Libermann and "Practical Union"

Jean Le Meste

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Jean Le Meste, C.S.Sp.
Jean Le Meste, C.S.Sp., was ordained priest in Chevilly October 04, 1931. For twenty-five years till 1956 he taught mathematics, the sciences, and Literature at Saint-Ilan. He became a specialist on Fr. Libermann and greatly imbibed his spirituality. Greatly sought-after as counselor and spiritual director, the superiors freed him to devote full time as chaplain, confessor, and spiritual director, and charged him with research on Father Libermann at Chevilly. As such, he collaborated in the publication of the first numbers of the journal Spiritus. He died on February 15, 1982.

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LIBERMANN AND “PRACTICAL UNION”

“Do not complain about how little time you have for prayer and study; happy the missionary whose moments are taken up in the work of saving souls. You are more to be congratulated than pitied” (ND, VII, 147; April 1845)1

Pope Pius XII, in 1952, proposed Father Libermann as a most reliable guide to missionary action, and rightly so, for when faced with the dilemma that readily distresses specialists of apostolic work, fruit of the quality of their prayer, Libermann never disturbed the balance. Thrust into action, this mystic did not form contemplatives, rather men who really put their shoulder to the wheel without fear of occasionally getting covered in mud. To begin with, he neither distrusted action nor underestimated it. On June 16, 1842, he responded very clearly to a young priest who told him about a problem he was having (his own sanctification or that of others):

One of these two things depends on the other .... This reflection is very important, because often priests ... have more zeal for the virtue of recollection and the other virtues that tend to their own sanctification, than they have for the salvation of souls. It is a big mistake. Once one is a priest, one no longer belongs to oneself, rather to souls, according to the divine will that deploys us among them as it pleases him. Others, on the contrary, on the pretext of zeal for souls, are entirely devoted to their ministry, without taking care of their own sanctification, which then suffers as a result. They hurt even more than the first group. They ought first to obtain the glory of God in their own souls. Moreover, if they are holy, they will save even more souls, and with much less movement. We must therefore do one and not omit the other (ND, II, 472-473).

Thus, there is no way to retreat into oneself or escape into Trappist or Carthusian dreams. It is there, on the ground that our vocation assigns to us, that we must maintain intimate contact with the Lord.

The Greatness and Misery of the Apostle

Most often problems stem from a lack of perspective. Father Libermann tried to anticipate them by reminding

32
those who are about to depart that “the apostolic life is nothing else than the life of love and holiness, which the Son of God led on earth to save and sanctify souls”\textsuperscript{2} (ND, II, 290). As such:

There is nothing so beautiful, nothing so high upon earth, as the apostolate. Contemplative life, though possessing the splendor of high favors and the sweetness of its outpourings, is inferior to it,\textsuperscript{3}

for contemplative life represents only a portion of the life of our Lord. Apostolic life, on the contrary, includes the perfection of our Lord’s life and is modeled on that life. More than any other life, it makes us to be like Christ. It demands an absolute and continual sacrifice for it is based on the perfect love which transforms us into Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{4}

The founder never sought to sidestep the truth. In his lectures as well as in his recruiting rounds in 1846, he brought people face-to-face with the heroic life they were choosing. In so doing, he aimed to eliminate candidates whose vocation was sustained only by false enthusiasm. His letter of March 2, 1840 to M. Bureau is a typical example; it demonstrates an almost brutal honesty and a reassuring balm. After laying bare all the candidate’s limits concerning nature and grace with regard to the demands of the apostolate – giving an unvarnished description to make Bureau keenly aware of his complete powerlessness – Libermann encouraged him to draw on this very weakness in order to be filled with strength through complete trust in the Lord’s succor:

\begin{quote}
Learn, by everything I am saying to you here, never to worry, no matter how great your misery .... It is by grace that you must move towards perfection, not by your own strength, which is less than nothing, as you yourself must sense (ND, II, 113).
\end{quote}

