

Fall 2016

Praying with Father Libermann

Joseph Hirtz C.S.Sp.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons>

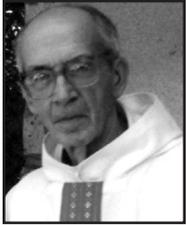


Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hirtz, J. (2016). Praying with Father Libermann. *Spiritan Horizons*, 11 (11). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol11/iss11/8>

This Wellsprings is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Horizons by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.



Joseph Hirtz, C.S.Sp.

Born at Sarrewerden in Alsace on December 24, 1919, Joseph Hirtz was ordained priest on July 1, 1945. He then left for the Congo as professor and Rector of the Major Seminary, Brazzaville. In 1959, he became superior of the Spiritan community at Strasbourg, then superior of the Philosophy Seminary of Mortain (1960-62). He served as first assistant in the general administration in Rome till 1970 when he was elected Provincial of France. There followed a 17-year stint at Croix Valmer where he was responsible for preaching retreats while giving courses in the diocesan seminary of Toulon. He retired in 1995 and died August 16, 2006.

*Translated from French by
Roberta Hatcher.*

Introduction

Prayer (*oraison*²) is one of the privileged means of developing our communion and closeness with God and of leading us to continuous prayer, to practical union. We are all convinced of the importance of contemplation in our Christian life. We have only to look at the place of silent prayer in the life of Jesus to understand the absolute necessity of this form of prayer. Jesus spent whole nights in this silent contact with his Father.

It is certainly not easy to talk about prayer since there are as many ways to pray as there are people praying. Yet let us try, by referring to Libermann, to provide some clarification on the nature of prayer, followed by the role and aim of prayer in the project of the love of God.

What is Prayer?

This is how Libermann described it: “*prayer—that is a serious business, but a very simple business. Your prayer should consist of a simple, humble, peaceful, and completely confident repose before our Lord, that’s all.*”³

- **Repose:** tranquility, quietude . . . which does not mean “sleep”!
- **Simple:** without pretense, without complication, without getting all worked up, in keeping with our physical and psychological state at the moment.
- **Humble:** conscious that we are as nothing before our Creator, conscious of our misery, our sin.
- **Peaceful:** without contention, relaxed, without strenuous effort.
- **Completely confident:** convinced that it is with a gaze of benevolence, understanding, and love that I am received, whatever state I may be in.

God loves us as we are, despite our wretchedness, even because of it. This simple repose, this “very simple business,” is nevertheless a difficult conquest and requires a long apprenticeship. We will attempt to examine how and by what paths Libermann intends to lead us there. First let us clarify the nature of prayer.

The Nature of Prayer

Libermann deserves credit for freeing prayer from the straightjacket of meditation in which it had often been confined, in part at least due to a rational interpretation of the *Exercises of St. Ignatius*, whereas St. Ignatius himself had made clear that “*it is not the abundance of knowledge that satisfies the soul, but to feel, to savor things inwardly.*”

For centuries prayer was viewed as a way to penetrate the mystery of salvation by actively using the powers of the soul: discursive reason, imagination, affectivity, will . . . It was a meditation. Libermann strongly challenged such a concept of prayer. He was not unaware, of course, of the enhancing role of reflection in the organization of prayer. Such work yields a more penetrating belief in the truth to which one is applying one’s mind. This truth is more fully assimilated, one ends up relishing it. In this way it leads to an improvement in our relation with God, to a life change.

But Libermann refused to see in meditation thus understood—as relying solely on natural faculties—the essential and definitive component of prayer. He himself had attempted to follow this method at the beginning of his life as a seminarian. He quickly freed himself from this constraint which threatened to become artificial after a very short time. He then sought to free those who came to him for guidance, all the while respecting each one’s path and the particular work of the Holy Spirit in each soul. There are in fact, as we have noted, as many ways to pray as there are people praying.

There are in fact, as we have noted, as many ways to pray as there are people praying.

The Means of Prayer

For Libermann true prayer is not a matter of technique but a question of grace. Its goal is *to put the soul in living and life-giving contact with God*; yet neither the most rigorous methods, nor meditation through zen or yoga, nor the natural efforts of reflection, can attach the soul to God or draw God into the soul. God is not conquered. He gives himself. That is why for Libermann natural prayer, in which the soul claims to unite with God through its mental activity, through the action of its sensibility, through the effort of its will, is “*bad and worthless.*”

God is not conquered. He gives himself.

