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## FRANÇOIS LIBERMANN, THE SAVERNOIS MELTING POT OF A JEW FOUNDER OF A RELIGIOUS CONGREGATION

### INTRODUCTION

Mathieu Biala Balu CSSp.  
Originally from DR Congo, Fr. Mathieu Biala Balu was ordained a priest on July 18, 1998 in Brazzaville (Congo). His 1<sup>st</sup> assignment was Bangassou (Central African Republic). In 2000, he joined the Daniel Brottier Spiritan Seminary in Libreville (Gabon) as professor of African philosophy and bursar. He then spent 15 years in parish ministry in Libreville and Port-Gentil. Since February 2022, he has served as Superior of the Saverne Spiritan community.

*Translated  
from the French*

On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2023 we celebrated the one hundred and seventy first anniversary of the death of Fr. François Libermann (Saverne 1802 – Paris 1852), second founder of our congregation and spiritual teacher. He “was above all,” writes Gerard Nnamunga, “a man of his time who carefully interpreted the signs of his time. He was also a critical voice for the structural injustices of the first half of nineteenth-century Europe.”<sup>1</sup> Libermann wanted to “evolve” certain ideas of his time. His missionary commitment to the emancipation of the oppressed peoples of his time is known as the missionary project *l’Œuvre des Noirs*. Thus, in the founding text of his Provisional Rule, the proclamation of the Gospel is identified with the service of the poor.

Fr. Libermann’s inspiration and action have borne much fruit throughout the world. Also, it is indisputable that his work is rooted in the “first moment of his human and religious experience,” that is to say, in the first years of his life. For a human being, in fact, these first moments of existence are very important because an essential part of our relationship with the world is tied to our early years. This is particularly true in the case of Francis Libermann. Indeed, understanding his life and work involves revisiting the early years he spent with his family in Saverne. For, as we shall see, his family environment and his initial training will have a special influence in the orientations and major choices of his life.

In this article we propose to address some aspects of Libermann’s “Savernois experience” that may have shaped his future orientations as a spiritual guide and teacher. We will then deal with how Libermann is remembered and celebrated in Saverne, his hometown, where it all began.

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1. Nnamunga, Gerard Majella CSSp, “ Libermann’s Theological Anthropology and Contemporary Context”, *Spiritans Horizons*, 17, 2021. 10.

*On the eve of  
the Revolution,  
of the fifty  
thousand Jews  
in France,  
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community  
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thousand.*

## **JACOB LIBERMANN, THE SON OF THE RABBI OF SAVERNE, ALSACE**

### *Jews in Alsace*<sup>2</sup>

Jews have been settled in Alsace for several centuries. Many historians claim that the first Alsatian Jewish community may have been formed around the year one thousand. A votive stone evoking a donation to the synagogue and dating from the same period was indeed found near the Rue des Juifs, in Strasbourg, more than a century ago. But proof of a Jewish presence in Alsace dates back to the twelfth century. Alsatian Judaism is also distinguished by the large number of communities that settled in this region at that time. Thus, on the eve of the Revolution, of the fifty thousand Jews in France, the Alsatian community numbered twenty thousand.<sup>3</sup>

According to some historians, Saverne had 103 Jews in 1784, representing 21 families; in 1806, the Jewish community amounted to 252 people, about 5% of the population; in 1808, the Jewish population represented 260 people: “Jacob Libermann, six years old, was then one of the 140 children of this small Jewish village in the larger village of Saverne.”<sup>4</sup> The Jewish community was grouped in a separate neighborhood. It was then quite easy to identify the sociological criteria of his identification. As Paul Coulon writes, “although their outward appearance (long beard, papillotes, long frock coat) and their diet, it was their language that distinguished them and isolated them within the Christian population: they spoke Judeo-German among themselves, Alsatian and very little French.”<sup>5</sup> It was in such a very particular socio-cultural context that Jacob Libermann lived the first twenty years of his life in Saverne.

