

SUMMARY OF THE NEW PROJECT of the ASSOCIATION OF THE SACRED HEARTS OF JESUS AND MARY FOR THE CONVERSION OF AFRICA

PROPOSED to the SACRED CONGREGATION OF PROPAGANDA FIDE by Father Daniel Comboni of the Mazza Institute

Rome, 18 September 1864

[800] Even today a mysterious darkness still covers those distant expanses which go to make up the immensity of Black Africa. Down through the centuries both civil governments and private companies have laboured energetically to organise research into that limitless territory and have sent out well-equipped expeditions to further that purpose. Despite countless such efforts carried out at very great human cost, the impenetrable veil, drawn for so many centuries across the face of Africa, has never been torn aside.

[801] Right up to the present day intrepid explorers have concerned themselves with that unknown part of the world. They have allowed themselves no respite in seeking to complete their research, to solve the remaining geographical problems and to discover the continent's hidden treasures, with the aim of enriching natural history and developing commerce. At the same time, Christian philanthropists have turned their attention to the spiritual and social conditions of those peoples bowed beneath Satan's power and have, in their turn, poured out the results of their brotherly pity and worked to better the Africans' sad lot. Indeed, right up to our own day, these feelings of compassion have found powerful and effective expression, and praiseworthy things have been done to lift the unhappy Black race from its deplorable condition, by setting it on the path of a life lived by the light of Christian truths.

[802] Without mentioning here the numerous different expeditions of zealous Missionaries, which various religious orders and ecclesiastical societies have organised in past centuries, with the authority of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide and the purpose of raising the standard of the Cross in the arid sandy wastes inhabited by the Africans. It must suffice to recall how Pope Gregory XVI of happy memory founded the Mission of Central Africa; and how the immortal Pius IX, now gloriously reigning, in confirmation of his predecessor's decrees, sent Missionaries to Central Africa. These, travelling along the Nile, penetrated into the newly erected Vicariate Apostolic in 1848. This is the largest Vicariate Apostolic in the world, covering an area twice that of Europe. In this immense field, once it had been opened up to the zeal of Evangelical Love, there laboured, with unheard-of industry, several worthy Priests, from Austrian and Bavarian Germany and especially from the German Tyrol, who were recruited by the distinguished Committee of the Association of Mary and through the enthusiastic interest of the praiseworthy Professor Mitterrutzner. These were followed by the Missionaries of the Mazza Institute from Verona and finally by a large group of Franciscans. This chosen cohort of Christ's soldiers overcame difficult obstacles, made enormous sacrifices and finally succeeded in founding four important stations on the banks of the majestic Nile, which flows between the Tropic of Cancer and the Equator. As their communication centre they chose the capital of the Egyptian Sudan, the political conditions and geographical position of which destined it to be the forward base for Europeans who venture into those distant lands.

[803] Yet all these generous and loving endeavours, all this most noble concern for Africa, spread over more than fifteen years, were dashed to pieces on the rock of base selfishness, of innumerable adversities and of the harsh climate of those unfortunate lands which proved so deadly for the European. With the sacrifice of the lives of three-quarters of the Athletes of Christ who had dedicated themselves to this difficult enterprise, the meagre fruit of a limited number of somewhat shaky conversions was bought at a high price.

[804] For some time we too studied those distant peoples at first hand and, in so far as it was possible, given the virulent diseases that often nearly killed us, we researched their nature, customs and social conditions. We discovered, among other things, that besides the harsh climate which is the first obstacle to hinder the conversion of the Africans, there is also the conspicuous lack of a living centre which would be able to give continuity to the work of the propagation of the Faith in Central Africa.

