Through the sweet serenity of soul produced by the Holy Spirit in prayer we find ourselves wanting to repudiate anything that disturbs it (=self-denial) so that union with God remains the one absolute good of Jesus' love. Self-denial finds its *raison d'être* in the experience of sweetness that "proceeds directly from our union with God" (ESS 39).

Libermann affirmed the absolute necessity of self-denial: "The true means of preparing yourself for a great gift of prayer is the most perfect self-denial... Once entirely empty of every creature and yourself, you will be disposed and ready to receive the Spirit of God with abundance" (ibid).

His idea of self-denial is expressed in shocking imagery and language: "annihilate one’s own faculties," "desire to be nothing and abject before God and man," "beat yourself down," "crush the old man." Libermann was a man of his time. P. Blanchard ties Libermann’s strong insistence on self-denial to his long exposure to the French School: "The principle [of self-denial] is the object of penetrating and prolonged reflection in the perspectives offered by the French School."

Libermann’s language discloses a gospel urgency and clarifies the memorable saying he uttered not long before he died: “God is all, man is nothing,” an expression totally biblical and profoundly exposing the spiritual thrust of the Bible. Libermann insists that the Spirit operates best when the human being realizes he is poor and nothing by himself. It’s not a question of self-humiliation, rather of experiencing our desperate need to rely on the Spirit. This is the core of how the Spirit fashions a person in holiness as he marvelously did in the Virgin Mary.

Holiness as the work of the Holy Spirit should guide us in assessing Libermann’s “dark side” of self-denial. He is not recommending psychical stamina or a future without laughter, rather something like Thérèse of Lisieux experienced. When her sister marveled that she must have suffered a great deal and given up a lot to have reached sanctity, Thérèse answered, “No, it isn’t that!” She is not denying the mortification and suffering she endured. She is saying that looking at them as the painful cause of her holiness misses the point; love came first and total love means total and exclusive self-gift that is joyful.
Libermann is not proposing an active and *afflictive* program of mortification, rather a *passive* stance, a kind of negative (*privative*) mortification in which we give up our own planning and choosing and accept what happens to us in everyday living, seeing in the present moment the hand of Providence. “The most sanctifying crosses are those that come to us independently of our willing them,”¹⁶ he writes. Both P. Blanchard and Liagre see Libermann as close in this to Saint Thérèse.¹⁷ However, some “afflictive mortification” may help prime the pump, as it were, for better discernment of the Spirit’s call to “privative mortification.” Moreover, such “afflictive mortification” can be expressive of a deep sense of Jesus’ love and sacrifice for us, filling the need to respond to his love and sacrifice. And in some cases Libermann did allow it for a short time,¹⁸ as long as it emanates from divine attraction and from a calm interior attraction without anxiety and tenseness.

¹³Le Vénérable Libermann, 1802-1852, I. 428.
¹⁴Jesus’ lack of interest in family (Mark 3:31-35), politics (Mark 12:13-17), property rights (Luke 12:13-15), manmade beauty (Mark 13:1-2) underlines his passion for the “one thing necessary,” namely, the will of his Father. He translates this into his teaching on human ‘inability to serve two Masters (Luke 16:13).
¹⁵Jean le Meste on Libermann’s “practical union,” Spiritus, no. 22, 6 (1965), p. 31 so summarizes Libermann’s spirituality: “simple in his direction, Father Libermann had only one aim: to give his own people the haunting sense of their absolute poverty before a work taken up and to provoke in them an unquenchable thirst for living water which resumes the entire prayer of the missionary.”
¹⁶LS 2. 92. Aug 1838, to Paul Carron, seminarian; ND 1.511.
¹⁷Blanchard says: “One has claimed that Saint Thérèse had effected… a real revolution in substituting for an asceticism of grandeur that emphasized crucifying performances an asceticism of littleness that preferred interior mortifications. From 1835 to 1850, in France, the Venerable P. Libermann had begun this revolution in his direction of innumerable people who entrusted themselves to him” (I. 436). Louis Liagre, “Saint Thérèse de l’Enfant Jésus et le vénérable père Libermann,” Conference, Feb 2, 1926 at Blanche de Mortain Abbey, 1936 on the spirituality of Thérèse and Libermann, singled out profound similarities between them, especially in the priority of love.
¹⁸LS 2.135, Dec 1838, to M. de Goy; ND 1.438; LS 3.29-30, Feb 1842, to M. Lannurien. This kind of mortification would consist in fasting, long prayers, discipline, wearing hair shirts, anything that would inflict pain on the body (ND 13.72, Mar 1851, to M. Collin) and block the emergence of a sweet disposition essential to the Spirit working in us.