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11. Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint John

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Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint John

The Cardinal Prefect of the Propaganda had told Libermann that ordination would be a condition for granting approval for the missionary project he had submitted to the Holy See. While waiting for a bishop who was willing to do this, he decided to pass the time by writing a commentary on the Gospel of St. John. He started this in his attic, which had been previously inhabited by pigeons, and worked on it from the beginning of September to the middle of November, 1840. For this Anthology, we have chosen extracts from his comments on Chapters 3 and 10 of St. John's Gospel.

Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John

by François Marie-Paul Libermann

An important note before reading this Commentary

May God alone be praised and glorified in all things, through his beloved Son and his Most Holy Mother, Mary!

During the time I spent in Rome, I lived the life of a recluse and had nothing to do. To change this, I looked for something which would be useful to my soul which was in great need of spiritual advancement. I could think of nothing better than meditating on the Scriptures and putting my thoughts on paper.

The thing that has always appealed to me in the Holy Scriptures is Jesus speaking to us through the Gospels. So I have chosen my favourite that of Saint John, which always gives us our Master's most profound teaching, capable of touching our souls. I try to reach the utmost depths of his teaching, going straight to the point he is making. I am always looking for that which is his full thinking at its

deepest level. I think that I will extract most profit by tackling it in this way.

My purpose was to get the most profit just now and then to reread another day for more fruit. Then I would burn it, or burn it earlier if I fell ill. This was to stop it falling into a stranger's hands, as I felt too much pride in myself and wouldn't want to be full of myself were I to die leaving this work behind. However, when I discussed the matter with my confessor, he told me not to even think of burning the document now or when sick. In fact he forbade me to do so as my director, although a future confessor might have a different opinion. So I am obliged to preserve these exercise books for the time being.

This I why I now warn all into whose hands this work may fall to be very careful of the contents. The writer has only done a little elementary theology, as taught in French seminaries. Also, he has done very little further study and hasn't opened a theology text book for about ten years. He has also forgotten everything he learnt during his studies. In addition, he has hardly ever read a commentary on the Scriptures and then only read patchily and can hardly remember anything he read. At the time of writing these reflections, all he did was meditate on the words of Our Saviour in a small Latin New Testament, not knowing any Greek. In other words, I am someone who is not a theologian by any means. That is why, when you read this commentary, examine it carefully for fear of falling into serious error. For myself, writing this, I put my confidence in God and his Holy Mother, and I hope that he won't allow me to fall into mistakes which would harm my soul.

I proclaim before Our Lord, his Holy Mother, the angels and all the saints, that I reject, detest and disassociate myself from everything in these exercise books which is opposed to the holy doctrine of the Church. I am firmly resolved to die a thousand times rather than believe a single thing which is rejected by this Holy Church, given to us by Our Lord. I wish to cling totally and without the least restriction to everything taught by the successors of Saint Peter, and all that they have professed since the beginning of the Church to this

present day. Equally, I reject wholeheartedly everything in these exercise books which goes against the principles of the Doctors of the Church. I have believed, however, that I should continue to write in spite of the danger of making errors, because I hope to find good for my soul. Also, later on, my confessor might perhaps allow me to burn the books and, if not, I shall have them examined by a theologian. I hope in the goodness and mercy of God that no harm will come to any reader. Rather, may his Holy Name be glorified by this work, on earth and in heaven above, by his angels and saints for all eternity. Amen.

John 3, 5: "Jesus answered: I tell you most solemnly, unless a man is born through water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

With infinite kindness, Our Lord took account of Nicodemus' weakness and ignorance and replied to everything he said and everything he had in his mind. He began by explaining what the rebirth he had spoken of meant. So he repeated the same sentence, explaining it more fully and adding the instruction: our soul has to be reborn of water and the Holy Spirit. Water is the figure and the Holy Spirit is the reality. This spiritual birth is accomplished like our natural birth and produces similar effects. In our natural birth we are first in the womb of our mother as in a prison. We are bound and pinioned there, unable to make vital movements, although we exist and live; we are, as it were, non-entities to the world into which we shall soon enter.

Similarly in the second birth; before being born, our soul is in the prison of sin; we are bound and pinioned and are unable to make any vital movement, although we exist and are alive with a natural life. In the natural state, we relate to the things that surround us, our intellect conceives ideas of them and our will embraces them. These three powers remain. Moreover, we

are non-entities in the kingdom of God, which is a new world unknown to us.

