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More extracts from the memorandum of Fr. Tisserant: the missionary vocation of Francis Libermann¹

28th December 1839

Signed on the 13th October, 1842, this part of the Memorandum is concerned with what happened in 1839, when Libermann finally decided to join the project for the black people which had been conceived by his friends, Tisserant and Le Vavas seur. It includes the letter that Libermann wrote to Le Vavas seur on the very day that he received a "tiny spark" from God about his missionary vocation.

1839

Very little happened during the three months before the holiday in 1839 as regards the work for the black people, apart from Libermann writing to one or other members to encourage us to follow our calling to serve Jesus and Mary through working for the poor black people.

In June and July of that year, Libermann was afflicted with various ailments and other problems which made him think of leaving the Eudists, but without any thought of working on our project which he had found so attractive. This was simply because the Lord had not yet prompted him in that direction. He felt he should stay with the Community of Jesus and Mary² until God moved him to do otherwise.

During the holidays, he went to Paris. With his help, more research was done on the Work for the Black People and the plans were gradually becoming clearer. Some more

¹ N.D. I, pp. 659-665

² This is the name the Eudists gave to their institute

seminarians decided to join the original three¹ while others felt attracted without fully committing themselves. Up to that point, only Tisserant and Le Vasseur had made a definitive decision. Personally, I had not thought much more about the blacks of Santo Domingo, leaving it in the hands of God and Mary. The Archconfraternity continued to pray for this unfortunate country, supported, to some extent, by the associates of Notre-Dames-des-Victoires. It was the same for Bourbon. I hadn't even thought of keeping Libermann up to date with our proposals for that island whilst he was in Rennes. But then he came to hear about what had transpired three months before with the secretary of President Boyer; and he got quite excited about it and hoped that circumstances might allow us to go to Haiti first of all.

But Providence did not give us this joy until later, after we had turned our attention to Bourbon, as you will see in this short narrative. This was the state of affairs when Libermann returned to Rennes, towards the end of September 1839, disappointed but ready to stay with the disorder² in the seminary which he had not been able to solve, unless God would indicate that he wanted him to leave.

He had hardly been there for eight days, when he was joined by one of those destined to be part of our work. This was the sub-deacon whom we have met before, M. de la Brunière, a

¹ Le Vasseur, de la Brunière, and Tisserant. Others who were showing an interest in the work were Luquet, Bureau, Bonalgues, Papillon, Oudin and a few others.

² This disorder was due to a failure to observe the Rule, insubordination, a lack of order and a poor community spirit" (Note of the Ven Father).

⁵ "I recall that Libermann, when he spoke to me about the difficulties and troubles that he experienced at Rennes, added that he had always believed there was something diabolical in what happened there." (Note of Fr. Schwindenhammer).

rich young man, very fervent and able. He had just finished his theology and as Le Vavasseur was his junior, it was foreseen that de la Brunière would be the leader of the project. In any case, it would have been difficult for Le Vavasseur to be Superior of those who wanted to enter this association, as he did not have enough experience and was unlikely to have gained their confidence.

De la Brunière spent about two months with the Eudists at Rennes. He could see at once Libermann's unhappy state of mind and the insurmountable difficulties that the devil had put in his way, as he tried to help this Congregation.¹ But Libermann had begun to feel strongly that he should give himself wholly to this work for the black people. The first occasion when Mary put this idea into his head was on October 25th, 1839, a day that is celebrated as the Feast of the Sacred Heart in the Congregation of Jesus Apostles and Mary; three days later, as he told me himself, it became even clearer to him that this is what he had to do, so he finally arrived at a definitive decision. He always regarded this day as one of the happiest in his life, because of the grace that Mary had given him to recognise what his role in the Church was to be. It was the feast of the Apostles Simon and Jude.

I have before me a letter that Libermann wrote to Le Vavasseur that same day. I invite all our brothers to read it as a source of edification and advice. The aim of the letter was to get Le Vavasseur to pray for him and to ask others to do likewise, so that he could be certain that this idea was really coming from God. He also wanted to be assured if he should go to Rome, an idea which had started to form itself in his mind.

28 October, Rennes, SS Simon and Jude, 1839

Dear brother,

M. de la Brunière came to see me last night to urge me to offer Holy Communion to God on behalf of the poor and beloved black people. We did this and the Lord in his goodness gave me some enlightenment. I don't want to tell you about it just yet: I think it is good to wait for the idea to mature a little in the presence of God, to see if this tiny spark develops into a much clearer light. Before attempting to share such plans with others, they need to be clearer so that we can all consider them in depth before God. Please pray about this and ask the confreres to do the same, because it is very important. Encourage everybody in their love for the black people. And ask *M. Tisserant* to send me a copy of his memorandum.

I shall give some thought to the Constitutions when I have time. I would have preferred to postpone reflecting on those things until after the project had passed through the hands of the Holy See. But *Fathers Galais* and *Pinault* want me to do it and I do see some advantage in having the Constitutions sketched out before they are presented to the Holy See, especially regarding the way they should be formulated. I think that my plan will meet with some difficulties, but I will still follow it, leaving the Lord to take care of any obstacles which arise.

