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## FRANÇOIS LIBERMANN AND HIS FAMILY

### Arsène Aubert, C.S.Sp.

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

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

*...he was always close to his family, especially his brother Samson and his nephews and nieces.*

François Libermann is known as a spiritual director and the second founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Less is known about his relations with his family, apart from the fact that his father, Lazar, was a rabbi at Saverne. But he was always close to his family, especially his brother Samson and his nephews and nieces. The family kept 155 of the letters he wrote to them. Despite his epilepsy and his missionary responsibilities, he wrote long letters, full of humor and obvious affection, showing concern for the human and spiritual growth of each one of them. This correspondence with his family throws revealing light on his own personality and spirituality.

Frédérique Le Vavasseur, a fellow Spiritan and one of his closest collaborators, spoke of the great affection that François had for his family: *"It was only with the greatest difficulty that he agreed for the Congregation to make a gift of about 100 francs to one of his sisters-in-law, who was old and sick and abandoned by public charity. But he did everything he could to help his family in other ways. He was deeply affected by their sufferings. Although he was so strong in other ways, he could be overwhelmed by their troubles; you could tell by his expression when he had received news that one of the family had problems."*

### FRANÇOIS AND HIS BROTHER SAMSON

#### **Two future rabbis facing the same cultural shock**

Lazar, the much esteemed rabbi of Saverne, ensured that his two sons, Samson (1790-1860) and Jacob (1802-1852), received a strict and closeted education, based solidly on the Talmud, with a view to them both being future rabbis. But once they had left the ghetto, they discovered a Judaism divided between traditional Jews (Talmudists) and the enlightened Jews who were followers of *haskala* (*sekhel* in Hebrew, meaning 'reason'). This was a social and cultural movement which sought to return to Moses and to integrate Judaism into a Europe that was under the influence of a philosophy of enlightenment and reason. Jews became French citizens in 1792. Napoleon created the Consistory in 1807 and obliged all future rabbis to have a knowledge of the French language and culture. This was the context that favored the growth of *haskala*, which ironically turned out to be a stepping stone towards faith in Christ for both Samson and Jacob.

*Samson recommended Jacob to M. Drach, a Jew who had been baptized in Paris, and it was there that Jacob discovered the light of Christ.*

*Both Samson and François would suffer because of their Jewish origins.*

Samson was the secretary to the “first Jewish primary school in Strasbourg,” which, in the words of Samson himself, taught the Bible, Hebrew, and French, instead of the “Hebro-Germanic jargon,” in spite of the “ignorant teachers.” Samson and a friend, who wanted to start a society led by a priest, which would preach Christianity among the Jews, wrote to the bishop: “*Jews recognize a Supreme Being and the religion of Moses contains general precepts of a sublime morality, but the great truths contained in this religion are lost for them because they are drowned in a flood of bizarre ceremonies... The rabbinic religion is basically anti-social. The Jewish people, despite their decadence, still cling to the ancient fantasy that they are the chosen people, the favorites of God!*” The bishops are sending missionaries to evangelize “*the savages living on the banks of the Mississippi*”; could they not do the same for the French Jews? Samson and his wife, Babette, were baptized in 1825.

Jacob wrote to Samson from Metz on January 6, 1826: “*I have based my religion on my own reason... We say that God chose the Jews to give them his sacred laws. What does this mean? ... Were all the other peoples not just as much his creatures as the Israelites?... I have come to the conclusion that all God wants from man is that he recognizes him and that he lives in a just and human way. Moses played his role like all the law-givers... but I can assure you that I would be a no better Christian than I am a Jew.*” Referring to the difficulties that Jews were experiencing in 19<sup>th</sup>-century France, he wonders why, if God had done so much for their fathers, he did nothing to help their children.

Samson recommended Jacob to M. Drach, a Jew who had been baptized in Paris, and it was there that Jacob discovered the light of Christ. “*Turning to the God of my fathers, I threw myself on my knees and begged him to enlighten me about the true religion. I prayed that he would let me know if the beliefs of Christians were true, but that if they were false, he would remove them from me at once. The Lord, who is close to those who invoke him from the bottom of their hearts, heard my prayer. I was immediately enlightened and saw the truth. Faith penetrated the depths of my heart and my spirit.*” He was baptized on Christmas Eve, 1826, and took the name François.

Both Samson and François would suffer because of their Jewish origins. In 1825, Samson (who was also a doctor) was appointed mayor of Illkirch, but the people were slow to accept a Jewish mayor, even if he was baptized. At his baptism, François had to reply to the questions in the ritual: “*Do you renounce the hard-hearted blindness of the Jewish people, who refused to recognize our*

*Lord, Jesus Christ? ...I do! Do you believe that, by his death, the divine Savior abrogated the ceremonies of the Law of Moses, and that being abolished, they can no longer be carried out without sin? ...I do!*"<sup>21</sup> David Libermann, another brother, invited only a few people to his baptism because "he wanted to make his abjuration without too much fuss." When François went to Rome in 1840 to present his plan for a missionary society, one of the main obstacles to his success was "that he was a convert Jew, something that they were very wary of in that city."

