

FRANCIS LIBERMANN

NOVENA

In preparation for 2 February 2018



Composed by the Spiritan Community of the Philippines

(Illustration : rice field in the Philippines - photo UNDP)

***“The missionary commits himself
to the Congregation only on condition
that he has a community life”
(Father Libermann)***

From 24 January to 1st February 2018

GATHERED AND BOUND BY THE SPIRIT

Spiritan Group of the Philippines

INTRODUCTION

In the next nine days, we are invited to reflect on the life of our Co-Founder, Venerable Father Libermann. We seek to learn what the Holy Spirit is willing to teach us through his life and teachings. We shall focus on the call of God to us as a Community vis-a-vis our ministry to the poor. We have our identity as a people called and gathered together by the Holy Spirit with the purpose of following and serving the one Master, Jesus. The reason therefore for our togetherness is divine and not just a human ideology. This fundamental background is at the core for our sharing, support and witness to the world.

Fr. Libermann is unequivocal about our call to community life together as he teaches us that; 'the Missionary commits himself to the Congregation only on the condition of having a community life'. It is the Holy Spirit who gathers, He is the one who creates and make fruitful his presence within us.

In the 21st century, we are faced with the temptation of individualism and we are presented with two options; whether to follow the standard of Jesus the caller to journey together as a community of faith or go our separate ways and live for our own ego and interest alone. As a Spiritan family, we resist the temptation to convenience or selfishness of individualism and we say with our founder; 'I am determined to work in the path that you have shown to me'. (Fr. Poullart des Places).

Fr. Libermann reminded us of our call to community all through his writings. For the next nine days of our Novena, we shall try to pray and reflect on this divine call to renew our zeal in community life in direct connection to our ministries. Our ministries are organized from the community, therefore, both the community and our ministries are intertwined and they both combine to make us who we are. Thus we ask, Why and for who are we in community?

DAY ONE: A COMMUNITY FOR HIM

The uniqueness of our community life is the fact that we are gathered together by Him and for Him. Our community life is not an end in itself; it must point to Jesus and bear fruits of love towards the poor. The Holy Spirit brought us all together as a community of his beloved disciples and He is therefore the center of our life in community and we must focus on Him as the Master. We must keep talking and looking on the Holy Spirit because when we talk about Him, we are referring to the breath of God breathing in us. We are like the tree planted beside the river, we blossom, prosper and bear fruits year in year out; we are ever fresh and green so long as we dwell within the freshness of the river. We shall cease having life in us once we go out of the living water, the Holy Spirit who is the refresher, the sanctifier of all our communities.

SPIRITUAL READING:

From the words of Fr. Libermann

“We are all worthless people, who have been brought together by the will of the Master, in whom lies all our hope. If we thought we were worth something, we would not accomplish very much. Paradoxically, now that we are nothing, have little, and are good for less, we can dream of doing something really worthwhile. This is because we do not rely on ourselves, but rather on him who is almighty. Do not be concerned about your weakness and poverty. It is when we are weak that the power and mercy of Jesus can really reveal themselves in us.” (To Mr. Briot, 1843, Spiritan Anthology, pp 261-262)

REFLECTION:

1. Do we feel the presence of Christ in our community today? If it is for Him, then love must be the motivation for everything.
2. Who or what has become the center of our community today? We have the temptation to focus on activities and the many apostolate, dedicating less time for prayer and brotherhood. Material needs or money could change our focus in the community.
3. Do we need to slow down a little? We may be too fast such that we could fall out of the stream.

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, you have called us together for your own purpose; to love you and to serve one another with the love you first poured out unconditionally to us. Open our hearts and engrave your love in our hearts, help us to follow the example of Father Libermann who did simple things with great love and care and inspired us to live for our brothers and sisters in community life. Amen.

