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### Libermann's Respect for Human Persons (Continuation) Libermann and Human Freedom

Amadeu Martins

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# SPIRITAN PAPERS



**Number 3**

**MAY-AUGUST 1977**

**SPIRITAN STUDIES GROUP  
GENERALATE C.S.Sp.  
ROME**



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Poullart des Places at the age of 16.



## LIBERMANN'S RESPECT FOR PERSONS

### 2 – LIBERMANN AND HUMAN FREEDOM<sup>1</sup>

I looked for a text of Libermann which would serve as a summary of my chosen topic and the most appropriate one I could find is from a letter he wrote to his brother on January 6, 1826, before his conversion:

**“You seem to doubt my friendship for you since you have changed your religion. Even if I were most zealous for the synagogue, I could not stop being sincerely fond of my brothers. This attachment was bred in me from my infancy and has always been my delight and my happiness . . .”**

And he adds:

**“Here is what I think about religion:**

**God gave us the ability to think . . . so that we might use it. If man . . . had to give himself up blindly to the bonds of religion, what difference would there be between him and the beasts . . .? Why did I receive this heavenly gift, if not to use it? Working on this principle, I have formed my religion according to my own reason, and I do not think I have committed a crime, even though I may have made a mistake in one or other of its maxims, as long as I don't do any harm to my neighbor. Still, since I don't know the principles of philosophy and hence can easily go astray, I think I need to open myself to an enlightened man who can correct my mistakes; . . . and I prefer you to all others . . .”<sup>2</sup>**

Then Libermann tries to use the Bible to show that the Bible is false. If it were true, God would be unjust in treat-

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<sup>1</sup> This section of the article was given as the conference for February 2, 1977 at the Generalate.

<sup>2</sup> *Notes et Documents (N.D.)*, I, p. 52.

ing the Jewish people differently from other people, and in punishing children for the sins of their fathers. **“Would it not be an injustice on God’s part to choose only one people from the whole world, to enlighten them and reveal to them the true principles of religion, while leaving all the others in ignorance and idolatry?”** And, almost as if rising against such an injustice, he exclaims: **“Were not the other peoples just as much His creatures as the Israelites were?”**<sup>3</sup>

Can we not see in this text the germ of his vocation as an apostle to the Blacks? At least we can see in it the germ of his key ideas: the love we owe to all men, no matter what their attitudes or even their religion; the right of a human person to act according to his conscience and the duty to respect the thoughts and actions of others; the equality of all men, all creatures of God, the God who has chosen a people, – first the Jewish people, then the Christian people – not so that they might keep His revelation for themselves but so that they might communicate it to all the peoples of the earth who are all equally called to belong to one family, the family of the children of God.

\* \* \*

**Libermann’s whole doctrine is one of liberation.** It is significant that Libermann left Rennes to go to Rome and devote himself to the Mission to the Blacks on the same day as Gregory XVI published his letter **In Supremo Apostolatus** in which he solemnly condemned slavery and the trading in Blacks. Libermann, in his memorandum of 1848, will call that trading “an infamous business.”<sup>4</sup> His entire life was a continual fight against slavery in all its forms. Libermann was a lover of human freedom.

The 1848 Revolution in France proclaimed the general freeing of slaves. The following month, Libermann wrote to Father Blanpin, a missionary in Bourbon: **“My letter will surely reach you too late to announce the good news: the**

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<sup>3</sup> N.D., I, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> N.D., VIII, p. 262.

slaves are going to be freed from captivity immediately. They will even share in all the rights of citizens. They will elect their deputies for the National Assembly. Isn't this a wonderful thing that God has brought about? Poor people, what joy they will feel! You have a very important role to play at this time and, if you do it well, you will be making yourself helpful both to the Whites and to our poor Blacks . . .

"Oh! what a big task is before you: to give good direction to these poor children, especially in the early days. Not being accustomed to freedom, they could go to excess . . . We must help them to maintain their good reputation and not let people be able to say that they were not worthy to be set free . . . Recommend to them peace, gentleness, the forgiveness of injuries . . . Teach them to profit from their freedom for the good of their souls, to obtain instruction in religion, to attain a certain degree of comfort for their families. Teach them to use their freedom worthily, nobly, – to show that they are worthy of it, to make their friends happy. "We are the friends of the Blacks."<sup>5</sup> "After the first days of rejoicing, we must get them to go to work in peace and earn their living . . ."

He gives some other recommendations and then adds: "Your mission is now ten times as important as it was before. Teach them to be good fathers and mothers to their families, and to place their happiness there where it belongs. You may find it difficult to get them to appreciate work and to love it; still, it is a very important point for these dear friends . . ."

