

Fall 2008

## Libermann's Spirituality: A Spirituality of Presence

David L. Smith C.S.Sp.

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



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Smith, D. L. (2008). Libermann's Spirituality: A Spirituality of Presence. *Spiritan Horizons*, 3 (3). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol3/iss3/7>

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

## LIBERMANN'S SPIRITUALITY: A SPIRITUALITY OF PRESENCE

*"Let us come into the Lord's presence singing for joy."*

David L. Smith,  
C.S.Sp.

David Smith is a Spiritan from the USA Eastern Province. A graduate of the University of Fribourg, Switzerland (Theology), Duquesne University (Existential-Phenomenological Psychology), and the University of Montreal, Canada (Clinical Psychology), Fr. Smith taught for many years in the Department of Psychology at Duquesne University and served as its chair from 1976-1985. He served subsequently as the Executive-Director of the Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center at Duquesne. Author of a history of the graduate programs in Psychology at Duquesne University, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, and a history of the Simon Silverman Center, *Born to See-Bound to Behold*, Fr. Smith has also published in a number of scholarly journals.

*Keep me always in your presence.*

### INTRODUCTION

It was a crisp September afternoon in 1946 when a young fourteen-year-old first set foot upon the beautiful grounds of Holy Ghost Apostolic College. Youth had made the decision of a lifetime, and the next day I found myself kneeling at morning prayer in the chapel of the Holy Ghost Fathers' Minor Seminary in Cornwells Heights PA, praying in unison with a hundred other young men, "*Let us place ourselves in the presence of God and humbly adore Him.*" Over the next thirteen years of our Spiritan formation for the priesthood, that holy invocation would greet the dawn of our every day. At the time, we had no way of knowing that these words echoed the words of the original founder of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. Nearly 250 years before we had even arrived on the scene, Claude Poullart des Places had prayed, "*Let my heart and soul be filled with you alone, O God. Keep me always in your presence.*"

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Fr. Libermann would continue this Spiritan doctrine of the divine presence with his notion of "practical union with God." This expression appears only toward the end of his life in his *Instructions to Missionaries* (1851), but it does not seem to be in any way a new doctrine, but rather an expression that sums up his entire spiritual teaching. "*Action or practical union [with God] consists in divesting oneself of natural impressions to open one's soul to divine impressions ... Then we have a superabundance of truth... we see the things of God effortlessly and clearly, because our soul is in its element, the divine light*" (cited in Gilbert, 1983, pp.99-100). Heedful of the busy and difficult lives of his missionaries in Africa, Libermann expands upon his notion of practical union with God: "*One can have distractions in prayer without ceasing to be united with God... Our whole being must be united to God, and that can only be done by practical union*" (cited in Gilbert, p.100).

Libermann's fascination with 'union with God' stretches back to the early days of his own seminary training. In a letter to Father François Liévin (1/22/1837), he writes,

*Pay close attention to the great principle which was the constant theme of your conversations at St. Sulpice, namely*

*peace and union with God, based upon complete denial of self and the intimate knowledge and conviction of the exceeding greatness of our misery and weakness. Think back on this great principle constantly.*

*Don't become discouraged if you find yourself oppressed with all kinds of weaknesses and imperfections. On the contrary, the poorer and smaller you see that you are, the more you ought to place your trust and confidence in God alone. The moment has arrived, dear friend, when you must come to a complete surrender of yourself to the hands of God. (Liebermann, 1963, p. 16)*

*Don't become discouraged...*

Liebermann always understood this union with God to be intimately related to the Holy Spirit and to the apostolic life. To express the inextricable bonding of the two, he once wrote to his brother Samson and his wife, “Give him [Holy Spirit] freedom [to act in you] and you will see the great things he will work in you” (cited in Malinowski, n.d., p.39).

*... Liebermann's spirituality is above all a spirituality of presence.*

When we unpack all of these texts, we discover that Liebermann's spirituality is above all a **spirituality of presence**. We also detect within the texts four basic constituents of his spirituality. Each one in its own unique way contributes to the co-constitution of the gestalt and they all cohere to form a network of reciprocal personal relationships. In every true gestalt, the whole shapes each constituent, each constituent shapes the whole, and each constituent exerts a formative influence upon each other to form together a gestalt of personal presence. In an authentic spiritual gestalt, an inexorable logic demands the total presence of the whole in each and every one of the parts (see Gurwitsch, 1966, p.26). It follows inevitably that if one constituent changes or disappears the total gestalt is essentially changed. For this reason each of the four constituents must be operative simultaneously to constitute an authentic Spiritan spirituality. Merleau-Ponty (1962) calls this type of phenomenon “a relationship of reciprocal expression”(p.160). The four constituents of Liebermann's spiritual doctrine are:

1. **Availability to the Holy Spirit**—Evangelical Availability;
2. **Abandonment**—Releasement;
3. **God is all; Man is nothing**—The Decentered Ego;
4. **Practical Union with God**—Union in Action.