OUR FATHER

HAIL MARY

GLORY BE

DAY TWO: A COMMUNITY OF PRAYER

Our Spiritan communities are the wellsprings of prayer and action. We feel constantly the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit who energizes us and teaches us how to pray beyond words that cannot be expressed. (Rom 8: 26). As we continue to face the fragilities and the uncertainties of today's many worries, the Holy spirit provides freshness to all those who are willing to call upon God through prayer life. Prayer is therefore the fabric of our lives in community and that is the only one thing necessary in a Spiritan community.

“Prayer is not what is done by us, but rather what is done by the Holy Spirit in us”. (Henri Nouwen). For all our missions and daily works, we remain in prayer, because through prayer, we become docile to surrender to the will of God in everything. Prayer is the most important pillar of our life and mission. By prayer, the Holy Spirit reveals to us the right direction of our mission; actually, the will of God is revealed to us in prayer. We must remember that our prayer is nourished by the word of God. It gives us access to the mystery of which we announce.

SPIRITUAL READING:

‘Pray always without ceasing’ (2Thes 5:17)

“When we remain attentive to the Spirit living in our hearts, we meet the Lord in all that makes up the fabric of our life. The essential thing is to live all day long in Practical union with God”. (Spiritan sisters, Our Spiritan life, N° 36).

REFLECTION:

1. How much time do you dedicate to your prayer every day?
2. Are you able to offer your work as a prayer to the Lord every day?
3. A community without a prayer life is bound to fail. Prayer is therefore not an option, it is our life style.

PRAYER:

O most holy and adorable Holy Spirit of Jesus, let me hear your gentle voice. Refresh me with your precious inspiration. O divine Spirit, I want to be like a light feather so that your breath may carry me to where it will and that I may not offer the least resistance to it. Amen. (Fr. Libermann, Commentary of St John, 3:8)

OUR FATHER

HAIL MARY

GLORY BE

DAY THREE: A COMMUNITY FOR THE SAKE OF THE POOR

Our religious communities must be the source of hope for the poorest of the poor. We are connected to the source of life, Jesus. We, in turn, become the well of hope from where the poor can drink. We follow the example of the first disciples who shared their resources, making sure that the poor can find hope and acceptance. A community united in one heart and one Soul! (Acts 4:32-35)

The Spiritan community at our lady of Fatima parish in Digkilaan, Iligan city Philippines is a community of very poor farmers who have no land, no water, no electricity and no good roads, etc. The Spiritans began working among them about 20 years ago and beyond preaching to them, we became the agents of change for the entire community; witnessing to them, offering hope and reconciliation. We have impacted this community through education and support for farmers. Today, we are sending more than seventy Children to school, from Elementary to college through our scholarship programs with our benefactors and our partners like *Enfant du Mekong*, McDonnell foundation and other local benefactors.

The Parish is the center for relief and evacuation at the event of any disaster such as the Muslim-Christian- conflicts in 2007, the ‘typhoon sendong’ in 2011 which took the lives of almost 200 people from our parish community. We still walk for more than 4 hours with our mass kits, crossing the rivers and climbing the mountains to offer the Holy masses for the poor farmers on the mountain sides. When people are sick, the Parish Priest will still have to find ways to move them to the City for medical assistance since there are no hospitals in the hinter lands. Here on this mission; we are all things to all men. (St. Paul). We face constant tensions with Muslim rebels here, and yet, our community is standing in here as the sign of hope. It is a community of the poor servants working for the poor.

SPIRITUAL READING:

From the words of Fr. Libermann :

“To preach the good news to the poor, that is our general goal. Nevertheless, the missions are the principal object we aim at, and in the missions we have chosen the most wretched and abandoned souls. Providence gave us our work for the Blacks whether in Africa or in the colonies; incontestably, these are the most wretched and abandoned populations down to our day. We would also desire to work in France for the salvation of souls, but still having the poor as principal goal, without abandoning, all the same, those who are not.” (N.D.,XIII, p. 170,1851)

REFLECTION:

1. As a community or an individual, what is your action plan to help the poor?
2. Are the poor able to come to seek hope in our community?
3. How can we transform the lives of the poor who come to us on a long term?

