

Fall 2020

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### Recommended Citation

Fagerberg, D. W. (2020). Libermann, Abnegation, and Liturgical Theology. *Spiritan Horizons*, 16 (16). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol16/iss16/7>

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## LIBERMANN, ABNEGATION, AND LITURGICAL THEOLOGY

### INTRODUCTION

I do not have to persuade readers of this journal that Francis Libermann merits repeated visitation. Readers know that this mountainous figure rewards each visit by the complexity of his life and thought. One can look at his personal conversion story, at the first founding of his mission society, at the second founding of the Spiritans, at the spiritual direction he gave both personally and by the tireless activity of his pen, at his advocacy for prayer (meditative, affective, contemplative), at his devotion to the Blessed Mother, at the intricate doctrine of sin and grace he continually unfolds, or at the practical apostolate resting upon holy union with God.<sup>1</sup> I have neither the time nor the temerity to review the above features for readers who already know Libermann well,<sup>2</sup> but I will be so rash as to speak about what is perhaps Libermann's most distinctive teaching, namely abnegation, daring to do so only out of the hope of bringing an additional perspective to it. This is the perspective of liturgical theology, which is the field where I work. I propose that the self-denial that Libermann recommends so fervently and persuasively is actually in service to our liturgical life. If abnegation is not placed against the liturgical horizon, we fail to do justice to Libermann's understanding of it.

The Christian's *telos* in this life and the next is union with God, what is known as deification (*theosis*), adoption. Asceticism and liturgy are the block and tackle God uses to hoist us toward holiness, and if Libermann is emphasizing the former, it is not in neglect of the latter. If it was—if abnegation is treated as a simple moral category disconnected from liturgical theology—then it would be difficult to understand, and even more difficult to defend. Libermann uses terms that startle us and grate against our sensibility, like “abnegation,” “annihilations,” “indifference,” “self-denial,” “self-renunciation,” and “crosses.” He shares them with members of the French School of Spirituality.<sup>3</sup> When we place these terms against a limited horizon of morality or human psychology, they raise objections of dualism, depravity, and self-harm. That is why the terms must be placed against a more transcendent horizon, one detected by liturgical theology. This will have a benefit to liturgical studies as well, a point I will make in conclusion.

We know Libermann best from his epistolary spiritual direction, partly made available to the English-speaking world in the five volumes published by Duquesne University Press, translated by Fr. Walter van de Putte.<sup>4</sup> In them, Libermann speaks of the cross as a path to holiness.

## GOD ENERGIZES, MAN SYNERGIZES

“As soon as the finger of God touches a soul to fashion it to his image and to the resemblance of the saints, a first and lively charm draws it away from exterior things, and causes it to enter into itself.”<sup>5</sup> It is love that will cause love to enter. “A pure and perfect love of Jesus should inspire you with a holy generosity in giving yourself to him.”<sup>6</sup> And after perfect love, then renunciation of self can occur. “You ask me whence comes that openness of heart and mind in those who give themselves entirely to God. It seems to me that it comes naturally, and, as it were, necessarily, from this perfect love. A man who desires nothing upon earth fears nothing either; and a man who desires nothing and fears nothing, must necessarily have his mind and his heart in perfect freedom.”<sup>7</sup> When we reach this highest degree of loving God above all things, then we can love all things in God. This, Libermann says, “is perfect love, the love of perfection. In this case we always prefer, from among good and holy things or actions, those we believe to be most pleasing to God. We then still love the things of earth—we still have a taste for, and a delight in, creatures and in the satisfactions and pleasures of this world—but we do it with moderation and without offense to God.”<sup>8</sup>

