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Exchanges on the Essential: The Libermann-Laire Correspondence

Paul Coulon

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Spiritan Horizons is a journal of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit, Pittsburgh. Published annually by the Center for Spiritan Studies at Duquesne University, the journal combines scholarly articles on Spiritan history, spirituality and mission with others related to the praxis of the Spiritan charism in a wide variety of cultural and life settings.

Special attention is given in each issue to the ethos of Spiritan education (including service learning) and especially the interface of faith and reason in the setting of higher education. Past issues of the journal can be accessed online at the Spiritan Collection at www.duq.edu/about/centers-and-institutes/spiritan-studies/spiritan-collection-information

The Center for Spiritan Studies is a collaborative venture between the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit. The Center was founded in 2005. Its purpose is to foster and disseminate research into Spiritan history, tradition and spirituality. It serves the Congregation throughout the world and Duquesne University by making resources for the Spiritan charism available for ministry and learning and teaching. It likewise serves all people who wish to benefit from the Spiritan charism in their various callings.

Win a Scholarship for a Sabbatical at Duquesne

The Center for Spiritan Studies (CSS) at Duquesne University offers 2 scholarships for sabbatical in the 2015 academic year in the Spiritan Scholar in Residence Program (Spiritans Scholar).

The program is designed for Spiritans who wish to research various topics of the Spiritan charism and tradition. The program lasts one academic year, usually from September to May.

It is especially indicated for formators, teachers in secondary and tertiary institutions, and missionaries who wish to return to their Spiritan roots.

Interested Spiritans need to secure the approval of their competent superiors. Applications may be made to (and additional details may be obtained from) the following. Applications close by March 15, 2015.

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00136 Roma. Italia

Or

The Director
James Chukwuma Okoye, C.S.Sp.
Center for Spiritan Studies
Duquesne University, Pittsburgh. PA 15282

Introduction

The Venerable Father Libermann was writing *Instructions for Missionaries* when he wrote the letter to Charles Lairé that contained these oft-quoted lines:

The people of Africa do not need and will not be converted by the efforts of clever and capable missionaries: it is the holiness and the sacrifice of their priests that will be the means of their salvation ... The missionaries must possess a holiness which draws down upon the Africans the all-powerful and merciful merits of Jesus.

Paul Coulon, “Exchanges on the Essential,” shows how the teaching in the letter to Lairé is a succinct summary of the *Instructions*. Another reason for including this article is to introduce our readers to Coulon’s methodology (akin to the biblical historical critical method) that understands the founders within their context while tracing their relevance for today. **Donald Nesti** often spoke of the gem that is Libermann’s *Instructions for Missionaries*. So I asked him to “translate” this for modern readers. His commentary, “Living the Life of Self-Giving Love,” excellently transposes Libermann’s teaching onto relevant modern keys. This essay is among the best explanations I have read of Spiritan “apostolic life,” “practical union,” what Libermann means by “holiness,” and why it is crucial for mission.

Dean **James Swindal**, “Pope Francis and the New Evangelization,” presents the pope’s Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, outlining some key thematics it develops, its view of the role of the interplay of faith and reason, and its outline of the role that education plays in evangelization. It concludes with three challenges for the future. **James Chukwuma Okoye**, “*Evangelii Gaudium* and Pope Francis’ Pastoral Plan,” examines the pope’s Exhortation as a sort of blueprint for how Pope Francis intends to govern the Church. Several themes in some of his interviews recur in this Exhortation. **Ian Edwards**, “Let it Be: Wellbeing as Fiat for a Life that Gives Birth to the Divine,” shows how, like Mary, Mother of Jesus, wellbeing is wholeness, a response to the divine call to become the persons God intended us to be, our best selves.

This issue contains seven reflections on Spiritan charism and education. In the 2013 academic year, Duquesne faculty and staff met a couple of times on Spiritan pedagogy under the leadership of Fr. Ray French, the Vice President for Mission and Identity, and Dr. Darlene Weaver, the Director of the Center for the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. **James Chukwuma Okoye** kicks off the section with an

continued on next page

Introduction (continued)