PRAYER: *The Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi*

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let us sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is discord, union;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy;
O Divine Master, Grant that we may not so

much seek
To be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

OUR FATHER

HAIL MARY

GLORY BE

DAY FOUR: A COMMUNITY FOR THE FREEDOM OF PRISONERS

The declaration of Jesus and the purpose of his mission in the Gospel of St. Luke 4:18-19 is at the core of the Spiritan vocation. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.... He has sent me to set the prisoners free...” We embrace those words of Jesus and we offer ourselves at the service of the prisoners. Many times in the Gospels, Jesus spoke about the prisoners revealing the power of God’s mercy and love even for those whom the world may have sentenced or condemn and therefore imprisoned for their offences. We see from Jesus that the prisoners are still God’s beloved children and their opportunity to make it to heaven is equal to that of the free.

In today’s world, each one of us is in prison in many other forms. Apart from being in the prison physically, our spiritual struggles and limitations, our weaknesses, our own environment and opinions also jail us from time to time. Both the main stream and social media create their own prison cells, the drive for money and the crave for material things also creates its own prison, etc. For all of these forms of imprisonment, Jesus has come to set us free and as and we must run to Him for hope. As Spiritans, we are the instruments in the hands of the Lord for the sake of our brothers and sisters.

Fr. Libermann was moved with the passion to set the black slaves free. He felt this call and used all the opportunities to liberate them and to bring them to Freedom.

In the Philippines, the Spiritan community in Iligan has served in the City prison as chaplains for more than seventeen years already. We offer the mass for them every week, we provide the sacraments to them, we create opportunities for counselling and guidance to them. Every prison you enter is over populated especially because of the government crackdown on the use of Illegal drugs like Marijuana, Shabu, etc. A lot of innocent people are also inside these walls, waiting for justice for years without any support.

Apart from helping them inside, we reach out to their children in their families. We are helping some of the children of the prisoners to go back to school and we provide encouragement to their families.

SPIRITUAL READING:

From the writings of Fr. Libermann:

‘I can do all things by the power of Christ who strengthen me’. (Phil. 4:13)

“If we should undertake only what is easy, what would have become of the Church? Saint Peter and Saint John would have continued fishing on the lake of Tiberias and Saint Paul would not have left Jerusalem. I can conceive that a man who considers himself important and relies on his own powers, should stop before obstacles ; but when our trust rests solely in our adorable Master, what difficulty need we fear? We will stop only when we are blocked by a wall. Then we wait with patience and confidence until there is a breach and resume our march as if nothing had happened. This is the way Saint Paul and the other apostles have acted.” (To Mr. Dupont, 1840, Spiritan Anthology, p 236)

REFLECTION:

1. Have you ever visited the prison near to your community? What can you concretely do to show your compassion to the prisoners?
2. What kind of prison do you find around your community and what are you doing to set people free?
3. Today, so many people are still being sold for money because of poverty and evil. Our communities must do their part to offer freedom.

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, by your death and resurrection, you have set us free. Show your compassion to all prisoners all over the world, especially those who no longer have any one to visit them. Sanctify their souls for the kingdom even if they have to be separated from other people. Heal us of our loneliness and deliver us from the prison of materialism. Amen.

OUR FATHER

HAIL MARY

GLORY BE

DAY FIVE: A COMMUNITY FOR THE HOMELESS AND THE DISPLACED

One of the most challenging situation around the world today is that of refugees and migrants moving from one place to another, displaced because of war and violence. In every continent of the world today, we meet homeless people and this is a new challenge for mission. According to the United Nations refugee agency, we have more than 362,000 refugees crossing to Europe in 2017 and about 3000 out of these are feared dead and drowned in the Mediterranean Sea.

Every day, they are people who must move out of their homes, seeking refuge, asylum, safety or survival. We have the challenge of health care, vulnerability of children and women, the emotional torture and hunger. What can we do as a community? “The simple truth is that refugees would not risk their lives on a journey so dangerous if they could thrive where they are”. (Melissa Fleming, UNHCR).

