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## The Treatment for Nervous Ailments

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## THE TREATMENT FOR NERVOUS AILMENTS

*"The path that I have followed since I first began to give myself to God"*  
(Liebermann).

In my article "Liebermann 'Man of Sufferings'" I mentioned that Liebermann, although not cured of his epilepsy, did not have any attacks after leaving Rennes, more precisely, after February 1838.

In a splendid letter, written to a certain Miss Barbier on July 2, 1845, Liebermann reveals how he handled this awful affliction. What particular nervous ailment this young lady suffered from, we do not know. Liebermann wrote to her: . . . *I do not know enough about the nature of your illness to give you definite advice on how to deal with it. In general, nerves have to be "forgotten, disregarded and treated with disdain".*<sup>1</sup>

*I have suffered from serious nervous attacks since I was young. What troubled me most was the fear, the anxiety, and the endless precautions. These distressing tendencies have to be shaken off by diverting one's attention from oneself. Don't let nervous anxiety take possession of you. Rather, go against them and, ready to accept whatever comes, place yourself unconcernedly in the hands of God. In that way you can carry on as if nothing had ever happened. I told you about the line I took, since I first gave myself to the good God. Because I never doubted that it was the best thing to do, I did so out of a spirit of faith and with the desire to please God, not seeking thereby to recover my health. But, as things turned out, it played a big part in my recovery . . .*

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<sup>1</sup> The inverted commas are the author's.

Libermann, then, goes on to advise her: *You should take a trip to Amiens; the change and the distractions will be good for your nerves . . . Don't withdraw . . . , go out and visit your friends in the neighbourhood . . .*<sup>2</sup>

One might wonder when did Libermann first begin to "give himself to God". Certainly at the time of his baptism, but especially after receiving the well-known letter from his father, trying to turn him away from the faith. Of that time Libermann wrote: *Our Lord gave me the grace to resist my father who wished to prevent my acceptance of the faith: but I forsook him rather than that. After that the good Master came to me without warning to detach me from myself . . . my whole concern was to be united with him, and that I didn't find difficult . . .*

A few lines before he had written: *. . . I had nothing . . . ; God gave me all; he drew me to himself without asking my permission, and he did so with an insistence that I had never before encountered in anybody.*<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps Libermann was thinking of this experience when he wrote on the 31<sup>st</sup> August 1838: *Since the divine Master's wish to reign in the soul is absolute, nothing can resist him; he reverses everything and triumphs over everything. Since then I have felt the effects of his choice of me for himself; in spite of the innumerable obstacles and infidelities that I have constantly placed in his way.*<sup>4</sup>

In the following pages we will see how he applied to himself, particularly in regard to his epilepsy, the advice he gave to others, especially to those suffering from nerves: peace, self-forgetfulness, calm, indifference, abandonment to God.

\* \* \*

On the 8<sup>th</sup> April 1829, a short while after a fresh attack of epilepsy, Libermann wrote to his brother Samson: *I have decided to leave the Seminary for a while. I don't know yet where I shall go, but that doesn't bother me . . . What is more, I want to tell you that I am always perfectly content, and I can as-*

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<sup>2</sup> Notes & Documents, VII, pp. 237-239.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to M. Jerome Schwindenhammer, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1846, N.D., VIII, pp. 203-204.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to a Seminarian, 31<sup>st</sup> August 1838, *Lettres Spirituelles*, II, p. 91.

*sure you that I have never been as happy as I am now. How true it is that the more we love God and the more we seek to serve him well, the more we fulfil the purpose of our existence! Indeed, if I were to tell you all that is in my heart I would never finish.*<sup>5</sup>

It is clear from this letter that such admirable words from the mouth and heart of an epileptic who had just undergone another severe attack, could come only from one wholly dominated by love of God.

When Father Garnier, director of St. Sulpice, asked him where he would go in the event of his leaving the seminary, the saintly epileptic replied humbly and calmly: *I am homeless and penniless. I will walk the streets and Providence will take care of me.*<sup>6</sup>

A short while before he was to receive the sub-diaconate he had another violent attack of epilepsy. He was under no illusions. He accepted fully the will of God which permitted his illness. A few days afterwards he calmly wrote to his brother, Samson: *I have not advanced to the sub-diaconate because I am still ill, and probably will be for a long time more. I shall not therefore go any further for many years, and perhaps never.*

Libermann found his spirit of abandonment to God quite natural. What would have been an affliction for another was not so for him because he loved God as his Father. Thus, he continues in his letter to his brother: *See what a distressing and insupportable affliction I have to put up with. That is the way a worldly person would speak, one who sought only the things of this world and who lived as if God were not on his side. But the children of God, true Christians, do not talk like that. They are satisfied with whatever their heavenly Father sends them because they know that it is good and useful. It would be a great misfortune for them if it were otherwise.*

For Libermann, God was not an abstraction, but the greatest, the only reality. For him, God is everything, and there is only one criterion for distinguishing between good and evil: the will of God. So, what the world considers a misfortune is oftentimes a blessing. *The afflictions God seems to send us are*

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<sup>5</sup> N.D. I, p. 150; L.S. I, pp. 7-8.

