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CONVERSION: Christmas 1826-1976

On Christmas Eve 1826 Jacob Libermann was baptised. He was the fourth son of the Rabbi of Saverne to become a Christian. For the pious Rabbi this was a serious blow. His sons had become perverts and traitors. He must have wondered as to what had gone wrong that all his sons should betray him as they did. The Rabbi had been a strict observer of the Law. He had refused to compromise like many of his fellow Jews with the "reforms" that Jewish leaders had accepted under pressure from Napoleon. For Jacob, his favorite son, "the Talmud and its commentaries had been the sole object of his meditation. Up to the age of eighteen he observed the precepts of the Talmud with scrupulous care even in the most minute absurdities."¹

At home with his father Jacob had been a faithful observer of the Law. When he left home he changed. "I wanted to be educated and I began to study French and Latin. The old Rabbis in a fanatical spirit had a horror of all languages other than Hebrew."² The fanaticism, the coldness and harsh legalism of his teachers caused Jacob to doubt the authenticity of their religion and of his own religious beliefs. Soon he saw the Bible as a collection of myths. He thought that it would have been unjust for God to have chosen the Patriarchs and rejected so many other philosophers of antiquity. How a good God could discriminate by choosing one people and condemning another he could not understand. "I have come to the conclusion that all God wants of us is to acknowledge Him, to be just and humane and to accept Moses as a legislator like so many others."³

¹ Notes et Documents, I, p. 51
² N.D. I, p. 61
³ N.D. I, p. 54
With such ideas as these Jacob could not remain at home. He went to Paris. There he felt alone and homeless. ‘I was overcome by a terrible loneliness. The thought of being far from my family and my friends from being away from my country greatly depressed me. I felt an awful melancholy. I then remembered the God of my Fathers. I threw myself on my knees and begged for light. The Lord who is near to those who call on him from the depths of their hearts heard my prayer. Immediately I saw the light. I came to know the truth. The Faith penetrated into my mind and my heart.’

Soon after this experience Jacob was baptised.

What did this conversion mean for Libermann? He says that Faith entered into his mind and his heart. He was able to see things differently and to love things and people that he feared and hated before this. He had always been a religious person, and even in his doubts he had remained deeply religious. He had been morally upright. Yet he experienced a profound change, he was really converted. ‘There is nothing positively asserted in the Hebrew religion which cannot be included in Christianity. Contrariwise, however, the positive assertions of Christianity cannot be encompassed by Judaism.’ (Alan Watts) It was in coming to see and accept the positive assertions of Christianity that the conversion of Libermann consists. This vision was a gift, a gift of Faith.

‘Faith is the knowledge born of religious love... Without Faith, without the eye of love, the world is too evil for God to be good, for a good God to exist.’ (B. Lorigan) The positive assertions of Christianity that surpass what Judaism teaches, are seen in the goodness and kindness of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. When one is possessed by the knowledge born of religious love problems remain but doubts vanish, insecurity persists but hope prevails. ‘I cannot adequately appreciate the wonderful change that took place in me the moment the baptismal water flowed on my forehead. All my doubts and fears suddenly vanished.’

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4 N.D. I, p. 65-66
5 N.D. I, p. 66
Christ frequently questioned his followers, "Why are you afraid? Why do you doubt, you of little Faith?" In times of change and uncertainty we might well ask: "Are we afraid, Do we doubt? Have we but little Faith?" Do we see the world around us as really evil? Are people of this generation really perverse? If the world and people seem evil, perhaps there is lack of Faith in Christ. Jesus saw people as good enough to come among them in order to make them better. Libermann's experience at baptism was that of finding his doubts and his fears had vanished. He got a new vision of the world and of people. People were sinners, but sinners good enough to be saved.

Our mission is to bring to others, and share with others the vision of a world that is saved by Christ. Perhaps when we come to the poor and the oppressed, the sick and the hopeless cases of the world we get some insight into the meaning of Faith, and realise the demands made on us by our baptismal commitment. The gift of Faith which we have got should make of us the heralds of Good New.

F. TIMMERMANS, Superior General

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On February 2, the anniversary of the death of our Venerable Father, there must have been many celebrations, elaborate or modest. The Spiritan Group would like to hear about them, particularly to receive the texts of conferences, homilies, etc., given for the occasion.
THE BAPTISM OF LIBERMANN

“All at once, I was enlightened. I saw the truth. Faith came into my mind and heart... From that moment on, I no longer desired anything but to be plunged into the sacred font. This happiness did not keep me waiting: they were already preparing me for the great sacrament, and I received it on Christmas Eve. The same day I was admitted to the Holy Table.”¹

* * *

“When the blessed water flowed over my forehead, it seemed to me that I was in another world. I was at the center of a globe of fire, no longer living a natural life. I no longer saw or heard anything that was going on around me. What was happening in me was beyond description. This lasted during a part of the ceremony.”²

* * *

“Speaking of his baptism and of the exorcisms, Libermann tells us that he felt physically the deliverance of his soul from the powers of darkness.” (Mr. Gauffreteau)³

* * *

“I saw him baptised on Christmas Eve in the seminary annex of College Stanislaus... I came into the chapel at the

¹ Notes et Documents (N.D.), I, p. 66. Told in confidence to Father Gamon by Libermann.
² Told in confidence to Mr. Vernhet by Libermann, N.D., I, p. 104
³ N.D., I, p. 92
moment the ceremony was taking place... The priests of the seminary, dressed in surplice, were reciting a psalm. Father Augé..., wearing a white cope, performed the ceremony. The newly-baptized was clothed with a white robe..." (Mr. Froment de Champlagarde)\(^4\)

* * *

"When the water of baptism flowed over my Jewish head, I immediately began to love Mary, whereas I had hated her before."\(^5\)

"As he left the baptismal font, the pious neophyte promised the Lord that he would consecrate himself to His service in the priestly ministry and he remained at the Seminary..."\(^6\)

CERTIFICATE OF BAPTISM

Parish of Saint-Sulpice

The twenty-fourth of December in the year one thousand eight hundred and twenty-six, Francis-Mary Paul, born at Saverne in the Jewish religion, of the marriage of Lazarus Libermann and his wife Henriette, on April 12, 1804, was baptized in the chapel of the seminary of the Missions of France by me, Jean-Baptiste Augé, Director of Collège Stanislaus, having jurisdiction from His Excellency the Archbishop of Paris.

The godfather was François, Baron de Malet, and the godmother was Aglaé Marie, comtess d'Heuzé, both of whom have signed this document with me.

Paris, the twenty-fourth of December, one thousand eight hundred and twenty-six.

Augé, priest  The Baron de Malet
Director of Collège Stanislaus  A.M., Comtesse d’Heuzé\(^7\)

\(^4\) \textit{N.D.}, I, pp. 73-74
\(^5\) \textit{N.D.}, I, p. 92, note
\(^6\) Told in confidence to Mr. Drach by Libermann, \textit{N.D.}, I, p. 105
\(^7\) \textit{N.D.}, I, p. 72
THE VENERABLE LIBERMAN AT ROME

A talk given by the Right Reverend Bishop Jacques Martin, Prefect of the Pontifical House, on February 12, 1974. A contribution to the series of lectures on KNOWLEDGE ABOUT WESTERN CIVILISATION. Published by Osservatore Romano, March 1, 1974.

Many of the initiators of great religious undertakings – and in particular the founders or restorer of Orders – have felt the need, at a special time in their lives, to come to Rome, to the Primatial See of Peter, in order to submit their projects.

When the Venerable Libermann came to Rome early in 1840, he followed some of the greatest names in the French Catholic Church.

There was Mother Barat (now St. Sophie Barat) foundress of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart. She was requested to take over Trinità dei Monti where she installed her Sisters at the time of the restoration of the Monarchy.

To Rome came the three “Pilgrims of Freedom,” – Lammenais, Lacordaire and Montalembert, just after 1830. There they placed their Memorandum in the hands of Pope Gregory XVI. The leader, Lammenais, was to cause scandal by his revolt. The others, mature in their experience and judgement, through having overcome trials and difficulties, were to accomplish great achievements in the Church.

Lacordaire first galvanised the youth of France through his Conferences at Notre-Dame de Paris in 1835. Subsequently he went again to Rome, with his plan for the rebirth of the Dominican Order. In 1841 he was the Lenten Preacher at Notre-Dame, but this time in the Dominican Habit.

Montalembert began his campaign to rally Catholics to undertake an assault on the Napoleonic Universities. The monopoly was finally broken in 1850.

Abbe Louis Bautain, as we can read in the writings of Monseigneur Poupard, also came to Rome in 1838. He had come to rebut the accusations brought against him by the aged Bishop of Strasbourg, Mgr La Pappe de Trevern. His own account of his stay in Rome is informative and lively.
Also in 1838 came Louis Veuillot in search of enlightenment. He became a convert and made his submission into the hands of Father de Rozaven, a member of the General Council of the Jesuits. Veuillot became a great polemist and apostle, and it was he who eventually weaned France from Gallicanism and brought her to the Holy See, earning for the Church in France the nickname “ultramontane.”

Dom Gueranger, who was to be the soul of the Apostolate in the reformation of the liturgy came to Rome in 1837. When he met Cardinal Sala, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Bishops, the Cardinal spoke to him of his wonder at the fruitfulness of the Church in France. “Not a day passes but we receive petitions and requests to approve new religious societies. The French Church seems to abound in founders and foundresses.”