## **RABBI LAZARD LIBERMANN**

Jacob was born in the house adjacent to the synagogue served by his father, Rabbi Lazard Libermann. Many commentators attach some importance to this historical detail. “The rabbi’s house adjoined the

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2. On the situation of the Jews in Alsace and on the Libermann family in Saverne, one will read with great interest the article of Paul Coulon, “The Jewish genesis of Jacob Libermann in Saverne (1802 – 1822)”, *Mémoire Spiritaine*, 18, 2003. 11-30.
  3. Raphael, F., “Présence du juif dans la statuaire romane en Alsace”, *Journal of Social Sciences in Eastern France*, 2, 1973, 54-73.
  4. Coulon, Paul, “The Jewish genesis of Jacob Libermann in Saverne (1802 – 1822)”, *Op. Cit.*, p.15.
  5. *Ibid.*, 15-16

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*The rabbi of  
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community."*

synagogue. Its austere façade, its narrow and vaguely Moorish porch, its gable higher than that of the rabbi's house was reminiscent of a big brother who protects his younger brother by hugging him close to himself.<sup>6</sup> Paul Coulon accentuates this detail by insisting on the domestic dimension of the rabbinic ministry. According to him, it was indeed the "time when rabbinical activity was confined to the four cubits of the Halaka, that is to say inside the houses of prayer and religious studies."<sup>7</sup> Jacob's childhood was spent in the shadow of the synagogue.<sup>8</sup> It is worthwhile to recall some biographical details about his father.

Lazard Libermann was born in Saverne in 1758. He was brought up in the fear of the Lord. He was educated at the Talmudic school of Ettendorf<sup>9</sup> near Strasbourg in the Bas-Rhine department. In 1788 he married Leah Suzanne Haller, daughter of Rabbi Jacob Hallé, the principal of the Talmudic school. She gave birth to Jacob in 1802. That same year, Lazard became rabbi. He was, according to some Jewish witnesses, "poor, but highly esteemed and highly regarded: he was regarded as a scholar, and many came from afar to consult with him."<sup>10</sup> His rabbinical ministry was exercised in a context of strengthening faith among his co-religionists. The rabbi of Saverne "felt mandated by the God of his fathers to safeguard the shaky faith of the Jewish community."<sup>11</sup> He wanted to keep his community in purity, to protect them from the prevailing secular ideologies. He did not allow his children and students to learn French. Fr. Alphonse Gilbert CSSp sums up in illuminating terms this very particular context of the Jewish genesis of the faith of the young Jacob, "frightened by the race to liberalism of the young Jewish elite, the irascible rabbi educated his children and those of his school according to the rigorous principles of strict Jewish observance, free from all the harmful influences of the sur-

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6. Piacentini, R., *Son of a Rabbi, Father of apostles. The painful and fruitful life of F.-M.- P. Libermann, promoter of the African Missions in the nineteenth century*, Paris, Saint - Paul, 1959, 21.

7. Coulon, *Op. Cit.*, 28.

8. Gilbert, A., *God is everything. François Libermann*, Paris FAO Coll. "Soul and life", 1990, 13.

9. Letoutneur, C., *Libermann Notebooks*, Book One, Chevilly-Larue, 1967, 3. -Unpublished text, from now on CL.

10. Coulon, *Op. Cit.*, 19.

11. Gilbert, Alphonse, *Fire on earth. A path of holiness with François Libermann*, Paris, Le Sarment/ Fayard, 15.

*Following this conversion, the disappointment felt by the father was commensurate with the hope placed in his son so that he was inconsolable.*

rounding area.”<sup>12</sup>

It is in such a religious environment that Lazard wished to pass on to one of his sons his greatest treasure: his biblical and Talmudic knowledge. Jacob, his fifth son, the favorite son, seemed the best disposed for this purpose. Jacob’s biographers noted that he was a pious child, precocious, intelligent, with a vivid memory and assiduous scholar for study of the Talmud. But since God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, he will discover the light of the Christian faith. Following this conversion, the disappointment felt by the father was commensurate with the hope placed in his son so that he was inconsolable.

