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# THE MARRIAGE FEAST AT CANA

by Félix Gils, CSSp.

An attentive re-reading of ten short pages of the Commentary of Fr Libermann produced for me quite a few pleasant surprises. I wish the same and more to those who will be encouraged by this article to take up Libermann's text itself.

In the first part of the article, we will present an essential theme of Libermann's meditation. This is followed by an appraisal of the Commentary and some reflections on Libermann's sources.

## PART ONE

### "THIS MARRIAGE REPRESENTS THE CHURCH"

First pleasant surprise – Libermann mentions the Spirit several times and speaks a lot about the Church. The seven times he makes use of this term do not disclose by themselves the full importance of this theme.

For Libermann the marriage feast at Cana is the life of the Church today. This application to the present, which matches perfectly the thought of the evangelist, is an essential element of Libermann's meditation. Mary "ceaselessly obtains" for the Church the wine which "is the symbol of strength, joy and consolation" (2,1). What Christ did at Cana, he will continue to do "as long as the world exists" (2,11).

Here are the three texts in which the marriage feast and the Church are explicitly associated, identified one could say. It is the Christian Church in its beginnings that is "**represented by the marriage at Cana**" (2,1). "**This mysterious miracle... must have symbolized the beginning of the Church**" (2,5). And above all this limpid statement: "**this**

**marriage represents the Church of Jesus Christ, in which souls are espoused by the divine Spirit'' (2,5).**

Libermann, in his Marian fervour, squeezes, so to say, each word of the text to sing the praises of Mary and to gather lessons from her example.

The commentator, who has just dedicated his future Congregation to the Blessed Trinity, recalls along with Jesus the roles of the Father and of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, the director of so many priests finds as well in the attitude of Christ an example for priests, called to seek in everything the will of God alone.

Here is one possible way of listing the centres of interest of Libermann's very fine meditation on the wedding at Cana:

- I - The Church and the Trinity.
- II - The Church and Mary.
- III - The Church experiencing the Messianic rest on the seventh day: the repose of the New Law, the law of grace.
- IV - The Church and its priests.

We will allow Libermann himself to do much of the talking, so as not to schematize his thought too much.

#### I. THE CHURCH AND THE BLESSED TRINITY

Libermann thinks of the Blessed Trinity more than the mere use of the word Trinity would lead one to suppose. I quote here only those texts which explicitly mention the Church.

##### *The Father Gives Mary to the church.*

**Jesus "gave Mary to understand clearly that she had been heard, that his Father had given consideration to her holy prayer, and that because of the great kindness he had towards her, he had advanced the hour for miracles" (2,4).**

**God the Father had brought Mary to Cana "to show the Church what it was to expect from Mary. . . strength in its struggles, consolation in its sufferings and joy in prosperity. . ." (2,1).**

*Jesus, the head of the church.*

The question of Mary will come up frequently in what follows, but Libermann does not forget that it is Jesus who gives the messianic wine. Mary says to him simply: "They have no more wine". **"She does have control over the Head of the Church by her nature, but she controls him by grace, by means of her prayers which are always heard"** (2,4).

*The Holy Spirit.*

**"This marriage represents the Church of Jesus Christ, in which souls are espoused by the divine Spirit"** (2,5).

From the first lines of his Commentary, Libermann speaks, with enthusiasm, about the Church. It can expect through the intercession of Mary: **"strength in its struggles, consolation in its sufferings and joy in prosperity. . . for the wine is the symbol of strength, joy and consolation"** (2,1).

A. *Strength, Joy and Consolation: Gifts of the Spirit to the Church.*

We notice the biblical resonance of these three terms: strength, joy and consolation. Libermann does not say explicitly that there is question here of the gifts of the Spirit, but he has it in mind. In the context does he not note that "souls are espoused by the divine Spirit" (2,5)? He knows too that in the New Testament strength, joy and consolation are attributed to the Holy Spirit.

*Strength.*

When writing "strength", Libermann thinks more easily than we do of the Holy Spirit. He writes "strength", and he thinks in Hebrew "ruah" (Spirit/spirit or wind, in our translations). So for the Bible scholar "ruah" is almost synonymous with (divine) strength. Let us look at only one text, Isaiah 31,3:

**"The Egyptians are men and not God,  
And their horses are flesh and not spirit"**.

The prophet opposes men/flesh (weakness) and God/spirit (strength). It may be mentioned in passing that this idea of Isaiah is reflected frequently in Libermann's spirituality.

