

# PRACTICING THE PRESENCE

*by Henry Thomas Hamblin*

Most of us are familiar with the little book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, which tells of the way of life of one Nicholas Herman of Lorraine who is more generally known as Brother Lawrence. He was a humble 17th century Carmelite lay-brother, a mere hewer of wood and drawer of water for those about him in the monastery. We are told that Brother Lawrence lived in an irreligious age, amid a skeptical people, yet he found God and lived his life in God, and found God within his own being.

So much so indeed that some who were much above him in his order, and also other orders, came to him to ask questions and be instructed.

Brother Lawrence's methods were simplicity itself. **Instead of studying books of doctrine and theories about God, he started off with the assumption that God was Ever-Present with him, and therefore could be spoken to, and confided in, at all times. Thus he made direct contact with God, in utter childlike simplicity, from the very beginning.**

**He had no theoretical difficulties; he simply took God for granted, as a child takes its parents for granted.**

**Some people believe that an extensive knowledge of the Bible is necessary. I have known people however who have been great students of Holy Writ who made a practice of reading it through from beginning to end, at least once a year, and yet they did not really know God, although no doubt they knew a lot about God, which is a very different matter.** But Brother Lawrence did not know much about the Bible - at any rate, his little book shows no sign of any such knowledge. (I remember once some years ago taking a copy of *The Practice of the Presence of God* with me to read on the train, when visiting a friend. He noticed the book and expressed an interest in it, so I handed it to him. While I was engaged in visiting a sick relative, my friend read the book, or rather raced through it, and when I left by train a few hours later, he handed it back to me with the remark that he did not think much of it, because it was not scriptural ! Yet this lay-brother knew God; he knew God through constant prayer and intercourse with Him. **Reading about God is not sufficient, even though it may be the Bible that we read.**

This is helpful up to a point, but **we have to get beyond the stage of knowing about God - we have to have intercourse with God, and finally become one with Him.**

Brother Lawrence did not think of God as being afar off in another place; instead he thought of Him as being with him amongst the pots and pans of the monastery scullery, and as much interested as he himself was in their efficient scouring and polishing. Now Brother Lawrence was what might be termed a natural saint through and through - he owed nothing to the schools; he had no teacher but the Holy Spirit. He was not converted in the ordinary way, for God dealt with him direct in the same way that He dealt with Saul of Tarsus, turning him into Paul the Apostle in a matter of seconds.

The following extract taken from the First Conversation in the book tells in a few words of the wonderful transformation wrought by the Holy Spirit in this unlearned kitchen menial:

He (Brother Lawrence) told me that God had done him a singular favour, in his conversion at the age of eighteen.

That in the winter, 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, he received a high view of the Providence and Power of God, which has never since been effaced from his soul. That this view had perfectly set him loose from the world, and kindled in him such a love for God, that he could not tell whether it had increased in above forty years that he had lived since.

There surely has never been a clearer case of direct action by the Holy Spirit than this! And it was all accomplished through Nature, not through ecclesiastical channels at all. He looks at a tree in winter stripped of its leaves and behold, the miracle takes place. It was much the same with Jacob Boehme who one day in 1600 was 'sitting ...in his room when his eye fell upon a burnished pewter dish which reflected the sunshine with such marvelous splendor, that he fell into a deep inward ecstasy, and it seemed to him as if he could now look into the principles and deepest foundations of things'. Jacob was a humble and unlearned shoemaker; Brother Lawrence was a one-time soldier and footman. Jesus called not learned people, but fishermen, to be His disciples and to carry on His work after He had ascended.

**Now our lay-brother took God's immediate presence for granted; he made a practice of speaking direct to, and making a confidant of, Him. He believed that God was with him as an invisible presence, in whom he could confide at all times.**

And this reminds me of a story told by that great man, the late F. B. Meyer. One day he was

travelling in a tram when he noticed a sad-faced and tired woman sitting opposite to him. She told him that she was a widow, that she lived alone in one room, that she went out charing all day, and that when she returned home at night, her room was in darkness, without fire or meal ready. And oh, how lonely and hopeless it all was. Mr. Meyer sympathized with the woman but, discovering that she was a follower of Jesus, he proposed that she should believe that He was in her room. He also suggested that she should reserve a chair for Him, believing that He was sitting in it. Then she was to speak to Him just as though His visible presence were with her: also she should tell Him all her troubles, and also all her hopes. At night, when she came home from work, she was to knock at the door, and say: 'Are you there, Lord Jesus?' In every way she was to act precisely as though He Were actually present.

The woman listened to all that Mr. Meyer had to say and determined to put his suggestions into practice. Some months afterwards they met again. But he did not recognize the former sad and unhappy woman, for she was transformed. She was now happy and radiant. She made herself known to him, and then told him all that had taken place since their first meeting. She had put his suggestions into practice with the result that she was no longer lonely, neither was she alone, for the presence of Jesus was always with her. That was her way of practicing the presence of God which was not so very different from Brother Lawrence's.

Their methods were the same in principle, although differing in detail. Brother Lawrence found God amidst the pots and pans of the scullery in which he worked, while the woman found Jesus in her one-roomed home. Both were simple and unlettered people, neither of them spent their time in reading books about God: instead, they worked at their humble tasks and found God in the ordinary affairs of life. Neither would they have read books on psychology (if such had been available in their respective times), yet what they practiced was based upon a great psychological law.

