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HAS LIBERMANN ANY RELEVANCE TODAY?

Once in a while we hear this kind of remark: nobody can deny that Father Libermann played an important role in the Church a century and a half ago. But, his deeds are inscribed in past history; his writings too were for his own time, and times have changed since then. Since his death, our planet has been shaken by profound mutations which have not spared any group of human beings. Many of our contemporaries look only to the future and have no interest in the problems which worried or excited their forebears. Several of them wonder what Libermann can still contribute to our generation.

This paper proposes to show what should be retained today from the life of Libermann and from the teaching he left us. I hope it will provide an answer to the objection stated above.

* * *

It is a part of wisdom to look to the *signs of the times* and to recognize the irreversible changes that occur in our ways of thinking. It is wise, and necessary, to follow with attention and without looking back the directives of the Post-Conciliar Church which would like to see fewer useless constraints and less tension in religious life, and which demands that there be continual appeal to the conscience of the individual person. But, while doing away with the exaggerations and deviations of the past, we must take care not to reject at the same time the changeless and absolute values handed down to us by the masters of spirituality and the saints and which are often no more than simple corollaries to the Gospel.

* * *

One cannot enter into the mind of Libermann in one simple effort. If we want to know and really appreciate his

thinking and not just make do with a few quotations taken out of context, we have to approach his correspondence and his writings without any preconceived notions. We must not be offended by his out-of-date style nor turned away by the manner in which some of his spiritual writings — after the fashion of the times — give too meticulous a treatment of minutiae. We have to accept that often what we have are only pale transcriptions of lively talks which made a great impression upon his hearers. We have to take things in their context and be willing to pardon expressions that reflect the pessimism of the French School; e.g. as we find them in the letters from Rennes, written when he was going through a painful experience and speaks of himself as *surfeited with abjection and misery*.

We have to get beyond these difficulties in order to discover Father Libermann's soul. If we do so, we can begin to take the particular issues he treats in his correspondence with so much wisdom and such good psychology and distill from them with great profit to ourselves the permanent values (e.g. the Holy Spirit's action in our inner life and in our apostolate, union with God, the awareness of sin and the need for asceticism, the primacy of prayer over action, etc. Then we can feel the strength of his goodness and his high-mindedness, and especially his all-embracing charity.

It is **his love for God and his charity for his most disinherited brethren** which are the most memorable witnesses of his life.

* * *

Reference has often been made to the similarity between the Jew Libermann, so distraught in his garret room at Stanislaus College on that day in November 1826, and Saul, the disciple of Gamaliel, thrown to the ground on the road to Damascus. It was the same type of sudden and violent irruption of God into their lives. It was the same burst of irresistible light. Libermann was to say: *All at once, I saw the light, I accepted the truth, faith penetrated my mind and my heart.* He who had spent such a long time in searching and in bitter argumentation became a Christian with the absolute certitude that he had found the truth. He had no difficulty in breaking with his past: the old law had been abrogated. The

only way he could now see the history of salvation was in the light of the Incarnation of the Son of God, the Messiah. From that moment on, his life would be lived under the sign of Christ and his teaching would be centered around the person of Christ.

We discover his love for Christ and his irresistible attraction to the humanity of Christ in his Commentary on the Gospel of St. John. He wrote it only for himself, at a time when he found himself face to face with Our Lord, living with Him, walking at His side along with the Apostles. Thus he lets his heart pour out in all simplicity. He picks up the slightest word of the Master with the greatest attention and respect. He is not afraid to enlarge upon the divine utterances, because he feels he is an intimate participant in the Gospel scene which he is describing. We could say that Libermann was on familiar terms with Sacred Scripture: with the Old Testament by reason of his rabbinnical training; with the New Testament, especially with the Gospel of St. John and the Epistles of St. Paul which he could quote from memory. In these days, when biblical renewal holds such an important place in our Spiritan gatherings, might it not be opportune to recall the advice he gave us for reading the sacred books?

The steps he had to take in Rome in 1840 to get his project approved were repugnant to his temperament. He was happy when he could just leave his dossier in the hands of the religious authorities and simply trust in Providence. The long wait for a Roman decision afforded him leisure to go and spend a few days with a hermit who was also said to be a Jewish convert. This was in the Alban Hills, in a remote spot not far from the Lake of Nemi. He was delighted with everything in the little town of Ariccia, but especially with the air of profound peace he seemed to breathe there. Why should not he too pitch his tent there and leave to other more capable hands the heavy missionary undertaking that was being asked of him? However, this was only a dream,—perhaps even a temptation from the Evil One. He had a different destiny and he could not run away from it. His horizon would not be the quiet countryside of Ariccia but the tormented world of the African missions. All during his life he would be torn between the attraction to the solitary life and the call of abandoned souls. Never would he be able to settle down in the joys of contemplation. Once he even said that he felt as if *strangled* by the Divine Will! For any of his sons who might be tempt-

ed to take refuge in the silence of the cloister, Father Libermann's example would always be there to show that, in the long run, and in spite of all the heartaches involved, there is no necessary contradiction between prayer and activity.

