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FATHER LIBERMANN'S MESSAGE OF MODERATION, EQUILIBRIUM AND PEACE

by Jean Gay, cssp.

"The fruits of the Spirit are these: charity, joy, peace, amability, kindness, loyalty, gentleness and self-mastery" (Gal. V, 22).

To become aware of the interior action of the Holy Spirit and to allow oneself to be led by his influence: these few words give the central theme of Father Libermann's doctrine. There is no doubt that union with God will always be conditioned by the quality of our asceticism, but, once that requirement is met, spiritual wisdom consists in keeping oneself in an attitude of "listening to the Holy Spirit".

As he gained more personal experience in directing others, Libermann began to notice that the delicate and highly-nuanced working of God in souls was often frustrated by a lack of exterior or interior silence, by too much activity, by rigidity or contentiousness, and sometimes by an exaggerated ambition for sanctity. Thus his first concern in dealing with those who placed themselves under his guidance was to help them to be at peace, to try to create within them a relaxed atmosphere, to make them peaceful, attentive and receptive vis-à-vis God's grace.

As we go deeper into Father Libermann's thought, we are struck by the contrasts we find there. He combines absolutes and delicate nuances; he never ceases to be orientated towards the sovereign grandeur of God which can never be compromised or limited, but at the same time he is always indulgent with the inevitable fragility of human beings. He gives the impression of possessing that intellectual robustness

and realism which, according to Bergson, is the privilege of mystics. In Libermann, spiritual drive never changes his good practical common sense or his clear discernment of what can be done by adapting oneself to circumstances.

In this way he has left us a very personal message of MODERATION, EQUILIBRIUM AND PEACE . . . a message which is always of value and which it is urgent to recall to our present day . . . a message which concerns the interior life as well as apostolic action.

I. THE CALL TO HOLINESS

The Second Vatican Council reminds us that the call to holiness is addressed to all human creatures.

Father Libermann considers the pursuit of personal sanctification an absolute necessity. For the missionary it is the very condition of the effectiveness of his ministry. Nevertheless he demands that it be realized in peace, without violence, without exaggerated ambition.

In our relationships with God, the spirit of gentleness is opposed to fear, especially to that jansenist fear which is a tenseness of will, a turning in upon oneself. The spirit of gentleness allows the soul to expand, to keep its equilibrium and be at peace.

Father Libermann considered contentiousness, as well as bitterness and discontent with self, to be real sicknesses of the soul, which destroy interior peace and pose obstacles to union¹. These maladies are frequent in fervent souls. Whence comes this stiffness of the will? For the most part, it stems from the persuasion "**more or less avowed of our own excellence**". We easily confuse *generosity* (which comes from the heart and the will) with *vigor* "**which is more likely to lead to self-satisfaction than to lead to God**". He draws attention to the fact that the absence of contraction and stiffness, along with interior relaxation and full self-possession, constitutes *the most effective attitude for the recep-*

¹ Cf. L.S. II, 376 - III, 165 - I, 58, 146, 165.

*tion of grace*². He goes even further: this **"total abandonment into the hands of God"** can have a good effect upon psychic equilibrium. He had experience of this himself³.

He recommends to the seminarians and priests whom he directs that there should be no worrisome haste, no violent effort. Give the Holy Spirit time to work in you. **"Don't get ahead of your guide"**⁴. **"Spread out your soul before God"** as oil spreads out without violence and without noise⁵. Learn to be contented with your present situation, no matter how mediocre it may be, and don't try **"to be more perfect than is possible for you at the present time"**. **"Don't let your soul climb up on scaffolds in order to see farther ahead"**⁶.

This counsel of moderation was expounded by him in these terms to one of his confreres (who later became a Capuchin with the name of Brother Denis):

"Go before God in all simplicity; don't try to find out what you are. . . ; don't be worrying about the road you are travelling (. . .). Don't envision great things, but be content to be always faithful to Our Lord during the moment you are now living, without thinking about tomorrow (. . .). Don't even try to form an analytical idea of Christian perfection. Never let your spirit walk upon the heights of the spiritual life, nor take on a certain hardness and rigidity . . . Forget yourself, and don't do anything either to make people think about you or to make them forget about you." He then added: **"don't try to evaluate your interior state (. . .) keep quiet and let God act . . . Don't prescribe anything for Him and don't prescribe anything for yourself either . . . Be satisfied to deny yourself in all things and to have a peaceful desire to live for God alone"**. **"Always remember that your condition is not that of a perfect soul, but of a soul tending towards perfection"**⁷.

