The Local Or Particular Churches According To Father Libermann

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One of the subjects most studied at the Bishops' Synod of 1974 was that of the local or particular churches. In order to point out the interest that this problem raised it is sufficient to recall the press reports of the interventions of the Fathers, especially the reports of the various linguistic groups. A good summary was given in the English edition of Fides Bulletin for November 6, 1974, and reprinted in the French edition the same day. More significant still is the place given to this subject in the final declaration of the Synodal Fathers, and in the official list of questions treated by the Synod. It would be interesting to point out the insistence on this subject by bishops of the third world countries, especially those from Africa and Asia. But this would take us too far afield. My aim is more limited: I would like to try to show that Father Libermann already understood the importance of this question, at least in its major aspects, and this at a time when very few seemed to have foreseen its essential role in missionary work. It would be superficial, even anti-scientific, to try to find in him a problematic similar to that which is uppermost in our minds today; but it is interesting to note that the fundamental principles were already quite clear in his mind.

Father J. Kirkels, Oblate of Mary Immaculate, recently defended a thesis in Strassburg which concerns our subject, but he based himself almost exclusively on Father Libermann's letters to the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda between 1840 and 1849. It seems possible to me to broaden his investigation. This will, I hope, make it possible to correct or at
least to moderate a few of his conclusions. I shall simply follow, in chronological order, some of Father Libermann's writings and then conclude with a quick synthesis of the points discovered.

**FIRST INTUITIONS**

It was on October 28, 1839, that Father Libermann, then master of novices at Rennes, decided to consecrate his life to the mission to the Blacks. In the letter he wrote that day to Le Vavasseur, he mentions in passing the dispositions of Mr. de la Bruniere who had decided to join the project. And in his writings we find this expression which is at least surprising: "The good Mr. de la Bruniere is all black ...". One simple word, but already revealing, - it is the missionary who should change his mentality, adapt himself to those whom he wants to serve, and not the contrary. We shall see later that this is indeed the mind of the future founder.

Libermann left for Rome a few days later, arriving there on January 6, 1840, for the feast of the Epiphany. He began to draw up the report which he turned in to Propaganda on March 11. A few days earlier, on March 2, while writing to Mr. Bureau, a student at Saint Sulpice who dreamed of joining the mission to the Blacks, he wrote these few lines: "Missionaries must value, respect and love all men, and this with all the sincerity of their hearts, and they must behave accordingly". Esteem, respect, love, - three very significant words! The missionary does not come to destroy, but to acknowledge the values already present in those to whom he brings the Gospel.

The report of Monsignor Cadolini is very precious. True, it speaks of the misery, of the abandonment of the Blacks, of their ignorance, of their vices. How could it have been otherwise, given the knowledge that was had then? But, from his very first official document, Father Libermann speaks of the formation of a native clergy "that seems to be a great good, and of the highest necessity". He mentions the possibility that, once the need in a country is less great, the missionaries could be transferred to "another more needy country".

This same idea comes back strongly in a letter to an unknown correspondent, dated October 5: "If, in fifty years, all the Blacks are in a good situation, what or who will prevent
the missionaries then from running to the aid of another part of the Church, which at that time will be the most abandoned and the most despised”? Thus, even at this time, the young acolyte foresees that the day will come (and soon enough, he thought) when the local churches will be sufficiently established to be able to do without missionaries. These latter are merely, as stated in the Provisional Rule which he wrote at that period, “servants” of the poorest⁸. Meanwhile, they will not abandon “a mission already begun to undertake another one” which would be even poorer, “unless, by the grace and the blessing of God, the first one be in a good enough state that it no longer has the conditions” of poverty, of great need and of abandonment⁹. An important principle whose value always remains real: once engaged in a determined task, the missionaries remain faithful to it until the local Church can do without them and become fully independent. The expression “local Church” is not used, but the idea is undoubtedly present in the thoughts of Libermann. To be convinced of this, it is enough to reread the whole chapter which he dedicates to the formation of a native clergy in areas where the missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary will be established (Provisional Rule, Part I, Chap. 8).

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE FOUNDATION

On January 8, 1841, Libermann left Rome, after having received the necessary authorizations. He would not be ordained priest until September 18 of that year, but meanwhile he continued his reflections on the work which had been undertaken. In a letter of January 1842, addressed to Mr. Dupont, a student at Saint Sulpice, we find restated: “Suppose that this great misery, contempt and desertion were to cease among them (the Blacks) and that they were to enter the ordinary state of the peoples of Europe, we would then have to go elsewhere and look for a people which is more miserable”¹⁰. In other words: when the evangelized nation will have a “church” sufficiently established, they themselves should take the responsibility for its direction.

In the beginning of 1842, there was the question of uniting the new society with the Congregation of the Holy Cross of Mans: Father Libermann refused, because the aim of the
Holy Cross Fathers was not the same as his. In a letter dated February 15 to Father Moreau, Superior of the Holy Cross Fathers, he gives the reasons for his refusal: let us draw attention to these few words: “We will do all we can to form a native clergy”.

A little while later, in December, there was question of sending missionaries not only to the French or English colonies, but also to Guinea. Father Libermann tried to gather all the information he could about the population of that country. A letter dated January 3, 1843, to Father Gamon, a Sulpician, summarizes what he learned about their customs, their religious beliefs, the qualities which predisposed them to receive the Gospel. The same favorable impressions appear in a letter dated February 7, to Madam Bresdon de Nantes, and in a letter dated February 17, to the Mother Superior of Castres: Father Libermann mentions also the faults of the people of Guinea, such as they had been described to him, but he does not insist upon them. The missionaries should learn their language from the first year.

