

1980

The Spirituality of Father Libermann

Joseph Lécuyer

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



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lécuyer, J. (1980). The Spirituality of Father Libermann. *Spiritan Papers*, 12 (12). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-papers/vol12/iss12/4>

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 Spiritan Papers by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

THE SPIRITUALITY OF FATHER LIBERMANN

(A Lecture delivered by Father Joseph Lécuyer, C.S.Sp., at the Centre d'Etudes, Saint-Louis-de-France, Rome, on March 25, 1980).

It has often been said that the fountain-head of St Paul's doctrine was the vision he had on the Damascus Road, when Christ reproached him saying: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?" Here already we have the beginning of the whole theology of the Mystical Body, of grace and of the action of the Holy Spirit of Jesus in all the members of His Body. Without wishing to force the comparison too much, I venture to suggest that all the spirituality of Father Libermann depends also on the decisive moment of *his* conversion, a conversion as immediate, as definitive and as unexpected as that of Paul. Perhaps we might usefully recall the details.

A Sudden Conversion

Jacob Libermann, a Jew, son of a rabbi of Saverne, was destined by his father to succeed him. With that in view, he was sent in 1822 when twenty years of age, to the Superior Institute of Talmudic Studies at Metz. There he would spend four years studying the Bible, the traditions of his race and the Talmud, after the manner of Paul in the School of Gamaliel. During this time, various factors led Jacob to abandon belief in the Bible of his Fathers. Completely disorientated by this, he adopted a kind of deism, inspired in part by the teachings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Three of his brothers had already embraced the Catholic faith when he made his historic journey to Paris. There he would meet David Drach, himself a convert rabbi of three years standing. Some weeks later Jacob was installed in the well-known Collège Saint Stanislaus, whose authorities had agreed to welcome him for bed and board. There in a small room he was entirely on his own. This is how he describes the experience: -

This was a moment of great suffering for me. The view from this deep solitude, from this room where only a small

window gave light, the thought of my isolation from my family, friends and country : all combined to plunge me in the deepest sadness. It was then, that recalling the God of my Fathers, I threw myself on my knees and begged Him to enlighten me on what was the true religion. Immediately I saw the light, the truth, faith penetrated my heart and mind. I believed all without difficulty.

Experience of his personal helplessness, the efficacy of prayer, the all-powerfulness of grace seem to me to give special insight into all Libermann's spirituality. One of the last things he would say on his death-bed was : « God is all ; man is nothing ». These are no more than an expression of his first experience of God in his life. At once doubts vanished : Gospel miracles, the Divinity of Jesus, and even the mystery of the Eucharist are all accepted by him. This « capture » of his soul by God would be even more evident when he was baptised on Christmas night, 1826. He would himself later admit that he truly felt, at the moment, delivered from the spirit of darkness, adding : « When the waters of baptism flowed over my Jewish head, I came at once to love Mary, whom I had hated previously ». This was also the moment when he decided to become a priest.

The Absoluteness of God

« God is all ; man is nothing ». The conviction of the absoluteness of God, relative to the nothingness of the creature, a conviction deeply biblical, endured throughout his life and is manifest in all the work of Fr Libermann. It is perhaps the key to all his spirituality, of which I propose to present to you a brief synthesis. This is not easy, as the thoughts of Fr Libermann are to be found principally in his letters of spiritual direction. Only occasionally, and that in the second half of his life, is this teaching gathered in formal treatises, many of which were never completed. A remarkable summary of Libermann's thinking appears in Fr. Blanchard's two-volume work, *THE VENERABLE LIBERMANN*, published in the series *CARMELITE STUDIES*, in 1960. Whatever I say here draws heavily on this fundamental source-book.

In spite of the undeniable unity in the thinking of Libermann, we can discern in his life two distinct periods, corresponding to the two different orientations of his life. In the

first, from December 1826 until the end of 1839, that is, from his conversion to the time he resolved to dedicate himself to work for the Blacks, he appears to be preoccupied with what might be called the theocentric or theological aspect of charity : union with God, total submission to His Will and the total rejection of everything opposed to it. In the second period, the other dimension of charity, zeal for the salvation of our neighbour, appears with increasing insistence and vehemence, and with a marked apostolic and missionary savour. The distinction may appear arbitrary but, in one form or another, may be discerned in the lives of many spiritual people. We are reminded of "the second conversion" of Fr Lallemand, or of the decisive stage that was for St. Teresa of the Child Jesus, according to Pierre Decouvenant, the revelation of love of neighbour. We shall therefore try to present Libermann's doctrine in the context of this schema, fully conscious in advance of its arbitrary nature.

