

**Novena with
Fr. Francis Libermann
2024**



**SPIRITAN MISSION
2022 - 2024**

**Novena for
Father Libermann's Day**

2 February 2024

Libermann Novena

(from 24th January to 1st February 2024)

Mission in the spirituality of Fr. Libermann

The activities proposed by the Generalate Team for the period 2022-2024 invite us to reflect on Mission. In this novena, we propose to take a look at the missionary dimension of the life of our second founder Francis Libermann: his journey in this specific vocation, beginning with the first elements that paved the way for his choice of the mission and other important aspects of his missionary activity, right up to his last words, left as a legacy to his beloved Congregation.

Illuminated by Gospel texts, we will also reflect on the life and journey of Jesus of Nazareth in relation to his mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God.

We will then reflect on the way in which the Congregation today incarnates the charism and missionary spirituality of its founder so that it, in turn, can fulfil the mission of the Divine Master.

Finally, we will conclude by proposing either the prayer for the beatification of Fr. Libermann, or the prayer for the Spiritan mission proposed with the General Council's Animation Plan.

May this reflection help us to nourish and animate our current mission for the Congregation and the Church!

Our thanks to Brother Mariano Espinoza of the Paraguay Group for preparing this novena.

Day 1: Mission as a call

1. Libermann's missionary awakening

In Libermann's life, the vocation to follow Jesus was born in a context of searching for meaning in a fundamental aspect of his life: the spiritual dimension. Libermann grew up in a family environment where religious practice was a fundamental part of Jewish family and community identity. Religion then sometimes became an instrument of social affirmation and not so much a deep inner experience that could guide a person towards a certain lifestyle. This situation led the young Libermann to question the meaning of his faith. The example of his two brothers who had converted to Christianity, contact with Christian literature and his stay outside the strictly Jewish environment gave him the opportunity to experience the Christian God:

"It was then that remembering the God of my ancestors, I knelt and begged him to enlighten me as to the true religion. I asked Him to tell me if the beliefs of the Christians were true and to help me know them, but if they were false to keep me far from them. The Lord, who is close to all who call on him from the bottom of their hearts, heard my prayer and answered it. All at once I was enlightened. I saw the truth and faith penetrated my mind and heart. Reading Lhomond, I had no trouble accepting everything he said about the life and death of Jesus Christ. The mystery of the Eucharist, perhaps imprudently put before me, I accepted fully. I believed everything without any trouble. From that moment, my one desire was to be baptised. I didn't have to wait long for this happiness; I was immediately given instruction for this wonderful sacrament and received it on Christmas Eve. On the same day, I made my First Holy Communion. I have no words to express the change that took place in me as the waters of baptism flowed over my head. All

uncertainty and fear fell away. Even ecclesiastical dress, so repugnant to Jews, no longer bothered me at all; instead of fear, I now loved it. Above all, I felt courage and invincible strength to practise the Christian faith, being in love with everything connected with my new belief”.

The idea of the priesthood naturally germinated in his mind. “My entry into the seminary of Saint-Sulpice was one of blessing and joyfulness”. (Spiritan Anthology, pp. 57-59).

In the process of his formation for the priesthood, Libermann had several experiences that guided his future life, and one of these was living with fellow seminarians who were interested in an apostolic life in distant missions. The idea of “L’Œuvre des Noirs” was born, and Libermann was initially only involved in developing the project. While at the Eudist novitiate in Rennes, Libermann was visited by M. de la Brunière, a sub-deacon who had signed up to the “Œuvre des Noirs” project and spent two months with him.

Libermann wrote to Le Vasseur:

“The good Monsieur de la Brunière is a complete Negro and I am delighted with him from the bottom of my heart (...). Yesterday evening he came to see me to ask me to offer Holy Communion on behalf of the poor and dear blacks (...). We did so and the good Lord gave me a little light (...) [hoping that] if it pleases God this little spark will grow and become a clearer light” (Spiritan Anthology, p. 100).

A horizon is glimpsed in Libermann’s vocational journey and it is only the beginning of a long journey of a life fully lived in faith.

2. Gospel: Lk 4:16-21

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus became clearly aware of his mission; he declared openly and in public, in an official religious setting, the mission to which he had been called and sent. His mission has a spiritual dimension; the sending comes from God.

We can imagine that in Jesus, from the point of view of his humanity, his vocation and the mission that God had prepared for him were awakened little by little throughout his pre-baptismal life (adolescence, youth...).

There are external elements, whose influences are generally decisive in a vocational choice and even more so in a vocation of a spiritual nature: family upbringing, the practice of religious precepts, the testimonies of significant people in our lives, the socio-economic-political context that surrounds us.... These factors undoubtedly played an important role in the vocational choice of Jesus of Nazareth, because it is through these experiential factors that the Holy Spirit reveals the path to follow.

In the biblical context, God's call to raise up a prophet like Jesus of Nazareth always includes a socio-spiritual motivation. From this perspective, the possibility of a disembodied spiritualism or a purely sociological activism in the work of evangelisation is excluded.

