The Practice of the Presence of God

Brother Lawrence

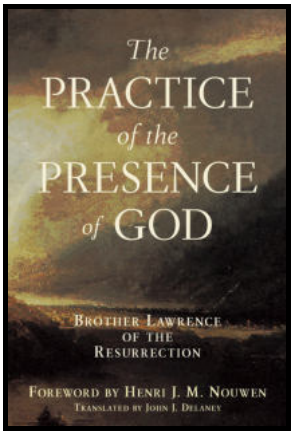
(Originally published in 16894. New translation by John J. Delaney in 1977.)

"Lord of all pots and pans and things,
Make me a saint by preparing meals
And washing up the plates."
– Brother Lawrence

Introduction

Brother Lawrence (c. 1614-91).

- Nicolas Herman.
- Brother Lawrence served as a lay brother in a Carmelite monastery in Paris for 50 years.
- Author of *The Practice of the Presence of God* (1694).
- A man of little formal education.
- Terrifying experiences in the Thirty Years War (1618-48).
- A spiritual awakening:
  - "God granted him an exceptional grace in his conversion which took place, while he was still in the world, when he was eighteen.... While looking at a tree stripped of its leaves and reflecting that before long its leaves would reappear anew, then its flowers and fruits would bloom, he received an insight into the providence and the power of God, which was never erased from his soul; that this insight had completely detached him from the world, and gave him a love for [the greatness and love of] God." [23]
- An unfulfilled hermit.
- "Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection" and the Discalced Carmelites.



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The Discalced Carmelite Order.

- The Carmelite Order (est. early 1200s).
  - A center on Mount Carmel.
    - The prophet Elijah v. the prophets of Baal (I Kings 18:16-46).
  - An order of friars – monastics who serve their community through the establishment of schools, universities, retreat centers, prisons and hospitals.
- The Order of the Discalced Carmelite Order (est. 1562).
  - A spiritual reform movement with roots in the contemplative spiritual tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers.
  - Teresa of Ávila (1515-82).
  - John of the Cross (1542-91).

Life and Ministry.

- Life in the monastery kitchen.
- Early spiritual struggles.
  - "I must tell you... that during the first ten years I endured great [mental] suffering."
- The blessing of "ineffable happiness and joy".
  - "I suddenly found myself changed and my soul, which up till then was always disturbed, experienced a profound interior peace." [6-7]
- Through humility and simplicity, he learned to maintain an inward focus on Jesus.
  - "No conceited scholar was Brother Lawrence. Theological and doctrinal debates bored him.... His one desire was for communion with God....

    "Wherever he was, the Light was there. He showed us how... the soul that seeks God may find Him, and practice the presence of God."
- A reputation as a man of gentle temperament, faith, wisdom, and character.
  - A priest: "Lawrence was open, eliciting confidence, letting you feel you could tell him anything.... Once you got past the rough exterior you discovered unusual wisdom, a freedom beyond the reach of the ordinary lay brother."
  - He was content to live a simple, humble and quiet life. [I Thes. 4:11; I Tim. 2:2]
  - The archbishop of Paris: Brother Lawrence "forgot himself and was willing to lose himself for God and that he had always served others in a spirit of love and humility."

The Practice of the Presence of God: An Overview

- The basic theme: The development of a constant awareness of the presence of God and a constant dialogue with Him via the internal presence of the Holy Spirit.
  - The ultimate goal in life is knowing and loving God so that one might be worthy of celestial union with God for all of eternity.
  - John J. Delaney: "Here is a man who has found a way to be always in the presence of God.... Though he knew the perfect union can take place only after death, he believed we can achieve a far greater degree of unity with God in this life than most people think is possible. The way to accomplish this is through practicing the presence of God." [16]

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- The process of loving God with all one's heart.
  (1) Abandon oneself totally to God without reservation.
  (2) Constant conversation with God regarding all matters.
- Few persons attain this state; it is a state that God grants only to certain chosen souls.
  - "All who earnestly strive to attain this state of spiritual union with God will be blessed."
- True prayer was not discursive (mental) prayer but a contemplative lifestyle.
  - A way of living in the presence of God so that everything we think, say and do becomes a prayer.
- In the community of Christ there is no hierarchical social class system.
- From the Foreword by Henri J. M. Nouwen:
  - "Our lives are fragmented. There are so many things to do, so many events to worry about, so many people to think of, so many experiences to work through, so many tasks to fulfill, so many demands to respond to, and so many needs to pay attend to. Often it seems that just keeping things together asks for enormous energy. Different powers pull us into different directions and our sense of unity and togetherness is constantly threatened.... [We often feel like] passive victims of great powers that control us and seem very hard to resist."

