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Memorandum on the Black Missions in general and that of Guinea in particular

Presented to the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith by Fr. Libermann, Superior of the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary¹

In 1846, Fr. Libermann drew up a long Memorandum, a veritable missionary plan of action, on the advice of Mgr Luquet², Fr. Colin³, the founder of the Marists and Fr. Steiner. It was presented soon after the publication of the Apostolic Instruction "Neminem Perfecto". This Memorandum was approved unanimously by the Propaganda Fide and is now regarded as one of the greatest missionary texts of the 19th century. Because of the length of the document, we give below the introduction and conclusion, which summarise the main points of the text.

Illustrious and Very Reverend Fathers,

Your Sacred Congregation asked us to work for the salvation of the black races, particularly those of Haiti, Guinea etc. It is therefore our duty to give you an account of everything that could contribute to the advance and stability of our holy religion amongst these people, in addition to the details which are of equal interest to your Eminences. The Sacred Congregation will give orders according to the inspirations that the spirit of God will communicate to them on these points; in obeying these orders, we will march onwards along the road of

¹ N.D. VIII, pp. 222-277.

² See index

³ Fr. Jean Collin (1790-1875), founder of the Marist Fathers

the apostolate, assured of the help of the grace of Jesus Christ to carry out his holy will.

Not wishing to take up too much of your Eminences' time, we will limit ourselves to calling your attention to some questions of principle which have a great and pressing importance for us. After briefly recalling the special aim of our nascent society and the circumstances in which Our Lord has raised it up in his Church, we will speak of the difficulties we have encountered and the means, that we ask you to approve, for overcoming them....

Résumé of the whole Memorandum

In the first part of this deposition, we gave Your Eminences an account of the state of the black peoples, and the reasons why we have committed ourselves to help them. We listed all the difficulties which threaten the success of the work, we refuted those which are groundless and suggested solutions for those which have substance.

We went on to show the necessity of drawing up an overall plan and an organisation that would give real hope of starting a solid work, preparing the necessary elements and erecting the strong edifice of a canonically established Church. This plan and organisation is still imperfect, but it can be improved in the measure that circumstances will allow.

Our plan consists of paying special attention to the education of young people¹ and the best social training that we can give

¹ A letter from Libermann to M. Arragon written some time later (February 12th, 1847), reveals more of his thoughts on the importance of education: "I was very happy with what you wrote about the schools, especially as I was rather alarmed at what was said in a letter by Fr. Bessieux, supported by Fr. Gravière: he seemed to be moving towards abandoning the schools. I believe that if we abandon the schools, we will destroy the future of the Mission. I suppose it will be said that they could be taken up again later on, but this would be unrealistic: a Mission that

them, the formation of a black clergy, of school teachers, catechists and farmers and artisans skilled in a variety of trades. We give below a more detailed description of the path we wish to follow:

- ***Schools and Central Houses in the Missions***

In these houses, we plan to train three groups. The first are those in whom we have identified an aptitude for studies and a character suited to developing priestly virtues. They will study Latin so that they will be able to move on to philosophy and theology later on. To begin with, the number who would be suitable for ordination to the priesthood would probably be small. But as the country develops, so would the quality of these young men and the number of vocations to the priesthood would increase. Once ordained, they would be at the disposition of the Bishop in charge of the Mission.

There is no need to justify the importance we give to this stage; Your Eminences have already done this for us in the wise instruction that your Sacred Congregation has recently addressed to missionaries.

- ***Catechists and school teachers***

Amongst these children, there will be some who are talented and who even show signs of a sincere devotion, but who would not be suitable for the priesthood because of their difficulty in observing continence and various other reasons. We would give them a period of solid instruction and teach them singing and the ceremonies of the Church; they could then take on the roles of altar servers, catechists and

begins badly will almost certainly end badly. The more difficult and slow the work is in the early stages, the more important it is to persevere from the very beginning". (N.D. IX, pp. 42-48)

school teachers. They would be a great help to the missionaries, above all with the new stations and missions.

