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05. On suffering during sickness

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On suffering during sickness

To Fr. Cahier¹

In this letter to the Sulpician, Fr. Cahier, who was gravely ill with tuberculosis, Libermann speaks as one who is an expert on severe and constant sickness. We know that whilst in Rennes, from where he wrote this letter, he had frequent lapses into epilepsy, a continuation of his sufferings in the Eudist noviciate at Issy, where he had first got to know Fr. Cahier. The way Libermann sees Christ on the Cross in our lives may appear severe, but is not out of place in those post-revolution days in France. After all, the Cross is central to the life of Jesus. Libermann's convictions are a preparation for his teachings on the true nature of the Apostolic Life.

Rennes, 29 November 1838

Dear Father,

I hope with all my heart that the holy cross of our good Master will never leave you. It seems that, little by little, our Saviour intends to cure you of your sickness. If it pleases him to do this, we will rejoice because all the wonderful things he does for us who belong to him are very welcome. But if, in his wisdom, he were to ask us what we want apart from what He wants, I would find it very difficult to answer, because what I would have to say would sound very cruel.

I believe that Jesus is powerful enough to save souls without your help and that he will save them without giving you the consolation of being involved in the process, at least for the time being. It is a wonderful thing to be crucified when you are in the hands of Jesus and Mary! If the good Lord wants to free you from this beloved illness, I'm sure that that will not be the

¹ L.S. II, pp 122-126

end of it; He will compensate the removal of one cross by replacing it with another, which could be even heavier than the first!

The holy cross continues to do its work so long as our nature is not dead; it fights and crushes it until all life has gone out of it. Once it has accomplished this, once it has exterminated all human affections and desires, it will begin to unfold the wonderful presents that it possesses. It raises the soul to a divine union, consummation and transformation. Then the soul no longer seeks to have the cross removed: on the contrary, it cannot live without it. When there is no longer any suffering, the soul feels a kind of hunger and emptiness that is impossible to imagine if you have never experienced it.

So, my dear friend, you should try to forget about your body and experience a sort of joy when you are suffering. Develop a love for the cross that God shares with you, allow yourself to enjoy and take pleasure in it, so that the kingdom of God will be established in your soul and bring about your sanctification. Be relaxed, even neutral, during the struggle, resigned and abandoned under God's protection. Accept whatever blows it may bring and hide them in your inner depths.

It would be a tremendous grace to ask our Lord that your body as well as your soul should be totally given up to this holy indifference and loving abandon in his arms. Don't let your mind be dominated by the medicines and remedies that you are taking; use them as though they mean nothing to you. Think about Jesus alone, living and reigning everywhere. Seek only one thing: to live in him and to die to yourself so completely that he alone is you and you are a stranger to yourself. If you do this, whether you are feeling better or not, it will not affect your peace of mind. By nature, we feel relief when things are going better, but worse when they deteriorate. But if we want to look at things in exactly the same way as the Holy Spirit does, we must abandon ourselves so completely to

Him that we are happier in times of suffering than when we are feeling more at ease.

If a person's state of health prevents him from speaking to others about God and seeking his greater glory, he must not feel that he has to get well at all costs so as to serve the Lord. Generally speaking, our mind should be focused on God acting within us and our sole aim should be to please him. Flowing from this, we will try to ensure that He will reign in the hearts of everybody. An interior movement and not our own wish should bring us to this. Hence we must take great care to maintain and nourish a relationship with God in our hearts; everything else is secondary.

When, through following God's will, we find that we are incapable of doing anything practical for his glory, we can experience great suffering. But our peace, our love and our union with God should grow as a result of this suffering, because it is something that is coming from God. However, if this holy and supernatural action gets mixed up in our own way of doing things, when we are incapacitated as you are at present, we can feel disturbed and agitated and turn in upon ourselves; *What is born of flesh is flesh, what is born of the Spirit is spirit.*

So, in my opinion, you must not get upset because of the difference between what you can do and what you would like to do. Don't push things, be stable and wait upon God to show you what He wants. Obviously, you should not lose sight of the sanctification of souls nor of the means to achieve this, but then, you must not try to go further than where the will of God is leading you. However, don't conclude from all this that God doesn't want you to do anything at Reims. Very often, God chooses ways which are the opposite of what we think are necessary, thus confounding our human wisdom.

This is why in everything we should not try to guess what God intends to do with and through his servants. Our role is to continue straight down the road, never failing to obey blindly whatever He wants, but leaving everything in his hands.

Yours in the hearts of Jesus and Mary,

Fr. Libermann