

Practicing the Presence of God

Brother Lawrence's Simple Method for Knowing God

If it were not for his simple-yet-profound method of communion with God, the cook turned shoe-repairman, Nicolas Herman, would have gone unnoticed in the annals of history.

was born in France in 1614. As a young man, he was wounded in military service. After recovering at home, he made a brief attempt to live in solitude as a hermit, but he soon abandoned it. He then decided to become a monk. In 1640, at the age of 26, he entered the Order of Discalced Carmelites in Paris as a lay brother and took the religious name of Lawrence.

For 15 years he worked as a cook in the monastery kitchen, at times cooking for over one hundred friars. In later life, due to severe sciatic gout, he was unable to stand for the many hours required to cook. He spent the remainder of his years as a sandal-maker for the barefooted Carmelites (a combination I still don't understand!) until his death at the age of 77.

Although a monk, the disciplines of the cloistered life did not appeal to him. He tried to nurture his devotion to God through the set methods of the monastery – meditation, contemplation, silence, and written prayers. He found these methods overly complicated and personally ineffective. His inability to connect with God through these common monastic means led to the formation of his simple method of practicing God's presence. He writes,

"I gave up all devotions and prayers that were not required and I devote myself exclusively to remaining always in his holy presence. I keep myself in his presence by simple attentiveness and a general loving awareness of God that I call 'actual presence of God' or better, a quiet and secret conversation of the soul with God that is lasting." (Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God: Critical Edition*, 53)

In all things, Brother Lawrence sought to maintain a constant awareness of God's gracious presence in his life. For this, this "practice of the presence of God" was "the essence of the spiritual life" (xxxiv).

One of the best descriptions of his simple practice is found in his *Spiritual Maxims*:

The holiest, most ordinary, and most necessary practice of the spiritual life is that of the presence of God. It is to take delight in and become accustomed to his divine company, speaking humbly and conversing lovingly with him all the time, at every moment, without rule or measure, especially in times of temptation, suffering, aridity, weariness, even infidelity and sin. (36)

The Beauty of Brother Lawrence's Method

Brother Lawrence provides us with a beautiful vision of the Christian life. He invites us to live a life completely supported and sustained by God's loving presence. What if we were to live as if God was present at all times in every place in all situations, always seeking our good? How would this practice change our lives? The exciting truth is that this kind of life is possible for everyone!

Lawrence's method is simple yet profound. He argues that, at its core, the spiritual life is very simple. Life with God does not require great theological sophistication or demand the accomplishment of great spiritual feats. The spiritual life is for everyone; for the beginner as well as the mature, the simple as well as the sophisticated.

Brother Lawrence provides us with an immanently practical way to live the Christian life. There is no time in the Christian life when Lawrence's method could not be practiced. God is available in all of life – from the ordinary, common, and mundane activities of everyday living to the deep and profound rituals of corporate worship.

Most importantly, Lawrence's method appeals to our most basic human need — the need to love and be loved by God. We don't necessarily need all the answers to all our problems in order to live life. We do, however, need the comforting presence of God to comfort and carry us. We can do without a lot of things –and a lot of answers – if we know that God is with us and for us.

Brother Lawrence's Method in Five Simple (But Not Easy) Steps

At the risk of oversimplifying the complexities of a relationship with God, I offer the following five simple steps. These five steps come from Brother Lawrence's writing and (I hope) accurately

communicate his counsel for practicing God's presence.

1. Seek God's Presence: Guard your heart with extreme care to retain purity

"The first means [to acquire the presence of God] is great purity of life" (41). We can only enjoy the presence of another if we walk together in agreement. "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3, AV). God leads us in "the path of righteousness" – a path of love, truth, beauty, mercy, and justice. Sin is the antithesis of these things. Therefore, we cannot pursue God and sin at the same time. These two realities are diametrically opposed. Sin involves turning away from God. Therefore, if we desire to practice God's presence, we must not run from it through our sin. We cannot walk together with God in righteousness while simultaneously running from God in sin.

