

1978

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Recommended Citation

Monteiro, J. (1978). Celebration of February 2 1977 in Nairobi, Kenya. *Spiritan Papers*, 5 (5). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-papers/vol5/iss5/5>

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CELEBRATION OF FEBRUARY 2ND 1977 AT NAIROBI, KENYA

CONFERENCE BY FR. JOHN MONTEIRO

When I was at Usa River at our Novitiate, I had occasion to read the Venerable Francis Libermann's *Écrits Spirituels*. I also translated a few passages from it, one of which is on his *Instructions to Missionaries*.

Today, I am attempting to comment on these instructions as contained in Chapter 1, which carries the title: Holiness of our Vocation - Need for us to respond to it worthily.

To be able to appreciate well Fr. Libermann's exhortations, it is good to remember a few points about his character. We have to keep in mind all the time that Fr. Libermann was the son of a strict Jewish Rabbi, and himself had the training for a Rabbi. The Old Testament tradition was in his blood. Hence, we notice in his writings, the OT prophetic style of now warning, now cajoling, then praising and promising.

He starts the *Instructions* with the statement that God wills to save the world through his Son:

*When it pleased God to send his Son to save the world, from afar he prepared the sacred humanity which was to bring about the salvation of humankind. He sanctified his Victim before immolating Him.*¹

But, our dear Father points out, God does not want to achieve the salvation of man without man's co-operation. In this co-operation, he has chosen, in a special way, the priest, taking him out from his lowly state:

God is great and mighty in his compassion towards us. Let each one of us measure the depth of his own nonentity, examine his weakness, his poverty, his unworthiness, look back on his past

¹ *Écrits Spirituels du Vénérable Libermann*, p. 366.

*and consider where God has searched for him, to raise him up to a vocation which places him among the number of Jesus Christ's apostles, if we are faithful to his grace.*²

Certainly we are reminded here of the Deuteronomy passage.

*He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness: he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the Lord alone did lead him . . .*³

Then Fr. Libermann goes on:

*We were prostrated on the ground, weak and feeble, hardly having the strength to crawl into the last ranks of the servants of our God. His compassion lifted us up and made us stand upright. Immersed as we were in the dunghill of our pride, of our evil nature, and of our sins we were pulled out from there, to become not just ordinary servers, but to be placed in the ranks of the princes of God's people: What have we done to merit this immense favour?*⁴

Fr. Francis seems rather pessimistic of human nature. This facet of his character, which probably arose from his Jewish background, abided with him to the end, giving him that unfeigned humility which was so remarkable in a man of such learning, as he possesses, and also, later on, of such power, as the Superior General of the Holy Ghost Congregation enjoyed in those days. Francis Libermann, at his deathbed, would still say with simplicity and conviction: *God is all, man is nothing.*

But Francis Libermann's life was one, continuous challenge, and so now he throws the gauntlet to the priest:

*What then, do we wish to confound God's plans and put Christ to shame on account of us? My dear brothers, that would indeed be a shame and a profound embarrassment for us and our divine Master . . .*⁵

² É. S. du V. Libermann, p. 365.

³ Deut. 32, 10-12.

⁴ É. S. du V. Libermann, pp. 365-366.

⁵ É. S. du V. Libermann, p. 366.

The OT technique now comes into play forcefully, as Fr. Libermann continues passionately:

*Jesus has chosen us, he has made us his partners in order that we chase the devil and destroy his rule over souls. He arms us with power over hell.*⁶

However, the call is only the beginning of the apostolic endeavour. The response to the call starts a long process of growing in Christ, which will continue to the last days of the apostle. Fr. Libermann pertinently asks:

*But, how shall we be able to act in Jesus Christ's name, if he does not reign in us? How shall we be able to destroy the devil's power, if he has still authority over our own soul. We cannot be at the same time the devil's masters and his servants. Let us ponder on the fact that our vocation is the greatest good that God accords a creature. But this favour demands of the creature a sanctity in keeping with the designs of the divine compassion, which makes the call, and the vocation to which it calls.*⁷

Fr. Libermann points out the need for formation for the arduous task ahead, and says that Jesus himself, the first priest, the first missionary, sets the example:

*The Son of God, seeing the abyss of corruption and perversion into which the souls were immersed, has become man so as to come to their rescue. He spent 33 years on earth, he made himself an example, he taught the holy doctrine of his Father, he suffered and he died so as to pull out souls from the pit of evil, in which they were immersed, and in which they would stay immersed for eternity.*⁸

So, too, Christ prepared his disciples, setting an example of formation for the future missionaries:

We can see with what great care Our Lord Jesus prepared his apostles for this great ministry. He kept them close to himself during three full years, he manifested himself to them, he instructed them, he strengthened them after his resurrection, and lastly, he sanctified them by sending the Holy Spirit. If Christ took so much trouble over the formation of his apostles in holi-

⁶ É. S. du V. Libermann, p. 366.

