

Chapter Five.

"Nocturnal Adoration."

(1848)

"My well-beloved when all are asleep
And seem to forget your love
Do permit me to watch
Alone with you in this abode."

(Canticle put to music by Hermann Cohen, from a collection called
'Love of Jesus Christ.)

Hermann was instrumental in founding the movement for Nocturnal Adoration of the blessed sacrament, which was later to become a very popular movement indeed. It happened that one afternoon in November 1848 Hermann entered the chapel of the Carmelite Sisters in Paris, where the blessed sacrament was exposed. There were some women present. Eventually one of the Sisters came to lock the chapel and politely asked him to leave. Hermann inquired why the women were allowed to remain and the Sister told him that they would be praying there all night. Later Hermann consulted his confessor, who explained to him that a group of young women had come together to adore the blessed sacrament. Between 1846 and 1847 the leader of the group got to know the Prioress and they started to meet in the chapel. They saw their prayer vigils as an answer to the problems of the times. So when Hermann consulted his confessor he said "You find the men and we will allow you to do the same." So Hermann had the task of finding companions for this work. He thought of going to the church of Our Lady of Victories, which Hermann loved and where he knew of someone who might be interested. In fact this acquaintance was interested and even recruited several more men.

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They met together in Hermann's room and so the Association of Nocturnal Adorers was formed. The first meeting took place on December 6th. 1848 in the Basilica of Our Lady of Victories. Hermann wrote three years later:

"In order to contemplate you as fully as we desire, daylight hours fly by too quickly. I called together some like-minded Christians and we went along to spend the nights in your churches... a priest directed us..and the dawn found us still kneeling before you."

These first nights of nocturnal adoration made a great impression on Hermann, and he would recall them later in the 'dedication' of his hymns to the Eucharist.

Hermann addressed fervent prayers to God, expressing his eucharistic devotion:

"Oh Jesus my love, I should like to kindle in the hearts of my former friends the fire which burns in me. I should like to show them the happiness you give to me.... If you no longer see me trying my utmost for applause and empty respect, it is because I have found my renown in the eucharist... If you no longer see me wasting my resources in casinos or chasing riches, it is because I have found wealth and inexhaustible treasure in the cup of love sealed in the eucharist. If I no longer come and drown my worries in your noisy parties, it is because I am nourished at the wedding feast with the angels of heaven. It is because I have found true joy. Yes I have found it, what I really love, it is mine and no one can take it from me. Unhappy

riches, cloying pleasures, honours that only debase - those are the things I looked for in your company. But now that my eyes have seen, and my hands have touched and my heart has beaten on the heart of God, I can only be sorry for your blindness in pursuing pleasures that are unable to fill your hearts. So come to this heavenly feast which has been prepared by eternal wisdom. Come, draw near. Abandon your baubles and empty dreams, cast off the rags that cover you. Ask Jesus for the shining robe of pardon, then with a new heart, with a pure heart quench your thirst at the limpid fountain of his love. Cast yourselves down at his feet.

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Give your heart to him and he will bless you, and you will taste joys so great that I cannot describe them for you - unless you come and try them.

'Taste and see how sweet is the Lord',
If King David danced before the ark which prefigured you o my true covenant, then with what songs of triumphs ought I break out?"

And again he prayed:

"Having loosened worldly bonds, I can now penetrate the dark cloud that surrounds the tabernacle and open myself to the piercing rays from the sun of your grace, and plunge into this sea of light so as to be burnt in the flame of this blazing furnace. Then, taking shelter in the shade of this tree of life I can taste its fruits. For me those days and nights pass joyfully in intimate converse with your adored presence, between the memory of today's communion and the hope of tomorrow's, God united with the least of his children."

So we see that Hermann saw no contradiction in theory or practice between nocturnal adoration and sacramental communion. For him his adoration was essentially mystical and was the fruit of his sharing in the eucharist. It has been objected that the infrequency of holy communion in the 19th. century was due to the practice of adoration of the blessed sacrament. But this was due rather to Jansenistic influences. Indeed people like Hermann Cohen and Julien Eymard prepared the way for Pope Pius X's reestablishment of frequent communion.

Hermann himself always retained his deep devotion to the eucharist and linked it to his devotion to Our Lady whom he thought of as having revealed the eucharist to him. Even Franz Liszt writing after Hermann's death attested that his life was one of constant and deep devotion to the the eucharist.

Many people today acknowledge Hermann Cohen as the founder and the inspirer of the movement for the Nocturnal Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. There are many people still today who find this devotion a great source of strength for their Christian lives.

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In the Basilica of Our Lady of Victories there is a marble plaque attached to the pillar near the altar of St Augustine recalling the first meeting for Night Adoration and its founder:

"The movement for Exposition and Night Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in Paris was inaugurated in this church on December 6 1848 through the efforts of Father Hermann and Monsignor De La Bouillierie, Bishop of Carcassonne, then Vicar General of the Diocese of Paris."

Recently a new central altar, octagonal in shape, has been installed in the basilica . It contains eight panels illustrating the stories of those connected with the church. One of these is dedicated to St. Therese of Lisieux to commemorate her link with the church. On 13th. May 1883 she was cured during the course of a novena of masses being offered there. Therese tells us in her autobiography the the Blessed Virgin smiled at her and cured her. On 4th. November 1887, Therese visited the church with her father on her way to Rome to thank Our Lady for her intercession. It was because of the connection with St. Therese that Pope Pius XI raised the church to the rank of basilica in 1927. (1) Another panel of the altar is devoted to Hermann Cohen her Carmelite brother. It depicts him holding a chalice and host accompanied by a colleague and with an pipe organ in the background suggesting his musical accomplishments. It is indeed a fitting tribute to two Carmelites whose memories are enshrined in this place of prayer.

(1) See Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux, Translated by Ronald Knox. Chapters 10 and 19. P.J Kennedy and Sons, New York, 1958.