Prayer in awareness of God gives rise to inner calm, contentment and peace.” Libermann calls this array of attitudes “sweetness” (douceur), which also defines his notion of how holiness comes to be. It is not a state of being that launches out into a self-activating holiness but a readiness to be impressed by the Holy Spirit. It is a condition of passiveness and receptivity that attracts to itself rather than reaching out to make or change this or that. It is like a magnet that attracts the Holy Spirit.

True to biblical teaching, Libermann regards the Spirit as the one who breathes life into us in a noiseless, invisible, and creative way. The Spirit is the creator of the life of Jesus in us into whose image he intends to make us. This life of Jesus is a total supernatural life, a life only possible through the Spirit who gave purpose to the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is a life, something that can grow. It surges up (John 4:13) to eternal fullness. It is no automatic growth nor a blind surge, but effected by the Spirit acting within our total humanness. Libermann insists on the necessity of a favorable climate in which the Spirit can be powerfully active. Attitudes of anxiety, grouchiness, surliness, sullenness, impetuousness, impatience, e.t.c., disturb this climate and cause the Spirit to be null and without effect.

Commentators on Libermann’s spirituality focus on this “climate” differently. Some see it as a peaceful soul, others a self-abandonment, others as self-denial—attitudes that occur frequently in Libermann’s exhortations. He did not mean muscular effort or mental strain. “Never strain with head or heart to maintain recollection or arouse good feelings towards our Lord.” “In order for God to act in us, it is extremely important to keep oneself in continual peace before him; it is even the unique means of arriving at the interior spirit” (ESS 47).

Libermann thus often warns against “contention.” In his last conferences in 1851, he defined contention as straining in an aggressive manner to be virtuous and prayerful by one’s own natural efforts. Libermann saw a lot of this among seminarians. Not a few of his associates suffered incapacitating headaches, namely, Beauchef, Bureau, Roussel, Lannurien, Briot, Regnier.
F.X. Libermann (his nephew), even Frédéric Levavasseur who for four years was not able to read even a few lines in a book or pray a decade of the rosary. Libermann was horrified by the violent and futile struggle these young men engaged in. He warned of the devastation: “All this was really spiritual sensuality” (ESS 1 80), the cultivation of self-love (ND 4.229). For it was a denial of the supernatural character of holiness; it wanted what it could see and feel, it was confident in human muscular power to produce the physical signs of holiness. But only the Holy Spirit can sanctify and create union with God.

The theme of “douceur” is increasingly seen as a central element in Libermann’s spiritual insight and missionary spirituality. But “douceur” is not “meekness” and “gentleness.” James C. Okoye, C.S.Sp. translated “doux” as “meek” of the Beatitudes. But “meekness” evokes non-violence, non-resistance, both negative attitudes whereas “sweetness” [douceur] is positive, like goodness, mildness, tenderness, affection, all in the one word. A woman might call a man “sweet” meaning tender, concerned, thoughtful, loving; she certainly wouldn’t use “meek” in that context. Adrian van Kaam, C.S.Sp. uses “gentleness,” but acknowledges it does not do justice to Libermann’s conception of douceur which defies translation in English. Some find the translation “sweetness” archaic, even repulsive. Others combine words, for example, “loving gentleness,” avoiding the saccharine taste suggested by “sweetness,” but retaining the element of love missing from “gentleness” and “meekness.”

The context of the word “douceur” and its cognates (“doux” “doucement”) often leaves little room for limiting Libermann’s understanding of the word to “gentleness” and “meekness.”

Sweetness [douceur]... one of the most beautiful virtues that our Lord brought to earth is not only practiced towards others, it first touches ourselves. It proceeds directly from our union with God, it is a ray of Jesus’ love flowing into our souls to refine them by removing uncouthness and harshness of which they are full.
This ray of love gives off a suavity which is felt in all our actions. Those who possess lovable sweetness (douceur) open themselves up before God with tenderness and receive everything from his love with suavity, joys as well as sufferings. In peaceful humiliation of heart they patiently put up with their own troubles and imperfections. They maintain with their neighbor and with themselves such suavity and tenderness of heart that they win over everybody and diffuse God’s blessing on all capable of it (ESS 39).

So more than gentleness and meekness we are dealing with union with God, with Jesus’ love for us. “Douceur” flows from that union and love. It is an integral element of loving union. Love does not exist without it.

Be careful, friends, that it doesn’t become your sweetness (douceur). It isn’t a question of your being sweet (doux), but that Jesus living in you lives there with his Spirit of sweetness (douceur) and suavity.

Hence, Jesus in his Spirit is the source of our “sweetness.” Its nature is divine, celestial and irresistible. It proceeds from the Spirit who unites us in love with Jesus and makes us experience within ourselves the sweetness of Jesus. In this sense, a “sweet” person is not just a gentle person, but loving and tender, caring, warm, pleasant, accessible, pliable, mild, compassionate, kind, sympathetic, and empathetic, devoid of harshness, bitterness, and vengefulness. There’s a beauty in such people that even an ugly physique cannot conceal. Jesus is the original sweet person, it is his sweetness that makes us sweet and can create the climate for authentic growth in holiness by the Holy Spirit.

Libermann’s teaching on “douceur” depends on biblical imagery. Jesus said, “Learn of me for I am “doux [sweet] et humble de coeur” (Libermann’s French text of Matt 11:29). He “grew in grace before God and man” (Luke 2:52). He was easy to approach. Children saw he liked them and they found him likeable.
The Tradition of the Church has retained the meaning of “douceur” as “sweetness” in its devotion to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. It likes to call her “Dulcis Virgo Maria” (sweet Virgin Mary), “Dulcedo Nostra” (our sweetness). We mean much more than gentleness, rather lovelableness, tenderness, responsiveness, warm embrace.

The “douceur” that proceeds from union with God and is a ray of Jesus’ love for us is beyond our control. It is pure gift, grace. It is something that the Spirit wraps us up in, clothes us with, soaks us in, to use common similes of Libermann. We become meek, gentle, and “sweet” with a sense of being loved that leads to fulfillment, contentment, expanding affection.

8In the New Testament writings “peace” is the most prized effect of believing in Christ and being laid hold of by the Spirit: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness and chastity” (Gal 5:22-23). The first word of the risen Christ was SHALOM (peace). Libermann not only exhorted to peace but also tried to show the “logical” connection between peace of soul and holiness. “In order for God to act in us, it is extremely important to keep oneself in continual peace before him; it is even the unique means of arriving at the interior spirit” (ESS 47).

9LS 3.254, May 1843, to a novice, Sister Paule.

10Spiritan Papers, no. 20 (Dec 1986), 93. n.8.


12LS 2.28-29, Jul 1838, to several seminarians per M. Leray; ND 1.431.