3. The Congregation today:

Today, in the Church and in the Congregation, we continue to believe firmly that the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth is still, and perhaps more than ever, the most powerful way of leading human beings to the fullness of their being. We continue to trust in the Kingdom proclaimed and lived by Jesus of Nazareth as the definitive means that leads us to an encounter with God. Our founders had an absolute conviction about this Truth. They discovered that their vocation and their mission were to open paths, to provide means, to create conditions... so that this Truth could be transmitted to the world. Their mission was to bring this good news, particularly where it was most needed.

The Congregation is called to be a place of evangelical witness, from which the light shines out into the world. Its mission has been, is and will continue to be to bring the Gospel to the men and women of the different periods of its history. The Congregation of the Holy Spirit has a clear and defined *raison d'être*:

“The evangelisation of the “poor” is our goal (cf. Lk 4:18; N.D.XIII, 170)I. Therefore, we go more especially to peoples, groups and individuals who have not yet heard the message of the Gospel or who have scarcely heard it, to those whose needs are the greatest, and to the oppressed (cf. N.D.II, 241). We also willingly accept tasks for which the Church has difficulty finding workers” (SRL, 4).

“We are participating within the Church, in the mission of Christ, in communion with him and all people, proclaiming a salvation that is a gift from God, liberation from all that oppresses people, joy in knowing the Lord and being known by him,” (SRL, 11).

4. Prayer:

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

5. Prayer for the Spiritan Mission

See the last page of the document.

Day 2: The decisive stage

1. Libermann decides to embrace the “Work of the Blacks” once and for all.

Libermann opts for mission ad gentes as a response to his inner quest, without first taking the time to think about it, abandoning himself to God’s will.

Libermann wrote to Le Vasseur:

“I don’t want to tell you about it just yet: I think it is good to wait for the idea to mature a little in the presence of God (...) Before attempting to share such plans with others, they need to be clearer so that we can all consider them in depth before God. Please pray about this and ask the confreres to do the same, because it is very important. M. de la Brunière encourages me and is in perfect agreement with what I have in mind. I want our project to be solid, fervent and apostolic: in other words, a commitment to all or nothing! (...) I hope to write to him within two weeks,, telling him what the good Lord has made known to Mr de La Brunière and to myself.” (Spiritan Anthology, p. 104-105).

A few days before his departure from Rennes, he wrote a letter to Father Louis, his superior, in which he declared his firm decision and begged him not to try to hold him back:

“You can see, Mr Superior, what it’s all about. I have consulted my God, I have consulted his wisest and most zealous servants for his glory, and they have all unanimously decided that I should leave this poor Congregation which is and will be truly dear to me all my life. I hesitated, I considered for a long time, in the desire I had to be of some use to this

little Congregation and I never found in myself (...) an affirmative answer. (...) Now I have only one grace to ask of you, my Father and my most respectable superior, and that is not to make any effort to stop me (...) The order has been given by God (...). My resolution is made, my sacrifice is done" (Spiritual Letters, II, pp. 296-298).

He decided to leave the Eudist society to devote himself to the "Work of the Blacks". A memoir written by Father Eugène Tisserant in 1842 confirms this:

"Liebermann had begun to feel strongly that he should give himself wholly to this work for the black people. The first occasion when Mary put this idea into his head was on October 25th, 1839 (...). (...) three days later, as he told me himself, it became even clearer to him that this is what he had to do, so he finally arrived at a definitive decision (...). He always regarded this day as one of the happiest in his life," (*Spiritual Anthology*, p. 103).

"He decided, after consulting Father Pinault, to join us, continuing as before with the office of our counsellor" (*Spiritual Anthology*, p. 106).

2. Gospel: Lk 3: 21-23

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry.

Luke tells us that Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his public mission. It is certain that throughout his youth, he discerned, matured and formed himself for this decisive moment.

Jesus saw in John's pastoral work the appropriate context in which to take the decisive step and begin his mission. The space and time chosen by Jesus were appropriate, and this is confirmed by the manifestation of God through a voice.

Jesus begins a new stage in his life with a new identity. At this moment he is born for mission, "today I have begotten you". With the absolute certainty that his life will be the channel through which will flow the water of life of the new humanity, announced by John, and the force that will animate him for this undertaking is the presence of the Holy Spirit who materialises in the form of a dove. In short, we are dealing with a Trinitarian theophany. The Trinitarian God who manifests himself takes it for granted that the mission Jesus will undertake will not simply be an action of a socio-political nature, but a project from a perspective of faith in which God is the main protagonist.

3. In the Congregation today:

If we were to look at the vocational history of each of the Spiritans who have been and still are part of the Congregation, we would find thousands of wonderful life stories, the fruit of our choice of life. Each of us has had our own journey towards the definitive decision that led us to follow Jesus in this missionary adventure. Since we made our choice of life, we have built a new face, we have entered into a process of interior configuration to adopt the necessary elements that make possible our life of discipleship in the footsteps of the one who seduced us at a given moment in our existence: Jesus of Nazareth. The Congregation of the Holy Spirit is but the reflection of the vocational light of each of its members. At the heart of every Spiritan vocation is the mission. It is the driving force behind all our actions.