*A man who desires  
nothing upon earth  
fears nothing either*

The sort of union with God he is advocating is of a different kind than the union a creature might have with his creator on natural grounds. This union is supernatural, and made possible only by Jesus, the Only Begotten Son. Jesus’s life is holiness; our holiness is Christ’s filial life extended to dwell in us; his holiness becomes our sanctity. “You can say that he lives in you and that he is your life; and if he is your life, your life will be one of holiness, since he possesses all sanctity in himself and his life is sanctity itself.”<sup>9</sup> Libermann’s love for his brother Jew, Jesus, is unbounded. “It is Jesus alone who is the holiness of your soul. Belong only to Jesus, love only Jesus, live only for Jesus.”<sup>10</sup> When you live this way, then “your life will no longer be your own, your life will be that of Jesus Christ’s Spirit in you.” And to perfect this “there must be no impression in you foreign to this Spirit of holiness and love. Your soul must experience no sentiment, no movement, no impression whatsoever, it must have no life, but in this Spirit and by this Spirit of the love of Jesus.”<sup>11</sup>

*your life will no  
longer be your own*

Where can we enter into such a mystical, sanctifying, perfect, conjugal union with Jesus? Libermann points the way. “Do you know the nuptial hall in which Jesus unites himself with the church? It is Calvary. It was there that he sacrificed himself for the church to make her worthy of being his spouse. Since then, every soul that desires to be perfectly united with Jesus, must expect that union to be accomplished in immolation. Rejoice therefore, in the midst of tribulations, be strong, be

*Do you know the nuptial hall in which Jesus unites himself with the church? It is Calvary.*

worthy of the crucified Jesus.”<sup>12</sup> Captive to sin, we cannot carry out the command to be like God, so God himself accomplishes the very command he gives.

*Our Lord establishes holiness in us by means of his divine grace. Sanctity can come in us only through the grace of Jesus, by means of which we participate in his life. Our nature, with all its powers, is always incapable of giving us the least degree of holiness. We are completely dependent on Our Lord, who alone is able to communicate that holiness to us as it pleases his heavenly Father, and he can do this regardless of the condition of our nature. It is this life of Jesus, this grace of life, which is our holiness. The more this life is developed in us, the holier we are. We have no merit of ourselves. Jesus alone is the source of all merits. It is Jesus who merits in us and in our works.<sup>13</sup>*

*If we beg his spirit of holiness to enter our hearts, then we are begging for “His state of detachment from all creatures . . .”*

We are asking for the life of Jesus in us, but beware. Of what did Jesus’s life consist? It was entirely consumed in his heavenly Father. Jesus gave perfect love, perfect honor, perfect glory to the Father; therefore he lived in perfect obedience, perfect submission, perfect humility. His will was his Father’s, not his own. If we beg his spirit of holiness to enter our hearts, then we are begging for “His state of detachment from all creatures, his horror for, and separation from, everything that might divide him from his heavenly Father.”<sup>14</sup> If we beg his spirit of holiness to enter our hearts, then we are begging “that he may remove, cast out, exterminate from our soul all life that is foreign to the life of his Father in him and to his life in his Father. We ask that he may purify our souls from all that is foreign to God, that he may separate us from all creatures, withdraw our affections from every created object and from our own selves, so that he may attach them, together with his own, to his heavenly Father and may establish in us his own life of holiness.”<sup>15</sup> If we are holy it is because we are filled with Christ’s spirit, and if we are filled with Christ’s spirit then we love God as Jesus loves him. “And when do we love God in this way? It is when we have no desire nor affection apart from God; when they are all concentrated in him alone.”<sup>16</sup>

## **THE DIVINE POTTER MOLDS HIS LIKENESS**

God seldom stamps the soul with the seal of his holiness without marking it first with that of his cross.

Biblical passages about the Cross have been worn smooth by constant repetition. We hardly hear the words anymore, and are scarcely startled when Paul says that he has been crucified with Christ (Gal 2:20), that he dies daily (1 Cor 15:31), that

