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1-1-2011

### Introduction to the Anthology

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#### Repository Citation

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## **INTRODUCTION TO THE ANTHOLOGY**

The purpose of this *Anthology* is to make known to the members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit the personalities of the two men responsible for its existence. Claude François Poullart des Places founded the Congregation of the Holy Spirit in 1703 and Francis Libermann, founded the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary in 1841. The latter was integrated into the former in 1848, giving it a new breath of life and widening its missionary objectives.

Claude François Poullart des Places was born in Rennes, which at that time was the capital of Brittany, on February 26th, 1679. His family belonged to the upper classes of Breton society. His father, M. François Claude Poullart des Places, was both a business man and an expert in law, with many contacts in the Parliament of Brittany. His mother, Jeanne Le Meneust, also came from an old Breton family. The young Claude received a very good Christian and academic education from the Jesuits in Rennes and Caen (Normandy), and was one of the best students in his group. But just as he was about to embark on a career as a councillor in the Parliament of Brittany, he decided, during a retreat, to become a priest instead, in the service of the poor.

During his theological studies at the Jesuit collège of Louis-le-Grand, just opposite the Sorbonne University in Paris, he became increasingly aware of the many young seminarians who were finding it almost impossible to complete their training for the priesthood because of a lack of money. So with them, on May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1703, he set up a community of residence and

formation, dedicated to the Holy Spirit and under the protection of the Immaculate Conception.

The community grew rapidly, so Claude had to find larger premises and, above all, a body of formators to help him in his many tasks. This was the origin of the Priests of the Holy Spirit, guiding the students of the seminary of the Holy Spirit for their future ministry to the poor and neglected. Claude was ordained priest on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1707, but died only two years later on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1709, worn out by his labours and the victim of an epidemic which swept through Paris. He left behind a flourishing community of 80 young men, well catered for by a team of formators, a community already known for its spiritual and missionary dynamism.

François Libermann was born on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1802, at Saverne in Alsace, the fifth child of the rabbi of this small town. All his early years were passed in absorbing the culture and traditional sources of Judaism. He was sent to Metz in Lorraine to begin his rabbinical studies, but he soon underwent a deep crisis of his Jewish faith, as his eldest brother, Samson, had done before him along with several well-known Jewish personalities of the time. On moving to Paris, where he was to complete his studies, Francis sought refuge at the Collège Stanislas. It was while there that he was bowled over by a sudden enlightenment and he received baptism on Christmas Eve of the same year.

Almost immediately afterwards, he felt called to serve Jesus, whom he now recognised as the Messiah, as a priest; so he entered the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice in Paris in September, 1827. But he was prevented from advancing to holy orders because of serious epileptic attacks, so the seminary sent him to another of its houses at Issy, near Paris, where he spent the next six years as an assistant bursar and spiritual guide to the young seminarians. He eventually moved to Rennes as novice

master for the Eudist Fathers and it was there that he heard the call to offer himself for the "Work for the Black People", a project of Frédéric Le Vavasseur and Eugène Tisserant for the evangelisation of the black people in the islands of Bourbon (today La Réunion in the Indian Ocean) and Haiti in the West Indies. He then spent a whole year in Rome (1840), waiting for the authorisation to found this new missionary community, the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary.

He was ordained priest at Amiens on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1841, and opened the novitiate of the young Congregation at La Neuville, near Amiens. Later, he was asked to accept two other missions – Mauritius in the Indian Ocean and the Two Guineas along the West Coast of Africa – so he took steps to unite his young Congregation with that of the Holy Spirit, in order to coordinate their respective forces and obtain the approval of the French government, without which any missionary activity would be almost impossible.

On September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1848, the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary was suppressed by Rome and integrated into the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Libermann was elected as the 11<sup>th</sup> Superior General. He then led the renewed Congregation, the result of what has been known as the "fusion", for the next three years and he died on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1852, venerated by all who knew him, as had been the case with the original founder, Claude Poullart des Places. As a guide in the spiritual life, an animator of missionary awareness, an architect of Mission, a leader of men, an inspiration of apostolic communities and a guide for two other congregations, Libermann was rich in talents and gifts, yet always profoundly poor and totally committed to God.

The best way to get to know the character of those who have gone before us is through their writings. Those of Poullart des Place are quite few in number: they consist mainly of personal

notes made during retreats and the *General and particular Rules* that he drew up for the community of the Holy Spirit. But Francis Libermann has left us many letters and a good number of more systematic writings, composed, according to circumstances, in his various roles as spiritual director and superior general of a missionary order. The experts reckon that his letters give a more living and intimate access to his personality, so rich in different gifts. In them, Libermann speaks in confidence and shows the same trust in the discretion of his correspondents.

But his letters and writings in the *Notes et Documents*, collected by Fr. Cabon over 35 years, are very numerous and very varied in their purpose. This collection is not exhaustive as a few more letters have been discovered subsequently. So a selection has had to be made, and, unfortunately, some of the basic texts could not be published in their entirety in the present work because of their length.

The choice was not based on purely subjective criteria. It has taken into account the studies and advice of various Libermann experts—francophones, anglophones and lusophones. It is also based on the experience of several

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<sup>1</sup> *Notes and Documents relative to the life and work of the Venerable François Marie-Paul Libermann, Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Heart of Mary*. published in French by the Mother House in Paris, 30 rue Lhomond, between 1929 and 1956. It consists of 13 volumes and two supplements. References to this work will be as follows: N.D.I, II, etc.

*Spiritual letters of the Venerable Libermann, Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Heart of Mary*. This was also published in French in 3 volumes in 1889. References to this work will be written as: L.S. I, II, etc.

English translations of some of the above works were published in the 1960s in the *Spiritian Series of Duquesne Studies* by Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pa. The General Editor was Fr. Henry Koren, C.S.Sp., and most of the translations were done by Fr. Walter Van de Putte, C.S.Sp.

formators who have been responsible for young Spiritan candidates over many years.

The selection is divided into eight parts. The first presents the person and the work of Claude François Poullart des Places. The other seven chapters are devoted to Libermann and they try to show the various gifts that he brought to the service of the mission confided to the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary and, later, to the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. The aim of this selection has been to provide sufficient resources for a serious initiation into the persons and works of our founders.

Has there been a critical edition of the texts chosen? Yes, as regards those of Poullart des Places. For the Libermann texts, some have been published after consulting the original manuscripts, especially those reproduced by Paul Coulon in his important work on Libermann.<sup>1</sup> A comparison of the versions Fr. Cabon produced in *Notes et Documents* and the originals<sup>2</sup> shows a few variations, most of which are of small importance as regards the overall meaning.

At the end of this book, you will find an explanatory index of the principal correspondents of Libermann, which can be useful in understanding the background to some of the letters.

**Père Christian de Mare**

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Coulon and Paule Brasseur: *Libermann. 1802-1852* (1988). Cerf, Paris.

<sup>2</sup> The originals are kept in the General Archives of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, 12, rue du Père Mazurié, 94669 Chevilly-Larue Cedex. Copies of the original letters exist on microfilm and CD, the latter having been produced by the Swiss Province of the Congregation. A certain amount of expertise would be needed to read these originals.