

The “Good Father”

Léon HARMEL

N I C E

“A JEANNE D’ARC”, 7, rue du Palais

1915

THIS EDITION

This is an English translation of the original French text, made for the website leonharmel.com in 2026. It follows the original sentence by sentence, without cuts or additions.

The text is given in full, translated from the 1915 edition. It has been typeset in the spirit of the original: title pages and headings follow the layout of the book; the illustration has been cut out of the digitised document and restored.

The notes marked with an asterisk * have been added for this edition, to shed light on the historical context.

Léon Harmel, le Bon Père du Val-des-Bois

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OBITUARY

THE GOOD FATHER

On Sunday 14 November 1915 nothing gave any warning of the death of the Good Father, Léon HARMEL.

At one o'clock in the afternoon, accompanied by his daughter, Mrs Paul Saucourt, the Good Father walked, without tiring and even very briskly (in spite of his 86 years), the long way between 83 Avenue de la Californie and 29 Boulevard Carabacel, to attend the opening of the retreat of the Tertiaries of St Francis.

The next morning he was seized with shivering and felt frozen; in the evening the illness grew worse; a violent attack of fever struck him down, and his daughter in alarm sent for the doctor, who did not succeed in breaking the fever, which had risen to 40 degrees.

On the morning of Tuesday the 16th, the condition of the venerable patient seemed to be improving, when in the evening the situation became worse. Father Donetta, his confessor, was sent for. The Bishop, on being informed, came on Wednesday the 17th at half past five in the evening. His Lordship, in spite of his many pastoral occupations and his great solicitude for the retreat of his priests, hastened to the bedside of the Good Father to give him his blessing, to console him, to strengthen him, to prepare him for the last combat, and to invite him to be present in thought and in heart, the next morning at half past seven, at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass at the Bishop's House, where he would have a special intention for him. The Bishop came back twice more to bless and strengthen his dear patient, on

Friday the 19th and on Tuesday the 23rd, expressing the sorrow he would feel at letting him go. But the Good Father kept repeating to him:

My Lord, to heaven! to heaven! I shall pray for you, who have been so good to me.

An hour after His Lordship's first visit, on Wednesday the 17th at seven in the evening, Father Donetta came back to visit his saintly penitent.

The patient said to the Doctor: Here is the Abbé, who is to administer the last sacraments to me; would it not be fitting for him to administer them to me at once? The Doctor, somewhat surprised, did not dare to answer the question; he rose and, speaking aside to the Good Father's confessor, said to him: the case is serious, but I would not have dared to answer the question for fear of giving the patient a shock; to which the Abbé replied, so as to be heard by the patient: you need not hide your opinion, for the Good Father, on learning that he may receive Extreme Unction, and in receiving it, will feel great joy. He would be far too grieved if through our negligence he were to be deprived of it. And the Good Father approved this reasoning, adding: "I am not afraid, since I am going to see the good Lord. It is life that is going to begin for me. I shall forget no one; for you especially, Father, I shall ask all kinds of protection and favours." Nevertheless, after the Doctor's opinion, the Father decided to put off the administration of the Sacrament of the Sick to a later date. He was well inspired, since the next day the Good Father, feeling better, had himself got up and placed in his armchair. He asked to be taken into his little oratory. In the evening, as the fever was rising and the doctor declared that the situation was serious, the family was informed by telegram.

From Quimper, from Châlons-sur-Marne, from Nancy, from Tours, from Cannes, from Grasse, from Menton, from Le Mans, from every corner of France, several of his children, grandchildren, sons-in-law

and daughters-in-law hurried to their Good Father. Not all of them, alas! Two of his sons and several of his grandchildren are prisoners of the Germans, and others are working for the defence of the fatherland. Those present, the privileged ones, numbered ten. To describe the joy, the very remarkable heart-to-heart intimacy, the lucidity of mind, the charming aptness of Léon Harmel towards his beloved children, and the respectful veneration, the passionate love, the affectionate, touching and devoted care of all his sons and daughters, would take the pen of a psychologist of the Académie. It was the perfect fulfilment

of the word of Jesus: "Love one another." The hearts of the Harmel and Saucourt children beat in unison with that of the Good Father, and showed themselves frankly, with exquisite simplicity and delightful abandon, under the warm influence of the soul, the mind and the heart of Léon Harmel, as roses open and breathe out their delightful fragrance under the bright and life-giving action of the sun.

