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FROM DOUBT TO THE FAITH : THE CONVERSION OF FATHER LIBERMANN

Opening conference given to the Novices in France during their
Retreat,
by Father Bernard TENAILLEAU C.S.Sp.

1 – In the steps of Father Libermann.

At the beginning of this Retreat which we are going to "live" together, it is good for us to listen to the Word of God. Of the many dialogues in the Gospels, one of the most beautiful is that between Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (John 4 :1-42). "If only you knew the gift of God and who it is who says to you, Give me to drink, it is you who would have asked instead, and he would have given you living water" (John 4 : 10).

Jesus wants to quench our thirst with this living water of His Word and Spirit, just as He wished to quench the thirst of the Samaritan Woman. He wants us to draw water from the source He gives us, and that source is Himself. "... the man who drinks the water I give him will not know thirst any more. The water I give him will be a spring of water within him, that flows continually to bring everlasting life" (John 4:14).

To slake our thirst with the living water of the Spirit of Jesus is what we are invited to do during this Retreat. Now we ourselves meet Jesus for an intimate conversation. In silence and prayer we encourage the Lord to enkindle in us the desire to quench our thirst. Only someone who is thirsty can desire the source of living water.

The real Wells of Jacob, which are in reality the Lord Himself, *can be reached in different ways and along different paths*. For example, the Word of God, the Sacraments, the Eucharist, our life as missionaries, our religious engagement

are all hallowed places from which the living water can spring. There are other places too. Our heart has its own memories whose roots are nourished from past experience : from the experience of the Church and also from the experience of our Founders such as Father Libermann. Here we have, I believe, a well that we can profitably dig together and examine together. Libermann is himself a source that we can re-discover. Together, then, let us walk in "the steps of Father Libermann". The ways of meeting the Lord are many, just as the gifts of the presence of the Risen Lord are many, just as the gifts of the Holy Spirit are many.

One remark however is important. The spiritual progress of Father Libermann can only be of interest to us because it is the progress of a believer in whom we see the working of grace, the working of the Invisible God, the working of the source of living water. We are not looking for a hero; we are following *in the steps of a believer*, whose spiritual experience remains for us the road to follow.

It is clear that different ways can be found to penetrate the spiritual experience of Father Libermann. For myself, rather than explore this or that particular aspect of his life, I prefer *to allow myself be led along by the great occasions of his life*, because I believe we are more sensitive today to all that pertains to human life and human experience. Moreover, meeting the Living God is a very special occasion, it is a journey, and advance, an exodus. It is even a struggle similar to that between the Patriarch Jacob and the angel. How did the meeting between Father Libermann and the God of Jesus Christ come about? What road did he follow? How did he respond? How did he allow himself to be guided by the Holy Spirit? How did he welcome God's company on the road he trod?

These are the many questions I would like to answer with you, paying special attention to the action of God in the life of Father Libermann.

To set us off on our journey, which this evening will be directed towards the conversion of Father Libermann, I would first like to quote from a letter he wrote on 3 August 1846 to the young Jerome Schwindenhammer (who was the brother of Ignatius Schwindenhammer). At the time of writing, Father Libermann was in Rome waiting to present a Memorandum on the Mission in Guinea to Propaganda, while Jerome was still at student at Neuville, struggling with his headstrong character

and despairing of God's action in his own life. Father Libermann wrote him using the example of his own experience in a similar situation, or perhaps we should say, using the experience of the action of God in his own life. This letter gives us the key to all his spiritual experience: the spiritual life is a journey, a way of life, in which Jesus takes the initiative and of which He is the great craftsman. It is Jesus who alone models us interiorly, and we have only to remain docile to His hands and allow ourselves to be moulded.

