

Chaplain at Spandau, 1870-1871

After leaving the desert house, Hermann spent some time at the Carmelite Priory of Bagnères-de-Bigorre. From there he went to the priory at Carcassonne. Then he left for Switzerland. The war was now raging and Hermann was on the run. Bishop de la Boullerie mentions the 'double crime of being a friar and a German!' He reached Grenoble where he was physically attacked, being taken for a spy. Eventually he reached the safety of Geneva. From there he went to Montreux, a lakeside city popular with tourists. After the revolution of September 4th many refugees poured in - they were fleeing both from the Germans and from the revolutionaries. Hermann was asked by the Bishop of Geneva and Fribourg to care for the spiritual needs of these refugees. So on October 7th he opened a little chapel to cater for the group.

Then later on in the month of November the Bishop sent for Hermann again. The French prisoners needed a chaplain, but the Prussian government would not give them a French priest. Hermann received permission from his superiors to comply - at the same time as his permission to retire to the desert at Tarasteix came through! But instead Hermann had to leave for Berlin which he did on the 24 November, the old feast of St John of the Cross. He wrote to his sister:

I shall say mass for George on November 24th, the Feast of our father St John of the Cross. On that day I am leaving to minister to the French prisoners interned in Germany. French priests who wished to go were refused permits. I felt I could not refuse this mission, since Jesus says to those he rejects, 'I was in prison and you did not visit me.' People think I am suited to the work because I have relatives in Germany. So I am setting out under the protection of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. I am looking forward to bringing some consolation to these prisoners who are in such great need.

When he left Montreux he made this prophetic statement, 'Germany will be my grave'.

When Hermann arrived in Berlin, he was given the chaplaincy of

Spandau, fourteen kilometers from the capital. As well as ministering to their spiritual needs, Hermann did not overlook their material one? either. He would arrive at the camp armed with cases of clothes and linen which he distributed to those in need during the bitter winter. Again he writes to his sister:

I am at Spandau where you made your first communion in the sacristy. I vest in this sacristy every day to say mass and to preach to the French prisoners. I have been appointed chaplain to the five thousand three hundred prisoners of war here. About five hundred of them are ill with typhus and dysentery. About four hundred attend mass every day and I preach to them. . Then I visit the hospital to minister to the sick and in the afternoon I visit the barracks to see those who are well. Pray earnestly for their conversion - many of the healthy have not been to confession yet.

On 12 December he wrote to his sister-in-law:

The prisoners are beginning to ask for confession. This evening I had eight in my room. You see the Lord gives me plenty to do! I have never had such a vast harvest from which to win people to Christ.

He wrote to her again on 22 December:

The prisoners besiege me from eight o'clock in the morning until evening and I try to serve them and they make use of me! They are allowed to come to the presbytery. I must say they are grateful for my devotion to them...

He wrote to another friend:

I have received no answer to the fourteen letters I sent to France so I presume they have been confiscated, although there was nothing political in them. But as I receive letters from Geneva very regularly, I am asking you if you will be so kind as to take care of my correspondence. I enclose stamps for 4,80 francs...

It is certain that Hermann must have felt isolated in Germany, cut off as he was from France where his sister and much-loved nephew lived, as well as his Carmelite brothers and many friends. But he did not complain. A last fragment of a letter from Hermann has survived. It was addressed to either George or his mother but was found in George's papers. George has noted on it:

N.B. End of a letter written on 11 December in Spandau, twenty days before his death.

Let us love Jesus more every day!
Fr Augustin

An unworthy sinner who wishes to be converted for the new year that⁹⁹ beginning. Amen.

In his situation here Hermann's health deteriorated. He never mentions the tiring mornings in the bitterly cold church at Spandau, saying mass and hearing the confessions of about fifty prisoners.

George wrote to him on 8 January, three days after Bismarck had ordered the bombing of Paris:

If Prussia believes it can demoralise our people by the despicable bombing of women and children - the first time in history this has been done - it is much mistaken. In spite of the 396 victims, the courage of the Parisians, men women and children is admirable and indomitable.

We have an account of Hermann's last labours from a Capuchin priest who met him in Berlin at this time, where he was shopping for clothes for his prisoners:

I spent a lot of time with him that day... I found him old and worn and very pale. I also noticed an unhealthy looking spot on his left hand which seemed to be the result of contagion in the hospital. I went to visit him again in the evening in his room in the presbytery of St Hedwig¹ where he used to stay when he came to Berlin. As he spoke to others present I studied his face and I became convinced that he had come to the end of his laborious career...

This intuition was only too well justified. On 9 January Fr Hermann contracted smallpox while anointing two of its victims. The family believed afterwards that he did not have with him the spatula with which he usually anointed the sick. He had a scratch on his finger through which he contracted the disease².

Fr de la Billerie (the Capuchin) tells us:

On Friday 13th Fr Hermann was ill. We went to his room and his eldest brother Albert had come from Montreux. He was being looked after by a Sister of Charity. 'Well Father, I need you', he said to me. 'I have smallpox and I shall be in bed for three or four weeks. I shall be unhappy if the work I have begun is not continued. Besides the Lord can take me. You will be there to take my place.' 'Father', I said, 'I hope God will leave you still longer in your ministry'. But he looked at his crucifix and said, 'No, I don't think so, I hope the Lord will take me this time.'