² N.D. VII, 238.

³ N.D., VII, 238.

⁴ L.S. II, 221.

⁵ L.S. II, 113.

⁶ L.S. II, 328.

⁷ L.S. II, 219.

We have this significant recommendation from his pen: it would be better to retrench those grandiose desires for holiness. He makes it more precise:

“Have a great desire for sanctification, but moderate . . . its precipitation, its impetuosity (. . .). These desires must be calm, humble and subject to God’s good pleasure”⁸.

The important point, says Libermann, – and what explains to a great extent his refusal of all systems – is not to pursue an imaginary ideal according to well-established principles and to take charge of one’s own progress, but to submit oneself peacefully to the directives of the Holy Spirit who is “**a Spirit of gentleness, of calm, of abandonment**”. Spiritual ambition, if carried too far, would risk ending in discouragement, in being torn apart – being seized by the absolute at the same time as one becomes aware of how far one is from the dreamed-of perfection!

II. ABANDONMENT TO THE HOLY SPIRIT, DOCTRINE OF PEACE

In order to understand Father Libermann’s insistence in preaching gentleness, we have to refer to the great principle of *abandonment to the Holy Spirit* which inspired even his least action. His entire life was bathed in an atmosphere of relaxation and confidence. We must not forget that his teaching was always the reflection of his personal experience.

To abandon oneself to God, he taught, is to place oneself at the disposition of God, the guest of our soul. It is to unite oneself habitually and with a calm attentiveness to the grace which is in us and which exerts its influence upon us, at least as long as we allow it to act. The presence of God enlightens us as to our human poverty and convinces us of how much we need His help. Then our abandonment is understood as a

⁸ Cf. L. S. II, 259, 42, 197 – III, 600.

movement towards him and our collaboration with grace is seen as the subordination of our faculties and our activities⁹.

"The Divine Spirit acts within us in a uniform way; His action is strong yet gentle; it is integral and comprises no agitation"¹⁰. **"This gentleness, this manner so poised, calm and moderate"**, – we must find this in ourselves along with the God who abides in our soul, when **"by a continuous direction of our will we keep ourselves radically united to Him"**¹¹. We shouldn't event force ourselves to carry out the good desires He inspires in us, for fear of **"spoiling His work"**¹². We must keep ourselves **"in peace and at rest without worrying about anything"** (. . .) and forget about the past, – live as if only the future existed. We must live for Jesus *in the present moment*, or rather live as if there was no life in ourselves, leaving Jesus to live there at His ease"¹³.

Fidelity to actual grace, to the **"grace of the moment"**, which is nothing other than *practical union*, – this is the central theme of abandonment.

Fidelity to the interior experience of the Holy Spirit is a guarantee of equilibrium of soul. Putting us face to face with our incapability in the spiritual order, abandonment opens us up to thoughts of moderation and humility. It silences our selfishness, restrains our imagination, gives direction to our freedom of choice, strengthens our will. It fore-arms us against haste, presumption, spiritual ambition, worry and discouragement¹⁴.

Speaking of "the holy freedom of the children of God", Father Libermann says that it consists "in keeping our spirit at rest, in calming and softening our interior, in bearing with patience any interior disturbances that may arise"¹⁵.

⁹ Some references *re* abandon: L.S. I, 74-76, 86, 278, 285, 296, 301, 405 – N.D. III, 102, 103 – E.S., 418.

¹⁰ N.D. III, 89.

¹¹ L.S. I, 380.

¹² L.S. III, 602.

¹³ L.S. II, 392.

¹⁴ Cf. L. S. IV, 255, 549 – II, 182-136.

¹⁵ L.S. III, 119.

III. TRIALS PEACEFULLY BORNE

Nobody was better qualified than Father Libermann to talk about putting up with trials: physical suffering, moral suffering – he was spared none of it.

He calls these sufferings “crosses” because they accentuate our resemblance to the divine Crucified One. They can be the occasion of meeting God¹⁶, but are not necessarily so. We have to be “going towards Him, seeking Him”¹⁷. From his own experience he assures us that one can sometimes “find happiness in being on Calvary with Him”, but for this “we have to be there willingly”¹⁸.

Crosses are a precious school of abandonment and they offer excellent opportunities for practical union. If they are well received, they help to keep the soul in a state of confident submission.