GOD IS ALL : MAN IS NOTHING!

Ten months after his baptism, Jacob (now Francis Mary Paul) Libermann entered the Seminary of St Sulpice in Paris. He had previously read Philosophy at St Stansilaus College, and improved his knowledge of Latin and French. He had also received the Sacrament of Confirmation in the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris.

Delicate in health, embarrassed in surroundings where people did not speak his native tongue, still not well-versed in Latin in which lectures were given, and himself an object of curiosity to his fellow-students, Francis nevertheless quickly made an impression on everyone in the Seminary. "Have you heard the little Jew speak of God!", they asked. Of these first months he would later write : "Without having the intention of cultivating any virtue in particular, all my thoughts were of Our Lord : that I found easy".

His influence was such that, in a very short time, he was a kind of spiritual director to some of the seminarians and that with the approval of his Sulpician superiors. We have letters of direction written by him as early as October 1828, less than two years after his conversion and only one year after his entry into the Seminary. Later these letters would multiply at an astonishing rate, and they were often very long. More than 1700 of them are still extant.

Strikingly, from the outset, the line of Fr Libermann's teaching is clearly discernible: it is at once personal, spontaneous and practical, based on the Scriptures and enlightened by an acute psychological perception. Let us try to present the main points of this doctrine.

First of all, Libermann clearly asserts the absoluteness of God so strongly inculcated in the Bible: « My God is great, my God alone is beautiful . . . and I am poor and miserable before Him (I, 195) God alone, God alone, God alone always . . . in all things, we should only see God alone ». (I, 153). Libermann is happy to base himself upon the text of Deuteronomy, cited by Christ Himself: « Thou shall love the Lord Thy God with all thy heart (Deut. VI, 5). On August 30, 1835, he wrote to a seminarian: "I urge you to love God with all your heart and soul, with all your faculties . . . We should love God with all our heart, that is, with all our affections and desires When do we love God like that? When we have no other desire, no other affection, but God; when everything in us is focussed on him alone. Never in heaven or on earth may we love anything other than God. All other things are to be loved uniquely for His sake and in Him. That may sound a little severe to you, my dear friend, but as long as our hearts are divided between God and creatures, as long as we seek pleasure however little, we cannot make true progress in the holy love of God ». (I, 107-109).

RENUNCIATION OF THE HEART

These lines clearly reveal the close and necessary relationship between the absoluteness of God and the absoluteness of the self-denial demanded of anyone who wants to love God whole-heartedly. One of Libermann's most frequent citations is the expression of Jesus Himself: « If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow Me » (Mt, XVI, 24). Self-denial is the logical or rather the psychological consequence of the determination to love God with one's whole heart. To those who reproached him for insisting too much on this, Libermann replied: "It is not I who preach abnegation but Jesus Himself, Who made it a condition of welcoming anyone to be His disciple: "If anyone comes after me and loves father and mother, wife or children, even his own life, more than me . . . he cannot be my disciple" If

anyone comes after me and loves father and mother, wife or children, even his own life, more than me . . . he cannot be my disciple" (Luke XIV, 26). There is no other doctrine in the Gospel more forcibly expressed" (E.S. 476-477).

Libermann is therefore relentless in attacking, in all his correspondence, all egoistic self-seeking, all that is merely "natural life", that is, life not ordained to the love of God. Or to use another expression : "All that in us prevents or restrains the Spirit of Jesus, which urges us constantly to reply to God's infinite love by the total giving of our heart to Him".

