

VINTAGE Saints & Sinners

Brother Lawrence (1614-1691)

Introduction 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 attention to. This fragmentation is probably one of the most painful experiences of modern men and women. Underneath the running and rushing of life often lurks the nagging feeling of being disconnected, alienated and bored....

It is to this condition that Brother Lawrence speaks. For Brother Lawrence, to live in the presence of God was his only concern. In the presence of God life became very simple for him. This simpleness of life, however, was the result of a long struggle. He leaves little doubt that the simple is very difficult, that to be free for God asks for discipline and the determination to let go from many daily worries. Brother Lawrence indeed lived a life of connectedness, which is the opposite of alienation, and a life of unity, which is the opposite of fragmentation...It is a hard way but a way worth following. It is the way to God.

Excerpts from *The Practice of the Presence of God*

Since you've earnestly asked that I impart to you the method I've followed to reach a state of the presence of God, which our Lord in His great mercy has allowed me to attain, here is what I can tell you about it.

When I read about different methods of going to God and different practices of reaching the spiritual life, I decided that all of those would serve more to hinder than to help me in what I was seeking—which was nothing other than a way to be wholly God's. This made me decide to give everything to gain everything. So, after having given everything to God in satisfaction for my sins, I began to live as if there were no one in the world but God and me.

During my early years I meditated in my prayers on death, judgement, hell, paradise and my sins. I continued in this matter for a few years. I assiduously devoted 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 places of my heart. I must tell you that during the first ten years I endured great suffering. I feared that I was not being with God as I wished; my sins were constantly on my mind. I often fell but raised myself up again. Just as I thought I must live out my life beset by these difficulties and anxieties, I suddenly found myself changed. 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 in faith, with humility and love, and I have labored to do and say and think only what would please God. I trust that when I have done all that I can do, God will do with me as God wishes.

I have given up all my non-obligatory devotional practices and prayers and concentrate on being always in God's holy presence. I keep myself in God's presence by simple attentiveness and a loving gaze upon God---a habitual, silent and secret conversation of the soul with God that causes me great interior, and often exterior, happiness and joy.

Sometimes I think of myself as a block of stone before a sculptor, ready to be sculpted into a statue, presenting myself thus to God, and I beg God to form a perfect image in my soul and make me entirely like God's self. Let God do with me as God wishes, I desire only God and to be wholly God's.

As to what I experience now, I cannot express it in words. I have no other will but God's, which I try to fulfill in everything I do, and to which I am so resigned that I would not lift a straw from the ground except in accordance with God's command—since my only motive is sheer love of God.

You can be sure that you tell me nothing new. You are not the only person who is troubled by wandering thoughts. Though your mind constantly wanders, your will is the mistress of your faculties, so you must recall your mind and bring it back to God as its intended end.

When the mind is untrained from the beginning, it develops bad habits of wandering and dissipation which are difficult to overcome and usually tempt us, even against our will, to do worldly things. One remedy is to confess to our faults and humble ourselves before God.

I do not recommend much talking in prayer, long discourses being the cause of wandering. Present yourself to God as if you were a helpless beggar at a rich man's door; concentrate on keeping your mind in the presence of the Lord. If your mind sometimes wanders and withdraws, don't let it upset you. Confusion only serves to distract the mind rather than to recollect it. Use your will to bring your mind back calmly; if you persevere in this way, God will have pity on you.

I deeply sympathize with you. If you can devote yourself entirely praying to God you will have accomplished a great feat. God does not ask much of you—only a thought of God from time to time, a little act of adoration, sometimes to ask for God's grace, sometimes to offer God your sufferings, at other times to thank God for the graces, past and present, God has gifted to you. In the midst of your troubles take comfort in God as often as you can. Lift up your heart to God during your meals and in company with other people; the least little remembrance will always be pleasing to God. One need not cry out very loudly; God is nearer to you than you think.

It is not necessary to always be in church with God; you can make a private chapel of your heart where you can withdraw from time to time to commune with God, peacefully, humbly, lovingly. Everyone is capable of these intimate conversations with God, some more, others less, but God knows what each one of us can do.

Let us begin. God is waiting only for a single wholehearted resolution from us. Have courage, for we have little time to live. I am approaching 80; let us live and let us die with God. Suffering will always be more pleasant when we are with God and the greatest pleasures would be a cruel affliction without God. May God be blessed by all. Amen.

Become accustomed then little by little to adore God in this way: ask God for grace; offer God your heart from time to time during the day in the midst of your work, at every moment if you can. Do not burden yourself with rules or particular devotions but act with faith, with humility and with love.

Remember, I beg you, what I have recommended to you, which is to think of God, by day, by night, in all your pursuits and obligations, even in your recreations. God is always near you and with you; do not leave God alone. You would think it rude to leave a friend alone who came to visit you. Why abandon God and leave God alone? Then do not forget God! Think of God often, adore God continually, live and die with God. That is the glorious occupation of a Christian; in a word, it is our calling. If we do not know that calling we must learn it. I will help you with my prayers.

Sources

Henri J.M. Nowen, foreword to *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. New York: Image Books, 1977

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