⁷ É. S. du V. Libermann, pp. 366-367.

⁸ É. S. du V. Libermann, p. 368.

*ness, would it be right for us to be satisfied with a natural type of life, full of faults and imperfections?*⁹

Father Libermann insists that holiness in the priest is a 'sine qua non' for his apostolic ministry:

*He has shown us by his example and by his words, that one cannot take an active part in his work of redemption, except in sanctifying oneself, that is to say, in living in a saintly manner. And this holiness of our life must have the same goal as that of the divine model.*¹⁰

Again and again he will return to this demand which becomes a refrain in his holy exhortation.

What is the mission of Christ's disciple?

To bring the free but perverted will of men to a return to God and to make them accept the merits of their Saviour to be offered to God as ransom for their sins.

*This return to God, and this acceptance of the merits of the divine Saviour, should be effected by the associates of Jesus Christ, and those who are to continue his mission on earth.*¹¹

But Jesus Christ does not send his disciples into the battlefield without power:

*And it is because of this, that their Master communicates to their souls his divine Spirit, he clothes them with his priestly character, to make them like unto himself, he puts into their hearts his divine faculty. Having thus transformed them, armed with his power, and filled with his divine doctrine and his holiness, he sends them, by virtue of his Infinite Power to spread out in the world, to teach the people the doctrine of sanctity of which they themselves are filled: Data est mini omnis potestas in caelo et in terra, euntes ergo docete etc. (All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me, going therefore teach etc.).*¹²

Thus ordinary men, weak and imperfect as they are, *he transforms them and makes them completely different ones. Men of nature, he makes into men of grace. Weak and infirm men he makes powerful in a saintly way, obscure men he transforms into men of eternal light.*¹³

⁹ É. S. du V. Libermann, p. 369.

¹⁰ É. S. du V. Libermann, pp. 369-370.

¹¹ É. S. du V. Libermann, p. 370.

¹² Mt. 28, 18-20 et É. S. du V. Libermann, pp. 370-371.

¹³ É. S. du V. Libermann, pp. 370-371.

Father Libermann then asks:

*Why this wonderful transformation? And goes on with the same breath to give the reply The reason is that this is necessary to draw sinful men to Christ, so that he can apply to them (i.e. his disciples) his divine merits and through them save sinful men and sanctify them. These sinful men cannot come to him of their own: 'Quomodo audient sine praedicante? Quomodo praedicabunt nisi mittantur?'. (How will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach without being sent) there must be apostles of Jesus to hold them by the hand and to lead them to their Master. But, for this it is necessary that these apostles be themselves transformed, they must be holy.*¹⁴

Our Venerable Father then explains in detail the various means the devil employs to keep sinful men tied fast to their forlorn state, and how difficult it is to bring them back to God through repentance. He stresses their near inability to rise from the pit into which they have fallen.

*And thus immersed in their ignorance and in their sins, they have no merit to offer to obtain the first grace for their return.*¹⁵

Here then, is the need of the apostle of Jesus Christ to come to the rescue of these unfortunates:

*It is necessary that another merit this grace, on behalf of them and draw it on them. This other is the one who is sent to them. So he must be holy. This holiness is part of his mission.*¹⁶

The man sent by Jesus Christ fails in his mission if he does not work seriously for his own sanctification. Here is the warning again for the disciple not to fail Jesus Christ. But if he does avail himself of the means given by the master for his own sanctification, then Jesus will definitely help his disciples:

Jesus Christ sends us as he had been sent. Our mission is his mission. It is Jesus who lives in his apostles, who suffers in them, who draws souls to God his Father, and gives them the graces through his apostles. But, for Jesus to live in the apostles and to do everything in them and through them, it is necessary

¹⁴ É. S. du V. Libermann, p. 371.

¹⁵ É. S. du V. Libermann, pp. 373-374.

¹⁶ É. S. du V. Libermann, p. 374.

