A. Discerning the Action of the Holy Spirit

Libermann teaches that we are led by the Spirit toward holiness in accordance with our human nature. It is not an operation of the Spirit in which we have no part. Holiness, like human maturation, does not happen without our cooperation, without our sustained intention to be united with God in all we do and experience (“... divine grace, sown in the soul as a seed of life, does not develop without our fidelity and cooperation” ES 387). He manifests his energetic presence through our experience.

There is no neon sign indicating that our experience is the result of the Spirit’s action. We must exercise discernment to judge its origin, for we cannot know the Spirit’s action except by the effects we see in ourselves (CJ 123).

The Spirit cannot be discerned unless the noise of agitation, restlessness, anxiety is muted. “Let your interior be in silence before him, the Spirit cannot be heard when we are in interior commotion.” Consistently Libermann refers to the “voice” of the Holy Spirit that can be heard in the depths of the soul, which we recognize by the effects we experience (CJ 123). This “voice” discerned within our interior is “sweet” (“douce”), “adorable,” “celestial,” “divine,” “lovable” (CJ 123). It is the Spirit who is instructing us. These “divine instructions” are “powerful and efficacious” and they especially reveal “the marvels the Father has endowed his Beloved Son to be also accomplished in us.”

Libermann is not talking about “hearing voices” as we say of some people who say they do. He speaks metaphorically (see CJ 123). Hearing the voice of the Spirit is recognizing the Spirit as the source of desires, impulses, inclinations, affections, feelings, attractions, insights, zealous energy, impressions, enthusiasm, intentions, sentiments, dispositions, etc., which “tend towards God in all things and aim continually at union with our Lord in whom alone we find the life of our soul, which life is his Holy Spirit.”
When we desire a spiritual good, we can tell its genuineness as coming from the Spirit when we experience a wanting that stands the passing of time, that is accompanied by a certain gladness, sweetness of soul, a sense of unworthiness to be so graced, readiness to pay whatever price necessary, even experiencing rejoicing in the midst of obstacles, contradictions, resistances, misunderstandings, feeling a certain contact with the divine world. We run towards the goal of our desires and wants, like Mary in haste to see Elizabeth. We are preoccupied, the desire continuously on our minds, constantly warming our hearts, raising us above our pride and selfishness. Mary’s first lines in her Magnificat capture the mood, rejoicing in God her Savior when great things were done to her. Something like Jesus’ anxious desire to set the world on fire or his passionate anticipation to eat a last Passover with his disciples. There is released zealous energy, enthusiasm, excitement for the apostolate, joy in believing and loving, supported by hope and expectation of immediate fulfillment.

Libermann often returns in his letters to “rules of discernment,” that is, how do we know that what we want or would like to do is from the Holy Spirit or from our own wishful thinking. He stresses the role of the heart as the recipient of divine impressions and inclinations, but cautions against the excitement of the mind and imagination.

An attraction triggered by nature exalts the mind, agitates and preoccupies it, distracts from God, and inclines to self-love. God’s attraction is peaceful, inclines less to the mind than to the heart, fortifies the will and makes it more faithful to God. The soul is in this case humble before God, joyous, happy, and desirous to be faithful to its vocation for which it prepares itself peacefully.49

Discernment proves itself effective when we respond to these experiences without worry or haste, but in sweetness [douceur] and fidelity, conscious that the Spirit is leading us. Libermann believes that the Holy Spirit is prevented from doing “great things” in us because we indulge in “negative feelings,” which keep us agitated, uneasy, ill-tempered. “If you let yourself be troubled, agitated and anxious, the Holy Spirit will not be able to act in you like he wishes...”50 Resisting them brings on effort, vigilance, self-contemplation.
These are not the supernatural. Libermann warns against thinking we can overcome them by muscular effort. He points out a better way that respects the primacy of the Spirit who powerfully achieves holiness without our anxious effort and distracting vigilance. And this “better way” is Prayer, which he calls “Oraison.” We expose ourselves to the Spirit, consciously, yes, but it is really the Spirit who leads us to this prayer-exposition of ourselves.51 “The union of our soul with God is the work of our Lord and not ours; it is the divine Spirit who should effect it in our souls more or less perfectly, according to the designs of God on us, and according to our fidelity in responding to them.”52

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45LS 1.294, Sept 1837, to M. Gamon, seminary director; ND 1.394. “...An essential point, in the spiritual life, is preserving peace of soul in order to hear our Lord” (CJ 343).
46LS 1.447, Mar 1838, to several seminarians; ND 1.455.
47LS 2.407, 1839, to an anonymous seminarian; ND 1.453.
48LS 1.532, Jun 1838, circular letter to seminarians.
49LS 3.499, Aug 1845, to Marie Bouchet; ND 7.279. Some other advice: “When God gives you a desire, it will always be with suavity [douceur] and peace, allow yourself to be drawn ...” (LS 2.392, 1839, to a seminarian; ND 1.453).
50LS 1.171; May 1836, M. Mangot, future sub-deacon; ND 1.273.
51Blanchard commenting on Libermann’s passive-like spirituality says: “We are here at the very heart of the religious experience and spiritual doctrine of F. Libermann” (1.301).
52ND 3.103, Jan 1842, to Ign. Schwindenhammer, deacon.