In the New Testament the association of strength with Spirit is not infrequent. The apostles receive a strengthening, a power, which is that of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1,8; Lk. 24,49). At Corinth the power of the Spirit is at work in the hearts of the believers (I Cor, 2,4-5). A recent study on the Acts of the Apostles is entitled: *The Spirit, Strength of the Church*, the very significant title of the work by G. Haya-Prats, Cerf, 1975.

### *Joy.*

Joy, a very characteristic attitude of the first Christians, is also a gift of the Spirit (Acts 13,52; Rom. 14, 17; Gal. 5,22). Jesus himself prayed "rejoicing in the Holy Spirit" (Lk. 10,21).

In his turn Libermann associates joy and Spirit. He begins his meditation with this reflection: the Virgin Mary "loved. . . **to remain in the embrace and the joy of her own spouse, the Holy Spirit**" (2,1). The joy that Mary obtains for "souls espoused by the divine Spirit" is certainly for Libermann a joy which comes to them from their spouse, the Holy Spirit himself.

### *Consolation.*

Like Jesus' Jewish audience, Libermann understood this word as embracing all messianic happiness.

In Matthew's beatitudes, consolation (Mt. 5,4) is the equivalent of inheriting the promised land, of satisfaction of hunger at the feast, and of enjoying the vision of God. When commenting on Jn. 2,12, Libermann points out to those not conversant with Hebrew that Capharnaum means "town of consolation" (nahum = consoled), and that Jesus brings it "the great (messianic) light" announced for Galilee by Isaiah, "the prophet of consolation".

The Novum Testamentum that Libermann possessed, stated also in Acts 9,31: "Ecclesia. . . consolatione sancti Spiritus replebatur". Besides, translations in Libermann's time probably spoke of the Spirit as Consoler rather than as Paraclete in J. 14,16.26 etc.

B. *"The Church in which Souls are espoused by the Divine Spirit"*.

The Church is not only enriched by the gifts of the Spirit. He gives himself as Spouse. **"This marriage represents the Church of Jesus Christ, in which souls are espoused by the divine Spirit."**

This affirmation may seem surprising. Is not Jesus himself the bridegroom? After the mention of the Church, you might have expected a turning to the imagery of the Apocalypse: the Church, the new Jerusalem, the bride adorned for her husband, Jesus Christ (Ap. 21,1-2). In the beginning of the synoptic gospels (Mk. 2,18-22), Jesus clearly presents himself as the messianic bridegroom, who inaugurates the messianic marriage, where the wine ought not to fail. And what is more, in John's Gospel, the Baptist clearly points out Jesus as the Bridegroom (Jn. 3,29).

We may perhaps conclude: Libermann lived intensely according to this doctrine: the Holy Spirit is the spouse of souls. He introduces it here, somewhat contrary to our expectations. But from where does he get this doctrine?

Several texts of the New Testament mention the inhabitation of the Holy Spirit in us: Rom. 8,11; Jn. 14,16-17; etc. These could have been a source of enlightenment for our author. He is perhaps making explicit only his doctrine on grace starting from Jn. 2,6-10. Jesus gives **"the wine of the new law under the law of grace, which is substantial and in itself possesses all the qualities which wine represents"**. Now these qualities: strength, joy and consolation, bring the Holy Spirit to mind. Libermann's idea would be: with his gifts, the Holy Spirit gives himself as spouse.

Another possible influence might be an old theme of spirituality. Mary is the spouse of the Holy Spirit, and the Christian soul shares, after a fashion, in this privilege. Among several possible examples, two texts might be quoted, which were used by Pope Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation, *Marian Cult Today*, published in March 1974. In it Paul VI recalls the words of Prudentius: "The unwed Virgin espoused the Spirit" and he quotes the prayer of Saint Ildephonsus: "I beg you, I beg you, holy Virgin, that I may have Jesus from the Holy Spirit, by whom you brought Jesus forth. May my soul receive Jesus through the Holy Spirit by whom your flesh conceived Jesus. . ."

The Holy Spirit, spouse of souls, is not then without support in ancient tradition.

