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Libermann, Bishop Barron, and the Two Guineas

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*Article translated from French by
Vincent O'Toole, C.S.Sp.*

**LIBERMANN, BISHOP BARRON
AND THE TWO GUINEAS.**

**THE GENEALOGICAL DIMENSION OF A
MISSIONARY PROJECT: 1842-1846**

Introduction

There is no lack of subjects for investigation regarding the thought and missionary spirituality of our Venerable Father, François-Marie-Paul Libermann (1802-1852). Those who have worked with Spiritan sources over a period of time would surely agree. As well as what has already appeared in the 24 editions of *Mémoire Spiritaine*, we have more articles in *Spiritan Horizons* (Center for Spiritan Studies, Duquesne University) which, unfortunately, is only published in English. Not long ago, Fr. Arsène Aubert pointed out to me that there has hardly been a mention of Libermann's sense of humour which can be frequently seen in the vast collection of his letters, even those which are labelled "spiritual letters." One can also legitimately search through his work to help us live and reflect on mission in our day, a time of inter-culturality where missionaries move in all the directions of the compass.

I must confess that I am only at the beginning of research into Libermann. Three years ago, I answered a call from the General Council to the young provinces to become involved in Spiritan studies. I decided to delve into the work of historians with a view to taking another look at our Spiritan sources: the documents, the events and the people at the beginning of our missionary history at the time of Libermann. I decided to look again at the person of Mgr. Barron even though he was not a Spiritan himself. I had the feeling that what happened between this young bishop and Father Libermann will help explain further the latter's great passion for Africa. The collective Spiritan memory tends to gloss over the fact that responsibility for the mission of the Two Guineas was passed on from Barron to Libermann and that both were greatly concerned about the future of the project. Some express their disappointment that Barron 'abandoned' the mission at the worst possible moment, like a captain who deserts his sinking ship with all the passengers still on board. Faced with the decimation of his missionaries who did not take all the necessary precautions, Barron decided to pull out, leaving the way clear for Libermann to carry on the work. Barron gets all the blame while people forget that this disastrous event on the west coast of Africa while Barron was in charge gave a new orientation to the missionary thought of Libermann.

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It is not my intention to examine details of this event so as to rectify some misconceptions and rehabilitate this “unacknowledged hero” of the African missions. This has already been done by our Irish confrere, Sean Farragher.¹ My concern is to assess how this key moment, when mission was restarted in Africa, prepared the ground for the deployment of the missionary ideas of Libermann in Africa. I believe that Mgr. Barron saw in Libermann the person needed to consolidate that missionary enterprise. This is why I would rather talk of Barron’s “transmission” than his “resignation.” But would this approach change something of our view of Libermann as a great missionary figure for Africa? Certainly not. But it would lead us to compare Libermann to the “scribe who was learned in the reign of God” whom Jesus said “can bring from his storeroom both the new and the old” (Matt. 13.51). I say this without inferring any connection to the rabbinical origins of Libermann.²

But before coming to the core of the subject, I would like to say something that I think is relevant concerning the date of February 2nd. For us Spiritans, it takes us back to our Venerable Father, François-Marie-Paul Libermann. On that day in 1852, he died in the odor of sanctity while the Congregation of the Holy Spirit was being rejuvenated as it absorbed the new blood injected into it by Libermann and his missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary.

But by coincidence, February 2nd is also important for another occasion³ in the history of the Congregation: It was on that day in 1839, that the parish priest of Notre Dame des Victoires in Paris, l’Abbé Dufriche-Desgenettes, made an appeal from his pulpit to the members of the Archconfraternity of the Holy Heart of Mary for the conversion of sinners, an association that he had founded in 1836. They had come together for their evening devotions and Desgenettes told them of a request for prayers he had just received from two Creole seminarians, Nicolas-Eugène Tisserant and Frédéric Levavasseur, who, unknown to one another, had sought the prayers of the Archconfraternity for the apostolate to the black people. The association had been started to offer prayers for an increase in religious fervor in a parish that was right in the business centre of Paris. In agreeing to the request of these two seminarians to pray for their compatriots in the far off French colonies, the association was to become truly universal in its outlook. So on February 2nd, 1839, the Work for the Black People was first presented at this important centre of spirituality, Notre Dame des Victoires. The Church was later to be raised to the rank of Minor Basilica because of the importance and extension of the Archconfraternity.

