

Fall 2020

From Crisis to Commitment: Libermann's Pilgrimage to the Holy House of Nazareth at Loreto

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Recommended Citation

McFadden, J. (2020). From Crisis to Commitment: Libermann's Pilgrimage to the Holy House of Nazareth at Loreto. *Spiritan Horizons*, 16 (16). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol16/iss16/8>

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FROM CRISIS TO COMMITMENT: LIBERMANN'S PILGRIMAGE TO THE HOLY HOUSE OF NAZARETH AT LORETO

THE CONTEXT¹

The pilgrimage was from November 13 to December 15, 1840. Libermann has been in Rome since the 6th of January 1840,² in the hope of having his “Work for the Negroes” recognized and supported by the Holy See. He had taken a leap into the unknown by giving up his position as the novice master of the Eudists at Rennes. He knew this clearly himself, he was well aware of the great risk he was taking. He had written to his brother Samson on the 12th of December 1839 from Lyons:

I have left Rennes. I have now no man, no earthly creature, in whom to place confidence. I have nothing, nor do I know what will become of me, or how I shall even live . . . Many of those who loved and esteemed me will disapprove of me. I shall perhaps be treated as a senseless, proud man . . . Consider me as a man dead and buried. Pray to God for the good of my soul and for the accomplishment of his most holy will.³

The tone of this letter shows that he was indeed going through a period of crisis and uncertainty, where nothing at all was clear to him regarding his future, and most importantly, regarding the “Work for the Blacks,” which many of those who knew him considered a hopeless cause already. Yet he writes in the same letter, “I am the happiest man in the world because I only have God alone, with Jesus and Mary” (L.S., II, 302.)

So often for Libermann, when outward circumstances were dire, he held on to a deep trust and confidence in God.

A serious setback for him came when his closest collaborator at the time, the one who accompanied him from France and who was helping to finance his stay in Rome, the sub-deacon Maxime de la Brunière, gradually also came to lose confidence in him and his project. While he was with Libermann they could afford to stay in a hostel for the clergy in 1 Via Magnapoli run by the Jourdan family, but when he abandoned Libermann at the end of March, the latter had to seek alternative and cheaper accommodation. He was in fact, on the point of going back to France due to lack of funds,⁴ when, in the beginning of June, he found the humble attic on the top floor of the house of the Patriarca family in Vicolo Pinaco 31, near to present-day Piazza Navona.⁵ It was this attic which in 1937 was re-constructed on the roof of the French Seminary in the Via

Santa Chiara when it was due to be demolished to make room for a new road. When the Congregation eventually decided to hand over responsibility for the seminary to the French bishops, the same attic was dismantled once again and reconstructed on the grounds of the generalate in Rome in 2010. The roof tiles and beams, the floor tiles, and the old door are original.

Already both Libermann and de la Brunière had been given a very brief audience with Pope Gregory XVI, an audience procured by his former acquaintance, Dr. Drach, another convert from Judaism who had been given a job in the library of Propaganda Fide. The audience, on the 17th February, 1840⁶ was very short, but the pope is reported to have laid his hand on the humble acolyte's head and foretold that one day he will be a saint—"Sara un santo."

Libermann and de la Brunière had worked on a preliminary report seven pages in length⁷ outlining their project for the Black race. This was presented to Mgr. Cadolini, the Prefect of Propaganda Fide on the 27th of March for them to study. Meanwhile, the Prefect had sent a message to the Nuncio in Paris to find out more about Libermann and to ascertain if he was a man of integrity and if his proposed work was worthy of support. The report that came back was positive, so Libermann received a letter from Propaganda Fide in support of his project and encouraging him to seek ordination to the priesthood.

Curiously, it appears that even at this point the authorities at Propaganda Fide encouraging him to seek ordination were satisfied that Libermann's epilepsy was not a problem. In fact, it had been over two years since he had recorded any seizures, so it must have been concluded that he was clear of the ailment. Libermann had, in fact, informed Cardinal Cadolini in his report of his "nervous illness which was a canonical impediment," but he did not call it epilepsy as such.⁸

It has often been remarked how quickly Libermann received such positive support for his project from the authorities in Rome. It may be because the Holy See was anxious to be seen doing something to respond to the emancipation of slaves which had already been enacted in the French and British colonies. On December 3rd 1839, Pope Gregory had issued an encyclical entitled, "*In supremo apostolatus*," welcoming the movements for the abolition of slavery. He himself, as a former Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda Fide, was *au courant* with the matter. It was after this highly encouraging letter that Libermann set out on the pilgrimage to Loreto.