[805] If any Mission whatsoever is to be guaranteed continuity, it must have a well-established centre from which there may without pause proceed a spirit of vitality. This spirit will spread like life-giving rain over the field of the mission to care for its most precious first fruits, its material needs and its exercise of the ministry. This living Centre would administer and make possible the annual recruitment of new Missionaries, from among whom it would be possible to reinforce the band of missionaries in the field, continually reduced in number by the harshness of the climate, the extremely hard work, and martyrdom. Such a centre of vitality is clearly desirable in the Institutes and Seminaries of Europe which exist to serve the Missions of Asia, America and Oceania. This is so because between Europe and these three continents there exists a certain similarity of temperament, customs and climate. At the very least, between the one and the others there exists a potential for intercommunication and a readiness continually and lastingly to receive the fascinating impressions of life which the spirit of the Gospel usually impresses on the structures of human society.

[806] Such a useful centre sending out the spirit of vitality so very necessary for the preservation and continuity of the foreign Missions would not, however, if it existed in Europe, be helpful and effective in the matter of the conversion of the Africans. Experience has clearly shown that European Missionaries cannot carry out the work of redemption in those burning regions of the African interior, because the conditions are ruinous for their health, and also that they cannot bear the weight of the exertions, the multiplicity of the discomforts or the harshness of the climate. In the same way, experience has shown that in Europe Africans cannot receive a complete Catholic education which enables them subsequently to be dependable, in body and soul, in promoting in their native land the propagation of the Faith. This is because either they cannot live in Europe or, by the time they return to Africa, they have become unsuitable for that continent because of the European habits which have become almost second nature to them, habits which become repugnant and harmful in the conditions of African life.

[807] We have seen with our own eyes how fatigue, privations and the fatal African climate have brutally cut down even the most physically robust Missionaries. There were, indeed, those who survived the dangerous journey down the White Nile and who prepared themselves to preach the Gospel to the Africans, by learning the language of the tribe among whom a Catholic Mission had been set up. Yet hardly had they done so than they quickly succumbed and soon died, thus rendering fruitless their work for the conversion of the Africans who, because of the continual decimation of the Missionaries, still lie in the power of the most degrading fetishism. Further, Propaganda, which knows all the institutions which have undertaken the education in Europe of individuals of the African race, is well able to confirm the ineffectiveness and inadvisability of the creation of an indigenous clergy, educated in our countries, yet destined to evangelise Central Africa.

[808] Experience has thus clearly shown that the system followed until now, while most useful for the conversion of unbelievers in other parts of the world, is no less than plainly inadvisable for the regeneration of the African interior. This is because, in the first place, European Missionaries are not able to live in the torrid heat of those regions and thus do not succeed in establishing and giving continuity to the Faith there and, in the second place, because Africans educated in Europe, for the reasons set out above, become unsuitable for the exercise of the apostolic ministry in their own countries. The Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide is therefore faced with a hard dilemma: either to announce the closing of the important Mission of Central Africa, or to urge the drawing up of a project which holds out better founded hopes of success for the conversion of the Africans.

[809] The heart of every good and faithful Catholic, inflamed as it must be by the spirit of the love of Jesus Christ, will surely be deeply wounded and grievously disturbed by the appalling idea of seeing the Church suspend, perhaps for many centuries, her work on behalf of so many millions of souls still languishing in darkness and the shadow of death. So the path so far followed must be abandoned, the old system must be changed and a project must be drawn up which will lead more effectively to the desired end. This will serve to strengthen the superhuman virtue of Christian love and will cancel forever from the mind of the Christian philanthropist the distressing thought of leaving those vast and populous regions cloaked in unbelief and barbarity, when they are clearly the most needy and abandoned in the world. This is why, in our weakness, we have tried to sketch out a way which would probably, if not certainly, lead to the making of provisions for the future regeneration of those abandoned souls, on whose good our every waking thought will always be centred, and for whom we would be happy to pour out the last drop of our blood.

[810] It is thus that a project has flashed into our mind, one which, if it does not in fact contain all the good points contained in plans so far worked out for the other Missions of the world, will perhaps, nevertheless, be effective in producing a considerable improvement in the unhappy conditions of the Africans. Thus they will arrive, travelling gradually along the way marked out by Providence, to take their share of the inexpressible fruits of the Redemption of the God-Man.

