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Historical and Theological Notes on Libermann and Slavery

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Translated by Roberta Hatcher

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL NOTES ON LIBERMANN AND SLAVERY

It is impossible within the limits of this article—though it would be very important—to fully recreate the historical context of the early nineteenth century that would allow us to understand the positions Libermann took regarding slavery. French slavery, abolished by the French Revolution and reestablished under Napoleon, was only finally abolished on April 27, 1848, after many battles in which ideas and economic and political interests collided. When we reread Libermann's writings we run a great risk of anachronism, meaning understanding facts and texts with our perspectives of today, in light of what has occurred since, and interpreting them through a colonial or postcolonial studies lens.¹

We are going to explore the life and writings of Francis Libermann in relation to the theme of slavery.² Born Jewish, named Jacob, in Saverne, Alsace in 1802, at his death in 1852 he was superior general of a Catholic missionary congregation dedicated to evangelizing the old French colonies and the African continent. This is not to single him out from his companions, in particular Frederic Levavasseur, Eugene Tisserant, Benoit Truffet, and Claude Chevalier. Even if ours is a slightly different approach, it does not replace the great interest of Paule Brasseur's pioneering study, "*L'esclavage, les campagnes abolitionniste et la naissance de l'oeuvre de Libermann*,"³ whose opening comment can surprise us today: "It was in a religious climate profoundly indifferent to the problem of slavery that Libermann's work emerged beginning in 1836."⁴ Claude Prudhomme said the same thing: "The relative scarcity of written sources on the abolition of slavery that explicitly reference religious belief as a foundation in the fight against slavery is a fact."⁵

Frédéric Levavasseur, Who Started it All

Frédéric Levavasseur (1811-1882) initiated the "Work for the Blacks," along with Eugene Tisserant (1814-1845), though moreso the former. It was the missionary project he submitted to Libermann in late February-early March 1839 that set everything in motion. From a well-off family of slave-owning planters on the Isle of Bourbon, Frédéric was sent to France for his studies and to prepare for the École Polytechnique. Health problems required him to quit and in 1832 his spiritual director sent him to Paris to "mend his worn out head" at the home

of Sister Rosalie, a tireless apostle in the struggle against poverty in the Latin Quarter. For two years he devoted his life to visiting the poor, where he no doubt encountered the young Frederic Ozanam, one of the founders in 1833 of the very new *Conférence de Charité*, who also worked with Sister Rosalie. Levvasseur's earlier desire to become a priest was affirmed. He then returned on vacation to his native island, where he became aware of something: the poor of the Latin Quarter, he found them again in the black slaves on the Bourbon plantations, and no one was taking care of them! The priests did not set foot on the plantations. When he returned to France and entered the Sulpician seminary at Issy, he spoke of nothing but the Blacks of his island; he did not talk about abolishing slavery but about the urgency of evangelizing the Blacks by becoming close to them. The *Oeuvre des Noirs* was thus born from a double spiritual experience – the contact with the poor in Paris and then the Black slaves of Bourbon. We understand how Frederic could have written, referring to himself: “Levvasseur always considered the time he spent with that Sister [1832-1834] to be one of the greatest blessings God gave him.”⁶

The Oeuvre des Noirs was thus born from a double spiritual experience – the contact with the poor in Paris and then the Black slaves of Bourbon

The project that gradually developed, initiated by Levvasseur and Tisserant and continued by Libermann, was an apostolic project presented to Rome in the *Petit Mémoire sur les missions étrangères* on March 27, 1840 as follows: “It consists of giving ourselves and devoting ourselves completely to Our Lord for the salvation of the Blacks, as being the poorest, the furthest from salvation and the most neglected souls in God’s church.”⁷ No direct reference was made as to their condition as slaves or freed slaves.

Skipping over the well-known beginnings of the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary, we pick up Libermann and his men in the mid-1840s, when the small society in full expansion extended its project to the coasts of Africa.

