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THE INTENTIONS OF VENERABLE FRANCIS LIBERMANN

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Introduction:

The following reflection is an attempt at a personal appropriation of the second founder's goal, namely the so-called *oeuvre des noirs* and how it could be understood in the context of contemporary developments. We are living at a time and under conditions unforeseen by Francis Libermann. The call for renewal that defines the Church of Vatican II has implications for the thoughts of Libermann as well. On the tombstone of Bishop Joseph Shanahan at the Holy Trinity Basilica at Onitsha is inscribed this epitaph from the Letter to the Hebrews: "*Remember your leaders, who preached the word of God to you, and as you reflect on the outcome of their lives, take their faith as model*" (Hebr. 13: 7).

I came to know Venerable Francis Mary Paul Libermann through the Irish missionaries of the Spiritan Congregation he led. This intrepid band of men descended on Eastern Nigeria braving the inclement ecological conditions of Nigeria at the beginning of the twentieth century. They were passionately driven by their zeal to achieve the goal of the founder of their Congregation. They were led and inspired by the now Servant of God Joseph Shanahan. The achievement of these missionaries of the first hour, namely the establishment of the church in Eastern Nigeria, a church that has not only produced many missionaries for the universal church but is the home of Blessed Cyprian Iwene Tansi and a curial cardinal, certainly questions Libermann's scepticism about the Irish temperament's availability for mission. He is reported to have observed: "The Irish are not generous enough to renounce everything to the extent that is necessary for our vocation."¹

While I was in the Junior Seminary, the biography of Libermann written by Helen Walker Homan, *Star of Jacob. The story of Venerable Francis Libermann* (1953), was read during meals in the refectory. In this biography a lot of emphasis was placed on what was called *l'Oeuvre des Noirs*. What was this *Oeuvre* that fired the imagination and informed the Herculean labours of these early missionaries? Whatever it turns out to be, it was the motive force that drove many of them to an early death on the West African coast which, because of malaria fever, was then dubbed "the white man's grave."

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Meaning Not Lost in Translation

The term, however, bristles with exegetical and hermeneutical difficulties. A few examples taken from the writings of the members of, and/or sympathizers with, his Congregation suffice as evidence for this observation. If the authors fail to agree on Libermann's intention, then evidently there will be a problem in executing their founder's primary insight. Homan in her imaginative but historical biography mentioned above left the phrase in the French original untranslated. Bernard Kelly² translated it as "the Work for the Blacks". Joseph D'Ambrosio, when translating Arsène Aubert's retreat booklet, *Coping with the Darkness* (2006), into English renders it as "Project for the Blacks."³ But Rogath Kimaryo, in the title of his book, denotes it as "Project of the Blacks."⁴ Left in its French original, we may perhaps have no ambiguity about the founder's intention; in English, however, the prepositions "of" and "for" make a world of difference. What was Libermann's intention? Did he undertake a "work" or a "project"? Was it to be "for" or "of" the Blacks? In other words, are we to understand a task conceived in Europe by whites for the well-being of the Blacks outside the European Continent? Libermann himself co-ordinated operations without ever travelling to the southern hemisphere. Or was it a service thought out for the Blacks to carry out by and for themselves for the good of their race? The originators, Tisserant and Le Vavasseur, for instance, went back to the Blacks to implement the conception. This lack of clarity needs further exploration if a hermeneutic of suspicion is to be avoided in its ultimate understanding. Hence a background analysis would offer us some light.

Sources of Libermann's Compassion for the Blacks

In the first place, Libermann's concern for the Blacks was not original with him. He was recruited to the cause by two diverse creoles from Atlantic and Indian Ocean islands, who approached him because of his apparent leadership qualities. The two creoles were convinced that he was well equipped to organize and give direction to an idea that had occurred to them: to recruit missionaries who were generous enough to bring the Gospel of freedom and human dignity to their fellow Blacks. The Gospel message would, they were convinced, fashion self-esteem, confidence and self-respect for the liberated slaves in the islands of Haiti and Reunion. These people had lost a sense of self-esteem and of meaning in their humanity as a result of their slavery experience.

