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1807-2007: Whose Bicentennial and Whose Abolition? Keynote

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This paper, the keynote address of the 2007 annual meeting at Saint Meinrad Archabbey and Seminary, delineates the events leading to the 1807 abolition of the slave trade in Great Britain and traces the roots and significance of this historic event for the Church. Davis demonstrates that the complex relationship between the Church and slavery continues to shape the experiences of Catholics today.

Historians like to mark anniversaries...we like to have a segment of time to celebrate an event...we like a point in time to recall an event...we enjoy to have opportunity to revise the events. So we have centennials, sesquicentennials, bicentennials. Perhaps what historians like best about these time marks or time lags of an event is that *we* can do a bit of historical revision. It's happy hunting ground for riding rough shod over what others have done before. We can flex our historical muscles over the failures of times gone by and the historical writing that recorded them. At any rate, we observe this year an event

that has been scarcely mentioned here in the United States this year but still recalled elsewhere. In fact, it is also an event that touched the Catholic Church worldwide although again no one has said very much about it.

The Slave Trade

In 1807, the Slave Trade Act was enacted by the British Parliament. The slave trade was made illegal throughout the British Empire. The English navy could stop, search, and free any slaves found on the ships. British ships also stopped all other ships—including Portuguese, Spanish, and American slave ships. In fact, the American Congress passed a law outlawing the slave trade of American ships beginning in 1808.

The Slave Trade Act, however, did not outlaw slavery as such either in the British colonies—notably in the West Indies—or in the United States. Slavery was finally abolished in the British colonies in 1833. Nor did the abolition of the slave trade enacted in 1807 really stop the slave trade. In fact, this commerce flourished as never before on both sides of the Atlantic.

Why did Great Britain at the end of the eighteenth century decide to curtail the trans-Atlantic commerce of slaves? There are three reasons. 1) Political astuteness and persistence; 2) Economic growth and economic decline; and; 3) Colonial expansion and commerce.¹

¹ Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa*, chapter 16. “West Africa in the Nineteenth Century and the Ending of the Slave Trade.” 226-241 (London: Macmillan Press, 1993), esp. 232-41.

Thanks to a very dedicated group of Protestant political leaders in England at that time who publicized the brutality and horror of the slave traffic, they revealed to the average people in the United Kingdom both the high mortality rate and the physical misery of blacks crammed head to toe into slave ships for a six-week Atlantic crossing. These were highly motivated men who possessed enough political astuteness to change public opinion among many sectors of the English public and steer the legislation through the British parliament. Men like William Wilberforce, member of Parliament and a sincere Protestant Evangelist, and William Grenville, future Lord Grenville, prime minister in 1806, were religious and highly motivated. The Abolitionist movement in the United States was active and also highly motivated with William Lloyd Garrison as leader but with less political savvy.

The second reason is the industrial development. It was soon realized that it was cheaper to exploit the native people at home and create their markets in the resources of the homegrown raw materials. And finally, the creation of an economic dependency that in some ways still exists in African countries through exploiting their former colonial natural resources.

General History of Africa. VI. Africa in the nineteenth Century until the 1880s. J.F. Ade Ajayi, Ed.
Chapter 4. "The Abolition of the Slave Trade." By S. Daget. 64-89.
"Slave Trade Act 1807"
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/slave_Trade_Act_1807>.
"Abolitionism." <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolitionism>>.
"Africans and the Abolition of Slavery," *History Today*. 57 (March 2007): 18-29.

Although many think of the Catholic Church as having little to do with slavery, the opposite is true. Catholicism was very much implicated in this institution in more than one way. The year 1807 is significant for our Church as well as for the British Empire. Slavery is significant for the Church because Catholics were both enslaved and slaveholders. Roman Law left its imprint and understanding on Catholicism. In Roman Law, one can speak of five “titles” or legal justifications for slavery, namely as prisoners of war, penalty for crime, payment for debt, sale of one’s own children because of penury, or sale of oneself, and birth from a slave mother. Nevertheless, slaves were bound to receive baptism and thereby had rights. In medieval Europe, slaves were most often prisoners or criminals from the area of the Crimean Sea. Most historians consider that the name “slave” comes from the large number of enslaved “Slavs” from this area. The Moslems of North Africa enslaved the Christians; in turn Catholics reduced to slavery the Moslems who did not become Catholics. The slave trade of blacks began as early as the 10th century with African slaves transported by the Arabs across the Sahara and the Indian Ocean as far as India, and finally also north across the Straits of Gibraltar into Europe.