So we Spiritans celebrate two “presentations” on this day, for it also commemorates the anniversary of our close ties with the Archconfraternity and its founder, l’Abbé Degenettes. And, as we know, the Libermann branch of our Congregation was born on the altar of the Archconfraternity as “its eldest daughter,” as Père Cabon put it. It is because of the Archconfraternity that the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary eventually received their first mission in Africa. So, Feb 2nd brings together two dates—the death of Libermann on the Feast of the Presentation and the “presentation” of the Work for the Black People at Notre Dame des Victoires. This Marian sanctuary facilitated the all-important meeting between Edward Barron and Francis Libermann in 1842. L’Abbé Desgenettes saw the possibility of collaboration between Mgr. Barron, to whom had been confided the vast Vicariate of the Two Guineas but who had no personnel, and the young Society of the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary, who were having great difficulty finding a mission territory for themselves.

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We begin with a brief portrait of Mgr. Barron and the growth of his interest in the missions. We will see how he was well fitted for the missionary task that he undertook in 1841 on the west coast of Africa and his search for personnel which eventually led him to France. Then we will examine what I call the “confluence” of two missionary visions which came together at Notre Dame des Victoires: the one coming from America in the person of Barron and the confirmation of these dreams through the implementation of Francis Libermann. We will look at the apparent failure of Barron in a new light, which the passing of time allows us to reassess in another way. This is possible because when Libermann took over the task, he did not reject the approach of Barron. I will look at the genealogical dimension in the first missionary outreach, not to claim that Libermann took his inspiration from Barron when he got down to organising the African mission, but to underline how we cannot ignore the fact that Barron preceded him in the African mission. What I am thinking of is the way we approach a mission in the light of those who went before us, not the order of thought but the order of praxis.

Edward Wilson Barron (1801-1854): a Brief Missionary Portrait.

Edward Barron was born in Waterford, Ireland, on June 18th, 1801, (a year before Libermann) and he died in an epidemic in the United States on September 11th, 1854 (two years after him). One curious fact is that he started to learn French before the young Jacob Libermann. His well-to-do family owned a lot of property and were involved in the Irish political scene. Each of the children was prepared for a particular career. They were sent to the best

schools and Edward was earmarked for the diplomatic service in the footsteps of one of his brothers who later entered parliament. In those days, French was the recognised diplomatic language and was essential for progress in that particular career.

At that time, there were a number of Irish and Scottish colleges in France. Having survived the French revolution, they started once more to receive students from Scotland and Ireland. Before the Revolution, Catholics in the United Kingdom were still being persecuted and were subject to much social exclusion, so many crossed over to France for their education. In 1818, at the age of 17, Edward, with his younger brother William and a cousin, arrived at the prestigious High School of Henri IV. They did not stay in the Irish College because this was reserved for those on scholarships, so instead they went to the Scottish College which was close by, in what is today the rue Cardinal Lemoine. So Edward came to know Paris – the Latin Quarter and the great churches – before Libermann's arrival at Saint-Stanislas and, later, Saint-Sulpice. The time he spent in that city proved to be very useful when he returned there 22 years later, looking for finance and personnel. In 1820, Edward Barron returned to Dublin to study law at Trinity College. It was while he was there that he began to think about the priesthood, influenced thereto by a Jesuit, John Kenny, who got him to reflect on the easy lifestyle he had adopted which was impeding his progress in legal studies.⁴

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Barron's family gave their approval to his vocation, as did the Bishop of Waterford who decided to send him to the Propaganda Fide College in Rome. It was here that his missionary vocation began to mature. The Urban College, the forerunner of the present-day Urbanianum, had been founded to train missionaries, not as a religious Congregation but as a centre of studies where those who received scholarships were expected to put themselves at the disposal of bishops in mission countries. Many of these bishops had been students at the Propaganda themselves. Barron was not obliged to follow these conditions because he was not receiving any scholarship. But his exposure to mission and the intercultural atmosphere of the College influenced him to such an extent that after his ordination in October, 1829, he became interested in the Diocese of Philadelphia in the United States, where the bishop was a past student of the Propaganda in Rome. The coadjutor bishop, Mgr. Francis Patrick Kenrick, had sent a request for personnel to the college and this was passed on to the ordinands. The Bishop's letter still exists, as does the reply of the secretary of the Propaganda Fide that was sent to Mgr. Kenrick on April 8th, 1830:

“... (Edward Barron) of the diocese of Waterford, belongs to a distinguished family who have paid for his expenses at this college; he is keen to work with you in the vineyard of the Lord. This young priest, who shows a remarkable moral integrity and prudence, applied himself very well to his studies at this Urban College and received a doctorate last year. He would like me to convey this information to you...”⁵

Apparently, this letter, dated April 8th, 1830, was written while Barron was still in Rome, even though he had been ordained in October of the preceding year. It seems that he was in no hurry to return to Ireland because he had been bitten by the missionary bug which he had caught during his stay in Rome.