"In the midst of God's people, among the numerous and varied vocations which the Holy Spirit inspires, we Spiritans are called by the

Father and “set apart” (cf. Acts 13:2) to follow Jesus and to announce the Good News of the Kingdom”. (SRL, 1)

4. Prayer:

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

5. Final prayer:

Holy Father, you are magnificent in your love;

grant us the grace of seeing confirmed by the Church

the beautiful testimony of faith and holiness that Francis Libermann has left us.

Enlightened by his missionary witness, we feel moved by the Spirit to proclaim the Good News of salvation with new zeal.

Grant us, we ask you, through the Holy Heart of Mary, his beatification and the graces we implore through his intercession.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Day 3: The need for advertising

1. The urgency of Libermann's mission

Libermann, having decided to embrace the cause of the fledgling work, did not wait a moment to put himself entirely at its service and to seek the means necessary to advance the project. A few days before his departure from the Eudist Society, he wrote a letter to Father Louis, his superior, in which he declared his firm decision and begged him not to try to hold him back. He left Rennes without delay on the day the Church celebrates the feast of the generous missionary Saint Francis Xavier. Was this date a harbinger of his future life, entirely devoted to the missionary cause?

Libermann's decision to join the group of future missionaries set in motion the implementation of the plan, which until then had been the subject of speculation and consultation.

He decided to make the trip to Rome, which he saw as the necessary step to give the "Work of the Blacks" a solid base from which to gradually begin organising the future Congregation.

The impetus to embark on this path with firm confidence in Divine Providence must have come from the fervent witness of his companions Tisserant and Le Vasseur, who spoke impetuously of the absolute necessity of pastoral care for the "poor blacks" in their respective countries, and that for this reason they were ready to offer their lives.

Fr. Tisserant's memoir bears witness to this:

"M. Le Vasseur left for his country in the hope of restoring his health. (...) This journey, without having any other result for his body than to

aggravate his illness, became for his soul a precious opportunity provided by Providence to make this pious worker aware of the kind of work that the Lord was destining him to do one day in his vineyard. The state of degradation and especially of neglect of the poor black slaves of Bourbon inflamed him with the desire to provide some spiritual help to the negroes of his country; he had just seen at close quarters the abandonment of these poor unfortunates, (...) [and] he had been moved by this sad spectacle” (Spiritian Anthology, p. 84).

“M. Le Vasseur, who had often spoken to M. Libermann about the misfortune and neglect of his poor Blacks in Bourbon, wrote to him in February or March 1839 to consult him about the project of finding ways to come to the spiritual aid of the slaves in this colony and the surrounding islands” (Spiritian Anthology, p. 89).

2. Gospel: Lk 4:40-44

At sunset, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them. Moreover, demons came out of many people, shouting, “You are the Son of God!” But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew he was the Messiah. At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.” And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea.

The spiritual and social project of Jesus of Nazareth is part of God’s salvific plan for humanity. This divine plan involves rebuilding the unity lost through sin between man and his Creator God. Jesus calls this project the Kingdom of God and He is the incarnation of this plan.

The specific historical context in which Jesus lived was full of situations in which God was a stranger to the decisions that governed social, political and religious organisation. A paradigm shift in such a society was urgently needed because the effects were so dehumanising. The silent cries of the victims were heart-rending. There was an urgent need for someone capable of dealing with such a situation. And Jesus appeared as the answer. His presence announces a God of love who makes people feel worthy. These people felt God's love in their lives, they tasted God, they didn't want to let Him go. The need for this kind of proclamation is felt everywhere, it's what mission is all about.

3. In the Congregation today:

The Christian era was inaugurated with Jesus of Nazareth's plan for a social system governed by values based on faith in a God who is Love, called the "Kingdom of God". However, since the emergence of the "Kingdom of God", history has shown that in different human societies, whether Christian or not, we are still a long way from social and relational systems governed by profoundly human and therefore evangelical values. This raises the question: is the project of the Kingdom of God announced by Jesus of Nazareth, in other words his Gospel, still necessary in our contemporary world?

Our last General Chapter was very sensitive to the situation of our contemporary world. The capitulants reflected on the current reality of the world and the challenges it presents to our mission, and they determined lines of action to respond to these challenges. The Superior General notes in the preface to the Bagamoyo II document: *"The conviction that the changing world in which we live calls the whole Congregation to new methods and forms of missionary expression animated the Chapter's deliberations. We recognised that the new forms of poverty emerging in our world call for radically new and creative*

responses to living the Gospel; they require us to broaden our vision and to take the necessary risks” (Bagamoyo II - Preface).

It’s a bold invitation to be open to new things without fear. May the Spirit of God do something new in us, in the Congregation, in the world!

4. Prayer:

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

5. Final prayer:

Holy Father, you are magnificent in your love;

grant us the grace of seeing confirmed by the Church

the beautiful testimony of faith and holiness that Francis Libermann has left us.

Enlightened by his missionary witness, we feel moved by the Spirit to proclaim the Good News of salvation with new zeal.

