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A DREAM REALISED AND STILL BEING REALISED BY THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

Everybody who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, for fear his actions should be exposed; but the man who lives by the truth comes out into the light, so that it may be plainly seen that what he does is done in God
(Jn. 3 :20-21)

Everywhere nowadays, we see, and are involved in ourselves, attempts to create new forms of spirituality, and this is a sign of the centuries-old search by man for God. Or, if we prefer it, man feels in the depths of his being the need for the Absolute; he needs to contemplate beauty and to reach out beyond himself. This is the same for all men everywhere, including those with whom we come into daily contact.

Today, capitalism, materialism and totalitarianism – so called attempts to form perfect societies where justice, equity and peace abound – claim to respond to this painful search for the Absolute by modern man. With varying degrees of success, these systems which themselves are alternatives of an absolute character, claim to respond to the fundamental questions of human existence and to satisfy the uniquely important desires of all men. Man wants to be fully happy, to know the meaning of his own existence, and so he sets about trying to find the answers.

The People of God experienced such a quest for many years. Freed from slavery in Egypt, they set out for the Promised Land and, like the men of every age, they sought the place where the promise of well-being and happiness would be found.

Libermann too, went through a period in his life when he tried to discover the real meaning of his life and was preoccupied with a desire for authenticity which brought him many difficult moments :

This period was extremely painful for me. The experience of profound solitude in a room where the light came in through a simple skylight, and the thought of being so far away from my family, my acquaintances and my home, filled me with a profound sadness and my heart was oppressed by the most painful melancholy¹.

Totally disorientated and with no-one to advise him, Libermann began to have doubts about everything, Judaism, Christianity, his friends, and above all himself; his despair pushed him to the very limits.

It was then that, remembering the God of my fathers, I got down on my knees and I implored him to enlighten me as to which was the true religion. I prayed, asking him that if the belief of Christians was true, he would let me know it, and if it was false, to dispel any thought of it from my mind immediately All of a sudden I was enlightened and I saw the truth; faith flooded my mind and heart. Having started to read the works of Lhomond, I readily accepted everything he had written about the life and death of Jesus Christ².

From this moment on, he started out on a new path which he was to follow for the rest of his life, together with those who shared with him his work and vision, and had found in Jesus Christ the true response to man's painful search.

Libermann realised that men can only live their lives in the deepest way by following in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth, by adhering closely to him, letting his originality and his spirit penetrate into the depths of their being.

After the beginning of his Christian experience, two things presented themselves to Libermann: on the one hand his encounter with the Messiah, and on the other the consequences of this encounter. His life changed completely after his discovery of Jesus as the One Sent by the Father.

Libermann brought these two experiences together to form a basis for a style of missionary life which was all his own, and which he passed on to those whom the Spirit called to follow him.

1 Mgr Jean GAY, Libermann, Juif selon l'Évangile, 1802-1852, p. 54.

2 Ibidem, p. 55.

*In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it*³.

. Today in our Congregation, we seem to have forgotten about the authentic experience of Libermann. Is it not from our own personal, interior lives as a source, that our apostolic effort must flow? Do we Spiritans walk along the same path as Libermann did? Are we not in the process of cutting ourselves off from our origins?

Should not the uniting force of Libermann's personality always be the source of our inspiration and our joy?

Undoubtedly, each age has its own specific problems; those of our own times are different from those which Libermann knew, but I think that we can continue to ask ourselves: Are the demands of the Gospel not the same today as yesterday? Do they not continue to call the Christian to make the cause of the poor his own?

It seems to me that if we wish to continue to participate in the movement of liberation which the Gospel sets forth, we have to make our choice according to the insights of Libermann and place ourselves within his fundamental view of things. It is in this perspective that I will try to put myself in order to re-interpret the meaning of Practical Union for us today, and to deepen the meaning of the charism of service which the Spirit granted to Libermann.

I – LIBERMANN'S EXPERIENCE OF GOD

It is at the origin of the Christian insight of Libermann that we find one of his key experiences of God; it was a profoundly emotional one which, before explaining his idea of the work of the Community, he described thus:

*I am the happiest man in the world, because I have no-one but God alone, together with Jesus and Mary; I am already in heaven while still living on the earth*⁴.

My body, my soul, my being and my whole existence belong to God, and if I thought that there was still one single fibre of me that did not belong to him, I would tear it out and trample it underfoot. Whether I am a priest or not, whether a

³ Jn. 1, 4-5.

