

Two Men, One Charism

Sister Marta Pettenazzo OLA

*Sr. Marta Pettenazzo is a Sister of the missionary Congregation of Our Lady of Apostles, and a member of the Italian Province. She spent eight years in Djougou (Benin Republic), where she was engaged in the formation of community leaders, promotion of women in the villages, and mission animation in the Diocese. She is now the General Bursar of her Institute. During the 2000/2001 academic year, she undertook a study of the original charism of the SMA and the OLA Sisters at the Institute of Spirituality of the Gregorian University, Rome. The 150th anniversary of the foundation of the SMA and the 100th anniversary of the death of Fr. Planque have been an occasion for her to revisit this study and to share it with her OLA sisters and SMA brothers. Her work is kept at the house of the OLA sisters in Milan and published under the title **"You shall be this Will"**, April 2007, 120 pages. For the moment it is only in Italian, waiting for the English and French versions. With the cordial authorisation of Sr. Marta and the Superiors of the OLA, we reproduce here the second part of the work entitled **"La Fedeltà"** and the conclusion¹.*

In 1928, there was a commemorative celebration in Lyon of Bishop de Marion Brésillac, Founder of the Society of African Missions, and of Fr. Augustin Planque, the first Superior General of the Society and the Founder of the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of

¹ *Augustin Planque hier et aujourd'hui*, Sœurs de Notre-Dame des Apôtres, Rome 1984 ; Claude-Marie Échallier, *La foi et l'audace d'un apôtre, Augustin Planque*, Karthala, Paris 1995.

Apostles for the African Missions. The monthly review “*L’Echo des Missions Africaines de Lyon*” devoted an entire issue to the event. The “two Founders” were presented in it in the following way:

If it is certain that Bishop de Marion Brésillac conceived all by himself the idea of founding a new Society of missionaries, and if, alone, he dug its foundations, it is not less true that, following the catastrophe of Sierra Leone, in June 1859, the Society he founded could be said to be so harmed in its existence, that, to make it survive, it needed more than just a restoration. It needed something akin to a new foundation. This was the work of Fr. Planque, and it is befitting that the Society of African Missions considers him, following the expression of Our Very Holy Father, Pope Pius XI, as its “second Founder”. He completed and finished the work of the first Founder².

Today, some 75 years later, one could disagree with the author of the article and suggest that his assertions were exaggerated. However, what is interesting to note, is not so much the providential intervention of Fr. Planque, but rather the unity of purpose that impelled the two men, from the moment of their meeting, and the fidelity with which Fr. Planque continued the work.

It is these two aspects, the unity of purpose of the two men and the fidelity of Fr. Planque that I will try to focus on, while making reference to their lives and the convictions that formed the basis of their apostolic vocation: set apart to announce the Gospel to the Gentiles.

² *L’Echo des Missions Africaines*, 27th year, n° 5-6, May-June 1928.

SET APART FOR THE GOSPEL

The meeting

A priori, De Marion Brésillac and Augustin Planque had little in common. The former, a bishop, had already had a missionary experience in India, where he was able to compare his ideals and convictions with the missionary reality existing in that country. The latter, a young priest, a professor of philosophy in the Seminary, had especially cultivated his missionary dream through the reading of the *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith*. One, coming from the south of France, was considered as a “*furia francese*”³; the other, from the north, was of a calmer personality and more methodical.

Their relationship, right from the beginning, was, however, characterised by mutual trust and complete openness of spirit, similar to the relationship that normally exists between two friends, or between a disciple and his master, or, better still, between a father and his son.

After reading the first letter of Planque and noticing his eagerness to put himself at the service of the new project, De Marion Brésillac responded: “*I start by blessing the Lord for the intention he is inspiring in you. Your perseverance, up to this time, with the intention of working in the missions seems to me a great sign of a vocation*”⁴. “*Dear friend*”, writes De Marion Brésillac in his next letter, “*allow me to call you by this name, in the hope that, henceforth, we will share our works, our consolations and our crosses, even more so than the consolations that God will be pleased to give to our weakness*”⁵.

We can already sense the trusting and sincere tone with which the bishop speaks to the young priest, who reciprocates in a simple and open manner: “*I am happy to be able to make myself available to*

³ The name given to Mgr de Brésillac by Card. Barnabò (cf. P. Dominique à de Brésillac, 17.08.1856, AMA 2 F 13).

⁴ De Brésillac to Planque, end of 1856, *Lettres*, Erga Edizioni, Genova 2005, n. 697.

⁵ De Brésillac to Planque, 14.07.1856, *Lettres*, n. 705.

you: God himself seems to have arranged all things for his greater glory, and I hope not to encounter any other obstacles. Thus, my lord, I can't wait to see the opening of your house. May the Master of all things and of all hearts grant your wishes, to which I join mine!"⁶

From the beginning of their relationship, De Marion Brésillac was very impressed with Fr. Planque⁷: *"He is a man of providence for our work. He left the chair of philosophy which he was occupying with honours in a Seminary of some consideration in France to join us. Very enlightened, pious like an angel, having lived all his life in Seminaries, familiar with directing young persons, and gifted with a perfect character, he is very well suited to take direction of our noviciate and the house in Lyon in my absence"*⁸.

Wherever he was, De Marion Brésillac was in contact with Fr. Planque whom he considered as his alter-ego. In his letters he makes apparent his solicitude for Fr. Planque; rather than force, he uses gentleness in regard to him. Sometimes, he seems to entertain some fears about him, because of his somewhat introverted personality and tendency to be prone to discouragement. *"Fr. Planque seems always animated with the same commitment"*, he writes in his diary, *"He is, however, a bit rigid vis-à-vis the young aspirants"*⁹. Often, he invites him to have a certain humility when faced with the faults of others; this he does with a lot of gentleness and patience, in order to lift up what is imperfect¹⁰. He does not hesitate to remind him of the necessity of not giving in to discouragement in the face of adversities and to put all his confidence in Providence¹¹. *"We must, therefore,*

⁶ Planque to de Brésillac, 03.07.1856, AMA 2B. Talking of obstacles, Planque was referring to the difficulty to leave his aunt Poupart, now aged and needing his assistance.

⁷ In his journal he writes: « 7 (November 1856), Fr. Planque arrives, first impressions of whom seem the most favourable » (*Journal 1856-1859*, Roma 1985, p. 53).

⁸ De Brésillac to Barnabò, 12.11.1856, *Lettres*, n. 726.

⁹ MARION BRÉSILLAC, *Journal 1856-1859*, op. cit. p. 58.

¹⁰ De Brésillac to Planque, 29.06.1857 ; 13.07.1857, *Lettres*, nn. 767,769.

¹¹ De Brésillac to Planque, 28.12.1856 ; 30.12.1856 ; 01.01.1856 ; 17.01.1857 ; 03.03.1857, *Lettres*, nn. 733, 734, 736, 740.

*never be discouraged no matter the afflictions we face. I have told you, very dear friend, and I believe I can repeat it again, with the trust I have in you: it is only the temptation of discouragement that I fear in you. Some words in your last letter suggest such reflections. But I have full confidence that you will find in your knowledge of the human heart, and in your profound piety, the much needed energy to overcome it*¹².

All this will lead to the decision of Bishop de Marion Brésillac, at the time of his departure, to leave the direction of the Seminary to “*the excellent Fr. Planque*”¹³, who “*will develop here our Society and prepare the others, not only for Dahomey, but also to be at your disposition, later on, for other countries, the most abandoned of Africa*”¹⁴.

At this juncture, it is right to ask, to whom was the young Fr. Planque so strongly attracted that he found in himself the necessary force to overcome all doubts and to accomplish the intention at last, which he so long desired, of giving himself totally to the missions?

The response of Mgr de Marion Brésillac to the call

Missionary from the bottom of my heart

“*O God, make me a missionary according to your heart*”¹⁵. That was the prayer that De Marion Brésillac formulated when, as a young priest, he was preparing to leave for India. Furthermore, he took note of what he considered to be fundamental in his missionary life:

¹² De Brésillac to Planque, 12.06.1857, *Lettres*, n. 764.

¹³ De Brésillac to Barnabò, 17.02.1859, *Lettres*, n. 892.

¹⁴ De Brésillac to Barnabò, 12.11.1856, *Lettres*, n. 726.

¹⁵ MARION BRÉSILLAC, *Souvenir de douze ans de mission*, Médiaspaul, Paris 1986, p. 78.