- ***Minor Orders***

On the same subject, we would like to suggest to Your Eminences the adoption of a measure, which is perhaps unknown in other missions but which could produce good results in our own: to give Bishops the power to confer the Tonsure and Minor Orders on catechists. Although not destined for the priesthood, they could be allowed to wear the ecclesiastical habit in church and for other clerical functions. Such a step would have several advantages:

- a) It would greatly encourage these men in their work for the spiritual good of their compatriots.
- b) It would oblige them to behave in an exemplary manner in their families and in the presence of others.
- c) They would receive more respect and so would be able to do more good.
- d) Finally, in some areas that are too unhealthy for European missionaries, and while there are still insufficient local priests to man all the stations, these men, being in minor orders, could replace them up to a certain point—presiding over the meetings of Christians, leading public prayer in the morning and evening, singing the Office on feast days and giving suitable instructions to the people.

We make this proposal to Your Eminences in the knowledge that we would be following the practice used by the Church in its early years, when Christianity was at a similar stage to the one we currently have in these missions. We would, of course, proceed with caution

and prudence in these promotions to the clerical state and to the function of catechist.

- ***Students for agriculture and craft training***

The third group which we would train in the same central house are those who would be excluded from sacred functions because of a lack refinement, virtue or capability. They would be divided into two categories:

- Labourers, who we would train in the type of agriculture that can be employed in their own countries and which they would carry out for the benefit of their families;
- Arts and crafts. It seems to us that it would be difficult or almost impossible to instruct this group in their own country because of the absence of workshops where the instructions of their teachers could be put into practice. Our plan is to build a centre for them in a European country where the climate is good, so as not to put their health at risk. They would be helped to acquire religious devotion and good manners.

- ***Building a foundation of human development, independent of the Missionaries***

This step rests on two related principles:

- 1) We are convinced that the faith will never have a solid foundation amongst these people, nor will the embryonic Churches have an assured future, without the help of a certain degree of human and

social development. The setting up of stable and enduring Churches in Europe in the early days depended to a large degree on a parallel development of this kind; without it, it would have been difficult to introduce and preserve that canonical organisation that is so necessary to guarantee the perpetuity of the Church.

Apart from religion, this sort of development also needs knowledge and work to provide an adequate foundation on which to build.

A civilisation which only learns to use a spade and tools to a basic level will have little effect in improving the behaviour of a people. It is not sufficient to show them the practical side of work; they must also learn the theory behind it so that gradually, they will no longer need the help of the missionaries to continue with it and they will cease to be dependent. It will surely take a considerable time to arrive at this point, but if it is not the ultimate aim from the very beginning, it will never be reached.

- 2) The second basic principle is that civilisation is impossible without the faith. Therefore, it is the task of the missionary to work towards it, not just concentrating on morality, but also on the intellectual and physical side, that is to say, instruction in agriculture and the crafts. He is the only one who by his supernatural authority as a person sent by God, by his love and priestly dedication, can arrive at a complete and balanced result; the success of the work depends on him.

If the missionary concentrates exclusively on the moral aspect, without bothering about the rest, others will come along to fill the gap and this could easily result in the destruction of all that he has tried to build up with so much labour and suffering....

Having explained the topography of Guinea, we have some requests which concern this particular mission:

1. The boundaries of this mission should be determined.
2. The jurisdiction of Senegambia (with the exception of the French and Portuguese colonies) needs this to be done, because the success of the Guinea Mission would become impossible without Senegambia, as we have already explained.
3. A Vicar Apostolic.

Finally, we would like to set before you a difficulty of which we have learnt very recently. Bishop Barron, the former Vicar Apostolic of Guinea, has resigned from his mission and has received verbal approval; he has returned to Philadelphia in America, but he has not yet received an official acceptance of his retirement by a decree from the Sacred Congregation. We do not see this as a major difficulty and we ask Your Eminences to use the sovereign power that Jesus Christ has given to his Vicar on earth to regulate this problem. This important mission would run into serious dangers if it had to wait much longer for this confirmation.

These are the matters that we wished to place before Your Eminences in this Memorandum. We have acted with the confidence of children towards their venerated fathers. We place ourselves entirely in your hands and we will submit fully

and with joy to all that divine wisdom inspires you to tell us. Your words will be words of life for a multitude of peoples and words of encouragement and consolation for those missionaries who serve them. Our greatest happiness is to work for the glory of Jesus Christ and the salvation of souls, under the guidance of the wonderful prudence which God has given you in abundance.

Libermann