But we all sin? What do we do when we displease God? Brother Lawrence's method makes full allowance for our continued sinfulness. Striking a beautiful balance, Lawrence was able to know God's presence along with a true view of his own sin (cf. 1 John 1:5 – 2:2). He writes,

"I consider myself as the most miserable of all human beings, covered with sores, foul, and guilty of all sorts of crimes committed against my King; moved by sincere remorse I confess all my sins to him. I ask him pardon and abandon myself into his hands so he can do with me as he pleases. Far from chastising me, this King, full of goodness and mercy, lovingly embraces me, seats me at his table, waits on me himself, gives me the keys to his treasures, and treats me in all things as his favorite; he converses with me and takes delight in me in countless ways, without ever speaking of forgiveness or taking away my previous faults. Although I beg him to fashion me according to his heart, I see myself still weaker and miserable, yet ever more caressed by God. This is what I see from time to time while in his holy presence." (54)

Lawrence's experience of God's gracious acceptance was so sweet to him, he continues by comparing it to an infant resting in its mother's breasts: "if I may dare use the expression, I would gladly call this state the 'breasts of God,' because of the indescribable sweetness I taste and experience there" (54). In this way, Lawrence was able to harmonize his continued sinfulness with God's loving embrace. Lawrence was able to practice God's presence, even when aware of his own sinfulness, because he was realistic. He refused to be surprised by his sins. His biographer writes, "He acknowledged his sins and was not surprised by them. He confessed them to God and did not plead before him to excuse them; after that he returned to his ordinary exercises of love and adoration in peace" (93). He continues, "He told me that he was rarely scrupulous. 'When I realize I have failed, I acknowledge it and say: this is typical; it's all I can do! If I have succeeded, I thank God and acknowledge that this grace comes from him' (94). The same wisdom is communicated by Thomas Merton: "It is true that we make many mistakes. But the biggest of them all is to be surprised at them: as if we had some hope of never making any" (Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 128).

Jesus taught, "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). The purity that allows us to "see God" is not sinless perfection. Purity is not primarily moral, but teleological. It has to do with our bent, our direction, our goals and aims in life. It involves an undivided or single-minded pursuit of something or someone – the opposite of double-mindedness. "Purity of heart is," as Kierkegaard put it, "to will one thing."

This purity of heart is compatible with recognizing one's own sinfulness. Lawrence struck this balance: "I make it my ordinary business to abide in the presence of God with the humility of a useless, though faithful, servant."

If we seek purity of heart, we must repent immediately when we recognize sin in our lives and beseech God's forgiveness. We must not waste time in regret about the past or worry about the future. Without this mindset, unconfessed sin becomes a powerful tool in the devil's arsenal to keep us from God's presence. Gerald May writes in the forward to the critical edition of Lawrence's writings,

There is a rough, even tough quality in his single-minded dedication to the practice of the presence of God. There is no time to waste, either in distraction or in regrets. There is no time for fear or worry, no place for despair. There is hardly even time for thinking. In every present moment we must get on with living in the direct, immediate love of God. (x)

2. See God's Presence: Keep the "soul's gaze" fixed on God by faith

“Keep the soul’s gaze fixed on God in faith, calmly, humbly, lovingly, without allowing anxious cares and worries to enter in.” The “soul’s gaze” is cast with eyes filled with faith. We know God’s presence primarily by faith, not by sight or our other senses: “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). We must not allow sight to eclipse faith if we desire to practice God’s presence. We must commit ourselves to seeing the invisible God in all things. Like David, we must say, “I have set the Lord before me” (Psalm 16:8).

This habit is simple but not easy. Brother Lawrence encourages the beginner, “So much time and effort are required to acquire this practice, we must not get discouraged when we fail, for the habit is only formed with effort, yet once it is formed we will find contentment in everything” (41). Practicing God’s presence involves patient discipline that does not happen by accident. We must constantly strive to do this in order to make it a habit in our lives. Most people in our world are asleep to this reality. We must remain awake. We must strive to be attentive. Otherwise, we will sleepwalk along with the rest of the world.

