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17. Instructions to Missionaries

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Instructions to Missionaries¹

Early in May 1851, Libermann began writing some "Instructions" about the apostolic life for his missionaries. He paid a great deal of attention to this composition so that his followers would be provided with clear teaching, and thus assures the fruitfulness of their hard, apostolic work. There is a great resemblance between this text and other letters which Libermann wrote during this last year of his life.

Although these "Instructions" were to remain unfinished, the text at our disposal is still rather long (70 pages plus supplements). To give an idea of the whole document, we give below the introduction which Libermann wrote himself.

The following note was printed in a supplement to the first edition published by Fr. Ignace Schwindenhammer, Libermann's successor and 12th Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit;

"Before starting to write the "Instructions to Missionaries", our Venerable Father listed certain points that he wished to discuss. In order not to lose this plan, we have included it in the main text, so that the whole document forms a unity. We have also included various elaborations which our Venerable Father added to certain chapters. He did not follow his plan exactly when he finally composed the Instructions to Missionaries, so we can assume that he would have dealt in the same way with what remained unwritten at the time of his death."²

¹ « *Directoire Spirituel, Instructions sur la Sainteté* », pp. 3-8 (9-179); « *Ecrits Spirituels du Vénérable Libermann* », pp. 365-558

² This note was added in a supplement to the first edition published by Fr. Ignace Schwindenhammer, Libermann's successor and 12th Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit.

Dear Confreres,

For some time now, I have wanted to offer you some detailed instructions, which would bring you encouragement and support on the road towards perfection. You are already working with enthusiasm and perseverance towards that end, thanks to the grace and mercy of God. I hope my words will also help to maintain the spirit of our Congregation amongst yourselves.

I feel very guilty in even speaking to you about perfection, because compared to you who are offering yourselves constantly to the glory of our God and the salvation of souls, I have done nothing at all. Our Lord has found me unworthy of sharing in his sufferings, while your lives are so similar to that of Jesus.

But don't despise the words of your poor and miserable father just because it has not pleased God to give me as great a share in the gift of suffering as yourselves. God gives different gifts to different people, as part of his merciful plans, but always towards the same end - the sanctification of his creatures. From all eternity, he has marked you out as victims who are to be sacrificed for the salvation of countless unfortunate people, who are so unfavoured and who have been held in the demon's power since the beginning of the world. This is why he has given you an abundant share in suffering, through which he wants to raise you to a high degree of love and holiness; the victims must be holy, like the great Victim of universal propitiation and in union with him.

Sometimes I am very sad at the thought of your sufferings, but this is replaced by joy when I think of your continual sorrows and afflictions, because I know that life in this world is only an empty shadow, a dream which soon passes away. I can understand the happiness of somebody who suffers for the glory of God and is made holy by these sufferings. And even

though I have not been judged worthy of such a grace, which is the greatest gift of all, God has allowed me to rejoice with you in seeing these favours which he has given you, favours which are reserved for the dearest and most privileged servants of God.

But if it has not pleased God to grant me the grace of suffering with his Son, he has at least given me the grace of guiding those servants of his on the road which he has chosen for them. He wishes to make these servants holy for the salvation of many poor people. During this life, I am your leader and you should listen to me as you would to God, because it is God who is speaking through me. He gives life to my words for your sanctification and for that of the people for whose salvation you are suffering. In the next life, if we have the happiness of getting there, the order will be reversed. Then, you will be way above me, because you now have the happiness of partaking in the sufferings of Jesus Christ, who is the source and principle of our life and apostolate. Then the words of God will be fulfilled: *Erunt novissimi primi et primi novissimi*¹.

My dear brothers, learn how to judge things correctly through God's eyes during the short time that you have to pass in this world. This life is very small and unhappy, but it can become rich and great for you through your sufferings, which are treasures of wealth and glory, thanks to the merciful plan of our all powerful God. Keep yourselves firmly and gently on the holy and difficult path in which God in his goodness has placed you. The road you follow is that of Jesus himself; walk in it as he did, following his example all the way, for the sanctification of others. Make yourselves holy, so that those people may be sanctified in the truth of God.

¹ "The last will be first and the first last" (Lk. 13.30).

Just as Jesus Christ, sent by his Father, lived only for Him, you who have also been sent by the Father must live for Him in his spirit of holiness. Jesus Christ sanctified himself and sanctified his sufferings for the salvation of all; that is how he gave birth to those souls by his sufferings, and made them holy in truth. Therefore, a missionary who has been sent by Jesus Christ, and who does not make his sufferings holy cannot make others holy in the truth. This holiness must have its foundation in the depths of his being and show itself in the way he lives, works and suffers. This is the way the missionary gives birth to souls for God in the truth, after the example of Jesus Christ, because he gives to them the Saviour's life already present in himself.

We should all see ourselves as victims, consecrated in accordance with the merciful will of God, in our work, suffering and death, all for his glory and for the salvation of others. But even if we are not all chosen to suffer in the same degree, we have all been singled out as victims for the glory of God and for the salvation of souls and we have all been called to have the holiness of Jesus Christ within us.

So let us rejoice, peacefully, in Jesus Christ that we have been called by God to be offered up together with his well beloved Son! May those of us who have the happiness of suffering the most find our joy in our sufferings, and make ourselves holy in the love of Jesus. May those of us who suffer less put ourselves at the disposal of Jesus, and be ready to suffer for him. Let them not despise themselves because they suffer less, but sanctify themselves by their work and by their desires, in the humility of their hearts and in the love of Jesus.

[Since I am convinced that God has special plans for each of us, I am very anxious to give you some guidance concerning the path to holiness. The goodness of Jesus has set you on that road and he wants you to advance along it with all speed. I will try to help you as much as I can. It would be so sad and

disappointing if you were to journey in vain, *tanquam aerem verberantes!*¹ And that is exactly what will happen, my dear confreres, if laxity enters into your souls, if your faults, weaknesses and human imperfections smother the abundant graces which Jesus has already given you. He is offering them to you all the time and is ready to double and triple them if you are faithful.

Is it possible for those dedicated to the heart of Mary to be anything else but faithful? I am afraid it is, because our human nature is weak and inclined to evil. You all know that on plenty of occasions you have not been faithful, despite the protection and concern of our good Mother. So I pray to God that, through the intercession of Mary, He may give my empty words the power, light and holiness of his own words and that they may give you the courage to persevere along the road to holiness and the love of Jesus²!

After I have helped to make you understand the necessity of holiness, I will talk of the nature of this sanctity and the obstacles that we put in its path. Then I will give a detailed account of the virtues which are needed for the development of this holiness and what we must do to resist the obstacles which it finds in us. I will describe the virtues which come from this effort of trying to be good, and the perfection of the soul which comes about as a result.

I will classify the different themes to put some kind of order into my ideas. I will begin by describing the virtues which concern the individual person, in other words, the virtues which form the foundations of holiness as such. Then I will consider all that pertains to our priestly and apostolic vocation.

¹ "Like a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 13.1).

² The part in brackets is to be found only in the text of the "*Directoire Spirituel*".

Finally, I will treat of the virtues proper to a religious as a member of our Congregation.