⁴ Lettres Spirituelles, II, p. 302.

*millionaire or a poor man, all that I am and all that I have belongs to God and to no-one else but him*⁵.

The key-moments of Libermann's life were lived in this perspective, and not only the key-moments, for his whole life was built around the principle that «God is all».

Thus we come to understand his faith in God and the importance which he always gave to the action of the Spirit in his life. Always ready to follow the smallest manifestations of the Divine Will, Libermann never established himself permanently anywhere, but always lived as a poor man, one who was free to serve others.

Attention to the poorest and most abandoned was at the very heart of Libermann's idea of his mission. His Congregation was founded to announce the Gospel to those peoples for whose evangelisation the Church had difficulty in finding workers.

*To evangelise the poorest, that is our general aim. However, the missions are the principal object of our work, and in the missions we have chosen the most miserable and most abandoned souls. Divine Providence has given us the work for the Blacks, whether of Africa or the colonies, and they are without doubt the most miserable and abandoned of our time. We would like also to work in France for the salvation of souls, but always having work among the poor as the principal aim, without forgetting however, those who are not poor*⁶.

These were the signs of the time which revealed to Libermann gradually the path God wanted him to follow, and to be able to interpret these signs he allowed himself to be led by the Spirit of God.

Thus two important aspects of the Christian experience of Libermann begin to emerge; there is the awareness that «God is all», contrasting with the situation in which many men find themselves which is irreconcilable with this God who is all. The conclusion for Libermann presented itself very clearly; he asked himself "What does God demand of me? How can I

5 L.S., I, p. 10.

6 N.D. (Notes et Documents relatifs à la Vie et à l'Oeuvre du Vén. Libermann) XIII, p. 170.

contribute to changing the miserable and deprived state in which so many human beings find themselves entangled?

The history of the Congregation should be able to give us an answer; we must put ourselves at the service of the most abandoned, and at the disposition of the Church in readiness to undertake commitments for which it cannot find personnel.

But I think that before going any further with our considerations, we need to ask ourselves; Is Libermann's charism still valid today? What must be our attitude of mind in order to reply to the urgent state of Mission in today's world?

Libermann, in a formula rich and full of meaning, has left us what may be termed the essence of Spiritan spirituality; I am referring to what he called *Practical Union* (or *Practical Action*).

II – WHAT IS PRACTICAL UNION?

Contemplative union should, naturally, be more important among the contemplative orders, while practical action must be more characteristic of Christ's missionaries. This practical action consists in sacrificing oneself for the glory of God and the salvation of souls without habitually feeling great spiritual consolations⁷.

Normally speaking, we will be more concerned about being effective in our apostolic work, rather than trying to reach the affective stage in our prayer. We will of necessity have to think about tomorrow, and so will not have the time to nourish our souls with such spiritual consolations. The Good Lord will give us the required amount of consolation and strength; we need only to be motivated by a love that is strong and put into practice. Such is the missionary; he must in no way get worried or think that he is doing something wrong when he does not have satisfying spiritual feelings in prayer⁸

To live as apostolic men, you must have a great sense of your own nothingness, and this spirit of abnegation should be there at all times, not just during periods of strongly felt fervour. These never last very long and are not relia-

7 N.D. XIII, p. 697-698.

8 N.D. XIII, p. 711.

*ble. What is important is to keep one's soul in peace and to have a deep spirit of joy even in the midst of great privations either of a material or a spiritual kind; the former are easy enough to put up with, while the latter are much more difficult to bear . . .*⁹.

*A strong and truly apostolic person is always calm, gentle and confident when trials and contradictions arise; such a person is never sad, disagreeable, agitated, offhand or harsh . . .*¹⁰.

To be at peace because nothing disturbs you is not a proof of great apostolic strength . . . When such people are successful they are full of enthusiasm, and this often causes them to commit faults and imprudences . . .^{10b}.

At the heart of the concept of Practical Union is the conscious or habitual desire to overcome in ourselves any purely natural tendencies so that grace can inspire all our actions. Libermann always mistrusted the illusory nature of superficial and false intentions.

How is one to act therefore? Libermann says that one must learn how to discern between the movements of nature and those of grace, and not allow oneself to be carried away by the former to the detriment of the latter. This is an objective for which one must be courageous, and resolve to commit oneself to a life of total abnegation. This abnegation will only be achieved by a deep spirit of faith, and an unlimited charity which will give us the desire to please God and which here and now gives us the joy of doing always that which pleases him.