**1. AVAILABILITY TO THE HOLY SPIRIT—EVANGELICAL AVAILABILITY**

In the spirit of a true phenomenologist, Koren (1990) invites us to attend to the lived experience of the Spiritans themselves, and not so much to theory, if we wish to discover what constitutes a Spiritan spirituality. In this vein, he writes,

*It seems to me that our lived spirituality can best be described as an EVANGELICAL AVAILABILITY, WHICH REMAINS ATTENTIVE TO THE HOLY SPIRIT MANIFESTING HIMSELF IN THE CONCRETE SITUATION OF LIFE.* (p. 15)

Koren describes two profiles of this single availability. The one profile reflects our total availability before the Lord with our hearts wide open to be fully available to him. He describes this existential disposition as our personal holiness; an inclination of our total being to live out in our daily lives the words that Jesus taught us: “*Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.*” The second profile reflects our availability to be at the service of others. Jesus spoke of these two profiles of one reality when he gave us the great commandment to love God above all things and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Koren goes on to explain how this twofold reality enfolds a double dimension: the life of prayer, which is our personal union with God, and our life of action to transform the world for Christ’s people. Our work of faith at the altar must always overflow into the public square. *Lex credendi/orandi* must always inspire *lex operandi*. According to Koren, our availability before God in our life of prayer and our availability for others in a life of service forge a unity of our religious and apostolic life. This double reality has been beautifully captured in the words of Jean Gay:

*Listening calmly to what the Holy Spirit has to tell us and living intensely the love of Christ so as to be close to the poor – this is the essence of Père Libermann, the summary of his spirituality.* (cited in de Mare, 2002, p.8)

In this text we find both a spiritual and material form of poverty embodied in Libermann’s spirituality. There is first of all availability to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives, allowing ourselves to be open and to be led by the inspiration of the Spirit. Hand in hand with this spiritual poverty goes a material poverty, lived out in a lifestyle of simplicity and frugality with a moderate attitude toward the necessities of life. With regard to our service to the poor, Kritzer (2006) informs us that in the context of Jewish traditions and attitudes -- where Libermann

*Our work of faith at the altar must always overflow into the public square.*

*Hand in hand with this spiritual poverty goes a material poverty...*

was so comfortably at home-- charitable giving is essential to ethical behavior. She writes,

*The word tzedakah, which is usually translated "charity," is derived from a Hebrew root that means righteousness, justice, or fairness. The central attitude is that food, shelter and other basic needs are a human right; giving food to the hungry is not doing them a favor but rectifying an injustice by giving them something they should have had in the first place. (p.8)*

Echoing the sentiments of Libermann, Kritzer reminds us that, in Reform Judaism, charity and justice are situated in "*the larger context of tikkum olam or the 'repair of the world'*"(p.8). Where there is no justice there can be no true charity. Where there is no charity, there can be no true justice.

*Libermann's spiritual poverty found expression in his radical openness to the world...*

Libermann's spiritual poverty found expression in his radical openness to the world, to the future, and to human experience. He never believed in dividing up the world into "we are good and they are evil." He rejected the religious prejudice that all the angels sang in the church choirs and the demons slept on the streets of the world. Koren reminds us that Libermann distrusted practical plans that were worked out in ivory towers, "'because they always contain speculative elements... and experience is lacking.' He wants his men to avoid measuring everything by fixed ideas... (because) one does not acquire any true experience in such a way"(1990, p.23). This radical poverty of spirit immunizes his spiritual doctrine against all forms of rigidity. Koren interprets Libermann's "*poverty of spirit*" as "*openness to the world and to the experience of concrete life*" (1990, p. 22).

Libermann speaks as loudly and clearly to us today as he spoke to his men after the people's revolution of 1848 in France. At the time, while many priests, bishops, and even Rome feared the new democracy introduced by the revolution, Libermann encouraged his men to get out and vote. He wrote,

*Let us therefore frankly and simply accept the new order...*

*The misfortune of the clergy has always been that they remained stuck in notions of the past...Any attempt to cling fearfully to 'the good old times'...nullifies our efforts ...Let us therefore frankly and simply accept the new order and bring to it the spirit of the Gospel. (cited in Koren, p.22)*

Without doubt, Libermann would have agreed wholeheartedly with Jaroslav Pelikan who once said, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."

*Pay particular attention  
to the Holy Spirit  
dwelling personally in the  
core of your being...*

*Flesh makes possible  
the shining of light, the  
sounding of the word, in  
the world.*

Libermann rooted his spirituality of presence in availability to the Holy Spirit and evangelical availability. He never ceased to remind us of the intimate presence of the Holy Spirit active in our lives: “*Pay particular attention to the Holy Spirit dwelling personally in the core of your being*” (cited in Malinowski, 5/1/1998).