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THE HOLY HOUSE OF NAZARETH IN LORETO

Loreto is a town very near to the Adriatic coast of Italy, about 270 kilometres to the northeast of Rome. It had been a

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place of pilgrimage since the Middle Ages, and during that time, in fact, was the most important Marian shrine in the western Church. Legend has it that the house in which Mary received the greetings from the archangel Gabriel had been transported miraculously by angels from the Holy Land in the year 1294, to protect it from desecration by the Muslims. Libermann would have believed this legend without question just as the generality of Catholics from the Middle Ages onward. In our modern and more skeptical times, it started to be questioned. A scientific approach was made to establish the authenticity of the story. Archaeologists established that the three walls that constitute the house (it backed into a cave) were indeed of stone from Nazareth, in contrast to all the houses in Loreto which were constructed of brick. In the walls, five red cloth crosses were found indicating the involvement of crusaders, for the red Cross was their sign and symbol as they fought to free the Holy Land from the Muslims. Coins of the thirteenth century were also found in the foundations.⁹ In 1900 a document was found in the Vatican archives stating that the Angeli family descended from the Empress of Constantinople were responsible for bringing the walls to Italy. Some confusion may have arisen, for the phrase in Italian that the house was carried by the angels, “*trasportata dagli Angeli*,” is exactly the same as saying they were carried by the Angeli (family)!¹⁰

It is to be noted that the Holy House of Nazareth¹¹ now enshrined within the great basilica at Loreto, is venerated as Mary’s maternal home, the place where the archangel Gabriel announced to her that she was chosen to be the Mother of our Savior—in short, it is the place where the Word became Flesh. This had a very strong attraction for Libermann himself, the very place where the immediate plan of God for our salvation was realised.

THE MOTIVE

*The place had a
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It is interesting to analyze Libermann’s motives for wanting to go to Loreto. The place had a reputation for miraculous healings. It was here that Mgr. Olier, founder of the Sulpicians, while a student for the priesthood in Rome, made the pilgrimage there on foot in 1628; he went in order to seek healing from a serious eye ailment and was cured.¹² In appreciation for this, he had a small replica of the house put up in the garden at Issy with which Libermann was very familiar. His fascination with the holy House of Nazareth must have stemmed from this.¹³ That it was also a tangible link with the land of his own ancestors had also a great influence on his desire to make a pilgrimage there.

At first he did not intend to go alone. Some supporters and acquaintances had provisionally agreed to accompany

him, but for different reasons they pulled out and he had no other choice than to set out alone. This in itself had potential dangers from wild animals, such as wolves, as well as armed robbers, known to frequent the route. Add to this that he set out on 30th November 1840—in the middle of winter. He was prepared to face the rigors of cold days and nights as he crossed the long mountainous spine of Italy.

More importantly, perhaps, Libermann was still seeking confirmation of the next step in putting the work for the Blacks on a sure footing. The other big question for him now was whether he should he seek ordination to the priesthood. He was still in quite a quandary about this and on several occasions expressed his deep desire to retire completely from the affairs of the world and live in total obscurity like a hermit, hidden from the world, spending his time in prayer and contemplation.¹⁴ The supportive letter from Propaganda Fide indicated to him that he could go ahead with his foundation of a society of priests for the evangelization of the Blacks, as long as he got ordained to the priesthood. Still an acolyte in minor orders because of his epilepsy (a serious impediment to ordination at the time) he had nonetheless received the go-ahead from the highest quarters of the Church and felt this was a very positive sign in his discernment. What he was really seeking when he went to Loreto was, then, confirmation from Our Blessed Lady that he was indeed called, not to the contemplative life, but to take up the leadership of the new society whose rule he was in the process of composing. He was also desirous to know more clearly whether he was being chosen for ordination to the priesthood.

Propaganda Fide indicated to him that he could go ahead as long as he got ordained to the priesthood

THE JOURNEY

After receiving the encouraging letter from Propaganda Fide concerning his project, Libermann had gone on to write what is now known as the *Provisional Rule* of the Society of the Most Holy Heart of Mary. From September 1840 until the middle of November, he had occupied himself in writing his *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*. His spiritual director back in Paris, Fr. Pinault, gave him the go-ahead to undertake the pilgrimage on foot. He would beg his food and lodgings as he went along. He had some money with him, also his passport to indicate that he was a bona-fide pilgrim and not a vagrant. There were police checkpoints to pass through on the way, so this was important.

