

The Practice of the Presence of God

Letters 6 through 15 (translated by Bob Clarkson)

These letters substitute M_ for specific names.

Sixth Letter: I have received from M_ the things which you gave her for me. I wonder why you have not shared your thoughts with me on the little book I sent to you. Diligently engage in the practice of presence of God even in your old age. It is better late than never.

I cannot imagine how Christians can live satisfied in God without the practice of the presence of God. As for me, I keep aware of Him in the depth and center of my soul as much as I can. While I am with Him, I fear nothing; but the least distraction from Him opens my spirit to all kinds of anxiety. This constant and consistent practice does not even make me tired. It is, however, important not to spend time in any little pleasures which are innocent and lawful, but distract me from Him. God alone through His Holy Spirit changes our desires such that we find little or no pleasures other than with and in Him.

I am not suggesting that we must put any extreme constraints upon ourselves. Rather, we should serve God in a holy freedom in our love for Him. We can then do things in His will faithfully, without effort or worry. We can then recall our mind to God gently and with tranquility as often as we find our thoughts wandering away from Him. It is, however, necessary to have an

unwavering trust in God in order to be free from all negative emotions. We must stop worrying about all other cares and even stop doing some forms of devotion, though they may be very good in themselves, often become nothing more than routine. Such devotions are only a means to attain to our results and not to be fully aware of Him and to simply be in His presence.

Once we have established a habit of the practice of the presence of God, we are then with Him who is our end. We have no need to return to the any other means. We may simply continue with Him in our dialog of love, persevering in His holy presence with an expression of praise, of adoration, or of desire; or with resignation of all our ends, or purely to be giving thanks, and in all others ways we can imagine.

Be not discouraged by how unnatural this practice seems in the beginning. You must sacrifice your desires to pleasure only yourself in any moment. At first, one often thinks that simply developing our love affair with God is a waste of time. But unless you persist in this pursuit of God, as in a courtship with a lover, you will never be fully satisfied in Him or in your spiritual journey. Keep on keeping on until death. Pay no attention to trials or difficulties that may occur, except to seek and find God's purposes in them.

I ask for the prayers of your holy society, and yours in particular. I am yours in our Lord.

Seventh Letter: I pity you greatly. It will be a great relief if you will let M_ handle all your affairs and spend the remainder of your life only in worshipping God by practicing His presence with you. God demands nothing of you. He is pleased with even a little remembrance of Him from time to time. He thoroughly enjoys your adoration. He wants you to sometimes to pray for His grace. He delights in your sufferings when you rejoice in them. And He always receives your thanks for the favors He has given you, and continues to give you in the middle of your adversities. Console yourself with Him and His favors as frequently as you can. Dwell on your love for Him at your meals and when you are with others. The least little remembrance will always be pleasing to Him.

You don't need to cry out loudly to God. He is as near to us as we are to ourselves whenever we are aware of it. We don't ever have to be in church to be with God. Actually, His Holy Spirit is always with us and in us. We may make music to Him in our spirit. Make it a practice, to spontaneously get quiet so as to converse with Him in meekness, humility, and love. Everyone is capable of this kind of familiar conversation with God; some more, some less. He knows what each of us is capable to do and is happy with each of us when we give Him as much as we are able.

Let's get started. Perhaps He expects only one loving resolution on our part. Have courage. We do not have long to live. You are nearly sixty-four, and I am almost eighty. Let us live and die with God. Sufferings will seem sweet and pleasant while we are with Him. Without Him, the greatest pleasures will seem like cruel punishment to us. Let Him be praised.

Gradually become accustomed to worshipping Him in this way; to notice His grace, to offer Him your heart often; in the middle of every decision or activity, even every moment if you can. Do not always tenaciously confine yourself to certain rules of behavior or particular forms of daily devotions. Instead, act a constant awareness of the presence of God in faith with love and humility.

You may assure the society of M_ of my meager prayers, and that I am their servant, and especially yours also.

Eighth Letter: What you're telling me is nothing new. You are not the only one who is troubled with wandering thoughts. Our mind is easily and often distracted. But our will is in charge of all of our thoughts and feelings. We must exercise our will to gather our wandering thoughts and offer them to God for His correction.

