François Marie Paul Libermann, the second founder of the Holy Ghost Fathers (today, the Spiritans), was born on April 12, 1802, in Saverne, Alsace. He was the fifth son of Lazar Libermann, a rabbi, who registered this son as Jacob. Ultra-Orthodox, the rabbi spoke only Hebrew and Yiddish. Jacob attended the local Jewish school but received rigorous training in the Bible and the Talmud from his father. At the age of twenty Jacob went to Metz to earn his diploma as a rabbi. It was his first contact with the world outside the Saverne synagogue. His interaction with liberals and conservatives in the Jewish community in Metz caused his previously unconditional trust in his father’s wisdom to be deeply shaken. Secretly, he learned French and Latin. A further shock was that David Drach, a rabbi who was a close friend of the family, became a Christian. This news was followed by that of the conversion of his revered elder brother Samson and then of other prominent Jews. He read Rousseau’s novel Émile and retained only a vague kind of deism.

Ignorant of this change in Jacob, his father let him go to Paris to complete his studies under its chief rabbi. In reality, however, Jacob was looking for a secular job. There he met his brothers Samuel and Felix, both also just converted, as well as Drach. They advised him to go to Stanislas College to study the Catholic faith. Alone one day in a bare attic room, he threw himself on his knees and, close to despair, prayed: “God of my fathers, I beseech you to enlighten me on the true religion. If it is the Christian faith, let me know; if that faith is false, take me far away from it.” Later he wrote, “Our Lord, who is close to those who invoke him from the bottom of their heart, answered my prayer. At once I saw the
truth, and faith penetrated my mind and heart.”¹¹ He was baptized François Marie Paul six weeks later. When his father heard about the apostasy of his most beloved son, he tore his vestments and sent a fulminating condemnation that caused François to weep, but not to surrender; “I am a Christian!” he cried.

François always continued to see his relationship to God as he had learned it from his orthodox father: you stand as a sentry before God, waiting to act as he wills. The pious Jew, says Martin Buber, “lives in the consciousness that the proper place for his encounter with God lies in the ever-changing situations of life. . . . Again and again, the pious Jew hears God’s voice in a different way in the language spoken by unforeseen and changed situations.” The text goes on to say that a believing Jew does not silence God under the pretext that God has already spoken before in a different way; he does not hide from God’s voice behind a model of life and works undertaken before in obedience to that voice, but he always remains in an attitude of unconditional availability before God.² Thus the dynamic Judeo-Christian charism that Libermann was to bestow on his followers may be formulated as follows: evangelical availability in openness to the Holy Spirit, speaking through the voices of people of good will in the ever-changing situations of life.

Libermann’s openness to the Spirit and the world were revolutionary with respect to traditional conceptions of religious orders. His openness to the world and to people led Dominican Roger Tillard, professor of spirituality at the Angelicum in Rome, to call Libermann one of the four pivotal figures in the history of the orders—the other three being St. Benedict, St. Francis of Assisi, and St. Ignatius. Here are the main points as outlined by Tillard:

• Monastic withdrawal from the world becomes openness to the world in which the Spirit continues to speak through human beings.
• Religious stability loses its spatial interpretation to become God-anchored mobility in answering the appeal coming from anywhere in the world.
• Monastic contemplation, which is generally beyond the reach of active people, becomes practical union with God in everyday life.
• Romantic love of Lady Poverty for her own sake becomes apostolic poverty for the sake of bringing the Gospel of love to the poor.
• Living for God’s glory becomes also living for the happiness of others.
• Self-sacritucation to save one’s soul becomes sanctification with, through, and for others.
• Systematic and methodical drilling in holiness becomes flexibility and profound respect for each person and his or her mode of being.
• Corpselike obedience becomes openness to the Spirit and therefore dialogue between authorities and rank-and-file members.³

Training

In 1827 Libermann began theology studies at Saint Sulpice in Paris. In 1829 he suffered an attack of epilepsy, followed by five other attacks in the next three years. This illness barred him from ordination, but because of his influence on both students and staff, he was allowed to stay. For six years he functioned unofficially as a highly appreciated spiritual guide. His spiritual correspondence grew by leaps and bounds; some 1,800 letters have been preserved. Experts in spirituality have considered him one of the greatest spiritual directors of the nineteenth century. He belonged to no particular school, followed no system, but approached each one in his or her particular situation of life and being: “there are not ten souls who are alike.”⁴

Sent to the Eudists’ novitiate at Rennes in 1837, he found it virtually impossible to function there. Though only in minor orders himself, Libermann was asked to be the novice master for priests. In this role he felt great discouragement which he ascribed to his own failings. He suffered a violent epileptic seizure,

A penniless epileptic Jewish convert, he sailed to Rome to obtain its approval.

doubtless precipitated in part by stress.⁵ Though feeling useless, he stayed on. Then early in 1839 he got involved in a project of two Saint Sulpice seminarians who wanted to start an apostolate among the neglected blacks in Réunion and Haiti, and consulted him. He advised them to go slowly and pray. During the summer he went to Saint Sulpice to help them. By then six other seminarians had expressed interest. Libermann, however, feared that their youthful enthusiasm would vanish when they faced ridicule and opposition. And this is what happened: only the two who had originated the project persevered. Returning to the Eudists, he prayed, waiting for a sign from heaven showing what God wanted him to do. When that sign came, he did not hesitate: he should take charge of the faltering project, ridiculous as it seemed. With the approval of his spiritual guide, he, a penniless epileptic Jewish convert, lacking important connections, sailed to Rome to obtain its approval.

