

Summer 2013

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Bernard Kelly

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### Recommended Citation

Kelly, B. (2013). Francis Libermann 1802–1852: The moulding of a missionary. *Spiritan Magazine*, 37 (3). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc/vol37/iss3/11>

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# The moulding of a missionary

Bernard Kelly CSSp

**S**on of a Jewish rabbi, Francis Libermann was born in Saverne, Alsace, France. His mother died when he was eleven. He did not leave his hometown until he was twenty. All his early schooling was supervised by his father, whose great desire was to have a son a rabbi like himself. When Francis finally left home to go to the Talmudic school at Metz, his brothers had already gone in different directions.

He was aware that only he could bring to fulfillment his fathers' cherished dream.

But Francis soon experienced serious difficulties of faith, and after four years of struggle he was converted to Catholicism. A sensitive fidelity to his Jewish faith had led him to a belief in Christ. He moved to Paris and at the age of 25, entered the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice, Paris to study for the priesthood. Aware that this news would break his father's heart, he tried to keep it from him.

## “Betrayal!”

But one day at the seminary he received a letter. His aging father had heard the news and had written a letter of bitter reproach. In his eyes Francis' behaviour was a betrayal of family and faith. Because of his great affection for his father, Francis felt his heart torn apart. He broke down and wept, all the time repeating, “I am a Christian!” God sometimes asks his chosen ones to go against the people they love the most: “God gave me the grace to resist my father,” he wrote. Francis had tried in every way to avoid this confrontation with his father. Confrontation brings suffering. But it also puts an end to pretense.

Confrontation carries the risk of an outbreak of violence, of open warfare. Almost always it bodes ill. Yet we are forced to recognize that some confrontation is inevitable. Within both family and church, confrontation is never far away.

## Epilepsy

When Francis suffered his first epileptic seizure a year after receiving his father's letter, it was the beginning of twelve years of obscurity. His hopes of ordination to the priesthood were dashed, but he refused to be downcast. Because of his illness, no planning for the future was possible, everything was tentative. Constantly vulnerable, he accepted his nervous fragility and came to terms with uncertainty. There were some



dark moments — once he was tempted to suicide as he crossed a bridge over the Seine in Paris. He tells us that he overcame this temptation by turning his attention to Christ, the living witness to the Father's love.

## Vocation

In retrospect, these years would better be described as “the making of an apostle.” They were prologue to a creative outburst that took everyone by surprise. Founder of a missionary congregation, its superior general, renowned spiritual director, confidant of government officials ... Libermann had discovered his missionary vocation to the most abandoned. He would revitalize the African missions.

During the period of hectic activity that followed, he found unexpected resources of energy in his love of God and his compassion for others. His energy was soon to be stilled — he died at the age of 50 — but its source remains the lifeblood of Spiritans today. His simple lifestyle and missionary zeal still sound an echo in the hearts of many men and women. ■

## Prayer in honour of Francis Libermann

O loving Father,  
In sickness and in loneliness  
Let your peace come upon me  
As the morning dew.  
Help me as you helped Francis Libermann  
Never to doubt your love.

O Christ, my fellow traveler,  
Suffering servant  
Acquainted with infirmity,  
Help me as you helped Francis Libermann  
To turn my attention away from myself  
To you.

O gentle Spirit,  
Secret of the world's meaning,  
Help me as you helped Francis Libermann  
To seek your hand  
And your design  
In my present situation.