**Union of the Instrument and the Hand that wields It**

Simple in his spiritual life, simple in his spiritual direction, Father Libermann had only one aim: to impart to his brothers a haunting feeling of their absolute poverty before the work they were undertaking, and as a consequence, to provoke in them an insatiable thirst for the living water that epitomizes the missionary’s entire life of prayer.
Little by little the soul ... fills with the thought of its nothingness ... and being in extreme need, it raises itself to him to find his support .... Then begins a new life .... Then the soul begins to become a good enough instrument in the hands of God - a rusty instrument, twisted and crippled, yet flexible enough in the skillful hand that wields it, to do some little things for the glory of him who alone works all that is good. This flexibility ... comes to him only by the overturning of his first desires and his first hopes.⁵

Father Libermann’s synthetic thought delighted in this theme of instrument and all his teaching aimed to imbue his disciples with it. That is undoubtedly why he came to speak of “practical union.” Indeed, an instrument, no matter how perfect, can only be useful if the worker has a firm grip on it and can manipulate it as he wishes, in short, if it is fully united with him. Otherwise, something will play to adulterate the intentions of the master of the work.

In all Relationships and Life Circumstances

It was only in his final year of life that Father Libermann coined the term “practical union,” but he had often described the thing itself as being the very ideal of every Christian life, that is, this intimate connection with the Spirit in all our active life, thanks to a permanent state of receptivity and attention to God. Such state should lead us to no longer think, love, desire, and act except under the sole influence of him who has become “the soul of our soul.”⁶ A prayer by the Venerable beautifully highlights this realism of Christ’s life acting on human intelligence and will in order to enrich them and make them more and more free and original:

Most holy and most adorable Spirit of my Jesus, let me hear your sweet loving voice. Refresh me by your delightful breath ... Divine Spirit, I wish to be before you as a light feather, so that your breath may carry me off where it wishes and that I may never offer it the least resistance.⁷

The date of these lines is significant, for in that year of 1840,⁸ Libermann was facing a wall and expecting, in an act of full abandon, that the wall would tumble like that of Jericho and that the Lord would say to him: “set out overseas.” Libermann had only one thing to offer to God for the purposes of leading Black Africa to Christ: an attentive
ear and a receptive heart. The wall fell and the lesson was not lost: once again, he has confirmed that Jesus is the master of the impossible for those who follow him in every sense of the word. The future founder was not surprised at this success, nor, we daresay, was God surprised at this attitude, for Libermann remained consistent with his past and the conception he had formed of baptism. A few months earlier, on October 19, 1939, he had written to two recently converted Jews:

Now that you have had the supreme happiness of receiving in your souls the holy and divine life of Jesus, you must also manifest it in all your actions; it must be the occupation of all your thoughts and the object of all your desires .... Open your souls, spread them out, let them be as vast as the sea before our most sweet Jesus, so that he will make them overflow with his most holy love. I do not know if you can fully envision the thought I want to express, for when one speaks of the love of Jesus in souls one can never explain it ... because one sees oneself more than one can understand. For who has ever been able to understand the length, the breadth, the height and the depth of knowledge, and the immensity of the love of Jesus? At least, give yourself completely (to this love). There is something to fulfill you, to satisfy you and to make you flourish in all the relations and all the circumstances of your life. Jesus and his holy love are all we need (LS, II, 282-284).

Everyone knows that baptism confers upon us the dignity of God's children and many of us recall the words of Saint Paul: “For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (Rom. 8:14), or these: “yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20). Yet how many interpret it in their own way in their practice! Libermann takes these words to their full conclusion, as much in his personal conduct as in his spiritual and missionary doctrine.

