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### Apostolic Life and Experience of God, According To Libermann

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## APOSTOLIC LIFE AND EXPERIENCE OF GOD ACCORDING TO LIBERMANN

(Translation of a paper read by the author, Father Bernard Tenailleau, of the French Seminary, Rome, to the Community of the Generalate and of the French Seminary, in the presence of Archbishop Tchidimbo, formerly of Guinea, on Libermann Day, February 2, 1980)

### INTRODUCTION

In a letter written by the young Mr. Libermann, then at the Novitiate in Rennes, to Mr. Cahier, on Sept. 11, 1837, speaking of the Sulpician spirit Libermann says: *to have the spirit of the company, it is necessary to assume that of the Founder*<sup>1</sup>.

This statement of Libermann is also true for us today, especially on the eve of another General Chapter. But, to benefit of the spirit of our Founder, particularly in the case of Libermann, it is not sufficient to be acquainted with his writings: we should, above all else, strive to penetrate the deep spiritual experience that inspired him, seek to discover what exactly was his «witness». The truth is that our Founder was a **man privileged in his encounter with God**, one whose spiritual journey sets the pattern for us in our day. We can never truly understand all that he did, all that he lived, I am convinced, other than in the light of his experience of God. There is a danger that we grasp some aspects of his living while neglecting this fundamental experience which enlivened his heart and faith. We may admire the Libermann of 1846, the remarkable spiritual director, the young man capable of initiating a truly missionary venture, on which the mission of the Two Guineas and many others would be established. We may not, for all that, neglect the Libermann of the later years of a life into whose depths the «Instructions to Missionaries» gives us an insight. His concern is no longer merely that of founding,

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<sup>1</sup> N. D. (Notes et Documents relatifs à la Vie et à l'Oeuvre du Vénérable François-Marie-Paul Libermann), I, p. 385.

creating, extending the frontiers of the Church. Missionary life must be deep-rooted rather in a spirit; that the house may stand firm and endure it must be built not on sand but upon rock. In keeping with his own spiritual experience, the rock was the rock of holiness, in the likeness of Christ.

In this talk, which I have called **Apostolic Life and Experience of God according to Libermann**, I have no wish to revive old conflicts between religious and apostolic life. There is no conflict, really, except for him who has lost the spirit that binds them together; no other than the loving experience of God, to whom our whole being is consecrated and whom we radiate, as apostles and missionaries. My aim is, quite simply, to seek to enter into the vision of Libermann. His way of living «contemplation» and «action», two facets of the one reality, can be a powerful stimulus for our consideration, and, why not, even for our conversion. Addressing the members of the Union of Superiors General in audience, on November 29, 1979, Pope John Paul II said :

«In a time and in a world, where there is an immediate danger of building man in one dimension only, religious are called to esteem highly the value and meaning of prayer of adoration, not separating it from, but uniting it to active commitment in a generous service of men, a commitment which justly draws all its possibilities and its momentum from this prayer»<sup>2</sup>.

The plan I propose to follow in this paper is to consider :

1. Libermann's Spiritual Experience;
2. Missionary commitment and spiritual experience.

## 1 – THE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE OF LIBERMANN

*Everything I have is from God. He attracted me without asking my permission, and with a vehemence I have never allowed anyone to glimpse, until now*<sup>3</sup>.

My aim is to show you, in this first part of my talk, that the logic of Father Libermann, seen at work especially in the

<sup>2</sup> Our translation.

<sup>3</sup> Words addressed to J. Schwindenhammer, August 23, 1846, N. D., VIII, p. 203.

foundation of the Congregation, is the logic of a **mystic, a spiritual man**, steeped in God and acting only in that perspective.

#### a) **Libermann was «possessed» by God**

This is most strikingly evident *at the moment of his conversion*. Libermann himself never set down, nor spontaneously recounted the story. Too discreet for that, he was afraid perhaps that his conversion might be exploited in order to influence the Jews. Whatever the reason, the story of the events surrounding his vocation was confided only to close friends in answer to their questions, and even then he gave only the general outlines. The most valuable and complete account we have is that of the Suplician, M. Gamon, whom he knew intimately in the Seminary of Issy, and with whom he continued to correspond afterwards.

