

# Francis Libermann CSSP

Ed: Fr. J. Clifton Hill, CSSp, of Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, met Fr. Elias in 1994, while on a sabbatical leave. He offered Fr. Elias a series of papers

on Francis Libermann, written by Fr. Francis X. Malinowski. We have received permission to reproduce them in The Hebrew Catholic.

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## Growing up Jewish — May 1993

Fr. Francis X. Malinowski

### His Father the Rabbi

Libermann's father was a well-known rabbi, Jews of eastern France (Alsace) and west Germany recognized him as their spiritual leader. The Talmud was his total concern and decided his thought and action. He refused to take part in French political and social life, which he saw as a threat to the spiritual purity of his people's Judaism. Ghetto life for them and for him and his family offered protection from cultural and Christian influences.

In a climate of strict and uncompromising Judaism his youngest son Jacob (Francis) lived his formative years. He was 20 when his father sent him to Metz, France, to study Talmud more professionally. He hoped young Jacob would succeed him as chief rabbi. He was a model Jewish boy, destined to be great, so his father expected, in Jewish intellectual and religious life as portrayed in the Talmud.

He became fluent in Hebrew because of talmudic and biblical studies. When he went to Rome (1840) he took a Hebrew Bible with him and later had it on his desk until he died.

### Talmud

During his youth Libermann spent a lot of time under his father's tutelage poring over talmudic texts of legal reasoning aimed at finding the exact way of acting in everyday situations. Long hours were required to deal with the intricacies of coming to a decision and taking proper action. It could be demanding and mind-tiring, but it sharpened the mind like few other study pursuits did. He came into contact with centuries of Jewish thought, which let him glimpse spiritual horizons most Jews only dream about.

Arduous study of the Talmud, done out of religious motives, bolstered the conviction, often joyous, that the Divine Presence (Shekinah) drew near. The Mishnah of which the Talmud is a commentary describes it:

*"When two sit and there are between them words of Torah, the Shekina rests between them" (Pirke Aboth 3.3).*



### Torah

Studying the Talmud is studying "Torah." Torah is a complex term, designating a variety of things, all related to the divine instruction given Moses on Sinai. It is used of all the books of Jewish Scripture, of the first five books of the Bible ("Pentateuch"), of the oral interpretations of its legal codes ("the traditions of the fathers") that were handed down and later codified in the Mishnah around 200 A.D.. This became the "canonical" text for all subsequent Jewish study found in the Talmud.

### Tradition

Briefly, all Talmud is believed to go back to Moses, emanating from the revelation given him and handed down to each generation. "Torah" is this tradition-written and oral-initiated and sustained by Yahweh. Hence, Torah study is revelation study, a holy practice that naturally engages the Shekinah, the divine presence among believers and students of what Moses received on Sinai.

Revelation, Torah, Tradition, Talmud monopolized the mind and heart of Libermann until he was in his twenties and stamped his psyche forever. In the Christianity of St. Sulpice and Issy, molded by the French school of spirituality, he will find a congenial mirror image of his Jewish spirituality. He will feel at home. He said in an early letter from the seminary:

*"... I am always very content and I can assure you that I have never been as happy as I am now"*

*(LS 1.5, to his brother Samson).*

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## The Darkest Night — Part One, June 1993

### Away from Home

Jacob Libermann in Metz for rabbinic studies, and removed from the presence of his father, begins to stray immediately. Like any university town, all kinds of viewpoints-religious and non-religious-swirl around, touching everybody in sight. Jews were given freedom by Napoleon to participate in political life, which right away took them out of the ghetto. Also, the practical impact of the Enlightenment like "Existentialism" of the 1960s exposed the fragility of religious adherence of many.

Among the volatile students these political and intellectual currents were breezes of fresh air hardly breathed before, though secretly wished for. In Jewish circles, especially in the rabbinic schools, the impact was devastating: a good number converted to Catholicism; others abandoned any religion; others kept their loyalty to their roots but hardly with much enthusiasm.

When Libermann arrived in Metz his brothers had already become Catholics which disconcerted Jacob no end. He had looked up to his oldest brother Samson as far back as he could remember. In turn, Samson, a physician, carefully looked after him, since Jacob had been of fragile health and the youngest. Eventually, Samson's genuine Catholicism will make Jacob think of the apparent abandonment of Judaism as less of a monstrous deed. In the meantime Samson's conversion will be matched by many other Jews. This did not escape Jacob's notice.

