

LIBERMANN'S SECRET

My Spiritan Brothers, Spiritan Lay Associates and Spiritan Friends,

It may well be true that history does not repeat itself, and yet at this moment in our Spiritan history we stand on the threshold of a new adventure, reminiscent of our Spiritan past. Our reunion with our brothers in the West for some members of each Province may be nothing more than a marriage of convenience or at worst even a shotgun wedding and not one of full choice. Both Provinces have suffered decline for many years and now with an aging membership long for a rebirth. No one wants a reunion of mere survival just to keep at bay the death throes of the old. All of us hope and pray for something truly new.

We are not the first Spiritans in the long history of the Congregation to face the unhappy prospect of becoming dinosaurs. When Claude Poullart des Places gathered together his little band of followers on Pentecost Sunday, 1703, there were only twelve of them. Six years later when he died on October 2, 1709 that small mustard seed of twelve had flourished into a large tree of sixty members spreading its branches to the ends of the earth. He had launched his new work by preaching a retreat to his young group. "He has sent me to preach the Gospel to the poor." Today in more than sixty countries of the world nearly 3,000 Spiritans continue to live and to proclaim that same message. Poullart did not preach in vain.

And yet due to social and political conditions beyond the control of any Spiritan, by 1848 the Congregation of the Holy Ghost was definitely on the wane. As the official supplier of priests for the French colonies, the government demanded that they send every available priest to the missions and they were never able to retain the best graduates of their Seminary to strengthen their own ranks. From the very beginning of his new Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary in 1841, Libermann had discussed the possibility of incorporating his membership into the old Congregation of the Holy Ghost. In fact, when Libermann presented his own plans to Rome in 1840, he was bluntly told, "The Society of the Holy Ghost takes care of this work. You are not needed". (Koren, 1958, p. 97) Still, it was left to him to pull their chestnuts out of the fire. At the time of the merger, Libermann's Congregation was absorbed into the Old Congregation and he was elected the 11th Superior General. In the words of Fr. Henry Koren, "A young and vigorous branch had been grafted onto an aging tree." (Koren, p. 105) The rest of the story in broad outline is well known to you. From 1848 to the 1960's that revitalized tree grew and grew and spread its branches to the four corners of the earth.

Today, faced with our own merger, where might two aging Spiritan trees turn to find a vigorous Spiritan branch? Let us turn back the clock to the days of Libermann to discover how he made the old Spiritan tree flourish anew once again. All commentators upon the life of Libermann concur that he was blessed with an abundance of leadership qualities, but precisely what was the secret of his success when challenged to meld the old with the new? I would like to propose for our brief consideration what I consider to be a few qualities that account for his success.

First: His clarity and conviction of Mission. In a letter dated January 1842, Libermann wrote of the purpose of his new Congregation... "I did not want to say that we have any other aim beside the apostolate among the Negroes. This is our only aim at this time but, properly speaking, the object that we aim at ... is to work for the poorest, the most despised and the most neglected of souls." (Koren, 1963, p. 64) A year after the merger, these goals would echo in Libermann's Rule of 1849. We must make ourselves "the advocates, the supporters and the defenders of the weak and the little ones against all who oppress them." (SRL, 1987, p. 21) Today the need is not so much for a new mission statement, but to own and implement what we already possess. It is not a question of Mission and Identity for Mission is

Identity. If we do not embrace our Corporate Mission wholeheartedly, we are little more than individual frogs squatting on our own lily pads slowly croaking to death.

Second: His Flexibility or Availability to the Holy Spirit. As the Congregation grew and times changed, Libermann showed a profound openness to an expansion of his Mission's concrete embodiment. Before long he came to realize that many of the poor and abandoned were at his very doorstep in Europe. He began to minister to, and I quote him, "the working classes in general... seamen, soldiers, forced laborers, prisoners and beggars." This ministry was not to be confined to catechetics but include as well "their instruction in profane science and the improvement of their material condition". (Koren, 1958, pp. 126) In short order, he would extend the mission to the education of personnel to staff these new works. (p. 129). In response to strident objections from some confreres, he responded that it was even justified to withdraw men from the missions when deemed necessary for the total good of the Congregation. On Libermann's behalf, his secretary, Fr. Schwindenhammer, wrote at the time, "It is not enough to do and die, but we must do and keep alive to do again and to keep doing." (p. 129). Libermann fully grasped that imaginative rigor mortis was just a short Concorde flight away from institutional extinction.

Third: Tact. Surprisingly, the old Holy Ghost Fathers enthusiastically supported his new life-giving vision. He gives us a glimpse into the secret of his success when he wrote, after fully consulting with them at the time of the merger "We no longer have to fear any difficulty on the part of the old members of the Holy Ghost ... Our moderation, kindness, and confidence in them has won them over completely." (Koren, 1958, p. 106)

Fourth: Libermann manifested infinite patience and toleration for all who differed with him or even opposed him. One of the members of the old Holy Ghost Fathers, Fr. Gaultier, vehemently opposed the merger to the very end. Once the union had been completed, however, he climbed aboard and became a most loyal supporter. Lo and behold, Libermann made him his First Assistant. Libermann knew intuitively that coercion, intimidation, threats and marginalization of confreres are the death knell for a vital community life. All members must feel welcome, all must feel secure, all must feel respected, and all must feel at home. For him, solidarity and loyalty were two way streets.

Fifth: While Libermann was not oblivious of his own leadership gifts or of the need for a full human effort, he also realized that in the final count, when the chips are down, only one factor could determine the success of the Union. "God is all, man is nothing." Our efforts will bear fruit only if God builds the new Spiritan house. We should not be Pollyannaish and pretend that all is well. At times we can only hope, and when there are no clear signs for hope then we must hope against hope. To quote the words of the renowned Protestant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, "We must live in hope, for God's work on earth is never done."

REFERENCES

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