

Duquesne University

## Duquesne Scholarship Collection

---

François-Marie-Paul Libermann Collection

Spiritan Collection

---

2010

### **You are here...at the corner of grace and surrender: A retreat of discovery with Francis Libermann**

Bernard Kelly

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

---

#### **Recommended Citation**

Kelly, B. (2010). You are here...at the corner of grace and surrender: A retreat of discovery with Francis Libermann. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/libermann-collection/68>

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.



# You Are Here

...at the corner of  
grace and surrender

A retreat of discovery with Francis Libermann

---

*Presented by Bernard A. Kelly, CSSp*

# You Are Here

... at the corner of grace and surrender

A retreat of discovery with Francis Libermann

*Presented by Bernard A. Kelly, CSSp*



**Spiritans**

**You Are Here**  
**... at the corner of grace and surrender**  
A retreat of discovery with Francis Libermann

*Presented by Bernard A. Kelly, CSSp*

© 2010 Spiritans: The Congregation of the Holy Ghost

Bible quotations are from the New Jerusalem Bible

Design and Layout: Tim Faller Design Inc.

Cover photo: © Roger McClean/Dreamstime.com

Printed in Canada by Priority Printing Ltd.

**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Kelly, Bernard A., 1933-

You are here-- at the corner of grace and  
surrender : a retreat of discovery with Francis  
Libermann / presented by Bernard A. Kelly.

ISBN 978-0-9865317-0-5

1. Libermann, François-Marie-Paul, 1802-1852.  
2. Spiritual life--Catholic Church. 3. Catholic Church--  
France--Clergy--Biography. 4. Christian converts from  
Judaism--Biography. I. Title.

BX4705.L63K44 2010

282.092

C2010-901607-6

This book may be ordered through the Spiritan Provincial Office:  
121 Victoria Park Ave., Toronto, Ontario M4E 3S2, Canada  
\$10 (Cdn)

Also available:

**Where Are You?**  
**A short retreat for men and women in hiding**  
**A few steps into the open with Francis Libermann**

*Presented by Bernard A. Kelly, CSSp*

\$10 (Cdn)

---

# Contents

---

Introduction: Who was Francis Libermann? ..... 4

*Chapter 1*

**At the corner of grace and surrender** ..... 12

*Chapter 2*

**Who am I?** ..... 18

*Chapter 3*

**Keeping afloat** ..... 26

*Chapter 4*

**Refining and deepening desire** ..... 34

*Chapter 5*

**When things go wrong** ..... 42

*Chapter 6*

**Seek and you will find** ..... 50

Conclusion ..... 57

Francis Libermann timeline ..... 61

Endnotes ..... 63

---

# *Introduction*

---



*Francis Libermann*

# Who was Francis Liebermann?

**I**n Knechtsteden, Germany there is a Liebermann Haus. In Toronto, Canada there is a Francis Liebermann High School. In Saverne, France there is a marble monument with the image of Liebermann in brass, where children like to play. Around the world there are centres that bear the name of Francis Liebermann. Why do we still remember him? Who was Francis Liebermann?

In late September 1841 Mgr Mioland, bishop of Amiens, was asking himself the same question. He had just ordained him a priest and now some influential visitors were implying that Francis Liebermann was a misfit and an opportunist. Happily another visitor, the novice director of Saint-Sulpice, came by later and was more reassuring: “Monseigneur, this ordination will rank among the best things you have done in your life.”

## **Young man Liebermann**

Jacob (later to take the name Francis at baptism) was born in Saverne, France in 1802, the fifth son of Rabbi and Mrs Liebermann. The first twenty years of his life were spent in the Jewish ghetto of Saverne. His father supervised his education with high hopes that his son would become a distinguished rabbi. This was also Jacob’s ambition when, at the age of 20, he left Saverne to go to the rabbinical school at Metz.

Away from the sheltered existence of home, Jacob suffered many rude shocks at Metz and underwent a crisis of faith. He found himself re-examining his father's teaching, which he had previously accepted without question. Influenced by the reading of Rousseau, he found he could not accept God's intervention in the world in favour of a particular people. He found the message of Jesus of Nazareth attractive but the miracles repelled him. The conversion to Catholicism of his elder brother, Samson, was a further shock to him.

### **Prayer is dangerous**

He managed to hide his doubt from his father and he went to Paris, where through the influence of Paul Drach, a friend of his brother Samson, he got a position in Collège Stanislas, a Catholic college. This situation only added to his religious confusion. Casting aside all organised religion had seemed to satisfy his calling everything into question at Metz. Now the only guiding principle in his life seemed to be expediency. Weary of the effort of keeping up appearances, he did a dangerous thing. He decided to pray again. God re-entered his life with a force that took him completely by surprise. He was baptised a Catholic and entered the seminary of Saint-Sulpice.

### **When life becomes a burden, do something small**

At first his life at the seminary was supremely happy. Then a storm developed. His father found out about his 'apostasy' and sent a letter of malediction that reduced him to tears. He fell victim to 'grand mal' epileptic seizures which dashed his hopes of priesthood.

At this stage he went to live at the philosophy house of Saint-Sulpice at Issy with the wild hope that fresh air and the absence of strain would work a cure. At one period during this time, he was so discouraged that he was tempted to commit suicide while crossing a bridge in Paris.

With the large stage denied him, he decided to do something small. He gradually spent more time with the students. He began meeting them in small groups and helping them in their prayer life.



Such was his success in this that in 1837 he was appointed novice master of the Eudists even though there was little hope of his ever being ordained a priest.

## **When you come to a dead end, listen to those who don't count**

He spent two years at the Eudist novitiate in Rennes. It was a frustrating time. His predominant feeling was one of a creeping uselessness accompanied by an insatiable desire to do something for God's glory. When two créole seminarians, Frederick Levavasseur (Reunion) and Eugene Tisserant (Haiti) came to him with a project (*L'Oeuvre des Noirs*) to serve the liberated slaves of their homelands, he encouraged them and promised to help them. As he listened and prayed, he realised that he could only do this effectively by leaving the Eudists and bringing the project to Rome for approval. He set off with another member of the group, Maxime de la Brunière, who soon decided that the project was getting nowhere and returned to Paris to become a missionary in China with *Missions Etrangères de Paris*. Libermann stayed with the project of the seminarians. He believed that it was "God's work" even if humanly speaking he had to admit that it was "a foolish undertaking".

Having listened to people who didn't count, he was now faced with people who didn't hurry. The Vatican made exhaustive enquiries in France before giving the first encouraging response in June of 1840. A year later Libermann was ordained and the adventure was on. During his year in Rome he had written a provisional rule for the Society, composed a commentary on the first 12 chapters of John's gospel and made a pilgrimage to Loreto, after which he got word that Strasbourg diocese had accepted him for ordination.

## **Mary, companion of missionaries since the Upper Room**

Do you hate it when you turn the key in the car and nothing happens? Writer's bloc is even worse, just looking at that blank page, as the waste paper basket slowly fills with crumpled sheets.

Liebermann experienced this when he tried to write the provisional rule in Rome along the lines that he and Levavasseur favoured of dedication to the Holy Cross. Deep in the doldrums, he considered Tisserant's suggestion of dedication to Mary and the result was immediate fluency. The name became the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary.

It was in the context of the Archconfraternity of the Holy Heart of Mary at the parish of Notre Dame des Victoires in Paris that Levavasseur and Tisserant had first realised that they had similar dreams. This parish would continue to play a significant role in the development of the Society's missionary activity, notably by putting Liebermann, who had a group of missionaries, in touch with Mgr Barron, who had urgent need of them in the vast mission territory of West Africa. When missionaries struggle against the odds, Mary is not far away.

## **The heart of the matter**

For Liebermann, God always approaches us with respect. He draws us to himself. This is particularly clear in the activity of Jesus. He attracts people. The principal influence of Jesus' disciples will also be by attraction. The key to missionary authenticity is therefore the holiness of the missionary as Liebermann clearly wrote to Fr Lairé in 1851: "The Africans do not need and will not be converted by the efforts of clever and capable missionaries. It is holiness and the sacrifice of their priests that will be the instrument of their salvation...." Later in the same letter he sets out the two essential virtues of a missionary: humility and gentleness. Any initial surprise at the prominence given to these virtues evaporates if we remember the secret of Jesus that he shared with us: "Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light." (Mt 11,29) The importance Liebermann accords to gentleness fits well with the great respect he has for the Africans, and for their customs and culture. He also considered that colonial officials, however different their interest and industry, should nevertheless be treated with respect.

## **“Don’t complain, organise”**

From his early days in the seminary of Saint-Sulpice, Libermann realised that if holiness was the heart of the matter, very little progress would be made without organisation. Without good organisation, heroic efforts could disappear like water into sand. He took great care with the provisional rule, while at the same time seeing it as a framework that in time would need revision. He did recommend a method for mental prayer, but presented it as a scaffolding that would serve only for a time.

The climate and cultures of Africa would call for adaptations, but essential elements, such as community life, would have to be safeguarded. He warned the early bishops that structural mistakes in the first arrangements would be like “original sins”, organic flaws that would have lasting effects.

On the west coast of Africa, there was already a considerable French commercial and military presence. The responsibility of providing for their pastoral care fell to the Holy Ghost Congregation, a venerable society founded in 1703 and with a stirring history of survival through the French Revolution and all sorts of political regimes. They were responsible for providing priests for the French Colonies and so their ministry sometimes overlapped that of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary. Libermann suffered some early frustration in his approaches to them, but he persevered in his desire for collaboration and finally a merger took place in 1848 and an agreement was established that greatly benefitted the missionary cause, and to the present day.

## **Dealing with setbacks**

The first team of missionaries of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary set sail for the west coast of Africa on 13 September 1843. It comprised seven priests and three lay helpers. A year later, only one priest and one layman were still alive. The physical strain, the cultural challenge and the health hazards of a tropical climate had taken a terrible toll. Libermann did not consider abandoning what he considered to be God’s work, but he took his time in carefully preparing the second wave, a smaller group that left two years later.

