Libermann: Formator of Priests

Amadeu Martins

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Amadeu Martins, C.S.Sp., was director of formation, then provincial superior of Portugal. He became the secretary of the Spiritan Study Group (Rome) in 1974. As such, he published many articles on Libermann and on Spiritan Spirituality in Spiritan Papers. He authored the “Amadeu Files,” a collection of more than 13,000 files on Spiritan topics. He did mission work in Angola before his death in 2007. Among the works he had at hand before his illness, was a large manuscript entitled, “Libermann, Distributor of the Gifts of God to Priests,” of which “Libermann, Formator of Priests,” forms the introduction and first chapter.

Translated by Isidore Nkwocha, C.S.Sp., from Portuguese

LIBERMANN, FORMATOR OF PRIESTS

Introduction

Jacob Libermann was born in Alsace (France) to Jewish parents on April 12, 1802. Called by God, as the Apostles were, to be part of the Church of Christ, he received baptism at the age of 24 on the eve of Christmas, 1826, with the name of Francis Mary Paul. This was in the seminary-college of Saint Stanislaus in Paris. The prophecy of his sister-in-law was being fulfilled. Together with her husband, Samson, she had converted to the Catholic Church from Judaism and had told Libermann that “not only will you convert, you will also become a priest, Libermann.” He was soon in the seminary, first in Saint Stanislaus and, the following year, in Saint Sulpice, both in Paris.

Life was moving well for him; he was fervently preparing for the reception of sacred orders which he was to receive on 14 March 1829. The evening before, however, a violent attack of epilepsy floored him. That seemed to shatter almost completely his hopes and those of his directors of seeing his dreams of priesthood come to realization. Owing to his outstanding virtue, however, and the marvelous influence he exerted on the other seminarians, the superiors did not dismiss him. They simply transferred him to the seminary of Issy, in the proximity of the French capital. Perhaps there, with the pure air of the countryside, he would recover his health. His job would be to prune and clean the trees of the orchard and run errands in Paris at the behest of both the bursar and the seminarians... This material work would contribute to the spiritual formation of several seminarians and even some priests, among them the bursar himself.

Libermann left St. Stanislaus for Issy at the end of 1831. But it was still in the Seminary of St. Sulpice that, months before, in July, he had a vision, described thus by one of his biographers:

It was on a Sunday in July of 1831, the day in which the Feast of the Priesthood of Jesus was celebrated at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice. During the solemn Mass, Libermann had a vision: he distinguished clearly the figure of Our Lord, in the aspect of the Eternal Priest ... passing slowly among the ranks of his companions, gathered in the chairs of the choir, distributing to each one his benefits. He was the only one excluded. But when all had received their share, it seemed to him that the Eternal Priest gave him the
Horizons

If, in fact, we would want to give a title to Libermann’s continuous and intense activity, since his entry into the Church of Christ by baptism until his precious death on February 2, 1852, I think the most suitable would be “Libermann, formator of priests.” This was indeed his great activity in the seminaries of St. Sulpice in Paris, then in Issy, then in Rennes, in the novitiate of the Eudists, and finally in the novitiate and seminaries of his congregation. His life was the realization of the vision of 1831.

In the summer of 1837, Libermann left for Rennes, where he would be master of the novices of the Eudists, although he was a simple acolyte, and the novices were all deacons or priests.

His activity, however, was not limited to the training of priests. It was mainly from Rennes that he put himself in an epistolary relationship with many people of all categories, from rectors of seminaries and other priests to seminarians, men and women religious, to simple Christians living amid the world, and even to children. His spiritual leadership did not exclude anyone. Libermann was one of the greatest spiritual directors of the nineteenth century. Someone affirmed him to have been the greatest indeed.