“Here are the special resolutions I made at the end of the retreat:

1. *To be a missionary with all my heart.*
2. *To neglect nothing for the advancement of God’s work.*
3. *To seize every opportunity for preaching God’s word.*
4. *To use every means I have – all my strength, all my study and effort – to contribute towards the formation of a native clergy. And it is there that I implore your blessing especially, O my God”¹⁶.*

It is important to emphasize that this text is taken from the journal, *“Souvenirs of 12 years of Mission”*, which he wrote during his stay at the Capuchin Convent in Versailles, in 1855. Having returned from India, at the most obscure and uncertain period of his life, De Marion Brésillac reviewed the journal he had written during his sojourn in India. He revised certain passages entirely. He added some extracts taken from his correspondence and some personal reflections on the lived experience.

The new journal, like some other pages written by him, expresses the heart and the deep aspirations of this man, who, seized by God, was able to follow the “voice” that was calling him, knowing for certain the priority that was to be given to obedience to God’s voice, rather than to any other.

The voice calling you

“The Will of God is not as vague or general as is commonly supposed. And on the day of general judgment and clarification, that will be a source of shame to many, because they did not bother enough to find out exactly where and how God wanted them to be. As for me, I am convinced that such is my vocation; I have reflected seriously on it, I believe I commit a crime not to obey it. (...) Whatever it pleases the Lord to ordain; I accept the trials even the most terrible. I only pray to

¹⁶ MARION BRÉSILLAC, *Souvenir de douze ans de mission*, op.cit. p. 78.

*him to give me the grace to always do his holy will, and to inspire in the persons I cherish the desire to do the same*¹⁷.

Words of such intensity take on even more significance when we know that De Marion Brésillac lived by them up to the end. Fidelity to the will of God led him to the point of giving up his entire life for the accomplishment of a mission he had not chosen, but to which he humbly and serenely submitted. He died at the service of mission and in mission.

Bishop de Marion Brésillac wanted to pass on the same spirit of total submission to his Society, through the intermediary of the Church, and by the voice of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. A month before he died, he wrote to Cardinal Barnabò from Freetown: *“I have confidence that the new Seminary of the African Missions will become, in the hands of the S.C. for the Propagation of the Faith, one of the instruments of the mercy of God in this grand task*”¹⁸.

Obedience to the will of God and love for the Church are the two foundations that gave him the assurance to be, like Jesus Christ, always and everywhere, at the service of the Father, and which, at the same time, gave him the strength that guarantees the unity of the work.

All for the Missions

“May the divine infancy of Jesus and his entire life be a model for us, to teach us that always and everywhere, even to the commonest and the most ordinary in life, we must, following his example, be entirely at the post we have been assigned. (...) We missionaries are not free, not to continuously do the work of God. (...) To be like Jesus Christ in the work of God, it would not suffice for us to act more or less for God, to offer more or less directly our actions to God. We

¹⁷ MARION BRÉSILLAC, *Souvenirs of twelve years in Missions, op.cit.* pp. 37-42.

¹⁸ De Brésillac to Barnabò, 25.05.1859, *Lettres*, n. 914.

*should be in the work of God, we should be part of it completely, immersed in it, identified with it, swallowed up in its accomplishment; the work should be our life, our raison d'être: oportet me esse*¹⁹.

For De Marion Brésillac, there is no dichotomy between the doing and the being, neither is there a life given at half measure. It is “all” of the *sequela* that makes a true disciple and a true missionary. Included in this “all” is the perfect self-denial, of goods as well as of one’s will and way of viewing things. However, this “all” is not done once and for all, but needs to be renewed each day, at the feet of the Lord.

*“To be a missionary is not a title, neither is it a surname (nickname) referring to a geographical position where one is found: it is not enough to be in mission to be a missionary”*²⁰. In “*My thoughts on the Missions*”, De Marion Brésillac makes an autobiographical rereading of his 12 years in India, addressing himself to a certain Theophilus, in other words, himself. He explains what it means to be a missionary: “*You say, Theophilus, I am a missionary, and an apostolic missionary at that, for I am a member of a Society exclusively devoted to the Missions... My Superiors gave me the title when they ordered me to leave my country and go to preach the Gospel on foreign shores. Let us understand each other, Theophilus. Believe me, I don’t want to diminish either your merit or the glory of your sacrifice – if you still cling to that glory. As your friend I would advise you to renounce it, just as you renounced all the other glories which you so courageously left behind. However legitimate this glory seems, it could make it awkward for climbing to Heaven. You are a missionary, that is to say you have the title of it, and maybe the privileges. Agreed. But what are you actually doing in the portion confided to you in our Lord and Master’s vineyard?*”²¹.

¹⁹ MARION BRÉSILLAC, *Retreat to Missionaries*, Paris 1985, pp. 31-39.

²⁰ MARION BRÉSILLAC, *Documents de mission et de fondation* (DMF), *Mes pensées sur les Missions*, n° 7-8, Mediaspaul, Paris, 1985, p. 81 : «This truth is quite generally understood in catholic countries, but not much so in countries that are generally pagan, where almost all the priests call themselves missionaries, although, in actual fact, they are not ».

²¹ MARION BRÉSILLAC, *My thoughts on the Missions*, n° 8-9, DMF, pp. 79-80.

The missionary finds his joy and his total fulfilment from being where the Lord wants him, and as he wants him. The missionary is always called to be a pilgrim, someone sent: *“I hear it being said: happy the real missionary, happy the glorious confessor! Happy the generous martyr! And I say: Happy is the one who marches and stays where the Lord calls him!”*²²

Self denial is, for De Marion Brésillac, the most necessary virtue of a missionary in all aspects, from the birth to the development of an indigenous Church (local Church)²³.

The Formation of an indigenous Church

*“Happy the apostolic missionary who founds Churches and, as soon as he sees them well established, hurries on elsewhere to found new ones! He is someone who does not hear the name of “apostle” in vain – a name that is self-contradictory for those who want to settle down and reign in these places. Once again let us remember that we do not aim to dominate peoples, but only to teach them the one way to be happy, and show them the way they should follow. As soon as we have laid out that way for them, let us leave them to walk it themselves, on their own. We do not want to reign spiritually over them; we only want to give them to Jesus Christ”*²⁴.

Sent by the Church of Rome, to represent her universally, the missionary is not called to go and settle down, for his first preoccupation is to indicate the way that leads to Jesus Christ and to promote the establishment of a true indigenous Church. For this, the formation of a local clergy is necessary, and this is a conviction of De Marion Brésillac. He considered it a priority, and for this reason, he spent a good part of his years in India in the formation of seminarians and Indian clergy. *“An indigenous priest- he says- with much less perfection than a European priest - will do infinitely more good in his own land than the foreigner”*²⁵.

²² MARION BRESILLAC, *My thoughts on the Missions*, n° 8-9, DMF, p. 87

²³ P. Gantly, E.Thorp, *La voix qui t'appelle*, Roma 1994, p. 360.

²⁴ MARION BRESILLAC, *India : a brief account of the state of religion*, DMF, p. 115.

²⁵ MARION BRESILLAC, *My thoughts on the Missions*, n° 61, DMF, p. 99

The missionary must have the capacity to diminish so that the local Church will increase, until finally he is of no use. This capacity is even more necessary when the missionary is called upon to be tolerant of some racial and cultural differences. It thus transforms into patience and gentleness towards those to whom we are sent.

Affectionate Love

“There can be, from one people to another, differences in the intensity of such and such a sentiment, and especially in the expression of these sentiments, but hearts are essentially the same everywhere. (...) A way does exist of always preserving one’s patience and gentleness in the midst of these imperfect Christians. It exists but it is unique. The infallible way, without which all our efforts are useless, is to love them; to love them when they are unworthy of our love; to love them not only in God, as it is said, and not only to fulfil the essential conditions of charity in their regard, but to be fond of them and to show this affection in every encounter with them”²⁶.

This splendid text, taken from the retreat De Marion Brésillac preached to missionaries when he was in India, shows his apostolic heart. Far from considering affection as a virtue unique to himself, he affirms that at the heart of every missionary vocation, and even looking deeper, of every existence, there must be love, an affective love. He realised that it was easy to love persons, especially those to whom we have little or no attraction, but only in an abstract way: *“This kind of charity loves the soul without loving the person”²⁷*, but for him it was important to have, like a father, a paternal affection for one’s children²⁸. However, he was very much aware that what he was asking for was not something simple: *“I confess that it is singularly difficult for certain characters to overcome themselves in this respect. I even believe that in some cases it is impossible by the*

²⁶ MARION BRÉSILLAC, *Retreat to missionaries*, Paris 1985, pp. 107 et 112

²⁷ MARION BRÉSILLAC, *Retreat to missionaries*, Paris 1985, 112

²⁸ MARION BRÉSILLAC, *Retreat to missionaries*, Paris 1985, 112

*powers of nature alone; but I also believe the grace necessary for that is essentially attached to our vocation as missionaries*²⁹.