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Francis Liebermann's own life-experience had eminently endowed him with appropriate credentials, namely the solidarity in suffering which would enable him to spearhead this proposal. Like Jesus, his Jewish brother and the supreme high priest, as presented in the reflection of the writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* (4: 15), Liebermann, not unlike the Blacks, was no stranger to being marginalised and sidelined. In leading the crusade to reconquer the Blacks' humanity, he would be bringing to bear the social teaching of the church. What was happening to a part of humanity was not what should be.

Clearly, on the one hand, the fate of the Blacks immediately found echo in his personal experience. He knew what it meant to be abandoned. As a Jew he was brought up in the history of the Hebrew suffering in Egypt. As a Jew living in France during an anti-Semitic period of French history, he had the experience of ghetto exclusion. As a Jewish convert to Catholicism, he had been disowned by his own father who was a rabbi. He aspired to join the Catholic priesthood but he was rejected because of his epilepsy. He thus saw the Blacks' situation as reflective of his own personal experience; he found solidarity with this desolate situation as presented to him by both creoles, Eugene Tisserant and Le Vavas seur.

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On the other hand, his Jewish upbringing and his earlier rabbinical studies had imbued him with a sense of the dignity of man. Without doubt, the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the anthropology of Psalm 8, understand man as, in the words of Houston Smith, a "blend of dust and divinity";⁵ there is even a rabbinic saying that when a man or woman walks down the road an invisible choir of angels go before shouting, "Make way, make way! Make way for the image of God".⁶ His study as a rabbinical acolyte of the medieval teacher of Judaism, Moses Maimonides, (see his *The Guide for the Perplexed*), must have imbued him with the ultimate purpose of Judaism's mysteries namely, and in the words of the chief rabbi of Britain and the Commonwealth, Jonathan Sacks, "to honour the image of God in other people, and thus turn the world into a home for the divine presence."⁷

The task of the rabbi, which he had aspired to become, according to R. Hayyim of Brisk, the greatest Talmudist of the late nineteenth century is: "To redress the grievances of those who are abandoned and alone, to protect the dignity of the poor, and to save the oppressed from the hand of the oppressor."⁸ In his study titled *Francis Liebermann's Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John*,⁹ Michael Cahill undertook to examine the influences

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his rabbinical studies had in his attitude when he became a Catholic and a Founder of a Christian religious Congregation. Without a doubt, Libermann's rabbinical background convinced him that even the Blacks were embodiments of the image of God. He did not, as a convert to Catholicism, leave behind his Jewish convictions about Yahweh's compassion for the poor and oppressed. It is therefore correct to affirm that his interest in the situation of the Blacks was informed by a crusading ambition to reassure them of their dignity as images of God. How was this task to be achieved?

Distinguish Two Types of Blacks: The Enslaved and the Free.

I mentioned at the very beginning of this discourse that I learnt about Francis Libermann through the work of the band of Irish missionaries led by Bishop Joseph Shanahan. Evidently, his success is traceable to the gigantic school system which he set in place. He further developed the missionary strategy of the first French missionaries of Alsace from whom he took over the mantle of leadership.¹⁰ He realized what freedom meant for the Igbo people, the *Ndi nwe obodo*, that is, "the owners of the land." Slaves had no rights as encased in the Igbo name, *Obuabunwa*.¹¹ Without having comprehended the Igbo cultural disdain for the slaves, the original French Spiritans were frustrated by the lack of success of their effort to found a local church on the foundation of the slaves they had ransomed with aid of the subsidies from the Vatican. Shanahan, popularly known as "Onye ishi", "the chief" or the "commander" had penetrated the psyche of the Igbo social hierarchy, discovered the Igbo disdain for enslaved people, their fierce defense of their freedom and their love for the "white man's knowledge." As a result, he decided to build the schools to give them the white man's knowledge, and hopefully in the schools to gain converts to Christianity.