<sup>6</sup> Account of P. Coyer, N.D. I, p. 157.

*really blessings. Woe betide the Christian when everything goes his way, for then he is not sure of God's favour. Thus, I assure you, my friends, my illness is for me a great treasure, preferable to anything the world has to offer its devotees.*

Libermann's way of thinking is very different to that of the world. His philosophy, making good out of evil and evil out of good, is what is called "the folly of the Cross". It is also the secret of his happiness. *I hope, if our Lord Jesus Christ continues to grant me the graces he has been giving me until now, . . . to lead a life that is absolutely poor and entirely given over to his service. In that way I shall be far richer than if I possessed the whole world, and I defy the world to find a happier man. For, who is richer than the one who wishes to have nothing? Who is happier than the one whose desires are all realised?*

It seems to me that in this doctrine of Libermann we have not only something for those who wish to give themselves to God, but also a psychology which can bring happiness to those who are looking for it in the possession of earthly goods. *Who is richer than he who does not wish to have anything?*

The Gospel is not abstract theory. It is a programme of life for the genuine Christian. As Libermann puts it in a letter: *Why are you worried on my account? Are you afraid that I'll die of hunger? My God! The Lord feeds the birds of the field.*

*But, you will say, if I were a priest, I would be able to find a good position and help my family. No, my dear friends . . . My body, my soul, my whole being, my entire existence, belong to God. If I thought there was even one small fibre in my body that did not belong to him, I would tear it out and trample it underfoot. Whether I am a priest or not, whether a millionaire or a beggar, all that I am and all that I possess is for God . . . I plead with you not to force me to do otherwise. Not only would such an attempt be unjust on your part, it would also be useless. The bond of charity that unites me with my Lord Jesus is too strong for you to break, even if you wanted to do so.<sup>7</sup>*

Here you have Libermann's application of the words of St. Paul: "Who shall separate me from the love of Christ? . . .". In breaking the strong link between himself and his fa-

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<sup>7</sup> Letter of 8<sup>th</sup> July 1830, L.S. I, pp. 9-11.

ther, Libermann proved that he was ready to sacrifice every human tie however strong in order to remain faithful to God.

He expressed the same sentiments in a letter written on the 16<sup>th</sup> October 1830 to a young seminarian who had expressed his sympathy for him and wished him happiness. Again, he insists on total self-abandonment to God. God, who is the absolute Lord of our existence, loves us. The only proper attitude a Christian can take before God is to place himself entirely in his hands.

*Our task is to seek, peacefully and calmly, God alone. All the better if he wishes us to die, for then we shall see him in heaven. This, the goal of all our work and hope, is the great happiness that awaits us. If, on the other hand, God wants us to go on living, this is a great blessing also, for we shall have the happiness of suffering for the sake of his divine glory. No matter what happens, what is important is that his will is done in every thing . . .*

Libermann continues in the same letter: *You told me that you wished to see me happy. I don't know what you mean by that. Is it that you want to see me rich, in good health and without anything to suffer here below? That would be unfortunate, for then you would be wishing to see me in hell! My friend, leave me my beloved poverty, my dear illness and the thousand other sufferings that I have, for it is these alone that make me like our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*If you really want to make me happy, come and visit me and your wish will be realised.*

Libermann gives us the real reason for his happiness: *I am a Christian. Our Lord Jesus Christ died for me and has filled me with his gifts and his grace. I share a little in his sufferings and his cross. I hope that I will share in them even more. I don't want to be happy. My God, what would that require?*<sup>8</sup>

This attitude of Libermann did not come from a kind of fatalism, but from love. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January 1835, he wrote to his brother, Samson: *I am not cured . . . and I don't believe that God wants me to become a priest. But, if he calls me, I'm ready. He knows that I am ready to do whatever pleases him.*<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Letter to a Seminarian, L.S. I, pp. 17-18.

<sup>9</sup> Letter to Dr. Samson Libermann, 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1835, N.D. I, p. 164.

