

On Simple Prayer

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Praises the simplicity of Bro. Lawrence's way of practicing the presence of God, comparing it to St. Therese's "little way." Sees faith coming through the senses. Calls for an increase in the desire for God in our troubled times. (DDLW #568).

(This article is taken from Dorothy's introduction to the Templegate edition of **THE PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD**, by Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, Templegate Publishers, Springfield, Ill., 1974. The book is edited and translated by Donald Attwater: 127 pages, \$5.95—Eds. Note.)

This book, made up of a few conversations, a few letters, has come down to us through the centuries, and is too little known. It is a classic, and carries a message, points a way. It tells of a spirituality which is within the reach of all. Most men and women have to work for a living. A philosopher once said "Do what you are doing"—that is, pay attention to what you are doing. Brother Lawrence obviously had no books in his kitchen, to study ways of finding God. He had to find his way, obviously by prayer.

But how to pray? St. Teresa of Avila wrote many books on prayer, St. John of the Cross too, and books have been written about their books, further expounding the meaning of prayer. St. Paul told us all to search the scripture and to pray without ceasing. Both commands must have presented difficulties to Brother Lawrence, who spent his life in a kitchen or in the market place finding the bread and wine, meat and vegetables for a community. Certainly there was little time for the delightful occupation of **reading** about prayer.

I am sure the disciples of Jesus did little reading, fishermen as they were, many of them. They asked him, "How shall we pray?" He gave them the Lord's prayer. He, God-man that he was, told them no other prayer...

Entire books have been written about the Lord's Prayer but there is no mention of books in Brother Lawrence's reported conversations and letters. His serenity, his simplicity is that of the Prayer. He, God-man that he was, told you shall receive. "Seek and you shall find." Jesus taught us what to ask for and, as Pascal commented, "You would not seek Him, if you had not already found Him."

Faith and the Senses

Brother Lawrence's times were no different from ours. St. Teresa of Avila, who lived in the time of the Inquisition, wrote, "All times are dangerous times." Just as St. Paul called upon us to be other Christs, Lawrence was another Christ, who lived in the presence of the Father at all times.

He grew up like other children and young men, and went through a conversion of heart at the age of sixteen. He had one of those striking experiences that I think we all have, whether we live in the country or in the city. "One winter day he noticed a tree stripped of its leaves and reflected that before long leaves would appear anew, then flowers and then the fruit, and that this consideration gave him so striking an idea of the Providence and might of God that it had never since been effaced from his soul; . . . and kindled in him so great a love for God that he was not able to say if it had at all increased during the forty-odd years which had since passed."

We have to leap into faith through the senses—from the natural to the supernatural—and I was drawn to the Church in my youth because it appealed to the senses. The music speaking to the ear, the incense to the sense of smell, the appeal of color to the eye, stained glass, ikons and statues, the bread and wine to the taste, the touch of rich vestments and altar linens, the touch of holy water, oils, the sign of the cross, the beating of the breast.

When my own mother was dying, she asked me quietly and soberly, "What about a future life?" I could only point to the flowers which surrounded her. It was in the fall and there were giant chrysanthemums filling the tables in her room. It was like a promise from God, and God keeps his promises. I pointed to the trees outside, stripped of their leaves, looking dead to the eye from that distance, but there had recently been a blaze of glory in the color of the maples. Another sign of a promise. Later she said, "I can only pray the Our Father and the Creed. Is that enough?" And when I thought of the books which would fill libraries which had been written on every phrase contained in the Our Father, it comforted my heart to know that she was practicing the presence of God this way.

The Practice of the Presence of God consists of conversations, letters, and maxims on how we should live, with the idea of cultivating this sense of the presence of God in the soul, and indeed in the world about us.

The very word "sense" might seem to throw us off, because the whole book has to do with the spiritual life of man, not his sense life, and so can be brushed aside as non-sense. But we all have a desire for the True, the Good and the Beautiful which is God. And we look around us today in a time of war and fear, of stockpiling for war, of greed, dishonesty, and ambition, and long for peace in our time, for that peace which passeth understanding, which we see only glimpses of, through a glass darkly.

(I cannot write and express myself without using the words and phrases of St. Paul, of scripture. We are told to "search the scripture" to find comfort and guidance. St. Therese of Lisieux who reminds me of Brother Lawrence in her practice of the "little way," said once that she could read fifty chapters of Isaiah and get nothing out of them and then suddenly the fifty-first flooded her soul with light. Which makes me think of the subconscious mind working away, and leaping on what it needs for sustenance, comfort, or understanding.)

When St. Paul says to pray always, to pray without ceasing, he is also talking

about practicing the presence of God.

Return to Simplicity

A few years ago an old woman died in our midst, here at our House of Hospitality in New York. She was surrounded by many men and women she had known a long time; she had the best of care. We had a nurse living with us who could meet any emergency. But Catherine, the last few weeks of her life, often clutched at my hand as I passed her, and would plead with me, “There is a God, tell me there is a God! Tell me!”

I could only say, “Yes, Catherine, there is a God. He is our Father and He loves us, you and me.” When you say these things it is an act of faith. You feel your helplessness so you pray harder. You seem to know nothing, you can only hold her hand and make your affirmation. So much of our prayer is made up of these affirmations. “I praise Thee, O God, I bless Thee. What have I on earth but Thee and what do I desire in heaven besides Thee? I am saying this **for** Catherine, **instead** of Catherine, because she is in”the valley of the shadow.”

But did I comfort her? A few days later a young girl said to me, “The word **Father** means nothing to me. It brings me no comfort. I had a drunken father who abused my mother and beat his children.” We can do nothing by our words. So we are driven to prayer by our helplessness. God takes over—

Living today in a time of war, crying out Peace, Peace when there is no Peace, fearing age and death, pain and darkness, destitution and loneliness, people need to get back to the simplicity of Brother Lawrence. . .

Brother Lawrence did not have the tumultuous life of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross (who lived in the century before him, in danger of the Inquisition, the latter imprisoned and beaten by his fellow monks, factions growing up in the church around them). Perhaps it was because he did not write, was not published. Yet, writes Attwater, “He was known and venerated by the whole of Paris. And not only by the crowd of nameless and poor Christians who, in all ages and places, have had such a genius for detecting sanctity, but also by the learned, the distinguished, and the noble, both clerical and lay.”

Our Real Desire

We need this book today when we are overwhelmed by the vastness of today’s problems. We need to return to the simplicity of a Brother Lawrence, whose “little way” makes our burdens light and rejoices the heart.

These days I can never look up at the sky and see the moon without thinking with wonder and awe that men have walked there. To conceive of such a thing—to desire such an adventure, to be capable of overcoming all fear, all doubt, to have faith in man’s ability to solve problems, and seek out the way to go about this

great exploration—what dedication of mind and will! “What is man that thou are mindful of him? Thou hast made him little less than the angels.” It keeps coming into my mind—how much man would be capable of if his soul were strong in the love of God, if he wanted God as much as he wanted to penetrate the power and glory of God’s creation.

To know Him, to love Him and to serve Him—a personal God, who took on human flesh and became man and suffered and died for us. To find the way, not to the moon but to God—this is man’s real desire, because of his need for love, and God is love.

Brother Lawrence, who worked the last 30 years of his life in the kitchen of a Carmelite monastery and died at the age of 80 found Him in “The Practice of the Presence of God.”