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## LIBERMANN: THE MAKING OF AN APOSTLE\*

### Introduction

Henri Nouwen says that healing occurs when strangers “become sensitive and obedient to their own stories.”<sup>1</sup> In this time of renewal, we are called to reaffirm our original commitment to God, in the Church and in the Congregation. Sometimes our situation has changed so radically that we begin to wonder are we the same person who made the original commitment. Individually and collectively, it is time to become “sensitive and obedient to our own story.” This is what the second Vatican Council asks of us in *Perfectae Caritatis*. It asks that we “return . . . to the original inspiration behind a given community,” that “loyal recognition and safekeeping should be accorded to the spirit of the founders, as also to all the particular goals and wholesome traditions which constitute the heritage of each community.”<sup>2</sup>

More than once, I have been asked to give the spirit of Libermann in one sentence. I never tried because I knew I couldn't win. The next question would be: the spirit of Poulart des Places in one sentence, the history of the Congregation in one sentence, the history of the Province in a subordinate clause . . . If I am being a little cynical, it is to make clear that this talk is about Libermann, not the length and breadth of our heritage. Libermann's spirit is elusive because it is hidden in his life. It is what he lived by. It can really only be evoked – by talking about his life. This is a short look at his life from a particular perspective, as indicated by the title: the making of an apostle.

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\* Talk given by Bernard Kelly C.S.Sp. (TransCanada) at the U.S. (East) Chapter on 15<sup>th</sup> June, 1977.

<sup>1</sup> H. Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2.

### Section one: Adrift

At the age of 20, Libermann left home for the first time and went to Metz to study at the Talmudic school there. This project had an air of adventure for him and a little spice was added by the fact that in the recent drawing of lots for military service, he had drawn a number which entitled him to exemption. He left Saverne with warnings about secular culture ringing in his ears. His father, Lazard, was so suspicious of modern culture that he had refused to learn French and had forbidden it to his sons. Libermann did not realise how ill-prepared he was to cope with the situation at Metz and his experience there was a series of shocks. There was the coolness of his reception by the professors, who were friends of his father. In startling contrast, there was the free language instruction from a Catholic student – he had been brought up to expect no good from Christians. Cracks began to appear in the value system he had accepted uncritically from his father. He was taken aback by the rifts in the Jewish community, between the rich and poor Jews, between progressive and conservative. As he read Rousseau and Voltaire, he began to call his religious beliefs into question for the first time. He was already experiencing a crisis of faith when news of the baptism of his brother Samson brought things to a head. In a letter to Samson on 6 January 1826 (the only letter we have of Libermann before his conversion), he states his views. Here are a few extracts:

*“God gave us the power to think not for the sake of letting it lie dormant but that we might exercise it. If a man had to allow his mind to grow dull, if he had to surrender blindly to the chains of religion, how then would he differ from the brute?”*

*In accordance with those considerations, I have formed my own religion based on my own reason, and I don't think that I would commit a crime, even if I erred in some of my maxims, provided I don't harm my neighbour.*

*We must regard the Bible as a foundation of all the religions that are predominant in Europe . . . Now a structure that has poor foundations crumbles of its own accord. Looking closely at the Bible, we see that it is false and the Bible itself proves this. How foolish to believe all*

*the fables that it contains! How can we believe that God showed his favours for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob by so many wonders? Why didn't God have a like interest in so many philosophers of antiquity?*

*The same applies to the punishment of Adam . . . Must I be so unjust as to believe that God avenged the crime of Adam in the latter's descendants? . . . Is not this blasphemy, does not God himself give the command "Do not punish the children for the crime of their father?"*

*Would it not be unjust on the part of God to chose a single people on earth to enlighten and reveal the true principles of religion?*

*I conclude from all this that all God demands of us is to acknowledge Him, to be just and human . . . <sup>3</sup>*

After years of observance comes the hour of revolt. This is the letter of a young university student away from home. There is the calling in question of the family upbringing, the neglect of the practice of religion. There is the temerity to call God to account and the passionate concern for justice. What really matters is how we treat each other. "All God demands of us is to acknowledge Him, to be just and human." "I don't think I would commit a crime even if I erred in some of my maxims, provided I don't harm my neighbour." Young peoples' deep concern for others, their shouts against injustice are usually regarded as enthusiasms that will evaporate in time. In Libermann they were transformed but they did not disappear. Experience brought them greater realism, God's grace gave them strength and resilience. What did disappear was the excitement of taking a personal stance for the first time. In its place came an emptiness, a loneliness. Within the year, Libermann found himself on his knees in a room in Paris calling on the God he used to know.