To put his brother and his family at ease, Libermann wrote again on the 13<sup>th</sup> September: *Don't worry about my health. God knows what he has to do. Let him act according to his love. Don't worry as to whether I have enough of the things of this world since that doesn't bother me at all. God alone should be my only portion and my only love. Woe betide me if I think of seeking anything else in this world.*<sup>10</sup>

Suffering serves a purpose in life, and in the bodily life in particular. That's what Libermann wrote, with his usual sense of humour, on the 9<sup>th</sup> August 1844 to a seminarian: *Don't trouble yourself over my body. The little discomforts that come occasionally are good for my health. You see, if I didn't get sick from time to time I'd forget to take care of myself! It's a clever, though polite, way the body has of making sure it's needs are looked after. In this way it succeeds: I look after it like a precious jewel. . . . On the other hand, these things serve to remind us of our mortality. They help us to see that we are nothing, that we can do nothing, and that we are worth nothing. All this is good for the soul. God keeps me mindful of it by sending me little illnesses from time to time. Don't worry, I won't die from these things. It's more likely that I'll be saying the 'De Profundis' for the repose of your soul.*<sup>11</sup>

Libermann insists a lot, usually with a fine sense of humour, that sickness is a gift of God: *You musn't harp solely on my migraine. Don't blame it. It is a good companion which, because it loves me, visits me often. I usually offer him a cup of black coffee. This satisfies him and he goes off immediately. But he lets me know when I forget him or haven't the time to be polite to him! Don't ask God to take this away from me. It is very useful to me. You suffer in sacrificing yourself for the glory of God and I in doing nothing. No matter, doing nothing, I must at least suffer a little.*<sup>12</sup>

Ever forgetful of himself, Libermann asks his correspondent not to be upset because of his sufferings: *this sickness is not unto death. I assure you it is a gift from God.*<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Letter of 13<sup>th</sup> September 1835, L.S. I, p. 122.

<sup>11</sup> Letter to M. Beauchef, N.D. VI, pp. 300-301.

<sup>12</sup> Letter of 8<sup>th</sup> April 1845 to the community at Bourbon, N.D. VII, pp. 125-126.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to M. Warlon, 15<sup>th</sup> November 1845, N.D. VII, p. 397.

About the beginning of 1848, the attacks of migraine began to ease off. Libermann mentions this to his brother Samson: *My attacks of migraine have lessened considerably since the beginning of winter. I think it's the heat of summer that brings them on. God's will be done. If he sends them back to me, I'll take them on again, and cope with them as best I can...*<sup>14</sup>

His dispositions are always the same: love for God and total abandonment to his will. This attitude of abandonment gave him a deep happiness that was entirely supernatural: ... *I am a poor galley-slave who drags his load as best he can. I am resigned to my lot and happy to suffer something at least in the service of God. Otherwise, how would I ever reach heaven?*<sup>15</sup>

In a letter of the 17<sup>th</sup> July 1850 to Father Le Vavas seur, Libermann speaks of the trouble he has keeping up his morale, and declares explicitly that the strength he has comes from God: ... *whenever I experience difficulties or trials, it seems that God in his goodness gives me new strength. It seems that I am destined to suffer, to be broken into pieces. My heart is filled with joy and hope. I prepare myself for the combat, not being the type of character that seeks it out. Don't fear for me. God is my strength, and nothing in the world can make me afraid...*<sup>16</sup>

## LIBERMANN'S WAY IS RECOMMENDED TO OTHERS

In the preceding texts we have seen the policy Libermann adopted in regard to his illness. We shall see it again in the advice he gave to others in the same circumstances. As always, Libermann preaches what he practises. In advising others he implicitly reveals his own personal experience.

*You tell me that you are suffering again from headaches. There is only one thing to say to this illness that does not want to go away: 'All to the good, may God be thereby blessed'. This illness cannot prevent you from working for the glory of God because if it did, he would cure you at once. That is*

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<sup>14</sup> Letter of 1<sup>st</sup> February 1848, N.D. X, p. 46.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> N.D. XII, p. 316.



*why I think that it would do you more good to remain perfectly calm about it and not even to wish, at least not too much, to be cured. If you are able, leave yourself entirely in the hands of the divine wisdom which does all things well.*<sup>17</sup>

That was his attitude in regard to his own illness: total abandonment to God, our Father.

Too much medication can be a nuisance for both the soul and the body. Libermann points this out in the same letter: *Recall how often the Imitation says: 'Pauci in infirmitate meliorantur'. By taking too much care to avoid suffering, one often makes things worse, and falls short of the holiness to which God calls us. It is necessary to put all our confidence in God, and to suffer happily in union with our Lord Jesus Christ and his most holy Mother on Calvary.*<sup>18</sup>

Because he knew that suffering was a source of grace, we find him telling his closest friends, how happy he was to see them having something to suffer. He is interested above all in loving abandonment in the hands of God: *Sickness and contradictions are a wonderful thing because they detach us from ourselves and teach us little by little how to acquire genuine interior detachment . . .*<sup>19</sup>

He had already expressed such thoughts in a letter to M. Paul Carron, on the 12<sup>th</sup> August 1837: *. . . Far from being sorry to see you suffer, it gives me the greatest joy to see the divine will being accomplished in you in all its fullness.*

Abandonment, which in its turn leads to happiness, is the only acceptable attitude in a true son of God. Thus Libermann continues: *Leave yourself entirely in the hands of God . . . It is to him, and to him alone, that we belong . . . consequently, it is for him to do in us and with us whatever seems good to him. The great value of this is that no matter what he does in us it will always be absolutely holy and sanctifying. Blessed indeed are we if we abandon ourselves entirely to his divine and incomparable ways.*<sup>20</sup>

Libermann recommended another correspondent to forget himself in order to lose himself in Jesus: *Forget yourself . . .*

<sup>17</sup> Letter to a Seminarian, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1830, L.S. I, p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 20-21.