### ***Temptations***

Jacob, far from ghetto life with his father, stands in a cauldron of conflicting theologies, of modern world realism that if it's not seen it doesn't exist and of the freedom no other class of people enjoy than university students. It didn't take long before he was affected and infected.

He was doing things "unorthodox": learning Latin and French, reading Voltaire and Rousseau (anybody's iconoclasts), meeting highly respected Jewish scholars who appeared indifferent to "Judaism", reading the New Testament, and taking part in "bull sessions" with student peers who usually will say anything that comes to mind or try whatever is in vogue. A sensitive and pure person like Jacob would easily attract their attention and their assaults on whatever he stood for or was. Few students can escape such frequent encounters unsullied in thought and deed.

### ***Doubts***

It wasn't long before Jacob began to have deep doubts about his religious convictions. Who can prove the Bible inspired? Who can believe in its miracles? Who really can take seriously the Bible's claim the Jews are God's chosen people? All these questions strike at the heart of belief, where he lives deep within himself, where reside the energies for living with motivation and where is experienced the peaceful assurance of being related to God and accepted by him.

Libermann was tampering with his primal energies and beliefs. He was asking for trouble, a lot of trouble. On top of this revolutionary ferment and unrest going on inside him he felt obliged to deceive his father who had put all his hopes in him, naively confident Jacob would not let him down like his brothers did.

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## **The Darkest Night — Part Two, June 15, 1993**

### ***Turmoil***

Libermann knew that what was going on in him, and

what he was letting go on, would almost literally kill his father, chief Rabbi of Alsace, France, if he knew. He was a dominating influence in regional Jewish life. He wasn't dealing with differing from his father in choosing a role within Judaism, nor was it a case of a son like the prodigal son wanting to get away from home to taste the world and be on his own. This his father could allow as he did Jacob's brothers without feeling personally betrayed or fearing that spiritual death judged to be the lot of those abandoning Judaism.

### ***Deception***

Libermann's deception had biblical echoes. It was not a deception for freedom from restraint, or for personal advantage. Like Jacob he would have to wrestle with doubts and struggle with demonic influences, like Jacob he would have to deceive his father, but unlike Jacob he had no mother (she died when he was 11) to shield him from his father's awful curse. His deception shielded him for a while, but could not remain secret forever. He no doubt wanted his father to be as little hurt as possible over decisions he would have to make. This is almost a classic case of father-son confrontation. The perennial temptation of the father is to determine the future of his son, especially his firstborn or youngest son. He can resist the father and end up in hostile relationship (which happened without Jacob experiencing the hostility his father will carry to his grave). Or he can passively let the father shape his future and then all his life wonder how different things might have been. He chose to let his father go on thinking that all's well with his son, at the cost of living in the fear of being unmasked in his father's eyes.

Libermann chose deception to protect his father's feelings and no doubt to prevent interference with the process of rethinking his deepest thoughts and desires. He would go to Paris, meet Jewish intellectuals who had converted (e.g., David Drach), be housed in St. Stanislaus seminary.

### ***All alone***

Then, alone, like a hermit in the desert, without the usual day by day experiences and familiar faces, he would find himself drowning in an ocean of the most painful kind of despair.

Libermann would feel he is on his own, completely, with no relief in sight. He wasn't a kid anymore, but an adult who had been enured to physical difficulty. His problem would be isolation or deprivation of sense experience. He would be deprived of what matters to any person. He has forsaken his Jewish belief and now was left with nothing to anchor his whole being.

This abandonment of a belief that once defined his past, present and future would bring on an insecurity that surpassed physical pain. His suffering was, you could say, metaphysical in the sense that it touched the roots of his self-consciousness. There is no pain, no insecurity, no despair like the loss of faith that once was the reason for

everything. The Bible knows such pain and associates it with the “fire of the Holy Spirit.” There is no aspirin to relieve it, no book to dissipate it, no human being to give comfort. It is the pure blackness of despair like David losing Absalom, like Judas hanging himself, like those driven to suicide because they cannot cope with what they see as the impossibility of going on living.

