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FIRMNESS AND GENTLENESS IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF FATHER FRANCIS LIBERMANN

by Adrian van Kaam, C.S.Sp.

At present Christianity is in search of a basic spirituality that is meaningful not only for members of a specific religious community in a specific culture but for all Christians in all cultures. One way to disclose such a transcultural or missionary spirituality is provided by the method of foundational tracing. By means of this method we trace in various spiritualities and their masters those elements that are fundamental for any spirituality and *a priori* for a transcultural, missionary spirituality. Not all masters of the spiritual life have equally elaborated such basic elements. Due to his special grace and calling, background and apostolic concern, the contribution of our venerable Father in this regard is unique. In this article we shall reflect on one facet of this contribution: his development of the dispositions of firmness and gentleness in their mutual consonance and modulation. Fundamental spirituality considers these two interacting dispositions basic for any formation of the spiritual life and its apostolic effectiveness in any cultural setting. Let us first consider the role of these two interacting dispositions in a basic spirituality and subsequently trace them in the life and some of the writings of our venerable Father.

DISPOSITION OF FIRMNESS

Consonant life formation is impossible without the disposition of firmness. Life is called forth by grace to form itself in an upward movement. Our response to grace meets with

countless resistances. Some are so minute that they may go unnoticed. Others may be so formidable that they seem almost overwhelming. Resistances, if not spiritually appraised, hinder the flow of our life as drawn upward by the Spirit. Unappraised they disturb our inner consonance. The meeting between such resistances and the gentle firmness that is a gift of the Holy Spirit is what gives consonant form to our spiritual life.

An effortless life without friction is an illusion. It is a flight from the challenges that mark our existence from morning to night. The gift of firmness readies us to welcome resistances even in our own temperament not as sources of distress but as invitations. The Lord invites us to turn whatever is difficult into an opportunity for formation in holiness. Refusing the grace of firmness, we may feel like running from resistances instead of welcoming them as opportunities for growth.

On this basis, Father Libermann insists that we begin by firmly affirming as a treasure from God's hands the nature we have received. He writes:

The nature you possess is a gift of God, a beautiful gift, but that gift costs its owner dearly because it entails deep and piercing pain. Nonetheless, if a soul's vigor is strengthened by God's grace, it gains immensely by such suffering. It perfects the gifts He has accorded it and attains to that high vision, that nobility of sentiment which forms great souls, souls that are eminently Christian (N.D. 12, 107).

Affirming one's nature firmly and gently involves accepting its shortcomings too. He told one of his clients:

You will not be able to change your nature. It is extremely sensitive and impressionable. Besides, it is inclined to extraordinary violence and ardor. That's a cross you will have to bear. It is engraved in the core of your being. Basically, it is not a handicap in serving God, provided you put up with it quietly and don't give in to discouragement (N.D. 7, 8).

To another he frankly admitted:

You do have a difficult character, a troublesome temperament. Don't get it into your head that you

absolutely have to get rid of it. Convince yourself rather that God intends you to live with that enemy. . . . What can you do? Your nature is very bad, but you must live in peace and humble submission to God as far as that's concerned. . . . Don't be unhappy with your lot. Your natural imperfection is compensated for by great interior graces that you aren't aware of, graces that get results in spite of the bad features of your character. . . . That is why you are quite wrong in thinking that the feelings of remorse you refer to are reproaches that Our Lord is addressing to you. No, my dear fellow, Jesus doesn't speak to your soul so harshly. He loves you too much for that. . . . Don't talk to me about breaking your character. . . . You don't break iron; you soften it in the fire. Don't be in such a rush to shake off your fault. Don't long for it too vehemently. . . . that would do you more harm than good. . . . Don't take things so much to heart. Forget yourself and quit all this self-analysis. All these troubles will then disappear gradually (N.D. 7, 35 ff.).

FIRMNESS IN EVANGELIZATION AND PRE-EVANGELIZATION

Similarly the effective expression of our spiritual life is only possible when we respond generously to the grace of firmness. To reform an unjust society we have to cope continually with resistances. We must not flee from them but examine them carefully with a courageous open mind. Cooperation with the divine gift of firmness is essential if we are to contend with the mentality that delays the reformation of a merciless, mercenary society. Instead of fearfully shrinking from harsh reality, we must be open to it.

Father Libermann listed "an open mind" among conditions for admission to the Congregation, and complained for instance that Father Gravière, though a pious man, was "very narrow-minded". Once he wrote with his usual frankness:

If you look at the way Our Lord taught, you will find that He always chose the method that was best

adapted to the mentality of His hearers, and even to the character of each person He was instructing. Today new needs are felt everywhere. Every priest, without abandoning his assigned position, must study those needs, probe society's wounds, and grasp every opportunity offered by his position to provide remedies or alleviations for those wounds and needs (N.D. 11, 536).

If we allow only a little strength to flow into us from the mystery of grace, we can expect to grow only a little in the struggle for a humane, harmonious society. By contrast, if we embrace wholeheartedly the fortitude infused in our soul, we will grow strong in the struggle for justice that appeals so deeply to committed Christians. Father Libermann firmly expressed his commitment to justice at the occasion of the French Revolution of 1848:

I think this revolution is an act of justice that God has directed at the recently fallen dynasty, because it sought its own ends instead of the welfare of the people committed to it, because it sacrificed for its own advantage the interests of God and the Church that it knew quite well as an agency set up to procure the happiness of human beings. . . .