From these words, it could be seen how important interpersonal relationships were for him, with the compassion and affection that go with them. The ability to have such relations, to make known to the other person that he/she is loved, concretely and not only with words, is a grace attached to the missionary vocation, or, rather, attached to the missionary charism that De Marion Brésillac handed on to us.

A Community of Action

*“What can we do with our good individual wills, if, pushed by thoughts, affections, different sentiments, we cannot create a community of action through the power of the perfect abnegation of the will in obedience? Where there is a diversity of wills, there is no success. In order to have unity of will, it is absolutely necessary that the will of the superior leads all the others, and in order that that may be so, it is necessary for each one of us who wishes to be a disciple of the Lord to have acquired, over a long period, the habit of the renunciation of his own will and that he has often practised this commandment of the Lord: Abneget semetipsum”*³⁰.

These words bring out another virtue without which one cannot speak of a unique mission. It is about the ability to build unity around the same project, which becomes a community project, in which every member of the community identifies with it completely. For De Marion Brésillac, this is how a community can function in a privileged way and under the direction of a superior who knows how to build unity around a common project. For this reason, community life will be one of the fundamental values of the Society that he will found.

²⁹ MARION BRÉSILLAC, *Retreat to missionaries*, Paris 1985, 113

³⁰ MARION BRÉSILLAC, *Retreat to missionaries*, Paris 1985, 165.

Unity of Purpose between De Marion Brésillac and Planque

The virtues and the options mentioned above are among the most important of the virtues and options dear to De Marion Brésillac. He continuously makes reference to them during and after the foundation of the SMA. That is to say that he considered them as essential, not only for his own life, but also for the lives of the members of the Society.

“During the time he was starting in Lyon – writes Planque sixteen years after the death of De Marion Brésillac – we were living in a very great intimacy. He was often telling me about the spirit he wanted to give to his small Society”³¹.

In effect, we cannot know the content of the conversations between Planque and De Marion Brésillac. We can only presume that they were about their common convictions. This can be inferred from their correspondence which stem from 1856 to 1859³², and from the “Fundamental Articles” of the Society written by De Marion Brésillac in 1858³³.

From these “Articles”, which will later form the basis of the SMA Constitutions, emerged the nucleus of the charism of the Society; in other words, her mission and the spirit with which each member commits himself to serve:

“The Society of African Missions has as its principal aim the evangelisation of the countries in Africa which have most need of missionaries. It places itself under the protection of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide, 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. It will accept no mission except in conformity with the

³¹ Planque to Propaganda Fide, Report of 1885, AMA 2B.

³² Unfortunately we lack, from this period, several letters of Fr. Planque addressed to Mgr De Marion Brésillac. Their existence is inferred from the references which Mgr De Marion Brésillac continually makes to them.

³³ They are dated from 24.07.1858 (AMA 2 A 100).

wishes of Propaganda. Conversely, it will try to make itself capable of responding to the wish to go to any point whatsoever in Africa, however unpromising or difficult the mission may be that is confided to it. It will constantly work to prepare ways for penetrating into the places where there are no missionaries; and when it believes the time is ripe for an attempt to be made, it will inform the S.C. in order to obtain authorisation to execute it. Finally, on the express request of the S.C. it can accept missions outside of Africa, provided it is to peoples of colour. (...) Candidates shall be received from all nations, provided they bring certificates of capability and good conduct and, moreover, give signs of a vocation to the apostolic life. (...) The Society, being essentially secular, a member will not take vows in it but he will 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. The sinew and strength of the association is to concord in perfect charity and obedience to those placed in charge, to direct rather than govern their confreres. (...) Wherever several associates are together, they shall lead the common life. (...) Lay brothers must all exercise a skill or trade so as to make themselves useful, either in Europe or on the missions, and be able to train the young Negroes (Africans) at the various establishments of the Society”³⁴.

The Founder was counting a lot on the first group that had committed themselves to his project. He was anxious to pass onto his first associates the spirit that he wanted to see develop in his Society. In this enterprise, he counted, in a special way, on the help of his first collaborator, Fr. Augustin Planque: “Your letter of the 14th gave me great pleasure, because it makes me hope that there will be, henceforth, a common vision and common sentiments among the companions of our enterprise. I bless heaven for giving you, to a very

³⁴ MARION BRÉSILLAC, *Fundamental Articles*, DMF, p. 220.

*great extent, the spirit of our work. Without you, I would still be asking if the Lord wants the success of our enterprise. But, all the rest can go wrong, provided that the Good God gives us, you and me, the spirit of patience and of perseverance, sooner rather than later, we will succeed in creating some new missions in Africa, something which is worth the life of a man*³⁵.

Often, De Marion Brésillac comes back to the same principles, in particular to the harmony between members and the unity of action: *“We must absolutely work to create a spirit which must dominate in our congregation. Let us start with ourselves; adopting the spirit of a great humility before the faults of the other, but without the flaw of erroneously giving the impression of compromising the principles needed to maintain good order by our gentleness, a virtue we must not part with”*³⁶.

All for the Missions, in submission to God and the Church; a spirit of openness, of concord and simplicity; unity of purpose in the search for the will of God: this seems to be the spirit that De Marion Brésillac wanted to give to his work.

³⁵ De Brésillac to Planque, 17.01.1857, *Lettres*, n. 740.

³⁶ De Brésillac to Planque, 13.07.1857, *Lettres*, n. 769.

“YOU SHALL BE THIS WILL”: AUGUSTIN PLANQUE, THE HEIR

From what has been said, we can infer that Planque was able to assimilate the personality and the ideals of the Founder of the Society of African Missions. We can infer also the fidelity with which he wanted to follow the footprints left by De Marion Brésillac. My aim is not to describe the value of such fidelity, or his capacity to interpret correctly the thoughts and intentions of the Founder, but mainly to bring to light the action of the Holy Spirit in this man who, initially, was fearful and prone to discouragement, but who succeeded in assuming the responsibility for and the development of an enterprise he knew was not born of him. *“When he was preparing to leave, - recounts Fr. Planque some years later – I tried to persuade him, repeating to him incessantly that he let me go first, and that he should stay in France to solidify his foundation and safeguard the base. I was telling him that his work will perish if he were to die. It will live, he answered me, as long as there is a will to maintain it, and you shall be this will”*³⁷.

What Planque was expressing had been anticipated by the Founder himself. In fact, in one of his last letters, sent before his departure for Sierra Leone, De Marion Brésillac told him: *“May the Heavens bless you and bless us with our work, which is all yours and to which we must be faithful, though unworthy, instruments. He alone knows all the afflictions and difficulties that await me this year, but it seems to me that, by His grace, I am ready to suffer all, the trials of the tempest, physical and moral; and if the sea and its dangers wish that this year be my last, you will be there so that the enterprise is not shipwrecked”*³⁸.

To be the “Will” capable of continuing the work undertaken by another, to forget oneself to the point of assuming what De Marion Brésillac desired and dreamed of, I believe I can affirm that Fr. Augustine Planque was exemplary in his total adhesion to the project

³⁷ Planque to Propaganda Fide, Report of 1885, AMA 2B.

³⁸ De Brésillac to Planque, 01.01.1859, *Lettres*, n. 874.

of the Founder, in which he recognised, right from the beginning, the providential design of God.

Rereading attentively the letters that Planque wrote to his confreres, especially to those on mission, it is surprising to see the frequency with which he makes reference to the Founder, considering himself as the guardian of his thoughts³⁹.

Some years after the death of Bishop de Marion Brésillac, he could write that he has always worked for the good of the Mission and that he never went beyond the rules mapped out by the Founder⁴⁰. For the rest, he had the obligation, coming from the S.C. of Propaganda Fide, not to change any of the rules⁴¹; and for issues not treated by the Founder, he always went back to the general ideas of the Congregation⁴².