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*François asks them to live with that total trust in God that he himself had learnt through his sickness...*

### **Human trials – a path that can lead to total trust in God**

Samson lost his Jewish clients when he was baptized and, in 1830, he was also deprived of his position as mayor. He continued to be a doctor for religious communities, but more often than not they paid him with prayers rather than money! His wife, Babette, who was the niece of Rothschild, also lost the support of her family. So they both began to worry about the future of their children. They felt that if only François was a priest he would be able to help them, but ordination was now impossible because of his epilepsy. François asks them to live with that total trust in God that he himself had learnt through his sickness: "All those sufferings with which God seems to inflict us are really blessings; a Christian for whom everything works out according to his own wishes has not been favored by God... My own sickness is a great treasure for me... Are you frightened that I will die of starvation? The Lord feeds the birds in the fields – and he loves me much more than the birds! You may say that if I were a priest, I would be able to help my family, but whether I am a millionaire or a beggar, all that I am, all that I possess, belongs to God... It makes me sad when I see you pursuing the vanities of this miserable world." (letter of July 8, 1830).

### **New Year's greetings to Babette, inspired by his reflections on Christmas**

*"I beg you not to seek to be esteemed by this miserable world... Look at how the child Jesus was ignored and despised... and the Blessed Virgin was not exactly inundated by the good things of this world, even though she was Queen of heaven and earth... From the beginning of his life until his death, Jesus, who was so loveable, lived a life of poverty, ignored and despised. That is why I cannot wish you things that will suit or please you according to nature; that would be more of a curse than good wishes for the New Year." (December 27, 1836). Babette finds her life too austere, while François invites her to live the poverty of the Christmas they have just celebrated.*

### **The sacred mission of parents**

*François had a high regard for the wonderful vocation of parents, always concerned for the future of their children.*

On January 3, 1835, François wrote to Samson and Babette after the birth of their sixth son, Henri: *“The eternal Father brought about the birth of his only Son for our salvation; so you must try, in your turn, to present him with children for his greater glory... The care that a father takes in bringing up his children in a Christian way allows him participate in the life and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ on this earth... Jesus came into the world, lived and died to fulfill his ardent desire for the salvation of his children; you should try to cooperate with this grace from God which he gained for you, so as to contribute to the completion of this desire. Remember that you carry out the role of priest, missionary, and guardian angel for your children, so that you can lead them to a happy eternity... The six children that God has given you are like six talents that he has placed in your care; it is up to you to make them flourish and increase... It will be a great joy to find yourself surrounded by six chosen ones in heaven!... So don't worry if you cannot (or fear you cannot) leave them as many worldly goods as you would like; they were not created for this. Besides, their Father in heaven loves them and will take greater care of them than you could ever do. You are only their father and mother in a passing way, but God will be their parent for ever, provided they want him to be. Give them a good example of fervor and Christian life; this will be of greater value to them than millions in gold or silver. In this way you will sanctify them - and you will be sanctified with them.”*

Are these just the pious musings of a seminarian or the fruit of deep contemplation - human paternity flowing from the paternity of the Father of Jesus, the parents sharing in the mission of Jesus, their children as “talents” that need to bear fruit, and all the family looking forward to the riches that will be theirs in heaven? François had a high regard for the wonderful vocation of parents, always concerned for the future of their children.

### **François recommends prayer and the Eucharist to his brother Samson**

*Try to be more aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit who is in the depths of your soul...*

François is delighted to hear of his brother's desire to live a fully committed Christian life. He suggests an “infallible way” to reach that goal: a half hour of prayer each day (letter of May 21, 1832). In another letter, of November 25, 1836, he goes into more detail: *“Your longings are important, so take courage... Ask for the grace to have greater trust in future... Trust only in God... Try to be more aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit who is in the depths of your soul, by the power of Jesus; it is the Spirit who is encouraging you to give yourself completely to God. He wants to work in you, but you have tied his arms and legs with your hesitations*

*If you give the Spirit complete freedom to act, you will see what wonderful things he will do within you...*

*We must leave something to divine Providence which will provide for all our needs as long as we have trust.*

*and fears. He is urging you on with great love but you are blocking his action. If you give the Spirit complete freedom to act, you will see what wonderful things he will do within you... Go to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and you will have everything, because you will have life – not just ordinary life, but the life of God himself, which contains all light, all greatness, all glory, all strength, and all love.”* This intimate sharing between the two brothers reveals a love that is both human and spiritual.

