

Never seek to advance further than that which is given to you from on high. Follow grace and never go ahead of it. It is not necessary that you see how you are advancing – that is for the Spirit to do. He is your guide and not you. In prayer follow that which attracts you and don't be preoccupied by method.

“DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE”

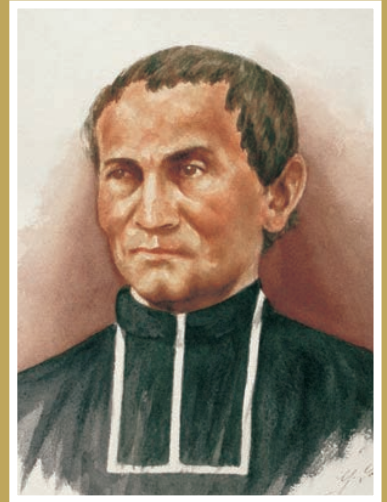
LC 10, 28

The union of our soul with God is the work of the Spirit and not of us... without him, all our efforts would be useless and even harmful. For the more we work to unite ourselves to God the more there will be of our own actions and thus the less there will be of the Spirit working in us.



**Spiritans Life
and Mission**

No. 1



*Some
elements
of the
spirituality of
Francis
Libermann*

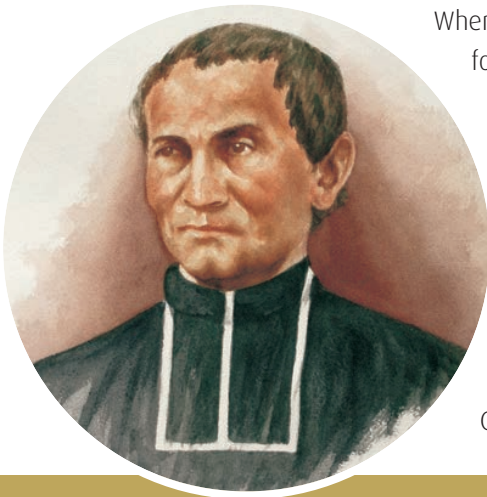


WHO IS FRANCIS LIBERMANN?

Jacob Libermann was born in Saverne (Alsace) in 1802 into a strict orthodox Jewish family. Son of a rabbi, he was destined to become a rabbi himself, but contact with the non-Jewish world was to have a profound effect on him. So much so, that in 1826 he admitted that he no longer believed in the bible. After a long and difficult journey, through doubt to faith, he settled in Paris where he would experience a sudden conversion to Catholicism.

One day in November 1826, he began to pray to the God of his ancestors. He would recall later how he was filled with light and saw the truth and how the faith penetrated his spirit and his heart. Jacob was baptized and took the name of Francis and then entered the seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris in order to become a priest. When his father learned of his son's apostasy of the Jewish faith he cursed him. In 1829 on the eve of his ordination to the sub-diaconate Francis was brought down by epilepsy which would block his way to ordination for over twelve years. During this long and difficult period Francis became the spiritual advisor to numerous seminarians, priests and lay people with whom he kept up an important correspondence.

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When Francis became aware of a project for the evangelization of slaves, known as the Work for Black People, he became involved and set out for Rome to take up the cause with church authorities. Rome gave its approval and, after being cured of his epilepsy, Francis was ordained priest in 1841 at Amiens. He founded the Congregation of the Holy Heart of

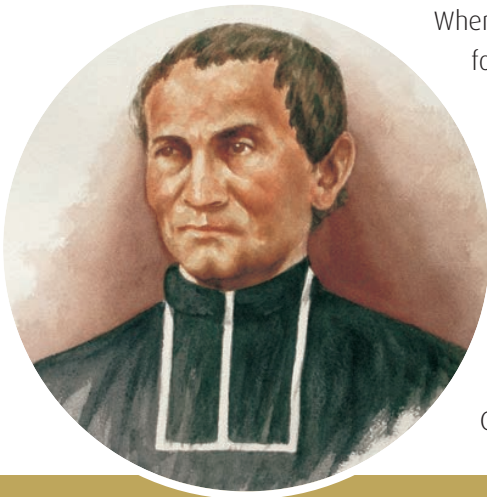


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Writing to his missionaries Libermann would comment at length in his letters on the profound meaning of what he calls the apostolic life. All through his letters Libermann reveals himself to be one of the great spiritual masters of our time. Meditating on his own experience he was able to throw light on the action of the Holy Spirit at the heart of the life and work of men and women. Libermann died in 1852 just short of his fiftieth birthday.