In December 1845 Eugene Tisserant, one of the founding team, died in a shipwreck off the coast of Africa. In 1846 Libermann received a letter from the other founding member, Frederick Levasseur, indicating that he wanted to leave the Society and join the Jesuits. Libermann had sent a priest to Reunion to join him, who had turned out to be unsatisfactory. Levasseur concluded from this individual failure that the whole society was disintegrating and would not survive for long. Libermann was firm in refusing to accept his resignation. In the process he did not hide his own suffering as he faced all the pressures of leadership. Maybe the most striking feature of the letter was Libermann's self-confidence. He could believe in himself because he had been allowed to glimpse that somehow God believed in him. He was convinced that the missionary venture was "God's work" and would succeed despite the serious setbacks.

## **Leaving us with work to do**

When Libermann died in 1852, he entrusted a missionary task to his followers that is challenging them to the present day. But alongside the challenge of proclaiming the gospel is the even more demanding journey of self discovery, of what it means to be human. Here, Libermann points to Jesus as the key. He saw the rhythm of death and resurrection as the rhythm of human life.

The trouble is that this truth is disturbing in the extreme, even as it is lifegiving. It defies the logic we know. At the end of his personal journey, on his deathbed, Libermann cannot escape the contradiction of it. "Fervour...Charity...Sacrifice...God is all, man is nothing..." In his effort to express his wonder at the greatness of God, he seems to devalue the human: he, who had given his life in the service of people he considered the most deprived. Death and resurrection overflow theory. They must be lived to yield their treasure. They are the ultimate coordinates of self-discovery.

Libermann lived in another day. He spoke another language, he observed the habits and customs of another age. This booklet is an effort to share aspects of his journey of faith, his attempt to live the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. He was surprised by grace, by

God's interest in him. He began a journey of surrender through the weakness of illness and the threat of depression. He experienced failure and rejection. He became familiar with disappointment and disaster. He showed us that surrender to God is the very opposite of giving up. It is a progressive journey of self-discovery. Hopefully it brings us the joy of knowing where we stand...at the corner of grace and surrender.

---

The following pages have been prepared to help people make a retreat, especially those who do not have the benefit of a retreat director.

In your meditation and prayer, give preference to any questions that arise spontaneously. Some of the questions at the end of each chapter may also be helpful. Libermann has already brought peace and hope to many people. May this be your experience too.

# Chapter 1

---

## *At the corner of grace and surrender*

---



For I am certain of this:  
neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities,  
nothing already in existence and nothing still to come,  
nor any power, nor the heights nor the depths,  
nor any created thing whatever  
will be able to come between us and the love of God,  
known to us in Christ Jesus our Lord

*(Romans 8:38-39)*



Piet Fransen tells a story to attempt to give an idea of how grace happens. A young woman bears the scars of having grown up in unfavourable circumstances. A basic instinct of survival determines all that she does. Other interests beckon, sometimes with insistence, but they are luxuries she can't afford. She has no friends. She has been deceived so often that she trusts no one. She considers those who speak kind words to her as interested only in her body. She has let herself go. She gives no thought to her appearance. All her energy goes into getting through the day.

She is in danger of spending her life in the world's casualty ward, when a young man comes upon the scene. He sees beyond appearances and he sees more than a wounded woman. She distrusts his interest and rejects the tentative attention he pays her. Why does he persist when there is no future in it? He is disappointed but he does not give up. Slowly she begins to be affected by his gentle presence. Could it contain a ray of hope? Finally she plucks up the courage to respond to his advances. Then she gains in confidence and a friendship blossoms. Because he cares for her, she now begins to care about herself. At last her smile comes to life and her true beauty emerges.

This is the story of grace, the story of God and his people. It is the Good News. As St Augustine puts it: "God loves us and makes us lovable." But at every step it is fraught with risk. Grace happens only when both parties find the courage to take great risks. The only solid ground is that God will not give up. Even if we are unfaithful, He remains faithful. We can count on Him and the power of his love.

St Augustine again: “God does not love us because we are good. We are good because God loves us.”

In the Song of Moses the same story of grace is told but with a different imagery:

He found them in a wilderness,  
a wasteland of howling desert.  
He shielded them and cared for them,  
guarding them as the apple of his eye.

As an eagle incites its nestlings forth  
by hovering over its brood,  
so he spread his wings to receive them  
and bore them up on his pinions. (Deuteronomy 32, 10-11)

Here the same idea of desire and nurture is present in favour of the “apple of his eye”. Nothing is rushed, great care must be taken and at first we must be carried along on wings not our own. Then comes the moment of great risk, the frightening leap into space. Courage is rewarded and we somehow hold our course. Where grace meets surrender, we find we can fly.

## **Mary shows the way**

Our sense of grace and surrender will hopefully deepen as we go along, but to arrive at a working understanding let us turn to the opening chapter of Luke’s gospel. Mary is fearful and confused by the mysterious challenge that comes to her from God. How can this be? “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow.”(1,35) This promise of God’s grace leads to Mary’s surrender: “You see before you the Lord’s servant, let it happen to me as you have said.”(1,38)

Grace then is God’s self communication to us through his Spirit. It enlivens us, changes us for the better and provides practical help when we are in a tight spot. Fundamentally it is the effect of God’s love for us. We are comforted and we are challenged and we have “...a hope which will not let us down because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.” (Rom 5,5) Mary’s response can be taken as the model of our surrender. Surrender in this encounter is not what armies do. Throughout this retreat we must try to avoid the military mindset that



daily oozes out of our television sets. Surrender is something personal that lovers do, when they can find the courage to take the risk involved.

## **Returning a favour**

Clearly grace and surrender are intimately linked. The drama begins with the greeting that so disturbed Mary. “Hail, full of grace” or as we now say “Rejoice, you who enjoy God’s favour”. God wants to move into her life in a loving but demanding way. She has questions. The answers are helpful but really only lead further into the mystery of God’s love for her. He has plans for her. Respectfully he waits, hoping for her wholehearted consent. When it comes, the adventure is on. The interplay of God’s favour and Mary’s surrender will continue through the lifetime of Jesus and beyond. There will be moments of misunderstanding, of crisis even, as Mary progressively learns what it means to be loved by God and to love him in return.

We may think that it is the surrender that is the difficult part. True, but the two are so intimately linked that the greater problem may be dealing with the reality of being loved, of being loved by God. Maybe we share the hesitation of the woman in Piet Fransen’s story, which is resonantly biblical. We have not been able to accept ourselves as good and lovable.

This new moment of self-acceptance in a love relationship, is the crucial moment. It is the watershed in all human relations. It is what most of us most of the time stop short of. For this is the vital point at which our belief in our goodness is not strong enough to carry us forward. It is always some, often subtle self-rejection that hinders us from believing in another’s finding us attractive and from seeing that the other does so when this happens.<sup>1</sup>

## **Not speechless, but breathless**

Francis Libermann’s spirituality was anchored in the firm Jewish belief of being chosen by God. His sense of self-worth survived many severe shocks. In his middle years it found expression in the spiritual vocabulary of Saint-Sulpice. His sense of God’s grace became so powerful that surrender was the only option that would maintain the thrill of the relationship. His wonder at God’s choice so filled the horizon that he found himself speaking almost entirely of God’s mercy and

downplaying his own human response. The arrival of the Holy Spirit made him feel good about himself to the point of self-forgetfulness. The tendency of the day was to minimise the importance of the human contribution so as to draw attention to the influence of the divine.

Today the pendulum has swung in the other direction. We struggle to elaborate the human picture. Our desires and feelings, from being almost “unmentionables”, are the centre of attention. The effect of God’s loving us — our becoming lovable, desirable — is being articulated more often. A hundred and fifty years ago, when Libermann wrote his letters and commentaries, this declaration of self would have been considered a breach of humility. Now it is a welcome exploration of the human implications of God’s grace. It is more in tune with modern consciousness without claiming to be superior to the efforts of another age. It is certainly not the solving of a mystery. Nor is the pathway easy to follow, but new energy is there because the discovery of God is now inextricably linked to the discovery of self. Our desire for God leads us to discover our own desirability. To illustrate this Sebastian Moore has recourse to a Victorian music-hall refrain:

Desiring you / awakens me  
To what you may see / in me<sup>2</sup>

Benoît Garceau recalls the story of the famous Argentinian pianist, Miguel Angel Estrella.<sup>3</sup> In a prison in Montevideo under threat of torture, his inner strength astonished his captors. He explained that it came from the conviction of his self-worth, a reflection of his being loved, especially by his mother. From her he also learned the to and fro rhythm of love. When he was a child, his mother used to wake him up saying; “I need your smile to get me going in the morning. That’s why I wake you up.”

## **You are here**

It can be rewarding to consider the question “Where are you?”<sup>4</sup> In this retreat we will explore the implications of one possible response “You are here”. This is both a question of finding a place on a map, and of identifying a moment of decision. It was after Jacob wrestled with the angel that he gave a name to the place, a name that would recall the experience. You are surprised by grace and you wonder where you are,

even as you realise that you are at a place of struggle, at a moment that will likely be a turning point in your life.

The coordinates of your position are grace and surrender. Each makes claims on you and how you respond leads to a journey of continuing self-discovery. You are trying to get your bearing here now, but you will surely be here again at other moments of crucial decision in your life. In another day you may again have difficulty recognising the place but you will recognise the struggle. The creative tugging of grace and surrender will have become familiar.

We will be considering the life and writings of Francis Libermann, trying to see how he welcomed grace and came to surrender. For he found himself in the same place of wrestling, not once but many times. There may be a few difficulties of vocabulary, but hopefully these will not detain us as we are clearly dealing with biblical realities. It is a journey of self-discovery. Who I am, where I stand, unfold where grace and surrender meet. Everything depends on my welcome of the Spirit and whether I let him lay claim to all of me. "You are here" is not really the answer to a question. It draws attention to the crossroads of life where the Spirit stakes his claim and I feel the stretching of my heart. In personal relations it can be flattering, if not always welcome, to be under friendly siege, but fear mixes with excitement at the prospect of invasion by the Spirit.

---

## Questions



1. Can you name God's grace in your life? Is it welcome attention? Or unwelcome disturbance?
2. Is there someone you can trust without reserve? To whom you would entrust your deepest secrets? Do they help you discover who you are?
3. Can you believe in your deep personal goodness, which is fundamentally unearned and without conditions, like all God's loving gifts?

# Chapter 2

---

## *Who am I?*

---



The voyage of discovery  
is not in seeking new landscapes  
but in having new eyes.

