



## Christianity and enslaved Africans in colonial South Carolina

Francis Le Jau (1709-1714)

*Francis Le Jau was a Huguenot, a French Protestant. To escape religious persecution in Catholic France, he fled to Britain, where he became an Anglican priest. Subsequently, he ministered in two of Britain's American colonies under the auspices of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), an Anglican missionary organization. The SPG sent him first to the Caribbean island of St. Kitts and later to South Carolina, both places where black slaves outnumbered white colonists; part of Le Jau's mandate from the SPG was to make Christians among the enslaved. The following selections come from Le Jau's reports to SPG leadership in England about his work in South Carolina. In these selections, he describes his interactions with enslaved Africans and his relations with white Christian slaveholders.*

*[October 20, 1709]*

On Sunday next I design, God willing, to baptize two very sensible and honest Negro men whom I have kept upon trial these two years. Several others have spoken to me also. I do nothing too hastily in that respect. I instruct them and must have the consent of their masters, with a good testimony and proof of their honest life and sober conversation. Some masters in my parish are very well satisfied with my proceedings in that respect; others do not seem to be so, yet they have given over opposing my design openly. It is to be hoped that the good example of the one will have an influence over the others. [...]

To remove all pretense from the adult slaves I shall baptize of their being free upon that account, I have thought fit to require first their consent to this following declaration: *You declare, in the presence of God and before this congregation, that you do not ask for the holy baptism out of any design to free yourself from the duty and obedience you owe to your master while you live, but merely for the good of your soul and to partake of the graces and blessings promised to the members of the church of Jesus Christ.* One of the most scandalous and common crimes of our slaves is their perpetual changing of wives and husbands, which occasions great disorders. I also tell them whom I baptize: *The Christian religion does not allow plurality of wives, nor any changing of them. You promise truly to keep to the wife you now have till death does part you.* It has been customary among them to have their feasts, dances, and merry meetings upon the Lord's day; that practice is pretty well over in this parish, but not absolutely. I tell them that present themselves to be admitted to baptism, they must promise they'll spend no more the Lord's day in idleness, and if they do I'll cut them off from the communion.

*[February 1, 1710]*

I have in this parish a few Negro slaves who were born and baptized among the Portuguese but speak very good English. They come to church and are well instructed, so as to express a great desire to receive the holy communion amongst us. I proposed to them to declare openly their abjuring the errors of the Romish church, without which declaration I could not receive them. I bid them consider of it against Easter. [...]

I should say something of propagating the Christian knowledge. We want a schoolmaster in my parish for our white people's children; but as for the Negroes or Indians, with all submission I would desire that such a thing should be taken into consideration as the importance of the matter and the consequences which may follow do deserve. The best scholar of all the Negroes in my parish, and a very sober and honest liver, through his learning was like to create some confusion among all the Negroes in this country. He had a book wherein he read some description of the several judgments that chastise men because of their sins in these latter days. That description made an impression upon his spirit, and he told his master abruptly there would be a dismal time, and the moon would be turned into blood, and there would be dearth of darkness; and went away. When I heard of that, I sent for the Negro, who ingenuously told me he had read so in a book. I advised him and charged him not to speak so, which he promised to me, but yet would never show me the book. But when he spoke those few words to his master, some Negro overheard a part; and it was publicly blazed abroad that an angel came and spoke to the man, he had seen a hand that gave him a book, he had heard voices, seen fires, etc. As I had opportunities, I took care to undeceive those who asked me about it; now it is over.

I fear that those men have not judgment enough to make good use of their learning, and I have thought most convenient not to urge too far that Indians and Negroes should be indifferently admitted to learn to read; but I leave it to the discretion of their masters, whom I exhort to examine well their inclinations.

