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SPIRITAN AFTER LIBERMANN'S HEART

by Joseph Hirtz, cssp.

"The African people do not need and will not be converted by clever and able missionaries; it is the holiness and the spirit of sacrifice of their Fathers which ought to bring them salvation. Ah! how I wish that all my confreres felt as keenly as I do the need for holiness in a missionary working in Africa. Be holy as Jesus was holy. It is the only means of redeeming and sanctifying souls. May the Spirit of Jesus prompt all your actions; may he form all your deepest feelings; may he calm and moderate all the mind's tendencies to brusqueness, all the heart's hard or rigid feelings, in a word, all that is impassioned and dissolute in the soul. May he pass on to your heart the gentleness and the humility of which the divine Master has given us the example" (N.D. XIII, 143)

This letter of Father Libermann written to Fr Lairé, 8 May 1851, sums up all the missionary spirituality of Libermann. For him, we can respond to our missionary vocation, to our vocation of witness to Jesus Christ only to the extent that the Good News which we want to pass on to others has become a reality lived by us, and that the realities of faith have ceased to be for us purely intellectual, abstract truths, and have taken root in us, transforming our whole life.

"The holiness of Jesus Christ must reside in the missionary, a holiness which ought to be grounded in his heart all the time and reproduce itself in his activity and sufferings. Thus after the example of Jesus Christ, he brings forth souls for God in truth because he communicates to them the Saviour's life which is in himself".

This re-iteration comes from his "Instruction for Missionaries" (N.D. XIII, 405).

A WAY OF LIFE

This holiness that Libermann judged indispensable for a missionary in Africa today has become a universal necessity.

People of our time, no matter where we are, do not ask us so much for intellectual proofs for the existence of God or for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, they look rather for an experience of God and of the life of Christ in us. They have no need of propagandists of Christian doctrine, what they require are witnesses who pass on what they live. This is no doubt a consequence of the verbal inflation with which we are bombarded by the mass media. But, whatever the reason, it is a fact today more than ever, that a purely verbal transmission of the Christian message is no longer credible. If the realities of faith that we wish to pass on have not truly taken root in us, and have not become living realities in our own lives, our witness will not get through. What is expected of us today are not words *about* the faith, but words *of* faith.

The present passion for oriental spirituality, for the gurus of India or the zen of Japan, is only one fact among many others that reveals this mentality, this present aspiration, which involves a rejection, especially by the young, of any religious life composed exclusively of rites and moral precepts. The mad rush for drugs, as an ersatz religious experience, has doubtless no other origin.

"The 21st century will either be spiritual or it will not be at all", as Malraux told, or rather foretold, us.

We Spiritans are lucky to have in Libermann:

- a wise, experienced, and well-balanced guide with an authentic spiritual life;
- a guide who can, with sureness of touch and without danger of illusion, bring us into intimacy with God and make us true witnesses to Jesus Christ;
- a guide who, to an astonishing degree, meets the requirements of the mentality and aspirations of people today.

I notice with astonishment, in my present ministry, how valuable to a goodly number of the guests in our house of welcome at La Croix Valmer is the discovery of Father Libermann's spirituality. (They are priests, religious men and women, lay people, who have never heard of him before.) I can see that this spirituality possesses a liberating, transforming, even therapeutic power, that helps people to become reconciled to God, to themselves and to others, and to find in intimacy with God, not only interior peace, but also a dynamism and a renewed apostolic zeal.

It seems to me that we, Spiritans, too often go seeking far and wide for examples to light our way towards the Lord, while neglecting the riches that are part of our inheritance.

So I would like simply to share the way in which I understand and try in my small, poor way to live certain points in the missionary spirituality of Father Libermann. . . hoping that other testimonies will help me to see more clearly.

Preliminary Remark

From my first contacts with the writings of Father Libermann, I have been struck by the fact that his spiritual and missionary doctrine is not the result of a learned intellectual deduction, a learned construction of his intelligence, but the fruit and transcription of his personal experience. Libermann is not a theoretician of the spiritual and missionary life, but a clinician and a "practitioner".

Admittedly, he has been influenced by his biblical and rabbinical studies, and later on by his contact with the French School and Olier, when he was with the Sulpicians, and by his stay with the Eudists at Rennes, but, like the bees, he knew where to find the nectar, and retained only what became for him a living truth. It is that which gives the remarkable ring of truth to all his writings.

I. THE BASICS OF HIS SPIRITUALITY

All Libermann's spirituality rests, I believe, on a few fundamental convictions, certain certitudes of faith which inspire his whole spiritual and missionary teaching.

1. *Faith in God's love*

In the first place, his faith in God's love, in the God of tenderness and mercy, already revealed by the Old Testament prophets and which Libermann afterwards rediscovered in his meditation on St John especially, as well as St Paul. Fifty years before Therese of Lisieux, he had dared to believe (he had the faith of the Patriarchs) in this tenderness and merciful love of the Father for him and for all men, and had dared to place his confidence in him in spite of all difficulties, and to abandon himself to this love.

It is not for nothing that he saw in Jansenism, still very widespread and active in his time, the worst, the most dangerous of heresies.

From Rennes he wrote to a seminarian, full of fear and anxiety, on 23 August 1838:

"You are a child of God; live as such. You are even a privileged and favoured child; be tranquil and peaceful before your heavenly Father, who loves you with so much tenderness. True love of God will never establish itself in your soul, if you accustom yourself to entertain fears and apprehensions. Our Lord has said that he had not come to judge the world, but to save it" (L. Sp. II, 77).

"By the inclination of his character", as Fr Blanchard notes, "by the unconscious drives inscribed in his flesh, by the terrible sickness of epilepsy, he was drawn to despair and pessimism. The abyss called him. And to save himself from this abyss of incurable discouragement, he threw himself into the abyss of confidence".