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## The Darkest Night — Part Three, July 1, 1993

### Struggle

In this dark dungeon of despair Libermann did not give up. He didn't look for distraction to forget his troubles. He wanted answers: is God real, does he know me, does he care for me? Even these questions didn't relieve his despair nor give meaning to it. He was in the deepest blackness, where no light even faintly flickered, in a darkness that was unbearably painful. It affected his whole being, tearing apart body and soul—just unrelieved black pain.

Jacob reached the limit of his dark despair (“*This was an extremely painful moment for me ... all this plunged me into a profound sadness ...*”). He couldn't go backward to the security of his Jewish life or go forward to Christian faith as some around him were suggesting. Reasoning about it left him cold; remembering his father's house only aggravated his dark isolation (“*My heart felt oppressed by the most painful melancholy*”).

He was perplexed, unable to assuage his pain, ignorant of how to escape “this body of death” that Paul speaks about (Rom 7:24). He couldn't go on pretending he believed in Judaism nor could he embrace Christianity that disgusted him with its belief in Mary and the Eucharist.

Libermann reached the limits of his powers on that “dark night.” Separation, loneliness, doubts, mental pain and distress overwhelmed him, putting him up against his legendary wall that would not fall down in front of him. His despair was almost total.

### Remembering

Then, like a good Jew, he “remembered.” He remembered the God of his fathers and uttered a prayer of anguish and lamentation like the Psalmists of old.

*“It was then that remembering the God of my fathers, I got down on my knees and implored him to enlighten me regarding the true religion. I begged him, if what Christians believed was true, to let me know it, and if what they believed was false to remove me immediately from it. There and then I was enlightened. I beheld the truth, faith entered my mind and my heart ... I believed everything without difficulty.”*

There is a kind of laudable presumption in his prayer that implores God to prove himself. It differs from the Gospels' “*Throw yourself down*” “*Turn these stones into bread*,” because it comes from humble conviction, not arrogant independence.

## Faith In God

Reeling from excruciating suffering, Libermann had no alternative than to expose his deepest self to the only One who can make all things right. He holds onto his faith. His faith in the one and only God, though now no pleasure to him, resists all kinds of attacks and will prevail.

For Spiritans, Libermann's faith remained a constant his entire life, even down to his dying hours when he painfully breathed “*God is all, man is nothing.*” At this crucial juncture of his life, his darkest night, when doubts multiply and besiege him, his Jewish faith sustains him.

Faith in God pervades his conversion, his life, his leap toward holiness. Holiness, he will later point out, is believing that the Holy Spirit draws us up into the being of God.

In this “darkest night” Libermann undergoes the forging of his soul into complete adherence to God.. He experiences a quantum leap into closeness with God that lights up and dispels his despair and gives him the sensation that the “darkest night” is over (but he will learn later that “dark nights” never cease to recur).

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## Baptismal Light — August 1, 1993

### Enlightenment

Libermann describes the end of his ordeal of “the darkest night” as an enlightenment. It enables him to believe everything Christians profess, especially about Mary and the Eucharist. He is specific about what happened at the end of his cry of despair: “*There and then I was enlightened*” The statement has a biblical ring to it. He doesn't pronounce the Divine Name (cf “Blessed [i.e., by God] are the merciful”) but stresses divine intervention. The effect on him was remarkable. He not only “saw” as true (“*I beheld the truth*”) what pertained to Christian belief he was struggling with and against, but also became a profoundly changed man.

### Baptism

He now wants to be baptized.

*“From this moment on I wanted nothing more than seeing myself plunged into the sacred font.”*

Baptism will express sacramentally what was going on inside him, i.e., dying to his former life and rising to another. He will know and so will others that he is a “new man.”

*“I can't admire enough the change that took place in me the moment the waters of Baptism flowed down my forehead I became truly a new man.”*

He received the sacrament of Baptism Christmas Eve, 1826, age 24. It was no ordinary experience. The Baptism of adult converts, prepared and anxiously waiting, is rarely without emotional impact and eschatological significance [they see themselves in the light of eternity]. It gives them insights they will not easily forget.

Libermann's Baptism was like that, but much more.