## II. THE CHURCH AND MARY

Libermann reads the account of the wedding at Cana with all his Marian fervour, which is in turn rekindled by his reading. From the first lines of his meditation he describes the role of Mary towards the Church, and he comes back to it in the following pages with a great variety of themes:

1. Mary, "the all powerful intercession" for the Church.
2. Mary obtains for the Church: strength, joy and consolation.
3. Mary brings about desire for the presence of Jesus.
4. Mary inspires faithfulness to the will of Christ and of the Spirit.
5. Mary teaches the Church the prayer of rest, abandonment and loving contemplation.
6. Mary is honoured by the Church.

### 1. "The all powerful intercession" of Mary for the Church

This is how Libermann puts it: God has intervened "to show the Church what it has to expect from Mary" – the wine which is "the symbol of strength, of joy, and of consolation". God has shown the Church "the all powerful intercession that it has in Mary" (2,1). "She is omnipotens supplex" (2,3).

Mary "does not have control over the Head of the Church by her nature, but she controls him by grace, by means of her prayers which are always heard" (2,4). "Mary's prayer is all powerful and always heard, because it is the prayer of the Mother of God: 'Exaudita est et ipsa (Mater Dei) pro sua reverentia', but as a grace and not as a duty" (2,4).

We have to pause for a moment at Jesus' brief reply to his mother. Libermann explains one part of it very well from his knowledge of Hebrew. He quotes the Latin text which he

has at hand, but he thinks of the underlying Hebrew expression and notes: **“The term *quid mihi et tibi* is used in Scripture as a complaint, as discontent or refusal. But it can be used with respect.”** He gives from memory the story of Elias, since he had at his disposal only the New Testament. We might open our Bible and read I Kings 17,18 and other equivalent uses of *quid mihi et tibi*: Judges 11,12; 2 Sam. 16,10; 19,23 and Mk. 1,24. Libermann cites explicitly, from his latin text, Mt. 12,48-50, where Jesus refuses to allow himself to be retrieved by his family from Nazareth.

There follows this very clear commentary: **“Jesus said to his mother *quid mihi et tibi*. . . It is as if he said: to tell me in your capacity as my mother, that I must begin to work, that does not belong to your privilege as mother. . .”** Concerning my public mission as Messiah, I have ears only for my Father, **“it is as if you were not my mother, when it is a question of that”**. That is why he calls Mary *mulier*, to show that it is not in her capacity as mother, and as by an order that she is going to be heard, but as by a prayer” (2,4).

Let us hold on to the essential: Jesus distances himself from Mary. At Cana he does not execute an order of Mary's; he answers a prayer. **“This prayer of Mary is all powerful and always heard, because it is a prayer of the mother of God. . . this is so as a grace and not as a duty”** (2,4).

2. *Mary obtains for the Church: strength, joy and consolation.*

God has brought Mary to Cana **“to show the Church what it was to expect from Mary, by the symbolism of what she obtained in this particular circumstance, that is, strength in its struggles, consolation in its sufferings and joy in the prosperity that she ceaselessly obtains for it; for wine is the symbol of strength, joy and consolation”** (2,1).

3. *Mary brings about desire for the presence of Jesus, for the presence of the Church.*

“And Jesus also was invited”. Another surprise for us. The commentary on this verse is above all Marian.

Libermann is thinking about the concrete happenings at Cana, but doubtless also about the experience of all true children of Mary.

**"Since then the house (at Cana) was already fragrant and filled with heavenly joy from the presence of the mother, there necessarily arose the desire to have the Son with his disciples" (2,2).**

In that final phrase: "the Son with his disciples", Libermann is probably thinking of the Church. He has just mentioned the Church **"which was then enclosed within the small number of disciples who were with Jesus"**. From this we can understand: for Libermann, the presence of Mary brings about desire for the presence of Jesus, for the presence of the Church.

4. *Mary inspires faithfulness to Christ and to the Spirit. She has given the example.*

A. Mary recommends the servants to fulfill Jesus' instructions. Libermann applies this to the present: **"She (Mary) teaches us again that we must be faithful and exact in fulfilling all the orders of her Son if we are to obtain great graces from him"**.

