

12-1986

Father Libermann and the Reading of Sacred Scripture

Claude Tassin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-papers>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tassin, C. (1986). Father Libermann and the Reading of Sacred Scripture. *Spiritan Papers*, 20 (20). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-papers/vol20/iss20/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Spiritan Collection at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Papers by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

FATHER LIBERMANN AND THE READING OF SACRED SCRIPTURE*

by Claude Tassin, CSSp.

Father Libermann's correspondence offers about a dozen passages concerning Sacred Scripture, most of them addressed to seminarians. This is quite a small proportion of the entire collection of his letters, which come back much more often, for example, to the problems of *mental prayer*. But precisely, the author does not envisage the reading of Scripture outside the context of prayer; and there already is an indication of the sense which he gives to the reading of the Bible.

In a previous article¹, we had emphasized what Fr Libermann owed, as we thought, to his Jewish roots in his way of meditating on Scripture. This point is more complex than appears, in as much as, even today, in virtue of their common roots, Judaism and Christianity practise in parallel the same techniques in the reading of sacred texts. Let us remark as well that there should not be any cause for surprise if it is affirmed that, in regard to the reading of the Bible, Fr Libermann does not add anything very original in relation to earlier spiritual movements, especially that of the "French School"².

* The abundance of these notes will, I hope, be forgiven: they are modestly presented as the basis for a more extensive and thorough research.

¹ C. TASSIN, "How Libermann read the Gospel: a Study of the Commentary on St John", *Spiritual Papers No. 4* (1977), Rome, pp. 31-44, especially pp. 33-39.

² The present article may be situated within a wider perspective, at least with the help of the following two articles in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*: J. ROUSSE, H. J. STEBEN, A. BOLAND, "Lectio divina et lecture spirituelle", tome IX (1976), col. 470-510 and J. MARECHAL, "Application des sens", tome I (1937), col. 810-828. This last article can be integrated in quite an extraordinary way within the theological perspectives of H.U. von BALTHASAR, *La Gloire et la Croix, I. Apparition*, Paris, 1965, pp. 309-360 "les sens spirituels".

Nevertheless the reflections of Libermann concerning this subject form a coherent way of thinking, and calling it to mind can still be a challenge to those who, for one reason or another, claim to draw their inspiration from that spirituality.

The first part of this article will go in the search of passages where Fr Libermann has expressed himself on the reading of the Bible. The second part will try to single out the basic principles of the kind of reading which he recommends. Finally, some more personal reflections will be offered on the present significance of such a message.

I. SOME GENERAL POINTS

On the reading of the Bible, Fr Libermann often returns to the same points of reflection. First we would like to take stock of these points before going deeper into some features that are important in our eyes. It is best to begin by presenting the following article of the *Provisional Rule* which, as we shall see, sums up various pieces of advice scattered throughout the letters:

Each one will devote half-an-hour every day to the reading of the *New Testament*, unless occupation with the holy ministry absolutely prevents it. This reading is not to be done out of curiosity or by way of study, but in a spirit of prayer and in the presence of Our Lord Jesus Christ. An effort will be made as well to arrange for oneself a few moments each day for reading the other parts of Holy Scripture³.

1) The reading of the Bible is to be frequent, daily, relatively short (according to the Rule, mental prayer would last an hour at that time). These instructions are very similar to the advice that Fr Libermann gives to his correspondents: “**If you have a taste for the reading of the holy Gospel, read it**

³ *Règle provisoire*, 2^e partie, ch. VI, art. 14 in ND II, p. 278 (written during his stay in Rome, distributed in 1845).

often. . . Do not read much at the same time"⁴. This reading is sometimes conceived as a help for prayer: "If you cannot keep yourself occupied without the help of a book, take the Imitation or the *New Testament*; read a verse of it and occupy yourself with that"⁵.

2) It is the reading of the New Testament that is favoured. For himself, Fr Libermann is completely immersed in the spirituality of the texts of St Paul and of St John's Gospel. His attachment to this evangelist is certainly from the same motives as those he attributes to M. Liévin: "The taste he had for St John, came from the fact that Our Lord speaks there always, and he could never grow weary of collecting his works". And he continues: "What he felt for St Paul had its origin in the esteem he had for M. Olier, and in his own experience of finding there the genuine perfection and the pure spirit of Our Lord Jesus Christ whose true doctrine this great apostle has so faithfully transmitted to us"⁶. Very often Fr Libermann encourages the reading of the Gospels and of St Paul⁷. In the *Regulations of the Congregation*, a new edition, in 1849, of the Provisional Rule, the same insistence will return, within a more explicitly apostolic aim: "The missionaries. . . will often read and meditate on the holy Gospel and the writings of the apostles, to acquire a perfect knowledge of Our Lord Jesus Christ and of his holy Mysteries, so that they may be filled with the great and admirable truths which he came to teach us by himself and by his Holy Spirit"⁸.