By the 14th century, the Portuguese had introduced the slave trade into the Iberian peninsula, into Sicily, and southern Italy. Pope Nicholas V in 1452 permitted the Portuguese to reduce the Moslems to slavery. From all appearances the pope had been led to believe that as the Portuguese descended farther and farther down the coast of West Africa that the blacks south of the Sahara were also

Moslems. Through all the Middle Ages it was agreed that there was no justification to enslave innocent persons whether Christians or pagans. Notwithstanding, African slavery became very much a part of the Mediterranean world. The Fall of Constantinople in 1453 closed the market for slaves from Eastern Europe.²

Elmina

The slave trade across the Atlantic began with the Portuguese and in the beginning they had a monopoly on the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In 1482, the Portuguese built the first section of Elmina Castle on Cape Coast in Ghana. Elmina became a massive trading post on the Atlantic Ocean. Columbus, it seems, visited Elmina before making his first voyage of discovery to the Bahamas. Despite their best efforts, the Portuguese did not remain without rivals in this most lucrative of human traffic. The Dutch took over Elmina and shortly thereafter the British seized it from the Dutch where it became an immense slave mart until 1807. Afterwards it became an immense African prison. For a time the Ashanti sovereigns were imprisoned there.

Today, Elmina has become a sort of pilgrimage center. Both Africans and African Americans are sightseers today where their ancestors were forced immigrants. For many it is a very emotional tourism. The guides point out the huge

² John Francis Maxwell, *Slavery and the Catholic Church: The History of Catholic Teaching Concerning the Moral Legitimacy of the Institution of Slavery* (Chichester and London: Barry Rose Publishers, 1975), 13-80.

cavernous prisons on ground level opening onto the central courtyard. Over a thousand slaves could be held in these precincts when necessary. The chapel used by the Catholic Portuguese is now a museum located at the entrance. The Dutch Calvinists fitted out a different chapel in one of the upper storeys of the prison. In one of the most emotional moments in the visit to Elmina is the narrow passageway descending from the prison where one is forced to stoop down like the slaves as one emerges through the doorway to the ocean. This is one of the exitways named *The Door of No Return*. William St Clair, in his recent history on Elmina, wrote the following:

For 143 years (1664-1807) [Elmina] was, in the words of one of its British governors, the grand emporium of the British slave trade. From this building perched on the shore of the South Atlantic Ocean, men, women, and children born in Africa were sold to British slave ships and carried to the West Indies, to North and South America, and to destinations elsewhere.³

By the middle of the 17th century the contract from Spain for African slave trade passed from the Dutch to the French and to the British, not forgetting the Danes, the Americans, and the Swedes, etc.

Historians are not in agreement over the total number of African slaves forced into the slave ships often called “slavers.” Most estimates suggest 12 million Africans

³ William St Clair, *The Door of No Return: The History of Cape Coast Castle and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York: BlueBridge, United Tribes Media, Inc., 2007), 1-2.

made the mid-passage from 1532 to 1880. Some would add that there were as many more captives not recorded.

The Atlantic slave trade was about wealth and greed. Sugar even more than gold, silver, and other resources was the driving force for slavery. The sugar plantations demanded more and more slave labor. The cultivation of sugar cane was labor intensive. In the Caribbean, the West Indies and Brazil were the leading exporters, but other island territory was almost as important. There was the famous triangular trade—cheap manufactured cloth, cheap firearms, and rum from Europe to the African west coast, loads of human cargo from Africa to the American and Caribbean slave markets, with sugar and rum back to Europe.⁴

Elmina on the beautiful Atlantic coast of Ghana is almost a pilgrimage place for African Americans. This past summer I went there with a Ghanaian friend. The guides were men who were descendants of former slaves of the British soldiers and guards. The tourists were subdued and attentive as we listened to the brutal facts of life in the castle. Most were people of color. Many were young Ghanaians. During the month of July there had been many celebrations to commemorate the abolition of slavery in 1807.