Here the intimate relationship between prayer and Practical Union can be seen, for the spirit of prayer keeps man in an attitude of faith and disposes the heart to love. Similarly, someone who lives continually in fidelity to grace encounters God at every moment of the day.

In some ways, Practical union is similar to contemplative Union, because it supposes a latent and subconscious state of prayer which affects the quality of action; this action is directed

⁹ N.D. IX, p. 327.

¹⁰ N.D. IX, p. 327.

^{10 bis} Ibidem, p. 328.

continually towards motives of faith, hope and charity and becomes a state of conscious prayer in the more important and intensive moments.

Practical Union is similar to prayer because it has its own degrees, trials, setbacks and advances. It is truly an art whose secret is in God, the one who communicates it freely and takes into account our nature, our vocation and our desire to do good, a desire that is not content with saying «Lord, Lord» but tries its best to do God's will.

Always taking a simple approach in his spiritual life and in his direction of souls, Father Libermann aimed at only one objective: to produce in his followers the desire for absolute poverty confronted with the enterprise to be undertaken.

It was not until the last year of his life that Libermann adopted the expression «Practical Union», but he had already described it frequently as the ideal of the Christian life. He saw it as an intimate union with the Spirit throughout the activity of each day, based on a permanent state of availability and attention to God who leads us to think nothing, to love nothing, to want nothing and to do nothing except under the influence of the one who came among us as «the soul of our soul»¹¹.

However, in practice, each one interprets these things in his own way. Libermann himself draws several conclusions from this which influence both his personal conduct and his spiritual and missionary doctrine.

It is precisely when speaking "ex professo" to his missionaries on prayer and contemplative union, that the Venerable Father sees the need to remind them of another way of union which according to him is more necessary and more perfect, and at the same time more characteristic of the missionary. In chapter five of his "Instructions to Missionaries", he calls it "Active Union or Practical Union"¹² and he also speaks about it in his last conference to the novices of Notre¹³ Dame du Gard – both texts are of spring 1851. With great clarity our author speaks about these themes in the following order: union with God by grace, union through prayer, and union through other activities. In the first of these we are passive, while the

11 *Commentaire du Saint Évangile selon S. Jean*, Ngazobil ed., p. 85.

12 *Écrits Spirituels (E.S.)*, p. 480-496.

13 N.D. XIII, p. 696-702.

last two demand our conscious attention and our fidelity, and in this sense they can be termed "active"¹⁴.

*Practical action, or practical union, consists of getting rid of all one's natural impressions and laying one's soul open to divine impressions. While the soul is a slave to any purely natural tendencies, it is like an opaque window and does not allow the supernatural light of the truth to enter*¹⁵.

III – THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE OF THE SPIRITAN CHARISM

*The charism of the founders*¹⁶, is seen to be an "experience of the Spirit" passed on to their followers to be lived, kept, deepened and developed constantly by them in harmony with the Body of Christ, so that it is growing continually. That is why the Church defends and supports the proper character of so many religious institutes.

This "proper character" permits a unique style of sanctification and apostolate which creates a particularly determined tradition whose objective elements are easily observed and analysed.

*At this time of cultural evolution and of renewal in the Church, it is therefore necessary that each institute should preserve its own identity. Then the danger of an insufficiently defined situation where Religious would insert themselves into the life of the Church in a vague and ambiguous way with insufficient reference to their proper character, might be avoided*¹⁷.

To live a charism means first of all to have discovered it as a certain way of reading the Word of God, taking from this reading the practical consequences for our Christian lives, and

14 N.D. XIII, p. 699. Cf. also E.S., p. 480 f.

15 N.D. XIII, p. 699.

16 Evang. Nuntiandi, 11.

17 Directives de Base sur les Rapports entre les Évêques et les Religieux dans l'Église (Cité du Vatican, 1978). 11.2.

for us as Spiritans, the consequences of the religious-missionary life. It is necessary then, to get to know Libermann, his fundamental insights and his experience of God, so that together with this reading of God's Word, we may be able to establish a programme of action in accordance with the demands of the present moment in which we live.