3) When the Provisional Rule speaks of "the other parts of Holy Scripture", it is of course referring to the Old Testament. In Libermann's conception of biblical reading, the Old

⁴ L.S.II, p. 381, letter of 1839 to a seminarian; see also L.S.II, p. 280 (from Rennes, 16 August 1839 to a seminary director). Compare this advice to that of Francis de Sales: "Read as often as you can, but a little at a time and with devotion" (*Œuvres*, tome 17, p. 13). This was also recommended by M. Olier, according to L.S.I, p. 531.

⁵ L.S.I, p. 322 (from Rennes, 10 October 1837, to a seminarian).

⁶ E.S., pp. 628-629.

⁷ L.S.II, p. 185 (from Rennes, 9 January 1839, to a seminarian); L.S.II, pp. 346-347 (of 1839, to a seminarian).

⁸ *Directoire spirituel*, p. 545.

Testament must be spontaneously placed in relation to the New, as fore-shadowing Christ. This is the spiritual principle of the unity of the Scripture: **"In the Old Testament, pause piously at the pre-figurations which represent the different subjects of the New Testament, such as the prophecies which announce Our Lord and the law of grace. . . Give nourishment to your soul by considering the spirit which animated the patriarchs of old and the prophets"**⁹. That last sentence refers us to the way in which the *Commentary on St John* understands Esdras and other scribes of the Old Testament, who **"either in the traditional explanation of their law, or in particular illustrations, received concerning the Messiah, Son of God, who was announced to them everywhere in such a hidden manner, as well as concerning all his life, his mysteries, his greatness and the humiliations to which he would submit. . ."**¹⁰.

4) **"This reading is not to be done out of curiosity or by way of study"**, says the *Provisional Rule*. This is a point to which Fr Libermann often returns. Having noted, with the subtlety of a modern exegete, the redactional problem posed by *Jn 4,38*, he remarks straight away in the *Commentary on St John*: **"we must not allow ourselves to be carried away by that curiosity, which desires to seek and know these secondary matters, and which is basically indifferent concerning the knowledge of Our Lord and concerning the sanctification of our souls"**¹¹. His letters are peppered with analogous appeals: **"watch especially your eagerness for science. . ."**¹²; **"I advise you to read St Paul without a commentary"**¹³; **"do not be carried away by the eagerness of your mind for the beautiful things that you see in the words of grace which come from the mouth of our**

⁹ ND III, p. 68 (from la Neuville, 1841, to M. Lannurien); in L.S.II, p. 587f., the beginning of the sentence is erroneous.

¹⁰ C.J., 2nd edition, p. 210. (The other references that will be made to the *Commentary on St John* are to this second edition).

¹¹ C.J., pp. 160-161.

¹² L.S.I, p. 338 (from Rennes, 31 October 1837), letter to a seminarian who, according to the context, had overdone his "swotting" of Hebrew and Greek during the holidays.

¹³ L.S.II, p. 185 (from Rennes, 9 January 1839, letter to a seminarian).

Lord and good Master" ¹⁴; "you know that you have to keep a watchful eye on your mind, which always wants to know the reason for everything and which reasons about everything in a human manner: that is the right way to being unfaithful to our good Master" ¹⁵; "it must be read (Holy Scripture) in the spirit in which it was given, but not in a spirit of curiosity" ¹⁶. Let us stop this accumulation of quotations. In the type of reading of the Bible recommended here by Fr Libermann, all idea of research and of *curiosity* must be put aside. This apparent anti-intellectualism must be put in context first with regard to the concrete state of the correspondents (sickness, risk of avoiding duties of state, excessive fascination with science, cf. footnotes) ¹⁷. Moreover, he is rooted in a whole spiritual tradition which, in parallel with the education of the mind, intends above all to inculcate a *personal, committed, spiritual* way of approaching Scripture, which, as we shall see, retains all its relevance. Francis de Sales had already written: "To want to read out of curiosity is a sign that we still have a somewhat superficial mentality" ¹⁸. Vincent de Paul is more direct; this saying is attributed to him: "Curiosity is the pest of the spiritual life".

