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## LIBERMANN IN CONFLICT WITH THE AUTHORITIES

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Arsène Aubert is a French Spiritan who worked for several years as a missionary in Africa and in Guadeloupe. A former Vicar-Provincial of the Province of France, he has been involved over many years in the biblical formation of future Spiritans and of laypeople. Currently residing in Paris, he continues to animate retreats centered on Scripture and on the spirituality of Francis Libermann. He is author of *Prier 15 Jours avec François Libermann*. (Montrouge: Nouvelle Cité, 2003)

(Translation: Vincent O'Toole,  
C.S.Sp.)

*Without reconciliation,  
justice and peace will  
always be precarious...*

Libermann had several controversies with civil and religious authorities: slave masters, ministers and commandants of the navy, even bishops! He put himself in the position of the defenseless who struggle for justice against the powerful.

But in some countries where democracy and freedom of expression are completely absent, prudence and discretion are the only way forward for those who struggle for justice. There are several places where declarations and demonstrations for “Justice and Peace” are useless, but the practice of Libermann could be a help to those who live in such unfortunate circumstances.

From the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 26<sup>th</sup> of October, 2009, the Synod of the Bishops of Africa examined the theme: “The African Church at the service of *reconciliation, justice and peace*.” Without reconciliation, justice and peace will always be precarious—and this is exactly what Libermann felt.

At first sight, his attitude could appear to show a lack of courage when he was dealing with slave masters, for example. But it was a realistic approach. Look at our own experience: it is not people who make the most noise and thump tables who achieve the most progress; very often, a more reserved and balanced attitude achieves better results in the long run. This approach fits in perfectly with the characteristics of Libermann’s own spirituality—peacefulness, gentleness and reaching out to others where they are at a particular time.

### 1) The relations of missionaries with the slave masters

In February, 1839, two seminarians—Frédéric Le Vasseur from Reunion and Eugène Tisserant from Haiti—decided to form an association of priests to help the slaves in the French colonies. In France at that time, there was much talk of the abolition of slavery. Victor Schoelcher wanted it done immediately, but the government favoured a more gradual approach with what it called a “moralisation campaign,” so as to avoid the troubles and destruction of the economy that had been experienced in Haiti. Libermann, a Jew who had become a Christian, was the assistant novice master in the novitiate of the Eudist Fathers. Le Vasseur asked him what he thought of their scheme:

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*“You have often heard me talk of the deplorable state of religion in Bourbon and the surrounding islands and the way the blacks, the freed slaves and the poor are totally abandoned. The black people, who make up about half of the population, are condemned to a state of ignorance, suffering and corruption that is impossible to imagine from here... Their future emancipation will do nothing to improve the situation; in fact it will make it worse, so they will never be able to escape from their present miserable state”.* (March, 1839. ND I 635)

*The missionaries will be the advocates, the supporters and the defenders of the small and weak against their oppressors.*

Libermann encourages the project and adds: *“It is almost essential that a Congregation should undertake such a task.”* (8 March, 1839. ND I 638) In 1840, he presented the plan to Rome and drew up the Rule of the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary. The first novitiate opened in September, 1840. He explained the Rule to the novices:

Chapter 9, Article 6: *“The missionaries will be the advocates, the supporters and the defenders of the small and weak against their oppressors. When faced with such situations, the love and strength of Our Lord, Jesus Christ must increase in them. But their actions must be inspired by a gentleness and prudence which their Master will give them if they are faithful.”*<sup>1</sup>

*But he must guard against letting his anger run away with him...*

Article 14: *“They will do all they can to establish this Christian charity between the rich and the poor, the whites and the blacks, so that all will see one another as brothers in Jesus Christ and overcome the disdain and indifference on the one side and the jealousy and hatred on the other. But this requires great prudence or all could be lost.”*

The explanation in the “Glose”,<sup>2</sup> or commentary given by Libermann to the novices, can come as something of a shock:

