

Fall 10-1-2023

## “Doing Something New” with Venerable Francis Libermann

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### Recommended Citation

Cleary, B. (2023). “Doing Something New” with Venerable Francis Libermann. *Spiritan Horizons*, 20 (20). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol20/iss20/7>

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## “DOING SOMETHING NEW” WITH VENERABLE FRANCIS LIBERMANN

### INTRODUCTION

Bagamoyo II, the 2021 General Chapter (GC XXI), calls on Spiritans to respond as missionaries to the needs of the time by “doing something new.” Such a call is a reminder that the Spiritan way of living and preaching the gospel in the contemporary world is “determined by the times, and the places we are living in” (Spiritan Rule of Life, 15) and that Spiritans take on works within the Church “as it is in our time” (Spiritan Rule of Life, 13). This article examines how Venerable Francis Libermann transcended the particularities of his life to embrace a new way of understanding God and a new way to engage with the world. As Spiritan Scholar and former Superior General Fr. Joseph Lécuyer put it, Libermann “refused to be bound by Gallican, nationalist, colonialist, political, racial or social ideologies” of his time.<sup>1</sup> It is proposed that Libermann’s new way of engaging with the world was wholly consistent with his refusal to be bound spiritually by a particular school of spirituality and a rigid spiritual discipline. Spiritan Scholar, Fr. Christy Burke maintained that if Libermann were to do otherwise it “would indicate a defect in spirituality, a kind of ‘ghetto spirituality’ that distorts the gospel.”<sup>2</sup>

### LIBERMANN, SON AND SEMINARIAN

#### *The Ghetto Years*

Jacob Libermann, the devoted son, in training to succeed his father Lazard as rabbi, was immersed in the life of the Jewish ghetto of Saverne. He did not know French and spoke Yiddish, the language of the ghetto, up until 1822 when he went to Metz for further Talmudic studies. We know of a ghetto mentality at work in him that engendered a fear of Catholicism.<sup>3</sup> Can we assume that Libermann internalized his father’s opposition to the popular movement for the

1. Lécuyer, Joseph, CSSp, “The Spirituality of Father Libermann.” *Spiritan Papers* 12, 1980. 23–38, at 37.
2. Burke, Christy, CSSp, *Morality and mission: A case study: Francis Libermann and slavery (1802-1852)*. Nairobi, Paulines Publications, 1998. 24.
3. *Notes et Documents Relatifs à la vie et à l’Oeuvre du Vénérable François-Marie-Paul Libermann*. 13 vols. + supplements. Paris. Maison-Mère, 1929–41. (henceforth, N.D.) I,66.

integration of Jews into French society? Lazard believed that separation would maintain the purity of Jewish traditions and opposed Jewish reformers who advocated for a measured assimilation into French cultural and political life.

*Perfection, ...,  
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### ***The Seminary Years***

It is suggested by scholars like Burke, that a “ghetto mentality” continued during Libermann’s seminary years. Following his baptism and estrangement from his father in 1826, *St-Sulpice*, the seminary founded in Paris by Fr. Jean-Jacques Olier in 1642, became his home. Fr. Perée, a fellow seminarian confirmed the formative influence of St. Sulpice and the Sulpician spirituality.

Fr. Libermann was completely penetrated by the doctrine and the spirit of Fr. Olier; he never missed an opportunity to put them forward, to develop them, they were the measure of all his instructions and he strongly urged the seminarians to take them as the measure of all their opinions, of all their projects and behavior, while they were at the seminary and afterwards for their whole life.<sup>4</sup>

Perée summarized Libermann’s spiritual doctrine by recalling his teaching, “Perfection, he often told us, is enclosed in two words: renunciation of everything, whole union with God.”<sup>5</sup> This summary resonates with the presentation of the French School “as a model of what the ordinary lives of Christians finally entail – the joining of all in the harmony of the one body of Christ to the glory of the Father, a life hidden in ordinariness, made extraordinary in the heroic effort to make Christ’s presence, Christ’s Spirit, the very breadth and depth of all that is.”<sup>6</sup>