He then clarifies: **"This wedding represents the Church. . . in which souls are espoused by the divine Spirit. . . (Mary) brings joy to the divine spouse by the faithfulness she inspires to all his wishes" (2,4).**

B. Mary gives herself an example of perfect submission to the Spirit. "There was a marriage at Cana. . . and the mother of Jesus was there". Libermann explains: **"the divine Spirit brought her there, and she, always perfectly docile and submissive to his holy guidance, went there without hesitation. . ." (2,1).** This point is taken up again further on at verse 4: **"Mary who had been brought there, and inspired by the Holy Spirit, her spouse. . . requested as a grace (wine for the quests)" (2,4).**

We may surmise that Libermann is already praying in his heart the words he will write down later on when dealing with Jn. 3,8: **"O most holy and most adorable Spirit. . . I wish to be before you like a light feather. . ."**

5. *Mary teaches the Church the prayer of rest, abandonment and loving contemplation.*

Libermann admires the brief few words addressed by Mary to Jesus. Three words only, he stresses: *vinum non habent*. In it he finds a very rich teaching.

A. **"Mary knows the great precept of Our Lord on prayer, which does not consist in multitude of words. She says little, but her soul is poured out in her Son with her usual love" (2,3).**

Libermann had already in 1839 proposed this same attitude to one of his correspondents: "... rest in Jesus, pour out your soul before him like oil, that is, without noise or violence, but with gentleness and a very sweet and peaceful love" (L.S. II 114).

"Mary pours out her soul in her Son". Libermann is referring probably, as in the letter of 1839, to the symbol of oil used in the liturgy of the Temple (Lev. 2,1-13). He may be thinking of an intimate union with Jesus, in which Jesus takes the initiative in coming to meet the soul, as Libermann describes later on in a letter of 1834: "He (Our Lord) will pour himself out in your soul like a river, and will fill it to overflowing" (ND IV 72).

There is an impression of hearing a variation on a theme from the Song of Songs: "My Beloved to me and I to him", the refrain that Libermann loves to cite, as we will mention further on.

B. *Rest, Abandonment and loving Contemplation.*

Another gem from the Commentary. **"In three words Mary teaches us an admirable way to pray; she only points out the needs. . . It is a very perfect way of praying, of opening the wounds of our hearts before our most gentle Master, of resting our soul then in him, and of abandoning ourselves to his very great love, and to his very great mercy, and of awaiting thus, in loving contemplation, the effect of his fondness for us" (2,3).**

A more schematic presentation may let us see better the richness, the density of this text.

To pray is:

- open the wounds of our hearts before the most gentle Master

- then (in one and the same movement)
  - *rest* our soul in him
  - *abandon* ourselves to his very great love
  - await in *loving contemplation* the effect of his fondness.

*Open the wounds of our hearts.*

"Open the wounds of our hearts. . .", is a constant piece of advice from Libermann. The master of novices at Rennes, had already suggested, at Easter 1839, to M. de Conny: "Act as if you held your soul open before Jesus, as if to show him the wound with the desire for him to heal it" (L.S. II 231). No lengthy reasonings, but "let it be almost like a loving gaze. . . Aim at moving humbly and simply along this way of confidence and loving abandonment" (L.S. II 231).

It can be seen that Libermann brings to the text of St John a whole experience as a spiritual guide. The gospel rekindles his convictions, authenticates his intuitions.

In 1846, he will write in the same sense to Fr Blanpin: "With Mary be like a little child with his dear Mother. He has hurt himself, he goes immediately to show it to his mother; he is much less concerned about curing it than with the desire to let his mother see the hurt so that she will feel sorry for him and give him a little hug" (ND VIII 206).

Recognize and open the wounds of our hearts, yes; but tenderness always has the last word – the tenderness of Christ, and that of the Blessed Virgin, and Mother.

*Rest, Abandonment and loving Contemplation.*

This marvellous triad summarizes an essential aspect of the writings of this eminent, 19th century spiritual director.

Libermann affirms that "the light of God alone" can guide the director; a light "that he ought to receive in prayer and in his continual union with Our Lord" (L.S. II 311). This does not exclude the Word of God from being a great help to the Director. "The light of God alone" can accommodate the biblical message.

The Scriptures as a whole orientate the soul towards the fundamental attitudes indicated by Libermann. Among the multiplicity of particular texts which could have exercised a special influence on him we can cite only a few.

“In returning and rest you shall be saved;  
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength” (Is.  
30,15).

“If you will not take your stand on me (Jahweh),  
you will not stand firm” (Is. 7,9).