Rome’s initial reception was cool. They were used to people coming with plans and telling them what God wanted. But this man was different. He asked them whether his project was indeed God’s will. Propaganda Fide told him to wait while it studied his memorandum and sought information in France. Getting very favorable replies, its secretary gave him his personal provisional approval, adding that he should first be ordained.

Opposition developed, and an official answer was slow in coming. Meanwhile Libermann lived in an attic next to a pigeon cote. There he wrote the provisional rule for the new congregation, dedicating it to the Holy Heart of Mary. Next, he composed a mystical commentary on the Gospel of John. Finally he got word that a definitive approval would have to wait until the new congregation had proved its viability, but he could go ahead. Sailing back to France, he studied for half a year at the seminary of Strasbourg, where he so impressed students and staff that six of them joined him. He was ordained at Amiens on September 18, 1841.

Burgeoning Ministry

Nine days after his ordination, Libermann opened a novitiate at La Neuville, near Amiens. Within one year three of his men had gone to work among people of African origin in Mauritius, Réunion, and Haiti.

Then political factors closed these islands to his followers, and he had a house full of eager young men but no place to send them. In his distress he visited the Shrine of Our Lady of Victories

October 2004

175
in Paris and asked its director for prayers. Shortly afterward Edward Barron, an Irish-American bishop and the newly appointed vicar apostolic of Upper and Lower Guinea, also saw the rector and explained his predicament: his mission covered 5,000 coastal miles of Africa, and he had only one priest to help him. The rector was used to listening to the troubles of many and spoke only a few words of consolation and a promise to pray. The next day, however, it suddenly struck him while he was offering Mass: he could solve both problems by bringing the two together. And he did. Libermann offered the bishop seven priests as a starter, and a few laymen were added later. In 1843 they sailed to their destination.

Despite all precautions, this expedition ended in disaster. African fevers struck, and one by one, the men died or had to be evacuated. Bishop Barron himself returned to the United States. That one priest and one layman had survived was not known when the bishop sent his tragic report to Libermann. Calling his community together, Libermann announced the bitter news in a saddened but calm voice. The reaction was the opposite of what one, humanly speaking, could expect. One by one all begged him to send them to the two Guineas. He had to tell them to wait, but he was resolved never to abandon that mission, unknowingly one by one all begged him to send them to the two Guineas. He had to tell them to wait, but he was resolved never to abandon that mission, unknowingly repeating what the directors of the Protestant Church Missionary Society had said when, some twenty years earlier, they got the news that ten of the twelve missionaries they had sent to Sierra Leone had died: “We must not abandon West Africa.”

Libermann began to formulate a plan to evangelize Africa by means of well-educated indigenous priests and laymen and sent more men to establish a central base at Dakar for it. Once again, death struck. The two men he had named to head the mission died, one by shipwreck before arrival, and the other half a year after reaching Dakar. It took until 1848 before stability of leadership came about by the appointments of Bishop Jean Bessieux for Lower Guinea (Gabon) and Bishop Aloyse Kobés as his coadjutor in charge of Upper Guinea (Senegambia). Both lived to a ripe old age.

Meanwhile, important things were happening in France. In 1848 Libermann’s Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary merged into the Congregation of the Holy Ghost Fathers, founded in 1703, which sent its priests to the old French colonies and also to Gorée, a coastal island opposite Dakar. Seeing similarities, the Holy See had suggested a merger in 1840, but the time was not yet ripe for it. It happened in 1848, and Libermann was elected superior general.

Shortly before that election, the February Revolution had taken place. It was a revolt of exploited workers against their oppressors, but not antireligious. Libermann sympathized with the workers and complained of the ineptness of the clergy. “Its misfortune,” he wrote, “has always been to remain stuck in the past. The world moves forward, but we remain behind … instead of adapting ourselves to the conditions and spirit of the time.”

So he and his men boldly went to vote in what others saw as a communist election.

Next, in 1849 he turned his attention to the old French colonies. There the governors’ stranglehold often overrode the simple prefects in charge of the church. “I am the bishop here!” thundered one governor when he dismissed or transferred priests against the will of the prefect. For nearly a century the Holy See had wanted to place bishops there—for by law bishops had full control over their dioceses—but the government had refused to give up its control. Showing considerable diplomacy, Libermann convinced four government ministers to surrender their power. Next, he persuaded the politicians to vote for increased funds to educate future priests in Holy Ghost Seminary in Paris, which prepared them for their missions. The result was that in the next twenty-eight years, over 360 priests were sent to these colonies.