For those who suffer from bad health, Father Libermann proposes the following: don’t become impatient; try to forget what is happening inside you; be convinced that the Lord is suffering with you and clothe your weakness with His divine strength¹⁹. To a brother who was gravely ill he wrote:

“If, in the midst of your sufferings, you don’t feel able to produce sentiments of love for God, I want you to know that it is not necessary to do so. Love consists in being perfectly resigned to God’s holy will (. . .). Bear all these miseries for the love of God and with the desire to please Him. He is your love (. . .). Offer Him frequently and with love the sacrifice of yourself”²⁰.

Father Libermann also speaks of the apostolic value of suffering, especially in the case of those who find themselves in enforced inactivity: **“Do you think souls can be saved**

¹⁶ D.S., 205 – L.S. I, 36 – II, 42 – N.D. XII, 187.

¹⁷ N.D. III, 317.

¹⁸ N.D. VIII, 216 – Cf. also L.S. I, 7, 20 – II, 36 – III, 489.

¹⁹ L.S. II, 36, 56, 117, 223 – III, 644.

²⁰ L.S. III, 644.

without pain?"²¹. He also makes the point that "**crosses, difficulties, interior frustrations are of great utility in counteracting the danger represented by success in the ministry**"²². Great missionary that he was, he did not hesitate to draw a parallel between "the apostolate of suffering" and missionary activity. *He calls upon the Blessed Virgin as witness.*

"She did not go out to preach the Gospel like the apostles did, but she suffered in her heart (. . .). isn't she the greatest of all the apostles?"

Did not Jesus Himself win the salvation of the world by his suffering²³? We might add that Father Libermann, although prevented by sickness from going to the missions in spite of his strong and often-expressed desire to share the life of his confreres in Africa, can still be considered a *great missionary*, not only because he founded and organized a missionary society and was at the origin of the great apostolic movement of the last century, but also because the numberless physical and moral trials which made an end of him at the age of fifty were borne by him generously for the missions, the sole purpose of his life.

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To these general considerations on the acceptance of suffering Libermann adds his usual advice concerning prudence, moderation and peacefulness.

He wants us to be satisfied with the crosses which the maternal hand of Providence places along the way of human life and not to try to imitate the giants of asceticism who begged heaven for still more suffering.

"Don't rush to ask for (crosses) but resign yourself to what the Master does (. . .). We must carry the cross that Jesus gives us and carry it in the circumstances in which He gives it"²⁴.

²¹ D.S., 224 - L.S. III, 220 - IV, 94 - N.D. XIII, 37.

²² N.D. VI, 98.

²³ L.S. II, 56 - III, 220.

²⁴ L.S. II, 44 - Cf. also N.D. II, 450.

If we try to get ahead of the divine intentions, our crosses could come faster than we wish and **"we would not be able to carry them as we should"**²⁵. And why should we be in a hurry? We are assured in advance that we shall have our share of trials. Let us be quiet, and **"when the time comes, we will see how to bear, how to overcome or how to elude the difficulties which present themselves"**²⁶. Sufferings which we undergo, he says, have much greater value for our spiritual progress than mortifications which we might choose and which are often intermingled with movements of self-love²⁷.

In life on the missions, the spirit of mortification must never take precedence over **"what is necessary and useful for maintaining bodily strength"**. **"Mortifications do not form part of the apostolic spirit. Love of God, zeal for the salvation of souls . . . interior privation of all that pleases the senses or self-love . . . this is what constitutes the essence of zeal, not mortifications"**. The life of the missionary will be mortified enough if he holds to what the Rule indicates: **"There should be nothing superfluous; whatever we have should be poor and ordinary"**²⁸. The Rule adds: no excessive care, no anxiety about one's health²⁹. Prudent moderation in all things . . .

He reminds missionaries in Dakar that they are not the masters of their health: their bodies belong to God and to the peoples they are evangelizing. This recommendation became urgent in view of the imprudence of the Vicar-Apostolic of Guinea who had thought himself obliged to adopt the diet of the natives for himself and impose it upon his confreres, pretending that this would bring them closer to the people. It was not long until the bishop died from following this diet and all his missionaries fell sick³⁰.

It is very important to learn how to bear trials in peace by establishing a relaxed attitude within ourselves. Father Libermann advises against "stirring up sadness in the soul".

²⁵ L.S. II, 305.

²⁶ D.S., 224.

²⁷ L.S. II, 38 - III, 644.

²⁸ Cf. N.D. II, 445 - L.S. III, 591

²⁹ IInd Part. Ch. IX, art. IX.

³⁰ Cf. N.D. I, 19, 511 - VII, 231, 297.

“Whatever misery comes your way, meet it with gentleness, peace and interior moderation before God, simply abandoning yourself into his hands and peacefully desiring to live only for Him”³¹.