    "[As a result, we feel] disconnected, alienated and bored.... and an inner emptiness.

    "When I was exposed to his thoughts for the first time, they seemed simple, even somewhat naive and unrealistic, but the deeper I entered into them and the longer I reflected on them, the more I became aware that Brother Lawrence's advice to walk constantly in the presence of God is not just a nice idea for a 17th-century monk but a most important challenge to our present-day situation....

    "In the presence of God life became very simple for him. This simpleness of life, however, was the result of a long struggle.... The simple is very difficult."

    "[Ironically], this single-minded concern for God does not lead us away from people but, to the contrary, closer to them.... When we look at the world as a great wagon wheel of which we are the spokes and God the hub, it becomes clear that our first task is to remain anchored in the hub. There in the center we find ourselves most closely connected with each other." [1-3]

Quietism.

- Brother Lawrence is often (but erroneously?) associated with "Quietism".
- Quietism: Spiritual perfection is achieved through "union with God".
- The controversy regarding Christian "perfectionism".
  - A state of sinlessness, or the cessation of desire to sin?
  - John J. Delaney: The goal [of Quietism] is total passivity.... All spirituality is reduced to the simple working of God in oneself, and in a complete indifference to everything, even to virtue and to one's own salvation.... A state of mind in which one's will is crucified and all effort or desire is extinguished to the point that "sin is impossible." [12]

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- Sin and human nature.
    - Rom. 3:23.
    - Heb. 12:1.
    - Phil. 2:12-13.
    - Gal. 6:9-10.
    - Eph. 5:15-16.
    - Eph. 6:10-12.
- Miguel de Molinos, *Spiritual Guide* (1675).
    - All activity – spiritual or otherwise – disrupts passive receptivity.

    [NOTE: This is a Buddhist concept of meditation in which one "empties" one's mind of all thought. By contrast, Christian mediation fills our hearts and minds with what is "true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy" – Phil. 4:8.]
    - God allows sin in order to discipline and purify the soul, so it is wrong to resist temptation.
    - A controversial figure.
    - In 1687 Molinos the Inquisition convicted Molinos of heresy and sentenced him to life in prison.
- Madame Jeanne Guyon, *A Short and Very Easy Method of Prayer* (a.k.a. *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ,* circa 1685).
    - Spiritual perfection was attainable by praying without ceasing.
    - In 1687 Mdm. Guyon was charged with heresy and imprisoned for12 years.
- Quietism in Christian history:
    - The "Gnostic Gospels".
    - Medieval dissident and reformist groups such as Beguines, the Beghards, and the Cathars (Albigensees).
    - Meister Eckhard (c. 1260-1328): True spiritual Christians can transcend their sin nature by experiencing "union with God" in which they are transformed just as the bread is changed into the literal body of Christ in the sacrament of transubstantiation.
    - Eastern Orthodox Hesychasm: "The supreme aim of life on earth is the contemplation of the uncreated light whereby man is intimately united with God."
    - Protestantism "pietism" limits discipleship to one's personal devotional life, commitment to one's family and involvement in church to the exclusion of the broader issues of life.
    - George Fox and Quakerism.

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Major Themes and Insights

On the Spiritual State of Humanity:

- A realistic assessment of our humanity.
- The discipline of suffering. [85]
- The virtue of perseverance.
- "We must watch carefully our impulses which affect our spiritual life." [24]
- Reliance upon God's grace. [38]
- The discipline of practicing the presence of God.
  - "You are not the only one troubled by wandering thoughts; our mind constantly wanders.

    "When the mind is [undisciplined] from the beginning it has acquired bad habit of wandering and dissipation which are difficult to overcome and usually draw us, even against our will, to worldly things.

