A. The Spirit of Holiness

Libermann was familiar with the prayer, “O Jesu Vivens in Maria” (O Jesus living in Mary), from his early years in Paris when preparing for the priesthood in an environment steeped in the French School traditions. In explaining it he stressed the invocation “in Spiritu sanctitatis tuae” (“in the Spirit of your holiness”), that is, in the Spirit that caused Jesus to be completely holy, completely devoted to his Father. The Spirit as the cause of holiness recalls the primordial meaning of holiness which defines God (Isa 6:3: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord”) and purges away what offends God. The invocation affirms that the Spirit’s action is ordained towards bringing about adherence to God and separation from all creature preference, both essential to holiness.

It seems to me that in this life all the activity of the Holy Spirit has our holiness as its goal; and consequently, he is able to be in us a Spirit of holiness, which is about the same thing as a Spirit of separation from every creature in order to be united with God, plunged into the bosom of God, and having no other life than his.

Libermann calls the Spirit the author (originator) and consummator (finisher) of holiness. In the process of holiness, the Spirit is “terrible” in the sense that he works moral purification which cannot be done without pain. This is essential for the establishment of God’s reign in us.

The means Jesus uses to establish us in his life and holiness are terrible. You can imagine what force is necessary to uproot us effectively from ourselves and as it were despite ourselves ... The shock is terrible and the jolt frightening. But this flesh succumbs, it is beaten down and the Spirit of Jesus gradually takes control of us to the detriment and on the ruins of every hostile power.

No doubt Libermann’s Jewish upbringing left in him deep convictions of how awesome the reality of God is, and how God’s being can only be holiness, that is, holiness proper to God alone. Man unless invited and drawn by God’s Spirit, cannot approach this Holy Being, and when he does it’s only because he has been made ready through a purifying and painful experience. However, there is a positive side to painful moral purification. The Spirit dwells within the believer, not as an antagonist, but as an intimate friend, whose presence radiates sweetness and love. “All that trickles down from the divine Spirit is sweet [doux], gracious [suave], unassuming and humble.”
Libermann knows the prayer has a history going back to Charles de Condren (1588-1641). The version of the prayer Libermann knew and commented on (LS 2.506-22, Apr 1841, to Eugene Dupont; ND 2.456-6.7) was a revision of de Condren’s original which lacked “in Mary” (as in “Jesu vivens in Maria”) which was added later by J. J. Olier (1608-1641).

LS 1. 279, Aug 1837, to Paul Carron, seminarian; ND 1.483.

See ND 10.568: Règlements 1849; LS 1.52, 1834, etc. Libermann is frequently “Trinitarian” in his description of divine activity in human beings, referring also to Jesus and the Word as author and consummator of all holiness: LS 1.60 (Word), LS 3.339 (Jesus), ES 407 (Jesus).

LS 2.396-97, 1839, to a Eudist seminarian; ND 1.453.

Blanchard, Libermann, underlines this in referring to Libermann as “an authentic representative of the people of Israel” (1.24). Michael Cahill, C.S.Sp., Libermann’s Commentary on John: an Investigation of the Rabbinical and French School Influences, 1985 however asserts that, as regards the Commentary on John, his Jewish education had little impact on his interpretation of John. Recent Spiritan scholarship tends to dissent from Cahill’s position, but has hardly given Cahill’s work satisfactory consideration.

LS 2.468, Feast of St. Dominic, 1840, to M. Luquet; ND 2.124.