The idea that the Africans should be their own apostles as soon as possible brings Father Libermann to welcome to La Neuville in April of 1843 a young negro named Thieroco, an ex-slave, “a young man, robust and well built, full of spirit and vivacity, intelligent, skillful. He learns very quickly and has a good memory, plenty of common sense and is of an excellent character. Besides this, he is full of faith and piety. He gives us much to hope for in his country.” But his projects go much further. Already on October 8, 1843, he wrote to the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda of his desire to found a seminary in Haiti, and the context of the letter shows clearly that he would wish to see established on the island not only a national clergy, but also a bishop of the country, despite the opposition of the government. At the same time, he takes pains that the missionaries be totally independent of the French Government for the practice of their ministry. Numerous letters dated November and December 1843 concern this problem.

At the beginning of 1844, he speaks again of founding “as soon as possible” a seminary in Haiti, another in Guinea “as soon as possible and to form a native clergy so that we can do away with the foreign priests.” Soon the project expands. They will try to establish one or several houses of education for the Africans. There will be an establishment for general
culture and specialization for children and young people who
could then bring to their countries the values of (European)
civilization and help their African brothers at a human level
as well as at a spiritual and supernatural level. There will be
a special establishment for the preparation of future priests\textsuperscript{23},
since it is absolutely necessary to form a native clergy if one
hopes for the conversion of Africa\textsuperscript{24}. Let us note in passing
that when Father Libermann speaks of civilization in these
pages he is thinking of European civilization. How could he,
in his time, have suspected that the Africans could have a cer-
tain civilization, an authentic culture, different from that of
Europe?

At every moment, the necessity of a native clergy comes
back: “If we do not form a native clergy, we shall never suc-
cceed in this mission”\textsuperscript{25}. This concerns Santo Domingo, but
the same principle applies to Madagascar and Haiti\textsuperscript{26}, to Gu-
yana\textsuperscript{27}, and Guinea\textsuperscript{28}. A passage from a letter to Father Ga-
mom, dated May 20, 1844, expresses well the thoughts of Fath-
er Libermann on this point and ties it to his general concept
of the Mission: “The condition of the missions is such that the
great good to be done does not consist in perfecting a work in
a country and giving it the combined care of several commu-
nities. It consists rather in scattering our efforts, in bringing
the faith to the great stretches of the country, in perfecting
meanwhile as many things as we can. We will form a native
clergy for them, which will take on what the missionaries will
have begun and carry it forward with the aid and support of
those missionaries”\textsuperscript{29}. It is then a matter of forming a good
native clergy and letting them continue the work begun by
the missionaries. The latter would be there simply to aid and
support them as long as this would be necessary. This was in-
deed the idea of the African Bishops at the last Synod.

Moreover, we should not ignore some texts which today
may seem embarrassing to us. On several occasions Father
Libermann seems to doubt the possibility of forming black
priests who would have the same value as white priests. On
July 24, 1844, he writes to the Assinie Community: “I am more
and more convinced that we must decidedly embrace all pos-
sible means to form a native clergy . . . I imagine that the
black priests will not be of the same worth as the white ones,
but the one will not hinder the other, and once we have black
priests, we could undertake the most unhealthy countries,
and thus go to the aid of the most important places. Our mis-
sionaries would travel all along the coasts to support the black priests”.

A letter written a few days later to the Minister of the Navy allows us to understand Libermann’s thoughts better. After affirming the necessity of a native clergy, because of the shortage of missionaries and the unhealthfulness of the climate, he adds that “the black priests will have the advantage over the Europeans in many aspects of dealing with their compatriots; but, left to themselves, they will not be able to support themselves and they will not produce for very long nor to its fullest extent the good that we are looking for. They will need to be guided and encouraged by the European missionaries”. It seems then that the fears of the founder concern the first African clergy. He thinks that the formation received in a still pagan country does not predispose them to perseverance. They will have to “lose their old tastes, lose their European habits, form their character better by acquiring a little energy…” The same fear is expressed four days later in a letter to the Prefect of Propaganda: if the first candidates were not formed or supported by the missionaries, “there would be a risk that we would not find in the Blacks sufficient energy to bring about the good result desired. They will need to be supported, – at least the great majority of them”.

It isn’t only the small number of missionaries or the unhealthful climate which requires the formation of a native clergy. The African priests “would accomplish considerable good and would soon gain the confidence of the tribes from which they will have come. They will have great facility in abolishing superstition and idolatry. They will be better able than the Europeans to destroy Mohammedanism in the many regions where it is established, and to fight against Protestantism”. These lines, written to the Prefect of Propaganda after the news of the death of the first missionaries sent to Guinea, were completed by an important treatment of the help that well-trained African laity could bring to evangelization as catechists. He returns to this idea in a letter written to Father Le Vavasseur at about the same time: “The black priests and catechists will be much better able than our missionaries to resist the errors of the Protestant ministers and of the Moslems. At least with their help our missionaries would have greater ease in over-powering those instruments of the devil”. These last words shock our ears which are ac-
customed to more ecumenical language, but they reflect very well the mentality of the time. This point could serve as a topic for an interesting study which it is impossible to undertake here.

The project of forming future priests, as well as lay people who could become catechists, comes up constantly in the correspondence of the last weeks of 1844. A letter from Propaganda, received a few days before Christmas, encourages Father Libermann in his project of founding a house in Rome for this purpose, but asks for details about the financial resources at his disposition. The answer was dated Christmas Day.