This same act of justice is leveled at all the crowned heads of Europe. . . . I am fully convinced that the tide of the French revolution will reach them all and engulf a great number of them. The autocrat of Russia will also have his turn. . . .

Should we grieve because pride is overthrown?

The same act of divine justice is also striking at our great politicians. By their trickery and confounded craftiness they sacrificed God and humanity to their own aggrandizement. . . . Justice and equity existed in almost no government wherever their interests were involved, no matter how remotely. Is it not natural, then, that God's arm is raised against so many criminals who gave justice only to those they feared? They were strong with the weak and weak with the strong, even to the extent of sacrificing the weak to the strong ones they feared. . . .

I must confess that, despite all this uncertainty about the future, I cannot help experiencing a pro-

found feeling of gratitude to God because He has stepped in at last. He has blown on the pretentious great and with His breath He is toppling their pride and crushing it to bits.

Another group of people who have been cast down by this hurricane is the civil aristocracy, the bureaucratic *pays légal*, who so arrogantly outraged the Church and refused it every shred of justice, trampled underfoot the welfare of the poor, sacrificed their souls and their country to miserable selfishness and special interests. The anger, or rather, the justice of God has swept aside all these haughty egotists. Great and small, they have been overthrown in France, and in all probability the same thing will sooner or later occur throughout Europe. I feel sure that the Republic will prosper if it is as faithful as the other governments have been unfaithful (N.D. 10, 146 ff.).

Obviously, then, his firmness was not limited to systematic missiology, objective scholarship, and organized social work. It extended to politics as well. He even went so far as to rebuke his contemporaries among the clergy for clinging anxiously and stubbornly to attitudes inherited from a time that would never come again.

It has been the misfortune of the clergy in recent times that they hold to ideas out of the past. The world has progressed, the enemy has set up his batteries in line with the situation and the spirit of the age, but we have lagged behind. We must keep abreast of the times. With complete fidelity to the Gospel we must do good and combat evil according to the state and the temper of the period in which we live. We must attack the ramparts of the enemy wherever they happen to be set up and not give him a chance to entrench himself and consolidate his position while we are off seeking for him in places where he is no longer to be found. Clinging to olden times and retaining thought patterns that ruled a previous era will destroy the efficacy of our endeavors and enable the enemy to establish a stronghold in the new order. Let us then frankly and simply embrace the new order and breathe into

it the spirit of the Gospel. We will thereby sanctify the world and the world will be on our side (N.D. 10, 151).

The next morning Libermann did something that shocked a lot of people. He gathered together those of his confreres who were eligible to vote and marched them down to register. He accepted the right of suffrage for which the people of Paris had paid a bloody price on the barricades. **"I understand very well",** he said, **"that elections are not ecclesiastical affairs, and yet we must keep in mind that we no longer live in the political situation of the past"** (N.D. 10, 151) 1848.

In an era of monarchist clerics, this was a superb example of his perfect adjustment. If only the contemporary clergy had heeded his advice, the terrible persecutions around the turn of the century could have been forestalled.

Spiritual formation of life and world in a spirit of justice can be wearisome and arduous. It is like swimming against a might stream. True spiritual growth implies suffering as well as joy. Once we acknowledge and accept this as the Divine Will for our life, we will be less bothered by it. Once grace frees us from the illusion that life will be smooth, we can begin to grow resourceful, resilient, even ingenious in the struggle for the kingdom as our Father was in an exemplary fashion. Hence, Father Libermann offered no panaceas.

All the works that have been undertaken and carried through in the Church have had . . . difficulties. . . . Yet those difficulties did not scare off the apostolic men who initiated the projects, nor did they prevent them from going ahead with constancy as well as success. It has always been the way of Providence to manifest itself in the midst of obstacles and the happiest results have normally lain beyond the greatest handicaps. (N.D. 8, 92).

This is what Father Libermann had in mind when he wrote in his Rule: **"They must be careful to avoid timidity, excessive precaution, lethargy and other faults that stem from false prudence. . . . We must courageously make a decision . . . and then follow through on it energetically"**. (N.D. 10, 546).

Like Father Libermann we must welcome resistances as gifts of the Lord, as opportunities for growth in the firmness the Holy Spirit grants to us, as signposts of God's presence in our life, as stepping stones to a dynamic existence, fervent, and daring to the end. As Father Libermann said on his deathbed: "**Be fervent. . . always fervent.**" (N.D. 13, 659).

RESISTANCES AND THE FIRMNESS OF PATIENCE

Firmness, fortitude, strength are words that may evoke in us images of self-exertion and strenuous action. Action is one expression of firmness. Our venerable Father exemplifies in his life also the grace of passive strength, the power of endurance and forbearance, of tolerance and waiting, of tenacity and perseverance rooted in abandonment to Providence. The firmness which endurance demands can be far greater and more taxing than the strength and exertion needed for active fortitude.

Francis Libermann met many resistances in his life which he could not immediately overcome. His fidelity to the grace of patience enabled him to turn these resistances into providential opportunities for spiritual growth, such as the sickness which delayed his ordination, the opposition against his project of a new religious community, the long wait before the absorption of his community in that of the society of the Holy Spirit, the bearing of the difficulties he faced after the fusion inside and outside the seminary in Rue Lhomond.

