

## Chapter Six.

Disciple of St. John of the Cross.

(1849)

At this stage in his story Hermann Cohen, the recent convert, now aimed at clearing the debts he had incurred in his gambling life, but at the same time he continued with frequent vigils before the blessed sacrament. To this end he resumed giving piano lessons in his surroundings.

Since his conversion and even before his baptism, Hermann had the desire to dedicate his life wholly to God as soon as he was free to do so. It would take him two years to reach this point. It was a difficult time for him. Some of his friends thought he was mad and mockingly touched their heads when they saw him to indicate as much. Perhaps it was taken in good part! He tried to influence some of these friends in favour of the Catholic faith, sometimes with an understandable, if exaggerated zeal, due to his own new-found faith.

Hermann became involved with helping the poor through Frederick Ozanam the founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. He found this work a great source of inspiration during his time of preparation to join a religious order. Hermann's mother had been kept in the dark about his conversion. His brother Louis was anxious for her to know but his sister did not wish her to be told. Hermann in fact went to see her every week and this must have created a tense atmosphere. She seems to have guessed that there was something unusual but Hermann remained evasive.

(33)

Eventually one of Hermann's friends decided to tell her without more ado. At first she probably didn't take it seriously and thought it was just one more eccentricity in her favourite son.

At this point in his life, also due to certain circumstances, he began to compose music for a collection of hymns that were brought to his attention. These were called : "Praise of Mary". This turned out to be a successful venture, the hymns proving very popular.

Hermann needed to give a final concert to pay off all his debts and this was duly arranged. It proved to be a resounding success. Indeed Hermann's own relief was immense when he concluded this final show. He is known to have exclaimed: "I have finished forever with the world! With what joy after my last note did I bid it farewell!"

So now Hermann was free to look for a religious form of life. He was attracted to the Carmelites and wished to be enrolled in the brown scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. We have already mentioned his familiarity with the convent chapel of the Carmelite sisters in Paris. The first priests he consulted discouraged him from joining the Carmelites however, so he turned his attention to the Benedictines at Solesmes. But a vocation to the Benedictines did not materialise.

The return of the Carmelite Friars to France had an interesting history. The Prioress of the Carmel of Bordeaux, Sister Bathilde, wrote to the Carmelites in Spain about the possibility of a foundation, but was at first refused. She then tried the Papal Nuncio in Paris and the Generalate in Rome but nothing happened. Then almost ten years later, a Carmelite priest, Fr. Dominic, who had been expelled from Spain, arrived in Bordeaux with the intention of going to Mexico. Here he met the Prioress of the Carmel who made known her wishes to him and within eight he made up his mind to stay in Bordeaux.

(34)

Then on October 14th.1840 he inaugurated the first house of Carmelite friars (although he himself was the only one) in a little cottage which belonged to the Carmel. Soon he was joined by three more friars from Spain. After initial opposition from the civil authorities they were allowed to stay and before long they received some French novices. They were given a foundation at Le Broussey near Bordeaux. Additional houses were also opened including one at Agen.

Around this time Hermann Cohen met the founder of the Blessed Sacrament Fathers, Julien Eymard who encouraged him to enter the Carmelites. Hermann decided to make a retreat and it would seem that it was at this time that he discovered the writings of St. John of the Cross, Co-reformer of Carmel with St. Teresa of Avila. The ideal of the Carmelite Reformer appealed to him. He would have delighted in reading about the Living Flame of Love which longs to communicate itself to the contemplative soul, to inflame it and transform it into itself, making it too a 'living flame.' This is the sublime theology of love sung about by John of the Cross in his poems, 'The Living Flame of Love', and 'The Spiritual Canticle'.

To respond to this kind of vocation, the disciple of Christ must undergo a long and hard pilgrimage which brings about a complete purification of sense and spirit. This must happen before someone can be transformed into a living flame of love.

(Cfr. Collected Works of St. John of the Cross. Dark Night of the Soul. Book 2, Ch. 10. ICS Publications, Washington DC. 1979.)

We have St. John's programme for reaching this transformation in the Ascent of Mt. Carmel.

"Endeavour to be inclined always:

not to the easiest but to the most difficult;

not to the most delightful, but to the harshest;

not to the most gratifying, but to the less pleasant

not to what means rest for you, but to hard work;

not to the consoling, but to the unconsoling;

(35)

not to the most, but to the least;

not to the highest and most precious, but to the lowest and most despised;

not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing."

"Do not go about looking for the best of temporal things, but for the worst, and desire to enter for Christ into complete nudity, emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world." (Ibid. Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book 1, Chapter 13.)

In the measure to which the soul becomes purified, illumined and united to the beloved, God reveals himself and communicates himself in his divine beauty.

When John goes on to describe the flowering of love in the Christian life he is at his best.

"Let us go to see ourselves in your beauty.", (Cfr. Ibid. Spiritual Canticle. Stanza 33)

Here John is commenting on the Song of Songs in a phrase from 'The Spiritual Canticle'. This is a book which appeals to all followers and devotees of the teaching of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross. It would certainly have appealed to Hermann Cohen who had an eye and ear trained for beauty which is a characteristic of all great artists. (Cfr. Ibid. The Spiritual Canticle)

A deep longing arises in the contemplative to be transformed into this beauty. And for John, God's beauty is now revealed in the face of his incarnate word.

Hermann would certainly feel at one with John's theology. Here Christ is the mediator and saviour in the story of salvation. Christ, dead, but risen again, Christ the lover of souls, Christ sacrificed but always alive in the eucharist.

He would also have felt in accord with the song John wrote from his prison cell in Toledo:

"Song of the Soul that rejoices to know God through faith."

Well I know the spring which flows.  
In spite of night.

(36)

This lasting source concealed in living bread  
So as to give us life,  
In spite of night.

There it cries to every creature  
To come by dark and drink this water,  
For it is night.

This living water for which I greatly long  
I see it in the bread of life  
In spite of night."(Cfr.Ibid.Poetry.)

Hermann Cohen then, was prompted to enter Carmel through his desire to give himself completely to God in a relationship of prayer.This was reinforced through his acquaintance with the writings of St.John of the Cross and St.Teresa of Avila.

John wrote: "A little of this pure love is of greater value in God's eyes and is more profitable to the church, in spite of its apparent idleness, than all other works put together....."(Spiritual Canticle, Stanza 28).

From John of the Cross too, Hermann derived that desire for the retirement of the desert, in the spirit of the Carmelites on Mount Carmel.John himself had wanted this so much that at one point he thought of joining the Carthusians but was dissuaded from doing so by Teresa who told him this ideal was also possible in Carmel.And so the Carmelite reform began with two friars in a little cottage at Duruelo in Castile....

Hermann by chance met a Carmelite from the priory of Agen on the street of Paris when he had finished a retreat, and so began his apprenticeship to the Carmelites.

(37)

He successfully applied for permission to enter the Carmelite Order.On July 14th he went to break the news to his mother and family. Next day he took leave of them at the railway station and headed for Agen.July the 16th. was the feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel.Hermann would now become a brother of the Queen of Carmel and in God's future designs he would contribute greatly to the expansion of the Order of Carmel in France and later in England.

(38)