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Libermann’s Provisional Rule of 1840

The Libermann Provisional Rule, written in 1840, is one of the fundamental references for the Spiritan missionary ideal: profoundly inspired by the Gospel, it remains marked by the permanent newness of the same. Libermann liked to comment on his Rule to the novices in the young missionary community of the Sacred Heart of Mary; the founder was a pedagogue, and even more, a witness. Libermann always knew how to get close to young people; “he listened with great interest to all their questions, even during recreation.”

Beginning in 1846, Libermann’s commentaries on the Provisional Rule were painstakingly noted by one of the novices, the future Father Lannurien, and collected under the name of “Glose” (brief commentary).

The Meaning of a Rule (Introduction)

The Founder often recalled how much a rule of life provided structure at once for the mission, for individuals, and the community: “when one member of a body is dislocated, out of place, all the members suffer” (Introduction, No. 6). At the same time, Libermann is fully aware that his Rule is “provisional,” because the form of mission in which the young people are going to find themselves will be of a completely new type. Despite the qualifier of “provisional” that the founder gives to his Rule, “its inner core, that which concerns the spirit of the Congregation, must not change” (Introduction, note). Libermann tells us. Indeed, from the opening articles of the current Spiritan Rule of Life we find the key statements of the original Rule.

Libermann describes the spirit of his Congregation in the first two parts of his provisional rule: the first speaks to a certain extent of the identity of the Congregation; the second describes the way of life, “the state” it must achieve if it wants to respond fully to its mission. The third addresses the government of the Congregation, but Lannurien did not note any commentaries or glosses on this section.
1. THE IDENTITY OF THE CONGREGATION

The profound Being of the Missionary (Chapter 1)

The first article of the rule sums it up: The missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Mary “in the name of Jesus Christ and as sent by him, devote themselves completely to announcing his holy Gospel, and to establishing his kingdom among the poorest and most neglected souls in God’s Church” (Art. 1.4). Libermann immediately draws attention to the fact that missionaries are called to live the itinerant life that Christ himself lived on earth, “having not even a rock on which to rest the head” (Art 2). Christ sends them in order to carry on his mission. With the priests, lay brothers will be very useful “for sharing our work,” “taking care of material needs” and “the education of the ignorant” (Art. 1.1), this latter being a priority for everyone.

Libermann asks his missionaries to give priority to their spiritual life: “Those who have done the most good in God’s Church were generally not those who are called learned,” but like the Apostles they were filled with the Gospel, and their wisdom “was accompanied by the spirit of a life of prayer” (Art 2). To evangelize requires a long labor of sowing the seeds of faith, which is what Jesus did all during his apostolic life.

The result is that Libermann demands of his novices a very high idea of this type of vocation which carries with it a very particular need of holiness: “they will not lose sight of the fact that if they are to establish the love and reign of Jesus Christ within others, the more so must they first establish it more powerfully and solidly in their own souls” (Art 3). The missionary vocation is a great responsibility, for missionaries are the founders of churches and communities: “even if a missionary in Guinea only converts a dozen people, he will have performed an incalculable good . . . what glory for a missionary to have been the founder of a church! And Libermann adds: “ten converts here and ten over there, it’s not the same!” (Art 3)

Servants (Art 5). Can one change hearts by arriving as conquerors? Following the example of Jesus (Matt 20:28), the missionary will not seek “to be served but to serve” (Art 5), and he will sacrifice everything, even a certain spiritual comfort, for the good of those he wants to lead to Christ. Of course, faced with such a vocation, missionaries will increasingly discover themselves poor, but that experience in itself will be a special grace and a great strength for
them. Indeed, the missionary “walks in the presence of God” (Art 7), knowing that “I have the strength for everything through him who empowers me” (Phil 4:3; Art 6) and that God through his Spirit will cause the growth of that which one has planted (1 Cor 3:6; Art. 7). In this sense, the missionary cannot be content to live a “natural life,” meaning being inspired in faith and a true relation to Christ only from afar (Art 8). People must not be able to say of us that “we are only doing our job,” nothing more; “that will prevent them from profiting from our words” (Art 9). Never say: “that is enough”; “otherwise, since we always have a weight in us which drags us down . . . our ministry with souls will be little productive” (Art 9). “Let us be like the fire that warms” (Art 10).

