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02. Memorandum presented by Fr. Libermann to Bishop Cadolini, Secretary of the Propaganda Fide

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Memorandum presented by Fr. Libermann to Bishop Cadolini, Secretary of the Propaganda Fide¹

While Libermann and Maxime de la Brunière were together in Rome in 1840, they worked on this crucial text explaining the idea of the "Work for the Black People" for presentation to the Propaganda Fide. Half way through, de la Brunière became discouraged and left Rome, leaving Libermann, who was only a seminarian in minor orders and with no prospect of being ordained, to finish the work and hand it in at the Vatican. He did this at the end of March, 1840.²

In our General Archives in Paris there are two copies of this memorandum: the present one, which is an exact copy of the original in the Propaganda archives in Rome and another in Libermann's own handwriting, which carries the following note: "This is only the draft copy. A few changes were made to the final version presented, but nothing of importance and generally only correction of style".

Rome, March 27th 1840

My Lord Bishop,

I am taking the liberty of presenting this small Memorandum on the foreign missions to your Excellency. I am confident that your love and zeal for the salvation of souls will ensure a favourable reception, even though I do not merit it.

We are a group of Frenchmen who have come together to pursue this project that we are convinced is inspired by Our Lord. We are in great need of encouragement and enlightenment to accomplish God's will for us and I am confident that we will receive them from

¹ N.D. II, pp. 68-76.

² The Propaganda made enquiries about M. Libermann through the Nuncio in Paris. The correspondence to which this gave rise can be found in N.D. II, pp 77+

your Excellency. This is why we humbly entreat you to receive our memorandum through the love of Our Lord, Jesus Christ and his holy Mother. Let me assure you that, by the grace of God, I am ready to put myself entirely in your hands and to obey all your advice and orders as if they were coming from God himself.

To enable you to assess these things in the Spirit of God, I will give you some details so that nothing will remain hidden in my heart and you will be able to see, in depth, all the important elements involved.

The project can be exposed under three main headings:

1) The first point: a general outline of the plan

We resolve to give ourselves totally to Our Lord for the salvation of the Black People, who are the most unfortunate, the furthest from salvation and the most abandoned in the Church of God.

For the last two years, we have been deeply touched by reports we have received of the great sufferings that are crushing these poor people in several countries, and of the little help they are given to escape from the ignorance and vice in which they are sinking. They are engulfed by so many misfortunes that their very salvation is in jeopardy. We are determined to work for their salvation, whatever the cost, knowing that there are very many sufferings, humiliations and contradictions which await us in undertaking such a work.

The choice of place for this mission

*We have concentrated our attention on two places – first of all, **Haiti**. From what we have heard, this country would seem to be the most abandoned in the Church. I am sure that your Excellency is better informed than I am on the sorry state of this island, so there is no need to tell you what I have heard. Our entry into that country would be helped by the fact that one of our members is the grandchild of a former President. This cleric has already taken some steps in this direction by outlining our plan to the secretary of the actual President who visited Paris last year. He reacted very favourably; he said he would be happy to see a group of good priests*

arrive in his country to work for the salvation of the Blacks. There was already considerable concern about them because of their unruly attitudes and for several other reasons. He even promised to interest the Præsident in this project.

The second place is the island of **Bourbon** (Reunion). It has fewer Blacks than Haiti but their needs are very great, and after the abolition of slavery, they will be in particular need of help. It would also mean that we would be close to Madagascar into which we could perhaps penetrate if the Holy Father thought fit to send us there. It would be a great joy to bring the Gospel to that country and perhaps even add to the number of martyrs in the Church. Another point in favour of this mission is that a member of our group, a priest, is from one of the leading families of the island, a man full of zeal and fervour, who is well acquainted with the habits and traditions of these countries.

2) Second point: Community life, to ensure success

We believe that community life is essential for the success of this enterprise. We will summarise our thoughts under three headings:

We do not wish to be attached permanently to a particular parish or other work; we would work directly under the authority of the Bishop or Prefect Apostolic, moving around the country to which we are sent, sometimes as a community giving missions as is done in France, sometimes two by two, staying for a time in a particular quarter to catechise, encourage, console, support and relieve the poor people according to their needs, sometimes performing ministry in one way or another. But we will never remain permanently alone and from time to time, we will return to the community at intervals to be determined by the superior.