**Let Oneself be acted upon by God**

“All belong[s] to you, and you to Christ, and Christ to God” (1 Cor 3:22-23), St. Paul said to the Corinthians. “All belongs to us,” added the rabbi’s son from Saverne, for:

the divine graces our Lord imparts on earth become our very substance; by faith they impart our Lord’s holiness, his virtues, his dispositions, and his life; they make us sharers in his mysteries. All of these divine
qualities of which our Lord is the great treasury are a sort of property belonging to our souls, which enjoy them already in this life.\(^9\)

This living water is there, within our reach; you only need to want it and give yourself over to it. How? A January 13, 1842 letter [to Schwindenhammer, then a deacon] strikingly condenses all his prior writings as well as all his instructions to the missionaries. The landmark date of this letter is also notable: it comes five months after he became the founder–novice master, and it is surely how he taught those who were preparing for the African endeavor. The commentary on the Provisional Rule of 1844 even offers proof. In the letter he writes that man's entire role in the spiritual life consists:

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\text{in disposing, by means of the very powerful help of divine grace, which is in us very strong... to follow the movements and the impressions of the divine Spirit which is in us. He wants to be the soul of our soul.... Let him act in us as our body allows our soul to act, which moves it as it thinks fit and as it wishes. The only difference is that the body receives and necessarily follows the impulse that the soul gives to it, while our soul must receive and follow voluntarily the holy impulse of this divine soul of the Spirit of Jesus (ND, III, 102).}
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Libermann abundantly develops this idea in the lines that follow. Other texts in a similar vein are legion; this one states the essence, at the same time protecting he who never tires of advocating “a vigorous, male piety... that of our Lord and his Apostles” (LS, II, 10) from any hint of quietism.

**And for this dwell in Him**

Though very enlightening, the comparison to the soul leaves us wanting more: we desire to know how human will ought to offer itself to the powerful impulse of the Spirit. Father Libermann responded many times to this desire, especially in a letter to M. Dupont, dated October 5, 1840. In this case, he refers to study, but the solution applies also to action, whatever it may be. After distinguishing between purely natural knowledge and that which is purely supernatural or infused, he arrives at the knowledge he calls mixed:
It is acquired, he writes, when, by a purely supernatural principle, such as that of pleasing God and of doing his holy will, one seriously applies his natural faculties to study, full of confidence and in a spirit of recollection and love for him.

We must, on the one hand, give ourselves over to it completely, “to avoid that natural laziness and cowardice which constantly compel us to repose”; on the other hand, “we must guard against too marked a taste and passion for study. This passion is one of the strongest. (Of course) a taste for the things we study is good; it is a gift from God, but it must not be abused. It is like the taste for food, there is a very great danger of going too far.” Balance, though difficult, is achieved by the spirit of meditation:

Study, as well as all our other actions, ought be done in God .... The spirit of recollection is of paramount importance to us; all the fruit we can produce in souls depends on it. Moreover, without contemplation, it is inevitable that nature and passion take over and engender all sorts of errors. Without recollection, our mind gradually becomes accustomed to acting by itself and independently of God. This is already an evil in itself; but it produces another and even greater evil in that our mind then acquires an extraordinarily natural activity, which renders it incapable of being pliant and docile to divine light, and becomes a terrible obstacle to prayer, to knowledge of oneself and of souls, and the action of grace in them. Believe me, I have seen and observed all these things many times and in many people; and, moreover, they are all natural (ND, II, 184-187).

All this is already very much like practical union, but the word is not there yet; it will take new circumstances to bring it forth.

Active and Practical Union

Wishing to speak ex professo to his missionaries about prayer and contemplative union, the Venerable Father Libermann felt it necessary to remind them of the other mode of union, in his eyes more necessary and more perfect, and at the same time more characteristic of the missionary. He will call it “active union” or “practical union” in chapter 5 of his Instructions to Missionaries, “action or practical union” in his last lectures to the novices of Notre-Dame du Gard.
Notre-Dame du Gard (ND, XIII, 697-702). Both texts date from the spring of 1851. The letters of the same period do not use this vocabulary. Perhaps this new expression, which serves to gather his thoughts on a crucial point, seems to him too complex and too rich to be grasped on the fly, when he does not have the leisure to explain it. This is, it seems, the last stage of a doctrine that seeks to mold itself into a concise and resonant formula.

With great clarity, our author locates union with God by way of grace, prayer, and other actions of life, respectively. The first “is passive on our part,” while the other two, requiring our participation and our loyalty, deserve, in this sense, to be called active.