Dom Gueranger established the Benedictine Congregation in France at the Abbey of Solesmes. He also led the opposition to particular liturgies, which were tainted with Gallicanism. In this he played a leading part in bringing the dioceses of France to adopt the Roman Rite.

It was against this background that another pilgrim from France arrived in Rome, unknown to the public or to the Roman Curia and quite different from those who had preceded him. Francis Mary Paul Libermann, clerk in minor orders, thirty eight years old, was the bearer of a plan to found a society of missionaries to preach the Gospel to the black races.

A Jew from Alsace

Who was Libermann, where did he come from?

He came from as far away as possible, from Judaism at its most enclosed and fanatical. He was Jacob, one of the sons of Lazarus Libermann, the Rabbi of Saverne and a strict observer of the Jewish law. He understood only the Jewish script and the Talmud.

One example will serve to typify the character of the Rabbi. One poor man accidentally killed an insect on the sabbath and reported it to him. Without hesitation Lazarus Libermann put him on bread and water for thirty days.... One can imagine the stifling atmosphere of the Libermann home, especially as Jacob was growing up. One by one the sons of the Rabbi had gone out into
the world, and learned the Graeco-Latin culture and to the horror of their father, had become Christians.

Jacob was destined to become a rabbi like his father. In view of this Lazarus allowed his son to go to Metz for advanced rabbinical studies. Jacob too began to study Latin and read Caesar and Virgil. He neglected the study of the Talmud and began to have doubts about the Jewish faith.

His father began to have his doubts about this son of his, so much so that when Jacob asked for permission to go for further studies to Paris he decided to test him. Few were better equipped for examining on the Talmud and its interpretation than the Rabbi of Saverne. So he gave the boy an oral examination.

Here the plan of God for his servant first manifested itself. Jacob was to write subsequently, "The first question was one to which my reply would denote the exact amount of my knowledge of the subject. For two years I had not studied the Talmud, yet as soon as I heard the question I seemed to be inspired and know exactly what to reply. I was astonished by the clarity and certainty of my mind in dealing with the intricacies and hidden meanings of the passage on which I had to give my comments, and the answer to which would decide my journey to Paris."

The old Rabbi was very pleased with the replies and gave his consent immediately.

When he failed to establish contact with those Jews to whom he had presented the letters of introduction from his father, Jacob was bewildered. It was a very poor welcome to Paris. He went to see Mr. Drach on the recommendation of his elder brother Samuel. Mr. Drach was a convert from Judaism, and he welcomed the student and found him lodgings in the Stanislaus College. Jacob had told him of his dilemma and it was one which evoked the deep charity and concern of Mr. Drach. This was the second and decisive manifestation of God's plan - his conversion to Christianity. Jacob was 24 years old, and the year 1826.

"They gave me a room and I found a book, 'The History of Christian Doctrine' by Lhomond, on the table. In my solitude, the thought of being so far away from my family, my loved ones, my country plunged me into a deep melancholy. Then recalling the God of my Fathers I fell down on my knees and implored Him to help me, to enlighten me about the true religion. I begged him, if the Christian reli-"
region were true to lead me to it; if false to remove me as far as possible from this without delay.

"At once I was enlightened. I saw the truth. Faith penetrated into my mind and heart.

"Settling down to read Lhomond, I easily accepted and believed all that was unfolded about the life and death of Jesus Christ. The mystery of the Eucharist, although I thought it imprudent to put it to me at that time, caused me no difficulty.

"I believed all without scruple, all my doubts were suddenly resolved. The ecclesiastical dress for which, as a Jew, I had an instinctive dislike, no longer repulsed me. In fact I was more attracted than frightened by it."

He said later, "When the waters of baptism flowed over my Jewish head I immediately accepted and loved Mary, who was previously the object of my hatred."

The Seminary of St. Sulpice

There was no question of any reservation in his giving of himself to God; he would be a priest.

He entered the seminary of St. Sulpice in Paris. At once he began to aim at perfection and the evident fervour of this older seminarian impressed his fellow seminarians.

Bishop Depont Desloges of Metz, a contemporary of Libermann in his seminary days, recounting how he arranged his period of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament to coincide with that of Libermann, relates, "How many times I saw him beside me in a sort of ecstasy, his chest heaving, his eyes half closed, with tears falling down his cheeks as he prayed. That picture of him at prayer is ever with me."

The years passed but the seminarian made no advance towards the priesthood. There was a dreadful reason for this.

"He was standing in the office of this spiritual director talking about his soul. He was near the fire-place when he began shaking from head to foot. His face became agitated, his eyelids puffed up and closed, his lips became ash-en. Foaming at the mouth, panting and suffocating, he fell at the priest's feet. The latter picked him up and carried him to a couch. The doctor was sent for."

Libermann had become an epileptic. This barred him from his longed for goal, the priesthood.
Libermann once spoke of an event which occurred during the celebration of High Mass on the Feast of Christ, the eternal High Priest on July 16, 1831. He saw Christ, as High-Priest, go from seminarian to seminarian distributing graces to each one. He alone was excepted from this distribution. Christ then seemed to point to the seminarians and as if offer them to him. Mr. Libermann took this as a sign that he would never be a priest. Others who heard this saw in this the first indication of the plans of God on him as a future founder of his society of missionaries.

His sickness left its mark but his perfect mastery of himself lessened the outward effects. Though the attacks were violent, at least they were well spaced. Because of his undoubted worth, the directors of the seminary of Issy allowed him to stay on there, helping the Bursar with his work. His influence on the seminarians was beneficial. He helped them by his advice and influenced them deeply his example.

He organised prayer-groups which discussed spirituality and prayer. The results were remarkable and transformed the seminary in its spiritual tone. So that it was not a complete surprise when he was proposed to the Superior of the Eudists as the ideal Novice Master for the Novitiate which he wanted to restart again. There had been none since the French Revolution. The date was 1837.

In his role as Novice-Master in the Eudist Novitiate, he was introduced to the spirituality of St. John Eudes. It supplemented the spirituality of Father Olier, the founder of St. Sulpice, and was of great benefit to Mr. Libermann. It was during his stay at Rennes, where the Eudist Novitiate was located, that another indication was given of what God wanted him to do.

The call from Far-off Lands

In January 1839 he received a letter from a seminarian he had known at Paris. It began; “Father Pinault urges me to write to you about a project of considerable importance for the glory of God.” Pinault was one of the directors of the seminary of St. Sulpice. The project was to help liberated slaves as at that period they were being liberated by the governments of the world. The idea was to form a community of priests who would undertake this vi-
tal work for souls, given their freedom but without knowledge of how to cope in a free society.

The writer of the letter was Monsieur Le Vavasseur who was born and brought up in the Island of Reunion in the Indian Ocean. His knowledge about the sorry state of slaves was first-hand and he spoke of this to his companions in the seminary. Some of these showed interest, especially Mons. Eugene Tisserand, originally from Haiti, and Mons. Maxime de la Bruniere, a talented young French seminarian. They were concerned about the spiritual welfare of the liberated slaves and sought advice from Father Pinault.

Libermann gave the letter a lot of thought and prayed about it. As other letters came and even a visit from Mons. de la Bruniere, he overcame his diffidence and thought it was the will of God that he should become involved. He consulted with prudence and deliberation over a period of months. Once he had come to a decision he saw that the project should be submitted to the wisdom of the Holy See. Mr. Bruniere and he resolved with the approbation of Father Pinault to place the project before the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith.

“...to Rome, where God has placed his light for guiding his Church.” wrote Libermann. He also left a touching farewell to Mr. Louis de la Moriniere, the Superior of the Eudists, who was opposed to his leaving Rennes and the Novitiate. De la Bruniere, who belonged to a wealthy family, accompanied him to Rome and took charge of all expenses.

On the 1st December 1839, Libermann took the stagecoach to Paris and then to Lyons. It had been agreed that he would travel ahead, and that his companion would join him in Lyons. Libermann had recommended his enterprise to the Archconfraternity of Our Lady of Victories. The venerable parish-priest of Our Lady's, Mons. l'abbé Desgenettes had assured them all of Our Lady's protection. When on the 7th December he arrived at Lyons he was physically worn out and in low spirits. He lodged with the Ozanam family occupying his time in writing and in prayer.

At the shrine of Our Lady of Fourviere, he felt much peace and a renewal of his interior confidence. From Lyons he wrote to his eldest brother, Samson and his sister-in-law, both converts to the Faith.
“You will be surprised to receive a letter from me, written in Lyons... I have left Rennes for ever. That is a great imprudence not to say folly if we judge things as men of the world would do... I have left Rennes. At the moment I have no one in whom I can confide. I do not know what will become of me, how I shall be able to exist. I have nothing. I shall lead a contemptible forgotten life, a neglected, lost one according to human judgement.

“I shall have the disapproval of a great number of those who formerly loved and held me in high respect. I shall be treated as a proud, senseless man, may possibly be despised and even persecuted. Who will then console me? Am I a ruined man, doomed to unhappiness for the rest of my life? If I can no longer rely on human reason and the judgement of men, how tragic is that?

“Dear friends, let us remember that beside the great and adorable Jesus, we have in heaven a Father and a Mother powerful and gracious. They never abandon those who put their trust in their glory and love.”

