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### 04. Correct spiritual guidance

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## Correct spiritual guidance

*To Fr. Poupart<sup>1</sup>*

*The following letter is addressed to M. Poupart<sup>2</sup>, spiritual director at the seminary of Saint-Sulpice. It was written during Libermann's last year at Rennes, but the identity of the seminarian of whom he speaks is not known.*

*The letter is particularly interesting for those who are involved in spiritual guidance. so it is reproduced here in its entirety. It describes in detail the method of spiritual direction employed by Libermann.*

In the name of Jesus and Mary!

1839

My dear Father in the Lord,

May Jesus, our all, be the absolute master and the unique life of our souls, so that he will live and reign there alone before his Father, amidst the suffering, the despondency, the destruction and the annihilation of our entire, miserable nature, which is nothing but sin and abomination in his sight.<sup>3</sup>

Some time ago, I received a letter from Mr. X<sup>4</sup> and this is the reason why I am writing to you. I want to use this opportunity to hear what you think of these ideas which follow. In his letter, Mr. X asked my advice on his prayer life. There is no point in repeating the whole of my reply to him; you will no doubt see him yourself so you can ask him about it. I just want to explain

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<sup>1</sup> L.S. II, pp. 386-390

<sup>2</sup> See index

<sup>3</sup> The deep pessimism of these opening words can be better understood if we realise that Libermann was going through a period of severe physical, moral and spiritual trials.

<sup>4</sup> This was a seminarian who was being guided by Fr. Poupart.

here why I told him what I did. I hope and pray, by the mercy of God, that if he follows my advice he will come close to God and make much progress.

It seemed to me that it would be right for him to continue using mediation<sup>1</sup>, rather than a simpler and purer style of prayer, remaining united to God in a spirit of faith, interiorly detached from the senses. I believe that this latter type of prayer should never be used by beginners because they are so used to acting through their own imagination. This means that at the stage where they are presently, there are many obstacles that prevent them going directly to God without using their imagination and senses, unless, of course, God is pulling them strongly in that direction. Even if that is the case, they will continue to do so using their senses to a certain extent; they will form an intellectual image of God to which they will unite themselves. Without doubt, this is a step beyond meditation, but unless God pushes them strongly, they will not free themselves completely from the senses.

I believe that in the early stages, God allows for our weakness by communicating with our souls through the senses. In other words, he contacts us through our imagination and other internal senses and draws us towards him by means of meditation. But once he has purified our senses and detached us from sensations and gratification, once he has filled our soul with fervour, a desire for sanctification and self-denial in all things, he will then withdraw gradually into the depths of our souls, separating himself from our senses and acting purely,

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<sup>1</sup> Several times in this letter, Libermann talks of "*considerations*". He is referring to a type of prayer called "meditation", where the mind and the imagination are at work, a method which varies according to different schools of spirituality. For example, there is a meditation method of the school of Saint-Sulpice to help beginners. Meditation should lead to contemplation, a form of prayer which is simpler and less discursive.

working through the faith which he gives to the intimate and completely spiritual faculties of our soul. This faith is always accompanied by love, but there is no longer any involvement of the senses; it operates only in the most intimate and purely spiritual part of our souls.

This moment, when God separates himself from the senses, is the most critical and, in my opinion, the most decisive. The person becomes convinced that he is lost, no longer having the feeling of being united to God. He believes that he has been unfaithful and that God has abandoned him. So there is a great danger of discouragement, uncertainty, scruples and many other kinds of suffering. If the person has truly renounced himself, he will overcome all these feelings and move towards the real contemplative life; if the opposite is true, he will gradually withdraw and, in some cases, become worse than he was at the beginning.

In all this, I feel the most important thing for the director is to let God work in his own way, to follow his action and encourage the person to be faithful to the path along which He is leading them. When I see somebody who is more advanced, somebody who appears to be called to the perfection of the interior life (and there are more such people than one would imagine), I start to give him an idea of the real nature of Christian perfection. I do this when it seems that God wants to raise him to greater heights; seeing the beauty of these things, he will be amazed by them and experience an overwhelming desire to reach that state.

Then I try to show him the different aspects of perfection, in so far as I can with the help of God. I wait for some time before getting down to his particular situation and giving him direction suitable to his current state. Once I have gained this entry and the Lord lets me know the interior life of this person, I come to appreciate the difficulties he is facing and adapt my direction accordingly. At this stage, I try to help him avoid too much

activity and haste, so that he will be at peace and remain quietly in God's presence and more easily follow all his promptings. This state of peace will always lead him on to contemplation and renouncement.

I insist a great deal on interior and external self-denial, building the state of peace on this foundation, so that the person will devote himself continually to this process of purification. I feel this is particularly important for beginners, so for a long time, I never speak of prayer. I do not know if I am right in this, but I have always felt that since they are striving to live an interior life that is self-denying, God will perfect their prayer, and living in a state of peace and internal gentleness and practising self-control and sincerity, they will come to know and follow God and the ideas with which he inspires them.

When they speak to me, I get to know their spiritual preferences and the way that they pray. I try to correct anything that is defective, but in general, I do not interfere. And gradually, I think they are led to a prayer of pure faith and union with God by simple contemplation.

I am overjoyed when, as often happens, they tell me things that are happening within them which indicate a state of pure contemplation, even though I have never said anything that would have led them in that direction. I tell them to carry on as they are doing, putting no pressure on them but allowing them to follow what is happening in their soul. Later, when things have advanced to a point where they can no longer do meditation and even have distaste for it, I tell them to continue with this simple view of God and encourage them to remain in his presence by faith.

So dear Father, having examined them before God, be so kind as to give me your reaction to what I have described above. There were many other things I wanted to say to you, but they have slipped my mind for the moment.

I am your servant in the love of Jesus and Mary,

**François Libermann**