Africa’s Time Has Come: Signs of the Times and the Holy Heart of Mary

Libermann proved to be an attentive observer of events concerning Africa, insofar as he tried to discern trends that would affect the missionary work. On January 7, 1846 he wrote to his friend Mgr. Luquet in Rome: “There are going to be fifty-two French and British ships that will continually move along the coasts [*of Africa*], followed by many merchant ships.”⁸ He was referring to the treaty concluded on May 29, 1845 between France and England concerning the suppression of the slave trade, a treaty which, in January and February 1846 provoked long debates in the two chambers that were widely reported by the press. It was not the actual event that interested Libermann, but the general movement towards Africa that he had been noticing for several years and with which the mission would have to keep pace.⁹

The newspaper *L’Univers*, was read at Neuville. Libermann must have learned from it that a debate took place in the House of Peers on March 4, 1846 about a petition presented by M. Bissette, a strongly militant abolitionist.¹⁰ Bissette denounced the seizure

ordered by the mayor of St. Pierre (Martinique) in 1844 of three bundles of books he had sent. They contained, among other things, the *Discours prononcé à la Chambre des Pairs* by Count Beugnot on slavery in the colonies, and – it was later learned – the Apostolic Letter of Gregory XVI, *In Supremo Apostolatus*, included in a petition titled *Les Esclaves des Colonies françaises au clergé français* [The Slaves from the French Colonies to the French Clergy]. Outside specialized abolitionist circles, the debate probably did not cause much of a stir in the cottages of the realm,¹¹ but at the Holy Heart of Mary, it was certainly read as one of the “signs of the times” justifying a Christian action “among the black race so neglected up to now,” as Truffet wrote.

In a commentary on the Rule that Libermann gave each ordinary day from 5:45 pm to 6:15 pm, he spoke then of the congregation’s purpose by reading the will of God in the signs of that moment in history:

Now that God calls us to [the mission of the Blacks], he seems to arrange everything to facilitate their conversion; not only does religion prepare its blessings and the graces in its possession for these poor people, but even politics enters into the plans of divine providence to hasten their conversion by facilitating communications between them and us. All eyes are now turned towards the Blacks; on the one hand, the aim is the abolition of slavery, on the other hand, more than fifty vessels are being sent to the coasts to prevent the slave trade. But we must also hurry.¹²

1846: On the Way to Rome, the Question of the Abolition of Slavery

In May 1846, with Fr. Blanpin as his companion and secretary, Libermann undertook a grand tour of France and Savoy, that he had to extend to Rome, but which at the time appeared to be a great information campaign on the missions and a quest for vocations. Everywhere he went, he systematically saw the bishops and visited the Major Seminaries.

The welcome given to Libermann both by the ecclesiastical authorities and by the seminarians made it possible to measure the rise of the missionary ideal in the 1840s. Libermann thus learned to know the state of mind of the young men in the different regions of France and Savoy. It seems that it was while he was passing through Savoy (the home of Benoît Truffet who had just returned to the novitiate in La Neuville) at the beginning of June, that among the various things to remember for the trip back to Paris, he had Father Blanpin make a note: “*Take out a subscription to the abolitionists’ newspaper.*”¹³ Was this because he had noticed in his meetings the growing interest in this question of slavery and the abolitionist struggle? It was indeed the case in the Jura seminaries, as evidenced by a letter from Claude Chevalier, written from La Neuville, to M. Cornu, priest teacher at the minor seminary of Nozeroy (Jura), dated February 16, 1847.¹⁴

The Great Memorandum Presented in Rome on August 15, 1846

We can never emphasize enough the historical importance of Libermann’s Memorandum “on the mission of the Blacks in general and on that of Guinea in particular” presented in Rome on August 15, 1846.¹⁵ No one can deprive this

Memorandum of its status as a milestone and landmark in the history of the mission in Africa. It is the first major text of the contemporary era to have presented to the Congregation of Propaganda a plan for the evangelization of Western Africa from Cape Verde to the Orange River. More than its content, what is important is the awareness it manifests, the missionary will it bears witness to, and the positive view of Africans.

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Libermann is keenly aware that Africa is making its entry into eurocentric history. He dreads it for the continent, and wants Africans to enter into another story, the story of Christian salvation.

The second part of the Memorandum is devoted to laying out and refuting objections against the work of the missionary society of the Holy Heart of Mary and against Black peoples; here, slavery is the issue. The depravity that Blacks are accused of stems from contact with Europeans or living conditions linked to slavery: “As a result, work and slavery is something synonymous [*sic*].” “The odious notion of work originates from the fault of Whites.”