So far, we have noted some elements of Libermann's experience, and now we can put them into clearer relief :

- a) After his conversion Libermann lived continually in deep communion with God.
- b) Through this union with God he discovered his vocation of announcing the Gospel to the poor.
- c) In discovering the action of God in events, reading them in the light of faith, contemplating the saving acts of God and actually taking part in them, we discover a whole programme by which we can assimilate the basis of Libermann's spirituality. In this way we can live the ideals of Practical Union in the midst of the world and dedicate ourselves to the service of those men who as yet are unliberated by the Gospel.
- d) We need to acquire once again two priorities of the Spiritan charism : the contemplative cast of Libermann's thought, and his love for the most abandoned.
- e) Going beyond the perspectives of the charism set out at the moment of foundation, the fundamental criterion which should inspire the apostolic endeavours of Spiritans, should always be concern for those "who have not yet heard the Gospel message or who not yet heard it completely"¹⁸. Spiritans should always prefer to work in frontier situations.
- f) The founder's charism is situated less in the past than in the present ; it is a question of a vision and a hope, rather than a memory. By this prophetic gift a founder is always present among his spiritual sons. Without a vision of the future received from the founder, a community will be unable to interpret its own charism, because it will have lost the strength of its original impetus. Without this hope it will also be unable to understand and interpret its past ; its prophetic gift will be lacking.

¹⁸ Directive and Decisions, (General Chapter, 1968-1969), 1 and 3.

IV – AT THE SERVICE OF THE SPIRIT – THE DEMANDS OF HISTORY

The Spirit of the Lord continues to send out urgent and often agonising appeals. Pope John Paul II's journey to Mexico for the third CELAM Conference has once again made all men aware, and especially Christians, of the serious situation in which millions of human beings whom we are not ashamed to call our brothers find themselves. This is what he said :

The Church, expert in human matters and faithful to the signs of the times . . . asks today to continue its mission of faith and to defend the rights of man, inviting all Christians to get involved in the building of a more just, human and habitable world which is not closed-in on itself, but which is open to God¹⁹.

To make this world more just would mean, among other things, to make every effort to ensure that there are no more badly nourished children without education or instruction; that there are no more young people who lack the necessary formation; that there are no more peasants who lack the land they need to live and develop with dignity; that there are no more workers who are badly treated or whose rights are not respected; that there are no more systems which allow man to be exploited by man or by the state; that there is no more corruption; that there are no more people who have all they want while others, through no fault of their own, have nothing; that there are no more families which are broken, disunited and insufficiently aided; that there are no more injustices and inequalities in the administration of justice; that no-one lacks the protection of the law, a protection that should be given equally to all; that force does not prevail over truth and right, but on the contrary, that truth and right prevail over force; and that the economic and the political never prevail over the human²⁰.

The Spirit of the Lord is still speaking to us today and these words above represent one of the great signs of our

19 John Paul II – Le Message de Puebla – Éd. du Centurion, p. 55-56.

20 Ibidem, p. 56.

times. The inhuman conditions to which many men are subjected cry to God who, through his representatives, wishes to make his liberating power present among these men.

We are today at a crossroads where action and contemplation must unite to show us the way forward. Our world is used to accepting everything; hatred, injustice, economic and social inequalities, ideological and political marginalisation. The critical spirit is slowly diminishing and is being smothered little by little, even among those who at other times were more attentive to reality. The time has come to discover in the light of faith, what the divine plan of salvation is for humanity and for each individual. It is not enough to support or oppose political or ideological systems; it is necessary to pay attention to the misery in which contemporary man lives, in order to transform it according to the spirit of brotherhood which God has revealed in Jesus Christ.

Jesus evangelised by his words and by his liberating actions, and the work of missionaries should follow a similar pattern. We need men who are deeply rooted in the spirit of the Gospel and who are ready to risk all to give its liberating message to the poor; thus the liberation of the oppressed and the exclusion of all evil forces among those who are rich, will come through Jesus, the saviour of the whole human race.

We must contemplate deeply the mystery of our salvation in Christ, and admire God's loving plan of salvation for men; the need for evangelisation will flow from this experience.

The one who evangelises must try each day to be a living witness of what he announces; faith is not received just once and for all, it needs to grow continually and become more real in practice every day. Evangelisation is impossible if you do not live the faith as an option for the kingdom, as something which is always new within us; we need to be able to grow both personally as individuals and as members of a given community. Conversion in such a direction will open up new possibilities for evangelisation.

Evangelisation and love are universal and all men have a right to them, but this universality is only real in so far as it is part of history, takes different situations and surroundings into consideration and becomes pluralistic.