For the moment, he decided to return to his diocese of origin in Ireland where he joined the staff of St. John’s College in Waterford, which was also the diocesan seminary. But a few years later, in 1837, he decided to go abroad, even though he was much appreciated in Waterford. Apparently, the missionary call was still very strong for him, so he left his native land. The United States was still a mission country in the middle of the 19th century and he put himself at the disposal of the diocese of Philadelphia. He felt much more at home on the frontiers of mission.

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After he was no more than three years in America, a new missionary need came to his attention. The second Provincial Council of Baltimore (1833) turned its mind to the need of pastoral care for the liberated slaves who were beginning to return to Africa from the United States. The territory was given the name Liberia. The plan was left to simmer for a while until Pope Gregory XVI on December 3, 1839 condemned slavery and the slave trade in an apostolic letter, *In Supremo Apostolatus*. The Church in America felt that it had to play its part in the repatriation of the liberated slaves, especially as the protestant Churches already had pastors installed on the West Coast of Africa.

It was Mgr. Francis Patrick Kenrick, a past student of the Propaganda College in Rome, who was the first to react. By that time, Edward Barron was his Vicar General and he lost no time in volunteering to help in Africa, not counting the cost to himself. Through this generous act by which the American Church decided to send missionaries to Africa, Barron soon emerged as a leading missionary figure. Some use the image of a great wind blowing from Africa.⁶ In fact, it was only a team of three - two priests and one layman - but their expressed intention

was to send a “boatload of missionaries.” The Holy See ratified the initiative and gave the mission a juridical status. Even before Barron had arrived on African soil (and unknown to him) he was appointed Prefect Apostolic with all the canonical faculties that accompanied such a post. The area was to be known as the Prefecture of Northern Guinea. Although unaware of the enlargement of his missionary mandate, the immensity of the task soon became evident to Barron and his great concern was to ensure the continuity of the work. So he decided to set out once more to look for personnel. He knew exactly where to go. During his journey to Europe, he wrote to the Propaganda, in April 1842, explaining his ideas about the future:

“If I can find committed and zealous people for this difficult and dangerous mission, above all religious, I will have taken an important and lasting step to provide for the future needs of the Mission of Guinea.”

This quotation is an important indication as to why the “resignation” of Barron should be seen rather as a “transmission.” At this point, Barron knew nothing of Libermann but he was already convinced that in France he would find Congregations whose charism fitted in with the work to be done in Guinea. And he was not mistaken. Having been appointed Vicar Apostolic of the Two-Guineas and ordained bishop in Rome in 1842, he was directed towards Libermann who had founded a new missionary society dedicated to the apostolate to the Black People. The confluence of these two missionary streams would change the religious geography of Africa. This is what took place at Notre Dame des Victoires which looked like no more than a coincidence.

The confluence of these two missionary streams would change the religious geography of Africa.

We come now to what I refer to as the “confluence” at Notre Dame des Victoires. It was so important because the future of the Catholic mission in Africa in the 19th century owed so much to two pilgrims of the Immaculate Heart of Mary being brought together by the parish priest. And this could happen nowhere else but Notre Dame des Victoires. I want to spend a little time looking at this union of two streams: the union of the *wind blowing from America* and the apostolic zeal of Libermann and his small family, who had recently taken up residence at la Neuville, near Amiens. In my opinion, this meeting prefigured that other coming-together in 1848, with the dissolution of the young society of the Holy Heart of Mary.

A Coming Together at Notre-Dame des Victoires: the Genesis of a Providential Mission.

