basically, as it was exercised at that time, it focused on a particular moral failing to be overcome, or on a virtue which needed to be cultivated and exercised. Nowadays, the exercise is called “*Examen of Consciousness*” and focuses on awareness of God in one’s life and not on matters of conscience. For a modern treatment of the topic, cf. Dan Burke: *Navigating the Interior Life - Spiritual Direction and the Journey to God*. Sophia Institute Press. New Hampshire (U.S.A). 25th July 2019.

326 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 962 - 963.

There was a brief moment of satisfaction at this time (March 1848). This was occasioned by the laying of the first stone for a new building at the Carumatampatty Seminary. *“The Christians had generously promised to contribute a considerable sum of money towards it. Then, with all possible pomp and ceremony, I laid the foundation stone of their new Seminary. It was a day of great feasting and rejoicing”*.³²⁷

News of a serious revolt had also been coming through from Pondicherry. There had been rumblings for a few months against the Seminary and the missionaries in that Vicariate. Father Leroux had apparently gone “a step too far” in the Seminary. In a long letter to Melchior, he describes how all his proposals to the Bishop and Council for reform were continually being ignored. So, he decided to go ahead with his own plan. *“I am actually eating in the same refectory as our dear students. All our boys are delighted. Not a murmur; not a sour face among them”*.³²⁸ Encouraged by this, Father Leroux went ahead (after some time) with another innovation. Non-tonsured seminarians always wore the Indian “angi” (dress) when serving at the altar (as acolytes). In fact, this was the general custom of all the Pondicherry Christians - even before the Blessed Sacrament exposed. But now, Father Leroux decreed that the altar servers must be *bareheaded* in church. Father Godelle (Melchior’s successor as Superior there) wrote to Bishop Melchior, expressing his worry about the likely consequences of these two sudden innovations, one after the other.

The trouble actually erupted when this change became completely public at a solemn Procession through the city. Melchior summarizes the information which had received from various sources. *“It seems that things are very bad in Pondicherry. Father Leroux is universally blamed for starting it all... The Christians are now protesting openly - not only against the two recent innovations - but about ‘all’ their ancient grievances against the missionaries. They accuse them of trying*

327 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 956.

328 *Ibidem:* page 883.

to abolish Caste altogether. And following their usual deplorable procedure... they are now threatening to leave 'en masse' and never set foot in the church again... They are busy spreading false rumours and some highly exaggerated stories... The Seminary itself has also been badly shaken. Several students have left and others are wavering... Bishop Bonnard is very pained and worried... all the more so because there are such deep-rooted contradictions between the various views of the missionaries about [the right approach] to Caste. Some are ready for immediate reform; others want no change whatsoever. To the revolt, some would make huge concessions; others would concede nothing".³²⁹

And then, there was more bad news. Father Vanthier - who had come to Coimbatore the previous September (just six months earlier) - died from cholera. He was aged 28. Bishop Melchior had kept close to Father Vanthier during his short time in India. *"He still retained all the good qualities and high ideals which young missionaries always bring out with them... Then he had to go off on his first campaign, alone. He was stationed at Darapuram. There he caught a violent fever. The Christians there wrote to me to tell me his condition was critical. I was arranging for one of the confreres to go to his aid when I received a second message. He had got himself transported to the Jesuit Fathers at Trichinopoly (which was much nearer than Coimbatore). I was glad to hear that, for I was sure that the Fathers would leave nothing undone for his recovery. But alas! Only two days later, their Procurator sent me the sad news. The Lord had called him - this well-beloved confrere... Since he arrived, he always acted in such a way as to give me great hopes that he would turn out to be a very good missionary... He barely had time enough here to win the special crown that God reserves for his apostolic workers... May his soul rest in peace".³³⁰*

329 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac*...page 889 - 890.

330 *Ibidem*: pages 975 - 976. From a statistical point of view, the Vicariate had seven missionaries in March 1848. But from the practical viewpoint, the Bishop noted that he had only two missionaries at this time on whom he could *fully* rely i.e. Father Metral and Father de Gelis. He would have to continue as best he could until new confreres would arrive, hopefully towards the end of the year.

The news which came from Europe in April (1848) was also very disturbing. A wave of Revolutions was sweeping across the Continent. Specifically in France, the “*February Revolution of 1848*” overthrew King Louis Philippe (the Monarchy having been restored in 1830 after the brutal Revolution of 1789). This was triggered by general dissatisfaction with his style of leadership, political corruption, unemployment, peasant unrest and power struggles between conservatives, liberals, radical republicans and socialists. French influence on the world scene was also in sharp decline. The result was the overthrow of the Monarchy and the establishment of an *elected* government.

This actually took place on 2nd December 1848. Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (Napoleon III) was elected President of the Second Republic, largely on peasant support and that of the Catholic Church.³³¹ Melchior read many commentaries on the situation from various sources, but “*I will quote only my father [Gaston] here. Son of a Royal Musketeer, brother of three émigrés (one of whom was caught with weapons in his possession and summarily executed by firing squad for fighting for the defence of his King and Country), my father had been a [refugee] up to the return of the Bourbons*”.³³²

Gaston’s long letters show a critical and balanced analysis of the situation. He recognised that the behaviour of the Monarchist regime had been “*so demoralizing for all classes that it could not go on for much longer... Most people were glad to see the end of it... [And now] the army is the least affected - and the clergy not at all. Industry and commerce are going through an extremely difficult time - fortunes lost, bankruptcies every day... numerous frauds taking advantage (as usual) of the crisis. We ourselves have just become victims of one; we will not be paid for our wheat. It is a big problem, for money has become very scarce! Speculation on the necessities of life has pushed up*

331 Three years later, Napoleon III suspended the Elected Assembly and established the “French Empire” which lasted until 1870. In many ways, Napoleon III was, *de facto*, the last French Monarch.

332 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 947.

the prices of everything. And the government (because of the previous waste) has had to increase taxes by 45%... [However] I have no need to tell you to trust in Him who directs all things - if not always as we would like - certainly always for the best. Your confidence in Him cannot fail you. And I ask you not to worry yourself too much about us. Everything has gone peacefully up to now, and there is no indication that it is going to change".³³³

Bishop Melchior shows his Royalist sympathies in his own comments. He too regretted that they had done so little while they were in power. *"They have not even admitted their past faults, which were the real source of the [first] Revolution and the ruination of the Bourbons... After that terrible catastrophe, they were given another chance - a time to come to their senses, to self-recognition and humility... They had the honour of being the 'eldest sons' of the Church... but nothing about an 'amende honorable' for the past or about a sincere resolution for the future... But can we hope that the new Republic will be more active in maintaining the honour of France overseas - not to mention her Christian duties? Alas, I do not expect much from a Republican government. However, it can't be much worse than the Louis-Philippe one - at least on overseas policy*".³³⁴

It was this possibility of changes in "overseas policy" that caused immediate concern to Bishop Melchior. In practical terms it could mean the decrease - or even the end - of the financial contributions of the faithful in France (through the "Works of the Propagation of the Faith"). This would mean the collapse of the Coimbatore Mission - as it had little local income and minimal savings.

The Bishop decided to send a circular to his missionaries about this possible new development, asking them *"to waive part of their 'personal expenses' for reasons of economy... I was not trying at that time to abolish the 'viatique' (their financial allocation from Paris) but only to reduce it - thus leaving a little more money for the common*

333 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 947 - 949. Melchior quotes Gaston's letters on this topic in full (cf. pages 947 - 952).

334 *Ibidem*: pages 952- 956.

*fund... In their replies, all consented... but most of them also let me see that this would be a big inconvenience to them”.*³³⁵

Melchior then goes on to reflect on the virtue of Renunciation, and what it meant to many of his missionaries. *“It is not so perfect in us... Not that our men, generally, are too fond of money (that fault is very rare). No, that is not our trouble. It is simply that everyone wants to have ‘his own’ money, for his own local projects, for doing good individually. Each one acts in his own way - all without a unified plan. This individualistic attitude splinters our resources - which are already slender enough, God knows. This prevents a lot of progress. And it is all due, in my opinion, to this fatal flaw in our Constitutions. I very much fear that, in such a delicate matter, there will be no quick and easy cure”.*³³⁶ Nonetheless, Bishop Melchior sent a second circular to “his” missionaries, thanking them for their positive response and inviting them to a Retreat and full Council Meeting in the following September (the 13th - 20th).

Bishop Bonnand had already written to Melchior (in January) about the widespread unrest in Pondicherry. *“We have closed the Seminary-College... Father Leroux left on 5th January - taking six students with him... We have kept all the Tonsured and Minor Orders clerics plus Mariapragassam (the cantor) and Papu. These two still want to receive Tonsure - in spite of all that has happened. The rest we have sent home... some are weeping and did not want to go. Further, we have given leave of absence to all teachers - except Tamily. Fathers Godelle, Mousset and Geret are still at the Seminary. The majority of the Sudra Christians are still in ‘kattu’ [conspiracy] and refuse to come to church. Karaikal is up to now in total rebellion. Nellitope, Ulgaret and Ariankupan have not moved an inch... But through it all, there is one thing to thank God for: ‘the steadfastness of all our clerics’...”.*³³⁷

335 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 978.

336 *Ibidem.*

337 *Ibidem:* page 894.

Melchior felt that he could not afford to be indifferent to all the chaos in Pondicherry. While noting Bishop's Bonnard's recognition of the courage and steadfastness of the Seminarians,³³⁸ he was aware that the latest "troubles" would deepen (even more) the split among the missionaries. Unfortunately, this proved to be the case. *"One side blamed the whole thing on Caste and on the [wrong] missionary policy of tolerating it. The other side thought that it was all due to a lack of understanding and sympathy for caste customs... And both sides blamed Bishop Luquet for stirring up the issue in the first place".*³³⁹

The "actions" of Father Leroux in the Seminary-College were also being *"universally blamed for starting it all"*. On this particular point, Melchior held the view that - based on his own efforts while he was at the Seminary-College - Father Leroux had gone too far (and too fast) in the particularly sensitive atmosphere of Pondicherry. *"His intentions were very good; but why was it necessary to go public immediately with his reforms? A bit of common prudence would not have gone amiss. [Further] he did not always take enough care to be in line with his Superiors (an unfortunate widespread tendency in our Society)... No doubt, he did not formally disobey - but he obviously acted against the known wishes of his Bishop".*³⁴⁰

Then Father Leroux indicated that he had the solution to the problems. *"He wanted to go to Rome, bringing a request from many confreres to 'Propaganda Fide' to have Bishop Luquet put in charge. Also to get down to the fundamental issues on which (in my opinion anyway) the whole future of Christianity in India must depend. But, obviously, Father Leroux was not the man to send. So, I quickly had to*

338 Melchior wrote to "his" Seminarians in Pondicherry encouraging them and giving advice. *"Did it not prove once again, that by giving them a decent education, we could indeed raise them well above their inherited caste prejudices, and make excellent priests of them, well able to publicly maintain the right attitude to Tamil customs..."*. (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 895).

339 Ibidem: page 895.

340 Ibidem: page 887. Melchior devotes seventeen pages of his *Souvenirs* (pages 882 - 899) on this entire episode.

repent of any encouragement I gave to him. [And so] I wrote to him - congratulating him on his zeal and courage in fighting for the most fundamental principle which urgently requires to be put into action - right now! As for going to Rome, I have nothing to say...". Melchior also added some critical remarks on Bishop Bonnand and the very narrow ideas of his advisors. He immediately regretted this... "Even if these statements were true, there was certainly no need to write them down at the time, especially to Father Leroux".³⁴¹

Melchior also regretted the tone of the letter which he had sent to Bishop Bonnand, who had made a request to Melchior to "*please let me know how you see all of this*". But now, Melchior felt that, in trying to be clear and honest, he had not chosen his words very well, and that he had been disrespectful to a prelate of Bishop Bonnand's standing and goodness. He held back posting the letter for two days, but then decided to send it with an added footnote: "*I was in a fever of perplexity, whether to post it, hoping that Your Lordship would not see anything else in it but a sign of my concern for your terrible situation. If I am right, then no matter how painfully my ideas may strike Your Lordship, they can still be of some use to you; and so I will be glad I sent them after all. If I am wrong, please ignore them. I will not be in the least disappointed, provided you write a brief note that you are not angry with me... In his reply, Bishop Bonnand did complain - but in such a Christian way that it made me feel very humble. More and more I consider him to be a Saint. [Melchior immediately apologised] As I said, I was afraid my last letter would earn me your anger. Certain expressions in it went too far - beyond my present thinking indeed. But how impressive and consoling was your reply".³⁴²*

Nevertheless, Melchior noted his dismay on the lack of action by his esteemed confrere. "*I was still disappointed that he would not make 'use' of the crisis to get to the root of the trouble... He could have set up a serious Enquiry into Caste (etc), and taken the findings to*

341 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...*pages 900 - 901.

342 *Ibidem:* page 901.

Rome. After that, we might at least 'begin' to know where we stand, and what should be our common moral stance towards Indian customs. We would see which things (if any) in the practice of the missionaries need to be changed. Then, under the guidance of the Holy See, we could at least adopt a new, coherent and stable policy".³⁴³

In order to clear up any misunderstandings with Father Leroux, Bishop Melchior wrote to his confrere (7th March 1848). "*The Pondicherry affair is turning very dangerous (and it will sooner or later affect Coimbatore). So one has to be very careful about what one says, and even more about what one puts in writing. I am very sorry now about the general tone of my last letter; it was much too 'fiery'. Furthermore, when I congratulated you on your courage in fighting for the principle at stake, I did 'not' intend to congratulate you for all the moves you felt obliged to make. Certainly you acted for the best. But there were many actions of yours which I could not approve... As for your project of going to Rome, I persist in considering it excessive [and disproportionate] at the very least... [Also] I hope that you have not mentioned my imprudent remarks to anybody else. If you have made use of them, I now ask you to please let the people concerned know of this retraction... What is happening in Pondicherry is so painful, sensitive and complex that I will be very glad to keep out of it as far as I possibly can*".³⁴⁴

As it turned out, this was wishful thinking... It appears that Bishop Luquet had written to a confrere mentioning the proposal that Bishop Bonnand had made to the Holy See concerning a "swop" of jurisdictions between him (at Pondicherry) and Melchior (at Coimbatore). Bishop Luquet had actually sent the official forms to Bishop Bonnand for the requested transfer. "*Suddenly, all my confreres knew about it. And some of them were so imprudent as to write immediately to congratulate me! I still did not know all the details when I had to write to Bishop Bonnand*" [on 2nd May

343 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 902.

344 *Ibidem:* page 903.

1848].³⁴⁵ In this letter (and in further exchanges) one can detect the irritation of Melchior and the somewhat confusing style of Bishop Bonnand's replies. Surely, this matter had been resolved just two years previously! For Melchior, there was to be no change: *"They can dismiss me; but they cannot put me in charge of any place without my consent... As far as I am concerned, I will cheerfully hand over all administration to Your Lordship. But I will not take over any other place"*.³⁴⁶ In the end, both Bishops agreed to wait and not to act until they could meet and discuss the issue.

On 24th May 1848, Bishop Bonnand also wrote to Melchior on an entirely different matter. *"You know, my Lord, that I have more or less promised to hold a Synod in January (1849). I wanted to postpone it until a much later date; but I know that several missionaries have made an outcry against any postponement, in spite of all the good reasons for such a delay... But now I have another problem... the agenda for the Synod has to be worked out and carefully prepared... It would also be very good to have a Retreat for the missionaries... Now, for all of this, I need a man who is free from narrow views... who can weigh up the present and the future, a man who understands the planning of the missions and is able to point the way forward towards the true progress of the Church in India... I am hereby requesting you to be so kind as to help me in all of those ways. I would like you to come here several months before the Synod. Then, the two of us, having co-opted a few others who, we think, should be most helpful, would carefully prepare everything in advance. By doing this, you will (perhaps) be working more for yourself than for me [for your own dearest objectives]... I therefore appeal to Your Lordship, and I hope that you will respond generously to my request"*.³⁴⁷

As one might expect, there followed a period of "discernment" on the side of Bishop Melchior. The First Synod (1845) had not dealt

345 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 932. The full correspondence between the two Bishops on this issue may be found in pages 932 - 938.

346 *Ibidem*: page 936.

347 *Ibidem*: pages 917 - 918.

with Caste. It is true that its one achievement was on “local diocesan clergy” (for which Bishop Luquet’s efforts would (and should) always be remembered. As already mentioned, the Instruction *Neminem profecto* (Pope Gregory XVI: 23rd November 1845) followed within four months of Bishop Luquet’s interventions in Rome. This benefitted all parts of the world, especially South-East India, Australia and the United States of America. Could something similar happen with the Caste System and its customs as regards the entire sub-Continent of India?

However, even if this was possible (and Melchior’s whole being longed for a solution), there was need for very careful preparation. He wrote to Bishop Bonnard: *“One of the most sensitive and most urgent issues which must be dealt with is Caste: the right relationship of our Holy Religion with the caste system and vice versa. The situation, at present, is disastrous in its utter confusion. Each Vicariate in India has its own different policy. Not only that, each single missionary has own! Obviously, this is the road to ruin. With everybody pulling in opposite directions, what progress can be achieved?... If [your] proposed Synod finally decides to do nothing, this will just be a further confirmation (at least for the time being) of the pre-existing disastrous chaos... [Bishop Melchior then goes on to say] “It isn’t that I do not want to tackle the caste issue. My whole soul yearns to have it solved - once and for all. But, I see only one way out of this hopeless complexity, the only way that can lead us on to a solid and reliable road forward. That is to make a Report to “Propaganda Fide” which would not merely describe the whole caste situation, but should clearly explain the various ‘options’ - the various ways of looking at the situation. The advantages, the dangers and the likely consequences of each option should be spelled out. After that, we should ask “Propaganda Fide” to choose and to trace out the future policy, the line of conduct we must follow, and impose it on everybody... [However], even if you agreed, my Lord, that this is the right procedure, there is not enough time to assemble all the material for such a Report. And without it, what can we achieve? What else but to get further and further lost, inside this*

vast and extricable Maze of caste".³⁴⁸

There were also some personal issues which Melchior had to ponder. There was the continuing opposition of not a few confreres to himself (both in Coimbatore and Pondicherry), his friendship and alleged "collaboration" with Bishop Luquet in many of "his projects", and the proposed long absence from Coimbatore. Finally, "*certain people might think that I was merely executing the first 'clever manoeuvres' towards a permanent transfer (for they were already talking). And so, I asked him to consider all these factors before God*".³⁴⁹

Bishop Bonnard replied (11th June 1848), expressing gratitude for "*your very good response to my appeal. I will let you know soon how I am going to arrange things... It was with very special interest that I read what you had to say about the main Question of the January Synod [caste] and I am still thinking very seriously about it... I am going to write to Rome in the way you outline, and will try my best to describe the [caste] situation clearly. And I will press the Sacred Congregation for a prompt reply... The moves about our transfers are no reason for keeping you away from the Synod. On the contrary, they are a strong reason for coming, and for taking an outstanding part in all its deliberations... Your presence will let all of them see... that we two are together in all of this [and] that in the present grave situation - far from working against each other - we are completely in concert...*".³⁵⁰

Melchior was happy with the general tone of the letter, but felt that a "mere" letter to "Propaganda Fide" was quite inadequate. A more solemn and far-reaching document was required to make Rome really face this critical issue of caste, and bring the Church authorities to lay down a uniform line of conduct which all must obey. He immediately wrote to Bishop Bonnard to consider again, as any move on caste must be well founded and prepared in order

348 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 938 - 939.

349 *Ibidem*: page 938.

350 *Ibidem*: page 939.

to succeed and obtain a lasting result. Bishop Bonnard replied (30th June 1848) stating that he agreed that careful and detailed enquiries and investigations were required... and that “*we must think well about it and not rush into it now*”. However, he also expressed the fear that “*the enquiries and investigations necessary for gathering the required information would be sure to leak out to the Christians, and start another revolution... Besides, the missionaries themselves are not calm and cool enough to give good, clear replies...*”.³⁵¹ At this point, Melchior decided to participate in the Synod and do what he could “*to advance the work of God*”.

More news had been arriving from France. Melchior was saddened to hear of the death of Bishop Gualy of Carcassonne who had played such a prominent part in Melchior’s road to the priesthood. Since that time, Melchior had very little dealings or correspondence with him. “*But it was he who gave me all my Orders, including priesthood... So he was spiritually related to me in a special way. He has a right to a memory and a prayer... [Also] Father Dubois, a Paris Director, passed away... I am sure that he went straight to Heaven. He contributed a lot to the work of the missions. He led a full life for them. He served them from his youth to his last 84th year. And even in dying, he was our benefactor. He happened to be quite rich, and he left a great part of it to various missions... May God reward him for his good action!*”.³⁵²

Efforts to have Bishop Luquet appointed as Procurator-General of M.E.P. - residing in Rome - had finally failed. The Vatican then sent him as “*Charge d’Affaires Extraordinaire*” to Switzerland. In the volatile situation that was Europe at the time (and especially in Switzerland) Melchior was surprised that his friend accepted

351 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 941.

352 *Ibidem*: page 976. Father Jean Antoine Dubois was born in the Diocese of Viviers in 1766. He went to India in 1792 where he served with great distinction. He became a member of the M.E.P. “Board of Directors” in 1823 and Superior from 1836 - 1839. He died in 1848. As regards Father Dubois’ financial bequests to “the missions”, Coimbatore received “*more than 10,000 francs; Mysore the same; Pondicherry 30,000 francs and, as far as I know, 30,000 francs each to two missions in China*”.

the assignment. *“True, it is a big honour for our zealous friend... and I have no doubt that Bishop Luquet is well qualified to render great services to the Church... But this kind of situation needed a man already well tried and tested in diplomatic affairs... [And] he can be lacking in prudence and good timing, as he has shown in some of his dealings with Indian affairs... I fear that he is now exposing himself to be broken again... So, this mission fills me with sadness and foreboding”*.³⁵³

It was not too long before Melchior's fears were realized. Bishop Luquet was recalled to Rome after only four months. It appears that he had blundered. In carrying out negotiations between seven catholic cantons and the federal regime, Bishop Luquet had spoken openly and far too soon on a very sensitive issue i.e. that the church would eventually recognise the great principle of complete separation between Church and State.³⁵⁴ Of course, Bishop Luquet's opponents “took courage” by his failure in Switzerland. They raked up past controversies and exaggerated his mistakes. They even claimed that he had *“betrayed his own conscience out of political ambition”*! Even Bishop Bonnand wrote a *“very hurtful letter”* to Melchior. The contents made him doubtful about the invitation to Pondicherry.

On 10th August 1848, Melchior replied: *“Your last letter made me very sad. When I promised Your Lordship to go to Pondicherry, I asked you to let bygones be bygones, and forget all about past differences which God alone can truly evaluate. Otherwise, I said that I would not be able to face it. And how can I be expected to face it today, after Your Lordship's very hurtful remarks about Bishop Luquet. History will relate his great achievements and his honest intentions... Also, no doubt, history will point out his mistakes and faults, unavoidable results of our poor human nature. But his courage in recognising them (and trying to correct them when recognised) will show the basic purity of his intentions. It will also plead for our indulgence upon those defects*

353 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 942 - 944.

354 *Ibidem:* page 942.

which he himself failed to see (if indeed they were real defects). Allow me therefore to stand up for him - as I would for your Lordship if anybody dared to demean you in my presence... About Your lordship (as about Bishop Luquet) I would say: 'He may have blundered; but he did not go against his conscience'...".³⁵⁵

In the midst of what was proving to be a very difficult year, Melchior had spent all of Lent at Carumattampatty, preaching and hearing confessions at the first Mass on every Sunday. It was here also that he had his one abiding consolation i.e. the Seminary. Father Metral was busy with the seminarians and Father Pajeau had agreed to supervise the construction of the new building. *"It will be a very nice building and very comfortable for twenty or thirty pupils. As we set the material foundations, we also try to construct the real seminary by encouraging the good dispositions of the few children that the Lord seems to be calling to become the first priests of the Pro-Vicariate".³⁵⁶*

After further reflection and prayer, Bishop Melchior finally decided that he would go to Pondicherry for the Synod. Perhaps - despite the unrest among the Christians and the huge variance in attitudes to caste customs on the side of the missionaries - something good and worthwhile could be achieved. As he was now a "Superior" himself, he not only had to exercise sacred functions, but he had to *direct* others. How could he do this, when he had so many doubts himself? Was he not obliged in conscience to investigate these doubts and go deeply into the reasons behind them? *"Unfortunately, the more I go into these questions and examine them, the more serious become my doubts. [And] one has no right to endanger the weak faith of our neophytes (our Christians) by acting imprudently or by harsh actions or loud condemnations... For with such a dangerous issue, one necessarily has to go softly... If our toleration has become too wide-reaching, we must narrow it down... and before we openly change*

355 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 945 - 946.

356 Letter to Bishop Bonnard: dated 9th April 1848. *Archives of Paris Foreign Missions* (AMEP: Vol.1000 J, 159-162). Quoted in *De Marion Brésillac...* page 244.

*anything that is capable of blowing our communities apart, we must be sure of this: that we have exhausted all the other resources which our prudence can possibly suggest to us... We will submit all to the Holy See later... and we will obey its decisions (while going as softly as we can with the people). I just hope that the meeting of all the Pondicherry missionaries will give us an opportunity to clarify our minds about all these doubts!"*³⁵⁷

Bishop Melchior then decided that, as so much preparation was required for the Synod (including a six-day Retreat), he would leave Coimbatore for Pondicherry after marking the second anniversary of his consecration on 4th October. Meanwhile, apart from the normal pastoral and administrative work, there was one remaining important thing to do before that date... the Retreat and General Council Meeting of the confreres in the Vicariate in September.

Bishop Melchior spent from June to August in Coimbatore, and visited Carumattampatty several times. He alerted the missionaries to the method which would be followed at their forthcoming meeting... Discussion topics would be made known beforehand (including topics proposed by the missionaries themselves), and the Assembly would conclude the discussion of a topic before moving on. The Bishop would also present a detailed account of the Procures' assets, liabilities, methods of sourcing and administering finances at each annual General Meeting. Among other topics suggested for discussion were pastoral priorities, relationships with the Christians, financial difficulties and how to prioritize the evangelisation of "the pagans". On this particular issue, one proposal had already come from one of the missionaries: that all would agree on a specific day for the celebration of Mass for the Propagation of the Faith, and another Mass asking the Lord to bless their own projects and supporters.

Two new missionaries, Fathers Cornevin and Ravel, were sent

357 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 979 - 981.

to Coimbatore in June (1848).³⁵⁸ This was good news. Melchior prayed that they would be “true” missionaries and not be influenced by the negativity of some of the confreres, or by “unacceptable values” which had taken root in France during the first fifty years of the 19th century.

The gathering in September was a big disappointment. *“At first, I had hoped that we could all make a Retreat together. But the Athicode crisis, the general unrest among the Catholics, and especially the very bad attitude of a few of the confreres, made it quite impossible. The meeting itself was very far from encouraging... Those few who are contaminating the newcomers should just be sent back to Europe... If I expelled them, nobody would support me - except (maybe) Father Metral. Everybody would say that I was being outrageously severe, and the evil would be worse than it is. [But] The countless seeds of progress here are being stifled... If any more manage to sprout, they will quickly fade and wither. The few that survive will be squashed before they are strong enough to stand on their own... The future looks very bleak indeed to me. [He prayed] Mary, beg Your Son not to let so many good promising things perish like this!”*³⁵⁹

It was no consolation for Melchior to hear that he did not have the monopoly of troubles during 1848. It was proving to be an “*annus horribilis*” (a disastrous year) for the entire Catholic Church in India. In Bombay, Verapoly and Mangalore, the Carmelites were having difficulties, much of it caused by themselves. Later on, this would result in big trouble... *“At Bombay, they would soon be ruined by it. [Further] in Calcutta and Madras, the Irish Vicars Apostolic showed no sympathy or understanding for the problems of their fellow Bishops [about Caste etc]. In their newspapers, they dealt most insensitively with these very explosive and complex issues... showing no sign whatever about being worried about the possible reaction of*

358 Nicholas Cornevin was born in the diocese of Langres in 1824. He came to Coimbatore in 1848 and died there in 1849. Joseph Louis Ravel was born in the diocese of Digne in 1824. He came to Coimbatore in 1848 and died there in 1881.

359 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...*pages 978 - 979.

*'the natives' to what they printed... In the island of Ceylon, the recent introduction of European missionaries was changing the face of the Church (in a few ways for good, in many ways for bad). [Melchior reflected] "Happy is the man who is allowed to keep to his own little area, and never have to be dragged by circumstances into the workings of other places! I was not given that much luck... O my God, in return please give me some merit from the crucifixion that my soul and my heart had to go through as a result!"*³⁶⁰

But now, it was time to set out for Pondicherry, as a lot of preparation was needed for the forthcoming Synod.³⁶¹ Bishop Melchior celebrated the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary at Carumattampatty on 1st October 1848, and blessed the new seminary building which had just been completed. Though still concerned and sad about the situation in his own Vicariate (especially, the possibility of new conflicts between the missionaries and the Christians) Melchior set out for Pondicherry on 8th October. He decided to take "the excellent" Father de Gelis with him. *"We went by our "cab" [pony-trap]. I was driving myself. Our people followed with our luggage etc., in a bullock-cart. I had made this trip several times before; so I will not bother describing the various places we passed through"*.³⁶² However, Melchior does record that he began to enjoy the trip - *"a moment of relaxation between the afflictions which had been besieging me for some time at home, and the probable afflictions awaiting me at Pondicherry..."* Also, the progress which a confrere (Father Bardouil) was making *"with a community that is barely catholic"*

360 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 982. Melchior would have occasion to visit the Vicariates over the following years. For example, he gives a detailed analysis of the Bombay situation in his *Souvenirs*: pages 1235 - 1272 (thirty-seven pages).

361 Since agreeing to help, Melchior had several times requested Bishop Bonnard to cease calling a *Canonical* Synod. The forthcoming meeting in Pondicherry could not possibly deal adequately with many issues - and particularly with the urgent and necessary question of Caste - due to the abnormality of the times, the paranoia of the laity and the necessity for careful research. Perhaps, it could be termed an "Extended General Council Meeting" or some other less grandiose title. *"It would be unrealistic to expect some kind of missionary cure-all from the forthcoming 'Synod'"* (cf. *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 989). However, Bishop Bonnard decided otherwise and gave his reasons in several letters to Melchior.

362 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 983.

impressed him. *“This was due to his extreme kindness, his patience and his eminently apostolic and ascetic spirit. This dear old confrere, totally absorbed in the care of his Christians, knows absolutely nothing about events in the outside world, nor about the moral questions which are now troubling the confreres... [But] Improvement will come about in this community because Father Bardouil loves them...”*³⁶³

After a leisurely journey, the de Brésillac caravan arrived in Pondicherry on 28th October, just over two years of absence. Bishop Bonnard had organised a big reception. He was determined that this occasion was going to be *“the very first external effort at any visible kind of Catholic unity since the Revolt began... Up to now there had been no processions - no celebration of any kind in the open air. But now the Catholics had managed to agree - all of them - to come out and meet me in style. The Bishop was hoping that this would be a sort of breakthrough, an opportunity for everyone to look forward towards a united future, without either side having to ‘lose face’ about the past. In that situation, I ‘had’ to agree... At the city gate, under an elegant ‘pandal’, there was a majestic Kneeler for me to pray.. Here, the crowd was waiting for me, all the priests and (now numerous) seminarians (it was a great joy to see them dressed as clerics and even a few Sub-deacons!) There was music, the ‘garrison’ band, fireworks, drums - indeed every possible ‘amenity’ was brought out! [Then] we all went forward in slow and solemn procession, towards the church, to the strains of harmonious hymns and canticles. This impressive ceremony concluded with Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament.”* After this formal reception, Melchior got a great welcome from the confreres... *“In the joyfulness of this reunion, we forgot all about our different views... for our hearts were never divided”*.³⁶⁴ Melchior hoped that, after patient dialogue, all the necessary changes for

363 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 984 - 987. These pages give a full description of this episode. Jacques Marie Bardouil was born in the diocese of Vannes in 1799. He went to the “Indian missions” in 1835 and died in 1878.

364 *Ibidem:* pages 987 - 988. The “numerous clerics” to which Melchior refers here, include those with Tonsure. It seems that Bishop Bonnard had quietly introduced the conferring of Tonsure on young boys (around fourteen years of age) after Bishop Melchior had earlier received approval of the process from the Holy See.

the future of “mission” in South India would be accomplished. He noted how the recent changes in Pondicherry had progressed education in general and the Seminary in particular. *“Remember what a hard struggle Father Leroux had then to try to obtain the first slight progress towards proper education, both for the Seminary and the College in this city! Well, what would they shout today if anyone proposed that we should now take the Seminary back down to the 1842 level?... The Seminary battle has been almost won... but other vital ones remain... May true realism about all of this Work make itself clear”*.³⁶⁵

Preparations for the Synod

After a few days rest, Melchior began his work. Bishop Bonnard had already formed a “special” commission to prepare the agenda and present reports to the January Synod. Bishop Melchior was appointed Chairman of this Commission, which would then report to “the Bishop in Council”. It was this Council which would formally draw up the agenda. Further, in his long letter of Convocation,³⁶⁶ Bishop Bonnard had indicated that the Synod would last eight days. Six of these would be given to a Retreat and two days to receiving reports for consideration and voting. *“As priests, we need to think of our own spiritual health, and therefore to renew our strength in a good Retreat. Secondly, as pastors, we have to deal with some important matters concerning the exercise of the sacred ministry in this Vicariate. We will do this in the Synod. Thirdly, as members of the Society, we have some Society matters to decide in the Council... So, we need a Retreat as priests, a Synod as missionaries and a Council as Society members. And it is in that order, and from these three viewpoints, that things will be arranged and treated”*.³⁶⁷

With a little more than six weeks to Christmas (and while retaining some reservations about Bishop’s Bonnard’s “plan” for the Synod) Melchior threw himself wholeheartedly into the preparations.

365 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 990.

366 This letter is dated 14th November 1848 and comes to ten pages.

367 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 991 - 992.

Usually, he enjoyed preaching and giving Retreats, but in this particular instance, he felt that he had to be “extra cautious” about everything he said. He decided to write out all his talks in full.³⁶⁸ Melchior would gradually hand the scripts to Father Lehodey³⁶⁹ to read and make comments. He would then modify some things in accordance with his confrere’s suggestions and advice.

At the same time, the “Preparatory Commission” set about working out Decrees for the Synod. Melchior met Bishop Bonnard regularly. During the following weeks, thirty seven proposals and three reports were presented to the “Bishop in Council” for possible adoption.³⁷⁰ If agreed, they would then be placed on the official agenda for the Synod in January.

The three reports demanded long hours of dialogue, study and prayer from the members of the Preparatory Commission. The topics were (a) The Question of Caste and its Customs. Bishop Melchior was asked to prepare this report. (b) Mission Property and all Financial aspects of the Vicariate. This was assigned to Father Depuis (the long-serving Procurator of the Pondicherry Vicariate). (c) Personal Spiritual Life of the Missionary; Clerical Department; Assignments; the importance of distinguishing the Missionary Vocation and that of the Indian Parish priest. Also included were the correct implementation of liturgical practices (baptisms, hearing confessions, marriage dispensations, registers etc); catechists and good literature. This was entrusted to Bishop Charbonnaux of Mysore.³⁷¹

Meanwhile, Bishop Melchior kept the Superiors in Paris informed of his activities and involvement in Pondicherry. To

368 These “talks” consisted of fourteen conferences and seven meditations.

369 Julien Charles Lehodey was born in the diocese of Coutances in 1808. He went to the “Indian missions” in 1832. He died in Pondicherry 1869.

370 The three reports had been specifically requested by Bishop Bonnard.

371 Bishop Charbonnaux and his Vicar General (Father Jarrige) had arrived in Pondicherry in mid- December. They had come “to help”... Even Bishop Bonnard seemed taken aback by their arrival. However, *“Both were taking part in our work. This was not, in my opinion, of very great advantage to it”*. (*Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 998).

Father Tesson (especially), he was forthright in his views...³⁷². From Carumattampatty, Father Metral wrote regularly to Bishop Melchior to keep him informed about events in the Vicariate of Coimbatore. *“The situation is far from satisfactory. It seems that Fathers Pajeau and Bonjean are very active, but ‘not’ at promoting unity and harmony among the missionaries... Even the news I am getting from the Seminary of Coimbatore is not all encouraging... I informed Bishop Bonnand’s Council about the behaviour of Father Pajeau... and was ‘then’ told about some of his previous ‘exploits’ here [in Pondicherry]... His actions in both places, taken together, made the members of the Council conclude that he should not yet be definitively admitted into our Society. I wrote to inform him of this; but unfortunately, I have no reason to expect it will have any sobering effect on him”*.³⁷³

And so, as the end of 1848 drew near, Melchior was very tired. One can well understand this, as he had been working up to ten hours each day. He was looking forward to the Christmas ceremonies, especially as Pondicherry was *“the only place in India which has such a beautiful celebration of Mid-night Mass. [But] I was confined to my room [by protocol]. Since Bishop Charbonnaux arrived, he has not been attending public Mass or Office in the church. And Bishop Bonnand never attends. So I felt obliged to stay away myself... I could (I suppose) have gone secretly and sat in a corner of the sacristy, but that [non-participation] would be even worse... Staying in my room was a privation ... It was quite a miserable night for me”*.³⁷⁴

372 For example, in a letter to Father Tesson: dated 6th November 1848. This is quoted in: *Marion Brésillac in India...* page 180.

373 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1006 - 1007.

374 *Ibidem*: page 1008.

Chapter Thirteen

A Critical Year: 1849

In the early days of January 1849, Bishop Melchior put the final touches to his text for the Retreat. Thirty seven proposals and the three reports had also been approved by the Preparatory Commission (unanimously) and by the Bishop's Council (by a large majority). The contents may be summarized as follows:

1. Personal and Clerical Department, Liturgical Matters and Organisation.

In his introduction, Bishop Charbonnaux drew attention to one piece of advice which Saint Francis Xavier had left for missionaries... *"A missionary is 'a model, a living book for the people to study and imitate'... [Hence] he should maintain a constant obvious decency and modesty, worthy of a representative of God Most Holy - in his public appearances, in his journeys, in his recreations, in all his dealings with his catechists and disciples - because these will retain what they have seen and heard... A missionary is expected to have a stronger character, a keener and wider zeal than others (including native clergy)".*³⁷⁵

This report goes on to deal with specifics (clerical dress, liturgical ceremonies, literature, maintaining and improving one's theological knowledge, gentleness and fairness in ministry, prudence, necessity for prayer, "examen", spiritual reading, regular retreats, frequent confession etc.). Many of these issues were formulated into proposals.

The report concluded with a recommendation to sub-divide Districts. *"This is better than keeping several missionaries together in one central place... [He counters a possible objection by stating] if we were talking about olden times when a missionary was 4 or 5 days journey from the next man, there would be a case to answer. But we are talking about sub-divisions that are much more compact*

³⁷⁵ *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 999.

than that. In one direction or another, there will always be someone to visit, someone to encourage or help - never more than 1 or 2 days away. Given this kind of safeguard, we believe it is better to put each man in his own mission, in a fairly small sub-district. Nevertheless, the Commission believes that it is good (and indeed necessary) to put each newly-arrived missionary with a senior man for the first 1 or 2 years...”.³⁷⁶

2. Mission Property and Financial Administration

Father Depuis (the esteemed and long-serving Procurator at Pondicherry) gave what Melchior describes as “an excellent” report... [adding wryly] *maybe because it was more or less in line with my own ideas!*”.³⁷⁷ The report sought to clarify ownership of property (whether Society, Vicariate or Institution), so as not to have problems for the local church in the future. It was necessary to work out proper distinctions - with legal safeguards. The powers of the Vicar Apostolic (in this context) should also be clearly stated.

An immediate and simple step would be to have a Procurator who would look after all accounts, and who would “*show these accounts, at least once a year to the Council (not only to render an account) but in order to enable them to give fully informed advice on this important aspect of the Vicariate*”.³⁷⁸ Further, each District mission or institution should send an exact report as to the state of the Work and its most urgent needs, in order to realistically prioritize their urgency and usefulness.

The report goes on to “*fully support the formation of a local clergy... [And] it is now absolutely necessary to prepare for its means of livelihood... To leave them just to fend for themselves, will be to leave them in want - without the necessities of life... To continue with the old system is to prepare a future disaster... local self-sufficiency is essential*”.³⁷⁹ Various suggestions are put forward - including Benefices - but above all,

376 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1000.

377 *Ibidem*: page 995. The report runs to twenty pages.

378 *Ibidem*: page 1012.

379 *Ibidem*: pages 1012 -1013.

small local contributions from the faithful. There must also be planning towards Independent parishes, while the whole process of the “viaticum” (*viatique*) which the missionaries receive needs to be assessed and reformed.³⁸⁰ Finally, the report strongly encourages “lay participation” - not only to pay but to have competent leaders “for managing and using the revenues in a relevant and feasible way... *The administration can work out a thorough system for local finances - making precise and sensible rules about the number, functions, methods of appointment and the terms of office for the individuals involved. A statement should be sent to the Vicar Apostolic yearly (or less frequently where it is judged appropriate). [The report ends with the advice]... Be prudent... Be cooperative... always thinking of the glory of God and the common good*”.³⁸¹

3. Report on Caste and Customs

In his introductory remarks, Bishop Melchior indicated that the Preparatory Commission was well aware that the question of Caste in relation to Christianity is very difficult. But, “*if God grants us the grace of solving the Caste Question according to Justice and Truth, what a blessing that will be!*”.³⁸² Melchior also states that, initially, a distinction must be made between seminarians and the rest of the people. The Christians should be shown tolerance regarding caste, but candidates for the priesthood should be trained - right from the beginning - to refuse anything that was clearly contrary to the Gospel. The whole process of “inculturation” would be gradual... and in the long-term, it would be “their own sons” (the local clergy) who would succeed (with God’s grace).

The Commission report goes on to state that it “did not dare” to formulate a solution on its own, but it did offer a way forward. It made the following remarks and recommendations:

(a) It is impossible to deal adequately with the question of Caste

380 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* 1014 -1015.

381 *Ibidem*: page 1023.

382 *Ibidem*: page 1001. For the full report on this issue, cf. pages 1000 - 1005.

at this time, due to the fraught situation (i.e. the suspicion and unrest among the Christians and the need for time to conduct a thorough investigation among the missionaries).

(b) Nevertheless, it was necessary and urgent to deal with it - and to do so in depth. The missionaries were confused and divided. Some were dismissive of the whole topic, others acted in a laissez-faire manner, a few were indifferent and some were dealing with problems of conscience. *“We must break out of this state of self-destruction; and this can only be done by going to the root of the problem”*.³⁸³

(c) While a full report and a decision from Rome would obviously take time, the missionaries needed to be assured that the problem would be tackled as a priority. The Bishop must issue instructions (as an interim measure) which would make for *uniformity* in approach, and which require all missionaries to conform. Further, he would assure them that “Propaganda Fide” was being kept fully informed, pending its final ruling on the matter.

(d) A method of investigation was also proposed in the search *“to find the Truth in all of this... We do not want to prejudge it.”* This would offer a clear range of questions, ranging from (i) the abolition of all Caste customs (in relation to religion), (ii) toleration of any or every custom which is not clearly against the Gospel, (iii) a decision from Rome to modify things or just leave things as they are. The report would also indicate the age of each missionary, the length of time in India and the positions held in the Vicariate. All of this would be compiled and sent to Rome for decision. Once that was given, all would have to abide by it.

Melchior devoted the few days before the opening of the Synod to prepare, both mentally and spiritually, for the Retreat.

Retreat Before the Synod

The Retreat began on Monday evening, 15th January 1849 and

383 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1003.

ended on the following Monday at noon. Two Bishops (Bonnand and Charbonnaux), twenty-two missionaries and three Indian priests participated. Apart from the celebration of the Eucharist and other spiritual exercises, there were two conferences, one meditation and the examination of conscience each day.³⁸⁴ Adequate time was given for personal reflection and prayer.

In his opening talk, Bishop Melchior stated the aim of the Retreat. *“My aim is not to convert you. I suppose and I believe that all of you are converted to the Lord. I simply want to try to bring us all together one step closer to the perfection of our sublime state. I want all of us to enter sincerely into ourselves, and in the sincerity of our hearts and alone with God (as if Jesus Christ was speaking to us with His lips) to ask ourselves if, up to now, we have been what we should be. Our life is not simply the life of a priest... It must also be the life of an apostle... Are the obstacles which we blame for our lack of success ‘within’ us - rather than outside of us?... My words will be especially those of Jesus Christ himself. Let the Word in some way be incarnated again in you - penetrate your soul and fill you with light - so that you can receive the graces which He is as desirous of giving to you as you are desirous of receiving”*.³⁸⁵

It was also the hope and prayer of Melchior that, with such an understanding, the missionaries would be ready to undertake the radical changes which were so necessary in the vineyard entrusted to them.

Several comments (and commentaries) have been made on the contents of the Retreat.³⁸⁶ Bishop Bonnand wrote soon afterwards: *“Monsignor de Brésillac gave an excellent retreat. It was carried out*

384 The first edition of *Retraite aux Missionnaires* was printed in Lyon, 1942 (322 pages). It was reprinted in Rome in 1985. The English translation: *Retreat to Missionaries...* was made by John Flynn S.M.A. and printed in Rome in 1985 (255 pages).

385 *Retreat to Missionaries*: pages 23 - 25.

386 In a historical “biographical” study (such as this work), it is neither feasible nor practicable to give an in-depth study of the “spirituality” of the *Retreat to Missionaries* here. However, the following pages give some views which, it is hoped, will stimulate interest to read the book itself.

according to the needs of the Vicariate, and with the deep conviction that always characterizes him. It really surprised me by its relevance from beginning to end".³⁸⁷ Bishop Charbonneau stated: "What can I say about the retreat conducted by Monsignor [de Brésillac]... It was sublime, clear and practical. I never read or heard a better comment on self-denial and on the need to carry the cross in general, and our own cross in particular. I fear only one thing: these teachings suppose a degree of perfection to which, generally speaking, we seem little accustomed".³⁸⁸

On the occasion of the publication of *Retraite aux Missionnaires* (almost one century later), Father Jean Louis Caer (who edited the book) wrote: "One of the great achievements of Bishop de Marion Brésillac in this retreat is, that without ever losing sight of the existing situation - his preoccupation which is evident in every page - he rises to that upper plane in which he invites his listeners to reflect serenely on the perennial and really fruitful principles of all missionary activity. This is what gives this retreat a value which, for the most part, transcends the narrow framework of circumstances within which it was given... This impassioned teaching - suffused to its depths with the spirit of Christ the Apostle - was intended to propose no more than the missionary ideal that Christ Himself proposed to His apostles, when he sent them out to conquer the world... A complete missionary teaching - bold and lucid - can be deduced from these homely conferences...".³⁸⁹

Father Jung SMA made the following reflection about the same time: "Monsignor de Brésillac seized the central idea of the Christian faith with all his soul. The retreat (which we could qualify as a paraphrase of the Gospel in the strict sense of the term) seems to tell us in each page over and over again that the first truth of the Christian faith is Jesus Christ himself. Christ, the definition of his very person,

387 Letter to Father Tesson: 10th February 1849. This is quoted in *De Marion Brésillac...* page 252.

388 Ibidem.

389 Father Jean Louis Caer SMA was born in the Diocese of Quimper in 1910. A Doctor of Theology, he taught at the Seminary in Lyons. He died in 1946 - at the age of 36.

the reason for His mission on earth will therefore be the theological foundation of his missionary doctrine... This approach can make us grasp the underlying idea - so real and so lively - that runs throughout this book, [which is] intended at understanding missionary activity as a continuation - an extension - of the very act of Incarnation".³⁹⁰

In the foreword of the second edition of *Retraite aux Missionnaires* (1985), Father Jean Bonfils SMA advises the reader of the text, not to be deterred by *"a certain anachronism of form and even of substance. The style is 19th century. The tone has sometimes the feel of the prevailing romanticism. The use made of the texts of Scripture is no more current ... The ascetic doctrine is quite severe etc... but it leads us to find our roots... And a man without roots is a man without memory. A man without a memory lacks that which is at the basis of culture. This is true of persons and also of institutions... [Further] It is pointless to talk about the 'charism' of a founder without, to begin with, a study of the written sources which are an original and privileged expression of it... And access to these sources presupposes that one dares to make a leap over the unavoidable cultural distance. The same is true each time a study is made of literary or theological tradition".³⁹¹*

Father Michael O'Shea SMA sums up the Retreat as follows: *"Keywords and ideas of the spirituality revealed in Retraite aux Missionnaires are: the Cross, apostolic activity and discipleship, renunciation, doing God's will and abandonment to Providence... [He goes on to state] Of a different tenor is Melchior's conference on Christ's 'Great Commission' ('Go teach all nations') which he entitled 'Go with joy, zeal and courage'. He said that Joy, Zeal and Courage were the three virtues specially required of a missionary... The joy he spoke of was interior, stemming from the missionary's awareness that*

390 Conference given on 17th May 1942. Quoted in *De Marion Brésillac*...page 253. Father Antoine Jung was born in the Diocese of Strasbourg in 1918. He died in France in 1993, aged 75.

391 *Retreat to Missionaries*: page 15. Jean Marie Louis Bonfils was born in Montpellier in 1930. Ordained priest for the SMA in 1954... Doctor of Theology 1957... He retired as Bishop of Nice in 2005.

*he was with Christ - even in the midst of sufferings and trials. It was the joy of a servant who loves his master... Joy in the Lord banishes melancholy and renders the cross lighter... Zeal was necessary in the face of the urgency of the missionary task, as he interpreted 'Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus' strictly ["Outside the Church there is no salvation"]... Zeal also fitted his personality as he delighted in action, and he held idleness as 'the mother of vices'. [And] Melchior inevitably treated 'Courage' in the context of battling for Christ... The missionary battles, not with his own strength, but with that of Christ... The great enemy of the missionary is discouragement... The missionary should look to the example of Jesus, who in His life often suffered disillusionment and disappointment, but did not become discouraged. He kept up His courage by frequent recourse to conversation with His Father... Prayer is not difficult. 'A simple raising up of the heart renders His presence sensible to us. Let us adopt this holy habit of speaking with Him'... From attention to the whole text of *Retraite aux Missionnaires*, as well to each of its parts, it is obvious that his spirituality, as well as being a spirituality of the Cross, is an active apostolic spirituality".³⁹²*

Finally, an expert theological consultant (who is not a member of SMA), was invited to examine the *Positio*.³⁹³ He has written: *"(Bishop de Brésillac) was a man gifted with a profound piety and interior richness, animated by the Word of God as well as by the theology and spirituality of his time. His writings are rich in prayers linked to the events of his life and missionary action. He thus presents himself as a valid example for those in the Church today who are dedicated to apostolic life and action, and who need a particular spirituality to sustain them".³⁹⁴*

392 Michael O'Shea SMA: *Mission or Martyrdom? The Spirituality of Melchior de Marion Brésillac and the Society of African Missions*: Ambassador Book Centre, Ibadan. Nigeria. 1989; pages 62-63.. Michael John O'Shea was born in the diocese of Cork and Ross in 1944. Ordained priest for the SMA in 1969... Doctor of Theology (Spirituality): 1988. He is Professor of Church History in Saint Augustine's Seminary at Mpima, Kabwe, Zambia.

393 The "Positio" is a document required by the Congregation for Saints before a person can become "Venerable". This is a step on the way to being declared a Saint.

394 Quoted by Bruno Semplicio (Postulator) in a letter from SMA Rome: *Venerable Bishop Melchior de Brésillac*... June 2020.