Libermann had the faith of the Patriarchs, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and he looked to God for everything. And this faith in love was strengthened in him as he went through the most hopeless situations.

He wrote from Rome, in 1840, when for him the future was completely obscured and when he was in utter darkness with regard to the work he wanted to found: **"We stick by Our Lord without fear, without anxiety, and without understanding. We follow him blindly"** (C.S.J. 584). He has confidence in God because he looks to him for everything, since he lives in absolute certitude of his infinite love.

"It is a great joy for a soul", he writes again, **"to know**

that it is loved by Jesus Christ, and this knowledge becomes for it a source of limitless confidence".

2. Faith in the Holy Spirit

Another conviction informs and throws light on all his spirituality and missionary activity. That is his faith in the active and effective presence of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of people and in the world. He has been given to us to put God's loving plan into practice. Only he can establish the life of Christ in us. He is also the real director of the missionary apostolate.

In his feast-day talk on the occasion of Pentecost in 1837 at Issy-les-Moulineaux, shortly before his departure for Rennes, Libermann affirmed:

"If our Lord gives us his Holy Spirit, it is not so what we may live, even partly, according to our own. He is given to us to be the life of our soul, which comes alive only through the Holy Spirit. It therefore has true life only through the movement he gives it. Every other movement or action, which does not come from the Holy Spirit, is dead".

And to a seminarian he wrote on 9 December 1837 from Rennes:

"He (the Holy Spirit) ought to be the principle and the only source of all your affection, of your desires, and of all the movements of your soul. He ought to be the mover of your mind and your soul's guide through the movements he transmits to it. It belongs to him alone to give you impetus or any kind of impression, and it is for him too to cause you to reduce this impetus or impression to practice. For if you involve your violent activity in the matter, you can only spoil things".

And commenting on the words of Jesus: "I am the way", he adds:

"It is only the Holy Spirit who can help you to walk along this path", and a little further on: "Jesus has left you his Holy Spirit to direct and lead you along this way. It is this Holy Spirit who turns your soul

around and directs it along this path. Be docile, my dear friend. If you want to go it alone, you will stray from this path. Only the Holy Spirit knows it and can help us to walk along it''.

For Libermann, the Holy Spirit not only enlightens us and shows us the road, but he it is as well who gives us the strength to tackle this road and walk along it (L. Sp. I, 366).

This is what he wrote to another seminarian in 1839:

''Our Lord has sent us his divine Spirit to be our whole life, to work in us all the perfections and the holiness that he worked in Our Lord himself. See, my dear friend, what a miracle of grace and of love it is to send us such a great Master in order to instruct us about all the wonders that the Father has placed in his well beloved Son, and to bring them about in our souls'' (L. Sp. II, 409).

For Libermann, there are in a way two sources of activity in us: on the one hand, the self, with its natural faculties: intelligence, will, affectivity, which Libermann, following St John and St Paul, views pessimistically. Nothing really good can emerge from this source. Insofar as our activity issues from this source, it is spoiled by self-seeking, egoism, and the dross of self-love, which becomes mixed in even with our best efforts. Our nature is wounded and does not draw us naturally to what is good, but rather to egoism and self-love. But as with St Paul, this pessimism is dominated in Libermann by a Paschal faith in the power of grace and the Holy Spirit who is in us. They are able to transform and rectify our wounded nature.

But it is only to the extent that we no longer act according to our natural faculties left to themselves, and that these faculties allow themselves to act according to this other source of action which is in us, that is, the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, that true life, the life and the love of God, can flourish in us. Then we can really love and become true witnesses to the Father's mercy towards the human race.

And Libermann does not hesitate to affirm in his "Spiritual Writings" (p. 384): **"As natural life, even intellectual and moral natural life, was not in God's plan when he created us, if we remain in it we shall miss the purpose of creation"**.

Our vocation, our human destiny, is to be children of God. Hence, if we wish really to participate in God's loving plan for us, we must allow the only principle, the only agent, who can introduce us to this life, to act in us. If we wish to collaborate in the extension of the reign of God in the world, and to be efficacious missionaries, we must rely on the Holy Spirit.

It is in this sense that we should understand and interpret the words of Libermann which, at first sight, offend us, and which we find difficult to admit. He speaks of the destruction, of the annihilation of the natural life, and of the death of all natural life: that is, of all thoughts, desires and affection springing from natural activity.

But Libermann speaks of death only because he wants to lead us to life. What he has in mind is the death of the old man so that the new man may be born. The Lord wishes to bring about in us the Paschal mystery of death and resurrection already here below, in this life. That is the meaning of the Lord's words: *"He who loses his life, will find it; he who tries to save his life, will lose it"*.

As Libermann wrote to Fr Angot on 6 July 1840:

"Nature must first die in us before grace can become established in us. The life of nature is always an obstacle to the life of grace, and we achieve perfection only when grace has more or less succeeded in extinguishing nature and bringing about its death".

And Libermann exclaims:

"Oh! What holiness would be ours, if our soul had no longer any inclinations save those given it by the Holy Spirit, if it had no longer any desire or affection, any action or movement, except those received from this divine Spirit".

Indeed, we shall not fully respond to our human and Christian vocation except to the extent that our thoughts, desires and affection are inspired, not by our natural life, but by the Holy Spirit who is, in the words of Libermann, "the soul of our soul". In this Libermann straightaway joins St Paul who said: **"Those led by God's Spirit are the true sons of God"**.

Does it follow then that grace and the Holy Spirit destroy our nature, so that we are no longer ourselves? Far from it.

On the contrary, we become fully ourselves, with all our personal faculties liberated and made really human according to God's loving plan.