Rabbi Libermann’s action and influence on the Talmudic education of his son Jacob is evident and manifest. The latter was very proud of his father. He was a “distinguished rabbi,” he would say of him, a “man of science” enjoying a fine “consideration among his coreligionists.”<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Libermann was considered by all Saverinois as a man of integrity and sincere, a “just”, upright rabbi, carrying out his office with seriousness and determination. This is the testimony that can be read on his epitaph at the Jewish cemetery of Saverne:<sup>14</sup>

Here rests a pious, upright, and loyal man, he devoted himself to the study of the Torah night and day, with foresight. He served here as Rabbi for nearly 40 years. Passed away with a good reputation, our venerable master Liebermann, may the memory of the righteous be a source of blessings. Died and was buried on Friday 28 Shevat 591 according to the small compute (February 11, 1831). May his soul be bound to the bundle of the living.<sup>15</sup>

12. *Ibid.*, 16.

13. Libermann, Francis, *Notes and Documents I*, 61 (from now on ND).

14. The Jewish cemetery in Saverne: this land of one hectare on the hillside, “useless for agriculture,” had been ceded by the city to the Jewish community in the early seventeenth century for the Jews of Saverne and neighboring communities. It is a “little known” place, admits one of the officials of the Tourist Office. At the foot of a cliff, this cemetery is nevertheless there, rue du Haut – Barr, since 1632. In the middle of the forest, with the canal from the Marne to the Rhine located just below, “the scenery is very relaxing,” noted one of the 20 people who came to enjoy the guided tour offered during the European Day of Jewish Heritage. Cf. DNA (*Latest news from Alsace*) of 3 September 2018). This is the resting place of Rabbi Lazard Libermann, who died on February 10, 1831.

15. Translation of the epitaph engraved only in Hebrew by Alain Kahn (President of the Jewish Community of Saverne). The latter adds: “There is no

This is a beautiful tribute of the Savernois with strong words of gratitude. But many observers often present Rabbi Libermann as an authoritarian, tough, intractable man, “quite cold, distant (...), a little brittle.”<sup>16</sup> Were these character traits related to his “rigorism” in the transmission of Talmudic knowledge? We have already noted that the rabbi of Saverne directed his community and his school according to “the rigorous principles of strict Jewish observance,” free from all surrounding influences that he considered harmful. However, many Savernois also paid tribute to the “charity” and “kindness “ of Jacob’s father. Unanimously, the people of Saverne recognized that the rabbi was a “man with a big heart,” full of “very Christian charity.”

Here is the testimony of Fr. Bosch, who was born in Steinbourg, near Saverne in 1844 and entered the congregation in 1862.

The unanimous voice of all Jewish Savernois, Catholic and Protestant, attests that Rabbi Libermann was an upright, honest man and above all full of a completely Christian charity. I was shown, in the house where he lived, the room that was intended to receive, day and night, the needy knocking at his door. He maintained them at his own expense without ever putting anyone off.<sup>17</sup>

*Attention to  
the other, love  
of neighbor,  
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abandoned  
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the heart of  
the life and  
work of Jacob  
Libermann.*

This trait of the personality of the rabbi of Saverne – an honest, charitable, human man according to Fr. Briault, another Spiritan, – certainly marked the young Jacob Libermann. As Gilbert recalled, Jacob was immersed thanks to his father in the Jewish faith, in the atmosphere of the sacred and in the familiarity of the Eternal. But he certainly also learned from him attention to the needy, to all those who needed help. Very early on, Jacob was spoken of as “a young man with a heart of gold, who attracted to himself the friendship of all, especially that of many indigents whom the generosity of the rabbi attracted to his house, where they were fed and lodged.”<sup>18</sup> Attention to the other, love of neighbor, the poor, the abandoned will be at the heart of the life and work of Jacob Libermann.

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monument for his wife who probably did not stay in Saverne.”

16. *CL.*, 61.

17. *ND*, I, 9.

18. Gilbert, *Op. Cit.*, 16.

**LÉA SUZANNE HALLER  
AND THE FIGURE OF THE “DARLING MOM”<sup>19</sup>**

*She bore  
her husband  
seven  
children.  
She died  
on April 13,  
1813. Jacob  
was then  
eleven  
years old.*

We talked about the relationship between young Jacob and his father, Lazard Libermann. The latter’s influence on his education is indisputable. But what could have been his mother’s place in his life?

