

Return to Lourdes, 1868-1870

The desert will blossom like the lily'. Miraculous cure at Lourdes.

We remember that Hermann had to abandon his hope of, living in the Pyrenean desert with great regret in 1858. Fr Dominic, the Superior General, was anxious to get the desert house established with regular observance and this came about in 1867. Now in 1868 after a visit to the desert house, Fr Dominic gave Hermann permission to reside there. Hermann wrote to his nephew.

My dear George,

Today I come to say goodbye to you, until next Lent, because Our Lord is calling me into solitude. For a long time Fr Provincial has promised me this favour. In the desert there is no correspondence and no visits, even those from close relatives and friends. I am looking forward to my stay there as in the antechamber of heaven.

However, he knew there might be obstacles:

I know that, with the exception of the Provincial, every attempt will be made to keep me at Brousey and to give me other work to do in the province. But I know I have made up my mind to try as hard as I can within reason to achieve my purpose, and I will ask Our Lady and St Joseph to make me successful. If I do succeed you will not receive any more letters from me, so if you see me writing you will know I have failed!

And just before leaving he wrote to a colleague in Paris:

Dear Father,

You asked me to send you a line before leaving for the promised land. I can only say that I feel great joy as I approach the place of my rest. As you say, this period will be decisive for me. Our Lord awaits me there to mould me according to his will, and if I leave myself flexible in his divine hand, I shall at last become, what I have for a long time wanted to be, a son of St Teresa,

and conformed to the image of the son of God crucified by love. O happy solitude! Yes the happiness found in solitude. . .

So Hermann was eventually on his way to Tarasteix to stay. As the hermit drew near the bells rang out to welcome him. Candles were lit and the *Veni Creator* sung, as Hermann prostrated himself in the middle of the choir. Then the ritual question was asked:

What have you come to do in the desert?

Hermann replied:

Reverend fathers and brothers,

I am searching for Jesus. Since my conversion I have not looked for anything else, or wanted anything else but him. I have looked for him among the great and the little, always trying to make him known and loved. And I have not found him anywhere. I have only succeeded in making him known and loved by a very few people, compared to what I would have wished. This is why you see me here today among you, with my wish to be one of you. I hope you will help me by your prayers and example to find at last him whom my soul loves.

The Carmelite desert is constructed like a Carthusian monastery. The desert at Tarasteix was designed for about twenty people. The main building consisted of a church, a sacristy and a chapter room. There were twenty separate apartments, each containing four rooms and a garden which made up the dwelling area for each hermit. All these buildings open on to a cloister. Of the four rooms, one is an oratory and one a workshop. Silence is strictly observed in the desert and it is not permitted to break it, except to speak to the superior. In his workshop Hermann would have occupied himself with carpentry and also cultivated the little garden. Each of the apartments were completely cut off from its neighbour. Night office was recited in the church from midnight until 2 p.m. that being part of eight hours in all of liturgical praise.

Hermann's stay in the desert began in the month of May when nature was awakening.

Even within the desert complex, there were additional hermitages - further away, after the manner of the old anchorholds. These were used by the friars during Advent and Lent. Each of these was built according to the custom in the Pyrenees of different shaped stones placed in such a way as to resemble a fern leaf. Here the Carmelite hermit was completely on his own and cut off from even the minimum contact with his brother-

in normal desert life. At the times when the whole community assembled each of the hermits rang a bell in his own hermitage so as to synchronise with the main services.

Hermann, with the permission of the Prior, composed some motets during his time at Tarasteix entitled, *Thabor*. He had to do so without any instrumental resources which were not available there. One of these motets was entitled:

A Little Flower at the door of the Tabernacle.¹

Between two cold barriers there grew a little plant
Which brightened the tedium of the prisoner
who cultivated it with love.
And in exchange for his care
he saw the humble plant
Emit with all its energy the fragrance
Of its flowers.

