C. The Spirit’s Purposes

(1) Jesus, when addressed as good, promptly replies that
no one is good except God (Mark 10:17-18). The
Old Testament affirms that God must be loved without
reservation, exclusively. The Book of Revelation (4:8-11)
portrays the heavenly beings proclaiming God’s absolute
claim over all creation and history. Libermann remained
true to his Jewish roots, declaring a short time before he
died that God is all, man is nothing. A. Gilbert, C.S.Sp.
considers this statement of Libermann a summation
of his life and teaching, bonding them together: “Such is the
definitive interior experience, such is the definitive message
of Francis Libermann at the threshold of the eternal face to
face: God is all.”

Rooted in biblical convictions, Libermann taught that
the Spirit’s influence affects everything we think and do. The
Spirit is to be our unique life, “the soul of our soul,” an
expression he liked. This stresses the Spirit as the constitutive
principle of supernatural life in us as well as the promoter and
sustainer of that life.

All you have to do is keep yourself docile and
pliable in the hands of the Spirit of life, whom
our Lord has placed in your soul to be your all.
He must be the principle and unique source
of all your affections, desires and movements
of your soul; he must be the driving-power of
your mind and the guide of your soul through
the movements he implants there.

There is a “totality” in Libermann’s conception of the
Spirit in us: his operations determine all of ours. His mastery is
to become so “natural” that the movements of our being are in
harmony with his sanctifying influence just as our bodies are in
tune with our soul’s faculties. “Let the Holy Spirit act in you as
our body lets our soul act... the only difference is that our body
is compelled to receive and follow the soul’s impulses, while our
soul ought to willingly receive and follow the holy impulse of
this divine soul of the Spirit of Jesus.” Hence he could write,
“The supernatural life becomes somehow natural (ES 554).

Enter fully into the designs of holiness that our
great Master has over you... Abandon yourself
fully to this Spirit of sovereign holiness and
not only will he live fully in you, but your life
will no longer be yours, it will be that of the
Spirit of Jesus Christ who will be all things in
you.”
Libermann wrote the above passage just after arriving at Rennes to take up the job of Novice Master for the Eudists. No doubt, he was full of excited anticipation, feeling, for the first time, perhaps, that he was no longer a servant kept around out of pity but was now “earning” his keep. The text sums up the kinds of spiritual themes found in his previous letters, themes suffused with the enthusiasm of the new convert, the insight of the novice who has just glimpsed the beckoning world of holiness.

(2) Libermann was exposed to the spiritual writings of J. Olier (1608-57) and Jean Eudes (1601-80), who were influenced by Pierre de Bérulle (1575-1629) but whose works were unavailable to Libermann, and to the tradition they left behind in Saint Sulpice and Rennes. They pointed to the permanent significance of Jesus’ life experiences which were the experiences of God’s Son. What Jesus experienced was meant to benefit others. “He establishes his life in us in all the states and mysteries he lived and lives now in the eternal bosom of the Father” (CJ at 6:57). The prayer, *O Jesu Vivens in Maria*, originating in the same tradition, contains that teaching: “*veni et vive in mysteriis tuis*” (come and live in us in your mysteries), asking Jesus to let us share in his mysteries so that he may live in us in the Spirit of his holiness. It is the life of Jesus that Libermann wants to see reproduced in us through the Spirit. The Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, he imparts the life of Jesus himself.

These mysteries are meant to be assimilated by the believer who gives the Spirit opportunity and license. Then the Spirit establishes in him the life of Jesus with its sweetness [douceur] and loving dedication. The work of the Spirit in the mysteries of Jesus cannot be ignored and relegated to a piety of another age. The New Testament isn’t saying anything different: see, e.g., Phil 1: 8; 2: 5; 2 Cor 3:1 8; 4: 1 0-11; Col 1: 24; 2:9; Eph 3:16-19, etc. Jesus in exhorting us to learn of him because he is meek [sweet?] and humble of heart (Matt 11: 29) is not so much inculcating attitudes we should foster as revealing who he is for others.