The Work of the Synod

The actual Synod began on 23rd January and ended on the 25th. On each of the three mornings, Bishop Charbonnaux gave a talk in the church. The Plenary session on the first day dealt with twenty-eight items – nine of which treated with the personal spiritual life of the priests and the remainder with their ministry.³⁹⁵ It seems that the Synod members were expected to ratify the texts which had been approved by the Bishop's "Enlarged Council".

The Plenary session on 25th January dealt with nine items: the local clergy, "good" books and their distribution, conditional baptism, use of baptismal water, registration of baptisms, marriage dispensations, hearing confessions, marriage registers and the annual Retreat for Catechists. While all of these issues have a certain importance, one Biographer has remarked that *"these were matters of routine administration which scarcely called for the convocation of a Synod... As far as the Vicar Apostolic [Bishop Bonnand] was concerned the whole purpose of the Synod was to strengthen his own authority, to promote discipline among his missionaries and to formulate practical rules of administration"*.³⁹⁶

Nonetheless, we see some advances from the thinking which dominated the First Synod (1844) - especially with regard to local clergy and their future maintenance, contributions from the local Christians and the acceptance of the proposal on the "viaticum" (viatique). (This was identical with what Melchior had proposed to his missionaries in Coimbatore). The only "Special Report" which was *not* tabled for discussion was the one prepared by Bishop Melchior on "Caste and Customs". Bishop Bonnand had decided that he would not carry out the proposed enquiry, nor use the suggested methodology or send the results to Rome for approval.

395 The source for all information concerning the "Acta" of this Synod is: Launay. A. *Histoire des Missions de l'Inde: Pondichéry, Maïssour, Coimbatore*. 4 Volumes. Paris. 1898. All biographers (quoted in this present work) are indebted to him for the information on this particular issue.

396 *Marion Brésillac in India...* pages 186 -187.

He would communicate with the missionaries later, concerning “*this difficult issue*”. And so - as was the case in the 1844 Synod - the effort to solve the Caste problem was postponed.

Bishop Melchior was extremely disappointed. On the 31st January, he wrote: “*After the Opening Ceremony in the church (which was very impressive), it [the Synod] achieved almost nothing at all. The mountain heaved and groaned, and gave birth to a tiny mouse... The missionaries are going back to their stations a little less agitated and somewhat less angry than before... But they are still not calm enough, not united enough, not clear enough about their present pastoral duty*”.³⁹⁷ As regards himself, Melchior noted that, while it was within the rights of Bishop Bonnard to withhold the report on “Caste and Customs”, this was another lost opportunity to bring clarity to the burning issue which was seriously hampering the progress of the Kingdom of God in India. Further, it would complicate - even more - his own pastoral ministry as a Vicar Apostolic and increase his already disturbed conscience. This failure would have huge implications for Melchior’s future life as a missionary.

Though he would have preferred to leave Pondicherry as quickly as he could, Melchior acceded to the request of Bishop Bonnard to “*stay here for a little longer*” to help him to prepare a “Plan of Administration” for the Vicariate. Ever courteous, Melchior agreed - though he felt that “*it would be an obvious waste of time!*”.³⁹⁸ Meanwhile, Melchior sent Father de Gelis back to Coimbatore with instructions to send a “bullock team” to Pondicherry. He had just purchased a bullock-cart and was looking forward to returning home. The plan was to take the new arrival (Father Cornevin) with him and a confrere from Pondicherry (Father Pouplin) who was unwell. The hope was that a period in the cooler climate of Ootacamund would help his recovery. As there was some delay, Bishop Melchior gave a short Retreat at the “Colonial College”

397 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1041 - 1042.

398 *Ibidem:* page 1042.

and “*God gave me some happy results there...*”.³⁹⁹

News had been filtering through that Father Pacreau was very disturbed. “*He is asking [to leave Coimbatore] and go back to Pondicherry – or else to Europe! I am writing to encourage and console him. But, with a head like his, I fear anything can happen...*” Father Leroux was also a cause for concern. Melchior had seen several letters written to Bishop Bonnand and to various confreres. “*Truly this dear friend of mine forgets himself. His letters are full of anger and irritation; and these emotions cannot be easily combined with wisdom or prudence. They made painful reading. I have written to him about this... but I fear the he will not take my advice very well*”.⁴⁰⁰

At long last (on the 5th March 1849) the Melchior caravan left Pondicherry. It would take over two weeks before it reached Carumattampatty. Melchior felt sad - not because of leaving Pondicherry - but because “*I did not manage to achieve anything while I was there; not even the slight changes which I considered so important (almost essential) for ensuring some minimal progress at this crucial time*”.⁴⁰¹

After one week, Melchior and his companions reached Oludupet. There, he met his old colleague at the Pondicherry Seminary, Father Leroux. After some happy exchanges and reminiscences, Father Leroux said that his main problem was the struggle with his own conscience. He had now reached the conclusion that there should be zero tolerance of caste and customs, as they were in “*clear opposition to the laws of God, against the stated laws of the Church and against the terms of the Oath we have sworn*”. Melchior listened with sympathy to his friend’s reasoning, assuring him that he was not the only one to feel fearful. Others would agree with him that such a radical solution was the only viable one, the only possible key to an insoluble riddle. Nonetheless, Melchior reminded his

399 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1043.

400 *Ibidem:* pages 1042 - 1043.

401 *Ibidem:* pages 1043 - 1046.

confrere: “*It could also become the ruin of every Christian community in India. Weak and timid in the Faith (many of them with hardly any Faith at all) they are the only ‘Christian communities’ we have in this country...*”⁴⁰²

Here in Oludupet, Melchior also had time to reflect on the “*Plan of Administration*” which (in keeping with his promise), Bishop Bonnand had sent to all confreres in the Vicariate of Pondicherry. In dealing with the pastoral problem of caste and customs, the Bishop stated that all missionaries must follow the traditional approach, under pain of grave disobedience. If they had doubts, these must be referred to him. Bishop Bonnand did *not* say that this would be a temporary measure or that it was provisional, pending a decision from Rome.

Certainly, this letter did little to allay Father Leroux’s conscience. Melchior wrote: “*Bishop Bonnand has refused to proceed with this Enquiry, for fear of stirring up unnecessary or dangerous problems. I must say that this line [of argument] does not at all convince me. The dangers could be effectively avoided while still meeting the needs of the confreres. And for some of the men, those needs are very urgent indeed; for they are nothing less than burning problems of conscience. As for the moral question, it seemed to have been kept very low... but [maybe] it may turn out to be not so important after all... May God enlighten us!*”⁴⁰³

The young Father Cornevin spent a lot of time during the journey on perfecting his knowledge of Tamil. He was making “extraordinary progress” in this. Besides, as he could speak English “quite passably”, he would be a great asset to Coimbatore. However, Melchior noticed that he often looked somewhat fearful and depressed... Father Pouplin, on the other hand, was finding the heat “excessive” and was becoming weaker.

All of these concerns were compounded by a tragic event at Salem

402 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac.* page 1045.

403 *Ibidem:* page 1046.

(on 17th March). Shortly before dawn, one of Melchior's staff reported that a member of the "bullock-team" was very sick. Melchior went and saw immediately that he had cholera. After sending for the doctor, Melchior states: *"I tried to give the man some laudanum and opium [in water]... He vomited it all - twice. The sickness rapidly grew worse... It was barely seven (a.m.) when I sent Father Cornevin to give him Extreme Unction. A few hours later, the man died. He was the father of a family - and a good Christian. It was he who had brought our bullock team down from Carumatampatty... The sudden death had a very strong effect on everybody. All the members of the staff were scared... Father Pouplin was terrified... So I asked Father Cornevin to go on ahead, with Father Pouplin, [to the next stop - about 12 miles beyond Salem] while I stayed behind for the funeral... May the Lord graciously receive this poor man's soul".*⁴⁰⁴ On the following day, Melchior caught up with his companions. All arrived safely back in Carumatampatty on 23rd March 1849.

The Christians were happy to have their Bishop back, while Melchior was glad to be home. *"Father Metral and the young Father Ravel cheered me up a lot... and Father Cornevin was now in better health".*⁴⁰⁵ Life returned to what was "normal" for Melchior in Coimbatore, dealing with outbreaks of cholera, problems with the missionaries, disagreements among Christians, infiltration by Goan (schismatic) priests and the poverty of the people. The one consoling aspect of the work was the Seminary. Melchior gave it his "constant care" and was pleased with the steady progress which the students were making in their studies and in their human/spiritual development.

In April, Melchior heard that Father Leroux had taken on some "pariah disciples", with a view that they would become seminarians! *"Obviously, he is going too far and too fast - at least in the present situation in India".*⁴⁰⁶

404 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1046 - 1047.

405 *Ibidem:* page 1048.

406 *Ibidem.*

In May, Bishop Melchior decided to write to “Propaganda Fide” to update Rome on current events in Coimbatore Vicariate. In enclosing the signed “Oath” documents of Fathers Cornevin and Ravel, Melchior “took the opportunity to mention the moral doubts of several confreres about the Indian customs and ‘rites’ authorized by us. These doubts become more and more serious according as I study them in more depth”.⁴⁰⁷ This letter set off a correspondence on the topic of “Caste and Customs”. This would go on for a considerable time in the future.

The month of June saw “some reckless correspondence” going around about Bishop Melchior and the state of Coimbatore Vicariate. It appears that Father Barot had been telling everyone in Madurai, Pondicherry (and beyond) about all the wrongs which Bishop de Marion Brésillac had done to him. Father Pacreau was also moving about, and having a negative influence on the younger confreres. Melchior had often written to Father Tesson on this subject of discipline, but he now felt that it was necessary to formally write to the entire Board of M.E.P. Directors. He expressed his concern about “the spirit “of the young priests who were coming to South India.⁴⁰⁸ What he called “a Republican spirit” seemed to have taken hold of them. A typical example was Father Pajean who, while strongly advocating equality (“*égalité*”), was quite dictatorial in his words and actions. Further, many of the young missionaries showed little sympathy towards the cultural and social system of the area (caste etc.). At least, they should be prepared to learn... And so, there was an urgent need to reform the Formation programmes in the Seminary in Paris. Love and respect for the Indian people (and for those in the other M.E.P. missions) must be inculcated.

In July, Bishop Melchior began to plan for Saint Michael’s Church in Coimbatore. “*The Foundation stone is still a long way off, but*

407 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1050.

408 Bishop Charbonnaux had also expressed similar concerns.

I have at least firmly decided on the Church. It will be the first financially considerable project to be undertaken by the Mission. I am setting aside the 10,000 francs bequeathed to us by good Father Dupuis... I have been working on a plan. And I have just sent the sketch of it to Pondicherry, asking Father Laouenan to show it to the colonial Engineers and get their views and advice... It will take at least 50,000 francs to build. We will certainly need the help of 'Propaganda Fide'".⁴⁰⁹

During August and September, Melchior was very unwell. While he does not refer directly to his ailment, it would appear to be a recurrence of the intestinal problem which had afflicted him some years earlier. In the middle of this, Father Pacreau came to inform him that he was leaving India, and also quitting the M.E.P. Society. *"When he arrived here, I was exceedingly ill. I could just barely say a few words to him. I gathered all my poor strength together, urging him to think again, and I tried to let him see that all I wanted was his happiness. [But] I had no success. He set out for Ootacamund to collect his belongings and, then, he took the road back to Pondicherry. I have written to him again, but it all seems quite useless. May the Good Lord protect him from all evil".⁴¹⁰*

On the 17th September, Bishop Melchior became aware that Father Barot was trying his best to come back to Coimbatore after his various trips and exploits around the South of India. *"I must say, I feel very reluctant to take him back... So, I asked Bishop Bonnard to put some pertinent questions about him to his Council..."⁴¹¹* On 25th September, Father Cornevin showed symptoms of smallpox, but the English doctor said that there was "no danger".

409 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1053.

410 *Ibidem*: page 1056. Father Pacreau sailed for Bourbon Island on 22nd October. Bishop Bonnard did not know of his travel arrangements until after he had sailed. He was very hurt and annoyed. It was some confreres from Bangalore who had helped Father Pacreau with his passage money. Melchior truly wished him well and prayed: *"May the Angels assist him... Wherever he is going, may he be happy..."* (cf. *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages: 1056 and 1059).

411 *Ibidem*: page 1056.

On 1st October, Bishop Melchior felt well enough to go to Carumattampatty for the celebration of the Feast of the Holy Rosary. Father de Gelis stayed in Coimbatore to look after Father Cornevin. But the condition of this young and promising missionary quickly deteriorated and he died on 4th October. Melchior immediately sent Fathers Metral and Ravel to Coimbatore *“to give our dear departed confrere a fitting burial... Father Cornevin was a man of talent, of outstanding gifts... Indeed, he was to come here for the feast of the Holy Rosary to preach the principal sermon... I have a quiet confidence that he is now in heaven. Let us adore and pray...”*⁴¹²

On 10th October, Melchior received two “outrageous” letters. Both Bishop Bonnand and the Superiors in Paris wrote to *“censure and over-rule”* Melchior’s handling of the Father Barot case and the way he had dealt with Father Pacreau. Bishop Melchior was furious... *“In any normal administration - civil or military - I would at this point feel obliged to send in my resignation... When a man has done what he had to do, done what his conscience commanded him (taken the only permissible course) and when he is censured for it and over-ruled by his (de facto) Superiors, what does he do? He resigns. Or he might first try to demand a formal withdrawal or apology from them for the kind of statements they have had the nerve to write to me...”*⁴¹³ However, after some reflection, Melchior decided that, for the moment, he would not reply in anger and would *“stay on silently”* at his post.

On 13th October, Father de Gelis came down with smallpox. Fortunately, he had been vaccinated and the doctor “guaranteed” that he would recover... *“But I can’t help worrying. This dear confrere has every good quality one could possibly ask for... May God keep him with us...”*⁴¹⁴

On 31st October, Melchior decided that this was now the time to

412 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac..* page 1057.

413 *Ibidem:* page 1058.

414 *Ibidem.*

assess his own situation. It was three years since he was consecrated as Vicar Apostolic of Coimbatore.

1. In his relationships with the two neighbouring Bishops, he felt isolated. Bishop Bonnand continued to be an enigma, sometimes showing confidence in Melchior but often treating him harshly. Melchior felt that he could no longer rely or confide in him. As regards Bishop Charbonnaux, that relationship was never easy. Melchior felt that, right from the outset, this confrere had never really understood him and had turned several confreres against him.

2. Referring to the missionaries, Melchior knew that many in Pondicherry were wary of him - and a few were against him. The same could be said about those in Mysore. However, in Coimbatore (where it really mattered) *“I have now many missionaries who are openly opposed to me. By this time, a few of the younger ones have imbibed the negative attitudes of Father Pacreau. And Father Pajeau is still keeping things stirred up... Father Barot is coming back... With these two in a Mission, ‘anything’ can happen - especially when one has no sanctions whatever to keep them under control. It is inevitable that some of the new men who come here in the future will be contaminated by their subversion”*.⁴¹⁵

3. As regards the work of the Mission in Coimbatore, it was practically at a standstill. Melchior felt that no real progress was being made.

4. The Second Pondicherry Synod had come and gone - with no advance on the burning issue of Caste and Customs. In fact, consciences had been disturbed even further. As the “leader” in the Vicariate, Melchior felt that he had a serious obligation to get clarity on the issue.

5. Confidence in the M.E.P. Superiors and its structures of government were being questioned, not just by the Bishop of

415 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1060.

Coimbatore.⁴¹⁶

6. On the positive side, the only real progress in the Vicariate was the Seminary at Carumattampatty, directed by the “saintly” Father Metral.

7. Bishop Melchior also felt that, as a person and as their Bishop, he had been well accepted by the Christians. They felt that, by his words and actions, he had taken their concerns to heart and was treating all of them with kindness and respect.

So, what was he to do? As in all his decisions, Bishop Melchior weighed up possible solutions. *“I would not hesitate to resign if all the trouble came from me personally (even if I was in no way to blame for it)... The root of the evil lies elsewhere... It will never go away until God permits the real underlying trouble to be seen and remedied... Nevertheless, I think that - taking all aspects into consideration - it would still be better to resign... Wouldn't this resignation be the loudest possible protest we could say to those who are more powerful than us and who do not want to listen to our words? Fine! I will test the ground with a letter to 'Propaganda Fide' expressing my readiness to resign. I will send it through the Paris Superiors and see what impression it makes. Whatever is the Will of God, I will not stand in the way...”*⁴¹⁷

In a covering letter to Paris, Melchior stated that his decision was the fruit of a long period of reflection and deep conviction.⁴¹⁸ It was not taken in a fit of pique or anger. He also pointed out that he believed a lot of the problems came from the Statutes of the Foreign Missions Society. These needed reform, as some of them

416 Melchior is here referring to the “Siam Case” where the secular rulers had demanded that all Christians conform to certain traditional customs. The Vicar Apostolic made a decision... but the majority of the missionaries decided on the opposite. As the Vicar Apostolic felt in conscience that he must stay with his decision for the sake of the Church in that area, the missionaries decided to leave *en masse* - leaving him with a few native priests to help him. Afterwards, the missionaries wrote to Paris and Rome, ignoring and showing little respect for their Vicar Apostolic. Melchior felt that this scandal could have been avoided if there was a bit of order in the M.E.P.

417 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1060 - 1061.

418 The letter to Father Tesson is dated 25th October 1849.

were actually preventing the accomplishment of its own Mission. He had wondered if he could help in this task, but concluded that he might be an obstacle. *“I would still like to be at the service of the Church through the Foreign Missions. But since all my efforts are paralysed - and since I could become a destructive force in other people’s efforts - what better option than resigning do I have?...”*⁴¹⁹

Meanwhile, Melchior was quickly brought back to the “realities” of the Coimbatore mission. The new “Collector” (British Administrator) was *“showing himself to be a notorious fanatic, outstandingly hostile to everything Catholic. Our relations with the Government will become even worse than before...”*⁴²⁰

For the remainder of this painful and eventful year, Melchior continued his usual pastoral activities with a certain peace in his heart - as he awaited replies to his two letters.

419 Quoted in *De Marion Brésillac...* page 260. M.E.P. Archives: Vol.1011, Number 57.

420 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1066.

Chapter Fourteen

A Great Debate?... Dialogue?

1850 - 1851

At the beginning of 1850, Melchior did not know if the Superiors in Paris had forwarded his letter to “Propaganda Fide”. But a letter from them did arrive on another matter. It was an apology for their letters to him on the occasion of his handling of the Father Barot case. They were now very sorry and completely approved of everything that Melchior had done.

On 18th January, Bishop Pallegois of Siam sent a circular refuting the allegations which his missionaries had made and which they had distributed widely. Melchior commented: “*These gentlemen have already promised a refutation of the refutation. How edifying!*”⁴²¹

Nearer to home, some rumours had started about Father Ravel. “*They say he was guilty of grave infringements of caste law; he even ate some food prepared by pariahs!... I wrote to him and advised him to be extremely careful. This young missionary has given no trouble whatsoever up to now - nothing but good and encouraging reports about him. He replied, informing me exactly about what he had done [and not done]. I am hopeful that this latest scare will go no further. Lucky it was Father Ravel (so pious, so correct, so prudent). What if it was some other missionary who had chanced to get involved in that particular problem? We might be having a revolution on our hands right now!*”⁴²²

On 6th February, Melchior received letters from the Superiors in Paris strongly urging him not to resign. Each of them expressed their views on Melchior’s “plan”. There was also a letter which was written “in common” (and was signed by all of them). Basically, it was a request to continue the work which he had started. “*An*

421 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1071.

422 *Ibidem:* page 1072.

*administration sealed by a paternal goodness without weakness, by a courageous firmness without superiority, by an entirely fraternal authority, will probably be insufficient to govern certain rough characters... but the good confreres - who very fortunately are the great majority in your mission - will end up by giving all their confidence to it".*⁴²³

On 25th February, Bishop Melchior wrote a long letter to Father Tesson replying to all the objections which the Board Members had made. It was not the case that he was being severely tempted or tried. Neither was it the case that he was uneasy or unhappy in India. In fact, *"the Lord gratifies me with such an interior peace that personally I seem to be indifferent to the outcome of the procedures, which I only pursue to accomplish a duty. I have not mentioned it to anyone here... and I go on taking care of my present duties with much pleasure and as if nothing has happened"*.⁴²⁴ He reiterated that his main problem was one of conscience regarding Caste and customs. In the past, he tried to follow the instructions and policies which were put in place by his Bishop, the M.E.P. Superiors and the Holy See. But now, he was a Leader himself. He was faced with so many interpretations of the "regulations" and the widespread and varied practices of the missionaries - not to mention his own reservations - that he was convinced a new policy was necessary. This could only come about by informing Rome in great detail about all aspects of this difficult but crucial challenge facing the Church in India. It was necessary for the Holy See to reconsider previous decisions and, in his personal opinion, become more tolerant. It was precisely because Melchior felt all alone in this task that he had decided to "step aside" and avoid conflicts with other Vicariates and religious groups.

In this letter to Father Tesson, Melchior also mentioned the issue of obedience to Vicars Apostolic. (He had already written

423 *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2 F 8, 346 - 347). Quoted in *De Marion Brésillac...* page 262.

424 *Ibidem*: AMA 2 F 6, 321 - 329. Quoted in *De Marion Brésillac...*page 263.

concerning the formation of students). Now, several confreres had openly stated that as they were not “religious” (and had no vows), they could pick and choose regarding instructions from Vicars Apostolic. This was not just his problem in Coimbatore. Further, there were other matters which, in his view, required a Revision of the Statutes of M.E.P. Of course, all of this would take time; and the work should be carried out prudently and dispassionately. On a purely personal note, Melchior made it clear that he was in no position to help bring about reform in the M.E.P. This was primarily due to his friendship with Bishop Luquet. Contrary to the widespread opinion of many in M.E.P., he did not agree with Bishop Luquet in all his policies, words and actions, considering many of them to be imprudent. He had made that known to his friend on several occasions.

Finally, Melchior wrote that he was always ready to listen to the advice of the Directors in Paris - if it was founded on solid reasons. Any advice which was based on friendship or other interests would not suffice in these matters. As regards his own future, he was ready to obey the Holy See and go elsewhere on mission - to the heart of Africa or Siberia.

On 1st July, Bishop Melchior received a brief from Rome (dated 3rd April 1850) establishing Coimbatore as a “full” Vicariate. In practice, this would mean little; but it does give an opportunity to “*bring about good, if it is supported and followed up by the desired Instructions from the Holy See, bringing order, harmony and unity to the administration of ecclesiastical affairs in India... It also implies the obligation of increasing our efforts... and the need for apostolic virtues, such as self-denial, patience, perseverance when facing failure, a spirit of penance and mortification and a loving acceptance of humiliating situations*”.⁴²⁵

In acknowledging this Brief from Rome, Bishop Melchior gave the up-to-date statistical data of the Vicariate :

425 Letter to Missionaries: 5th July 1850. *De Marion Brésillac...* page 267.

1. Population: 1.2 million. Catholics: 15,000; Protestants: 2,000. Remainder: Unbelievers. Adults baptized: 120.
2. Clergy: 1 Bishop. 8 missionaries and 7 clerics in the seminary.
3. Churches: 5 or 6 (not really deserving the name). Chapels: 30 - 40.
4. Establishments: 1 Seminary, 1 Catechesis Centre (with 20 to 30 catechumens). 1 Hospital (under construction but halted due to lack of funds); 4 or 5 small schools.⁴²⁶

In the middle of grappling with the “tangled affairs” of Coimbatore, Melchior felt that he needed the advice of an “outside wise and experienced” person before putting his entire case directly to “Propaganda Fide”. So, he decided to visit his neighbour (Archbishop Martini) at Verapoly. At the end of July, he went there and received a warm welcome from all the Carmelites. They discussed many issues; and Melchior got a more complete picture of that Mission than he was able to form in his previous visit (1847). He also learned about the serious situation in Bombay where the Holy See had to replace the Carmelite Vicar Apostolic.⁴²⁷ As Providence would have it, Bishop Bacinelli of Quilon was staying in Verapoly for health reasons. “*He is an excellent architect [and] he has very kindly agreed to put the finishing touches on the Plan for the Coimbatore church. I hope to lay the foundations very soon*”.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁶ *De Marion Brésillac...* page 268. According to the Diocese of Coimbatore website (2021), the Diocese is 28,490 km² in size. Its population is 4,224,107. Catholics number 250,139. It has 70 parishes (65 under diocesan clergy) and 129 outstations. The total number of diocesan clergy is 125. Of these, 118 are resident in the Diocese; 6 resident abroad and 1 resident elsewhere in India. Religious women are 686. There are two Seminaries (philosophy and theology separated) and one preparatory secondary school. The number of educational institutions in the Diocese is 117, with 80,429 students in attendance. Hospitals are 7; Dispensaries 20. There are 171 “Charitable Institutions” (homes for the elderly, handicapped, orphanages, nurseries, social and re-education centres, mother and child health programmes etc.).

⁴²⁷ For the full description of the visit to Verapoly, cf. *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1079 - 1086.

⁴²⁸ *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1085.

As for the moral questions surrounding caste and customs, the answers of the Carmelite Fathers were predictable. “*We had many long talks... [and] in general, these Fathers consider our tolerations and authorizations in Tamil country to be more than extraordinary. They are within inches of considering us guilty [of paganism] - only to be excused by good faith or invincible ignorance! They wonder (quite seriously) if there is a single genuine Christian in all our missions!... [However] I know that those remarks are not to be immediately taken as conclusive... They are at the ‘first-impression stage’ since they have never worked in our area... Nevertheless, their views are not to be easily ignored either, as they are the unanimous views of strangers with no vested interests in the matter*”.⁴²⁹

At this point, Melchior decided to finalize his letter which he would send *directly* to “Propaganda Fide”.⁴³⁰ He meticulously outlined the various approaches to Caste and Customs, the terms of *Omnium sollicitudinum* (Benedict XIV) and the Oath which he had sworn to observe on his arrival in India. He also outlined the “confusion” in the pastoral practice of the missionaries. He told “Propaganda Fide” that the Paris M.E.P. Directors had advised him to put all his doubts to the Holy See, whose decision would become binding on all. Melchior added that “*as a Bishop (however unworthy), how can I remain in a state of practical doubt and require my missionaries to do what sometimes repels them and what I myself cannot vouch for as safe in practice? Nevertheless, I have no option but to adhere to that course of action, and oblige others to do so, at the risk of turning my mission upside down and destroying it*”.⁴³¹ Melchior dared to hope that some conclusion would be reached on this issue. “*It is highly important - it is vital - to decide this thing one way or another. Either we are entitled - in all conscience and honesty - to continue with the line we have always been pursuing (and if we can we ‘should’) or else that this line is incompatible with the Gospel (and then we should all drop*

429 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1082.

430 This would be Melchior’s second letter requesting acceptance of his resignation.

431 This letter (written in Latin) is in the *African Missions Archives*. Rome. (AMA 2 F 6). Quoted in *Marion Brésillac in India...* pages 210 - 212.

it immediately).⁴³² However, as he (as an individual) could not expect the Sacred Congregation to create the necessary harmony on its own, Bishop Melchior “humbly” requested its permission to leave India. He would be willing to go, as a missionary, to any part of the world (should Rome allow). Finally, Melchior recalled the joyful sacrifice he made when leaving his home for the missions. And now, he would have to face another sacrifice - that of leaving his mission in Coimbatore.

Melchior gave the final draft to Archbishop Martini to read. “*As he approves of it entirely, I will write it to ‘Propaganda Fide’ entrusting myself into the hands of Divine Providence, to do with me as It shall please*”.⁴³³ The letter was posted directly to “Propaganda Fide”, and was dated 16th September 1850.

Even though Melchior was taking a much-needed break from Tamil country, a confidential letter arrived from Bishop Bonnand. He still wanted Bishop Melchior to come to Pondicherry! “*Allow them to appoint you Coadjutor in Pondicherry. I promise that I will give you complete freedom of action in running the Vicariate. [Melchior replied] I thank you for your kind offer and for the confidence shown in me... I still feel very reluctant to take on the administration of Pondicherry. Things are far too complicated over there; the missionaries are too badly divided. There are so many prejudices against me that I doubt if I could get anything at all worth-while done there. Therefore, I beg you, if you do need a Coadjutor (I cannot see any use for one myself) please look elsewhere for him. Finally, I hope and pray that the good God will always protect me from ever being made Bishop in Pondicherry, as long as things are in their present state. This probably means not in our life-time*”.⁴³⁴

On the way back to Coimbatore, Melchior was again struck by the poverty of his Vicariate. Further, the Christians were now being

432 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1086.

433 *Ibidem*: 1082.

434 *Ibidem*: pages 1084 -1085.

forced to leave the area because of “sheer destitution”... *“It is the ‘Schedar’ caste especially (these are the weavers of cheap cloth) who are the worst hit. This caste is very numerous among ‘my’ Christians, especially around Carumattampatty. Theirs was the biggest community in the whole Vicariate; but it is going down and down... Time after time, these poor people have migrated. They have come back again, and have been forced to go away again. During each migration, several die on the road of hunger... whole families have died. Eventually, many others end up by settling permanently in Mysore (especially), so that the once-numerous caste of Catholics is shrinking visibly in this locality”*.⁴³⁵

After a thorough analysis, Melchior thought that it might be possible to entice many of the “Schedar” caste to become farmers. However, he knew that this change of occupation and status would take a long time. So, Melchior drafted a plan for the immediate future. The Vicariate *“could buy great quantities of cotton ourselves. [Then] get the jobless Christians to spin it and the weavers to weave it (in the periods when they have no normal work)... And then, sell it at the current price... If we limited our efforts to the few thousand Christian weavers, there could be a sufficient market - either in India itself, in Senegal (blue cloths) or in some other country where there is a need for very cheap stuff... It would only require an initial expenditure of a few thousand rupees. And, for this good work to be lawfully undertaken by us missionaries, it would have to be clearly and visibly a work of social charity - not a commercial, profit-making enterprise”*.⁴³⁶ Melchior made contact, through Father Laouenan, with a businessman in Pondicherry (Mr. Poulin). He replied that he was willing to help... But he would require a guarantee that a fixed quantity of cloth would be delivered each year. This made Bishop Melchior pause and reassess the plan. It would be necessary to make some profit in order to “tide” the people over the difficult years (which would inevitably happen). This might change his own role and that of

435 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1086 -1087.

436 *Ibidem:* page 1088.

the missionaries in the eyes of the Christians.⁴³⁷ They would be seen as businessmen! However, he felt that he should pursue the plan... Melchior would continue consulting lay experts and some Christians, before presenting it to the missionaries at their next General Meeting.

Early in October, a new missionary arrived, by name Louis Perceval.⁴³⁸ He had four years in ministry before joining the M.E.P. Bishop Melchior already admired his qualities, noting that these priests had a better attitude towards the missions than those who had received their formation at the Paris Seminary. However, it was unfortunate that the new confrere did not know English. *“What is worse, they actually stopped him from learning it in Paris after all the times I had written to them about the great usefulness of English for all missionaries coming here! I told them that, as soon as anyone was appointed here, he should immediately be given a teacher of English. At the very least, he should be given the necessary books, and be told to study English during the voyage, instead of Tamil”*.⁴³⁹

After the celebration of the Feast of the Holy Rosary at Carumattampatty, the Retreat for all the missionaries took place. *“It was mostly a bad experience, very far from satisfactory... Nobody gave any practical preaching... The only things we did in common were the devotions we had in the chapel. Anyway, the heat was overpowering. Obviously, this is not the best time of the year for the Coimbatore Retreat”*.⁴⁴⁰

Shortly after the retreat, Melchior fell ill. Again, there is no mention of the type of illness, but it did confine him to bed (more or less) for most of a month. Certainly, it curtailed his activities. He would have liked to lay the Foundation Stone of the Church in

437 It might also be against Canon Law which specifically forbids clerics to deal directly in business and commerce (“*negotium*”).

438 Louis Perceval was born in the diocese of Verdun in 1822. Ordained priest in 1846, he joined the M.E.P. and departed for Coimbatore in 1850. He died of cholera in 1854.

439 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1090.

440 *Ibidem*.

Coimbatore, but, in addition to his illness, he discovered that there was not enough money for the construction. Instead, as Father Bonjean had been asking for a church in Ootacamund, Bishop Melchior decided he would soon go “to the Mountains” where they could (together) decide on the matter.

Bishop Melchior had seen promising possibilities for Ootacamund on previous visits. *“As I have already described them, the Nilgiris are wonderful mountains and plateaus between Coimbatore and Mysore, on which you can breathe real air... no fevers... It has quickly become a health resort as well as a holiday resort for the wealthy... Some of us have to live there because of the relatively large Catholic community that has grown up there... I also wanted to make it a general sanatorium for all the Indian missions. All I required was a modest contribution from each of the Vicars Apostolic towards a bigger building... It would have been a wonderful place to send sick missionaries to regain their health and strength... But the Bishops of the various nationalities and congregations were not big enough to see the opportunity... Apart from Archbishop Martini, not one of them even replied... I had to drop the whole idea of a common sanatorium”*.⁴⁴¹ And so, when Melchior met Father Bonjean at the end of the year (1850), they decided to build a house which would meet the needs of the Coimbatore Vicariate (while adding on a few spare rooms to provide hospitality for any missionaries who may ask to stay there). He prayed: *“Peace be to this house, and to all who will live in it”*. Melchior stayed in Ootacamund for about three weeks and returned to Coimbatore, feeling much better, around the middle of January 1851.

On 5th February, Bishop Melchior received a reply from “Propaganda Fide”. He was somewhat surprised at the speed of the response. His request to resign was rejected. Instead, *“they have ordered me to write down a detailed Account of every missionary practice, here [in*

441 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1093 - 1094. A “sanatorium” has been defined as “a facility where people with chronic illnesses or a need to convalesce are treated”. This is to distinguish it from a “sanatorium” - which became synonymous with the treatment of Tuberculosis.

Coimbatore] and elsewhere that seems to me contrary to the Gospel or the Oath which we have taken... So, in a way, the Great Debate is on, as of now! What will be the final outcome of my Account? I just do not know. I cannot even envisage the end result... [But] whatever the outcome, O my God, I pray to You now - do not let my pen (or my tongue) be ever led astray by too much feeling. I will just try to write down impartially what I see, what I hear, what I really think. I will simply state in a straightforward way and in good faith everything I know - without mental reservations. Having done all of that, I will place it all in Your hands, O my God, as well as my own future, my whole person, my honour before men and my own peace of mind".⁴⁴²

Within a week, Bishop Melchior sent a Circular to all "his" missionaries, asking them to send their opinions to him on the caste practices in their areas. He sent the same invitation to Father Leroux, his colleague and friend since he had come to India. As already noted, he held strong views (opposed to those of Melchior) but had valuable experience in dealing with these issues. Melchior also informed Archbishop Martini of Verapoly (who had become his trusted friend) asking him for his prayers and advice. Finally, Bishop Melchior wrote to Bishop Canoz S.J. (who was in Rome at the time) inviting him to give his views on Caste and Customs directly to "Propaganda Fide"... "I very much hope that the time for disputes has passed. In asking the Sacred Congregation to ease my conscience, I feel certain that, with God's grace, I have no thought or desire other than that of ensuring my own salvation and that of the Christians for whom the Lord will hold me responsible".⁴⁴³

Some family news arrived in March 1851. Melchior's uncle (his mother's brother) had died. He was also Melchior's god-parent (sponsor) at Baptism. "He was always like another father to me. He was an upright man, always just, sincere, loyal, very talented, capable of great things and worthy of the highest office. A highly political man,

442 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1096.

443 *African Missions Archives*. Rome (2F6). Quoted in *Marion Brésillac in India...* page 215.

he was utterly devoted to the sacred cause of the Bourbons. But this did not in the least prevent him from being an excellent family man, a refuge for all those in trouble, a selfless consoler of the widow and the orphan, a father to the poor and a good friend to the priests".⁴⁴⁴

However, Melchior was aware that his uncle did not frequent Mass or the Sacraments. This had been a matter of concern for him over many years. Hence, he was very happy to read that his uncle de Gaja "*had received the Last Sacraments and fulfilled all his duties with full consciousness and in a great spirit of faith... His final self-understanding and the last actions of his life gives me confidence that these will be a source of endless blessings to my dear uncle*". The other piece of news was that his "little" sister (Félicie) was engaged and would soon marry M. Melchior de Ranchin de Saissac. He wrote to congratulate her; and he prayed that the Lord would bless them and grant them a long and happy life.

By the middle of June, Bishop Melchior had completed the Report which had been requested by "Propaganda Fide". It was a comprehensive report. "*I have written a long 'letter' on all the Customs we are still tolerating here. I explained them all in detail (in so far as I know them) taking every possible precaution to include no statement except what was quite certain, and to exaggerate nothing. I did not discuss anything. I just described them as accurately as I possibly could. It is an exposé - not a discussion. The discussion about the morality will come later, if the Sacred Congregation decides that the matter should be pursued further. But if it is to be satisfactory (and to actually satisfy everybody concerned) it should not be a discussion with 'one' person only...*"⁴⁴⁵

After further reflection (and before mailing the Report), Melchior decided that he could not leave out all mention of moral reasoning.

444 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1097.

445 This "long letter" (thirty-nine pages) may be found in the *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2F 11: pp.200 - 250). Melchior added a note explaining that he had to write it in French (instead of Latin) in order to be more nuanced and accurate. (cf. AMA 2F 6: pages 387 - 388). A summary may be found in *Marion Brésillac in India...* pages 217 - 224.

*“A mere exposé would have inevitably turned the members of the Sacred Congregation against tolerating those Customs, if I did not state that it was not without good reasons that [some] of these customs are being tolerated here. Without this, I would have been working in favour of one ‘side’ only - which I do not wish to do”. And so, Bishop Melchior decided to enclose a second document. He framed this one as “a series of Propositions giving the essential reasons for our tolerations... Tolerance towards Indian customs is much to be preferred... provided that one acts in concord with the Holy See, keeping it constantly up to date on all that is done, and doing nothing without its approval. May Heaven bless this work of mine, and make it serve nothing but the victory of the truth... May God’s Will alone be done!”*⁴⁴⁶

On 30th June, Melchior recorded having a visit from Bishop Bettachini (Oratorian) from Jaffna, Ceylon. During the two day visit, both Prelates discussed many issues and enjoyed each other’s company. *“It seems that all the Christians there...are in a kind of half-way position between our own caste-ridden Christians and the completely caste-free Christians [of the Malabar Coast]. Moreover, the Church in Ceylon has special problems of its own - and also special achievements - which cannot be seen elsewhere...”* As Melchior always wished to add to his knowledge, he decided to accept his colleague’s warm invitation to visit the island. *“I also decided to invite Father Pajeau to accompany me. By this, I hope to give him a much-needed break, and also to show him that I am willing to let bygones be bygones. For it seems that now, he is really making an effort to control himself...”*⁴⁴⁷

On 1st July, a new missionary (Father Mulhaire) arrived in the Vicariate. Melchior was happy to hear that he was proficient in English. On the same day, a letter arrived from Father Tesson (Paris) apologising for his remarks (in an earlier letter) about Melchior’s complaints concerning “young” missionaries and the formation programme at the Paris Seminary. *“This is only what I would expect*

446 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1100.

447 *Ibidem:* page 1101.

from an excellent confrere like Father Tesson".⁴⁴⁸

Father Ravel continued to do well. He made a kind of "breakthrough" on 30th July when "*he actually had a 'funeral' in his District! And it was a higher-caste man - 'inside' the church! Who could believe it in [this part] of India!...* Another surprise was a complete change of mind by Father Jarrige on the question of caste and customs. He had written to his Bishop (Charbonnaux) some time earlier, expressing his serious doubts about following the "traditional approach" to the entire question of caste and customs.⁴⁴⁹ "*Up to this day (i.e. for the last thirty years) I have been following our traditional policy in good faith. But now, after examining it closely, I cannot... Those [customs] and ceremonies now cause me such disquiet that I have to say directly that if Your Lordship (whose authority is the only thing that keeps me still working here) does not change our policy - if you do not want to re-examine and prohibit these fearful ceremonies - then, as I do not want to be lost, I will be forced to resign (with great regret) from the Mission*".⁴⁵⁰

Melchior was convinced that the recent "conversion" of Father Jarrige was due to the widespread and persistent protests. These had awakened Father Jarrige from "*his dogmatic slumber... He has been obliged to really study several moral aspects [of Caste and Customs], and to take a long look at the [traditional] practical solutions (which he had formerly 'assumed' to be correct but which he had never reached by any personal, logical conclusion)... But today, he has suddenly come round... Indeed, he has gone much farther than me - too far, in my opinion. He is demanding that his Bishop should instantly solve those*

448 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1101.

449 Father Jarrige was an experienced and highly regarded M.E.P. missionary. He had worked in more parts of Tamil country than anybody else. He was considered to be a good theologian and capable administrator. He had served as Vicar General in Pondicherry, Coimbatore (before Melchior came) and then Mysore. It was he who wrote the "Coutumier" of Pondicherry which all missionaries had to sign on their arrival in South India. He had also been sent to Ceylon by "Propaganda Fide" to help solve some problems there. Finally, it was Father Jarrige who led the opposition to the "crazy ideas" of those "reckless innovators" (Luquet and de Brésillac).

450 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1104.

questions for him, by outright official prohibitions. [And] all that I am saying is that there is a real doubt... there must be the most serious study by all of us together... in sincere and respectful dialogue, in all honesty and good faith. And I say that the final decision must come from the Holy See, which alone has enough authority to decide very grave questions... [Further] I say, that in the meantime, all of us must continue with our traditional practice, because 'in dubio praesumptio stat pro possidenti'. [i.e. In doubt, the policy which has long been in practice "on the ground" must be presumed to be correct, until further notice]".⁴⁵¹

When Bishop Bonnand heard that his colleague (Bishop Melchior) had sent a report to "Propaganda Fide", he was annoyed at not being consulted. On the other hand, Bishop Charbonnaux was much more understanding, as he too had serious doubts... "My doubts have become a moral certainty and my fears have increased... Consequently, the responsibility of being a Superior in this country has become a growing burden that makes me secretly ponder the desire and the hope of leaving it on someone else's shoulders as soon as possible, and go on offering the services that are within my reach".⁴⁵²

Early in August, Bishop Melchior and Father Pajeau set out for Ceylon via Trichy, Tanjore and Negapattinam. The "break" from Coimbatore was scheduled to last about five weeks. Melchior provides great detail (as was his custom) about the means of transport, dangers and difficulties encountered, the glorious scenery, the magnificent architecture and, of course, the people whom he encountered (both religious and laity).

Their first glimpse of Ceylon was the island of Manar, a place made

451 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1104 - 1105. By way of concluding these remarks, Melchior posed a question: "What does "long experience" really mean? We are generally inclined to concentrate more on the length of the time rather than on the quality of the 'experience'. There are certain things that are not of the kind that make themselves better understood through the lapse of time. There are people for whom ten or twenty weeks can be as valuable as ten or twenty years of 'experience' by others..."

452 Letter dated 28th July 1851. *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2F8, 512 - 513). Quoted in *De Marion Brésillac...* page 278.

famous in the books about Saint Francis Xavier.⁴⁵³ On disembarking, they were welcomed by “a large number of Christians”, led by the only white missionary on the island. The visitors were shown around the island and were impressed by the “*fine church buildings - each with an equally good priest’s residence...*” Regrettably, there were only three other priests on the island (in addition to the one European) - and these were the “schismatic” clergy from Goa. This was hardly sufficient for a Catholic population, estimated at 6,000 in 1851. However, the main problem on this island was clear - no local, native-born island priest! As regards caste and customs, the Christians seemed to be free of caste ideas.⁴⁵⁴

The travellers arrived in Jaffna (the northern tip of the island of Ceylon) at nightfall on 11th August. It was in this city that most of the Tamils in Ceylon had settled. Bishop Bettachini had organised a big reception for his visitors. “*All along the water-front (more than half a mile) to the church, there was nothing but beautiful fireworks, lanterns, illuminated ‘arcs-de-triomphe’... [And] at the church entrance, I found all the Episcopal regalia had been laid out for me... The people were packed like sardines into the church for Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament... Such was our triumphal entry into Jaffna*”.⁴⁵⁵

The visitors stayed in Ceylon from 12th August to 9th September. Generally, they were well received. Among the places visited were Jaffna, Trincomelee, Metallia, Kandy and Colombo.⁴⁵⁶ One may summarize Bishop Melchior’s “findings” with regard to religion as follows:

453 Mannar Island is situated off the South-Eastern coast of Tamil Nadu State, India. It is part of Ceylon (Shri Lanka) and has been described as “dry”, “barren” and “covered in vegetation and sand”. It is about 130 Km² in area and has fishing as its main industry and economic source.

454 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1116 - 1119.

455 *Ibidem:* pages 1119 - 1120.

456 Melchior describes all aspects of their visit to Ceylon in *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1119 - 1144 (25 pages).

1. A very serious lack of a native diocesan clergy.
2. Both missionaries and Goan clergy widely criticized for their insensitivity to the people (including not being able to speak the local language).
3. Disputes over financial management between missionaries, Goan priests and lay Christians.
4. Due to the number of missionaries (from various religious congregations... and the presence of Goan priests), there were no clear coordinated policies on a pastoral approach to mission.
5. Regarding caste and customs, a “laissez-faire” attitude seemed to be prevalent.

On the positive side, Melchior noted the fine church buildings, the enthusiasm of some priests (and Bishops) as well as the generosity and devotion of individual Christians.

During his visit to Kandy, Melchior became particularly interested in Buddhism. *“The Buddhist Temple at Kandy is one of the most venerated in the world, because they have a most wonderful relic - a real Tooth of the Buddha himself. The relic is kept in the holiest of all sanctuaries, locked in a silver tabernacle, covered with priceless jewels and precious stones of incalculable value... Their priests are trained in noviciates (just like ours)... They always seem extremely modest and humble... observe strict chastity... True, they are still free to marry, but if they do, they must leave the monastery... At present there is a dispute between two groups: the strict observance and the ‘half ‘Brahmin’ variety introduced long ago by the Tamil Kings... Would it not be a favourable time to get to know them, start a religious dialogue, and let them see that neither camp has got it right! But who can do it? Where is the Apostle of this nation? Nobody - not even one since Francis Xavier?”*⁴⁵⁷

Melchior and his team sailed for India, after a few days in the

⁴⁵⁷ *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1139 - 1140.

port of Colombo, on 9th September (as scheduled). The crossing was “*quick and easy... [And] apart from a violent headache which was tormenting me, all was well. [However], that headache on board turned into a serious illness... I was hoping to be back in Carumattampatty for the Holy Rosary Feast there... But man proposes and God disposes*”.⁴⁵⁸

Melchior hoped to meet Father Lazare, that “excellent” Indian diocesan priest who had served with him in the Pondicherry College-Seminary, but he had travelled to outstations. However, he did meet his confrere Father Richon⁴⁵⁹ at Kariakal. This mission (in a French “possession”) had always proved to be difficult for a number of reasons, but particularly for the anti-clerical and actual behaviour of the government officials there. This inevitably affected the attitude and actions of the small Christian community. Melchior prayed that “*the tireless zeal of this good priest and confrere may bring consolation to him and do some good in this most unpromising soil for a missionary. May the good God crown his steadfast fidelity with success!*”.⁴⁶⁰

The remainder of the trip to Carumattampatty was uneventful, except for an occurrence at Kumbakonam (where the Christians were few). Melchior was “*amazed and disappointed by Judge Alagwiya Pillai (my esteemed companion of a few years ago), who barely came to greet me just as I was leaving, giving a rather lame excuse that he was ‘indisposed’. What has happened to the excellent spirit he had in Coimbatore? I have always considered him the most sensible and well-informed Indian that I know. Anyway, they say that he is still a very good Christian*”.⁴⁶¹

458 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1144. Melchior goes on (uncharacteristically) to devote four pages to his illness and to the medical attention he received. It seems to have left him very weak and not fit to resume his journey home until 17th October.

459 Pierre Joachim Richon was born in the diocese of Chambéry in 1808. He left for the Coramandel Coast in 1839 and died in Pondicherry in 1864.

460 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1148 -1149.

461 *Ibidem:* page 1152.

On 3rd November, Melchior arrived back (at last) in Carumattampatty. He was happy to be home again and “*not too worn out by the long journey*”. A letter from Father Tesson was the first thing to be dealt with. “*He told me that the Carmelites are giving up two of their Vicariates (Quilon and Mangalore), and want to retain only Bombay and Verapoly. The Sacred Congregation are offering to confide the two Vicariates to us. This would be ‘easy’ if Mysore would be prepared to take on Mangalore and if I could take on Quilon... Before giving any reply, I will write to Archbishop Martini, asking if this information is correct... for as a good neighbour, I do not want him to wonder if I am involved in some intrigue against them*”.⁴⁶² Melchior, however, did give some time to reflecting on the proposal. He could see that Coimbatore would hardly ever be viable if confined to the existing territory and diminishing (rather than increasing) number of Christians. But, he felt that taking on Quilon was not the answer. The two peoples had nothing in common - no understanding or empathy - while their customs and habits were entirely different. Thankfully, he was under no pressure... he would wait and see in what way this latest “proposal” would develop.⁴⁶³

On 15th November, a letter arrived from “Propaganda Fide”. “*They say that they are very satisfied with my long account of the customs and ceremonies we are tolerating in India. They will soon make similar enquires among all the other Vicars Apostolic in this country... Please, O God, bring this very grave question to a good solution*”.⁴⁶⁴

Early in December, the Vicars Apostolic received the Memorandum from “Propaganda Fide”. Even Melchior was taken aback by

462 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1153.

463 Within a week, Melchior received letters from Bishops Bonnand and Charbonnaux asking for his opinion. He replied stating that he was not sufficiently informed to give a view on Mangalore, but stated clearly his conclusions on the Quilon/Coimbatore proposal.

464 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1153. This letter (dated 1st October 1851) may be found in the *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2F 13, No. 14) and is quoted in *De Marion Brésillac...* page 281. “Propaganda Fide” described Melchior’s Memorandum as a “*well thought-out answer, and perfect in every respect*”.

the strength of its tone. Bishop Charbonnaux found the letter “fulminating”, while Bishop Bonnand felt that the Vicar Apostolic of Coimbatore had exaggerated the issues in his report. Melchior offered to host a “working” few days with these confreres at the new house in Ootacamund. Unfortunately, they were unavailable.

At the end of December, a new missionary (Father Lefeuvre) arrived in Coimbatore.⁴⁶⁵ This brought the total to ten. Melchior finished the year 1851 by writing to his mother, assuring her that he was in good form. “*There is nothing new here. I have been spending my time as head mason, working on the foundations of a big church. I do not know when it will be finished... That depends on what Providence will send us...*”⁴⁶⁶

465 Hyacinth Lefeuvre was born in the Diocese of Paris in 1823. He departed for Coimbatore in 1851 and died there in 1893.

466 Letter (dated 28th December 1851): *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2 F1, 154 - 155).

Chapter Fifteen

A Final Push...

1852 – 1853

At the beginning of the New Year (1852), Bishop Melchior reviewed his situation (as was his custom). The Sacred Congregation had responded quickly to his report. This was a positive development. However, he felt that due to some reactions, he should write again (briefly) to Rome to make his own personal views on caste and customs “crystal clear”. This would also serve as his response to the Circular.