He was also a great missionary, although not directly in the missions, and a brilliant missiologist, especially from December 1839 when he left for Rome in order to deal with the foundation of his “Work for the Blacks,” which was the first title of his Congregation of the Most Holy Heart of Mary that in the autumn of 1848 merged with that of the Holy Spirit. The Work then went on, to be officially called the Congregation of the Holy Spirit under the Protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, or simply Congregation of the Holy Spirit and the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

The great Task of the Church

The formation of priests should be the great task of the church. We read in Optatam Totius, (Preface): “This sacred Synod well knows that the wished-for renewal of the whole church depends in large measure on a ministry of priests.
which is vitalized by the spirit of Christ. Hence it proclaims the extreme importance of priestly formation…”

“There is no authentic formative work for the priesthood without the influx of the Spirit of Christ.” Each human formator should be fully aware of this. But the trainee must also be conscious of this. This is what Libermann, an eminent master, reminds a seminarian: “Be faithful to all that the divine Master asks of you. Engage yourself seriously to the work of your sanctification. It is no small thing to prepare for the priesthood.” To another he wrote: “You are getting closer and closer to the priesthood ... and to always grow in grace and spiritual wisdom before God and man (cf. Luke 2:52). Grow therefore and make your soul great with all the greatness and power of divine grace, from which you will be filled.” Certainly, also, he, the future priest, more than anyone, must grow in the awareness that the protagonist, by antonomasia, of his formation is the Holy Spirit, who, with the gift of the new heart configures and assimilates to Christ, the Good Shepherd …”

The highest function entrusted to a man in the church of God: “… How can one not rejoice in the dignity of every human formator, who in a certain sense shapes himself as the visible representative of Christ for the candidate to the priesthood?”

“The first representative of Christ in the formation of priests is the Bishop ... In addition to this and the candidate, also responsible for the priestly formation are the seminary educational community, theology professors, the community of origin, and the youths’ associations and movements”

Libermann considers the task of forming priests as “the highest function that can be entrusted to a man in the Church of God.” Referring to a young priest, recently appointed rector of a seminary, he wrote to another: “I am sorry to see him already entrusted with the rectorship … but God will help him, and it is very necessary, because the place that he occupies is one of the most important and the most difficult in the church of God. He can do immense good in a place like this, but he can do a lot of harm too.”

“The priest is anything but great!” Libermann writes in the same letter, “He is a man who must have all the perfections of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the highest quality that Jesus was vested with is his divine priesthood. This is why I find it truly devastating to see so few ‘truly holy’
priests. However ... a priest should no longer have human life; human life should no longer be noticed in him. All his life should be divine ...”

**Formators, First of All, should be Role Models**

Libermann continues: “The rectors of the seminaries must therefore render great services to the church and to the priesthood of our Lord when they are concerned with the priestly formation of their students. But, for this, it is necessary that they are models, and that their life be a life of consummated holiness and perfection.”

“For this ministry, priests of exemplary life who possess various qualities must be chosen: human and spiritual maturity, pastoral experience, professional competence, stability in one’s vocation, ability of collaboration ...”

Vatican II recommends to superiors and professors that “they seriously consider how successful formation depends on the way they think and act.”

Libermann wrote: “Our Lord tells the rectors of the holy church that they must be fiery and luminous flames. The director may rightly be compared to one of these flames.”

“If we were saints, Libermann wrote, we would make the seminaries everything we wanted.”

**It is not Enough to Know how to Teach**

“The Church as such is the communal subject that has the grace and responsibility to accompany all those whom the Lord calls to be his ministers in the priesthood.”

Libermann wrote: “It is a great evil to imagine some who do very well, if they teach theology well, content themselves with mediocre piety. They think that they can form good priests like this, but they excessively deceive themselves. A holy rector will form many holy priests; a rector of ordinary piety will not form any holy priest. And if, in an extraordinary case, a good priest comes out of his hands, you can believe that this rector trained him, at least, very badly. Such a priest only formed himself a good priest by force of graces, which the rector could not overcome. If this priest, as a seminarian, had been entrusted to a holy priest and had had the same graces and the same good will, there would have been seen in him, no doubt, many other wonders.”