During the first days of 1845 the unexpected return of Father Luquet to Europe provides an opportunity for a new reflection and a treatment of the subject in depth.

**RELATIONS WITH FATHER LUQUET**

Father Libermann had known Father Luquet ever since the latter entered Saint Sulpice in June 1838. He had even hoped for a time that the young man would join the new work for the Blacks; but, after many hesitations, Father Luquet decided on the Seminary for Foreign Missions, where he was admitted in 1841. During his sojourn at rue du Bac, Father Luquet carefully studied the history of the Society of Foreign Missions and prepared a book on this subject which, under the title *Letters to Mgr. de Langres*, was published by Gau me in 1842, a few days before the young priest's departure for India. This big volume of 600 pages deals at length, among other subjects, with the necessity of a native clergy and of a native hierarchy. It is difficult to say whether Father Libermann had any influence on this precise orientation of Father Luquet or if, on the contrary, Father Luquet's book had an influence on the founder. Already during his first stay in Rome, Father Libermann had written two letters to Father Luquet, who was still a student at Saint Sulpice. The second letter, dated August 4, 1840, is a real treatise on what we would call today "charisms". At that time, Father Libermann had already composed his *Memorandum to Mgr. Cadolini* and had written his *Provisional Rule*. In his letter, Father Libermann
announces that he is sending the first copies of the *Rule* (with explanatory notes) to Father Pinault, Director at Saint Sulpice38. It is therefore certain that Father Libermann did not wait for Father Luquet's book before taking up his position on the problem which concerns us here. But it is very possible, if not probable, that during the year 1842 they remained in contact and discussed these questions. In any case, it is very significant that the young missionary, before leaving for India on December 21, 1842, felt called to make a commitment in writing on this point and that he placed the paper on the altar dedicated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in the Church of Our Lady of Victories. He wrote, in particular, the following: "The fundamental principle ... is therefore ... that we must try by all possible means to make mission countries into real Churches, independent of European help and depending, like all the churches of the world, only upon the One Holy Mother and Mistress of all Christians, the glorious Roman Catholic Church"39. It is difficult to think, when we realize the ties which bound Father Libermann to Our Lady of Victories, that he was not aware of this event.

Having left for India on December 21, 184240, Father Luquet assisted in the preparation and the meetings of the synod of Pondichery (January 1844). More than that, he was appointed by the Synod to go to Rome to present and promote the decisions or the wishes of the Synodal Assembly. As soon as he returned to Europe, he got in contact with Father Libermann again41. Then, in October, he went to Rome. On January 6, 1945, the founder wrote to him and spoke of his project for Guinea: "The only means that I can see is the formation of a native clergy, and we are seriously occupied in preparing for this... I have always looked on the formation of a native clergy as of the highest importance for any mission; but if, in other missions, it is necessary to have recourse to the formation of a native clergy, here it is absolutely indispensable"42. A little later, Father Luquet sent Father Libermann a memorandum which he had presented to Propaganda and which is dated April 9, 1845: "Explanation of the Synod of Pondichery": it is an energetic defence of the position of this Synod in favor of the formation of a native clergy43. Father Libermann thanked him on July 30, 1845, in a letter in which he re-affirmed his own conviction: "Since 1840, when I wrote and sent to Rome the first version of the Rules which I had to propose for our little society, I thought it urgent to work
for the formation of a native clergy and, without any information on the manner of doing it, I put in a chapter on this subject so that, if I were to die before having begun the work for a native clergy, my confreres would not abandon it". He was then delighted with the approbation given by Rome, but expresses his worries: "The recommendations that Propaganda will make now and all the orders it will give, - will they be any better carried out than they were in the past?" The old missionaries "with their minds all made up to remain the sole spiritual proprietors of the missions which they have taken on - do you think they will yield so easily and give up their system?" The severe judgment which Father Libermann pronounces in these last lines is explained in part by the severity of Father Luquet himself in his "Explanations". Besides, the latter was criticized for it by his confreres and he later tried to justify himself; but Father Libermann could not doubt the information given by his correspondent. In any case, the taking of a position by Propaganda only confirmed him, as he says himself, in a conviction which he had since his first trip to Rome. In the following months, he will be very busy with the project of fusion with the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, but he does not forget his great project of a house in Rome to form future priests, catechists or lay people of African origin. He even dreams of preparing Blacks from Bourbon to make missionaries of them and catechists for Guinea and for Madagascar; to establish in Goree and then in Gabon a house to form catechists and Black farmers who would help the native clergy which we would have formed. For a little while he dreamt of buying the isle of Levant for a foundation of this sort. On November 23, there appeared the Instructions of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda "Neminem Profecto", which insists on the necessity of forming a native clergy, in conformity with the oldest tradition of the Church and with Guidelines already given by Rome. The Instruction foresees explicitly that there will even be native bishops. Father Libermann received two copies directly from Propaganda. On January 7, 1846, he expresses his joy to Mgr. Luquet (who had meanwhile become Titular Bishop of Hesebon and Co-Adjutor to Bishop Bonnard, Vicar Apostolic of Pondichery): "Now it is to be hoped that all missionaries will work seriously to establish solidly-based Churches in foreign mission countries and that hereafter they will employ every valid means for putting them into the same ca-
nonical situation as the Churches of Europe and America". These last words are as clear as one could want them to be: the Churches of mission countries should obtain the same status of local Churches as those of the older Christian countries.