*"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*

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<sup>3</sup> Libermann: *Spiritual letters to people in the world*, p. 2-3.

*Lord, who is near to those who call on Him from the depths of their heart, heard my prayers. In an instant I was enlightened, I saw the truth: faith penetrated my mind and my heart.”*<sup>4</sup>

God made a dramatic re-entry into Libermann’s life. Where reasoning had given rise ultimately to frustration, prayer had touched God’s heart.

### **Section two: The harbour**

The “harbour” refers to Libermann’s time at Collège Stanislas, at Saint-Sulpice and at the Eudist novitiate in Rennes. Here he found shelter to root himself in his new Christian belief. It was also a period of confinement, in a sense another ghetto. This is said not to minimise its importance or to imply that it was some sort of limbo of permanent rehearsal. Authors of novels and plays often confine their characters – on a ship, on a desert island or more recently in psychiatric hospitals – in order to have them plumb the depths of who they are. Little remains hidden if people live at close quarters for a while.

One of the most significant things that happened to Libermann at the Sulpician house in Paris was his confrontation with his father. He had tried to keep his baptism a secret from his father but he underestimated the Jewish grapevine. A letter arrived in which Lazard, now 70 years old, poured out all the suffering of his soul in bitter reproaches. The affectionate Libermann was overcome, but through his tears kept repeating “I am a Christian.” In 1846, Libermann wrote to Jerome Schwindenhammer and uncharacteristically referred to his own religious experience. Somehow the letter survived the instructions of the postscript, which read: “You will burn this letter on the third day after receiving it.”

*“Our Lord gave me the grace to stand up to my father, who wanted to tear me away from my faith. I renounced him rather than the faith. Whereupon the good Master*

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<sup>4</sup> N.D. I, 65.

*came without warning to tear me from myself and he held my faculties captive and absorbed for about five years. During all this time, it never occurred to me to work at one virtue or another; my whole concern was to be with him and this was very easy.”<sup>5</sup>*

When God has designs on someone, He often asks him to go against the ones he loves the most.

I don't have a bumper sticker on my car but I saw one once that I would like to have. It showed a picture of the earth from outer space with the words “God put it all together.” What was Libermann's view like from inner space? from the new vantage point where God took him when He kidnapped him (or rather his faculties). Of course we don't know what the view was like, but we do know that Libermann proclaimed God as the one in whom we live, move and have our being, the principle of coherence of the universe, the moving force in the unity of mankind. He constantly repeated “God, God alone” and finally he said “God is all.” As for every apostle, Libermann's faith was the wellspring from which he continually refreshed himself. The configuration of this faith evolved from Libermann's experiences as he made his way through life. The verbal expression of this faith comes to us in the language of Sulpician spirituality. Of course, Saint-Sulpice gave Libermann far more than a terminology, it provided a spiritual terrain about which he moved for ten years.

The onset of epilepsy was a traumatic experience for Libermann. It was the closing of a door. Through no fault of his own, his life's ambition of becoming a priest had suddenly moved out of reach. His own reference to his “beloved illness” needs a little context:

*“You wrote that you would like to see me happy. I don't understand what you mean by that. Do you want to see me rich, in good health, with nothing to suffer here below? . . . My dear friend, leave me my beloved poverty, my beloved illness and a hundred thousand other sufferings as well: it is only suffering that can make me to be like Our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Libermann: *Spiritual letters to clergy and religious III*, p. 129.

<sup>6</sup> Libermann: *Spiritual letters to clergy and religious II*, p. 11.

Libermann referred everything to God, accepted everything gratefully from His hands. Suffering for him was a privileged access to communion with Christ. Let us not forget, however, the continuing struggle that maintaining this faith attitude entails. Suffering can bring us close to Christ, it can also lead to bitterness and depression. Libermann had suddenly become part of a minority, marked out by misfortune. The threat of losing control of himself hung over him like the sword of Damocles. There was no effective medical treatment at the time. Today great advances have been made in the treatment of epilepsy, but, outside medical circles, sympathy and understanding for the epileptic leave a lot to be desired:

*“Unfortunately there is still a considerable amount of lay ignorance tinged with superstitious beliefs regarding epilepsy, so that while some conditions excite sympathy, epilepsy is not quite socially acceptable, and even produces rejection and revulsion.”<sup>7</sup>*

The thought of rejection can produce in us a devastating fear. Libermann knew rejection. He experienced depression, depression that culminated in a temptation to suicide. He overcame this by turning his attention to Jesus, the living witness to the Father’s love. At Saint-Sulpice, Libermann came to terms with insecurity.