*(Marcel Proust)*



**W**hen I went to Papua New Guinea in 1980 my hope was that I would be able to make a difference. I wanted to help the people to live fuller lives (Jn 10,10). They would help me in this of course, but I would do the important things, ... like carrying the fragile and valuable projector to show the film strips in the distant village. After crossing the first river and somehow clambering up the first cliff, I readily entrusted the projector to one of my youthful companions, who was negotiating the rough terrain with the surefootedness of a mountain goat. It began to dawn on me that maybe I would not be the one to do the important things. The voyage of discovery had begun, the “having new eyes”. I was beginning to learn the missionary lesson. It is in evangelising that we ourselves are evangelised. And conversion is not only about remorse but about seeing in a different way.

### **The outing of Jesus**

Jesus was considered to be the son of Mary and of the carpenter, Joseph. He had grown up in Nazareth. People knew who he was. Then at his baptism a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you.” (Mk 1,11) This declaration of the Father’s love marks a turning point in Jesus’ life. We sometimes call it the beginning of his public life. Now he openly proclaims the presence of God’s kingdom. His realisation of being loved by the Father

seems to sharpen his sense of who he is. And in the light of who he is, he knows what he has to do.

Jesus is the beloved Son, but the meaning of his being loved must be made clear by being tested. “Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert, for forty days being put to the test by the devil.” (Lk 4,1) Here he finds that, while being loved is the cornerstone of his being, it does not lead to a life of privilege. Being loved does not ensure always having enough to eat. Nor does it replace patient effort by recourse to spectacular shortcuts. Above all it does not express itself in the exercise of worldly power. But being loved by God is the most important source of human strength, more nourishing than the food we eat. “Jesus replied, Scripture says: *‘Human beings live not on bread alone.’*” (Lk 4,4)

Jesus, with the power of the spirit in him, returned to Galilee; and his reputation spread throughout the countryside. He taught in their synagogues and everyone glorified him. He came to Nazara, where he had been brought up, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day as he usually did. He stood up to read and they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll he found the place where it is written:

*The spirit of the Lord is on me  
for he has anointed me  
to bring the good news to the afflicted.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives,  
sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord.*

He then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the assistant and sat down. And all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to speak to them, “This text is being fulfilled today even while you are listening.”

John Shea in his book *Gospel Light* shows how our awareness of being loved is what allows us to know who we are. This realisation brings an enthusiasm which must be tested. Our sense of being loved must be capable of undergoing temptation and hardship if it is to

enable us to see what we have to do. The challenge of God's call will be daunting when we hear it and try to own it as Jesus did.

Any confidence must come from the conviction that we are loved by God. This is our treasure, the secret of our self-worth. It must undergo its time in the desert, refuse the immediate satisfactions on offer, cling to its belief that there is more to life than food or fame or power. The conviction that God loves us, as it survives its testing, gives us a sense of who we are. This is re-enforced when it dawns on us what God wants us to do. This, our vocation in life, may have nothing to do with a place of worship or a sacred text, but it will surely be a call to service in the kingdom of God, as Jesus described this kingdom in the synagogue in Nazareth: "good news to the afflicted...liberty to captives, sight to the blind...the oppressed go free...a year of favour...."

### **Francis Libermann: conversion and baptism**

In Paris in 1830, Libermann was welcomed by David Drach, a friend of his brother Samson and a fellow convert, who secured an attic room for him at *Collège Stanislas*, a Catholic seminary. Keeping his father in the dark about his crisis of faith, and now this tentative contact with a Catholic community engendered a duplicity in his life that was slowly becoming 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. 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 heart.*

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 prayer is a cry 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.<sup>5</sup>

On Christmas Eve 1826, Jacob was baptized and became Francis Mary Paul Libermann.

## **The testing**

It was not long before the Spirit led him into the desert. He felt called to enter the Seminary of Saint Sulpice where he felt at home. The one thing he feared was that his father would somehow discover what had happened and that the news would break his heart. His worst fears were realised and a letter arrived from his father that accused him of betrayal and brought tears to his eyes. His ardent efforts to explain went without reply. God's designs sometimes involve causing hurt to those we love the most.

Then a serious physical setback occurred. Libermann had his first *grand mal* epileptic seizure. His hope of priesthood receded. He was retained in the seminary on sufferance. Now his conviction of being loved by God was seriously threatened and he admitted to having a temptation to suicide. This low point yielded its fruit however. He realised that suffering could not be a sign of God's displeasure.



Consider what happened to Jesus, the one God loved the most. Libermann was developing a sensitivity for those, who through no fault of their own, find that they belong to a neglected minority. He was learning about life on the margin.

Looking around him in the seminary, Libermann felt that he could be of help to the seminarians in their prayer life. He followed this up by organizing a network of small groups. He was so successful that he was selected by the Eudists to be their novice director. For the first time he had a position that brought some recognition, respect even. Through no fault of the Eudists, this time was to be the time of his most severe testing in the desert. Everything seemed to go wrong. Everywhere he looked all he could see was personal failure. How could he be God's beloved if he was such an ineffectual leader?

I began to think that Our Lord wanted to keep me there (in Rennes) 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.<sup>6</sup>

## **Work for the Blacks**

Wanting to “do something for the glory of Our Lord” opens the door to unasked for challenges. For Libermann these centred around The Work for the Blacks, which was the dream of two Créole seminarians, Frederick Levavasseur and Eugene Tisserant. They wanted to organise a group of priests to serve the liberated slaves of their island homelands, Reunion and Haiti. At first Libermann was reluctant to become involved. He wanted to hold on to the relative security of Rennes and suggested that the project proceed under the umbrella of the Eudists. When this became impractical, he still hesitated to become personally involved. His recent failures held him back, the feeling that everything he touched seemed to go wrong. Then in his prayer he received encouraging signs. Grace was showing the way. Parting from the Eudists was very painful, with its implication of leaving them in the

lurch. What Libermann lived as surrender to God was seen by some as the ambitious move of an opportunist. The corner of grace and surrender is where big decisions are made. It is a place of struggle. It can be a place of deep peace but it is not a place of comfort.

He certainly did not suspect that this venture would grow and flourish to be still alive today in the form of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Spiritans), missionaries still at the service of those in most need. Today's Spiritans have taken Luke 4;18-19 as the banner headline for their Rule of Life

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
for He has anointed me,  
to bring the good news to the afflicted....*

They look to Libermann as he struggled in 1839 with the immensity of the task and the insignificance of the resources. Both look to Jesus, the first to take the words of Isaiah as the blueprint for his life.

---

# Questions



1. From your experience what difference does it make to be loved by God? Does it help you to know who you are?
2. Are you on good terms with the poor? Do they help you see with new eyes?
3. John Lennon has said that life is what happens when we are making other plans. How do you react to unasked for challenges?

## Chapter 3

---

# *Keeping afloat*

---



The fear peculiar to men and women  
cannot be overcome by reason  
but only by the presence of someone  
who loves them.  
(Joseph Ratzinger)



When John Mortimer wrote the first part of his autobiography, he entitled it *Clinging to the wreckage*. For some reason this title sounded a chord in me at the time. It derived from the dilemma posed when your boat capsizes. Do you bravely set out to swim for shore? Or do you cling to the wreckage and wait for help to arrive? I leave you to ponder what you might do. It is enough to recognise that keeping your head above water is a requirement in life.

I once had the privilege of visiting my Spiritan confreres working in a part of Brazil. They were an inspiration, not least because of a special quality that I could only describe as buoyancy. In the midst of poverty and injustice they did not lose heart.

In his book *Jesus Today*, Albert Nolan OP goes beyond buoyancy and speaks of Jesus' fearlessness (p121-122).

He was not afraid of the scribes and Pharisees. He was not afraid of what they would think of him or say about him. He was not afraid of what they or the chief priests or the Sanhedrin or Herod or Pilate might do to him. And at every opportunity he encouraged his disciples and friends by saying: Do not fear; do not worry; trust God (Mt 6:25-34; 10:19, 26-31). Where other teachers might have had long lists of "do-nots" or prohibitions, Jesus' principal concern seems to have been that people not be paralysed by fear.

## The enemy

In August of 1843, Libermann wrote to the Superior of the Convent of the Immaculate Conception (Castres): “Remember what I told you in Paris; the majority of souls are lost through discouragement.” From his own experience he was able to identify the enemy. Many dark clouds had gathered for him. The magnitude of the task cast a huge shadow. The unevenness of his health introduced a note of uncertainty into all his plans.

Later his letters to those who turned to him for guidance had a recurring refrain; “Be not afraid”. The message came across as insistently as in the modern encouragement of Pope John Paul II to young people. “Be not afraid.” It is the greeting of the risen Lord. The Spirit will soon come at Pentecost and take away our fear. But now the enemy is still around as we seclude ourselves behind closed doors. And the enemy’s trump card is discouragement.

## Out of the depths

In 1839 discouragement had seeped into the heart of Francis Libermann. It was his second year in charge of the Eudist novitiate at Rennes. A sense of failure clouded his whole outlook on life. Here is how he described his situation in a letter to Fr Féret, a seminary director, in November.

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 Fr Féret, I am good for nothing, I assure you. I have been given a great reputation, but the pure and simple truth is that I am a worthless 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.<sup>7</sup>

In the second chapter of Mark’s gospel, a paralytic is carried by his friends, who show great ingenuity in getting him into Jesus’ healing presence. (Mk 2,1-12) Libermann had a few friends with whom he

shared his hopes and fears. His brother Samson was a lifelong support. Now he had his colleagues in the Work for the Blacks, Frederick Levavasseur, Eugene Tisserant, Maxime de la Brunière, as well as a few supportive Sulpicians and Eudists. In difficult days they carried him and then he was able to walk on his own. This breakthrough came at the end of 1839 when he left Rennes and spent some time in Lyon as a guest of the Ozanam family, before setting off for Rome. According to Tisserant it was in Lyon that Libermann recovered his mobility and it came about through the intercession of Our Lady.

Fourvière, a hill overlooking the city, has been a focal point for the citizens of Lyon since Roman times. Since the 12th century there has been a small chapel dedicated to Mary, which quickly became a place of pilgrimage. The magnificent basilica which presides over the city today was built towards the end of the 19th century. It was not there when Libermann arrived on 7 December 1839. But if the church building then was more modest, the coming celebration of the Conception of Mary lacked nothing in fervour.<sup>8</sup> The feast that year was the occasion of the canonical erection of the Archconfraternity of the Holy Heart of Mary at Notre-Dame de Fourvière. In this sanctuary of Mary, according to Eugene Tisserant, Libermann found peace.

