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### 10. Memorandum of François Libermann to the Bishops of Guadeloupe, Martinique and Reunion

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## Memorandum of François Libermann to the Bishops of Guadeloupe, Martinique and Reunion<sup>1</sup>

*After his election as Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit in 1848, Fr. Libermann began the protracted task of setting up bishoprics in the French colonies. He saw this step as essential for improving the quality of the colonial clergy. Despite his bad health and his many other responsibilities, he pressed ahead with the necessary dialogue with Rome and the French government. In this Memorandum, he gives wise and important advice to the new Bishops appointed to Martinique (Bishop Leherpeur<sup>2</sup>) Guadeloupe (Bishop Lacarrière) and Reunion (Bishop Desprez.) It reveals a surprising knowledge of the current state of affairs in the colonies just after the abolition of slavery. The new Bishops were ordained on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1851 and set sail soon afterwards.*

*The original document is very long—62 pages in “Notes et Documents” – so we can only give an extract here. This passage suggests the approach the new Bishops should take when faced with the thorny relationships between Blacks, Whites and Coloureds.*

June 27<sup>th</sup>, 1850

...When you arrive in your dioceses, your own wisdom and the grace of the episcopacy will help you to take a particular approach when dealing with the Governors and the many administrative pit-falls. I think that if you follow the general recommendations given below, you will obtain the desired results.

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<sup>1</sup> N.D.XII, pp. 281-286 (The whole document is pp. 245-286)

<sup>2</sup> See Index of persons for notes on these three Bishops.

- As the Governors have all the powers of the Head of State and outrank the Bishops,<sup>1</sup> it is only right in everyday relations that you cede honour and show them every consideration in a fitting way. If this is done with the dignity and decorum as befits a bishop, it will be well received by the Governors.
- While safeguarding all the rights of your spiritual authority, it is perhaps better not to insist on issues which only affect us indirectly and at a distance and which are of minimal importance.
- As far as possible, foresee any conflicts that may arise and be on your guard, so that you do not provoke the Governor into taking steps which are beyond his own remit.
- If the Governor finds himself in such a position, look for ways of offering him an escape route which he can take without compromising himself and, as far as possible, try to give the impression that you had not noticed it.
- If you take a moderate line in the way you deal with questions of lesser importance and consequence, you will maintain a harmonious relationship and work things out in an amicable manner.
- In this way, you will gain his esteem through friendly relations and kind consideration while at the same time maintaining the dignity of the Episcopal state.

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<sup>1</sup> Only the Governor outranked the Bishop; the Director of the Interior came after him. However, the latter also had to be shown some deference because it was he who related directly to the clergy and their attitude was often quite authoritarian. There were fixed rules laid down regarding procedures when the Governor or other high authorities came to the church.

Forgive me for informing you of things that you surely know so much better than I do. But I felt it would be useful to draw them to your attention because they can be fraught with danger.

Another thorny problem you will be faced with is the political and social situation in these countries. As soon as you arrive, the factions will be scrutinising every step you take. I have already had the honour of explaining to you the susceptibilities which exist between these two groups, Black and White. They will anxiously examine your every move: if one of them gets the impression that you are favouring the other, you will have a lot of problems ahead for you. But I am sure that the Holy Spirit will guide you.

There are two lines of conduct you might follow. The first would be to give the impression to both parties that you are on their side. This would be extremely difficult or even impossible. First of all, it would not be honest, and even if you did decide to follow it, it would be impossible to maintain. Sooner or later, circumstances would arise where your conduct would reveal a preference for one side or the other, so things would then be worse than ever. On the other hand, you might opt for neutrality. But even if this path is more rational and priestly, there could still be great difficulties. Everybody would rightly feel that this is the line a bishop or priest should take; but in practice, with the violent passions which exist in the colonies, nobody listens to the voice of reason. Each faction would want the Bishop to back them and oppose their adversaries.

