
Document 1668G

Letter from Fr. Sanvitores to the Pope, dated Acapulco 20 March 1668

Source: Jesuit archives of the Province of Toledo, Alcalá de Henares, Legajo 672, n° 39 (6 folios in Latin); translated by Fr. Juan Ledesma.

Note: The Pope did not answer this letter personally; one of his secretaries wrote back an ordinary acknowledgment (now lost), in Spanish, as was reported later by Fr. Bustillo (see Doc. 1681N).

Letter from Fr. Sanvitores to Pope Clement IX announcing his final departure for the Marianas

Most Holy Father.

I am one of Your Holiness' sons and the least of them, as well as the least of Society of Jesus. When I was still in my minor orders, in Madrid I had the extraordinary experience of the great clemency of Your Holiness. I was granted the faculty to preach and administer the sacraments for more easily and successfully giving missions; I could use this faculty not only in the district of Madrid and of the diocese of Toledo, but also in all the other cities and places that were under the jurisdiction of Your Holiness when you were then Apostolic Nuncio and Legate *a Latere* for the Kingdoms of Spain. You granted me this faculty through an autograph letter, which even now with due respect and reverence I keep with me.

Prostrate at the feet of Your Holiness, which I kiss with affectionate reverence, I come now for a new and bigger favor, your Apostolic blessing, which I humbly and confidently ask for in favor of my missionary work in the Indies, which are in greater need of it. I had been assigned by my Superiors nine years ago... to these Missions, moved by a mortal sickness that assailed me twice, from which I was saved by the merciful will of God after I had made a vow to spend my life in the missions...

...

When later... I was favored with very good health... I felt almost uninterruptedly the Divine help for the salvation of souls in various missions carried out under obedience, by land and sea, as much among Christians as among pagans and those who had abandoned their religion.

I made up for the scarcity of missionaries particularly in the mission to the Island they call Mindoro, of the diocese of Manila. In the space of five months from the month of November of the year 1665, more than 500 pagans... admirably attracted came forth freely to hear the word of God and to receive the sacraments; likewise 200 who had already been baptized but later apostatized were accepted to penance and to the faith.¹

Finally, after these labors, I am now sent by the same obedience to the Islands which... originally were called the “Ladrones” and now... “Mariana Islands” in honor of the Blessed... Virgin Mary. She... had such pity on these poor people, that the Islanders themselves attribute to her apparition and exhortation the first that we know of that generation to have happily died soon after receiving holy baptism, which was administered by a certain Spaniard called Marcos Fernandez. He had been some time before saved in those Islands from an auspicious shipwreck of the ship called **Nuestra Señora de la Concepción**.

Guided, therefore, by her who is truly the Star of the Seas and of peoples... we, 4 priests of the Society of Jesus set forth, together with some 30 laymen, who voluntarily offered themselves as our companions to help us in planting there the Christian faith and to be an example for the prospective Christians... Embarking at the port called Acapulco in New Spain, within our Lord's Passion week... we set sail directly for the aforesaid Mariana Islands...

This Marian name is now that of all... those islands and territories, which... widely extend from north to south, that is, from the Japanese Islands to the... southern unknown land, which... is still regarded as the fourth part of the whole world... Now this very good part of the world, Most Holy Father, lies still in darkness and under the shadow of death...

Having verified the excellent disposition of the inhabitants, especially of the Islands that deserve Mary's name and special protection,... an abundant and well-prepared harvest of souls awaits us, and we on our part are expecting any moment now to gather a most happy... fruit into the granaries of our Lord, unless we set an obstacle to it through our sins, principally my own.

Should the contrary happen... what would be its principal cause, our sins or theirs? That Your Holiness may decide and not excuse our spiritual tepidity and laziness which may Your Holiness avert through your prayers and blessing, it is necessary to know beforehand that those people were already discovered years ago and explored by many, whether Spaniard or others from the Indies who were already Christians. The latter on the occasion of shipwrecks or in ships passing through these islands, dealt with the former, and some of them lived for almost 30 years in the aforesaid Islands.

All of them unanimously declared that the country we call the Marianas is an excellent one and very well prepared for the seed of the Gospel; in other words, they assure us that the inhabitants are of an admirable disposition, docile, humble, courteous, kind

1 Ed. note: For more details about his mission in Mindoro, see Doc. 1666B.

towards their guests, to whom including the shipwrecked, they never inflicted the mark or even the name of slaves; rather they treated them as their children.

They are averse to vices, especially those that are common among the other peoples of the Indies, such as robberies, homicides, incests, adultery. They are monogamous; they know nothing of drunkenness, a principal obstacle to the fruits of the Gospel. What a rare ignorance in the Indies! They are completely averse to the juice of certain fruits, of which they do not lack, the substance of which juice is good or exceedingly bad when its use turns into a vice, as happens among the natives of the Philippines and others.

There are no temples of gods among them or any sects of idolaters, nor the Mohammedan plague. Consequently, they have no *Caciques*¹ or the Devil's sworn ministers who have conspired under oath against our most holy faith. They worship neither the sun nor the moon nor any other creatures. They only honor and invoke the spirits of their ancestors for the good of their crops and the success of their fishing. This error perhaps comes from God's kindness, so that the said islanders may be illumined by the light of the Gospel. It will end up in a stronger faith in the immortality of the soul and easier assent to the things that they do not see.

I do not wish to annoy Your Holiness with the length of this letter. Our Procurator, Andrés de Ledesma by name, left the Philippine Islands. He is going to deal with Your Holiness personally. And may Your Holiness deign to listen to him and favor the causes which he will present to the Holy See for the common good of this people.

Besides, for the special information of Your Holiness and towards the increase of abundant graces in favor of this new plantation, our aforesaid Procurator will offer to Your Holiness in the name of our Admiral Bartolomé Muñoz... a humble brief. Through the same Admiral... the priests also of the Society, who are the missionaries of this Mission, together with the other companions and poor people of the Marianas, prostrate at the feet of Your Holiness humbly pour out our prayer and we beg from your clemency a generous blessing, as we fervently pray that the Lord, for the good of the Catholic Church and all mankind grant Your Holiness a long life.

From Acapulco, on 13 April [sic] 1668.

[P.S.] Another humble brief will be presented to Your Holiness in the name of the Sodality of St. Francis Xavier... In honor of the same Holy Apostle of the new nations, this Sodality accepted to support our Mission for the conversion of the new Marian nation. And it already supports it principally through its pious works and prayers and other deeds of charity, among which is the college or refuge for poor women, the only one that was missing in Mexico among its varied acts of piety. For this Sodality, therefore, and its pious works... with cordial trust and humility I beg for the clemency of Your Holiness.

1 Ed. note: A word of Caribbean origin meaning chief, but applied here to Moslem priests.

Most Holy Father: Prostrate at the feet of Your Holiness, humbly kissing them, the undersigned, together with his associates, humbly begs your holy blessing for this Marian Mission.

Diego Luis de San Vitores