Christianity however, has always shown a preference for the poor, the humble and the simple in its evangelisation, and so it is necessary to re-examine at community level our involvement and our sharing with them.

V – EVANGELISATION THROUGH COMMUNITY

They remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. The many miracles and signs worked through the apostles made a deep impression on everyone. The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common²¹

The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power, and they were all given great respect. None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money from them, to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any members who might be in need²².

Up to this point, we have been dealing with the question of fidelity to the charism of the founder, keeping in mind the acute problems of our time upon which the proclamation of the Gospel must shed its light. But our way of life and the way in which we carry out our mission are also quite important. As well as the task of announcing the Gospel to the poor we should also be aware of the importance for Libermann of our life in community.

Hence, we will devote some time to considering the key role which community life has in the apostolic work of missionaries according to Libermann.

The following texts will serve to introduce this theme.

As men who live together in community, you must provide for your own sanctification and for that of your confrères and brothers; you must give good example in all things; you must be interior men, men of prayer, faithful observers of the rules and always inspired by their spirit; consider your superiors as the representatives of Our Lord Jesus Christ himself, obey them dutifully and with an attitude of simplicity in all that has to do with the religious life and your own sanctification. There should be no grumbling or harmful criticism, either publicly or privately, about their conduct or way of acting; never give in to this source of self-love which makes subordination to others

21 Act. 2,42-44.

22 Act. 4, 33-35.

hard for us and makes us always want to compare ourselves with our superiors; be respectful and open towards superiors and help to make their responsibilities easier to bear. Live together in peace united in the most perfect charity; care for each other and bear with one another's faults . . .

The conviction that you are always in the right is one of the greatest dangers for men who have to live together in the peace and love of Christ²³.

For the perfection of the apostolic life which is its end, for the stability and extension of the works which are its object, and for the sanctification of its members, the Congregation has taken community life as its fundamental rule²⁴.

All its members will always live in community²⁵.

In the "Instructions to Missionaries", Libermann states quite clearly that our role as ambassadors of the Gospel, demands that we live the same kind of life as Jesus by whom we are sent :

As the Father has sent me, so I send you²⁶

Holiness is therefore essential for the one sent if he is going to be effective in his work :

The missionary must first of all be holy, so as to bring the blessing of God on those he has to evangelise²⁷.

The missionary must imitate the One Sent by the Father :

Our life and work must be the same as his, for Jesus, who was sent "in the spirit of holiness", does not live in those who are not one with him²⁸.

There are two main ideas which become evident in the missionary thinking of Libermann; on the one hand fidelity to the mission received from Jesus, and on the other the need for holiness in those who are sent. He understood clearly the

23 N.D. IX, p. 326-327.

24 Règlements de 1849, N.D. X, p. 454.

25 Ibidem.

26 Jn. 20,21.

27 Letter to Father Duret, 10 May 1851, N.D. XIII, p. 146.

28 E.S. p. 375 et 374.

great importance of community life in the realisation of these objectives.

Nowadays we understand sanctification to be a growth in the following of Christ, a faithful response to the plan of God, who wishes to save all men in Christ through the preaching of the Gospel. We must then, take advantage of this God-given moment which today, as in Libermann's time, has its own peculiar characteristics.

If community is so important in the thought of Libermann, do we not have to re-discover it as the privileged place of discernment for our apostolic service?

Should not community life today make it easier for us to contemplate the mystery of God, a God who saves and unites all men into one people, a people to whom those who are sent to preach the Gospel also belong? Can we dispense ourselves from contemplating God's action in the world while at the same we carry out the work we have to do in accordance with his will?

Will the community not have to try to accomplish its mission of helping its members to grow in fidelity to Jesus and his mission by working among those with whom it should be concerned – the poor?

More than ever today, the work of bringing salvation to men demands the light and the Spirit of the Risen Jesus who is the real craftsman in the work; we are only his servants and the servants of the Church.

In its way of life, the community must show itself to be the evangelical conscience of an inhuman and dechristianised society. To fulfil this role it must have a deep concern for justice and a sincere desire for solidarity with those who live on the margins of society – whatever their condition may be.

Furthermore, the community should be the privileged place where its members can get a foretaste of salvation. It is absolutely indispensable for anyone wanting to live an apostolic life, to experience in a profound way the presence of the Risen Jesus in his brothers.

*Go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has risen from the dead and now he is going before you to Galilee; it is there you will see him. Now I have told you". Filled with awe and great joy the women came quickly away from the tomb and ran to tell the disciples*²⁹.