As far back as he could go into the past, he found everywhere the traces of the Almighty, the signs of His Presence. Keeping God and men together in one understanding, in one and the same love, he found that the more he penetrated the mysteries of God and the misery of man, the more he was drawn as if by instinct towards the most unfortunate.

* * *

There was nothing outstanding in his life: no miracle was reported by those who lived close to him, no ecstasies, no visions . . . He himself mistrusted marvellous manifestations in the spiritual life.

What is extraordinary and merits our attention is his constant faithfulness to grace; his tranquil availability to the influence of the Holy Spirit; his over-flowing and infectious charity; his humble and sincere recognition of how poor he was in himself; his enlightened and manly piety; his daily getting above his physical suffering and even welcoming it with calmness and joy; his straightforward conduct; his practical common sense; his psychological balance, so surprising in a man subject to nervous upsets; his real charism for directing those who came to him for advice and for discerning what was the path of grace for them; his gentleness and kindness which went so far as sometimes to be mistaken for weakness; a daring which was always tempered with prudence; a certain flexibility inherited from his Semitic origins which enabled him to adapt easily to situations and to people; his good judgement of reality and of the possible which led him straight to the essence of things and made it possible to find a way through the most tangled situations.

" . . . How could anyone say that there is nothing in our Founder's example of unusual virtue, courage, generosity and confidence that is worth keeping for our own edification?"

* * *

Surely the most significant thing in Father Libermann's life is his **prodigious missionary activity**, his feeling for the

apostolate — supernatural as well as practical — and his truly prophetic vision of the future of the missions.

It is not within the scope of this paper to list in detail all the works he started: those which worked out and those which did not, those no longer active and those still in operation. (In passing, let us recall that he dreamed for a time of acquiring a large property on Levant Island for a training school for Black apprentices!)¹. I shall limit myself to his essential activities, and especially to the spirit which animated them.

At the same time as he was himself taking care of the formation of his first novices and spending several hours a day writing or dictating letter to his confreres in the Mission — who from all sides wrote to him for advice — he was also continually working out new plans for the conduct of the missions, and always looking for new fields of apostolate. Alone, or practically alone, he carried the responsibility for his Congregation, encouraged the confreres, advised young and inexperienced Bishops. It is worth while to stress his immediate reaction, his *grand plan for the apostolate*, after the disaster in the two Guineas had carried off seven out of ten of his first missionaries. We could stress too his cleverness, his honesty, his spirit of conciliation at the difficult time of the fusion of his Society with that of the Holy Ghost. Then there were the endless dealings with the Holy See and with the government.

We have to remember that this very active man suffered every day from violent migraine headaches and that he had only ten years in which to accomplish all he did. What kept up his confidence and spurred him on to action without respite was the certainty that his Work for the Blacks was willed by God.

His health was always too weak to permit him to do what he so greatly desired to do — go out and share the life of his missionaries in the field. But he knew well the Blacks of Africa and all their misery; he had met them in the heart of God.

The universal brotherhood of men and the equality of all vis-a-vis the promise of salvation were for him unassailable

¹ This reference is explained by the fact that Bishop Gay's article is the transcript of a talk he gave during the time he spent at La Croix-Valmer which is just opposite the Ile du Levant.

truths. His obsessive anxiety about the abandoned Blacks permeated all his thinking. It could be said that, by reason of his missionary activity, his many accomplishments and his desire to bring the Gospel to all peoples who did not yet know Christ, he merits a place in the front rank of pioneer evangelizers of Africa in the last century.

He would have liked to communicate his apostolic ardor and his feeling for the Mission to all churchmen. *If you do not have the missionary spirit*, he wrote to a young priest, *you do not have the priestly spirit*. More than a century before the Second Vatican Council he said: *The Bishops have received the plenitude of the priesthood; they must extend their solicitude to the whole world*.