*Are you still nailed to the Cross? If so, so much the better.*

those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh (Gal 5:24), that our old self was crucified with Jesus (Rom 6:6), and that we must die with Christ (Rom 6:8). Crosses sound more alarming when Libermann talks about them, and examples abound. “It seems that the good Lord wants you on the Cross and I am glad that it is so.”<sup>17</sup> “Do not set limits to the crosses you are willing to bear. Accept all that come as so many precious stones and be afraid to let any escape from your grasp.”<sup>18</sup> “How are you yourself? Are you still nailed to the Cross? If so, so much the better.”<sup>19</sup> “I am perfectly certain that the very best moments of your life, whether past, present, or future, are those spent upon the cross. It is here that Jesus is always to be found.”<sup>20</sup> “Nothing is more sanctifying than crosses. Remain constantly in your abjectness before God and tell him, a thousand times a day if necessary, ‘Thy will be done.’”<sup>21</sup> “You see then that God wishes you to practice perfect self-renunciation. That is why he places you on the Cross.”<sup>22</sup> “We ought not to forget that if crosses are not painful, they are not crosses at all.”<sup>23</sup> “Carry the particular cross which divine Goodness sends you each day. Bear it with patience, mildness, humility, and submission to God’s will.”<sup>24</sup> “Do not bear any ill will towards them on that account. It is God who wants you to be on a cross.”<sup>25</sup> “Strive always to suffer in peace, with humility, love, and perfect submission to the will of God who desires to keep you on the cross.”<sup>26</sup>

Why crosses? Why abnegation, renunciation of self-love, detachment from the world? Because this is the way to union with God, a synonym for holiness. “As long as you retain desires and wishes of your own, your union with God will be neither real nor perfect.”<sup>27</sup>

### **THE CROSS: GOD CLEANS OUT THE ROOM FOR HIMSELF**

The cross can be imagined as a pry bar God uses to leverage open a space for himself and to prepare us for beatitude. The cross is “the shortest and straightest way to that goal. It is Jacob’s ladder on which the angels of the earth—the children of God—must ascend to their heavenly Father, and where angels of heaven descend to lend their help to their earthly brothers, in the painful labor of ascent.”<sup>28</sup> Grace is the downward traffic, asceticism makes room for it, and together they create room for sanctity. “You will gradually become accustomed to forget yourself or avoid pre-occupation with yourself. In a word, you will thus be empty of self, and Our Lord will occupy the place that is left vacant.”<sup>29</sup> Humility and self-renunciation make us pliant under the action of the Master’s grace, but “that pliability, which makes the soul a faithful instrument in God’s hands, comes only to a soul whose first

*Grace is the downward traffic, asceticism makes room for it, and together they create room for sanctity*

desires and hopes have been overthrown.”<sup>30</sup> Libermann takes a familiar image from Jeremiah and Isaiah.

*The more the clay has been battered and crushed, the easier it is for the potter to achieve his purpose*

*You should remain in the Lord's presence like clay before the potter. The workman does what he pleases with it: he beats it, presses it, and beats it again to make it supple. The clay offers no resistance; it leaves the potter perfect liberty to do with it what he wishes. The potter fashions a vase and it often happens that when it is half-finished he breaks it up and reduces it to a shapeless mass. He then starts anew to make of it the particular vase he wants. The more the clay has been battered and crushed, the easier it is for the potter to achieve his purpose . . . .<sup>31</sup>*

“Allow God full liberty to handle you,”<sup>32</sup> Libermann concludes, because we are his possession, his property, and he does with us what he wills. “Does the earthen vessel say to the potter, ‘Why do you make me thus?’ Does it not allow him to fashion it according to his wishes?”<sup>33</sup> Libermann returns to this theme repeatedly. “He is the Lord of your soul; let him do what he wishes with his property; remain prostrate and at peace before him.”<sup>34</sup> “Since Jesus, then, is the owner of your soul, leave to him the care of defending his property. Instead of being preoccupied with yourself, think only of pleasing him, the Lord to whom you belong.”<sup>35</sup> “After all, even if [a sister] should become incapacitated, is not Jesus the master of his possession? . . . If he desires to act in that soul in a way that destroys her body, what right have we to object?”<sup>36</sup> “Everything that is in you should be employed for God, and for God only. He alone may dispose of it as a chattel that belongs exclusively to himself, and over which nobody else has any right or control.”<sup>37</sup>

