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THE TRIAL OF ILLNESS

"I was given a thorn in the flesh"
(2 Cor. 12:7)

(This is the text of the second talk in a Retreat preached in the French Province by Father Bernard Tenaillieu of the French Seminary, Rome. The title of the Retreat was "In the Footsteps of Father Libermann").

Introduction: Jesus, Victorious over Temptation
(Luke IV, 1-13).

After being baptised in the Jordan, *Jesus withdrew into the nearby desert* . . . before setting out upon His Mission. He felt the need to go aside that He might better appreciate the significance of His Father's call which had been repeated on the occasion of the baptism by John. Until that time, He had lived in the silence of Nazareth in a privileged relationship with the Father but following a life-style little different to others about Him. Now, His true Mission was to begin: He was the beloved Son men were invited to listen to.

The relationship between Jesus and the Father was about to change: hereafter, it would be lived out in the preaching of the Word, in witness and even in the midst of confrontation. That is why like Moses, Abraham and Elias before Him, He now chose to spend some time of preparation in the desert, that place of silence where Jahweh likes to meet with men But, the desert is also a place of trial. As formerly in the time of Moses, now Jesus is going to be put to the test. The very fast that accompanies His prayer leaves Him vulnerable. That is when the tempter strikes. He knows this Man is the Son of Mary. This was made clear by Luke after the account of the Baptism (Luke III, 21-22) when Luke immediately presented His genealogy (Luke III, 23-37). Now, the Tempter would try Him in order to establish His real identity.

You are all familiar with Luke's account of the Temptations. He sets the confrontation between Jesus and the Devil in three acts each in a different place: the mountain, the desert, the temple. *In the first two temptations*, Jesus is tested more directly on His relations with the Father. (1) The Tempter first proposes to Jesus to use His powers for His own advantage: "Command that these stones be made bread". This in fact is to invite Jesus to save Himself by His own unaided effort, since as Son of God, He has the means to do so. But, it is precisely because He is the Son of God that Jesus refuses. Unlike the Devil, wholly turned in upon himself, before the Father Jesus effaces Himself in a relationship of obedience and of dependency. He refuses to use His Father for His own personal advantage. He stands before the Father as a human being and that has to be expressed in His own attitude - of welcome, obedience and dependency. God is infinitely more to be valued than the bread of this world. (2) Again the Tempter returns to the attack - this time indirectly, by an appeal to power. He would like to get Jesus on his side. Again the refusal is absolute: "the Lord, thy God, thou shalt adore and Him only shalt thou serve". Once more Jesus effaces Himself before the Father but this time in a relationship of adoration and submission. (3) Finally, *the third temptation*: this is directed more specifically to the relationship between Jesus and those who would one day be his disciples. It takes place on the pinnacle of the Temple. The Devil urges Jesus to throw Himself down and so win immediately and miraculously the recognition of the Jewish people. This was all the more likely as the populace were hungry for the extraordinary. Once more however Jesus refuses. He has come not as a magician but as "the Servant" who will give His life for the salvation of the world. The way He chose was to insert Himself into the human situation as it is, to experience suffering, failure and death. Jesus is the Beloved Son of the Father: in human terms that can be expressed only in assuming the role of "Servant", for God is Love In the heat of His trial in the desert Jesus shows Himself to be truly His Father's Son as He places Himself totally in His hands.

Libermann also knew what it was to be tried: in his case, it was illness that would constitute his desert-experience. It was to be a trial of long duration but instead of opening up the way to depression, discouragement and temptation it would

become "a great treasure" which would purchase for him a greater interior peace and availability. As a result of this experience of illness, Libermann more than any other would insist that interior peace was both the sign and condition of true docility to the Holy Spirit.

1. TRIAL BY ILLNESS

Francis Libermann entered the Seminary of Saint Sulpice in October 1827 and was already a year and a half there. Despite an occasional attack of nerves, his health seemed fairly satisfactory. In March 1829, on the eve of his ordination to the subdiaconate, he was struck down by a nervous attack more severe than any of the others. There was no doubt that the milder attacks had developed into clearly recognisable *epileptic fits*. It would seem that entry to the priesthood was closed to him forever. What follows is a harrowing account of one of these attacks, given by his spiritual director, M. Carbon. "He came to me one day to discuss his interior state, which he did with his usual calm, standing by the chimney and showing no sign of tiredness. Suddenly he began to shake all over: his whole nervous system seemed to be upset. His face convulsed, his distended eyes glazed, his lips, ghastly pale, were covered with froth". Panting, choking, he fell at the director's feet. Bravely, the director took him in his arms and placed him on a bed (Dom Pitra, *Vie*, p. 79, 5th edition).