⁴ J.E. Inikori, "Africa in World History: The Export Slave Trade from Africa and the Emergence of the Atlantic Economic Order," Chapter 4 in B.A. Ogot., ed., *Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Publishers, LTD, 1992), 80-112. See also Shillington, 170-80.

1807⁵

In 1807, the pope was Pius VII, a Benedictine monk, elected in 1800 three months after Pius VI had died a prisoner in Revolutionary France. Pius VII had to face the ever increasing demands of Napoleon I and eventually the pope was reduced to becoming his prisoner. In 1801, Pius VII came to Paris to celebrate the coronation of Napoleon I as emperor of the French. This Benedictine pope, loved and admired by many, was finally kidnapped by force in 1809 and ended up as prisoner in Fontainebleau, one of the royal palaces. He would not return to Rome until 1814. During much of his pontificate, Cardinal Consalvi, secretary of State, a consummate diplomat, a man of vision with a will of steel, gave support and courage to Pius VII. It was through Consalvi that Pius VII was urged by the British Foreign Minister, Viscount Castlereagh, to use his influence to urge both Portugal and Spain to abolish the slave trade. But the question of the Holy See and the abolition of the slave trade goes back to another pope a hundred and fifty years before earlier.

⁵ Margaret M. O'Dwyer, *The Papacy in the Age of Napoleon and the Restoration. Pius VII, 1800-1823* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 1985), 190-95; 226-27.

The Procurator for all Christian Blacks

It begins with a badly written note now found in the Propaganda Fides Archives in Rome now known as the Congregation for the Evangelization of the People. Lourenço da Silva de Mendouça was an ex-slave seemingly from Brazil, of mixed parentage, who claimed descent from African kings. He arrived in Rome with letters of recommendation from Lisbon, dated February 15, 1681. The papers stated that Lourenço was the Procurator of the Confraternity of Our Lady Star of the Blacks. At this time both in Spain and in Latin America, there were established brotherhoods or *cofradías* composed of blacks, mulattoes, slaves, and freedmen. The *cofradía* were corporations with their own privileges under the patronage of a saint or a Catholic devotion. These *cofradía* brought honor and prestige to their members—even though they were blacks or even slaves. Some of these *cofradía* were very wealthy corporations; many of them bought the freedom of those members who were slaves. They were, in fact, mutual aid societies.

Lourenço had come to Rome in order to present to the Pope (Blessed Innocent XI 1676-1689) the horrors of slavery and asking him to issue a decree against the sale and the purchase of black Christians condemned to perpetual slavery. His petition called for an end of the evils and the cruelty of slavery. He wished that the pope would address this issue and bring liberation among all those Christians who were then in slavery. Although information regarding the treatment of slaves and the cruelty of the slave trade had already been transmitted to the

Congregation of the Propaganda, the report of Lourenço seemed to have captured their imagination.

Subsequently in 1685, the Congregation of the Propaganda received a lengthy memorandum on the condition of African slaves from statements of Capuchin missionaries relating their experience. They drew up a series of eleven propositions calling for a change in the treatment of African slaves. The Congregation of the Propaganda had to submit the eleven propositions to the Congregation of the Holy Office because they touched on ethical and theological questions. After a year's delay the Holy Office returned the Capuchins' propositions with total agreement. The Congregation was prepared to send directions regarding the treatment of slaves in their missions when it was stopped. The cardinals who were under the control of Spain and Portugal prevailed over the Congregation of the Propaganda.

