



1866: Lavigerie creates the Ecole des Hautes Etudes de Nancy.

Circular on the baptism of Muslims (15th December 1880)

Fathers and Co-operators,

I am writing this letter to you from Tunis, where I am presiding at the opening of Saint-Louis French College. Recent events have made it necessary for me to remind you of the grave instructions from the Holy See and from the diocesan authorities, concerning the baptism of non-Christians. As far as non-Christian children are concerned, a decree of 1763 given by the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office forbids them to be baptised while they are subordinate to their parents, which means while they have not yet come of age. The diocesan statutes, for their part, state the following: « No Jewish or Muslim child must be baptised without the express permission of their parents. »

The only exception would be for children who have been abandoned, or those in imminent danger of death, or those with no family at all who have been picked up and adopted by Christian organisations or settlers. Those who, in adopting them, have accepted responsibility for their spiritual upbringing can only teach them what they believe to be true, that is to say the Christian faith, and if, at a later date, they present them for baptism, this must be granted to them. But even in such cases as these, all the precautions prudence demands must be taken so as to ensure that the children are really orphans abandoned by their families, that they have the necessary maturity and freedom and that their perseverance is morally guaranteed by the care they have received from their adoptive parents.

For adults, those who have reached the age of majority, parental permission is not required, but the bishop's is. Here again is what the diocesan regulations state: « No Protestant, Jewish or Muslim adult must be baptised without our special authorisation. » The aim of this measure is to enable the bishop to check whether all the precautions have been taken, namely: whether the age of majority, a sufficient level of independence and the disinterestedness of the motives which lead him to ask to become a Catholic have been indisputably established. If there were any serious doubts concerning these points, the decision must be deferred. In such a case, a promise could be made to those whose baptism has been delayed that they will be baptised on their death-bed, if they renew their request, since their good faith and their determination will then no longer be in doubt. It should be explained to them, moreover, that, if any insurmountable obstacle were to prevent them from receiving baptism at the last moment, then the firm desire to receive it along with an act of love of God would suffice to justify them.

Dear Fathers and co-operators, no-one wants the conversion of the non-Catholics of Africa more than I do. I have dedicated my life to this task, but I can only want this in accordance with the rules of wisdom. To accept at face value abjurations in which imprudence or compulsion or dishonesty might be suspected would go totally against this aim. It is not in isolation, through conversions which are rashly undertaken, that we can hope to return the natives of Algeria to the faith which was once that of their forefathers – since almost all of them, contrary to the prejudice received, are of Berber stock – it is upon the whole population that we must act and I have already indicated to you several times the means to do this effectively. The first and the most powerful means is the instruction of children, which will herald, as new generations come along, a new future by destroying the blind fanaticism which they take as faith; the second is practising charity, the third is example and the fourth is prayer.

It is to this, dear Fathers and Co-operators, that I have always invited you to channel your zeal. In this way, all its ardent desires will be met, and all the laws of the Church and all the rules of wisdom will be respected. Besides, in order to avoid any very harmful consequences which might result from the slightest acts of foolishness, in these times when so many frenzied passions are seeking to exploit them and use them against the clergy as a whole, I feel I must, in conclusion, reiterate and clarify the instructions of the diocesan statutes and set penalties on them that must not be violated.

Consequently:

- 1) It remains forbidden for any secular or regular priest of the diocese, in accordance with the formal instructions of the Holy See and with those of the diocesan statutes, to give baptism to any non-Catholic child without the express authorisation of the parents or legal guardians, if the child has a family. This authorisation must be given in writing in front of witnesses and entered on the baptismal certificate.
- 2) It is also forbidden, in accordance with the diocesan statutes, to give baptism to any non-Catholic, including adults, without our personal authorisation. This authorisation must also be given in writing and entered on the baptismal certificate.
- 3) Except in clear cases of danger of death, any priest, secular or regular, who contravenes this ruling will incur the penalty of canonical suspension.