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Libermann’s twelve years lived in a secluded seminary setting first with the Sulpicians in Paris (1827-37) and then the Eudists in Rennes (1837-39) provided the environment for a profound deepening of his spiritual life. Apart from “the dangers of living in the world”, his letters at this time suggest that he gave little thought to the moral and social questions of his time. Writing to a seminarian he described the

4. N.D. I, 311.

5. N. D. I, 313.

6. Thayer David T. “The French School” in *The Bloomsbury Guide to Christian Spirituality*. Edited by Richard Woods and Peter Tyler, London: Bloomsbury, 2012. 171-183 at 181.

*The Gospels  
and St Paul  
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and more the  
source-books  
on which he  
draws and  
from which  
he quotes  
constantly.*

world as “wretched” and “so full of abominations that it would corrupt even those who wish to rescue it from the horrible state in which it lies.”<sup>7</sup> Meditating in 1831 on the hidden life of Jesus in Nazareth, Libermann recognized the “great treasures” of peace, gentleness and humility to be found in the secluded life the seminary offers “that is essential for the great ministry to which we are called.”<sup>8</sup> Writing to another seminarian on the dangers of living in the world, Libermann urged “do not be disturbed by the fact that it pleases God to keep you in the world, but at the same time do not consider yourself perfectly secure.”<sup>9</sup>

### **LIBERMANN, MYSTIC AND SPIRITUAL GUIDE**

How did Libermann transition from distrust of the world and his advocacy for maintaining distance from it, to an engagement with the world that would lead him not only to leave the seminary enclosure but to also found a missionary society? There was certainly a transition and, as suggested here, a missionary outreach grounded in the breadth and depth of an inclusive spirituality.

Following his conversion from Judaism and during his seminary days, Libermann sought a grammar and vocabulary to give Christian expression to his life experience. This he did by immersing himself in the language and practices of the French School of Spirituality. He often quoted Fr. Olier and recommended people to read him, and at Rennes he studied St John Eudes. “Later, however reference to these two disappear almost completely. The Gospels and St Paul become more and more the source-books on which he draws and from which he quotes constantly.”<sup>10</sup> His spirituality grounded on the experience of “the absoluteness of God and the nothingness of the creature,” outgrew the once needed scaffolding of Olier and the French School. This is well illustrated by the advice Libermann gave in a letter dated January 10, 1844, to the much-troubled Fr. Étienne Clair (nephew of M<sup>gr</sup> Mioland, himself superior of the missionaries of Lyon and Bishop of Amiens from 1837 to 1849, who in September 1841 ordained Libermann a priest).

In regard to the direction of souls, adopt as a fundamental principle that we should avoid impeding or constricting

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7. Van de Putte, Walter, CSSp, *Spiritual Letters of the Venerable Francis Libermann. Volume 4: Letters to Clergy and Religious II*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1964. 16-7.

8. *Ibid.* 69.

9. *Ibid.* 267

10. Lécuyer, 37.

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excessively the ones we direct. Let us not prescribe too many rules to them. We ought not to follow any determined system of spirituality; otherwise, we will do harm to souls. ... I consider it a point of capital importance in the matter of direction that we leave great freedom to the action of grace. We should distinguish between true and false attraction and prevent souls from rejecting true attractions as well as going beyond them.<sup>11</sup>

Commentators often associate Libermann’s spirituality with the French School which remains “not only in the Church of France, but throughout the world. At times its light has faded, only to be renewed in the voices of such as François Libermann (1802-52), Frederick William Faber (1814-63), Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-97) and Madeleine Delbrel (1904-64).”<sup>12</sup> Yet, as seen in the advice for spiritual direction given to Fr. Clair, Libermann “outgrew” the scaffolding that the French School provided and let it fall away as he focused on the primacy of the Holy Spirit and the operation of grace in a Christian holiness that is at once devout and apostolic.