Throughout the Memorandum, there is also the Libermannian “little music” that we recognize at the turn of a paragraph, which suddenly reminds us that this text is not an administrative report but the expression of a heart touched by grace, inhabited by the tenderness of the God of the Bible. After reporting everything that had been said to him and his missionaries about the “stupid, incapable, heartless” “*negroes*” to distract them from their evangelizing, Libermann wrote, “We are happy to be able to affirm to Your Eminences that the Blacks in general in all the countries where our missionaries have seen them, are naturally good, gentle, sensitive and grateful [...]. Blacks are no less intelligent than other peoples.”¹⁶

“We are happy...” Perhaps Libermann was a clear-sighted thinker of the mission only because he was first and foremost a benevolent heart? Moreover, did he not write at the beginning of 1848, “to Eliman, king of Dakar, to Soleiman, his nephew, and to all the leaders of the people,” after learning of the death of Bishop Truffet: “... I wish you to know that my heart is yours; my heart belongs to Africans, wholly to Africans, wholly to black men whose souls are good and whose hearts are sensitive.”¹⁷

Early 1847: “We Are Above All Apostles of Liberty”

Although public opinion as a whole was not significantly affected by the issue of the suppression of the slave trade and the abolition of slavery, the debates on these topics were increasing in intensity in the Chambers and among interested circles throughout the year 1847. In early January, from La Neuville, Chevalier presented to Abbe Billet what appears to be one of the dominant themes of his correspondence:

Even the abolition of the slave trade contributes to the good of our missions, because slavery is no less opposed to religion than to humanity, and we are

above all apostles of liberty, destined to deliver the final blows [to slavery] by converting the peoples from whom slaves are exclusively drawn.¹⁸

Msgr. Truffet, consecrated bishop at Notre-Dame-des-Victoires on January 25th, began a correspondence as head of the mission by making useful or symbolic contacts. The fight against the slave trade comes up constantly: for him, as for Chevalier, Gospel rhymes with freedom. To King Charles Albert, to whom he was subject as a Savoyard, he presented his mission: “Sir, you desire the abolition of the trade in living human flesh. Well! One of your subjects is sent by Pius IX to work patiently and effectively to close these shameful markets. The establishment of the reign of God is the strongest guarantee of human freedom.”¹⁹

Although the word has taken on a particular meaning in recent years and it would be anachronistic to transpose today’s usage to the nineteenth century, we can nonetheless speak of a theology of liberation (salvation and liberation) in relation to the thought expressed so forcefully by Truffet and Chevalier. In a letter of February 16, 1847, Chevalier, who was due to leave for Dakar in the company of Bishop Truffet, reminds a friend of their common youthful passion for the abolitionist struggle that his missionary vocation has not dimmed:

Moreover, the Guinea missions will provide me the means to achieve a desire that has long nourished my heart, as you know. By working for the conversion of these peoples, I will work indirectly, it is true, but effectively for the abolition of frightful slavery. Do you remember the toast proposed by the priest of Nozeroy to the death of slaveholding tyrants? I would change only one thing; I will now drink to the death of slavery and the conversion of tyrants. That will be a little bit more apostolic.²⁰

So there were people fired up for the abolitionist cause, including members of the clergy. Moreover, on March 30, 1847, the same day that Msgr. Truffet and his companions left Paris to go to Bordeaux, their port of embarkation, a lively debate opened in the House of Peers, dominated by Montalembert, following the announcement by Count Beugnot that “three thousand petitioners, including bishops and a large number of clergymen, demand an immediate abolition of slavery in the French colonies.”²¹

Msgr. Truffet met with great success in Bordeaux during Easter week (April 4) when he went from churches to salons, not missing an opportunity to talk about Black peoples and abolition. Invited to a picturesque lunch at the home of Mr. Isaac Louverture, son of the liberator of Haiti, Mgr. Truffet made a toast “to the unfortunate Haiti, where Mr. Louverture’s agent was to travel in a few days. Mgr. took great care to develop his ideas of freedom for Blacks in his presence so that the Haitians would learn through him what they have to fear from Catholic missionaries.”²²

Isaac Louverture had known Libermann through another Bordelais, Mr. Germainville (1801-1881), a man of good works who had long been in contact with Libermann. Mr. Germainville had finally convinced the latter to open a community in Bordeaux, and at

the end of July 1847 he came to Amiens to settle the matter. He brought in his luggage a parcel entrusted to him, undoubtedly during his stay in Paris, by Mr. Cyrille Bissette, a Martinican free man of color and radical abolitionist activist who was always promoting petitions for the Chambers. In the package were abolitionist pamphlets intended for the clergy (undoubtedly the famous petition of 1844: *The Slaves of the French Colonies to the French Clergy*, containing the apostolic letters of Gregory XVI on the slave trade)²³ as well as a petition booklet to circulate and collect signatures.