Without too much concern about getting better, a sick person must take the remedies prescribed for him, – take them not only because they are helpful, but in a spirit of obedience, without worrying too much about the results³² and without being too distressed

“when his poor body is in pain, when he doesn’t have what would relieve him, when the things he needs are not brought quickly enough or when he continues to suffer in spite of the care he receives”.

If the sickness is prolonged, he has to endure that length of time and

“all it entails, with contentment of heart, treating himself like a stranger to himself because it is to God that we belong”.

Always beware of too great a tenderness for oneself³³.

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In giving this advice on the way to bear trials in peace, Libermann simply pointed out the line of conduct which he had always followed himself.

He was never known to complain or to turn the conversation towards the state of his health. No matter how sick he was, he never let it be noticed. When his novices came to consult him at a time when he was in great pain, they normally were unaware of his condition, so well did he manage to listen to them patiently and affably. Who can measure the heroism it takes to smile to others when one is crushed by suffering?

Speaking to a person who suffered from the same malady as he did, he very simply outlined the means he used to dominate his nervous seizures.

³¹ L.S. II, 382, 220.

³² L.S. II, 37.

³³ L.S. II, 36-39.

"The worst part of it all was the fear, the worry (. . .). You have to shake off those movements and agitations of soul, distract yourself at those moments, don't let yourself be seized by nervous anguish, but place yourself with great indifference before God (. . .). I am telling you the path I have followed ever since I began to give myself to God. I have followed it in a spirit of faith and in the desire to please God, without thinking about it as a means of recovery of my health, because I did not suspect that it would be helpful. As a matter of fact, it had a great deal to do with my recovery"³⁴.

During the apostolic investigation of Libermann's cause, Father Le Vavas seur was asked what had struck him most during the last illness of his superior. He replied. "his indifference as to whether he was going to live or die: we never heard him ask for prayers for his life to be saved; his indifference with regard to treatments: he did not want any doctors other than those who took care of the house. "Certain remedies, instead of easing his suffering, seemed to make him sicker. He drew attention to this in all simplicity, but he did not stop taking them. "In this way", he said, "they will not have anything to reproach me with".

He died simply, in peace and calm, just as he had lived, accepting the grace of the moment which he had always known would be proportionate to what he had to suffer. For him, sickness was not an extraordinary event in life, but the manifestation of God's will to which he submitted with thanksgiving. Death was the final stage which he passed through in practical union with Christ just as he had passed through all the other moments of his life.

IV. IS THE DESIRE FOR MARTYRDOM PRUDENT AND LEGITIMATE?

To those who asked questions about the legitimacy of the desire for martyrdom, his advice takes on the usual logical

³⁴ N.D. VII, 238.

form: on the one hand, he recalls the solidly based principles and on the other hand he calls for prudence and careful consideration in the application of those principles.

It was a time when, in the seminaries of France, many young men were enthusiastic about the deeds of the martyrs in the Far East and dreamed of undergoing a violent death for the cause of Christ. The prospect of martyrdom was quite normal in the Society for Foreign Missions, but Libermann, always a realist, was addressing men destined for the missions of Africa, and there was no reason at that time to foresee that Africa would one day have its martyrs also.

Not to refuse God anything; not to fear sickness or death in His service; to be ready to accept everything from His hand; to be attentive to the divine order of things clearly manifested, without going beyond what Providence expects of us at the present moment: these are the general laws of abandonment which extends well beyond the desire for martyrdom.

In times of persecution, martyrdom becomes "**a common grace**" which one must accept . . . "**as one disposes oneself to any other observance of the divine precepts**", without, however, exposing oneself to danger unless there is "**an impression from the Holy Spirit, (for) no one should presume to enter the nuptial banquet hall without being invited**"³⁵.

Outside of troubled times, Father Libermann advises against wasting time dreaming of a violent death: "**Tell them to dispose themselves before God in order to be ready . . . for death, but for the death of the cross**"³⁶; that is, for that slow "death to self" which is a less spectacular form of sacrifice but often more difficult than martyrdom.

Even though it may not be absolutely wrong to ask God for the grace of martyrdom, he says again, still that request should be formulated "**with fear and apprehension . . . in great mistrust of oneself**", because this enthusiasm which inflames the imagination can also easily distract from fidelity to the duties of the present moment. "**The essence of holiness does not consist in martyrdom**". "If you knew", Father Libermann adds, "**what dangers and illusions mingle**

³⁵ N.D. III, 95-98 - Cf. also III, 8, 26.

