



Rob and Sharla Walsh
Provincial Couple
Teams of Our Lady
emmettwalsh@me.com
503-939-8577

“The woolen yarn”

Letter #22

Fr. Henri Caffarel

being present to God; Letters on Prayer

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There is a short sentence in your letter, dear friend, that I cannot let pass unanswered: “I no longer have the right to pray.” There is no situation that gives anyone the right to speak in this way. No one is ever deprived of the right to cry out to his God. It does not matter how sinful or degraded a man may be, even if he has lost his citizenship or been excommunicated from the Church. As long as he still has a breath of life in him, nobody can deny him the right to pray.

You add, “How could I speak to God, since I do not have the courage to make the break that would restore me to his friendship?”

In spite of these scarcely noble sentiments, you must praise the Lord for his perfections and for his admirable works. You must recognize his sovereignty by adoration, even if on one point you are denying it in practice. You must ask, even if you are not doing his will, that his kingdom come, and you must pray for others.

Why don’t you take one more step that will bring you closer to his restored friendship? You do not have the strength to perform the act that he expects of you? So be it! But why not ask him for this strength? Perhaps you will answer, “I don’t want him to give it to me.” Then beg him to give you the desire to ask him for the strength. Again, you may say, as a good man said one day, “really, the Lord is not proud!” That is certainly true.

We are the proud ones. We find it humiliating to be forced to “ask for the desire” to be healed of our evil. A poor prayer it is! And yet, it is already a living bond between man and God. If you are willing to offer this prayer, it will obtain the desire for you, and this will lead to your request. And after the request, strength will come to you, and it will bring about the break. Then, thanks to the break and God’s forgiveness, your friendship with him will live again.

Allow me to put my lesson in the form of an anecdote, so that you cannot forget it.

The scene is a small British city in the 19th century. The large chimney for a factory has just been completed after many months of work. The last workman has come down from the top of the chimney, by way of the wooden scaffolding. The whole population of the town is there to celebrate the event, and first of all to witness the collapse of the large scaffolding.

Scarcely had the scaffolding come crashing down amid laughter and shouts when, to everyone's amazement, a worker appeared atop the chimney. He had been putting the final touches on the masonry inside the chimney. The spectators were filled with terror. It would take many days to set up new scaffolding, and by then the workman would be dead from the cold, if not from hunger. His aged mother was in tears.

But then, all of a sudden, she came out of the crowd, made a sign to her son, and shouted to him, "John! Take off your sock." Everyone was distressed. The poor woman had lost her mind! She insisted. So as not to grieve her, John obeyed. Then, she shouted, "Pull hard on the woolen yarn." He obeyed, and soon had an enormous handful of woolen yarn in his hands. "Now, throw one end of the yarn out, and hold the other end tightly in your fingers."

A flaxen thread was tied to the woolen yarn, and by pulling on the woolen yarn the young man brought the flaxen thread up to him. A piece of twine was tied to the flaxen thread, and then a rope was tied to the twine, and a cable to the rope. All John needed to do now, was to tie the cable more firmly and come down amid the cheers of the crowd.

Have I succeeded in convincing you to throw out a woolen thread to God? I hope so. I ask this of the Lord, with all my friendship for you.