The purpose of crosses, in a word, is to sanctify us. Libermann says this over and over, and examples are easy to find. “These trials are given for your sanctification, to make you more flexible in his hands, more humble, more detached from yourselves and more confident in God.”<sup>38</sup> And “he sends you this life of crosses and pains. They are for your sanctification; they must help you to detach yourself from the world and from all that it contains.”<sup>39</sup> And “courage, my beloved confrères! God is giving you his grace. You have begun with the cross! It is a sign that God’s goodness desires to sanctify you.”<sup>40</sup> And “with God’s help, you will persevere in your good desires and make use of the cross to advance God’s work through the sanctification of your soul.”<sup>41</sup> We must be emptied of self and world before we can be filled with holiness. We like the filling more than the emptying! Nevertheless, this is the necessary sequence, the necessary route we must follow. “Jesus could not

rise and ascend into heaven, until he had died on the cross. Our poor afflicted nature weeps and laments; well, let it weep and lament. This will finally cost it its life, but, as a compensation, we shall possess the life of our divine Jesus and his well-beloved Mother.”<sup>42</sup> Libermann learned from the apostle Paul that if we would share in the glory of Jesus, we must begin by sharing in his cross and his shame. “He willingly bore his cross and finished the work his heavenly Father had given him to do; you must act likewise.”<sup>43</sup>

*Run to the foot of the cross and stand there beside Mary; there is no better place for us in this world*

Run to the foot of the cross and stand there beside Mary; there is no better place for us in this world.<sup>44</sup> “There are a great many ways which lead to heaven, but there is none that is not strewn and bristling with crosses. We are covered with sins from head to foot—how, then, can we look for repose? No, dear friend, afflictions, sufferings, crosses of every kind [await us]. Jesus and Mary have been constantly on the cross; should we be spared? What we need is crosses, sufferings, heartaches.”<sup>45</sup> The Jesus we have in our hearts must be the crucified Jesus.

### ABNEGATION, DETACHMENT

Attaching to God means detaching from all that is not God. When Libermann speaks about separation from the world, he is actually speaking about forging an alliance with heaven. We will not understand him if we restrict ourselves to an earthly ethic and ignore the heavenly society toward which he is pointing us.

*If we are not completely freed from all that is not God, it is impossible for us to be perfect. The Holy Spirit constantly knocks at the door of our heart. We most ardently desire to have him enter and by this desire open the door for him. But how can he enter if he finds no room, if he finds this heart, which should belong unreservedly to him, filled with adverse affections? He is then obliged to remain outside. But he is so unbelievably good that he waits until he finds a little place, which grows in proportion as we rid ourselves of those wretched attachments.*<sup>46</sup>

The annihilation of self-will and the extermination of self-love is the beginning of making room for the triune God’s residence in his human temples, which are tiny, cluttered, unruly places. Scripture calls this disordered state “the world.” We flatter that world, and it flatters us; we divert ourselves with its trifles; we are captivated by its manners, its pleasures, its frivolous amusements, its spirit of pride and vanity, and its false judgments.<sup>47</sup> To rescue us, Jesus approaches that world (but we know the reception he received). “Our kind Lord Jesus is at its door in order to enlighten it. He shines his great and wonderful

*Scripture calls this disordered state “the world”*

light before it; and yet it does not recognize the light but runs after darkness.”<sup>48</sup>

*nor can we serve the  
kingdom in peace so  
long as our self-love*

Libermann’s first prescription for recovering health is to not cling to this world. But a second sickness comes out of the first, and must be attended to next. We can neither serve the kingdom of God while we cling to the world, nor can we serve the kingdom in peace so long as our self-love “makes us wish to be loved, esteemed and respected by everybody. Self-love always fears to lose something in the esteem of men. Self-love makes our heart vain and victim of caprice. It is pained, grows angry and discouraged as soon as anything happens that is not perfectly suited to its taste or wishes . . .”<sup>49</sup> We must be freed from both world and self: the liberation must be twofold. Christ has commanded us to despise the world so that it does not tempt us to self-love. There is nothing wrong with the world (Libermann is no Gnostic), but there is something wrong with our heart when infected with the spirit of the world. “This spirit inspires worldlings with a desire for display, for self-esteem, for self-love, a spirit that attributes everything to self, instead of directing all things to the love of God alone. It makes them seek their own interest, and not the interest of God alone, as Our Lord did and taught.”<sup>50</sup>

It is not easy. Self-esteem is such a powerful force in our lives that Libermann must mock it gently in order to awaken us.