The opposite to all this happens when we arrive in the world. It is the same in our spiritual birth. "*He cannot enter*": here Our Lord says more than in verse 3, and yet it is the same thing. For it is possible to see the kingdom of God without entering into it. In order to see it, we must have the Holy Spirit, since it is only in his light that we can see it. Now as soon as we have the divine Spirit in us, we are in the kingdom of God. But without this divine Spirit, it is impossible to enter into it; for this birth takes place through the Holy Spirit.

We are dead before baptism; we have no life in our souls. For all life is in God, who alone has life in himself, as is seen in chapter one. Before baptism, God is not in our soul in a living way, that is, he is not in our soul as our soul is in our body. He is not in it as the principle of our tendencies, views and ideas, or of our love. Our soul acts independently of God, consults him in nothing, does not receive influence from him in all its movements so as to follow him; it follows its own influences.

But after baptism, the Holy Spirit dwells in us in a vital and life-giving way. He is there to be the principle of all its movements; he becomes, as it were, the soul of our soul. It falls to us to let ourselves be touched and influenced by him and to follow his holy promptings as far as we can, according to grace and our dispositions. The more the Holy Spirit becomes the principle of the movements of our soul, the more he influences our sentiments and dispositions, the more we follow him, the more perfect also will be life in us and so much more holy shall we be.

If after baptism we move away from that divine influence of the Holy Spirit through the state of mortal sin, our soul then once again becomes dead, because its soul, which is the Holy Spirit, no longer dwells in it and no longer communicates his

life to it. This is why damnation, is called eternal death, because our souls which are in this unfortunate state have lost the Divine Spirit, who should be animating them in such a marvellous manner, and this will last for ever. What a tragedy!

Our divine Master uses a different term here to give two instructions which in reality constitute only one. Without water and the Holy Spirit, one cannot enter the kingdom of God on earth, that is to say, into the Church, or into God's kingdom in heaven, that is into glory. The two things constitute only one: the reign of God in souls is one and the same reign. He who dies while living under his rule upon earth, that is to say, if God has reigned in him on earth, will enter into his reign in heaven. If, on the contrary, he dies in disobedience to his rule on earth, correspondingly he will not be in God's heavenly reign. In that case, the soul being dead, not possessing the Holy Spirit, can no longer acquire him, and being unable to acquire him it will remain dead and cannot come under the reign of God.

The only difference between these two reigns of God is that the earthly one is imperfect. When we are born into it, we can still die; being dead, one still rests within the enclosure of the kingdom, for although the soul no longer enjoys God's reign in the depth of its being, it still bears the mark and character of those who belong to God in his earthly kingdom. God's kingdom in heaven is perfect and no soul can be admitted to it which does not come to it with the Holy Spirit and is not truly under God's reign. If a soul has not been wholly and perfectly submissive to this divine reign upon earth, if the Holy Spirit has not been the principle of that soul's affections, desires and tendencies and if it has observed those of its former nature, such a soul when it presents itself at the heavenly kingdom cannot be received there. It needs purification of these extraneous things. Only divine tendencies inspired by the Spirit of God may remain; they were formerly in the soul in a veiled way and now become manifest.

When our Lord says “*Truly, truly I say to you*”, these words usually indicate special emphasis. He uses these words in opposition to the ideas of Nicodemus, who previously thought that practising the law sufficed. After that, Nicodemus also showed by his reply that he thought there was a way to cure corrupted nature other than by a necessary rebirth.

John 3, 6: “What is born of the flesh is flesh, what is born of the Spirit is spirit”.

That which is born of the flesh, could not be anything but flesh. The fruit gathered from seed cast in the ground will be like the seed. It follows that everything that comes from the flesh is nothing but flesh and if we were to enter again into our mother’s womb to be born again, we would be born once more as carnal people and all our affections, desires – the whole life we receive from the flesh – would likewise be flesh. But that which is born of the Spirit will be spirit, for the same reason. And because we are talking here about a spiritual and supernatural life, the birth that produces it must be spiritual and supernatural, which means a birth which comes from the Holy Spirit.

In our Lord’s statement, we see two kinds of life that are found in us, two opposed lives causing continual warfare: the life of the flesh, which comes from the nature which we have received from our carnal birth, and the life of the Spirit, which we owe to the Holy Spirit, through the grace of our adorable Lord Jesus (Cf. Gal 5:17; Rom 7:23).