overview of Spiritan education showing how various contexts and “signs of the times” affected Spiritan commitment to education. **George Boran** and **John Assey**, “Reflections on Educational Commitments in the Congregation of the Holy Spirit,” summarize the findings and proposals of the 12 participants in the Rome meeting of July 3-9, 2011. This meeting prepared the position on education eventually adopted by the 2012 Bagamoyo General Chapter. **George Worgul**, “Spiritian Charism and Ethos in Education,” argues that the Spiritian charism functions as a particular activation and sign of the charism of the People of God of compassion for the poor and oppressed. He opines that “Duquesne students reflect some new forms of poverty which cry out for mission as evangelization of the poor and educating for liberation and integral human development.” **Joseph Okafor** traces “The Spiritian Contribution to Education in Igboland” which was such that “for the period 1885 to 1970 a history of education in Igboland will have the Spiritians front and center.” **Maureen O’Brien**, “Spiritian Pedagogy and Critical Thinking in United States Higher Education,” outlines the characteristics of both critical thinking and Spiritian pedagogy and demonstrates what they contribute to each other. Doctoral students, **Rebecca Durbin** and **Jessica Martin**, teamed up with **Jason Margolis**, their professor, to search for common themes that connect Spiritian pedagogy and spiritually-based educational theory. **Ronald Arnett**, “The Wonder of Communicative Encounter,” calls for clarity in what educators bring to the table for conversation. As in a good business, research and development and considerations for a long-term future trump marketing temptations that risk the future for immediate relational customer satisfaction. Such misguided relational effort to salvage a campus would be no more than “emotional prostitution.”

Dean **Edward Kocher**, “Learning from Libermann,” shares in a very personal manner how Father Libermann influenced his work as an academic administrator at Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit. Adrian van Kaam’s biography of Father Libermann, *A Light to the Gentiles*, is at the core of this experience. **Lina D’Ostilio** presented a well-received paper to the Duquesne University Board of Trustees Executive Committee meeting of March 21, 2014 outlining the twists and turns of “Community Engagement, Civic Learning, and the Spiritian Charism.” She lays out the parameters, demands, and difficulties of *true* service learning in the university context.

James Chukwuma Okoye, C.S.Sp. (Editor)



Paul Coulon, C.S.Sp.

Paul Coulon, C.S.Sp. studied in Rome (1962-1967) before becoming a professor at the Spiritan Scholasticate in Chevilly and Lyon (1967-1972), then in Congo, Brazzaville (1975-1979). He returned to France, where he was engaged in spiritan formation, teaching and research at Chevilly and Paris (1979-1994) gaining a joint doctorate on Father Libermann in History (Sorbonne) and Theology (Institut Catholique of Paris). He has served as professor and director of the Institute of Science and Theology of Religions at the Institut Catholique of Paris (1994-2005), director of the review *Mémoire Spiritaine* (1995-2006), then of the review *Histoire et Missions Chrétiennes* (2007-2012). Since 1999, he has been director of the collection *Mémoire d'Églises* at the Karthala Press (75 volumes in 2014). He is member of the Académie des Sciences d'Outre-mer. Of his many articles and works, one has become an indispensable and classic source: Coulon-Brasseur, *Libermann (1802-1852). Une pensée et une mystique missionnaires* (Paris, 1988).

*Translated from French by
Roberta Hatcher*

EXCHANGES ON THE ESSENTIAL: THE LIBERMANN-LAIRÉ CORRESPONDENCE¹

Libermann is not an “author” who is writing a “work.” He is not a spiritual writer composing tracts intended for publication to be read, perhaps, by strangers, intellectual disciples of a master thinker or spiritual guide. What must be emphasized is the concrete, interpersonal nature of Libermann’s writings: they are essentially letters to individuals or specific communities (1,800 letters). By definition occasional writings, these letters, in order to be considered valid historical documents require basic textual treatment: identifying the recipient and relying on that person’s letter as much as possible (since the letter in front of us is the response that Libermann wrote to him or her).

These elementary principles of historical reading—which consist of taking into account the literary genre, the social context [*Sitz-im-Leben*], the text’s recipients, its date, the very structure of the text, which cannot be carved into slices of meaning when it is the whole that makes meaning—these have not always been applied in the past. The early Libermann is not the superior general of 1850; one doesn’t write the same thing when giving spiritual advice to a scrupulous seminarian or a good-time Charlie, or to a nun or a nuncio or the Minister of the Navy.

I would like to apply these reading principles to a single letter (but what a famous and important one!) that Libermann wrote to Mr. Lairé,² dated May 8, 1851. It is in response to Lairé’s letter from St. Marie of The Gambia, March 7, 1851.

Who was Charles Lairé?

Charles Marie Lairé was born January 12, 1826 in Murtin, a small French village 14 km. from Mézières (Aisne), in the diocese of Reims. His personnel file in the archives contains a series of testimonials about him and a packet of letters written to his family in his youth. His father was a schoolteacher. The village priest, Abbé Migeon, tells us that Lairé’s health was fragile from birth and that his intention to become a priest dates back to his early childhood. When he was twelve, he entered the diocesan secondary school. He completed his advanced seminary study in Reims.

A rough draft most likely dashed off during his seminary days contains Christian counsel that he offered to his sister Pauline. The piety it manifests is intensely *Christocentric*: “Tell

Jesus-Christ all your troubles, ask him for his light and especially for the strength to follow the path of righteousness [...] Read the Bible often, even if it is only a few verses in secret.”³ All the testimonials also highlight the intensity of his devotion to Mary.

