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Libermann's Understanding of Suffering and the Challenges of Covid-19 Pandemic in Africa

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LIBERMANN’S UNDERSTANDING OF SUFFERING AND THE CHALLENGES OF COVID19 PANDEMIC IN AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

The inevitability of suffering as a human experience calls for the need to reflect on its phenomenological, social, spiritual, and redemptive implications for humanity. We read the biographies of figures like St. Ignatius of Loyola, who in their thorny moments, received the insight that enlightened their gaze towards the most profitable path. The powerful quote of Tertullian “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church” captures the facilitating role of persecution/suffering in the growth of the Church. In a way, suffering announces the limitations of earthly life even as it compels us to seek solutions to the happy state or fulfillment we always wish. Nevertheless, afflictions abound even in our greatest wish to be happy. Some people consult psychologists and read books that recommend ways to happiness. Yet we all continue to suffer. Can we now say that life is a drama of endless episodes of tragedy? The problem is that the incessant pursuance of happiness and the psychological inclination to resist suffering make us think of suffering as absolutely opposed to happiness. But the art of happiness is also and at the same time the art of knowing how to suffer well. If we know how to use our suffering, we can transform it and suffer much less. Knowing how to suffer well is essential to realizing true happiness.¹

This essay presents the reader with Francis Mary-Paul Libermann as a model for understanding human suffering. This French Jewish convert to Christianity, first had to face rejection and excommunication by his father. After embracing Catholicism with the thought of becoming a priest growing naturally in his mind, he had to suffer the sting of epileptic seizures, which prevented his ordination for nearly fifteen years. Libermann, whose health was always fragile, was able to transform his condition into an opportunity of being a helpful companion to sick persons. Like Job, Libermann was not just patient in suffering, he was steadfast. His entire life and the wealth of insights garnered from his epistolary spiritual direction provide us with abundant evidence that he was never

The adverse schemes of colonialism which produced exquisitely detailed imperial power politics with tragic implications for the whole of the third world.

a novice in the school of suffering, especially in relation to practical union with Christ. Like Jesus, Libermann did not spend time trying to know why he suffered, rather he lived it. The major concern of this paper is to recommend Libermann's theology of suffering as a healing remedy for Africans, who were already bedeviled by poverty, bad governance, and corruption before the harsh wind of the current pandemic heightened the misery of their lives. Were Libermann to be alive today, his message to the Black Continent in the midst of the dreadful pandemic would be "There is nothing wrong in feeling pain, so long as we place our soul at the disposal of the divine Master. So long as the sorrow and pain which we feel at the sight of tribulation is not inspired by resistance to the will of our divine Master, there is nothing wrong with it."² What a hard but curative teaching for a people whose lives have been plunged into the darkness of uncertainty, illness, and death. True, life was not so unproblematic in the Black Continent (socially, politically, and economically) before the dawn of the dreadful and unexpected Covid-19 pandemic.

AFRICA BEFORE THE PANDEMIC: A RELIGIO-POLITICAL ACCOUNT

With the sudden appearance of Europeans around the coast of Western and Central Africa in the 18th and 19th centuries, a large-scale slave trade strategically crept in and left a transformative impact on the many institutions of the "virgin" continent. The "conquest mania" of some tribes doubled as soon as they received guns and ammunition from the Europeans in exchange for slaves. "By 1730 about 180,000 guns were being imported every year just along the West African coast, and between 1750 and the early nineteenth century, the British alone sold between 283,000 and 394,000 guns a year. Institutions, even religious ones, became perverted by the desire to capture and sell slaves."³ This massive shift from a convivial society to factional belligerent units was heightened by the adverse schemes of colonialism which produced exquisitely detailed imperial power politics with tragic implications for the whole of the Third World. Colonization and globalization were essentially tools of manipulation. It is quite pitiful how Africans were quick to learn the subjugating and bourgeois tendencies that were part and parcel of the western colonization approach.

Since their independence, the political scenery of most multi-tribal African states is colored by successive bloody coup d'états, power struggles, serial ethno-religious wars, poisonous sabotage, bad

Proper education, good health systems, and balanced nutrition are not within the reach of the majority of the African populace.

Suffer with humility and love all that He sends you; it is not you who are suffering, but Jesus.