³⁶ N.D. I, 662.

with these preoccupations . . . you would perhaps ask Our Lord not to give you this desire”.

For himself, he would not want a missionary vocation based upon this desire, **“unless there were certitude about the divine will concerning such a vocation”.**

V. MODERATION IN THE EXERCISE OF AUTHORITY.
OBEDIENCE FINDS ITS EQUILIBRIUM IN THE FAITH

Father Libermann puts the treatment of religious obedience on a very high level. In his thinking, the superior's authority and the subject's obedience have to be seen in a spirit of faith, on a supernatural plane, otherwise they are incomprehensible and unacceptable. Authority comes from God, not from the superior, and it is to God Himself that obedience is directed. The superior is never more than an intermediary. Once authority is understood in a supernatural perspective – as Libermann demands – it translates itself in terms of prudent moderation, a search for effectiveness and respect for persons. It must always bear the imprint of kindness.

A religious who wants to obey in a spirit of faith should always find before him a superior who is conscious of the demands, but also the limits, entailed in the difficult handling of authority. Libermann calls attention to these demands and these limits very clearly in the Provisory Rule and in his correspondence with his missionaries and with women religious. Perhaps no other founder was as strict as he with regard to those who are in authority: 18 articles in the Rule give in detail the qualities a superior ought to possess in order to make supernatural obedience less difficult³⁷.

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The superior's authority, he teaches, is not simply an honorary title to flatter his vanity. It is an effective *service* which

³⁷ R.P., art. 384-402 – Cf. also N.D. IX, 277 – XIII, 149.

requires an uncommon dose of personal self-denial, patience and self-giving³⁸.

Addressing himself to superiors he says. **"You do not merit respect. Only Jesus merits it, and it is Jesus that your confreres must respect in you"**. Christ is the true superior and to Him alone are due obedience and submission. It would be an insult to Him for anyone to try to enhance his own authority by multiplying personal commands, or by adopting an "air of superiority" towards his subjects, or by seeking to win their esteem to his own advantage. His role is one of "holy servitude" as ordered by the Lord in these words. *"Let him who is first become the servant of all"*³⁹.

So that his subjects may be able to recognize him as Christ's representative, the superior will strive to conduct himself as Christ does⁴⁰. For Father Libermann, this means that he must keep trying to bring himself into conformity with God's will on all occasions and to discern the divine intentions for those for whom he is responsible, since everyone has to be directed in the way of perfection to which he is called. The superior will show great flexibility in his leadership of the brethren,

"always being considerate and adopting whatever ways of acting that will be for their good. This is what St. Paul calls being all things to all men. "Gentleness and persuasion", repeats Father Libermann, "penetrate within souls", whilst "rigorousness changes only the exterior. . . , breaks the spirit and almost never heals it"⁴¹.

A religious community ought not to be led without discernment. The superior is obliged to respect the liberty of his confreres and allow them **"the possibility of following and doing good after their own fashion"**⁴². He should avoid trying to realize in his brothers an unattainable ideal and should

³⁸ Cf. R.P. art. 364, 369, 370 – R.P. (1845) Illrd P, ch. II, art. VIII – N.D. IX, 293.

³⁹ N.D. IV, 293, 295.

⁴⁰ Cf. L.S. II, 196, 311 – III, 99, 263, 350.

⁴¹ N.D. IV, 293 ff – Cf. also E.S. 338 ff. – L.S. II, 388 – N.D. II, 127.

⁴² N.D. V III, 27 – Cf. also N.D. II, 124.

direct each one according to his capabilities⁴³, leaving them the possibility of realizing the good as they understand it, – even encouraging them to do so⁴⁴, because he is dealing with human beings and he never has the right to treat them like toys of his own fantasies or as victims of his moods. Libermann expresses this principle in picturesque terms: Men are not “marionnettes”⁴⁵.

In every exercise of authority, there is an essential element to be safeguarded: effectiveness. To put up with another person’s faults which we cannot eliminate is a form of fraternal charity. It is also the mark of a certain realism⁴⁶. . .

The superior never has the right to shirk his responsibilities. However, even if there are circumstances which force him to be energetic and firm, he must always be understanding, moderate, prudent . . . humble especially, because humility has the effect of forestalling any tenacious holding to personal opinions⁴⁷. Whenever he is obliged by his function to form a judgment, he must do so without prejudice and give his confrere the benefit of the doubt⁴⁸. This is always a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Always leaning more towards benevolence than towards rigor, he will tend, says the Provisionary Rule, “**to lighten the yoke of our adorable Master, as long as this does not favor laxity**”⁴⁹. Any time he realizes that he has gone to extremes or made a mistake which works to the disadvantage of one of his brethren, he must not hesitate to go back over the decision which had been made.

