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The last conferences of Libermann given at the novitiate of Notre-Dame du Gard

March–April, 1851¹

This text consists of extracts from the final spiritual talks of Libermann to the novices at Notre-Dame du Gard, shortly before his death. They were recorded by one of the novices. According to a note added by Fr. Delaplace², although we cannot guarantee that this was exactly what Libermann said, it is typical of his approach and his way of expressing it.

The grace of sanctity cannot act without our cooperation. It is placed within us when we are still young and only develops when we are capable of cooperating with it. There are two states of the soul that emerge: contemplative union and practical action and it is these which assist the development of sanctifying grace.

Contemplative union is a thirst for Our Lord, that need that we experience to set out in search of the light and strength, the seeds of which are already planted in our souls and which grow as a result of that direct relationship which is created between Our Lord and ourselves. This thirst, or raising of the soul to God, is what we refer to as “prayer”. Prayer is essential to the life of the soul, just as the air we breathe and the light of the sun are essential to the life of the body.

This contemplative union can be compared to a child who always wants to be close to his mother, the only person that he really trusts and loves. There are different types of prayer

¹ N.D. XIII, pp. 686-711

² N.B.: Fr. Delaplace was assistant novice master in the novitiate; he also heard these conferences given and subsequently completed and printed them. (Fr. Barillec).

and each of us has our own, the details of which suit our situation. To get to know the particular path we should follow, we look at the times when our prayer has gone well and remember our disposition on that occasion; this will show us the path that God wants us to take.

But contemplative union is not as necessary as **practical action**. A more perfect contemplative union, linked to a practical action that is less so, produces a less perfect result than a practical action linked to a contemplative union which is inferior. Obviously, a contemplative union must dominate in contemplative religious Orders, while practical action will be more characteristic with missionaries. This missionary practical action will reveal a readiness to sacrifice oneself for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, without frequently experiencing regular moments of consolation in prayer. But finally, each person has his own special path to follow in prayer, because the graces we receive are tailored to the passing or permanent dispositions of our unique soul.

Contemplative union

Before arriving at contemplation, which is real prayer, we normally pass through a stage of "meditation" (which is not prayer in the strict sense but rather a preparation for prayer). This is followed by what is referred to as "prayer of affection", where one experiences strong feelings which absorb the soul. Finally, "prayer of contemplation" consists of a constant and habitual union of our soul with God. We are always in the presence of God and more or less conscious of that presence.

There are three degrees in contemplative prayer:

- *The first degree:* absorption of the soul, which is detached from its surroundings and is aware of God

alone - gently and without any effort, like a small child at its mother's breast.

- *The second degree:* we are not absorbed in God but we continually and instinctively return to him while we are doing other things, in such a way that we cannot help thinking frequently about him, just as a friend turns his mind repeatedly to the one he loves.
- *The third degree:* we do **not** return instinctively to God; a deliberate act is **necessary for that**, but such an act is pleasant and easy.

This third degree is particularly suited to apostolic life. We are occupied and not distracted. In this state, it happens that we do not experience explicit feelings before God; we are with him in a passive way, not suffering but also without experiencing joy. In such a state, it is difficult to do an hour's meditation. We prefer to glance at some thought and act externally; then this exterior action helps to encourage prayer, just as a walk or some other form of exercise helps the digestion.

Although contemplative union is not as perfect as practical action, we still have to work at it, because without it, we cannot really enter into practical action, and practical action is not good if it is not joined to contemplative union.

Practical union

Practical action (or practical union) involves stripping oneself of "natural impressions" in order to open up one's soul to the impressions of God. As long as the soul is a slave to natural impressions, it is like some opaque material, which prevents the entry of the supernatural light of truth. But as soon as we dominate these natural impressions and are prepared to accept and act on what God inspires us to do, then our soul receives this life. It becomes spiritual and transparent, like the

divine truth which can then enter the soul naturally and unopposed. We then possess an abundance of the truth, we breathe the truth and feed ourselves from it. We can see the things of God clearly and without effort, because our soul is now in its element – the divine light.

We have to do two things in this practical union:

- a) The first step is to suppress the natural impressions which are of three types:
 - The current impressions of the senses;
 - The moral impressions which relate to the past or the future;
 - The purely intellectual impressions, like pride or self-love.
- b) The second step is to open oneself to receive impressions from God, which infuse into us the two-fold element of supernatural life – faith and love.

We have to work on the contemplative union and the practical union at the same time, so that they will perfect each other and produce the complete life.

We can have distractions in our prayer without ceasing to be united to God. Sometimes, we can get completely confused. It is not just that we do not know what we are doing: we can have doubts as to whether we are doing anything at all. We can find ourselves in a state of total passivity, where we are convinced that nothing is working, or that we are spoiling the work of God. But this can mean that the action of God is at its most efficacious, because it is out of our control and is acting almost completely on its own. We can see this when come to an end of such prayer and feel that we have been enlightened and strengthened to do good.

It is of critical importance that we never allow feelings of self-love to enter into our prayer. We must be totally convinced, and learn from our experience, that on our own, we can achieve absolutely nothing in prayer; it is solely because of the mercy of God descending upon us that we can enter into communication with him.

There is a text in scripture which proves that practical union consists in repressing nature and allowing ourselves to be dominated instead by grace: "*Abnega temetipsum, tolle crucem tuam et sequere me*"¹. "*He must renounce himself*" – that is to say, he must take no notice of himself, banish all natural feelings and seek to please God alone. "*Take up his cross*" – Far from taking things easy, he must open the wings of faith and fly towards suffering and the cross. He must take these crosses upon himself, assured that God will help him and draw him up to where He himself is suspended. "*And follow me*" – In doing this, he is following and imitating Our Lord. To keep going and not lose the way, he must keep the Lord in his sight. Jesus is always on the path ahead of him, carrying his own immense cross. He will often turn round to help his follower carrying his cross - and even carry it Himself, filling his disciple's heart with great joy amidst his sufferings.