At the Sulpician house at Issy, Libermann began helping the students by guiding them in their discussions and helping them with their prayer life. What began informally soon became structured and Libermann launched out into an apostolate of small groups (*Bandes de Piété*). Similar societies had existed previously in the seminary, but had become ineffective. Libermann gave two reasons for this: 1) unity had not been taken seriously and had not been based on charity, 2) priority had not been given to personal sanctification. In Libermann’s view, concentration on personal sanctification was the best way to render service to the community. This was not the same as concentration on self. In fact it involved the opposite. Libermann was an avowed enemy of introspection.

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<sup>7</sup> J. Sutherland and H. Tait, *The Epilepsies*, p. 76.

The forming of the groups involved the careful selection of those only who were serious about their personal sanctification. Everything was done secretly. Nevertheless the establishment of a religious elite held dangers of a division in the community. Among the students there was some opposition to the groups. Among the staff the general attitude was one of tacit approval, although a few professors actively supported the groups and took part in the reunions. The verdict was that the groups worked a spiritual renewal in the seminary, compared to which the undesirable side-effects were insignificant. That they succeeded was a tribute to the leadership of Libermann. Some excesses on the part of the young students were inevitable and when Libermann left Issy, the groups began to falter and were finally suppressed in 1842. Libermann showed some signs of inexperience, but in taking his first steps in a personal apostolate, the predominant note was one of promise. He had initiative. He could feel the possibilities in a concrete situation and could bring men with him in a new enterprise.

The years as novice master at the Eudist novitiate in Rennes were probably the most painful of his life. On 7 February 1838 he was struck down by probably his most severe *grand mal* seizure. There were differences of opinion about novitiate policy between himself and the superior, M. Louis de la Morinière. His lack of experience in the ministry showed in a slighting reference to diocesan priests for which he apologised on his knees. Through it all, he was held in high esteem by everyone. What caused him the most suffering was the behaviour of M. de Brandt, who had been one of his intimate confidants in the *Bandes de Piété* at Saint-Sulpice. Now he turned completely against Libermann and was a disturbing influence in the community. Libermann was taken completely by surprise and began to call in question his seeming success at Issy. At that time, he had referred to M de Brandt as "a pillar in the house of the Lord," now he described his state as "simply diabolical." Was the achievement at Issy merely an illusion? Was he really a dismal failure as a spiritual director? Now he was tortured by the harm he was doing to others. Some of his letters of this time are a real cry from the heart. Unsure of his own advice, he recommends a correspondent at Issy to read John of the Cross and Louis Lallemand, who have established sound



guidelines in the spiritual life. Haunted by an overwhelming sense of uselessness, Libermann was going through the dark night. He had no idea that he was at the threshold of a period of creativity that would surprise everyone.

Today, in our age of instant communication, the plight of the world crowds in upon us at the turn of a knob. To what extent anything is really communicated is another question. At least in a superficial way we become aware of problems in our cities, of threats to our countryside. Other problems are posed "long distance" as news of suffering and injustice reaches us from the Third World. Our hearts are touched but our hands are tied by a general feeling of helplessness. What are our slender resources compared to the immensity of the task? What assurance have we that our efforts would not be counterproductive, especially now that the philosophy of the handout has been found wanting? And if our desire to help still survives, where would we start? If we ever become really involved, what would become of our present way of life? Thoughts like these filled Libermann's head as he listened to Levavasseur, Tisserant and de la Bruniere outline their dream of *L'Œuvre des Noirs*. The problem of liberated slaves in the colonies was a vast problem to which the government and other institutes were trying to address themselves. By contrast, the group gathered around Libermann, none of whom were ordained, seemed pitifully insignificant. They risked finding themselves stranded in a venture with no tomorrow, all security gone. Libermann hesitated and prayed, and in prayer to Our Lady, he realised that it was time to leave what had become familiar and widen his vision to the brotherhood of all men. It was time to launch out into the deep.