The letter has been succinctly summed up by a Biographer. “[Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac] *wanted Indian Christians to remain Christian... He wanted toleration extended to the furthest limit... He was against condemnations... He wanted to open the door to non-Christians... He wanted a truly Indian Church... He was being personally inhibited by the condemnations of ‘Omnium Sollicitudinem’ and his oath to observe the terms of that papal instruction... and he was being obliged to order his missionaries to follow the pastoral policy which he personally believed to be wrong. Bound by Rome, he could not follow his conscience; but some of his missionaries (not feeling bound by him) were disobeying his orders and causing chaos in his Vicariate*”.⁴⁶⁷ Melchior again implored “Propaganda Fide” to “*take plenty of time, and to use a procedure which will make it ‘evident’ to all, that Rome is indeed examining and considering the question from every point of view, and with ‘all’ of its implications and consequences in mind*”.⁴⁶⁸

Without stating it explicitly at this time, Melchior knew that any “New Instruction” from Rome would need to be reviewed

467 *Marion Brésillac in India...* page 235.

468 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1159.

and updated in the future, perhaps every ten years. But for him (personally), what was necessary *now* was to have clarity and approval from the Holy See which would satisfy his conscience. He prayed that (as time went on) his position would be understood more fully in Paris, in India and among the many M.E.P. Vicars Apostolic in Asia.

On the domestic front, nothing much had changed. A visit to Ootacamund towards the end of January gave Melchior the opportunity to see Father Bonjean and the new house. “*Father Bonjean is still very zealous... but his zeal is the sort that cannot take advice or direction. And so, he mixes a lot of mistakes and imperfections into its good actions. [As regards the house] I regret that I had let Father Bonjean go ahead and finish it in my absence. It has many flaws; and it has cost a lot more than it is worth*”.⁴⁶⁹

In other parts of the Vicariate, Father Pajeau was (again) busy - stirring up trouble and negatively influencing the younger missionaries. Melchior had hoped that the visit to Ceylon would have tempered him - but this was not the case. Further, it appears that “*when he was at Jaffna, he must have spoken to Father Semeria... and asked that unsuspecting and imprudent man to take him into his Order (the O.M.I.). Neither of them said a word to me, either in Jaffna or afterwards. I had not the remotest suspicion of this underhand intrigue going on. Then I received a letter from Bishop Bettachini. He was ‘delighted’ to hear that Father Pajeau was planning to come to Jaffna - ‘not as a passing visitor but to stay!’ He asked me for all relevant information about Pajeau, to see if there was any obstacle to accepting him!*”⁴⁷⁰

Bishop Melchior was “amazed” at this development - and especially

469 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1159.

470 *Ibidem*: page 1160. The Oblates of Mary Immaculate (O.M.I.) is a Catholic Missionary Religious Congregation of priests and brothers. It was founded by Saint Eugene de Mazenod who was born in the South of France in 1782. He established the O.M.I. in 1816. “*Over 4,000 Oblate priests and brothers are to be found today in more than 60 countries of the world*”. www.oblates.ie (5th June 2021).

at the “delight” of Bishop Bettachini (Oratorian). He wrote back to the Bishop, asking him to reflect on Father Pajeau’s temperament and “*on the weakness and temptations of discouragement which often trouble the heart of any missionary... [These temptations] would greatly proliferate if missionaries saw that they could quite easily change from one Mission to another. Neither of the Missions would gain from a situation of easy transfers like that...*” In declining to give his consent, Bishop Melchior was well aware that others in Coimbatore might follow Father Pajeau’s example “*especially when this Mission is so poor, so remote and uncomfortable, and so lacking in obvious spiritual or missionary consolations... I also wrote to Father Pajeau, trying to reason with him as gently as possible... [and] to Father Semeria (a strong letter) letting him know how greatly he had offended me [by ignoring the usual procedures]*”.⁴⁷¹

After this, Father Pajeau came a few times to the Bishop’s house at Coimbatore - expressing his “annoyance” at Melchior’s decision. Finally, he formally requested to return to Europe within two years, if his Bishop did not grant him permission to go to Jaffna. Melchior reflected on the request. “*That permission cannot be granted without serious danger to this Mission. It would be far, far better if he took himself off to Europe immediately; because now I fear that he will go all out to double the damage which he did before. I cannot do anything to prevent him from infecting the young confreres with his bad attitude. And I have no power whatsoever to dismiss him or send him home. Well, let the evil consequences of ‘that’ fall on the people who have tied our hands – leaving us with no come-back whatsoever in the Rule.*”⁴⁷²

As already indicated, Melchior had drawn the attention of the Superiors in Paris to the weakness of the formation programme and the indiscipline of the young missionaries. He was now fully convinced that the Society’s Constitution was in need of reform.

471 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1161.

472 *Ibidem:* page 1162.

How could “proper authority” be exercised with such unwieldy structures - “*where the head is partially in Paris, partially in Japan, partially in Bangkok etc.? Is it not evident that we carry within ourselves the principle of our extreme weakness?*”⁴⁷³

It is important to note that Melchior was not alone in being frustrated with the authority structures of M.E.P. Bishop Bonnard (as a young Bishop) had written to Paris on this topic in the early 1830s. Others (such as Bishop Lefebre of Cochin, China) were strong advocates for Reform. Indeed, this Bishop had indicated that he knew five other Bishops who shared this viewpoint. However, it was also clear that the M.E.P. Superiors in Paris were convinced that the “essentials” of the Constitution should not be changed. So, for now, as this matter needed further reflection, Melchior decided to postpone writing to all concerned until later in the year (1852).

At the end of February, trouble had unexpectedly flared up in Carumattampatty District. “*One village, in rebellion against Father Metral, had called in the Ootacamund ‘schismatic’ priest. He had promptly arrived and was received with full honours by the village, aided by a neighbouring village which has always kept up its affection for the West Coast priests. It seems that there are secret understandings with other villages too*”.⁴⁷⁴ This again showed the volatility of the situation in the Vicariate of Coimbatore and the sensitivity of the Christians (and the insensitivity of the missionaries) regarding caste and customs. Normally, Father Metral handled all such “conflicts” with great understanding and expertise but, in this case, Bishop Melchior himself intervened to diffuse the situation. The Goan Schism would continue to present a huge challenge to the Church in South India...

At this time, Bishop Melchior sent a Circular to all his missionaries on two issues. Firstly, he informed them that he intended to appoint two for “*the preaching of the Gospel to the gentiles*”. In his

473 Letter to some M.E.P. Bishops. *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2 F6) pages 433 - 436.

474 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1162.

view, there were now enough missionaries to attend to the pastoral needs of the Christian communities. He invited his priests to reflect on this and present their reflections at the General Meeting later on. Secondly, he wished to call their attention to the fact that some missionaries were taking decisions without consultation and acting independently in a number of mission stations. He asked the missionaries for “collaboration” and invited them to send suggestions to him. *“I have no doubt that all of you have the sincere desire to have a ruling that is in perfect harmony with the real needs of the mission - helping us to remain in the Vicariate - helping us to remain in the grace of the sublime vocation which we have been favoured by Heaven”*.⁴⁷⁵

In April (1852), Melchior was becoming more and more concerned with the lack of progress (even stagnation) in the work of evangelization in the Vicariate, the recurring crises on caste issues and his own deepening problems of conscience. Very few of his friends were aware of the depths of his suffering. For the third time, he offered his resignation to “Propaganda Fide”. He stated to the Cardinal Prefect that it was morally impossible for him to remain in his mission. In fact, the reasons which he previously offered were still valid and even had become more acute. For over two years, he had tried to cope with the distress - but it was now unbearable. He would not live anywhere else in India or in France. He would retire to a place of seclusion, and then go on to Jerusalem to await there the end of his life in the presence of Him who died for all and *“praying for the missions on whose behalf I can no longer work effectively”*.⁴⁷⁶ Melchior knew that it would take time - perhaps months - before he would receive a reply from Rome.

Meanwhile, there were some consolations. Work on building the Church in Coimbatore was progressing under his supervision. A ceremony for the laying of the Foundation Stone would soon

475 Letter to his missionaries: 23rd February: *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2 F6) pages 418 - 420.

476 *African Missions Archives...* 26th April 1852 for the full text of this letter (written in Latin).

take place. He also had his own “little domain” (the garden) where he relaxed - “*enjoying the perfumes of the flowers, the sweet-scented lemons, a large and deep pool, and so many other wonderful products of a climate no longer inconveniencing me*”. In the garden there was also a large and deep pool, a home for some tame animals and birds (including a peacock) and a kennel for his faithful dog. At the corner of that garden, Melchior had also constructed a tomb where, one day, he had hoped to be laid to rest.⁴⁷⁷

Another “delightful consolation” was the Retreat (which had been brought forward to the end of June). “*Father Bonjean was the preacher and he spoke like an angel. [The Retreat] went very well; most edifying. All my missionaries took part, except Father Pajeau. Afterwards, we had a general meeting, at which everything went satisfactorily. O My God, why can't we have some more like this - some 'ongoing' methods - to continually instil some of Your Mind into the minds of our young missionaries!*”⁴⁷⁸ Points agreed at the meeting included new appointments and transfers. The most noteworthy of these were the assignment of two missionaries to work exclusively among the pagans (Fathers Metral and Bonjean), a new Director for the Seminary (Father de Gelis) and Father Ravel to Carumattampatty District. On 4th July, Bishop Melchior informed the Paris Superiors of all the changes, and he requested them to send to Coimbatore just one more missionary to have in reserve, in case of an illness to any of the confreres. Such a man would need to be zealous (but not impatient), a person who would not become bored if not always active, and who would be indifferent as to what kind of work would be assigned to him. He would always be “available for tasks”.⁴⁷⁹

On 26th July, Melchior returned to his reflections on reforming the structures of the M.E.P. He weighed up a number of possibilities for action. Eventually, he decided to opt for one. “*I am going*

477 *Marion Brésillac in India...* pages 237 - 238.

478 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1165 - 1166.

479 *African Missions Archives* (2F 17) and *Marion Brésillac in India...* page 240.

to write, now, to all the principal Vicars Apostolic of the Society. I will propose one way out of our dilemma. It could still be successful without violating the Rules... I will not tell them that I have resolved to resign... [But from my own viewpoint] I will then have tried everything possible (and maybe the impossible as well). Then, if there is still no progress, it will not be for want of sincere efforts by one man at least. This plan would take time. But time is always a necessary factor in any good achievement”.⁴⁸⁰

Briefly, the “plan” consisted in three steps:

1. Each Vicar Apostolic would prepare an accurate exposition of his views on what was needed to ensure the progress of the missions in general. Each of them would also be invited to review and comment on the structures of the M.E.P. and on the structures established in his own jurisdiction.
2. One of the Vicars Apostolic would then be delegated to visit every Vicar Apostolic to thoroughly discuss the contents of his report.
3. The delegate would then collect all the papers and proceed to Paris and Rome in order to get the proposals approved.

Bishop Melchior saw the plan as a legal and practical way to begin (at least) the process of Reform. The ultimate aim would be to have unity of purpose and action.⁴⁸¹

It was now time (mid-August 1852) for Bishop Melchior to make official visitations to the “poorer Districts” of his poverty-stricken Vicariate. These included Darapuram, Madatakulam, Nerrur and Chinnamallee. He encountered the now familiar problems - “nominal” Christians, “peculiar” marriage customs, some “caste-ridden” villages, “sub-standard” church facilities, “superstitious” practices and the “strong influence” of the “schismatic” priests in some places. Nevertheless, there were still devoted Christians and

480 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1167.

481 *Marion Brésillac in India...* pages 238 - 240 for a more detailed account of this proposal.

missionaries among them.

At Nerrur, Melchior records an incident which gave him great joy and consolation. *“We were here at Nerrur in the middle of the night, trying to sleep in our ‘house’ (a ten foot shack with swarms of ‘carea’ insects around us) when suddenly I was startled by a voice outside calling ‘Monseigneur!’ ‘Monseigneur!’... Who was it but my very first disciple, good Marie Xavery! (He is now a priest - and a very good priest too). He happened to be in a village across the River and he came over to meet me. (The excellent Father Borderaux was with him). As soon as he heard we were really here, he ‘had’ to cross over immediately. And there we were sitting around our ‘table’ composed of Mass boxes and travelling bags etc. From this tiny joyful palace of our reunion, all sadness was totally banished”*⁴⁸²

For some time now, Bishop Melchior had been receiving reports that some of the missionaries were *“annoying the people unnecessarily, insulting and humiliating them, beating and ill-treating them, in all kinds of situations (even completely apart from caste and customs dilemmas)”*⁴⁸³ When Melchior was in Salem almost ten years earlier (1843), he had witnessed “deplorable examples” of corporal punishment. He had also seen that the Indian Christians were in no way surprised or shocked by corporal punishment in itself. Even “the old” missionaries used to order the Catechists to give some small slaps on the hand for certain offenders, to avoid litigation or to bring about reconciliation between adversaries. But it was easy to see how this “custom” could be abused (and at this time it was actually being abused in his Vicariate by young missionary priests who were personally punishing people). Back in 1843, Melchior had concluded: *“My own opinion is that we should not beat them at all. Or else have the use of corporal punishment so well restricted by Superiors that there would be no chance for any abuses. For when all is said and done, our ministry should be a ministry of peace, gentleness*

482 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1169.

483 *Ibidem:* page 1172.

and mercy, before all else. And it is all too easy to forget gentleness in a country where the climate and other hardships tend to make foreigners irritable, not to say violently angry. In India, like everywhere else, severity from a minister of the Good News should be something very exceptional indeed. How dare we frighten away a single one of the Lord's flock by our harshness! Even if a few were to be lost by our over-gentleness, I still think our accounting will be a lot less severe than if we drove them away with our big stick".⁴⁸⁴ On many occasions, both Melchior and Father Metral had communicated this message to the confreres in the Coimbatore Vicariate. The next few months would show that, in several instances, it had fallen on deaf ears.

From October onwards, replies began to come in from the Vicars Apostolic regarding Melchior's proposal for Reform.⁴⁸⁵ While the respondents agreed that "something should be done", they felt uneasy with the actual proposal - stating that it was "impracticable" and very difficult to implement. Bishop Bonnand had already pointed out the flaws in the proposal but suggested that "*a meeting of the Vicars Apostolic with a representative from Paris would be very possible in any city under European government... And if the idea 'got off the ground', I would not hesitate for an instant in giving you my support*".⁴⁸⁶ On the need for meetings, Melchior was in complete agreement. Perhaps, many of them would be necessary to achieve anything valid and durable.

One month later, Bishop Bonnand wrote to Melchior again, stating: "*After receiving my plan, the whole Seminary in Paris was upset, particularly Father Langlois... He wrote a long letter to prove that, as simple as $a+b$, my project had no sense. I didn't insist, and I can't really say why the meeting won't take place*".⁴⁸⁷

On 1st November (1852), Bishop Melchior received another letter from "Propaganda Fide" stating that, after consultation with the

484 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 293 - 295.

485 From October 1852 to July 1853, Melchior received nine replies to his circular letter.

486 *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2F 8) 31st October 1852 pages 608 - 609.

487 *Ibidem:* (AMA 2F 13, 18). These letters were dated 13th July and 13th September 1852.

Paris Fathers, his resignation was not accepted. Letters followed from all the Superiors in Paris. Each one of them used various arguments in trying to persuade him “to stay at his post”. Bishop Melchior would reply to each one of them, answering their objections calmly, while firmly stating that nothing he had read from them had convinced him to change his mind. Further, “*The Holy See has done or said nothing about the customs (etc.) to make me change my mind*”.⁴⁸⁸

On that same day (1st November 1852), Bishop Melchior replied to “Propaganda Fide”. He stated his continuing willingness to obey, but added that he believed that the Sacred Congregation would not wish to impose on him the permanent obligation to remain in Coimbatore and to exercise his functions as a Vicar Apostolic in a Mission where circumstances were repugnant to his conscience. However, before taking the matter directly to the Holy Father “who alone is the Ordinary of all these churches”, he was requesting that he be allowed to go to Rome to explain his position face to face.⁴⁸⁹

In the letter which he wrote to Father Barran, Melchior also mentioned the lack of communication from Paris. As an example of this, Melchior stated that he had learned about his confrere’s appointment as Superior of the Seminary from the French newspapers! It was clear that the Vicar Apostolic of Coimbatore was a bit annoyed, but he did not wish to dwell “*on an omission which was found more blameworthy by the heart than by the head*”.⁴⁹⁰

On 10th December, Bishop Melchior noted the death of Father Langlois. Melchior was deeply saddened. “*That great missionary has gone to a better life, after a long life here below, filled with great achievements and spent entirely in the service of the Missions... Father*

488 *African Missions Archives...* Replies of Bishop de Brésillac (AMA 2F 8) pages 286 - 391.

489 *Ibidem*: Reply to “Propaganda Fide” (AMA 2F 6).

490 *Ibidem*: Letter to Father Barran (AMA 2F 6).

Langlois is irreplaceable...”⁴⁹¹

As Christmas approached, Melchior's thoughts were taken up with the evolving situation in France. *“So there is France, proclaimed an Empire again! For a long time now, it was nominally a Republic. Did the real Republic even last one year?... As for an ‘Empire’, I don't think that is what is required either from the point of view of justice, good order and the total public welfare...”* He goes on to discuss the legitimacy of various forms of government, the qualities of leaders and the policies which directly affect the people.⁴⁹²

As the New Year dawned (1853), Bishop Melchior felt that it was only a matter of time before he would receive permission to go to Rome. In the meantime, he carried on with his usual work. He did not tell anyone in Coimbatore about his efforts at resignation or his request to put his case directly to *“Propaganda Fide”*, by going to Rome.

Regrettably, the situation in the Vicariate had not improved... *“Father Pajeau is getting worse and worse. And the poor Christians are the first to feel the edge of his bad humour. Any attempt to advise or direct him is now quite useless. Unfortunately, he appears to be having a big influence over the susceptible Father Lefevre. Thus the Palghat community is going as badly now, as it was going outstandingly well under the excellent Father Ravel. I tried to give a few useful hints to Father Lefevre... I asked him to come and stay with me for a few days. But I was wasting my time. He started off by making lame excuses... and finally ended the discussion with outright refusal...”*⁴⁹³

It was now February. Work on the church in Coimbatore was gaining momentum. *“Yes indeed, work has really started on the church. But I don't know who will finish it! I have been thinking out the Plan over the last two years. It will be a decent church, worthy of the name, if we can finish it. Well, it certainly can be finished in two*

491 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1174.

492 *Ibidem:* pages 1175 - 1178.

493 *Ibidem:* page 1179.

or three years from now, if the “Propagation of the Faith” continues its present rate of help. But who will be finishing it? [Probably: not me]. At the present time, however, let me work on as if I were staying here for the rest of my life!... because, at the present time, this work is my duty”.⁴⁹⁴

The illness of Father Metral at the end of March caused Melchior huge concern. Indeed, his prayer for his friend reflected a sense of desperation. “O my God, do You want to snatch away Father Metral from them [our Christians], the only one of my priests they can call their true pastor! Tell that cruel fever to go away... restore his strength... Give him back to us, Lord! Let Yourself be moved by the violence of my prayer, I beg You... Good Virgin, please help me to send these heart-broken prayers up to the Eternal Throne”.⁴⁹⁵

In April, Bishop Melchior heard that his confrere Bishop Charbonnaux was going to Rome! This was a big surprise. Melchior regretted the fact that neither he nor Bishop Bonnand had been informed. It would have been very useful for their confrere to have an up-to-date and impartial account to present to “Propaganda Fide” of all that was happening in “these Missions”. This would also have helped to strengthen the links between themselves in India and give some cohesion to all their activities.

During May, Father Metral was slowly recovering - but still remained very ill. “It is greatly to be feared that he will never again recover his former strength. He has been (almost) to the end of the road several times now, and these repeated relapses are bound to weaken a body already worn out by over-work. I have sent him to the Mountain [Ootacamund] to try to recover his health. May the Lord command the cool fresh elements up there to restore and repair all the ravages of the fever!”.⁴⁹⁶ Also at this time, Melchior had to cancel the Annual Retreat. He had already announced the time and the place, and

494 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1179, 1182.

495 *Ibidem*: page 1183.

496 *Ibidem*: page 1185.

Father Barot had agreed to give the talks. But the response from the missionaries was less than satisfactory. Some did not even reply, while the few that did respond showed no enthusiasm at all. Melchior recalled the Retreat of the previous year which had been encouraging and consoling, but even then, the absence of one confrere (Father Pajeau) had an effect on morale. He felt that the absence of several missionaries this year would be a complete scandal. And so, he postponed the Retreat indefinitely.

The month of June brought distressing but all too familiar news. There was “open revolt” in Palghat and Athikode Districts, “disaffection” in Ootacamund and even a threatened “boycott” in Carumattampatty. Fathers Pajeau and Lefevre seemed determined to provoke the Christians by their words and actions in Palghat and Athikode, while the missionaries in Ootacamund *“had made several ‘caste blunders’ out of mere imprudence and due to a lack of complete inner conviction about their strict obligation to keep exactly to the line laid down by Superiors”*. The threatened boycott at Carumattampatty (Seminary and District) was the result of the growing suspicion and dislike of “all missionaries” by the Indian Christian community in the Vicariate. The rough treatment by missionaries in one area or any violation of caste and customs now appeared to affect the people’s attitude to all of them - even the kindest and gentlest missionary.⁴⁹⁷

Melchior began his reconciliation (or “repair work”) in Carumattampatty, where he had *“some influence left with the Christians. Fortunately also, the good attitude of the two confreres allowed me to intervene directly and personally, to settle things before it went too far... It appears that a servant of one of the missionaries had done something against caste. Immediately, the whole caste had assembled and decreed that none of the caste could henceforth serve the two Fathers in any way, under pain of being driven out of the caste. An order was then sent out to ‘all’ the servants [in the Mission and*

497 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1186 - 1188.

Seminary] *to leave immediately or be similarly 'excommunicated'... The priests would be left completely on their own, without cook, gardener, cowman or anybody to do all kinds of jobs - not only for themselves but for the students in the Seminary*".⁴⁹⁸ Bishop Melchior had his own suspicions concerning the "guilty servant" and the reasons for the boycott. However, he set about restoring some peace and harmony. "*I called the caste heads together, made them see reason, obtained an apology, and got one of the servants reinstated immediately [for a start]. Today, the thing seems to be finished. It will not go any further, provided both sides restrain themselves*".⁴⁹⁹

Palghat was a different story. On his return from Carumattampatty, Melchior found a letter from all the Palghat Christians "*complaining about the harsh way they were being treated by the missionary of this place [Father Lefeuvre]. Not only that but the missionary from a completely different District [Father Pajeau] comes in here and judges cases, and punishes people, in the name of his friend...*".⁵⁰⁰ Melchior noted that in this letter, it was the pariahs (usually very devoted to the missionaries) who complained the loudest.

The Bishop was faced with a dilemma. He could not go in person to Palghat - not because of the attitude of the Christians - but because he did not want a public confrontation with his priests. This would result in a grave scandal. So, he wrote to the Christians (with a copy to each of his confreres and asking them to make it available to their communities). He hoped that by reading his letter, "*the missionaries would study it carefully, weigh the implications and then try to coax their Christians into reconciling... But some missionaries are a lot more difficult to deal with than the people. The two got together and worked out a 'fitting' reply...* [which consisted of] "*insults, utter shock that he should even write to the "rebellious" Christians and their own intent to never distribute his "stupid letter"*

498 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1187.

499 *Ibidem:* page 1188.

500 *Ibidem:* pages 1188 - 1189.

to them”.⁵⁰¹

Melchior was now facing another dilemma. If he suspended the priests from their pastoral duties, this would create more trouble. At the same time, he could not sit “idly by” and watch a whole District of Christians defect. *“And so I sent for Father Ravel, who had been in that District up to a year ago, and had done so very well there. I told him the whole situation, let him read the letters and asked him to do what he could”*. Father Ravel was already aware of the situation and agreed that if a solution was not found quickly, *“the whole caste community can go over to the Schism; and most of the pariahs will become Protestant”*. Bishop Melchior had no need to “order” this good priest to go to Palghat. He set out immediately on his “mission of reconciliation”. Father Ravel explained to the Christians that the Bishop had carefully read their letter and had sent him to speak with them. *“Thanks to God, he had some success with the Christians, who calmed down, for the moment at least. As regards his two confreres, he had no such luck”*.⁵⁰²

From Melchior’s point of view, he had tried all the means available to him to placate and assist these two missionaries. He now felt that they should be recalled - and maybe even asked to leave the Society. But he also knew that this would not happen due *“to the lack of any discipline at all in the Society... The only weapon I now have here is ‘endurance’. May the Lord Himself render it victorious!”*.⁵⁰³

On 24th July, Melchior had an unexpected visit from Bishop Bonnard. He was on a pastoral visit to Salem and he came to spend a few days in Coimbatore. It was simply a social call, with nothing important being discussed.

On 1st August, something really significant happened! Bishop Melchior received a letter from Father Tesson (Paris) which stated that the Cardinal Prefect of “Propaganda Fide” had granted

501 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1189.

502 *Ibidem:* pages 1189 - 1190.

503 *Ibidem.*

him permission to go to Rome, as he had requested. Melchior immediately informed his recent visitor (Bishop Bonnard) as a matter of courtesy, but did not mention his intention to resign. On 15th August he received a letter from Bishop Bonnard, full of arguments and exhortations to “drop the whole idea!”⁵⁰⁴

On 8th September, Bishop Melchior had the joy and consolation of dedicating a new church at Codively “*which (for the country) is quite beautiful*”. The Christians were beside themselves with joy, and celebrated in the traditional Indian way (fireworks, music, clarinets, horns, drums, sacred dramas etc.) “*May God be praised!*”. In the villages nearby, Melchior noticed a lot of poverty, even though the land looked to be arable. But, due to the taxes levied by the English government, many farmers were making very little profit. They did the work but often had to borrow to pay the taxes. Inevitably, this situation would lead to the demise of the farming community, unless the system would soon be totally changed.⁵⁰⁵

On 15th September, more news arrived concerning the behaviour of some of the missionaries. “*They are not even content with being supreme Judges in all possible cases (religious, domestic and civil). They now have to be Legislators, original law makers as well! Supreme legislators! Universal reformers! The Codively Christians are groaning under the new harsh yoke of the new arbitrary ‘code of laws’ imposed by one of our youngest missionaries, a great lover of Liberty: for himself!... The ‘reform’ is dictated by irate passion and by sheer ignorance about the people, and done under ‘their’ favourite slogan: ‘the Purity of the Gospel’... O my God, where are we at? ”*⁵⁰⁶

On 2nd October, Bishop Melchior marked the seventh anniversary of his consecration as Vicar Apostolic of Coimbatore. As usual, he celebrated Pontifical High Mass in the same church in Carumattampatty as on that day in 1846. “*The same walls, but it*

504 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1191.

505 *Ibidem:* pages 1192 - 1194.

506 *Ibidem:* pages 1194 - 1195.

was now very different, with beautiful decorations, new buildings all around it, and in the way it is being cared for and served... I could not keep the tears from my eyes, as I tried to read the opening Psalms. For the thought hit me as I entered the church: 'this is likely to be the very last time I come here for a Pontifical High Mass'... O my God, why must I leave?... My only ultimate motivation in resigning was the glory of Your name... It is a sacrifice I make to You, a sacrifice known to You alone... As for me, O my God, I only hope that, out of the many humiliations which surely lie ahead, You will know how to draw out some benefit, some progress for the Church on the Missions... And that will be enough for me".⁵⁰⁷

On 31st October, Melchior returned to Coimbatore after preaching the Annual Retreat to the Seminarians. This particular Retreat was also a preparation for six students who were to be ordained to Minor Orders by their Bishop. It lasted from a Wednesday evening to a Sunday morning.⁵⁰⁸ Among the commentaries on the contents of the Retreat, the following are particularly noteworthy:

1. *"Bishop de Brésillac was a progressive Bishop with a broad vision... The Retreat he gave (in Latin) to the seminarians of Carumattampatty just before he left for Rome, bears ample testimony to the great love he had in his heart for the seminarians. This Retreat was based on the three theological virtues of 'Faith, Hope and Charity', which to say the truth, form the very foundations of the spiritual life. While going through the text, one cannot but notice the deep love and knowledge Bishop de Brésillac had for the Holy Scriptures. His meditations are all based on Scripture... [Further] he not only preached about Faith, Hope and Charity, he lived them himself... This could [also] be easily seen from the fact that these were the last three words he pronounced before his death".⁵⁰⁹*

507 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1195 - 1196.

508 Melchior de Marion Brésillac: *Faith, Hope, Charity*. Printed by "Propaganda Fide" Rome. 1854. (244 pages). The text, originally in Latin, was translated into French by Dom Gerard Dubois O.C.S.O. and published in Paris in 1985 (96 pages). It was translated into English by John Flynn S.M.A. and published by SMA Publications, Rome in 1988 (154 pages).

509 *Ibidem*: pages 4 - 5. M. Ambrose Mathalaimuthu (Bishop of Coimbatore). 24th August 1985.

2. *“Bishop de Brésillac did not have a purely functional concept of the priestly ministry. He wanted ‘secular’ priests ‘after the manner of Apostles’, who would also be witnesses to the Kingdom which they announce and celebrate. Whence comes the call for the evangelical counsels which are at once the fruit of charity and a means of making it grow; at the same time they promote liberty in the service of the Lord... [The commentator goes on to note that] spiritual theology has certainly progressed since then... However, whatever be the case, a breath of optimism, not very usual at that time, flows through these pages. Marion Brésillac calls with insistence to love more than to fear. He believes that these seminarians are capable of Christian perfection in line with the evangelical statements of Jesus... [The Bishop] was capable of distinguishing the sins of weakness from those of malice. He does not believe that a man with living faith can easily commit mortal sin. Besides he rests the whole edifice of the spiritual life on the foundations of Faith, Hope and Charity.. When one remembers that these were the last three words he uttered before dying, one can see in these virtues the rock on which this eventful life had found its most solid foundations. This largely corrects considerations that elsewhere could appear to us as rigorous, narrow and somewhat moralizing... Finally, one will be struck by his vast biblical knowledge... To draw from the Word of God can only rejuvenate and strengthen Faith, and it is in this spirit that we approach the reading of these pages, and putting into practice in our time, the content of these exercises, as the Christian and missionary life has no foundation other than that of Faith, Hope and Charity”*⁵¹⁰

On 9th November, Fathers Metral and Ravel came with all the Seminarians to say “bon voyage”. None of them had any inkling that their Bishop (more than likely) would not be returning. *“In spite of the natural sadness we all felt in parting, there was a heartfelt joy and harmony in the little gathering. [However] into this peaceful scene burst young Father Malhaire. He had just left his station, without saying a word to anyone and had called in now, on his way*

510 Faith, Hope, Charity... pages 8 - 9. Jean Bonfils S.M.A.

to Malaysia!”⁵¹¹

It was barely twelve months since Father Malhaire had arrived in India. He had never settled and had informed Bishop Melchior about three months earlier that he had enough of India and foreign missions. In fact, he had already written to his parents for the fare home. Melchior had done everything possible to make Father Malhaire happy... *“a priest who had some quite good qualities but had many deficiencies as a missionary. I even suggested that he should ask for a transfer rather than abandon the missions entirely... and I would do my best to arrange things in such a way that he would be able to leave regularly and honourably”*.⁵¹² The story of Father Malhaire is a convoluted one, with many twists and turns. But the end result was that Bishop Boucho of Penang (Malaysia) had already accepted Father Malhaire, without asking any information from Bishop Melchior. And now, in spite of last minute efforts from Fathers Metral, Ravel and the Bishop to dissuade him, this young confrere left the next morning at dawn, without any official authorization. He did not even ask for the usual letter to testify that he was a “priest in good standing”. The whole episode was just *“another example of the way we do business in our Society! That is the way the administration of the Foreign Missions Society operates!... Where are you now, Venerable Founders? I hope that you are in Heaven... Obtain a special grace to open the eyes of those who remain, so that our Society which has so much potential for good in it may not disintegrate entirely before it has achieved half the Aim which Providence intended for it”*.⁵¹³

A few days before leaving Coimbatore, Bishop Melchior sent a Circular to his missionaries, informing them of the administrative arrangements of the Vicariate during his absence. Father Metral would act as Vicar Apostolic, with Father de Gelis as his Deputy. He encouraged all of them to work together with diligence, tolerance

511 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1202.

512 *Ibidem:* page 1204.

513 *Ibidem:* pages 1203 - 1205.

and with a prayerful spirit. He also requested prayers for himself. Afterwards, as he reflected on the confreres in the jurisdiction, he could name only three who were his true collaborators and friends. These were “the saintly” Father Metral... next, the confrere who “loved the Indian people in his heart” (Father de Gelis)... and thirdly, “the young, pious and ever-available” Father Ravel. *“These three men have never let me down, never swerved from the constant practice of all the virtues”*.⁵¹⁴

In private letters to Father Metral and de Gelis, Melchior suggested a possible “division of labour” between the two officials. He asked Father Metral to maintain a “special interest” in the Seminary, and he invited Father de Gelis to keep him (Melchior) informed on any issues affecting the Vicariate through a monthly letter.

As for himself, Melchior knew that he had tried to respect all his missionaries and work with them. Also, most consoling was his relationship with all Indians. *“I know that I have loved them, and that they have loved me in return. I can testify to that much. I believe that I can safely say that every Indian who knows me does have some affection for me... and that the better they know me, the more affection they have...”*⁵¹⁵

On the morning of 12th November 1853, Melchior quietly left Coimbatore in his bullock-drawn “trap”. He had one last function to perform in the Vicariate, namely the celebration of Confirmations in Palghat. *“On the following day (a Sunday) only eight or ten people were ready to avail of the opportunity... even though Father de Gelis had been doing all he could since his arrival on the previous Thursday morning. The Confirmations have been almost completely spoiled by*

514 Father Metral would administer the Vicariate from November 1853 until his death in Coimbatore (1857) at the age of 55. Father de Gelis continued with the construction of the Church in Coimbatore and serving the people with great dedication. He died at Salem (1891) at the age of 71. Father Ravel is especially remembered as the Founder of the Franciscan Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Coimbatore). In 2021, this Congregation gives its membership at 822. They serve in nine states of India and three other countries (Italy, France and Zambia). cf. <http://presentationcbe.org>

515 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1206 -1207.

*the abrupt departure of Father Malhaire... The community seems to have gone down a lot since the time of good Father Ravel. What other way could it go, with all the miserable troubles they had this year?"*⁵¹⁶

Later on that evening, Father Pajeau came to see Bishop Melchior, but no allusion was made to past events and nothing was said about his plans.⁵¹⁷

As Melchior had decided to take ship from Bombay to Europe, he set off the next morning for that city. He recounts (as usual) many details of the scenery, the state of roads and transport, the economic and social conditions, as well as the state of religion in the various villages and towns. Generally, they stayed at the small guest-houses on the way, but occasionally, with the clergy.⁵¹⁸

Among the stops which Melchior made was at Calicut (Calcutta) where he was graciously received by the two Indian priests there. *"One was of the Latin Rite and looked after the "tapa" [mixed-race] Christians. The other, Syrian Rite, takes care of the purely Indian Catholics, who are very few here. But it was rather depressing because you are very much aware that it is only a drop in the ocean of pagans and Turks... The Turks seem to be rich and powerful in this entire region. They control all the trading, which is very active here. The Christians just barely exist... And it [Christianity] does not seem to be making any numerical progress whatsoever"*⁵¹⁹

On 29th November, Melchior arrived at Cannamore, where he was told that there was no road from there to Mangalore - at least not for bullock carts. *"So it was here that I left my Tamil servants to make their way back to Coimbatore. This was a new heart-break for me, when the time came to say good-bye. 'There goes the last link', I*

516 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1213.

517 Father Pajeau eventually returned to France (due to ill-health) in 1865, and died in Savoy in 1884 (aged 62). As it turned out, it was Father Bonjean who left the Vicariate of Coimbatore to join the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in 1856. He later became Archbishop of Colombo (1886) and died there in 1902 (aged 79).

518 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1214 - 1225.

519 *Ibidem:* pages 1217 - 1220.

felt, 'probably the last people I will ever again meet from my Vicariate'. Moreover, they had always been loyal and faithful to me...⁵²⁰ Melchior was assured that a "patamar" (a little Turk ship) would get him to Mangalore in two days.

On 1st December, Melchior disembarked at Mangalore, where he received a warm welcome from Bishop Antoine Anfossi (a Carmelite). He was happy to rest for a few days in very pleasant company. Over the following ten days, he became acquainted with the operation of the missions in this jurisdiction (their joys and sorrows, their hopes and challenges). It was here too that Bishop Melchior received "*a troublesome letter from one of my missionaries [in Coimbatore]. It was very disrespectful and in fact, downright insulting. It made me think that maybe it was high time, now, to spell out why I had hurriedly left and had offered my resignation... They must all be made to see that it was not the troublemakers that 'drove him out'... I had pre-empted them (long before)... It they had contributed to making me leave, it was by their mere insubordination and downright misconduct towards me... I wrote all this plainly and sent it unsealed to Fathers Metral and de Gelis so that they could read it, before passing it on to our confrere*".⁵²¹

Bishop Melchior was invited to speak to the Seminarians before he left Mangalore on 10th December. His talk may be summarized as follows:

1. "*Ubi amatur non laboratur; vel si laboratur, labor amatur.* [Where there is love, there is no hard labour; or - if there is - it is a labour of love].
2. *Keep the silence better... Keep that one well, and all the rest will follow...*
3. *Learn Gregorian Chant when you get the chance. You sing very well. But other occasional hymns, however beautiful and however nice for*

520 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1226 - 1227.

521 *Ibidem:* pages 1228 - 1229.

*a change, cannot be a substitute for a sound foundation for liturgical singing".*⁵²²

While continuing his journey on another "old creaky patamar", Melchior passed Goa. He would have liked to visit Goa "to venerate the precious relics of Saint Francis Xavier... But the present-day schismatic state would not allow me. There was a real chance of being arrested, even imprisoned!... Misfortunate Portugal! When will the day come again for you to 'earn' your ancient motto 'Most Faithful Kingdom'? Today, it is nothing but a reproach to you... O Good Lord, do not condemn them. Let them soon be converted".⁵²³

Melchior had been told that the trip from Mangalore to Bombay would take five days. However, after eleven days at sea, he wrote: "we still do not know when we will arrive. Calms and head winds are the trouble. There are many Indian passengers onboard, and some of them have not eaten a single meal (I mean cooked) since we started. Every now and then, they chew a piece of sugar-cane or pop a few grains of roasted rice into their mouths. And how do they manage? They sleep all day, and they sing all night... And yet, you won't hear a single murmur at the big delay, not a word of complaint, not the slightest sign of impatience... I sincerely thank God for this disappointment... It is a very good opportunity to study the virtue of Patience, for it looks like I am going to have great need of this virtue in the coming years... The memory of this striking example of Indian fortitude will be, I hope, a great help to me. However, 'natural' it may be, it is certainly most impressive".⁵²⁴

Bishop Melchior, with all his shipmates, arrived in Bombay harbour shortly before Christmas. They disembarked on 22nd December 1853.

522 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1230.

523 *Ibidem:* pages 1233 - 1234.

524 *Ibidem:* pages 1234 - 1235.



6.1 St Michael's Cathedral, Coimbatore



6.2 Palghat Town



6.3 Carumattampatty Old Seminary



6.5 Founder's Room Carumattampatty



6.6 Old Bombay Street



6.7 The Saint Peter's Square that Melchior saw



6.8 St Peter's Basilica, Rome

Chapter Sixteen

On to Rome

1854...

On 1st January 1854, Melchior wrote: *“Time is flying; year rapidly follows year. Piling up on me! [He was 40 years old on the previous 2nd December]. And still nothing done for Your glory, O my God! Ah, how useless was 1853! How poor in good works! How marred by my faults and mistakes! Do not judge me, Lord, by Your Justice, but remember Your Mercy. Stretch out the healing hand of your great bounty. May the year 1854 be more salutary than the years just past. May I do some little good in it... Continue your kindness to me, O Mary and you, good angels, your loving care. Be with me in Rome... Show me some new way to do some good. Open a way to some new saving work for the Missions and for Holy Church, our Mother. In her and for her, I aim to live and to die”*.⁵²⁵

Melchior wrote up his impressions of Bombay while on board the ship to Aden. He recalls that he was warmly welcomed by all the clergy there. The city itself was very impressive *“with its beautiful harbour, vast population, extensive and intensive trade, its magnificent Esplanade, Observatory, City Library, Museum and the Native Hospital. There are scores of mosques... And Hindu temples, quite elegantly built... I think that in Bombay, you could find followers of every known religion and sect in the world. The Christians, though such a small number, are well and truly divided. This greatly helps to frustrate the efforts of the true followers of Christ here. As well as the Goa Schismatics, there are Protestants of every hue, from the ‘Established Church’ to the American Mormons, who seem to be making some inroads... As regards Catholicism, it is in a pitiful state of confusion (even among the priests who are from the many religious orders), and there is alleged mismanagement of certain funds...”* Nonetheless,

525 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1235.

Melchior noted that there could be great future for the Church in this dynamic city. “*May God bless all those Missions*”.⁵²⁶

The journey from Bombay to Rome would take three months and five days (14th January to 19th April 1854). The itinerary was certainly challenging, and for most people, a severe test of endurance. However, Melchior’s indomitable spirit and “insatiable curiosity” concerning all aspects of nature and human life never faltered.⁵²⁷ From Aden (where he heard nearly one hundred confessions in Tamil) he went up the Red Sea to Suez. Their ship passed Mecca and Mount Sinai on the way. From Suez, they went across the desert (by carriage) to join a steam-boat which would take them through the muddy waters of the Nile to Cairo.⁵²⁸ It was now 13th February.

On the following day, Melchior visited the mosque of Muhammad Ali, took a tour around the city, climbed to the top of the highest pyramid and prayed at Joseph’s Well. Then, he went on to Alexandria (“the city of the Saints”) where he stayed with the Vicar Apostolic (Bishop Guasco of the Franciscan Observantine Order).⁵²⁹ Melchior enjoyed the company of his gentle host and admired his simplicity and generosity. On 24th February, he embarked on the *Salamandre* (a French steamboat) for Malta. The weather was bad... Some big storms prevented them from reaching the island of Crete. Melchior prayed a lot... They finally arrived in

526 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1237 - 1272. This long and interesting item on Bombay (35 pages) is a fine example of Melchior de Marion Brésillac’s “insatiable curiosity to see and hear whatever was of note” on the route to Rome.

527 *Ibidem*: pages 1272 - 1383. In these one hundred and eleven pages, Melchior records many “unusual” incidents, the variety of personalities he encountered, the varying climatic, social and political conditions, the delays and the changes of plans... He paid particular attention to the state of religion (and especially Christianity) in all the places which he visited.

528 The Suez Canal was not opened until 1869.

529 The “Observantines” were members of the Franciscan Order who wanted to observe the Rule of Saint Francis with no relaxation. It began in Italy in 1368, and was recognised in 1517 as a “true Order” of Saint Francis. In 1897, it was incorporated (with other groupings) into a single Order of Friars Minor. (cf. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, first published in 1957).

Malta on 6th March. He found accommodation with the Order to which Bishop Guasco belonged.

Bishop Melchior spent his six days in Malta visiting the different churches and all the places associated with Saint Paul. He noticed a large attendance at Mass. But, he had to keep moving... He embarked on the “Bosphore” for Naples and arrived there on 14th March.

The Superior of the “Chinese College” in Naples immediately granted him hospitality. Two days later, he visited the Cardinal Archbishop Sforza, a young and “modest” man (aged only 36). With his permission and blessing, Melchior collected money for the Vicariate of Coimbatore.⁵³⁰ In addition to some sight-seeing, Melchior visited many places of interest, gave sermons to Sisters and preached at a large parish church on each day of the week preceding Palm Sunday. Generally, priests were plentiful but the liturgies were very poor. He was certainly far from impressed with the Holy Week ceremonies in Naples. However, on the positive side, one could not but be impressed with the gentleness and mildness of the people which could be seen in their relaxed but lively faces... *“Happy people of Naples, your poverty and hardships are famous. But they are more famous than real... May you, even at the expense of outward prosperity, always keep your inner treasure, the Faith!”*⁵³¹

Bishop Melchior left Naples for Rome on board a “battered-looking old coach” on 20th April. After an interesting but largely uneventful trip, he arrived at the Generalate of the Carmelites in Rome on 27th April 1854. There he met his “old friend” (Archbishop Martini of Verapoly) who went immediately with him to the Carmelite Seminary (“San Pancrazio”) to greet their Superior General. He received Bishop Melchior very warmly and

530 Bishop Melchior was somewhat disappointed with the collection. He expected about ten times more than he actually got! It was then that he realized that the work of “the missions” was not well known in Naples.

531 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1383.

immediately arranged for him to stay at the Seminary. Melchior looked forward to having discussions with the Superior General about their missions in India, as the Carmelites there had requested him to do.⁵³²

Face to Face in Rome

On the next day (28th April) Melchior went to “Propaganda Fide” to report his presence in Rome. *“I could not see anybody. They were all at a Council Meeting (as is the case, it seems, every Thursday). I went back to walk around the inside of Saint Peter’s splendid Basilica. Before going to Propaganda, I had gone in there, just to salute Saint Peter at his Tomb; not to look at or admire anything... but [at that time] I could not keep my eyes down; still less could I prevent a thrill of wonder and admiration which actually brought tears to my eyes”.*⁵³³

That same evening, he visited his old friend Bishop Luquet. As they had not seen each other for ten years, they had a lot to talk about. *“I found him still the same... in his study, buried in books like in a tomb, completely unconcerned about all church or political affairs, busy with only one affair: God, and the company of the Saints. He is writing new glimpses of some of their wonderful lives, while trying to follow the living example of their heroic virtues. I told him a lot about India (that lost country for him) and the current moves here! We had dinner together, along with a pious French family who are giving him hospitality for some time now...”.*⁵³⁴

On the following day, Melchior went again to “Propaganda Fide”. He met the Cardinal Prefect (Franzoni) – *“an excellent prelate... who received me very kindly but who is far too old to discuss business”.* Then he went to the office of Monsignor Barnabo (the Secretary of “Propaganda Fide”).⁵³⁵ *“He struck me as a very intelligent man... I*

532 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1390 - 1391.

533 *Ibidem:* page 1391.

534 *Ibidem:* page 1392.

535 Alessandro Barnabo was born in Foglio (Italy) in 1801. He was ordained a priest in 1833. From 1833 to 1856, he held a number of Administrative positions in the Vatican, becoming Secretary of “Propaganda Fide” (1848 -1856). He was created a Cardinal in 1856, and was Prefect of “Propaganda Fide” from 1856 until his death in 1874 (aged 71).

was astonished at how well informed he is about our Indian affairs. He spoke to me with such outstanding kindness that I was truly enchanted with the interview. But we did not really get to grips with any of the problems. He just urged me to put my ideas down on paper and pass them on to 'Propaganda Fide'... It is obvious that everything here depends on this man. Not that he does everything there, but I would say that, without him, nothing gets done... I wanted to ask to see the Pope, but Monsignor Barnabo said it first... At his next weekly visit to the Pope, he would request an audience for me". On 3rd May, Bishop Melchior again went to "Propaganda Fide". This time he had a long discussion with Monsignor Barnabo and had the opportunity to assess the type of person with whom he would be dealing. "Very intelligent and gifted with a fantastic memory, he just about knows every written fact concerning the Missions. So, you do not have much to teach him about your own particular area!... So, I am inclined to hope that, provided you carefully avoid opposing or contradicting him, you might get him to consider a few useful new ideas, starting off where his views happen to be quite sound... Such considerations are strongly inclining me to get down to putting my views on paper, as Monsignor Barnabo himself is pushing me to do... Once again, however, I tell myself to take it very gently and not to even start before seeing the Holy Father".⁵³⁶

On 8th May (10.45 a.m.), Pope Pius IX granted an audience to Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac. "His remarkable kindness (and even cheerfulness) puts you completely at your ease. At first (of course) you are extremely overcome with emotion, to be actually face-to-face with the Vicar of Christ on earth. But in the space of a few short minutes, he has got you completely restored... We conversed tête-à-tête for a good half-hour, all in French...".⁵³⁷ The Pope was well briefed on the missions in India. He mentioned the difficulties of the Carmelites in Bombay and that "all missionaries are not as good as they should be". He also mentioned that he had heard a

536 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1393.

537 *Ibidem*: pages 1397 - 1400 for a full account of this Audience.

rumour that Melchior had some differences of opinion between his own Society (the Paris Foreign Missions) and himself. To which Melchior replied: *“I do love my Society but I do not think everything is perfect in it, especially with regard to the formation of the aspirants... and other things too. But what pains me more than anything else is the conclusion which I have reached that there is a huge confusion in the way the Missions are being worked... This is [one] reason why I have asked to resign...”*. To this, his Holiness replied: *“But you have been on the missions for quite a long time! You must let us know, in writing, exactly what you think about it all. Then we will see...”*. As Melchior had anticipated such an answer, he drew from his brief-case a note which Monsignor Barnabo had given him earlier. He asked permission to read it. His Holiness agreed and listened attentively. *“Most Holy Father, Monsignor Barnabo, Secretary of the Sacred Congregation desires me to let “Propaganda Fide” know in writing what I think about four specific issues*

- *The Question of the Malabar Rites*
- *The Missions in India*
- *On the Catholic Missions in general*
- *On the present state of the pious Society of the Paris Foreign Missions (M.E.P). I must admit, Holy Father, my extreme reluctance to go into these questions in detail. For I am sure it will be impossible for me to present a work that will contribute to a happy outcome [for all concerned]. Nevertheless, whatever Your Holiness commands, that I will do”. [The Pope simply replied] ‘Do it’. [Then} after a few polite vague words, I got to my knees and asked for a special blessing”*.⁵³⁸

On that same day, Melchior sent a letter to his mother letting her know that she (and all the family) had received a special blessing from the Pope. As regards his own plans, he would probably be delayed in Rome for some time but hoped to visit home later

538 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1400.

on. Meanwhile, any letters should be sent to him at the French Seminary. He provided his mother with the exact address.

Two days later, Bishop Melchior wrote a letter to the Paris Superiors. He informed them of what he had been doing in Rome.⁵³⁹ He let them know that, at the request of Monsignor Barnabo and Pope Pius IX, he was about to put in writing his views on the four specific issues which were well known to them. He emphasised that he was doing this with great reluctance and assured them that his report “*would be used solely in assisting the Sacred Congregation in its study of these grave questions*”.

Melchior then went on to invite his Paris confreres to present their own ideas as “*I shall have no objection whatever if others who disagree with me, put forward their views. It is in fact from this charitable tension that the pure light will emanate... I have nothing at heart but the discovery of the truth*”. In concluding his letter, Melchior made an appeal for their help. “*I hope, my dear confreres, that far from judging me rash... you will on the contrary, assist me by sending whatever information you consider useful either to me or directly to the Sacred Congregation, the focal point at which all the rays converge in order to shine more brightly. We, all of us, desire the good, the good and true, and desire nothing else. Let us then, help one another, and the Lord I am confident, will bless our efforts... at any rate, the Lord will take account of our goodwill and for each of us that will suffice*”.⁵⁴⁰

Before getting down to work, Melchior decided to take a break. He hoped to make a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Loreto some time before leaving Rome. But now, a wonderful opportunity arose. “*It was Bishop Bettachini (of Jaffna) who pushed me! He was on his way to spend some time with the Oratorian Fathers in those areas and I decided to make the journey along with him. We hired a small carriage and driver, so as to be able to stop-off at any interesting place we*

539 Letter of De Brésillac to Directors. *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2F 17) dated 10th May 1854.

540 *Ibidem*.

came across... We started off on Thursday 11th May...”.⁵⁴¹ Overall, this break of two weeks proved to be refreshing and enjoyable. He was particularly enamoured with the “Santa Casa” (the Holy House) in Loreto.⁵⁴² The one major disappointment was the government of the Papal States. Apparently, “it is riddled with blatant corruption”.