At the age of twenty, Jacob Libermann, the son of a distinguished but austere rabbi of Saverne, left home for Metz in order to begin his rabbinical studies. This was to be for young Jacob the beginning of a great disillusionment and the drift into religious indifferentism. The conversion of his oldest brother, Samson, in 1825 was a terrible blow. He could not understand it and attributed it to natural motives. In spite of that, he continued to correspond with his brother and to open his heart to him. In a letter of January 6, 1826, Jacob makes clear his own position regarding the Jewish faith. This touching letter is of capital importance to an understanding of the interior struggle he was having at the time :

*I no longer believe in the Bible... how absurd it is to believe in all the fables the Bible contains. We claim God chose the Jewish people to confide to them the sacred laws. I should like to have that choice explained to me. What does it matter whether I am a Jew or a Christian, provided I adore God, whether in Him there is one person or three. For all that, I assure you, I should be no better a Christian than I am a good Jew<sup>4</sup>.*

At the end of his rabbinical studies Jacob was haunted by the problem of whether to become a rabbi or not, in view of his

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<sup>4</sup> Letter to Samson, January 6, 1826, N. D. I, p. 52-55.

spiritually confused state. A friend advised him to go to Paris and meet the old convert rabbi, David Drach. This was in October, 1826. From there on things began to snow-ball. Jacob paid a short visit to his father in Saverne and succeeded in dissipating his doubts about him. He was permitted to visit Paris. There he met Mr. Drach, who introduced him to Stanislas College, where he might think things over quietly. There, alone, far from his own, and a prey to great sadness, Jacob threw himself upon his knees, and to the God of his fathers poured out an ardent plea, imploring light on what was the true religion. Listen to Father Libermann's own account of what happened :

*The Lord who is always near to those who call upon Him from the depths of their hearts, heard my prayer. At once I was enlightened, I saw the truth, faith penetrated my mind and heart. My only desire was to be plunged in the sacred font . . .<sup>5</sup>.*

**b) Libermann sets out on a road marked  
by suffering and mystic darkness**

No Christian experience can be genuine that does not pass through Christ and his Paschal Mystery. Since God has fashioned us in the image of Jesus, His Son, it is never possible to attain to the transforming light of the Resurrection without passing through the paradox of death. That Libermann lived through, in a special way, in his body, in his sensibility, even in his mind. It was in this dark night of trial which lasted twelve years that the faith and longing for God, which we so much admire today, was forged. The strength, the solidity of the instrument that God had chosen and shaped for his service would be proved in Rome, when alone, Libermann handed to Propaganda his plan for a new missionary foundation. Now the contemplative was sufficiently mature to go into action, to begin the great work of bringing the Gospel to the poorest of mankind.

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<sup>5</sup> N. D. I, p. 65-66.



## THE TRIAL OF SICKNESS : EPILEPSY

Having entered the seminary of Saint Sulpice in 1827, Francis Libermann was looking forward to the subdiaconate, which he was expected to receive in March 1829. Apart from some minor nervous attacks his health had stood up well. On the eve of his ordination however, he had a more serious crisis of nerves. There was no doubt, the series of minor crises had developed into an epileptic one, quite clearly recognisable. Admission to the priesthood was henceforth out of the question. This trial was to endure until the year 1841, the year in which in fact he was ordained a priest. Not wishing to send him away, the Fathers of St. Sulpice allowed Libermann to remain in the seminary of Issy as a domestic, with the task of helping the Bursar. The attacks, which grew less frequent, began again most seriously when he was living with the Eudists at Rennes. Gradually they ceased, but left their mark. As Father Lamoise tell us, when a novice at La Neuville in 1845 :

*Sometimes our beloved Father would have to interrupt (his lectures) before time because of an attack of migraine or nervous worry : words would fail him. Sometimes he overcame the attack : at others, migraine struck even in the heat of a sermon. When he was thus forced to leave the explanation of the rule, he showed such humility, simplicity, peace and resignation, that he produced an even greater effect than if he had been speaking . . .<sup>6</sup>.*

Epilepsy is, without doubt, a humiliating, a dwarfing experience. And some of his attacks were in public. Yet all those who saw them are agreed in testifying to his interior acceptance. Moreover, in this new climate in which God wills him, Libermann gives himself wholeheartedly : thanks to him, at Saint Sulpice and at Issy pious associations, of which he was the chief animator, flourished. In spite of the priesthood being momentarily closed to him, the time at Issy was rich in action which would lead to his being appointed, in 1837, Novice Master to the Eudists at Rennes.