In the month of August, Father Libermann was in Rome and he met Bishop Luquet there. On August 15, he presented to Propaganda a memorandum on his work. It is impossible to summarize this document. Let us at least underline the vehemence with which he pleads the cause of the Blacks. "These men are made in the image of God like everybody else, and they are disposed to receive the treasure of Faith which they do not know". He rejects the accusations levelled against them, insisting on their qualities, their intelligence. If there is at times depravity or demoralization among them, "it comes almost entirely from contact with Europeans" or from the inhuman situation imposed upon the slaves. The reputation that was given them of being inconstant, indolent, is no better founded, or else is able to be explained by the same causes. He spends some time on the causes of the decline of the Church in Angola. "We believe that we should not attribute the relapse of this country to intrinsic causes found in the very nature of the people, but rather to the pattern followed in the history of this mission. The missionaries... would have made numerous conquests... and their labor would have produced numerous Christian communities perhaps even without these fervent missionaries taking sufficient means to consolidate the fruits of their labor by giving these communities the enduring strength of a Church. The Sacred Congregation, with its usual wisdom, in order to consolidate and assure the future of these Churches, established an episcopate there, but this was only the beginning of the good work. These wise intentions of the Holy See should have been well understood and accepted by the missionaries. The newly established Bishop should no longer be content to have a "flying wedge" of missionaries. He should form a native clergy attached to the country, a native hierarchical order. If he did not do it, the decline of that Christian community is easily explained. If the preservation of a uniquely white clergy was a rule of behavior proposed for always, or for a very considerable length of time, the decline would be inevitable." It is necessary then that there be, "from the very beginning... a stable organization indigenous to the ground we
have to cultivate”, to tend effectively, “always to implant our holy religion in the very soil”; especially to form a native clergy.

Father Libermann refers to the recently published Instruction, and then traces a detailed plan of the steps which he wants to see followed: central schools and houses in the missions, farming to insure the survival of the schools and to train good farmers; formation of future priests, catechists, teachers. He even asks that the catechists be able to receive Minor Orders, to preside over the meetings of the faithful and the prayer meetings, to sing the office and to give instructions to the people. We shall also train farmers, artisans of “arts and crafts”. We shall bring to the Africans “an improved civilization, one which has as its foundation religion, science and work... in order little by little to make them reach the state of no longer needing any help from missionaries in order to continue the task, -- otherwise these peoples will always remain in their childhood...”. He asks then that Bishops be named as soon as possible, and he outlines a project of regulation (or contract) for the relations between the Bishops and the missionaries. As soon as there is a certain number of native priests, one of them will be a member of the Bishop’s Administrative Council. There follows some information on the territories where the missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary are working.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

These ideas of Father Libermann became clearer as time went on. On November 2, 1846, he wrote to Father Percin, a young mulatto priest, born at St. Lucie, who was working in Haiti: “The Church of Haiti... should not and cannot be put on the same footing as a Church which is still only a mission”. This country “should certainly have a Church regularly constituted like all other particular Churches which make up the universal Church. As long as it doesn’t have this respectable position in the midst of the other Churches, it isn’t in a normal condition, it is in a state of suffering and disorder...”. The status of mission is “only a provisional status to allow enough time for the solid formation of a regular Church”. Now, “to constitute a regular Church, there must be a Bishop with fixed and permanent authority...,”
rators... a spiritual administration". The present situation is abnormal, as long as there is no Haitian bishop with Haitian collaborators, and we “turn to strangers to fill these important functions”; these strangers “moreover, do not have sufficient knowledge of the spirit and the customs of the country”. Because of this, it is necessary to prepare men capable of filling these functions. “To put it briefly: Haiti needs a Bishop and clergy who come from the country itself; for this, a Seminary is needed.”

While waiting for this to become possible everywhere, missionaries should make every effort to get to know the people they are evangelizing, not to judge according to European ideas: “Do not judge according to what you have seen in Europe, according to what you have been used to in Europe, cast Europe aside, its customs and its spirit; make yourselves negroes with the negroes so as to form them as they should be formed, not in a European way, but leave them what is theirs, act towards them as servants should act towards their masters, towards the customs, ways and habit of their masters, and this so as to bring them to perfection, to sanctify them... and to make of them little by little people of God.”

When we read these well-known words, we can’t help being struck by their similarity to certain expressions of the Second Vatican Council and of the Synod of 1974, concerning the need for the Church to incarnate itself into each human culture, while leaving to each that which is its own.

On November 22, 1847, three days after the letter we have just quoted, the founder wrote to Bishop Truffet, Vicar-Apostolic of the two Guineas. One little detail deserves our attention. Father Libermann speaks to him about church singing and says: “From what I can see, French hymns are worthless in Africa, where the Blacks do not learn our language well enough to be able to sing hymns in it. We shall probably have to compose some for them in their own tongues, so as to instil into them the principal truths of our holy religion. From the little that I understand of the pronunciation and the sounds of the Guinean languages, it seems to me that our French melodies can hardly be adapted to them. I thought that it might be good if we were to get some Italian religious melodies. They are soft and simple and seem to me to be more in harmony with the feelings and imagery of our good Africans, and closer to the gentleness, the flow and the simplicity of their forms of expressions.” It is evident that Father Libermann
did not consider the possibility that there exists an African music able to be adapted to religious songs; who would have thought of it at the time he wrote? It is astonishing, therefore, that Father Kirskels, in the work that we quoted above, basing himself on this one text, reproaches the founder for not “having had real dialogue with the cultural factors already present in this country”68. This is true, of course, since he never went to Guinea himself, but, besides other texts already cited, the one we have just read above clearly shows that he wants this dialogue to exist, that he wants the decisions that are made to be “in harmony with the feelings and the imagery” of the Africans. Besides, the first part of this letter to Bishop Truffet congratulates him for the decisions he had made and which he had communicated in his letter of September 1. That letter speaks of an effort to adapt, at least in part, to the native food69, of study of the native languages, of the need for the missionaries to show that they are independent of France and of Europeans, who are “the scourge of the coasts of Africa”70 and of slavery which is a “crime”71. It is about all this that Father Libermann says at the beginning of his letter: “You enter fully into all the ideas which Divine Providence gave me from the beginning for the salvation of the Blacks. Father Chevalier’s letter convinces me more and more of the perfect agreement which exists between our two ways of thinking”72.