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<sup>20</sup> L.S. I, pp. 278-279.

and lose yourself in Jesus. May the eyes of your soul be turned solely towards him . . .

*These sufferings . . . that it pleases him to send you, have given me the greatest joy because I expect that they will sanctify your soul . . . I advise you not to think about them at all . . . Don't say to yourself: 'these sufferings are useful', they are going to have this or that holy effect on my soul.*

*Forget yourself . . . , keep yourself in a spirit of poverty before him, and say yes to all that he permits to happen. Say yes with the greatest willingness to your beloved Master . . .*<sup>21</sup>

Once Jesus is everything for us, and once we abandon ourselves entirely to him, then there is no more suffering. The spirit of abandonment makes us forget it. This is exactly what Libermann said in a letter of the 11<sup>th</sup> September 1837 to a seminary director: *When we are in this state (of total abandonment to our Lord) we no longer think of ourselves nor of what concerns us. It is all the same whether we are sick or well, whether we are in pain or not. We lose sight of ourselves completely and fix our gaze on Jesus . . . Thus we enjoy great peace in the midst of whatever pains, sufferings, afflictions or contradictions befall us. Rather, for us there is no longer any such thing as real suffering or real vexation.*

*We feel the pain, of course, but in the depth of our being we remain attached to God and to him alone. Thus, what before would have caused us great suffering, no longer penetrates to the depth of our soul because we are united to our Lord present there. He is firmly enthroned in the depth of our being.*

*It is undoubtedly true that patience perfects the soul. It is there that all perfection is found: it is the great reward that comes from bearing with sufferings and the cross. Happy are those thus favoured, who profit from such a great opportunity to achieve forgetfulness of self and of creatures, and to attain perfect union with Jesus dwelling in the invisible depth of our being.*<sup>22</sup>

The heart of Libermann's spiritual doctrine is that love which enables us to say yes to all that God asks of us: *Behave before God like a lamb that is led to the slaughter . . . Let the Master have his way. Be content to fix your loving, if anguished, gaze on him. Never complain. Always respond affirmatively to*

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<sup>21</sup> Letter to a Seminarian, 20<sup>th</sup> September 1837, L.S. I, pp. 302-303.

<sup>22</sup> Letter to a Seminary Director, L.S. I, pp. 299-300.

*what he does. Let it be a silent yes that is born of nothing else but our crucifying love for him.*

I think that Libermann, without realising it, reveals in these words the intensity of the sufferings he bore in silence. Addressing himself directly to Jesus, he continues: *O, the love of Jesus! How hard and painful it is on those whom it chooses!*

He continues again after this sigh of love: *Know that no matter how trying this love is, it is a thousand times gentler and sweeter on the one chosen . . . This love of Jesus working in the soul is very hard for human nature to bear, but, then, what wonderful sanctity it produces . . . Do not seek to find out God's designs . . . content yourself with putting yourself entirely in his hands, and with letting him alone to do what he wants . . .*<sup>23</sup>

In a letter dated the 28<sup>th</sup> July 1838, Libermann, having spoken of the advantages of illness for the sanctification of the soul, also speaks of its dangers: *. . . (sickness) has its dangers, which can be avoided if one deals with it properly.* He then goes on to list seven important conditions for bearing sickness well:

1) *You should never try to reason about the pains and difficulties you have to put up with. You should abandon yourself rather to God and rejoice only in him who sends these things for the sanctification of our souls.*

2) *You should not be too anxious to be cured. You should rather surrender to God your desires and ideas concerning this. Having done that, you may seek medical treatment as something necessary and ordered by God . . . , without worrying or waiting for the results of this treatment. The important thing is to abandon yourself to divine Providence.*

3) *You must carry on without worrying, living simply in the presence of God . . . , and taking your medicines . . . , but using them as if you used them not. Why wish so much to be cured when God does not wish it? . . .*

4) *You should avoid falling into a depression if your illness continues for a long time. You must bear with it always and with whatever else it brings, with a contented heart . . .* Libermann then recommends: *Do not neglect your spiritual exercises;*

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<sup>23</sup> Letter to a Seminarian, 5<sup>th</sup> October 1838, L.S. II, pp. 95-95.