By the fact of possessing sanctifying grace (whose seeds are “imparted to us in baptism”), the soul is united with God. This union is passive on our part; God, animating us through his Holy Spirit, unites us with him, without us doing anything other than to prepare ourselves, and being prepared, to not resist (ES, 480, ND, XIII, 696).

But this grace requires growth, and therein lies the entire matter of our holiness. It can only do so with the cooperation of our freedom (ND, XIII, 696-697):

God unites himself with us by giving us his sanctifying grace; he unites us to him with the aid of our fidelity. (Indeed) by our fidelity in following the impressions and inclinations of this grace, either in our relations with God or in our relations with all creatures, we unite with God, and it is an active union. Here, two states of the soul manifest themselves: contemplative union, and practical action (or union), which are what provide openness to the development of sanctifying grace (ES, 480; ND, XIII, 697).

Libermann calls active union contemplative or practical according to whether we turn directly to God, because we are thirsty for him like a child for its mother (ND, XIII, 697), or we adhere to the tendencies of grace (ES, 480-481) in the course of all our daily activities and relationships.

Thus, in prayer [oraison], as in practical union, for the ordinary habits of life, the soul unites with God by faith and love. But there is this difference. In the latter, the soul, preserving its relations with creatures
according to the order of God’s will, obeys and adheres to the grace which animates it and unites it with God in its works, while in prayer [oraïson] it breaks all relation with creatures, gathers all her powers, to apply them to God through a thought of faith, and unites with him through love (ES, 496).

Faced with such a definition, we understand that practical union is more perfect and more essential than contemplative union. “It is not those who say: Lord! Lord! ...”

A more perfect contemplative union, with a less perfect practical action, constitutes less great perfection than perfect practical action, joined to a contemplative union which is less so (ND, XIII, 697).

In any case, it is practical union that must characterize the missionaries who have to “sacrifice themselves for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, without usually experiencing great inner sweetness” (ND, 698):

Our state must be effective rather than affective. Completely devoted to our neighbor one day (he was speaking to novices), we will not have time to feed our soul with ... spiritual comforts. The good God will give us the desired measure of consolation and strength, but we must rely only on strong and active love. Such is the missionary; he must in no way be disconcerted and believe he is doing badly just because he does not feel tender sweetness. Let us be men, vigorous soldiers in his service, forgetting ourselves and breathing only his glory and the salvation of souls (ND, 711).11

Acting by Faith and Love

At the heart of practical union, there is therefore the will (actual or habitual) to make the inspirations of grace dominate the tendencies of nature in us, to inspire our actions. For if the latter remained the only “masters of our activity ... active union would then disappear” (ES, 483). A matter of intention, some will say. Admittedly, and Libermann does not disagree, but, with ruthless clinical sharpness, he denounces at length (ES, 481-489) the illusions “of a false and superficial intention” (ES, 487) and “the so-called piety, which wants to be united to God while
preserving one’s natural affections, the search for oneself, one’s vices and faults” (ES, 484).

“How, then, to act?” (ES, 486). We must learn to discern the movements of nature and grace (ES, 490) and, in order not to be dragged along by the former at the expense of the latter, we must have the courage to apply the “firm resolution of a complete abnegation” (ES, 487, 491). This can only be done by forming in us “a habit of the spirit of faith and pure charity,” which gives us the desire to please God and makes it a joy for us to adhere “to practically anything that is pleasing to him” (ES, 486, 491). For the rest it is one and the same thing to make “the influence of the grace which unites us to God” prevail in us or to act by a movement of faith and charity “because it is in these movements that the action of grace resides” (ES, 483-484, see ibid., 556-557).

We now see the intimate relationship between prayer [prière] and practical union because “the spirit of prayer [oraison] keeps the soul in its visions of faith and disposes the heart to love” (ES, 483-484). Conversely, a soul that lives in “a state of habitual fidelity to grace ... very frequently turns to God during the day” (ES, 497-498):

One is not absorbed in God, but one comes back to him ceaselessly, without any effort and as if instinctively, during one’s occupations, such that one cannot help thinking frequently about God, as a friend frequently thinks of the one he loves (ND, 698).