"I will tell you something about myself on condition that you do not speak about it to anyone . . . It is certainly *grace alone* which has strengthened what was feeble and rectified what was defective. This is so clear to me that even if I came to lose the Faith my mind could never deny the existence of grace nor of its action in my soul. Whenever I spoke of virtue or of perfection, it was never after a long meditation, the words rather came to me as I spoke or developed as I was speaking. At the same time, I had an impression of clarity and strength of will. This impression disappeared as soon as I had finished speaking. This makes me think that God gave me this grace so that I could communicate it to others while I tremble with fear for my own salvation. But, God will have pity on me, I have no doubt. In short, I have acquired nothing by myself, neither intellectually nor in strength of will nor in the practice of virtue. *God has given it all to me.* He drew me to Himself without asking my permission with a violence that I have never before experienced. At first I was very indifferent and careless, and had very little spirituality in my life. The Lord gave me the grace to oppose my father who wanted to tear me away from the Faith. I renounced him rather than renounce my Faith. After that, *the Lord came unexpectedly to take me out of myself and hold me captive, completely absorbed in Him, for about five years . . .* My only preoccupation was to be with Him, and this I found very easy". (N.D. VIII 202-204).

In this letter, Father Libermann is explicit. The spiritual life is the response to God's first Gift, to God's taking hold of us, to God's kindness towards us. To emphasise this, Father Libermann quotes his own experience which he recognised as being *something special and personal*. This reminds us of

St. Paul, of St. Ignatius and of the other great converts. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, Father Libermann was taken hold of by Christ and he would remain all his life marked by this intervention even though he did not as yet know Christ who was to become the "all" of his life. It is impossible to follow in the steps of Libermann without taking as our point of departure the fundamental experience of his conversion.

2 - THE CONVERSION OF FATHER LIBERMANN

Father Libermann himself never wrote spontaneously about the stages of his conversion. This can be explained both by his humility and by the discretion he exercised about all that he felt interiorly. It could also be explained by the fact that he feared people would exploit his conversion among the Jews. This can be deduced from a letter he wrote on 6 July 1843 to his brother Samson, who was a medical doctor at Strasbourg, in which he mentions among other things the conversion of Alphonsus Ratisbonne, who had been received into the Church in Rome and who had written an account of his experiences (N.D. III 218-222). Whatever the reasons for Father Libermann's reticence were, it is *only in reply to questions put to him by intimate friends* that he gives, in a few lines, the course of events that led to his conversion.

Of these different accounts, the most detailed and the most complete is that of *Father Gamon, a priest at Saint Sulpice*, whom Father Libermann knew very well for a short time before leaving Saint Sulpice for the Eudist Novitiate at Rennes. In fact, Father Gamon, who was recently ordained, had spent the academic year 1836-1837 making his Novitiate in the "solitude" of the Seminary at Issy. Afterwards, he went to the Seminary at Clermont to become professor and director in the Major Seminary there (1837-1860). In 1850 he wrote to Father Libermann and asked him for a detailed account of his conversion. (N.D. I 59-70).

When reading this account, we can see the "turning-points", or landmarks, that Father Libermann himself recognised as he looked back in later years on his own road to Damascus.

The first of these landmarks dates from 1822. Jacob was at that time 20 years of age and had left the family home to

pursue his rabbinical studies at Metz. For him, this was the beginning of a great disillusionment which resulted in total religious indifference. Such was the narrowness of mind that proliferated in the rabbinical school at Metz, and such were the divisions among the Jewish Community, that Jacob was so disenchanted as to give up his studies and turn instead to the study of French and Latin, languages abhorred by the orthodox Jews.

"I was about 20 years of age when it pleased God to initiate the work of my conversion. My father, who was a distinguished Rabbi, decided to send me to Metz to complete my studies . . . Disappointed by everything I saw, I fell into a state of deep melancholy . . . Till then, I had lived as a Jew of good faith. But now, I fell into a sort of religious indifference which in a few months was replaced by a complete lack of faith" (N.D. I 61-62)

The second landmark dates from the year 1825 when his eldest brother Samson was converted. Samson was a medical doctor who had his practice at Illkirch, near Strasburg. Jacob knew that he was unsettled and that he had serious doubts about his Jewish faith, but he did not expect such a shocking outcome, with all the humiliation it would bring to the family of the respected old Rabbi of Saverne. At first he tried to persuade himself that Samson had acted from motives of selfishness. However, the ties that bound the two brothers were not severed, for Jacob could not really doubt the sincerity of his brother's conversion, even if at the time he could not accept it as the fruit of grace.

