

The Practice of the Presence of God

Conversations: (translated by Bob Clarkson)

First Conversation: The first time I saw Brother Lawrence was on the 3rd of August, 1666. He told me that God had done him a unique_favor in his conversion at the age of eighteen. During that winter, upon seeing a tree stripped of its leaves and considering that, within a little time, the leaves would be renewed and, after that, the flowers and fruit appear; Brother Lawrence received a high view of the providence and power of God which has never since been erased from his soul. This view had completely set him free from the world and kindled in him such a love for God, that he could not remember whether it had increased in the forty years that he had lived since.

Brother Lawrence said he had been footman to M. Fieubert, the treasurer, and that he was a very large awkward fellow who broke everything. He finally decided to enter a monastery thinking that he would there be made to hurt for his awkwardness and the mistakes and sins he would commit, and so he would sacrifice his life with its pleasures to God. But Brother Lawrence said that God had surprised him because he met with nothing but pleasure in that state.

Brother Lawrence said that we should effectively remain in God's presence by being constantly aware of Him. It was a shameful thing to stop thinking about Him to think insignificant and useless thoughts. We should feed and nourish our soul with considerations of God's extraordinary and unconditional love which would create in us great pleasure and delight in being completely surrendered to Him.

He said we ought to make our faith practical by living it out. It was unfortunate that we had so little loving expression of our faith, Instead of making faith the source of their motives, men amused themselves with interesting but useless devotions which changed daily. He said that faith alone was sufficient to bring us to spiritual maturity. We should stop planning and engaging in activities, both secular and spiritual and be satisfied only by fulfilling His will. Whether God let us suffer or be comfortable we would be equally satisfied in either case.

He said we need to be true in our marital love for God in those times of distraction from our awareness of God when God tests, by adversity, our love for Him. Adversity is the time for a complete act of resignation to self during which a single loving expression could greatly increase our love for God and spiritual maturity.

He said that observing the miseries and evil expressions in the world around him, he was not surprised by them. Rather, he was surprised that there was not even more misery and misconduct, considering the malicious (hurtful) nature of sinners and the awful things they were capable of.

Instead, he prayed for them; but knowing that God could remedy the mischief they did when He pleased, he simply stopped worrying about it.

Brother Lawrence said to become absolutely surrendered to God, we should include God in all our passionate pursuits, both secular and spiritual. God makes all of our passions which include Him and His glory to be holy.

At the end of this first conversation Brother Lawrence said that, if my purpose for the visit was to sincerely discuss how to serve God, I might come to him as often as I pleased; and without any fear of being a bother to Him. If this was not the case, then I should not bother Him again.

Second Conversation: Brother Lawrence told me he had always been governed by love without selfish views. Since he resolved to make the love of God the purpose of all his actions, he had found reasons to be very satisfied with his method. He was pleased when he could pick up a piece of straw from the ground simply for the love of God, desiring His presence only, and nothing else, not even His gifts.

He said he had been bothered for a long time by the belief that he should be damned. All the men in the world could not have persuaded him to the contrary. This belief troubled him for four years, during which time he suffered greatly.

Finally he realized, "I only engaged in a religious life in order to experience the love of God. I have tried to express myself in word or deed for Him alone. Whatever becomes of me, whether I be lost or saved, I will always continue to act purely for the love of God. I will take comfort in knowing that until death I will have done all that is in me to love Him." From that time on Brother Lawrence lived his life in perfect freedom with continual love, joy and peace. He placed his sins between himself and God and told God that he did not deserve His favors, yet God still continued to bestow grace (undeserved favors) in abundance.

Brother Lawrence said that in order to develop a habit of being aware of God's presence continually,

must let Him participate with us in all we do. We must, at first, determine to, and be diligent in, inviting Him into every decision. Then, having made this practice habitual, after several such moments of including God in our every decision, we will find His love drawing us to Him without any difficulty.