He ends his letter with these words: "I am giving you all this advice about things which you probably know better than I do, but I am happy to give it. I am happy about the happiness of those good children of ours."<sup>6</sup>

As a matter of fact, although there were serious excesses in other places, such as the West Indies, "in Bourbon everything happened in a tranquil atmosphere with scarcely any worries. Le Vasseur spoke to his flock from the pulpit, giving them the news from France, along with a commentary and

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<sup>5</sup> N.D., X, p. 23. – Letter to the king of Dakar, January 1, 1848.

<sup>6</sup> N.D., X, pp. 125-126. – Letter to Father Blanpin, March (?) 1848.

explanation, and holding out the hope of a freedom which would fulfill their expectations. When the day came, freedom was proclaimed in a peaceful atmosphere and December 20 was set aside as a day of thanksgiving and celebrated with religious ceremonies."<sup>7</sup>

The previous year, the missionaries had started a Junior Seminary at Dakar in Guinea as a starting-point for the salvation of Africa according to Libermann's new plan. For this plan to be carried out, the students had to be trained from the very beginning in the true meaning of freedom, without which no true civilization is possible.

On November 23, 1847, Libermann wrote to Father Chevalier, the Director of the Seminary: "**It seems to me to be absolutely necessary to strengthen the weakness of character of these poor people . . . , to get them to realize that they are free, and to appreciate the beauty of the freedom and equality which they share with all the children of God. The idea of inferiority must be erased from their minds, because it increases natural weakness and lowers them in their own estimation, - which is a very great evil . . .**"<sup>8</sup>

Shortly after returning from Rome in 1846, where he had presented to the Propaganda his new project for the salvation of Africa, Libermann wrote to Father Percin about Haiti: "**If we had been able to make a foundation in the Republic, I am sure that our succes would have been complete. After a few years we would have been able to show the whole world a proof of the falseness and bad faith of those who recklessly calumniate a large segment of the human race . . . I am convinced that . . . we would have shown the detractors of the African race that, in spite of not having a white skin, its members are just as much God's children as they are, that the aspirations of their soul are no lower, that they are no less able to accept the faith; in a word, that color has nothing to do with any kind of inferiority . . .**"

And Libermann goes on to speak of Guinea: "**In Guinea we are meeting with all kinds of difficulties. Who can tell whether I shall live long enough to see our efforts**

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<sup>7</sup> N.D., "Compléments", p. 292.

<sup>8</sup> N.D., IX, pp. 359-360.

succeed! You can imagine how much I want to bring about such a good effect whose consequences would be so beneficial for the whole great work we have to do . . . ”<sup>9</sup>

\* \* \*

**The message of freedom was also a message of happiness.** On May 4, 1845, he had advised Father Bessieux, the first missionary in Gabon: **“Take an interest in the poor people and teach them to be happy not only by means of the Faith and of piety . . . , but also by means of their civilization which you are working to promote.”**<sup>10</sup>

The Gospel is the message of happiness, the Good News. But the Gospel is not just the four little books written by the evangelists. It is everything that helps to advance the integral development of man. *“The Church knows perfectly well that her message is in agreement with the depths of the human heart when she defends the dignity and the calling of man . . . This message, far from demeaning man, helps him to progress by spreading light, life and freedom; apart from it, there is nothing which can satisfy the human heart . . . ”*<sup>11</sup>

\* \* \*

When Libermann speaks to his missionaries, he insists not only upon the freedom of the Blacks, but also upon their equality. The Blacks are their equals. **“Be gentle, affable and kind to the Blacks . . . Treat them with respect. Never give the impression that you treat them as people inferior to you. Do all you can to foster their contentment . . . ”**<sup>12</sup>

The French Revolution’s motto *“Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”*, understood in its rightful meaning, was a part of Libermann’s ideological baggage.

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<sup>9</sup> N.D., VIII, p. 334. – November 28, 1846.

<sup>10</sup> N.D., VII, p. 162.

<sup>11</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 21, sect. 7.

<sup>12</sup> N.D., X, pp. 161-162. – Letter to Father Gallais, April 12, 1848.