Practical union thus resembles contemplative union in so far as it involves a state of latent, subconscious prayer [prière] which influences the quality of action by constantly orienting it towards grounds of faith, hope and charity and causes it to rise to conscious prayer in the most important or critical moments. An example taken from the Venerable’s life gives us a clear idea of this point. Here is how Mr. Mangot describes it during the years 1837-1839, at the Eudists in Rennes:

At the novitiate, he was perfectly proper. He served at everything and, although always busy, his lectures delighted us .... One day I remarked to him: “It seems to me that this multitude of concerns must conflict with the habitual union of your soul with God.” “It’s quite the opposite,” he replied, “since in every new
business my soul rises to God to ask for his assistance, it follows that the more business I have, the more my union with God is strengthened” (ND, I, 521).

In the end, it is the facility, as irresistible as the natural inclination of the heart (cf. ES, 483), to surrender to the slightest impulses of grace. One comes to identify with the knowledge of salvation like an artist with the object of his art “such that we march on well without having to reflect much about it” (ND, 701). “The supernatural life ... has become, so to speak, natural” (ES, 554).

A long Labor

After having depicted such an ideal, it hardly needs be said that this union is not a matter of one day, but the fruit of a long labor (ES, 487). “It takes time, no doubt, to get to that point ... but once one is there, it is a happy life “(ND, 705).

“Practical union,” like prayer [oraison], will proceed by degrees, trial and error, handicaps, and progress. It is an art, an art whose secret is first in God, who communicates it at will, though taking into account our nature, our vocation and our “practical” good will, that which, not content with shouting “Lord, Lord,” tries its best to embrace divine action in the present moment with the means at hand. On this point, Father Libermann, who just a moment ago seemed to sketch a program of chimerical perfection, exhibits a disconcerting realism that only increases with the experience of years and deeds. Above all, let us not say, “They were saints, the people to whom his words were addressed.” Saints, these priests of twenty-five to thirty years old, who, to top it off, were French with their bristling character? Watching the ship carrying them move into the distance, the founder is not without a hint of melancholy, despite his unbreakable optimism in the almighty grace of the Lord. How will they react over there, when reality is unveiled to their conquering imagination? He knows them well. The delicate affection he has devoted to them further sharpens his keen understanding of them. He knows very well that Le Vavasseur is a “terrible rowdy,” Tisserant impulsive, that Bessieux is taken in by the mirage of the new, that Arragon, when emotional, speaks with a violence that crushes all evangelical tenderness, that Lossedat oscillates between rigidity and discouragement, and so on. He gave them credit, for he judged them to be generous and docile to grace anyway, but in the manner of spirited horses.
Jean Le Meste, C.S.Sp.

who balk under the goad. But “practical union” in all this, how will it be viable? In the way Bossuet described it in a famous page ... from the time we read Bossuet!

See this fiery and impetuous horse, while his squire leads and tames him; only irregular movements! It is an effect of his ardor, and his ardor comes from his strength, but from an ill-regulated strength. He composes himself, moderates himself, becomes more obedient under the spur, under the bridle, under the hand that manipulates him to the right or to the left, pushes him, holds him back as it wishes. Finally, he is tamed. He does only what he is asked to do. He knows how to walk at a pace, he knows how to run, no longer with this activity which exhausted him, by which his obedience was still disobedient. His ardor has been changed into strength ... Note that it is not destroyed, it is adjusted; it no longer requires the spur, almost no more bridle ... By a small movement, which is only the sign of the will of the squire, it notifies him rather than forcing him, and the serene animal does nothing more than listen, so to speak. Its action is so united with that of the one who leads it, that it is no more than one and the same action.12

This description can be compared with the letter to the superior of missionary nuns quoted earlier, in which Father Libermann portrays the walk of “good souls” who “want to have arrived before they’ve set out,” and whom “God stops with all kinds of obstacles. They fall down, but get back up; they keep on going, at breakneck speed and gasping for breath. He closes all the passageways, etc.” (ND, IX, 155, LS, III, 575). Though the style is not as studied, it is not without charm; in any case, the inspiration is from the same source.

