

L É O N H A R M E L

**The Good Father Léon Harmel's
Wishes to His Grandchildren**

Val-des-Bois

1906

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 1906 edition. It has been typeset in the spirit of the original: title pages and headings follow the layout of the book; the illustrations have been cut out of the digitised document and restored.

The numbered notes are those of the original work; here they are numbered continuously from beginning to end.

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

leonharmel.com

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VAL-DES-BOIS, Low Sunday

22 April 1906

Wishes of the Good Father Léon HARMEL

TO HIS GRANDCHILDREN

on the occasion of his feast day

and of his recent entry into his 78th year (17 February 1906)



My beloved Grandchildren,

How can I tell you the joy I feel at being among you and receiving the tokens of your warm and open affection! My ears are gladdened by the pearly notes of your good little hearts, acclaiming your old Good Father! The expression of your wishes stirs up waves of tenderness in the very depths of my being, and I wish you could read there the passionate love I have vowed to you.

As the years bring me closer to the end of my pilgrimage, I feel urged to share my soul with you, wishing it to outlive me in you, as a memorial of my fatherhood and the lesson of my long experience.

You are still at the dawn of life, in the season of flowers; but you must think of the future. You must prepare yourselves, from now on, for the harsh struggles that will consume your existence.

Roosevelt, in his book on *la Vie intense*, gives us the right frame of mind. He begins with these valiant words:

“I wish to preach not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, of labour and strife; to preach that highest form of success which comes, not to the man who desires mere easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from

danger, from hardship, from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph¹.

“We do not admire the man of timid peace, we admire the man who embodies victorious effort, the man who never wrongs his neighbour, who is prompt to help his friend, but who has the manly qualities needed to win in the stern strife of present-day life. It is hard to fail, but it is worse never to have tried to succeed. In this life we get nothing save by effort².”

In another place, Roosevelt quotes the gentlest of the poets of his country, who begins thus:

“Be bold! be bold! and everywhere be bold! better the excess than the defect³.”

Paul Doumer, in a thought-provoking work entitled *Livre de mes fils*, sums up his chapter on will and character as follows:

“From an early age, young men must work at the formation of their will, at the moral development of their person; this must be their first and chief concern. To achieve a result, to learn to will, one must apply oneself to it with resolution and constancy. One must exercise one’s will without truce, without rest, and apply it to one’s own improvement, as well as to all the acts of life.

“The aim is to make oneself a man of character, master of himself, able to direct his life, to govern his actions, to be the maker of his own happiness and of the happiness of others, to serve his country usefully and to do it honour⁴.

I. — Will and duty

And I in my turn, my beloved grandchildren, say to you:

1. *Vie intense*, page 1.

2. *Vie intense*, page 2.

3. Id., page xxx.

4. *Livre de mes fils*, page 33.

Apply the energy of your will to the practice of duty. Duty carries its reward with it. Even when it might seem contrary to the narrow interest of the moment, be assured that it agrees with the interest of tomorrow, that is to say with the higher interest.

Do not fear obstacles. For the courageous, they are means. They force us to increase our effort and consequently to become stronger.

Hold fast to realities. Do not let your imagination carry you away into the land of dreams. Accept resolutely the situation in which God has placed you, so as to make the most of it. When we do not have what we love, we must love what we have: a very wise proverb that gives the key to happiness. Instead of wasting your time in vain re-creminations and useless regrets, which kill energy, set to work courageously, and you will succeed beyond your expectations.

The man without will, even if he is endowed with great intelligence, has only a very weak influence on his own fate. He is the plaything of events. He complains of destiny, of everything and everyone, except himself, the chief author of his ills.

Be convinced of it, my beloved grandchildren: with an energetic and persevering will, enlightened by the right frame of mind, you will yourselves be the makers of your happiness.

II. — The Christian life

At our gathering of 1 January, I spoke to you of the treasure of faith.

The supernatural life begins here below, to continue throughout eternity, for ever and ever. It rules over our fleeting life, our business and our undertakings, which are no doubt the duties of our state in life, but fragile in their duration. Do not sacrifice the principal to the accessory; apply yourselves first and foremost to being valiant Christians.

Now, the Christian life is summed up in the Eucharist, the masterpiece of the love and power of a God. It is there that humanity comes

to draw the inspiration and the strength for every sublime virtue, every divine fruitfulness.

It is before this silent bread, motionless, unmoved by outrages, that millions of men have followed one another, repeating the words of Peter: Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

It is through the Eucharist that Jesus reigns over humanity, that He is truly glorified and that He glorifies His Father.

And now at Lourdes the Immaculate Virgin has stepped aside before her divine Son. It is around the golden monstrance, to the invocations that once rang out in Galilee, that there now take place , through Jesus in the Host, the miracles that marked the passage of God made man on earth.

Our dear Félix, whose memory I always love to recall, was faithful to daily Mass and weekly Communion, which he called the family Communion. He had promised Our Lord to place His adorable name in all the speeches, toasts and addresses he would deliver. He did so with such perfect tact that, even in worldly circles, that blessed name sounded like a harmonious echo of the beyond.

One may say that the Christian frame of mind is a Eucharistic frame of mind. Be faithful to it, my beloved grandchildren, and let your will remain fixed on that pole of love, the source of all energy and all heroism.

III. — The life of business

After the Christian life, I must speak of the life of business.

These are the duties of our state in life. Every man must work to live, and he must wish his work to be productive, since the comfort of his family depends on it.