5) Once "curiosity" and "study" are excluded, what remains? "The spirit of prayer" and "the presence of Our

¹⁴ L.S.II, p. 381 (1839), letter to a seminarian who distinguished himself by his "hotheadedness" and his "terrible activity". The end of the extract refers to *Luke 4,22*. Is it a reminiscence of the writings of John Eudes who often recalled the scene in the synagogue at Nazareth in *Luke 4*?

¹⁵ L.S.II, p. 344 (1839), letter to a seminarian who had a passion for writing and literature. In the same letter, p. 346, the following celebrated cry is heard: "... you would not be ashamed to go and amuse yourself with the nonsense of Homer and Virgil, and leave aside the holy Gospel and St Paul! That would be unpardonable!"

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 347. F. GILS reminds me that this formulation comes from the *Imitation of Christ*. Here is the under-lying text: "All Scripture ought to be read in the same spirit in which it was written. . . Often our curiosity does us injury in the reading of holy Scripture, when we want to understand and discuss where we should simply pass on" (*De Imitatione Christi*, Book I, Chapter V, 1-2).

¹⁷ At the time when Fr Libermann wrote, the word "curiosity" already had the double sense, positive and pejorative, that we know: "Desire to know or to see. . . An ardent and often indiscreet desire to know, to surprise, to find out secrets, other people's business", P. LAROUSSE, *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle*, 1869, sub voc.

¹⁸ *Œuvres*, tome 6, p. 292.

Lord Jesus Christ", says the *Provisional Rule*. It is not question of a simple need for recollection. As we shall see, this idea of the *presence* of Christ has to be taken in the strong sense. It is the very purpose of our reading: to be placed in the presence of Christ, to be united to his person and, as with every person who has "presence", to allow ourselves to be impressed and transformed by him. The twofold recommendation of reading little, but faithfully then takes on its full meaning. On the one hand, the page of the Bible becomes a support for dialogue, a "**subject of conversation**" that ought, to a certain extent, fade away, become transparent. But rather let us transpose this image into a sonorous register with this comparison of St Augustine¹⁹: "*Wanting the word, which is already in my heart, to come over to you, and make its way into your heart, I make use of my voice to talk to you. The sound of the voice brings you to understand the word. And when my voice has done this, it ceases; but the word carried to you by the sound is now already in your heart, and has not left mine*".

There is need in some way to "break through" the page in order to enter within. But, on the other hand, the biblical word conveyed by the text cannot vanish: it is written *for me*; it is in this conviction that the *Commentary on St John* moves several times into explicit prayer. Again, that is why, frequently in his letters, Fr Libermann speaks of an attitude of submission, of humility:

Our adorable Master shows us how all the divine words he addresses to us must be weighed in a holy manner. . . Each discourse has its purpose and its end, each sentence is weighed, measured and arranged to bring about varied effects of light in intellects, and of love in wills; each word is in its place, nothing useless and superfluous, no vague and approximate term. All springs from the eternal wisdom of the Father. . . From that how should we not go deeply into all these divine words, which have come forth from the mouth of the Word of God! We must not content ourselves with seeing in them only

¹⁹ Serm. 293, 3, P.L. 38, 1328, trans. from the Divine Office, 3rd Sunday of Advent.

a superficial sense. . . but must enter into the most intimate sense of each word, and review it for ourselves in the presence of God and by the light of the Holy Spirit. When we do not penetrate and when we cannot understand, then let us humble ourselves and say to ourselves that we do not understand this passage perfectly²⁰, and let us be content with understanding at least something, being unworthy of the happiness of reading only these divine words²¹.

We are thus at the heart of biblical reading: an encounter with Christ which aims at transforming the reader. Let us add two testimonies to such a perspective. In the little work entitled "Short Treatise on the Interior Life" which, on the 19th June 1841, Fr Libermann sent to M. Dupont from Strasbourg for his friends in the seminary at Issy²², the purpose of the interior life is thus defined: "**the interior soul tends in all its works to bring about the death of its natural life, in order to allow Jesus Christ to live and reign in it**"²³. In this context, the reading of the Bible is to be situated as a means of realising this purpose, among the "means of nourishing and increasing the interior life": "**Great assiduity in reading and in meditating on Holy Scripture, which is the light which ought to guide us, give us warmth, and which is a most vivifying nourishment for our soul; to be nourished little by intellectual views and much by union of the will**"²⁴. The second testimony has already been partially quoted. It shows very well that the missionary, in his reading of the Gospel, aims above all at an interior knowledge of Christ ("to be filled") to become perfectly conformed to Christ in the mission which is confided to him ("as he announced them himself"):

²⁰ These dispositions are exemplified in M. Liévin: "When he would not understand a text. . . , he would pass over it, peacefully submitting to the most holy will of God who left him in the dark about his divine word", E.S. p. 630.