The letter from Father Chevalier (to Father Boulanger) which is mentioned here was dated August 29, 1847. It gives details about the education that is given to the children according to the directives of Bishop Truffet, in order to prepare them eventually for the priesthood: We teach them “all that they will need later to be self-sufficient”. Consequently, as well as latin and religion, they must also acquire knowledge of trades, mechanics, etc., which they will need later; but the materials for this varied knowledge, as for clothing, for housing, for food, should, as far as possible, be drawn from the local scene and apart from the European way of doing things. Also, the education that they receive here is completely different from that which is given in the junior seminaries and colleges of Europe. Starting with the principle that the missionaries are for the children and not the children for the missionaries, things are arranged in such a way that the students render no manual service whatever, at least directly, to any of the members of the community. Instructed to be
self-sufficient, they have no domestic servants themselves, but neither are they domestic servants to anyone else. They are the most independent of Blacks. If they work, it is for their own profit and not for the profit of the house. The house gains only to the extent that less sacrifice will be required to support them, since all their revenue rightly belongs to them. It is they who cook, make their clothes, and take care of themselves in every way. . . .”

There follow a number of details: they are taught Latin and Wolof (but not French), carpentry, sewing, agriculture, breeding and raising of domestic animals. They have a flock of sheep and goats and they administer the money they make. They govern themselves for the most part according to their own customs.

Now Father Libermann warmly congratulates Father Chevalier for this type of education “which agrees perfectly with the idea I had formed. . . . It seems absolutely necessary to me. . . . to make them understand that they are free, to make them aware of the beauty of freedom and of this equality that they share with all the children of God. The idea of inferiority must be erased from their minds, because it. . . . degrades them in their own eyes, which is a great and immense harm. They are not in any way inferior by their nature to Europeans. . . . The African nature must have its own miseries, just as the European nature has its own, but it also has its qualities, just as the European nature has its own.”

Father Libermann sends at the same time a lovely letter “to my dear little children in the Junior Seminary of Dakar.”

This desire to keep the Black mentality in mind and to respect it is not limited to Africa. A few days later, Father Libermann sent a long questionnaire to the chaplain of a convent in New Orleans, Louisiana, concerning the condition of the Blacks in the United States. As the time for the suppression of slavery in Bourbon approached, he communicated his profound joy to Father Blampin, at the same time recommending him to help the liberated Blacks to use their re-found liberty well. The decree of abolition of slavery would be published by the French Government on April 27, 1848. But, as early as the month of March, after the Commission was set up to prepare the decree, Father Libermann wrote to Father Le Vavasseur to repeat the advice given to Father Blampin, insisting on the necessity of helping the freed Blacks to use their liberty, and especially to work freely.
The months that followed were very busy with the immediate preparations for the fusion of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary with the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. Father Libermann, confirmed by Rome as Superior General on November 3, 1848, revised the Rules. The new text contains several pages on the way the missionaries should act towards the populations to be evangelized. "They should consider carefully what there is in the customs and ways of doing things that springs from the character of the people and the nature of the country. They will scrupulously avoid disturbing these habits (as long as they are not opposed to the law of God) and forming them in the European way of life". They must love these peoples, bring to them along with the Gospel "the natural knowledge and the social virtues" which can be useful to them. They will listen to them kindly, study their tendencies, their inclinations. There is a whole chapter on the formation of the local clergy, which is the only "means of spreading widely the light of the Holy Gospel and of establishing it firmly in the countries we have the task of cultivating". We shall treat the native priests as equals and confreres, and we shall even willingly give them the first place. All this is only a summary of the principles which we have met already.

In a letter dated February 6, 1849, Father Libermann mentions with admiration the missionary method followed by Father Laval in Mauritius: he had chapels built in different sections, where a Black is in charge of leading the prayers, of teaching catechism, and where the missionaries visit from time to time. This information is repeated in a letter to Propaganda dated November 3, 1849, which also mentions the foundation of a religious community for young Black girls: "They have adopted the rule of the Visitation, modified according to the needs of the country". But the founder continued to think of the foundation of a work in Europe (in Brittany) for training Guineans in different trades. They would then return "to their own country, serve as catechists either as Brothers or by settling down in the midst of their fellow-citizens, and they would thus be a great help to the missionaries".
A long memorandum sent to the Bishops of Guadeloupe, Martinique and Reunion on June 27, 1850, refutes vigorously the accusations made against the Blacks. The Bishops must, with time, be able to dispense with Europe and find in their own dioceses the number of vocations which their needs demand. It is absolutely necessary to fight against the prejudices of the whites who think that “the Blacks are not capable of being priests and of conducting themselves well in the priesthood.”