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 with 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.<sup>9</sup>

Mary taught Libermann that grace could be troubling. It causes a major disturbance in one's life. And surrender is the ultimate trusting of another. The amazement is that when surrender responds to grace the Lord becomes present. Mary invited Libermann to recognise that the Work for the Blacks, all unsettling but seductive, had the marks of being God's work. This conviction became the secret of Libermann's buoyancy during 1840 and beyond.

## Mission is what God does for a living

Already in his December 1839 letters from Lyon this new perspective was clear. What a difference a month can make. His November letter to Fr Féret reflects only his pathetic feeling of helplessness. Now Fr Féret's criticism of involving Maxime de la Brunière in the Work for the Blacks calls forth an unequivocal response from Libermann.

So all those who are fervent, generous and of good character must stay in France....

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 for the most highly regarded. His priestly spirit is nothing other than a Spirit of reconciliation and salvation for the whole human race.<sup>10</sup>

Fr Tony Gittins CSSp likes to say that mission is what God does for a living. He wants to make it clear that missionaries will get nowhere unless they see themselves as involved in God's work. It was this conviction that gave Libermann the courage to embark on the adventure of 1840 — going to Rome to seek approval for the Work for the Blacks.

I am going to Rome with M de la Brunière. God alone knows what we will do there. At least St Peter and St 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.<sup>11</sup>

Later in this letter Libermann admits that, humanly speaking, the project is “a foolish undertaking”. The important thing is to let God take control. There is a divine energy, there is a Holy Spirit, whose passion is to establish the kingdom, the reign of God. All our human tendencies will be overridden, “even the most innate tendency of



every creature, that of self-preservation". In the following reflection on John's gospel, Libermann is touching the inner reaches of surrender.

The glory that is imparted to the created person in accomplishing God's plan consists principally in the reign of God within it. This reign of God over the created person and in them has the effect of bringing him to perfection. When the created person immolates and sacrifices himself as far as he can for the love of God, God's plans for him are being carried out. Then the created person, giving free play to the divine will at work within himself, empties himself and allows God to take charge. All the powers of the soul are transformed and inspired by the active power within it so that God's action overrides them all, even the most innate tendency of every creature, that of self-preservation. Without doubt this is the reign and life of God in his creature, reign and life in the highest degree possible. Consequently the greatest glory consists in this most perfect inner surrender to God.<sup>12</sup>

## 1840, a Marian Year

It would be a great mistake to understand surrender as an abdication of responsibility. Libermann's surrender was modelled on that of Mary. There was a lot of listening, of learning to wait, of accepting delays. But there were no concessions to inertia. Maybe all journeys of faith are erratic, at times inching along, occasionally making spectacular progress. Libermann's life had been seemingly becalmed for a few years. Now in Rome promoting a missionary project, some treated him as an opportunist. In evaluating proposals, the Vatican set great store by priestly ordination. De la Brunière judged that the overall prospects were too bleak and returned to France. There he joined the *Missions Etrangères de Paris* and subsequently worked and died in China. Deprived of his financial support, Libermann moved to attic accommodation.

1840 for Libermann can lay claim to being a Marian year. He could make no progress in formulating a provisional rule when dedicating the society to the Holy Cross, the title favoured by Le Vavasseau and himself. Fluency came when he changed the dedication to the Holy Heart of Mary, as suggested by Tisserant. He was in regular

pilgrimage to the churches dedicated to Mary in Rome, *Santa Maria Maggiore*, *Santa Maria in Trastevere*, *Santa Maria della Pace* and *Sant'Agostino* where he often prayed before the statue of *Madonna del Parto*. Finally he journeyed, for the most part on foot, to Our Lady's shrine in Loreto. Upon his return, news awaited him that the bishop of Strasbourg had accepted him as a candidate for ordination. The approval of the Vatican was given to the Work for the Blacks.

Libermann's relation to Mary went beyond devotion to trusting, together with her, in God in the way that Jesus did. This was the solid ground that gave him foothold. He was no longer afraid. To the extent that he put all his trust in God he had become fearless. This fundamental stance would withstand all trials and tribulations. In no way had he been emotionally anaesthetised. He would continue to feel hurt and disappointment; to suffer terribly when disaster struck. But without panic, he had discovered a way to walk upon water. It involved utter confidence in the unfailing presence of a helping hand. It called for a surrender that was at first frightening, but later fear fell away and discouragement lost its hold.

---

# Questions



1. Did you ever experience surrender as invigorating?  
What place has God in your plans?
2. Have you a favourite title for Mary? Have you had the help  
of a friend, or of friends, in overcoming your fears?
3. In “the hour of the storm”, where do you turn for help?  
Have you found a way to well-being without drugs?

## Chapter 4

---

# *Refining and deepening desire*

---



“Greed... is good.  
Greed is right.  
Greed works.”

(from the film “Wall Street” 1987)



I don't go to films to be frightened, so I generally avoid “horror” movies. Of course for films to be gripping they must try to create some unease. One of the most chilling sequences I have experienced was Michael Douglas' passionate defence of greed in the film *Wall Street*. It was a masterful sequence. It took my breath away. It was spoken with such conviction. It was an exaggeration, but it had the whiff of truth, a truth that people live by.

It is not easy to establish the truth that people live by. Traditionally this was an intellectual search in the philosophical sense. Today philosophy is losing ground to science, which wields its influence through amazing mechanical and technological achievement. Advertisers also have a vested interest in determining the truth that people live by, not just with a view to knowing it but, more importantly from the point of view of profit, with a view to shaping and exploiting it. They study human desire, how it can be identified, how it can be fanned into flame.

In the Christian tradition desire is as old as the psalms:

God, you are my God, I pine for you;  
my heart thirsts for you,  
my body longs for you,  
as a land parched, dreary and waterless. (Psalm 63)

Augustine gives it classic expression in his *Confessions*: “You have made us for yourself O God, and our hearts are restless until they

rest in you.” There is a holy longing that inhabits us, that disturbs us. Mystics and prophets have insistently reminded us of this, often without getting our attention. We prefer to stay on the surface and satisfy ourselves with explanations in keeping with our way of life. But these pale in the face of rampant greed or the naked lust for power. There is a rogue desire that can get out of control, destroy families, incite violence and even start wars.

## **What is going on?**

Francis Libermann was a very practical person. He was not a trained psychologist but he was very gifted in evaluating human behaviour. He was a highly regarded spiritual director. From experience he had worked out an image of how people acted under the influence of God’s grace.

A point now about your general way of acting. A ship has sails and a rudder; the wind blows into the sail, getting the ship to proceed as it should, so it advances by its sails and takes its general direction. Yet this direction could be too vague and could lead the ship astray at times. So there is the rudder, to guide it exactly in its due course without straying in any way. Your soul is the ship, your heart represents the sail, the Holy Spirit is the wind; he blows into your will and your soul goes forward, proceeding towards the goal God proposes for it. Your mind is the rudder to prevent you, in the strength and vivacity of the movement given to your heart, from departing from the straight line determined by the divine goodness.<sup>13</sup>

From this we see the breath of God, the Holy Spirit acting on the human will, being an important source of its energy. The intellect meanwhile has the crucial role of providing direction, “of preventing the will and the heart from leaving the precise path that christian prudence requires for the perfect accomplishment of God’s good pleasure.”

Fr Pierre Blanchard in his two volume study of Libermann considers Libermann “un volontariste”.<sup>14</sup> He does not want to suggest that Libermann was anti-intellectual, but rather that Libermann’s intellectual genius was practical rather than theoretical. Libermann

believed that the Spirit of God enters our lives principally through the will. Spirituality is an affair of the heart. In Libermann's view more people are willing to discuss in detail the spiritual itinerary than are prepared to make the journey. This is not to downgrade the intellect. We have great need of light in our darkness. But often we have even more need of courage to overcome our fear.

## Entering a new space

Libermann very rarely shared his personal experience. In 1846 he made an exception in a letter to Fr Jerome Schwindenhammer, who was instructed to speak of the contents to no one and to destroy the letter within three days. Happily for us the letter survived.

I must tell you then, that I never made mental prayer on the virtues, even on the virtues of Jesus and Mary, that I was never able to draw a conclusion or take any resolution to practise virtues, at the end of my mental prayer. I could never even reflect on the virtues in order to know what to do or teach. This I have attributed sometimes to a disorder in my own nervous system, sometimes to a natural incapacity. I really feel that my mind has developed a power, a clarity, and my judgement breadth and rectitude, but certainly it is grace alone which has created that which was not, which has strengthened what was feeble, and rectified what was defective. So clear and true is this that if I became an unbeliever my mind would never be able to deny the existence and action of grace in my soul. In short, nothing in me by way of knowledge in the intelligence, will-power or the practice of virtue has been acquired. God gave everything. He drew me along without asking leave, with a violence which I have not perceived in anyone else up to now.<sup>15</sup>

For the human attitude to God that we try to achieve Libermann used the word "*abandon*" which we translate as "surrender" in the sense explained in the introduction; an end to bargaining, a glad laying down of our arms in the presence of someone who loves us. From the above passage we see that God's love can sweep all before it, but we do not lose our integrity. In fact we discover to our surprise and delight a new integrity. Libermann spoke now from a new space, a place of grace and surrender.

The surrender did not lose the element of struggle. During the period at Issy, Libermann knew loneliness and frustration as his epilepsy persisted and the prospect of priestly ordination grew more and more remote. But he had reached a point of surrender that allowed grace to cast a powerful light, to lay open an unexpected reservoir of courage. His new view of the world was marked by surprising self-assurance. In 1830 he wrote to his brother Samson.

So, my dear friends, I can assure you that my dear sickness is a treasure for me....

I hope that if our Lord Jesus Christ continues to give me grace as he has up to now, grace which I do not deserve at all, I will lead a perfectly poor life entirely employed in his service. Then I will be richer than if I were to possess the whole world, and I defy the world to find me a happier person, for who is richer than the person who wants nothing? Who is happier than the one whose desires are accomplished?