The firmness of his endurance manifested itself early in his epilepsy. "He never spoke about it", reports a friend, "except to help someone else who was suffering too. Once he told me: 'I suffer an awful lot; it feels like something were torturing me and tearing my insides apart. It's frightfully painful'. And while he was saying this, the lines on his face showed clearly that he was enduring unbearable distress" (N.D. 1, 299). Moreover, the illness often left his speech impaired and confused. Some of the more callous seminarists referred to the condition as a kind of insanity.

Worse still, his hypersensitivity inclined him to react on the natural plane with fiery impatience and even with violence.

It was grace alone that gave him the power to master both his emotions and his affliction. As another contemporary observed: "When you saw the terrific emotion that shot right through him and the continual calmness, poise, and earnestness that characterized him, you easily realized how much violence it took to give himself entirely to God". (N.D. 1, 303).

Another analysis bears out the same point: "It always seemed to me and to everyone else who knew him that he was naturally sincere, openhearted, and highly considerate, but that he was also temperamentally sensitive and quick-tempered. Time and again you could see him fighting to control his natural tendencies. Sometimes his explosive character made him react too quickly to a situation and he showed it momentarily, but a second later shame and self-mastery took command". (N.D. 1, 307).

PATIENCE: POISED READINESS

True patience is not the inertia of empty waiting. It is a dynamic, poised readiness for the propitious moment, an alert attentiveness for any opportunity the Lord may give us to actualize the aspirations He has planted in our heart. Patience is resignation not in the sense of capitulation but of re-assignment, that is to say, patience assigns a new graced meaning to the obstacles firmness meets on its path. It gives them the meaning of a delay by the Lord.

Father Libermann enjoyed in unusual measure this readiness for the graced disclosure that he could implement long delayed aspirations. When the opportunity arose, he acted firmly without hesitation, no matter the opposition. For example, God had given him the aspiration for the formation of leaders in the Church. The inspiration of this task was granted to him during the famous vision on June 20, 1831 in the seminary chapel during the celebration of the Feast of Christ's priesthood. In a sudden rapture he saw with crystal clarity the figure of Christ, the High Priest, passing along the stalls. To each of the seminarians he lovingly distributed His gifts, but when he came to Francis, He passed by. After everyone had taken his share, the figure of Christ returned and

placed in his hands the very treasure of His graces. Somehow Francis immediately understood that he was called to distribute the treasures of the Lord by the formation of priests and leaders in the Church. This vision was authenticated by his confessor, Father Fallon. When the propitious moment had come, he implemented the old aspiration with firm determination. He implemented it so well that Pope Pius XII declared more than a hundred years later: "This century of active consecration to the work of the priesthood has amply justified the confidence which our predecessor, Pope Pius IX, placed in the sons of Venerable Francis Libermann. Today we can count thousands of priests who have received their spiritual formation from their hands". (Bulletin General, Vol. 43, p. 58).

His firmness manifested itself when confreres tried to make him abandon the academic task to which they were irrevocably committed by entering fully into the society of the Holy Spirit with its long academic tradition in accordance with the decision of the Holy See. He answered firmly:

Until now we have stayed in the path of Providence and God alone has been our guide. I was never able to bring to fulfillment a plan that I had conceived on my own. Nonetheless, I have consistently succeeded – as if by magic, though surrounded by problems and annoyances – in every enterprise that was thrust upon us by Providence. That is why it would do us more than others untold harm if we were to leave that roadway and substitute our own ideas for it, no matter how fervent and generous those ideas might be. You propose that we disband the Seminary. . . . I feel sure that would be one of the most grievous faults, one of the gravest insults that our poor little Congregation could inflict upon God. In fact, I believe that such a program would ruin us completely because it would make us deserve to be abandoned by God; it would compromise us quite seriously in the eyes of men; and it might even cause trouble and dissension in our own ranks. I believe that we cannot leave the Seminary. . . without being seriously unfaithful to the Divine Will. It is God, Divine Providence, who has put us in the Seminary. . . . We have no right to grumble against

His orders or say that we have done enough to obey His good and holy Providence.

The work at the Seminary is hard, very hard, and we are extremely poor and weak. But does that justify us in giving up? By no means! Even if we were to be crushed under the weight of that work, we should be ready to be buried in the ruins. . . . To abandon this operation is like watching the house of God burning and refusing to come to the rescue (N.D. 12, 199 f.).

After fighting off the opposition, his faithfulness to the academic tradition of the new community he had entered with his men was amazing in its effectiveness.

"As long as our Venerable Father stayed at the Mother-house", we read, "it was a center where priests who were eminent in scholarship, talent and virtue loved to meet". (N.D. 13, 597) The learned Benedictine, Dom Pitra, who subsequently became a cardinal, had a regular room there. Then there were the Abbé Blanc, an ecclesiastical historian; Abbé Bouix, famous for his studies in Canon Law; Abbé Rohrbacher, another renowned writer of Church History; Abbé Martinel, celebrated for his apologetic and political books; Abbé Gaume, well known for his catechetical works and an epoch-making indictment of contemporary education; and, perhaps, the most illustrious of all, J. P. Migne, who marshaled an army of collaborators and published an ecclesiastical library of eleven hundred quarto volumes, one third of which was devoted to the now famous collections of Greek and Latin Patrology which every priest encounters in his course of study. Years later, Migne was among the many eminent persons who petitioned the Holy See to initiate the process for Libermann's canonization.

