

Chapter Eight.

'You are a Priest Forever'

(1851)

Hermann left Bordeaux in 1851 to begin his preparations for the priesthood at Agen. In a real sense he would miss the greater leisure for prayer which he had in the novitiate by having to commence a course of study. Hermann was by now thirty years of age. He approached his studies in a spirit of faith and particularly of trust in Mary, seat of wisdom. He remarked:

"I remember how, when I decided to put my faith in Jesus Christ, all that I read saw and heard when I took this decision, appeared to me in a new light, a luminous dazzling light.....I saw the great perspective of the Scriptures unfold - the Messiah promised in the Old Testament."

During his studies his superiors allowed him to resume composing music for various motets on eucharistic themes to words composed by his friend Sister Pauline.

When he had almost completed his studies and had been ordained a deacon, his superior decided to take him to Carcassonne to restore a Carmelite house which had been closed in the Revolution of 1789. He wrote to Sr. Pauline:

"We arrived at last after a hard journey. We encountered a lot of problems which the Lord in his goodness allowed. We were able to take over a lovely gothic church - still a stable - and also the old Carmelite priory. The habit has been welcomed here again. We don't know what providence has in store for the Order. It wouldn't surprise me if in a few years the whole of the south of France were part of a network of St. Teresa's vineyard."

In this Hermann was indeed proved right for it was really the beginning of a second spring for Carmel.

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Hermann himself could not see that he would be instrumental in this revival, not only in southern France but in England too and indirectly in Poland.

There was an amusing aside to the takeover of the church in Carcassonne where, he tells another friend, that he was worried when one of the horses refused to vacate his home and they had to use some additional persuasion with the help of a stick!

Hermann began composing music for Sr. Pauline's poems in November 1850 and the work was finished before March 21st. 1851. It amounted to 40 motets in honour of the eucharist, called, 'For the love of Jesus Christ'

Thirty were written in French and ten were in Latin: (See Hermann's Foreward or Dedication to this work in the Appendix.)

As we look at Hermann's musical work today we find it very impressive indeed. It consists of motets in polyphony, for organ or piano accompaniment and he also composed a Latin Mass which has been described thus.

"This musical work, executed in 1856 in this town, (Bordeaux) is remarkable for its pure melody under an impression of great simplicity. It is easy to memorise and the solos are beautiful. The solemn Kyrie Eleison is reminiscent of the German school. The Sanctus and Agnus Dei, are two striking pieces and are indeed inspired." (1)

And about the motets a famous pianist from Bordeaux, Joseph Shad wrote:

"As to melody and religious feeling they are very remarkable compositions, and they are based on a harmony which is pure and happily varied."

Monseigneur Baunard, writing at the beginning of the 20th. century, referred to them in these words. "...The artist (Hermann) was to sing the sweetest, the most mystical and penetrating melodies ever heard in our century".

Another comment:

"Hermann's romantic impulse never became pretentious. The listener could also sense that there is a high degree of complexity in his piano technique and there are unexpected chords which some musical commentators thought had been invented in the 1930's! Even in the 'ritornelle' there is a great sense of German music."

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It is true that Hermann Cohen is not well known as a composer in spite of his great talents, but at a time of great poverty in church music in the 19th century, Hermann's motets were a welcome and original creation adapted to the times in which he lived.

It should be said too that Franz Liszt made his own great contribution to

church music especially when he became reconciled to the church.

Hermann's less ambitious motets however became very popular and were subsequently often sung in cathedrals, churches and schools throughout France right into the 20th. century. They have therefore their place in the history of church music in the 19th. century.

Meanwhile Hermann was completing his studies for the priesthood and his ordination was fixed for Easter 1851. Hermann looked forward to that day with great expectation.

He expressed as much in letters to friends, particularly to Sr. Pauline:

On Easter Monday the day after his first mass, he wrote to another sister in Paris:

.....I hope to have more leisure later to tell you about the grace-filled events in which I have been involved these days.I'm still not myself, nor do I wish to be!".....

The first sermon Hermann preached was on frequent communion - thus keeping his pledge.

In fact Hermann had overreached himself a bit in the aftermath of his ordination and he was ordered to take a rest.The condition continued into the summer and Hermann also found that he could not pray as easily as heretofore, which was an additional trial for him.He did not shirk the cross nevertheless but indeed accepted it joyfully, as we see from his letters at this time.Hermann was transferred to the new Carmelite foundation in Bordeaux, which was a change for him.He engaged in the ministry to local hospitals and he continued to take an active interest in the work of eucharistic adoration especially in Paris which he himself had initiated and which at this time was undergoing a crisis.

(1).An audio tape of Hermann Cohen's Mass performed by the Carmelite Choir Kensington, conducted by John McCarthy OBE, is available from the Carmelite Priory, St. Ignatius Square, Preston.It is introduced by Fr. Antonine Newman OCD. John McCarthy also hopes to produce a selection of Hermann's canticles sung in English.

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The following is the Foreword to a collection of motets composed by Hermann Cohen :

"Adorable sacrament,blessed spring from which my dry lips can drink the first fruits of eternal life, my heart is filled with joy.I need to bless you and sing your praises in songs of joy and thanksgiving.Indeed I have learnt that my brothers in Paris can now adore you each day in the practice of perpetual adoration.The Church bells in the city are ringing, and processional banners go before you.The Archbishop is promoting this devotion,calling Christians together to arrange the altars and asking the children to come and sing.He himself is taking part in this uninterrupted adoration from church to church, making it a kind of image of the eternal praise given by the blessed to God...You have given me o God of love, the language of harmony.Am I to remain dumb and not use it? If your friends do their best to adore you o divine sacrament, have I not also an hosanna to sing to your glory and a palm branch to place beneath your feet? Adored Lord, I must unite my songs with the hymns of Paris! For it was in that great city,hidden in the eucharist that you revealed the truth to me, and the first mystery you revealed was that of your real presence in the blessed sacrament.Even then, although I was still a Jew,I wished to present myself at the holy table and receive you.(1)

I was anxious for baptism in order to be united to you.But I did indeed receive untold consolation from you.And when at last I could receive the heavenly banquet I found there the strength I needed, and I was changed.It became my protection and treasure;I longed to drink that living water and I hungered for the bread of angels.I am now

obliged to sing joyful hymns to you, because it was your sacrament which did all this, which turned me from what was harmful to a frugal life, and from an extravagant life to one of a humbler kind. Not only have I made solemn vows which consecrate me to you in Mary's order and makes me your beloved for ever, but you ask me out of your jealous love, to make a further vow appropriate to your divine sacrament, a vow which will bind me with indissoluble bonds to the love of love itself". (The vow referred to was Hermann's resolution never to preach without mentioning the eucharist.)

O Jesus my love, how I want to enkindle my former friends with the love with which you have enkindled me. How I want to witness to the happiness which you give me. But unfortunately I stop short, not able to say any more, for my songs don't have the fire of love I wished them to have and I can do no more. It is to you O God that I come for help. Give me the hidden strength with which you alone know how to draw me. Then like a torch thrown on a heap of wood, it will light a fire of love for the eucharist. Amen ".

Carmelite Priory, Agen, March 1851.

(1) Hermann made his First Communion on September 8th. 1847, the feast of Our Lady's Birthday.

In one of sermons we find this passage:

"O Jesus present in the eucharist, in the desert of this life you appeared to me one day, you revealed to me your light, your greatness and your beauty. You knew how to overcome all obstacles in one moment. Then you drew me strongly to yourself and stirred in my spirit a hunger for the bread of life and a thirst in my heart for your precious blood.. then at last came the day when I received you which I remember so well.."