    "I think one remedy for this is to confess our faults and humble ourselves before God; I do not advise much talking in prayer, long discourses often being the cause of wandering. Present yourself in prayer to God like a [mute] and paralytic beggar at a rich man's door; concentrate on keeping your mind in the presence of the Lord; if it sometimes wanders and withdraws itself from Him, do not let it upset you;... the will must be brought back calmly; if you persevere in this way, God will have pity on you.

    "[This is] the practice of the presence of God." [63-64]

Christian Religion and Christian Spirituality:

- "It is not necessary to be always in church to be with God; we can make a private chapel of our heart where we can retire from time to time to commune with Him, peacefully, humbling, lovingly; everyone is capable of these intimate conversations with God." [52]
- "It is a great delusion to think that time set aside for prayer should be [qualitatively more spiritual than] other times. We are equally obliged to be united to God by work in the time assigned... as by prayer during prayer time." [38]

On Communion With God:

- "If I were a preacher, I would preach nothing else but the practice of the presence of God." [48]
- "The soul that is joined to God has no other desire than to be with Him." [57]
- "Let us devote ourselves entirely to knowing God." [81]
- "I cannot understand how religious people [i.e., truly committed Christians] can live contented lives without the practice of the presence of God. For myself, I withdraw as much as I can to the deepest recesses of my soul with Him, and while I am thus with Him I fear nothing; but the least turning away from Him is hell for me....

  "God does not allow a soul entirely devoted to Him to have any other pleasure than with Him." [49, 50]
- "We should establish ourselves in the presence of God by continually talking to Him, and it is a shameful thing to allow thoughts of trivial things to break into this conversation." [24]

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- "Our only concern in this life is to please God.... Let us renounce fully for His love everything that is not of Himself;... let us think of Him continually, let us put all our confidence in Him."
  Our calling as Christians is to "think [continually] of God, by day and by night; in all your pursuits and duties; [and] even in your recreations [leisure time]...." [65, 66, 68]

A Personal Testimony:

- "On my entrance into religion [i.e., into true spiritual life through faith in Jesus Christ] I resolved to give myself entire to God in reparations for my sins, and to renounce everything else for his love.
  "During my early years I meditated in my prayers on death, judgment, hell, paradise and my sins. I continued in this manner for several years, assiduously devoting myself the rest of the day, even during my work, to the presence of God whom I felt was always near me, often in the deepest recesses of my heart...."
  "Gradually I found myself doing the same thing during the time formally set aside for prayer which caused me great delight and great consolation. I must tell you that during the first ten years I endured great suffering; the apprehension of not being with god as I wish, my sins constantly on my mind... were the cause and source of all my difficulties....
  "Just as I thought I must live out my life beset by these difficulties and anxieties... I suddenly found myself changed and my soul, which up till then was always disturbed, experienced a profound interior peace as if it had found its center and a place of peace.
  "Since that time I have walked before God, in simplicity and faith, with humility and love, and I have labored diligently to do, say and think only what would please Him....
  "As to what I am now experiencing, I cannot express it in words: I have no difficulty with or doubt about my [spiritual] state as I have no other will but God's....
  "I have given up all my non-obligatory devotions and prayers and concentrate on being always in His holy presence. I keep myself in His presence by simple attentiveness – an habitual, silent and secret conversation of the soul with God; which sometimes causes me interior, and often exterior, happiness and joy....
  "I have no doubt at all that my soul has been with God for more than thirty years....
  "I regard myself as the most wretched of all men, stinking and covered with sores, and as one who has committed all sorts of crimes against his King. Overcome by remorse, I confess all my wickedness to Him, ask His pardon and abandon myself entirely to Him to do with as He will. But this King, filled with goodness and mercy, far from chastising me, lovingly embraces me.... He talks with me and is delighted with me.... He forgives me and relieves me of my principle bad habits without talking about them....
  "As for time formally set aside for prayer, it is only a continuation of this same exercise. Sometimes I think of myself as a block of stone before a sculptor, reading to be sculpted into a statue, presenting myself thus to God and I beg Him to form His perfect image in my soul and make me entirely like Himself." [53-56]

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On Faith, Hope and Charity [Love]:

- "Only faith, hope and [love] are needed to become united to the will of God." [39]
- "Do not burden yourself with rules or particular devotions but act with faith, with love and with humility." [52]