This last phrase touches upon a fundamental aspect of Fr Libermann's thought: "If man is nothing he cannot love God with his whole heart . . . unless he receives from God the power to do so. This God does, giving His Son, who lives only for His Father, giving Himself to Him with all his heart and mind. We should not then merely contemplate and imitate Jesus. We must let Him live in us. "But, to ask that Jesus live in us is to ask that His Spirit live in us. It is the Spirit who establishes in us the life of Jesus, who makes us live the life of Jesus, for the Word of Life lives in us only through His Holy Spirit living in us." (N.D. II 463). This Spirit is constantly at work to bring us to God. "He knocks at the door of our heart at every instant . . . but how can He come in, if there is no room for Him, if he finds the heart, that should be His, cluttered up with all kinds of attachments opposed to Him"? (I, 13,14) That He may enter and take possession of our soul "we must be absolutely empty of all that is not God" (Ibid.) How, you may ask, is it possible for the Holy Spirit of Jesus to become the soul of our soul, the principle of its life and action, if we lead a natural life not fully subjected to Him? The simple answer, in that case, is that we must deal death to the natural life.

Be, in the hands of God, as a man dead, annihilated . . . Neither live nor feel other than in God and as God wills. Remember you are filled with the Holy Spirit and this Spirit wishes to be the unique principle and sole end of all your desires, of all the movements and inclinations of your soul. Live no longer a merely personal life. Let Him alone live in you. Seek nothing, do nothing, of yourself. Let Him be your only life, the only driving-force of your soul's activity. We should be entirely dead to self and to all things. Then our life will be "hidden with Our Lord, in God" (Col. III, 3); we shall be united to Him with all the powers of our soul. The soul being totally

empty of creatures and of self, the Holy Spirit will be all its life.
(I, 214/5).

We can recognise in this passage an echo of St Paul to the Colossians : "You are dead and your life is hidden with Christ in God". To die to all that is not God, that is not directed to Him also echoes another passage in St Paul : "If you live according to the flesh you shall die, but if, through the Spirit, you mortify the deeds of the body you shall live", (Rom. VIII, 13).

DOCILITY TO THE SPIRIT

The absoluteness of God requires us to mortify *all life* in us that is not His, in order that the Holy Spirit may pour into us the life of Jesus Himself. Only the Holy Spirit can do so : His is the initiative, the primacy. By our docility, we should leave Him free to work in us. Docility to the Holy Spirit is without doubt one of the principal elements in the spiritual teaching of Libermann. This is not however a theoretical, an abstract, doctrine for him. It is rather a practical attitude to be maintained and preserved. I must be convinced of my own nothingness, of my inability to do anything of myself. As a consequence, I should not let myself be upset or impatient but remain always calm and peaceful, moderating the spontaneous movements that arise and which would precipitate or even precede the action of God in me. If I preserve myself in this peaceful state, in a state of interior silence, the Spirit of Jesus can make His voice heard and can guide me. To illustrate his thinking on this Libermann uses some charming examples :

If you find yourself in the dark and blinded, you must relax and trust Our Lord to lead you according to His good pleasure, as He wills, when He wills. Your good intention of serving Him should suffice. A blind man entrusts himself to a small dog, which leads him as it pleases and the blind man follows. Why then are you afraid to confide your blind soul into the hands of Jesus, that He may lead you, Who is Light of heaven and of earth? (II, 200).

Another of his comparisons is reminiscent of St Teresa of the Child Jesus :

Be, in His hands, like a toy in the hands of a child : that He may do to you, and in you, according to His good pleasure. Do

so without questioning whether or not He is leading you according to your own ideas and desires. (II, 330). "Be in the hands of Jesus like a football in the hands of a child. Allow yourself to be thrown around as your Divine Master wills and for as long as pleases Him (III, 385).

Again, he writes :

Be, in the presence of the Divine Master, as an anvil at the service of a blacksmith or rather, like a piece of red-hot iron which he holds in his tongs. He strikes it repeatedly and it takes the shape he wishes to give it. You are still a piece of crude, rough iron, sharp, hard, inflexible. Our Lord will break you down and make you more malleable, by means of crosses and contradictions. (III, 115/16).

Our basic attitude, therefore, should be this : To be totally available, to desire to do God's Will and nothing else. In practice, we should drive far away from us all that is hard and unyielding, all too-eager haste, all feverish activity, and all tenaciousness. All these reveal the inclination to do everything by ourselves, whereas all should come from God. "Wherever there is harshness or obstinacy, (excessive) activity, there is the human, there is evil".