If our mind is not managed fully when we begin our quiet times of devotion to God, it will habitually continue to wander and render our devotions useless. Wandering thoughts are difficult to control. Our mind will drift, even against our desire to be with God, to worldly thoughts. How I handle them is to humbly confess these distractions to God and ask Him to draw my attention back to Him.

I advise you not to use many words and long discourses in prayer, because these usually cause the mind to concentrate more on the embellishments of the words than on the true sentiments of love and worship of God. You might actually keep silent, like a mute or paralytic person. Make a concerted effort at all times to be aware of the presence of God. Don't be upset when your mind does wander because such trouble of mind tends to distract the mind even more, rather than bringing God back into focus. You will must dwell on tranquility. Persevering in this way, God will increase your awareness of His presence.

One way to help keep your mind focused on God in prayer, and feel greater tranquility, is to practice this awareness of God at all other times as well. Once you have become accustomed to thinking of Him often, you will find it much easier to keep calm in prayer and to eliminate distractions altogether. I have already described the advantages of practicing the presence of

God. Now, let's be serious about this and pray for each other.

Ninth Letter: Please deliver to her the enclosed answer to the question she posed to M_. She has good intentions but hurries too much and spends too little time aware of God's presence with her. One does not become intimate with God in an instant. I suggest that she take your instruction and guidance in these matters. Sharing with each other is helpful. Even more useful is our example of abiding in the presence of God. Please keep me informed of her progress, whether she is fervent and obedient or not.

Let's make it our only purpose and practice to please God in all things. Obviously every thing else is vain and foolish. You and I have lived this monastic life for over forty years. We have concentrated on loving and serving God, who called us to do just that. Sometimes I am ashamed and confused when I think about how fickle I am. Sometimes I reflect on the great favors God has shown me in the past and continues to show me. At other times I have wasted much time and matured very little in my love affair with God.

Since His mercy has given us a little more time, let's make up for lost time. Let's purpose earnestly to be aware always of the presence of the Father of mercies who is always ready and waiting to receive our love for

Him and pour His love on us. Let us frequently and fervently discard, simply for our love of Him, anything and everything that is does not draw us into His presence. He deserves that and much more. Let us think of Him in every waking moment, and even in our dreams. Let's trust Him without any doubt whatsoever.

I have no doubt that we shall soon receive an abundance of His grace, with which we can do all things, and, without which we can do nothing but act selfishly, which is sin. We simply cannot remain at peace in the difficult trials and troubles of life without the awareness of God's presence with us in them. We can be aware of Him at all times.

How can we pray to God without being with Him? How can we be with Him except by thinking of Him very frequently? And how can we often think of Him, unless we develop a holy habit of it? You may tell me that I always say the same things. It is true, because this is the best and easiest method I know. I don't do anything else. So, I advise everyone else in the world to do it too. When we become intimate with God, we will also think of Him almost incessantly. Where our heart (love) is, that is our treasure! We always think about who we love.

Tenth Letter: It is very hard to bringing myself to write to M_. I am doing it now purely because you want me to

do so. Please address it and send it to him. I enjoy seeing all the faith you have in God. May He increase it in you even more. We can't have too much trust in such a good and faithful Friend who will never fail us in this world nor in the next.

If M_ seizes the opportunity of the loss he has experienced and puts all his confidence in God, God will soon give him another friend even more powerful and more inclined to serve him. God removes people from us whenever He pleases. Perhaps M_ was too attached to the helper he has lost. We should love our friends, but without encroaching upon the love of God, Who must always be our greatest lover.

Please keep in mind my recommendation that you think of God often; by day, by night, in your work, and even in your play. He is always near you and with you. Don't ignore Him. You would think it rude to leave a friend alone who came to visit you. Why, then, do we so often ignore God? Do not forget Him. Think of Him often. Adore Him continually. Live and die with Him. This is the glorious work of a Christian; in a word, this is our profession. If we do not know it, we must learn it and practice it.

I will try to encourage you with my prayers, and am yours in our Lord.

