

**An abridged version of Chapter 4, 'Led by the Spirit' from *A Gentle Way to God*,**

**Alphonse Gilbert, C.S.Sp.**

**Translated from French by Myles Fay, C.S.Sp.**

It was the year 1831 and Francis Libermann was 29 years of age. He was told he would have to leave the seminary of St. Sulpice and look for a position elsewhere. His theological studies were completed satisfactorily enough, but he could not advance to the priesthood because of his health. "As for the world," he said, "I cannot go back to it. God, I hope, will provide for me ... I am happy to have no resources but God alone" (66). This approach disarmed the seminary council, who arranged to look after him "for as long as it pleased God." They transferred him to the nearby seminary of Issy-les-Molineaux where he was put at the bursar's disposal to act as a messenger, garden cleaner, wood polisher and provider of other small services.

In his new location, Francis began a series of multiple contacts with seminarians and directors of the seminary; the house-staff, including the door-keeper, his best disciple, and the sick in the infirmary, whose companionship he shared in his epileptic seizures. Bonds of friendship and then of trust were born from this network of relationships.

In the course of these years, Francis experienced the ever-increasing absolute control of the Holy Spirit over his life. His total surrender to God brought him imperceptibly to the total commitment of his person to the Person of the Holy Spirit. He invited many of his friends to have the same experience, teaching them the science and art of allowing oneself to be led by the Spirit. He spoke with the enthusiasm and conviction of one who sees, "as seeing him who is invisible" (Hebrews 11:27).

Francis was a mystic before everything else: he spoke from experience when he elaborated on the spiritual ways. His method was existential; that is why it remains relevant. He was obviously teaching others with firm assurance the path that led him to this openness to the Holy Spirit. Little by little, and always increasingly, he taught them "to walk under the Spirit's impulse."

### **The Fire of the Spirit**

The witnesses who testified about the first years of Francis's Christian life repeated without exception that he was a man who carried out small services in all circumstances, constantly available to others. It is not easy to be the messenger-boy of a big group of young men, among whom his infirmity made him stand out. What was remembered afterwards was his pleasantness and his smile.

Personal holiness was the starting point for Libermann's design to serve others. He used say that "the first thing, and most important of all, is your own sanctification." And he gave a comparison. "You have a stove in the room which is lit with the intention of heating everyone who happens to be in the room; he who lights it has that intention. Nevertheless the fire heats nothing but the stove itself at first. Once it is hot it heats the room. The God who is Father of us all wants us to love one another. For this to happen "he must give heat to yourself, and this fire of divine love that he wants to put within you will not be only for yourself, but is to be shared with others." (69).

Francis continues, "But you have to receive it for yourself first, this divine fire, before you can bring warmth to others ... I will continue the comparison. If the room was enlarged and filled with more people, and the ordinary moderate heat did not suffice to heat the room, would we leave the room unheated? On the contrary, we would have to put more fire in the stove. Then the stove, even if somewhat on the small side, could yet produce decent results. Do likewise. Pray the Master of the divine fire to put more fire into your souls. Be more fervent, more zealous, more filled with God, and you will be certain of helping others" (69-70).

"The best means seem to be these: great unity between the members, a unity of mind and heart. We must love one another affectionately and closely, so that we can share the graces and love of God that are in our heart. These will follow from the continual sincere prayers we say for one another" (70). Union with God empowers us to reach out in loving service to one another.

### **Openness of Mind and Heart**

**A** fundamental attitude for allowing the Holy Spirit to act freely is that of humility and trust. This attitude places us in dependence on God in serenity, cheerfulness, and freedom of spirit. "Try to keep your mind always free, cheerful and open ... This openness of mind and heart is indispensable for acquiring a true interior spirit. It is essential that you be open, simple and gentle with everyone ... Go your way cheerfully, simply, but without strain or inhibition, without a thought of being judged well or ill, of pleasing or displeasing, without wanting to appear important, to attract people's esteem or goodwill. Have God always in view, and your mind will enjoy that freedom. In the course of conversation, observe moderation, peace, and gentleness. Do not be too much centered on yourself. Forget yourself completely. In fact, every time you start thinking about yourself you will become complicated" (72).

“The idea is to become gradually passive under the overwhelming action of the Holy Spirit, with a passivity of the dynamic kind; this consists in collaborating with the all-powerful action of the Holy Spirit, who takes charge of operations. “This union is passive on our part. Giving us life by his Holy Spirit, God unites us with himself while we on our part do nothing but dispose ourselves and, being disposed, offer no resistance”(72).