### **The love of François for his brothers and sisters**

Felix, a brother of François running a bookshop in Paris, was planning to marry Adèle Berger. Samson felt she was too poor, but François thought otherwise. On September 12, 1830, he wrote to Samson: *“Would you be happier if Felix was marrying a girl who was well off but lacking in virtue? This would make him miserable for the rest of his life... Perhaps you feel he should wait for a suitable person who has some money. I think you are wrong, because Felix is living in a city where there are great dangers which could easily set him on the wrong track... Moreover, I don't see that he has a great need of money; I don't even know what he would do with it. He is a very good worker and he could easily take on three more employees and two servants. I think that is enough to feed a wife. We must leave something to divine Providence which will provide for all our needs as long as we have trust.”*

David (Christophe), another brother, was baptized on May 28, 1830. François wrote to Samson: *“I found him very well disposed, much better than I was when I was baptized... At this time, I dined with Felix three times a week and it almost ruined him!”*

With tongue in cheek, François told Samson what happened to Felix when the Revolution broke out in 1848 (letter of March 6, 1848): *“What a hero Uncle Felix is! I am convinced that as soon as he heard the drums begin to beat, he grabbed his uniform and put it on (probably backwards, he was in such a hurry!), seized his rifle with the ferocious looking bayonet attached, and ran as fast as he could, carrying baggage and arms, to hide under his bed! At least, this is what I told him he would do the week before the revolution and he seemed to accept it as good advice!”* He said something similar regarding his nephew Xavier, when writing to his father: *“When he was called up, having escaped with difficulty from the arms of his wife, he threw himself, like a ferocious and intrepid lion, into the midst of the enemy ranks (having first gone to confession!). Then after countless brave actions in defense of his country (which my poor pen is incapable of describing), he returned safely and without wounds, to resume his normal duties. Glory and honor to the blood that courses through the veins of our family!”*

*Despite his sickness...  
he played the role of  
advocate for his niece  
with realism and  
perseverance.*

François sent Albertine (the daughter of Adèle, widow of his brother Felix) to learn embroidery at one of the best workshops in Paris, but Adèle took her out again after two days. Writing to Samson on December 8, 1850, he asks him to persuade Adèle that Albertine will need a skill to assure her future: *“Perhaps you could refer to the considerable sacrifices that you yourself made to prepare your children for the future. It is important for your letter to reach poor Adèle before the first day of the New Year so that I can add my voice to it when I go to dine with her on that day.”* Despite his sickness (this was just 14 months before he died) and his many worries about the Congregation, he played the role of advocate for his niece with realism and perseverance.

### **François tells Samson about the future missionary society**

In 1839, François left Rennes for Rome to submit a plan for a mission to black slaves to the Pope. Leaving Rennes involved “great suffering,” but in the church of Fourvière at Lyons, *“Mary poured balm on the wound.”* He wrote to Samson on December 12, 1839: *“I have left Rennes for ever. It is very imprudent, if not foolish...I have nothing, I don’t know what will become of me, I have no idea how I will survive. I will be despised, forgotten, lost to the eyes of the world. Many of those who have loved and appreciated me up till now will disapprove of my action. Perhaps they will think I have gone out of my mind or that I am acting through pride...But rest assured that I am the happiest man in the world, because I now have only God, with Jesus and Mary.”*

*I have nothing, I don’t  
know what will become  
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I will survive.*

In January 1840, François told Samson that he was in Rome because of a plan to create a society of priests to help the black slaves: *“This news will make you anxious...But if I have to leave, I want you to thank Our Lord and never think of trying to dissuade me. I hope you will share the same concern for these poor and neglected people. If you think back to the sad state in which you and Babette were before God, in his mercy, revealed himself to you, if you consider that what you are today is entirely the result of his goodness and mercy, then you will surely be prepared to offer the greatest sacrifices so that this same mercy will be shown to others who are much poorer and worse off than you were, so that they also can come to experience the goodness of God.”* So François is asking Samson to support his plans because of the goodness that God has shown to his own family!

In April, 1840, he writes of his joy in visiting the churches of Rome: *“When you get to the Confession of St. Peter’s, you can’t avoid feeling a special devotion for the two holy Apostles, Peter and Paul. It is so encouraging to see how prominent people have devoted their talents and money to embellish the tomb of these two poor Jews*

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*so magnificently, who were so unimportant in the eyes of the world.”*  
‘Two poor Jews’: is François also thinking about himself and his brother?

In another letter (July 16, 1840), he thanks Samson for having used the services of a friend to ensure that the future Coadjutor Bishop of Strasbourg would ordain him: *“You are often frightened that pride will enter into plans and spoil everything – and you are quite right. If I was guilty of this in the past without knowing it, I have had plenty of time and opportunities to correct it, because since I left Rennes my self-interest has had nothing whatsoever to feed on. God will help me despite my shortcomings, so don’t worry about it. Leave it all to Our Lord because it’s his business, not ours.”* Samson is worried that his little brother will succumb to pride! But François was saved from this by the many trials that he does not mention: slander by a friend, abandonment by a confrere, rejection because of his Jewish origins, uncertainty about the future. All that can be left to the Lord.

