According to Libermann the Spirit of God is a Holy Spirit, who starts the process of holiness in Baptism and intends that it be finished. The human being, when aware in faith that the Spirit is present within him, responds in the only “logical” way possible: he lets the Spirit in a climate of sweetness lead him into the holiness of living for God and for others, holiness and zeal being integrated, each in the other, each unable to do without the other. This integration Libermann calls practical union.

Practical union offers a new way of looking at the holiness for which his missionaries willingly undertook difficult and dangerous works. This was not a new secret for achieving holiness. There is nothing in his explanations of practical union that cannot be found in his earlier writings. Nor does he give the impression of discovering something new.

As far as we know, he first used the expression in 1851 the year before his death (February 2, 1852). The expression does not appear in his letters. It is only found in his Instructions for Missionaries (ES 480-96, 1851) and in the notes Father Lannurien took at Libermann’s conferences (ND 13.697-702). Hence, it is used in situations where Libermann can give it special attention. Father Jean Le Meste, C.S.Sp. thinks that the formula, “practical union,” was too loaded with meaning to be treated informally in a letter. He wrote:

perhaps this new expression, which served to bring together his thought on a crucial point, appeared to Libermann too complex and too rich to be grasped on the fly, when he had no leisure to explain it. For the expression contains, it seems, the last stage of a doctrine which needed a concise and significant formula.

It seems to have been forged out of awareness of his missionaries’ experiences in equatorial Africa where they labored in enervating climates, crude living conditions, and exhausting apostolic endeavors. Prayer proved to be difficult and unattractive. Yet they knew, as Libermann taught them, that without prayer there was not much chance of growing in holiness which, in turn, was absolutely necessary if they were going to be effective missionaries. Libermann urged them to persevere in prayer despite the lack of feeling or consciousness of union.
Tell our beloved brothers not to be at all discouraged if they feel no sensible piety, if they experience a certain lassitude due to the heat and difficulty in praying well. They are not children any more: so they have to be vigorous in walking in God’s ways without bodily enjoyment. They must seek God for God himself and in God.\(^{25}\)

Libermann studied the nature of prayer all his life—people who knew him said “he had an answer for every difficulty in prayer.” He learned that many people desired a life of solitude and contemplative prayer which he himself longed for. But, for him, this was not the superior form of prayer and life, because that was not the way Jesus lived. Jesus didn’t remain in the mountains to pray or in less populated places to get away from the people but exposed himself to the public at large. He worked for his Father and nothing other than that. “I always do what is pleasing to him” (John 8:29) denotes active ministry and connotes unbroken union with God his Father. His life was the complete blending of prayer and action. The example of Jesus himself should convince them that the integration of prayer and ministry through practical union was possible and necessary.

The apostolic life is that life of love and holiness the Son of God led on earth in order to save and sanctify people, and by which he continually sacrificed himself for the glory of God and the salvation of the world (ND 10.505, \textit{Règlement} of 1849).

Libermann knew that his missionaries will have more than enough work. They will not easily find the satisfaction of being successful nor of enjoying what they are doing for God. The climate and work will see to that. They will not “feel” holy. But the process of holiness is going on in profound ways and with startling effectiveness, because they have entrusted themselves to God. “The soul is directed towards God and that renders its actions holy” (ES 96). The attestation of one of his former novices at Rennes (M. Mangot) shows how Libermann realized this teaching in his own life:
One day I made this observation to him [Libermann]: It seems to me that your very busy life opposes habitual union with God. He answered: on the contrary, as each new duty rises, I appeal to God for his assistance, and then it happens that the more I have to do the more my union with God is strengthened (ND 1.521).

Libermann sees his missionaries as men of action (often he calls practical union “active union”). He expects them to be busy people, engrossed in apostolic tasks (preaching, establishing churches, liberating people from ignorance, poverty, and oppression). The experience of his missionaries compelled him to think in terms of practical union. That teaching, in his mind, belongs naturally in a missionary world.

Libermann calls this union “practical” because it relates to “the ordinary habits of life” (ES 496). In these daily experiences he talks of “directing ourselves towards God” (ES 96), “tending towards God” (ES 491), “being inclined towards God” (ES 447), “being attached to God” (ES 448). Practical union is initiated and developed in tending towards God, intending God as the purpose of our actions.

