The Spirit starts his action in Baptism, clothing us in sanctifying grace that essentially connects us to the Trinity. But for this inchoate grace to blossom into conscious union with the Trinity, exposure to the Spirit is absolutely necessary. Libermann calls this intentional exposure “oraïson,” which we translate as “prayer.”

Prayer (“oraïson”) as Libermann meant is not “mental prayer.” He writes: “...ordinarily one starts with meditation which is not strictly speaking “oraïson” [prayer] but a preparation for it ...” Mental prayer is thinking about something, it is meditating for the purpose of exciting the will (ES 115); in “oraïson” we do not merely think of God, but relate to him, are aware of him, look at him as it were face to face. It is a direct prayer, contrasted with meditation as indirect prayer. It is being present to God, aware that he is present to us. “Oraison” brings to bear the unitive virtues of faith, hope, and love, called theological because they touch on God immediately (ES 8), exercising these virtues like nothing else can. In this “theological” environment, the Holy Spirit, the giver of these virtues in Baptism, takes over because of our innate weakness and helplessness. It is he who prays in us, whose sole object is to make us adhere to Jesus in a faith excited by hope and energized with love.

Praying thus in the Spirit we assimilate some of his holiness and this triggers apostolic zeal; the Spirit so gives us a taste for the love that Jesus has for us that we understand better Paul’s “caritas Christi urget nos” (the love of Christ impels us, 2 Cor 5:14). Increasingly, the one who prays such “oraïson” experiences the holiness of the Spirit seeping through soul and body. One effect is that increasingly the poor and the weak and the oppressed haunt one’s prayer and life.

Of course, prayer cannot be a substitute for the apostolic life of service to the poor and the oppressed nor can there be any apostolic excuse for neglecting prayer. Like Jesus, we desire in our prayer the realization of God’s plan of salvation for all and we work at it with him. Jesus’ prayer was rooted in his Trinitarian relationship radiating out into the world for its salvation. In that prayer-relationship was the only power that could realize God’s plan of salvation. The power of the Spirit (“if it is by the Spirit of God I drive out demons,” Matt 1 2:28) is a power which has to be to be prayed for and received.
The important thing is reaching what Libermann calls a “state of prayer,” an awareness not of the topics of prayer but of God himself to whom we attend wholeheartedly. We know we don’t need to go here or there or anywhere to engage in such communion with God. We need only look within.

Descend deeply into your innermost self and never come out. If you do that, your joy will be full and the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ will flood your soul … For as long as you remain withdrawn into your heart of hearts you will always find the Holy Spirit there, who will lift you up and transport you to the top of that mountain of love which our Lord has built for his elect, and he will fill you with his graces, lights, beauty and happiness.³

Libermann allows no justification for neglecting prayer. “There is definitely no relation with God without prayer [oraison]” (ES 212). Pope Saint John Paul II writes of religious life: “No movement of religious life has any importance unless it is also movement inward to the “still center” of your existence, where Christ is.”⁴ Libermann too writes about the “still center”:

May Jesus be everything in you, and may his Spirit be the unique life of your soul. Always go your way, or rather, let the divine guide lead you, who dwells in the center of your soul.⁵

Prayer is where the Spirit forges a sweet and peaceful soul, fixing our eyes on Jesus in union with the Father.

Lay open your inner being before our Lord so that you can sweetly [doucement] fix it on him, unite your heart to God; sometimes, keep it in repose, in his holy presence, looking at him thus with an eye of love, without effort, without forced attentiveness, but rather with sweetness [douceur] and suavity; sometimes, allow your soul to flow sweetly [doucement] into the bosom of Jesus our Lord.⁶

Libermann speaks here in the language of lovers, not the cool and objective language of the philosopher or businessman. It’s reminiscent of childlike simplicity.
Prayer ("oraison") is... a very simple matter... It should consist in a repose which is simple, peaceful, and full of confidence before our Lord; that is all. There is no need to look for many reflections or produce many acts of the will. Force nothing. Stand before Jesus like a needy and helpless child before his father, nothing more. Desire to be at his service. Be content with an interior glance towards him from time to time, with that intention. Do the same thing in the course of the day; from time to time an effortless glance, aware of belonging to him and aware of our own inability, but always with peace and in the calm desire to belong to him as you are. Look for nothing more.7

Libermann knew that praying like this would surely permeate the practical living out of life, changing profoundly the one praying. “The more we are men of prayer [oraison], the more our soul with its faculties and senses is perfected in the natural order and in the supernatural order” (ES 212). “Prayer reforms faults of character. If we want to know if we have made true progress in prayer [oraison], see if our faults perceptibly diminish. Natural faults cannot hold out against true oraison” (ES 107). “Prayer is one of the most powerful means and even perhaps unique means for surmounting our bad inclinations because it puts us in rapport with God” (ES 216). Life lived this way keeps the one praying in constant contact with Jesus, in “practical union.” In the praying person the Spirit finds room, opportunity, and liberty to be the Spirit of holiness who produces “the greatest marvels of his grace.”

1 Notes et Documents XIII, 698: Libermann’s last conferences based on Fr. Lantruit’s notes. The references are as follows: CSJ: Commentaire de L’Evangile de saint Jean; DS: Directoire spirituel; ES: Ecrits spirituels; ESS: Ecrits spirituels supplements; RP: Règle provisoire; IM: Instructions aux missionaires; LS: Lettres spirituelles; ND: Notes et Documents.

2 All the Gospels speak of Jesus praying often and exhorting to prayer. Luke in particular gives the most emphasis: 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28, 29; 11:1; 22:32, 41, 45, etc.

3 LS 1.386, Jan 1838, to M. Tisserant, seminarian; ND 1.495.

4 John Paul II Speaks to Religious: 1978-1980, ed. Jean Beyer, S.J., no. 375. Recently, well-known Trappists (T. Keating, B. Pennington, both influenced by Thomas Merton) have been propagating the practice of Centering Prayer. This type of prayer absorbs input from Oriental mysticism, especially in the use of the body, and the rich Catholic tradition of mystical experience as represented in books, like The Cloud of Unknowing. It is based on the belief, like that of Libermann on prayer, that the Holy Spirit is present and always operative in the soul and seeking to open up space for God in it.

5 LS 1.386, Jan 1838, to M. Tisserant, seminarian; ND 1.495.

6 LS 3.166, Dec 1842, to M. Guédant, seminarian; ND 3.351.