

# The Practice of the Presence of God

Brother Lawrence

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

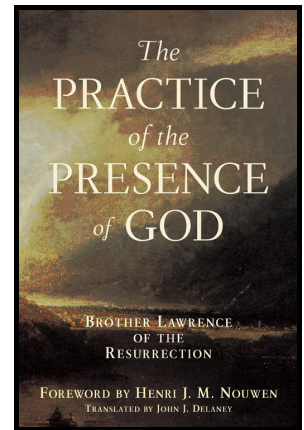
*“Lord of all pots and pans and things,  
Make me a saint by preparing meals  
And washing up the plates.”*

– 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.



.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

**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]

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 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 17<sup>th</sup>-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]

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....















**“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, contrition, 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]

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....