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06. The dark night of the soul

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The dark night of the soul

To Paul Carron¹ at Saint Sulpice

In Rennes, where he had finished a second year helping in the Eudist noviciate, Libermann continued his spiritual direction of several seminarians at Saint Sulpice. Paul Carron, with whom he had a lengthy correspondence, was one of them. Carron was going through a difficult period because of his ill health; it was affecting his studies and raising doubts about his faith. Libermann had the same problems, but with a much greater intensity: the advice he gives to Paul Carron reflects his attitude to the trial that he himself was going through at Rennes.

Rennes, 13 June 1839

Dear Confrere.

May the good Lord keep you in his peace and love. I see that you are still a poor man, but it doesn't matter as long as you belong to the Lord. What more do you want? You say that you do not know whether you belong to Jesus, but you hope so, and so do I! We must cling on to this hope and our hope will not be confounded.

Keep moving forward in the darkness of the cross of Jesus. You rejoiced in him when you felt you had his divine light in a tangible way; but you have no doubt committed several faults and you certainly had several defects in the past. But you continued your progress all the same, increasing your desire of belonging entirely to our Lord. This is what he recommended to his apostles while they enjoyed his visible presence on earth: *Walk in the light while it is day, for the night comes when no one can work.* Now is the moment of the

¹ L.S. II, pp. 265-267

cross, of privation, of interior darkness, when the senses have nothing to act upon. It is the moment, dear friend, for living by faith, a faith full of hope in God's goodness, but mixed with fear and self-distrust, in a quiet, gentle and peaceful way. I am speaking of that living faith which exists and acts in the depths of the soul, which clings to our Lord and to all his words and acts from the love of Jesus, so as to please him in all things.

This night is most beneficial for it is in it and through it that we are perfected and gradually lose the defects which cling to us. Remain before God so that he can act in you according to his good pleasure, in the midst of all the darkness...

I see you are still poor and miserable, still suffering and sick. May the good Lord and our Lady console and strengthen you, so that you may sanctify yourself by this long infirmity and that by this means, the perfect love of our Lord will grow constantly in your heart and take possession of your whole being. This is the whole man and all the rest is vanity and affliction of spirit. Don't worry if you can't study and acquire knowledge, even the knowledge of theology and Scripture; I can assure you that there can also be a lot of self-love in such studies.

Let everything in you be entirely submissive to God's will and to the holy and perfect love of Jesus. Let this be the centre of all your desires, thoughts, words and actions. Be careful not to be misled by appearances, but always remain on the solid and unshakeable foundation of Jesus. Keep your soul united to him by a love that is pure and holy and let everything else be guided by this love. As long as you are holy, everything will work out in accordance with God's will. I heard you are going on a journey; take care, because there can be both dangers and advantages in this.

Yours in Jesus and Mary,

Fr. Libermann