Back in Rome, Bishop Melchior assisted at First Vespers in the Sistine Chapel, and, on the following morning (Ascension Thursday), at the Solemn Mass in the Basilica of Saint John Lateran. From that date until 10th July, there is no entry in his *Souvenirs*. Melchior later explains that this was due to a reticence in commenting on the government of the church in June 1854. “If it was a lay government and you were loyal to it, then to point out its defects would certainly be to do it a service... But with the Holy Father’s government, you have to think twice. The interests of Religion are at stake here, indirectly... These days, then, careless talk is dangerous. Writing is worse. So let us be silent”.⁵⁴³

However, Bishop Melchior did not spend the time in idleness. He read the letter from Father Tesson (Paris). This had been written before receiving Melchior’s earlier report of his activities in Rome. He wished him well and looked forward to him finding a solution to all doubts before returning to India (after a visit to his family and to Paris).⁵⁴⁴ However, when the Superiors in France (including Father Tesson) had read that he was writing on “Reforming the Society”, their reaction was swift and unequivocal. Any assistance Melchior would get would certainly not come from them. Father Barran made “a mild protest” to Monsignor Barnabo who, in order

541 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1401. The following thirteen pages give a full account of this “break”.

542 “According to tradition, the ‘Santa Casa’ (31 feet by 13 feet), was the house of the Blessed Virgin in Nazareth and was transported from there by Angels after the fall of the Latin kingdom in Jerusalem in 1291. De Brésillac seems to have entertained no doubt about the historicity of the tradition. Loreto [has been] visited over the centuries by more than fifty Popes...” (cf. *Marion Brésillac in India...* page 277).

543 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1415 - 1416.

544 Letter of Tesson to de Brésillac. *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2F 8): dated 17th May 1854.

to placate the M.E.P. Superiors, sent a diplomatic reply.⁵⁴⁵

Unaware of what had been written by others at this time, Melchior got on with writing his own report. He completed the work by 24th June (1854). Here again, he dealt (extensively and intensively) with the four subjects that Monsignor Barnabo had indicated to him.⁵⁴⁶

The report to “Propaganda Fide”

In an important *Introduction*,⁵⁴⁷ Bishop Melchior summarized the difficulties which had compelled him to resign, especially his own problems of conscience. He expressed his uneasiness at writing about the M.E.P. in the report, stating that his only wish was to start a sincere and friendly discussion about issues which he thought were necessary to address. He also recalled that it was at the express request of Monsignor Barnabo that he was writing the report. In concluding this *Introduction*, Melchior stated: “*So vast a subject, Most Eminent Lords, could not, I think, be treated all at once or in a single report. And if Your Eminences feel that my work can be of real use, you will, I hope, share my opinion that it must be preceded by exact research into the facts... Everyone should be perfectly clear about the objective facts of the matters to be treated*”.⁵⁴⁸

In his presentation of the first point (the Question of the Malabar Rites), Bishop Melchior briefly mentions the history of this complex matter in Southern India, before and after Cardinal Tournon’s visitation (1703 - 1704). He goes on to recall what happened before and after the Constitution *Omnium Sollicitudinem* of Benedict XIV (1744) and remarks: “*These miserable troubles are already too well known to everyone who has had anything at all to*

545 Lettre e Decreti...e Biglietti di Mgr. Segretario: 1854. *Archives Propaganda Fide* (APF). Volume 345: 615 - 616: dated 17th June 1854.

546 Marion Brésillac: *Mission and Foundation Documents*. Mediaspaul. Paris. 1986. The French edition was prepared by Jean Bonfils S.M.A. and Noel Douau S.M.A. The Translator into English was Robert Hales S.M.A. (291 pages).

547 Ibidem: pages 21 - 27. The full Report may be found in pages 21 to 78.

548 Ibidem: page 27.

do with the missions of China and India".⁵⁴⁹ He now expressed his conviction that such previous prohibitions were now inadequate and perhaps too severe... *"Let us observe, in passing, that all Indian customs, including the most bizarre and ridiculous, have a rationale that is either political, philosophical, hygienic or of some other kind. Superstition has taken over all these customs and has apparently caused the original good reason to be forgotten. But the reason still exists, and it could become a life-saver [a life-line] for us"*.⁵⁵⁰

He then went on to recall the uneasiness of the missionaries in his own time, mentioning Bishop Charbonnaux and Father Jarrige (two experienced confreres) as examples. Further, there was the Oath which all missionaries were obliged to take before they officially began their ministry. *"It was now a cause of trouble, anxiety and embarrassment... So, instead of thinking of new rigours and asking for new condemnations... would it not be suitable to review what we have done in order to see if there are other means or preserving Christians from a guilty involvement in idolatry, but without vexing, insulting and browbeating them, as has happened since the implementation of the decrees?... Circumstances change in the space of one hundred and fifty years. In our overall circumstances of today, would it not be possible 'now' to find better and happier methods?"*⁵⁵¹ But, before pursuing the matter any further, Bishop Melchior felt that it was important to know if the Congregation was willing to re-examine the past, and he offered a short questionnaire of ten questions to assist its members and those with whom they would consult.

Towards the end of this section of the report, Bishop Melchior went further by presenting sixty seven precise questions which would be addressed to the persons in charge of the Missions and to the "principal missionaries" of Pondicherry, Madras, Madurai, Mysore and Coimbatore jurisdictions.⁵⁵² Vicars Apostolic could

549 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* page 28.

550 *Ibidem*: page 31.

551 *Ibidem*: pages 36 - 39.

552 *Ibidem*: pages 39 - 40 and 47 - 53.

answer separately, while the missionaries would (probably) add information, as they are often in a better position to know local details. Melchior also recommended that, in answering the questions, the respondents should be assured that “Propaganda Fide” wished to be updated on the situation and that their answers should be clear, categorical and short, after which they could add the reasons for and against their opinions. The desired result would be an agreed solution to the problem.

In the second part of his report (the Missions in India)⁵⁵³ Bishop Melchior indicated other problems and obstacles. He cited the Goan Schism. He acknowledged the many writings which had been published on this issue and, though persistent and annoying in some areas, he believed that it would decrease with time. The key would be the nomination of suitable Bishops by the Holy See and that it would not consent to any interference from Portugal. A big help would also be greater efforts by the Vicars Apostolic “*informing a local clergy to gradually take the place of the Goanese clergy in their respective missions*”.⁵⁵⁴ Other obstacles included the cultural bias of the missionaries, tendencies towards an “ideological mentality”, prejudices and the interference by colonial governments. Above all, there was uncertainty and lack of uniformity in the laws of the Church. On lesser points, such as liturgical details, celebration of feasts, days of fast and abstinence, holy days of obligation etc. there was also considerable confusion. “Propaganda Fide” could certainly intervene in many of these situations, while regular meetings and sharing by Vicars Apostolic would help to defuse local problems and provide the Sacred Congregation with regular detailed information.

Melchior goes on to mention one moment in his missionary life when he felt real hope for religion in India. “*This was in 1845 when the immortal Gregory XVI, to whom the missions owe so much, made*

553 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 53 - 63.

554 *Ibidem*: pages 54 - 55.

the series of Acts well known to you. All they needed was a few later modifications, and the development of their principles about what was most essential for the progress of the missions. However, if the expected good results were not to fail, it was essential that the immediate action of the Holy See should not stop at that, but should be able to oversee the details of the implementation in a sustained manner until such time as the whole ecclesiastical set-up in India was completely harmonised". After giving details about his own efforts at forming a local clergy in both Pondicherry and Coimbatore, Melchior states that there are still Vicariates which do not even want a local clergy!⁵⁵⁵

Bishop Melchior concludes this section by referring specifically to the interference of the English government in ecclesiastical administration. The Vicars Apostolic *"in the immense English Colonies should not, according to rule, have any authority superior to their colleagues. So how is it tolerable that they usurp such authority through the leverage of a Government that does not even recognise the Catholic Church? I have had reason already to call the Sacred Congregation's attention to this matter, but since then, not only has there been no improvement, things have got much worse...* [He then asks "Propaganda Fide"] *"to write to all Vicars Apostolic (if it deigns to take what I have said into consideration) asking for all available ideas which could be of help in guiding It , both for its own direct actions and for Its preparatory work towards a meeting of the Vicars Apostolic"*.⁵⁵⁶

On the third part of the report (Catholic Missions in General), Bishop Melchior is quite brief. He recalls that he has worked on the missions for over fourteen years and that he had acquired some knowledge and experience through daily interactions, written communications, many conversations with experienced people who were sometimes pious and advanced in knowledge and in the "things of God". He felt that "Propaganda Fide" could invite such

555 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 55 - 60.

556 *Ibidem:* pages 60 - 63.

people to “*share their ideas and realities... and not keep them hidden in their hearts*”. This would be of benefit to the Sacred Congregation, “*which can never cease for a moment from its active vigilance over the whole work. It would [then] at all times be equipped, ready to act or to postpone action with full knowledge of the situation. I say ‘act’ or ‘postpone’ because, as I have to repeat imprudent hurry and culpable slowness are equally disastrous for various works*”. Again, Bishop Melchior was available to offer further reflections, if the Congregation so desired.⁵⁵⁷

The fourth and final part of the agenda (The Paris Foreign Missions Society) was the most sensitive and difficult one for Bishop Melchior to write about. “*Truly, I love this pious Congregation of Foreign Missions... to which I have the honour to belong. I believe it to be good, even excellent, in its fundamental principles... It is precisely because my love for the Society is deep and real, that I am not among those who think they are helping it by denying the faults which circumstances have let creep into it, or by ceasing to deplore its failure (up to now) to acquire the qualities which in my view it lacks, in order to render the Church the best services that can rightly be expected from it*”.⁵⁵⁸ There were many excellent members of the Society who were able to give great service, but were isolated and hampered by circumstances and unwieldy structures.

A look at the M.E.P. Statutes would illustrate some of this malfunctioning. First of all, the Statutes had never received the official approval of the Holy See. Secondly, the Authority Structure within the Society meant that plans or problems were never treated properly. “*How could it be otherwise... when treated by men dispersed over India, China, Indo-China, Korea, Siam, etc.? It can take two years to get a reply that is hurried and has not been discussed. For, it is worth recalling that the Superior of the M.E.P. Seminary in Paris is in no way the Superior of the Society. Neither is the whole Bureau of*

557 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 63 - 65.

558 *Ibidem*: pages 65 - 66.

the seminary Directors. This merely has one vote (by its majority voice) equal to only one vote from one of our bishops... Can anyone fail to see, at first reading, that association is a body without a head, in the sense that there are as many heads as there are Vicars Apostolic, and that there is no machinery for them to arrive at agreed solutions? Another head exists in the Bureau of the Paris Seminary which, without being any higher than the others, often finds himself in the position, and almost the necessity, of abusing its powers? This is what everyone sees. This is the subject of continual protests from those who dare to speak out".⁵⁵⁹ Melchior then goes on to quote letters which were written to him and he suggests that the files in Paris must also have a considerable amount of correspondence on this issue.

So, what was the way forward, as he saw it? *"I would therefore wish that the Sacred Congregation first obtain information and opinions from all the Superiors of the Foreign Missions Society in to order to see the following:*

- *To what extent do they desire a reform*
- *What means seem best to them for producing a better state of things.*

Once in possession of these replies, an attempt could be made to coordinate, if possible, the resulting diverse ideas. Or one could search, in the peculiar nature of their contradictions, for the precise nature of the remedies, which the Holy See might have to apply, by authority. And in the case that authority had to be used, I am convinced that it would be easy to bring the great majority (or even the unanimity) of the Society Superiors to ask for this themselves".⁵⁶⁰

Melchior then concludes the report by stating his fear of *"being an obstacle rather than being an instrument in the merciful hands of God in all these matters. It brings me to ask again whether it would not be better that I just simply resign and retire into a life of silence*

559 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 67-71

560 *Ibidem:* pages 70 -72.

and solitude. God alone knows the heart-break and pain of all kinds that these problems have brought to me from people whom I like and respect... I only want to be the defender of the simple truth, and not to be at all severe; but to be a gentle father who is evangelically and theologically kind and understanding towards those whose guidance was confided to me. One thing I cannot do. I cannot continue my present ministry in the present state of the missions. It is clear and proven to me personally that we are on a false and dangerous path. God may not enable me to convey this conviction into the minds of others. But as long as He leaves it in my own [mind], how could I continue to proceed along that path with such awareness and with such a conscience? ”⁵⁶¹

Father Patrick Gantly S.M.A. has given the following assessment of Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac’s report to “Propaganda Fide”: *“On the report in general, it may be said that it added little to what de Brésillac had already written on these subjects. In fact, for a more complete and precise account of his thinking, especially on caste issues, it would be necessary to supplement the report with material from his ‘Souvenirs’... But it is worth emphasising that in composing this report, he adopted a method which would make it plain that he was not seeking to have his own ideas accepted, but was inviting all interested parties to send theirs to the Sacred Congregation. Thus, he rarely gave his personal view, although on matters about which there was general agreement, he made quite firm proposals. On all others, he confined himself to advising consultation, and formulated*

561 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 72 - 74. Almost two months later, Melchior sent an “Addition” to the report concerning the First Question (The Malabar Rites). He confirmed what he had written about the rites and customs, as well his statements regarding the confusion in many people’s minds. However, he was now concerned that he could be seen as an objector to Cardinal Tournon’s decree or be described as a sympathizer of Gallicanism. Neither was true. Further, he was not asking for an actual revision of “Omnium Sollicitudinem”. He wished to make it clear that his contribution was made to overcome doubts and to arrive at “a unity of feelings among all evangelical workers”. But, if there was anything in the report that is “lacking in the respect to the Holy See, I retract it immediately. But before rejecting it, I would ask the Sacred Congregation to take note of it and to have its terms weighed by its theologians”. (Ibidem: pages 75 - 78).

several questionnaires. For its time, or for any time, his approach was remarkably democratic. Neither Bonnard in India nor Barran in Paris need have feared that decisions were going to be made 'behind their backs'".⁵⁶²

While Melchior was awaiting a response to the report, he sent a copy to Bishop Luquet three days after its submission (27th June). He invited his friend to give his opinion. Besides, he was far more experienced in the ways of action of "Propaganda Fide" than Melchior. In his reply,⁵⁶³ Bishop Luquet stated that the persons in charge who were called to intervene had only a limited knowledge of the Malabar Rites issue. To understand its value and implications, they would need to have a field experience. Without it, the only choice they had was to avoid any change, or suggestion of change. On the other hand, a meeting of Bishops at the scene itself could carry a certain authority. Melchior could be of help to the Congregation by preparing and organizing it. Generally, however, Bishop Luquet felt that the report was not practical enough, nor easy enough, to summarize in a simple and safe decision. He forewarned his friend not to be too surprised if he received a negative reaction from "Propaganda Fide".

During July, Monsignor Barnabo read the report and made his own summary of it. He also kept the Pope informed. On 1st August, Melchior summarized the situation: "*The Report does not seem to have impressed Monsignor Barnabo at all. He has spoken to the Holy Father about it, doubtless in a negative way. For the Holy Father did not think fit to have it printed and circulated to the Cardinals. The printing did not really matter to me. All I wanted was that they should address the problem in depth and, at least, that I be given the chance to 'discuss' the issues contained in my report*".⁵⁶⁴ Nonetheless, the Pope felt that a Plenary session of the Cardinal members of the Board of

562 Marion Brésillac in India... pages 279 - 280.

563 Letter from Bishop Luquet . African Missions Archives (AMA 2 F 8, 790 - 791) dated 13th July 1854.

564 Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac... page 1416.

“Propaganda Fide” should meet to discuss the issues.

That meeting took place on 31st July. Monsignor Barnabo had presented his summary to the Cardinals. *“As far as I know, his presentation was quite accurate. But never really getting down to the core of my thinking on the matter...and always under the influence of some of his own ideas, which are of such a nature that they must always prevent a full airing [of the Indian problem] within the Sacred Congregation. I have not seen or spoken to any of the Cardinals, except the Cardinal prefect [Fransoni] who is too elderly to take any active part in all these issues. Anyway, from what I heard from Monsignor Barnabo this morning, the outcome of the Meeting is perfectly designed to end all my hopes... I can have no hope whatsoever of getting anything ‘real’ done for India. And not only that, I do not see how I could possibly continue to exercise the pastoral ministry in that country..*

*As regards working for the general service of the Missions (or even for our own dear Society) it now seems to be no longer possible... O my God, it is You who know my intentions! Be then, I beg You, my only consolation and reward. You also know my weakness. Do not let confusion or depression take hold of my soul! Come to my aid in this hour of trial! O blessed Virgin Mary, and you my good angels, help me now in my time of great need... a need for peace, self-renunciation and complete abandonment to Your will...”*⁵⁶⁵

Before leaving Rome, Bishop Melchior was granted “a farewell audience” with the Pope. It took place on 12th August. *“Needless to say, his fatherly goodness persisted right to the end. But about my own personal situation, he said only a few words. And these only confirmed my own assessment: that there is nothing left to hope for. It is evident that the Holy Father has not examined the issues himself. All that he knows is what Monsignor Barnabo has told him”*⁵⁶⁶

After the Audience (and just before leaving Rome) Melchior wrote

565 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1417.

566 *Ibidem:* page 1418.

a final assessment of his dealings with the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. [Firstly] “*These Gentlemen of ‘Propaganda Fide’ are afraid of engaging in a difficult, complicated, delicate and dangerous affair. So, they wish for a way of doubting the truth, so that they can let things rest with a good conscience. The question now is: will this reluctance... go so far as to make them avoid the true way towards a complete investigation and understanding of the real situation in India?.* [Secondly] *It seems obvious to me that they would hold the present state of affairs condemnable if they were really aware of the situation. No one has ever said to me: ‘we know the situation perfectly, so you can go on participating in it without any problems of conscience’... So, for me, there is no way to be a missionary [in South-East India] with a safe conscience*”.⁵⁶⁷

On the evening of 20th August, Melchior left Rome. He had come to it over three months earlier with a sense of awe and excitement. “*I am now leaving it broken-hearted, all my hopes almost completely shattered, far from satisfied in heart or in mind with all I have seen, heard and experienced in this City, the head and heart of Christianity... O God, save this great city of Peter and Paul... Lord, have mercy on us. Mary, pray for us. Peter, pray for us!*”.⁵⁶⁸

What next for Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac?

On to France

Melchior boarded the State ship *Eclaireur* at Civitavecchia (Italy) on the morning of 21st August. He arrived in Toulon harbour in France only seventeen hours later. “*Am I really back in France? The France I left forever? Or is it a mirage?... But no, it is Toulon, with its forts, its convict prison, its huge arsenal and the people who are all white!* [He was immediately struck by] *the crowds pushing and rushing feverishly around in pursuit of the interests of this passing world, so utterly unconcerned for the everlasting things of Heaven... they are all Christians in fact or in name. O Lord, do not let their*

⁵⁶⁷ *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1418 - 1419.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibidem:* page 1419.

*ignorance or indifference ever go so far as to forget your Name entirely or give your Holy Name to some vile creation of their own hands”.*⁵⁶⁹

After a brief stay in Toulon, Melchior moved on to Marseille where he hoped to visit Bishop Eugene de Mazenod O.M.I. and deliver a message from Bishop Bettachini (Jaffna). He also planned to have a few words with Bishop Mazenod about the Oblates in Ceylon. However, the Bishop was not available and, as Melchior was in a hurry to get to Carcassonne, there would (perhaps) be another occasion when they could meet. After a train journey to Montpellier, Melchior took a coach to Carcassonne and arrived there on 24th August 1854. He had been away from the diocese for over 13 years.

Melchior went straight to the Minor Seminary. This place had many wonderful memories for him. As it was holiday time in Europe, Father Arnal and another priest (Father Barthe) were away. Both of these priests had played an important part in his seminary education. But he was made very welcome by the two young priests staying there. It was unfortunate that an outbreak of cholera was raging at the time in the city. It had already caused 600 deaths. Nonetheless, as soon as it became known that Melchior was at the Seminary, priests who knew him came to meet him. Melchior spent the next two days in visiting people and welcoming others at the Seminary. The local Bishop (Henri de Bonnechose) was particularly welcoming. All of this helped to relax Melchior and, at least for a while, to put aside his many worries and concerns.

On Saturday 26th August, Melchior travelled to Castlenaudary along the road which he had so often traversed in his childhood. *“Every village, every country house along the road, every clump of trees, the distant mountains and the nearby hills, everything reminded me of names I thought I had long ago forgotten, of little incidents from my lost childhood... I must admit, however, that my heart started beating a good bit faster when the old church-tower of Saint Michael’s*

569 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1423 - 1424.

came into view and when I turned into the town. As soon as the word went around that I was coming, a crowd of women gathered at my father's house. But it was in the town square that I saw my mother, tears of joy in her eyes. I flung myself into her waiting arms and tears fell from my own eyes. My father (who felt that he could not stand all the excitement) was waiting for me at the door of our home. I ran into his arms, and there were plenty more tears... Soon, my sister Bathilde, neighbours and friends were all crowding into the house".⁵⁷⁰ During the following days, Melchior's youngest sister (Félicie) arrived with her husband and "charming little daughter". His brother (Henri) came and invited Melchior and the "whole family" to his home for a few days. It was there that Melchior met Henri's wife and little son Georges. In fact, it took almost three weeks for Melchior to visit all the family connections in the neighbouring towns of Lascourtines, Pamiers and Lassere de Monestrol... "*I haven't had a single half hour to myself, with so many people coming to see me, at all hours!*"⁵⁷¹

There were many occasions to celebrate Mass with his family and the wider public. He met several of the local clergy who impressed him with their devotion and dedication to their various ministries. Bishop Melchior also had to find time to prepare eight sermons in preparation for the Feast of the Holy Rosary. He had been invited by the Bishop of Carcassonne to do so in Saint Michael's Parish Church in his own hometown of Castlensaudary. This was held from Sunday 23rd September to Sunday 1st October. Despite the prevalence of cholera and it being harvest time, it was well attended. "*Every evening had a big congregation. On the two Sundays, the vast nave of Saint Michael's (at least forty meters by twenty) was literally packed, as well as the choir and the sanctuary... I think the Lord has blessed this little effort*".⁵⁷²

570 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1429.

571 *Ibidem:* page 1430.

572 *Ibidem:* page 1432.

But now, the time had come for Melchior to leave Castlensaudary. *“At first, I intended to leave casually, without telling my father and mother the exact day or hour in advance, so as to spare them the heart-break of another departure. But I saw that this would cause much pain to my father (in view of his great age). So, about four days beforehand, I let him know the exact time of my planned departure... He had prepared himself well and was very sensible (and what is more, very Christian) when that painful moment came... It was not heart-rending or in any way exaggerated or melodramatic... Be You blessed, O my God, for the great strength of mind You give to your servants in the trials most painful to their human hearts”*.⁵⁷³

Bishop Melchior stopped at Toulouse. Here, he met some of his own cousins and the mother of Father De Gelis (“that excellent missionary” whom he had left behind in Coimbatore). He was very happy to tell her, his brother and sisters about the work and virtues of their beloved family member. The Archbishop of Toulouse invited Melchior to preach in the Cathedral on the following Sunday... *“As it turned out, the church was absolutely crowded. I think that the Lord blessed that sermon... On Monday, I finally gave in to my brother (Henri) who wanted at all costs to have my portrait painted, to be presented to my aged father. As I knew that my father would be delighted with that present, I managed to overcome my reluctance (perhaps I should have obeyed it!”*.⁵⁷⁴

On 18th October, Bishop Melchior stopped briefly in Bordeaux. He wished to thank the Seminary staff for giving many of the young M.E.P. missionaries lodgings when they were about to sail for India. Members of the M.E.P. had always spoken well of the hospitality of this Seminary. However, Melchior was disappointed

573 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 1432 - 1433. One recalls the sadness and suffering of their separation over thirteen years previously when Melchior left home to join the Paris Foreign Missions (1841). Melchior was now aged 41, while his father (Gaston) was 81 years old. Melchior's mother (Josephine) was 70 years of age.

574 *Ibidem*: pages 1434 - 1436. The portrait (a *paste*) is by Gabriel Durand. It is now in the S.M.A. Generalate, Rome.

at the reception which he received from the Superior. He decided to continue his journey (by train) that same evening after he had paid a courtesy call to the Archbishop at his home. The next day, Bishop Melchior arrived at the M.E.P. Seminary in Rue de Bac, Paris.

At the Paris Foreign Missions (Paris)

Melchior received a polite but restrained welcome. He immediately wrote to Monsignor Barnabo in Rome to inform him about his arrival at M.E.P. headquarters.

On 1st November, Melchior noted: *“It is now almost two full weeks since I have been in Paris. In the first week, I never discussed any business or affairs at all; and certainly nobody here wished to mention them. They received me well enough but as they would do to a stranger. As for fraternity or family spirit, there was not a hint of it. It is obvious that they are very wary of me. At the end of the first week, I gave Father Barran a copy of the Report which I had drawn up for “Propaganda Fide”. I requested him to read it and then to pass it on to the other members of the Board. I do not think that anybody has read it yet, except Father Tesson and Father Voisin. They seemed to like what I wrote about the Malabar Rites [Indian customs] issue. But even these two seem to be very annoyed with what I had to say about the Seminary and about the M.E.P. structures... I suppose it is only natural... but no ‘natural’ reaction is any help at all to the supernatural work of Grace. That work is in Your hands alone, O my God. You alone are our hope, our only hope”*.⁵⁷⁵

A couple of weeks passed, during which (one presumes) Melchior had informal discussions with the Paris Superiors. On the 22nd November, however, he wrote an official letter ⁵⁷⁶ to them in which he stated that he was now finally convinced that, due to their adverse reactions to his report to “Propaganda Fide”, he would receive no cooperation from them. With regard to the situation in

575 *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* page 1439. This is Melchior's final entry in his *Souvenirs*.

576 *Letter to the Seminary Directors...* *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2F1) pages 172 - 173.

South India, he had been forced to take a leading role. As long as the situation regarding caste and customs remained as it was, he could not in conscience continue to exercise his ministry there. Bishop Melchior then informed them that he would now insist that “Propaganda Fide” formally present his resignation to the Pope. *“I hope that it [the Sacred Congregation] will not conclude that I am leaving my post moved by rancour or pride or any other human motive... I am resigning solely because I feel obliged in honour and in conscience to leave, and I certainly do so with great regret”*.⁵⁷⁷

Bishop Melchior then went on to refer to the section of the report concerning the reform of the Society (M.E.P.). He agreed that this matter was within their competence, either to agree with or hinder his proposals. As a Vicar Apostolic himself (and hence a Superior of the Society) he had put forward several propositions to “Propaganda Fide” at its request and that of His Holiness, the Pope. He had included the views of only a few of the other Vicars Apostolic in the report, but now he was inclosing extracts from a number of them, indicating that it was not only one or two who were asking for change... Even if these (including himself) were mistaken, they at least deserved to be heard, as they were Superiors of the Society. Melchior concluded his comments by saying that he had put forward a proposal for the appointment of a *Visitor*. But now, as several of his colleagues disagreed with it, favouring instead a meeting of all Society Superiors, he was withdrawing that proposal. His only motivation was to give further motivation and momentum to the M.E.P. missions and to enable all involved to *“make them bear fruit in proportion to the huge sacrifice we are making for them”*. Finally, Bishop Melchior asked two personal questions. Firstly, once his resignation as Vicar Apostolic of Coimbatore was accepted, could he be of some service to M.E.P. and in what capacity? Secondly, would the Paris Superiors support a meeting of all the Society’s Superiors if the majority were in favour?

577 *Letter to the Seminary Directors... African Missions Archives (AMA 2F1) page 173.*

It was ironical that on the very day that Melchior wrote this letter (22nd November), Father Barran had sent one to Monsignor Barnabo in Rome.⁵⁷⁸ In this letter, he referred briefly to different points in the report, but concentrated on defending the *status quo* regarding the government of the M.E.P. He objected to the description of the Society as a “headless or a many-sided body” with no opportunity for the different persons in charge to listen to each other. The Society never had a Superior General... It was not its nature to have one. Further, as regards Vicars Apostolic meeting to listen to one another, it was impossible due to the huge distances between jurisdictions. As regards the Society having a *de facto* head residing in Paris, Father Barran stated that the Superior of the Seminary in Paris was not the Superior General of the Society and had always remained within the limits of the powers ascribed to it. On a personal note, Father Barran wrote that, as the person who had been honoured with that position at that time, “*I do not pretend to impose myself or act as a Superior General...and the Board of Directors is as removed from this pretension, as I am*”.

On 12th December, Bishop Melchior wrote to Monsignor Barnabo saying that it was impossible for him to continue fighting what was clearly a lost cause. He hoped that the Holy Father “*will not want to condemn me to be the sad witness of this state of things, for a long time, but that instead he will kindly accept my resignation, which I beg you to please obtain for me as soon as possible*”.⁵⁷⁹ Melchior then remarked that, as a Bishop, he thought that it was inappropriate for him to stay in France without a suitable position. Consequently, he was planning to leave France for Jerusalem or Syria, so as to take advantage (if possible) of the forthcoming return of the Patriarch of Syria. He added that the Paris Seminary still had plenty of young men joining it (there were almost forty at that time). Melchior did

578 *Letter of Father Barren M.E.P. to Monsignor Barnabo...* Archives of Propaganda Fide, Rome (APF) *Indie Orientali* 1855 - 1856. pages 302 - 313 and Archives of Paris Foreign Missions (AMEP) Volume 170 f. pages 368 - 384.

579 *Letter of Bishop de Brésillac to Monsignor Barnabo...* *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2 F 11) pages 467-470.

not wish all of this goodwill and energy to be dissipated later on the missions, due to a lack of organisation and order at home.

Bishop Melchior kept himself busy around Paris. For example, from 3rd to 10th December he had preached a Retreat in preparation for the Jubilee of *Notre Dame des Victoires*.⁵⁸⁰ He received other invitations to preach, especially for celebrations and on the occasion of certain feasts. But now, he knew that those invitations and he himself must wait...He prayed (as he had so often done in the past) for patience and for a deepening of faith, an increase of hope and a growth in love for God and for all His people.

580 The text of this Retreat was published by Melchior himself in Paris. The title suggests that it focused on the power and influence of Mary to regenerate France. It contained 292 pages.

Chapter Seventeen

New Beginnings?

1855

On 3rd January 1855, Bishop Melchior celebrated Mass in Saint-Etienne du Mont for the feast of Saint Genevieve. A letter from “Propaganda Fide” (dated 13th January) informed Melchior that his request for resignation was being actively considered, but that further information was required. A brief delay would give him a bit more time to find an appropriate solution for his future as a bishop. Monsignor Barnabo stated that he needed all such information before he could formally propose the resignation request to the Holy Father. Then, he asked a specific question: How was he (Melchior) going to provide the necessities of life for himself? And he concluded the letter by expressing the opinion that, for a number of reasons, his proposal of going permanently to Syria was not a suitable solution.⁵⁸¹

About one week after receiving the letter, Melchior followed up the request from Monsignor Barnabo. He wrote a formal note to the Paris Superiors stating that, in his view, his resignation from the Vicariate of Coimbatore did not entail his leaving the Society. He would continue to consider himself as a member... “*Sooner or later, Divine Providence would enable me to render some service to it.*” He would then receive the normal “viatique” (personal financial allocation). Otherwise, in case of exclusion, he needed to know what would be the financial allowance that the Congregation would assign to him when he needed it, and for how long would such financial assistance be available to him?⁵⁸²

Meanwhile on 25th January, the Paris Seminary was shocked at the unexpected death of Father Barran. It appears that he had been

581 *Letter from Propaganda Fide... African Missions Archives* (AMA 2F 13, No. 21).

582 *Letter to the Seminary Directors... Ibidem.* (AMA 2F 1, No. 244). It was dated 4th February 1855.

suffering for a long time from a serious illness but had successfully concealed it. Melchior prayed that he would now rest in peace. Father Francois Antoine Albrand was elected the new Superior on 2nd February (eight days later).

On 5th February, the Board of Directors met. As regards Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac's position in the Society, they decided to forward the question to the Vicars Apostolic. As for the financial question, they committed the Society to assuring him of a yearly income of fifteen hundred francs, under the condition that it would cease when he found another source of income.⁵⁸³

That same day, Melchior wrote to his sister Bathilde: "*My situation here is very pleasant, always close to a good fire, well accommodated, well fed and with nothing to do. More than one would envy my happiness. We are the best friends in the world here; we only see the missions in a different way...*".⁵⁸⁴

In a letter (dated 28th February), Monsignor Barnabo informed Bishop Melchior that he had spoken with the Holy Father. While the Pope did not refuse Melchior's resignation, he preferred to wait a little while longer so that a suitable person could be found for the Vicariate of Coimbatore. In this regard, the Pope asked Melchior to suggest a name as his possible successor. The letter concluded by stating that the Holy Father was not favourable to Melchior's plan of retiring to Jerusalem.⁵⁸⁵

Bishop Melchior replied immediately. He offered one name as a possible successor and added that he would abandon his idea of retiring to Jerusalem.

583 *Délibérations du Conseil...* Archives of the Paris Foreign Missions (AMEP) Vol. 83, 70 - 71. On the subject of membership of those who returned from the missions, the Rule stated that "*in the case of a Bishop, his reasons ought to be approved by the Holy See or by two Vicars Apostolic. If reasons are approved, he can remain in and be maintained at the Seminary where he will receive a pension*". (*Reglement de la Congrégation des Missions Etrangères*: 1847, 45 - 46).

584 *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2 f 17) dated 5th February 1855.

585 *Letter from Propaganda Fide ... African Missions Archives* (AMA 2 F 13, No. 23).

While he awaited a definitive answer from Rome, Bishop Melchior continued with preaching in several places, including a novena (from 18th - 25th March) to the “Workers of Saint Francis Xavier” (a group who worked for charity, while at the same time, deepening their own spiritual lives). He also pondered on his own situation... “*There is a mystery hidden in all of this. Can my position be a big mistake when it seems to be so obvious to me? Or is it that the times are not ready to put things clear regarding the work of the missions? Let us adore God and keep silence*”.⁵⁸⁶

The answer from “Propaganda Fide” came to Bishop Melchior in a letter dated 27th March 1855. Monsignor Barnabo informed him that in the audience of 18th March, the Holy Father agreed to accept his resignation as Vicar Apostolic of Coimbatore. The Monsignor added that the Pope was glad that Melchior had given up his plan of retiring to Jerusalem and that he had agreed with him on his choice of successor. The letter concluded with the following words from Monsignor Barnabo: “*The Holy Father instructed us to congratulate Your Lordship (a task we gladly undertake) for the deep study and for the great work you did for a long time to nurture with care and promote the flock that was entrusted to you*”.⁵⁸⁷

The saga surrounding Bishop Melchior’s resignation, which began in 1849, was now finally ended. There remained only one thing for Melchior to do before leaving the Seminary in Rue de Bac. This was to write to the Vicars Apostolic, letting them know of his resignation and asking for their prayers. In the letter, he also stated that, as his resignation did not entail leaving the Society (unless the Superiors thought differently) he was ready to help in any way possible.⁵⁸⁸ It would obviously take some time before he would receive replies to this letter. The missionaries, on the other hand, heard of Melchior’s resignation by way of the Seminary Superiors

586 *Letter to Bishop Luquet...* Sources Luquet (256, B XIII) dated 30th March 1855.

587 *Letter from Propaganda Fide... African Missions Archives:* (AMA 2 F 13, No. 24).

588 *Letters to the M.E.P. Vicars Apostolic...* Ibidem (AMA 2 F 11, 449) dated 17th April 1855.

and through a letter which Melchior wrote to Father Metral (dated 19th April 1855).

A Time for Discernment in a Monastery

Bishop Melchior knew the Master of Novices in the Capuchin Monastery at Versailles.⁵⁸⁹ They had been together in the diocesan college at Carcassonne. In fact, he was also from Castlensaudary and now was known as Father Dominique.⁵⁹⁰ To rest in a peaceful atmosphere, praying, studying and writing was always something that Melchior appreciated.⁵⁹¹ It was true that his life on the missions was a very active one. He would continue this by preaching, giving direction to some charitable groups and exercising the sacred ministry from time to time while in the monastery. As he was staying in the guesthouse, he could also receive visitors and go out as he pleased. However, he chose to follow the Monastery timetable. He seldom had visitors and rarely went out. Besides, he was very short of money.

On 3rd May, Bishop Melchior did accept an invitation to preach at the church of Saint Sulpice in Paris. The topic was “The Works for the Propagation of the Faith”. The Mass was presided over by Archbishop Walsh of Halifax. Melchior gave a “truly remarkable sermon” based on his own first-hand experience of the enormous importance of this organisation for the missions. Afterwards, he received a letter expressing “deep gratitude and admiration” from the President of the Central Council of this association.⁵⁹²

During the first month of his stay at the Capuchin monastery,

589 Nowadays, Versailles is estimated to be about twenty-two kilometres from central Paris.

590 Jean Baptiste Gouttes (Father Dominique) was born in Castlensaudary in 1814. He was ordained priest for Carcassonne Diocese and served there for eleven years. He joined the Capuchins in 1849. He took up important roles in the Capuchins, including Master of Novices (1854) and Vice-Prefect of a new foundation in Ethiopia (1863). He founded a Capuchin Monastery at Carcassonne (1868), and in 1870 was elected Provincial of Toulouse where he remained until 1885. He died there in 1890.

591 cf. *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac...* pages 929 - 930.

592 *Letter from Mr. Bernard des Glajeux ... African Missions Archives* (AMA 2F 8, 841-842). It is dated 5th May 1855.

Bishop Melchior spent a lot of time reflecting on the meaning of his life. One may describe it as a long “dark night of the soul”. He pondered on all the circumstances which had brought him to this cloister. On his Indian experience, he recalled the love which he had for the people and the seminarians. And while readily admitting mistakes in the way he had carried out his ministry and in his relationships with the M.E.P., Melchior knew from the depths of his being that it was *“the voice of my conscience that persuaded me to leave the mission that I loved, and that I will always love more than my life”*.⁵⁹³ He prayed for peace in his heart and for trust in God’s mercy... Gradually, Melchior emerged from his feelings of sadness, regret, isolation and guilt.

The Brother-in-charge of the guesthouse gave an assessment of their guest. *“I noticed a good and simple bishop called Marion de Brésillac... We took him as one of us, and his simplicity was so great that only his bishop’s cassock could make you notice it. He seemed really at home... Monsignor seemed to be a simple priest, a disciple who listens, to the point that he appeared so modest that one didn’t know if he had any opinion of his own... Far from having any pretensions, and even farther from expressing them, I witnessed in recreation or when I met him alone that he never spoke about his own work. What struck me about him was his demeanour, always calm, his arms folded over his chest, with a serious attitude but not sad, never loud with laughter, only a smile, as if he weighed his words. He was quite tall... I never singled out anything special in his room (the furnishings or bed) and I never heard a complaint. It was the same with his meals, eating with simplicity what we presented to him. It seemed that everything agreed with his taste. During the Holy Mass, he didn’t seem to have more authority than the person who served him. For the rest, he celebrated devoutly, calmly and religiously. Now, that I know that he is a Founder (which I did not know then), my judgement about what I have mentioned, is that he must have spoken more to God than to*

593 Letter to Mr. Rodière... African Missions Archives (AMA 2 f 1A; 2 F 1D, 572-573) dated 10th June 1855.

people about his worries”.⁵⁹⁴

Meanwhile on 26th May 1855 (about two months after his resignation had been accepted) Bishop Melchior wrote to Monsignor Barnabo. He thanked him for facilitating the process. After informing him about his change of address, he reiterated his profound respect for the Holy See. Melchior then goes on to state that “*now since all hope is lost for me of ever again seeing the missions of India, so dear to me, I ask: is there not some other place in all the world where I can be a missionary? Young as I still am, is it really the Will of God that I should remain inactive like this? I just cannot believe it. And I hereby pray you, Monsignor, to present to the Holy Father the offer I am making of myself for any place whatsoever in the universe. If the episcopal character which I bear is an absolute obstacle to my working in an already-existing Mission, is there still not some place in the world where missionaries have not set foot? For example, in the centre of Africa?... I am under no illusions about the difficulties - even the apparent impossibility - of succeeding. But everything is possible to God. In Him we place our hope... My desire would be to go straight to these peoples, either alone or with one or two companions... Please present this offer to the Holy Father as soon as possible and let me know his orders...*”.⁵⁹⁵

Melchior received a reply from Monsignor Barnabo (dated 9th June), in which he urged prudence. He advised Melchior to postpone such major decisions, since it was such a short time since his resignation. He also felt that His Holiness would be a little shocked at such a sudden request. Besides, there were many difficulties in the proposal which needed to be carefully weighed...

Melchior sent a reply to this letter on 23rd June. He agreed with the Monsignor that prudence was required “*lest the Holy Father think that my request is the result of an inconstant and fickle-minded spirit.*

594 *African Missions Archives* (AMA 1270/72 - 11/01 25). Not classified. This assessment was given some years later.

595 *Mission and Foundation Documents ...* pages 127-128.

My unlucky involvement in matters which there is no point in going over again must have given him a bad opinion of me... True, I have thought it my duty to sacrifice my affection for the mission confided to me because of my rejection of trying to continuing the sacred ministry with a caste system at present in force... Please see some zeal for the missions in it...and allow me to hope that the day will come when 'they' will recognise that the core of my thinking was in line with the present needs of the Indian missions and especially with the spirit of the Holy See... [Melchior went on to state that it was his hope that] the Holy Father will recognise, that in me he has a son who is full of respect, obedience, love; one who is completely devoted to the Missions. It is in this hope that I have the courage to ask him to please allow me to continue that work. And if the Episcopal character which I bear (unworthy but without regret) is an obstacle to my being sent to an already established Mission, why could the Sacred Congregation not permit me to go and try to open a new one in places hitherto inaccessible? If I do not succeed, what is lost? ... With the blessing of the Holy Father, I would go to the Mission of Guinea. There, I would get all the possible information from the good Fathers of the Sacred Heart of Mary,⁵⁹⁶ and from natives of the interior who come to trade on the coast. Then, I would throw myself in the arms of Providence, towards the interior. I would take one or two devoted companions with me; no more would be needed, I feel, at the start. And if success answered to our zeal, it would not be difficult to attract the interest of some Congregation. Of course, this plan would be modified according to the wishes of the Sacred Congregation, whose instructions I would scrupulously follow... [In concluding the letter, Bishop Melchior stated] It is my hope that the Holy Father will see in this offer not a fickle-minded spirit... but the actual desire I have: to keep faithful to my vocation and to use up all my life in the work of the missions".⁵⁹⁷ He

596 This congregation had been amalgamated with the Holy Ghost Fathers in 1848. The Venerable Francis Libermann (who was its founder) became the First Superior General of the United Societies. He died in 1852 (aged 49).

597 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 129 -131. Also *African Missions Archives AMA* 2 F 1. page 247.

signed off with the usual courtesies and requested the Monsignor to present his petition to the Holy Father.

Melchior continued to write and to reorganize all the papers which he had brought with him from India, Paris, Rome and elsewhere... diaries, letters written and received, homilies and retreats. He re-read his *Souvenirs* from the day he wrote the first entry (1st January 1841) while still an Assistant priest in Castlenaudary, and tried to put some order into the entries.

Two weeks later (in a letter dated 7th July) Monsignor Barnabo sent more hopeful news. He had spoken to the Pope who was surprised (as he himself had foreseen). Having listened with interest to the West African proposal, His Holiness had then enumerated all the difficulties (climate, language, the state of the people etc.). Besides, the territory was already under the care of Vicars Apostolic. But, he was impressed by the zeal of Melchior and said that he would think it over. Should the Pope have any instructions, Monsignor Barnabo would let Melchior know without delay.

Melchior drafted a reply, which he sent on 16th July 1855. *“It was a great consolation to receive your good letter of the 7th July because it gives me hope of taking up again, at the time chosen by Providence, the ministry of the missions, in the exercise of which I desire to go on living and to die. Allow me however, to add a few words to what I have written already, for I noticed in your letter a few expressions that made me fear that I have not yet properly explained my whole thinking about it”*.⁵⁹⁸

Melchior then offers some clarifications about the Indian episode, but moves on quickly to the African proposal. He suggested that there were plenty of places in Africa where, in fact, there were as yet no missionaries. In mentioning Guinea, he did not wish to convey the impression that he was asking to be sent to that

598 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* page 132. At this point, he quotes some passages from Monsignor Barnabo's letter, which implied that Melchior had suddenly changed his mind about his missionary commitment. (*African Missions Archives* AMA 2 F 13, page 16).

mission... *“I merely expressed the hope that these Fathers would have the charity to let me stay with them as long as was needed to get the required information and the other means required by prudence, before pushing East beyond its limits, to where they themselves have not started evangelising. It seems to me that, this being well understood, the Holy Father would not put any obstacle in my way, unless he wanted to employ me elsewhere. As to the enormous obstacles I would meet... well, the first person there will just have to face them. Still, one may hope to find on the frontiers or on the coasts, some individuals from the interior who can be contacted first...As regards the fathers on the coast, they already have more than enough to do in their actual Mission. Whereas I would not have to concern myself about that... and I would seize the first opportunity to penetrate the interior and contact peoples to whom the Holy Name of Jesus Christ has never been brought... And so, Monsignor, to sum up: you can plead my case with the Holy Father by pointing out the following:*

- *there is no inconsistency in me or in my proposal*
- *I am not asking to work in other people’s fields*
- *That to take on the work which I am asking to go and try, perhaps what is needed is a person who is unsuitable for any other mission, such as I am at present.*

In any case, if the Holy Father replies favourably, as I hope, my plan would be not to set out without first going to Rome, to arrange with ‘Propaganda Fide’ and receive its detailed instructions. Only before going to Rome, it would be very advantageous to be sure of the Holy Father’s assent, so as not to have to come back again to France and lose still more time arranging with the Propagation of the Faith etc.” Melchior concluded this letter with placing the hope which Monsignor’s letter had enkindled in him into the hands of the Immaculate Virgin Mary and to the kindly zeal of the Secretary of the Sacred Congregation.⁵⁹⁹

599 *Mission and Foundation Documents...*pages 132 - 134.

Monsignor Barnabo sent a swift reply. In this letter (dated 7th July),⁶⁰⁰ he made it clear to Melchior that, having presented his request to the Pope and reported back to him, he was less than enthusiastic in pursuing the topic any further. Patrick Gantly writes: “*One cannot be sure whether Barnabo was indifferent, bored, overworked or was being deliberately provocative. Whatever his motivation, he could not have chosen a better way of ensuring that de Brésillac would not relinquish his project*”. This biographer then goes on to recall the opposition of his father on hearing of his sons’ desire to become a missionary and Melchior’s response to it. He points out that this determination was also shown through successive crises in India and during the period before the acceptance of his resignation.⁶⁰¹ Was it now to falter?

Meanwhile, Bishop Melchior had halted his work in reorganising his *Souvenirs*. Many letters had been arriving for him at the monastery in Versailles. News of his resignation had spread. Several letters had come from India lamenting his decision. Father Metral asked agonisingly: “*Were you not doing good? Did you not have here and elsewhere more success than at first you dared to hope for? How many and how great were the obstacles you overcame to promote the local clergy and bring it to a point where it has reached today?*”.⁶⁰² Father de Gelis was also saddened, and spoke about the consternation of “*poor Father Metral*”. The Christians too had asked Father Metral for permission to write to the Holy Father “*as we have lost our beloved Father and we will never again have so good a bishop*”. But perhaps the longest and most poignant letter was from the students at the Seminary who said that they had become orphans. Father Ravel, the seminary Superior, confirmed how deeply affected the Seminarians were, but he added that there was no danger that they would leave. “*Their behaviour is more and more re-assuring*”.⁶⁰³

600 The Letters of Melchior and Monsignor Barnabo had crossed in the mail.

601 *For this Cause...* page 184.

602 *Marion Brésillac in India...* page 295.

603 *Ibidem:* page 295.

Melchior responded as best he could to all the letters and gave the reason for his resignation to some of his confreres. For example, in his reply to Father Metral (his Vicar and friend) he made it clear that his decision not to return was final. It was a matter of conscience. *“Thus, my dear friend, we have no hope of seeing each other again on this earth... Thank you for all you did for me. Thank also for me those who were so co-operative with me, Fathers de Gelis and Ravel, since it is only right to make special mention of those who gave me nothing but consolation... As for me, I assure you that no day will pass without my praying for Coimbatore. May another do the good that was made impossible for me... You who know me through and through understand that it was the sole ambition of my life. But who knows? God may accord to sacrifice what he did not accord to action”*.⁶⁰⁴

In his reply to Bishop Bonnard, Melchior offered several elements which contributed to his final decision. He ended this letter with the statement: *“I assure you that everything that has happened in the last two years is a deep mystery to me”*.⁶⁰⁵

Earlier, from 1st to 8th June, Bishop Melchior had preached an Ordination retreat at the Major Seminary in Soissons. Again he emphasised the need for faith, hope and charity (the key elements of his own life and spirituality), contemplation (as was particularly evidenced in the life of Mary) and the necessity for priests to seek perfection.⁶⁰⁶ On 1st July, he had responded to the invitation to celebrate a Pontifical Mass for the Feast of Saint Peter in the Church of Saint Sulpice. But now, as July 1855 came to an end, he had to decline many other invitations. Since that letter of Monsignor Barnabo which he had received on 16th July, the eyes of Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac were firmly focused on the future.

604 *Marion Brésillac in India...* page 296.

605 *De Marion Brésillac...*page 352. Archives of the Paris Foreign Missions (AMEP Volume P. pages 817b - 820. Dated 13th June 1855.

606 *African Missions Archives* (AMA) 2 f 10, 499-602 (103 pages). Dated June 1855.

Melchior did receive offers of work during the last months of 1855. For example, Bishop Verolles M.E.P. (Vicariate of Japan) had written to his friend Bishop Bonnand of Pondicherry, on 1st August, stating that he would be very happy if Bishop de Brésillac would replace him in Japan (as he was retiring). He requested Bishop Bonnand to support him by making the necessary contacts.⁶⁰⁷ Another offer came through Bishop Luquet. His friend informed him (in a letter dated 11th September) that he had met a Father Etienne Djunkosky who had been sent by the Holy See to start an Apostolic Vicariate in Iceland. The priest wished to propose Bishop Luquet for the position, but he immediately thought of his “unemployed friend”. He suggested to Melchior that, if he was interested, he could personally visit the priest who was in Paris.⁶⁰⁸ A few replies to Melchior’s letter to the M.E.P. Vicars Apostolic (which had been dated 17th April) concerning his membership of the M.E.P. were also reaching him at the Monastery. And, while they had been superseded by subsequent events, most of them were in favour of him remaining a member of the Society. Bishops Bonnand and Charbonnaux had even suggested that he should serve as the M.E.P. Procurator to the Holy See.⁶⁰⁹

The Guardian of the Capuchin Monastery at Versailles (Father Ambrose) and Melchior’s friend (Father Dominique, the Novice Master) were both aware of their guest’s growing interest in Africa. *“Now it happened that Father Ambrose, having gone to Eaux Bonnes, made the acquaintance of Mr. Regis senior of Marseilles, a very good Christian man, it is said, a rich ship-owner trading on the Guinea Coasts. This gentleman spoke to him of the complete absence of missionaries in the African Kingdom where he does most of his trading, adding that he personally would be ready to facilitate the action of missionaries in that country, where he has some influence, although*

607 Bishop Bonnand did not send this letter to Bishop Melchior until much later. He actually wrote from Pondicherry six months later on 24th January 1856 and the letter reached Melchior on 29th April 1856. (*African Missions Archives: AMA 2 F 8, 871-872*).

