

Chapter Four.

A Convert of the Eucharist .

Hermann Cohen achieved some success on his concert round, though he was very disappointed over the split with Liszt. He continued to waste money in gambling and he avoided self scrutiny. Later he wrote to Fr. Ratisbonne, "When I say all the young people I knew lived like me I don't exaggerate. They looked for pleasure everywhere and wanted the resources to buy it. They never thought of God, only of themselves and their desire to pile up things and their only moral guidelines were human respect, and a desire to keep on the right side of the law."

However something was stirring in Hermann's soul. Perhaps it was the sensitivity of the artist. His mood swung up and down, and his heart always ruled his head if he made a decision at all.

He had a deep distrust of the Catholic Church and of clergy, although the only Catholic clergyman he had ever spoken to was the ex-priest Lamennais. He hardly retained any of his religious leanings at twenty-seven years of age. We have mentioned how profoundly organ music moved him. He also treasured a bible which Liszt had once given him in Geneva with the inscription:

"Blessed are the pure of heart."

It was Hermann's first acquaintance with the words of Jesus. But any good influence was shortlived.

Hermann later on in his 'Confessions' protested his sinfulness. Certainly he was a gambler. We also have an interesting account of his love life at this time by someone involved. In the spring of 1847 Hermann was invited to a Parisian 'soiree'. He played the piano as usual. A girl named Celeste Mogador who was a wellknown circus rider at the Hippodrome gives us a striking portrait of him in her diary.

(22)

"There was a request for music and a young man sat down at the piano. As soon as he began to play I recognised an expert. He was fair with blue eyes, slightly protruding lips and white teeth. His hands worked the keyboard with incredible lightness and agility. It was not like music but really a melody that went straight to the heart."

Celeste enquired who he was and was told that it was the composer Hermann. So they were introduced. "he bowed to me and went away", she says. But for him it was really love at first sight. He thought of arranging another evening at his own house on the Rue de Provence so as to meet her again. Celeste duly attended and when it was time for everyone to go, Celeste however stayed behind. Hermann treated her to some more of his music which she enjoyed, but as he became completely taken up with his playing she fell asleep in the armchair! That was the beginning of their friendship. Celeste noted in her diary:

"One day I saw him enter the church of the Madeleine (1) where he stayed for two hours. He seemed depressed and soon after I had a letter from him in which he said that his life was no longer his own and that his trust in God was growing, in whom he was finding support. But when I asked to see him again he declined. Later I heard the unusual news that after we parted he left for Italy, visited Rome, became a Catholic and entered a monastery. I was very disappointed myself although I did not admit it."

Celeste's account, though somewhat inaccurate, still sounds very personal and is a valuable indication of what was happening in Hermann's life. She certainly packs a lot into the last sentence! Celeste herself retired from circus life soon after, married and settled down.

Hermann's conversion was in fact slow.He later commented:

"Yes.I already knew Jesus Christ,I saw him, I felt him,felt his touch on every page I read,in every hymn I sang and in every Catholic service I attended.I understood I must break the chains that bound me and walk towards him but I was unable to do so.I made resolutions in the morning which were gone in the evening.I resisted temptation in the evening only to give in by morning."

(23)

But we can be sure that as he entered various churches the Lord was drawing him to himself in a hidden way.Hermann didn't consciously want to become a Catholic yet - that came more dramatically.We have an account of the change from Herman's Spanish tutor Chavalier Asnarez and it happened in May 1847 in the church of St.-Valere.(2) Hermann had met Chevalier in Paris shortly after the event and his old teacher was amazed at the change in him.Hermann approached him on the street with some trepidation realising he owed him money.He invited him to his room which was now a very simple one.Asnarez observed that it contained only an iron bed-stead, a trunk, a piano, a crucifix, a little statue of Our Lady and two pictures, one of St. Teresa of Avila and one of St. Augustine:

'The room was certainly austere as was his dress'.Hermann told this friend about the change that had come over him:

