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## FATHER LIBERMANN'S TRUST IN PROVIDENCE

### Christian de Mare, C.S.Sp.

As a Spiritan missionary in Senegal and Congo, Fr Christian de Mare was active in the work of priestly formation. Subsequently in Europe, he was heavily involved in the formation of Spiritan novices and seminarians in his native France and in several other countries.

His life and work draw strength from his study of Spiritan sources. He wants to share his grasp of the Spiritan way of life, especially with formators. With this in mind, he edited "A Spiritan Anthology" – a collection of essential Spiritan texts, which has been translated from the original French into English, Portuguese and Spanish.

*Translation: Vincent O'Toole,  
C.S.Sp.*

*...our faith in Divine Providence is a sign that our mission is indeed the "Missio Dei."*

The words "Providence" or "Divine Providence" occur frequently in the writings of Francis Libermann. The index to the volumes of *Notes et Documents*, now available online at the Center for Spiritan Studies (Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, USA), <http://digital.library.duq.edu/cdm-spiritan/> shows just how many references there are, volume after volume.

The trust of Libermann in Providence is very close to the contemporary theology of mission that we hear today: it is God Himself who is the source, promoter and guide of the mission that Jesus Christ confided to his Church at the end of the paschal events, after he had appeared in many different ways to his disciples. For many years now, theology speaks of the "Missio Dei." Jesus himself is the missionary of his Father and he sends the Holy Spirit to be the soul of his disciples as they carry out this same mission. There is only one Mission that Jesus announced from the start of his ministry: "*Convert and believe in the Good News.*"

Francis Libermann is totally convinced that he is the servant of this mission, he and his confreres of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary and, later, those of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit after the unification of the two Congregations in 1848. It is the constant theme in his spiritual guidance of many priests and lay people. He expresses this trust by his frequent use of the word "Providence" throughout his writings: it is God who watches over the mission to which he and his confreres are sent. Therefore, we must not use the inspirations that the Holy Spirit sends us by setting to work as if the ideas flowed from our own initiative. When we are halted in our tracks by problems and cannot decide which way to go, we must simply wait for "the moment of God" before going any further - another of Libermann's favorite expressions.

In letter after letter, he underlines the need for this trust in the presence of God working within us and in our activities. We can only be sure that our mission is authentic if we are completely convinced of this truth: our faith in Divine Providence is a sign that our mission is indeed the "Missio Dei."

This is what he wrote to the first team of missionaries that he sent to the west coast of Africa:

*Have no fear of the difficulties you are going to meet. They must never discourage you. You have not gone out in your own name; it is not you who are doing the work, but the One who sent you. You are not alone, and He will always be with you if*

Christian de Mare, C.S.Sp.

*Stop a while in front  
of obstacles... and wait  
for God's moment with  
confidence.*

*you remain faithful. So do not be faint-hearted or allow your faith to weaken. An apostle of Jesus Christ cannot be downcast when faced with obstacles. Bear them manfully with peace and patience, and always persevere with any of your projects which are definitely useful for the glory of God and for the salvation of souls. Stop a while in front of obstacles and difficulties which, for the moment, seem to be insoluble, and wait for God's moment with confidence. Be faithful, and that moment will surely arrive.<sup>1</sup>*

The faith of Libermann in Providence is far greater than the trust we put in the Lord to give us the material resources that we need. But that trust is part of our conviction that it is God who is in charge of our mission and it is He who will meet all our needs to accomplish it. These are the words, for example, in which Libermann assures Cardinal d'Auvergne that the Lord is looking after the young foundation (August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1842)<sup>2</sup>: “*Divine Providence has given us sufficient material blessings to ensure the modest survival of our novitiate.*”

Libermann returns several times to this “modest” financial help to which his missionaries are indebted. Their experience will build up their confidence; Providential help will not be lacking but it will always be “modest” and just about sufficient for their needs. Providence wants us to remain in a spirit of ‘confident dependency’ – to teach us that it is God who steers the mission on its way.