608 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 353. There is no record that Melchior followed up on this offer.

609 Other offers of work would come during the following year (1856).

the inhabitants are very difficult but friendly at the moment towards the French". On his return to the Monastery, the Guardian told Melchior of the opportunity and the offer of Mr. Regis. Melchior filed the information for the present.⁶¹⁰

It was now coming towards the end of Melchior's sojourn in the Capuchin Monastery at Versailles. His hosts had shown him wonderful hospitality and kindness during the six months (approximately) since his arrival there. But they had done something more... Through their interest in missions they had helped to "fan into a flame" Melchior's own passion for missions. Above all, they had done their part in watering the seeds of interest in *Africa*, which the Lord had planted in his heart.

On 13th October 1855, Bishop Melchior sent a brief note to Monsignor Barnabo. He informed him that he was leaving Versailles to spend some time with his family. He then planned to go to Rome before the end of the year. "*I am still hoping that the Holy Father will grant me his blessing for some spot on the globe where there are no evangelising workers, since any other mission seems closed to me. The moderate size of my request and the purity of my intentions (as far as I can testify to myself about that) sustain me in this hope...*" Before signing off, Melchior stated that he also hoped to meet the Monsignor himself during his stay in Rome.⁶¹¹

While relaxing with his family at Castlenaudary, Melchior began to write a new Diary. It briefly presented his thoughts and feelings at this period of his life, as he prepared for new challenges.⁶¹² In

610 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* page 139.

611 *Ibidem*: page 135.

612 Marion Brésillac: *Diary, 1856 -1859*. Rome 1986. 114 pages. This is one of the original writings of Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac. It was presented in both French and English as "a manuscript for the use of S.M.A. members" (*ad usum S.M.A. pro manuscripto*). It opens with a twelve line summary of Melchior's activities "up to the end of 1855". The style of this Diary is very different from his *Souvenirs*. For the most part, it simply records Melchior's activities and remarks on places and people he met during the period (1856 - 1859). "*This text was a useful travel notebook for accounting and planning purposes*". (*De Marion Brésillac...* page 383).

December, Melchior received a letter from his Capuchin friend (Father Dominique) who told him that, while on a visit to Marseilles in connection with affairs dealing with his own Order, he had encountered Mr. Regis. He strongly advised Melchior to meet this man as he could prove very helpful regarding his mission project. Melchior immediately wrote to Mr. Regis for an appointment. This was graciously granted to him.

Bishop Melchior was very impressed with Mr. Regis. A committed Catholic, he provided him with invaluable information about the “Kingdom of Dahomey” in West Africa. Its principal city Ouidah (situated on the coast) was also the headquarters of Mr. Regis’ business in West Africa. In 1851, the French government had signed a treaty with the King of Dahomey which included a clause allowing Catholic missionaries to enter his kingdom. The King had also requested that these missionaries should establish schools for the children.⁶¹³

There were about two thousand Christians among the population “along the Coast” who had returned from Brazil or who were descended from families who had been baptized by missionaries who happened to be passing by. The French and Spanish Capuchins had also made efforts to evangelize the area in the 17th and 18th century, but without much success.

At long intervals, a Portugese priest (who was a black person) would pass by to baptise children presented by their parents, who otherwise carried out the traditional “pagan” customs of the area.

Both Mr. Regis (and Melchior) were aware that “Propaganda Fide” had assigned the whole, huge region to the Holy Ghost Fathers (also known as the “Spiritans”). In fact, Mr. Regis had met Bishop Bessieux (a member of that congregation) when that Prelate visited the area in 1849. During that visit (which lasted about three weeks), Bishop Bessieux had seen and noted the needs and the possibilities for evangelisation in the area. However, due to a

613 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 138 - 146.

decreasing number of missionaries and the vastness of the territory, nothing had happened since then.⁶¹⁴

By way of concluding their conversation, Mr. Regis stated that the climate of Dahomey was difficult but “not absolutely unhealthy”. He had several European employees there. Some of these were there for many years. However, he added that there was no doubt that precautions were necessary because of intermittent fevers. He offered to provide accommodation in his own houses at Ouidah until such time as the missionaries built a mission. He would also facilitate a meeting with the King of Dahomey and his advisors.⁶¹⁵

To all of this information, Melchior added other bits which he had gleaned through reading and other contacts. He also touched on the financial implications of preparing, establishing and maintaining the new Mission which he was proposing. The remaining month of 1855 was spent in drafting and refining his report for “Propaganda Fide”. Bishop Melchior entitled it: *“Report to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide about a New Mission to be established in the Kingdom of Dahomey”*. He attached to it a map of Dahomey and a copy of the Convention between the King of Dahomey and the French government (1851). He left France for Rome on 16th December 1855.

614 Archives of Holy Ghost Fathers (ACSSp B 165). Quoted in *De Marion Brésillac...* page 367.

615 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 138 -146.

Chapter Eighteen

The Foundation of the Society of African Missions 1856

After greeting Cardinal Frasoni and Monsignor Barnabo at “Propaganda Fide” headquarters, Bishop Melchior handed his report to them. It was dated 4th January 1856. On this occasion, even though Melchior had addressed it to the Cardinals associated with “Propaganda Fide”, Monsignor Barnabo decided to give it to a “working committee” (*Congresso*) within the Sacred Congregation. This group dissected the clear, precise and brief document and was soon reporting to the Monsignor that “the project deserved to be studied”. It suggested that Bishops Bessieux and his Coadjutor Kobes (both Holy Ghost Fathers) of the Vicariate of the Two Guineas⁶¹⁶ be contacted, so as to give their opinions on the proposed project. The Superior General (Father Schwindenhammer C.S.Sp.) should also be invited to send his views.

While awaiting some news from “Propaganda Fide”, Bishop Melchior came across a Capuchin Friar (Father Leon des Avanchers). He was in Rome looking for personnel for other regions of Africa. In particular, he was focused on the East Coast of Africa. Aware of Bishop Melchior’s commitment to working in Africa, he wrote: *“If Your Lordship allows me, I will ask the Sacred Congregation if they can offer this Mission to you. Personally, I would be happy to be guided by you through the paths of the apostolate, and would be a most obedient son to you. May Your Lordship kindly listen to my plea on behalf of all these poor people... And do not worry about missionaries... I am sure that we will find some”*.⁶¹⁷

There is no definitive evidence regarding Melchior’s answer to

616 *Diary 1856 -1859...* page 14. The Vicariate of the Two Guineas was erected in 1842. It extended from the mouth of the Senegal River to the mouth of the Orange River, with no limits towards the interior.

617 *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2 F 1, 252-253) 15th January 1856. Also, *De Marion Brésillac...* page 367.

this heartfelt plea. He would need further time to consider this request. At this particular point, he had begun to wonder if his own suggestion of going to Africa with just one or two companions was being overtaken by more positive signals from the Sacred Congregation regarding the West Coast. He recalled that “*the idea of forming an ad hoc community had been suggested to me, almost from the start by Monsignor Barnabo*”.⁶¹⁸

In a letter to a priest friend (Father Vian), Bishop Melchior indicates how (at this time) his thinking had evolved. “*Providence has had me meet another evangelising worker who is here to seek help for other points in Africa where there seems to be an abundant harvest to gather but where the labourers are lacking. This and other considerations are urging me to form a special society for the evangelisation of the peoples of Africa among whom the Gospel has not yet been preached or who, through the misfortune of the times, are the most deprived of missionaries... So, when my long-offered resignation was finally accepted, I volunteered for another mission... wishing to be sent, as far as possible, to the peoples where the light of faith has not yet reached... The Sacred Congregation would be happy if I worked to open this new mission. But they do not want me to go alone; they advise me to found a society of missionaries for that purpose. [He was now committed] to the founding a special society for the evangelisation of the peoples of Africa, to whom the Gospel has not yet been preached, or who are the most deprived of missionaries because of the difficulties of the times. If God blesses this idea, it will grow and gain some importance in the Holy Church; and in that sense, I am resolved to undertake this and get on with it as soon as I can gather the first members. At the moment, I need only a few collaborators to follow me to the missions, and some others who could be our correspondents in Europe, and the soul of the new association*”.⁶¹⁹ Indeed, his growing enthusiasm for the idea is

618 *Diary 1856 -1859...* page 14.

619 *Letter to Father Vian... African Missions Archives* (AMA 2 F 1, 252-253). 15th January 1856. Also: *De Marion Brésillac...* pages 370 - 371. Father Vian was a priest of the Diocese of Fréjus who had been teaching at the Carcassonne Minor Seminary with Melchior. He was always interested in “the missions” but had indifferent health.

evidenced in the remainder of this letter where he suggests various ways in which Father Vian could help him!

As the month of January progressed, more signals were coming from Monsignor Barnabo that “Propaganda Fide” would agree with Bishop Melchior’s project, provided he set up a Society of missionaries to implement it and to provide continuity. He was allowed to print a brochure to describe the project (“Propaganda Fide” covered the cost). This exercise would help Melchior to sharpen his thinking on the future Society and how he would inform the Catholic world about the project. It would also provide “Propaganda Fide” with a written statement of intent.

In this brochure of four small pages, Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac began as follows:

- 1. The first and main goal of this Society is to evangelise, under the authority and direction of the Sacred Congregation of “Propaganda Fide”, the countries of Africa where the light of Faith has not yet penetrated or that are most deprived of missionaries.*
- 2. A number of clergy would be part of the Society. They would not take vows, but would make a solemn resolution to persevere in the apostolic vocation and observe the statutes of the Society until the end of their lives.*
- 3. It was foreseen from the beginning that some members would remain in Europe to ‘correspond with the missions and provide for its needs’.*
- 4. The Mother House would be in France, but the Society would ‘accept members from different countries that would agree to follow the statutes and prove to have a solid vocation to apostolic life’.*
- 5. The Society would be composed not only of priests, but also of lay brothers who should have a trade.*
- 6. Wherever several members happen to be together, they will lead a common life.*

7. *The new Society would rely on associated benefactors for financial support. They would be informed periodically about the Society's needs, life and activities in the missions.*

8. *The patronage of the Holy Family, honoured in the mystery of the flight into Egypt, would assure spiritual assistance, also those of several Saints particularly related to Africa: Saint Augustine, Saint Cyprian, Saint Benedict of Philadelphia (so-called the Moor), Blessed Peter Claver 'the slave of the black people'⁶²⁰ and all the Blessed persons who became holy through the exercise of apostolic ministry in the missions, especially in Africa".⁶²¹*

On 6th February, Bishop Melchior wrote to Father Metral in Coimbatore. *"Finally, I volunteered to the Sacred Congregation to attempt to open a mission in places where there are presently no evangelical workers, and perhaps have never been... And as one thing brings up another, I am working (encouraged by the same Sacred Congregation and being aware of the unavoidable delays that this affair implies) to gather the members of a missionary society whose specific goal would be the evangelisation of the most abandoned peoples in Africa".⁶²²*

Then, on 26th February, Bishop Melchior sent a brief but particularly significant letter to Cardinal Frasoni (Prefect of "Propaganda Fide"). *"While waiting until the Sacred Congregation receives replies to its letters and can authorize us to penetrate the Kingdom of Dahomey, it is my duty to do all I can to recruit evangelising workers full of zeal and devotedness, ready to help me in this enterprise, which is difficult but all to the glory of our divine Saviour. For that purpose, I plan, God willing, to make a tour of several French dioceses as soon as the Easter feasts are over... At the same time, **I shall mark out the foundations of a society of missionaries** who, under the authority of "Propaganda*

620 Peter Claver was canonized by Pope Leo XIII in 1888.

621 *Notice sur la Société des Missions-Africaines...* Rome. 1856. four pages. Archives of Propaganda Fide (APF) *Scrittura Riferite* AGEA 1848-1857, ff. 1010-1011, and *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2 F 13).

622 Archives of the Paris Foreign Missions (AMEP Vol. 1000 J, 1129).

*Fide” will get ready to evangelise the countries of Africa which the light of Faith has not yet reached, or which are the most deprived of spiritual help... You have already given me signs of the gracious confidence and interest which you have in my undertaking. Nevertheless, it would be very useful to have a letter from the Sacred Congregation that I could show, testifying to your sentiments towards me and to the entire harmony of my plans with the wishes of the Holy See. I hereby ask you, Eminence, for this letter, which will give me the moral support I need and will inspire confidence in those whom the Spirit of God will move me in this work, whose direct aim is the propagation of the Gospel... May I say again, Eminence, (without labouring the point) that one of the things that can notably delay and frustrate the starting of my enterprise is the lack of material means... I would be grateful if the Sacred Congregation would come to my aid”.*⁶²³

On 29th February (three days later), Cardinal Frasoni replied. After expressing his own support for the project and outlining some of the difficulties involved, His Eminence continued: “*I highly commend Your Lordship’s desire to establish the said Society, especially because missions of this kind can be usefully undertaken and can promise lasting fruit only if they are entrusted to an institute of priests who can succeed each other without interruption... I consider that Your Excellency’s project deserves the adherence of other clergymen who are inflamed by zeal for God’s glory...*”⁶²⁴

While this letter could not be considered as a formal document establishing a new Society, it was sufficient for Bishop Melchior at this time. He had the endorsement of the Cardinal Prefect of “Propaganda Fide”. As for himself, he was a missionary again; and his life was about to take a new direction. From this moment, all his thoughts, prayers and work would be focused on Africa and

623 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 155 - 156. The Editor of this work (Robert Hales S.M.A.) states that he has underlined the phrase “*I shall mark out the foundations of a society of missionaries*” [because] *this is the first time that Melchior had indicated clearly to “Propaganda Fide” that he intended to found a new institute.* (Footnote 2, page 155).

624 *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2 F 13, No.29).

on establishing a new missionary Society in the Catholic Church.

As the Lenten season was well underway, Bishop Melchior decided to remain in Rome for the ceremonies of Holy Week and Easter at Saint Peter's Basilica. In the meantime, he would prepare a sermon (homily) which he would deliver at Saint Louis Church (*Saint Louis des Francais*) in Rome on 25th March 1856. This would also serve (with minor adjustments) for the many future sermons he would preach in France (and beyond) in favour of his project. In many ways, it could serve as a "Template" for all future missionaries, and particularly for those who would work in the ministry of missionary animation and promotion.

This prototype sermon on mission may be summarized as follows:

1. The Theological basis for Mission

This is to be found in the life of the Trinity, which is strictly linked to the Paschal Mystery. *"The supreme goal of everything that God was pleased to create outside himself is the glorification of the Word, eternally generated by the Father within himself, in the ineffable embrace of the Holy Spirit that unites them. 'God made everything by the Word and nothing has been made without him' (John 1:3). He had the right to this universal glorification already from the beginning".* But then, there came the rebellion of angels and the sin of humans. And as God's great merciful love is unlimited, He sent his Son to redeem and save all. *"He lived among us, doing good as He passed by; he died for the salvation of the world; he resurrected by his own power and rose to the heavens in his glory; and at the name of Jesus, victor over death and hell, every knee on earth will bend, and every tongue will sing praise... He was lifted on the cross to draw all things to himself (John 12:12), but there are persons, entire nations, who are not exposed to his divine attraction".*⁶²⁵ It was for this very reason (to tell people this "Good News" and to carry on His mission) that Jesus sent his disciples all over the world.

625 *Sermon pour l'Ouvre des Missions Africaines...* African Missions Archives (AMA 2 F 5, 62 - 97) and *Notice sur la Société des Missions Africaines...* Lyon, 1858, pages 37 - 38.

2. The Actual Situation and the Needs of Mission

Bishop Melchior summed up the situation that prevailed in the middle of the 19th century by saying that the apostles and “the uninterrupted chain of their successors” had answered that call, but still apostolic work was not finished. Indeed, evangelisation would go on until the end of time. There were many parts of the world where the message had not yet been heard. Many apostles were needed – people who would follow the example of Jesus “*who did not wish to do violence to our will, nor force Himself on the conscience of nations and individuals... He establishes His kingdom by the sweetness of His word and the merits of His death*”.⁶²⁶ There were also nations who had received the gift of faith. All of these should thank God and the apostles who had been their “spiritual parents”. They were also deeply indebted to their own families and to the pastors who had nourished this faith. But, it was important to realize that this faith could disappear... “*Yes, my brothers and sisters, we all need to be continually evangelized*”. Bishop Melchior then concluded this section by briefly recalling some facts from the history of the missions and the challenges which confronted the missionaries.

3. Personal Experiences

Bishop Melchior spoke about his twelve years in India. “*Forgive me if I speak about myself... and if the memory of those who were my children recurs in my words and, as always moves my heart*”. After recounting several incidents, he went on to explain the reason why he felt that God (who disposes all events) was calling him to leave that mission.

“My departure from India took place in a manner that was incomprehensible to me. Being unable to understand the reason for the divine motions elicited in my soul, it now seems that I am beginning to see the point... I trust that all along it was God’s intention (if I am faithful to the grace He has given to me) to assign me to a more difficult and more arduous work than what was entrusted to me in the midst of

626 *Notice sur la Société des Missions Africaines...* page 39.

the peaceful Hindus... [He continued] One day the Lord allowed to pass before my eyes the different kingdoms of the world, so as to make me consider their spiritual misery. I looked for the most abandoned people in this world and I said: 'Lord, may your hand guide me there; it is there I will go to proclaim your name'. Now I see that apart from the vast regions of Africa, the Lord has envoys on nearly all the surface of the globe. In Africa itself (apart from a few places), there are immense areas where the name of Jesus Christ has never been proclaimed; and in the interior of this vast continent (which is hardly explored and to which we usually refer to as 'the desert') we must presume that there are vast populations. So, I said: 'Lord, why will we not try to carry the flame of Faith to those arid regions?'.⁶²⁷

4. The Need for Help

There was no doubt about the difficulties of the mission which Bishop Melchior was about to undertake. *"The enterprise is difficult, I admit. As collaborators I would need a number of priests who do not shy away from sacrifice, self-denial and the sweet burden of the cross... I also need the sympathy and generous support of the faithful... Even though the Lord wishes that a spirit of detachment may always reign on the work of evangelisation, He has placed it in the hands of the faithful to become the ordinary means of his Providence... In ordinary circumstances, we must not count on miracles".⁶²⁸* There were also other important reasons for helping the work of evangelisation in Africa. For example, there was the matter of justice towards the people there. Bishop Melchior recalled briefly the commercial injustices heaped on Africans by colonial powers (something which he had also witnessed in India). *"We are the heirs of those who rushed into these nations to grab their riches through violence or deceit... exchanging men for cheap trinkets or seizing them for no reason, buying and selling them, without even bothering to find out why they had been enslaved... So, let us not tell any person that we owe them nothing, because the interests of humanity as a whole are*

627 *Notice sur la Société des Missions Africaines...* pages 51 - 55.

628 *Ibidem:* page 67.

*intertwined in such a way that perhaps there are persons truly entitled to our ancestors' inheritance on the other side of the world. Moreover, and very especially, our charity is indebted to everyone. It cannot remain cold and inactive as long as there are poor people on earth, both far away and around us".*⁶²⁹

Bishop Melchior's sermon received an encouraging response. He felt that the faithful in attendance had been attentive and shown interest in the missions. In purely monetary terms, the collection came to 500 francs. It was a beginning...

Melchior returned to France on 10th April 1856. The Marists in Toulon welcomed him and gave him accommodation. Immediately, he met the newly appointed Bishop (Jordany) who received him very well and encouraged him to visit all the parish priests in the city. While doing this, he decided to print the letter of recommendation which he had received from Cardinal Fransoni (the Prefect of "Propaganda Fide").

It was a big shock when news reached Melchior of the death of Cardinal Fransoni on the 20th April 1856.⁶³⁰ He recalled his kindness to him personally and that it was he who had authorized him to be a Founder of a missionary society. He was also aware of his thoughtfulness towards his friend Bishop Luquet, especially after he lost favour with the M.E.P. and with several Roman "Dicastries" (Departments).⁶³¹ On that very same day Bishop

629 *Notice sur la Société des Missions Africaines...* pages 70 - 72.

630 Giacomo Filippo Fransoni was born in Genoa in 1775. Ordained priest in 1807 and Bishop in 1823, he was appointed as Apostolic Nuncio to Portugal (1822-1830). He was then created a Cardinal and made Prefect of the "Congregation of Ecclesiastical Immunity" (1830). He was transferred to "Propaganda Fide" in 1834, where he served until his death (1856) at the age of 81.

631 For example, the Cardinal had involved Bishop Luquet in the creation of "The Society for the Union of all Christians of the East". The Paris branch of this Oriental Society owed its origin to Luquet. With the approval of Pius IX, Bishop Luquet had also been sent to Milan to meet the Archbishop and the Oblates of Saints Ambrose and Charles de Rho to discuss the establishment of a missionary institute. Years later this would become "The Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions". Bishop Luquet was also involved with the Reparation Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. This was a congregation dedicated to Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and to making reparation for the sins of the world. It had been founded in Paris in 1848.

Melchior preached in favour of the Society of African Missions, during which he prayed for the eternal repose of Cardinal Frasoni.

Bishop Melchior now began to organize the tours which he would make around France to seek men and money for the African Missions. He always asked the local bishop's consent. Generally speaking this was given, though some prelates distinguished between preaching and raising funds. Melchior used the mail service to arrange scheduling and adapted his plans in accordance with the replies. Posters were sent ahead of the agreed dates and were displayed at the entrance of churches. These explained the purpose of the visit and collection. One new clause was added in these posters. It was that Bishop Melchior *"also planned to include affiliated lay members in the new society. They could participate in the merits of the works in a special way, if they were prepared to back them with their moral influence, and offer financial support within their possibilities"*.⁶³² Other details gave times and venues for the sermons.

Diocesan Seminaries were of special interest to Bishop Melchior. He kept in touch with the Superiors of these institutions and always spoke to the seminarians when invited to do so. He gladly accepted hospitality at monasteries, houses of bishops, clergy and religious communities. Almost always he visited Convents as he had in mind that, one day, some sisters would be needed in Africa to pay particular attention to women and girls. He also wrote articles for church magazines and for some newspapers. It was an itinerant ministry which called for good organisation and adaptability. Melchior was sometimes tired but never deflated. He kept brief notes about his journeys, the people he met and the size of the collections.⁶³³

The names of towns and parishes which Melchior visited are all recorded... From Toulon on to Hyères, Brignoles, Lorgues and

632 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 383.

633 *Diary 1856 -1859...* Regarding the collections, Melchior described them as either "good, average or disappointing". Occasionally he gave an exact figure.

Marseille. Then on to Dragnuignan, Fréjus, Cannes, the Lérins islands, Grasse, Antibes, Nice, Castellane, Digne, Sisteron, Forcalquier, Monasque, Aix-en-Provence and then back to Marseille. And this was only his first tour of two months! It quickly became clear that Bishop Melchior needed assistance in this work. Father Vian's interest in helping had diminished (mostly due to his ill-health) but his younger brother (Father Emilian) had expressed a wish to join the new Society. Melchior encouraged him and would be happy to receive him when the young priest was ready.

During May 1856, some letters came to Bishop Melchior regarding the African project. Among them was a particularly interesting one from a certain Father Augustine Planque.⁶³⁴ It was dated 23rd May 1856. This priest seemed to be highly motivated. He had read an article in the "*Universe*" newspaper of 23rd March which was written by Bishop Melchior about the most abandoned people in Africa. Father Augustine was immediately interested...

A biographer of Father Planque goes on to state: "*It was almost by accident that Augustine's eyes lit on this announcement. To say that 'he fell for it' would be to forget his Flemish temperament which prevented him from taking such an important decision before giving long consideration to the proposition. But one thing is sure: the article in the 'Universe' was of immediate and lasting interest. His lively faith and the continued presence of God in his everyday life encouraged him to believe that this call was meant for him. All the more so because it applied in every way to his personal situation which was not simple... He was not at his own disposal to leave the North. Paradoxically, the obstacle came from the one who had helped the most in the pursuit of his vocation...*".⁶³⁵

634 Born in Chemy (near Lille) in 1826, he was ordained priest for the Diocese of Cambrai in 1850. In the six years since then, his principal ministry was that of teaching. At the time of writing this letter, he was a Professor of Philosophy at the seminary in the diocese of Arras.

635 Claude-Marie Echallier: *The Fortitude and Faith of an Apostle...* (page 36). This is the English Edition of a work first published in Paris by *Editions Karthala* in 1995. It was translated by Sister Peter Coyle O.L.A. in 1996. OLA Publications, Cork (367 pages).

This “obstacle” was his aunt Augustine-Charlotte Poupart. She was “a woman of ardent faith, strong personality and attentive kindness to all” who ran a haberdashery in the city of Lille.⁶³⁶ Left a wealthy but childless widow, she had noticed the “maturity and alertness” of her young nephew (Augustine) and offered his parents “to let him come to me and I shall take care of everything”. So, at the age of twelve Augustine moved to Lille where he settled into a life that was built around “order, respect for a time-table and reading”. When not at school, the reading materials available in his new home were the *Gospels*, the *Lives of the Saints*, the *Martyrology* and the *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith* (first published in 1826). Aunt Poupart hired a local priest to teach Latin to Augustine. Each day, he served Mass in the local parish. Later on, he would become a priest.

The “obstacle” to Father Planque joining Bishop Melchior in the near future was that his Aunt was now almost ninety years old and depended a lot on her nephew. She also wanted him to be near at hand when her final moments came on this earth. “*Augustine was too attached to her, his debt too great for him ‘not’ to give her the promise she expected. But it was a promise that weighed heavily on him, risking if not compromising his plan, or at least delaying it for a long time*”. He explained all of this in his letter to Bishop Melchior, as well as the attempts which he had made to join other groups (including M.E.P.). “*At first, my Lord, I was not going to tell you all of this... but then I considered it more in keeping with the spirit of simplicity to keep nothing from you*”.⁶³⁷

On receiving the letter, Melchior immediately replied to Father Planque (26th May).⁶³⁸ It was a long, kindly and even enthusiastic letter. “*Perseverance at your present age in your intention of working for the missions seems to me a powerful sign of vocation... I respect your*

636 The city of Lille is situated about 220 kilometres north-northeast of Paris. Today, it is only about 14 kilometres (by road) from the Belgian Frontier.

637 *The Fortitude and Faith of an Apostle...* pages 34 - 35.

638 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 157 -160.

continuing reluctance to leave your country just now... As Providence would have it, in the present state of things I will need priests just like you - ready to set out at a given time, but who would not in fact set out immediately. I would need them at once so that a nucleus of the Society could be definitely formed and on which the Sacred Congregation could count. When the moment comes for you to join, I would invite you to live together with us, until the time of departure. Meanwhile, because of your special circumstances, I give you advance assurance that I would not have you set out as long as the reason holding you back continued to exist. I myself would set out then, with others, and you could come to join me later. In the meantime, you would be of great help to the new-born association... It is important also that the Sacred Congregation become aware that some generous hearts are responding to my call... I would be obliged if you could let me know this and authorise me to give your name to "Propaganda Fide".⁶³⁹

Correspondence between Father Planque and Bishop Melchior during the following months shows that things went smoothly. Further, the initial relationship of openness and respect grew into an excellent personal relationship which was based on sincerity, dedication, trust and affection. Their own futures and the future of the Society of African Missions would be intimately linked.

But now, it was still only the end of May and Melchior was in Marseille. The local bishop, Eugene de Mazenod (Founder of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate) welcomed him and gave him permission to preach on the African project in the Cathedral. *"Just one sermon (especially during Processions time) is a very small thing in a city the size of Marseille. It would require some support from religious people and also some follow-up outside the sermon. I visited some people for that purpose. But I haven't any great hopes of success, as this class of work is not exactly my charism [particular gift]".* The actual sermon took place on the evening of 1st June (as arranged). *"There were few people in the Cathedral. The Processions were not over*

yet and many people who would have come being absent in the country (they say) explains partially the reason for the poor attendance... The collection was good (for the small congregation) and bad (for a city like Marseille)".⁶⁴⁰ Meanwhile, from all sides, came news of floods and the over-flowing of the principal rivers of France. The Rhone especially was causing havoc. Naturally, all thoughts were on helping the people suffering from the floods. As Melchior felt that this disaster would obviously affect his collections (as the needs nearer home would have to get priority) he left for Nimes to visit a friend (Father d'Alzon) who was Vicar General and Founder of the Augustinians of the Assumption. However, he was away for "several days". The Director of his Seminary welcomed him, and after a brief tour of Nimes and its antiquities, Melchior departed to Avignon.

As he journeyed along, Melchior witnessed at first hand the terrible damage which the floods were causing. It led him to decide to stay overnight at the Seminary in Avignon. As there was no immediate prospect of taking up any collections, he would continue on to Lyons the next morning. He did enjoy his stay at the Seminary which was being run by the Saint-Sulpice Fathers. *"There you can breathe the air of order and calm which is one of the characteristics of their seminaries everywhere... They welcomed me amid the discomforts of the inundations which had flooded the ground floor up to six feet in some of the lowest rooms... I was invited to say a few words to the seminarians (which I did). Next morning, I left at 8.00 a.m."*⁶⁴¹

On the evening of Saturday 14th June, Bishop Melchior arrived in Lyons. He stayed with the Marist Fathers. The city itself was still trying to recover from the floods, while the persistent rain was giving rise to a growing anxiety about the harvests. On Monday 16th, Melchior went to the Diocesan Offices where he was informed that His Eminence Cardinal de Bonald had gone to Paris for important

640 *Diary 1856 -1859...* page 36.

641 *Ibidem:* pages 38 - 39.

meetings. However, he did spend some time with officials of “The Works for the Propagation of the Faith” who confirmed that they could support “only Bishops who had a definite territory assigned by the Holy See”.

On 17th June, after celebrating Mass at the Shrine of Notre-Dame de Fourvière, Melchior heard that the Cardinal had returned. He went immediately to talk with him. His Eminence listened carefully to Melchior’s outline of his project for Africa and that he was hoping to have the headquarters and Mother House of the Society of African Missions in Lyons... Afterwards, he noted: “*My work did not seem to arouse any great enthusiasm in his Eminence. As far as I can now see, we will hardly be able to count on the support and protection of the Cardinal Archbishop*”.⁶⁴² Nonetheless, Bishop Melchior decided to press ahead, and with the help of the Bursar of the Marist community, he began to look for a suitable house for his newborn society. “*The big difficulty is: I have no money. And apart from the collections (which cannot resume for some time yet) I have no idea how to get any. Let us hope in the infinite goodness of God’s Providence and his mercy towards the peoples I desire to evangelize*”.⁶⁴³

On 23rd June, Bishop Melchior wrote to the newly created Cardinal Alessandro Barnabo: “*I learn today that the Holy Father has graciously clothed you with the Roman Purple. All the Missions will rejoice. And I, who have had the advantage of talking face to face with you about our ever blessed work, do not want to be the last to join my congratulations to those which you are receiving from the four corners of the universe. We have, moreover, the confidence that the Holy Father is going to give you the Prefecture of ‘Propaganda Fide’. Nobody doubts that, under Your Eminence’s active and enlightened direction, the reign of Jesus Christ will be extended and strengthened in the regions still groaning in the darkness of idolatry. This letter, Eminence, has no other object but to offer my congratulations and*

642 *Diary 1856 -1859...*: page 40.

643 *Ibidem*: page 41.

best wishes. In a few days time, I hope to write giving you some details about my undertaking for the evangelisation of the most abandoned peoples of Africa".⁶⁴⁴

A few days later, Melchior decided to make a retreat at the Grande Chartreuse monastery near Grenoble.⁶⁴⁵ It was a long time since he had made what he called "a proper" one. On 26th June, Melchior was "in the midst of the sons of Saint Bruno... who are so well placed for forgetting the miseries of earth". Having concluded his retreat on 3rd July, he spent the whole day meeting some of the monks privately in their cells. "It was a very edifying experience for me. What peace and calm in those souls, withdrawn from the world, some of them for over thirty years now! What tranquillity! What deep holiness! However, we must not delude ourselves. This would be a dangerous state of life for certain characters and for those who are not centred on this vocation. They could be very unhappy here".⁶⁴⁶ There was one monk Father Jean-Louis (the external confessor) who became deeply interested in the African project. He even persuaded the Superior to give a donation to Melchior. He also stated that he would do some fund-raising in his home region of Savoy.⁶⁴⁷

After a two-day visit to La Salette, Bishop Melchior returned to Grenoble on 9th July. The local Bishop had invited him to speak to the seminarians. Afterwards "eight or ten" students came to see him. Melchior thought that perhaps four of them were well-rooted in their vocation to priesthood and maybe two had missionary

644 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* page 161.

645 The Grande Chartreuse is the Mother House of the "Carthusian" Order (established in 1084). It is situated in the hills north of the city of Grenoble, a city South-East of Lyons. The distance between the two cities today (by road) is about 110 kilometres.

646 *Diary 1856 -1859...* page 42.

647 But there was also to be a long-term result from this visit of Bishop Melchior. Both the Carthusians and the Society of African Missions developed their links of friendship from that day in June 1856. This took official form by an Act in 1889. This stated that the two institutions for ever held in common their "spiritual goods". (*African Missions Archives* (AMA 48/4-11/031 1899).

vocations. He encouraged all of them to pray for a deepening of their faith, hope and charity.

On the evening of 10th July, Bishop Melchior was back in Lyons and stayed again with the Marist Fathers. There he found a letter from Father Planque (dated 3rd July) which stated that he was making good progress regarding the “obstacles” which he had previously mentioned to Melchior. He would be ready to join him “soon” in Lyons. This was great news! Also, the Cardinal Archbishop of Lyons was “*beginning to take an interest in my work and has invited me to preside at the closing of the diocesan priests’ retreat... It will be good for your work’ he said*”.⁶⁴⁸ Melchior was happy to accept this invitation.

Bishop Melchior had been trying to find a house in Lyons for some time. Now it was a matter of urgency. “*A lot of plans and possibilities failed to work out in practice. But at last I decided on a small enclosure with two little houses on the Sainte Foy road, belonging to the Carmelite Ladies. It is not a simple matter to purchase any piece of land, however tiny! What a lot of words it takes, proposals and counter-proposals etc. At long last we came to an agreement for 34,000 francs, payable in several instalments. But the house will not be free until 31st October. The deal was concluded on 29th July 1856*”.⁶⁴⁹ As a first instalment, Melchior was only able to pay 3,000 francs.

The *Gazette de Lyon* (a Catholic journal) in its issue of 29th July announced that the Society of African Missions had settled in the city. “*Monsignor the Bishop of Prusa, who has lived in Lyons for some time, is working on the foundation of a society that will carry the torch of faith to the heart of Africa. The house he acquired on the hill of Sainte Foy is destined to become a mine of workers for this task, which is difficult but very appropriate - to inflame the zeal of those who embark on it*”.⁶⁵⁰

648 *Diary 1856 -1859...* page 45.

649 *Ibidem*.

650 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 391.

Melchior's reply to Father Planque (dated 14th July) was very upbeat. He mentioned that, at the time of writing, a deal on the new house was agreed and was just awaiting signatures. Melchior would be ready to welcome him in Lyons "*before the end of the summer holidays... Indeed, I would like you to let me know now what time you could come in case the business gets finished within a few days... I ask you to pray a lot to the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph, the great provider of those who are in need. If he gets us some good amount for our future dwelling, he will be doing a great favour to our new-born work*".⁶⁵¹

For several months, Bishop Melchior had been reflecting on composing a brief text of *Fundamental Articles* which could "be a basis for the Society of African Missions" if they were approved by the Sacred Congregation of "Propaganda Fide". As it was now time to update Cardinal Prefect Barnabo on all that had been happening, he finalized a document of thirteen *Fundamental Articles*.

Other reasons for having such a document was that Melchior was now confident that "aspirants" would soon be coming to Lyons, and for the many Bishops and new contacts which were being made throughout France and elsewhere, it would be a useful "handout".⁶⁵²

The Fundamental Articles of 1856

1. *"The Society of African Missions has for its principal aim the evangelisation of the countries of Africa which have most need of missionaries.*
2. *It places itself under the protection of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda, to whose authority it will always remain perfectly obedient as being the official voice of the decisions of the Sovereign Pontiff for everything concerning the missions.*

651 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 162 -163.

652 Melchior did not consider this document to be a definitive text. Within two years, he would make some additions and minor changes as he (and his helpers) gained further experience. Hopefully, when that time came, "Propaganda Fide" would give its full approval.

3. *It will accept no mission except in conformity with the wishes of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda. Conversely, it will try to make itself capable of responding to these wishes for any point whatever in Africa, however uncompromising or difficult be the mission to be confided to it. It will constantly work to prepare ways for penetrating into the places where there are no missionaries; and when it believes that the time is ripe for an attempt to be made, it will inform the Sacred Congregation in order to obtain authorisation to put it into execution. Finally, on the express wish, never sought, of the Sacred Congregation, it can accept missions outside Africa, provided it would be to peoples of colour.*

4. *The Society being essentially secular, a member will not take vows. Later it will be considered whether it would be advantageous to have an oath of perseverance taken after a year's probation in the mother house, or after some years on the missions. For the moment, he will just make a solemn Resolution to persevere in the Society to the end of his days, considering it his greatest merit to die at the work, either on the missions or at their service in Europe.*

5. *The association will comprise the Superior General, local superiors, councillors, other priest confreres and lay brothers. The government structure of the Society will be detailed later. In the meantime, Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac shall be considered the Superior of the association, and the four priests his councillors. Before leaving for Africa, he shall appoint a superior for the house in France.*

6. *To have active and passive voice shall require three years of membership.*

7. *Before being accepted as a member a candidate shall normally spend a year in the house of probation in Europe.*

8. *Wherever several members are together, they shall observe the common life. They can use the revenues from their patrimony according to their own will. But everything they receive, directly or indirectly, from the missions or for the missions, shall be put in a common fund. Superiors*

can require that their subjects apply a certain number of Masses for the needs of the community, but not more than four per week.

9. Superiors shall take care to provide for the needs of the members without neglecting anything necessary, but without deviating from holy apostolic poverty.

10. Members of the association finding themselves in Europe, either by the will of the superiors or in the cases to be foreseen in the Rule, shall not neglect to make themselves useful to the Church and the missions, not only by prayer but also by works which maintain the apostolic spirit at the heart of the association, for example: orphanages, educating poor children and children to be brought from the missions to be taken home after their schooling. They shall also make themselves useful by preaching, especially in the country towns and villages. All this in accordance with the direction of the superiors.

11. Lay brothers shall, as far as possible, exercise a skill or a trade, so as to be capable of teaching poor children and young Africans, either in Europe or in establishments on the missions.

12. The sinew and strength of the Society is concord in perfect charity, and obedience to those placed in charge to direct rather than govern their confreres. Therefore, even if an aspirant has all other qualifications, he shall not be incorporated in the association if he is seen to have a spirit of independence in him, or a marked reluctance to adapt to characters different to his own.

13. After eight or ten years of existence, a detailed Rule shall be drawn up and submitted for the approval of the Holy See.⁶⁵³

In his long letter to Cardinal Barnabo, Bishop Melchior described all the initiatives, preaching, work and problems since his previous communication exactly three months earlier. He enclosed (in a separate text) the *Fundamental Articles*. Further, he was now able to give His Eminence the names of those whom he hoped would

653 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 169 -172.

soon join him in Lyons and become the first members of the Society of African Missions. *“We will all live in community until the day of departure and together we will lay the foundations of the Society. The names are*

- *Father A. Planque, a priest, at present professor of Philosophy at the Arras Seminary.*
- *Rev Girerd, a deacon. The Directors of the seminary where he still is (though he has finished his theology) have given me the best of reports about him.*
- *Rev. Noché and Rev. Faure (sub-deacons).*
- *Rev. Brissaud (minor orders). The same remarks for these young clerics as for Rev. Girerd; only Rev. Brissaud has not yet finished his theological studies.*
- *Mr. Paul Nicol (layman) and Mr. Joseph Richard (layman). These two could be lay brothers”.*⁶⁵⁴

Melchior goes on to point out that he did not expect all to stay; but *“what is certain above all is that, as soon as four or five of us have come together - once the Society has a domicile and the work becomes known - many generous clerics will join us, especially when they know that a definite mission has been confided to us”.*⁶⁵⁵

The idea of having “a definite mission” is what was clearly on Melchior’s mind at this particular time. Much of his letter is given to this topic. He had again consulted Mr. Regis and others who would welcome them to Dahomey and give them support. Bishops in France and Seminary Directors were advising possible candidates to be cautious because the new missionary society had not received a “territory” in Africa from “Propaganda Fide”. So, it was urgent that his Eminence *“who is the providential instrument of God’s providence and mercy, would graciously hasten that moment for*

654 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 165 - 166.

655 *Ibidem:* page 166.

the salvation of some chosen ones".⁶⁵⁶

Referring briefly to the *Fundamental Articles*, Melchior recognises that "*it would be difficult and perhaps impossible, just now to formulate detailed regulations for the Society of African Missions. Nevertheless we are going to have to follow a common rule (at least provisional) from the start. We have therefore agreed on a few Fundamental Articles, of which I have the honour to send you a copy. Please examine them, Eminence, and tell us if we can keep to that for the moment. We will accept them with the modifications you may think it useful to make in them*".⁶⁵⁷

On 6th August, Melchior records that he wrote again to "Propaganda Fide". The contents were simply to confirm that all legal matters concerning the purchase of the property in Lyons had been formally completed. He also reiterated "*how greatly it is to be desired that the erection of the Dahomey Mission not be delayed for too long*". This time he sent it by hand, courtesy of his Capuchin friend from Carcassonne (Father Dominique) who was going to the Sacred Congregation on business connected with his own Institute. Melchior asked him to sound out Cardinal Barnabo's intentions on the Society of African Missions.⁶⁵⁸

Also in August, Bishop Melchior received a short letter from a certain Father Reymond. Originally from the diocese of Besançon, he described himself as coming from a poor background, with little means or social standing. Since he was a child, he always wanted to be a missionary and now, at thirty three years of age, the desire still burned in his heart. He had done classical studies and was very interested in natural sciences, as he thought that they could be useful "on the missions". He was ready "*to go to Africa, under your direction and make an attempt at this work. [He added] perhaps the first priests that will be sent to these unknown regions will*

656 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* page 168.

657 *Ibidem*: page 166.

658 *Diary 1856 -1859...* page 46.

not be able to achieve their goal, but through their sacrifice, they will take possession of a harvest that their successors will collect”.⁶⁵⁹

Melchior replied immediately and received further details from Father Reymond. After being ordained a Marist priest (“*sub titulo missionis*”: “for the missions”) in Lyons, “*a false accusation forced him to leave that Society in order to avoid a scandal. But he knew he was innocent. There had been an apology afterwards and he had been asked to return to the Society. However, he had not been able to do so, due to deterioration in his health... He had worked as a tutor for a Baroness’ family for some time ... but then had moved to Paris in the hope of fulfilling his missionary vocation. Surprisingly, he had recovered his health, without having to take any medicine. He now realized that he should abandon himself to God’s Providence, instead of looking for human answers... [In his own words, he concluded] “Having got used to a hard life in my youth, I am not afraid of weariness or suffering. There is only one thing I fear: to be found unworthy”*”.⁶⁶⁰

Father Dominique met Cardinal Barnabo on 16th August at “Propaganda Fide”. On the following day, he wrote to his friend Melchior: “*I had the honour of seeing His Eminence... He was quite kind and pleasant. He likes you and appreciates you very sincerely, but he thinks there is maybe too much of the “furia francese”*”.⁶⁶¹ *in you. He will support your work with all his heart, but he wants to see it well established first. He used a comparison to express his thinking and his wish. He wants you to have ‘a square battalion’ of missionaries to ensure replacements and guarantee the continuity of evangelisation in these poor African countries. If new members were not enough to stand in when they were needed, there would be an interruption when death and other reasons would take away the missionaries”*”.⁶⁶²

659 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 402.

660 *Ibidem:* page 403.

661 Italian for “*French vehemence*”... This remark probably irked Melchior as much as that of Father Barran M.E.P. when he had referred to Melchior’s “*Carcassonnian impetuosity*” some years previously.

662 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 405.

Meanwhile, Melchior had begun his second preaching and fundraising tour. He had written to the Bishop of Montpellier, suggesting that he was available to preach on Sunday 10th August. *“The Bishop was very gracious, and so was the Superior of the Major Seminary... The Bishop regretted that it was such an unfavourable time to have a collection as most of the rich people were out in the country... Nevertheless, with my present hope of leaving France before having another chance to come back to his diocese, I thought it better to give the sermon at Montpellier right now... And indeed, the audience was not numerous... But this did not prevent the collection from being ‘relatively’ good. Moreover, the Bishop himself gave a personal contribution of 200 francs”*.⁶⁶³ There followed Breziers, Carcassonne, Castlensaudary, Limoux, Mirepoix, Lassere-de-Monestrol and Toulouse. It was the same story as regards the collections. All were much less than one would expect, due to the fact that all the more wealthy people were away in their country houses.

While at Lassere-de-Monestrol, Bishop Melchior joined a family gathering at the house of his brother Henri. There he spent almost two weeks. *“Besides Henri, his wife and their two children, there were also his father and mother and his sister Bathilde. His other sister Félicie was also there with her husband (Melchior de Ranchin) and their daughter... The Archbishop of Toulouse, who was passing that way, also visited the family”*.⁶⁶⁴

From 19th September, there followed sermons and collections in Toulouse, Lavour, Albi, Castres, Rodez, Villefranche-de-Rouergue, Saint-Geniez, Mende, Marvejols, Langogne, Le Puy, Yssingeaux and Monistrol. Bishop Melchior was accompanied by Father Alba from Carcassonne who had shown some interest in the missions. In addition to preaching and collecting money, Melchior visited Father de Gelis’s family (his friend and colleague in Coimbatore) where that priest’s mother especially was delighted to have an update

663 *Diary 1856 -1859...* pages 46 - 47.

664 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 397.

on her son's welfare. As he was leaving the house, she gave Melchior 300 francs for the African Missions. He called at the convent in Castres where he hoped to meet the Superior of the Congregation of the Immaculate Conception who had made it known that her Congregation had an interest in Africa. Melchior had hoped that "*the good Sister would be able to give me exact information about the aim of their Institute, and that maybe we could agree on a long-term project for shared action*".⁶⁶⁵ However, the Sister had just left for another house of the Congregation. On the other hand, Melchior was particularly happy with his visit to Mende and Le Puy where he was made especially welcome by both the Bishops and priests. The collections were also good, and he received two small chalices from the priests of Le Puy who seemed very favourable towards the work of the African Missions. Finally, after a few more short stops, Melchior and his new aspirant (Father Alba) arrived in Lyons on the evening of 28th October. They stayed the night at the Marists' house.⁶⁶⁶

On the next day, Melchior went to the Carmelite Sisters to ask if the house was now available. "*Nearly all we needed was still missing. Nevertheless, I moved there in the afternoon with Father Alba and stayed there for good. We had a cold supper and had to deal with some embarrassing circumstances, but nothing that would frighten missionaries. The following day, some people brought a few necessary items and we began organising our household*". The Bishop then paid 10,000 francs to the Sisters, which (in addition to the 3,000 deposit) brought the total paid to 13,000 francs. There remained a debt of 21,000 francs.⁶⁶⁷

Bishop Melchior next met with the Cardinal Archbishop. While His Eminence still remained reserved about Melchior's work, he granted him all the necessary permissions for the opening of

665 *Diary 1856-1859...* pages 51 - 52.

666 *Ibidem*: pages 54 - 55.

667 *Ibidem*: page 55.

the new house. However, there were no collections allowed in the Archdiocese at the time due to the “difficult situation” of the people. “*The official clergy take the same line as the Archbishop, except for the Superior of the Major Seminary, who continues to be very kind. The rest of the clergy in Lyons (though I do not know them very well) seem to be very favourable towards my work. The Pontifical Works Society here also appears to be ‘understanding’ us better and better each day*”.⁶⁶⁸

On 7th November, Father Augustine Planque arrived at the African Missions’ House in Lyons. Melchior records the fact in two lines of his Diary, commenting simply: “*My first impressions on meeting him have been most favourable*”.⁶⁶⁹

On 12th November, Bishop Melchior again wrote to Cardinal Barnabo. In this letter he gave a detailed financial report (including a new development which had enabled him to benefit from a part of his own patrimony). This now resulted in him owing the Carmelite Sisters just 10,000 francs, and he had five years to pay this). “*It will be very easy to pay this, once you will have definitively assigned us the Dahomey Mission. For the rest, I hope to make a few more collections before setting out, and to leave no debt on the establishment... The Propagation of the Faith here are now more than willing to help me with more than good wishes, but they cannot do so until a Mission is confided to us. Then they can put the name of that Mission into their Annals. You can imagine, Eminence, how anxious I am that they come to our aid soon, because the ten aspirants who are going to be entirely my financial responsibility, could become an awkward burden on me if I am not helped by the Propagation of the Faith. All the more so, as the Directors of the Paris Foreign Missions have written saying that, as I am now in the process of forming a Congregation, they feel they are no longer bound to pay me the pension they have been giving me up to this... As I place a lot of store in maintaining good relations, I will not*

668 *Diary 1856-1859...*

669 *Ibidem*: page 56.

*dispute this... as it is important for the common good of our work and for public edification... ”*⁶⁷⁰

Other points made in this letter included the reluctance of Bishops to release their clerics and students to Bishop Melchior because no mission had been formally entrusted to him. Neither could he solicit support, protection and perhaps finance from the government in Paris for the same reason. Melchior also recalled that it was the Prefect himself, when he was a Monsignor in “Propaganda Fide”, who had given life to the Society of African Missions. Melchior had gone to Rome only to request the Dahomey Mission for himself and two or three evangelising workers. *“It was you who expressed to me the idea that it would be much better to found a Society of missionaries to be at the service of ‘Propaganda Fide’ for Dahomey and the most abandoned countries of Africa. I was terrified at this proposal; but still I accepted it with some hope... Today, the reality exceeds my expectations: we have a house; we have the support of the clergy everywhere I have been able to make my work sufficiently known; we have an assurance of help from the Works for the Propagation of the Faith; we have eight or ten very well disposed candidates, among whom four or five are ready to leave in a few months and the prospect of numerous vocations to nourish our central house in Lyons. The only thing we still need is to get official permission to call ourselves the Dahomey missionaries ”*⁶⁷¹

Melchior concluded the letter by stating that Mr. Regis had recently assured him that Sisters also could establish themselves in Ouidah (Dahomey). In fact, some Sisters had already expressed their interest to Bishop Melchior as he went around France. However, he preferred to study the possibility in the field itself, before making any recommendation to the Sacred Congregation.

670 *Mission and Foundation Documents...*pages 177 - 181. On the point of Melchior's pension from the M.E.P., it was later allocated to him until 30th April 1858. *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2 F 18 and 2 F 5, page 125).

671 *Ibidem*: page 180.

On 16th November, Father Louis Reymond arrived at the new house in Saint Irenaeus' Parish, Lyons. Bishop Melchior, who had made all the necessary enquires and had received letters of recommendation, welcomed him. But disappointing news also came about the same time. The clerics from Grenoble were not coming because the Bishop had withheld his permission, at least for the time being.

So now, as the month of November came to an end, the house was becoming more like a home for the small community of aspiring missionaries. As Melchior always wished to dedicate the work of the African Missions to Mary at an important shrine in France, the ideal day and place presented themselves on the 8th December 1856.

Official Birth of the Society of African Missions (SMA)

The small group of African Missionaries dedicated their lives to the work of the missions at the Shrine of "Our Lady of Fourvière" (which overlooks the city of Lyons) on 8th December 1856.⁶⁷² The Founder did not speak of this in his *Diary* or indicate the names of the participants. Neither do we know the details of this ceremony.