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6 N. D. VIII, p. 489-490.

## THE TRIAL OF THE NIGHT OF THE SENSES

In an authentic spiritual odyssey, sooner or later comes the night of the senses to purify the feelings. It is difficult to say exactly when Francis Libermann experienced this. From a letter written to Jerome Schwindenhammer, still a student at La Neuville, and dated August 3, 1846, we can see how deep was the union with God in which Libermann lived. What does he say in this letter? Suddenly, the Lord had come to him and drawn him to himself with an indescribable force. He could no longer make separate acts or meditate: All his faculties were absorbed, captive, for five years: his spiritual life was simplified, being reduced to an easy and exclusive attention to God alone (N. D. VIII, 202-204). Libermann had, thus, a very vivid experience of God, nourishing his spirit on the affective prayer of which he would so often speak to his missionaries.

*When the Holy Spirit acts in us, he wrote to a seminarian, our soul is on fire, and in the midst of this fire it is transported, united to God, Without disturbance, restlessness, agitation, irritation or movement of pride . . . my dear friend, how happy we are when we are under the sway of the Holy Spirit, completely under the influence of the Spirit of love of Jesus! All becomes love in us . . .<sup>7</sup>.*

To reach that state, the night of the senses is necessary. In Libermann it must have occurred about the same time as his illness, reappearing and disappearing momentarily. Here is the testimony of M. Perée, who was later a priest in Marseilles, which discreetly alludes to the purification of the senses experienced by Libermann when at Issy.

*On one of the big feast-days of the Seminary several fervent students spoke in his presence of the sentiments of piety and holy joy with which they had assisted at the ceremony of the day. 'And I', said Libermann to us, "I was like a log all day, unable either to talk to God or to think or feel'. He said this with a knowing smile to some of his trusted friends who were present. From that, we guessed what for a long time had been his habitual state which he had borne with perfect resignation and even a sort of joy<sup>8</sup>.*

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<sup>7</sup> Letter of 31 December 1841 to M. Douay, N. D. III, p. 88.  
<sup>8</sup> N. D. I, p. 307-308.

## THE TRIAL OF THE DARK NIGHT, THE NIGHT OF THE SOUL

This began quite unexpectedly at Rennes. . Coming from the seminary at Issy where all ran smoothly, Francis Libermann found a poor Congregation, the Eudists, whose members were pitifully few and whose works were ill-defined : where, moreover, day-to-day improvisation was more important than sound organisation. The local Superior, M. Louis de la Morinière, began by simply classing Libermann with the other novices. Only later would he accept Francis Libermann as counsellor and spiritual director, and that without giving him the necessary authority, since M. Louis himself retained the title of Novice-Master. In his correspondence with a sick seminarian, young Paul Carron, Francis Libermann would occasionally give an inkling of what he was going through interiorly. He does not understand what is wrong with M. Louis : it is as if he had something against him. Where the novices are concerned, he is sometimes stuck for words and cannot explain himself. Worse still, he feels that his words as spiritual director are not awakening any response. On top of all this, his cruel illness returns, in most humiliating circumstances. Then, his brightest hope, a young deacon, Alexandre de Brandt, turns arrogant and dissipated, and openly shows his contempt for the spiritual director of the Novitiate. Libermann has no longer any control over him and fears his bad influence on others. He becomes overwhelmed by an obsessive conviction of his own uselessness : he is haunted by the thought of death and, still worse, by the thought that God has disapproved of and abandoned him.

This apparent trough of depression hid something much deeper : it was really a **mystical purification**. In point of fact, nobody round about is aware of what is going on in Francis Libermann. Always he appears smiling, kindly, devoted. He achieves a vast volume of work, re-copying the writings and the Rule of St John Eudes. He maintains a voluminous correspondence and follows the common regime of the community. The following letter, written to Paul Carron, then sick and very anaemic, could rightly apply to his own situation :

*Walk in the darkness of the Cross of Jesus! When you had his divine light in a way you could experience with your feelings, you rejoiced in Him . . . It is now the night of the Cross, of*

*privation, interior darkness, in which our senses are no longer active but dead : this is the time to live by faith but by a faith full of hope . . . Bear yourself, therefore, before God in such a way that he can act in you, according to his own good pleasure, amidst the interior darkness and obscurity.*<sup>9</sup>