Since Loreto was a popular place of pilgrimage, efforts had been made over the centuries to keep the road from Rome in good repair; even the popes made their contribution because, after all, Loreto was within the Papal States.



Loreto was a popular place of pilgrimage

He remained in the town for a week, spending the time there in the basilica, praying for guidance and for enlightenment

We know some of the barest details of Libermann's journey, because he made some notes in pencil on some flimsy pieces of paper that still exist in the archives in Chevilly. However, the notes are incomplete and some places he names are not easy to recognize. In general, he would have followed a well-worn route: through Civita Castellana, Narni, Terni, Spoleto, Foligno, Camerino, San Severino, Recanati and then Loreto. On his return journey, he made an 80 km detour to Assisi to visit the tomb of St Francis. Some of this information

I have taken from an account written by François Nicolas, C.S.Sp., who, together with Maurice Gobeil, C.S.Sp. (Canada) and Roger Heyraud, C.S.Sp. (France), the driver, attempted in November 1989 to retrace Libermann's path to and from Loreto. It is estimated that Libermann set out from Rome alone on the 13th of November, the anniversary of his conversion.¹⁵ The delay in Libermann's decision to "hit the road" was caused by one of his advisers, Fr. de Villefort, who said it was necessary for him to be in Rome while negotiations were going on between Rome and Paris concerning the setting up of the new society.

Once on the road, he seems to have averaged 30 to 35 km per day.¹⁶ One commentator remarked that he must have been well-fed in the Patriarca family's house to have achieved such a speed. It is estimated he arrived in Loreto on Saturday, 21 November, the Feast of the Presentation. So the journey to Loreto took him nine days all told. He remained in the town for a week, spending the time there in the basilica, praying for guidance and for enlightenment in the great enterprise on which he had embarked, and seeking confirmation that this was the way forward for him. Cardinal Pitra, Libermann's first biographer and someone who knew him in his lifetime, records the great happiness Libermann had in being in the same spot venerated as where the Word was made Flesh and of coming so close to elements of the land of his ancestors.¹⁷ Libermann himself gives no indication as to how he passed his eight days in Loreto. Francois Nicolas has opined that Libermann set himself a program of prayer very close to that which he proposed to the so-called "Bands of Piety" he set up while at Issy for those going on the pilgrimage to Our Lady of Chartres. These proposals are found at the end of the *Ecrits Spirituels du Vénérable Libermann*.¹⁸ He describes as follows the spirit in which the pilgrim is to journey.

Travel with the intentions of our Good Mother in mind, for she has called us to herself in what concerns her, to commend to her our own concerns, to co-operate with her immense charity for the sanctification of souls, by means of the attitude of abandonment in which we offer to her all our prayers and good works, uniting ourselves to her as good children, so as to become one with her . . . Mary is not ungrateful and she never forgets those who completely forget themselves for her.¹⁹

he heard “an interior voice” telling him he was cured

Each day is composed of daily Mass, prayer, the rosary, the psalms and scripture reading, as one might expect. Nicolas suggests that Libermann probably undertook one or two all-night vigils in the Holy House, as it was a facility that was regularly granted to pilgrims.²⁰ An example of the proposals is no. 26: “On entering a town or a village, you will go straight to the church to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament . . . if the church is locked, you will adore Our Lord in a spirit of love and affection, kneeling down in front of the church door.”

Though seeking a definitive cure from his epilepsy was not the major reason for his undertaking the pilgrimage, Libermann was to confide later on to a close friend (Abbé Vaugeois, a one-time Spiritan who left us because of family reasons) that it was while he was there that he heard “an interior voice” telling him he was cured and that he felt this healing “in the depths of his being.”²¹ It is true that after the pilgrimage, he never had any more serious seizures or manifestations of his epilepsy, though he still suffered some minor nervous attacks which he was able to control and overcome. He was still to suffer migraine headaches and stomach problems for the rest of his life.²²

the two intentions were approval for the new missionary society of the Most Holy Heart of Mary and the question of his priestly ordination

According to Pitra, the two intentions Libermann put before our Blessed Lady in Loreto and which he saw as being intimately connected, were approval for the new missionary society of the Most Holy Heart of Mary and the question of his priestly ordination.²³ Being the man he was, he did not want to “force” any issue, or to seek any miraculous sign; he remained calm, confident and convinced that the path he was following was the correct one and that God’s will would be made manifest in due course.