When God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary at Nazareth he announced God’s presence to her: “*Rejoice, O highly favored daughter! The Lord is with you.*” When the angel leaves her, she has agreed to give flesh to “*the Son of God.*” She has assumed responsibility for the presence of God in her womb and in our world. In the case of Mary, making herself available to the Holy Spirit, her “*yes*” becomes “*an act of self-presentation to the God who is already present*” (Westphal, 2005, p.21). One of the Son’s names shall be Emmanuel, God-with-us; God present among us.

When we hear God speaking his Word to Mary, we hear echoes of the Gospel of John. “*In the beginning was the Word; the Word was in God’s presence, and the Word was God... whatever came to be in him found life, life for the light of man... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us*” (John 1:1,4,14). Commenting upon this text, McKendrick (2003) writes,

*In the beginning of this Gospel is the Word. Almost immediately the Word is Light [and Life] ...and soon too it becomes Flesh..., by which the Word might be both heard and seen. Flesh makes possible the shining of light, the sounding of the word, in the world. (p. 105)*

The Word, the Light, the Life, the Flesh - they all express God’s presence among us. The proclamation of Isaiah that Jesus chose for his own self-definition fully expresses the unity of Libermann’s spirituality of presence - both an availability to the Holy Spirit and an availability to the world. When Jesus stood up in the synagogue of his home town of Nazareth to proclaim God’s Word, he took the scroll and read,

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
for he has anointed me  
to bring the good news to the afflicted.  
He has sent me  
to proclaim liberty to captives,  
sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord.  
(Luke 4:18-19)*

It is not accidental that this text opens the Spiritan Rule of Life. It is the perfect expression of Libermann's spirituality of presence, of availability to the Holy Spirit and to all the afflicted of the world. Pope Benedict robustly affirmed the unity of this double presence when he met with the Episcopate of South America and the Caribbean in May of 2007. In his address, he reminded them that "*the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in God who became poor for us in order to enrich us with his poverty.*" Still the question remains: Even though God is always present to us, how do we become present to him? When God calls us by name, how are we enabled to respond? What is required of us to be able to say, "*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening*"? Libermann does not hesitate to answer, abandonment.

## 2. ABANDONMENT / RELEASEMENT

Our personal availability to the Holy Spirit, who speaks to our hearts in the concrete experience of our daily life, springs forth from what Libermann called *abandonment*. Jean Gay, quoting Libermann's close friend, Frederick Le Vasseur, informs us that for Libermann,

*Abandonment is the perfection of patience.*

*Abandonment is the perfection of patience. When one has reached this state, the person rests in God, gives himself up completely and no longer wants to act of himself. He allows himself to be totally directed by God, according to his wishes. It is a state of continuous availability. (cited in de Mare, 2002, p.185; emphasis mine )*

Libermann's own description of abandonment reveals its major constituent to be a total detachment from bondage to any created thing, a liberation inspired totally and only by love of God and neighbor. The following passage from Libermann's own pen provides us with his personal understanding of abandonment as he exercised it in his own hectic and burdensome daily life:

*I learn to abandon everything into his hands and rest in him in everything...*

*Our Lord wishes our business to drag on. Every step I take must have its hitches and delays, so that I learn to abandon everything into his hands and rest in him in everything... Providence alone has guided us... Christian perfection [consists] in a union of perfect love with our Lord, founded on a complete renouncement of ourselves, our self-love, our will, our ease, our satisfaction, and everything we prize. (cited in Gilbert, 1983, pp.120-121)*

In this text he speaks of "*to abandon,*" which means to give up something completely, to relinquish, or to ban totally from one's life. He also uses the word "*renouncement,*" which means to

take back or cast off. Sometimes the word *detachment* is used to express the sense of unfasten or disconnect. Each case suggests some type of dis-engagement, de-coupling, in essence, a re-lease from some form of bondage. Abandonment/releasement is above all a liberation in the service of a free(ed) spirit.

*Abandonment/  
releasement is above all a  
liberation in the service of  
a free(ed) spirit.*

In the realm of the spirit (Holy Spirit), we might say that abandonment is akin to the philosophical notion of the phenomenological reduction or epoché. In order to see reality clearly, after it has been covered over by familiarity and scientific explanations, we need to question it, even interrogate it. Merleau-Ponty (1962) speaks of our “complicity” with the world. We are so close to our everyday world and so intimately immersed in it that we need a way to stand back from it to see it afresh. The epoché or phenomenological reduction brackets the taken-for-granted world of everyday life. We take a stand back from it and try to see it anew. We then discover how we have even contributed to the co-constitution of our world and how we have become bound to it. To describe this strategy, Merleau-Ponty speaks of the loosening of the threads of consciousness that in an original naiveté bind us to the world (p.xiii). With this approach we can begin to see the structures (not the etiologies) of certain phenomena much more clearly. The very seeing can be liberating.