*that the apostles live in him, that they be united with him in their life, their sufferings, and their apostolic work.*¹⁷

We must be true apostles as Christ himself showed us the way:

*If that is not the case, they are apostles of Jesus Christ only in name, not in fact. Jesus was sent by his Father, not as a figure-head, but having in him the substantial life of the Father. Very well. He sends us as he was sent. His Holy Humanity was marked with the substantial character of the Word, and it had in it the life and merits of the Word. In the same way, in sending us, Jesus Christ has marked us with the sacramental character. He lives in us and in our apostolic works to which he communicates his merits. Thus, our life and our works have become his. But, for that, our life and our works must resemble his, and his merits are not communicated to him.*¹⁸

Knowing full well the pitfalls of either triumphalism (I have done this, I have done that) or disappointment (I am useless, I can't achieve anything), into which a missionary can easily fall, the Venerable stresses that the mission of the apostle is for God's glory not his own:

*Finally Jesus, coming into the world, sent by his Father to save men, did not come to seek his own glory. Non quaero gloriam meam (I do not seek my own glory). He did not come to seek his own satisfaction or self delight: 'Nunquam sibi placuit' (He never pleased himself). He did not come to judge and condemn: 'Non venit Filius hominis ut judicet mundum' (The Son of Man did not come to judge the world). He did not come to do his own will: Descendi de caelo non ut faciam voluntatem meam (I came down from heaven not do do my own will). His Father sent him, and he did not live except for his Father, and for the accomplishment of the mission which he had received,*¹⁹

So the disciple of Jesus Christ is to carry out his mission, to do the will of the heavenly Father, not his own:

Woe to us, if we live our own selves, if we are proud, if we are stiff-necked, and do not wish to bow with suppleness and love under the sweet and light yoke of the divine will, if we have a

¹⁷ É. S. du V. Libermann, p. 374.

¹⁸ É. S. du V. Libermann, pp. 374-375.

¹⁹ É. S. du V. Libermann, p. 377.

*spirit of severity, of hardness and of judging. Then we are nothing more than abortions of apostles. Our apostolate will not only be sterile, but it will be dead and the life of Jesus will not be in us.*²⁰

This is not a reprimand to the missionary and it is not meant to discourage him, but it is a warning to him of the dangers that beset his path of being a true apostle. Immediately, therefore, there follows some consolation to the harassed missionary trying to do his best for the Lord:

*But how happy shall we be, a thousand times happy, if we empty ourselves of the malice of pride of our evil nature, so that we may be vivified by the spirit of Jesus who has sent us. Our sufferings, our sweat and our labours will make us shine forth in the midst of angels and saints like suns in the sky. All our actions will be full of grace and will be blessed by God, and we shall populate heaven with the blessed.*²¹

In developing further the theme of Christ setting us an example to follow, the Venerable makes an interesting point. He says that, although Our Lord spent three years going up and down the length and breadth of the Holy Land teaching and doing wonders, ending up with his death and resurrection, yet the number of people who came to believe in him then was infinitesimal!

Was his mission a failure? he asks, and replies straightaway. *Not at all!* Jesus set us the example of doing the Father's will no matter what the outcome. His was not the intention of total conversion of the people. This he could have achieved, if he desired, most easily, with the divine virtue residing in him.

This is a comforting thought for the missionary who has to work for years in a territory where hardly any conversions take place, and yet he has to carry on the Lord's work with zeal and enthusiasm, as it behooves a man of God.

The last part of the chapter is a real clarion call from the commander to his troops, and I would like to end this paper quoting for you that invigorating summons:

Let us take our position seriously, and let us not reduce the standard of our ideas. We have made a contract with Our Lord

²⁰ É. S. du V. Libermann, p. 378.

²¹ É. S. du V. Libermann, p. 378.

*Jesus Christ. We have accepted the charge that he has given us. We have entered into the holy militia of the conquerors of souls. There is no room to draw back, we have to fulfill the duties of this wonderful army. Marked with the seal of Jesus Christ for that end, we can no more withdraw. That seal is indelible. If we abandoned his standard, we would be recognized by him as deserters. Well, to remain under our flag, under the apostolic flag of Jesus, it is necessary that our souls be clothed in the uniform of Jesus' sanctity.*²²

Moreover, consecrated as we are to God through baptism, consecrated through the religious promises, consecrated through the apostolate, of necessity we must fulfil this triple commitment. Should we be satisfied in being only Christians, when we should be religious and apostles? And if we had this idea of being satisfied being Christians only, let us find out whether we do not lack Christian virtues. If we do lack them, then we are three times blameworthy.

If we do possess these virtues, we shall not lack the religious and apostolic virtues, for, we cannot have Christian virtues without the action of grace in us, and if the grace of God is master of our soul, it will inevitably make us religious and apostles.

If we are not faithful to grace in the matter of sanctity of religious life and apostolic life, it will not give us any more holiness of the Christian life. There is no middle way for us; either we become imitators of the Master in the religious and apostolic life, or we shall be poor Christians. Well, it is a great misfortune for an apostolic man to be nothing more than a poor and weak Christian: *Cui multum datum est, multum quaeretur ab eo.* (Much will be asked of him who has been given much.)

²² É. S. du V. Libermann, pp. 380-381.