Eleventh Letter: I will not pray that God will take away your pain and misery. He brought them to you in order to mature you. I pray earnestly that God will give you strength and patience to bear them as long as He pleases. I pray that you will seek His purpose in these afflictions and that you will respond to His purposes for you and others in them. Comfort yourself with the presence of Him who holds you fastened to the cross. He will deliver you when He knows it is time. Happy are those who suffer with Him, knowing that His purposes will be the best for everyone involved. Accustom yourself to suffer in that manner, and seek from Him the strength to endure as much, and as long, as He deems appropriate for you.

Non-Christians don't comprehend these truths. That is no surprise, since they suffer because they don't know what God is doing or have any interest in Him. They see sickness and pain as a nuisance and bad, rather than as a favor from God. Seeing it only in that light, they find nothing in it but grief and distress. Even many Christians wrongly believe that infirmity is bad and should be prayed away or against. But those who consider that sickness comes from the hand of God, out of His mercy and wisdom, and as the means He uses for their salvation or spiritual maturity, feel sweetness and consolation in it.

I hope that you can see that we are much more aware of God's presence within us while we are sick or in distress than while we are healthy and life is easy. You don't need to rely on another physician because God alone will affect your cure, with or without a physician. Put all your trust in God. You will soon notice the effects in your recovery. We often delay our recovery by putting greater faith in medicine than in God. This also applies to all your business. Whatever remedies you choose, they will succeed only if or when He permits. When adversity comes from God, only He can ultimately release us from our distress over them. God often sends sickness to the body to cure diseases of the soul. Comfort yourself with the Sovereign Physician of both soul and body.

I expect you think that I am very much at ease, and that I eat and drink at the table of the Lord without any troubles. And it may be reasonable for you to think that. But think how painful it would be to the greatest criminal in the world to eat at the king's table and be served by him, yet have no assurance of God's love, mercy, forgiveness and eternal salvation! I believe that he would feel anxiety that nothing could calm except his trust in the goodness of his king. So I assure you, that whatever pleasures I taste at the table of my King, my sins, ever present before my eyes, as well as the uncertainty of my pardon, torment me. But I accept that torment as pleasing to God.

Be satisfied with the condition in which God places you. However happy you may think I am, I envy you. Pain and suffering would be a paradise to me if I could suffer with my God. The greatest pleasures would be hell if I relished them without Him. My only consolation would be to suffer in some way for His sake.

I will soon experience death. What comforts me in this life is that I now see Him by faith. I see Him in such an intimate way that I sometimes say, “I believe no more, but I see.” I feel the great assurance that faith teaches us and in that practice of faith, I live and die with Him.

Be aware of God’s presence always. He is the only provider of comfort during your affliction. I will beseech Him to help you to always be aware of His provision in all things. I present my service.

Twelfth Letter: If we were well accustomed to the practice of the presence of God, bodily discomforts would be greatly alleviated. God often permits us to suffer a little to purify our soul and increase our desire to trust Him more completely.

Take courage. Thank Him even for your pains and ask Him for strength to endure them with joy. Above all, get in the habit of often thinking of God, and forget Him as little as possible. Adore Him in and for your infirmities. Remind Him, from time to time, of your full

commitment to Him. In the greatest of your sufferings, humbly and affectionately ask Him, as a child asks his father, to make you conformable to His holy will, even if it means that they will never stop. I will agree with you with my meager prayers.

God has many ways of drawing us to Himself. He sometimes seems to hide Himself from us. But faith alone should be our confidence in His wisdom on our behalf and His as well. Faith is the foundation of our confidence. We must put all our faith in God. He will not fail to do the right thing for us in time of need. I do not know how God will bring me to my end, but I am always happy. All the world suffers and I, who deserve the severest discipline, feel joys so continual and great that I can scarcely contain them. I would willingly ask God for a actually feel some of your sufferings.

I know my weakness is so great that, if He left me one moment to myself, I would prove to be the most wretched man alive. Yet, I do not know how He could leave me alone because faith gives me as strong a conviction that He will not leave me as reason could give. He never forsakes us. It is always us who forsakes Him. Let us be afraid to leave Him. Let us always be with Him. Let us live and die in His presence. Please pray for me. I am praying for you.