*take every precaution not to lose your interior spirit amidst the care which reluctantly you have to take of yourself. Since a sick person tends to slacken off he has need of a strong interior spirit and of the love of God more than others.*

5) *You must do whatever is necessary for the treatment of your illness . . . , but*

6) *You must take care not to get too soft with yourself. Don't love your body too much. Give it what it needs; the soul owes it that. But, do this without being too fond of it . . .*

7) *You must never get too upset or worried no matter how much the poor body is weighed down, nor when you lack what you need to comfort it, nor when the things you need are slow in coming . . . The way to handle this is, often during the day, to make acts of love, of submission, of self-offering, of sacrifice, of desire to see the will of God fully accomplished . . .*

Liebermann ends with these words: *. . . if you do all this, your illness will make a saint of you.*<sup>24</sup>

He was so convinced of the value of suffering and that *all that he does for those who belong to him is most admirable and sweet* that he wrote: *. . . if the divine wisdom were to ask me what we most desired for our poor souls . . . I would be somewhat embarrassed . . . it is such a lovely thing to be crucified between the hands of Jesus and Mary! I hope that even if Jesus were to deliver you from your present illness he would still not leave you alone; . . . he would replace the present cross by another . . .*

*The holy cross . . . transforms the soul and lifts it up to the very pinnacle of divine union. Once a person reaches that point he no longer desires to be relieved of the cross. On the contrary, he finds that he cannot live without it. The soul hungers and thirsts for the cross when it is absent. The absence of the cross causes an emptiness and a pain that is indescribable and inconceivable to one who has not experienced it . . .*<sup>25</sup>

It is clear that Liebermann is speaking of his own experience. He recommends his own spirit of abandonment, of indifference, and of love to his correspondent: *A great grace to*

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<sup>24</sup> Letter to a Seminarian, L.S. II, pp. 37-40.

<sup>25</sup> Letter to a Seminary Director, 29<sup>th</sup> November 1838, L.S. II, pp. 122-123.

*ask of the divine Master would be that he fill you, both body and soul, with this indifference, this loving attachment and abandonment to his divine will . . . Think only of Jesus living and reigning in everything and everywhere, and desire only to live in him alone, to die to yourself, in such a way that he alone may be in you . . . If you act like this, then, whether you get better or not, your spirit will be neither more nor less happy for it . . . ; but, in order to enter fully into the Holy Spirit's way of seeing and doing things, it is necessary that the soul abandon itself entirely to him so that it finds contentment rather in pain than in its own well-being . . . Because, at the level of will, we are incapable of doing what is necessary for his glory, we find it painful, sometimes very painful. But, our peace, our love, our union with God ought to increase as a result of this pain, since this pain is itself the mark of God.<sup>26</sup>*

Crosses are a sign of God's love for us. *Our Lord is pleased to keep you on the cross . . . May his holy name be blessed: It is a sign of his special love for you. The divine Master does what he wants and what pleases him, to those whom his heavenly Father has given him . . . The means he uses to bring about the wonderful sanctification of his chosen ones vary greatly . . . What they all have in common is the cross. It is the seasoning of all the spiritual food he gives to souls . . . ; these are graces given only to privileged souls.*

The only important thing is love. And Libermann expresses again a favourite idea of his, namely, that of being useless through love. . . . *Keep yourself simply in a continual disposition of being pleasing to him in all things: pleasing to him both when occupied and unoccupied, in your work for his glory just as in your uselessness . . .*<sup>27</sup>

Libermann had a passionate devotion to the cross and its sanctifying value. *What more glorious life than the crucified life of Jesus! Happy the soul who possesses Jesus on the cross and whose life is a true copy of it! The Father is well pleased with him. Our admirable mother, Mary, also finds her greatest delight in this object of his sorrows, . . .*

*Since it has pleased Jesus to establish himself in a soul by means of the cross, this is normally to give it a participation in the*

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, pp. 124-125.

<sup>27</sup> Letter to a Seminarian, 1838, L.S. II, pp. 151-153.

*deep intimacy of his divine love and that of his Father. He who is crucified with Jesus will be glorified also with Jesus; and the more he is crucified, the more will he be glorified. The degree of our glory is measured by the perfection of our resemblance to Jesus.*

The Passion belongs entirely to Jesus. It is he who suffers in us. Thus is realised in us the word of St. Paul: "I make up that which is wanting in the passion of Christ".<sup>28</sup> That is what Libermann says in the following text: *... Let us suffer then with joy and with love; ... let us never say: it is enough; but let us suffer in complete peace, gentleness and tranquillity of soul. Be well advised that it is not we who suffer; it is Jesus, living in us by his divine Spirit, who offers himself anew to his heavenly Father. How fortunate we are to be instruments in the hands of our well-beloved Jesus, by which he works so marvellously for the glory of his Father!*

Libermann then goes on to express an idea that is perhaps not to be found in other spiritual writers. *What great happiness to renew in this way the glorious passion of our Master! There is something even more in it than in the passion of Jesus on Calvary. His passion was accomplished to the detriment and loss of a great many souls: a whole people acted criminally on that occasion. Whereas, the sufferings, the passion and the death of Jesus effected in our souls is achieved without sin, and in a manner most holy and excellent ...*<sup>29</sup>

