

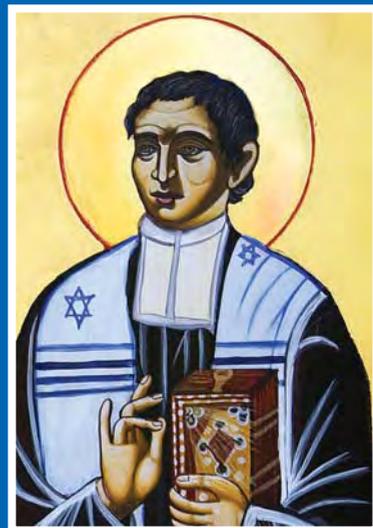
Never seek to advance further than
that which is given to you from on
high. Follow grace and never go
ahead of it. It is not necessary that
you see how you are advancing –
that is for the Spirit to do. He is your
guide and not you. In prayer follow
that which attracts you and don't be
preoccupied by method.

A SHORT LIFE OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN

The union of our soul with God is the
work of the Spirit and not of us...
without him, all our efforts would be
useless and even harmful. For the
more we work to unite ourselves to
God the more there will be of our own
actions and thus the less there will be
of the Spirit working in us.

Spiritual Life
and Mission

No. 3



*Jewish by
birth,
Christian by
faith and
baptism*



IMPORTANT DATES IN THE LIFE OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN



12 April 1802	Birth in Saverne
24 December 1826	Baptism in Paris
1826-1827	Philosophy at the College Saint-Stanislas in Paris
1827-1831	Seminary of Saint-Sulpice
1831-1837	Seminary of Issy-les-Moulineaux
1837-1839	Eudist novitiate in Rennes
28 October 1839	The Call to Mission
3 December 1839	Departure from Rennes for Rome
1840-1841	Resident in Rome
27 March 1840	Presentation of his first memorandum on <i>The Work for the Blacks</i> to Propaganda
18 September 1841	Ordination to the Priesthood at Amiens.
25 September 1841	Mass at Notre Dame des Victoires Foundation of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary
27 September 1841	Opening of the Novitiate at La Neuville, near Amiens
13 September 1843	Sending of the first missionaries to Guinea
15 August 1845	Memorandum On the Mission to the Blacks <i>in general and on that to Guinea in particular</i>
26 September 1848	Union of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.
2 February 1852	Death in Paris
19 June 1910	Declared Venerable by Pius X



A SHORT LIFE OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN

As Jesus Christ was sent by the Father
so he sends us forth.

Our Mission is his.

It is Jesus who lives

in those whom he sends,

who suffers in those whom he sends,

who draws souls to God his Father

sharing with them his grace

through those whom he sends.

So that Jesus may live

in those whom he sends

and that he might do all things

in them and through them,

it is necessary that those whom he sends live in him

and would be united with him in their lives,

in their sufferings

and in their apostolic activity.

If this be not so,

they are not the envoys of Jesus Christ

except in appearances

having nothing real to their mission...

Every aspect of our mission must be like his...



CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION

Jacob Libermann, the fifth son of a Rabbi from Saverne, was born on 12 April 1802. He was brought up in strict fidelity to the Law of his ancestors and to the traditional customs of his people in the little local Jewish community which had taken refuge at the entrance to the town in the shadow of the synagogue.

Timid and gentle as a child, he was nervous and sensitive. Of precocious intelligence and a quick memory, he was the favoured child of the Rabbi who hoped to pass on to him his fervour for the Jewish faith as well as his learned knowledge of the Bible and the Talmud. Yiddish was spoken exclusively in both his family and district. He spoke no other language but this and Hebrew until he reached the age of 20!

He was noted for his adolescent piety. "Listen, Israel, the Lord is God. You will have no other God but him alone! (Dt. 6:4). The absoluteness of God permeated his entire being. He had a heart of gold and was loved by all, especially the poor who were received at the family house.