M. de la Brunière encourages me and is in perfect agreement with what I have in mind. I want our project to be solid, fervent and apostolic: in other words, a commitment to all or nothing! This "all" is a great deal, and weak people will not be ready to give or do so much. But this is something to be happy about: we don't want timid people joining a Congregation which is completely apostolic. We only need fervent and generous members who will give themselves entirely and are ready to undertake and suffer all things for the greater glory of God.

I believe that all who are called to give themselves to God in this work must be ready to undertake and suffer anything. They will be left in no doubt when they see that the rule demands a high state of perfection and a total dedication to the Lord. Encourage them and tell them to make themselves ready before God to undertake anything, to suffer death – even death on the cross. It is only at this price that we will be able to share in the spirit and apostolic glory of Jesus Christ, the Sovereign Lord and model of apostles.

Please tell Fr Pinault that I am waiting to hear from him. He never tells me anything about this great and beautiful work and leaves me completely in the dark. I hope to write to him within two weeks, telling him what the good Lord has made known to M. de la Brunière and myself.

We have already met some disappointment and our hopes have sometimes been frustrated; but we must not let this discourage us. We must wait until Our Lord and his Mother develop what, after all, is their work. Tell all those who wish to join us that they must not get too excited when things are going well, which is what happened when M. de Brandt seemed interested in becoming a member. But neither must they give way to sadness and depression when they meet with adversity and their hopes do not materialize. They will have to be always humble and poor before He who is the Head and Lord of all. Let them put all their hope in His goodness and love.

M. de la Brunière and I will offer Holy Communion for our dear black p[people on the feast of All Saints. Unite your intention to ours and ask Frs. Pinault and Galais to do the same if you think it is wise.

Yours in the most holy love of Jesus and Mary."

Despite the powerful attraction to the work that he had experienced on the Feast of Simon and Jude, Libermann had considerable doubts about those who wished to join him. He had met several young men eager to fly to the help of the blacks at the first opportunity, but he wasn't sure of their perseverance. This included the young Sub-deacon, M. de la Brunière. He began to have doubts about him towards the end of the two months he had spent in Rennes. He had little hope for my own perseverance - and rightly so, because without the help of Mary, his fears would probably have been fulfilled. He even doubted if he could count on Le Vavas seur.

Indeed, human humanly speaking, a work riddled with difficulties of every sort such as ours seemed to be impossible. The wisest people would have trembled to attempt such a thing as it demanded so many virtues and such apostolic commitment. As for we young and inexperienced people, hardly capable of surviving the regime of a seminary where we were totally protected and sheltered, how could we even think of undertaking such a venture? Knowing us as he did, Libermann was quite right to have doubts about our suitability. But, putting his full trust in her who gives strength to the weak and acts as Mother to the poor, "*Maria mater pauperum*", he dared to hope in the mercy of Mary for each one of us. He decided to carry on and after asking M. Pinault to join us, he continued to lead and counsel us.

From the moment Libermann decided to leave the Eudists to join us, he did not hesitate. He left Rennes three days after the feast of St. Andrew on the feast of Francis Xavier, a man who, like Andrew, was attached to the cross of Christ. Libermann had never experienced such heavy sorrows, a veritable dark night of the soul. Temptations came from every quarter and evil of every kind seemed to seek him out. His greatest worries were the doubts he sometimes had about the work for the black peoples which had been confided to him and the scorn

of his elders and friends. Several of the early supporters of the project fell away, he had no money and his sickness, although slightly improved, was still very much with him. Finally, he was upset at the thought of the suffering his departure would inevitably cause Fr. Louis, the superior of the Eudists, and the other members of his Congregation.

But despite these doubts and sufferings, he still felt that God wanted him to leave Rennes. He allowed this difficult trial for the sanctification and progress of our dear Father. When someone has passed through the crucible of the most severe temptations, he is more understanding of others and is able to console and direct those in a similar situation. Such was the test that Our Saviour gave Francis Libermann as an immediate preparation for the plans that He had for in store for him. This was the path that Mary traced out for him, a grace for which he always thanked her, once the storm had subsided.

Two days before he left the Eudists, he wrote a letter to Fr. Louis, telling him of this final decision. He also described the dreadful sufferings bearing so weightily upon him, begging him not to try and make him change his mind, as that would just break the reed that was already bruised, without influencing the decision that God had brought him to. He told him that he would be leaving immediately, fearing that his torment might lead to another crisis in his health.

Fr. Louis replied to this letter by telling Libermann that his plans were an illusion from the devil and an effect of self-love. When he met Libermann, he did his best to stop him leaving by every argument he could think up. But nothing would now prevent his departure, no matter how black the future might seem and how futile the enterprise. This letter and the remonstrations of the Superior of the Eudists broke his heart; so fearing that it might make him so ill that his departure would have to be delayed, he left immediately. His letter to Fr. Louis

had been written on the feast of St Andrew and he left Rennes on the day that the Church celebrates the Apostle of India, Francis Xavier.