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IF YOU ONLY KNEW WHAT GOD IS OFFERING



Bernard Kelly, C.S.Sp.

Bernard A. Kelly C.S.Sp. was ordained in Ireland 1961. He received the STL from Fribourg University, Switzerland (1962), then taught theology at St Augustine's Seminary, Toronto (1964 to 1968). He gained the doctorate at the Cité Universitaire, Paris in 1978 with a thesis on Libermann, subsequently published as *Life began at Forty. The Second Conversion of Francis Libermann*, C.S.Sp. (1983). One time Provincial of Trans-Canada and missionary in Papua New Guinea, Fr. Kelly became general councillor in Rome (1992-1998) and director of the Center for Spiritan Studies, Duquesne University (2009 to 2012). He has written two short studies, *Where are you?* and *You are here*, on Libermann's spirituality.

“What God is offering” is usually challenging.

If you only knew what God is offering and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me something to drink,’ you would have been the one to ask, and he would have given you living water (John 4:10).

“If you only knew what God is offering.” This phrase from Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman somehow leaps out of the context and takes on a life of its own. He badly needs a drink of water. She is surprised by the unexpected request which crosses cultural boundaries, but she wants to help.

As he slakes his thirst, he begins to speak of “living water” that he can provide. “If you only knew what God is offering ... you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” Until now she has been aware only of a request, there is no sign of anything being “on offer.” Her interest is aroused and a conversation begins. To her bafflement, he takes the lead and they wander down the personal corridors of her life. Undeterred by her failed relationships that come to light, he insists on his offer of “living water.”

“Living water” turns out to be a very personal gift and it changes her life. She becomes a missionary. She proclaimed to her own people what had happened and the people rushed to meet Jesus. In their turn the people declared her a true missionary when they testified: “Now we no longer believe because of what you told us; we have heard him ourselves and we know that he is indeed the Saviour of the world” (John 4:42). She had somehow brought about the transparency that is a goal of all missionary activity.

“What God is offering” is usually challenging. It pushes the boundaries of our thinking and threatens our customary way of acting. We move into a more penetrating self-knowledge which may be embarrassing. We face the challenge of a new self-acceptance. We may shy away from going public. We may draw back from becoming missionary.

Mission and God's word.

Francis Libermann wrote his commentary on the first twelve chapters of the Gospel of John in 1840. He was 38. He was a student for the priesthood still unsure of his future because of his epilepsy. He was in Rome seeking approval for a missionary project to French colonies, in particular Haiti and Reunion. This had been the dream of two seminarians, Eugene Tisserant from Haiti and Frederick Levavasseur from Reunion, whom he had met in France. Another very interested colleague, Maxime de la Brunière, who had accompanied him to Rome, had judged that the difficulties were so great that the project had little chance of success and he had returned to France.

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Then, as now, the wheels at the Vatican turn slowly. And the project was complicated. The leaders were without financial resources. In touching on the question of liberated slaves, they were touching a nerve in the world's economic structure. And then for Libermann there was a major personal drawback. Because he had suffered epileptic seizures, the road to priesthood was closed to him.

In his commentary on Chapter 4 of John's Gospel, Libermann is intrigued by the episode with the Samaritan woman. He seems surprised by the openness of Jesus.

This is remarkable. Our adorable Master was more willing to announce eternal truths to this poor woman, degraded by sin, who was decried by her own people, a stranger despised by the Jews as a Samaritan, than to Nicodemus, a pious Jew, a doctor of the law and a prince of the people, who had come, nevertheless, with good intentions. He spoke to her more clearly and directly than to the doctor of the law.¹

At the same time it sounds echoes for him. He recognises her prayer with its mixture of desire and puzzlement, the struggle between "living water" and the tug of passions. In his commentary, he himself joins the ranks of all who know this struggle.

So they say to our Lord: 'Lord Jesus, give me this living water to satiate my soul, which without this good surrenders to its passions and seeks nourishment in worldly goods. I am always thirsty; and not having your divine water of grace

I go and pursue the goods of this world. In these I seek pleasure. Lord, give me your living water that my passions may be satisfied and that I may no longer draw upon the pleasures of earth.²

The emotional commotion of the passions is part of being human. It brings excitement, it spurs on our creativity. It may also mask our radical need for “living water,” for “what God is offering.” The surprise of the discovery of “what God is offering” is a turning point in life, for Libermann as for the Samaritan woman. For him it is a slow adventure, less spectacular than the marital adventures of the woman but also tortuous with surprising unexpected developments.

At this stage of his life, nothing was very clear. He had an attic room in Rome, in a building long since destroyed (Vicolo del Pinaco, no. 31, with M. Patriarche), not far from the Piazza Navona. The proprietor was kindly and Libermann’s needs were simple. He provided his own meals for the most part. He had a table to work at but he had to be careful not to bump his head on the ceiling when he stood up. When he returned to France the following year he sent a Christmas letter to M. Patriarche with greetings in Italian for all the members of the family.

“Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give will never thirst.”

