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Prayer for Busy People – Some insights and advice from Francis Libermann

John Fogarty

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Introduction

The Center for Spiritan Studies, inaugurated in September 2005, is a collaborative venture between the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and Duquesne University. Its purpose is to promote scholarly research into Spiritan history, tradition and spirituality with a view to fostering creative fidelity to the Spiritan charism in a changing world. *Spiritan Horizons* is an annual publication of the Center for Spiritan Studies which seeks to further the Center's aims. The journal combines articles of a scholarly nature with others emphasizing the lived experience of the Spiritan charism today. Special attention is given in each issue to the Spiritan education ethos, in view of the university context in which the journal is published. It is hoped that the journal will provide a wider audience than hitherto with access to the riches of the Spiritan charism and spirituality.

In this first edition, **Jean-Savoie** explores the originality of the Spiritan founder, *Claude-François Poullart des Places*. Articles by **David Smith**, **John Fogarty**, **Bernard Kelly** and **Pádraig Leonard** investigate different aspects of the spirituality of *Francis Mary Paul Libermann*, 11th Superior General of the Spiritan Congregation and effectively its second founder, and point to his relevance for the contemporary world. **Anthony Gittins** and **Casimir Eke**, each from his own perspective, reflect on the meaning of the *charism of a religious Congregation* and on the issue of creative fidelity, with particular reference to the contemporary Spiritan context. **Janie Harden Fritz** and **John Sawicki**, two professors at Duquesne University, explore the notion of *charism* in regard to *the founding vision of a university* and outline how the charism is expressed and lived in the context of the Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies at Duquesne today. **Bruce Beaver**, a chemistry professor at Duquesne, introduces us to his efforts to bring the *Spiritan charism into the classroom and laboratory*. Scripture scholar **Séan Kealy** examines the text that introduces the Spiritan Rule of Life, Lk 4, 16 ff., and looks at the challenge of St. Luke to bring the *Good News to the poor*. Lay Spiritans **Gary Warner** (Canada) and **Maria Jesús de Souza** (Bolivia) share with us their *personal stories* of how the Spiritan charism has shaped their lives and continues to do so.

PRAYER FOR BUSY PEOPLE¹

Some insights and advice from Francis Libermann

John Fogarty, C.S.Sp.

J. Fogarty is a Spiritan from the Province of Ireland. He worked as a missionary for several years in Ghana, West Africa. He has also served the Spiritan Congregation in a variety of administrative roles, both in his home Province of Ireland and at the Spiritan Generalate in Rome. John is currently Director of the Center for Spiritan Studies at Duquesne University.

Our days seem so occupied with endless meetings, schedules, deadlines to be met etc...

Introduction

There is a marvelous passage in the book *Alice in Wonderland* where the Queen of Hearts declares: “Here... it takes all the running you can do just to keep in the same place; if you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast”. I suspect that the Queen is reflecting the inner sentiments of many of us today. Our days seem so occupied with endless meetings, schedules, deadlines to be met etc.; no matter how fast we seem to go we rarely feel that we accomplish all that we should do. We know that there is more to life than increasing its speed, yet we find it so difficult to get time to stand back from it all. Despite our best intentions, personal time with God is often relegated to the periphery of our hyperactive life. Against this background, Francis Libermann offers us some very useful insights into the place and importance of prayer in our lives. In particular, the simple method he proposed for his colleagues in Africa, weighed down by the cares of their ministry and the effects of an inhospitable climate that took its toll on their health and energy, seems especially appropriate for today.