Hence, I truly cannot see why nor how Libermanian spirituality could have sometimes been interpreted exclusively or principally from the perspective of renunciation, when it is completely centred on life, true life in St John's sense.

But, if the Holy Spirit has been given to us and is actively present within us, if our sanctification is his work and can be brought about only by him, what part do we play ourselves? What do we have to do? For Libermann it is clear and simple, even if it is difficult and not very obvious: allow the Holy Spirit to act in us and become docile to his lights and to his promptings.

"All you have to do", he wrote in December 1837 to a seminarian, **"is to make yourself docile, capable of being moulded by the hands of the Spirit of life whom our Lord has placed in your soul to be everything in you"** (L. Sp. I, 366).

All that is doubtless very beautiful, very clear, but the real problem facing us is to know how, by what concrete means, are we to succeed in putting ourselves thus under the influence of the Holy Spirit? How concretely are we to release the Spirit within us? Father Libermann does not rest content with the above affirmations, he also traces the road which leads to true docility to the lights and to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

II. THE CONCRETE MEANS OF PLACING ONESELF UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

– Believe in the merciful love of the Father for me and for all people: a love which comes first, and which is gratuitous and indefectible.

– Believe in the active presence of the Holy Spirit within us, the sole author of our holiness.

These are the indispensable, preliminary conditions, according to the experience of Father Libermann, if we wish to allow the Holy Spirit to act in us.

1) *To have the desire*

Another indispensable condition, to which Father Libermann often returns, is *to have the desire*. The desire, first of all, to really fulfil what we are because of our human destiny, and not to fail in our vocation as a human being and as a child of God, called to intimacy and communion with God and with our brothers.

The desire to allow ourselves to be transformed by the Holy Spirit, no matter what it may cost us!

The desire to give ourselves completely to God, to "hand ourselves over to him", as Libermann puts it.

The desire to accept all the demands which this life of union with God will make on us.

Libermann affirms that **"Desire is the soul of the spiritual life"**.

In the Commentary on St John, on several occasions he shows the importance of this desire, this thirst to respond to God's call, to really love him and hand oneself over to him.

Commenting on the text of St John: "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink", he wrote the following to Mr Casteilla in 1840: **"You must begin by being thirsty, that is to say, by having great desires of loving and serving Jesus, and him alone"**. But he adds, convinced that God is not to be harnessed by man, who, left to himself, cannot put this desire into practice:

"Having this supernatural thirst, you should not try to quench it by yourself, through your own efforts and activity. It would be in vain, as you would never succeed in finding a single drop to slake this thirst" (L. Sp. III, 46).

And to Fr Cahier in June 1838 he wrote: **"It should be enough that you have that desire in your soul and, while keeping it before you, look with joy and surrender upon Jesus"** (L. Sp. I, 535).

Commenting on the beatitude: "Happy those who hunger and thirst for justice", Libermann maintains that the first disposition with regard to perfection. . . is to desire it ardently.

Again, this desire must be purified and freed, as he wrote to Mr Dupont, from motives that might not be entirely supernatural, since, as he makes clear, natural desires often become mixed up with supernatural ones.

"Be content", he continues, "to gaze with great desire on Jesus, but expect everything from his divine goodness and not from your own efforts, not even from your violent prayers. You must put yourself in a state of holy and loving patience".

For Libermann, if the desire is to be granted, it must remain humble and patient. We must not try to rush things. *Humble*, certainly, for Libermann is too shrewd a psychologist not to realize that egotistical desire for self-fulfilment can contaminate the desire for holiness. We can seek to increase our own worth in all fields, including the religious domain. . . whereas it is a question of allowing the Lord to carry out his work to the detriment of our egotistical self, and of allowing ourselves to be liberated from our egoism and our pride. Spiritual good is not an object of conquest; it is a free gift of God, so one can only humbly desire it.

But this thirst for God, this desire to allow the Lord to carry out his loving plan in us, to be effective, should be accompanied, Libermann tells us again and again, by a loyal resolution not to sidestep the issue, calculating and making reservations in our gift of self to the Lord.

Commenting on the words of Jesus: "No one can serve two masters", Libermann wrote to Mr de Conny, on 11 February 1838: **"Why, my dear friend, do you wish to vegetate during your whole life, to stand undecided on the threshold of a holy life and of a natural one?"** (L.S. I, 418).

An authentic spiritual life is possible only through self-denial, so categorically asserted by Jesus: **"If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me"**.

And Libermann continues:

What are you afraid of? Don't imagine that the feat is so difficult. Don't think that you will have to be sad all your life and mortify your body with disagreeable austerities. The perfect life is purely spiritual".

To prevaricate with Our Lord, to be calculating is, according to him, not only weakness and cowardice but foolishness, as he asserts in his *Spiritual Talks*. **"Let us be completely convinced that it is easier to deny oneself entirely than to**

go half way". The double game and the procrastination only cause us to be torn apart inside, depriving us of true joy.

"When we begin bargaining with Jesus", he wrote to Frs Lossedat and Thévaux, "he bargains also with us and we gain nothing. If, on the other hand, we approach him with generosity and hand ourselves over entirely to him, Jesus accepts our offering to the full extent of his divine love and fondness for us, and then gives himself completely to us" (L. Sp. III, 201).

2) *Live in the Depths of the Heart*

Another condition, another means of opening ourselves to the action of the Holy Spirit is, according to Libermann, to become accustomed to living in the depths of our being, and not on the surface. Father Libermann wrote on 13 November 1838 to Fr Aubriot, a young priest:

"I exhort you to become used to keeping your soul united to God, not so much through the mind as through the will and the depths of your being. In that way you will adhere to God".