He thought that sooner or later, having enjoyed such pleasant days with God he would have his turn at pain and suffering. Yet he was not concerned about it. Knowing that, since he could do nothing of himself, God would not fail to give him the strength to bear them.

When God gave him an opportunity to practice some virtue, he said to God, "Lord, I cannot do this unless well unless You enable me to do it". Then he received strength more than sufficient for the experience. Every time he had failed in his duty, he simply confessed his failure saying to God, "I will never do otherwise, if You leave it to me. It is You who must overcome my failing and correct what is wrong in me." Then, he dismissed it completely.

Brother Lawrence said we should remain aware of God in the greatest simplicity, speaking to Him openly, honestly and plainly. We need not beg for His assistance in our affairs, because He is always with us in everything that happens. In this constant awareness of God, peace is absolutely assured.

He said he had recently been sent into Burgundy to buy the provision of wine for the community. This was a very uncomfortable task for him because he had no business savvy and because he was crippled and could only move around the boat by rolling himself over the casks of wine. Yet he refused to be uneasy about his handicap and about the purchase of the wine. He said to God, it was His business he was doing, and when all was said and done, it had been very well performed. He mentioned that it had turned out the same way the year before when he was sent to Auvergne.

So, in a similar manner, in his work in the kitchen (which, at first, he hated), having accustomed himself to do everything there for the love of God and asking for His grace to do his work well, he had found everything easy during the fifteen years he had been employed there. He was very well pleased with the post he was now in. Yet, he was just as ready to quit that as the former, since he tried to please God by doing little things for the love of Him in any work he did. To him the scheduled times of prayer were no different from other times. He left his post to pray as directed by his superior, but he did not need such scheduled times for prayer nor did he ask for it because his greatest labor did not distract him from his awareness of the presence of God and constant conversation with Him.

Since he knew that God's only desire was that he love God in all things, and as he actually did so, he had no need of a director to advise him. However, he greatly desired a confessor to absolve him. He said he was very aware of his faults, but not discouraged by them. He confessed them to God and made no excuses. Then, he peaceably resumed his usual practice of love and adoration.

Whenever he was troubled, Brother Lawrence had consulted no one. Knowing only by the experience of faith that God was present, he was content with directing all his actions to Him. He did everything with a desire to please God and left all of the results to God without any concern about them.

He said that useless thoughts spoil everything - that mischief begins with them. We should reject useless thoughts quickly and return to our communion with God. In the beginning he had often spent his time appointed for prayer in pushing useless thought out of his mind and finding them wandering right back in. He could never maintain his devotion by repetitious methods as some do. Initially, he had practiced meditation but, after some time, he stopped but could not say why or when.

Brother Lawrence emphasized that all physical and mental disciplines and exercises were useless, unless they served to arrive at the union with God by love. He had thoroughly pondered this. He found that the

quickest way to become intimate with God was by a continual expression of love for God and doing all things for His sake.

Also, he noted that there was a great difference between acts of the intellect and acts of the will. Acts of the intellect were comparatively of little value. Acts of the will were of utmost importance. Our only purpose was to love and delight ourselves in God.

He then said that all possible kinds of self-sacrifice, if they were not motivated by love of God, would not bring pleasure to God. Instead, we should, without anxiety, expect the pardon of our sins from the blood of Jesus Christ, desiring only to love Him with all our heart. He noted that God seemed to have granted the greatest favors to the greatest sinners as more proof of His mercy.

Brother Lawrence said the greatest pains or pleasures of this world were nothing compared to what he had experienced of both kinds in a spiritual state. As a result he feared nothing, desiring only one thing of God - that he might not offend Him. He said he carried no guilt because, "When I fail in my duty, I readily acknowledge it, saying, I am prone to do so all the time. I will never do otherwise if I am left to my own means. If I do not fail, then I immediately give God thanks, acknowledging that it comes from Him."

