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### 05.The Church in Haiti and the aim of the mission

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## The Church in Haiti and the aim of the mission

*To Fr. Percin<sup>1</sup>*

*Fr. Libermann wrote a long letter to Fr. Pierre Northum Percin<sup>2</sup>, a secular priest whom he was sending to work in Haiti. He describes the situation in that country where Fr. Eugène Tisserant had tried unsuccessfully to establish a mission of the Holy Heart of Mary (1843-1845). Libermann's attitude towards the black population of the island is devoid of any prejudice. He outlines his vision for the country and the Church which will be at its service. Our aim must be to build an adult, not a missionary, Church.*

La Neuville, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1846

Dear Father,

I am happy to send you a written account of the thoughts I shared with you during your brief stay with me. There is no need to apologise for asking my advice on the country which will now become your home. I am happy to contribute in any way to the good of Haiti and was moved to hear your own concerns for this country.

I am very sorry to have to withdraw entirely from the religious affairs of Haiti, but I am now convinced that divine Providence does not want me to be involved. Things will progress without me - even better than if I was still playing a part. I would have been happy to help Haiti and its people, who are so well disposed towards religion. There was an even stronger reason why I was keen to undertake this work: if we could have made a foundation in the Republic, I am sure it would have been

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<sup>1</sup> N.D. VIII, pp. 333-342.

<sup>2</sup> See Index

very successful. After a few years, we would have been able to expose to the world the calumny and bad faith of those who were denigrating such a large number of people. We could have destroyed the ridiculous prejudices of a handful, who only think of their own ambitions and interests, to the detriment of millions of people created in the image of God and redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. I am convinced that we could have proved to the detractors of the African race that not having a white skin does not mean that they were any less the children of God, that their souls are less noble, that they are less capable of receiving the faith, Christian morality and the principles and practice of civilisation. In other words, we would have shown them that the colour of one's skin in no way denotes any inferiority<sup>1</sup>.

With your personal interest in this worthy cause, you, more than anybody will understand the paramount importance of emphasising this fact. In Haiti, it is quickly and easily demonstrated. In Guinea, we will meet all kinds of obstacles and who knows if I will live long enough to see the success of our efforts. You will appreciate how ardently I desire to achieve this goal, because it would do so much good for the whole of the great work on which we have embarked.

But it is not the will of God – blessed be his holy name! I have to confess that it makes me very sad, but I submit to the holy will of God. Perhaps God wants yourself and others to bring this about in Haiti, so that your energetic protest against these unjust prejudices will have the same effect as ours would have done. Have courage, because God will be with you!

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<sup>1</sup> For the background to the turbulent religious history of Haiti to which this letter refers, see *"To the Ends of the Earth – A General History of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost"* by Henry Koren c.s.sp., Duquesne University Press, 1983, p. 238 +

So here is a summary of the substance of our conversations on the state of affairs in Haiti and the means that I feel should be used to arrive at a suitable remedy for the problems of the Republic. To find a way of improving the deplorable state of religion in Haiti, we must take a close look at situation regarding the Catholic Church. I begin with two observations:

- 1) The Church in Haiti cannot and must not be classed as a missionary Church. A civilised country, which has been entirely Christian since time immemorial, with established parishes and a legitimate government like all the other governments of Europe, must have an official and regularised Church like all the other local Churches which together make up the universal Church. As long as it does not enjoy this status, it is in an abnormal state of suffering and disorder, and this disorder will be intolerable for all competent civil administrators. In view of this, I am not in the least surprised that Fr. Tisserant did not succeed, despite his great enthusiasm and virtue. The Government would feel insulted to be given a Prefect Apostolic. I know that neither the Propaganda nor Fr. Tisserant intended the country to retain the status of "mission" for a long period; it was a provisional arrangement aimed at setting up a solidly established Church. So it is understandable that the country rejected such an intolerable state of affairs.
- 2) Therefore, it is evident that the Church in Haiti cannot be a "mission" but must be fully established. An established Church has a bishop with fixed and permanent authority. The bishop needs collaborators to

carry out his work properly. There will be a spiritual administration which, albeit completely independent, will achieve a perfect harmony with the temporal administration of the country. While maintaining the principles of the faith and administrative independence and avoiding any involvement in political affairs, the Church will nevertheless help the Government to maintain good order by preaching the Christian faith and morality and through the purely spiritual influence that she will have over the people. I believe that it is here that the great problem lies, looking at the present state of the country.