However, we do know that the ceremony actually took place. The *Gazette de Lyon* published the following note on 9th December 1856: "*In the midst of the compact crowd of clergy and faithful that hurried yesterday to the shrine of Notre-Dame de Fourvière, we spotted the members of the African Missions. Bishop de Marion Brésillac, founder of this institution, celebrated the Mass at 8 o'clock. His Lordship was assisted by two priests, three young clerics and a lay Brother who have joined him in the great enterprise which they are placing under the Virgin's protection. We are sure that such an interesting and French work will be protected and blessed by Heaven*".⁶⁷³

672 "The church in which they stood had been built upon an ancient shrine of Our Lady, on the 'Forum Vetus', the old forum of Trajan, where many early Christians had been martyred". (For This Cause... page 199).

673 De Marion Brésillac... page 408.

Five days later (13th December), Bishop de Brésillac wrote to Cardinal Barnabo as follows: *“Although I have not yet received a reply to the letter I had the honour of writing to you about one month ago, I think that it would be good to let you know that on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, seven of us offered our enterprise to the Blessed Virgin, at her venerated image on the hill of Fourviere. There we renewed our resolution to devote ourselves entirely to the work of the African Missions. And, we desire, if the Sacred Congregation so permits, to date the existence of our Society from the 8th December 1856...”* [The Founder then goes on to state] *“At the moment, I have two priests with me, three young clerics and a brother. Another has been received already, a sub-deacon from the Lyons Seminary. The Cardinal Archbishop gave him permission yesterday. He is to receive the Diaconate on Saturday and enter here on the following Monday. The three Deacons from Grenoble are not with us yet. They are still waiting for the permission of their Bishop, but that is all they need. Others have also offered themselves”*.⁶⁷⁴

From these sources, one can conclude that the seven who made their commitment on 8th December 1856 were: Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac, Fathers Planque and Reymond. The three young “clerics” were Fathers Alba, Genin and Garnier (or Regis)⁶⁷⁵ and the brother was Jean-Baptiste.

A letter did arrive from Cardinal Barnabo (dated 4th December 1856).⁶⁷⁶ It was brief. The Cardinal was pleased to hear of the developments but added: *“I would like you to take care of bringing to*

674 *Letter to Cardinal Barnabo... 13th December 1856. Archives of Propaganda Fide (APF, Congressi Etiopia, Arabia, Vol. 5, 1848 - 1857, 1166 ff.). Copy in African Missions Archives (AMA 2 C 19, 19 - 20).*

675 During the month of December, Bishop de Brésillac spoke of the presence of a Reverend Regis and a Reverend Garnier in the SMA house. (Letters to Father Planque: *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 185-187). It is unclear which of these men made the solemn promise on 8th December 1856. Father Genin had been recommended “by three Dominican priests, his parish priest and a Dominican Reverend Mother (*Diary 1856 - 59...* page 56). The Father Regis referred to was not a relative of Mr. Regis (the businessman who had agreed to help the new Society in Dahomey).

676 Obviously, the letters from Bishop Melchior and Cardinal Barnabo had crossed in the mail.

completion and strengthening the foundation of the society of priests that you have undertaken". As regards the allocation of a new mission in Dahomey, he still awaited an answer from Bishop Bessieux (Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas) who lived in Libreville, Gabon. The Congregation had written to him the previous January.⁶⁷⁷ Finally, His Eminence stated that the letter from "Propaganda Fide", signed by the late Cardinal Fransoni on 29th February 1856, was sufficient to elicit a favourable response from the French Bishops. He made no reference to the *Fundamental Articles*.⁶⁷⁸

As the year 1856 was coming to a close, Melchior reflected on how the Lord had blessed him and the new Society in many ways. However, this was not a time for inaction. With his customary passion and astonishing energy, he set out again on 19th December to preach and collect funds. He left "the impressive" Father Planque in charge at the Mother House but took Father Reymond ("a man gifted with very remarkable qualities") with him.

Melchior preached at Dijon Cathedral on Sunday 20th December and took up a "good" collection. On Christmas Eve, Bishop Melchior officiated at midnight Mass at Sens. On the next day (Saint Stephen's Day) he preached there... The collection was "somewhat disappointing". On 27th December, he left for Paris (with Father Reymond) where they were very well received by M. and Madame Blanchet and family.⁶⁷⁹

677 Jean-Remi Bessieux was born in 1803 and was ordained priest in Albi in 1829. He entered the novitiate of Father Libermann in 1842 and departed for Africa in 1843. He became Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas in 1848 and died in Gabon in 1876.

678 *Letter from Propaganda Fide... African Missions Archives (AMA 2 F 13, Number 33)*. 4th December 1856.

679 *Diary 1856 -1859....* page 57.



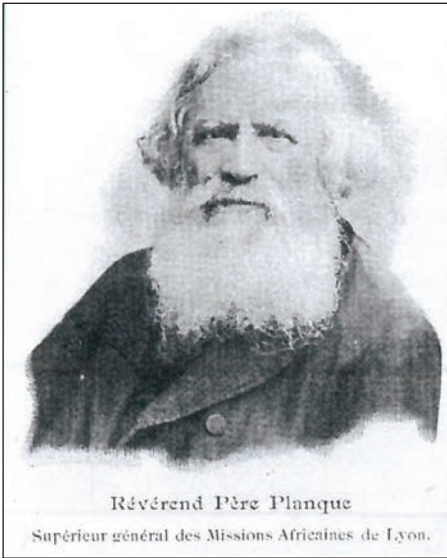
Pius IX

7.1



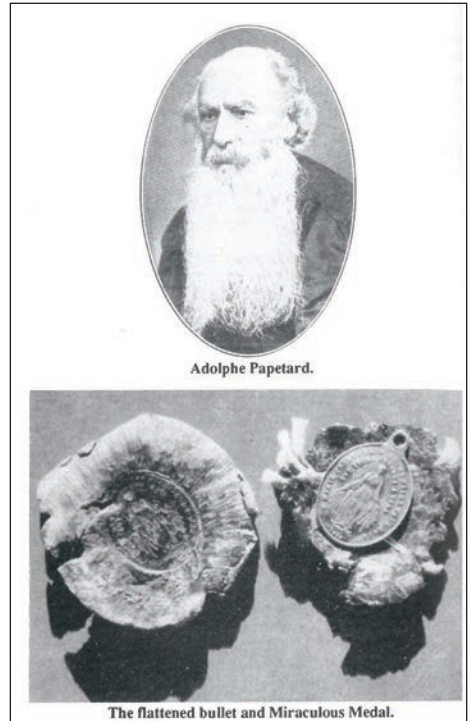
Cardinal Alexander Barnabò.

7.2



Révérend Père Planque
Supérieur général des Missions Africaines de Lyon.

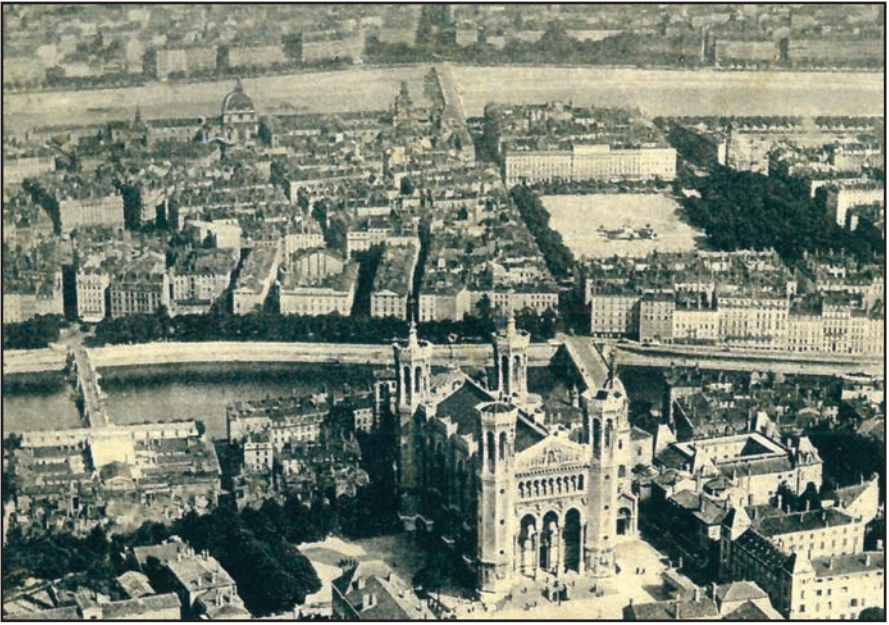
7.3



Adolphe Papetard.

The flattened bullet and Miraculous Medal.

7.4



7.5 Notre Dame de Fourvière, Lyon



7.7 Sainte Foi – Sainte Irénée, Lyon
(First Society House and Seminary)

Chapter Nineteen

Building

1857

On the 1st January 1857, Bishop Melchior sent New Year greetings and words of encouragement to Father Planque at Lyons. This was the first of five letters which the Founder wrote to him during the month of January 1857.⁶⁸⁰ The young Fathers Regis and Garnier were already showing signs that they were “*not meant for us...* [The Founder goes on to state] *It matters little that we should be numerous from the start. What we need is none but devoted men... Let us take care not to be discouraged. These are the trials of the present moment... Let us pray and keep firm. Above all, let us be faithful to grace*”.⁶⁸¹ On the other hand, the young Deacon from Lyons (Rev. Riocreux) who had joined just before Christmas was “settling in well”. Bishop Melchior hoped that he would not be scared by the probable departure of Fathers Regis and Garnier.

On the other hand, the month of January (1857) would prove to be very significant as regards the financial aspects of the work. In a letter (dated 17th January) the Founder was able to inform Father Planque that he would receive the sum of 5,500 francs from his own brother-in-law (Mr. de Ranchin). He requested that this be given at once to the Carmelite Sisters. He also asked Father Planque to send him a receipt at Paris, so that he could give it to his family. In this letter, Bishop Melchior also wrote: “*I thank Heaven for giving you the spirit of our work in a very high degree. Without you, I would still be asking myself whether the Lord wills the success of my enterprise. But even if all the rest went badly, provided only that God in His goodness gives you and me the spirit of patience and perseverance, then sooner or later we shall eventually manage to*

680 *Mission and Foundation Documents ...* pages 185 - 192.

681 *Ibidem*: page 187.

*create some new Mission in Africa, which is something well worth the life of a man”.*⁶⁸²

It was about this time that a second priest arrived. He, with Father Planque, was to become instrumental in establishing the Society of African Missions. His name was Father Adolf Papetard. This priest had an unusual background. It has been summarized as follows: *“Born in June 1808, the son of a colonel, he followed his father’s career and distinguished himself in the North African campaign, being decorated with the Legion of Honour. Although a Catholic, he shared in the fashionable indifference, but in order to please his pious mother, he carried on his person a Miraculous Medal. While leading an attack at the siege of Constantine, he was struck in the chest by a bullet and fell unconscious. He revived, however, and it was discovered that the bullet had pierced his uniform but had been stopped by the miraculous medal; imprinted in relief on the flattened top of the bullet was the image of Our Lady. Thanking his lucky stars, Captain Papetard put the bullet in his pocket and went on with the siege. The campaign over, he returned to Paris... Out walking one day, he took shelter from the rain in the porch of Our Lady of Victories. Many people were going inside, and feeling conspicuous standing there he went in with them and listened to a sermon on the favours granted by Our Lady through the Miraculous Medal. After the sermon, Papetard told the priest of his experience at the siege of Constantine and showed him the bullet. The conversation concluded with him going to confession. It was a turning point in his life. He resigned from the army and at the age of thirty three, he went to study for the priesthood in Rome and was ordained in 1845”.*⁶⁸³ After some time, Father Papetard was sent to assist Father Desgenettes (the one whose sermon had “changed” him) at the Shrine of Our Lady of Victories in Paris.

Father Papetard was one of the faithful present at Bishop Melchior’s inaugural sermon in Rome (25th March 1856). He was attracted

682 *Mission and Foundation Documents ...* page 192.

683 *For This Cause...* pages 201 - 203.

by the “African project” and wished to help in some way... *“It seems that God has given him the gift of raising money. I had met him in Rome and I had hoped that he would help. But he had already promised to work for the Bishop of Nesqually [present-day Seattle, U.S.A.]. Within a short time, he had sent off more than 50,000 francs collected in Germany, Holland and Belgium. He had then decided that it was enough for Nesqually... I had lost touch with him when, just the other day, I received a letter from him offering his services. And today (21st January 1857) he is setting out for the north of Italy. From there, with the help of God, he plans to go through Germany and Poland, and later to the colonies. I have given him letters of recommendation. May God in his goodness bless his zeal and devotedness”*.⁶⁸⁴

Furthermore, Melchior’s friends and gracious hosts (Mrs Blanchet and her daughters) agreed to organize a group of ladies to sponsor and financially support the African Missions. Among the first to join the group was Mrs. Ozanam, the mother of Blessed Antoine-Frederic Ozanam.⁶⁸⁵ Bishop Louis Gaston de Segur, a prelate who had gone blind and who was “the great apostolic and spiritual personality” of his time in Paris, accepted to be the Honorary President of the group and gave it his full support.

In the midst of all these developments regarding the Society of African Missions, the Catholic faithful of Paris were trying to cope with the assassination of their Archbishop Marie Dominique August Sibour (1792-1857). This had happened on 3rd January in the church of Saint Etienne de Mont. A dissident priest (Jean Louis Verger) admitted to the crime. He had always been difficult in the Archdiocese but his latest objection was to the recently defined doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. The trial was an occasion for him to publicize his views but it ended with him being sentenced to death for the murder of his Archbishop. Jean

684 *Diary 1856 -1859...* pages 62 - 63.

685 Antoine Frederic Ozanam was born in Milan in 1813. As a young student, he had founded the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Paris in 1833. He became a University Professor and died in Marseille in 1853 (aged 40). He was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1997.

Louis Verger was executed on 30th January 1857.

One practical outcome of this event was that Bishop Melchior was unable to systematically preach or take up collections throughout the Archdiocese of Paris. However, he did speak at some private functions, for example at the community of the Blessed Sacrament Fathers (founded in 1856) and those of the Oratory of the Immaculate Conception (founded in 1852). Bishop Melchior also made contact with the Superiors of the Paris Foreign Missions and met with four of them. Melchior describes this meeting as “positively chilly”. However, he did receive some news about India. In a letter from Bishop Bonnand (which was passed on to him) the Prelate told Melchior that the Holy See had requested that all Vicars Apostolic of the Society were to meet in Hong Kong in 1860. Bishop Bonnand had been appointed to make all preparations for the meeting and to coordinate its work. Bishop Melchior wrote at once to Bishop Bonnand: *“I am delighted to know that a meeting of the Vicars Apostolic - for which the biggest stone was cast at me - was finally recognized as necessary. I am positive that, little by little, everything that I suggested for the prosperity of the Society of the Foreign Missions and the development of our holy religion in India will be acknowledged as useful”*.⁶⁸⁶

Bishop Melchior had a useful meeting with the Superior General of the Holy Ghost Fathers (Spiritans). Father Schwindenhammer informed Melchior about Bishop Kobes’ opinion concerning the project in Dahomey. This prelate suggested that *“it would be better if Bishop de Brésillac went to Sierra Leone, and that he should have religious missionaries to carry out a solid work”*.⁶⁸⁷ When Bishop Kobes eventually replied to the letter of the previous January from “Propaganda Fide”, he expressed that same opinion. *“According to me, the mission of Sierra Leone would be the most interesting and the easiest place to begin. I get several requests for missionaries from this*

686 *Letter to Bishop Bonnand...* Archives of Paris Foreign Missions (AMEP Vol. 1000 P, 975 - 982).

687 *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2 F 8, 931).

colony every day. I have just received a new appeal from the Consul of Spain and Portugal residing there".⁶⁸⁸

On 3rd February, Bishop Melchior briefly acknowledged a letter from a Father Bresson from Autun who wished to become a missionary. He decided to follow up on this, after he had fulfilled an "important engagement". This was an audience with the Emperor Napoleon III. The Emperor was most kind and listened attentively to Melchior's requests. However, Melchior's hopes of assistance from the Emperor were soon dashed. On 5th February, the Emperor wrote, assuring Melchior of his keen interest in his work but regretting that he was not in a position to give any financial help. "*When it requires extraordinary expense, I cannot personally come to its aid. Besides, the many calls of this nature from various parts of France oblige me to divide with equity the funds at my disposal. I am genuinely sorry, then, and pray God to keep you and your work under his protection*".⁶⁸⁹

Bishop Melchior felt that he could achieve little more by staying in Paris. In fact, he was somewhat disappointed with the financial results and especially with the inability of the Vicars General to agree to a formal, official charity sermon. So, with Father Reymond, he decided to return to Lyons, via Toulouse. At Pamiers, he officiated at a cousin's wedding and then stayed for a few days with his parents at Castlenaudary. They arrived back in Lyons on 21st February.

At Lyons, Bishop found that "*our men are fairly well. Father Planque seems to be animated with the same devotedness... But Father Alba does not look solid, though I am still hoping strongly for him. Father Riocreux, whom I hardly knew at all up to now, impresses and pleases me. Father Reymond, whom I had with me all this last trip, is a man on whom I can rely*".⁶⁹⁰ During the following weeks, Bishop Melchior and Father Planque drew up and began to implement

688 Archives of Propaganda Fide: APF Congressi, Etiopia, Arabia, 1848 -1857. Volume 5, 1060 -1061.

689 *For This Cause...* page 203.

690 *Diary 1856 -1859...* page 63.

a clear policy on the recruitment, screening and formation of aspirants at the house of the African Missions. *“Generally speaking, the Founder was not interested in big numbers, but in the quality of the future missionaries - even though the Society was just beginning and in spite of the need to present ‘Propaganda Fide’ with a solid society. For that reason, he tried to inquire about the people knocking at his door, to know them personally and to exclude those without deep vocational motivation”*.⁶⁹¹ In this spirit, and as an example of this “screening” policy, Melchior had written to his own former Superior at the Carcassonne Minor Seminary (Father Arnal), inquiring about Father Alba’s ministry. It appeared that he had been *“knocking at several doors”* since he had left that seminary. The Founder also got in touch again with two other priests who had expressed interest in joining the Society of African Missions. One of them (Father Bresson) confirmed his desire to become a missionary. Further information from the Superior of the Major Seminary in Autun was positive. This priest was experienced and, though aged 42, Melchior decided to admit him.

Further points regarding the “formation policy” were elaborated. Conferences or “other formative interventions” given by the formators should be kept brief enough so as to hold the interest of the pupils. Also, patience and kindness were necessary in smoothing out differences and in dealing with what is imperfect. Liturgical singing was also important, and all members in the community must be encouraged to participate. The Daily Rule would give details regarding times for the Eucharist, prayer, work, meals, study and recreation. A yearly retreat was also part of the programme in the house.

On 3rd March, Bishop Melchior decided that it was time to write another report for Cardinal Barnabo. He began: *“The last letter I had the honour of receiving from the Sacred Congregation was No.5 of 4th December 1856. Our work is going from strength to strength. And*

691 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 419.

now it cannot but succeed provided we are faithful to grace. This you will help us to do, Eminence, by your goodwill and kindly direction".⁶⁹² He then goes on to give a full financial report on the state of the Society of African Missions and an update from Mr. Regis on the dispositions of the King and people of Dahomey which "could not be more favourable to our project". Melchior then states: "Allow me to remind you, Eminence, how much it is to be desired, for the full success of our enterprise, that a Mission be assigned to us soon, even if we have to stay in France some time longer before actually setting out, if you judge it proper. It would double our strength and inspire greater confidence in those who are interested in our work, in the young clerics wishing to join us, and in those already with us. We feel the need for this so strongly, Eminence, that if there were obstacles in assigning us the Dahomey Mission very soon, we would pray you assign us another in one of the places of Africa where the need for missionaries is most strongly felt, while still keeping free to give us charge of Dahomey later on if you wish. Still, we would prefer Dahomey before all if possible, because that was the first place we set our sights on, and because it is becoming more and more clearly desirable that there should be no delay on evangelising that country".⁶⁹³

On 8th March 1857, Bishop Melchior records: "Today, Father Bresson arrived. He has just left his parish to join us. He is from the diocese of Autun".⁶⁹⁴

As a resource for missionary animation in France, Melchior prepared a "Report on the Present State of the African Missions Work", which he planned to distribute widely. He outlined the urgent need for missionaries to preach the Gospel in Africa in response to the command of Jesus Christ. There were also other reasons for engaging in this work. These included the rising influence of Islam among the indigenous people of Africa, the growing presence of powerful companies in Africa who would

692 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 193 -196.

693 *Ibidem*: page 194.

694 *Diary 1856-1859...* page 64.

undoubtedly exploit the local population and the fact that existing missionary and religious congregations were overstretched and not always able to open new missions. While a missionary society dedicated to the most abandoned peoples of Africa could not solve all the problems in such a huge continent, it would at least fill part of the gap and answer some of the needs of a new, emerging Africa. *“Summing up, the work of the African Missions is an answer to a need of the times. We will surely find devoted missionaries. A number of men have already joined; others are volunteering but we have to ask them to wait due to a lack of resources... The work of the African missions is founded; it will certainly follow the development that God wishes, depending how we correspond to His grace”*.⁶⁹⁵

On 28th April, Bishop Melchior wrote again to Cardinal Barnabo: *“I come in all simplicity to ask you for some sign of encouragement. I ask above all, Eminence, on behalf of the worthy priests who are with me. For in spite of the fact that they are persevering in their good intention of sacrificing their lives for the evangelisation of the most abandoned peoples of Africa, I can see that the continued silence of the Sacred Congregation in leaving my last two letters without a reply, is causing them a certain anxiety. A letter assuring us that, either in Dahomey or somewhere else, a Mission will be confided to us soon, would renew their courage by reassuring them about their future. We would see many other clerics finally joining us who are now stopped by the consideration that nothing is yet fixed about our starting off, neither the place nor the time”*.⁶⁹⁶

On 30th April, Bishop Melchior left Lyons with Father Reymond on another tour of preaching and fundraising. During the month of May, they visited fifteen localities in West-Central France. Melchior briefly records the varying expressions of welcome which they received from bishops, priests, religious and faithful, as well as

695 De Marion Brésillac: *Exposé de l'état actuel de l'oeuvre des Missions Africaines...* Printed by Girard et Josserand, Lyon, 1857. 4 pages. Published in *Gazette de Lyon* (25th April 1857) and in *“L'Univers”* (26th April 1857).

696 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 197 - 198.

the response to the sermons and the amounts collected.⁶⁹⁷

On 1st June, Melchior and Father Reymond arrived in Paris and stayed again at the Blanchet's home. This family was always very welcoming and proved to be a big help to Bishop Melchior, not only financially but in many other ways. In her *Memoirs*, Miss Blanchet states: "*When in Paris, Monsignor used to stay at my parents' place (31 Rue de Londres). From there he went out to the neighbouring dioceses and came back. There we came to know him in the closeness of family life. He usually celebrated Mass at the Holy Trinity parish, and would often be invited to various other churches. He spent his time in Paris doing business and making contacts in favour of his project... His time was really full, not free from problems and trouble, but his patience and kindness remained constant... We used to meet around the family table each evening. Each of us would narrate how the day had gone. Monsignor was usually the first to speak. He took an interest in everything that interested us and his conversation was bright and cheerful more often than not... He used to play a hand of piquet with my father, while we worked around the table. Father Reymond, his secretary, would be kneeling at the corner of the table, carving a piece of wood with his knife, making a lovely water-font or something like that, for he was a real artist... Monsignor was nice and kind, simple and fun during our family gatherings, following the children when they played, even joining the young in their little games, always keeping his dignity with a mild serenity that nothing could disturb. That is how he won every heart... His own heart was very sensitive to others. For the good, he was very grateful; for the unpleasant (after calling for 'holy patience') he would not speak about it again. After a kind word he would give advice and he would draw a moral after telling a story... He was very responsive to courteous behaviour and always grateful for any little courtesy done to him*".⁶⁹⁸

Towards the end of June, Bishop Melchior received a letter from

697 *Diary 1856-1859...* pages 64 - 69.

698 Miss Blanchet: *Souvenirs de 1856 a 1859... African Missions Archives* (AMA 2 F 8, 865 - 870); and *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 277 - 280 (footnotes).

Cardinal Wiseman of England (dated 11th June). This was in reply to a request which he had made for permission to preach and take up collections in England. His Eminence regretted the fact that *“every Sunday is already taken up with some appeal. Next Sunday I am preaching on behalf of Father Carron’s orphanage, and the curate or Father Lavigne will preach in French in the Jesuit church. On the following Sunday, it is forbidden to preach in any church, as this day is reserved for collections for schools for the poor. The field is fully occupied then, and I could not promise that you would have any success”*.⁶⁹⁹ Bishop Melchior would also have liked to join Father Papetard on his proposed visit to Germany. However he felt that there were still sectors in France which at this time would yield more fruitful results. So, he wrote to Father Papetard and asked him to go alone.⁷⁰⁰

Meanwhile, the Rev. Riocreux had been ordained priest in Lyons on 6th June. Bishop Melchior decided that the new priest would benefit from gaining experience in mission animation and promotion. So, he sent Father Reymond back to the house in Lyons from Paris. Father Riocreux would accompany himself on the next trip. This would take them to Brittany and the North-West of France where they would visit seventeen centres.⁷⁰¹ *“Throughout July and into August, he was touring Brittany... The roads were rough, arrangements for his sermons were frequently upset by muddle or dilatoriness, the people were poor and the bishops (though not the parish priests) were frequently uncooperative. Nonetheless, the tour was a success and like many others before and since, he fell in love with the beautiful countryside and its tough, staunchly pious people”*.⁷⁰²

After a brief retreat at the Trappist monastery at la Meilleraye, Melchior and Father Riocreux set out for Angers, on 1st August 1857. They were welcomed by the Superior of the Major Seminary

699 *For This Cause...* page 208.

700 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 200 - 202.

701 *Diary 1856 - 1859...* pages 71 - 79.

702 *For This Cause...* pages 211 - 212.

*“who let us know immediately that I was not going to get authorization to preach in this city. The Bishop was away; but his previous policy towards some missionary bishops made the Superior presume that the Vicars General would not dare to take it on themselves to authorize me. And that is exactly how it turned out”.*⁷⁰³ Then, on to Tours where the Bishop *“did not fully understand the African Missions project”*. However, after some explanations, he seemed touched by what the Founder was aiming to do, and hurriedly arranged a gathering for that same evening. *“I was anxious to make my work known to the clergy... The collection could not be plentiful but it was good only in proportion to the small group around the pulpit”.*⁷⁰⁴

Melchior's plan was to return to Lyons directly from Tours. But two invitations made him change his mind. The Bishop of Soissons strongly encouraged Melchior to attend a major feast in his diocese (the feast of Notre Dame de Liesse). *“The thought that my presence at Liesse could be useful to my work (both because of the protection of the Blessed Virgin, to whom I would commend my work on that solemn day and because of the numerous Bishops whose acquaintance I would make there) forced me to take the road back north”.*⁷⁰⁵

On Monday (4th August) the two missionaries left Tours. They diverted at Orleans to spend a few days with the entire Blanchet family at Les Buissons. This was to honour the invitation of this “wonderful family” who were on holidays at their country house in Sully-sur-Loire.⁷⁰⁶ They received a very warm welcome. *“Young Father Riocreux who accompanied Monsignor still had the looks and gaiety of a child; he engaged in everything and laughed wholeheartedly. Monsignor liked young people and treated the young priest like a playful child”.*⁷⁰⁷

703 *Diary 1856 - 1859...* pages 79 - 80.

704 *Ibidem*: pages 80 - 81.

705 *Ibidem*: page 82.

706 This gathering included Mrs. Blanchet's eldest son (Henri) and his family. The children of a younger son (Jules) were also there.

707 Miss Blanchet: *Souvenirs de 1856 à 1859...* pages 865 - 870.

After four days of relaxation, Bishop Melchior and Father Riocreux set out with renewed vigour for Soissons. Bishop Melchior preached at Noyon (9th August) and participated in various functions on the way (such as the prize-giving at Minor Seminary at Noyon with the Bishop of Beauvais, and a similar function at the Ecclesiastical College of Chauny). They arrived at Soissons on 11th August where they received a “very friendly” welcome. Bishop Melchior preached on Sunday morning (16th August) and in the evening at Laon. Both collections were “poor”. But the visit was worthwhile. On Tuesday, 18th August, both Bishop Melchior and Father Riocreux participated in the grand ceremony of the crowning of Our Lady of Liesse and spoke with “many bishops, priests and faithful”. On the next day, the two missionaries left for Lyons and arrived there on 20th August. *“I saw my small family again with great happiness”*.⁷⁰⁸

On 28th August, Bishop Melchior wrote another letter to Cardinal Barnabo *“to give an account of the state of the work, to insist on the establishment of a Mission in one of the most abandoned places of Africa, especially Dahomey, and to sound out the attitude of the Cardinal about a journey to Rome that I was thinking of making”*.⁷⁰⁹ He noted that there were eight associates in the house at Lyons. *“Among these are four priests who possess very remarkable qualities and who have already spent a long time with me. I can answer for the soundness of their vocations.... [From the financial viewpoint] I have collected 39,500 francs for the foundation of our Seminary. Thus, our establishment in Lyons is completely paid for. And I still have a few thousand francs in case the Propagation of the Faith makes the decision to come to our aid only when we are actually in African countries”*.⁷¹⁰

On this occasion, the Cardinal Prefect of “Propaganda Fide” promptly replied. With his letter dated 12th September 1857, His Eminence included a duplicate of a letter sent by “Propaganda Fide” on the previous 27th April which had never arrived in Lyons. This

708 *Diary 1856 - 1859...* page 83.

709 *Ibidem:* page 83.

710 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 205 - 206.

had contained momentous news. The Cardinal had then explained that, having received advice regarding the Mission of Dahomey, the Congregation had concluded that it was unwise to establish Melchior's requested mission at that time. However, because of Bishop Melchior's zeal and sense of urgency, the Cardinal had let him know the following: *"The Sacred Congregation had decided 'in 1854' to establish an Apostolic Vicariate in Sierra Leone, going from the Nunez River to the Republic of Liberia, if one of the Religious Orders accepted it".* But now, in 1857, no one had come forward. *"I would now like to tell you that you can easily fulfil your desires if you go there, which would be of great advantage for those tribes who have been urgently demanding Catholic missionaries for a long time".*⁷¹¹

The following is the full text of Bishop Melchior's acknowledgement (dated 25th September 1857): *"Two days ago, I received your letter of 12th of this month, along with the duplicate of your letter (which had not previously arrived). Immediately, Eminence, I shared them with my associates. And I am glad to tell you that, unanimously, they got into the spirit which will, I hope, always animate our Society, by instantly letting go of the desire we had of starting our work in Dahomey, in order to go along, purely and simply, with the views of the Sacred Congregation. We will therefore accept, with joy, the Mission of Sierra Leone. And we are confident that you will aid us, Eminence, to obtain from Almighty God the grace of doing some good there in the extension of the reign of Christ, the salvation of souls and our own sanctification".*⁷¹²

Bishop Melchior also sent another letter requesting information about Sierra Leone, in order to prepare for this Mission. *"I feel that this is difficult to do by letter. A conversation with Your Eminence and the Secretary of 'Propaganda Fide' would be much more useful. So, I am hoping to journey to Rome for that, as well as for finalizing the structure of our Society with Your Eminence. However, unless Your*

711 *African Missions Archives ...* (AMA 2 F 13. Numbers 34 and 36).

712 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 207 - 208.

Eminence thinks otherwise, I would prefer to wait until the business of erecting the Vicariate of Sierra Leone is concluded. In the meantime, we could usefully employ our time in learning the English or Portugese language, if they are indispensable, and in preparing for our future mission in other ways. We would be grateful, Eminence, if you would please let us know:

- *About what is the number of Catholics at present in the country?*
- *Any native Catholics? Do they speak English or Portugese?*
- *Do you think that all the missionaries should know English, or only a few because of the stations?*
- *Is there any Catholic Church there?*
- *At what point should we first land, Freetown or Monrovia?*

*I would be afraid of abusing your kindness, Eminence, if I were to make a longer list of questions. So, I stop here”.*⁷¹³

On 26th September, Bishop Melchior wrote to the Bishop of Grenoble informing him of this new development and requesting that he now kindly release the young clerics who had been awaiting his permission to join the African Missions. Two days later, Melchior actually went to Grenoble. “*The Bishop seemed willing to release some of them later on, but did not grant anything yet*”.⁷¹⁴ On 2nd October, Cardinal Barnabo wrote back to Bishop Melchior stating that he had received the news of his acceptance of Sierra Leone with pleasure. However, regarding the trip to Rome, he advised Melchior to wait for an invitation “*as all the Dicasteries were closed at that time*”.⁷¹⁵

Commenting on Bishop’s Melchior’s acceptance of the decision of “Propaganda Fide” to grant Sierra Leone to the African Missions rather than Dahomey, a biographer states: “*This decision was a*

713 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 209 - 210.

714 *Diary 1856 - 1859...* page 84. In fact, the only one of this group who eventually joined was Father Hector Noché who died in Dahomey in 1864, aged 30.

715 *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 13, Number 35).

bitter disappointment for de Brésillac, since he had been attracted by Dahomey precisely because it was one of the most dangerous and neglected parts of Africa.. But he always regarded the wishes of Rome as commands, and he felt that the first great act of the Society of which he was the founder and spokesman, must be one of obedience, especially if it demanded from him the sacrifice of his personal preferences".⁷¹⁶ In a letter to his brother Henri, dated 29th October 1857, Melchior confirms his disappointment.⁷¹⁷

Nevertheless, Bishop Melchior immediately began to gather information about Sierra Leone. He contacted the Superior General of the Holy Ghost Fathers (C.S.Sp.) who gave him practical details regarding suitable dress and the means and costs of travel to the West African Coast. He also advised Melchior to write directly to Bishop Kobes at Dakar who would be happy to share the fruits of his many years of experience in West Africa.

On 31st October, Bishop Melchior resumed his animation work and collections. He took Father Riocreux with him and faced towards the East of France and Alsace. From then until just before Christmas, they would work tirelessly in about thirty different centres in eastern France. Melchior kept the usual record of the different responses from Bishops, priests, sisters and faithful, as well as the size of the collections.⁷¹⁸ He was particularly happy with the visit to Besançon on 19th November. *"The Seminary professors were excellent to me and the Cardinal Archbishop Matthieu could not have been kinder... The collection was good, without being in proportion to the importance of the city, but the Cardinal made it really good when he came to visit me and left me a five-hundred franc note"*.⁷¹⁹ There followed visits to Colmar, Strasbourg, Saverne, Sarrebourg and on to much smaller centres. At Nancy, the local bishop was not well and he asked Bishop Melchior to perform the ordinations

716 *For This Cause...* page 213.

717 *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 1, 199-200).

718 *Diary 1856 - 1859...* pages 84 - 89.

719 *Ibidem:* pages 85 - 86.

of deacons and sub-deacons at the seminary. This was his first time conferring these “Major Orders”.⁷²⁰

At Chalons-sur-Marne, they met Father Papetard (by appointment). Melchior had promised to go and stay at his place for a day of relaxation and discussions. Afterwards, Father Riocreux stayed on with Father Papetard while Bishop Melchior went directly to Paris. His purpose was to offer condolences to the Blanchet family on the sudden death of Mr. Blanchet. Miss Blanchet writes: “*I cannot really speak about how much Monsignor meant to us that time after my father’s death, taken away so suddenly from us within a few days... It is too personal. But I can say that the saintly Bishop was an incomparable friend to us during that painful time*”.⁷²¹

On 8th December, Bishop Melchior celebrated Mass at the convent of Le Roule. He was presented with 1,000 francs which the students had collected for the African Missions. Melchior had previously spoken to the pupils of this school (and to the young ladies of the Legion of Honour at Saint-Denis) about his African project. They had agreed to carry out some small collections during their holidays.⁷²² That same evening, he preached at Saint Denis and received 300 francs. The next day, Melchior joined Fathers Papetard and Riocreux at Pierry. After preaching there and at Arcis-sur-Laube, he went on to Nogent-sur-Loire, Chaumont and Langres. Apart from the money which he received at Paris, “*none of the other collections were very productive*”.⁷²³ While at Langres, Bishop Melchior took the opportunity to visit Mrs. Luquet (the mother of his friend Bishop Jean Luquet) and two of his sisters.

On arrival at Lyons on 23rd December, Melchior found a note from the Bishop of Grenoble. Melchior had requested to preach

720 *Diary 1856 - 1859...* page 87.

721 *Souvenirs de 1856 à 1859...* African Missions Archives (AMA 2 F, 865 - 870) and *Mission and Foundation Documents...* page 280.

722 *African Missions Archives* (AMA 2 F 10, 265 - 280) contains a draft sermon for engaging people to collect for the work of the African Missions.

723 *Diary 1856 -1859...* page 88.

there on Christmas Day, but the Bishop asked that he postpone his visit until early in the New Year. He suggested that the Sunday after the Epiphany (6th January) would be a suitable day.

In a very brief letter to Cardinal Barnabo (dated 24th December), Bishop Melchior stated: *“We are daily expecting a further letter telling us that the Sierra Leone Mission has been definitively confided to us. Meanwhile, permit me to remind Your Eminence how important it would be to us, to receive an official reply before the Propagation of the Faith finishes distributing this year’s funds, which it does in the course of the month of January... In my own name and in that of my priests, three of whom have been with me for a year, I am yours etc.”*.⁷²⁴

It was now time for Melchior to relax with his little community and, in a prayerful and reflective manner, to celebrate the Feast of the Nativity. After a strenuous and an eventful year, all of them prayed for God’s continuing blessings on the infant Society and on all those who were helping to establish it.

Chapter Twenty

1858

Preparations Intensify...

Bishop Melchior began the New Year by fulfilling the preaching engagement at Grenoble. The local Bishop was (as usual) courteous, and the collection was good. While there, Melchior also met several members of the Blanchet family whom he “*had hardly seen before, or not at all. We spoke a lot about our departed friend*”.⁷²⁵

A letter from Cardinal Barnabo (dated 8th January 1858) would focus Melchior’s attention on intensifying plans for actually going to West Africa in the not too distant future. His Eminence wished to know the date of his departure to the Sierra Leone Mission and the number of confreres who would accompany him. This was necessary, he stated, so that the Holy See could grant him “official powers”.⁷²⁶

On 20th January, Bishop Melchior wrote the following letter: “*In reply to your letter of the 8th January, I have the honour of assuring you that, as soon as the Mission of Sierra Leone has been officially confided to us, we will start immediate preparations for our departure and will be happy to get to work there as soon as possible. Leaving Father Planque as Director of the Lyons establishment to form the novices and send them to us later on, I can at present take three priests and a lay brother with me. The three priests have been with me a year and more. I know their characters and virtues perfectly. I have full confidence that they will be excellent apostolic workers. [Melchior continued] As soon as I have received my powers for the Sierra Leone Mission, I still think that it would be useful to go and spend some days at Rome, to get detailed information at Propaganda about this Mission, and also to properly establish the basic structure of our Society*

725 *Diary 1856 - 1859...* page 93.

726 *African Missions Archives...* AMA 2 F 13, Number 37.

of African Missions. Perhaps I might bring Father Planque with me, so that he may be imbued with the spirit of the Sacred Congregation and direct the household in that spirit. I recommend our new-born Society to Your Eminence's prayers and I renew my assurance of perfect devotedness etc."⁷²⁷

While awaiting further developments from Rome, Bishop Melchior set out for Paris in very bad weather. On the way, he preached at Clermont on Sunday 24th January. The congregation was small due to widespread influenza. The collection was also poor. He arrived in Paris on 27th January, where he was received "*as always with the same loving kindness by the now widowed Madame Blanchet and her daughters*".⁷²⁸ This house would be his headquarters for the following four weeks (approximately).

At Paris, Melchior met Father Papetard, whose work of animation and collecting for the missions had been going on well. He now wished to collect money in Paris from house to house. To do this, he would need authorization from Bishop Melchior and formal letters to present to the Archbishop and to the civil authorities. "*The long and painful efforts and applications which I made for that purpose came to nothing of any use. Not to waste my time absolutely, I tried to make use of the Sundays [for preaching and collecting]*".⁷²⁹ During the other days, Melchior tried to gather as much information as possible from the Ministry of the Navy and other sources about Sierra Leone and Liberia. Further, as he too could not do very much in Paris, Father Papetard decided to go to England. Melchior provided him with letters for Cardinal Wiseman and a Member of Parliament who had promised Melchior to help the African Missions.

On Sunday 7th February, Melchior was in Rouen, where he received a warm welcome and a good collection. On the following Sunday,

727 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* page 212.

728 *Diary 1856 - 1859...* page 93.

729 *Ibidem:* page 94.

he had a similar experience in Le Havre. He left Paris on 23rd February and, after brief stops at Joigny, Auxerre and Tonnerre (where the collections in all places were poor) he arrived back in Lyons on the 26th February.

Good news awaited him there. *“The Archbishop of Lyons no longer seems to be against my doing some collecting in his diocese. So, off I go to setup a few dates for sermons in the Lyons area for the rest of Lent”*.⁷³⁰ On the other hand, a letter from Father Papetard (3rd March) informed Melchior that, due to an “increased indisposition”, he could not go to England at this time.

Bishop Melchior would use the next six weeks in Lyons by preaching and collecting in approximately eleven locations. But, before turning his mind to concentrate on matters which were internal to the new Society (its spirit, legal structures and personnel), he again wrote to Cardinal Barnabo (12th March 1858). His Eminence had not replied to Melchior’s letter of 20th January. *“I hope that no more letters from the Sacred Congregation have gone astray, as happened last year. We are every day expecting the definitive erection of the Sierra Leone Mission. Too long a delay would be very regrettable, both from the precious time it would make us lose and from the discouragement it would cause in the hearts of the associates... and for several others who are waiting for something real to be started on the missions before coming to us... [Melchior then goes on to give a detailed account of the financial situation]. At present, I am busy consolidating our African Missions Seminary by getting it some revenues and by long-term preparation for a building to accommodate forty to fifty aspirants, a number we can easily hope to have, once our congregation is seen to be actually at work on the missions”*.⁷³¹

Before the members of the new Society would depart for Africa, however, it would be necessary for them to make a solemn resolution. So, it was now time to draw up a ceremony for this

730 *Diary 1856 - 1859...* page 95.

731 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 213 - 214.

important moment. The event would be preceded by a three-day retreat. On the third day, each candidate would recite the text of the resolution in the presence of the community after the singing of the *Veni Creator*.⁷³² With this ceremony, they would become permanent members of the Society of African Missions. This was the text:

*“I, (name of priest or brother) make the solemn resolution of working all my life for the missions within the pious Society of the African Missions. I commit myself to observe the Rule precisely, and when I get to the missions, I will not return to Europe without the order or express permission of my Superior, except when the Rule entitles me to do so. I will perfectly submit myself to the decisions of the Holy See and the orders of the Sacred Congregation of ‘Propaganda Fide’, which I will always regard as the Sovereign Pontiff’s agency for everything concerning the Missions. I now offer my life to God, and I accept beforehand with joy - for the God’s greatest glory, the development of the Church, the salvation of my soul and that of the people entrusted to me - the sufferings, deprivations, difficult climates, the pain of persecution and even martyrdom, if God finds me worthy of dying as a witness to the faith. May God listen to this resolution and give me the strength to follow it, as also may these Holy Gospels”.*⁷³³ After reciting the text, the Superior or his delegate would reply: *“Dear confrere, I admit you to the pious Society of the African Missions, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”*. He and the other confreres participating in the ceremony would then embrace the new member and sing the *Te Deum*.⁷³⁴ The name of the member would be immediately inscribed in the registers of the Society, and he would never cease to be a member unless he freely withdrew or

732 This is a traditional Latin Hymn (composed around the 9th century A.D.) which invokes the Holy Spirit to come *in a special way* into the minds and hearts of the faithful. It is used regularly on solemn occasions.

733 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 231 - 232.

734 The *Te Deum* is a Latin Hymn of thanksgiving. According to tradition, it goes back to the time of the baptism of Saint Augustine by Saint Ambrose (387 A.D.). It is sung on occasions of public rejoicing.

merited exclusion.

The *Fundamental Articles* of 1856 also needed updating (as had been envisaged). The Founder took into account his own missionary experience, that which had been gained since these Articles were written, the advice of people who were competent in these matters and conversations with his confreres. He listened attentively to Father Planque in whom he had a lot of confidence and trust. The new document (1858) would be much longer and more detailed than the *Fundamental Articles* of 1856. The following is a summary:

1. The section on the goal or aim of the Society of African Missions remains the same as in the 1856 version i.e. the focus would be on the countries of Africa in most need of missionaries and, at the express request of “Propaganda Fide”, outside of Africa - provided it would be to people of colour.

2. As regards the nature of the Society, it remains “secular” (without religious vows) and will be composed of priests and lay brothers. “*Candidates from all nations shall be received, provided that they bring certificates of capability and good conduct and moreover, give signs of a vocation to the apostolic life*”. The bond uniting each member to the Society would be the solemn resolution to remain in the Society until the end of his life. The sinew and strength of the Society would be “*concord in perfect charity and obedience to those placed in charge, to direct rather than govern their confreres*”.

3. Lay brothers must exercise a skill or a trade which will enable them to work in various establishments of the Society in Europe and to train young Africans on the missions.

4. The section on authority and government was considerably developed. The role of the Superior General, his councillors, the General Meetings “*in which the sovereign power resides and which would take place very ten years*”, the authority of Major Superiors on the Missions - all of these are clearly defined.

5. On finances, each mission was required to find local resources to

support itself, “*while carefully avoiding the least sign of avarice*”. No mission expenses would be charged to the Mother House (which would be in Lyons). Each mission had to live on its own income. Individual members could use their patrimony according to their own will. But everything they receive, directly or indirectly, from the missions or for the missions... shall be put in the common fund. Superiors, on the other hand, “*shall take care to provide for the needs of their confreres without neglecting anything that is necessary, but without ever deviating from evangelical poverty*”.

6. Associate members will share in a special way in the merits of the work, if they are ready to help both spiritually and financially.

7. *The Society shall make every possible effort to raise up a local clergy in the countries where evangelisation is confided to it*”.

8. The Patronage of the Society remains the same as stated in the *Fundamental Articles* of 1856.

9. “*After a suitable time, Constitutions shall be drawn up in this same spirit, to be submitted for the approval of the Holy See and received back with respect along with the modifications, additions and excisions which the Holy See will see fit to make*”.⁷³⁵

On 13th April 1858, Bishop Melchior made the following entry in his Diary: “*Today I have received a letter from ‘Propaganda Fide’ announcing that the Mission of Sierra Leone has been definitively set up and that, in a Papal audience of 21st March, it has been confided to me, along with the priests of my ‘Seminary of the African Missions’*”.⁷³⁶ In fact, there were two Papal Briefs. The first one stated that the new circumscription came from a sub-division of the Vicariate of Guinea and went “*from the Nunez River up to the Republic of Liberia inclusively, a territory called Sierra Leone*”. The second Brief appointed Bishop de Marion Brésillac as the Vicar Apostolic.⁷³⁷

735 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 220 - 234 (fourteen pages).

736 *Diary 1856 - 1859...* page 95.

737 *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 13, Number 40), 31st March 1858.

Two days later, Bishop Melchior informed the *Works for the Propagation of the Faith* in Lyons and Paris of these developments and requested some funds. However, he was unable to be precise about actual expenses (at this stage) but added that everything had to be started from nothing in this Mission. On the 17th and 18th April, the *Gazette de Lyon* made the news known to its readers.

In a letter dated 29th April, Melchior wrote to Cardinal Barnabo: *“With joy we have received by your letter of 31st March the definitive assignment of the Mission of Sierra Leone. We are in daily expectation of the official papers with the powers, which Your Eminence mentions in that same letter. I immediately got information from Paris from the Superior General of the Holy Ghost Fathers and at Marseilles from the Superior of the Major Seminary, about means of transport and the times of departure. Unless we set out immediately (which we cannot do because we have not yet received our powers) it seems a few months delay is imperative, because of the rainy season soon starting in Sierra Leone, during which no one can land there without being morally certain of getting very pernicious fevers. We are going to arrange everything so as to be ready to leave as soon as the rainy season is over. For that purpose I am going to Marseilles, to get a thousand details and facts direct from the sailors, who know the country by having been there themselves. Once in Marseilles, Eminence, I will take the opportunity of going on to Rome, where I have many things to say to you which are too long to confide in paper, many things to ask you, many graces to request from the Holy Father by the intermediary of your benevolent protection, on which you will permit me to count. Yours etc.”*⁷³⁸

Having got some details from Marseilles and the Holy Ghost Fathers, Bishop Melchior again wrote to the Works for the Propagation of the Faith in Paris and Lyons. He presented a detailed list of his material needs which would cost a total of 46,800 francs. He mentioned that this was higher than he had expected and was due to the high cost of living in Sierra Leone, which was much

738 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 215 - 216.

higher than in Dahomey. *“But obedience must count more than anything else; we have been sent to Sierra Leone and there we will go, knowing that God must have, without the shred of a doubt, hidden plans which we will understand in time”*.⁷³⁹

Early in May, Bishop Melchior was ready to travel to Rome. On this occasion he took Father Planque with him, so that he could become familiar with Rome, with “Propaganda Fide”, the people in charge and the “style of the Roman Curia”. On the way, they stopped at Castlenaudary to visit Melchior’s parents and sister, at Lassere de Monestrol to see other members of the family and at Toulouse. At the end of May, they embarked at Marseilles and arrived in Rome on the eve of the Feast of Corpus Christi (2nd June 1858).

During his stay in Rome, Bishop Melchior requested three things from “Propaganda Fide”:

- Official Documents nominating him Vicar Apostolic of Sierra Leone
- An “Act of Benevolence” from the Sacred Congregation to state that the Society of African Missions was under its protection, while awaiting formal recognition from the Holy See
- An approval of the Fundamental Articles (1858) as a basis for the Constitutions which would essentially govern the Society.⁷⁴⁰

What Bishop Melchior actually received was his “Nomination Briefs” as Vicar Apostolic of Sierra Leone, “certain powers”,⁷⁴¹ and a Declaration authorizing the Founder *“to settle, if necessary, outside the region between the Nunez River and the Republic of Liberia,*

739 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 459. (Letter dated 29th April 1858).

740 Archives of Propaganda Fide... (APF, *Congressi*, Africa Centrale, Etiopia, Arabia, Tome 6, 113 -114). Dated: June 1858.

741 *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 31): Personal Dossier.

provided that the area is not occupied by the Holy Ghost missionaries or any other Catholic mission".⁷⁴² He was also provided with a letter for the Papal Nuncio in Paris.

Some discussion took place about the departure date for the first missionaries and who should go. Father Planque was present at these discussions and stated that it was his wish to be in the first expedition. On the other hand, Bishop Melchior had always believed that he should be in the first group to formally establish the Vicariate. Cardinal Barnabo was inclined to agree with Father Planque. A type of compromise was reached. According to this, the first group of the Society of African Missions (two priests and one brother) would leave and take possession of the Vicariate of Sierra Leone on behalf of the Vicar Apostolic. They would also set bases for an establishment in Freetown. Then the Vicar Apostolic himself would follow (with another priest and brother). The Founder would only stay a short time in Freetown, as he would move on to Gabon to hear from Bishops Kobes and Bessieux what were the main points along the coastline which were currently without Catholic missionaries, and where it would be possible to establish operation centres for the Society of African Missions.