*... all species of fanaticism  
are expressions of a  
totalization of one aspect  
of reality.*

For instance, with the epoché, we begin to see that all rigid ideologies and all species of fanaticism are expressions of a totalization of one aspect of reality. Strasser (1977) invites us to consider the political or religious fanatic:

*He also sets everything in relation to an ideal which fills him completely and constitutes for him the horizon of all values and meanings. The fanatic considers things and persons...evaluates them according to his totally dominant aim and makes them accordingly into objects of well calculated actions. Of such a man one would say that he has “no heart.” (p. 197)*

By absolutizing the partial in place of the whole, we become enslaved and blinded by a species of idolatry. This myopic view of the world permeates all the common “isms,” be it racism, sexism, consumerism, militarism or totalitarianism. On the affective level, in depression, for example, human consciousness bears the world as a crushing and constricting burden and other profiles of the world recede beyond consciousness. In addictions, the totality of the individual’s existence is imprisoned by the ‘drug,’ whatever it may be. In a personal communication,



*... humor provides a space, a distance from our ordinary complicity in our world...*

*... the gift of the Spiritan epoché he bestowed upon us sharpens our vision to see our world through the eyes of the poor.*

Father Raymond French, C.S.Sp., has drawn my attention to suicide as perhaps the boundary example of the constriction of consciousness to a hopeless and foreclosed future. It is precisely because humor provides a space, a distance from our ordinary complicity in our world, that we can appreciate it as a saving grace. Abandonment/releasement suspends our 'complicity' with the world and, by loosening the threads of our consciousness with the world, liberates us from bondage to any created thing (see Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.xiii).

I do not wish to suggest that abandonment was for Libermann some type of philosophical methodology or psychological technique; it was not. He did not practice it or promote it in order to produce practical benefits for himself or others. Still, to be docile to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, to be guided only by Providence, does keep all the reality of our life in proper perspective, *sub aspectu aeternitatis*. Living constantly "*in a union of perfect love with our Lord,*" nothing could enslave his mind or his heart. As he lay dying, the members of his religious community gathered around his bed and when they recited, "*In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum*" [*Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit*"], he looked as though he understood (van Kaam, 1959, p.296). That is the ultimate spiritual epoché and the key to his unbounded serenity, joy, and freedom. Libermann's spiritual doctrine was in no sense relativistic, but it did radically relativize all of temporal reality - time in the light of eternity. This did not mean that his spirituality was in any sense a disembodied way to God. On the contrary, the gift of the Spiritan epoché he bestowed upon us sharpens our vision to see our world through the eyes of the poor. Father Joseph Maier, S.J., (Anderson, 2007) tells us that St. Ignatius once wrote to a community of Jesuits in Padua to remind them that when we identify with the poor we identify with Jesus. Of course, he was merely reiterating the point that Jesus himself had made when he told his disciples, "*I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me*" (Mt. 25:40). In consequence, the 'epoché of the poor' enables us to unmask the political and social structures that oppress the poor. Our taken-for-granted vision of the world is then disrupted, and we see the world as the poor see it: a world where they are hungry and no one gives them to eat; thirsty and no one gives them to drink; hungry and no one clothes them. To identify with Jesus is to see afresh through the eyes of the poor. At this juncture, availability to the Holy Spirit and evangelical availability embrace.

*... we actively welcome  
God into our lives.*

Libermann's spiritual wisdom of abandonment resonates with other expressions of renouncement, both practical and philosophical. For example, in the Twelve Step program of A.A., members are encouraged to "let go, and let God"; to "get out of the driver's seat" and to "turn their wills and lives over to the care of God." Even though abandonment is a profound willingness to allow the Holy Spirit to take over our lives, we do not become passive puppets or will-less automatons. Rather, we actively welcome God into our lives. "Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love." What we give up for the sake of freedom is our own will-full-ness that always struggles to force the state of affairs.

The German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, uses the word releasement (*Gelassenheit*) to express the philosophical sense of this phenomenon. At first, he used the word to describe an authentic and free-spirited stance toward the tyranny of technology. In common German usage today, it is most often used to express 'composure,' 'calmness,' and 'unconcern.' In earlier ages, some mystics, including Meister Eckhart, used the word in the sense of 'letting the world go' and giving oneself to God. Heidegger (1996) writes,

*Releasement toward things and openness to the mystery belong together. They grant us the possibility of dwelling in the world in a totally different way. They promise us a new ground upon which we can stand and endure in the world of technology without being imperiled by it. (p.55)*

*Both Libermann  
and Heidegger were  
preoccupied with the  
values of human freedom  
and human dignity.*

Both Libermann and Heidegger were preoccupied with the values of human freedom and human dignity. They both sought for a way for humanity to escape domination by things and to remain open to 'the mystery.' Each one offers a new ground upon which we can stand to discover a possibility of dwelling on this earth in a totally new way. In spite of any differences, we can only marvel that they both insisted that "releasement toward things and openness to the mystery belong together." For Libermann the mystery was God/the Holy Spirit; for Heidegger it was Being. With the concept of abandonment, Libermann articulated his concern for the liberation of the human spirit from the tyranny of any created thing; Heidegger's 'releasement' expressed his alarm in the face of the tyranny of the spirit of technology. Only releasement can ward off the day of the approaching tide of technological revolution in this atomic age, which according to Heidegger,