Mission as “God’s Work”

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Libermann continues his commentary on Chapter 4 of John’s Gospel:

After casting these first glimmers of truth into her mind and after making her soul more docile and attentive to his divine voice, our divine master advances further diffusing the brilliant light of his grace. At the same time he gives her will an impetus to move forward energetically to that saving water he so greatly desired to give. Yet he still refrained from giving full clarity until she underwent a complete change, but he was disposing her and preparing her for that perfect grace.

That is how divine wisdom gradually deals with souls, to have them come to the peak of his holiness and love. He gives a first grace we

must be faithful to, and if we are, we receive a more perfect one; to the extent that we properly respond to these graces our divine benefactor proceeds until we have entered the sanctuary of his divine love. Then there is no more piecemeal giving. He gives and bestows himself with a generosity that surpasses all understanding. This is how he dealt with the Samaritan woman; as he progressed with her he enlightened her, constantly preparing her for further illumination. He said: 'anyone who drinks from that material water which was given to you by Jacob continues to thirst; but the living water which I give is not like that. Those who drink of the water I give experience no more thirst, not only in this world but for all eternity.'³

Libermann was writing from experience. He had known God's respectful, patient approach. His father had been Rabbi of Saverne and had nurtured in him a strong faith that was severely shaken when, at age 20, he left home to study at the rabbinical school in Metz. It was a tumultuous time for Jews in France, who had only recently been granted the right of citizenship. The foundations of his worldview were shaken, most seriously by the conversion to Catholicism of his eldest and favourite brother, Samson. In Paris it was time to pray again:

It was then that I thought of the God of my fathers and I threw myself on my knees and begged him to enlighten me concerning the true religion. I prayed to him that if the belief of Christians was true, he would let me know and that if it was false, he would at once remove me far from it. The Lord, who is near to those who call on him from the depths of their heart, heard my prayer. In an instant I was enlightened, I saw the truth: faith penetrated my mind and my heart.⁴

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In baptism Jacob Libermann became Francis Libermann. He was immediately disowned by his heartbroken father. Without knowing clearly what it might entail, he devoted himself to "God's work." If he had received the refreshment of "living water," it was to share it with others. He joined the seminary of Saint Sulpice. Then he had his first epileptic attack and his future became very uncertain. Undeterred, he accepted

the insecurity. His conviction that he was engaged in “God’s work” brought him an unshakable resilience.

His brother Samson, a medical doctor, must have been surprised, maybe even troubled, by the letter he received from him in July 1830, where he made little of his illness.

And why should you be sorry on my account?
Are you afraid I shall die of hunger? Well, the
Lord feeds the birds of the fields, and will he not
find means to feed me also? He loves me more
than he does the birds of the fields.⁵

Francis’ situation was clearly very uncertain. He was happy to entrust his future entirely into God’s hands. It was enough for him to be engaged in “God’s work.” This conviction became a cornerstone of support in many moments of difficult decision. It served as a personal compass when the direction he should take was unclear. Of course, some people grew impatient at his waiting for “God’s moment.” Others were surprised that he would consider holiness more important in a missionary than human ability.

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At Saint Sulpice, he developed a reputation as a spiritual guide and went to the Eudists at Rennes as novice master. His two years there were a time of struggle and frustration, the beginning of an interest in foreign missionary work and especially a deepening of his prayer life, where Mary had a central role.

Mary, Guide to What God is Offering.

For Mary what God was offering became known through the dialogue of life (the angel Gabriel, Joseph, the birth of Jesus, the shepherds, the magi, Simeon, Anna, the flight to Egypt, the adolescent who went missing ... the surprises of her son’s ministry all the way to the cross). She became the companion of Libermann in his search for what God was offering him. On 9 February 1844, he wrote to Fr. Desgenettes at the parish of Notre Dame des Victoires in Paris:

It is absolutely certain that our little Work for the Black Peoples owes both its foundation and the progress it has made in the few short years of its existence to the powerful protection of the Most Holy and Immaculate Heart of Mary⁶

Back in Rome in 1840, Libermann was a frequent visitor to Marian churches and his return to Rome from a pilgrimage to Loreto (mostly on foot) was greeted by the news that he was accepted for diaconate in the diocese of Strasbourg.

The most spectacular indication of a Marian intervention in 1840 occurred when Libermann set himself to draw up a provisional rule for the missionary group. He and Levavasseur favoured a dedication to the Holy Cross. Tisserant was convinced that the dedication should be to the Holy Heart of Mary. Here is how Libermann describes what happened.

I thought that the society should be consecrated to some perfect model of all the fundamental virtues of the apostolate. I don't know why I failed to see that we would find all of that in the devotion to the most holy and immaculate Heart of Mary.