He recalled later: "I was aged about 20. My father, who was a distinguished Rabbi, decided to send me to Metz so that I might complete my studies there. He did so not so much that I might acquire knowledge that I could most certainly have received from him but rather to give me an opportunity to deepen my knowledge, develop my talents and to make myself acceptable to the rabbis who came in large numbers to complete





their training in that town. My father gave me letters of introduction to two of the professors at the Jewish School, one of whom had been his student and the other his friend. The first received me with a coldness and disdain which hurt me deeply and made me decide from the very beginning not to see him again. The other showed great harshness towards me because I began to study French and Latin. He treated me discourteously and expressed his ill-humour towards me in everything he said to me. I began to become aware of the work of Providence in my regard. God, who desired to draw me out of the error in which I was steeped, was preparing my heart by making me undergo these trials and rebuffs which I was far from expecting."

4

His soul was filled with doubt. Why such harshness from the chosen people of God? Why had God left other peoples in ignorance? Why were there no more prophecies and miracles today? "I came to the conclusion that those ancient miracles were no more than an invention of the imagination and the credulity of our ancestors." In addition to the rejection of the talmudic reasoning of his teachers, he experienced interior turmoil, made more acute by the conversion to Christianity of his brother, Doctor Samson, whom he trusted deeply. He experienced deep sadness, religious indifference leading to a "complete absence of faith".



"I came to the conclusion that those ancient miracles were no more than an invention of the imagination and the credulity of our ancestors."



ILLUMINATION AND BAPTISM



A Jewish friend advised Jacob to go to Paris to see M. Drach who had become a Christian after having been the Principal of a contemporary Jewish school in the capital. It was by a miracle that Jacob obtained permission from his father to make the journey to Paris. He reached the capital on November 1st, 1826. There, it was by a direct intervention by God, similar to what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus, that Jacob's eyes were opened to the light of the faith.

"Monsieur Drach obtained a place for me at the College Saint-Stanislas and brought me there himself. There I was confined to a cell, I was given "The History of Christian Doctrine" by Lhomond as well as the History of Religion by the same author and I was left alone. It was an extremely painful experience for me.

In the profound solitude of that room where only a skylight allowed the daylight in,

the thought of being so far from my family, from my friends, from my country plunged me into a deep sadness. I experienced an aching melancholy in my heart. It was then as I remembered the God of my ancestors that I threw myself on my knees and implored him to enlighten me in the true faith. I beseeched him to let me know if what Christians believed was really true and, if it was false, to take it immediately away from me. The Lord, who is close to those who invoke him from the depths of their hearts, heard my prayer. Instantly, I received the light, I saw the truth. Faith penetrated my mind and heart. I began to read Lhomond and I found I could accept easily and firmly all that was said about the life and the death of Jesus Christ. The mystery of the Eucharist on which I rather imprudently meditated, caused me no difficulty. I believed everything without any difficulty. From that moment onwards, I desired nothing more than to plunge myself in the waters of the sacred pool."





On Christmas Eve, 1826, a Sunday, his prayer was heard. He was baptised in the College Chapel and was given the name of Francis Mary Paul. At the moment of baptism, he had a profound inner spiritual experience of the free and overwhelming power of the grace of God. This would become thereafter one of Francis' favourite themes – "What I became I owe solely to grace."

"I received Baptism on the eve of Christmas. On that day also, I was allowed to take my place at the Holy Table. I am filled with wonder at the wondrous change that took place in me at the moment when the water of baptism flowed on my forehead. All my uncertainties, my fears fell away instantly. The ecclesiastical habit (soutane?) for which I used to feel something of the ordinary repugnance which

would be proper to a Jew, now appeared to me under the same aspect – I loved it more than I feared it.

6

But above all else, I felt an unconquerable courage and strength for the practice of the Christian faith. I felt a gentle affection for everything which had to do with my new faith."

A tender love of Mary was also bestowed on the occasion of Francis' baptism – a choice gift which would be a source of light for his entire life. "When the baptismal water flowed over my Jewish head, I immediately loved Mary whom I had detested previously." As he emerged from the saving water of Baptism, he expressed a desire to become a priest. He spent eight months at the College of Saint-Stanislas, dressed in the soutane which hitherto he had held in abhorrence. He then entered the seminary of Saint-Sulpice where he was to remain for four years.

On learning from a third party that his favoured son had become a Christian, his father, the rabbi, let loose his fury in a letter in which he called down on his son the direst curses of Israel and thereafter considered Francis as dead, cut off from the family. "But I am a Christian" Francis said over and over again, in tears. The Rabbi died without ever pardoning his son.