So why worry yourselves about me? Are you afraid I will die of hunger? What! The Lord nourishes the birds of the field, and will he not find a way to nourish me too? He loves me more than the birds of the field.<sup>16</sup>

In this declaration of love, which must have surprised and maybe even alarmed Samson, desire has not been dulled. If anything it has been sharpened. What is happening is a deepening of desire. It has become fierce and focused. It is an answering urge from the depths of an exciting realisation. "He loves me more than the birds of the field."

## **Desire, now flickering flame, now raging fire**

For Libermann grace is the work of the Holy Spirit, who overcomes inertia, moves the will and deepens desire. Our deepest desire is to be loved and to love. Libermann accepted the seminal Thomistic description of love; to love is to want the good of another person. Sentiment now takes second place to self-denial. We *put our selves out* for someone. We *go out of our way* for someone. And when love is mutual, sacrifice can be a joy. In the context of discipleship, Libermann frequently quoted Lk 9,23 in his letters: "Then, speaking to all, (Jesus) said, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me'.



Today desire has made a comeback in the spiritual vocabulary. The brilliant insights of Rene Girard and the work of the school that has developed around him underline the importance of desire in understanding human behaviour.<sup>17</sup> Others claim a place for sexual desire in any discussion of loving.<sup>18</sup> Pope Benedict wrote in his first encyclical: “God loves, and his love may certainly be called *eros*, yet it is also totally *agape*.”<sup>19</sup>

Certainly spirituality cannot disregard feelings and desires and the old theory of sublimation is no longer adequate. We nevertheless heed the warning of Girard that desires can lead beyond rivalry to a violence that the present custom of scapegoating cannot satisfactorily resolve. The scene from “Wall Street” has not lost its disturbing impact. Pope Benedict XVI reminds us of the traditional Christian stance. We must begin with the fact that God loves each of us. This love is at once *eros*, passionate and personal, while remaining always *agape*, unconditional and inclusive.

Liebermann always insisted that we can count on God’s love for us. We may not always feel it. There will be times when enthusiasm wanes, when discouragement takes hold. Feelings and desires out of control can create havoc. Greed or spite can inflict wounds that never fully heal. Sudden enthusiasm can bring a rushed decision that everyone regrets. Is there a way of telling if a particular desire is a friend or a foe?

## **Firmly but gently, a working hypothesis**

In their efforts to be faithful to grace many of Liebermann’s disciples found themselves wrestling with contradictory feelings. They turned to Liebermann in search of a pattern to the activity of the Holy Spirit. Of course there is no pattern; “The wind blows where it pleases; you can hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (Jn 3,8). There is no pattern, but there are some indications that Liebermann discovered in the book of Wisdom.

The first verse of Chapter 8 of the Book of Wisdom seems to have become a guiding light for Liebermann in discerning the action of the Holy Spirit. He usually quoted it from the Latin Vulgate;

*(Sapientia) attingit a fine usque ad finem fortiter et disponit omnia suaviter*: “(Wisdom) spans the world in power from end to end, and orders all things benignly” (NEB). *Fortiter et suaviter* (firmly and gently) became the touchstone in identifying the movement of grace, the action of the Holy Spirit.

Liebermann insists that we be gentle with ourselves. This is not laxity or softness but a peaceful self-acceptance. “Gentleness comes from the same source as firmness. This virtue, one of the most beautiful that Our Lord has brought to men on earth, is not exercised only on others, but first of all affects ourselves.”<sup>20</sup> If we wonder how this works out in practice, Fr Joseph Hirtz gives us a concrete example in his article *Spiritana after Liebermann’s heart*.<sup>21</sup>

In 1843, (Liebermann) wrote as follows to a young missionary who was very annoyed and impatient because of his faults:

There is one thing that has to be clearly recognised and that is that putting an end to our faults will require long, hard work. What is to be gained from making yourself unhappy, discouraged and tense with yourself because of these faults? These attitudes are the product of your self-love and stubbornness. (LS III 214)

And he adds:

A thousand reasons will come to your mind encouraging you to take a hard line with yourself, to become upset, etc. Such reasons come from self-love. You may say to yourself, for instance: “These things are disagreeable to Our Lord, they prevent me from reaching the perfection of my state, they are an obstacle to the good I could do, etc. Therefore (and it is the direct conclusion), the best means must be taken to overcome these failings, etc.” But, my dear friend, the best means are, without contradiction, to accept peacefully, gently and humbly, the pain you feel at being so defective, and to put all your confidence in the Lord. By acting thus, by being gentle with yourself, while gaining strength through confidence in Jesus and Mary, and keeping in a state of peaceful and gentle humility before God, well aware of your destitution, you will make infinitely more progress than by any other way.

We can see from this letter of Libermann how he can help us in our journey of self-discovery. He encourages us to direct our attention away from our selves towards the Lord, to marvel again that He loves us as we are and not as we would like to be. In preventing us from becoming engrossed in a personal project of perfection, Libermann gives us a lightness of being. We acknowledge our failings and we work to correct them, but in the meantime we don't bemoan who we are. We may feel some impatience at not being more fully ourselves, but as we are we place ourselves in God's hands. We surrender. And it makes us free. We feel the Spirit is at work.

Firmly and gently (*fortiter et suaviter*) combine to form an attitude of openness to others. Strength alone can be powerful, but with its rough edges, it fails to move people. Gentleness alone can be maudlin. It is the combination that allows a personal presence that is both sympathetic and demanding. To be firm and gentle brings out the best in others.

---

## Questions



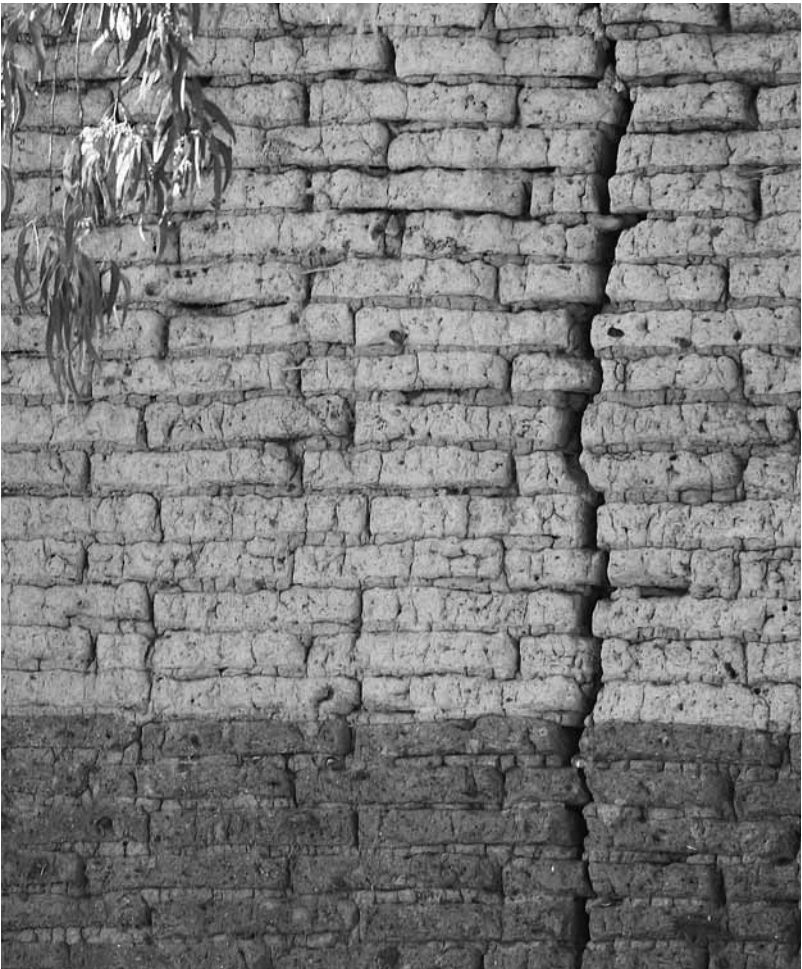
1. Our desires must be put to the test to find their authentic place in our life. Reflect on Jesus' temptation in the desert (Mt 4, 1-11) and on how he challenges us to deepen our desires.
2. Do you share the Libermann perspective that there are more people who know what to do than are prepared to do it? How does this apply in your life?
3. Libermann's attitude to his epilepsy allowed him to enter a new space, where he found that God's love for him was undiminished. How do you face up to misfortune?

## Chapter 5

---

# *When things go wrong*

---



The heart has its reasons  
that the reason knows nothing of.  
(Blaise Pascal)



In Haiti, I was struck by the very common salutation *Bondye bon*. God is good. It was as common as *Bonjour*, as uplifting as the broad smile that spoke it. It might accompany a wild plan to improve the situation. Then it was an act of hope in the future. It might be the conclusion to a terrible tale of woe. Then it was an act of faith flying in the face of the evidence. It revealed an attitude that kept hope alive through a succession of false starts, of promises unfulfilled. Surrender can be a saving grace, but surrender to God is not at all surrender to circumstances.

Circumstances are only the scenario of surrender. They are often fickle, unpredictable. A fever does not always respond readily to medication. The clash of cultures may sometimes be far from friendly. Misunderstandings occur, things go wrong.

During the 1840s Libermann engaged in a flurry of diverse activity. He had continuing dealings with the French government about the transport and upkeep of missionaries. The restoration of the African missions involved detailed correspondence with *Propaganda Fidei* in Rome. At every turn he sought an opening to bring about the fusion of his society with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and finally succeeded despite malicious rumours that he was mounting a hostile takeover.

There will be more evidence later in this chapter that surrender to God does not make for a quiet life. But it remains the bedrock that ensures against personal collapse. For Fr Daniel O’Leary it is “the essence of all great faiths”.