Thus restored, this context lends great interest to the note Libermann sent to Mr. Bissette on August 17, 1847 in response to this dispatch. In fact, it is the only writing of his that allows us to see what his position was towards the abolitionist campaigns of 1845-1847.²⁴ Bissette must have received positive reports about Libermann (from Mr. Germainville?) to dare to use him as a relay. And indeed, Libermann clearly states his principled position: “I am very grateful to you for the confidence you place in me; you treat me as a friend of the black race and as a man who desires its emancipation and you are right. I glory in it, and my happiness would be great if God were to lend me enough life to see the fulfillment of my wish.”²⁵

In practice, Libermann took steps to distribute the pamphlets and even gave some to Mr. Germainville to distribute to the clergy of Bordeaux.²⁶ As for the petition, that was another matter. He did not mind having it signed by the priests of Amiens who would do so “with pleasure,” but he failed “to put the booklet into the hands of another person” (people ready to commit were therefore not as numerous as that!). Indeed, Libermann considered that in his personal position, he could not sign or make others sign: “Very serious reasons forbid me. On my first trip to Paris, I will explain these reasons to you.” Before writing these last words, he had written a much more detailed paragraph that he had crossed out, presumably fearing that written explanations would not be clear enough to Mr. Bissette (orally, he could respond to objections). This is what he wrote, before scratching it out: “But here prudence forbids me any such step, as someone responsible for a project like the one that occupies me, because such a move would draw too much attention. I would be positioning myself as a harsh and prosecutorial adversary.” Caught between his personal conviction and the “political” demands as head of a religious Society dealing with the government, Libermann chose caution. Truffet would perhaps have called this more compromised than compromising, but Libermann knew better than Truffet that in the world of men and not ideas, government is the art of the possible at a given moment, even as he knew nonetheless how to keep aiming towards the ideal.

"But here prudence forbids me any such step, as someone responsible for a project like the one that occupies me, because such a move would draw too much attention...."

Late 1847: The Missionary's *Kenosis*: "Slave" In Imitation Of Christ

At the end of the year 1847, in a series of exchanges between Libermann, Bishop Truffet, and the missionaries on the ground, we find a letter from Libermann that we regard as the heart of his missionary theology and thought. It is the letter “to the community

of Dakar and Gabon, Amiens, November 19, 1847.”²⁷ We have studied it at length elsewhere²⁸; so before addressing what it says concerning the subject of slavery, we will first recap the main points of that analysis.

In this letter, the very *structure* of Libermann’s thought is of Paulian inspiration: mission, as he conceives it and lives it, is a *kenosis*, abasement-elevation, death-resurrection, in imitation of Christ as found in Phil 2:5-11. It is within this framework that we must understand his writing of what is one of the most famous missionary instructions of the contemporary period: “Make yourself *nègres* with the *nègres*.” The herald of the Gospel is called to become the servant of those whom he evangelizes, the slave of the former slaves. This is the *kenosis* evoked by St. Paul (Phil 2:5-11). *Kenosis* refers to the movement of the Word that empties itself to become a servant until death, and death on the cross. The word used by St. Paul (in Greek, *doulos*) refers to both servant and slave. When Libermann uses this word, he is thinking of this double meaning.

