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05. The key to educating young Africans

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The key to educating young Africans

To Father Chevalier, Principal of the school at Dakar¹

In this letter, Libermann is giving Chevalier good pedagogical advice, to help him set up his educational establishment for young Senegalese students. It is necessary to read the letter to the end, in order to judge the sense of certain expressions which could seem unjustifiably critical of the Africans. What Libermann is saying is that all people of every race have their characteristic faults and the message of the Gospel purifies them.

23 November 1847

My very dear Confrere,

I am taking this opportunity to write you a short letter. Because of the amount of correspondence I have to get through at this moment, I cannot write at greater length.

The letter you wrote to Father Boulanger has given us all much pleasure and encouragement. I hope your young students will benefit from the ordered life they are now leading. Above all, try to develop their characters in the best possible way by giving them a really good education. Bring out the good in them, and correct what is not so attractive. Encourage the development of any activity and potential that you may find in them.

Please understand, that by "correction" I do not mean any form of repression. I do not expect you to be rebuking them all the time; rather, I hope you will use wisely every possible

¹ N. D. IX, pp. 359-361

means to help them overcome what is defective, without making them fall into other faults of character in the process. That happens so often if correction is given in the wrong way. I am very pleased with the way you are doing things. It agrees completely with the idea that I have of the depth of character of these students and their needs and inclinations.

I believe that we strengthen the character of these good children. We must give them a pride in themselves and bring them to appreciate the liberty and equality that they share with all the children of God. We must banish any idea of inferiority from their minds, because that will only increase their natural weakness and lower their self-esteem. That would be a terrible thing to happen! Once they understand and are fully convinced that they are in no way inferior to the Europeans as regards their natural talents, it seems to me that their zeal for the salvation and advancement of their fellow Africans can only increase. I believe this is so, because when they realise that their compatriots can, and must be, on a par with Europeans¹ as regards intelligence and nobility of soul, they will not fail to feel the deepest and most compelling desire to raise themselves up. If, as a result of your efforts, there appears among them some person of energy, with a lively faith, generosity and intelligence, who can tell what great good they will achieve?

You are doing a very important work so try to carry it out with dedication and wisdom. Study in depth the character of the Africans, their mental calibre and their way of doing things. Do not judge them superficially: that is what we get from those

¹ Libermann was no great admirer of the Europeans involved in trade on the African coast. By "Europeans" here he must mean the missionaries coming from Europe, who have acquired, by their education and formation, a certain elevation of soul and intellectual development.

who only see what is on the surface and, unfortunately, that is how many people in the world react to them.

Looked at superficially, they are people who are abandoned to all that is vicious in their nature and they have no means of raising themselves up out of that sorry state. But if you were to take a successful man, for example, who had fallen into the depths of depravity, and then wash the mud from his face, bind his wounds, clean him up and give him good food and new clothes, you would find you are dealing with a fine man. The very look on his face will have changed completely.

However, be on your guard against a premature optimism; don't be too quick to jump to conclusions but be realistic in your assessment. The character of the Africans, just like the Europeans, has its shortcomings as well; but it is compensated by other qualities. So make sure that your judgement is not superficial. You would do well to have in-depth discussions on this whole subject with the bishop. Meet him often, tell him what you have seen and heard and listen carefully to what he has to say. He is more gifted than all of you by nature and by grace, because of his long experience of men and the special gifts that he has received from God because of the responsibility that has been given to him.

Please tell Father Gallais¹ and Father Durand² that I could not write because I was suddenly taken ill. But assure them that they are not forgotten.

Yours in Jesus and Mary,

F. Libermann
Priest of the Holy Heart of Mary

¹ See Index of Names

² See Index of Names