[811] Not only the inhabitants of the African interior, but also those peoples who live along the coast and in all the other parts of the great peninsula, although divided into thousands of different tribes, have more or less the same temperament, habits, tendencies and customs, well enough known to those who have concerned themselves with them over a long period. It seems to us, therefore, that the Love of the Gospel may offer them similar remedies and help, such as to be effective in communicating to the great family of the Africans the precious advantages of the Catholic Faith. We would consequently consider it opportune, and indeed almost necessary, that among the many ideas that could be put into effect for the regeneration of the Africans, that one ought to be chosen which unites in itself an absolute unity of conception together with a general simplicity of application.

[812] And this would seem to us to be the case with the project which we have developed for the conversion of the Africans, a project which, although vast in its extension and very difficult to put entirely into effect, nevertheless seems to us both one and simple in its conception and application.

[813] This project would, therefore, not restrict itself to the old-established borders of the Mission of Central Africa, which, for reasons set out above, have proved unhelpful, but it would rather include the whole African race; it would consequently extend and develop its activity over almost all the countries of black Africa.

[814] Now, although the Holy Apostolic See has never succeeded in planting the faith with stability among the huge tribes of Central Africa, it has, however, been profuse in its loving concern for the Islands and Coastal regions which surround the great African peninsula and has founded there twelve Vicariates, nine Prefectures Apostolic and ten Dioceses. Indeed these flourish more or less splendidly.

[815] In the north there are the two Vicariates Apostolic of Egypt and Tunisia and the three Prefectures Apostolic of Upper Egypt, Tripoli and Morocco.

[816] In the west there are the five Vicariates Apostolic of Senegambia, Sierra Leone, Dahomey, Guinea and Natal and the three Prefectures Apostolic of Senegal, the Congo and the islands of Annabon-Corisco and Ferdinando-Pò.

[817] In the south there are the two Vicariates Apostolic of the Western and Eastern Districts of the Cape of Good Hope.

[818] In the south-east there is the Vicariate Apostolic of Madagascar and the three Prefectures Apostolic of Zanzibar, the Seychelles and the Nossibè, Ste Marie and Mayotte islands.

[819] In the north-east there are the two Vicariates Apostolic of Abyssinia and the Gallas.

[820] Further, among the ten existing Dioceses, those of Algiers in the north and of St Denis on Réunion Island in the Indian Ocean in the south-east are especially successful. It is therefore natural that in order to put the suggested Project into effect, these Vicariates, Prefectures and Dioceses, already established around Africa, will have to be asked to help and co-operate. They witness at especially close quarters the distressing misery and extreme need of the vast populations of the interior, populations on whom the bright star of the Faith has not yet shone. Accordingly, they will be able validly to contribute with their authority, advice and work in assisting and facilitating the great undertaking of the regeneration of the vast and numerous tribes of the African interior.

[821] The Project, therefore, which we would dare to submit and propose to the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, would be the creation of innumerable Institutes of both sexes to surround the whole of Africa. These would be carefully situated at the least possible distance from the interior of the continent, in stable and fairly civilised areas, in which both Europeans and Africans could live and work.

[822] The men's and women's Institutes, each situated and set up according to the regulations of the canonical provisions, would admit young African men and women, with the aim of educating them in the Catholic Religion and in Christian civilisation, and of thus creating one men's and one women's group, destined, each in its own way, gradually to advance and to spread into the African interior, there to plant the Faith and civilisation they have received.

[823] To the direction of these Institutes would be called the religious Orders and the Catholic Institutes of men and women, as approved by the Church or recognised or permitted by the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide, with the permission of the latter and the mutual consent of the Heads and Superiors General of those Orders and Institutes. Further to this, and with the permission of Propaganda, there could to the same purpose be founded new Seminaries for the African Missions, modelled on the existing Seminaries for the foreign Missions, with the application of all those guidelines which experience would indicate as advisable in the case of Africa.