"My eldest brother has become a Christian. At first, I attributed this to natural motives" (N.D. I 62).

Jacob continued to keep up a correspondence with his brother even though he himself was torn with doubts about his faith. In a letter to Samson dated 6 January 1826 he states his own position with regard to his Jewish faith. This touching letter is of capital importance in understanding the interior struggle that Jacob was undergoing. Like the Patriarch in Genesis (32 : 23-33) he is at the ford of Jacob without realising it.

"I no longer believe in the Bible . . . What an absurdity it is to believe all the fables it contains . . . We say that God

has chosen the Jewish people to give them His sacred Law. It matters little whether I be a Jew or a Christian as long as I worship God, whether he is One Person or Three. However, I assure you that I would be no better a Christian than I am a Jew" (N.D. I 52-55).

The third turning-point came with Jacob Libermann's decision to leave for Paris in 1826. He had completed his studies in Metz and the question that haunted him now was – should he become a Rabbi. Deeply honest with himself, he was loath to embrace a profession in which he no longer believed. But, there was always his father to take into consideration, a father who had put all his hopes and trust in him. How ought he to face the future and what should he do to find the truth? Would it be possible for him to become a Rabbi in spite of all, maybe elsewhere than Saverne? Before becoming a Rabbi, Jacob knew that he would have to take a solemn oath never to abandon his religion. How could he do this when he no longer had the faith? In the meantime he learned of the conversion of his other two brothers, Felix and Samuel. This was a further source of sadness to him because now he found himself alone to face his father. He tried to find out something about Christ by reading the Gospels in Hebrew, but his thoughts only limped along. A Jewish friend in Metz named Lazarus Liebmann, advised him to go to Paris to meet David Drach who was a convert Rabbi and the son-in-law of Emmanuel Deutz, the Grand Rabbi of Paris. David Drach would be able to help Jacob to see clearly the question of his future as a Rabbi and the obligations which are part of such a profession. But, to go to Paris Jacob had to pass through Saverne to obtain his father's consent.

"A friend advised me to go to Paris to see M. Drach... but I had to have my father's permission to do so..." (N.D. I 63-64).

A fourth landmark is the meeting of Jacob with his father on his return from Metz in October 1826. The old Rabbi of Saverne had heard rumours about his son's progress and wanted to get to the bottom of it. To be able to judge Jacob's good faith and orthodoxy, the Rabbi prepared to test him and questioned him closely on some of the most subtle questions in the Talmud. Jacob answered with such brilliance that his father was satisfied and allowed him to leave for Paris immediately.

"My father was even more astonished than I was. His heart overflowed with joy. He found me worthy of him and all his apprehension disappeared. He embraced me tenderly and my face was covered with his tears. "I suspected that they were lying about you when they said that you were giving your time to the study of Latin and neglecting the subjects appropriate to your profession". At supper, he wanted to open his oldest bottle of wine to celebrate with me my success" (N.D. I 64-65)

The fifth landmark was Jacob's arrival at Paris. His interior turmoil was as great as ever, and was now aggravated because he had left his father without telling him about his deepest thoughts. He had not told him why he wanted to go to Paris. However, in his new surroundings, away from his father's restrictions, things began to move faster. The struggle as it were, between the angel and himself was coming to an end. Though he was deeply affected by the happiness his brother Felix felt after his baptism, Jacob was still far from feeling any change within himself. He was still riddled with doubts and his interior struggle continued as before. M. Drach had arranged for him to lodge at the Collège Stanislas to allow him a quiet environment in which to reflect. It was there that Jacob Libermann was overcome by grace. But let him speak for himself :