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A Guide for living the Gospel of Jesus



The spiritual teaching of Libermann is not born from any intellectual theorizing. Above all it rests on his own personal experience of life. This life was profoundly marked, at the moment of his conversion, by his encounter with the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Libermann would go on to bring together the best of Jewish spirituality – the transcendence of God – with the revelation of a God in the life of Jesus who wishes to be with us in our daily lives and even to spring up within us through the gift of the Spirit. Libermann’s spirituality is based around two convictions:

FIRST CONVICTION

God calls each one of us to holiness. He calls us to be sons and daughters in the image of Jesus, “holy and faultless before him in love” (Ep 1,4) and in this way they announce to the world the Good News of salvation.

This call is personal and unique to each one of us. The holiness to which one is called is not the holiness of another person. Each baptized person is called to radiate, in his or her own particular way, the deep richness of the person of Jesus, Son of God.



Each of us in our life is called to show in someway something of the holiness of Jesus and thus manifest the continuing presence of Jesus among us.

But how this holiness is to take shape, how we are each called to be the image of Jesus rests unknown to us. This leads us to the second conviction in Libermann’s spirituality.

SECOND CONVICTION

Only the Holy Spirit knows by what manner we are to radiate the presence of Jesus Christ. It was given to us on the day of our baptism to make present the holiness of Jesus in our lives. Only the Spirit of God, and nobody else, can lead us to the holiness which we are called to and to bring to fruition the love of God poured out in our lives.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

We should just let ourselves be led by the Holy Spirit along the unknown road. This is one of Libermann's strongest convictions: *"Only the Holy Spirit can bring us forward [...] Jesus has given you his Spirit to lead and guide you. Be docile to him. If you wish to go alone, you will leave the path. Only the Holy Spirit can make you progress along this path."* (L.S. I, 366).



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One has to learn how to listen to the voice of the Spirit.

Libermann assures us that his voice will be more or less present depending on the circumstances: *"At times the Spirit will act in a lively and even violent way. At times he acts with gentleness, moderation and pleasantness. One should always follow him, letting him act and take possession of you as he pleases."* (L.S. II, 406).

And so it follows that after a time of journeying, the Holy Spirit enlightens us as to what he expects of us with such clarity that it becomes obvious to us what to do. This was the case with the first disciples when they heard Jesus say to them: "Come, follow me!", or when Paul had his dramatic conversion experience on the Road to Damascus.

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But rarely does the Holy Spirit intervene in our lives with such a force. His voice is discreet. We have to continue to journey on our way with only our daily inspiration as light for the path. But this is enough to guide us.

To hear the voice of the Spirit which speaks to our hearts it is enough to put ourselves in the condition to listen to him. This is where the first effort is asked of us. And this involves looking closely at our way of living. We must have the desire to listen to the Spirit and to lead our lives in company with him. We should seek then to discover what our deepest desire is. This is not just a wish or a need but something deep within our lives like a lack that only the presence of God can fill. In this way we respond to the God who has loved us first. We do not pray just to get something from God, or out of a sense of duty or obligation. Rather, we confidently open ourselves to God and the presence of His Holy Spirit in each one of us. In this way we can see in our lives the manner by which we are invited to be disciples of Jesus. Hearing the Spirit speaking to our hearts involves looking closely at our way of living.

THE DANGER OF ROUTINE

Often we live on the surface of our existence. We are scattered, distracted. We act as if we were on automatic pilot, without really committing ourselves to what we are doing. We welcome someone with a smile or we keep our distances depending on the first impressions we make of the person. Or we might react with sarcasm if we feel we are being attacked. We might partake in liturgy and prayer by pure routine. On this level it is difficult for us to be aware of and act according to the Spirit.



REFLECTION AND LIFE

We can live on a higher level, on the level of our thoughts and reflection. Libermann would call this the “the mind level”.



On this level we examine things with our intelligence to see what should be done. We make a decision which engages our responsibility, but if we look closely at what happens we see that we might have lofty thoughts of God,



profound reflections on the Word of God and even make a courageous choice, but without the Holy Spirit being factored into our decision and discernment.