Thirteenth Letter: I am sorry to see you suffer so long. What eases my mind and sweetens the feeling I have about your grief, is that your sufferings are proof of God's love for you. Look at your pains in that way and you will accept them much more readily. In your case, it is my opinion that, at this point, you should stop medical treatment and trust completely in the providence of God. Perhaps He has been waiting for your resignation to Him and perfect faith that He will cure you if that is His will. Since, in spite of all of your due diligence, treatment has proved unsuccessful and your condition is still getting worse, don't wait any longer. Cast yourself completely into His hands and expect Him to use you and your situation to His glory.

I told you in my last letter that God sometimes permits bodily discomforts to cure the distempers of the soul. Be encouraged. Take this opportunity to develop Godly character. Don't ask God for deliverance from your pain. Instead, simply because you love Him, ask for the strength to endure all the misery that He pleases, and as long as He pleases. Such prayers are hard at first, but they are very pleasing to God, and become sweet to those that love Him.

Love sweetens pain. When one loves God, one suffers for His sake with joy and courage. Do so, I beg you. Comfort yourself with the presence of His Spirit within you. He is the number one physician for all our illnesses. He is the Father of the afflicted and always ready to help

us through all things. He loves us infinitely more than we can imagine. Love Him in return and seek no consolation elsewhere. I hope you will soon receive His comfort.

I will offer my prayers to God, poor as they are, and shall always be yours in our Lord.

Fourteenth Letter: I give thanks to our Lord for having relieved you a little as you desired. I have often been near death. I have never been so contented as then. At those times I didn't pray for recovery but I prayed for strength to suffer with courage, humility, and love. I was amazed at how sweet it is to suffer with God! No matter how great your sufferings may be, receive them with love. It is paradise to suffer while fully enjoying His presence within. If, in this life, we expect to experience the joy and peace of paradise, we must frequently engage in a familiar, humble, and affectionate conversation with God.

We must cast out all useless thoughts while enjoying Him on all occasions. We must make our heart into the Holy of Holies in our spiritual temple so we can constantly adore Him in utmost reverence and love. We must continually confess any thing we do which we know displeases Him with a renewed acceptance of the complete and utter mercy and forgiveness of our Salvation. When, in the practice of His presence, our

minds and hearts are filled with God, suffering becomes a source of pleasure and consolation of the love of God.

I know very well that to arrive at this state, we must in the beginning be intentional and persistent. It is very difficult to establish this new habit because we must act purely on faith. But, though it is difficult to be aware of God's presence at all times, we know as well that we can do all things with the grace of God. He never refuses those who ask earnestly. Knock. Persevere in knocking. I can attest to the fact, that, in His due time, He will open His grace to you with a constant awareness of His presence and His Divine love in you. He will enlighten your entire being in a moment, what He has deferred during many years.

Pray to Him for me, as I pray to Him for you. I hope to see Him soon.

Fifteenth Letter: God knows best what we need. All that He does is for our good. If we knew how much He loves us, we would always be ready to receive both the bitter and the sweet from His Hand. It would make no difference. All that came from Him would be pleasing.

The worst afflictions only appear intolerable if we see them in the wrong light. When we see them as coming from the hand of God, and know that it is our loving Father who humbles and distresses us, our sufferings

lose their bitterness and can even become a source of consolation.

Let all our efforts be to know God. The more one knows Him, the greater one desires to know Him. Knowledge is commonly the measure of love. The deeper and more extensive our knowledge, the greater is our love. If our love of God were great we would love Him equally in pain and pleasure.

We only deceive ourselves by seeking or loving God for any favors which He has or may grant us. Such favors, no matter how great, can never bring us as near to God as can one simple act of faith. Let us seek Him often by faith. He is within us. Seek Him not elsewhere.

Are we not rude and deserve blame if we leave Him alone to busy ourselves with trifles which do not please Him and perhaps even offend Him? These trifles may one day cost us dearly. Let us begin earnestly to be devoted to Him. Let us cast everything else out of our heart. He wants to possess the heart alone. Beg this favor of Him. If we do all we can, we will soon see that change wrought in us which we so greatly desire.

I cannot thank Him enough for the relief He has given you. I hope to see Him within a few days. Let us pray for one another.

Brother Lawrence died within days of this last letter.