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### 12. Advice on prayer to his nephew

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## Advice on prayer to his nephew

### *Letter to François-Xavier Libermann<sup>1</sup>*

*This letter was written by François Libermann less than a year before his death. It shows him, once again, as a spiritual master and an expert on prayer. It is a long letter of 8 pages and our extract below is from the section dealing with prayer.<sup>2</sup> The letter is addressed to François-Xavier Libermann<sup>3</sup>, his 21 year old nephew, son of his brother Samson. He was a Spiritan student at Gard and had written to his uncle about the problems he was having with his prayer. In reply, Libermann talks of the history of his own prayer life when he was a student and bases his advice on this experience. He has words of warning about the advice given in some manuals of prayer.*

Paris, May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1851

My Dear Child,

... Let us now talk about Fr. Courbon.<sup>4</sup> I will tell you my experience of him. During my seminary days, I passed through very many phases of prayer. At first, I was in the “affective” stage but I moved through various other phases until I arrived at what Fr. Courbon calls “*the presence of God through pure faith*”. At that time, when I found myself in a quandary, a little like your own, my director gave me Courbon’s manual to set me on the right tracks. But I found almost nothing described there which had any resemblance to my actual state or to the stages I had already passed through. The stages that had a slight resemblance to my own story were not in the same order as I had experienced them. Courbon ascribed certain

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<sup>1</sup> N.D. XIII, pp.132-133

<sup>2</sup> Libermann treats of the same subject in his letter to Fr. Collin, N.D. VII, pp. 31-39

<sup>3</sup> See Index

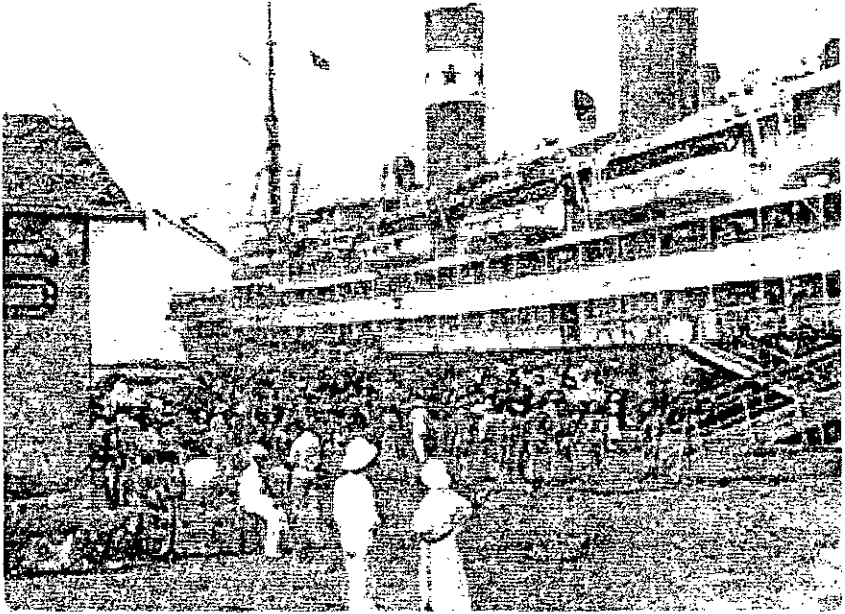
<sup>4</sup> Fr. Courbon was a priest of Saint-Sulpice in Paris and had produced a book on prayer and its various stages for the guidance of his seminarians.

effects to one stage and others to the next, whereas I had experienced them simultaneously. The result was that I became completely muddled, so my director told me to discontinue following Courbon. Later on, when my prayer had reached some stability, I read him again, at least in part, and decided that all these detailed theories were inexact and would do more harm than good.

It is true that the grace of God adapts itself to our particular nature, and there are also other elements which are common to everybody. But when we get down to details, we can get very lost if we try to have rules which fit everybody, because no ten people are alike; the nuances of prayer are extremely diversified. So I suggest that you look on the rules of Courbon as a dead end and continue to follow your own path in all simplicity, placing your trust in God and his great goodness.

Stay humbly in God's presence when you pray, with the desire to unite yourself to him and his great mercy and be ready to sacrifice yourself totally for his glory. From time to time, try to re-live this frame of mind (as long as you are able to do so); but it does not have to be strictly formulated. Accept your nothingness in peace, but do not waste time trying to work out if your vocation is to arrive at this or that state of prayer. This would be both useless and harmful and is certainly not what God wants you to do. These states of which they talk do not really mean anything much and are far from being proven. If you follow what I am telling you with humility and generosity, I will take responsibility for whatever happens...

*F. Libermann, Sup.*



*The "Asia" prepares to take new missionaries to Africa*