This work at the level of our mind is useful and important, but alone it is incapable of transforming our life. At this level our prayer can be more duty than relation and can easily become just words for the sake of

words. Rarely is it a true meeting with the living God. Libermann warns us against this sort of intellectual prayer: *“Be careful so that your prayer does not just consist of an exercise of the mind [...] Make as simple as possible the work of your mind in your prayer and meditation. Calm your mind so that the Holy Spirit can joyfully work in you.”* (L.S. I,405)

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ENTERING INTO THE LEVEL OF HEART

In order to let the Holy Spirit work in our lives we have to look for him at the level of our heart.

The *heart* in our day-to-day language conjures up images of love, sentiment and emotion. This is different to its meaning in the culture of the Bible – which is the Jewish culture of Libermann. In the bible the heart represents the profound personality of the human person. It is where one formulates one’s dreams, projects and vision for the future. It is really the “core” of our being – the place from where our true self is revealed, from where true relationships are formed and from where deeper convictions and decisions are made. This is where the Holy Spirit is at work in us and manifests himself in experience which is, at the same time, deeply spiritual and personal.





The Spirit of God, Breath of Life

Of course it is never easy to live at this level. In order to be able to do so we have to open ourselves to the movement of the Spirit, to allow ourselves be guided by him freely and without any underlying motivations. Time and time again Libermann comes back to his guiding principle: *"It is the Holy Spirit who will spring up in you the holiness that he brought forth in Jesus."* (L.S II, 407).



Desiring to come to holiness by our own efforts will only lead us to a blind alley: *"The union of our soul with God is the work of the Spirit and not of us... Without him, all our efforts would be useless and even harmful. For the more we work to unite ourselves to God the more there will be of our own actions and thus the less there will be of the Spirit working in us."* (N.D. III, 103)

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If our encounter with God in prayer is marked by so much difficulty and failings it is often because we think that the initiative in prayer is ours to take. But it is always the work of the Spirit of God in us: *"This is the direction you should follow. Never make the effort to unite yourself more or less perfectly to God. The communion of your soul to God is the work of the Spirit and not of you"* (N.D. III, 102)

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When we are faced by periods of dryness and desolation in our prayer, incapable of putting ourselves in the presence of God, we should not try to force ourselves. For in so doing we would block the work of the Spirit in us. Instead, we should humbly accept our incapacity to pray and continue to put ourselves in God's presence and wait. In this way we are letting the Spirit act in us. We should be open to his movement at all moments. The Spirit of God, who is the spring of all love, gently leads us to be more like Jesus, for whom we have been chosen with whom we become the joy of the Father.

8

Working in us, the Spirit always takes into account our personality, our history, our cultural context – everything that helps us bring to fruition the work of the Spirit in each one of us. Libermann often remarked: *“I believe that the Holy Spirit constantly breathes into each and every soul –(but) differently according to each soul... this action presents an extraordinary continuity in each individual soul.”* (L.S. II, 601). Once we discover this reality in our lives it is like a path that is traced for us by the Spirit. By following this path our encounter with God becomes more evident.



LETTING ONESELF GO

However, we can easily give up – wondering are we wasting time. Daily, we put ourselves in God's presence and try to open ourselves to the Spirit – but, often, nothing seems to be happening.

As we mentioned above, the really important thing is our DESIRE. We want to open ourselves to the Spirit. That is our part, the rest is the work of the Spirit. In this context we might consider such questions: Who decides what is “good” or



“bad” prayer? God alone is the judge of this and, in His eyes, a time of prayer struggling with distractions may be as acceptable as one where we have nice, pious feelings. Further, who are we trying to please when we come to prayer – God or ourselves?

The key by which we judge our prayer is the effect it has on our lives. Whether we are being guided or not by the Spirit in our prayer, will be proven by whether we are showing the “*fruits of the Spirit*” in our lives – “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control*” (Gal 5:22). Are we gentler and kinder in our relationships with others? Do we radiate something of the love and joy that should characterize the followers of Jesus?



