

The Practice of the Presence of God

Letters 1 through 5 (translated by Bob Clarkson)

Introduction: Brother Lawrence's letters are the very heart and soul of what is titled 'The Practice of the Presence of God'. All of these letters were written during the last ten years of his life. Many of them were to long-time friends, a Carmelite sister and another nun at a nearby convent. One or both of these friends were from his native village, perhaps relatives.

These letters substitute M_ for specific names.

First Letter: You so earnestly desire that I describe the manner and method by which I arrived at my habitual sense of God's presence, which our merciful Lord has been pleased to grant me. I am complying but with my request that you show my letter to no one else. If I knew that you would let it be seen, no matter how much I desire for you to make spiritual progress, I would not write this letter.

Here's what I can tell you: Having found in many books various methods of approaching God and many diverse practices of the spiritual life, I thought this would confuse me rather than help me find what I was seeking. I was searching simply how I could become passionately intimate with God. I was very intentional about giving my whole heart, soul, mind and body to the Most High God.

Once I had succeeded in giving myself wholly to God and fully accepted His acceptance of me and the completeness of His forgiveness of my sins, I stopped

pursuing, for the love of Him, everything that did not draw my attention and affection to Him. I began to live as though He and I were the only beings in the world.

Sometimes, in His presence I considered myself like a poor criminal at the feet of his judge. At other times, I felt His affection for me as my Father and as my God. I worshipped Him as frequently as possible, focusing my thoughts on His holy presence and recalling that awareness as soon as I realized that I had been distracted from it. I practiced this awareness of His presence not only at the appointed times of prayer or devotion, but also at all other times; every hour, every minute, even in the busiest moments of my day. I pushed away all thoughts or distractions that interrupted my awareness of God's presence.

This process or exercise was an extremely difficult one. Yet I persisted in it regardless of the amount or measure of the distractions I encountered. I tried not to get confused or angry with myself when my mind wandered. Actually, this has been my common practice ever since I came to this monastery. Though I have not yet perfected this method, I have found great advantages in practicing it. These, to be sure, are due to the mercy and goodness of God. We cannot achieve this constant awareness of Him without His help. I need it more than most.

When we are consistently and constantly maintaining an awareness of His holy presence, and set our focus always on Him, this helps to keep us from offending Him or doing anything that may displease Him. It also provides for us a sense of holy freedom, and, if I may add, an intimate love affair with God, where, whenever

we ask, He does supply the grace we need. Eventually, after consistently practicing His presence, they become habitual, and the presence of God becomes the most natural thing to do.

Please give Him thanks with me for His great goodness towards me, which I can never sufficiently express, and for the many favors He has done for such a miserable sinner as I am. May all things praise Him. Amen.

Second Letter: I have not found my way of life with God described in any books. Even though I have no problem with that, yet, for reassurance, I would appreciate your thoughts about it.

In conversation some days ago, a devout person told me, “The spiritual life is a life of grace, which begins with serving God motivated by the fear of God. Then, it is increased by our hope of eternal life. And it is completed by pure love. Each of these practices has its different phases, by which one arrives, at last, at that blessed consummation of love.”

I have not followed these methods at all. On the contrary, I instinctively felt that they would discourage me. Instead, upon joining this religious order, I resolved to give myself up completely to God as the best way to be fully satisfied in my relationship with Him and, simply because of my love of Him, to reject all other methods.

For the first few years, I most often focused my attention, during the times designated for devotions, on

thoughts of death, judgment, hell, heaven, and my sins. I continued, for some years, thinking carefully for the rest of the day, and even in the midst of my work, of the presence of God, whom I considered always as with me, often as in my heart.

Eventually, I began to do the same thing during my set times of prayer, which gave me joy and consolation. This practice produced in me such high esteem for God that faith alone was sufficient assurance that this was the right way.

This is how I began. Yet I must tell you that, for the first ten years, I suffered a lot. During this time I fell often and got up again immediately. It seemed to me that all creatures, reason, and God, Himself, were against me and faith alone for me.

The concern that I was not devoted to God as much as I wanted to be, my past sins always on my mind, and the great unmerited favors which God did for me, were the source of my sufferings and feelings of unworthiness. I sometimes feared that to believe I had received such favors was my imagination, which pretended to be so quickly where others arrived with great difficulty and much more time. At other times I believed it was all a willful delusion and that there was no hope for me.

Finally, I considered the possibility of spending the rest of my life plagued by these delusions. I discovered that this did not diminish the trust I had in God. In fact, it only served to increase my faith. It then seemed as though, in an instant, I found myself changed. My soul, which, until that time was troubled, felt a profound inner

peace, as if she was centered and at rest.

Ever since that moment, I have walked before God simply, in faith, with humility, and with love. I diligently purpose to do nothing and think nothing which may displease Him. I hope that when I have done what I can, He will do with me what He pleases.

As for my present state of mind, I cannot fully express it. I have no pain or misgivings about my state because I have no will of my own, but only the will of God. I strive to accomplish His will in all things. I am so resigned to His will that I would not pick up a piece of straw from the ground against His order or from any motive other than that of pure love for Him.