*...could so captivate, bewitch, dazzle and beguile man that  
calculative thought may come to be accepted and practiced*

*as the only way of thinking... Then man would have denied and thrown away his own special nature—that he is a meditative being. Therefore, the issue is of saving man’s essential nature. Therefore, the issue is keeping meditative thinking alive. Yet releasement toward things and openness to the mystery never happen of themselves. They do not befall us accidentally. Both flourish only through persistent, courageous thinking. (p.56)*

*Both flourish only through persistent, courageous thinking.*

At the time of Libermann, humanity was not yet faced with the threat of the imperialistic spirit of technology. Though the exploitation of the poor flourished in his time as well as ours, he did not yet have to face the globalized sweat shops or the behemoths of modern agribusinesses that oppress the poor of our day. Libermann would have agreed with Heidegger’s prescription for the salvation of humanity - “releasement toward things and openness to the mystery” - but he would have added to the prescription loving action as well. He had foreseen the necessity of this releasement to the mystery with his notions of availability to the Holy Spirit and evangelical availability to the poor. Though he did not use the language himself, I have no doubt that he would have embraced the notion of a ‘radical de-centering of ego’ as a *sine qua non* for the very possibility of this double availability.

*God is everything; man is nothing.*

### **3. GOD IS ALL-MAN IS NOTHING: THE DE-CENTERED EGO.**

On the last day of January 1852, two days before his death, as they gathered around his bed, his confreres heard Libermann whisper, “*God is everything; man is nothing*” (cited in van Kaam, p.206). His words strike our modern ears as strange and even somewhat bizarre. To fully appreciate them they must be placed in their proper historical context. Libermann’s age was a time of rationalism. Approximately two hundred years before his death, his fellow countryman, René Descartes (1596-1650), had launched a new philosophy that soon spread throughout France and the rest of Europe. For our purposes, it stands out as notable for several reasons. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, Being had been the central concern of philosophical speculation. During all the Christian centuries prior to Descartes, God had held pride of place. Though Descartes was and remained a faithful Catholic, his new philosophy had two unintended consequences. First of all, with his famous *Cogito ergo sum*, he shifted the central focus of philosophy from Being/God to human subjectivity. Then, he exiled God from active participation in the daily affairs of humanity by relegating him to a distant point in past time as a first cause. In due time this divine banishment would give rise to

Deism, and among the French intellectual and political leaders rationalism would eventually rule the day.

Historical conditions actually determined that Libermann would be born into a world permeated with French rationalism. Following the turbulent years of the French Revolution of 1789, on November 10, 1793, the French National Convention, at the suggestion of one of its delegates, Chaumette, proclaimed a Goddess of Reason. They chose Thérèse Momoro, the wife of a printer, as the personification of the goddess and she was duly enthroned on the main altar of Notre Dame Cathedral by the freemasons. Imagine the shock to Catholic sensibilities! This event transpired only nine years before Libermann's birth, on April 12, 1802. When we situate this divinization of reason in the context of Libermann's Jewish origins, we grasp intuitively what a blasphemy he must have found it to be. To enthrone a human being as the personification of reason on God's altar was a gross defilement of all that was holy. Gilbert (1983) alerts us to the intrinsic link between Libermann's Jewish upbringing and 'God is all' to "*Hear, Israel, the Lord is your God; you will have no other God but him alone.*" Gilbert continues,

*The expression, man is nothing, is a paradox when one knows the esteem, respect and love that Libermann nourished for people, in particular for the poorest and most abandoned. In fact the axiom wishes to highlight the fact that in the domain of faith and in sharing the life of God human beings are completely dependent on God and are invited to expect and to receive everything from him. In Libermann's spirituality the expression gives us to understand that the more one leaves place for God the more one finds the way of freedom, peace and limitless happiness. (p. 131)*

Faced with a culture that had divinized human reason, Libermann executes a corrective maneuver to put reason in its place – its proper place - and to remind us that it is in God that "*we live and move and have our being*" (Acts 17:28).

Intellectual historians are wont to describe three major decenterings of human consciousness in the course of Western thought. The Copernican revolution displaced the human race from the center of the physical universe. Darwin toppled the human being as king of the jungle, no longer entitled to lay claim to a place at the apex of the biological hierarchy. Finally, Freud shifted the cool rational ego of human consciousness to the seething cauldron of the instinctual unconscious. Humanity had fallen from riches to rags almost overnight. Ever since the

*... you will have no other God but him alone.*

*... the more one leaves place for God the more one finds the way of freedom, peace and limitless happiness.*

