

Chapter Ten.

Living Stones.

Let us now take a look back at Hermann Cohen's involvement in the expansion of the Carmelite Order in France. During the course of his apostolate he preached all through France - in Toulouse, Pamiers, Lyon, Bordeaux, Agen, etc. At one point in the year 1853 he was exhausted from over work and came to Bagnères-de-Bigorre near Lourdes, for a rest. For a long time previously, Mother Mary of the Angels, Prioress in the Carmel there, wished to have a foundation of the Fathers in the Pyrenees just as they had established themselves at Bordeaux. Her repeated requests to the Provincial, Fr. Dominic, were however turned down. She had even contacted Hermann about this while he was still a novice at Le Broussey. Now when he came there for a short stay the matter was taken up again. Hermann felt it was a good place for a foundation, this Pyrenean town which was very popular in the summer with visitors coming from all parts to seek the healthy spa wells there. Hermann chose a suitable site and the Provincial came to examine the situation and agreed that the project should go ahead, after they had obtained the permission of the Bishop of Tarbes in whose diocese Bagnères was situated. All went according to plan until they were ready to sign over the site, but the Carmelites could not find anyone to stand surety for the purchase. Providentially an English friend of the Prioress was passing through at the time and undertook this obligation and herself paid for the site. Hermann himself designed the new Church and laid the foundation stone.

In regard to the great development of the Order in France at this time Hermann observed that when he entered the Order there were only six French Carmelites - now there were forty! The number was swollen to one hundred counting the great many Spanish Carmelites who had to flee Spain at this time. Moreover when Hermann entered there were only four Carmelite foundations in France. Now however he enumerates the new ones at Carcassonne, Montpellier and Pamiers. There were plans for a Paris

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foundation, and a large Church at Bordeaux was in the process of being built. Hermann glosses over his own part in bringing so many foundations to fruition.

Hermann returned to Bagnères in the spring of 1854 and supervised the completion of the Carmelite Priory there. Meanwhile the Prioress of the nuns had rented some accommodation for the friars. At the same time Hermann continued his apostolate in the south of France.

About this time Hermann received a request from the General of the Order to meet him in Belgium and preach there for some weeks. The emphasis was always on eucharistic devotion and Hermann reported his joy at visiting Liege where St. Juliana was inspired to institute the Feast of Corpus Christi. He then returned to Broussey where he preached for the profession of a fellow convert Jew named Bernard Bauer. They both thought of themselves as the David and Jonathan of the New Testament! The profession ceremony took place on June 29th, the Feast of the apostles Peter and Paul. (1)

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This was a homily preached by Hermann Cohen at the profession of Bernard Bauer.

"I give thanks to Jesus Christ who strengthened me. I thank him for having called me to the priesthood, though I was unworthy....

When we first met, Bernard and I, we were both opposed to the saviour of the world and his teaching...But God has had mercy on us and his grace, stronger than our resistance, has been poured out on us, filling us with the faith and love of Jesus Christ. What a lovely day for us Brother Bernard! You are about to dedicate yourself for the rest of your life to this God of love and mercy....

Three nails fastened our saviour to the cross - namely the pride, the greed and the lust of mankind. Three vows will today fasten you from now on to the cross of Jesus our beloved, and by these vows you bind yourself to a deep struggle against these three terrible and overriding preoccupations of fallen nature. You control pride and overthrow it through obedience. By the vow of poverty you dominate the desire for riches, and by the vow of chastity you keep your body under subjection, offering it as a living sacrifice.

No one can show greater love than to give his life for his friends. Jesus, my love, has given his life for me, has died for love of me. Let me die for love of him. Yes, Jesus, our love, we wish to live and die for you, to die every day, every moment an inner death of sacrifice, renunciation and self-denial. We want to give ourselves on the altar of Carmel, night and day, body and soul, spirit heart and will, everything, to show you our love and our gratitude.