Regarding this visit to Rome (which lasted one month), Bishop Melchior was not completely at ease. One may paraphrase his comments by saying that they got a good reception from the Cardinal Prefect of "Propaganda Fide". The audience with the Holy Father also went very well, though perhaps a bit too formal. But Melchior could not get a completely satisfactory response from 'Propaganda Fide'. He felt that the explanations given by the Cardinal Prefect in their discussions were vague and somewhat confused. On the other hand, he had received the official "Nomination Briefs" of appointment, with the title of Vicar Apostolic of Sierra Leone. He could see that there was little point in asking for extra powers. He would have to be content with the bare minimum for the time

742 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 460.

being. Bishop Melchior decided to leave Rome after the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul (29th June).⁷⁴³

Though Melchior was not to know it at the time, the visit to Rome brought a major boost to the Society. This was by way of an Italian aspirant, named Francesco Borghero. Born in the parish of Ronco Scrivia (near Genoa) in 1830, he had studied at the Seminary in the Archdiocese of Genoa. As he always wanted to be a missionary, he moved to the Benedictine Monastery at Subiaco at the age of twenty-two, and was ordained a priest there in 1854 (“*sub titulo missionis*”, as a missionary). Melchior had met him in Rome and was impressed by him. He invited him to accompany Father Planque and himself to Lyons. All three arrived at the Mother House on 5th July 1858.⁷⁴⁴

Seeing that the Society of African Missions was going to Sierra Leone (a British Colony) Bishop Melchior immediately drafted a letter to Cardinal Wiseman of Westminster, London. He asked the Cardinal whether he (or his delegate) could inform Her Majesty’s government about his own appointment as Vicar Apostolic of Sierra Leone and whether one of his priests “*could be recognised as chaplain with salary etc. as there must be some Irish in Freetown*”. Melchior stated that he was prepared to travel to London. However, he hoped that the Cardinal, in his charity, would deal with this business as “*I speak English very badly*”. Finally, in order to update His Eminence on all aspects of the new Society which he had founded at Lyons “for the evangelisation of the most abandoned peoples of Africa”, Bishop Melchior would send on some pamphlets within a few days, as “*any English or Irish priests who might associate themselves with this work could do great good*”.⁷⁴⁵

743 *Diary 1856 -1859...* page 96.

744 *Diary of Francesco Borghero, First missionary in Dahomey 1860 - 1864...* Edited by Renzo Mandirola S.M.A. Translated into English by R. Hales S.M.A. Rome. 2006. (332 pages).

745 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 217 - 218.

The Actual Situation in Sierra Leone and Liberia (1858)

Sierra Leone had become a British colony in 1810. Its capital was Freetown where a Governor resided and ruled with a Consultative Council. The British government had declared the slave trade illegal in 1807. It had also decided that Sierra Leone was a suitable place to welcome the freed slaves. In 1858, it had a population of about 17,000.

From the religious and missionary point of view, approximately 13,000 were Christians from various Protestant denominations. Their pastors relied heavily on financial support from the United States of America and from England. Freetown and its environs had about thirty chapels, with five large ones in the city and a Cathedral, with a resident Protestant Bishop. Contributions from the faithful were compulsory. Regarding education, it was estimated that there were about 4,000 students in the colony. Books were printed locally, mostly by the missionaries. These publications consisted mostly of grammars and dictionaries in the local languages.

From the Catholic perspective, there were only about 100 living in Freetown in 1858. These were mostly African-American and Spanish-American traders and some consular employees (including a Spanish Consul and a French Vice-Consul. Their children attended Protestant schools. They had no fixed place of worship.⁷⁴⁶

The Republic of Liberia (which was part of Bishop Melchior's newly erected Vicariate) was born in 1847. The "American Colonization Society" had assumed responsibility for a programme of "repatriating" American freed slaves to Africa between 1810 and 1848. Father Edmund Hogan S.M.A. writes: *"The Liberian settlement of 'freed slaves' could not have been established without the aid of the U.S. Federal and State governments. But with the passage of time, U.S. interest began to wane... In these circumstances, the leadership of the settlement felt that legal possession of the colony by an*

746 De Marion Brésillac... page 453.

organisation based in the United States, and which could no longer depend on government resources or support, would be of no further benefit... [So] In 1847, they declared Liberia as an independent Republic with a Constitution on the U.S. model".⁷⁴⁷ The capital Monrovia (named after the American President James Monroe 1758 - 1831) became the centre of administration for the new State. The British government recognised Liberia as an independent state in 1848. The American administration did not recognise the new State until 1862.

It was hardly surprising that the "settlers" from America did not wish to give up their American style of living. Their number in Liberia had grown over the years since 1810. It was estimated at 12,000 in 1854. In that same year, the native African population in the territory was given at 150,000. All through the years, there had been conflict between the two groups over land and adaptation to different customs. This was compounded by the feeling on the part of the native-born Africans that those "repatriated" from America portrayed "a general air of superiority" over them. Certainly, they held all the responsible posts in the administration of the new Republic and would continue to do so for many years. As regards religion, four Protestant missionary societies were present in Liberia in 1850: Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian and Episcopalian. Protestant Ministers often held posts in government, while all schooling and health services were under their control. In 1854, there was not a single Catholic mission in the Republic of Liberia.

Meanwhile back in Lyons, preparations for the departure of two priests and one brother to Sierra Leone had continued. The *Works of the Propagation of the Faith* informed Bishop Melchior that it had granted 40,000 francs and was advancing 5,000 "for the first outfitting expenses". Father Papetard and the other regular sources were consistently sending some funds. So, as Melchior felt that sufficient progress had been made for the first team to leave for

747 Edmund M. Hogan: *Catholic Missionaries and Liberia: A Study of Christian Enterprise in West Africa 1842 - 1950*, Cork University Press. 1981 Page 6. (268 pages).

Africa, it was now time to hold the Solemn Ceremony of taking the Oath of membership in the Society of African Missions.

On 24th July 1858, the following men pronounced the Oath in the presence of the little community: Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac, Fathers Planque, Reymond, Riocreux and Bresson, along with Brothers Perrre Guillet and Eugene Reynaud. On that same day, Bishop Melchior appointed Father Planque as Superior of the African Missions House in Lyons.

One thing remained to be done regarding the Mother House in Lyons. This was the formation of the Rule for the house. With the new Superior of the House (Father Planque) Bishop Melchior drew up "The Provisional Rule of the African Missions House".

In general, the Rule was inspired by the spiritual and ascetical tradition of that era. It followed the pattern that was in vogue in all such houses of formation. It borrowed many elements from different religious groups, notably the Jesuits, Eudists, Sulpicians and Lazarists. From rising at 05.00 a.m. to retiring at 10.00 p.m. the day was taken up with prayer, study, meditation, spiritual reading and periods of silence, work and recreation. The centrepiece of each day was the Eucharist (06.15 a.m.) while times for the reading the New Testament especially, were clearly stated. The priest aspirants were required to revise aspects of moral and dogmatic theology which had particular relevance to the missions. They would also prepare sample sermons and "*small courses of informal instructions suitable to preaching in the country areas*". A slightly modified programme was devised for other aspirants. There were rules regarding contacts within the house. Permission was also necessary for anyone leaving the house, even for a short time, and one reported to the Superior immediately on returning to the house. Aspirants could write letters but should pay for the postage, though the Procurator could help "provided the letters were not too frequent". Holidays were allowed for "a few days" but permission to go home was not granted "except in very grave

cases". The Rule would become operative at the beginning of the new Academic Year and would fully function from 1st October 1858.⁷⁴⁸

As it was now the beginning of September, Bishop Melchior decided to attend a few functions around his home area (Castlensaudary, Carcassonne, Lasserre-de-Monastrol and Toulouse). He took Father Reymond with him. However, as he and the first missionaries were soon to leave for Sierra Leone, all of them had to be given time to spend with their families. In Melchior's own case, his parents were now quite elderly and he did not wish to sadden them. "*It is a final farewell visit, but I do not say that in so many words*".⁷⁴⁹

A sad event took place in Rome on 3rd September 1858. This was the death of Melchior's long-term friend and collaborator Bishop Jean Luquet (aged 48). Melchior does not mention this in his *Diary* or in any of his writings. One wonders if he was aware of the death at the time. Bishop Luquet had been suffering from cancer of the mouth for over six months and was in great pain. Patrick Gantly S.M.A. wrote: "*Like a brilliant meteor, he [Luquet] had shot across the Indian sky, only to be quenched in the troubled waters of the Bay of Bengal. He was to spend another thirteen years, a semi-recluse in Rome... instead of striding through the Indian countryside turning young Tamils into Catholic priests*".⁷⁵⁰ Certainly, Bishop Luquet had made a major contribution to the development of a local clergy in South-East India, as well as through his contribution to the Document *Neminem Profecto* of Pope Gregory XVI (1845). Bishop Luquet was buried in the French College Chapel, Via Santa Chiara, Rome.

On 28th September, Bishop Melchior returned to Lyons. In his absence, two new candidates had been admitted to the community (Fathers Gondin and Courdioux). A letter from Bishop Kobes

748 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 235 - 239.

749 *Diary 1856 - 1859...* page 97.

750 *For This Cause...* page 106.

C.S.Sp. (dated 21st August 1858) arrived shortly afterwards. It stated that he would be happy to contribute to the success of the new Society in West Africa *“by sharing with you, as well as with your missionaries, the fruit of our experience regarding the particular climate of this country, and perhaps helping you to avoid therefore the numerous personnel losses that we faced at the beginning”*.⁷⁵¹

On 3rd October, Brother Pierre Guillet died from typhoid fever at the age of 24. He had taken the Solemn Oath on 24th July and had been chosen to leave for Sierra Leone with the Founder. He was the first member of the Society of African Missions to die. Brother Guillet was laid to rest at Loyasse cemetery.

In a letter to his Capuchin friend Father Dominique around this time, Bishop Melchior mentioned that he was busy with a plan to construct a Seminary which would cost about one hundred thousand francs. Father Papetard, who was in Spain on a fund-raising trip, had gathered 50,000 francs for the Society of African Missions. He had also been contacted by two Spanish priests and a brother who wished to go to Africa. Father Papetard would bring them to Lyons before the end of the year.

On 26th October, Brother Gratian Monnoyeur made his solemn resolution. He would go to Africa in place of the deceased Brother Pierre Guillet.

In a letter (dated 1st November 1858) Bishop Melchior replied to a communication which he had received from Bishop Bonnard of Pondicherry.⁷⁵² This letter reveals Melchior's concerns and state of mind at this time. After explaining about the foundation of the Society of African Missions, Bishop Melchior states that the first team (who would leave Lyons shortly) would be in Freetown *“to worm our way in gradually, as if we are just looking after the few Catholics living there. Then, we will see”*. This was to avoid

751 *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 8, 1068).

752 Bishop Bonnard's letter to Melchior was dated 11th September 1858.

“upsetting” the well-established Protestant churches there. His own trip (which would take place shortly afterwards) would be “*a sort of exploration... from the Nunez River up to Gabon, in order to spot the places where we could set up our centres of action with some probability of success*”.⁷⁵³

As he was fully aware of the endemic fevers in the region, Melchior asked Bishop Bonnand for prayers “*because a disaster from the beginning could destroy all our hopes*”. Regarding himself, he put his confidence in Mary, under whose protection the Society had already been placed at Lyons. He would take her picture with him and install it in the first chapel which they would build in West Africa. That chapel would be dedicated to her under the title “*Mater Febricitantium*” (“Mother of Those Suffering From Fever”).

Melchior then summarized the *Fundamental Articles* “*which were only in germ*” by remarking that “*the general idea is the same as in the Foreign Missions [M.E.P.] in such a way that if God blesses our seminary, it will be for Africa what the Foreign Missions seminary is for the East Indies*”.⁷⁵⁴ Nonetheless, there were clear differences in government structures and in other details. But the overall impression given in this letter is that, in spite of having contested M.E.P. statutes on its government structures, Bishop Melchior was convinced about the mission of the Paris Foreign Missions Society to non-Christians. Melchior simply wished to do this in a different way in the Society of African Missions, with a particular emphasis on founding and building up self-sustaining and vibrant local churches, with their own well-formed clergy.⁷⁵⁵

753 Archives of the Paris Foreign Missions... (AMEP, Vol.1000 P, 1131 - 1138).

754 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 473.

755 Melchior received another letter from Bishop Bonnand (dated 25th October 1858). This informed Melchior that he (Bishop Bonnand) had been nominated by Pope Pius IX as “Visitor Apostolic of all the Missions in India”. After stating that he felt unsuitable to carry out such a mission, Bishop Bonnand wrote: “*I come then, Monsignor, to beg you in the name of Religion, to be so good as to give me all your views on reform of the administration of the Christian areas of India under all aspects*”. *African Mission Archives...* (AMA 2 F 8, 1089-1090) and the Archives of Paris Foreign Missions ... (AMEP, Vol. 1,000, 998-1001).

About this time, Melchior also received a message of congratulations from Father Tesson (the M.E.P. Director and his former mentor). *“I rejoice most sincerely that your patience, so tried for such a long time, has at last received recompense. This reward will no doubt include much weariness, many crosses and difficulties. But these are the lot of the apostolic life. The glory of God being your one and only aim, God will sustain you and proportion His graces to your crosses and trials”*.⁷⁵⁶

The Departure of the First Group of Missionaries

The first missionaries chosen to leave for Sierra Leone were: Father Louis Reymond, Father Jean-Baptiste Bresson and Brother Eugene Reynaud. The Founder had scheduled their departure so that they could arrive in West Africa during “the season of good weather”.

Bishop Melchior informed Bishop Kobes C.S.Sp, indicating that they would take the “Express” from Marseille to Senegal, West Africa on 30th or 31st October. He added that he would follow them “two or three months later”. Bishop Melchior also wrote to the French Consul in Freetown, asking him to find a healthy place for the missionaries to live and where they could gather “the few Catholics” in the city. Lastly, he wrote to the Bishop of Marseille (Eugene de Mazenod) requesting hospitality for the departing missionaries and for himself.

The Founder of the Society of African Missions wanted to publicize the departure of the first missionaries. The *Gazette de Lyon* carried a long article on the event, describing also the development of the Society of African Missions, an international Society which was sponsored by alms from all over France and also from Spain, which would help the African Missions Seminary “*which has so favourably started out, to develop, consolidate and become a new glory for Lyon*”.⁷⁵⁷ The missionaries concerned had a two-day retreat, followed by Mass at the tomb of Saint Irenaeus. The *Gazette de Lyon* reported: “*Saint Irenaeus crypt this morning was full of people*

756 *For This Cause...* page 216.

757 *Gazette de Lyon...* 20th October 1858; republished by the “*L’Univers...* 27th October 1858.

eager to attend the Mass celebrated on the tomb of the apostle of Lyon by the missionaries of the African Missions Seminary who will leave tomorrow for the Sierra Leone mission. Tomorrow morning, they will celebrate Mass in our city at the pious sanctuary of Our Lady of Fourvière".⁷⁵⁸ Bishop Melchior gave a detailed account in a letter to Mrs. Blanchet and the supporters in Paris (dated 26th October).

On the evening of 27th October, the Ursuline Sisters (who lived near the African Missions Seminary) served a small farewell dinner at the Seminary at 5.00 p.m. Afterwards, Bishop Melchior and the chosen team of missionaries and "several members of the young Society" went to the station to take the train to Marseille. Father Philibert Courdieux (who had come to the Seminary just one month earlier as an aspirant) has given a vivid and detailed account of the actual departure and the ensuing days in Marseille.⁷⁵⁹ Bishop Melchior simply notes:

"I went to Marseille to accompany Father Reymond, Fr. Bresson and Brother Eugene who embarked on the Express on 4th November. I went as far as the open sea, and came back on the pilot's boat after giving them my blessing".⁷⁶⁰

After the departure of the missionaries for Africa, Bishop Melchior went to his brother's house at Lassere de Monestrol where he had arranged to meet Father Papetard. They discussed many things: the future of the Society, the project of a house in Spain for young Africans, the possibility of priests and brothers from Spain joining the community in Lyons and fundraising activities in Spain. In fact, Father Papetard had brought along with him two priests and

758 *Gazette de Lyon...* 26th October 1858.

759 *African Missions Archives...* (AMA: 2 E 11, 5 - 6). It is summarized in *De Brésillac...* pages 477 - 479. Father Courdieux was born in Autun in 1838. After being admitted to the Society of African Missions, he served as a missionary in Dahomey from 1861 to 1872. He left the Society in 1875. When he died in Lyons in April 1898, he was Parish Priest of the area where the African Missions had its headquarters.

760 *Diary 1856 - 1859...* page 97.

a brother who had expressed the desire to go “on the missions”.⁷⁶¹

Melchior was so encouraged that he wrote a “thank you” note to the Archbishop of Barcelona.⁷⁶² This prelate had shown a personal interest in the African project and had sent a circular to his diocesan priests asking them to assist the Society of African Missions. Bishop Melchior also wrote to the newspaper “*La Regeneración*” in Madrid, giving an account of Father Papetard’s work in Spain and outlining the work of the Society and its mission in Africa. He thanked the Spanish people from the eight dioceses who had responded so generously to Father Papetard’s appeals.⁷⁶³ Melchior then “*settled up everything with Father Papetard and came back to Lyons, after having said an extra, unplanned goodbye to my parents. Father Papetard went to Marseille, to go back to Spain from there*”.⁷⁶⁴

On 20th November, Bishop Melchior wrote a report to Cardinal Barnabo. This document informed “Propaganda Fide” of the departure of the missionaries to Africa, “the real enthusiasm” of the Spanish people for the project, the possibility of opening the house in Andalusia (Spain) and the much improved financial state of the Society. Specific collections for the foundation of a new Seminary were also encouraging. In the present house, there were some priests who had finished their “novitiate”, others who had not concluded it, philosophy students and lay brothers. “*Thus, Eminence, from every point of view, our work seems to be blessed by God*”. Bishop Melchior concluded by requesting Cardinal Barnabo “*to obtain from the goodness of the Holy Father certain indulgences which would encourage the zeal and sustain the goodwill of those who*

761 Regarding Father Papetard, we read in *For This Cause...* page 201: “*At first, Father Papetard was reluctant to become a member of the Society, preferring simply to work for it. Later on, however, he became an associate member and for the rest of his life, until his death in 1877, he dedicated his life to the work of the African Missions. He, more than anyone else, put the young Society on a sound financial basis, so that de Brésillac used to refer to him gratefully as ‘la source Papetard’*”.

762 *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 1, 402 - 403). November 1858.

763 *Ibidem:* (AMA 2 F 1, 416 - 417). November 1858.

764 *Diary 1856 -1858...* page 97.

*are interested in the work and are supporting it with their prayers and their charity”.*⁷⁶⁵

Spurred on by Father Papetard’s experience in Spain, Melchior decided to update a “Rule” for *Associates of the Society of African Missions*. He attached this to his Report to Cardinal Barnabo.⁷⁶⁶

The document contained 26 Articles. The general aim of the Associates to the Society was to find different ways of helping the missionaries and their work in Africa. *“It was placed under the patronage of the Holy Family, ‘specially honouring the mystery of the Our Divine Saviour’s flight to Egypt’ with a number of Saints who were born in Africa or who had worked there... As regards the spiritual advantages, it mentioned the participation in the prayers, Masses, works and sufferings of the missionaries, the members of the Association and the converted peoples... After death, the ‘associate member’ would also participate in the Society’s prayers for its late benefactors and all [its] members”.*⁷⁶⁷

Bishop Melchior also enclosed a suggested list of prayers for consideration and/or modification. Among the indulgences requested for all members and associates of the Society was for a “Plenary Indulgence” once a month on recitation of the following prayer: *“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us; Our Holy Guardian Angels, pray for us; Saint Joseph, pray for us; Our holy Patrons, pray for us; Saint Augustine, pray for us; Saint Benedict of Philadelphia, pray for us; Blessed [now Saint] Peter Claver, pray for us. All you who have sanctified yourselves on the missions, and especially in Africa, pray for us; All the Saints in Paradise, pray for us”.*⁷⁶⁸

765 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 241 - 243.

766 Formal permission to establish such a structure had been granted earlier that year. *“This association was attached to the Congregation of the African Missions Priests, authorized by His Holiness Pope Pius IX, happily reigning, on 8th January 1858, under the direction of the most illustrious Count de Marion Brésillac, Bishop of Prusa, to evangelise the unfortunate non-believers of the West Coast of Africa”.* (*African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 13, No.37). Also, *De Marion Brésillac...* page 481.)

767 *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 5, 38, 44 - 47). Dated 21st November 1858. Also, *De Marion Brésillac...* pages 480 - 482, 484.

768 *Mission and Foundation Documents...*page 243.

Melchior also wrote to Father Reymond. He had appointed him as his Vicar before they had departed from Marseille. As mail by boat was the only means of communication, information about seaports and the times projected for the arrival of ships was important. All of this had been checked out as part of the immediate preparations for the trip. It was important for maintaining contact. Thanks to this correspondence over the following months, we know about the missionaries' trip, their arrival in West Africa and the replies from Bishop Melchior. This particular reply from Melchior simply contained "family news" from the house at Lyons and the exploits of Father Papetard in Spain.⁷⁶⁹

At the end of November, there was disappointment for Melchior. The two Spanish priests did not persevere and left for home. The brother aspirant stayed on, though "*he seems to have a bad case of home-sickness. I suggested that he could go. He wants to stay*". Melchior feared a negative effect on the promotion work in Spain.⁷⁷⁰

Melchior now decided that it was time for himself and a second team to set out for Africa. On 14th December 1858 he went to Paris, taking Father Riocreux with him. His main purpose was to get assistance from the national government for the voyage. In a letter to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Melchior wrote briefly about the Society which he had founded, the fact that he had sent three missionaries already to Freetown and that he and two others were soon to join them. Bishop Melchior also mentioned that he hoped to make exploratory trips in the general area to places where there were no Catholic missionaries. He then requested the following: "*Recommendation letters for the Consular Agents and Marine Officers at the service of France in this region; the facility of visiting the coast on the ships owned by the state, stopping over as many times as possible, from Saint-Louis or Gorée up to Gabon; a ticket for myself, a priest and a brother, travelling on the ships owned by the*

769 *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 1, 382-384) 20th November 1858.

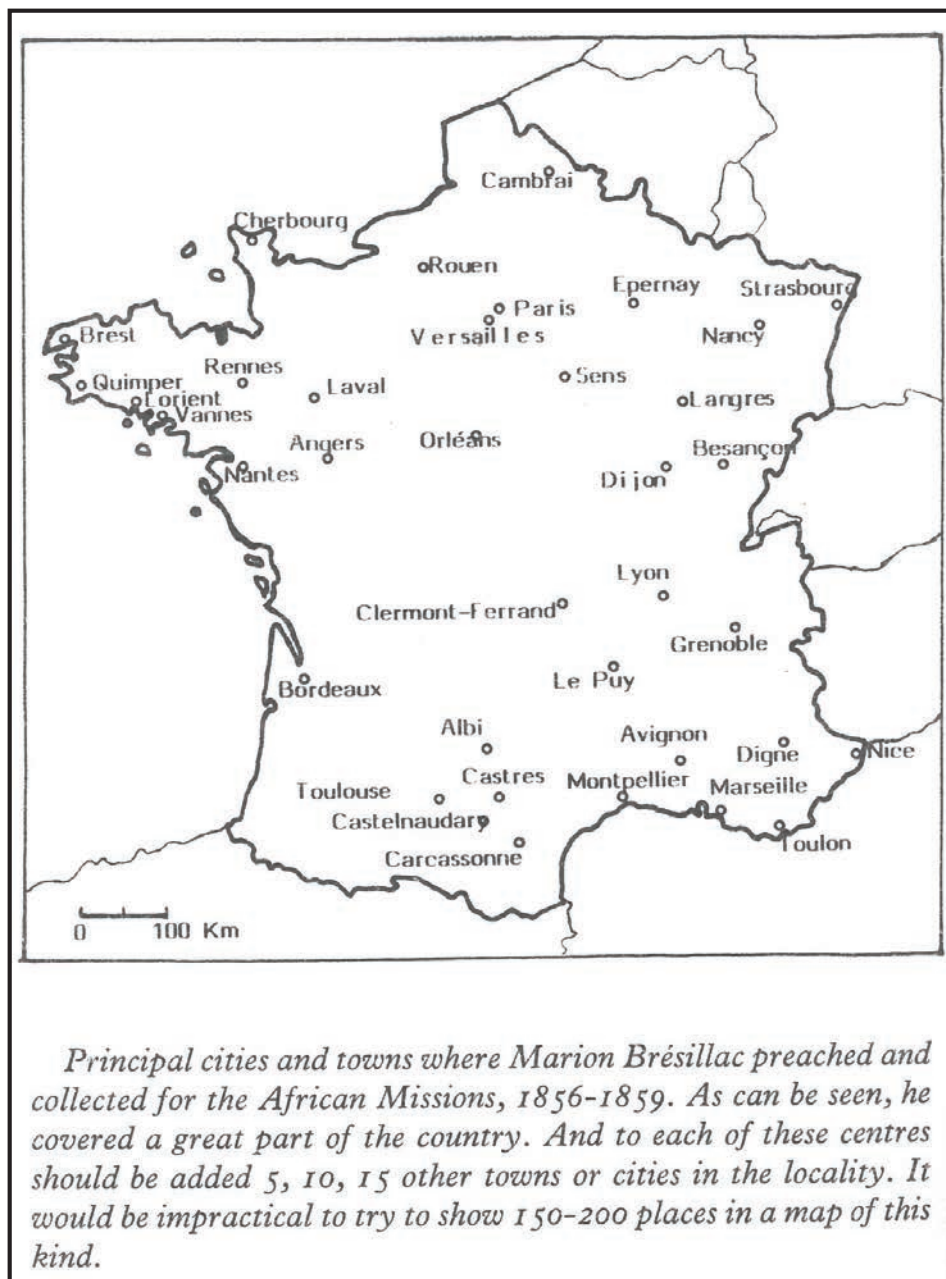
770 *Diary 1856 -1859...* page 98.

*state, both leaving France and making the aforementioned tour”.*⁷⁷¹

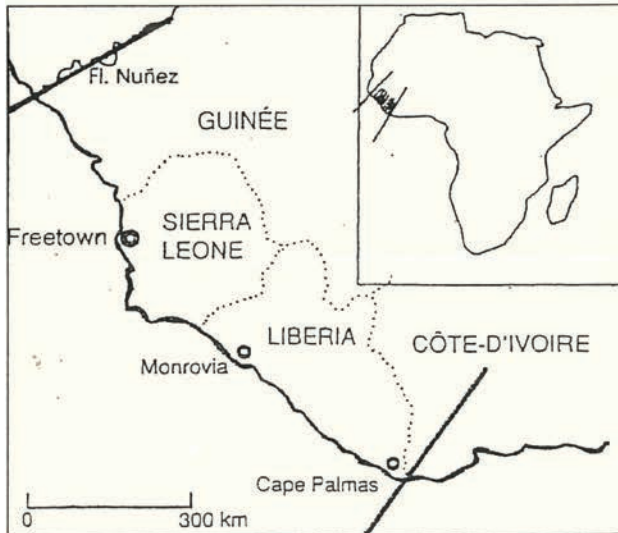
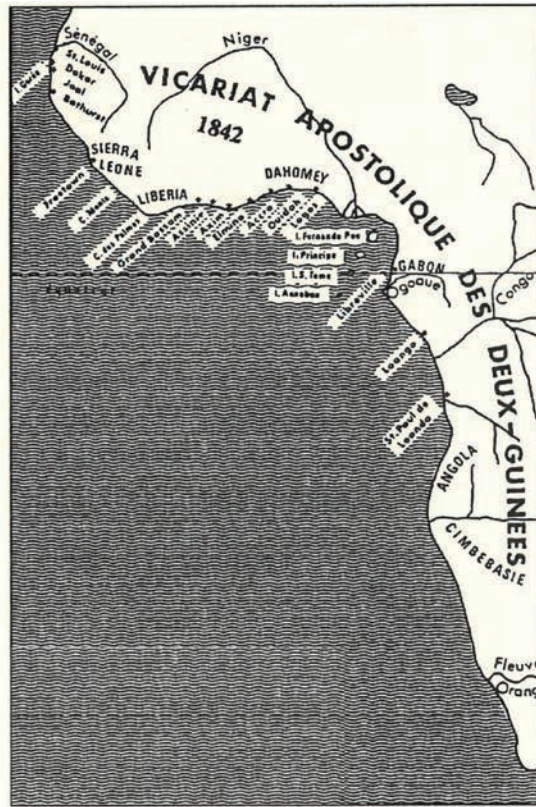
As it was the festive season of Christmas, Melchior knew that it would take time before receiving a reply from the government. He made contacts with several people who understood the bureaucratic requirements and who held administrative positions where they could expedite matters.

Melchior ended the year (1858) with prayers of thanksgiving, solemn celebrations of Mass and a few days of peace and relaxation with Father Riocreux and his close friends (the Blanchets).

771 *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 1 396-397) 26th December 1858.



8.1 Map of journeys all over France



8.2 Vicariate Apostolic of the Two Guineas (1842) and Vicariate of Sierra Leone (1858)

Chapter Twenty One

1859

*The Grain of Wheat Dies...*⁷⁷²

On 1st January 1859, Bishop Melchior sent New Year greetings to Father Planque. He prayed that God “*would bless us all and our work - all of which is His. We ought to be its faithful instruments, though unworthy*”. As regards himself, Melchior told his trusted colleague and friend that “*only God knows all the pains and difficulties awaiting me this year, but by His grace, I think that I am ready to suffer all of them, all the trials of the tempest both physical and mental. And if the sea and the rocks were to make this year my last, you would be there to see that the work did not get shipwrecked too*”.⁷⁷³

On that same day, Melchior sent greetings to his brother Henri, noting that his one achievement since coming to Paris a couple of weeks earlier was in meeting the “Works for the Propagation of the Faith” and the “Holy Childhood Association” which he described as “*the two feeders of the missions*”. He had been invited to preside at the first yearly assembly of the Paris “Holy Childhood” on 13th January.⁷⁷⁴

On 3rd January, Bishop Melchior celebrated a solemn Mass on the feast of Sainte Geneviève, patroness of Paris, at the church of Saint-Etienne-du-Mont. On 16th, he presided over the celebration of the patron feast in the church of Saint Sulpice and also at the solemn celebration of Vespers. All of this time, Melchior continued to search for Sisters who “*would agree to go to Sierra Leone, when the time was right*”.

While awaiting a reply from the government, Bishop Melchior

772 “*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit*”. Gospel of Saint John (Chapter 12, verse 14).

773 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 244 - 245.

774 *De Marion Brésillac...*page 487. He would fulfil that engagement, celebrating the Mass and preaching “*a homily that really touched the people*”.

decided to make a “quick visit” to Belgium. He hoped to speak about the missionary vocation and his own work in the Seminaries. During the week which this trip involved there (21st-28th January), he managed to visit Father Planque’s mother and his family at Chemy (near Arras). They had all gathered for the occasion, as well as some priests from the region. While in Belgium, Melchior was well received and managed to visit a different seminary each day. He prayed that his words might have inspired some of the seminarians to join the Society of African Missions.⁷⁷⁵

On arrival back in Paris, two important letters awaited him. The first one was from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *“The Minister of Naval Affairs will gladly give the orders for your admission, together with the people accompanying you, on board a ship leaving in about a month for the West Coast of Africa. Admiral Hamelin is also willing to allow you to travel in the ships of the Division of the West Coast Division of Africa, which as part of their service, touch the various parts of the coast where you intend to explore”*.⁷⁷⁶

The second letter also brought good news. It was the long-expected letter from Father Reymond (dated 16th December 1858). After difficult and dangerous moments during the trip, they had arrived at *Gorée* Island on 3rd December 1858 and at Dakar (West Africa) on the following day. They received a very warm welcome from Bishop Kobes and his missionaries. Father Reymond described his visits to the various mission establishments in the Dakar area, particularly the seminary, various classrooms, the printing and bookbinding establishments, and the carpentry, shoemaking, tailoring and iron workshops. He also mentioned a group of indigenous Sisters (founded by Bishop Kobes) and Sisters of Castres (founded in France in 1836) who were working in the

775 Melchior was also conscious that there would be a need to have English-speaking members - especially since the mission confided to the Society was a British colony. He was aware of the possibilities of finding some in Ireland. However, it was not possible for himself to go to Ireland then, due to time constraints.

776 *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 138/77 - 11/022 -1859). The letter is dated 15th January 1859.

field of education. Bishop Kobes shared with Father Reymond the official report which he had sent to “Propaganda Fide” (in 1853) and also the letter from the Spanish Consul which had invited him to send missionaries to Sierra Leone. In general, Father Reymond’s letter was upbeat and encouraging.⁷⁷⁷ Bishop Melchior sent a copy of the letter to the “Works for the Propagation of the Faith” in both Paris and Lyons, asking them to publish it.

On 2nd February, Bishop Melchior and Father Riocreux came back to Lyons “to make immediate preparations for departure and await the order to embark”.⁷⁷⁸ The naval ministry had indicated that the ship *Danae* (a warship, steam and sail) was scheduled to leave Brest for Africa between the 10th and 15th February 1859.

The names of the second team of missionaries who would go to Africa were already well known to all concerned with the African project. These were: Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac, Father Louis Riocreux and Brother Gratien Monnoyeur.

In a letter dated 3rd February, Melchior received a farewell note from his father. “*It was full of paternal feelings and best wishes for the success of his mission. Gaston de Brésillac was quite elderly and he had the feeling that God could call him at any moment. His son had gently warned him against strong emotions regarding his departure. He thanked him for his kindness and opened his heart to his son leaving for Africa*”.⁷⁷⁹ In his own words, Gaston goes on to state: “*As I thank you for the kindness of warning me against a weakness that nature allows but which does not actually offend Heaven, remaining calm without presumption and resigned without ostentation, I now say to you... Go, my dear son; go where your God is calling you. May*

777 *African Missions Archives*. (AMA 2 F 8, 1120 - 1123). At Bishop Melchior’s request, Father Planque had already provided “a large book”, into which all letters from the Missions would be transcribed and kept separately from other Society matters. Father Reymond’s letter was the first entry. It was “the precursor of many letters which succeeding African Missionaries would send back to Europe, and which were to contribute, in no small measure, to the sum total of Europe’s knowledge of Africa”. *For this Cause...* page 219.

778 *Diary 1856 - 1859...* page 101.

779 *De Marion Brésillac...* page 499.

He protect you in His mercy, so that my best wishes - brief but full of all the good I can wish you - may be fulfilled".⁷⁸⁰

From an administrative point of view, the Founder wished to leave everything in order. He spent a lot of time with Father Planque discussing details and signed several documents granting him all the necessary powers. He also informed "The Works for the Propagation of the Faith" and other groups who were helping the Society financially, that Father Planque was now acting in his place and would receive donations and issue receipts. The Founder knew in his mind and with his heart, that the welfare of the Society was secure in the hands of Fathers Planque and Papetard.

On 8th February, a farewell dinner was held for Father Riocreux. His parents and a few other persons attended. On the 9th, Melchior celebrated a farewell Mass at the church of Saint Irenaeus. On the 14th, there was still no notification of sailing.⁷⁸¹

A second letter from Father Reymond, (dated 18th January) brought the news that the first team had finally arrived in Freetown. After celebrating Christmas with Bishop Kobes in Dakar, their ship had anchored in the Freetown harbour on 13th January 1859. They had disembarked on the following day "in the midst of a numerous and curious crowd". The Spanish consul had provided them with a small house until they could find their own. They had been well received by the French consul and by the British Governor, who promised them the same protection as he offered to other denominations. On the following Sunday, Father Reymond had celebrated Mass, with an attendance of about thirty Catholics "who appeared to be well off". Father Reymond also offered some data about the Protestants' organization according to the Methodist Almanac of 1859: *"There are 30 chapels, 2 extra preaching centres, 8 missionaries, 363 paid or unpaid agents, 6810 members, 3993 schoolchildren, 13,100 faithful Wesleyans. There are around 40 other sects. Freetown and its suburbs have 40,000 inhabitants. The Anglican church dedicated to Saint*

780 *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 8, 1147 - 1148).

781 *Diary 1856 - 1859...* page 101.

George, is as big as Saint Ireneaus in Lyons".⁷⁸² He would provide further information on the cost of living, the attitudes of the people and of the other churches in future letters.

On 17th February, Melchior received notification that the *Danae* could be ordered to sail from Brest at any time during the following week. So, he immediately completed a report which he had been preparing for "Propaganda Fide". This would be his final communication to the Sacred Congregation before leaving France.

Bishop Melchior informed Cardinal Barnabo that the first missionaries had arrived in Freetown and had received "*a perfect reception*" from the French and Spanish Consuls and from the English Governor. "*Their first impression has been most favourable... They are convinced that a lot of good can be done there. This is something that Bishop Bessieux, whom I had met briefly in Paris a month earlier, had confirmed - not only for Freetown but for many other places in those unhappy lands*". Melchior then told His Eminence about the trials and consolations of the Society since his last communication (including the departure of the first Spanish aspirants). He again requested Cardinal Barnabo to obtain the indulgences from the Holy Father, which would be "*a reward and encouragement for the Spanish people who were so generous for the foundation of our seminary*". He also mentioned that "*although the Sierra Leone Mission is in English territory, the French government has granted free passage for me, one priest and a lay brother on a state frigate which is to set sail one of these days. So I am leaving Lyons the day after tomorrow*". He was leaving "*the direction of our dear seminary in the excellent hands of Father Planque whom you know*".⁷⁸³

782 *African Missions Archives ...* (AMA 2 F 8, 1138 - 1139).

783 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 246 - 248. In a footnote (page 248), we read that some years later, Father Planque wrote to the Cardinal Prefect of "Propaganda Fide": "*When he was preparing to leave [for Sierra Leone] I tried to talk him out of it, ceaselessly urging that I should be allowed to go first and that he should stay in France to consolidate his foundation and ensure its bases. I kept telling him that, if he should die, his work would perish with him. 'No', he replied, 'it will live as long as there is a will to keep it going. And you shall be that will'. I could make no headway with him about it*". (cf. *African Missions Archives...* (AMA Planque, Letters: Vol.11). It is dated 1885.

On the 19th February, the Founder celebrated Mass at the Ursuline Convent nearby. They had always been very helpful to the seminary and he wished to say “Thank you”. At noon, the second team of African missionaries took the train to Nantes.

On the morning of 20th, *“we stopped off at Tours to celebrate Mass. I was perfectly received by the Archbishop and met the Bishop of Marseille there too. After lunch, we left for Nantes... There, after an excellent supper, which had been prepared for us by the Procurator of the Seminary, we took our places on the stage-coach. The booking had been made by the Procurator at my request. We reached Lorient on the morning of the 21st and we arrived at Brest on the following morning. There we were very well received by the parish priest of Saint Louis”*.⁷⁸⁴

On the following day, the missionaries were informed that the commandant of the ship *Danae* (Mr. Bosse) had not arrived in Brest and that he would be delayed “for a few days”. In the meantime, the Admiral-Prefect arranged that Melchior and his confreres be taken to visit the frigate. They were impressed. The *Danae* would have a crew of 400 men. It would also transport some troops.

However, as the waiting time grew longer, the “holy patience” of Bishop was well tested. He received and wrote several letters to Lyons and to some friends. He was also a bit worried about the extra expenses involved.⁷⁸⁵ There was also the concern that the delay could mean arriving in Sierra Leone during the rainy season when various diseases became a real threat to health and well-being. *“We owe the clergy of Saint-Louis a great debt of gratitude for giving us such charitable and cheerful hospitality for such a long time”*.⁷⁸⁶

784 *Diary 1856 - 1859...* pages 101 - 102.

785 The “extra expenses” included an adjustment to Brother Gratien’s ticket. Melchior informed Father Planque that he had not been aware of the term “*a la ration*” when booking Brother Gratien’s passage. This meant that their confrere would be obliged to live, eat and socialize with the crew, and be unable to share fully with his fellow missionaries. Melchior applied to the Naval Prefect to upgrade Brother Gratien’s accommodation and other arrangements. He agreed, provided that the Bishop paid the extra expenses.

786 *Diary 1856 -1859...* page 102.

Mr. Bosse arrived in Brest on the 8th March. On the 10th, all the passengers embarked on the *Danae*. The missionaries greeted Captain Bosse “who was not very gracious” and, even though the weather was favourable, the ship did not weigh anchor. On following morning (11th March) the weather had changed drastically. “*Captain Bosse went to see the Prefect at 8.00 a.m. to express his misgivings. The Prefect insisted on sailing. We weighed anchor at 10.00 a.m.*”⁷⁸⁷

Captain Bosse’s misgivings proved to be entirely justified. The weather on the 12th, 13th and 14th March was atrocious. The ship could not stay on course. “*We are not without serious fears. The lifeboats are smashed. Three out of the four are swept away. A man has fallen into the sea and has had to be abandoned. Towards seven, the frigate is struck a terrifying blow... Water is pouring through all the upper port-holes... Those in command have left the ship drift with the wind as there is no possibility of steering against the gale. The hope is to find a sheltered anchorage the next day off the coast of England.*”⁷⁸⁸ On 15th March, the *Danae* dropped anchor in the Bay of Torbay, near Dartmouth. Sufficient emergency repairs were then carried out so as to allow them to make it to Cherbourg for a complete overhaul. On the 16th, the *Danae* set out for Cherbourg. They disembarked there on the following day.

It was only in the ensuing days that the passengers learned about the extent of the danger in which they had survived. “*What great thanksgiving then, do we owe to God and to Mary’s special protection... It is going to be a round-the-clock job in Cherbourg port with the crew put at the service of hundreds of repair workers from the Navy yards. They will be made to work all through Sunday... Captain Bosse needs the Navy to believe that the danger was not great and that the damage was not considerable!*”⁷⁸⁹ Nonetheless, it took a full week to make the *Danae* seaworthy.

787 *Diary 1856 -1859...* page 103.

788 *Ibidem:* pages 103 -104.

789 *Ibidem:* page 105.

The missionaries spent the week as guests of the Parish Priest of Holy Trinity. They also had to sort out their clothes which had been soaked and damaged by the huge waves which had swept over the ship. The Sisters of Charity graciously helped them to do this. Bishop Melchior kept Father Planque fully informed about the latest developments. He also celebrated Masses, preached at various services, talked to the students being educated by the Brothers of the Christian Schools and dined with several people who had invited him. The missionaries were informed that the *Danae* would sail on 23rd March. So, after celebrating Mass on that day at 8.00 a.m., they embarked, and “to our great surprise”, the *Danae* weighed anchor at 10.00 a.m.

Much to everyone’s relief, the voyage from Cherbourg to West Africa went well. On 27th March, they stopped at Madeira to take on coal. Melchior recalled the first time he had seen this island back in 1842 when he was travelling to India as a young missionary.⁷⁹⁰ This time Melchior stayed on board.

On the evening of the 6th April, the *Danae* arrived in the island of *Gorée*.⁷⁹¹ The missionaries disembarked on the morning of 8th April and Bishop Melchior celebrated Mass at the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny. As they were anxious to go across to Dakar (a boat journey of 20-30 minutes), the resident priest (Father Lossedat C.S.Sp.) arranged a rowboat for them. That same evening, the members of the Society of African Missions arrived in Dakar. “*We were perfectly welcomed by Bishop Kobes and his colleagues. The Mission has a big compound there, with workshops, a college, a convent of the Immaculate Conception Sisters from Castres and a girls’ boarding school... In such a tough territory as Africa, it must have taken a lot of time, patient efforts and expense to achieve such a result*”.⁷⁹²

790 cf. *Souvenirs: Marion Brésillac ...* pages 95 - 97.

791 This island was an important commercial centre for France (the colonial power). It was well developed. “*In 1830, it had 5,000 inhabitants, 200 residences and 40 shops. The Courts and schools, the municipal services and customs operated as in France*”. [De Marion Brésillac... page 504].

792 *Diary 1856 -1859...* page 108.

It was unfortunate that the *Danae* had missed the “steam-packet” by two days.⁷⁹³ Captain Bosse made it clear that “his” ship would have to wait until the next scheduled arrival. This meant that the missionaries would have to stay in Dakar for almost another month. On 15th April, Bishop wrote to Father Planque stating “*All circumstances seem to conspire to prolong our voyage. A few days would have been fine. They were useful to look and listen around, but a month is just too much*”.⁷⁹⁴ He also told Father Planque that he very much appreciated that the Holy Ghost missionaries had welcomed them as confreres, and were giving them “the opportunity of learning from their qualities and experience”.⁷⁹⁵

The members of the Society of African Missions spent the time in Dakar gathering information about Sierra Leone to supplement that from Father Reymond.⁷⁹⁶ During Holy Week 1859, Bishop Melchior celebrated a solemn Mass at *Gorée* on Holy Thursday. On the following day (Good Friday) he delivered a sermon on the Lord’s Passion and on Easter Sunday, led the celebrations of the Lord’s Resurrection. This facilitated Bishop Kobes who could then lead all the Holy Week celebrations in Dakar itself.

On 5th May, Melchior received a note from Captain Bosse which stated that the frigate would sail as soon as it had taken on the mail from France, which was coming on the packet. “*I decided to continue the voyage on the frigate, as it will mean only three or four days’ delay*”.⁷⁹⁷ Eventually, the *Danae* weighed anchor on 11th May 1859.

793 These were medium-sized boats which carried mail, freight and some passengers between different ports along the Coast of West Africa. They provided a regularly scheduled service (usually once a month). In the political system which operated in many parts of the world at that time, the “steam-packet” was central to the history of “Empire”.

794 *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2F 1, 452 - 453).

795 *De Marion Brésillac...* pages 505 - 506.

796 Even though it could take two or even three months to arrive, Father Reymond was regularly sending news to Lyons. Some of this was meant for “missionary animation” at home. Father Planque in turn would write to Melchior, who would get the letters when he disembarked at Dakar and at the end of the voyage.

797 *Diary 1856-1859...* page 110.

Bishop Melchior describes the arrival at Freetown as follows: “On rising early in the morning of Saturday the 14th May, we saw the mountains of Sierra Leone. By noon, we were entering the harbour. We dropped anchor at about one o’clock. Then, after saluting the fort, our dear confreres Father Reymond, Father Bresson and Brother Eugene came on board. We all embraced. At four o’clock, we set foot on this land so afflicted in every sense. It would be the theatre of our zeal from now on”.⁷⁹⁸

Freetown: Sierra Leone 1859

The climate of the city of Freetown was always difficult and even dangerous at times. On the evening of his own arrival, Bishop Melchior noted: “The consistently bad climate of Sierra Leone seems at this particular time to be redoubling its malignancy. So much so, that the captain was advised to allow none of the crew to go ashore. The Europeans were dying like flies. The already small flock of Catholics had just suffered some cruel losses. The consul-general of Spain had died, and the vice-consul also. These two gentlemen had given great help to our confreres on their arrival. The Malfilate trading house representative had also died. Several others are seriously ill”.⁷⁹⁹ On the next day (Sunday 15th May), only two people attended Mass. According to the locals, there had not been so many deaths in Freetown in 27 years.⁸⁰⁰ The city was in “a state of terror” due to an epidemic of Yellow Fever (which seemed to affect the Europeans especially) and of small-pox (which was decimating the local population).

Despite all of this, the “younger” missionaries were enjoying being together. “We laughed, chatted and made some projects together. We had not seen each other for over six months! From 14th to 16th May, we enjoyed great happiness. We planned some outings. Father Riocreux and I were getting ready for an expedition to a neighbouring river

798 *Diary 1856-1859...* page 111.

799 *Ibidem*.

800 Letter from Father Reymond to Henri de Brésillac, *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 8, 1242-1243); Dated 16th June 1859.

which was about three days away by foot".⁸⁰¹ Bishop Melchior, on the other hand, was feeling downhearted. He wrote his first letter to Father Planque from Sierra Leone on 19th May: *"The country doesn't look too bad on the material side, but it is a mess without equal regarding morality. The oppressive heat just now, plus the fatigue of the trip and the distress of stepping on each other's toes in a small house with hardly one room, is getting on my nerves..."* He then mentions the epidemic, the number of deaths, the dissolute lifestyle of the Europeans and the enormous expenses which would be incurred in the Mission and in the care of the missionaries. *"All of this has led me to a certain inner sadness that I will hopefully overcome by God's grace. Just now, I am unable to write at length or talk business. I will leave that until later on"*.⁸⁰²

Housing was the first urgent problem to be addressed. Clearly the house in which they were living was too small. Besides, the rent was far too high. After making enquires, Melchior rented the recently deceased Spanish consul's house for a year. This was spacious and comfortable. They converted the largest room into a chapel where they celebrated Mass.

On Saturday (21st May), Bishop Melchior paid a courtesy call on the Governor (Colonel J. Hill) but he was unwell. An appointment was made for some days later.⁸⁰³ On Sunday (22nd May) only a few Catholics came to Mass. This was hardly surprising in the prevailing conditions.

While the latest arrivals were settling in and making some plans for the future, Father Reymond continued his ministry to the sick. While he had already seen the "immense possibilities" for schools

801 Letter from Father Reymond to Henri de Brésillac, *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 8, 1242-1243): Dated 16th June 1859.

802 Letter to Father Planque, *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 1, 454 -455): Dated 19th May 1859.

803 The Governor (who had welcomed the first three missionaries) recovered and received Bishop Melchior graciously. He renewed his commitment to providing the same protection to the Catholic missionaries as he was giving to "the members of other denominations".

in the area, he knew that this would take time. There would also be a need to have missionaries who could speak English well. So, he had decided that the best way of making contact with the local population and establishing friendly relations was by means of an unofficial dispensary. He had mentioned earlier in one of his letters to Lyons: *“I am at present by way of being a doctor (docteur à la mode). There are three doctors in the town and a hospital. But few enough go to them because they must pay for treatment. Neither do they go to the hospital because there they are put on a diet. Thus, I have at present a large clientele, mostly of patients with sores on their legs caused by going about barefoot. I wash the wounds, cover them with camphor and bandage them as best I can. Once the pain ceases, they are quite satisfied”*.⁸⁰⁴

Meanwhile, Bishop Melchior had written to the Secretary General of the “Works for the Propagation of the Faith” in Paris, alerting him to the fact that the needs of the Mission would greatly exceed what had been anticipated. *“Apart from the trips necessary to establish our centres outside Freetown, the yearly maintenance of a missionary alone could cost up to three thousand francs”*. He also informed Bishop Kobes of this and of some other concerns. He added: *“In spite of these sad thoughts, I am fully resolved to do everything possible – and even to die of a broken heart if God so desired – for the success of these Missions; but again, notwithstanding my hope in God’s unlimited power, I cannot state with the same confidence that the time of mercy has arrived for these people”*.⁸⁰⁵

On 25th May, Bishop Melchior began to write his report for “Propaganda Fide”. After expressing the hope that the Sacred Congregation had received his previous letters (as he had not received any replies) Melchior summarized all the events since he and his confreres had left Brest in France on 11th March 1859. He went on to describe the long stay in Dakar where they were

804 Letter of Father Reymond, *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 8, 1170): Dated 18th February 1859.

805 Ibidem: (AMA 2 F 18 - 1859): Dated 19th May 1859.

hosted by the “worthy Holy Ghost missionaries and their Bishop”. He had held many discussions with Bishop Kobes which included the “possible opening of several other points in Africa”. He then outlined the many difficulties of the new Vicariate of Sierra Leone - the climate, the size of the territory, the diversity of tribes and languages, the dominating influence of Protestantism and the high cost of living. *“We will need both plenty of men and money”*. Indeed, the infant Society would need to receive *“powerful encouragements from the Holy See and be the object of its tender solicitude”*. Melchior then added: *“Maybe I am the reason myself for the sort of coldness in our regard that I seem to perceive in the Sacred Congregation. If that is the case, I beg you, Eminence, to forget my mistakes, and to think only about the unfortunate people of Africa for whom Christ died on the Cross, and for whose salvation I want to live and die, no matter how unworthy of joining the divine sacrifice of Mount Calvary my own sacrifice may be”*.⁸⁰⁶

This letter was written before any of the African missionaries had died. Bishop Melchior did not mail it immediately, as the mail-boat would not leave for “several more days” due to its late arrival and the general turmoil in Freetown. He would later add some postscripts.