Each Person is Unique

Although Francis Libermann was a much sought-after spiritual guide by people in many different walks of life he hardly ever spoke of his own spiritual journey. The following extract from a letter, written in 1846 to Jerome Schwindenhammer, a colleague and friend, was one of those rare occasions when he did so:

“I have never made my meditation on the virtues, not even on the virtues of Jesus and Mary. I have never been able to draw any conclusion or make any resolution at the end of my meditation as far as the practice of the virtues is concerned. I have never even been able to reflect on the virtues to know what to do or what to teach. Sometimes I have put that down to a personal nervous problem, other times to a natural incapacity...”²

Interestingly, he asked for the letter to be burnt three days after it was received but fortunately his instructions were never carried out. What he says in the letter is quite an extraordinary admission because as soon as he entered the seminary – shortly after his conversion – he was taught a very definite method of making his meditation. It consisted in taking a scene from the Gospels, imagining the feelings and the attitudes of Jesus, uniting oneself with him in these sentiments and finally making very definite resolutions for action afterwards.

JOHN FOGARTY, C.S.SP.

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*...God always comes to
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finds us where we are.*

In his earlier years he had spoken of this as “an excellent method of prayer”. However, his own experience taught him that people cannot be fitted into a mould – a fixed system – but that the Holy Spirit leads each one of us individually, according to our own personality, our temperament, our gifts and our weaknesses. We have to find our own unique path to God, our own unique way of praying. To someone who sought his advice in 1845 he suggested that he follow his own inner attraction, the way his heart was telling him:

“Make your prayer as simple as possible; don’t try to bring in too many ideas or to follow too closely the Sulpician method. Your prayer should consist in simply resting before the Lord in humility and peace”³

One of Libermann’s key insights was that God always comes to meet us in the reality of our situation, he always finds us where we are. He has made us what we are and he expects us to pray with the personality type that we have: if we tend to approach the world through our emotions and feelings, he wants us to use our senses to pray; if we are the intellectual, rational type, then reasoning will play a big part in the way we pray. In short, it is God who leads us in prayer; we simply have to discover the path along which he is inviting us.

Union with God

In the letter to the Colossians, St. Paul says: “*As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, live in union with him. Be rooted in him and built upon him as you were taught...*”⁴ This idea of being united with Jesus/God is at the very heart of Libermann’s spirituality. Fundamentally he believed that we are made for union with God; it is the purpose for which we are created, it is the only way to true happiness and true freedom. The passages he liked best in Scripture were the ones that clearly expressed this idea: “*I am the vine and you are the branches...make your home in me as I make mine in you*”⁵; “*It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me*”⁶. We are meant to be united with God not only in the next life but here on earth, in the concrete circumstances of our lives, with our own particular personality and in the reality of our particular situation. God unites himself with us in our baptism and in the sacraments but prayer is essential if we are to live our daily lives in union with him

Two Ways of Being United with God

Libermann distinguished two types of union with God: *contemplative union* and *practical union*. Both are closely linked and depend on each other; in other words how we live and how we pray are closely connected with each other.

...(prayer is) loving attention to God.

...the quality of our prayer does not depend on our feelings.

Contemplative union effectively covers all type of prayer⁷, the type we make when we take time out from our daily activities and speak to God in our own words. It involves three actions on our part: recollecting ourselves, concentrating our attention in an attitude of faith and ‘applying our soul’ to God in love. In simple words, it can be described as loving attention to God. Love is the measure of the quality of our prayer; it is our attention to God (an intellectual act) that distinguishes prayer from all other activities. He stresses that the quality of our prayer does not depend on our feelings. Interestingly, Simone Weil, the Jewish philosopher, says something quite similar: “The key to a Christian conception of studies is the realization that prayer consists of attention...The quality of the attention counts for much in the quality of the prayer. Warmth of heart cannot make up for it.”⁸

If the time given to God in prayer is to be quality time, if our prayer is to be real, Libermann adds two preconditions. We need, in the first place, to forget ourselves, to let go of our self-preoccupation and, in particular, of our tendency towards self-analysis. For Libermann self-forgetfulness is the principal mortification in the Christian life. Secondly, we need to be trying to respond to the voice of God’s Spirit in our hearts during the day. This is the real test of the quality of our prayer, even if it is filled with distractions.