It is indeed necessary to understand all the connotations of Libermann’s phrase: “Make yourself *nègres* with the *nègres*.” We believe it can be established that, in Libermann’s writing in 1847, this formulation is not equivalent to “Make yourself Blacks with the Blacks [Noirs].” The charge of meaning is not the same in both cases, nor are the value judgments implied. As Serge Daget has indeed shown,²⁹ in the abolitionist struggle that goes from the Revolution to the mid-nineteenth century, the word *Black* [*Noir*] can be used in opposition to the words *slave* [esclave] and *nègre*: “Because Black [*Noir*] is neither tainted by prejudice nor yet stereotyped, it makes an argument against alienation and contributes to founding abolitionist ideology: it is therefore an innovation.”³⁰

Serge Daget does not reach any clear conclusions from his quantitative survey of abolitionist literature. Historical fluctuations govern the use of the three words, *esclave*, *nègre* and *noir* among abolitionists. In 1847, they continue to speak of “*la traite des nègres*,” a word immediately perceived by the public as referring to the reality of slavery and the slave trade.” Thus, far from insisting on the word supposedly charged with innovative value, [the abolitionist literature] preferred words that were guaranteed immediate perception, even if it meant reinforcing stereotypes. No unanimous agreement or concerted policy is apparent regarding the use of vocabulary; it remains an act of personal decision, never integrated into a collective and uniform discipline.”³¹

Libermann’s evolution in his use of vocabulary is precisely such an example: “an individual decision” arising from a personal sensibility and commitment. In what follows, we make an effort to trace the evolution of Libermann’s vocabulary in his key documents.

In the *Petit Mémoire sur les missions étrangères de 1840*,³² the word *nègres* is used four times, while the word *Noir* [Black] is not used once. It should be noted that in this memorandum, Libermann does not speak of Africa at all, but only of Haïti and the Isle of Bourbon, and therefore the word *nègres* in both these cases refers to black populations originally victims of the slave trade and subjected to slavery.

On the other hand, the earliest version we have of the *Provisional Rule of the Missionaries of the Most Holy Heart of Mary*,³³ written during the same Roman year, uses

both the term *Noirs* and *nègres*. Thus in Chapter III of the first part we can read in two successive articles: “Art. VII. The mission which our Lord now gives us is a mission among the Blacks [*Noirs*] [...] Art. VIII. Although all our designs must now be turned towards the *nègres* [Negroes]...”³⁴

However, four years later, when Libermann sends Cardinal Frasoni his *Project for the Salvation of the Peoples of the Coasts of Africa* (1844),³⁵ only the single word Black [*Noir*] is used (16 times) to designate both Africans and island peoples, distinguishing between “savage blacks” [*les Noirs sauvages*] and “the Blacks of civilized colonies” [*les Noirs des colonies civilisées*].

This shift seems to be the result of a determined desire to eliminate the word *nègre*, no doubt considered pejorative, and to replace it with a more noble word. Proof is provided by the 1845 printed version of the Provisional Rule mentioned above³⁷: a comparison with Arragon’s 1844 handwritten copy shows that wherever the word *nègres* appeared in the earlier version, it was replaced by the word *Noirs*. Thus, in the example given above, Article VII remains unchanged since it already used the word *Noirs*, while in Article VIII the word *nègres* is twice deleted: “Although all our designs must now be turned towards the Blacks [*Noirs*] [...] provided, however, that the spiritual interest of the Blacks [*Noirs*] will not suffer any damage.”³⁸

The great *Memorandum on the Missions of the Blacks* of 1846³⁹ provides even clearer proof that Libermann’s use of the word *Noir* as more positive, in preference to the word *nègre* with its pejorative tone, is indeed intentional. We found 36 uses of the word *Noirs* (*Noirs* or *populations noires*) against 2 occurrences of the word *nègres*. These two exceptions are particularly interesting because they both take place in a context that connotes a negative value judgment on Blacks or a reference to the slave system: “These people,” one would say speaking of *nègres*, “will never know to conduct themselves [...] They are stupid, incapable, without heart, they are thieves, etc.”⁴⁰ “In the colonies, work is made so odious and so revolting for the wretched *nègres* that they abandon it as soon as the rod no longer forces them.”⁴¹

Thus, at the end of an evolution of vocabulary that stretches from 1840 to 1846, it seems that the word *nègre*, in Libermann’s mind, designates not only the Black [*le Noir*] but the Black considered as subhuman and as slave; hence the disappearance of the word *nègre* from his writing, *except* when he wants precisely to refer to the negative and tragic aspect of their historical situation marked by the slave trade and slavery.

...it seems that the word *nègre*, in Libermann’s mind, designates not only the Black [*le Noir*] but the Black considered as subhuman and as slave;...

