

Brother Lawrence: The Practice of the Presence of God

Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (1614-1691) was a humble lay brother in the Discalced Carmelite Monastery in Paris, where he served first as a cook, and later – owing to gout – as a sandal maker. His peacefulness and simple wisdom attracted others to him and his conversations and letters formed the basis for a book *The Practice of the Presence of God* (“PPG”).

Prayer

Let us listen to what Brother Lawrence says about prayer in his own words:

‘I keep myself retired with Him in the deepest centre of my soul ... I make it my business only to persevere in His holy presence, in which I remain by a simple attention, and a general loving gaze upon God, which I may call an actual presence of God, or ... an habitual, silent, and secret conversation of the soul with God, which often causes in me joys and raptures inwardly, and sometimes outwardly, so great that I am forced to use means to moderate them and prevent their appearance to others’ (Letter 6, *PPG*).

‘Sometimes I beheld Him in my heart as my Father, as my God: I worshipped Him as often as I could keeping my mind in His holy presence, and recalling it as often as I found it wandered from Him... without troubling or disquieting myself when my mind had wandered involuntarily. ... I drove away from my mind everything that was capable of interrupting my thought of God. [At other times] I consider myself before God, whom I behold as my King’ (Letter 1, *PPG*).

‘My most usual method is this simple attention, and such a general passionate regard to God, to whom I consider myself often attached with great sweetness and delight like that of an infant at the mother’s breast, so that if I dare use the expression, I should choose to call this state the bosom of God, for the inexpressible sweetness which I taste and experience there’. (Letter 2, *PPG*).

‘Spend the remainder of your life only in worshipping God. He requires no great matters of us; a little remembrance of Him from time to time, a little adoration: sometimes to pray for His grace, sometimes to offer Him your sufferings, and sometimes to thank Him for the favours He has given you. ... Lift up your heart to Him, sometimes even at your meals, and when you are in company: the least little remembrance will always be acceptable to Him. You need not cry very loud; He is nearer to us than we are aware of ... we may make a chapel of our heart, wherein to retire from time to time, to converse with Him in meekness, humility and love’ (Letter 7, *PPG*).

Abandoned to the Will of God

At the beginning of his religious life Brother Lawrence had firmly renounced his own will and resolved to live as if just He and God were alone in the world, his heart empty of all other things:

‘I have no will but that of God, which I endeavour to accomplish in all things, and to which I am so resigned, that I would not take up a straw from the ground against His order, or from any other motive but purely that of love for Him. ... I apply myself diligently to do nothing and think nothing which may displease Him.’

Practice of the presence of God in daily life

He spent all the intervals of his time, before and after his work in prayer. Yet he tells us that that the set times of prayer were not different from the other times of the day, because his work did not draw him from God. Indeed, he found he was more united to God in his outward employments than in times set aside for prayer, in which he generally experienced spiritual dryness. His practice was to do little things for love of God as he confided to Abbé Joseph de Beaufort:

‘The most excellent method he had found of going to God was that of doing our ordinary occupations (received under obedience) for the love of God without any view of pleasing men’ (Conversations, *PPG*).

At first we have to work at referring everything to God, as he himself did, but later, Br. Lawrence assures us the remembrance of God comes easily.

‘We need only to recognise God is close to us and to turn to Him every moment ... We may beg His help for knowing His will in things doubtful, and for gladly performing those which we plainly see He requires of us, offering them to Him before we do them, and giving Him thanks when we have done them for His honour.’

Distractions

At the beginning of his prayer-life he had spent much of his time rejecting wandering thoughts and then falling back into the same distractions:

‘Our mind is extremely roving, but as the will is mistress of all our faculties she must recall them, and carry them to God as their last end. ... I do not advise you to use a multiplicity of words in prayer; many words and long discourses being often the occasions of wandering: hold yourself in prayer before God, like a dumb or paralytic beggar at a rich man’s gate: let it be your business to keep your mind in the presence of the Lord. If it sometimes wanders and withdraws itself from Him, do not disquiet yourself for that; trouble and disquiet serve rather to distract the mind, than to recollect it; the will must bring it back in tranquillity; if you persevere in this manner, God will have pity on you’ (Letter 8).

‘[Later in life] he thought only of God. If some other thought or a temptation intruded, he felt it coming, and such was his experience of God’s prompt help, that sometimes he allowed it to approach until it was almost upon him, when he turned to God and it disappeared at once.’

He kept himself in the present moment:

‘He did not reflect upon those things which were over and done. ... Of late he had followed this plan of not anticipating difficulties... when it was time to do it, he found God showed him as in a clear mirror how it should be done’ (*PPG*)

Failures

Our mistakes can sometimes unsettle our prayer. So we can learn from Br. Lawrence’s humble approach. He expected failures and was by no means discouraged by them:

‘When he had failed in his duty, he only confessed his fault, saying to God, I shall never do otherwise, if You leave me to myself; it is You who must hinder my falling and mend what is amiss. After this, he gave himself no further uneasiness about it. He [then]

peaceably resumed his usual practice of love and adoration. If I don't fail, then I give God thanks, acknowledging that it comes from Him' (*PPG*).

Troubles

Again, a lot of our disquiet in prayer comes from our internal resistance to trials and difficulties. Brother Lawrence counsels us:

'We ought ... to submit ourselves to them, and bear them as long as God pleases, as things highly advantageous to us. ... The sorest afflictions never appear intolerable except when we see them in the wrong light. When we see them in the hand of God, who dispenses them: when we know that it is our loving Father, who abases and distresses us: our sufferings will lose their bitterness and become even matter of consolation' (Letter 15).

Self-denial

Following St Teresa of Avila, Brother Lawrence saw the life of virtue and self-discipline was a support to the life of prayer.

'It is ... proper to deprive [the body] sometimes, indeed often, of many little pleasures which are innocent and lawful: for God will not permit that a soul which desires to be devoted entirely to Him, should take other pleasures than with Him' (Letter 6).

Virtue – Help!

'When an occasion of practising some virtue offered itself, he addressed himself to God, saying, Lord, I cannot do this unless You enable me; and that then he received strength more than sufficient.

'God never fails to offer us His grace at each action; but we do not perceive it when our thoughts have wandered from a sense of God's presence or we have forgotten to ask His assistance. ... We can do nothing without Him' (*PPG*).

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