The superior is the principal moderator of his community. The unity of the community depends upon him. There are so many recommendations given by Father Libermann to the communities in Africa and in Bourbon to foster good relations, understanding and mutual tolerance. Harmony in those communities is a strong point in his missionary teaching⁵⁰.

⁴³ N.D. VIII, 47, 111.

⁴⁴ N.D. III, 44 – VIII, 119.

⁴⁵ N.D. VIII, 34.

⁴⁶ Cf. L.S. II, 357 – III, 533 – IV, 329 – N.D. IV, 296, 297.

⁴⁷ Cf. N.D. IX, 173 – XIII, 141.

⁴⁸ L.S. III, 300 – N.D. IV, 297.

⁴⁹ Art. 367.

⁵⁰ Cf. f. ex. N.D. IX, 98, 326 – X, 56.

Speaking of community or provincial councils, the Provisory Rule insists upon the importance and the necessity of dialogue⁵¹. This is not easy, since it demands give-and-take acceptance of the position of others. In discussion, the superior will faithfully accept confrontations and respectful criticisms, on condition that charity reign throughout⁵². He will keep in mind that he is not the only one to possess the elements of the truth. He must also avoid making his own point of view prevail at any cost⁵³.

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It is in the Faith that *religious obedience* finds its foundation and it is only in the Faith that it can find *its equilibrium*.

Religious obedience – a genuinely evangelical virtue – is a personal adherence to the obedient Christ⁵⁴. It has nothing in common with blind submission or base servility: “**We do not practice obedience from fear, like galley-slaves, says the Commentary on the Rule⁵⁵, but we submit ourselves out of love**”. Father Libermann is not afraid to assert: “**A religious who obeys his superior whom he sees only as a man does an injury to himself**”⁵⁶. Far from being a restraint upon individual liberty, obedience guides the subject in the choice he makes and thus contributes to his peace of mind, his development and his sense of security.

VI. MODERATION, PATIENCE, EVANGELICAL GENTLENESS IN MISSIONARY LIFE

It is not always easy to draw a boundary line between evangelical gentleness and zeal for the glory of God, between

⁵¹ Art. 412, 452, 463, 484, 492.

⁵² N.D. IX, 357 – XIII, 174.

⁵³ Art. 484, 492.

⁵⁴ Cf. R.P., Ch. IV, art. 1.

⁵⁵ Ch. IV, art. X.

⁵⁶ Cf. R.P., Ch. IV, art. 1.

pity for the sinner and detestation of the sin. Taken by themselves, certain attitudes of the Lord in the Gospel might seem to incite us to violent reactions. For instance, we see Jesus chasing the merchants out of the temple without sparing them in any way; we see Him reacting with severity against the hard-heartedness of the Jewish people; we see Him casting terrible accusations in the face of the pharisees. Perhaps we tend to linger with a certain enjoyment over the texts which offer us a good excuse for our natural obduracy, too easily forgetting that there are other Gospel passages where it is written: "*Learn of Me that I am meek and humble of heart . . . Blessed are the meek for they will possess the land . . . I am sending you as lambs among wolves*".

Father Libermann had a remarkable sense of the divine. He had no difficulty reconciling evangelical gentleness and the most ardent zeal in God's service. On the contrary, he made gentleness one of the fundamental conditions for apostolic zeal. He reminds us that it is in no way to be confused with weakness. Rather it is the virtue of the strong, demanding as it does an uncommon self-mastery⁵⁷.

The letters he received from the African churches which were then at their very beginnings, kept him well aware of the differences – often exasperated – which formed the milieu in which his inexperienced confreres had to struggle. They were all too young (Schwindenhammer remarked: our old men are not yet forty years old!). There were personality conflicts in community life, rigorous superiors and inflexible subjects, divergent views regarding the work, sometimes excessive severity towards the Blacks, incessant conflicts with the colonial administration, – there was no end to the points of discord. The advice about gentleness received by those young apostles, launched upon the great adventure of the first missions and condemned to a continuous practice of heroism, might well have seemed strange, – even mean. Perhaps some of them thought that their Father Founder repeated himself a great deal and was lacking in imagination. Still, Libermann never ceased to repeat his recommendation of gentleness, judging it indispensable for interior equilibrium as well as for action⁵⁸.

