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### 01. Memorandum of Fr. Le Vasseur on the projected 'Work for the Black People'

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## Memorandum of Fr. Le Vavas seur on the projected 'Work for the Black People'

*Presented to Fr. Gallais,<sup>1</sup> his spiritual director*

*At the request of his spiritual director, Fr. Gallais<sup>2</sup>, Frédéric Le Vavas seur, a seminarian from the island of Bourbon (Reunion), gave details of the 'Work for the Black People' of his island and that of Eugène Tisserant (Haiti), one of his fellow students. This project included the suggestions that Libermann had made to him on March the 8<sup>th</sup> of the same year. The document shows us the earliest ideas on the proposed work, to which Libermann had given his full approval and support.*

*July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1839*

*I believe there are 15 or 16 churches on the island of Bourbon. Each church is surrounded by a certain number of houses and small fields, which form what is called a "quartier" in this country and is the centre of an even greater number of properties, most of which are very sizeable.*

*In each church, there is, at the most, a priest and a curate, who, up until now, only minister to the Whites. They spend most of their time visiting the sick, which normally means making long journeys to administer the sacraments. On Sundays, a small number go to the church, most of whom live in the neighbourhood. Sometimes, others come from further afield, driving their wives to the church when they still have a little religion. But there are very many who live as though there is no such thing as a church; the priest does not travel to where they are (no doubt, through lack of time) nor do they ever, or hardly ever, put their foot inside a church. This is because they*

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<sup>1</sup> N.D. II, pp. 63-67.

<sup>2</sup> See index

*are normally corrupt and are far from the practice of religion. Consequently, the parish priest only ministers to those pious souls who come to the church; they are very few in number. So the ministry is almost non-existent, both for those who go rarely to the church and do not fulfil their Easter duties, and for those never come at all. They are lucky if the priest is called to their deathbed before they loose consciousness!*

*As regards the Blacks, who are infinitely greater in number, the parish priests and curates do nothing at all for them. Their masters have no religion themselves and their only concern is to get as much out of their black servants as they possibly can; so these poor people, in their extreme misery, receive no religious instruction whatsoever. Their ignorance is total and I doubt if 3 or 4 out of ten can even make the sign of the cross.*

*When one has spent a little time with the inhabitants of this country, it is evident that if a few apostolic men would be ready to bring the word of God to these souls, they would be able to bring most of them back to life. For despite the moral corruption, there are those who still have the seeds of faith and a readiness to believe; they would produce much fruit if the seed was sown in their hearts. I am convinced that they presently lack faith and devotion because they are without priests.*

*Anyone who goes there to verify this state of affairs and see for themselves the moral state of both Whites and Blacks will soon be convinced that the only solution to the problem is a group of apostolic men who would act as helpers and servants of the parish priests. These men should form one body with their own rule and under a superior. They would need a house where they could come together frequently to build up their zeal and fervour and then radiate out to evangelise the Whites and the Blacks who have no contact with their parish priests.*

*First of all, these missionaries are essential for the Blacks, because to instruct them, one must either go to find them in their masters'*

*place or they would have to come to the parish. But to expect them to come themselves for instruction is hardly realistic.<sup>1</sup>*

*These missionaries are also needed for the Whites who do not come to church. The only possible way to instruct them and win them over is to go to their houses with the Word of Life, taking care to give the impression that one is only interested in teaching the Blacks.*

*A third reason why these missionaries are indispensable for Bourbon is that so few churches have been built. Most of the properties are very remote because of their great size; the Whites and the Blacks could never be persuaded to make the effort to travel far for Sunday Mass, even occasionally. More churches need to be built between those which already exist; then on Sundays, the missionaries could at least preach in the chapels where there had been no Mass and in this way, sanctify the Sunday and provide an opportunity for instruction. This increase of chapels is also essential to persuade the masters to send their children (and those of the Blacks) to attend catechism classes. If they were to use a private property as the place to prepare children and older people for First Communion, it would lead to dissension because everybody would want the centre to be in their own place.*

*For the missionaries to make a success of such a noble project, they would have to adopt a style of life that was even poorer and more deprived than that of the Blacks. If these poor people were to see that their evangelisers were enjoying a more comfortable life than themselves, they would not be able to understand their message. In the same way, for Jesus to have the right to preach poverty and self-denial, he chose to be born in a stable and die on a cross.*

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<sup>1</sup> "Experience subsequently taught that this second alternative, rejected by M. Le Vavas seur, is the best way to minister to the Blacks. Trying to instruct them on the farms of Bourbon led to great difficulties, but when they came to the chapels, there was considerable success". (This is a note added to the manuscript, apparently in the hand of Fr. Le Vavas seur).

*The missionaries must love and cherish the Black People as their own brothers and children; this love and affection should be much greater than the love they have for the Whites. They must be so devoted and united to the Blacks that they will become associated with them and be looked down on by the other Whites. But even if this does happen because of their concern and solicitude for these poor people, with the passing of time, they will be greatly venerated, as happened with Peter Claver. He sent the great men of Cartagena to listen to these despised people and, despite their great pride, they eventually came to hold Peter in great esteem.*

*If the parish priests do little or nothing for the Blacks, it is because they are not seen as fathers and brothers. The missionaries must be regarded as friends in whom the people can confide, and this is very possible without them losing the respect to which they have a right. One can respect somebody and at the same time have a deep love and filial trust for him; to achieve that, all that is needed is for the missionary to be seen as a devoted father, brother and friend. Their conduct towards the Blacks must be such that they will be respected as people who would be happy to suffer death to preserve them from the least suffering or evil. The missionaries will have total confidence in these people, who will feel that they are loved passionately in the Lord, just as God loved us when he was on the cross and in the Blessed Sacrament – the same love as a mother has for her children.*

*The missionaries could easily build a small group of huts like the locals. In the middle, they could put a chapel and that would be the place where they would frequently come together to renew themselves spiritually. They would then spread out, going from house to house, just like Peter Claver.*

*The state of things regarding the Blacks in the Isle de France (Present-day Mauritius) and the other French colonies is exactly the same as in Bourbon, except that in the American colonies, they seem to be more religious. Efforts should be made to establish congregations and convents in these places. If missionaries are sent*

*to Bourbon, they should also take steps, with the help of God, to set up a mission in Madagascar, perhaps one of the most important locations for future missionary activity.*

*To sum up regarding this projected mission to the island of Bourbon, the immediate step to be taken are as follows:*

*To present the plan to the Propaganda, explaining in detail the state of the Black people on this island;*

*To outline the style of life the missionaries wish to adopt and explain in detail why this kind of life is essential for success, in view of the virtual impossibility of finding priests among the ordinary clergy who are capable of undertaking such a work;*

*Finally, if the Propaganda is ready to authorise such a work, the missionaries, having obtained permission from their own bishops, will place themselves at the service of the Propaganda and submit the rules under which they intend to gather as a group (These could be the rules of the Eudist Fathers). They will choose one of their members, with the approval of the Propaganda, who will receive orders in Rome as to which colony they will devote themselves.*

*Once Rome has given its permission and authorisation, priests will be asked to volunteer and, while the details are being worked out, the missionaries will go to the Eudist Fathers for one or two years of novitiate, basing themselves on the one or two years of "Solitude" at Saint-Sulpice.*

*Frédéric Le Vasseur*