Third Conversation: Brother Lawrence told me that the foundation of the spiritual life in him had been a high degree of admiration and respect for God in faith. Once he had solidly established his faith, he had no other concerns about religious traditions or activities. He would reject every other thought or motive so that he might perform all his actions solely for the love of God. He said when sometimes he had not thought of God for a good while he did not get angry with himself. Having acknowledged his distraction to God, he simply returned to the constant awareness of Him with so much the greater love and trust.

He said that the trust we put in God honors Him and enables us to see and appreciate His great grace. It was impossible not only that God should deceive but that He should long let a soul suffer which is perfectly resigned to Him and resolved to endure everything for His sake.

[aside: The soul does not suffer, which truly desires that God's purposes be fulfilled. He may experience pain and calamity, but the soul remains undisturbed in the awareness of God's love in them.]

Brother Lawrence often experienced the pleasures of Divine Grace. Because of his experience of grace, when he had business to do, he did not make a plan as to how to do it. When it was time to do it, he found in God, as in a clear mirror, all that was

necessary for him to do. When outward business distracted him a little from the thought of God, a fresh remembrance coming from God overwhelmed his soul and so inflamed and attracted him that it was difficult for him to contain himself. He said he was more aware of and passionate for God in his outward employments than when he left them for devotions in his private quarters or in the sanctuary. Brother Lawrence said that the worst that could happen to him was to lose that sense of God which he had enjoyed so long. Yet the goodness of God assured him that He would not forsake him utterly and that God would give him strength to bear whatever evil He permitted to happen to him. Brother Lawrence, therefore, said he feared nothing. He had no occasion to consult with anybody about his state. In the past, when he had attempted to do it, he had always come away more perplexed. Since Brother Lawrence was ready to lay down his life for the love of God, he had no apprehension of danger.

He said that perfect resignation to God was a sure way to heaven, a way in which we always have sufficient light for our conduct. In the beginning of the spiritual life we ought to be faithful in doing our duty and denying ourselves. Then, after a time, unspeakable pleasures followed. In difficulties we need only turn to Jesus Christ and beg His grace with which everything became easier.

Brother Lawrence said that many do not become more spiritually mature as Christians because they stick in wallowing in guilt, shame and fear for the sins they continue to commit, using penances and particular spiritual recovery exercises, while they neglect the love of God which is the end. This appeared plainly by their works and was the reason why we see so little solid virtue. He said there needed neither art nor science for going to God, but only a heart resolutely determined to apply itself to nothing but Him and to love Him intimately and passionately.

Fourth Conversation: Brother Lawrence spoke with great openness of heart concerning his manner of going to God. He told me that all consists in one hearty renunciation of everything which we know does not lead to God. We might accustom ourselves to a continual conversation with Him with freedom and in simplicity. We need only recognize God intimately present with us and engage Him in conversation every moment. We need to listen to His Holy Spirit in order to know His will in things doubtful and for rightly performing those things which we plainly see He desires for us to do, offering them to Him before we do them, and giving God thanks when we have completed them.

In our conversation with God we should engage in praising, adoring, and loving Him incessantly for His

infinite goodness and perfection. Without being discouraged because of our sins, we should be aware that His grace always pours out on us. We can, with perfect confidence, relying on the infinite merits of our Lord. Brother Lawrence said that God never failed offering us His grace at each action. It never failed to be received except when Brother Lawrence's thoughts had drifted from a sense of God's presence, or he forgot to ask His assistance. He said that God always gave us light in our doubts when we had no other motive than to please Him.

Our sanctification did not depend upon changing our works. Instead, it depended on doing those things for God's sake which we commonly do for our own. He thought it was deeply sorrowful to see how many people mistook the means for the end, addicting themselves to certain works which they performed very imperfectly because of their human or selfish regard. The most excellent method he had found for going to God was that of doing our common business without any view of pleasing men but purely for the love of God.

Brother Lawrence felt it was a great delusion to think that the times of prayer should be different than from other times. We are as responsible to remain aware of and stay close to God by action in the time of action, as much as in prayer in its time. His own prayer was simply a sense of the presence of God, his soul being

at that time aware of nothing other than Divine Love. When the appointed times of prayer were past, he found no difference in all other pursuits, because he still continued with God, praising and thanking Him with all his might. Thus his life was a continual joy.