The current positions of both parties would give them a certain justification for their attitudes. The Blacks have justice and religion on their side. They have justice because they are so poor and helpless; as such, they have every right to expect sympathy and support from the representative of Jesus-Christ and his Gospel. The Whites, with their power, pride and spirit of domination, will expect the Bishop to be an ally. He is also

somebody of high rank and position in society, so they will feel that he should come to their help to maintain the aristocracy and good order. But by "good order", they mean a return to the status quo before emancipation, when they believed that Blacks existed for their sole advantage. Now their interests and power have been severely curtailed and this trend will continue. But far from being resigned to this, they are working passionately for the re-establishment of all they have lost. They are blind and have abandoned all reason, so they will expect the Bishop to be one of them.

Despite these difficulties, it is this second line of impartiality that should be adopted, so we must now look at the exact way in which it should be followed. I see three possibilities:

- 1) The first would be to take up a clear and well-defined position as soon as you arrive and make sure that it is well understood. This way has the advantage of leaving no doubt in people's minds from the start and thus closes the door on attempts by one or other of the parties to win over the Bishop exclusively to their side. But this approach has something rigid about it and could easily become unacceptable after a time. Passions are strong and inflexibility could easily upset both parties, especially the Whites. Their keyed up minds would scrutinise each word used and conclude that the Bishop was veering towards the opposing party. So for me, this declaration of principles would seem to be a dangerous way of proceeding.
- 2) The second possibility would be the opposite: make no initial statement of intent, but make one's mind known by one's style of life, by conversations with individuals or when men from one or other of the parties raise matters relating to the question. This procedure would be adequate when ordinary difficulties arise; but the colonies are in an exceptional or abnormal state and

their problems are extraordinary. Uncertainty about the ideas of the Bishop could easily produce a deep anxiety in the minds of the people. They could conclude that they are surrounded by all sorts of intrigues and this might lead to unrest.

- 3) The third possibility would be to present yourself, on arrival, as the representative of Jesus Christ, coming amongst them with the love of our Saviour for all his children and a deep concern for the whole flock. You would talk in gospel terms of your mission and of your plans to devote yourself to the service of the country and its inhabitants, leaving them with the impression that you will never get involved in any political questions. However, your attitude to the questions that have arisen should become evident through your gospel-inspired language and behaviour. You must always be the man of God who walks the path of peace and charity, so essential to your eminent position. You should be able to maintain this approach for several months, because people will realise that you have only arrived recently and are not yet familiar with the state of the country. After a few months, they will have learnt what kind of man you are in your conduct and ideas, so they will be slow to make wrong judgements about you and some will have developed a certain affection for you. If difficult questions are raised in your presence, you will be able to withhold your opinion because you are a newcomer.

Treat the Whites with honour and consideration according to their rank and social position. If they talk of the state to which they have been reduced, you can show your sympathy without giving the impression that you approve of slavery, because this would not be worthy of a Bishop. Remain independent on this question of rights as well as on the fact of abolition.

If a Black wants to speak to you, welcome him with the tenderness of a father. In this case, the tone of your conversation will be simpler. Such conversations will rarely be embarrassing: these are very good children who are talking to their father, so they must be treated as such.

In relating to a coloured person or a friend of the black people, relate to them according to their rank and position in society, remembering that they too can be very sensitive because of their ambiguous position. You can tell them that you are greatly interested in the black people, that you will take particular care of them and work to do everything possible to improve the religious instruction and human development of these poor children.

I think it is very important that you think deeply about all these questions and that you consult reliable men who know the colonies well, but who are without prejudice or allegiance to either of these parties. It is equally important to be clear in your mind before departure as to how you will conduct yourselves when faced with these important questions. Right from the start, you will be called on to reply to different formal addresses. Some will be in the name of everybody, but others will be on behalf of one or other party. You must be ready for such events, because your replies will be published the following day in newspapers of different political leanings. Remember that the word of a Bishop will be considered much more important than in France, because these addresses will contain at least allusions to disputed matters.