For him, liberty was, above all, freedom to be good, independent of the passions. **“Keep your heart and your mind free,”** he wrote to Father Blanpin. **“Be independent of any passion, of all impressions, . . . bring your soul under the influence of the Christian and priestly virtues. . . . under the influence of the exigencies of your relationships with people. Be gracious with everybody. If others have to be gracious to you, it’s because you are the weaker and they are the freer. If it is you who are gracious, it’s you who are the stronger, the freer . . . .”**

Father Blanpin had criticized the Jesuits for the rigorous obedience they professed. Libermann replied: **“As far as the Jesuits are concerned, I do not think there are grounds for criticizing the rules and constitutions by which they are governed, nor the strict obedience they practice . . . . Even though it may be true that our age no longer accepts that organization and that such strict obedience does not suit today’s thinking, that is not a reason to blame them . . . . Let the Jesuits do what they think is right; let us do what we think we ought to do and leave others to act as they see fit. Let’s not be intolerant. Each individual has to answer to God for his own actions.”**<sup>13</sup>

Earlier, with respect to the rules for the prayer groups, Libermann had written: **“We made several resolutions . . . ; those who do not want to submit to them are entirely free to withdraw. We promise in advance to be just as charitable towards them as before . . . . This is very important: everybody should be free to act according to his own conscience and God’s good pleasure and will for each.”**<sup>14</sup>

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Libermann carried on most of his correspondence with persons of great piety who were concerned about their own sanctification and that of others. He tried to show them that **there are many mansions in the Father’s house and many roads that lead there.**

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<sup>13</sup> N.D., X, pp. 235-236. – June 18, 1848.

<sup>14</sup> N.D., I, p. 249.

**“Never be tenacious in your ideas,”** he wrote to Father Ignatius Schwindenhammer. **“Learn to give in with gentleness and humility when your confreres are not of the same opinion as you. Try to acquire flexibility of mind and will and avoid stiffness and stubbornness. That’s the way to train yourself solidly for your own sanctification and for the good of your ministry to souls . . . You must realize that there are many ways of doing good . . . It does not matter which way is the best; as long as we act God’s way, He blesses us; to act God’s way is to give in to the ideas of others and to submit to them.”**<sup>15</sup>

On August 4, 1840, he wrote from Rome to Father Luquet along the same line: **“It is a basic principle in things of God that we must not want to bring everybody around to our opinion and to our way of acting. Rigorism in this sort of thing has very bad consequences. God has his plans for each person; He communicates and distributes his graces in a variety of ways; it is vain for us to try to change others, we’ll never succeed . . .**

**“May everything in you be supernatural and come from the Holy Spirit. Everything that comes from the Holy Spirit is gentle, kind, modest and humble. Strength with gentleness, – that’s the way God acts; that’s the way all apostolic action must be done also.**

**“ . . . All who do good in a spiritual way do it by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, we must not torment them because they act differently from us . . . ; we must respect different tastes and attractions and not allow them to interfere with that spiritual union which is nothing else but the charity of God in our souls and the sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit in each one of us, the same source of all the different attractions . . . ”**<sup>16</sup>

**“ There are no two minds that think exactly alike. However, when we see things God’s way, it is easier to agree, because we prefer to place our confidence in God’s will and are more ready to let others act without bothering them or tormenting ourselves to find out whether they are right or wrong . . . ”**<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> N.D., X, p. 238. – June 25, 1848, *cf.* also *N.D.*, III, p. 122.

<sup>16</sup> N.D., II, pp. 123-124; *cf.* also *N.D.*, IX, p. 299.

<sup>17</sup> N.D., II, p. 86. – Letter to Mr. Le Vavas seur, July 12, 1840.

In January 1844, Libermann made a recommendation to the first missionaries sent to Guinea: **“Love one another . . . Show that the spirit of Jesus Christ is in you by your perfect union and mutual affection . . . Don’t pass judgment on one another . . . Allow your confrere to act as he thinks right and proper before God. For your own part, act according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit within your soul. Be thoughtful and affectionate with one another . . .**

**“In meetings, don’t be too attached to your own opinions, don’t defend them too vigorously . . .”**<sup>18</sup>

These exhortations are not just something Libermann remembered at the last minute. No, they were a part of the instruction he gave his novices.

Speaking of the union that ought to exist among all the members of the Congregation, he told them: **“Unity of spirit comprises three things and may be said to be found in three degrees:**

**1) not to want to subject others to our ideas, and especially not to get angry when they do not think the way we do. To want to impose one’s opinions upon others is tyranny . . .**

**2) to have a certain disposition and ease for coming around to the opinion of others . . .**

**3) to act as if one were of the same opinion as others, when we see nothing wrong in doing so . . .”**<sup>19</sup>

In this connection, he made a very interesting comment about Mr. Warlop, the architect and novice of whom he speaks several times *à propos* of the building of the chapel at La Neuville.<sup>20</sup> This novice, “although he is only in Minor Orders, has been sent to the Missions right after his consecration because of his talent in all sorts of activities which can be helpful and useful for our poor Blacks.”<sup>21</sup>

He was sent to Gabon where he was needed for some building they wanted to do.

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<sup>18</sup> N.D., VI, pp. 4-5.