The Patronato

In Spain and Portugal, the Catholic Church was under the control of the crown. The *patronato* granted to the crown the right to name the bishops and other ecclesiastics in their dominions, to control the activity of the missionaries, and to determine the questions of slavery. Those ecclesiastics who were most closely attached to the crown in Spain and Portugal were ready to block any interference from the Curia in Rome to the situation of

black slaves in their colonies. The petitions of Lourenço de Mendouça were filed away in the archives.⁶

A Black Saint

Over a century later the question of the Slave Trade and slavery itself came to the fore again. In 1807, Pope Pius VII canonized a black slave, St Benedict the Moor. He was the first canonized black saint in modern times. He was born in Sicily near Palermo in 1526. He died in 1589. His parents were slaves, part of the Africans brought to the Mediterranean region after the slave trade with the East was no longer possible. Benedict had been freed as a young man. He joined a group of hermits who lived under the inspiration of St Francis. The congregation was later dissolved and Benedict entered the Order of Friars Minor. He was later chosen as guardian and was a spiritual guide and counselor for many. Later again he was made a cook. He was never ordained, and he did not know how to read or write. He was a very popular saint. There was great devotion to him in Sicily, Italy, Spain, and Latin America. He was named the patron of African communities everywhere, especially in the Americas.

Pius VII was pope from 1800 to 1823. In this period, he canonized very few saints. Two hundred years ago this year, he had a period of peace and he canonized five saints on May 24th. One of them was St Benedict the Moor or St

⁶ Richard Gray, "The Papacy and the Atlantic Slave Trade: Lourenço da Silva, the Capuchins and the Decisions of the Holy Office" in Richard Gray, *Black Christians and White Missionaries*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 11-27.

Benedict the African. Some would say that canonizations are for political reasons. It might be more correct to say that many saints are canonized because they are truly relevant to the age and for the people who live at the time of the canonization. This was certainly true of Benedict the Moor. Pius VII had been asked to influence the Spanish and Portuguese to end the slave trade. Benedict the Moor a saint was a statement about blackness, slavery, and racism.⁷

Unfortunately, this can only be conjecture. I have not found any documentation that says the canonization of this holy black man was to further the abolition of the slave trade. Thanks to the efforts of William Wilberforce, Lord Grenville, and Viscount Castlereagh, however, the assembled European powers at the Congress of Vienna from 1814-1815 were to make some notice of the evils of the African Slave Trade. Consalvi was present to represent the Papal States. Nevertheless, Pius VII was more than ready to work for the end of the slave trade. The pope wrote several papal letters to France, Spain, and Portugal to urge a cessation of the slave trade and even for slavery itself. The action of the pope regarding the slave trade was the clear expression of the Holy See.

The Final Condemnation of Slavery

It was only in 1839 that a pope clearly and unequivocally condemned the slave trade and also slavery.

⁷ See Peter Doyle, *Butler's Lives of the Saints. April. Revised edition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 26; see also O'Dwyer, 97.

The pope was Gregory XVI, a Camaldolese monk, elected pope in 1831-- narrow-minded but open to the needs of the time; rigid but a champion of the missions; and an openness to the ordination of a native clergy—he was a strong opponent to all revolutionary and liberal governments, but also a determined opponent of the slavery trade and slavery itself.

In 1839, he published the Apostolic Brief, entitled *In Supremo Apostolatus Fastigio*.

We, by apostolic authority, warn and strongly exhort in the Lord faithful Christians of every condition that no one in the future dare to bother unjustly, despoil of their possessions, or reduce to slavery Indians, Blacks or other such peoples. Nor are they to lend aid and favor to those who give themselves up to these practices, or exercise that inhuman traffic by which the Blacks, as if they were not humans but rather mere animals, having been brought into slavery in no matter what way, are, without any distinction and contrary to the rights of justice and humanity, bought, sold and sometimes given over to the hardest labor, to which is added the fact that in the hope of gain, proposed by the first owners of the Blacks for this same trade, dissensions and almost perpetual conflicts have arisen in those regions.

We then, by Apostolic Authority, condemn all such practices as absolutely unworthy of the Christian name.⁸

⁸ Joel Panzer, *The Popes and Slavery* (New York: Alba House, 1996), 100, 101-102.