***"All my uncertainties and my fears suddenly left me. I experienced a courage and an invincible energy to practice the Christian law. I felt a sweet affection for everything that pertained to my new belief."***

His Christian life will lend credence to this testimony by its constancy and conviction.

### ***A New Man***

He will never regret what he had done. He was a "new man" who will endure his father's curse with heavy-hearted acceptance. He will suffer epileptic seizures in full view of his peers without losing sweetness of disposition that people admired in him. He will agonize over the unexpected and tragic deaths of his first missionaries, without giving into paralyzing despair. He will go through a long illness prior to his death, without complaint or resentment. He dies like a saint at the age of 50. Throughout all this he was conscious of being close to *God*.

***"...the more I have to do the more my union with God is strengthened."***

This "new man" was aware that God looked on him with preferential designs and had graced him with a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit that others noticed, even Pope Gregory XVI who predicted ***"he will be a saint."***

### ***Like Paul the Apostle***

Libermann experienced the Pauline description of Christian conversion: ***"Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light"*** (Eph 5:14). The "light" that Libermann experienced was the "light" that only the Holy Spirit can bring.

The grace and election of the Holy Spirit no doubt prompted him to take "Paul" as a baptismal name. He and the Apostle Paul were both Jews, marvelously enlightened and changed. The name "Paul" will be an omen. For, like Paul, Libermann will become a relentless missionary.

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## **Baptismal Fire — August 15, 1993**

### ***The Setting***

Libermann's Baptism attracted a crowd, some, no doubt, curious to see a Jewish convert baptized, the son of a famous Rabbi, known throughout France. The place of Baptism was the seminary of St. Stanislaus where he was charitably housed. The seminarian choir and the godparents—a baron and a countess—added importance and solemnity.

This was not an ordinary Baptism. Given all the circumstances attending this expected event, it would be surprising if there were not present excited people, ready to be impressed. The atmosphere, as we say, must have been charged. There are multiple testimonies about what took place, including the recollections of Libermann himself.

Years later when he talked about his Baptism, when prompted by fellow seminarians, he couldn't hide his

emotion which in turn affected them. They reported feeling something like an electric spark running through them.

### ***The Fire***

The ecstatic element in his Baptism was strong. The most well-known description of what took place is the weakly attested report of what Libermann is supposed to have said about it.

***"When the holy water was poured over my forehead it seemed to me that I was in the midst of an immense globe of fire .. things impossible to describe were happening to me"*** (ND 1.104).

We would like to think that the mention of "fire" recalls the Pentecostal experience and his own predilection for Jesus' words that he came to cast fire on earth. Perhaps he remembered Moses and the Burning Bush. Using "fire" as a metaphor of spiritual experiences has a long and hallowed history (e.g., Richard Rolle's *Fire-of Love*, John of the Cross' *Living Flame of Love*, etc.) and so could account for Libermann's usage.

He will later write (1841):

***"When the divine Spirit is in us, our soul is on fire, and in the midst of this fore, is as it were borne along, united to God, without trouble, without anxiety, without agitation, without irritation, without movement of self-love ..."*** (LS 2.599; 1841).

Libermann's baptismal "globe of fire" and this text have affinities that are far from coincidental.

### ***Spiritans***

Spiritans like to recall this ecstatic event as part of their conscious tradition. It not only underlines the divine in Libermann's conversion but also evokes for them Pentecostal fire, the Holy Spirit, the fire of love they pray for everyday, the holiness sought for in virtue of their calling and commitment. They are convinced they are following a saint, especially endowed by the Holy Spirit, and this gives a feeling of contact with the Holy Spirit present within them. It is not like belonging to a political party or a cultural group. It is of eschatological import. They see their heritage in the light of eternity. They live it for eternity's sake and expect to be vindicated in eternity for their choice.

Their charismatic and spiritual lineage leads back to Libermann whom the Holy Spirit placed in a "globe of fire" that changed him and them forever. He knew that what happened to him was completely gratuitous and wholly of divine origin.

***"In all these miseries it pleased God to let me see my own, which doubtless is the greatest; it is only that his goodness and mercy towards me are quite outstanding, quite extraordinary; anything like it I have never read in a book or heard recounted."***

(ND 1.502; 1838)