In the Philippines, precisely in Iligan city where the Spiritans call their home, we are facing a lot of challenges of welcoming displaced people due to the violence caused by terrorism. On the 17th of May, 2017, a war broke out in Marawi city between the Maute Islamic Terrorist group and the Philippine Army. Marawi city is only about 45kilometers from Iligan City. More than 1000 people were killed in this war. More than 300,000 refugees and displaced people have to run to Iligan under some very strange and painful situations.

As Spiritans, we became part of their story. We did our part in visiting the evacuation centers and reaching out by providing water and food for the victims. As of November 2017, the war is partly over in Marawi, but the refugees, mainly Muslims are still stranded in Iligan with many of them having no place to go back to.

Our Spiritan community must be a place where the homeless can find hope. We are very grateful to some Spiritan Communities in Europe who have also been welcoming refugees from Syria, trying to offer solidarity and hope.

SPIRITUAL READING:

From the Gospel of Mat. 25: 35-40.

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Then the righteous will answer him, Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in Prison and visited you? And the king will answer them, truly I tell you, just as you did to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.

REFLECTION

1. Do you have some homeless people around your community?
2. How can we become the face of home; the face of Jesus to them?
3. Some people around you may have a very big house, but very lonely and miserable. How can you reach out to them?

PRAYER

Forgive us our sins oh Lord for the many times that we have neglected you in the homeless people around our community. Forgive us for the many times we have to justify and rationalize about our lack of generosity. Open our hearts to be generous, hospitable to our brothers and sisters. Amen.

OUR FATHER

HAIL MARY

GLORY BE

DAY SIX: A COMMUNITY THAT HEALS THE SICK AND THE WEAK

On this sixth day of our Novena, we think about the sick in our society and how our Spiritan communities interact with them, offering our own lives as instruments of healing to the rest of our brothers and sisters. We know that sickness today is not just the physical disabilities, but it also includes the many forms of sicknesses from which the world is seeking for healing.

Our venerable Father Libermann had to face the struggle of ill health in his life time and from him we learn how to direct the sick to trusting the Lord even in the midst of despair that is caused by sufferings. Jesus knows what the human condition and sufferings in sickness looks like and so He mandated us to become healers of the world. In Matthew 10:18 He instructed us to heal the sick. In His own time on earth, He showed his compassion by healing the sick especially the most hopeless cases of sickness and death. In John Chapter 9, we saw Jesus healing Bartimaeus and many other numerous testimonies of his healing Mercy.

In our communities in Iligan and Mactan-Cebu, Philippines, we have been working for the sick in two hospitals; Mercy Community Hospital and Mactan Doctor's Hospitals. These two hospitals are opportunities through which we offer healing and care for the sick. At the Holy Spirit Shrine in Pindugangan-Iligan City, we offer the Holy Mass for the sick every 3rd Thursday of the month and people come from around the city to seek God's healing and Mercy.

The most vulnerable time in our lives are when we are sick; when we lose all our securities due to weakness. Our communities must therefore be a place of healing and peace. First, we must heal among ourselves, pick up confreres who are wounded and suffering, support the broken hearted around us, comfort those who are mourning and offer support to the weak.

SPIRITUAL READING:

From the writings of Fr. Libermann:

"I was subject to that sort of sickness in my young days, very violently at that. What did me most harm was the fear, the inquietude, the precautions. It is essential to shake off these movements, these agitations of soul, to distract attention from yourself at those moments, not to let yourself become preoccupied by a nervous anguish of heart, but to take forceful action against these sentiments and place yourself in great indifference before God, to master the hurt and not mastered by it. Thus disposed, you will act as if you had never suffered trials. I am telling you how I proceeded since I began to give myself to the good God. I followed this line in a spirit of faith and in the desire to please God, without a thought of recuperating my heart by this means, because I never suspected that this way of acting could be useful. In effect, it played a large part of my cure." (N.D., VII, p. 238, 1845)

REFLECTION:

1. Our community must be a healing community; healing by forgiveness and support for one another. Is your community a healing community or a sick community
2. How can we become the instruments of healing both for our confreres and the weak around our community?
3. Do you have some sick people around you? How much do you care for them?