Grant us, we ask you, through the Holy Heart of Mary, his beatification and the graces we implore through his intercession.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Day 4: Beneficiaries of the mission: missionary places

1. Libermann directs his mission towards those on the margins of society

Through his deep personal experience of suffering, Libermann developed a fine sensitivity to situations of suffering. His decision to leave the Eudist Society and join the new missionary initiative was due to his great desire to be useful in God's Church.

A letter written in 1839 to Father Carbon, director of the seminary of Saint-Sulpice in Paris, bears witness to this:

"All the time I spent in the Congregation of Jesus and Mary in Rennes was a time of affliction and torment for me. That is not what made me leave that poor Congregation; but one of the things that most influenced me was that I saw myself there as absolutely useless and incapable of doing nothing for the glory of God. I saw myself confined in a novitiate surrounded by three or four people to whom I was of little or no spiritual use. (...) I spoke, I instructed, I tried to inspire fervour, and my words were dead, without any blessing from God and without any effect of spiritual advancement (...). I can tell you in truth that the greatest of all was to see myself useless in the Church of God. This view was real, not a figment of my imagination. And this view was accompanied by such great desires to do something for the glory of God, that it was a most painful cross for me. (...) I could see the few days I have to spend in this world slipping away one by one, and this was fruitless and useless for the glory of Our Lord, for which I would have liked to devote myself unceasingly" (Spiritual Anthology, pp. 80-81).

This feeling of apparent uselessness led Libermann to set out in search of the place that God, for whom he had changed his life, had prepared

for him in his Church. He then embarked on l'Œuvre des Noirs, an initiative that sought to give a faith response to a painful social reality, the product of a profoundly inhuman system: slavery. Tisserant and Le Vavasseur enabled Libermann to see social marginalisation as an area for evangelisation. l'Œuvre des Noirs defined the social locus of evangelising action: the social peripheries of the time.

2. Gospel: Lk 5:29-32

Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

At the time of Jesus of Nazareth, the law totally governed the way people related to God. God expressed Himself through the law, and it is the only way that leads to Him. In this type of socio-religious system, it is normal for a large number of members of society to remain outside the ideal of purity demanded by the law, for the simple reason that human reality is marked by sin.

Jesus appears with a new vision and takes on bold attitudes. He goes to the house of Levi, an unclean man who lives outside the law, sits at his table and eats his food. Jesus was scrutinised by the guardians of purity, but he openly challenged it by choosing to be open to those marginalised by the system: "*there was a large crowd of tax collectors and other people sitting with them*". Jesus is sending a clear message about the social context of his mission. These socially and morally marginalised people need to experience the loving face of God, they need the candid presence of a God who sits at their table and shares their food. This is a concrete sign of the Kingdom of God.

3. In the Congregation today:

Throughout its history, the Congregation has endeavoured to remain faithful to its specific missionary space. Since the merger of the two Congregations, the search for fidelity to the source has intensified. Periodic general assemblies, methods of reflection and discernment on the most appropriate way to carry out evangelisation on the basis of our own spirituality and charism in the different eras, the training needed to respond to the challenges of the mission, the drawing up of a well-founded Rule of Life. These are just some of the methods that have helped the Congregation to remain faithful to its founding inspiration. These methods were developed, purified and refined until they reached what is today the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Especially since the Second Vatican Council, the regularity of General Chapters has become necessary.

Today, we have a well-organised system that allows us to constantly review our missionary activity in the Church and in the world. The last General Chapters have been schools of discernment with a real practice of synodality. The system of consultation of the preparatory documents for the General Chapter, which allows all members to participate, is one of the signs of this.

The Rule of Life, for its part, constantly reminds us of our *raison d'être* and the social place of our mission:

“The evangelisation of the ‘poor’ is our goal (...)” (SRL, 4).

“.....we must make ourselves “the advocates, supporters and defenders of the weak and the little ones against all those who oppress them” (SRL, 14).

The last General Chapter, like its predecessors, continues to remind us that the recipients of our mission are those on the periphery of our world:

“ Spiritan mission today requires a willingness to be sent to the peripheries or frontiers of the contemporary world to share the joy of the Gospel, a synodal attitude” (Bagamoyo II, Preface).

“Mission priorities should be in line with a creative reading of the signs of the times in the light of our charism, and to a synodal approach, that is, of collaboration” (Bagamoyo II, 3).

“Circumscriptions will only accept missions that are consistent with the vision of the Congregation” (Bagamoyo II, 4).

4. Prayer:

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

5. Prayer for the Spiritan Mission:

See the last page of the document.

Day 5: Identifying priorities

1. The concrete subjects of the apostolic action of Libermann and his companions: the poor Blacks of the colonies.

The project for which Libermann definitively opted had as its clearly defined objective a precise, well-defined, verified social group, with a reality that was impossible to ignore: *the enslaved Blacks, many of whom had already been freed but abandoned to their fate*. This social group and, above all, their concrete living situation would become the main motivating force behind the missionary project embraced by Libermann.