*Financial  
administration was  
always a great worry  
for him.*

### **Help yourself and heaven will help you**

If Libermann believed so firmly in Providence, he also knew that help would only come at the price of suffering on our part. Financial administration was always a great worry for him. At times, his confreres made unfortunate investments which he deeply regretted. We have an example of this in the letter he wrote to Mgr. Truffet, the Vicar Apostolic of Senegambia, on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1847:<sup>3</sup>

*Our house in Amiens<sup>4</sup>, this unfortunate house which was such a bad buy, has cost us more than 100,000 francs<sup>5</sup>. The property has now been paid for but money is still owing to the workers to the tune of around 24,000 francs. We only have around 18,000 francs left. But God and Mary have come to our help; we received 9,000 francs unexpectedly and we have been able to sell one of our boats.<sup>6</sup>*

*But Providence never wants us to sit back contentedly when help turns up. We have to learn that we depend solely on His generosity so He never sends us the full amount of what we need. That will come later. As a result of the poor harvest*

*last year, food prices were three times higher than usual and we had not foreseen such an additional expense. Added to this, we had a desperate need to buy linen and furniture for the Community.*

*These unforeseen expenses last year have left us with a debt of about 15,000 francs. This year, after the departure of Fr. Bessieux and his companions, our personnel will number at least 65, 27 or 28 of whom will be students at Notre-Dame du Gard...*

*...he constantly stressed the importance of having a good bursar!*

A letter he sent to Fr. Lambert around the same time shows that while Libermann was very keen on having efficient handling of finance by a qualified bursar, he was always ready to put up with the inconveniences coming from unwise expenditure by his confreres; he never let their mistakes influence his overall appreciation of their contribution. Nevertheless, he constantly stressed the importance of having a good bursar!

*Port-Louis, August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1847<sup>7</sup>*

*What we are lacking above all is a novice master and a bursar – the first, to look after their spiritual lives and the second to provide their daily bread. The greatest need is for a bursar so ask the good Lord to send us one with, preferably, a sack of money! If we had had a good bursar this year, we could have saved between 10,000 and 12,000 francs. We have good procurators but not bursars. The high price of food, buildings to be erected and the need for more furniture because of the increase in numbers have almost ruined us. We are now 15-20,000 francs in the red. But don't worry; the good Lord will look after us.*

*We have good procurators but not bursars.*

*The building cost us 10,000 francs more than we had foreseen and the rise in prices a similar amount. We are spending 600 francs per month on bread alone and everything else has risen in proportion.*

*Unfortunately, no provision had been made (Fr. Kobès was not yet in charge of finance last winter). The house of Gard with the gardens etc. cost no more than 34,000 francs, but the one in the outskirts of Amiens will be at least 100,000. I was very upset by the purchase; I had decided otherwise but the confreres thought that I had given instructions to buy it, whereas I had decided the exact opposite before I left.*

*But I made up my mind that it was better to go ahead with the transaction rather than cause humiliation for my confreres, and I think that this was pleasing to God. I now*

Christian de Mare, C.S.Sp.

*see all this as an intervention of Divine Providence who wanted us to have this house, even though it was three times more expensive and five times smaller than the one we had at Gard.*

*The house at La Neuville is no longer big enough for our needs...*

### **The hand of Providence**

A good example of the way that Providence was helping the young Congregation of Libermann was the acquisition of the Abbey of Notre Dame du Gard, near Amiens. In a letter to the confreres working in West Africa, written on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1846,<sup>8</sup> he relates the whole story in some detail:

*Everything is going well here and God continues to bless us. The house at La Neuville<sup>9</sup> is no longer big enough for our needs, so we have bought the house of the Orphans at Faubourg Noyon and have built on another twelve bedrooms as the old building was scarcely habitable. Having bought this house, Providence sent another blessing that will be very beneficial.*

*The Trappists had been forced to abandon the Abbey of Gard, because the new railway had cut their property in two and the line ran very close to the monastery buildings. A lay man bought the whole compound and then sold off different sections of the land. The proprietor sold the buildings and the surrounding property.*

*...that very day, three other potential buyers turned up...*

*The buildings consist of a large house 60 metres long, a beautiful church consecrated to St. Peter (40 metres approx.), stables and several other buildings – a farmyard, a brewery, a bakery, washrooms etc. The total area is about 10 acres, including the courtyards and the farmyards. We paid 36,000 francs for the whole property. They had been searching for a buyer for 18 months, which is why we were able to get such a good price. In fact, we wanted to withdraw temporarily from the deal, but because of the imprudence of the person who was acting on our behalf, we found ourselves legally bound to accept the contract. On that very day, three other potential buyers turned up, so six hours later, we would have lost the property altogether. It includes everything necessary for a community – enough land to provide vegetables for the two communities, sufficient cider to last the whole year, plenty of fruit and sufficient grass to support five cows for the whole of summer and part of the winter.*