PRAYER:

Heal us oh Lord and refresh our lives with hope and grace. Heal us of our pride and selfishness that we can share more with the poor. Heal us of anxieties and the chase of material things that we may be able to share our time with the poor and sick. Fill us with compassion that we may be your mercy to the world. Amen.

OUR FATHER

HAIL MARY

GLORY BE

DAY SEVEN: A COMMUNITY FOR RELIGIOUS AND INTER PERSONAL DIALOGUE

Today, we intend to reflect on our call to community life as essentially a place of dialogue of religion and interpersonal relationships. More than before, religion has become the highest cause for disagreement, war and violence in our world. The claim and the clinging to our personal religious views has generated conflicts, attacks, disunity and pain in our world. You may begin to question; do we really need religion? Why has it become our reason to fight rather than a reason for peaceful co-existence?

In the Philippines we have more than four different rebel groups causing deaths and destruction of lives because their religious ideologies. The most recent is the Maute Group which has led to war and the deaths of more than 1000 people in Marawi City.

We are familiar with all the terrible attacks in Europe and around the world in the name of ISIS and religious believes. We must condemn and reflect on what to do to save our world from this terrible trend.

The Spiritan Community in Digkilaan, Iligan City is located among a Muslim majority population. We have been involved in dialogue with the Muslims, the tribal groups like the Lumads, the Higaonons and the Cebuano Christians. This is the most fragile Spiritan mission in the Philippines, it is partly the safe havens for many Muslim rebels. We are constantly in dialogue with these rebels as we stand in their midst as the instrument of peace.

After the natural disaster called Typhoon Sendong in 2011, the Spiritans got involved in helping both the Muslims and the Christians as the Parish became the automatic evacuation center for the majority of the victims. As a way of responding to the calamity, we build more than 150 temporal houses for Muslim victims and we were also able support in building of four mosques for the Muslims after getting some approval from the local bishop.

That act of building houses for them and also building the mosque for them was the most significant dialogue of action that touched the heart of many Muslims in Digkilaan. The Muslims were surprised and some of them received Jesus through the works of love that they see us do. The greatest way to work for dialogue is by action of love and peace. Our communities must be a place where love is made practical and in that way, we can build peace and harmony among larger communities.

SPIRITUAL READING:

From the words of the Catholic Bishop Conference of the Philippines on War in Marawi City, June, 2017.

“Turn from Evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it” (Ps. 34:14)

The essence of every true religion is love. We therefore believe that the war in Marawi is not religious. We have heard and read truly stunning stories of how Muslims have protected and helped Christians to escape from almost certain death. Even now Christians are assisting thousands of Muslims who have fled from Marawi for safety in Iligan City and other parts of the Country. These are indisputable signs that there is no religious war.

For this reason as Catholic religious leaders we condemn in the strongest terms possible, as did Islamic religious scholars in Mindanao, the violent extremist Maute group in Marawi. Its leaders

and members have pledged allegiance to ISIS. They have contradicted the fundamental tenets of Islam by abducting and hostageing, maiming and killing the innocent.

Join us then, beloved people of good will, in conducting intra-faith dialogue among our respective co-religionists so that our various faiths may not be exploited and abused for the sake of terrorism or violent extremism. Let parents, schools, churches and mosques ensure that none may be lured by the recruitment efforts of terrorists. Let us teach the young and the old that our faiths are meant for peace. No religion teaches the killing of innocent people, simply because they belong to another religion.

