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Father Libermann and Guinea (February 2, 1980)

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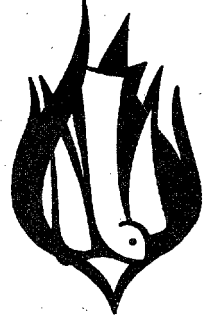
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CONTENTS

Amadeu MARTINS: THE CENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF FATHER SCHWINDENHAMMER: WHY FATHER SCHWINDENHAMMER?	3
Amadeu MARTINS: "MEMORANDUM OF SOME MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION... AGAINST THE ADMINISTRATION OF FATHER SCHWINDENHAMMER"	26
Frans AUGUSTIJNS: FATHER LIBERMANN AND GUINEA (February 2, 1980)	32
A.M.: REPORT ON THE ANNUAL MEETING OF SPIRITAN STUDIES' GROUP	40

FATHER LIBERMANN AND GUINEA (February 2, 1980)

INTRODUCTION

The General Chapter of the Spiritans took place in July, 1980. We were privileged to receive a visit on that occasion from the former Archbishop of Conakry, Guinea: Monseigneur Tchidimbo. Under the Government of Sekou-Touré he had suffered persecution for the Faith. He was in fact held as a political prisoner for eight years in one of the most notorious prisons in Guinea.

Mgr Tchidimbo's visit to us fell on July 3, when he presided the Eucharistic Celebration. In his homily that day he said: "What St Benedict is to Europe and Europeans, Father Libermann is to Africa and Africans: their father in the Faith".

It is fitting that our Founder, Francis Mary Paul Libermann, should be considered the pioneer of the African Mission Revival of the 19th century.

The renowned Cardinal Lavigerie only founded the White Fathers in 1868. Mgr de Marion Bresillac of the Society of African Missions would send his first missionaries to Africa 15 years after Father Libermann, that is, in 1856. The Scheutists of Fr Verbist appeared on the African scene, in what is now Zaire, at the end of the century.

I should like in this talk to speak of Father Libermann's first mission in Africa: that of the "Two Guineas", established in 1842.

The reasons for this choice are two-fold:

1. It reveals the end of our Congregation and the spirit moving the Founder.
2. This more than heroic saga in mission history merits to be known for itself.

I. GUINEA.

The designation, "Guinea" or "The Two Guineas", and its significance in the mid-nineteenth-century, reveals to us that

this was an era when Africa was unknown in Europe and in the Church.

The name was applied to the whole West Africa coast, from Senegal to Angola, a distance of some 1250 miles with an unknown territory behind it, stretching into the interior.

Neither was Africa a primary consideration of the Church or of Propaganda. In fact, it was the American Bishops who first concerned themselves with the evangelisation of this area. In the years, 1820-30, several of the American States had voted laws abolishing slavery and had sought to re-settle their former slaves in Africa. It was in this way that the State of Liberia came to be. In these circumstances the American Hierarchy requested the Holy See to appoint Mgr Barron as Prefect Apostolic of the new State. This was agreed and Mgr Barron became Prefect Apostolic of the Two Guineas on December 8, 1841. Alas, the poor Prefect had only one priest, a Father Kelly, and a lay-missionary, Mr Denis Pindar, to help him. After a short visit to Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, he set out for Europe to find missionaries.

In the same year, 1841, Francis Mary Paul Libermann, for many years a victim of epilepsy, was presumed cured of this affliction and allowed to advance to the priesthood. At the same time, Cardinal Fransoni, the Prefect of Propaganda, finally authorised Libermann to launch his "Work for the Blacks".

II. THE AIMS OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY AND THE MISSIONARY SPIRIT OF LIBERMANN.

The general end of the "Work for the Blacks" was "the evangelisation of the poor"; but Libermann wrote: "the missions are the principal objective to which we direct our attention. We have opted for the poorest and most abandoned souls".

A number of young priests and some Postulant Brothers were members of the first Novitiate of the new Congregation. This Novitiate was, at one and the same time, a year of immediate preparation for a missionary obedience and a year of prayer and recollection. Libermann himself was the Novice Master. Although he had no personal experience of the missions all his writings show that he had been endowed by the

Lord with a deep missionary spirit. This enabled him to discern the principal virtues proper to an apostle of Christ. These he set down as:

1. True love of the poor and abandoned;
2. Easy adaptability;
3. A spirit of renunciation and of poverty.

Here are some extracts from the Provisional Rule written by Libermann in the period 1839-40, which he explained and developed during that first Novitiate:

1. *Love of the Poor.*

The guiding principle of our attitude to the poor, to whom we are sent, is tender love; then a strong and fervent desire to win them to salvation and to sanctify them.

The missionaries will be the supporters, advocates and defenders of the small and weak against their oppressors.