*Our community of 30 students has already moved in. The house is isolated and healthy. The young men are very happy with it and the rule is being observed perfectly. I go over there once a week. The house where I am will be the*

*It was painful for me to sell this house...*

*...leaving La Neuville must make you as sad as it makes me.*

*I was never able to succeed with a plan that I had thought up myself...*

*novitiate. We already have some novices and are expecting another in a few days' time. We have sold the house at La Neuville to the Ladies of the Sacred Heart, who will retain the chapel. It was painful for me to sell this house, but the advantages of the house at Gard were very many and we needed the cash to buy it. We sold La Neuville for 20,000 francs more than we paid for Notre Dame du Gard. By next year, we would have been obliged to spend money on extending La Neuville because of the number of students; we were already greatly pressed for room and, as a consequence, it was difficult to observe the rule and in winter, 30 plus people would have found it impossible to take recreation. With the 20,000 francs we were able to pay off the total cost of the house in Faubourg Noyon. If we had kept La Neuville, we would have had to find another 20,000 francs to adapt the house for community living, and that would have been impossible.*

*I am giving you all these details because I am sure that leaving La Neuville must make you as sad as it makes me. But I am convinced that this is what God wants. We will stay at La Neuville until May and then move to Faubourg Noyon. The building is called the "House of the Holy Heart of Mary."*

**"So far, we have always followed the way pointed out to us by Divine Providence."**

The following letter was sent by Libermann to Fr. Le Vasseur who was on a recruiting drive for the new foundation in the Senior Seminaries of France. Le Vasseur suggested that they should go back on the integration of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary into the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, which had taken place in September, 1848. In reply, Libermann gives a summary of the respectful and flexible attitude towards Providence by which he had steered the Congregation from the beginning:

*To Frederic Le Vasseur,*

*Pentecost, 1850.<sup>10</sup>*

*... So far, we have always followed the way pointed out to us by Divine Providence; this and this alone was our guide. I was never able to succeed with a plan that I had thought up myself, but almost by magic, I was always able to achieve, in the midst of burdens and sufferings, what was indicated providentially. So it would be the worst thing we could possibly do to abandon this policy and replace it with our own ideas, however fervent and generous they might seem to be.*

*Such a step would lead to our complete ruin...*

*...we are certainly a poor and feeble bunch of men...*

*...to abandon the task would be like letting the house of God burn down...*

*I see two flaws in your advice: in the first place, it is a personal idea that does not come from God but from your reaction to what you have seen and heard from others;<sup>11</sup> secondly, your advice goes far beyond the normal way in which God acts. To follow your suggestion would need some sort of assured supernatural revelation.*

*You are suggesting that we close the Paris Seminary,<sup>12</sup> return to Gard<sup>13</sup> and abandon the colonies. I am convinced that that would be one of the worst faults, the most violent insults that our poor little Congregation could throw at God. Such a step would lead to our complete ruin; we would deserve to be abandoned by God; it would ruin our reputation in the eyes of men and, perhaps, would cause great disruption among our own members.*

*I believe strongly that by leaving the Seminary or abandoning the colonies we would be acting contrary to the will of God. It was the Providence of God which placed us in the Seminary and sent us to Bourbon and Mauritius; it is not for us to suddenly reject His orders, nor to say that we have already done enough in following His good and holy providence.*

*The work of the Seminary is difficult, very difficult and we are certainly a poor and feeble bunch of men, but is that a reason for giving it up? If the bishops no longer want us, they will get rid of us, but it would be a crime on our part to deliberately do something to force their hands. There are no difficulties that cannot be overcome with the help of God, so we must let Him show His great goodness and never abandon a work that is so important. To act according to our emotions when there is so much at stake is not the way of a man of God, which is what we should aim at.*

*If we have to be crushed under the weight of such a work, then so be it. But simply to abandon the task would be like letting the house of God burn down without doing anything to put out the fire.*

*You want me to say to the bishops: "Destroy this Seminary!" You say now that we have bishops, we have no further responsibility for the colonial clergy! I believe that neither of your suggestions is according to the mind of God; if we were to follow them, we would be destroying religion in the colonies and putting the bishops into an impossible situation. They would have reason to criticise us for getting them appointed bishops and then abandoning them to their own devices. I am convinced that if the bishops were*