From January to August 1841, François was in Strasbourg preparing for his ordination, so he saw a lot of his brother. The ordination took place at Amiens on September 18, and his first letter afterwards was to Samson and Babette: *“I have just been ordained this morning! Please ask Our Lord to sacrifice me for his glory, for this must be my first concern from now on.”* He described the novitiate, the chapel, and the help given by the sisters... *“In short, the Lord has favored us so far beyond all expectation.”* François had left Strasbourg with regret, but he was optimistic about the future.

### **François interests his brother in the missionary project**

François asked Samson for vegetable seeds for the novitiate at La Neuville (August 4, 1842) and for fruit and cabbage seeds “if they are not too dear” (October 24, 1843). He adds: *“As usual, I forgot to thank my dear sister-in-law for the gift of plums she sent me – they were very fine. I hope she will find me some more of the same type. I am sorry in advance for all the trouble this will cause her, but what is done out of love comes easily.”*

On November 2, 1843, he told Samson of the agreement he had reached with officials of the Ministry of the Navy regarding Africa: *“They do not hide their political views, but they are interested in the spread of religion... You can see how the good Lord is blessing us, even though we do not deserve it... If we can find enough people, we will take on the whole of West Africa and Madagascar too, which is also being offered to us by the Admiralty. The harvest is enormous but the laborers are few... For your part, you must pray*



*for us because, as you can see, the difficulties are great, but the good that can be done is also very great; the crop is abundant but there are not many pairs of hands to work at it.”*

In December, 1844, Samson complained of the lack of news, so François sent him an update on the work. He spoke of the missionaries who had died in Guinea, the missions of Haiti, Reunion, and Mauritius, and the building work going on at the novitiate. Samson congratulated him, but François then sent a more somber reply: *“You haven’t seen the other side of the coin. You would hardly believe the heartaches and disappointments that such a huge and difficult undertaking brings. Crosses and sufferings normally sanctify people but these huge ventures tend to dissipate the soul.”* He compares himself to an employee in a bank; much money passes through his hands during the day, but when he goes home in the evening, his own pockets are empty. But even though he is not rich, whatever money he has belongs to himself. (January 1, 1845).

*You would hardly believe the heartaches and disappointments that such a huge and difficult undertaking brings.*

In May, 1846, François dropped in on Samson with a confrere, M. Blanpin. Blanpin admired the “good-humored kindness” of François with his family; *“He makes everybody feel at ease and forgoes his special diet so as not to cause any extra trouble... Seeing and listening to their uncle-priest, his nieces and nephews almost forgot to eat. They are so happy to see him smile and receive his blessing.”*

*Blanpin admired the “good-humored kindness” of François with his family*

In July, 1848, he told Samson about the ‘fusion’ with the Spiritans: *“Don’t be afraid – our good Father and dear Mother are looking after us... Anyhow, things are not yet completed.”* Then, changing subjects rather rapidly, he adds: *“The little bottle of kirsch that my kind sister sent me has done a lot of good, so I would like you to get me two liters of it.”*

Later in the year (October 7, 1848), he spoke further about the fusion: *“Our meeting with the Spiritans involved a great deal of extra work, but my health stood up well to it. The work was finished in two months, but it would have taken a whole year if not for the deadline of this meeting. There was a rumor that we were bankrupt and this was why we wanted to merge with the Community of the Holy Spirit. This was totally false.”* He then went on to ask his brother’s advice about the menus for the community.

### **François comes to the aid of his brother and sister-in-law**

Samson was worried about the future of his children. The support that François gave was not just spiritual; in return for the help he had given to the Sisters of Louvencourt, the Mother Superior took his nieces into their school without payment.

She concealed this gift by getting the two girls to give piano and German lessons. François took his nephew François-Xavier into La Neuville, got him entrance to the school at Amiens, and found him a private tutor. His nephew Henri also came to do his baccalaureate. When Samson fell into debt in 1846, François lent him some money: *"I have borrowed these 2,000 francs for two years."* In fact it was the same Mother Superior who had come to his aid again!

His brother Christophe got married to a girl called Julie in the United States. François got the impression that she was not a very reputable person. *"Christophe now believes she was already married in France; if so, he would be able to extricate himself."* But after the death of Christophe, François wrote to Samson: *"The wife of poor Christophe is now with us at Gard. She is a very good and well-behaved person."* Encouraged by his confreres, he helped her financially and after searching for two years found her a place with the Little Sisters of the Poor at Dinan.

François was very affected by the death of his brother Felix on May 8, 1849, and needed a period of rest to get over it. But by June 12 he was able to write to Samson: *"At last, I am well enough to write to you. The fever left me a few days ago and I am now well on the road to recovery."* On August 16, he wrote again to say that he was coming to see him: *"The doctors made me agree to spend my holidays in my own area, and I am now nearly ready to travel."* The break seems to have done him good. In December he wrote: *"I am surprised at how well my health is holding up, seeing the amount of work I have had since October. I am making up for the time I lost during the five months I was sick. Many things needed my attention."*

Samson, who was a doctor, was asked to come during his brother's final sickness and he stayed with him until his death on February 2, 1852.

