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Conversion: Christmas 1826-1976

Frans Timmermans

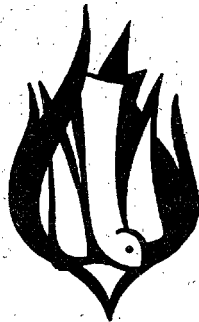
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CONVERSION: Christmas 1826-1976

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

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

¹ Notes et Documents, I, p. 51

² N.D. I, p. 61

³ N.D. I, p. 54

With such ideas as these Jacob could not remain at home. He went to Paris. There he felt alone and homeless. "I was overcome by a terrible loneliness. The thought of being far from my family and my friends from being away from my country greatly depressed me. I felt an awful melancholy. I then remembered the God of my Fathers. I threw myself on my knees and begged for light. The Lord who is near to those who call on him from the depths of their hearts heard my prayer. Immediately I saw the light. I came to know the truth. The Faith penetrated into my mind and my heart."⁴ Soon after this experience Jacob was baptised.

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

"Faith is the knowledge born of religious love. . . Without Faith, without the eye of love, the world is too evil for God to be good, for a good God to exist." (B. Lonergan) The positive assertions of Christianity that surpass what Judaism teaches, are seen in the goodness and kindness of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. When one is possessed by the knowledge born of religious love problems remain but doubts vanish, insecurity persists but hope prevails. "I cannot adequately appreciate the wonderful change that took place in me the moment the baptismal water flowed on my forehead. All my doubts and fears suddenly vanished."⁵

⁴ N.D. I, p. 65-66

⁵ N.D. I, p. 66

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

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

F. TIMMERMANS,
Superior General

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