

FATHER NICHOLAS PETIT, S. J. AND THE COADJUTORSHIP OF VINCENNES.

CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN MGR. BRUTÉ
AND THE VERY REV. FATHER ROTHAAAN, S. J.

(Translated from the French.)

Father Nicholas Petit ⁽¹⁾ (Vivier, No. 1954) was born in the island of Hayti July 8, 1789; entered the Society in the Province of France, January 1, 1816; and after laboring as a Missionary at Paris and Laval took his last vows as Spiritual Coadjutor February 2, 1829. He sailed from Bourdeaux November 19, 1830 with Fathers Chazelle and Ladavière and Brother Corne and arrived at New Orleans January 20, 1831. They came to take charge of St. Mary's College, Kentucky, but on reaching New Orleans they learned that the venerable Bishop Flaget, not expecting them, had entrusted its direction to secular priests. This forced the Fathers to stay in New Orleans several months, during which time they exercised the sacred ministry in different ways. Father Petit, amongst other occupations, preached the Lent at the Cathedral with great success. When at last Father Chazelle set out to Louisville to meet Bishop Flaget, and ultimately to take charge of St. Mary's College, Kentucky, he took Father Petit with him.⁽²⁾ Father Petit took part in the college work but was especially employed in missionary work in the neighboring towns and cities as we learn from a letter written by him to his Provincial,⁽³⁾ it was while at St. Mary's that he became known to Bishop Bruté and did some work in his diocese.⁽⁴⁾ He came down to New Orleans several times

⁽¹⁾ He is mentioned in the *Catalogus Galliæ* for 1817 as P. Ludovicus Nicolas Petit and in the Index "A" of the *LETTERS* as Father Louis Petit. He was born, according to Père Vivier, at St. Michel-du Fond-de-Negres, Santo Domingo, Hayti.

⁽²⁾ *WOODSTOCK LETTERS* vol. iii. 136.

⁽³⁾ See Vivier, *Cat. Prov. Galliæ* 1834 p. 34.

⁽⁴⁾ P. Guidée in *Diar. Prov.* scribit: "27 dec. 1835.—Mgr. Bruté (an American missionary Bishop) has just said Mass in our chapel. . . . Father Provincial gave him permission to have Father Petit for some apostolic work in his diocese."

Cfr. "Litt. Anu. 1814-1835 p. 440, ubi de Patris Petit per septem menses laboribus in diœcesi hujus Præsulis agitur." P. Vivier, *Catalogus Prov. Galliæ S. J.*, 1863, p. 37.

and at least once, in 1845, again preached the Lenten sermons. When in 1846 our Fathers left St. Mary's for Fordham, Father Petit accompanied them. At Fordham he remained only one year being operarius. When Father Larkin was sent to New York to found a residence and church, Father Petit was given to him as his socius and here he remained for two years as operarius and Spiritual Father. In 1850 he was transferred to Troy where he spent the last five years of his life, dying there on February 1, 1855.

Monseigneur Bruté's life is too well known to be given here. A sketch of it with his memoirs was written by the Rt. Rev. James R. Bailey, then Bishop of Newark, and published by P. O'Shea at New York, in 1865. No mention is made in it of the negotiations which form the subject of the present correspondence, though Father Petit is mentioned as having accompanied the Bishop to Vincennes after his consecration at St. Louis, October 20, 1884.

I.

BISHOP BRUTÉ TO VERY REV. FATHER ROTHAAAN.

Vincennes, Sep. 23, 1837.

My very dear Father,

Excuse the expression! "Very Reverend" I feel would be the proper title to be given to the General Superior of the holy Society of Jesus; but your kindness to me compels my heart to use a more endearing name. Your kind letter announcing to me the death of our holy Anthony Kohlmann, for many years an intimate friend of mine and a devoted friend of America, reached me via Calcutta in the Indies. . . .