²¹ C.J., pp. 390-392, *passim*. Entire expressions from these pages appeared in a letter of 1835 addressed to a seminarian, L.S.I, p. 108.

²² E.S., pp. 271-280; on the circumstances of the sending, ND II, p. 485.

²³ E.S., *ibid.*, p. 271.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

Missionaries, sent by Our Lord Jesus Christ and in his holy Name preaching the doctrine of salvation which he came to bring upon the earth, ought to have these divine truths in the heart and announce them as he announced them himself.

That is why they will often read and meditate on the holy Gospel and the writings of the apostles, to acquire perfect knowledge of Our Lord Jesus Christ and of his holy Mysteries, to be filled with the great and wonderful truths which he came to teach us by himself and by his Holy Spirit²⁵.

II. FROM THE BIBLE TO THE WORD OF GOD

We have outlined the principal characteristics of Bible reading according to Fr Libermann and tried to throw light on these features by recalling his writings. We would now like to categorize better this spiritual approach to the Bible, to systematize some reading techniques of Fr Libermann himself and finally to situate, if possible, his position with regard to exegesis.

A. ENCOUNTER WITH THE WORD OF GOD

At the end of the first part we emphasized that for Fr Libermann reading the Bible is an encounter which puts us in the presence of Christ. Let us go back to the presuppositions of such an approach, beginning with this extract from one of his letters:

I advise you to read St Paul without a commentary, but before God and in a spirit of prayer. When you have absolutely no understanding of a passage from his epistles, consult a commentary on this passage only, and then take up the text again to meditate on

²⁵ *Directoire Spirituel*, p. 545.

it before God. Thus you will be able to draw very great fruit from it²⁶.

The advice given here supposes as a prerequisite a certain familiarity with the texts of Paul, an understanding of their literal sense. If this sense is not completely assured, then a "commentary" is used – the explanatory notes in our bibles, we would say today –. But that is only preparatory "spade work"; the main thing is to achieve a reading that bears fruit ("very great fruit").

As we have seen, this reading aims at a *knowledge* of Christ, a knowledge which transforms the reader, makes "his natural life die in order to allow Jesus Christ to live" in him. It is question then of a kind of experimental knowledge, an investment of the whole being, an adherence of the person which surpasses the order of the mere intellectual faculties. This experimental side appears clearly in this advice given to M. Lannurien:

For the New Testament, apply yourself to nourishing (your soul) with the doctrine full of love and grace which is enclosed within it; enjoy it, savour it, savour as well the knowledge of your divine Master, but a practical and loving knowledge. . .²⁷.

Already it can be seen that the mere intellectual plane is surpassed: "enjoy it, savour it". It is indeed a question of knowledge, but "practical and loving" which includes our affectivity ("enjoy") and our senses ("savour"). Here we are at the heart of the anthropological problem. Without going into the delicate question of the anthropological ideas of Fr Libermann (theory of the faculties, etc.), let us content ourselves with what his language shares with the constant themes of the history of spirituality. Right from the biblical descriptions, spiritual traditions picture man as a totality and the human being as endowed with *senses*: "it is only by the senses and in them that man perceives and acquires contact with the reality of the world and of being"²⁸. All human knowledge passes through the senses, that is to say. But can

²⁶ L.S.II, p. 185.

²⁷ L.S.II, p. 588 (La Neuville, 12 December 1841).