It was in a mood of abandonment to God’s will that he spent the feast of Christmas while awaiting the arrival of his companion. They met at Marseilles and on New Year’s day 1840 they embarked for the port of Civita Vecchia. They arrived there on the 5th and were in Rome for the 6th. Mr. de la Bruniere arranged for them to stay at the Jourdain guest-house, on the Magnanapoli Rise, near the Angelicum College.

Prayer at the tombs of the Apostles

Libermann visited the basilicas and the churches. His letters tell us of his devotions and prayers. To a seminarian at St. Sulpice he wrote “I will remember all you asked me and beginning today, I will make the Stations of the seven basilicas, in the company of your guardian angel.”

To another he wrote, “I will pray for you at the basilicas of St. Mary Major, at St. Peter’s, St. Paul’s, St. John Lateran and in the catacombs.”

The catacombs impressed him: “When one enters them the reaction is soul-stirring. For myself, I would have liked to remain there always.”

The basilicas of St. Peter and St. Paul enraptured him. “One is delighted and awed to note how the great, the rich and the mighty of this world gave of their best and
of their riches to embellish and adorn the tombs of these two poor Jews, who were rated so low in their own world and in their own day.”

(He too was a poor Jew, who was estimated as of little worth in the world of his own day).

Thus, a great part of his time in Rome was spent in prayer and pilgrimage. He preferred the shrines and churches of the Blessed Virgin – the Madonna del Parto at St. Augustine’s and the Madonna della Pace. When his pilgrimage took him further afield and he could not get back for the mid-day meal, he queued up with the beggars and the very poor at a convent door for a piece of bread and a bowl of soup.

Christian Rome delighted him. It still had intact that sacred character which it had built over the centuries. It was still the capital of the Papal States. It was thirty years later, in 1870 that the Papal States ceased to exist.

Libermann wrote to a friend, “You cannot imagine the spiritual satisfaction experienced here. I realise that the Romans have their faults, even ugly ones. Are they not inheritors of original sin like the rest of us? But here, – the faith is intact, – as it was in France in the fourteenth century... a faith that is simple, open, direct. The Romans manifest their faith with utter simplicity. Their piety highlights their faith, their devotions are so sound from a religious point of view. The Cross of Our Lord and all that is connected with the Passion are its foundation.

“In Rome there are excellent societies founded for the furtherance of devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to the Blessed Virgin. Here they carry devotion to Our Lady to greater lengths than I have ever experienced before. There are too devotions to the saints, a fact which is not astonishing, as many bodies of saints are venerated here. I find all these quite wholesome, expressions of basic christian belief and worthy of the Mother of all churches.”

Suffering and contradiction

But there were trials and difficulties. It was inevitable that a project presented in these circumstances would provoke opposition and doubts about its promoter. Was he serious or was he trying to attract attention to himself? It was rumoured that, having been stopped from taking Orders in
France, he had come to Rome in the hope of being ordained to the priesthood. Even the best of people heard this.

Father de Rosaven, French Assistant to the Superior General of the Jesuits, a counsellor at the French Embassy, a priest, venerated and held in high esteem by all for his prudence and sound judgement, took one glance at the humble acolyte who had come to consult him and walked out of the parlour. Actually he had been briefed by his secretary, a Father de Villefort. Strangely enough the same priest was Libermann's confessor. He had heard so much against Libermann that he worked actively against him, in all good faith.

"It was there I came to realise how good men, seeking the glory of God can act most strangely. What helped me to understand and accept this was the fact that their sole motivation was indeed God's glory. If our Lord permitted them to act in that way, — who was I to object?" But it was not easy. He had to do himself violence to swallow the bitter bread of contradiction, placed before him by God.

Then he was granted a single ray of hope; Pope Gregory XVI would receive him in audience. It had been arranged by the only person in Rome that he knew, the same Mr. Drach who, fourteen years previously, had welcomed him to Paris. When the revolution of 1830 broke out, he emigrated from France to come to Rome where he obtained a post as librarian at the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith.

Referring to this interview, Mr. Drach wrote, "The 17th February 1840 I presented to Pope Gregory XVI Mr. Libermann and his companion. The Sovereign Pontiff visibly moved placed his hand on Libermann's head and pressed it gently. When the young people had left, the Pope asked me, 'Who is the one whose head I touched?' In a few words I told him about the neophyte. His Holiness then said 'Sarà un santo.' (He will be a saint). Those were his exact words."

Apart from this, Libermann had to tread the way of the Cross. Mr. de la Bruniere, under the influence of Father de Villefort and of the person first responsible for floating the rumours against the Jewish acolyte, Monsignor de Conny, first wavered in his faith in Mr. Libermann, then came to the conclusion that the rumours were true. From then on he resolved to return to Paris. He turned against Libermann.
"I had to endure a great deal from him," wrote Mr. Libermann to his friend, Dom Salier, a Carthusian. "Seeing me despised and powerless, doubting me and our project, he continually found fault and upset me in every way."

Straw Mattress, a Chair, and Pigeons

The inevitable happened. Mr. de la Bruniere left him and returned to Paris. Libermann remained alone, and penniless. He sought to rent a more suitable room. He had to leave their place at the Jourdain Pension. He managed to rent the garret room of the house of Mr. Patriarcha for an ecu (25p.) per month. It was not much, but it was a roof over his head. It was freezing in the winter and very hot in the summer. As it was part of the roof, he had the pigeons for companions.

From outside sources we learn that actual physical hardship was added to his spiritual and mental suffering. Frederick Ozanam wrote, "I found him in a garret on a small primitive bed with a threadbare blanket, feverish and sick. His only medicine was what he could afford; some crusts of bread and water. He dipped the crusts of bread to soften them so as to be able to eat them."

Paul de la Bruniere had given him a fortnight in which to pack up and follow him to Paris. If he did that he would pay the expenses of the return journey. Would Francis yield to discouragement and abandon all idea of founding a society to help liberated slaves?

"de la Bruniere's withdrawal alters nothing. It would be wrong to believe that the loss of one person and his connections would be enough to destroy this work. If we only undertake easy things in the Church, what would become of the Church? Saints Peter and John would have continued to fish in the lake of Tiberius; St. Paul would never have left Jerusalem.

"I can understand how anyone who relies on himself alone could be deterred by obstacles, but when we rely upon our Adorable Master, – what can we fear? We stop only when a brick wall bars the way. Then we wait for an opening in order to continue on, as imperturbably as before.

"Let us go on with the work as if we were metaphysically sure that God is going to prosper it and make it succeed. At the same time let us be quite prepared to see
the whole task fail, as though we had never believed that it had a chance of success.”

When a soul has gone so far as to leave aside any possible human assistance and relies solely on God, — then it can act, for it is uniquely allied with God. Libermann had prayed; he had suffered. Now, three months after his arrival in Rome, he was going into action.

A Rule, but no Religious

On the 22nd March he wrote a memorandum on the project, which he gave to the Secretary-General of the Propagation of the Faith, Archbishop Cadolini. The document set down the special purpose of the proposed missionary society, “to devote ourselves entirely to our Lord for the salvation of the negroes, as being the most miserable, the farthest away from salvation and the most abandoned in the Church of God.” The means of achieving this were to be found in Community Life. Finally and most important; that the new missionary society must be subject directly to the Holy See was proposed in the memorandum.

He describes his own situation in all simplicity. He explains that he has not been able to advance to the priesthood because of his nervous condition, which constituted a canonical impediment. It is now two years since the last attack. This raised his hope of being ordained as a priest, as this seemed necessary to the realisation of founding a society of priests.

Archbishop Cadolini was impressed by the memorandum but decided not to give any sign of this.

“When I returned to enquire what he thought of the project, he was kind but very non-committal. He stressed that not being a priest, I could not yet think of mission-work. I could not get another word out of him.”

Nevertheless in the middle of this darkness and difficulty Libermann was confident that God would approve and bless his work in spite of everything. “My confidence was such that, at the very moment when all seemed lost, I got down in earnest to outlining how to undertake the proposed work, the necessary steps to take at the beginning and the spirit which ought to animate it.”

What audacity! The new religious institute had no existence outside the minds and hearts of a few seminar- ians. No sensible person had approved it, — Rome had, as
far as we know, turned a deaf ear. Undeterred, Libermann drew up his Rule as though he had an army of subjects to legislate for and a multitude of houses and works. He clarified the aim and object of the congregation, the spirit that should animate it in its administration and in its life as a religious society. He laid down rules for the novitiate and for the sending of Missionaries.

This Provisional Rule is a precise and detailed draft-plan of the organic structure of the institute he wished to found. It is a document of 196 pages divided into four parts and contains 39 chapters, sub-divided into articles. Each of these is abundantly annotated. More than that, the views he was expressing then were ahead of the thinking of his day. Thus we find him expressing anti-racist opinions in an age when the word had not yet been coined. He asks that between white and black there should be that Christian love which makes them think of themselves as brothers of Jesus Christ (Part 1, Chapter 9, article 14).

In chapter 8, article 1 we find; “The missionaries of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, when they have established themselves in a territory, should do all they can to create a Native Clergy.” Who else talked about establishing native clergies in 1840? Who dared conjure up such an idea? It seemed as if his love of the Gospel gave him an insight into the future.

He confided to Father Desgennettes, parish priest at Our Lady of Victories, that when he started to think about the rules for his society he did not know how to begin. He visited all the shrines of Our Lady he knew in Rome. “After which without being able to explain how, I found that I knew the name for our society. I would consecrate it to Our Lady and call it the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary. I returned to my lodgings and began to write the rules. I could now see so clearly that, at one glance, I had grasped all the organic unity, the developments and the details. This experience was a source of both joy and consolation.”

