

12-1988

# The Holy Spirit and Mary in the Spiritan Tradition

Alphonse Gilbert

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-papers>

 Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gilbert, A. (1988). The Holy Spirit and Mary in the Spiritan Tradition. *Spiritan Papers*, 22 (22). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-papers/vol22/iss22/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Spiritan Collection at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Papers by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND MARY IN THE SPIRITAN TRADITION

The person to whom an institute is consecrated is not merely a term of reference or the expression of a particular devotion. That person becomes rather a sign of belonging, a name which summarizes a whole life-attitude, the heart of a spirituality inspired by the Lord.

From the very beginning of their long history, the Spiritans have been consecrated to the Holy Spirit and to Mary. Their first Founder, Father Claude-François Poullart des Places, inaugurated his seminary and his community on the Feast of Pentecost 1703 before the statue of Our Lady of Good Deliverance, the Black Virgin of Paris. Their second Founder and Restorer, Father Francis Libermann, likewise initiated his congregation in 1841 before the image of Our Lady of Victories in Paris. At the time of the fusion of their two institutes in 1848, it appears that the same mystique governed their thoughts.

Throughout the ages, She has always been at the heart of the apostolic life of Spiritans. Their new *RULE OF LIFE*, approved at Pentecost 1987, has confirmed this for the generation which has to work in our modern times.

### IN THE LIFE AND WORK OF CLAUDE-FRANÇOIS POUILLART DES PLACES

" All the students will especially adore the Holy Spirit to Whom they have been dedicated in a particular way. They will also have a remarkable devotion to the Blessed Virgin, under whose protection they have been offered to the Holy Spirit. " (*Spiritans Papers*, No. 16, p. 77)

The first article of the opening chapter of Claude Poullart des Places' *Regulations* is explicit: consecration to the Holy

Spirit is primordial in the Holy Ghost "House". It is worth noting the words "regulations", "students", "house": The Founder of the Holy Ghost Seminary and of the Congregation founded to direct it had no official standing or canonical approbation. He therefore carefully avoids the words "rule", "seminarians", "seminary". All the legal papers were drawn in his own name. Only in 1734 did his successor, Father Bouic, obtain legal recognition of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, and that in the face of an intense cabal on the part of the Jansenists. Father Bouic then drew up a proper rule.

According to the Founder, it was "thanks to the protection of the Blessed Virgin" that the members of the community would belong entirely to the Holy Spirit to Whom they had been "offered up".

It was, therefore, by the choice of the Holy Spirit that they had been called and gathered together. They are consecrated to Him because He has taken possession of their hearts. He places upon them the seal of His eternal alliance and they become His. But, in turn, they offer themselves in order to belong to Him by constant fidelity to His inspirations and to receive from Him "the fire of divine love", a fire which, according to Surin, "purifies everything", and a fire of Pentecost which is zeal for God.

"They will take Pentecost and the Immaculate Conception for their principal feasts. They will celebrate the former to obtain from the Holy Spirit the fire of divine love, and the latter to obtain from the Most Blessed Virgin an angelic purity. These two virtues must be the foundation of their piety." *Spiritian Papers*, No. 16, p. 79)

Purity of heart appears to be an indispensable condition for life in the Holy Spirit. Mary will foster it in them by her example and her maternal presence and thus introduce them to the favors of her "Spouse". That is how Poullart des Places refers to the Holy Spirit when he is making regulations about the prayer of the community: the Office of the Holy Spirit, the Litanies and the "Petite Couronne" of the Immaculate Conception. He writes:

"Before every study-period or review session, they will ask the Holy Spirit for light so that they may work effectively. With that in mind, they will recite a "Veni

Sancte", along with an "Ave Maria" in honor of the Blessed Virgin to obtain this light from her Spouse. " (P. 81)

For Lallemand, Mary is "the only spouse of the Holy Spirit, since she alone, in the name of all human nature, contracted a holy marriage in order to be the mother of the God-Man." (*Doctrine spirituelle*, p. 295)

Father Lallemand, Master of the Third-year Jesuit Novices, had died in 1635, but his disciples had spread his teaching all over Brittany. In 1694 Father Champion edited notes he had taken during his conferences under the title "Doctrines Spirituelles". This spirituality, if not the book itself, had a great influence upon Claude-François. He had studied law at Nantes for two years where Father Champion was director of a retreat house.

It seems certain that Claude-François went there.

For Lallemand, the two poles of spirituality are purity of heart and docility to the powerful action of the Holy Spirit. The former is a means, the latter is the end in view.

"The end toward which we must aspire," he wrote, "when we have worked on purity of heart for a long time, is to be so possessed and governed by the Holy Spirit that it is He alone who leads us, who regulates all our interior and exterior movements, and that we abandon ourselves entirely by a spiritual renunciation of our will and our own satisfaction. In this way, we shall no longer live in ourselves but in Jesus Christ by faithfully corresponding to the operations of His divine Spirit". (*Doctrine Spirituelle*, p. 176)

He writes further:

"Really interior persons who are guided by the light of the Spirit of God, who direct themselves towards Him by purity of heart and who follow Him with perfect submission, advance with giant steps and could even be said to fly along the paths of grace". (p. 181)

The young Jesuits who, after ten years in the apostolate, came back to reflect and pray about the mystery of their vocation, heard Father Lallemand repeat insistently that they must "take the step" of completely confiding their person and their apostolate to the Holy Spirit

of God. That was the purpose of the third year of novitiate.

The few retreat notes of Father Poullart des Places which we still have give us a filigree of the interior combat he went through to "take the step" of making a total gift of himself without reserve in order to be a true son of God. "Those who are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God!" (Rom. 8 : 14). These notes also reflect his offering of his life to the all-powerful action of God:

"My divine Saviour, I have come only to allow myself to be conquered. . . I will make You known to hearts which have no longer any knowledge of You. . . and You will be praised for all eternity." (*Spiritan Papers*, No. 16, pp. 17 and 25)

In 1703 he was twenty-four years old, the youngest founder of an order in all history. . .

When Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort came to Paris in 1713, he exhorted the students at Holy Ghost Seminary to submit themselves to the divine Wisdom, which is none other than the Holy Spirit. He had been a close friend of Claude Poullart des Places since their secondary school studies and had shared with him, first in a marial congregation at Rennes and then in their talks as friends and founders, a similar devotion to the Holy Spirit and to Mary, and a common spirituality.

"God the Holy Spirit", wrote Montfort, "became fruitful through Many whom He espoused. It is with her, in her and from her that He produced his masterpiece who is God made man, and continues to produce Him every day until the end of the world. Those who are predestined are the members of this adorable body. That is why the more He finds Mary His beloved and indissoluble spouse, in a soul, the more He becomes active and powerful to produce Jesus Christ in that soul and that soul in Jesus Christ". (*Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, Part I, Ch. 1)

Ever since their foundation, the sons of Saint Ignatius have invoked Mary under the title of the Immaculate Conception. In their college, Claude Poullart des Places while still quite young learned to pray to her also, specially in the marial con-

gregations. It was under that title that the first Spiritans consecrated themselves to her: the living image and mother of purity of heart, prelude to the invasion by the Spirit!

What characterizes Father des Places' ideal of apostolic holiness and gives it an original touch is his devotion to poverty. First he brought his alms and his zeal to the aid of some young chimney-sweeps in the city, of some beggars and some sick people. Then, with total disinterestedness, he devoted his generosity to the service of poor students who could not pay for their studies for the priesthood. As founder of a seminary of poor students whose apostolate would be to evangelize the poor, he led his disciples toward the love of Jesus in the mystery of His poverty. Material poverty was close to spiritual poverty and was the way along which he led them the latter. For the Spiritans there would be no university degrees, no ambitious studies at the Sorbonne, but a solid equipment of theology, without any pretensions, in order the better to serve the poor! . . . . Thus they would be

"ready for anything, . . . not only to accept, but to prefer, humble and laborious appointments for which it is difficult to find workers, such as service in hospitals, evangelization of the poor and even of infidels".

Spiritual poverty stands out notably in these new apostles. In conformity with the first Beatitude, it disposes them, like Mary and with Mary, to give themselves over totally to God and to let themselves be led by His Spirit. The path of Spiritan holiness is marked out in this manner: IT IS A PATH OF SPIRITUAL POVERTY WHICH, LIKE MARY AND UNDER HER MATERNAL PROTECTION, LETS ITSELF BE ANIMATED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT IN ORDER TO BECOME EVER MORE TRULY SONS OF GOD AND TO SPREAD "THE FIRE OF DIVINE LOVE" AMONG THE MOST ABANDONED.

To honor and glorify the Holy Spirit and to honor His divine spouse is a duty of the Spiritan who bears their names. There was a Congregation of priests of the Holy Spirit founded at Quimper by Father Le Grand, and they used similar language, speaking of a "really particular affection" for the Holy Spirit which should characterize them. Claude Poullart des Places speaks with even more fervor and love. There exist scattered souvenirs of this in the tradition and the correspondence of the members of the Congregation who were called Placists. As direct heirs of his spirit and his thought, they were

to inculcate them in the students of the seminary (of whom there were about a thousand in all, – sixty in the times of the first Spiritans). The Rule of 1734 gives the following formulation of the spiritual program to be realized:

“to transform by devotion to the Holy Spirit the souls of teachers and students and to draw down into these souls the great graces of interior holiness without which the preaching of those considered most capable from a worldly point of view can produce little in terms of salvation”.

That Rule was drawn up by Father Bouic, one of the first companions of the Founder, and from the very beginning it reflects the author’s wish to remain faithful to the genuine spirit of Father des Places. The motive for the Seminary and the Congregation being dedicated to the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Virgin, he said, is the following:

“It is in order that the hearts of the members may be inflamed with the fire of divine love and they may all attain to perfect purity of heart and soul”.

The Rule also says that they must keep to all the pious exercises set up by the Founder, because the Society has to be ruled by the light of the Holy Spirit and it is by the patronage of Mary interceding with her august Spouse, the third Person of the Holy Trinity, that they will come to be animated by Him! Quite a program. . .!

On May 27, 1703 Claude Poullart des Places had offered to the Holy Spirit and to Mary all his disciples, present and future. Every year, on the feasts of Pentecost and the Immaculate Conception, the Spiritans ratified that offering by means of a consecration in Latin which must go back to the Founder himself:

“O my good Mother and Sovereign, holy Mary, Mother of God, holy Virgin, gentle refuge of sinners, powerful comforter of the poor, my dear hope in this valley of tears, with a fervent and humble heart I have recourse to your clemency, asking you to help your servant to give himself, to consecrate and devote himself to the Holy Spirit, your most noble Spouse, in Whose honor, notwithstanding my weakness, I want to make an important commitment. . .

My good Mother, listen to me. All-powerful Spirit, listen to my good Mother and, through her intercession, illumine my spirit with Your light and warm my heart with the fire of Your love, so that, in this house consecrated to You, I may be able to accomplish faithfully all that is pleasing to You, all that has to do with Your glory, my sanctification and the edification of my brothers". (Joseph Michel, *Claude François Poullart des Places*, p. 299)

Father Warnet, the seventh successor of Claude Poullart des Places, in a talk given on December 8 1837 for the feast of the Immaculate Conception, and in another talk given at Pentecost 1839 and to be found in the archives in Chevilly, comments upon that consecration in terms which, in spite of the vicissitudes of history, express admirably the Spiritan Placist tradition:

"That consecration is an essential part of the spirit of our constitutions. The holy promises we make in it are like an inheritance from our fathers who have gone on before us. They were poor in the world's goods and wanted to be rich only in the gifts of the Holy Spirit which constituted their entire treasure. They have left us a witness to their pious sentiments in a formula of consecration which we ought to treat with religious veneration because it is a sort of spiritual testament from them. If children respect the last wishes of their parents to the point of feeling themselves obliged to carry them out faithfully, must we not feel bound to conform to the last wishes of our pious founders?

They consecrated themselves to the Holy Spirit under the invocation of Mary conceived without sin, and they offered us to them also. We could not possibly belong to a better master than the Holy Spirit nor be under better protection than that of Mary. So let us consecrate ourselves to both of them after the intentions of our fathers. . .