"It happened in the month of May last year 1847.Mary's month was celebrated with great pomp at the Church of St-Valere. Various choirs were playing music and singing which drew people in.Prince Moskowa who organised the music and who was known to me, asked me if I would stand in for him and direct the choirs.I agreed and went to take my place purely from my interest in music and a desire to do the job well.During the ceremony nothing affected me much, but at the moment of Benediction, though I was not kneeling like the congregation, I felt something deep within me as if I had found myself.It was like the prodigal son facing himself. I was automatically bowing my head.When I returned the following Friday the same thing happened and I thought of becoming a Catholic.A few days later I was passing the same church of St-Valere while the bell was ringing for Mass.I went in and attended Mass with devotion and stayed on for several more Masses, not understanding what was holding me there.Even when I came home that evening I was drawn to return.Again the church bell was ringing and the Blessed Sacrament was exposed.As soon as I saw it I felt drawn to the altar rail and knelt down.I bowed my head at the moment of Benediction and afterwards I felt a new peace in my heart.I came home and went to bed and felt the same thing in my dreams.

(24)

From then on I was anxious to attend Mass often which I did at St-Valere and always with an inner joy."

In a letter to Fr. Ratisbonne, himself a convert Jew with whom he had become friendly, Hermann continues the story of his conversion up to the time he was baptised.

"At the moment of Benediction I felt a very real emotion though I cannot describe it, as if I had no right to be taking part in the ceremony.the following Friday the same thing happened." Hermann was naturally disturbed and he consulted his friend the Duchess of Rauzen who later became his godmother.Hermann writes to Fr. Ratisbonne:

"I told her I wished to see a priest to talk things over.This was amazing seeing I distrusted them.However I didn't meet one immediately, but eventually I was introduced to Fr. Legrand.He listened with interest,calmed me and told me to continue as I was doing.He told me to trust in divine providence who would show me what to do.At the end he gave me the book,
'An Account of Christian Teaching.'

I found this churchman good and kind and he certainly changed my opinion of priests,having only known them in the pages of novels where they threatened excommunication and hell-fire.Now I had met a learned man,humble,kind and open-

mind, looking to God - not himself. So in this frame of mind I left for Ems in Germany to give a concert. As soon as I arrived there I sought out the parish priest of the little Catholic church, as I had a letter of introduction from Fr. Legrand. The day after I arrived was a Sunday, but braving the ridicule of my friends, I went to Mass. Everything affected me - the hymns and prayers and God's invisible presence. I was very moved and felt the Lord was touching me. When the priest raised the host my tears began to flow. It was a consoling and unforgettable moment... Lord you were there with me filling me with your divine gifts. I really prayed to you, all-powerful and all-merciful God and this memory of your beauty would be impressed on my inner being, proof against all attack, together with lasting gratitude for your favours.. I felt then what Augustine must have felt in the garden of Cassiacum when he heard the famous words,

(25)

Take and read'..or what you yourself must have felt in St. Andrew's church in Rome on January 20th. 1843 when Our Lady appeared to you. I remembered having cried as a child, but I certainly never experienced tears like these. And while the tears flowed a deep sorrow for my past welled up. I immediately wanted to confess everything to the Lord, all the sins of my life. There they were all before me, countless and despicable and deserving God's punishment. But at the same time I felt a deep peace which really healed me and I was convinced that the merciful Lord would forgive me, and overlook my sins and accept my sorrow. I knew he would forgive me recognising my resolve to love him above all things from now on. By the time I left the Church at Ems, I already felt I was a Christian, or at least as much a Christian as it is possible to be before being baptised.!"

(Letter to Fr. Ratisbonne.)

Hermann attributed the grace of conversion to Our Lady. In fact when he came out of the church he met a friend who noticed the change in him and enquired about it. Hermann related what had happened and this friend urged him to thank Our Lady and be devoted to her.

Then she gave him a picture of Mary's assumption. Hermann himself needed no encouragement to attribute favours to Mary, to whom he became increasingly devoted.