Learned prelates like Bishop Gousset and Bishop Parisis loved to stay at the exciting center of learning on the Rue Lhomond where, with Francis' assent and encouragement, intellectual life once more sparkled through the ancient halls. Dom Cabrol described the vibrant atmosphere in these words: "Here was a scientific and literary group where everyone spoke freely about things that pertained to the Church, where everyone contributed not only his personal views but the results of his research as well. . . . Sometimes a veritable

debate took place among the members of this scholarly areo-pagus". (N.D. 13, 598 f.).

The first Assistant, Father Gaultier, facilitated this rebirth of the Spiritans' academic tradition. He placed himself at the service of learned visitors, to supply them with precious data for their research, using the well-stocked old motherhouse library and to inspire them when possible with original approaches and views. His influence showed itself especially in the editorial work of Voigt's *Theology* and the *Graduale* of Rheims and Cambrai.

Some of these learned men became permanent guests. Father Rohrbacher, for example, found the atmosphere of the Motherhouse so conducive to research that he asked permission to stay there for the rest of his life. One of his last desires was to be buried next to Father Libermann. When Father Bouix published his *Concile Provincial*, Archbishop Sibour grew indignant over its propapal orientation and relieved him of his office with only five francs in his pocket. Francis courageously took him in, even though he could ill afford to incur any more of the Archbishop's displeasure himself.

Before long, the undaunted Spiritan General received a summons to appear at the archepiscopal residence. Father Bouix left a personal account of the audience:

When he came home, Libermann described the conversation with that quiet serenity which even the most painful events could not affect. The prelate had reproached him with these words: 'You are harboring in your seminary priests who are at odds with their bishops. There's Father Rohrbacher, for instance'. Then the Venerable Father added for my benefit: 'I believe you were uppermost in the Archbishop's thoughts, but no doubt he didn't dare to name you. Moreover, I can assure you, I didn't say one word about you'. Father Libermann then answered regarding Rohrbacher: 'I did not know that he was at odds with his bishop, but Your Grace can trust me to set things straight with that prelate'. Then I (Bouix) offered to leave the Seminary if my presence there would do harm to his congregation, but he told me to remain. That question could be considered later on (N.D. 13, 600 f.).

REFLECTION AND THE FIRMNESS OF PATIENCE

The firmness of patience is the mother of reflection. Impatience acts upon the first impulse, image or thought that stirs one inwardly; it wants instant answers; it cannot bear with the discomfort of unsolved problems; it is enslaved to the pleasure and satisfaction of their immediate solution. Many letters of our venerable Father counsel this kind of reflection:

Never let yourself be carried away by an idea. Make up your mind only when the enthusiasm and excitement have passed. Even that is not enough. Always beware of ideas that present themselves with such wild attractiveness that they take your mind by storm, arouse your imagination, fire you up, and excite you. You may be sure that every time you are not master of your thinking processes, you are either off the beam, or tending to exaggerate, or lost in a speculation that is hardly ever feasible (N.D. 12, 319).

Never listen to the first thought that comes to your mind. Let it mature before you put faith in it, especially if it was an idea that seized you violently and stirred you up to some degree. Beware of such ideas and guard against being carried away by them. Put off doing anything as long as possible until you are completely calm. Then quietly analyze all the pros and cons.

When you want to weigh something, if you throw it on the scale carelessly, it swings the indicator over to that side even though it is only half as heavy as the counterweights. This is due to the violence with which you cast it on the scale. What do you do then? Why, you stop the indicator and wait till equilibrium has been restored. Then, when the balance is at rest, you gently release the needle and find out which side is heavier.

Every time some new idea strikes you, it swings the balance in its favor even though the contrary reasons may be six times weightier. That's because

the violence unbalances your judgment. . . . What should you do then? Stop the needle. Hold it for a while to keep it from going one way or the other until the agitation is over. Then calmly examine the pros and cons and the greater weight will be on the side marked by the indicator. . . . Little by little, try to moderate the impulsiveness that new ideas arouse (N.D. 7, 423).

Realistic planning is one of the foundation stones of apostolic success. Francis resolutely opposed it to the impulsive and emotional methods that were so widely employed in his day. He urged:

We should avoid forming vague and general ideas of things. If we want to know them precisely, we have to consider them practically. . . . Don't picture things in your imagination. Observe them calmly, consider them practically. . . . In so far as you can, act in important matters only when you see clearly. . . . Leave nothing to chance, look ahead as far as you can. Then, when you have taken every precaution, put all your trust in God alone. . . . We should not go adventuring, banking on the breaks of the game (N.D. 7, 82, 192 f., 287).