On Christian Discipleship:

- "Take our happiness in doing [God's] will whether He leads us by suffering or by consolations," for none of this matters "to the soul truly resigned to His will." [24]
- Brother Lawrence expected, after the happiness God had given him, that he would experience pain and suffering, but he did not worry about it since he knew that God would not fail to give him the strength to bear the pain and suffering. [29]
- "One must carefully differentiate between the actions of the understanding and those of the will; that the former are of little value, and the latter, all...." [31]
- "We must persevere since in the spiritual life not to advance is to retreat." [45]
- Prudence is "the mother of all the virtues." [88]
- Letters to the abbess of a local community of nuns:
  - "If our love for God is great, we will love Him entirely in sorrow and in joy." [82]
  - "God knows best what we need and everything He does is for our good." [81]
    - I John 4:16.
  - "God often permits us to suffer a little to purify our souls and to bring us to Him....
    - Heb. 10:36.
  - "I am not asking God to deliver you from your sufferings, but I do ask Him earnestly to give you the strength and patience to endure them as long as He wishes you to. Comfort yourself with Him who keeps you fastened to the cross. He will release you from it when He deems it proper. Happy are those who suffer with Him.... The world does not understand these truths.... They regard sickness as an affliction of nature and not as a gift from God. But those who look upon sickness as coming from God, as a consequence of His mercy and as a means for their salvation, ordinarily bear it with great contentment and solace.

    "God is often nearer in times of illness and weakness than when we are in a perfect state of health....

    "Be satisfied with the state God has designated for you...." [69-70]
    - Rom. 8:28.
    - Phil. 4:19.

On His Own Fate in Life:

- Brother Lawrence "was concerned about nothing and feared nothing, asking of God only one thing, that he not offend Him.... He gave no thought to death, nor to his sins, nor to paradise, nor to hell but only to doing little things for the love of God.... That whatever happened to him after that would not bother him since it was God's will." [31]

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On His Own Fate in Life:

- "The greater perfection a soul aspires to, the more dependent it is upon grace." [39]
- "I have entered the religious life solely for the love of God. I have tried to live only for Him; whether I am damned or saved, I desire to continue to live only for the love of God; I shall at least be able to say, right up to my death, that I have done my utmost to love Him." [28]
- "I have been near death several times and have never been so content as then; and so I did not ask for relief but rather for the strength to suffer courageously, humbly and lovingly.... If we wish to enjoy the peace of paradise in this life, we must accustom ourselves to an intimate, humble and loving conversation with Him." [I Thes. 5:17]

  "We must prevent our minds from wandering away from Him on any occasion. We must make our hearts a sanctuary where we adore Him continually. We must ever be on the alert not to do anything, say anything or think anything that might displease Him....

  "I know that to arrive at this state at the beginning is very difficult, that we must act entirely in faith. [Heb. 11:6]

  "We also know that we can do all with the grace of the Lord and he does not withhold His grace from those who earnestly ask Him for it." [Phil. 4:13]

  "Knock on His door and keep on knocking and I assure you that if you are not discouraged, He will open it in His own good time and give you all at once what He has withheld for years." [Rev. 3:20] [79-80]
- Death is inevitable, "so let us be prepared." [45]
- "Let us be devoted to Him in earnest, banishing from our hearts and minds all else.... If on our part we do the best we can, we will soon see in ourselves the changes that we are hoping for....I hope through His mercy the grace of seeing Him in a few days." [82]

Spiritual Maxims

The "Road to Perfection".

- "All things are possible to him who believes, more to him who hopes, still more to him who loves, and most of all to him who perseveres in the practice of these three virtues. All those who are baptized (!) and believe have taken the first step on the road to perfection and may become perfect if they persevere in the practice of the following maxims: [85]

(1) "Always seek God and His glory to everything we do, say and undertake." [85]

(2) "When we enter upon the spiritual life, we should consider in depth who we are [i.e., a realistic assessment of our gifts, our limitations, our temperament, and the present state of our spiritual maturity and the general state of our soul] and we will find ourselves deserving of all contempt, unworthy of the name Christian – in short, persons whom God must humble with an infinite variety of suffering and travails [both internally (mentally and emotionally) as well as externally (i.e., situationally)]."