THE RETURN

On Monday, 30 November, in the afternoon, Libermann began his return journey on foot back to Rome. Nicolas²⁴ remarks on a distinctive change in the notes Libermann left of his return journey, which are more accurate in the place names given, the stops he made, the distances covered and the accompanying dates. This illustrates a greater confidence in

Libermann calmly made a potion out of some leaves and seeds and applied the salve to the child's lips. Immediately it became calm and began to sleep

himself and in the future path his life will take. At Foligno, he made a detour northwards to take in Assisi to visit the burial place of his patron, St. Francis, to whom he had a great devotion.²⁵ He stayed in Assisi four days visiting the places associated with St. Francis as well as St. Clare and started his return to Rome on the 8th of December. He made another small detour to visit the tomb of another St. Clare, this time St. Clare of Montefalco, who died in 1308 and was canonized in 1881. According to Nicolas²⁶ it was on this part of the journey that he actually took a carriage for about 50 kilometres, because, according to his calculations, he could never have covered the distances quoted on foot.

Reaching a small village called Strettura, after Spoleto, he could find no place to stay but was lodged by a poor family who took him in for the night. They had a child (it is not known if it was a boy or a girl) who was groaning in great pain and who was unable to swallow anything. Libermann calmly made a potion out of some leaves and seeds he had picked up at Clare of Montefalco's tomb, and applied the salve to the child's lips. Immediately it became calm and began to sleep. Libermann was anxious to stress to the family that it was their faith in St. Clare that healed the child and not himself. He left very early the next morning leaving some money to cover his stay.²⁷

He arrived back in Rome on the evening of Tuesday, 15 December. Years later, (in 1853) Fr. Lannurien (who purchased the property where the French Seminary exists), interviewed Signora Patriarca concerning Libermann's condition when he returned from his pilgrimage. She confirmed that his clothes were badly worn and his shoes in pieces.²⁸

THE RESULTS

There were four letters awaiting his return to Rome. Our Lady of Loreto was answering Libermann's prayers in a real and effective way. One of these, from his brother Samson in Strasbourg, told him that the co-adjutor bishop of Strasbourg, Bishop Raess, was ready to ordain him to the sub-diaconate. Another letter from the archdiocese of Paris confirmed that everything had been regulated properly for this step. A third letter from Eugene Tisserant, one of his closest collaborators in the whole concept of the project for the Blacks, informed him that he, Tisserant, was going to be ordained a priest and would soon leave for the Island of Mauritius with Fr. Jacques Laval. The fourth letter was from his spiritual director in Paris, Fr. Pinault, with 500 francs for him to pay for his return to France.²⁹ It remained for Libermann only to put his affairs in order, complete the *Provisional Rule* and attend the Christmas celebrations in the city. He went with the Patriarca family for

There were four letters awaiting his return to Rome

the Christmas Mass at St Mary Major where a conserved piece of wood is reputed to be from the Manger of Bethlehem.³⁰ A letter to Fr. Carron, written on New Year's Day, 1841, gives us a clear picture of Libermann's state of mind at this time.

I must sacrifice my repose and my personal tastes. This is the only reason that impels me to seek ordination

I confess to you, my dear friend, that I always doubted whether Our Lord wished me to be a priest, and that I cannot persuade myself of it even now that everything seems certain. Nevertheless, I believe I ought to abandon myself to Providence, and if events so shape themselves that I may be ordained, I will advance without hesitation . . . Let us leave all in the hands of Our Lord. These good men have engaged me in their holy undertaking. I must continue what we have begun. I must sacrifice my repose and my personal tastes. This is the only reason that impels me to seek ordination and actuates me now in setting out for Strasbourg. But I can assure you that it costs me much to plunge again into the midst of men and to expose once more my salvation. The best thing a poor fellow like me could do would be to hide himself in some corner of the world where he would be overlooked and forgotten by all, where he would have no social contact with anyone, and might thus pass this wretched life in retirement and poverty, waiting for the great day of Our Lord. That would be my greatest desire, but it does not seem to be the will of God. Though bruised and grieved, I must go on; the Master wills it.³¹

He finally left Rome on 8 January, 1841, taking the boat from Civitavecchia to Marseilles on the 9th.