So I fixed my attention on another object of devotion – that of the Cross. I had gone to a lot of trouble to try and write down a Rule for the new society. But it was impossible to find a single idea because my mind went completely blank. I visited the seven most important churches in Rome, and also decided to include some churches where there was a particular devotion to Our Lady. Without quite knowing why, I found myself deciding to consecrate our work to the most holy Heart of Mary. I went back home and immediately got down to work. I then saw everything so clearly that with a single glance I had a complete view of everything, its whole complexity down to the last detail. It was an inexpressible joy and consolation for me.⁷

This letter to Fr. Desgenettes was not written out of the blue. Notre Dame des Victoires, Fr Desgenettes' parish in Paris, had been an important part of the genesis and development of the missionary project. It was in the context of the Archconfraternity of the Holy Heart of Mary in the parish that Levavasseur and Tisserant realised that they shared a missionary dream. Later, when Mgr. Barron came to the church of Notre Dame des Victoires to pray for mission assistance for his vast diocese in West Africa, Fr. Desgenettes was able to help by putting him in

touch with Francis Libermann. The beginning of their collaboration brought at first heartbreaking casualties, but subsequently spectacular progress and countless blessings.

What God is Offering at Duquesne

This is not a course of study that you sign up for. It is really an invitation to adventure. The woman at the well must have felt Jesus' interest in her personal life as an invasion of her privacy. Without knowing what it was or having heard of it before, she found herself asking for "living water." And when she received it, she wanted to share it and found that she had become a missionary.

Some of the characteristics of "doing God's work" the Libermann way may have a familiar ring. Quite clear is that in the face of the unexpected you stand your ground. You defend yourself. You don't hide. You stay part of the conversation. Discovering what God is offering may only gradually dawn. It may involve risk. You don't have to accomplish the task at once. Like Libermann, like the woman at the well, you just take the next step.

Having recourse to Mary is a great help in realising that the discovery of what God is offering will likely be a gradual process. Mary learned what it meant to be the mother of Jesus slowly as she dealt with the surprises during his growing up. By comparison, the experience of the woman at the well could be considered a crash course. Nevertheless, it proceeded step by step all the way from the initial shock to a new understanding that sparked fresh enthusiasm for living, and for sharing the good news.

In the 1960's a phrase of St. Irenaeus became very popular: *The glory of God is man/woman fully alive*. The rest of the sentence situates human development in the contemplation of God.⁸ The ebb and flow of our relations with God come into the working out of the Duquesne motto: *to serve God by serving students*. This is a passport to the adventure of slaking God's thirst. It can lead to receiving the gift of "living water" that is at once satisfying and disturbing. It holds within it a missionary imperative. It is exciting and challenging and it must be shared. It stays alive by being passed on. Serving God by serving students is a happy way to live. It brings us to the brink of Jesus' extraordinary revelation: "You did not choose me, no, I chose you" (John 15:16)

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Realising God's interest in us and in what we do is both a challenge and an inspiration. It is at once so disturbing and so encouraging that we cannot keep it to ourselves. We are excited and restless. We want to share our good fortune. We become missionaries.

A missionary is someone who has discovered something exciting, and he/she wants to share the joy, the hope and the meaning that it holds. Spiritans have been doing this for more than three hundred years. Periodically representatives of the worldwide Spiritan family gather to renew their vision and their energy. The most recent gathering of this sort took place in Bagamoyo, Tanzania in 2012.

Sometimes Spiritans in a specialised field come together to share their experience. The most recent meeting of Spiritan educators took place in Rome in July 2011⁹. The Spiritan presenters came from Africa, Latin America, the Indian Ocean, the Caribbean, Europe and North America. President Charles Dougherty delivered a paper giving the aims and achievements of Duquesne University. As well as formal education, informal education was given prominence. In this there was evidence of much creativity at the service of the poor.

The drama played out by the well at Sychar in John's gospel shows us that responding to the cry of a person in need, in this case a thirsty traveller, can change a life dramatically. This is a challenge we can share whenever the unexpected threatens our routine. The interruption may be unwelcome, but behind the unasked for disturbance may hide wonder and delight. "If you only knew what *God is offering...*?"

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Endnotes

¹*Jesus through Jewish Eyes, A Spiritual Commentary on the Gospel of St John by Francis Mary Paul Libermann C.S.Sp., Part 1, translated by Myles L Fay, C.S.Sp. Dublin: Paraclete Press 1995, 104.*

²*Jesus through Jewish Eyes, Part 1, 113-114.*

³*Jesus through Jewish Eyes, Part 1, p109*

⁴Cited in Kelly, Bernard A., C.S.Sp., *Life Began at Forty*. 2nd edition Dublin: Paraclete Press, 2005, 24-25.

⁵Letter to Samson Libermann, 8 July, 1830. *Spiritual Letters to People in the World by the Venerable Francis Libermann, C.S.Sp.* Duquesne University Press, Spiritan Series 6, 1963, 13.

⁶*A Spiritan Anthology. Writings of Claude-François Poullart des Places (1679-1709) and François Marie-Paul Libermann (1802-1852)*. Chosen and presented by Christian de Mare, C.S.Sp. Rome: Congregazione dello Spirito Santo, 2011, 559.

⁷*A Spiritan Anthology*, 561-562.

⁸*Adversus Haereses*, 4.20.7. *Gloria enim Dei homo vivens, vita autem hominis visio Dei.*

⁹*Spiritan Life* no 23, (Rome: Congregazione dello Spirito Santo, September 2013), is devoted entirely to this meeting of Spiritan educators.