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Since the elders felt that they could not abandon the traditional religion of their ancestors, they encouraged Bishop Shanahan to start with their children. So zealous for knowledge were the Igbos that they built the schools and asked Shanahan to provide the teachers. Informed by this insight, he found the key, the Archimedean screw to win both the *ndi nwe obodo* of the Igbos and the liberated slaves, ostracised as *obuabunwa*. In the schools both the freeborn and the slaves would sit side by side, learn together, develop friendships through interaction and in that way grow up together as free citizens of a new Nigeria. With this conviction, Shanahan had no crisis of conscience in diverting

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the subsidy sent from Rome to building schools.¹² Under him, these schools have now become a melting pot for every child without discrimination. In his last testament regarding the projected book on his mission activity in Nigeria, he insisted that the book above all must report “about the schools, especially about the schools.”¹³

It would seem that Shanahan, through his option for the medium of the schools, effectively gave Libermann’s intention a concrete embodiment. Namely, it is through education that the blacks were to rediscover their self-confidence and existential meaning. Some Igbo village elders on the outskirts of Onitsha clearly rebuffed Shanahan’s effort to convert them to Christianity. His evangelical program did not seem to have impressed them. They told him that they wanted his school but not his religion. “We have our own God”, they assured him. That signalled a turning point in Shanahan’s missionary strategy. His Episcopal motto was: “*Domine, ut videam*”. In the resistance of the Igbo elders to his proselytizing efforts and in their preference for the school, he saw the light he sought from the Lord. It was through the schools that he eventually broke the native resistance. Not only did he gain the youth of the land but brought freedom to the slaves. It was through his schools that the erstwhile despised slaves attained self-respect and became respected and respectable members of public polity. Because of the knowledge they acquired in the schools they could now be consulted as resource persons; they could henceforth vote and be voted for in society without discrimination. Through the intelligence displayed by their academic laurels and technical achievements exhibited in the structures they erected, they no longer were regarded as second-class citizens to be deployed in the service of the gods and their shrines. Every office in the land was open to them. His foresight in building the schools made it possible for Igboland to provide for the colonial power a large source of its educated man-power and the elite group that tried to secede as Biafra from Nigeria on the basis of the “Ahiara Declaration”, one which, in many ways, rivals America’s document of the declaration of independence from Britain.

A Contemporary Model of Libermann's Vision of the Blacks

Libermann, *mutatis mutandis*, wanted through the preaching of the Gospel to achieve for Africans the same sense of belonging and equality as Europeans enjoyed in Europe. Thus the white man’s cynicism and abuse of African humanhood would be seen

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for what it was, namely racial prejudice. Rephrasing the campaign slogan of President Obama, Libermann would unapologetically concur with: “Yes, Africans can!” Shanahan, through the schools, prepared the blacks in his mission territory to shoulder that responsibility.

The *Negro Spirituals* sung among the African Americans in their Christian assemblies had imbued them with the hope of deliverance from the slavery and oppression orchestrated by the white slave owners. Their trust in the God of the Exodus, about whom they learnt in the Bible readings, fed them with hope. “We Shall Overcome Some Day”, they confidently sang. It was in the spirit of this Bible reading that Obama based his book, *The Audacity of Hope*. His election to the highest political office in the land cannot but be seen otherwise than as the response of the Yahweh of the *Spirituals* to the cry of despair surging heavenwards from the black population. Libermann’s letters of instructions bear witness to the faith he reposed on the capability of the Blacks:

Inspire them with self-respect. Help them to understand that they are free; help them appreciate this freedom – the beauty of the freedom and equality which they share with all the children of God. Try to remove from their minds any idea of inferiority. This would exacerbate their natural weakness and give them a low self-image.

*...they will be...inspired
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own people.*

Once they come to realize that they are in no way inferior by nature to Europeans, when they become convinced in a practical experiential way, in the depths of their souls, they will be all the more inspired to work for the salvation and advancement of their own people . If they come to be convinced that their own race can and will become equal to Europeans as regards development of the mind, they will be inspired to rescue their people from the sad condition they are in.

Make a study and penetrate into the character, the mentality and the basic attitudes of the black people. Avoid judging them by outward appearances. This leads to superficial judgments that led many astray... there is no doubt the Africans have their faults, just as the Europeans have theirs. They have their strong points too, like the Europeans have [ND IX, 359f].¹⁴

...there would be no more racial abuse and injustice.

