

# Letter to the Citizens of Color and Free Negroes of Saint-Domingue

## Abbé Grégoire

### 1791

On June 8, 1791 - about two months before the start of the Boukman Rebellion - Henri Grégoire, the influential member of the Société des Amis des Noirs in Paris, wrote the following letter to the "*Citizens of Color and Free Negroes of Saint-Domingue* "

Friends:

You were men; you are now citizens and reintegrated to the plenitude of your rights. From this day forward you will participate in the sovereignty of the people. The decree that the National Assembly rendered in your regard on this subject is not a favor, for a favor is a privilege, and a privilege is an injustice, and these words must never again soil the Code of the French. In assuring you the exercise of political rights we have paid a debt. To fail in this would have been a crime on our part and a stain on the constitution. Could the legislators of a free nation do less for you than our former despots?

More than a century ago Louis XIV solemnly recognized and proclaimed your rights, but this sacred patrimony was invaded by pride and cupidity, which gradually made heavier your yoke and poisoned your existence. The resurrection of the French Empire opened your hearts to hope, and this consoling ray soothed the bitterness of your ills. In Europe this was barely suspected. The white colonists who were seated among us loudly complained of ministerial tyranny, but they were careful not to speak of their own. They never articulated the complaints of the unfortunate mixed-bloods, who are nevertheless their children. It is we who, from a distance of two thousand leagues, were forced to defend the children against the contempt, the fury, the cruelty of their fathers. But it was in vain that they attempted to silence your demands, your sighs. Despite the extent of the seas that separate us your ills resonated in the hearts of the French of Europe, for they have a heart.

In his tenderness God embraces all men. His love only admits the difference that results from the extent of their virtues. Can the law – which must be the emanation of eternal justice – consecrate a guilty predilection, and the fatherland, which looks after all the members of the great family, can it be the mother of some, and the stepmother of others?

No, messieurs, you could not escape from the solicitude of the National Assembly. Upon unfurling before the eyes of the universe nature's great charter it found your titles. An attempt had been made to make them disappear, but fortunately the characters were ineffaceable, like divinity's sacred imprint engraved on your foreheads.

Already, on March 28, 1790, in its instructions to the colonies, the National Assembly had included both the whites and the mixed-bloods in a common denomination. Your enemies wanted to make the paper lie by printing the contrary. But it is uncontested that when I

specifically asked that you be included a mass of deputies, including several planters, hastened to say that the article included you in its generality. And M. Barnave himself, who had told me this, ceding to my many questionings, finally admitted this before the Assembly. Was I not right in fearing that perverted interpretation would travesty our decrees? New vexations concerning you, and your ills carried to an extreme, have only too well justified my apprehensions. The letters I have received from you have made my tears flow. Posterity will be astonished, will perhaps be indignant, that for five consecutive days we debated your cause, whose justice is so evident. Alas, when humanity is reduced to fighting against vanity and prejudice, its triumph is a difficult conquest.

For quite some time the “Society of the Friends of Blacks” has sought to find a means of easing your lot and that of the slaves. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to do good with impunity, and its respectable zeal has earned it many insults. Vile men have hidden themselves behind anonymity to cast their venom on it, and in impudent pamphlets they have not ceased to repeat objections and calumnies that have been pulverized a hundred times. How many times have these perverted beings not accused of us having sold out to the English, of being paid off by the English against the French, of having addressed incendiary letters to you and sent you arms! My friends, you know how cowardly and atrocious are these impostures, we who have ceaselessly preached attachment to the motherland, resignation, and patience while waiting for justice’s reawakening. Nothing was able to cool off our zeal, nor that of your mixed-blood brothers who are in Paris. M. Raimond, above all, has heroically dedicated himself to your defense. With what transports you would have seen this distinguished citizen at the bar of the National Assembly – which he deserves to be a member – present the heart-rending tableau of your misfortunes and energetically demand your rights! If the Assembly had sacrificed them it would have corrupted its glory. Duty commanded it to decree with justice, to explain with clarity, to execute with firmness, and this it did. And if (which God forbid) some event hidden in the future’s breast were to tear our colonies from us would it not be better to have a loss to deplore instead of an injustice to be reproached?