This was a spirituality “ahead of its time.” Conscious always of attending to God’s providence for him, can it be said that the God of the prophet Isaiah would speak approvingly of Libermann, “Watch for the new thing I am going to do. It is happening already – you can see it now!” (Isaiah 43:19). As a spiritual guide Libermann went beyond the “determined systems of spirituality” in which he was trained and advanced a spirituality grounded in openness to the Spirit and respect for the person.

## **LIBERMANN, PRIEST AND MISSIONARY**

### ***Founder of the Missionary Society of the Holy Heart of Mary***

The second and shorter part of Libermann’s life (1840-52) began with great personal suffering and self-doubt. As Bernard A. Kelly CSSp wrote, Libermann’s “firm conviction of his utter uselessness combined with an intense desire to achieve something worthwhile for the glory of God”<sup>13</sup> was a great source of anxiety for him. He was convinced that God had a special purpose in mind for him. But what was it? The answer came from fellow seminarians passionate about

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11. Van de Putte, Volume 5: *Letters to Clergy and Religious* III. 197.

12. Thayer David T., 172.

13. Kelly, Bernard A. CSSp. *Life Began at Forty*. Dublin, Paraclete Press, 2005. 78.

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responding to the spiritual needs of the enslaved black people in the colonies particularly in Haiti and Reunion. They called on him first to be their spiritual guide, and then to lead them. He came to realize that this was the special purpose as one of these, Eugene Tisserant recalled, he "began to experience a strong desire to give himself completely to the Work for the Blacks ... he was strengthened in his desire by a clearer insight, which allowed him, as he told me himself, to definitely make up his mind."<sup>14</sup> With his departure from the enclosed life of Rennes for the open road to Rome and the founding of a missionary society dedicated to the Work for the Blacks Libermann's life was transformed into one of "intense apostolic activity".<sup>15</sup>

The extraordinary transformation in Libermann is difficult to explain without the gospel language of metanoia, "change of heart". An abrupt departure from Rennes was out of character and annoyed, not least, Fr. Louis de la Morinière, the superior, to whom Libermann announced his leaving by letter after he had left. His year in Rome to secure permission for a new missionary society in the Church, his ordination, and subsequent years in Amiens as he established the society's home base and overseas missions present us with a Libermann deeply engaged in the formation of his members, the preparation and planning for their life and work, and the encouragement needed for their mission to succeed. We can say of Libermann, what is often said of Spiritans today, "he excelled at learning on the job." He demonstrated worldly wisdom, engaging in the political, financial, and ecclesial affairs necessary to carry on the mission.

At this time, looking back on his years with the Sulpicians, Libermann wrote that while they gave good advice for the soul, when it came to his missionary project he needed to look elsewhere as "they hear little that happens outside their circle." His letter continued, "It would be a very extraordinary thing that they (the Sulpicians) understood and would be able to judge well of these things of which they have no experience and of which they cannot have an exact idea. Still once, in this, let us put our trust in God, let us consult him since we have hardly any other advisers at the moment."<sup>16</sup>

### ***Superior General of the Holy Ghost Congregation 1848-1852***

1848 was a tumultuous year for France with the February Revolution resulting in the abdication of the last king of the French, Louis Philippe

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14. ND I, 660-1.

15. Kelly, 109.

16. N.D. VI, 118.

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and the establishment of a republic. With keen political sense, Liebermann wrote from Amiens on March 20 to Fr. Gamon, a friend from his days at St. Sulpice, noting that all was quiet in the town although a few public buildings were attacked. He attributed the social unrest to a government "which looked only to its own interests rather than those of the people confided to its care."<sup>17</sup> He saw that the same was happening throughout Europe with those in power, - including "the dictator of Russia" - reaping the whirlwind of their despotism.