Fr Blanchard (Vol. I p. 134) picks out five citations of the Song of Songs 2,16: “My Beloved to me and I to him”. Libermann probably draws inspiration from it also when he does not quote it explicitly. For example, in this letter: “Jesus dwells in the deep interior of our soul and, being master of all our powers, keeps them resting in himself. . . Our soul, for its part, resting thus on its Well-Beloved, gives itself over to him completely. . .” (L.S. II 594).

Throughout his reading of St John, Libermann is carried into God. He confides to us: “**St John takes the Christian soul who reads his gospel, and, in a contemplative surge full of light and love, transports it into God’s bosom**” (Preface of the Commentary).

Libermann will specify further on, when commenting on Jn. 4,23, that this contemplative surge is the work of the Holy Spirit: “**It is by adoring. . . (the Father) in the Holy Spirit and in union with the Son of God, that our acts of adoration are genuine**”. One of the beautiful Trinitarian expressions, which are frequent enough with Libermann.

## 6. *Mary is Honoured by the Church.*

“**The children of the Church have a profound respect for her (Mary) and regard her as their mistress and their benefactress**” (2,5).

Such is the final remark of the Commentary on Mary’s words to the servants: “Do whatever he tells you”. Previously Libermann has twice repeated that Mary inspired faithfulness to all the wishes of Jesus. The profound respect for Mary, all Marian piety, ought to lead to obedience to the will of Christ.

Libermann meditates as well on: “**Mary’s life of silence**”, “**the conversation between Jesus and Mary, a conversation entirely interior. . . and continuous**”; “**the priceless communications between Jesus and Mary**” and “**The heart of Mary which is a treasure**”. He thinks of

Mary **“this mother of divine love”**, who loves **“to remain in the embrace and the joy of her own spouse, the Holy Spirit”**.

One recommendation, practised by Libermann and intended by him for us: **“This mouth, full of honey, of gold and of precious stones, is not often opened; that is why it is necessary to open one’s soul to receive with avidity each of its words, and give them full consideration”** (2,3).

### III. THE CHURCH AND THE NEW LAW REST, THE LAW OF GRACE

“The New Law rest” and “the law of grace” are the two themes of the brief commentary on Jn. 2,6-10.

#### A. *The rest.*

The six empty jars recall to Libermann the six working days and “the subsistence of the old law: weakness and uselessness”. Cana inaugurates the 7th day, the new law rest, **“one day only, to make clear that there will no longer be any change until the end of the world”**.

From his knowledge of the rabbinical traditions, the former student at Metz would have been inexhaustible on the happiness of the messianic sabbath rest. To enter a little into Libermann’s world, we can call to mind at least a chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews (3,7-4,11), a commentary on the Invitatory (Ps. 95/94). Let us note the refrain: “good news” for us (Heb. 4,2.6), and the insistence on the “today” of the psalm; this today holds for us. “So then, there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God. . . Let us therefore strive to enter that rest. . .” (Heb. 4,9-11).

At Saverne, Libermann had already experienced the sabbath as “delightful in Yahweh”, according to Isaiah’s expression. Now he understands that Cana inaugurates true delights: the messianic feast, the perpetual sabbath, participation in the blessedness of God in Christ.

#### B. *The law of grace.*

Again, let us leave the word to the commentator: **“(At Cana), this water of the old Law was changed into the**

wine of the new Law under the law of grace, which is substantial and itself possesses all the qualities represented by wine”.

This wine is “the sign” that Jesus gives “for as long as the world exists”. **“Jesus manifests his power by this miracle, and the glory which will be his in the Church by this sign”.**

With this word *Church* the commentary on Cana reaches its close. . . a very beautiful note to end on and an excellent echo of the double use of the same term at the beginning of the Commentary.

#### IV. THE CHURCH AND PRIESTS LIVING FOR GOD ALONE

For at least ten years Libermann had been engaged in the formation of priests. Quite spontaneously, he is going to suggest to every apostle, to every priest to make present in his life the behaviour of Jesus towards his mother.

Let us listen to the commentary on Jn. 2,4: **“For his public ministry, Our Lord had no longer to keep up relations with his mother, but only with the will of his Father”.** Thus, **“he gave a great example to all apostles and all priests to the end of the world. Once they have begun their ministry, they no longer have either father, or mother, or brothers, or sisters; God, and God alone, is everything for them, and they must be occupied only with his glory and with the fulfilment of his holy will”** (2,4).