Interior Peace

The clearest sign of a genuine attitude of docility to the Holy Spirit of Jesus is interior peace. Libermann was deeply convinced that "wherever God is there also is peace" (I, 91). Peace, meekness, gentleness are words that fall constantly from his pen. To remain in this state is to practise interior silence, that is, silence of all the passions and faculties of the soul, to avoid excessive interior activity, to moderate all violent movements . . . not to want to know any wisdom or prudence other than what comes from the Holy Spirit. This means making it our sole concern to remove the obstacles that come from bustling zeal and our attachment to creatures and to ourselves (E.S. Supp. 83).

The Heart of Mary

Docility to the Holy Spirit is best exemplified in the Blessed Virgin Mary. "There", writes Libermann, "you will find all you have to do in this world. (There you will learn) how to let the Holy Spirit of the Master fill you with the meekness,

gentleness and peace with which He filled and continues to fill the mother and mistress of holy love" (I, 366). What Libermann sees and studies above everything else in Mary is Jesus living in her through the Holy Spirit. Later, he will write a commentary of the *O Jesu, vivens in Maria*, which has been attributed to Fr Condren. But, even from the beginning, he constantly returns to the presence of Jesus in Mary: "I earnestly pray Our Lord to live and reign alone in your soul, in the same Spirit in which and by which He lives in our . . . Mother, that He may fire you with the same charity with which He has so powerfully inflamed the Heart of Mary" (I, 18).

It was to the Holy Heart of Mary that Libermann would consecrate the society he would found for the Apostolate of the Blacks. Later, he would explain that "We have always found our happiness and repose in the Heart of Mary, full of the superabundance of the Holy Spirit, and if we have not (from the beginning) expressed this plenitude of the Spirit in the Heart of Mary, it nonetheless was an essential part of our devotion to the Holy Heart of Mary" (N.D. XII, 133). More and more he would come to consider this presence of the Holy Spirit in the Heart of Mary from the angle of apostolic zeal. It is the Spirit that engraves on hearts zeal for the salvation of souls, as he did in an especially privileged way in "the eminently apostolic heart of Mary" (N.D. 10, 568). There, those dedicated to the apostolate will find "a perfect model of fidelity to the holy inspirations of the Divine Spirit" (Ibid).

Thus, it was along the line of docility to the Holy Spirit that Libermann would develop a missionary and apostolic spirituality.

II – SERVANTS IN THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST

In my view, we can discern a new era in the thought and life of Libermann after the last months of 1839. He had been 13 years a convert at that time and in the intervening years had lived almost exclusively amongst priests or clerical students, first at Saint Sulpice where he did his ecclesiastical studies. There, in March 1829, as he prepared to receive the sub-diaconate, he suffered an attack of epilepsy and found the road to the priesthood closed to him. Then, he moved to another clerical setting, at Issy – le – Moulineaux, where the Superior welcomed him out of charity and where he would

make himself useful assisting the Bursar and doing messages for him. In spite of his disability, he still continued to play an important role as spiritual counsellor to the students there and even to some of their Directors. So highly was he thought of that, in 1837, the Eudists, who were trying to restore their society decimated by the Revolution and its aftermath, invited him to be spiritual director of the Novitiate they had opened at Rennes. There for two years, Francis Libermann underwent a period of purification and unbearable suffering. In October 1839, a concurrence of circumstances and of grace led him to think that the Holy Spirit was calling him to consecrate his life to "work for the Blacks". Initially, there was question only of a relatively modest project but in time the original plan would assume proportions quite unforeseen.

SOJOURN IN ROME

A simple cleric, apparently too delicate to advance to the priesthood, he set out for Rome to present his project of a new foundation. There, while awaiting a reply from Propaganda, he wrote his First Rule and a spiritual commentary on the Gospel of St John. I pass over the details of his stay in Rome: some years ago at this Centre, Mgr J. Martin already in a conference spelt out what this involved.

