Libermann - missionary

FOUNDER

"The extraordinary, though little known charismatic founder of the nineteenth century." This was how Fr Tillard O.P. described Libermann while listing him among the great and well known founders, Francis, Dominic and Ignatius. Tillard was giving a conference in Rome last November. He was emphasising the importance of distinguishing between the great founders whose "spirit and aims should be faithfully accepted and retained", and the numerous men and women who initiated works or institutions that continued to exist after their death, but who could not be regarded as founders whose patrimony is of permanent value. As far as Libermann is concerned, there can be no doubt about his being the founder of an important missionary movement in the nineteenth century. It is particularly as a missionary that Libermann has left a "patrimony", and inspired people with a "spirit and aims" that deserve to be preserved.

DIRECTOR

Many of us have come to know Libermann as a spiritual director. Many writers on Libermann's method of direction and on his spirituality may not have emphasised sufficiently the missionary dimension of the direction and spirituality. Consequently, it has been concluded that, like many directors of the nineteenth century, Libermann's spirituality is individualistic and egocentric. This may have been true early on, but once Libermann became aware of his mission and then became conscious of the suffering and the oppression the slaves were subjected to he directed many men and women to devote their lives to alleviate the suffering and remove the oppression. Tisserant and Levavasseur were seminarians who needed help and direction. Libermann realised that a spirituality that did not take account of their interest in helping the poor in Haiti and Réunion would be harmful to them. The delicate de Regnier who died within two months of landing in Africa and the first of Libermann's followers to die, wrote "If I had to begin over again I would do the same a thousand times I would not change my position for all the world can offer." This is an example of one who appreciated the direction Libermann gave to his life.

CONVERT

For twenty years Libermann lived in the Jewish ghetto of Saverne. There he experienced the mutual hatred of Jews and Christians, and the injustice his own people suffered at the hands of Christians. He left the ghetto and became a Christian. It was a difficult step to take, but the initiative had come from God and the result brought a deep and peaceful joy. Twelve years later he became aware of the condition of the slaves in the Colonies and of the inhuman exploitation of the people of Africa by some Christians. Once again he felt called to leave another type of ghetto and do something to help a people in need, a people who were despised and ill-treated by many. Once again Libermann is "converted." In many ways this conversion was as real as the first one, it was painful but rewarding as well. "I have left Rennes forever. This was utterly imprudent, sheer folly, according to those who judge in terms of the world. There my future was secure, I had enough to live on and even a certain prestige... Now I have nobody nor anything to support me. I do not know what will become of me... Don't be afraid, don't worry. I assure you that I am the happiest man in the world... I'm already in heaven while still on earth."

CHRIST'S MISSION

No sooner had Libermann left Rennes than he heard an objection from a priest who had
been a seminary director for eighteen years. "What a massacre you are committing, taking this young man from France and sending him to the blacks!" Libermann had to realise that it was not just himself, his mission or his spiritual life that was at stake, he was now directing people to a difficult mission. He replied to the objection with unusual irony. "So those who are good, generous and fervent should remain in France and only those who are good for nothing should be sent to these poor people who are in dire need... Our Lord has a much wider view of things. He came to save all. He sacrificed himself for all, for the least as well as for the greatest. His priestly spirit, then, is one of salvation and reconciliation for the whole human race. Therefore, those who share in the fullness of the priesthood of their Master should extend their mercy through the whole world." Here we find the key to Libermann's mission. In Christ there are no outcasts. Christ died for all. Christians are to share in the mission of Christ by reconciling people in Christ.

The life of Christ is summed up in his sacrificial self-giving on the Cross. The sacrifice of Christ is a sacrifice of reconciliation. He gave himself that all may be one, that all may be children of their Common Father. The missionary shares in the priesthood of Christ. He is called to share in some way in the sacrifice of Christ for the reconciliation of people in Christ to God. Christ calls all into the one fold. "I am the door, anyone who enters through me will be saved." Libermann's comment on this: "The true pastors are at the same time pastors and sheep. Our Lord is the unique Pastor, and all the other pastors are his sheep... In working for the salvation of others they find that they are sheep, for if they carry out their pastoral work as they should they will find their lives, and in this pastoral work they have to be guided by the Supreme Pastor and be his sheep... Often one finds pastors who defend religion but with bitterness and harshness; often, it is their own passions they are defending... The Old Testament was a fold of external practices... in the new fold the Divine Pastor will reunite all His sheep to make of them one flock and to gather all into the one and only fold. In this the essential and only mark of the sheep will be in the souls. It will be a mark made by the Holy Spirit, uniting all in the one fold and making all docile and pliable under the same Pastor." There is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, between the priests and the faithful, all are one in Christ, gathered together by the sacrifice of Christ into the one fold.