### **Section three: The open sea**

About five years after Libermann left Rennes, he wrote to his brother:

*"You have no idea of the heartaches, worries and anguish that have come from my solicitude for so vast and difficult a task, at the sight of the enormous difficulties of the mission of Guinea, a mission so very dear to my heart . . .*

*I tell you frankly that if I had foreseen what I now behold, I should have been frightened and would not have dared to undertake so great a work and one that is so far beyond my powers.”<sup>8</sup>*

“Who would have thought that things would have turned out like this?” is a phrase that frequently finds an echo in the minds of priests and religious today. Very little is predictable. We have very little idea where deep personal commitment is going to lead. “When you were young, you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go.” (JN. 21,18)

Erik Erikson speaks of that “crisis of middle age which occurs when an original man first stops to realise what he has begun to originate in others.”<sup>9</sup> Libermann quickly became aware of the implications for others when news of the death of six of the first missionaries arrived in October 1844. Had he rushed things? Was it all a mistake? What of the men who were impatiently asking to replace those who had died? What had he started? In trying to come to grips with the situation, Libermann was very much alone. He was to become more so. Towards the end of 1845, Tisserant died in a shipwreck on his way to Guinea. Levvasseur wrote from Reunion to say that he was going to join the Jesuits. There was now only one strand to the rope that held the daring project in place and the strain was considerable. Libermann wrote to Levvasseur on 28 January, 1846:

*“Let us suppose for a moment that you abandon this work of God and that, I in turn, become discouraged like yourself. What then shall both of us say to the Sovereign Judge to justify our yielding to discouragement?”*

*I have not had one moment of peace and consolation since the time when God placed me in this work. My spirit seems to have become dull and insensitive to everything that could give me pleasure and consolation, but I am at the same time supersensitive to pain: and God's goodness has not spared pain.*

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<sup>8</sup> Libermann: *Spiritual letters to people in the world*, p. 151.

<sup>9</sup> E. Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, p. 225.

*Everything within me seems to go counter to my remaining in my present situation. Every attraction of nature and of grace points in a different direction. There is not one fibre in my body nor one tendency in my soul that does not prompt me to seek solitude. In spite of all that, however, I would consider it actually a crime to entertain such a thought in my mind. God binds me and chains me to that task which is crucifying, yet most dear to my heart.”<sup>10</sup>*

Suffering from the turn of events that could not have been foreseen, suffering from the demands that were being made on others, Libermann held firm to his missionary work. When the experience of enthusiasm had dried up, he kept his word by keeping his nerve.

When Tisserant was reflecting on Libermann’s providential journey through life, he used the phrase: *Attingit ad finem suaviter sed fortiter*.<sup>11</sup> This phrase derives from Wisdom 8.1, a verse which Libermann himself liked to refer to. In his conferences explaining the meaning of apostolic zeal in the congregation, he quotes it twice:<sup>12</sup> *Attingit a fine usque ad finem fortiter, et disponit omnia suaviter* (She/Wisdom spans the world in power from end to end, and orders all things benignly NEB). For Libermann, the hallmark of an apostle was this combination of gentleness and determination, because these characterise God’s dealings with us. Libermann himself was an example in this respect. He was noted for his peaceful self-possession and his dogged determination. These qualities were exemplified especially in his efforts to bring about the fusion with the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. Such a union had been in the air from the beginning but there were many obstacles to be overcome. The bringing together of any two groups is always an accomplishment. This instance was complicated by personality clashes and there were periods when relations were frankly hostile. Through all this, Libermann waited for the “moment of God.” He saw the harm that was being caused in Africa by the wrangling between the two groups, he deplored the fact

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<sup>10</sup> Libermann: *Spiritual letters to clergy and religious III*, p. 32, 33.

<sup>11</sup> N.D. I, 159.

<sup>12</sup> François Nicolas C.S.Sp., ed. *Règle provisoire des Missionnaires de Libermann: Texte et Commentaire*, p. 150, 161.

that their dealings with the French Government seemed to inevitably take on a competitive character. He regarded good administration as essential to the apostolate. When favourable circumstances presented themselves, he did not hesitate. Even though practically no consultation was possible with the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary, all of them came with him into the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. In the case of some, their initial reaction was one of violent opposition, especially when they realised that their own congregation would cease to exist, but Libermann succeeded in answering their objections and winning their support. There are many examples of the high store Libermann set on good administration as a primary value in the apostolate. He spared no effort to promote unity of purpose, to prevent the dreadful waste of energy involved when dedicated apostles pull against each other. Through a prodigious correspondence, he tried to prevent misunderstandings and give encouragement. At the same time he saw the limitations of administration and communications. The worth and effectiveness of the apostle ultimately depended on his personal sanctification.

