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PRACTICAL UNION AND THE CRESTFALLEN GOD

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“(The elder son) was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out and began to urge him to come in; but he retorted to his father, ‘All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property – he and his loose women – you kill the calf we had been fattening.’ The father said, ‘My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours.’” (Luke 15, 28-31)

The story of the two sons in Chapter 15 of St Luke’s Gospel is disconcerting when we feel a guilty sympathy for the elder son, a complicity in his refusal to join the celebration. Maybe we also feel for the crestfallen father, completely taken aback at his son’s failure to appreciate his loving presence. Can there be a more heartrending lament than the father’s protest? “You are with me always and all I have is yours”. The father’s love has not broken through the sometimes dull surface of everyday living.

God does not love us because we are good. We are good because God loves us. (St Augustine)

In God’s creative design we have been brought into being. “I am loved, therefore I am.” God looked out on His creation and saw that it was good. This dynamic of God’s initiative in love runs through Benedict XVI’s first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*. God’s love empowers us. God loves. Now we also can love because we are created in His image.

Acknowledging that God makes the first move in no way diminishes us. It does not set a limit to our creativity or responsibility. Rather it intensifies them. We are now in the realm of spiritual energy. Goodness consists in the pouring out of itself. Love increases, not decreases, with use. Today we would say “Use it or lose it” (cf. Matt 18, 23-35).

Acknowledging that God makes the first move, that He first loves us, is enlightening and liberating, but it is not always easy to do. It is often very difficult to accept God’s love for us in the face of blatant injustice, in the midst of violence and war. It is nevertheless possible because Jesus has shown us the way. He had to suffer and die for it, but he never wavered in proclaiming God’s love for the world. (Jn. 3, 16)

*Love increases, not
decreases, with use.*

We have to be concerned, to be troubled, not about the other side but about our own side, not about grace but about will. (Martin Buber)

From his Jewish background Francis Libermann was familiar with a God who made the first move, a God who cared deeply for His people, whose loving presence accompanied them on their journey through life. In his baptism Libermann was nevertheless surprised by the extravagance of God's desire for intimacy, by His breathtaking availability in Jesus. In this period of grace, it seemed that nothing could halt God's loving advance.

It was not long, however, before Libermann had to struggle to hold on to the sustaining conviction that God loved him. There was the open wound of estrangement from his father as a result of his conversion. There were the *grand mal* epileptic seizures, which seemed to rule out priestly ordination. Later on there were the many crises of the fledgling missionary society, especially the disastrous start when almost all of the first group of missionaries died in Africa within the first year. Everyday pain calls God's love into question, and draws us further into its mystery. Slowly Libermann learned that he could count on God, but to do so he had to deny himself because God's ways are not our ways.

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The apostolic life is that life of love and holiness lived on earth by the Son of God in order to save and sanctify people. By it He continually sacrificed Himself, thereby glorifying the Father and saving the world. (Spiritan Rule 1849)

Libermann had a passion for the apostolic life, which for him was a share in the life of Jesus. Jesus' union with his Father reached a crescendo in his moments of going apart for quiet contemplative prayer, but continued undiminished in the crowded hours of his activity. This loving union involved a radical absence of self-interest.

...Libermann's own union with God was the secret of his remarkable buoyancy.

In trying to follow this pattern, Libermann's own union with God was the secret of his remarkable buoyancy. And he continually sought to share this energy source with others. At the end of his life he made a particular effort to reach out to his missionaries. He distinguished between contemplative union with God and practical (or active) union with God. For us these are two aspects of the same reality, as they were for Jesus. They nourish each other. They thrive together and are threatened only by our selfishness or sin. Not only is practical union with God not diminished by activity, it is at once at home and restlessly creative in the apostolic life.

“Practical union” has become a Libermann footprint on the Spiritan path for the last 150 years. It has encouraged seminarians because it has offered new meaning to the drudgery of everyday living. Above all it has consoled missionaries, especially in moments of exhaustion or loneliness. Its healing balm is not in the details of its explanation, but in its putting us in contact with Jesus at prayer, at work, rejoicing at the initiatives of his Father, weeping at the stubborn resistance of his people. Together with Jesus we experience all the emotions. As his disciples we do not escape the need for self-denial, lest we miss the whisper of the poor, the suffering of the excluded.

O Holy Spirit, I wish to be like a feather before you, so that your breath may carry me wherever it pleases and I may never offer it any resistance. (Francis Libermann)

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Much of the time we may taste only our own poverty.

The Spiritan Rule of Life (1987) invites us to consider practical union as a “condition of habitual fidelity to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit”. Our model in this fidelity is Mary (cf. SRL 5 & 88). Her union with her son grew through practical everyday association. There was some misunderstanding in his teenage years, later a seeming exclusion from his ministry, but then a fierce solidarity with his final suffering. Practical union does not keep us safely on the sidelines but plunges us deeply into the drama of life. Elusive as the breath of the Spirit, practical union rarely reaches consciousness. Much of the time we may taste only our own poverty. We do not often recognize God’s presence, but occasionally, in a flash of grace, we catch a fleeting glimpse. We enjoy a brief Emmaus moment (Lk 24, 31) and it transforms despondency into wild enthusiasm.

Through his teaching on practical union, Libermann has put us in touch with Jesus’ deep desire to be with us to the end of time (cf. Matt 28, 20, Jn 17, 24). If we are feeling left out or forgotten, Jesus’ longing for our friendship comes to us with the freshness of the dawn. It brings us peace and hope. And if weariness and stress squeeze all the joy out of life, we will again hear that voice of invitation, “You are with me always, and all I have is yours.”

Practical union? It’s your move. Join the celebration!