Our Lord has sent us his divine Spirit to be our whole life and to effect in us the perfections and holiness he worked in our Lord himself. Notice, friend, God’s goodness - his miracle of grace and love - in sending us such a great Teacher to reveal the marvels the Father endowed his Beloved Son with and to bring them about in our souls.
The Spirit by means of these mysteries molds us in Christ’s image. We become what we see and hear, what we keep in our hearts. “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, being changed into his likeness from degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). The Holy Spirit would act in us according to the full force and to the full extent of grace, and our interior would be a perfect image of the interior of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In this way the power of the Spirit is engaged. The Spirit, as Scripture asserts, is associated with power—in fact, rarely a text or context exists in the Bible in which Spirit and power are not associated. Felix Gils, C.S.Sp., in his paper on the Cana episode in John’s Gospel, offers a useful resume of the biblical meaning of the Spirit as “dynamis” (=power) but does not do justice to its full connotation when he restricts it to mean “strength.” The Spirit’s “dynamis” not only “strengthens” the Christian to preach boldly and believe without fear, but also dramatically changes those on whom the Spirit pounces (see Judges, 1 - 2; Samuel, passim). The Spirit can be gently received, like oil poured out (Tit 3:6), but can also be sensed as a “violent” agent (Acts 8:16, 39; 10:44; 11:15), as it were. “The Spirit of Jesus Christ is strong and powerful; once in a soul, he takes hold of it and dominates all its acts, thoughts and feelings”; “...being thus abandoned into the hands of his Holy Spirit, he takes hold of your soul and possesses it to such an extent that he becomes its whole life.” However, by constricting his movements and blocking his illumination, we keep the Spirit, who ought to fly free like a dove, a caged prisoner anxiously waiting release.

The Spirit would like to act, but you bind his arms and legs by your indecision and fears. Take a look at the love with which he pushes you, and you keep him from acting! Give him liberty, and you will see the great things he will work in you...

How do we “set free” this holy and powerful Spirit? Libermann doesn’t say that we “use” the Spirit, that we “move” him, rather we let him be the Spirit of holiness, “delivering ourselves tied feet and hands to his [Jesus] divine Spirit,” for only he has the power to create that divine reflection shining on Jesus’ face (2 Cor 3:17-18; 4:6). In a word, which Libermann likes to repeat, we cannot effect the supernatural, which holiness is. “It is metaphorically impossible for someone to practice supernatural virtue by the efforts of nature. One could feign them hypocritically, but, seriously, that’s hardly possible.”
That’s why he was wary of spiritual writers. How can they know the interior soul and its divinely-fixed destiny?36 “God gives to each one interior grace by which one ought to unite oneself to God. This grace God gives diversely according to the character, spirit, and natural manner of being of each one. Hence, each one has his way, his direction for going to God…”37 Logically only the Spirit knows and only the Spirit has the power to accomplish this. Libermann compares the new creation in the Spirit with the old creation: God created the first out of nothing; he does the same for the new and last creation, and that is what he prefers to do.

When God wanted to create the universe, he worked with nothing; and look at the beautiful things he made! Likewise, if he wants to work in us in order to operate things infinitely superior to all the natural beauties that have come from his hands, he doesn’t need us to be unduly concerned to help him…”38

It is impossible to appropriate to oneself the presence and sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit. He is always the Gift.39 Libermann felt complete helplessness in the matter of holiness, which he wanted above all. This was highly intensified by his epilepsy. He coped with debilitating and humiliating fits through an unwavering confidence in the Holy Spirit rather than in useless muscular efforts.40 He lived his frequent exhortation: “Wait peacefully until it pleases our Lord to communicate with you; for this is not something that one takes, but something that one receives.”41 Hence, it’s simply a question of letting the Spirit be who he is, the Spirit of holiness: “…if he is your life that will be a life of holiness, since he has in himself all holiness and his life is holiness itself.”42

Libermann insists that the Holy Spirit incessantly knocks at the door of our heart. The Holy Spirit makes the initial overtures, sustains the movement towards holiness, and he knows how it is to be done. “It is the Spirit who must work in our souls, more or less perfectly according to God’s plans for us and according to our fidelity in corresponding.”43 He wrote five years earlier, in the same vein: “Jesus left you his Holy Spirit to direct you and lead you in this celestial way [Jesus as the Way]. It is this divine Spirit who turns your soul and directs it in this way. Be docile, for if you wish to go it alone, you will stray from this way. Only the Holy Spirit knows it and only he can make you walk in it.”44
19 Alphonse Gilbert, Le feu sur la terre (Le Sarment: Fayard, 1985), 239-40. We find similar statements in his St. Sulpice-Issy period: “God alone, God alone, and always God alone!” (LS 1.53, Jan 1836, to M. Mangot; ND 1.274). “God alone, nothing more, nothing less” (LS 1.160, Apr 1836, to M. Mangot; ND 1.272).