One feels that Libermann is most at home when he talks of suffering and its fruits. All his life he experienced the paschal mystery. In the previous letter he continues: *... my dear, Jesus is wonderful when he fully sanctifies his elect. The means he uses to establish us in his life and in his sanctity are frightening; but we must remember the one power necessary to save us effectively from ourselves and in spite of ourselves. This power Jesus exercises in you; he penetrates so deeply as to seem to divide the soul . . . , to shake it to its foundations. The shock is terrifying and the disturbance great; but the flesh yields, is overcome, and the Spirit of Jesus gradually makes itself the master of the soul . . .*

*What more is necessary to fill us adequately with joy and love for our most lovable, all powerful, and most compelling Lord Je-*

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<sup>28</sup> Col. 1, 24.

<sup>29</sup> Letter to a Seminarian, 1839, L.S. II, pp. 394-396.

*sus? He is lovable and wonderful in everything, but especially so in the forceful way he deals with those he wishes to possess at any price. They may try to resist, to dig in and defend themselves; the rampart of flesh raised up by these poor souls is soon destroyed, and Jesus triumphs.* Here Libermann cries out with enthusiasm: *Long live Jesus, the divine conqueror of our souls! May he reign forever as the sovereign master of your soul! He has won the battle, he has conquered . . .*

Then Libermann continues: *Be docile and supple in his hands. You know what that calls for from you: to keep yourself in peace, tranquil; never to worry or trouble yourself about anything; to live as if there were no future; to forget the past; to live this moment for Jesus . . . ; to proceed . . . in every circumstance, in every encounter, without fear and without worry . . . ; never to think deliberately about yourself; but to leave the care of your soul to Jesus alone, etc.*

Then comes an invitation to love, which ought always to be the disposition of children of God: *Do not fear the judgement of such a gentle Master. In general, banish fear and replace it with love . . .*<sup>30</sup>

Libermann recommended a seminarian, Lanurien, who was inclined to worry: *This year . . . should be for you a year of rest, of relaxation, and of peace. Take care and do not strain yourself; you will gain nothing by it, neither in the way of piety nor study. Serve our Lord in peace and quiet of soul. Forget yourself as much as possible, forget what you are doing, what you have done, what you are going to do, and what you will have to do later on . . . Keep your soul in gentleness and peace before him; the less worry and strain there is in your activities, the more will our Lord be in you and with you . . .*<sup>31</sup>

In the second of two extremely fine letters that Libermann wrote to Miss Barbier, he reveals how he overcame his bouts of nervousness. I quote the following excerpt:

*Your letter both consoles and troubles me; it distresses me because I would have been happy to be a source of consolation and encouragement in your present suffering. A visit from me or a few lines would do you infinitely more good than all the medicine they are giving you. But what can we do? Your parents*

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 396-398.

<sup>31</sup> Letter of 6<sup>th</sup> November 1843, N.D. IV, p. 427.

*don't understand such things . . . don't blame them. It is God who wants you to suffer on the cross; that should be true happiness for a Christian. In that you will find your spiritual advancement . . . Be strong in faith, strong in your confidence in Jesus and Mary, strong in your love for God, and in the spirit of sacrifice; be happy to suffer something for love of your divine Master and unite your sufferings to his . . .*

*Bless God's goodness always and love tenderly the instruments he uses; be tolerant of them: they are doing you a great deal of good. Keep your soul always in the peace and gentleness, the joy and modesty of a child God loves. Accustom yourself gradually to keep calm under oppression and injustice. Imitate your well-Beloved in this . . . These upsets are bad for soul and body. Therefore, be determined with yourself, strong with the strength of divine love. What does it matter whether people do you good or evil? One thing suffices for you: that your well-Beloved is with you and you with him. No one can rob you of that happiness. On the contrary, the more you have to suffer, the happier you will be. Bear your suffering, then, in peace, with humility and love and in perfect submission to the divine will that wishes to keep you thus upon the cross.<sup>32</sup>*

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> July, Libermann wrote her another letter, so beautiful that I quote extensively from it:

*. . . The good Master accomplishes in you his divine word, which has always been and always will be, true: 'Blessed are those who weep, for they shall be comforted'. I am very happy to see the good he is doing you by means of his cross. He has planted it solemnly, profoundly, in the depths of your heart. It seems it has taken root there; yes, it has taken root there . . . It is a lovely tree, this cross planted in your soul; a tree which at this moment is producing beautiful flowers, and which will bear beautiful fruit later on. A good tree, says the Saviour, can only produce good fruit. What fruit? The fruit it bore on Calvary, Jesus will produce in your soul. And in this way:*

*For a long time Jesus has wanted to live in your soul by the sanctity of his ways and the truth of his virtues. He sought to draw you to himself by the attraction of his grace, by the beauty of his light, by the serenity of his peace. You have followed him as a sheep follows its shepherd, and he has fed you on milk and*

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<sup>32</sup> Letter of 5th June 1845, N.D. VII, pp. 189-191.