Possibly out of a hidden hope that time might cure Libermann's illness, he was allowed to finish his theology course. *But, at the beginning of the scholastic year 1831, his condition was still the same*, and the Council of the Seminary found itself obliged to invite him to withdraw. M. Carbon communicated this decision to Libermann. Since his state of health precluded all hope of advancement to the priesthood, it was suggested that he find a suitable position in the world; the Seminary would help him to do so. Without the slightest show of emotion, Libermann asked simply when he would be required to go. "As to the world, I cannot return to it but I trust God will provide for my future". Deeply moved by such faith, peace of spirit and abnegation, the Superior of the Seminary, M. Garnier, could not find it in his heart to implement his original decision. He sent Libermann instead to the Seminary

at Issy to help the Bursar there by doing the messages. This he would do for the next six years.

Little by little the major crises became less frequent, so much so that when a request was received from the Eudists at Rennes for someone to fill the office of Novice Master, M. Mollevaut, the Superior at Issy, did not hesitate to recommend Libermann as an experienced spiritual animator. But, at Rennes, *the illness returned even more strongly and under very humiliating circumstances: the attack actually struck during a spiritual conference given by Libermann on the eve of the Feast of the Holy Heart of Mary, February 7, 1838.* This is an account of the incident written later by a novice present at the time:

“One day, during a conference, he fell down in an epileptic fit. We watched him writhing on the ground for three quarters of an hour, foaming at the mouth, in the grip of this horrible sickness. Professors as well as Novices were at the conference and he was eventually carried to his room. Shortly afterwards I went there to see how he was. He was as serene as ever but said sadly, ‘the good Lord wants to show what a poor specimen you have got as director’” (M. Mangot, N. D. I. p. 521-522).

This was the last major fit he experienced: after that there were only some slight attacks. *His pilgrimage to Loreto* in 1840 however, contrary to popular belief, did not result in a definitive cure. Divine favour manifested itself rather in suddenly smoothing out the obstacles to his priestly future. A year later, in fact, he was ordained priest. In a letter to M. Cahier, of August 1, 1841, Libermann makes it clear that he had no attacks for three-and-a-half years, only some slight nervous movements which were on the decline but which were sometimes embarrassing when he was speaking in public (N. D. II, p. 493).

In 1846, he made a tour of France to visit a number of Senior Seminaries and then went on to Rome to present his Memorandum to Propaganda. We know *on the authority of Fr Blanpin* that he had a nervous attack at Strasbourg during this trip. It occurred apparently after a discussion with his step-brother, Isaac, who had remained a Jew (N.D. VIII, p. 453-454). There is also a rather interesting testimony of Fr Lamoise, who was a novice at La Neuville in 1845.

“Sometimes our beloved Father was suddenly obliged to interrupt his conferences before the end because of migraine and nervous upset: words would fail him. At other times, he gained control of himself and was able to continue; at times too the migraine passed as he lost himself fervently in his subject. When he was suddenly forced to interrupt his explanation of the Rules in this way, his humility, simplicity and peacefulness were such that he was often more effective than when he spoke . . .” (N.D. VIII, p. 489).

As the epilepsy receded, however, problems of *gastroenteritis* ensued and these he would experience to the end of his life. The members of the General Council meeting on August 5, 1845, “alarmed by the increasing bad health of the Founder and the unceasing progress of his illness”, took special measures to spare him all unnecessary fatigue: they decreed that he “be in bed by 10 p.m. and that he take two full hours off work every afternoon”. Libermann submitted obediently to these decisions (N.D. VII, pp. 517-519).

The worst blow struck him in 1849. In that year he was ill for five months and it was thought it might be fatal. He was sent on convalescence to the seaside at Arromanches. By this time he realised that he had not long to live. On March 18, 1851, he wrote to Fr François – his secretary for three years, and now a missionary in the island of Reunion – “*I must be very brief: I get migraine after each phrase I write. I have to put down my pen and hold my head. You can imagine what I’m worth in the circumstances*” (N.D. XIII, p. 78) The time would indeed be short. Libermann would die on February 2, 1852: he was barely 50 years of age.