Each morning we need to surrender our lives completely into the heart of God. This surrender is of the essence of all great faiths. It is the dark leap. It has a raw and scary quality about it. Even Jesus hesitates. Most of us, too, shy away from such a challenge. Yet without that initial, blind and extreme act of trust, repeated as often as possible every day for as long as we live, all other routine rituals and pastoral performances will only, at best, boost our ego, at worst, poison our soul.<sup>22</sup>

Libermann was equally uncompromising in his stance, as seen, for instance, in his letter of 8 February 1847 to Fr Le Berre in Gabon:

Let us put all our trust in God, let us surrender to Him body and soul and things will go well. Everyone should have this attitude, every Christian and especially every missionary; above all missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary who work for the glory of the Lord in the coastal countries of Africa. This surrender full of confidence and love is their very life, the source of their strength. It is their happiness and the mainstay of their work.<sup>23</sup>

In taking this stance, Libermann based himself on God’s predilection for the *anawim*, those who put all their trust in God. In their company is where he wanted to belong. He would then find himself among the poor — but God hears the cry of the poor. It gave him roots in God’s Trinitarian life, in the self-effacement of the Persons, three relations all directed away from themselves. The Father so loved the world that he sent his Son; the Son does what he sees his Father doing; the Holy Spirit will not speak about himself.

Grace helps us deal with the frightening aspect of surrender but it also plunges us deeper into mystery. Grace is God’s free gift of the Spirit, in no way deserved. We are uneasy not to be in full control of moments that may be turning points in our life. “In control of our life and in touch with our God” are parameters with which we are comfortable. We know the difficulty of surrender even in the most loving

personal relationships. Difficult as this is when things are going well, the stakes are raised considerably when things go wrong.

## **Dealing with disaster**

On 13 September 1843, seven priests of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary and three helpers left France for the west coast of Africa to work with Mgr Edward Barron, who had come from the diocese of Philadelphia to Africa to minister to the emancipated slaves from the Eastern United States. On 8 October 1844, Libermann received a letter from Mgr Barron with the sad news that the clash of the African climate and European human immune system had proved to be a very unequal struggle. All but one priest and one helper had already died. The reaction within the missionary society was a rush of volunteers to replace those who had died. The outside world, by contrast, was very critical of Libermann, some seeing him as an opportunist who was sending Frenchmen to their death.

There was need to reflect and regroup and it was a year later that Libermann wrote his final letter to the replacements, Frs Briot and Arragon, as they were about to set sail from Bordeaux. It is full of very practical advice but the prevailing thrust is still one of grace and surrender. Mission is God's work. He is the source of the missionary's ability to face hardship and to avoid discouragement. It is a long letter of great balance where faith and reason blend, and where God is in charge without diminishing the importance of caring for one's health or the necessity of dialogue in decision-making. Here is an extract:

Don't depend on your own powers, your own prudence and your own activity. In God alone and in Mary you must place all your confidence.

Be prepared, both of you, to meet great difficulties and to have to suffer delays in the execution of your plans. You will meet troubles, disappointments, contradictions, of every sort, pains inflicted by all kinds of persons, things and circumstances. Don't worry and don't give up. Even when things seem perfectly hopeless, make sure not to yield to discouragement.

Be quiet and calm, humble and gentle in all circumstances. Preserve the same disposition in both prosperity and adversity;

be always humble, peaceful and submissive to all that God wills; refer everything to Him and expect all things from his divine mercy.

Don't look at things the way an excited imagination might suggest but consider them calmly and in a practical way. Don't become too elated by great success or dejected when you see the possibility of failure. Work as faithful labourers in the Lord's vineyard, without self-complacency or discouragement before or after your labours. Whether you are successful or not, your reward will always be great.

When you have to undertake something that is important, weigh and discuss the matter in the presence of God. Begin with casting out all prejudices for or against the venture. Don't allow yourselves to be carried away by enthusiasm; never do things hastily; weigh well what you ought to do in a spirit of faith, but at the same time reason things out.... Use a suitable length of time to examine a case, weigh the pros and cons in the presence of God and act calmly with the sole desire of pleasing God and fostering His glory. After the case has been well examined, fearlessly make your decision and then put it into execution with great confidence in God. Where there is no need for a prompt decision, give the project a long examination. It is not necessary that all the difficulties be eliminated before you undertake a thing. When you have taken proper precautions for its success, always leave something to Providence....

Do not plunge imprudently into the works with excessive zeal at the risk of ruining your health. What good will it be if you win a few souls for God at the expense of your health thus rendering yourselves useless to a greater number....

Maintain peace and harmony among yourselves; do nothing without consulting one another. Let your *esprit de corps* be evident to everyone in all circumstances.<sup>24</sup>

## **“It was a great mistake on my part...”**

Surrender to God is compatible with making mistakes, but if we can't avoid mistakes, we can avoid discouragement and depression. In January of 1846, the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary was a little over four years old. It was mourning the death of one of its founding members, Fr Eugene Tisserant, who was drowned in a shipwreck off the coast of Morocco on his way to Africa in



December 1845. Now Libermann receives a letter from the other founding member, Fr Frederick Levavasseur in Reunion, saying that he has decided to leave the Society and join the Jesuits. The main reason for this is that Libermann has sent a missionary to Reunion who is proving to be more of a hindrance than a help. This has led Levavasseur to conclude that the formation programme is dysfunctional and the Society is falling apart.

Libermann begins his reply to Levavasseur by admitting his mistake. "It was a great mistake on my part..." He nevertheless roundly criticises Levavasseur's overreaction and especially the severity and rigidity of his outlook. "The Jesuits 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." Maybe the most interesting part of Libermann's letter is the very uncharacteristic reference to his own experience. Living at the confluence of grace and surrender is not without cost. Libermann considers himself under far greater pressure than Levavasseur.

...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 superiorship; 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, the solid foundation that has to be ensured 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 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....

Everything within me seems to go counter to my remaining in my present situation. Every attraction of nature and of grace points in a different direction. There is not one fibre in my body nor one tendency in my soul that does not prompt me to seek

solitude. In spite of all that, however, I would consider it actually a crime to entertain such a thought in my mind. God binds me and chains me to the task (of leadership), which is crucifying, yet most dear to my heart.<sup>25</sup>

Libermann compares himself easily with Levavasœur, whom he considers a partner of special standing in the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary. Yet he openly contests Levavasœur's poor opinion of how things are going and his request to leave the Society. Were Levavasœur to have been superior of the Society...

On many occasions, acting upon your present ideas you would have said; "God does not want this work; it will never be successful." And yet it is certain that God does want it, and it is evident that it will succeed. The more I examine it, the more I realise that your yielding to views inspired by trouble and anxiety would constitute a serious infidelity.<sup>26</sup>

We see that surrender to God does not preclude speaking up for oneself. Grace can lead to being decisive and unambiguous. Libermann was nevertheless faithful to his guideline of *suaviter et fortiter*. He admitted his mistake and accepted that the missionary causing the disruption return to France. At the same time he refused to accept Levavasœur's departure and vigorously defended the standing of the Society.

Thanks to my method and the concessions that I have made, the work is established and beginning to develop. Men who are wise and know the difficulties that accompany the foundation of a society are astonished that we were able to obtain so great a regularity in such a short time, for we have been in existence only four years....

If, on the contrary, I had used the unyielding method which you want me to adopt "not one stone would have been left upon another."<sup>27</sup>

It took Levavasœur a little more than a year to get over his 'temptation' to join the Jesuits. Sixteen years after Libermann's death, when the diocesan process towards his beatification was opened, Levavasœur had this to say about him:

Total abandonment to God as a part of his spiritual teaching grew from his own complete refusal to put any trust in himself or any other created thing. The situation that God allowed him to experience right up to the time of the foundation of our Congregation gave him an unbroken opportunity to practice it to a heroic degree. His sickness and unmitigated poverty forced him to count no longer on human help but to look habitually towards God. His relationship to God was that of a child who sleeps peacefully in the arms of its mother. No worries could weaken his trust: in giving his whole self to the Lord in total and unending confidence, he became incapable of doing the slightest thing for personal reasons.<sup>28</sup>

---

## Questions



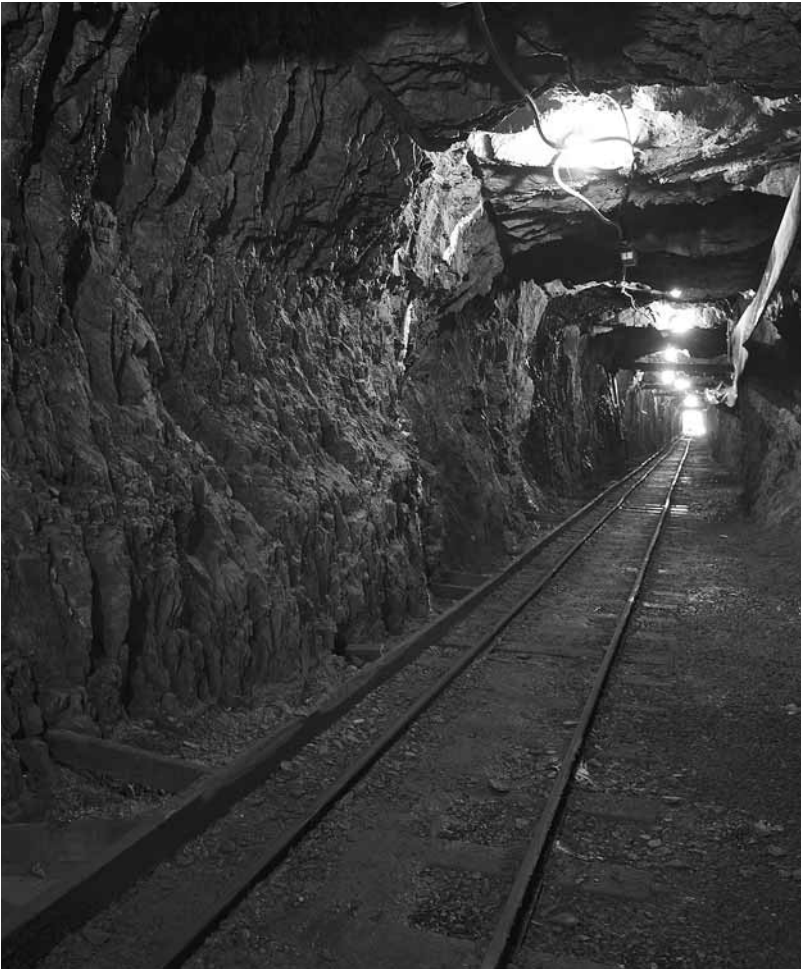
1. “Begin by casting out all prejudices for or against the venture” (Liebermann) Can you name your prejudices? How do you arrive at personal freedom, as a first step in discernment?
2. In your opinion does surrender to God make for a quiet, dull life?
3. Have you experienced a break-up in a human relationship? Did it help you to say to yourself who you are?