<sup>19</sup> *Règle Provisoire*, pro manuscripto, art. 1, ch. VII, 2nd part, p. 125.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. for example N.D., VIII, pp. 43, 48.

<sup>21</sup> N.D., VII, p. 343. – Letter to Father Bessieux, October 28, 1845.

Mr. Warlop was convinced that his Superior at La Neuville wanted him to remain in Minor Orders. Libermann wrote to him on November 15, 1845, at Lorient where he was waiting for the ship: **"I have never . . . had the idea, not even for a split-second, that you would have to remain in Minor Orders . . ."**

After some explanations of his way of dealing with him, he adds: **"You let yourself be taken hold of too much by your prejudices for or against something, and reason does not have the mastery. When you are attracted to an idea, it must be carried out."**

**"You sometimes go so far that you are unable to act, or at least to act as you ought to, and this goes against your idea. I have even noticed a rather surprising phenomenon: that sometimes you do what you want while believing that you are acting according to the mind of those who are opposed to you. You will laugh at this and say that I am making fun of you; but no, that has really happened. I have laughed more than once when I saw it . . ."**<sup>22</sup>

**"If your ideas,"** he wrote to the missionaries in Guinea, **"do not agree on some subject, be ready to give in for the sake of the peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ in your midst. That peace is beyond all price; to obtain it, no sacrifice is too great."**<sup>23</sup>

Father Arragon, "our hot-headed missionary in Senegal," as Libermann describes him,<sup>24</sup> although a fervent missionary, was a difficult character. On November 19, Libermann wrote to him about some misunderstanding with Bishop Truffet: **"Calm down . . . Learn to form an opinion moderately, to uphold it calmly, to give it up humbly and agree with someone else's, especially that of the Superior . . ."**<sup>25</sup>

In a long letter to Father Lossedat, to try to help him resolve certain difficulties he was having in his relationships with his confreres, Libermann wrote these words: **"Leave**

<sup>22</sup> N.D., VII, pp. 397-399.

<sup>23</sup> N.D., VIII, p. 24. - January (?) 1846.

<sup>24</sup> N.D., XI, p. 64. - Letter to Mrs. Arragon, March 5, 1849.

<sup>25</sup> N.D., IX, p. 323. - November 19, 1847; cf. also *N.D.*, X, pp. 229-230.

each one in his own condition and way of acting. God made them all the way they are. We must encourage them and they will do it according to what is given to them from on high . . . So be master of your soul and you will be master of the whole world. It is in this that consists the kind of superiority we need.”<sup>26</sup>

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\* \* \*

**This kind of graciousness is absolutely necessary for those who live in community.** Libermann says so to the community in Africa on November 19, 1847: “**When it happens that you don’t agree with your confreres, lose your judgment in that of the group. Holding on tenaciously to one’s view is one of the greatest causes of harm for men who have to live together in the charity of Jesus Christ.**”<sup>27</sup>

Sometimes it even has to be carried to extremes. Although the missionaries in Australia had been unjustly treated by their Bishop, Mgr. Brady, Libermann gently calls them to task for perhaps not being gracious enough with him. “**You did right,**” he wrote, “**in wanting to see to it that conditions were fulfilled in everything that was basic, a matter of principle; e.g. as to the rule of living together and not having an outsider as master within the community.**”

“**Perhaps you were too unyielding on less important matters. In the position where you find yourselves, it is necessary to yield up to the last possible limit . . . Perhaps there was a little too much stiffness in your way of acting or speaking . . . Finally, your letters to Bishop Brady were all right . . . , submissive and respectful in a certain way, but a little too strong overall, as well as in the turn of phrase . . . , some defects . . . which come from lack of experience in dealing with men and affairs . . .**”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> N.D., VIII, p. 114. – April 15, 1846.

<sup>27</sup> N.D., IX, p. 326.

<sup>28</sup> N.D., X, p. 94. – Letter to Father Thévaux. – February 27, 1848.

\* \* \*

In all the quotations I have given up to now, Libermann was writing to people who were seeking God, people of faith, in their relations with other believers.

But Libermann's missionaries were in continual contact with men of the world, unbelievers, sometimes evil men. How should they deal with them?