The Meaning of Consecration (Chapter 2)

To follow Christ in his mission is to engage in a veritable “consecration.” “The nature of the work we are proposing” (Art 1), missionary life, consists of entering into the heart of a mystery, that of God’s own life. Missionary life is thus in a sense captured in the radiance of Trinitarian love itself, it is consecrated by that love. That is why Libermann says that “the Congregation is consecrated in the first place to the very Holy Trinity . . . God alone is our heritage!” (Art 1)

Our place in the dynamic of Trinitarian love is that “we have been given to Jesus Christ by his Father” (Art 2), specifically to continue his mission. It thus follows that “we belong to and are completely dedicated to Our Lord Jesus Christ. He sends us as he sent his Apostles, knowing “that he generally uses the weakest instruments” (Art 2). This consecration is indeed the work of the Spirit!

However, following from these two consecrations, there is the vow of the Congregation to the apostolic Heart of Mary (Art 3). The mission being a humanly impossible task, we want to identify ourselves with Mary who humbly says in her Magnificat: “The Mighty One has done great things for me.” We must therefore regard the apostolic heart of Mary “as the model of the perfect zeal with which we must be consumed” (Art 3). Libermann draws again on the image of the heart that, like a fire, warms all those who are in its presence.

These three consecrations (to the Trinity, to Christ, and subsequently to Mary, Art 3 and 4) do not prevent our turning to some “favored patrons or models,” such as Saint John and the Apostles and saints who opened the
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path to the mission. Saint Joseph also has a very special place in our hearts “because of the close relationship he had with Jesus and Mary . . . and he is the model of the inner life” (Arts 5-7).

What is the Congregation Destined for? (Chapter 3)

For Libermann, at the time of the Provisional Rule, the Congregation was destined for “distant and foreign missions” (Art 1), “among the poor, despised peoples whose needs are very great” (Art 5); also “the mission that our Lord gives us now is to the Blacks” (Art 7). It is a matter of priority over all other types of mission, until the local church “has enough clergy for the needs of this people (Art 6). Libermann judged that the moment was favorable because slavery was thankfully going to be abolished soon: “already 50 ships are being sent to prevent trading in slaves” (Art 7). It is this primary urgency which led to the founding of Libermann’s small Congregation; but at the same time Libermann foresaw the harm that could accompany the arrival of large numbers of colonists: “Look at this crowd of Europeans who are going to arrive in their land,” bringing with them “corruption of manners” (Art 7), not to mention the competition of a very active Protestantism, much feared at the time.

What will be “the Missionaries’ special and ongoing Task”? (Chapter 4)

Libermann understands that his era conveys many prejudices against blacks and he specifies that it will be necessary from the outset “to carefully study the customs of people entrusted to our care” (Art 2). All the while he insists on the fact that the moral transformation of the people could never be achieved without their own true discovery of the faith (Art 3). The missionaries are thus exhorted to establish as soon as possible Christian communities that radiate influence because profoundly driven by faith and charity (Arts 4 and 5).

The Means of attaining this Goal are “Missions” (Chapter 5) and “Stations” (Chapter 6)

Father Libermann first envisioned “missions” on the model of rounds made throughout the island parishes, with a team of missionaries coming to teach and hear confessions. Of particular note is Libermann’s insistence on evangelizing children; for him they are “new souls who readily believe and in whom prejudices and habits have not
taken root; whereas older men . . .” He gives this instruction: “win over the rising generation, who in ten years will set the tone.” (Chap 5, Art 8). The “stations” are central points where the missionaries, fewer in number, will allow themselves time for more in-depth evangelization. Libermann anticipates that this will be the case for new forms of mission (Chap. 6, Art 1).

