

Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection: The Practice of the Presence of God

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"Each one of you is to stay in his own cell or nearby, pondering the Lord's law day and night and keeping watch at his prayers unless attending to some other duty." The Rule of St Albert, chapter 8, has provided over the centuries a focus for the prayer life of Carmelites. It has also provoked a problem, the solution to which Carmelite writers have applied their creative gifts. The problem is that the Rule was written for hermits, but after 1248 the Carmelites became active in preaching and teaching, adopting the mendicant lifestyle. How, then, were they to practice constant prayer to God? Many Carmelites, such as Nicolas the Frenchman, took strong exception to the change of lifestyle and urged a return to the desert. Others, however, saw in the problem an opportunity to be creative and resourceful in adapting the ideals of Carmel to the new situation. By managing to combine the active life with an intense life of prayer Carmelites set an example that all Christians could follow. One of the most popular texts in this regard is the one known as *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Br. Lawrence of the Resurrection, a 17th century Discalced Carmelite, whose influence on Christian spirituality continues to grow with the passage of time.

Biographical sketch

Br Lawrence was born Nicolas Herman in 1614 in Hériménil, near Lunéville in the Lorraine district of France. His parents were pious and probably not wealthy. His uncle was a Discalced Carmelite brother, and there was a monastery of Carmelite nuns in Lunéville. His parents could only afford to give him an elementary education, although he was considered intelligent.

At the age of 18 he had a sudden cosmic intuition of the grandeur and presence of God. We are told in his *First Conversation* that "One day in winter while he was looking at a tree stripped of its leaves, and he realized that in a little while its leaves would reappear, followed by its flowers and fruit, he received a profound insight into God's providence that has never been erased from his soul. This insight completely freed him from the world, and gave him such a love for God that he could not say it had increased during the more than forty years that had passed." This was the beginning of his life-long practice of the presence of God.

One might have thought that after this he would have become a religious, but instead he enlisted in the army and saw active service in the Thirty Years War. He witnessed many atrocities during this time and was even taken prisoner, impressing his captors with his peaceful demeanour and holy resignation in the face of their threats. Wounded at the battle of Rambervillers in 1635, he returned home, never completely recovering from the injuries to his leg. At this point he discussed his future with his uncle, Jean Majeur, a Discalced Carmelite. We know nothing of the details of this encounter, but shortly afterwards Nicolas joined with another man in setting up a hermitage, perhaps motivated by the need to reflect upon his feelings of guilt after the war. The move appears to have been premature in his spiritual development for he left the hermitage after a short time and went into service in Paris as valet to Monsieur de Freubet, a well-known banker.

It was in 1640, aged 26, that he entered the Discalced Carmelite Priory in Paris as a lay brother, being without the education, especially in Latin, a requirement for clerical orders. Nicolas took the religious name Lawrence of the Resurrection. In 1642 he made solemn profession of vows. For the rest of his life he worked in the kitchen and then, his health declining, as the community sandal-repairer, looking after the footwear of over 100 friars. Apart from two trips, to the Auvergne in 1665, and to Burgogne the following year, to buy wine, he remained within the walls of the priory (or "monastery" as it is often called.) We should remember, though, that as a lay brother his life was one of long hours and continuous work. There was actually little time for contemplation, the lay brothers being expected to find time for mental prayer only when the practical work was done for the day.

For about ten years he suffered a period of intense spiritual trial in which his awareness of God's presence was at war with his conviction of his own unworthiness. It was when he resigned himself to the possibility that he might have to suffer this for the rest of his life, and surrendered himself to God's mercy and providence, that he entered into a profound peace in the centre of his soul, a peace which never left him for the rest of his life. He was much sought after as a spiritual guide by lay people and religious of all kinds and wrote many letters of direction, only a few of which have survived. Br Lawrence died peacefully, after several painful bouts of illness, on February 12th, 1691, aged 77, lucid till the last.