I wish to ask Your Reverence for a favor far more important, and this is to give us Father Petit, whose services are no longer required at St. Mary's, and whom I have directly asked the Holy See to appoint, as my Coadjutor. I am confident that his Eminence, Cardinal Fransoni, who has always taken the greatest interest in this diocese, will favor my desire. I am now fifty-nine years of age, weakened by a chronic catarrh of long standing and by continual travels over a territory of more than fifty thousand square miles. Since my return from the Council in April, I have, though scarcely convalescent, travelled some eleven or twelve hundred miles on horseback. I have besides the direction of the young clerics brought over from France, one of whom, Mr. Merle, an

excellent young man well known at Friburg, has lately left us to enter the novitiate. In addition I have charge of the seminary where I have to teach, and of a college for which I must provide, since I cannot have your assistance which I have desired and worked for ever since my arrival, etc., etc.

All these considerations have compelled me to apply for a Coadjutor, and of three names that were sent in, my preference is in favor of Father Petit, who has been in this diocese three or four times and has left everywhere many proofs of his zeal, piety, and prudence, while he has a practical acquaintance with the particular needs of these missions. In my letter to the Holy Father, I have in all simplicity expressed my desire and added the hope I felt that your Reverence will not oppose my plan. I shall not repeat here the conversations, ever present to my memory, which we had together, nor the contents of the memorandum which I left in various places, especially at the Propaganda in the hands of Monseigneur Mai, nor the views I was allowed to develop before the Holy Father in your presence and that of Father Kohlmann. In these I insisted upon the necessity, in the interests of religion, of having the religious institutes give up, for a time at least, the "fatal" ordinance which by excluding their members from the episcopate, diminishes considerably—at least by one-half—the number of eligible persons for the Sees to be established in this new Europe, which is rapidly forming, and where within twenty years it must be decided whether Christ or Satan is to rule,—whether error, impiety, deism, indifference or pure naturalism shall have the upper hand in a combat, of which it is almost impossible for Rome to measure the violence and calculate the outcome. In presence of this fact, it is absolutely necessary to proclaim loudly the true principles, and none are better fitted to do this than the Religious Institutes and more particularly your Institute. I repeat that this is our common interest, since it must be tenfold more advantageous than detrimental to these societies, to allow now and then, especially in points of greater importance, as our own, that some of their members when requested by the hierarchy, be raised to the Episcopate.

In writing this, I have accomplished a duty towards my diocese, towards the Society of Jesus, towards our Holy Father, whose burden is already so heavy,—the decision I leave to divine Providence. In conclusion I beg of you to remember me kindly to the Fathers of the

Gesu, and among outsiders to good Lord Clifford and to Father Gerard, the Carthusian, to whose prayers I recommend myself through Father De Villefort. I also crave your prayers and those of your community; with all the respect and gratitude which, would to God! I could express better than I have.

SIMON (BRUTÉ) *Bishop of Vincennes,*
Indiana, U. S. Auspice Maria.

II.

THE VERY REV. FATHER GENERAL'S ANSWER.

Rome, November 18, 1837.

Monseigneur,

I hope that this letter will not, like the one of last year, travel around the world before reaching your Lordship. I have just received your favor of September 23, so full of kindness and affection for us, and I hasten to answer it.

First of all, I must give you a thousand thanks for your good wishes, and assuredly if we had a sufficient number of subjects to open new fields of labor in the United States, I should be happy to come to the assistance of the worthy, zealous, and indefatigable Bishop of Vincennes, in whose diocese everything is in the state of formation. But we are forced to restrain ourselves and strengthen and consolidate the many establishments already existing.

As to the great favor you ask, Monseigneur, to grant you Father Petit as your Coadjutor, I beg you to remark, that St. Ignatius, whilst prohibiting severely his religious from accepting any ecclesiastical dignity without the consent of the General, strictly forbids the General to grant his consent, except in the extreme case of an express command of the Sovereign Pontiff *in virtute sanctæ obedientiæ*. Hence it is the duty of the General to do all in his power to prevent such a misfortune ("un tel malheur"). Such being the case, assuredly your Lordship will not insist any further. You do not, you cannot wish to require of me the sacrifice of one of my most sacred duties. "But," I hear you say, "The situation of the United States! What would St. Ignatius do?" He would do what he did in Germany during his life-time, when her situation was, at least, as critical and as delicate as that of the United States to-day. He did his utmost to ward off the imminent danger of seeing his religious becoming Bishops of Vienna, Trieste, etc. And

yet assuredly he was not wanting in zeal for the preservation and salvation of Germany.