### **Samson – a 'Spiritan Associate'?**

After the death of his wife, Babette, in 1856, Samson retired to the Spiritan house at Langonnet. He joined the confreres in their prayers and gave medical care to the poor of the area without any payment. In 1859 he went to Paris to help his daughter who was dying. She was only 30 years old. Three months later, Samson himself died at Langonnet and his sons built him a tomb in the cemetery of the community.

Samson surely has a place in the Spiritan family. He and François shared their lives with each other – the one, a father of a family, the other, a missionary and spiritual guide. The closeness of

*François was very affected by the death of his brother Felix on May 8, 1849...*

*Samson surely has a place in the Spiritan family.*

François to Samson, and to his family in general, was both a human and a spiritual duty. Perhaps Samson could be regarded as a ‘Spiritan Associate.’

#### FRANÇOIS AND HIS NIECES AND NEPHEWS

Samson Libermann and his wife Babette had seven children:

- Pauline (1824-1891) who became Sister Saint Léopold with the Sisters of Louvencourt at Amiens;
- Caroline (1827-1867) who became Sister Agnès with the Sisters of Louvencourt;
- Marie (1829-1859), the god-child of François, who remained single;
- François Xavier (1830-1907) who became a Spiritan;
- Théodora (1831-1919) who became Sister Marie-Thérèse with the Sisters of Louvencourt;
- Henri (1834-1890) who was a military doctor;
- Léon (1837-1923) who was a General in the army and a Grand Officer of the Légion d’honneur.

#### Pauline—“naïve simplicity, but slow to make up her mind”

...‘Big’ Christophe  
converted before he left  
for America, where he  
joined Uncle Alphonse...

After the baptism of his brother, David-Christophe, on May 28, 1837, François wrote to his niece Pauline: *“You know very well how irreverent your uncle used to be. When he came to Illkirch, he never went to church and he could not be persuaded to pray. He always wanted to eat well on Fridays and Saturdays... and he was inclined to tell lies... Caroline tried everything to make him say the rosary... and all the other children pressed him to recite grace before and after meals, but all in vain. He was hardened in his bad behavior and stubbornness and neither wanted to serve the Lord nor pray to him... Then ‘Big’ Christophe converted before he left for America, where he joined Uncle Alphonse... Thank the good Lord and the Blessed Virgin for the conversion of your uncle, and promise that you will be even more dedicated to them since they were so good as to convert him.”*

Somebody who belongs to  
Our Lord should be filled  
with joy and serenity.

Pauline was thinking of becoming a religious but could not make up her mind. On November 14, 1843, François wrote: *“This indecision is harmful for the soul and makes you upset. I want to see you living with an untroubled conscience and enjoying the peace of the children of God. Somebody who belongs to Our Lord should be filled with joy and serenity. It all depends on you. Be determined and hesitate no longer. Don’t be afraid that you will upset your mother and godfather... when they see you are happy, they will be happy too.”*

She continued to ask his advice. On April 14, 1844, he writes: *“You are not made for this world...After a month of community life, you would feel at home as a religious...Do you remember when your father called you ‘eine dumme Gans’ (a silly goose!)? Look at the difference between yourself and your dear mother...She was called to live in the world. You know her devotion and fervor. If one day as a religious you reach her degree of piety and fervor, faith and love of God, you will have become a saint! And she had a simple and upright heart to go with it.”* Shortly after this, Pauline entered the convent, taking the name of Sister Saint-Léopold.

She was troubled by what she saw as her excessively human affection for her Superior. Writing on February 1, 1849, her uncle reassures her: *“Get rid of fear and live only by love... When receiving communion, don’t let these worries bother you but go to the altar in simplicity and confidence... When these troubling moments come, don’t try to think them through; you are not capable of reason or reflection at such a moment... As regards temptations, treat them with disdain... And why do you get so worked up about your faults? If the good Lord loves you despite them, what more is there to say? You are frightened that you have faults, but who doesn’t?”*

*Get rid of fear and live  
only by love...*

At one period, she would only eat jam! Her uncle, who was sick and burdened with many worries about the missions, wrote to Samson about this on April 23, 1851: *“I went to Dunkerque... Little Sister Saint-Léopold was eating nothing but jam, but I managed to set her right again. When she was at table with me, she ate meat and other things and they seemed to go down very well.”* She was so happy to be with her uncle that she ate everything without realizing it, and he made her promise that she would continue like that and eat whatever the Superior gave her. François was aware of her “naïve simplicity” and helped her overcome her indecisiveness through love, humor, and patience – without making a fuss about it.

*François...helped  
her overcome her  
indecisiveness through  
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patience...*

### **Caroline – “a shining-light, but serious”**

Caroline was full of energy and so gifted that she won several first prizes in class. But she knew it, and sometimes displayed her talents with pride.