The enumeration: neither father, nor mother etc. is taken from Heb. 7,3 and above all Mt. 12,49-50, where Jesus distances himself from his mother, and his brothers and sisters so that he is attached only to the will of his Father.

On the very day of his ordination, Libermann will write to his brother and sister-in-law: “Pray (to God). . . that it be for his great glory, for the salvation and sanctification of souls, and for the building up of the Church, that I have reached the priesthood. Pray to Our Lord that he may sacrifice me to his glory; for it is to that that I must devote myself from now on” (ND II 497-498).

One has the impression that Libermann applies to himself the rule of life which he set down for priests, deriving from St. John’s gospel.

## CONCLUSION

## THE CHURCH'S IMAGE ACCORDING TO LIBERMANN

To conclude our analysis of the text, there remains for us to say how in our opinion Libermann sees the Church. What is his image of it?

A realistic image: he sees struggles and joys, but also sorrows and wounds.

An optimistic image above all: he discovers a CHURCH that is:

*festive*: "This wedding represents the Church. . ." The life of the Church: a wedding. That is the backdrop. For the new people of God the eternal marriage feast has already begun. Under the sway of "the law of grace", the people of God have already entered "the 7th day rest", a unique, definitive day. The Church says, as Libermann did in a very difficult year: "I am already in heaven though still living on earth" (L.S. II 301).

*strong* in its struggles, *consoled* in its sorrows, *joyous* in prosperity.

*faithful* to the wishes of Christ and of the Spirit by the grace and the intercession of Mary.

*praying, contemplative, wounded* by sin, she shows her wounds to Christ and she enters into rest, abandonment, and loving contemplation.

*missionary*: like Christ, the priests, detached from family ties, seek only the glory of God.

*Marian*: "The children of the Church have a profound respect for her (Mary) and look upon her as their mistress and benefactress". Her words and her example are received "with avidity". All recognize "the great function she has to fulfill in the holy Church by her all-powerful prayers" (2,4).

*under the impulse of the Spirit*, like Mary and through the intercession of Mary.

## PART TWO

## A COMMITTED COMMENTARY – REFLECTING A LIFE

Libermann's meditations are not outside time. We have noticed a very strong personal resonance in them.

## I. ROOTED IN THE BIBLE

Libermann manifestly turns to good account his long familiarity with the biblical writings.

1. We have already noted how the recollection of a Hebrew expression in the story of Elias (I Kings 17,18) helped him to give a very good explanation of the famous: *quid mihi et tibi*.

2. The wine is for him the symbol of strength, joy and consolation. The (evil) strength of wine is well known in the Bible (Prov. 23,31-32). Noah was unaware of wine's strength. But "wine which rejoices the heart of man" can also be appreciated as a beneficent force (Ps. 104,15; cf. Zach. 10,17; Si. 10,19).

When speaking of *consolation*, Libermann echoes Genesis. It is by planting a vineyard that Noah, to do so, draws consolation from the soil (Gen. 4,29 and 9,20). In a Jewish milieu, consolation would be synonymous with messianic happiness (cf. Lk. 2,25 and Mt. 5,5). The Jews took an oath by putting at stake their participation in the messianic reward. . .

Thus Libermann could take advantage, in Jn. 2,12, of the etymology of the word Capharnaum (nahum = consoled). It is in Capharnum, "that the consolation of Israel began in a striking way". There, through Jesus, shone out "the great light" announced by Isaiah, the prophet of consolation.

3. The six jars remind Libermann of the six working days of the week. He can then present Cana as introducing the seventh day, the day of rest, "**one day only to show there will be no more change until the end of the world, be-**

**cause that is what unity represents, Unity also represents the perfection of this new law”.**

A sabbatical rest, that is, participation in the rest, the happiness of God – a beautiful biblical image to describe the joy of Christian life. This happiness is experienced particularly in the prayer which Libermann describes as rest in Our Lord, our most gentle Master (2,1).

It is not in any dictionary, but in the Bible and in his Jewish background, that will be found the deep meaning which Libermann gives to the words *rest* and *consolation*.