 Shortly afterwards, he wrote to another priest on the same subject:

Your vocation ... is the most beautiful I know. It
is a matter of communicating the priestly spirit to those who want to train for the priesthood of our Lord. Jesus is the High Priest, who has in himself the essence of the priestly spirit and all the fullness of the perfections therein contained. Only in Jesus can you draw this treasure. If you are not constantly in the font, you will dry and cannot flourish except in dry and empty words without zeal. It may, from time to time, produce good effects, but it will no longer be a channel of grace; it will only do so occasionally. If God sometimes uses irrational creatures to impress souls, he can also use the lifeless mouths of priests attached to the earth to realize his designs of goodness in the souls he absolutely wants to save.

In the *Reglements* of 1849, Libermann explains some of the “functions of the prefects of study”: 1) to follow the students in their studies ... giving them good advice to do these studies and thus to be able to provide, later, good service to the church; 2) to watch over the observance of rule and order by students ...; 3) to form them in the ecclesiastical spirit, giving them the necessary instructions.”

**To form Pastors**

The importance of the selection of formators is already well evidenced in what was written earlier. “The best ones are chosen,” Vatican 11 recommends. Both the Council and Libermann, more than a hundred years earlier, recommend that “people with pastoral experience and adequate spiritual and pedagogical formation be chosen,” so that in seminaries “true shepherds of souls may be formed.” This was also Libermann’s thinking. In a letter to Fr. Levasseur, he communicated his intention to stay with Fr. Inácio Schwindenhammer in France. Fr Levasseur drew attention to the need for the formator of the members of the congregation to have pastoral experience. Libermann replied him: “Your reflection is just, but at this moment we cannot do otherwise and we have, therefore, to stay here with a person without experience, because we do not have it in him ...” “On the other hand,” he observes, “these missionaries will have no administrative experience.” Actually, Libermann has always attached great importance to the “good administrator,” one of the most necessary attributes, according to him, for example, in the bishops. Even with qualities, not all qualify for the direction of the seminaries. About Fr. Vidal, then a missionary in Senegal, Libermann wrote to Don Aloísio Kobês: “I cannot keep him in France.
He is not qualified for seminary rector in Europe. He would spoil the young and spoil the spirit of the house, despite his excellent goodwill.”

On pastoral experiences with young people, priests or seminarians, Fr. Levavasseur made the following curious, but exact observation: “All the world’s experiences are not worth a year of ministry in chosen works, under the guidance of a man of virtue and experience. But it is difficult, in all, everywhere and always, to find anyone who has both head and heart at the same time. I recognize daily, and increasingly each time, how such men are rare in all congregations and in the whole church.”

“The superiors and professors ... constitute among themselves and with the student a family that corresponds to the Lord’s prayer ‘ut unum sint.’” If there is a family spirit, there will be a good spirit. “What is necessary is that the spirit is good.” Libermann also reminds the seminary formators that “the great formator is the High Priest, who is responsible for training his collaborators.” It requires, therefore, a close collaboration with him.

How to Stimulate a Seminary

Libermann indicates the method he followed in the seminaries of St. Sulpice with excellent results. But such a method, if it is not well used, can have counterproductive effects, as it did with the Piety Groups, which, some years after Libermann left, had to be suppressed. He spoke of his experience at the seminaries in Paris, when he wrote:

An effective means for the sanctification of seminarians and to spread their influence throughout the seminary is to choose a small number of generous young men determined to give themselves totally to God ... Such young people should be very united and concerned only with their own sanctification ... This must be the main purpose of their meetings ... If this can be done, the resulting good for the seminary will be enormous. The group will increase little by little; will grow in zeal ... for the grace of God is most powerful.

Libermann adds: “I was a witness in this regard, in the seminaries of Paris, of the great wonders which I had never seen and probably will never see again.”

In order not to create any Manichean division, it would
be better to give these meetings or associations a more academic face than a pious association, an academy open to all, where science and piety are cultivated side by side, always putting the latter in spotlight. “To introduce zeal in the seminary,” Libermann insists with a correspondent, “always adopt the following principle: the first and most important thing is sanctification itself ...”