We will live in obedience to a superior, who will be chosen from amongst us, and according to a rule of life that will be drawn up later.

We will practise perfect poverty.

We also wish to make vows, which will not be solemn but dispensable by the superior, so as to avoid any inconveniences which may arise as a result.

The reasons why we wish to live in community are as follows:

The fear of losing ourselves while saving others. This is a constant danger for a missionary working alone and completely dependent on his own decisions and actions: whereas life in community, practising faithful obedience and perfect poverty, shields him from all these risks.

The good of the mission and the salvation of souls. For if we support each other in fervour and devotion, we will work more fruitfully than if we fall into laxity, which would inevitably happen to many if we were to live and work alone. Also, living in community, we would be better placed to give help and support to the neglected priests of these countries. This is one of the central aims of our project: to gain the confidence of the local priests by different means and give them as much help as we can.

If we live in community, we may be able eventually to form a local clergy in the countries where we are sent; we see this as a highly desirable and necessary step for overcoming the many sufferings of these places.

Finally, living in community under one superior can achieve so much more than acting in isolation. The undertaking can be on a much wider scale, with a plan of action and a follow-up which is well thought through. It will be more vigourously pursued with a uniform plan of action. The superior will examine the project with his council, measure up the difficulties and prepare the necessary means to achieve success. He would be able take on more projects because he would have more resources at his disposal and could deploy the confreres as needed. Each would be employed according to his particular skills and this would make for greater efficiency. With each one having a particular area to cover, he would give

himself more completely to the task in hand. There are so many advantages resulting from community living.

Nota¹: Even though we are asking for community life, we do not want to be approved as a Congregation; at present, we are too fragile to even think of such a thing. I presume that even if we did request it, the Holy See would not grant permission. For that reason, I will not add any reasons why we do not seek such a favour.

3) Third point: Submission to and dependence on the Holy See.

Our greatest desire is that we be sent on mission by the Holy See and that we always remain under its jurisdiction and dependence, so that the superior whom we chose will have no authority until approved by the Cardinal Prefect of the Propaganda. The Propaganda will likewise decide which mission we will undertake and in which countries we will work, so that if the needs of a particular country are no longer so great, we can be re-located to another mission where the needs are greater. The superior will have absolute power regarding the running of the Community, but he will obey absolutely and perfectly all the orders he receives concerning the Mission to be undertaken and the country where the work will be done. He will have the duty to send his Eminence, once or several times a year, detailed information on the members of the Community, their work, their successes and everything else that concerns the Mission.²

¹ Libermann added this note to the draft version of the document at the bottom of the page. It appears to have been added later: "To explain this note, everybody had been telling me emphatically that I would never be given permission to found a Congregation. So I dropped the idea, for the moment, for fear that I would otherwise lose everything. I simply asked to set up a community, and later, if our ministry proves to be effective, we will take whatever steps the Lord inspires us to take."

² In a previous project, Fr. Libermann had written that he wanted to depend on the Holy See without being subject to the Prefects Apostolic. He explained it in this way: "Because of the great desire I had to belong to the Holy See for the reasons written below, I wanted to establish this Third Point as it is written here;

The reasons we are asking for this permission

We would surely be more zealous and detached from this earth and ourselves if we came directly under the Holy See, and we would know that his Holiness was fully informed about us. Moreover, if we were sent by the Holy Father, we would receive the apostolic Spirit in even greater abundance, coming from the source and the great treasure where Our Lord placed this Holy Spirit for the whole of his Church.

We would be sure that we are going to the place where God wants us to be and where the needs are greatest, having been sent by the Supreme Pontiff, who alone was told to care for all the Churches.

Not being set up as a Congregation, at least for the time being, we would have to be dependent on some superior who would send us; if we need to be subject to an authority on this earth, we would wish, above all, to come under the authority of the Vicar of Our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Who else could send us? It would have to be one of the Congregations in France, but that would be extremely difficult. We could not be joined to the Picpus Congregation or the Foreign Missions; this would divert us from our principle object—the salvation of the Black People. There are other objections which I will treat below.