This new departure in the life of Libermann was to have an influence on his spirituality. Up to this time, as we have noted, his dealings were principally with those, not merely converted, but called also to the priesthood or religious life: his concern was for their personal progress, how he might lead them to greater fervour in God's service. Since he was dealing with future priests evidently the apostolic dimension was not absent: still, it was not first in his thoughts. Henceforth, his concern for founding a missionary society and training its members would lead Libermann to progressively elaborate a rich apostolic and missionary spirituality. And, since he intended in the first place to train priests for the apostolate proposed, priests who would live in community, his thought would develop along two lines in particular: ministry, especially sacerdotal, on the one hand and community life on the other. The elements of this thinking are to be found in the letters he continued to write and in a more developed and systematic form in the other writings of his at this time: the FIRST RULE

and the COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST JOHN, composed in Rome, the REGULATIONS OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE HOLY GHOST, written after the fusion of his own foundation with that of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost and his INSTRUCTIONS TO MISSIONARIES of 1851. To these should be added his interesting little treatise on THE EPISCOPACY, written at the request of Mgr Truffet. Many occasional writings should also be included, especially his conferences to his novices and more especially his COMMENTARY ON THE RULE. We are fortunate in the fact that some notes of his conferences were taken by some novices and that their accuracy is vouched for.

A MISSIONARY SPIRITUALITY

Some salient points clearly emerge from all this, which constitute in effect the principles of a very original missionary and apostolic spirituality. We should not however be misled into thinking that the great directives he gave in the first part of his life were forgotten or substantially changed. The absoluteness of God, docility to the Holy Spirit, the elimination of the obstacles to progress raised by the natural life – all these remain fundamental to his teaching. The only difference was that from now on these principles would be considered from the perspective of a life wholly dedicated to THE MISSION.

Priests and missionaries are like the apostles, perpetuators of the mission of Jesus Himself. Frequently Libermann quotes the words of the Saviour: "As the Father has sent Me, so also I send you" They should be penetrated by the thought that the son of God sends them as the Father sent Him, to consecrate, to dedicate and to immolate themselves to His glory for the salvation of souls", (Rule of 1842, II, I, 14). These words addressed to the Twelve apply also to their successors, the Bishops and those who collaborate with them in the priesthood. But, that word of the Master also implies a radical demand for holiness :

Sent by His Heavenly Father, in a spirit of holiness and mercy, He (Jesus) lives only for Him (the Father) and in Him for the souls He came to save. That is why His life is one of self-denial, sacrifice, humiliation, obedience and love, full of strength, gentleness and mercy. He sends us in our turn, with

the same spirit, under the same conditions. He gives only what He has received from the Father: as the Father has sent Me so also I send you. We are to Jesus Who sends us, what He was to the Father. We should live only for Him, we should always seek His glory not our own. We should reflect in our life and works, His holiness, mercy, self-denial, His love of suffering, charity, strength and gentleness, (E.S. 377/8).

All apostolic work therefore is to be undertaken in the same spirit that inspired Jesus. We can study this spirit in Him and in His apostles, those whom He first sent on mission. They can be shepherds only after the image of the Good Shepherd Himself, Who laid down His life for His sheep. The Commentary on St John treats of this at length. With particular care Libermann also quotes passages from St Paul describing his apostolic ministry. It would almost be possible to reconstitute a commentary of certain Letters of Paul especially Corinthians I, from the quotations scattered throughout Libermann's writings. To cite but some examples :

Always join to humility, mistrust of self, recourse to Our Lord and confidence in His liberality. We should always keep before us, our nothingness on the one hand and on the other, the splendour of our vocation, or rather Our Lord Who calls us and offers us all the help we need. Should our unworthiness frighten us, we should recall that it is "the weak things of the world God chooses to confound the strong" (I, Cor I, 27) . . . the Apostles were all useless, maybe more so than we are. If we wish to become strong and faithful apostles like them let us learn to be humble, truly humble that is with a humility full of confidence. (Comm. Prov. Rule, p. 8).

To have an influence over souls, you should speak out of the abundance of your heart, and this abundance will be yours, this interior basis, if you possess a spirit of fervour and love of God. We do not speak, says St Paul, with the learned words of human knowledge but with the language taught us by the Spirit (Ibid. 204).

Let us be certain that we cannot save souls. Only the Holy Spirit can do such wonders. Great things were achieved by the ministry of St Paul yet he would cry out "I have planted; Apollo has watered, but it is God who gives the increase". Let us engrave this expression in our hearts (Ibid, 9).