In a long letter of direction to Fr Blanpin, in 1848, he specifies: **"Take as your principle of action your heart and not your mind".**

And in 1842 to Fr Le Vavas seur: **"Never wish for anything with the violence of the mind, but with the gentle ardour of the heart and of the will".**

To Fr Schwindenhammer:

"Distrust any interior movement having its principle and its activity in the mind. The heart is the centre of all that is good in us, that is, of all that comes from divine grace. Above all when this movement excites the imagination it must be considered as null and void and as a temptation".

And to a group of seminarians he wrote: **"I leave it to the divine Spirit to train you from within your inner depths".**

For Libermann, all that comes from divine grace and from the Holy Spirit comes from the heart, from the depths of our

being. It is from there and from there only that the Spirit enlightens us and acts in us.

But what does Libermann mean in reality and in the concrete when he tells us to keep in touch with our inner depths, where the heart is to be found? It is important to grasp this, not only mentally, but experimentally.

The echoes created by the word "heart" are not identical in the Bible and in French culture. In our present manner of speaking, "heart" evokes hardly anything apart from feeling and our affective life. In the biblical sense the heart is conceived as the "within", the depths of our being, the very source of our rational and free personality, the *scene* of its free and decisive choices where the unwritten law is, the scene of God's mysterious action in us. In the Old Testament as in the New, the heart is the place where man meets God and makes genuine contact with him.

Here we find ourselves before an essential point in our relations with God, as in our relations with our brothers. We shall try to understand it a little better by analysing and becoming aware of the different levels at which we live.

We can live, firstly, and in fact we do live partly at the superficial level of simple reflexes, of mere automatism. I can actually complete a whole series of activities in relation to others by simple automatism, without being present or involved in what I am doing or saying. This is at the level of simple reflexes, in which my mind, intelligence and will take no real part. Thus, in my interpersonal relations, in my encounters with others, I can react simply according to reflexes of antipathy or sympathy, of aggressiveness or instrumentalization, while other people are no more for me than interesting or unpleasant objects.

How many people thus spend a considerable part of their social lives and of their activities on the surface of their being, in a kind of half-sleep, in which neither their intelligence nor their will, let alone the depths of their being, are involved! Movements of uncontrolled impatience, hurtful sharp answers because one feels attacked, etc. . . . All that is a product of this superficial level of our being.

From the religious point of view: religious gestures and prayers devoid of our presence arise from the same level. And we would doubtless find it interesting to examine ourselves about how much of our daily life, our activities, and our relations with others are spent at that level.

At that level, of course, the Holy Spirit cannot intervene; we are absent from ourselves.

Libermann wrote to a seminarian in November 1938:

"You don't give time for grace to act. In that you lack something very important. Once in action you forget everything; you forget perhaps yourself and you are interested only in the thing for which you are responsible" (L. Sp. II, 118).

We too leave ourselves, becoming easily immersed in action.

We can also live, and in fact we do live, at a higher level: at the level of thought and reflection, at the level of the mind, as Libermann puts it. At that level my activity has its source in reflection. I act after having examined with my intelligence what I want, or ought, to do, and the will acts according to the light of the intelligence.

At that level my action, whatever it is, Libermann tells us, always remains more or less stained with self-love, with conscious or unconscious self-seeking. At that level, I may reflect, have pious thoughts about God, meditate on God and on his word, and make pious resolutions, but without real contact with the Lord and, consequently, leaving the Holy Spirit unable to intervene. I remain in contact with myself. I monologue with myself, and God, or his word, remains for me an object of study. I may even express fine feelings about him, while remaining at this level.

The work of the mind is not useless, but all this reflection hardly nourishes or transforms my life. In the long run, it finishes by becoming rather tedious even and, if my prayer remains at this intellectual level, a monologue. In fact, it will be at best a duty which I fulfill, and will never become an inner need, a vital interior necessity. This is cerebral prayer against which Libermann often warned.

"Take care", he wrote to M. Grillard in 1838, **"not to have your prayer consist merely in the labour and the exercise of your mind. In order that the state of prayer be real, the prayer itself should proceed from an affection of the heart (in the biblical sense), or from a simple view of the presence of God, before whom we perform all our actions in order to please him. But we must not do our mental prayer through the thinking of our mind (underlined by Libermann), seeking to attach ourselves here and there to some**

thoughts relating to God. This would not be exactly bad, but it would be very mediocre and of little fruit". And he concludes:

"Try to yield as little as possible to your mind; simplify as much as you can its action in your prayer and recollection. It would be all the better if the mind kept quiet altogether. Still, if it does take part in your mental prayer, it should not be the principal agent; on the contrary, it should be forgotten, because it spoils everything and is your greatest obstacle to recollection. Quieten the activity of your mind, keep it in repose before God, in order that the divine Spirit may act in you according to his good pleasure" (L. Sp. I, 405).

For Libermann, not only is the Holy Spirit not truly present in the activity of our mind, but, for him, this activity is rather an obstacle to his action in us.

Finally, we can also live at a deeper level, at the level of the heart, in the biblical and Libermanian sense of the word. There my unified faculties of understanding and willing along with my feelings and sensitivity, in a deep harmony of body and soul, are fully committed. Only at the times when we are living at this level can the Holy Spirit intervene effectively and enlighten and move us by his promptings. If we are situated at this level, his way of making himself heard, of revealing himself, Libermann makes clear, is more often than not by assuring us silently that he is there, by giving us the ineffable experience of his presence, a presence more eloquent, more effective, more transforming than any word.

Hence, to live under the influence of the Holy Spirit, allowing him to act in us and to carry out in us his work of liberation and sanctification, means living habitually at the level of the heart, at the deepest and most interior level of our being, not only during times of prayer and meditation, but throughout our daily occupations.

So, what can we do to keep ourselves habitually at this level, to set free the Spirit within us?