*[June 13, 1710]*

I have upon Sundays, after our divine service, invited the Negroes and Indian slaves to stay for half an hour. The invitation, to my great comfort, has been joyfully received by about fifty of them [...] I teach them the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Commandments; I explain some portion of the catechism; I give them an entire liberty to ask questions; I endeavor to proportion my answers and all my instructions to their want and capacity. I must acknowledge that the hand of God does visibly appear on this particular occasion. I had often attempted and proposed a time, a method, and means easy, as I thought, for the instruction of those poor souls; but all in vain, till this last was put in my mind by special mercy. The most pious among their masters stay also and hear. Others, not so zealous, would find fault if possible; their murmurings sometimes reach my ears [...]

Four or six shall soon be baptized by the consent of their masters [...] Those slaves behave themselves very well and do better for their masters' profit than formerly, for they are taught to serve out of Christian love and duty. They tell me openly that they will ever bless God for their knowing good things which they knew not before. [...]

There are three or four Portuguese slaves in this parish very desirous to receive the communion amongst us. I framed a short model of submission grounded upon some popish tenets which they told me of their own accord, without troubling them with things they know not; I require of them their renouncing of those particular points, the chief of which is praying to the saints and that they must not return to the popish worship in case they should be sent to Madeira again. I gave them that form of submission in writing and left it to their consideration; they come constantly to church and are very sensible.

*[February 9, 1711]*

I had undertaken to keep the holy days. When I had declared it, the Negroes took that opportunity and would not work, which made the masters angry, and none came to church. So I am forced to forebear.

*[September 18, 1711]*

A few days ago, I heard of some strange reasoning of my neighbors. “What?” said a lady, considerable enough in any other respect but in that of sound knowledge. “Is it possible that any of my slaves could go to heaven, and must I see them there?” A young gentleman had said, some time before, that he is resolved never to come to the holy table while slaves are received there. I really believe they speak unwisely through ignorance and will fail to take proper opportunities to instruct [their slaves].

There are two poor Negro slaves, born and brought up among the Portuguese, that are very desirous to abjure the popish heresies and be received to the communion among us. I have kept them above two years upon trial, as to their life and behavior, and have taught them as diligently as I could. One of them has an admirable sense and is a pattern of faithfulness and sobriety to all the slaves in the parish; the other has not so much wit but is very honest. I intend, God willing, to receive them both in some short time and to do it in public, in the best and most solemn manner I can contrive [...]

*[February 20, 1712]*

I have had of late an opportunity to oppose with all my might the putting of a very inhumane law—and in my judgment, very unjust it is—in execution, in relation to runaway Negroes. By a law enacted in this province some years before I came, such a Negro must be mutilated by amputation of testicles if it be a man, and of ears if a woman. I have openly declared against such punishment, grounded upon the law of God, which sets a slave at liberty if he should lose an eye or a tooth when he is corrected (Exodus 21); and some good planters are of my opinion. [...] When I look upon the ordinary cause that makes these poor souls run away and almost despair, I find it is immoderate labor and want of victuals and rest. God Almighty inspire the honorable Society, my most illustrious patrons, to consider those things, so that they may be remedied for the encouragement of those poor creatures [...]

*[May 26, 1712]*

I had the honor to inform the Society of the good disposition of some of my parishioners to have the slaves' children baptized. I said I would receive any that should be presented by the masters. I told also the Negroes who are baptized that such children as have both their parents Christians should be admitted to the holy baptism, and the Christian slaves in the same plantation should be received as sureties<sup>a</sup> because of the difficulties of prevailing upon the white people to be so charitable. The difficulty I meet at this time, and which I humbly presume to propose to the

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<sup>a</sup> sureties = godparents, responsible for seeing that the baptized child receives a Christian upbringing

Society, is whether I may receive a child who has but one of his parents baptized and for whom I cannot find any other sureties but some Christian slaves [...]

*[December 11, 1712]*

I thought to have baptized some more Negro slaves this Advent; they are well instructed, and I hear no complaint concerning them. Their masters seem very much averse to my design. Some of them will not give them leave to come to church to learn how to pray to God and to serve him. I cannot find any reason for this new opposition but the old pretext that baptism makes the slaves proud and undutiful. I endeavor to convince them of the contrary from the example of those I have baptized, and chiefly those who are admitted to our holy communion, who behave themselves very well [...]