*“In the colonies and undeveloped countries, there is a huge number of unfortunate people who are dependent on others who treat them abominably. The missionary must take up the cause of the oppressed and defend the weak against those who abuse them. But he must guard against letting his anger run away with him when he sees their condition and the way they are treated; he must learn to be prudent and control his feelings lest he make their situation even worse. His sole aim must be to alleviate their sufferings by acting in a way that can bring this about. So he will use*

*authority, giving orders, begging, gentleness according to the attitude of the oppressors. If he has sufficient influence over them, he should speak strongly and reproach them for their injustice in a dignified way; but if this is not the case, it would be wise to speak to them in a pleading rather than an authoritative manner, avoiding words of condemnation for their unjust behaviour.*

*The missionary must strive to understand what makes these hard men act in such a way...*

*The missionary must strive to understand what makes these hard men act in such a way towards their dependents. He will try to discover what motivates them and gradually prepare them to be open to feelings of pity and moderation. This method will often lead to the desired effect, whereas if they are confronted brusquely with indignation, it will usually achieve nothing apart from annoying these people who are likely to increase their cruelty towards the poor souls we are trying to help and render the situation hopeless.”*

*Many priests were shipped back to France because the masters felt they were getting too close to the slaves.*

This advice from Libermann could be seen as recommending duplicity of language and purely human prudence. But we must remember the context in which his missionaries were working. Slavery in the French colonies was regulated by the “Black Code”, written in 1685, revised in 1724, and implemented up until 1848. It gives the masters total power over the slaves, including branding, mutilation and using the lash. The Church in the colonies was run by Apostolic Prefects (not bishops), and they were appointed by the civil authorities which were also subject to the slave masters, because their plantations brought considerable profit to the “mother” country. Many priests were shipped back to France because the masters felt they were getting too close to the slaves. The missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary were preparing for the emancipation, but quietly, so as not to run the risk of being expelled from the colony; their expulsion would have deprived the black people of their most faithful supporters. At that time, their religious family lacked any juridical approval by either the Church or the state. So their situation was very precarious and they had many enemies. As Libermann himself put it, “The smallest breeze could destroy everything” (Memorandum to the Propaganda in Rome).

M. Bissette, a native of Martinique, launched a petition for the immediate abolition of slavery and sent a copy to Libermann, hoping for his signature and help in its distribution. Libermann replied that he was not prepared to do so because any intervention on his part could lead to the expulsion of his missionaries, who

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*...you rightly treat me  
as a friend of the black  
race...*

*It would have been better  
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were almost the only ones who mixed with the black slaves. His reply to Bisette reads as follows:

*"I received your packet at the end of July. I am honoured by the trust you have put in me, for you rightly treat me as a friend of the black race and as one who desires their emancipation above all things. I am proud of this and I will be immensely happy if God in his goodness allows me to live long enough to see my desires fulfilled. I have forwarded the brochures to the priests to whom they were addressed. I would dearly love to have signed the petition myself, but I have declined to do this for very serious reasons which I will explain to you when I next come to Paris. I tried to find somebody else to take on the distribution of the petition but without success, but I am sure that the clergy of this diocese would be happy to sign. I am sorry not to be able to satisfy our shared desire, but I have given some of the brochures to M. Germainville who will distribute them to the clergy of Bordeaux."<sup>3</sup>*

After the revolution of 1848, slavery was abolished and Libermann wrote: *"It would have been better if the slaves had been properly prepared for it; but it is doubtful if any such preparation would have been successful because of the opposition of their former owners. Nevertheless, it (the emancipation) was a great blessing from God."* (from his Memorandum to the Bishops of French West Indies and Reunion, 1850).

The Church had also accepted the "Black Code"! Cardinal Etchegaray presided at a colloquium in Rome in 1998 entitled: "Slavery, a denial of humanity." On that occasion he said: *"This exchange of ideas must help us to understand why the Church... has not always been in the forefront of the opposition to slavery and was often more concerned about its humanisation than its abolition."* (Cf. *Mémoire Spiritaine*, no. 9, 1999, p. 6) Libermann would not have been able to propose a missionary project to Rome in 1840 that was opposed to the practice of the Church at that time.