Charles entered the novitiate of the missionary society of the Sacred Heart of Mary in La Neuville (Amiens) in the fall of 1847. He was ordained deacon in Amiens on June 17, 1848⁴ and made his consecration in the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and the Sacred Heart of Mary at Notre Dame du Gard on February 2, 1849.⁵

On February 17, 1849 he embarked for Toulon aboard the *Achéron*, a government steamship, with Bishops Bessieux and Kobès, eight confreres (priests and brothers), and the first six Sisters of Castres to leave for Africa.⁶ Upon arrival in Dakar, he was ordained a priest on April 7, 1849. He would occupy several posts in the two years that followed, including a period in Gorée. He was also sent to St. Marie of The Gambia (Bathurst).

Charles Lairé writes to Libermann on March 7, 1851

Mgr. Kobès—the youngest bishop in Christendom—was just ending his twenty-ninth year when he arrived in Dakar. The young Apostolic Vicar had difficulty adapting to Dakar: he realized he would have little influence on the Muslim population and that it would be better to turn his attention to the pagans of the coast who were moreover less contaminated by European vices. He had his heart set on St. Marie of The Gambia.

It was precisely on the subject of St. Marie of The Gambia that Charles Marie Lairé wrote a four-page letter to Fr. Libermann on March 7, 1851 as he was preparing to once again change posts, having been named to Grand-Bassam. A copy of the letter can be found below. The numbers preceding the points addressed in the text are Lairé’s.

Note the tone of the letter: very simple and very free, it is more the letter of a disciple confiding in his beloved master than that of an inferior addressing his administrative superior. The spiritual quest appears intense: without a doubt it conveys the strong desires and evangelical spirit that Libermann tried to inspire in the hearts and lives of the young people in training at Amiens.

The Latin reference by Mr. Lairé to the words of the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda is particularly interesting. It shows what fed the *missiological* training provided under

Libermann's influence: the 1845 Instruction *Neminem Profecto* of the Propaganda but also all the other preceding texts in the great tradition of the Society of the Foreign Missions of Paris, which Libermann would have known about through his friend Mgr. Luquet.⁷

The Letter from Mr. Lairé to Libermann⁸

St. Marie of The Gambia, March 7, 1851

Very Reverend Father and Superior,

1 – I wrote you several lines on four different occasions two weeks ago despite the poor state of health I was in; I was ashamed to have waited so long to send you my news despite my desire to do so. And yet that small journal is irrelevant now, seeing how various circumstances have changed and I would no longer dare send it to you. Monsignor⁹ is recovered and will be able to write you himself via the English steamship whose departure has been postponed.

2 – What can I tell you at this moment? In a few hours I will be leaving St. Marie of The Gambia for Gorée to find the *Rusé* which should not yet have left, in order to make my way from there to Gr. Bassam where Mgr is sending me as superior; Brother Charles¹⁰ is to accompany me. There I will find Mr. Bourget¹¹ and Mr. Duret.¹² May God bless the intention of my Bishop and may he use it for his glory. I assure you that it is pleasing that I go over there; I've moved so much at this point, always in a precarious position, sometimes a bit false! At last the good Lord wants to give me, firmly tie me I think, to a patch of the poor heathen vine. There the weeds to tear out are not the smallest, nor the labors [*efforts*]¹³ that will be required the least amount of patience and perseverance. It will end up, I think, diminishing this last bit of avidity, this too great or too impatient desire for the good which consumes me; and will also deliver me completely from all the inconstancy of character, of all the remaining

*...this too great or
too impatient desire
for the good which
consumes me...*

*...oh! I feel that God
is purifying [me] my
soul more and more...*

3- influence that sensation still holds on the young part of our soul that must alone see and guide and love . . . oh! I feel that God is purifying [*me*] my soul more and more and all its faculties in every way, and that he transforms it more every day in the purity and the strength of his love, in the light of only his faith and in the repose of his will, accomplished over and above all sensitivity, consolation, above all pettiness of vanity, human respect, self-love, self-seeking in all things . . . seeing things only like God, wanting the good in us and in others only like Jesus, no more than Jesus . . . , being a person solidly grounded on the

Paul Coulon, C.S.Sp.

*...confidence that his
mercy will work its
holy will in me...*

principles of Jesus and his Holy Church, but with all gentleness in relations with men of this world. Oh! pray, dearest Father and superior, pray. I count on the paternal kindness of your heart for my poverty; pray that God saves me no longer as a child and that I no longer serve him as a child either . . . I am ashamed to not yet have truly and concretely let myself go, to not have thrown myself headlong into the hands of his will / resting softly in the confidence that his mercy will work its holy will in me, in the middle of miserable states of body and soul, in the midst of the darkness of soul [and] ...