If we joined with the Community of the Holy Spirit, our activities would be limited to the French Colonies; but we are also thinking of other countries, like Haiti and Madagascar, which are the most in need and the most neglected.

but this could hardly be done since the Holy See sends Prefects and Vicars Apostolic into the Colonies which depend directly on its jurisdiction, giving them full jurisdiction in these countries, and therefore cannot force them to send them missionaries with independent power". This text conforms to the original. It seems that Fr. Libermann wanted to say "...cannot force them to receive missionaries".

Whichever Congregation we linked up to, we would never be able to practise a way of life following a rule, and living together in obedience and perfect poverty. None of these Congregations send out their members in community, but all are isolated and dispersed. The Community of the Holy Spirit has something else: they are sent into parishes so it would not be possible to practise poverty.

The only other possibility would be to form an association with a Community that is already approved, while continuing to live according to our own rule, but this could lead to many difficulties. Another Community, fulfilling a useful role in the Church, while we are still of no account, would find it difficult to come to terms with us. We would have to practise great discretion so it would be very difficult for us to lead this holy life that we so much desire. And even if they did accept us under those conditions, the difficulty would remain. Each of these Communities has its own spirit and outlook – very good in themselves, but they would find it difficult to enter into a relationship with a group which had a very different aim to their own. Almost inevitably, these Communities would influence us to follow another path than the one we have adopted. Without intending it, they would change our spirit and give us their own, resulting in the discouragement of our missionaries, a lessening of our zeal and maybe even a state of complete laxity. Moreover, it would lead to a lack of esteem for the Superiors, discord among the members and the consequent paralysis and failure of the Mission.

What we have written above is a description of the whole project which we submit to your Excellency to judge in the light God's inspiration which you have received.

Finally, I would like to bring two more difficulties to your attention:

The first is the way in which we will increase our numbers. At present, we are only eight, four of whom are aged between 27 and 35, and three who are ready to receive the priesthood when necessary. This number is not sufficient for the large project we have in mind, but I am certain that we will increase if you give us your

approval and blessing. I am thinking of setting up a Novitiate in France where we can prepare ourselves for this great undertaking. A priest of the diocese of Lyon, with much influence and respect in this diocese, has made us some very good offers, on condition that I take charge of the novitiate myself. If I return from Rome with your Excellency's recommendation, I am convinced that others will join me and that we will soon be able start the novitiate and then begin some of the work by the following year.

The second problem refers to me. I spent ten years in the Seminary of Saint Sulpice and I studied theology for the first four. But the authorities did not want to risk advancing me to Sacred Orders because of a nervous sickness I had developed which carries a canonical impediment. This sickness has never been very strong and for the last 9 years, it has diminished to such an extent that I am free to devote myself to whatever tasks the Lord wishes to give me. These attacks happened occasionally and for the last two years there have been none at all. I can tell when they are going to occur and can take the necessary precautions; for very many years, they have only come on when I failed to take precautions.

When I came to Rome, I wanted to remain as I was, believing that the priesthood was not necessary for the work I wanted to undertake. But since then, I have come to realise that ordination would be necessary, or at least extremely useful. I consulted my Director in Paris to know whether God really wanted me to be ordained; he gave me a positive reply and told me to make every effort to get permission for it in Rome. So I place this request in your hands. I have asked for Dimissorial letters from Paris but have subsequently learnt that the Capitular Vicars do not have the right to issue them. The only solution I can think of is to put this request to yourself; I can then ask the Vicars General of Paris for permission to go on the Missions if necessary, and I am sure I would obtain it without difficulty.

I ask your Excellency to forgive me the boldness and the confiding simplicity with which I have addressed you. God knows that I am

only inspired by my desire to please Him and by my trust in your own love and zeal.

In the presence of Our Lord, I want to assure you that I am determined with all my heart to follow your orders and advice. I am, and always shall be, my Lord, your humble and obedient servant.

F. Libermann, acolyte.