[824] These Institutes would be placed under the jurisdiction of the existing Vicariates and Prefectures Apostolic on the African Coast or of such Vicariates and Prefectures as the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide might decide to set up, as the work of the Project develops.

[825] The personnel in charge of these Institutes would direct their students according to the rules and spirit of their own Societies, suitably adapted to the requirements of the African interior. Their special aim would be the direction and successful organisation of the Institutes for African men and women, without, however, neglecting to promote and effect, as far as possible, the good of the country where the Institutes are situated.

[826] The education to be given to all the individuals of either sex who belong to the Institutes surrounding Africa must be characterised by the following goals: to impress and plant in their souls the spirit of Jesus Christ, integrity of behaviour, firmness of Faith, the principles of Christian morals, a knowledge of the Catholic catechism and the basic elements of necessary human knowledge. Besides this, all the men will be instructed in the practice of agriculture and in one or more skills of first importance; and every woman will be similarly educated in the most necessary of women's skills. Thus the former will become honest, virtuous, useful and active men, and the latter virtuous and capable mothers and wives. We believe that this active application to work, in which we want all the members of

the African Institutes to be involved, will have a powerful influence for the moral and spiritual good of the individual Africans, who are especially inclined to laziness and inaction.

[827] Once an individual student has completed his religious and secular education in the Institute and leaves its jurisdiction, the administration will do everything in its power to help and advise him, so that he may be placed in such a situation as to help him keep to the healthy religious and moral principles which were impressed on him through the education he received.

[828] From each of those Institutes surrounding the great African peninsula there will be formed Bodies of men and women, destined gradually to move into Central Africa with the aim of initiating and consolidating there the saving work of Catholicism, and of setting up Mission Stations, from which will shine forth the light of Religion and civilisation.

[829] The Groups of young African men, made up of those individuals most suited for the purpose, will be composed of:

1. capable catechists to whom will be given a broad knowledge of the sacred sciences;
2. capable teachers who will receive every possible instruction in the most important sciences adaptable to the countries of the interior;
3. capable craftsmen, to whom will be given a practical knowledge of the necessary skills most useful in the interior to make them into virtuous and capable farmers, doctors, phlebotomists, nurses, pharmacists, carpenters, tailors, builders, shoemakers, etc.

The group of young African women, similarly formed from those individuals most suited for the purpose, will be composed of:

1. capable school mistresses, to whom will be given the most complete education possible in Religion and Catholic morals, so that they may spread these principles and their practice in the degraded African female society on which, as is the case among us, depends almost entirely the regeneration of the great family of Africans;
2. capable women teachers and housewives who must promote the education of women in reading, writing, keeping accounts, spinning, sewing, weaving, caring for the sick and practising all the domestic skills most useful in the countries of Central Africa.

[830] These great Groups will gradually be transferred from each of the different Institutes which surround Africa to various points in the countries of the interior. While each individual member will work to propagate Religion and civilisation, as he has been trained, and to develop agriculture in those unspoiled and unoccupied lands, he will remain free to embrace whatever state of life to which he feels inclined.

[831] From the group of catechists formed by the young African men, there will be drawn a group composed of those individuals who most distinguish themselves for their holiness and knowledge and in whom there appears to be the readiness to enter the clerical state. These will be directed towards the priesthood. In the training of this special group, the great variety of subjects which Seminarians in Europe are obliged to study will be avoided. The teaching will be limited to those theological and scientific subjects that are of first importance, such as are sufficient for the requirements and needs of those countries. Also, given the quick physical and intellectual development of the Africans, we would not wish this training to be prolonged to the twelve or more years usual in Europe. We would consider six to eight years sufficient, as might be judged advisable in each case.