Carnegie is a master in this matter, and, while rejecting his ideas hostile to the family, we must acknowledge that he holds the secret of

the Empire of Business. Now he begins his book with this praise of poverty:

“It is because I know how much sweetness, happiness and purity there is in a home where honest poverty reigns, how free that home is from cares and quarrels, how strong is the affection that unites its members, that I pity the rich man’s son and congratulate the poor child. And it is for this reason that what is great and good has always come, and will always come, from the ranks of the poor. In our day everyone calls for the abolition of poverty. I would ask nothing better than to see luxury abolished, but to abolish poverty would be to destroy the only soil capable of providing humanity with the virtues that allow it to reach a higher degree of civilization⁵.”

My grandfather, Jacques Harmel, the founder of our dynasty, thought likewise when, in the evening of his life, he said to my mother: “I shall pray the good Lord that my children may never be rich.” My mother, on her deathbed, passed on to me the same wishes, which I in my turn shall pass on to you.

For indeed luxury, the inevitable fruit of wealth, quickly brings down what several generations have built.

“It takes more virtues to keep a fortune than to amass it; the strength that built it is seldom enough to bear it. Families are dynasties of virtues; everything declines as soon as that sceptre slips from their hands.

“The reins of effort must constantly keep a man’s head held high. As soon as they slacken, the will sinks and pride grows accordingly⁶.”

That is why, my beloved grandchildren, as long as you remain in business, you must work like poor men. Regard simplicity and thrift as the true foundations of prosperity.

5. *L'Empire des Affaires*, pages 8 and 9.

6. *La Douleur*, by Blanc de Saint-Bonnet, page 75.

At the start of your married life, spend little. Are not youth, health and love at the hearth enough for happiness?⁷.

On all these important points, reread the will of the Good Father, Jacques-Joseph Harmel (I attach it to these wishes). It is a masterpiece of practical wisdom. It was he who built the Val-des-Bois mill in 1840. The masses of stone bound with cement, which the pickaxe cannot demolish, are an image of that robust nature, in which duty was served by an austere will and unremitting work.

From his will I shall quote only this sentence: *When one is in business, one must be in it wholly, and not by halves.*

If you follow this advice, you will learn to tell the necessary from the useful, and truly productive occupations from insignificant details.

According as this discernment is complete, you will do the work of a giant instead of the work of a squirrel.

That is what we call the right frame of mind, an essential quality that ensures success when it is served by a will of iron, a will that sacrifices ignoble ease (as Roosevelt says), comfort, leisure, everything except health, to the pursuit of the success of the enterprise.

But I cannot hide it from you, my beloved grandchildren: the union of these two forces is very rare, and that is why so many good people, even hard-working ones, remain in mediocrity; they lack either will or the right frame of mind.

You must therefore boldly place yourselves among the exceptions, if you wish to be worthy of your name and of what God expects of you.

Flee speculation as the certain source of ruin, and gambling as a criminal act. Do not let yourselves be deluded by the contrary appearances that reckless people may dangle before your eyes. They are will-o'-the-wisps that lead to the abyss.

7. Let us take an example: a thousand francs saved each year make, after forty years, a capital of one hundred and twenty-five thousand francs.

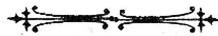


My beloved grandchildren, I have set out my wishes for you on the Christian life and the life of business. I would still have to speak to you of several important subjects, notably the family and your social mission.

I shall do so later. One must know how to keep within limits.

I sum up in a few words: be joyful to show yourselves everywhere and always valiant servants of Christ and courageous followers of duty.

Do not fear toil, effort, the struggle of life. Be bold against every obstacle. As long as you keep this frame of mind, if you have God with you and a noble goal to reach, you will be able to go on your way with confidence, sure of honouring the name you bear and of gladdening the heart of your Good Father.



Aphorisms of the Good Father

The worst way of doing wrong is to do nothing.

It is so sweet to be good! God alone has of Himself the power to be good. Insofar as He grants us this power, He admits us to a share in His divine action. Let us therefore miss no opportunity offered to us, and each time let us raise our gratitude to Him who allows us to be good.

It is so sweet to be good!

It is not enough to be pious; one must also be good.

A man is worth what he wills, as gold is worth what it weighs. If he wills nothing, he is worth nothing. If he wills evil, he is bad. If he wills perfection, he is perfect.

Gentleness is the splendour of humility.

Revenge is the pleasure of the gods, said a pagan philosopher. It is true in the sense that this satisfaction costs so dear that one must be a God to be able to afford it.

The sign of God is the persecution of the good.

Extract from the will of Ernest Harmel:

Rightly regard as an enemy anyone who seeks to divide you. If someone reports to you either an unkind remark or a wrong act of your brother's, do not argue, and answer without hesitation: that is not true! If you are offered to be persuaded by other witnesses, do not accept, and answer again: that is not true! Experience will always prove you right. The wicked are not the only ones exposed to the errors of the tongue: the best of men, when he speaks ill of another, lies without knowing it, without even suspecting it. You will do him a service by answering him: that is not true; you will oblige him to reflect, and, if he is in good faith, he will acknowledge his error.

Teasing and unkind are often the same thing. Shun teasing, for fear of wounding your best friend beyond repair, even without meaning to.

Always starting again without losing heart is often the only way to finish.

The key to happiness:

When we do not have what we love, we must love what we have.

The family meal is a sacrament. It is the outward sign of the union of minds and hearts.

Let us never forget the solidarity that exists between the members of one family: whether they wish it or not, this solidarity obliges them to help one another.

Rule for decisions:

Between two honest means of reaching a praiseworthy goal, take the one that is most repugnant to you, and be sure that it will be the more fruitful.

Events are the messengers that convey God's will to us. Let us receive their indications with respect and submission. Illness points to rest and the way of suffering. An obstacle calls for our effort. Failure shows the need for reforms. Contradiction prompts our reflection.

A well-ordered life is a life doubled.

Sell like a rich man, buy like a poor man.

To govern is to compromise.