The End in Sight

However one incident could have spoiled everything. A subtle temptation took hold of him. It sprang from the poor opinion he had of himself and from the ever-pres-
ent conviction that he would never be a priest. He therefore had decided that God wished him to start this work for the black people but that another would be called upon to guide it. When he had finished drawing up the Rule, all that remained for him was to quietly slip away and end his days in a Hermitage.

"While I was in Rome I would dearly have loved to remain in Italy and retire into some solitude because I still believed that I would never do anything worthwhile. The life of prayer and of solitude has always attracted me. But that did not seem to be the will of our Lord."

It was really a temptation. The will of God was to be clearly shown. While Libermann had been occupied drawing up the Rule of the society, Rome had not been idle. The Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith had taken soundings in France, especially in Paris. Enquiries had been made "of a certain Mr. Libermann, clerk in minor orders, from the diocese of Paris, who had offered himself with the idea of starting a society, devoted to the civilisation of the negroes of Santo Domingo and the Island of Bourbon."

The Papal Nunciature in Paris made the enquiries and sent replies and references back to Rome.

In June 1840 Libermann received his reply from Propaganda, signed by the Cardinal Prefect, Cardinal Franzoni. The project had been judged useful. Libermann and his friends should not hesitate to proceed with the plan. "May it please God to grant him sufficient health to receive Major Orders."

In an interview subsequent to this reply, the Cardinal repeated what he had written. He encouraged Libermann to try to find a Bishop who would ordain him. For Libermann this was an answer from heaven. He wrote to Paris to the Chancellery of the diocese to obtain his exeat (permission to transfer to another diocese) and to Strasbourg which was the diocese in which he was born, asking for permission to be enrolled in the diocesan seminary in view of promotion to Major Orders.

These requests remained unanswered for months. The See of Paris was vacant, as the former Archbishop had died and no successor had been appointed. Bishop Raess had been appointed to the See of Strasbourg but the Papal Documents were delayed.
At the Feet of St. John

The delay proved fortunate. It would provide both the time and the opportunity for some of Libermann's finest writings.

Alone in his pigeon-loft he read and meditated on the Gospel of St. John. He recorded his thoughts, nearly five hundred pages of them. Then he got scrupulous. To his confessor, Father Villefort, he accused himself of the sin of complacency, of pride in keeping a diary of his thoughts and meditations, and added “But I intend to burn the notebooks”.

“What have you written?”

“I wrote down some ideas which occurred to me when reading the Gospel of St. John.”

Father forbade him do destroy the copybooks. “Bring them to me,” he instructed his penitent.

Libermann’s commentary on the first twelve chapters has no biblical pretensions. It consists of spiritual thoughts arising from the Lord’s words and actions in the gospel. It is the author’s insight into context and background, his knowledge of Jewish customs and traditions, his ease in outlining them and his unique gift for psychological analysis which gives to the commentary its freshness and originality.

One can recognise Libermann himself when he writes about the various characters who meet Jesus. As if cries from the heart, the commentary includes prayers, personal prayers. Writing about the Samaritan woman he notes, “I too my most adorable Saviour, I too am miserable, despicable in the sight of your creatures. I too come to draw water, spiritual water, at the well of my sweet Saviour. Tell me, instruct me as you did the Samaritan, what I should do to please you, what is agreeable and acceptable to you and to your heavenly Father.”

Writing about the man blind from birth, thrown out of the synagogue by the Sanhedrin: “Jesus, how happy this man to be treated so by his enemies because of love for you! The door of the synagogue was closed to him; his joy was all the greater, infinitely greater because he now found the door to your Heart wide open. Open to me too the door to your Sacred Heart... Let me in to enjoy the fulness of your divine light, and of your holy love.”
Spiritual Direction

While composing the commentary Libermann spent a great deal of time keeping up with his correspon-dance, which since his conversion, had remained voluminous. After his death his writings were collected. Eighteen hundred spiritual letters were found, written mainly to priests and seminarians. Father Le Vavasseur, one of the three co-founders, assured the Congregation after the death of Father Libermann, that the early letters from Rennes to Issy were avidly received and passed around to the seminarians.

Some of the best were written from Rome and give us an insight into his gift for the direction of souls.

"Do not yearn for great things, important things. Seek to be poor, small contemptible in your own judgement of yourself and before God. It is by grace alone that you will make progress in perfection, not by your own strength, which is less than nothing as you must be aware."

And again: - "Keep your soul in a state of lowliness and poverty and free of concern for yourself. Also do not be busy in the work you do for the glory of God. Rather, let God use you like he would an inanimate tool or instrument in his hand, being at the same time pliant and yielding."

The letters were often long. Some outlined his proposals for the time remaining to him in Rome. One was a pilgrimage to the Holy House of Loreto in the company of some clerical students who were planning to go in the month of September. Because of pressing business he could not spare the time in September and was only free in mid-November, and then he went alone.

He set out on foot on the long trek to the Adriatic coast. Loreto had ever been a favourite place of pilgrimage for the sons of Mr. Olier because as a young man he also had made this journey on foot. Libermann’s personal devotion urged him to take his remaining doubts to Mary, in the intimacy of the holy House of Nazareth, because he was a Jew. This was part of the homeland.

As he was penniless he begged his food as did destitute wayfarers, as also a place to sleep at night. When he returned to Rome a month later, his soutane was torn and travel-stained. He himself was tired and exhausted. But
all his doubts and temptations had vanished. He was ready to go where God willed him to work.

A letter from the Bishop of Strasbourg, Monseigneur Raess, invited him to take up residence in the diocesan seminary and prepare for Major Orders. This was what Libermann had been waiting for, and he hastily made his preparations for leaving for home. He embarked at Civita Vecchia on 9th January 1841. He had been in Rome a year. He went there to find out the will of God. Rome had shown him the way and the work. He was now to become a priest and found the missionary Society.

He received the sub-diaconate and the diaconate at the hands of Bishop Raess at Strasbourg. The Bishop of Amiens, Monseigneur Mioland ordained him to the priesthood and gave him his country home to house the members of the new Society.

Novices flocked to the young society. Seven years later in 1848 this Society was large enough to absorb a dying institution, which at the time, consisted of only six members. (Actually and legally it was the other way around. The Holy Ghost Fathers had legal recognition. Libermann with the consent and approval of the Holy See had his own congregation suppressed and he and all the members of his former Society went over to the Holy Ghost Fathers and joined them). The fusion of the two societies having been brought about by mutual consent, Father Libermann was elected Superior General, and here fulfilled the role which God had first in mind, the restoration of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost.

Four years later Father Libermann was dead. There were then over a hundred members of the Congregation, two of them missionary Bishops. Today the Congregation of the Holy Ghost numbers more than four thousand.

The Power of Humility

There are a number of points which impress us as we renew acquaintance with Father Libermann by reviewing his life and his impact on history. He speaks to us still through his writings, extracts of which have been quoted. Few churchmen wrote so much in so short a time. All the more remarkable then the findings of the Congregation of Rites, when his cause was introduced in Rome. Having examined his writings they found that “seldom have writ-
ings been given so favourable a judgement by the reviewers.”

They contain a rich store of spiritual doctrine. Unhappily this fact is not widely known. This is the first point which it is necessary to make.

But Libermann speaks to us even more vividly through his example than through what he wrote. He lived a life ruled entirely by the supernatural, totally submitted to God, completely unconcerned with the judgements of men. The whole life of the man is a sermon in word and example.

During his stay in Rome he spoke in a way not usual among certain modern prophets, in a way we should not forget. His is the language of confidence in the Church, in the institutional Church, for Libermann (a mystic with his own particular charisms) knows no other.

There is only one Church. We must place our confidence in the Visible Head of this one, unique Church and confidence, more meritorious (but which God, we have seen, rewards) in the structures he uses, for the government of the Church; confidence in the Curia of the Holy See.

There may be a lesson for us here. There is certainly matter for thought and reflection.

Canon Peter Blanchard in the preface to his book on the Venerable Libermann writes, “He has become for me a friend. My world is not the same since I got to know him.”

Many of those who have had the opportunity, – let us say the grace of making contact with his fascinating personality react in the same way. The vision of the suffering, cheerful figure of the poor epileptic Jew is ever with them. They discover not only the initiator of the great, modern, missionary movement but also one of the greatest Masters of Christian spirituality.

With your permission and if it be not indiscreet on my part, I would like to formulate a wish. It is this. That our meeting with the Venerable Libermann may inspire you to get to know, or if you already know him, to deepen your knowledge of this incomparable Master.

May it give you the wish to learn at his school, awaiting the day when, if it please God, he will be raised to the altars and be given as a model to all Christian peoples.
"In our day, there is a livelier awareness of the dignity of the human person. More and more people are claiming for man the possibility of acting in terms of his own choices and with full freedom and responsibility – not under pressure or constraint – while still being guided by knowledge of his duty." Those are the opening words of "Dignitatis Humanae", the Second Vatican Council’s decree on religious liberty.

Nobody understands man as well as those authentic Christians, the saints. Nobody else has as broad or as correct a vision of man and his dignity.