2. HOW DID LIBERMANN ACCEPT AND LIVE OUT THIS TRIAL?

The Psychological Effects of Epilepsy

Psychologically, the consequences of epilepsy are extremely depressing, to the point of being suicidal. Libermann himself strongly experienced this urge but always resisted it peacefully and with deep interior confidence: for him the attraction of God was more powerful than that of his depres-

sion. What for others was a veritable psychosis was for him an occasion of grace. At the same time, I stress what Libermann experienced on the psychological level because of his illness and because of the impossibility of ever achieving the priesthood. A friend of his who became a Marist, Fr Ducourneau, records the following: "In the company one day of an overwrought student who envied Libermann his calm, the latter told him quite simply of how he had been tried in the furnace: *I never cross a bridge, he said, without being tempted to throw myself from the parapet and so put an end to my sufferings but the thought of Jesus strengthens me and makes me patient*". (N.D. I, pp. 289-291). And another fellow-student, M. Perrée, later a priest in Marseilles, writes:

"One feast-day in the Seminary, several devout students spoke in his presence of the sentiments of piety and holy joy they had experienced at the ceremonies at which they had assisted that morning. *I, on the contrary, said Libermann, have been heavy as a log all day, unable to speak to God, to think or to feel.* Several of his usual confidants were there and smiled significantly to each other: this seems to imply that such had for long been his habitual state, borne with perfect resignation and even with a degree of joy. Speaking to me confidentially about his interior sufferings, he confided that they were so violent and accompanied by such a terrible temptation to despair, that more than once when walking along the quays of the Seine he had had to ask his companion to grip him tightly, to prevent him from throwing himself into the river" (N.D. I, pp. 307-308).

The Interior Dispositions of M. Libermann

Fr Libermann welcomed his cross in a spirit of faith and trust. Hidden deep in it he also discovered that "allowing oneself to be led by God" meant "abandoning oneself into the hands of God", with total interior peace, and without worrying even about the way God wished to lead one. Faced with an illness hard to bear and from which he must have suffered intensely, Libermann reacted by simply yielding himself up entirely to God's good pleasure, and this state of abandonment he lived in the utmost interior peace day by day. In this lay the explanation of why his many friends, priests and semi-

narians, who came to speak to him of their own little interior problems or difficulties in human relationships, received from him the same reply: calm, gentleness, moderation, interior peace and trust, as the means of becoming pliable instruments in the hands of God. Two examples will be sufficient to make this point: they concern his own illness and help us to better understand his own serenity of spirit. The first is a quotation from a letter to his doctor-brother, dated July 8, 1830:

“ I have not wholly got over my illness and so cannot receive the subdiaconate for some years, maybe never

I assure you my illness is to me a precious treasure, more desirable than anything this world has to offer its devotees

I shall remain in the Seminary as long as the Rector is willing to keep me” (Lettres Spirituelles, I, 8-10).

The other letter was written to a Seminarian (M. Viot) of the diocese of Tours, who had left the Seminary of Saint Sulpice under a cloud after the events of July 1830. Libermann, forwarding the young man's trunk to him, wrote:

. *You say you would like to see me happy: I do not understand. Do you mean you would like to see me rich, in good health, without suffering in this world? Do not wish away my dear illness, a hundred thousand sufferings as well: for, only suffering can make me like Our Lord, Jesus Christ. If you want to see me happy, come to visit me and your wish will be fulfilled. I am a Christian. Our Lord Jesus Christ died for me. I am overwhelmed by His graces and blessings. I have a tiny share in his sufferings and you think I am not happy. What more could I want to make me so. As for you, my friend, keep yourself calm, in peace and interior silence* (L.S. I, 16-18).

As a rule, Libermann did not speak of his illness, so wholly was it integrated into his life with God. He also applied to himself without doubt the infallible remedy he suggested to a seminarian undergoing a crisis of vocation:

Let me recommend to you an infallible remedy against every kind of interior trial: never speak to anyone of these trials, the scruples you suffer or of other things connected with your vocation. That holds even for things you would like to do, or should do for God's glory. It is enough that

you speak to your director and follow what he says without reference to others (to Mr de Farcy, 23 Oct. 1830: N.D. I, 145).

In other words, according to Libermann, the best way to overcome difficulties of whatever kind is to be discreet and to avoid too much talk or exterior expression of our interior state: that neither comforts us nor does it ensure interior peace.