“Our Founder entrusted me with a legacy – writes Planque to a confrere – I am striving to keep it”⁴³; and to another: “I would have believed that I betrayed the trust of our Founder in distancing myself from his way of seeing things”⁴⁴ – “I believe that in all things it would be necessary to recommend that nothing be changed from the spirit and the principal rules of the Founder. (...) Do what our Founder wanted to do, and as he wanted it”⁴⁵.

This fidelity will enable him to overcome the crises and the trials both from inside and outside the Society. It is this same fidelity that will make him feel obliged to carry the responsibility of the SMA for almost 50 years. These years were not without criticisms and conflict.

Analysing his correspondence, we can bring out three areas in which this fidelity is expressed:

³⁹ Planque to Borghero, 19.02.1863, AMA 2B.

⁴⁰ Planque to Borghero, 19.10.1862, AMA 2B.

⁴¹ Planque to Laffitte, 16.11.1862, AMA 2B.

⁴² Planque to confrères, 17.06.1863, AMA 2B.

⁴³ Planque to Laffitte, 16.11.1862, AMA 2B.

⁴⁴ Planque to Courdioux, 18.02.1863, AMA 2B.

⁴⁵ Planque to Card. Barnabò, 12.12.1868, AMA 2B.

- Fidelity to the works undertaken by the Founder
- Fidelity to the projects of the Founder
- Fidelity to the apostolic virtues dear to the Founder.

Fidelity to the works undertaken by the Founder

Completing the foundation of the SMA, and making it known with its Constitution

On January 17, 1863, Planque hinted to Fr. Borghero, who was on mission in Dahomey, that the Sacred Congregation was taking seriously the stability of the work. Barnabò approved the provisional Rules left behind by De Marion Brésillac⁴⁶. In 1868, he informed the confreres that Propaganda, for the first time, had officially approved the existence of the Society. *“You will bless God with me – he writes to the confreres in Dahomey – and you will be even more motivated to pursue the goal of our Venerable Founder, at the same time as you observe faithfully the rules approved by the Cardinal of Lyons and which Propaganda, after examining them, now enjoins us to observe with unflinching fidelity”*⁴⁷.

Internationalizing the Society

Right from the beginning, the Society was, in effect, international. In fact, the Italian, Francesco Borghero and the Spaniard, Francisco Fernandez, were among the first group constituted around the Founder. They were also the first to leave for Dahomey. However, even though internationality was understood to mean the different nationalities of the members, it was not lived as such. Until 1912, the foundation date of the Province of Ireland, everything was centralised in France, at the Mother House in Lyons. The non-French members had to accept to travel and undergo

⁴⁶ Planque to Borghero, 17.01.1863, AMA 2B; (cf. Letter of Propaganda Fide du 29.12.1862, AMA 23055 2/0).

⁴⁷ Planque to confrères in Dahomey, 20.03.1868, AMA 2B.

formation in the only centre at Lyons. Even from the time of Bishop de Marion Brésillac, this was the cause of the departure of several seminarians. Hence, when a suggestion was made to open a Seminary near the school for African boys in Spain, Fr. Planque, after several consultations with the confreres, especially Fr. Borghero, decided not to give permission fearing that the work could be divided into two⁴⁸. Consequently, for the first 50 years, rather than talk of internationality, it would be more proper to talk of different nationalities in the one centre in France.

Continuing to accept Lay Brothers

The acceptance of Lay Brothers is one of the points that De Marion Brésillac had in the “*Fundamental Articles*”. He recommended that brother candidates should be able to learn a trade and to practice it. Planque does not delay in writing to Fr. Borghero on the missions to ask him if he thinks the presence of Brothers is really useful⁴⁹. He will often come back to this issue, declaring that he is open to the acceptance of brothers, on the advice of the Mission Superior⁵⁰.

In 1869, a report to the *Oeuvre de la Sainte Enfance*, mentions, under the title “*Personnel de Mission*” (mission personnel), 10 Priests, 4 Lay Brothers, 4 Sisters, in the missions of Lagos, Porto-Novo and Whydah⁵¹. The sending of Lay Brothers was therefore a reality. In 1927, there is mention, in the general works of the African Missions, of the presence of Brothers involved in mission activities⁵².

⁴⁸ C. M. Echallier, *L'audace et la foi d'un apôtre*, Karthala, pp. 89-93.

⁴⁹ Planque to Borghero and Fernandez, 20.04.1861, AMA 2B (Cf. *Fundamental Articles*, DMF, p. 226).

⁵⁰ Planque to Courdioux, 21.02.1865, AMA 2B.

⁵¹ Planque to “*Sainte Enfance*”, 27.10.1869, AMA 2B.

⁵² *L'Echo des Missions Africaines de Lyon*, 27^{ème} année, n. 5-6, May-June 1928, p. 132 (the state of the Works of the African Missions of Lyon).

Promoting the autonomy of the Institute and of the Missions

In the “*Fundamental Articles*”, there was a point about the sharing of offerings and gifts. Planque makes reference to this article when he writes to the Fathers on Mission⁵³. He reminds them that the mission must provide the deficit in the accounts of the Mother House so that it can meet its annual needs since “*that was how Bishop de Marion Brésillac had envisaged such things*”⁵⁴. Later on, while taking up the project of the Constitution written by the Founder, he will recommend to the confreres to be financially self-sufficient⁵⁵. He likes to recall that “*the mission will be said to be founded only when it knows how to find, on the spot, what it needs to maintain itself*”⁵⁶. “*In accordance with our Constitutions, every residence will work prudently to procure for itself local resources so as not to depend absolutely and solely on the resources from Europe. Our aim must be to affirm and move the mission forward; but, this goal will not be attained if we only rely on the resources from Europe*”⁵⁷.

This was a conviction that Planque completely believed in, following Bishop de Marion Brésillac and the S. C. of Propaganda Fide. However, he never ceased making reference to the Founder. “*I want to remind you that our Founder held dear that each residence works to obtain local resources. He reasoned that a mission acquired as much stability and force of expansion as the roots she has in the very soil she is living in*”⁵⁸.

⁵³ Planque to Borghero, 19.10.1862, AMA 2B.

⁵⁴ Planque to Borghero, 19.08.1862, AMA 2 B.

⁵⁵ Planque to confrères, 18.03.1863, AMA 2B.

⁵⁶ Planque to Thillier, 20.04.1869, AMA 2B.

⁵⁷ Planque to confrères in Bénin, 18.01.1876, AMA 2B.

⁵⁸ Planque to confrères, august 1881, AMA 2B.

Fidelity to the Projects of the Founder

Establishing an Indigenous Clergy

Sometime, before founding the Congregation of Sisters, Fr. Planque, pressed by Cardinal Barnabò, wrote to him, “*Your Eminence insists on two points whose importance I value completely: the creation of a seminary to form an indigenous clergy and the foundation of a congregation of indigenous religious sisters. On the first point, things are moving towards its realisation. The children who have been taken by our confreres to live with them are a precious group from which we are already getting some catechists, and from which we could see some ecclesiastical vocations. (...) Your Eminence, you are quite aware how much our Founder had at heart the formation of an indigenous clergy and I hope that his children will not let any opportunity escape them to do what he regarded as fundamental to the missions*”⁵⁹.

In his correspondence, Fr. Planque invites his confreres to gather to themselves, boys who could become catechists and, eventually, seminarians, reminding them that the Founder insisted very much on the formation of an indigenous clergy⁶⁰.

The urgency of a local clergy is very much tied in with the growth of an indigenous Church. We have already highlighted how much Bishop de Marion Brésillac held onto this priority. We find the same concern in the writings of Fr. Planque: “*When will Africa be evangelised by Africans? It is God’s secret. All we can do is to prepare the way*”⁶¹. To this end, Planque urged the confreres to favour the construction of agricultural schools run by Christians. This will help form true Christians⁶².

⁵⁹ Planque to Propaganda Fide, 03.11.1867, AMA 2B.

⁶⁰ Planque to Bouche, 29.09.1867, AMA 2B.

⁶¹ Planque to X, 04.06.1890, AMA 2B.

⁶² *Id.*; Planque to P. Bricet, 03.06.1896; Planque to P. Thillier, 19.05.1870, AMA 2B.

Founding the Mission in Dahomey and being open to new demands

The project of founding the Mission in Dahomey was undertaken and accomplished by Fr. Planque soon after the Founder's death. Planque requested this from the S. C. for the Propagation of the Faith early on and it was accepted. On the 28th of August 1860, the Pope erected the Apostolic Vicariate of Dahomey and on the 5th of January the following year three SMA missionaries set sail for the new mission, the country which de Marion Brésillac had chosen at the start of the enterprise.