**The Ministry to Priests and the Birth of a “native Clergy” (Chapters 7 and 8)**

Libermann makes a priority of ministry to priests. It is on the good priests the missionary “leaves behind him that the stability of the good he was able to accomplish will depend, they will spread this good and thereby bring salvation to an incalculable number of souls” (Chap 7, Art 1). Beginning with the missionaries’ relations with the secular clergy or parish priests in the Islands, Libermann recommends having “the greatest respect and affection for them, just as our Lord Jesus Christ gives us towards our superiors” (Art 2, Art 10); even if they sometimes encounter opposition, they are to seek every way to be useful to them and “to help them in their sacred functions” (Art 8).

Libermann next demands of his missionaries, “once they are situated in a country, to do all they can to establish a native clergy there” (Chap 8). He determined that the missions undertaken elsewhere failed due to lack of attention to this fundamental objective (Art 1).

**Attitudes.** Libermann ends his reflections on the identity of the Congregation (Chap 9) with a description of the “rules of conduct towards those we must evangelize.” The attitude of the missionary in the manner of his encounter with other peoples is best summed up in the last article of this important chapter of the Rule:

We will do all we can to establish between rich and poor, blacks and whites, that Christian charity which makes all men consider themselves brothers in Jesus Christ...
don’t yet know their worth. “We must therefore seek to help them in earthly matters, but for us this assistance will be based on faith and charity; that is how we will gain their trust and affection” (Art 2).

The missionaries’ zeal must be directed first towards the poorest and also the sick (Arts 3-5). This led Libermann at the same time to utter a very strong statement: “They will be the advocates, the supporters and the defenders of the weak and the little against those who oppress them” (Art 6), “the master or the colonist who thinks of them as dogs” (Art 6); all the while making clear that, though feeling strong emotion and indignation over injustices suffered, they must maintain self-control and try to act towards all with tenderness and prudence, yet without weakness (Art 7). To find the right balance, there is a fundamental spiritual rule: one must “look upon our Lord in their souls,” without asking oneself who may be deserving or not, and without limiting ourselves to those we find pleasing (Arts 8-11).

Libermann insists on the necessity of studying people’s “character,” “the penchants of their hearts, their inclinations and affections” (Art 12). Every missionary may not necessarily be able to “give a scientific report” of such a study, but each can acquire the practical knowledge that stems from “natural tact perfected by grace, that allows us to penetrate as with a glance to the interior of souls” (Art 12). We will then learn “to adapt to different ways of being”; “it is a gift of the Holy Spirit that is so admired in St. Paul” (Art 12).

2. THE CONGREGATION’S WAY OF LIFE

Libermann envisions for his missionaries the way of life of religious apostles: that is what will create the unity of the Congregation and ensure its “spiritual state,” along with community life and the three vows (Chap 1). This latter, progressively required of all members of the Congregation (Art 3), will be clearly influenced by the demands of the mission itself.

Concerning the practice of poverty (Chap. 2), Libermann foresees that there will always be a certain gap between the missionary’s living standard or resources and that of the needy populations where he is sent; allowing our resources to create a distance from the people or even among missionaries must be avoided. In asking that poverty be practiced “as perfectly as possible” (Art 1), Libermann distinguishes first between poverty of the heart,
which involves “having the mind free from regard for riches and greatness” and a concrete poverty which is controlled by the concrete demands of the missionary relation (Art 1). Poverty experienced in common requires detachment and discernment on everyone’s part, as all become easily attached over time “to trifles that make our heart smaller” (Art 3) and must learn “to suffer privations with love” (Art 4). A long series of prescriptions (Art 6, 20) makes it possible to keep a watch out for inequalities and see to it that everyone has what he needs for his work and his health, the standard of living of the community seeking to stay as close as possible to that of the poor in the country where it is carrying out its mission (Arts 6-20). Being very pragmatic, Libermann particularly insists on a regular auditing of the accounts: a council of almoners (Arts 16 and 17) is planned for this task. Libermann specifies as well that we must not be “ashamed to appear before a rich man in humble clothing.” And yet, “we do not profess absolute poverty: except for cases of necessity, we must maintain an ordinary appearance, and not be dressed like a Capuchin who practices the poverty of St. Francis!” (Arts 21 and 22).

Concerning chastity, the founder details at length (Chap 3) all the usual rules of caution and control of the imagination and senses; he insists a great deal on the control of affectivity and, as an experienced spiritual director, he describes the possible drifting of generous hearts living the relationships inherent in every mission: the temptation to “capture hearts” or to “let our own be captured” (Art 8).

Essentially, for Libermann, the best stabilizer of the missionary’s emotional life is community life. The founder was even more convinced of this fact when, after the merger with the Seminary of the Holy Ghost, he received government reports on drifting by priests isolated in the colonies.

Obedience (Chap 4) is tied to our consecration which consists of espousing the loving will of God with our entire being. Obedience towards one’s superiors is still very influenced by the rules of the era, but the fact remains that the practice of obedience, over and above its spiritual grounded-ness, also has a large practical advantage: it allows for “long-lasting and concerted efforts!” (Arts 1-4). Nor does obedience exclude “explanations to enlighten the superior” (Art 4, 7). It must also be expected that the bonds which are established between a pastor and
his community can make it difficult to accept “a change of locale” and in the case of a new assignment “one will find a thousand pretexts to be excused from it” or to resist a transfer, for example, “the good one is doing, the experience gained” (Art 10). These are certainly arguments which may be put forward (provided one doesn’t use roundabout means to do so!). Obedience will always remain the best guarantee of being certain of fidelity to God’s will; it also requires a great deal of spiritual humility in situations where one receives reprimands that one feels are undeserved . . . (Art 16, 17).

**Community life** (Chap 5) is already justified by the fact that “a missionary alone is very vulnerable to becoming lax” or getting discouraged (for Libermann the worst of temptations will always be discouragement). Solitude? : “Out of 100, you will not find one capable of truly withstanding it! Solitude was very hard for our first three missionaries (“with the exception of Father Laval” Libermann noted . . .) (Art 1). Therefore the Rule is that “all members live in community” (Art 1). One must be wary of easy excuses or urgent reasons for being exempted from communal life (Art 8). Libermann also raises the question of food: ideally it would be the same as that of the people living in the area, but reality shows that it is also necessary to take care of one’s health! (Art 9, 10). Regularly returning to a central community, if one has to leave to make rounds, allows one to be revitalized in spiritual and fraternal life; it also allows one “to rest a bit,” to give reports to several people . . . and receive advice (Art 12 and following).

**Relations in Community.** After a chapter touching on the regulations organizing “community life in general” (Chap 6), Libermann spends a long time on “Rules for conduct towards each other” (Chap 7). Community relationships are the place where the “cordial” love that is the heart of our mission is borne out (Art 1).

Remember first of all that in community what unites us is more important than what might seem to momentarily divide us: “the same faith” (thus the same opinions in substance); “the same goal” based on love, the “same general principles of action”; “the same enemies to combat” and “the same weapons or means” (including community life), not to mention the priority given by all to God over the search for oneself (Art1). In addition, community life helps to develop a sense of dialogue: in providing “the ability to willingly come round to others’ point of view, and to welcome
criticism . . . (Art 1) and to “be in control of the first stirrings of sensitivity” (Art 2), as well as to also delight in the good done by others (Art 3, 4). There is this very wise note: “If your neighbor exhibits any discontent towards you, it almost always stems from a wrong you have committed or a fault of character you possess” (Art 20). But Libermann adds, “of the judgments that I’ve heard the past three years I have never heard one that was correct,” and “judging others is a common failing of pious souls”? (Art 7).

In conclusion to a long development on the theme of brotherly love, Libermann advises deeply loving one’s community and Congregation by manifesting at all times real warmth or cordiality, a spirit of service, frankness and openness (Art 12 and following).