Join us and let us continue the inter-religious dialogue called for by hundreds of Islamic leaders throughout the world. The basis for peace and understanding already exists. It is part of the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God and love of neighbor. This is the commandment of God in Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

Maryam, the mother of Jesus, is praised and honored in the Qur'an and by many Christians. Catholics believe that 100 years ago she appeared to three children in the village of Fatima, which is the very name of the daughter of the prophet Muhammad. To the prayers of Maryam, we commend our efforts for peace and harmony between peoples of different faiths.

REFLECTIONS:

Does God need us to fight with guns and trucks for His glory here on earth? How can our community be a part of dialogue of love and peace with people of other faith, colour and race?

PRAYER:

Grant that we may all become lovers of peace; making peace at every opportunity of life. Console all those who have lost their loved ones because of violence of war and help us to realize that we gain nothing by fighting each other. May those who plan evil realize that they are many good people who will fight them for the good will always prevail over the evil. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

OUR FATHER

HAIL MARY

GLORY BE

DAY EIGHT: A COMMUNITY FOR INTER-CULTURAL RENEWAL AND GROWTH

The beauty of the Spiritan Community from the start is the sharing and diversity that is available through our internationality. Our communities are therefore, a place of discovery, learning, growth, newness and appreciation of the beauty of life together. We see beauty in every culture and seek to understand each culture as an aspect of God's love. The authentic Spiritan community is constructed through a life of intercultural and international fraternity.

More and more, our cultural values are yearning for harmony and peaceful co-existence and the Spiritan communities must be an agent of this experience. In the Spiritan mission in the Philippines, we are 19 confreres, originating from 10 countries. Our mix of colors, languages, cultures, togetherness, etc are all a witness to the unity and the power of the Holy Spirit among us. Every day we learn something new from each other, opening our hearts to the guidance of the Spirit among us.

SPIRITUAL READING:

“Fraternal life always implies attention and sharing, common reflection, mutual help and friendship. Whether prayer or recreation, apostolic work or ongoing formation, refresher courses, hospitality or sharing are concerned, we always try to plan everything together and to help each other.” (Spiritans, Our Spiritan life, N° 21).

REFLECTION:

1. Are you open to other people's culture or we believe our own culture must be the standard in the community?
2. Are we patient with our brothers and sisters when their opinion does not agree with ours?

PRAYERS:

You have made all cultures oh Lord and all we call our differences are just but your gifts to diversify our communities. Help us to appreciate one another genuinely in our communities and bless us with the large heart for one another through Christ our Lord, Amen.

OUR FATHER

HAIL MARY

GLORY BE

DAY NINE: A COMMUNITY TOWARDS THE ESCHATOLOGICAL 'COMMUNITY'

On this last day of our reflection on community life, it is important to pray and meditate on the greatest goal of our togetherness. We are gathered by the Holy Spirit and for the Holy Spirit and nothing compares to the glory which we look forward to; the eschatological community which God has promised to all who love Him. St. Paul reminded us in Romans 8:18 that nothings compare to the glory that will be revealed and this is very much on our mind. The Second Vatican Council articulated this direction of the Church when it says: The Church is 'already' and 'not yet', journeying on a pilgrimage towards the father. The Church, and the community is therefore not an end in itself, but it exists always and only for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Our Spiritan communities are communities of hope, transforming the word with love through the power of the Holy Spirit that dwells within us. We must not be so pre-occupied with the issues of this present life such that we ignore the 'end' of our journey. We must lead people to set their eyes on this direction of our faith.

SPIRITUAL READING:

From the Gospel of John 14: 1-4

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God and believe also in Me. In My Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

REFLECTION:

1. Community life is beauty. Its diversity is a gift to everyone to benefit, especially when it is for Him. Do you perceive this beauty in your community?
2. When we live well in our community, we feel the kingdom of God fully alive. Is your community a kingdom of love?

PRAYER:

Thank you Lord for the joy and encouragement we find in our community life together. Help us to see you in every member of our community that we may love without counting the cost. Grant us the faith and trust of Fr. Libermann that we may be totally in your hands. We make our prayers through Christ our Lord. Amen.

OUR FATHER

HAIL MARY

GLORY BE