Libermann was convinced that prayer changes us, or rather that God changes us through prayer. He outlined the reasons why:

- Prayer helps us to get to know ourselves, to see ourselves as God sees us.
- Prayer is a powerful way of overcoming our faults and weaknesses. Here he would include things like oversensitivity to what others say, the desire to do everything perfectly etc. However, Libermann quickly points out that our faults and weaknesses are never eradicated completely; we carry the fundamental limitations of our personality and temperament to the grave. Prayer actually helps us to accept ourselves and our limitations with peace, with patience, with gentleness.
- Prayer helps us to see God’s action in the life of others, to see how best to lead them to God. It gives us a wisdom and an insight that we cannot get from human effort alone.
- Prayer helps us to get to know God better and to see how and where he is leading us. Here Francis was clearly speaking from personal experience. God had entered his own life dramatically at his conversion after his personal painstaking efforts to find the truth through intellectual reasoning had failed completely; it was in prayer that he discovered the path to follow.

*Practical Union...is
effectively a way of life.*

Practical union, or ‘union of operation’, as he called it, is effectively a way of life. It is aimed at ensuring that all our daily actions are done in God. Again, it is always linked in Libermann’s writings to letting go of oneself, of self-centeredness, of self-preoccupation and to trying to find God’s voice and respond to it faithfully in the ordinary circumstances of our daily lives. We remember the words of St. Paul: “*It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me*”. The whole aim of the Christian life is to allow Christ to take over my entire life so that my actions are his, my attitudes are his, even my sentiments are his. “*Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*”⁹

Practical union involves frequently turning to God during the day, simply telling God our desire to do what he wants in the concrete circumstances in which we find ourselves. Our attitude should be one of complete dependence on him, trust in him in difficult moments and a desire to accept his will. Thus it is far more than just a pious turning to God from time to time with holy phrases. It is a way of living and quite a demanding one at that.

Once again, living life in this way gradually changes us:

- It gives us a practical feeling for the things of God, what Libermann calls ‘a spiritual tact’ in dealing with others
- It gives us good judgment. Again we recall the words of St. Paul: “*A spiritual person judges all things wisely and no-one should question such judgment.*”¹⁰
- It gradually frees us from being over concerned with misunderstanding, with contradictions etc.
- It gives us serenity, peace, joy in our relations with others

As mentioned previously, both contemplative union and practical union go hand in hand and each is incomplete without the other. Practical union ensures that our prayer is not an illusion: we can’t live a life that is separate from God during the day and hope to pray properly.

*Practical union ensures
that our prayer is not an
illusion...*

Prayer and a Busy Lifestyle

For Francis Libermann, as we have seen, all our activity – our work, our study, our Scripture reading etc.-should be done in a spirit of prayer. He has a beautiful expression: “*All our sighs must be in God to enjoy Him, to honor Him and to have His life in us. This is nothing but continual prayer*”¹¹. St. Augustine’s insight is quite similar: *desire is prayer without ceasing*.

Not surprisingly, Libermann emphasized that a missionary – that really means all of us – must above all be a person of prayer. He insisted on an hour a day, whatever the demands of the work, even if the time spent at prayer seemed useless:

He insisted on an hour a day...even if the time spent at prayer seemed useless...

*"It is very rare, if not impossible, that we are free of all the preoccupations and tensions that come from a busy lifestyle... It costs us a bit to stay a long while at prayer when we are preoccupied with many things throughout the day. These things invade our prayer, the time for the end of the prayer approaches and we are inclined to say that we have wasted an hour of our morning. I could have spent it much more profitably than battling with distractions, I am tempted to say to myself...but if we think that we are greatly mistaken"*¹²

Interestingly, St. Ignatius of Loyola refused permission to his Spanish confreres to pray for an hour and a half a day. *"A truly mortified person needs only a quarter of an hour to be united with God"*¹³, he claimed. This would not be Libermann's thinking.