Libermann compares holiness to central heating. “You have a heating stove in the exercise room. I lit it with the intention of warming up everyone in the room. Whoever has this intention is the one who lights it. Meanwhile, the fire immediately only heats the stove, which in turn warms the whole room when it might have become very hot.”

“We must pray for one another and lead others to do it as well. It is important to lead the good and the fervent ... to spread out through the community, thus bringing piety and love of God to all hearts. In this way, you would have the fervent ones in hand, who, without knowing it, will do what you have agreed for the good of the community.”

Saints Burning

Of “burning saints” Libermann speaks once again. “This year,” he wrote in September 1835, “we must set the seminary on fire, and the fire must burn and consume all who dwell in it.” “I came to bring fire to the earth” (Luke 12:49). Wanting to produce this fire, Christ will necessarily put burning torches in the hands of those he charges to stir it. “Why, then,” Libermann asks, “are there such few burning saints?” He himself answers:

Because there are few saints, few souls united to God in the practical habits of life; their torches are therefore doomed to be expunged, producing at most the fire of a match. That is, those who are chosen to be men of God, the apostles of Jesus Christ, remain lovers of themselves, men of the earth, obedient to their pride and senses, weaknesses and defects, and because of that, the sanctifying grace, received in the priesthood, does not develop in them, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit are necessarily refused them. The designs of God are aborted; people remain in darkness and bondage; the demons are happy and our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Church are engrossed in pains.

And, supposing that his missionaries will remain
faithful, Libermann exclaims with joy: “What happiness for the souls entrusted to us if our missionaries live very united to God! ...”

Libermann, model Formator

Libermann, no doubt, was a burning formator whose action in the seminaries of Paris was extraordinarily fruitful. The directors had the best collaborator in him. No wonder they were sorry to lose him. When he learned of his intention to go to the Eudists, one of the seminary priests wrote of him: “The Issy Seminary is going to lose a great deal with his departure, and Fr Pinault told me that it is a loss that cannot be repaired. Fr. Mollevault even went so far as to say that if he could cry for anything, it would be for Libermann to leave Issy.” On the contrary, the feeling of the Eudists who knew him was that of great euphoria.

“Libermann is ours! Libermann is ours!”

The servant of God now goes to work in a congregation whose specific purpose was “the formation of the clergy in the seminaries and the renewal of the Christian spirit in the people.” His experience will add new experience and new knowledge. He continues to closely follow the life of the seminaries of St. Sulpice and rejoices at his good progress. “I have received wonderful news from the Paris seminary,” he writes. “It seems that everything there is even better than last year [he refers to 1837], however, I almost would not have dared to wish better, everything works so marvelously.” In a letter to several seminarians he wrote: “Have a great desire of sanctification of your brothers ... and spread the passion throughout the seminary. It is not by the calculations of your spirit, by your abilities and the inquiries of your imagination that you will sanctify it, but by the sanctity of your life, by your inner spirit, by the most ardent and perfect love of our Lord and the Blessed Virgin.”

Continuous Formation

“There is no lack of “reasons, even purely human,” which require a priest to carry out ongoing formation.” This is meant to make the priest grow in holiness and to keep him up to date in the doctrine of salvation. “A diplomat,” Libermann wrote, “has a wonderful mastery of his science, and applies himself to it relentlessly and with pleasure; it is his life, he needs it. Workers, each in his specific genre, know how to make an immediate judgment on every object of his art, and dedicate himself wholly to it. We must also be able
to identify ourselves with the science of salvation in such a way that we may walk well without much thought in it.”

The priest needs knowledge. This, according to Libermann, should be sought more in prayer, in union with God, than in books. “The sanctification of priests” was for him always considered “one of the most important points” of the priestly ministry. “The salvation of an innumerable multitude of souls depends on it, as well as the solidity and conservation of the good that we can do in people.” For this reason, he sought, from the beginning of the “Work for the Negroes,” to create a truly holy local clergy.

All that concerned the sanctification and formation of the clergy interested him. On his journey from Rennes to Lyon on his way to Rome, he was radiant with the plan, which “an excellent priest” showed him, to form a society of fervent and holy priests, who would charge themselves with maintaining in zeal the priests who exercise the holy ministry in the midst of the world.”

