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## Libermann's Commentary of "Wisdom VIII, 1."

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## LIBERMANN'S COMMENTARY OF "WISDOM VIII, 1"

Solomon's Book of Wisdom was not part of the Hebrew Bible. Therefore, Libermann would not have known it until after his conversion. The book indeed is not one with which he is particularly well acquainted. Apart from a possible reference to Wisdom, XVI and what follows<sup>1</sup>, he quotes only from Chapter VIII, 1, which he read in the Vulgate as: *(Sapientia) attingit a fine usque ad finem fortiter et disponit omnia suaviter*. This Libermann translates in the letter we refer to below, addressed to Mlle de Loges, as: "He (God) achieves one end after another firmly and arranges all things harmoniously".

This quotation seems to have impressed him deeply. He refers to it frequently and quotes it explicitly on several occasions. We have thought it useful, in consequence, to gather together all the texts in which Libermann comments upon this verse: an important spiritual teaching develops through them. When presenting these texts we shall follow, as far as possible, the chronological order.

- 1) **Letter to Mr de Conny**, May 13, 1839 (N.D. I, pp. 406/407).

Mr de Conny was to be ordained Deacon in a few weeks: Libermann from Rennes, writes him a letter of spiritual advice. His reflections on fortitudo seem to have been inspired by the formula of the Roman Pontifical used in the consecration Preface of a deacon: "*Accipe Spiritum Sanctum ad robur, et ad resistendum diabolo et tentationibus ejus*" ("Receive the Holy Spirit that he may give you strength to resist the devil

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<sup>1</sup> Novitiate Conferences, March/April, 1851 (N.D.P. 692) . . . "The manna took on all the flavours desired of it" . . . This was part of Jewish tradition, well known to Libermann.

and all his temptations"). Though the text of Wisdom VIII, 1, is not directly quoted, it seems clearly presumed:

"As you well know, the diaconate has in it the divine power of Our Lord which makes it possible for you to resist the power of the enemy. This gift of fortitude you will receive is founded solely on Our Lord: it envelops within it a heavenly gentleness. Mere human strength is brusque and bristles with harshness: divine strength is serene, filling our soul with gentleness and giving uniformity to our action. Consider St Stephen: what great strength he shows and yet the divine strength in him is marked by all those characteristics I have already pointed out.

**2) The provisional rule, Part II, Chapter 8, Article 15.**  
(N.D. II, pp. 287/288).

M. Libermann was in Rome from the beginning of January, 1840. In a letter written on July 9 to Dom Salier, he reveals that he is writing a «Provisional Rule» for his new foundation. He also wrote a «fairly extensive Commentary», in which he explained the significance of each article. Regrettably, this Commentary is no longer extant but the particular article with which we are here concerned is clearly inspired by *Wisdom 8, 1*: this is confirmed by the Commentary he made on it for the benefit of young missionaries, which we quote below.

"They (the missionaries) should ally to their zeal fortitude and gentleness. They should wage unceasing war on sin and vice . . . Nonetheless, while pursuing their holy objectives vigorously, *all should be done gently, serenely*, after the manner of God Himself".

The words underlined are evidently a transcript of the Latin phrase: "et disponit omnia suaviter". It is Libermann's desire that his missionaries should model their action on that of God Himself.

**3) Letter to Mr Luquet, August 4 1840** (N.D. II, p. 124)

From Rome Mr Libermann wrote to Mr Luquet, still a student at St. Sulpice: –

*“May everthing in you be wholly supernatural, coming from the Holy Spirit: Whatever has its source in Him is kind and gentle, modest and humble, Strength and gentleness: these are indicative of divine action, they also summarise all apostolic action”.*

In this letter Fr Libermann speaks also of the Notebooks on the Rule (and the Commentary?) which he has sent to M. Pinault (p. 126) We already saw in N° 2 an extract from this Rule. The last words clearly refer to Wisdom 8, 1. Libermann, as he stated in the Rule, considers all apostolic action as modelled on divine action. We notice however that in this particular instance that action is attributed specifically to the Holy Spirit.

