



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

From head to foot

Letter 25

Fr. Henri Caffarel

being present to God; Letters on Prayer

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A number of things make you unhappy and anxious: your meditations as arid as a desert, your lack of spiritual vitality at the hour of prayer, the feeling that the Lord no longer opens the door at which you are constantly knocking. You tell me that you are eager to rediscover, if not fervor, at least those periods of mental prayer in which you were sure that you were not wasting your time. I certainly have no infallible advice to give you. I would simply invite you to find out for yourself what God is expecting of you.

It is possible that this is a trial permitted by the Lord to whet your desire, and stimulate your search and your trust. But it may also be a signal, a warning that something is lacking in your life. I ask you not to eliminate the latter hypothesis too quickly.

You write: "Never before have I striven so scrupulously to follow your advice on the practice of mental prayer." I am the first to agree. That is precisely what makes me think that there is something in need of change, not so much in your manner of praying as in your life.

In the Christian life, everything is interrelated. If the practice of one virtue is neglected, if the sacraments are not received often enough, and if the will of God is disregarded on some point, the effects are felt everywhere, and first of all in the life of prayer. That is why I am not sure that your intense effort to pray better is the best course for you. Begin by trying to discover whether God is expecting some reform on your part.

Examine yourself first on the theological life, the foundation of the Christian life. And in the very first place, examine yourself on charity. Perhaps you are not gracious to your neighbor, eager to serve him, to witness to the love of God, who has given you an insight into and a taste for his infinite goodness. That would explain why the Lord—I will not say rejects you, but—withdraws from you the sense of his presence and of his love.

Love those around you. Make an effort to reach out to those with whom you are less spontaneously sympathetic. Ask yourself whether there are certain persons who are expecting, in vein, some material or moral help from you. It is very possible that progress

in charity will enable you to recover the reassuring presence of God in your mental prayer, or at least the sense of not wasting your time at it. Christ cannot resist the prayers of those who, for their part, do not resist the appeals of their neighbors. As you well know, he considers whatever we do to others as being done to himself. St. Augustine, in his commentary on the First Epistle of St. John, identifies Christ with his members by means of an unexpected and vigorous comparison, impossible to forget:

“He whom you adore in his head, you outrage in his body. He, for his part, loves his body. If you remove yourself from the body, the Head does not cut itself off from its body. From heaven, the Head cries out, ‘It is in vein that you honor me, it is in vein that you honor me.’ It is as if someone wanted to kiss your head by walking on your feet. His heavy hobnailed shoes would crush your feet while he was trying to grasp your head in his hands to kiss it. Would you not interrupt these demonstrations of respect with a scream and say: ‘What are you doing, wretched one, you are crushing me!’ You would not say, ‘You are crushing my head,’ since he is honoring the head. But the head would speak louder for the members that are being crushed than for the honors it is receiving.

“The head would cry out, ‘I want none of your honors. Stop crushing me!’ If you answer, ‘How can you say that I am crushing you? On the contrary, I want to give you a kiss, I want to embrace you.’ ‘But don’t you see, foolish one, that, by virtue of the oneness that makes the body one single entity, what you want to embrace is present in what you are crushing? You honor me above, but you crush me below. There is greater suffering in what you are crushing than there is joy in what you are honoring, because what you honor suffers for the member you are crushing.’”

I would be inclined to interpret this astonishing page in this way: “You come to mental prayer to kiss my face, but you refuse your brother the honor and help he expects from you—and that I expect from you in him. Do not be surprised, therefore, that I react to you like a man who pulls away from someone who is stepping on his feet.”

I do not claim to have infallibly expressed Christ’s sentiments toward you. I simply invite you to ask yourself a question.