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Creole Mission in the Footsteps of Blessed Jacques Desire Laval

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CREOLE MISSION IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF BLESSED JACQUES DESIRE LAVAL

Introduction

“Our life is paved with hopelessness
As we tread highways of darkness
Your finger points to Jesus our Way
His Light beams a promising new day
Laval, His face, help us to recognize
May His presence not escape our eyes.”
(Jocelyn Gregoire (1991): « Laval Ed Nou. » Audio Cassette :
Père Laval Dis Nous Comment. Mauritius : Ste. Croix.)

My dear confrere Jacques Desiré Laval,
In the summer of 1841, after twenty one days of excruciating travel on board “*Le Tanjora*” (Farragher, 2007), you became the very first Spiritan missionary sent by Venerable Francis Libermann to have left your native Normandy and set foot on Ile de France. In your heart was a deep love for Jesus Christ and an incredible zeal to set free from any spiritual bondage the captive black slaves of the colony among whom, unbeknownst to you, were my ancestors. You knew them as your ‘poor Blacks’ with whom you spent your entire life being the doctor of their souls (Bernier, 1978; Michel, 1976). Your missionary zeal, the sanctity of your life, and your genuine eagerness to win as many souls as you possibly could for Jesus Christ were so wondrous that they won you the title of Apostle of Mauritius and led the Church to beatify you in 1979.

As you can observe from where you are, Ile de France has surrendered its name to Mauritius and is often lauded as one of the few African countries with continuous economic success as well as peaceful co-existence among its multiracial, multiethnic citizens. However, behind the appearance of success, is a record of slavery, marginalization, and discrimination, especially against the descendents of your “poor and dear Blacks” (Lecuyer, 1978, p.43), the Creole community. Today, the population of Mauritius is comprised of 51% of people of Indian origin, 27% of Creole, 17% of Muslim, 3% of Chinese, and 2% of White (Harmon, 2008). The constitution of Mauritius names and formally recognizes three groups of people: individuals of Indian origin, or the Hindus, individuals who are Muslim, and individuals who are Chinese. In this same document, though, the Creole are non-existent, classified instead as “General Population,” which is a conglomerate group of ‘every person who does not appear, from

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his way of life, to belong to one or other of those [previously listed] three communities' (The Constitution of the Republic of Mauritius, 1992).

Creole Reality

Even though there is no historical evidence that you could have been interested in the political life of the Mauritian society during the 23 years you toiled there, I nevertheless dare to assume that you will be happy to know that a little more than one hundred years after you left for the Father's home, Mauritius became an independent nation, thus breaking loose from the yoke of British occupation. Proudly we can brag about the fact that since the dawn of its Independence on March 12, 1968, the Island has risen from the ashes of an underdeveloped country to become one of the most successful developed nations within the African continent. However, during that process, the Creole community seems to have been left behind by the high speed train of social, economical, political and academic development. Among the various components of the Mauritian nation, the Creole can be considered as the poorest of all. It would seem that the social, political, economic, academic and even spiritual landscape of the Creole community still parallels the situation of the "80,000 forsaken (Blacks)" to whom you dedicated your apostolic work from 1841 through 1864 (Michel, 1988; p. 19). Indeed, it is within this community that we find today the highest number of drug addicts, prostitutes, academic failures, HIV/AIDS, jailed men and women, squatters and street children. The population of the Catholic Church in Mauritius is mainly Creole -- something that has not changed since your time -- and even though the Church is very much involved in both primary and secondary levels of education in Mauritius, yet, only a little few of its Creole members have access to these schools. Most of the Creole children fail their basic primary education, which explains the high rate of illiteracy within the Creole community.

Feeling of forsakenness

I am sure that, on account of your own personal experience with the forsaken Blacks of your time you will empathically understand why there is among the Creole community a feeling of being abandoned by politicians and the government in general, by the Catholic Church, by the private sector, and by their own fellow middle-class Creole. The Creole feel that they have been forsaken by politicians and the government in general. Out of twenty-two ministers, only three Creoles have a ministerial portfolio in today's government. They feel forsaken by the church of which they are the majority. The chances for

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most of our children to enroll in a Catholic primary or secondary school are very lean. They feel forsaken by the private sector, which for economic or even political reasons has preferred to give more support to the other components of the Mauritian community, namely the Hindus. They feel forsaken by their own fellow middle-class Creole who have chosen to immigrate instead of staying behind to help make a difference. Most of the jobs associated with Creole genius are facing extinction and thus point to a gradual genocide of the Creole community, since the job market for the Mauritius of the future will require candidates with university degrees, something that is very scarce among the Creole.