## **2) The relations of missionaries with civil and military leaders**

### **To Fr. Briot**

In November 1843, the Minister for the Navy offered Libermann an "agreement" that would bring many advantages to his French missionaries—transport, indemnity, medical help, protection, buildings. Libermann knew full well that the motives behind this offer were political. Just as England supported its

*The missionaries of Libermann did not like the arrangement on offer...*

*It would be most unfortunate if these people were to get the impression that you were opposed to the Government...*

Protestant missionaries in Africa, so France wanted to support its French Catholic missionaries to help in the spread of its influence. Bishop Barron, the Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas, was a victim of this policy: the naval commanders virtually ignored him because he was not French.<sup>4</sup> The missionaries of Libermann did not like the arrangement on offer, fearing that their Superior had been taken in by the minister, putting their freedom of action in jeopardy.

At Libreville (Gabon) in 1847, for the opening of the Catholic church built for the missionaries by the French Admiralty, the Commandant turned up accompanied by a detachment of soldiers. Fr. Briot, a missionary of the Holy Heart of Mary at Libreville, refused to let “*these Muslims and idolaters*” enter the church! The Commandant was extremely annoyed and left, sending a report on these events to the minister. The minister sent Libermann a copy who then excused his missionaries with the words; “The best ones have died!”

Libermann subsequently wrote to Fr. Briot with some “rules of prudence”:<sup>5</sup>

*The mission in Africa necessarily involves having relations with the Commandants. A missionary who finds himself in such circumstances must maintain friendship, or at least good relations, with the civil and military authorities and the captains of visiting ships, while at the same time ensuring the freedom necessary for his ministry. It would be most unfortunate if these people were to get the impression that you were opposed to the Government... You must be very prudent in the way you act. Never get mixed up in politics... be kind to those around you and treat them with gentleness, charity and thoughtfulness. When you are unable to do what they ask (e.g. baptise somebody with several wives, bypass the precepts of the Gospel), be kind and polite to them and satisfy them as far as you can.*

*Here are a few rules of prudence to follow in your relations with these officials:*

- 1) *Don't give the impression that you have doubts about their good intentions towards you. Let them feel your confidence and act as if you have no doubts about them; this can sometimes forestall them from showing their opposition, if they have any.*

*...even if you get the better of them, they will make you pay dearly for it later on.*

*When you have a request to make to the Commandant, do not normally put it in writing but go to see him...*

- 2) *Be firm in doing your duty, but with humility and gentleness. It is of the nature of soldiers to use their authority proudly and aggressively: it is for us to calm down their aggression by our moderation, and their pride by our humility.*
- 3) *Try to avoid confrontations. These men are used to getting their own way from those subject to them... Once they have taken up a stance, they will not retreat and even if you get the better of them, they will make you pay dearly for it later on. If, despite all your precautions, a Commandant takes a decision that is beyond his competence, don't get into an argument but let some time pass. Later, you can raise the problem again at an appropriate moment and talk things through in a calmer atmosphere.*
- 4) *When it becomes clear that you are in the right, don't put on a triumphant air or give the impression that you have won the battle. Be sensitive and never steer the conversation back to this question. Be humble and charitable and avoid humiliating others, whatever the circumstances. Sometimes we want to emphasise that we are in the right and that they have overstepped the mark; this is a very bad way to proceed, because it simply increases our self-love and achieves nothing that is good.*
- 5) *When you have a request to make to the Commandant, do not normally put it in writing but go to see him and gradually steer the conversation round to the question. Prepare the ground and ask him in an atmosphere of relaxed conversation. For example, if you want to hold a liturgical celebration, or ask that the workers should not have to work on a Sunday, or that men and women should not be lodged in the same place in the workers' camps, then go to see him and be prepared to modify your requests where necessary.*

These “rules of prudence” show the realism and practical spirituality of Libermann. For him, if it was not practical, it would not be apostolic.