Africa was a case in point. Some three hundred years before, scores of zealous and determined missionaries had gone out from Europe and baptized thousands of natives, yet by the nineteenth century hardly a trace remained of the tremendous work they had done. It was only when Libermann came along with his analysis and plans and memoranda that a self-perpetuating church was established in Africa. He saw that action without thought is like a flower severed from its parent stem. Feverish activity and the passionate engagement of the most powerful forces is but a blow in the dark unless directed by an observant and reflective mind. The best-equipped army is powerless without tactical and intelligence staffs. That is why Father Libermann burst out with "For the love of God and the Blessed Virgin, don't be just a missionary. Be a leader as well. Get to know men and things. Look to the future as much as to the present situation".

Even in the trivialities of life he kept this practical outlook.

When Father Collin became overwrought because he had to wear long pants instead of the usual knee-length culottes, Francis wrote back: **"I don't see any problem here. You say it's not our style, but the Rule doesn't prescribe our style of dress and we cannot adopt any one in particular. In Guinea, for instance, they wear straw hats. . . . Father Tisserant wore long trousers in San Domingo. . . . If God sees fit to enable me to send you the confrere I have in mind, I'll put long pants on him"** (N.D. 10, 90).

DISPOSITION OF GENTLENESS

The gentle disposition has to complement firmness if our life is to remain consonant. Firmness disappears as a consonant disposition whenever we become uncaring or insensitive to the point of ruthlessness. Willfulness of this sort is destructive not only of others but of ourselves as well. It leads to impetuous over exertion or a destructive style of asceticism and discipline. Our Father warns against both deviations.

Father Libermann regarded it as essential that we "always avoid seeking for and insisting on ideal perfection".

He told Father Lossedat:

"Admittedly, I have more influence over our confreres than you do. Now, what is my most effective approach in guiding others? It's this: I tolerate all the faults that I know I can't succeed in eliminating and put up with manners that are sometimes downright unbecoming and boorish. . . . For example, if you were to try and force Father Arragon to conduct himself in a sedate, polite and friendly fashion, you would be pursuing a will-o-the-wisp. You would stand a better chance of stopping the sun in its course. But if you treat him kindly and let him act according to his character and the way he is built . . . you will certainly bring out the good in him" (N.D. 8, 113).

This principle of tolerance for the imperfections of others was a natural consequence of his reluctance to force things.

"Beware of that imagination which makes you demand perfection in human beings, in organizations, and in things in general", he counseled.

We are right in wanting to see everything done perfectly and wanting to bend every effort with calmness, moderation, and wisdom to bring men and things close to that ideal. But we may as well make up our minds that we will encounter imperfection wherever we encounter human beings. Let us try to achieve the maximum, but let's not break anything in the process. Otherwise we lose twenty times more than we gain and in the end, if we're honest, we'll soon realize that we are rather far from being perfect ourselves because we demand such absolute perfection of others. I have observed that the really great saints always acted in the way I have recommended. Only the 'petty' saints, the ones who haven't gone very far along the road of piety, act contrariwise. . . . This sort of energy has another defect. It has a penchant for methods and remedies that are radical. Now, radicalism is good and even necessary in the realm of Dogma, but it is detestable and destructive of all good when it comes to the administration and supervision of sacred things (N.D. 12, 319 f.).

Onesided firmness betrays itself by an inclination to rigidity or inflexibility. Firmness must thus be balanced by gentleness. The life of the Spirit is a blend of firm gentleness and gentle firmness. The two dispositions should modulate each other. Firmness without gentleness deteriorates into severity; gentleness without firmness becomes flabbiness. The balance of the two is one of the main characteristics of Father Libermann's graced and gracious personality; it is a cornerstone of his spiritual doctrine.

Gentleness must be genuine. Oppressors of the underprivileged may only play at being gentle when they keep company with high society. In the meantime, they may be ruthless with those whom they exploit. Their gentleness may be only an imitation of genteel appearances customary in certain circles. Such surface gentility is useless for growth in real gentleness, which is a gift of grace. In no way does it bring us nearer to the mystery of divine gentleness that indwells in

our souls. Libermann warns against this danger. He inveighed against make-believe gentility that shrouds a lack of respect and considerateness with a semblance of deference, and covers insincerity with a veneer of culture. Once he told a priest:

If you cringe before the world, if you flatter it, or if you merely ape its manner, you may be sure that your priestly work will be sterile. Don't be afraid of the world. Approach it as one who belongs wholly to God. Face it without fear. Do not stop to consider what people will say or think about you. The world's judgments have little effect on a true priest (L.S. 1, 41).

Yet he did not want his men to withhold their own gentleness from such people.

Live in peace with the outside world. Be genuine in your dealings with poor Frenchmen who have no religion. Pity them but don't be angry with them. Excuse them when they oppose you. . . . Be particularly careful to overcome the embarrassment you may feel when you are in the company of men of the world whose habits of thought and judgment are different from yours, who look askance at you, or perhaps despise you. . . . Such embarrassment engenders a sort of stiffness, a kind of shyness that gives one the air of being ill-humored and stand-offish. . . . That type of attitude makes a very bad impression on them and estranges them from our holy religion. . . . In general, you ought to like all men, no matter how they may feel about religious principles or about you.

If we are able to force consciences to be pure, wills to be good, and minds to be truthful, it is evident that we should do so. Charity would make it our duty. But there is no one in this world who can even slightly force the consciences, wills, or minds of his fellowmen. God didn't want to do it. Why should we? (N.D. 9, 248 f.).