[832] However, the peculiar instability and weakness which characterises the African race must mean the use of the greatest caution in deciding when aspirants to the Priesthood may be allowed to proceed to Holy Orders. We are fully convinced that it is absolutely necessary to lay down that they must not be allowed so to proceed until after several years of proven constancy and chastity, spent living in an exemplary and active fashion, and in the ministry of God's Word, exercised in the existing Missions of the African interior, in a strict and irreproachable celibacy.

[833] From among the young African women who do not feel inclined to the married state will similarly be chosen the group of the Virgins of Charity, made up of those individuals who have most distinguished themselves by their holiness and in the practical teaching of the catechism, of languages and of feminine skills. This special section will constitute the elite of the women's group and will be entrusted with the direction of the girls' schools, with carrying out the most important tasks of Christian charity and with exercising the ministry of the Catholic woman among the tribes of Africa.

[834] In this fashion, through the most important ministry of the indigenous Clergy and of the Virgins of Charity, assisted by the good work of the catechists, teachers, craftsmen, school mistresses, women teachers and housewives, many Catholic families will gradually be formed and flourishing Christian associations will be founded. Our Holy Religion will spread its saving influence over the African family and will gradually extend its wholesome sway over the vast expanses of the unexplored regions of the whole of Africa.

[835] Experience having shown that it is only a long and continuous stay in the countries of the interior, and not a temporary stay, that is dangerous and even fatal for Europeans, the setting up of Missions and the founding of Christian communities in the countries of Central Africa will be personally begun and set in motion by European Missionaries, commissioned for that purpose by their respective Vicars and Prefects Apostolic. The latter will also, however, decide which native catechists and Priests may suitably be entrusted with the permanent direction of the Missions and Christian communities, once they have been founded and set in motion by the European Missionaries.

[836] On the other hand, the statistics of the African Mission show that European women, given their advantageous physical flexibility, the character of their moral life and their social and domestic habits, withstand the harshness of the African climate much longer than European men. Accordingly, with the approval and permission of the respective Vicars and Prefects Apostolic, regular Institutes of European women may be set up in the countries of the African interior, which would for the reasons just mentioned be less harmful to the women's health, so as more effectively to offer the marvellous and important services of the Catholic woman to the work of the regeneration of the great African family.

[837] Since the temperament and character of the African race is very fickle and inconstant, we think it wise and necessary for the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide to authorise the Vicars and Prefects Apostolic to organise frequent apostolic visitations to the Missions and Christian communities of those parts of the interior within their legitimate and respective jurisdiction. The purpose of such visitations would be to correct, confirm and improve the state of Catholicism in those dangerous areas, where base selfishness and the fanatical fury of Islam often corrupt and devastate the work of the Christian priesthood, and where the tenor of life, the climate and other special circumstances contribute to weaken both the body and the spirit, and to enfeeble ecclesiastical discipline, putting the faith at great risk. Suitable European Missionaries should be commissioned to undertake such visitations and, without running any risk whatsoever to their lives, as we have explained above, they can carry out their important Mission to the great advantage of all.

[838] In order to develop the gifts of the most able members of the indigenous Clergy, and to train them as able and enlightened leaders of the Christian communities of the interior of Africa, the Association in charge of directing the new project will, as its great work progresses, found four great African Theological-Scientific Universities at the fourmost important points of Africa. In our opinion these would be Algiers, Cairo, St Denis on Réunion Island in the Indian Ocean and one of the more important cities on the Atlantic coast.

[839] In these four University Centres, as in other important places on the Islands and along the coast of Africa, there may in due course be founded great centres of specialisation in craft studies. These would be for the young African craftsmen found to be most suited to amore advanced training. Thus, by means

of the introduction of these crafts which would improve the material conditions of the immense African tribes, the Missionaries would find it easier to introduce the Faith in a deeper and more stable way.