So let us go on to sing together, "O how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity", to live with brothers who only wish to live and love and serve Jesus Christ, who work for his glory, and who make up one heart and one soul.

What joy we have felt since Jesus has been pleased to reveal himself to us and to gather us in this solitary place. Who can relate the deep joy that a Carmelite can experience in prayer during the long hours of silent and loving exchanges between him and his beloved..with Jesus! And especially who can tell of the great gladness which flows from the tabernacle when that door is opened and our God, our love, our dear and compassionate Jesus comes to visit us making us forget the world and

ourselves, in order to rest on his heart, absorbing us and identifying us with himself, raising us to the throne of the Father and saying to him, 'Father look at those who love me. I ask that as I am one with you, they also may be one with me, by this holy kiss, this sacred embrace of a loving communion.'

.....Could you have believed, before that happy moment of conversion, that you would have a mother in heaven, so loving, so powerful, so considerate, so full of grace and love for you?..

Could you have thought that self-control is better than self-indulgence, and that the life of a friar is one of spiritual experience.. Finally, did you think that one day you would be called to work with the saints for the salvation of the world by the foolishness of the cross, preaching the gospel and living the fullest Christian life. 'O the depths of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God, how incomprehensible are his judgements and how unsearchable his ways....all is of him, by him and from him, to whom be honour and glory through endless ages .Amen."

Hermann was preaching an Advent retreat at Lyons the following December when he learned the sad news of his mother's death. It had been a disappointment to Hermann that his mother had not embraced the Catholic faith. He went to comfort his family and he remarked:

"We must hope that at the last moment something happened between herself and God of which we know nothing."

He told the Cure d'Ars about his anxiety and the latter reassured Hermann. "Hope, continue to hope", he told him, "One day, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, you will receive a letter which will give you great consolation."

In fact on December 8th. 1861, a Jesuit priest gave Hermann a letter which in effect contained a private revelation that on her death-bed Hermann's mother had accepted Christ. Hermann showed a balanced approach to the 'revelation'. He wrote: "So we can accept this good news with reasonable confidence, although without the certitude of faith, which is only granted to canonised saints".

The year 1856 was a busy one for Hermann. A large mission team including no less than five Carmelites, preached a mission for men in the Cathedral at Bordeaux which was packed to capacity for the occasion. He even interrupted his work in Bordeaux to preach in Paris and returned to complete his commitments in Bordeaux. On the Easter Monday after that mission, the Mass which Hermann had composed and which has already been referred to, was sung for the first time.

A young priest called Abbe Lapire, who later joined the Franciscans preached the sermon. He recalled Hermann's conversion and retraced the story of the foundation of Bagnères-de-Bigorre.

"In just two years a unique monument is being built in Bagnères - a priory and a church. The foundation which is nearly completed began with the sign of the cross and was carried through with no other resources except faith and hope, yet it cost 200,000 francs to build. A friar, whom, I don't have to name because you know him very well yourselves, said to himself in the manner of St. Teresa whom he calls his seraphic mother: "Five sons and I are nothing, but five sons, God and I are everything."

In fact money flowed in for this foundation. Artists came forward. The painter Horace Vernet knew and respected Fr. Hermann and volunteered to decorate the church with frescoes, though he died before he could complete his work. A sculptor named Bonassieu enriched the nave and porch with two beautiful pieces of statuary. The organ builders, Cavaille and Coll, out of appreciation for Hermann, gave him one of their best instruments at a reduced price.

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Indeed the story of Hermann's work for Carmelite foundations resembles that of St. Teresa of Avila in Spain. After the mission in Bordeaux, Hermann returned to Bagnères where the building work was in full swing. Hermann loved this retreat but he was far from idle there. The church was finished in early September and was consecrated by Bishop Laurence - who was later St. Bernadette's bishop! The blessed sacrament was transferred in procession from the convent of the Carmelite sisters in the town. When all was over the Provincial asked Hermann to go to another house with the object of supervising further developments.