It was on November 12 1788 that Lazard Libermann married Léa Suzanne Haller, daughter of Rabbi Jacob Hallé, his former teacher in Ettendorf. Léa Suzanne Haller belonged to “a family renowned throughout Jewish Alsace for its piety, its science, its scrupulous orthodoxy.”<sup>20</sup> She bore her husband seven children. She died on April 13, 1813. Jacob was then eleven years old.<sup>21</sup> We know very little about Jacob’s mother. Samson Libermann, his elder, gives us a small indication in one of his letters:

My late mother died in 1813; she took little part in the early education of my brother (Jacob); Jewish women in Orthodox families find themselves, as in primitive times, subject to a certain respectful dependence on their husbands, and they ordinarily limit their sphere of action to the training of the household.<sup>22</sup>

*The respect  
due to  
a man who  
was admired  
by the people  
of his house  
and by the  
entire Jewish  
community.*

If primary education here is specifically about instruction (which is most likely the case), it is understandable that Libermann’s mother “took little part” in Jacob’s education. Indeed, the rabbi of Saverne, who was a “sure guide,” a “man of science,” serious in his work, and hence, “competent enough” to assume the primary education of his children. And as Fr. Jean Letourneur affirms, the “respectful dependence” of which Samson Libermann speaks is not to be confused with “reverential fear.” It must do, rather, with the respect due to a man who was admired by the people of his house and by the entire Jewish community of Saverne and elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> Does this mean that Jacob’s mother played no role in his upbringing?

*Le Robert*, the dictionary, defines education as the knowledge and

19. *CL.*, 1, 47.

20. *Ibid.*, 12.

21. We refer here to Coulon, *Mémoire Spiritaine*, 18, 2003, 22. He wrote: “Here is the family constellation of the rabbi of Saverne: from his first marriage, he had 6 sons and a daughter: Samson (1790), David (1794), Enoch (1796), Falick (1799), Jacob (1802), Nathanael (1805) and Esther (1807). After the death of his wife in 1813, from a second marriage: Isaac (1815) and Sarah (1816). Jacob / François Libermann had close relations especially with his eldest, Samson, a doctor, and with Falick/ Félix, who became a bookbinder in Paris.”

22. *ND*, I, 37.

23. *CL.*, 44.

*He did not  
speak directly  
about her  
because of the  
pain attached  
to her early  
death.*

practice of what is useful in society; the means to achieve something.<sup>24</sup> However, the following lines, which exalt the role of the (Jewish) mother, are significant: “Faithful guardian of the home, whether she is far from it, whether she is close to it, she always thinks about it. For it is she who is the mother, the nurturer (sic) of the children, the comforter of the husband, the mistress and protector of the house.”<sup>25</sup> In this sense, Léa Suzanne Haller, as “mistress of the house” and “protector” of her children, did more than “maintain the household” for Jacob, this “child with a heart of gold,” and her other children.

It can therefore be affirmed, without fear of being mistaken, that the very young Jacob received from his tender mother sufficient attention. We then understand the hypothesis that he did not speak directly about her because of the pain attached to her early death. This may explain why his letters give an important place to the figure of the mother, as evidenced by one of his letters to a missionary in difficulty.

Be like a little child with his dear mother. He’s struggling? He will immediately show it to his mother. He is much less concerned with healing than with the desire to make his mother see evil, so that she consoles him and gives him a little caress. The mother caresses him and dresses the wound. And the little one, without worrying about healing, without worrying about it, is content and quiet. His mother gives him a kiss; She speaks a few words of love to him; he is satisfied.<sup>26</sup>

These words, so profound and touching, can only be the fruit of “a real and living experience.” Having become a Christian, François Marie Paul Libermann will be attached to the Virgin Mary. We can say with Lucien Favre that the Church having become his new family, he found in the Virgin a mother who fully took the place of the mother he lost so prematurely. Favre wrote, the following, about Fr. Libermann’s relation with the Virgin Mary,

Throughout Libermann’s spiritual journey, there is the face of Mary. He who had lost his mother at the age of eleven, it is through the Marian experience that he will rediscover

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24. We can evoke here the initiation into the (good) ways of society, starting with life within the family, knowledge-living, politeness, etc.

25. *CL.*, 46.