*...we must retain responsibility for this house until Providence chases us out of it...*

*...if God is leading us, heaven forbid that we should run away.*

*forced to place their seminarians in the diocesan seminaries of France, the Church in the colonies would be finished. It is a utopian and impractical idea, so I would be completely opposed to giving the bishops any such advice. The way I see it is that we must retain responsibility for this house until Providence chases us out of it, and do all we can to make it a place of holiness. With God's help we will succeed, even though we have so little to recommend us.*

*You go on to say that the priests destined for the colonies must receive a better education than the others and that we are incapable of giving it. I cannot see why either of these statements is true. Most of the teachers in the diocesan seminaries are no better than what we provide. Are we not capable of running the Seminary? Perhaps we are also incapable of running the Congregation, but we were infinitely worse when we started. If we cannot count on God's help, then we should flee to the desert and never get involved in God's work again. If you reason like this, no good man would take on an important task because he would always feel incapable of succeeding on his own. So such important work would be left in the hands of those who have a high opinion of themselves, people who are incapable of carrying out such work according to the plans of God.*

*In short, your ideas are not coming from God!*

*However inadequate we are, we will succeed if we remain faithful. We must not act according to our own ideas and presumptions, but if God is leading us, heaven forbid that we should run away. We must count on Him and He will never let us down.*

The unimagined development of the missions started by Francis Libermann, and the crushing loss of so many missionaries in the early days, are a sure sign of Divine Providence at work, that same Providence which sends out and protects missionary families as they follow in the steps of Jesus today.

**Our Spiritan Rule of life** takes up these missionary insights of Libermann, even if it does not explicitly use the word "providence." The following extracts from our present Rule show the continuity of the same spirit at the very heart of our Spiritan family. The banner headline for the chapter on *Our Mission* reads:

*As the Father sent me, so am I sending you. After saying this, Jesus breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit (Jn 20 21-22)... You will be my witnesses to earth's remotest ends. (Acts 1 8).*



...to become aware  
of the energy and  
excitement that comes  
from being involved  
in *Missio Dei*.

8. *The Spirit of the risen Lord, working in the Church and in the world, gives life and direction to our entire apostolic life. This apostolic life contains in itself the perfection of the life of Our Lord on which it is modelled.*

9. *The Spirit pours the Father's love into our hearts (cf. Romans 5 5). It is this love that produces apostolic zeal in us, shown by a powerful desire to see the same love established in the hearts of all people.*

11. *We are participating, within the Church, in the mission of Christ, in communion with Him and all people, proclaiming a salvation that is a gift from God, liberation from all that oppresses people, joy in knowing the Lord and being known by Him.*

Libermann would like everyone to become aware of the energy and excitement that comes from being involved in *Missio Dei*.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Notes et Documents* VI pp. 3-8. English version : *A Spiritan Anthology : writings of Claude Poullart des Places and François Libermann*, p. 227.

<sup>2</sup> ND IV p. 18

<sup>3</sup> ND IX p. 344

<sup>4</sup> This was the house in Faubourg Noyon, near Amiens, where it was planned to have the novitiate of the young foundation.

<sup>5</sup> Acknowledging the great difficulty in establishing contemporary monetary equivalents at a distance of more than 150 years, taking the 1840s French Franc as worth about US \$5 today can help in forming an idea of expenses and revenue.

<sup>6</sup> Libermann had received a gift of two small boats to carry out his first project of opening a sort of junior seminary for young African boys in the suburbs of Rome.

<sup>7</sup> ND IX p. 257

<sup>8</sup> *A Spiritan Anthology*, p. 49 and ND VIII, p. 389.

<sup>9</sup> The house at la Neuville, near Amiens, was the cradle of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary, its first novitiate and the place from which the original missionaries to West Africa left in September, 1843.

<sup>10</sup> ND XII p. 199

<sup>11</sup> Le Vavas seur had heard a great deal of criticism of Libermann's decision to amalgamate the two Congregations.

<sup>12</sup> The Seminary of the Holy Spirit, founded by Claude François Poullart des Places in 1703 was now the responsibility of Libermann; as a result of the integration of the two Congregations in 1848, he had become the 11<sup>th</sup> Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, he was now in charge of providing clergy for all the French colonies.

<sup>13</sup> Shortly before the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary was absorbed into the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, it had sold both La Neuville and Faubourg-Noyon; all that remained was the Abbey of Notre-Dame du Gard.