*honey. You have seen him, you have known him, and you have followed him. He has won your heart, and all the rest, all that is not Jesus, tastes stale to you. You have wanted to follow him always, to be alone with him, to choose him for your spouse, and all this in order to rest unceasingly on his heart, to live always in his heavenly intimacy, to be nourished with his divine and delightful love.*

*You have wanted to be the spouse of Jesus. But that does not happen quickly. The one you wish to marry is a great king. He has chosen you. He has attracted you. He has insinuated his divine love into your soul. It is he, therefore, who has made the advances. It seemed proper that the divine nuptials take place without difficulty, when suddenly Jesus asks for a dowry: not for a dowry of silver or gold, as worldly-minded souls might imagine. They do not appreciate the delicacy and purity of sentiments inspired by the Spirit of God.*

*The dowry that Jesus asks for is the total sacrifice of yourself. It is he who pays the price; it is he who realises his plans for you, who plants his cross in your soul and immolates it to his divine love. Abandon yourself to him. You have wished to belong to Jesus, to be united intimately with Jesus. But, in your soul there are still many imperfections, attachments and worldly desires. To be united to Jesus, you must be worthy of him. And you will make yourself worthy of him only by suffering. By means of suffering your soul has to continually conquer, renounce, humiliate, subdue, immolate itself with courage and generosity. At the same time, the grace and divine love of Jesus, working in the depth of your heart, will give you the fidelity and constancy necessary to do all these things, and indeed to do them better and better. The greater your sufferings then, the more profoundly the cross will be planted in you, the more will grace and love increase and your soul advance in true sanctity. Do you understand better now how the cross produces in you such wonderful fruits?*

*These are the virtues of Jesus, the holiness of Jesus, and union with Jesus. The nuptial chamber where Jesus united himself with the Church was Calvary. There he sacrificed himself for her in order to make her worthy to be his Bride. It is the same ever since for every soul that wishes to be perfectly united with Jesus. It is in immolation that this union is realised. Rejoice then in the midst of your suffering. Be strong and worthy of Jesus crucified.*

It is in this letter that, after other considerations, Libermann adds: *I am telling you the way that I have followed since I began to give myself to God . . .*<sup>33</sup>

A few days earlier he had written in the same vein to Miss Clemence Godrand: . . . *If you are submissive you will remain joyful in the midst of suffering, you will acquire solid virtue, and you will become more steadfast in good . . .*

*Yes, the Heart of Jesus loves you! Oh, yes, indeed, he loves you very much. Love him very much in return. Love his cross. Be submissive and good, try to respond to the crucifying goodness of Jesus crucified . . .*

*There is nothing like suffering for detaching you from the earth and for attaching you to the divine master. God's grace abounds in you, to support you and assure your success . . . Carry the cross, then, like Jesus, with love and humility. When you are very hurt, prostrate yourself at the feet of Jesus; offer him your soul; abandon yourself to his divine will and you will find peace in suffering.*

*Avoid self-preoccupation. Distract yourself when you are suffering. Never be sorry for yourself.*<sup>34</sup>

Two months later, he preached the same doctrine to Sister Aloysia: *God has given you a great grace in sending you the cross. These are sweets of a different kind to the ones you ask me for. Rejoice over the good things God has given you. This illness will purify you. If you really want to be attached to Jesus Christ, then you must remain on Calvary with him, in union with and in the company of our good mother, Mary. Be calm, docile and obedient. Don't worry about your uselessness. St. Vincent de Paul always said sickness was a blessing for the community. Sufferings borne with peace, confidence, submission and love, draw down great blessings on a house. Be gentle and calm. Don't let yourself get into bad humour. Don't worry. Don't complain too much, nor show too much what you are suffering inside . . .*<sup>35</sup>

On the 15<sup>th</sup> April 1846, Libermann wrote to Fr. Lossadat, who had complained to him about his moral sufferings: *Have courage. You are suffering now: you will suffer more. But*

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<sup>33</sup> Letter of 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1845, N.D. VII, pp. 235-238.

<sup>34</sup> Letter of 17<sup>th</sup> June 1845, N.D. VII, pp. 219-220.

<sup>35</sup> Letter of 4<sup>th</sup> August 1845, N.D. VII, p. 265.