This respect for individuality, this reluctance to hurt a fellow human being, this disinclination to force anyone to act contrary to his temperament demand a refined and accurate

knowledge of the human personality. Father Libermann knew this. He urged his men to develop a sound psychological insight and even his Rule prescribed a high degree of empathy on the part of his confreres:

They ought to adjust their speech and their behavior to the emotional make-up and the interests of the people with whom they deal. This emotional make-up and these interests cannot always be known by calculated conclusions, arrived at by reasoning. It takes a certain tact to do so, and this tact is normally acquired through a general and practical knowledge of the recesses of the human heart, of character differences, and of interest specialties. These things are picked up by observing the people you meet and paying attention to the sentiments and dispositions they display (N.D. 10, 545).

The more we are at home with the Mystery, the more we sense that it suffuses people, events, and things. They begin to light up for us as symbols of its presence. Their veiled radiance illumines our surroundings. A sense of gentle love begins to pervade our life. The gift of gentleness may manifest itself in a refined mode of presence to all persons we meet, to all things we handle. They become for us fragile mirrors of the mystery. We sense how liable they are to be dimmed or fractured. While gently tending the people and things entrusted to us, we grow in reverence and respect. Our conversation becomes compatible and compassionate. We become competent in the fine art of gentle adaptation of appropriate words and expressions.

A passage reminiscent of Newman's famous sketch of a true gentleman gives Father Libermann's thinking on the point:

Speak little, but do not be taciturn. Always be good-humored and satisfied. . . . A multiplicity of words drains your spirit like water and gives self-love a chance to grow unhampered. . . . You ought to adjust your conversation to the taste and background of the people with whom you are speaking. . . . Don't be a know-it-all. . . . Don't parade your knowledge. Even when people obviously don't know what they are talking about, treat them gent-

ly. Don't pass judgment on or despise anyone because of his ignorance. Refrain from correcting misstatements all the time unless the glory of God requires it (N.D. 6, 450 f.).

Father Libermann uses for gentleness the word *douceur*. *It is a keyword in his writings.* In its highly elastic applicability, it defies translation. This "douceur", resulting as it does from harmony within the personality, excludes harshness, tension, compulsion, and rigidity toward oneself and others. It moderates all hysterical agitation, relieves nervous anxiety, controls aggressiveness and hostility. It is the fruit of quiet self-possession that has been gained through daily growth in self-understanding through the light of grace. Far from generating a superficial make-believe conviction that all is sweetness and light, it rests firmly on an awareness of self and of outside reality. Francis Libermann gave evidence of its value in all the aspects of his life.

GENTLENESS TOWARDS OURSELVES

Francis Libermann fears our temptation to abuse our fortitude by willful exaggeration when we are disappointed in ourselves. He warns us not to discipline ourselves rigorously without wisdom and compassion, blunting the voice of the Spirit and of our finer sensibilities. He does not want us to silence the whisper of the Mystery in our heart. He prays that the grace of gentleness will enable us, in moments of downheartedness, shame and guilt, to nurse our wounded lives compassionately and kindly.

Most frail and vulnerable is our presence to the Presence. It is threatened by countless distractions, popular pressures, and excessive austerity. The awareness of its abiding is delicate. It cannot be compelled by external mortifications. It may close itself like a flower at nightfall, when we try to force its appearance or its abiding. Gentle surrender more than spectacular austerity is the mild, propitious climate in which the flower of presence blooms. Hence long before St. Therese of Lisieux propounded her "little way", Father Libermann had effectively disposed of the rigid and self-conscious asceti-

cism that found such favor among the spiritual guides of his time. Except for its masculinity and greater applicability to the active life, his doctrine is typically Theresian. It embodies a surprising degree of psychological refinement and emphasizes in a special way the dangers attendant upon excessive religious tension.

He saw little value in extreme and external mortification for the members of his Congregation. He refused to consider such things as strokes with the discipline, penitential chains, hair shirts, sleeping on wooden planks, and fasting on days other than those appointed. He mistrusted the unhealthy atmosphere in which these practices are apt to flourish and he was particularly apprehensive about their effect on young people. He saw that all too often they end in pride, conceit, nervous tension, and a distorted scale of spiritual values.

Perfect and ready surrender to God's will at all times and under all circumstances provided the only key to holiness that Francis ever needed:

In order to go to God with your heart your mind must be undisturbed, indifferent. Keep it quiet. Do things simply, without too much analysis. If you really want to please God and intend to be in full agreement with His Will, you can't go wrong. It is important for you not to spend time trying to find out exactly what is agreeable to Him or what pleases Him most. Act like a child that is fond of its father. It can't analyse or figure out what its father likes most. . . . It does the first thing that comes into its head. It gets the idea that Daddy will be pleased and then goes ahead and does it. Why not do the same? Sometimes the child makes a mistake. So will you. But that doesn't matter. God knows you meant well . . . and that pleases Him. It's essential for you to develop this unconcerned way of doing things. It will improve you much quicker than any self-conscious striving for perfection (N.D. 4, 105).

Of course, with such an approach to the spiritual life, Francis came into immediate opposition with the prevailing thought of his day. In entering the new road, he had been led solely by grace and experience, for, outside of Holy Scripture and some lives of the saints, he read hardly any ascetical literature.