A few years ago, people wanted to persuade me that the Government was opposed to the creation of a spiritual administration. I believed them at the time, because I did not know the country and had to rely on the opinion of those who claimed to know it well.

Meanwhile, Fr. Tisserant was in Haiti and he gave me a more positive picture of the events that had taken place, of the spirit of the inhabitants, the circumstances surrounding the former negotiations and the work he had done himself. I carefully examined his evidence and I am now convinced that the former assessment was based on first impressions and the conclusion reached too hastily, which unfortunately, is often the case. I believe this is where the difficulty lies. The government, like any government, must feel the need for the moral support that comes from religion. To say that the government is the enemy of Catholicism and is intent on destroying it is quite ludicrous. Perhaps its members are not religious people, perhaps they find the present state of the local Catholic Church highly embarrassing, perhaps they have even thought of introducing Protestantism to the country

instead. But to say that they are acting from a hatred of Catholicism itself would be unacceptable. In these times in which we live, those in high positions in government would never let their decisions be influenced by their personal likes or dislikes. The Emperor Nicholas of Russia<sup>1</sup>, who is an obvious dictator, would only act in such a tyrannical manner where political or administrative issues were at stake. But looked at from the point of view of politics and administration, it is easy to see that a well-organised Church would be a great help to a Government, so it would be supportive of the Church in its turn. If Napoleon, with his iron authority, found it necessary, for purely political and administrative reasons, to re-establish the Church in France, then a country with a constitutional government and a tradition of liberty, like Haiti, would feel an even greater need for ecclesiastical support.

The problem is to be found in the current situation in the country. As things are, Haiti has no alternative but to accept foreigners to administer its spiritual affairs. It is not a normal situation and it is certainly detrimental to the Haitian Church. There is not a single ecclesiastic in its ranks who is capable of becoming bishop, or any personnel who could assist him in the administration of the diocese or take charge of the principal parishes. All these important functions have to be put in the hands of people from other countries.

So it is not surprising that the Government has difficulty in accepting a stable administration built on strong foundations. It cannot be expected to place its trust in unknown personnel coming from outside the Republic, who inevitably have a scanty knowledge of the spirit and traditions of the country.

Everybody knows that if there were no other way to correct the disorder in the Church, the Government would have to accept

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<sup>1</sup> Emperor Nicholas I of Russia (1825-1855).

these foreigners, putting its trust in the choice of the Holy See, knowing that Rome would seek a solution acceptable to the government of Haiti. But it is quite natural that the personnel of the Republican Government will look for a solution better adapted to the needs and the situation of the country.

This explains why the Government of Haiti has always accepted the overtures of the Holy See, but when it comes to the practical implementation, its worries return because it involves handing over spiritual authority to foreigners. So they prefer to delay things further. They fail to realise that by procrastinating, the problems increase and the chance of successfully removing them becomes ever more difficult.

So this is my opinion on the present situation of the Church in Haiti and the background to the obstacles that so far have spoilt the negotiations between the Holy See and the Government of the Republic. Every wise and serious person, who does not judge superficially, will appreciate the truth of what I am saying. Several people have said (you have probably heard this yourself) that the priests already in the country are afraid of the prospect of having to reform themselves and consequently are siding with the Government in its prejudices against the Church. This suggestion is so absurd that I cannot understand how otherwise reasonable people could give it any credibility. Those running the government could not fail to see through the opposition of such priests, who would fear nothing more than a clergy born and trained in Haiti, who would take over all the main parishes and the leadership of the local Church.

We must now look at the ways of solving these difficulties. If a native of the country could be found who had the confidence of the Government and the trust of the Holy See regarding his orthodoxy, the Gordian knot could immediately be unravelled. The Government would present him to the Holy See for

consecration as a bishop. But such a man does not exist! So somebody needs to be trained, along with a team of Haitian helpers; these would be necessary to help the bishop with the administration, run the most important parishes and, eventually, the smaller ones. Gradually, the country would no longer need these foreigners, who are often there simply for reasons of personal interest or because they have been thrown out of their own country.

