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## A Letter to Blessed Jacques Laval: One Spiritan to another

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# One Spiritan to another

Jocelyn Gregoire CSSp

*My dear confrère,*

In the summer of 1841 after twenty-one days of excruciating travel on board La Tanjora, you became the first Spiritan missionary Francis Libermann sent from your native Normandy to Mauritius. In your heart was a deep love for Jesus and an incredible zeal to liberate the black slaves of the colony — among whom were my ancestors. You came to know them as your “poor Blacks.”

Your missionary zeal, the sanctity of your life and your genuine eagerness to win as many as you possibly could for Jesus Christ won you the title Apostle of Mauritius and led the Church to beatify you in 1979.

## Creole Reality

The constitution of Mauritius formally recognizes three groups: Indian Hindus, Muslim and Chinese. The Creole are classified as “General Population.” They parallel the situation of the “80,000 forsaken Blacks” to whom you dedicated your missionary work from 1841-1864. Among them we find the highest number of drug addicts, prostitutes, academic failures, HIV/AIDS, jailed men and women, squatters and street children.

Most Catholics in Mauritius are Creoles — something that has not changed since your time. But very few Catholic Creoles have access to Catholic schools. Most of them fail their basic primary exams — which explains the high rate of illiteracy within the Creole community.

## Feeling abandoned

I am sure that from your personal experience with the forsaken Blacks you will understand why the Catholic Creole community feels abandoned by politicians and government, by the Catholic Church — the majority of which are themselves Creoles — by the private sector which for economic or political reasons prefers to support the Hindu community, and by their own fellow middle-class Creoles who have chosen to emigrate.

I left Mauritius in 1989 to embark on a missionary adventure in Papua New Guinea for nearly seven years. There I ministered to tribal people and learned the art of communicating the word of God in simple, colorful language in order to make it come alive for them.

You had set the tone with your creation of a little Catechism in the Creole language that your “poor Blacks” could easily

understand. But the Roman Catholic Church in Mauritius has opted for French instead of Creole as its vernacular.

## Go and proclaim the good news

In 1996, after my return from Papua New Guinea, I started an evangelization program, *Session Gregoire*, as a three-phased journey towards a greater knowledge, appreciation and intimacy with the Blessed Trinity, the Catholic Church and the world.

To the Creole people the good news is that they are children of God, no longer in the grip of sorcerers, charms, hexes, curses, witchcraft, and other spiritual bondages. They encounter the author of their liberation — Jesus Christ.

Through storytelling, Scripture reading, sermons and homilies I teach them that God is a God of love, who sent his only Son Jesus to redeem us and give us new life in the Holy Spirit. In the name of Jesus we have the power to conquer our fears.

The next phase encourages them to become witnesses to their newfound life and renewed faith. They are not afraid to

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The dreadful bruises of slavery continue to throb in the Creole community.

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talk to members of their family, their colleagues and their friends. Nor are they afraid to go public in the media about their relationship with Jesus and the Church. They also convince those involved in occult practices to reconvert their life to Jesus Christ. Their eyes are open to issues of social justice and the need for Christians to opt for the poor in their society.

The use of Creole enables them to understand better the practice of their Catholic faith. Many lapsed Catholics return to the Church through participation in the sessions. As churches became overcrowded we have moved outside or utilized stadiums to accommodate the crowds. I will not be surprised to learn that from where you are you somehow have a hand in all this.

I have written hymns in Creole based on biblical passages and psalms and have recorded and produced more than one hundred thirty songs to be used in the celebration of the liturgy and as media for catechism and evangelization. Creole



Catholics can now sing, worship, pray and enter into intimacy with God in a language, music and culture they know and are at ease with.

Cardinal Jean Margeot's words were publicly reassuring: "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 Creoles into the Bible."

## A cry for more social justice

Our sessions brought me to a front row encounter with poverty as lived by so many Creole families in areas infested by drugs, prostitution, academic failure, sexual abuse, economic and social deprivation.

God who "observed the misery of his people in Egypt and heard their cry on account of their taskmasters" (Exodus 3,7) called Moses to set his people free. God 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. Today in Mauritius, God hears the cry of the same Creole people.

As the divide between the haves and the have-nots becomes more and more abysmal in Mauritius, I have no other choice than to push myself, in the name of Jesus, to take a stand for more social justice in favour of the poorest and most vulnerable. You did that for 80,000 poor Blacks despite the virulent opposition you had to face from the white colonists and clergy.

## Grassroots advocate for the Creole people

In September 2007 I initiated the emergence of the Federation of Mauritian Creoles (FCM) as a political voice and grassroots advocate for the Creole community. The FCM has four primary goals: a) to assist Creoles to take responsibility for their own advancement b) to restore pride in the Creole contribution to Mauritius c) to work alongside other ethnic groups d) to advocate for a constitutional change recognizing the Creole community as a national ethnic group.

My own 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 is so gloomy?
- Why so few employment opportunities for Creoles in the public sector?
- Why is there a perceived institutional discrimination against Creoles when it comes to government promotions?
- Why are Creoles denied official recognition as a racial and ethnic group like the Hindus, Muslims and Chinese?

The dreadful bruises of slavery continue to throb in the Creole community. Education is the key for our future. We are ready to work with others to develop various adult education programs.



We are also seeking to develop better housing 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

Dear confrere, Jacques Laval, the moment you set foot on the island of Mauritius more than 150 years ago you were moved, against all odds, to establish the *Mission for the Blacks*. Your courage and perseverance, above all your uncompromising belief that these "poor and dear children" of yours had an absolute right to encounter Jesus, who loved them and died for them, prompted you to row against the social, political and church tides of your day.

Your memory is still alive in the collective consciousness of the Mauritian people. Day by day, hundreds of people visit your shrine in St Croix seeking physical or spiritual comfort, healing, reassurance or even a miracle. They believe their fervent prayers will be heard through your intercession.

However, the missionary momentum that you set in process with the *Mission for the Blacks*, along with its catechists and lay collaborators that were the backbone of your pastoral success, has been allowed to die. But the Creole language is painfully edging its way into the official liturgical celebrations and translations of our missals, rituals and scripture.

Your poor children still need you. The Creoles in Mauritius still need you and I definitely need you. Thank you for praying for us.

*In Jesus and Mary,  
Your brother, Jocelyn Gregoire CSSp*

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