As he admitted himself, "**in this matter I am almost completely without such knowledge as is gleaned from books. I have done almost nothing in the line of spiritual reading**". Yet he set himself calmly and squarely against contemporary opinion because he knew in his heart that he was right.

GENTLENESS AND SIMPLICITY OR CONGENIALITY

Without gentleness we become tense and strained in labor and leisure. Losing ease of heart and mind, we no longer feel able to muse in a leisurely way about the divine meaning of life, its sufferings and joys. We become upset if things don't go our way. We feel the need for instant accomplishment. Like loving gardeners, we should flow gently with events and things that emerge in the garden of life. As Father Libermann repeats in many ways, exalted ideals, endless worries, and violent emotions should not overwhelm us at a feverish pace. On the other hand, if we can simply be congenial with what we most deeply are, the gentle life is facilitated immensely.

Libermann summarizes this process of being true to one's self by using the word "simplicity". It is a concept that has nothing to do with uncouth or gauche behavior, want of intelligence, lack of refinement, or disdain for culture. Francis envisioned simplicity as a courageous and genuine faithfulness to what is really authentic in us, to what is in accord with God's plan for us. Thus, for example, when Thomas Aquinas wrote his great Summa it was an act of sublime simplicity, for that mode of thinking and writing was a congenial expression of his gifted mind. Had he forced himself to write out of character in an entertaining and popular way, he would have been wanting in simplicity.

Everything that goes counter to personal honesty and consistency denotes a lack of such congeniality. Paradoxically, there may be instances when a man may have to be so simple that he seems proud, for the mediocre minds around him often confuse this virtue with a leveling process, a lack of originality, an absence of culture. Throughout his life, Father Libermann himself was accused of inordinate ambition,

when in reality he was nothing more or less than heroically faithful to his life call. A lesser man might have counterfeited simplicity by escaping into the security of a nice little "petit bourgeois" life, but Francis never wanted to be "safe" at the expense of his integrity.

With considerable logic he argued that if a man had to respect his own endowments, others had to respect them too. If abilities and special graces had marked him out for a definite function in the scheme of things, no one should forcibly change that orientation.

We must accord to everyone the freedom to follow his own ideas and to do good in his own way. We should encourage him along those lines. This method will produce the best results, for we then have the person doing all that is good in his own manner. Perhaps he might have accomplished more if he had followed other ideas, but we cannot change that. He happens not to have those ideas. . . . When we allow everyone to act according to his own concepts, his own character, his own cast of mind, and the entire pattern of his being, a great deal of good will be achieved. Many will make mistakes and act imprudently, but experience will come with time and everyone will perfect himself in line with his own nature. . . . Accord everyone the freedom to live in a way that suits his nature. God made him that way. His intentions are good. Encourage them and they will all do good in the way they are inspired to do from above (N.D. 8, 111 f.).

GENTLENESS AND ABANDONMENT

Gentleness is the finest flower of abandonment. Those who live in abandonment can let go. They can give themselves over to the calming climate of a gentle style of life. We lose the anxious urge to do more and more things in less and less time. The spirit of gentleness begins to modulate serenely our pace of achievement and production.

Father Libermann tells us about his own abandonment:

"I abandon myself and hand myself over to the heavenly Father's disposal, so that he may do with everything, and in particular with me, all that seems good to him. In life and death, in time and eternity, everything for him and in him alone. May he alone, and all he wishes, live and reign in everything and everywhere" (L.S. 1, 352).

GENTLENESS COMPANION OF FIRMNESS

True gentleness makes firmness its faithful companion. Gentleness does not demand, for instance, that we become defenseless in the face of oppression of the poor. Gentleness gives way to firmness when the Lord invites us to strong stands and daring decisions. This firmness is as striking in Father Libermann's life as it was in that of Teresa of Avila who called it "determined determination". This firmness in both of them is rooted in a deeper gentle receptivity. Gentleness preceded firmness. It enabled them to appraise dispassionately the nuances that emerged constantly in their field of presence and action. The grace of appraisal helped them to enhance their effectiveness in consonance with these insights. It enabled them to offer their best possible service in changing situations in spite of false accusations. As Father Libermann wrote to Le Vavas seur:

Develop great sentiments of confidence and love towards God, and act forcefully. Do not be discouraged by the difficulties which will be placed in your path, reproaches, false judgments which will be made about you and your line of action in everything you do. You will be taken for a weakminded person, imprudent, proud, and they will say a thousand things about you, not only in your own country but even in Paris. Respectable people will disapprove of you, blame you, and treat this plan as a young man's dream, foolishness, and look on it as impossible. But do not allow yourself to be discouraged or stopped, even temporarily. Even if the wisest and

most pious people oppose it, persevere in your project before God, for those who do not feel the interior movement of God towards such a work look on it as impossible because of the difficulties. That is why you need to remain always in our Lord in a great spirit of humiliation and love, letting him act rather than acting yourself. Follow the movements he gives you and the desires he implants in you, in all gentleness, peace and love and in the deepest humility of your heart (N.D. 1, 638).