Yes, it takes a great deal of time and many aborted attempts to attain “practical union” in the full sense of the word. The example of the greatest saints teaches us this, by Libermann’s own admission. And even when they have achieved “the habit of this perfect renunciation and of this holy union with God ... don’t imagine ... that they enjoy so much of this light that they are never deceived .... If, on occasion, they make a mistake, some imperfection prevented them from receiving the perfect rays of light” and the divine force.13 It is therefore a long, rugged, and winding road, with ascents and descents, more or less steep depending on
the character of each person and the way the divine Guide makes himself heard.

But for all, from the very beginning, all have to surrender completely to his sovereign power by renouncing their judgment and self-will - at least the intent - as one does upon entering a motor-coach or train car. During the whole journey, we agree to let ourselves be driven and to not disturb the driver in any way until the final stop. The intention to let oneself go is the first condition of “practical union.” As God sees everything and provides for everything, the alarm signal is superfluous. Nothing is yet achieved, yet everything is at work for success. Such is the importance of the mode of total self-denial demanded of the novices from the beginning. “I begin by giving them a high idea of perfection.”

Completely different Men

To describe the journey from this beginning to the desired end would be to review and summarize Libermann's entire spirituality, and much more space would be required. We will be satisfied simply to increase the desire to set out on the path by describing, following Father Libermann, the apostolic beatitudes promised to those who agree to unite themselves practically with their Lord. They are listed in three pages of the Instructions to Missionaries, which we will summarize here at the risk of depriving them of eloquence (ES, 49, 494).14

**Beatitudes of Light.** “A soul thus united to God ... acquires solid and practical enlightenment, meaning a certain tact in the things of God (for oneself, for others, and for his works)” (ES, 491-492). “One has in oneself a superabundance of truth, one breathes the truth, one is nourished by it, one sees the things of God clearly and without effort, because our soul is in its element, the divine light” (ND, XIII, 699). This presupposes “a perfecting even of our natural faculties” (ES, 273) and Libermann himself had experienced it, as he confessed in an ultra-secret letter of August 3, 1846 which never should have reached us:

> I can feel that my mind has acquired a certain strength, a certain elevation, and my judgment has gained expansion and rectitude; but it is certain that grace alone has created that which was not, has fortified that which was weak and rectified that which was faulty. This is so true and clear that, if I became
faithless, my mind could never deny the existence and the action of grace on my soul (ND, VIII, 203).

**Beatitudes of strength.** “The soul thus united to God ... is full of strength and does not get knocked down or become discouraged by anything. (In the midst of the most unfortunate events and setbacks), it remains calm, docile and free in her faculties and action.”

**Beatitudes of happiness!** “The soul thus united to God enjoys a profound peace ... of a supernatural well-being of which those who do not possess it cannot form an exact picture. This well-being (very deep: “at the source and the root of his life”) exists even in the midst of troubles and tribulation of all kinds. (Moreover, it) is often more sensitive in these states (so that in the time of affliction) the soul so disposed experiences a greater serenity of mind and gaiety of heart (mild, moderate, in its relations with others).”

**Abundance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.** “Finally, our soul thus united to God in its practical habits, receives in abundance the graces fitting to one's state and position, and the special gifts of the Holy Spirit in keeping with one's vocation according to God's plans for it.”

This allusion to the gifts of the Holy Spirit adapted to the special needs of the missionary would require a long comment. Let us only say that the Venerable Libermann remembers here chapter XII of the First Corinthians and all Second Corinthians. His *Commentary on Saint John* often returns to this theme.

The Apostles, during all the time our Lord lived on the earth, lacked these abundant gifts; also, what was not their weakness! As soon as they received them, they became completely different men (333).

“**Completely different men!**” Father Libermann is sure that his missionaries will also be transformed into completely different men through “practical union,” because their vocation absolutely demands it. If Christ “took so much care to train his apostles to holiness, would he be satisfied for us to have a natural life full of flaws and imperfections? (ES, 369). Equally, for his disciples, who are to serve as role models in everything for very poor men, Father Libermann promises all the virtues of the new man.