I'm terrified when I think of these words of the Sacred Congreg. of the Propag. for missionaries. . . *non mediocri caritate ac prudentia insignitas . . . sed diuturnus rerum usus et experientia . . . probaverit*¹⁴; but I count above all on your prayers, and those of the few who love the glory of the divine Savior and who love me on earth and even in heaven. *Omnia possum in eo qui . . .*¹⁵

4 – I will tell you no more about things here. . . Msgr and Mr. Duby¹⁶ are writing you themselves. . . May the good Lord preserve you a long time in our love . . . I am very happy that Mr. Le Vasseur¹⁷ has come to share our burden. Mr. Schwindenhammer¹⁸ delighted me with his too brief note – I had already heard some of the missionaries complain that our brothers in France would not reply to our letters... etc. . . . I will let you judge.

I've forgotten none of these Messieurs from the Paris house . . . , praying that God's will be totally done for our poor little Congregation and for the novitiate especially. Adieu! in union with Jesus Christ and Mary, *in osculo sancto*,¹⁹

Your servant and son in Our Lord

c.m. Lairé

missionary H.S. et S. H. Mary

P.S. My sister will be buying several things with her own money for the community of Grand Bassam; I have the permission of His Lordship; I asked her to speak to Mr. Briot,²⁰ if . . .

P.S. Abbé Moussa²¹ is doing a great deal of good here; he seems to have a particular grace for explaining the religion to his poor fellow countrymen. I've listened to him for a month now with great pleasure. I have not reread [this letter].²²

Libermann's Response to Lairé

Libermann's response to Lairé draws its significance from the *moment* in which he wrote it, in the biblical sense of *moment*

of God (*kairos* in the New Testament).²³ Further, “God’s moment” constitutes one of the main categories in Libermann’s thought and missionary strategy.²⁴

... “God’s moment”
constitutes one of the
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and missionary
strategy.

In 1851, the development of the Congregation and its missionary engagements was not without creating some tensions in its midst. An exceptionally long letter (written over a period of eight mornings) that Libermann wrote to Mgr. Kobès between April 21 and May 3, 1851,²⁵ bears witness to this fact. In it, he takes up the defense of Ignace Schwindenhammer, his counselor, strongly criticized by the missionaries, and responds to several fears they expressed from the field.

Libermann is worried about the unity of the institute and the spiritual quality of its members. Already between the 22nd and 24th of the preceding February, he had written a series of four letters to the missionaries in Mauritius in which he insisted on the religious life, on fidelity to the Rule and to the life of the community in the whirlwind of apostolic life.²⁶

On his return to Notre Dame du Gard (the novitiate and theology) where he remained from March 9 through Holy Monday April 14, 1851, Libermann began work on drafting *Instructions to Missionaries*. A major text that he surely intended as his spiritual testament, it cost him great effort and would remain unfinished after he stopped writing it in July 1851.²⁷

Libermann felt the need to re-center everything on the essential: that is why he wrote the *Instructions*. Fortunately, we have a sort of *summary of that essential* in the letter that he wrote during the same period, May 8, 1851, to M. Lairé, in response to the latter’s letter of March 7th.²⁸

Libermann’s Text²⁹

[The cross-references to the text published in *Notes et Documents* XIII, p. 142-146 and the numbered lines in Coulon’s text have in large part been omitted. The translation below is taken from *A Spiritan Anthology*, 322-326 (Editor)].

Here is the outline of the letter:

- Introduction: (lines 1 – 11)
- I – Holiness, only source of Mission (lines 12 – 52)
- II – The Spirit of Jesus and its fruits in the life of the apostle (lines 53 – 91)
- III – How to conduct oneself towards one’s brothers when one is a superior of the community (lines 92 – 107)

- IV – On the importance of exchange of letters for communion between France and Africa (lines 108 – 123)
- Post-scriptum (lines 124 – 133)

Paris, 8th May 1851

My very dear Confrere,

In your letter of 7th March, which, like all your letters, gave me great pleasure, you stated that you were ashamed of having waited so long before writing to me. If you have reason for blaming yourself, I also ought to feel a similar compunction because of my own delay in replying. So we can both make good resolutions! We shall change our ways and no longer have reason to blush with embarrassment.

Your most important preaching will be your holy life and the good example that you give...

So now you are in Grand Bassam. You will find a rather difficult people there whose conversion, it seems, could take some time. Your most important preaching will be your holy life and the good example that you give and God will send his grace to these poor people who are preyed on by the devil.

The people of Africa do not need and will not be converted by the efforts of clever and capable missionaries: it is the holiness and the sacrifice of their priests that will be the means of their salvation.