God gives himself to whom he wishes, when he wishes, as he wishes. The first condition for succeeding in prayer is the conviction that we are incapable of achieving prayer.

Libermann makes his own the declaration of St. Paul: “the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings” (Rom. 8:26).

It is he alone who makes us say, “*Abba, Father.*” That is why, all the while proceeding by stages, Libermann sought to orient his correspondents as quickly as possible towards supernatural prayer, for him the only true one, the only one which transforms, hence prayer in the Spirit, prayer of the heart. If we try, without becoming discouraged, to live as much as possible from the heart and in the present moment, very quickly the Holy Spirit will draw us toward this prayer.

If we try, without becoming discouraged, to live as much as possible from the heart and in the present moment, very quickly the Holy Spirit will draw us toward this prayer.

Some lines from Libermann mark out the path: “*Pray with calmness, let your presence with God be gentle, humble and without effort.*”⁴ Libermann never stopped warring against tense and strenuous effort that unnecessarily wearies the mind. God is not directly present in our thought, but in the depths of our being beyond discursive thought. By thought alone we cannot enter into true contact with him.

Libermann writes elsewhere:

We must not pray through the work of our intellect by trying to hold on here and there to some thoughts having to do with God. That is not exactly bad, but it would be fairly mediocre and bear little fruit. Nor must it be, he continued, our mind at play, seeking to keep itself occupied in its own way, entertaining itself with thoughts it finds beautiful and striking, turning them round and round to keep itself busy. Try to give as little as possible to your mind; simplify as much as possible its activity in your prayer and recollection.⁵

In fact, to pray:

- is not to reflect on God or on the mysteries of faith in a monologue where God is reduced to an object of study. In that case, we remain in our own presence. That is not bad in itself, but hardly fruitful.
- is to let the Holy Spirit place us in humble and peaceful repose before God, in contact with him, in his presence.

If we restrict ourselves to meditation, to “natural prayer,” this work of the mind and imagination will become false and insipid. If we do not give it up, the imagination will produce only malaise, boredom, the impression of wasting time. We will have experienced the limits of our nature and failed to advance to establishing ourselves in the open realm of grace, in “supernatural prayer.”

This supernatural prayer, said Libermann, is passive. It is not we who enter it when we wish. It is God who lets us in. That doesn't mean that we have nothing to do but to wait for God to let us in. On the contrary, we have to prepare ourselves for this gift that he wishes to grant us with all his love.

What does Libermann say in this regard? As long as we have not resolved to surrender ourselves to God, to turn ourselves over to him, as long as we “*waver between the two thresholds of natural life and supernatural life*” as he puts it, we will keep the door to our heart firmly closed to him. God cannot bind us to himself. He can only do it if we are detached from ourselves. It is the renunciation of oneself and creatures, this “*inner decentering*” which is ordained towards supernatural prayer.

*And progress in
abnegation leads to
progress in prayer.*

And progress in abnegation leads to progress in prayer. In return, that progress detaches us still further from ourselves. Libermann writes:

The true means of preparing yourself for a great gift of prayer is the most perfect renunciation, it is to this you must solely devote yourself and aim for in your every action . . . As long as nature still has a breath of life, the Spirit of Our Lord will be unable to live perfectly in you, but once nature is dead, you will live only the life of God and then the spirit of prayer will animate all the movements of your soul, it will become your regular practice and will be like second nature to you. This is why, my dear one, you must apply yourself to inner renunciation, make it the foundation of your entire spiritual life.⁶

We can now review everything Libermann says about the conditions and means for liberating the Holy Spirit within us: remain in a state of inner peace; live in the present moment, by moderating the disorder of our mind and imagination. That is the meaning of “*inner*

...this communion with God will easily come to exceed our moments of prayer. It will accompany us in our daily occupations, at first intermittently, then on a quasi-permanent basis.

renunciation.” Then, and only then, can prayer become for us “a peaceful and simple repose before God.”

If we are faithful in our prayer and if it is truly supernatural, this communion with God will easily come to exceed our moments of prayer. It will accompany us in our daily occupations, at first intermittently, then on a quasi-permanent basis. It becomes a state of prayer or what Christ asks for, a continuous prayer. For Libermann, the practice of prayer is not a goal, but the means to lead us to a life in God, to a permanent communion with him.

