

Chapter Thirteen.

Confessor and Confidant.

We have mentioned many times that Hermann Cohen had an intense devotion to the Eucharist.

In 1859 he had gone to Wildbad in Germany to be near his father who was dying at that time. While there he discovered that the local Catholic community had no church of their own but shared with Protestant neighbours. Hermann became concerned with this situation and he mentioned the problem when preaching in Geneva some weeks later. A lady in the congregation followed him into the sacristy and undertook to help towards the building of a Catholic church in Wildbad. She got the necessary information from Hermann, went to see the parish priest and some time later Hermann received a letter from a grateful pastor to tell him that the church was in process of being built.

In Hermann's thinking the sacrament of reconciliation was closely allied to the eucharist and so he was a careful and conscientious confessor. It is interesting to record some of the impressions of his penitents- in this case from a woman.

"It is not the same ardour which characterises his pulpit appearance and which is so effective there, but rather something stronger, more austere perhaps, but no less moving. In the confessional Fr. Hermann expresses himself in short, concise but very effective words, giving what he is asked for or rather what is needed. His words strike home and certainly make a deep impression on one....and as a director Fr. Hermann is decisive, looking to the guidelines of the gospel and expecting freedom of spirit from all those who confide in him. In his relationship with them he is rarely affectionate, usually short, and even dry. But in spite of this there is a style in his direction which can only be understood by those who have experienced it. One feels he really is a father - you sense a spiritual

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fatherhood with a strong and close bond. You know that his dedication is without limits and that his heart is so very capable of loving, and this inspires a childlike trust and a deep respect in which there is not the least fear."

Other witnesses are unanimous that Hermann had a great charm and even fascination for many people which explains the influence he could have over them.

His advice was invaluable and even bears reminiscences of St. John of the Cross:

"You cannot be mistaken when you obey in faith him whom Jesus has inspired to help you and to save your soul as well as his own. So do what I say and you will have peace of soul. Obedience is without sin". (Hermann used stress this). Hermann was quite demanding with those he directed, wishing to lead them along the way of holiness; he showed them how prayer was the way to achieve this and a life of prayer was essential.

"The way of prayer infallibly leads to perfection," he said, "it is in prayer that we learn to detach ourselves from the world, and to live here below as exiles longing for our homeland."

Prayer for him was not that kind of vague, unformed 'pentecostalism,' dominated by feeling and not directed by the soul and the will. Rather it was a total life-commitment based on genuine evangelical renunciation.

"The important thing is not to encourage in ourselves a desire for worldly-living. That is what prayer day by day does - it kindles in the heart a desire for Jesus alone. An excessive taste for material things is not compatible with possessing the God of love. The God of love is a jealous God who wishes to dwell alone in the heart so as to be loved, experienced and desired for himself."

It does seem that Hermann is here giving us unwittingly a picture of himself, giving us the secret of his own life of union with Jesus....

"We ourselves are too poor and worthless to merit much attention from

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others. Our Lord is so noble and attractive that it is foolish not to be always taken up with him. Think of Jesus and not of yourself and Jesus will think of you. Try hard to preserve the deep peace of Jesus within you.... When someone entrusts himself or herself to Jesus, and to reflecting on his attractiveness and divine qualities, Our Lord takes particular care of that person, keeping him or her in peace - as he did on the sea of Tiberias when he came to Peter walking on the water."

Hermann was specially helpful to those who wished to develop their prayer-life, but who meet with the usual obstacles in trying to do so.. His direction was the same as St. John of the Cross or St. Teresa would give, but it carried Hermann's own particular stamp.

"The reason why our master does not always allow us to hear his voice is because he wishes to be sought after. There is nothing he wants more than someone who has been attracted like the Magdalen and questions the whole of creation saying: 'where is my God'. We must long for Jesus as the thirsty deer longs for living water. Another reason is that we are kept humble. If we always enjoyed consolation, we would surely swell with pride - we who are nothing and worse - sinners. How good of the Lord not to throw us off but rather to support us in spite of all our faults."

..... And on the subject of death:

"As for death, it will come to you at a time God wishes. That will mark our deliverance, and an end of to our faults. That will be the moment we see Jesus, the moment in which we lose ourselves in his divine heart - are you afraid of that? You must look on death as the day of your true espousals with Jesus for all eternity."

In another letter he portrays death in the context of the peace which Jesus alone can give.

"You must try to maintain a deep peace in your soul. Do not allow yourself to be troubled, the world cannot give peace. Jesus the lamb of God has come so that we can have it abundantly. However we shall only have perfect peace

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in heaven. Here below we are only passing by, but we must keep on aspiring for that perfect peace which awaits us in the arms of God." Again he writes:

"I would like you to live totally by the eucharist. May he be the source of your thoughts, feelings, words and deeds. May he be the light that guides you, your inspiration, your model and your constant preoccupation. As Magdalen shed tears and poured perfume over the feet of Jesus, may you never tire of offering your prayers, aspirations and gifts before the tabernacle. I wish the eucharist to be for you a fire of love, a burning fire, into which you can throw yourself so as to emerge as a flame with love and generosity. May the altar where Jesus sacrifices himself, also receive your sacrifices, so that with him you may become a victim of love, whose odour of sweetness rises before the throne of the eternal."

Like St. Teresa herself he attached great importance to thanksgiving after holy communion.

"Peace is a gift of God which is obtained by being faithful to prayer and to a long thanksgiving after holy communion. Dedicate a quarter of an hour to your thanksgiving after holy communion, and keep yourself in peace united to our dear Lord. There is no need for much activity - one word says it all, 'love.'"

There can be no doubt but that Hermann Cohen was a devoted and dedicated member of the Carmelite Order. His brothers in Carmel seemed to have appreciated this fact. For instance Fr. Nicomede, the Prior at Tarasteix, remarked:

"Fr. Hermann was the right hand man of Fr. Dominic - Superior General - when he set out to plant and consolidate St. Teresa's vine in France. He is the one whom the Holy Spirit seems to have prepared in a special way to make a big contribution to the development of the order."

Another witness confirms that Hermann was always among the first to share in community work, and he was always anxious for God's glory and the wellbeing of the order. (1)

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He liked to wear the traditional brown habit and the white mantle. This impressed his former tutor Franz Liszt, and Lacordaire remarked 'that you could easily see that a woman (St. Teresa) had designed it and had possibly made the first pattern.'

Hermann himself felt a great affinity with St. Paul in his vocation.

"Do you know," he wrote, that between me and St. Paul there is some resemblance. First he was a Jew like me. Also as he confessed himself, that his youth was not beyond reproach, nor was mine. Perhaps here I might add, in spite of my shortcomings, that from the time the Lord called me to his service I have not willingly turned back or given in to selfish motives. 'I plant, another waters' - this is where I also see a special resemblance between his vocation and mine. The same thing happened to me on a smaller scale. I had a certain gift for initiating things and for facing up to obstacles - in a way the qualities that are needed, together with God's help, in order to begin new projects. Hardly are they well established when the Lord takes me away from them. Leave to others the task of development, yes, leave Lyons, Bagnères, London.. in other hands. So in spite of my conversion I am still a wandering Jew."

(1)It is opportune to add to the testimony given here the following :

Fr.Nicomede observed also:

" He had some ecstasies during his two years in the Holy Desert which took place during his prayer which was normally very intense".

Another colleague of Fr.Hermann gave his opinion:

"I think he possessed all the virtues to a high and even heroic degree.(Letter dated 14th.Oct.1874)