They increased the sufferings of their peoples and did not hesitate to demoralize them in the interests of their own power and their march towards absolutism. I believe the echoes of the revolution in France will hit them as well and bring down a good number of them. The dictator of Russia will not be spared.<sup>18</sup>

Liebermann's sensitivity to the suffering of ordinary citizens and his global and critical evaluation of the political powers of his time differed significantly to that of French Church leadership in general and of another outstanding French missionary, Cardinal Charles Lavigerie (1825-1892), founder of the Missionaries of Africa and archbishop of Carthage and Algiers. His biographer, François Renault concluded that Lavigerie "like the rest of the French Bishops, showed what seems to us a remarkable insensitivity to social injustice and a blindness to the nature of the structures which produced it."<sup>19</sup>

1848 was a momentous year that tested Liebermann's resolve

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17. *A Spiritan Anthology: Writings of Claude-François Poullart des Places (1679-1709) and François Marie-Paul Liebermann (1802-1852). Chosen and presented by Christian de Mare, CSSp.* Enugu, 2011 (henceforth *Anthology*) 150.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Renault, François. *Cardinal Lavigerie Churchman, Prophet and Missionary.* Translated by John O' Donohue. London, The Athlone Press, 1994. 199. After Liebermann's time the Spiritans, along with the Comboni and SMA Missionaries would learn of Lavigerie's "subterranean intrigues" and "boundless ambitions" through a *Propaganda Fide* decree (September 27, 1880) he secretly engineered in a "land grab" for the African interior, which, among other directives, confined Spiritan missionary work to 400 Kms inland from the coast. Unfortunately, Liebermann was not alive to provide a counterweight to Lavigerie's political intrigues. See Koren, H., Littner, H. "Le cardinal Lavigerie et les missions spiritaines au cœur de l'Afrique," *Mémoire Spiritaine*, 8, 43.

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and skills as a leader and missionary strategist.<sup>20</sup> Negotiations on a union with the Congregation and Seminary of the Holy Spirit were gathering momentum. Correspondence to Libermann from Fr. Alexandre Monnet, the superior, and his first assistant, Fr. Jean-Baptiste Loevenbruck, who played a key role in the proceedings, moved frenetically from enthusiasm, to doubt, to certainty, to confusion, and back to doubt again.<sup>21</sup> Fortunately Loevenbruck returned from Rome with news of the appointment of Monnet as Vicar Apostolic to Madagascar paving the way for Libermann to succeed him as eleventh superior general.

The way forward met with opposition from both communities. Libermann wrote to the members of the Holy Heart of Mary persuading them to accept the arrangement. He emphasized that the coming together was in accordance with the will of God. "They do the same work and walk along the same line." He surmised that it was not in the order of providence to raise up two societies within the church for a special work if one was sufficient.<sup>22</sup> The Archbishop of Paris, M<sup>gr</sup>. Sibour, had a different understanding of the working of providence and took offence at not being consulted over the union and the election of Libermann as superior. He threatened the legal status of the seminary demanding its return to the diocesan approval granted it in 1734. Libermann engaged in considerable correspondence with Sibour on the matter, and with consummate tact, ultimately prevailed.<sup>23</sup>

### **LIBERMANN, MYSTIC AND MISSIONARY**

Blessed Anne Marie Javouhey (1779-1851), the foundress of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, found in Libermann a spirituality that was both mystical and missionary. She turned to him for advice and help as she encountered much opposition from Church authorities to her missionary work. She wanted Libermann to be spiritual director to her sisters. More than that, her problems with bishops so threatened the work of her congregation that on a visit to La Neuville (Libermann's novitiate in Amiens) in April 1844, she proposed a union of the two congregations with him as superior.

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20. For a chronology of events for 1848 see Paul Coulon, Paule Brasseur et collaborateurs, *Libermann 1802-1852. Une pensée et une mystique missionnaires*, Paris, Le Cerf, 1988. 115-9.

21. N. D. X, 396-411.18. Letters from May 8 to September 10, 1848.

22. N. D. X, 339-344.

23. N. D. XI, 458-469.



Prudence prevented this as Libermann,

did not wish to be responsible for a congregation of nuns, which counted some 700 members, two thirds of whom were in France and only one third out of France. Moreover, his own congregation was only in its infancy and had not yet been approved by Rome. Libermann also feared opposing Bishop d'Héricourt and the bishops with Cluny sisters in their diocese.<sup>24</sup>

*Libermann's strategy was not the expansion of a European church but the coming to birth of the Church in every culture and each human being in the world so that the good news of salvation could be heard by all. His was a global vision.*

Javouhey referred to Libermann as “the saintly founder of a new order, dedicated to the conversion of the black people...”<sup>25</sup> For him, the absoluteness of God relativized everything else. Can it be said of him, as it was said of the Lord, here is a teaching that is new and with authority to it (Mark 1:27)?