In their conduct they will show themselves simple, gentle and cordial towards the poor. Whatever the circumstances, they will show the utmost interest in them and listen to them with kindness.

They shall avoid as faults to be detested: domineering manners, disdain and mockery such as are so often adopted against the poor.

2. *Need of Adaptability.*

Their character, inclinations and tendencies shall be studied and examined.

It is also necessary to adapt to the food of the country. Our food should be the ordinary food of the poor, as near as possible that of the people in whose service the Lord employs us: at the same time, it should be healthy and substantial.

Clothing and furnishings should also be simple and poor. When out of Community the missionary shall seek lodgings, as poor, as like as possible to those of the people to whose service he has offered himself.

St Paul said that he made himself all things to all men to win all men to Christ. Missionaries should make their own this lovely apostolic principle of that great Apostle. Thus, they will be always available to all persons, making their wishes, tastes and characteristics their own.

3. *Renunciation and Self-Denial.*

Missionaries shall be detached from riches both spiritual and material: and completely detached from relatives, friends and country.

Listen to Libermann expounding this rule of detachment to his first missionaries:

"Strip yourselves of Europe, its customs and spirit. Make yourselves black with the blacks in order to train them as they should be trained, not European-style but preserving their own particular ways; be to them as servants to their masters in order to perfect and sanctify them and make them people of God".

III. THE MISSION OF GUINEA.

This was the spirit in which Libermann trained his first Novices for Haiti, Mauritius and Reunion. Then in mid-December, 1842, he received Mgr Barron, come to seek recruits for the Prefecture Apostolic of Guinea.

Although Mgr Barron himself had but a superficial knowledge of the Prefecture, gathered during a brief first visit, he nevertheless gave the Novices a number of talks on Africa, the Blacks there, their poverty, their moral needs, their good dispositions: all of this set their generous young hearts on fire.

Before Mgr Barron left at the end of the month, everything had been arranged. Libermann would send his first group of missionaries for March, 1843. The departure was in fact delayed for several months. It was only on September 13, 1843, that the 7 priests and 3 Brothers of the group set out on the "The Clementines" for Guinea.

The senior of the group was Fr Bessieux, aged 40; the intellectual, Fr de Regnier, aged 38; he was able to speak a little English, which was a great help.

Frs Audebert, Maurice and Paul Laval were all 30; Fr Roussel was 28 and Fr Bouchet, 27.

Brothers Gregoire, André and Jean were all young, none of them being more than 20.

Their journey was a difficult one. The 10 missionaries were crowded together in one large cabin in steerage. This they had to share with some young sailors and the ship's dogs!

After a voyage of 4 weeks they arrive at Ndakarou (Dakar) where they put in for a fortnight. It was the season of fevers and the sun was overpowering: there was no shelter on deck and the cabin was too small for the number. Two-and-a-half months after leaving Bordeaux they arrived at Cape Palmas. It was November 30, 1843: the Feast of St Andrew.

Fr Kelly, the only priest Mgr Barron had succeeded in recruiting in America, was there to meet them. He was accompanied by Denis, the Catechist, and Mr Davis, the brother of the King of Cape Palmas.

It was a solemn moment when the clergy of the Prefecture of the Two Guineas moved in procession to the Mission, headed by the Cross. On their way they sang the "Exsurgat Deus" and the "Magnificat".

When they arrived at the Mission, they found a large crowd assembled there. At this sight, Fr Bessieux at once decided to preach his first sermon!

He had a problem however and a big one: what language to use? He only spoke French and Latin: Fr Kelly only English and Latin. Fortunately, Mr Davis understood English and spoke Grèbe, the language of the country. So, Fr Bessieux preached in Latin; Fr Kelly translated this into English, which Mr Davis then rendered in Grèbe!

The subject chosen for this first sermon was: Original Sin and the Goodness of God. Not surprisingly, the listeners dispersed after a few minutes.

The following day, the missionaries set out to make contact with the local people and to study the local language. Both were innovations for the people: that whites should come to visit them in their homes and that they should try however haltingly to speak to them in their own tongue.

Unfortunately, the young missionaries were also guilty of some imprudences:

- they walked under the blazing sun;
- they continued to mortify and penance themselves as in the Novitiate;
- they adopted the diet of the people in the hope of drawing closer to them: a little rice cooked in water at midday, the only meal of the day, served with a little meat or smoked fish;
- they all worked hard and long each day;
- they were in addition without a doctor or medicines suited to their condition in the circumstances.

The first to suffer effects of this regime were the three youngest members of the group, the Brothers:

On December 14, a mere fortnight after their arrival, Br John fell ill;

On the 15th, Br André began running a high fever;

On the 17th, Br Gregoire and Fr Maurice had to take to their beds;

On the 20th, Fr Bessieux, the oldest, went down;

Half the group were sick; the other half had to nurse them. Unfortunately, the number of sick increased still further: on Dec. 21, Frs Audebert and de Regnier were also in bed.