Although he had never traveled to Africa himself, Francis Libermann was a very practical man. He was well aware of the difficulties of the climate and of fatigue when it comes to prayer: *"...the hot climate, the tiredness that comes from our ministry, from physical weakness...all of that prevents us from applying ourselves as we should."*¹⁴ Because of this, he developed a special method of prayer for missionaries¹⁵, which we can summarize as follows:

- We give ourselves wholeheartedly and totally to God at the beginning of our prayer, without looking for any feelings to that effect
- Then we simply recollect ourselves, for example by considering the presence of God or Jesus in a Gospel scene etc.
- We should then use various means of maintaining this spirit of recollection, for example we can think of our poverty before God, of our limitations and faults, we can tell him of our desire to do better, or perhaps think of a Scripture passage...
- We should deal with distractions gently; we simply go back to considering God's presence

We should deal with distractions gently...

It seems to me that this simple method is particularly appropriate for the hyperactive world of today.

Final Words

Many have correctly pointed out that Francis Libermann's spirituality basically came from his own experience. The foundation and early development of his Congregation made incredible demands on his time and energy as he battled with ill-health, with criticism and misunderstanding by others and, at times, with his own self belief as he had to face the reality of failure. There were times when he admitted to feeling overwhelmed by it all.¹⁶ Clearly, it was his practice of 'examining everything before God', of spending time with him on a daily basis, whatever the demands of

JOHN FOGARTY, C.S.SP.

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his work, that helped him keep things in perspective and that gave him the energy to continue. It was in prayer that he found light, patience, serenity and peace. His life and his teaching remind us that prayer is vital to our Christian life no matter how busy we are. The quality of our prayer and the quality of our life go hand in hand and the latter is the test of the former. We have to find our own unique way of praying, of communicating with the God who loves us, a way that takes into account our own unique personality and the concrete reality of our lives. And the comforting aspect is that prayer will change us little by little, make us more serene, more patient, more gentle with ourselves and with others...and others will see the difference!

Footnotes

¹ First given as a talk, under the same title, to the staff of Duquesne University during Founders' Week, February, 2006

² Notes and Documents, VIII, p. 203. There is another letter in a similar vein to his nephew, François-Xavier Libermann, in 1851, cf. Notes and Documents, XIII, pp. 132-133.

³ Notes and Documents, VII, pp. 37-38: Letter to M. Collin, January 29, 1845

⁴ Col 2, 6-7

⁵ Cf. Jn 15, 1,4

⁶ Gal 2, 20

⁷ Strictly speaking, Libermann distinguishes between *meditative* prayer, *affective* prayer and *contemplative* prayer, cf. *Ecrits Spirituels, Instructions aux Missionnaires*, pp. 496 ff.

⁸ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, (trans. Emma Craufurd), Perennial Classics, New York, 2001, p.57

⁹ Phil 2, 5

¹⁰ 1 Cor 2, 15

¹¹ *Ecrits Spirituels, Instructions sur l'Oraison*, p. 99

¹² Notes and Documents, VII, p. 898: Letter to the Community in Dakar, December 27, 1846

¹³ Robert McNally, "St. Ignatius, Prayer and the Early Society of Jesus", *Woodstock Letters: A Historical Journal of Jesuit Educational and Missionary Activities*, 94, No. 2 (Spring 1965), p. 121

¹⁴ *Ecrits Spirituels, Instructions aux Missionnaires*, pp. 526-527

¹⁵ Cf. *Ecrits Spirituels, Instructions aux Missionnaires*, pp. 527-528

¹⁶ Cf., for example, his admission to his close friend Frédéric le Vasseur, who was threatening to leave the Congregation: "God is overwhelming me with this troublesome work for which we need so much patience." [Walter Van de Putte (ed. and trans.) *Spiritual Letters to Clergy and Religious, Volume III*, Duquesne University Press, 1966, p. 31]

Spiritan Horizons seeks to further research into the history, spirituality and tradition of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. In line with the aims of the Center for Spiritan Studies at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, its overall goal is to promote creative fidelity to the Spiritan charism in the contemporary world. The journal combines articles of a scholarly nature with others emphasizing the lived experience of the Spiritan charism today. Special attention is given in each issue to the Spiritan education ethos, in view of the university context in which the journal is published.

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