3. Live God’s Presence: Do all for the love of God

Practicing the presence of God is “to take delight in and become accustomed to his divine company, speaking humbly and conversing lovingly with him all the time, at every moment, without rule or measure” (36). Lawrence calls us to pray “in the depths of your soul... while walking, conversing with others, reading, eating, or working.”

Doing “all” for the love of God includes all things – both “sacred” and “secular.” Nothing is excluded. The practice of Christian spirituality does not demand isolation or retreat. All of our acts hold the potential to “become little acts of communion with God.” There is no excuse: “No affairs or cares of the world can serve as an excuse for neglecting this, our duty.”

Brother Lawrence exemplifies this holistic spirituality. After participating in ritual worship with his fellow monks and sharing in the climactic worship event of his tradition – the Eucharist – Lawrence writes, “Possessed thus entirely with the greatness and the majesty of this infinite Being, I went straightway to the place that duty had marked out for me — the kitchen.”

God’s presence charges all our activities with glory. According to Lawrence, “our sanctification does not depend as much on changing our activities as it does on doing them for God rather than for ourselves.” Only this kind of spirituality allows for holistic, lively participation in all the mundane duties of life. We don’t stop eating, drinking, working, bathing, and sleeping just because we are Christians. Instead, we now eat, drink, work, bath, and sleep with God, and thus, to God’s glory. Externally, the difference is not observable; a casual observer could hardly tell the difference between a Christian and non-Christian doing the same things. But internally, the difference is real.

G. K. Chesterton embraced this holistic spirituality. We would do well to imitate his spirit:

You say grace before meals. All right.
But I say grace before the play and the opera,
And grace before the concert and pantomime,
And grace before I open a book,
And grace before sketching, painting,
Swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing;
And grace before I dip the pen in the ink.

“All” things includes all acts – both “great” and “small.” According to his biographer, “Brother Lawrence said he concentrated on doing little things for Him, since he was unable to do bigger things.” Again, Lawrence provides us with another beautiful example of his spirituality:

“I flip my little omelette in the frying pan for the love of God, and when it’s done, if I have nothing to do, I prostrate myself on the floor and adore my God who gave me the grace to do it, after which I get up happier than a king. When I can do nothing else, it is enough for me to pick up a straw from the ground for the love of God.” (116)

This quote is even more powerful when we realize that his biographer says that “he had the strongest natural aversion” to kitchen work. For Brother Lawrence, there was no difference between the religious and the secular. Lawrence was able to experience God in the glorious beauty of the Blessed Sacrament

– the Eucharist – and in the mundane activities of simple service.

“The times of activity are not at all different from the hours of prayer... for I possess God as peacefully in the commotion of my kitchen, where often enough several people are asking me for different things at the same time, as I do when kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament.”

(115)

It is the greatness of the love we have for God, not the greatness of our work, which God recognizes.

“We must never tire of doing little things for the love of God who considers not the magnitude of the work, but the love” (98). When one approaches God as Lawrence did – “with the humility of a useless, though faithful, servant” – then one is able to transform all activity into a sacrifice of love, praise, worship, and gratitude.

4. Speak in the Presence of God: Offer short prayers to God

Speech is the way you recognize someone’s presence. When someone is present with us, we acknowledge their presence by communicating with them. In his writings, Brother Lawrence conveys how he sought to maintain continual communion with God through short prayers.

In his kitchen he devoted time “to mental prayer, before as well as after my work.” Before beginning his duties, he uttered a simple prayer. He offers the following short phrases as examples: “To those who set out upon this practice let me suggest a few words, such as ‘My God, I am wholly Yours,’ ‘O God of love, I love You with all my heart,’ ‘Lord, make my heart even as Your own,’ or other such words as love prompts at the moment.”