[840] To put the new Project into effect and to direct it, a Committee shall be set up in one of the capital cities of Europe. This Committee, composed of capable and active Prelates, Ecclesiastics and distinguished Lay people, will be responsible to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide. It will be governed by a President and will take the name of the Association of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary for the Conversion of Africa.

[841] The special Mission of this Committee will be:

1. Through a procurator based in Rome to communicate with the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide and to deal with matters concerning each of the most important of the new Association's undertakings inasmuch as they concern the Sacred Congregation.
2. To conduct dealings with the generalates of the Orders and the men's and women's Congregations in the foundation of the African Institutes and to keep in touch with the same generalates, with the Vicars and Prefects Apostolic of Africa and with the administrators of the African Institutes.
3. To provide, with the agreement of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide, the financial and material means for the carrying out of the new Project.
4. To found Institutes, Seminaries and craft Schools for the African Missions in the most suitable Centres in Europe and America.
5. To set up a Corps of educated and zealous European Missionaries to conduct personal dealings with the Vicars and Prefects Apostolic of Africa and with the heads of the Institutes concerning the interests of the new Association, and to explore the coasts and most important points of Africa to find sites for the African Institutes.
6. To study and put into effect the most effective methods for the improvement of the system of executing the new project.
7. To gather and publish annually in different languages reports of the progress of the new Association, and to draw from practical experience such lessons as will improve the condition of the African Institutes and the Christian communities so as to help in the regeneration of Africa.

[842] It is our firm hope that this Project of the Association of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary for the Conversion of Africa, once it has received the gracious approval of the Apostolic See, will receive the co-operation of all those Holy Institutes which have until now concerned themselves with, or sought to further, the spiritual advantage of the African race. We also hope it will be protected and assisted by those pious Associations which provide the financial and material means for the Holy Works set up for the propagation of Faith in Jesus Christ.

[843] Finally our soul is full of the dearest hope that the unity, simplicity and usefulness of the new project of the Association of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary for the Conversion of Africa will please the mind and heart of the Holy Father, the immortal Pontiff Pius IX, of his Eminence the Cardinal Prefect General and their Eminences and Right Reverend Members and Consultors of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide. We trust it will at the same time find an approving echo, support, favour and help in the heart of the Catholics of the entire world, clothed and filled as they are by the spirit of that superhuman charity which embraces the immense vastness of the universe and which our divine Saviour came to bring to the earth: *ignem veni mittere in terram, et quid volo nisi ut accendatur?*

[844] If the Holy Apostolic See is pleased to smile with approval on the new Project of the Association of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary for the Conversion of Africa, we would be happy to dedicate our limited energies and our whole life to co-operate in the great work, firm in the certainty that it will succeed because we have come to see in it the will of God. God in his greatness will cancel once and for all the terrible curse which has borne down for so many centuries on the miserable children of Ham, and his blessing of peace will spread over the great family of the Africans, there to remain forever.

[845] If, though, the Holy Apostolic See does not decide to approve this new Project, we shall be happy to submit ourselves fully to the adorable dispositions of God's Providence and we will have a new reason rightly to exclaim with the great Apostle: *servi inutiles sumus*.

[846] Fr Daniel Comboni of the Mazza Institute Apostolic Missionary of Central Africa Rome, 18th September 1864 Day of the Beatification of Sister Margaret Mary Alacoque of the Visitation

[847] P.S. His Holiness Pius IX has deigned to encourage the carrying out of this new Project for the Conversion of Africa; and his Eminence Cardinal Barnabò, the Prefect General of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide, wishes that it should receive the assistance of the Pious Association of the Propagation of the Faith in Lyons and Paris.

[848] As a consequence of this new project there will follow the execution of the Plan of the Very Reverend Father Nicholas Mazza, to whose Institute will be assigned a Vicariate or Prefecture Apostolic in Central Africa assisted by the Association of Mary in Vienna.

Father D. Comboni