"M. Drach found me a room in the Collège Stanislas and took me there himself to introduce me. There I was left alone in a small cell with only the History of Christian Doctrine by Lhomond and the History of Religion by the same author. This was my hardest moment. 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 friends and my home, filled me with a profound sadness. My heart was oppressed by the most painful melancholy. It was at this moment that I thought of the God of my Fathers, and I threw myself on my knees and begged Him to enlighten me on the true religion. I prayed to God to let me know if belief in Jesus Christ was true, otherwise to remove me from its influence. The Lord, who is close to all who call on Him from the bottom of their hearts, heard my prayer. All at

once I saw the light, I saw the truth, Faith penetrated my mind and my heart. Setting myself to read the books of Lhomond, I accepted firmly and without difficulty all that he wrote about the life and death of Jesus Christ. Even the mystery of the Eucharist, somewhat imprudently offered for my meditation, did not discourage me. I believed without difficulty. From this moment I desired only to be immersed in the sacred pool. This happiness was not deferred for long. I was instructed immediately to receive this admirable sacrament and I was baptised on the eve of Christmas. The same day I was admitted to the Holy Eucharist. I continue to marvel at the wonderful change that came over me the moment the baptismal waters flowed down my forehead. All my uncertainties and fears fell away instantly . . . I felt a tender affection for all those who shared my new belief. (N.D. I 65-66).

Having entered the Collège Stanislas in mid-November, Father Libermann was baptised on 24 December 1826. The following year he entered the Seminary of Saint Sulpice. (The detailed account of the conversion of Father Libermann drawn up by Father Cabon can be found in Notes and Documents I, 94-105).

3 – IMPORTANT POINTS THAT FOLLOW THIS FIRST EXPERIENCE

Conversion is a grace

We are now in the year 1840. Father Libermann is in Rome waiting for the reply from Propaganda concerning the foundation of the work for the black race. Even though still only in Minor Orders, he had just written the Rule for the future Congregation. To occupy his free time, and above all to satisfy his thirst for contemplation, Father Libermann had begun to write his commentary on the Gospel of St. John. It was meant to be a spiritual commentary in which his intimate spiritual experiences expand and develop; we cannot but be reminded in a very direct way of the words of St. Paul: "It is no longer I who live, it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2 : 20). Several pages of this Commentary speak explicitly of conversion, of its nature and all that it entails. For

Father Libermann, conversion is something that he has lived through: *true conversion is a work of grace*. Commenting on the last verses of the discourse on the "bread of life" (John 6 : 66), Father Libermann puts these words in the mouth of Our Lord speaking to the crowd which would soon reject Him :

"I know that there are some of you who do not believe me and that is why I tell you that no one can come to me unless my Father has given him the grace to do so. It is not from human insight that you come to me, nor is it from the satisfaction of the pleasure that you feel. Likewise it is not from the sweet and soothing effect that my words have on the soul that you follow me. Those who react in this way are not coming to me but seeking themselves. It is not nature that gives perseverance but grace. Our Divine Master . . . makes everything depend upon grace and wants to fix our attention firmly on that fact" (Comm. St. John Ch. VI : 66)

Father Libermann always saw his own conversion in this perspective of grace. This was God's kindness acting in his own life. All along the road to conversion; Francis Libermann had been guided without realising it, by God. It was only later when the Baptismal water flowed over his forehead that he began to understand. Like Jacob at the Ford of Jaboc he too had wrestled all night with the "angel". His years at Metz, where he was haunted by doubts and religious indifference, were for him his "temptation in the desert". He was overcome, like the Patriarch Jacob, in a struggle with an adversary he could not see. The books he read left him without an answer though his thoughts were still active. He was beginning to lose his grip. Faced with his brother's conversion he acted with great sincerity. He greatly resented his brother's treason and the humiliation it brought. Yet, despite the injury he suffered, he did not separate himself from his brother but wrote him and shared with him his doubts and his questions about his faith and the Bible. Jacob no longer believed in Judaism. He was in a state of total confusion. The meeting with his father led to his being allowed to go to Paris, something that had appeared highly improbable. Later on, Father Libermann would come to realise that it was Christ who had taken hold of him, that grace was already working in his soul. In Paris, the last links with the past were to be broken,