²⁸ H.U. von BALTHASAR, *La Gloire et la Croix*, I. . . , p. 309.

divine, non-sensible, realities also be encountered through the senses? The theologian will reply by pointing to the reality of the incarnation. But let us remain on the anthropological plane. In fact the senses, and nothing else, basically give us the experience of *otherness*: I touch this table and, since touch is the most "reflexive" sense, I sense *myself* touching a *resistance*, the table, which is not me. Here all the ambiguity of the senses becomes apparent: I can "divert" them into sensuality, caressing for the pleasure of *my* touching, or make of them the medium of encounter with the other as other, caressing for the wonder of the beauty of the other. The sense is in itself bearer of a communication, with the other, of something other than of the materiality of the sense: *there is soul in the sense*. The eye, for example, is also *regard*, expression of the person for the other (and for myself): "Just as in the human face and in the whole human structure the instinctive psyche of man as well as his freedom of spirit are translated in an inseparable manner. . . , likewise the object of knowledge that one mind presents to another is always clothed in sensible symbolism"²⁹. The physical is inseparably physiognomy; which is to say that the senses have in themselves a spiritual dimension. Language, beginning with the biblical language of the psalms, translates this dimension very well: "I see what you want to say. . . I won't hear of it. . . I scent there the stench of anger. . . with my finger I touch his fragility. . ." Whether the senses be translated through the imaginary or transposed by metaphor, the metonymy is significant: the senses transcend themselves to arrive at a knowledge of the other as other, to encounter *in* the sensible that which is not sensible. There we set out on a trail the following of which would demand a minute analysis which we cannot undertake here. We get back to what, from the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, is known as the "application of the senses", but has many antecedents in spiritual tradition, at least since Origen. It can be question of the imaginative senses by which, in a very simple way, our affectivity "sees", "hears" the characters of a gospel scene. Or it can be question of a metaphorical application of the senses to invisible realities: "*all our senses lend themselves to a transposition which operates on an ef-*

²⁹ H.U. von BALTHASAR, *Phénoménologie de la vérité*, Paris, 1952, p. 83.

fective basis, and essentially consists in keeping, before immaterial objects, the total attitude that one is accustomed to take in the seeing and hearing, etc., of sensible objects"³⁰.

Be that as it may, the Libermannian perspective is analogous: our senses have a dimension of interiority and ought as such to participate in the reading of the Bible if there is to be an authentic encounter with God in his Word:

"May your spiritual ear be attentive to his adorable voice speaking in the depths of your soul; may your spiritual eye be modestly drawn towards him in a spirit of continual prayer, and may all the activity of your will consist in following him with love, with peace, with docility and confidence. . . With your exterior senses, in peace and docility, listen to the word of men and of authors; but, at the same time, in your interior and by prayer, listen to the divine word"³¹.

In an earlier letter, the same descriptions were applied to reading texts of M. Olier: **"you know well that it is not man that given this strength and this efficacy, but rather divine grace which forms an interior word, at the same time as your eyes are caught by what you read and your ears by the voice of him who tells you these things"**³².

All this has nothing to do with a search for some extraordinary sensation. It springs from a calm, relaxed attitude, which, starting from texts already familiar to the understanding, guides the whole person, his affectivity included, to the experience of a certain presence and allows the *will* ("the heart") to adhere to what the biblical passage says in a simple desire to correspond to what is being read.

At this stage, we can justify the title of this part of our article: it is not so much a question of reading the Bible as of hearing and encountering the Word of God. Without doubt then the study of the texts constitutes a necessary prerequisite. Necessary to avoid being led astray onto illusory paths: **"it dissipates many illusions of the mind and rectifies sev-**

³⁰ J. MARECHAL, *Dict. de Spir.*, art. cit., col. 826-827.

³¹ L.S.II, pp. 479-480, to M. Clair (from Rome, 11 September 1840).

³² L.S.II, p. 326 (of 1839, to a seminarian).

eral false ideas into which one can sometimes fall with regard to holy things". But study comes under the jurisdiction of the "natural" domain: "Study just as you eat and sleep. To save souls, you must eat and sleep; but from that is it necessary to say that it is the eating and the sleeping that saves souls?"³³. In such a matter, to revel in this kind of research is to miss that for which the Bible is written: to be the word in which the Lord speaks to me. Every biblical study must stick to its proper purpose and, in the short or the long term, to its right intention: to encounter God³⁴.

B. THE EXAMPLE OF FR LIBERMANN

This kind of reading, involving the whole person, with Fr Libermann gives rise to a certain number of "reading techniques", if that is the right way to express it. To make an inventory and analysis of them would lead to a complete re-reading of the *Commentary on St John*. Only one or two of them will be indicated, in a schematic way, to refer the reader to his own experience:

1) The construction of *spiritual types* or figures. For the reader this means portraying the characters in typical spiritual attitudes, in which I can recognize myself or those whom I meet³⁵.