The Latin text of Gregory XVI is difficult. It is convoluted. It is the language of the curia. It is written for the theologians. It is written so that some theologians could say the text does not mean us. And, in fact, the American bishops did just that. Bishop England of Charleston wrote eighteen open letters published in his diocesan newspaper to John Forsyth, Confederate leader during the Civil War, who had at one time served as Secretary of State under Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren. Bishop England wanted to prove that Gregory XVI was not an abolitionist. According to England, the pope's concern was with the Spanish and the Portuguese and was not pertinent to the slavery as found in the United States. On the other hand, despite the language of Gregory XVI, the Holy See in later documents would make clear that this document of Gregory XVI condemned slavery and the slave trade; and that in addition, Gregory XVI forbade any ecclesiastic or lay person to defend openly "this trade in Blacks."⁹ The force of this condemnation, however, is attenuated by the fact that Gregory XVI did not apply any censures. It was also weakened because there was no theological foundation.

This foundation would be given in one of the most remarkable pastoral letters of the nineteenth century. Félix Antoine Philibert Dupanloup (1802-78) became the bishop of Orléans in 1849. He was one of the most vocal of the French bishops. His influence was enormous. He was both a liberal and at times a conservative. In 1862, he wrote a pastoral letter to his priests and, in fact, to the whole world.

⁹ Ibid., 102.

This letter is perhaps one of the most beautifully written texts regarding the Church's teaching...

...what I do know is that there are still four million slaves in the United States, two million in the rest of America, in all six million slaves on Christian lands, eighteen centuries after the cross...

...I lay aside abstract theory, and I look at the facts.

...I do not care about abstractions and hypotheses. ...How is it that man could reduce a man to slavery? I defy that they explain this to me without original sin. How has the slave become the equal of the owner? I defy that they explain this without the Redemption. Slavery is so detestable that one cannot comprehend the beginning, and it is so easy that one does not understand the end.

If I were to venture the theory, I would show that the unity of the human family, which is for us not an opinion but a dogma—let it be understood well, a dogma, and one of the foundations even of our Faith has become also a dogma of science. I would show that the unity of the human family, the principle of dignity, of equality, of liberty, of humanity among persons, condemns and rejects slavery...

There are then on the same earth as I, children of God and sons and daughters of men as well as I, saved by the same blood as I, destined to the same heaven as I, five or six million of those like me in the United States, ...who are slaves: elderly people, men, women, young girls, and children. Just Heaven! Is it not

finally time after eighteen hundred years of Christianity that we all begin to practice the eternal law: Do not do to another what you do not wish that it be done to yourself!¹⁰

What Dupanloup did in his pastoral letter was to shift the question of slavery away from the Roman Law and its categories, away from economic necessities and shift to the unity of the human race, the essential dignity of the human person, and the universality of Christ's redemption. Slavery denies that all people reflect the image of God. It demeans the image of God. Dupanloup speaks with a passion and with an eloquence in a way no American bishop ever did.

In the long history of the Catholic Church, there is enormous documentation concerned with slavery and the acquisition of slaves. Popes and theologians have wrestled with the issue of slavery and enslaved people. We live in a world where slavery still exists. We live in a world where the consequents of slavery are still operative everywhere.

In 1992, Pope John Paul II visited the African nation of Senegal. He went to the island of Gorée, a few kilometers off the capital city of Dakar. The pope went to the House of Slaves where men, women, and children were assembled to take them into the pirogues to the slave ships anchored off the island. Like our ancestors before him, the pope

¹⁰ "Letter of Monsignor the Bishop of Orléans to the Clergy of his diocese on Slavery, 1862," in *Stamped with the Image of God. African Americans as God's Image in Black.*, eds. Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. and Jamie Phelps, O.P., a series of *American Catholic Identities. A Documentary History*, general editor Christopher J. Kauffman (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 43-46.

looked out through the gateway leading down to the pirogue — *The Gate of No Return*. The pope was so overcome that he spoke from his heart, laying aside his text. I would like to end with a quotation from part of that address.

Throughout a whole period of the history of the African continent, black men, women and children were brought to this cramped space...They came from all different countries and, parting in chains for new lands, they retained ...the last image of their native Africa... this island is fixed in the memory and heart of all the black diaspora...

From this African shrine of black sorrow, we implore heaven's forgiveness....We pray that the scourge of slavery and all its effects may disappear forever...¹¹

¹¹ Panzer, *Appendix D.*, 119.

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