the scales would fall from his eyes. A new presence has just entered, decisively, into his life. This presence was Christ before whom he abandons all resistance. He had still 25 years to live, 25 years of a journey that would bring much suffering. This we will examine together also. However, these years were dominated by one certitude that was totally evident to him: God is all, man is nothing. Left alone with himself and without God, man is effectively nothing. But, he can become everything if he allows himself to be possessed and led by the One who is "All".

Father Libermann looked back over the road to his conversion with the eyes of Faith. He fully understood that he had been grasped by Christ who had shown him a special preference. We too have been grasped by Christ and the most profound sign of this is the living presence of God in the lives of each one of us. Like Father Libermann, we too must not hesitate to look back over our own lives during this Retreat, look back, that is, with the eyes of Faith and in the light of the grace that is in our souls. Nothing that happens in our lives is alien to the loving grace of God whether we welcome it or resist it. If we go back over our lives thinking only of ourselves and what we have achieved we shall end up with very little. On the other hand, everything can become clear if we accept to examine ourselves with Jesus and in Jesus.

Conversion is an experience which takes many forms

Father Libermann realised that a conversion can follow many different routes and can appear under many different guises according to the totally free gift of God and His loving kindness. However, basing himself on his own experience, he distinguishes *two main types of conversion*: one is more striking and blinding and God's action is quite remarkable, the other is more humble and very ordinary. In later years, Father Libermann comes back to this distinction in his "Instruction to Missionaries". Even if the actual modes of conversion are different however, they have one thing in common and that is that all conversion is the fruit of God's freely given grace and attention. In his Commentary on the Gospel of St. John he wrote:

"All the perfection and all the merits of our actions are the result of grace; the gift of God and the merits of Our Lord are crowned in our lives" (on John 10:38).

What are these two great modalities of conversion as seen by Father Libermann? I will only quote the explanation given in the Commentary on the Gospel of St. John. This will perhaps help us to thank God, especially now during this Retreat, when He takes hold of us in a very special way.

"In the first of these two ways of conversion, grace precedes knowledge. Our Lord draws the soul to Himself and marks it interiorly with the grace of Faith without us being able to understand His words or His ways. The soul is faithful to this grace and gives itself up without resisting to the action of Christ accepting the faith without seeking to rationalise it and without seeking to understand the object of its belief. The words of Our Lord and His Divinity are accepted without looking for proof. But once the soul has accepted the Faith purely and simple from the workings of grace, then Our Lord gives it deeper insights and knowledge of the objects of Faith. This knowledge is far more perfect, far deeper and far more convincing than any knowledge that the soul acquires by itself.

In the second way God uses reason to convince us and lead us to the sheepfold. However, it is a reasoning that is inspired by grace that causes the conversion and leads to the Faith. We begin by reasoning about things, and then with the help of grace, we find the truth. Then with the help of another grace we accept that truth in the belief of Faith. This second road to conversion is less perfect than the first, because since this is a supernatural work the greater the action of grace the greater the perfection of the work. The more the human element influences our intellect and our judgment the less perfect the supernatural work" (Commentary on John 10 : 38).

What strikes the reader of these pages of the Commentary most is Father Libermann's insistence on the loving kindness of God. Behind such an insistence we see the force of his own spiritual experience. Throughout his life whether in his deeds or in his writings, we always find this primacy given to God's loving kindness. For Father Libermann, the true spiritual life is a response, a co-operation, a dialogue with God in which God is the principal partner.