According to the same principles of respect, understanding, tolerance and love. On April 1, 1843, he gave Father Colin some pointers on how to act on board ship when he would set out for Bourbon a few days later: "**Be open and natural in dealing with the Prefect... In general, be cordial with everybody... Agree with what they say, as long as it is not against God; if you see something wrong in it, pass it off... Prudence demands that you be cordial with everybody...**

**"Don't argue, even when they talk the most utter nonsense...; don't bother anyone, try to help everybody and to be well-disposed and affable, ready to give service and to receive it."**<sup>29</sup>

Several times he advises his missionaries not to argue, especially on the subject of Islam, since "argument does not make converts, it rather hardens people in their position."<sup>30</sup>

In a letter of May 4, 1845 to Father Bessieux, Libermann asks a number of questions and then gives some important recommendations:

**"Tell me about your position in the midst of the French (in Gabon), about your relations with the representatives of government. Are you not perhaps a little too severe, too unyielding? Do you not fail to observe the expected formalities in dealing with them?"**

And then he advises: "**Always be gentle, charitable and gracious with everybody. Act politely, kindly, thoughtfully. You will see them commit very grave sins, – are you to get angry? That would do no good at all. Imitate our Master who was so gentle with sinners. Be all**

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<sup>29</sup> N.D., IV, pp. 172-173.

<sup>30</sup> N.D., X, pp. 161-162. – Letter to Father Gallais, April 12, 1848, cf. also N.D., VII, p. 354; X, p. 209.

things to all men and put up with all their faults without bitterness or stiffness . . .

**“Those whose relationship with men is a matter of salvation have to be able to bend; otherwise, either they will break themselves, or they will cause others to break . . .”**<sup>31</sup>

At the beginning of 1847 there was a serious disagreement between the missionaries in Gabon and the military authorities. Libermann describes the incident himself in a letter of July 3, 1847 to Bishop Truffet: “I have just received some letters from Gabon. Our men there seem to have gotten themselves into a dispute with the Europeans . . . In Father Bessieux’s absence, our confreres finished their chapel . . . They decided that they would never allow infidels to assist at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Their motives were based upon the rules of the ancient Church . . . For the day of the dedication of their chapel, they invited the Commandant, who seems to have been pleased and proposed to come with a military guard . . . mohammedans and idolators. Fathers Briot and Lossadat refused to let them in; hence the disagreement. The Commandant thinks they are too severe and has sent a rather stiff answer. He did not come to the ceremony.”

Later, Libermann gives his own reflections upon the case: **“ . . . the ancient discipline of the Church was like that . . . What is certain is that in Rome heretics and infidels are admitted: the Turkish ambassadors have their assigned places during ceremonies . . . I am afraid that our confreres acted a bit rigoristically in this affair . . . and that it will lead to some embarrassment . . . ; it ought to teach them the importance of prudence before acting, and how much we need to be gentle, moderate and polite in the way we defend our rights.”**<sup>32</sup>

On the 20th of the same month, he wrote to Father Lossadat, one of those implicated in the affair: **“As far as the guard of infidel soldiers is concerned, we are all of the opinion that you should have let them in . . . Be moderate, gentle, patient. If the French representatives are stiff, impatient, or even wicked sometimes, it’s up to you to show compassion, to make the best of it . . . above all . . . in the way you go**

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<sup>31</sup> N.D., VII, pp. 161-162.

<sup>32</sup> N.D., IX, pp. 222-224.

about fulfilling your duties. Avoid stiffness of manner, haughtiness and other faults of this kind. In all things, take a tone of charity, of willingness to be obliging and considerate, – that will win them over, if anything can.”<sup>33</sup>

Five days later, he gave similar advice to Father Briot: “Mr. Brisset (the Commandant) is stiff, like all military men. He does everything in military fashion . . . This always involves difficulties for our missionaries, but these difficulties are found everywhere . . . The great talent of the missionary who finds himself in such circumstances is to maintain friendship, or at least good relations, with the civil and military authorities . . . , while at the same time maintaining the freedom of his ministry . . .”

“When you cannot do what is asked of you . . . treat those who ask it with gentleness and charity . . . ; you have to be frank and honest, but with prudence; only avoid answering with stiffness, with an argument, with an air of being displeased, or embarrassed, etc. . . . All these reactions cause trouble; you must . . . always be calm, maintain with them the same air of serenity and confidence, even when they have done something stupid against you. Let it be known that, if you don’t agree with them, it is simply because it goes against your conscience . . .

“I have a few rules to give you for your relationship with civil and military authorities:

1) As much as possible, avoid giving the impression that you mistrust their dispositions towards you . . .

2) Avoid speaking and acting with authority; i.e. with an air of authority . . . Be firm when it is a matter of the duties of your state in life, but do so with gentleness and humility . . . ; take the Gospel maxims as your rule of conduct. We have to soften people’s stiffness by our gentleness, temper their violence by our moderation and check their pride by our humility.

3) Try to foresee and avoid collisions. These men are used to never having to give in to those they administer, to having their will carried out within the entire range of their command. That is why, once they have taken a stand, they never step back, and, if you manage to get the better of them

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<sup>33</sup> N.D., IX, pp. 233-234.

by force majeure, they will make you pay dearly for it in other circumstances . . .