*In regard to vanity, it is a troublesome fly that you must drive away but without worrying about it. Bear patiently, before God, with his importunity, and look upon it as a cross. With regard to the esteem and affection of men, it is not worthwhile taking them seriously. Let us suppose that I come from a neighbor’s house. His little dog has shown me great affection and made very much of me. I esteem myself neither the better nor the happier for it. The same applies when people show this esteem for you.<sup>51</sup>*

*Libermann is a  
shrewd observer of  
human nature*

Libermann is a shrewd observer of human nature in this regard. He knows that self-love rears its head even in our attempts at humility, and he smiles kindly at our human weakness.

*There are those who act in this self-humiliating way to satisfy themselves and convince themselves that they are humble, or again to make others believe that they are. They often scarcely notice the real motives. Sometimes the whole thing remains on the level of the imagination. In reality those people would be very much pained if others actually despise them or ill-treated them. And they would*

*be particularly resentful if others despised them for other reasons than those that have their approval. To give an example, if, in order to parade his humility, a person performed an action that would indicate a low degree of intelligence, he would be very annoyed if someone actually concluded from it that he is wanting in intelligence. To give a second example, a person may feel very sad if he were looked upon as possessing only ordinary holiness or even false notions of sanctity.<sup>52</sup>*

*The cross opens a route into the deep interior of each person, where he or she abandons the noise for quiet*

Our self-love must pass through many crosses and dishonors<sup>53</sup> before we no longer use the world to feed our self-love. The cross opens a route into the deep interior of each person, where he or she abandons the noise for quiet. When Libermann counsels us to abandon the world, he is telling us to abandon this noisiness. “If we want to speak the language of grace well, we must forget the language of our fallen nature. We forget the latter only by perfect silence.”<sup>54</sup> “Replace self-love with the love of Jesus who is at the right hand of the Father.”<sup>55</sup> When that has been done, then you will be willing to “Let him strike, execute, sacrifice, annihilate everything in you that does not belong to his heavenly Father so that his spirit of love may establish itself perfectly in you, and may keep you in continual immolation and sacrifice before him. Have a constant care to forget yourself, so that your interior may always turn toward God, who is your All.”<sup>56</sup> Why is this necessary? Because our natural activity constantly blocks the action of grace.<sup>57</sup> “The cross is a beautiful tree, a good tree planted in your soul and it is now producing beautiful flowers; at a later date it will yield beautiful fruit. ‘A good tree’, says the Savior, ‘can only produce good fruit.’ What kind of fruit? Those which he bore on Calvary. Jesus himself will be formed in your soul by means of the cross.”<sup>58</sup>

*We have no life for anything outside of God*

The cross leads to this end, and to reach this end two things must happen: abandon the world and overcome self-love. We have no life for anything outside of God. It is painful to the Old Adam, Libermann admits, but in the midst of speaking truth to our fallen condition he has flashes of tender encouragement. “Does a mother give a nice dress to her child in order to have the satisfaction of scolding her when, later on, the child soils it? And does the child who received the nice dress get upset because it was love that prompted the mother to give it to her? . . . You should act in the same way. Be pleased and feel happy about God’s infinite love for you, and do not insult his goodness and his great love for you by yielding to fears. It is not to make you fear him that he gives you graces.”<sup>59</sup> Do not confuse remorse with reproach. Do not think that the compunction you feel is a rebuke from the

Lord. “No! Dear confrere. Jesus does not speak so harshly to your soul. He loves it too much for that . . . Don’t take the voice of the wolf for that of the lamb.”<sup>60</sup>

Thus we can approach the apex of perfection.

*We realize our baseness and abjection and how contemptible we are before God and man. But we are at the same time full of joy, realizing that He alone is all beauty, grandeur and perfection. We cast a peaceful and loving glance at our great wretchedness and even look at our miseries in detail, but far from being disturbed by the sight, we remain before our great Master in loving lowliness. When this sort of humility has reached perfection, we are delighted to be known and spoken of as the most despicable of all creatures. This degree is very perfect. Those who have reached this love of abjection do things that render them abject in the eyes of men.*<sup>61</sup>

You should from time to time “cast a glance without effort but with the intention of belonging to him, and accompany it by the awareness of your poverty and wretchedness. But all this must be done tranquilly with the peaceful desire of belonging to him in spite of your wretchedness. Don’t seek more than that.”<sup>62</sup> Therefore he counsels those who write him to take courage and not grow despondent over their present weakness.