On April 6, 1976 the Permanent Delegate from Mauritius to the United Nations, a Hindu, presented to his country a bust of Father Laval. In his address to all the notable religious and civil personalities of the Island, the diplomatic corps and the Parliament, he praised Father Laval as "that man who, during his lifetime and since his death, never stopped – and still has not stopped – teaching a lesson of humility, of love for one's neighbor and of the dignity of man." He continued: "I can't keep from thinking that we, members of the United Nations, have been nothing more than poor fellows trying to parody what our nobler predecessors had already proclaimed. Without any doubt, Father Laval was one of the noblest of them all."

At the end of his talk, the speaker expressed his dearest wish: that Father Laval get us to understand "that humility, mutual respect, charity, love of neighbor... are the essential tools, are the examples we can still give to the whole world and are the things that must give meaning to the life of every Mauritian."

Anyone who knows the life of Father Laval can have no doubt about the truth of these words. We can also apply

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1 Speech by His Excellency Mr. Rada Karishna Ramphul, April 6, 1976, cf. also Pentecôte sur le Monde, No. 118, July-August 1976.
them to Father Libermann. Laval and Libermann, who were both taught in the school of Christ who "came to save mankind", both spent their entire lives fighting for the rights of man as a child of God, especially those men who were the most miserable, the weakest, the most abandoned. They loved and respected all men, of every race, on every continent, of every color, in all sorts of conditions. I hope to demonstrate this in this article.

* *

If you take a superficial look at certain expressions of Libermann; e.g. "God is all, man is nothing", you might form the opinion that he despised humanity. Nothing could be farther from the truth. He has too great an esteem for the human person – body and soul – to be able to despise it. His expressions must be read in the light of his understanding of the Absolute that God is. If God is all, then man must be nothing. But Libermann is also aware that God loved this "nothing" and predestined a marvelous dignity for it, hence he too loves man.

Like St. John whom he quotes, Libermann also has "a strong love for God and great charity towards his neighbor... Perfect charity necessarily leads to charity towards our neighbor. St. John demonstrates this in the following way: he says it is impossible to have the Holy Spirit within us if we do not love our neighbor, because God loves all men, He gave His Son for them and the Son humbled Himself to redeem them. Therefore, if we act according to the movement of the Holy Spirit, we will necessarily love all men; if we don't love them, we do not have that Divine Spirit within us."²

Care for One's Health

Libermann, therefore, loves man as he is, body and soul, since the whole man is the work of God, called to union with God... "Your body belongs to God, just as

²“*Ecrits Spirituels*, “Suppléments”, pp. 96-98.
much as your soul does." \(^3\) Therefore he advises his missionaries "not to ruin their health" \(^4\), "to take a little nap during the day... if sleep overcomes them" \(^5\), "to avoid too much privation" \(^6\), "to tell the superior all their infirmities and fatigues", whenever "it is a question of serious illness." \(^7\)

Libermann writes to a priest who wants to enter the Congregation: "The Rule for the missionaries is sufficiently broad. Missionaries should not be constrained too much. We have no austerity in our Rule; a life of interior perfection; simplicity, charity and zeal should be our chief virtues. We oblige ourselves to poverty and obedience... Our food is the food of the poor, but solid and substantial. A missionary's health is too precious, – it must be maintained." \(^8\)

The same Rule imposes upon superiors the duty of watching over the health of the missionaries: "The superior will take... great care of the health of his missionaries, never giving them heavier burdens than they can bear, and not waiting until they are too worn out before taking care of them..."

The commentary on this same article says: "He owes this to his missionaries, who have given themselves entirely to the community, giving up all that belonged to them; they owe it to the good of the Missions, because the accomplishment of that good requires missionaries who can make use of their bodies, their mouths to speak, their lungs to support apostolic endeavors, their feet to run after the lost sheep, their hands to administer the sacraments...; he owes it to the Holy Spirit, since their bodies are the temples of the Spirit and hence instruments which must be re-

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\(^3\) Letter of January 26, 1848 to the Community of Dakar, N.D., X, p. 29 (N.D. : Notes et Documents).

\(^4\) Letter to Father Laval, July 28, 1842, N.D., III, p. 234.

\(^5\) Letter to Father Le Vavasseur, April 18, 1843, N.D., IV, p. 196.

\(^6\) Letter to Father Bessieux, N.D., VIII, p. 297.

\(^7\) Règle Provisoire des Missionnaires de Libermann, "La Naisance d'un Code de Spiritualité Missionnaire", Pro manuscrito, p. 35.

\(^8\) Letter to Father Boulanger, April 17, 1845, N.D., VII, p. 155.
spected, maintained and renewed when they are worn out. . . ."

Libermann gives the example himself. He writes to Father Briot, a missionary in Africa: "Don't be impatient in your undertakings. Don't give yourself up imprudently to an over-heated zeal which tends to ruin one's health. What good would it be to gain a few souls for God and lose your health in the process, and thus make yourself useless to a much greater number? To give up one's life for the salvation of one soul is a wonderful thing to do, no doubt about it; but to save one's life for the salvation of one hundred others is still better. Not to be afraid of sickness or of death, - that's the mark of a zealous missionary devoted to God alone; but, to take precautions to keep alive in order to save a greater number of souls, - that's the mark of a missionary who knows how to join perfect prudence to his perfect zeal and his perfect devotedness. . . ."

To the community of Dakar he wrote that "as concerns bodily privations", they must follow "what the Rule says; do nothing except in obedience; your body belongs to God just as much as your soul does; you cannot dispose of them without His permission. I want you to get good food that can restore your strength and maintain it until the new Bishop arrives. I shall have a talk with him about this before he leaves here. . . ."

Unfortunately, Bishop Truffet did not follow Liber mann's recommendations about food. On the contrary, he and the missionaries who lived with him, "in order to live in a more apostolic way and to get closer and closer to the people they had to evangelize, adopted the same diet as the people of the country. They banished bread, meat and wine from their table.

They ate only rice (cooked with water and salt), couscous, manioc, potatoes and yams, with fish once in a while. They drank nothing but water. . . After six months they all fell sick. On November 23, 1847 Bishop Truffet died.

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9 Règle Provisoire, p. 35.
10 Letter of June 8, 1845, N.D., VII, p. 194.
Libermann comments: "He was a holy man... but he was too enthusiastic, and his imagination was too active and too impressionable. That’s what made him adopt that unfortunate diet which took him to his grave. But, it is God’s Will, – may His holy Name be blessed!"

Even though Libermann was able to see the finger of God in this event, – “He wants to be seen alone in his work, and He chose... his servant not to found a beautiful Mission in that country but to sacrifice himself for it and be its intercessor in glory”13, – still, he blames Bishop Truf-fet for having made “two mistakes which seriously compromised the Mission... The first mistake was the one which cost him his life...”14

On January 26, Libermann wrote to Father Arragon: “I hope you have changed the food. If you haven’t done it yet, you must do it at once: bread, meat and wine, within reason, and according to the demands of the climate.”15

As a matter of fact, Libermann sent out his missionaries not only to lift the native peoples out of their moral misery, but also to help them materially, since “those poor people are the most unfortunate on earth... These people, so unfortunate in the supernatural order, are equally so in the natural order (...) They are burdened with work from morning to night, exposed to the hottest climate and burning sun in summer and the beating rains in winter. They are cruelly beaten for the slightest faults... They are treated like beasts of burden...”

He also deplores the way these poor slaves are fed: “Their food consists of a root they call sweet potato, cooked in water with salt, and rice cooked in water serves as their bread. That is their only food day after day. They get some meat once a year. They cannot earn anything for themselves... to obtain any comfort or satis-

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12 Letter to the Community of Bourbon, February 18, 1848, N.D., X, pp. 68-70.
13 Letter to Father Chevalier, January 1848, N.D., X, p. 32.
14 “The second fault was an administrative one...” Letter to Father Le Vavasseur, February 24, 1848, N.D., X, pp. 79-80.
faction. Men, women and children work without any respite and have no reward but that miserable food..."16

Miserable conditions, miserable food! The missionaries don’t go to Africa to dive into this material misery, but to lift out of it the natives they have to evangelize, “raise them out of their brutalized condition...”17

That is why Bishop Truffet made a serious mistake, one which proved fatal to himself and his co-workers.

It is in the light of the Will of God “who wants all men to be saved”18 that Libermann takes care of the health of his missionaries – the instruments of salvation – as well as of his own health, because he has a mission to accomplish: to save Africa. He spares nothing when it is a question of the health of his sons who are missionaries and who are all in need. He accepts with resignation and simplicity doctors’ prescriptions and his confreres’ advice when his own health is in question, for he is aware of having “a poor body which he will have to drag along till the end.”19

Father Blanpin was taking a cure at Eaux-Bonnes in the Pyrenees for a serious throat disease he had contracted in the mission of Bourbon and which had left him almost entirely without the power of speech. Libermann writes to him on August 7, 1846: “As far as the doctors in Eaux-Bonnes are concerned, if you don’t see any use in consulting them, don’t do so; but be sure you don’t make that decision just to save a few francs. God and his Holy Mother will know how to pay all that back to us with interest.”20

One month later, on September 14, he wrote to him again: “Ask the doctors whether it would be better for you to spend the winter in Rome or in the south of France. If it’s the latter, we can probably get permission from the Superior of the Seminary in Toulouse for you to be received there as a boarder... You could do some good among the seminarians and attract some of them to the Missions. Understand however, that is not a reason for you to prefer

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16 Letter to Father Gamon, December 20, 1841, N.D., III, pp. 76-77.
17 Letter to the Director of the Colonies, Mr. Galos, September 22, 1842, N.D., III, p. 283.
18 I Tim., 2: 4.
19 Letter to Dr. Samson, July 6, 1842, N.D., III, p. 218.
20 N.D., VIII, p. 218.
that arrangement. It is your health that counts... If Rome is better, then go to Rome...