4) If you happen to win out, don't take on a certain triumphant air. Avoid "rubbing it in." Be humble and charitable and don't humble other people on any pretext whatsoever . . ." <sup>34</sup>

"I have always foreseen that one of my greatest difficulties would be to keep peace between the missionaries and the officers of the coast. I am convinced that it is strictly necessary for the good of the Mission that we get along with those men . . . If you don't manage to bring out the best in them, they will give you trouble and will hinder the good you want to accomplish . . .

"If you are caused some annoyances by the representatives of government, don't be surprised; . . . this is a necessary evil which has to be borne with patience . . .

"It is in the midst of these troubles and contradictions that God wants us to do good. We must do all we can to live in friendship with those who annoy us, be gentle and thoughtful towards them in order to win them over . . . Virtue, piety and prudence don't consist in living in peace with those who show us all kinds of friendship, but with those who are hard on us . . .

"The way to deal with 'these soldiers and sailors' is to see to it that their dignity is never offended; never seem to attack their authority by our way of speaking . . . And, when you are obliged to resist – when your ministry demands it – do it cautiously and gently, taking all possible care to avoid a conflict of authority; because, once war is declared, they will never give way. Therefore, take care that war is never declared . . . In a word, gentleness and charity will be a great help to you. Rigorism and a stiff manner will always be interpreted as intolerance on your part; and you must understand that, once you are declared intolerant, you can no longer do anything. The term 'intolerant' in the mouths of men who know little about religion and who are prejudiced against you is a terrible word, likely to be wrongly applied and capable of outlawing you from humanity . . ." <sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> N.D., IX, pp. 239-242. – August 2, 1847.

<sup>35</sup> Letter to Father Lossdat, July 27, 1847. – N.D., IX, pp. 232-233.

There were difficulties in Bourbon similar to those in Dakar and Gabon. In this connection, Libermann advised Father Le Vasseur, a victim of the machinations of the Director of the Interior in Bourbon: **“Let them say whatever they like, – place your confidence in God. Let us be like lambs in the midst of wolves . . . I want you to live in peace with the civil authority . . . If Government employees are badly disposed . . . try to balance their bad dispositions by great politeness . . .”**<sup>36</sup>

Three months later, on August 24, 1844, he wrote again, reproaching him for “a certain bitterness of tone” in the memorandum in which he “refutes the accusations of the Director of the Interior”: and reminding him that “Our Lord sends us as lambs among wolves” and that “a lamb does not bite the wolf that attacks it.” **“Moderate and peaceful language is in accord with the spirit of our Divine Master.”**<sup>37</sup>

This teaching, valuable in colonial times, may perhaps be still more valuable today in the new African countries, so jealous of their independence and their power.

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As if anticipating Vatican II, which affirms that “... *all men, believers and unbelievers, must devote themselves to building a just world to live in together,*”<sup>38</sup> Libermann urges Father Bessieux to favor the plans of the civil authorities. **“Give them your support, as long as their plans are within the limits of justice and truth . . . This is the Will of God, and is necessary for the good of souls,”** But he adds: **“Take care, however, not to step out of the proper sphere of a minister of the Holy Gospel.”**<sup>39</sup>

Father Le Berre also received a letter dated August 9, 1847 on the way to conduct himself «with those poor Frenchmen who have no religion.” **“Keep peace with those outside, act naturally with your poor Frenchmen who have no**

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<sup>36</sup> N.D., VI, pp. 203-204. – May 26, 1844.

<sup>37</sup> Letter of August 22, 1844. – N.D., VI, pp. 316-317.

<sup>38</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 21.

<sup>39</sup> N.D., VII, pp. 161-162. – May 4, 1845.

religion; ... don't be angry with them. If they go against you, pardon them; if they treat you badly, speak to them gently and kindly; if they blame you, despise you, look at you suspiciously, – don't be embarrassed in their presence ...

“In general, you must love all men, no matter what their attitudes towards religious principles and towards you. Besides, you must leave them complete freedom to think and act as they wish.

“If we could force minds to be open, wills to be good, souls to believe in the truth, we would have to do it: charity towards men would make it our duty. But never in the world has a man been able to force in any way either the conscience, or will, or minds of his fellow-men. God did not do it, – why should we? God leaves these men the freedom to ignore Him, to act against Him. We should not wish to force them, nor get angry with them; on the contrary, we should be concerned, not against them, but for them, because we see them in such a bad state. That concern should prompt us to love them, to be free and open with them, to talk with them about all sorts of things which interest them, try to win their friendship, and always greet them pleasantly.”<sup>40</sup>

Doesn't it sound as if I had just quoted Vatican II?