What sublime thoughts! What divine feelings were exchanged between the Good Father and his children! Such delightful moments seemed at first to ward off the illness.

But the fever was wearing him down all the same, imperceptibly, making him endure a purgatory in advance and increasing his great and many merits for Heaven.

On the evening of Friday the 19th, in spite of his great weakness, he begged his daughter, Mrs Paul Saucourt, to dress him and carry him to the chapel adjoining his room. This was done. Before the Blessed Sacrament, which he had been granted a month and a half earlier as a reward for his fine Christian life, in the fullest and finest sense of the word, he made the sacrifice of his life and burst into tears, not because of his condition, but at the thought of the great grief his death was going to cause his daughter, who had nursed him with so much affection and devotedness for 34 years. Kneeling beside him, she tried to console him: "If I weep," he said, "it is not for

myself, but it pains me so much to leave you alone, and never to see the Val again, my beloved children who have stayed there and my dear workers. In spite of all that, I want absolutely to do the holy will of God; I submit to it entirely; I ask Him to do what He wills, without standing on ceremony with me."

Ah! is that not the expression of his apostle's heart, forgetting itself to think of others? His mouth spoke, in the words of Jesus, out of the abundance of his heart. Then, after a few moments of calm, he offered his resignation to death to Jesus in the Host, whom he so often went to visit at the Carmel of Nice and at the chapel of the Sacred Heart (where he was the inspirer and the apostle of the Friday adoration); his chapel was then his Gethsemane.

Then he went back to his bed to begin there the ascent of Calvary, softened, it is true, by Holy

Communion as viaticum, which he had the happiness of receiving during his nine days of illness. His beloved daughter, wishing to do violence to Heaven and to hope against all hope, prayed and had others pray, and hastily called in other doctors. Alas! the Doctors could only confirm the fever, already eight days old, and the congestion of one lung.

Shortly afterwards bronchopneumonia set in: the situation was hopeless. Father Donetta, on being informed, hurried there at once on the morning of Sunday the 21st to confer Extreme Unction on the Good Father. The whole family present, kneeling around Léon Harmel's bed, recited the litany of the Saints, while the priest made the holy anointings on the patient, who had all his lucidity of mind (which he would keep to the end) and enjoyed a calm and a resignation that were quite remarkable. That same day, 21 November, at nightfall, Father Donetta came back to give Léon Harmel the absolution granted to Tertiaries at the point of death.

On Monday the fever did not go down; the doctor's only treatment consisted of injections, which were repeated several times a day. The

family asked for another doctor on Tuesday morning. After examining the patient, he declared that he had one chance in a hundred of saving him, but refused to treat him, knowing that he was in the hands of another doctor. In vain they begged him to give his care to the patient.

Obtaining nothing, they decided on a consultation for Wednesday evening. But it tired the patient greatly, and at seven o'clock he was much weaker. Abbé Donetta was called and all the children gathered round his bed. At half past seven in the evening, a fit of suffocation announced to all those around him that the Good Father, after the ascent of Golgotha, was nailed to the cross. From half past seven until two o'clock on Thursday morning his strength went on declining. When the first crisis had passed, the Good Father's children and his servants came to receive his last farewell, his blessing: "My dear Maurice, I bless you with your good little wife;

"My dear Anna, I bless you; Pierre, Gabrielle, Jean, I shall protect you;

"Julien, I bless you; Charles, his wife, the children, Cécile and Antoine;

"My good little Laurence, I bless you with your good little André whom I love so much;

"My little Paul, I bless you; listen carefully to Granny; Fernande and Germaine, above all listen carefully to Granny. My dear Marthe, I bless you with your children, your good Jeanne, her husband, her children, Jacques, his wife and his children, my dear Gabriel and his family.