3. WHAT OF OUR OWN PERSONAL EXPERIENCE?

In every spiritual life, Jesus begins by drawing us to Himself. Normally, this taking possession of us begins with Baptism. But, very often it is later in life that He chooses us, takes us once more to Himself. That explains how, after years of religious life itself, people experience a second "conversion". Moreover, He does not come merely to set His seal upon us but to *identify us with Himself*: this He wishes all the more if we are His friends by vocation. As St John says, "Whosoever presumes to live with Christ should walk in the way that Jesus walked", (1 John II, 6). In other words, if we genuinely want to become like Christ, to be one with him, we cannot but pass in the way of trial, the way of suffering. Unless we enter into the Passion of Christ, we can never become like Him. Also, to quote St Paul, who himself underwent great sufferings for Christ, it is important to remember that "when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. XII, 10).

Suffering in life may visit us under many disguises: illness, (physical or mental) handicap, bereavements, failures and setbacks, doubts, misunderstandings, etc. Faced with trial, especially when it bites deeply, we may be tempted to rebel. Certainly, there are many natural helps to reaction in these cases: reflecting on the root of our setback or failure, consulting a trusted friend or spiritual director, medical aid, change of scene, and so on. But, because we are believers, we can also see in these trials, even after they have ceased, a visitation of the Lord, that it was really a moment of God. In the words of Libermann, all such sufferings that are strewn on life's journey are "moments of God", that is, times when He invites us to explore more deeply our first encounter with Him. Whether

physical or moral, the suffering becomes a sign, a "moment of God".

Only those who *live in close relationship with God* can react in this way. Those who live superficial lives cannot discern the action of Christ seeking to unite them more deeply with Himself. We can only recognise, and understand, God's action in trial *if our attitude is one of welcome acceptance, of availability and abandonment to God* in the circumstances. This Libermann teaches out of personal experience, so terrible yet so transforming. He shows us moreover how interior availability, when given priority and lived out peacefully can work miracles even therapeutically. It lifts us up even out of the deepest depressions. But always the first principle is: to allow oneself to be possessed by God, by Jesus. For that, prayer is vitally important, especially the prayer of contemplation we call "mental prayer", in which we let Jesus freely have His way with us: He is able to break through even our deepest interior disturbances.

In support of my thesis, I shall quote two examples only, from Libermann's Letters. The first is addressed to a Miss Barbier, who wished to be a religious but was restrained by two obstacles: one, of family; the other, of health. She also was a victim of nervous illness.

..... Nervous troubles should be forgotten, overlooked, despised. I was the victim of such myself in my youth and violently so. What did me most harm was the fear, the uneasiness, the precautions. Such movements, such disturbances of spirit should be resisted by forgetting ourselves. We should not allow our hearts to be distressed by nervous trials: we should react against them vigorously and place ourselves in the presence of God to suffer or not as He desires. I am telling you what I myself have done ever since I first gave myself to God. I have followed Him in a spirit of faith and sought only His good pleasure. I did not stop to think I might regain my health in this way: I just trusted it would be useful, and in fact it did greatly contribute to my cure (July 2, 1845; N.D. VII, pp. 235-239).

The other example has to do with a young seminarian, serious victim of cerebral anaemia; at the time of the letter he was convalescing at his parents' house. Young Mr Libermann

often wrote to the sick young man to encourage him and to help him in his affliction, starting on the psychological level. The following is an extract from a letter written to this young Mr Carron by Libermann and dated October 17, 1837:

We never know the way Jesus wishes to lead us; nor does it matter provided He Himself reigns wholly and exclusively in our hearts. If you live, it is Jesus who lives in you: if you die then you live fully, exclusively, in Jesus and He in you: if you rest it is in Jesus you repose. He wants to be all in you: your rest, your consolation, your suffering, your death, your life, your love, your happiness, your all . . . Keep yourself therefore perfectly at peace before Him and in Him: abandon yourself completely to His action, whatever the place, whatever the interior or exterior circumstances He desires. Let all be for Jesus, let Jesus be all in you . . .

Let God alone be the source of what you do: let Him act through you. Keep the eye of your soul firmly fixed on Him, whatever you do, wherever you go. May your will always depend fully on Him alone (Rennes, October 17, 1837; L.S. I, pp. 325-328).

Prayer: Lord, grant us interior peace.

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