In another passage, he describes this process with greater detail:

“Before beginning any task I would say to God, with childlike trust: ‘My God, since you are with me, and since I must apply myself to these duties by your order, I beg you to give me the grace to remain with you and keep you company. Even better, my Lord, work with me, accept my efforts and take possession of all my affections.’” (12)

During his duties, he describes how he sustained his awareness of God: “Moreover, as I worked, I would continue to hold familiar conversation, offering to Him my little acts of service, and entreating the unfailing assistance of His grace” (12).

After he completed his tasks, he gave thanks for all the good that was accomplished. He also asked pardon for all his shortcomings.

“When my work was completed, I would examine how I had performed my duty. If well, I gave Him thanks. But if I noticed any mistakes, I asked pardon. Then, without getting discouraged, I set my spirit right, and returned anew to His presence, as though I had never moved away from him. Thus, by rising after every fall, and by doing all in faith and love without wearying, I arrived at a state in which it would have been just as impossible not to think about God as it was difficult to get used to doing so in the beginning.” (12-13)

Throughout his labors, Lawrence turned his thoughts over to God. His own thoughts became the subject matter for an inner conversation with God. Since it is impossible to stop the flow of our thoughts, Lawrence offers us a way to collect our self-centered monologues and transform them into God-centered dialogues. In this way, Brother Lawrence is like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevye never talks to himself. When he appears to be talking to himself, he is actually talking to God. His conversation includes his aches and pains as well as the joys of everyday life — even joking with God. All things – all creation, all people, and all acts – can provide food for our conversation with God.

5. Treasure God’s Presence: Value the presence of God more than anything

If you don’t treasure God’s presence, you won’t pursue it. “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21). We must treasure the presence of God. Like Lawrence, we must view God’s presence as “the life and nourishment of the soul.” The difference between mere survival and vibrant living is knowing God’s presence.

Lawrence speaks of God’s presence with words of great adoration:

“There is no way of life in the world more agreeable or delightful than continual conversation with God; only those who practice and experience it can understand this. I do not suggest, however, that you do it for this reason. We must not seek consolations from this exercise, but

must do it from a motive of love, and because God wants it.” (57)

Although the benefits of experiencing God’s presence are great, we do not love God for what we can get out of it. We treasure God’s presence simply because we are privileged to experience it. The greatest pleasures without God’s presence would be empty. God’s presence is not a means to an end, but an end in and of itself. If I love my wife for what I can get out of it, then she becomes a means to an end. I do not love her for herself, but for what she gives me. If I do not love her for her own sake, I “use” her rather than “love” her. Lawrence does not want us to seek God’s presence as a means to an end, but to seek it for its own sake – for God’s sake. In doing so, we will not “use” God, but truly “love” God.

As further motivation to treasuring God’s presence, Lawrence reminds that “God wants it.” We can know with certainty that God wants us to experience God’s presence. Indeed, God desires us to know his love, grace, and comforting presence far more than we actually want to know these things. God in Christ continually stands at the door of our hearts and knocks, urgently and intensely desiring communion with us (Rev. 3:20). God treasures a relationship with us. We should respond in kind!

Conclusion

Brother Lawrence’s method is profoundly simple and simply profound. However, do not let its simplicity seduce you into thinking it is easy. However, if we set our minds to follow the five steps above, we will eventually attain that which our hearts desire – an awareness of God’s presence in all things.

“We look for methods... to learn how to love God. We want to get there by I don’t know how many practices. A multitude of methods makes it more difficult for us to remain in God’s presence. Isn’t it much shorter and more direct to do everything for the love of God, to use all the works of our state in life to manifest our love to him, and to foster the awareness of his presence in us by this exchange of our heart with him? Finesse is not necessary. We need only approach him directly and straightforwardly.” (116)

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Comments

Brother Lawrence is awesome! He is a true ascetic that is not spending time in a box to be with God or suspended over a cliff to keep away from the world. This is truly how to become virtuous. It is in the practice. We are creatures of habit that are transformed by practice. Aristotle figured that one out a long time ago. Good habits are practiced and become part of us just like the bad ones. true goodness will only come into our hearts in the seed God plants in us by tabernacling in our hearts. If