Grace is so powerful that any activity of the soul looks passive—and that is cause for our greatest hope. When Libermann admonishes us to abandon our self-will he is telling us to abandon ourselves—to Jesus. Abandon self-effort, abandon our own strength, abandon the interferences of a will that interposes itself between God’s grace in ourselves. He offers a risible comparison.

*When Jesus wishes to reproduce himself in the soul, his divine image is much better executed if his own hand alone touches it. Any human hand meddling with it would only mar it. It would be like a monkey which wanted to finish a picture at which he saw his master working. You can imagine the results! He sees his master dipping the brush into the colors and then applying them to the canvas, but that is all. He is unable to distinguish the skillful strokes that the painter draws on the canvas. As soon as the master leaves the studio, he takes hold of the brush, dips it into the paint and applies it to the picture. Fancy the masterpiece his daubing would produce. Well, such is our work. We have not the slightest idea of what our divine and most adorable Master wishes to do in our souls; we cannot distinguish a*

*his divine image is much better executed if his own hand alone touches it*

*single stroke. Still we sometimes wish to interfere with his work and reproduce in ourselves the wonderful lineaments of this dear Love. Let us beware of that.*<sup>63</sup>

*The reason for all this talk about abnegation, annihilation, indifference, and crosses is so that we will get out of the way!*

The reason for all this talk about abnegation, annihilation, indifference, and crosses is so that we will get out of the way! Become the image that the Great Iconographer wants to paint. Move over! Let God have his way with you. Become “a plaything, as it were, in his hands.”<sup>64</sup> Take the shape the potter desires.

### THE DIVINE LITURGIST

And what kind of vase does the potter desire to throw on his providential wheel of salvation history? A liturgist. The High Priest comes to liturgize God for us, and in us. “Why does he come? He comes solely for the greater glory of his Father and for the sanctification of our souls. We ought therefore to establish the glory of his Father in ourselves, and sanctify our souls by a complete separation from every creature.”<sup>65</sup> The traditionally named twin purposes of liturgy are the glorification of God and the sanctification of humans. Why does Jesus come? To accomplish his liturgy of glorifying God and sanctifying us. These, Libermann says, can be seen as the great principles in all Jesus’s activity on earth. “The first (is that) in all the works he accomplished on earth he looked only to his Father’s glory, before which everything else counted as nothing, everything yielded, everything was sacrifice, even his own life. His Father’s glory was what he had to accomplish in everything . . . The second principle of Jesus’s activity on earth is the salvation and sanctification of souls, particularly those who are dear to him, whom his heavenly Father specially gives him. He is not afraid to afflict and even overwhelm them with distress when he works to their sanctification.”<sup>66</sup>

Libermann says the virtue of religion consists of three things: “[1] giving your whole being so that it may be completely immolated and sacrificed to God’s glory; [2] having sovereign reverence for him and for everything that concerns him; [3] and in loving him above all things.”<sup>67</sup> In other words, religion is sacrifice, reverence, and love. Alas, we sinners have stripped religion of the first, are casual about the second, and have made the third into a painless state distorted to work our benefit. That’s why we must put self-love to death: because we even attempt to use the love of God to our own advantage. Libermann will restore vigor to religion by proposing *practical union* with God. “Practical union . . . is a state in which we have renounced all natural activities and reactions, so that the grace of the Holy Spirit is able to quicken and govern all our activities.

*In other words, religion is sacrifice, reverence, and love*

*practical union, which gradually transfigures not only our religious activities, but every act of our life*

Once nature has ceased entirely to rule our life, and has been supplanted by the supernatural life of grace, we enter into a habitual state of union with God . . . This practical union, which gradually *transfigures not only our religious activities*, but every act of our life, resides in the intention.”<sup>68</sup> Liturgical abnegation is living beyond creatures, living with the Uncreated One, and as a result having a proper evaluation of creatures. The *perichoresis* of the Trinity hides in the kenosis of the Son when it extends itself. We can join that hidden life and become a hidden soul by having nothing but the Trinity occupy our attention. This is the definition of a liturgist. The abnegation of world and self makes liturgy possible.