### **To Frédéric Le Vasseur**

Another example of Libermann's approach to such situations can be found in a letter he wrote to Le Vasseur. At that time, he was a missionary in Reunion, and he sent Libermann a

*...the sheep don't bite the  
wolves when they are  
attacked!*

memorandum he had written to the Director of the Interior who had criticised Le Vasseur for celebrating Mass for the black people in a chapel which was not legally authorised. Libermann replied to him as follows:<sup>6</sup>

*I read your memorandum with great interest. I feel you adopted a rather harsh tone to the Director of the Interior. You would have done better to use more charitable words which were less wounding. You don't say anything wounding as such, but you give the impression that you feel he is not being totally honest. There probably was some bad faith in what he had said to you, but a spirit of moderation and charity on your behalf would have been more in conformity with the spirit of our Congregation. The Lord sends us like sheep among wolves, but the sheep don't bite the wolves when they are attacked! You would have done better to work on the assumption that the Director had been badly informed. For example, he could have picked up his information about you from people who were themselves either mistaken or malicious in your regard. Explain to him calmly and dispassionately that the information he had received was not exact. Peaceful and moderate language is what Our Lord always used. A sheep does not defend itself against an aggressive wolf. Moreover, humanly speaking, the sort of language that I am recommending will be much more successful in the long run.*

*He imposed a completely  
unsuitable diet on the  
priests working under  
him...*

Mgr. Truffet, the Vicar Apostolic of Dakar, refused all contact with the colonial administration. He was insistent on stressing the independence of the Church and wanted to abrogate the agreement that had been reached with the Minister for the Navy. He imposed a completely unsuitable diet on the priests working under him in the Vicariate. When he eventually fell ill as a result of his excessive mortifications, he refused to see the doctor of the French Administration, and he died after only a short time in Africa.

Libermann gives his views on the conduct of the bishop in a letter to Fr. Le Vasseur:<sup>7</sup>

*Despite his lofty ideals, Mgr. Truffet committed two mistakes which threatened the success of the whole Mission. They resulted from his extreme commitment to the glory of God and the exaltation of the holy Church—and his lack of experience; his undoubted holiness and virtue were no substitute for his naiveté.*

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*His first mistake was one that cost him his life...*

*His first mistake was one that cost him his life and which would have caused even more damage if he had lived. To give you some idea of the risks he took, I will tell you what happened to Fr. Briot. He was struck down by persistent dysentery in Gabon and went to Dakar to recuperate. He recovered almost completely, but fell ill again because of the stringent diet they were practising in Senegal. After the death of Mgr. Truffet, Fr. Briot continued to worsen, but the confreres were following the Vicar's dietary principles and were unwilling to send him back to Europe to recuperate. They felt it was better for a missionary to die at his post than to withdraw for reasons of health. Finally, they decided to send him home and he made a complete recovery. The principles they had been following could have had catastrophic results for the whole Mission.*

*His second fault was in his administration...*

*His second fault was in his administration and it came from his great purity of view and fervour. Having seen how the colonial clergy were impeded in their ministry, Mgr. Truffet blamed it on the government. He wanted to cancel the agreement with the government and all the missionaries were ready to back him. It would have meant refusing to accept the appointments that the government gave to nine missionaries and nine brothers. They would receive no free passage from Europe, no free transport from one post to another and no ration of bread and rice. In all, this would have meant a loss of 25,000 francs. But even worse than that, the missionaries would be seen as enemies of the government, resulting in many difficulties, arguments and sufferings.*

*I am sure (and the Nuncio agrees with me) that this would place the Mission in a perilous situation because it is still very fragile. So I wrote to our confreres that this was an administrative affair and they should not interfere in it; if they were having difficulties, they should let me know and I would try to do something about them. Missionaries can be very fervent, but moderation is not always their strong point. In general, they don't understand administration; they can only see the immediate difficulty and they want to get rid of it as soon as possible. They fail to see the hidden dangers.*

For Libermann, fine principles are not enough; they must be applied “gently” and with discernment. He wrote to one of his missionaries, Fr. Lossedat:

*For Libermann, fine principles are not enough...*

*Here is a very important principle for action that should always be applied: we must be on our guard against an “ideal” perfection. It is good to know how things should be arranged to lead to success and how to choose the best means for their implementation; but it is even more important to learn how to make adjustments, how to accommodate oneself to different people in whatever circumstance may arise.<sup>8</sup>*