Brother Lawrence asked for God's help before beginning each task. Then when it was finished, he thanked God for having helped him to perform it perfectly. We can imagine how interested he became in the work which formerly he loathed and despised! **God became very real to him and was always present with him, and this filled him with such joy and happiness that he had great difficulty in restraining himself from bursting into such exuberance as would have been an annoyance to those around him.**

But after all, the practice of the presence of God as followed both by the charwoman and Brother Lawrence, **is but the beginning of a wonderful adventure into Omnipresence.**

**First of all, it is as though a person were in the room with us -a loved friend, real although invisible. If we can realize this, it is indeed a great achievement, sufficient in itself to transform our life.** When our life and all its actions become based upon a realization of this truth, it means goodbye to our inclination to sin, to worry, to fear, and to be selfish.

But as I say, **such practices are only at the beginning of the great adventure into Omnipresence.** We have to advance by stages, and we are brought to each stage in God's good time.

Let me cite a personal experience which has an indirect bearing on the subject. All my life I have been subject to heavy colds. In winter time, almost as soon as one cold has run its course, another would begin. This was very discouraging, for they continued in spite of all my attempts to overcome my weakness by means of what are called Nature Cure methods. Even after I had gained quite a lot of benefit from right thinking and mental self-treatments, I still remained a victim. Now, when a cold was coming on I used to feel chilly and shivery and want to sit by a fire with much more clothing on than usual. I knew that this was all wrong, so one day I started imagining the very opposite of this. I saw myself mentally in the open air with the wind blowing on my body, the sun shining upon me, and rain - even hail and snow - falling on me. I imagined and felt myself to be one with the elements and welcomed all these forces of nature and co-operated with them. I noticed that after practicing this applied imagination for a time, I began to feel better, while the congestion of the cold seemed to grow less. But I had to repeat the practice many times before getting the better of the cold.

I relate this experience **simply to show how my experiment with Omnipresence began.** In course of time, as I practiced this method, the realization came to me that the forces which played upon my body were part of the life of God. I recalled the words of St. Paul: 'In Him we live, and move, and have our being.' I had thought of these Nature forces as being apart from God; but gradually I began to realize that they are an outward manifestation of inward spiritual powers, and that that was why my imaginative exercise was helpful to me. I realized that the sunshine, the wind, the rain, were not merely beating on my body, but were entering and passing through it; or rather, the invisible forces and rays of Infinite Life which they represented, were doing so. **Of Course, it was all done in my imagination; actually I did not stir from my chair while I experienced and felt the forces of Nature beating upon my body.**

Later I used to say to myself: 'God is in this room: His presence fills it.' Then I would try to realize that there was not a fraction of an inch space in the room which was not filled with the presence of God; then after realizing this I would add: 'His presence is Love.' Jesus

said: 'God is Spirit' - which means the one universal Spirit in which we live, and from which everything proceeds. Spirit surrounds us like an atmosphere and penetrates us, just as wireless waves pass through concrete or brick walls.

**All such creative work must of course be done in a state of relaxation.** Somebody has said (I think it was Emerson) that the Absolute abides always in smiling repose - or words to that effect. Some learners (we are all learners) think that such a thought is discouraging, for what can such a God care about them - He, in smiling repose, while they are being so tried and troubled? It is however simply a matter of relaxation; if we relax sufficiently we can experience some measure of the same smiling repose, for what we suffer is due to our tenseness and resistance. **We can experience the repose of the Absolute to the extent that we truly relax, and as soon as we do so we experience a feeling of deep peace, which shows that our mind has ceased its agitation and is working in correspondence with the Divine Mind.**

**All our work with the imagination must therefore be done while we are in a state of relaxation. In fact, I do not think that we can use our creative imagination at all without first relaxing.**

But when we do so completely, so that we lean back on the Everlasting Arms, we are then able to realize that the rays of the One Infinite Life are not merely impinging upon us, but are passing through us. **The more relaxed we become, the more possible it becomes for us to realize that this is actually happening.**

**The effect of practicing the presence of God in all its various forms is that we become changed into His likeness.**

Probably the luminosity which some people exhibit is due to the Spiritual Man within and the Celestial body which is being prepared for them to use, when they pass on to: Celestial planes. But at this stage, I must repeat that we should never practice negative passivity. When I say that: we should relax, I do not mean that we should become negatively passive - far from it. **Although we relax, our mind still remains concentrated upon God; consequently, we are positive. Neither should we enter the Silence when we are in a negative condition, or when we are over-tired. We should always maintain a positive attitude.**

It may be wondered what this about Brother Lawrence and others may have to do with my search for Truth. This much: like Brother Lawrence, I am of humble origin with hardly any education and like him I know nothing about theology or doctrine, but at certain times in my life God has come very close to me, and has raised me up into a higher state of

consciousness. Now there is an all too common idea that we can only find God if we are learned and well-educated, capable of reading very difficult books about prayer. I thank God that this is not the case, and it is my hope that this book will bring encouragement to many, seeing that it is written by one who is neither learned nor clever, but who has nevertheless found a safe and happy anchorage at last. 'What God has done, God can do.' If God has been able to bring me through in spite of my ignorance and frailties, then He can do the same with anyone and everyone. Nothing is impossible with God.

Of course, I realize the value of culture; I realize that cultured people live a fuller and richer intellectual life than those who are not. But the point which I wish to make is: it is not necessary to be highly educated or learned in order to know God. **Indeed, in the last stage of our journey we have to cast aside our intellectual knowledge about God, like a tree shedding its leaves in autumn. This process of exfoliation casts off everything that is not God, every atom of self, until there is nothing left. Then, when we have succeeded in casting off everything and have reached nothing - we find Everything! This is indeed a great paradox.**

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