Things moved fairly quickly after that. The above letter indicates clearly Libermann's deep trust in divine Providence and co-operating with it. He waited for God's moment, patiently and confidently, in prayer and peace, ready to accept whatever signs and indications would be sent his way. His pilgrimage to Loreto helped him put these things into greater clarity, so that now, on his return to France, he is assured that the work for the Blacks has received both divine and ecclesiastical approval, and the same goes for the question of him being ordained a priest. On Ash Wednesday, 1841, he became a seminarian again in Strasbourg. On 15 June he received the sub-diaconate; on the 10 August, feast of St Lawrence, the Roman martyr, he was ordained a deacon. Bishop Mioland of Amiens, on the other side of France, was encouraged to offer a diocesan country house (La Neuville) for the work for the Blacks and he was also keen to ordain Libermann to the priesthood. So it was, that on the 18th of September, he was ordained priest in the bishop's private chapel in the cathedral of Amiens. On the 27th of September,

the novitiate of the infant Society of the Most Holy Heart of
Mary opened in La Neuville.
The rest is history!

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ENDNOTES

1. This is a revised version of a talk given to the generalate community in Rome for the feast of Libermann, February 2, 2018 and which subsequently appeared on the Congregation's Facebook page.
2. Coulon, Paul, C.S.Sp., *Libermann 1802–1852: Une pensée et une mystique missionnaires*. Paris: Les Editions de Cerf, 1988, 97.
3. Lee, George, C.S.Sp., *The Life of the Venerable Francis Libermann*. London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1937, 151–152. Original: Libermann, Francis, *Lettres Spirituelles*, (henceforth, L.S.), Vol. II, Paris, 301–302.
4. Letourneur, Jean, C.S.Sp. *Cahiers Libermann*, 5 vols. Seminaire des Missions, Chevilly. Livret 1, 77 (available only in typescript).
5. Coulon, *Libermann 1802–1852*, 97.
6. Lee, *Life of Venerable Francis Libermann*, 159.
7. Coulon, *Libermann 1802–1852*, 97.
8. *Ibid.*, 204.
9. Laurentin, René, “La Sainte Maison de La Vierge à Lorette,” *Chrétiens Magazine*, no. 81, 19
10. *Ibid.*, 20.
11. That Jesus hailed from Nazareth is attested by the notice affixed to the cross, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” However, Luke 2:4-5 has Nazareth as the home of Mary and Joseph before the birth of Jesus, while Matthew has Mary, Joseph, and the Child in Bethlehem, but moving from the flight into Egypt to Nazareth for fear of Archelaus. When Egeria (4th century) visited Nazareth, she was shown a cave in which Mary was said to have lived; the pilgrim of Piacenza (570 C.E.) spoke of the house of Mary that became a church. A rival Greek Orthodox tradition has the Annunciation to Mary fetching water at a well now in the Orthodox Church of St Gabriel built over a still active spring that leads to a well that pilgrims venerate as Mary's Well. The Crusaders took Nazareth in 1099 and built a larger church, though the Mamlukes destroyed the town in 1263. It is possible that the Angeli family removed the house to preserve it from destruction or desecration.
12. Letourneur, *Cahiers Libermann*, I, 112.
13. See Martins, Amadeu, C.S.Sp., “Libermann, ‘Man of Sufferings,’” *Spirititan Papers*, No.8 (Jan-Apr, 1979), 32.
14. Nicolas, François, C.S.Sp., “Le Père Libermann, Pélerin de Lorette,” Rome, 1989 (typescript copy only), 19.
15. Letourneur, *Cahiers Libermann*, I, 114.
16. *Ibid.*, 116.
17. Pitra, Cardinal Jean-Baptiste, *Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu François-Marie-Paul Libermann*. Troisième Edition. Paris: Librairie Poussielgue Frères, 1882, 381.

18. See Nicholas, *Le Père Libermann*, 24.
19. *Ibid.*, 20.
20. *Ibid.*, 26.
21. Letourneur, *Cahiers Libermann*, I, 119.
22. Martins, “Libermann, ‘Man of Sufferings,’” 34–35.
23. Pitra, *Vie du Vénérable Serviteur de Dieu*, 382–4
24. Nicholas, *Le Père Libermann*, 26.
25. Letourneur, *Cahiers Libermann*, 121.
26. Nicholas, *Le Père Libermann*, 27.
27. Letourneur, *Cahiers Libermann*, 121.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, 122; Nicholas, *Le Père Libermann*, 29.
30. Letourneur, *Cahiers Libermann*, 125.
31. *Notes et Documents*, II, 148; Lee, *Life of Venerable Francis Libermann*, 191–192.