First of all, Libermann assures us, we cannot achieve this right away. It is the work of a whole lifetime, and we cannot, apart from an exceptional grace, keep ourselves constantly in this state. It is as much a grace and gift of God as the result of human effort. But we can and must prepare for it, to allow

the Lord to draw us to it, and help us to live frequently, if not habitually, at the level of the heart. For such a life is not just the exclusive right of some exceptional beings, but the normal outcome of every Christian life, and a fortiori of every life consecrated to the Lord and to the preaching of the Good News.

I know mothers of families and Christians leading a very busy professional life, for whom this supernatural life has become natural, or rather all of whose natural life has thus become supernatural.

3) *How then are we to reach this state?*

If we skim through Father Libermann's letters or his other writings, we can see that all the advice that he gives to his correspondents, whether they be young seminarians, priests, directors of seminaries, or lay people, has only one purpose: to encourage and help them to live at the deepest level of their being.

To a seminarian on vacation he writes:

"Remain at the deepest level of your interior life and never leave it. For as long as you remain thus with-drawn into the depths of your inner being, you will always find the Holy Spirit, who will raise you up and carry you to the summit of that mountain of love which Our Lord has built for his elect. He will fill you with his graces and lights, his loveliness and joy. You will get into the holy habit of listening to his voice and you will be faithful to his graces" (L. Sp. I, 127).

To another he wrote in 1837, from Rennes:

"Remain at peace in your inner being where your life's source is, that is to say, the Spirit of Jesus, with all his loveliness and his gifts, all his graces and love. Remain there calmly and peacefully through the faith that this Spirit of love has placed in your soul".

And the first practical advice that Libermann never stops giving to his correspondents to help them to live more and more at the level of the heart, is to keep oneself, despite all difficulties, in interior peace, to eliminate, as far as possible, inner turmoil and distress, tension, agitation and conflict.

In his Spiritual Writings he asserts:

"For God to act in your soul, it is of the greatest importance to keep yourself in continual peace before him; it is even the only means of achieving this spirit of interiority, and without it everything else is useless".

"See how I am always preaching Our Lord's peace to you; it is so important that everything else depends on it" (L. Sp. I, 175).

4) *But what kind of peace is he talking about?*

For Libermann, it is not the peace that comes from indifference (in which one turns to stone, no longer affected by anything), nor the peace that comes from the absence of difficulties, nor that superficial peace acquired through the human effort to lose interest in everything happening around us.

"I mean that peace and gentleness that comes from God and not insensitivity and indifference", he wrote to some seminarians.

He gives the following advice to a seminarian:

"If you give in to anxiety and distress, the Holy Spirit won't be able to act in you as he would wish. He won't be able to make himself the absolute master of your soul. Soften, soothe, ease and calm down your imagination" (L. Sp. I, 167).

We could continue quoting. There is hardly a letter of Libermann's in which he does not speak of this necessary peace. He asks us, everytime the storm of anxiety and distress arises in our soul, for whatever reason:

- to accept the suffering involved,
- not to try to get rid of it by reasoning or by repression (that will only make it worse),
- to turn gently to the Lord in the depths of our heart and there recover true peace.

Another obstacle to be overcome if we are to set the Spirit free within us and allow him to act, is the interior "cinema" of the mind and imagination, which we must gradually succeed in calming and finally halting.

He writes to a seminarian:

"Do you want an effective means for allowing the divine grace of the life of Jesus to spread in your soul and take over all its operations? Be always present to yourself before God in peace and gentleness, without strife. But how can you be, if your mind is always running on? So you must keep this mind in a state of peace, gentleness and calm" (L. Sp. III, 89).

And in 1839, he made clear to a seminary director in what genuine ascetism and mortification consist.

"Self-denial in all things", he wrote, **"does not mean loading yourself with external mortifications; you can be quite immortalized in the midst of your multiple mortifications, and very proud in the midst of numerous acts of humility. Your great mortification, to which you must apply yourself very specially, is to moderate the over activity of your mind and of your heart. When we are thus self-controlled and peaceful before God, we are better able to listen to and follow the movement he inspires in our inner being. To distress and upset yourself, to vex and torment yourself, would be very bad, and would become one of the greatest obstacles to perfection, an impediment even to correcting your faults. In all this avoid the mind's activity and investigations. Go gently into the depths of your heart, stand before God, and forget yourself"** (L. Sp. II, 337).

A letter of Libermann can hardly be found in which he does not put us on guard against this constant rumination of the mind. He sees there one of the principal obstacles to the spiritual life, and he dares to assert that our mind is unable to recognize divine things. The Holy Spirit alone can enlighten us. Isn't that what Christ asserted when faced with the incredulity of the Jews, when he sought to reveal the Eucharist to them? *"Only the Spirit gives life, the flesh is of no avail"* (Jn. 6,63).

But how concretely are we to calm our mind and stop this interior cinema which prevents us from living at the level of the heart, in the depths of our being, where the Holy Spirit can enlighten and move us?

The simple and practical advice that Father Libermann gives us to break with the mind's uncontrolled racing and live at a deeper level, is to become gradually used to living in the present moment. In his Little Treatise on the interior life he writes (according to the manuscript on 1851):

"An interior soul remains all the time present to herself and to Our Lord who dwells in her". Then, Libermann continues, "she lives and acts under the influence of Our Lord Jesus Christ who lives in her".

By giving full attention to the present moment we are also freed from sterile preoccupation with the past and the future.

"Let us never be concerned about the future, nor tormented about the past. Let us place our soul in the present moment in the hands of God with peace, humility and gentleness".

If we do not take care, we risk allowing time become for us a mere flow without presence. We live on the surface of our being, immersed and enclosed in our thoughts, ruminating over the past or the future, and we are not present, really present to the passing moment, to what we are doing at that very moment. Yet, it is only by our presence to the "now" that eternity can enter time. Only out of the present moment consciously assumed can anything eternal be constructed.