Le Vavas seur and Tisserant spoke with such vehemence and determination about their beloved Blacks in Bourbon and Saint-Domingue, who were in a deplorable state of abandonment. They both wanted L'Œuvre des Noirs to be the answer to the reality that was consuming their souls. With the help of Le Vavas seur, who wrote a Memoir on this project - a text that served as the basis for the project presented to Propaganda Fide - the island of Bourbon was envisaged as the first mission site.

Le Vavas seur put it this way:

“As far as the Blacks are concerned, (...) neither the parish priests nor the vicars concern themselves with them in any way. The masters only think of getting as much use out of them as possible” (N.D., II, 63-64).

Missionaries are needed first and foremost for the Blacks... Libermann explained this to Tisserant in 1839:

“As for Saint-Domingue, I advise you not to talk about it for the moment. The good Lord has turned people’s minds to Bourbon, that is where he has opened the door, and we must not easily divert our attention from

the primary objective. To speak of this, moreover, would be to share and dampen the spirits of those whom the good Lord has turned towards the Blacks of Bourbon; besides, the latter are more destitute and more abandoned than those of Saint-Domingue” (N.D.,I, 649).

2. Gospel: Mk 3:1-6

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shrivelled hand, “Stand up in front of everyone.” Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Jesus set his sights on the real men and women who suffered in his social context. The direct and immediate beneficiaries of his evangelising action were people in vulnerable situations.

Jesus went in search of these people. On his apostolic journey, he met them, stopped and offered them what he possessed: divine love. Jesus’ way of acting had an immediate echo, like a powder keg, in this suffering, marginalised, unloved group. At last, they found someone who spoke of God in a different way. Here we have the people of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus welcomes them, heals their ills, and this is real Good News for them.

3. The Congregation today:

One of the tasks of General Chapters is to discern the concrete recipients of the Congregation’s mission in the world in which it operates. This is a

delicate task. Our last General Chapter, after reflecting on the reality of the contemporary world, concluded that in our present context:

“The priorities of the mission will be as follows:

- *Outreach to young people (taking into account the digital world);*
- *Attention to people on the peripheries of society, the new urban poor, migrants and respect for ecology.*
- *Action in favour of justice and integral ecology” (Bagamoyo II, 3).*

These realities call for a response of faith, and we missionaries are called to respond.

4. Prayer:

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5. Final prayer:

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Enlightened by his missionary witness, we feel moved by the Spirit to proclaim the Good News of salvation with new zeal.

Grant us, we ask you, through the Holy Heart of Mary, his beatification and the graces we implore through his intercession. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Day 6: The three dimensions of integral evangelisation

A. CHARITY

1. Libermann emphasises integral human promotion as a way of evangelisation.

Libermann pays particular attention to charity in his conception of the service of God. This perspective was also at the root of the vocational concerns of Tisserant and Le Vavas seur, who, moved by a love born of faith, felt challenged and touched by the reality of the suffering and injustice experienced by the most disadvantaged in their respective social contexts: the black slaves. Libermann follows the same line of understanding of faith.

In his famous missionary letter to the community of Dakar and Gabon in 1847, we can appreciate his profound thoughts on charity, both communitarian and apostolic:

“If you want to be good community men, you should look to the sanctification of yourself and of your confreres and brothers. (...) Live together in peace, love and unity. Comfort and encourage one another and bear with each other's faults of character. Support your confreres and don't judge them. Love them and be gentle in your treatment of them, even when they irritate you” (Spiritual Anthology, p. 283).

“Don't judge by first impressions or by what you are used to in Europe. Forget about Europe, its ways of thinking, its customs, its conventions. Be African with the Africans, and you will learn how to judge them as they should be judged. Be a Negro with the Negro, so as to form them into what they can be, not along European lines, but according to their own way of being. Relate to them as if you were their servants and they were your masters, adapting yourselves to their style of doing things. Your sole purpose in all this must be to perfect and sanctify them and to

raise them up from their oppressed state to become a people of God” (Spiritan Anthology, p. 287).

Libermann was so interested in promoting the dignity of the “poor blacks” that he drew up a plan and proposed to Propaganda Fide to train a black clergy and laity.

“In the two principal establishments, we have about fifty children receiving elementary education in both Christian and secular subjects. We are trying hard to prepare some of them for higher studies, thus hopefully making possible the training of an indigenous clergy (...)” (Spiritan Anthology, p. 613).

It is a question of promoting human dignity in all its dimensions, without distinction.

2. Gospel: Lk 5:17-26

One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven.” The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, “Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, “Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the paralyzed man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. Everyone was amazed

and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, “We have seen remarkable things today.”

‘Get up and walk’ are the key words of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus directly opposes the established and theologically justified social norms, which are the worst kind of injustice. His opponents try to justify by faith a position that, in the end, only reveals their absolute lack of faith. Jesus said to the paralytic: “Get up, take your mat and go home”. He got up in front of them and went home. Going home symbolises the return to a place of safety, freedom and acceptance... in other words, a place of dignity. Jesus brought the paralytic out of the periphery where he had been thrown and gave him back his place in society. Jesus certainly runs the risk of openly siding with the paralytic, but he knows that this is his mission. A courageous stance that can only come from absolute conviction. Jesus’ action deconstructs an entire mental schema, handed down from generation to generation in the form of religious precepts. For Jesus of Nazareth, God’s fundamental precept is the dignity of the individual. In Jesus, God became God again.