This is not something exceptional, reserved for an elite. It is sufficient, Libermann says, to be convinced that on our own we are incapable of opening ourselves to the action of the Holy Spirit. Humility and audacious faith in the merciful love of the Father, fervent desire and patience in learning to love: that is the path marked out by Libermann. Young Thérèse of Lisieux would say the same thing but she added—and it is this that perhaps proves to be our greatest obstacle—there are few souls who consent to remaining “*little*.”

Peace and Relaxation in Personal Prayer

We can encounter God in multiple ways: in his Word, in the Sacraments, in our brothers, through signs of the times. But the primary place of our encounter with God is in ourselves, in the stillness of our soul. Prayer is but one approach, among others, for reaching God, but it is the one which brings us closest to him, for then our attention is completely absorbed by his presence.

Practicing prayer means being peacefully united with God, in faith and in love, after having created silence within and around oneself. Prayer is a dialogue with God, a friendly exchange with God. In prayer we enter into direct contact with God who lives in us. We penetrate, in its profound reality, the rich doctrine of the Holy Spirit’s dwelling within souls. Prayer is therefore not a discretionary discipline; it is the daily occasion of our encounter with God.

Nothing Artificial in Prayer

In the recent past, many religious orders and spiritual writers imposed their own particular methods. Libermann, having personally suffered from an overly-strict application of the method in use at Saint Sulpice, opposed rigid

Joseph Hirtz, C.S.Sp.

His principle: let the Lord act in souls according to their own "state of prayer."

"Do not be a slave to one method of prayer. Follow your inclination and don't worry about the method."

formulas among his followers. His principle: let the Lord act in souls according to their own "*state of prayer*." The form of our relations with God actually depends on our personal fidelity as well as the graces granted us, for all souls do not receive the same graces and are not called by the same paths.

When he accepts for his beginners to follow the method of their choosing, Libermann also advises them to quickly free themselves of it in order to not materialize prayer. "*Do not be a slave to one method of prayer. Follow your inclination and don't worry about the method.*" Maintain a great freedom, the method means little. Only one thing matters: to remain before God "*in a simple, humble, completely confident repose.*" In your prayer, "*manage as best you can. Be in prayer as at mealtime, meaning preserving that freedom, that complete forgetting of yourself and that peaceful calm before God.*" Nothing systematic, in other words.

Affective Prayer

It is a good idea to keep to traditional terms, fruits of centuries of experience, which help to clarify the principles of mental prayer. Libermann reprises the classic divisions of prayer: *meditation, affection, contemplation*.

In *meditation*, the soul raises itself to God through the work of reflection. It seeks to penetrate more and more deeply a knowledge of supernatural truths and the understanding of the Scriptures and the mysteries of our Lord. The most profitable subjects of meditation are those which correspond to an individual's inner leanings, spiritual advancement, and occasionally, "*to the circumstances in which one is situated.*"

Libermann finds meditation useful in the beginning. But are not many people periodically beginners? Although some—this was his own case—are called to affective prayer without passing through meditation.

When reason and imagination take up too exclusive a space, Libermann does not recognize in that type of meditation a true value of prayer. He instead considers reason and imagination as preparation for contemplation. Reasoning, analysis, the work of imagination can give rise to easy illusions. Thus, he remarked, "*some people imagine themselves to have done a great deal to acquire humility when they have reasoned about this virtue.*" They have erected a

*If meditation makes
God known, affective
prayer leads to loving
him, showing its
superiority.*

beautiful speculative assembly and persuaded themselves that this is what comprises virtue. But as soon as reflection ceases, the entire structure crumbles.

Affective prayer, whose goal is to keep the soul in the love of Christ, must be considered the better. If meditation makes God known, affective prayer leads to loving him, showing its superiority. The goal of this prayer is not to address God with beautiful speech, but to elevate us in his love and incite us to the practice of virtue.

In affective prayer, the soul turns to God. It draws from itself the feelings of love for God by starting from a supernatural truth and considering the mysteries of our Lord. Its predilection is to bring itself to bear on subjects that stimulate its love. The truths of faith do not remain for this soul in the realm of the speculative; on the contrary, the soul adheres to the truths of faith through profound feeling. It *“savors these truths through the heart.”* It is useless to impose on it a program. The divine mystery, the supernatural truth provides it with opportunities for union; at times all it needs is the simple feeling of God’s presence.

Liebermann hopes that meditation, even for beginners, might lead to affective prayer, and that reasoning leaves more and more room for an affectionate conversation with God. There should not be an airtight divide between meditation and affective prayer; all meditation must move towards becoming affection. He gives advice on practice: to frequently interrupt one’s thoughts and reasoning *“in order to savor those things that one sees in our Lord and let oneself go with the desires and feelings of the heart.”*

If all collaboration with God requires a repose of the spirit, the calming of imagination, and inner and outer silence, these general laws of surrender are particularly vital in the intimacy with God that we enter into in affective prayer.