St Therese of Lisieux wrote in 1889, when she was a 16 years old novice, to her sister Céline: "Let us see only each moment, a moment is a treasure". Our life develops and is enriched to the extent that the number of moments, filled with presence and love, are multiplied. Each moment that is filled with a "yes, Father" has value for eternity. Moments without presence are so much lost time.

Living in the present moment is another kind of asceticism, a very real and radical one, which enables us to die to ourselves, to our "ego".

Doubtless, at the end of a day, we take stock on how we have lived that day. Instead of counting our acts of impatience, the times we were lacking in charity, or neglected our duties of state, I think we would do better to examine ourselves on the moments in our day that went by without presence. How much time did I spend today in the depths of my

being, not only at the time of prayer, but above all in the course of my normal occupations? Because there alone can be found the means of eliminating a certain number of my faults and lapses in charity.

To help us to live more and more in the present moment, to prevent the mind running wild and to keep at the level of the heart, we have a very simple means at our disposal: *become receptive*. We have, alas, unlearned how to feel, how to consciously tune in to our feelings, lost as we are in our ideas. To be receptive, means to look at a beautiful spectacle of nature, a flower, or a fine picture, and allow it to make an impression on you as on a photographic plate. To be receptive means to register a noise, a sound, a piece of music like a tape-recorder. Not think that I see or hear, but simply see and hear, allowing myself to receive the impression of what I see or hear, like a child open-mouthed before a flower. If we are genuinely receptive, the mind keeps quiet and then quite naturally we live in the present moment. We become established at the level of the heart, and present to the depths of our being, where the Holy Spirit is acting.

Usually we feel our body only when it hurts us. If we could become used to feeling ourselves walk and breathe, without thinking, we would soon come out of our half-sleep! A simple method, too simple it may seem, to enable us to live more and more at the level of the heart. And yet my experience and that of many others convince me that in it we have a means of amazing effectiveness for passing from the superficial levels at which we risk spending a good part of our lives, to the deep level of our being, in a gradual progression. It is of course a discipline, but an effective one, more transforming than all the little sacrifices we could otherwise impose on ourselves; for it sets the Holy Spirit free within us.

Libermann also used to recommend ejaculatory prayer, but he warned and clarified that it was not a question of having from time to time a pious thought about God, on the surface of our mind and there only. On the contrary, it involved going really deeply into our being, to have a rapid but real contact with the Holy Spirit present in us. To a young priest he wrote:

“You should often have the eye of your soul turned towards him and your interior ear attentive to his divine voice” (L. Sp. II, 138).

That will allow him to intervene. If I am in my office, for example, engaged in some work that requires a lot of concentration, and the telephone rings, my natural reflex will be one of irritation. But, if at that moment, in a quick glance, I reach this interior presence, my "hello" on the telephone will take on quite a different tone. The Holy Spirit will have had the chance of transforming irritation and impatience into welcome.

In conclusion

If we really wish to set the Holy Spirit free within us, in addition to a sincere desire to place ourselves under his influence and to give ourselves totally to God, we must also become used to living more and more at the level of the heart, and not at the level of our reflexes or of the mere outlook of our reasoning mind.

And the best means to achieve that are our efforts to maintain peace of soul, to live in the present moment, and to become "receptive". Let our asceticism be exercised, not where it is useless or even dangerous, but where it opens us to the Spirit.

When we are living habitually at the level of the heart, not only in our times of prayer, but also in the middle of our daily occupations, all our life will be under the influence of the Holy Spirit. That is the genuine "practical union" towards which Father Libermann invites us all to stride.

III. THE HOLY SPIRIT COMES TO THE AID OF OUR WEAKNESS

Even when our desire to give ourselves entirely to the Lord is sincere, and we are resolved to make every effort to live under the influence of the Holy Spirit, we are obliged to remark with St Paul that we scarcely do the good we desire, and that the evil we would like to avoid is what we do. If we are at all lucid and sincere with ourselves, we will notice all the time that our life is far from corresponding to the ideal which we set before ourselves. The remains of self-love slip into most of our actions, along with lapses in charity, lack of confi-

dence in God, self-seeking, etc. Besides, the more we try to come close to God, the more we discover new failings in ourselves.

This is what Father Libermann wrote to a seminarian in 1838:

“Realize clearly, my dear friend, that you are a poor man like myself. I don’t say this to hurt or insult you, but I am expressing a truth that you know as well as I do”.

And he admits that at times he feels overwhelmed by all the woes, all the filth, and all the self-love which are in him, and he adds: “It seems to me that you are more or less as poor as I am”.

The Curé of Ars, at the end of his life, spoke of taking refuge in la Trappe to weep over the poverty and failings of his life, and to make reparation for them. This is no feigned humility, but a profound experience. We will never be more than pardoned sinners! If we imagine that by advancing in the ways of God, we will soon be able to record our virtues and present a good image of ourselves to God, we are deceiving ourselves and it would be better not to launch into the venture at all! The more the Holy Spirit frees us from our faults and failings, the more he leads us to discover further areas of darkness. Our affairs will never be in order when measured by the law of love.

If our desire to live and progress in union with God is sincere, our natural reaction to the discovery of our weakness and negligence is one of vexation and harshness with ourselves, leading to loss of inner peace and, in the long run, discouragement. Throughout his letters, Libermann attacks that kind of reaction. In it he sees pride and self-love, which, far from helping us to be freed from our faults, only consolidates them. This is what he wrote to a seminarian in 1837:

“Why are you always causing yourself pain and upset because you are having difficulty in overcoming your faults? It is pure pride. If you are upset and impatient, that comes from the fact that you want to be rid of them for other reasons which are bad, for example, to be respected and respectable. But as long as you get impatient like that, you will never overcome them” (L. Sp. I, 286).