29 Mt. 28, 7-8.

It is this same Risen Jesus that we have to proclaim, while being rooted thus in a true apostolic tradition.

According to the original inspiration of Libermann we must devote ourselves to the poor. Our way of life in consequence, must be very close to that of the poor, and this way of living our religious and missionary life, in its external manifestations, must be discovered by each community in its own particular situation, and always in view of our specific end – first evangelisation. It is in this sense that the community should be the privileged place for the discernment of our apostolic priorities.

It is also the community which should help each one to attain an attitude of complete liberty, simplicity and availability without limits, so as to accept the new demands of Mission in every circumstance.

When it is a question of either leaving certain commitments for which we are no longer needed, or accepting new ones, the community should exercise an important role of discernment if it wants to remain faithful to the specific end. Since it is the community which always accepts the responsibility of apostolic commitments, the changing of one person should not cause a rupture with the work undertaken, because the community assures its continuity. The community also has a lot to bring into any new works which it may begin. Without doubt, the community represents a very precious element of stability and equilibrium and it helps to bring to a satisfactory conclusion all works undertaken within the scope of the Spiritan charism.

VI – NEW DEMANDS

It is perhaps here that we come across the most important question with regard to Mission at the present moment. The handing over to the local Churches of "mission territories" formerly confided to missionary societies is an irreversible fact, one which confirms the autonomy and responsibility of these particular Churches in their role of evangelisation. But this change-over is a slow process and one which requires a new form of presence on the part of those who are sent; their home Churches are now referred to as sister Churches.

In this new situation, Libermann's spirituality takes on a new meaning. More than ever we need a great spirit of abnegation to be able to put ourselves in the lowest place in an

attitude of generous service to the ecclesial community which receives us, and under the direction and leadership of those in charge of it.

Libermann, in a letter to the community of Dakar³⁰ emphasises that it is imperative to start off a new project on a solid base, and for that he recommends the acquiring of good customs and practices so that those who come afterwards will be formed by the good example of their predecessors. It may be said that the same thing happens today. The demands for unconditional service of the communities which welcome us call for an attitude of humility, poverty and abnegation, but also of confidence. To be servants and in the lowest place is not easy, especially when we are westerners and therefore tending to make dependent on us those who, in reality, we should be serving without expecting anything in return.

The spiritual depth contained in the idea of practical Union can help us to adapt to these new circumstances and the demands of the present time of the Mission that Our Lord continues to confide to His Church

Adaptation to the new stage of evangelisation in the local Churches according to the Spiritan charism will be the guarantee of a promising future for the mission of Jesus for all those who wish to follow in the footsteps of Libermann and Poullart des Places.

The local Churches need great men, but above all they need great Christians who put all their confidence in God.

We are in the process of entering fully into a new era of Mission whose plan for evangelisation will not depend upon things received from outside, but whose effectiveness will primarily be based upon the extent to which people live the same kind of life as Jesus lived. They will be the ones who will make the liberating and saving power of the Gospel more transparent; they will be the ones who, led by the Spirit of Jesus, will make the message of the Good News more credible.

Libermann asks that, in times of difficulty, we display «apostolic endurance», which he sees as the most authentic mark of the true apostle; this has been manifested in the past and also in our own times, in this new era of mission where the

30 N.D. IX, p. 324-331.

missionary must take a lower place and be aware that he is tolerated rather than accepted.

The tension between being called and being sent is clothed nowadays with very particular characteristics and it is important to be aware of them to be able to accept in a spirit of faith and service the proclamation of the Word of God.

It is an irreversible fact : the local Church is responsible for evangelisation ; this means that those who are sent must work within the pastoral strategy and orientations of the welcoming Church and offer it their services. This does not mean that there should not be a spirit of deep communion and dialogue between the two groups – on the contrary, these things should become more and more necessary.

VII – A DIFFERENT CULTURE

Libermann wrote the following to the community at Dakar :

Forget completely about Europe, its culture and its customs; be black with the blacks, to form them in the way that they should be, not in a European way, but in a way which is in accordance with their own character³¹.

Acculturation, which has always had an important place in the Church, acquires today an even greater importance, because the incarnation and indigenisation of the Gospel message does not compare with an imported Church in its expression of the faith. The Gospel needs to be assimilated into the culture of the country where it is announced, so that different cultures can be enriched by the proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ.