"when we find out what expenses are to be paid and what sacrifices have to be made, we shall do it gladly. You know I am telling you the truth, There is no cost too high if it will obtain the recovery and the peace of mind of a confere who got sick on the Missions."\(^{21}\)

As far as his own health is concerned, he tells his brother the doctor the regime he is following: "As to food, here is what I take: bread and water in the morning (I believe that is what agrees with me best, ... in this case mortification seems very good for the body); at noon... and in the evening... the doctor wants me to eat some roast meat at noon; I have not followed his advice up to now."\(^{22}\)

Later he will admit explicity in one of his letters that he made a mistake in not following the doctor’s advice. The Fathers in the community obliged him to follow it. On September 6, 1845 he wrote: "Some time ago our men here got together and laid down the law that I must get as much sleep as all the other members of the community... They also decided that I must follow a diet altogether different from the rest of the community, The doctor had already prescribed this diet several times, but I could not bring myself to live delicately and in a different manner from the others. I believe I must obey what my confreres demand with respect to my person, and I am being faithful to it. It costs me a very great deal..."\(^{23}\)

One month later he wrote with some humor: "We have three cows, one horse, some hens, ducks, geese, turkeys and pigeons. All these are for the use of the house. As to our food... I'm the only one on a special diet; they are fattening me up like one of the boarders mentioned above that I would be ashamed to name here for fear of shocking you... That's enough for this time. The clock is just striking ten and I must go to bed, otherwise I shall be wanting in obedience..."\(^{24}\)

\(^{21}\) \textit{N.D.}, VIII, pp. 291-293.
\(^{23}\) Letter to the Community of Bourbon, September 6, 1845, \textit{N.D.}, VII, p. 291.
When we bear in mind all Libermann’s worries about his missionaries, and, at the same time, the strength and courage with which he bore his infirmities all his life, we can only apply to him his own words: “An apostle is not like a child: he does not feel sorry for himself and his own troubles; he has learned to forget himself and to go along with head bowed in the face of afflictions. He has a heart as strong as a rock, as far as his own pains are concerned; but the tender heart of a dove, when it’s a matter of someone else’s sickness...”

Libermann and the Unfortunate

The final words of the preceding paragraph give a good summary of the whole life and activity of Libermann. Wherever there was suffering to be relieved, wrongs to be righted, there was his heart, “gentle and tender as a dove” to be moved to pity, “strong as a rock” to bear his own troubles and the burden of the troubles of others.

His work, destined at first for the evangelization of the liberated slaves of Bourbon, Mauritius and Haiti, soon extended itself to include the whole black race, “the black peoples wherever in the world they are to be found... Everywhere, until now, they live in misery, in a stupid ignorance...; and no one is thinking about lifting them out of it. And still these people are made in the image of God just like everybody else, and are disposed to receive the treasure of the Faith which they don’t know about...” Later, his work extended to all the unfortunate.

“When the Venerable Father passed through Bordeaux on his way back from Rome in 1846, he was struck by the charity of Father Germainville who kept 10 or 12 different works going in his house, – all of them very interesting. He promised to help by sending a priest and paying his way. To maintain community life, he decided to send another confrere, along with a brother. The foundation began in August 1847...”

26 Memorandum of 1846, N.D., VIII, p. 223.
Of the many works of Father Germainville, the Fathers retained only three or four;– in particular the work for the soldiers which "consisted in welcoming soldiers in the evening, teaching catechism to all of them and giving academic classes to the illiterate, and providing wholesome activity for their leisure hours."  
Libermann refers to this foundation in his letter of August 9, 1847 to Father Le Berre, a missionary in Gabon: "We have opened a small establishment in Bordeaux. We shall work there for laborers, sailors, and for the poorer classes in general..."  
On the following October 14, he explains the purpose of these works to Father Le Vavasseur: "Our field of work in Europe would be among the poorest classes, who... are in great need of help, such as sailors, soldiers, workingmen in general, the still more miserable class of galley-slaves, prisoners, beggars. I don't need to tell you that these would be excellent works..."

To make all their undertakings more effective, Fathers Germainville and Libermann launched the idea of holding meetings periodically in Paris of people interested in needs of this kind. "The general purpose of these meetings would be: to procure the salvation of the poor and laboring classes by means of religious and secular instruction and by all other means; to uplift their moral state and improve their material conditions... The particular purpose: to establish a close relationship and common outlook among those inspired by God to devote themselves to this work;...finally, to decide upon the way of giving the work the fullest possible extension in the different provinces and among the various classes of the most neglected and needy."

In the letter to Father Germainville which we are quoting, Libermann continues: "As to questions of detail, here are the suggestions of Mr. Cacheleux:

1) What would it be most useful and advantageous to do for the orphan apprentices?

28 N.D., IX, p. 249.
29 N.D., IX, p. 288.
2) What more is to be done for the workmen who come from the apprentice class, orphan or not?

3) What is to be done for workmen who are sick?...

When he moved to Paris after the fusion of the two Congregations, Libermann was able to give himself more to these social works, especially those among workingmen. On February 19, 1849 he wrote to Miss Guillarme to invite her to join this new Mission to the Workers: “Only a few days ago we opened the chapel to some poor laborers who are out of work, reduced to the depths of misery, without bread, without clothing, without consolation. Our men are giving them instruction and supplying them with vouchers to buy vegetables, and we hand out to them things that are given to us: shirts, trousers, stockings, etc. It would not be possible to engage in a finer work...; but, to keep it going, we'll need some resources. Come to our aid...”

Libermann adds a postscript: “If, by way of the people you know, you could obtain different things I need, you would be doing something pleasing to God... If you were to give some money, that would be excellent. Every week we give them vouchers for vegetables, – each one costs a sou. First there were 150 of them; the second week, last Sunday, there were more than 400. The number will grow. Thus, every week we shall need enough for 500 or 600; i.e. 29 or 30 francs.”

As a matter of fact, this crowd of laborers grew considerably. On March 29, Father François, Libermann’s secretary, gave the following details in his name to Father Lossedat: “...we have in our chapel every day, every evening, meetings of workingmen or rebels... This work is admirable and touching. The bad newspapers scold us; the good ones and all men of good will applaud and offer something to help. All this does good and arouses greatly the zeal of all the students in the house. It initiates us a little into your great work of the Missions...”

30 Letter of November 6, 1847, N.D., pp. 314-315.
31 N.D., XI, pp. 48-49.
32 Letter from Father François to Father Lossedat, N.D., XI, pp. 95-96.
Libermann says the same thing himself to Father Schwindenhammer: "We gather here in the chapel the poor laborers of the area. They come three times a week, about 400 or 500 in number. Yesterday there were 700... The great majority of these men are rebels from June (1848) who fought at the barricades... The socialists are furious with us... I have received an anonymous letter, addressed to all the priests which, without introduction, begins with the words: "Pack of churchmen". In it we are called reactionaries, assassins, hypocrites, scoundrels..." 33 The quotation ends with words which I pass over in silence so as not to shock sensitive ears.

Another similar work was that of the Holy Family, "a meeting of poor families which takes place in our chapel every two weeks," writes Father Lanurien, "it includes fathers, mothers and children. We say Mass for them and give instruction. Then a talk is given by a layman... Finally, the meeting ends with a small lottery, and everyone goes away happy either because he won something or because he has hopes of winning some other time..." 34

We can say that Libermann had a life-time program of restoring man, disfigured by sin and material misery, to his original dignity, called as he is to be a child of God. With regard to all these unfortunates, he strives to actualize the ideal he presented to Father Chevalier, the director of the Junior Seminary of Dakar, as an objective to be attained in the formation of his seminarians: "Study, gain a deep knowledge of the character, the mental stamp, the depths of the being of the Blacks. Don't stop at the externals, which can only deceive a superficial judge and which unfortunately do deceive many people.

"Be convinced that their exterior is that of people abandoned to all that is vicious in their nature... This exterior is clothed with all the miseries of humanity. Take the case of a poor nobleman who has fallen to the lowest of beggary, - wash off the mud that covers his face, heal the wounds on his body, give him rest and nourishment and

33 Letter to Father Schwindenhammer, N.D., XI, p. 100.
34 Letter from Father Lanurien to Father Le Vavasseur, May 10, 1489, N.D., "Compléments", p. 128.
put good clothes on him, and you will find that he is quite handsome, – his features will change completely.”

Libermann had already shown this compassion for the unfortunate long before he thought of the Work for the Blacks. “One of his companions at St. Sulpice tells of being responsible with him for the distribution of alms, especially clothing, to the poor. One day this young man was annoyed at those who were too quick to grab things and thus created confusion. He wanted to warn them that they would receive nothing next time. Libermann’s reaction was immediate: ‘What? impose a penance upon the unfortunate!’ But he said it in a tone of surprise and tender compassion.”

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Suffering does not find its source only in corporal pain and material misery. There are also the sufferings of the soul which come from contradictions, persecutions, misunderstandings, despair and sin. He wanted to be the good Cyrenian to all who were suffering: “I hope that Our Lord,” he wrote to Miss Guillarme, “will always give me courage to be able to support all souls who are suffering and need help.”