⁵⁷ Cf. N.D. II, 474 – R.P. (1845) IInd P. Ch. VIII, art. XV.

⁵⁸ Cf. R.P. (1845) IInd P. Ch. VIII, art. XI, XII, XIII.

Among all the many letters to his missionaries which we possess, there are hardly any in which we don't find these calls for gentleness.

"You are terrible men", he wrote, **"if you follow your impetuosity, you can be sure that you will do great harm to the Mission"**⁵⁹ **"Be moderate, gentle, considerate in everything"**, he tells his confreres.

To one of them, Father Collin, who sought his advice before leaving for the island of Bourbon, he gave only this recommendation. **"Work at acquiring gentleness"**. Gentleness, kindness, mutual support in community life, – the success of the apostolate depends upon these⁶⁰ **"You have to proclaim peace, therefore you are angels of peace"**⁶¹. Gentleness and benevolence towards the peoples to be evangelized:

"Show yourselves to be patient and gentle – without your gentleness being identified with softness or weakness (. . .). The Blacks must always be able to see that we love them"⁶².

He was full of respect for the principles of the moral law and wanted their application to be made as easy as possible; if you are going to make mistakes,

"it is better that it be on the side of too much kindness rather than on the side of severity. . . Many souls are lost because of severity, many are saved because of gentleness. As a general rule, tend towards indulgence in dealing with weak souls. Don't be rigid. Thus you will imitate Our Divine Master's way of acting and you will go good for souls"⁶³.

⁵⁹ N.D. VIII, 289.

⁶⁰ L.S. I, 380 – N.D. II, 176 – IX, 326.

⁶¹ N.D. IV, 152 – IX, 172.

⁶² L.S. IV, 368, 148 – N.D. IX, 9.

⁶³ L.S. III, 525 – Cf. R.P. XI, art. IX and X – N.D. II, 147.

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The Holy Spirit, who is within us, creates the unity in our existence, since our entire life must be lived under his influence. In Father Libermann's teaching, abandonment of oneself to God is both a doctrine of interior life and a doctrine of missionary life. He considers abandonment to be the disposition of soul which assures the best results in the ministry and he declares that true apostolic action proceeds from a soul which is confirmed in peace.

"We must give ourselves over to Jesus in our action. If we are flexible and docile, His Divine Spirit animates and sanctifies us. While recognizing our poverty and our inability, we must act with fervor and with confidence in Jesus"⁶⁴.

The most expressive definition he gave us of an apostle is that of an **"instrument abandoned into the hands of God"**. That phrase is very dear to him⁶⁵. It is not a mere metaphor but a close parallel between an instrument or a tool, inert in the hands of a master-workman, and the missionary sent only to carry out God's work. He has not to work for his own satisfaction. He must always be attentive to the smallest of the divine wishes, without excessive ambition for success, without being discouraged when he fails. When Libermann's confreres in Bourbon were discouraged, he wrote:

"What have we to do upon this earth except to place ourselves body and soul in the hands of God so that He can dispose of us according to His good pleasure (. . .). If we wish to be faithful instruments in His hands, we must not worry about ourselves but simply go forward . . . In the moment we are living now, let us place our soul in the hands of God with peace, humility and gentleness. It is not our work we are doing, it is His. It is not our interest but His that we are seeking in the souls we want to

⁶⁴ L.S. IV, 109.

⁶⁵ Cf. L.S. II, 207 - III, 205, 335 - IV, 83, 390 - N.D. IV, 286, 461 - IX, 13.

save for Him. He is powerful enough to give us success, but, if He judges it better to deter our efforts, that is His business and His alone"⁶⁶. To other missionaries, Libermann recommended: "May the work you are concerned with be His and not yours, so that the souls you are serving may be sanctified for Him, and not for your own satisfaction"⁶⁷.

* * *

Abandonment to the Holy Spirit in missionary activity inevitably produces fruits of patience, moderation and peace, and is always opposed to excessive impetuosity.

Venerable Father Libermann presents patience as "a perfect endeavor – perfection is wholly there"⁶⁸. He wrote to the missionaries in Dakar: "If you knew, my dear confreres, the value of patience among the apostolic virtues, you would strive with all your might to obtain it"⁶⁹.

"Know how to await peacefully God's good time" is another familiar expression of his. God's good time sometimes delays in coming, at other times presents itself in a very different way than we had imagined. It is always awaited with confidence by a soul which is abandoned to God.