# Chapter 6

---

## *Seek and you will find*

---



I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
    Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears  
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.  
    Up vistaed hopes I sped;  
    And shot, precipitated,  
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,  
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.  
    But with unhurrying chase,  
    And unperturbéd pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
    They beat — and a Voice beat  
    More instant than the Feet —  
All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.

*(Francis Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven")*



**I**n Francis Thompson's poem, we have eloquent expression of God's search for us. We have strayed, we have fled, but God's love only intensifies His unrelenting pursuit. In the unfathomable depth of His love, He wants us back. As we seek everywhere for a source of happiness, the source of happiness is looking for us. But, lost as we are, we can't believe we're in demand.

It was when "Snowbird" burst upon the popular music scene in 1969, that I first began to enjoy the singing of Anne Murray. But it was about ten years later when she recorded "You needed me" that I really began listening carefully to the words. Now it was no longer just the melody that mattered. The lyrics had put their finger on how the realisation of being needed builds us up and gives us hope.

In the study of theology, I was always fascinated by the theory of continuing creation. The most exciting statement of this that I have seen is the image at Chartres cathedral of Adam looking over God's shoulder as creation unfolds. In the very act of creation, God has humans in mind. Even if it is an unequal relationship, there is a sense of partnership, a sense that they are accomplishing something together. Marc Gellman captures this well in a modern *midrash* on the creation story in Genesis.

The man and the woman asked, "What's a partner?" And God answered, "A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means that you can never give up, because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think I am not doing enough and on the days I think you are not doing enough, even on those days we are still partners and we must not stop trying to finish (creating) the world."<sup>29</sup>

While the search for God is central to human living, in keeping with the spirit of Libermann, I will direct attention more to Jesus' search for us. Discreetly maybe, but unfailingly, Jesus the seeker shows up where people are. As Libermann wrote in 1840:

This is the way our loving Master does things. He waits for people. He does not come himself or (act) in such a way that nothing remains for them to do, but he waits for them and in waiting he draws them to himself with infinite goodness. He possesses an inner gentleness which attracts....<sup>30</sup>

Jesus influences us by attraction. He is not disinterested. He gets our attention, he catches our eye. His grace is an invitation that respects our freedom. From his own experience, Libermann knew how Jesus had waited patiently for him until he was ready.

### **"Living water"**

The "living water" of John's gospel refers to the gift of God. It is grace, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the sign that God loves us. As we saw at the beginning of Chapter 1, the realisation of being loved opens up new horizons and gives fresh zest for life. Libermann reflected on this

in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. The whole adventure began with Jesus making the first unexpected move. “Jesus said to her, ‘Give me something to drink.’” From the intriguing exchange that followed, we see that Jesus’ initiative was richly rewarded as the woman went from strength to strength in self discovery and conversion through her desire for “living water”. In his commentary on these verses of John’s gospel, Libermann rejoices in the spirit and the courage of the woman, while at the same time expressing a ripple of surprise at Jesus disregard for “what people might think”:

Although she was a woman and a Samaritan, our Lord did not consider it inappropriate to speak to her. . . . This is remarkable. Our adorable Master was more willing to announce eternal truths to this poor woman degraded by sin, who was decried by her own people, a stranger despised by the Jews as a Samaritan, than to Nicodemus, a pious Jew, a doctor of the law and a prince of the people, who had come, nevertheless, with good intentions. He spoke to her more clearly and directly than to the doctor of the law.<sup>31</sup>

I refer to this cultural animosity and gender bias of another day only to highlight the fact that in the story of grace, the initiative does not belong to us. Jesus is the one who first expressed his own thirst. The thirst of the Samaritan woman for “living water” grew as she made a journey along a pathway of embarrassing disclosure of her personal life. At any stage in our journey, our thirst for “living water” will likely develop hand in hand with our openness to the Lord.

On the last day, the great day of the festival, Jesus stood and cried out:

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me!  
Let anyone who believes in me come and drink!  
As scripture says, ‘From his heart shall flow streams of living water.’” (Jn 7, 37-38)

This is a favourite text of Libermann. He finds in it an echo of his own desire. At one point his commentary on it breaks into a prayer.

(Jesus) calls those who thirst and he himself is parched with thirst. The difference is that those he calls are thirsting to drink

from his fountains of grace, in their weakness and total privation of that salutary water, which can satiate their souls perishing from apathy. Jesus, on the contrary, thirsts to give drink through the superabundance of his love for our wretched souls; he has a burning desire to fill all souls and satiate them. And so immense is this thirst of our Lord that the sum total of the thirsts of all parched souls cannot equal Jesus' thirst for each one of them.

Is it to be wondered at, that on the solemn day of the feast he cried out: "Let him who thirsts come and drink"? O my Lord Jesus I hear your cry. You call me; Lord, here I am. I am thirsty, my adorable Jesus. Great is my thirst even to fainting, for I am empty and burnt up inside. Take me into yourself and give me to drink from your fountain of salvation; plunge me into it, submerge me, drown me in your heavenly waters. Yes, Lord, I beg you, drown me in these most desirable and desired waters. Drown my concupiscence; drown my pride; drown all my vices and all my defects, so that everything in me that comes from myself may die; may the old creature no longer live, and may there be nothing more in me than you alone! Grant me this grace, my most kind, lovable and loved Jesus, so that I shall no longer live except by your life and in your life, the life by which you live in your Father's bosom and in the whole body of your elect. Amen.<sup>32</sup>

A little later in his commentary Libermann refers to those thirsting for holiness. "They have merely to come to (the Lord) and drink in proportion to the greatness and intensity of their thirst." Thirst speaks to thirst.

**"You did not choose me, no I chose you...."**(John 15,16)

The full force of what God wanted of him came to Libermann only gradually. His conversion experience marked him most. In a time of aimless wandering and wondering, God brushed aside his half hearted hesitation and laid claim to his future. Firmly anchored by God's love for him, and undeterred by his epilepsy, he found new strength in the christocentric spirituality of Saint Sulpice. In the *Work for the Blacks*, widely considered to be a farfetched dream of a few seminarians, he recognised the call of God. In response to this grace, he offered again his surrender.



During the last twelve years of his life, more and more he refers to his life being a sharing of Christ's life and death. He is nourished by the Pauline themes.

I have been crucified with Christ and yet I am alive; yet it is no longer I, but Christ living in me. The life that I am now living, subject to the limitation of human nature, I am living in faith, faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."(Gal 2,20 )

Sharing Christ's life involves sharing his cross. Our self-denial makes sense, but only as an identifying mark of Christ's disciple. Libermann was not interested in a programme of mortification as such, but he was very interested in avoiding Jesus' devastating criticism of Peter who was unable to integrate suffering and friendship. "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path, because you are thinking not as God thinks but as human beings do." (Mt 16,23)

From his perspective of seeing mission as God's work, Libermann frequently refers to the parable of the vine and the branches (Jn 15). The missionary who "remains in" Jesus bears much fruit. The pruning of the branches by the Father, the vinedresser, may be painful, but it is necessary to increase the yield. "It is to the glory of my Father that you should bear much fruit and be my disciples."<sup>33</sup>

It was Jesus who said: "Seek and you shall find". His own restless searching can be glimpsed in the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to search for the one who has strayed, in the woman who scours the house until she finds the coin that was lost (Lk 15). Libermann was caught up in the contagion of this search. He wanted to seek out those, until now deprived of the good news of God's great love for them, as expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The theology of mission has developed greatly since the mid-19th century. About forty years ago Karl Rahner considered that many secular people were also seeking Jesus and sharing his life without being consciously aware of it. He called them "anonymous Christians". This phrase has dropped out of use, but the fascination with the man from Galilee continues. The search for Jesus in all its rainbow colours has survived the centuries. It may sometimes be an

underground, anonymous activity but it moves steadily forward to meet the eager approach of Jesus the seeker.

I still remember the photographs of the Mont Blanc tunnel in a *Paris Match* of the early sixties where the Italian and French workers were celebrating the final penetration of rock which left them face to face. From different countries they had hollowed out a tunnel of more than 7 miles under the highest mountain in Europe. The joy of the moment showed in their faces and embraces. It was a memorable moment, years in the making, a celebration of partnership and a symbol of welcome closeness. Jesus' search and our search are the same search.

---

## Questions



1. Has Jesus ever taken you by surprise? Has he ever asked you for a favour? For something to drink?
2. What is your experience of "living water"? What is your deepest longing?
3. "You did not choose me, no I chose you...." Have you worked out how Jesus has chosen you?

---

# Conclusion

---

Sweet, sweet surrender  
Live, live without care  
Like a fish in the water  
Like a bird in the air

*(John Denver)*



When we see someone who is thriving, someone who is really happy, we say that they are ‘in their element’. It is where we all long to be. We have all known moments of pure happiness, where everything has fitted into place. Very likely they have been moments shared with someone we love. Such moments are all too fleeting but they haunt us with their possibility. As long as they beckon to us, our desire never dies. Even if they come without warning, we would welcome them. And when there is no limit to their claims, we are ready to surrender.

John Denver’s popular song touched a nerve in all of us. We long “to live, live without care.... like a fish in the water, like a bird in the air.” If only we could be always in our element, surrender would be sweet and life would be good. During this retreat we have been considering grace as the gift of the Spirit that brings beauty and joy into our world, even as it calls out for the enlarging of our heart, for our surrender. Like the water and the air, it is God’s free gift. When we

welcome grace we are in our element. Surrender then becomes the sign that we want to be fully alive and fully ourselves.

In Chapter 1, we began at the beginning. God's love for us seems too good to be true. It is the good news, but we are slow to trust it. It is undeserved and it doesn't fit in a world ruled by market forces. Only in the context of a love affair can it gradually unwrap its gifts.

In Chapter 2 we saw Jesus' identity as the Father's beloved son in whom he was well pleased. We felt that baptism was also a secret source of our own identity. We were beginning a journey of self-discovery. Libermann would be our companion on the journey and point out to us that, while we have many worthy guides, it is ultimately God who enables us to discover who we are.

