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**CONCERNING
FATHER LIBERMANN'S
COMMENTARY
ON ST JOHN'S GOSPEL**



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PURSUIT AND RAPTURE: LIBERMANN'S COMMENTARY ON THE CALL OF THE FIRST DISCIPLES St. John 1: 35-51

by James C. Okoje, cssp.

1 – GENRE

Between September and November 1840, Libermann wrote 700 pages of commentary on the first twelve chapters of John's Gospel. It was attraction towards the words of Jesus which made him decide for John¹. There is also an affinity between Johannine christology and Libermann's spirituality, all centred on Jesus.

He describes his method as follows². He does not seek the strict and unique meaning. Hence, often, many possible interpretations are offered. Beyond circumstances of time and place, he would penetrate into the interior depths of Jesus, his internal dispositions. His purpose is to learn about

¹ I have the text, *Commentaire des douze premiers chapitres du St Evangelie selon St Jean*, 30, Rue Lhomond, deuxième édition.

To facilitate access to the new editions and translations, I shall cite according to the chapter and verse being commented upon.

² See *Preface* and at 4 : 38.

Spiritual exegesis? Psychological exegesis? None fits. Libermann pays close attention to the text and even though he examines minutely the internal states of Jesus, there is no attempt to trace his psychological development, or to understand texts from that point of view. His method resembles Jewish *derash*, as seen in Ps 119 : 104, 105, 130 :

*" Your precepts endow me with perception . . .
' Now your word is a lamp for my feet,
a light on my path . . .
As your word unfolds, it gives light,
and the simple understand. '*

and be drawn to Jesus, to be transformed in his interior according to the model of Jesus, and hence to derive profit for his soul. The words of scripture become for him a personal dialogue with Jesus, hence commentary merges with prayer. At 3 : 15 fully one-third of the commentary is prayer³.

2 – JEWISH BACKGROUND

When one considers the content, however, one is at first struck by a seeming negative stance towards the Jews and their traditions. Jews are referred to in the third person (*le peuple Juif*), sometimes with an epithet (*ce malheureux peuple*). The Old Testament was given, not by God, but by Moses (at 1 : 17)⁴, it was *une terrible loi pour écraser les pécheurs* (at 1 : 14)⁵. The *haggadah* and *halakhah* (oral tradition) were false and human traditions which led to ridiculous errors (at 5 : 11,36), which by Christ's time had obscured the vestiges of the Messiah and his divinity (at 5 : 18).

Jewish material is rare in the *Commentary*. The Targumic rendering of Gen. 1 : 1 (by *wisdom* God created . . .) is used at 1 : 3, hardly even again. Occasions for the use of Jewish material, for example, Lamb of God (1 : 29,36) are passed over.

Here and there one does, however, find positive evaluation of the Old Testament. The five porticoes of 5 : 2 signify the five revelations of the ancient law: Adam (the Jews assign this to Noah); Abraham; Moses; interpretations by the prophets and oral tradition, which is authentic unwritten revelation. It contained divine promises (1 : 17). It conferred right relations with God and salvation, although only through the

³ Here and there grammatical facts bear meaning. *Qui credit in ipsum* 3 : 15 (not, *in ipso*) underlines firm adhesion to Jesus. *Panis vivus* begins at 6 : 51 as distinct from *Panis vitae* earlier; therefore discourse on the eucharist began at 6 : 51. The majority of modern scholars accept this.

⁴ This is derived from the different terms used. *Lex per Moysen data est* (imperfection, lack of power); *Veritas per Jesum facta est* (perfection, power to observe).

⁵ The six urns of Jn 2 : 6 signify the ancient law. They were empty because the law had come to be scarcely observed at all by the time of Jesus.

grace to come later in Christ. Commenting on 4 : 22, "salvation is of the Jews", he says: "**All the true traditions are found with them, whether about knowledge of God, duties towards God, or the way to fulfil them. . .**"

There is, therefore, some tension in his relationship to Judaism, but this is part of an overarching problematic: interior – exterior; grace/Spirit – nature; Christ/Church – non-Church. It would be interesting to compare Libermann on this with his contemporaries, as it would be to trace his development in later writings.