This memorandum is, without a doubt, the last important document in which Father Libermann expressed his thoughts on the subject which interests us here. Perhaps he would have talked about it in the Instructions to Missionaries, had not sickness and death prevented him from finishing that work. But it seems that all the essential has been said already, and with all the clarity one could wish for.

ATTEMPT AT A SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we should try to summarize the thoughts of Father Libermann on “the particular Churches”. Here are the points which seem to us to be the most important.

1. In a Christian community, the state of being a mission is only a provisional state to allow time to form a solid regular Church, with a Bishop and a clergy drawn from its own people. All the particular Churches together form the universal Church.

2. It is necessary then, from the beginning, to make every possible effort to prepare a native clergy, to whom the missionaries will progressively hand over the responsibility for their Church.

3. However, clergy is not enough. It is also important to form lay leaders, so that they can collaborate in evangelization, either as catechists, or in the different professions which they will choose. Father Libermann even dreams of giving Minor Orders to some of their number.

4. In the formation of Black priests and Black laity, Father Libermann at first thought of bringing them European civilization; they must take on “European habits”. But this
conviction soon faded in a very striking way: religion must be “fixed in the native soil”, “inherent in the earth”.

5. It is necessary then to beware of European prejudices, European methods. We must leave to the evangelized populations that which is their own, all that is compatible with the Gospel. It is necessary to save the national customs of the native clergy and avoid at all costs imposing on them European ideas on theology, liturgy, etc. . . . “To establish the Kingdom of God is not to establish the ideas and customs of Europe”. (Correspondence with Bishop Truffet and Father Chevalier, 1847).

6. During all the time required for the establishment and the growth of these particular Churches, the missionaries will be at their service. They will make a constant effort to understand, to esteem, to love the people to whom they are sent, without any feelings of superiority. They shall prepare them to be able to lead and develop their Christian communities in their own way, and shall be ready to withdraw when their presence is no longer necessary.

It seems to me that these are the essential points of Father Libermann's thought on the subject of the particular Churches. It is clear that he was not alone in defending these principles, and that perhaps he was not entirely original his thinking. But it is impossible, if we remember his lack of direct experience of the missions, not to admire his clairvoyance and his courage. Would to God that we had always followed the directives which he gave!

Joseph Lécuyer
January 16, 1975
NOTES


3 - *N. D. (Notes et Documents)*, I, p. 661.

It is useless to mention that the word "black" does not have in the language of Father Libermann the same belittling connotation which it was sometimes given since then.

4 - *N. D.*, II, p. 112.

In Fact Father Bureau became a Capuchin.


7 - *N. D.*, II, p. 182.

8 - *Provisional Rule (Règle provisoire des missionnaires du très saint coeur de Marie)*, I, Chapter 1, a. 5 (*N. D.*, II, p. 236).


10 - *N. D.*, III, p. 94.


13 - *N. D.*, III, PP. 354; 357; 386; IV, pp. 32-34.


15 - *N. D.*, IV, pp. 94-95.

16 - *N. D.*, IV, p. 17.


See also the Letter of October 10, 1843, to Father Germainville (Ibid., pp. 386-387) and that of October 11, 1843, to Mr. Louverture (p. 391); the latter is the son of the famous Toussaint Louverture, head of the insurgents in Santo Domingo from 1796-1802.

20 - To the Director of the Colonies, November 18, 1843 (IV, p. 434); to the Community of Guinea, November, 1843 (pp. 435-436); to Father Choiselat, November 28, 1843 (P. 441); to the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda, November 28, 1843 (p. 445); to Father Dupont, December 4, 1843 (p. 451); to Father Gamon, December 7, 1843 (pp. 452-454). See the replies of the Director of Colonies and of the Minister, especially, pp. 492 and 496.

21 - To Mr. Louverture (N.D., VI, pp. 32-33); and also to Father Gamon, February 8, 1844 (N.D., VI, p. 36); to Father Cahier, February 25, 1844 (N.D., VI, p. 72).

22 - To Mr. Louverture, February 24, 1844 (N.D., VI, p. 64).


24 - To Father Germainville, February 26, 1844 (N.D., VI, p. 82).

25 - To Father Le Vasseur, March 10, 1844 (N.D., VI, pp. 121-122).

26 - To Father Gamon, March 29, 1844 (p. 144).

27 - To Mother Javouhey, June 13, 1844:
"You are putting very attractive bait on the hook: the junior seminary! It is really there that you can catch me... I am convinced that we can provide for Africa only in that way". (N.D., VI, p. 237).

28 - To Mother Javouhey, July 22, 1844:
"... form a native clergy: it is the most useful thing, the most important... I don't think it's possible to get good results without this". (N.D., VI, p. 276); to the Nuncio in Paris, October, 1844 (VI, p. 388).

29 - N.D., VI, p. 190.

30 - N.D., VI, p. 281.

31 - To the Minister of Marine, July 29, 1844 (N.D., VI, p. 285).

32 - Ibid.

33 - August 3, 1844 (N.D., VI, p. 294).

On this necessity of a good formation, see also the letter of October, 1844, to the Nuncio in Paris (N.D., VI, p. 388): at this moment, Father Libermann thinks of founding a house of formation in Rome, to escape the influence of the
colonial governments, English or French. On this point, see also N.D., VI, pp. 395 and 420-421.

34 - To the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda, November 3, 1844 (N.D., VI, p. 393).

35 - Letter of November 14, 1844 (N.D., P. 420).
See also the notice dated November 15, 1844, and sent to some Belgian priests. (N.D., pp. 437-438).

36 - See letter of December 8, 1844 to Father Schwindenhammer (N.D., VI, pp. 489-491).


