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An account of Libermann's conversion

by Fr. Firmin-Régis Gamon

This second document is not by Libermann but by his friend and confidant M. Gamon¹, a Sulpician. Libermann wrote him several important letters, among which was that of the 20th March, 1848 about the Revolution of February, 1848 and how it affected the Church and the clergy. M. Gamon had known Libermann at Issy in 1836-37 during the year spent at "La Solitude" (the Sulpician noviciate). Now Director of the major seminary at Clermont-Ferrand, he took advantage of visiting "La Solitude" in 1850 to ask Libermann the story of his conversion. Libermann, at the Holy Spirit Seminary in Paris, took him aside and confided in him all the details. Delighted, Gamon put down on paper all he had heard as soon as he got back to Issy. Thus we have this exceptional account, inspired by his great love for Libermann. This is an essential document for understanding Libermann's conversion.¹ (N.D. I, pp. 61-68).

I was about twenty years old when it pleased God to set about my conversion. My father, a distinguished rabbi, had made me study the Talmud under his direction. He was satisfied with my progress and happy to think that I would follow in his footsteps. About this time he decided to send me to Metz to finish my studies. He didn't do this so that I would learn more than by studying under him but to show off my talents and knowledge and make me acceptable among the rabbis who came in large numbers to perfect their skills in that city. He gave me letters of recommendation to two teachers at the Jewish School, one a friend of his and the other one of his

¹ See index

¹ N.D. I, 61-68

former pupils. It was there that I became aware that God was withdrawing me from the ways of error in which I found myself. I felt unsatisfied and was subjected to various trials that I had not expected. The first of these teachers, the one who had been a pupil of my father and who had often visited my family home, wanted to have nothing to do with me. The other, a respectable old man, at first showed plenty of interest but this didn't last. I wanted to learn, so I began to study French and even Latin, but this lost me the approval of my protector. The older rabbis, who were rather fanatical, were frightened of any language other than Hebrew because of the bad influence they might have; my own father was unable to write in either French or German. My new master was of the same school and was very angry when he saw what I was doing. At first he said nothing but he made life very hard for me, belittling me and only speaking to me severely and harshly.

It is true that I greatly neglected study of the Talmud and that I only studied bits of it to avoid bitter recriminations and to escape the humiliation that complete ignorance would have brought down on me. All of this was very annoying and I became really depressed. But this state of mind can also help to turn somebody who has lost his way towards the Lord and open himself up to the influence of His grace. Until then, I had been a good practising Jew, never suspecting that I was on the wrong path. But at the same time, I became indifferent to religion and within a few months I had lost any semblance of faith. I did read the Bible, but I was very sceptical; all those miracles really put me off and I could no longer believe in them.

Meanwhile, my eldest brother had become a Christian. At first, I thought this was just from natural motives, thinking that his views of Judaism were like my own, but I did blame him for upsetting our parents. However, we didn't fall out over it, but kept writing to each other. I told him that I wasn't happy with

what he had done but I also revealed what I thought about the miracles in the Bible. Amongst other things I said that God's actions were incomprehensible if these miracles did actually happen. How could one understand a God who favoured idolaters and troublemakers yet did nothing for those who were good and faithful? I dismissed miracles as an invention of the imagination and credulity of our ancestors. But my brother replied that he believed fully in the miracles and that God worked none nowadays because they were no longer necessary; the Messiah had arrived and his coming meant that God had finished preparing his people for his arrival. This was the only reason why the wonders of the Old Testament had taken place.

This letter made an impression on me, because I knew my brother had done the same studies as myself. But I still believed that his conversion had come from human motives and the effect of his letter on me soon wore off. The overpowering doubts I had were too deep to be shaken by feeble arguments; but all the while, God in his goodness was preparing much more convincing ones for me!

About this time, one of my fellow students showed me a book in Hebrew with no punctuation. He was unable to read it as he was just starting his study of the language, but I read it avidly. It was the Gospels in Hebrew. I was most interested, but was again put off by the number of miracles worked by Jesus. I then began to read Rousseau's *Emile*. Who would have thought that this book, almost guaranteed to shake the faith of the most fervent believer, was to be the means that God would use to bring me to the true faith? It was in the confession of a country priest that I found the bit that attracted me. In it, Rousseau gives the pros and cons for the divinity of Christ and he concludes with these words: *At this stage I didn't even know how a rabbi from Amsterdam would deal with this question.* Personally, I could not see what there was to

answer. My reaction showed where I was at that point in time: my conversion had not made any great progress.

Then I learnt that two more of my brothers who lived in Paris had become Christians. This went straight to my heart and I felt sure that the youngest would also follow suit. Thanks be to God, this is what happened. I loved my brothers very much, but I suffered a great deal when I thought of the isolation I would now experience by staying with my father. I had a friend who was thinking along the same lines as me about religion. I saw him often as we studied and took walks together. He advised me to go Paris to see M. Drach, himself a convert, and to discuss with him the implications of becoming a rabbi, in that every rabbi has to swear never to abandon his religion. This seemed a good idea to me, but I would need the go-ahead from my father and to get that would be far from easy. Writing to him about my plans would be the surest way to failure, so I decided to go and see him.

I was very tired after walking all the way to Saverne, so my father gave me time to recover before voicing his fears. But later in the day, he could wait no longer to clear up his doubts about me. There was an easy way for him: he just had to question me about my studies, especially those on the Talmud. My replies would let him know how seriously I had taken them. He knew full well that one cannot deceive examiners in a subject requiring such memory work and such ease with the subject matter. The Talmud, although not too difficult to grasp, needs a great degree of expertise to teach and present to others. There is humour in it and plenty of subtlety. Only someone who has studied at length and recently at that, could expound upon it. My father was one such person: it would only have taken ten minutes for him to see through me, if divine providence hadn't miraculously come to my rescue.