Holiness for Libermann means being caught up in the life of the Trinity. This comes about through loving God and loving men and women without distinction of persons, that is as God loves them. Loving someone involves putting *your self* out for him or her, hence the importance of renunciation:

*“We must have two focal points of attention – the first to renounce ourselves, not to consider ourselves at all and to greatly distrust ourselves and the second to strain towards God in everything, to aim continually at union with Our Lord, in whom alone we find the life of our soul, which life is His Holy Spirit.”<sup>13</sup>*

To say something brief and summary about Libermann's spirituality is to tread on dangerous ground. However the only real option I have is to say nothing at all and that would be worse. So let me stay on dangerous ground for another sentence or two and suggest that Libermann would appreciate the New English Bible translation of the wellknown “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” It reads: “There

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<sup>13</sup> L.S. I, 532.

must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds." (Matt. 5.48) Within him was a desire for God's glory which continually strained against the practical limitations to its expression. Libermann became holy and became an apostle by pushing back the boundaries of his goodness.

This did not happen in a vacuum, It happened firstly under God's inspiration and guidance. Secondly it happened in the world of 19th century France. Like every true apostle, Libermann knew that he had not chosen God but that God had chosen him. God had led him from the narrow confines of the ghetto in Saverne through the crisis at Metz to baptism and the shelter of Saint-Sulpice. Through epilepsy and the experience of insecurity, God showed him the source of true and unassailable peace. Through failure at Rennes and the experience of helplessness, God showed him in whom he could put his trust. In the restricting confines of the seminary, God was at work on his heart. He was deepening and enlarging his desire: He was pushing back the threshold of his panic and his fear. When the challenge of *L'Œuvre des Noirs* came, Libermann was ready for the leap in the dark that it involved.

Libermann was inexperienced in the ways of the world when he emerged into the society of the July Monarchy. However no amount of experience would have made the missionary venture he had taken on anything but a big risk. What became evident was that Libermann was no starry-eyed adventurer. He learned quickly. He wanted to establish something solid. He took a long term view and was wary of sudden enthusiasm. He was a leader and believed in planning but the administrative crust never obscured the heart of the apostle. In 1845, he gambled on the mission to Australia and found he had a lot of explaining to do to the missionaries in Africa. The plight of the poor in France also touched his heart and he did what he could to help them. When it came to organising this social apostolate and to setting up additional communities in France, Libermann's motivation seems complex. On the one hand there was his insatiable apostolic urge, on the other his judgement that the health of the congregation needed a more diversified and influential home base – there was a danger of a talent drain to the missions that would greatly weaken the hand of the con-

gregation in its dealings with missionary bishops. This should not be construed as simply referring to an ecclesiastical power struggle but more to Libermann's concern to protect the religious spirit of the congregation and in this way its apostolic potential.

I have come to think that one of the most remarkable things about Libermann, the person, was his ability to survive. He tried to pass on this quality to his congregation. When he was trying to explain the idea of European communities to Levavasseur in 1847, he told him they were not so much a response to present difficulties as a provision for the future: "I am concerned mainly with envisaging the situation after my death."<sup>14</sup> Deluged with the documents and the demands of administration, Libermann was an apostle who looked ahead, witness again the fusion. The ones to whom he looked ahead are faced with an embarrassment of riches. Whatever it is that survives, may it be stirred into life by Libermann's apostolic spirit.

*"But I have promises to keep  
And many miles to go before I sleep  
And many miles to go before I sleep."*<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

I have no conclusions to draw, just a few final words to try to refocus the central idea of this talk. In the film "Hiroshima mon amour," a young man and woman meet in Hiroshima, a city where the feeling of senseless devastation is suffocating. They return for shelter to his apartment. As their feeling for each other develops, they become intimate and would people the whole world, themselves alone. An old man with a raking consumptive cough comes along the street and sits to rest beneath their window. They hear his cough, which will not abate, and it intrudes upon their peace. When Libermann heard that cough, he left the security and warmth of indoors and became an apostle.

Bernard KELLY  
(Edmonton, June 1977)

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<sup>14</sup> N.D. IX, 294.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Frost, "Stopping by the woods on a snowy evening."