### LITURGICAL SPIRITUALITY

And this brings me to a concluding observation that not only does liturgy help us understand Libermann, but Libermann opens a door to a more profound understanding of liturgical theology. I am inclined to call it a *liturgical spirituality*.

The study of liturgy currently takes place under two types of investigation. The first uses the intellectual faculty. Work here is rational, academic, bookish. This study of liturgy does not require any performance of liturgical rite, or examination of liturgical environment. Ratiocination makes a grab at the substance of the liturgy. The second uses a number of bodily faculties because the focus here is on how ritual affects the person. Work here is observational, ethnographic, and pays attention to physical activities and experiences. But these two faculties do not by themselves adequately penetrate the reality of liturgy. The faculty for liturgical theology is not just the mind (the first method of academic study) or the body (the second method of ritual studies); the faculty for liturgical theology includes the spiritual faculty of an interior life. “To know such things, we need to *live an interior life*; we need the grace of the Holy Spirit and experience; we need an experimental, not a speculative knowledge of things.”<sup>69</sup> Libermann has been talking about the faculties of the soul, over which God “claims for himself the exclusive privilege of setting those faculties in motion and handling them in his way and to the extent of his wishes.”<sup>70</sup> That’s why Libermann wants to train and strengthen it. “We ought to be completely dead to ourselves and all things; then our life will be hidden in God with Our Lord, with whom we shall be intimately united in all our *spiritual faculties*. When our soul is completely emptied of creatures and of self, the Spirit of Our Lord will be its only life.”<sup>71</sup>

*Experiencing Christ’s lordship means joining him on the altar of the cross*

There is a difference between talking about the activity of liturgy, or watching the activity of liturgy, on the one hand, and experiencing liturgy, on the other. Experiencing Christ’s lordship means joining him on the altar of the cross. For liturgy to be

true, our heart must become “a pleasing victim in the sight of his adorable Majesty, offered in union of love with Jesus, the great Offerer, and the great Victim of his Father for the salvation and sanctification of his elect . . . Let us offer the sacrifice on the great altar of the holocaust, on the Cross of Jesus, and have it offered by the most pure and holy hands of this High Priest, who is always near the throne of his Father, interceding for his children.”<sup>72</sup> All of Libermann’s spiritual direction has been leading us toward this end. He tells us that our suffering is sanctifying, our annihilation is oblatinal, our abnegation is patterned on Jesus’s kenosis. He tells us that liturgical abnegation is the act of leaving the world for heaven, darkness for light, fear for love, ourselves for God.

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## ENDNOTES

1. A significant portion of this paper was presented at the Eighth Day Institute Symposium (Wichita, Kansas) in January, 2020, where I introduced the audience to some of Libermann’s life story and the themes of abnegation.
2. Two early biographies of Libermann are by Prosper Goepfert, *The Life of the Venerable Francis Mary Paul Libermann*. Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1880; and G. Lee, *The Life of the Venerable Francis Libermann*. B. Herder, 1911. Two more recent biographies are Adrian L. van Kaam, C.S.Sp., *A Light to the Gentiles: the Life Story of the Venerable Francis Libermann*. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1959; and Alphonse Gilbert, C.S.Sp., *A Message of Francis Libermann for Our Time: You have Laid Your Hand on Me . . .* Rome: Spiritan Research and Animation Centre, 1983. For Libermann’s spirituality and theology see Alphonse Gilbert, C.S.Sp., *A Gentle Way to God: The Spiritual Teaching of Francis Libermann*. Dublin: Paraclete Press, 1990; and Bernard J. Kelly, C.S.Sp., *The Spiritual Teaching of Ven. Francis Libermann*. Dublin: Clonmore & Reynolds, Ltd., 1953.
3. Among them Pierre de Berulle, Francis de Sales, Madam Acarie, Jean-Jacques Olier, Charles de Condren, Jean Eudes, Jean Pierre de Caussade, Francois Fenelon, Vincent de Paul, Henri Boudon, Louis de Montfort, and Jean-Baptiste de la Salle.
4. In 1962–66 Duquesne University published a selection of letters, translated by Walter Van De Putte: *The Spiritual Letters of the Venerable Francis Libermann*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, *Duquesne Studies*. Spiritan Series 5–9. All references below will be made to this series so I will refer to them by the Volume Number of the letter, but please note that this differs from the Series number. Vol. 1 *Letters to Religious Sisters and Aspirants* is Spiritan Series Vol. 5; Vol. 2 *Letters to People in the World* is Spiritan Series Vol. 6; Vol. 3, 4, 5 *Letters to Clergy and Religious* are Spiritan Series Vols. 6, 7, 8. The other writings by Libermann include three volumes of his commentary on the Gospel of John, translated by Fr. Myles Fay: *Jesus Through Jewish Eyes*. Dublin, Paraclete Press, 1995, 1999, and 2005; his Instructions for Missionaries, appearing as