Let us clearly understand the meaning of those three words: "se dedicantem, consecrantem et voventem": "I dedicate myself, I consecrate myself", – it is something like a dedication and consecration of ourselves to the Holy Spirit after the fashion of temples being dedicated to His cult, or of vessels consecrated in His hon-

or. Just as a temple dedicated to divine cult cannot be used for any other purpose and would be profaned if put to ordinary usage, so also our souls and our bodies should no longer serve for anything other than to honor the Holy Spirit whose temples they have become in a special way.

To be devoted to the Holy Spirit means to do everything which may be agreeable to Him. Otherwise there is no true devotedness. One is devoted to a master only to the extent that one tries in every way to please him.

We offer ourselves to Him entirely, so as to be able to say with Saint Ignatius: "All that I am, all that I possess, has been given to me by You. I give it all back to You without reserve, dispose of it according to Your good pleasure". Stripped thus of everything, we are rich enough. His love is our treasure. We must, therefore, abandon everything at Mary's feet, like the first Christians deposited their goods at the feet of the Apostles. Otherwise we are lying to the Holy Spirit.

What the Holy Spirit asks of us at the present moment, He asks of us forever. We must belong to Him for life and for death. . . . Otherwise where would our devotedness be? What would our consecration mean?

We commit ourselves to seek the honor of the Holy Spirit – first of all within ourselves – by a spirit of perfect docility to the Will of God, of obedience and perfect submission to the movements of grace, by a spirit of abandonment of ourselves to the plans of divine Providence. We must let ourselves be governed by the Holy Spirit, only follow his inspirations and resist those of the flesh. We must have no other affections or intentions but those which He inspires. We must place our confidence in Him and put aside all worries: "He is my shepherd, I shall want nothing". (Ps. 22 : 1) To procure the honor of the Holy Spirit, we shall cultivate within ourselves the spirit of faith which will remove from us all human methods which are the main-spring of every worldly movement. We shall also cultivate humility, simplicity and a spirit of sincere, deep and interior piety that consists in self-abasement of a heart wholly devoted to God's good pleasure, in which everything is done for God and nothing for self.

In addition, we shall be disposed to fulfill another duty: as children of Mary and of the Holy Spirit, we shall strive by word and example to make them better known, to love and to serve. We shall bring all our brothers to glorify the Holy Spirit and to honor His divine spouse. . .

In this way we shall walk in the footsteps of our fathers, convinced that this is the surest way to do what is pleasing to the Holy Spirit. . . May we be like them and inherit their virtues as well as their name. Thus we shall be able to call Mary our mother. We shall be her family, and the Holy Spirit will look upon us as her children."

"To walk in the footsteps of our fathers" . . . we can see how deeply the mark – nowadays we would say the "charism" – of Claude Poullart des Places has made itself powerfully felt in the Congregation of the Holy Ghost all throughout its history. The Placists (as his disciples were also called) were to carry the fruits of his spirituality well beyond the frontiers of France, as far as Asia, Canada, Saint-Pierre and Miquelon and other French possessions!

One of the earliest "students", Father René Allenou de la Ville-Angevin, was to found, at Saint Brieuc, the Congregation of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit, which is dedicated to the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Conception. It has the same fundamental rule as the Spiritans and is strongly oriented towards "poverty", "humiliations", the "care of the sick", persons suffering tribulations, – all in a genuine spirit of spiritual poverty. "The women who sacrifice themselves to God in this house are to remember that, in taking the Holy Spirit as their father and the Most Blessed Virgin as their mother, they are obliged to make a sincere renunciation of all possessions." (Rule of Father de la Ville-Angevin). The Holy Spirit as "father" and Mary as "mother", – these are expressions which go back to Father Poullart des Places himself: "since the best way to obtain graces from the Holy Spirit is to get the Blessed Virgin interested in our request, . . . they will look upon her as their patroness and advocate with the Holy Spirit, their father. . ."

In 1828 the Holy Ghost Seminary gave particular prominence to "devotion" to Mary under the title of the Holy Heart of Mary. The Archbishop of Paris had strongly recommended this devotion in a special message in 1827. The following

year he ordered that a Mass be celebrated in honor of the Holy Heart of Mary. The "Association of the Holy Heart of Mary" was swept away by the revolutionary turmoil of 1830 which almost brought the "house" down in ruin. However, the apparitions at the rue du Bac and the fervor of the Archconfraternity of Our lady of Victories gave a new life to marial piety. In 1840, in the chapel of the seminary, a confraternity was established, dedicated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Refuge of sinners. Teachers and students joined it. To the Holy Spirit through the Immaculate Heart of Mary. . . . Eight years later, at the time of the fusion of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost and the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary, it was seen what an astonishing affinity there was between the two charisms of Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann.

#### IN THE LIFE AND WORK OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN

Son of an Alsatian rabbi, Jacob Libermann was led to the Christian faith by the very faithfulness of his judaic faith. This was the effect of an overwhelming grace which burst upon him when he "conjured" the God of his fathers to let him know the truth. On December 24 1826 he was baptized with the names of Francis Mary Paul.

"When the holy water flowed over my forehead", he said, "it seemed to me that I was in the middle of an immense globe of fire. I no longer lived a natural life. I no longer saw anything, I heard nothing of what was going on around me. There took place within me things impossible to describe". (*N.D.*, I, 90)

This "globe of fire" makes one think of the burning bush at Sinai. As at Pentecost, it symbolizes the very Person of the Holy Spirit taking possession of his life.

"At the very instant when the water of baptism flowed over my forehead, I began to love Mary, whereas I had detested her before." (*N.D.*, I, 99)

An exceptional knowledge and love of Mary was given to him then directly, as a choice gift which was to illumine his entire life.

The Holy Spirit and Mary, these were to be the two great magnetic poles of his judeo-christian heart!

He entered the Seminary of Saint Sulpice to study for the priesthood. After four years of study, the serious malady of epilepsy hindered his advancement to Orders. He was to spend six years in the service of the seminarians at Issy-les-Molineaux.