Citizens, raise your humiliated faces. To the dignity of men, associate courage and the pride of a free people. May 15, the day upon which you re-conquered your rights, should be forever memorable to you and your children. This epoch will periodically awaken in you sentiments of gratitude towards the Supreme Being, and let your voices strike the vaults of heaven to which you will raise your grateful hands!

You finally have a fatherland, and from this day forward you will only see the law above you. The advantage of participating in its creation will assure you the inalienable right of all peoples, that of only obeying yourselves.

You have a fatherland, and it will doubtless no longer be a land of exile in which you recognize only masters or companions in misfortune, the former distributing, the latter receiving contempt and insults. Your sobs of pain were punished like cries of rebellion. Placed between daggers and

death that unhappy countryside was often drenched with your tears, sometimes tinted with your blood.

You have a fatherland, and doubtless happiness will shine on those places that witnessed your birth. In peace you will then taste the fruits of the fields that you have cultivated without trouble. Then will be filled the gap that – placing at a great distance from each other the children of a same father – silenced nature's voice and broke the ties of fraternity. Then the chaste sweetness of the conjugal union will replace the filthy explosions of debauch, which was an insult to the majesty of morality.

And by what strange overturning of reason was it shameful for a white to wed a woman of color, when there was no dishonor in living with her in the crudest libertinage? The more denuded a man is of virtues, the more he seeks to surround himself with frivolous distinctions. And what an absurdity to want to base merit on the nuances of skin, on the more or less brown tincture of a face! The thinking man sometimes blushes at being a man when he sees his like blinded by such a delirium. But since pride unfortunately is the most tenacious of passions, the reign of prejudice has been prolonged, for man seems not to be able to attain truth until he has exhausted all of errors possibilities.

In our eastern colonies this prejudice does not exist, which have been condemned by the organ of MM Monneron. There is nothing as touching as the elegy of the people of color as it was consigned by the inhabitants of that part of the world in their instructions for their deputies to the National Assembly. The Academy of Sciences in Paris has the honor of counting among its correspondents a mulatto from the Ile de France. Among us, a highly-esteemed Negro is the administrator of the district of Saint Hypolite in the Department of the Gard. We do not believe that the difference in skin is capable of establishing different rights between the members of a political society. Nor will you find that prideful pettiness among our brave National Guard, who want to go to America to ensure the execution of your decrees. Penetrated by the praiseworthy sentiments manifested by the city of Bordeaux, along with it they will tell you that the decree relating to men of color, written under the auspices of prudence and wisdom is an homage to reason and justice; that the deputies of the colonies slandered your intentions and those of commerce. It is quite strange, the conduct of these representatives, ardently soliciting from Versailles their admission to the Assembly, swearing along with us at the Jeu de Paume <sup>1</sup> not to quit us until the constitution shall be completed, and then declaring to us, after the decree of last May 15, that they can no longer take their seats among us. This desertion is an abandonment of principles and a breach in the religion of the vow.

Already those white colonists who are worthy of being Frenchmen have hastened to abjure ridiculous prejudices and only see in you brothers and friends. With what sweet emotion do we quote these words of the active citizens of Jacmel: "Vowing to follow without restriction the decrees of the National Assembly on our present and future constitution, and to conform to those that could change its substance." The citizens of Port-au-Prince tell the National Assembly the same thing but in different terms: " Deign, Messieurs, to receive in the vow taken by the

municipality in the name of the commune of Port-au-Prince, to respect and promptly execute all your decrees and to never stray under any pretext.”