The people of Africa do not need and will not be converted by the efforts of clever and capable missionaries: it is the holiness and the sacrifice of their priests that will be the means of their salvation. Blindness and the spirit of Satan are still too much rooted in those peoples and the curse³⁰ of their father still leaves its mark on them. They can only be saved by your trials, united to the sufferings of Jesus Christ; that alone can expiate these abominable sins. The missionaries must possess a holiness which draws down upon the Africans the all-powerful and merciful merits of Jesus to wash away God's curse from them.

Be holy yourself and encourage your confreres to be holy. On this depends the salvation of these unfortunate people for whom you suffer and sacrifice yourself. Your trials and pains will remain futile if they are not sanctified by your whole way of life. It is not enough simply to offer your sufferings to God or even to offer your whole life for the salvation of souls; such an offering is useful for yourself and will obtain the forgiveness of your own faults. But if God's mercy depends on your sanctity to bring about your own pardon, and there is not enough holiness in you to make up for your own sins, how will your work and sacrifices be enough to save others?

If we do not have God's holiness in our way of living, if his sanctity does not eliminate, remove, or at least keep under control all our faults and imperfections, how can he possibly hear the prayers which we offer for the people he has asked us

*Be holy as Jesus was
holy; there is no other
way to redeem and
sanctify souls.*

to save? How then will our sacrifices bear fruit in our apostolate? These sacrifices would always be tainted by our natural habits, faults and imperfections. As a result, there will be very little left to attract God's mercy down on the people.

It is my greatest wish that all my beloved confreres should feel as strongly as I do about the holiness necessary for our missionaries in Africa. Be holy as Jesus was holy; there is no other way to redeem and sanctify souls.

May the spirit of Jesus inspire your actions. May he inspire all your feelings and deaden, or at least moderate, the impetuosity of your mind and all your tendencies to be harsh and unyielding. In short, may he control whatever is passionate and unruly in you. May he guide all your feelings, and direct all your emotions. May he grant you the gentleness and humility of which he has given you such a perfect example. How important are humility and gentleness and how few people possess these virtues! They are very precious and are the direct fruits of true and perfect love, demanding as they do a very high degree of interior self-denial, docility, and submission to God. If we want to obtain them, then all the inflexibility of our wills and all the confidence in ourselves and in our own ideas will have to disappear and be destroyed. A missionary who has the virtues of humility and gentleness deeply embedded in his soul, who allows them to affect his interior habits and outward actions, is truly made holy by the Spirit of God. But the one who lacks those great sanctifying virtues is stunted so far as Christ's apostolate is concerned. Even if he is as zealous as St. Paul or St. Francis Xavier, he is still lacking any solid foundation on which to build. The spirit of Jesus cannot permeate him and most of the time it is replaced by the missionary's own spirit, and sometimes even by the spirit of darkness.

However, my dear confrere, I don't know why I am spending so much time on these details, because I know that you are working with all your strength to put the commands of our Lord into practice, "*discite a me* (learn of me)." ³¹ I have no doubt that his grace is working powerfully in your soul to give you those two holy virtues.

As regards your relations with your confreres, act with gentleness, affection, moderation, simplicity and confidence. Bear their faults with love and patience. Console them in their troubles and, as much as possible, support them in their temptations. Preserve among them peace, gentleness, charity, and perfect harmony. Our Lord will live among us if we are truly united in his holy Name; but if we have no cohesion among ourselves, he will not be present and will not give us his blessings.

Keep the Rule faithfully. It is the only way of preserving fervor and is a sure guarantee against laxity. Without fidelity to the Rule, it is impossible to avoid becoming lukewarm; so try your best to ensure that the community in your charge follows the Rule as closely as possible.

I am still trying to find out which confrere in France is not being careful to reply to the letters he receives from you in Guinea. They assure me here that they have answered all the letters they have received from West Africa. All of us would like to receive lots of letters from you and we promise to be very prompt in replying to them. In fact, I have heard the complaint that the dear confreres in West Africa have forgotten all about those at home and don't write to them anymore! So please urge the Fathers and Brothers not to neglect the confreres in Europe who love them tenderly and who want to hear from them as often as possible. Ask them to write to one confrere and then another. In that way the holy charity that ought to unite us in Jesus and Mary will be perfect and God will bless us.

Goodbye for now, my dear confrere.
Yours in Jesus and Mary,
F. Libermann, superior³²

Commentary

...the necessity of holiness, the only source of mission...