During his mission in Lyons, Hermann had been approached by a wealthy businessman who wished to donate 10,000 francs towards a Carmelite foundation there. At the time Hermann was embroiled in the work at Bagnères, but he thought about the project and waited for God's good time. A providential sign occurred in July of 1857. Carmelites had flourished in Lyons for a hundred years before the revolution of 1789. In 1610, Lyons the ancient city of the Gauls, and devoted to Our Lady, had welcomed the Discalced Carmelites.

"They established themselves on the summit of a high rock in the town overlooking the Saone which flowed past nearby. It was a pleasant place and very healthy." (Chronicle.)

For almost two hundred years they devoted themselves to the spiritual wellbeing of the town. But the Carmelites, like all other religious orders, had been driven out by religious persecution during the Revolution. Since the first quarter of the nineteenth century, their old priory was used as an army barracks and it was in a bad state. The church itself had been divided into sleeping quarters. It was also difficult of access, the road being very steep.

The superior of the Daughters of Charity was instrumental in the return of the Carmelites. In 1853 she had arranged for a Carmelite to preach to the St. Vincent de Paul society. Then Hermann himself came in 1855, and as stated, funds were promised for a foundation. More donations came in and by 1857 the Provincial negotiated the purchase of the old priory due to be released in 1859. However, unexpected opposition arose when a government figure persuaded Cardinal Bonald to delay things. But with some ingenuity, the president of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society publicised the project, commending the Cardinal for his initiative. A high government official met the Cardinal and congratulated him for restoring the Carmelites to Lyons! The Cardinal dropped his opposition and authorised the foundation for the year 1860. Hermann believed the Cure d'Ars had foretold the foundation and the fact that it would be of great benefit to the diocese. During 1859 Hermann continued his work through France. He returned to Lyons on August 2nd, a day on which a pilgrimage in honour of St. Francis converged on the convent of Poor Clares. Many of the people recognised him and there was an amusing incident when they asked for a public blessing in the street though Hermann was anxious to reach the church.

Hermann planned to inaugurate the foundation on September 8th, the feast of Our Lady's birthday, which was the twelfth anniversary of his first communion. The church was duly reconsecrated on that day. It was a difficult time for Hermann and the new community. They were struggling financially, but were helped by their Carmelite sisters in Fourvier in spite of the poverty of the latter as well. But the foundation flourished and the community was enlarged to meet the demands of the people. As the Carmelites became better known many benefactors came forward to pay for the work of restoration. The foundation of Lyons was a great personal success for Hermann. The ensuing winter was a trying time for the community. It was bitterly cold and they all fell prey to illness. Hermann remarked:

"In order that the grain grow and bear fruit it must be trodden underfoot, crushed and pressed down under the snow during the winter. We are buried under the weight of suffering and illness, but this makes me hope that the Lord will make use of us as good seed to bear fruit for the harvest."

In the following May the house was allowed to inaugurate a noviciate, and so Hermann became the first prior of the Carmel at Lyons. It was indeed a busy time for Hermann with the cares of reconstruction and the apostolate in the city, as well as serving his community and the new novices. There were many unusual conversions in Hermann's apostolate, among them an intelligent lady who went to hear the former artist out of curiosity and abandoned her scepticism as a result. There was also a well-known violinist who was dying, and though he refused to see any other priest, he agreed to see Hermann to talk about music! He became reconciled to the church. Another artist called Hainl, not noted for his devotion, reluctantly agreed to call at the Carmel but tried to compromise. He decided he would call on a Wednesday when he knew Hermann would be hearing confessions at the sisters convent in Fourviere. He saw a priest talking to workmen at the church and asked: 'may I see Fr. Hermann'. 'I am he sir' replied Hermann, 'and you are Georges Hainl'! Hermann had not been able to go the Carmel that day. Hainl was caught but followed Hermann to the parlour where they had a long chat. A few days later Hainl received holy communion at the church of Our Lady of Fourvier!