4. Libermann says concerning priests: **“God, and God alone, is everything for them, and they must occupy themselves only with his glory. . .”** He is inspired perhaps by the New Testament – we are thinking of Rom. 11,33-36 and 16,27. But the influence of the Old Testament is also probable. From his infancy, the ears and the heart of Libermann would have resounded with the cry of the psalmists: *give glory to our God* (Ps. 29,1; 96,7; 145,10-11). The whole of his education shouts out to him: *“God alone is everything for man”*.

5. Jewish midrashic exegesis, familiar to the former student at Metz, aimed at moral edification by bringing the texts alive in their effect on practical behaviour. It is this kind of exegesis that Libermann practises here. He applies the Cana narrative to the present. From it he draws invaluable teaching on prayer, apostolic life, Marian devotion.

## II. MARIAN EXPERIENCE

From the time of his baptism, Libermann experienced the presence of Mary in his life (ND I 99). At St Sulpice, he belonged to the Association of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. With the Eudists, at Rennes, he continued to honour the Holy Heart of Mary. He mentions himself the great favours obtained from Mary: at Rennes 25th and 28th October 1839 (ND I 660-661); at Lyons 8th December 1839 (ND I 670-671); and then at Rome (L.S: III 364).

At Rome, he at first found it impossible to come up with a single idea for his Rule. Then, thanks to Mary, as he notes, "suddenly I saw so clearly, that with one glance I took in the complete whole and all the detailed developments. That was for me a joy and an inexpressible consolation" (L.S. III 364). He wrote to Fr. Desgenettes: "(At Rome), only my confidence in Mary alone remained to give me support" (L.S. III 362).

We understand then why, in Rome, Libermann writes in his Rule: "(To St Peter and St Paul) we will join St John as apostle of the Heart of Mary as well as of the Heart of Jesus. . . St John will teach us (. . .) to be well loved children of this tender Mother and to draw from her most holy heart the ardent zeal which Jesus Christ has lavished on it" (ND II 238-239).

This profound Marian experience, above all that in Rome, explains for us the fervour with which Libermann, in his Commentary, sings the praises of the Virgin Mary.

### III. A TRINITARIAN PIETY

Libermann refers spontaneously to the Blessed Trinity. In a letter from Rennes, he summarizes the doctrine of Father Eudes in these terms: "The Heart of Mary is a continuous sacrificial victim of praise and adoration. . . before the Most Blessed Trinity" (L.S. II 128).

The Rule written at Rome shortly before the Commentary on St John inculcates in the members a great devotion to the Blessed Trinity. One has only to look at the general introduction, and articles 1 and 4 of Chapter II.

On the day of his priestly ordination, the new priest wrote to his family: "I will say my first Mass next Tuesday. . . I will offer you all to the Blessed Trinity with the adorable sacrifice" (ND II 498).

The meditation on the marriage at Cana testifies to the same Trinitarian orientation of his spirituality.

### IV. A SENSE OF THE CHURCH

In a letter, dated the day of his ordination, Libermann asked for prayers that he might be truly a priest . . . "for the

building up of the Church" (ND II 497). His role as spiritual director, his project to found a missionary congregation, sharpened down through the years his "sense of the Church".

In his study of the Cana narrative, Libermann is to be found quite spontaneously presenting Christ as "Head of the Church", the Holy Spirit as the spouse of souls, the Virgin Mary as an all powerful intercession for the Church.

The example of Christ detaching himself from his family in Nazareth gives Libermann the occasion for recalling a great ideal of the apostolic life.

### LIBERMANN AND THE PRESENT STATE OF EXEGESIS

Libermann intended to write his meditations for "his spiritual advancement" (Preface to the Commentary). We have appreciated the beauty and the richness of these pages.

Today's exegetes omit from their commentaries on the marriage feast at Cana any considerations on Mary's "life of silence", on "her priceless communications" with Jesus. They speak about Mary without using such Libermannian terminology as "the perfect love of the heart of Mary", or Mary, "mother of divine love" (2,4), etc.

The essentials of Libermann's teaching, however, are to be found in recent authors.

Several halt, like him, at the rich symbolism of the 7th day. They do not do so by starting from the number of the six water pots, but from a calculation that places Cana at the end of the first week of Jesus' public life. By mentions of "the next day" (1,29.35.43) and "the third day" (2,1), John would have intentionally situated Cana on the seventh day, a sabbath.