3. In the Congregation today

During our last General Chapter, we once again placed clear and decisive emphasis on questions relating to justice, peace, the safeguarding of creation and universal brotherhood as fundamental elements of our missionary work. These are guiding elements for our concrete choices of action in favour of human promotion. Let us do everything in our power to ensure that the dignity of persons is the central axis from which decisions are taken on issues relating to the lives of men and women in our societies. Similarly, respect for life should be the parameter that governs all human activities.

“In the parishes entrusted to us and in the works animated by Spiritans, JPIC groups will be formed with appropriate accompaniment. These

groups will pay particular attention to educating and sensitizing people regarding: situations of injustice, threats to life and the environment, the defence of social, fiscal and economic justice” (Bagamoyo II, 16).

4. Prayer:

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

5. Final prayer:

Holy Father, you are magnificent in your love ;

grant us the grace of seeing confirmed by the Church the beautiful testimony of faith and holiness that Francis Libermann has left us.

Enlightened by his missionary witness, we feel moved by the Spirit to proclaim the Good News of salvation with new zeal.

Grant us, we ask you, through the Holy Heart of Mary, his beatification and the graces we implore through his intercession.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Day 7: The three dimensions of integral evangelisation

B. CATECHESIS

1. Proclamation, witness and formation.

Faith formation is an essential element of any missionary project. The project of Libermann and his companions to evangelise the black race was no stranger to this reality. To carry out such an undertaking, Libermann was demanding about the quality of his missionaries.

In his letter to Le Vavas seur, he mentions his vision:

“We need no weak souls in this all-apostolic Congregation; we need only fervent and generous souls who give themselves entirely and who are ready to undertake and suffer everything for the very great glory of our most adorable Master.” (Spirit an Anthology, p. 100)

First of all, a deep conviction is the foundation of all apostolic motivation, because the proclamation of the Gospel is testimony.

In his Mémoire, Le Vavas seur had already sketched out the practical attitudes of future missionaries for the success of the missionary initiative:

“For the missionaries to succeed in such an admirable mission, they must adopt a way of life that is poorer and more mortifying than that of the Negroes; as long as these poor people see them leading a more comfortable life than their own, they will not understand them; thus our Lord, in order to have the right to preach poverty (...), wished to be born in a cot and to die on the cross. They must make up their minds to love and cherish the Negroes as their brothers and children. (...)”

The important thing is for them to be so confused with the Negroes that they resemble them. *“The missionaries could easily have a small group*

of huts built to live in, similar to those built by the blacks” (N.D., II, 65-67).

Libermann had presented a Memorandum to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda, a whole programme for organising action in the missions, an admirable plan for evangelisation:

“We have established the need to begin the Mission with an overall plan, and an organisation such that we can conceive the well-founded hope of forming a solid work (...). Our plan consists in taking particular care of the education of youth and of the most perfect civilisation that we can give to these peoples: training a black clergy, schoolmasters and catechists, farmers and workers in the arts and crafts” (ND, VIII, 275).

A genuine programme of integral catechesis. Libermann was clear from the outset that the collaboration of the laity in the work of evangelisation was fundamental, and he did his utmost to ensure that this was the case, hence the importance of both spiritual and human formation. It aims to create the foundations of a culture perceived from a Christian point of view.

2. Gospel: Lk 10:29-37

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn

and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Jesus spent a large part of his life teaching and revealing in concrete terms the loving and tender face of God the Father. People were astonished by his teaching, not so much for its content, but for the way he taught: living witness.

In this episode of the Gospel, Jesus teaches that faith is essentially communal, that it necessarily leads us to a social commitment. If we give importance to other elements, as the priest and Levite do, and not to the other as a person, we cut the thread that unites us. The other ceases to exist as the other. There is an inner sign that indicates unequivocally that the other exists in your consciousness as a person and not as a concept, and that sign is compassion: "*But a Samaritan who was on the road came up to him; he saw him and was moved with compassion.*" Compassion is a powerful inner movement that allows us to feel the presence of the other in our lives, and this is what leads us to encounter them as subjects.

Jesus said to him: "*Go and do likewise*". The Gospel is life, concrete commitment, social responsibility. It is true love that leads you to meet your brother.

3. In the Congregation today:

Animation and formation have been an integral part of our missionary activity throughout the history of the Congregation. In the various geographical locations where we are present, our institution has different infrastructures that allow us to carry out formation work both within the Congregation and in society. Internally, we are concerned

with the proper formation of our missionaries, so that they acquire the spiritual and human tools they need to carry out the catechetical work that the mission demands of us. Initial training, specialised training, ongoing training, language learning, etc. are all part of this process.

“Every Spiritan should try to acquire the competence and the qualifications needed to further our mission...” (SRL, 137).