**4) Letter to Mr Douay, a seminarian: December 31, 1841. (N.D. III, p. 87 seq.)**

This letter was written from La Neuville, where Mr Libermann had opened his first Novitiate-House. Two passages are of interest to us. We underline the significant words: –

a) “How your activity and your inflexibility have resisted His good pleasure. Realise how His Divine Spirit is working unceasingly in your heart, *gently and firmly* and how your own spirit, for its part, is agitated unceasingly by bitterness and activity. The Holy Spirit, while working *powerfully*, pours out on your soul *gentleness* and peace. He plants in you the life of Jesus Himself – the affections, the loves, the desires of Jesus. How divinely beautiful is this life of Jesus! it is a life of love, and a life of love is a life of *gentleness and strength*, which fills us with the holiness of Jesus (p. 87).

b) “When Jesus acts through the Spirit, He moves the will and so sets all the other faculties in motion: our spirit clearly receives the impact of our Master but not by a direct action upon it. Thus, the Holy Spirit is always uniform in action: *strong and gentle*, harmonious and without agitation: it tends moreover to unite us to Our Lord. Briefly, there is no disorder in His action, which has all the savour of the action of divine grace?” (p. 89).

As in the preceding letter, Libermann attributes to the Holy Spirit the special characteristics of strength and gentleness, which in Wisdom 8, 1 are attributed to Divine Wisdom. We

should note particularly the description of the opposing defects: self-will, . . . bitter and feverish activity, agitation, disorder.

**5) Letter to Mr Ignatius Schwindenhammer: January 13, 1842 (N.D. III, p. 104).**

Mr Schwindenhammer was a deacon at the Seminary of Strasbourg. Libermann's letter to him is written from La Neuville.

"The principal quality you yet have to acquire is that of moderation of your mental activity. There is no need for me to delay long over it, as we discussed it at length last year. In your mind be always kind and gently disposed. Never be bitter or harsh, remembering the maxim: "*Attingit a fine usque ad finem fortiter, et disponit omnia suaviter*".

This is an explicit quotation of Wisdom 8,1. Once again observe the words he uses to describe the contrary defects: harshness and bitterness.

**6) Letter to M. Leon Levavasseur: July 20, 1845. (N.D. III, p. 226).**

This letter to Mr Levavasseur, then a student at St Sulpice, was also written from La Neuville.

" . . . always be temperate and free of harshness, so that Jesus may lead you in all your ways. Harshness is always an obstacle: the gentleness of spirit that distinguishes our works is frequently an indication of the presence of Jesus. Be firm in action but at the same time preserve a great spirit of gentleness. *Attingit a fine usque ad finem fortiter et disponit omnia suaviter*. Follow Jesus in this. If He works with you, He will impress upon you, He will make you aware of, his way of doing things: never harsh, severe, bitter, etc . . . , never agitated nor disturbed".

With the quotation of the Latin text of Wisdom 8,1, he once again points out the corresponding defects: harshness, severity, bitterness, agitation and disquiet.

7) **Letter to Miss Louise des Loges: January 8, 1843.**  
(N.D. IV, p. 70-71).

Miss Louise Voille des Voges was a young Breton girl of Montcontour who wished to consecrate her life to the mission for the black peoples. She would eventually become Sister Aurelie of the Congregation of Our Lady of Castres.

"Nature finds strength in severity: grace disposes the soul to gentleness, and can sometimes be a source of comfort to those whom we have to oppose. Sweet and gentle is the action of divine grace in those souls over which it has complete control: at the same time, it is strong and persevering. Speaking of the action of God's divine and merciful Providence, Scripture says " He reaches out from beginning to end, that is, from the moment His action begins until it is accomplished, "*He reaches out from beginning to end with strength and disposes all things with gentleness*". This is always the way Jesus acts upon the soul . . . with firmness in His action but with gentleness in the manner of it. Be faithful to what the Beloved desires to achieve in you and you will experience the wonders of His love of you and the incomparable delicacy of His mercy. Be gentle, peaceful and humble in His presence. Give your will to Him with determination and leave it with Him without restriction . . . Be very careful: every time you want to do your own will, however holy the object of your desire, your will has a certain harshness about it: every time your will is flexible in the hands of Jesus, and that you want only the good pleasure of your divine and beloved Spouse, you will find that your soul is both strong and gentle. How strong, how gentle is this beloved will of Jesus, the only love of your poor soul!"

Observe once more the confrontation: on the one hand, strength, serenity, consolation, sweetness, peace, constancy, humility, flexibility; on the other, the harshness of self-will . . .

8) **Letter to Mr Levavasseur, father of Leon: Sept 15, 1845.** (N.D. VII p. 305.)