“We are a thousand times blessed because we are able to suffer with Jesus and the peace of Jesus.”

governance, looting of public funds, near irreversible austerity, and survival of the fittest. The most shameful part of the story is that our present political leaders exhibit signs that suggest a woeful lack of the knowledge of history. “Nigeria, since her independence in 1960, had been ravaged by an ethnoreligious crisis which has kept the nation in a state of coma.”⁴ Restructuring has not been achieved in Nigeria because the Muslim ruling class would never allow it, on the grounds that it would make them loose their grip of the country that they believe is “Allah’s gift to their grandfather, Uthman Dan Fodio and his descendants.”⁵ Furthermore, proper education, good health systems, and balanced nutrition are not within the reach of the majority of the African populace. Many Africans today cannot afford good medication for malaria. “Africa continues to carry a disproportionately high share of the global malaria burden. In 2019, the region was home to 94% of all malaria cases and deaths.”⁶ On the whole, the African problem was a mountainous one before the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, most Africans are tempted to believe that the yoke is unbearable and has to be cast aside by any means possible.

Nevertheless, as God’s children who are solely dependent on his grace for survival, “we must be ready to suffer a thousand times more if such is the will of the divine Master.”⁷ To this Libermann adds, “But you may ask God for relief for the good of the souls that are dear to you.”⁸ This altruistic option is captured by St. Paul who said, “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”⁹

Libermann returns to this theme in another letter to depict the true meaning and purpose of human suffering for the Christian disciple. “Be fully subject to the Divine Will – suffer with humility and love all that He sends you; it is not you who are suffering, but Jesus, the Heart of Jesus, which is the love of all hearts.”¹⁰ He continues: “He is in you and suffers with you; abandon your soul to Him; His divine grace is there; it will render your sufferings very profitable for the sanctification of your soul.”¹¹ A very significant step towards Christian maturity is to recognize the truth of the cross as the point of departure for Christian faith. This is because Jesus made suffering a normal part of his life.¹² Christ, the Redeemer of all, became a slave (*doulos*) in order to restore humanity to a glory that supersedes the pristine splendor of Eden. Libermann reasoned that if God could descend as low as this for our sake, then “we are a thousand times blessed because we are able to suffer with Jesus and the peace of Jesus.”¹³ After all, “He (God) will not abandon us (Africa).”¹⁴

THE DAWN OF THE PANDEMIC: THE UNTOLD HARDSHIP

The outbreak of the pandemic exposed the insufficiencies in the health-care systems of African states.

In a circular of February 2020, the Catholic Archbishop of Lagos, Most Rev. Dr. Alfred Adewale Martins confirmed that “In December 2019, a cluster of pneumonia cases was reported in the city of Wuhan, China. Investigations found out that this was caused by a previously unknown virus now named 2019 novel Coronavirus (nCoV).”¹⁵ This cautionary circular was released when only one case had been officially recorded in Nigeria, and that was in Lagos. By the end of the first quarter of 2020, several African countries had confirmed their first cases of Covid-19. At the time of this writing, “there have been 116,874,912 confirmed cases of Covid-19 globally, including 2,597,381 deaths. As of 9 March 2021, a total of 268,205,165 vaccine doses have been administered globally.”¹⁶ The total number of confirmed cases in Africa at that time was 2,909,543. In the midst of the pandemic, Africans faced several trials in their social, political, economic, and spiritual life. Social distancing as one of the cardinal preventive measures enforced by governments and health agencies dealt Africans a grievous blow and left a deep impression on the psyche of many. Social distancing and the lockdown meant closing economic centers and schools, quarantining, travel restrictions, and so on. Some must have been killed not by the disease but by hunger and frustration as they lacked resources to support life in such a dehumanizing condition.

Libermann’s approach towards suffering stands as a healing remedy.

The outbreak of the pandemic exposed the insufficiencies in the healthcare systems of African states. The unavailability of world-class hospitals and other essential infrastructure denied affected persons access to adequate health care. It is a shame that the blindness and ineptitude of our leaders combined to worsen the effect of the pandemic. There was no depth in the reasoning, actions, and plans of African governments and leaders to combat the disease. In Kenya, for instance, “the measures to curb Covid-19 precipitated a humanitarian crisis of great proportions among the poor as people lost their jobs, were faced with hunger, lacked adequate face masks, sanitizers, among others.”¹⁷ Apparently, the pre-existing state of affairs in Africa worsened the effects of the pandemic.