One of his spiritual children was Fr Joseph de Beaufort who was responsible for composing a Eulogy after Br Lawrence's death and also collected together his notes from conversations with Br Lawrence as well as letters of direction written to various people and some Maxims. To these Fr de Beaufort added his own summaries of Br Lawrence's teachings in the style of his mentor. Thus was composed the book we know as *The Practice of the Presence Of God*.

Teachings

This is not, therefore, a systematic or comprehensive treatment of the spiritual life like the writings of St Teresa of Avila or St John of the Cross. Rather, we find here, in very simple, straightforward words, advice on laying the foundation of our personal spirituality through the simple exercise of awareness. Br Lawrence does not teach a "method" of prayer, but, instead, a way of orientating ourselves towards God that makes all talk of "methods" seem superfluous. Behind his writings there would seem to be four principles to keep in mind, which form a constant refrain as one reads the book.

Firstly, "**Renounce and scorn creatures in order to enjoy their Creator for a moment.**" (Letter 2). At first sight, this seems almost an un-Christian precept which is, moreover, difficult to reconcile with the Br Lawrence who gained the love and respect of those who knew him. What he is saying in the language of today is that we should not depend on other people for our sense of security that stems from knowing that we are loved. It is a common experience that human love is fickle and not to be depended upon as the source of our security. Only God can provide that.

Secondly, "**Great fidelity to the practice of this presence and to the fostering of this awareness of God within**" (Spiritual Maxims, chapter 6). It does not matter if at first we find the exercise of practising God's presence in our everyday

lives difficult. We can at any time turn our gaze inward to the Lord and this especially at times of difficulty or temptation. He assures us that if we are faithful to this practice during the day we will find it easier to recollect ourselves at the set time of prayer. Br Lawrence suggests practical helps for fostering an awareness of God's presence: short, spontaneous prayers of love and adoration can turn the heart and mind back to God at any time. We can also form the habit of preceding any activity by making an "inward glance" to remind ourselves of God's presence within us. Importantly, how we conduct ourselves throughout the day can assist our awareness of God. Br Lawrence was always rooted in the here and now and so avoiding the anxiety of worrying about what might happen in the future. Those who met him testified to Br Lawrence's calmness and tranquillity at all times.

Thirdly, **"Offer him your heart from time to time, during the day, while at work, at every possible moment"** (Letter 2). This is an essential disposition of the human creature before God if God is to be allowed to do His work in the soul. This is also the most effective way of keeping the mind from wandering at the time of mental prayer.

Fourthly, **"The habit of practising the presence of God is only acquired with effort"** (Spiritual Maxims, chapter 6). Br Lawrence acknowledges, with St Teresa of Avila, that the beginnings of the spiritual life are a lot of hard work, like the carrying of water laboriously in a bucket. Though there will be times of failure and falling away on account of human weakness, he advises simply returning to the practice of God's presence with the knowledge that God will forgive us for any neglect. Perseverance is required not only in the practice of God's presence but in response to that presence within whomever and whatever we encounter on the journey.

A Cautionary Word!

It will be readily appreciated from the above that Br Lawrence's writings speak to people of today as relevantly as they did to the people of his own time. But he was, inevitably, still a man of his time. We should remember this when we read, for example, his advice to ignore the help of doctors and medicine and trust solely in God. Medicine was at a very primitive stage of development in the 17th century compared with today. Doctors were usually summoned as a last resort in those days. Advances in medical science in our own time renders his advice on this matter obsolete: we are to take all reasonable measures to care for our bodies, the temples of the Holy Spirit, and this may entail consulting a qualified medical practitioner when necessary. Such caution applies to all spiritual classics: we have to use our common sense in reading them, keeping in mind whatever may be our differing circumstances. In the case of Br Lawrence such a reservation does nothing to undermine the essence of his teaching. His writings derive from his own experience of life with all its struggles and difficulties. Especially, he shows us how, in the midst of a busy life, we can pray continuously, giving praise to God at all times, in all places, in all circumstances. The practice that transformed Br Lawrence can also transform each of us today ... beginning today!