From the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks (Matt 12:34), so does Libermann's pen write! After an introduction (1-11) full of tact in which the superior declares himself to be as *ashamed* as his correspondent to have written so infrequently, Libermann pours out his feelings in a long fiery river on the necessity of holiness, the only source of mission (12-52); not an abstract source, but a source that bears a Name, that of Jesus, whose spirit (and Spirit) drives the life of the apostle (53-91). Judging, moreover, that he let himself get carried away by considerations of passionate concern to him, Libermann recognizes that he is preaching to the converted. M. Lairé's letter, to which he is responding, was, as we have seen, full of the same spiritual fervor.

A certain number of themes introduced in Libermann's letter may be surprising and require some contextual explanation regarding their content as well as their form. To speak of *the clutches of the demon* (17-18) or the *spirit of Satan* (21-22) with regards to Africa inevitably surprises today's reader raised on Vatican II and the dialogue advocated by recent popes and synods of Africa concerning traditional African religions.

In order to understand Libermann's letter, it is necessary to refer to the rather restrictive theology of salvation that still

prevailed in France at the beginning of the 19th century. Elisabeth Germain has shed significant light on “the catechism of salvation in Restoration France,”³³ based on analysis of catechisms used in various French dioceses at that time. Of course it is taught that God wants all men to be saved, but few are, even among Catholics, so what is to be said about the others!³⁴ The adage, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*³⁵ is strictly interpreted by the catechisms:

- Can one be saved outside the Church?
- No, for outside the Church, no salvation.
- Why? –Because he who does not have the Church as his mother, cannot have God as his Father.
- Who are those who are outside the Church?
- They are the infidels, heretics, schismatics, apostates, and the excommunicated.³⁶

Similarly for another theme that recurs several times in this letter: “*the curse of his father*” that rests on Africa (22-23 and 27) referring to what was a commonplace of the period, *the curse of Ham*, in reference to the story in the book of Genesis (Gen 9:20-27). A legend of uncertain origin had it that Africans were the cursed descendants of Ham, son of Noah, who had mocked his drunk and naked father . . . There, too, Joseph Lécuyer has shown³⁷ that on this point Libermann was simply following a stereotype of the theology of his time, but that his more elaborated personal thought, for example in the great *Memorandum* of 1846 to the Propaganda,³⁸ is more nuanced and resolutely optimistic: “These men are made in the image of God like others and are disposed to receiving the treasure of the faith that they don’t know.”

The tone of the letter to Mr. Lairé in its pessimistic and provocative elements (but they are not the only ones!) can be explained by the precise historical juncture in which Libermann was situated. In 1851 he better ascertains the immensity of the challenge represented by the evangelization of Africa; he knows all the human losses already incurred and he gives them a resolutely *biblical* reading: it is a matter of a battle against the Enemy (Matt 13:25, 39), the eschatological combat that the apostle Paul (Eph 6:10-17) and the Apocalypse (Revelation 20) speak of in terms of a cosmic confrontation.

It is for this battle of faith that Libermann wants to arm his missionaries. The lofty instruction that resonates throughout the entire letter (and the *Instructions to Missionaries*) is: *Be Holy*. Deep in the heart of Libermann, son of Israel, it is the commandment of Leviticus that resounds: “Be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 19:2; 20: 26). But the Jew turned disciple of Jesus is more specific:

It is for this battle of faith that Libermann wants to arm his missionaries.

*It is in this "as"
that the missionary
vocation resides.*

*...the sacrifice of
Christ continued in
that of Christians.*

*...we see Lairé apply
himself to the study
of several languages,
compile a dictionary,
visit villages, make
friends with the
people...*

"Be therefore holy as Jesus was holy; it is the one and only way to redeem, to sanctify souls." It is in this "as" that the missionary vocation resides. The apostle Peter, in his discourse of Acts 3, epitomizes the mystery of salvation in the putting to death of the Holy One, Jesus, *Servant* that God resuscitated from the dead so that by his Name healing would be restored to every man as to the cripple at the temple gate called Beautiful (Acts 3:13-26).

Only the reference to the Paschal mystery (death and resurrection of Jesus) allows us to understand Libermann's insistence on sacrifice(s), sufferings. In fact, sacrifices and sufferings are not valued for their own sake; it is not a question of *dolorism* but of "pains united to those of Jesus." It is not man that saves the world, it is not the missionary who saves Africa, it is God who in Christ saves the world by the scandal of the Cross (1 Cor 1:22-23). The immolation that Libermann speaks of is participation in Christ's sacrifice of love.

More than a vicarious redemptive suffering, the victim spirituality that would become widespread at the end of the 19th century,³⁹ Libermann's inner movement is akin to the writings of P. de Condren and M. Olier on the sacrifice of Christ continued in that of Christians. Beyond the vocabulary, to our eyes dated, it is the meditation on the Mystery of Christ according to St. Paul that is being offered here.⁴⁰

That M. Lairé was filled with this pascal spirituality of identification with the dead and resuscitated Jesus was dazzlingly apparent in his last letter to reach us, written to his bishop, Mgr Kobès, only minutes before his death . . .