Leon Levavasseur had sought admission to the Society of the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary. His father had shown his disapproval. Therefore, Mr Libermann wrote to him personally from La Neuville.

However much I should like to see your son join us, I have made up my mind to refuse him, if you are really opposed to his coming. It is a principle of ours not to force the issue. When the Holy Spirit acts, it is most certainly with force, but always He disposes things with gentleness”.

It is not just therefore in our interior life that each of us should imitate the “strong but gentle” action of God: but, in our relations with others, and in inevitable clashes of opinion.

**9) Commentary of the Provisional Rule: 2nd P, Ch 8, art. 8 & 9). (ed. F. Nicolas, p. 150).**

During his Novitiate at La Neuville (Oct. 1844-Aug. 1845) Mr Lannurien made a faithful copy of Mr Libermann's Commentary on the Provisional Rule. Two passages of this Commentary are of interest to us, both from the Chapter on *Apostolic Zeal*. The first is a commentary on Art. 8 & 9.

“True zeal consists in a charity that is ardent and pure . . . its companions are calm, gentleness, humility and constancy in difficulty . . . True zeal, peaceful, humble persevering, is a source of sanctification. It is never upset but moves us to pray for those who sin, to offer ourselves to God for them and to take to ourselves the punishment of their crimes . . . We should therefore try to acquire that holy and supernatural zeal proper to truly apostolic men. This requires that we control our imagination not “building castles in Spain” but always ready to be immolated and sacrificed to the glory of God, according to His good pleasure, content to wait in peace of spirit for the moment He judges opportune. That is the sign of true zeal, which assures us peace of soul. Zeal is a fruit of grace, a movement of God: in consequence, its action should be in conformity with that of God, strong but peaceful: *attingit a fine usque ad finem fortiter, et disponit omnia suaviter*”.

**10) Commentary of the Provisional Rule: 2nd Pt, Ch 8, a. 15. (Ed. Nicolas: Pp. 160/161).**

The following lines are a commentary of the article already quoted above (Text N° 2).

“One can be too gentle if this gentleness is only natural. The point is to be firm in action but dispassionate. To

harmonise both of these qualities in our action, it must be carried out in view of (God's) glory and as a response to His Will: moreover, with the help of the Holy Spirit we should examine the means to adopt for the realisation of the good we believe we should accomplish: this done, we should put them into operation with vigour. Nevertheless, our application of them should be free of passion: we should always preserve freedom of spirit in our action, freedom to judge and to discern the demands of prudence; freedom of hearts filled with charity for our neighbour. The man who has true self-mastery and fulness of charity, weighs, examines, foresees means and likely obstacles: he then sets to work with determination, not allowing himself to be disturbed by any merely human power. By contrast, the zealous man not wholly master of himself, who allows himself to be carried away by impetuosity, sees a good to be done, an evil to be prevented, a vice to be uprooted; but, he does not stop to weigh the difficulties. He goes right ahead with his plan, breaking down whatever lies in his way if he can; still, unforeseen obstacles stop his way forward and upset his badly-planned efforts. That is when he becomes guilty of imprudences, attacking people, using no diplomacy: instead of doing good, he does harm. That is not the correct way to act: we should imitate God's way of conducting things: He *attingit a fine ad finem fortiter et disponit omnia suaviter*"

These two passages of the Commentary on the Provisional Rule are of primordial importance: with a wealth of practical precision they apply directly to apostolic zeal the principles required to harmonise human action with that of the divine, as described in the Book of Wisdom.

**11) Regulations of 1849: 2nd Part, Sect I, Ch. 2,  
Art. 14.** (N.D. X, Pp. 511/12)

After the "Fusion" of Libermann's own Society with the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, he drew up a new edition of the Rule, published as REGULATIONS, in 1849. There he repeats almost textually the lines we have already quoted above (n° 2). This fact of itself shows the importance he attached to this particular teaching.

"In their zeal they should ally firmness with gentleness. They should wage unceasing war on sin and vice, pursuing them relentlessly until they are eradicated: to that end

they shall arm themselves with the virtue and power of the Master, which He is always ready to communicate to them if they are faithful. But, while pursuing their holy objectives with determination, all shall we done with kindness and gentleness, as is the way of God Himself”.

12) **Letter to Mr Fridoli: December 28, 1849.** (N.D. XI, P. 317).