2) On a second reading, seeing in the biblical texts my experience of the *sacraments* or my life in the *Church*³⁶.

³³ L.S.II, p. 195 (from Rennes, 15 February 1839, to a seminarian); cf. also ND II, pp. 184-187 (of 5 October 1840).

³⁴ It would be proper also to quote the frequent passages where Fr Libermann emphasizes the necessity of study and at the same time its dangers when it becomes an end in itself or a passion. We must also recall the places where he touches on the different ways of knowing the realities of the faith: a three-part distinction in L.S.II, pp. 416-417 (letter of 1839? or 1837?), a two-part distinction in C.J., pp. 76-77, which in fact match up.

³⁵ We touched on this point in our article "How Libermann read the Gospel. . .", p. 38, pp. 40-41.

³⁶ Thus Baptism (C.J., pp. 38-39; 443-444), the Eucharist: pp. 266ff., the Church: pp. 228, 246, etc.

3) The imperceptible and oft repeated transition from meditation to direct prayer (innumerable examples in the *Commentary*).

4) The implementation of a sense of the *unity of the Scriptures*. In contrast with an exegetical reading situating the text at a point of history (historical critique) or isolating it as a totality bearing a certain sense (structural analysis), it is proper to a spiritual reading to keep present to the mind the Bible as a whole, as a unique revelation in which the various succeeding characters and the different stages of the history of salvation merge into a single present placed at the disposition of the reader³⁷.

5) A spiritual reading of the Bible that aims at a conformity of existence to God's call transmitted through the pages of the Bible. This reading spontaneously opens into practical requirements, into a desire for an improvement in conduct. Here we could recall all the pastoral implications brought out in the *Commentary on St John*³⁸.

C. FR LIBERMANN AND BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

One may complain of the excessively technical nature of exegetical works, or be tempted by the fundamentalist dead ends; one may never have personally grappled with the scientific requirements of the contemporary mentality. The fact remains that exegesis today is commonly felt to be a necessity in every honest approach to the Word of God. What pastor has not got his little exegetical collection, if only for preparing his Sunday homilies? What a missionary in the field unearths from his trunk are his courses in moral and his courses in holy Scripture.

³⁷ Thus the sacrifices of the O.T. are really part of the New Testament mystery of the Bread of Life (C.J., pp. 269-270); what Esdras was meditating on (even if he did not know it), was already the mystery of Christ (C.J., p. 210). On this *unity of the Scriptures*, see our article "How Libermann read the Gospel. . .", pp. 37-38. That is what is expressed in the rabbinical saying: "in the Torah, there is neither before nor after".

³⁸ For example C.J., pp. 330-331 on Jn. 7,39, etc.

But the kind of spiritual reading of the Bible that Fr Libermann advocates, his repeated distrust of study, quotations such as those already taken from the *Commentary on St John*, does not all that discredit biblical exegesis in the eyes of those who claim to draw their inspiration from his spirituality? Certainly not. We would like to show this by three remarks based on the *Commentary on St John* taken as a whole and on a letter, astonishing among the others, addressed on 11th March 1848 to M. Dupont, then a young priest, in response to exegetical difficulties raised by this correspondent³⁹.

1) One would first of all have to ask what biblical exegesis was in Fr Libermann's time. On the Catholic side, it was practically non-existent in the sense that we understand it nowadays. In seminary education, the course in Scripture was "secondary matter" and was confused with an apologetic which indicated how, from the theological point of view, one had to interpret the texts so as not to be outside the Catholic faith. In a very general way, critical exegesis was hardly in its spring-time⁴⁰. Moreover, in its origins, biblical criticism was strongly marked by the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the exclusivity of Reason which, often explicitly, tried to explain away the supernatural and with it, of course, all miraculous phenomena. In this context, the more than reserved attitude of Fr Libermann is easily understood:

As likewise the story of Jonas, why would it not be taken in the ordinary sense? I think in recent times that the effects of the incredulity of the age are becoming somewhat apparent. Could not God have brought about these wonders? And if he can, why do we try to explain the sacred text which reports them, differently than it is?⁴¹

We live in a different age. If, as some have said, one believed formerly because of miracles, often, today, one be-

³⁹ ND X, pp. 132-139. The explanations have a bearing on three passages: Jg. 11,29-40; Jos. 10,12-14; 2 Cor. 11,25.