It is thus that philosophy expands its horizons in the New World, and soon absurd prejudices will have as its only followers subaltern tyrants, who want to perpetuate in America the reign of despotism that was crushed in France. And what would they have said if the men of color had attempted to tear from whites the enjoyment of political advantages? With what force would they not have cried out against this vexation! They are foaming with rage that your rights were revealed and your rights rendered to you. In the hope of consoling their irritated pride they will perhaps exhaust themselves in efforts to foil our decrees' success. They will attempt an uprising which, tearing the colonies from their motherland will facilitate the means of escaping from their creditors. They are tireless in spreading terror, in saying that an act of justice touching you will shake Saint Domingue. We have seen nothing but falsehood in that assertion. On the contrary, we believe that this decree will tighten the ties that unite you to the metropole. Patriotism enlightening your interests and affections, it is yet towards the metropole that you will direct your commercial operations, and the mutual tributes of industry will establish between France and its colonies a constant exchange of fortunes and fraternal sentiments. If you were to be unfaithful to France you would be the vilest and most evil of men. No, generous citizens, you will not be traitors to the fatherland; the very idea of this penetrates you with horror. Rallied along with all good Frenchmen under the flags of liberty, you will defend our sublime constitution. One day deputies of color will cross the ocean to come sit in the national diet and swear with us to live and die under our laws. One day the sun will only light free men among you; the rays of the star that spreads light will no longer fall upon irons and slaves. The National Assembly has not yet associated these latter to your destiny, for the rights of citizens, briskly conceded to those who do not know the obligations, would perhaps be for them a harmful present. But do not forget that like you, they are born free and equal. It is part of the irresistible march of events, of the progress of enlightenment that all the dispossessed peoples of the domain of liberty will finally recuperate that inalienable property.

More than whites, you are reproached for your harshness towards Negroes. But alas, so many impostures about you have been spread that it would be only prudent to have doubts concerning that accusation. If it were nevertheless to be founded, act in such a way that a malicious rumor becomes a slander.

Your oppressors have often kept the lights of Christianity far from slaves, because the religion of kindness, of equality, of liberty, was not suitable for the ferocity of these blood-thirsty men. May your conduct contrast perfectly with theirs. Charity is the cry of the gospel; your pastors will make it resound among you. Open your hearts to this divine morality whose organ they are. We have eased your sufferings, ease those of these unfortunate victims of avarice who water your fields with their sweat and often with their tears. Let existence no longer be a torture for the slaves. By your beneficence toward them expiate Europe's crimes. In progressively bringing them towards liberty you will be fulfilling an obligation, you will be preparing consoling memories for yourselves, you will be honoring humanity, and you will be assuring the prosperity

of the colonies. It is this shall be your conduct towards your Negro brothers. But what should you do regarding your white fathers? You will doubtless be permitted to shed tears on the ashes of Ferrand de Baudière , over the unfortunate Ogé <sup>2</sup>, legally assassinated and dying on the wheel for having wanted to be free. But may he perish, he from among you who will dare conceive projects of vengeance against your persecutors. In any case, are they not given over to remorse and covered in eternal opprobrium? Will not contemporary execration outstrip posterity's execration concerning them? Bury in a profound forgetfulness all of hatred's resentment, taste the delicious pleasure of doing good to your oppressors, and repress those too open joyful impulses which by recalling their wrongs will sharpen repentance's point against them.

Religiously submissive to law, inspire the love for it in your children. May a meticulous education, developing their moral faculties, prepare for the generation that will succeed you virtuous citizens, public men, and defenders of the fatherland.

How their hearts will be moved when, taking them to your shores, you will point their gaze towards France, saying to them: over there is the motherland. It is from there that liberty, justice, and happiness came among you. There are our fellow citizens, our brothers and our friends. We have sworn them eternal friendship. Heirs of our sentiments, of our affections, may your hearts and your mouths repeat our vows. Live to love them and, if need be, die to defend them.

Signed,  
Grégoire  
Paris June 8, 1791

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