### **Be at Peace in Yourself**

“This, then, is to be your whole line of action. Do not work agitatedly, do not make efforts to unite yourself more or less perfectly to God. The uniting of our soul with God is our Lord’s work, and not ours. The Spirit must work in our souls, more or less perfectly according to God’s plans for us and according to our fidelity in corresponding. Without him, all your work and effort will be useless, even harmful, because the more you labor to affect this union with God the more there will be of your own activity; and the more there is of your own activity the less there will be of the Holy Spirit’s activity. And yet he alone can bring about this union in its different degrees, while our own activity and efforts are worthless” (74).

“We do not see all this at first. We consider ourselves lukewarm or bad. Still, there must be no worrying on our part but always the intention of persevering. The light will come before long and the form of God will appear in our soul” (75).

### **Mind, Heart, and Spirit**

Francis outlines the respective roles of the Spirit of God, the soul and the human heart and mind with an extended metaphor. “The following may help you for your manner of acting in general. A ship has its sails and its rudder. The wind blows into the sail and makes the ship move in the desired direction. It advances by means of the sails and takes a general direction. Nevertheless, this direction would be too vague and could even put the ship astray. That is what the rudder is for; it steers the ship exactly in the direction it should take without going astray at all” (76).

“Your soul is the ship, your heart represents the sail, the Holy Spirit is the wind; he breathes into your will and the soul goes forward, forward to the end God destined for it. Your mind is the rudder that must prevent you from straying outside the straight line determined by the divine goodness, as could happen from the strength and liveliness given to your heart” (76).

Francis often repeated the conditions for this life in the Spirit: recollection and self-denial, in an atmosphere of gentleness, trust and peace. He defined recollection as a habit of presence to God and presence to oneself: presence to God practiced as an exercise in time of solitary prayer and as an act throughout the day; presence to self, which presupposes that a person remains habitually in charge of his reactions, of his natural violence; finally the Gospel radicalism of self-giving: "If you want to follow me, deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me" (Luke 9:23).

"By means of this perseverance in gentle patience, our soul becomes strengthened little by little in the service of God and relies on God alone, abstracting completely from itself in order to live in God and in order to surrender to divine guidance. This is the beginning of that loving hope which consists in a humble, peaceful, loving surrender into our Lord's hands, to whose care we leave ourselves and all our concerns. This hope is never confounded; it is made living by the divine charity poured forth into hearts by the Holy Spirit" (77). Francis's advice is clear. "Moderate your exterior activity in some small way so as to keep your soul in perfect stillness and remain all the time in tranquil interior attention to the grace of the Holy Spirit, who is within you" (78).

### **In the Power of the Spirit**

"How happy we are when we find ourselves under the divine Spirit's power, completely under the influence of Jesus's Spirit of love. Everything becomes love within us: all our actions, even the slightest movements of our soul, and still more all its deeper movements and activity; all is love. It is love for our God, before whom we never cease to fall prostrate in our nothingness; it is love for all human beings, without bitterness towards anyone or judgment of them. Our mind is calm, not worked up against people who hurt us, who thwart, persecute or torment us in any manner whatsoever. Good people and bad, people who think like us or not, nobody can take our mind from its repose in God or draw our displeasure, whether rightly or wrongly" (79).

"The same Holy Spirit who did great things in the saints is within you. He has made his dwelling there as in his sanctuary, in order to produce the same effects. Whether he will succeed depends on yourself. Maintain a calmness within, watch for the Spirit's grace and movements in order to let him act in all freedom within you. Shun every feeling and movement of self-love, whim, and self-satisfaction, everything that could become an obstacle. Let your desire be to live wholly by his life, faithful to his voice. Then you may be sure that he will work the greatest wonders of his grace within you" (82).

"Remain tranquil and peaceful in the presence of the Holy Spirit who wishes to inspire all your activity, interior and exterior, and all your hopes. Stay calm in God's presence, do nothing by your own

ever-agitated spirit. Bring it finally to silence before the one who resides in you and wishes to be everything for you” (82). The same Spirit who fills us with the love of God gives us great charity and a great understanding of human beings. The Holy Spirit empowers us to have for others the compassion God has for us. We are to place our trust in God’s Spirit at work in us. “Acknowledge your poverty and powerlessness. Look to God’s great mercy for everything. ‘The wind blows where it wills’ (John 3:8)” (85).

Francis composed this prayer to the Holy Spirit:

O most holy and adorable Spirit of Jesus.

Let me hear your gentle voice.

Refresh me with your precious inspiration.

O divine Spirit,

I wish to be before you like a light feather,

So that your breath may carry me where it will

And I may not offer it the least resistance (88).