38 - August 4, 1840 (N.D., II, p. 126).
See also Ibid., p. 154. We have a letter to Father Luquet, dated during Father Libermann's stay in Rennes, in 1839 (N.D., "Complements", pp. 18 ff.), and another letter of July 18, 1840 (Ibid. pp. 25 ff.).


40 - It is the date indicated by Father Luquet in the work cited above, p. 46. The date of February 8, 1843, indicated in N.D., "Complements", p. 18, is then to be corrected.

41 - Cf. Father Libermann's letter of August 17, 1844 (N.D., "Complements", pp. 46 ff.).
More complete information on this period in the life of Father Luquet can be found in the book by R. Roussel: Un Précurseur, Mgr. Luquet, Langres, 1960, above all pp. 27-34. For what concerns the influence (perhaps reciprocal) of the thoughts of Father Luquet and those of Father Libermann, it would be useful to study the manuscript thesis of Father Pinus which I was unable to consult.


43 - This memorandum was printed for the meeting of the Plenary Council of the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda, May 19, 1845; it is in quarto of VIII, 213 pages, and can be consulted in the Archives of Propaganda (Acta Sacrae Congr. de Propaganda Fide, anni 1845, vol 208, of the Archives, pp. 130-240); the memorandum has its own pagination which I will cite in the notes that follow. Cardinal Celso Constantini published some long extracts in: Ricerche d'Archivio sull'Istruzione "De Clero indigena" emanata dalla S. C. de Propaganda Fide il 23 Novembre 1845, in: Miscellanea Fumesoni-Biondi, Rome, 1947, pp. 1-78. The Acts of the Synod of Pondichery (January 18, 1844) are reproduced in Mansi Ampliss. Collect. Conciliorum, T. 39, col. 413-427. The approbation of Propaganda is dated July 28, 1845 (Ibid., col. 427-430). For all these points, see also the work of Bishop Luquet: Considérations sur les Missions Catholiques, Paris, 1853, pp. 351 ff.; 408 ff. According to Bishop Luquet's introduction to his memorandum, this memorandum was not written until after the first meeting of the Plenaria, held on February 17, 1845. Father Libermann's letter is dated January 6, and therefore is prior to it.

44 bis - In his memorandum, Bishop Luquet is often enough severe with the position of the Jesuits against the native clergy. See in particular pp. 37, 90, 98-99, 117, 119, 137, 141, 180. He adds: “Unfortunately, all these Societies have as their principle of action a unified centralization which will prove a difficulty for their taking root in the native soil”. The memorandum underlines the difficulty which religious missionary institutes have in accepting the establishment of independent local churches and the authority of the bishops (pp. 8-9). It tries to prove that, on the contrary, the Foreign Mission Society, by its very foundation, is destined to favor the particular churches and the formation of a native clergy.

See also R. Roussel, loc. cit., pp. 34 and 56-57: J. Luquet, Considérations sur les Missions Catholiques, pp. 137 and 238 ff. The reproach has often been made that Bishop Luquet was stiff and severe in his judgments. This had already been said by his confreres at Saint Sulpice: cf. letter of F. Le Vavasseur (N.D., II, p. 26); letter of Father Libermann (N.D., II, pp. 123-124) Again in 1848, Father Libermann advises him to use “gentleness... moderation... humility of heart and mind” (N.D., “Complements”, p. 108).

45 - To the Community of Bourbon, April 8, 1845 (N.D., VII, pp. 122-124).

46 - To Father Le Vavasseur, April 9, 1845 (N.D., VII, pp. 126-127, 128 and 132).

In this last letter, Father Libermann affirms his conviction that “the Jesuits will not establish a native clergy. That is entirely contrary to their system for the missions” (p. 132). Is it still the influence of Bishop Luquet which makes him pronounce this judgment? Luquet defends himself against the accusation of prejudice against the Jesuits in his book Considerations sur les Missions Catholiques... dans l’Inde, Paris, 1853, p. 240, note 1.

47 - To Bishop Bessieux, May 4, 1845 (N.D., VII, pp. 160-161).

In the same letter, Father Libermann insists upon the absolute necessity for the missionary not to appear as “the agent of the French Government”, and to work to make the Africans happy “not only because of their faith and their piety... but also because of the good in their civilization for which you will work” 8p. 162) – same subject in a letter to the Ministry of the Marine, may 7, 1845: we must train priests, catechists, even farmers, school teachers, technicians, etc... (N.D., VII, pp. 165-168). See also the letter to the Central Councils of the Propagation of the Faith, dated May 30 (N.D., VII, pp. 185-187); the letter to Mr. Perrée, June 14 (N.D., VII, pp. 214-215); to the Community of Bourbon, November 5, 1845 (N.D., VII, p. 375); to Father Le Vavasseur, December 18, 1845 (VII, pp. 425-426). It is interesting to note the opposition to the project of an establishment in Goree met from the European clergy already present there (cf. N.D., VII, pp. 481-487).

48 - to Mr. Perrée, August 13, 1845 (N.D., VII, pp. 270-271).

49 - The text of the Instruction is found in Mansi, Amplissima Collectio Conciliorum, tom. 39, coll. 442-447.
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51 - N.D., VIII, p. 223.

Bishop Luquet affirms that Father Libermann's memorandum was strongly influenced by "the principles of a hierarchical nature which Father Theiner and I impressed upon him" (quoted by R. Roussel, loc. cit., p. 82). Father A. Theiner (1804-1874), a member of the Italian Oratory, was a celebrated scholar and later became Prefect of the Vatican Archives. He did, indeed, help Father Libermann a great deal during all this period: see N.D., VIII, pp. 194, 355, 358, 359, 363, and above all the letter of July 21, 1847 (N.D., "Complements", pp. 86-89).