St John of the Cross speaks of the «awful night of contemplation». Francis Libermann had experience of this «dark night of the soul»: step by step, it had led him to a constant state of contemplation, where in the deep recesses of the heart he would live in peace and availability, always assured of the presence and action of God. When God takes possession of a person, he wishes to do so fully, in a way similar to that of his Son, Jesus, the Perfect One. On this road, it will be now Tabor, now Calvary. Union with God is perfect when amidst the most painful and distressing trials, the believer continues to be possessed in the depths of his being by unshaken trust in him who is all and can do all things. No matter what happens, the heart of that person is bathed in an interior peace that nothing can disturb: neither doubt, nor failure, nor opposition from others, nor spiritual dryness. Libermann experienced this «dark night» in his time at Rennes. And, still was ready to walk the road that God expected of him: his missionary foundation and the work the Blacks.

### **c) The Mystic prepared by God, becomes the Founder**

When Francis Libermann left Rennes, his intention of making a missionary foundation must have looked like suicidal folly. He leaves a Congregation where he might have found his niche, to launch into an adventure where everything has to be created from nothing. He himself is not a priest. His followers are a group of young people whose vocation is not certain and the majority of whom would drop out, starting with their leader, Maxime de la Brunière. Rome was already submerged with proposals of foundations and was, if anything, biased against whatever came out of France. Indeed, the whole thing seemed quite irrational, unless seen in the light of the inscrutable ways of God.

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9 15 June, 1839, L. S. (Lettres Spirituelles), II, p. 265-266.

In Rome itself, things were not working out that easily either. Maxime de la Brunière, already in doubt about whether he had a vocation to the black slaves, began to grow impatient and discouraged. Finally, he left Rome and joined the Paris Foreign Missions. Francis Libermann was on his own.

*If in the Church we undertook only what was easy, what would become of her. I can understand how a man who believes in something and relies on his own resources can be overcome by an obstacle. But, when a man counts only on his Beloved Master, what has he to fear?*<sup>10</sup>.

What does Francis Libermann himself do? He presents his plan for a foundation to Propaganda, and awaits a favourable reply. Where many another would have taken flight, he remains, with the utmost serenity, writing, first his Provisional Rule and then, his Commentary on St. John. At the end of 1840, things began to move for Libermann. The way of God was clear. He returned to Strasbourg to prepare for his ordination to the priesthood.

**This, for Libermann, was the beginning of an incredible and unsparring activity**, which would continue to the end of his life. Time does not allow us to enter into the details of the peak-moments in the founding work of Father Libermann. We must be content to recall some key-dates only: 1841, ordination of Father Libermann and opening of the first Novitiate; 1843, first missionary departure for Guinea, led by Mgr. Barron; 1845, a new missionary group leaves for Guinea; the Australian foundation; 1846, Memorandum to Propaganda on the evangelisation of Africa; 1848, the «fusion» with the Society of the Holy Ghost; 1849, drafting of Regulations or the Second Rule; 1850, re-organisation of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in the Colonies; 1851, the Instructions to Missionaries; 1852, the death of Father Libermann.

Over and above the facts, which you already know, what attracts my attention is the spirit in which Libermann lived and carried out all this vast work. A truly spiritual man, in the real sense of the word, he considered the missionary and apostolic life to be essentially **an answer to a call**. So deep is this conviction that he demands of a missionary an attitude of

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10 To M. Dupont, August 17, 1840, N. D. II, p. 170-171.

constant discernment. In face of God's loving Will in the matter of the mission, Libermann, in every circumstance acts in this perspective. Of course, the missionary should bring to the service of the mission his physical strength, his intelligence, all that is best in him. He should be up-to-date on the situation in which he finds himself. Father Libermann was himself a model of diplomacy and of ingenuity, in his efforts to help his missionary confreres and to build something that would endure, on sound foundations. Experience is very important in all missionary work, as he reminds Father Arragon, whom he asks to be more flexible, for we were only beginning and are necessarily groping our way. We should not therefore start from strong, fixed views decided upon a priori<sup>11</sup>.