THE NEED FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF SUFFERING

For the Africans whose lives were compounded by the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, Libermann’s approach towards suffering stands as a healing remedy. The best of options is not to rebel

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and revolt against God, neither is it sensible to comprehend suffering pessimistically, as the ultimate lot marked out for humanity. We all have to look inward in order to hear God speaking to us through this hard time, and like Libermann, be able to say in our disappointments, “Our Father in heaven will know what to do with me as I belong wholly to him, body and soul.”¹⁸ What other choice is there apart from submitting to God’s will that can grant us unrestrained access to hearing the voice of God? If all that fill the ears of our minds are the echoes of oppression, political injustice, and the woes of a deadly pandemic, then we would soon begin to perceive little or nothing about the sublimity and profitability of suffering. Hence, Libermann counsels that it is essential for us, in the time of suffering, “to remain prostrate at the feet of the Divine Master.”¹⁹ The transformation of suffering begins the moment we are able to lift the weight of our afflictions to God, and even more, recognize the hand of God working in our life.

Libermann appropriated his experience of illness as a gift to help him counsel others who suffer pain. His condition gave birth to a mission. The pandemic has frustrated the designs of great nations and crippled the plans of countless persons, yet there are still remedial options towards a meaningful life, and we can find examples in the writings of Libermann. “Live only for His Divine Will, preserve peace in the midst of your pains. Jesus is in you; what more can you desire?” “And if you suffer, it is in Jesus crucified who is in you. Oh! How happy is the soul which possesses Jesus crucified within it!” Suffering is not absolutely opposed to happiness. We only need to bring our afflictions along the path of transformation so that they can assume their proper meaning and purpose. We are most fortunate in our afflictions because the soul that suffers with Christ “possesses the treasure of all graces and the source of all love and holiness.”²⁰

SUFFERING, GRACE, AND SANCTIFICATION

“You suffer, so much the better; the greater are your pains, the greater will be your treasures of sanctification.”²¹ Libermann emphasized the conscious effort of the individual in the transformation of suffering as he wrote, “It is up to you to profit from them (sufferings).”²² “Joys, delights, and good-living nourish the body; afflictions, privations and sorrows nourish the soul and fill it with graces.”²³ “These temptations and crosses are so many rungs by which we ascend to God; they are so many knots by which we bind ourselves to him.”²⁴ We find sentiments similar to this Libermannian exhorta-

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tion in the writings of Thomas à Kempis: “When thou art troubled and afflicted then is the time to merit. Thou must pass through fire and water before thou comest to refreshment.”²⁵ Libermann further recounted, “It is during those states of trial that we love God solely for himself. On the contrary, when we love him with a ‘sensible love’ we often love him for ourselves, because of the pleasure which loving him gives us.”²⁶ In his letter to Fr. Cahier titled “On Suffering during Sickness,” Libermann explained the sanctifying effect of the cross as the means through which the Lord establishes holiness in us by means of his divine grace:

The holy cross continues to do its work so long as our nature is not dead; it fights and crushes it until all life has gone out of it. Once it has accomplished this, once it has exterminated all human affections and desires, it will begin to unfold the wonderful presents that it possesses. It raises the soul to a divine union, consummation and transformation. Then the soul no longer seeks to have the cross removed: on the contrary, it cannot live without it.²⁷

In another place, Libermann employed the same tree analogy used by the evangelists²⁸ and set himself to weave around it a sort of theology of the cross, bringing out the hidden dimensions of the words of our divine Master. “The cross is a beautiful tree, a good tree, planted in your soul and it is now producing beautiful flowers; at a later date it will yield some wonderful fruit.”²⁹ “A good tree can only produce good fruit as our Lord said. What kind of good fruit? Those which he bore on Calvary; Jesus himself will be formed in your soul by means of the cross.”³⁰ Jesus desires to have a dwelling in our souls through the sanctity of his ways and the truth of his virtues, but this cannot be ultimately grounded in us if we live in repudiation of the crosses he sends us. A basic fact of Christian experience is discipleship after the example of the King of martyrs – Jesus Christ. Hence, the materialization of a practical union with Christ begins with the acceptance of the cross, matures around the cross, and comes to fruition as far as the seed of suffering remains implanted in our souls, as was the tree of the cross in the soil of Calvary hill. What else will the cross implant in our souls if not the whole weight and essence of the Lord of Love, which it bore and raised unto us as an invitation to redemption and sanctification? Our current predicament is a call to gaze unto Jesus who comes to us as a bridegroom, “trying to attract us by the sweetness of his grace, the beauty of his light and the balm of his peace.”³¹ He comes to

heal, renew, sanctify, and lavish love on his spouse – the new Africa.