Fr de Regnier was in danger as a consequence of ignorance and imprudence: although not feeling well, he had still continued to work for a whole day beneath the scorching sun. His condition grew daily worse. A few days before he died, he wrote to Fr Libermann: "Tell my family and friends I am glad I left all for our Divine Master. Had I the choice again I should do the same thing a thousand times over". He died on Dec. 30, aged 38.

This alas was only the first victim. Fr Roussel dug his grave and then felt ill himself and took to his bed. He would die on January 23.

Mr Denis, Father Kelly's catechist, died suddenly on January the 2nd. At the end of his tether, Fr Kelly let Guinea for good on the first boat that called.

Providentially, at the end of January, an American doctor visited the missionaries. Thanks to his care health improved. At once the Fathers set to work learning Grèbe!

Mgr Barron disembarked on March 1. He decided at once to leave the mission of Cape Palmas and go to Assinie, an area said to be much more healthy. Fr Bessieux and Br John however would stay on to look after materials.

On the way Mgr Barron changed his mind again and decided to open a third mission at Grand-Bassam.

At Grand-Bassam the obtaining of food supplies was very difficult. As a result the health of the missionaries, who had only just recovered from their previous illness, began to deteriorate again. Some weeks later, in mid-June, Frs Audebert and Bouchet went down sick: fifteen days later they were dead. On July 14, Fr Paul Laval also died. Completely exhausted and discouraged, Fr Maurice and Br André left for Dakar to return to Europe. Shortly afterwards, Br Jean followed.

In the midst of these grave misfortunes, Mgr Barron himself gave up. He had done all in his power to get on top of the problems but human nature has its limits. He left Guinea for Rome where he tendered his resignation as Prefect-Apostolic of the Two Guineas and then returned to the U.S.A.

Thus, of the original apostolic group there only remained Mgr Bessieux and Brother Gregoire, who had been sick several times and had received the Last Sacraments twice.

The greatest trial of both was the inexplicable silence of Fr Libermann. Fr Bessieux had written nine times already. Not getting a single answer, his imagination set to work, asking why? Were the missionaries being blamed for the tragedy that had befallen them? etc. etc.

Libermann was also suffering at the same time. It was only at the end of 1844, 6 months after their departure from Bordeaux that he received their first letter, written before disaster had struck.

The letter announcing the death of Fr de Regnier did not arrive until June 8: that recounting the terrible event that followed so soon after was received only on October 8.

Fr Théveau, then a novice, tells how Libermann announced the catastrophe to the novices who were preparing to go on the Missions:

"The Retreat was nearly over. The day before it closed, the bell rang at 11 o'clock calling us to an unscheduled meeting. Fr Libermann, having said the prayer, calmly told us what had happened: 5 of our missionaries are dead; there is no news of 2 others; 3 are returning to Europe completely exhausted. All of these were men who had been remarkably strong physically and zealous and holy.

Little by little the account given by Fr Libermann became more vivid: 'Satan has done this thing', he said, 'He wished to have poor Guinea for himself. He shall not get it! I shall no longer send my sons there however. I should have to be forced to do so; otherwise, I should go myself. . .'"

What followed was deeply moving. The news of the tragedy inspired the novices with new hope. Libermann had only got back to his room when there was a knock on the door. A novice entered and said quite simply: "Father, let me go to Guinea". Another followed a few minutes later with the same request; then, a third!

"All", wrote Libermann, "volunteered for Guinea. I had

to forbid them my room to prevent them from persecuting me about their plans”.

CONCLUSION

The work started afresh. At the end of the 1844-45 Novitiate, 3 were appointed to join Fr Bessieux and Br Gregoire in Guinea.

In 1845, the Prefecture was confided to the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and Fr Tisserant was appointed Prefect.

In 1846 the Prefecture was raised to the dignity of a Vicariate Apostolic. Mgr Truffet, a member of Libermann's Congregation was appointed Vicar Apostolic and was ordained Bishop on Jan 25, 1847.

It was not the end of the troubles, unfortunately: after only six months of active ministry Mgr Truffet died and was succeeded by Mgr Bessieux, one of the first in the field and justly remembered as "The Pioneer of Gabon". He guided the destinies of the Vicariate until his death in 1878.

For Libermann, "Guinea will always be my favourite mission". "I should prefer to give up all the rest and keep Guinea", he once wrote. When in his last agony, at the end of January, 1852, he offered his sufferings for the salvation of his beloved Guinea: "Oh, yes", he whispered, "for Guinea, poor Guinea, Dakar...".

Is it not fitting then that in ending this talk I should make my own those beautiful words of a Guinean Bishop, Mgr Tchidimbo: FOR US, AFRICANS, "LIBERMANN IS OUR FATHER IN FAITH".

Frans Augustijns