The fruit of letting one’s self go is peace – a peace which goes beyond all understanding (cf. Phil 4,7). Happy are those to whom the Spirit gives the strength to live this recommendation of Libermann: “*Place yourself in all simplicity before God, do not seek to know who you are... Do not worry about the path in which you should walk but content yourself to be always faithful to Our Lord in the present moment without thinking of what the next day brings.*” (L.S. II, 219).

PEACE: THE GIFT OF THE RISEN LORD

Libermann attached a special importance to the gift or fruit of peace in our lives. It is a peace that is not born out of insensitivity or indifference. It takes its source in God. It is the personal sign of the Spirit. This is how Libermann describes it: “*When the Spirit of God acts in us, our soul burns as if carried, united to God, without trouble, without worry, without agitation, without irritation, without self pride in a movement of emptying oneself before God, before oneself and before our brothers and sisters*” (L.S. II, 599).

To maintain this peace Libermann recommends that we put aside all that is opposed to the action of the Spirit. This involves struggling against our egoism and our pride. Libermann holds this to be very important and often comes back to it in his writings: “*Watch that you might always remain in a true letting go of*



yourself. This is the rock, the most fundamental element of our lives. Piety, devotion and a spirit of prayer are good, excellent, but letting go surpasses and replaces everything.” (L.S. III, 625).

This *dying to oneself* is not an end in itself. We seek it only in order to open ourselves to the action of the Holy Spirit and to make ourselves more available for the service of others.

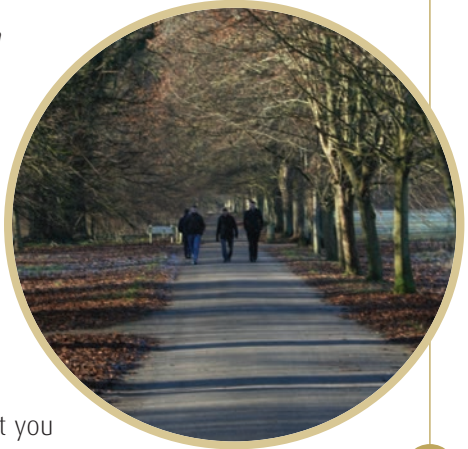
The sentiment of peace and inner freedom is necessary for us if we are to hear the voice of the Spirit. Libermann invites us to be attentive to all that might be an obstacle to us finding inner peace. These are some things which he suggests we might be attentive to:

- Be moderate in our personal activity and, in so far as it is possible, try to eliminate any stress: *“In all that you do act in peace, moderation and gentleness.”* (L.S. II, 380)
- Calm our urge to strive ahead without thinking or reflecting on our activity: *“Never be strong headed when you take up an idea. Never make a decision until your strong headedness and the firing up of your mind have subsided.”* (E.S. 81).
- Reject any thought that comes to you during times of trouble: *“One should never follow ones inner thoughts which do not bring your mind to rest before God, ... even if they be holy thoughts. God will provoke and challenge us, but always in peace.”* (L.S. III, 187).
- Avoid overworking and bitterness towards oneself because of sentiments of weakness or failings. This is how we lose our inner peace and end up discouraged: *“Why do you always trouble yourself because you have difficulty in overcoming your faults? This is pure pride. If you trouble yourself thus and become impatient it is because you want to rid yourself of your faults for the wrong reasons – because, for example, you think yourself respectable or worthy of consideration.”* (L.S.I, 286).

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- Put aside all that might worry you and in particular the memory of past failings: *“Undo in yourself any kind of heartbreak or anxiety you might have when you consider your faults. Do not be bitter against yourself, never cause hurt to yourself. Rather, treat yourself with gentleness and peace. It is with gentleness and in moderation that you should struggle with your failings.”* Our sin, no matter how real it is and how troubling it can be is no longer just our sin – it is being assumed in the Paschal mystery of Christ who brought it to the tomb where it is buried so that new life might rise again in the joy of his resurrection.
- Do not rush God’s moment. Letting yourself be led by the Spirit supposes that you advance calmly and by putting your faith in God: *“Why do you agitate yourself so much in order to obtain a result which depends entirely on God?”* (L.S. II, 43). *“Never seek to advance further than that which is given to you from on high. Follow grace and never go ahead of it. It is not necessary that you see how you are advancing – that is for the Spirit to do. He is your guide and not you. In prayer follow that which attracts you and don’t be preoccupied by method.”* (L.S. II, 558).