I have stopped using trite devotional writings and discontinued saying prescribed prayers except those which my superiors require. My highest priority is to be aware of His holy presence at all times. I maintain a simple attention and a fond regard for God, which is the practice of the presence of God. Or, to put it another way, it is an habitual, silent, and private conversation of the soul with God. This gives me much joy and contentment. In short, I am sure, beyond all doubt, that my soul has been with God for more than thirty years. I'll give you no more details so as not to bore you.

Yet, I think it is appropriate to let you how I perceive myself before God, whom I behold as my King. I consider myself to be the most miserable of men. I am constantly and consistently weak and failing, and have committed all sorts of crimes against my King. With deep regret I confess all my wickedness to Him. I ask

His forgiveness. I abandon myself in His hands that He may do what He pleases with me.

My King is consistently merciful and kind. Far from chastising me, He embraces me with love. He makes me eat at His table. He serves me with His own hands and gives me the key to His treasures. He converses and delights Himself with me incessantly, in thousands of ways. And He makes me feel like I am His favorite. In this way I am continually aware of His holy presence.

I maintain this simple attention and affectionate regard for God in which I feel greater sweetness and delight than that of an infant at the mother's breast. Let me express it like this. I would call this state the bosom of God for the inexpressible sweetness which I taste and experience in it. If, at any time, my thoughts wander from this state, from necessity or infirmity, I am instantly drawn back to this state by inward emotions so charming and delicious that I cannot find words to describe them.

Please keep in mind my great wretchedness which you fully know, rather than the great favors God does for one as unworthy and ungrateful as I am.

As for my required prayer times, they are simply a continuation of the same exercise. Sometimes I consider myself as a stone which a carver is going to make into a statue. Offering myself like this to God, I want Him to make His perfect image in my soul and render me entirely like Himself.

At other times, when I pray, I feel my spirit lifted up

without any care or effort on my part. It feels as if my soul was suspended in air, completely fixed on God, centered and at rest.

I know that many accuse me of inactivity, delusion, and self-love. I confess that it is a holy inactivity. And it would be a happy self-love if the soul, in that state, were capable of it. But while the soul is in this repose, she cannot be disturbed by the kinds of things to which she was formerly accustomed to worry. The things that the soul used to depend on, which required religious practices, would now hinder rather than assist her in experiencing the fullness of love, joy and peace with and in God.

Yet, I cannot see how this could be called delusion, because the soul which enjoys God in this way wants nothing but Him. If this is delusion, then only God can remedy it. Let Him do what He pleases with me. I desire only Him and to be wholly devoted to Him.

Please let me know what you think as I greatly value and respect your opinion, and am yours.

Third Letter: We have a God who is infinitely full of grace and knows all of our desires. I always thought that He would reduce you to nothing. He will come in His own time, and when you least expect Him. Hope in Him more than ever. Thank Him with me for the favors He does for you, particularly for the strength and patience which He gives you in your afflictions. It is a plain mark of the care He takes of you. Comfort yourself with His presence, and give thanks for all circumstances He

creates for you.

I admire also the fortitude and bravery of M_. God has given him a good attitude and good motives; but he is still a little worldly and somewhat immature. I hope the health problems God has sent to him will help him do some reflection and soul searching. I pray that it may prove to be a wholesome remedy to him. It is a chance for him to put all his trust in God who accompanies him everywhere in the Holy Spirit. Encourage him to think of God as much as he can, especially in life threatening circumstances.

The slightest intention of the heart and a remembrance of God is all that is needed. One moment of awareness and worship, even in the heat of battle, is a prayer which, however short, is very pleasing and acceptable to God. And, far from diminishing his courage in dangerous events, they actually serve to increase it.

Let him think of God as often as possible. Let him accustom himself, slowly but surely, to this simple but holy exercise. No one even notices it, but nothing is easier than to repeat these little adorations all through the day.

Please recommend to him that he think of the presence of God as frequently as he can in this way. It is also very fitting and most necessary for a soldier, who is daily faced with danger, and might even save his life. The constant awareness of God serves to offer every moment of his life to the service of his Master.

I hope that God will assist him and all the family, to

whom I offer my support and service, being theirs and yours.

Fourth Letter: I am taking this opportunity to tell you about the sentiments of one of our society concerning the admirable effects and continual assistance he receives from the presence of God. May we both profit by them.

For the past forty years his continual practice has been to be always with God; and to do nothing, say nothing, and think nothing which may displease Him. He does this with his only motive that of pure love of Him. He knows full well that God deserves infinitely more.

He is now so aware of that divine presence that he receives from God continuous comfort and peace. For about thirty years his soul has been filled with joy and delight so continually, and sometimes so great, that he often tries to find ways to hide their appearance to others who may not understand.

When sometimes he becomes a little distracted from the divine presence, God gently recalls Himself by a stirring in his soul. This often happens when he is busiest in doing his daily chores and special assigned tasks. He responds to all challenges to his tranquility with perfect fidelity to these stirrings of his spirit, either by focusing his attention on God, or by a meek and fond desire to please Him, or by such words as love forms on these occasions. For instance, he may say, "My God, here I am fully devoted to You," or "Lord, make my heart like Your heart."