From Dahomey, the missionaries will travel the entire West African coast. In 1884, eighteen years after its foundation, the SMA had received from the Holy See the responsibility of an Apostolic Vicariate and four Apostolic Prefectures which covered several countries: the coast of Benin, Dahomey, the Gold Coast including the Ivory Coast, Niger and part of the Egyptian delta⁶³.

The Establishment of a College in Europe to educate young Africans

Bishop de Marion Brésillac had anticipated this and had written in the "*Fundamental Articles*" that "*as soon as possible, one or several houses will be established for black children who will be brought from the missions and later sent back after their education*"⁶⁴. After the death of the Founder, Fr. Planque and Fr. Papetard, one of the closest collaborators of the enterprise, decided to buy a house at Andalousia in Puerto del Reale. In February 1864 the new foundation could begin to function under the direction of Papetard, and assisted by three Religious Sisters of the Guardian Angel of Montauban and two Spanish Fathers. However, the project was abandoned and the boys quickly transferred to Algiers to a Jesuit house. Later on Fr. Planque

⁶³ Report of Fr. Planque on the Society of African Missions, May 1884, AMA 2B. Many other Mission territories where opened after these.

⁶⁴ MARION BRÉSILLAC, *Fundamental Articles*, DMF, p. 219

will favour forming the young boys and the students in their natural and familiar environment. Hence, he will encourage the Fathers and also the Sisters to open mission schools. It will become one of the most effective means, not only for spreading the Gospel, but also for human and social development⁶⁵.

Joining the action of Sisters to that of the Fathers

Collaboration with Religious Sisters was one of the projects dear to De Marion Brésillac. Fr. Planque pursued this desire and by the turn of events found himself forced to found a female Congregation for SMA Missions.

Fidelity to the apostolic virtues dear to the Founder

All for the Missions, in submission to God and the Church

The life of Fr. Planque, totally given to the work of the SMA and the Church, is already a far-reaching witness to this fidelity. Another proof of this fidelity is found in his letter to his friend, Bishop Fava, in which he responds to the proposition made to him to become the Vicar Apostolic, and, hence, a bishop of the Egyptian Delta⁶⁶: *“I have always professed to be the devoted and obedient servant of Propaganda. I received from Bishop de Marion Brésillac this special mark of trust and the responsibility of maintaining, solidifying and completing the work he had begun. Based on these two principles which have guided my whole life for more than thirty years now, I am responding to you to simply give to the question you are asking me, the answer which, in your wisdom and experience, you believe is best for the glory of God, the salvation of souls and the good of our Congregation. (...) What I would want, however, is to keep the general direction of our Society, at least, until we get definitive approval for*

⁶⁵ C.M. ECHALLIER, *op.cit.* pp. 89-94; 348-350.

⁶⁶ Fava to Propaganda Fide, 02.03.1891, APF COLLEGI ESTERI, vari 18,424 R.

*our Constitutions. We have an ad quinquennium approval and it would not be good, I believe, to retire from my charge as Superior General before the work of trust that I received from the Founder is definitively approved*⁶⁷.

Fr. Planque invites his confreres to the same devotedness and the same submission when he reminds them to follow the Rules as laid down by the Founder⁶⁸. Those who follow their own views, in effect, are not doing the work of God. Especially when an enterprise is “*orphaned*” right from birth, it is necessary that the members follow the first steps of the Founder and not try to replace the Founder’s vision with their own⁶⁹. “*If there is a point to which you must hold onto, it is to be convinced that the life of a missionary must be a life of self-denial*”⁷⁰.

Affectionate Love, Spirit of openness and of simplicity

Although Fr. Planque sometimes exhibits a rough character and one even less disposed to any spontaneous manifestations of affection, he shows in his correspondence with his confreres a warm and paternal interest in what they are doing and how they are living. “*My dear Confreres, we received your letter from Whydah with great happiness: whatever touches you touches the very core of our work, for there lies its very essence*”⁷¹.

To help them overcome the difficulties at the beginning, he strongly encouraged them thus: “*We sow in sadness, but we shall reap in joy. The foundation of an edifice is hidden under the earth but, nevertheless, it holds up the construction. Our Venerable Founder often said: we are the pioneers of the Society, we will suffer a lot in patience, but after us, others will come who will see to the growth of the edifice*”⁷².

⁶⁷ Planque to Fava, 28.02.1891, AMA 2B.

⁶⁸ Cf. Planque to Cloud, 19.02.1863, AMA 2B.

⁶⁹ Planque to Courdioux, 17.06.1863, AMA 2B.

⁷⁰ Planque to Wade, 25.12.1897, AMA 2B.

⁷¹ Planque to Borghero and Fernandez, 19.06.1861, AMA 2B.

⁷² Planque to Verdelet, 20.04.1867, AMA 2B.

Planque was particularly concerned to see grow, in those entrusted to him, a spirit of affability and an openness towards others, just as the Founder had commanded him. To achieve this he was not afraid to refer to them with the same simplicity that De Marion Brésillac had earlier appreciated in him⁷³: *“I would like to see you acquire this humble unity of life, which will make you constantly affable towards your confreres and in this way help to dissipate the moments of bitterness which compromise all relations. Be on your guard against personal ideas and hasty starts, and never be attached to your own judgement. I am telling you all this at the time when, to my mind, no cloud is troubling your horizon, so that you can prepare yourself in times of tempest, with a true spirit of obedience, without reasoning either exteriorly or interiorly. At the prize of this denial of self, you will bear fruit in yourself and in others”*⁷⁴.

Reading the letters, especially the one that follows, one can notice that the recommendations Planque makes are those he had received, the truth of which he had experienced in his own life. They are the same reminder of patience and moderation, with a few nuances here and there. *“Believe me, when you have a proposition to make concerning the good and development of the mission, hold your calm and allow the idea to mature and become feasible little by little. If you have to deal with Propaganda, you will often hear this response: God could have created the world in an instant, yet he spent six days; do you want to claim to act more wisely than him and to do everything at the same time? All these reflections are just to urge you to act calmly and moderately with yourself, with your Confreres and with your Superiors. I also want to tell you not to allow yourself to be carried away by the feelings of the moment, because they are never good advisers. You will do even much greater good if you follow this path of calmness and patience that I have been preaching to you for a long time now”*⁷⁵.

⁷³ De Brésillac to Planque, 29.06.1857, *Lettres*, n. 767.

⁷⁴ Planque to Bouche, 19.09.1868, AMA 2B.

⁷⁵ Planque to Bouche, 18.10.1868, AMA 2B.

With a liking for simplicity and openness of heart, Planque often invites the confreres to express themselves openly, as shown in this letter to Fr. Zappa: *“I have the hope that all will work unto good. You will work with the zeal that we know you for, and I am convinced that God will bless your efforts. (...) As for me, you make me happy when you talk to me with an open heart. I feel that it is in this way that one obtains better results and the practice of true charity, outside all personal inclinations and susceptibility”*⁷⁶.

Unity of purpose in the continual search for the Will of God

*“The community spirit is excellent”*⁷⁷. This was what Planque could write to the confreres in Africa about the Seminary in Lyon. At the same time, he often invites them to know the necessity of taking decisions with common accord because *“this is what Bishop de Marion Brésillac did and how he wanted things to be done in the Society. He even wrote a special article on this in the Constitutions so that things will proceed in this way”*⁷⁸.

He had to revert back, often, to this aspect of common life, making reference to the ideas of the Founder and he did not see any reason why such a way of doing things should be changed⁷⁹. *“In each mission, in order to establish a unity of purpose, we have to try to discuss, often among ourselves, the best ways of moving forward God’s work, and formulating them in common accord, thus making mutual concessions in our ways of seeing things”*⁸⁰.

Unity of purpose among the members of the Society and cordial relationships, constitute, now and always, the essential condition for the work to progress and produce the expected fruits. *“You are in Lagos – writes Fr. Planque – where the work super abounds. I hope that you are bringing all your activities to the works that have been entrusted to your care and that you would never allow your zeal and*

⁷⁶ Planque to Zappa, 07.03.1888, AMA 2B.

⁷⁷ Planque to Borghero and Fernandez, 19.06.1861, AMA 2B.

⁷⁸ Planque to Borghero, 17.01.1862, AMA 2B.