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(3) "We must believe that this is for our own good, that it is pleasing to God to sacrifice ourselves to Him [and] to suffer all kinds of miseries and temptations for the love of God, since without this submission of the heart and mind to the will of God, devotion and perfection cannot exist."

(4) "The greater the perfection a soul seeks, the more dependent it is on grace. The world, human nature and the devil wage a war so fierce and so continual that without this actual help and this humble and necessary dependence, they will carry the soul away in spite of itself." [86]

"Practices Necessary to Attain the Spiritual Life."

(1) "The holiest, most common, most necessary practice in the spiritual life is the presence of God;... and especially in times of temptation, suffering, spiritual aridity, disgust and even of unfaithfulness and sin."

(2) "We must continually work hard so that each of our actions is a way of carrying on little conversations with God, not in any carefully prepared way but as it comes from the purity and simplicity of the heart."

(3) "We must carry out all of our actions with care and with wisdom... [by] continual mindfulness of God." [87]

(4) "During our work and other activities, during our spiritual reading and writing, even more so during our formal devotions and spoken prayers we should stop as often as we can, for a moment, to adore God from the bottom of our hearts...."

(5) "All of these acts of adoration should be made by faith, knowing that God is truly in our hearts, that we must adore, love and serve Him in spirit and truth, that He sees everything that happens to us. In justice we owe Him all our thoughts, our words and our actions." [88]

(6) "We must carefully ascertain what virtues we most need, which are the most difficult to acquire, the sins we fall into most often, and the most frequent occasions of such falls. In times of temptation we should have recourse to God with complete confidence,... tell Him of our troubles and weaknesses and ask Him for the help of His grace, and we will find in Him all the virtues we ourselves lack." [89]

"How We Must Adore God in Spirit and in Truth."

(1) "God is a spirit, therefore He must be worshiped in spirit and in truth – that is to say, by humble and genuine adoration from the very depths of our soul.... [T]his adoration if repeated often will eventually become natural for us as if God were one with our soul and our soul one with God."

(2) "To adore God in truth is to know Him for [who and] what He is and to know ourselves for [who and] what we are." [91]

(3) "God wishes very much to make us like Him if we [are willing]." [92]

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"Ways of Acquiring the Presence of God."

(1) We must "purify" our lives.
(2) We must "practice His presence" in such a way that is "quiet, humble and loving."
(3) Do not be discouraged when you fail since this habit is difficult to master – "but once you have acquired it, you will experience great joy." [97]
(4) Use words and short phrases to refocus your attention on the Spirit of God within. [NOTE: This is a meaningful word or phrase – not a 'mantra' or a nonsense sound.]
(5) Practicing the presence of God is challenging at first, "but if practiced faithfully, [it] works secretly in the soul and produced marvelous effects."
(6) "To attain this state [of concentration] you must take for granted the mortification of the senses since it is impossible for a soul still attached to worldly pleasures to be completely joined to this divine presence since to be with God requires complete rejection of worldly [unspiritual thoughts and impulses] things." [98]

"The Benefits of the Presence of God."

(1) "Faith becomes more alive and more active in every occasion of our life – particularly in our times of need – since [practicing the presence of God] readily obtains grace for us in our temptations and in our dealing with our fellow men."
    - I John 3:21-22.
(2) "The practice of the presence of God strengthens us in our hope, [and] our hope grows in proportion" to the knowledge and spiritual insights that we receive.
(3) Practicing the presence of God "inspires in the will a contempt for worldly things and inflames it with the first of divine love which... is a consuming fire that reduces to ashes whatever is opposed to it.
(4) "By the presence of God and by this interior [focus], the soul comes to know God in such a way that it passes almost all its life in making continual acts of love, adoration, contritition, trust, actions of grace, offering, petition, and of all the most excellent virtues."

- The summa:
    - "I know you will find few persons attain this state – it is a grace which God grants only to certain chosen souls since this simple [spiritual discipline] is a gift freely bestowed by Him. But I will say for the consolation of those who wish to undertake this holy practice that God usually gives it to souls which are disposed in that direction, and if He does not give it, one can at least – with the help of His ordinary graces – acquire by the practice of the presence of God a way and a state of prayer which very closely approaches this simple [practice]." [100]

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