**But, all that should be set in the context of our concern, first of all, to pay attention to the loving will of God for the mission, that is,** for what God is asking in the here-and-now of the mission. God does not share our impatience, our precipitation, our ambition: he moves at a pace other than ours. God's time is not necessarily that of man: God's ways are not always our ways. Only the man who lives in a spirit of interior peace and loving faithfulness to God, can discern the moment of God, which is shown to us in the action of grace. Equally, eagerness, precipitation, restlessness, severity, disturbing anxiety, are so many obstacles to our welcoming that moment. Always, in all circumstances, Libermann submits his action to **two clearly defined criteria**: 1) the interior one of fidelity to God's call; 2) the ecclesial one, of obedience to the Church. Libermann is a mystic: whatever he does is conditioned, on each occasion, by its relationship to God and his wish to answer God's call in union with the Church. God, for him, was no abstract principle but a living person, whose signs he seeks to read, whose calls he seeks to welcome. All that he recommends to others – «*to put oneself in God's presence before beginning a work*», for example, or «*to go ahead with interior peace*», or, to be «*patient in action*», he himself practises. That is why neither set-backs nor difficulties ever frightened him.

*When you have something important to do, weigh the matter up together, in the presence of God. Begin by setting aside all*

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<sup>11</sup> Letter of 12.2.1847 – N. D. IX, p. 43.

*prejudice favourable or unfavourable. Do not allow yourselves to be carried away by your enthusiasm, rush nothing, just consider well what should be done in a spirit of faith, while at the same time discussing it rationally. Put your trust in God in all you undertake, but do not act with presumption nor allow yourself to be carried away*<sup>12</sup>.

The spiritual experience of Father Libermann, of which I have traced the broad outlines, makes it possible to understand the logic which governed his heart. It is the logic of one who behaves «as if he saw the Invisible» (Heb. 11 : 27.)

## 2 – MISSIONARY COMMITMENT AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

*Jesus Christ sends us as He was sent. Our Mission is His : it is He who lives in those He sends, suffers in those He sends, who draws souls to God, His Father, and communicates grace to them through those He sends. But, that Jesus may live in those He sends and do all in and through them, it is necessary for them to live in Him, to be united to Him in their life, their suffering, their apostolic work*<sup>13</sup>.

So far, I have tried to focus attention on the situation out of which Father Libermann spoke : his spiritual experience. To neglect that is to run the risk of missing the essential. It now remains for us to see how in practice Father Libermann tried to implant this spiritual reasoning at the heart of his religious foundation.

### a) The Ideal of the Rule

On March 27, 1840, Francis Libermann handed the Offices of Propaganda a Memorandum outlining his plans for a missionary foundation. Its basic orientation is clear : to be a

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12 Letter to Father Briot June 8, 1845. N. D. VII, p. 192.

13 Instructions to Missionaires. Spiritual Writings, p. 374.

work of evangelisation, supported by community life. Certainly, the original plan of Libermann would be extended and become more precise as experience was gained. As the Provisional Rule of 1840 explains, **Father Libermann wanted a Congregation with an apostolic end.** It was intended at first for priest-members only and was later extended to embrace lay-brothers. His chosen field of apostolate was the most poor, especially those most spiritually abandoned. The perspective is therefore, and above all else, evangelical and apostolic; even if this implies also social work and work of human development. The most poor are the former slaves, followed by the Blacks in Africa and the under-privileged in Europe. The predilection of the Congregation, however, was for Africa, for which Father Libermann drew up a programme of evangelisation: the Memorandum, a genuinely missionary charter, on which enduring work could be built.

Nonetheless, Father Libermann did not wish merely to found a missionary institute: he wished the apostolic commitment to be enshrined **in a religious life lived in community.** We may be certain Libermann was in favour of a religious life with vows. In fact, he chose a more flexible formula: 1) for all members, consecration to God in the apostolate, under a Rule, and with obligations of poverty, chastity and obedience; 2) for those who so desire, private vows made in presence of a superior. Only later did a public form of simple vows become the rule for the whole Institute. Not considering practical forms of expression, it seems to me important to understand what was at stake in such a consecration and such a life-style. Father Libermann, as one close to God, goes right away **to the dynamic power of such a consecration** and life-style. That is already expressed in the Provisional Rule. Having asserted the apostolic end of the Institute, Father Libermann enters into the detail of the spirit that should be the motive-force of this apostolic life.