And then Libermann gives us this ultimate rule for discernment:

“Any sentiment, any thought, and inspiration which does not present itself to you in peace, graciousness and gentleness should be rejected completely as being very bad.”
(L.S. II, 159).



Practical Union

Spiritual Life and Spirituality is about an active life. It is a life which seeks to be open to the Spirit of God in one's own life and in the life of all those around us. Libermann was very conscious of the false distinction between a so called active life and a contemplative life. Our mission, our way of living the Gospel of Jesus, all our activity is born out of a contemplative attentiveness to the presence of God in our lives and in the life of the world. He calls this approach Practical Union. This consists of an attitude of mindfulness so that throughout the day we are conscious walking with God and meeting him in all those we meet on the way, in our activities, in our dreams and in our disappointments and sorrows.

How do we do this? One way of doing it is by giving some time of our day to reading the Scriptures. Perhaps we might take a Gospel story and take time to reflect on how it touches my present life. We should also try and find some quiet time with the Lord. A very simple definition of prayer is that we just sit and

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breathe – quietly experiencing the Spirit of God in our respiration leads us, over time, to much inspiration! Libermann tells us that *“All our sighs must be in God to enjoy Him, to honour Him and to have His life in us. This is nothing but continual prayer.”* [L.S., p. 99]. We might have other favourite prayers or devotions. The important thing is to give time regularly to the practice of prayer and the prayerful reading of the Bible.

Practical Union is a way of living whose secret lies in the heart of God. The Spirit communicates this to us in his time and according to the faithfulness with which we are able to respond to the grace of the moment. It is then that *“we have within us an overabundance of truth, we breathe truth and we are nourished by it. We see clearly and effortlessly the things of God because our soul is in its element, the divine light.”* (N.D., XIII, 699).

Gradually we will begin to sense that we are more aware of what is going on around us and what is happening in our lives. It will allow us to be more open to the Spirit of God and to *“the whisper of the poor and the suffering of the excluded”*.

SENT ON MISSION

Libermann trained future religious – brothers and priests. He formulated for the first members of his religious family a teaching on mission which consisted in the contemplation of Jesus *“who came to serve and not be served”* (Mk 10:45).



This mission theology led him to draw up directives for missionary activity which challenged the contemporary prejudices of his time – prejudices which have not gone away. The followers of Libermann continue to be inspired in their lives and their apostolic activity by his prophetic words to his missionaries in Africa in 1848: *“Do not judge things by what you have seen in Europe. Empty yourselves of*



Europe, of its customs and its mindset. Make yourselves Negroes with the Negroes and you will judge them as they should be judged; make yourselves Negroes with the Negroes to form them as they should be formed, not in the European way of things but leaving them what is their way of doing things; be to them as servants are to their masters.” (N.D. IX, 330).

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To our contemporary ears the word *Negro* can be difficult to accept. By using it instead of African or Black Person, Libermann was using the term commonly applied to the slaves that were being embarked from Africa to be brought to Europe. The slaves who were despised and dehumanized by the economic holocaust of slavery were to be considered as brothers and sisters by the missionaries.

Libermann had a profound respect for others, accepting them with their differences. He invites us to open ourselves to the values of other cultures, to rid ourselves from prejudices and stereotypes based on ethnicity and skin colour. We should seek to rid ourselves of any sense of superiority or privilege. It is to see others as Christ sees us.





WITH MARY

Mary occupies an important place in Libermann's spirituality. She is present all through his spiritual journey. At the moment of his baptism he has a deep spiritual experience: *"When the water of baptism flowed over my Jewish head, at that instant I loved Mary who I detested before."* (N.D. I, 99). This choice gift which enlightened the rest of his life is given to us so that we too might benefit from its grace.

Libermann's devotion to Mary is respectful and relaxed, simple without being excessive in expression. For him, Mary is God's success. He saw in her *"a perfect model of faithfulness to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit"* (N.D. X, 568). It is to Mary that Libermann dedicated his religious family.

Let us find in this heritage that Libermann left us an invitation to confide ourselves in Mary. As she did in her own life, she can help us allow ourselves be filled with, and led by the Spirit.





This text is an adapted translation of *Fais cela et tu vivras!: Quelques éléments de la spiritualité de François Libermann*, Coll. « Spiritualité Spiritaine ».