Indeed, by giving to weak and imperfect creatures this admirable mission of saving men, he transforms them
and makes them completely different men - of men of nature he makes men of grace; of weak and infirm men, he makes powerful and holy men; of men in the dark, he makes men of eternal light (ES, 371).

We wish we could quote here the full letter of November 19, 1847, addressed to the missionaries in Dakar and Gabon. It would show the concrete light in which the founder conceives “practical union” and its wonders. He contrasts, among other things, the man who floats according to his sensitivity and imagination to the man who, leaning on the strength of God, always remains like himself: “never any sadness, never any irritation, never spite, against (himself), or against others” (ND, IX, 329). Like the Apostle, who was overflowing with joy in his trials, Father Libermann also often insists on the pure joy produced by the suffering endured for the glory of God and the salvation of men; the words used are too eloquent to suggest any experience other than his own.

Another letter of June 18, 1848 is a useful complement to this one, showing us that this transformation is also the transition to true adulthood, while preserving the “gentleness, simplicity, and moderation of childhood.”

One is strong, one judges things by his reason aided by grace .... One is a man, master of oneself, one’s thoughts, and one’s imagination. One retains all the liveliness of feeling ... but ... feelings do not control us .... The mind is free from any hindrance .... This freedom of spirit, rid of the impressions of various passions, gives or rather preserves, this beautiful simplicity which is one of the greatest qualities of the finest minds (ND, X, 228-229).

We do not end up here on the first try, and certainly the Venerable Libermann himself was subject to the law of time. Dom Gardereau, his companion from Saint-Sulpice, noted this when he corrected the panegyric of Cardinal Pitra, Libermann’s first biographer. He recognized in the seminarian of yesteryear rigidity and excess of zeal, then added:

It was, however, the same person I have seen since at the head of his congregation ... - so prudent, so tolerant, so attentive to leading everyone in the path marked by Providence, sparing the weak, and
imposing on no one a burden he could not bear. But in that interval he had grown steadily in the spiritual life; the further he advanced, the more complete and enlightened he was with grace, the more his zeal became flexible without losing any of his fervor, but being all the more apt to direct souls according to the laws of discretion, according to the capacity of each and the extent of God’s plans (ND, I, 125).

Thus, in the doctrine of Father Libermann, “practical union” is the means par excellence to achieve the full development of nature and grace, the solution of Christian humanism. However, he warns against angelism, pointing out that if the spiritual part of ourselves is restored to order, “the root of perversion does not die; it often happens that souls, living ordinarily under the influence of God’s grace, still experience the stimulant (the spur) of evil nature” (ES, 416).

“Practical union” does not remove all effects of a lack of education; it also happens that some retain faulty manners, certain limits and other flawed traits. That matters little for the holiness and the apostolic influence that each one attains according to his capacity. This educator of missionaries does not worry too much when it comes to directing his disciples. Writing on April 15, 1846 to a young superior in Dakar who dreams of an unreal ideal, he presents own method:

You will almost never find men made just as you would like them .... Well, what is the most powerful way I use to guide them? It is by tolerating in each one the defects that I foresee not being able to stamp out ... Be sure that nothing is ever done in this vein by force ... but also, on the contrary, everything can be done, everything can be obtained through support, tolerance, gentleness and calm. I say everything; that does not mean that we manage to make people lose their character and their natural way of being, or even all the defects of this way of being, rather we win on all that is possible to win .... For example, if you wish to make Mr. Arragon moderate, polite, kind in his manners, you would be chasing a chimera, you would be stopping the sun in its course .... So leave each one in his state .... God made them as they are, they are willing to do everything for the good. We must encourage them, and they will do the good, each according to what will be given to them from above (ND, VIII, 113-114).
“It was as if He saw the Invisible”

With this article, we are not claiming that the Venerable Libermann, in speaking of practical union, was saying something original; he would have immediately denied it. On the contrary, our goal was to suggest that this scribe, this Rabbi’s son, by becoming a disciple of the Savior and missionary priest, found the “higher realism” that Bergson recognizes in the great mystics, in drawing endlessly on his treasure of both the new and the old (Matt 13:52). A witness at the beatification process said: “I will say that all his life he was invisibilem tamquam videns (as if he saw the invisible), always in the presence of God, always living in faith.”18 A recent book has rightly given this phrase new relevance, and perhaps Libermann’s doctrine as well.