*Apostolic life is nothing other than the life, all-loving and all-holy, that was led by the Son of God on earth: the salvation and sanctification of souls, and by which he sacrificed himself to the glory of the Father. . .*<sup>14</sup> *We belong to and are wholly consecrated to Our Lord Jesus Christ. We are the Father's gift*

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14 Provisional Rule, N. D. II, p. 290.



*to Him, for the work His Divine Will chooses to give us. He is the One that sends us into this corner of his vineyard, Who communicates to us His grace and power . . . It is in His Name, according to his intentions and under his sole direction that we should work*<sup>15</sup>.

In the commentaries on the Rule given to his novices, Father Libermann speaks often of this Christocentric character of our apostolic work. He even goes so far as to assert that the apostolic life, since it was that of Jesus in his public life, was superior to every other form of existence, even contemplative life of the monastic type, for example.

*There is nothing more beautiful, nothing higher than the apostolate. The contemplative life with all its blessings, all the consolations of its effusions, is much inferior. It represents only one part of our Lord's life. Apostolic life embraces in itself the perfection of the life of our Lord on which it is modelled; more than any other life it conforms us to Jesus, it exacts of us a sacrifice that is total and continuous and is founded on that perfect love that transforms us into Christ*<sup>16</sup>.

For Libermann, apostolic life is not a kind of ecclesial task to be accomplished. More radically, **apostolic life is rooted in Jesus Christ**, who is its source, and on which one must draw in order to live in intimate union with Him. For Father Libermann, apostolic life is made up of an indissoluble union of contemplation and action, and is authenticated by its being rooted in Jesus Christ. That is why the gift of self to God in religious consecration is an apostolic gift, in which contemplation and action are one. For Father Libermann not two lives, one religious, the other apostolic, but one, for apostolic life is, at the same time, intimate union with the Lord and service of others in the apostolate.

For that reason, **religious life considered as the practical organisation of prayer, poverty and the common life**, is not an end in itself but a *means* of being more completely apostolic. For Libermann, apostolic life is the heart of the Spiritan vocation: all the rest, what we call «community life», «religious life», are conditions of deeper planting such an apostolic

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<sup>15</sup> N. D. II, p. 237-238.

<sup>16</sup> Comentary of the Provisional Rule, p. 61.

vocation in Christ and the Church, so that it may be truly apostolic, that is, in conformity with Jesus Christ. The role of religious life, for Father Libermann, with the living of the Rule, is to engrave as far as possible in the heart of the apostle, the Mystery of Christ, whom he is called to reflect and radiate. This Father Libermann repeats in the Rule of 1849.

*The soul, the source and food of true apostolic zeal, is found in a pure, ardent, holy love of God, intimately engraved in the heart; the members of the Congregation will take the means most efficacious to perfectly establish that love in themselves<sup>17</sup>.*

#### **b) In Practice – Father Libermann’s practical dealings with his missionaries**

There is always a gap between theory and practice. The ideals expressed in the Provisional Rule and that of 1849, are clear. Father Libermann, in the Novitiate, tried to comment upon this ideal of apostolic life and to help people to live it. In the mission-field, «on the spot», things are not so easy: what should be a happy wedding of religious and apostolic activity is often a source of opposition and conflict. We desire to exercise our apostolate but are ready to sacrifice the observance of the Rule, which was given us in order precisely to better implant in us conformity to Christ. More than any other, Father Libermann is alive to the danger of throwing oneself heart and soul into the apostolate while neglecting what is essential to common life.

That is why, even at the busiest moments of his life, Father Libermann made a point of keeping up a constant correspondence with his confreres: to help them to live the missionary and religious ideal at the same time. The Mother-House, represented by Father Libermann, should not be a merely anonymous centre of encouragement nor a supply-base for missionaries. That is why, while writing personal letters, Libermann very quickly conceived the idea of collective or circular letters, addressed to communities, not merely to give them news, but also and more especially **for their spiritual and communitarian nourishment**. Fruit of experience, these

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<sup>17</sup> Regulations of 1849 (Règlements de 1849). N. D. X, p. 509.

letters (of which some thirty exist) would lead Libermann to make them truly instructions to missionaries, to help them establish the Institute on what was essential. Here, for example, is a letter written by Father Libermann to the Community of Dakar and Gabon, only a few months after the arrival of the new bishop, Mgr Truffet :