*[February 23, 1713]*

[...F]ew masters appear zealous or even pleased with what the missionaries try to do for the good of their slaves. They are more cruel, some of them, of late days than before. They hamstring, maim, and unlimb those poor creatures for small faults. A man within this month had a very fine Negro—baptized, sensible, careful, and good in all respects—who, being wearied with labor and fallen asleep, had the mischance to lose a parcel of rice, which, by the oversetting of a periagua, fell into a river. The man, though entreated by the minister of the parish, who is Brother Maule, and some persons of the best consideration among us to forgive the Negro, who had offended only through neglect without malice, thought fit to keep him for several days in chains and, I am told, muffled up that he might not eat, and scourge him twice a day, and at night to put him into a hellish machine contrived by him into the shape of a coffin, where he could not stir. The punishment having continued several days and nights, and there being no appearance when it should end, the poor Negro, through despair, asked one of his children for a knife and, manacled as he was, stabbed himself with it.

I am told this is the fifth slave that same man has destroyed by his cruelty within two or three years, but he is only a hired overseer; the owner of the slaves lives out of this province. I own I see everybody almost angry at so much barbarity; yet he pretends to go to church, and they look upon the man as guilty of murder, and so do great many of my acquaintance, who, though not so barbarous, take no care at all of the souls of their slaves and as little as they can of their bodies. I am at a loss when I see them in a praying posture, knowing that at the same time they do not love their neighbor; and what is most amazing, I cannot make them comprehend that their neglect is a habitual state of sin [...]

*[January 22, 1714]*

Since the first of this month, I baptized an old sensible Negro man upon his deathbed and three Negro children, and all of them with their master's consent [...]. It is a singular comfort to me to see that while so many professed Christians appear but lukewarm, it pleases God to raise to himself faithful and devout servants from among the heathens, who are very zealous in the practice of our Christian duties. I hear no complaining of our proselytes; their masters commend them for their faithfulness [...]

About Christmas last past, there was a rumor spread of an intended conspiracy of the Negroes against us all, like that of New York. I was told that the plot had been formed in Goose Creek, where there is a good number of fine Negroes. This news made me inquire and observe, being resolved to find out how true the thing might be. The matter has been examined very diligently by our government this very week, twelve or fifteen Negroes living on the north side of Cooper River having been apprehended under suspicion. It has appeared upon good evidence that a Negro fellow brought hither some years ago from Martinique, and of a very stubborn temper, had enticed some slaves to join with him that they might get their liberty by force. The thing being proved against him, he has been put to death for it. Two more slaves have been very severely chastised for hearkening to him, but there was not any sufficient proof to take their life, and all denied the crime; the other prisoners have been acquitted.

But what I consider as a singular providence, there has not been so much as one of our Goose Creek Negroes accused of having knowledge of the plot, far from having consented to so great a crime. The most sensible of our slaves whom I have admitted to the holy sacrament have solemnly protested to me that if ever they hear of any ill design of the slaves, I shall know of it from them, that it may be prevented; and I can't but depend upon the truth of their words, knowing them to be exemplarily pious and honest.

**Source:** Frank J. Klingberg, ed., *The Carolina Chronicle of Dr. Francis Le Jau, 1706-1717* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956), 60-61, 69-70, 76-77, 86, 102, 108-109, 112-113, 124-125, 129-130, 136-137, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31822015513922>. Public domain in the United States, Google-digitized.

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The capitalization of *Negro* reproduces the customary (though not perfectly consistent) usage of the source publication. The racial label *white*, inconsistently capitalized in the source, is consistently presented here in lowercase; so, too, the word *popish*. To strike a balance between avoiding confusion and improving the readability of the excerpts, the names of religious texts, or their shortened forms, are capitalized as in the source (*the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the [Ten] Commandments*), while other religious terms capitalized in the source have been converted to lowercase (including *holy baptism, holy communion, holy table, divine service, and catechism*—that last because, although a text, it is titled “A Catechism,” with the indefinite article, in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*).

These edited excerpts from Le Jau's correspondence are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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