"I bless Léon, his wife, his children;

"I bless my dear Alphonse, a prisoner over there, Marguerite and their children."

"I bless all my family, all, all;

"I bless the Val, my dear workers, the Prudhommeaux family. In heaven I shall forget no one, I shall protect you;

Then they all knelt down, and the venerable patient raised both his hands towards heaven and said, in a loud and firm voice into which passed all the strength and all the sweetness of his father’s heart: “May God bless you, all my dear children! In thought and in heart I gather you all together, present and absent.” And he left to all, as the spiritual bouquet of his apostle’s life, the motto of his seal, which he spoke stressing each syllable: “Union, the work of life; division, the work of death. All through the Sacred Heart.” This patriarchal and touching scene lasted about half an hour. Towards nine in the evening Father Donetta arrived to stay at the patient’s bedside and to invite him to have great confidence in his beloved Jesus. He was to remain there until three in the morning, a moved witness of the faith, the hope and the charity of the Good Father.

The agony was painful, but so edifying for all who witnessed it. How beautiful it was to see the actions and hear the words of his beloved daughter and of his daughters-in-law, devoted like true apostles: one held out to him the crucifix he had received from Pope Pius X, to which the *Toties quoties* indulgence was attached; another suggested a pious invocation to him; this one exhorted him to unite his sufferings with those of Jesus crucified; that one leaned over the Good Father to say to him: “Courage, dearest papa, soon the good Jesus will receive you into His beautiful heaven”; and all of them told their beads for the dear dying man.

During the recitation of these many “Hail Marys”, the Good Father gave a moved look, a kindly smile and an expressive gesture towards the Most Holy Virgin, whose picture hung on the wall facing his bed. He was then heard murmuring a prayer, without anyone quite making out what it could be; his daughter, Mrs Saucourt, caught these two words: *Mater misericordiæ*. Nothing more was needed for Father Donetta to understand the Good Father’s thought, and leaning to the patient’s ear, he repeated the prayer in full: *Maria mater gratiæ — mater misericordiæ — tu nos ab hoste protege — et*

mortis hora suscipe. — The patient, who had for some time been somewhat restless, repeated this invocation word for word, and after these last words, *et mortis hora suscipe*, which he pronounced with greater force, he sank into a recollected calm until his last breath. This detail did not escape those present, who were deeply edified by it. Towards two o'clock his breathing became more jerky and his pulse grew weaker. The words of the *Ave Maria* could still be made out on the patient's lips. The Good Father very gently gave back his soul to God towards half past two in the morning, with a last absolution.

At once, by a delicate attention of Providence towards one of its best sons, two priests followed each other at the altar, and all Léon Harmel's children and servants received Holy Communion. Immediately after his death, the Good Father's soul had received the fruits of two Masses, of 16 Communions and of many plenary indulgences. By a wholly providential circumstance, that same morning the Bishop was informed of Léon Harmel's death just at the moment of the offertory. And, by a wonderful privilege, the Holy Father celebrated Mass the next day for the Good Father, while Mgr Tiberghien had Masses celebrated in the principal sanctuaries of Rome for Léon Harmel, who had so often visited them.

Does not this series of surprising and unprecedented facts recall the well-known saying: "God never lets Himself be outdone in generosity"?

The Good Father died as he had lived, in the love of God and of his neighbour: "The summary," says Jesus, "of the whole Law."

That is why the Sovereign Pontiff saw fit to have his Secretary of State send to Mrs Paul Saucourt, the privileged and so devoted child of the Good Father, a long telegram, of which this is the full text:

"ROME. — Holy Father Benedict XV has just learned with keen sorrow painful news of the death of your venerable and deeply mourned Good Father, Mr Léon Harmel, whose qualities of mind and

heart he had appreciated, his profound devotedness to the Church, his constant care to conform to the directions of the Holy See in social works, and, praying God to grant eternal reward to this most deserving Christian, shares your mourning and that of your family and sends you all most heartily the apostolic blessing. Please accept my sincere personal condolences.