⁷⁹ Planque to Propaganda, 02.08.1863, AMA 2B.

good devotedness as a true missionary to be weakened. You should give yourself generously to the sacrifices of the work and engage yourself solely with the salvation of souls. I also hope that there will be peace and unity among you in Lagos. ‘Alter alterius onera portate’ will be, without doubt, a necessity there, as in other places, but with the grace of God you will put it into practice and God will bless your efforts”⁸¹.

One of the ideas dear to Bishop de Marion Brésillac could be seen in these words: the importance of being one with the work entrusted to you; to bear fruit where the Lord has put us. To achieve this goal, a generous gift of oneself is necessary: *“you are where the Lord has placed you; you will stay there as long as it pleases God to leave you there; there, you will do as much good as you can, and when you are assigned to another post, you will follow the same conduct. You should not believe that we will always have the same point of view, despite the fact that we all have the same good intentions; we should, therefore, do our best to contribute to a common goal and, sacrificing our own ideas, we shall obtain a more abundant fruit than if we had followed our own views. These observations are practical today; they will continue to be so tomorrow; and they shall be so all the days of our lives”⁸².*

Unity of purpose could be said to be the strongest apostolic value that Fr. Planque inherited from the Founder. The effort of a member is the effort of the whole Society and it is the sign that God is at work. *“We are happy to learn that the Mission is on its way to success – he writes to the confreres at the start of the mission in Dahomey - The glory of God, I hope, will emerge from these beginnings. Souls would be saved thanks to the efforts of our small Society: Infirma mundi elegit. Is this not the way to see that God is at work par excellence in his enterprise”⁸³.*

⁸⁰ Planque to confrères in Bénin, 18.01.1876, AMA 2B.

⁸¹ Planque to Thollon, 20.04.1870, AMA 2B.

⁸² Planque to Cloud, 19.12.1869, AMA 2B.

⁸³ Planque to confrères, 19.11.1861, AMA 2B.

A SMALL CONGREGATION OF SISTERS FOR OUR MISSIONS

When Fr. Planque wrote, in 1901, to Propaganda to ask for the approval of the Constitution of the Sisters he had founded, he wrote thus: *“I spoke to your Eminence about the necessity for me to found a small Congregation of Sisters for our Missions”*⁸⁴. He continued explaining that just as the Fathers have founded schools to train young boys, so also he sees the necessity to do the same thing for girls. And this will not be possible without the help of Sisters. This was a condition to guarantee the formation of Christian families. He recalled how the project had started, passing through various attempts with other Congregations, which proved to be inadequate: *“Seeing that, some serious minded persons urged me to found a Congregation for our Missions”*⁸⁵. He recounts how he had some difficulty in making a decision; however, in the end, pushed by necessity, he started to gather together some girls who wanted to consecrate their lives to the Missions.

The content of the letter cited above, like many others written before it, can help us reflect on the goal that Fr. Planque, like the Founder, wanted to give to this small Congregation of Sisters. We can ask ourselves if and how this Congregation could be considered complementary to the Society of African Missions.

“I found myself obliged to found”

Events made it necessary to found this Congregation, just like it was 20 years previously with Bishop de Marion Brésillac who, urged and supported by Propaganda, founded the SMA. However, these events would have remained insignificant if Bishop de Marion Brésillac and Fr. Planque hadn't the grace to discern in them a divine call. It is in this manner that we can understand their providential intervention in the foundation of the SMA and its female branch.

⁸⁴ Planque to Propaganda Fide, 22.01.1901, AMA 2B.

⁸⁵ *Id.*

De Marion Brésillac was disposed, from the beginning of the SMA, to associate Religious Sisters with the work of the Fathers. He had personally verified the usefulness of this collaboration and had spoken and written to Fr. Planque about it. Again, in line with his fidelity to his Founder, Planque did not allow this project to die and proposed it immediately to his confreres on the Missions. But it was not until 1876, after several trials with other Congregations, that he decided to found this new religious family, whose Founder he will become⁸⁶. *“It is from Propaganda Fide that I was urged to found the Sisters”*⁸⁷. And again: *“Seven years ago, we were thinking of getting Sisters to run schools in our missions. I went to fifteen Congregations and each of them responded with a no! It became a necessity then to add to our Seminary, another type of Seminary to form Missionary Sisters”*⁸⁸.

Missionary Sisters for “our Missions”

*“To complete the Work, it was necessary to prepare the Sisters for the education of girls in our missions and later, to run hospitals”*⁸⁹. This is what he wrote to Fr. Terrien, six years after the foundation of the Sisters. In 1893, he gave the following precision to a priest: *“We have Religious Sisters who we are forming for our missions. They do as much as the missionaries for the propagation of the faith. In certain areas even, they save souls that the missionaries cannot reach”*⁹⁰.

- *“To complete the Work”*: this means that, to him, the work was not yet complete.
- *“We also have Religious Sisters that are being formed for our Missions”*: for what mission was he referring to?

⁸⁶ Right from the beginning, Fr. Planque did not like to be called “Founder”, but rather “our Superior” or “our father”. (Cf. Cahier de Sr. Joseph, Archives NDA, Roma, 2 A 5/7; testimony of Sr. Dominique, in N. DOUAU, *Fidèle et vrai, op.cit. p. 75*).

⁸⁷ Planque to Mlle X, 11.09.1884, AMA 2B.

⁸⁸ Planque to Chartreux Fathers, 28.08.1883, AMA 2B.

⁸⁹ Planque to Terrien, février. 1882, AMA 2B.

⁹⁰ Planque to the parish priest of Kerbach by Forbach (Lorraine), 30.09.1893, AMA 2B.

*“The foundation of the Congregation of Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles was considered by Fr. Planque as complementary to the Society of African Missions”*⁹¹. I agree with the assertion of Noel Douau, SMA. This assertion is confirmed by the frequency with which Fr. Planque talks about *“Sisters for our missions”*. It is not about mission in general, but the SMA “missions” founded in Africa. The first name given to the Congregation by Fr. Planque, *“Sisters of the African Missions”*, and even the second *“Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles for the African Missions”* make specific reference to the missions founded by the SMA. The Sisters were known by the first name, at least until 1900⁹². The departure of the Fathers, the lay Brothers and that of the Sisters were mentioned in the Annals of Propaganda Fide, and in the Journal *“Les Missions Catholiques”*, under the heading *“Society of African Missions”* until 1908. As for the second appellation, requested by Fr. Planque⁹³, *“Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles for the African Missions”*⁹⁴, this was in use until 1929, the date when Propaganda decided to separate the two Institutes. That was how the second clause, *“for the African Missions”*, wanted by Fr. Planque,⁹⁵ was dropped.

We can understand how necessary it was, since the beginning, to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the Fathers and the Sisters in Africa. It often happened that one exercised some form of ‘power over’, rather than ‘collaboration with’, the other. We also understand how, because of a compendium of problems and events, we now have a situation, not only of the separation of goods, but also a clear separation of Institutes and of mission territories.

⁹¹ N. DOUAU, *Fidèle et vrai*, op. cit. p. 75.

⁹² “Society of Sisters of the African Missions”: This was how the Sisters were introduced on page 33 of the brochure of the Jubilee celebration of Fr. Planque in 1900.

⁹³ Planque to Propaganda Fide, 22.02.1901, AMA 2B.

⁹⁴ Cf. The First Constitutions of 1904 and the first appellation wanted by Fr. Planque.

⁹⁵ Propaganda Fide to Chabert, 14.05.1929 AMA rubr. 6152. I hold that it would not have been necessary to shorten the title if the meaning he gave to “for the African Missions” was generic, that is simply for the Missions in Africa.

The history of a gradual and sometimes painful separation cannot, however, hide what Fr. Planque as Founder, wanted and the necessity of recalling his original intentions. Remembering the history of the beginnings, and reading his letters and the testimonies of some of the early Sisters, it is clear that the complementarity between the two Institutes was, for him, more than just a simple utopia. We can truly affirm that for Fr. Planque, the two Institutes, despite being two distinct entities⁹⁶, were one and the same project, which was started by Bishop de Marion Brésillac in 1856.

In his response to Propaganda, concerning the situation in the Prefecture of the Egyptian Delta, Fr. Planque explained that the missionaries arrived in Egypt in 1877. *“The Religious Sisters of the same Society, - he continued - arrived at Tanta in the month of October 1881”*⁹⁷, and further on, he specifies that *“the Missionaries and the Sisters of the Society of African Missions are the only ones employed in the evangelisation of the 4 Provinces mentioned above”*⁹⁸. We can add many other citations that illustrate the continuity and the complementarities of these two Institutes.