In 1836, his nieces were very happy when François spent several days with Samson. In 1837, Caroline, aged 10, dreamed of being a religious at Rennes, near her uncle. François asked her to be patient, and recommended prayer, obedience to her mother, kindness towards her brothers and sisters, and humility! He has nothing against dreaming of the future, but for the moment it is the present which matters. *“You must be patient for a few more*

years... *Do not think that you are better than other people and never think of yourself as superior to them... . . . If you have any problems, write to me.*"

*Do not think that you are better than other people and never think of yourself as superior to them...*

When she reached adolescence, her thoughts of religious life gave way to a longing to shine in the world. François wrote to her (February 16, 1842): *"The only thing I worry about for you is your love of this world and a taste for its pleasures and vanities."* He invites her to direct her energies towards holiness of life: *"It seems that all your efforts are simply directed towards getting to heaven and that you do not think about being a saint. But I'll go further, my dear child: I firmly believe that God will sanctify you. I am convinced that you would never be satisfied with a half-way point, somewhere between this world and God; you will either give yourself to this world and lose your soul, or surrender to God and become a saint. It is a question of choosing between life and death, my dear child. The choice is yours!"*

Caroline went to study with the sisters at Amiens. François wrote to Samson on October 24, 1843: *"Caroline is homesick... When the school mistress saw her suffering on Sunday, she told her to cry as much as she wanted and this seemed to help. I went to see her the following day. She was certainly crying, but it was a pleasure to see her, because she was crying and laughing at the same time! She spent the evening with me today and things are much better. She has a lot to do, so she will not even think of crying tomorrow."*

M. Schwindenhammer, a confrere of François, was on his way to Rome so he asked him to find a place for Caroline. But the Mother Superior kept Caroline at Louvencourt because she was sure she would find a position for her when her studies were finished. At the age of 18, she informed her parents that she wanted to be a religious. François supported her request in a letter to her father on November 11, 1845: *"As you know, she has had a strong desire to enter religious life, and these feelings seem to come from God... Caroline was attracted to an austere order, the Trappistines or the Carmelites. M. de Brandt and I gave it serious thought, each in our own way, and we felt that she was rather called to a less strict teaching order."*<sup>2</sup> She finally joined the same convent as her sister Pauline, taking the name of Sister Agnès.

*I am delighted to have a baby daughter in Jesus Christ!*

### **Marie – his god-daughter, a “woman of the world!”**

*"You have made me very happy by asking me to be godfather to my little niece who has just been born. I am delighted to have a baby daughter in Jesus Christ!"* So wrote François to Samson and Babette on April 8, 1829. Marie laughed a lot, sometimes at others, but the laughter often quickly turned to sadness. When

*The young girl of 12 years old must have wondered how her old uncle knew all this!*

*Laugh when you feel like laughing...*

she was growing up, François wrote to her (November 20, 1841): *“I was very sad to see you upset when you would not tell me the reason. I cannot help or console you if I don’t know what is wrong... As regards the way you relate to your friends, always try to say good things, but never gossip. I repeat, never gossip!...Don’t speak badly of your teachers. By this, I don’t just mean what comes out of your mouth but also what you convey by your signs, gestures, or smiles. We can put on an expression which says clearly what we mean without saying a word!”* The young girl of 12 years old must have wondered how her old uncle knew all this!

On February 8, 1842, he wrote: *“I like the honest way you tell me that you do not obey the rules, but you don’t tell me why, or what it is you find difficult...Don’t worry about wanting to laugh at times – that is nothing. Laugh when you feel like laughing, but avoid flippancy... Jesus knows what is in your heart; as long as you think of him and want to please him, nothing else matters.”* On June 10, 1845, he says: *“Write to me every month. Take a few moments each day to examine your life – in this way, you will be able to tell me the important things...”* Later the same year he wrote: *“Try not to show it when you are sad or suffering, but look happy as much as you can. Sometimes, when we are fed up, we try to make sure that everybody knows about it so that they will give us their attention; we don’t complain, but we make others aware by the tone of our voice, our looks and the way we behave.”*

On December 21, 1847, François informed her that *“M. de Brandt feels you should become a religious.”* She refused, point blank! François replied in February, *“Don’t get on your high horse!... For a long time, you have spoken to me about vocation, but I have never heard anything decisive from you. I felt you should make up your mind, yes or no. So stay a ‘woman of the world,’ but make sure you become not just a little but a great saint! Be a lily in the middle of the thorns! Your Mother, Mary, also lived in the world, so don’t be afraid – be good, like she was. Religious life makes it easier to grow in virtue, but a good life lived in the world is also meritorious.”*

Writing to Samson, he said (March 4, 1847): *“A big hug to dear Marie. She will no doubt tell you that I am nicer to her in my letters than when I am with her. When she was here, I didn’t want to hug her, but I do in my letters. This is not surprising. When she came, she could see me and this was enough, but now she cannot see me because she is far away. So she deserves something more.”* Libermann stopped using the familiar ‘tu’ with his nieces once they reached the age of 14 or 15; this was the convention of the time.