Ah, divine master
within the tabernacle
a prisoner of love
For eighteen hundred years
In spite of our coldness, by a constant miracle
You have made your dwelling place with us.
And there more neglected, more lonely still
Than the poor captive whose loneliness I lament

Your tenderness implores from your faithless children
The hearts which they refuse to give you.
As they abandon you o God of my heart
I will be for you my Jesus
Your humble little flower.
And tell me how to please you as a little flower.
Within your hands may I forget myself forever.

The accompaniment of this melody is restrained. A succession of arpeggios suggests supplication.

Then there is a divine response and the music changes - 'Ardente maestoso'. The melody passes from minor to major suggesting strength and affirmation.

Jesus Speaks.
Indeed it is in faith, in naked faith
That my hand has planted this little flower
Which will come to me in solitude unknown to all.
It will have no other sun except a gaze from my heart.

In place of root in this frail flower
I wish to see hope in me which never fails
Infinite hope in my goodness,
The trust of a child who knows that he is loved.
And then its fruit will be a quality so pure
Which gazes only on God on earth as in heaven,
Which has eyes for no one else
Which turns to me for the fulfilment of its desires.

And so my plans being realised It will have
deserved the richest gifts I have. On my sacred
heart I will graft this lowly plant And I will be
happy to unite it to myself.

Autumn succeeded the fine summer days.

On 1 October his nephew George received a letter from Tarasteix Hermann mentioned the fact that he was having trouble with his eye-although otherwise everything was going fine. This was a bad omen for life in the desert with the onset of winter and indeed his health deteriorated At this turn of events, Hermann looked with confidence to Our Lady o: Lourdes. For nearly ten years now healings were being reported from the grotto. And so Hermann set out as a pilgrim for the grotto. This is how Hermann himself reported his visit in a letter to the members of the Confraternity of Thanksgiving.

Bagnères-de-Bigorre.

November 6th 1868.

My dear friends in Jesus Christ,

I have just received a fresh token of Our Lady's tender love for her childrer. and I am really happy to tell you about it. Since last year my sight wa-growing weaker due to fatigue. I spent the last six months in that lovely solitude of the desert in the Carmel at Tarasteix. There I had an unexpectec attack of ophthalmia and I was advised to go to Bordeaux to consult ,, specialist. About a month before that I was banned from reading. The specialist thoroughly examined my eyes and found them in a bad state --.:

was a complicated case. I was threatened with glaucoma and the loss of my sight. The doctor said inflammation was inevitable and I would have to undergo an operation to excise the iris - an operation pioneered by Dr Greaffe of Berlin, the same man who treated my brother Louis. When I left Bordeaux I had to wear dark glasses with biconvex lenses, a green eyeshade and take other precautions as well... Any light was unbearable, even that of a candle... It was very painful to try to read anything. At this point someone suggested that I make a novena to Our Lady of Lourdes, who had already-cured several people of blindness. This suggestion appealed to me and all the more since I did not look forward to an operation, which in any event might not be successful. I recalled that it was twenty two years since Our Lady had obtained for me from the Lord of the Eucharist, a cure far more important than that of my bodily eyes... The novena began on 24 October, the feast of St Raphael who had cured Tobiah of his blindness. I bathed my eyes every day in water brought from the miraculous grotto, and I prayed to my immaculate mother as did a lot of other people also. On the sixth day of the novena I walked from our house in Bagnères to Lourdes as I thought this was the best -way to do the pilgrimage. In fact already at Bagnères I felt an improvement in my eyes each day of the novena as soon as the Lourdes water touched them. I even made a point of checking this improvement through the ophthalmoscope, so that the doctor could see that the congestion of the visual organs was gradually diminishing - and I used nothing but Lourdes water. Finally, the last day, which was the feast of All Saints. I arrived at the grotto itself close to the spring; my pain was gone as well as all the symptoms of the illness. Since that day I have been able to read and write as much as I like, without glasses and •without precautions, without effort and without fatigue. I can look at the sun or at gas-light or candle-light without feeling the slightest discomfort... and I have got my greatest wish - to continue my life as a hermit at our desert. So, I am completely and totally cured! It is my inmost conviction that this cure is a miracle due to the intercession of Our Blessed Lady. So for that reason I need to proclaim in public, as much as I can, the goodness of the heart of Man.' I ask all of you who love our dear mother to thank God for me and I entreat all of you who are suffering to go to her with full confidence because no one has ever invoked her in vain.