From his mother, Leah, who died when he was only eleven years old, Francis Libermann inherited a very sensitive nature. His affection for Mary directed itself spontaneously towards her heart, source and center of love. In 1830, when the Archbishop of Paris, Mgr. de Quélen, was promoting the devotion to the Holy Heart of Mary, he wrote to Father de Farcy the following lines which burn with tenderness towards her.

"What a treasure we have in the Holy Heart of Mary! Jesus Christ has placed there such a plenitude of graces and favors that there would be enough to satiate not only the whole world, but a hundred million worlds and much more. Why did our dear, good Lord place such abundance in the Holy Heart of Mary? Oh! it is not hard to guess: it was because He knew the great misery in which we find ourselves. . . It seems to me that I hear that holy Mother crying out to each of us: "Come, my dear children, come to me. . . ; come and rest upon my heart; my dear Son has placed such abundance there that I will have enough to satisfy everybody.

So, my dear brother, go, run, throw yourself into the arms of this beloved and holy Mother. Go and say to her with confidence, simplicity, tenderness and love: "O my good Mother, you have known for a long time that I am your child and that I love you. . . You love me thousands and thousands of times more than mothers love their children, and would you leave me in distress without helping me? That would be impossible. Show that you are my dear Mother and that I am your child: "Monstra te esse Matrem". (N.D., I, 143)

This same seminarist was influenced by the jansenist milieu, and the following year Libermann spoke to him of the importance of love. It is love which is at the heart of life, it is love which is at the heart of the apostolate. Heart to heart,

and heart to Heart – from the Heart of Mary to his heart and from his heart to the Heart of Mary, that is an ideal already familiar to him! From the very first days of his conversion, he lived his union with God and with Mary in the depths of his heart with a love which went far beyond mere sentiment.

“Oh! the love of Jesus and Mary and nothing besides, my dear friend! If we knew how to love, we would know everything, we would be able to do everything, we would possess everything and we would be everything. Don’t be always thinking about yourself and your actions. . . . What good is all that? That does not give you love for Jesus and Mary. Do you know what you should be looking at? Jesus and Mary. And do you know why? So that you may be able to love them”.  
(L.S., I, 23)

He was the spiritual director of several seminarians. According to the thinking of Father Olier in the area, they were to be directed towards contemplation of the inner life of Jesus and Mary. Libermann did this in terms which give an insight into his own experience. Many of his letters make reference to this, like the following one written to Guy Leray, a young disciple of his, in 1834:

“Notice, my dear friend, that the admirable interior life of the Most Blessed Virgin is perfectly similar to that of Jesus. From all eternity a ray of light and of grace comes from the interior of Jesus to illumine and warm the heart of Mary. It is admirably reflected in her as in a pure and spotless mirror. Let us pray the Most Blessed Virgin to make us pure and holy in the sight of God. . . .”  
(L. Sp., I, 64)

It was during that period in Issy that he became conscious of, and communicated to his correspondents, a vivid awareness of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit within us. In an article for the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, Father Lécuyer wrote “All Father Libermann’s spiritual teaching can be reduced to a school of docility to the Holy Spirit”. (Tome III, col. 1494)

To a seminarian on vacation who asked him for the secret of remaining in the presence of God in the midst of distractions and leisure time, he wrote:

"Enter into the deepest place in your interior and never come out. If you do that, your joy will be full and the peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ will flood your soul and make it into a vessel of predilection and of love for His Father. As long as you remain retired thus in the depths of your interior, you will always find the Holy Spirit there and He will raise you up and transport you to the summit of that mountain of love which Our Lord has built for his chosen ones and He will fill you with His graces and His light, with His beauty and His happiness. You will form the good habit of listening to His voice and you will be faithful to His grace". (*L.S.*, I, 127)

Going beyond the superficial level of sentiment and even of simple intellect, Francis Libermann invites him to live at the level of the deepest heart where the Holy Spirit will be found at work. He must strive to be present to God's moment, to live the current moment without letting himself be troubled by surrounding circumstances, and thus to remain receptive to Him who is visiting him interiorly. Fifty years before Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus and her use of the comparison of the elevator, Libermann teaches that our union with Jesus will be the work of the Spirit Himself. It is to His tenderness and mercy that we abandon ourselves fully, accepting to remain poor and little, in peace, gentleness and confidence.

In a talk prepared for the "groups of piety" – groups of friends who met in order to deepen their spiritual life – he affirms that union with God requires constant growth by the action of the Holy Spirit.

"This interior union with God must be such that all our actions, external or internal, but especially internal, proceed, as much as possible, only from the Spirit of Our Lord Jesus Christ Who is within us, that they all be done in Him and with Him. . . . Not only the acts of our soul, but also its whole life with its impressions, its tastes, its joys, its sadness, must be 'in Him, through Him, with Him'. We would say: through God, i.e. through the movement of the Holy Spirit; in God, i.e. in order to unite us more and more with Him; with God, i.e. in union with Our Lord Jesus Christ". (*Es.* S., 18)

In another place he says. "The Spirit of God is "our consolation, our joy, our strength, our light and our love". (*L. S.*,

II, 407) God the Father sends Him to us so that, listening to Him and giving full liberty of action in us, He can freely conform us to Jesus. "What science and what art in the ways of God!" he writes to Father Carron.

"Be holy, my dear friend, because the Father of Our Lord is holy and because His Spirit Who must live and act within you is holy. Enter fully into the designs of holiness which our Master has for you. Your life will no longer be your own, it will be the life of the Spirit of Jesus Christ within you. For that to happen, He must be the only light of your spirit, the only motive force of your will and of all your actions, the only desire of your heart, the center and principle of all the affections of your soul. There must not be in you any expression foreign to that Spirit of holiness and of love. Your soul must no longer experience any sentiment, movement, or impression, there must be no other life in it except life in that Spirit and through that Spirit of the love of Jesus. Then you will be able to say that He lives in you and that He is your life. Your life will then be a life of holiness, because He has in Himself all holiness and His life is holiness itself". (*L.S.*, I, 301)

What means must be taken for this? Father Libermann makes this clear in an admirable text composed for the "bands of piety" at Pentecost.

