



On Slavery In The Missions

Catholicae Ecclesiae

Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII promulgated on November 20, 1890.

To the Catholic Missionaries in Africa.

The maternal love of the Catholic Church embraces all people. As you know, venerable brother, the Church from the beginning sought to completely eliminate slavery, whose wretched yoke has oppressed many people. It is the industrious guardian of the teachings of its Founder who, by His words and those of the apostles, taught men the fraternal necessity which unites the whole world. From Him we recall that everybody has sprung from the same source, was redeemed by the same ransom, and is called to the same eternal happiness. He assumed the neglected cause of the slaves and showed Himself the strong champion of freedom. Insofar as time and circumstances allowed, He gradually and moderately accomplished His goal. Of course, pressing constantly with prudence and planning, He showed what He was striving for in the name of religion, justice, and humanity. In this way He put national prosperity and civilization in general into His debt. This zeal of the Church for liberating the slaves has not languished with the passage of time; on the contrary, the more it bore fruit, the more eagerly it glowed. There are incontestable historical documents which attest to that fact, documents which commended to posterity the names of many of Our predecessors. Among them St. Gregory the Great, Hadrian I, Alexander III, Innocent III, Gregory IX, Pius II, Leo X, Paul III, Urban VIII, Benedict XIV, Pius VII, and Gregory XVI stand out. They applied every effort to eliminate the institution of slavery wherever it existed. They also took care lest the seeds of slavery return to those places from which this evil institution had been cut away.

2. We could not repudiate such a laudable inheritance. For this reason, We have taken every occasion to openly condemn this gloomy plague of slavery. We worked toward this goal in a letter sent to the bishops of Brazil on May 5, 1888. In it We

rejoiced over their exemplary accomplishments, both private and public, in the area of emancipation. At the same time We showed how much slavery opposes religion and human dignity. While writing, We were deeply moved by the plight of those who are subject to the mastery of another. We were bitterly afflicted by accounts of the trials which harass all the inhabitants of the African interior. How horrible it is to recall that almost four hundred thousand Africans of every age and sex are forcefully taken away each year from their villages! Bound and beaten, they are transported to a foreign land, put on display, and sold like cattle. These eyewitness reports have been confirmed by recent explorers to equatorial Africa, arousing Our desire to help those wretched men and to alleviate their lamentable condition. For this reason We have immediately delegated the task of going to the principal countries of Europe to Our beloved son Charles Martial Cardinal Lavigerie, whose swiftness and apostolic zeal are well known. He is to show how shameful this base dealing is and to incline the leaders and citizens to assist this miserable race. Therefore, We should feel grateful to Christ our Lord, the most loving Redeemer of all nations. He in His goodness did not allow Our efforts to go unrewarded. Rather, He planted them in fertile soil, like a seed which promises a joyful harvest. Secular leaders and Catholics from the whole world, everybody who deems holy the natural rights of people, struggle to discover the rationale and means to eradicate this inhuman commerce. There was a meeting not long ago in Brussels for the representatives of European leaders, and more recently a group of private citizens met in Paris for the same purpose. They clearly showed how much force and persistence they would use to defend the Negro cause, how many difficulties oppress these slaves. Therefore, with the occasion once again given, We praise and thank the leaders of Europe for their efforts in this matter. We strenuously pray that almighty God might give a happy outcome to the deliberations they have begun.

3. Besides protecting freedom, another more serious apostolic concern orders Us to spread the teaching of the Gospel in Africa. This teaching should bathe those inhabitants living in darkness and blind superstition with the light of divine truth, by which they can become co-heirs with Us of the kingdom of God. We are the more concerned about this because those who have received this light have also shaken off the yoke of human slavery. Wherever Christian customs and laws are in force, wherever religion establishes that men serve justice and honor human dignity, wherever the spirit of brotherly love taught by Christ spreads itself, there neither slavery nor savage barbarism can exist. Rather, mildness of character and civilized Christian liberty flourish there. Many apostolic men, like standard-bearing soldiers of Christ, go to the African interior to shed their sweat, even life itself for the welfare of their brothers. But "the harvest indeed is great; the laborers are few." Therefore, many others are needed where that scandalous commerce is conducted. They must be full of the spirit of God, fearing neither danger, nor inconveniences, nor labors to spread the teaching of Christ, which is joined to true freedom. This might enlighten even that wretched part of the human race with the revelation of His divinity and release it from the mire of superstition and misery in which it has lain abandoned and neglected for so long.

4. The money collected in the churches and chapels under your jurisdiction should be sent to Rome, to the Sacred Council for the Propagation of the Faith. It will divide the money among the missions which now exist or will be established primarily to eliminate slavery in Africa. The money coming from those countries which have their own Catholic missions to free the slaves, as We mentioned, will be given to sustain and help those missions. The Sacred Council will divide the rest of the money among those missions which show the greatest need, according to its discretion. We are confident that God who is rich in mercies will graciously receive Our prayers for the unfortunate Africans. You, venerable brother, should strive to complete this matter. Timely and special assistance should be given by the faithful to abolish the blemish of human commerce and to support the messengers of the Gospel in those places where slavery exists. We trust that nothing will diminish the generosity with which the faithful customarily support Catholic missions, once the money is transferred to the Institute "For the Propagation of the Faith."

5. This salutary work which We have long since commended to the zeal of the faithful demands many others of similar scope. A great outlay is required to provide for the education of missionaries, long journeys, constructing buildings, erecting churches, and teaching, as well as for other similar necessities. These expenses must be borne for some years, until the heralds of the gospel can establish themselves and take responsibility for their own financial affairs. We hope that We have enough strength to undertake such a project. When serious difficulties obstruct Us, We turn to you, venerable brother, and the other bishops, as well as all Catholics. We commend such a holy and salutary work to your love and to theirs. We desire that everybody participates; even if the collection is small, the burden spread among many people will make it lighter for all. Thus, the grace of Christ -- for this concerns the spreading of His kingdom -- might reach everybody and give everybody a share in peace, forgiveness of sins, and special gifts.

6. Therefore, We decree that every year, wherever the Epiphany of the Lord is celebrated, on that day a collection should be taken up to help in the project We have just outlined. We have chosen this day in preference to others because, as you well know, that is the day the Son of God first revealed Himself to the nations, when He showed Himself to the Magi. They were called "the first fruits of our vocation and faith" by Our predecessor St. Leo the Great. Thus, We depend on the good hope to come that Christ the Lord will be moved by the love and prayers of the faithful, who have received the light of truth. In a new testimony of praise, We pray that He extend His bounty far and wide and that it flourish in happy prosperity. Meanwhile, We lovingly impart Our apostolic blessing on you, venerable brother, on the clergy, and on the faithful entrusted to your pastoral vigilance.

Given in Rome, at St. Peter's, on November 20, 1890, in the thirteenth year of Our pontificate.