Meanwhile everyone noticed the change and Hermann himself was anxious to get back to Paris and see Fr. Legrand, the first priest to whom he had been introduced. Perhaps at their first encounter Fr. Legrand was somewhat suspicious of Hermann's resolve considering his past life. Now he was more impressed and felt God was at work. Now Hermann had to embark on a course of instruction and he came to see Fr. Legrand every evening. He enjoyed Catholic worship and liturgy and he felt he had shed a great burden. He longed for full communion with the Church and especially to receive the Eucharist. His fervent preparation reminds us of the intensity of Gerard Manley Hopkins' desire to become a Catholic some years later. Legrand introduced him to Theodore Ratisbonne who shared a similar background to himself. Ratisbonne had begun a movement for convert Jewish girls which was growing into the Institute of Our Lady of Sion.

(26)

Hermann attended the reception of some Jewish converts at the Paris house of the Sisters of Sion and he also wished that his own reception would take place there. The date was fixed for August 28th. 1847, which was the feast of St. Augustine whom he would take for his patron. It was a natural choice. On his first visit to the Church of Our Lady of Victories, the preacher spoke on St. Augustine and this was the name his godmother chose for him. Fr. Legrand gave him the Office of Our Lady on which to meditate; he would have been touched at the words of eternal wisdom put on the lips of Mary, mother of the messiah. Hermann recalled that he was first touched by grace in Mary's month of May.

Hermann experienced a sharp struggle just before his reception, taking the form of a dream, which indeed reminds us of the struggle of his namesake. (Cfr. Confessions of St. Augustine.)

Again he called for help to Our Lady in his time of need.

Of the day of his reception into the Church Hermann writes:

"On Saturday Aug. 28th, at three o'clock, the chapel of Our Lady of Sion was brightly lit by candles and the altar adorned with fresh flowers. The chapel bells were ringing, there was a full congregation, and the choir consisted of young girls wearing white veils singing beautifully, and accompanied by the organ. Both Fr. Legrand and Fr. Ratisbonne led me into the church. I was feeling nervous but calm accompanied by my godfather and godmother. I really felt the support of my brothers and sisters at my spiritual birth. God be forever blessed."

In a letter to Fr. Ratisbonne Hermann related how the ritual proceeded:

"'Do you wish to be baptised?'"

'Yes, I do wish it'.

(Yes, you know Lord how much I want it. I want to belong to you.)

Everything was transformed, I was hardly aware of the priest with the holy water shell in his hand. The Lord had promised to possess me at this moment.

(27)

The priest was pouring the holy water with triple gesture over my forehead and proclaimed solemnly that he baptised me in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit....

At that moment I was deeply moved and I can only describe it like an electric shock.(3)My eyes were closed but I had an inner vision as if the Holy Spirit,as though to seal his promise, took me by the hand and revealed to my gaze, rapt in ecstasy,while directed above, that which no finite being can ever understand - the infinite.Yes I saw (the eyes of my body were closed but those of my soul were awake with joy) a great and unlimited brightness, space without end,or rather not space,for my gaze soared,plunged always further,further..and met no obstacle..."

Hermann continues to describe in rather glowing terms what he saw and felt.

"A gentle warmth penetrated me and, in spite of the brilliant light which radiated from all sides,my gaze never tired of plunging into the rays of light..for deep within there was an even brighter light...and there stood a glorious throne and seated on the throne was Our Lord Jesus Christ,beautiful with eternal youth, with his beloved mother on his right and around his feet a host of saints clothed in the brightest colours of the rainbow...The saints were prostrated at the foot of the throne in adoration and yet at the same time they looked towards me and smiled kindly..Heaven and its inhabitants seemed to rejoice at my baptism as though the poor soul of a redeemed sinner weighed in the balance of eternity. Well, dear father how can I be so foolish as to try to describe what I saw.Indeed I should tear up this paper on which I have written, because it doesn't contain a single image remotely approaching what I have seen! Yes I have seen the abode of the Church Triumphant...No, it was not a vision, it was an apparition.God permitted that I though unworthy be given,by a grace that is nameless, to conceive, to see in an instant what I hardly dare remember...."!(Letter to Fr.Ratisbonne)

(1)The Church of the Madeleine dominates the business sector of Paris.It is a huge structure surrounded by Corinthian columns on the outside and inside resembles a Roman basilica.It contains notable works of art.

(2) The church of St-Valere has since been demolished.

(3) This experience of Hermann at his baptism seems to be a genuine mystical experience like those described by St.Teresa in her writings.

(28)