### **3) Mère Javouhey, a victim of the Bishop of Autun**

Anne-Marie Javouhey (1779-1851) founded the Congregation of St. Joseph of Cluny in the diocese of Autun in 1827. In 1835, Bishop Héricourt of Autun imposed a new status on the Congregation, making the Bishop of Autun the Superior General. More difficulties ensued; he forced the postulants and novices to choose between following Mère Javouhey to Paris and staying at Cluny. To his great disappointment, 73 out of 80 decided to go to Paris. Finally, a sort of peace was restored between the bishop and the foundress. Her sisters went to Bourbon in 1817, Senegal in 1819, and French Guyana from 1828. But she was a strong character and wherever she went, there was often trouble between her and the local ecclesiastical authorities; in Guyana, the Bishop barred her from receiving the sacrament of confession and communion for 18 months!

*...wherever she went, there was often trouble between her and the local ecclesiastical authorities...*

On the other hand, Libermann was impressed by her. He wrote to Le Vasseur on 26<sup>th</sup> May, 1844: “*We have had contacts with the Superior which were useful. Several people speak against her, but I think most of it is just calumny and exaggeration. She has been through a great deal of suffering, but the gentle and humble way she has accepted it is much to her credit. The contacts we have had with her could help considerably in our work for the black people.*”<sup>9</sup>

Libermann had written to Javouhey to benefit from her wide missionary experience. She was equally impressed by him, as is evident from one of her letters to a sister of her Congregation: “*Within six months, I will travel to Rome with the saintly founder of a new order, dedicated to the conversion of the black people... You should see those wonderful priests!... The founder is a convert Jew...and he will become our spiritual superior; I intend to ask the Pope for this favour so that our holy bishops will have to agree to the arrangement.*”

*...you would attract the attention of all the enemies I have in the Archdiocese of Paris and elsewhere...*

Mère Javouhey wanted to enlist the help of Libermann in her conflict with the Bishop of Autun, but he declined: *“I think it would be better, Sister, if you did not mention our relationship to other people: you would attract the attention of all the enemies I have in the Archdiocese of Paris and elsewhere and expose me to the ire of your own.”*<sup>10</sup> He wrote to his confrere, Ignace Schwindenhammer: *“As regards the question of superior, I am now even less enamoured of it: it would mean displacing both the Bishops of Autun and Beauvais and I have no desire to cross swords with either of them.”*<sup>11</sup>

He wrote to the Bishop of Autun on 13<sup>th</sup> September, 1845:

*I have learnt from the Bishop of Amiens that the superior of the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph intends to travel to Rome to ask that I be appointed superior of her Congregation. I want you to understand that I am in no way involved with Mère Javouhey in this affair. Two years ago, she came to see me for the first time and asked me to accept to be superior of her Congregation. Being ignorant of the situation and thinking that some good could come from it as regards our mission to the black people, I did not want to accept or refuse... But having now got to know the state of the Congregation of Saint Joseph, I can see that it is absolutely impossible for me to take on the role of superior. The work would be too heavy and the difficulties too great. I would have to neglect completely my own Congregation and I would run the risk of losing the good will of the Bishops. This would be the greatest affliction of all and the greatest danger to the work that God has called me to do.*<sup>12</sup>

*We are given no territory...all doors are shut for us.*

#### **4) Libermann’s difficulties with religious authorities.**

Fr. Fourdinier, the Superior of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit had a monopoly for sending priests to the French colonies, but he refused to accept the missionaries of Libermann. Libermann wrote to Fr. Desgenettes on 17<sup>th</sup>. December, 1842: *“We are given no territory...all doors are shut for us.”* But Bishop Barron, the Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas, was looking for missionaries for West Africa and Desgenettes told Libermann. On the 20<sup>th</sup> December, 1842, Barron and Libermann drew up an agreement to send a group of Spiritans to Guinea.