One wonders how the history of the foundation of Churches in Africa would have looked in our time but for the role of the Marian shrine of Notre Dames des Victoires. It would have been rather different. Mgr. Barron would have had to look elsewhere for personnel, for example, to the Spanish Capuchins. We know that a group of Capuchins were working on plans in that direction. But the basilica of Notre Dame des Victoires, very close to the stock exchange of Paris, was a famous spiritual centre where missionary ideas were exchanged and spiritual support and encouragement given to missions and missionaries. So it is not surprising that shortly after his arrival in Paris, Mgr Barron made a pilgrimage to the Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary, a devotion that the Archconfraternity, founded by l'Abbé Desgenettes, spread throughout the world. He presided at the evening prayers of the Archconfraternity on Sunday, December 18th, 1842 accompanied by a young Marist Bishop, Mgr. Guillaume Douarre, the future Vicar Apostolic of New Caledonia (1847-1853). According to a notice in *L'Ami de la Religion*⁸ the previous day, Barron was to talk about the mission of the Two-Guineas. It was l'Abbé Desgenettes, who was always on the look-out for such events, who first detected the hand of Mary in the visit of Mgr. Barron to the Archconfraternity. In fact, it took place during what proved to be the final visit of Libermann to Notre Dame des Victoires. Libermann talks of this visit the very night before Barron in a letter he subsequently wrote.⁹ He seems to have been there on business concerning Haiti. The new society of the Holy Heart of Mary was having great difficulty in finding a mission territory in the islands where the movement had begun. "*Father, we have a problem because we don't have any territory*" was how Libermann recalled his own words to Desgenettes on the steps of Notre Dame des Victoires; "*We have nowhere to go because all the doors are closed to us.*" He was talking of the doors into Haiti and Reunion. And it was the following day that Barron, with his huge territory and wide-open doors and lacking workers, arrived.

"Father, we have a problem because we don't have any territory..."

Desgenettes could see the confluence of two missionary dreams, both aimed at an apostolate to the Black People. In fact, all that he did was to bring together the two men so that this great missionary adventure could take off; he summoned Libermann to return to Paris at top speed and the result was an agreement between the two men that the missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary would go to Two-Guineas. The story is well-known to all Spiritans, but it is not always realised that it was also a foretaste of the future for the Society of the Holy

Barron, like John the Baptist, was the wind that prepared the ground and then died down to allow the sower to get to work.

Heart of Mary when Libermann led it into a union with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. The situation of the Holy Heart of Mary when it accepted the mission of Guinea is like the one that existed a few years later, when the two Congregations joined together; the Congregation of the Holy Spirit had juridical status and missions to which it was very attached, but it was unable to provide the necessary personnel. In the case of the Two-Guineas, Mgr. Barron had the juridical status. He held the official seal for the allotted territory but there was no point in going there on his own and without labourers for the vineyard! Libermann was to contribute new blood, full of optimism and tenacity. He represented the future, even if he was sometimes impeded by the Ministry of the Navy and the Colonies from providing all the manpower the Vicar Apostolic needed. Barron had to decrease while Libermann increased, so it was no surprise that the former was ready to hand over his place to Libermann so that he could spread his wings and even intensify his love for Africa. Once Libermann had demonstrated his total commitment to the task, Barron felt that *“he had taken an important and lasting step to provide for the future needs of the Mission of Guinea.”*¹⁰ It could no longer be seen as an abandonment of his duties; recognizing *“the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,”* he would step aside and leave it to Libermann to raise the mission to a new level. Barron, like John the Baptist, was the wind that prepared the ground and then died down to allow the sower to get to work. Now his “resignation” looks more like a “transmission” and the project would proceed in another way with other angles of attack, safe in the hands of a master of thought who only had to sow the land that had been cleared by Barron.

Libermann and Barron: mission as a genealogy

Why do I speak of a genealogical dimension to this missionary story as if Libermann, in some way, had received his intuition, his self-giving and his passion for Africa from Edward Barron, a passion that he passed on to his spiritual descendants? I have already said that the history of the foundation of the young Churches in Africa would be very different if Barron had not made his search and finally met Libermann at the crucial time when the Holy Heart of Mary was so desperate to find a mission territory. There can be no history without an origin. Our task is to bring together the origin and the history to understand how the passion of Libermann for Africa spread and strengthened as a result of this episode.

Speaking of genealogy is just a way of looking at things. Edward Barron was not the father of Jacob; Francis Libermann

was already a revered spiritual guide when Barron unexpectedly came on the scene. But “genealogy” is to be found in the way Libermann and Barron influenced each other in assuring the durability of their shared project when the responsibility for the mission of the Two-Guineas was taken over by Libermann. This mission would not come to an end with the withdrawal of Barron, the head of the mission; it would continue and be further strengthened by Libermann. That is where the genealogy lies; a spirituality is needed to think of mission as genealogy. For Libermann, the mission of Guinea could not be seen as the personal responsibility of Mgr. Barron. Guinea was a mission received as a gift, but also a commitment and a task. It would be a difficult trial for a young Congregation but it would show that same apostolic zeal of which Libermann was an outstanding example.