*“1) Respect and love must also be extended to those who think or act differently from us in social, political or religious matters. Besides, the more we bring ourselves to look into their attitudes with benevolence and love, the easier dialogue will become.*

*2) Of course, this love and benevolence must not in any way make us indifferent with regard to the true and the good. Indeed it is love itself which spurs on the disciples of Christ to announce the saving truth to all men. But we must always distinguish between error – always to be rejected, and the person in error – who always retains his dignity as a person even though he may be wandering in false or deficient ideas about religion. God alone sees and judges the hearts of men ... He forbids us to judge the interior culpability of anybody.*

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<sup>40</sup> N.D., IX, pp. 248-249.

3) *The teaching of Christ goes so far as to require pardon for offenses and extends the commandment of love – the commandment of the New Law – to all our enemies . . .*<sup>41</sup>

*“Certainly God calls man to serve Him in spirit and in truth. Even though this call obliges man in conscience, He does not force him. God takes into account the dignity of the human person whom He created Himself and who has to conduct himself according to his own judgment and make use of his freedom . . .”*<sup>42</sup>

*“Christian charity really extends to all men, without distinction of race, social condition or religion.”*<sup>43</sup>

Do these texts I have just quoted from *Gaudium et Spes*, *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Ad Gentes* add anything to the last text I quoted from Libermann?

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At this point, we can ask whether Libermann always had this spirit of understanding and tolerance.

He says himself that during his seminary days he was too effervescent, perhaps even violent. **“You want to act forcefully,”** he wrote to Father Le Vasseur, **“and your forcefulness has three faults.”** After speaking about them, Libermann continues: **“Do you know now what the results of that forcefulness are? . . . They are stiffness, hardness, sometimes even violence. Do you think I could not act as forcefully as you? be stiff and harsh like you seem to want me to be? I would only have to want to, and I would be like that, . . . I gave proof enough of it during my seminary days; but I don’t want to be an instrument of perdition for souls and of destruction for the works of God.”**<sup>44</sup>

Libermann had also been “that fervent seminarian” which Father Le Vasseur still seemed to be then, in 1850, “who has no practical idea whatever of the things of God” and who, “thinking he is abandoning himself to the love and

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<sup>41</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 28.

<sup>42</sup> *Dignitatis Humanae*, No. 11.

<sup>43</sup> *Ad Gentes*, No. 12.

<sup>44</sup> July 17, 1850. – *N.D.*, XII, pp. 320-321.

the action of God, is simply abandoning himself to his own hot-headedness.”<sup>45</sup>

Libermann describes himself in his writings. Speaking of the vocation of John and Andrew, he wrote in his *Commentary on St. John*: “All those who have the happiness of belonging to the Divine Master will recognize in these three verses (John I: 36-38) their own story or the story of the kindness, gentleness and love of Jesus for them . . .”<sup>46</sup>

Without any doubt, in several parts of this *Commentary* Libermann describes his own states of soul during his life before 1840.

“In the beginning,” he wrote, “the saints are still imperfect and lack sufficient light. Due to the excessive desire aroused in them by the attraction and the force of grace, they venture farther than the Divine Will is moving them. These excesses happen to almost all the saints when they first enter upon the path of Divine Love . . .”<sup>47</sup>

“Prudence is not the virtue of beginners,” he continues, “you can’t even talk to them about it. When they have made great progress, then Our Lord will give it to them . . . ; all the saints . . . found it necessary to reproach themselves for their excessive fervor in the beginning . . . All, or nearly all, had to reproach themselves for their early imprudence. Did they not become saints all the same?”

“It is almost impossible not to do something imprudent and excessive during that first great fervor.”<sup>48</sup>

Libermann did so too, and he became holy in spite of it. He recognized implicitly that a great change took place in him. He wrote to Mr. Ducournau, then a deacon, on July 10, 1843: “The spirit which reigns among us will destroy the calumny some are spreading, – that I am a possessive person. The exact contrary is true . . . Anyone who wants accurate information can ask Mgr. Rosati, or the Bishop of Amiens, or Father Carbon, or Father Mollevaut, or Father Galais, or Father Desgenettes . . . They should not ask other people who do not know me, – or, if they did know

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<sup>45</sup> N.D., XII, p. 317. – July 17, 1850.

<sup>46</sup> *Commentaire de Saint-Jean* (Ngazobil edition), p. 49.

<sup>47</sup> *Commentaire de Saint-Jean*, pp. 340-341.