*“Fr. Fourdinier would block us completely if he had the power.”* wrote Libermann to one of his missionaries. And to Le Vasseur he said the same thing: *“This holy man would be a great danger for us if he had the authority. He is doing everything he can to*

*destroy us, but from the very best of motives from his point of view. I think he is worried about the harm we could do to the Holy Spirit (Congregation).<sup>13</sup>*

*I was thinking of a possible union of our Congregation with the Spiritans...*

After the death of Fourdinier on the 5<sup>th</sup> January, 1845, Libermann made a suggestion to the Minister to unite the Holy Heart of Mary and the Spiritans. And to Mère Javouhey he wrote: “Not only have the Spiritans become useless in the Colonies; they are now very harmful. I feel ashamed to have to say this.”<sup>14</sup>

The election of Fr. Leguay to succeed Fourdinier extinguished any hope of a union. Libermann wrote to Le Vavasour:

*I was thinking of a possible union of our Congregation with the Spiritans, but the new Superior, although a holy man, would be a total block to such a scheme; so there can no longer be any question of it as it would ruin our spirit. The Nuncio was very keen for us to take over the role of the Spiritans, but he is no longer intervening in this affair. So I fear that all the fine promises that the Minister made to the Nuncio concerning the colonies will now come to nothing.<sup>15</sup>*

Fr. Tisserant informed the Nuncio about the opposition of Fr. Leguay to Libermann:

*He has declared open war on us.*

*He has declared open war on us. He accuses Libermann of bad faith and a lack of discretion... Finally, he is prophesying that as a punishment for the bad and indelicate manoeuvrings of Fr. Libermann (whom he refers to as an “intriguing hypocrite”), our society will come to a bad end. This is not an exaggeration and I could say a lot more.<sup>16</sup>*

Libermann wrote to Fr. Collin in Reunion:

*There is no doubt that Fr. Leguay would do anything to get us out of Bourbon (Reunion), but he will not succeed... He has tried everything to get rid of us... But all his scheming against us has backfired, because the heads of departments are men of sound judgement and experience. Fr. Leguay has been lobbying incessantly against us, but I have never said anything against the Spiritans nor given the impression that I knew anything of Leguay’s moves against us. I have suffered enough in seeing this man of God act in such a way with the best of intentions: there is no way in which I want to insult God and cause scandal before men in the same way and interfere in the good that Fr. Leguay might achieve. So*

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*I think he took me for an easy target, because I have always spoken to him with moderation...*

*I will keep quiet, knowing that if God wants us to move out of Bourbon he will use this affair to bring it about. But if he still needs us there, the scheming of Fr. Leguay will not be able to move us. So let us abandon ourselves to divine Providence and remain in peace.<sup>17</sup>*

So in spite of Leguay's constant pestering of the Ministry, Libermann won over many "heads of department" by his continuous gentleness!

Libermann also had many problems in his dealings with Mgr. Dalmond, the Prefect Apostolic of Madagascar. Writing to Le Vasseur, Libermann says:

*If the good Mgr. Dalmond had been a little more reasonable with us, a foundation for Madagascar could have easily been set up in Bourbon. I think he took me for an easy target, because I have always spoken to him with moderation, even when explaining things with which we were not happy. What you are telling me might be true in other circumstances – that I should be a bit more crafty and raise my voice if I want to get my own way - but I can't go down that road. I prefer to explain my point of view in a calm and gentle way; then, if I am asked to agree to unacceptable conditions, I will refuse, and that's that.<sup>18</sup>*

*...then, if I am asked to agree to unacceptable conditions, I will refuse, and that's that.*

#### **"Bishop Brady has deceived us"**

Libermann did not know where to send his missionaries: Fourdiner refused to have them in the French colonies, Fr. Laval was on his own in Mauritius because the British did not want French priests working there, and nearly all of the first team of missionaries sent to Africa died after a very short time. Then he met Bishop Brady, the Vicar Apostolic of Australia. He painted a wonderful picture of his mission and, through his "beautiful promises", convinced Libermann to send him some men. None of these promises were kept. Fr. Thévaux and his companions almost died and finally, the Bishop even forbade them to receive the sacraments!