3 – THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

I restrict myself to the *Commentary* and to what would throw light on his treatment of Jn 1 : 35-51.

(a) *Fusion Admirable* (6 : 57).

There are three descending models of spirituality. The first is the eternal repose in each other of the Father and the Word. The second is "fusion" of the Word and the human Jesus, the Word acting in and through the humanity. All the powers of Jesus' soul (he uses the term, *puissances*) were so absorbed by the Word, that he can say: "**the Son can do nothing of himself, he can only do what he sees the Father doing, and whatever the Father does the Son does too**" (Jn 5 : 19) – unity of action and of being. The third model, which is our sanctification, is the "fusion" of the Spirit of Jesus with our Spirit. It affects all our powers:

«He diffuses all that he is, all his love towards his Father, all his hatred toward what is contrary to that love. And he establishes his life in us in all the states (états) and mysteries (mystères) he lived and lives now in the eternal bosom of the Father. He thus becomes the principle, source, moderator and director of all the movements of our soul in all our works, and the soul and life of these same works, so that everything in us is no longer ourselves, but Jesus Christ who dwells in us» (at 6 : 57).

Libermann calls this "*fusion admirable*". Elsewhere, the term practical union is used⁶. The fundamental principle is love, a love which grips all faculties and their operations.

(b) *Interior-exterior.*

This polarity appears in two forms in Libermann's *Commentary*: merit comes from the interior; all external divine operations are accompanied by an interior grace.

The first is expressed thus at 1 : 13: "**it follows that every time our soul acts by a natural principle, good as it may be, its action is not an action of a child of God . . .**".

Faith⁷ is essential for grace, and an action not under grace is a dead work. Scholasticism expressed the same thing by saying that charity is the form of all the virtues. Libermann expresses the second axiom thus:

"all the relations and all the actions of our Lord bring with them an interior grace analogous to them, which they express; external appearance, interior knowledge . . ." (at 1 : 31).

In docile souls, God acts to impress the virtues signified by the words (at 3 : 34). The effect of scripture is quasi-sacramental.

(c) *Evaluation.*

Libermann will thus emphasize simplicity. The greatest obstacle to Christ's life in us is self-love, self-interest. He will insist on our identifying with Christ's Spirit in every thought, word and action, so that they become Christ's not ours. He will distrust certain natural effects and impulses in souls, looking steadily for the movements of divine grace. He evinces a conscious volitional effort to identify with Jesus living in us, so that we can say: "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me". (Gal 2 : 20). Hence, the constant prayer, *veni et vive in famulo tuo miserimo*.

⁶ Some mistake "practical union" as a form of prayer or contemplation. It describes rather a total relationship, a spirituality.

⁷ "Faith" for Libermann includes firm adherence to Jesus Christ, not just assent or acceptance.

The prayer and attitude is not unlike that of the so-called French School, and indeed experts will have recognised many themes of this spirituality. Even great men stand on the shoulders of others. However, I seem to detect in Libermann a very restricted use of certain terms and themes, e.g. *mystères*, and especially, *états*. More importantly, **Libermann's whole fundamental principle is mercy and love**, not "grandeur and glory"; the term of the spiritual quest is for him "fusion" not "adoration".

How far the theology and spirituality in the *Commentary* has been affected by Johannine theology merits study. Libermann's insight into John is accurate even by modern standards of exegesis. It needs to be shown that his theology elsewhere is different. Without being an expert on Libermann, I hazard a negative answer, for the prayers scattered throughout the *Commentary* (prayers are personal) contain the same theology as the rest of the *Commentary*.

Finally, modern theology has awakened to a lively sense of the operation of God's spirit in creation, and outside christianity. It has also re-defined the problematic of nature/supernature. While not yet up to modern theology in this, Libermann seems to me ahead of his time.

4 – THE FIRST STEPS (John 1 : 35-40)

"He calls those who thirst and is Himself parched with thirst" (at 7 : 37).

The first steps in a vocation belong to God. He prepares interior graces, and at the opportune moment uses an exterior means, here the Baptist. Jesus passed by as the Baptist stood with Andrew and one other disciple. This other disciple was probably the Evangelist, who out of modesty did not mention himself. The Baptist directed the disciples to Jesus, saying, "*Behold the Lamb of God*". "Lamb" signifies innocent victim; "of God" shows him as devoted to God, coming from Him, and wholly belonging to Him, in fact as having in himself the entire divinity.