The world which we see before us is crucified by injustice ; because of this the missionary is called to give a disinterested service and to witness to abnegation in a world dominated by greed for power and profit. The men of our day find themselves exploited and marginalised by man himself.

This situation is so sad and inhuman that men begin to distrust one another and do not see each other as brothers travelling along the same road together, but as aggressive

³¹ Ibidem, p. 330.

competitors. Thus in many ways man himself has initiated the structures of his own destruction.

For the Church to remain truly itself in the midst of a culture, it is fundamental that it preserves its missionary conscience, that it is aware of being sent, of existing and working for the world, and that it strives to present to men the liberating values of the Gospel. What is more, the Church should know that to accomplish its mission, it is not enough that it walks alongside or even before men – it must go forward together with them³².

CONCLUSION

The missionary activity of the Church must necessarily be one of conformation to the mystery of the Christ-Apostle, that is to say, the One Sent by the Father.

*Jesus declared: "Whoever believes in me believes not in me, but in the one who sent me, and whoever sees me, sees the one who sent me"*³³

The Church needs people who will be witnesses of this new era of Mission. She awaits men with a charism for Mission, whose dynamism and spirit of prayer make them, before men and especially before Christians, witnesses of this particular dimension of the Gospel message.

There can be no Mission without the missionary and there can be no missionary who has not had a true spiritual experience and who is not firmly rooted in Christ. The missionary is one who witnesses in the Church to the mystery of Christ, who himself was sent by the Father to unite men of every people, race and nation under the leadership of one and the same Spirit; in each generation, the Spirit continues to raise up men for the task of Mission³⁴.

There can be no missionary except after the intervention of a totally free God, into the life of someone who is possessed by the desire for exodus and encounter, who is willing to be the sign of his love for all men as was his Son Jesus Christ.

32 V. Ecclesia, n° 1,928, year XXIX, March 1979, p. 21.

33 Jn. 12, 44-45.

34 Cf. René YOU, «Plaidoyer pour une nouvelle spiritualité missionnaire», in SPIRITUS, n° 74, Feb. 1978.

I thank Christ Jesus Our Lord, who has given me strength, and who judged me faithful enough to call me into his service even though I used to be a blasphemer and did all I could to injure and discredit the faith. Mercy, however, was shown me, because until I became a believer I had been acting in ignorance, and the grace of our Lord filled me with faith and with the love that is in Christ Jesus. Here is a saying you can rely on and nobody should doubt; that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. I myself am the greatest of them, and if mercy has been shown to me, it is because Jesus Christ meant to make me the greatest evidence of his inexhaustible patience for all the other people who would later have to trust in him to come to eternal life³⁵.

From what has just been said, we may conclude that there is a need for fidelity to the experiences which form the basis of our missionary spirituality, especially the experiences of Libermann himself. We must keep in mind his discovery of God and the Absolute, through which he came to realise his position as man, an insignificant being: «God is all... man is nothing»³⁶. And together with this experience of God, Libermann also discovered the reality of men living on the margins of society, whose state of life is unacceptable in God's eyes.

There is a need for fidelity to a particular way of serving our fellow man which, according to Libermann, must be done in and through community. It is in community that Libermann presents to the Church the witnesses of the Gospel who are to be sent out; in community because it is there that "apostolic zeal" will grow and, along with zeal, all the other qualities necessary for an apostle. Furthermore, community will permit missionaries to live the continual experience of Salvation as Gift of the Father.

There is a need for fidelity to the new era of Mission which demands that those who are sent put themselves in the lowest place and share their pastoral responsibilities with the Church which receives them.

In trying to remain faithful to his commitments, and realising that cultural adaptation takes time, the missionary must always be ready to move on; the tendency for missionaries to

³⁵ I Tim., 1, 12-16.

³⁶ Mgr Jean GAY, Libermann, Juif selon l'Évangile, p. 264.

settle down must not imprison them in the works which have been undertaken.

We must be ready, as missionaries, to be "men without frontiers" capable of going out to other peoples and other cultures.

There is also a need for fidelity to the Plan of God which is not compatible with the continuing reality of injustice and marginalisation in the world.

Perhaps we could end this short reflection by suggesting that, inspired by Libermann's Practical Union, the essence of Spiritan spirituality, there will be the possibility of raising up new witnesses to the Mission of Jesus today, witnesses who will work in frontier zones where prophets are needed who, in the light of faith, share the salvation which the Lord freely offers to all men.

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