### ***God's love for all***

Libermann's perspective was fashioned by a profound conviction of God's love for all people. He believed that the gospel of salvation must be preached to the ends of the earth. In his commentary on John's Gospel, when meditating on the infamous line from Caiaphas that it is better for one man to die, than the nation perishes (John 11:50) he wrote, “Caiaphas seems to say that the Son of God died for the Jewish people, and God adds what Caiaphas did not prophesy, that he died for all peoples to reunite all in the Church of God.... He did not die just for a part of the human race but gave his life for (all) in general and for each one in particular.”<sup>26</sup> Libermann's strategy was not the expansion of a European church but the coming to birth of the Church in every culture and each human being in the world so that the good news of salvation could be heard by all. His was a global vision.

Libermann had already diagnosed the need for greater investment by French church leaders to reach out and give of their best to the new churches beginning in the colonies. Writing to Fr. Feret, a seminary director, he highlighted the responsibility bishops had for

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24. Ducol, B., “Dans la même portion de la vigne: le père Libermann et la mère Javouhey”. *Mémoire Spiritaine*, 12 2019. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/memoire-spiritaine/vol12/iss12/4>. 11 – 33 at 19.

25. *Spiritans Horizons*, 2010, 5. 11.

26. Francis Mary Paul Libermann CSSp, *Jesus through Jewish Eyes, A Spiritual Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*. Part 3, Chapters IX-XII. Translated by Myles Fay. Dublin: Paraclete Press, 1995, 182-3.

the universal Church.

*Libermann anticipated the call of Vatican II that "... bishops should gladly extend their fraternal assistance in the fellowship of an all-pervading charity to other Churches."*

... Those who have the fullness of the priesthood of their Master should extend their mercy throughout the earth and rejoice when this divine Master sends saviors to abandoned souls, and not to be stingy in order to give them only what cannot be of much use. When Our Lord sent the great Saint Paul to the vile Gentiles, who dared want to retain that incomparable Apostle in Judea for the good of the chosen people?<sup>27</sup>

Here Libermann anticipated the call of Vatican II that "... bishops should gladly extend their fraternal assistance in the fellowship of an all-pervading charity, to other Churches, especially to neighboring ones and to those in need of help."<sup>28</sup>

#### **SINGLE MINDED**

Libermann was laser focused on the calling that brought him from the secluded world of the seminary to the apostolic life. His was a mission to the enslaved of the French colonies and the Black people. Other founders of religious congregations sought the restoration of the church in France sorely threatened by the growing secularism of the age (since 1789 some two thirds of French clergy and religious were exiled or killed). One of these, Fr. Basil Moreau (1799-1873), gathered a number of priests from his own diocese of Le Mans in northwestern France and formed a missionary association in 1837, the Congregation of the Holy Cross (CSC). He set about renewing parishes through the founding of schools and junior seminaries.

Moreau reached out to explore the possibility of a merger between his congregation and the Holy Heart of Mary.<sup>29</sup> Libermann declined as such a merger would compromise the mission to which he and his followers had dedicated themselves. Moreau's congregation was focused on restoring the French church primarily through education. This was a very different work to Libermann's *l'Œuvre des Noirs*. He likened the proposal to a patch work coat without design or order. He could not see a common spirit embracing both congregations

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27. *Lettres Spirituelles du Vénérable Libermann, Premier Supérieur Général de la Congrégation du S. Esprit Et du St. Cœur de Marie*. II, 317-8. Letter of December 15 1839 to M. Feret.