'Fall,' various thinkers, especially in the social sciences, have used these three major decenterings to demean the human condition and the nobility and freedom of the human being. Libermann never followed suit. Rather, he often expressed his high regard for his fellow human beings. He once wrote, "*The nature you possess is a gift of God, a beautiful gift...*," and after having completed an exhaustive study of all of Libermann's voluminous writings, van Kaam (1959) was convinced that "*He knew that only the mature, fully developed personality can surrender himself to apostolic activity without losing himself in it*" (pp.259, 262). With regard to Libermann's frequent use of the phrase, "*God is everything; man is nothing,*" van Kaam wrote,

*[it] clearly indicates his conviction that whatever makes a man to be what he is, his whole capacity in the natural and supernatural order is truly a gift and a mandate of the Creator. (p. 264)*

Rather than demean the dignity of human existence, Libermann's insistence upon our availability to the Holy Spirit decenters the false self, only to elevate and ennoble humanity. "*Give the Holy Spirit freedom to act in you and you will see the great things He will work in you*" (cited in Malinowski, 1998, p.15); we might add, *and you will work for others*. The Holy Spirit in Libermann's spirituality never transports us into some nebulous spiritualistic realm, but always sends us back into the wounded heart of the world to serve and to heal.

*The Holy Spirit in  
Libermann's spirituality  
...sends us back into the  
wounded heart of the  
world to serve and to  
heal.*

The decentering of the self expressed in Libermann's paradoxical phrase is a form of *kenosis*, shifting the self from the technical, functional ego level of existence to the meditative core of our being where we become open to the action of the Holy Spirit. Gilbert identifies this emptying of self as the very essence of Libermann's spirituality. He writes, "*This then is the heart of Libermann's spirituality - docility to the Person of the Spirit of God living in us*" (p.39). Libermann spoke of this docility in many different ways. All we have to do is "*to follow the movements and the impressions of the Holy Spirit who is within us. This is to be your whole line of action...*"; "*It is the Spirit who must work in our souls, more or less perfectly according to God's plan for us...*"; "*All you have to do is to keep yourself pliable in the hands of the Spirit of life...*" Finally, he wrote, "*Your soul is the ship, your heart represents the sail, the Holy Spirit is the wind; He blows into your will and your soul goes forward*" (pp.37-41). When we reflect deeply upon Libermann's principles of the spiritual life, 'availability to the Holy Spirit,' 'holy abandonment,' and 'God is all,' we can only marvel at how perfectly they embody Westfall's description of

*Your soul is the ship, your  
heart represents the sail,  
the Holy Spirit is the  
wind...*

prayer: “Prayer is a deep, quite possibly the deepest, decentering of the self, deep enough to begin dismantling, or if you like, deconstructing that burning preoccupation with myself” (2005, p.15). “God is all; man is nothing” perfectly expresses this radical decentering of self required for practical union with God, the fourth principle of Libermann’s spirituality of presence.

*He possessed a deep trust  
in the power of our  
personal experience...*

*...he encouraged them  
to persevere in their life  
of prayer in the midst  
of the most difficult  
circumstances...*

#### 4. PRACTICAL UNION WITH GOD; APOSTOLIC AVAILABILITY

Libermann repeatedly encouraged his missionaries to be attentive to the Holy Spirit in the concrete situation of their daily lives. He possessed a deep trust in the power of our personal experience to teach us how to respond to the Holy Spirit in the conduct of our everyday affairs. Since he practiced what he preached, he too learned from experience, his own and that of his missionaries. When he sent out his first missionaries to equatorial Africa, he knew that they were going to a land where they would experience great hardship and possibly even death. As we know, the first ones did die very soon after their arrival in Guinea on the coast of West Africa. In various letters at the time, he writes that “hot weather disheartens and enervates” and he calls the climate “unhealthy” and a murderous influence which “can wreak havoc on prayer life, community relations and apostolic zeal because of the stifling heat.” In one letter he encouraged them to persevere in their life of prayer in the midst of the most difficult circumstances, even when they did not experience any spiritual consolation or feel any union with God (see Malinowski, A, p.35, n.152). In response to the plight of these early missionaries, Libermann crafted the phrase ‘practical union with God’ to enable them to cling to a life of presence to God while continuing to labor zealously for the ‘poor Blacks’ entrusted to their apostolic care.

Confronted by the horrible environmental conditions of his first missionaries, Libermann was challenged to discover a way to adapt his traditional teachings with the practical circumstances of their lives. He continued to insist on the necessity of prayer if their apostolic labors were to produce any results. In his commentary on his Provisional Rule of Life, he wrote,

*They must be filled with the Spirit of holiness of the adorable Master and act so much under the influence of divine grace that they will spread it by their words and their actions and will thus fill all those with whom they come in contact.*  
(cited in Malinowski, B, The Glose, p. 2)

Nothing new here, but he goes on to add a quite original twist:

*For in order to serve the mission, missionaries must be able to offer the service of their bodies: their mouth to speak,*

*their lungs to continue their apostolic labors, their feet to run after the wandering sheep, their hands to administer the Sacraments and to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice. There is an obligation also with respect the Holy Spirit, of whom those bodies are the temple and the instruments. Hence their bodies must be respected, must be taken care of...* (p.2)

*When we are holy we are like a fire that warms all that comes near it...*

In these two texts we find a beautiful example of what Libermann meant by practical union with God: “*When we are holy we are like a fire that warms all that comes near it*” (p.2).