At the end of the chapter on “practical union” in Instructions to Missionaries, Venerable Father Libermann recalls the words of Jesus: “I came to cast fire on earth” and comments:

Wanting to produce this fire, he will necessarily put burning torches in the hands of those he tasks with lighting it. Why are there so few of these incendiary saints? It’s that there are few saints, few souls united to God in the practical habits of their lives; their torches are therefore condemned to remain unlit, they produce at most the fire of a match .... The apostles of Jesus Christ remaining lovers of themselves, men of the earth, obeying their pride, their senses, their weaknesses, their faults ... the gifts of the Holy Spirit are necessarily denied them, God’s designs are aborted, the peoples remain in darkness ... our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Church are in pain .... Why and until when ... ? Ah! my beloved confreres ... have pity ... pity ... pity ... (ES, 494-495).

This pathetic call to missionaries to be saints ends in a prayer that springs like a cry. If we could, at the end of this study, make it fervently our own, would that not be a good conclusion? Come, Lord Jesus, come, raise up your servants and live in them!”

Jean Le Meste, C.S.Sp.  
Died in Chevilly, Paris in 1982
Abbreviations

CJ Commentaire de l’Évangile de St. Jean.


References

Provisional Rule of Father Libermann. Text and Commentary. Duquesne University, Pittsburgh: Center for Spiritan Studies, 2015.


Endnotes

1As far as possible, English editions of works referenced in French have been used [Editor].

2Provisional Rule, 277 (Part II: Chapter 9, Art. 1).

3One must not read in these notes – which moreover are not written in the hand of the Venerable Libermann but were transcribed in an interview by one of his sons, Fr. Lannurien – the sign of a lesser esteem for the contemplative life. He himself felt driven to it by “all the attractions of nature and grace,” but should he be “the last in the kingdom of the heavenly Father,” he would not admit the thought of leaving “the path laid
out by the order” of divine will (ND, VIII, 30-31)…

We remember the beautiful pages he left us in his
Commentary on St. John on “the contemplative love” of
Mary of Bethany.

4*Provisional Rule*, 43.

5Letter of May 31, 1847 to a superior of missionary
nuns; ND, IX, 155.

6*Jesus through Jewish Eyes*. Part 1, 69 (chapter 3).

7Ibid., 73.

8Some biographical references. 1802: birth in Saverne,
to the family of a rabbi; 1826: conversion and baptism
in Paris; 1827-1837: theological study at Saint-Sulpice,
then, fell ill, became factotum in the seminary at Issy;
1837-1839: Novice Master of the Eudists in Rennes;
1840: in Rome for the founding of the Work for the
Blacks; 1841: seminary in Strasbourg, ordination and
beginning of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of
Mary in Amiens; 1848: fusion with the Congregation
of the Holy Spirit in Paris, of which he became the 11th
Superior General; February 2, 1852: death in Paris at 30,
rue Lhomond.

9*Jesus through Jewish Eyes*. Part I, 112.

10*Instructions for Missionaries*, chap 9, 40–44.

11Henceforth, ND on its own refers to ND, XIII.


13See CJ, 358-359.

14See *Instructions for Missionaries*, 44 for something
similar.

15See the words of the Curé of Ars: “in the soul united to
God it is always springtime.”

16We find the same list of benefits in the Petit traité de
la vie intérieure (ES, 273)[*Small Treatise on the Inner
Life*] as regards the inner life whose definition clearly
echoes that of “practical union”: it means to live and act
practically “under the influence and dependence of Jesus
Christ who lives (in us).” Cf. ND, XIII, 684.

17See, in particular, 329-333; n.e., 210-213.

18Mr. De Brandt, Vicar General of Amiens, Procès de
Virtutibus (Process concerning his virtues), 195.