Now, in the Greek text of Phil 2:6-11, something of the same kind must be noted. When it is said of Christ Jesus that he took “the form of the servant,” the Greek word used - *doulos* - also carries a similar ambiguity: it means both servant and slave. Jesus became a servant by taking on the traits of the slave. The slave is the one who does not belong to himself, who belongs to someone else: Jesus gave himself into

our hands, Jesus washed our feet.⁴² “*Make yourself nègres with the nègres,*” mirroring *Phil 2: 6-11 as we have seen, thus means: “Make yourself slaves with the slaves, belong to the Blacks, surrender yourself into the hands of Blacks like the Suffering Servant when He gave His life.”* The expression is stronger in its linguistic and emotional implications than “*Make yourself Blacks with the Blacks*” could ever have been.

In the letter of November 19, 1847, the counsel, “*Make yourselves nègres with the nègres,*” is preceded by another piece of advice: “*Divest yourselves of Europe, its customs, its spirit.*” In this we can see that Libermann means to define not only a purely internal spiritual attitude with no bearing on behavior; rather he aims at an overall phenomenon that we would call today the concrete cultural adaptation of the missionary. We could even speak of the inculturation of faith in the fundamental (and general) sense that the Jesuit, Michel Sales, speaks of when he writes: “*This term inculturation evokes, by analogy, implicitly or explicitly, the theological concept and the theological reality [théologique] of the Incarnation, by which the uncreated Word of God, the Son of the Father, took flesh through the Virgin Mary, became man, lived, died and rose again for the salvation of all men.*”⁴³ It is exactly this movement of incarnation and “annihilation” of the Christ-Servant that Libermann intends to propose to his missionaries, as we saw in the analysis of the November 18, 1847 letter to the communities of Dakar and Gabon.

We would like to carry further the demonstration with a text hitherto virtually unknown, which we published among the source texts of our work *Libermann* (1988): *Instructions missionnaires aux premières Soeurs de l’Immaculée Conception de Castres en partance pour l’Afrique* [Missionary Instructions to the First Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of Castres departing for Africa]. They have the distinction of having been written just after the letter of November 19, 1847.⁴⁴

What does Libermann say to the Sisters of Castres? That they must do everything to abolish the distance between themselves and the Blacks: “*I regard everywhere, even in Europe, as a bad system opposed to the spirit of the Gospel, making people feel the distance between them and us by our dress, our conduct, our manner of speaking and acting.*”⁴⁵ And he added: “*Our system must be that of our Lord... “Is the system of our Lord anything other than the Incarnation of the Word whose kenosis “abolishes distance” in a sense between God and man? And, moreover, Libermann invites the Sisters to a true kenotic “stripping down”:*

The Sisters must have the intimate conviction that they have no idea what they will have to do and the manner in which they must proceed to do good... The reason is that coming from Europe, we are too used to European conditions, we want to establish them in places where the customs and ways of being are quite radically different.⁴⁶

The power of this text must be appreciated! And Libermann continued by proposing a method to the Sisters that is in keeping with the great missionary tradition: a

...coming from Europe, we are too used to European conditions, we want to establish them in places where the customs and ways of being are quite radically different.

program of incarnation of the missionary in the other, to let faith become inculturated in him, that is, to invest him from within and transform him: “you must,” Libermann writes to the Sisters, “leave to the natives the customs and habits which are natural to them, perfecting them by imparting to them the principles of faith and Christian virtue and correcting those that are unsound. We must rather take on their manners and customs than want to shape them to ours.”⁴⁷

1848, Abolition: “Is This Not a Wonder that God Has Worked?”

The revolution of 1848 in France took place from February 22 to 25. On March 4, F. Arago, Provisional Minister of the Navy and the Colonies, “appointed Citizen Victor Schoelcher, Undersecretary of State, with special responsibility for the colonies and measures relating to the abolition of slavery” and President of the commission charged with preparing, as soon as possible, the act of immediate emancipation in all the colonies of the Republic. On April 27, a decree abolished slavery. Approximately 250,000 slaves were affected and had to be effectively emancipated two months after the promulgation of the decree in each of the colonies.