He describes practical union in various ways, all reminiscent of biblical teaching and experience. 26

It is a question of living and acting practically under the influence of and in dependence on Jesus Christ who lives [in us] (ND 13.684).

To attain a habitual tendency towards practical union with God it is necessary to be zealous in adhering practically to all that pleases him (ES 486).

... the soul inspired by grace is united to God in the acts and ordinary habits of life by faith, hope and love ... In that is the foundation of the union of the soul and the essence of its holiness (ND 13.410).
Practical union is what Paul means when he says “that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor 5:15). This Pauline text, among others, shows how traditional Libermann’s teaching is and easy to hold. Practical union touches on everything we do and experience, “the acts and ordinary habits of life.” James Okoye\(^{27}\) says that it “describes...a total relationship, a spirituality.” Alphonse Gilbert\(^{28}\) comments: “in order to describe the way of practical union the entire spirituality of Libermann needs to be summarized.” Henry Koren goes simply to its essential nature: “In such a union [practical] the soul is faithful to God’s grace in all the big and little circumstances of everyday life and sees everything in its relationship to God and God alone.\(^{29}\)

These authors stress the all-embracing nature of Libermann’s conception of practical union, which he also calls “active union” and “habitual union,” both synonyms stressing the pervasiveness of this union throughout human life. It is a union that comes to terms with a busy apostolic life and finds in that apostolic life the expression of its relationship with Christ, rooted and developed in prayer, initiated and sustained by the Holy Spirit. The interplay of prayer and apostolic activity becomes a fertile field for the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who is “the author and consummator of all holiness and inspirer of the apostolic spirit (ND 10.568; Règlements 1849).

Mary who was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit lived to perfection “in the ordinary habits of living” the faith, hope and love that brings to fruition practical union. The Magnificat (Luke 1: 46-55) reveals that she could rejoice in God her Savior in ecstatic prayer and at the same time be concerned about the hungry, the oppressed and the weak and conscious of her people Israel. In her decisions she always says, “Be it done to me according to thy word.” Her Son remembered best about her that “Blessed rather is she [they] who hears the word of God and keeps it.” That is why the Spiritan Rule of Life asserts that “we live out our mission in willing obedience to the Holy Spirit, taking Mary as our Model.”

**Conclusion**

Practical union is the summit of the life of grace given by the Holy Spirit in Baptism. It shows that that
life was meant to affect human life in all its ordinary habits and acts. Noteworthy in Libermann’s teaching about practical union is the apostolic emphasis this expression evokes. Tending towards God must reach out to all human beings; pleasing God in every way includes all human beings, particularly those who are in misery and are abandoned. The Spirit is a power and energy, but a “sweet” Spirit who accomplishes his purposes in practical union in a smooth and solid way. The Baptism Spirit is an “apostolic Spirit” bent on comforting poor human beings through the vibrant apostolic effort of those deep into practical union. It is the sweet and gentle Jesus that the missionary works for and sweet union with him provides the space and freedom for the Holy Spirit to accomplish the salvific economy of the Father.

Francis X. Malinowski, C.S.Sp.

23In 1829 (ND 1.134-35) he urged M. Viot to the “holy practice” of doing nothing without raising the mind to Jesus and asking for help which is the same as living in God’s presence; in 1836 (LS 1.163-64) he explained to M. Mangat that continual prayer consists in the unique desire of pleasing God in everything; in 1845 (ND 7.213) he tried to encourage M. Perée to be attached to Jesus in everything and united to him in action; in 1847 (LS 4.547) he counselled J. Schwindenhammer to have a sincere intention (a key word in Libermann’s elaboration of his thought on practical union) to be for God. Similar ideas occur in the materials he prepared for discussion in the “Bands of Piety” at Issy and St. Sulpice (ESS 1-57).


26He knows what has been the practice of the biblical saints. Adam, Henoch and Abraham “walked before God.” Micah (6:8) counselled: “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Jesus taught that God blesses those who do his word like Mary who, completely trustful of God, was ready for the word to be done in her life. The essence of this biblical experience can be summed up in memorable Pauline statements: “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom 14:8). “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:17).

27Spiritans Papers, no. 20 (Dec 1986), 91.

28Le feu sur la terre, 182.