* * *

In my book on the life of Father Libermann which is now being printed² (this was written in Grasse last year), I recall how clearly he envisaged the problems of the apostolate at a time when nothing had yet been done in that area, and with what foresight he viewed the future development of the African Churches, in a way remarkably similar to the statements of the last Council.

I shall give here a short list of his directives to missionaries:

— Work for the development of the Local Churches, help them to grow by themselves and to achieve their own identity.

— Promote a local clergy: this is *the most important thing to which I shall devote all my energy*.

— Prepare Christian lay people to be the leaders in countries undergoing change.

— Respect the local culture: *Become negroes with the negroes*.

— Don't bring our Western civilization to Africa: *Divest yourselves of Europe, its customs, its spirit*. . . . Missionaries

² Since the time when this article was written, the book *Libermann, Juif selon l'Évangile 1802-1852* was published in 1977 by Editions Beauchesne in Paris. Here at last is the "Life of the Venerable Father" which we have been waiting for and which deserves to be widely disseminated.

will carefully avoid disturbing . . . practices and customs which are a part of the character of the people and of the nature of the country . . . and trying to conform them to the European way of life.

— Respect liberty of conscience. Above all, do not look down upon people who are still slow in certain respects.

— Be aware of the obligations flowing from charity towards men, especially the poor. Work for the human and social improvement of the people you evangelize.

— Be open to all the problems posed by evangelization. The Mission is essentially a service: *Become for them what servants must be for their masters.*

— Maintain complete independence of public authorities in spiritual matters. *Don't step out of your role as a minister of the Holy Gospel. People must not come to see in you the political agent of government, but only the priest of the Most High and the teacher of truth.*

. . . No, Libermann is not just a person away in a past which has no relevance for today. He still has something to teach us. He is more relevant than ever. For us, it is as if he were still alive.

I have found it interesting to compare some of our present-day directives with those given by Father Libermann . . . and which we may perhaps have forgotten:

— *Thus, for example, we have encouraged the experiments of itinerant missionaries going about outside the limits of the mission-properly-so-called in order to give spiritual and material help to the poor.*

In Father Libermann's thinking, to preach *missions* in the interior of the country after the manner of St. Paul should be one of the priorities of the apostolate: he devotes an entire chapter of the Provisory Rule to this.

The Rule made it clear, however, that priests who were in charge of these *missions* must be attached to a community to which they would return *every six weeks or two months . . . to renew their interior life*, i.e. to pray together, to exchange opinions and evaluations of the problems they met with . . . This, of course, pre-supposes communities which are truly welcoming and fraternal.

— Recently the General Council decided to extend the Congregation's missionary activity by going to help people

who are particularly poor, particularly helpless (in Pakistan, in Paraguay, in Angola).

Even though the Provisory Rule demanded a degree of stability in the apostolate, it foresaw cases, no doubt far in the future in those days, when missions would be *in such good condition by the grace and blessing of God* that they no longer came within the specific end of the Congregation which would always be to evangelize by preference *poor people who are the most neglected in the Church of God*. What then would prevent the missionaries, as Libermann said to M. Dupont in 1840, from "running to the aid of another part of the Church which was the most abandoned and most despised?"

In 1844, Libermann developed this thought: No doubt, it will be necessary *to bring things to perfection as much as we can (and, for that purpose) we shall form a native clergy to finish what the missionaries began. (But) the greatest good . . . consists in spreading out our efforts, in bringing the faith to the wide sweep of countries.*³

* * *

There remains to be said what we must retain today from Father Libermann's **spiritual teaching**. It is a vast subject, of which we can give no more than the bare essentials!

— Is evangelization a human undertaking or is it essentially the preaching of the Divine Mystery? Is the missionary simply a clever and courageous man brilliantly equipped for action or is he above all one of God's co-workers?

The question is always relevant. It is posed today just as rigorously as in the past and it helps in giving a good definition of the Mission. Father Liberman's reply to this basic question supplies us with the key to his entire missionary spirituality.

For him there can be no hesitation: evangelization, although confided to men, is a work of God continuing in the world down through the centuries the very mission of Christ and his Apostles. Consequently, the missionary is bound to give witness of a deep supernatural outlook. His human

³ Cf. the excellent article by Father Lécuyer in *Spiritian Papers*, October 1976, pp. 15 ff.

qualities are useful indeed for his activity, but they develop and come to full flower under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

The deep spiritual formation the Founder gave his disciples should have prepared them for all the eventualities of their difficult ministry, should have helped them to surmount physical and moral difficulties, setbacks, and even success, should have kept them in a permanent state of availability and self-sacrifice. It is the missionary's holiness, he said, that will free those souls and, by the very fact, save the missionary himself. He wrote to a Father in Guinea: *Ah! how I wish all my confreres felt as strongly as I do the need of holiness for a missionary in Africa.* Some said that Father Libermann had an obsession concerning the sanctification of his brethren.