Once more, we find ourselves referred to Libermann's fundamental certitude : of ourselves we are nothing: Only by giving freedom of action to the Spirit and by restricting all activity that does not come from Him, can we do His work :

Jesus wishes His work to remain pure and free from the defects of our nature, whose very strengths are weaknesses, the glorification of pettiness and stained beauty, when they appear to intermingle with the pure and deliberate action of the Spirit of Jesus. Happy priestly soul, you have achieved the heights of the apostolic gifts and graces of Jesus . . . Jesus and His Spirit animate you, illumine you, give you life and force. (To Mgr Truffet : N.D. IX, 351).

Many of these quotations may at times give the impression of a quietist attitude. The truth is that, far from condemning action and initiative, Libermann, who himself was so active, urges people to act generously but guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit. The signs of the action of the Spirit are precisely those St Paul calls the "fruits of the Spirit": love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, benevolence, faith, gentleness, mastery of self (Gal V, 22/23). Act firmly, certainly, but gently, *fortiter et suaviter*, as the Wisdom of God Himself does (Wis. VIII, 1). These words from the Book of Wisdom recur a dozen times in Libermann's writings . . .

He has left us also some splendid pages on apostolic zeal, which, whole, pure and true, is also undeniably "the loveliest of virtues" (Comm. on the Prov. Rule, 1843), and requires a spirit of total sacrifice. As in the case of Christ and the Apostles, the source of this zeal in us is love of God : "it is not awakened by an effort of nature but comes entirely from the grace of the Holy Spirit and must be drawn from intimate union with Jesus, its source" (N.D. X, 510). Since zeal is the fruit, not of nature, but of grace, "it should never disturb our peace of soul. We should carefully avoid every activity precipitate movement, haste, preoccupation or other fault of this kind which are marked with a zeal that is full of imperfection and that comes rather from nature, sometimes even from self-love, rather than from Him Who can make it pure and holy" (Comm. Prov. Rule, du Zèle, 5).

The Spirit of Jesus will guide us to be gentle with sinners, the weak, the sick, indeed in a general way with every-

one. We should adapt ourselves to all, be as St Paul says "all things to all men", with much patience. Libermann frequently quotes the instruction of Jesus: "I send you as lambs amongst wolves" (Mt, X, 16), and comments "a lamb has no defence: it does not bite" (N.D. VI, 318), "a lamb does not defend itself from the world by attacking it" (N.D. 317). Patience also is a fruit of the Spirit. It is necessary in community life, to bear with oneself, to tolerate trials and difficulties and to put up with the brethren. It is also needed in the ministry, to bear with troublesome people and with the obstacles that present themselves to good works. No virtue is more attractive than patience. Through it we learn to conquer self in all things, and true virtue lies in that alone: *Opus perfectum habet* (James I, 4) . . . unless we are patient we cannot truly love God (E.S. Supp. 215).

It is also in living according to the Spirit of Jesus that we are truly apostles: « Sent by Our Lord, acting and working in His Name, we must enter into the Spirit, live as He lived, and act as He would have acted had He been in our place. The whole of the life of Our Lord was a life of dedication to the glory of God and to our salvation, the salvation of souls whom He had been sent by His Father to ransom. That is what our own lives should be . . . We should see ourselves as servants of these poor souls. Here again, Our Divine Master is our example, the Son of Man came to minister, not to be ministered to. That is the very foundation of the apostolic spirit (Comm. Prov. Rule, p. 6). "We should consider ourselves the servants of souls and act in accordance with that principle" (Ibid. p. 224).

This evangelical principle led Libermann to formulate directives for action that were not without daring for his time and which are as valid as ever to-day. On Nov, 21, 1847, he wrote to the Communities of Dakar and of Gabon :

Examine things in the spirit of Jesus Christ, independent of mere impressions, or prejudice of any kind, filled with, and enlivened by the charity of God and the zeal poured into you by the Holy Spirit. I am sure you will judge our poor Blacks in a way different to that by which they are judged by others who speak of them. . . . Do not judge on a first view; do not judge by what you have seen in Europe, by that which you are accustomed to in Europe. Strip yourselves of Europe, its customs, its spirit: be black with the Blacks, and you will estimate

them as they should be estimated. Make yourselves black to train them as they should be trained, not in a European fashion, but preserving what is proper to them. Be to them what servants should be to their masters, to the customs, style and habits of their masters. Be like that in order to perfect and sanctify them, in order to raise them up and form them little by little in time into a people of God. That is what Saint Paul calls making oneself all things to all men, to win all men to Christ (N.D. 330/331).