To secure a solid home base, staffed by fathers and brothers who did not have a foreign mission vocation or were not fit for it, Libermann assumed social ministry among the disadvantaged, such as factory workers, orphans, and juvenile delinquents. This ministry subsequently resulted in a large string of institutes for street children. The largest of these agencies was the Auteuil Institute, which took care of 3,500 boys in its twenty-five branches and still flourishes today. He also added junior colleges and senior seminaries. The first of these was the Pontifical French Seminary in Rome, opened in 1853. Always in delicate health, Libermann began to feel very tired in 1851. He declined rapidly until his death on February 2, 1852, in Paris at the age of forty-nine.

**Principles of Evangelization**

Much of what Libermann wrote about missiology became commonplace later, but in his time it was daring. Paradoxically, it was also a return to church practice in former ages. “As early as 1840 when I was in Rome, working on the first draft of rules for our little society,” Libermann wrote to Jean Luquet, of the Foreign Missions Society, “I considered it urgent to work for the formation of an indigenous clergy.” Luquet was the prime mover behind *Neminem profecto*, an instruction of Propaganda Fide in 1845 that stressed the necessity and essential role of an indigenous clergy. Libermann had known Luquet since 1838, and the two exchanged numerous letters.

In reality, the creation of an indigenous African clergy was greatly retarded by the celibacy requirement. Only two reached the priesthood between 1852 and 1864; then twenty-two between 1869 and 1910, all but four from Natal and Madagascar, educated by Holy Ghost Fathers. In 1933, however, there were 150 indigenous priests; in 1939 there were 257, including two bishops; and by 1957 the number had risen to 1,380. Nowadays expatriate priests are exceptions rather than the rule, and African priests serve as missionaries in many foreign countries.

Preconditions of evangelization are the lived faith and virtues of its workers. Their good example sets the tone for the people, even as their vices will infect the people. Libermann referred to vices as original sins, added to that of Adam. These sins would impress a false fold or groove on the people. The same was true, he argued, when missionaries tried to impose on other people Christianity as it was lived in their own country: “We must divest ourselves of Europe, its customs and mentality, become Negroes with the Negroes, and then you will value them as they ought to be valued. … Let them retain what is their way of being, even as servants do with respect to their masters and adapt themselves to their ways and customs.” In modern terms this is called inculturation: the church must assume an African face on that continent in general, and this face should furthermore be diversified in keeping with the characteristic cultures of different African countries.
Freedom of conscience should be respected: Libermann maintained that God has given unbelievers the power to reject him and to act against his will; so we must not try to force them or become irritated at them.12

The purpose of evangelization is not just to make many converts but “to implant our holy religion permanently by beginning the construction of . . . a canonically established church,” that is, a church staffed by “indigenous clergy.”13 Laypeople should participate in ministry as catechists “to teach the Christian faith and Christian living.”14 Others of the laity would function as “teachers, farmers, and craftsmen” and, in general, learn not just “how to use [modern] tools but also how they work.”15 Libermann stressed that these educated Africans should not become an elite at the expense of the others but be “teachers, farmers, and craftsmen” and, in general, learn not just “how to use [modern] tools but also how they work.”15 Libermann stressed that these educated Africans should not become an elite at the expense of the others but be carefully formed in “all the religious and social virtues” needed to be useful in “solidarity with their fellowmen.” For otherwise, “a more advanced civilization would not be much of a present” to the African people.16

Missionaries should “take care never to go beyond the sphere proper to a minister of the Gospel.”17 “The people must never consider you as a political agent; they should see you only as the priest of the Almighty.”18

“The apostolic spirit consists in extending the frontiers of the church rather than making a small part perfect.”19 Consequently, we should found central residences from which the priests can fan out to simple stations, manned by catechists, that are to be visited on a regular basis.20

Libermann also urged the formation of lay associations of men and women to inculcate “industriousness, Christian life, or at least good moral conduct, and the proper education of children.”21

François Libermann was a man ahead of his time. His ideas when presented were considered unusual and were not widely accepted. Today, however, his novel approaches to mission find growing acceptance. His ideas are echoed in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, and his spirituality is becoming of interest to more people outside of his own Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Broader recognition has been hindered by the fact that so much of his work took the form of letters to individuals and that they were written in French with a language style that is not appealing to the modern sensibility. For some time his writings were out of print and were not available even within his own congregation. The resurgence of interest in Libermann’s work has led to reprinting of his Notes et documents. Also, his work is being translated into other languages and, with care to keep true to his ideas, rendered in more modern styles.

Notes
3. This summary comes from a conference given by Roger Tillard to the Spiritans at Maison Le Roy (Canada) on March 5, 1984.
8. Ibid., Compléments, 62.
15. Notes et documents, 8:247.

Selected Bibliography
Works by François Libermann

Works About François Libermann

Virtually all handwritten works of Libermann are preserved in the Archives Générales de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit, 12, rue du Père Mazurié, 94669 Chevilly-Larue, Cedex, France.