The reconciliation of people in Christ is what the mission of the Christian is all about. In his time Libermann saw as the most horrible example of hatred, division, alienation and injustice the institution of slavery. This had accepted the exploitation of one group of people by another and in doing this seriously damaged both. The slaves were subjected to inhuman conditions, the masters corrupted by the injustice they inflicted and the contempt they felt for their fellow human beings. In such circumstances the task of the missionary was "to do everything in his power to build up between the blacks and the whites, between the rich and the poor, that Christian charity that brings all to regard themselves as brothers of Jesus Christ. He should then try to remove the indifference on the one side and hatred and jealousy on the other". This role of peacemaker did not mean that the missionary was a neutral by-stander, the defender of the status quo.

"The black people have justice and religion on their side, justice because they are oppressed, religion because they are poor and weak and so they should have the support and the compassion of the representatives of Jesus Christ... What the white people mean by order is more or less a return to the status quo before emancipation." This refers to the conditions of the Colonies in 1850.

**HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

"The job of the missionary, his principal duty is to promote not only the moral but also the intellectual and technical advancement of the people." The basic principle of Libermann for missionaries was that they were for the people, not the people for the missionaries. The Gospel must be good news. To tell a slave that his condition is the one meant by God is not good news for him, though neither is it particularly helpful to tell him that he is equal to his master. Something has to be done to promote the equality and destroy the divisions. "Develop the personalities of the people, allow what is good to grow, correct what is defective... inspire them with self-respect, get them to understand and feel that they are free, help them to realise the beauty of the freedom and the equality they share with all the children of God... When in a practical and experiential way they are convinced that they are in no way inferior to Europeans, then I think they will be all the more eager to work for the advancement of their own people."

The promotion of self-respect and human dignity is an essential part of the work of reconciliation. The missionary will be able to reach relatively few people, but these people
should be inspired to help their fellow countrymen and women. "The people should be educated in such a way that gradually they will have no further need of missionaries. If they are not educated in this way they will remain like infants." Libermann was convinced that the best way for the missionary to help the people was to live according to the Gospel of Christ. No matter what he did he should be always the minister of the Gospel, not the propagandist for any human philosophy or ideology. "If people have a low opinion of themselves, if they have no appreciation of the dignity and the destiny they are called to they cannot then be enthusiastic about what is really good. Their minds and wills must be strengthened and developed by the teaching of the faith concerning the origin and the end of man. They must be taught that God made all men equal, that he loves black and white, rich and poor... Philosophy and philanthropy will not change the hearts of people, only religion will do this." The Gospel should be good news.

HUMANISE AND CHRISTIANISE

"The priest is consecrated solely for the salvation of souls... Some want to form men before they form Christians, this is a grave error. Men are formed only by faith and the practice of Christianity." If certain Christian practices had become corrupted this did not mean that Christianity was to be rejected and a humanism adopted. Libermann's first mission was to the slaves. These were Christians in theory. The law in force in the French Colonies required the masters to see to it that the slaves were baptised and practiced their religion, that is, that they attended Mass on Sundays and Feast days. If this as what Christianity meant, then Libermann is for humanism. This form of Christian initiation for slaves was a mockery of the Christian Sacraments. For the priests in the colonies "to have abandoned the people to their terrible misery was unpardonable. The clergy allowed itself to be dominated by the masters... it succumbed to the prejudices of the whites against the blacks and adopted all their biases." There was much more to the building up of a Christian way of life than baptising. This was why Libermann emphasised the need for education, for human development so much, not as something incidental to the Gospel but as belonging to the essence of the Christian message.