Gilbert (1983) asks the incisive question uppermost in Libermann’s mind: “How can a person of action remain united to God?” Reflecting upon Libermann’s own texts, he responds,

*By practical union... The essential thing is to live all day long in practical union with God, not only by accomplishing his holy duties but also by exercising a gentle and peaceful vigilance over oneself and by acting in everything conformably to God’s good pleasure, in a spirit of faith and love.* (p.99)

Libermann also calls this practical union a union of action or operation. “*Our whole being [prayer, thoughts, feelings and actions] must be united to God, and that can only be done by practical union*” (cited in Gilbert, p.100).

*...he considered the apostolic way of life to be superior to contemplative life.*

If he had felt free to follow the inclination of his own heart’s desire, Libermann would probably have become a contemplative monk. He once wrote, “... *my most ardent and constant desires carry me towards retreat and solitude*” (cited in Malinowski, A, p.35). At the same time, it may come as a surprise to some that he considered the apostolic way of life to be superior to contemplative life. Taking only Jesus as his model, who synthesized in his own life union with God and action for others, Libermann would write,

*There is nothing so beautiful, so noble on earth as the apostolate; the contemplative life is very inferior to it: it represents only a part of the life [of] our Lord. The apostolic life represents in itself the perfection of the life of our Lord on which it is modeled. More than any other life, it gives us conformity to Jesus Christ.* (cited in Malinowski, A, p.36)

In light of this text, no one could ever legitimately interpret ‘practical union’ as nothing more than a type of instant coffee or fast food for the spiritual life of busy people.

*Union with God in prayer leads us to be of service to others...*

The *Spiritun Rule of Life* (1987) captures precisely the intrinsic unity between practical union and apostolic activity when it says,

*... they are intimately linked. They complement each other. Union with God in prayer leads us to be of service to others, and the apostolic work we do is, in its turn, a worship offered to God in the Spirit (cf. Romans 1:9) and a deepening of our union with Him. (No. 87, p. 48)*

This text lucidly illustrates that we are not dealing here with two discrete actions but a mutual sculpting of the two. Our practical union with God is actually nourished and shaped by our service to others and our service to others is inspired and informed by our total fidelity to the Holy Spirit. As the Holy Spirit unites us to them in loving service so they bind us closer to that same Spirit. A few months before he was murdered by a right-wing death squad in El Salvador, Father Ignacio Ellacuria, S.J., called for “*a civilization of shared austerity with the poor*” (Anderson, 2007, p.19, quoting Maier). Maier speaks of “*salvation by the poor*” in the sense that “*The thrust of kenosis is to go from riches to poverty, from power to powerlessness*” (p.17). The perfect marriage of practical union with God and apostolic activity finds its highest expression in Jesus’ own *kenosis*:

*Though he was in the form of God  
he did not deem equality with God  
something to be grasped at.  
Rather, he emptied himself...  
obediently accepting even death,  
death on a cross. (Phil. 2, 6-8)*

*We pray because there is a vast disproportion between human misery and human compassion.*

In an interview about her father, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, his daughter, Susanna, tells us that for him religion began with “*a sense of mystery, of awe, wonder, and fear, but religion itself is concerned with what we do with those feelings*” (2007, p.12). He understood God to be a God who demands that we transcend ourselves to reach out to others, “*and it is precisely that going beyond, that awareness of challenge, that constitutes our being*” (p.13). In this same vein, Thompson-Uberuaga (2006) reminds us that each time we respond “*Here I am, Lord,*” we recognize not only who God is but who we are as well. According to Rabbi Heschel, his daughter tells us, “*We pray because there is a vast disproportion between human misery and human compassion*” (p.13). Libermann could not agree more. The Rule of 1849 sets down the words that best define a Spiritan when it insists that they must make themselves “*...the advocates, the supporters, and the defenders of the weak and the little ones against all who oppress them*” (cited in *Spiritun Rule of Life* , No.14, p. 21).



## CONCLUSION

Libermann's notion of practical union fused with apostolic action leads us to believe that he would have agreed that, even though God's Kingdom is not *from* this world, it certainly is *of* this world. From this scriptural text, Dennis Hamm, S.J., rightly concludes that,

*For exponents of Catholic social tradition, this means that any issue of public policy impinging upon the dignity of persons must be addressed within the Christian perspective of Jesus' reign over our lives here and now.* (2006, p.19)

Must this not always be the burning and defining concern for a Spiritan? Lisa Cahill directly and concretely addresses this concern in her book, *Theological Bioethics; Participation, Justice, Change*, when she insists that 'theological ethics' must evolve into 'social ethics.' As the reviewer of her book writes, "*Christian bioethics in particular should work to mobilize efforts for change, especially changes concerning fair and equal access to health care, both nationally and globally*" (Lysaught, 2007, p.33). How can we mobilize effort for change? United with the Holy Spirit, Spiritans throughout the world strive to be present for the 'little ones' by mobilizing efforts for the poor and powerless. "*Let us place ourselves in the presence of God and humbly adore him*" still resounds from the days of our youth. Every constituent in the gestalt of Libermann's spirituality announces and expresses some form of presence, be it in community, solidarity, prayer, service, evangelization, welcoming hospitality, or care for the environment.