“*Signed:* Cardinal Gasparri.”

To this telegram was added that of Mgr Tiberghien, announcing that the Holy Father was saying Mass for the Good Father and that he himself was having Masses celebrated in the principal sanctuaries of Rome.

Then very many telegrams and letters from the relatives and friends of the family.

Such a death, the worthy crowning of so Christian and so apostolic a life, called for a funeral to match. The Bishop of Nice came to sprinkle holy water on the mortal remains of the Good Father on the evening of Thursday the 25th, and expressed the wish to preside at the funeral two days later, on Saturday, at ten o’clock, at Sainte-Hélène. The church was too small to hold the very numerous congregation, whose bearing, recollection and piety showed that it belonged to the elite of society: the relatives, friends and acquaintances of the Good Father.

At ten o’clock, Canon Gasiglia, parish priest, performed the raising of the body. The mortal remains had been laid in the family oratory, where the Good Father loved to spend whole hours in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, which was, in the literal sense, the “*dimidium animæ meæ*” of the Good Father!

The procession was preceded by the children, boys and girls, of the “Apraxime” school, of which the Good Father was a benefactor. Then came a delegation of Don Bosco’s boys, numerous clergy and, by a kind attention of the Bishop, the whole major seminary.

Along the route of the procession, a respectful crowd.

The church was adorned with its great first-class hangings, and the huge catafalque, discreetly decorated with green plants, was thus in better harmony with the hearse and the coffin, which bore neither flowers nor wreaths, according to the express wish of the venerable deceased.

The service was presided over by the Bishop, assisted by the Vicars General Cappatti and Nicolas; the Mass was celebrated by the chaplain of Lenval.

The chants were performed by cantors chosen from among the best. The organ was played by Mr Ch. Fay, an admirer of the Good Father.

After the Mass, the Bishop of Nice went up into the pulpit to deliver the funeral oration of Léon Harmel. It was a magnificent breath of eloquence, reminding the people of Nice, and revealing to strangers, that His Lordship is a master of the art of oratory, but also bearing out the saying of Quintilian: *“Pectus est quod disertos facit.”* The Bishop was very fond of the Good Father, whose Christian democratic social action he admired above all; he was therefore bound to lead his audience up to the lofty summits of Parnassus. This magnificent funeral oration is reproduced in full below. His Lordship himself gave the absolution, then, in the square in front of the church, a last blessing symbolising the supreme action, the farewell on radiant and immortal wings.

The procession set off towards Caucade, led by the parish priest, who, quite exceptionally, in memory of the Good Father, his faithful parishioner, went as far as the cemetery to bless the temporary vault where the mortal remains of Léon Harmel now rest, until they are taken to Val-des-Bois.

May this pious and imposing funeral ceremony engrave for ever in the minds and hearts of all its saddened witnesses the word of the Divine Master: “Blessed is the servant whom his Master finds at his work when he comes unexpectedly.”

A Friend of the Good Father.

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ADDRESS

delivered by the Bishop of Nice
in the Church of Sainte-Hélène, Nice, on 27 November 1915
at the funeral of Mr Léon HARMEL

My Brethren,

This is not the hour for long speeches. The tragic events which call us to action and to struggle, and keep us there, each at our post, leave us no time to praise our dead — we scarcely have time to mourn them.

And yet I would feel I was failing in a duty if I let the mortal remains of the humble and great Christian whose funeral we are celebrating pass away without saluting him with our veneration and our gratitude, without recalling, to the honour of the Church and of France, the modest but glorious and fruitful work which will make his memory immortal among us.