ILLNESS

In March 1829, on the eve of his ordination to the sub-diaconate, he was unexpectedly prostrated by an attack of epilepsy in the office of his spiritual director. Further attacks followed each other in quick succession. The verdict was final – he could not become a priest! At the end of his theological studies, he was told that he would have to leave the Seminary. “I cannot return to the world”, he said. “I trusted in God to provide for me. I am content to have no other resource but God alone.” This attitude served to disarm to Seminary Council which now took responsibility for him “for as long as it will please almighty God.” He was sent to the Seminary of Issy-les Moulineaux, in the country, where he was placed at the disposal of the Bursar, as a messenger, gardener, floor polisher. He was given permission to continue to wear the soutane.

He had many and frequent contacts with the seminarians and the seminary directors. He easily invited friendship and trust. He became the spiritual director of a large number of them. This he did by one-to-one contact and later by correspondence. One professor said of him, “His heart was full of God, seeing Him in everything. He warmed us by his conversations....the hand of God was on him.” He spent six years at Issy-les-Moulineaux!

At that time, the writings of the founder of the Seminary, M. Olier, were being edited in a new edition. Francis became an excellent commentator on this great master of priestly spirituality among the seminarians and was no doubt influenced by him in his thinking and in his style. He learned the French language, he received the faith and he studied theology in a Sulpician atmosphere. He was indeed a mystic. It was of his own experience above all else that he spoke when he commented on the path of spirituality or when he





was sure to have received illumination for others. His method was existential. He referred constantly to the spiritual path on which he himself had travelled with the lucidity and the certainty of a seer. It was a path whose signposts were “gentleness”, “love”, “mercy”!

He experienced physical suffering. “My dear sickness is for me a great treasure”, he wrote to his brother, the doctor. He experienced humiliations, misunderstandings, interior darkness. “This darkness is excellent”, he wrote to one of the seminary directors, “because it is in it that our souls are brought to perfection.”

With the approval and even the agreement of some of the professors, he gathered the seminarians into “bands” of piety. In the written account of their meetings, he was named “Saintly M. Libermann”. The little notes that he wrote, especially for great feasts, were passed from hand to hand. One of the directors, M. Carbon, was able to say “God wished to give to Saint-Sulpice a model which would reform it. That is why he kept M. Libermann here for so long.”

Libermann’s spirituality was Christological. He encouraged the technique and the skill of allowing oneself to be led by the Holy Spirit into an atmosphere of the presence of God, the presence of one-self, of complete self-giving, of trustfulness, of gentleness and, above all, of peace so that one’s “heart and soul, body, life and existence would be for Jesus and in Jesus.”

In 1837, M. Louis, the restorer of the Eudists, asked him to be Master of Novices for his Congregation at Rennes. He stayed there for two years, experiencing real difficulties in this delicate task as well as mysterious spiritual difficulties – the dark night of the soul of people of action – which would place him completely in the hands of God, that he might become the instrument of his mercy.





THE WORK FOR AFRICANS

It was on October 28th, 1839 in a moment of interior enlightenment that he learned from the Holy Heart of Mary the place that she destined for him in the Church – to be the founder of a missionary institute to minister to Africa and the islands. Among the “fervents” in the bands of Saint-Sulpice, he had got to know two Creole seminarians – Frederic Levasseur from Bourbon (present-day Reunion) and Eugene Tisserant, of Haitian origin, both of whom dreamed of placing their lives at the service of the slaves with whose wretched fate they had become familiar when they were young. They wished to establish a foundation of priests, “the Work for the Blacks” in which other seminarians were ready to become involved. Francis Libermann encouraged them – in agreement of their seminary directors – both by word and in writing. He himself felt himself had not, at first, been drawn to devote himself to the Africans. However, on this occasion he heard God’s call in person and became their leader. “I will leave to the Lord the care of removing every obstacle”, he said.