Marie hesitated to write to her godfather because he had so much to do. But François encourages her to do so: *“Don’t punish me*

*Reading your letter gives me a short break and then I can take another short break to reply to you!*

*Let him come quickly and we will try to make him into a good missionary.*

*by not writing so I will not have to waste time reading your letters! Don't I deserve a bit of rest sometimes? Reading your letter gives me a short break and then I can take another short break to reply to you!"*  
(May 17, 1850)

### **François Xavier – a courageous man, except with the girls!**

From the age of 8, François Xavier wanted to be a priest. His uncle encouraged him in a letter of May 18, 1838, and recommended prayer, catechism, and hard work at school: *"If you do all that, the Lord will be able to make you into a good priest."* At 15 years of age, he was worried about making a 'lukewarm' communion, and compared himself to Judas. François reassures him: *"You exaggerate even more when you compare yourself to Judas... A lukewarm soul seeks only pleasure, not caring whether it pleases God or not... Is this how you are? Such a person is not troubled by committing venial sins and sometimes even exposes himself to mortal sins...he is negligent, distracted, seeking only amusement. Are you like that?... He is incapable of making any sacrifice for God... is satisfied if he does nothing bad, especially grave sin, but he does not seek to do good. Does this sound like you?... You are not lukewarm; persevere in your good will and in the fervent desire to please God."*  
(March 22, 1845).

On November 10, 1846, he asked Samson to *"send young François to La Neuville. He can stay with us and go as a day boy to the Collège Royal. Let him come quickly and we will try to make him into a good missionary. You could also put Marie in the bottom of his trunk and no one would see her!"*

In a letter of April 5, 1847, he wrote to Samson: *"By his prayers and fasting, François has managed to get to Gard!...He ran into my room, put his arms around my neck and said 'I have done it!' I embraced him and said that was because the Blessed Virgin had listened to him. I added: 'But do you realize that it was you who made M. Thiékoro ill? To meet your wishes, Our Lady arranged for M. Thiékoro to fall sick.' These joking words upset him so much that he went pale and his joy turned to sadness. Since then, he has not ceased praying for the cure of this poor fellow who is in a very serious state."* Thiékoro was a black slave who had been bought by a white man and Libermann had taken him into Gard. By means of a joke, François taught a lesson to his nephew who was giving orders to heaven.

We see from a letter of François to Samson that 17-year-old François Xavier was rather shy with girls: *"I recently took him to Louvencourt to visit his sisters and I noticed his embarrassment. Théodora, happy as ever, was teasing him and he replied light-*

*heartedly, but without lifting his eyes to her or to his other sisters.”* (August 27, 1847). In a subsequent letter he told Samson that he had appointed François Xavier as a catechist to a girls’ orphanage, to help him unwind a little and overcome his natural timidity. *“The first time he talked, he was trembling all over, but he gradually mastered his excessive shyness and was eventually able to speak without any problem.”* (March 9, 1850)

### **Théodora – “scatter-brained, petulant and impatient”**

Her uncle wrote to Théodora on February 17, 1843, when she was 12 years old: *“I was delighted with the lovely letter you sent me... It was very well written. There were a few spelling mistakes, but not very many. You are making progress. Well done! ... I am sure you can be one of the first in the class if you are patient and have courage... As for losing your temper, that is because you have a very lively personality – but that doesn’t excuse you with God!...If you give in to discouragement, you will be like a man with bad eyesight who is always falling in the mud. Does he just stay there? It would be very stupid if he said to himself, ‘I am always falling in the mud. I have now done it three times, so I won’t get up any more!’ This is how you would be if you let yourself get discouraged. You must get up as many times as you fall down, correct yourself and ask forgiveness.”*

*You must get up as many times as you fall down...*

On March 30, 1845, François told Samson: *“Théodora is very happy and is working well. She is docile and pious and is very frightened of her class teacher – who is solemn and serious, not a bit like Théodora! She has a likable character that is sensitive and attractive. She is very resourceful but not at all difficult. An open and loving child like her is easy to teach. She can be a bit scatter-brained but has excellent qualities. What is strange is that during recreation she can be very jovial, yet a few moments later she is a little saint in the chapel! Sister Léopold gives her good advice. Caroline is serious and collected, but this does not go down too well with her scatter-brained sister - ‘I have had enough of your sermons, why don’t you leave me alone?’ That’s the way she usually replies to Caroline ...No need to reproach her for that, and don’t let on that you know. She loves and admires Caroline, but she is so whimsical that, despite her love, she finds it difficult to listen to her sister’s corrections.”* François shows great insight in observing his niece and delicacy in writing about her to her father.

