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03. Plan for the salvation of the peoples of the African Coast

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Plan for the salvation of the peoples of the African Coast

*Submitted by Fr. Libermann to the Sacred Congregation
for the Propagation of the Faith
November 3rd, 1844¹*

The first missionary expedition to West Africa (present-day Liberia and Ivory Coast) by the new Congregation resulted in a number of deaths; Libermann spoke of it as "the disaster of Guinea". Of the 14 missionaries joining Bishop Barron (of whom 7 priests and 3 brothers were sent by Libermann), only Fr. Bessieux and Brother Grégoire were able to continue their mission in Gabon. Because of this tragedy, Libermann felt the need to define in more detail the missionary strategy of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary, hence this new plan sent to the Propaganda. It concerns the formation of a black clergy and laity to assist the European missionaries in their apostolic tasks.

November 3rd, 1844

Our recent sad experience of the bad climate in Africa, echoed by that of the French people in the new trading posts that have been set up on the African coast, shows clearly that the salvation of that area cannot be accomplished by sending European missionaries directly into such an unhealthy climate. These valuable men would surely perish before they could achieve anything.

In the light of this, I have been reflecting, in the presence of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, if there is not a more efficacious way of coming to the aid of these poor people. I believe I have now found a plan which would not be too difficult to realise; I am sending it to you for your advice and help and to see if you consider that it could be

¹ N.D. VI, pp. 392-399.

practical and useful for the glory of God. It consists in setting up an institution where young black men from all countries could be received; they would be instructed in our religion and eventually sent back to their own countries to spread the doctrine of truth and form their compatriots in the faith and the Christian way of life.

While they are given religious instruction, they could also be educated in those subjects which would be useful for their future life and contribute to the good they will accomplish. We would choose the more religious and capable amongst them for further studies with a view to eventual ordination to the priesthood. The rest would be taught agriculture and various other trades. On returning to their countries, they would enjoy considerable authority and respect among their compatriots. The priests could do much good work and would soon gain the confidence of the people from which they come themselves. They would not find it difficult to abolish their superstition and idolatry; they would be better placed than Europeans to destroy Islam in the many countries where it is to be found and to fight against Protestantism.¹

Those who study agriculture and trades will be a great help to their compatriot priests in the spreading of the faith. They could also serve as catechists and teach the Gospel in those areas where the priests have not yet gone, thus preparing the way for future evangelisation when there would be more local priests. Once these men have returned to their own country after studies, they will inspire others to follow the same path of education, so the work would grow rapidly. To encourage and support these black priests and catechists in their work for the glory of God, some communities of European missionaries would be set up in places with a better climate, from which they could work along the coast in the good season, visiting the recently erected churches and assisting the local priests with help and advice. Later on, when these missionaries have

¹ It must be remembered that the first tentative steps towards religious dialogue only took place in the early years of the following century.

become more acclimatised and experienced, they could perhaps, by the grace of God, take on a more active role.

If your Eminence is willing to accept the basic concept of this plan, in my opinion we should introduce it on as wide a scale as divine Providence will permit. We suggest that our first target should be the Blacks of the African coastline. In general, we would accept all Blacks, whatever country they come from. Those from Africa would be trained for agriculture and various trades, while those of the colonies would normally pursue studies leading to ordination to the priesthood; in the colonies, agriculture and trade skills would not be so useful for the good of souls. No distinction will be made as regards nationality; whether they come from French or English possessions, they will be received in the same way. The English and American possessions have a greater need of help than the French. (Moreover, in giving no special preference to any country, the success of the project will be better assured and more widespread; we would not be completely subject to the whims of governments whose attitudes to religion can change from time to time).

It seems to me, if the Holy Father and you are in agreement that the only place to base this work would be in Rome. My first reason would be the nature of the work itself, and my second would concern the resourcing of such a project:

1) The work itself

Being essentially an apostolic work, reaching out to all the peoples of the black race, there would be no better place for it than under the eyes of the Vicar of Jesus-Christ, who is responsible for the whole Church throughout the world. If it were placed in a particular diocese, it would imply, in a manner of speaking, the alienation of the rights of the universal Pontiff, who has been appointed to reign over the whole Church. It would also mean that we would have to limit ourselves to taking students only from the possessions of the particular country where the diocese was located. If it were set up in a French territory, the jealousy of the English would be an

insurmountable obstacle for the inclusion of the Blacks from English areas, and the reverse would be true if an English region were chosen. If the location was neither French nor English, the problems would be the same or even worse, but in Rome, the difficulties could be overcome. An establishment in one country would leave us at the mercy of a capricious government and greatly interfere with the good that could be done.

In Rome, the work could be directed and supervised by the Congregation of the Propaganda, and your Eminence would be able to place the subjects, at the end of their period of training, where the need was greatest. Supervision by the Propaganda would ensure that the operation would be infinitely more profitable for the good of the Church.