N.D. 1 – XIII, *Notes et Documents relatives à la vie et à l'oeuvre du Vénérable François-Marie-Paul Libermann, supérieur général de la congrégation du Saint Esprit et du Saint-Cœur de Marie*, A. Cabon, éd., Paris, Maison Mère, 30, Lhomond, 1929 – 1941, 13 tomes.

Ecrits spirituels du Vénérable Libermann, Paris, Duret, 1891.

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Translation: Fr. Marc Whelan C.S.Sp.



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The Spirit of God, Breath of Life

Of course it is never easy to live at this level. In order to be able to do so we have to open ourselves to the movement of the Spirit, to allow ourselves be guided by him freely and without any underlying motivations. Time and time again Libermann comes back to his guiding principle: *"It is the Holy Spirit who will spring up in you the holiness that he brought forth in Jesus."* (L.S II, 407).



Desiring to come to holiness by our own efforts will only lead us to a blind alley: *"The union of our soul with God is the work of the Spirit and not of us... Without him, all our efforts would be useless and even harmful. For the more we work to unite ourselves to God the more there will be of our own actions and thus the less there will be of the Spirit working in us."* (N.D. III, 103)

7

If our encounter with God in prayer is marked by so much difficulty and failings it is often because we think that the initiative in prayer is ours to take. But it is always the work of the Spirit of God in us: *"This is the direction you should follow. Never make the effort to unite yourself more or less perfectly to God. The communion of your soul to God is the work of the Spirit and not of you"* (N.D. III, 102)

"It is the Holy Spirit who will spring up in you the holiness that he brought forth in Jesus."



When we are faced by periods of dryness and desolation in our prayer, incapable of putting ourselves in the presence of God, we should not try to force ourselves. For in so doing we would block the work of the Spirit in us. Instead, we should humbly accept our incapacity to pray and continue to put ourselves in God's presence and wait. In this way we are letting the Spirit act in us. We should be open to his movement at all moments. The Spirit of God, who is the spring of all love, gently leads us to be more like Jesus, for whom we have been chosen with whom we become the joy of the Father.

8

Working in us, the Spirit always takes into account our personality, our history, our cultural context – everything that helps us bring to fruition the work of the Spirit in each one of us. Libermann often remarked: *“I believe that the Holy Spirit constantly breathes into each and every soul –(but) differently according to each soul... this action presents an extraordinary continuity in each individual soul.”* (L.S. II, 601). Once we discover this reality in our lives it is like a path that is traced for us by the Spirit. By following this path our encounter with God becomes more evident.



LETTING ONESELF GO

However, we can easily give up – wondering are we wasting time. Daily, we put ourselves in God's presence and try to open ourselves to the Spirit – but, often, nothing seems to be happening.

As we mentioned above, the really important thing is our DESIRE. We want to open ourselves to the Spirit. That is our part, the rest is the work of the Spirit. In this context we might consider such questions: Who decides what is “good” or



“bad” prayer? God alone is the judge of this and, in His eyes, a time of prayer struggling with distractions may be as acceptable as one where we have nice, pious feelings. Further, who are we trying to please when we come to prayer – God or ourselves?

The key by which we judge our prayer is the effect it has on our lives. Whether we are being guided or not by the Spirit in our prayer, will be proven by whether we are showing the “*fruits of the Spirit*” in our lives – “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control*” (Gal 5:22). Are we gentler and kinder in our relationships with others? Do we radiate something of the love and joy that should characterize the followers of Jesus?



The fruit of letting one’s self go is peace – a peace which goes beyond all understanding (cf. Phil 4,7). Happy are those to whom the Spirit gives the strength to live this recommendation of Libermann: “*Place yourself in all simplicity before God, do not seek to know who you are... Do not worry about the path in which you should walk but content yourself to be always faithful to Our Lord in the present moment without thinking of what the next day brings.*” (L.S. II, 219).

PEACE: THE GIFT OF THE RISEN LORD

Libermann attached a special importance to the gift or fruit of peace in our lives. It is a peace that is not born out of insensitivity or indifference. It takes its source in God. It is the personal sign of the Spirit. This is how Libermann describes it: “*When the Spirit of God acts in us, our soul burns as if carried, united to God, without trouble, without worry, without agitation, without irritation, without self pride in a movement of emptying oneself before God, before oneself and before our brothers and sisters*” L.S. II, 599).