*Learn to be true community men, truly apostolic men . . . As true community men, you must contribute both to your own sanctification and that of your brethren . . . you must be men of interior life, men of prayer, faithful observers of the Rules and thoroughly imbued with their spirit . . . to live as apostolic men, you need great self-abnegation, and that spirit of abnegation should always exist . . . a soul that is strong and truly apostolic is always calm, gentle, imperturbable amidst sufferings and contradictions : never sad, sullen, agitated, brusque, bitter, silent, never a burden to himself nor to his neighbour<sup>18</sup>.*

Frequently Father Libermann returns to this topic of the apostolic life and its necessary implantation in the spiritual. Missionary foundations should be solidly supported by community life. But, **especially in the last years of his life Father Libermann had some misgivings.** He had already warned his brethren of starting off badly. *If the first stones of a building are not carefully laid, all the others will be out of plumb<sup>19</sup>.* From the beginning Father Libermann knew quite well that the communities on the Missions could not be altogether like those of Europe, because of distance and living conditions. Community life had been adopted to support apostolic life as far as possible. But, this community life had itself to be supported, threatened as it was, not only by the dispersal of members of the communities themselves and the distance that separated them from each other, but also by the demands of the apostolate and of apostolic work. Moreover, after the initial enthusiasm, there was the question of going ahead in the future with the same fidelity to the original inspiration. None more than Libermann was aware of this, to the point that in his last years of life maintaining the Congregation in the fervour of religious and apostolic life became for him a matter of urgency, not to say, of obsession . . . And not without reason . . .

18 November 19, 1847. N. D. IX, p. 324-327.

19 19 Nov. 1847. N. D. IX, p. 325.

Some communities, in fact, especially those of the Two Guineas were made up of missionaries some of whom were «snipers», and loud-voiced ones at that. They would have liked to think of themselves as God's gift to the Congregation and sometimes lacked sympathy and good-will for the communities in France. Furthermore, with the nominations of Bishop Bessieux and Bishop Kobès, relations became even more strained, for the two new religious leaders sought quick results, and were ready to scuttle communities – in order to better cover the ground. By the same token, it was community that was being scuttled, and the Mother-House being treated as no more than a supplier of personnel. Moving at that speed, shortly the Congregation would cease to exist because it would have neglected to build in unity, which is the bond of charity. The mission is a common work, in which the Congregation as such is participant: what value otherwise has religious or community life! Certainly, Father Libermann had no wish to intrude on the rights of the two bishops; he had far too great a respect for the episcopal ministry to do so. He was however watchful and concerned especially for the Congregation, which, thanks to its religious and community spirit, is not a handicap for the mission but its chance of success.

Similarly the Communities of Mauritius and of Reunion had been a little upset at the moment of the «fusion» with the Society of the Holy Ghost, as a result of false news and the delay in arrival of Father Libermann's letters of explanation. Tempers were a bit high as, in the words of Father Levavasseur, people feared that this «fusion» would prove to be a regrettable mistake. The older Society of the Holy Ghost had a bad press in the two islands, and Father Libermann's missionaries feared that with the «fusion» it would not be possible to work exclusively for the Blacks as formerly: and that work was so absorbing that at times even community life was sacrificed to it. Father Libermann had already been made aware of all this, perhaps in somewhat exaggerated terms. However that may be, he replied, not to condemn, but to remind them of the importance of community life and regular observance. Father Libermann's thoughts are, perhaps, too much, for the future, which is dependent upon the religious spirit of the present. Here, for example, is what he wrote to Father Colin, a missionary in the Island of Reunion and who acted as Principal Superior there:

*We must put you on your guard against an imminent danger inherent in the work of the mission. The danger lies in the fact that every missionary, every community, having at heart, with all the ardent zeal God has given them for the work in which they are engaged, that Rule, obedience to Superiors and the spirit of community, are sacrificed to it. If that continues, after some years the whole Congregation will be in chaos and God alone knows what will become of the sacred work confided to us and for which He has asked us and still daily does, to make so many sacrifices. The missionary, the Superior, the Head of the Mission, sees only what is his responsibility, the good before him and so throws himself, full of zeal, into the battle and becomes entirely absorbed in his work: he forgets he is a member of a body whose parts must work together in harmony and so too easily frees himself from the ties by which God has attached him to it. As a result, as many as there are missionaries so many are there men living in isolation: what has been a passing advantage is lost a hundredfold later. We see souls to be saved, work to be done, community life as a hindrance, so we get rid of it; we are sure that living a holy life, in the spirit of community and in observance of rule, we could not do as much good . . . and so we break the link of community life to follow our own ardent desire. As a consequence, no more regularity, nor interior spirit, nor relationship of obedience to the Superior, except to the extent that one is not inconvenienced; certainly no more perfect obedience nor ties between the Communities and the Superior-General and Mother-House. We think we are being prompted by zeal: in fact, we are following the impetuous attraction of nature. We console ourselves for the loss of interior spirit and of community life by fixing attention on the good done to souls whom we try to save: we overlook the evil done to ourselves and to others<sup>20</sup>.*