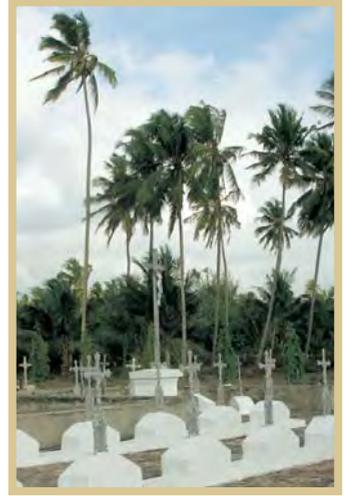
9



Then he left for Rome. “The order to do so has been given by God and the decision has been taken”, he wrote to the Eudist Superior. He reached Rome on January 6th, 1840. Gregory XVI had just condemned slavery and the way the black people were being treated in the Bull, “In supremo apostolatus” issued on December 3rd, 1839. In Rome, Francis submitted to the Congregation of Propaganda a Short Memorandum on the Foreign Missions on March 27th 1840



and which consisted of seven manuscript pages. But the principal obstacle was that he was not a priest nor could he become one. He waited therefore... "May the wall crumble. I do not feel the need to search for human support. I have presented my plan. If God wishes that it be accepted, they know where to find me. I will wait... If not, I will go back just as I came." He wrote the draft of a Provisional Rule for his Congregation once he had resolved to consecrate it to the Holy Heart of Mary. He found lodgings in an attic room in a garret which someone had rented to him out of pity.



At the beginning of September, he undertook "as a pious task", he said, to write a commentary on the Gospel according to Saint John. He continued with this task until mid-November. However, he did not complete it, his commentary covering only the first twelve chapters. It took him ten weeks to write some 700 pages on poor-quality copybook paper. The chapters were written at one go, almost without any corrections working from a single Novum Testamentum. It was an enraptured contemplation on the word of God, interrupted at regular intervals by lyrical passages of praise and of prayer.

10

This long meditation was not destined for publication. Francis Libermann was writing alone in the solitude of his relationship with God. In the style of the fathers of the Church, it was an intuitive exegesis of prayer. One would look there in vain for a rigorously scientific work, even for its own time. He did not know Greek and could not therefore have recourse to the original text. He had no commentary nor had he ever read one. On the contrary, like John himself, he listened to the beating of the heart of Jesus. His pages on the mystery of the Trinity, on the Marriage at Cana which "represented the Church of Jesus Christ where souls become the spouse of the Divine Spirit", the call of the disciples, the psychology of Martha and Maria, the commentary on "If anyone thirsts..." and especially that on the Good Shepherd – all of these, which opened up wide-ranging perspectives on the understanding of love, divine teaching and even on the attitude of the Jews and the advice given to the future apostles, flowed



fluently from his pen. "I try to go directly where the Lord is seeking to go. I strove to penetrate his divinity to see there his divine thought in the unique and strict meaning of his words." The whole undertaking was punctuated by cries of faith and confidence, by appeals addressed to the loving mercy of God, of expressions of pain, of abandonment to the Holy Spirit, of gratitude filled with tenderness. Francis Libermann was actually living an interior experience of real union with the Most Holy Trinity. The commentary shone with divine light. Far from being merely an individualistic perspective, he penetrated deeply into the divine reality, the "Kingdom of God of which our Lord speaks", the deep reality of the Body of Christ. To look for an exegesis of a contemporary nature only leads to disappointment. One is overcome when one allows oneself to be seized by the accessible mysticism of this work.



Providence then intervened. His health improved. After a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Loreto, the Vicar Apostolic of the island of Mauritius offered to sponsor the "Work for the Blacks" and the coadjutor Bishop of Strasbourg agreed to ordain him priest for the Vicariate of Mauritius.





ORDINATION AND NOVITIATE AT NEUVILLE

Francis was ordained priest at Amiens in the chapel of the local Bishop on September 18th, 1841. On September 25th, he celebrated Mass in the sanctuary of Our Lady of Victories in Paris surrounded by his first missionary companions. This Mass marked the foundation of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary. Two days later, he began his Novitiate at la Neuville, near Amiens. Francis Libermann was able himself to introduce the new Society to the Seminarians among whom, since Saint-Sulpice, his reputation for holiness was well-known. Many young people gathered around him. He formed them one by one and during their missionary careers, continued to accompany them with his counsel and encouragement. From this vast correspondence as well as from many Memoranda to Propaganda and from his remarkable "Instructions to Missionaries", he drew up an entire theology of Mission, based on the theme of being sent. "As Jesus Christ was sent by the Father so he sends us forth. Our Mission is his. It is Jesus who lives in those whom he sends, who suffers in those whom he sends, who draws souls to God his Father sharing with them his grace through those whom he sends." It is a mystical theology of mercy. The missionary goes to others to bear witness to divine mercy of which he himself has had constant experience. It was a mystical theology of love and of service of the most abandoned, in a spirit of humility of brotherhood, of welcome and of availability. "Empty yourselves of Europe, of its customs and its mindset. Make yourselves Negroes with the Negroes.... be to them them as servants are to their masters." It was a mystical theology of zeal, of apostolic strength, of patience in building a local Church, which would give great care to the formation of a local clergy and of local catechists. In short, it was a theology of holiness: "The African people will not be converted by talented and capable missionaries. It does not need them. It is by the holiness and the sacrifice of the Fathers that they will be saved."