John 3, 7: “Do not be surprised when I say that you must be born from above”.

Therefore, be not astonished when I tell you that you must be born again, says Jesus. Since everything in you is evil and

incapable of bringing you to see and enjoy the kingdom of God, you need another principle of life, you need another birth, a spiritual birth.

John 3, 8: "The wind blows wherever it pleases; you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. That is how it is with all who are born of the Spirit".

But you fail to understand how this spiritual birth takes place. It is my Father's Spirit who accomplishes it and the same things happen in that birth or operation of the divine Spirit as happens with a breath of wind. The wind blows without anything attracting it more to one place than another; it blows by the will that impels it "wherever it pleases". You hear its voice when it blows but you do not see it; neither do you see its origin or destination, whence it comes or whither it goes. So it is with those born of the Holy Spirit. The divine Spirit blows where he wills. The will of my Father determines his divine breath. The rebirth of our soul is always pure grace and strictly speaking, no one can ever merit it. We can touch the heart of God by practising natural virtues to obtain his great mercy, but it will always be simply pure mercy, however unfailing God's response.

We can also say that the divine Spirit breathes where He wills. You have no element in life in yourself on which you could draw to accomplish that rebirth. You even have all the elements which can expose and impede it. But the divine Spirit draws this life from himself and breathes where he wants to establish it, even in the mire and dirt of your evil nature, dead and destitute of everything.

Secondly, those who receive this new birth do not see the divine Spirit coming; they recognise him only through the effects they experience in their souls, which become

completely changed. They hear the voice of this divine Spirit, the heavenly voice, which gives a sweet fragrance to the soul and makes it realise it has a life other than the one it had before. Blessed are those who hear this divine voice and follow it! Most holy and adorable Spirit of my Jesus, let me hear your loving voice. Refresh me by your delightful breath. Divine Spirit, I wish to be before you as a light feather, so that your breath may carry me off where it wishes and that I may never offer it the least resistance.

Thirdly, 'you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes'. Our Lord says that those born in this manner do not see Him who carries out this rebirth in them. They do not know whence he has come nor where he is going; they do not see him either in his origin or in his end. We have a divine Person living and working in our soul; we sense his operation, which is this new life, but we feel nothing beyond that; we do not feel the person himself, either in his origin or in the aim he pursues.

John 10, 1: "I tell you most solemnly, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold through the gate but gets in some other way is a thief and a brigand".

In the light of the Pharisee's behaviour, our Lord gave this fine instruction to the shepherds of his Church, that is to say, pastors of souls. He addressed the parable to the Pharisees, who were the shepherds of the Jewish people. He compared the assembly of faithful souls to a sheepfold. He spoke in a general way, indicating either the faithful of the Old Testament or those of the New, so it concerns the priests of the New Testament as well as the doctors and heads of the people of the Old Testament.

By the entrance into the sheepfold, Our Lord did not just mean the initial taking charge, which needs a divine vocation, for he reproached the Pharisees in this passage for being thieves

and brigands. Now the Pharisees were not thieves for want of a vocation; they occupied the chair of Moses, as our Lord says in another gospel, and that through lawful succession. Our Lord had in mind every action of a pastor by which he governs and directs the faithful. This orientation towards the faithful to govern and guide them is called 'the entrance into the sheepfold', because in order to govern and direct as a true pastor, one has to enter spiritually into souls. Hearts must be open to the shepherd, who, after entering, must govern and direct them.

There are two entrances to the sheepfold: one is lawful and according to the nature of a sheepfold, the other is unlawful and contrary to the order of things. The lawful, natural entrance is called a 'door'; every other entrance is unlawful and unnatural. The shepherd enters by the door, because the doorkeeper who is in charge opens it for him. The stranger who comes to steal cannot enter by the door, because the doorkeeper will not open it for him. So what does he do? He uses violence or ruse to force another entrance into the sheepfold. Therefore any other entrance except the door is a thief's entrance.

Now in order to know and find the lawful door, one must examine the nature of the sheepfold and of the sheep contained therein. Only the genuine shepherd can enter, or someone in his name and with him, for no stranger can enter as shepherd. So for the present let us examine the sheepfold. It is a totally spiritual, supernatural sheepfold; the sheep are souls considered as living in a spiritual and supernatural condition. Therefore, the way to enter into the sheepfold must also be spiritual and supernatural. Now in order to enter in a supernatural way into that spiritual and supernatural sheepfold, there is and only can be one door, which is our Lord himself!