The whole of our being must be united to God, and this can only be done by practical union.

"*Mundus me non cognovit*"². Why does Our Lord refer to men as "*the world*"? It is because men concentrate so much on the joys of natural things that they become completely absorbed by them. These joys are identified with the world, so to speak. But our spirit cannot attend to two things at the same time, to

¹ "...he must renounce self, take up his cross and follow me". (Luke 9:23; Mark 8:34; Matt 16:24).

² "Father, although the world does not know you, I know you" (John 17:25)

the natural and the supernatural: "*Nemo potest duobus dominis servire*".¹ St. Paul put it like this: "*Homo carnalis non intelligit quae Dei sunt, sed homo spiritualis dijudicat omnia*".² The word "dijudicat" indicates that he has an insight into supernatural things and not just a passing enlightenment, as occurs in prayer.

This "Practical Action" will be better understood by using some comparisons. Let us look at how the world acts and how it has acted upon us.

- 1) *How the world acts.* The world knows its business very well. Jesus told us that the children of this world are wiser than the children of God, in other words, they know their business better than we know ours. A diplomat has all the skills he needs and he is constantly using them. It is his life - he has need of them. A workman knows his business and an artist is quick to comprehend the subject of his art. So our task is to acquire the necessary expertise in the science of salvation so that it becomes second nature to us.
- 2) *How the world has dominated us.* If we had not been born in sin, or if the grace of baptism, in curing our souls, had not left us still tied up in bandages, we would have overcome this world and everything would be in order within us. But we were born in sin and, even after receiving the seed of salvation, we are still very incomplete. We have been overpowered and tyrannised by sin and we allowed it to get a hold on us.

We must be unremitting in our study of sanctity, but do not be afraid by the word "unremitting". It is not a burden but rather a

¹ "Nobody can serve two masters" (Matt 6:24; Luke 16:13)

² "The carnal man does not understand the things of God, but the spiritual man can discern everything". (I Cor 3, 14-15)

relaxation. As Jesus put it, "*Jugum meum suave est et onus meum leve*".¹ So do not be frightened by the thought of the sacrifices that have to be made. If they seem to be impossible for our weak nature, the grace we receive will give us all the strength needed. In the depths of our soul we will find joy, even if on the surface we are suffering aridity, anguish and spiritual desolation.

Sanctity is hard for those who give themselves half-heartedly. But those who are big-hearted will find great joy, a joy that nature cannot even begin to understand: "*Gustate et videte quoniam suavis est Dominus*".² Nothing can stop us on our journey because it is grace which is carrying us onwards. The soul is like a ship, tossed about in the deep sea yet pushed onward by the wind. Or like a traveller who has to climb a high mountain: if he moves slowly, he will be overcome by fatigue, but if he gives himself generously to the task, he will arrive at the summit before he realises it.³ This is how it should be in the spiritual life; always be ready to sacrifice yourself. Half efforts are very tiring, but generous sacrifices bring peace and joy.

Our poor nature is still very much present and will continue to cause us trouble, but in the end, we will be victorious. The obstacles we have to face are our faint-heartedness, unbridled imagination and self-love:

- 1) *Faint-heartedness*. At times, we will be upset by the continuous sacrifices that are asked of us. The trials

¹ "My yoke is easy to wear and my burden is light" (Matt 11:30)

² "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34.8)

³ During his pilgrimage to Loreto, our Venerable Father found that he was very tired at the foot of a mountain which lay on his path. But he screwed up his courage and soon arrived at the top with a minimum of suffering. (from an account written by himself).

seem to be always coming at us, but we have all the grace we need! We have not yet resisted to the shedding of blood and death on the cross. With the grace of God, we can do so much more. Some mortification or a simple movement of the soul will eventually wake us up again and we will set sail once more, even stronger than before. Think of how Our Lord or one of the saints reacted when faced with similar problems, and take courage. Quite often, after prayer, Our Lord will present us with an opportunity to put it into practice, as if he were saying, *My child, I am going to test your faithfulness, but have no fear; I am here to help you!*

Another remedy against faint-heartedness is to have a talk with your director. Whenever you feel deficient in a particular virtue – charity, for example – have recourse to your director, even several times if necessary.

- 2) *Unbridled imagination.* This can give rise to two undesirable effects: anxieties and illusions. Imagination builds castles in the air and, as a consequence, the soul feels increasingly empty because of the unrelenting action of the intellect. The soul tries to acquire a virtue by assault, by its own human efforts. We feel we are acting rightly, but when it fails, the struggle gets worse and worse and we are exhausted, sinking deeper into the mire. Deep down, we are never convinced that we are incapable of doing anything in the spiritual order by ourselves.

When that happens, we must give up struggling and place our hope entirely in the mercy of God, trusting that he will help us. Our Father, who is so infinitely good, wants to send his gifts into the souls of his blind

children, but they frequently pay no attention and drift away. Often, God in his goodness sees the harm that they are inflicting on themselves and sends them his enlightenment. Then everything will go well.

The deception here consists in being convinced that we are on the right path and well advanced in virtue, while all the time it is only an illusion of the imagination.

- 3) *Self-love* also lives in the imagination. We become full of ourselves because we are present neither to ourselves nor to God. The solution is to live face to face with ourselves and with God and, in that way, we will avoid the illusions of self-love. Despise self-love where the will plays no part.