In 2003, on the happy occasion of the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Spiritans' founding, Pope John Paul II welcomed the Superior General and his Council with these words:

*Be faithful to the twofold heritage that you have received from your founders: dedication to the poor and the missionary apostolate...*

*Be faithful to the twofold heritage that you have received from your founders: dedication to the poor and the missionary apostolate - announcing of the Good News of Christ to all peoples. It means being at one with those whom the world reduces to dependency or pushes to the margins, the poor who make up the vast majority on some continents.*

Libermann's spirituality of presence and our Spiritan charism embrace this twofold heritage - availability to the Holy Spirit and availability to all who are pushed to the margins. It is through our presence to the Holy Spirit that we become truly present to others and it is only through our presence to others that we become truly present to God. Every person's free consent to accept the gift of the self-disclosure of Being [Divine Presence]

is a radical option “to be involved in the world of beings at all, rather than encapsulate oneself in one’s own ego” (Rojcewicz, 2006, p.135). And so, as Spiritans we pray, “Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, they are created and you renew the face of the earth” (Spiritans Manual of Prayer). Then we can go into God’s presence singing for joy.

### References

- Anderson, G. (2007). Salvation Among the Poor: An Interview with Martin Maier, *America*, June 4-11, 16-19.
- Donnelly, D. & Pawlikowski, J. (2007). Lovingly Obedient. *America*, June 18-25, 10-14.
- De Mare, C. (2002). *Spiritans anniversary diary (1703-2003): An historical overview published by the Generalate of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit as part of the Spiritans Year (February 2002-Pentecost 2003)*. Rome: Congregazione dello Spirito Santo.
- Gilbert, A. (1983). *You have laid your hand on me...: A message of Francis Libermann for our time*. (M. L. Fay, Trans.). Rome: Spiritans Research and Animation Center.
- Gurwitsch, A. (1966). *Studies in phenomenology and psychology*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Hamm, D. (2006). Faith’s Call to Justice. *America*, July 11- August 7, 18-20.
- Heidegger, M. (1966). *Discourse on thinking: A discourse on Gelassenheit*. (J. M. Anderson & E.H. Freund, Trans.). New York: Harper and Row.
- Hyde, M.J. (2001). *The call of conscience: Heidegger and Levinas, and the euthanasia debate*. Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press.
- Koren, H. (1990). *Essays on the Spiritans charism and Spiritans history*. Bethel Park, PA: Spiritus Press.
- Kritzer, N. (2006). On Giving to the Poor. *Commonweal*, December, 15, 8-11.
- Libermann, F. (1963). *The spiritual letters of the Venerable Francis Libermann*, Vol.3. *Letters to clergy and religious* (Nos. 1-75). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press. Editions E. Nauwelaers, Louvain.
- Lysaught, M. (2007). A Call to Activism. [Review of the book *Theological bioethics*], *America*, January 26, 33-35.

- MacKendrick, K. (2003). The Word Made Flesh: The Embodiment of Christ in the Fourth Gospel in *Explorations in contemporary continental philosophy of religion*. Baker, D-P & Maxwell, P.(Eds.). New York: Rodopi.
- Malinowski, F. (1998), *Libermann letters: The year of the Holy Spirit*. Unpublished Manuscript.
- (n.d.). *The Holy Spirit in Francis Libermann*. Unpublished Manuscript A.
- (n.d.). *Meeting the Holy Spirit in the writings of Francis Libermann, C.S.Sp.* Original texts collected and translated by Malinowski. Unpublished Manuscript B.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *The phenomenology of perception*. (C. Smith, Trans.). London: Routledge. (Originally published 1945).
- Rojcewicz, R. (2006). *The gods and technology: A reading of Heidegger*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Spiritan Rule of Life* (1987). Roma: Scuola Tipografica S. Pio X-Via Etruschi 7.
- Strasser, S. (1977). *Phenomenology of feeling: An essay on the phenomena of the heart*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- The New American Bible* (1970). New York: P.J. Kennedy & Sons.
- Thompson-Uberuaga, W. (2006) *Jesus and the gospel movement: Not afraid to be partners*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press.
- Van Kaam, A. (1959). *A light to the gentiles*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Westphal, M. (2005 ). Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self in *Phenomenology of prayer*. Benson, B. & Wirzba, (Eds.). New York: Fordham Press.