If we want to hear the Holy Spirit, see Him and go forward under His guidance, we must be attentive to His inspirations, keep our attention always directed towards Him, practice interior silence, i.e. silence of all our passions and of all the faculties of our soul, avoid too much interior activity. . . not wish to know any other wisdom and any other prudence than those which come to us from the Holy Spirit and avoid all natural efforts towards union with Him. . . All this has to be done in tranquility and peace of soul. This is the disposition in which we must await all that He may be pleased to show us and all that He may get us to do, always keeping ourselves ready to follow Him, but never to go ahead of Him". (*Es.S.*, 79)

In 1837, Libermann was asked to become Master of Novices for the Eudists at Rennes. Attentive as

always to God's manifestation through events, he accepted. One of his duties was to give the novices a commentary on texts of Saint John Eudes, in particular his work "The Admirable Heart of Mary". However, even though he had a great esteem for that "fool of love" for Jesus and Mary (the holy Founder), he gave his talk on the Holy Heart of Mary taking as point of departure his own personal marial experience. He suffered the painful trial of being an apparent failure as a teacher, as well as undergoing great interior distress. The Heart of Mary, in the sorrowful dimension prophesized by Simeon, was his refuge, as well as a lighthouse in the storm. It was with Mary that he murmured his words of self-abandonment:

"My Jesus, You know that I am nothing, that I am capable of nothing, that I am worth nothing. Here I am, just as I am, - a poor man. Accept me, if it be Your will to show so great a mercy. I abandon myself and give myself over into Your hands. There is nothing else that I want". (*L.S.*, II, 392)

If we compare this experience of spiritual poverty with that of Claude Poullart des Places, it is wonderful to see that it is in the interior disposition of the *fiat*, in the spirit of her who called herself the servant of the Lord, that both of these men became founders of orders! and both of them set out from Rennes to do this!

While he was with the Sulpicians, Francis Libermann had known two creole seminarians who wanted to set up a "Work for the Blacks" to come to the aid of abandoned slaves. Now Libermann felt called to take the lead in such a project. He felt commanded to do this directly by the Holy Heart of Mary. He had an interior illumination "which made known to him the role that She destined for him in the Church": that of Founder of a missionary institute for the salvation of the black race! This happened on October 28 1839, which date has been an anniversary ever since and particularly dear to Spiritans! He was always to look upon that day "as one of the happiest of his life" (*N.D.*, I, 551), according to Father Tisserant, one of his first companions.

This same Tisserant had given him "a great joy" in the spring of 1839 by giving him the Manual of the Archconfraternity of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Refuge of Sinners. This

had been instituted in Paris three years before by Father Desgenettes. Tisserant (a Haitian Creole) and his friend Levavasseur (a Creole from La Réunion) had enrolled at Our Lady of Victories, as the center of the Archconfraternity was called. For Francis Libermann that event was like a wink from Mary: it was the point from which the great adventure of the "Work for the Blacks" would take its beginning. . . !

He set off at once for Rome, by way of Fourviere, so as to submit his project to the judgment of the Church. He had everything against him: he wanted to found a congregation of missionaries even though he was not a priest and it seemed unlikely that he could become one; besides, he had no experience or knowledge of Mission. Still, his assurance was absolute: The Holy Heart of Mary was there:

From the very origin of this difficult enterprise all our confidence rested in the kindness of heart of our most holy Mother. In addition, in spite of the difficulties which, humanly speaking, went far beyond the resources of our weakness, we always felt a great conviction that we would succeed. On the one hand, I felt a profound sadness and did not dare tell anyone about our project because it looked foolish to me in the light of common sense and would look the same to any prudent person. On the other hand, I felt inside me a strong impulse and very great confidence in the Most holy Heart of Mary. The few people to whom I spoke of our plan condemned me and tried to make me back out. But I could not stop myself from going forward, so strong was the feeling of confidence which would not let me listen to what they were saying against me".  
(*L.S.*, III, 361)

It was to Father Desgenettes that he made this disclosure. That gives it all the more weight:

From Rome he wrote to Mr. Clair, a friend who was thinking of joining his community. It is a letter which makes clear the close bonds between the Holy Spirit and Mary. It is in Mary, through her, and with her, that the Spirit of God is supremely active! The date of the letter is January 19 1940. Saint Grignon de Montfort's Treatise on True Devotion had not yet seen the light of day; that would not happen until 1842. Once more Francis Libermann gives us one of his personal experiences!

"I do not have much to say to you for the moment. Besides, it is not words that fill our souls with divine love and keep us united in that holy love, but rather the Spirit of Our Lord Who lives in us and wants to bring about all kinds of things there. So it is enough for me to constantly offer your soul to Jesus Christ Our Lord and to the Most Holy Virgin our good Mother, so that the divine Spirit may be absolute master over you, that He may replenish you and unite you to Jesus and Mary with the same union, even though less perfect, with which He has united them together in love.

What a wonderful thing it would be, how gentle and admirable, if the Holy Spirit were thus to bring about in our souls that holy union with Jesus in Mary, and with Mary in Jesus. May Jesus live in us as He lived in Mary. May we be united to Mary as She was united to Jesus, by a union of desire, a union of wills, a union of vision.

Would that we were blind, crippled and annihilated in ourselves and for ourselves, and that the Spirit of Jesus were totally active and alive in us in order to unite us and make us one with Him in Mary, through Mary and with Mary". (*L.S.*, II, 424)

While waiting "for the wall to fall down"; i. e. for the obstacles to be smoothed out, he began to draw up the Provisionary Rule of his future congregation, working in an attic room which he had rented under the eaves of an apartment building. He traced out the general plan, tried to write, but found it "impossible to come up with even one idea"! He went out and visited several churches dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. Then he decided to consecrate the "Work for the Blacks" to the Most Holy Heart of Mary. Immediately it all cleared up...!