A person dealing with his own salvation, who not in charge of souls, is a simple sheep who has entered through the divine door into the way of salvation and into the sheepfold of the eternal Father, for nothing can enter except through the divine door which the Father has given us. But he who is not only concerned with his own salvation but also with the salvation of his neighbour is a pastor, insomuch as he has sheep under his care. Every time that he deals with the sheep in pastoral functions of governing and guiding, he enters into the sheepfold, and he can only do this lawfully when he does it in our Lord, who is the only supernatural entrance, the sole means of performing supernatural works.

Hence a pastor, who wants to enter by the true door, that is through our Lord, in all his relations with souls in directing and guiding them, must enter into the supernatural vision of faith and do his work through faith, animated by grace. He who does pastoral work according to merely human, natural views and through actions that are purely human and natural does not enter by the door but by one of the other entrances, even if he was legitimately called to the pastorate. These entrances vary according to the different passions that guide one and the more or less culpable activity involved. In such cases, each pastoral action is carried out not to govern and keep the sheep but for the pastor's own glory and advantage. For every time a pastor has purely natural views and activities, he is acting for himself. Now, since he has no right to draw profit from the sheep entrusted to him, it follows that he is a "thief" and a "brigand". Our Lord uses these two terms, one of which means to steal in secret and by trickery, the other by force and openly, because all bad shepherds use these two ways of stealing. The Pharisees constantly used both ways, as they showed in the affair of the poor man born blind. They used ruse and force to rule and guide and direct, and both were illegitimate means in their hands, because they used them illegitimately; they did not enter by the door. They were thieves

and brigands who desired to enter into souls through ruse and force, because they were unable to enter by the lawful door. They wanted to act upon their own, independently of our Lord who is the only door; they wanted to act upon them for their own interest and glory.

John 10, 2: "The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the flock".

In verse 1, we saw in what way our Lord is the door. In order to understand what follows, these two great truths must be known. Firstly, there is only one sheepfold, which is the assembly of the children of God, and one Shepherd, namely our Lord. Secondly, all those who are charged with guiding the sheep, who act only in his name and in union with him, under his eye and in his power, come as if they are one and the same person as this Great Shepherd, so that their pastoral action is done in him, the sovereign Shepherd, directing, feeding and governing souls. That is why their pastoral work is attributed to the great Shepherd, to whom it belongs; it is attributed to these other shepherds in the sense that they have his power and act in virtue of this pastoral power of the great Shepherd.

And so those who do not enter by the door or do not come from our Lord or act in our Lord, are thieves and brigands, for they grab for themselves profits realized from sheep, which belong exclusively to the great Shepherd. They are not shepherds, for they could only be so through his power and operating through his action. Those, on the contrary, who enter through the divine door, which is given to them for that purpose, are true shepherds as we have said.

When our Lord says 'he is the shepherd of the sheep', he is saying that he himself is the shepherd and the one who enters with him is also a true shepherd in and through him. In fact, our Lord exercises his pastoral function by means of the one who

enters through him and exercises pastoral activity by means of him. That is why, in the following verse when speaking of the shepherd who enters through him, he speaks of his own person and shows what he is in relation to the sheep which are his property, and how he deals with them. Everything he says is said about the real world, not only what the Shepherd does by himself, but also what he does through those who enter the sheepfold through him. Therefore, everything he says about himself happens also to them, with this exception: that all their activity is outside themselves in its source and goal, and in great part even as regards the way it takes place; these belong to the sovereign and unique Shepherd. Otherwise they would not be entering through him and would be thieves, because the sheep do not belong to them but to the sovereign Shepherd, whose property they are.

This existence of the sovereign Shepherd in those who come and enter through him into the sheepfold is not something new, nor is the union they enjoy with him new. The truth is taught in a multitude of places in the New Testament. The Son of God became incarnate to make us share in his divine nature. St Peter uses the word "sharers" (2 Ptr 1:4). St Paul says: 'I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me' (Gal 2.20); here Paul is speaking not just about himself but of every Christian, thinking of the outpouring of the Spirit of Jesus to establish his life in us. St Paul repeats this truth in a multitude of places and our Lord often speaks of it.