COMUNITY LIFE

From the beginning, Libermann wished his missionaries to live in community. Because of this, even in his very first Rule, he gave precise instructions on community life, instructions whose interest greatly exceeds that of his own Congregation. Father J. M. Tillard has on different occasions drawn attention to the richness of this teaching for all forms of religious life. In particular,, we should bear in mind what he has to say on the role of Superiors, in the light of the teaching of Jesus on authority and service: "Superiors will conduct themselves as servants placed by the Divine Master at the disposition of their brethren, to occupy themselves with them unceasingly . . . As servants they must never cease to sacrifice their own welfare, their satisfaction, health and life itself, if need be, for the spiritual welfare of their brethren". Rule of 1849). Like Christ they are there to serve, not to be served: "They will be careful to take all necessary precautions not to conduct the affairs of their superiorship in a proud and domineering way. Instead, after the example of the Master, they should govern their brethren with humility, gentleness and modesty", (Prov. Rule, 319).

An important letter of August 8, 1843, to the Superior of the Sisters of Castres, develops these principles at length: "How should you behave so that Jesus may not be despised in you? It is not in seeking to have yourself respected, in adopting a tone of superiority. The kings of the nations dominate their subjects in this way and expect moreover to be treated as benefactors. This is not how we should behave (Cf. Luke XXII, 25). Our Lord has set us the example. Our rule is one of

holy servitude, vowed to Jesus Christ, and to the souls He confides to our care. That is His command to us: *let him who is first amongst you be as the servant of all* (N.D. IV p. 294).

He has also left us some striking passages on how to live in community "as brothers, enlivened by the same Spirit, the Spirit of God, and the same sentiment, that which enlivened . . . the Heart of Mary", (Prov. Rule Nic. p. 2"). "The spirit inspiring their action should be charity, true and sincere. They should prefer their brethren to others, loving them as themselves with the true love of the Heart of Mary and out of the superabundant plenitude that fills it", (Ibid. 85). Libermann goes on to spell out the qualities proper to this charity, which should be cordial, affective, simple, frank and upright, modest and serious, respectful and holy", (Ibid. 85 e sqq.). In brief, "we should conduct ourselves as towards Jesus Christ Himself".

CONCLUSION

Many other aspects of Libermann's doctrine merit our attention, more especially his teaching on prayer. Limited in our choice of what may be said, it may be useful perhaps to conclude by seeking to place him amongst other schools of spirituality. L. Cognet and Fr. Blanchard have pointed out Libermann's links with the so-called French School. True, in the beginning, he often quoted M. Olier and recommended people to read him, while when at Rennes he studied St John Eudes. Later, however reference to these two disappear almost completely. The Gospels and St Paul become more and more the source-books on which he draws and from which he quotes constantly. Indeed, whenever there is question of spiritual reading to be recommended we find him somewhat reticent. He does not believe in "systems" (N.D. VI, 13). On the other hand, he constantly urges the reading of the Word of God "in the spirit in which it was given", (N.D. III, 347), "in the spirit of Our Lord" (N.D. III, 387).

The Talmudic writings he had studied in his youth greatly influenced his own writings, especially THE COMMENTARY ON ST JOHN. But, it is most likely that it was in his basic intuition of the absoluteness of God and the nothingness of the creature that his first Jewish formation is most clearly evi-

dent. Undoubtedly, this also throws light on the need he expresses of freedom from the passions and plemics of his day. He refused to be bound by Gallican, nationalist, colonialist, political, racial or social ideologoes whatever their origin. Here, again he reminds us of St Paul, claiming vigorously the fundamental liberty of the Christian. This liberty was bestowed upon him by the Spirit of Jesus, to override all barriers, so as to be all things to all men.

N.B. The Spiritual Letters are quoted according to volume and page of the (French) text (e.g. II, 385). Other abbreviations that occur are : N.D. i.e. Notes et Documents (relative to the life and work of the Venerable Francis Mary-Paul Libermann); E.S., i.e. Ecrits Spirituels, Paris, 1891.; and E.S. SUPP., i.e. supplement to the same.

Joseph Lécuyer. C.S.Sp.