52 - N.D., VIII, pp. 226-228.


54 - Ibid. pp. 231-234.

55 - Ibid. p. 235.

Bishop Luquet gives a long quotation from this text in his book Considérations sur les Missions Catholiques, pp. 75-77.

56 - Ibid., pp. 242-243.

57 - Ibid., pp. 244-247.

Thus, since 1846, Father Libermann, not without boldness, proposes what we would nowadays call "diversity of ministries", and the ordination of married men, at least to Minor Orders. Bishop Gay, C.S.Sp. made an intervention at the Second Vatican Council on this very point.

58 - Ibid., pp. 248-249.

59 - Ibid., pp. 249-254.

60 - Ibid., p. 253.

61 - Ibid., pp. 254 ff.

On all these points from the Memorandum, see also the long quotations made by Bishop Luquet in his book Considérations sur les Missions Catholiques, Paris, 1853, pp. 88 ff.


It is interesting to compare certain expressions of Father Libermann with those used by Group B (francophone) at the 1974 Synod: according to the Fathers, the expression "particular Church" must be used to mean "every Church which carries on the service of the Gospel in a particular human community, in communion with all the particular Churches which constitute the Universal Church" (Fides International Agency, Informations, no. 2627, November 6, 1974, p. 609). A few months prior to Father Libermann, Bishop Luquet had written that it was necessary "to change these precarious Christian communities into true local Churches (and not at all national Churches) by the establishment of native bishops". Cf. R. Roussel, Un Précurseur, Monseigneur Luquet, Langres, 1960, pp. 77-78.
These expressions are to be compared with those used by Bishop Luquet in his "Explanations of the Synod of Pondichery": "We must be Chinese in the Celestial Empire, Indians in India, Spanish in the Philippines and in Cuba, Portuguese in Goa, Macao, Madeira, English or French everywhere the flag of France or England flies, in order to retain above all our beautiful title of Catholics, of missionaries of the Holy Church" (Memorandum, pp. 61-62). But we can notice that Father Libermann goes much further, for it is his wish that the missionary cast aside Europe. He would never have written that we must become "Spanish... Portuguese... English or French", according to what was the colonializing power at the moment.

Vatican II, ad Gentes, 10; Gaudium et Spes, 44; Final Statement of the Bishops of the 1974 Synod, nos. 2 and 9.

Bishop Truffet never received this letter, as he died the following day, November 23, 1847.

J. Kirkels, O.M.I., Projet d'une Méthodologie missionnaire au XIXe siècle (cf. supra, note 2), Chapter 5, pp. 25-26, and Conclusion, pp. 24-29.

On this point, there had been some instances of imprudence and Bishop Truffet was the first victim of them. (cf. N.D., "Complements", pp. 108 and 222).

See also on this point the decree of Bishop Truffet (Ibid., p. 455) and also his very severe letter to Bishop Bouvier of Mans, dated September 15 (N.D., "Complements", pp. 100-101).

The reasons given both by Bishop Truffet and by Father Chevalier for not teaching Franch are very interesting: the missionaries ought not to seem to be "supported by any temporal influence or to be seeking anything other than God" (N.D., IX, "They have come to establish the Kingdom of God and of the Church, and not ideas or the customs of Europe" (N.D., IX, p. 454; cf. p. 457). Therefore they will leave "to the children the customs of their country in what concerns clothing, food, bedding, furniture, even the forms of civility and all the other customs which have nothing in them which is opposed
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to Christian thought and decency" (p. 457). We must "maintain for the native clergy the national customs", there will be for the clergy a danger of "drawing from their relations with the missionaries ideas about theology, liturgy, etc., which are more or less French..." (p. 458). The minds of the natives are forewarned against everything foreign (p. 460). For the same reason, in what concerns the clothing of the children "we have removed everything which smacked of the European, in order to give them a completely woloff costume, a costume which is besides much more dignified and comfortable that those of Europe" (p. 462).

75 - Letter of November 23 (N.D., IX, pp. 359-361).
76 - Ibid., pp. 361-364.
77 - To Mr. Perchet, December 9, 1847 (N.D., IX, pp. 374-378).
78 - To Mr. Blanpin, March, 1848 (N.D., X, pp. 125-127).
79 - Cf. N.D., X, pp. 419 ff.
80 - Ibid., p. 418.
81 - N.D., X, pp. 141-143.
82 - N.D., X, p. 452, art. 4 (Synopsis of Father Nicolas, no. 10); see also p. 511, art. 12 (Synopsis, no. 294).

They will place themselves at the disposition of all, will conform themselves to the character, tastes, desires and views of all...”.

83 - N.D., X, pp. 515-517 (Synopsis, nos. 308-316).
84 - Ibid., p. 517, art. 10 (Synopsis, no. 317).
85 - Ibid., p. 518, art. 15 (Synopsis, no. 322).
86 - Ibid., p. 519, art. 1 (Synopsis, no. 325).
87 - Ibid., pp. 520-521, art. 6 and 7 (Synopsis, nos. 330-331).
90 - Letter to Bishop Kobes, April 23, 1850 (N.D., XII, p. 169).
The project is that of a Breton priest, a friend of Mr. Le Berre.
91 - N.D., XII, pp. 248 ff.
92 - N.D., XII, p. 295.
93 - Ibid., p. 296.