⁴⁰ For example, concerning the Pentateuch, the documentary theory (JEPD) only took shape around 1853 and above all with J. WELLHAUSEN (1844-1918).

⁴¹ ND X, pp. 138-139.

lieves in spite of miracles. The exegete, equipped with better sharpened historical tools, has the task of interpreting history to scientific mentalities who see in the marvelous more of an obstacle to faith than a support. The perspective of Fr Libermann would willingly be reversed: why postulate a miracle where a simpler explanation would suffice?

2) In general, Fr Libermann emphasized the importance of study, even biblical study. Thus, to a seminarian: **"You have first your philosophy, then your theology; that is what you have to apply yourself to. . . But if you want some more subject matter for study, here is one much more important than you philosophy: it is holy Scripture"**⁴². One could pick out here many a passage where Fr Libermann encourages study, even gives advice on method. Besides, both at Issy and at Rennes, his art in explaining the texts captivated several witnesses: *"He used explain Sacred Scripture to us admirably, even for the literal sense, and he often used to give us explanations taken from a profound knowledge of Hebrew and rabbinical explanations"*⁴³.

3) Having taken account of the age he lived in, it could be said of Fr Libermann that he was a precursor in his way of thinking. We have emphasized above his prudence in the face of rationalist thought; but we also find, in the same letter to M. Dupont, this astonishing reflection on the miraculous stopping of the sun and of the moon in Jos. 10,12-14:

In this place Scripture did not wish to give us a lesson in astronomy; it wanted only to tell us of the miracle that came about at the prayer of Josuah. . . now to express this thought. Josuah, in his canticle, makes use of ordinary terms, which sinned against an astronomical truth, a truth entirely foreign to the object of the inspired thought. . ."⁴⁴.

⁴² L.S.II, p. 346.

⁴³ Testimony of M. Perrée on the period at Issy (ND I, p. 307). See also ND I, pp. 345-346 and p. 521 (On the subject of St Paul).

⁴⁴ ND X, p. 139.

In this text is found again the same apologetics of the miraculous. But here appears also at the same time this freedom and this openness of mind, that is known about him for example in the political domain, and which, here, anticipates the clarifications on the inerrancy of the Bible and the question of literary categories in the Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of 1943.

But where Fr Libermann, without knowing it, proved himself much more a precursor – but could the richness of such a vein be foreseen at that time? – was in his spontaneous exploitation of the *Jewish tradition* and of its kind of exegesis to clarify the texts of the New Testament: the testimony of his companions at Issy or at Rennes affirms it, the *Commentary on St John* confirms it fully⁴⁵.

Libermannian spirituality has had the good fortune, which should not be forgotten, of having at its inception a simple, spontaneous, solid and clear biblical exegesis. But this sphere remains in the shadows, like every servant. For exegesis has only one purpose, today as yesterday: to be of service to a spiritual reading of the Bible, that is, to a living encounter with God in his Word.

The pastor often finds himself cornered by the immediate necessity of preparing a homily or a catechetical instruction. The young christian undergoing spiritual training feels himself absorbed by the discovery, for the first time or in a scientific way, of the biblical texts. The adult christian, familiar with the liturgical system of "continous readings", runs the risk of stopping at a didactic knowledge of the Bible. Now all have need, as of an indispensable food, of this spiritual, "flavour-some" reading. In it are involved in a quiet way the senses, the affectivity, the desire to permit an encounter in order to

⁴⁵ See also in the same letter addressed to M. Dupont, ND X, p. 137, on the problem of the vow of Jephthe, Jg. 11,29-40. It was not until the 20th century that this branch of exegesis became operative. It is now unanimously recognised as indispensable. The following may be indicated as important: J. BONSIRVEN, S.J., *Textes rabbiniques des deux premiers siècles chrétiens pour servir à l'intelligence du Nouveau Testament*, Rome, 1955; H. L. STRACK, P. BILLERBECK, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament erläutert aus Talmud und Midrash*, München, 1956 (5 volumes). Above all the work of R. LE DEAUT, C.S.Sp., should not be forgotten, notably his *Targum du Pentateuch* in the collection *Sources chrétiennes*.

correspond existentially to a call. In brief, it is a reading in which the Bible becomes the word of God spoken for me. Fr Libermann reminds us of all this.

Claude Tassin, CSSp.

12, rue du Père Mazurié

94550 Chevilly-Larue

Translation: Tony Geoghegan, CSSp.