To a seminary director he gives the following advice:

"When you catch yourself doing an act of violence, letting out a few sharp words, etc. . . you should not let yourself be disconcerted by that, distressed, upset, tormented and vexed with yourself. All that would be very bad and would become one of the biggest obstacles to perfection, preventing you even from correcting your faults.

On the contrary, we must begin by halting the soul gently in front of God, peacefully trying to place it in all gentleness before him. . . in an attitude of humility in the sight of our indigence and poverty, the desire to give ourselves more and more to him. . . and to continue on his path as if nothing had happened" (L. Sp. II, 340).

In 1843, he wrote as follows to a young missionary who was very annoyed and impatient because of his faults:

"There is one thing that has to be clearly recognized, and that is that putting an end to our faults will require long, hard work. What is to be gained from making yourself unhappy, discouraged, and tense with yourself because of these faults? These attitudes are the product of your self-love and stubbornness" (L. Sp. III. 214).

And he adds:

"A thousand reasons will come to your mind encouraging you to take a hard line with yourself, to become upset, etc. Such reasons come from self-love. You may say to yourself, for instance: 'These things are disagreeable to Our Lord, they prevent me from reaching the perfection of my state, they are an obstacle to the good I could do, etc. . . Therefore (and it is the direct conclusion), the best means must be taken to overcome these failings, etc.' But, my dear friend, the best means are, without contradiction, to accept peacefully, gently, and humbly, the pain you feel at being so defective, and to put all your confidence in the Lord. By acting thus, by being gentle with yourself, while gaining strength through confidence in Jesus and Mary, and keeping

in a state of peaceful and gentle humility before God, well aware of your destitution, you will make infinitely more progress than by any other way''.

We know how much, for Libermann, peace of heart is needed if the Holy Spirit is to inspire us and make himself heard. That is why upset and vexation, brought about in us by the sight of our faults, do not help us to get rid of them, but rather create obstacles to the action of the Holy Spirit in us; and only he can free us from them.

This peace, however, in spite of our deficiencies, has to be sought in God. Libermann insists on this point. For, alas, a life of peace with and in spite of one's failings can be sought in another way, the way of false peace. And Libermann, in his treatise on humility, points out two ways of attempting to live in a false peace with one's defects. First, by trivializing them, and finding excuses for them: **"Our pride constantly bewitches the mind"**, he writes, **"to prevent it from seeing the full extent of our poverty. It drives us to searching for means of excusing or diminishing this vileness"**. This is the very temptation we face at the present time. The contribution of modern psychology provides the incentive. There is an attempt to diminish or eliminate our responsibility. There is talk of "outdated taboos", certain moral principles, etc. . .

In the same treatise, Libermann points out another attempt we make to live at peace with our failings. **"We never have complete knowledge of our sinfulness and nothingness"**, he says.

"We can indeed know from our intimate feelings and from experience that we are lacking in certain qualities and that we have certain faults and evil inclinations; but our reason will search in us to find something to make us happy and raise our spirits. . . while grace makes us see clearly all our nothingness, preventing our mind from hiding things and looking for palliatives, or discovering some favourable reality".

Here we are dealing with a process of compensation, well known to psychologists. I say to myself: Of course, I have certain failings, but I am faithful to my exercises, I devote myself to others, etc. And I justify myself, seeking security

against my inner emptiness, finding arguments, for example, in my exhausting apostolic work.

Such attempts can lead only to a false peace and will not prevent interior dissatisfaction and alienation. A life of true peace, in spite of our faults, can be achieved, Libermann tells us, only if we see them before God in humility and confidence.

But to be able to really recognize and accept our indigence and poverty before God, in a deep peace devoid of anxiety, our image of God must correspond to that revealed to us in Jesus Christ. This is a God of tenderness, pity, and mercy, whom Jesus asks us to call "Abba", the name given by young Hebrews to their daddy.

In reality, each of us carries within him an original image of this only God, who is at the same time Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in whom we all believe. This personal image determines all our relations with him. This particular image is the fruit of our early human and religious upbringing. This image has been formed in us, in the first place, through our human education, through the first form of authority that we have met, the authority exercised over us by our parents, which we instinctively transpose on to him who is the supreme authority. A rigid, hard parental authority, without tenderness teaches a God of severe justice, a policeman God, who is constantly watching us, ready to punish us if we fall out of line. Of course, this image of God which we carry within us, depends also on our first Christian education in the family and in catechism class.

If the image of God that we carry around approximates to that of the severe judge keeping a constant eye on us and ready to punish us for any fault on our part, then that will necessarily affect our relations with him. And, as a consequence, we will find it difficult to put ourselves really in his presence without fear, and peacefully, gently and with confidence, display our poverty before him. For, we know very well that in front of him all our masks and false security crumble; there are no lockers that we can keep closed. So we are afraid to present ourselves naked before him, reduced to what we are, that is, to our indigence, poverty and sin. And then, like Adam and Eve in paradise, we are tempted to hide from God, to take to flight, to keep our distance, like the Hebrews at Sinai with Moses. And there are many ways of keeping God at arm's length, avoiding him. The most subtle is to take ref-

uge in prayers, to be content with saying our prayers (on the level of the mind), thus avoiding really standing under his gaze. I am frightened to see how many Christian men and women, some of them young, some of them priests or religious, still convey more or less the above false image of God that was spread by Jansenism.

The God revealed to us in Jesus Christ is:

- a God who is love and tenderness;
- a God who loves us with a gratuitous, indefectible love (there is the image of the Father of the prodigal son, a Father of mercies, who loves us as we are, and takes pleasure in pardoning);
- Not a God who keeps watching us (that is done for the sake of a law), but a God who watches over us (you watch over someone out of love).