The same young lady, a pious and apostolic soul, had a strong tendency to cling to her spiritual directors. Libermann scolds her for it in a fairly severe letter. His words must have caused her sadness, so he hastens to console her: “I am coming to console you in the name of our good Mother, because my words have upset you. You gave them more weight than I did. Calm yourself. I shall leave this note in case I don’t find you at home... My answer to you is that there was nothing seriously wrong in all that you said to me...”

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35 Letter to Father Chevalier, November 23, 1847, N.D., IX, p. 360.
36 N.D., I, p. 127.
38 N.D., VII, pp. 11-12.
In Libermann’s eyes the unfortunate were always right. Recommending a German girl to the care of Miss Guillarme, he wrote: “The poor German girl is in despair. We must run to the rescue of this poor lamb... Help her, find her a good place... This soul is near the edge of the precipice; despair could carry her off...

Go and console her, in the Name of Our Lord.”

And he adds a postscript: “It is not a question of going to a perfect soul: this is a burden which must be taken up... Be careful... don’t be disgusted by the imperfect character and bad manners, by the prideful, violent and difficult ways of acting of poor, weak and imperfect people... Put yourself in their place... Don’t judge them, don’t say that they are wrong, that they are full of faults. An unfortunate person must never be wrong in our estimation, because our kindness and compassion for them should soften our hard hearts and calm our impatience and unwillingness to help... Do you want to participate perfectly in the love of Jesus? Your zeal and your love of souls, especially the most unfortunate and burdensome, must surpass all other affection and carry you beyond all difficulty and annoyance.”

On November 20, 1842, Libermann speaks to Father Dupont about this same German girl: “The poor German girl who has been converted from Protestantism... is very unhappy just now; she is in Paris without any money, staying in a boarding-house she can’t pay for. If you know some good person who would find her a place... it would be a good act. I have to tell you that she has a terrible character. As a result of her misfortunes, she has fallen into a state of exasperation which makes her very hard to get along with. She is difficult and sensitive. But, she is a soul be saved... If there is anything you can do for her through your acquaintances, don’t do it directly. She is one of those poor people who are ashamed and proud at the same time, and you will hardly ever find anyone more irritable... Pray for this poor German girl.”

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40 N.D., III, pp. 344-345.
Making reference to an aspirant sent away from the convent of Castres, Libermann wrote to the Mother Superior: "A few days ago I saw poor Miss Morillon. . . . The poor girl was very troubled. I tried to console her as best I could. It is hard to see the suffering of another person. . . ." 41

Advising Miss Barbier not to hold a grudge against those who had injured her, Libermann wrote: "Don't be angry with people who cause you harm. . . . Above all, don't hold a grudge against your poor brother. Don't be his accuser, rather be his advocate before God and Mary. . . If he is guilty, he is already more an unhappy man than a criminal. See only his unhappiness, not his fault, and love him more than ever." 42

In order to be always at the disposition of needy souls, one needs a great spirit of service. Libermann had it "I am the servant of all the souls who belong or who want to belong to Jesus. . . ." 43

The priest has to be a man for everybody, has to belong to everybody. That's what Libermann recalls to Father Bouteilhe, a parish priest in France: "Avoid getting involved in political questions. . . . The priest is the man of God, . . . his politics must be those of God. . . . The priest who gets mixed up in politics. . . repels a certain number of souls. . . Be a man for all men, by your universally charitable way of acting in moderation, modesty and benevolence. Spend more time with the poor than with the rich, but without neglecting the latter-they are to be saved too. Don't be fawning or flattering. Be polite and benevolent with the rich; be kind and charitable with the poor, and see that your charity is effective in practice. . . Don't take meals in the houses of the rich, so as not to lose your priestly spirit, and because you cannot take meals in the houses of the poor. They must all be equally dear to your priestly heart, but lean a little more towards charity and concern for the poor." 44

41 Letter of March 20, 1844, N.D., VI, p. 128.
43 Letter to Miss Guillarme, July 17, 1843, N.D., IV, p. 269.
44 Letter of November 30, 1850, N.D., XII, pp. 481-482.
Libermann shows that he is the defender of the poor, but still he recommends prudence. "We must do all we can to establish between rich and poor, between whites and blacks, that Christian charity which leads all men to think of themselves as brothers in Jesus Christ. In that way we can hope to extinguish both scorn and indifference on the one hand and jealousy and hatred on the other. But, great prudence is needed in doing this, lest everything be lost." 45

The commentary develops the meaning of this: "We must always work for the establishment of fraternal charity among men. We must always take up the cause of the unfortunate. But, in doing this, we must act not only with zeal, but also with prudence." And Libermann comes right down to a burning question of the day: "For example, although it is our desire that all slaves be freed, let us be careful about expressing this desire in the colonies: we would only succeed in turning the masters against us and thus making it impossible for us to do the good for the unfortunate blacks which we could do by acting prudently." 46

Looking at things in the light of faith, nobody is more wretched than sinners. That is why Libermann asks confessors not to be severe: "In your ministry," he writes to Father Dat, "take this as a general rule: severity loses souls; gentleness saves them... As a general practice, lean towards indulgence to weak souls, don't be stiff. In doing so, you will imitate the conduct of our Divine Master and you will do good to souls... It is through discouragement that most souls are lost." 47

He gives the same advice to Father Tisserant when he was working in Paris as an assistant to Father Desgenettes: "In confession... treat sinners with the greatest gentleness and kindness. Never be rigid or hard. Get them to realize the evil they have done, but without hurting them, al-

45 Règle Provisoire, 1e partie, Chap. IX, art. 14, p. 57.
46 Ibid, p. 57.
47 N.D., VIII, pp. 65-66.
ways gently. Almost never answer severely. Don’t preach a rigorous doctrine. I am not a theologian... I dare to assure you that rigorous principles are ruinous to souls."  48

Father Lossedat was indignant about the bad conduct of some priests in Haiti, where he was a missionary. Libermann wrote to him on September 17, 1844: “Avoid being bitter in dealing with sinners. Open up your soul when you meet sinners. For you to become irritated about their abominable sins, would be to act in a manner diametrically opposite to that of Our Lord... Be full of deference towards priests who are doing their duty. Your job is to win them over, not to grow bitter against them... Be gentle with sinners, gentle with yourself...”  49

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I bring to a close this series of quotations from Libermann with an episode from his life, one which witnesses to his good-heartedness towards those in need. I think it will be best to transcribe the summary of a letter he wrote to Mr. Demeuré on November 27, 1851, shortly before his death:

“Dear Sir:

Today I had a visit from your son. He finds himself in an embarrassing situation. On his way to Saumur, the poor fellow passed through Paris and I suppose he wanted to see the sights of the Capital. He stayed four days and spent all his money. As he did not have enough to pay his hotel bill, the man in charge would not let him go and spoke about taking him to the Chief of Police. In the midst of his troubles, our young man remembered my name and address. He came here, followed by the hotel man who would not let him out of his sight. I gave him a warm welcome, as I recalled his good family and all the kindness they had shown Father Schwindenhammer... and myself. He told me his story. However, as I did not rem-

49 N.D., VI, p. 344.
ember having seen him when I had the honor of visiting you... I wanted to make sure of his identity. He went to get his travel documents, still accompanied by the man from the hotel. I brought him up to my room by himself and, afraid that he had been reckless in spending all the money you gave him for his trip, I pretended to be a bit difficult so as to sound him out and give him some good advice. It did not take me long to see that he is all right... I didn't think I had to be too hard on him. Wanting to do what would please you... I advanced him the sum he needed...

I gave him some good advice and sent him off happy with the recommendation that he continue his journey today. He shook hands with me and left..."

The next day, Libermann added this postscript: "Your son came back looking for me this morning. Yesterday he said that 9 francs would be enough to pay his way to Saumur. This morning he tells me... that they asked for 17 francs..., he was obliged to spend the night in Paris; this cost him 10 francs and he had only 2 francs left. I let him see my displeasure and talked to him rather severely.

Still, I could not abandon him. Thinking it would be in line with your intentions, I gave him 17 francs more. When I gave it to him I told him that, if he did not get on his way by the very first train, I would have nothing more to do with him, he would have to get along however he could. However, don't be anxious, – if his light-headedness should cause him to make another mistake, I shall not abandon him, but I shall send someone along to pay for him. Thus the total amount I have advanced to him comes to 72 francs. I am convinced that what happened to your son is just a bit of foolishness and comes from the inexperience of youth... Your son seems to me to be a good boy...; I hope he will persevere in the right path."50

* * *

What is the origin of this unusual love for the unfortunate? It seems to me that we discover its roots in the fam-

50 N.D., XIII, pp. 391-393.
ily home in Saverne. Lazarus Libermann, Jacob's father, although a Jew, had the soul of a Christian. "The unanimous report of all the people of Saverne—Jews, Catholics and Protestants—witnesses that Rabbi Libermann was an upright man, honest and, above all, filled with an altogether Christian charity. There was a room in his house... ready to receive, night or day, the poor who knocked at his door. He took care of them at his own expense and never turned anybody away." 51

Without doubt, this example of his father was for Libermann the first source of his love for the unfortunate. Another source—this one negative—was the hard manner in which he was treated by his teachers of talmudic science at Metz, so different from the kindness and hospitality he knew in his father's house.