28. Documents of Vatican II. *Lumen Gentium* 23.

29. N.D. III, 153-159.

necessary for unified governance. Libermann also feared a dilution of the spirit of self-sacrifice so necessary for mission and so powerfully expressed following the disaster of his first mission to Guinea in 1843. The tragic deaths of the missionaries, and the extraordinary courage and conviction of the novices who immediately volunteered to replace them, bore testimony to the missionary zeal at La Neuville.

### **FAITES-VOUS NÈGRES AVEC LES NÈGRES**

A prominent voice for Catholic liberalism at the time, Charles Forbes René de Montalembert (1810-1870) voiced the concerns of many that the clergy trained at the Holy Ghost Seminary and serving in the colonies left much to be desired. He contrasted them with the zeal of English Protestant clergy for the liberated slaves.<sup>30</sup> Fr. Nicolas Warnet, professor and acting Superior of the Holy Ghost Seminary in 1845 and one of the few members of the seminary sympathetic to the “Libermannists” entered into the public debate by agreeing in part with de Montalembert’s assessment and promised change.

*A project of spiritual reorganization of the French colonies is being made which establishes this clergy in the appropriate conditions to produce in the colonies all the good that can be desired*

We believe with the Count of Montalembert that the clergy of the colonies has not been in a position until now to produce all the desirable amount of good: that a reorganization of this clergy is necessary. We can feel this more than anyone else and it is there that our wishes and efforts have been directed for a long time; we are happy to announce that in this respect, things are more advanced than the noble peer believes: a project of spiritual reorganization of the French colonies is being made which establishes this clergy in the appropriate conditions to produce in the colonies all the good that can be desired.<sup>31</sup>

Five years later, the situation of the colonial clergy so severely

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30. This evaluation of the clergy trained at Holy Ghost Seminary, made in 1845, suggests a distinct fall from grace for that institution and the caliber of its students. An evaluation made in 1752 by the L’Abbé de l’Isle Dieu, the priest responsible to the King and the Holy See for clerical appointments to the colonies and the Far East was full of praise for the seminary. “All who come from this institution are very good men. The education they get there for life is fairly hard, the studies are good, the priestly spirit is well taught, the students are trained in a great simplicity of behavior, moral theology is studied well. The best priests in your colonies and in the Far East missions have come from this institution.” See Henry J. Koren CSSp, *Knaves or Knights*, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1962. 15.

31. N. D. VII., 494-5.

*Be a Negro  
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of being.*

criticized by de Montalembert seems to have continued as evident from a memorandum written by Libermann to the bishops of Guadeloupe, Martinique and Reunion strongly rebuking the colonial clergy who “did not dare to show the Negroes the interest they deserved” but rather took the side of the slave-owners.<sup>32</sup> The interest they deserved was nothing less than what Libermann wrote to his missionaries in Dakar and Gabon in 1847, “Be African with the Africans, and you will learn how to judge them as they should be judged. Be a Negro with the Negro, so as to form them into what they can be, not along European lines, but according to their own way of being.”<sup>33</sup>

Spiritans, particularly since Vatican II, have variously expressed this ideal. The 1998 General Chapter at Maynooth, Ireland (GC XVIII), perhaps expresses it best. “We go to people not primarily to accomplish a task, but rather to be with them, live with them, walk beside them, listen to them, and share our faith with them. At the heart of our relationship is trust, respect, and love.”<sup>34</sup>

### ***The local church***

In taking up the position of Superior of the Seminary of the Holy Ghost at 30 Rue des Postes, Paris, Libermann became a national figure. But as before, this advance onto the national stage did not deflect him from his *l’Œuvre des Noirs*. He was an ardent supporter of *Neminem Profecto*, the missionary instruction of 1845 from *Propaganda Fide* challenging the eurocentrism of the time that militated against the establishment of truly local churches in mission territories.

The missionary expansion of the end of the century in connection (willingly or unwillingly) with the colonial conquests and the ideology of Western superiority could hardly have been claimed by a text that vigorously supported an indigenous clergy on an equal footing with the Europeans and demanded that missionaries not interfere in the affairs of secular politics.<sup>35</sup>

Libermann advocated for an indigenous clergy and an indig-

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32. N. D. XII. 245-307 at 265.