The gentle presence Father Libermann advocates is a healing power. It creates a climate of equanimity, an atmosphere of stillness and repose. It heals the wounds inflicted by the exalted pride form. It tempers the multitude of illusions that distort our apprehensions and appraisals, our feelings and motivations, the mirages that make us suffer and fail. Gentle presence is a return to our original call to loving consonance with the Mystery from which we emerge. The image of that lost paradise is buried in the silent abyss of our being. Unwittingly we are always in search of this treasure, like people who dream and seek for the legendary land of Atlantis. This inner call seems to draw us irresistibly. Yet only the Spirit can grant its fulfillment.

At certain moments the Mystery itself may take over and grant us a presence that goes beyond images, forms, and thoughts. It keeps us in silent wonder, embraced by the Holy and its myriad epiphanies. As Francis Libermann knew so well, the precious power of gentle presence is a way to oneness with the ineffable. It discloses to our vision of faith the mysterious apophatic depth of the people, events, and things we deal with firmly in our everyday life. They radiate again for us the splendor of epiphanies of the Mystery.

Our venerable Father tells us that our hearts should not be tightened by pained concern about our progress, that excessive forcefulness should be softened, that we should transcend natural impressions. He prepares us for the liberation from the curse of enslavement to popular opinion, natural impressions, and the paralyzing need to please all people:

Action or practical union consists in divesting oneself of natural impressions to open one's soul to divine impressions. As long as the soul is a slave to its natural impressions it is like an opaque body,

leaving no point of entry for the supernatural light of truth. On the contrary, as soon as we master these natural impressions and are completely centered on receiving the divine communications and acting on them, then our soul becomes spiritual and transparent. Then we have a superabundance of truth, we breathe truth, we feed on it, we see the things of God effortlessly and clearly, because our soul is in its element, the divine light (N.D. XIII, 699).

EXCESSIVE FIRMNESS BLOCKS GENTLE RECEPTIVITY

When firmness becomes excessive, gentleness fails to modulate its forcefulness. This is one of the main concerns of the spiritual direction of Father Libermann. Excessive firmness often conceals an arrogant need to be in total control. Fortitude is no longer guided by enlightened willing but by willfulness. It is nourished by the illusions of the pride form to attain perfect self-possession. Stubborn firmness replaces gentleness. True gentleness may be replaced by the calculated maintenance of a facade of gentility, which is a trick of psychology, not a gift of grace. Gentleness becomes a feat of self-mastery. Father Libermann cautions against such willfulness and violence:

All you have to do is keep yourself docile and pliable in the hands of the Spirit of life, whom our Lord has placed in your soul to be your all. He must be the principle and unique source of all your affections, all your desires and all the movements of your soul; he must be the driving-power of your mind and the guide of your soul through the movements he implants there. It pertains to him alone to give you any impetus or impression whatsoever, and it pertains to him also to get you to put that impetus or impression into practice, for if you mix your own violent activity with it you will only spoil everything (L.S. 1, 366).

Firm discipline is necessary for the formation of life and world, but it should not be the central event in the history of

our graced unfolding. Gentle receptivity should be the primary source of our inspiration and of our discipline. Relaxed firmness and the flexible discipline that flows from it is both a protection against and a preparation for the unique activity of the Holy disclosed to us in gentle and genuine abandonment. As Libermann says:

We must distrust ourselves all the time, distrust everything we do, everything we say and think. We have to be circumspect, and not act with that boldness which manifests itself at times under the guise of genuine abandonment to God, and yet is far from it. Let everything be done in God, gently, unpretentiously. O dear brothers, how perilous is all that haughtiness of mind, that presumption in acting, that determination and violence in the will. You have no idea! (L.S. 1, 503).

Our culture tends to applaud conquest and mastery, symbolized in modern technical and scientific advances. We are tempted to construe our personal formation in terms of the principles of management that allow us to gain dominance over nature. People who pursue excessive firmness exalt a perfectionistic form of life to be gained by inflexible willfulness. Their functional minds operate like computers. They refuse to be distracted by sensitivity to others or by openness to the Mystery.

Already in Father Libermann's time, this tendency of the modern age began to announce itself in his directees. Writing for them he penned a unique message for our age. He is a master for our times. He realized that our emotional life suffers many deformities when gentleness is suppressed by excessive firmness in the striving for perfection in ourselves and others. Our life loses spontaneity, flexibility, and vivacity. Any graced and human feeling that conflicts with one's project of self-mastery is automatically put down. The refused or repudiated feelings cannot be appraised for what they are. They are no longer precious stepping stones for growth in wisdom and consonance. Gentleness becomes only a facade; it does not flow forth from one's inmost center. One becomes a sick idolator of poise and perfect self-possession. Graced humanness is denied and maimed by perverted gentility covering up a harsh perfectionism.

Father Libermann describes the source of both firmness and gentleness in words that will echo with truth for all times;

If we want to hear and see him (the Holy Spirit) and go forward under his guidance, we must attend to his inspirations, keep our glance continually turned towards him, practice interior silence, that is, of all our passions and all the faculties of our soul, avoid too great interior action, rushing and activity, moderate all violent movements, even those whose object is something good, wish to know no other wisdom or prudence than what comes from the Holy Spirit, and by this interior path avoid all natural efforts to become united to him, and simply take care to avoid the obstacles which arise from rushing around and being attached to creatures and to ourselves.

All this must take place in complete peace and tranquillity of soul, and it is this disposition that we must await from him whatever he will please to show us and have us carry out, always in readiness to follow and never precede him (E.S., Suppl. 80).