The Roman climate would be the most suitable in Europe for the health of the young blacks. They could not live in England, or most of France, because of the cold. The only other possibility would be Africa or the West Indies. But the corruption in those countries would place the whole scheme at risk, and the objections mentioned above would be even stronger for the West Indies because of the despotic governors who are in charge of those countries. Finally, the difficulties of financing the programme, of which I will talk below, would become impossible if the work were placed in any of those countries.

2) The resourcing of the programme

The upkeep of the Centre, if placed in Rome, would not pose any serious problems, whereas elsewhere, it would be much more difficult, especially if the enterprise begins to grow. Although we trust totally in divine Providence, which will never let us down if this work is what God wants, we must nevertheless take all necessary steps to ensure our subsistence by ordinary means. The principle method that we envisage is to acquire sufficient land that can be cultivated by the young Blacks who are learning agriculture; more than one third of the total number will have agriculture for their

*speciality. From that point of view, nowhere would be more suitable than Rome. In France, 50 acres of land would cost at least 140,000 francs, whereas in Rome, we could buy the same amount for less than 40,000. There is a lot of fallow land in the countryside surrounding Rome that could be bought for a very good price. If the Holy Father were in agreement with our plans and would give us a certain amount of land to cultivate, it would be even better; we could then use the money at our disposal to build a solid base from the start.*¹

¹ *"If we have some land that we can cultivate, I am convinced that it would be sufficient for the establishment. The Blacks are used to food that is ordinary, but we could feed them very well. I have consulted men who are experienced in these things and they agree that this plan would assure subsistence. To appreciate the truth of what I am proposing, one only has to look at the situation in France where farmers rent land where the fertility is very inferior to that surrounding Rome. They pay a high rent and they have a large number of workers to feed for half of the year, as well as paying them a daily wage. The workers are able to live on their salary, along with their wives and children. If the foundation is run in this way, the income would grow with the increase in numbers, for as the number of Blacks increases, the number of labourers would be augmented proportionately.*

I hope to be able to raise 1,000 francs in advance to provide for the first batch of clerics. Those learning trades would be almost able to support themselves through the fruits of their work. The brothers who will run the workshops and the agricultural side would earn more than they spend.

Later on, when the work has proved its worth, the Governments would pay for the keep of a certain number of children they would send us for training. Also, if your Eminence finds that our project is useful for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, perhaps the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith would be able to give us financial help as the need arises.

Finally, I could use the money given by those priests who come to help this mission. At present, we have sufficient money to survive and to meet our most pressing needs. I am ready to make all possible sacrifices for the support of this work because I am convinced that the salvation of the peoples of the African coasts depends upon it".

Secondly, if the establishment is situated in Rome, we would benefit from the offerings of foreign visitors who go there in such large numbers. In France, the generosity of the faithful is rather to diocesan projects, and this is encouraged by the secular priests.

There is one remaining question to be considered: the transportation of these black children. There are three stages to be looked at:

What steps should be taken to recruit these children?

To begin with, we would only have a small number, but during their treks along the coast in the good season, our missionaries would recruit as many young blacks as they could. If the European merchants on the coast come to appreciate the value of the scheme, there will be good results from the start. There are other measures that could be useful. Through the friends I have in the principle ports of France, I would get merchants and ships' captains to bring me some children. Amongst them, there are some religious men who would consider it an honour to participate in such a praiseworthy undertaking. We would be able to pay for their expenses. I am also in touch with a Congregation of sisters who have had considerable success in Senegal and other African colonies; I am sure they would fully cooperate in this service for the Church of God and these poor souls. I shall also make contact with a trading company which is planning to set up a scheme for the exploitation of the resources of Gabon; they are also hoping that it will be colonised. Once we have made our contribution to the development of the country, we will find favour with the various governments and they will probably send us children themselves. Finally, we must put ourselves completely into the hands of God, who will surely make things favourable for our plans and suggest other means to us as we advance along the road.

The transportation of these children to the place where the establishment will be located.

We have two small boats at our disposal and I would be willing to make them available for this operation if they are of use. Otherwise,

we could use the revenue that these boats normally bring in to pay the passage of the children. If necessary, we could sell them and use the proceeds for the same purpose.

How would the children be transported home once they had finished their training?

I feel that the governments of those countries to which they will return would be willing to pay for their transport. Also, the societies in Europe for the propagation of the faith would give the same help to these children as they do to the missionaries. By the time the numbers concerned have risen, the funds available to the work will have also increased.

So this, your Eminence, is the complete plan that I am confidently submitting to you. I know you will listen to me with your usual fatherly goodness: I will await your orders and I will carry out with filial obedience.

F. Libermann

Superior of the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary