

Duquesne University

Duquesne Scholarship Collection

François-Marie-Paul Libermann Collection

Spiritan Collection

2005

Life Began at Forty: The Second Conversion of Francis Libermann CSSp

Bernard Kelly

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/libermann-collection>

Recommended Citation

Kelly, B. (2005). Life Began at Forty: The Second Conversion of Francis Libermann CSSp. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/libermann-collection/57>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Spiritan Collection at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in François-Marie-Paul Libermann Collection by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

Bernard A. Kelly CSSp

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

The Second Conversion of Francis Libermann CSSp

At the age of 37 Francis Libermann was almost completely defeated. Rejected by his own Jewish people because of his conversion to Christianity, he had been turned down for ordination to the priesthood by the Archbishop of Paris due to recurring attacks of epilepsy. An alternative career as novicemaster to the Eudist Congregation at Rennes held promise of a new dawn but in reality became a dark night.

But then all changed. He accepted the challenge presented by two fellow students Frederick Le Vasseur and Eugene Tisserant to set up a society to care for the spiritual and material well-being of the oppressed people of the black race. Fr Bernard A. Kelly of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost tells how its spiritual father, Francis Libermann, emerged from 'the shadow of darkness' to become the inspiration and organiser of a spiritual movement which now claims over 3,000 committed members and cares for the spiritual needs of people in more than 50 countries.

SPIRITAN ROOTS SERIES

Vol. I. Life Began at Forty

The Second Conversion of Francis Libermann CSSp
by Bernard A. Kelly CSSp

Life Began at Forty

**The Second Conversion
of Francis Libermann CSSp**

Bernard A. Kelly CSSp



Paraclete Press
Dublin & London

To Tim and Fred,
who enabled me to recognise
all my other brothers and sisters.

Paraclete Press,
169 Booterstown Avenue,
Co. Dublin.
Tel: 01-881789
First published by Paraclete Press 1983
Second edition 2005

ISBN 0 946639 00 0

Copyright © Bernard Kelly 1983
Made and printed in Ireland by Hard Copy Ltd, Dublin.
Typeset in Times Roman by Leaders Phototypesetting, Swords, Co. Dublin

"I tell you in the presence of Our Lord Jesus Christ who knows better than I the truth of what I say that I am like a piece of worm-eaten wood. It can do no more than smoulder in the fire so that it neither enlightens nor warms anyone. I am like a paralytic who wants to move but cannot"
Rennes, 1839 (L.S. 11,293).

"The man who generously and manfully takes on a life of perfect self-denial will come to know both profound peace and a burning zeal. He will be a thousand times happier than those who allow themselves to be dominated by material things. Divine grace will renew and strengthen him and he will find a consolation unknown to those who fear to lose the comfort of this world. Our Divine Lord has promised a hundredfold to him who keeps his heart fixed on God and keeps created things in second place. All who have tried it have found the truth of these promises of Eternal Truth"
Instructions for Missionaries (1851) in *Ecrits Spirituels*, (Paris, 1891), 47 5-6.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION		viii
CHAPTER		
ONE.	OBSERVANCE AND REVOLT	1
	Jews In France	1
	Life In Saverne	5
	Studies At Metz	11
TWO.	CONFUSION AND CONVERSION	17
	The Road To Paris	18
	Conversion	23
THREE.	PEACE AND FRAGILITY	29
	Saint-Sulpice: The Spirit And The Men	29
	Peace That Surpasses All Understanding	35
	Epilepsy	44
FOUR.	SUCCESS AND FAILURE	55
	Liebermann At Issy	56
	Liebermann At Rennes	68
FIVE.	"FRANCHIR LE PAS"	81
	Conversion	81
	Second Conversion	86
	Liebermann's Experience Of Second Conversion	90
SIX.	EPILOGUE	109
	Francis Liebermann 1840-1852	109
	Reflection on Liebermann's later years	116
SEVEN.	CONCLUSION	123
	Liebermann: A Portrait	123
	Liebermann And Second Conversion Today	128
NOTES	135
BIBLIOGRAPHY	143
APPENDIX: Some Events In the Life Of Francis Liebermann	146



F. Liberman

Introduction

If one searches for an example of someone who failed to cope with a profound sense of inner defeat in his middle years, one does not have far to travel. One instance occurs in Peter Shaffer's play, *Amadeus*. The play is about Mozart, but especially it is about the lesser known Antonio Salieri (1750-1825) who came from a small town in Lombardy. Son of a merchant, he had bargaining in his blood, but his great passion was music.

"By twelve I was stumbling about in the countryside, humming my arias and anthems to the Lord. My only desire was to join all the composers who had celebrated His glory through the long Italian past. Every Sunday, I saw Him in church, staring down at me from the mouldering wall. Understand I don't mean Christ. The Christs of Lombardy are simpering sillies with lambkins on their sleeves. No. I mean an old candle-smoked God in a mulberry robe, staring at the world with dealers' eyes. Tradesmen had put Him there. Those eyes made bargains — real and irreversible. 'You give me so — I'll give you so. No more: no less.'"¹

When Salieri was sixteen, he made a bargain with God. If he could but become a famous composer, he would honour God with his music all his life. He went to Venice to study music, then to Vienna, where he became the Court Composer at the age of 24. The arrival of Mozart provoked a crisis of faith in Salieri, who took God to task for bestowing musical genius on this swaggering youngster, Mozart, while he, serious, earnest, dedicated, had been less favoured. To get back at God, now addressed as the Unjust One, Salieri, from his official position, thwarted the career of Mozart. This did not bring him happiness. "The gulf that separates me from other men is exact. I was created a pair of ears and nothing else. The God I acknowledge lives, for example, in bars thirty-four to forty-four of Mozart's Masonic Funeral Music. To most people He is non-existent. Therefore I am ever the despair of all who seek to improve the world ... All around me men hunger for general rights: I hunger only for particular notes. They seek liberty for all: I long only for slavery. To be owned — ordered — exhausted by an Absolute. Music. This was denied me, and

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

with it all meaning. Finally I do not care if I live in satin or a sack; if I am ruler or ruled; or even abuser or abused. If I cannot be Mozart, I do not wish to be anything ... Now I go to become a ghost myself. I will stand in the shadow, and into your tormented ears as you come here in your turns, and fail — and hear the taunting of unachievable undismisssable God — I will whisper my name: Salieri — Patron Saint of Mediocrities. And in the depth of your downcastness, you can pray to Me. Secret Salieri. And I will forgive you. *Vi saluto.*"²

In this play I felt I was meeting the man who bargained with God; the man who bitterly resented God's arrangement of things and, belonging to management himself, felt that some backroom moves were called for to restore a proper balance; the man who hated mediocrity but at the end of life's struggle acknowledged himself its patron saint — and felt sure he would not want for clients. I met the ordinary, the average, the unexceptional, all walking easily in the corridors of power. Among them, only Salieri had to face up to the fact of Mozart's genius. Only he recognised it. His religious life, that is to say his continuing negotiations with God, was thrown into a turmoil. Faced with a God who insisted on keeping His mystery and His advantage by sudden, unexpected moves, Salieri felt cheated. He searched his heart and could not find surrender, but only anger and revolt.

Salieri strikes a sympathetic chord in us because we are familiar with his feeling of exasperation. Clinging to the bargain of our youth should not lead to this feeling of defeat. How were we to know that the stakes were going to be raised to the limit? Second conversion is rare but it happened in the life of Francis Libermann. The concept of "second conversion" has been developed most effectively by the Jesuit spiritual writer Louis Lallemand.

Louis Lallemand entered the Society of Jesus at Nancy, France in 1605.³ Subsequently, he became Master of Novices and then for three years director of the second novitiate — tertianship — at Rouen from 1626. He made a lasting impression in this post. It was at Rouen that he elaborated his theory on second conversion. As it is more fully explored later on, I will refer only briefly to it here.

Our first serious commitment to God is usually in carefully measured terms. A strong thread of bargaining runs through it, even though we may not be aware of this. We pledge ourselves sincerely but our eyes, so to

INTRODUCTION

speak, take note of the position of the exits. At this first stage, God has not yet shown his hand. We can only see, as it were, the backs of His cards. As the cards are played, things do not turn out as we had anticipated. There are unforeseen disasters and unexpected joys. Through a series of surprises our illusions fall away and our real situation dawns upon us.

In this second moment we realise a further step has to be taken. God is, metaphorically speaking, a Gambler who likes gamblers, but even more is He a Lover ... who sometimes likes to play cards. He now wants not a measured response, a tentative bargain fenced in by rules and limits, but an unconditional surrender against his own offer of complete intimacy. This surrender is "second conversion" and we face it in fear, as the risk involved fills the horizon. Lallemand refers to it as "taking the step" or "crossing the threshold". Few find the courage to take the step, to entrust themselves completely to Another. Most want to keep control of their lives; they cannot let go inside and "for fear of being miserable, they remain forever miserable".

Francis Libermann was born in Saverne (France) in 1802, the fifth son of a Jewish rabbi. When Salieri was dying and making his final complaints about the Unjust God, who graces the unworthy with genius, Libermann was a 21-year-old student at the rabbinical school at Metz, just beginning his own struggle with the enigma of God's choice. Away from home and making contact with secular authors for the first time, Libermann found himself asking questions about God's choice of the Jews. Could God have favourites? Would this not be unjust? For Libermann, God could not be other than the Just One. In the name of justice then and with Rousseau looking over his shoulder, Libermann denied any divine intervention in the world. Any talk of miracles repelled him. Jews and Christians alike misrepresented God by proclaiming Him as Someone who singled out a people for special favour.

After years of observance it was the hour of revolt. Libermann was a young university student who had grown careless about the practice of his religion. He felt the need to take a stance in the world that he could call his own, one that had not been inherited from his parents. There was an exhilaration in this struggle to establish his identity, but it did not last. Excitement gave way to a new confusion which no learning could dispel. A few years later in a lonely attic in Paris, he knelt down to pray to the God he used to know. In that attic was born a burning desire for baptism

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

and an unassailable conviction of the closeness of God. God entered Francis' life with a power that settled forever the question of His intervention in the world. Francis was baptised a Catholic and entered the seminary of Saint-Sulpice.

Libermann's father, Lazarus, sent him a letter of bitter reproach. It was the letter of an ageing, heartbroken father bewailing the "apostasy" of his son, in whom he had placed his hope and his trust. When Francis read it, he broke down and wept but kept repeating through his tears: "But I am a Christian."

Next the unexpected struck. Libermann had his first *grand mal* epileptic seizure. The door was closing on his hope of becoming a priest. The Sulpicians made a place for him in their house outside Paris. Libermann was grateful but knew that he was there on sufferance only. Through no fault of his own, his prospects had changed dramatically. Feelings of rejection and of uselessness took hold in his heart to the extent that he was tempted to commit suicide. He overcame this temptation by turning his attention away from his own predicament to Jesus, the man of suffering whom the Father loved the most. Turning to Jesus became the secret of his survival.

For a while his illness abated and he began to spend a lot of time with the philosophy students, meeting them in small groups, guiding and encouraging them in their prayer life. He was successful to the extent that he was appointed Novice Master at the new Eudist novitiate in Rennes, even though there was little likelihood of his ever being ordained a priest.

Everything went wrong during the two years at Rennes. There were difficulties with the Superior and opposition from the novices. Libermann seemed to have lost his touch. His letters to friends reflect someone whose eyes are being opened and who is having difficulty accepting what he sees, someone who has lost confidence in himself and is horrified at the harm he has done. The thrilling moment of his baptism and first conversion seems very far away. But the moment of second conversion is near at hand. It is not when someone is winning that he is likely to make an unconditional surrender.

The details of Libermann's second conversion are described in this book. One thing, however, that cannot be said too often is that it is God who makes the first move in second conversion. He lets us see who we really are, helps us to accept our insignificance and our high importance,

INTRODUCTION

gives us the courage to overcome our fear ... and then (the Gambler, the Lover) holds His breath.

Second conversion is winning the war against mediocrity. But to convey this we need sweat and blood, we need sacrifice and the scars of battle ... We need Libermann. We need his early wrestling with God. We need him to tell us that on the brink of success he felt like "a blind man at midnight".

This book is about Libermann, but about Libermann as exemplifying what Lallemand understood by second conversion, hence the sub-title: *The Second Conversion of Francis Libermann*. In a way this is a restriction of our attention to a single crucial decision that Libermann made in middle age. Taken in isolation, this decision would make little sense. Its proper understanding demands an acquaintance with all that led up to it. The first four chapters are a representation of Libermann's growing religious experience, from the Jewish ghetto in Saverne to the Eudist novitiate at Rennes. The point of the book is made in Chapter 5 with an exploration of the meaning of second conversion according to Lallemand and the examination of second conversion in the life of Libermann. The contemporary relevance of Libermann and of second conversion is indicated in the Conclusion (Chapter 7).

The original form of this text was that of a doctoral thesis for the *Institut Catholique de Paris*. To make it more readable, I have greatly reduced the notes. Those that remain can safely be disregarded by all except those who wish to investigate further some points raised. The original bibliography consisted almost entirely of works in French. It has been reduced to a skeleton. Where extracts from books in French are given in the text, the English translation is mine. I have made a few alterations in the text and written a new introduction and an "epilogue" to complete Libermann's personal history. For a variety of reasons the alterations in the text have been slight. There is still a taste of thesis so I take the liberty of exhorting the reader to perseverance. Please read the book — there isn't going to be a movie!

That we have arrived at this stage is due to the encouragement and initiative of many people. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all of them. Here I can mention only a few. My special thanks go to Fr. André Dodin for his careful direction and his practical advice and to Fr. Joseph Lécuyer for his continued interest and his specific recommendations for improving the text. I was lucky to have the services of two very competent

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

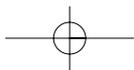
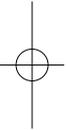
and obliging typists: Frances Lee and Monica Hecker. To all who helped me along the way, who read the text, made helpful suggestions and encouraged me to publish, I am deeply grateful. I gladly absolve you all from any responsibility for the shortcomings in the finished work.

Bernard Anthony Kelly, C.S.Sp.
Toronto, 8 September 1982

For this second publication I again owe a debt of gratitude to Fr Brian Gogan CSSp of Paraclete Press. It is a reprint rather than a revision. I have made a few cosmetic changes to the text to remove some exclusive language. I also draw attention to two books of interest: *Liebermann 1802-1852* (Coulon, Paul: Brasseur, Paule et collaborateurs) Paris, Cerf 1988 (in French) and *The Second Journey* (Gerald O'Collins SJ) Gracewing (Paulist Press) 1995

Bernard A. Kelly CSSp
Chicago, 2 February, 2005

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY



LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

CHAPTER ONE

Observance and Revolt

The Jews in France

In 1788, Lazarus Libermann was married at the age of thirty to Lea Haller in Bischheim, Alsace. He returned with his wife to his native Saverne and they set up house in the Jewish quarter of the town. It was a year before the outbreak of the French Revolution, that social and political upheaval that almost unwittingly became a turning point in the history of the Jewish people. Before the Revolution, for the Jews in France, as in most other countries, segregation was a way of life. They were not citizens but a separate people with a separate regime. They were a pilgrim people who settled where they could. In France they were a tolerated minority, who were never regarded as anything else but foreigners. As some of the sons of the soil had a low tolerance of foreigners, the Jews were familiar with hardship. The most evocative word in describing their situation is the word "Ghetto".

"Ghetto" in our context refers first of all to physical restrictions with regard to abode, occupation and freedom of movement. In general, Jews were not allowed residence in cities. In towns they were dependent on the willingness of the local nobility to give them permission to settle. In return for this favour they paid a tax calculated by the landowner concerned. They were confined to the Jewish sector, their tenure depending on their ability to keep up payment of the tax and the continuing indulgence of the noble. The local population was often hostile, especially in the poorer areas, where it was already difficult to make a living.

The subservience of the Jews was emphasised by the severe restrictions on their commercial activity. "Throughout Alsace, Jews were not allowed to engage in agriculture, or to belong to the craft guilds. Hence, they could practise no craft except that of goldsmith. Nor could they buy real

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

property except at their place of domicile for personal use. Similarly, in most of the province, Jews were excluded from all commercial pursuits except rag dealing. Within their towns and villages, they were limited to petty trade, peddling — which they mostly carried out surreptitiously — and usury."¹

The measures taken against the Jews were repressive and humiliating. Only in 1784 was the *péage corporel* abolished. This was a tax paid on entering and leaving towns and implied a comparison with beasts of burden.

The living conditions of the ghetto varied from extreme congestion that was a hazard to health, with ramshackle buildings and gates that were closed at night, to reasonable accommodation with only an invisible enclosure. In each case, however, the separation was very real. This separation found expression at another level in the "ghetto mentality." The Jews of the ghetto were inward-looking, obliged to be continually on their guard in any dealings with others. All the important moments of life, friendship and marriage, worship and family celebration, took place within the confines of the ghetto. A narrowness of outlook was accompanied by a strong sense of solidarity. This solidarity was not simply a natural effect of shared living conditions. It would be more true to say that it survived these conditions, where hospitality afforded to fellow-Jews sometimes risked compromising the situation of all the Jews in the locality.

It is in considering the mental aspect of ghetto life and now, finally, its spiritual aspect, that a certain ambiguity begins to appear. The Jews considered their presence as a spiritual ghetto, an island of fidelity to Yahweh in the sea of decadent Christian society. They were God's chosen people in perpetual pilgrimage until the coming of the Messiah, who would gather again His people. The mention of this positive element of their faith is not meant to suggest that their ghetto existence was chosen rather than imposed: rather it is to say that their faith was susceptible to finding expression in a ghetto existence. Over long years it had been so conditioned and when the walls of the ghetto were finally broken down, it would have to struggle to survive in an unaccustomed environment. Shaped by living in a continual state of siege, it would find in the cessation of hostilities a threat as well as a deliverance.

The three main groups of Jews in France lived in circumstances that differed greatly. The situation of the Sephardi Jews, centred around

OBSERVANCE AND REVOLT

Bordeaux, was exceptional. "Because of their wealth and commercial activity the Sephardi Jews had received *lettres patentes* from Henry II of France, as early as the sixteenth century. These granted them rights of domicile in whichever province they settled, the right to trade without hindrance, and the right to own real estate. Louis XVI supplemented the rights of the Jews of Bordeaux in 1776 by allowing them to settle and conduct their commercial activities anywhere within the borders of France. The Jews of Bordeaux included great bankers, exporters and importers, silk and other cloth merchants, and suppliers to the Royal Navy."²

The Jews of Avignon were confined to ghettos and were without any civil rights. However their situation was much better than that of the Jews of Alsace-Lorraine and some of them achieved considerable success in trading. The greatest concentration (over four-fifths) of French Jews was in Alsace-Lorraine (Ashkenazi Jews).³ These were, for the most part, very poor and they had a hard life in a hostile environment. Their undesirability was underlined by a series of humiliating restrictions and the exacting of high taxes. Their separation was emphasised by their attachment to Yiddish and their refusal of French and German culture.

When the Estates General was convoked in May 1789, the Jews were without a representative but not without some supporters. The resistance of the deputies to the King in June found a popular echo in the taking of the Bastille in July. In August, the National Assembly met to formulate "The declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen" as a basis of the new political regime. The Jews were not directly considered, but Article X provided the principle for the Jews' claim to equality. It stated that "no person shall be molested for his opinions even such as are religious, provided that the manifestation of their opinions does not disturb the public order as established by the Law." The Jews were now tolerated throughout France, in principle at least released from confinement to special areas. Full citizenship was not, however, so quickly attained. This became clear when, in December, the National Assembly failed to come to a decision on the eligibility of Jews for election. There was little objection to the Jews of Bordeaux and Avignon. It was the poor Ashkenazi Jews of Alsace-Lorraine who were undesirable.

The animosity towards the Jews of Alsace arose not because of their belief, but because they were foreigners and because they were accused of usury. Members of another race, who spoke in a strange tongue, the Jews

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

easily attracted the blame for the sorry situation that the peasants found themselves in. The proof of their guilt lay in the fact that they exploited the situation by usury. This charge was to keep ill-feeling alive right through the Napoleonic period.

Throughout 1790 strong opposition to the enfranchisement of Ashkenazi Jews continued. On 9th October of that year, Lazarus Libermann's wife, Lea, gave birth to her first child, Samson. The events being played out at the time of his birth were to greatly influence his future. The attempted flight of Louis XVI in June 1791 weakened the hand of the conservatives. A new constitution was voted on 14th September and a decree of enfranchisement of all Jews in France on 27th September. The turning point had been reached. This decree signalled a new era for the Jews in France. They were now equal by law with every other citizen.

For the Jews of Alsace-Lorraine things did not change overnight. The enmity was too deep-seated. Prejudice cannot be removed simply by making a law against it. Resentment towards the Jews resulted in new petitions for their expulsion. The 'reign of terror' spread confusion. The Jews as well as the Catholics were victims of the campaign for the "cult of reason." To the Ashkenazi Jews, the right of citizenship seemed for the moment to be a doubtful privilege.

When Napoleon came to power in France, his first concern involving religion was to find a solution to the chaotic condition of the Catholic church. After thirteen months of negotiation, a Concordat with Rome was signed on 15th July 1801. On Easter Sunday of the following year, a solemn ceremony in the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris marked the reestablishment of Catholic worship in France. A few days earlier, on 12th April 1802, Lazarus Libermann's fifth son, Jacob, was born in Saverne.

The thrust of Napoleon's way of government was to organise and unify, to set up lines of dependence which would assure him of maximum control. In this way he hoped to restore order to France and satisfy his personal ambition. He saw the Catholic church as a power in France that he must harness to his purpose: his efforts at reconciliation had a political motive. He saw the Jews more as a blemish than a power, but his attitude was basically the same. They must be brought under the control of the state, transformed from Jews into "Frenchmen of the Mosaic persuasion."

In his efforts to accomplish this, he convened a Council of Jewish notables. Then, realising that a more impressive assembly was required to

OBSERVANCE AND REVOLT

ensure the observance of its decisions, he decided on the convocation of a Sanhedrin. This initiative showed the monumental presumption of Napoleon but proved to be no more effective. One of the three rabbis representing the *Bas-Rhin* at the Sanhedrin was Lazarus Libermann. He didn't know a word of French and must have found the experience bewildering.

In 1808, Napoleon took things into his own hands when he published two decrees pertaining to the Jews. One set up a network of consistories in France and was a means of organisation and surveillance. The other reintroduced a measure of discrimination against the Jews and became known as the *Infamous Decree*. Napoleon's dealings with the Jews were marked by political opportunism. His personal dislike for them was never far beneath the surface. At the same time he was attracted by the thought of being their saviour.

Life in Saverne

Emancipation and full citizenship was a traumatic experience for the Jews in France. For some Jews, for example the Sephardi Jews of Bordeaux, who already enjoyed extensive privileges, the change in their life was not very significant. For the Jews of Alsace-Lorraine, on the other hand, the effects of emancipation were shattering. Before considering the reactions of the Jews, it is well to try and grasp the extent of their change in status since 1791. It was the end of a separation which had lasted since the middle ages. It was the end of a discrimination enforced by law, which often degenerated into outright persecution. It was the end of restrictions regarding trade and domicile. The walls of the ghetto were crumbling. It was also the end of special status, of the rule of the rabbi, of the exclusivity of the law of Moses as a rule of life. Problems of security of tenure and licences to trade receded: problems of public education and military service took their place. For centuries the Jews had enjoyed and suffered the segregation of a people within a people. Now they were leaving their confinement for the protection and demands of the laws of the land. Needless to say this transition did not take place quickly or smoothly. Freedom and responsibility cannot be given with the stroke of a pen. The turbulence and chaos of the Revolution spread confusion as decree succeeded decree. In Alsace there was continuing opposition to Jews becoming citizens from their Christian neighbours. Some Jews themselves were reluctant to surrender their autonomy. Many Jews were ill-equipped to take their place in society. Previously prevented from acquiring a skill, they were now at a disadvantage in competing for a living.

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

The reactions of the Jews to emancipation varied widely. On the one hand there were those who eagerly embraced their new freedom. Some went so far in the rejection of their previous servitude, that they found themselves also rejecting their Jewish faith. Of these, some subsequently became Christians. At the other end of the spectrum were those who stubbornly refused the "new" culture and deliberately tried to maintain their previous seclusion, seeing in it the only healthy atmosphere for their customs and their faith. Both these extreme reactions found expression in the Libermann family.

After his marriage in 1788, Lazarus Libermann lived with his wife in the Jewish ghetto in Saverne. He was thirty. For him there was no more glorious calling than that of rabbi. The Torah and the Talmud held the key to all the problems of life: only in the scrupulous observance of their prescriptions could the Jew show himself a worthy member of God's people. Fidelity demanded severance from the surrounding Christian society. The Jews were a people apart, a chosen people. Their history of harassment reinforced the tendency to see in isolation the only possible ground of fidelity. Lazarus Libermann was a convinced conservative.

The granting of the full rights of citizenship to Jews did nothing to change Lazarus' outlook. Predisposed to be suspicious, he could see it only as a political move to assimilate the Jews of France. The diminution of the role of the rabbis touched him personally. His feeling must have been one almost of redundancy as he saw judicial power transferred from the rabbis to the civil courts. However, his strictly conservative orthodox stance was not based simply on personal interest. In high regard because of his learning, he was an inspector of neighbouring Talmudic schools. He was aware of the currents of dissatisfaction with the Talmud, which grew out of the ideals of the Revolution. His conviction that these ideals were destructive of the Jewish faith seemed to him to be borne out by the many Jews who, in their enthusiasm for their new freedom, quickly abandoned the practice of their faith. Events seemed to conspire to make his conservatism more entrenched: the "reign of terror" the "cult of reason," finally the treachery of Napoleon. Lazarus' experience at the Sanhedrin did nothing to change his mind. While the President was the reputable rabbi Sinzheim of Strasbourg, the most influential member present was Abraham Furtado, who has been described as "a devout Voltairean, who regarded all religion as so much prejudice and superstition."

OBSERVANCE AND REVOLT

Lazarus Libermann's opposition to the line of thought of progressive Jews did not derive from any theoretical criticism of decrees but was the fruit of experience. The republican calendar threatened the observance of the sabbath, obligatory military service might pit Jew against Jew, integrated living with Christians favoured "mixed" marriages and because of the minority position of the Jews, there was a danger of their traditions disappearing altogether. While in the cities progressive Jews had much influence, in Saverne the people were faithful to tradition and appreciated the stance of their rabbi. He "was poor, but highly esteemed and very well thought of: he was regarded as a learned man and people came from a distance to consult him."⁴ Lazarus was a man of deep faith, which he would guard at all costs from the allurements of the new culture. He even refused to learn its language and he forbade it to his children.

When Lazarus' eldest son, Samson, left home to make his rabbinical studies, he knew that he held in his hands the fulfilment of his father's most fervent wish — to have a son a rabbi. While the subtleties of the Talmud were by no means beyond him, his feeling with regard to them soon degenerated into disgust. No longer in the closed atmosphere of Saverne, and sensitive to the wider horizons of contemporary thinking, he saw the minute and interminable exegesis of the Talmud as a prison from which he must escape. He gave up his rabbinical studies and turned to the study of medicine. He read Rousseau and Voltaire and soon he no longer believed. He fashioned for himself "a sort of religion, sentimental and vague, which imposed very few obligations and was no great inconvenience."⁵ He succeeded in his medical studies and as a result enjoyed a certain prestige among his fellow Jews. He took on the allure of a "modern Jew," who had quickly taken advantage of the new opportunities available to him. The Strasbourg Consistory envisaged an improvement of their schools, set up a committee to carry out this reform and appointed Samson its secretary. He worked hard in this capacity. He translated the catechism of the Central Consistory into German. All the while he was tormented by doubts of faith and by discouragement in his task of introducing secular culture into the Jewish schools. His uncertainty and his worries were shared by two other members of the committee, M. Mayer, a barrister, and M. Dreyfus, a merchant. Pessimistic about a renewal from within the Jewish community, they drew up a document addressed to the Catholic hierarchy asking their leadership in the

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

evangelisation of the Jews in France. The clergy would have the assistance of "enlightened Israelites" in an effort to free the Jews of "an accumulation of bizarre ceremonies" and "the absurd traditions and superstitions of the Talmud," which were obscuring the great truths of the mosaic religion.⁶ This project was impractical and also mainly concerned with the cultural value of Catholicism. Nevertheless, it was an indication of Samson's continuing religious concern. As a result of it Samson and his wife, who shared his religious malaise, came in contact with Fr. Liebermann, an Alsatian theologian of renown. Fr. Liebermann struck up a friendship with them, instructed them and gave them books to read. Samson and his wife were received into the Catholic church in 1825. Because of his conversion, Samson had to resign from his position on the committee, leave Strasbourg and go to live in Illkirch.

When Jacob Libermann was born in Saverne on 12th April 1802, he was the fifth son in the family. Already there were Samson, David, Henoch and Felix. Samuel was born in 1805 and the only girl, Esther, two years later. When Jacob's mother died in 1813, Lazarus married again and there were two children of this second marriage: Isaac and Sarah. All the sons of the first marriage converted to Catholicism. Esther and Sarah remained faithful to their Jewish faith, along with Isaac, who became rabbi of Nancy.

The principal source of information about Jacob's life in Saverne is his eldest brother, Samson. There was a close friendship between them until Jacob's death in 1852. The following year, Samson committed his memories of their childhood to writing in letters to Fr. Schwindenhammer. "He (Jacob) showed towards me in particular, as the eldest in the family, a veneration and a confidence without limit: he regarded me as someone much superior to himself in every respect. When the Lord deigned, despite my unworthiness, to call me, the first in my family, to the bosom of the Church, the influence, which I had at all times exercised over him, was without doubt one of the principal means which the Lord used to call him to himself."⁷

At the same time Samson, almost twelve years the older, says that he cannot give many details of Jacob's early life, as he left home young and returned to Saverne only once or twice a year for short visits.

The Libermann family lived in a modest but comfortable house adjoining the synagogue. Jacob was a delicate child and so attracted special attention from his mother. Samson remarks that, in orthodox

OBSERVANCE AND REVOLT

families, a wife defers to her husband and confines herself mainly to housework. It is sometimes said that the imagery of Jacob's later writing implies that his mother played an important part in his development. However, there is no direct evidence for this. Jacob nowhere mentions her explicitly.

Lazarus supervised Jacob's formal education, probably with renewed vigilance after the news came of Samson's decision to change to the study of medicine. Young Jews started in school between the ages of four and six. Their first task was to learn the Hebrew alphabet. Very quickly they were given a copy of the Pentateuch, which the teacher explained word by word, verse by verse, without any attention to grammar or the rules of syntax. They also learned the prayers in common use outside of the synagogue service. When they had some proficiency in reading the Bible, they were taught to read the commentary of Rabbi Jarchi in cursive Hebrew. Those with sufficient ability then started the study of the Mischna as an introduction to the Talmud. For those with aspirations to the position of rabbi, there then followed a long period of concentrated study of the Talmud. No other study was allowed: from morning till night, the Talmud was the sole occupation. Jacob gave himself to this total immersion for eight years. He showed great promise and was remarkable for his shrewdness of judgement. Lazarus was proud of his pupil and already saw him as a luminary of the synagogue. "I recall only that he (Jacob) had a delicate constitution, that he was of an extraordinary gentleness, which made him the frequent victim of the pranks of his brothers, who, nevertheless, all loved him very much. He was remarkable always for his deep humility, a humility so sincere that he regarded himself as the least of men."⁸ From Jacob's subsequent relations with his brothers, his affection for them is transparent. It seems clear that in the Libermann family, in the midst of normal childish eruptions, from which the sensitive Jacob suffered most, an atmosphere of affection reigned. The happiness of Jacob's childhood suffered a rude shock when his mother died in 1813. We have no indication of his reaction to this event. Did his sense of loss draw him closer to his father? How did he accept his father's remarriage and the arrival of his stepmother? In any event when, two years later, he prepared for the ceremony of Bar Mitzvah, he probably had a heightened awareness of leaving his childhood behind.

While the ghettos technically no longer existed, in Saverrie the

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

segregation continued. Deepseated attitudes die hard and the conservative stance of Lazarus ensured that Jacob's contacts with Christians were minimal. His recollections of childhood episodes depict a situation of precarious coexistence rather than open conflict. On one occasion when he met a Catholic procession, he fled into what turned out to be a Catholic church for safety. Another time, he saw the parish priest approaching in soutane and surplice. Seeing no available avenue of escape, he tried to get away by climbing a wall. These panic reactions, the "extraordinary repugnance" which Jacob had for ecclesiastical dress were the bitter fruit of long separation and mutual fear and distrust between the communities. One day, while still very young, Jacob received too much change from a shopkeeper but did not call attention to the error because she was a Christian. Jacob was absorbing Lazarus' convictions that society was hostile. Society meant the Christians, about whom he was conditioned to believe the worst. Lack of contact left scope for the imagination to outline the world, a world in which cheating a Christian could become a praiseworthy accomplishment.

Jacob's life as a teenager was very sheltered. At examination times, students would come from neighbouring towns to be examined by his father. It was on such an occasion that his brother, Samson, had struck up a friendship with David Drach.⁹ Now Jacob met Samson only on his brother's rare visits to Saverne. Samson probably took pains to hide his growing disenchantment with the Talmud. At any rate, Jacob was in no way deflected from his rabbinical studies. The study of the Talmud filled the horizon and the manner of its reasoning was becoming second nature to him. The Talmud, as well as being the object of Jacob's study, was also a vehicle of his religious dedication. "Until the age of 18 or 20, he (Jacob) practised the precepts of the Talmud with a scrupulous exactitude down to the most absurd minutiae."¹⁰ In this phrase of Samson's, his bias against the Talmud is apparent. For Jacob at the time the Talmud was the measure of his fidelity to God. He was still strongly influenced by Lazarus and his docility accentuated this influence. Jacob's attitude was not, however, uncritical and his father's refusal to discuss the hypothesis that the Messiah had already come left him unsatisfied: he was also disturbed by his father's narrowmindedness and severity, for example in condemning a poor workman to a fast of 30 days on bread and water for killing a flea (that was stinging him) on the Sabbath. But Lazarus' personal life, his deep

OBSERVANCE AND REVOLT

faith and his generosity, overcame any hesitations that Jacob may have had. If he left Saverne with an exaggerated tendency towards exact observance and rigid interpretation, his most important possession was a deep faith in God which would survive the shattering disillusionment that was to come.

Studies at Metz

Until he was about twenty, Jacob studied in Saverne under the guidance of his father. Lazarus then decided to send him to Metz to complete his rabbinical studies. Jacob later explains that the reason for this decision was not to avail of higher instruction beyond the capabilities of Lazarus, but to take advantage of the many benefits attached to studying in the Jewish academic centre of France. Since the setting up of consistories in 1808, an effort was being made by the Jews to ensure that only suitably qualified candidates were appointed as rabbis. Jacob was therefore obliged to earn his diploma at the Talmudic School in Metz. An important qualification for the prospective rabbi was familiarity with secular culture and knowledge of the French language. An instance of this importance was to be seen in Metz itself shortly before Jacob's arrival. On 7th November 1820, Samuel Wittersheim was named chief rabbi of Metz. Since 1813, Aaron Worms had been acting chief rabbi but the consistory refused to appoint him officially because of his obstinate refusal to show any interest in modern culture or the French language. Jacob's future as a rabbi demanded that he study at Metz. With reluctance Lazarus accepted this necessity. He gave his son two letters of introduction to professors of the Talmudic School. One of these rabbis was a friend of Lazarus, who would keep him informed of Jacob's progress; the other was one of his former students. Jacob left Saverne with warnings about the dangers of secular culture ringing in his ears.

For Jacob, the prospect of studying at Metz must have been enticing. The emotional impact of leaving Saverne for the first time was soon pushed into the background by the challenge that was ahead: matching his ability with his fellow students, hoping to bring credit to his father's teaching. Stories of Samson about Strasbourg, anecdotes of the city, came into his mind and lent the project an air of adventure. A little spice was added by the fact that in the recent drawing of lots for military service, Jacob had drawn a lucky number, which entitled him to exemption. The

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

warnings of his father made little impression on his enthusiasm. He was twenty. For the first time, he was feeling his strength.

Jacob had no idea how ill-equipped he was to cope with city life. His experience had been limited to the closely-knit Jewish community of Saverne. He lacked flexibility and the simple occasions of social life caused him considerable strain. During a visit to Samson at this time, when the family and a friend sat down for a meal, they teased Jacob about keeping his head covered. He failed to see any humour in the situation and replied self-righteously that he was simply being faithful to his religion. Jacob's sensitivity accentuated the difficulties normally experienced by anyone moving from a rural community to a big town.

When Jacob arrived in Metz, the ghetto was in the course of dissolution. The wealthy Jews had left the congested rue d'Arseuil in the *basse ville* and were becoming a commercial force in the town.

Accompanying the separation between the rich and the poor, another separation began to appear between the conservative and the progressive Jews. If Jacob had been forewarned about this, he had not been prepared to find that even the rabbis were in disagreement and furthering the rift between Jews. The Talmudic School was a further disappointment. It had opened the previous year (1821) with a flourish, but it was labouring under financial difficulties. Among the rabbis on the staff there was an antagonism against modern studies which ran contrary to its whole purpose.

The difficulty of the situation did not deter Jacob — he was accustomed to hardship — but what really hurt him, what stood out, in his mind almost thirty years later, was the coldness of his welcome. It was this which made him feel so far from Saverne, where he had known only the feeling of being accepted and wanted and where he had become acquainted with a hospitality that was never refused.

One of the rabbis, to whom Jacob had a letter of introduction, had been a student of Lazarus and while in Saverne had always been treated as one of the family by the Libermanns. Jacob approached him with confidence but was greeted with such condescension that he was deeply hurt and never returned. The other rabbi (probably Aaron Worms) showed some interest at first, but when he realised that Jacob was studying French, his sympathy vanished and he became a tyrant who continually made life unpleasant for Jacob. Despite the discouragement, Jacob continued alone

OBSERVANCE AND REVOLT

his study of French and later began Latin and Greek. Help came from an unexpected quarter. A Catholic, Jean Titercher, also a student at Metz, gave him free lessons. This was in 1825. When, the following year, Titercher took up a teaching post at Lunéville, Jacob made the journey on foot to visit him and to thank him. Even in Saint-Sulpice, he still spoke of Titercher to seminarians of Lorraine.

Jacob was not without friends at Metz. We know of one, Libmann, who subsequently married Jacob's sister, Esther. He abandoned his rabbinical studies and became a solicitor's clerk at Saverne. What remained in the front of Jacob's mind, however, was the rejection by the rabbis and the friendly and gratuitous help of Titercher. The attitude of the rabbis caused Jacob to fall into a state of 'profound sadness.' In retrospect, he says that at this time, he began to feel the "merciful action of Providence." Jacob's daily experience insistently called into question his Jewish faith. He fell into a sort of indifference, which soon gave way to a complete absence of faith. His acquaintance with Titercher further demolished his preconceived ideas. Predisposed to expect no good from Catholics, he received help and encouragement from Titercher which had been denied him by his fellow Jews. Before he read Rousseau, he was susceptible to the theory that God is no better served by one religion than another. It is how one treats one's neighbour that is important.

Not infrequently it is while young men are at university that they are struck by the gospel of humanism. The themes of justice and peace arouse a passion within them that often takes their whole energy, while their religious beliefs are rejected or at least no longer operative in their life. In piecing together a new world view, the writings of Rousseau have an attraction for them, which is not entirely unhealthy.

It is likely that Jacob had already lost his faith before reading Rousseau and that what he found in this reading was the articulation of vague feelings stirring within him. He himself recalls that he was struck by *La Profession de Foi du Vicaire Savoyard*.¹¹ Jacob states that his reading of Rousseau was a means towards his conversion. His allusion to a text which he found particularly striking, is not very helpful in pinpointing this influence as it is vague and refers in reality to two separate texts. At any rate, in trying to uncover his state of mind at Metz, it is probably best not to over-emphasise the influence of Rousseau alone. Jacob may also have read Voltaire and other popular authors of the time. While his limited

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

French makes extensive reading unlikely, he would have been influenced by the deist current of thought prevalent at the time. "I continued to read the Bible, however, but with distrust: its miracles repelled me and I no longer believed them."¹²

"At that time, one of my fellow students showed me a book in Hebrew without punctuation, which he was unable to read because he was only beginning the study of Hebrew. I went through it eagerly. It was the Gospel translated into Hebrew. I was very struck by this reading. Nevertheless, there again, the miracles, which Jesus Christ worked in such numbers, repelled me."¹³ When news of Samson's conversion reaches Jacob, he reproaches him bitterly. His reasons are significant. He accuses Samson of taking the step for natural motives and blames him for bringing shame and sorrow on his parents. For Jacob, human concerns have taken over the centre of the stage: his criteria for judging are confined to human considerations. The following extract from his letter to Samson of 6th January 1826 (the only letter of Jacob prior to his conversion that we possess) gives an indication of his thinking in his last year at Metz: "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? Religion would make him what a brute is by force of nature. Why did I receive that heavenly gift if not that I might make use of it?"

"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 neighbor. However, since I don't know the principles of philosophy and so am liable easily to go astray, I believe that I should open my mind to a man who is enlightened and who can correct my errors. You are my oldest and well-beloved brother ... I shall therefore explain my way of thinking to you and ask you to be a little indulgent.

"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 favors for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob by so many wonders? ... Why didn't God have a

OBSERVANCE AND REVOLT

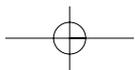
like interest in so many philosophers of antiquity? ... Suppose that the patriarchs really did practice the highest virtues, isn't it extravagant to accept that God rewards the virtues of the father by favoring his descendants who are filled with vices?

"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 choose a single people on earth to enlighten and reveal the true principles of religion? ... And then, if all those wonders recorded in the Bible aren't fables, how can we understand the repeated rebellions of the Jews? ... How was it possible for them to have so little trust in God? ...

"I conclude from all this that all God demands of us is to acknowledge Him, to be just and human ... So it makes no difference whether I am a Jew or a Christian, provided I adore God, and whether He is one Person or in Three ... This is also why I excuse you for changing your religion ..,"¹⁴

Jacob's basic stance is one of revolt — revolt against Judaism in particular, but also against organised religion in general. Judaism survives only because it forbids a criticism it cannot bear. The choice of Israel is absurd. God does not show a preference for some, as this would imply a neglect of others. The Bible is a collection of contradictory fables. It demeans God by showing Him as prejudiced and unjust. Divine interventions in the world, such as miracles, are unworthy of God, Who is not selective in bestowing His favours. Religion depends largely on circumstances of birth and cannot be crucial in deciding our destiny. What is important is what is available to all: reason. "In accordance with these considerations, I have based my religion 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." "I conclude from all this that all God demands of us is to acknowledge Him, to be just and human..." Though Jacob still talks of God, it is a god of his own making, an idol made to the measure of human reason and human justice.



CONFUSION AND CONVERSION

CHAPTER TWO

Confusion and Conversion

From the letter of 6th January 1826, we see Jacob as a young man who has become disillusioned with his inherited beliefs. He has lost the faith. Any practice of his religion lacks conviction and survives only through habit. He has awakened to the inadequacy of his previous schooling, he has subjected his father's world view to careful scrutiny and found it wanting. It is time to make his own statement and Jacob is experiencing the excitement of taking a truly personal stance in the world for the first time.

That Jacob knew the familiar growing pains associated with a crisis of identity produces an echo in our experience. However, our main interest lies in the details that are personal to him. While his change of outlook seems to be complete, many of his attitudes remain intact. His affection for his father is undiminished. He is at pains to make it clear that Samson's conversion will not interfere with their friendship: "Dear Brother: Your letter of Nov. 24 aroused my righteous astonishment. You seem to doubt whether my friendship for you will continue after your change of religion. Well, even if I were the most ardent zealot of the synagogue, I would find it impossible to sever my sincere attachment for my brothers, for this was instilled in me from my earliest years and has always been my delight and happiness." Mentally adrift, Jacob is still closely bound to his family by ties of affection.

In Jacob's letter to Samson, there is a faint cry for help. A little frightened by his new discoveries, he is sincerely searching for the truth. Through the anguish of this search Jacob's basic honesty and sincerity survive. While he has accepted a pluralism in matters of religion that more or less amounts to religious indifference, the moral rectitude of his behaviour is above question. The furthering of his quest does not involve a random sampling of the world's pleasures. If his written description of his

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

state of mind leads us to classify him as an unbeliever, the evidence of his way of life indicates someone who is painfully trying to rephrase his relationship with God.

The Road To Paris

For Jacob the road to Paris was to be his road to Damascus. In 1850 he told Fr. Gamon that God began the work of his conversion when he was about twenty. In retrospect he can pick out from the period at Metz certain indications of God's providential design. He mentions the unexpected difficulties, the frustration that led to a profound sadness, the chance reading of the gospel in Hebrew, the reading of Rousseau.² These realities, however, only took on this significance in the light of later events. In 1826 they were not recognisable as steps towards conversion, they were more like assorted debris in the shambles of Jacob's world. There is probably no single reason why Jacob went to Paris. On the other hand, it didn't happen altogether by chance.

Jacob's brother Felix was four years older than he. In 1825 Felix was working as a bookbinder in Leipzig and had become engaged to his employer's daughter, a Protestant. When Samson heard of this, he immediately urged him to return to France. Felix came without reluctance and spent a few months with Samson's family. Samson discouraged him from marrying a Protestant and suggested that he go to Paris and contact Samson's friend, M. Drach. This he did and he was baptised a Catholic at Easter 1826.³ Doubtless Samson gave news of Felix in his letters to Jacob, but passed over his baptism in silence. It was only when Jacob himself wrote to Felix that he discovered that another of his brothers had become a Catholic. Felix spoke enthusiastically of his conversion. He invited Jacob to come to Paris and assured him of a warm welcome. At this stage, spring or summer of 1826, Jacob began to write to M. Drach. From these letters M. Drach got the impression that Christ "had conquered his heart. Thus he arrived in Paris in the best of dispositions." Maybe Samson or Felix had advised Jacob to write to M. Drach. However, Jacob himself speaks of confiding in a friend at Metz who advised going to Paris to see Drach, but with the purpose of discussing the whole question of becoming a rabbi.

Samson and his wife, Babette, had been instructed and greatly helped at the time of their conversion by Dr. Liebermann, vicar-general of the Strasbourg diocese. When the news broke that Samson had become a

CONFUSION AND CONVERSION

Catholic, the opposition that he had experienced from the orthodox Jews in his work in the Jewish school at Strasbourg grew into an outcry against him. He had to move from Strasbourg to a small town nearby, Illkirch. There, probably through the influence of Dr. Liebermann, he became mayor of the town and also set up a medical practice. In this way he was assured of a reasonable living for his family. This "development" may have accounted for Jacob persisting in his belief that self-interest was the main moving force in Samson's conversion.

Samson's reply to his letter of 6th January 1826 caused Jacob to pause, but the effect was short-lived. Jacob's doubt about the use of any organized religion was too deeply rooted to be easily removed. In the discussion of such personal matters, letters have severe limitations. In autumn of 1826 Jacob visited Samson at Illkirch. Samson, in recalling the meeting, says that they had long discussions about religion and that "grace had already touched his (Jacob's) heart." Babette even expressed her intuition that Jacob would one day become a priest. They agreed that he would seek permission to go to Paris and there take instruction in the Christian faith. Samson gave Jacob a letter of recommendation to M. Drach.

The impression of everything having been arranged that comes from Samson's account of this visit is almost certainly exaggerated. Ever since the first earthquake tremors in Metz, Jacob's great concern had been for his father, who was now sixty-eight years old. His first reaction to Samson's conversion was to reproach him bitterly for the disgrace he had brought on the family. When a member of an orthodox Jewish family renounced his faith, he was regarded as dead and formally mourned. The more eminent the family, the greater the scandal. In the family of a rabbi the suffering caused would be intense. Jacob did not blame Samson for his doubts, for his disdain for Talmudic subtleties. These he shared. "At first I attributed the step he took to natural motives. I considered that his position with regard to Judaism was the same as my own, but I blamed him for causing grief to my parents by his abjuration."⁴ Jacob knew the depth of his father's disappointment when Samson turned to the study of medicine. He shuddered at the devastating effect that his own defection would have.

Jacob was apprehensive about meeting his father. He knew that now he carried all his father's hopes. He felt sure that lurid reports would have arrived from Aaron Worms in Metz detailing his neglect of Hebrew and

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

talmudic studies to concentrate on other languages and modern literature.

"So far I have neglected my Hebrew, for I am afraid I may have to leave Metz soon. I am very apprehensive with regard to papa. He has already said several times that he will not leave me here for long. That is the reason that I am giving all my time to the study of Latin and Greek. If, in a year or two, I have to stay for some time in Saverne, I will have ample free time to study Hebrew and Chaldean."⁵ The general tone of this and the reference to possibly spending some time in Saverne indicates that in Janaury 1826 Jacob has not yet definitely abandoned his father's plans for him. When he reached Saverne in autumn 1826 it is unlikely he was any more decided. He was still interiorly torn in different directions. For the moment his main preoccupation was to avoid causing further suffering to his ageing father.

Lazarus welcomed Jacob warmly but he could not hide his uneasiness and before the evening was out he had introduced a discussion on the Talmud. This was the moment that Jacob had dreaded. For two years he had neglected the study of the Talmud. To a talmudist of the calibre of his father this neglect would become apparent within ten minutes. Here is Jacob's description of what happened: "I had scarcely heard the question when I experienced an extensive enlightenment, which indicated to me everything I ought to say. I was completely taken by surprise. I couldn't understand such a great ease in relating things that I had scarcely read. I couldn't believe the brilliance and quickness with which my mind grasped all the most intricate and puzzling aspects of the passage that was to decide my journey. But my father was even more amazed than I was; his heart went wild with joy and happiness. He was well satisfied. He found me worthy of him once more. All the anxiety that had been aroused in him in my regard disappeared. He hugged me tenderly and his tears were on my face. 'I knew well that they were still spreading false reports about you when they said that you were giving yourself to the study of Latin and neglecting the studies of your profession.' Then he showed me all the letters that he had received giving this impression. At supper this good father wanted to give me a treat so he went for a bottle of his oldest wine in order to celebrate my success with me."⁶ The prophets of doom warned Lazarus that if Jacob went to Paris, he would follow in the path of his brothers, but Lazarus would not listen to them and Jacob left him with a blessing.

CONFUSION AND CONVERSION

For some time now we notice that Jacob is becoming caught up in a web of appearances. His censure of Samson had not to do with his conversion but with its becoming public knowledge. His life at Metz was a continual effort to save face. Now there is Jacob's refusal of honesty with his father. Has Jacob's inner life collapsed to such an extent that all that is left are appearances? Or is he suffering from a creeping hypocrisy?

First, let us acknowledge Jacob's great affection for his father. Even when recalling this meeting many years later the emotional atmosphere of it shines through the account. Jacob's first concern was to avoid upsetting his father, and if possible to console him. To this end he did not reveal his real feelings and aspirations. Secondly, such was Jacob's confusion, it is doubtful if he could have given a clear statement of his position. Thirdly, Lazarus was old and so settled in his ways that he was incapable of understanding Jacob's predicament. Finally, control of the situation seemed to have been taken from Jacob's hands. Someone else was supplying the answers and orchestrating the whole episode.

From another angle we could say that Jacob's behaviour at this time is generally non-committal. Later he will show himself to be a practical genius. Here he already shows poise in the face of a practical problem — he keeps his options open as long as he can. His ambition had been to succeed his father. Now, with the disgrace of the Libermann family, this was impossible. However, a position as rabbi in another town was not out of the question (his step-brother, Isaac, was to become rabbi of Nancy). Paris would be a good place to investigate this possibility. On the other hand Samson seemed to have found fulfilment in Catholicism. He would soon meet Felix. Progress along these lines would inevitably involve M. Drach, himself a convert from Judaism. These practical considerations were often excitingly interrupted by the memory of the extraordinary enlightenment Jacob experienced during the examination by his father. Had God taken a hand in the affair? Which way did the sign point?

Jacob could never escape the practical considerations for long. Not surprisingly one of the big problems was the financial one. In straitened circumstances at Metz, he received some small financial help from his brother David and probably also from Samson. Neither was in a position to help very much and the contributions were not very regular: "Until now I have received nothing from David. Please write to him and ask him to send me my money. Recently he wrote to say I would have it in January. I

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

took him at his word and this week I bought the Orations of Cicero and also Virgil on credit."⁷ Now the problem was of a far greater magnitude; it involved the fare to Paris and living expenses after arrival. Clearly Jacob would have to get a job in Paris. With no secular qualifications this would be difficult. In 1826 M. Drach taught Hebrew in the Seminary attached to *Collège Stanislas*, whose director at the time was Fr. Augé. It seems that a job was "made" for Jacob at *Collège Stanislas*. Maybe he acted as a tutor in Hebrew to Drach's students; maybe he also worked in the library. Something of this sort seems to be implied by Drach's account: "... I invited him to come to the Seminary of *Collège Stanislas*, thanks to the charitable offer of Fr. Augé, of holy memory, who even gave me the money to cover the expenses of his journey"⁸ Fr. Grillard writes that "someone offered him a position in Paris, but in a Catholic residence where he would have to become a Christian. The sort of unbelief into which Libermann had fallen coupled with the thought of finding a promising position made this offer very attractive to him. However, once in Paris, when the question of conversion was seriously discussed, he began to think about it from a more supernatural viewpoint."⁹

That Jacob would accept a job that would compromise him to such an extent is very revealing. Most importantly it brings home to us the reality of his unbelief. Now he is working in the context of expediency and his ambition is little troubled by scruples. His inner turmoil remains but the practical problems of daily living demand decisions. The tenacity of purpose that Jacob showed, for example in learning languages at Metz, now shows itself in less attractive guise. While we may not now admire, we must at least recognise Jacob's capacity to survive. In later life his critics will refer to him as an opportunist, an adventurer. These terms better describe him now. He has not discarded the principles that had become important to him at Metz. Especially with regard to his father, he does everything he can to avoid "causing harm to his neighbour". However, his principles leave him ample room to manoeuvre.

Several reasons for Jacob's decision to go to Paris have been advanced: to take instruction in the Catholic faith (Samson), to seek advice about continuing rabbinical studies (a friend at Metz), to take up a job (Grillard).

The contradiction between the first two reflects the contradictory forces at work in Jacob's heart, the third reason corresponds to a practical necessity. Jacob needed to get way from the familiar surroundings which

CONFUSION AND CONVERSION

were stifling him. Caught in a dilemma, he went to Paris to have a little time to think about his future.

Conversion

"He (Jacob) was an enthusiast. He was drawn into it and in his turn, he inveigled others. As well, at that time, there was a movement, a tendency which favoured all that. Today this would not happen."¹⁰ This is how Jacob's step-brother Isaac regards Jacob's conversion about fifty years after the event. Jacob was impressionable and was seduced by a prevailing movement within Judaism, which in 1878 was no longer in fashion. In the first half of the 19th century many Jews lost their faith. Among the reasons for this, the change in their social status weighs heavily. The traditional framework of their life, shaped of necessity in terms of ghetto life, seemed to be largely irrelevant in the context of their new experience of freedom. Their new mobility, for example, the simple fact that they could now take up residence in the cities, had serious religious repercussions. "When Provincials go up to Paris (which they do in increasing numbers), attachment to Judaism almost inevitably weakens."¹¹ Of those who lost their faith, some became Catholics. To speak of a movement in this direction, which would imply a certain organisation, may be an exaggeration but when Jacob went to Paris, three of his brothers had already been baptised. After enumerating a number of notable converts to Catholicism, such as the Ratisbonne brothers, Renée Neher-Bernheim continues: "Happily however, these cases of total desertion represent only a small minority. The great majority of Jews in France remained attached to Judaism, but by ties which became weaker according as their position on the social scale was higher."¹² There was then no tidal wave of Jewish converts but there was a significant number. In their conversion social factors certainly played a part. The Jewish contention that there was little religious content to these conversions, which was Jacob's own initial estimate of Samson's conversion, is not justified, but it provides a corrective to a Catholic vocabulary that spoke of "glorious conquests." Isaac Libermann's explanation that Jacob was carried along by the tide is a huge oversimplification but the grain of truth that it contains is important. Jacob's journey to Paris was made possible by a network of convert Jews, who arranged for accommodation and a means of livelihood. Here a certain social pressure certainly existed. We must now examine how Jacob reacted in this situation.

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

Jacob arrived in Paris with two letters of recommendation: one from his father to the rabbi Deutz, one from Samson to M. Drach. He first of all spent a few days with Felix. What stands out in his recollection of this short stay was the joyful disposition and obvious happiness of Felix. This made an impression on Jacob, but he was still a long way from conversion. He contacted M. Drach and took possession of his room in *Collège Stanislas* but still there was no serious change of mind. He still had an eye to his respectability in the eyes of the Jews. He was careful to cover his tracks from investigation by his father. He went to see rabbi Deutz and even borrowed a book from him, which he later returned. This was no more than a formal gesture in line with Jacob's diplomacy of survival. However, this diplomacy was now beginning to take its toll on Jacob. The further he proceeded with it, the more sterile it began to appear.

Now, in his room at *Collège Stanislas*, the experiences of Jacob's young life seemed very disconnected. The early happiness at Saverne held no hint of the disturbing discoveries at Metz. The enthusiasm at Metz had been a spring flower. It had not been able to withstand the news of Samson's conversion, the strange experience of enlightenment during his last meeting with his father. Could it be that God is not the deist God of non-interference but the God who acts, who intervenes, who performs miracles? And if he is the God who acts, is he the God of Lazarus or the God of Samson? For some time now Jacob had avoided this question. He had acknowledged its existence but had preferred the strain of duplicity to the struggle of decision. The job in Paris seemed attractive from afar, but now the prospect of it and its attendant circumstances had become unbearable. The hidden hypocrisy of Jacob's position was finally dawning on him. Far from family and friends, he felt only sadness and solitude. Previously he had extricated himself adroitly from difficult situations, now he refuses any further escape. He throws himself on his knees and prays to the God he once knew, the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob: "That moment was a very painful one for me. The sight of that deep solitude, of that room where the only light was from a skylight; the thought of being so far from my family, from my acquaintances, from my country, all that plunged me into a deep sadness: my heart felt weighed down by a most painful melancholy."

"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.

CONFUSION AND CONVERSION

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 Lord, who is near to those who call on him from the depths of their heart, heard my prayer. In an instant I was enlightened, I saw the truth: faith penetrated my mind and my heart."¹³ Nowhere in Jacob's journey is there any clue to this sudden eruption of God in his life. True, he has not fallen into dissolute ways. Then, neither has he come to this moment with the best dispositions. But if he turns to God only as a last resort, he turns to him with transparent sincerity. It is not important that he is a tired man who has stopped running. What is important is that his cry comes from the heart. It is not important that he had to be crushed by sadness before he came to his senses. Everything in conversion is God's grace, including the moment He chooses. And yet this grace does not destroy but only transforms him. Jacob's ambition, his tenacity, his resourcefulness, his tact, all the inner resources he developed in the service of evasion, will not disappear. They will instead be transformed and purified in the service of life.

Jacob's conversion took place suddenly. Two books by Lhomond, *Histoire de la doctrine chrétienne* and *Histoire de la Religion*, had been left in his room. They remained unopened. "Having begun to read Lhomond, I assented easily and surely to all that was said about the life and death of Jesus Christ. Even the mystery of the Eucharist, though somewhat imprudently suggested as a subject of my meditation, in no way put me off. I believed everything without difficulty. From that moment on, I wanted nothing so much as to be plunged into the baptismal waters. This happiness was not long delayed. I was quickly prepared for this wonderful sacrament and I received it on Christmas Eve. On that day too, I was admitted to the Eucharist. I cannot admire too much the wonderful change that occurred in me when the waters of baptism flowed over my forehead. All my doubts and fears suddenly disappeared. The priestly cassock, towards which I felt something of that deep repugnance proper to the Jews, no longer appeared in the same light. Instead of being afraid of it, I was attracted to it. Above all I felt an invincible courage and strength to keep the Christian law: I experienced a gentle liking for everything that had to do with my new belief."¹⁴

Jacob subsequently spoke of his baptismal experience to some of his fellow students at Saint-Sulpice: "In speaking to us of his baptism and the

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

exorcism, he told us that he physically experienced his deliverance from the spirit of darkness and that at the moment of this deliverance he had been violently shaken. At this juncture in his account, he was obviously emotionally affected. This communicated itself to us like an electric spark and made a vivid impression on us."¹⁵ "When the baptismal water flowed over my Jewish head, I suddenly loved Mary, whom I previously detested."¹⁶ "I asked him what his feelings had been during the baptismal ceremony. 'Ah', he said ingenuously, with the air of someone recalling a memory very dear to his heart, 'it would be impossible for me to tell you what I felt at that solemn moment. When the holy water flowed over my forehead, I thought I was in the middle of a large ball of fire. I no longer lived my natural existence. I neither saw nor heard anything of what was going on around me. Indescribable things were taking place within me, and this lasted for a part of the ceremony'.¹⁷"

Fr. Cabon cautions us about the accuracy of this last account.¹⁸ Other parts of Vernhet's testimony are not altogether trustworthy. However, Vernhet remains adamant that Jacob experienced an ecstasy during his baptism. "For 43 years I have spoken about it in many places. This has kept it fresh in my mind and I would testify to it under oath if necessary." While it may have gained something in the telling, it is unlikely that the reference to "a huge ball of fire" was invented. This then was how Jacob experienced God's taking possession of him. Certainly he had an intense religious experience which affected him bodily. On the rare occasions that he was induced to speak of it afterwards, he did so with obvious emotion, which spread to his listeners. This extraordinary experience filled Jacob's horizon at the time: it was the very working out of a radical transformation within him. But while it did not last and could not be recaptured, the effects of it remained and could be more clearly described. "All my doubts and fears suddenly disappeared ... I felt an invincible courage and strength to keep the Christian law."

Jacob experienced a "deliverance from the spirit of darkness". He was set free from his own confusion and darkness, saved from a life of expediency and pretence. Elements of the Christian life that previously caused him difficulty and even disgust, now aroused only affection: the Eucharist, Mary, the priestly cassock. He was no longer Jacob but Francis, Francis Mary Paul Libermann. Jacob had been troubled and anxious; Francis felt suddenly at home.

CONFUSION AND CONVERSION

Francis decided immediately to study for the priesthood. He leaves us no outstanding clues as to his reason for this decision. While conversion is a very personal matter, it also has wider repercussions. Its purpose is not simply personal rejuvenation but also the bringing of a new freshness and fervour to the Church. "Ultimately, conversion is nothing other than the discovery by an individual of his deepest vocation."¹⁹ Did Francis' experience at baptism throw light on God's future plans for him? His sudden change of attitude to the priestly cassock makes this possible. "Immediately after his baptism, he (Francis) promised the Lord to consecrate himself to His service and in the priestly ministry. He stayed in the seminary (section) of the building, which was directed by Fr. Froment."²⁰ The student body of the seminary was very varied. The seminary catered for Irish clerical students and other students for the priesthood who were attending the Sorbonne, as well as students of the *Missionnaires de France*. The aim of this latter society was to work as missionaries within France, mainly by giving retreats in towns and villages. This mixture was not very satisfactory and in the summer of 1827 the Archbishop of Paris, Mgr. de Quelen, decided to confine the enrolment to students of the *Missionnaires de France*. Not feeling called to belong to this society, Francis left *Séminaire Stanislas*. With this decision to leave, his financial problems once again came to the surface. M. Drach brought the problem to Mgr. de Quelen, who decided to accept Francis at Saint-Sulpice, without demanding any fee.

Francis' recollection of this time at Seminaire Stanislas was a happy one, although he was more at ease later at Saint-Sulpice. One of his fellow seminarians showed a great deal of curiosity about Francis' conversion. Francis was in the first flush of enthusiasm and he lived his new faith "happily and joyfully." He had vividly experienced God's goodness in a way that had taken him by surprise. Previously bedevilled by questions arising within himself, he was now happy that no more questions came. The new harmony within him carried its own guarantee. But now the questions that Francis would not ask himself were being asked by another. This seminarian wanted to know all about Francis' conversion. How had it happened so quickly? Had he not rushed into the seminary? What were his real motives? Francis was upset by the persistence of his questions and was often forced to take refuge in silence. He was sure of the ground on which he stood, but, in the grateful enjoyment of God's favour, he was

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

unable to give a coherent account of it. As the interrogation reopened the door on his past, he felt no doubt but only a painful embarrassment as the questions fanned the embers of old allegiances.

Francis' conversion experiences marked his stance throughout life. He was overwhelmed by God's goodness. He never tired of proclaiming it but he never tried to explain it. From his own experience, an intellectual search for God had proved abortive. Humble prayer had opened the door to new life. Francis was always suspicious of the intellectual life. He was an avowed enemy of introspection and morbid reminiscing. "Pay attention to this maxim that I am going to give you, I believe it to be of the greatest importance in the spiritual life: *We must seek less to know in what we are failing God than to set ourselves peacefully and lovingly to pleasing Him in all the movements of our soul.*"²¹ In writing of conversion in 1840, Francis pointed to the superiority of conversions where faith precedes knowledge over conversions where there is a considerable intellectual preparation.²² In the former, God's action is more pronounced and in this way the reality is better served. It is more obviously a love affair. God's attraction is unforgettable, He exerts a fascination that is lasting. Clearly, Francis is drawing on his own experience. Caught in the spell of God's attraction he will seek in turn to influence others by attraction. He will set a greater importance on prayer than on study. He will continually put the accent on life rather than doctrine.

In pointing to the importance of Francis' conversion experiences, we are not claiming that they alone were responsible for the pattern of Francis' subsequent way of life. There were other influences. The spirituality of Saint-Sulpice would introduce him into the life of the Trinity, not to explain but to adore. Francis himself had always been of a practical inclination. Theorising held little appeal for him; he proceeded more by intuition. Union with God would ensure that his instincts were sound. So much of his life defied explanation. He felt out of sympathy with the questions of the seminarian at *Séminaire Stanislas*. "Ambiguity is a part of the testing of a convert. By accepting the standpoint of an impartial interpretation, even if it is hurtful to him, he is taking an indispensable step in his spiritual purification. Understood in this way, criticism is a necessity and an instrument of conversion itself."²³ In one sense, Francis' conversion had just begun.

PEACE AND FRAGILITY

CHAPTER THREE

Peace and Fragility

During the Restoration, the seminaries in France struggled to re-establish themselves after the ravages of the Revolution. The shortage of professors resulted in many makeshift arrangements and, by force of circumstances, a professor had often to teach several theological subjects. This strain on the professors was transferred to the seminarians through classes that provided little stimulation. In this generally gloomy situation, there was one happy exception — Saint-Sulpice.

The Sulpician house for philosophy students was situated at Issy on the southwestern outskirts of Paris. The house for theology students was in Paris itself, on the north side of Place Saint-Sulpice. It was to this house on Place Saint-Sulpice that Francis Libermann came in October 1827.

When Francis arrived at Saint-Sulpice, he had as yet little framework for his faith. He was still a stranger in the Christian spiritual universe. When he left Saint-Sulpice ten years later, he was no longer a stranger but moved confidently about a terrain that had become familiar. While Christ himself was the principal agent in this development, it took its colouring from the spirituality of Saint-Sulpice and from the men who guided Francis and helped him to interpret his experience.

Saint Sulpice: the spirit and the men

The spirituality of Saint-Sulpice derived from its founder, Monsieur Olier,¹ and Monsieur Olier soon became Francis' hero. They had much in common. Francis' continual reference to Olier was remarked by others: "M. Libermann was completely penetrated by the doctrine and spirit of M. Olier; he never missed an opportunity to put them forward, to develop them, they were the measure of all his instructions and he strongly urged the seminarians to take them as the measure of all their opinions, of all their projects and behaviour, while they were at the Seminary and afterwards for their whole life."² M. Olier belonged to that school of

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

spirituality called *L'École Française* (The French School) which looks to Cardinal de Bérulle as its founder. There is no question here of trying to trace intricate lines of influence but simply of giving a general picture of Olier's spirituality as a help towards the understanding of Libermann. Everything centred on the Incarnate Word. The Christian life was presented as adherence to Christ. This implied a radical renunciation. Olier's doctrine was heavily sacrificial.

Adherence to Christ was seen as a participation in his mysteries. This participation involved reproducing in ourselves the interior dispositions of Christ in his mysteries. These interior dispositions were referred to as "*états*." More correctly, adherence to Christ involved allowing Christ to accomplish this interior configuration. In a very real sense, Christ was considered as living in us. Mary was venerated as the one in whom Christ lived most perfectly. Devotion to the angels and saints was directed to Christ living in them. The prayer "*O Jesu vivens in Maria*" (on which Libermann wrote a commentary) is regarded as a significant expression of Olier's outlook. The Christian is initiated into the mysteries of Christ at baptism. This participation is intensified through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist ("memorial of all the mysteries of Christ") and through prayer. Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament became a very prominent part of life at the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice. Through prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, seminarians became interiorly assimilated to Christ as living victim. Christ's mysteries refer to all the principal actions of Christ's life but M. Olier confined himself to a consideration of the Incarnation, Infancy, Passion, Death, Burial, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ.

When Libermann set himself to describe succinctly the interior life he wrote: "An interior soul remains continually present to itself and to Our Lord who continually dwells in it; it lives and acts under the influence and the sway of Our Lord Jesus Christ who lives in it."³ In general, throughout his writings, there is abundant evidence of Libermann's adoption of Olier's spirituality, for example in the following passage: "At the moment, Jesus ought to achieve everything in you. You, for your part, ought to be poor, insignificant and humble before him. Avoid elevated thoughts and sublime things. Rather nourish your mind on Jesus and his love. The less clarification you give to your love, the more it is worth before God. Your heart ought to be affixed to Our Lord in the state (*état*), the mystery or the

 PEACE AND FRAGILITY

circumstance of his life which has your attention at the moment. Your soul ought to unite itself to him in this state (*état*), this mystery or this circumstance without your mind introducing any clarifications. The mind should exert itself very little. The less the divine object takes shape in your mind, the better. This is one of the principal reasons why I so often recommend not to read very much, and I would like if one read only the lives of the saints because books teach us to classify things and to fix an idea or an outline in our mind. It is infinitely better if our souls turn to divine things with only the view, admittedly obscure, that the Divine Master gives, than to use external means, which frequently deceive, bolster pride, and very often are the source of illusions."⁴

Olier's conception of the Incarnation emphasises Christ's adherence to God, His Father, which persisted through all the contradictions and suffering which He experienced and which were traceable to His humanity. Implied in this view was a profound pessimism with regard to human achievement in the world. All creatures are nothingness; no good can come from the natural. Putting on Christ involves the destruction of the natural in us. From such a scenario emerged the primacy of renunciation. Our humanity is our enemy; only when it is conquered can God have a free hand with us. 'When we strip ourselves of ourselves, we are then clothed in Jesus Christ in a total consecration to God, for at the moment that (His) sacred humanity was destroyed in His own person, (Christ) was given the fulness of the divinity and an infinite capacity to receive the attentions of the Spirit.'⁵

An echo of this outlook is found in Libermann. Here it is well to remind ourselves that the occasional nature of Libermann's writings prevents us from reconstructing any sort of comprehensive theology or even Christology. The best chance of getting an idea of his understanding of the Incarnation is probably from his commentary on St. John's gospel, written when he had some time to reflect. In his commentary on verse 14 of chapter 1, the ideas of Olier are clearly recognisable, but there is also the impression that Libermann is not entirely satisfied with them.

"But why did the divine Word take on flesh? Why did he unite himself to this flesh?"

"1. In order to conquer sin in its principal dwelling place, by conquering and defeating it later through his cross. In so doing, he made us masters of our sinful flesh. For if he had not become incarnate, if he had

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

only united himself to a soul, we would not have received these great graces against the flesh.

- "2. Subsequently, the flesh also ought to participate in the divine filiation after the resurrection. It was, therefore, necessary that he should become incarnate, by an incomprehensible display of his divine goodness towards us, which goes beyond everything that the human mind can conceive.
- "3. But why did he become incarnate to purify our flesh only after the resurrection? Why, by his divine Incarnation, did he not purify already in this world the flesh of those who believe in him, just as he purifies their souls? This is a mystery, and certainly an expression of his great love for us. The reason that one sees is (his) plan of leaving us to struggle and in this way triumphing more often in our souls and also strengthening more and more our faith. But this does not seem to me to completely explain the matter."¹⁶

While Libermann does not formally identify "flesh" with "body", there is little doubt that all the emphasis is on the soul, the beneficiary of Christ's redeeming action during our earthly life. Even if, in the quiet of 1840, he finds himself asking himself questions about this, he never seriously deviates from Olier's position. Nothing of value can be expected from what is natural. The world and our humanity are obstacles to union with God.

Libermann also shares Olier's grandiose and austere vision of the priest. This derives from his idea of the meaning of the Incarnation where scant attention is paid to the humanity of Christ. " ... *Sacerdos alter Christus*, the priest is another Christ. Now in the behaviour of Our Lord Jesus Christ, everything was for his Father, nothing for creatures, nothing for the world which he held in horror, nothing for men, nothing for vanity: he was completely for God his Father and for God alone."¹⁷ "Everything in Jesus was divine: all his desires were divine desires, all his affections, all his love, were in the Father. All his thoughts, all the movements of his most holy soul were only in God, by God and for God, his heavenly Father: and this in an incomprehensible way. How then explain that priests, who are other Jesus Christs, don't stop being men like other men, leading a human life, having human desires and affections, engaging in human conversation, seeking themselves in their actions, wanting to live in the same way as other men, sinners like themselves."¹⁸

PEACE AND FRAGILITY

If Libermann followed Olier in his depreciation of all that is simply human, the reason is less likely to be intellectual affinity than a similar aftereffect of mystical experience. The whole thrust of Olier's spirituality is towards *communion* with God. Libermann's appreciation of this came from his own experience. He knew there was nothing to compare with it. In his effort to say so he sometimes got carried away. What we consider his exaggerations should not be a stumbling block to understanding him but a safeguard against profoundly misunderstanding him. "He (Christ) has come to communicate himself fully to our souls, to our minds as well as to our hearts. And how can he communicate himself to our minds, if not by being our light, just as he is the love of our hearts? Jesus is our model. We must do on a small scale what he has done on a large scale, or rather, it is his divine Spirit that must write small in us what he has written large in the most holy humanity of our Master."⁹ In his emphasis on docility to the Holy Spirit, Libermann showed himself particularly close to Olier and never so much as in his insistence on respecting the unique designs of the Holy Spirit on each individual.

In a seminary, the spirit of the founder pervades the atmosphere. Within this context is the more immediate influence of the spiritual directors. In fact, theirs may be the determining influence in the spirituality of the seminarian. Depending on circumstances, they may be more or less imbued with the spirit of the founder. Francis' experience in this respect was to be continually led back to Olier for inspiration.

In Paris Francis' director was Fr. Faillon, professor of dogma at the Seminary. He was also involved in catechising in the parish of Saint-Sulpice. He was a prodigious worker and "had already the habit, which he kept up all his life, of rising every morning at four o'clock and of never reading a newspaper." These habits did not leave Francis unaffected, especially during the period when he served Fr. Faillon's early morning Mass. More important, however, was the fact that Fr. Faillon was engaged in writing a biography of M. Olier. He was in constant contact with Olier's writings and was an authority on his spirituality. At Issy, Fr. Mollevaut was engaged in re-editing the works of M. Olier, which were published from 1831 to 1834. When Francis arrived at Issy in 1831 he turned to Fr. Mollevaut for direction.

Le Vavasseur said of Francis' relationship to Fr. Mollevaut: "He went to confession to Fr. Mollevaut and acted only in accordance with his advice."

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

Certainly Francis relied greatly on Fr. Mollevaut's advice and from his letters we get the impression that he turned to him for everything. In a letter to a seminarian, he refers to Fr. Mollevaut as the authority for the advice he is giving. A visit to Fr. Mollevaut is the cure for seminarians in distress. Francis recommends one seminarian to go to him for direction, another to make a retreat with him. No matter what the problem, Francis turns to Fr. Mollevaut. When Samson is having difficulty finding a school that he can afford for his daughter Pauline, it is Fr. Mollevaut who comes up with a solution, which Francis carefully outlines to Samson. As regards his own personal decisions, it is clear that Francis' dependence on Fr. Mollevaut is also very great as, for example, when he writes to a friend from Illkirch, where he is visiting his brother: "I have written to Fr. Mollevaut in order to know what to do; I am awaiting his reply before leaving either for Paris or for Nancy."¹⁰ In the difficult decision of whether or not to take the position of Novice Master with the Eudists, Francis wants Fr. Mollevaut to tell him what to do: "Send me and I will be happy to go." For his part, Fr. Mollevaut had a very high regard for Libermann. In his opinion Libermann was not the most intelligent, nor the most eloquent, but what he had to say seemed to flow from within him without affectation and was all the more striking for this. After careful consideration, Fr. Mollevaut recommended him highly for the position of Novice Master with the Eudists.

The effect of Fr. Mollevaut's direction was certainly to increase Francis' devotion to M. Olier. Fr. Mollevaut was very insistent on attention to the founder as the key to any real progress. At the same time, his opportunity being less, his grasp of M. Olier's teaching was probably not as sure as that of Fr. Faillon. Fr. Gamon in his book on Fr. Mollevaut says that the latter understood Olier imperfectly and insisted on renunciation without explaining its place.

At *La Solitude*, Fr. Mollevaut emphasised scrupulous exactitude with regard to the rule.¹¹ It was to be a year in the desert. Over the entrance could be read: *Mihi Solitudo Paradisus*. The world was to be kept at bay. News, even pertaining to matters of religion, was suspect by the very fact that it was news. Letters should be opened only when one had no longer any interest in reading them. A decent interval should be observed before replying, three months was suggested. Mollevaut was convinced that "souls had more need of submission than of explanations. Usually he

 PEACE AND FRAGILITY

refused every explanation that was not necessary, and his direction was much less a school of doctrine than an exercise of faith and obedience."¹² He believed that teaching was done by example.

Fr. Mollevaut was superior of *La Solitude* from 1818 to 1837. Among those who made their spiritual year under his direction were many who were to be closely associated with Libermann, including Fr. Faillon, Fr. Pinault and Fr. Louis de la Morinière. Fr. Mollevaut was a man of considerable influence in the Society of Saint-Sulpice: all the more so because of the illness of Fr. Garnier, who had become Superior General in 1826. The repercussions of his illness on the administration were giving rise to a certain malaise within the Society and were it not for Fr. Mollevaut, Saint-Sulpice might have lost some of its most talented members.

Fr. Mollevaut's influence on Libermann, both directly and indirectly, was considerable. Some of his maxims could be found almost verbatim in Libermann's own writing. For example: "One will have zeal for the salvation of souls only to the extent that one has zeal for one's own salvation."¹³ "Let us remain firmly convinced that it is God who does everything, and that He prefers to make use of nothingness than of learning. The less one has of this, the more one should rejoice. The little of our own that we contribute spoils everything."¹⁴ "Abnegation is the first and last point in the spiritual life. What remains, apart from this, is of very little importance." "Everything is possible when one has won the heart and it is by gentleness, simplicity, compassion, by sympathy and patience that one succeeds in winning hearts."¹⁵

However, Libermann was attracted to the man and not to his maxims. It was Mollevaut's complete dedication to God that impressed him. The most important thing that happened to Libermann as a result of the relationship was that he himself was led further along the path towards complete dedication to God in the spirit of M. Olier. The narrowness of perspective, the anti-intellectual tendency, the exaggeration of expression that Libermann also inherited were small handicaps by comparison. Besides, they could hardly be escaped, as they were characteristics of the spirituality of the time.

Peace that Surpasses all Understanding

On 9th June 1827 Francis received tonsure at Notre-Dame and became a

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

cleric for the diocese of Strasbourg. After the decision to leave *Séminaire Stanislas*, he received a burse from the Archbishop of Paris and entered Saint-Sulpice in October. These developments came to the ears of his father, who was crushed by the news and sent Francis a letter of malediction that reduced him to tears. On 20th December 1828, Francis received Minor Orders, now as a candidate for the Archdiocese of Paris. Shortly afterwards he experienced his first serious attack of epilepsy. In April 1829, he was envisaging leaving the Seminary. However, his superiors shared his own hopes of a cure and it was not until the end of his fourth year at Saint-Sulpice that his burse was revoked. Francis received the news of his dismissal with great calm. He was unconcerned that he had nowhere to go, and that he had no qualifications for a job, whereupon the authorities at Saint-Sulpice had second thoughts and offered to take upon themselves the responsibility for his upkeep. It was decided that he should go to their house at Issy. He arrived there in December 1831, and was to remain there almost six years.

Growth towards holiness involves a progressive integration of the personality. Communion with God slowly establishes a consistency in all the facets and activities of one's life. As this depends on intimacy with God, it is God who is mainly responsible for its rhythm. Usually it is a slow process. For example, a person may live for a long time without advertent to the fact that his business practices are in conflict with what he celebrates in the Sunday Eucharist. And when discovery comes, it is often so disturbing that it is resisted.

Francis found himself at home in Saint-Sulpice. "My entry into the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice was for my soul (the beginning of) a period of joy and blessing ... The silence which is so well kept in the seminary, the interior recollection which shines through all the faces and which is by way of being a special characteristic of those who live in that holy house, all that benefitted me greatly. I felt myself in a new situation where I could breathe freely."¹⁶ In this picture of happiness, one thing had slipped into the background of Francis' consciousness; his relationship with his father. If his father ever found out about his conversion and entry into the seminary, a painful confrontation would be inevitable. Better that he should not find out. He had not long to live; maybe the problem need never be faced. But circumstances decided otherwise. This area of his life that Francis refused to integrate into his personal stance, that he had

PEACE AND FRAGILITY

instead pushed into the corner of his mind, was to reappear dramatically and claim all his attention.

Francis' continued pretence with regard to his father was really a mark of love and concern. His father was in failing health. As things turned out, both his stepbrother, Isaac, and his friend and tutor from his days at Metz, Mr. Titercher, blamed Francis for his father's death. From all points of view, his reluctance to inform his father of developments was entirely justified. But unknown to Francis, the confrontation with his father was to be a turning point in his relationship with God. Sometimes those for whom God has special plans must go through the heartbreak of openly opposing those they love the most.

Inevitably, Lazarus learned of Francis' "apostasy." The prophets of doom had been right; Francis had deceived him, had betrayed his trust. Lazarus wrote to Francis and poured out all the suffering of his soul in bitter reproaches. When Francis received the letter, he broke down and through his tears kept repeating: "But I am a Christian". After prayer and much deliberation, he wrote back to his father explaining the reasons for his conversion, but he never heard from his father again. Two years later (1830) Lazarus died in Saverne.

In 1846, in a letter to Jerome Schwindenhammer, Libermann, uncharacteristically, refers to his own religious experience. In the opening paragraph, he explains that his reason is to better encourage Schwindenhammer, whom he engages to complete silence about what the letter contains. Somehow the letter survived the instructions of the postscript, which read: "You will burn this letter on the third day after receiving it." In the letter Libermann explains how he never considered himself as having acquired any virtue; everything was God's gift and grace. Even when explaining the virtues to others, it was not the results of meditation, but rather an enlightenment while he was speaking that accounted for the shape his teaching took.

"When all is said and done, I acquired nothing, nothing in the way of intellectual knowledge, no power of will, no practice of virtue. God gave me everything. He drew me (to Himself) without asking my permission and with a violence that I have not so far remarked in anyone else. At first I was very lax, very indifferent, worthless with regard to any supernatural life. Our Lord gave me the grace to stand up to my father, who wanted to tear me away from the faith. I renounced him rather than the faith.

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

Whereupon the good Master 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. During all this time, I didn't have a single clear idea of spiritual things."¹⁷ Francis' resistance to his father, with all the attendant emotional pressure to which he was so vulnerable, was the prelude to a period of privileged communion with Christ which was completely unexpected. The association of renunciation and communion with Christ were no longer simply resonances of Olier; they were now an expression of his own experience. Francis was now confirmed in his belief in the living God, who acts, who intervenes in history. The presence of God has become to him as the air he breathes, lifegiving, available, in danger of being taken for granted. But he has done more than recapture his Jewish faith, he has been drawn into the life of the Trinity. His communion is with the risen Christ, the source of his life is the Holy Spirit. "We must have two concerns. The first, to renounce ourselves, to completely go out of ourselves, to distrust ourselves greatly. The second, to tend 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."¹⁸

At first Francis found the method of mental prayer advocated at Saint-Sulpice very helpful. Obligated to rise later than the others because of poor health, one of his principal regrets was that he missed the explanations given on mental prayer. When he recovered sufficiently to be present at these, he found a greater facility in mental prayer. While never insisting on any particular method for others, he continued to recommend a method to those who were beginning mental prayer, as well as to those who were experiencing difficulties. In a letter to Samson in 1836 he gave detailed instructions which reflect his own experience, especially with regard to the choice of a subject.¹⁹ On many occasions he warned seminarians against meditations that were too sublime and beyond them. In his own case he realised the favour that had been bestowed on him. God intervened "with a violence that I have not so far remarked in anyone else." Small wonder that he found little help in books. "During my long time at the Seminary, I passed through many phases of mental prayer. At first it was affective prayer; I went through its stages, the most ordinary and the most intense alike. Then I experienced that type of prayer that Courbon calls *presence of*

PEACE AND FRAGILITY

God, pure faith and others. Once when I found myself with a difficulty — a difficulty akin to yours though a little different — my director gave me Courbon to read in order to throw some light on my way of prayer. Well, in what he described, I found nothing which exactly fitted my case, that is to say nothing which described my different states, nor the transitions which led me from one state to another, nor the preparations for these different types of prayer. That which did apply to me was not in the order in which Fr. Courbon described it. He attached certain effects to one state of prayer, others to another state of prayer, while I experienced these effects at the same time. And there were other differences of this sort. This reading confused me completely and my director told me to give it up."²⁰...

Probably no handbook could have helped Francis during the five years that "the good Master ... held my faculties captive and absorbed." His fellow seminarians noticed the intensity of his prayer at this time. Mgr. Dupont des Loges, who had since become bishop of Metz, wrote in 1853 of how he used to arrange to be with Francis at the weekly adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Francis seemed to be in ecstasy and his tears flowed freely. Certainly Francis learned about prayer from experience. And from his experience he concluded that prayer was principally the work of God. All personal effort in prayer is directed towards achieving a state of maximum receptivity. All attention is directed towards God, towards Christ in his mysteries, towards the Holy Spirit present in the soul. At no time should the attention return to oneself, not even to try and better understand God's action. "You know that famous phrase of Saint Anthony: 'To pray well, one should not be aware that one is praying'. During your mental prayer, you must not pay any attention to what is going on within you. Follow the movement that Our Lord gives you. That is the best thing to do."²¹

Often we turn to people of outstanding holiness for help in our problem of reconciling prayer and action. Usually we find that they don't seem to have the problem. For Libermann life consists of communication with God, adherence to Christ, which is brought about by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. The most favourable conditions for this communion are found in prayer. The moments of prayer are the high points in life. The pattern of prayer is the pattern of life. In life too the target is a greater receptivity which comes through progressive renunciation. Only in this way do we give the Holy Spirit free play. "The

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

authentic way of disposing yourself for a great gift of prayer, is the most perfect renunciation. It is to this, my good fellow, that you must give your whole attention. In all your behaviour this must be your aim. Once completely empty of every creature and of yourself, you will be disposed and capable of receiving the Spirit of God in abundance. As long as nature has some life left, the Spirit of Our Lord cannot live completely in you. But once this nature is completely dead, you will live only by the life of God, and then the spirit of prayer will inspire all the movements of your soul, it will become its habitual way of acting and will be like another nature in you. For this reason, concentrate on interior renunciation, make it the basis of your whole spiritual life."²²

The spirit of prayer should pervade all activity.

Reading: "Read little, don't seek sacred learning either in books or in men, but in Our Lord who abides in the depths of your soul. We have within us an abundant source of living water. Why go elsewhere to seek out a few small drops of muddied water? Read the authors, not so much to learn something as to pass the time fittingly. In this way there won't be any danger and you will benefit from it."²³

Study: "Study before God and in God, as Saint Thomas did: study in a serious and thorough way. Put all your trust, (seek) all your strength and all your light in God alone. Don't examine to what extent study and learning are necessary or useful. You are in the major course, you must do your homework and study the authors. Get down to it seriously before God, that is what is necessary. Simply take care that you are not carried away by this study, that your mind does not become preoccupied with it. Don't let it result in a sort of self-love, a confidence in your own learning, a self-sufficiency. I say this that you may have a distrust of yourself and live only in God and from God."²⁴

The approach to Scripture: "I advise you to read Saint Paul without a commentary, but before God and in a spirit of prayer. When you can make no sense of a passage from his epistles, then consult a commentary (but) for this passage only. Then resume reading the text, meditating on it before God. In this way you will find you greatly benefit. Do the same for the holy gospel and the other epistles."²⁵ As we read these passages, it is well to remind ourselves that we are not elaborating Libermann's doctrine on prayer. We are rather trying to grasp his attitude to life and how it developed. We are saying that for Francis, prayer was essentially intimacy

PEACE AND FRAGILITY

with Christ. It was a sustaining intimacy. It decided the pattern of all his other activity and at the same time sustained it. "The essential and the only point is, as I have already told you, to renounce oneself in everything to carry one's cross and to follow Our Lord Jesus Christ, that is to say to unite oneself to him in the most intimate way. If one does this, or at least if one tries whole-heartedly to do this, it would be a great mistake to worry about anything else."²⁶

This intimacy was all-consuming. By comparison, human concerns were worthless. For Francis, total renunciation of personal interests was the obvious course of action. For many this is too radical a stance, with its derogatory implications for human and worldly achievements. Once again our aim here is not to examine the intellectual coherence of Francis' attitude but to watch its development. The effort is to try to evoke Francis' religious experience. Did Francis realise how radical a stance it was, and had he any idea where it would lead?

On the morning of 27th July 1830, the seminarians of Saint-Sulpice, among them Francis, went from Paris to Issy for a day of relaxation. Scarcely had they arrived when the sound of gunfire from the city caused consternation. *Les Trois Glorieuses* — The Paris revolution — was under way. The seminarians huddled around their directors, whose worry increased as the sound of cannon continued. Away from it all in a remote corner of the grounds, Francis was discovered weeping profusely. "No one thinks of Our Lord. It is now that we should think of Our Lord if we would be faithful to him, it is now that we should gather together to help others and to die if necessary."²⁷

Already marked out by epilepsy, Francis' exceptional sensitivity to the presence of the risen Christ also set him apart. In 1830, Francis was very much alone, but ten years later people were seeking him out, and a group of young men were looking to him for leadership in a daring missionary venture. What had happened in between? Was Francis still as radical or did he find he had to compromise along the way?

During his time at Saint-Sulpice, the characteristic that his contemporaries seem to have found the most striking was Francis' calm, his peace of mind. Not only was Francis at peace within himself but he communicated this peace to others. Fr. Aubry recalls 1827: "He already had that air of gentleness and modesty which he always retained and, after such a long interval, I have not yet forgotten the attractiveness of his smile.

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

When I came across him, he was always at peace and already I considered his appearance angelic. At this time, to my shame, I was full of harmful tendencies and very disturbed. Well, it was enough to chat for a few minutes with this young convert. When I left him, I was completely at peace ... What above all shows the virtue of the young Libermann is that this was completely out of character. By nature, he was obviously very vivacious."²⁸

Even the onset of epilepsy did not deprive Francis of his serene self-possession. "When I saw M. Libermann for the first time at the Seminary, he had already had several epileptic attacks and we saw clearly in his face the traces of his suffering and his nervous contractions. His forehead and his temples, as he said himself, were gripped as by a headband of iron. But, in spite of his suffering, I never noticed in him any signs of a resentful sadness. On the contrary, his calm was imperturbable."²⁹ For Fr. Gamon even the remembrance of Libermann was a source of peace: "Many times the remembrance of his encouragement and his advice have restored my peace and tranquillity." For Libermann himself this peace determined his whole lifestyle. Its source is Christ. Just as the spirit of prayer overflows the times of intense communion with Christ and pervades all the actions of the day, in much the same way does the peace that Christ gives infiltrate every corner of our life. "The great means of establishing in us the wonderful reign of Christ are precisely a prevailing spirit of prayer and peace of soul. The divine mercy shows you a great favour in marking you with these two inclinations. Follow them gently and lovingly before his divine goodness. Never fail to remember — and fix this truth firmly in your mind and heart — that the greatest means, the infallible means even, of having this continual (spirit of) prayer is to possess one's soul in peace before the Lord."³⁰

The key importance of renunciation remains. "Perfect renunciation, by which one avoids allowing oneself the least satisfaction, is the most fundamental disposition to this holy peace."³¹ However, perfect renunciation is not achieved in a day and is not advanced at all by any frantic efforts that disturb our peace. In 1837, Francis writes to M. de Goy, who has reacted angrily when his request to transfer to another community was refused: "I am not at all surprised at the faults you have committed by reacting in a moment of agitation such as you found yourself in. You were not master of yourself and as a result you are not as

PEACE AND FRAGILITY

guilty as you might think. The cure for all this is not achieved in a day. So have patience, my friend, continue to concentrate on gentleness, on peace and on interior moderation. Put all your trust in God. Eventually, He will hear your prayer and will even do you the favour of gradually correcting all these faults. The patience with which you endure them will be well rewarded before God. Put up with them, then, in peace and gentleness. Humble yourself gently and peacefully before Him and wait until it pleases Him to draw you completely to Himself. Once again, don't be so concerned with yourself; instead concentrate on God's love, walk continually in a state of humiliation before Him, and this in all peace and gentleness and with interior moderation. Why are you always annoyed and troubled because you have difficulty overcoming your faults? This is pure pride. In fact, God is not asking that you overcome them, but He wants you to have the desire to overcome them and to work at this in order to become more pleasing to Him. Work at it gently and peacefully in this perspective and keep yourself calm. In this way, by putting all your trust in Him alone, you will endure with patience and tranquillity the faults which it pleases God to leave you with for the moment. If you become flustered and impatient, that is the result of wanting to be rid of them for other reasons, which are the wrong reasons, for example to be more praiseworthy or held in esteem, etc. And, for as long as you lose patience in this way, you will not overcome them."³²

Francis knew the ambiguity that attached to this peace and was well aware of our human vulnerability to illusion. A year later he wrote: 'Neither diminish nor make light of your faults in your own eyes with the idea of having peace of soul. That would be a false peace. But try to live in a great peace and a great union with Our Lord, in a recognition and an acknowledgment of our misery, our poverty and our malice. If someone is helped on towards peace and union with Our Lord by this recognition and this acknowledgement, that person should rejoice greatly before God, should humble himself more and more and should be content with his abjection and his misery. Pay special attention to this peace and aim at it constantly before God and in God. But let it be a peace of renunciation and death, not a peace of indifference; a peace of union and of love and not an artificial peace, which comes about either by simply forgetting what troubles us or by human effort. Your peace ought to neither fear nor always flee difficulties and temptations but overcome them."³³

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

Francis' concept of peace of soul grows out of the meaning he has found in communion with Christ. Union with God is the great reality that governs every other aspect of living. In this union, the initiative belongs wholly to God. The peace it brings is equally God's gift. We can to some extent prepare ourselves by renunciation, but renunciation is even more the living out of this union. It is an expression of the transformation taking place in us whereby all our attention and desire are being painfully turned from ourselves to God, to Christ, living, available and active and to the Holy Spirit at work within us. Once again our interest is not mainly in Francis' spiritual teaching on peace, which is not very original, but rather in how it became so firmly fixed in the fabric of his life as to withstand all crises.

Epilepsy

Samson's only reflection on Francis' health as a boy was that he had "a delicate constitution". One of his contemporaries at Saint-Sulpice, Fr. Perrée describes him as vigorous and strong from a physical point of view. Maybe this is an exaggeration, as Perree's claim that during their "several years" together at the seminary he could detect no sign of Francis' illness, is not in accord with the general body of evidence. On the other hand it is clear that Francis was no weakling and was capable of undertaking long journeys on foot. Already from Metz, he had travelled on foot to Lunéville to thank his language tutor; from Saint-Sulpice there were the pilgrimages to Notre-Dame de Chartres and in 1840 he made a pilgrimage to Loretto from Rome. Of the 212 kms. involved in this journey, Francis covered 179 kms. on foot, over a period of a month (mid-November — mid-December). The weakness in Francis was more of a nervous kind. Symptomatic of this was a nervous twitch around the mouth, which sometimes deteriorated into a difficulty in speaking. This was already evident at Metz: "There was about (the movement of) his lips and other of his movements something convulsive. For my part, I believed him to be an epileptic."³⁴

The first warnings of nervous strain occurred when Francis was at *Séminaire Stanislas* but this was not diagnosed as epilepsy, as Francis received tonsure in June 1827. He had not fully recovered when he entered Saint-Sulpice, and for a time was exempted from some of the seminary regulations, such as early rising. In July 1828, he writes to Samson: "I am in good health, my nervous disability is, I think, on the wane. Since February

PEACE AND FRAGILITY

of last year, I haven't had a strong attack. I get up now at five o'clock in the morning and make my meditation, an exercise that is most likely to irritate them (my nerves) and nevertheless, I feel nothing at all. It is doubtless another grace that God has granted me and that I have not merited."³⁵ Not long after receiving minor orders (20th December 1828), Francis experienced his first epileptic seizure. "One of his first attacks of epilepsy took place during recreation in the big hall of the Seminary in Paris, where we were walking because of bad weather. I was beside him with one or two other seminarians. We carried him to his room and put him to bed and we didn't leave until the crisis had completely passed. It would be difficult for me to describe with what serenity and kind appreciation he spoke to us, once he recovered consciousness."³⁶ In April of 1829, Francis wrote to Samson and made reference to his health: "I have not completely recovered my health but I am, however, getting better. My nerves didn't bother me for eighteen months, but at the end of last year and this winter they caused me trouble. I think that the mental work had tired me out. I was busy all day without a break at the study of theology and now, if I want to do a little work, I feel a pressure in my head as if my forehead and temples were gripped by a headband of iron. Because of all this, I will have to take a rest for a few years until I have made a complete recovery. I have decided to withdraw from the seminary for a while. I don't know yet where I will go, but this doesn't worry me. Fr. Augé, superior of a college, has offered to give me something to do at his house, where I wouldn't have to work (hard) and I may accept this. What is more, let me say that I am all the time well satisfied and I can assure you that I have never been as happy as I am at the moment. It is so true that the more we love God and seek to serve Him well, the more we fulfil the purpose of our creation. But if I am going to tell you everything I feel in my heart, I would never finish."³⁷

It is not easy to know how seriously Francis was considering leaving Saint-Sulpice, but it is interesting to note that he was not completely forlorn in Paris and that Fr. Augé continued to be a good friend. In any event he stayed at the seminary, but in the spring of 1830 another severe seizure occurred. "At the beginning of my first year of theology, in February or March of 1830, I was quite ill at the Seminary. Although not well himself, M. Libermann did not intend leaving to others all the acts of charity, so he came to visit me. I was up but could not put one leg on the

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

ground as it was sore all over from a mustard plaster that was on for twenty-four hours. I was resting this leg on a chair. M. Libermann was opposite and was passing me a newsheet when he was overcome by a severe attack of epilepsy. The house infirmarian, who had him lying on the floor in such a way that I could not see his face, called to the priests in the neighbouring rooms. (M. Libermann) was put on my bed for a few moments. The attack passed and he was brought to his room."³⁸

On 21st June 1830 Samson's wife gave birth to their first son, François-Xavier. Francis had been putting off writing to them, but he could not let such a big event pass unnoticed. This letter sheds light mainly on Francis' attitude to his illness (and in this regard we will be considering it later). Actual news is scarce. Francis first congratulates the parents on the birth of François-Xavier, then continues: "I must now start to tell you about myself. I am very much at fault for having sent you no news for so long. Realising that I could tell you nothing that would bring you pleasure, I decided to say nothing and that is the whole explanation of my negligence. My health continues to improve. My nerves are very much calmer than they were two years ago. However, I haven't advanced to the subdiaconate, because my illness has not completely left me and will probably be with me for a very long time yet. As a result, I cannot be promoted (to orders) for several more years and maybe never."³⁹

In the remaining letters to Samson during his stay at Saint-Sulpice, that is until 1837, Francis includes a few sentences on the state of his health. In 1835, he mentions that light attacks occur every fourteen or fifteen months. "My state of health remains the same all the time. There is an interval of fourteen or fifteen months between one mishap and another, but after this time a very light one occurs, it is true." There is never any great detail and it is difficult to arrive at the meaning of, for example, "mishap" (*accident*) or "very light." The general picture is one of gradual improvement and by 1836 Francis' references to his health have been relegated to postscripts. However, the unpredictability of his illness was to show itself again and in 1838, at the Eudist novitiate in Rennes, Francis had probably his worst attack. Fr. Maignan, a Eudist, writes: "The community of St. Martin of Rennes visited that of St. Gabriel on the vigil of the Sacred Heart of Mary for the conference prescribed in our Rules. Fr. Louis said to him: 'M. Libermann, would you please speak to us on the feast?' He began to speak and after a few minutes, he was gripped by this unfortunate illness. It was

PEACE AND FRAGILITY

about 3 o'clock in the afternoon on 7 February, 1838. He recovered from this attack only with great difficulty. He was indisposed for several days.⁴⁰ Pursued for further details, Fr. Maignan refers to his previous statement: "I uphold it just as it is and with no alteration: epilepsy in the full sense of the term, with foam at the mouth and loss of consciousness, the vigil of the Sacred Heart of Mary, 7 February."⁴¹

No further seizures occurred at Rennes. In 1840, while Francis was in Rome, he made a pilgrimage to Loretto. "He told me that he had just made the pilgrimage to Loretto, where he had been cured. Nevertheless, he still had a sort of nervous twitch, which remained with him all his life, but there were no further epileptic fits."⁴² Francis was ordained the following year but seems to have been surprised by another epileptic attack, while in Strasbourg in 1846. His companion on the journey, Fr. Blanpin, describes this isolated incident as a nervous upset (*crise de nerfs*), but it was serious and temporarily incapacitating. Fr. Briault regards the favour he received at Loretto not as a simple cure but as an alleviation of the disease, sufficient to clear the way for ordination.

During the period 1827 — 1839, we have seen that Francis had three *grand mal* seizures that we know of. He himself refers to light attacks at regular intervals of fourteen months, without giving any idea of what these involved. The accounts of contemporaries don't throw any great light on these "mishaps." Mgr. de Conny, who was at Issy from 1832 to 1834, "witnessed some of the manifestations of his illness, which were indeed very frequent in their mild form." The few other scraps of information, "he fell during a spiritual exercise," "he was helped to a window to get some air," are equally inconclusive with regard to the nature of the mild epileptic manifestations.

The surest information about Francis' general health comes from his own hand. He does refer to severe headaches. "I feel a pressure in my head as if my forehead and temples were gripped by a headband of iron." These headaches persisted throughout his life. In 1845, he refers to them as, in a way, replacing his nervous disorder. When Francis died in 1852, it was found that his liver had all shrivelled up. During his seminary days, he already suffered stomach pains. "I suffer a great deal, I have the feeling that something is twisting and rending my innards, it is very painful." While at Issy, Francis was on a diet. Soon after his arrival at Rennes, he writes to the bursar at Issy and jokes about this special treatment. "As

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

regards myself, my health is very good. I am no longer as sickly as I was at Issy. You spoiled me. Now it's beans, smoked bacon, cabbage, cod etc ... these are what replaced the boiled eggs by which I impoverished your community. My unfortunate stomach is never more content than when it gets something substantial which agrees with it. "⁴³

Francis also suffered from a speech impediment. At times he simply could not get the words out and had to leave the company he was in or discontinue a conference. Fr. de Brandt recalls the period at Rennes: "The physical sufferings of the servant of God were extreme. At times, he would make seven or eight attempts to speak, obliged as he was to interrupt himself because of nervous movements. For the same reason he had often to leave recreation several times in a row."⁴⁴ In 1841, just after receiving diaconate, Francis wrote to Fr. Cahier: "My health is much better. In more than three and a half years, I have not had an attack and the small (nervous) movements are diminishing: however, I am not cured. I still cannot speak freely and, as a result, I cannot risk preaching."⁴⁵

Apart from the *grand mal* seizures themselves, the marks of Francis' illness that were more or less continually present over a long period were severe headaches, stomach trouble and difficulty in speech. In the period we are considering (1827 – 1839), the year 1832 seems to have been a bad year for Francis. Beginning on 26th March, an outbreak of cholera swept Paris. Francis remained at Issy. On 21st May he wrote to his brother that he had just spent over a week in bed with slight inflammation of the lungs. On 27th July he was convalescing after a fever which lasted ten or twelve days. That year he went to the coast to take seabaths. The period in the thirties when Francis enjoyed the best health was probably from 1834 to March 1838. On 3rd January 1835 he wrote to Samson: "I am in good health. For a year now I have had no mishap." And on 31st December 1837 from Rennes: "My health is holding up splendidly since I came here: That will soon make it three years that I have been untroubled." Maybe Francis should have said four years. At any rate there is no evidence of any epileptic attack or serious indisposition early in 1835. Also Francis' activity at Issy, which will be described in the next chapter, would argue for a period of fairly good health over this period of four years.

When Francis moved from Paris to Issy he was forbidden to study and was given tasks that involved taking exercise in the open air. He worked in the garden and went to Paris frequently on messages for members of the

PEACE AND FRAGILITY

community. His treatment consisted mainly in plenty of fresh air and the removal of sources of tension. Seabaths and a diet, mentioned above, were introduced to counteract particular problems. No effective medical treatment for epilepsy was available at the time.

After Francis' second epileptic seizure in the spring of 1830 the likelihood of his ever being ordained a priest was very remote. Without any fault of his own, his great ambition had moved out of reach. How did he react to this disappointment? And what were his reactions to his mysterious illness? In the summer of 1830, he wrote to Samson and Babette: "It is all very distressing, heartbreaking, unbearable. Certainly that would be the language of a child of this generation, who seeks his happiness only in the goods of this world and who acts as if for him there were no God. But this is not the way of the children of God, the genuine Christians. They are satisfied with all that their heavenly Father gives them, because they know that all that he sends them is good and useful for them and if things happened otherwise, it would be a real misfortune for them."

"All the ills with which God seems to afflict us are in reality favours. Woe to the Christian for whom everything goes according to his will, he has not received the favours of his God in full measure. So I can assure you, my dear friends, that my beloved illness is for me a great treasure, preferable to all the goods that the world offers to its devotees. These so-called goods are only made of clay, are only misfortunes in the eyes of a true child of God. All they achieve is to estrange him from his Father, who is in heaven. For myself, if Our Lord Jesus Christ continues the grace that he has shown me up to the present, which I in no way deserve, I hope to lead a life that is really poor and given over uniquely to his service. Then I will be richer than if I possessed the whole world and I challenge the world to find me a happier man. For who is richer than the one who does not wish to possess anything? Who is happier than the one whose desires are satisfied? Why are you distressed on my account? Are you afraid that I will die of hunger? Good God, the Lord feeds the birds of the countryside, will he not find a way to feed me also? He loves me more than the birds of the countryside.

"But, you will say. If I were a priest, I could establish myself and help out my family. No, my dear friends, it would never be like that. My body, my soul, my being, my whole existence belong to God and if I knew of

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

even a small streak still within me that did not belong to Him, I would tear it out and trample it underfoot in the mud and the dust. Whether I am a priest or not, whether I am a millionaire or a tramp, all that I am and all that I have belong to God and to no one else."⁴⁶

This letter with its constant biblical overtones did little to satisfy Samson's medical curiosity. He probably found it puzzling and reassuring. Puzzling in its violence, reassuring in its evidence that Francis was standing firm in the face of difficulty. If we too are puzzled by such phrases as "my beloved illness," let us remember that Francis, in taking his stance, is counting on the continuing grace of Christ. He is glorying in his infirmity because it is giving him privileged entry to communion with Christ. This is even clearer from another letter of the same year. "You write 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? Wretch! you want me then to be in hell! 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."⁴⁷

These extracts reflect the classical tradition of living for God alone. But the problem with classical traditions is that they run into practical difficulties. For example, did Francis pray for his cure? What was his attitude to medical treatment? Unfortunately, lack of evidence makes these questions difficult to answer.

"Ah, my dear friend," he often said to us "pray with me to the Holy Virgin, for I hope to obtain my cure from the Mother of God." Thus reported a contemporary in the seminary in Paris. Later when Alexandre de Hohenlohe, a man of great confidence in prayer, which often resulted in healing, visited the seminary, the seminarians asked him to initiate a novena for the cure of Libermann. Francis, however, was not in favour of it, saying that he didn't deserve that God should perform a miracle for him, that if God wanted to do this he would be very happy but that he didn't want to ask it of him. It is probable that Libermann was a little overawed by the attention he was getting. At the same time it shows how an attitude of complete abandonment to God can be faced with unexpected difficulties. Francis' desire to become a priest remained very much alive. Mme. Remond, sister of M. de Goy, recalls: "At the time of his illness, he used to say to him (M. de Goy): 'How happy you must be, you

PEACE AND FRAGILITY

will be a priest'." This desire found expression in his prayers, especially during the pilgrimage to Loretto.

As regards his estimation of the value of medical attention, Francis' advice to others was: take your medicine but put your trust in God. In his own case he was not as faithful in following instructions. In his memoir (1840) to Mgr. Cadolini, secretary of the Propaganda, he set out the project for a new foundation. In speaking of his own state of health, he wrote: "For more than two years I have not had an attack. These attacks come only occasionally. I can forestall them if I take the necessary precautions, and for quite a long while, those that I have had came only because I did not take these precautions."⁴⁸

Francis' disregard for medicine may have derived in part from his distrust of the whole natural order and the achievements of science, but his temperament was also partly responsible. In February 1842, he wrote to his brother: "Your tablets did me good, at least I think they did. I don't have any more of them. Towards the end, I took two at a time, that is six a day. Did I do wrong?"

The generalized convulsions of a *grand mal* seizure are symptoms of disturbed electrical activity in the brain. The normal nervous system is protected against excessive neuronal discharges by inhibitory mechanisms. The effectiveness of these mechanisms establishes a person's seizure threshold. A person may be liable to seizures because his seizure threshold is congenitally low. "There is a continuum ranging from normal individuals (who have never had a spontaneous seizure, and who would have one only if given a convulsant drug or an electroconvulsive shock), through people who will have a seizure precipitated by physical upsets (such as extreme fatigue, teething, a febrile illness or acute alcoholism), or by afferent stimuli (such as emotional stress or flickering light), to those who have attacks without demonstrable cause other than the stress and strain of living."⁴⁹

On the other hand, there may be intracranial or extracranial reasons for a person's occasional inability to halt the eleptogenic process. There may be a physiological cause (e.g. a cerebral tumour) leading to abnormal electrical discharges from the brain. In this type of epilepsy the seizure threshold may be high or low, though probably it is low.

In the last hundred years there has been great progress in the understanding of epilepsy as well as in its treatment by anticonvulsant

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

drugs and even surgical intervention. The idea of an epileptic personality has proved so elusive as to have been generally rejected. Efforts to reach a characteristic behavioural pattern have reached little agreement. In general it is held that no firm relationship exists between epilepsy and intelligence or behaviour.

This demythologisation of epilepsy has unfortunately had little effect outside medical circles. "Unfortunately there is still a considerable amount of lay ignorance tinged with superstitious beliefs regarding epilepsy, so that whereas some conditions excite sympathy, epilepsy is not quite socially acceptable, and even produces rejection and revulsion."⁵⁰

This description of epilepsy and the attitude it calls forth in others helps us towards better understanding Libermann's experience. In a time of less understanding there was more room for superstition. Various contributing factors were advanced: the arduous study of the Talmud from an early age, the strain accompanying ordination ceremonies, the study of theology, mental prayer. But beyond this enumeration of occasions of nervous strain, no cause was forthcoming. Francis was not regarded as possessed, but among his friends an explanation based on a possible implication of the devil was not without its adherents. "I must say that, according to my own impression and the common opinion of my friends, this disease ought to be regarded as a satanic malignancy, a sort of obsession of the devil."⁵¹

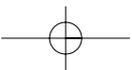
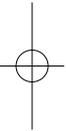
There is no doubt that Francis was well treated at Saint-Sulpice. Yet, in his heart, he knew that it was out of pity that he was allowed to stay. "Perhaps he (the superior) still hopes to have me ordained in a year or two. However, I think that instead he is really keeping me out of charity, for he knows that I have nothing and he is acting towards me out of pity."⁵² He was sent to Issy because no one really knew what to do about him. He stayed there on sufferance. Through no fault of his own, he had become a misfit. He was one of those who couldn't make it. In need of acceptance, the best he could hope for was tolerance. He had suddenly become part of a minority group marked out by misfortune.

The threat of losing personal control hung over his head like the sword of Damocles. To drive a car that skids out of control is to know a moment of panic. For Francis, this awful sense of helplessness was built into his body. At any moment things might be taken out of his hands. In retrospect, we can say that, through his illness, Francis came to terms with insecurity.

PEACE AND FRAGILITY

Let us not overlook the bitter struggle involved and the moments of deep depression. Francis was not only ill, he was *different*. The question: "Why me?" would not be stilled. The struggle for self-acceptance took more out of him than any of his letters indicate.

As month followed month at Issy and the road that stretched out before him still seemed to be leading nowhere, discouragement entered his heart and threatened to take complete possession. God seemed to be absent and to the question "What's the use?" no ready answer came. Pushed almost to despair, Francis was tempted to commit suicide. "Fr. Pinault used to tell us, in fact, that the good Libermann, as he called him, admitted to him that one day while crossing one of the bridges over the Seine, near the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, he felt overcome by such a profound sadness that, if he hadn't been a Christian and strengthened by his faith, he would have thrown himself into the river."⁵³ Another account indicates how Francis kept a grip on himself: "The sight of my Jesus supported me and made me patient". Francis' old ability to survive had found a new cornerstone, Christ himself. Where he turns when the pressures are at their peak tells a lot about a man. Francis turned to Christ and found his peace restored.



SUCCESS AND FAILURE

CHAPTER FOUR

Success and Failure

The reorganisation of the church in France after the Revolution found its first official encouragement in the Concordat of 1801. The Revolution had tried to do without the church; Napoleon saw its usefulness and was prepared to come to terms with it. The terms of the Concordat were far from giving the church freedom of action, but in a desperate situation they gave it recognition. The number of dioceses was reduced from 139 to 60, and Napoleon had the power to nominate bishops. Religious questions were regulated by a government official, the Minister of Religion. The excitement over the fact that freedom of worship was once again a reality in France was somewhat diminished by the unilateral promulgation by Napoleon in 1802 of the Organic Articles, whose purpose was to make it even more clear that he intended the church to be subject to the state. In such circumstances, not all religious activity was visible and some was strictly secret, for instance that of the *Congrégation*, which will be mentioned later in this chapter.

With the fall of Napoleon and the return of Louis XVIII, there was a return to the monarchy in a limited sense. Catholicism became the religion of the state; other religions were tolerated. Louis XVIII, in his efforts to undo the work of Napoleon, was unable to get rid of the Concordat, which was confirmed in a modified form in 1822. An alliance between the Throne and the Altar grew up and was even intensified when Charles X came to the throne in 1824. The church was active in home missions and education, especially at primary level. New religious congregations were founded and old congregations began the slow work of restoration. In this respect we will be talking of the Eudists later in this chapter. The activity of the Church did not take place without opposition. In 1828, under pressure from the liberals, Charles X was obliged to issue a decree preventing the Jesuits from teaching.

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

The political thrust of the period, to which the clergy was allied, was too much an attempt to return to the past. The Revolution and the Empire were regarded as an aberration rather than as events that had changed the climate of politics for all time. It has been said of the *émigrés*, who returned to France with Louis XVIII that they had neither forgotten anything nor learned anything. This may be an oversimplification, but it contains a certain truth, which applied also to some of the clergy. In 1830, the spectre of revolution returned to France on a smaller scale to underline its message.

Because of the close association between the clergy and the monarchy which had developed, the popular violence of 1830 extended also to the church. Churches and seminaries were attacked. In Paris, priests could no longer appear in the streets in clerical dress. A wave of anticlerical literature kept feelings high. Louis Philippe became *roi des Français* instead of *roi de France*. The tricolour was restored as the national flag. Catholicism became "the religion of the majority of Frenchmen", no longer the religion of the state. "Little had changed in the exterior form of government, but in its essence the revolution was complete for, as the principle of authority, divine or historical right had been replaced by the will of the people."

The formal recognition of the new regime by Pope Pius VIII and his instruction to the French bishops to give their promise of allegiance to Louis Philippe eased the situation considerably. The church and the government kept their distance but their mutual relations improved, until they were again disturbed in 1840 over the issue of freedom of education. During the July Monarchy, the church in France continued to recover. The initiatives of some individuals were particularly fruitful in the work of restoration and innovation, men such as Lacordaire, Gueranger, Ozanam, Libermann ...

Libermann At Issy

In 1801 a Jesuit priest, Fr. Delpuits, reorganized an association of youth called *La Congrégation de la Très Sainte Vierge à Paris*. Its aim was to help young people in living the Christian life and to encourage them to undertake charitable activity. The members made an act of consecration to the Blessed Virgin. They were drawn mainly from student and middle class milieux. Fr. Emery, superior general of Saint-Sulpice, was always glad to receive a member of the *Congrégation*: "I wish my whole seminary

SUCCESS AND FAILURE

belonged to the *Congrégation*, for the members who do come to us are already well formed." He encouraged the Sulpician seminarians in Paris to become members and gave special permission to lay members of the *Congrégation* to join the seminary community at recreation, on outings and occasionally for prayer. Several of these lay members subsequently entered the Sulpicians as a result of this friendly contact and sharing with the seminary community.

Also in 1801, another organization of Jesuit origin but of a different character was introduced in Saint-Sulpice. This was a devotional society (*Association de Piété*) which operated in secret and was referred to as the Aa.² "The principal aim of this society was to form in the seminary a body of very fervent seminarians who would be perfect in their observance of the rules, and who, by their example, their advice and their prayers, would contribute towards maintaining a great fervour in the community."

Great care was taken in the selection of candidates for membership of the Aa. At first there were only five members, then six and in 1803 it was decided to increase the number to eight. During the early years it seemed that the main preoccupation was personal sanctification and that the other aim of the society, the animation of the community, was being neglected. It was decided that the best way to correct this would be to pay more attention to newcomers to the community. From 1809 the welcoming and encouraging of newcomers became part of the policy of the group. Under strain in the following years, the society decided to emphasize its policy of secrecy by introducing a new article into its regulations which called for "the most inviolable secrecy about the activities of this society, even about its very existence; this to apply both inside and outside the seminary." Upon induction, the members made an act of consecration to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary which also engaged them in a lifelong communion of mutual assistance in the spiritual life. Their membership in this spiritual network was probably not unconnected with the fact that many of them subsequently reached positions of eminence in the Church in France. It has come to light that Libermann was a member of the Aa at Saint-Sulpice and presided at meetings of the society on 1st June and 2nd December 1829. That Libermann never mentioned this fact shows only that he could keep a secret. That he belonged to the society is an indication of the esteem in which he was held at Saint-Sulpice. It also throws considerable light on his apostolate at Issy.

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

When Libermann went to the Sulpician house at Issy in 1831, it was in the open countryside and not under the surveillance of highrise apartments as it is today. Then it offered a relaxing atmosphere to the theological students from the seminary in Paris when they came on their weekly walks. The main building at Issy housed the students of philosophy and the staff. In another part of the grounds was *La Solitude*, where the Sulpicians completed their formation by a novitiate, a spiritual year of seclusion.

Within a few years of his arrival, Libermann had aroused the interest of the young students of philosophy and was frequently seen at the centre of small groups as they walked about the grounds in animated discussion. This was the beginning of *Les Bandes de Piété*. According to Fr. de Brandt these began in 1833 "as a result of several discussions which Libermann had had with some of the seminarians." Fr. Le Vavas seur referred to them beginning in 1835 among fervent young men, "who felt themselves strongly drawn to open up to each other and to share with each other the good dispositions and desires which God was arousing in them ... A need to speak together about God was felt." It was likely that an informal beginning prepared the way for greater organization and this explains the disparity between the two dates.

Fr. Tisserant refers to the *Bandes* as aimed principally at counteracting the laxity that had crept into the seminary as a result of an upsetting political situation and the outbreak of cholera in Paris in 1832. During the cholera epidemic, which lasted six months, the Sulpician house in Paris was temporarily used as a hospital. From the organisation of the *Bandes*, it was clear that Libermann considered them as an instrument of renewal in the seminary community. In this sense they were a weapon against laxity. On the other hand Libermann had carefully sounded the temper of the seminarians and the *Bandes* came into being as something which corresponded to their dimly felt aspirations.

"This is how he organized this type of apostolate. He chose the students who were the most fervent. First of all he got to know them individually. When he was sufficiently sure of their dispositions and when he saw that they were determined to give themselves unconditionally to God, he suggested to them to meet together to encourage each other in the work of their sanctification. These proposals were welcomed with great eagerness. The enterprise was always subject to the authorities. When they raised no

 SUCCESS AND FAILURE

objection, he formed his first groups (*Bandes*). The composition of the groups was changed each week and they also met in different places. A leader had the task of contacting the ones who would meet together and of informing them of the subject of the spiritual discussion, which would be the theme of their meeting, although each one was free to express his thoughts on another topic when he thought this worthwhile. The meetings were characterized by the greatest simplicity and the complete absence of pressure, each one saying what came to him on the subject given or on what he considered to be a related matter. The meetings usually lasted half an hour or three-quarters of an hour. The members dispersed, as they had come together, one or two at a time in order to avoid notice. This was the arrangement at the seminary of Issy during the first year.

On outing days, the same procedure of the seminary was followed and with greater ease in the woods of Meudon. There the meetings were even less obvious.

When the philosophy students of Issy, who had become part of these groups during the first year of their existence, passed on to the Sulpician house in Paris, they lived up to the hopes of Libermann. They were models of fervour and regularity. During the Wednesday outings to Issy, they kept contact with the groups that they previously belonged to and brought along (other) students from Paris that they felt were sympathetic and would benefit from it. Occasionally there were meetings on a slightly larger scale presided over by Libermann or Fr. Pinault ... As a rule these took place in the more secluded spots, for example in the path called *La Quarantaine* in the grounds at Issy. Without being there, it would be difficult to have any conception of the graces with which God blessed these meetings. Especially when Libermann or Fr. Pinault presided, we went away with a burning desire to do good, which found expression in greater fervour in the struggle for perfection.¹³

From the documents relating to Libermann's animation of these small groups, we see that their organization was more complex than at first appears. There was a hierarchy among the groups. The inner circle was *L'Association du Sacré-Coeur*, whose members helped organize *L'Association des Saints Apôtres*. At a further remove were *Les Bandes de Piété*. The main thrust of the groups was the same but only the most fervent and the most reliable attained to the inner circle. Here the numbers were few and a high degree of secrecy prevailed. It was not possible to maintain the same

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

secrecy as one moved towards the periphery and the greater numbers. *L'Association du Sacré-Coeur* and *L'Association des Saints Apôtres* had previously existed in the seminary but had ceased to function. Libermann breathed new life into them and expanded their scope. Through all the groups ran a single line of purpose, which could be regarded as an extension of the impulse of Aa. To say that we are dealing with scaled-down versions of the Aa may be an exaggeration but the similarities of aim and organization are striking.

The aim of the groups was twofold: personal sanctification and the spiritual advancement of the community. Libermann emphasized especially personal sanctification and considered it the best possible contribution to the welfare of the community. Such was his insistence on personal sanctification that at times the community concern seemed to slip from view: "Seminarians come to the seminary not to do good to others but for their own sanctification ... they should concern themselves principally with their own sanctification, the rest is incidental."⁴ At other times the community dimension was firmly in focus: "The principal aim, I could say the only aim, is to radiate fervour in the community and to revive the courage of all who belong to it, each according to his capability."⁵ Again, any hope of realizing this had for a foundation stone the personal sanctification of the members of the small groups: "It is not a question of having some stirrings of zeal towards others, of experiencing some pious feelings, of being friendly and cheerful and faithful to the rule. What is necessary is to become saints, to practise the highest perfection of the Gospel, to deny oneself in everything, to seek only God and to live only for Him and in Him."⁶

While Libermann never tires of insisting on *personal* sanctification as the secret of apostolic potential, he has no illusions about the limitations of *individual* effort. He has not become involved in a solitary crusade, but in animating small groups. In reflecting on the *Associations* as they had previously existed, Libermann attributes their failure to two main reasons: first, unity was not taken seriously, was not based on charity, and secondly, personal sanctification was not the primary concern.

He sets great store by unity. Without it nothing of significance will be achieved. "It is a question then of gathering together all the most fervent seminarians. This does not mean that they be brought together in person but that a great charity and perfect unity be established among them. A

 SUCCESS AND FAILURE

unity of heart because of a genuine, truly supernatural charity which prevails among them; a unity of desire, for the unique glory of God and the sanctification of their souls; a unity of will, to go straight to God and to serve Him alone; a unity of mind, whether about the view or concept of perfection, or about means to be employed to achieve the goal of unity. In this way an unbroken peace and perfect agreement will prevail among them. There will be a pattern of behaviour which will not fail to bring about that which is so much desired — their personal sanctification and the good of the seminary.

On the other hand if each goes according to his lights and there is no coming together, no good for the seminary will come of it, or anyway very little. Even those who are fervent won't make much progress, because they are too isolated and too given over to themselves. On the contrary, by coming together, they share mutually their good desires and inclinations. A host of difficulties are cleared up which would never have been dealt with by their directors, simply because they would never have thought to mention them. Each one encourages and strengthens the other, each continually urges the other to become more fervent and to make further progress. Left to himself, each works for the good of others according to his good pleasure and according to his own ideas. Long experience has clearly shown that (in this way) even the most remarkable in the seminary achieve practically nothing for the good of the community."⁷

In a letter to M. Leray at this time, Libermann dwells at length on the meaning and importance of unity. Its source is, in a sense, outside the group, in God. It is based on love of God and love of each other. Compatibility and natural friendship have no contribution to make. Natural feelings "are an infection in the heart of the servant of God and poison his whole interior. If natural feelings take over, we will be good for nothing." For Libermann solidarity among people derives from the fact that they are children of God.

Turning to the topics discussed: "Pay careful attention to the great principle, which was the recurring subject of our conversation at Saint-Sulpice: peace and union with God based on a complete self-denial and an awareness and inner conviction of the great extent of our weakness and misery."

The conversations of the small groups followed the lines of Sulpician spirituality, with special attention to the epistles of Paul and the gospel of

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

John. The topics also reflected the seasons of the liturgical year. Often it was the shared reflection on the Scriptures that had the greatest impact. Among the students who enjoyed goading the members of the groups, M. Maigna was one of the most vocal. It was well known that he had no time for Libermann. One day, when Libermann took a place beside him at table, it seemed inevitable that sparks would fly and there was an expectant air among their fellow-students. "If you only knew how much I dislike you". Maigna was angry. "If you only knew how much I love you". Libermann's answer and especially his friendly manner completely disconcerted Maigna. After the meal, he sought out Libermann and when they had spent some time together, Maigna returned to his friends repeating: "*Pax Dei quae exsuperat omnem sensum*. I have learned where this peace is to be found." Maigna had been impressed by Libermann's personal peace, but his new excitement and enthusiasm had come when Libermann had shown him the source of this peace by sharing his reflections on Phil.4,7.

Libermann was a demanding leader. He did not want any halfhearted members. "If they don't love the good God with their whole heart, we don't want anything to do with them." On the other hand he insisted on the freedom of each one. No one should be pressured into joining, anyone should be free to withdraw. Others will be influenced, not by propangada but by attraction. "Instead of coming together to spread fervour among the others, we should aim at helping each other make progress towards holiness Instead of going out among the others, we will attract the others to us."⁸ This is how he understood Christ to have approached his task of saving the world. "He wanted to sanctify the world, for this He had to sanctify himself — Libermann is commenting on Jn.17,19. *Et pro eis ego sanctifico meipsum, utsint et ipsi sanctificati in veritate*. To say that Libermann saw the influence of the group being exerted by attraction does not mean that they had no plan of action. They were especially active among newcomers and made careful plans to welcome each new arrival at the seminary. With the encouragement of Fr. Carbon, Libermann went to considerable trouble to arrange for a "welcoming committee" at the theology house in Paris as well. Later he would remark that seminarians "are more amenable and more receptive to good example in philosophy (than in theology)."

The reaction of the staff to the groups began as one of tacit approval. They adopted the predictable attitude of authority towards something

SUCCESS AND FAILURE

experimental: wait and see. After a while some of the staff members actively supported the groups. Remarkable among them was Fr. Pinault, who experienced a change of attitude towards Libermann as sudden as that of M. Maigna. He became an enthusiastic member of the groups and a lifelong friend of Libermann.

There were several student groups in the seminary. The *Bande Joyeuse* was for those interested in music, the *Bande Littéraire* for those interested in the intellectual life. The *Bande Littéraire* was familiarly referred to as "*les savants*" (the learned) and these provided the principal opposition to *Les Bandes de Piété* (nicknamed "*les mystiques*"). It should also be said that Libermann had a low opinion of "*les savants*" and instructed the members of his groups to avoid their company as far as possible. Some students seriously disagreed with the way Libermann had organized the *Bandes de Piété*. "Several seminarians have expressed great displeasure with our meetings and intend to thwart them as much as they can next year, saying that they believe they are rendering a great service to the Church by so doing."⁹ However, there was no open conflict, and protest was often in the form of youthful banter and taunting: "Here come the mystics!". The general reaction of the students was favourable and the support greatly outweighed the small pocket of defiant resistance.

Libermann worked very hard at directing the small groups. In 1835, he spent his summer holiday in Normandy and Picardy, visiting some of the members and making arrangements for them to return a few days early to the Seminary to welcome the newcomers. He had high hopes for the year 1835-6, which he expressed as follows: "This year we must set fire to the seminary and may the blaze take hold of and consume everyone in it." Realizing that the groups were vulnerable, he gave careful instructions, especially to the *Association du Sacré-Coeur*, which was the hub of the whole organization. At the same time he saw the limited value of rules: "I am afraid that the rules have become too numerous even though I have added nothing or almost nothing to the directives of last year".

Obviously the exclusivity of the groups, the fact that they functioned apart and in secret, meant that there was a danger of them becoming a divisive force in the community. That they did not become so was a tribute to the leadership of Libermann. His moderating influence curbed the impetuosity of the young students. Inevitably there was some exaggerated behaviour, and this gave rise to a little friction, but the general opinion was

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

that the groups worked a renewal in the seminary compared to which the undesirable side effects were insignificant. Mgr. Luquet reflects: "It was the period when the convert Jew Libermann had brought about in this seminary a renewal of holiness and fervour." Deprived of Libermann's leadership, the groups began to falter and they were finally suppressed in 1844.

The Eudists were slowly recovering from the ravages of the Revolution when in 1836, Fr. Louis de la Morinière made overtures to the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice with a view to having them supply a Novice Master for the Eudist Novitiate which he hoped to re-establish the following year at Rennes. During the discussions, the name of Libermann kept recurring, even though he was not a priest and it was doubtful if he would ever be ordained. As against this, there was the influential voice of Fr. Mollevaut in his favour, and there was the success he was having with the seminarians at Issy and Paris. When he was chosen as Novice Master, he was 35. He undoubtedly possessed a remarkable personal magnetism. This power of attraction seemed to stem from the peace that characterised everything he did. In the phrase of Mgr. Dupont des Loges, "God gave him a sort of gentle dominion over hearts." He was single-minded in his dedication to God's glory. He spoke simply and with a directness that hit home. Of contemplative bent, he knew how to listen and to wait, but when the time came for action he was capable of bold initiative. When he started something, he stayed with it. His determination took the form, not of rowdy effort, but of a quiet sense of purpose.

When Fr. Icard, who became Superior General of the Sulpicians in 1875, was giving his impression of Libermann at Issy, he paid tribute to his outstanding qualities, to the influence he had with the seminarians, to the confidence they had in him. He also mentioned his inexperience. "As regards the seminarians, he lost no opportunity to encourage them in an interior life, in a spirit of faith, in detachment and in union with Our Lord Jesus Christ. In doing this he had great influence on the young men and they had great confidence in him

"I must admit that, under the influence of his zeal, he urged some of his young confreres to isolate themselves from the rest of the community, with the idea of keeping them in a state of greater fervour by withdrawing them from the danger of laxity. This conduct could have had, and did have for a while later on, some drawbacks which the Superiors had to

SUCCESS AND FAILURE

overcome. In all this, however, we never saw anything contrary to the holiness of the Servant of God. It was the result of his inexperience. I must add that he showed himself always docile to the advice he was given and in this policy he sought only the glory of God. Also he was guided, even in this matter, by the advice of two directors, who did not foresee any more than he the disadvantages which could result."¹⁰

The question of protectionism is sure to arouse animated discussion even today, whether the context is tariffs for industry or the education of seminarians. It is generally allowed that protection is at best a temporary measure and the crucial part of the discussion usually centres on the specific circumstances in which protection might be justified. While Libermann was influenced by the pattern of devotional associations of the time, what really gave rise to the small groups was the concrete situation at Issy. It is from the state of affairs at Issy that Libermann argues his case. He approaches the situation from the point of view of a fervent seminarian. This passage from *Notes pour Issy* has an autobiographical ring. "It could perhaps be objected that, in this way, the more dissipated and the more lax are neglected. I doubt it, because in the previous state of affairs they were perhaps as much or more neglected, because, in spite of the best intentions, I know for certain that nothing was ever achieved. I see the cause of this lying in the great difficulty experienced by a seminarian, who is truly well disposed and bent on becoming holy, and who frequently finds himself among people who are dissipated. What attitude will he adopt among them? Should he join them in their distractions and dissipation? This he could do only unwillingly and in a forced manner. Should he take things seriously, should he wish to disapprove of what they are doing, he would be very unwelcome and even left alone. Often he would be very upset, because at times he would have to disapprove. Will he adopt a neutral stance, cheerful but in a restrained way? (This would be the only approach he could reasonably take.) In this case he would bother and annoy them, because he would make them uneasy, and if he returned several times, he would be taken for a spy and they would not hide their displeasure.

It is the same with the tepid, who are concerned only about trifles, about learning, etc. If a good seminarian, recognised as such, finds himself among them, he is obliged to do as they do or to say nothing or to contradict (them). In any event they will see what is happening and the

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

result will be the same as with the dissipated. Besides, what great advantage is it to interject here and there a pious word, which will be smothered as soon as it is spoken? Is it not better to take care of those who are well disposed and enable them to make progress and in this way, as a large number becomes holy, to give to the community an atmosphere of holiness and fidelity to the rule, an atmosphere which will ensure respect also for the dissipated? Is this not better than concerning oneself uselessly or almost uselessly with the dissipated and neglecting the progress of the good? No good worth speaking about will be brought about among them and the community will take on a habit of mediocrity, which it will always hold on to, for it is certain that a fervent seminarian who directs his best efforts towards the lax seminarians, supposing that he enjoys success, will achieve nothing more than preventing evil, and he will be obliged to neglect the good. On the other hand, if all the good combine their efforts for their own sanctification and for the sanctification of those who are similarly disposed to sanctifying themselves and imitating their example, they will increase in holiness and cause these others to make progress (also). It is therefore extremely important to adopt this latter approach rather than the first one."¹¹

Did Libermann decide to start the small groups partly because of his own experience of being ineffective when he tried to improve the situation in the seminary by mixing with all the seminarians indiscriminately? Did he learn from experience the futility of trying to achieve something alone? Was it from his own frustration that he learned the importance of atmosphere, the importance of peer group influence? And if there are traces of Libermann's experience, is it surprising that there are also traces of his inexperience, to return to the statement of Fr. Icard? However, it is clear that Libermann was fully aware of the possible divisive influence of the small groups. He also succeeded in preventing any rifts in the community while he was at Issy. This he achieved by careful organisation and his own transparent sincerity.

Among those who did not favour "the propaganda that he (Libermann) tried to carry out in the community" was one student who subsequently became a Benedictine at Solesmes, Dom Gardereau. In the following text, beyond his implication of some immaturity, shines a very high regard for Libermann. "Our holy confrere was completely supernatural, but he wanted everyone to be so. He went directly towards perfection and

 SUCCESS AND FAILURE

perhaps he wasn't sufficiently aware that not everyone could fly vigorously enough to follow him. In the ardour and intensity of his zeal, there was something that put us off and made us afraid. For my own part, I say it shamefacedly, not only could I not keep up with him, but I did the wrong thing in kicking against the goad. We discussed these things hundreds of times together, for, once again I say it to my shame, he very kindly adopted me as one of his own from the very beginning, thinking me more supernatural, more detached from myself and from all vanity than in fact I was. I recall in particular that I attached too much importance to human means, especially to study. We used to argue about this, he with great charity and I with a certain irritation. The fault was certainly mine. But I am convinced, however, that we would have agreed more easily if he had at that time that condescension and, you'll excuse the expression, that spiritual versatility that filled him later on when I met him in Paris in charge of his great work."¹²

In later life, Libermann himself refers to some excesses of his seminary days. In reproaching Fr. Le Vavasieur in 1850 for being too radical, his mind goes back to his earlier days. "Are you aware now of what results from this drive when it is accompanied by the idea of going straight to the mark? Inflexibility, severity and at times violence. Do you think that I could not be forceful in the way that you are; inflexible and harsh as you seem to want me to be? I would only have to give my consent and I would be, and perhaps more so than you. I gave sufficient proof of this during my seminary days."¹³ Libermann's war on mediocrity and his intolerance of half measures gave rise to some sweeping statements and exaggerations. He suffered from what Fr. Pinault called "*indigestions de piété*." His ideas were too absolute and were inclined to collide rather than converge when they were being applied. This resulted in some dramatic condemnations and exclusions. Natural affection was "a gangrene which will destroy Charity." The company of seminarians who are not fervent should be avoided: "It is a waste of time to talk about God to a man who is not disposed to listen."

While allowance should be made for his special relationship with M. Lievin, his idea that the company of Lievin's parents and of visiting clergy during his illness would lead to laxity is certainly extreme. He wrote to M. Mangot: "In order to have this great charity and close union among you, you must choose your world with great care and you must be few." He

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

had to learn that reality poses limitations on the extent to which anyone can “choose his world” and that a ring of secrecy is no great protection. In trying to create an artificial confined space in which God could be better served, he was showing himself to be his father’s son.

That Libermann showed some signs of immaturity at Issy is not surprising. What is remarkable was the courage he displayed. He came across as a protagonist, a man of action. Instead of drifting along with the current, instead of hiding behind his disability, he took the initiative in a new venture that would inevitably draw some heavy criticism. While some of the more experienced bided their time in the wings, he went on stage and his inexperience showed.

Libermann at Rennes

The question of Libermann’s going to Rennes was already under discussion in September 1836 but the first news of a decision came in December. Then M. Leray, a candidate for the Eudists studying at Saint-Sulpice, wrote an enthusiastic letter to his Superior, Fr. Louis de la Morinière: “M. Libermann is ours. The final decision has been taken. Fr. Mollevaut has succeeded in removing the remaining difficulties. It only remains for us to thank the Lord for having heard our prayers and for having given us such a precious gift in the person of one of His most faithful servants.”¹⁴ In a letter to Fr. Louis in May 1837, Libermann refers to the Eudists as “our little congregation” and there is no doubt that he intended to join the Eudists. A year later, he wrote to the Jesuit, Hacquin: “I am at Rennes and not at Issy since the end of last year. I have entered the Congregation of Jesus and Mary, called the Eudists, which is rising from the ruins caused by the Revolution.”¹⁵

Once the decision was taken to leave Issy, Libermann began to prepare himself for his new task. In February 1837, M. Leray wrote to his Superior, Fr. Louis, referring to lengthy discussions about the Eudists with an enthusiastic Libermann, who saw recapturing the spirit of Jean Eudes as the key to a successful revival of the Congregation. Libermann then spent three months at *La Solitude*. Here he realised that not every practice could simply be transplanted to Rennes. He saw that the novitiate of an active religious congregation might provide a closer parallel with what the Eudists desired, so he suggested that he or another Eudist visit the Jesuit novitiate at *Saint-Acheul*. It was Fr. Louis himself who acted on this

 SUCCESS AND FAILURE

suggestion. He spent two months at *Saint-Acheul*, where his cousin, Fr. Rubillon, was novice master.

Libermann went to Rennes in August 1837. He had been happy with the Sulpicians. His sadness at leaving was eased by the prospect of becoming involved in a new enterprise. He was enthusiastic about his first contact with the writings of Jean Eudes: "We are reading the Constitutions of our poor little congregation and I am lost in admiration. I have not yet read very much, but the little I have read is excellent. My good Father Eudes is asking of me an extraordinary perfection of the sort described in the most elevated works."¹⁶ Two months later, at the end of October, his enthusiasm for "my good Father Eudes" had even increased: "Here everything is going very well. I am witnessing a marvel of grace, (the like of) which I have not yet seen at Saint-Sulpice. I cannot tell you about this wonder that God is working here at the moment, but it takes my breath away. My good Father Eudes is a prodigious man, and his Constitutions are beyond anything I ever dared to hope for. Give thanks to the good Master, who has shown such favour to us. I see now that we would always have vegetated, if the divine goodness had not led us here."¹⁷ Throughout his time at Rennes, Libermann continued to find inspiration in the life and writings of Jean Eudes. He continued to believe that the renewal of the congregation would spring from recapturing the spirit of the Apostle of Normandy. "Please pray to Jesus and Mary for our poor little congregation, in order that we may acquire and hold on to the spirit of our holy Founder. Otherwise we will never accomplish anything worthwhile."¹⁸ Libermann's efforts to grasp and pass on the spirit of Jean Eudes ran into difficulties.

The Novitiate began on 20th September 1837 with a retreat preached by a Jesuit, Fr. Lestrohan. The novices were housed in a building (*la Petite Cochardière*), which was named after St. Gabriel. It adjoined *Pension St. Martin*, an already well established hostel for secondary school students. Fr. Louis was rightly proud of this educational establishment. As well as being academically renowned, it was a source of vocations. On the other hand, educational works at this level did not enter into the intention of Jean Eudes, who established the aims of his congregation as primarily work in seminaries, and also the undertaking of parochial missions.

Fr. Louis set great store by the opinion of Fr. Mollevaut, under whose direction he had spent a year at *La Solitude*. He welcomed Libermann to

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

Rennes but was slow to give him responsibility at the Novitiate. He himself maintained overall control. Libermann was entrusted with the spiritual care of the novices and M. de Brandt was in charge of a catechetical programme among the students of *Pension St. Martin*. Libermann, then, was not Novice Master in the full sense. Fr. Louis acted with extreme caution in his regard and named Fr. Lucas as Superior of the Novitiate. Very soon, however, Fr. Lucas withdrew to become chaplain to a convent (*Notre-Dame de Charité de Saint-Cyr*) and Libermann assumed responsibility for all the interior organisation of the novitiate. Fr. Louis' voice was still the deciding one in matters of policy.

Fr. Louis and Libermann, because of their different temperaments and talents, made life difficult for each other. Fr. Blanchart had combined work in education in Rennes with his efforts to revive the Eudists after the Revolution. In this way he came in contact with Louis de la Morinière, who succeeded him when he died in 1830. Fr. Louis kept the educational connection in his policy of revival. When in 1832, one of the most able students of *Pension Saint-Martin*, Guy Leray, decided to join the Eudists, this policy seemed to be bearing fruit. At the end of 1833, the Eudists numbered seven professed members. There were also two postulant brothers and twelve clerics in formation. Six of these were students at Saint-Sulpice, while six worked at *Pension Saint-Martin*.

Libermann, on the other hand, proceeded from a different starting point. For him, any renaissance depended on making present again the spirit of the Founder. From this vantage point, the involvement in secondary education, engaged in through force of circumstances, represented a dangerous compromise. It was harmful for the novices if the thrust of the instruction they received was at odds with the actual practice within the congregation. Fr. Louis was certainly in favour of this turning to the founder for inspiration — during the period 1831 — 1838, he had supervised the re-edition of the works of Jean Eudes — but he was also beset by practical problems. In desperate need of personnel, it was difficult for him to look at the Novitiate of St. Gabriel and not think of manpower. He had found it necessary to recall M. Leray to Rennes for a period during his studies at Saint-Sulpice. Libermann, with vivid memories of *La Solitude* at the back of his mind, did not feel that the novices should spend a lot of time on the religious education of students or that the priest-novices should be on call for ministry. Despite this, his advice about the teaching

SUCCESS AND FAILURE

of religion is remarkably modern in many respects, e.g. it is student-centred, in a context of prayer, dependent on witness as well as word. Fr. Louis was trying to clarify his idea of what the novitiate should be. He wrote to Fr. Rubillon suggesting that maybe the novitiate conferences should consist mainly of a commentary on Rodriguez. Without depreciating the Jesuit author, Fr. Rubillon suggested rather that pride of place should be given to the writings of Jean Eudes, with a view to developing a characteristic Eudist spirituality.

In December 1839, when Libermann had just left Rennes, he wrote to Fr. Carbon and mentioned that Fr. Louis had been a cause of suffering for him. On the same day he wrote a long letter to Fr. Louis in which he respectfully made some suggestions concerning the future of the Eudists. He suggested a general assembly of all the members to take decisions on what work they should engage in, on the length of the novitiate and with regard to some regulations that were more honoured in the breach than in the observance. "Everyone will be satisfied with laws that they have agreed to ... and will observe them with good heart." "I believe that this (assembly) could be an effective means of definitively incorporating into the Congregation all those who are caught in continual hesitation. It would be a way of making clear to each one what he could expect upon entering the Congregation, for I believe that the sort of uncertainty about everything that prevails (at present) causes great harm."¹⁹ In the same letter, Libermann suggests continuing in the works of education and acknowledges that a full return to the primitive inspiration of Jean Eudes is not possible *for the moment*. At this stage and from a little distance, Libermann accepts the need for a temporary compromise. The more experienced Fr. Louis had accepted this from the start. The idealistic Libermann is still urging that steps be taken to reduce the air of uncertainty, to dispel the confusion which was probably largely responsible for his own suffering.

In an evaluation at the end of his second year at Rennes, among the reasons for this confusion, Libermann points to Fr. Louis' habit of dealing directly with the novices, assigning them work or granting exemptions from the Rule, without consulting him. The novices could hardly be blamed for sometimes taking advantage of this flaw in the fabric of authority and playing one superior off against the other. In any such manoeuvre, Libermann was inevitably the loser. He realised that Fr. Louis

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

was overworked, but he saw the solution to this not in hurried improvisation, but in the real delegation of authority. He thought that Fr. Louis should have an advisory council of two assistants, who would have a real voice in making decisions.

Fresh from his experience of the *Bandes de Piété*, Libermann was haunted by the lack of unity at Rennes. More than anybody he saw the need for self-definition and he was frustrated by the developing identity crisis of the Congregation. In this context, he found his own position particularly painful. Because of his differences with Fr. Louis, he seemed condemned to be an agent of disunity himself.

Libermann suffered even more from problems that arose in his relationship with one of the novices, M. de Brandt. Here he was completely taken aback by the unexpected turn of events. M. de Brandt had been one of his closest collaborators in the *Bandes* at Issy. Libermann looked forward to the continuance of their happy partnership at Rennes. When he returned from his holiday to Normandy and Picardy in the summer of 1835, he had written to M. Delasorne: "I saw also M. de Brandt, who is a pillar in the house of the Lord."²⁰ "I had the joy and consolation of seeing one of your good friends, who, during his holidays, perfectly exemplified that happy state of interior peace, of continual union with God and of complete absence of pressure. I refer to M. de Brandt."²¹ At Rennes things began in the same climate of friendship and cooperation which had prevailed at Issy. In September (1837) they shared a letter to M. Carron. Libermann wrote the first half, de Brandt wrote the rest, which included high praise for Libermann. The first cloud appeared in the sky in October when Libermann wrote to Carron: "Don't write any more to M. de Brandt and prevent the others from writing to him." No reason is given for this instruction. In any event the real crisis in their relationship was not to come until early in the following year.

In January of 1838 two newcomers arrived from Saint-Sulpice, M. de Staplande and M. du Peloux. On the last day of the month, Libermann wrote to M. Leray at Issy. He was worried that he would be accused by the Sulpicians of luring their students to Rennes, especially as M. du Peloux had apparently left without going through any formal process of referral. He was a young man of 18. Libermann had known him at Issy and had given him spiritual direction. Since Libermann's departure, he had become very disturbed. His letters had brought tears to Libermann's eyes. It was

 SUCCESS AND FAILURE

on the recommendation of Libermann that Fr. Louis accepted du Peloux at Rennes. Libermann rejoiced at being once again in a position to help him but disclaimed any initiative in his decision to leave Issy. On 3rd February, Libermann wrote to Carron informing him of the arrival of du Peloux: "He has recovered the same dispositions which he had when I left. The temptation hasn't changed anything. He is completely delivered now and perfectly at peace."

Paul Carron was a good friend of Libermann studying at the Sulpician house in Paris. After ordination he became secretary to the Archbishop of Paris. We have 27 letters that Libermann wrote to him from Rennes, an average of one a month. In the letter of 16th March 1838, there is a lapse in the pattern of reserve that Libermann so faithfully maintained with regard to his personal experience. His suffering leaps off the page. He is reduced to the role of a helpless spectator as M. du Peloux is being led astray by M. de Brandt, who has almost completely lost the run of himself. It should be remembered that Libermann is recovering from probably his most severe epileptic seizure, which took place on the 7th February. "Dear Confrere, it concerns our poor M. de Brandt. The state in which he has been for the last three months is dreadful. Imagine the most dissipated, the most wicked, proud and malicious seminarian; well, you have then the portrait of this confrere. So great is his wickedness and malice that I have never met with the like. I don't know what to do, for I have no power over him; he has a mortal hatred and supreme contempt for me. He observes none of the rules, rejects all curbs and restraints, and from morning till night thinks nothing but evil. During prayers and other pious exercises he sleeps or is occupied only with laughing and making others laugh at all sorts of jokes and strange actions. He often plays pranks with the same intention before the Blessed Sacrament. During recreations it is impossible for others to say anything of an edifying nature; he himself speaks only of foolish things, about hunting parties or other things of that sort, and he indulges in jokes and histrionics with a malice that is truly frightening. During evening recreation things are regulated and it is not permissible to get off the track; for the rule wants us to speak then about some edifying topic; but he tries to sneer or to turn the devout things that are said into a joke, or he walks outside of the group in mournful silence and indulges in all sorts of foolishness, such as goose-stepping or dancing.

"He has formed a particular friendship with M. du Peloux; and this is

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

another very great misfortune, for he does much harm to that poor lad. This friendship is particularly strong and of a special kind; it is diabolical and is rooted in malice alone. He is constantly running after the lad, tells him jokes, tries to make him dissipated, etc. M. du Peloux is running a very great danger; God alone knows if he will be able to extricate himself from it. And if he does, I shall no longer have the high hopes which I had placed in him, for he was advancing well. It is greatly to be feared that, even if M. de Brandt does not ruin him entirely, he will give him such a blow that M. du Peloux will feel its effect for a long time ...

"I have noticed one terrible thing: M. de Brandt sometimes transmits to him his hatred against me; and he does it without saying a word, through a kind of spiritual communication. If M. de Brandt wins out, the poor lad is lost; and I shall be obliged to look on that horrible spectacle without being able to offer the least remedy.

"Praised be Jesus. I am ready to receive all the blows. Let Him strike, let Him annihilate my sinful heart; let Him tear it to pieces, and consume it in the sorrows and the pangs of death. There are moments when I am in a sort of frightful agony, but I bless the Holy Name of our Master for all He is pleased to do.

"The state of M. de Brandt is truly diabolical. I had some hope at first, but for some time his condition has been getting worse and has become habitual. At first, things happened only now and then; there were at least small intervals of peace, but now there are none and his malice is continuous. I believe that his nerves are affected and I can no longer see the end to his ills. The consequence will be deadly; at least this is what I fear, and I do not see much hope for a perfect return to God. Nevertheless, God can do all things and His mercy is infinite. Let us pray."²²

Libermann invites Carron and his friends at Issy to join the community at Rennes in a novena to Our Lady. In his next letter to Carron, two weeks later, he is able to say that M. de Brandt has come to his senses and has experienced a change of heart. M. du Peloux left the novitiate in April. In the summer, M. de Brandt also left to become a diocesan priest. By this time his friendship with Libermann was completely restored and, when he was recalled by his bishop, Libermann was sorry to see him go.

Libermann had kept in touch with the *Bandes de Piété* at Issy. He wrote individually to some of the members and on occasion he sent a general letter to be circulated among them. Frederick Le Vavas seur was one of

SUCCESS AND FAILURE

these. Born in Reunion (then Bourbon) of French parents in 1811, he had come to France to finish his education according to the custom prevailing in the colonies. He was a sensitive young man and his heart had been touched by the plight of the slaves in Reunion. No one, not even the priests, had any time for them. Frederick was very intense in his approach to life, and he tackled the task in hand with an energy that knew no restraint. He studied to gain entrance to *l'École Polytechnique* but with such all-consuming application that he became ill, to the extent that he could no longer read. He began the study of law but again his health broke down. With time to reflect during the periods of recovery from fatigue, his thoughts often returned to his homeland and the plight of the slaves. That the thinking of the time in France favoured their emancipation was little comfort to him. He was afraid of the shape their liberation would take. The thought of how best he could help the slaves in his own country was joined by the feeling that he was being called to be a priest. For the most part the slaves had been baptised, but this had been their only contact with Christianity. In the general pattern of their neglect, Frederick thought that the most important service he could render them would be to go to live among them as a minister of Jesus Christ.

He entered the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice and came to Issy in 1836. He spoke of his aspirations to his friends and Libermann knew of his hopes before he went to Rennes. He encouraged him in his "fine project" without feeling attracted to become a part of it. Another student at the time, Maxime de la Bruniere, became very enthusiastic about it and wanted to become involved. He had been heavily involved with Libermann in the small groups. Le Vasseur was to say later that it was in these small groups that his project got its first important push towards becoming a reality. De la Bruniere was a very promising seminarian. Serious about his prayer life, he was talented, of considerable means and was the nephew of the Bishop of Mende.

Eugene Tisserant was born in Paris in 1814. His father was French, his mother was from Port-au-Prince in Haiti. From her Eugene learned of the sad state of the church in Haiti, where the people were neglected and the conduct of the clergy was far from being above reproach. He wanted to become a priest and to spend his life working in Haiti. He entered Saint-Sulpice in 1834 but lost his diocesan scholarship when he failed his examination in philosophy. He spent a while in a Cistercian monastery,

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

withdrew because of ill health and was re-admitted to Saint-Sulpice in 1836 by special favour. He was more reserved than Le Vavas seur in speaking about his personal project.

It was not until February 1839 that the two Creoles realized that they had similar interests. This came about through their mutual devotion to Our Lady and in particular their interest in the Arch-confraternity of the Holy Heart of Mary, which Fr. Desgenettes had inaugurated in his parish of *Notre-Dame des Victoires* on 3rd December 1836. In the context of devotion to Mary they were drawn to each other, and each spoke of his concern for deprived people far away. From this moment on, the project began to gather momentum. It was referred to as *l'Oeuvre des Noirs*, the Work for the Blacks. The previous summer (1838), Le Vavas seur had spent his holidays with Libermann at Rennes. In their conversations, Le Vavas seur often returned to his favourite topic. At that stage he was not thinking of founding a society, but of trying to interest a few other seminarians in his project. Libermann encouraged him and offered to arrange to receive any missionaries at Rennes for a few months of recollection and quiet prior to departure. Libermann recommended Fr. Pinault as someone whose advice could be relied upon and Le Vavas seur left to start his first year of theology in Paris. Fr. Pinault was to play a big part in the development of the Work for the Blacks. In Paris he became a sort of anchor man for the group. De la Brunière referred to him as "our overall director." Libermann wrote of him in 1843: "He suffered much for his interest in the poor Blacks, but bore steadily on with no fear of suffering or opposition, as is his custom when there is question of God's interests. He helped us a great deal also by his advice and he never wavered in his attachment to this work."²³

When Le Vavas seur wrote to Libermann about the beginning of March 1839, things had taken a step forward. Le Vavas seur's spiritual director, Fr. Gallais, had given cautious encouragement. He was in favour of de la Brunière becoming involved but restrained Le Vavas seur from rushing headlong into any widespread recruiting. He got Le Vavas seur to write an account of the project. Le Vavas seur had widened his horizon to include Mauritius and eventually maybe Madagascar. He dwelt at length on the need for exceptional men who would adopt the lifestyle of the Blacks they hoped to evangelize. Fr. Pinault had suggested a greater stability than that of a random gathering of interested priests. Le Vavas seur now suggested

 SUCCESS AND FAILURE

to Libermann that the group become the missionary arm of the Eudists “and receive their formation at St. Gabriel’s under Libermann’s direction.

March also brought a letter from Tisserant, which informed Libermann of his association with Le Vasseur and his interest in the Work for the Blacks. Tisserant also included the manual of the Archconfraternity of the Holy Heart of Mary. Libermann’s replies to these letters were full of encouragement. He warned Le Vasseur of inevitable opposition and urged him not to be easily deflected from his purpose. Fr. Louis had given approval for the association with the Eudists and Libermann was happy that there would be a serious preparation involved: “It is absolutely necessary that you would go apart for a few years to prepare yourselves for such a great ministry.”²⁴

Libermann chose a suitable date to reply to Tisserant, the feast of the Annunciation. He told of the great reception accorded to the literature about the Archconfraternity of the Holy Heart of Mary. Fr. Louis was canvassing the congregation for members and would send on a list. Tisserant had not as strong an influence on the new venture as Le Vasseur. He did not take part in the final deliberations. He was, however, mainly responsible for the eventual dedication of the group to the Holy Heart of Mary. His account of *I’Oeuvre des Noirs* could be entitled with justification *I’Oeuvre de Marie*.

In the spring of 1839, Libermann was not yet thinking of joining those interested in the Work for the Blacks. If anything they were contemplating joining him. He mentioned to Le Vasseur that this would be a great consolation to him, and continued: “Our constitutions will be good and will not need to be changed at all for your purpose. They lend themselves perfectly to this project: our spirit is nothing other than the apostolic spirit. Everything in our constitutions aims at forming a missionary whose sole foundation is the spirit of Our Lord to the exclusion of anything else.”²⁵

Tisserant tells us that Libermann’s suffering had reached a point in the summer of 1839 at which he was contemplating leaving the Eudists. He still had no thought of becoming part of the Work for the Blacks, “for the simple reason that Our Lord had not yet put the idea in his head.” In a disturbed state he came to Paris to seek some consolation and advice. “There I received some consolation but no advice.” Libermann returned to Rennes at the end of September and was followed a week later by de la Brunière, who stayed for two months. De la Brunière had finished his

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

theology and for this reason, as well as for his many qualities, he was looked on as the one who would assume leadership of the group. Libermann's personal suffering continued at Rennes. It arose, as many letters of the time attest, from a firm conviction of his utter uselessness combined with an intense desire to achieve something worthwhile for the glory of God. No new precision had been brought to the general situation at Rennes. Many things, aims and areas of responsibility, were still blurred at the edges. It did not take de la Bruniere long to decide that St. Gabriel's would not be a suitable place from which to embark on the new venture. When it became clear that the Work for the Blacks would develop apart from the Eudists, Libermann began to realise how much the missionary project had come to mean to him and he entertained once more the prospect of leaving the Eudists.

His natural inclination drew him towards his friends from the *Bandes de Piété*, but Libermann distrusted natural affinities. His fear of hurting the enterprise held him back, for he was still haunted by the feeling that he harmed everything he touched. He felt that God would give him some sign, so he prayed and he waited. Meanwhile, he consulted his previous directors at Saint-Sulpice. "For this serious matter I finally decided to seek advice and as, according to the rule, Fr. Louis read my letters, I made use of M. de la Bruniere to carry out this consultation." Mgr. Luquet says that Libermann left Rennes with the "very positive approval" of Fr. Pinault. Maybe, but on 28th October he chides Fr. Pinault for his silence: "Please tell Fr. Pinault that I am angry with him, almost. He never says anything to me about this great and beautiful work. He lets me go ahead completely on my own."

That Libermann engaged in a little subterfuge to seek the opinion of others is significant. Feeling himself particularly vulnerable to illusion, he set high store by the advice of others. Consultation by itself could deepen the confusion, but consultation accompanied by prayer had become part of the process of seeking God's will. Prayer remained at the heart of the process, and it was in prayer that the first light dawned. "(Libermann) began to experience a strong desire to give himself completely to the Work for the Blacks. The first insight that the Heart of Mary saw fit to give our dear Father was on 25 October of that year, 1839, the day on which the Congregation of Jesus and Mary celebrate the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Three days later, on 28 October, he was strengthened in his desire by

 SUCCESS AND FAILURE

a clearer insight, which allowed him, as he told me himself, to definitely make up his mind."²⁶ Fr. Cabon reminds us that the *Mémoire* of Tisserant, from which the above passage is taken, was written in October 1842 "under the eyes of Libermann, (and was) checked and annotated by him". Libermann did insert some explanatory notes but nothing with regard to the present passage. On the second day in question, 28th October 1839, Libermann wrote to Le Vavas seur: "M. de la Brunière came to see me last night to urge me to offer Holy Communion to God on behalf of the poor and beloved Blacks, as it is the feast of the holy apostles Simon and Jude. We have done so and the good God has let a little light dawn for me. I don't want to tell you about it yet, preferring to let this insight ripen before God, in order that, in the goodness of God and His beloved Son, this little spark may grow strong and become a clearer light."²⁷ Without positing any startling revelation or vision of the future, it is clear that Libermann saw at last what decision he should make. The letter to Le Vavas seur is confident and vigorous. "I would like something that is solid, something fervent and apostolic: all or nothing at all. But 'all' will be a lot, and weak spirits will not want to give or do so much. This should only make us happy, there is no room for weak spirits in this congregation which is wholly apostolic."²⁸

The month of November was one of considerable strain for Libermann as he prepared to break the news to Fr. Louis. As he began to grasp the ramifications of his decision, his confidence ebbed away. On the 13th November, in a letter to Fr. Féret, director of the Seminary at Nantes, he protests that he is incapable of offering him any advice: "in the extreme incapacity in which I find myself, there is only one thing I can do: prepare myself to die in a Christian way." The approaching confrontation with Fr. Louis weighed heavily on Libermann. He finally wrote Fr. Louis a letter on the 30th November explaining the situation. Fr. Louis felt that Libermann's plan might be "an illusion of the devil and a result of self-love." Libermann left St. Gabriel's a few days later on 3rd December: "I left two days before I intended. I was afraid of becoming ill, as a result of the great anguish I was experiencing."

It had been decided that he and de la Brunière would go to Rome to seek approval for the Work for the Blacks from the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith. Libermann set off for Lyon, where he stayed with the Ozanam family. De la Bruniere, who was organising and financing the trip, was to meet him there but was delayed. They finally met in Marseille

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

on 31st December and set off by boat for Rome the following day.

Tisserant tells us that Libermann stopped in Paris *en route* and probably met Fr. Pinault. He arrived in Lyon, probably, on 7th December in time for the feast of the Conception of Mary which, by special privilege, the church of Lyon had celebrated for seven centuries as immaculate. This year the feast was also the occasion of the canonical erection of the Archconfraternity of the Holy Heart of Mary at *Notre-Dame de Fourvières*. "Mary directed the steps of our good Father to this place of grace and blessing on the day when, more than any other, this tender mother showed herself prodigal in her favours. M. Libermann felt the effect of his prayer, which was united to the prayers of so many thousands of others praying with him and for him. He was healed of his anguish in this sanctuary of Mary. Strengthened by the consoler of the afflicted, who poured balm on his wound, he no longer had such a fear of the evils of the world."²⁹ During the three weeks that Libermann spent at Lyon, he had a welcome opportunity to rest. He also had a chance to write to his brother, Samson, as well as to some of his friends to inform them of the turn of events. We will be considering these letters when we take up his story again towards the end of the next chapter.

FRANCHIR LE PAS

CHAPTER FIVE

“Franchir Le Pas”

Conversion

We must first of all consider the meaning of conversion, for upon it the meaning of second conversion depends. Second conversion is the completion of conversion and not some unrelated elaboration.

In the Bible, God says to each of us: I love you. This message sounds clearly through the events of the Old Testament. It receives adequate expression only in the self-communication of God in Christ. Alongside this loving initiative of God and inextricably mixed up with its telling is our halting and uneven effort to respond. Our early religious history finds expression in the image of God calling out to us, now gone into hiding, sheltering in shrubbery, turned away from Him (Gn.3,8-9). The men and women of the Bible are sinners, estranged from God and from each other (Gn.11,9). Turned away from God, they remain the object of His love. Through the prophets and in Christ, they are urgently called to turn back to Him. This “turning back to God” is conversion.

Even as we describe conversion in terms of human response, we must never forget that God makes the first move. Through the prophets, He breaks in upon a person’s complacency and awakens him to the reality of his situation. This is well illustrated by David, whose conversion is the only one described in any detail in the Old Testament (II S:11,2–12,15). More frequently, the prophets address their call to conversion to the whole people. Israel has sought a framework for its life in the worship of idols: the prophets call the people to turn back to the living God. Israel has taken refuge in ritual and scrupulous observance: God’s word erupts in the midst of His people to claim a personal allegiance. Even the cult is a sham unless it is the authentic expression of the heart: “this people approaches

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

me only in words, honours me only with lip-service while its heart is far from me (Is.29,13). What matters most is the heart. Conversion is a change of heart. "Let your hearts be broken, not your garments torn, turn to Yahweh your God again, for he is all tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in graciousness, and ready to relent" (Joel.2,13).

God's joy is to forgive and in forgiving to awaken new life. But God's longing to forgive meets our hardness of heart. In Jeremiah, there is the impression that Israel is beyond conversion, that catastrophe is inevitable. There is just a glimmer of hope. If the sinner cannot change his heart, he can pray to Yahweh: "Bring me back, let me come back, for you are Yahweh my God" (Jr.31,18). It is God who will change the heart. What God insistently demands, He will give as a grace. "I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead" (Ezk.36,26).

The human response to God's call is to call out in reply to God. The most perfect expression of this is found in Psalm 51, the psalm of conversion *par excellence*. It is the prayer of the sinner, who acknowledges his sin, but who keeps his confidence in God's mercy, in His power to make things new: "God, create a clean heart in me, put into me a new and constant spirit" (v.10). There is suffering in conversion as the self is wrenched from its familiar path: it is "this crushed and broken heart" (v.17) that God will not scorn. But the thrust of conversion is towards life, a new life of gladness and joy. "Instil some joy and gladness into me, let the bones you have crushed rejoice again" (v.8).

John the Baptist, the last of the prophets, revives their message with insistence: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand" (Mt.3,2). The call of Christ too is for a change of heart. "I have not come to call the virtuous, but sinners to repentance" (Lk.5,32). But Christ is more than a prophet; he not only calls to conversion, he works conversion — he forgives sins. We get an idea of the meaning of this from Christ's healing miracles. The walls that hemmed us in are broken down. He who was blind, sees; she who was paralysed, runs and leaps; into the world of the deaf come words and music. Conversion is in view of life, a new life with Christ.

Probably the best known references to conversion in the New Testament are the parables in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's gospel. In the first two parables we see the lengths to which God is prepared to go to

FRANCHIR LE PAS

resume contact with the one who is lost. In the parable of the two sons the divine concern is also forcefully expressed in the eagerness of the father for the return of his son. Hopefully scanning the horizon he recognises him “while he was still a long way off” and runs to embrace him. The whole atmosphere of joy and celebration is too much for the elder son and maybe also for us. “There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine virtuous men who have no need of repentance.” From the standpoint of the prodigal son we can describe his conversion as a *turning back* to his father. Faced with adversity, he comes to his senses and suffers a change of heart. Accepting the reality of his separation from his father and prepared to live out the consequences of this, he turns again to his father and finds himself at home.

It must be remembered that for the one who has strayed, God’s initiative and the attractions of a new life are often not very apparent. Conversion is a very radical turning to God. It is a step that demands great honesty and courage. It is a step that the “wicked generation” is unable to take (Lk.11,29–32).

From this brief consideration of the biblical sense of conversion we can see that it is the turning point in a person’s life. The “turning to God” involves a radical re-orientation of life. The “change of heart” commands a new perspective, a new criterion for decisions, a new world-view. It is the beginning of an altogether new life, whose freshness and vitality often startle the observer. It is an event full of mystery because it is at the heart of relations with God. God’s initiative is primary even though its expression is earthly prophetic activity. Conversion is also intensely personal and so, in each case, unique. While complete understanding is therefore ruled out, we can nevertheless search further for the meaning of conversion by taking account of instances of conversion and of elements they have in common.

The first element that comes to light is that God is the principal author of conversion. The accounts of converts continually insist on God’s persistence in seeking them out. Frequently, they describe their own activity as a resistance that is finally overcome. Nothing in their life merited this loving attention of God. His coming was a favour, a grace. At the source of conversion is the glance of God (*le regard de Dieu*) — *God catches our eye*. The penetrating glance of God throws us sinners into great confusion and anguish.¹ It is a grace, but not a comforting grace. It is an

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

end to indifference: now we must come closer or move away.

The personal experiences of converts furnish certain insights into the meaning of conversion, which we can note without pretending to establish any approved way of conversion. The disturbance in himself arising from God's glance is experienced by the convert as an increased self-knowledge, a sharpened awareness of self. This new self-discovery brings him face to face with his sin, source of his separation from God and society. It is at once a revelation and a bursting of the bubble of self-importance. His effort at self-acceptance is excruciatingly painful as his previous posturing is seen for what it is, and his suffering is intensified by the realisation of his own helplessness and his need of pardon. But together with self-knowledge comes knowledge of God. God's glance reveals His tenderness and compassion and the convert is lost in wonder at God's love for him. He finds it in himself to repent. Unable to have confidence in himself, he does not hesitate to put all his trust in God. And from his anguish is born a profound peace. M. Nédoncelle points out that a sense of guilt, though frequently present, is not invariably present. For some converts the dominant feeling is a sense of fragility and unfulfilment.²

T. Mainage declares that the approach to conversion is characterised by an experience of dualism, of "being two." One feels threatened in the possession of oneself; there is another who is waging war on one's conscience and insists on taking possession.³ God's urging is experienced as a threat to the present course of one's life and the prospects of what might happen are frightening. This is a good description of the inner conflict that the convert goes through. Maybe he does not yet recognise God's action. But even if he knows that this outside influence is God's loving approach, the threat is not lessened. The demands of love know no bounds. The convert realises that he is faced with taking a new stance where, to a certain extent, he will lose control of his life. In his innermost depths, where he is most himself, he is being asked to "let go". And faced with this surrender, he is afraid. Later, in retrospect, the convert may reproach himself with his hesitation and resistance, but now these defences flow instinctively from his real fear of falling into the hands of God.

We have tried to evoke the experience of struggle of the person called to conversion. We must keep alive in our mind the sharp edges of this painful time even if, in the aftermath of conversion, the previous suffering

FRANCHIR LE PAS

pales into insignificance for the convert himself. For he has begun a new life, he sees with new eyes. Christianity, from being a system of belief among others, becomes *the Good News*. Faith awakens with all the characteristics of a new discovery: wonder, joy, enthusiasm. Caught up in this elan, which cannot pause for analysis, the convert believes firmly but still confusedly.

A distinction is made between conversions which are predominantly intellectual and those which are predominantly affective. If there has been a long intellectual enquiry, the faith of the convert will be more lucid, but when the moment of discovery arrives, it usually arouses a strong affective current, especially as the discovery is so out of proportion to the search which led up to it. Conversion brings about a radical newness in a necessary continuity. After conversion the newness fills the horizon, but the survival of conversion is in jeopardy where there is neglect of what remains the same.

When an effort is made to begin from the facts of conversion, it is usually a case of considering adult conversions that take place suddenly. In such cases there is a decisive change in the way of life, and often the details stand out in sharp relief. But while sudden conversions offer the observer a clearer outline of what happens in conversion, they are, in fact, exceptional occurrences. More commonly conversion is a slow process which lasts a lifetime. The distinction is made between conversion as sudden *event* and conversion as gradual *process*. This distinction refers to the predominant characteristic of individual experiences and in no way means that these differing experiences are irreconcilable. Each sudden conversion involves the slow struggle of its continuing actualisation: no gradual conversion is completely without any discernible turning point. The sense of conversion as event, which is our particular concern, only takes shape in the light of its preparation and development.

Finally, conversion has an ecclesiastical as well as a personal aspect. This truth finds sacramental expression in the association of baptism with conversion. Personal conversions are for the building up of the Church, Christ's Body. Bringing a different sensibility to bear, converts have sometimes been responsible for new enterprises within the church. "Whoever is converted for himself alone, has not really accomplished a true conversion."

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

Second Conversion

The expression “second conversion” was first introduced in the seventeenth century by B. Rossignoli and A. le Gaudier, but it has become associated especially with the teaching of Louis Lallemand.⁴ This association with Lallemand led to the belief that it was an original teaching of his. In fact he was influenced by his predecessors, and any originality lay in the manner of presentation. The achievement of Lallemand lay more in the impression he made on his hearers and it was through this effect on his disciples that lasting interest was aroused in second conversion. Through his disciples also, the reconstruction of Lallemand’s teaching was possible and second conversion was thus assured of a claim on our attention.⁵

The key phrase that Lallemand uses to explain second conversion is *franchir le pas*: “For years we fight against God and we resist the movement of his grace, which urges us to leave behind some of our troubles by giving up some of the vain amusements that claim our attention, and by giving ourselves to him wholeheartedly and without reserve. But, weighed down by our self-love, blinded by our ignorance and held back by false fears we don’t dare cross the threshold (*franchir le pas*). For fear of being miserable, we remain forever miserable instead of giving ourselves to God, who wishes to claim us only to free us from our misery. All that is needed is once and for all to renounce all our interests and all our satisfactions, all our plans and all our desires, in order to depend in future only on God’s good pleasure and to confide ourselves completely into his hands.”⁶ I have translated *franchir le pas* by “to cross the threshold.” Maybe a simpler phrase would be “to take the step.” The sense is of taking a decisive step which involves a real breakthrough. Before considering further the meaning of the phrase, let us explore the context in which it was used.

Lallemand introduced the idea of second conversion to young Jesuits making their third year of novitiate. They had already given firm expression to their conversion by taking the vows of religion, and they had already had some years of experience of living the vows in the apostolate. During the course of this experience they would have shed some of their illusions, some of their complacency. The time was ripe to go beyond their earlier measured response to the complete entrusting of themselves to God by second conversion. “Most saints and religious who become perfect usually have two conversions: one by which they devote themselves to the

FRANCHIR LE PAS

service of God, the other by which they give themselves completely to perfection. This is seen in the apostles, when Our Lord called them, and when he sent the Holy Spirit upon them; it is seen in Saint Theresa and in her confessor Father Alvarez, and in several others. Not all religious have this second conversion. The reason is their own negligence. The time of this conversion, as far as we are concerned, is normally the third year of novitiate."⁷

For Lallemand the setting of second conversion is an apostolic life. His hearers have been disposed by the lessons of their previous experience. Second conversion will be the source of a fruitful apostolate in the future. Francois Courel compares Lallemand and John of the Cross: "For Saint John of the Cross, the path, steep and straight, to which the soul resolutely commits itself, leads to the mountain of pure contemplation, to a sublime union and transforming vision, where the only longing left is to see broken 'the delicate veil of this life.' For Lallemand ... everything leads to action, to union with God certainly, but to union through service. At the end of all the diminishments and all the searching, both have lost everything to find everything. But for Saint John of the Cross, this everything is God, all in all. It is the splendour of creation become transparent in God For Lallemand, the everything recovered is the perfect intensity of apostolic action, lived completely for God's glory 'using creatures in his service, contributing to the glory that he wants to derive from all human creatures'."⁸ "For Lallemand, the everything recovered is the perfect intensity of apostolic service." Conversion does not fully take away man's ignorance of himself and so he still gives preference to his own ideas and desires without realising it. His personal ambition still finds a place in his apostolic activity. To the person who is available to God in prayer, the very course of his apostolic activity can reveal the incompleteness of his surrender to God, can directly challenge him to second conversion. Second conversion is the secret of a creative apostolate.

While the link between second conversion and apostolic activity is important, some cautions are called for, if the context is not to submerge the idea. Firstly, Lallemand himself is guarded in locating second conversion in the Jesuit tertianship. "The time of this conversion, as far as we are concerned, is normally the third year of novitiate." His emphasis on God's initiative, for example his insistence that true self-knowledge comes through God's illumination, would preclude any rigid timing of second

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

conversion. Already then second conversion showed signs of overflowing its original context and subsequently it was claimed to be an aspect of all spiritual growth.⁹ Secondly, to consider second conversion only in relation to apostolic activity would risk neglecting the personal act of turning to God. It would risk losing the real drama of the situation.

Taking the step (crossing the threshold) is a very personal decision. It is a response to God's call to complete intimacy. At first the frightening aspect masks the rewarding aspect. The purpose is never personal advantage but service of God and others. It has an apostolic context and thrust.

Second conversion was not introduced by Lallemand simply as a helpful idea for theorising about the Christian life. Rather it was his articulation of something that sometimes happens in the Christian life, something that he would like to see happen more often. We must therefore be careful not to demand of the idea something that it was never intended to give. It is not part of a system that tries to account for all spiritual growth. It is not an unnecessary refinement introduced to complicate our understanding of conversion. *Franchir le pas* illustrates conversion: second conversion has the same meaning as conversion.

It is not accompanied by any sacrament or profession of vows. It points more to the hiddenness of conversion; it emphasises that conversion takes place in the heart. If the characteristics of conversion and second conversion don't coincide exactly, this is because they are in a relationship not of identity but of complementarity. This can best be seen if we turn our attention to the realm of experience. This was where the term "second conversion" was born. It will live as long as it sounds an echo in Christian experience.

"Second conversion is not the choice of a state of life but the definitive and total dedication to a life already chosen."¹⁰ Second conversion is the re-affirmation of conversion. This is not to imply that conversion is of necessity inadequate, it is simply taking into account the intervening time and the changed conditions of a later day. Christ reveals himself only gradually: "I still have many things to say to you but they would be too much for you now" (Jn.16,12). Far from insinuating any insincerity in conversion, second conversion, in fact, is only a possibility for one who has already been generous and faithful in giving himself to God. Lallemand insists that second conversion is not for beginners. If we consider the story of the rich

FRANCHIR LE PAS

young man in Mark's gospel, we meet someone who has shown himself faithful in keeping the commandments. And "Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him" (Mk. 10,21). The calibre of his previous life and his obvious enthusiasm moves Jesus. There is a basis of hope that he will be able to take the next step. Jesus invites him to the intimacy of shared existence with him. At the same time he reveals to him that his wealth is keeping God at a distance. Second conversion is a re-affirmation of conversion. It is not an altogether new departure but it involves a step that could not have been envisaged at the time of conversion.

Jacques Loew writes of a "second moment" in answering God's call. At first there is a great enthusiasm, a making light of difficulties. Slowly the wear and tear of Christian living begin to make inroads. Failure and misunderstanding begin to eat away at the soul of the apostle. The early brilliance and easy success are seen as deceptive. Now his overriding impression is one of uselessness and fundamental incapacity. The previous time was only a trial gallop, the real point of departure is the "second moment." A fresh decision imposes itself in a moment when there are no illusions left.¹¹ Second conversion may be difficult to describe in detail but it sounds a familiar chord for anyone who has tried to live the Christian life.

A second key phrase in Lallemand's description of second conversion is "once and for all" (*une bonne fois*). "All that is needed is once and for all to renounce all our own interests ... and to confide ourselves completely into his hands." In speaking of second conversion to others, many have difficulty in accepting the ring of finality which attaches to "once and for all". It is regarded as a discordant note in the context of human growth which constantly progresses. Will there not be a third, fourth and fifth conversion? they ask. Others fail to see the point in talking of even a second conversion. It is true that there are many crossroads in life and many crises. Many times, and often unexpectedly, the call to conversion comes to us through the events of our lives. However, it is only when God takes the scales from our eyes and lays claim to everything in us that we talk of second conversion. Our response then is crucial and our characteristic attitude is hesitation. Lallemand urges us to take the step "once and for all." It is not the end of growth, it is more like the beginning. There is no implication that second conversion marks an end to struggling, suffering or sin. Also, a person may go through many conversion

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

experiences before he arrives at second conversion. Many times he may think that he has no further to go, that he has no more to give. Second conversion has very little to do with enumeration; it is mainly concerned with the full meaning of conversion. Once again we must not regard second conversion as part of a system, as some sort of milestone that each one must pass on his spiritual journey. Its possibility is a mark of God's favour; someone is given an opportunity that need not have occurred, that may not occur again.

"But weighed down by our self-love, blinded by our ignorance and held back by false fears, we don't dare cross the threshold." When discussing characteristic elements of the conversion experience, it emerged that God is the principal author of conversion, that his glance brought a new and uncomfortable self-knowledge and delivered at the same time a crushing blow to our self-importance. It also became evident that the struggle towards conversion was plagued by fear, especially the fear of losing control of one's life.¹² In the above quotation we find all these elements, except the divine intervention, explicitly mentioned. The exception is explained by the fact that Lallemand is describing an abortive second conversion. For Lallemand, second conversion is really a question of conversion; it is a crucial turning point in a person's life.

Lallemand places his description of second conversion under the sign of risk; it is a step we *dare* not take. There is no knowing where it will lead:

"I tell you most solemnly,
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 around you
and take you where
you would rather not go" (Jn.21,18)

Faced with this walk into the unknown, the real danger is that fear will paralyse us, that "for fear of being miserable, we remain forever miserable."

Libermann's experience of second conversion

We have described Libermann's conversion in 1826. For him this was the

FRANCHIR LE PAS

end of hesitation, it was an act of wholehearted surrender to God. In the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice he remained faithful when it meant estrangement from his father, whom he loved tenderly. He remained cheerful when epilepsy blighted his hopes of priesthood. He experienced the satisfaction of modest success at Issy, he tasted the bitterness of failure at Rennes. He went through all the seasons of prayer, he got to know the light and darkness of God's presence. At Issy he was an inspiration to others, at Rennes he was a burden to himself. In 1826, he held nothing back. Then, being close to God was a comfort. In 1839, being close to God was frightening. He had never suspected how close God wanted to come. Again he held nothing back, he took the step of second conversion. It was the beginning of a period of apostolic creativity that took everyone by surprise.

In talking of Lallemand's idea of second conversion, we identified certain elements which are present in "taking the step" (*franchir le pas*): God's initiative, a discomfiting self-knowledge, a painful deflation of self, a fear of losing control of one's life, a great sense of risk, an apostolic context. Second conversion is, however, primarily a decision, a decision of unconditional surrender to God in a second moment. For Libermann, it was his decision to leave Rennes and to commit himself to *L'Oeuvre des Noirs*. We will try to present this decision as fully as possible by evoking the experience from which it was made. In so doing we will refer to the elements already mentioned which, according to Lallemand, characterise second conversion.

Maurice Briault makes the following reflection on Libermann's time at Rennes: "He had succeeded too well and too quickly at Issy — he might have thought that the whole world was made like a seminary, had he not received severe lessons in responsibility, in struggle, in lack of success and even in the silence of God. From these circumstances he draws spiritual strength. He becomes less absolute, more compassionate, he learns that all cannot walk at the same pace, nor match strides with him."¹³

Shortly after du Peloux's arrival at Rennes in January 1838, Libermann wrote to his friend, Paul Carron: "He is advancing very well in the way of God, and I expect that our good Master will make him the instrument of the glory of the Heavenly Father. May his most holy name be blessed. When the seminarians hear this, those of them who do not yet perfectly understand the strength and the grace of our good Master will not fail to

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

bestow praise upon me, as if I had delivered this dear lad. Do not allow them, dear friend, to make this mistake, but convince them of the truth: I count for absolutely nothing in the good effected; it is the Divine Master who has accomplished this work in him, and I have only spoiled it in part. I am sure that if an imbecile like me had no part in this affair, things would be much better for him."¹⁴ Libermann meant what he said, but he did not yet realise the full truth of his words. In July he was etching out the same truth but with a new and terrible insistence. In the intervening months the Lord had led him to a new level of self-knowledge and some of the pain of this experience comes to us through his pen.

A shock is required if someone is to call himself into question in a fundamental way. A brush with death, the birth of a child, the experience of failure can be the gateway to a more realistic self-knowledge. Libermann was badly shaken by the behaviour of M. de Brandt in the winter of 1838. When we read the letter of 16 March to M. Carron (cited in the last chapter, pp. 73 – 74) we may feel that Libermann over-reacted, that he came close to panic in a situation that is not so unusual in seminary life. In this regard we should make two points. Firstly, and this should be kept in mind for all his letters, flourishes of exaggeration were the accepted thing in the spiritual writing of the day. Today we may not appreciate this style of writing but we must take it into account. Otherwise we will fall into the error of exaggeration in its interpretation.

To help us towards a balanced understanding, let us look at the postscript to the tortured letter just referred to: "Please tell M. Leray that I would like him to get me about ten pictures of the Blessed Virgin *in-folio* carrying the Infant Jesus, or if he can't find any, then without the Infant Jesus. They must be devotional and simple, they are for the rooms of our poor little novitiate. I don't have any money at the moment, so if he can get them for nothing, so much the better. If not, have him buy them. The good Lord will provide me with the means of paying."¹⁵ It seems clear from this that Libermann hasn't completely lost his presence of mind. On the other hand, and here we come to the second point, Libermann was deeply affected by the de Brandt incident, which resulted in du Peloux ultimately leaving the novitiate. For him it was not simply a serious disturbance in the novitiate, it was more like betrayal by a friend. It meant a calling into question of the whole time at Saint-Sulpice. This was no longer a time to which he could look back with some sense of

FRANCHIR LE PAS

achievement. In June he wrote: "I was blind during the whole time of my stay in the seminaries of Paris and Issy. Our good Lord has deigned to show me clearly a part of the harm that I am doing in the spiritual relations, in which, however, He wishes me to continue with those whom He loves most."¹⁶

The ground, which had previously given him a firm foothold, had become a quicksand. He feels he is to blame even for M. de Brandt's lunatic lapse. Only the goodness and mercy of God gives him a place to stand. "In the midst of all those miseries it has pleased God to show me my own, which is probably the greatest of all. However, His goodness and mercy toward me are something unique and wholly extraordinary. I have never read in any book or heard anyone tell things of that sort. He is the Master of all things, and I have no business to ask Him why He acts in that way; this is what He wants and it should fill me with joy and love. But consider the incomprehensible way of His divine wisdom. He punishes and treats rigorously good souls which He has overwhelmed with His favors and which are certainly much better than myself, and He punishes them for my sins. Perhaps you don't believe this, but I assure you that it is true. I who am the greatest culprit am left in peace by Him! I assure you that this surprises me greatly, but may His most Holy Name be blessed, praised and honored. He knows what He is doing, and I am a true imbecile! If M. de Brandt has failed and undergone this trial, as I believe, because of his faults, those faults so terribly punished, were first committed by me. Poor M. de Brandt has merely inherited them from me who am the true culprit."¹⁷

Throughout the spring and early summer Libermann's letters reflect the suffering that he is going through as he struggles for a new self-acceptance. He is haunted by the harm that was caused to others because of illusions so long unperceived. He sends letters of warning to the seminarians at Saint-Sulpice, who still turn to him for direction. In a letter to Carron and de la Brunière in June, which he said took a month to complete, he is still in the grip of fear: "I confess that for myself, I have not yet got rid of the extreme terror into which God was pleased to cast me by the terrible punishment that is still present to my eyes. Do you wish me to tell you more about it? For well nigh two months I have suffered great anguish on your account ... The anxiety in which I am, and which has cost me many tears, makes me fear lest the devil may be setting a snare for

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

you, and that you may be in danger. On the other hand, I think that my sins, which have already caused so many evils to souls, are perhaps the only cause of my trouble. But I am afraid that I may yet cause you harm."¹⁸

In this disjointed letter he seems to trace his trouble and illusions to self-esteem and complacency. "This complacency is far more harmful and dangerous in regard to yourselves. I beg our Lord Jesus that he may watch over you, for I know of no one in this world who is exempt from it, so frightful are our corruption and our folly. The greater God's graces are, the more we strive to live and to serve God according to the purity of faith and the spirit of perfection, the more subtle and delicate also become the after-thoughts, or rather the subterfuges of our complacency. For this reason, it is very difficult to discern them." He condemns "this exaltation of the mind, this presumption in our actions, this determination and violence of our will" and declares total war on self-esteem. "Never put yourself forward for anything whatsoever, even if the salvation of the whole world depended upon it. Do not desire what is useful for the glory of God and for the sanctification of souls, if it is calculated to raise you in the esteem of men or in your own eyes. If God should imprint this desire (for His glory) in your hearts, remain in fear and trembling before Him."¹⁹

Libermann saw pride as the enemy, pride that hides so successfully in the labyrinth of our inner self, pride that needs our illusions to sustain it. When God removes our illusions, he unmasks our pride. Then it is painful to look back because what previously satisfied us now repels us. And yet we are drawn to look back to see if anything is retrievable. We cannot survive if we disown our past. At the same time we remain poor interpreters of our own story. "I don't want to recall the past, lest I seek to establish myself instead of establishing God alone, and for fear that while seeming to accuse myself, I dissimulate the evil. It is good, I believe, to forget everything; and it is to be hoped that our Lord, on His part, will forget also and that He will make His grace superabound where iniquity abounded."²⁰ In this same letter of July, Libermann achieves his most concise description of what happened, and he does so by using biblical terms. Towards the end he writes: "It is clear that Our Lord wishes me to be a servant in His holy Church and not a master." And he finishes by a final look back: "This is even one of my great faults of the past, namely,

FRANCHIR LE PAS

that I left my servitude and acted too often as a master. God has punished me severely. But He has had pity on this poor man through His truly incomprehensible mercy."²¹

In a letter of 19 June he makes a less direct reference to his own case but the perspective is of interest in the context of second conversion. "I frankly confess that it would give me a certain amount of satisfaction to learn that you have been ensnared a little or even a great deal, provided it serves to reduce you to your proper stature before God and the world, and in your own eyes; for it is this which will establish true surrender to God in your soul."²² Libermann has been reduced "to his proper stature before God and the world, and in his own eyes." It was a painful experience but the implication of the above text is that it was worth it. From his new vantage point a "true surrender to God" is possible. He has taken possession of himself afresh. He knows himself better and his new stance before God and the world is a "reduction" to his proper stature. His sense of self-importance had to shrink to fit him properly.

His previous commitment had not been insincere but it was distorted by illusions. Unaware that he was subtly asserting himself, he openly disclaimed any contribution to the initial recovery of du Peloux: "I count for absolutely nothing in the good effected" (February). In the succeeding months he was to *experience* his basic incapacity in a way that he would never forget. Without wishing it, he was caught up in a situation where none of the old remedies worked. God was allowing a little of His unpredictability to be seen. Libermann was like a swimmer who got caught in a current that he didn't know was there. He swam this way and that and never really knew how he climbed to safety. All that he could say was that he had known terror and "God's truly incomprehensible mercy" (July).

Fr. Carbon had been an enthusiastic supporter of Libermann and of the small groups at Saint-Sulpice. He continued this support, when, later on, Libermann was engaged in missionary work. In 1842 Tisserant refers to him as "one of the most enthusiastic patrons of the little Work of the Heart of Mary". In December 1839, while waiting for de la Brunière at Lyon, Libermann had time to write some letters to his family and friends. One of these was to Fr. Carbon: "Dear Father, As you have always shown me such kindness, I feel I should let you know of my (recent) change and some of the reasons that led to it.

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

“The whole time that I spent with the Congregation of Jesus and Mary at Rennes was for me a time of suffering and torment.

This was not the reason that I left the struggling Congregation.

One of the things that influenced me the most in leaving was that I regarded myself as completely worthless and incapable of doing anything for the glory of God. There I was, enclosed in a novitiate with three or four people around me, to whom I brought little or no spiritual benefit. I would find it difficult to explain to you how this came to be, but I can assure you that this was the case. I spoke, I taught, I tried to inspire fervour but my words were dead, without any blessing from God, ineffectual towards any spiritual progress. Because of this, in my first year I was in a state of shock and alarm. I had just come from the Paris seminary, where the good Lord had blessed everything I did.

“In my second year I suffered even more. I recovered a little, however, from the despondency of my first year. I regained my courage and was ready to be crushed in this way under God’s hand all my life if necessary. Running the novitiate caused me such great suffering, that I would never have believed myself capable of supporting the like. But I can truly say that the greatest (suffering) of all was seeing myself useless in the Church of God. This was really the case, and not the work of my imagination. This realisation was accompanied by such an ardent desire to do something for the glory of God, that this was my heaviest cross. All that year I experienced a great inner frustration, with no hope of escape and no consolation. On the contrary, everything seemed to get on my nerves and Fr. Louis himself caused me a lot of suffering. That was the situation all last year.

“I saw the few days left to me in this world slipping away one by one, barren and useless for the glory of Our Lord, for which I wanted to spend myself without interruption. This picture was a continual wound in my heart. I saw no hope of getting away from it and anyone, Father, who was familiar with the situation would agree with me. To do battle against this thought, I sometimes said to myself that I must put my trust in Our Lord and in the Blessed Virgin, to whom the Congregation is consecrated. They will protect it and bring about a complete change in things. Afterwards this seemed a false hope. Meanwhile, as I was languishing there inactive, my days were passing by, my body was wearing out and I would soon be good for nothing. Nevertheless in the midst of all this, my soul opened

FRANCHIR LE PAS

itself out in all its grief before Our Lord. I hoped that, in His mercy, He would come to my help even though I in no way deserved it.

"It was in this state that I came on holidays to Paris in the hope of receiving some consolation and some good advice. I found some consolation but no advice. So I returned to Rennes, somewhat encouraged by the thought that others at least are serving and glorifying the good Lord, but greatly saddened that I could do nothing myself. I decided to go back to my tomb, never again to leave it, if that was God's holy will. I began to think that Our Lord wanted to keep me there to prepare me for death. I decided to fight no longer against the opposition that I was encountering to my good desires, to abandon everything a little more into the hands of God and to turn my attention to preparing myself seriously for death. But I could not contain the ardent desire, which gave me no rest, to do something for the glory of Our Lord and His holy Mother. I could not appease the acute suffering of seeing myself reduced to such wretchedness and complete uselessness. Nor could I quieten the fear of wasting the short time left me to live by doing nothing. In this serious matter, I finally decided to seek advice and as, according to the rule, Fr. Louis read my letters, I made use of M. de la Brunière to carry out the consultation. The decision was that I should go and so I left. I sought advice here as well and the result was the same. When the time came to leave, I was so torn by the suffering I was causing to Fr. Louis and to the others, when they would learn (of my leaving), I was so affected by the harm that my departure would cause the poor little Congregation, that I wept bitterly in the presence of Fr. Louis. I was in a sorry state, but I left anyway.

"That is the situation at the moment. I have left Rennes and here I am in the hands of Providence. I can't say any more just now. When Our Lord allows me to engage in something, I will write to you.

"I would ask you especially to console Fr. Louis, if an opportunity arises. Look kindly on this poor Congregation; even though I was unable to remain, I am still keenly interested in it."²³

During Libermann's second year at St. Gabriel's his frustration continued. Despite "an ardent desire to do something for the glory of God", he felt he was making no headway. "The greatest suffering of all was seeing myself useless in the Church of God." In the summer of 1839 he went on holidays to Paris, hoping to find a solution to his problem by

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

talking with his friends at Saint-Sulpice. He was disappointed in this hope. In September, he returned to Rennes and drew up a list of suggestions aimed at improving the situation in the novitiate. These he delivered to Fr. Louis.

Fr. Talabardon, who began his novitiate in autumn 1839, recalls how, on one occasion, Libermann gave a conference on the dangers involved in parish ministry. Without any personal experience to draw on, he consulted the *Annals of the Congregation*, which described the sad state of the secular clergy in the time of Jean Eudes. The result was a portrait in black of the secular clergy, which sent shock waves through the room. Two of the priest-novices approached Libermann afterwards and pointed out his error. Libermann apologised publicly and asked the novices to completely disregard what he had said. While relations with Fr. Louis continued to be difficult and the situation at the novitiate was still far from clearcut, not all Libermann's problems came from his surroundings. The discovery of his own limitations was also fuel for his feeling of uselessness.

De la Brunière came to Rennes at the end of September 1839 to investigate the feasibility of the embryonic Work for the Blacks becoming affiliated with the Eudists. Libermann was enthusiastic about this association but de la Brunière decided against it. If Libermann was to continue to be a part of the Work for the Blacks, he would have to leave the Eudists. The first indication that this should be his course of action came to him in prayer at the end of October, as described in the last chapter. He wrote for advice to people whose opinion he respected. One of these was the Trappist, Dom Jean Salier, who had been with him in Saint-Sulpice in 1829-30. "Towards the end at Rennes, I was very anxious and disturbed and could not wait for your reply. As well as that I was afraid that someone would notice something and that every effort would be made to prevent my departure. The good Eudists really want something worthwhile and they thought that I could be of help to them by staying, which was certainly not true. So I left, relying wholly on Fr. Pinault. Your letter reached me at Marseille."²⁴

On 13 November, he wrote to Fr. Féret, director of the Seminary at Nantes, who had asked him for some advice. "Now I should say a word about your seminary, and speak about how to make it fervent. But I am a poor man with nothing to say. In all truth, my good Father Féret, I am good for nothing, I assure you. I have been given a great reputation, but

FRANCHIR LE PAS

the pure and simple truth is that I am a useless vessel in the Church of God. In the presence of Our Lord Jesus, who knows better than I the truth of what I say, I am telling you that I am here like a piece of rotten wood, which hardly catches fire at all and which gives light and heat to no one. I feel only the deepest dejection and a great inner frustration before God. I am like a paralytic who wants to move but is unable. Don't ask me for counsel and advice; do you want to ruin your seminary?

"You will say that I am humble, or rather putting up a front of humility. But what can I do? I have studied everything with the desire of being able to say something which would be worthwhile and useful, but I have seen about as clearly as a blind man at midnight. Don't be upset by what I am saying and don't think that I am unwilling to say something edifying. What I am really trying to say is that I am incapable of the least good and am completely useless. It is not that I have no desires. My desires know no bounds but they are ineffectual, barren and dead. In the extreme incapacity in which I find myself there is only one thing I can do: prepare to die in a Christian way

"Because of my powerlessness, I have been for a long time very dejected and sad. My years are running out, death is approaching and at the same time there are so many souls to save."²⁵

In mid-November, Libermann is still in the throes of making his decision. He is "a paralytic, who wants to move but is unable". A pervading sense of uselessness still oppresses him. Convinced that he cannot be of service to the Eudists, he doubts if the situation will be any different if he joins the Work for the Blacks. Whichever way he turns, he sees *NO EXIT* signs and he thinks that what the Lord is asking of him is to prepare himself for death. At the same time, he cannot fully resign himself to the thought of death because "there are so many souls to save." In a time when he cannot see clearly, his desires keep him going.

By the end of November, Libermann had made up his mind to leave the Eudists. He felt the best way to break the news to Fr. Louis was by letter. "I have prayed to God for guidance and among His servants, I have consulted the wisest and most dedicated. All are unanimously agreed that I should leave this poor Congregation, which is so dear to me and which will always have a place in my heart. I hesitated and thought about it for a long time because I wanted to be of some use to this little Congregation, but nowhere could I find a good reason for staying on.

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

"Dear Father, what will become of this poor wretch when he is forsaken by everyone? *Multae tribulationes mihi manent. Et quid dicam? Quis me liberabit ab hac hora?* You remember what I said to you last year about this, please keep the strictest secrecy about it. For a time I shall have some respite because of a task that will occupy me. What will happen after that? God alone knows. I openly acknowledge my poverty and my wretchedness, the realisation of which sometimes drove me to my wits end. But thanks to the grace of my saviour, Jesus, who alone is my strength and my hope and thanks also to his holy mother, who is also mine, my heart was never laid low. My weak, hesitant and cowardly spirit has often been sad, depressed and dejected before Him at the prospect of all the humiliations and troubles that will come my way in this life, but the thought that Jesus is my strength and my support gives me a courage that is beyond description

"Now I have a favour to ask of you, Father Superior. It is that you don't try to stop me going. Why would you want to crush this frail insignificant reed that is already badly battered? God has given His command, the decision has been taken. Your words would not change my mind but only break my heart and deepen my distress. My mind is made up, my sacrifice has been made

"I have decided to leave next Monday. It is important and necessary that I do. You know, Father Superior, the precarious state of my nerves. I am afraid that the great sadness at the prospect of hurting all the people here, whom I love so much, will bring on a serious upset."²⁶

Libermann has found a new assurance: "the thought that Jesus is my strength gives me a courage that is beyond description." This letter marks an end to his hesitation but not to his suffering. The feeling of leaving the Eudists in the lurch was particularly painful to him as he vividly remembers seven months later when writing to M. de Farcy: "Once I had informed Fr. Louis of my plan to leave, I could not linger on. My suffering then was so great that it defies description. Never had I known such anguish. The reason for my sorrow was the trouble I was causing the good Fr. Louis and the disappointment that the others would feel. It was God's will that I disregard this, despite the extreme suffering that I was experiencing. This was greatly increased because I did not know what the good Lord would do with me or what would become of me."²⁷ Fr. Louis was understandably upset and he told Libermann that he was making a false

FRANCHIR LE PAS

move. He had been in favour of the Work for the Blacks coming under the wing of the Eudists. This would have assured it of a certain stability and official protection. Now it was just an idea of a few seminarians that risked becoming no more than an item in the Vatican archives.

Libermann had anticipated Fr. Louis' reaction and had dreaded the moment of making his intentions known. When they finally spoke face to face, Libermann broke down and wept. Though he knew in his heart that he would never return, he agreed that the "official" explanation of his absence would be that it was only temporary. He hoped that this would minimise disturbance in the novitiate. Libermann agonised over the pain he caused to Fr. Louis and the Eudists. He felt particularly responsible as he had aggravated the situation by making his preparatory moves in secret and presenting Fr. Louis with a *fait accompli*. In the letter to Dom Salier he said he "was afraid that someone would notice something and that every effort would be made to prevent my departure." He felt a loyalty to the Eudists but he also felt a prompting towards the Work for the Blacks, which deserved a hearing. Secrecy was required if this new stirring was to be given a chance.

The atmosphere of secrecy continued after he left Rennes. Now it attached to the project itself. In the letters from Lyon in December, Libermann mentions it to no one, except Paul Carron. Even his brother, Samson, is left in the dark. The caution that is given to Carron is revealing: "My journey to Rome must be kept as secret as the rest of the project. Much precaution is necessary: you know what a nice reputation they are giving me in Paris!"²⁸ Libermann also speaks of his poor reputation in his letter to Dom Salier: "Several holy people in France think that I did wrong by leaving the (Eudist) Congregation, but I think they are judging *secundem hominem*, and even without knowing what is involved. What I know is that within me I have had a feeling of approval and I believe that I have acted according to Our Lord's holy will. Since coming to Rome, I have had to put up with great hardship at the hands of men, even men who are very holy and who greatly desire the glory of God.

"For about six months, no one has given his approval to all that I proposed to do. In Paris, Lyon and Rome, all whom I consulted about my plan were against it. Fr. Pinault alone was for me, and he didn't seem to be completely sure. None of this got me down, Father, as you might have guessed. Even though everyone opposed me, I still carried on with my

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

project, because I found that the arguments of those who opposed me were not of the sort to make me give way. Most, and especially the holiest and the wisest, had a very bad opinion of me. They saw my plan as the scheme of an ambitious man and suspected several other ulterior motives."

"I regarded all this (opposition) as a great grace from God to protect me from all evils, but I did not think I should give way, because it seemed to me that I didn't have these unworthy motives in my heart."²⁹ In the light of this it seems likely that Libermann's secrecy at Rennes was not simply in his own interest: it was the soil that was necessary if the Work for the Blacks was to take root.

What part did the Work for the Blacks play in Libermann's decision to leave Rennes? In the letter to Dom Salier, Libermann speaks with a certain confidence of "my plan," "my project." We should remember that this letter was written from Rome in July 1840. After five bleak months, Libermann had just received (on 6 June) the first favourable reply from the Cardinal Prefect of the Propaganda. The previous response to the project had been so depressing that de la Bruniere had withdrawn at the end of March and left Libermann the leader by default. Two letters from Lyon in the previous December better reflect Libermann's commitment to the Work for the Blacks at the time he left Rennes.

On 15 December (1839), Libermann wrote to Fr. Féret: "What you said to M. Le Vasseur about M. de la Brunière cut me to the quick when I heard it: 'What a blunder you will make if you tear this young man away from France and take him with you to evangelise the blacks!'

"So all those who are fervent, generous and of good character must stay in France! And the poor abandoned ones towards whom God is arousing such sympathy must be left rush to perdition *en masse!* Only the rejects, the plodders, the halfwits, the incapable should be sent to save them!

"No, this is not God's way. Our Lord's horizon is wider. He came to save everyone. He sacrificed Himself for all, for the most despised as well as for the most highly regarded. His priestly spirit is nothing other than a spirit of reconciliation and salvation for the whole human race. As a result, those who have the fullness of the priesthood of their Master ought to extend their loving concern to all the earth. They ought to rejoice when this divine Master sends missionaries to those who are forsaken and not

FRANCHIR LE PAS

begrudgingly allow them only those who are not up to much.”³⁰

Fr. Féret must have been taken aback by the force of this rebuke, coming as it did from one not yet sharing in “the priesthood of the Master.” His surprise would have been all the greater as he remembered Libermann’s last letter with its protestations of uselessness and sense of approaching death.³¹ In the intervening month a transformation had taken place. A reluctant director had become a fearless missionary. Libermann’s new assurance was founded on God alone and sustained by faith. When he allowed himself to turn his attention to human accounting, the picture came out differently.

Four days later, on 19 December, he wrote to M. Carron: “Now let me say a little word about myself, I shall not say much; I reserve this for some other time. I beg you to keep all this strictly secret. I know that I will not tell you anything about which you have any doubts, especially after the things I made known to you at Rennes. I have not been able to remain in Rennes because I saw how wretched and useless I was. I consulted Father Pinault especially, and since then, also other persons; and I have left in order to enter into the Work for the Blacks. Nothing is yet fixed and settled. I am going to Rome with M. de la Brunière. God alone knows what we will do there. At least Saint Peter and Saint Paul are there, and we will pray at their graves if God grants it. Meanwhile I will keep busy with the rule to be followed. Once that is settled, we will take steps to obtain the necessary permission from the Holy See. In the meantime the good Lord may bring about some favourable situation, which we would be able to use the better to establish ourselves. Since everything is in the hands of Our Lord, we have only to place our trust in Him — which is what I like most in this affair.

“So far as I am concerned, dear friend, you see what my situation is. I am abandoned and without any help. I don’t even have any income or livelihood. I have no place where I can live and no hope whatsoever of human help. That is surely enough to drive a poor man like me to despair. But Jesus and Mary are my all.

“I am going to undertake the work mentioned above, I am going to speak to important and powerful people — but will they even look at me? Obviously, I am hopelessly lost. Thinking about the whole matter, I must confess that I consider it a foolish undertaking. I would hold it to be very presumptuous on my part if I did not feel in my soul a great humiliation

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

before God in the fact that I dare to get mixed up in such an enterprise. I cannot understand it at all and sometimes am so surprised (by my own daring) that I don't know what to think of it. ³²

From this it becomes clear that the essence of Libermann's decision was a complete surrender of himself into God's hands. "Jesus and Mary are my all." Involvement in the Work for the Blacks is the concrete expression of this surrender. It is a passionate and wholehearted involvement, as the letter to Fr. Féret shows, but it never becomes an absolute. This prerogative belongs to God alone. "Since everything is in the hands of Our Lord, we have only to place our trust in Him — which is what I like most in this affair." Humanly speaking, "it is a foolish undertaking." When Libermann considers himself and the men around him, none of whom are ordained, he cannot but be struck by the insignificance of the group and the immensity of the task. This in no way discourages him. The insignificance of the human resources gives the project a greater transparency: God's action can be more clearly seen. God chooses the weak ones of this world (1 Cor. 1,27). In the same biblical perspective, Libermann tries to reassure his brother, Samson, and his family. 'A great number of those who loved and esteemed me, will disapprove of my conduct. I shall perhaps even be treated as insane or as proud. I shall be despised and may even suffer persecution. And who on earth will give me even a little consolation in return? I am therefore a lost individual, unhappy for life. This is the only way in which the flesh can reason when it alone is the supreme counsellor; but do we want to judge according to the flesh? ...

"My dear friends, let us acknowledge that we have a Father in heaven! We have the great, most adorable Lord Jesus; we have His great and admirable Mother! They will not abandon those who deliver, and completely surrender themselves to them for their glory and their love. Therefore, have neither fear nor distrust; acknowledge that I am the happiest man in the world, because I no longer possess anything but God, Jesus and Mary; I am already in heaven, whilst still living on earth. If it pleases God to make me lead a hard and painful life, so much the better; He will give me His strength and His love, and that is all I need. My only hope is in Jesus and Mary; it should also be so for you. ³³

Libermann's decision to join the Work for the Blacks was also a decision to leave Rennes. He was walking away from a respectable position, from a place to stay. "I have left Rennes forever. This is most imprudent, if not

FRANCHIR LE PAS

sheer folly, according to those who judge things in worldly ways. A certain future lay before me if I remained; I was certain to have the means of subsistence and also an existence that would have been honourable."³⁴ It could be objected that when Libermann left Rennes, he had little left to lose. There is a certain truth in this statement if we remember that those who have little to lose are the ones who cling most tenaciously to the little they have. There is no grip as firm as the grip of a drowning man. Also, when God approaches, He chooses the moment that is best for us. Often this is a moment of failure. It was when Peter had fished in vain throughout the night that he was asked to launch out into the deep (Lk.5,4). When Libermann left Rennes, he left the harbour for the open sea.

In considering any reality, there is the view from within and the view from without. The view from within of a personal experience is, strictly speaking, available only to the person involved. Because second conversion is a personal decision, we have had to try to share Libermann's view from within. In our effort to do this we have let Libermann speak for himself as much as possible, especially with regard to the period at Rennes. On the other hand, speaking of Libermann's second conversion demands that we also take the view from without as it involves applying an idea of Lallemand to the life of Libermann.

We explored Lallemand's idea of second conversion and established its characteristic elements. These governed the structure of the foregoing section. It was not as if we were armed with a checklist to which we continually referred. This would have led to a very disjointed presentation. Rather the categories of Lallemand were what guided the investigation of Libermann's experience at Rennes. The early crisis brought a *new self-knowledge* by dealing a *crushing blow to his self-importance*. Then followed the year in the doldrums, when the only feeling was of uselessness. Diminished and free of earlier illusions, he faced the challenge of leaving Rennes for the Work for the Blacks. *The context was apostolic*, but if he was *to relinquish control of his life*, it was only to place it in the hands of God. The risk he took was that of a *complete surrender to God*, with no escape clause. That Libermann found it in himself *to take the step* was thanks, as he would put it, to Jesus and Mary. *God was orchestrating the whole affair*. And now we realise we have rejoined the view from within. Just how inextricably bound together are these perspectives is well exemplified in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's poem from prison, "Who am I?"

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

Who am I? They often tell me
 I stepped from my cell's confinement
 calmly, cheerfully, firmly
 like a Squire from his country house
 Who am I? They often tell me
 I used to speak to my warders
 freely and friendly and clearly,
 as though it were mine to command
 Who am I? They also tell me
 I bore the days of misfortune
 equably, smilingly, proudly
 like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really that which other men tell of?
 Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
 Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
 struggling for breath, as though hands were
 compressing my throat,
 yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
 thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,
 tossing in expectation of great events,
 powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
 weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
 faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.

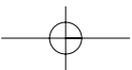
Who am I? This or the Other?
 Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
 Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
 and before myself a contemptible, woebegone weakling?
 Or is something within me still like a beaten army
 fleeing in disorder from victory, already achieved?
 Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
 Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine.³⁵

Bound together in experience itself, the view from within and the view from without are partners in the describing of experience. When it is a question of another, the view from within is a hazardous undertaking. But

FRANCHIR LE PAS

ultimately second conversion is an affair of the heart, so, despite the risks involved, the view from within has been given prominence.

A popular author once frivolously remarked that his favourite saint was Augustine — before his conversion! Preferences that I have heard expressed concerning Libermann usually refer to the period after his second conversion. In these twelve years (1840 — 1852), he founded the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary and was ordained a priest. He presided over the fusion of his young missionary society and the venerable Congregation of the Holy Ghost and was immediately elected Superior General. Second conversion is not the end but the real starting point. It is a turning point in life: there is a “before” and an “after.” We only began to consider the “after”, enough to indicate the transformation that took place. To consider Libermann’s involvement in the African missions would call for a book in itself. Just as there was a leaning towards the view from within, there was also a concentration on the “before”. There is a presentation, not of the better-known Libermann “in charge of his great work,” but of Libermann struggling in the darkness to let God have His way, of Libermann, “the blind man at midnight.” *Quis me liberabit ab hac hora?*



EPILOGUE

CHAPTER SIX

Epilogue

For those who are not familiar with the further development of the Libermann story I would like to recall briefly the main events of the last twelve years of his life (1840 — 1852). This narrative will be followed by a reflection on these years of intense apostolic activity. In this reflection, our attention will be directed to what is before our eyes but we will be stealing an occasional glance at the rear view mirror. We will keep our interest in second conversion.

Francis Libermann 1840 — 1852

When Libermann and Fr. de la Brunière arrived in Rome in January, 1840 to present their project of the Work for the Blacks, they met with difficulties at every turn. After a few months, Maxime de la Brunière decided that the situation was hopeless and he returned to France. Libermann's patience was rewarded on 6 June when Cardinal Fransoni informed him of the approval of Propaganda Fide. He set about writing a provisional rule for the future Society of the Holy Heart of Mary. There were still obstacles in the way of his ordination so he remained in Rome and wrote a commentary on the first twelve chapters of the Gospel of St. John. In mid-November he made a pilgrimage to Loretto and, on his return to Rome, a letter from his brother Samson was awaiting him with the good news that Bishop Raess of Strasbourg was willing to accept him into his seminary as a candidate for ordination.

Libermann returned to France and entered the seminary at Strasbourg in February, 1841. In the summer, he received sub-diaconate and diaconate. The other members of the embryonic missionary society wanted to see it established in the interior of France so arrangements were made for him to be ordained priest by Bishop Mioland of Amiens. The ordination took

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

place in the bishop's chapel at Amiens on 18 September. It was a simple ceremony witnessed only by Fr. de Brandt. A house (La Neuville) had been made available in Amiens for the novitiate.

On 26 September, Libermann celebrated his first solemn Mass at *Notre Dame des Victoires* in Paris. The association with this parish dedicated to Our Lady with its already renowned confraternity was to prove very important to the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary. Devotion to Our Lady was a hallmark of the new society. After Libermann's death his successor, Fr. Schwindenhammer asked Libermann's secretary, Fr. Lannurien, to outline Libermann's idea of the spirit of the congregation. Fr. Lannurien records it as including "a tender beyond-the-ordinary devotion to Mary, to her heart of love and trust. Our name and dedication make this clear and I (Fr. Lannurien) believe that this ought to be the supernatural drawing power by which we attract candidates to our Society."

Libermann returned to Amiens and in the company of Fr. Le Vavas seur and Marcellin Collin took possession of La Neuville on the evening of 27 September. It was the beginning of the new society. The previous June, Fr. Jacques-Desiré Laval, the first and most promising missionary of the society, had already transferred all his personal possessions to Libermann and left for Mauritius. Fr. Tisserant was temporarily detained by his bishop in Paris.

The early days of the novitiate were marked by differences of opinion between Libermann and Le Vavas seur about the programme to be followed. Libermann tried vainly to temper the extremism of Le Vavas seur, who was advocating only one meal a day and no bed to sleep on for the future missionaries in formation.

The situation eased when Le Vavas seur departed for Reunion in February 1842. Later that year, Tisserant went to Martinique, there to await a chance to enter Haiti.

Libermann will always be associated with the resumption of the African missions in the 19th century. He sent his first missionaries to mainland Africa in September of 1843. The opportunity came when Mgr. Barron, an Irish-American, was looking for missionaries to accompany him to Africa where he had been entrusted by the Holy See with almost the whole of the west coast from Senegal south and extending indefinitely to the interior (Vicariate of the Two Guineas — often referred to simply as Guinea). His search had so far been fruitless. When he came to say Mass at

EPILOGUE

Notre Dame des Victoires in Paris the pastor, Fr. Desgenettes, listened to his predicament and put him in touch with Libermann. It was a providential meeting and plans were made for seven priests of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary to go to Africa.

In the preparation for the venture, Libermann's practical good sense gained little ground against the romanticism of the missionaries. They could not see the wisdom of bringing adequate supplies and gave further evidence of immaturity by, at the last minute, bringing with them three "helpers" from a foundling home in Bordeaux.

They sailed on 13 September 1843 on *Les Deux Clémentines*. Their journey into the unknown demanded great courage and the way in which they faced up to the hardships of the long voyage and of the African climate must evoke our admiration. Not long after they landed, fever struck. Gaining a new missionary foothold in Africa was to take a terrible toll. Within a year, all had died with the exception of Fr. Bessieux and his helper, "brother" Gregory. Mgr. Barron felt powerless to overcome the odds. He returned to Europe and resigned.

Difficulties of communication added greatly to the suffering. It was two years before Fr. Bessieux received a letter from Libermann. Then a whole packet of Libermann's letters arrived together. Libermann also suffered from these delays. It was six months before he was aware of the sickness of the missionaries, a year before he had news of the whole terrible picture.

The expedition was quickly branded as a disaster in France and Libermann was criticised by his adversaries for sending young men to their death. Within the Society, the reaction was altogether different as new volunteers rushed forward to take the place of those who had died.

Libermann shook off the feeling of failure and set about preparing the next step to be taken in the Work for the Blacks. There were many lessons to be learned from the experience so far. There were many more precautions to be taken in the future. In June 1845, Frs. Ernest Briot, Stanislas Arragon and Bro. Peter Mersy left for Gorée, an island off the coast of Senegal. Fr. Tisserant was prevented by illness from joining them. When he did finally sail in November, he was killed in a shipwreck off the coast of Morocco. Fr. Bessieux and "brother" Gregory were establishing themselves in Gabon, about 3000 kilometres from Goree.

Meanwhile, there were problems in Reunion. Le Vavas seur wrote to ask permission to join the Jesuits. We will return to the correspondence about

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

this incident. It took more than a year before the “temptation” passed and Le Vavas seur withdrew his request.

It is time to mention the Holy Ghost Congregation which was founded in 1703 by Claude Poullart des Places. It suffered greatly during the French Revolution but the heroic loyalty of a few of its members kept it alive. In the 1840s it was still struggling to survive. Its central house was the Holy Ghost Seminary in Paris where priests destined for the French colonies were educated. It enjoyed legal recognition from the French government.

With the Holy Ghost Congregation and the the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary both sending priests to Africa, it was inevitable that jurisdictional problems would arise. The superiors of the Holy Ghost Seminary seem to have accepted the talk about Libermann as an opportunist and they were reluctant to co-operate with him. Nonetheless, collaboration between the two groups was essential if the mission to Africa was to succeed.

Meanwhile Libermann decided to diversify his activity and accepted to send three priests and two brothers with Bishop Brady to do missionary work in Western Australia. Bishop Brady, an Irishman who had studied at the Holy Ghost Seminary, had been named the first bishop of Perth. As an organizer he was hopeless and the venture was ill-fated. One priest died after the five-month voyage. After incredible hardships and many dramatic moments the other two priests and one brother succeeded in reaching Mauritius and joining the missionary work there.

In 1846, Libermann went to Rome to present a memorandum about the organization of the missions (especially that of Guinea) to Propaganda Fide. This document begins with a sympathetic evaluation of the African people. It outlines plans for their education, their training in practical skills, their catechesis. It aims at the formation of an African clergy. Remaining on a very practical level, it requests the appointment of a Vicar Apostolic for Guinea with provision for further appointments. We get an idea of the speed of officialdom when we see that it also asks for official acceptance of Mgr. Barron’s resignation.

In January of 1847, Etienne Truffet was consecrated bishop and appointed Vicar Apostolic of Guinea. He was a former seminary professor, a literary man who had led a sheltered life. In April, he sailed for Africa with three priests, a subdeacon and two students. He was greeted enthusiastically but he uncritically adopted local ways that were

EPILOGUE

impossible for Europeans. He imposed a local diet on his community and very soon all of them were ill. Mgr. Truffet himself died within seven months.

Fr. Bessieux had been working effectively in Gabon. Libermann knew of his reluctance to assume leadership, even the post of superior of a community, but he now felt that Fr. Bessieux was the man to succeed Mgr. Truffet. Fr. Kobes, professor of theology and only 28 years old, was chosen as his coadjutor.

After their consecration as bishops, they sailed for Africa on 18 February 1849. During the voyage, Mgr. Bessieux listened eagerly to Mgr. Kobes as he recounted all the details of the big event of 1848, for which Libermann had worked long hours — the fusion of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost and the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary.

This is how it came about. In March of 1848, Fr. Monnet had succeeded Fr. Leguay as superior general of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. Relations with the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary became more cordial. The time was ripe for a fusion between a missionary society that was rapidly gaining in strength and a venerable congregation that was ailing but nevertheless possessed of precious legal recognition by the French government. There were two revolutions in France that year. Neither Libermann nor Monnet could leave his post. Fr. Loewenbruck was the emissary who went to Rome with the proposal of fusion and the suggestion that Fr. Libermann become superior general and Fr. Monnet Vicar Apostolic of Madagascar. The threat of revolution in Rome expedited matters. Fr. Monnet was named Vicar Apostolic of Madagascar at the beginning of October. On 5 November, he was consecrated bishop and Libermann was unanimously elected superior general on 23 November 1848.

What happened in the fusion was not the creation of a third entity that was a combination of the previous two. In fact, the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary was dissolved and its members became members of the Holy Ghost Congregation. Libermann wanted above all an effective administrative structure that would enable the apostolic work to prosper. That the structure that he himself had elaborated would technically disappear mattered little.

Such a major transformation did not take place smoothly and Libermann had to contend with accusations of treason from within his

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

own ranks. The members of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary had not foreseen that Rome's decision would result in the suppression of their society. Libermann may have been somewhat surprised himself but he accepted the situation and when things settled down, and having consulted the original members of the Holy Ghost Congregation, he set about supplementing the rule to better deal with the reality of the new situation.

He also set about reorganizing the seminary along the same lines. Things had become lax. Two revolutions in the city in 1848 had not helped. In general, he received support. However, one priest, Fr. Hardy, never accepted him and continually fomented discontent among the students. Fr. Hardy was unbalanced and had already been expelled once, but had been readmitted by Fr. Leguay.

In April 1849 cholera swept Paris. Libermann's brother, Felix, died in the epidemic on 9 May. Libermann himself was stricken by a virulent fever and was away from Paris for six months. When he returned he found that things were in turmoil. Wild rumours were abroad that Libermann had plotted to "take over" the Holy Ghost Seminary with a view to getting government subsidies which he would put to his own use. In protest, five newly ordained priests had refused their appointments to Guyana. With firmness and tact Libermann succeeded in restoring calm to the situation. The five young priests had been manipulated by Fr. Hardy who continued to make trouble until his tragic death in January 1851. He was leaving the seminary when he slipped and fell under the wheels of a heavy cart which crushed him. He was carried into the seminary and died the following morning.

Mgr. Affre, the Archbishop of Paris, was killed in the revolution of 1848 while attempting to appeal for peace. He was succeeded by Mgr. Sibour who was not pleased by the fusion nor by Libermann's becoming Superior General. He was particularly annoyed by Libermann's insistence that the confirmation of his appointment as Superior General belonged to Rome and not to the Archbishop of Paris. Libermann refused to cede the point even though it caused him many difficulties. It was a conflict between the congregation and the archdiocese of Paris that was finally settled only twenty years after Libermann's death.

Even when convalescing, Libermann made valiant efforts to keep up with his correspondence. About 1800 of his letters are preserved but this is

EPILOGUE

considered to be only about one tenth of the total number. For all practical purposes he was the spiritual director of all his missionaries. He also directed numerous priests, mostly seminary acquaintances, in France. In 1851 he wrote *Instructions to Missionaries*. In this, he treated in a penetrating and sympathetic way of the problems of missionaries. He hoped, in this way, to diminish the need for individual letters.

After early reverses the missions were now making solid progress. In Guinea, the church was at last sending down firm roots. News from Mauritius was very encouraging. Already some improvements were noticeable in the French colonies which had become Libermann's concern since the fusion. In November 1851 Libermann's health deteriorated significantly. He confided in Le Vavas seur and asked him to get a doctor. He left Paris for a while but had to return to the city to avail of the better medical attention. On the 2nd of February 1852 he died at the Holy Ghost Seminary, 30 rue Lhomond, Paris.

This skimpy chronicle gives some idea of Libermann's activity from 1840 — 1852. His health had improved since his seminary days but it was never good. He suffered continually from migraine headaches. In the circumstances his activity was phenomenal.

The beginning of the mission venture made huge demands. He had constant correspondence with Propaganda Fide in Rome and with the French Government in Paris. There were numerous meetings with government ministers and with the Papal Nuncio. His fellow priests as well as lay people sought him out for spiritual guidance. Those close to him were amazed at his stamina but at the same time alarmed at his work load. In 1845, at a council meeting of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary, they tried to limit access to him and strongly advised him not to get up before 5.00 a.m.

The missions were his burning concern and yet they did not become an *idée fixe*. If his heart belonged to Africa, it also found a place for the poor of other countries. He fully accepted the educational heritage of the Holy Ghost Congregation, despite heavy criticism from some missionaries who thought that every member of the Congregation should go to Africa. He realized that there were "abandoned souls" in France also and engaged his men in social work at home, in Bordeaux, Amiens and Paris.

The long process to have his cause introduced with a view to ultimate canonization began in 1868. Already, Le Vavas seur gave nine cases of

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

extraordinary cures worked through his intercession. Later, in 1881, 34 new examples of healings were presented. None, however, satisfied the strict juridical criteria for miracles of the Congregation of Rites. However, considerable progress was made, especially with regard to the approval of his writings. On 1 July 1876, Pope Pius IX signed the decree introducing his cause. On 19 June 1910, Pius X issued the decree proclaiming the heroicity of his virtue. Both popes hesitated at first because of Libermann's nervous disorder and because he was a convert Jew. To say that only miracles are lacking before he is beatified is being very formal. What must become clear is that he belongs to the whole church, that his life has an appeal that cannot be contained within geographical, historical, clerical or any other frontiers. For this he must be known, not simply through books but through people who live by his spirit.

Reflection on Libermann's later years

Faced with this prodigious activity, our attention is naturally drawn to the inner dynamism that sustained it. We will not be surprised to find that holiness is still the heart of the matter. We are prepared to hear Libermann say: "The peoples of Africa will not be converted by the work of clever and capable missionaries but through the holiness and sacrifices of their priests".

The secret of Libermann's activity has already been well established. In this brief reflection, let us try to get an impression of what the aftermath of his second conversion was like. Let us take a closer look at Le Vasseur's request to leave the society. In his letters to his troubled friend at this time, Libermann forgets his normal reticence and speaks from the heart.

The period involved is late 1845 to February 1847. The collapse of the first mission to Guinea is still vivid in Libermann's mind. The second group of missionaries has left for Gorée. Others are on the high seas to Australia. Into this precarious situation comes a request to withdraw from the society from one of his original collaborators, who, despite their differences of opinion, is also one of his best friends. "I have a stronger attachment to you than to the others." Clearly second conversion did not immunize Libermann against crisis. He was now experiencing what Erik Erikson calls that "crisis of middle age which occurs when an original man ... stops to realize what he has begun to originate in others". In January 1845 he had written to his brother, Samson: "I tell you frankly that if I had

EPILOGUE

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."

The arrival of Fr. Plessis in Reunion seems to have been associated with the beginning of Le Vavas seur's disaffection. His request to leave and join the Jesuits was accompanied by an outcry against Fr. Plessis and slighting remarks about Libermann's selection and preparation of candidates.

Libermann replied at length on 28 January 1846: "I want to reply immediately to your letter in which you speak about Father Plessis and your desire to send him back to us. You have my approval to send him back. I was at fault when I admitted him; so it is up to me to bear the embarrassment he causes. However, you break my heart by your discouragement and the other unfortunate feelings to which you have yielded. Your letter shows me that you are deeply depressed and are worried to death about the condition of our society ...

"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 we both say to the Sovereign Judge to justify our yielding to discouragement? And let me add that, where you could mention but one reason for discouragement, I would be able to muster a hundred. For I am burdened with the duties of superiority; I bear all the solicitude and responsibility for the enterprise; I bear the brunt of all the most violent attacks, the afflictions and trials which divine Providence deigns to send; I suffer in sympathy with all the worries that accompany the missionary undertakings; I have worries about the novitiate, the studies, the various houses of missionaries, the arrangement of affairs, the rules that have to be perfected, and the solid foundation that has to be insured for our society. I am all alone here, having only one confrere able to help me effectively in introducing and preserving proper regularity in this place. I have the full burden of the correspondence; I have to deal with a variety of persons; I have to make the right choice of candidates, and there are a multitude of other things that can become a source of preoccupation and anxiety ...

"I greatly abhor the world and sometimes feel an almost insuperable repugnance towards it, but I am obliged to keep contact with it. I find it very difficult to converse with people, but it is my duty to do it at every turn. I must be occupied with giving direction to others from morning till night, in spite of the mortal repugnance I feel for it. I constantly have to

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

give instructions, and the least subject of meditation that I am called to prepare for others upsets me three hours before I have to propose it.

“Everything within me seems to go counter to my remaining in my present situation. Every attraction of nature and of grace point 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.”¹

Knowing Le Vavas seur’s impetuous disposition, Libermann continued his long letter by trying to show him the value of patience. He again admitted his mistake about Fr. Plessis but at the same time he warned Le Vavas seur about the severity of his judgement. He declared Le Vavas seur’s expectation of perfection completely unrealistic and added: “The Jesuits (you admire so much) are certainly one of the most fervent religious societies in the church. And yet, if your severe principles were applied to them, at least half of them should be dismissed.”

Le Vavas seur persevered in his request to leave but Libermann remained firm. In December of the same year, he wrote: “It is God’s will that decides everything, and the divine will manifests itself in a variety of ways. I truthfully believe that God gave very clear proofs in regard to your own vocation. There is no longer any need of trying to ascertain that vocation; the matter is settled. If I had to change my mind now and give you permission to leave our society, I would need much weightier reasons than the ones you have advanced. I shall say more: I assure you that the whole content of your three letters in which you deal *ex professo* with this matter, as well as the others which touch it incidentally, show clearly the presence of nearly all the elements that are usually a source of illusions.”²

A couple of months later, Libermann was delighted to hear that Le Vavas seur had abandoned any idea of leaving the society and had resumed his work with fresh enthusiasm.

What I find most startling about Libermann’s apostolic activity is his confidence, his belief in himself. This is evident in his dealing with Le Vavas seur in the incident just described. “There is no longer any need of trying to ascertain that vocation; the matter is settled.” It is behind his own tenacity of purpose which brushes aside conflicting inclinations. It shows itself in the way he conducted negotiations, especially those relating to the

EPILOGUE

fusion. It can be seen clearly in his bold initiatives, in his fresh thinking that refused to be confined by the letter of the law. It is present in the way that he dealt with criticism.

This confidence was not absent in his early days but it was confirmed in his second conversion, just as he himself was confirmed in who he was and in what he had to do. The difficulties of life did not suddenly diminish. In his letters of 1846 to Le Vavas seur, he does not hide the suffering, but if he feels the strain, there is no hint of doubt or indecision. He now stepped confidently into the future no matter how heavy his heart. He was not confident because he was armed to the teeth. He was confident because in second conversion he had laid down his arms.

It may be objected that this does not appear in his writings, or even that in his writings he warned people not to have confidence in themselves. There may be a language problem but there is no contradiction. It was by putting his trust in God that Libermann found the courage to act with confidence. While keeping his gentleness and his compassion, he still said clearly "Yes" and "No".

This brings up another matter that is at the heart of this book. It is the principle that what Libermann did, reveals who he was as much, if not more, than what he said. You may be surprised by this statement, given the amount of direct quotation in the book. There was need to let Libermann speak for himself. Without his own words, authenticity would have been impossible. Text and context go together.

The now famous phrase that Libermann uttered on his deathbed "God is all and man is nothing" must be put alongside the way he reached out to everyone in need if we are to have any idea of his concept of God or of his regard for men and women. Libermann's most telling statements are the things he did. The real excitement is in his story, in the decisions he made and especially in the lonely decision at Rennes in 1839.

It is from this perspective that I speak of the confidence of his later years. Second conversion did not take the anguish out of decision making or diminish the difficulties in making plans. Libermann still experienced the pain of self-displacement in listening to others, in serving others. Failure was still heartbreaking. Taking risks still quickened his breath. But if his heart was in his mouth as much as the next man, he still exuded confidence. Whatever he felt, he had it. Others recognized it and looked to him to lead them on.

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

You may find my mention of confidence, of belief in self, uninspiring or even irksome. Or you may be uncomfortable with Libermann's language. Pierre Blanchard said that Libermann's spirituality was his experience written down. The trouble is that he wrote it down in the language of St. Sulpice, which is "a language that the stranger does not know".

We may not warm to the thought of Christ "living in us", even if we remember that this is how St. Paul described his life. We may have trouble seeing that "Christ living in us" is the same as "the Holy Spirit guiding us" or "the Father's creative love stirring within us". And yet when we try to put into words God's coming into our life, we are at a loss. The important thing is that we try to put words on our experience. Maybe we will formulate things afresh. Maybe we will find ourselves returning to discarded phrases.

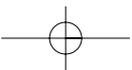
Recently, at a concelebration of the Eucharist, I listened with interest as a Swiss Spiritan described an incident that occurred during his mission work in Africa. He was called to the bedside of a girl who was dying. As he entered the darkness of the ramshackle hut, the sight of the girl, ugly with illness and lying in squalor, repulsed him. He just stood there helpless. He fought the feeling of repugnance, the temptation to flee. As he stayed, something new began to grow within him, a compassion that he felt was not his. He described the experience as God at work within him.

Libermann's writings are full of such disclaimers. The grace he receives is for others. He remains a poor man. He refers to himself as a bank clerk who handles money but does not own it. And yet, when God comes into our life to awaken compassion or to give us confidence, the compassion and the confidence become really ours. Libermann's confidence in his later years remains remarkable.

A final word about language. The experience of Libermann at Rennes could be described in other terms. It is sometimes referred to in passing in the terminology of John of the Cross as "the dark night of the soul". It is possible that someone might want to speak of it in terms of Libermann being "born again". I have spoken about it in terms of "second conversion". I feel that this traditional category that we owe to Louis Lallemant can be revived to our benefit. Its real attraction for me lay in its link with apostolic activity. Second conversion is not principally a landmark on the road to personal perfection. It is arriving at "the perfect intensity of apostolic service". For Libermann it was the birth of a new

EPILOGUE

confidence and the start of an apostolic service that has since reached around the world.



CONCLUSION

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

Libermann: a Portrait

In Libermann's day photography was in its infancy. As a result of the collaboration of Nicéphore Niepce and Louis Daguerre, the procedure known as daguerreotype came into commercial use about 1840. The exposure time required for the daguerreotype varied between three and twelve minutes depending on the lighting, and a head-rest was often used to help the subject remain still. Libermann was reluctant to have his photograph taken, but he finally gave in to the wishes of his sister-in-law in 1846 on the occasion of the religious profession of one of his nieces. The resulting photograph was of poor quality by modern standards but it is a precious document because it stands alone as the only authentic image of Libermann during his lifetime. The deathbed sketch by Mgr. de Ségur was made the day after Libermann's death. The death-mask, which was preserved at the novitiate at Orly, disappeared during World War II without having been photographed.

In 1964, the editor of *Spiritus*, Athanase Bouchard, undertook the project of submitting the photograph of Libermann to several experts in morpho-psychology, a recent scientific development of the age-old practice of reading the character of a person in his face.¹ Great care was taken with the preparation of the photograph to ensure authenticity. Those studying the photograph (and, in the case of Francis Baud, two examples of Libermann's handwriting from letters of 1846) worked independently of each other and were unaware of the identity of their subject. No extravagant claims were made for the value of the study. M. Francis Baud introduced his analysis of "Father X" by pointing out that the absence of a profile precluded a complete morpho-psychological study. Again, while the graphological documentation was precious, he noted the absence of a

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

signature as a drawback. The results were nevertheless intriguing. What follows is an extract from the analysis of Mme. Françoise Courtin-Duroux. "To sum up: someone abounding in vitality, especially of a psychic nature; gifted with a wide intelligence, an observant, reflective, imaginative mind; consumed with a desire to be of service to others; vulnerable because of the very intensity of this desire, which gives rise to a state of tension, necessary to channel and discipline his momentum. Vulnerable also because of a sensitivity that is too refined for run of the mill situations; obliged, almost unconsciously, to engage in painfully egocentric self-examinations. He suffered from these as from a fault, for they were contrary to the strong call he heard towards the gift of self. He has worked hard and long, he has struggled valiantly and suffered much. He still sees clearly and achieves his designs but too many trials have robbed him of his full capacity for the joy of living."²

There is a marked similarity between the three analyses. Francis Baud sees Libermann as ".... a very sensitive person whose emotions readily influence his health and activity" "He is fundamentally vehement, enthusiastic, fiery, even impulsive Father X, to remain faithful to his ideal, had to overcome a sensual nature, attracted to material pleasures" At first, he is full of life tackling every task with enthusiasm. Impetuous, persuasive, he is "a real leader of men." Then come times of depression and his humour is more uneven. He seeks the attention of others, he indulges romantic ideas. Later he chooses a goal in life and everything in him is centred on this goal. At great sacrifice, all his personal emotions and instincts are channeled to the service of this goal. "But there are still periods of emptiness, where we find him melancholy and dissatisfied with himself. Then he comes across as shy, vulnerable, uneasy, scrupulous, pondering his past and seeking solitude."³

The account of Colonel Jean Taboureau is marked by its personal style. Libermann is a man of action, with a taste for adventure. He invites comparison with Napoleon: "A conqueror! But here the combat dress is the soutane, the sword a cross."⁴

Before we rush to judgment on these studies of Libermann's character, let us be clear on what they purport to be. They are not descriptions of Libermann as he was, but as he was disposed to be. A person's character is the fundamental structure of his being as yet unshaped by outside influences. Morpho-psychology attempts to shed light, not on actual

 CONCLUSION

behaviour, but on the natural predispositions and innate tendencies of an individual. Even when the evidence submitted to the morpho-psychologist is meagre, we can still expect from it a little light.

In commenting on Libermann's sensual nature, Francis Baud permitted himself an aside on his idea of holiness: "Personally I think that holiness often means leading an exemplary life with a temperament that could have lead to debauchery. The key to something worthwhile is 'guts'."⁵ Libermann's own view of the role of character in the struggle for holiness is similar, though he would insist that the only hope of success lies in the grace of God. "The greater the influence of character, the less holy the action is: the less influence the character has, the more holy the action. The natural character is always more or less flawed."⁶ "Character, what is natural, is never completely effaced. It is always apparent in an action, for divine grace, however strong, neither takes away nor completely changes the natural makeup or character of a person. It always preserves it more or less, according as this character or natural makeup is in keeping with God's designs ..."⁷ For Libermann, any effort to embellish a person's character prevents us from doing justice to his holiness. So in the lives of the saints any "improving" of their character is misguided. It discredits rather than exalts them.⁸

When we turn our attention to Libermann's personality, we are trying to describe his complete concrete reality, no longer who he was disposed to be but who he became. Pierre Blanchard gives a succinct description of Libermann's personality in his introduction to the defence of his thesis on Libermann at the Sorbonne in 1959:⁹ "Truly paradoxical is the personality of this convert Jew, a striking sign of the supernatural, for it is not, it is never the inclination of his character which has his ear, it is the will of God that summons him. 'I am like a sentinel before God, I keep watch and I am attentive to His divine will' (ND. VI,171)." The harmony that Libermann, with God's help, succeeded in bringing into his life reflects nevertheless the conflicting elements of his character. Blanchard proceeds by invoking the many contrasts in Libermann's personality. He was a contemplative and yet a man of action, an innovator, yet someone who respected tradition, a man of the Spirit but also a man of the Church, prudent yet daring, an apostle of the transcendence of God, who was in constant dialogue with the men and events of his time.

Blanchard points to the difficulty of his task: "He revealed little of

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

himself even to his most intimate friends and, when one tries to classify him, he escapes all the categories." Libermann's reserve about himself coupled with the complexity of his life makes any attempt at a portrait difficult. And yet, for anyone interested in Libermann, the most persistent question remains: "Who was he, what was he really like?" In a sense the previous chapters have all been an attempt to contribute to the answer to this question. Continuous reference to Libermann's life and writings was necessary to fill out the picture. Alongside this moving picture, there is also call for an attempt at a portrait.

Libermann was physically strong and nervously fragile. Vulnerable to stress, his body possessed a wiry endurance. He was sensitive, affectionate and shy. He had a penetrating mind that went straight to the heart of the matter, paying little attention to appearances. He was not without intellectual curiosity, though it rarely surfaced. He was largely uncritical towards those he trusted. His intelligence was of essentially practical bent, and had a cutting edge. Theories were a luxury unless they led to decisions. If he considered the will more important than the intellect, this was no speculative conclusion. It was simply that, in looking around him, he saw more people who knew what to do than were prepared to do it.

Libermann was ambitious. He wanted badly to make the most of his life and, to this end, he was prepared to make great demands on himself. He was a man of action, who often agonised about whether or not to act. He was moved by a restless desire but anchored by strong emotional attachments to people and places. He liked the comfortable feel of the familiar, the firm feel of the traditional.

Schooled to believe in a God who is transcendent, he was shocked by the intervention of a God who is available — in Christ. At his baptism and in other mystical experiences, he was lost in wonder at God's invitation to intimacy. Yet he never took God for granted, never tired of proclaiming the gratuitousness of His favours. Nourished on a Sulpician tradition, communion with Christ became the centre of his life. A life of shared existence with Christ at once consoled him and disturbed him. Now his ambition had to answer the question: "Can you drink the cup?" In the face of risk, he felt the normal human weight of fear. His ability to listen to others brought to light unasked-for challenges.

Libermann welcomed the invasion of God into his life. His natural sensitivity gave a richness and depth to the impressions he received.

CONCLUSION

Periods of solitude and passivity became the most rewarding times. If he renounced himself, it was in order to become more receptive; if he denied himself, it was in order to hold on to his hunger and his thirst. No real nourishment or refreshment could be expected from anyone but God. No desire was worthy unless it was a share in God's desire, no vision to be trusted unless it was somehow a share in God's gaze. "As" was a key word in "Be holy as your heavenly Father is holy." Holiness meant authenticity and quality of life.

Always derived from experience, never tied to a system, personal holiness was for Libermann the key to life. In the sheltered seminary setting, it took the shape of a personal project of perfection. It had a private character, which greatly appealed to the shy and reserved Libermann. Yet it was only when it went public that Libermann was able to give it its full embodiment, its full statement with an obvious ecclesial ring. Then it was characterised by great gentleness and compassion. Then, too, the worst enemy was clearly identified. The deadly danger was discouragement.

The striking contrasts in Libermann's personality and the spectacular changes of direction in his life obscure the lines of continuity. From his Jewish background, his most important inheritance was his faith in God. Threads of continuity also stretch from the ghetto to his sympathy for the poor and the deprived, to his insistence on the formation of an elite. His affection for people, his personal loyalty, gave rise to a few firm friendships that helped sustain him in troubled times. His conviction of the need for organisation, whether in his personal life or in his enterprises, brought a certain stability. But when all the unifying threads in the fabric of his life have been invoked, they are more an illustration than an explanation of one inescapable fact. Libermann was a survivor.

He himself would insist that the real source of unity and continuity in his life was his relationship with God. Nothing is more true. Psychologically unsuited to life in the public eye, he was an unlikely apostle. Stricken with epilepsy, the source of his ability to bring peace to the disturbed is not obvious. The frugality of his needs is insufficient explanation for the simplicity of his life. In the struggle against his sensuality and his pride, he need not have won. No personal attraction explains the influence he had over people. Nothing of note need have happened, but something did. The most important lines in the portrait of

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

Libermann belong to the finger of God. But the image that emerges is a very human face.

Libermann and Second Conversion Today

There are many echoes of second conversion in modern writing. Not surprisingly these occur mainly in reflection on the meaning of religious life. No reference is made to Louis Lallemand; rather the principal source is Sacred Scripture. The term "second conversion" is not used in any precise sense but the reality is nevertheless recognisable.

J. M. R. Tillard contrasts the initial call of Peter and the second "Follow me" spoken to him by the risen Christ: "Between the two calls and the two answers lies the existence and the progression of a man, together with disappointments, disillusionings and rivalries within the apostolic community (Mt.20,25), the triple betrayal, the apostles' discouragement in face of the crucifixion of the One in whom they had placed all the hopes of their human existence, and also the heavy weariness which prevents the Eleven from heeding the women who claim to have a hopeful message for them. Their enthusiasm has calmed down and become more sober. It has matured. And at the same time it has endured There has been a conversion, a deepening of enthusiasm for Jesus. And, when all is said, it is the last enthusiasm, that of the meal on the shore of the lake, which counts. The first was but a preparation for that final enthusiasm."¹⁰

René Voillaume speaks of the *second summons* of Jesus. He also is inspired by the example of Peter. However he concentrates his attention mainly on describing the experience of someone faced with the crucial decision of responding to the second summons. In this, he draws out the full implication of Jesus' saying in the gospel of Mark: " 'In that case' they said to one another 'who can be saved?' Jesus gazed at them. 'For man', he said 'it is impossible, but not for God: because everything is possible for God.'" (10.26) In a letter of 17 March, 1957, René Voillaume wrote to his confreres from the Island of St. Gildas: "It is not enough to leave the boat and the fishing nets in order to follow Jesus for a spell; what must be done is to travel all the way to Calvary, and there to receive its message and its reward, and, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, mount to the climax of a life completed in the perfect existence of divine love.

"When we began we had as yet no experience of the natural and human *impossibility* of our living in harmony with the supernatural realm

CONCLUSION

of the counsels. In youth a kind of correspondence exists between the generosity natural to that age and our Lord's summons to leave all and follow him. Poverty, chastity, obedience, prayer and divine love — these do not seem to present us with insurmountable difficulties. And also the divine pedagogy of the Master who summons us, itself assists, to some extent, in maintaining a temporary illusion, without which no one would have the courage to leave all things in order to follow Jesus and to carry his cross.

“As time passes, however, and in accordance with the action of our Lord's grace, gradually, unconsciously, all this begins to change. Human enthusiasm gives way to a kind of insensibility with regard to supernatural realities; our Lord seems to become increasingly remote, and, on occasion, sheer weariness overwhelms us. The temptation to yield to our inclination to pray less or to pray by mere routine is more insistent. Chastity presents difficulties we had not foreseen. Altogether new temptations arise. We feel sluggish, and are more apt to seek sensual pleasure. Also, we tend instinctively and without being aware of it, or considering it to be wrong, to lead a rather more independent life, disregarding our superiors. Frankness seems less necessary; charity more difficult. The effort to adapt ourselves to other races or peoples sometimes leaves us discouraged; at the start everything seemed bright, but now we can only observe irritating defects. Criticism becomes normal; we fail to speak the language others use, or even to understand it. Poverty becomes a hardship. We hold tenaciously to our own ideas. Sometimes we wish for better food, and would like to feel more free. In general, we think — if only our lives could be more worthwhile! Throughout all this no word from our Lord reaches us; he is silent; no longer does he give us the joy that we can *feel*, the joy that made it so easy for us to regard every prospect with optimism.

“These experiences are quite normal, and they need imply no serious infidelity on our part, nor any abandonment by our Lord. Even if we keep fundamentally loyal to the demands of the religious life, we are bound to experience, to a greater or lesser degree, these various impulses or temptations.

“In short, we are *progressively entering upon a new phase of our life*; we are finding out, to our cost, that the demands of the religious life are impossible.

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

“If we fail to approach this stage frankly, fail to realise that it is radically impossible, with merely human means, to live a supernatural religious life and to help Christ with his cross, we incur the serious danger of either succumbing to paralysing discouragement, or deceiving ourselves by lowering our ideal to an acceptable level, a level that can be lived, or, in short, one that is possible. This, in fact, is what most often happens at this crucial stage of the religious life: *discouragement* or *the half-conscious acceptance of mediocrity*, because in order to make the religious life livable we have in reality introduced an alien element. We have tried to find for ourselves some centre of human interest, some motive for living which, for good or ill, can be reconciled with the externals of religious life and with the decent observance of the generality of our commitments. But if, through clear-sightedness and a desire to remain truly faithful to our Lord, we reject such a compromise, then discouragement lies in wait.

“And yet if only we could realise what Jesus expected from us at this critical moment of our religious life, if we knew what he expects from a stage which is not a step back, as we tend to think but the establishment of the conditions necessary for a new venture, for the discovery of a life in the spirit and in faith, then we should also become convinced that, *with Jesus*, a life like this is possible.”¹¹

In considering the second summons in the life of the Petits Frères, Voillaume insists on the purifying role of contemplation. Equally important is an apostolate among men. On 24 March 1957, a week after the letter from St. Gildas, Voillaume wrote from the Railway Station at Dijon: “Of course, we need the desert, but not always. We are not monks or hermits, even though we must share their essential disposition of a radical detachment from all created being. We are not hermits, and it is my personal belief that we cannot reach total generosity or sustain it, especially at the time of our Lord’s second summons, if we have failed to give our lives to men for their salvation. We are, in fact, vowed to take other men’s burdens upon our shoulders, with all the dullness, and sometimes even the crushing weight which that implies.”¹²

“All these men are to be sought out and loved; it is they who will help you towards complete renunciation, as the Toureg helped Father de Foucauld, and as all mankind in need of salvation provided our Lord, in his agony in the garden, with the absolute motive for persevering even to his death.”¹³

CONCLUSION

These lengthy letters are edited in the English translation. Already there are striking reminders of Lallemand's concept of second conversion and of Libermann's experience. Because of our interest in this, it is necessary to give another passage from the letter of 17 March 1957, which was omitted by the English editor. In the face of Jesus' second summons, the more generous one has been in the past, the more frightening is the next step: "What is even more disconcerting is that the greater has been our generosity and fidelity to grace, the more impossible seems the path ahead. Now the demands of poverty and interior detachment, of chastity, obedience and charity appear to us under a new light, and these demands are greater than we had thought. But then it is an inestimable grace to see opening before us a horizon that is more and more vast. It is proof that Jesus is there with his light. Along this path, become now so austere, how can we avoid being discouraged by the huge distance which separates us from our goal? Because the goal has receded, we cannot help but feel that we have fallen back instead of going forward. Everything that happens gives us the impression of having fallen back. Our feeling is that we have failed."¹⁴

The context of René Voillaume's letters was reflection on the religious life of the Petits Frères de Jésus. Some brothers had recently left. Many had come to the end of their spiritual adolescence. They were at a point which held the possibility of a new beginning, but there was a danger that they would settle for an honest respectability, which is really a falsification of religious life, even though the appearances remain intact. Without developing the idea, Voillaume considered that a community, as such, could also receive a second summons. While his attention is confined to a consideration of religious life, nothing in the idea of the second summons implies any restriction to a single category of people. It applies to all Christian life. Voillaume indicates as much, for instance when he says: "This second summons makes itself heard at a time of life when a person is ordinarily weighed down with the cares of others, with the responsibility of professional tasks and with the bringing up of children."¹⁵ It seems clear that Voillaume is really speaking of the same reality that Lallemand called second conversion, the unconditional surrender to God in a mature day. His reflections bring a little more light to the subject from a slightly different perspective. They also witness to the actuality of second conversion. It has lost none of its relevance.

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

Second conversion belongs to human experience. It is a crucial moment in our effort to respond to a loving God. An act of faith is called for in a radically new situation. Stripped of illusion, the individual scarcely recognises himself as the same person who previously committed himself. The landscape is bleak and a question that keeps recurring is: "Who would have thought that things would have turned out like this?" Priests and religious know this question with the accompanying feeling of being strangers to themselves. Married couples know it too. They have said "yes" to each other in the springtime of their love. The years have passed. The rearing of children and the wear and tear of married life have taken their toll. There have been disagreements, failures, maybe infidelities. Their love began as giving, soon it had to become forgiving. Now enthusiasm has waned and their "yes" to each other in a later day may draw upon the last reserve of their courage. This second "yes" is spoken with less self-assurance but joyfully still and with new hope. The strong light of midday has not only dispelled the mists of illusion, it has uncovered the real meaning of the marriage covenant which binds them to each other and to the Lord. The acknowledgment of their own poverty and weakness is a gateway to greater authenticity, to an unexpected future with its own new promise. God is the moving force in second conversion; the timing belongs to Him. He needs no particular setting, He takes us by surprise. A businessman becomes suddenly disillusioned with the profit motive, a woman is confined to a wheelchair, a close friend dies, a child is born; sooner or later the question "Who would have thought that things would have turned out like this?" strikes a chord in the experience of everyone. The call to second conversion is heard far beyond the confines of religious life.

If second conversion belongs to human experience, it takes on its full force, its full colouring only when it is lived. In Libermann it comes alive. From his struggle to live the Christian life we can draw strength for our own struggle. Libermann's crisis of faith at Metz sounds an echo for the young everywhere who are searching for God. His struggle to cope during the period of nervous disorder at Saint-Sulpice makes him a fellow and friend of the disturbed for all time. Here we will confine ourselves to a few remarks on how his second conversion can bring us new hope and courage. The message is mainly for those who have left behind the crises of youth but who somehow find themselves searching once again. They

CONCLUSION

have painfully come to terms with life but now suspect that there is something more to it.

In the seminary of Saint-Sulpice, “the world” was presented as the stronghold of the devil. This is reflected in a letter of Libermann to a fellow seminarian in 1830, a few months after the July revolution: “Don’t allow yourself to be disturbed by the things that take place in the world. Do not even seek information about those things. Let people act and say what they like; occupy yourself only with your self-perfection. You have only one task — namely, to please God and fulfil His divine will. All the rest is vanity. We worry on the pretext that religion is connected with the happenings of the world; this is often a false zeal and I am sure that God disapproves of it.”¹⁶

Shortly after the revolution of 1848, Libermann wrote to his old friend, Fr. Gamon. Now his attitude has changed: “It has been the misfortune of the clergy in recent times that they hold to ideas out of the past. The world has progressed, the enemy has set up his batteries in line with the situation and the spirit of the age. But we have lagged behind. We must keep abreast of the times. With complete fidelity to the Gospel we must do good and combat evil according to the state and the temper of the period in which we live. We must attack the ramparts of the enemy wherever they happen to be set up and not give him a chance to entrench himself and consolidate his position while we are off seeking for him in places where he is no longer to be found. Clinging to olden times and retaining thought patterns that ruled a previous era will destroy the efficacy of our endeavours and enable the enemy to establish a stronghold in the new order. Let us then frankly and simply embrace the new order and breathe into it the spirit of the Gospel. We will thereby sanctify the world and the world will be on our side.”¹⁷

The contrast in the two positions illustrated by these texts is obvious. It is nevertheless their continuity, the fact that one somehow grew into the other, that makes the contrast so striking. In his second conversion, Libermann took the step from the private to the public arena; he walked out into the world. It is his liberation from the previous restricted situation that catches our eye. Yet it was his fidelity in this restricted situation that made everything else possible. “You have shown you can be faithful in small things, I will trust you with greater” (Mtt.25,21).

It is tempting to try to write a modern scenario for second conversion,

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

but it is impossible. True, secularisation often brings the experience of a receding God, growing bureaucracy the feeling of personal insignificance. All the experiential elements of second conversion could be assembled and left waiting for God to arrive. The result would be a complicated piece of theatre removed from reality, where God is an afterthought. In second conversion God has the principal part. It is He who chooses the man or woman, and after years of preparation, it is He who chooses the moment. The circumstances of modern living are not irrelevant but they take on importance in second conversion only when God speaks through them — and God is as much at home in the kitchen as in the cloister.

Libermann's second conversion is a source of encouragement and hope to all who are sincerely trying to be faithful to God. They see beyond the more visible aspect of it, the daring apostolic initiative, to the frightening act of complete trust in God that is at its source. Everyone is afraid to let go completely. No one wants the experience of the trapeze artist during those few moments when he has his feet firmly planted in mid-air.

Just as we have been enlightened by the insights of Lallemand concerning the meaning of second conversion, so we are heartened by the fact that Libermann found the courage to take the step. By recalling this event we are enabling him to continue his favourite task of encouraging others. Libermann did not set out to write a book, but to light a fire. We should be grateful to him for the chance to warm ourselves.

NOTES

NOTES

The following abbreviations will be used throughout:

ND. *Notes et Documents relatifs à la vie et à l'oeuvre du Vénérable François - Marie - Paul Libermann*. The volume will be designated by Roman numerals, eg. ND. IV, 15 refers to page 15 of volume four.

CSJ. *Commentaire des douze premiers chapitres du Saint Evangile selon St Jean (de Libermann)*.

ES. *Ecrits Spirituels* (de Libermann).

LS. *Lettres Spirituelles* (de Libermann).

INTRODUCTION

1. Peter Shaffer, *Amadeus* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1980), p.23.
2. Shaffer, p.119.
3. Louis Lallemand was born in Châlons-sur-Marne (France) in 1588. He received his education at the Jesuit College of Bourges. In 1605, he entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus at Nancy and did his studies in philosophy and theology at Pont-à-Mousson. He taught in different places both philosophy and theology. For four years he was master of novices and then for three years director of the second novitiate at Rouen. His health was never very good and he died at the young age of 47.

Notes to Chapter One: *Observance and Revolt*

1. Raphael Mahler, *A History of Modern Jewry: 1780-1815* (London: Valentine, Mitchell, 1971), p.20.
2. Mahler, p.18.
3. The Jews of Alsace-Lorraine were referred to as Ashkenazi Jews because of their affinity in rite and custom to German Jews. *Ashkenaz* means Germany in Hebrew, *Sepharad* means Spain.
4. ND. I,15. *Lettre du R. P. Corbet, août 1878*.
5. ND. I,38 *Lettre du Docteur Libermann, 23 mai 1853*.
6. Cf. ND. I, 41-50. *Lettre de quelques Israelites au Clergé de France*.
7. ND. I, 50. *Note du Docteur Libermann*.

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

8. ND. I,50. *Note du Docteur Libermann.*
9. David Drach, a student friend of Samson Libermann, became a renowned rabbi and a specialist in oriental languages. His conversion to Catholicism in 1823 was given a lot of publicity. He was of assistance to Francis Libermann several times in Paris. They met again later in Rome, where Drach had become librarian of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. He died in Rome in 1865.
10. ND. I,51. *Note du Docteur Libermann.*
11. Cf. ND. I, 63. *Récit de M. Gamon, 1850.* As the *Récit de M. Gamon* is of considerable importance, it is well to say something of its origin. In 1850, Fr Gamon was doing a retreat at Issy. While there he met Libermann and told him that he would be very interested to hear an account of his conversion. Libermann invited him to come to the *Séminaire du Saint-Esprit* and there he satisfied his curiosity. Fr Gamon returned immediately to Issy and wrote an account of the conversation. He recorded Libermann's description of what happened in the first person, as can be seen from the following two notes.
12. ND. I,62. *Récit de M.Gamon, 1850.*
13. ND. I,63. *Récit de M.Gamon, 1850.*
14. Francis Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to People in the World*, ed. and trans., Walter van de Putte, CSSp., Duquesne Studies, Spiritan Series, 6 (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 2-4. Letter to Samson Libermann, 6 January 1826.

Notes to Chapter Two: *Confusion and Conversion*

1. Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to People in the World* (Duquesne), p.2. Letter to Samson Libermann, 6 January 1826.
2. Cf. ND. I,60-63. *Récit de M. Gamon, 1850.*
3. Felix subsequently married and had four children. He had a bookshop with a bookbinding service in Rue Mazarin in Paris. He died there of cholera in 1849.
4. ND. I, 62. *Récit de M. Gamon, 1850.*
5. ND. I, 54. *Lettre de Jacob Libermann, 6 Janvier 1826.*
6. ND. I,64-65. *Recit de M. Gamon, 1850.*
7. ND. I, 55, note 1. *Lettre de Jacob Libermann, 6 Janvier 1826, post-scriptum.*
8. ND. I,75. *Note de M. Drach, 3 mai 1859.*
9. ND. I,85. *Lettre de M. Grillard, 12 février 1858.*
10. ND. I,17. *Lettre du R. P. Corbet, août 1878.*
11. Renée Neher-Bernheim, *Histoire Juive de la Renaissance à nos Jours*, tome II (Paris: Durlacher, 1965), p. 185.

NOTES

12. Neher-Bernheim, II, 185.
13. ND. I,65-66. *Récit de M. Gamon, 1850.*
14. ND. I,66. *Récit de M. Gamon, 1850.*
15. ND. I,92. *Lettre de M. Gauffreteau, 29 octobre 1857.*
16. ND. I, 98. Note I. *Lettre de M. Delucheux, 18 février 1879.*
17. ND. I,90. *Lettre de M. Vernhet, 17 novembre 1876.*
18. Fr. Adolphe Cabon, CSSp (1873-1961) is undoubtedly the one who has contributed the most towards research into the life of Libermann. During the period 1929-1941 he compiled *Notes et Documents relatifs à la vie et à l'oeuvre du Vénéral François-Marie-Paul Libermann*. This corpus comprises thirteen volumes and two appendices. In 1956, a volume of additions (*Compléments*) appeared.
19. M. Nédoncelle, "Les Faits de Conversion devant la Réflexion chrétienne" dans *J'ai rencontré le Dieu Vivant* (Paris: Les Editions de la Revue des Jeunes, 1952), p. 28.
20. ND. I,76. *Lettre de M. Drach, 3 mai 1859.*
21. LS. I,115. *Lettre à M. Liévin, 11 septembre 1835.*
22. Cf. CSJ. 543.
23. Nédoncelle, "Les Faits de Conversion", p 29.

Notes to Chapter Three: *Peace and Fragility*

1. Jean Jacques Olier (1608-1657). During his student days in Paris, he recognised the signs of God's call and before his ordination to the priesthood in 1633 he was seriously living a fervent Christian life. His director at the time, St. Vincent de Paul, encouraged his apostolic inclination and he spent five years working in Auvergne and Bretagne. These years of mission within France brought home to him the need for good priests. Then followed two years of interior trials and poor health with nervous disorder.
 In 1642, he became pastor of the parish of Saint-Sulpice in Paris. He set himself to tackle the serious problems of this very large parish and in ten years it had been completely transformed. He later took on a missionary undertaking in Canada, but it is as founder of the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice that he is best known. The foundation dates from 1652. Soon requests came to the Sulpicians to staff other French Seminaries and later they did this work also in North America. In the formation of priests the influence of M. Olier has been immense.
2. ND. I,311. *Témoignage de M. Perrée.*

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

3. ES. 271. *Petit Traité de la Vie intérieure.*
4. LS. II, 363. *Lettre à un séminariste, 1839.*
5. Jean Jacques Olier, *Pensées Choisies*, p. 40, quoted in D. T. C. XI, col. 977.
6. CSJ. 21.
7. LS. I,44. *Lettre à M. Viot, 17 mars 1833.*
8. LS. I,485. *Lettre à M. Kervoal, 23 avril 1838.*
9. LS. I,453. *Lettre à M. Carron, 31 mars 1838.*
10. LS. I,180. *Lettre à M. Telles, 28 août 1836.*
11. *La Solitude*, the Sulpician novitiate in the grounds at Issy, where the Sulpicians spent a year after ordination.
12. *Vie de M. Mollevaut, par un prêtre de Saint-Sulpice.* (Paris: 1875). p. 187.
(The author is Fr Gamon).
13. Gamon, *Vie de M. Mollevaut.* p. 468.
14. Gamon, *Vie de M. Mollevaut.* p. 465.
15. Gamon, *Vie de M. Mollevaut.* p. 463.
16. ND. I, 67. *Récit de M. Gamon, 1850.*
17. ND. VIII, 203. *Lettre à M. J. Schwindenhammer, 3 août 1846.*
18. LS. I,532. *Lettre à un séminariste, 3 juin 1838.*
19. Cf. ND. I,169. *Lettre au Dr. Libermann, 25 septembre 1836.* (Cf. also LS. I, 219-232).
20. ND. XIII, 132. *Lettre à M. X. Libermann, 4 mai 1851.*
21. LS. II, 476. *Lettre à M. Dupont, 17 août 1840.*
22. LS. II, 355. *Lettre à un séminariste, 1839.*
23. LS. II,280. *Lettre à M. Carof, 16 août 1839.*
24. LS. II, 178. *Lettre à M.Carron, 4 Janvier 1839.*
25. LS. II, 185. *Lettre à un séminariste, 9 Janvier 1839.*
26. LS. I,106. *Lettre à un séminariste, 19 août 1835.*
27. ND. I,115. *Témoignage de Dom Salier, 21 decembre 1860.*
28. ND. I,75. *Récit de M. l'abbé Aubry, 28Janvier 1858.*
29. ND. I,119. *Lettre du P. Leblanc S. J., 18octobre 1876.*
30. LS. II, 113. *Lettre à un séminariste, octobre 1838.*
31. LS. I,74. *Lettre à M.Leray, 27 Janvier 1835.*
32. LS. I,286. *Lettre à M. de Goy, 5 septembre 1837.*
33. LS. II,26. *Lettre à M. Leray, 14 juillet 1838.*
34. ND.I,57. *Lettre de M. Titercher, 28 octobre 1854.*
35. ND. I,149. *Lettre au Dr. Libermann, 27 juillet 1828.*
36. ND. I,130. *Lettre de M. Viot, 16 mars 1858.*
37. LS. I,7 and ND. 1,150. *Lettre au Dr. Libermann, 8 avril 1829.*
38. ND. I,123. *Témoignage de M. Jarrier.*
39. LS. I,9. *Lettre au Dr. et à Mme. Libermann, 8 juillet 1830.*
40. ND. I,355. *Lettre du P. Maignan, 11 mai 1872*

NOTES

41. ND. I,356. *Lettre du P. Maignan, 7 mai 1878.*
42. ND. I,480. *Déposition de M. de Brandt, 17 février 1882.*
43. ND. I, 375. *Lettre à M. Telles, 4 Janvier 1838.*
44. ND. I,479. *Déposition de M. de Brandt, 17 février 1882.*
45. ND. II,493. *Lettre à M. Cahier, 10 août 1841.*
46. LS. I, 9-11. *Lettre au Dr. et à Mme. Libermann, 8 juillet 1830.*
47. LS. I,17. *Lettre à M. Viot, 16 octobre 1830.*
48. ND. II,75. *Memoir à Mgr. Cadolini, 27 mars 1840.*
49. John M. Sutherland and Howard Tait, *The Epilepsies: Modern Diagnosis and Treatment* (Edinburgh: Livingstone, 1969), p. 3.
50. Sutherland and Tait, *The Epilepsies*, p. 76.
51. ND. I, 308. *Déposition de M. Perrée.*
52. LS. I,12. *Lettre au Dr. et à Mme. Libermann, 8 juillet 1830.*
53. ND. I, 350. *Témoignage du P. Coyer, Eudiste.*

Notes to Chapter Four: Success and Failure

1. G. de Bertier de Sauvigny, "La Restauration" dans *Nouvelle Histoire de l'Eglise*, vol. IV (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 330.
2. Cf. Robert Rouquette, "Congrégations Secrètes" dans *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité II-II* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1953). Col. 1491-1507.
3. ND. I,215-216. *Témoignage du P. Le Vavas seur au procès apostolique.*
4. ND. I,242. *Notes pour Issy.*
5. ND. I,219. *Lettre à M. Liévin, 11 septembre 1835.*
6. ND. I,219. *Lettre à M. Liévin, 11 septembre 1835.*
7. ND. I,238. *Notes pour Issy.*
8. ND. I,240. *Notes pour Issy.*
9. ND. I,204. *Lettre à M. Leray, 20 septembre 1836.*
10. ND. I,176-177. *Témoignage de M. Icard au procès apostolique.*
11. ND. I,241-242. *Notes pour Issy.*
12. ND. I,173-174. *Lettre de Dom Gardereau, 1885.*
13. ND. XII, 320-321. *Lettre au P. Le Vavas seur, 17 juillet 1850.*
14. Joseph Dauphin, *Le R. P. Louis de la Morinière* (Paris: Delhomme & Briguët, 1893). p. 102.
15. ND. I,410. *Lettre à M. Hacquin, 20 mai 1838.*
16. LS. I,282. *Lettre à M. Carron, 21 août 1837.*
17. LS. I,334. *Lettre à M. Carron, 30 octobre 1837.*
18. LS. II, 129. *Lettre à M. Faillon, 4 décembre 1838.*
19. ND. I, 575. *Lettre à M. Louis, 15 décembre 1839.*

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

20. ND. I, 229. *Lettre à M. Delasorne, 9 septembre 1835.*
21. LS. I,126, ND. I,230. *Lettre à M. Delasorne, 19 septembre 1835.*
22. Francis Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious*, Vol. II, ed. and trans., Walter van de Putte, CSSp., Duquesne Studies, Spiritan Series 8 (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 227-230. Letter to Mr. Carron, 16 March 1838.
23. ND. III, 390. *Cahier des Bienfaiteurs*, de la main de Libermann, 1843.
24. ND. I, 639. *Lettre à M. Le Vavas seur, 8 mars 1839.*
25. ND. I,640. *Lettre à M. Le Vavas seur, 8 mars 1839.*
26. ND. I, 660-661, *Mémoire du P. Tisserant, octobre 1842.*
27. ND. I, 661. *Lettre à M. Le Vavas seur, 28 octobre 1839.*
28. ND. I, 662. *Lettre à M. Le Vavas seur, 28 octobre 1839.*
29. ND. I,670. *Mémoire du P. Tisserant, octobre 1842.*

Notes to Chapter Five: "Franchir Le Pas"

1. Cf. X. Jacques S. J., "Le Sacrament de la Conversion" dans *Christus*, juillet 1963, p.308.
2. Nédoncelle, "Les Faits de Conversion", p.17.
3. Th. Mainage, O. P., *La Psychologie de la Conversion* (Paris: Gabalda, 1915), p.195.
4. Cf. Henry Pinard de la Boullaye, "Conversion" dans *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* II-II (Paris: Beauchesne, 1953), col. 2259.
5. No original writings of Lallemand survive. His teaching was gathered together in *Doctrine Spirituelle* and published in 1694 by Champion on the basis of notes by J. Rigoleuc and J. J. Surin.
6. Louis Lallemand, *Doctrine Spirituelle*, Ile Principe, Sect. I, Ch. 1, Art. 2 (Ed. Courel, pp.90-91).
7. Louis Lallemand, *Doctrine Spirituelle*, Ile Principe, Sect. II, Ch. 6, Art. 2 (Ed. Courel, p.126).
8. *La Vie et la Doctrine Spirituelle du Père Louis Lallemand*, introduction et notes par François Courel, S. J., collection Christus no. 3, Textes (Desclée de Brouwer, 1961), introduction p.19.
9. Cf. *La Vie et la Doctrine Spirituelle du Père Louis Lallemand* (Ed. Courel), introduction p.26.
10. *La Vie et la Doctrine Spirituelle du Pere Louis Lallemand* (Ed. Courel), introduction, p.24.
11. Jacques Loew, *As if he had seen the invisible*, trans., Marie-Odile Fortier Masek (Notre Dame: Fides, 1967), pp.15-16.

NOTES

12. See above: pp.82-85.
13. Maurice Briault, CSSp., *La Reprise des Missions d'Afrique au dix-neuvième siècle: le Vénérable Père François-Marie-Paul Libermann* (Paris: de Gigord, 1946), p.61.
14. Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious*, vol. II (Duquesne), p.222. Letter to Mr. Carron, 3 February 1838.
15. ND. 1,499. *Lettre à M. Carron, 16 mars 1838, post-scriptum.*
16. Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious*, vol. II (Duquesne), p.314. Letter to Fr. Cahier, 10 June 1838.
17. Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious*, vol. II (Duquesne), pp.233-234. Letter to Mr. Carron, 29 March 1838.
18. Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious*, vol. II (Duquesne), p.254. Letter to Mr. Carron and Mr. de la Brunière, 17 June 1838.
19. Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious*, vol. II (Duquesne), pp.251-252. Letter to Mr. Carron and Mr. de la Brunière, 17 June 1838. Cf. also CSJ. pp.361-362.
20. Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious*, vol. II (Duquesne), p.262. Letter to Mr. Carron, 27 July 1838.
21. Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious*, vol. II (Duquesne), p.265. Letter to Mr. Carron, 27 July 1838.
22. Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious*, vol. II (Duquesne), p.257. Letter to Mr. Carron, 19 June 1838.
23. ND. I,674-676. *Lettre à M. Carbon, 15décembre 1839.*
24. ND. II, 150. *Lettre à Dom Salier, 9 juillet 1840.*
25. LS. II,293-295. *Lettre à M. Féret, 13novembre 1839.*
26. LS. II, 296-298. *Lettre à M. Louis, 30 novembre 1839.*
27. ND. II, 140. *Lettre à M. de Farcy, 6 juillet 1840.*
28. Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious*, vol. II (Duquesne), p.295, postscript of letter to Mr. Carron, 19 December 1839.
29. ND. II, 150-151. *Lettre à Dom Salier, 9 juillet 1840.*
30. LS. II,316-317. *Lettre à M. Féret, 15 décembre 1839.*
31. Cf. p.98-99.
32. Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious*, vol. II (Duquesne), pp.293-295. Letter to Mr. Carron, 19 December 1839.
33. Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to People in the World*, (Duquesne), p.82. Letter to Mr. and Mrs. Samson Libermann, 12 December 1839.
34. Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to People in the World*, (Duquesne), p.81. Letter to Mr. and Mrs. Samson Libermann, 12 December 1839.
35. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), pp.18-21. (Poem trans., J. B. Leishman).

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

Notes to Chapter Six: *Epilogue*

1. Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious*, vol. III (Duquesne), pp.31-33.. Letter to Fr. Le Vasseur, 28 January 1846.
2. Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious*, vol. III (Duquesne), p.47. Letter to Fr. Le Vasseur, 3 December 1846.

Notes to Chapter Seven: *Conclusion*

1. The experts involved were: M. François Baud, M. le Colonel Jean Taboureau, Mme. Françoise Courtin-Duroux. Cf. "Révélations d'un Visage" dans *Spiritus: Etudes Spiritaines*, 1964, pp. 141-155.
2. *Spiritus: Etudes Spiritaines*, 1964, p. 155.
3. *Spiritus: Etudes Spiritaines*, 1964, p. 148.
4. *Spiritus: Etudes Spiritaines*, 1964, p.152.
5. *Spiritus: Etudes Spiritaines*, 1964, p.149.
6. *ND*, III, 261. *Lettre à M. Dupont, 9 août 1842*.
7. *CSJ*, 324.
8. Cf. *CSJ*, 325.
9. The complete text of this introduction is given in "Libermann en Sorbonne" in *Spiritus*, no.2 (October 1959), pp.167-183.
10. J. M. R. Tillard, *A Gospel Path: the Religious Life* (Brussels: Lumen Vitae, 1977),pp.42-43.
11. René Voillaume, *Brothers of Men: Letters to the Petits Frères* (Denville, N. J.: Dimension, 1973), pp.30-32.
12. Voillaume, *Brothers of Men*, pp.34-35.
13. Voillaume, *Brothers of Men*, p.36.
14. René Voillaume, *Lettres aux Fraternités*, tome I (Paris: Cerf, 1960), p.19.
15. Voillaume, *Lettres aux Fraternités*, 1,32.
16. Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious* (Duquesne), vol. II, p. 12. Letter to Mr. Eugene Viot, 16 October 1830.
17. Letter to Fr. Gamon, 20 March 1848, quoted in Adrian van Kaam's biography of Libermann, *A Light to the Gentiles* (Denville, N. J.: Dimension, 1963), p.218. For the complete letter, cf. *ND*. X. 145-151.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(A) *Studies of Francis Libermann's Life and Teaching*

- Blanchard, Pierre. *Le Vénérable Libermann, 1802-1852*. Deux tomes. Desclée de Brouwer, 1960.
- Briault, Maurice, CSSp. *Le Vénérable Père F. -M. -P. Libermann. La Reprise des Missions d'Afrique au dix-neuvième siècle*. Paris: de Gigord, 1946.
- Gay, Jean, CSSp. *Libermann, Juif selon l'Évangile, 1802-1852*. Paris: Beauchesne, 1977.
- Kelly, Bernard J., CSSp. *The Spiritual Teaching of Ven. Francis Libermann*. Dublin: Clonmore & Reynolds, 1955.
- Koren, Henry, CSSp. *The Spiritans, a History of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost*. Duquesne Studies, Spiritan Series, 1. Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1958. *To the Ends of the Earth. A General History of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1983.
- Legrain, Michel, CSSp. "Une Union de Congrégations au XIXe siècle; le Saint-Esprit et le Saint-Coeur de Marie." 241p. Thèse de doctorat. Paris: Institut Catholique, 1965.
- Letourneur, Jean, CSSp. *Cahiers Libermann*. Chevilly: Séminaire des Missions, s. d. (1967-1970). La vie de Libermann jusqu'à son séjour à Rome, 1840. Neuf cahiers en cinq livrets, d'environ 250 pages ronéotypées, 21 x 27, le livret (pro manuscrito).
- Liagre, Louis, CSSp. *Le Vénérable Père Libermann: l'Homme, la Doctrine*. Paris: Alsatia, 1948.
- Lithard, V., CSSp. *Spiritualité Spiritaine. Etude sur les Ecrits Spirituels de M. Poullart des Places et du Vénérable Libermann, Fondateurs de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit*. Paris: Dillen, 1938.
- O'Carroll, Michael, CSSp. *Francis Libermann, Convert Jew, Apostle of Africa*. Dublin: Clonmore & Reynolds, 1953.
- Pitra, Jean-Baptiste. *Vie du Révérend Père Fr.-M.-P. Libermann*. 2e éd. Paris: Poussielgue, 1872.
- Rétif, A., S. J. *Pauvreté Spirituelle et Mission d'après le Père Libermann*. Paris: Spes, 1956.
- van Kaam, Adrian, CSSp. *A Light to the Gentiles, the Life Story of the Venerable Francis Libermann*. 1959; rpt. Denville, N. J.: Dimension, 1963.
- Walker Homan, Helen. *Star of Jacob. The Story of the Ven. Francis Libermann*. 1953; rpt. Bickley, Paraclete Press, 1980.

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

(B) *Writings of Libermann*

1. *Notes et Documents relatifs à la vie et à l'oeuvre du Vénérable François-Marie-Paul Libermann*. Pour distribution privée, Maison-Mère, 30 rue Lhomond, Paris, 5e. Cette édition, préparée par le P. Cabon, CSSp., comprend 13 tomes, 2 Appendices et des Compléments, qui ont paru successivement:
 - Tome I (1802-1839), paru en 1929; 713p
 - Tome II (1840), paru en 1931; 516p.
 - Tome III (1841-1842), paru en 1933; 566p.
 - Tome IV (1843) paru en 1935; 516p.
 - Tome V (Activité missionnaire, 1842-1844), paru en 1936; 707p.
 - Tome VI (1844), paru en 1937; 657p.
 - Tome VII (1845), paru en 1938; 542p.
 - Tome VIII (1846), paru en 1939; 510p.
 - Tome IX (1847), paru en 1939; 513p.
 - Appendice au Tome IX (Séminaire du Saint-Esprit, 1836-1847), paru en 1939; 216p.
 - Tome X (1848), paru en 1940; 599p.
 - Tome XI (1849), paru en 1940; 629p.
 - Tome XII (1850), paru en 1940; 717p.
 - Tome XIII (1851-1852), paru en 1941; 772p.
 - Appendice au Tome XIII, paru en 1941; 98p,
 - Compléments, paru en 1956; 344p.
2. *Commentaire des douze premiers chapitres du Saint Evangile selon Saint Jean* (1840). 2e édition, s. d., Maison-Mère des Pères du St. Esprit; 709p.
Commentaire de Saint Jean par Libermann. Avant-propos du R. P. A. Cabon, CSSp. Introduction du Pierre Blanchard. Choix des textes par le R. P. L. Vogel, CSSp. Collection "Les Grands Mystiques". Desclée de Brouwer, 1961; 317p.
3. *Ecrits Spirituels du Vénérable Libermann*. Paris: Sanguinetti, 1891; 696p.
Ecrits Spirituels du Vénérable Libermann: Supplément. Paris: Procure Générale, 30 rue Lhomond, 1891; 238p.
4. *Lettres Spirituelles du Vénérable Libermann*. Paris: Poussielgue.
 - Tome I, 3e édition, s. d., 109 lettres (1828-juin 1838); 549p.
 - Tome II, 2e édition, s. d., 128 lettres (juin 1838-1841); 612p.
 - Tome III, 2e édition, s. d., 148 lettres (1842-1851) avec table analytique des trois tomes; 675p.*Lettres Spirituelles de Notre Vénérable Père aux Membres de la Congrégation*. Paris: Procure Générale, 30 rue Lhomond, s. d. 143 lettres (1839-1851), avec table analytique; 716p.
The Spiritual Letters of the Venerable Francis Libermann. Duquesne Studies, Spiritan Series 5-9. Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Vol. 1 (second impression 1963), 90 letters to Sisters and Aspirants; 255p.
Vol. 2 (1963), 92 letters to People in the World; 310p.
Vol. 3 (1963), 75 letters to Clergy and Religious, I; 325p.
Vol. 4 (1964), 109 letters to Clergy and Religious, II; 420p.
Vol. 5 (1966), 90 letters to Clergy and Religious, III; 336p.
Volume 1 was edited and translated by Walter van de Putte, CSSp., LLD., and James Collery, CSSp., the remaining volumes by Walter van de Putte, CSSp. Each volume includes an Index of Subject Matter.
5. *Règle Provisoire des Missionnaires de Libermann* (règle de 1840). Texte et commentaire. Introduction de F. Nicolas, CSSp. Paris: 30 rue Lhomond, s. d. (1967), XXI et 229 pages ronéotypées, 21 x31 (pro manuscripto).
Synopse des deux Règles de Libermann, précédée de la première Règle Spiritaine (règles de 1840, de 1849 et de 1734). Texte intégral et authentique préparé et présenté par A. Bouchard et F. Nicolas, CSSp. Paris: 30 rue Lhomond, 1968, 204 pages ronéotypées, 21 x 31 (pro manuscripto).

LIFE BEGAN AT FORTY

APPENDIX

*Some Events in the Life of Francis Libermann***Adrift**

- 1802 12 April: birth of Jacob (later to be called Francis) Libermann in Saverne.
 1813 Death of his mother,
 1822 Departure for Metz to pursue his studies at the Talmudic School, where he undergoes a crisis of faith.
 1825 Towards the end of the year, he hears the news of the conversion of his brother, Samson, to Catholicism.
 1826 Summer: visit with his father in Saverne. Departure for Paris, where he stays at Collège Stanislas (rue Notre-Dame des Champs). Conversion to Catholicism. Christmas Eve: baptism in the chapel of Collège Stanislas.

The Harbour

- 1827 Student in the seminary attached to Collège Stanislas. 9 June: he receives Tonsure at Notre-Dame Cathedral. After the summer holidays, he enters the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice (Place Saint-Sulpice, Paris).
 1828 His father hears of his "apostasy". 20 December: he receives Minor Orders. First serious epileptic attack.
 1830 Death of his father.
 1831 December: he leaves Paris and goes to the Sulpician house at Issy.
 1833-1837 Organisation of prayer groups among the students at Issy.
 1837 Summer: he leaves for Rennes (St. Gabriel's) to become Novice Master of the Eudists.
 1838 Summer: Frederick Le Vasseur visits St. Gabriel's, speaks of the Work for the Blacks.
 1839 3 December: Libermann leaves the Eudist Novitiate to become involved in the Work for the Blacks. A few weeks of prayer and rest in Lyon,

The Open Sea

- 1840 1 January: with Maxime de la Brunière he leaves Marseilles by boat for Rome.
 17 February: audience with Gregory XVI. March: de la Brunière withdraws. March-September: formulation of the Provisional Rule. 6 June: encouragement from the Cardinal Prefect of the Propaganda. September — mid-November: writes the *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*. Pilgrimage to Loretto — improvement in health.

APPENDIX

-
- 1841 6 January; he leaves Rome for Strasbourg. 23 February: he enters the Senior Seminary at Strasbourg. Mid-May: Jacques Laval leaves for London en route to Mauritius. 6 June: Libermann receives sub-diaconate. 10 August: he receives diaconate. 18 September: he is ordained a priest at Amiens by Mgr. Mioland. 27 September; opening of the Novitiate of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary at Amiens (La Neuville).
- 1842 15 February: Frederick Le Vasseur leaves for Reunion. 17 November: Eugene Tisserant leaves for the West Indies.
- 1843 13 September: seven priests and three helpers leave for Guinea to work with Mgr. Baron.
- 1844 8 October: a letter arrives from Mgr. Baron — all but one of the priests have died in Africa.
- 1845 June: two priests and a brother embark at Bordeaux for Guinea. 16 September: three priests and two brothers leave for Australia to work with Mgr. Brady. 7 December: Eugene Tisserant dies in a shipwreck on his way to Guinea.
- 1846 Summer: journey to Rome to present paper on the Missions. Two properties bought near Amiens as Society expands in France: 28 seminarians, nine novices of whom six are priests.
- 1848 August: fusion with the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. Libermann is elected Superior General, takes up residence at 30 rue Lhomond, Paris (Séminaire du Saint-Esprit).
- 1849 Some tension between the “newly-weds”. April — August: Libermann very ill.
- 1850 Difficulties with Mgr. Sibour, Archbishop of Paris. Missionary consolidation and expansion.
- 1851 November; Libermann’s health deteriorates significantly.
- 1852 2 February: Francis Libermann dies at Séminaire du Saint-Esprit, 30 rue Lhomond, Paris.