Libermann carefully analysed many of the current prejudices against the slaves and Africans; lack of intelligence, immorality unreliaibility, laziness etc. He pointed out to Propaganda Fide in Rome and to the bishops in the Colonies that Christians had been guilty of making false and rash judgements on a people whose condition should inspire compassion and willingness to help rather than severe condemnations. It was sheer hypocrisy to condemn the vices of poor and suffering people when nothing was done to help them. Why should a slave not steal from his rich owner? How could people be accused of laziness if the fruits of their work served to enrich an oppressor? How can it be claimed that the people do not understand Christian teaching if no effort is made to present this teaching in a manner they can understand and if the teachers themselves do not live according to what they teach?

"It is extraordinary how Our Lord preferred the simple and docile people. Nicodemus was a good man, an observer of the law and awaited the redemption of Israel. The Samaritan woman was bad, she was a foreigner, she even belonged to a heretical sect. Yet Our Lord gave to this woman a more exact knowledge of his person that he gave to Nicodemus... Those who are bad because of ignorance and who have not got evil in their minds are very easy to convert, while those who are corrupt, full of malice and pride put obstacles in the way of faith entering their souls." Libermann would question much of what is regarded as virtue, culture, development and education. The missionary should not too easily accept common judgements on people or on things. Hatred for the rich is no more Christian than hatred for the poor, but often the rich and the learned can only be converted and saved by the poor. The rich and the educated are in a kind of slavery often and can only be emancipated by the authentic charity and humanity of ordinary simple people.

PLANNER

Libermann was never on the missions and perhaps this is why he is regarded more as a spiritual director than a missionary. He was a missionary strategist, however. He was convinced that little good could be done by the heedless messing about of individuals according to the whims of the moment. "We have already said, and we can't repeat this too often, that in order to succeed with the meagre resources we possess, it is certainly not enough to launch out at random with the general idea of converting the pagans. From the beginning we must have a more serious, more positive and more definite aim. To get any results, it is necessary from the beginning to establish the means that are
required to establish our holy religion firmly on the soil. For this we need a carefully prepared plan and a strong hierarchic organisation. To get lasting results... will require patience and perseverance. Without planning and organisation there is no order, without order there can be no perseverance and no success.” He worked out a plan, he presented this plan to Propaganda and discussed it with his missionaries. It was a plan for his time and for the conditions of the missions of that time. it is not necessarily one that is suitable for conditions today. It does however, give an insight into the spirit and the aims of the founder.

The early missionaries in Africa were advised to educate leaders. They should promote education, agriculture and trades. Those who were instructed in the different branches of study should be instructed in the Christian religion in such a way that they would be anxious to use their training for the benefit of others. Education should aim at bringing unity and harmony to people and should carefully avoid building up different classes in society. It seems that Libermann wanted a seminary in Africa to produce leaders in every field and not just priests. From among a number of students in the schools he expected that different students would take on different careers, one career being the priesthood. Some of those who did not want to be priests might want to take part in the ministry of the Church and the Bishop should be allowed to confer Minor Orders on these to encourage them to serve others in a Christian manner. The missionaries should be open to new ways of preaching the Gospel and establishing the Church. Only time and experience could determine what was of value; without experience it would be imprudent to have too fixed a notion of what should be done.

THE SPIRIT AND AIMS

Vatican II wants religious to preserve and develop the spirit and aims of the founders, and cherish the patrimony they left to their followers. It is sometimes objected that in the case of Libermann this patrimony is not easy to get at. There is a certain amount of work done that makes it more accessible. But there is a way of getting an idea of the heritage left by Libermann. In the history of the expansion of Christianity the nineteenth century is regarded as “the great century”. “In geographical extent, in movements issuing from it and in its effects upon the race in the nineteenth century, Christianity had a far larger place in human history than at any previous time.” (Latourette) Libermann was one of the pioneers of the missionary movement in Africa during that century. It could be that in the history of the African missions one could get a clearer idea of the “spirit and aims” of our founder than in his writings.

In our own times we have seen a General Council of the Church at which African peoples were represented by their bishop for the first time in history. There is little doubt but that the representatives of the young Churches had an effect on the Council and still have a very definite role in the directions the post-Conciliar Church is taking. Many of these new Churches in some way can trace their origins back to Libermann. In this way his “patrimony” is there to be shared by the whole Church today. Taking part in the development of these young Churches, learning from them, being in sympathy with them, trying to understand their problems, appreciating their insights is in a real, though indirect way, to partake of the “patrimony” of Libermann and to accept and retain his spirit.