It is only to the extent that our image of God really corresponds to this image that we can dare, peacefully and without fear, to present ourselves to him to lay out our troubles before him, sure of a kindly and understanding welcome and of forgiveness. Sure too that the sight of our poverty and weakness, far from causing him to avert his gaze, will draw his merciful love upon us even more. And it is only then that we will be able to understand how we can spread out our miseries before him, not only peacefully and without anxiety, but, as Libermann says, with true joy of heart.

This is what he wrote to a seminarian, upset by his inadequacies:

“Why should we become upset and anxious when we see how miserable we are? On the contrary, when our poor soul sees itself so small, naked, worn out and spoiled, to the very root of its being, it should stand before God in great joy and admiration. This arises from the fact that, in spite of all those horrors of which it is full, and by which it is in a way saturated to the core, it has still pleased him to draw it to himself, to lavish his love on it, to give it a share in his life, and to look upon it with holy kindness. What a joy for us to be in such great dependence on God!”

Libermann, as we have said already, dared to believe in the Father revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

But if all of us, such as we are, and whatever our religious education, have difficulty in really believing and having confidence in such a love of God, it is because we are always tempted to imagine God according to our human way of evaluating, and to believe that God loves us to the extent that we can present him with a good image of ourselves. We find it hard to admit our radical poverty, our smallness, our incapacity to free ourselves from our egoism, our complete dependence on God, and the fact that we will never be any better than pardoned sinners, ever with only empty hands to show him. Our pride makes it hard for us to be resigned to this and to accept it. "There are few people", Therese of Lisieux used to say, "who agree and accept to remain 'small'".

"It is a very difficult thing", Libermann wrote to a seminarian in 1839. **"You have to be very detached from yourself to agree to possess nothing in yourself, to be miserable, weak, cowardly. . . and thus to live like a bird on a branch. . . and to hope only in the goodness and unadulterated mercy of Jesus. Don't afflict or torture yourself with your weakness, cowardice, and many defects, but try to use them to go to Jesus"** (L. Sp. II, 238).

And here again Therese of Lisieux agrees with Libermann. For she wrote at the end of her life: *"How happy I am to see myself so imperfect and to be in need of our kind God's mercy at the moment of death"*. And she added: *"It is so sweet to feel weak and small!"* It is in reality a joy to feel fully in the truth, accepting yourself fully, being and recognizing yourself before God for what you truly are. And Therese concluded: *"The greatest thing that the Almighty has done in me is to have shown me my smallness and ineffectiveness for any good"*. And doubtless we all know the definition of holiness she gave: *"Holiness consists in a disposition of the heart which makes us humble and small in the arms of God, conscious of our weakness and confident to the extent of boldness in the goodness of the Father"*.

And so we come to grasp, from that moment, that it is precisely our miseries and weaknesses, recognized and thus borne in peace and humility before God, which are, not obstacles to sanctity, but the very material from which the Lord constructs it. God uses them to build up true sanctity within us. Paradoxical and wonderful at the same time!

Our miseries, in the first place, introduce us to humility and keep us in it. In 1845, Libermann wrote to an ecclesiastic who was torturing himself over his inadequacy:

"Don't be unhappy over your lot: the imperfection of your nature is compensated for by great interior graces that you don't notice, graces producing fruit in spite of the nastiness of your character. This nastiness will help to keep you small and poor at the feet of the Lord". And not without humour, he continues: **"It will be like manure that is spread around plants and seedlings so that they may produce more"** (L. Sp. III, 459).

Our weaknesses become manure in order to produce a harvest of holiness!

With a seminary director he employs another image:

"We are like bad trees that produce only bitter fruit, but this fruit is improved and rendered delicious, when it is transformed into humility and love by the divine Master, if we humbly entrust him with it. It is (he concludes) like fruit that is bad and bitter in itself, but which becomes excellent once preserved in sugar and spices".

When our miseries are cast into God's heart still more beneficent effects follow. This is how Libermann tries to make a seminarian, over confident in himself, understand the benefits of his defects:

"I rejoice before the Lord to see you are still such a poor man. God confers on you a real grace by leaving you in your inadequacy. That will give you a little seed of mistrust of yourself. You must realize that if you want to give yourself entirely to God through abandonment, you urgently need a good dose of self-mistrust; otherwise, you run the risk of tumbling into the abyss, or of building on air, without any foundation".

To another he shows the advantages of his weakness and the results that flow from it:

"It is very good that you should feel your weakness and poverty a little; that will teach you to mistrust

yourself. . . That arouses in you the filial confidence you should have in him (God), and that confidence leads straight to the divine love, it even contains it. That is why, my dear fellow, you must commit yourself to this holy and loving confidence. Never let your weaknesses get you down, nor become discouraged by them" (L. Sp. II, 207).

In the course of the Paschal vigil, the Church dares to sing: "O happy fault that brought us such a Saviour". Libermann teaches us to turn into a happy fault each of our defects. The merciful love of the Father is indeed able to transform our neglect and inadequacy, the material of death that we secrete all day long, into material for constructing our humility, confidence and love: into material for holiness.

These few reflections would need to be completed by a study on the criteria for the discernment of the action of the Holy Spirit upon us; on the very important place of Mary in Father Libermann's spirituality, etc.

CONCLUSION

In *Perfectae Caritatis*, Vatican II asserts that "the best adaptations to the needs of our time will produce their effect only when inspired by a spiritual renewal. The principal part must always be allocated to this renewal, even in the development of external activities".

In our community, Provincial, and District meetings, as well as in our General Chapters, do we always manage to put the accent on this "essential"? Isn't our fidelity to the charism of our founders to be found, above all, there?

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