The work of Léon Harmel is summed up in the name henceforth inseparable from his own: the *Good Father Harmel*. It is not only his 70 children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren (35 of whom are fighting on our battlefields, and several of whom have fallen there gloriously) who give him that name, with the accent that love, veneration, gratitude and filial pride know how to put into it, those three, those four generations (*usque ad tertiam et quartam generationem*) which the patriarchs of old gloried in blessing, as he himself blessed them in his last hour; — this name of Father had been bestowed on him by the 1,200 workers of Val-des-Bois, of whom he was able to

make a second and vast family: to widen the intimate circle of the Christian family, to extend it from the hearth to the mill, to carry it over from the private order to the social order, that is his glorious and fruitful work.

Brought early face to face with the social question by the very demands of his profession, he did not try, like so many others, to deny it, or to evade it, or to take no

interest in it. Ready for all the labours and all the sacrifices that it ordinarily imposes on those who devote themselves to it, he considered and tackled this formidable question of our times with all the more loyalty and resolution because, looking into his soul, he found there, in his Christian faith and in the teachings of the Church, in the light and grace that go with them, the resources needed to solve it. He was always convinced that from the day when the rich and the proletarians, employers and workers, were Christian enough to make these divine teachings prevail in their mutual relations, agreement and peace would not be slow to come about between them in justice and charity.

I say in justice and charity, for unlike certain timid and short-sighted minds, he never believed that charity alone would be enough to pacify a society in which, on more than one point, the rights of the little and the weak have been and still are disregarded; but he was convinced that, on their behalf, the sense of justice had to be reawakened in Christian consciences themselves.

Yet he was no less convinced that justice would remain a virtue without compassion and too often barren, so long as it was not made fruitful by charity, which alone is capable, in the conflicts that divide the classes, of inspiring in the workers the patience and resignation, and in the rich the self-denial and disinterestedness, that are needed so that, in even the most prosperous and the best legally organised society, the rights of the one and the other may be mutually guaranteed in an unshakeable union.

Hence the place that the *Good Father Harmel* won and kept in that illustrious group of social Catholics, beside Mr de Mun and several others. But his glorious distinction lies in this: in the setting where Providence had placed him, he carried out his social and Christian ideal, or at least made, in order to carry it out, the most generous and most fruitful effort that has been attempted so far.

In that vast manufacturing region whose industries are driven by the active waters of the Suippes, Mr Léon Harmel and his brother had founded as early as 1846* a large spinning establishment. Hundreds of workers, most of them without religion and steeped in socialist utopias, as nearly all of them then were, worked there. As soon as he had come to know them and love them (and for him that was one and the same thing), Léon Harmel felt that he had a providential mission among them; and without stopping at the difficulties of the undertaking, he resolved to transform this mass of workers into a family of which he would be the father. Thanks to action as energetic as it was discreet, but intelligent and persevering, he succeeded.

After rekindling, in these hostile or indifferent souls, the faith and charity which were to unite them in religious associations, he grafted onto these associations the most modern economic institutions, intended to provide for their temporal needs. He called them to put forward their claims there, to defend and manage their interests; he invited them, the first to do so, to share in the profits; and it is thus that he brought into being, in the industrial world, that great Christian family whose ideal his faith had revealed to him. His opponents said: A chimera! Indeed it was not without provoking criticism that he brought these things about, and more than once it came to him from the very people who, it would seem, ought to have applauded his designs and his efforts. Several were astonished, almost scandalised,

* **NOTE** Val-des-Bois was bought in 1840 by Jacques-Joseph Harmel, Léon's father, and the spinning mill was running there from 1841. Léon Harmel, born in 1829, took over its effective management at the end of 1854.

to see him combine with his so faithfully traditional faith some bold initiatives, and they did not seem to suspect that it was precisely in the understanding of that faith that he had found their inspiration. Yes, he had found that inspiration in the study and meditation of the Gospel and of its most authoritative commentators. He knew that our old theologians of the Middle Ages, in their claims for the rights of the weak and the little, more than once anticipated and went beyond our modern innovators, who, in their best moments, have been no more than their unconscious and belated echoes.