Conversion is an experience to be lived in docility to the action of the Holy Spirit

For Father Libermann, the response to God's loving kindness is regulated in a very precise way: it is defined *in terms of docility to the Holy Spirit*. This is all that is required because the Holy Spirit is a gift from the Father and the Son, who is at once the creative breath and the bond of love between the Father and the Son, and which they wish to share with us. Since God wants to make His home in us, as St. John tells us, only one single thing counts – to be docile to the breath of this Spirit who lives in us and who alone gives us access to the Father and to the Son. Father Libermann wrote the following commentary on the meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus :

“The Kingdom of God can be truly recognised only by a lively faith animated by the Holy Spirit. It can in no way be recognised by human research. (John 3 : 3)

After our baptism, the Holy Spirit dwells in us in a way that vivifies us. He becomes in us the source of all the movements of the soul. He becomes the soul of our soul. It depends on us to allow ourselves to be marked and influenced by Him and to follow to a greater or lesser extent His holy promptings. This depends on the degree of grace in our souls and on the good or bad dispositions which we have. The more the Holy Spirit becomes the source of all the movements of our soul the more He influences our thoughts and dispositions and the more we are filled with Him, the more holy are our lives (John 3 : 5)

O Divine Spirit, I want to be like a light feather before you so that your breath may carry me wherever it will, so that I never bring the least resistance to bear on your action” (Commentary on the Gospel of St. John, 3 : 8).

There is however, a preliminary condition to this docility to the Holy Spirit upon which Father Libermann puts great stress. This condition is that the soul have a *great thirst for the gift of God*. This is what we would refer to today as the desire for God. Without such a thirst it is impossible to go to meet the Lord. But, it is God Himself who gives this thirst, who buries this desire deep in our souls provided we put no obstacle in His way. Father Libermann comes back to this theme of

the thirst for God's gift several times. He had experienced it himself long before his conversion and baptism. Again in the Commentary on the Gospel of St. John we find him writing about his first hesitant steps towards conversion. This is what the theologians call the "initium fidei".

"The conversion of all those who do not yet belong to the Lord always takes place in this way. The soul begins to seek and desire the glory that comes from God alone. It is brought to this point by one way or another but we have always to start from here. The first act of the soul towards God ought to be this act of desire which is a kind of hope of finding this glory of God. This hope and these searchings are still obscure, vague, dark and more or less mingled with bad intentions. Then God begins by making the soul feel the need of His grace. The soul responds by seeking God's grace groping like a blind man seeking his way. As yet there is no light, faith has not dawned to lead the way. As yet Our Lord is not the Way" (Commentary on St. John, 7 : 37).

Further on in Chapter 7 of St. John there is again mention of this "living water" and in his Commentary Father Libermann writes the following prayer :

"Let the one who thirsts come and drink". Lord Jesus, I hear your cry. You call me, Lord, and here I am. I thirst, my adorable Lord, with such a great thirst that I feel faint because I am empty and burning inside. Take me to you and give me water from the fountain of salvation to drink, so that the old creature no longer lives but only you living in me" (Commentary on St. John 7 : 37).

Again a little further on he comes back again to the necessity of desiring God and writes :

"When we thirst in this way and desire ardently to drink of this water of salvation, we must become ever closer to the Lord. The greater the thirst the greater must be the fervour with which we approach Him in everything. From this we can see, that to attain perfection and to obtain the great graces which sanctify us, it is not enough to practise virtue, to correct our faults and to respect our neighbour. That is only half a life of perfection. The other and more important half and which is the

essence of perfection is the fervour of our devotion and the interior movement of our soul, which gives itself to Jesus with loving devotion and with a great desire to please Him and draw to oneself His graces" (Commentary on St. John 7 : 37).

For you, who wish to follow in the steps of Father Libermann, begin as he did by examining your own life. Do not rely totally on your own self, but look back with the eyes of faith and with the eyes of Jesus Christ. Above all, let yourself be led on by your thirst and desire for the "living water". "Let him who thirsts come to me and drink".

Father Bernard Tenailleau
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