Eventually, Fr. Thévaux took refuge on the island of Mauritius. Later on, Libermann wrote to him, urging him to learn from his sufferings in Australia:

*I want to say something about how you handled the problems in Australia.*

*You didn't always keep a cool head...*

*...resentment can only paralyse, while humility is always a source of dynamism!*

1) *You did well in stressing that the agreement (with Bishop Brady) should be fulfilled in all its important points; for example, our insistence that we should be at least two in each community and that the superior should always be a member of our society. But perhaps you were a little too rigid regarding matters of less importance; in the circumstances in which you found yourselves, you should have given way as far as possible.*

2) *You didn't always keep a cool head, but sometimes showed irritation and revulsion, probably because of the crying injustice of which you were victims. But we can commit many faults when we get too worked up and I hope you have learnt from the experience. Whatever the injustice that is committed against us, our souls must remain calm before God. Above all, we should avoid talking or acting when we feel our anger getting the better of us.*

3) *Perhaps, even probably, there was too much inflexibility in your conduct and words. You must be very wary of this fault of yours.*

4) *Finally, your letters to Bishop Brady were, in general, deferential and respectful, but sometimes, you were too sharp in the development of your ideas.*

*I feel that most of your faults were due to a lack of experience and that you will learn much for the future from what you have been through. You can learn a lot from sufferings and the fact that you have had to turn over everything that is in your mind many times will teach you lessons and help you to see your own defects more clearly.<sup>19</sup>*

We can be amazed at the way Libermann urges Thévaux to profit from the injustices he suffered at the hands of Bishop Brady. But this is his normal spirituality: resentment can only paralyse, while humility is always a source of dynamism!

### **Archbishop Affre of Paris.**

Shortly after the opening of the first novitiate, Libermann offered to vacate his position as Superior of the Society because of his bad relationship with the Archbishop of Paris. He wrote to Fr. Carbon, a priest of the Archdiocese:

*We were hoping that after a little time, the obstacles that a new venture always comes up against would begin to*

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*The only obstacle at the moment is myself...*

*...it does not matter if I am in charge or not.*

*evaporate. This is how things were when I learnt that there was a move to put the Archbishop of Paris in charge of all the French colonies and that he had a plan to found a missionary congregation to work for the black people. There is no doubt that if the Archbishop had established such a Congregation, it would have done us great harm. I would not want to stand in the way of the excellent initiative the Archbishop would launch for the good of the black people in the colonies. But in conscience, I could not let the work the Lord had asked us to undertake fall by the wayside and disband the small number of young people who had come to join Fr. Le Vasseur and myself.*

*“The only obstacle at the moment is myself. From what I have heard from different sources, there has been a concerted effort to spread rumours about me amongst those closest to the Archbishop. I have no idea if these rumours have any substance. If you feel that this obstacle is insurmountable, you could tell the Archbishop that the work could progress perfectly well without me. If it succeeds in bringing glory to God, it does not matter if I am in charge or not. The important thing would be to find somebody acceptable to the Archbishop who would also have the confidence of those who have already joined us. I think Fr. de Brandt could fulfil this role, with God’s help.”<sup>20</sup> (Fr. de Brandt was a diocesan priest, a friend of Libermann and secretary to the Bishop of Amiens.)*

Once the novitiate had opened at La Neuville after the uncertainties of 1841, Libermann believed that things would get better. But what could he do, faced with the Archbishop elect of Paris? “*The only obstacle at the moment is myself.*” he said, ready to step down in favour of Fr. de Brandt whom the Archbishop greatly esteemed. But Libermann soon recovered! Others were pushing him to seek a union with the Missionaries of the Holy Cross, but he remained faithful to the mission he had received from God, confirmed by Rome.

### **Archbishop Sibour of Paris**

The next Archbishop of Paris threatened the legal status of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit after its fusion with the Holy Heart of Mary in September, 1848. Earlier in the year, Fr. Leguay, while he was still Superior of the Spiritans, obtained a decree from the Propaganda in Rome (11<sup>th</sup> March, 1848), modifying the 1824 statutes of the Congregation; amongst other things, it withdrew the authority that the Archbishop of Paris had enjoyed over the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.