When he founded his congregation, he wanted to establish the novitiate in Strasbourg so that he could assist the German priests, who he thought were greatly lacking in moral and religious assistance. He exhorted a correspondent to help a certain priest, of whom he wrote: “I do not know his background ... I do not know why he runs from diocese to diocese ... But I do not think you should abandon him ... Continue to be interested in him ... giving him the advice that the divine Master will inspire you.”

Ecclesiastical Reunions under the Patronage of St. John the Evangelist

As soon as Libermann settled in Paris, a group of priests, “desirous of assisting each other in the fulfillment of their obligations,” founded under his presidency an association which they called, “Ecclesiastical Meetings under the patronage of St. John the Evangelist.” All these priests proposed “by common resolution to be faithful to the life of faith and prayer, to exercise the holy ministry with zeal and detachment from themselves and from their own interests, and to dedicate themselves, with particular devotion, to the service of the poor.” They met every week. “In these meetings they dealt in turn with matters pertaining to the personal sanctification of the members of the association and the spiritual direction of souls, as well as matters concerning the holy ministries, and works of zeal.” The President was
Fr. Libermann, whose word at the end of the meetings was always eagerly awaited and followed with fidelity. The fine flower of the Paris clergy belonged to this association. Thanks to these and other meetings, the Mother House of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, while Libermann inhabited it, became a center “where priests of knowledge and talent, as well as of virtue like to meet ... Among others received there were, Don Pitra, his first biographer, and then cardinal; Rorbacher, a celebrated historian of the church; Msgr. Gousset, Msgr. de Ségur,”40 son of the famous Countess of the same name, and the celebrated publisher, Jacques Paul Migne, founder of the L’Univers journal in 1833.

Libermann’s missionaries in the French colonies would have the same ministry of assistance to priests, where they would live side by side with the diocesan clergy. In a letter to the Director of the Colonies, he wrote about the ministry among the Blacks: “We also count on using indirect ministry in helping the indigenous priests where we find ourselves. We will give them every possible help and raise them to remain faithful to their duties, which will have a great influence on the improvement of the intellectual state of the Blacks.”41

In fact, every ministry done in favor of the sanctification of priests turns out in favor of the People of God. Whoever does it, works with multipliers.

**Amadeu Martins, C.S.Sp.**
Lisbon, Portugal

**Abbreviations**

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ND</td>
<td><em>Notes et Documents relatifs à la vie et à l’oeuvre du Vénérable François Marie Paul Libermann</em>. 16 vols.</td>
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<tr>
<td>OT</td>
<td>Vatican II Decree on Priestly Formation, <em>Optatam totius</em></td>
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Reference


Endnotes

1 This piece was translated from “Libermann, Formador de Padres,” *Missão espiritana* no. 18, Year 9 (2010) 7–16 by Isidore Nkwocha, C.S.Sp.
3 ND, I, 406.
4 PDV, no. 69.
5 PDV, nos. 65–68.
6 ND, I, 472.
8 PDV, no. 66.
9 OT, no. 5.
10 ES, 362.
11 LS, I, 12.
12 PDV, no. 65.
13 LS, I, 484–485.
14 Num. 22: 23
15 LS, II, 279–280.
16 ND, X, 493.
17 OT, no. 5.
18 ND, II, 30.
19 OT, no. 5.
20 ND, II, 30.
21 ND, XI, 197-198.
22 ND, XIII, 233.
23 OT, no. 5. Cf. John 17:11.
24 ND, XIII, 3.
25 ND, VI, 184.
26 LS, I, 489–490.
27 ES, 362.
28 ND, II, 177-178.
29 LS, I, 137-139.
30 LS, I, 130.
31 ES, 480ff.
32 ND, Comp., 3–4.
35 PDV, no. 70.
36 ND, XIII, 701.
39ND, IV, 257-258.
40ND, XIII, 597-598.
41ND, III, 284-285.