What is striking is the speed of Libermann’s reaction to the announcement of abolition, since we have a letter he wrote to Mr. Blanpin and the community of the Isle of Bourbon dating from early March,⁴⁸ as well as the joy he expresses on this occasion:

My letter will probably arrive too late to tell you the good news. The slaves will very soon be delivered from their captivity, and they will immediately participate in all the rights of citizens. They will elect their deputies for the National Assembly. Is this not a wonder that God has worked? The poor people, what joy they are going to have. You have a very important role to play at the moment, and if you pull it off, you’ll make yourselves as useful to the Whites as to our poor Blacks. The unfortunate Whites must feel bitterly the perhaps irreparable harm they have done in opposing the education of the Blacks, though I still doubt it: a large number of them will not be able to understand it.

He wrote a second time on this subject before the April 27 decree; this time to his alter ego, Frederic Levavasseur, also on the Isle of Bourbon, on March 16, 1848. It is not possible within the scope of this article to study what happened on the ground after abolition, but it is clear in this letter that Libermann is concerned, and, to the suggestions he had already made to Mr. Blanpin, he adds new ones for Levavasseur.⁴⁹ What is remarkable in the two letters is the modesty and humility of the one who is nevertheless the superior general of all these missionaries, and the confidence that he gives them to find the right solutions for themselves in the field. A last quote from the letter to Levavasseur will serve to conclude:

I do not know if these are utopias that I am proposing to you, or if this project is feasible. Whenever I suggest these things, I do it with a certain timidity, not knowing enough about the state of the country. You will examine before

God, you will judge, you will make your decisions and you will execute them, according to the good pleasure of the divine Master.⁵⁰

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Endnotes

¹ Three recent studies that address the question with regard to the first half of the nineteenth century: Grenouilleau, Olivier, *La révolution abolitionniste*, Paris: Gallimard, 2017, collection “Bibliothèque des Histoires”; Jennings, Laurence C., *La France et l’abolition de l’esclavage (1802-1848)*, André Versaille editor, Brussels, 2010; Prudhomme, Claude, “L’expérience et la conviction contre la tradition: les Églises chrétiennes et la critique de l’esclavage, 1780-1888,” in, Petre-Grenouilleau, Olivier, (dir.), *Abolir l’esclavage. Un réformisme à l’épreuve (France, Portugal, Suisse, XVIIIe-XIXe siècles)*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008, 57-77.

² We consider it sufficiently well known to not have to specify everything about places, dates, and people.

³ In Coulon, Paul, Paule Brasseur et.al., *Liebermann (1802-1852). Une pensée et une mystique missionnaires*, Paris, le Cerf, 1988, 391-332 (henceforth cited as Coulon-Brasseur). See also: Delisle, Philippe, “La Monarchie de Juillet, L’Église de France et l’esclavage,” *Mémoire Spiritaine*, 2 (novembre 1995) 59-80.

⁴ Article cited, 325.

⁵ Article cited, 58.

⁶ Levvasseur, Frédéric, « *Note autobiographique (1853)*, » *Notes et Documents relatifs à la vie et à l’oeuvre du Vénérable François-Marie-Paul Liebermann*. Paris, Maison Mère, (1929-2015) (henceforth cited as ND), I, 616.

⁷ ND, II, 69. Coulon-Brasseur, 199.

⁸ ND, *Compléments 1*, 70.

⁹ Cf. Coulon-Brasseur, 408-409, with notes 36-38.

¹⁰ Cf. Pame, Stella, *Cyrille Bisette, un martyr de la liberté* [Cyril Bisette, A Martyr for Liberty], Le Lamentin (Martinique), Désormeaux, 1999 and all references in note 43, in Coulon-Brasseur, 411.

¹¹ At the end of 1847, Count Beugnot lucidly stated that “in France, the cause of the abolition of slavery in the colonies is not placed [...] under the aegis of a popular sentiment powerful enough to dictate its will to legislators and the government” (*Le Correspondant*, t.20, December 10, 1847, 641).

¹² Nicolas, François, (Ed. and Introd.), *La Naissance d’un code de spiritualité missionnaire : Règle provisoire des missionnaires de Liebermann, Texte et commentaire* [The Birth of a Code of Missionary Spirituality: Provisional Rule of the Missionaries of Liebermann, Text and Commentary], Mortain, 1967, 25. These are the notes taken by the novice (1844-1845), then the young priest (1845-1846) Louis Marie Lannurien, at La Neuville.