The tone of Libermann's instruction would today give the impression of condescension. The *Sitz-im-Leben* of his time warranted it. If Europeans could teach Africans, he calculated, the educated Africans would then pass on their enlightenment to their fellows. Then there would be no more racial abuse and injustice nor the oppression of one race by another. The Messianic times would have been realised.

Elsewhere he writes:

*Those who have a low opinion of themselves and who have no grasp of their dignity nor of the destiny to which they are called cannot have the determination to advance. Their minds must be enlightened, their hearts and wills strengthened by what the faith teaches regarding their origin and destiny.*¹⁵

...would see this plan as a version of...colonial arrogance...

Thus he exhibited a strong faith in the African's capability to be master of his own destiny if given the chance to perform. He thought this was possible if only the African was well educated in European ways. Hence he proposed to the Vatican the worthwhileness of bringing some African clerics to Europe to be educated and then to be sent back to educate their own people. In a sense some African nationalists today would see this plan as a version of the colonial arrogance enshrined in their self-given task of showing the Blacks how human life is to be lived, the so-called "white man's burden," the colonial policy of the British or to "moralise" *the noble savages*,¹⁶ as the French articulated it. The Africans resisted this colonial imposition of an alien interpretation of human life. But what could their bows and arrows do against the lethal sophistication of the European machine guns and their ideological battery represented by their schools? One of the early missionaries, commenting on some missionaries' arrogant attitude at least warned against such an assumption. Africa before the Europeans arrived was not a *tabula rasa*. In a reflection in his journal entry of November 1947 at Kalimoni, Kenya we read: "*I have sent you 'to reap that in which you did not labour' – a very useful subject of remembrance for all who may think that the salvation of Africa has only begun on their arrival in the Continent.*"¹⁷

The True African.

It is certainly very important for understanding Libermann's intentions to lay crucial emphasis on the specific type of the

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Blacks which Libermann's plan presupposed, involved, and to which it was designed to respond. He was concerned with the Blacks of the Diaspora, those who had been robbed of their self-confidence and their self-esteem by the experience of slavery. The Blacks of mainland Africa who had not been exposed to white slavery activity were fiercely proud of their freedom in spite of the disruptive influence of colonialism; they still maintained a certain element of self confidence and tended to bring up their offspring on indigenous models of what it meant to be a human being. The Igbo, for example, educated their people to embody the ideal of the *Dimkpa*, namely a master of one's destiny. With Robert Bolt we might say, "a man for all seasons."

The *Dimkpa* was a person who knew how to cope in face of the unexpected, in hours of tragedy. Anyone who has gone through tests and trials without bowing his head became, in their hierarchy of anthropological values, a *Nwoke teghete*, namely "nine times a man." The emergence of Obama as president of the United States would qualify him for that honorific title. Obama was encouraged by the gospel messages of such pastors as Martin Luther King Junior and his own (now former) pastor in Chicago. In campaigning and winning the presidency of the world's largest economy and military power against considerable discriminatory odds, he displayed the type of courage and confidence which existed among Africans long before the colonial and slavery episodes of Africa's history. It is this model of self-confidence which Libermann did not know, but which he was intending for the blacks as his *oeuvre des noirs*. He did not and does not want Africans to be black-skinned Europeans. He was convinced that his goal for the Blacks could and would be achieved through education and by handing on the Catholic faith that moves mountains.

This...brings us back to our initial question.

This inference brings us back to our initial question. How do we understand Libermann's motive in founding his missionary Congregation: *l'Oeuvre des Noirs*? It is clear that both interpretations at the beginning of this discourse have a legitimacy of reciprocity. At its conception, it was the work which Europeans undertook to help the Blacks regain self-confidence after the psychological and cultural ravages of slavery experience. Therefore it was a project *for* the Blacks. That is why he asked that Blacks be trained in Europe and then later to be sent home to their Continent as was the case with Tisserant and Le Vavas seur. At its maturity, the project has become the work *of* the Blacks, namely for all the African members of his

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Congregation. Perhaps, this explains partially why vocations have dried up in Europe. Europeans consider their work of forming Africans to have been completed. Africans are now missionaries to themselves as Pope Paul VI urged.¹⁸ We have been enriched by our European contact. It is now left to the African genius and insight to creatively deploy with wisdom our twofold heritage – foreign and indigenous – to the benefit of our people and of the global human community.

