Francis Libermann

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Jacob Libermann was born in the Jewish ghetto of Saverne in 1802. At the age of twenty four he was baptized a Catholic and entered a seminary to train for the priesthood. Ill health delayed his ordination until 1841. Once he was a priest he founded a religious order of missionary priests under the patronage of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The missionaries met great success in the mission fields of Haiti, Mauritius and Reunion where they ministered to the recently emancipated slaves.

In 1848 the Vatican fused the Immaculate Heart of Mary group with another similar religious order called the Spiritans who were in serious decline. Libermann was elected Superior General of the merged group and served in this position until his death a little over three years later. Because of his successes in this short time, Libermann has earned the title of “Second Founder of the Spiritans”.

**Integrating the old and the new**

What did he accomplish as eleventh Superior General of the Spiritans? His first priority was to bring unity of fellowship and purpose to the amalgamated group, the majority of whose members were opposed to the merger. The noble and open way with which Libermann met his new fellow-Spiritans quickly provided him with a foothold. His view of the exercise of authority by religious superiors was unique in the French church of the era. He rejected the authoritarian approach exercised by other religious leaders. Whoever had anything to do with him felt themselves disarmed by his uprightness and transparency. He never covered his hand when he played.

During his term of office he worked unceasingly to bring harmony between the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ Spiritans. The former resented the dissolution of their young vibrant congregation and their inheritance of the problems of another group and the ‘old’ Spiritans feared that their history and traditions would be ignored by the brash newcomers.

**Dealing with church and state**

Libermann had inherited many difficulties which involved Spiritan missions and personnel from the period before the fusion of the two religious orders. Also, at that time, the French government which had banned all religious orders and confiscated all their properties during the great revolution sixty years earlier, was now negotiating with the same orders to restore these rights.

Libermann drew up a plan for the governance of the church in the French colonies and for the training of priests for these missions. His vision for Reunion, Mauritius, Haiti, St. Pierre & Miquelon, Martinique, Guadeloupe and Guyane was accepted and is still in place to this day. Libermann’s non-confrontational approach made agreement between the Vatican, the French Government and the Spiritans possible and Spiritans minister in these countries and departments to this day, over one hundred and fifty years later. He had been entrusted by the state and the Church to compose a type of concordat on the relations...
between the civil and religious authorities in the colonies and had done it.

At the time of the negotiations, the Provincial of the Jesuits in France said of Libermann, “Both in Rome and Paris there is the conviction that Libermann is not only a holy priest but also an efficient and honest broker, a just and noble spirit, rich in ideas, a man with valuable advice to give. In fact, God has richly blessed him with the wisdom necessary for his position, with a sharp understanding which is very necessary for him in the complicated circumstances in which he finds himself, and with all the necessary intelligence that one needs in order to be able to do business in this world.”

A very full agenda
Throughout his short three years as Superior General of the Spiritans, Libermann was also deeply involved in the training of the many seminarians who flocked to join the congregation, in new initiatives for the poor and most neglected strata of French society, in the encouragement of his overseas missionaries and their works, in the vibrant spiritual movement among a segment of the clergy in Paris, but above all in maintaining harmony, peace and cooperation within the Spiritan family. As disagreements and divisions broke out, time after time he was there to cool tempers and to model reason and restraint.

The letter writer
Many thousands of his letters have survived. A study of them reveals the greatness of the man. To quote from just one of these letters: “We turn ourselves first of all to the poorest and most despised missions. God’s Providence has allotted us our duty among the Blacks, in the French colonies and in Africa. Those are the people who are most lost and most forgotten up until today. But it is our wish to work also in France for the salvation of souls, in the parishes and out in the country, above all, however, among the poor in the cities. We will take to ourselves the working class, who at this moment especially are in need of help. We will move to a large populated industrial city. There we will seek to win influence over the working class. The secular priests do not reach them, since they do not come to church.”

Doing a thousand and one things
There we see Libermann at full stretch, arranging for the appointments of bishops to the colonies, equipping an agricultural college in Senegambia, looking after the chimney sweeps and down and outs in Paris, Bordeaux and in the ports of France, seeing to the renewal of the clergy, doing a thousand and one things. And he was busy writing thousands of letters of counsel and consolation to people with problems. It was as if he was superhuman. Yet he was sickly and would die three and a quarter years after his inauguration as Superior General.

No wonder his vision and spirit and energy live on over a century and a half later in three thousand Spiritans worldwide, religious priests and brothers, lay associates and volunteer co-workers who revere his name and follow in his steps.

Based on a paper delivered by Fr. Joseph D’Ambrosio, C.S.Sp