Over the next two years, Libermann tried to explain to Bishop Sibour that since the Spiritans were now established in various dioceses in France and in many missions overseas, they could no longer depend on a single bishop but would now come directly under Rome. The Archbishop did not agree and he finally forced Libermann to sign a letter to the Propaganda, recognising the rights of the Archbishop. But at the same time, Libermann sent another confidential letter to the Propaganda, contradicting the one that Sibour had dictated to him. Rome dragged its feet on the subject, and the Nuncio invited Sibour to be patient. In the meantime, the Congregation was left a legacy of a chateau at Maulévrier and 2,000 francs, on condition that the Archbishop would testify to its legal status. The Archbishop agreed to do so as long as the Spiritans would recognise his authority over them and return to their former status. Libermann would not agree to these conditions and renounced the legacy that had been promised.

*Libermann would not agree to these conditions and renounced the legacy...*

In conclusion, we can ask if the way in which Libermann dealt with disputes is still relevant to us today.

Our involvement in justice and peace cannot take the same form in a democracy with freedom of opinion as it would in a dictatorship, where any criticism of the regime could lead to a prison sentence or expulsion. Some discourses on justice and peace are not always relevant to situations where governments impose their will through injustice and violence. Moreover, foreigners have to be particularly discreet if they wish to remain in the country. Libermann, very much aware of the fragility of his young foundation, said that “*the whole thing could be blown away by the slightest breeze.*” (Memorandum to the Propaganda, 1846)

*...foreigners have to be particularly discreet if they wish to remain in the country.*

Some might say that the moderation and constant search for reconciliation of Libermann would simply help regimes guilty of injustice and stand in the way of more courageous and effective action. Others would reply that Javouhey and Libermann, in their historical context and in their own way, did a great deal to help the slaves while furthering the Christian mission in Africa.

The historical and cultural distance between us and the time of Libermann is very large. Our ecclesiology is not the same and neither is the role of NGOs or the weight of international or local opinion. Today, Libermann would not act in exactly the same way as he did in 1840. But his “spirit” is still very much a source of inspiration and dynamism for us. The Spiritan Rule

of Life says that “*the charism of our founders...urges us to respond creatively to the needs of evangelisation of our time.*” (SRL 2)

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>*Règle Provisoire*, First Part, Chapter IX, art. VI (ND II p. 256), with an explanation in the *Glose*, pp. 50 f.

<sup>2</sup>*Glose*. *The Glose* refers to a Libermann commentary on the Provisional Rule (1840) given in conferences to prospective members. This commentary is available indirectly through notes taken by Fr Lannurien. There is a presentation of this commentary in French: *Règle Provisoire des Missionnaires de Libermann (règle de 1840)*. Texte et Commentaire. Introduction de F Nicolas, CSSp. Paris: 30 rue Lhomond, s.d. (1967), xxi et 229 pages ronéotypées, 21x31 (pro manuscrito).

<sup>3</sup>17th August, 1847. ND IX 253 f.

<sup>4</sup>Bishop Barron was an Irish-born American.

<sup>5</sup>2nd August, 1847. ND IX 239 f.

<sup>6</sup>22nd August, 1844. ND VI 316 f.

<sup>7</sup>24th. February, 1848. ND X 79-85.

<sup>8</sup>15th April, 1846. ND VIII 112 f.

<sup>9</sup>ND VI 206 f.

<sup>10</sup>13th June, 1844. ND VI 235-237.

<sup>11</sup>8th July, 1844. ND VI 264-265.

<sup>12</sup>ND VII 302-304.

<sup>13</sup>26th August, 1844. ND VI 330

<sup>14</sup>9th March, 1845. ND VII 83 f.

<sup>15</sup>6th September, 1845. ND VII 288.

<sup>16</sup>5th. October, 1845. ND 478-480.

<sup>17</sup>24th February, 1848. ND X 89.

<sup>18</sup>10th December, 1845. ND VII 427.

<sup>19</sup>24th February, 1848. ND X 94 f.

<sup>20</sup>5th October, 1841. ND III 33 f.