**We should not over-dramatise this insistence of Father Libermann on community regularity and religious exactitude.** Rather than see it as the final pessimism of a sick man, it should be considered as the view of a father, imbued with a strong spiritual idea. Whatever he perceives is therefore centred on living in the dynamism of grace. This recall to regularity is not the dry legalism of a rabbi but the intuition of an

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20 September 22, 1851. N. D. XIII, p. 293-295.

observer, who knows from experience that apostolic action is inseparable from sanctification and contemplation. The INSTRUCTIONS TO MISSIONARIES of 1851 bears testimony to this view of things. The actual forms in which religious and community life are expressed may change, even greatly : it still remains true that the choice of community and religious life is the best support of the apostolic and missionary one. This was the spirit in which we were founded.

### THE INSTRUCTIONS TO MISSIONARIES

It was 1851. Father Libermann had suffered a serious illness in 1849, which confined him to bed for several months. He realises his end is drawing near. Until now, he had tried to give his missionaries spiritual support, as occasion arose. Now, he wishes to do this more systematically, all the more so as he realises there are some problems existing still, whether in Guinea or the isles of the Indian Ocean. It was in those circumstances that Father Libermann drafted his INSTRUCTION TO MISSIONARIES, which was to be sent, chapter by chapter, to the Communities. This synthesis of missionary spirituality would never be completed, but we still have the **central idea around which it was built** : holiness and the means to achieve it. Father Libermann insists much, in fact, on that holiness which conforms us to Christ, and which in practice implies abandonment of self and union with God, whole and entire, lived intensively in prayer and in an habitual way, all day long. That Father Libermann calls «Practical Union».

*Holiness is life but the life of Jesus Christ in us . . . Jesus is the true vine, the sap which produces in us the real fruits which God intended. Let us allow ourselves to be enlivened by the divine sap which flows into us from Jesus Christ, without losing a single drop<sup>21</sup>. For our part, as we have seen, we have been engrafted into the very heart, the marrow of the tree of life; we receive a superabundance of the sap of life, and it does not merely enliven us but makes us vigorous branches, master-branches as it were, for the communication of life and freshness to the shoots, born of this sap that is in us, given to us. If*

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21 Spiritual Writings, p. 384-386.

*then we, principal branches, planted in the very heart of the tree are lacking in life and freshness, how can they have life?*<sup>22</sup>.

For Libermann, the essential element in every spiritual implantation was union with God, Who should permeate us completely. The more we are possessed of Jesus and his Spirit, the more genuine missionaries we are. Mental and vocal prayer are the high moments of this spiritual experience, but they are not alone : all our actual day-to-day living are part of that experience, provided it is lived out of a continual striving for God, to the point where we with St. Paul can say «I live; no, it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me» (Gal. 3:20).

## CONCLUSION

Our Congregation has certainly grown old and perhaps even lukewarm. Nonetheless, I personally do not believe that we are finished. In the General Chapter of 1968, our reply to the desire of renewal was more pastoral than anything else : but, it is not enough to limit ourselves to the field of action, nor to bring it up-to-date. We need today to question ourselves more fundamentally. Father Libermann always submitted his action to his spiritual experience. Why should not the Congregation do the same in our day, even though we do not know where that may lead us? To be available to God, submissive in His hands, is more demanding than to be content to rectify pastoral action or initiate new plans. The 1968 Chapter reminds me of that spring-time of 1846, so full of promise, when the well-known Memorandum to Propaganda was written and presented by Libermann. Today, we are called rather, poor and humble, to listen to the «Instructions to Missionaries» of 1851. It would seem that that is the Libermann who speaks to us now.

Father Bernard TENAILLEAU

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22 Spiritual Writings (Écrits Spirituels), p. 420-421.