¹³ Blanpin notebook (Archives CSSp: old no. 24-B-I, new no. 4A1.4.1). At the end of the notebook that has been turned over to start the other way, under the heading “Notes for the return.”

¹⁴ Copy in the Archives CSSp: old no. 22-A-V; new no. 4A1.1a5.

¹⁵ The printed text of this memoir is found in Archives Prop. Fide, Fondo Acta, vol. 209, f. 361-382 c. The text published in *ND*, VIII, 219-277 is not entirely reliable. The best: Coulon-Brasseur, 221-270 for the text, and 401-455 for its genesis.

¹⁶ *Mémoire*, 4; *ND*, VIII, 226-227.

¹⁷ Letter transmitted by Mr. Arragon; written on January 26 and antedated to January 1, 1848, *ND*, X, 24.

¹⁸ Cl.-D. Chevalier to M. Billet, priest of Rahon (Jura): La Neuville-les-Amiens, January 16, 1847, Arch. CSSp: old no. 22-A-V; new no. 4A1.1a5.

¹⁹ Draft preserved in Archives CSSp: old no. 153-A-III; new no. 3I 1.4a.3.

²⁰ Mr. Chevalier, novice deacon of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary, to Mr. Cornu, professor at the seminary of Nozeroy (Jura), February 16, 1847. Copy, Archives CSSp; old no. 22-A-V; new no. 4A1.1a5.

²¹ *L'Ami de la religion*, tome 133, Thursday (April 1, 1847) 18. The debate is reported on pages 18-20.

²² In Chevalier's long letter-journal, begun in France on April 9 and completed in Dakar on May 17, 1847 (Archives CSSp: old no. 153-A-III, new no. 3I 1.4a3)

²³ See Coulon-Brasseur, 408-413, with nos. 43-44.

²⁴ It is reproduced in *ND*, IX, 253-254.

²⁵ This quote and the following are from *ND*, IX, 253-254.

²⁶ Mr. Germainville returned to Bordeaux from Amiens on August 7, 1847, taking with him Mr. Boulanger, priest, and Brother Thomas Mabit, soon joined by Mr. Clair, for the founding of the community of Bordeaux.

²⁷ *ND*, IX (1847), 324-331.

²⁸ Cf. Coulon-Brasseur, 489-546.

²⁹ Daget, Serge, « Les mots esclave, nègre, Noir, et les jugements de valeur sur la traite négrière dans la littérature abolitionniste française de 1770 à 1845, » *French Review of Overseas History*, vol. 60, no. 221 (1973), 511-548.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 518.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 544.

³² See Coulon-Brasseur, Source 1, 197-205.

³³ This is written by P. Arragon during his novitiate in 1844 (Archives CSSp: old numbering 16-A-V, new numbering 3A1.11.5).

³⁴ See *Provisional Rule of Father Libermann. Text and Commentary*. Translated by Walter van der Putte, C.S.Sp. Duquesne University, Pittsburgh: Center for Spiritan Studies, 2015, 68-69 [Editor].

³⁵ See Coulon-Brasseur, Source 3, 211-220.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 216.

³⁷ *Règle provisoire des missionnaires du Très Saint Cœur de Marie*, Amiens, Imprimerie Duval et Herment, 1845.

³⁸ Nicolas, op. cit., 25. Compare with page 12 of the handwritten copy quoted from Fr. Arragon (1844) (Archives CSSp: old number 16-A-V, new number 3A1.11.5).

³⁹ See Coulon-Brasseur, Source 4, p. 221-270.

⁴⁰ *Mémoire* . . . (original printed text), 3; *ND*, VIII, 225; Coulon-Brasseur, 232.

⁴¹ *Mémoire* . . . (original printed text), p. 9; *ND*, VIII, p. 233; Coulon-Brasseur, p. 238.

⁴² Léon-Dufour, Xavier, *Dictionnaire du Nouveau Testament*, Paris : Seuil, 1975, in the article

« Esclave ».

⁴³ Sales, M., « Christianisme, culture et cultures », *Axes*, XIII/1-2 (janvier 1981) 18.

⁴⁴ See Coulon-Brasseur, Source 6, 281-287.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 285.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 286.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 286.

⁴⁸ *ND*. X, 125-127.

⁴⁹ *ND*. X, 141-143.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 143.