*Living . . . with God*. New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1949. There is also the *Provisional Rule of Father Libermann*, translated by Walter van de Putte, C.S.Sp. Pittsburgh: Center for Spiritan Studies, Duquesne, University, 2015. The French web page of the Spiritans has a number of miscellaneous writings by Libermann at <http://spiritains.org/sources/libermann/textesspirituels/textendx.htm>.

5. Quoted in Goepfert, 77–78.
6. Vol. 1, 8.
7. Vol. 4, 136.
8. Vol 2., 218.
9. Vol. 4, 205.
10. Vol. 1, 3.
11. Vol. 4, 205.
12. Vol. 2, 304–5.
13. Vol. 3, 80.
14. Vol. 3, 37.
15. Vol. 3, 38.
16. Vol. 4, 168
17. Vol. 1, 152.
18. Vol. 1, 144.
19. Vol. 1, 171.
20. Vol. 1, 171.
21. Vol. 2, 245.
22. Vol. 1, 29.
23. Vol. 1, 186.
24. Vol. 2, 191.
25. Vol. 2, 300.
26. Vol. 2, 302.
27. Vol. 3, 4.
28. Vol. 5, 290
29. Vol. 3, 129.
30. Vol. 1, 131.
31. Vol. 5, 116.
32. Vol. 5, 116.
33. Vol. 2, 78.
34. Vol. 1, 49.
35. Vol. 1, 50.
36. Vol. 1, 79–80.
37. Vol. 4, 145. Chattel is a slave, a point made in 1 Cor 7:22 and 9:19, Rom 1:1, Col 4:12, 2 Pet 1:1, Jas 1:1, Tit 1:1.
38. Vol. 5, 245
39. Vol. 2, 200.
40. Vol. 3, 284.
41. Vol. 1, 100.
42. Vol. 4, 309
43. Vol. 2, 124.
44. Vol. 2, 244.
45. Vol. 4, 116.
46. Vol. 4, 9.

47. Vol. 4, 180
48. Vol. 4, 180
49. Vol. 4, 172
50. Vol. 2, 40.
51. Vol. 4, 39
52. Vol. 5, 68.
53. Vol. 3, 6.
54. Vol. 1, 87.
55. Vol. 1, 35.
56. Vol. 4, 203–04
57. Vol. 3, 77.
58. Vol. 2, 303.
59. Vol. 1, 230.
60. Vol. 5, 236.
61. Vol. 5, 67.
62. Vol. 5, 239.
63. Vol. 4, 247.
64. Vol. 4, 306.
65. Vol. 4, 151.
66. Libermann, *Jesus Through Jewish Eyes*, part 3. Blackrock College, Dublin: Paraclete Press, 2005, 125.
67. Vol. 5, 154
68. Libermann, *Instructions for Missionaries*, <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-rc/1/> 40. (Also published as *Living . . . With God*. New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1949. Emphasis added.
69. Vol. 3, 91. Emphasis added.
70. Vol. 3, 59.
71. Vol. 3, 12. Emphasis added.
72. Vol. 2, 79.