Medical science confirmed Hermann's inmost conviction that he was miraculously cured at Lourdes. Here is what Dr Boissarie said:

Among the events -which took place between 1868 and 1871, four have caught my attention particularly. One of the first cures to be published in the Annals of Lourdes² is that of Fr Hermann. Quite ill, he went to Bordeaux to consult a well-known specialist who formally diagnosed the presence of

glaucoma and proposed the excision of the iris. On his return from Bordeaux the illness deteriorated every day...

Dr Boissarie repeats the train of events mentioned by Hermann himself and concludes:

We are not accustomed to cures as complete and instantaneous as this. They are quite outside the rules and traditions of our art. For my own part I don't know how to contest or interpret this happening.

On 12 November Hermann returned to Lourdes to offer a mass of thanksgiving there. The annals of Lourdes mentions this private ceremony:

There were only a few people there. Very few in the town knew that F. Hermann was there. But he wished to express his very deep gratitude. 'What shall I render to the Lord' he asked, and then invited the people to help him pay his debt. He was very emotional and did not try to hide it. He expressed it eloquently making us share his gratitude with him. He was like one of the people Our Lord cured and who went out among the crowd singing his praises.

In a letter dated 22 November addressed to the Countess of Villeneuve he said:

I could write volumes to you describing all the details of my cure, showing how supernatural it was, and ordained by God to proclaim the power and goodness of his revered mother.

Hermann returned then to his 'desert' life. On 6 January 1869 he wrote to his sister:

I believe that with God's help I shall eventually become a contemplative. Our Lord is favouring me to this end. May the eyes of everyone be opened to see where happiness is really to be found.

And in another letter he wrote:

I am very happy to live this contemplative life. It is very clear to me that God-company and conversation are to be preferred much more to that of human beings and here one is always free to enjoy them.

From the desert he wrote to a friend who was a nun:

Help me to thank our loving master and to return him love for love. One day you said to me in the parlour - 'How much the Lord loves you!' I never appreciated these words as much as *I do now*. *I didn't realise that the spouse of souls chose mine specially*. But now for some time, whenever I have th-

experience of the Lord's love, your words come back to me and I realise that you already have an intimation of what Our Lord plans to do for me. I can't help feeling that you were right. I protest deep down, 'O Jesus how you love me, but what do you see in me? Nothing but weakness and unfaithfulness and yet you are content to favour me so much. I have these experiences, normally when I am not even thinking of God but am busy reading or writing or working in the sacristy. Then whether I wish to or not I have to stop what I am doing. If I don't I feel overwhelmed - if reading my eyes close involuntarily - until I go before the blessed sacrament on my knees, and abandon myself to God. It is impossible to resist the torrents of delight that fall on me or the gentle fire that penetrates my heart. I sometimes remain there for hours in keen delight and the hours pass like minutes.

Hermann wrote to his nephew George in October 1869: Could I ask you to cut out all the passages dealing with the Council in *L'Univers*. and send them to me? It is important for me to be in touch with a movement like that³.

Again he wrote to Cyrille de Bengue:

St Teresa's children must take part in this Council by a life of prayer and sacrifice. St Teresa said that we must support the church in this way. to obtain from God light and strength for those who lead us in faith. So you see that, without going to Rome, you and I can take part in the work of the council.. and if we offer ourselves singlemindedly to God in the fire of his love. we are doing more for God than some of those forceful prelates near you who try to give lessons to the Fathers of the Council in advance. Here I don't have much news, but I did hear of the trouble some people were trying to stir up on the eve of the Council.