26. *ND*, VIII, 206.



the infinite tenderness of a maternal heart. Therefore, it is to Mary that he will consecrate the future missionary congregation and he will not hesitate to give the mother of Jesus as a model and refuge to all his missionaries.<sup>27</sup>

*Within  
his family too,  
he was  
the spiritual  
guardian,  
concerned  
with the care  
of their souls.*

Continuing this assertion of Favre, we note in Pierre Blanchard the idea according to which the premature death of his mother, the separation from his father through his departure from Saverne until the death of the latter in 1831, François Libermann maintained constant relations with his brothers, “all full of cordiality and intimacy.” According to him, being “very kind, he was much loved.” Within his family too, he was the spiritual guardian, concerned with the care of their souls.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, he remained a “sign of contradiction” for those in his family and the Jewish community who did not understand the call of Christ who touched his heart.<sup>29</sup>

## **FR. LIBERMANN REMEMBERED AND CELEBRATED IN SAVERNE**

### *Attentive to the Calls of the Spirit*

To speak of Father Libermann’s actuality is to evoke the way in which the Spiritan charism is lived today, thanks to listening to the Spirit. How is Libermann’s intuition actualized in Saverne? How do we make ourselves more attentive to “the poor of today”?

### *The Libermannian heritage memory in Saverne*

By “heritage memory” we mean all material symbols evoking the memory of Fr. Libermann in Saverne. Among the great symbols of Libermannian memory in Saverne, we undoubtedly have the *Maison Saint-Florent*. According to the testimony of Fr. Robert Metzger CSSp, this old gendarmerie was bought by the Congregation of the Holy Spirit in 1900.<sup>30</sup> The reputation of the *Maison Saint-Florent* is attached to its Apostolic School (or Missionary School) where 2,169 students were trained from September 1900 until its closure in 1973. R. Metzger adds that the “Saint-Florent mission was to form mature and solid men, assertive Christians, able to flourish” as missionaries of Libermann or as

27. Favre, L., François Libermann. A Spiritual Guide for Today, The BookEdition.com, 2018, 45.

28. Blanchard, Pierre, *Venerable Libermann (1802–1852)*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1960, Vol 1, 31.

29. *Ibid.*, 33.

30. The Maison Saint Florent celebrated its centenary in the year 2000, the year of the Great Jubilee. As part of this centenary’s celebrations, an *Exhibition on Libermann and Africa* took place at the Musée des Rohan in Saverne.

*It is possible  
to visit  
the tomb  
of Lazard  
Libermann  
in the Jewish  
cemetery of  
Saverne.*

*It was  
rediscovered  
after recent  
restoration  
work.*

*Through the  
magazine  
Echo de  
la Mission,  
whose  
hundreth  
anniversary  
was celebrated  
in 2021, we  
communicate  
our concern  
for the  
mission beyond  
borders.*

citizens committed to society. 420 Spiritan missionaries graduated from the Saint-Florent Apostolic School.

On July 13, 1980, a plaque was erected near the site of Fr. Libermann's birthplace. In 1968, this house was "replaced by a building on which a commemorative plaque is affixed." On the plaque we can read the verse of St. Luke, "The Lord has sent me to bring the Good News to the poor" (Luke, 4). This monument is built by the association "*Les Amis de Libermann*" and the city of Saverne. It should also be noted that there is a stained-glass window in memory of Libermann in the parish church of Saverne. Also, for some time now, it is possible to visit the tomb of Lazard Libermann in the Jewish cemetery of Saverne. It was rediscovered after recent restoration work was carried out on the site. One becomes aware of the living memory of Fr. Libermann while walking through the city of Saverne. We meet, not far from the *Maison Saint-Florent*, the *rue du Père-Libermann*. The *Maison Saint-Florent* houses the *Espace-Libermann* which offers visitors a permanent exhibition allowing them to revisit the life and work of Fr. Libermann from his childhood in Saverne to the present day. Within the *Maison Saint-Florent*, there is also a permanent exhibition of photos produced by the *Amicale des Anciens de Saint-Florent* for the celebration of the centenary of the house. It traces Saint Florent's 100 years of history.

## THE UPDATING OF THE FIGURE OF LIBERMANN IN THE SAVERNOIS CONTEXT

A Libermannian heritage memory par excellence, the *Maison Saint-Florent* is also a place to celebrate the Spiritan charism. In fact, this house no longer houses an apostolic school, but it continues to be a place of welcome and openness, reflection, and expression of solidarity with all, especially with the poor.