In the field of mission, formal education is one of the forms that the Congregation has chosen as a means of transmitting the Gospel. Promoting human development in its social form is a path of faith formation. Basic, secondary and higher education institutions are places where the Gospel comes alive in people.

In the more specifically doctrinal field of catechesis in relation to education in the faith, we contribute to the animation and accompaniment of all that a parish structure implies at the catechetical level. A large percentage of our pastoral work in local churches is focused on animating parish structures. Through this work, we contribute to everything to do with teaching the faith.

4. Prayer:

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

5. Prayer for the Spiritan mission:

See the last page of the document.

Day 8: The three dimensions of integral evangelisation

C. CELEBRATION

1. The liturgy as a space for evangelisation

The Church has a rich liturgical heritage, the fruit of a tradition that has developed over the centuries. In the history of the missions, the various actors show us how liturgical actions have been the privileged means of evangelisation. Incredible as it may seem, Libermann was someone with a very broad outlook and a mind open to the adaptations necessary for the success of the missionary enterprise. He knew how to adapt the sometimes rigorous liturgical rules in order to reach the recipients of evangelisation better, even going so far as to propose completely innovative and daring initiatives.

In his Memorandum presented to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda on the missions of the Blacks, he declared:

“We shall recruit children who have talent and ability, who even show signs of sincere piety (...). We will give them a solid education, teach them the songs and ceremonies of the Church, and turn them into learned clerics, catechists and schoolteachers. (...) For these catechists, we propose to Your Eminences the approval of a measure, unusual perhaps in other Missions, but which could have very happy results in our own; it would be to grant bishops the power to confer the tonsure and minor orders on catechists, even if they are not destined for the priesthood, by being able to wear the ecclesiastical habit in church and during clerical functions. This would have several advantages. These men would be strongly encouraged in their efforts to procure the

spiritual good of their compatriots; they would be obliged to behave in an exemplary manner in their families and among their fellow citizens. (...) These men, being minor clerics, will be able to replace the missionary priests to a certain extent, presiding over the assemblies of the faithful, saying public prayers in the morning and evening, singing the services on feast days, and giving the appropriate instructions to the people. We thought that we were not acting rashly in making this proposal to Your Eminences, and that we were following the spirit of the Church, which followed this practice from the beginning, when the state of the Christians was such as it will be now in the countries we have to evangelise” (N.D., VIII, 246-247).

One of the things the Church has taken most care of throughout its history is the liturgy. It expresses the foundation of the faith. It commemorates, celebrates and brings to life God’s action in the life of the human being. It is in the liturgy that the community of believers finds its unity.

The practice and, above all, the life of the liturgy is of the utmost importance. Libermann was sensitive to this aspect of missionary work and gave it the importance it deserved.

2. Gospel: Mt 21:12-17

Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. “It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’” The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple

courts, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant. “Do you hear what these children are saying?” they asked him. “Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read, “‘From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise?’” And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.

Care of the liturgy is important because it runs the risk of being contaminated by elements that are not its own. Liturgical places remind us that God is always present in our midst, and that his presence must be characterised by elements that connect us to him.

At the time of Jesus, the physical place of God’s presence was the Temple. The Temple was the living expression of God’s long history with the people. It was there that the people found the core of their faith. It was the source that nourished the spirituality of society. Jesus recognised the special role played by this place. Its physical elements, with their symbolic meaning, have an extraordinary power capable of moving whole societies.

“My house shall be called a house of prayer. But you have turned it into a den of robbers”. Jesus justifies the *raison d’être* of this place, with his symbolic gesture of removing the merchants from inside the Temple, and he restores this space to its primordial meaning. Its meaning had been distorted; the Temple no longer represented the presence of God. Jesus attacked those specific practices that took place inside the Temple and that deviated from true worship: selling and buying. Worship had been corrupted.

Jesus takes another step to show the true meaning of the Temple, a place where God really is: *“The blind and lame came to him in the Temple, and he healed them.”* The Temple is a meeting place for God and humanity in need of God. The liturgy celebrates this miracle of encounter: *“the children shouted in the Temple, ‘Hosanna to the son of*

David!” These children recognised in Jesus’ gesture true worship “*in spirit and in truth*” (Jn 4:20-23).

3. In the Congregation today:

Our missionary vocation always leads us to meet people of different cultures, traditions, histories and languages...

“One basic characteristic of the Spiritan calling is an *availability* for the service of the gospel, a readiness to go where we are sent by the Congregation. We accept to free ourselves from an engagement in order to respond to new and different calls from a local Church or from the universal Church” (SRL, 25).

In the local Churches, we are integrated into pastoral programmes. One of our main pastoral responsibilities is to accompany and animate the liturgical life of the communities in our care. If the liturgical life is alive, it is a sign that people understand their faith, because the liturgy is the centre of the unity of the believing people.

The Congregation of the Holy Spirit has a rich tradition of building Christian communities and magnificent places of worship. Many peoples have encountered the true face of God in Jesus Christ, through our missionary institute.

Through us, may people, like the children of the Temple, discover the true signs of God’s presence.