Our divine Master established a definite number of sacraments as so many channels through which he passes on his own life to us, in order that in every moment of life Jesus may live in us according to that circumstance. Moreover, he has established his adorable Sacrament by which he unites himself to our souls and becomes one substance with them. Because of this, the ordinary Christian lives the intimate life of Jesus as Jesus lives it with the Father. The priest, who is truly a shepherd in Jesus

Christ, has within himself, not only Jesus' intimate life, but also the pastoral care of his sheep.

It is a fact, therefore, that everything our Lord will say about himself must be said of the shepherds who enter through the true door; otherwise, one might conclude from his discourse that every shepherd other than him is not a true shepherd but a thief. This is not so. All those who truly enter through the door, as we said above, are true shepherds. But it is Jesus who is Shepherd in them, and it is to him that the sheep belong, and those shepherds must not act in their own name or draw profit for themselves.

John 10, 3: "The gatekeeper lets him in, the sheep hear his voice and he calls his own by name and leads them out."

The spiritual sheepfold of souls belonging to God is closed and it is impossible to enter into it supernaturally except through our Lord, who is the door of souls. But we cannot open this door by ourselves; his Spirit is the doorkeeper; it is he who lets souls enter through the door. It is up to those who represent the divine Shepherd to turn to our Lord and through our Lord every time they want to deal pastorally with souls; then the Holy Spirit will open people's hearts to them so that they may enter and have excellent dealing with their flock. But the divine Spirit opens to them only when he sees our Lord in them, both in their entrance and in their actions; for it is only the sovereign Shepherd to whom the sheep belong who can enter and be received there.

This goes to show the great purity shepherds of souls should have in their pastoral works; they must be shorn of all self-love and personal interest. '*And the sheep hear his voice*'. In instructing people about divine things for God's glory and the salvation of souls, there is only one voice that can make itself

heard, namely, the voice of the Great Shepherd, for no human voice, however powerful, can bring people to understand eternal truths in a way that arouses sentiments of faith and love. But as soon as they hear our Lord's voice, all souls that are truly sheep, that is, who have God's grace and are well disposed, become immediately docile and submissive; they receive and listen to the voice which is touching and drawing them. It follows that if a shepherd wants to speak to souls and make them docile to grace, he must be filled with the Spirit of our Lord and speak in this divine Spirit of his Master. Good souls will hear that voice they know well, will turn to it and willingly let themselves be ruled and directed by it.

'He calls his own sheep by name'. The voice of the divine Shepherd, speaking through the mouth of his priests, calls his sheep. Our Lord calls them to himself as belonging to him, as his property; he takes them and wins them over. How great is the happiness of true sheep to have true shepherds, in whom dwells their great and only Shepherd! These shepherds speak their master's language and this divine Master speaks to them, touching them and calling them to himself.

'By name': only the divine Shepherd can call each sheep by its name! He gives this grace to true shepherds who can act and speak in his name and by his power. The name of an object or person expresses the nature of the object and the kind of person they are. We are speaking here of a spiritual object and of a supernatural state of life. This supernatural state of life can take different forms, because the ways of God vary so considerably as do his plans for them, as well as the course of grace and their own state of mind and heart, that it is impossible for anyone to know by himself alone the interior condition of a soul or the course it should follow. It is impossible for any single person to call each sheep by its name; this means to discern its pattern of life and activity and to speak to it and guide it according to its own style of life. Our

Lord is the source of all those graces; he knows intimately all that is taking place in each one; he calls them with a boundless love and goodness, each one by its name, according to its own inner being.

'And he leads them out': The divine Shepherd thus calls each sheep by its name, according to its own condition and inner attraction, according to which his divine voice touches it. And he leads that sheep out, that is to say, he makes it produce good works, according to the divine will for each.

In his wonderful goodness, the divine Shepherd communicates his life and pastoral spirit to those who act in his name, through his power and through his divine Spirit, so much so that Jesus, through his priests, accomplishes those same things that he accomplishes in himself. And thus the priest, who is filled with this pastoral energy and the Spirit which is its origin, acts only through him and in him. He knows – through supernatural power – the condition of souls, calls them by their name and helps them act according to God's plans and according to the true attraction of Our Lord within them. Thus he enables them to advance more in a month than they would have done in years.