Indeed, a few years ago, the house management established the *Matinales de Saint-Florent*. These mornings of reflection, exchange, and spiritual renewal, are arranged around themes and various subjects oriented towards the Spiritan charism and offer the opportunity for participants to connect with Father Libermann. Other moments of animation make our visitors sensitive to the diversity of the problems specific to Spiritan mission. Through the magazine *Echo de la Mission*, whose hundreth anniversary was celebrated in 2021, we communicate our concern for the mission beyond borders.

The house also plays the role of accompanying the Spiritan Fraternities Spirit and Mission. During these meetings, special attention is paid to the texts of Fr. Libermann. Four Spiritan Fraternities are

present in the North East of France, including one recently created in Saverne, named *Saint Florent*.

The *Foyer Père-Daniel-Brottier* in Strasbourg, attached to the community of the *Maison Saint-Florent* since 2020, welcomes students eager to live a community experience and share in the Spiritan charism. The figure of Fr. Libermann, his attention to the poor, finds much interest among these young people.

*We are invited to remind the people of Saverneois what a great man they count among their compatriots:*

*François-Marie-Paul Libermann, “the most illustrious of the Saverneois.”*

The main anniversaries concerning the life of our congregation or those directly related to the *Maison Saint-Florent* are also opportunities to remember Father Libermann. Thus, on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, the *Maison Saint-Florent* celebrates this event in a special way with a conference on an aspect of Fr. Libermann’s life and work. At the beginning of the pastoral year, the Friends of the *Écho of the Mission* meet to share the joy of their commitment to the service of the mission beyond borders. The patronal feast of the *Maison Saint-Florent* is celebrated on November 7<sup>th</sup>. The Elders of the Apostolic Schools of Neufgrange, Blotzheim and Saverne have their feast day on May 1<sup>st</sup>. There are these and other many moments of conviviality for the “Friends of Fr. Libermann.”

The presence of an intercultural, international, and intergenerational community at *Maison Saint-Florent*, the apostolate, the various pastoral commitments of the members (services in parishes or in retirement homes, listening, sacrament of reconciliation...) and above all the way of living and accomplishing this mission are the fruit of Libermann’s intuition. We are invited to remind the people of Saverne what a great man they count among their compatriots: François-Marie-Paul Libermann, “the most illustrious of the *Saverneois*.” These words of Mr. Adrien Zeller, former mayor of Saverne, summarize well the mission of the *Maison Saint-Florent*:

Our contemporaries are looking for social and human values and spiritual references. In Saverne, the *Maison Saint Florent* uses its time serving men and women in search of meaning. It remains, according to a strongly affirmed will, a significant Libermannian place.<sup>31</sup>

## CONCLUSION

At the end of this brief journey, it should be remembered that Jacob Libermann spent the first twenty years of his life in Saverne in a kind

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31. Mr. Adrien Zeller, Mayor of Saverne during the celebration of the centenary of the *Maison Saint Florent* (2000). Cf. *The Centenary Year of Saint Florent (1900-2000)*, Unpublished text, 16.

of self-centered “cultural ghetto.” But François Libermann will be “the universal man,” open to all. Indeed, seized by Christ, he will put the poor at the heart of his missionary project. Through his exceptional life and his work, Fr. Libermann will continue to be a model for all those who, even today, are committed to the service of the weak and the little ones, also created in the image and likeness of God.

*The Saints  
hardly ever  
grow old.*

In Saverne, places of memory and various activities perpetuate the message of this illustrious Alsatian. All recognize that Fr. Libermann is, without question, the *Savernois* whose influence has been, for more than a century and a half, the greatest in the world. It is appropriate to apply these words of Pope St. John Paul II to Jacob Libermann:

The Saints hardly ever grow old. They remain continually witnesses of the youthfulness of the Church. They never become characters of the past, men and women of “yesterday.” On the contrary: they are always the men and women of “tomorrow,” the men and women of the evangelical future of humankind and of the Church, the witnesses “of the world to come.”<sup>32</sup>

*Mathieu Biala Balu CSSp,  
Maison St-Florent,  
Saverne, France.*

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32. John Paul II, from “Homily during the Apostolic Journey to Lisieux.” June 2, 1980.