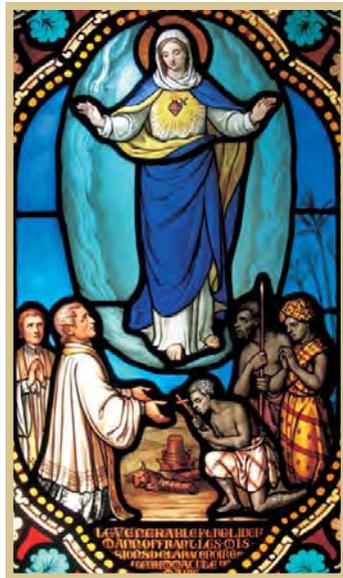


THE BEGINNINGS OF THE MISSION

The first ten missionaries left on September 13th 1843. Many would die in the very flower of their lives. However, little by little, others would establish themselves on the coasts of African and of the islands. The rest of the story is familiar to us – it was a period of great missionary endeavour – but with interruptions.

In 1848, the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary was merged into the Congregation of the Holy Spirit which had been founded in 1703 by Claude-François Poullart des Places. Father Libermann became the Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and of the Holy Heart of Mary and placed particular emphasis, in his Rule of 1849, of the consecration of one and all to the “apostolic life” as an essential aspect of their life.

In 1850, Spiritan missions in Senegal, Gabon, Madagascar and the island of Mauritius, Guadeloupe, Martinique and Reunion were erected as dioceses. Mission was well and truly launched! Other missionary institutes would be founded in their turn. The great apostolic current, breathed into life by Father Libermann, continued to grow. Even today, its fruits are to be seen, still bearing fruit.





THE FINAL MONTHS

At the end of 1851, Father Libermann complained often of overwhelming fatigue. His health, which had always been rather precarious, began to rapidly deteriorate. By December he was confined to his room. Father Le Vavas seur wrote to Francis' brother, Doctor Libermann: "It is more or less the same sickness as he had three years ago. He can eat practically nothing. He is on a starvation diet."

On January 27th 1852, he received the last sacraments. On the evening of January 30th, with the whole community assembled around him for the final farewell, he uttered a few words with great difficulty. "I am seeing you for the last time. I am happy to see you. Sacrifice yourselves for Jesus, for Jesus alone. God is everything. Man is nothing. Charity, sacrifice...zeal for the glory of God, the salvation of souls." These were to be his last words. He died on February 2nd while the seminarians, in the nearby chapel, were singing the words of the Canticle of Mary "Et exaltavit humiles..." ("He has raised up the lowly")

14

A certain Father de Segur sketched a portrait of him on his deathbed. It is a portrait that gives the best likeness of him of all that were done. His funeral took place in Rue Lhomond in the chapel of the mother House. M. L'Abbe Desgenettes, Rector of the Basilica of Our Lady of Victories, sang the Mass and gave the Final Commendation.





The Decree of the Heroicity of the Virtues of the Servant of God, declaring Father Francis Libermann “Venerable” was published on June 19th 1910.

Some 1800 Spiritual Letters of Father Libermann have been collected or published as well as his Spiritual Writings, including, of course, his famous Instructions to Missionaries. The Commentary on St. John, although it is incomplete, remains one of the jewels of his thought.

**I believe that it has pleased God
to give me a particular grace
for the truths of salvation
and the guidance of certain souls...**
**I have received a grace which is purely for others
and from which I take nothing for myself.**



This text is a translation of La Brève Vie de François Libermann, Coll. «Spiritualité Spiritaine» and published by the Spiritans in France.

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