On 15 January he got worse and after a seizure, the parish priest of Spandau decided to give him the last rites. Hermann accepted them with joy and peace which impressed everyone present. Then he renewed his Carmelite vows in order to die as a brother of the Virgin Mary. He joined

in the *Te Deum*, the *Salve Regina* and the *De Profundis*. Then he saw his brothers for the last time and asked Louis to see that he was buried in the vaults of the Cathedral of St Hedwig in Berlin. Two days later Hermann grew worse but hung on. On January 19th the Sister asked if he wished for a confessor: Hermann replied, 'so I am going to die. May God's holy will be done, besides if I were cured I would have to witness distressful things.'

Hermann's last hours do remind us of what St John of the Cross wrote in his *Spiritual Canticle*:

Death cannot be bitter to the soul who loves, who finds in her all sweetness, delights of love. The soul looks upon death as her friend and spouse, and thinking of her, rejoices as on the day of her espousals. She desires the day and hour when death will come, more than the kings of this earth desire their kingdoms³.

After giving a last blessing to his attendants, Hermann said: 'And now oh my God, into your hands I commend my spirit.'

Hermann survived the night and next morning at about 10 o'clock he asked the sister to join him in singing the *Salve Regina*.

'After this our exile, show to us the blessed fruit of your womb, Jesus. There can be no doubt that as the Vincentian sister finished the *Salve Regina* alone, Our Lady had heard the prayer to the end and had shown to Hermann in heaven the blessed fruit of her womb, no longer hidden under the eucharistic veil, but in the full beauty of his humanity risen and glorious, in that happy reality of face to face.

Hermann Cohen was buried according to his wishes in the cathedral of St Hedwig, Berlin. After the war his remains, together with others who had been buried in the bombed cathedral, were reinterred in the city municipal cemetery in East Berlin. With the recent reunification of Germany there will be easy access to Hermann's grave.

I would like to complete this account of Hermann Cohen's life and message with these words from a fellow French Carmelite:

Let us endorse the wish to see Fr Hermann's beatification introduced. For us his holiness is beyond doubt and his canonisation highly desirable at the present time. Fr Joseph a St Marie OCD. (Pensee Catholique 1982)

¹ The church of St Hedwig was founded by the Carmelites.

² The author of the book, *Fleche de Feu*, a great grand-nephew of Hermann Cohen. testifies to this family tradition.

³ *Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza II.

Appendix

Extracts from the Sermons and Writings of Herman Cohen

Many of Hermon Cohen's sermons have been preserved and they help to give us an insight into his spirituality. Sermons of course are meant to be heard and they lose a lot of their impact when they are merely read. I will now include some-extracts from his sermons, homilies and dedications. The first of these speaks of the love of Christ in accents which were perhaps more appropriate in the French style of his day:

My God, is it possible to have lived -without thinking of Jesus, without loving Jesus, without living for Jesus and in Jesus? Now that your grace has awakened me, now that my eyes have seen, my hands have touched, ears have heard, my heart has loved -yes, I love Jesus Christ. I shall take care not to hide it. I am in honour bound to proclaim it before the world. I love Jesus Christ - that's the secret of my immense peace which has gone on increasing since the first moment I began to love. I love Jesus Christ - this is what I want to proclaim to the ends of the earth. I wish that the walls of this temple would expand to include the millions who live on the earth, so that my voice could reach and penetrate the depths of their hearts, making them vibrate in unison with mine, all responding together in one great hymn of joy and triumph, echoing from earth to heaven, 'we too love Jesus Christ'...

Everyone wants happiness. But Jesus Christ who is the source of happiness is not loved. We seek pleasure and greatness but Jesus Christ our greatness joy and the splendour of the father is not loved.

I want to make up to your unknown love. Yes I want to punish my unfaithful and deceitful heart. Yes, heart of mine, if you have been foolish enough to prefer an empty love to the dove of charity, from now on you will find no more satisfaction on earth. I will deprive you of all consolation here below.

I will deprive you of the tenderness of a mother and of the blessing of a father. I shall tear you away from all who cherish you. I will consign you to solitude and there I will purify you every moment of your life. You will no

longer act except at the will of another. You will no longer enjoy the shared friendship and concern of others; you will become like ice or marble in regard to all that formerly pleased you. But, O sublime vengeance, O generous exchange, O happy fault, all these privations will win for you in return a new love and a divine life... like the phoenix you will rise from the ashes, a pure flame will emerge within you, he will renew your youth like the wings of an eagle, and with those wings you will fly to undreamt of realms. You will rise above the clouds of faith and pierce them. You will ascend to a lofty region, to a supernatural world and there you will see what no eye has seen, you will hear what no ear has heard and you will feel what no one's hands have ever touched, what the heart has never conceived. You will learn secrets which must remain hidden from the wise and prudent. You will be enkindled with a love for the beauty of all beauty that cannot fade, the light from light, true God from true God. You will love Jesus.

This was really Hermann Cohen's apologia for becoming a monk. Compare this with Thomas Merton's reflections on becoming a monk at Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky.

Everything that can be desired will sear you, and brand you with a cautery, and you will fly from it in pain to be alone. Every created joy will come to you as pain, and you will die to all joy and be left alone. All good things that other people love and desire and seek will come to you, but only as murderers to cut you off from the world and its occupations.

Cfr. *Elected Silence* by Thomas Merton (Epilogue).