Evangelization

Following in your footsteps, I left Mauritius in 1989 to embark on a missionary adventure that would have me work in Papua New Guinea for nearly seven years. There I ministered to the tribal people and learned the art of communicating the Word of God in simple, colorful language in order to make it come alive in their own language and culture. At the same time, I was gradually awakened to the fact that from the beginning of French colonization until the nineteen sixties, the liturgical celebrations in Mauritius, such as the mass and the sacraments, were mostly done in Latin. While you had set the tone with your creation of a *Little Catechism* in the Creole language that your “poor blacks” could easily understand (Delaplace, 1932; Michel, 1988), no one seems to have picked up the momentum you set. As of today, apart from some isolated initiatives by some priests and lay people, neither the Bible nor the basic catechetical literature for faith instruction has ever been translated into Creole. You will be surprised to learn that when the ecumenical council of Vatican II opened the doors for the use of the vernacular in the celebration of the liturgies, the Roman Catholic Church in Mauritius opted for the French language instead of Creole, which was spoken and understood by all of her congregants. The Creole Catholics had to listen to Sunday sermons and homilies, attempt to read the Word of God, pray and worship, and be catechized all in a language that was foreign to them. As you can surely imagine, to most Creole people, Latin and French are foreign languages that have been barriers to faith literacy, since a large majority of its members cannot read or write with proficiency.

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Session Gregoire

Drawing heavily on your missionary approach that targeted the adults and the insight you had about the use of Creole language in your apostolic works among the Blacks in Mauritius (Michel,

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1988), I started in 1996 an evangelization program which is commonly referred to as “*session Gregoire*.” It can be visualized as a three-phased catechumenal journey towards a greater knowledge, appreciation and intimacy with the Holy Trinity, the Catholic Church and the world. It takes its inspiration from the final commissions of Jesus to his disciples in the Synoptic Gospels which can be succinctly outlined thus:

Phase 1: Mark 16, 15: “*Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel.*”

What is that Gospel or Good News that we have to proclaim to the people of Mauritius, more particularly to the Creole who make up the large majority of the Catholic population? It is the Good News of freedom and liberty that has been won for them through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is a Gospel that frees them from their fears, their sins and oppression. It is the proclamation of the Good News that they are children of God endowed with the dignity of priest, prophet, and king, heirs of a Spirit that frees them from the grip of sorcerers, charms, hexes, curses, witchcraft, and other spiritual bondage.

Phase 2: Matthew 28, 19-20: “*Go ... and make disciples of all nations... teaching them...*”

After the Good News of freedom from fear and bondage has been proclaimed, people need to encounter the author of their liberation – Jesus Christ. An anthropological study done in 1990 arrived at a very disturbing conclusion that, because of their practices and the way they relate to God, the Creole in Mauritius would be shocked to learn that they are not fully Catholic (Zimmermann, 1995). Through storytelling, Scripture reading, sermons and homilies I taught them about God being a God of love, who sent His only son Jesus Christ to redeem us and to give us new life in the Holy Spirit. We are freed by Jesus Christ who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life and in whose Name we have the power to conquer our fears and break away from evil’s bondage.

Phase 3: Luke 24, 48: “*You are witnesses of these things.*”

Once the sense of freedom has been acquired and a genuine encounter with Jesus Christ has been made, those touched cannot help but witness to their newfound life and renewed faith. Family life starts changing for the better and people are not afraid to talk about their faith to members of their family, colleagues and friends, or even to testify publicly about their relationship with Jesus and the Church in the media. What once was taboo and practiced secretly as the “religion of the night” (Zimmerman,

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1990) is denounced openly and publicly by former practitioners in the aim of convincing those who are still involved in occult practices to reconvert their life to Jesus Christ. It is also during this phase that eyes are opened to issues of social justice and the need for Christians to take a preferential option for the poor and most vulnerable members of our Mauritian society.