To maintain this peace Libermann recommends that we put aside all that is opposed to the action of the Spirit. This involves struggling against our egoism and our pride. Libermann holds this to be very important and often comes back to it in his writings: “*Watch that you might always remain in a true letting go of*



yourself. This is the rock, the most fundamental element of our lives. Piety, devotion and a spirit of prayer are good, excellent, but letting go surpasses and replaces everything.” (L.S. III, 625).

This *dying to oneself* is not an end in itself. We seek it only in order to open ourselves to the action of the Holy Spirit and to make ourselves more available for the service of others.

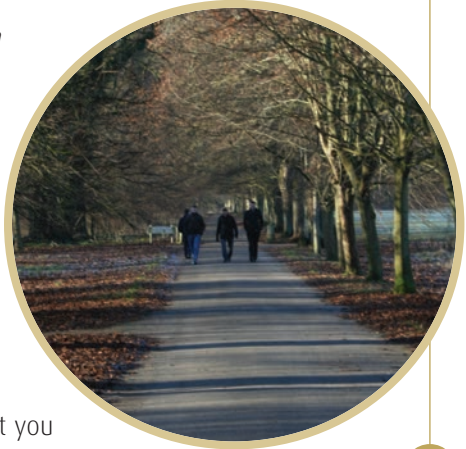
The sentiment of peace and inner freedom is necessary for us if we are to hear the voice of the Spirit. Libermann invites us to be attentive to all that might be an obstacle to us finding inner peace. These are some things which he suggests we might be attentive to:

- Be moderate in our personal activity and, in so far as it is possible, try to eliminate any stress: *“In all that you do act in peace, moderation and gentleness.”* (L.S. II, 380)
- Calm our urge to strive ahead without thinking or reflecting on our activity: *“Never be strong headed when you take up an idea. Never make a decision until your strong headedness and the firing up of your mind have subsided.”* (E.S. 81).
- Reject any thought that comes to you during times of trouble: *“One should never follow ones inner thoughts which do not bring your mind to rest before God, ... even if they be holy thoughts. God will provoke and challenge us, but always in peace.”* (L.S. III, 187).
- Avoid overworking and bitterness towards oneself because of sentiments of weakness or failings. This is how we lose our inner peace and end up discouraged: *“Why do you always trouble yourself because you have difficulty in overcoming your faults? This is pure pride. If you trouble yourself thus and become impatient it is because you want to rid yourself of your faults for the wrong reasons – because, for example, you think yourself respectable or worthy of consideration.”* (L.S.I, 286).

“Never be strong headed when you take up an idea. Never make a decision until your strong headedness and the firing up of your mind have subsided.”



- Put aside all that might worry you and in particular the memory of past failings: *“Undo in yourself any kind of heartbreak or anxiety you might have when you consider your faults. Do not be bitter against yourself, never cause hurt to yourself. Rather, treat yourself with gentleness and peace. It is with gentleness and in moderation that you should struggle with your failings.”* Our sin, no matter how real it is and how troubling it can be is no longer just our sin – it is being assumed in the Paschal mystery of Christ who brought it to the tomb where it is buried so that new life might rise again in the joy of his resurrection.
- Do not rush God’s moment. Letting yourself be led by the Spirit supposes that you advance calmly and by putting your faith in God: *“Why do you agitate yourself so much in order to obtain a result which depends entirely on God?”* (L.S. II, 43). *“Never seek to advance further than that which is given to you from on high. Follow grace and never go ahead of it. It is not necessary that you see how you are advancing – that is for the Spirit to do. He is your guide and not you. In prayer follow that which attracts you and don’t be preoccupied by method.”* (L.S. II, 558).



And then Libermann gives us this ultimate rule for discernment:

“Any sentiment, any thought, and inspiration which does not present itself to you in peace, graciousness and gentleness should be rejected completely as being very bad.”
(L.S. II, 159).