It would be too long to expose and discuss the reasons which determined the Holy Founder to act as he did. Besides they are sufficiently explained in his life and in history. I will add only this, that I see scarcely any country in the world, where the taking of bishops from the Society would prove more prejudicial and dangerous than it would in the United States. If the door was once opened, the Society would languish and perish there. As I have been obliged several times already to plead the same cause before His Holiness and the Sacred College, I have good reason to know that my arguments have been accepted by the Pope, the Prefect of the Propaganda, and by nearly all the Cardinals of the Sacred Congregation. As for ourselves, Monseigneur, the thought of becoming a bishop at any time, is and ought to be as much out of question as the idea of travelling to the moon. Were it otherwise we should not be what we ought to be.

In craving your pardon, Monseigneur, for thus opposing your desire with the hope that your mind and heart will approve what it is for me a clear duty, I remain with most profound respect and veneration, etc.

III.

A second letter from Monseigneur Bruté more pressing than the other bears the date of December 4, 1837. The text is not at hand, but it contains the words, "It is the wish of the Bishops; to resist it would be cruelty."

IV.

The Father General's answer is dated February 4, 1838. He writes: "How could I do this? *Quomodo possum hoc facere?* A thing which depends as much on my free will as it depends on me to become a traitor to the Society. *Quomodo possum?* If you wish, Monseigneur, the Society to do any good in the United States, let it be as it is, let its members be what they are. If in America bishops were taken from it, it would be ruined there. This is my firm conviction. Yet this conviction is only a secondary argument; the *Quomodo possum?* shuts out every other consideration."

V.

Bishop Bruté's next letter was written from New Orleans, whither he had gone to seek health in a warmer

climate. It is dated February 24, 1838 and renews his request in terms most pressing and affectionate.

VI.

Another letter without date, but written March or April, is addressed to Bishop Blanc of New Orleans, but is destined for the Rev. Father General. In it he says: "The council of American Bishops is unanimous in demanding Father Petit as Coadjutor of Vincennes. My esteem of the Society and of the services it is rendering to the Church and to our America is such that if I saw its ruin in the exception to its rule, even in our case, I should at once cease to insist. But as I am convinced of the contrary, the urgency of our situation imposes upon me the obligation of insisting as much as I can."

To this letter Bishop (afterwards Archbishop) Blanc adds the following P. S. "I can only approve with all my heart the request of my venerated colleague to obtain Father Petit as his Coadjutor."

VII.

VERY REV. FATHER ROTHAAAN TO BISHOP ANTONY
BLANC.

July 10, 1838.

What shall I say of the P. S. your Grace has added to the letter of Rt. Rev. Bishop of Vincennes? Since then other letters have reached me by which that good prelate seeks to *convert* me. I have had a conversation on the subject with Monseigneur Laval and that worthy prelate has been forced to avow that I was right, and that if he were in my position, he would oppose the same resistance. The Sovereign Pontiff himself is fully convinced of the harm that such an appointment would cause the Society in America.

VIII.

BISHOP FLAGET OF BARDSTOWN TO VERY REV. FATHER
ROTHAAAN.

July 31, 1838.

He congratulates Very Rev. Father General "for having obtained from the Sovereign Pontiff that Father Petit could continue exercising his functions as a missionary in Kentucky, renouncing forever the episcopal dignity at Vincennes or elsewhere. . . . I remember distinctly your reflection as we discussed this and other questions in your room at Rome, that the very best friends of the Jesuits, directly though unintentionally work its ruin by wishing them to become bishops."