Father Louis Riocreux

Father Riocreux became unwell on the morning of 26th May. Father Reymond used all his talents, experience and medicines to save his confrere. When these failed, he tried local medicines. *“On 2nd June (Ascension Day) he looked better and we thought that he was saved; the fever seemed to have taken another turn. Unfortunately, it was too late. That same evening at 8 o'clock, he passed away, glad that he had come to Africa, only regretting one thing: that he had not been able to render a better service to the mission”*.⁸⁰⁷

806 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 249 - 251.

807 Letter of Father Reymond to Mr. Henri de Brésillac: *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 8, 1242-1243); Dated 16th June 1859.

Father Louis Riocreux was 26 years old and was the first member of the Society of African Missions to die in Africa.

The death of Father Riocreux came as a great shock to Bishop Melchior. On 3rd June, he added the following postscript to his letter to “Propaganda Fide” (dated 25th May): *“As the mail-boat is not ready to leave with this letter for a few more days, I have time to inform Your Eminence of the great trial and the great calamity the Lord has just sent us. The young priest, Father Riocreux, who had just arrived with me from France, died yesterday, Ascension Day. I am heart-broken. He was a priest full of good health, talents, piety and zeal; and the Lord has snatched him from us at this first hour, before he even had time to put his hand to the plough! His designs are impenetrable. Let us adore them”*.⁸⁰⁸

Bishop Melchior had always liked the boyish, lively, good-humoured and talented Father Riocreux. He had plans for him to open a school, as he always seemed to get on well with children. *“It is an immense misfortune and one that can have very grievous consequences for our work... His death was very calm and gentle, very edifying. I am afraid of the effects which his death may have for the success of the mission. God’s decrees are impenetrable; let us adore them in silence with our broken heart”*.⁸⁰⁹

Father Jean-Baptiste Bresson

Father Bresson had been unwell for some time. On 2th June (two days after the death of Father Riocreux) Bishop Melchior wrote another postscript to his letter to Cardinal Barnabo: *“The hand of God weighs still heavier on us, and it seems to want to wipe out all our plans. And still, it still seems to me that they were all made only for His greater glory. Father Bresson, one of the two priests left to me, died yesterday (the Sunday within the Octave of the Ascension) three days after Father Riocreux. The latest blow can have the most deadly consequences, not only by making it impossible at this time to*

808 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* page 251.

809 *Diary 1856 -1859...* pages 112-113.

*do what we had planned at Freetown and environs, but most of all by the bad effect it can produce on the minds of the young aspirants at the Lyons Seminary... But should this awful trial discourage us? I think not. While a breath is left in me, I will still hope for the success of the African Missions seminary. May I be able to say to the Sovereign Judge when He calls me (maybe it will be tomorrow) that I have, on my side, done absolutely everything that was in my power to do. The frightful epidemic raging here at present is quite out of the ordinary... Proportionally, the Europeans are the most numerous victims. The Protestant Bishop has just died. Nearly all our Catholics are gone... In case this letter does not arrive by the ordinary mail, I am sending a duplicate through the Lyons seminary”.*⁸¹⁰

In what was to be his last entry in his own Diary, Bishop Melchior wrote: *“Another thunderbolt... a real desolation. It leaves me inconsolable. But, by the grace of God, I remain submissive to His holy will, without understanding it”.*⁸¹¹

Later on, Father Reymond gave an explanation for the sudden death of Father Bresson. *“On 29th May, my companion fell ill, not from the climate but from a hernia which he had concealed from everyone. He could not eat and on 5th June, from the want of nourishment and not from the fever, he died. It was only then that I discovered his ailment”.*⁸¹² Father Bresson was 46 years old.

On 10th June, the steam-powered boat *Dalmaith* dropped anchor in Freetown harbour. It was on its way from Gabon and eventually on to Europe. The ship had been forced to seek shelter from a very bad storm. The commander, Lieutenant Vallon, was immediately informed of the health situation in Freetown. He later described it as follows: *“It was a violent epidemic of pernicious bilious fever. Europeans had perished there in big numbers and continued to die every day. Two French missionaries had died already; a brother had*

810 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* pages 251 - 252.

811 *Diary 1856 -1859...* page 113.

812 Letter from Father Reynond to Mr. Henri de Brésillac: *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 8, 1242-1243); Dated 16th June 1859.

been infected and was in a desperate situation, while a second brother was not feeling well".⁸¹³ As the Commander thought that there were no physicians in Freetown at the time, he sent the ship's doctor (Mr. Beauchef) and put the ship's supply of drugs at his disposal. He also noted that Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac was suffering from nagging headaches, "*because he had stayed up at night and gone through much sorrow in the past days at the bedside of his dear patients*".⁸¹⁴

On Sunday 12th June (Pentecost Sunday), Bishop Melchior celebrated Mass which was attended by a few people. Later on that day, he wrote letters to his brother (Henri) and to Mrs Blanchet. He informed them of all the trials which he and his confreres were undergoing, including the loss of the two priests, the illness of the two lay brothers and the feelings of exhaustion which he and Father Reymond were suffering. "*I am half-dead with fatigue, sadness and the dreadful influence of the weather... Will God preserve us, so that we can continue our mission, or does He want this mission to end before it even begins? Only God knows. May His holy will be always done. Humanly speaking, in any case, the misfortune we are going through is a terrible blow for this mission... Pray for us and ask our friends to do so*".⁸¹⁵

On that same evening (12th June), Bishop Melchior showed the first signs of the dreaded fever. Nevertheless, on the following day he accompanied Lieutenant Vallon to visit several sick people on board the *Dalmaith*. They were happy to see him; and he talked and prayed with them for some time. However, on returning to the mainland, Melchior was completely exhausted and had to lie down. Ominously, the first symptoms of the dreaded fever became evident. The Commander recorded the events: "*I immediately went to see him, bringing the doctor with me. The Bishop was lying in the*

813 Letter from A Vallon to Father Planque: *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 8, 1254 - 1255). Dated 14th November 1859.

814 Ibidem.

815 *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 1, 240-241). Dated 12 - 18 June 1859.

living room fully conscious; but in speaking to him, we understood with regret that he had assumed his end was near. There were mainly two fears that besieged him, and he did not stop repeating them during the ensuing days of this first attack: that God would hold him responsible for the mistake he believed he had made by coming to Sierra Leone to establish the headquarters of his mission... and that, if God suddenly called him to His presence, he should be deprived of the joy of receiving the Viaticum in his last moments". Commander Vallon also added that during the benign phases of his illness, Melchior would ask him for information about places which he had visited along the West Coast of Africa (especially Dahomey). But he also expressed fears of the possible negative effects on candidates for the missionary life as a result of the unfolding events in Sierra Leone.⁸¹⁶

Brother Gratien Monnoyeur

On the evening of the 13th June, Brother Gratien died. Father Reymond had assisted him all through his illness and was with him when he died. Bishop Melchior was "*overwhelmed by it and he had no energy left to cry or to eat*".⁸¹⁷ Brother Gratien had done well since he had joined the Society of African Missions in March 1858 and made his solemn resolution on 25th October 1858. He would have his place in the overall plan for Sierra Leone and, with God's help, would make a significant contribution to the work of the mission. Now, he was dead at the age of 29.

Temporary Improvement

On 16th June, Bishop showed some signs of improvement. Father Reymond was cautiously optimistic that the disease was receding and the Bishop was "out of danger". Certainly, the Founder was well enough to write some letters. The recipients included Father de Gellis (his missionary friend in India), his cousin Louis de Brésillac, Father Riocreux (the uncle of the recently deceased

816 Letter of A. Vallon to Father Planque: *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 8, 1254 - 1255). Dated: 14th November 1859.

817 Letter of Father Reymond to Mr. Henri de Brésillac: *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 8, 1242-1243). Dated: 16th June 1859.

missionary) and Bishop Kobes. He also added postscripts to several letters which he had already written.

Among the postscripts was a third one to the letter which he had written to “Propaganda Fide” on 25th May: *“The post is going tomorrow. The hand of God is weighing heavier and heavier on us. My other travelling companion, Brother Gratien, died on Pentecost Monday. The other brother is leaving for France. I have been very ill myself. Only today have I been able to get up. They say that the danger is over. I am overwhelmed with sadness, weariness and fever. A few days ago, we were six. Now we are two, the excellent Father Reymond and myself. May the will of God be accomplished... And now, if God preserves my life, what ought to be done? I await your advice”*.⁸¹⁸

On that same day (16th June), Father Reymond noticed that the bishop looked happier and was walking around the house. It had begun to rain again, and the temperature had dropped a bit. Hopefully, the Bishop would be able to celebrate Mass soon.

On 18th June, Melchior wrote to Father Planque. *“May God’s holy name be blessed! His ways are impenetrable. Let us adore them and submit. As for the suffering brought about by the difficulties his hand is sending us - I hope that He will not take offense as it is given without murmuring - I can say that it knows no limits”*. Melchior then recounted the terrible news of the deaths of their confreres and his own fears of the possible effects on the aspirants in Lyons. He mentioned that Brother Eugene was being sent back to France. Father Reymond would convey the reasons in detail, as he was feeling very weak himself. He then states: *“In spite of all of this, I will go alone, next month if possible, on a journey to Dahomey, to see if it might not be better to establish a centre there. If only Fathers Borghero and Brossard could come out immediately, what a help they would be! As regards the Brothers, do not send us any unless they are*

818 *Mission and Foundation Documents...* page 252. In a footnote on that same page, we read: *“On 20th June, Brother Eugene (the 6th member of the Society of African Missions) went back on Commander Vallon’s ‘Dialmath’ to Goree and France. He left the Society and joined the Trappists at Aiguebelle. He died at Privas on 10th February 1905”*.

perfectly solid. The example of Brother Eugene has been a big lesson.” As he did in all his letters to Father Planque, the Founder spoke about the formation programme in Lyons. In this (his final letter), he emphasised the need to cultivate the virtue of obedience in the aspirants and a willingness to follow the directions of the Superiors. He concluded by stating that he felt very weak. He had been taking “*medicine after medicine*” for eight days. “*I am overwhelmed with sadness and fatigue*”.⁸¹⁹

On Monday 20th June, the *Dailmath* was ready to resume its voyage. The damages had finally been repaired. Earlier, Commander Vallon had invited Melchior to come as far as *Gorée* where conditions would be better than in Freetown. The Bishop did consider the kind invitation but, as he was feeling a little better, he decided to stay in Sierra Leone. According to the Commander, another reason was Melchior’s conviction that, as he was in charge of the mission in Sierra Leone and the community, to absent himself (even for a short time) would not be the right thing to do. Mr. Vallon regretted later that he did not insist. However, before leaving Freetown, the Commander left Melchior and Father Reymond in the hands of Mr. Alphonse Seignac de Lesseps who was the interim French Vice-consul.⁸²⁰

On 21st June, Bishop Melchior fell gravely ill and was assailed by fever. Father Reymond also began to show the initial symptoms. A French trader (Mr. Charles Bremond) who was living in Freetown had come to know and appreciate the missionaries. He had recently lost his own wife to the epidemic. After he had consulted Mr. Seignac de Lesseps and the missionaries, it was decided to move them away from the Spanish Consul’s house, where they had experienced so much sorrow. Bishop Melchior would go to

819 Mission and Foundation Documents... pages 253 - 254. In a footnote to this document, we read: “*Brother Eugene, instead of doing his work [the work allocated to him], started to preach in Freetown for the instant conversion of the Protestants. Apparently, the ‘African sun’ was too strong for his head. He caused a lot of problems in a short time*”. (page 254).

820 Letter of A. Vallon to Father Planque: *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 8, 1254 -1255): Dated 14th November 1859.

the residence of Mr. Seignac de Lesseps and Father Reymond to the house of Mr. Bremond. The hope was that by doing this, both missionaries would receive better care and attention.

Between 21st and 25th June, Bishop Melchior grew weaker. He was being cared for by Mr. Ferdinand Seignac de Lesseps (a brother of the sick Vice-Consul) and his staff. A doctor called at the house from time to time, as did Mr. Bremond and an Irish trader (Mr. Quinn). Father Reymond was also exhausted and was showing the initial symptoms of the fever.

The Founder's Last Moments ⁸²¹

Mr. Bremond has testified that he was called to Mr. Seignac de Lessep's house on Saturday morning 25th June 1859. *"I found the Bishop very agitated. He had been and was still vomiting black coagulated blood, a sad premonition that death was near. With his usual kindness, he asked me about my young children's and Father Reymond's health, and then he very calmly said to me: 'My dear son, what I was dreading is now happening: the disaster will in fact take place. Do you think that Father Reymond could come to see me'?... My answer was clear and concise. 'No, I replied, in soul and conscience, I believe that telling Father Reymond about the situation in which you think you are would be a deathblow to him'. He replied: 'Fiat voluntas tua' [May Your will be done] but it will be really hard to die without receiving the Sacrament of Extreme Unction".*⁸²²

Mr. Bremond began to reflect on his decision. Had he the right to conceal from Father Reymond the seriousness of his Superior's condition? Had he the right to deny the Bishop the Last

821 There are two testimonies which describe the last dramatic moments of Bishop Melchior's life. The first is by Mr. Bremond (the French trader) who was an actual eye-witness. It is quite detailed. The second is an account by Mr. Alphonse Seignac de Lesseps (the French Vice-Consul) who wrote to the French Foreign Ministry and Bishop Kobes) after he had recovered. It is much shorter. (cf. *Archives of the Mission of Dakar...* (AMD 18th August 1859) and *Archives of the Holy Ghost Fathers...* (ACSSp.1 A 658). There are no significant differences between the two testimonies.

822 Letter of Bremond, C. to "Propaganda Fide", October 1859. Archives of Propaganda Fide... (APF Congressi, Congo, Senegal, Vol.VII, ff. 660 - 665.

Sacraments? After consulting the doctor and Vice-Consul, Mr. Bremond decided to inform Father Reymond.

Father Reymond immediately asked to be taken to the Bishop and was helped from his own sick bed. *“A touching scene took place there in my presence and that of two other people from the city. Bishop and Father Reymond embraced each other religiously for a moment and shared their last adieu on this earth... I heard Bishop de Brésillac saying to Father Reymond: ‘If you have the joy of overcoming your illness, write to Rome and tell the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide what has happened’”*.⁸²³ They then asked Bishop Melchior if he had anything particular to say to his family. He simply gestured by a movement of his head to indicate “no”. Then those people present were asked to leave the room while the Bishop made his Confession (the Sacrament of Penance).

A short time later, the little group were called back into the room. Then, in the presence of Messrs. Bremond, Quinn and Ferdinand de Lesseps, Father Reymond administered the Sacrament of the Sick (Extreme Unction). Father Reymond was taken back immediately to Mr. Bremond’s house, as the Bishop had explicitly asked him to care for Father Reymond “until the end”. Mr. Bremond describes the last events as follows: *“From that moment on, (it must have been eleven o’clock) the disease progressed very rapidly and all the signs of an imminent death were drawn on the illustrious patient’s face. He became very agitated but remained fully conscious until half an hour before dying. Then, he raised his eyes to Heaven, and with a sweetness I will never forget, he said ‘faith, hope and ch... I completed the phrase myself: and charity! ‘Thank you’ he said to me very softly. He passed away at 20 past one in the afternoon, in perfect peace, but after a terrifying agony of nearly half an hour”*.⁸²⁴

Melchior Marie Joseph de Marion Brésillac, Titular Bishop of

823 Letter of Bremond, C... It was this overheard remark that motivated Mr. Charles Bremond to write a full account to “Propaganda Fide”.

824 Ibidem.

Prusa, Vicar Apostolic of Sierra Leone and Founder of the Society of African Missions died on Saturday 25th June 1859. Born on 2nd December in 1813, he was approaching his forty-sixth birthday. More precisely, he was forty-five years, six months and twenty-two days old. His mission in Sierra Leone lasted forty-two days.

Bishop Melchior's carers dressed him in his Episcopal vestments and the funeral took place on the following day (26th June) at 9.00 a.m. According to Mr. Bremond, the Catholic Bishop received the same tribute as his Protestant counterpart (who had died the previous month):

*"The Governor and the General Staff, a detachment of troops, the French and the American Consuls, plus all the traders and the distinguished inhabitants of the region, accompanied our poor Bishop, who had attracted everyone's respect in such a short time, to his last dwelling. The Protestant Minister in charge of the Sierra Leone bishopric delivered a few noble words at the tomb out of a Christian heart, to which we all listened with great emotion".*⁸²⁵ Mr. Seignac de Lesseps (who had recovered sufficiently to attend the burial) wrote to Bishop Kobes: *"I did everything I could, I assure you, to bury Bishop de Marion Brésillac with all the honours due to his rank. The Governor and all the authorities of the Colony accompanied the body to its last dwelling".*⁸²⁶

Concerning the death of Bishop Melchior, Mr. Seignac de Lesseps later wrote to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs: *"This worthy Prelate was the second last to die; he was stricken more by the pain of seeing his priests die before his eyes than by his own illness... There has been sincere regret for these worthy and courageous missionaries, not only from the Catholic community of Sierra Leone, but also from a*

825 Letter of Bremond, C....

826 Letter of Mr. Seignac de Lesseps to Bishop Kobes. *African Missions Archives...* (AMA 2 F 8, 1244). Dated 20th July 1859. In this letter, Mr. Seignac de Lesseps also asked Bishop Kobes what he was to do with the money which Father Reymond had entrusted to him because of the circumstances. Bishop Kobes informed Father Planque who received his letter on 12th August 1859.

large part of the indigenous population not belonging to any kind of religion. Their house had become quickly a shelter for the poor, grieving people who found in them all the help and consolation they were able to give, both regarding spiritual suffering and bodily illness".⁸²⁷

Commander Vallon (of the *Dalmiath*) wrote to Father Planque some months later: "I left Sierra Leone for Gorée, carrying with me the memories of Bishop's character and virtues, and of Father Reymond's courageous self-sacrifice, which will never fade away".⁸²⁸

Father Louis Reymond

Father Reymond's health deteriorated rapidly after Bishop Melchior's death. Mr. Seignac de Lesseps states: "On the evening of 27th June, he spent the evening in prayer until midnight suffering from a strong fever, feeling that his end was near and firmly convinced that very soon he would receive the prize for the commitment to the noble mission he had undertaken".⁸²⁹ Mr. Bremond adds the following: "My servant called me at 3 o'clock in the morning, on the night of 27th to the 28th. I found Father Reymond unconscious and agonizing. Everything was useless. We could not make him open his eyes or say a word... He breathed his last at precisely 6.00 a.m. On the evening of the same day, at 5 o'clock, his mortal remains accompanied by a lot of people, were returned to the earth, next to his brothers and his worthy and venerable Bishop, who had preceded him".⁸³⁰ Father Reymond was aged 36. He had been in Sierra Leone for 5 months and 15 days.

Thus ended the first mission of the Society of African Missions to Africa.

827 Letter of the interim French Vice-Consul to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. *African Missions Archives ...* (AMA 11/032, no.143/77, 1859): Dated 20th July 1859.

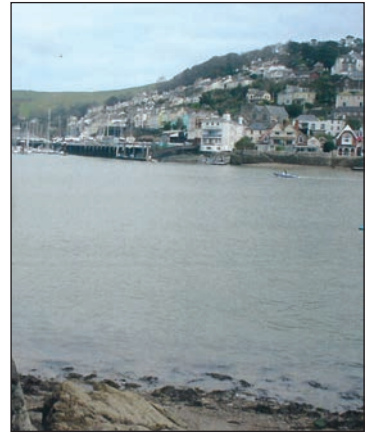
828 Letter of Mr. Vallon to Father Planque. *African Missions Archives ...* (AMA 2 F 8, 1254 - 1255). Dated 14th November 1859.

829 Letter of Mr. Seignac de Lesseps to Bishop Kobes. *Archives of the Mission of Dakar...* (AMD) and *Archives of the Holy Ghost Fathers...* (ACSSp. 1 A 658): Dated 18th August 1859.

830 Letter of Mr. Bremond to "Propaganda Fide". *Archives of Propaganda Fide...* (APF, Congressi, Congo, Senegal, Volume VII 660 - 665): Dated: October 1859.



9.1 Map showing Brest and Lorient



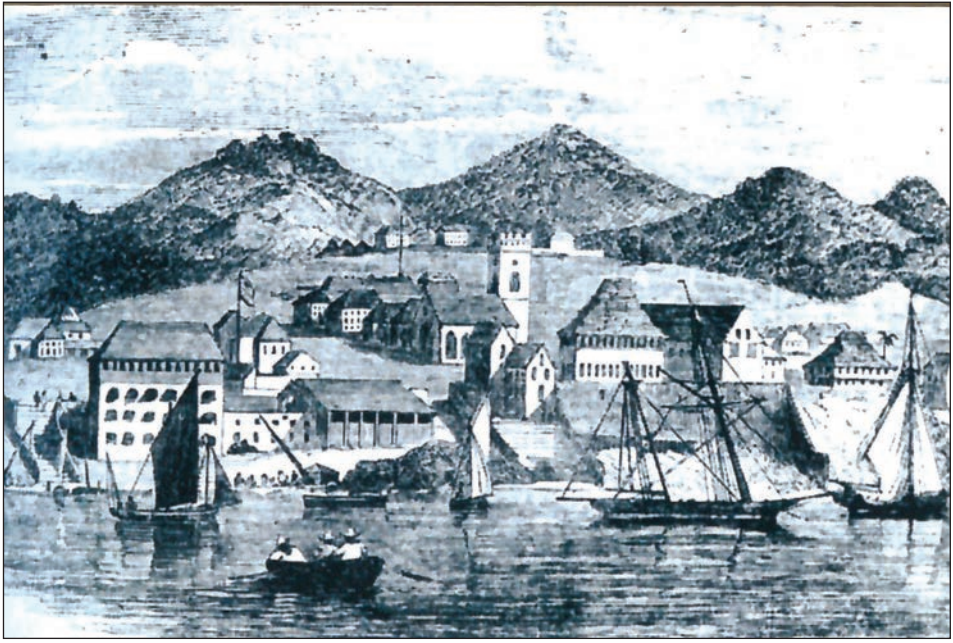
9.2 Dartmouth Harbour, England



9.3 Gorée, West Africa



9.4 Dakar, West Africa



9.5 Freetown in the 19th Century



9.6 Founder's Tomb at Freetown

Postscript

A Sketch of the Legacy of Melchior de Marion Brésillac

The life of the Venerable Melchior de Marion Brésillac, which we have traced from its beginnings in Castlenaudary, France (1813) to its end in Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa (1859) could be summarized in a few pages. It was an incredibly busy life, entirely focused on Jesus Christ and in carrying out His mission in the world. Gifted with remarkable intelligence, analytical skills and organizational ability, Melchior was called upon to assume very difficult and complex roles from a very early age. As we have seen in his *Souvenirs* and other writings, he never made major decisions without prayerful reflection and listening to the views of others. In ecclesiastical matters, he paid particular attention to the directives of the Pope and the Holy See. He was also big enough to acknowledge and apologise for his mistakes. His one goal in life was the service of his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and the implementation of His mission here on earth.

Melchior had formally stated the goals of his own life in 1842 at the age of 29:

- *“To be a missionary from the bottom of my heart*
- *To neglect no means of advancing the work of God*
- *To use all my means, all my strength, all my study, to foster the formation of a local clergy”.*

As we saw in the outline of his life, he revisited these resolutions regularly and remained true to them to the end.

Several commentators have noted his complex personality, his physical and moral strength, his love of peace and quiet, his interesting perceptions on Creation and on the many places he visited. Others have commented on his 19th century theological

and spiritual mindset, the place of the Cross in his life, his prayerfulness and strong devotion to Mary (the Mother of Jesus) and the occasional flashes of criticism and humour in his writings.

As for me, I see Melchior de Marion Brésillac primarily as a “Precursor” of many aspects of life and religion which we take for granted in the 21st century. He was one who “*prepared the ways of the Lord*”.

1. The Role of Conscience

All through his missionary experience in India, Bishop Melchior was troubled by a problem of conscience. On many occasions, he wrote about the Oath which all priests were required to take regarding the local Indian customs. This involved a solemn promise regarding religious rites and ceremonies and other aspects connected with the caste system. Many of these were expressly forbidden by the Holy See.

He agonized and prayed over these challenges. He thoroughly researched the issues involved and sought the advice of many (including the Holy See). Guided by the word of God (“*a Light for our path*”: Psalm 119) and the writings of Saint Paul (especially the Letter to the Romans), Melchior gradually came to the conclusion that some of the directives on concrete acts were not in conformity with his own moral judgements. Particularly in a leadership role as a Bishop, Melchior decided that he could not enforce the regulations on the priests and people of his time. That is why he resigned from his post as Vicar Apostolic of Coimbatore.

Melchior de Marion Brésillac epitomizes the *personalist* understanding of conscience proclaimed by the Fathers of Vatican Two (1962-1965): “*Deep within their consciences men and women discover a law which they have not laid upon themselves and which they must continue. Its voice, ever calling them to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells them inwardly at the right moment to do*

this, shun that. For they have in their hearts a law inscribed by God. Their dignity rests in observing this law, and by it they will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and the sanctuary of the human person. There they are alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths". (Church in the Modern World: paragraph 16: Dominican Publications 1996).

Following the traditional teaching of an *informed* conscience (associated with theologians like Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Alphonsus Liguori), Melchior exemplified the *exercise* of conscience. In displaying and defending its dignity, Bishop de Brésillac could make his own the words of the Psalmist: "*May my ways be steady in doing your will. Then I shall not be shamed, if my gaze is fixed on your commandments. I thank you with a sincere heart for teaching me your upright judgements*". (Psalm 119, verses 5 - 7).

Throughout his life, Melchior showed a great love for the Sacred Scriptures. He spent many hours in reflecting on the texts (particularly the New Testament) and found in them sure guidance, solace and comfort. He emphasised for the Christians of his time, the necessity to read, accept and endeavour to live out the Gospel message in their daily lives. He was well aware of his own shortcomings and failings, and he was fully aware that the journey towards realizing the great ideals was a life-long pilgrimage. In his own writings, homilies and retreats, the Scriptures took central place. He was a man of the Gospel and he made it clear to his missionaries that the "*Proclamation of the Word*" is at the core of all evangelisation. All of this would be reflected and amplified in Church Documents of the 20th and 21st centuries.

In 1990, Pope Saint John Paul II stated in his encyclical "*Redemptoris Missio*" (paragraph 44): "*Proclamation is the permanent priority of mission. The Church cannot elude Christ's explicit command, nor deprive men and women of the Good News about their being loved and saved by God*". He then goes on to quote Vatican Two (*Decree on Missionary Activity of the Church. Ad Gentes: paragraph 13*):

Evangelisation will always contain - as the foundation, centre and at the same time the summit of its dynamism - a clear proclamation that in Jesus Christ... salvation is offered to all God's people, as a gift of God's grace and mercy".

Following the Ordinary Synod of the Church on the *Word of God* (2008), Pope Benedict XVI wrote: *"The Synod reaffirmed that 'the the mission of proclaiming the word of God is the task of all disciples of Jesus Christ based on their Baptism'... A consciousness of this must be revived in every family, parish, community, association and ecclesial movement. The Church, as a mystery of communion, is thus entirely missionary, and everyone, according to his or her proper state of life, is called to give an incisive contribution to the proclamation of Christ... [Further] "The immense horizons of the Church's mission and the complexity of today's situation call for new ways in effectively communicating the word of God... It is very important that every form of proclamation keeps in mind, first of all, the intrinsic relationship between the communication of God's word and Christian witness. The very credibility of our proclamation depends on this. On the one hand, the word must communicate everything that the Lord himself has told us. On the other hand, it is indispensable through witness, to make this word credible, lest it appear merely as a beautiful philosophy or utopia, rather than a reality that can be lived and itself give life". (Verbum Domini: Post-Synodal Exhortation 2010; paragraphs 94, 97).*

In our time, we too are called and encouraged to reflect on the message of Jesus and to proclaim it through all the means of communication now available. Melchior has also re-emphasised for our world that the acceptance and living of the Gospel, in a generous and self-sacrificing way, brings true freedom and peace. Through reflection on the word and on the urgent personal, social and cultural issues of our day, we are in a position to form our own consciences and undertake appropriate courses of action.

2. The Dignity of Persons

Melchior de Marion Brésillac had received a broad education in the so-called “liberal arts” (history, literature, humanities, social sciences, philosophy and science) right from his childhood. He was also well versed in “ecclesiastical studies” (theology, scripture, liturgy and canon law). Flowing from all of this, but especially from an informed and refined conscience, he has left us a legacy of respect for each and every human being.

In all that Melchior said and did, he recognised the dignity of the human person. He believed that all human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, have by their very existence, an inherent value and worth. This was in no way lessened by the colour of one’s skin, gender, age or level of income. That is why in the India of the 19th century, he advocated and worked for the rights of *all* to education, to a worthy standard of living and to access to health-care.

As we have seen in his *Souvenirs*, the social dimension of life and the rights and well-being of people, were at the core of his missionary commitment. His own respect for the Indian people was seen and appreciated by them. They felt that he had confidence in them. Simply because they came from different strata of society and backgrounds did not label them as competent or incompetent, talented or limited. His frequent advice and admonitions to his missionaries regarding their attitudes and actions towards the people were strong and heartfelt. Melchior saw prejudice “*as a cloud over the understanding of the mind and especially over the understanding of the heart*”. He called for politeness and unflinching courtesy to all, even when there is disagreement on issues or actions. In an age when ethnocentrism was rampant and colonial powers and unbridled capitalism dominant, the lonely voice of a Precursor calling and working for a better way would eventually yield some fruits, but only “in due season”.

In a long list of National and International Declarations on Human Rights, I mention two:

1. The *Universal Declaration on Human Rights* (1948). This was agreed after the horrors of the Second World War (1939-1945). We read: “*The inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world*”. The Declaration goes on to spell out these rights in 30 articles. The first two articles include the basic principles of dignity, liberty, equality and brotherhood. These are followed by specific rights pertaining to individuals, rights in relation to one another, and then the social, political, economic, cultural and spiritual rights.

2. *The Second Vatican Council* (1962 - 1965) called on all Christians and people of good-will to focus on the human being - “*whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will*”. It speaks of a development which is based on the unqualified acceptance of the inherent dignity of the human person and spells out what is essential for human existence: “*food, clothing, shelter, the right to choose a state in life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one’s conscience, to protection of privacy and to rightful freedom in matters of religion*”. (*Church in the Modern World*: paragraph 26).

The Vatican Two Document on *Religious Liberty* (1965) specifies the right of individuals and communities to social and civil freedom in *religious* matters. They are “*to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to their beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others*”. (*Dignitatis Humanae*: paragraph 2).

As we look at our world in 2021, it is with real concern that we are witnessing such intolerance among peoples due to radical

religious fundamentalism. News of killings, displacement, hostage taking and forcible “conversions” fill news bulletins, as well as the extremely disturbing pictures which are flashed across television screens. This lamentable situation has become a real challenge to the governments, international agencies, religious movements and churches of our day. It is also a challenge to each and every one of us.

3. Inculturation

Nowadays, the movement towards “inculturation” seems to be the obvious and the right thing to do. In the 19th century, this was not the case in India and in many other parts of Asia, despite heroic efforts by some individuals such as Father Matteo Ricci. S.J. (1552 -1610: who worked in China), and Father Roberto de Nobili S.J. (1577 - 1656: who served as a missionary in India).

Since that time, anthropological research has made people increasingly aware of the enormous variety in social arrangements, human cultures and mentalities throughout the world. Many scholars and leaders (particularly in the church) had been trained in the classicist mould i.e. that culture is something normative, that philosophy is a perennial thing and that all we had to do was to imitate models and proclaim universally valid laws. (In some places this system of formation continues to be the case). However, in our time we now know that culture is empirical and that cumulative human development differs according to the different histories of peoples. The consequence, as the Second Vatican Council points out, is that “*the Church is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to ... any particular way of life or any customary pattern of living, ancient or modern*” (*Church in the Modern World*: paragraph 58). Every people must be allowed to develop along the lines of their own culture. Religious and social engineering by outsiders (even if this is well-meaning) can make a people more dependent and less free.

The First African Synod of Bishops has made a commitment to

inculturation. In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (*Ecclesia in Africa*: 1995, paragraph 59) Pope Saint John Paul II wrote: “On several occasions, the Synod Fathers stressed the particular importance for evangelisation of inculturation, the process by which ‘catechesis takes flesh in various cultures’. Inculturation includes two dimensions: on the one hand ‘the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration into Christianity’, and on the other, ‘the insertion of Christianity in the various cultures’. The Synod considers inculturation an urgent priority in the life of the particular churches, for a firm rooting of the Gospel in Africa. It is ‘a requirement for evangelisation, a path towards full evangelisation’ and one of the greatest challenges for the church on the Continent on the eve of the Third Millennium”.

The Asian Synod of Bishops made a similar commitment a few years later. The same Pope wrote: “In the process of encountering the world’s different cultures, the Church not only transmits her truths and values and renews cultures from within, but she also takes from cultures the positive elements already found in them. This is the obligatory path for evangelisers in presenting the Christian faith and making it part of a people’s cultural heritage. Conversely, the various cultures, when refined and renewed in the light of the Gospel, can become true expressions of the one Christian faith. ‘Through inculturation the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission’. This engagement with cultures has always been part of the Church’s pilgrimage through history. But it has a special urgency today in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural situation of Asia, where Christianity is still too often seen as foreign”. (*Ecclesia in Asia*: 1999, paragraph 21).

While many elements of the social stratification system of India and its customs were clearly not in keeping with basic Christian teaching, Melchior de Marion Brésillac did not favour either of the two extremes which were in his time being advocated i.e. zero tolerance or total acceptance. From his own assiduous study and

practical experience, he wrote many thousands of words on the need for “tolerance and acceptance” of some customs which were clearly not superstitious, and the removal of others from an Oath which all missionaries were required to take. Private and varied interpretations of the regulations were not acceptable to him. However, he knew that it would take many years before thorough studies could be carried out and for approval to be granted by the Holy See. Even then, there would be a need for regular updating.

Melchior believed in the “*Principle of Gradualness*” but, once convinced, he worked boldly, courageously and relentlessly towards a solution to the vexed question of the “Malabar Rites”. To assist in this process, he involved the local Christian communities, as it was their “right and duty” to participate in all decisions which directly affected them.

4. Local Clergy

It was perfectly clear to Melchior that, in order to assure the church of a permanent and essential presence in India, there had to be a local, indigenous clergy. And so, he pushed ahead with his other great resolution and life-long commitment, namely the formation of a local clergy. This was not a new or original idea in the churches of some parts of India. The theory had been well signalled and enunciated over many decades. But in some places (even beyond India, such as Australia and the United States of America), there was no sense of its urgency or of its significance for local, indigenous communities.

In his *Souvenirs*, Melchior records in great detail the need for an educated and well-respected clergy (something that was particularly necessary because of the caste system). He also writes on the indifference, the challenges, the outright opposition and his own personal traumas in what turned out to be arguably the most successful outcome of his twelve years on Mission in India. The work of Bishop Luquet in Rome and Melchior’s own contribution

“in the mission field” influenced the writing of *Neminem profecto* of Gregory XVI (1845) which made it clear that forming an indigenous, diocesan clergy throughout the world was urgent and obligatory.

Even Melchior’s severest critics had to admit that his work in the Pondicherry College-Seminary bore fruit in a remarkably short time. When he was in a position to establish a Seminary in Coimbatore, he was able to organize and set up a Seminary in accordance with his own vision and understanding of the formation required for the India of his time. He kept in close touch with the students and with his talented and his most trustworthy colleague Father Metral. (Incidentally, Father Metral was appointed as Bishop of Coimbatore in 1857. However, he died at the age of 55, before the letter of appointment could reach him). The fruits of their dedicated work would appear in due course.

Of the first two students to whom Bishop Melchior gave tonsure, one did not persevere. Not long afterwards, he gave tonsure to four more, all of whom persevered. All five candidates were ordained to the priesthood. Two received ordination on 29th May 1859 (a month before the death of Bishop Melchior in Africa) and three others in 1862. These became the “*five pillars of the Indian clergy in the mission of Coimbatore*” (L. Bechu: *History of the Coimbatore Mission*: Bangalore. 1948 page 21). One of them died in 1920 at the age of 87. He often expressed during his long life his great affection for the man who had given him the opportunity to become a priest. The 2021 Directory of the Diocese of Coimbatore states that there are 125 indigenous diocesan clergy for 250,139 Catholics in the diocese (which has been greatly reduced in size). These local priests minister in 65 of the 70 parishes.

5. The Goan Schism

This schism was another matter of deep concern to Bishop Melchior when he served in India. We have read that suspicion, competition and even violence were at their height during his ministry there. However, in his Report to “Propaganda Fide” (1854), he stated his personal belief that this would decrease in time, provided that “suitable” Bishops were appointed (particularly in Goa and Macao) and that “properly formed” clergy were in place. Happily, this proved to be the case.

Another Concordat was signed in 1857 between all the parties involved, which gave tranquillity for the following few decades. The Papal Document “*Humanae Salutatis Auctor*” (Pope Leo XIII: 1886) brought peace to all the affected areas. It also divided the country ecclesiastically into Provinces, Dioceses and Prefectures Apostolic. It would take until 1939 for the last traces of the schism to disappear.

6. The Paris Foreign Missions

On a personal level, Melchior’s relations with his own congregation (“*The Paris Foreign Missions*”) caused him pain and anxiety. He regularly expressed his love for his Society and his conviction that its initial ideas were excellent. However, some “accidental defects” had crept in over the years which had made it less effective in providing the Church with the particular service for which it was born. He had no doubt that there continued to be many very good missionaries who were willing and capable of offering great service to the work of the missions, but they were isolated and hampered by the existing statutes of the M.E.P.

In his view, the Society was a “headless” body or more correctly, it had many “heads” in the Vicars Apostolic who were very far distant from each other and were often preoccupied with the issues in their own jurisdictions. The “Superior of the Paris Seminary” had

his own board in Paris, but was often slow in responding, had only one vote (cumulatively) and made “binding decisions” without much discussion. Melchior felt that the M.E.P. Statutes (which had never received official approval from the Holy See) needed to be reformed, so as to obtain greater unity and cohesion. As a possible method to achieve this, he suggested that “Propaganda Fide” could ask all the Vicars Apostolic if they desired to have reform. If so, they were invited to suggest the means to achieve this. The Sacred Congregation could then gather the information, all the ideas and proposals for study and for eventual agreement.

In 1856, “Propaganda Fide” began this process. At its invitation, the “Superior of the Paris Seminary” sent out an invitation to all Vicars Apostolic, convoking a meeting at Hong Kong in 1860. Its stated aim was to modify certain points in the Rule. However, the meeting did not take place. Nonetheless, a first draft of the revised rule was prepared with a view to presenting it at the First Vatican Council (1870) when the Vicars Apostolic would be together. This draft envisaged having a Superior General for the Society. It was not accepted by two of the Vicars Apostolic. The result was a long delay in the process. It was only in 1890 that the text was approved by the Holy See. The Procurator of the M.E.P. at that time, who had known Melchior in India, told Father Planque that “*in the end, the Paris Foreign Missions had to bring in everything that Bishop de Brésillac had been advocating*”. (*African Missions Archives... AMA 2 F 12*).

7. The “Malabar Rites”

As it turned out, the difficult question of the “Malabar Rites” was also not resolved for many years. With the arrival of the so-called “era of enfranchisement”, a meeting of Vicars Apostolic in Manchuria (1935) sent a report to Rome concerning ceremonies in honour of Confucius. Pope Pius XI took a liberal stand on the issue. The following year, marriage, funeral and other customs

(hitherto banned) were declared “tolerable” in Japan. In 1939, Pope Pius XII issued an Instruction on Chinese Rites, which declared that certain ceremonies which were for centuries linked with pagan, “heathen” attitudes were now seen as having no more than a social significance. It was only on 9th April 1940 that the Sacred Congregation of “Propaganda Fide” abolished the Oath which all the missionaries had to take in India ever since the days of Pope Clement XII (1734) and which caused Melchior such agony of conscience.

In concluding this part of a sketch of Melchior’s legacy, I note an assessment made by the eminent Missiologist Pierre Charles S.J. (1883-1954): “*God’s bewildering Providence placed this sensitive and tender man in the middle of a tough battle, and granted him the inflexibility that goes with holy obstinacy.. He never bargained with what appeared to him to be the supreme interest of the Church, and the raison d’etre of the missions*”. (*Echo des Missions Africaines...* May-June 1928, 107 - 111,110).

The Bishops who succeeded him in Coimbatore have also testified to the “outstanding qualities” of Bishop Melchior. For example, on the occasion of the centenary of his death, his successor wrote: “*Bishop de Brésillac is a well-known personality, still well-remembered here. Several monuments perpetuate his memory. I have heard senior missionaries saying he was a hundred years ahead of his time. He is a saint and a heroic model for missionaries*” (*Letter from Bishop Francis M. Savari Muthu...* Dated 12th March 1959). Personally, I have had the opportunity to visit Southern India on several occasions, over twenty-five years after this Bishop’s testimony. I have seen the reverence with which his name is treated, especially in Carumattampatty and Coimbatore.

For us in the 21st century, we too could learn from Melchior’s profound conviction that actual circumstances, structures and mental categories need not remain static or time-bound. For him, this applied to society (e.g. the caste system and customs) and to

the church (e.g. the question of “local clergy” and rites). Something better is always possible. One must continue to push out the frontiers of thought and action. This should be carried out in an honest and respectful manner. In doing this, the courage, zeal and “boldness” of Melchior de Marion Brésillac, his persistence and his single-minded commitment, his understanding and acceptance of the Cross - as well as his respect for and acceptance of legitimate authority in both church and state - *all* of these traits have served as an inspiration and encouragement to the members of the Society which he founded. Indeed, they could serve as a model for all people of goodwill, and for all seasons.

8. Legacy to Africa

On hearing of the death of Bishop Melchior and his companions in Freetown, Sierra Leone, Pope Pius IX exclaimed “*Sunt Martyres*” (“They are Martyrs”). He then added: “*The Work will live... yes, it will live*”. News of the deaths in Africa reached Father Planque and the little community in Lyons in letters from the Superior General of the Holy Ghost Fathers (11th August 1859), from Bishop Kobes of Dakar (20th August) and, a few days later, from the French Foreign Ministry. It was published in the *Gazette de Lyon* and in *l’Univers* on 19th August 1859.

The community at Lyons (consisting of Fathers Planque, Borghero and Eddé, two Brothers and four or five seminarians) met to discuss the situation. Father Papetard (Associate member) was also involved. Already, some “outsiders” were advising dissolution of the infant society. However, a decision was soon reached and sent to “Propaganda Fide”. Father Planque wrote: “*God did not leave us without consolation in the midst of such great pain. Our candidates are more firm than ever in their resolution. Already, I have received five new requests for admission, three of which come from priests*”.... (African Missions Archives... AMA 2 F 8, 1252; 2 B. Vol.1: dated 26th August 1859).

The Acting Leader (Father Planque) informed Cardinal Barnabo that he would go to Rome to discuss all aspects - past, present and possible future of the Society of African Missions. He left for Rome on 18th September 1859. He was well received and had several discussions with the Cardinal Prefect of "Propaganda Fide". On hearing that the group was willing to continue the mission in Africa, Pope Pius IX exclaimed: "*Dio sia benedetto*" ("*Blessed be God*"). Father Planque pointed out the very important role of the Congregation in establishing the Society, the unanimous decision of the "little" community to continue and the fact that the Founder "*was able to think about the future, and had endeavoured not to become indispensable, in such a way that the Society was collated with its own dynamics and its own life*". He also pointed out that the infant Society was ready to assume the mission of Dahomey which the Founder had requested on several occasions. Father Planque felt that in the particular circumstances, this mission was more suitable and could begin almost at once. (*African Missions Archives... AMA 2 B.Vol.1: dated 27th September 1859*).

After a series of consultations and having fulfilled all the necessary protocols, the Holy See created the Apostolic Vicariate of Dahomey on 28th August 1860. This included the vast territory between the Rivers Volta and Niger, with no territorial limits to the interior. The territory was then formally assigned to the Society of African Missions, and Father Borghero was appointed the *Superior ad Interim* on 2nd December. The Vicariate of Sierra Leone was reassigned to the Holy Ghost Fathers. The Sacred Congregation of "Propaganda Fide" continued to regard Father Planque as the Superior of the Lyons Seminary and of the entire project, thus following the nomination which Bishop Melchior had made in 1858.

On 5th January 1861 (seventeen months after the events in Freetown), Fathers Borghero (Italian: aged 31), Eddé (French: aged 26) and Fernandez (Spanish: aged 25) set out for Dahomey (now

the Republic of Benin). Father Edde had been ill throughout the voyage. While they were awaiting a ship at Freetown to continue their voyage further along the Coast to Dahomey, Father Edde died. He was buried beside the Founder and the first missionaries. Regrettably, this pattern would continue. Between 1859 and 1914, the Society of African Missions suffered about 175 deaths from tropical diseases. There were no vaccines. Several missionaries died within a year of reaching Africa. All of them worked in a spirit of faith, hope and love to prepare the ground and to sow the seed, so that others would reap and “gather in” a harvest in God’s own time. The Founder had shown them the *permanent validity* of the mission of the church and the need to continue promoting it.

The mission of the Society of African Missions (S.M.A.) gradually extended in Africa. Members arrived in Nigeria in 1868. They spread to South Africa (1873), to Egypt in 1877, to Ghana in 1880, to Cote d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast) in 1895, to Liberia in 1906, to Togo in 1918 and to Niger in 1931. After the Second World War (1939-1945), S.M.A. missions were established in the Congo in 1951, in Zambia in 1973, Central Africa and Tanzania in 1977, Kenya in 1989, Angola and Morocco in 1998. Some individuals have also worked in other countries of Africa.

True to the vision of the Founder, Melchior de Marion Brésillac, the Society has contributed to the birth and development of the local churches of Africa by proclaiming the Gospel and witnessing to it in the lives of its members and by “neglecting no means of advancing the work of God”. This has included involvement in catechesis, pastoral/sacramental care, education, health-care, human/ Christian formation, “development” in all its aspects, peace-building, the defence of human rights and by using all forms of communication (the media, art and music) and the technical equipment as it developed over the past 165 years. The church buildings (which many S.M.A. missionaries themselves constructed) ensured that the growing numbers of Catholics have

suitable places to worship, receive the sacraments and celebrate the many important occasions in their lives. Several historians have described all of these developments, while the increasing number of biographies and autobiographies give detailed and colourful accounts of an exciting period in the Church's history.

As we have read in several places in his *Souvenirs*, Bishop Melchior had an all-consuming passion to establish an educated and well-respected local diocesan clergy. The Society which he founded has never lost sight of this objective. Especially from 1861 to 1983 (over 120 years), its members have constructed Seminaries and have served as administrators, teachers and formators of young African students to serve the local Christian communities. They were always aware that, while as missionaries they could preach and work with and for the people, it would be their own African clergy who would fully inculturate the Catholic faith in the minds, hearts and lives of the African people. Under the leadership of African Bishops (who now serve in most parts of the Continent), the Church in Africa is vibrant and active, deeply involved in all aspects of life and, in recent years, helping more ancient churches in serving the "People of God" in many parts of the world. However, there are still parts of the immense African Continent where the Gospel has not yet been proclaimed.

The Society of African Missions itself has developed since the early days in Lyons and the death of its Founder. Under the long, wise, prayerful and dedicated guidance of Father Planque, it survived many crises during the second half of the 19th century. All of these have been well documented. Meanwhile, individuals from different countries continued to answer the "call of the missions" and came to Lyons for formation and to make the necessary preparations to go to Africa.

Gradually (and after many years of set-backs and blessings) several groups were *formally* established in different places: Ireland in 1912, the Netherlands in 1923, two French "provinces" in 1927,

the United States of America in 1941, Argentina in 1965 and Britain, Spain, Canada and Italy in 1968. Efforts were also made in Australia (1963). Lay people were often deeply involved in the establishment of these foundations. Some became formal associates of the Society of African Missions, while others gave generously of their time and resources. Meanwhile, the missionaries slipped out quietly for Africa from such ports as Toulon, Marseilles and Liverpool. At the end of the 1960s, they took off from airports like Paris, New York, Dublin and Rome. *“To most of them, their Founder’s years of strife and controversy in India were unknown, but every detail of his death in Freetown was familiar. They saw him as a martyr for the cause of the missions...”*. (For This Cause... page 252).

Following the call of Pope Saint Paul VI to Africans *“to become missionaries to themselves”* (1969), the Society of African Missions reflected on this call, consulted widely and with the approval of “Propaganda Fide”, decided in 1983 to welcome Africans who wished to become *missionary priests* into the Society. Work began immediately in discerning suitable candidates, constructing houses of formation in Africa and providing trained formators.

During the period 1984 - 1986, the Society reinforced its international dimension by re-establishing its presence in Poland and South Africa, and by setting up new foundations in India and the Philippines. Pope Saint John Paul stated in an address to the S.M.A. in 1989: *“I also urge you to continue your efforts to place your long missionary experience at the service of the young African churches now wanting to open up to the mission ‘ad gentes’ outside their own frontiers. May the Lord bless these young Africans, Asians and South Americans who are joining you in your commitment to the missions”*.

In a report dated 25th March 2021 (page 316), we read the following statistics regarding the family that is the Society of African Missions:

1. Permanent Members

Bishops: 9; Priests: 735; Brothers: 4; Deacons 19. Total: 767

2. Temporary Members: 95

3. Students without Oath 224

4. Associate Priests 4

5. Lay Associates 61

6. Honorary Members 72

Total: 1,223

Conclusion

In tracing the life, writings and actions of Melchior de Marion Brésillac, we have already seen several elements which he has left as a legacy to the Church and the world. May I conclude by suggesting Melchior's vision for his own life and on how he wished to live it out each day. It was based on his oft-quoted words and writings on "*Faith, Hope and Charity*". He actually died with these words on his lips.

Through the gift of Faith, he believed in God and in all that He has revealed to us, human beings. Melchior responded by committing himself entirely to God and sought to do His will at all times. Through the gift of hope, Melchior placed his trust in the promises of Christ, responding to the aspiration of happiness which God has placed in the heart of every person. By charity, he tried to love God above all things and to love all human beings as we love ourselves.

Following the principle that grace presupposes and perfects nature, these three "theological virtues" brought out Melchior's natural "moral virtues" of courage, fortitude and a sense of justice.

The virtues of *Faith, Hope and Charity* laid the foundation. It was faith that gave him the passion for mission. It was hope that impelled him to expand its horizons. It was love that empowered its enactment.

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**Prayer for the Canonisation of the
Venerable Melchior de Marion Brésillac**

*Lord God, you called
Melchior de Marion Brésillac to serve you.
To make you known and loved,
you sent him to India and then to Africa.
For you he gave everything – even his very life.*

*Guided by your Word, he was a missionary
from the bottom of his heart.
He cared for the poor,
the sick and the abandoned.
He sought to build a local Church
with a well-formed and respected clergy.*

*We pray that, through the intercession
of this great servant of mission,
we will receive the graces we need....
(In particular....)*

We ask this through Christ Our Lord.

Amen.