Libermann later said that he had counted upon the charity of a rabbi to whom his father sent him. Instead of that, he was badly received, and then scorned,—all for reasons he considered outrageous and futile: the study of profane languages. This rejection lessened his respect for his religion. "So it wasn't as high or as great as he had thought it was!" 52

Later on, in his life as a Christian and a priest, he would always say that: "Religion pure and blameless before God our Father is this: 'to visit orphans and widows and to keep oneself free of the corruption of the world,'" 53

All during his life—we see it in his correspondence—Libermann strove, in his relations with others, to avoid everything that could turn them away and to do whatever he could to help them.

More than once, Libermann experienced what it is like to be alone, abandoned by men. The anguish he felt within the four bare and austere walls of his room at Collège Stanislaus, far from his own people, apparently abandoned by his God who is, however, "close to those who are broken-hearted," 54—that anguish led him throughout his life.

51 *N.D.*, I, p. 9.
52 *N.D.*, I, p. 94.
53 *James*, 1:27.
54 *Psalm* 34:19.
to think of those who suffer from solitude and who lack help and comfort. Himsel himself an unfortunate in the eyes of men – “I have neither resources nor home; “I am taking to the streets and Providence will lead me where It wants me to go”⁵⁵ – he will be an object of compassion for those same men, who decided to keep him at St. Sulpice even though they thought his terrible epilepsy incurable. He could never forget such humaneness and tried to find ways to thank the Lord by placing his whole life at the service of men, especially those most disinheritied by fate.

This love of Libermann for people went on growing as his love for God grew also.

Amadeus Martins
(to be continued)

SECOND MEETING
OF THE SPIRITAN STUDIES GROUP

The Spiritain Studies Group, which was founded a year ago, held its second meeting in Rome from December 31 to January 2. All the members were present.

Work began at 9:00 o'clock on December 31. The Superior General was present and spoke of the interest in Libermann which seems to be rising anew in the whole Congregation-an interest which centralizes and synthesizes the spirit of the Congregation and is in agreement with the two-fold objective of the Group: a) research in depth on his life and teaching, with reference to the sources, in view of making known both the Congregation’s history and its spirituality; b) a bringing of this message to all the confreres by means of Spiritan Papers and other publications, by means which are adapted to modern times, and giving assistance to the General Council in its task of stirring up enthusiasm in the Provinces and Districts and in all the countries where Spiritan missionaries work.

Before getting down to the agenda, the Group heard from Father Brasio. This Father, from the Province of Portugal, has been in Rome since the first of October at the invitation of the General Council to do research in the Archives of Propaganda concerning the history of the Congregation and especially the life and work of Libermann. He presented to the Group an inventory of his recently completed findings. It is unusually rich, including: a) many letters written before the “fusion” to the Superiors General of the Holy Ghost, or written by these latter; b) several letters of-or to-Libermann (some of them previously unpublished), as well as letters to Schwindenhammer, Le Vavasseur, Tisserant, Collin, Bishop Barron, the Nuncios in Paris, etc. . . ; c) memoranda from Libermann to the Propaganda written in 1840 and in 1846, documents relating to the “fusion”; d) other documents relating to many countries in Africa and the West Indies, as well as Australia and St-Pi-
erre-et-Miquelon, with which the Congregation was concerned. The regular agenda dealt with the following:

1. *Report of the activities of the Group during the past year:*

   They were rather limited, due to the fact that Father Martins, the Secretary, only took up his duties in October, and that Father Lécuyer, the President, had some serious health problems to contend with. Still, the Group was not completely inactive and it managed to bring out the first issue of *Spiritain Papers.* Among personal work of the Group members, we can note an important article by Father Sigrist in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité:* "Libermann (F.M.P.) 1802-1852. 1) Life-2) Works-3) Spiritual Teaching." (cf. Bibliography). The editor (Beauchesne, Paris) proposes to make a reprint in the form of a 50-page pamphlet. Father B. Kelly gave several conferences and retreats based upon Libermann in Canada and in Nigeria. They were well received.

2. *Finance:*

   Since *Spiritain Papers* and the Group itself have no revenue, it was decided to ask the General Council for a "regular budget" to take care of current expenses: production of *Spiritain Papers*, equipment and operation of the Secretariat, the Secretary's travel, help for poor Provinces which may wish to publish in their own language an article from *Spiritain Papers* which has particular interest for them, etc. Extraordinary and occasional expenses would be arranged in understanding with the General Council.

3. *Spiritain Papers:*

   In principle, they will appear three times a year in French (*Cahiers Spiritains*) and in English, and will be sent to all our communities. If a Province or District wishes to receive more copies than were sent of the first issue, they should let us know and we shall see what can be done. At the same time, the Group accepts-even requests-the collaboration of the confreres in the writing of the *Spiritain Papers*, especially in what has to do with the teaching of the founders, the activities of the members, the history of the Congregation, but it reserves the right to decide for or against the publication of any item submitted.
4. Other Questions:

The Group would be grateful to all members of the Congregation if they would inform us, through the offices of the Provincial or District Superior or Secretary, of all publications about the Congregation or the Venerable Founder which appear in their respective areas. This is in view of drawing up a Spiritan Bibliography.

Works about Spiritan writings and about Libermann are becoming very rare; some are completely out of print. If some communities have two or more copies of any of them, it would be generous on their part if they would supply them to communities which have none. The Center could serve as a clearing-house between them...

5. Work to be undertaken immediately by the Group:

a). Father Sigrist is going to prepare a new Spiritual Directory, in a new format and comprising, in historical order, texts from Poullart des Places and Libermann, as well as other more recent texts.

b). Father Koren is going to revise and bring up to date his book The Spiritans, which is without any doubt the best thing of its kind we have in the Congregation.

c). Father Lécuyer has begun the publication of a series of articles on the Holy Spirit in the writings of Libermann. These will appear in Esprit-Saint (a review of spirituality published at rue Lhomond).

The Group decided that its next annual meeting will be held at the same time next year, but in Paris. At the end of the meeting, attention was drawn to the fact that February 26, 1979 will be the tercentenary of the birth of Poullart des Places. The Group urges the confreres to begin now to acquire a better knowledge of our first founder and his writings. His works, in French and in English, were edited by Duquesne University and can be obtained there...

In the same Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, there are entries about two Spiritans: “Father Louis Liagre 1859-1936” by Father Marc Duval (Fasc. LXI-1976-col. 748) and “Father Victor Lithard 1872-1944” by Father Joseph Bouchaud (Fasc. LXII-LXIII-1976-col. 872-873).

Bergar, Father Augustin, C.S.Sp., – Le premier et désastreux voyage du P. Bessieux vers le Gabon (1843-1844). A conference given at the Académie des Sciences d’Outre-Mer, it is reproduced in the Record of the Meetings of the Academy, XXXVI, 2, 1976, pp. 257-268. (In the same issue, on pp. 402-402, there is an obituary notice of Father Charles Estermann 1895-1976.)


–, – Histoire religieuse de Sénégal, 126 pp., illus., 1976 (Ed. Clair-afrique, Place de l’Indépendence, Dakar). “The author, as the competent archivist of the Diocese, was well placed to make the origins of the Church in the country come alive for us... After the principal sections which study the three periods typical of our religious history, the Annex entitled ‘Eglise de Dakar’ gives a rapid overview of the organization of the Archdiocese and is a fitting conclusion to the continual development of the work of God in Senegal.” (Cardinal H. Thiandoum, Archbishop of Dakar).

Kirkels, P.J., O.M.I., — Projet d'une méthodologie missionnaire au XIXe siècle. Lettres de F.M.P. Libermann au Cardinal-préfet de la Propagande. J. Ph. Franzoni, 1840-1849. A doctoral thesis in religious studies, under the direction of Professor Nédoncelle, presented to the Faculty of Theology of the University of Strasbourg, 1972.


Le Déaut, Roger, C.S.sp., — In the new Introduction à la Bible, Tome III “Nouveau Testament,” by George and P. Grelot, Father Le Déaut is the author of the chapters in Volume I concerning the Samaritans, the Pharisees, the Sadducees (pp. 131-142) and Jewish Life and Thought after the year 70 (pp. 217-228).


The Cuadernos Humanismo Espirituano of our Spanish Province recently published several issues devoted to Libermann: No.25: “Libermann ha triunfado?” (may-June 1976); No.26: “Libermann y su huella judia” (July-August 1976); No.27: “Promover el clero africano, preocupación de Libermann” (September 1976), Olivos 12, Madrid.

Father Henry Koren, C.S.Sp. has informed us that there are still 70 to 100 copies of his book The Spiritans, of his book Knaves or Knights? (on the first Spiritans in North America), of the Letters of Libermann to religious, to people in the world and to members of the clergy, of the Spiritual Writings of Poullart des Places (French-English), and only 6 copies of the 5-volume Monuments Spiritana devoted to Angola. All his other manuscripts have been lost. . . .

Rath, Josef Theodor, C. S. Sp., — Geschichte der Kongregation vom Heiligen Geist. I Teil: Das Pariser Seminar vom Heiligen Geist für arme Kleriker 1708-1800 (385 pp., 1972). II Teil: Das Pariser Kolonialseminar vom Heiligen Geist 1800-1848 (306 pp., 1974). Missionsverlag Knechtsteden, Hermes-Druck, Düsseldorf. These are the first two volumes of a History of the Congregation written by Father Rath of the Province of Germany. A third volume is about to appear. We have already written in CSSP-Newsletter (February 1973 and April 1975) of how highly we regard this publication, well documented and pleasant to read. It is a valuable contribution to the history of our religious family.