<sup>48</sup> *Commentaire de Saint-Jean*, pp. 347-348.

me, it was long ago, at the beginning, a few years after my conversion, and their judgment is not really acceptable . . . ”<sup>49</sup>

Yes, everything leads one to believe in the truth, or at least partial truth, of what Father Galais said to Libermann himself on February 17, 1841: “You pushed people too hard.”<sup>50</sup>

Libermann shows several times that he repented of that fault. “It should not be hard for us to have special compassion, affection and fondness for people who have some evil in them, especially if that evil is the result of illusions. We have only to glance at ourselves . . . Have we never had illusions? . . . Who led us out of them? . . . the kindness of our Sovereign Master. God has been kind, tender and compassionate, and we don’t want to show the same qualities towards others!

“However, this conduct is in the line of the Will of God. He commands the Israelites to have compassion upon slaves and strangers because they had been in the same condition in Egypt and He had led them out. During my life I have been guilty, very guilty, of that fault which is very serious in a soul which has received so many graces from God. I judged much more than I excused . . . God had to make me become strongly aware of the evil of such conduct by causing me to be judged by other men.”<sup>51</sup>

He makes the same confession in several of his letters (*cf. N.D.*, IX, p. 456). “We are always ready to sacrifice souls, and I am worse than all the others. I have experienced this sort of thing . . . I have committed a multitude of faults of this kind and I have learned to correct myself a little at the expense of those dear souls . . . Oh! God will punish me for it! . . . ”<sup>52</sup>

Father Galais, one of the Directors at St. Sulpice, in a letter of February 17, 1841, tells of his fear that Libermann will make the same mistake in the Mission to the Blacks as he

<sup>49</sup> N.D., IV, pp. 264-265.

<sup>50</sup> N.D., II, p. 396.

<sup>51</sup> N.D., IV, p. 310. – Letter to Mr. Dupont, August 13, 1843.

<sup>52</sup> N.D., IV, pp. 365-366. – Letter to the Superior of Castres, September 28, 1843.

made in Rennes: "I think you pushed souls too hard, beyond the grace they had at the time, and that you reacted too personally to their imperfections, thus bringing about a state of tension for them and for you and causing embarrassment and opposition which could only have disastrous results."<sup>53</sup>

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But it did not happen. – Libermann had learned a great deal from his experience by following the light which the Lord caused to grow always more abundant in his faithful soul. When he started the Mission to the Blacks, he was a new man. He was ready to be a real leader, another Moses to lead another people – the African people – into the Promised Land.

"**It is certain,**" he wrote to Father Lossadat on April 15, 1846, "**that I have a much greater influence upon our confreres than you can have. Well, what is the most effective means I use for leading them? It is tolerance of each one's faults which I see I cannot correct; it is putting up with manners which are not the most agreeable, which are sometimes gross; it is above all leaving each one in his own mode of being and trying to find ways for him to become perfect in that mode. You may be very sure that nothing of this kind is ever accomplished by force, by contradiction, by resistance. On the contrary, all things can be accomplished by support, by tolerance, by gentleness and calmness. I say 'all things'. I do not mean that one can make people change their character or their way of being, but one can accomplish all that can be accomplished in this line and one brings out the good which would be nullified by the opposite way of acting. For example, if you wanted to make Father Arragon moderate, polite, well-mannered, you would be undertaking the impossible, – you would have more success trying to make the sun stand still. But, if you are friendly with him, if you let him act according to his own character, his own way of being, and if you deal with him in the way I have just described, you will certainly have a good effect on him . . . But, if you torment him, if you show disapproval**

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<sup>53</sup> N.D., II, p. 396.

or repulsion, you will obtain all the worst results . . . So leave each person to his own way. God made them as they are. They are disposed to do everything for the good. You must encourage them, and they will each do what is in line with their gifts from on high."<sup>54</sup>

Libermann wrote to Father Le Vavas seur giving him advice on how to deal with Father Blanpin: "**You must be natural with him, but gently and with decorum. Obedience is very hard for him if he is not treated gently or if you appear to be restricting him . . . I never had any difficulty with him in this regard . . . I always spoke to him in the manner which you know, without any stiffness, without a positive and commanding air of authority, but with ease and naturalness, even when this was not to my taste. It is true that I liked to study his tastes and avoid going against them. In this way, he was always very docile with me . . .**"<sup>55</sup>

We could quote several texts of Libermann, similar to these. We could cite several examples from his life. However, I think that what I have said will suffice for us to conclude that Libermann really knew and practiced "the holy art of directing the things of God,"<sup>56</sup> of which man is the principal one, "gloria Dei vivens homo."

Amadeu MARTINS, C.S.Sp.  
(to be continued)

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<sup>54</sup> N.D., VIII, pp. 113-114.

<sup>55</sup> N.D., IX, pp. 190-193. – June 15, 1847.

<sup>56</sup> N.D., XII, p. 321. – Letter to Father Le Vavas seur, July 17, 1850.