**Having an apostolic Spirit: “apostolic zeal” (Chapter 8)**

What Libermann terms apostolic zeal is the distinguishing characteristic of the apostle and entails an exacting standard of perfection in every aspect. In addressing novices Libermann wants to warn them against an ephemeral enthusiasm or zeal, “fruit of the imagination” (Art 1, 2). Zeal assumes that one tries very hard to overcome many natural faults by starting to totally follow Christ (Art 3). Rare are those, Libermann says, who have a perfectly correct zeal because “one must love God for himself and not for oneself” (Art 3), have a “love of sacrifice” for the salvation of souls (Art 4). We must also not forget that “the crosses that are the most difficult to bear are those which come from ourselves,” (Art 4) and thus to develop a strong and faithful will despite the difficulties (Art 5-7). The sign of zeal is not an anxious activism; one of the keys to zeal is yet again that peace which is the fruit of a deep inner life. Apostolic activity necessarily confronts the missionary with a lot of opposition, even calumny, and generally with resistance to evil. Libermann recalls in this respect the words of Jesus: “I send you as lambs among the wolves” (Art 12). The virtue of gentleness will then consist of loving those who hurt us and believing in the work of grace in them. In any case, “we are made for souls and not the souls for us” (Art 13). Libermann makes frequent reference to St. Paul and the example of the saints to show his missionaries how they must join strength and gentleness in their conduct:

*If Saint Paul was forced at times to speak harshly, he immediately added words of tenderness, which...*
won hearts by showing the paternal affection he felt for the souls . . . he called them “my children for whom I am again in labor, until Christ be formed in you!” (Art 16; Gal 4:19).

Chapter 9, titled “On some principal virtues that are the basis of apostolic zeal,” is like a long meditation that develops in greater depth the direction given at the beginning of the Rule:

the apostolic life is nothing other than that life of love and holiness that the Son of God led on earth in order to save and sanctify souls, and through which he sacrificed himself for the glory of his Father . . .

Chapter 10 invites the missionary to develop a very useful skill for his condition: to know how to “speak” or the art of preaching. “Preaching, to make our Lord known, is the principal and most important ministry of his apostolate” (Art 1). Like Jesus himself, it is necessary to “be simple and to strive directly for the conversion of hearts” (Art 2). As in other domains concerning the mission, Libermann asks them to model themselves on St. Paul (Art 2, 3), who adapted his manner of speech to his different publics, and not “on those preachers who write a sermon in their study without knowing to whom they will preach it; and then go and deliver the same sermon everywhere” (Art 7). Libermann also insists that moralistic preaching that seeks “first to make men and then to make Christians” will not bear much fruit (Art 8). It is then that Libermann challenges his listeners, impatient to get out in the field: “most of the time it is to ourselves that we preach” (Art 9). You must learn to “say ordinary things that have been said a hundred times, but in a non-ordinary way” (Art 12), and this presumes that “you are full of it, convinced and deeply penetrated by it.” Libermann specified too that all preaching must be prepared with great care in the study of God’s word illumined by prayer.

The final chapter of the Provisional Rule (Chapter 11) is mainly about the way to hear confessions and to exercise other sacred functions. The spirit is the same as for the Rule as a whole: one must learn “to know the human heart” (Art 1) and “to not be partial to anyone” (Art 2), while accepting to be disturbed at any time (Art 3). One must ask “as few questions as possible” (Art 6) and “act always with the greatest tenderness (Art 7).
...it is a commentary on the Rule as well as a meditation on the Gospel in light of the mission as lived by Jesus himself, then in particular by Saint Paul.

**Conclusion**

A general impression emerges from the whole of this commentary: it is a commentary on the Rule as well as a meditation on the Gospel in light of the mission as lived by Jesus himself, then in particular by Saint Paul. Many comparisons could be made between the mission described by Libermann and that which Pope Francis speaks of in the *Evangelii gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*): they both have the same desire to give the taste of an apostolate based on the meditation of the Word and the same concern to give priority to encounter with the human heart, over any organization focused on itself.

Paris*

**(Endnotes)**

1Cf. Notes of Fr. Delaplace, March 1851, *Notes et Documents* (henceforth ND) XIII 713.