The first question he put to me was exactly one of those that will catch you out unless you are up to date. Well, for the best part of two years I had neglected my study of the Talmud, and the bit I had done was just to keep up appearances. However, no sooner had I heard the question than things seemed very clear and I saw exactly how to reply. No one could have been more surprised than myself to find this ability to explain things I had hardly read. I hadn't the slightest difficulty in explaining the most enigmatic and confusing elements and so the way was laid open for my trip to Paris. My father was even more surprised than I was; his heart was full of joy, happiness and satisfaction and all his apprehensions vanished. He saw that I was worthy of him and embraced me tenderly, covering my face with his tears and said: *I suspected that what they were saying about you – that you were learning Latin and neglecting your rabbinical studies - was just calumny.* He then showed me all the critical letters he had received. That evening at supper, he produced a bottle of his best wine to celebrate my success.

Permission to go to Paris was soon given and he refused to believe the warnings given him that I was just going there to join my brothers and do what they had done. He gave me a letter to rabbi Deutz², but as I had already been recommended to Mr Drach³ it was to him that I turned. However, I did give the letter to Deutz and even borrowed a book from him to show willing. Soon afterwards, I gave it back and didn't see him again. I spent a few days with my brother and was touched to see his obvious happiness. But I was still a long way from conversion myself.

This was the son of the Deutz who delivered the Duchess of Berry in 1830

Drach found me a place at Collège Stanislas and took me there where I was given a cell. I was left alone to read *A History of Christian Doctrine* and *A History of Religion*, both by Lhomond. This was a most painful time for me. The loneliness in a room with nothing but a skylight to let in the sun, the thought of being so far from family, friends and homeland made me deeply depressed.

It was then that remembering the God of my ancestors, I knelt and begged him to enlighten me as to the true religion. I asked Him to tell me if the beliefs of the Christians were true and to help me know them, but if they were false to keep me far from them. The Lord, who is close to all who call on him from the bottom of their hearts, heard my prayer and answered it. All at once I was enlightened. I saw the truth and faith penetrated my mind and heart. Reading Lhomond, I had no trouble accepting everything he said about the life and death of Jesus Christ. The mystery of the Eucharist, perhaps imprudently put before me, I accepted fully. I believed everything without any trouble. From that moment, my one desire was to be baptised. I didn't have to wait long for this happiness; I was immediately given instruction for this wonderful sacrament and received it on Christmas Eve. On the same day, I made my First Holy Communion. I have no words to express the change that took place in me as the waters of baptism flowed over my head. All uncertainty and fear fell away. Even ecclesiastical dress, so repugnant to Jews⁴, no longer bothered me at all; instead of fear, I now loved it. Above all, I felt courage and invincible strength to practise the Christian faith, being in love with everything connected with my new belief.

⁴ "Liber mann told me the story of what happened one day to his father in Saverne. He found himself with the local priest on a path between walls; the priest was on his way from visiting the sick and was wearing his surplice. He was so terrified by this ecclesiastical dress that he tried to escape by clambering up the wall."

I spent a year in the college, practising my religion wholeheartedly and joyfully. But I wasn't totally at ease, because I should have been in the Seminary of Saint Sulpice. Amongst all the good example surrounding me there, my path crossed that of a young man who could have done me great harm. For reasons beyond me, he incessantly accused me of converting frivolously and without purpose. He wanted to know what reasons I had had, and then rejected them, reducing me to silence with his constant quibbling. My heart, however, remained untouched, and although I had difficulty explaining my faith to him, I never doubted it for one moment.

At the end of October, 1827, Mr Drach introduced me to the Superior of Saint-Sulpice. After a retreat, M. Drach told me he was worried about my health and feared that the morning rising might be rather too early for me. To this M Garnier⁵ (Superior of the Sulpicians) replied that if that were the case, there would be no point in my going to Saint-Sulpice. Drach told him that, although I was most fluent in Hebrew, my Latin was weak. The Superior replied: *Theology is taught in Latin, not in Hebrew!* These remarks made me tremble a little, but it didn't put me off; later on, I was to discover that a very kind heart lay underneath this apparent brusque attitude of M. Garnier.

My entry into the seminary was one of blessing and joyfulness. My "Guardian Angel" was Fr. Georges⁶, now the Bishop of Perigueux. The great charity he showed me in fulfilling this role surprised me and made me appreciate even more a religion which could inspire such gentle and wonderful

⁵ See Index

⁶ "I hope I'm not confusing this Georges with someone else of the same name. However, this is a good chance to ask the bishop if he really was the "angel" of our Venerable deceased. If he was, than perhaps he could give some more useful information."

concern. The silence which pervaded the seminary and the interior recollection reflected in every face helped me very much. I lived in a new world, completely at ease.

One thing I lacked completely at first was the ability to practise mental prayer. Despite what M. Garnier had said at first, he allowed me to get up later than the others. This meant that I missed the training in prayer given on Saturday mornings, so I used my manual and followed its instructions. This seemingly painful exercise was made easy for me by the grace of God. By Easter, I was able to get up at the same time as the others and follow the Saturday lessons.

This is how I passed my early years in the seminary. Everything had happened as I had hoped when, just before my sub-diaconate ordination, I was struck by violent nervous attacks and my ordination was differed. The Superior sent me to Issy, hoping that the country air would heal me. I stayed there until 1837.

This account by M Libermann ended here. I put a few more questions to him which he answered quite simply. Then, delighted with the treasure that had come my way, I went off thinking of the wonderful ways in which Providence had prepared the founder of a new Congregation. As soon as I got back to Issy, I wrote down what I had heard and I'm happy today to have been able to recall my first impressions and lose none of my memories (M. Gamon).