"I came back to my room and set to work at once to review the plan from the beginning. I was able to see it all so clearly at a glance that I took in the ensemble of it along with all the developments and details. This gave me inexpressible joy and consolation". (*L.S.*, III, 364)

The Rule begins with these words: "ALL TO THE VERY GREAT GLORY OF OUR HEAVENLY FATHER IN JESUS

CHRIST OUR LORD THROUGH HIS DIVINE SPIRIT IN UNION WITH THE MOST HOLY HEART OF MARY”.

In the meantime, at Our Lady of Victories, the Vicar Apostolic of Mauritius gave support to the planned Society, thereby giving it an indispensable canonical foundation. In their prayers in Paris, Tisserant and Levavasseur attributed this favor to the Holy Heart of Mary!

When he had finished the Rule, Francis Libermann, to occupy his “spare time”, started to write a commentary on the Gospel of Saint John. The story of the Wedding at Cana gave him an opportunity to exalt the powerful intercession of the Heart of Mary and its influence upon the Heart of Jesus.

“This wedding feast represents the Church of Jesus Christ in which souls are taken in marriage by the Divine Spirit. It is Mary who prays and obtains strength, joy and consolation for those who are admitted to this holy marriage. In addition, She provides joy for the divine Spouse by inspiring fidelity to all that He wills. The children of the Church have deep respect for Her and look upon Her as their mistress and benefactress”. (*C.S.J.*, II, 5)

In the Scriptures, he says, wine is “a sign of strength, consolation and joy”. Mary obtains these from the Holy Spirit for those who are admitted to the mystic espousals with the God of love. She also fosters their fidelity to the divine inspirations, a source of joy for Him Who wants nothing so much as to spread that love. Here we have explained in a few words the theological basis for the particular bond between Mary and the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, – a concept which is the very center of Libermannian spirituality.

“ O most holy and adorable Spirit of my Jesus”, he writes in the Commentary, “let me hear your gentle voice. Refresh me with your delicious breath. O divine Spirit, I want to be before You like a light feather which Your breath can carry wherever it wills; may I never offer it the slightest resistance”. (*C.S.J.*, 89)

After a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Loretta, Francis Libermann returned to Rome in better health. He found waiting for him a letter from Propaganda which ratified his project and a letter from the Bishop of Strasbourg offering to ordain him a priest.

It was appropriate enough that the first mass of the community of the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary be celebrated at Our Lady of Victories. That same morning, there was by chance in the church a zealous priest from the South of France who had come to ask guidance from the Holy Heart of Mary. The answer was clear, and Father Bessieux – for it was he – immediately joined the little Society. He was to become the founder of the African Mission in Gabon and would be for twenty-seven years the Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas!

It would also be Our Lady of Victories from which the first missionary of the Holy Heart of Mary would take his departure, – Father Jacques Laval who was to be the firstone to be officially recognized for holiness by the Church.

There too the Apostolic Delegate of Haiti was to meet Father Tisserant who put him in touch with Father Libermann. Thus the mission of Haiti was born in Mary's sanctuary also.

At Our Lady of Victories, once again, at the end of 1842, there took place the historic meeting between Mgr. Barron and Father Libermann. The Founder had five priests ready to leave for the missions and he had come to pray to the Holy Heart of Mary and to ask the advice of Father Desgenettes as to where he should send them. His heart was at peace. He felt sure that "the Heart of Mary is preparing a mission for us". The next day Mgr. Barron, Bishop of the Two Guineas, came to speak to Father Desgenettes about his immense territory and his lack of missionaries. The zealous pastor did not immediately think of Father Libermann's request. It was while he was celebrating mass at the altar of the sanctuary that he understood that the mission of Guinea was directly born of the Holy Heart of Mary!

One of Libermann's earliest companions, Father Levavas-seur was taken in by some outside and apparently prudent individuals and he began to stir up serious opposition to the Founder. The night before February 2, he came to pray before the same altar and was freed from his temptation!

At the same time that Father Libermann lived in deepest intimacy with Mary, he also experienced an exceptional intimacy with the Holy Spirit, a prelude to the final union with God, and this intimacy was to last until the day he died. On December 31 1841, he wrote a letter to a seminarian who was to become a missionary in Cochinchina. In it he praises

the greatness and beauty of life in the Holy Spirit which had clearly become his own way of life.

“When the divine Spirit works within us, our soul is afire and, in the midst of this fire, it seems to be carried along, united to God without any trouble, worry, agitation, irritation or promptings of self love. On the contrary, it is moved to self-abasement, not only before God, but within ourselves and before every creature. How happy we are when we are under the power of the divine Spirit, under the total influence of the Spirit of the love of Jesus! Everything in us becomes love. All our actions, even the slightest movements of our soul, as well as its interior movement, – all becomes love: love for our God, before Whom we are constantly prostrated and annihilated; love for our fellow human beings, love without any bitterness, without passing judgment upon anybody. Our spirit is calm, does not react against those who afflict us, contradict us, persecute us and torment us in whatever manner. Be they good or evil, persons who agree with us or who do not, they can never jolt our spirit out of its calm rest in God, nor provoke us to discontent, whether justified or not”. (*L.S.*, II, 599)

At La Neuville Father Libermann began to comment upon the Rule for the novices. The foundation of true zeal, he says, is “THE APOSTOLIC LIFE”, which is nothing other than

“the life of total love and holiness which the Son of God led upon earth in order to save and sanctify souls and by which He sacrificed Himself for the glory of His Father”. (*N.D.*, II, 290)

IT IS AT THE VERY CORE OF THE APOSTOLATE THAT, BY BEING FAITHFUL, LIKE MARY AND WITH MARY, TO THE SPIRIT OF HOLINESS AND OF PENTECOST, THEY WILL INSURE BOTH THEIR OWN HOLINESS AND THE GENUINE FRUITFULNESS OF THEIR APOSTOLATE. This entire ideal is contained for him in the expression: “The eminently apostolic Heart of Mary”.