To provide a bishop and collaborators, a school of knowledge and virtue has to be set up – in other words, a seminary. For a seminary to exist there has to be an ecclesiastical authority which communicates its power to the person in charge. But what sort of authority? Here we have arrived at the crux of the problem: would he be a residential bishop, the Bishop of Port-Republicain? A priest born outside the country could never receive sufficient confidence from the Government. So there would need to be a *provisional* authority whose only role would be to draw the Haitian Church out of its vicious circle by creating a native clergy and preparing some of them to occupy the most important posts in the Church of that country. But sufficient authority could never be imparted under the title of “*Vicar*” or “*Prefect Apostolic*”, because this would be tantamount to making the Haitian Church into a mission – an abnormal position which would be degrading for the Church and the distinguished members of the Republic.

There could be another solution. What would prevent the Haitian Government from approaching the Holy See and expressing its desire to see the Church in their country break out of its deplorable state? They could easily explain that it is not yet time to appoint a residential Bishop to this Church because there is nobody at present who would receive the confidence of the country if appointed on a permanent basis. Neither should somebody be appointed Vicar or Prefect Apostolic, because that would be to reduce the Church to the



status of a mission. So they would ask for an interim administration, appointed directly by the Sovereign Pontiff, to prepare a future Bishop and his collaborators; they would only exercise this spiritual authority until such time as a worthy Bishop, emerging from the local Church, could be found.

I think the interim Administrator should be a Bishop; he could be given a title "in partibus infidelium"<sup>1</sup> as was done in Lyon and elsewhere when a similar need arose. Conferring the Episcopal dignity would have a three-fold advantage:

- It would be a consolation for the good people and would provide an authority for the priests who would ensure that they carry out their duties;
- By appointing a Bishop, Rome would be recognising *de facto* that the See of Port-Republicain had never ceased to be an Episcopal See;
- The Church in Haiti would not have to turn to foreign countries to look after its young seminarians.

Such an authority could not give rise to any concern, since it would only be provisional.

To sum up: Haiti must have a Bishop and clergy who originate in the country. To achieve this, a seminary is essential but there can be no seminary without a spiritual authority. For the moment, the authority cannot be a residential bishop, nor a Vicar or Prefect Apostolic. So Rome should be asked to appoint an interim Diocesan Administrator, whose task would be to prepare subjects to take over the running of the diocese of Port-Républicain. He would be replaced as soon as there was somebody suitable to lead the diocese, whose name would then be proposed by the Government to the Holy See.

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<sup>1</sup> A non-residential bishop is given the Title of a diocese that no longer exists.

This would also be the time to request a concordat. The above plan is simple, it goes straight to the heart of the problem and it would solve all the major difficulties.

When the Bourbons returned to France, Cardinal Fesch (the uncle of the Emperor) had to leave, but not wishing to abandon his seat, a request was made for an Administrator who would stay there during the life of the Cardinal. As soon as he died, the Administrator (Bishop Pins) was asked to resign because the government wanted to present another subject to the Holy See. Such a procedure would engender far fewer difficulties in Haiti because the Holy See is so anxious to see the Diocese of Port-Républicain occupied by a residential Bishop.

This letter has turned out to be far longer than I intended. I was going to give you a brief résumé of my thoughts, but once I had started, I saw that it would be better to explain my views in greater detail. I am rather ashamed at sending you a letter like this, full of crossings-out and corrections and written on ordinary paper. If this causes you some disturbance, please let me know. In that way, you will give me some idea of the amount of humility in your heart – fairly abundant, I imagine! If I had had sufficient time, I would have copied it out again, and this was my initial intention. But I now find that this is impossible; all the men here are on retreat and I am the one who is preaching, so I am sure you will forgive me.

Be courageous and put all your trust in God and in Mary. You are leaving during the bad season, but God will protect you. Let me assure you that I will be with you in spirit. I will ask God to give you all that you need for a safe journey and a happy arrival.

Please remember to give my respects to M. and Mme Laforestrie, and to the pious young lady who has just added another young citizen to the Republic. If you can find time to write, give me news of the health of Mme Laforestrie. Also, remember me to M. and Mme Mirambeau, above all M. Mirambeau whom I know better.

Goodbye, my dear friend. We shall now be separated by a great distance, but our hearts will be united in the love of Jesus and Mary.

Yours as ever,

*F. Libermann*