Session's Format

Typically, all “sessions” have a three evening, three hour and three stage format consisting of praise and worship in the first hour, preaching and teaching in the second hour, and individual testimonies in the last hour. They are held on a site, a village or area in a parish with the explicit authorization of the parish priest. While the principle of getting a pastor’s permission to hold a session can be lauded as a “best practice” in terms of boundary respect and reverence of church authority, it also has its drawbacks. Most of the requests for a session come from lay people who either have been to one of my sessions or who have had someone witness to them about a session and the change that he or she experienced because of participation in it. When they contact my office to schedule a session, they are always sent back to their parish priest in order to get his approval for me to come and hold a session in his parish. Unfortunately, most priests who refuse to authorize a session in their parish seem to overlook these facts:

- Laypeople are taking responsibility for their spiritual needs and are taking the necessary steps to have their faith be fed;
- The need to embark on this catechumenal journey is more necessary for the parishioners than for the parish priest per se;
- It costs the parish practically nothing to stage a session since the parishioners themselves take over the logistical and financial aspects of the session;
- Every session always brings a renewal in the life of the parishioner and thus in the life of the parish on which the parish priest can easily capitalize for his own pastoral plan;
- Involvement of the laity is very consequential and many people who normally are not even seen at the doorsteps of the parish church

commit their time, talents and energy in the preparation for the session;

- The sessions are normally held in areas within a parish where most of the poignant social evils, such as drugs, prostitution, abject poverty and gangs are nested.

I believe from where you are, dear confrere (and I will not be surprised to learn if you somehow have your hand in it), you must have witnessed that many lapsed Catholics are returning to the Church through participation in the session. The use of the Creole language contributed a lot to helping all those who participated to have a better understanding of their practice of the Catholic faith. Moreover, since 1986, I have been writing hymns in the Creole language based on biblical passages and the Psalms and have recorded and produced more than 130 songs to be used in the celebration of the liturgy and as media for catechism and evangelization. The response to this endeavor has been very positive, and there seems to be a rejuvenation of the faith and a better understanding among Creole Catholics of their relationship with God because they now can sing, worship, pray and enter into intimacy with Him in a language, music, and culture they know and are at ease with. Over time, as churches began to get overcrowded during the sessions, we had to move outside in the church's yard or utilize stadiums in order to accommodate the crowds.

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The Need to Incarnate the Gospel

The Creoles' journey to renewed faith and relationship with God and the Church through the sessions gradually became an evident success, which prompted Cardinal Jean Margéot to publicly declare, "Jocelyn, you have succeeded where for thirty some years we older priests have tried hard but have failed. Through your songs, you have put the Bible in Creole and placed the Creole into the Bible." As reassuring as those words may be, they also called for a further pursuit of the journey, which is well in line with the third phase of the evangelization process. The sessions in the different parts of the country brought me to a front-row encounter with poverty as it is being experienced and lived by a multitude of Creole families in areas infested by drugs, prostitution, academic failure, sexual abuse, economic and social deprivation. The peace and solace that most of these Creole families were taking out of the sessions also called for a concrete incarnation of the Gospel in their daily existence, much like you tried so hard to do in your time with them. From the bosom

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of the inhuman conditions in which practically most Creoles in Mauritius found themselves was emerging an agonizing cry for more social justice.

Thus, the consuming passion that is driving me to tread daily in the footsteps of Jesus also brought me to a confrontation with his whiplashing proclamation: “Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6, 20. NRSV). God once “observed the misery of (his) people who are in Egypt; ... heard their cry on account of their taskmasters” (Exodus 3, 7, NRSV) and called Moses to go and set his people free. Similarly, he observed the misery and heard the cry of my poor Creole ancestors on account of their slave masters, and sent you, Jacques Laval, to be an instrument of their deliverance. And today, in contemporary Mauritius, the certitude that the cry of the Creole is still being heard by the Lord and the pangs of their sufferings are known to Him, prompt me to realize that He has not disincarnated Himself from their daily life. As the divide between the haves and the have-nots is becoming more and more abysmal in Mauritius, I have no other choice than to push myself to take, in the name of Jesus, a stand for more social justice in favor of the poorest and most vulnerable members of our Mauritian society, in the same way you did for the 80,000 poor blacks despite the virulent oppositions you had to face from the white colonists and members of the clergy.

The Birth of the FCM and its Vision for the Creole

So, in September of 2007, I initiated the emergence of the Federation of Mauritian Creole (FCM) as a political voice and grassroots advocate for the Creole, working to increase public awareness of the community’s diverse economic and social problems. Since then, the *FCM* has engaged in numerous endeavors to advance consciousness of Creole issues, promote changes in governmental policy that disadvantage the Creole, and mobilize the Creole community to take an active part in changing its status as the poorest and most under-educated ethnic group on the island. In our 2008 Global Vision, the *FCM* noted its four primary goals: a) to assist the Creole community to take responsibility for its own advancement, b) to restore pride in and recognition of the economic, historic, and social contribution made by Creoles to Mauritius, c) to work fully and conjointly with other ethnic groups for the development of the country, and d) to advocate for a constitutional change that will officially recognize the Creole community as a national ethnic group (*Federation Creoles Mauriciens*, 2008). In the name of the common good, and on the basis of the solemn principle