"Don't try to anticipate (God's good time). At the first moment of sunrise it is never as bright or as warm as at high noon"⁷⁰. "Our corrupted nature's impatience wants to hasten God's good time – or even to create it, if that were possible"⁷¹. "Wait in peace, with gentleness and patience, for His good

⁶⁶ N.D. IX, 63.

⁶⁷ N.D. IX, 64, 40.

⁶⁸ L.S. I, 300.

⁶⁹ N.D. IX, 329.

⁷⁰ L.S. II, 199.

⁷¹ L.S. III, 574.

time to arrive⁷². **“Be faithful and that moment will arrive”**⁷³.

God’s work, he assures us, and especially the work of the conversion of infidels, progresses slowly and steadily. If we try to get ahead of Providence, we are necessarily heading for failure⁷⁴.

“Put aside all haste, all agitation, all worry and anxiety. Don’t be in a hurry about anything. Await God’s movements. If they are slow in coming, remain at peace before Him”⁷⁵. **“Learn how to follow the pace of Divine Providence in all things and in all circumstances, – to follow it, not to precede it”**⁷⁶.

The difficulties which we inevitably encounter cannot defeat the true apostle:

“You are not alone. He will always be with you if you are faithful. Don’t be pusillanimous or weak in faith. Put up with difficulties peacefully and patiently . . . Give way for a time before obstacles which you cannot surmount, and await God’s good time with confidence”⁷⁷. **“It would be a departure from the ordinary way of Divine Providence . . . to want to undertake the work of the missions with an absolute guarantee of success and the assurance that all difficulties would be smoothed out”**⁷⁸. **“Don’t be afraid of difficulties . . . Disciples of Jesus Christ, don’t expect to be treated better than your Master”**⁷⁹.

Father Libermann also recommends keeping a steady pace of activity, equally avoiding slowness and precipitation⁸⁰.

⁷² N.D. III, 347.

⁷³ L.S. III, 357.

⁷⁴ L.S. IV, 75 – N.D. IX, 40.

⁷⁵ L.S. III, 18.

⁷⁶ L.S. IV, 223.

⁷⁷ L.S. III, 357.

⁷⁸ N.D. VIII, 92.

⁷⁹ N.D. VI, 3 – L.S. III, 412 – IV, 15 – N.D. II, 170 – IX, 271 – R.P. (1845) IInd P., ch. VIII, art. XXI and XXII.

⁸⁰ L.S. IV, 231 – R.P. (1845) IInd P. ch. VIII, art. IX – IIIrd P. ch. 1, art. XIV.

One should "**adapt oneself to persons, things, and circumstances**"⁸¹. One should not triumph in success⁸² nor be crushed in failure⁸³. One should not count too much upon oneself, but always leave something for Providence to do after one has taken the normal means of assuring the success of an undertaking⁸⁴.

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Commenting upon St. Paul's text which tells us "*to become all things to all men in order to gain all for Jesus Christ*", Father Libermann asks his missionaries to make themselves "**available to all**", to adapt themselves "**to the personalities, the tastes, the desires, the viewpoints of all, so that by this means they can instill into their hearts the love of the truths of the Holy Gospel and the fervent and effective will to put them into practice**".

There ought to be engraved upon marble in gold letters these well-known words:

"Don't judge according to what you have seen in Europe (...). Strip yourselves of Europe ... Become negroes with the Negroes. Don't impose your views upon them, but leave them their own views. Act towards them as servants have to act towards their masters ... in order to make them perfect, to sanctify them ... and little by little make of them a People of God"⁸⁵.

Don't these recommendations regarding missionary adaptations bear witness to Father Libermann's extraordinary spirit of moderation, benevolence and gentleness, and very sure sense of equilibrium?

Jean Gay cssp.

Translation: Walsh J. Gerald, cssp.

⁸¹ L.S. II, 337.

⁸² L.S. IV, 21, 220 – VII, 7.

⁸³ L.S. IV, 21 – N.D. II, 122 – IV, 286.

⁸⁴ L.S. IV, 222, 537.

⁸⁵ R.P. (1845), IInd P. ch. VIII, art. XIV N.D. 330 – Cf. also N.D. II, 287 – VII, 161 – X, 293 – XI, 538.

REFERENCES

LS : Lettres spirituelles	RP : Règle Provisoire
ND : Notes et Documents	CR : Commentaire de la Règle
ES : Ecrits spirituels	IM : Instructions aux missionnaires
CSJ : Commentaire de l'Évangile de saint Jean	LM : Lettres aux missionnaires
	DS : Directoire spirituel