Practical Union

Spiritual Life and Spirituality is about an active life. It is a life which seeks to be open to the Spirit of God in one's own life and in the life of all those around us. Libermann was very conscious of the false distinction between a so called active life and a contemplative life. Our mission, our way of living the Gospel of Jesus, all our activity is born out of a contemplative attentiveness to the presence of God in our lives and in the life of the world. He calls this approach Practical Union. This consists of an attitude of mindfulness so that throughout the day we are conscious walking with God and meeting him in all those we meet on the way, in our activities, in our dreams and in our disappointments and sorrows.

12

How do we do this? One way of doing it is by giving some time of our day to reading the Scriptures. Perhaps we might take a Gospel story and take time to reflect on how it touches my present life. We should also try and find some quiet time with the Lord. A very simple definition of prayer is that we just sit and





breathe – quietly experiencing the Spirit of God in our respiration leads us, over time, to much inspiration! Libermann tells us that *“All our sighs must be in God to enjoy Him, to honour Him and to have His life in us. This is nothing but continual prayer.”* [L.S., p. 99]. We might have other favourite prayers or devotions. The important thing is to give time regularly to the practice of prayer and the prayerful reading of the Bible.

Practical Union is a way of living whose secret lies in the heart of God. The Spirit communicates this to us in his time and according to the faithfulness with which we are able to respond to the grace of the moment. It is then that *“we have within us an overabundance of truth, we breathe truth and we are nourished by it. We see clearly and effortlessly the things of God because our soul is in its element, the divine light.”* (N.D., XIII, 699).

Gradually we will begin to sense that we are more aware of what is going on around us and what is happening in our lives. It will allow us to be more open to the Spirit of God and to *“the whisper of the poor and the suffering of the excluded”*.

SENT ON MISSION

Libermann trained future religious – brothers and priests. He formulated for the first members of his religious family a teaching on mission which consisted in the contemplation of Jesus *“who came to serve and not be served”* (Mk 10:45).



This mission theology led him to draw up directives for missionary activity which challenged the contemporary prejudices of his time – prejudices which have not gone away. The followers of Libermann continue to be inspired in their lives and their apostolic activity by his prophetic words to his missionaries in Africa in 1848: *“Do not judge things by what you have seen in Europe. Empty yourselves of*



Europe, of its customs and its mindset. Make yourselves Negroes with the Negroes and you will judge them as they should be judged; make yourselves Negroes with the Negroes to form them as they should be formed, not in the European way of things but leaving them what is their way of doing things; be to them as servants are to their masters.” (N.D. IX, 330).

14

To our contemporary ears the word *Negro* can be difficult to accept. By using it instead of African or Black Person, Libermann was using the term commonly applied to the slaves that were being embarked from Africa to be brought to Europe. The slaves who were despised and dehumanized by the economic holocaust of slavery were to be considered as brothers and sisters by the missionaries.

Libermann had a profound respect for others, accepting them with their differences. He invites us to open ourselves to the values of other cultures, to rid ourselves from prejudices and stereotypes based on ethnicity and skin colour. We should seek to rid ourselves of any sense of superiority or privilege. It is to see others as Christ sees us.





WITH MARY

Mary occupies an important place in Libermann's spirituality. She is present all through his spiritual journey. At the moment of his baptism he has a deep spiritual experience: *"When the water of baptism flowed over my Jewish head, at that instant I loved Mary who I detested before."* (N.D. I, 99). This choice gift which enlightened the rest of his life is given to us so that we too might benefit from its grace.

Libermann's devotion to Mary is respectful and relaxed, simple without being excessive in expression. For him, Mary is God's success. He saw in her *"a perfect model of faithfulness to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit"* (N.D. X, 568). It is to Mary that Libermann dedicated his religious family.

Let us find in this heritage that Libermann left us an invitation to confide ourselves in Mary. As she did in her own life, she can help us allow ourselves be filled with, and led by the Spirit.





This text is an adapted translation of *Fais cela et tu vivras!: Quelques éléments de la spiritualité de François Libermann*, Coll. « Spiritualité Spiritaine ».

N.D. 1 – XIII, *Notes et Documents relatives à la vie et à l'oeuvre du Vénérable François-Marie-Paul Libermann, supérieur général de la congrégation du Saint Esprit et du Saint-Cœur de Marie*, A. Cabon, éd., Paris, Maison Mère, 30, Lhomond, 1929 – 1941, 13 tomes.
Ecrits spirituels du Vénérable Libermann, Paris, Duret, 1891.

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