In the highest stage of affective prayer, reflections have diminished, the work of the mind has dwindled, the soul no longer feels the need for long outpourings. It slowly learns to love God in a selfless manner, with a love that is simple, quiet, wordless, and without display. It gazes and it loves. It listens and follows. This prayer of simplicity marks a long ascension. It is already the threshold of contemplation.

Contemplative Prayer

In *contemplative prayer*, “*the powers of the soul are focused on God*” by a particular grace. Reason is suspended. Emotions are reduced. The soul is happy to receive, abandoned to God in tranquil attention, fixing a simple gaze on the divine light, steadied in this peace which according to Paul surpasses all feeling. With the intellect and will under the possession and control of God, contemplation is the most perfect union with God that can be achieved on earth.

Infused grace granted by God with no merit on the part of the one who receives it, contemplation is sometimes the reward for long perseverance in prayer [*oraison*], conformity with divine will, and habitual concurrence with grace.

The Place of [Affective] Prayer in Active Life

What place should prayer occupy in an active life? How to insert it into our daily occupations? What type of prayer to recommend to men overburdened with work? What type of difficulties will be encountered? To these questions, Libermann responded with wisdom.

Libermann held no illusions concerning the difficulties encountered in the daily exercise of prayer. If bad weather, the extreme task of evangelizing in newly-formed missions, fragile health, and shortage of food supplies generally prevented missionaries from maintaining a high level of prayer, why would they not have the possibility of uniting with God in their personal prayer? These men had left everything to serve God and souls; are they not filled with love, often heroically so? The saints were not all contemplatives, but they all devoted themselves to living in union with God, in their prayer as well as in all their activities. Libermann thus recommended to his missionaries a middle way, accessible to all, even to those who struggle to focus calm attention on God: the path of *affective prayer*.

Despite dry periods and difficulties, he affirms that prayer remains possible.

You will often find that, deprived of emotions, given to distractions and sometimes even to revulsions, you will be tempted to judge your prayer according to what you are feeling, and you will see it as useless ...

After a brief time it will happen that you no longer pray because you believe it is not working. You will be tempted to lessen the time of prayer as much as possible, even to omit it altogether ... That would be a grave error and a dangerous temptation.⁷

The contact with God, maintained in the midst of our normal occupations, must be considered as the indirect and necessary preparation for prayer.

We must unite with God in moments of action as closely as in prayer so that action is transformed into prayer, into love (which doesn't occur without effort) and so that our apostolate may become the radiant emanation of our prayer.

If prayer proves to be a rigorous exercise, it is because the preliminary conditions have not been fulfilled or have only been met imperfectly. We might well report for prayer with the best intentions in the world and employ all “*the diligence taught by the spiritual writers*”; if the rest of the time we lead a “*natural life*” we will be fatally prevented at the hour of prayer from focusing our mind on God. The contact with God, maintained in the midst of our normal occupations, must be considered as the indirect and necessary preparation for prayer.

Libermann calls this union with God amidst earthly tasks *practical union*, because it is attained in activity. It differs from prayer proper, which is contact with God in the most complete inward gathering, with our attention turned only towards him along with a pause in our activities, a time of respite from our work, a momentary forgetting of our preoccupations.

Libermann differs from M. Olier who considered the exercise of prayer as “*the most important action of the day and the night.*” For Libermann, prayer is not an exceptional exercise which is inserted into the middle of our days. It is an episode of our daily life, a stage of our love for God. It is in fact always the moment to unite ourselves with God. We have to encounter him in our prayer as well as in our work or leisure, in our ministry as well as in the most humble labors. We must unite with God in moments of action as closely as in prayer so that action is transformed into prayer, into love (which doesn't occur without effort) and so that our apostolate may become the radiant emanation of our prayer.

In the coming together with God which is attained in prayer, the soul sees its level of love increase. Its supernatural habits and even its natural virtues are perfected. It is given enlightenment regarding its faults, regarding everything in it which is contrary to Christ's love. From it the soul draws greater strength for action.

In prayer one attains *unity* between interior life and a life of action, between love for God and love for one's

neighbor; it is one of the greatest advantages that one can derive from prayer for the apostolate of all the baptized.