*Africa stands
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A NEW AFRICA

The virus, perceived by many at the beginning as having something of a short-lived effect, has turned the state of affairs in most nations upside down (medically, politically, economically) – and we will likely be dealing with the pandemic's impact for some time to come. Now, Africa stands in dire need of God's intervention and sanctification, just as much, and probably more than medical experts, political activists, and pressure groups. It is true that even a day old African can feel, as it were, the sting of the pandemic, but in our quest to undo this yoke, "we must avoid a zeal which is only a product of the imagination or of natural ardor."³² "True zeal does not come from our nature, but comes from grace alone. Its source is the Heart of Jesus. It is from that source that we must draw it through an intimate union with him."³³ "Hence our zeal must be divine and supernatural as was his."³⁴ We should not set before ourselves the schemes of economic emancipation and social welfare as the ultimate goals of life. Before proceeding to secure temporal needs like good health, democratic dividends, justice and equity, sound education, and the rest, we must first take to heart the word of our Lord, "Bread alone does not suffice."³⁵ Our desires as individuals and as nations must be guided and inspired by the dictates of the preeminent word – the Incarnate Word.

*A new Africa
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Any careful reader of the gospel of John will immediately come to terms with the centrality and role of the logos in creation – the Incarnation. St. Paul leads us to understand that what we ultimately encounter in the Son who became flesh is the self-emptying (kenosis) of God.³⁶ As the prophets wrote, the Messiah who comes to us is not Deus impassibilis, but rather "a man of suffering and one acquainted with infirmity."³⁷ Thus, from a Christian perspective, a new Africa is possible only by being espoused to the crucified Christ. Interestingly, the custom of the newly wedded maiden adopting her husband's surname is ingrained in traditional African societies. The new status becomes the honor and pride of the woman – a treasure she could not easily trade for anything else. The voice of the prophet echoes: "You shall be called by a new name bestowed by the mouth of the Lord."³⁸ This new name signifies honor and honor derives its value from the dignity of him who bestows it. The voice continues: "But you shall be called 'My Delight is in her,' and your land 'Espoused'."³⁹

Espousal to Christ entails healing, goodness, and graciousness, but there is no healing greater than true repentance and spiritual conversion – metanoia.

This is yet a greater honor considering the fact that Africa had been espoused to corruption, bribery, hedonism, individualism, ethnic/political bigotry, and hate. Certainly, many embraced ungodly means of survival as the hardship, economic hibernation, lockdown, social distancing, and the death toll occasioned by the pandemic increased exponentially. At the same time, the land cries out for a healing remedy. Nevertheless, those who go out in search of a cure, without paying attention to the sinful state of “the soul which still has many imperfections, attachments and unworthy desires,”⁴⁰ “will be given nothing except the sign of the prophet Jonah”⁴¹ – repentance and faith in Jesus. The gospel of Mark does not include “the sign of Jonah option,” but it does express Jesus’ impatience with the desire for a sign when the heart is far away from repentance. This is captured in the expression: “And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, why does this generation ask for a sign?”⁴²

Espousal to Christ entails healing, goodness, and graciousness, but there is no healing greater than true repentance and spiritual conversion – *metanoia*. “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”⁴³ A greater honor which is symbolized by their new name will be bestowed upon them. But what kind of honor can be derived from being espoused to the ‘Afflicted One’? Paradoxically, admittance to the honor of Christ means submitting to his pattern of humility, and a spiritual configuration to his self-emptying mission. If we are truly configured to Christ, we would yearn all the time to sacrifice ourselves for him. The condition for this hallowed espousal is laid bare by Libermann.

You want to be the spouse of Jesus, but this could take some time. It is a great king whom you want to marry. He chose you and attracted you to himself and he placed his love in your soul. It was he who took the initiative. But Jesus asks a dowry, not of silver or gold as some might imagine; the gift he wants is the complete sacrifice of yourself. He bears the cost, he takes charge of executing his designs; he plants his cross in your soul and immolates you to his love. Abandon yourself into his hands.⁴⁴

To bear this new name and honor which Jesus bestows, we have to be worthy of him. We belong to Jesus, for all intents and purposes, “by those sufferings in which your soul has to conquer

itself constantly, renounce and humble itself and submit and generously immolate itself.”⁴⁵

“The pandemic has shown us that we cannot live without one another.”

A misery more deplorable than the pandemic is the one occasioned by the expulsion of charity from our communities.