Further Reflections.

The above exposition raises further questions. Our Church today lives from the teaching of Vatican II. This Council recommends a threefold criteria for the renewal of Religious Congregations. We are not only to return to the original insights of the Founders; we are to be sensitive to the signs of the times and, above all, we are to embody the spirit of Jesus of the Gospel. Nobody doubts that reflections on ecclesiology and missiology have not remained static since the days of Liebermann. Neither has the situation of the Blacks marked time. The question arises as to whether, in the context of post-Liebermann developments and of all we have come to accept as true and valid today, Liebermann's concept of *l'oeuvre des noirs* still has legitimacy in the twenty-first century. Today, mission is said to be everywhere. Mobility and globalization define our historic epoch. Church is communion and solidarity. The secular notion of interdependence has become a working theorem for church people as well. The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican urges us to think of the church as the pilgrim people of God. Recently in the year of Saint Paul we were reminded of why he rebuked the nascent Corinthian community for its party spirit and clique mentality. In his letters to both the Ephesians and the Galatians he unfolds the great mystery hidden from the beginning of creation; namely that in Christ the wall of division has been broken down. Since the former wall of separation erected between Jew and Gentile, between Greek and barbarian has been erased, do we still have to continue to rebuild the fictive, and speculative "Berlin Wall" between Europeans and Africans within our one Congregation? Is paternalism to continue to define the relations of the whites to the blacks in the one Christian community? Is it really convenient, even for administrative purposes within the Spiritan Congregation to fragment personnel into provinces and circumscriptions based on place of origin? How should we today understand the Congregation's original motto: *Cor Unum et Anima una?*

Endnotes

- ¹S. Farragher, *Père Leman*, Dublin: 1988, p. 87 as cited in D. Forristal, *The Second burial of Bishop Shanahan*, Dublin: 1990, p.16
- ²B. Kelly, *Life Began at Forty: The Second Conversion of Francis Libermann*, Dublin: 1983, p.69.
- ³A. Aubert, *Coping With the Darkness*, Dublin: 2006, p.xi.
- ⁴R. F. Kimaryo, *Venerable Fr. Francis Libermann's "Project of the Blacks": Challenges facing the African missionary*. Nairobi: 2005, title page.
- ⁵H. Smith, *The world's Religions*. San Francisco: 1991. p. 280.
- ⁶Smith, p.281
- ⁷J. Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*. London: 2005, p. 4.
- ⁸Sacks, p.5.
- ⁹M. Cahill, *Francis Libermann's Commentary on the gospel of St. John: An Investigation of the Rabbinical and French School Influences*. Dublin: 1987.
- ¹⁰See P B Clarke, *The methods and ideology of the Holy Ghost Fathers in Eastern Nigeria, 1885-1905*, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, VI (Issue 2,1974), pp 81-108
- ¹¹L. Mbefo, *The True African: Impulses to Self-Affirmation*. Enugu: 1996.
- ¹²J. P. Jordan, *Bishop Shanahan of Southern Nigeria*. Dublin: 1949. pp. 84-85.
- ¹³Jordan p, 245
- ¹⁴Cited in C. Burke, *Morality and Mission: Francis Libermann & Slavery (1840-1850)*. p, 88.
- ¹⁵In Burke, p,90
- ¹⁶Kelly, Passim. See also the account of the Negro situation in H. W. Homan, *Ven. Francis Libermann: Star of Jacob*. Bickley: 1953, p.272 ff.
- ¹⁷C. Gogan, *M.G.M: The Spiritans in Nairobi 1899 – 1999*. Nairobi: 1998, p. 10.
- ¹⁸*The African today*, The Pope speaks, XIII-XIV (1968-1970), pp.214-220.