Practical Advice for Prayer

To these general reflections on prayer, let us add some practical advice given by Libermann. They will help us ensure balance in prayer.

Prayer does not consist in “good thoughts.”

- In prayer, don't look to develop beautiful pious thoughts that occupy the imagination and the intellect for your own gratification. Prayer does not consist in “good thoughts.” It is not a mental attitude or play of the intellect, but a repose in God without effort or mental searching.
- Be, in prayer, “as if you held your soul open before God, withdrawn into itself,” in a calm, effortless attention to God.
- In affective prayer, don't exaggerate your feelings for God. Do not seek to express all the emotions that you would like to have. Don't strain to put your needs forward. As for inner attractions and holy desires, never push further than the Good Lord leads you . . . Do not seek to retain inner emotions or pious affection longer or higher than would be pleasing to our Lord.
- *You say that you have all the trouble in the world letting a few words of love escape from your heart. I reply: Why do you want to draw them out? Leave these words of love in your heart. Jesus is there, he will take them himself.*⁷⁸
- Do not chase after the extraordinary blessings of prayer. Have a humble and calm piety, “a sincere, natural piety.” Do not strain for a more perfect prayer, “do not take food that you cannot digest. Christian perfection does not consist of a state of prayer of varying degrees of elevation, but of perfect union of love with our Lord, based on a complete renunciation of ourselves, our pride, our will, our comforts, our pleasures, and all that has to do with us.”
- When you are in “a state of agitation, be content with a little return to our Lord at different intervals, with a lifting of the soul, a simple gaze, a rest before him, a desire to live for him. Gestures of this type made simply, without effort or striving, that is excellent prayer. Be happy to be what you are, as long as it pleases God to

Christian perfection does not consist of a state of prayer of varying degrees of elevation, but of perfect union of love with our Lord, based on a complete renunciation of ourselves, our pride, our will, our comforts, our pleasures, and all that has to do with us.”

*leave you thus.*¹⁰

- To put oneself in the spirit of prayer, self-dispossession and inner solitude must be achieved.
- Do not seek to shorten or eliminate prayer because you find yourself unmoved before God. Sensation and pleasure are not essential to prayer; the essential is the surrender to God's will, the resolve to please him and serve him more completely; that is true love. You must suffer with "*patience, tenderness, love*" from the inferior state of your prayer.¹¹
- When distractions arrive, gently brush them aside. "*Distractions during prayer are not dangerous and will not impede your progress. Our Lord can act in the midst of these distractions; let him do so. He will not hold them against you . . . for he is not reliant on you not having any.*"¹² "*With a surrender full of trust, humility and love, you will make amends for anything you may lose through distractions in prayer.*"¹³
- Strengthen your prayer "*without examining too closely whether what you are doing is perfect; simply do your part and leave the rest to God.*" Beware of slackening and delusion! You must avoid "*false security as much as anxious uncertainty.*"
- As for resolutions to make in the course of the prayer, do not worry about them. "*You must place all your trust in God, never in yourself or in your resolutions.*" Resolutions will be "*practical and not too vague.*"¹⁴ You will put yourself in a position to carry them out as soon as the occasion presents itself. If you have trouble formulating any resolutions, "*it is better not to make any. Your prayer will be just as good, especially if you form a resolution to always remain peaceful and to aim to please God.*"¹⁵
- The best resolutions will be resolutions of silence (inner and outer), renunciation, calmness, surrender to God.

*Joseph Hirtz, C.S.Sp.
Paris*

Endnotes

¹The French original, Joseph Hirtz, "*Faire Oraison avec Libermann,*" appeared in the pamphlets named *Spiritualité Spiritaine*, (Paris, 2008).

²Libermann uses both *prière* and *oraison* for prayer, but the term, *oraison*, refers to the actual act of praying, of exclusive focus on and dialogue with God, as distinct from meditation or thinking about God. This would correspond to what he later termed *affection* or *oraison d'affection* (affective prayer). [Editor].

³*Lettres Spirituelles* (henceforth LS) III, 462.

⁴*Notes et Documents* (henceforth ND) IX, 41.

⁵LS I, 405 and 406.

⁶LS II, 355.

⁷*Directoire Spirituelle* 172 and 340.

⁸ND III, 154.

⁹LS II, 452.

¹⁰LS III, 479.

¹¹Cf. LS III, 166.

¹²LS III, 6.

¹³LS IV, 552.

¹⁴LS I, 231.

¹⁵LS III, 166.