CHARITY IN THE MIDST OF AFFLICTION

The choice and position of this last theme are symbolic of Libermann’s last words before he died – “charity above all...” In a September 2 2020 tweet, Pope Francis gave a very important message to the world: “The pandemic has shown us that we cannot live without one another; we are linked to each other, for better or for worse. Therefore, to come out of this crisis better than before, we have to do so together, all of us, in solidarity.” On December 20 2020, he uploaded again what seemed like a sequel to the above tweet, “Instead of complaining in these difficult times about what the pandemic prevents us from doing, let us do something for someone who has less: not the umpteenth gift for ourselves and our friends, but for a person in need whom no one thinks of!” The Pope’s tweet fits in well with the last words of Libermann as quoted in the *Spiritun Rule of Life*, “above all charity...charity above all... charity in Jesus Christ. Charity through Jesus Christ...charity in the name of Jesus Christ; fervor...charity...union in Jesus Christ...the spirit of sacrifice...”⁴⁶ “Let us love with that spirit of sacrifice and we will be capable of doing anything and everything.”⁴⁷ We are sons and daughters of God whose nature is infinite charity. Any nation or system that fails to recognize and imitate God’s unsurpassed gratuitousness is bound to be ruled by confusion. The people that make up such a system can neither discover the true foundation of their existence; neither can they realize the very purpose of life. As God’s ambassadors in a pandemic stricken world, we must put on “the love of generosity which consists in forgetting oneself so as to think henceforth only of God’s interests and to act only for them. If we are animated by that love we will not fear anything; we will be disposed to suffer everything in order to make our divine Master live and reign in souls.”⁴⁸

A misery more deplorable than the pandemic is the one occasioned by the expulsion of charity from our communities. The hoarding of palliatives meant for the suffering masses during the lockdown phase of the pandemic is nothing but the utter abnegation of charity. In Nigeria, for instance, many individuals enriched themselves with the fund for the fight against the pandemic. In addition, massive deposits of food items were discovered in warehouses where they were hoarded, rather than distributed to the masses.

The repudiation of charity is ipso facto a rejection of God. *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*. The sully of human dignity we experience in the 21st century is the direct result of the massive neglect of charity which is the most sublime gift of God to humanity, for the principal purpose of harmonizing creation. Calvary becomes for us the perfect university and formation house of love: the potter's field where we are molded and remolded until Christ (Infinite Charity) is formed in us. In our confusion, sickness and hardship, we have to draw strength and inspiration from the cross that bore the weight of the Eternal *Logos* – the meaning that comprises us all and by which we are all sustained.⁴⁹ Jesus is the reason to keep hope and charity alive in all circumstances. He is the panacea and elixir for all human ills – the standard for the reign of love in the hearts of all persons in the world.

CONCLUSION

The cross, as the point of departure for Christian faith, is a sign of contradiction in the world.

Theodicy is quite a pretty business, but we come to a mature understanding of the divine-human relationship through a practical union with God consisting in accepting wholeheartedly the trials intended to transform us from within. What is more important is not the theology Libermann developed, but rather a new experience of the relationship – between him and God – in which he had participated throughout his life. He embraced afflictions as the little crosses he had to bear, in imitation of Christ, in order to align his life with the will of God. His affliction theology beats ordinary human imagination and values. Utilitarian socialism, for instance, would not support the idea that suffering (as in the case of the pandemic) has any advantageous effect for the people. However, Libermann's stance reminds us of how the Passion and Death of Christ seem absurd in the face of the "ordinary" compass of logical reasoning, especially when the latter assumes absolute control over the mind and the heart. The cross, as the point of departure for Christian faith, is a sign of contradiction in the world. It is the sign we must embrace in order to merit the title "Christian." It is a title believed as well as lived. It represents a perfect harmony of creed and deed. Love leads to suffering, but as Christians, we take the risk to love because it is a divine mandate – our principal vocation.

Libermann's theology of suffering speaks so meaningfully and honestly to pandemic stricken Africa, inviting the people to realize that love and suffering can triumph together in their hearts, making a lasting impression in the world. There is no doubt that suffering divested of love leads to vicious agony. However, true love in the soul

makes us constantly desire to immolate ourselves for the glory of our adorable Master and to make continual sacrifices for the good of others. Apart from being the ultimate ground for common good, true love is necessarily concerned with questions about the eternal destiny of the human person. Libermann's affliction theology is neither antiquated nor alien to African sentiment. It is not correct to view it as a pessimistic or nihilistic approach to the current condition of Africans. We can, with good reason, perceive that each of Libermann's admonitions is instructive and revealing. We are privileged as well as gifted with the availability of his epistolary spiritual direction that reveals the admirable nature of the cross/suffering to readers enriched not only by his theology, but also by the practical examples he sets before them. The spiritual guidance of this saintly figure who cherished and facilitated missionary activities in the 19th century Africa is still relevant for us today.

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