“We have been called to the apostolate. What do we need to have a fruitful apostolate, if not the apostolic spirit? Where are we to find that apostolic spirit most

perfect and most abundant? After Our Lord it will be in the Heart of Mary which is completely filled with it, that heart which is eminently apostolic and afire with desire for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. It is true that She did not cross the seas and travel through far-off countries like Peter and Paul and the other apostles. Why? Because it was not her vocation. But, if that had been God's will for her, there would have been nothing missing. That apostolic spirit which filled her would have spurred her into action according to all God's plans for her. God did not will it so. It was Mary's task, in a retiring way, to guide the apostles, to communicate to them her apostolic spirit and to draw down upon souls the graces of conversion and sanctification. From the heights of heaven She continues to do for the spread of the Church what She did for its beginnings. We must, therefore, consider the Heart of Mary as the perfect model of the zeal which should consume us, and as an abundant source from which we have to draw that zeal." (Glossary)

It is the Holy Spirit in person, He Who manifested Himself to Her on Pentecost, Who is at the source of her "apostolic spirit". Father Libermann will say later that, even if he did not say so explicitly in the Provisory Rule, the idea was there "implicitly".

"If our hearts are filled with that ardent charity which burned in the Heart of Mary, we shall always be able to kindle that fire in the souls with whom we are in contact. If, however, we think only of activity without being primarily and principally concerned about conforming our interior to that of Mary, we shall be cold for ourselves and the good which we ought to be doing for others will be less abundant. . ." (Glose, 18)

The Heart of Mary, that source of apostolic inspiration and of constant support for apostles in their so difficult missionary task which is also hers, has raised up a school of heroes in the Church! Our first missionaries all died in Africa with her name on their lips. To their way of thinking, the daring enterprise which was theirs could be accomplished only with the affective and effective presence of Mary leading and supporting

God's messengers so that Jesus might be known and loved by all peoples. This is far from being just a simple devotion. It is an authentic inspiration, willed by the Spirit of God and become a marvellous gift which we can never finish drawing upon. Mary, totally given over to the love of God and love of humanity and inspired by the Holy Spirit, becomes the living model of the "apostolic life". Even more, She is the loving and caring mother of her Son's apostles.

"We have a special right to call upon so kind a heart, a motive of particular confidence in her all-powerful protection: first of all, because of the total consecration that we make of our whole self and of our whole Congregation to her Holy Heart. We can, therefore, with the greatest confidence go to draw from that unailing source, to obtain all the graces we need for our own sanctification and that of others.

The Holy Heart of Mary has been given to us to be the light which guides us and the strength which must sustain us in our labors". (Glose, 18)

The biblical meaning of HEART is well known to Libermann. The heart is the expression of the personal life of a person in its deepest source, the center out of which flow thoughts, desires and freedom. Only God knows the hearts which He has created in order to fill them with His presence and to give them of His life. Libermann found in Mary a heart free of all selfishness and totally given over to His Spirit. The Immaculate Heart of Mary is Mary totally given to the love of God and of mankind. The heart is the symbol of love, and the word "immaculate" indicates the aspect of unreserved offering towards which we sinners look as to an ideal. We look to Her also with the confidence of a child who expects everything from his mother in full security, in absolute security during life and at death! With Mary, everything is simple! With Mary, there are no worries! With Mary, there is security and peace! Her Immaculate Heart is all tenderness and mercy, the echo of the tender mercy of God. Hers is an "eminently apostolic" heart which fosters, through the power of her intercession, the conversion of peoples to Jesus Christ by sure and lasting victories. Instigator of the apostolate, She also works through her participation in the redemption accomplished by her Son: the passive way along with the active way!

"I would like to tell you that the passive way is infinitely more –effective than the active way. Just look at the Immaculate Heart of Mary! What sufferings endured for the salvation of the world! Mary did not go out to preach the Gospel of her Son, but She suffered in her heart; that is the remarkable apostolate of Mary. Wasn't She greater than all the apostles? Jesus Himself, who left to His apostles labors and successes incomparably greater than He willed to do Himself, did He not also suffer for the salvation of the world? You can see by this that genuine apostolate consists in suffering". (*L.S.*, IV, 655)

#### THE FUSION

1848 was the year of the fusion of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost and the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary. "They do the same work, walk the same road," wrote Father Libermann. The older congregation had been badly treated by the Revolution, was left with very few members and was no longer able to assure a serious formation for missionary aspirants. The younger congregation could inherit the older one's legal existence and the territories confided to its mandate. "But", wrote Father Cabon, the great Spiritan historian, "among the providential affinities which had been pointing towards the fusion for some time, there is one of a higher order: it is the similarity of the devotions of the two congregations: the devotion to the Holy Spirit and the devotion to the Holy Heart of Mary." (*General Bulletin*, 1948, p. 9) The fusion was also the work of Mary. Father Desgenettes received assurance of this before Our Lady of Victories long before its realization. "I was a prophet without knowing it," he said on his death-bed, "I even predicted the time when the fusion would take place". (Notice in the Mother House, 1936, p. 34)

For Father Libermann, who saw events in the light of God and who had consulted many, in particular the famous Mother Javouhey, the fusion was both a necessity and a grace. The missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary were not of the same opinion, especially those who were far away like Father Laval. They could not resign themselves to losing a title which was

very dear to them. Father Libermann reassured them at once.

"In the sight of men we shall lose our name. They will call us "Spiritans". But we are not interested in words, but in things. We shall not cease to belong to Mary or to be priests of her Most Holy Heart. . ." (*N. D.*, VII, 75)

Father Libermann saw no problem in joining the names "Holy Ghost" and "Holy Heart of Mary". Not only does one go to the Holy Spirit through Mary, but it is the Holy Spirit Who reveals Mary. Personal, experiential, familiar intimacy with Mary (all expression fall short of describing what is indescribable) is a choice grace for the missionary, a special gift of the Holy Spirit. It is not possible to acquire perfect fidelity to the Holy Spirit without an intimate union with Mary, since She has "the keys to the divine cellar" (Grignon de Montfort). Isn't the Holy Spirit in Mary the source of her holiness and of her apostolic spirit? Putting all this in better relief by joining the two names will give greater force and truth to devotion to the holy and wholly apostolic Heart of Mary, he believes.

