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The story of an attic

Vincent O'Toole CSSp

“My address is c/o M. Patriarcha, Vicolo del Pinaco 31, Roma.”

This was to be the address of Francis Libermann in 1840. Although it sounds good, in fact it was a couple of tiny attics on top of a high building, the home of pigeons. The roof was just tiles and it was impossible to stand upright. Libermann was happy with them and rented them both for an écu a month.

Libermann had come to Rome to get approval from the Vatican for a new missionary religious family. Its purpose was to go to Africa where most people lived in deplorable conditions. Slavery had just been abolished, but the plight of the people in the colonies was worse than ever. Libermann and a few companions were determined to do something to help.

Nearly everyone told Libermann that he hadn't a chance: he was an epileptic and so barred from the priesthood: “Almost everyone I spoke to about my plans disapproved of them.” He received no encouragement at all. Even good, virtuous and learned people harboured suspicions about his motivation. The companion who came with him from Paris decided they were getting nowhere and went home to his family. He was the one who paid their expenses, so the impecunious Libermann moved into the attic.

A long wait

There he patiently waited for the will of God to become evident. It was a long wait. Life must have been very hard for Francis, living in a tiny room that was like a furnace in



Above: Fr. Francis Libermann's attic re-erected atop the French Spiritan Seminary in Rome. Facing page: The attic in its final resting place at the Spiritan General House in Rome.

summer and a fridge in winter. However, his landlady, Senora Patriarcha, never heard him complain. When Brother Thomas Mabit was in Rome in 1859, after the death of Libermann, she told him that in order to survive he used to go to the market and buy a few vegetables and when he ran out of money — which was a frequent occurrence — he would join the poor people at the doors of convents to beg for some food.

Fr Mabut also relates that while Libermann was patiently waiting for news from the Vatican, the children of the family told him that he used to teach them the catechism and how to pray. The whole Patriarcha family were convinced that Francis was a saint and referred to him as “Il Santo.”

Writing a “provisional rule”

During the long wait for news from the Vatican, Libermann set about writing a “provisional rule” for the proposed missionary family. He had never done anything remotely like that before, so he sought advice from friends who had some experience in that area. But it was not easy.

He put all his trust in Our Blessed Lady. He decided to consecrate the work to the Holy Heart of Mary. He wrote, “I sometimes came up against great difficulties, so I would rush to one of my favourite churches.”

One of these was the church of St Augustine, just round the corner from where he was living and working in his attic. Inside there was a statue of Mary called the Madonna del Parto (the Madonna of Childbirth), much loved to this day by Roman women waiting for the birth of their child. Libermann frequently prayed in front of this statue because “*I could be sure that when I got home and took up my pen again, all the difficulties would evaporate. This never failed to work.*”

Meanwhile Vatican officials began to realize that this young seminarian was a rather special person. At the same time, his epileptic fits were becoming less violent and less frequent, so when the coadjutor bishop of Strasbourg agreed to ordain him

a priest, Libermann was encouraged to continue with his project. He finally vacated his attic in early January 1841.

In the 1930s all the houses around the famous Piazza Navona in central Rome were to be demolished to make way for a large road. The attic was perched on top of 31 Vicolo del Pinaco. When the Spiritan students at the French Seminary heard about this, they sprang into action and got permission to dismantle the attic, and re-erect it on top of the Seminary. The Seminary was run by the Holy Ghost Fathers on behalf of the bishops of France. Spiritans coming to Rome from all over the world would visit the attic, now a shrine. There they were delighted to sit and pray in what was the cradle of Libermann’s foundation of the Holy Heart of Mary.

Linking past and future

In 2010, the Spiritans handed over the administration of the seminary to the bishops of France. Before leaving they decided to dismantle the attic once more and transfer it to the Spiritan General House on the top of Monte Mario overlooking Rome and the basilica of St Peter. It was no easy task as great care had to be taken of the now fragile materials and exact measurements had to be made.

The newly renovated headquarters welcomed the arrival of the attic, with its strong associations with our roots, as it was a fitting climax that linked our past with our future. Cardinal Robert Sarah, former archbishop of Conakry in Guinea, welcomed and blessed the attic to what must surely be its final resting place.

Visiting Spiritans can now spend some time in it, thanking God for all his blessings and asking Father Libermann to continue to guide us into an unknown future with the same trust and courage that he possessed in abundance. Those who complain about banging their heads on the low beams get no sympathy. Libermann surely spent a whole year doing the same. ■

Courtesy of *Missionwide*, Spring 2012



Alphonse Gilbert CSSp and Paul McAuley CSSp visit the attic.