Mission is the sole objective

“The Sisters, who go to our missions, are not the White Sisters of Cardinal Lavigerie, but of a small and special Congregation that remains in the shadows. It has 18 establishments in our missions, be it in Guinea, or in Egypt, and others are preparing to open. They do not talk about themselves, but they are doing very serious work and

⁹⁶ Planque to Mother X, 20.10.1876, AMA 2B; Planque to Sr. Véronique, 16.01.1889, AMA 2B (in this letter Fr. Planque appoints Sr. Veronique as Provincial Superior of all the Sisters in Benin and he specifies that the Superior of the missionaries was not the superior of the Sisters ; he must not interfere in the affairs of the Sisters) ; Planque to Sr. Veronique 6.02.1889, AMA 2B (here Planque warns that the appointments of Sisters from one mission to another must be done by the Superior of the Sisters and not by the Mission Superior. However, he urges mutual understanding between the two.

⁹⁷ Planque to Propaganda Fide, 23.11.1886, AMA 2B.

⁹⁸ *Id.*

*saving a lot of souls. (...) Mission is their sole aim*⁹⁹. This is how Fr. Planque presents the Congregation to a priest who was asking for some information. For him, therefore, in clear and unambiguous terms, the goal of this “little Congregation” is mission. *“The Sisters are exclusively for mission”*¹⁰⁰.

As heir of Bishop de Marion Brésillac and as his first successor in the SMA, Fr. Planque had received with all the other responsibilities, the missionary charism of his Founder. He, therefore, had to pass on this charism with its characteristics. We deem it evident, therefore, to make reference to this charism, since it is the charism of the SMA, of which Fr. Planque was a member and, moreover, its first Superior.

Fr. Planque, like his other confreres, certainly strived to identify with this charism and to incarnate it in his life. He incarnated it in his own personality which had been shaped by several external influences, the first being, Bishop de Marion Brésillac. Once again his correspondence can illuminate what we are trying to explain. His letters show his total devotion and the complete affection he had for his daughters; at the same time, we can notice how much he wanted them to live the same virtues he was constantly urging his confreres to practice.

Consecrated for the Missions

*“The life of our Sisters – writes Fr. Planque to Fr. Guerin – in every aspect, is more or less the reproduction of ours. I tried to make it as similar as possible, since the Sisters, in their life style, have almost the same concerns as we have”*¹⁰¹. He explains that, in order to give them a rule of life, which must be without austerity, he took as a base the rule of St. Ignatius. Many other Institutes had done the same. In a previous letter he explained the reason for this choice: *“This Rule*

⁹⁹ Planque to a priest, 25.10.1898, AMA 2B. (cf. Letter of Planque on 23.09.85 where he says : « the foremost goal is the missions»).

¹⁰⁰ Planque to Terrien, 29.05.1903, AMA 2B

¹⁰¹ Planque to Guérin, 22.07.1884, AMA 2B.

seems to me the most adapted to the apostolic life"¹⁰² because it "*has nothing of austerity and it is suited for all forms of activity*"¹⁰³. This rule is, in effect, sufficiently adaptable to the goal and exigencies of the missionary family he was forming. It is the beginning of the foundation when he makes reference to this rule; Fr. Planque did not know how a female Institute operates. He asks for advice, makes reference to other Institutes already in existence, and seeks help from Bishop Cretoni, the archivist of Propaganda. He accepts guidance and enlightenment until the final text, which will become the first Constitution, is approved by Bishop Fava, the bishop of Grenoble. The first formula used for profession and written by Fr. Planque himself indicates very clearly that the Sisters are consecrated for the Missions:

*I, (...) Sister N., with the help of the divine grace and knowing the aim of the Congregation of Our Lady of the Holy Apostles for the African Missions, desire, for the greater glory of God, and the eternal salvation of my soul, to persevere in it till my last hour. Thus prostrated before you, Reverend Father, in the fullness of my will, I here declare solemnly: I promise freely and spontaneously to live for the love of Our Lord Jesus Christ, in poverty, chastity and obedience, according to the Institute and the spirit of the African Missions. I humbly implore the help of the Holy Spirit never to lack in fulfilling my sacred promise*¹⁰⁴.

We can deduce from the clause "*according to the Institute and the spirit of the African Missions*", just like in most of his letters, that the intention of Fr. Planque was to give to the female Congregation, the same aim, and the same spirit as that of the male Society. This confirms the fact that while there were two Institutes, there was only one Work, with one desire: a complete gift for the Missions.

¹⁰² Planque to Durieux, 18.07.1877, AMA 2B.

¹⁰³ Planque to X, 11.11.1884, AMA 2B.

¹⁰⁴ The first profession formula, reproduced in N. DOUAI, *Fidèle et vrai*, op. cit. p. 223.

In international Communities

The Congregation can declare itself international from its origins, on the same basis as the SMA. The girls came from Ireland, Switzerland, Britain, Italy, and even Syria; they all came to Lyon, in France. Within 10 years of their foundation there were already six nationalities; after 20 years, there were fourteen coming from three Continents¹⁰⁵.

For “the most abandoned countries of Africa”...

From the beginning, even before 1876, the Sisters settled in places where there were already SMA missionaries. Fr. Planque followed the line of Bishop de Marion Bresillac: to go to the most abandoned countries of Africa, which were in most need of missionaries. “*We have only one desire: to give to the Church good and numerous missionaries for the countries of Africa, which, until now, have been abandoned*”.¹⁰⁶ This gift to the Church cost the lives of many missionaries, both Sisters and priests. The statistics, in fact, show that from 1856 to 1906, 400 Fathers and Sisters gave their lives for the proclamation of the Gospel, and most often, it was shortly after their arrival in Africa.

A special attention for women

The need for Sisters was felt right from the beginning, because of the impossibility of the Fathers to approach the women and the girls. As a result, they were unable to effect any changes from within the community. The first activity of the Sisters, therefore, was the education and formation of girls, by means of schools and colleges, etc. Fr. Planque did not hesitate in urging them to get out of their convents, to go out and meet the people and to learn their language

¹⁰⁵ Planque to Sr. Joseph, 13.03.1878; to Sisters Perpetuel et Vincent, 21.05.1879; to Sr. Emile, 25.01.1888; the Superior of the Lazarists, 18.08.1888, AMA 2B. (cf. the book of C.M. Echallier, *op.cit.* p. 174).

¹⁰⁶ Planque to Propaganda Fide, 9.03.1873, AMA 2B.

so as to facilitate contact and friendship. *“I hear with pleasure that you have started to have some influence on the women of Lokodja and I do not doubt that, after some time, you will attract many to Jesus Christ. The first conversions are always the most difficult to get. When you will have some good Christians, they will bring you more. Courage and patience”*¹⁰⁷. *“The Religious Sisters are doing a lot in our Missions, and in training the young girls, they are preparing Christian mothers, and we would then get Christian families”*¹⁰⁸. *“The question of Sisters is very important to me. If there are no Sisters to train the girls and to get some Christians from among them, we will not be able to form Christian families. Here, to my mind, lies the most important question. It would be better to have fewer mission houses and to have, almost everywhere, Sisters to train girls”*¹⁰⁹.

Forming Christian families is a priority, but it is not yet the main objective.

To Establish an Indigenous Church

A true indigenous Church: this was what the missionaries sent by Fr. Planque, male or female, were about: *“I will follow with delight the progress of your work among the girls. By training them you are preparing a Christian family, which will later on become a Christian people”*¹¹⁰.

To guarantee the formation of an indigenous Church, it is necessary to maintain the birth and growth of Christian families and thus the growth of the Church, which right from the start, must produce a local clergy. It is the goal Bishop de Marion Brésillac aimed for, at the very beginning of his missionary activity. In this Fr. Planque is not only faithful to his Founder, but he also shares the idea of Cardinal Barnabò on the necessity of having indigenous Sisters: *“Your Eminence insists on two points, whose importance I am*

¹⁰⁷ Planque to Sr Emile, 07.03.1888, AMA 2B.

¹⁰⁸ Planque to X, 29.10.1898, AMA 2B.

¹⁰⁹ Planque to Zappa, 02.03.1904, AMA 2B.

¹¹⁰ Planque to Sr. Cornélie, 07.03.1893, AMA 2 B.