Mr Fridoli was a member of the Colonial Clergy working in Gorée. He was particularly devoted to the cause of the Blacks but had some difficulties with the former Minister of Slaves and other representatives of the Government. These accused him of intemperate zeal and lack of prudence. On Dec. 18, 1849, Mr. Libermann had to intervene on his behalf with the Naval Minister (Cf. N.D. pp. 295-299). He wrote directly to Mr Fridoli to encourage him, while at the same time giving him some advice on his conduct in future.

“Have no regrets if you experience pain and suffering in your work for the glory of God. Nevertheless, in all circumstances, and especially in those in which you now find yourself act with the prudence, gentleness, charity and moderation of a man of God: most especially towards those who cause you pain. To this prudence, gentleness, charity and moderation unite the ardour, the activity and energy of true zeal: they should be the cadre in which these are executed. In brief, ardent desire for the salvation of souls, vigorous action to realise this desire: but, the energy and determination to realise our desires should submit itself to and express itself in terms of the prudence of the Spirit of God which enlightens us: and, in all our exterior acts we should be moderate and calm, especially with regard to those who are opposed to the work of God, lest we break them and impede this holy work. We should act like God, our Master, of whom it is written: *“Attingit a fine usque ad finem fortiter et disponit omnia suaviter”* *Fortiter et suaviter*: that describes the nature and conduct of a priest who is God’s representative on earth”.

These words of advice are dictated no doubt by the particular character of Mr Fridoli and the particularly difficult ministry that was his. Nevertheless, it is certainly true that these lines reflect Mr Libermann’s habitual way of thinking: how necessary they were appears from what follows in this letter.

## CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, we could quote other texts, for example the important letter to Mgr Truffet (Nov. 22, 1849: N.D. IX, p. 151). in which similar advice is to be found: but these do not refer to Wisdom 8,1, nor even to *the action of God*, which is *fortiter et suaviter*. However, the texts here quoted are sufficient to our purpose and allows us to make a brief synthesis of the teaching that follows from them.

Libermann never describes explicitly the action spoken of in Wisdom 8, 1, as that of divine *Wisdom*. He speaks always of the action of God Himself, the action of grace, divine conduct, Providence, and sometimes of the action of Christ or of the Holy Spirit. We should not be surprised at this: the Old Testament itself never distinguishes between Divine Wisdom and God Himself. Moreover, it would appear that Libermann was not much interested in Wisdom in itself: only rarely does he refer to those passages in the Bible that speak of it.

His principal interest, when he speaks of the action of God "forte et suave", is the spiritual life of his correspondents or hearers, and also their apostolic life. They should imitate God or His Holy Spirit in their way of acting: in fact, it is the Holy Spirit that acts in them and so they should allow themselves to be led in His way: He it is who acts *with determination and with power*: "it is He Who" gives impulsion to the will and so sets all our faculties in motion" (Cf. Text N° 4). This power of divine action is manifest in a certain uniformity of constancy in the interior act (Nos 4 & 7). This is seen first of all in the will, not in movements of the imagination (N° 9), of the passions (N° 10) or even the fabrications of the human spirit (Nos 4,5 & 10). Mr Blanchard has clearly shown the primacy of the will in the spiritual doctrine of Libermann<sup>2</sup>: in spite of its importance, we shall not delay over this point.

Since it is on the human will that the Holy Spirit acts directly, the life of the Christian, and of an apostle, is a "life of love, and the life of love is a gentle powerful one . . . it inclines us to union with Our Lord" (N° 4). It is clear therefore that such a life cannot be reconciled with all the faults enumerated

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2 P. Blanchard: Le Ven. Libermann, I, Paris 1960, p. 230/45 & 339/41.

in the text: abruptness, bitterness, uneasy agitation, disorder, harshness, severity, asperity . . . All, in fact, that is not the fruit of charity but of an excessive preoccupation with self, with success: a passionate attachment to our own ideas, impatience . . . Truly, all these faults are in opposition to not merely the gentleness and serenity of divine action but even to true strength, since they reveal a lack of self-control: "The man who is fully master of his movements and wholly charitable, calculates, examines and foresees means and obstacles, then goes into action firmly and allows no merely human power to stand in his way. By contrast, the man who is zealous but lacking in self-control . . . does harm instead of good.

That is not how we should act. We should imitate the way God acts, *attingit a fine us que ad finem fortiter et disponit omnia suaviter*" (Cf n° 10 above).

Joseph Lecuyer