"I believe that Saint John of the Cross was greatly enlightened by God and what he said is wonderful. But I also believe that our divine Master is even more wonderful and what we learn from him is more beautiful, more enlightening and more sanctifying for our souls. I even believe that only he can make things clear to us, make himself known to us and enable us to know ourselves."<sup>34</sup>

One of the saddest moments in my ministry is to hear a young man or woman dejectedly admit; "Father, I have nothing to live for." From all appearances they should have the world at their feet. They are young, strong, beautiful, but somehow hopelessly depressed. In Chapter 3 we saw how Libermann fought the battle against discouragement. Seeing God's hand behind the crooked lines of life, he somehow accepted his epilepsy, survived pain and frustration at the Eudist novitiate and entered heart and soul into the missionary Work for the Blacks. Encouraged at every turn by Mary, like her he drew upon the strength that comes from being engaged in God's work.

In Chapter 4, we acknowledged the powerful influence of desire in our life. We don't try to domesticate this life force but we must refine and deepen it. As our love becomes more authentic, we allow God to move us with his love song and the sending of his Son. We find ourselves in a new space. How we got there probably eludes us, but 'firmly and gently' we are able to make our way through the whirlpools of desire.

Saint-Exupéry says that we learn more from the earth than from books because the earth resists us. In chapter 5, we see Libermann under pressure. Problems arise. He acknowledges a mistake and accepts the consequences. We see that his surrender to God does not prevent things going wrong; that grace may give him courage but it does not take away the pain of difficult decisions.

In Chapter 6, we enter the heartland of Libermann's thinking. We don't have to search high and low for God. He is here and he is thirsty. It may be we who are not here and who are not thirsty. There are so many fields to wander in today, so many places to hide. Distractions abound. Sometimes they are only a click away. Are we then enjoying wonderland? Or just sleepwalking to nowhere?

Libermann does not view the world as a theatre of human achievement, but more as people trying, often clumsily, to make known the good news that Jesus has brought. This they proclaim principally by the quality of their lives, what Libermann calls their holiness. This holiness is their faltering surrender to God whose love never leaves them. Here is a modern echo of this view:

We must enter the future fields of freedom not proudly through guarded gates with our special passes, but humbly, on our knees, in a company of fellow failures, quite unable to believe how, in our sins, we are so undeservedly loved and utterly cherished by a tearful, smiling God. A God who cannot resist the surrendered heart.<sup>35</sup>

I leave you in the hope that Libermann has helped you in your retreat. I would like to insist that loving surrender according to Libermann is surrender to God. It is as possible for the politician as for the monk. It is not acceptance of injustice. It is not an attitude of *laissez faire*. All our difficult human problems remain. But God's love has touched us. We are in a different space. We hear a music that changes things.

They said 'You have a blue guitar  
You do not play things as they are.'  
The man replied, 'Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar.'<sup>36</sup>

A quotation from Libermann, in the wake of the revolution in Paris in February 1848, should make it clear that a spirituality of grace and surrender speaks to us where we are, at the heart of the modern world.

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.<sup>37</sup>

The corner of grace and surrender will forever be associated with Mary for the courage she showed. We also welcome the nourishment from all the faithful echoes that have reached us since then. This is a popular Libermann prayer:

O divine Spirit  
I wish to be like a feather before you  
So that your breath may carry me wherever it pleases  
And I may never offer it any resistance. Amen.

---

# *Francis Libermann*

## *(1802 – 1852)*

---

- 1802 Birth of Jacob (later to become Francis) Libermann in Saverne, France.
- 1813 Death of his mother
- 1822 Departure for Metz, to pursue his studies at the Talmudic School.  
He undergoes the crisis of faith of a university student away from home.
- 1825 He hears of the conversion to Catholicism of his brother, Samson.
- 1826 He returns to Saverne to visit his father and earns his blessing on his journey to Paris. Torn in different directions, he finds his life becoming a web of pretence. In desperation, he decides to pray again.  
God rushes back into his life. He becomes a Catholic and enters the seminary of Saint-Sulpice.
- 1828 (December) His first serious epileptic attack.
- 1830 Death of his father.
- 1831 He goes to the Sulpician house at Issy. Organisation of prayer groups.
- 1837 He becomes novice director of the Eudists at Rennes. The following summer Frederick Levavasseur comes from Saint-Sulpice to discuss “The Work for the Blacks”.
- 1840 Libermann goes to Rome to seek approval for the missionary project (Work for the Blacks).  
At length, on 6 June, some official encouragement.  
Nov-Dec: Pilgrimage to Loreto. Acceptance for ordination.
- 1841 18 September, he is ordained priest in Amiens, and sets up the first house of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary there.  
Strong association with Notre Dame des Victoires in Paris, where he celebrates a first Paris Mass on 25 September.

- 1842 Levassasseur leaves for Reunion (Feb) and Tisserant for Haiti (Nov).
- 1843 Seven priests and three helpers leave for West Africa with Mgr. Barron.
- 1844 8 October, a letter arrives from Mgr. Barron: all but one of the priests have died in Africa.
- 1845 June, two priests and a brother embark at Bordeaux for West Africa.  
16 September, three priests and two brothers leave for Australia.  
7 December, Eugene Tisserant dies in a shipwreck off the coast of Morocco.
- 1846 Benoit Truffet, a talented priest from Savoy arrives at the novitiate in Amiens. A year later he becomes the first bishop of the society, Vicar apostolic of the Two Guineas (most of West Africa), but dies after only seven months in Africa.
- 1847 Levassasseur, in Reunion, recovers his enthusiasm for the society after a year's disenchantment.
- 1848 Fusion of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary and the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. Libermann is elected Superior General.
- 1849 Two recently consecrated bishops, Mgr. Bessieux and Mgr. Kobes, with 6 priests, 3 brothers and 6 sisters of Castres set sail for West Africa.  
The Congregation now has 48 priest members of whom 33 are on the missions.
- 1850 Libermann defends the reputation of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit against a wave of criticism. He spends a lot of time preparing the way for the appointment of bishops in Guadeloupe, Martinique and Reunion.
- 1851 Libermann, still writing individual letters to Spiritans, begins to compose a summary version of his concern and advice, *Instructions to Missionaries*. At the end of the year his health deteriorates significantly.
- 1852 Libermann dies on 2 February at 30 rue Lhomond, Paris.



---

# Endnotes

---

## Abbreviations in the notes:

ND: *Notes et Documents relatifs à la vie et à l'oeuvre du Vénérable François-Marie-Paul Libermann*

LS: *Lettres Spirituelles du Vénérable Libermann*

When a note refers to a source containing a Libermann text in French, the English translation is mine.

- 1 Moore, Sebastian, *Let this mind be in you*. A Seabury Book, Winston Press, 1985, p27
- 2 Moore, p21
- 3 Garceau, Benoît, *La voie du désir*, Médiaspaul, 1997, p49
- 4 “Where are you?” *A short retreat for men and women in hiding. A few steps into the open with Francis Libermann*. Presented by Bernard A Kelly, CSSp
- 5 Kelly, Bernard A. *Life began at forty. The second conversion of Francis Libermann* CSSp Paraclete Press (Dublin) 2005, p24
- 6 ND.I, 675-676. Lettre à M Carbon, 15 décembre 1839.
- 7 LS.II, 293-294. Lettre à M Féret, 13 novembre 1839.
- 8 The definition of the Immaculate Conception of Mary came only in 1864, but the church in Lyon had, with permission, been celebrating this reality for centuries
- 9 ND I, 670. Mémoire du P. Tisserant
- 10 LS II, 317. Lettre à M Féret, 15 décembre 1839
- 11 Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious, Vol 2*: Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1964, pp293-295. Letter to Fr Paul Carron, 19 December 1839
- 12 *Jesus through Jewish eyes*, Libermann’s spiritual commentary on the Gospel of St John, translated by Myles Fay CSSp, Paraclete Press, Dublin, *Part 3*, 2005, p221
- 13 *You have laid your hand on me...* Libermann texts assembled by Alphonse Gilbert CSSp (Published by Spiritan Research and Animation Centre, Clivo di Cinna 195, 00136 Rome, Italy) p41. From a letter to Fr Blanpin April 1845.
- 14 Blanchard, *Le Vénérable Libermann*, Desclée de Brouwer 1960, vol I, pp230-235

- 15 Gilbert, *You have laid your hand on me...* p22
- 16 Gilbert, *You have laid your hand on me...* p20
- 17 Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2005
- 18 Philip Sheldrake, *Befriending our desires*, Darton, Longman and Todd, /Novalis 2001 Chapter 4
- 19 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no 9.
- 20 Spiritan Papers no 21, p 58
- 21 Spiritan Papers no 21, pp 29,30
- 22 O'Leary, Daniel *Leap in the Dark* in *The Tablet*, 26 January 2008, p 14
- 23 ND IX 40-41 Lettre à M Le Berre, 8 février 1847
- 24 Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious vol 1*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1963. p 213f
- 25 Libermann, *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious, Vol III*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1966 pp32-33
- 26 Ibid. p35
- 27 Ibid. p38
- 28 Spiritan Anniversary Diary 1703-2003, p 62
- 29 Gellman, Marc *Does God have a big toe? Stories about stories in the Bible* Harper Collins 1989, p3
- 30 *Jesus through Jewish eyes*, Libermann's spiritual commentary on the Gospel of St John, translated by Myles Fay CSSp, Paraclete Press, Dublin, Part 3, 2005, p146
- 31 *Jesus through Jewish eyes, Part 1*, pp103-104
- 32 *Jesus through Jewish eyes, Part 2*, pp 125-126. We must remember that what is sometimes referred to as Libermann's commentary on John's gospel were his personal spiritual reflections with no thought that they might ever be published.
- 33 Lettres spirituelles de notre Vénérable Père aux membres de la Congrégation p189 (Lettre au Père Lossédet, 27 décembre 1844)
- 34 Letter of Libermann to Paul Carron, 31 March 1838 (LS I,451)
- 35 O'Leary, Daniel, *Leap in the Dark* in *The Tablet*, 26 January, 2008 p14
- 36 Stevens, Wallace, *The man with the blue guitar*
- 37 Letter from Libermann to Fr Gamon, 20 March 1848, cited by Adrian van Kaam CSSp in *A Light to the Gentiles Dimension*/Duquesne University Press 1959, p 218 (ND X 151)



FRANCIS LIBERMANN



Spiritans

ISBN 978-0-9865317-0-5