In another letter to George he wrote:

We must continue to pray hard for the Council. The Holy Spirit has promised his assistance, but by prayer the light of truth may come to a particular Council so that certain controversial questions may be unravelled and that the weak may know what a Catholic ought to believe, and the totality of revealed truth is not diminished.

Hermann had no sympathy with those who were 'stirring things up' and he remarked:

The Galileans cut a sad figure just now and our Holy Father preaches humility on every occasion. May we obtain, and always possess this lovely and precious quality.

Hermann was anxious that eucharistic devotion might be propagated at all times and he makes a request of M. de. Benque to tell the bishops

about nocturnal adoration so that it might spread from France throughout the whole world.

Hermann Cohen seems to have had some premonition of his early death. In the course of a walk at the beginning of the year 1870, he said emphatically to the brother with him:

I feel that God has called me here to the desert to prepare me for my death. If you only knew how, for some time now, he has been detaching me from everything.

On 28 October 1869, he confided to someone in a letter:

The good master, the lover of our souls, wants to possess my heart for himself alone and not only my heart, but also my memory, my mind, my thoughts and my attention. He does not want me to initiate anything, he does not want me to work in his service by preaching or other enterprises. He wishes me to give myself and remain hidden, silent, forgotten, so that having been in some way a public figure with acclaim from a lot of people, I should now retire into obscurity through self-effacement, and disappear as though I were dead so that my life may remain hidden in God with Jesus Christ. I have never felt called as clearly as this. I enjoy great peace doing this though by nature I am expansive and given to continual activity.

At the Chapter in May 1870 Hermann was elected First Assistant of the Province of Aquitaine. He was also appointed Novice Master which meant he would be based at Broussey. However, Hermann in a short time requested permission to return to the Desert and this request was granted. He was even assigned there 'for life'! But as things turned out he was never to benefit from this concession. Within two months of his arrival at Broussey war broke out between France and Germany, that is between his native country and the country of his adoption. He stayed on at Broussey for a while, until the battle of Sedan which was the end of the Napoleonic regime, and the founding of the Third Republic. Religious persecution followed. The Priory at Agen was destroyed and that at Lyon was looted and the Carmelites were evicted - some of them imprisoned. This was naturally a great blow to Hermann who had done so much to establish it. He knew he would have to leave France and he was given some final days of quiet at Tarasteix. There is a valuable comment extracted from the famous scholar Fr Benedict Zimmermann from the Kensington Priory. In London where we made our noviciate, Fr Hermann's memory is still alive. Two of our brothers lived with him in the desert (Tarasteix) and they are never tired of telling us about him⁴.

¹ Literally, The Divine Prisoner's Little Flower (Knox). Here again we have a clear spiritual link with Hermann Cohen and Therese of Lisieux. Therese mentions a picture prayer card she had on this theme, though she does not quote the hymn. The sentiments of the hymn were very much her own however and indeed in popular devotion she has been bestknown as the Little Flower. (Autobiography, Chapter 10.)

² Annales de N. D. de Lourdes, November 1868.

³ Vatican Council I opened on 8 December 1869.

⁴ Religious were expelled from monasteries in France at the end of the nineteenth century. Tarasteix fell into utter ruin and decay. It was used as a prisoner of war camp for three thousand German soldiers during the great war. It became a restaurant for some time in the Fifties. A French priest, Fr Jean-Claude Mercier came to Tarasteix in 1977 and began the restoration of the monastery. It is now opened as a retreat and prayer centre for young and old under the title of The Abbey of Our Lady of Hope. Truly the desert has blossomed again! It would indeed be fitting if pilgrims to Lourdes were to include a visit to this holy place on their itinerary, to recall the close links between the original founder of the monastery Hermann Cohen and Bernadette of Lourdes.