"My dear brother", he writes to the Director of Aspirants, "you belong to the Holy Heart of Mary and you will always so belong. Our union with the Holy Ghost Community can't do otherwise than increase our devotion and our love for that Heart which gave birth to our little Society. We have always placed our peace and our happiness in the Heart of Mary filled with the abundance of the Holy Spirit. If we did not express that plenitude of the Holy Spirit in the Heart of Mary, it nevertheless constituted the essence of our devotion to the Most Holy Heart of Mary. We have not changed. It is merely a matter of our now expressing what before was understood, what we took for granted. . .

We loved you all with the charity of Jesus Christ and in the Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary. We shall love you always. God united us in that Holy Heart. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, we shall remain in that Heart". (*N. D.*, XII, 133)

After the fusion of the two congregations of which he became the Superior General, this statement was made a part of the Rule of 1849. It expresses it beautifully:

"The Congregation. . . especially consecrates (its members) to the Holy Spirit, the author and accomplisher of all holiness and the inspirer of the apostolic spirit, and to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, superabundantly filled by the divine Spirit with the plenitude of holiness and of the apostolate and the most perfect participator in the life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, her Son, for the redemption of the world. . . They are to consider the Immaculate Heart of Mary as a perfect model of fidelity to all the holy inspirations of the divine Spirit and of the interior practice of the virtues of religious and apostolic life. They will find in Her a refuge to which they can have recourse in their labors and their pains. . ." (*N.D.*, X, 586)

This text is at the heart of the Spiritan mystique. It forms the bond between the two traditions which we have inherited. IT IS GOD'S WAY OF MAKING US INTO HOLY APOSTLES OF CHRIST. I might add that, in accord with this basic charism destined to radiate throughout the Church, IT IS GOD'S WAY OF MAKING SAINTS OF ALL APOSTLES OF CHRIST!

"This double devotion is the special and distinctive devotion of the Congregation," Father Libermann concludes. In the Act of Consecration he formulated it in the following terms:

"Graciously accept, O my Mother, the offering that I make of all that I am. Present me to the Holy Spirit, your well-beloved Spouse. I want to devote and consecrate myself completely to the divine Spirit and completely to your Immaculate Heart. I wish to live and die, devoting and immolating myself in imitation of Jesus, in the Missionary Society which is wholly devoted to the all-powerful Vivifier of souls and wholly consecrated to your Immaculate Heart. . .

I open my heart and give it up to the divine Spirit. May He fill it. May He possess it and may He act as its sovereign master. I desire, under His guidance, to pour out His holy love into all the souls confided to me. . ." (*N.D.*, X, 449)

The text is theologically very rich. With filial tenderness Mary is asked to "present" ("give") the apostle to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the "one who gives life" to souls into whom He infuses God's holiness, while acting as their sover-

eign master. But He is also the Spirit of Pentecost Who lavishes love – which He is – upon the world through His go-between, His apostle: “Et renovabis faciem terrae, You will renew the face of the earth.” The apostle is thus invited to privileged relationships with the Spirit of Jesus and of the Father, in close intimacy with Mary. The more zealous he is, the holier he will be. The holier he is, the more he will allow the Spirit to renew the face of the world through love. . . !

“The African people do not need clever and capable missionaries and they will not be converted by their efforts, ” Libermann wrote in 1851 to Father Lairé, an apostle who had just arrived in Africa. “It is the holiness and the sacrifice of the Fathers which are to save them. Be holy as Jesus was holy. That is the only way to redeem and sanctify souls. . .

May the Spirit of Jesus Christ animate all your actions. May He form all the sentiments of your soul. . . May He communicate to your heart the gentleness and humility of which the divine Master has given us the example. Oh! but that gentleness and that humility are important, and how few people possess them. . .” (*N.D.*, XIII, 143)

The same year, a few months before his death, he let fall this phrase, which can serve as conclusion and as synthesis of the subject :

“The divine Goodness has given us the Heart of Mary to bring about our regeneration. MARY HAS TO BRING THE HOLY SPIRIT INTO US, so that we may be filled with the superabundance of His holiness as She was”. (*N.D.*, XIII, 716)

It is from these living fountains that, from that time on, the Spiritan tradition has always drunk !

The new *RULE OF LIFE* of the “Congregation of the Holy Ghost under the protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary”, promulgated at Pentecost 1987, takes up again these great intuitions of the Founders and presents them once again as sources of life and of apostolic fruitfulness:

“ We are truly apostles to the extent that we are totally abandoned to the Holy Spirit in our whole life.” (no. 85)  
 “Mary is our model of docility and fidelity to all the

inspirations of the Holy Spirit. We venerate Her and pray to Her so that, after her example, the Holy Spirit Who inhabited her Immaculate Heart may also become for us the fruitful source of our apostolic spirit." (no. 89)

"In the Church we are living a privileged moment of the Spirit", said Paul VI in "Evangelii Nuntiandi". We are also living in a privileged moment of Mary: seventy years after the apparitions of the Immaculate Heart of Mary at Fatima, a marian year opened on the feast of Pentecost. It is a prelude to the jubilee year of the year 2000 which will be specially dedicated to the Holy Spirit. . .

There are so many providential signs which challenge Spiritans whose emblem is the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove hovering over the Holy Heart of Mary with the motto: "one heart and one soul" . . .

Alphonse GILBERT, C.S.Sp.

Translation: J. Gerald WALSH, C.S.Sp.

## REFERENCES

### FROM FATHER LIBERMANN'S WRITINGS

*L.S.*: *Lettres Spirituelles* (Spiritual Letters)

*N.D.*: *Notes and Documents*

*ES.S.*: *Ecrits Spirituels*, Supplément (Spiritual Writings, Supplement)

*CSJ.*: *Commentaire de Saint Jean* (Commentary on St. John's Gospel)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Joseph Michel, C.S.Sp.: *Claude François Poullart des Places*. Editions Saint-Paul, 1962

Louis Lallemand, S.J.: *Doctrine Spirituelle*, Desclée de Brower, 1959

Henri Barré, C.S.Sp.: Article "Spiritualité mariale du Vénérable Père Libermann" in the review *MARIA*, Tome III, p. 379. Beauchesne 1954

*Cahiers Spiritans* (Spiritans Papers), no. 16: "Writings of Claude-François Poullart des Places". Spiritan Center, Rome.