In Conclusion: M. Lairé's Final Letter

M. Lairé would die on November 25, 1852 in a yellow fever and typhoid epidemic. His companion, Brother Charles, was the sole witness to his efforts to scribble *a final letter to his bishop*, a testament of his missionary life, *moments before passing away*. In a few lines, we find in this letter the essence of M. Lairé's inner feelings towards his mission and his imminent death, pure echo of the missionary instructions received from Libermann.

And yet, be careful! M. Lairé wasn't content to be inwardly holy and to die at age twenty-six! Lairé and his companions approached the establishment of the mission at Grand-Bassam with great earnestness. Through the letters sent to his bishop, to Libermann, and his fellow missionaries, we see Lairé apply himself to the study of several languages, compile a dictionary, visit villages, make friends with the people, recruit children and

open the first school in Côte d'Ivoire, the beginnings of a future secondary school. His aim from the start was the formation of a native clergy in accordance with the Propaganda guidelines (*Neminem Profecto*). He drew plans to go settle further in the interior, far from the European and commercial tumult of the coast . . . In short, the letters of someone who thought, with Libermann, that a living missionary is worth more than a dead one, who overflowed with the spirit of enterprise and love for Africans . . . His last letter can thus be read with emotion, for it is neither an exercise in piety nor an exercise in style, but a pure Eucharistic offering with Christ *for the glory of God and the salvation of the world*. It is with this letter that we will conclude this article.

*I wish only one thing
and that is that my
brothers benefit [from
my death] by seeing
clearly like me that
God wants to appear
alone in his work...*

St. Jacques of Grand Bassam being tied to the Cross of Jesus and Mary on my bed of sorrow, October 25, 1852. [...] I wish only one thing and that is that my brothers benefit [*from my death*] by seeing clearly like me that God wants to appear alone in his work, without all the industry nor the will of the flesh, nor the will and force of the natural spirit, in order that he may be praised before the angels and his saints [...] My love to you all . . . I can't go on.

Your child and brother,
c.m. Lairé, m.ap.

*Paul Coulon, C.S.Sp.
Paris*

Endnotes

¹Text abridged from Paul Coulon, "L'évangélisation de la Côte d'Ivoire: préhistoire spiritaine d'un Centenaire," *Memoire Spiritaine*, no. 2 (November 1995), 100-127.

²In Libermann's time, according to French and Sulpician tradition, a lay ecclesiastic was called Mr. [*Monsieur*]. The title of *Father* for priests became customary in the order when it moved to public religious (and no longer simply private) vows in 1855 (the first *public* religious profession was August 26, 1855).

³« Souvenir à ma chère Pauline » [Reminder to my dear Pauline] (Arch. CSSp, Dossier personnel).

⁴ND IX, p. 475. ND = *Notes et Documents relatifs à la vie et à l'œuvre du Vénérable François-Marie-Paul Libermann, supérieur général de la congrégation du Saint-Esprit et du Saint Cœur de Marie*. 13 volumes, 2 *Appendices*, 1 *Complément*. A. Cabon éditeur. (Paris, Maison Mère : 1929-1956).

⁵ND IX, p. 476.

⁶For a chronological summary of this entire period, see P. Coulon, P. Brasseur, *Libermann (1802-1852): Une pensée et une mystique*

missionnaire. Paris: Le Cerf, 1988, pp. 89-129.

⁷See P. Coulon, “L’effervescente année 1846 et le genèse du grand *Mémoire* de Libermann à la Propagande”, in P. Coulon, P. Brasseur, *op.cit.*, p. 401-455 (esp. p. 421-424).

⁸General archives CSSp, Personnel file of M. Lairé. We give a faithful transcription of the original manuscript letter, with its errors and apologies.

⁹Bishop Aloyse Kobès (1820-1872).

¹⁰Charles Gay (1828-1881).

¹¹Joseph Bourget (1817-left the Congregation in 1873).

¹²Jean-Claude Duret (1824-1875).

¹³The italicized words in brackets appear in the text but were crossed out by Lairé.

¹⁴Translation: [the missionary] “will prove himself by the distinguished characteristics of outstanding charity and prudence but also by his long use and experience of things . . .”

¹⁵Translation: “I can do everything in Him who . . .” Beginning of the citation from Phil 4: 13: *Omnia possum in eo qui me confortat. I can do everything in Him who gives me strength.*

¹⁶Martin Duby, born May 1, 1823 in Ammerschwir (Strasbourg diocese), entered Notre-Dame du Gard on December 11, 1847 and left for Africa with Mgr. Bessieux in February 1849. He served his apostolate in N’Dhangol, at St. Marie of The Gambia, in Dakar, and again in The Gambia. Returning to France in 1856, he twice went back to Senegambia for extended stays. He died in Chevilly May 8, 1890.

