



Letter to King Léopold II of Belgium (27th December 1884)

Your Majesty,

It is not simply out of obedience to the old custom of the Sacred College that I come today to present to Your Majesty my respectful good wishes and my devotion. I cherish only too well the memory of your kindness to me for me not to hold this duty as a debt of gratitude. I am especially pleased, Sire, to have this opportunity to thank Your Majesty for the benevolence you have shown this year towards the Society of the missionaries of which I am the founder for the setting up of a house at Woluwé whose purpose is the recruitment of Belgian citizens who dedicate themselves to the missions in Equatorial Africa.

The decisions taken recently by the International Conference of Berlin open a new path to the Christian apostolate in countries which come henceforth under the authority of the Association Africaine of which Your Majesty is the august head. Having no political ulterior motive and seeking only those higher interests of truth, humanity and civilisation, allow me to tell Your Majesty that we shall be happy, in so far as we are able, to work towards fulfilling Your Majesty's most generous plans. The Belgian missionaries whom we have trained with care will eagerly dedicate themselves to this work.

I had even thought of telling you about a new project along these lines, but I do not wish to enter into all the details of the project before knowing if it might be agreeable to you. So here is simply the main idea: in the great enterprise recently blessed by European approval, what seems to me to present the most difficulty is the creation of an armed force which might give those countries far away sufficient guarantees, these so necessary but so difficult to obtain, of high moral standards, of constantly assured harmony and of low cost so as not to create burdens too heavy for the sponsors to bear. I do believe, Sire, that this problem can only be resolved, for the time being at least, by a military association of a religious nature. With the information I already have and having had a first experience of this in other circumstances, this association could be made up entirely of Belgians and Dutch, former soldiers, who, in a spirit of Christian devotion, might wish to dedicate their lives to so great a task, by accepting a common set of rules and oaths freely pronounced.

The house at Woluwé Saint-Lambert could serve as a place for rallying together and as a first novitiate. Those candidates deemed suitable for this life of military activity and religious devotion would then be sent to one of our houses in North Africa to help them adapt to the climate. Once their training is completed, which would take at least year, they would be directed to places in Equatorial Africa chosen by the Association Africaine and there they would establish military posts for the purpose of maintaining respect for and influencing by their example the surrounding populations.

I estimate that, instead of the enormous expenses which salaried men would demand, and Your Majesty knows only too well how excessive this can be, we should have totally dedicated men who would cost, as a fixed sum, not more than one thousand or one thousand five hundred francs per year, because they would ask only for their food and clothing.

Having only a small number of military posts set up at intervals in fortified positions, the whole course of the Congo could be sufficiently guarded for two or three hundred thousand francs per year. One or two missionaries would be attached to each of these posts as chaplains and would similarly require only their food and clothing, not including the cost of their settling in at the beginning.

But, could such a project find its place in Your Majesty's plans? This is what I ask myself, and uncertainty over the response is what prevents me, as I have said, from entering into greater detail. Whatever it might be, Sire, I consider myself at Your Majesty's disposal on this matter. In all this, I hope you will find new proof of my active desire to show you my continued deference and my devotion.