22 ND 3.102, Jan 1842, to Ign. Schwendenhammer, deacon.

23 LS 1.301-02, Sept 1837, to Paul Carron, seminarian; ND 1.484.

24 Libermann reflects a Berullian influence that came to him through Olier, Eudes and others: “It is vital to realize that the divine Incarnation of the Word in the holy humanity is not a transitory act of the divinity, nor a passing operation of the Holy Spirit, but will be henceforth an act which will last for all eternity” (CJ 648).

25 Perhaps the earliest expression of this is in the confessional statement in I Cor 15:3: “…he died for our sins.” John’s Gospel accents heavily that whatever the believer receives is first the perfect possession of Jesus. We receive light, truth, life, resurrection, sonship, the Spirit, the bread of life, etc. because Jesus possessed them first.

26 Using “Spirit” or “Spirit of God” or “divine Spirit” (which are favorites of Libermann) highlights God-being; the “Spirit of Jesus Christ” highlights the mysteries of Jesus in which the Spirit played a full role, but also emphasizes that the Spirit comes from Jesus, belongs to Jesus, and brings all things to him. Statistically, “Spirit,” “Spirit of God,” “Divine Spirit” predominate in volume 2 of his letters and the Commentary on John, a period identified with or close to Libermann’s painful Rennes experience (1837-1839). It was a time when he had nothing else to rely on than the Holy Spirit.

27 LS 2.407, 1839 to a seminarian; ND 1. 453 suggests 1837 as the date.

28 See the attitude of Mary when confronted with the mysteries of Jesus: Luke 2:19, 52 (keeping in her heart the mysteries of Jesus she witnessed). The early Church’s interpretation of Mary’s inner life is surely meant to be a “canonical” attitude in the sense that the early Church proposes it as normative for us.

29 LS 1.66, Sept 1834, to M. Leray, seminarian; ND 1.199.


31 ND 12.361, Sept 1850, to M. Libmann.

32 LS 1.368, Dec 1837, a circular letter to seminarians.

33 LS 1.222, Sept 1836, to his brother Samson; ND 1.168-70.

34 LS 2.44, Jul 1838, circulated letter to seminarians; ND 1.448.

35 ND 8.204, Aug 1846, to J. Schwendenhammer.

36 “Don’t read much and don’t put your confidence in what you read, but in the Spirit of our Lord who dwells in you, to whom you must unite and entirely abandon your soul” (LS 2.382; 1839, circular letter to seminarians; ND 1.452); “Retain this principle well: you should not read spiritual authors in order to learn the theory of the interior life (LS 2.588, Dec 1841, to M. Lannurien, seminarian; ND 3.73). Blanchard confirms Libermann’s thought when he says, “The position of Libermann in spiritual matters is firm: rejection of systems and fidelity to the interior experience of the Holy Spirit” (1.204).

37 ND 11.546; Mar 1849, at a clergy meeting.

38 LS 1.295-96, Sept 1837, to M. Gamon, seminary Director; ND 1.394. “God wants to create his new spirit in you; he wants to make a new creature in you, and in the same fashion he created the universe, by his will and by his sole good pleasure” (LS 2. 290, Oct 1839, to M. Carof; ND 1.461).

39 Catholic tradition has always insisted on the Holy Spirit as “Donum Dei” (Gift of God). This is richly developed in St. John Paul II’s Encyclical, Dominum et Vivificantem, 1986.

40 Gilbert, Le feu sur la terre, 132 emphasizes the “passive” character of Libermannian spirituality and for support calls upon two sympathetic commentators of Libermann, viz., P. Blachard and Père Liagre.

41 LS 2.490, Dec 1840, to E. Dupont, seminarian; ND 2.176.

42 LS 1.302, Sept 1837, to Paul Carron, seminarian; ND 1.484.

43 ND 3.103; Jan 1842, to J. Schwendenhammer, deacon; LS 3.15.

44 LS 1.367, Dec 1837, circulated letter to seminarians; ND J.447.