For numerous commentators, "the third day" echoes Osee 6,2 and the Paschal expression "risen on the third day". John would be evoking the theme of the resurrection as he will explicitly a bit further on.

The exegetes are (almost) unanimous in giving a more biblical explanation than Libermann of the important terms "woman" and "my hour", used by Jesus in his reply to his mother.

They all remind us that the two scenes proper to John – Mary at Cana and Mary at the foot of the Cross – mutually refer to each other.

“My hour”, a frequent expression in John, always evokes at the same time the Passion, the Glorification-Resurrection and the pouring forth of the Spirit.

On Calvary, the word “Woman” refers to Genesis 3,15 and 20: the same allusion should be seen in the Cana narrative.

After what has been said, we can now appreciate the comments of two specialists in Johannine theology.

“At Cana Jesus lets it be understood that when his hour will have come, the Woman’s hour will also have come. Effectively, on Calvary, Jesus’ Hour having come, the Hour has also come for Mary to become definitively the new Mother of the living, the Mother of all the disciples of Jesus represented by St John” (A. FEUILLET, *Jésus et sa Mère*, Gabalda, 1974, p. 23).

In the symbol of the water changed into wine, “the substitution of one regime by the other has been recognized. The production of wine, brought about at the request of Mary, is the economy of the Spirit coming to replace the order of the Law. We are pointed in the same direction by the notion of the Hour. No need to repeat once more that this latter is the moment appointed for the Saviour’s Passion. But the Hour of Jesus’ death is also that of the gift of the Spirit. John has expressed this synchronism, always present to his thought, by noting with regard to the declaration made by Jesus on the Feast of Tabernacles: the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified (7,39)” (F. M. BRAUN, O.P., *La Mère des Fidèles. Essai de théologie johannique*, Paris, Castermann, 1953, p. 73).

In Jn. 2,4, Libermann refers neither to the Hour of the Passion-Glorification, nor to the “Woman” of Gen. 3,15 and 20. But his Commentary is close to what we have just seen of A. Feuillet and F. M. Braun.

For Libermann, John does not limit the intervention of Jesus and Mary to the granting of wine “on the spot”. This wine is the “symbol” of what Mary obtains “ceaselessly” for the Church, that is, strength, joy and consolation (2,1). We have estimated that Libermann is thinking here of the gifts of the Spirit. He does not say explicitly that Jesus envisages for his Hour the gift of the Spirit, but “this marriage represents

the Church. . . where souls are espoused by the divine Spirit''.

Let us keep in mind this mention of the Spirit and the over-all assessment: "This water of the old law was changed into the wine of the law of grace, which is substantial. . .". Libermann was ahead of Fr. Braun: "(In the miracle at Cana) the substitution of one regime by the other has been recognized. The production of wine. . . is the economy of the Spirit coming to replace the order of the Law".

#### A MEDITATION ON CANA AND LUMEN GENTIUM

Lumen Gentium consecrates its first chapter to *The Mystery of the Church*. Vatican II recalls the Father's plan, the Son's mission and the Holy Spirit's sanctifying role.

There we read this very fine definition: ". . . the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament – a sign and instrument, that is, of intimate union with God. . ." (Ch. I, 1).

Libermann would have been delighted with this presentation. In his writings, he is continually guiding souls to this intimate union with God. Within its modest proportions, the commentary on the marriage at Cana evokes the role of the three persons of the Blessed Trinity. The Church of which Libermann speaks is that "where souls are espoused by the divine Spirit".

Libermann sees the Church as "the sacrament – the sign and instrument, that is, of intimate union with God. . .".

#### EPILOGUE: A PRAYERFUL READING

In the course of his Commentary, Libermann often passes into explicit prayer. He does not do so in these pages on the marriage at Cana. But several times his reflections reflect, as it were, his own contemplation, and may become starting points for our own prayer. His words suggest it.

Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, the Church's Lord,  
never cease to gain for this Church the gifts of the Spirit:  
strength in struggle,  
joy in prosperity,  
consolation in sorrow.

Virgin Mary, spouse of the Spirit, who is our souls'  
spouse too,  
keep us faithful to all his wishes.  
Guide us, in holy abandonment to Jesus,  
to the contemplation of our most kind Father.

Félix Gils, CSSp.

*Translation: Tony Geoghegan, CSSp.*