Moreover, to reassure him and confirm him in his convictions and his undertakings, the “Good Father” had the highest, the most divine authority there is here below. The eyes of Leo XIII were upon him. Attentive as he was to the distress and the aspirations of modern society, the great Pope, as soon as he had met him, had not been slow to discern in Mr Harmel an intelligent, docile and wonderfully active co-operator. In their conversations he had found in the words of Léon Harmel something like an echo of his own thought, of his personal concerns, of his pastoral solicitude; and from then on he never ceased to follow him, to encourage him, to bless him, and when need be to reassure him, to spur him on, to hold him up as an example. And never perhaps did the soul of the old Pontiff pour itself out more eloquently than on that memorable day when Mr Harmel presented to him, beneath the astonished vaults of the Vatican, where they were welcomed as princes were received there, as princes were not received there, those workers to whom, in faith, humility and Christian charity, he had restored, together with the awareness of their duties, the sense of their rights and of their dignity.

And so, when a few months later there appeared that immortal Encyclical *Rerum novarum* on the condition of the workers, destined amid the confusion of systems, through so many reefs and contradictions, to serve as a beacon to our modern societies to lead them towards the achievement of social peace, the *Good Father* Harmel

could, without presumption, recognise in it the doctrines he had always defended and, on more than one page, the echo of his private conversations with Leo XIII.

These events are already distant. Soon seventy years have passed over the great family of Val-des-Bois without changing its spirit or loosening its bonds; and therein lies the pledge of a powerful vitality in days when so many short-lived institutions have seen their ruin hastened. The famous mill is today undergoing the ordeal common to so many great institutions: the desecrating flood of the barbarians has overrun it and perhaps destroyed it. It was the supreme grief of the *Good Father* Harmel to be separated from it in these last days of his life and to die far away from it. But the children of Val-des-Bois have remained faithful to their "Good Father". Scattered for the most part over our battlefields, where several have already paid their glorious and bloody debt to the fatherland, they turned to him and, in admirable letters, asked for his advice and encouragement. The last lines he wrote, vibrant with Christian and patriotic faith and with indomitable confidence in the destiny of Catholic France, were for them, to sustain or revive in their souls that Christian courage which, for fifteen months now, has never ceased to give France so many heroes, almost martyrs.

It is thus that he died, consoled and strengthened in his last hour by the tender blessing of Benedict XV,

in whom he had found again the friendly and fatherly heart of Leo XIII; he passed away like the patriarchs of the old Law, keeping to his last breath, with the serene activity of his intelligence, the gentle radiance of his heart and of his soul upon all those who surrounded him and came to him, blessing, in the persons of the children and grandchildren whom insurmountable obstacles did not keep far from him, that whole great and fine family, to which he bequeathed, and which has faithfully received, the unimpaired inheritance of his faith, his charity and his works. Thus he died, with a prayer on his lips,

pointing us to heaven, carrying towards the God who welcomed him in His mercy the first fruits of our souls.

Is that, then, to die? No, for such dead are more alive than we are. They remain with those who mourn them, they remain with their works, invisible but present, loving and active, helpful and powerful as they never were, even in the most fruitful days of their earthly life.

And that is why it is most often when they have gone that the seed sown and tended by them in sweat and tears, amid obstacles and contradictions, suddenly takes on an unhopd-for growth and flowering.

This will be seen once more when, on the morrow of victory and deliverance, Val-des-Bois rises from its ruins to shelter a new generation of Christian employers and workers. Many of those who will then have at heart to work for our national regeneration will turn towards this oasis, to find there, together with a generous and fruitful inspiration, the model and already the seed of a France that is greater, better and stronger, because it will be truly fraternal and Christian.

It is then too that our gratitude will inscribe indelibly, in the history of the laborious, sorrowful and tragic days we shall have lived through, among the best children of the Church and of France, the for ever blessed name of the *Good Father Harmel*.

Amen!

Extract from the *Semaine Religieuse de Nice*.