Three months before his death he confided to Bishop Kobès: *When I think of the continual sufferings of those poor children and the generous way in which they put up with them, I tell myself that there is there the makings of great saints, if they are diligent in working at the interior and religious life and virtues.*

God seems clearly to want us to save that country (Guinea) more by our own sanctification than by our zeal.

Devotion to the Holy Spirit has seen in our day a renewal of fervor reminiscent of the best years of the Middle Ages. Might this not be the moment to turn to Father Libermann whom Father Martelet does not hesitate to call *today's Doctor Spiritus Sancti*?

When I dedicated my previous book to Paul VI, the pontiff sent me the following reply through Cardinal Villot: *Libermann's spirituality of complete availability to the Holy Spirit deserves to be placed before today's Christians who are so often disturbed by the many rapid changes He is making them go through. Your book is the answer to a very great need.*

Libermann's spirituality of complete availability to the Holy Spirit cannot be presented in a few words. Let us simply recall the two-fold influence of the Holy Spirit over missionaries (as over all men of action).

— What is to be reserved to the Holy Spirit in one's intimate personal life? According to Libermann, — everything! We should be conscious of His Presence and peacefully allow ourselves to be led by Him, never trying to run ahead of Him. We should maintain a certain atmosphere of peace and silence within ourselves and around us. We should be pliable under His influence; live in the present mo-

ment, according to the grace of the moment; know how to wait for *God's moment* and work tirelessly and with conscious discipline to rid our souls of anything foreign to the Spirit of God which might hinder His action: — these are the expressions which occur most frequently in Father Libermann's writings.

— The action of the Holy Spirit does not occur only in the privacy of our own spiritual life. It extends to all our external activities. St. Paul thought of his apostolate as *the ministry of the Spirit*. Libermann calls *practical union* the attention we give to the Holy Spirit in the midst of our apostolic labors. *Missionaries*, he wrote, *will find in the Holy Spirit living in their souls a source of interior and religious life, as well as a never-failing fount of that charity which is the very soul of their zeal and of all the other apostolic virtues.*

It is charity that makes missionaries conscious of their evangelical mission, that inclines them to esteem and love the poor and to extend to them generously all the spiritual and human assistance they have a right to expect. Libermann wrote: *Missionaries will be the advocates, the support and the defenders of the weak and the small against those who oppress them. It is in circumstances such as these that the charity of Jesus Christ must be made manifest.*

Faithful to the Holy Spirit, not neglecting personal prayer — the mental prayer in which they meet God one-to-one, the missionaries must not neglect community prayer. (It is not only at table that confreres meet as members of the same religious family, but in common prayer as in something *essential*). They will strive to maintain the necessary balance, so often threatened, between their life of prayer and their life of action.

— Father Libermann made life in common a *constitutive* principle of his Society. He refers to it on every possible occasion: in the Rule, in his reports to Rome, and in a great many of his letters. For him, the missionary is never isolated, he carries the responsibility for the Gospel *along with* his brethren.

A community united in charity is a sign of the Holy Spirit's presence. *Be perfectly united one with another*, he recommends . . . *it is in such unity that the presence of the Spirit of God will be made manifest.*

If we are to follow Libermann's thinking, we shall have to say that all the missionary projects springing from our Spiritan meetings must be influenced by the spirit of community.

* * *

Most of the advice the Founder gave his disciples to help them live up to their supernatural vocation can still be taken as valid. Some points are necessarily out-of-date; others merit to be brought back from oblivion and *put into practice again . . .*

The Council asked religious institutes to bring about renewal by means of fidelity to the spirit of their Founders. We, as Spiritans, have the precious advantage of possessing a guide who was of extraordinary virtue, wise and well-balanced, whose supernatural impulses never go in opposition to practical common sense, and in whom we can almost always discover the solution to the problems which come up nowadays.

* * *

Recently I paid a visit to my editors in Paris. One of them said to me: *Libermann! our readers don't know anything about him. But, if what you have written is genuine, then you have as founder a truly exceptional man, a great saint. And I don't understand why your Congregation has left such a shining light under a bushel-basket.*

. . . Could it be that in these words there is matter for meditation for his spiritual children?

† Jean Gay, C.S.Sp.
La Croix Valmer
February 2, 1977