*these sufferings will develop you spiritually. I suffer, believe me, and I shall probably always suffer as much and more than you. I am at least as sensitive to pain as you are, but is that a reason for being discouraged? Never should these sufferings be manifested externally. By the grace of God, never shall I complain. Take a strong line with yourself, for you are doing great things for God. If you do not learn how to bear with yourself, you will always fall short of what God has in mind for you. The whole thing is summed up in self-control, suffering without paying attention to it, offering with generosity all your sufferings to God. Bear with yourself, sacrifice yourself, and bear with others in spite of their faults. There, for you who loves great and beautiful things, is without doubt the greatest and most beautiful thing. Ask for that grace.*<sup>36</sup>

P. Blanpin, a missionary from Reunion, had an ailment of the throat, which was partly a nervous condition. Libermann wrote to him on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1846: *Poor child, your sensitive soul was made for the cross. Without a doubt, you will always have something to suffer in this world, but you should know that it will lead to glory.*

There follows from the pen of Libermann a beautiful image: *The cross is the shortest and most direct way of getting to heaven. It is the Jacob's ladder which the angels of earth, the children of God, have to climb in order to reach their heavenly Father, and which the angels of heaven descend to help their brothers of earth making this difficult and painful climb.*

Libermann continues: *Hardened souls who seem incapable of any feelings other than those of animals do not suffer in this world. Nothing bothers them as long as they have enough fodder. We shouldn't envy them, any more than we'd envy the lot of beasts. Rejoice, then, in the midst of your sufferings of mind and heart. If you were not afflicted by them, you would have reason to regret that you had not been tried in them. We do not have a permanent city in this world. All passes like a flash of lightning. Happy are those who suffer because they will not become attached to this passing world. Rather, they will press on towards that world that will not pass away, the heavenly fatherland, where Jesus waits for us in the resplendent glory which shines about his holy Cross.*

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<sup>36</sup> N.D., VIII, p. 114.

Sensitiveness undoubtedly has its dangers, but it can also be a source of sanctity, if the soul abandons itself into the hands of God. Libermann makes this point in the same letter: . . . *this sensitivity is a gift of God. Certainly, it causes much pain and mental suffering. But, it is because he loves us that God makes us pass through this crucible . . .*

*When you feel sad, place yourself like a child in the arms of Mary. Our glory consists in being identified with Jesus Crucified, in being children of the Heart of Mary, in being pierced unceasingly by the sword of sorrow. It is our glory to be ourselves children of sorrow . . . Try, then, to work without fatiguing yourself. Vary your tasks, and take a break by going for a walk or some other distraction. For the sake of your health, you should avoid worry. If things go well, blessed be God. If things don't go well, may God be equally blessed.*

*Put your destiny in the hands of Mary. Stay with her as a little child stays with its devoted mother. A child when he suffers runs to his mother. He is not so much concerned with being cured as with winning the attention and loving caresses of the mother. She caresses the child, who is content and at ease. He is satisfied with his mother's kiss and murmured words of love. You should be the same with your heavenly Mother, and suffer lovingly what it pleases Jesus to make you suffer.<sup>37</sup>*

You might think that I have just quoted from St. Therese of the Child Jesus. Not at all. These words are from Libermann. Even before St. Therese of Lisieux, he had pointed out the way of spiritual childhood. The texts are more numerous in his case than in hers, but the doctrine is the same.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> September 1846, Libermann wrote again to Fr. Blanpin: *We should submit ourselves to whatever privations God's mercy imposes on us. I think this will be harder for you than for me since I am so occupied or rather preoccupied, with other things that I can easily bear these privations. Moreover, my soul is at peace, while you, not having anything to do and at the same time suffering in spirit, feel them vividly. But I am certain that Mary will help you, and indeed your letter is evidence that this is so.<sup>38</sup>*

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<sup>37</sup> N.D., VIII, pp. 205-206.

<sup>38</sup> N.D., VIII, p. 291.

Let us conclude by quoting from a letter Libermann wrote to Julie, the widow of his brother Felix: *Don't lose courage. I am confident that God will not abandon you . . . My dear sister, if we only realised how great is the reward of our resignation to God's good pleasure, these sufferings would not seem so hard to bear. Time is short, eternity is long. Every one of these sufferings is for us a source of great glory and of great happiness, and this glory and this happiness are eternal . . .*<sup>39</sup>

For the saints, heaven is not a fairy story but a reality. It is the greatest foundation of Christian resignation.

How apposite to the world today is the message of Libermann. Our suffering world of anguish and anxiety cannot understand the reason for suffering because it does not know God or does not want to accept him.

How different would be the spirit in hospitals, clinics, etc. where people suffer, if this doctrine was accepted. How stupid is the opinion of those who wish to remove the crucifix from the walls of hospitals and schools on the pretext that it is discouraging. Would it not be much better to channel the admirable energy that suffering produces to the supreme purpose of man's existence, that is, union with God! Suffering contributes so much to the making of saints! The world would be different if people could look at suffering as Libermann did. His doctrine is more efficacious than that of psychoanalysts and psychiatrists for the treatment of nervous ailments and for making people truly happy!

Amadeu MARTINS C.S.Sp

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<sup>39</sup> Letter of 7<sup>th</sup> July 1848, N.D., X, pp. 253-254.