¹⁷Frédéric Le Vasseur, born February 25, 1811 on the island of Bourbon (Réunion). Succeeded, in August 1881, Fr. Schwindenhammer as Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. He died in Paris on January 16, 1882.

¹⁸Fr. Ignace Schwindenhammer was then Assistant General. He succeeded Libermann as Superior General of the Congregation (1853-1881).

¹⁹Translation: “by a holy kiss.”

²⁰Ernest Briot of Malleric, born in Loyat (Vannes diocese), June 2, 1813. In 1857, he left the Congregation and retired in Switzerland. He died around 1870.

²¹“In 1825 the first young Africans, boys and girls, that Mother Javouhey had brought from Senegal for training, arrived in France. Arriving in France in the spring of 1827, David Boilat, Arsène Fridoil and Jean-Pierre Moussa entered the Major Seminary of Carcassonne in 1834. Before their ordination (September 18, 1840) they spent some time at the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. . . “ *cf.* P. Coulon, P. Brasseur, *op.cit.*, p. 550.

²²Arch. CSSp 154-B-1

²³See the article “*temps*” in X. Leon-Duffour, *Dictionnaire du Nouveau Testament*, Paris: Le Seuil, 1975.

²⁴P. Coulon, “Faites-vous nègres avec les nègres” ou la stratégie missionnaire d’un mystique (1847),” in P. Coulon, P. Brasseur, *op.cit.*, p. 489-546 (esp. p. 530-541). See also Christian de Mare, ed., *A Spiritan Anthology. Writings of Claude François Poullart des Places (1679-1709)*

and François Marie-Paul Libermann (1802-1852). (Onitsha: Spiritan Publications, 2011), 281-287.

²⁵*ND XIII*, p. 101-119.

²⁶*ND XIII*, p. 46-49: to M. Thiersé, “Paris, 22 February 1851”; p. 50-52: to M. Lambert, “Paris, 23 February 1851,” p. 52-54; to M. Baud, “Paris, 24 February 1851,” p. 55-57; to M. Laval, “Paris, 24 February 1851”.

²⁷*Instructions aux missionnaires* can be found in the *Ecrits spirituels du Vénérable Libermann*, Paris, Poussielgue frères, 1891, p. 365-560. English translation, *Instructions for Missionaries. Francis Mary Paul Libermann*. Translated by Walter van de Putte. Mimeograph copy. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University. No date).

²⁸*ND XIII*, p. 142-146.

²⁹Composed of four pages, two sheets front and back, on paper bearing the emblem of the *Congregation of the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Heart of Mary*, this letter is registered under number 143 in Volume 1 of *Copies d'autographes*, p. 682-687. Microfilm of originals: reel 1, letter 143. *ND XIII*, p. 142-146. We adhere to the original text even in its errors.

³⁰Cf. Joseph Lecuyer, “Father Libermann and the Curse of Ham,” *Spiritana Papers*, no. 6 (1978), 33-47.

³¹Matt 11:29: “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

³²We omit the post-scripts to the letter, lines 124-133, *ND XIII*, p. 145-146; *A Spiritana Anthology*, 325-326.

³³E. Germain, *Parler du salut? Aux origines d'une mentalité religieuse. La catéchèse du salut dans la France de la Restauration*. Paris: Beauchesne, 1967, 690 p.

³⁴E. Germain, *op.cit.*, p. 467-481.

³⁵“Outside the church, no salvation.”

³⁶*Catéchisme de la Rochelle* (1814), cited by E. GERMAIN, *op.cit.*, p. 485.

³⁷Lecuyer, “Father Libermann and the Curse of Ham,” *Spiritana Papers*, no. 6 (1978), 33-47

³⁸Partial text in *A Spiritana Anthology*, 376-386.

³⁹See the article *Victimale (spiritualité)* by Giuseppe Manzoni in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, t. 16 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1994), col. 531-545.

⁴⁰See Jean Galy, *Le Sacrifice dans l'école française de spiritualité* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions latines, 1951), 404 p.

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Editor: Dr. James Chukwuma Okoye, C.S.Sp., Director, Center for Spiritan Studies, 18 Chatham Square, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA 15282, U.S.A.
Telephone: (1) 412 396 4824
E-mail: okoyej@duq.edu

Editorial Board: James C. Okoye, C.S.Sp., Dr. Janie M. Harden Fritz, Dr. Laverna Saunders, Dr. Fintan Sheerin, Dr. Daniel Watkins, Dr. Gerrard Magill, Dr. George Worgul.

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