It seems to him (in fact, he feels it) that this God of love, satisfied with such few words, relaxes again and rests in the depth and center of his soul. This experience of the peace of God gives him such certainty that God is always present in the depths of his soul that he never doubts it in any circumstance.

Imagine what contentment and satisfaction he enjoys. While he continually finds within himself so great a treasure, the love of God, that he no longer needs to search for it. He no longer has any anxiety about finding it, because he now has his treasure open before him and may take what he pleases of it.

He often points out our blindness to the vision of God's presence and deafness to the voice of the God calling from within us. He exclaims that those who are perfectly content with so little awareness of God are to be pitied. He also says that God has infinite treasure to bestow, and we receive very little through routine devotion, which lasts but a moment. Blind as we are, we fail to see and appreciate the flowing current of His grace. But when He finds a soul saturated with a lively faith, He watches them see and enjoy His grace and favors plentifully. There they flow like a torrent, which, after having being forcibly stopped against its ordinary course, when it has broken through, spreads itself with overwhelming force.

Yet we often stop this torrent by the little value we place upon it. Let us stop it no more. Let us search our souls and break down the obstacles which hinder it. Let us continually be aware of His grace. Let us redeem the lost

time, for perhaps we have little time left. Let's prepare for our impending deaths. We die but once and a mistake there is irretrievable.

I say again, let us search our souls, as time flies, avoiding delay for our souls are at stake. It seems to me that you are prepared and have taken good measures so you will not be taken by surprise. I commend you for it. It is the only thing necessary. We must always work at it, because not to persevere in the spiritual life is to retreat. Those who have a strong sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit continue to grow in Christ even while sleeping. If our soul is still anxious and fearful of the winds and waves of life, let us renew our awareness of the Lord whose Holy Spirit resides within. He will quickly and completely calm us, even if the storm rages on.

I have shared my ways and means of coming to God so that you may compare them with your own. May they serve to re-kindle the flames of your love for God, if at any time they may be even the least bit cooled. Let us recall our first favors and remember our earliest joys and comforts. And, let us benefit from the example and sentiments of this brother who is little known by the world, but well known and extremely caressed by God.

I will pray for you. Please pray also for me, as I am yours in our Lord.

Fifth Letter: Today I received two books and a letter from Sister M_, who is preparing to make her profession to join the convent. She desires the prayers of your holy

society, and yours in particular. I think she greatly values your support. Please do not disappoint her. Pray to God that she may take her vows in view of His love alone, with a firm resolution to be wholly devoted to Him. I will send you one of those books about the presence of God; a subject which, in my opinion, contains the whole spiritual life. It seems to me that whoever duly practices it will soon become very spiritually mature in the love of God.

I know that for the practice of it to be most effective, the heart must be empty of all other passions because God will possess the heart that is desirous of Him alone. He cannot possess it alone without emptying it of all other things, so, neither can He act there and do in it what He pleases, unless it has become vacant to and for Him.

There is nothing sweeter and more delightful in the world than a continual conversation with God. Only those can comprehend it who practice to learn it and ultimately experience it. I advise you not to do it from that motive. It is not personal pleasure which we should seek but God's pleasure alone in this exercise. It can only be achieved through love. It is His will and purpose for us.

If I were a preacher, I would, more than all other things, preach the practice of the presence of God. Were I a spiritual director, I would advise the whole world to do it. It is not only necessary, it is so simple too. Unless and until our love for God exceeds all other loves in us, we cannot experience the peace that passes all understanding. Ah! If we only knew how much more we could experience of the grace and assistance of God, we

would never take our eyes off of Him nor forget His presence with and in us, not even for a moment.

Believe me. This is the best life possible. Don't wait! Right now make a holy and firm resolution never to be distracted from your awareness of His presence. Resolve to spend the rest of your life in His sacred presence, deprived of all other consolations except His love and His purposes. Make a purposeful choice to practice the presence of God. Be intentional and relentless to be aware of His presence at all times and let His Spirit guide you in every decision you make. If you do it sincerely, be assured that you will soon experience the effects of it.

I will assist you with my prayers, poor as they are. I recommend myself earnestly for prayer to you and those of your holy society.

**Similar thoughts of other authors:
collected by Bob Clarkson**

“The **strongest deterrent** of wrong-full behavior is a **genuine affection** for the one I might otherwise do wrong.” – John Henry Alan

“The point is not to **fully comprehend** God, but to **fully enjoy** that which I do comprehend about Him.”
-- John Henry Alan

“Why settle for morning coffee with God, when you can spend all day communing with Him?”
– John Henry Alan

“All of us need a radiant idea of God. It’s the only place to live. To be astonished, amazed, and marvel in Him. Be so caught up with the beauty of His nature that it comes who you are!” – Graham Cooke

“God did not create us to be worshippers or servants. He created us to be intimate lovers!” – Graham Cooke

“Imagine for a moment that God wants to be your **MOST** significant other!” – John Henry Alan

“The greater my awareness of God, the more meaningful and pleasurable my life will be.” – John Henry Alan