*François shows great insight in observing his niece and delicacy in writing about her to her father.*

At the age of 14, she was frightened of losing her religious sisters. François wrote to her on November 25, 1845: *“My dear friend, with things like this, you must trust the decisions of wise and experienced directors. I think you are wrong, because you are judging by your feelings; it is your generous heart that is talking, but your judgment is set to one side... If God wants Caroline to be a religious*



*you will be the first to say that she should stay in the novitiate; if this is not what God wants, she will certainly not remain there.”*

He wrote about her to her sister Marie on June 15, 1847: “*Théodora ... takes after your father. To know what she really feels, you have to look at her eyes and gestures, not very expressive in themselves but quite revealing when you get to know her. Your mother, who is very expansive herself, looks for something more in her, but anything more from Théodora would savor of affectation. She is very turned off by affected behavior. Her greatest fault is impatience... You have to approach her through her feelings and then she will do anything for you. Tell your father not to scold her when he writes. She needs encouragement, but also sensitivity to her feelings.*”

*She needs encouragement,  
but also sensitivity to her  
feelings.*

### **Henri – “brilliant, imperturbable”**

On August 23, 1850, François wrote to Samson: “*Henri is at Gard. I will buy him the books that he needs for his baccalaureate... If God wishes to give him a vocation to be a priest, that would be better, but I rather doubt it.*” On January 17, 1851, he wrote to Henri’s sisters, Léopold and Agnès: “*Henri is doing very well... To enter the Polytechnic he would have to find a preparatory school in which to study for two years... I am looking for some way of getting him special tuition without him having to go to a school.*” To Samson he wrote in April: “*Our dear Henri is not as depressed as you seem to think. He is not one to let things get him down, so he will soon get over this problem regarding his future admission.*”

François wrote to Marie on May 15, 1851: “*Henri gives the appearance of getting on well, but if he stays in Paris, he will surely get into trouble and there is no way that I can keep an eye on him. I know for a fact that he has been to the theatre several times (What does he do for money?)... So I think it would be better if your father were to call him back to Strasbourg.*” A few days later, François wrote to Samson, “*Henri is not really a bad lad. He is basically sound and has plenty of faith. His problem is that he has a superficial and simplistic character... Poor chap, it’s not really his fault; with his good looks, easy conversation, and youthful high spirits, how could he escape trouble?... I understand the family difficulties, so having discussed the situation with M. Le Vavasseur, I have decided to try once more.*”

*It is time to forget the  
past...*

In a later letter to Samson (July 18, 1851) François adds: “*I almost forgot to tell you that Henri is now a Bachelor of Arts... It is time to forget the past and see him as a fine son who was a victim of his goodness of heart.*” To Marie he wrote: “*He is a good-hearted man, but his superficiality, excessive self-confidence, easy-going character, and need to be recognized, all exposed him to great danger when he*

*was in Paris...He needs to be treated firmly but reasonably, with great kindness.”*

### **Léon – the “dear little bambino”!**

Born in 1837, Léon was 13 years old when he received a letter from his uncle: *“This is to prove that I am not above writing to my dear little bambino! My letter will be short, but it’s a way of letting you know that I think about you more than you realize...I hope to find you a place by October, but at present, I am not sure where it will be... I will do what I can to help our dear Henri as well... The good Lord is looking after us, so we will surely succeed. Meanwhile, pray for these things and be a good boy so that God will bless our efforts. Goodbye, my dear friend. Give Henri a hug for me, but don’t bite his ear while doing so! No more fighting, and show love and respect for your sisters.”*

*He loved friendship and humor, happiness and the joy of life.*

### **Conclusion**

The letters of Libermann to his family show what a caricature it would be to see him as somebody who was always sad, speaking only of death and renunciation. He loved friendship and humor, happiness and the joy of life. His letters, far from being full of spiritual theory, are a heart to heart chat, perfectly adapted to the needs of each one, full of humor and affection. His relations with his family are marked with the warmth and humor typical of the Jewish family circle and bring out new aspects of his personality and spirituality. *“He puts everybody at their ease.”* For his nephews and nieces, he is a trustful and interested friend with whom they can share all their joys and sorrows in full confidence.

*For his nephews and nieces, he is a trustful and interested friend...*

Despite his illness and the many demands on his time and energy he remained close to his family. Several of his letters were written in the same week so as not to interfere with his duties as Superior. He would not accept Christophe into the community: “Big Christophe” would always be on their backs, getting involved with everything. Nor would he take money from the community to help him. But at the request of his confreres, he did eventually give financial help to his widow, Julie. Also in agreement with his confreres, he took François Xavier and Henri into the community while they were doing their studies. And he accepted the help of Mother Saint-Bernard, the Superior of his nieces, when Samson fell into debt. Finally, he did not keep his relations to himself but shared them with his confreres, who would often visit them on their travels. With François Libermann, everything was done openly, in a spirit of trust and sharing.

**Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Paul Coulon in *Mémoire Spiritaine*, no. 24, 2006, p. 162.

<sup>2</sup> M. de Brandt was a priest and a friend of Libermann. He was spiritual director to the Sisters of Louvencourt