4. Let us pray:

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

5. Prayer for the Spiritan mission:

See the last page of the document.

Day 9: Fullness in life

1. Mission accomplished

In the twilight of his life, Libermann understood that his life had been a mission received in his encounter with Jesus of the Gospels. He took it on with all his being, he felt himself pierced by the piercing dagger of contact with the true God, and, like Jeremiah, he surrendered to his seductions. He experienced God's love in all its depths and passed on this experience in a wonderful spiritual way to his companions.

Libermann felt God's closeness, his tenderness, his presence in the strongest and most overwhelming way: in suffering. The last words of this great man reflect this life of loving encounter with God:

"Charity above all ... charity above all ... Charity in Jesus Christ ... charity through Jesus Christ ... charity in the name of Jesus Christ; fervour ... charity ... union in Jesus Christ ... the spirit of sacrifice" (N.D. XIII, 659 and 660, cf. SRL 38).

Charitable action based on love of God is the most sublime of human actions.

Libermann experienced the profound inner freedom that faith in God can bring. The freedom of the sons of God in the manner of Paul of Tarsus. Not a faith bound by cultures, traditions, norms, social identities... On the contrary, faith is the expression of an encounter with a God who leads us to go beyond our human limits and encounter our deepest essence: to be children of God in love. A love free of all the motivations that can come from our limitations.

"O divine Spirit, I want to be before you like a light feather, so that your breath may carry me where it wills, and that I may never put up the

slightest resistance to it" (Francis Libermann, Commentary on Saint John, 3:8).

2. Gospel: Mk 14:32-42

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Couldn't you keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

Thy will be done, not mine! Jesus gives himself in a total covenant to his God and Father, and he decides to commit himself only where that covenant leads him. He lives in constant communion so that he is always attentive to the signs that indicate the Father's will.

He has a mission to accomplish, he has chosen it and he lives it with courage, determination and bravery. He realises that this mission is leading him to the cross, his body is suffering, he is in agony, he wants to resist but his spirit sees that the cross is the way, he cannot turn back and finally he makes his decision. At that moment, it was clear to him

that his blood was the price of his mission: he was sweating drops of blood. It was there that he shed the blood that signified his true surrender. This was the crucial moment, the moment of flight or the cross. No one could take that decision for him. The moment to confront the true meaning of his life. The pain of childbirth.

The moment had come, and now he was ready. With absolute inner freedom, he decided to face what lay ahead:

“It’s done; the time has come (...). Get up! Get up! Behold, he who betrays me is near”.

Absolute fidelity to his mission led Jesus to the way of the cross, in a total surrender of himself. This total surrender can only be understood from the point of view of love. Jesus lived from his mission and for his mission. He loved so much that he gave his life.

3. Witnesses

Throughout the history of the Congregation, there have been countless people who have lived their missionary life seduced by this God of love. Some have stood out: Jacques Laval, Daniel Brottier... and many others have given their lives in total abandonment for the love of God and the mission in anonymity. The history of our Congregation is the fruit of lives lived to the full, lives made up of the Gospel, charity and sacrifice in the manner of Libermann.

From the beginnings of this missionary family to the present day, it has been a rich story of generosity, dedication and selflessness, born of faith and lived out in total commitment to the cause of Jesus of Nazareth. Today, he is calling us to follow in his footsteps, supported by the life examples of our ancestors in the Congregation. They are lights on our path that enlighten us and give us the landmarks to guide our destiny.

Confident of the presence of God's Spirit in our lives and in our missionary action, we continue to travel to the ends of the earth, proclaiming God's presence and love to humanity with our simple and humble way of doing things.

The Congregation of the Holy Spirit is an expression of the Gospel in the past and present of the Church. Happy to be part of this enterprise of God. When our time comes, we can salute as Paul of Tarsus did:

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. All I have to do now is receive the crown of righteousness: the Lord, the righteous judge, will give it to me on that day" (2 Tim 4:7-8).

4. Prayer:

Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory be to the Father...

5. Final prayer:

Holy Father, you are magnificent in your love;

grant us the grace of seeing confirmed by the Church

the beautiful testimony of faith and holiness that François Libermann has left us.

Enlightened by his missionary witness, we feel moved by the Spirit to proclaim the Good News of salvation with new zeal.

Grant us, we ask you, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, his beatification and the graces we implore through his intercession.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

PRAYER FOR SPIRITAN MISSION

God of new beginnings,

God of our founders and ancestors in the Faith,
we pray and thank you for calling us to renew our Spiritan Mission.

Give us new eyes,

to discern the horizons for Spiritan mission to which you call us in the
challenging world of today.

Give us new ears,

to listen to your ever-creating Word
and to hear the voices of those who hope and long for a better world.

Give us new words,

to proclaim the Gospel of Christ
and to witness your love and mercy for all people.

Breathe on each one of us,

your life-giving Spirit of renewal.

May we rejoice,

in the richness of our diversity
and strive to foster among our Spiritan family a deeper communion of
life and mission.

We make this prayer through Jesus Christ, Who accompanies us on our
pilgrim path, in the Spirit that binds us together.

Amen.