Immediately the disciples followed Jesus. This shows that they had good dispositions. In effect, three qualities are necessary for familiarity with Our Lord: **ardent desire, simplicity of heart and docility of spirit**. Simplicity more than anything else draws down graces on a soul.

These first disciples are a mirror in which we see the movements in God's attraction of souls. The steps are as follows:

- 1 (a) He wishes to draw a soul.
He takes the first step,
Usually an exterior means.
Here he uses John's testimony.
- 1 (b) At the same time,
He touches the interior.
He shows himself in order to draw the soul the more.
2. Drawn and touched, they follow.
3. They need his assurance,
so he "looks" at them,
showing that he knows their intentions.
This look is essential for beginners,
for otherwise they become discouraged and turn back.
At the same time,
He speaks to increase their desire, "what seek you?"
4. Last blow - an invitation which offers interiorly what it promises. He gets total hold of the powers of the soul.

Attirer (to attract) is ubiquitous, so also images of relishing (*jouir*), thirst (*soif*), desire. God is seen as love and mercy, meeting in a quality Libermann calls *douceur* (gentleness, mildness, meekness)⁸. The disciples drawn from inside by God, and applying all their faculties to the pursuit, finally find their desires fully assuaged. One of the terms most characteristic of this *Commentary* is *remplir* (to fill). The human person is a "yearning", to be filled by God is both a fulfilment of his being and a joy.

⁸ *Doux* (meek, gentle, sweet), *douceur* (gentleness) merit a study in Libermann. It is a fundamental quality in God, in (sanctified) men, and of (holy) human action. English speakers will do well to remember that *doux* translates "meek" in Mt 11 : 28f: "Learn of me for I am meek and humble of heart"; also "blessed are the meek" of Mt 5 : 3.

5 – THE EXPANDING CHAIN (vv. 41-51)

In a sense, his commentary here is completed by that on the Good Shepherd in Chapter 10. Here he is more keen to show that true vocation attaches one to Jesus. However, he does insist that pastoral zeal comes from within the experience of being possessed by Jesus. This unity Libermann calls *pastoral life* (*vie pastorale*, at 10 : 3). Always the exterior action is united to, and flows from, the internal adhesion in love to Jesus, and the whole is, in fact, Jesus living his pastoral life in us.

He first found his brother Simon (v. 41).

Libermann remarks that Nathanael is possibly Bartholomew. (Gospel lists of the apostles do not mention Nathanael). He is an example of the simplicity and good heart necessary to come to Jesus. His prejudice against the inhabitants of Nazareth is excused, for they were indeed so wicked that they failed to discern the treasure in their midst. Our Lord's praise of him is more a grace which increases the virtue he praises⁹.

I saw you. A look of mercy and kindness, which prepared graces and found occasion through Philip's invitation.

Before leaving this section, let me draw attention to an important corollary for spiritual directors. Libermann advise them to pay attention to divine grace (interior) more than to characters and natural dispositions (see at 6 : 66). Jesus did not say, "those who have too fickle a character will not persevere", rather, "no one comes to me unless my Father draws him". He notes that **strong characters often seem to persevere**. In fact, they are often serving themselves, holding on to a thing once undertaken, not because **our Lord has bound them with the sweet chains of love**. The latter situation would manifest itself in *douceur*.

⁹ Nathanael in John's design is a symbol of Israel: he shows that when one reads Moses and the Law without guile (cf Jn 5 : 39-47), one is led to accept Jesus.

Heaven opened (v 51).

This refers to the Ascension. It was only after that, that the apostles had a true knowledge of our Lord's divine mediation and priesthood.

The angels ascending and descending allude to the ladder of Jacob. (Gen 28 : 13). This ladder signifies the Sacred Humanity. All prayers and adoration from angels and men go up through the Sacred Humanity; all graces come down through it. This also refers to the time after the Ascension. Before it, the Word fulfilled this role. And so having been fully perfected, Jesus is now the form and means of all sanctification.

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