Brother Lawrence said we should, once and for all, heartily put our whole trust in God, and make a total surrender of ourselves to Him, secure that He would never lead us into temptation. We shouldn't weary of doing insignificant and mundane things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed. We should not wonder if, in the beginning, we often failed in our attempts to be aware of His presence with us, but that eventually we should develop a habit which will naturally produce its acts in us without our effort or even awareness and to our great delight.

The whole substance of Christianity is faith, hope, and love. In the practice of these we become united to the will of God. Everything else is unimportant and to be used as a means to the end that we would be swallowed up by faith and love. All things are possible to him who believes. They are less difficult to him who hopes. They are easier to him who loves, and easier still to him who perseveres in the practice of these three virtues. The end to which we should aspire is to become, in this life, the most perfect

worshippers (lovers) of God we can possibly be, and as we hope to be through all eternity.

We must, from time to time, honestly consider and thoroughly examine ourselves. We will, then, realize that we are worthy of great contempt. Brother Lawrence noted that when we directly confront ourselves in this manner, we will understand why we experience all kinds of misery and problems. We will realize that God has a reason for changes in our health, mental outlook, and dispositions. And we will, indeed, recognize that we require all the pain and labor God sends to humble us in order for us to achieve humility.

After this, we should not be surprised that troubles, temptations, oppositions, and contradictions happen to us. We should, on the contrary, submit ourselves to them and bear them as long as God pleases as things highly advantageous to us. The greater perfection (spiritual maturity) to which a soul aspires, the more dependent it is upon Divine Grace which flows from the unconditional love of God.

Being questioned by one of his own community, to whom he was required to answer, by what means he had attained such an habitual sense of God; Brother Lawrence told him that, since his first coming to the monastery, he had considered God as the focus and the end of all his thoughts and desires.

In the beginning he spent the hours appointed for private prayer in thinking of God, so as to convince his mind and impress deeply upon his heart the Divine Existence. He did this by great desire for God and submission to the revelations of faith, rather than by studied reasoning and elaborate meditations. By this short and sure method he immersed himself in the knowledge and love of God. He resolved to use his utmost efforts to live in a continual awareness of His presence, and, if possible, never to forget Him again.

When he had thus, in prayer, filled his mind with that Infinite Being (which is the essence of prayer), he went to his work in the kitchen where he was then cook for the community. There, having first considered the things his job required, and when and how each thing was to be done; he spent all the intervals of his time, both before and after his work, in prayer.

When he began, he said to God with a filial trust, "O my God, since Thou art with me, and I must now, in obedience to Thy commands, apply my mind to these outward things, grant me the grace to continue in Thy Presence; and prosper me with Thy assistance. Receive all my works, and possess all my affections." As he proceeded in his work, he continued his familiar conversation with his Maker, imploring His grace, and offering Him all his actions.

When he was finished, he examined how he had performed his duty. If he found well, he returned thanks to God. If not, he asked pardon and, without being discouraged, he set his mind right again. He then continued his exercise of the presence of God as if he had never deviated from it. "Thus," said he, "by rising after my falls, and by frequently renewed acts of faith and love, I have come to a state where it would be as difficult for me not to think of God as it was at first to accustom myself to the habit of thinking of Him."

As Brother Lawrence had found such an advantage in walking in the presence of God, it was natural for him to recommend it earnestly to others. More strikingly, his example was a stronger inducement than any arguments he could propose. His very countenance was edifying with such a sweet and calm devotion appearing that he could not but affect the beholders.

It was observed, that even in the busiest times in the kitchen, Brother Lawrence still preserved his recollection and heavenly-mindedness. He was never hasty or loitering, but did each thing in its turn with an even, uninterrupted composure and tranquility of spirit. "The time of work," said he, "does not with me differ from the time of prayer. In the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great a tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Lord's Supper (Eucharist)."