Was it perhaps visions of grandeur or self-esteem that led Libermann to continue with the mission of Guinea which was proving to be so costly in human lives? After all, he kept going despite everything and continued to send the best men available. On the contrary, this shows an unswerving dedication to the people of Guinea (whom he never met) and whose defence he took up in his famous memorandum to the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda of 1846 on *“The black missions in general, particularly that of Guinea.”*¹¹ In my opinion, this perseverance sprang from the mutual admiration between Barron and Libermann and a deep respect for each other’s motivations. This esteem shines through their letters, even in the most difficult moments when they did not agree with each other on some point. When Barron began to think about his withdrawal, he discretely told Libermann about it, asking him not to mention it to anybody else. He wanted to make sure that such a step would not threaten the success of the project, because Barron never hid his conviction that Libermann would be able to overcome the difficulties. In his final report to the Propaganda, dated January, 1845, he clearly expressed his confidence in Libermann:

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*“From the difficulties that were met in this first mission, it is clear how many obstacles will be encountered in establishing religion in Guinea. The plan that M. l’Abbé Libermann has suggested to solve these problems seems to be the only one that could succeed.”*¹²

In these words, Barron was referring to *“the first project for the salvation of the people of the African coasts”*¹³ which Libermann drew up in October 1844 in the wake of the death of nearly all the missionaries of the first team which went out to West Africa

with Mgr. Barron. The suggestion was that young Africans be brought to Europe for their formation in the hope that some missionary vocations might emerge who could evangelise their own people, but this scheme came to nothing.

In the light of what I have said regarding the genealogical dimension of this venture, one can pose a whole series of questions regarding the Spiritans of today. Much has been done during recent years to show the relevance of the historic Libermann to our own times. One aspect is the sacred character for Libermann of the mission received as both gift and task. To my mind, this is what assured the durability of the mission of the Two-Guineas, passed on from Barron to Libermann and subsequently to the many generations of missionaries who laboured in that part of Africa. It is only right that we should renew this link with our predecessors by studying their correspondence and other writings. They still have many valuable things to pass on to the missionaries of today.

Endnotes

¹Sean Farragher: *Edward Barron, 1801-1854; an unsung hero of the mission to Africa*. Dublin, Paraclete Press, 2004.

²For the influence that his rabbinical roots had on Libermann and his missionary ideas, see R. Tillard: “*L’Intuition missionnaire du Père Libermann*” in *Spiritains aujourd’hui*, no 4, 1985, pp. 80-98. [Spiritans Today, no.4, pp. 77-94].

³Arch. CSSP, 4F1.1.7, a manuscript entitled “*L’Archiconfrérie de Notre Dame des Victoires*,” signed by Père Cabon, 1934.

⁴Cf. Sean Farragher, *op. cit.* pp. 20-22.

⁵Archives of the Propaganda Fide, APF – Lettere e decreti – vol 311. F.269, quoted by Gérard Morel in “*Edward Barron et les Deux-Guinées* ». « *La fondation des Eglises en Afrique de l’Ouest au XIX siècle* » (forthcoming from Éditions Karthala, in the collection « *Mémoire d’Églises* », *ibid.*, p. 85).

⁶Gérard Morel: “*Mgr. Edward Barron (1801-1854) ou ‘le vent d’Amérique’ et la reprise de la mission à la côte d’Afrique* », « *Mémoire Spiritaine* » no 15, p. 53-80.

⁷Cf. *Notes et Documents*, Volume V, p. 19.

⁸“*L’Ami de la religion*”, no 3686, volume CXV, Saturday December 17th, 1842, p. 534. This old newspaper is accessible on the website of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France: www.gallica.fr

⁹*Lettres Spirituelles*, volume CCCXVII, p. 368.

¹⁰*Notes et Documents*, V, 19.

¹¹A critical edition of this memorandum can be found in “*Libermann, 1802-1852: Une pensée et une mystique missionnaire*,” Paul Coulon and Paule Brasseur, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1988, p. 221-270.

¹²*Notes et Documents*, vol. V, p. 38.

¹³A critical edition of this memorandum can be found in: P. Coulon and Paule Brasseur, *op. cit.* pp. 211-220.