*very much aware: the creation of a seminary to form an indigenous clergy and the foundation of indigenous religious Sisters. On the first point, things are moving on as planned. (...) The question of religious Sisters is less advanced, but it will not be long before it gets started. (...) I am looking for a means to send some Sisters to Porto-Novo. (...) When they start work, we will not fail to let them choose among the young girls of the place, those of good disposition, so as to form a small group among whom some could be called to the religious life*¹¹¹.

The spirit of the Work

*“I bless Heaven for giving you, to a great extent, the spirit of our Work”*¹¹². The profundity of these words of De Marion Brésillac to Fr. Planque in 1857 will be revealed all through his life. For more than fifty years, Fr. Planque strived to transmit this spirit, convinced that it was the way to establish the foundations of the two Institutes; and that God would bless all the efforts accomplished for the progress of evangelisation.

“My daughter, in working to form missionaries, we are like the roots of the Missions. Without roots a tree cannot live. Without formation of missionaries, the missions will not exist. I have been working in the formation of missionaries for 46 years now. In spite of my desire to go on mission, I have remained in the post our Founder had assigned me and I am convinced I have worked for the Missions”.¹¹³ *“I am convinced that you and we here are doing the holy Will of God in the work we are involved in together. In spite of the contradictions, God will bless, for his glory, the work we are doing. Already many souls have been saved, and many more will be saved. This is our joy; this will be our glory in heaven”*¹¹⁴.

The *spirit of the Work*¹¹⁵ that Fr. Planque received from Bishop de Marion Brésillac comprises mainly the apostolic virtues cited

¹¹¹ Planque to Barnabò, (cf. N. DOUAU *Fidèle et vrai*, op. cit. p. 57).

¹¹² De Brésillac to Planque, 17.01.1857, *Lettres*, n. 740.

¹¹³ Planque to a Sister, 28.02.1877, AMA 2B.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

above: the spirit of faith, a life completely consecrated to the Missions in submission to God and the Church, a spirit of affability, of openness and of simplicity, unity of purpose in the continual search for the will of God. He wanted to pass on to the Sisters these same virtues, which were incarnated in his own life. We shall cite a few of these as they emerged from his many letters to the Sisters:

- *“What must I wish you? I see nothing else but to wish that you live from the life of God through the various occupations you undertake. God accepts everything from a heart that is for him and that has nothing else in sight but his glory”*¹¹⁶.
- *“You need to sanctify yourself where you are and in the circumstances you find yourself in, instead of believing that, elsewhere, you would only experience feelings of consolation. Gain victory over yourself where you are. To die to self will always be on this earth an absolute necessity. See God on your right and on your left, before and behind, above and below; you will be his worthy spouse, because you will be his humble servant”*¹¹⁷.
- *“Oh! How I want all the Sisters to understand that humble obedience wins more souls for God than even the most enviable job”*¹¹⁸.
- *“I want nothing of insolence, but only simplicity with an open-mindedness that is truly apostolic. The Holy Spirit will second our intentions and from our efforts he will bring out his glory”*¹¹⁹.
- *“I say squarely without any ulterior motive what I think; but that is not to say that I do not have confidence in those I speak to. I do not see mistakes as irreparable nor persons as incorrigible”*¹²⁰.

¹¹⁵ The deepening of the “the spirit of the Work” that Mgr de Marion Bresillac transmitted to Fr. Planque is the subject of a special study.

¹¹⁶ Planque to the Sisters, décembre 1897, AMA 2B.

¹¹⁷ Planque to Sr. Joseph, 15.04.1885, AMA 2B.

¹¹⁸ Planque to Sr. Alexandre, 17.01.82, AMA 2B.

¹¹⁹ Planque to Mother X, 20.10.1876, AMA 2B.

¹²⁰ Planque to Sr. M. Veronique, 17.09.79, AMA 2B.

- *“Do the work of God with gentleness and affability. May the charity of Our Lord Jesus Christ always be your companion and your guide in all your thoughts and in your actions”*¹²¹.
- *“Humility and gentleness are the two sources filled with divine blessings”*¹²².
- *“For you, I am asking God that you may always be detached from yourself and from your ways of looking at things. Be gentle and humble in everything and always; put yourself last in your own estimation and do not view it as bad if you are put aside”*¹²³.
- *“You all should be of one heart and soul”*¹²⁴. *“I believe that you have not yet understood that you are to put a hyphen between gentleness and humility in order to bring about this spirit of family and of trust. (...) For me, I pray the divine Heart of Jesus to unite us all in His Holy charity and to make us all into one heart and one soul for his greater glory”*¹²⁵.

The writings and the life of Bishop De Marion Brésillac, like those of Fr. Planque, and also those of many missionaries who followed them, constitute the spiritual patrimony from which we can draw to revitalize our SMA-OLA Missionary Charism today, in our common search for a *spiritual pedagogy* that is original and appropriate.

¹²¹ Planque to Sr. Joseph, 07.01.1885, AMA 2B.

¹²² Planque to Sr. Eugène, 02.01.1884, AMA 2B.

¹²³ Planque to Sr. Joseph, 06.02.1889, AMA 2B.

¹²⁴ Planque to Sr. M. Veronique, 06.02.1878, AMA 2B.

¹²⁵ Planque to Sr. M. Veronique, 05.02.1879, AMA 2B.

CONCLUSION

“You shall be this will”: with these words, Bishop de Marion Brésillac handed on this newly founded Enterprise to Fr. Planque. Fr. Planque was the first and true object of this heritage and he made it his own until the end.

The invitation of Bishop de Marion Brésillac *“to be this will”* is also addressed to all those who were and are the heirs of this enterprise, to each and every one of us, both personally and as a community; though separate entities, the SMA, the OLA, and all the associates of these two Institutes (the consecrated lay persons and married persons), form one big and unique family having as its source, this original charism. For us to consider ourselves as forming one Family or one Enterprise necessitates identifying ourselves, first of all, as having the same missionary charism and spirit, which animates us and distinguishes us from others.

The aim of this research is *“to throw light on the missionary charism, which from the beginning animated the two Institutes, male and female”*. I believe that I have achieved this objective, at least in part. I can affirm, based on the facts of our research, that the missionary charism inherited from Bishop de Marion Brésillac for the SMA, was handed on to its *“female branch”*, the OLA, by Fr. Planque. Consequently, the two Institutes, SMA and OLA were born and developed pursuing this same charism inherited from the two Founders.

The two Institutes, with their international character, were founded for the evangelisation of the most abandoned peoples of Africa, with the aim of establishing Christian families and a truly indigenous Church through the formation of its leaders.

The two institutes were animated by the same desire: to be a complete gift for the Missions, in their submission to God and the Church, united in the continual search for the Will of God with a spirit of openness, of simplicity, of fraternal charity and of patience.

Fr. Planque wanted the two Institutes to be really complementary, not just ideally, but also concretely through common

projects and effective collaboration, and he laboured along this line. History seems to want it otherwise.

“You shall be this will”. For us today, this could simply mean:

- Deepen and actualise together the charism and the spirit that have been handed on to us today.
- Promote a greater knowledge of each other for an effective collaboration at different levels;
- Seek together ways of responding to new demands at the service of the same Mission.

“You shall be this will”

I am convinced that, today, more than ever before, this expression has meaning if we truly live by it¹²⁶. It is exactly this same desire and conviction about the necessity of a common spirit for the same mission that Sr. Sainte Monique, who was the first postulant of the OLA Congregation, confided in her sisters just before leaving this earth: *“...I desire with all my heart that our two Societies work together in the vineyard of the Lord and, in this end, I ask God to give to these two Institutes, the Fathers of the African Missions and the Sisters of our Lady of Apostles, one big blessing”*¹²⁷.

Marta Pettenazzo, O.L.A.

¹²⁶ The complementarity of missionary Institutes, male and female, and the different states in life is more than ever in the spotlight. John Paul II underlined this in *“Christi Fideles Laici”*. *Post synodal apostolic exhortation on “vocation and mission of the Laity in the Church and in the world”, 30 December 1988; in Church-communion, the states of life are thus united one to the other that they are ordained one for the other...”* no. 55.

¹²⁷ We are talking of Marie Adelaide, born in Botz (Maine and Loire) on the 04.02.1855. She entered the postulancy on 09.11.1875, took her habit on 15.04.1877 under the name Sr. Ste Monique. She made her profession on 25.03.1878 in Africa and was a missionary in Benin and in Choubra (Egypt), where she died on 08.03.1923. *Archives NDA, R 1 (1864-1900)*