33. *Anthology*, 287.

34. The Generalate, Rome, 1998. *The General Chapter 1998 Maynooth Ireland*. 99.

35. Coulon, Paul (2019). *Neminem Profecto: Instruction de la Propagande du 23 novembre 1845. Mémoire Spiritaine, 3*. Retrieved from <https://dsc.dug.edu/memoire-spiritaine/vol3/iss3/9>. 111 - 142 at 111.

*I know that  
you are not  
Christians, but  
also know that  
your hearts are  
good and that  
you love what-  
ever is good.  
... The people  
of Dakar are  
good: they  
know God and  
so they are not  
unhappy.*

enous hierarchy as part of a “stable system of organization rooted in the soil which we wish to cultivate.”<sup>36</sup> This strategy was in response to the example of Angola where the church which once prospered, had all but disappeared, as it relied on missionaries who “did not take the steps required to consolidate the fruits of their works by giving to their converts the enduring strength of a Church.”<sup>37</sup>

In this, as in relation to French politics, Libermann differed from Cardinal Lavigerie’s approach to the establishment of the Church in Africa. Lavigerie fully accepted the European monoculturalism of his time. His focus was on the Christianization of Africa. This, he maintained, could only be achieved through the establishment of local authorities with the power to maintain order and ensure the security of the missionaries. Lavigerie also understood missionary work in Africa as equivalent to the establishment of French culture. He “believed that all civilization is Christian civilization, for Christianity is the engine of civilization.”<sup>38</sup> By contrast, Libermann’s respect for the local people and their culture is a constant theme in his letters to missionaries. In a much-quoted letter written to a local African leader, King Eliman of Dakar, we find sentiments of respect and affection coming from his belief in God’s love for all people. “I know that you are not Christians, but also know that your hearts are good and that you love whatever is good. ... The people of Dakar are good: they know God and so they are not unhappy.”<sup>39</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Fr. Alain Mayama CSSp interpreting GC XXI that elected him as Superior General wrote, “new forms of poverty emerging in our world call for radically new and creative responses to living the Gospel; they require the broadening of our vision and the necessity of taking risks.”<sup>40</sup> What are these new forms of poverty? What are the radically new and creative responses that Spiritans ought to make? This article looked to Venerable Francis Libermann, the eleventh superior general and second founder of the congregation, to find answers to these questions. We can do so with confidence,

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36. N.D. VIII, 242.

37. *Ibid*, 234.

38. Renault, 241.

39. *Anthology*, 305.

40. The Generalate, Rome, 2021. *The General Chapter 2021, Bagamoyo II*.  
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*The challenge  
today is the same  
as it was  
for Libermann,  
to leave the  
security of  
the familial,  
and follow the  
path of  
uncertainty  
and new  
adventure  
in quest of God's  
will for us.*

for we “have the precious advantage of possessing a guide who was of extraordinary virtue, wise and well balanced, whose supernatural impulses never go in opposition to practical common sense, and in whom we can oftentimes discover the solution to today’s challenges.”<sup>41</sup>

The challenge today is the same as it was for Libermann, to leave the security of the familial, and follow the path of uncertainty and new adventure in quest of God’s will for us. His advice to the Paris based St. John the Evangelist fraternity of priests in 1849 inspires and sets a standard.

Today new needs are felt everywhere. Every priest, without abandoning his assigned position, must study those needs, probe society’s wounds, and grasp every opportunity offered by his position to provide remedies, or alleviations for those wounds and needs.<sup>42</sup>

In other words, Spiritans are to transcend the limitations of a ghetto way of thinking and engage creatively with the needs of evangelization of our time (*Spiritans Rule of Life*, 2).

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41. Gay, Jean, Mgr., “Has Libermann Any Relevance Today?” *Spiritans Papers* 6 (1978) 22-32, at 29.

42. N.D. II, 536.