that recognizes the fundamental rights and dignity of every human person, I sincerely believe that one of the tasks of the *FCM* is to call out and confront the deafness and blindness of every political, social, and religious institution to the desolate situations of the Creole. My unshakable willingness to remain faithful to my vocation as a missionary priest intertwined with my resolute choice to heed the commission of Jesus to take a preferential option for the poor, drives me to ask: WHY is it that after 40 years of independence, the present state of the Creole community in Mauritius is still gloomy? WHY are there so little employment opportunities for the Creole in the public sector? WHY is there a perceived institutionalized discrimination against the Creole when it comes to promotion processes in the government? WHY are the Creole denied official recognition as a racial and ethnic group by the Constitution while the Hindus, Muslims and Chinese are officially recognized?

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It is my belief that there is a need for rigorous work aimed at healing the traumatic scars of slavery that brand the Mauritian Creole community even today. Such a healing can only be achieved if all of the ethnic, racial and cultural groups that comprise the Mauritian pluralistic society, as well as every secular and religious institution, work hand in hand towards the fulfillment of this process. The dreadful bruises of slavery from which the Creole in Mauritius have not yet fully recovered are not mere illusions of a fictitious novel, but they are deep psychological, social, cultural, spiritual, economic, academic and human traumas that continue to throb in the Creole community. Attempting to deny this painful reality, or even to minimize the very fact of its existence, would be equal to enslaving the Creole once again under the yoke of a new slave master I would name a *hypocritical and indifferent false Mauricianism*. True Mauricianism can only be achieved when the Creoles in Mauritius are incorporated more fully into mainstream society. While the momentum must be created by the Creoles themselves, the rest of the country must react to our claims with tolerance and generosity (Carroll & Carroll, 2000).

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Far from taking a stand of political demagoguery that would promise false hope of change for the Creole's life, my honest and transparent motives boldly cry out to the Creole that they cannot just sit and wait for the government, the Church, the private sector or even for a charismatic leader to come and take them out of their misfortune. They have to roll up their sleeves, stand on their own feet and get to work very hard in order to achieve the advancement for which they are aspiring. **Empowerment** is the key concept here. Moreover, since it is the belief of the *FCM*

JOCELYN GREGOIRE,
C.S.SP.

that education is the key for our future, we are working towards the principle of a second-chance education, which calls us to work with the government, the church, and the private sector to develop various adult education programs. We also are seeking to develop better housing situations for the poor squatters, shelter for the street children, and training and formation programs for Creole men and women in the various parts and slums of the island.

Conclusion

*...to row against the social,
political and even ecclesial
tides...*

Dear confrere, the moment you set foot on the island of Mauritius more than one and a half centuries ago, you were moved to establish the *black mission* against all odds. Your courage and perseverance but most uniquely, your uncompromising belief that these “poor and dear children” of yours had the absolute right to encounter Jesus who loved them and died for them prompted you to row against the social, political and even ecclesial tides of your day. Nearly one hundred and fifty years after your death, your memory is still very much alive in the collective consciousness of the Mauritian people of every racial, cultural, ethnic and religious background. Day after day, the shrine in St. Croix, where your body has found its last abode, is visited by hundreds of people seeking physical or spiritual comfort, healing, reassurance, or even a miracle. They believe their fervent prayers will be heard through your intercession. However, while the sanctity of your life is greatly and justly extolled, as a confrere and fellow missionary, who timidly is trying to tread in your footsteps, I believe that your apostolic genius and missionary vision have been somewhat overlooked. Somehow, the missionary momentum that you set in process with the *black mission* has been allowed to die to such an extent that talking about Creole mission in Mauritius today makes many Catholics and even some members of the clergy cringe. Moreover, the laity is still struggling to find its rightful place in the apostolic and administrative life of the Church in contrast to the army of catechists and lay collaborators that were the backbone of your pastoral success. The Creole language is still painfully elbowing its way into the official liturgical celebrations and translations of the main books, rituals, and even the scripture in usage in the Catholic Church in Mauritius. I bring all these now to your attention and the intercessions of your prayers. Your poor children still need you. The Creole in Mauritius still need you, and I definitely need you. Thank you for praying for us.

*The Creole language is still
painfully elbowing its way...*

In Jesus and in Mary, your brother,
Jocelyn Gregoire, CSSp.

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