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Francis Libermann – Annual Remembrance

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Francis Libermann

Annual Remembrance

Bernard Kelly CSSp

*Divine Spirit,
I wish to be like a feather before you
so that your breath may carry me
wherever it pleases
and I may never offer it any resistance.
Amen*

– Francis Libermann's favourite prayer

Today the word “ghetto” refers to a part of a European city where Jews were obliged to live. Francis Libermann knew life in the Jewish ghetto in Saverne, France, at the beginning of the 19th century. His father Lazarus was its rabbi – the guardian of its Jewish tradition. Francis was the fifth son in the family and he had a sister younger than him. His mother died when he was 11. His father remarried and had another son and a daughter.

In 1791 a very significant law was passed enfranchising the Jews in France. Previous to this they had been a barely tolerated group, outsiders who could not own property or take up a profession. They had become Frenchmen of the mosaic persuasion. But during Francis' youth separation was still a sharp reality in Saverne. The sight of a priest in soutane, or even more when vested, caused Francis to run for his life.

Lazarus was in high repute as a scholar and was also highly regarded by the people. But he saw the move

towards French citizenship as an effort by the government to gain more control over the Jews by assimilating them. He saw this happening especially through mixed marriages and entering the professions. His own influence as a rabbi was slowly diminishing.

Francis' eldest brother, 12 years older than him, was the brother who influenced him most. He became a doctor and broke his father's heart when he and his wife became Catholics.

When Francis was 20 he went to study at the Talmudic School in Metz — his father hoped this son would become a rabbi. Samson was the brother Francis

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looked up to most, but his conversion to Catholicism came as a real bombshell to the younger brother. Francis was particularly influenced by Jean Jacques Rousseau's writings. He wrote to Samson: "It makes no difference whether I am a Jew or a Christian, provided I adore God, or whether he is one Person or in three ... This is also why I excuse you for changing your religion."

A cry from the heart

With his father's permission Francis went to Paris. A friend of Samson, Paul Drach, a professor of Hebrew and also a convert to Catholicism, got him a position at the Catholic College Stanislas. But he became weary of not being honest with his father. His religious practice had virtually come to a standstill. He was keeping up appearances. Tired of a life that depended only on expediency, he decided to do a dangerous thing: pray again to the God he once knew — the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob.

"That moment was a very painful one for me: that deep solitude, that room where the only light was from



a skylight, the thought of being so far from my family, my acquaintances, my country plunged me into a deep sadness. My heart felt weighed down by a most painful melancholy.

"It was then that I thought of the God of my fathers and I threw myself on my knees and begged him to enlighten me concerning the true religion. I prayed to him, that if the belief of Christians was true, he would let me know and that if it was false he would at once remove me far from it. The Lord, who is dear to those who call on him from the depths of their heart, heard my prayer. In an instant I was enlightened. I saw the truth: faith

penetrated my mind and my heart."

He turns to God only as a last resort, but he turns to him with transparent sincerity. It is not important he is a tired man who has stopped running. What is important is that his cry comes from the heart. It is not important that he had to be crushed by sadness before he came to his senses. Everything in conversion is God's grace — including the moment He chooses. This grace does not destroy, but only transforms him. Jacob's ambition, his tenacity, his resourcefulness, his tact, all the inner resources he developed in the service of evasion will not disappear. Instead, they will be transformed and purified in the service of life.

Seminary days

Soon after Francis' baptism, he decided to enter the Saint-Sulpice seminary in Paris. His father heard about it and wrote a letter that reduced Francis to tears. But things went well until December 1828, when he had his first serious epileptic attack. His superiors arranged that he transfer to the Sulpician House of Philosophy in Issy, on the outskirts of Paris. His time was spent meeting

him out to lead a missionary adventure in the French islands of the Indian Ocean and Haiti. Francis went to Rome to propose the project to the Vatican. The odds were against him, but he was encouraged and permission was granted.

Dispelling discouragement

After a pilgrimage on foot to Loreto, he got news of his acceptance for ordination. A path was opening up in the

There was never a dull moment. One of the founding members of the missionary society, Eugene Tisserant, was killed in a shipwreck off the coast of Morocco in 1845. A year later the other, Fr Frederic Levavasseur, wrote a letter of discontent, asking for permission to join the Jesuits. It took him a year to get over this "temptation". Libermann suffered from the pressure of leading the fledgling missionary society. He felt drawn to a life of solitude, but he felt chained to the missionary task.

His quiet perseverance reaped rich rewards. In 1848 his society merged with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Libermann became its eleventh Superior General responsible for preparing priests for service in the French Colonies.

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with the students and helping them with their prayer life in small groups. Francis had arrived at a method of survival – even if it was a precarious one. When your big plan is thwarted, do something small.

But discouragement threatened – he was once tempted to suicide as he was passing over a bridge in Paris.

In 1839 the Eudists were re-establishing themselves after the turmoil of the Revolution and setting up a novitiate in Rennes. They asked the Sulpicians to recommend a novice master. They proposed Libermann. He went to Rennes in 1838 and stayed for two very difficult years. He felt a complete failure there, but some of his former students sought

wilderness. They founded the missionary society of the Holy Heart of Mary and in September 1843 the first missionary team (7 priests and 3 lay helpers) set sail for Africa. No news for a year – and then news of a disaster: all but one of the priests were dead. The surviving priest was carrying on with one lay helper.

"Most souls are lost through discouragement" – Francis' advice to the superior of a convent. Time and again in his own life, he had to dispel waves of discouragement. Now was the time to regroup, not to withdraw. Eight months after receiving the bad news he was able to send a new team of two priests and one brother.

His source of self-confidence

What was Libermann's secret? What was the bedrock of his life, his survival, his success?

When his doctor brother was worried about his epilepsy and what it would mean for his future, Francis wrote back that the Lord looks after the most insignificant creatures: he feeds the birds of the field and "he loves me more than them. Are you afraid I shall die of hunger? Will he not find means to feed me also?" You may have to face all sorts of difficulties – but count your blessings first.

His commitment to a project, however worthy, came only when he was convinced that it was "God's work". This conviction allowed him to commit to the dream of Eugene Tisserant and Frederic Levavasseur. It was a real long shot, but he was convinced it was God's work – and therefore unstoppable. He was prepared for all its twists and turns, its disappointments – as well as its achievements and joys. Being involved in God's work was the source of his self-confidence – it allowed him to believe in himself.

So, as you face difficult decisions, all sorts of issues will crowd in on you to exert their influence. Give all of them your serious consideration, but make what God wants the determining factor in any decision. ■



Francis Libermann's attic re-erected in its final resting place at the Spiritan General House in Rome.